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Weeding out the Garden:
Minimisation of the female voice within Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden

Misogyny as a mindset is prevalent within human society. The inner workings of this ideology creep into the minds and motives of those who have lived throughout history, and thus the idea of male dominance comes out of the woodwork when translated to art. Art imitates life, and thus misogyny becomes art in a pessimistic sense. While obviously damaging to social progress, it damages the mindsets of women in particular. The idea of female subordination is internalised through its utter stratification within society (better known as internalised misogyny), and thus misogyny exists even in the art of women. This becomes a precedent, and it has a historical arc to today through several landmark texts spanning various genres, suggesting that the precedent goes far beyond genre. In this paper I will argue that internalised misogyny has a tendency to create narrative misogyny within the writings of women authors, most exemplary in the novel The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett.

There exists a narrative shift within literature wherein a male character is introduced, and takes over the main character role of the female character who had led the story from the beginning. Upon his introduction, a minimisation occurs wherein the female voice is slowly but surely usurped by the male voice. This issue of the minimisation of the female voice has been discussed many times before in regards to The Secret Garden, with a common viewpoint in the 1980's being that Colin Craven, as a male and heir to the Craven name, wrests control of the narrative from Mary Lennox in a very patriarchal and sinister way. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser and U.C. Knoepflmacher make this

point in spades, with both authors touching on the fact that despite Colin's usurpation of the text, young readers tend to remember Mary more than Colin; in many cases readers forget Colin's presence in the story. Because of this, a new camp has emerged, with voices like Adrian Gunther and Linda T. Parsons offering that Colin never truly does usurp Mary's importance in the novel for precisely the reason that he has no staying power in the eyes of the audience, therefore just because Mary is not in the forefront in the last third of the novel it does not strictly matter because she has already made her impact on the audience and as a character Colin is simply unable to make the same sort of impact. I will argue that The Secret Garden consists of a dated viewpoint of males usurping female characters, and the fact that this narrative shift exists within the novel can have a highly negative impact upon the children the novel was intended for. As well, the important aspect of the narrative shift is not what impression the characters leave upon the reader, it is what is written in the text and how the events of the story minimise Mary's story and make Colin's story the important and foregrounded narrative. Precisely because of this, the novel conveys a message of female unimportance and male importance that is damaging to the mind of a young woman, to the point where internalised misogyny is engendered within them as a direct cause.

The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett starts out as the tale of Mary Lennox, a girl with a fiery personality and ill-tempered disposition, and indeed "everybody said she was the most disagreeable looking child ever seen" (Burnett, 2003: p. 1). After her parents and servants in India are wiped out by cholera, she must leave the country to live with relatives. Upon her arrival to Misselthwaite Manor, her uncle Archibald Craven's estate in England, she slowly opens up to the world around her and begins to find peace in her own soul as a person. In the process she restores Archibald Craven's dead wife's garden with the help of her new-found friend Dickon. However with the introduction of Colin Craven, her cousin, the story takes a strange turn.

The narrative becomes slanted more towards Colin, and Mary's rehabilitation of him rather

than her rehabilitation of the garden and herself. He is described as a demanding boy (Burnett, 2003: p. 110), to whom Mary owes nothing, but she decides to help him anyway even though he makes it difficult for her every step of the way. By the end of the story Mary's role in the narrative is shunted to the side as Colin's narrative dominates, and her character disappears altogether by the last page of the novel as Colin's narrative completely eclipses her own (Burnett, 2003: p. 262). The purposelessness of this narrative minimisation of a perfectly suitable female main character is striking, for even though Colin as a character wrests control of the narrative from Mary the story would have been heavily improved upon without the inclusion of his character.

When Mary first comes to Misselthwaite Manor, she is described as disagreeable and sour, and indeed she is snobbish and full of herself without any sense of decency whatsoever (Burnett, 2003: p. 23). But it is in this state of being that she makes herself as a character known; because of all these negative qualities she defines herself as Mary, to be improved upon, and the course of the narrative suggests that she will eventually learn to overcome these flaws in her personality and find a true amount of inner peace. U.C. Knoepflmacher suggests that these flaws are not even necessarily flaws: "Mary's anger proves emotionally therapeutic. It is a sign of her hardiness. While the adults around her perish, she survives" (1983: p. 23). This idea is a great way of viewing Mary's disposition as a productive kind of anger, however, the garden itself is a great metaphor for a turn towards self-actualisation; Mary has to discover a way into it, and then choose of her own free will to rehabilitate it. The moment she does, her character slowly but surely shifts into that of a caring girl with a green thumb, with the help of Dickon.

Dickon as a character is an excellent complement to Mary, for he has that gentleness and connection to nature that Mary needs to learn in order to successfully rehabilitate the garden. Her brusqueness has only carried her so far in the narrative, and now that she is within the proverbial womb of the garden, she must learn to nurture the earth in order to nurture her own self. Adrian

Gunther notes the lack of animosity amongst critics in regards to Dickon: "It is interesting that no critic has seen Dickon as usurping Mary's central position in the text in spite of the fact that his influence is a key one, right from the moment he is first mentioned to Mary. Perhaps this is because, as a vegetatian [sic] god he takes on the characteristics of the androgyne?" (1994: p. 168). I want to venture that this is precisely true: because of how mild and charismatic of a character he is, Dickon does not hinder Mary's narrative, and indeed he helps it along greatly. As a character he acts as Mary's fairy godmother of sorts, providing a huge amount of aid to her without taking away from her agency as a character. He merely provides the tools that she needs to succeed, and it is up to her to decide how to use them. He is not a dominant and assertive character, which shifts his gender in most readers' eyes to that of androgyny. Nature tends to be seen as a female force, and thus with Dickon's soulful connection to it, it renders him a sexless character. This is quite perfect for a female bildungsroman, because Dickon is there to aide but not usurp. He is there to foster growth but not to directly cause it. The way that Mary describes him, with his "cheeks as red as poppies," and his "such round and such blue eyes" (Burnett, 2003: p. 84), and "a clean fresh scent of heather and grass and leaves about him, almost as if he were made of them" (Burnett, 2003: p. 85) seem to elevate him to to a mythical level with his gentleness and complete and utter mildness. He is the perfect complement to Mary's character, and they immediately get along and seek to improve upon the world together. It is precisely because of his gentleness, knowledge, and mild character that he helps Mary's story rather than hinders it. As well, upon his introduction Mary remains the central character: the novel is still centered around her story and her reactions to Dickon and the world around her.

Colin Craven, on the other hand, is a foil to Mary's role as a character. Much like Mary at the beginning of the story, he is selfish, rude, and angry, but he does nothing to help himself grow as a character (Burnett, 2003: p. 171). It is at this point that the narrative starts to shift, and Mary's

narrative is abandoned in favor of Colin's rehabilitation. Indeed, Mary's rehabilitation of the garden is written more in favor of helping him heal than to help Mary become a better person (Burnett, 2003: p. 188). It is Colin's strength that is described as improving every day, not the state of the garden. It is his happiness and pallor that is described as brightening and strengthening, not the garden. Indeed, the status of Mary as a character ceases to be mentioned, and the reader becomes lost as to how her own process of self-actualisation is progressing because Colin is quite solidly in the way. Instead of descriptions of the garden's blossoming beauty, and Mary's reactions to it, the reader is treated to descriptions of Colin's calisthenics, his pomp and arrogance, and his demanding nature that he cannot seem to grow out of even by the end of the story.

Colin demands of Mary to see the garden, he demands to meet Dickon, he demands to be carried out of the house in order to do both of these things (Burnett, 2003: p. 116). In doing so his agency eclipses that of all of the other characters of the novel, including Mary's. This narrative shift culminates on the final page of the novel, where Mary as a character disappears entirely in favor of Colin's narrative of his return to health; he is shown as returning from the garden to the manor by his father's side as a fully healed individual, and Mary is completely absent from the scene (Burnett, 2003: p. 261). From the most important character to the least, Mary simply vanishes as the story takes a turn in which she is no longer needed, and Colin is left to sit on the main character throne as he bounds happily along back towards the house that was once his prison, and now will be his domain and future property. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser notes "...Mary slips into the background until she disappears entirely from the final chapter. The novel ends with the master of Misselthwaite and his son, Master Colin, crossing the lawn before their servants' admiring eyes" (1983: p. 9)

Thus we have witnessed the minimisation of Mary in its entirety, to the point where a character that is introduced halfway into the novel wrests control of the main character slot from Mary and makes it his own. U. C. Knoepflmacher notes: "Yet if The Secret Garden ends as the story

of Colin's mastery, a weak boy's recovery from an imaginary curvature of the spine, the book begins —and usually is remembered—as the story of the tough and indestructible Mary Lennox, a garden-builder from the very start. Indeed, the book was originally to be called Mistress Mary" (1983: p. 22). Indeed, if Mary is such an important character from the very beginning, such that the novel was originally going to be named after her by Burnett, how is it that Colin ended up becoming more important in the long run in terms of the narrative? Keep in mind that the impression Mary makes upon the reader before her untimely disappearance from the narrative is less important than the disappearance itself. Consider Colin's purpose within the narrative: why is he there when Mary is already established as a character with a projected character arc that has a logical conclusion as a bildungsroman and solid metaphor with the garden itself?

Indeed, the sad yet highly interesting part about this whole business is that the story's narrative would have been greatly improved and even simplified with the removal of Colin from the story entirely. In my mind's eye, Mary would have stayed the main character of the story, Dickon would have helped her restore the garden, and she would have come to terms with her new place in the world and the metaphor of the garden being her own internal tranquility would come to fruition and bloom. Archibald would return to the manor and be shocked and pleased by the rebirth of his wife's garden, and he would fully accept Mary as his daughter and see something of his dead wife in her, restoring his happiness in the world and naming her a rightful heir to his estate. Mary would be recognised and rewarded for her own personal growth, and the house, garden, and everyone that lives in and around it, would benefit from such a story, and there would be a happy ending for all to enjoy. In this way, we would have the restoration of Archibald's happiness, the blooming of Mary's happiness, and in general a very solid bildungsroman with a girl in the main character's shoes. Mary could have been an icon and model for girls everywhere, a character whom they could look up to and see themselves in, learning to dig deep into their fertile minds to come to terms with their reality

and realise that they too can bloom with their own hard work and creativity. They could follow Mary's example and grow roots and move earth and water their own personal creativity until it blooms into maturity.

What I find the most interesting about the reactions documented by U.C. Knoepflmacher, Adrian Gunther, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, and Linda T Parsons, is that most girls upon reading the story actually do end up loving Mary's story and fondly remember the novel as her own story, with little recollection of Colin. The idea of Mary overshadows the real ending of the novel, and in the minds of these little girls they look back on The Secret Garden as a celebration of femininity and its connection to nature. Of course, this is not how the story actually goes; Burnett foils that possibility with the narrative shift upon Colin's introduction. Because the story re-centers on him, the subtle meaning of the novel takes on a rather insidious underlying message, one highly detrimental to the metaphor of the garden, Mary's well-being, and indeed the well-being of every little girl who reads the novel.

With Colin as the replacement main character, stripping Mary of her status, the narrative in effect tells the reader that Mary's story does not matter when a man is introduced mid-way into the narrative who can take her place in the narrative. Mary is required as a caretaker, but her own inner happiness is not what is at stake. "Mary, the book's seeming protagonist, slips into an increasingly subsidiary role. The garden becomes the boy's preserve, the place where his fragile mother (Mary's paternal aunt) had sustained her fatal injury. It is his to reclaim. He is the future master of Misselthwaite; he is a male" (Knoepflmacher, 1983: p. 24). There can be no question that there is a gender disparity here, for not only does Colin usurp Mary's coming of age story of soul searching and growth, he usurps the androgynous Dickon from his task of helping Mary. Indeed, Dickon is too busy helping Colin for there to be a mention of him helping Mary at any remaining point in the novel. In essence Colin steals Mary's mentor and appropriates him to his own use, ordering Mary to

bring him into the house, and ordering Dickon to carry him out of the house.

Colin's physical and mental health come first, and once he is fully restored, Mary is free to fade away completely. This narrative shift heavily implies that Mary's narrative is not nearly as important as Colin's. The male narrative is more important than the female's narrative, and thus the female narrative is not strong enough to keep the spotlight. It is deemed not interesting enough to see through, and is exchanged for a boy's story of recovery because a girl's story of discovery is too weak of a narrative, and thus can and will be overshadowed. The important question here is why. Why is the boy's narrative given precedence over the girl's? Why is Colin's story more important than Mary's, that it can be introduced halfway through the novel and resolved, whereas Mary's story is introduced at the very first page and peters out to nothing by the last? Why is Colin as a character given that much more attention by Burnett than Mary when Colin is clearly the inferior and immature character?

Nonetheless, girls who read this story could identify with Mary at the very beginning, and then be taught through the narrative shift that her story does not actually matter in the long run of the book. Therefore, their own stories do not matter, and that their role might start out as important, but ultimately becomes unimportant when a man becomes involved. This is a highly damaging and dangerous idea to plant at so young an age. Young girls need strong role models just as boys do, and when Mary gets tossed away in this narrative, Burnett gives the impression of the opposite. Girls are taught in this manner that boys will always take precedence over them, cementing an unhealthy inferiority within them that is societal, taught, and learned behavior; the term for this phenomenon is internalised misogyny. As Adrian Gunther notes: “Burnett may have thought she was a feminist, but it is predominantly the male quest she is interested in” (1994: p. 159), and with this observation the narrative shift essentially disqualifies The Secret Garden from being any sort of feminist text celebrating a girl coming of age when a boy derails the story halfway through.

Adrian Gunther however is of the opinion that Colin "never at any point displaces Mary" (1994: p. 168) within the text, which I would like to argue the opposite. The process that Colin displaces Mary is a subtle one, but it is very much so present. To wit, "[Mary] advances so much further along the path of self-discovery than does Colin that we cannot help but experience her as more important" (1994: p. 160), which is definitely true in the eyes of the audience but it simply is not so within the realm of the text. The main point here I want to push back against is this one: "An examination reveals that in almost every case in this last section of the book, where Colin is referred to, [Mary] is also" (1994: p. 161). This is true, but in what way is Mary mentioned alongside Colin? Taking it to the text of the novel itself, Mary is barely even mentioned by name alongside Colin, with his presence eclipsing her agency upon almost every mention of her: "The little girl from India was sitting on a big footstool looking on" (Burnett, 2003: p. 180), and in most of the scenes Colin's dialogue dominates the narrative only until he addresses Mary directly.

To consider this is to consider the idea of Mary herself as more powerful than her in-text representation at this point in the story. If she is not mentioned by name and speaks only when spoken to, her presence within the novel seems to have run its course while the narrative itself is focused on Colin and his politics within the house before he even enters the garden itself. Dickon and Mary visit Colin because he demands that it will happen, exercising his authority in order to shape his world, but in doing so the narrative shifts focus from the story of Mary and her rehabilitation of herself and the garden and more towards a notion of getting Colin into the garden because he just wants to be in the garden. And of course, once Colin gets into the garden, he claims it for himself: "It is my garden. I am fond of it" (Burnett, 2003: p. 200) despite not knowing of its existence until Mary told him of it. So while in truth Mary is the standout character of the novel, it is Colin who takes over through this narrative shift, and Mary while still present within the text, takes a definitive back seat to his story upon his introduction.

The potential damage that this narrative shift could have on the developing child is tremendous. U.C. Knoepflmacher notes that even children pick up on the narrative shift and seem not to understand the purpose of Colin's narrative:

> The responses of two of my students, both of whom first read The Secret Garden at the age of eight...Writes one: "It was the garden I pictured and Dickon; Colin did not interest me." The other one admits: "I detested Colin and strongly identified with Mary, but I simply must not have paid much attention to Colin..." By successfully screening out discordancies [sic] that an adult reader cannot as easily dismiss, the child reader can always be more selective" (1983: p. 31)

But as selective as a child reader can be, it is worth noting that even though they may not be able to make sense of the narrative shift, they are readily able to see its presence. The devil is in the details, and thus with how subtle the narrative shift is, it is attempting to instruct the quiet dominance of the male narrative over the female. With Colin's introduction and subsequent usurpation of Mary's importance, the institutionalisation of internalised misogyny acts as a means of narrative misogyny, which in turn repeats the cycle. Internalised misogyny is taught through the narrative misogyny of the narrative shift. So while children can pick up on it, they do not yet have the tools with which to properly identify it, question it, and reject it; thus it becomes a manner of pedagogy for the patriarchy at large.

There are several scenes in which this pedagogy is on full display within the narrative, and the first comes when Colin is first introduced into the narrative. One evening Mary is laying awake in bed because the rain and the sound of the wind "wuthering" through the trees outside keeps her awake, but she distinguishes the sound of a child crying through all the other noise. She follows the sound to find Colin in his room on a bed. Colin's use of language and the way that Mary describes his actions are the most important things to note here, because Colin is never once polite, and all of

his actions are demands. ""Come here," he said, still keeping his strange eyes fixed on her with an anxious expression. She came close to the bed and he put out his hand and touched her" (Burnett, 2003: p. 110). Colin demands that Mary approach him, and does not hesitate or ask to touch her; he just does it. Colin does not need permission in his own mind, and he has no concept of personal space. He makes demands and expects Mary to follow them. "Tell me your name again" (Burnett, 2003: p. 110), he says not grasping that Mary is quite real despite her presence in his room. Colin is even a little manipulative, for when Mary suggests leaving he says "I should be sure you were a dream if you went. If you are real, sit down on that big footstool and talk. I want to hear about you" (Burnett, 2003: p. 112). Never-mind the fact that he does not ask Mary politely to so, he does not ask permission to pry into her life either. He manipulates Mary, using his supposed illness to keep her there and make her stay, allowing him full access to her life and experiences out of guilt of his bedridden status. The narrator even uses the phrase "He made her tell him" (Burnett, 2003: p. 112), which suggests that Mary had very little choice in the matter.

Mary herself notes that despite this being their first meeting, Colin is overbearing and spoiled: "He thought that the whole world belonged to him" (Burnett, 2003: p. 114), for the phrases that he uses regarding his medical staff and the help of the house are akin to tyrannical. "I am going to make them" (Burnett, 2003: p. 115) he says, and treats Mary in much the same way. Upon showing her the portrait of his mother (of which he claims "she is mine" (Burnett, 2003: p. 118)), he demands of her "Draw the curtain again," with the narrator stating "Mary did as she was told and returned to her footstool" (Burnett, 2003: p. 118). Mary, for whatever reason, is being quite amicable to this mysterious boy and his demands despite having never met him before. Consider the audience and how they would respond to this sort of treatment of what is supposed to be the main character. Mary is wholly characterised before this as a disagreeable child with a fiery temper, but as soon as Colin is introduced, he as a man can order her around and she just does it without fanfare.

In this way, the very first interaction between Colin and Mary, Colin is shown as superior to Mary on a social level, and in this way patriarchal gender roles are taught simply through the actions of the characters and the words they use. This subtlety is highly important, for it can slip under the radar while seeming innocuous, for it reinforces an internalised misogynistic idea on the societal roles of the sexes: men give orders, and women follow them without question, ignoring the fact that this is completely out of character for Mary and that she owes absolutely nothing to this boy she has just met.

Speaking on the subtlety of this patriarchal pedagogy as well as the narrative shift aforementioned, Linda T Parsons presents the idea that the feminine role within the narrative is one of subversion, and that in taking on the healing role of a mother figure for Colin, Mary is allying herself with nature and the feminine that it inherently represents. Parsons argues that precisely because Mary is absent from the final pages of the novel is what in the end makes her a more powerful character within the novel, for while Colin and Archibald embrace outside the walls of the garden, herself and Dickon do not join them for they remain within the garden to embrace the feminine rather than side with the masculine outside (2002: p. 266). I want to point out however that if the novel started off as the story of Mary, it still remains considerably odd that the story does not end with Mary. This is what I have been arguing: Colin's story wrests control of the narrative, leaving Mary behind in the garden while he goes off to become a masculine nuisance within the house. While the garden itself is certainly the more desirable place to be, and it itself holds the power of the house, Mary needs to emerge from the garden as an embodiment of the feminine strength of the garden.

This is what the projection of the story should build to, and it is precisely why I believe that Colin as a character is wholly unnecessary within the narrative. If Mary never met Colin, she herself would rehabilitate the garden and emerge from it a woman who, with all the power of the natural

world behind her and the grace of the feminine that it represents, could lead Misselthwaite Manor into a new era. No longer would there be hundreds of rooms with most of them locked away, her mere presence within the house would have the garden invade and bring life throughout the manor, in the same way that Lilias Craven had once done. This is the true way that this story should end, with what was once a grumpy, spoiled, and arrogant child transformed by nature into a powerful, independent, graceful woman that would be ready to lead and prosper. As it stands, all Mary does with her feminine power is reassert the patriarchy for a new reign of the Cravens, who shut the garden and locked it away upon the death of Lilias Craven, shutting away that feminine power and leaving it to wither and rot. Not only is this a waste, but it highlights the idea that women are there to bolster the power of the men in power: internalised misogyny, which in turn, leads to the real ending full of narrative misogyny.

With the removal of Colin from The Secret Garden, not only is the narrative as a whole improved upon, but the problematic implications of internalised misogyny and the domination of male influence over female is also stripped from the novel. Mary is left to be her own person, to rehabilitate the garden, and in doing so rehabilitate her own soul. She is left to carve out her own little space in the world after the tragic death of her parents. She is left to examine herself, and with the help of Dickon as her translator to nature itself, she learns how to define herself and who she really is with the garden as the metaphor for her own soul. She helps it to grow once again and indeed bloom. She helps Archibald Craven finally get over the death of his wife and becomes like a daughter to him, taking over the estate as its rightful heir. Colin is the bane of this story, and with his own strong-handed inclusion in the novel, the quality of the novel drops heavily as he wrests control of the narrative and makes it his own. Indeed in this version of the novel there is an afterword by Sandra Gilbert, and she says all of this and more with the barest mention of Colin (2003). This is apropos for Gilbert reasserts the story as the bildungsroman of Mary Lennox by tellingly neglecting

Colin's usurpation of the tale, but this is not the reality of the narrative; Colin Craven usurps the main character spot from Mary Lennox as much as rational folk would like to pretend that he does not. Burnett allows Colin to stride away with the spotlight at the very end of the novel, leaving Mary shunted off the stage; the proverbial shrew has been tamed, and thus her agency and potency as a character is diminished as a result.

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