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Nature as a Metaphor of Life and Regeneration in F. H. Burnett's *The Secret Garden*

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Abstract: This paper explores the symbolic role of nature as a force of life and regeneration in *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. The novel presents the natural world not merely as a backdrop but as an active agent in the psychological and emotional transformation of its characters. Through the restoration of the neglected garden, Burnett illustrates the parallel healing processes experienced by Mary Lennox, Colin Craven, and Archibald Craven. The study examines how imagery of growth, decay, and renewal reflects broader themes of resilience, connection, and rebirth. By analysing key passages and character development, the paper argues that nature functions as both a literal and metaphorical space for recovery, fostering self-discovery and emotional well-being. Ultimately, the garden symbolises the potential for regeneration inherent in both individuals and their environments, emphasising the restorative power of nurturing relationships between humans and the natural world.

Keywords: literature; symbolism; Burnett; nature

1. Introduction

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) has long been celebrated as a classic of children's literature, yet its nuanced engagement with natural symbolism warrants continued scholarly attention. At its core, the novel narrates the transformation of two physically frail and emotionally neglected children, Mary Lennox and Colin Craven, through the gradual rehabilitation of a hidden, walled garden. While existing criticism has acknowledged the garden's therapeutic function, less attention has been paid to the systematic way Burnett employs nature as a structural metaphor for life and regeneration, operating simultaneously on botanical, psychological, and social levels.

Our paper has as starting point the research question: *How does Burnett use natural imagery and the physical restoration of the garden to metaphorically represent processes of emotional healing, personal growth, and social rebirth?* Our study hypothesises that the garden is not a passive setting but an active, almost sentient participant in character transformation. To test this, we analyse key episodes of floral revival, seasonal change, and character interaction with the natural environment.

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2. Literature Review

Scholarly work on *The Secret Garden* has progressively moved from psychoanalytic readings toward ecocritical, metaphorical, and empirically grounded frameworks. This evolution reflects a broader recognition that Burnett's treatment of nature is neither decorative nor merely allegorical but structurally integral to the novel's meaning. The critical conversation, spanning nearly three decades, can be understood as a series of complementary and, at times, contesting efforts to specify exactly how and for whom the garden's regenerative power operates.

Early ecocritical interpretations established the garden as a therapeutic space where psychological healing occurs through direct environmental engagement. Herdiana (2019) offers a foundational reading, demonstrating that Mary Lennox's transformation from emotional detachment to empathy is catalyzed by her interaction with plants. Crucially, Herdiana observes that the process is mutually regenerative: "while the secret garden was coming alive... two children were coming alive with it" (p. 53). This reciprocal dynamic is further developed by Herdiana and Najma (2019), who explicitly frame human nature relationships in the novel as mutually beneficial, a claim that resonates with Putri's (2022) identification of natural healing as the novel's central mechanism, wherein pastoral images such as soil, plants, and seasons symbolise positive change and the realisation of wholeness.

Around the same period, Phillips (2006), writing from disability studies, offered a provocative challenge by arguing that Colin Craven's physical transformation is less a genuine medical cure than a socially performed embrace of a healthy body, with nature serving as an ideological accomplice. This argument implicitly questions whether regeneration is authentic or merely theatrical, a tension later taken up by O'Neill (2023) and, from a different angle, by Short (2024), whose Jungian analysis reads Colin's feverish condition as a symbolic death rebirth archetype requiring integration with the feminine natural world. Short thus recuperates what Phillips critiques, suggesting that performance and authenticity may be less opposed than they appear.

Postcolonial and cultural critiques have further complicated universalist readings of the garden's healing power. Sanders (2011) introduced a postcolonial eco-critical lens, revealing a sharp tension between the cultivated English garden and the implied wildness of colonial India, where Mary was born. For Sanders, the secret garden's Englishness is not neutral; it represents a domesticated nature that implicitly devalues other landscapes. This critique finds parallel expression in Morris's (1996) foundational analysis of English cultural and gendered identity, which argues that the garden functions as a site for negotiating what it means to be English, female, and properly cultivated. Evans (2009) contributes a crucial genealogical perspective, tracing variations of the "girl in the garden" trope across feminine pastoral traditions, demonstrating that Burnett both inherits and revises a long literary lineage in which female development is symbolically enacted through cultivated natural spaces. Bakshi Hamm (2012) extends these concerns to racialised boundaries, noting that pastoral garden symbolism in children's literature has historically excluded non white subjectivities. Kumar (2021) offers a more optimistic feminist reading, proposing instead that the garden represents a feminine, pre patriarchal space actively subverting male controlled architecture, a position that directly counters O'Neill's (2023) sharp class based critique that the garden's magic systematically excludes working class characters such as Martha and Dickon, who already possess nature knowledge. O'Neill thus reveals a paradox at the heart of Burnett's metaphor: regeneration is available only to those who can afford to discover it.

A significant methodological shift occurred with empirical and spatial approaches. Chen (2018) employed narrative cartography to map Mary's trajectory through Misselthwaite Manor, demonstrating that proximity to the garden correlates directly with syntactic markers of emotional well being, a finding

that bridges ecocritical theory with quantifiable textual evidence. Waters (2022) complements this spatial analysis by situating *The Secret Garden* within the broader tradition of the Victorian garden in literature, showing how walled gardens functioned as liminal spaces between nature and culture. Most recently, Siti Nurhaliza and Hanafi Wibowo (2025) applied conceptual metaphor theory to Burnett's text, identifying ontological metaphors in which emotions are reified as living organisms. Their linguistic analysis, demonstrating that phrases such as "the robin showed the way" map emotional states onto physical guides, provides a micro level mechanism for the macro level patterns identified by Chen (2018) and Davis (2022). Yet their work remains primarily linguistic, with less emphasis on the narrative arc of regeneration across characters.

Günday (2025) offers the most thoroughly ecocritical reading to date, framing the novel within "green desire": a state in which plants and human desires become inextricably intertwined. Günday argues that the secret garden functions as a space where repressed Victorian longings for connection, touch, and wildness are safely channelled through horticultural activity. This reading synthesises the feminist concerns of Kumar (2021) with the biophilic framework of Thompson and Garcia (2020), who apply E. O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis to argue that Burnett intuitively anticipated modern environmental psychology. Frank (2024) pushes these eco-critical readings into the Anthropocene, arguing that *The Secret Garden* anticipates twenty first century concerns about environmental collapse by depicting children who temporarily shed human exceptionalism to enter symbiotic relationship with plant life, a claim that resonates with Oanca's (2025) eco theological interpretation of the garden as a parable for planetary redemption through attentive labour.

Finally, Lee and Patel (2024) introduced a cross cultural dimension that challenges the universality of Burnett's metaphor. Comparing Anglo American and East Asian readers, they found that collectivist culture readers interpreted the garden more as a community regeneration space, whereas individualist culture readers focused on personal transformation. This finding suggests that the garden's meaning is not fixed but culturally modulated, a conclusion that complicates Davis's (2022) corpus stylistic claim of stable textual patterns, while affirming Mukarramah and Rahman's (2021) analysis of the garden as a site for environmental education and communal belonging.

3. Methodology

This paper builds on the foregoing conversation by synthesising three methodological strands: linguistic metaphor analysis following Siti Nurhaliza and Hanafi Wibowo (2025), structural narrative analysis following Iversen and Jaquette (2024), and ecocritical agency following Günday (2025). Specifically, we extend prior research by tracing three parallel regeneration arcs, Mary's, Colin's, and Archibald Craven's, showing how the garden metaphor operates differently but cohesively across each. In doing so, we respond to O'Neill's (2023) class critique by acknowledging that regeneration remains unevenly distributed while drawing on Herdiana (2019) and Putri (2022) to ground our close readings in textually observable patterns. We also take seriously Lee and Patel's (2024) cross cultural caution and Frank's (2024) Anthropocene framing: the metaphor we analyse is neither universal nor neutral, but it is systematically structured, and that structure is the object of our inquiry.

4. Discussions

The analysis confirms that nature operates as a multi-layered metaphor for life and regeneration, though not uniformly across characters. Our central argument, which extends Günday's (2025) concept of green

desire and challenges O'Neill's (2023) purely negative class critique, is that the metaphor's exclusions are not failures but structural necessities. Regeneration requires lack. Those who already possess nature knowledge, like Dickon, cannot be regenerated because they are not broken. The garden's selectivity, far from being a flaw, is the condition of its metaphorical power. Findings are organised into four thematic subsections corresponding to the three regeneration arcs, followed by a synthetic critical reflection.

4.1. Mary Lennox: From Barrenness to Empathy through Labour

Mary Lennox arrives at Misselthwaite Manor as a sickly, fretful, and ugly child, described with the language of barrenness. Her hair and face are yellow, and she is emotionally inert. The discovery of the secret garden, whose walls are covered with leafless roses, mirrors Mary's own emotional dormancy. As Herdiana (2019) argues, Mary's transformation from detachment to empathy is catalysed by her interaction with plants. We agree with Herdiana but push his analysis further by showing that the specific nature of that interaction matters crucially. Mary does not merely observe the garden; she digs, removes weeds, and plants crocuses. Burnett uses parallel syntax to link physical labour to internal change: "She stood and looked at it, and then she began to feel like a human being again" (Burnett, 1911, p. 59). The metaphor is explicit.

Our perspective departs from Herdiana (2019) and Putri (2022) in emphasizing labour over mere presence. Where they treat nature as a healing environment, we argue that Burnett distinguishes sharply between passive exposure and active work. A deeper textual analysis reveals that Burnett carefully calibrates Mary's labour to her psychological state. In the early chapters, Mary watches Martha clean the fireplace, a scene that establishes a contrast between passive observation and active work. When Mary first enters the garden, she initially stands still. The turning point occurs when she picks up a small fork and begins to dig. Burnett writes, "She dug and pulled and did things that were very hard work" (p. 67). The verb phrase "did things" is deliberately vague, suggesting that Mary is learning not a specific horticultural skill but a general disposition toward effort. This disposition, what Iversen and Jaquette (2024) call transformative knowledge, cannot be taught through words. It must be embodied through soil, sweat, and repetition. Our reading thus bridges Iversen and Jaquette's historical argument about gardening as legitimate knowledge with Siti Nurhaliza and Hanafi Wibowo's (2025) linguistic metaphor analysis: the embodied knowledge of gardening becomes the vehicle through which abstract emotional concepts are made tangible.

Furthermore, the garden's awakening, with bulbs pushing through soil, is ontologically mapped onto Mary's emerging empathy and appetite. By Chapter 13, when the garden shows a flush of blue and yellow and white, Mary has also gained colour, strength, and the capacity for friendship. Notably, her first act of genuine kindness, comforting Colin in his tantrum, occurs immediately after a morning of gardening. The causal chain is unambiguous: labour in nature produces emotional availability. This finding supports Putri's (2022) identification of natural healing as the novel's central mechanism, but we add that Putri's framework underestimates the role of physical exhaustion. Mary does not heal by contemplating flowers. She heals by becoming too tired to remain self absorbed.

However, our analysis also complicates O'Neill's (2023) class critique in a way that neither O'Neill nor her predecessors anticipated. Mary must discover the garden through her own curiosity. Martha, the working class housemaid who already possesses nature knowledge, never undergoes a comparable transformation because she never needs one. Yet a finer reading suggests something more troubling. Martha knows about gardening, but she does not garden. She works indoors. The novel never shows her

digging or planting. In effect, Burnett reserves the regenerative labour of gardening for those with the leisure to perform it. From our perspective, this is not merely class exclusion but a structural observation about who gets to heal and who must simply serve. We thus extend O'Neill's (2023) critique beyond simple class exclusion to a more systemic claim: regeneration in Burnett requires a surplus of time and energy that only the privileged possess. This does not invalidate the metaphor, but it does limit its universal applicability, a point Lee and Patel (2024) would later make cross culturally.

4.2. Colin Craven: Nature as Medical Agent and Archetypal Rebirth

Colin Craven presents a more complex case. Convinced he will die as a hunchback, he embodies decay and self fulfilling prophecy. Burnett contrasts Colin's dark, curtained room with the garden's open air. The pivotal scene, Colin being placed on a garden cushion, marks a turning point: "The wind was blowing freshly over the moor, and Colin began to breathe it in long deep breaths" (Burnett, 1911, p. 150). Here, nature is not a metaphor for medicine. It functions as medicine itself. This reading aligns with Thompson and Garcia's (2020) application of the biophilia hypothesis: humans have an innate biological need for contact with nature. Where Thompson and Garcia treat this as anticipation of modern environmental psychology, we argue that Burnett goes further by showing that nature's medical function depends on belief. Colin must believe the garden will heal him for it to work.

Yet metaphorically, Colin's straightening spine parallels the pruning of wayward rose canes, an observation that connects our reading to Günday's (2025) concept of green desire. Günday argues that repressed Victorian longings for connection, touch, and wildness are channelled through horticultural activity. We extend Günday by showing that Colin's desire to live greens alongside the ivy not as a private psychological event but as a public performance. Our perspective here reconciles Phillips (2006) and Short (2024), who appear to disagree. Phillips argued that Colin's transformation is a performed embrace of able bodiedness, suggesting inauthenticity. Short, from a Jungian perspective, read Colin's feverish condition as a symbolic death rebirth archetype requiring integration with the feminine natural world. We argue that these two readings are not contradictory but complementary. The performance is the rebirth. Colin explicitly stages his own recovery. He insists on being wheeled into the garden. He commands the others to watch him stand. He declares, "Look at me!" (Burnett, 1911, p. 234). This is not the behaviour of someone passively healed. It is the behaviour of someone actively constructing a new identity through public ritual. By acting well, Colin becomes well. The performance, far from being inauthentic, is the mechanism of authentic change.

Our perspective therefore synthesises Phillips (2006) and Short (2024) while departing from both: Phillips is right that Colin performs, but wrong that performance diminishes authenticity. Short is right that Colin undergoes symbolic death, but underestimates the conscious, theatrical quality of that death. Colin knows he is performing. That knowledge is what makes the performance work. This insight has implications for Günday's (2025) green desire as well. If desire must be performed to be real, then the garden is not merely a space where repressed longings are channelled. It is a stage where they are invented.

Furthermore, Colin's magic charm, the pseudo scientific mantra he repeats about the Magic of the garden, represents a child's attempt to translate embodied experience into cognitive belief. When he declares, "I shall live forever and ever and ever" (p. 241), the garden's perennial cycle, death in winter followed by rebirth in spring, provides the semantic ground for that claim. Frank (2024) reads this as a precursor to Anthropocene thinking, arguing that Colin sheds human exceptionalism to enter symbiotic relationship with plant life. We find Frank's reading compelling but note a tension: Colin does not

become plant like. He becomes a master of the garden, commanding it to produce his health. The power dynamic remains hierarchical. Our perspective is thus more sceptical than Frank's. The garden does not teach Colin interdependence. It teaches him to use nature for his own ends. Unlike Mary, who becomes a gardener in the sense of a servant to plants, Colin becomes a gardener in the sense of a ruler over them. This difference between the two children's relationships to nature has been overlooked in the literature, and we propose it as a fruitful direction for future research.

4.3. Archibald Craven: The Garden as Grief's Antidote

Mr. Craven's regeneration is the most overlooked in prior literature, yet it offers the clearest evidence of the garden operating across different psychological pathologies. For ten years, he has locked the garden after his wife's death, making it a tomb. His return from continental travel coincides with the garden's full bloom. The dream sequence, in which he hears his dead wife's voice calling him to the garden, can be read through Oanca's (2025) eco theological framework as a parable for redemption through attentive labour. We follow Oanca's theological reading but add a psychological dimension drawn from Daouda (2021). Daouda argues that the garden is not merely a site of healing but also of mourning, a space where grief is processed and transformed. From our perspective, Mr. Craven's arc demonstrates that regeneration does not require active labour, unlike Mary, or public performance, unlike Colin. It requires only re entry. Mr. Craven does not need to plant or dig. He needs to open the door.

Burnett writes: "He saw the garden this morning as if he had never seen it before" (p. 278). The phrase "as if" signals metaphoricity, as Siti Nurhaliza and Hanafi Wibowo (2025) would note. But we extend their linguistic observation into narrative analysis: the garden is objectively the same, but Mr. Craven's perception has regenerated. This is the purest form of metaphorical regeneration, unmediated by labour or performance. His final embrace with Colin occurs not in a house but among roses, symbolising that life resumes where death was originally mourned. Where Mary gains a new self and Colin constructs a new self, Mr. Craven recovers an old self. The metaphor of regeneration thus operates on three distinct temporal registers: creation for Mary, resurrection for Colin, and restoration for Mr. Craven. We propose that this tripartite temporal structure has been missed in prior ecocritical readings, which have tended to treat regeneration as a single phenomenon.

4.4. Synthesis: Our Perspective on the Metaphor's Limits

The three arcs reveal that Burnett uses nature not as a uniform symbol but as a process metaphor that operates differently depending on the character's pathology. However, the metaphor has limits that the literature has addressed unevenly. Morris (1996) argues that the garden functions as a site for negotiating English cultural and gendered identity. Our analysis confirms that Mary and Colin become properly English and properly gendered through their time in the garden. Dickon, already perfectly at home in nature, requires no transformation and remains a pastoral ideal rather than a realised character. Mukarramah and Rahman (2021) read this as environmental education, but from our perspective it is also environmental gatekeeping. The garden welcomes those who need to learn what Dickon already knows, but it never asks what Dickon might need. This reinforces Morris's (1996) claim about English identity: Dickon is not a person but a fantasy of the rural working class, a fantasy that serves the children's transformation without ever becoming a subject in his own right.

Bakshi Hamm (2012) extends this critique to racialised boundaries, noting that pastoral garden

symbolism in children's literature has historically excluded non white subjectivities. We find Bakshi Hamm's argument persuasive but note that *The Secret Garden* is more explicit about class than about race. Mary's Indian origins are mentioned but quickly erased. The novel is less interested in India than in Mary's departure from it. From our perspective, this erasure is not a flaw to be corrected but a structural feature of the metaphor. Regeneration requires a blank slate. Mary cannot carry India with her into the garden. She must become English to be healed. This reading, which synthesises Sanders (2011) and Bakshi Hamm (2012), suggests that the garden's power depends on a prior act of cultural forgetting. We do not celebrate this forgetting, but we insist on naming it as a condition of the metaphor's operation.

Furthermore, Lee and Patel's (2024) cross cultural finding that collectivist culture readers interpret the garden as a community regeneration space while individualist culture readers focus on personal transformation challenges the universalism of our own Western trained reading. Our analysis has privileged Mary's and Colin's internal states over their social embeddedness. Lee and Patel (2024) remind us that the metaphor is culturally modulated. We take this as a serious limitation of the present study. Where we see psychological healing, a reader from a collectivist culture might see community building. Where we see individual transformation, another might see the restoration of family. Our perspective, therefore, is not offered as definitive but as situated. We read as Western individualists. That shapes what we see.

4.5. The Robin as Mediator: A Neglected Metaphorical Agent

No analysis of nature as metaphor in *The Secret Garden* would be complete without attending to the robin, a figure that appears across the literature review but receives insufficient systematic treatment. Siti Nurhaliza and Hanafi Wibowo (2025) briefly note that phrases such as "the robin showed the way" map emotional states onto physical guides. However, we extend their linguistic observation by arguing that the robin does more than guide. It actively interprets the garden for Mary. When Mary cannot find the key, the robin perches on a pile of disturbed earth. When she cannot find the door, the robin flits to a hidden corner covered in ivy. The bird's agency is unmistakable: "He looked as if he were showing her something" (Burnett, 1911, p. 48). Burnett deliberately blurs the line between animal instinct and intentional communication. The robin knows what Mary needs before Mary knows it herself.

From our perspective, the robin represents nature's ability to initiate relationship rather than merely respond to human intervention. This is where we depart from Günday's (2025) concept of green desire. If green desire is merely human longing projected onto plants, the robin complicates the picture. The robin longs for nothing from Mary. It simply shows her what she cannot see alone. The robin thus functions as a metaphor for grace: something given freely, without expectation of return. This reading connects to Oanca's (2025) eco theological interpretation, where the robin becomes a kind of natural angel, a messenger from a world that precedes and exceeds human intention. Unlike Frank (2024), who reads the garden through the Anthropocene as a site of human plant symbiosis, we argue that the robin represents nonhuman agency that cannot be reduced to symbiosis. The robin does not need Mary. Mary needs the robin. That asymmetry is the heart of the metaphor.

Our perspective thus offers a corrective to anthropocentric readings that treat nature as a resource for human healing. The robin acts without being asked, without being thanked, without being transformed. It is the only character in the novel who is not regenerated because it never needed regeneration. From our perspective, the robin is Burnett's most radical figure: nature as pure gift, requiring nothing in return. Future research might productively compare the robin to animal guides in other children's literature,

such as the lion in *The Chronicles of Narnia* or the crow in *The Secret of Nimh*, to trace how nonhuman agency functions as a metaphorical gateway to regeneration.

4. Conclusions

This paper has argued that nature in *The Secret Garden* functions as an active, multidimensional metaphor for life and regeneration, operating across botanical, psychological, and social domains. Through systematic close reading and metaphor analysis, we demonstrated that Burnett aligns the garden's seasonal cycles with each character's healing trajectory. Mary learns care through manual labour. Colin learns hope through performance and belief. Mr. Craven learns acceptance through re entry and perception. These three arcs, traced in parallel, reveal that Burnett's metaphor is not a single image but a flexible structure that adapts to different forms of brokenness.

Our perspective has departed from previous criticism in four key ways. First, we argued that the metaphor's exclusions, particularly of working class characters like Martha and Dickon, are not failures but structural necessities. Regeneration requires lack. Second, we reconciled Phillips (2006) and Short (2024) by showing that Colin's performance of health is not inauthentic but is itself the mechanism of rebirth. Third, we distinguished three temporal registers of regeneration: creation for Mary, resurrection for Colin, and restoration for Mr. Craven. Fourth, we elevated the robin from a minor figure to a central metaphor for non-human agency and gratuitous grace.

The study has three main implications. First, for literary ecocriticism, *The Secret Garden* offers an early model of regenerative nature that anticipates contemporary environmental psychology and biophilia theory, as Thompson and Garcia (2020) have shown. However, our reading complicates that model by insisting on the metaphor's exclusions and asymmetries. Second, for pedagogical practice, reading the novel through metaphor analysis helps students recognise how symbolic systems cohere across an entire narrative while also revealing what those systems exclude. Third, for critical theory, engaging with O'Neill's (2023) class critique, Morris's (1996) cultural identity analysis, and Bakshi Hamm's (2012) racialised boundaries reading forces a more honest appraisal. Regeneration in Burnett is real, but it is not democratic. It is not universal. It is not available to everyone.

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