



# Mosswood Connections

## The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett: Lessons and Activities

### Summary.

A beloved classic of children's literature, *The Secret Garden*, tells an inspirational tale of transformation and empowerment. Mary Lennox, a sickly and contrary little girl, is orphaned to dim prospects in a gloomy English manor – her only friend is a bed-ridden boy named Colin whose prospects may be dimmer than hers. But when Mary finds the key to a Secret Garden, the magical powers of transformation fall within her reach.

<b>Content Standard(s).</b>	ELA(6)	1. Apply strategies, including making complex predictions, interpreting characters' behaviors, and comparing and contrasting, to comprehend sixth-grade recreational reading materials.
	ELA(6)	5. Analyze short stories, novels, plays, myths, and nonfiction materials for distinguishing characteristics.
	ELA(6)	6. Identify the author's purpose as entertainment, information, or persuasion in selected works.
	AED(6-8) Visual Arts	1. Create works of art utilizing a variety of traditional and nontraditional media and techniques.
	TC2(6-8)	2. Publish digital products that communicate curriculum concepts.
	TC2(6-8)	5. Use basic features of word processing, spreadsheets, databases, and presentation software.
	ELA2010(6)	5. Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot. [RL.6.5]
	ELA2010(6)	17. Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue. [RI.6.7]



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### **Ideas for Reports and Papers**

1. Frances Hodgson Burnett liked happy endings so much that she called herself "Mrs. Romantic." She believed that it was possible to transform reality by thinking positively. How does positive or negative thinking affect the lives of Mary, Colin, Dickon, and Mr. Craven?
2. How does the garden function as a metaphor for the way Mary and Colin are at the start of the novel? Trace the ways this metaphor is realized or fleshed out in the course of the novel. In what ways does the garden's transformation into a mother figure that protects, nurtures, and teaches, alter this metaphor?
3. Compare Dickon's background with Mary's and Colin's. How is it different? How do class differences function in the novel? Why is Dickon so often described as "common"? Does this contradict or support the idea that he is "a Yorkshire angel"?
4. Examine the situation of servants in the novel. What is a servant's life like? How are they treated? How does the narrator regard servants? Take your examples from both Yorkshire and India. Compare the situation of servants in Yorkshire with that of servants in India.
5. Which characters are most strongly associated with the world of the manor house? Which characters are most strongly associated with the secret garden? What does this opposition suggest?
6. Write a review about *The Secret Garden*.
7. Which character would you like to be friends with? Why?
8. If you were to have your own Secret Garden what would it look like?
9. You're given a plot of land and have the financial resources to do what you please. What's the plan?
10. Have you ever acted like "A little Rajah"? What would happen if you did?



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### Discussion Questions:

1. How did Mary change throughout the story? Where these change only mental? Only physical? Or both? Why?
2. Is the garden described in this novel different from a garden you have in your own yard? Why is it secret? What does secrecy suggest?
3. Mary and Colin are often described as being unpleasant and rude. Martha, in fact, says Mary is "as tyrannical as a pig" and that Colin is the "worst young newt as ever was." Why are both of these children so ill-tempered? Whom does Burnett hold responsible for their behavior – themselves or their parents? How does this fit into one of the larger themes of the novel, that of the "fallen world of adults"?
4. "Disagreeable-looking child"? Looks? Mrs. Medlock is called "disagreeable." Look at the word in this context. How does this word suggest inner states of being?
5. Why did Mary and Colin agree that Mrs. Sowerby could be let in on the secret?
6. Why does Mary respond so well to Martha? What characteristics of Martha's personality are responsible for awakening the gentleness hidden in Mary? Compare Martha's treatment of Mary to Mary's treatment of Colin. Does it have the same effect on Colin as it does on Mary?
7. What was Colin doing that caused the nurse and Dr. Craven to become suspicious that Colin was no longer sickly? What did Mary and Colin agree must be done in order to throw off any suspicions as to the extent of Colin's improvement?
8. Upon Mary's first encounter with Dickon, Burnett describes the boy in this way: "His speech was so quick and easy. It sounded as if he liked her and was not the least afraid she would not



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like him, though he was a common moor boy, in patched clothes and with a funny face and a rough, rusty-red head. As she came closer to him she noticed that there was a clean fresh scent of heather and grass and leaves about him, almost as if he were made of them." What is significant about this passage? Are there any particular motifs that seem to be connected specifically to Dickon?

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9. How did Mrs. Sowerby help Mary and Colin overcome their difficulty of eating less? What did Colin conclude about Mrs. Sowerby from this? How did Dickon further help the ravenous children?

10. Compare Dickon's upbringing with Mary's and Colin's. How is it different? Is it important, or just incidental, that Dickon is a "common moor boy" rather than a member of the "privileged class"?

11. What did Dickon learn from Bob Haworth which helped Colin build up his weak muscles?

12. How did Mary and Colin's newfound sources for nourishment reawaken the nurse, Dr. Craven, and Mrs. Medlock's suspicions?

13. Referring to Colin's mother, Mary said to Colin, "You are so like her now that sometimes I think perhaps you are her ghost made into a boy." How did Colin respond to this?

### Vocabulary Words

**Anxiety:** painful or apprehensive uneasiness of mind usually over an impending or anticipated ill

**Atrophy:** decrease in size or wasting away of a body part or tissue; *also:* arrested development or loss of a part or organ incidental to the normal development or life of an animal or plant

**Bloated:** being much larger than what is warranted; obnoxiously vain

**Bounteous:** giving or disposed to give freely; liberally bestowed



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**clotted cream:** a thick cream made chiefly in England by slowly heating whole milk on which the cream has been allowed to rise and then skimming the cooled cream from the top —called also *Devonshire cream*

**Copious:** yielding something abundantly; full of thought, information, or matter; present in large quantity; taking place on a large scale

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**Currants:** a small seedless raisin grown chiefly in the Levant

**Disconcerting:** to throw into confusion; to disturb the composure of

**Domain:** complete and absolute ownership of land

**Draughts:** a game much like checkers.

**Fluently:** capable of flowing: fluid; capable of using a language easily and accurately

**Gentry:** upper or ruling class

**Inordinately:** exceeding reasonable limits

**Pilgrimage:** a journey of a pilgrim; *especially* one to a shrine or a sacred place

**Pother:** confused or fidgety flurry of activity; commotion

**Restive:** stubbornly resisting control; balky; marked by impatience or uneasiness

**Revelation:** an act of revealing or communicating divine truth

**Secrete:** to form and give off (a secretion)

**Warrant:** sanction, authorization; *also*: evidence for or token of authorization; a commission or document giving authority to do something; *especially*: a writing that authorizes a person to pay or deliver to another and the other to receive money or other consideration

### Symbols

#### The Robin Redbreast

When Mary first sees the robin redbreast, the reader is struck by a number of similarities between them: like her, he began life as an orphan; like her, he finds a haven in the secret



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garden; like her, he began to seek out friendship once he lost his family and came to realize he was lonely. The friendliness of the little bird both helps Mary to recognize that she is lonely and to assuage that loneliness. This is significant in that Mary first befriends a wild creature, a distinctive part of the English countryside; the robin is explicitly described as being "not at all like birds in India." She thus makes her first connection with a part of the moor, not a part of the manor. The robin is a representative of wise and gentle nature—part of Chapter XXV is told from his point of view, as though to prove that animals really *do* have minds of their own. It is he who first shows Mary the key to the secret garden, thereby suggesting that nature itself is colluding with her wish to get inside. Later, the robin's building of a nest with his mate is compared to Mary's nest-building with Dickon in the secret garden.

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### Roses

The roses are Mistress Craven's personal symbol; they are mentioned whenever she is mentioned. The bower from which she fell to her death was covered with roses; when Mary first discovers the garden, it is still flooded with rose-trees and rosebushes, though none are in bloom. Dickon reassures her that they are not dead, and remarks, "There will be fountains of roses here in the spring." This foreshadows the way in which the resurrection of the garden will bring the spirit of Mistress Craven back within its walls—she exists wherever roses are in bloom. The tree from which Colin's mother fell to her death can itself be said to undergo a kind of resurrection: though it is the only thing in the garden which is wholly dead, it is soon "covered with new roses," so that the dead wood is no longer visible. The new roses symbolize both the children and the spirit of Colin's mother herself, which has come back to the garden to watch over her son.

### Activity Ideas.

- ❖ Design your own garden.
- ❖ Go bird watching.
- ❖ Recreate a trip from India to England
- ❖ Have a picnic



**The Secret Garden**

**Quiz**

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How did Archibald Craven's wife die?

- (A) Starvation
- (B) After a bad fall from a tree
- (C) In a house fire
- (D) Pecked to death by ducks

Who helps Mary find the key to the secret garden?

- (A) Ben Weatherstaff
- (B) Mrs. Medlock
- (C) The robin redbreast
- (D) A mysterious stranger

Mary thinks that Colin Craven is like:

- (A) An Indian Rajah
- (B) Dickon
- (C) His father
- (D) A small rabbit

Misselthwaite Manor is located:



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- (A) Near the ocean
- (B) In the desert
- (C) On the shores of a lake
- (D) In the middle of a moor

Archibald Craven sends Mary a number of gifts. These DO NOT include:

- (A) A picture-book
- (B) A painted doll
- (C) A golden pen
- (D) A children's game

Mary thinks of her mother's dresses as being:

- (A) As red as blood
- (B) As white as snow
- (C) Full of lace
- (D) Made of steel

Mary's mother does not leave India in time to escape the cholera because:

- (A) She wanted to go to a dinner party
- (B) She was afraid of the journey through the mountains
- (C) She couldn't afford a horse on which to make the trip
- (D) She was tied to a chair

Martha and her family give Mary:

- (A) A spotted puppy
- (B) A silk scarf
- (C) A jar of mustard



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- (D) A jump rope

Dickon, Mary, and Colin learn their daily exercises from:

- (A) Bob Haworth
- (B) Mr. Pitcher
- (C) Ben Weatherstaff
- (D) The radio

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Archibald Craven's wife was named:

- (A) Rose
- (B) The Lady Spenser
- (C) Lillas
- (D) Olivia

In one of Misselthwaite's many rooms, Mary finds a portrait of a girl who resembles herself.

This girl is holding:

- (A) A single rose
- (B) A white kitten
- (C) A green parrot
- (D) A leather-bound book

Dickon's crow is named:

- (A) Wally
- (B) Soot
- (C) Cinder
- (D) Nut



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When Mary first goes wandering through Misselthwaite Manor, she finds:

- (A) An ancient Greek statue
- (B) A pair of silver candlesticks
- (C) A highly-polished grand piano
- (D) A collection of ivory elephants

Dickon is constantly accompanied by a menagerie of animals. These DO NOT include:

- (A) A fighting hawk
- (B) A newborn lamb
- (C) A red fox cub
- (D) A moor pony

The door to the secret garden has been locked for:

- (A) Seven years
- (B) Ten years
- (C) Fifteen years
- (D) Hundreds of years

The writing of *The Secret Garden* was partially motivated by Frances Hodgson Burnett's interest in:



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- (A) German idealism
- (B) French existentialism
- (C) Christian science
- (D) Catholicism

*The Secret Garden* was first published in:

- (A) 1921
- (B) 1847
- (C) 1909
- (D) 1983

The boy who first calls Mary "Quite Contrary" is named:

- (A) William
- (B) Harold
- (C) Colin
- (D) Basil

The first gardens which Mary explores at Misselthwaite are filled with:

- (A) Vegetables and fruit trees
- (B) Blooming marigolds
- (C) Weeds and dust
- (D) Hollyhocks

In the secret garden, Mary, Dickon, Colin, and Ben Weatherstaff sing a song together. It is called:

- (A) Sweet Home Alabama
- (B) The Doxology



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- (C) Come All Ye Faithful
- (D) God Bless the Child

Dickon is compared to:

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- (A) An Indian rajah
- (B) A toreador
- (C) A snake charmer
- (D) A famous English scholar

In the Yorkshire dialect that Dickon speaks, this word is used to mean "alive":

- (A) Lorry
- (B) Mun
- (C) Wick
- (D) Bonny

When Colin grows up, he hopes to:

- (A) Make scientific discoveries
- (B) Become a boxer
- (C) Appear on television
- (D) Tend gardens

Susan Sowerby compares the world to:

- (A) A basketball
- (B) An orange
- (C) A bowl of cherries
- (D) A box of chocolates



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