

THE SECRET GARDEN
by
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The film *The Secret Garden* is based on a novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, published in 1911. Several previous films and a stage musical have been based on the story, which has the quality of a favorite childhood fairy tale. The story is fateful and formative, holding a personal and collective significance, and seems to appeal especially to girls and women, who speak of their love of it in enthusiastic terms. Many people who have seen the film have closely identified with at least one character.

The initial setting of the film captures a central theme throughout the story: the absence or abuse of the Feminine. Mary Lennox, the story's protagonist, born in late nineteenth-century India, is orphaned at age ten when her parents, who paid little attention to her, are killed in an earthquake. A spoiled, angry, and sullen child, she is shipped back to England, to the home of her uncle, Lord Craven. A desolate and depressed man in his thirties, crippled by a spinal curvature, Lord Craven is filled with unresolved grief over the death of his beloved wife, Mary's mother's twin sister, ten years ago. Besides the painful memories of his wife, he can't stand to be in the presence of his sickly, death-obsessed, ten-year-old son, Colin (Mary's cousin), and so travels frequently.

This story captures the malaise of a patriarchal society that is narcissistic, materialistic, power-, pleasure- and dominance-oriented by highlighting the disturbances in this unhappy girl, her grieving uncle, and her sickly cousin. All three are powerfully affected by the absence of positive feminine energy and by the presence of deeply wounded masculine energy. Mary, however, finds within her psyche a wellspring for her own and others' healing.

On a cold wintery morning, Mary leaves the dark, dank, decaying manor house and begins to explore its grounds. She meets her first friend at her new home, a robin. This robin, like a shaman's power animal, leads our wounded healer to a secret garden that has been closed off for ten years, since Lord Craven's wife died from a fall off the garden swing. The robin helps Mary find the hidden garden door, which she opens with a key she had found in her dead aunt's bureau. With the special help of a boy who lives on the estate, a Pan-like figure named Dickon, Mary brings this moribund garden back to life. The garden becomes the *temenos* for the transformation, healing, and restoration of all the wounded characters.

The image of an enclosed secret garden is a compelling archetypal motif. In this film it is a beautiful image symbolizing the life-giving, protective, and nurturing qualities of the Great Mother archetype, and an alchemical image of the Self. After Dickon teaches Mary to plant seeds and tend their growth, we watch in slow-motion cinematography as roots extend deep into the earth and flowers bud and bloom. Mary brings Colin into the garden, and as the year progresses through its seasons, both children, like the garden,

come alive and regain physical and emotional vitality. Erich Neumann, a first generation follower of Carl Jung's philosophy, writes about the power of nature in *The Child*:

If the damage did not occur too early, if the earliest phase of life was characterized by a positive primal relationship, a compensatory experience of the Great Mother as impersonal archetype of nature, or as a tree, garden, forest, home or sky is perfectly possible. . . Here the primordial, archetypal experience of the world comes into its own, and forest, garden, or tree as symbol of the Great Mother becomes the Great Mother herself, ready to embrace the child in need of help. (p. 80)

One night in the garden, Mary, Colin, and Dickon perform a ritual that telepathically summons Colin's anguished and forlorn father home. Lord Craven symbolizes the masculine crippled by the loss of love in a one-sided patriarchal world. His response to the mysterious call portrays a deep psychic process: An over-burdened, masculine ego is revitalized by new attitudes gained from a connection to the child Mary, who leads him back to his son, and to the Great Mother archetype (the garden, which is the healing container for all of them).

Mary's communion with the secret garden is the dominant healing theme, but other restorative strategies are shown as well. In one scene, Mary intuitively uses a homeopathic-like remedy; she defuses Colin's tantrum by angrily ordering him to shut up! At another point she soothes Colin with imaginal storytelling techniques. At various times she utilizes a modern mind-body technique of positive thinking: When Colin first struggles to walk, she repeatedly exhorts, "You can do it!" And Mary and Colin together, in a shamanic mandalic circle ritual with others, use chanting, music, dancing, and play to telepathically summon Lord Craven home from France. Like all fairy tales, this story has a happy ending. Although it might seem an overly simplistic and sentimental resolution for those of us jaded by a century of war and other kinds of violence, *The Secret Garden* conveys a psychic truth regarding humankind's inner drive for healing.

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