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Braid Yorkshire: The Language of Myth?

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Abstract

Examines the use of Yorkshire dialect in *The Secret Garden*, as well as the imagery of gardens, mothers, food, and nature.

Additional Keywords

Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *The Secret Garden*; English language—Dialects—England—Yorkshire; Gardens in literature

BRAID YORKSHIRE: THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH?

AN APPRECIATION OF *THE SECRET GARDEN* BY FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT

MARY M. STOLZENBACH



At first glance, nothing could seem more prosaic than "braid Yorkshire" — the language of a particularly hard-headed group of country-dwelling people in the North of Britain.

This paper proposes that there are many mythopoetic motifs in Burnett's Yorkshire story, *The Secret Garden*, whose perennial popularity has now lasted 80 years and which was once again filmed, to critical acclaim, just last year.

C.S. Lewis in the preface to his anthology, *George MacDonald*, has talked of the nature of myth: a series of events which in themselves have value, apart from the language in which they are told (pp. 14-16). In fact, I think the theory could be maintained that the language of myth consists of the elements, archetypes, symbols, which are its nouns, and the events which are its verbs. Lewis also comments that MacDonald's novels often come closest to excellence as they come closest to fantasy (p. 17).

I would maintain that MacDonald was not the only writer to use fantasy in "realistic" fiction. This was often the case in Victorian children's stories, for instance. Think of the plots of Burnett's other children's stories and you will see what I mean. How "realistic" is it that a little American boy should suddenly be heir to an earldom, or a poor English child suddenly be given the luxuries of a princess in her lonely garret room? Could these things happen? Well, yes, but it's not very likely.

Fauntleroy may strike us as the most maudlin wish-fulfillment — I confess it tends to strike me that way. Some say the same for *Sara Crewe*, also known as *The Little Princess*, though I tend to like that book better.

Fairy tales, we all know, live and thrive through mythic power. I would argue that the melodramatic, coincidence-filled Victorian and Edwardian children's tales, and indeed some of MacDonald's adult novels, are in effect fairy-tales, whether or not magic and the supernatural literally enter into the story.

The Secret Garden is now thought a much finer book than the other two by Burnett. What accounts for its enduring popularity? I would suggest, not just simple platitudes like, "Nature will heal you, gardens are nice." Anyone could say this, but Burnett has embodied her story in motifs, or "mythologems" as someone has called them, which touch deep chords in the reader.

The moor itself, at first, is presented to us as dark, strange, bleak and wild, almost deathly. Yet later, as we will see, it is one of the important sources of life.

Another motif is that of the house, Misselthwaite Manor, with its mysterious corridors and the hidden child. It is a labyrinth in which Mary must wander, finding clues. "Labyrinth" itself, we recall, comes to us from mythology. Thornfield, in *Jane Eyre*, was another Yorkshire mansion which hid a secret. But I was more vividly reminded of houses in C.S. Lewis' fiction: the Manor at St. Anne's, Professor Digory Kirke's house, the Magician's house which Lucy visits in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. I have wondered whether C.S. Lewis read *The Secret Garden*, and if so, when: it appeared when he was already an adolescent, who, he wrote, was ashamed to read children's stories. I think that the adult Lewis would have liked the book, perhaps liked it very much.

Now we come to the characters found in this setting. Mary Lennox, the hard-headed, spoiled, prematurely adult daughter of a British officer in India, comes among the Yorkshire folk at Misselthwaite Manor and discovers her youth, her freshness, the joy of growing things and the joys of friendship with other children and the nurturing love of adults - things she has never experienced before. In India, we are told, everything withered in the heat; Mary's attempts at gardening, there, are merely little games. Her ayah's care was partly smothering and partly servile, and her parents' love was distant or non-existent.

Mary Lennox is the Little Lost Princess. Hidden royalty, particularly that of an orphan child, figures in uncountable tales, and here we have it again. As we know, Burnett wrote of another Little Lost Princess, Sara Crewe. In Jungian terms, I suppose we would say that the interior self of each of us is royal... and the interior self of each of us is pitiable and lost, to some degree. Here we see this pictured in Mary Lennox's life and development.

Mary's parents lived on a lavish scale, and she was indulged by the ayah and the other servants, but she was an interior orphan, only to become one in fact as well. How well Burnett has painted the loneliness of the child in India, combined with the hot, inhospitable strangeness of her environment, climactically revealed in the cholera attack when all die around her — no one thinks of her, they never have! — and she is left all alone. The recent movie's writers appear to have found this so unlikely that they replaced it with a more sudden disaster, the earthquake. But psychologically, mythically, speaking, I much prefer the cholera. Mary has been forgotten all her life, and it happens again. Even though we flinch at her imperious, "Why does nobody come?" we are touched by the young officer's words, "Poor little kid! There is nobody left to

come." (*The Secret Garden*, p.12) (Further references to this book will give page numbers only.)

Royal appears again with Colin. Well does Mary dub him the "young Rajah." Like other royal figures in the tales we read as children, he must learn to be a real human being and not a spoiled lordling. Mary is already tracing this path of interior development, and she can be a guide to Colin. Her own hot temper and imperious ways help her to change him — a point I owe to Gwenyth Hood. Mary can get through to him in a way which is not possible for the fearful adults who humor him — the servants and Dr Craven — or the adults who are in fact responsible but who have left Colin, too, an orphan: his dead mother and his deliberately neglectful father.

For both of these children, and for Colin's father, healing must come from being close to Nature. There is some validity in this, too. Victorianism was in some ways the nucleus of our own civilization with its highly mechanistic ways. And writers of the time felt this. They knew that with the passing of green, rural England something was being lost. Often, I think, they also sensed correctly that if a sick person could get away from the ill-informed dosing and quack treatments of Victorian medicine, and live a simpler and healthier life, the chances of robust health would be greatly increased. Although let us remember that the entire Brontë family died of ill health on those oh-so-healthy moors and that no amount of clean living and positive thinking will conquer the TB bacillus!

Nature is expressed primarily in three ways: first, through the life-giving qualities of the Moor. "I told thee tha'd like th' moor after a bit," says Martha. "Just you wait till you see th' gold-coloured gorse blossoms an' th' blossoms o' th' broom, an' th' heather flowerin', all purple bells, an' hundreds o' butterflies flutterin' an' bees hummin' an' skylarks soarin' up an' singin'." You'll want to get out on it at sunrise an' live out on it all day like Dickon does." (p. 16)

Second, through the Secret Garden itself and its guardian, Ben Weatherstaff, a "son of the soil" indeed. The Secret Garden is of course central to the story and the most powerful mythology of all. It shares the life-giving, life-filled qualities of the moor, but there are two differences; unlike the moor, it requires human work, first from Ben, who kept it barely alive, and then from the children who truly transform it. Second, there is the quality of its being hidden away, enclosed. Our very word "paradise" is derived from a Persian word meaning "an enclosed garden." Here are some of the references to this powerful symbol in literature with which we are all familiar.

In the Biblical "Song of Songs, which is Solomon's," we read: "A garden locked up is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed." (*Song of Solomon*, 4:12.)

Then there is the garden where, the Bible tells us in *Genesis*, we all had our beginning; and Milton's treatment of it in his great epic, which C.S. Lewis discusses in his

Preface to Paradise Lost. (I recommend to your attention this entire extraordinary passage in which Lewis teaches us much about the art of a great writer and also reveals a good deal about his own inner being; but I can only quote a little.)

[Milton] does not begin with a particular image, rather with an idea — in narrow room Nature's whole wealth. The 'narrow room', the sense of a small guarded place, of sweetness rolled into a ball, is essential. God had planted it all. Not created it, but planted it — an anthropomorphic God... the God of our childhood and man's, making a toy garden as we made them when we were children.... [Milton seeks] not to give us new ideas about the lost garden but to make us know that the garden is found, that we have come home at last and reached the centre of the maze — our centre, humanity's centre." (*Preface to Paradise Lost*, pp. 50-51)

Those who are familiar with Lewis' life will recognize the image of the toy garden. In *Surprised by Joy*, he describes the tiny garden made by his brother and how "it made me aware of nature... as something cool, dewy, fresh, exuberant... As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother's toy garden." (*Surprised By Joy*, p. 12)

In the passage from *Preface* Lewis also refers to the enclosed garden as one of the richest symbols of the female body; this links it to the Mother who has been absent for both Mary and Colin.

Most of us remember the garden of the house at St. Anne's in *That Hideous Strength*. Actually it is not described in great detail, but while being led through it, Jane muses:

It was a very large garden. It was like - like - yes, now she had it: it was like the garden in Peter Rabbit. Or was it like the garden in the Romance of the Rose? No, not in the least like really. Or like Klingsor's garden? Or the garden in Alice? Or like the garden on the top of some Mesopotamian zigurat which had probably given rise to the whole legend of Paradise? Or simply like all walled gardens? (*That Hideous Strength*, p. 61-62)

And then she goes on to consider the symbolism of the garden as female body.

More impressive in its sense of secrecy and beauty is the description in the same book of the walled forest, Bragdon Wood, the place where Merlin lies sleeping. "[W]hen a thing is enclosed, the mind does not willingly regard it as common," Lewis remarks significantly. The rest is too long to quote, but I refer you to it for a study of a masterly piece of writing (*That Hideous Strength*, pp. 20-22). In later years, Lewis likened his wife to "a garden. Like a nest of gardens wall within wall, hedge within hedge, more secret, more full of fragrant and fertile life, the further you entered." "And then... [he adds] up from the garden to the Gardener... to the life-giving Life and the Beauty that makes beautiful." (*A Grief Observed*, p. 50.)

Burnett would have understood this. That "life-giving Life" is what she refers to - through Susan Sowerby's voice

- as "The Big Good Thing." It is what Colin calls the Magic, what the children and Ben Weatherstaff are singing to in the Doxology.

Tolkien's garden of the mind, I suppose, is Lothlórien; and we think of it when we read Burnett's description of the Secret Garden as autumn begins to change its color - "a embowered temple of gold." (p. 251)

Finally, Nature reaches the children through the actions of the Sowerby family. Mary first meets the Sowerbys in the person of Martha the housemaid, and then she is introduced to Martha's brother Dickon and her mother, Susan.

Martha indeed is the first person to "talk sense" to Mary. The clergyman's family with whom she first stays when orphaned could have taught her a thing or two, but her shell is closed tight against their roughness and ridicule. However, though she flares up at first at Martha's plain speech, or even fails to understand it when expressed in Yorkshire dialect, eventually Martha, as we say, "gets through" to her.

Just one example among many of how "braid Yorkshire" leads to truth: "Hasn't tha' got good sense?... Sometimes tha' looks fair soft in the head." Mary had worn her contrary scowl for an hour after that, but it made her think several entirely new things." (p. 50)

On p. 96 we read: "Then Mary did a strange thing. She leaned forward and asked him a question she had never dreamed of asking anyone before. And she tried to ask it in Yorkshire because that was his language, and in India a native was always pleased if you knew his speech." Frances Hodgson, says her biographer, picked up the local Southern American expressions readily upon moving to Tennessee as a girl. (Carpenter, p. 20)

Just so, Mary has more than one language. She rapidly comes to grips with Yorkshire, and on p. 60, she even talks robin! Any time we learn another language, it widens our world. And as Mary "chirped, and talked, and coaxed... [and] he allowed her to draw closer... and bend down and talk and try to make something like robin sounds," she receives her reward: the robin leads her to the long-hidden key. "Perhaps [Mary thinks] it is the key to the garden!" (pp. 60-61)

This is one of the most universal motifs in fairy-tale: the youth who is kind to animals will find their kindness returned to him in significant ways.

As for the robin, we think of the bird which helps Siegfried in the Rheingold. And remember Peter's words in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when the robin there shows itself as a guide? "A robin, you know. They're good birds in all the stories I've ever read. I'm sure a robin wouldn't be on the wrong side." (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, p. 19)

A touch which I profoundly disliked in the recent film was the finding of the key to the Garden. Here in the book it is a gift, almost from Heaven, through the entirely ap-

propriate medium of the Robin. There, the story was cheapened by making the finding of the key a product of Mary's own rather unpleasant inquisitiveness.

On the very next day, in Chapter 8, two very wonderful things happen to Mary. One of them we might describe as part of the magic of love: the Sowerbys, out of their great poverty, send Mary a gift, the skipping-rope; a gift which will help in her recovery of health and appetite and freshness. Mary herself recognizes the second event (p. 68) as part of the Magic she learned about from her ayah's stories (here we have more proof, if proof were needed, that all children should hear stories of Magic!). The Robin leads Mary to just the spot where she will see, when the wind comes up, the ivy lifted away from the gate to the Secret Garden: the gate which her key will open. And with her, we are "breathing fast" when at last we read the words: "She was standing *inside* the secret garden." (p. 69)

Now, we turn to Dickon, who bears more symbolic importance in the story than Martha. He is a Pan figure. "Mother says he just whispers things out o' th' ground," Martha says. But Dickon is not only magical with plants. He has instant rapport with animals, including the crafty fox and the ominous raven, not just the "cuddly" kinds. He wanders among them and knows their language, he even plays a pipe. Everything about Dickon would fit into the much more mythopoeic *The Wind in The Willows*. On p. 85 we are made witnesses of an Epiphany of Pan.

A boy was sitting under a tree, with his back against it, playing on a rough wooden pipe... And on the trunk of the tree he leaned against, a brown squirrel was clinging and watching him, and from behind a bush near by a cock pheasant was delicately stretching his neck to peep out, and quite near him were two rabbits sitting up and sniffing with tremulous noses - and actually it appeared as if they were all drawing near to watch him and listen to the strange, low, little call his pipe seemed to make.

Now - how do we top that? Well: Susan, Dickon's mother, is the Universal Mother. Even her blue cloak makes her suit the image of the Madonna, as she is portrayed in the great art of the West. [[Susan in fact means "lily" - a flower often associated with purity and thus with the Madonna, though I doubt that Burnett consciously had this in mind.

Susan, her children fervently believe, knows exactly what is best for all children. They love to be with her, love to please her, seek her advice on all questions. Even other adults like Mrs Medlock the housekeeper and Mr Archibald Craven, the lord of the manor himself, respect and follow Susan's counsel; and it is in great part through the actions and the counsel of the mother, Susan, that Mary Lennox, the motherless child, finds herself and is healed. Colin dreams of his mother; "I think," he says, "she must have been a sort of Magic person perhaps." Mrs Sowerby says that she (Mrs Craven) is certainly present nearby to watch over her child (p. 186); but Mrs Sowerby herself is

the mother here on earth, the immediate, warm, living, practical mother that these two children need.

It was Mrs Craven, of course, who first made the garden of roses, with Ben Weatherstaff's help. And remember that a garden of roses was associated with the Madonna, in the devotion of the Rosary. I believe the Madonna is referred to in her special Litany as the "garden enclosed" of the Song of Songs in the Bible, and I know that in the Eastern Church one of the titles of Mary the Theotokos is "The Life-Giving Fountain," from the other half of that verse.

The language itself that is spoken by Martha and Dickon and their mother is given magical effect. With the speaking of Yorkshire, one leaves the realm of artificiality, of the highly conventional Victorian society, and comes closer to earth, to honesty, to reality. Dialect, as we know, often has the power to evoke far more emotion than "standard English." I can only guess at the reasons for this: because it takes the reader out of the common, everyday world, or conversely, because it returns the reader perhaps, and in any case the characters, to the world of their most intimate childhood, where they learned their "mother tongue."

Everyone in the novel who is regarded favorably - except Archibald Craven - comes to speak Yorkshire, at one time or another: Mary begins to pick it up, she coaches Colin, and Dickon takes great pleasure in hearing Colin use it. Even Mrs Medlock, who is not the ogress which the recent film makes her into, in the end falls into it.

"Well, upon my word!" she said, speaking rather broad Yorkshire herself because there was no one to hear her, and she was so astonished. "Whoever heard th' like! Whoever on earth would ha' thought it!" (p. 160)

The Yorkshire word with the strongest connotation is "wick." Here we have, not just the standard English "live," or even the resonant prayer-book and Bible word "quick," but dialectic variant.

"There!" he said exultantly. "I told thee so. There's green in that wood yet. Look at it." wick," he explained.

"When it look a bit greenish an' juicylike that, its wick," he explained. "... There's a big root here as all this live wood sprung out of, an' if... it's dug round, an' took care of there'll be... a fountain o' roses here this summer." (p.92)

The rose-bushes are *wick*, though they appear at first to be dead. Mary Lennox resembles them: she is withered in appearance, hard and thorny in personality. Colin, too, is dried-up, literally withered. Yet as time and the garden work their magic, both discover the life-force within them, an inner green-ness, and it is shown that both these children, too, are wick and will reawaken to life and health.

"Is the spring coming?" he said. "What is it like? You don't see it in rooms if you are ill."

"It is the sun shining on the rain and the rain falling on the sunshine, and things pushing up and working under the earth," said Mary. (p. 115)

My heart, too, always leaps up in the spring. So did C. S.

Lewis', judging from his poem "What the Bird Said Early in the Year":

I heard in Addison's Walk a bird sing clear, "This year the summer will come true. This year. This year.

"This year, this year, as all these flowers foretell, We shall escape the circle and undo the spell.

"Often deceived, yet open once again your heart, Quick, quick, quick, quick! — the gates are drawn apart."

(Poems, p. 71.)

A sign of the children's new life is their appetites. How marvelous is the description of their reawakening appetites, complicated and made humorous by their desire to deceive the adults; for they wish Colin's recovery to be a surprise for his father when he returns.

"You ate so well a short time ago." [says Dr. Craven]

"I told you it was an unnatural appetite," answered Colin.

Mary was sitting on her stool near by and she suddenly made a very queer sound which she tried so violently to repress that she ended by almost choking.

"What is the matter?" said Dr. Craven, turning to look at her.

Mary became quite severe in her manner.

"It was something between a sneeze and a cough," she replied, with reproachful dignity, "and it got into my throat." (p. 220)

In another passage:

The morning that Dickon... brought forth two tin pails and revealed that one pail was full of rich new milk with cream on the top of it, and... the other held cottage-made currant buns folded in a clean blue and white napkin, buns so carefully tucked in that they were still hot, there was a riot of surprised joyfulness. (p. 216)

And this is not the only marvelous description of food in this story. I am reminded of the wonderful times the children have in Narnia, eating marmalade-roll with that excellent provider Mrs Beaver. C.S. Lewis in his essay "On Three Ways of Writing for Children" told of someone who said to him regarding the Narnia stories, "If you want to please grown-up readers you give them sex, so you thought to yourself, 'That won't do for children.... I know, the little blighters like plenty of good eating.'" Lewis remarks, "In reality, however, I myself like eating and drinking. I put in what I would have liked to read when I was a child and what I still like reading." (p. 31, *On Stories*, Walter Hooper, ed.) And I must say I enjoy it too! I remember also the meals which enchanted me as a child where Heidi and Klara grew fat and healthy on bread, cheese and goats' milk. (Klara, of course, is another example of the invalid who is healed by contact with Nature and with a child of Nature.) I probably wouldn't really have liked goats' milk, and I began to wonder on my last re-reading if Heidi ever saw a vegetable! But the descriptions were so enticing.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things." Or, in Dylan Thomas' words, "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower." This is what Burnett has sought to

evoke. We may call it the myth of Arcadia, the belief that nature heals and that people who live close to the soil are somehow purer, fresher. It may or may not be true, but it is a very old idea. Let us look again at Susan Sowerby.

Though Susan speaks simply, in very braid Yorkshire indeed, and has a modest opinion of herself (again like the Christian view of the humility of Mary, the blessed Mother), we can see a special light about her. Particularly do we see this at the moment when she enters the Secret Garden for the first time, just as the children have been singing the Doxology:

The door in the ivied wall had been pushed gently open and a woman had entered. She had come in with the last line of their song and she had stood still listening and looking at them. With the ivy behind her, the sunlight drifting through the trees and dappling her long blue cloak, and her nice fresh face smiling across the greenery, she was rather like a softly coloured illustration in one of Colin's books. She had wonderful affectionate eyes which seemed to take everything in — all of them, even Ben Weatherstaff and the "creatures" and every flower that was in bloom. Unexpectedly as she had appeared, not one of them felt that she was an intruder at all. Dickon's eyes lighted like lamps.

"It's Mother - that's who it is!" he cried, and he went across the grass at a run.

Colin began to move towards her, too, and Mary went with him. (p. 233)

And there, I think, we shall leave them. Once more the mystical Garden has flowered, once more the Universal Mother gathers her children to herself. Colin will be healed of his lameness, Mary of her loneliness, and Archibald Craven of his despair. Yes, "the garden is found... we have come home at last." Praise God, we may well say, from whom all blessings flow!

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