
From Folktales to Fiction: Orphan Characters in Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

ORPHAN HEROES AND HEROINES ARE familiar characters in children's literature, particularly in the fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This type of protagonist has its roots in folktales. An analysis of fifty folktales from different cultures reveals that, while the details of orphan stories vary, there are some universal elements. A comparison of these patterns to a literary orphan story, *The Secret Garden*, demonstrates how the patterns found in orphan folktales were adapted and applied in children's fiction.

INTRODUCTION

Once there was a child wandering about on the earth who was an orphan. He had neither father nor mother, and he was very sad. Nobody paid any attention to him, and nobody asked why he was sad. Though he was sad, the child did not know how to weep, for there were no tears yet in the world.

When the moon saw the orphan child going about, he felt compassion: since it was night, the moon came down from heaven, lay down on the earth in front of the child and said, "Weep, orphan child! but do not let your tears fall on the earth, from which people get their food, for that would make the earth unclean. Let your tears fall on me. I shall take them with me back to the sky."

The orphan child wept. Those were the first tears in the world, and they fell on the moon. The moon said: "I shall now give you the blessing that all people shall love you."

After the child had wept his heart out, the moon went back to the

sky. From that day on the orphan child was happy. Everyone gave him whatever delighted and gladdened him. To this day people can see on the moon's face the stains of the orphan child's tears, which were the first tears in the world.—*The First Tears* (Algeria: Kabyle)¹

Orphan characters in folktales and literature symbolize our isolation from one another and from society. They do not belong to even the most basic of groups, the family unit, and in some cultures this is enough to cut them off from society at large. In other cultures, orphans are regarded as special people who must be protected and cared for at all costs. In either case, orphans are clearly marked as being different from the rest of society. They are the eternal Other.

Orphans are a tangible reflection of the fear of abandonment that all humans experience. Orphans are outcasts, separated because they have no connection to the familial structure which helps define the individual. This outcast state is not caused by any actions of their own but because of their difference from the "normal" pattern established by society. Orphans are a reminder that the possibility of utter undesired solitude exists for any human being.

Orphans are at once pitiable and noble. They are a manifestation of loneliness, but they also represent the possibility for humans to reinvent themselves. Orphans begin with a clean slate because they do not have parents to influence them either for good or for evil. They embody the hope that whatever the present situation, it can change for the better. When orphans succeed against all odds, their success ultimately becomes ours. We can look to orphans and say, "You see, there is hope for all of us if even this orphan child can overcome obstacles and succeed." Characters such as Dick Whittington and Yeh-Hsien (a Chinese *Cinderella* variant) go from rags to riches and so can we.

Orphan characters are prevalent in children's literature, both in folktales and in fiction. What is the relationship between the two? Are there patterns in folktales which recur across different stories and cultures? If such patterns exist, do they also occur in literary treatments of orphans? This discussion will show that such patterns can be found in folktales and that they do have a parallel in literary orphan stories.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, I examined fifty folktales from different cultures (see Appendix A) to find similarities, differences, and patterns which contributed to the evolution of the literary orphan hero and heroine. I found most of the tales by using *The Fairy Tale Index* (Eastman, 1926, 1952; Ireland, 1985, 1989; Sprug, 1994), *The Storyteller's Sourcebook* (MacDonald, 1982), and Thompson's *Motif-Index* (L111.4-L111.4.4, "The Orphan Hero"). I found the remaining tales by searching through folktale collections for children.

I used several criteria for story selection. First, both parents of the orphan had to be dead (according to the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3d ed., an orphan can be a child who has lost only one parent). Second, the story had to be a folktale rather than a literary tale. Literary tales are stories created by a particular author. Examples of literary tales which include folkloric elements but which are not really folktales include the "fairy tales" of Hans Christian Andersen and Oscar Wilde. Folktales, by contrast, include "all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years" (Thompson, 1946, p. 4). It is impossible to separate the written and oral traditions because they have become so interconnected (Thompson, 1946). While this cross-over between literature and oral narrative makes it difficult to discern which is the "original" version, all of the stories in this study, as far as I have been able to determine, are folktales that originated as oral narrative.

Third, I limited the study to those stories which were available in English or English translation. I tried to cast a wide net across a variety of countries, ethnic groups, and cultures. In many cases, I had to take the stories at face value, as source notes were either very sketchy or nonexistent. Some collections, such as Raouf Mama's (1998) *Why the Goat Smells Bad and Other Stories from Benin*, had very detailed notes and explanations of changes that were made to the stories from their original form, while other collections, such as those of Ruth Manning-Sanders, had no notes at all beyond listing the country of origin.

A major drawback in this process is the unevenness of source notes in collections for children. Without clear notes, it is difficult to determine where or from whom the author obtained the story. Even more puzzling is the question of how authentic the tale is if it has been retold by someone other than a member of the culture from which it stems. Many of these stories were retold by authors with a European or American background. It is possible that the Western literary tradition of the orphan hero/heroine contributed to the interpretation of folktales with orphan characters. Because it was not possible to place each story in its cultural framework, I chose to do a structural study rather than a contextual one. For purposes of this study, there are enough stories with good source notes to be sure that many of these tales are "authentic," but it would make for an interesting further study to determine how much folktale collections for children have imposed a Eurocentric viewpoint when telling the tales of other cultures.

ORPHANS IN FOLKTALES

Folklorists, psychologists, literary scholars, and sociologists who study folktales agree that these stories represent more than simple entertainment for children. The meaning contained in folktales varies according

to who is reading, listening, or telling the story; the cultural context in which it is read or heard; and the sense that the individual teller tries to convey. For example, Darnton (1984) points out that the world which peasants in early modern France inhabited was so difficult that we can hardly imagine it now. Stepmothers and orphans were common and this, in part, explains why they are customary figures in folktales.

In *The European Folktale*, Lüthi (1982) states that the hero in a folktale operates in isolation. In many folktales, the hero is outcast from those around him because of social status, poverty, or a "deformity" such as that of the animal husband. This isolation is far from being unique to European tales but is reflected in tales from across many cultures. The orphan is the quintessential outcast, operates in isolation, and thus makes the perfect hero figure.

GENDER

Twenty-nine of the stories contain male orphan characters, seventeen have female orphans, and four have at least one of each. The breakdown of the orphan character by gender has significance because the ways in which orphans overcome obstacles in the stories are sometimes related to gender. In seven of the stories, the orphan uses wits to overcome obstacles; none of the orphans in these stories is female. The female orphans tend to overcome obstacles by their virtuous behavior rather than their cleverness. Also, female characters are rewarded by marriage more frequently than by any other means. While it is out of the scope of this article to delve deeply into gender issues, Appendix B shows some of the plot elements as they relate to gender. Further study of the orphan character and gender issues is warranted in the future.

CHARACTERS

The orphan hero or heroine faces the same conflicts, assistance, and rewards as any other folktale hero. There is usually a journey or quest of some sort that includes obstacles that must be overcome in order for the protagonist to win his or her reward (Thompson, 1946). However, analysis of the orphan stories reveals some distinct patterns. Character types, mistreatment of the orphan character, the quest upon which the orphan sets out, the obstacles put in his or her path, the methods employed to overcome the obstacles, and the final reward for the orphan are all common elements in these tales.

In forty-six of the fifty stories used for this study, the orphan character is the protagonist. In the other four, the orphan plays a secondary, but pivotal, role. For example, in *The Obsession With Clothes*, the story centers on Basia Gittel, the distant relative and employer of the orphan character. She is the person who mistreats the orphan girl but is also the one through whom the orphan triumphs and gains the reward of a husband and

children. The pattern of the story does not vary despite the fact that the orphan character is a secondary one. The outcome for the orphan is the same as if she had been the main character; only the point of view differs.

HELPERS AND OTHER CHARACTERS

Lüthi (1982) notes that no folktale hero or heroine is completely in charge of his or her own destiny but is assisted at precisely the right time by human or supernatural helpers. Every character has his or her function and, once that function is accomplished, the character usually disappears from the story line. The orphan interacts with other characters, some human, some animal, and some supernatural. They include siblings, godmothers, foster parents, step parents, employers, animal helpers, friends, grandparents, and spirits. Generally these characters exist for one of two purposes—either to help the orphan or to provide an obstacle for the orphan. There are no bystanders.

MISTREATMENT

The majority of the orphans in these tales are mistreated (Appendix B, Table 1). The mistreatment ranges from a simple tongue-lashing to physical abuse or the threat of death. It is not enough that the character be an orphan; his or her isolation must further be defined by hostility which, in many cases, stems from jealousy or from the fact that the orphan has something the other character wants. Some orphan boys are treated badly by their uncles (*The Strongest Boy in the World* and *Coolnajoo, the Foolish One*), and orphan heroines are often cruelly treated by their female relations (*The Case Against the Wind*; *Yeh-Hsien*; and *The Prince and the Orphan*). Other orphans are made to suffer by their neighbors (*The Story of Bhikkhu Sok*; *Kautaluk*; and *The Girl in the Moon*). One of the saddest openings of all the orphan tales in this study is found in the Cherokee tale *The Orphan Boy and The Elk Dog*. In addition to being orphaned, Long Arrow is deaf, and the only person in the world who loves him is his sister. When she is adopted by another tribe, he is completely ostracized by the other members of his group and eventually abandoned in the woods. Their abuse is mitigated when he manages to rejoin them (having miraculously regained his hearing on the journey) and is taken in by Good Running, an elder of the tribe, but the earlier image of his waking up and finding himself completely alone in the world is haunting even read alongside so many other stories of the abandoned and isolated.

QUESTS

The performance of difficult tasks or quests is frequent in folktales (Thompson, 1946). Thirty-three of the stories in this study include a journey for the main character or characters. The reasons for undertaking such quests include the need to find employment (*Mannikin Spanalong*),

a desire for riches (*Dick Whittington; The Dragon; and Sliced in Two*), the need to find a place in the world (*The Orphan and the Leper; and John the Bear*), to avenge wrongs done to siblings (*Quick-Witted; and The Jurga*), to prove oneself to the tribe (*The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog*), and to escape danger (*John and Mary* and *The Story of Bhikkhou Sok*). Sometimes the wandering seems to stem from the simple fact that the protagonist is suddenly orphaned. After his parents die, Julio says: "Now that there is nothing to keep me here, I shall wander. . . . I travel the trail of life in search of my destiny" (Aiken, 1980, p. 124).

The folktale hero must leave home in order to find that which is essential (Lüthi, 1982). This wandering is made easier for the orphan characters because they often do not have a home. What the orphans seek, in fact, is a place to belong and the right to be there. In a typical coming of age tale, the hero or heroine seeks to break away from the family or group, to stand alone in the world as an individual. In a coming of age tale with an orphan hero or heroine, the protagonist seeks a sense of belonging, of finding an appropriate place in the world, of coming home. In the folktale, this homecoming may be quite literal as the hero or heroine marries royalty and goes to live in a palace. The difference between the ending of the orphan story and other folktales is that the orphan is not leaving the parents' home to become independent but finding a home after coming from nothing.¹

OBSTACLES

The orphans in these tales come up against many obstacles in the pursuit of their quest. In most cases, other characters are the impediments. Jealousy and greed are prime motivators for these characters-as-obstacle:

There lived once . . . a proud and wicked woman. She was rich enough to afford anything she wanted, and yet her heart was filled with envy of anyone who was rich, contented, good-looking or young. If she saw someone in a happy mood, or heard of a true friendship, this was enough to arouse her bitterness and anger; indeed she was annoyed each time a poor person dared to smile. (Novak, 1970, p. 44)

Often it is the stepmother/stepsisiter/stepbrother who imposes extreme hardship on the hero or heroine, usually in the form of hard work, beatings, and lack of food (*Wend'Yamba, The Market of the Dead, The Orphan and the Leper, Yeh-Hsien, Khavroshechka, The Prince and the Orphan, The Magic Drum*). Sometimes it is a blood relative who causes problems (*The Strongest Boy in the World; Coolnajoo, the Foolish One, The Obsession With Clothes; and The Little Orphan*). Cruelty is not limited to relatives; employers can also be cruel (*Yukiko and the Little Black Cat; Quick-Witted; and The Jurga*).

In other stories, the danger is supernatural: either an evil sorcerer or witch (*Foni and Fotia; Julio; Quick-Witted; Old Verlooka; and John and Mary*),

a monster (*Qalutaligssuaq*), or a bad spirit (*The Skull*). Less often it is the orphan's loneliness or extreme poverty that causes problems (*The Orphan and the Leper*; *Spindle, Shuttle, and Needle*; *The Strongest Boy in the World*; and *Dick Whittington*). The character becomes so overwhelmed by his situation that he wants to give up, perhaps even commit suicide.

SURMOUNTING OBSTACLES

Because orphans are without the natural protection of family, they must stand on their own to conquer their problems. As is common in folktales, assistance is always provided at the crucial moment and is often rendered by supernatural means in the form of magical human beings, talking animals, or enchanted inanimate objects. Lüthi (1982) notes that, in folktales, such magical assistance is accepted without remark by the hero or heroine. No expression of astonishment is made when animals begin to talk, sorcerers appear, or ordinary objects run amok. These are simply taken for granted in the world of the folktale.

Supernatural assistance comes in many guises. Magic animals provide assistance for many characters (*Yeh-Hsien*; *Khavroshechka*; *The Poor Turkey Girl*; *King Zargand's Daughter*; *Kenzuko Sudden Wealthy*; and *Yukiko and the Little Black Cat*). Supernatural helpers can also come in the form of spirits disguised as mortals (*The Prince and the Orphan*; *King Zargand's Daughter*; and *Julio*). The gods provide another means to help orphans (*The Angekkok*; *Kautaluk*; *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dogs*; *The First Tears*; *The Legend of The Chingolo Bird*; and *The Girl in the Moon*). A very powerful supernatural ally is the spirit of the dead mother. When, in *The Market of the Dead*, the twin boys go to the underworld and tell their mother about their stepmother's cruelty, she gives them a poison palm nut which kills the stepmother after she eats it. Still other supernatural assistance takes inanimate form (*Spindle, Shuttle and Needle*; *Mannikin Spanalong*; and *Old Verlooka*).

Supernatural help is not the only way that orphans surmount barriers. Sometimes the orphan uses his wits to outsmart his opponents (*The Dragon*; *Sliced In Two*; *Qalutaligssuaq*; *Johnny and the Witch Maidens*; *Quick-Witted*; *Hans and His Master*; and *The Jurga*). Some orphans prosper because of their virtue and kindness to others (*The Prince and the Orphan*; *The Magic Drum*; and *Julio*). *Wend'Yamba* is unfailingly good to his foster family even when they treat him badly. At the end of the story, he becomes a king:

My countrymen, when our king died, you sent me out into the world, as is our custom, to comb even the smallest village in order to find a truly virtuous young man to be our next king. I found this young man. He is an orphan. . . . His patience is equaled only by his kind heart, and his heart is that of a king. (Guirma, 1971, p. 67)

Other orphans are hardworking, industrious, or brave (*Dick*

Whittington; *Mannikin Spanalong*; and *The Skull*). In some cases this virtue is not explicitly stated but is observable as the orphan endures abuse without complaint (*Yeh-Hsien*; *Khavroshechka*; *Little Berry*; and *The Wooden Bowl*). Finally, some characters are assisted by means other than the supernatural, wits, or virtue. Bhikkhu Sok (*The Story of Bhikkhu Sok*) is rescued by various kindly people as he runs from the murderous villagers who killed his family, and Sehou in *The Orphan and the Leper* is encouraged by the faith of a leper. In order to punish Tosuke for his greed (*Ooka and Tosuke's Tax*), Ooka, the wise judge, orders him to open his home to orphans who have lost their orphanage in a storm. Basia Gittel's *Obsession With Clothes* leads her to wrongly punish her orphaned relative. When Basia is on her deathbed, she asks her husband to marry the orphan girl in order to atone for this abuse.

REWARDS

Almost half of the orphan characters in this study, twenty-four out of fifty, are rewarded by marriage, wealth, and power. Thirteen of the twenty-two female characters marry while eleven of twenty-eight male characters prosper by marriage. In some cases, usually in non-European stories, success is achieved not through money or marriage but rather with a position of respect or honor. Bhikkhu Sok (*The Story of Bhikkhu Sok*), for example, becomes a Buddhist priest, Oolak becomes *The Angekkok* (Holy One) for his tribe, and Ma Liang uses *The Magic Brush*, which makes whatever he paints come to life, to better the lot of poor people.

Other orphans are "rewarded" by being saved from monsters (*Qalutaligssuaq*; *Old Verlooka*; and *Johnny and the Witch Maidens*). The orphans in *Ooka and Tosuke's Tax* get to move to a new house complete with a set of parents and eventually "Tosuke's taxless house was the happiest in all Japan" (Edmonds, 1994, p. 44).

Yukiko (*Yukiko and the Little Black Cat*) and the orphan girl in *Mannikin Spanalong* earn money and prosper without marriage. The character Wend'Yamba, in the book by the same name, and Sagbo in *The Magic Drum* both become powerful rulers on their own merits rather than through marriage. Long Arrow in *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog* earns his people's respect when he brings them the mythical Elk Dogs (horses) stolen from the gods. Sabadis, in *The Strongest Boy in the World*, is taken to a lodge at the end of the sky where he can live with the sister the spirits have given him and where he will never be lonely again.

In three of the fifty stories, the orphan is unsuccessful or lives in an unchanged situation at the end of the story. *Poor Turkey Girl*; *Coolnajoo the Foolish One*; and *The Orphan Boy* are all examples of stories in which the protagonist doesn't win out over the obstacles. In all three stories, the reasons for a lack of success lie in the nature of the protagonist. The *Poor Turkey Girl* is given a chance for happiness as long as she leaves the dance

at dawn in order to tend to her flock of turkeys who magically helped her. Her indifference to this request makes the turkeys abandon her, and at the end of the story she is left even more poverty stricken than before because now she has no livelihood at all. "If the poor be poor in heart and spirit as well as in appearance, how will they be anything but poor to the end of their days?" (Sierra, 1992, p. 127).

Coolnajoo, in *Coolnajoo, the Foolish One*, is angry because his uncles, who take advantage of him and make him do all the domestic work, believe he is foolish. To spite them, he behaves very foolishly indeed, but takes it too far and is almost destroyed before Glooscap intervenes and sends him and his uncles on their way with an admonition to behave less foolishly in the future.

In *The Orphan Boy*, Kileken, the orphan, is actually the planet Venus who comes down to earth to live with a lonely old man. During a severe drought, he is able to keep the old man's herd of cattle strong and healthy by taking them to the stars where the land is green and lush. His only admonition is that the old man must never follow him to find out where he goes with the herd. The old man, enticed by a spiteful shadow, is unable to resist temptation, and Kileken returns to the sky, leaving the old man alone. While these three stories serve as cautionary tales warning of dire consequences for lack of gratitude, excessive foolishness, and too much curiosity, most orphan tales end with the orphan in better condition than at the beginning of the tale, less lonely, usually rich, and often in a position of power.

PUNISHMENT OF THOSE WHO OPPOSE ORPHANS

Those who oppose orphan heroes and heroines are usually punished, often by death. The death of evil-doers is generally accomplished in deus ex machina fashion, by flying rocks (*Yeh-Hsien*), angry cats (*Yukiko and the Little Black Cat*), poisonous food (*The Market of the Dead*), and so forth. In the Armenian stories *King Zargand's Daughter* and *Quick-Witted*, the evil-doers are killed by the hero, an unusual occurrence in orphan stories. Some tales have less dire consequences for those who abuse the orphan. The step-relations in *The Prince and the Orphan* and *The Magic Drum* are reviled by their respective communities. Some stories end with the orphan interceding on behalf of those who mistreated him. *Wend Yamba* returns good for evil when he is made king and brings the foster family to live with him in the palace. His stepmother, finally moved by his goodness, reforms and becomes good herself. In *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog*, Long Arrow brings horses to his tribe so that his people may prosper despite the fact that they previously made him an outcast, and, when his fortune is made, *Dick Whittington* gives money to everyone in the household, even the cook who treated him badly.

ORPHANS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

As orphan tales passed from the oral to the written tradition, literary conventions for this type of story developed. By the nineteenth century, the orphan heroine was an established character in English and American literature (Avery, 1994), but the genre was found in other countries as well. Classic novels such as *Heidi*, *Pollyanna*, *The Little Princess*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Anne of Green Gables* are all examples of this type of heroine. Male orphans also had their place in the literature as exemplified by the novels of Dickens (*Oliver Twist*; *David Copperfield*; and *Great Expectations*) and Horatio Alger (*Ragged Dick*), but female orphans predominated. These heroines were usually left with relatives who did not want them, a hard-hearted aunt being the favored foil, but by the end of the story the orphan heroines transformed the lives of those around them by the force of their spunky, but sweet, natures (Avery, 1994).

Orphans continue to appear as characters in children's fiction. Examples of contemporary fiction with orphan characters include Joan Aiken's (1962) *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* and *Midnight is a Place* (1974), Joan Lowery Nixon's (1987-1989) *Orphan Train* series, Philip Pullman's (1982) *Count Karlstein*, and Geraldine McCaughrean's (1998) *The Pirate's Son*. The reality of orphans in society and their function as a hero type explains their presence in folktales, but the continuing use of orphan characters in literature for children indicates that they still hold great fascination for authors and have great meaning for readers.

It is from the folkloric elements previously outlined that the standard story of the orphan developed: the outcast main character; the secondary characters who affect the orphan for both good and evil; the task or quest that the orphan must perform; the usually happy resolution with the orphan finding success through marriage, wealth, and position; and the punishment of those who mistreated the orphan. Each of these elements has a parallel in literary orphan stories. Tracing the orphan hero motif in folktales makes it clear that this literary genre had its roots much further back than the sentimental novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. To see how these folktale patterns asserted themselves in literary orphan tales, we can turn to a comparison with a well-known children's novel.

Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic *The Secret Garden* was first published in 1911 and has remained a beloved fixture of children's literature ever since. It has been published many times over and has been the subject of numerous movie, television, and stage versions. The story of orphaned Mary Lennox is familiar to many readers, and it is a good representative example of the type of orphan story popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which makes it ideal for the purpose of comparison with the folktales in the study.

CHARACTERS

The central character in *The Secret Garden* is Mary Lennox. Mary's psychic isolation is mirrored in her actual physical isolation from her parents even while she lives with them. From the time of her birth she is "kept out of the way," taken care of by Indian servants. She develops into a tyrant, loved by no one, isolated physically and psychically because she is so unpleasant. She is, in essence, an untouchable. When her parents die, her isolation is made quite literal:

It was in that strange and sudden way that Mary found out that she had neither father nor mother left; that they had died and been carried away in the night, and that the few native servants who had not died also had left the house as quickly as they could get out of it, none of them even remembering that there was a Missie Sahib. That was why the place was so quiet. It was true that there was no one in the bungalow but herself and the little rustling snake. (p. 9)

The other character who could be considered an orphan is Colin Craven, Mary's cousin. Although he does not fit the definition imposed on the folktales in this study, he does fit the dictionary definition of an orphan. Colin's mother died at his birth, but his father is still alive. His father is seldom home and rarely visits the bedridden Colin. Colin parallels Mary in his physical isolation from everyone in the house. His fear of death and deformity causes self-inflicted separation from other people. His selfish spoiled nature further isolates him. Colin is also the Enchanted Prince,² under a spell until he is freed by Mary and the helper figures in the story.

There is a third character in *The Secret Garden* who, although not an orphan, is just as isolated as Mary and Colin. Mr. Craven is devastated by his wife's death. He blames his son for causing her death and can barely stand to be in the same room with him. He is constantly away from home, seeking diversion by moving restlessly from place to place. He mirrors Colin in the role of Enchanted Prince. His anguish has made him just as much a prisoner as if he were locked away physically:

He had not been courageous; he had never tried to put any other thoughts in the place of the dark ones A terrible sorrow had fallen upon him when he had been happy and he had let his soul fill itself with blackness and had refused obstinately to allow any rift of light to pierce through . . . darkness so brooded over him that the sight of him was a wrong done to other people because it was as if he poisoned the air about him with gloom. (p. 356)

Part of the story of *The Secret Garden* is about his redemption as well as the healing of the two children.

A major difference between this story and folktales is the way the main characters are rendered in a three dimensional manner. Literature can capture not only action, but also the feelings of the characters. We

are privy to the psychic pain of both Mary and Colin and made aware of their fears, their gradual awakening to the world around them, and ultimately, the triumph of their physical and emotional healing.

HELPERS AND OTHER CHARACTERS

Just as folklore heroes and heroines were assisted in their quests, so Mary and Colin receive help from other characters in *The Secret Garden*. Chief among the helper figures is Dickon. In this story, he is clearly a human helper, but in a folktale he would more likely be a supernatural helper, probably a type of benign earth spirit. While he does not possess the outright magic that such a character would in a folktale, there is certainly something mystical about the way he interacts with nature and wild animals. "I believe Dickon knows some Magic, but perhaps he doesn't know he knows it. He charms animals and people" (Burnett, 1938, p. 299).

Other human helpers are Dickon's sister, Martha; Ben Weatherstaff, the old gardener; and Dickon's mother, Mrs. Sowerby. Martha, who works as a chambermaid for Mr. Craven, is the first person Mary meets after arriving at Misselthwaite Manor. Martha is an important conveyor of information. She tells Mary about the existence of the secret garden. She also tells Mary about Dickon and piques her interest in going outside. Later in the story, Martha facilitates Mary's initial secret meetings with Colin.

Ben Weatherstaff is a cantankerous plainspoken Yorkshireman. He is a reluctant helper figure, almost against his will. When Mary meets him, she is taken aback at his straightforward assessment of her:

"Tha' an' me are a good bit alike," he said. "We was wove out of th' same cloth. We're neither of us good lookin' an' we're both of us as sour as we look. We've got the same nasty tempers, both of us, I'll warrant."

This was plain speaking, and Mary Lennox had never heard the truth about herself in her life. . . . She had never thought much about her looks, but she wondered if she was as unattractive as Ben Weatherstaff and she also wondered if she looked as sour as he had looked before the robin came. She actually began to wonder also if she was "nasty tempered." She felt uncomfortable. (p. 51)

Mrs. Sowerby does not actually appear in person in the story until the penultimate chapter, but her presence is felt from the moment Mary first hears about her from Martha. Although an off-stage actor, Mrs. Sowerby provides the orphaned children with a live mother figure. She provides both figurative and literal sustenance by sending advice and food via Dickon. She also advises Mrs. Medlock (the housekeeper) and Mr. Craven about how better to take care of the children. She sends Mr. Craven a note that gives him the impetus to come home, thus providing the happy ending to the story. She is, albeit in a very practical manner, a Fairy Godmother figure.³

The robin is the main animal helper in the story. He shows Mary where the secret garden is, and shows the way to the key and the door in the wall so she can get in. He is the first creature that befriends Mary and is clearly a magical being. Dickon's animals are also helpers, though in a less straight-forward way. They help Colin, in particular, come out of his preoccupation with himself and care for something even more helpless than he is.

Supernatural helpers exist in this text too. The spirit of Colin's dead mother is present in the story, a parallel to the spirits of dead mothers in such traditional stories as *Cinderella* and *The Juniper Tree*. In these folktales, the spirit of the dead mother lives in a tree. In *The Secret Garden*, the tree motif is turned on its head and, rather than being the living embodiment of the mother, is associated with her because it is the instrument of her death. At the beginning of the story, her presence is not strongly felt because both Colin and his father have shut her away from their minds. Colin has covered her portrait in his room, and Mr. Craven has run away from the places that remind him of her. As the story proceeds, her presence is more and more strongly felt. Colin feels able to look at her picture again because he likes to see her laughing down at him as he regains his health and strength. Finally, she is strong enough to break into Mr. Craven's dreams and tell him to meet her "in the garden."

Nature, as embodied by the moor (wild) and the garden (tamed), is another supernatural helper. Nature is the healer of both children. They move from sickness to health as they spend more and more time out of doors. Bodies and appearance are crucially important in this story, as they are in folktales, because they are an outward sign of the psychic healing process going on internally in the characters. Those characters, such as Dickon and Mrs. Sowerby, who are already psychically whole, are described as looking healthy, while at first Mary and Colin are thin and pale. As the children play outside, their bodies and souls are healed. This is most dramatically demonstrated when Colin learns to walk while in the garden, but Mary also responds to nature's healthfulness. At the beginning of the story, Mary has "a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression" (Burnett, 1938, p. 1). She also is described as having yellow skin because she has been a sickly child. By taking an interest first in the garden, then in Dickon and his animals, and finally in Colin and his problems, Mary becomes less and less self-centered and more and more outwardly oriented. It is done unconsciously and naturally; much of the time Mary doesn't notice that a change has occurred until after it has happened. As her personality transforms, so does her outward appearance until, by the end of the book, Mrs. Sowerby assures her that she will be a "blush rose," a true beauty like her mother.

MISTREATMENT

The mistreatment suffered by both Mary and Colin stems from their

parents. In Mary's case the neglect is a result of deliberate selfishness. By the time Mary arrives at Misselthwaite Manor, her soul has died symbolically because of neglect, lack of love, and loneliness. The mourning clothes she wears for her parents are symbolic of this death. When she casts off her black clothing and puts on new clothes her first morning in Yorkshire, it marks the rebirth of her soul and the blossoming of her body and inner person into good health.

QUESTS

Mary and Colin both have several quests to fulfill. As in many of the folktales studied, Mary's quest begins with a journey. Hers is from India to Yorkshire and her quests are to find and renew the garden, to transform herself into a healthy, loving, and beloved child who is not isolated from the rest of the world, and to help Colin do the same. Colin's quest is similar in that he also needs to be transformed into a complete person, but he must rescue his father as well.

OBSTACLES

Just as folktale orphans encounter obstacles to the successful completion of their quest, so too do Mary and Colin. These obstacles are both external and internal. Mary's external obstacles include Mrs. Medlock, who tells her she is to keep to her rooms and not wander around the house. If Mary had obeyed this edict, she wouldn't have found Colin. Another obstacle is that the garden Mary wants to see is locked up and the key buried.

Colin's obstacles are more internal than external. His fear of deformity and the fear that he won't live to grow up so dominate his thoughts that they keep him bedridden and unwilling to interact with anyone other than his caretakers. His lack of physical health is also an obstacle. He cannot walk or even sit up without help, not because of any real physical problem but because the muscles are weak from lack of use. He has made his own home a prison. His external obstacles include Dr. Craven. While he is not actively promoting Colin's decline, the doctor does nothing to help Colin do the things that are healthy for him. Colin believes that the doctor wants him to die so he will inherit the manor, but there is no mention of that by Dr. Craven himself. Rather than an active obstacle, the doctor is a passive one, as are the other grownups. The servants, the nurse, the doctor, none of them, tries to lessen Colin's spoiled nature or see him as anything other than a tiresome duty.

SURMOUNTING OBSTACLES

The obstacles faced by Mary and Colin are overcome in two ways: first, with assistance from others, and second, by their own "virtue." As seen in the discussion of helpers, Mary and Colin are assisted by an

assortment of characters. The helper characters each advance the quest a bit further by providing key bits of information or by physical and emotional assistance. Dickon, Martha, Ben, and Mrs. Sowerby are all obviously helpers.

In the folktales studied, many of the characters overcome impediments by their virtuous nature. Mary and Colin are scarcely virtuous in the same way. They are both spoiled, selfish, and stubborn. These traits would ordinarily weigh on the minus side of the ledger but in this case are turned into assets. If Mary weren't so stubborn, she would have behaved when Mrs. Medlock told her not to go exploring around the house. If she had been a "nice" child, she wouldn't have become angry with Colin when he had a temper tantrum. By shouting at him, she startles him into voicing his greatest fear, that he has a lump on his back and proving him wrong about his illness:

"There's not a single lump there!" she said at last. "There's not a lump as big as a pin—except backbone lumps, and you can only feel them because you're thin. . . . There's not a lump as big as a pin! If you ever say there is again, I shall laugh!" (p. 223)

Mary's lack of sympathy does more to convince Colin that he isn't going to be a hunchback than any statement the doctor or nurse ever made.

By the same token, Colin's Rajah-like imperiousness and assumption that everyone will do as he asks ensure that they can go to the garden every day without being disturbed. When Ben Weatherstaff calls him a cripple with crooked legs, he becomes so angry that he stands up and walks a few steps. His bad temper cures any reluctance he has about using his legs. When at the end of the story his father sees him running like any normal boy, it serves to heal his father as well.

REWARDS

As with any folktale, the good characters must gain a reward at the end of the story. Mary and Colin are not poor as are most orphans, so their reward is not a material one. Rather, they are physically and emotionally healed. They stand apart from everyone at the beginning of the story and, by the end, they stand together as a family. Mary has found a home with people who love her, Colin has found the love of his father and that of Mary, and Mr. Craven has regained his son, home, and happiness. While not explicitly stated in the story, it is even possible that this familial relationship will continue with Mary and Colin marrying when they are older, paralleling the happy folktale ending even more.

PUNISHMENT OF THOSE WHO OPPOSE ORPHANS

Unlike the folktales studied, those who mistreated the orphans are not punished. Mary's parents die, it is true, but there is no indication that

their deaths come as some sort of divine retribution for what they have done to their daughter. In Colin's case, the person who has wronged him the most, his father, is also suffering and in some degree is more to be pitied than censured. Far from being punished, he is rewarded by a renewed happiness in life with his son.

CONCLUSION

It has been said that there are no new stories, just retellings of old ones. A comparison of orphan tales from around the world has shown that, while the details of the stories are not the same, there are some common elements that can be extracted. The isolated orphan character; mistreatment of the orphan; human, animal, and supernatural helpers; quest; obstacles to fulfillment of the quest; punishment of those who wrong orphans; and, in the end, happy rewards are found in most of the orphan tales studied for this discussion.⁶ These same elements exist in literary tales about orphans as shown in the representative example of Burnett's *The Secret Garden*.

It is because the orphan so deeply represents the feelings and pain of us all that the character continues to exist in children's literature. And until the day when none of us feels the pain of isolation, orphans will continue to symbolize it for us. The use of elements from orphan folktales in literature is an indication of the depth with which this particular character resonates. Darnton's picture of orphans running rampant in early modern France is very different from the America of 1998, but what orphan characters represent is just as real now as when the first orphan wept the first tear.

NOTES

- ¹ This idea stemmed from a conversation with Christine Jenkins at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois sometime in early 1998. We discussed coming-of-age stories and she postulated that orphans find a home instead of breaking away from one.
- ² Janice Del Negro suggested the idea that Colin functions as an Enchanted Prince figure in a conversation about this project in Autumn 1998.
- ³ In the course of reviewing this article, the guest editor asked if I thought Mrs. Sowerby was the Fairy Godmother. My initial reaction was in the negative, but as I re-read the catalog of what she actually provided the children, I reasoned that she acted as much like a Fairy Godmother as the stock character we have come to think of in relation to *Cinderella*. Mrs. Sowerby is not overtly magical, but there is something otherworldly in the way she "observes" the children from a distance and in the stories about them told to her by others.
- ⁴ There are more than fifty orphans because some stories have more than one orphan as a character.
- ⁵ Some orphans succeed by more than one means. For instance, their virtue may lead to their being kind to a supernatural creature who will later reward them by helping them prosper.
- ⁶ These categories were created by the author and are not meant to correlate with similar categories found in the motif and tale type indexes.

APPENDIX A

ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF FIFTY FOLK TALES

- Ah Tcha the Sleeper*, Chrisman, A. B. (CHINESE)
- Alenoushka and Her Brother*, Ransome, A. (RUSSIAN)
- The Angekkok*, Shelley, N. (INUIT)
- Celery*, Manning-Sanders, R. (MEDITERRANEAN)
- Coolnajoo, the Foolish One*, Hill, K. (WABANAKI)
- Dick Whittington and His Cat*, Reeves, J. (ENGLISH)
- The Dragon, Sliced in Two*, Spicer, D. G. (SWISS)
- The First Tears*, Jablow, A. & Withers, C. (ALGERIAN: KABYLE)
- Foni and Fotia*, Manning-Sanders, R. (SUDANESE)
- The Girl in the Moon*, Deutsch, B. & Yarmolinsky, A. (SIBERIAN: YAKUT)
- Hans and His Master*, Manning-Sanders, R. (HUNGARIAN)
- John and Mary, or the Girl with the Chopped Off Hands*, Carriere, J. M. (MISSOURI FRENCH)
- John the Bear*, Carriere, J. M. (MISSOURI FRENCH)
- Johnny and the Witch-Maidens*, Manning-Sanders, R. (BOHEMIAN)
- Julio*, Aiken, R. (MEXICAN)
- The Jurga*, Belpre, P. (PUERTO RICAN)
- Kautaluk*, Metayer, M. (INUIT)
- Khavroshechka*, Carey, B. (RUSSIAN)
- King Zargand's Daughter*, Sheohmelian, O. (ARMENIAN)
- Kuzenko Suddenly Wealthy*, Wyndham, L. (RUSSIAN)
- The Legend of the Chingolo Bird*, Courlander, H. (PARAGUAYAN)
- The Little Orphan*, Ekrem, S. (TURKISH)
- Little Berry*, Illyes, G. (HUNGARIAN)
- The Magic Brush: A Han Folktale*, Sadler, C. E. (CHINESE)
- The Magic Drum*, Mama, R. (FON: BENIN)
- Mannikin Spanalong*, Manning-Sanders, R. (GERMAN)
- The Market of the Dead*, Carter, A. (FON: KINGDOM OF DOHOMEY)
- Mary-Ann and the Cauld Lad of Hylton*, Finlay, W. (ENGLISH)
- Merafa*, Wheeler, G. C. (MONOALU: SOLOMON ISLANDS)
- The Obsession with Clothes*, Peretz, I. L. (JEWISH)
- Old Verlooka*, Manning-Sanders, R. (RUSSIAN)
- Ooka and Tosuke's Tax*, Edmonds, I. G. (JAPANESE)
- The Orphan and the Leper*, Mama, R. (FON: BENIN)
- Orphan Boy: A Massai Story*, Mollé, T. M. (MASSAI: TANZANIA)
- The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog*, Yolen, J. (CHEROKEE)
- Oudelette*, Manning-Sanders, R. (MEDITERRANEAN)
- Poor Turkey Girl*, Sieita, J. (ZUNI)
- The Prince and the Orphan*, Mama, R. (FON: BENIN)

- Qalutaligssuaq*, Caswell, H.
 (INUIT)
- Quick-Witted*, Hoogasian-Villa, S.
 (ARMENIAN)
- The Skull*, Manning-Sanders, R.
 (TYROLESE)
- Spindle, Shuttle, and Needle*, Lang,
 A. (GERMAN)
- The Stolen Jewel*, Hitchcock, P.
 (NEPALESE)
- The Story of Bhikkhu Sok*, Carrison,
 M. P. (CAMBODIAN)
- The Story of Mordecai and Esther*,
 Barash, A. (JEWISH)
- The Strongest Boy in the World*, Hill,
 K. (WABANAKI)
- Wend'Yamba*, Guirma, F. (UPPER
 VOLTAN)
- The Wooden Bowl*, Hearn, L.
 (JAPANESE)
- Yeh-Hsien, Sierra, J. (CHINESE)
- Yukiko and the Little Black Cat*,
 Novak, M. (JAPANESE)

APPENDIX B

PLOT ELEMENTS AS THEY RELATE TO GENDER

Table 1

<i>General Plot Elements</i>	<i>Female Orphans</i>	<i>Male Orphans</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Number of Orphan Characters by Gender</i>	22	34	56 ¹
<i>Mistreated Orphans</i>	12	18	30
<i>Orphans Who Go on a Journey</i>	10	25	35

Table 2

<i>Causes of Success⁵</i>	<i>Female Orphans</i>	<i>Male Orphans</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Virtue</i>	13	16	29
<i>Wits</i>	0	7	7
<i>Supernatural Helpers</i>	16	18	34

Table 3

<i>Rewards</i>	<i>Female Orphans</i>	<i>Male Orphans</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Marriage</i>	13	12	25
<i>Wealth without Marriage</i>	3	6	9
<i>Does Not Prosper</i>	1	2	3

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