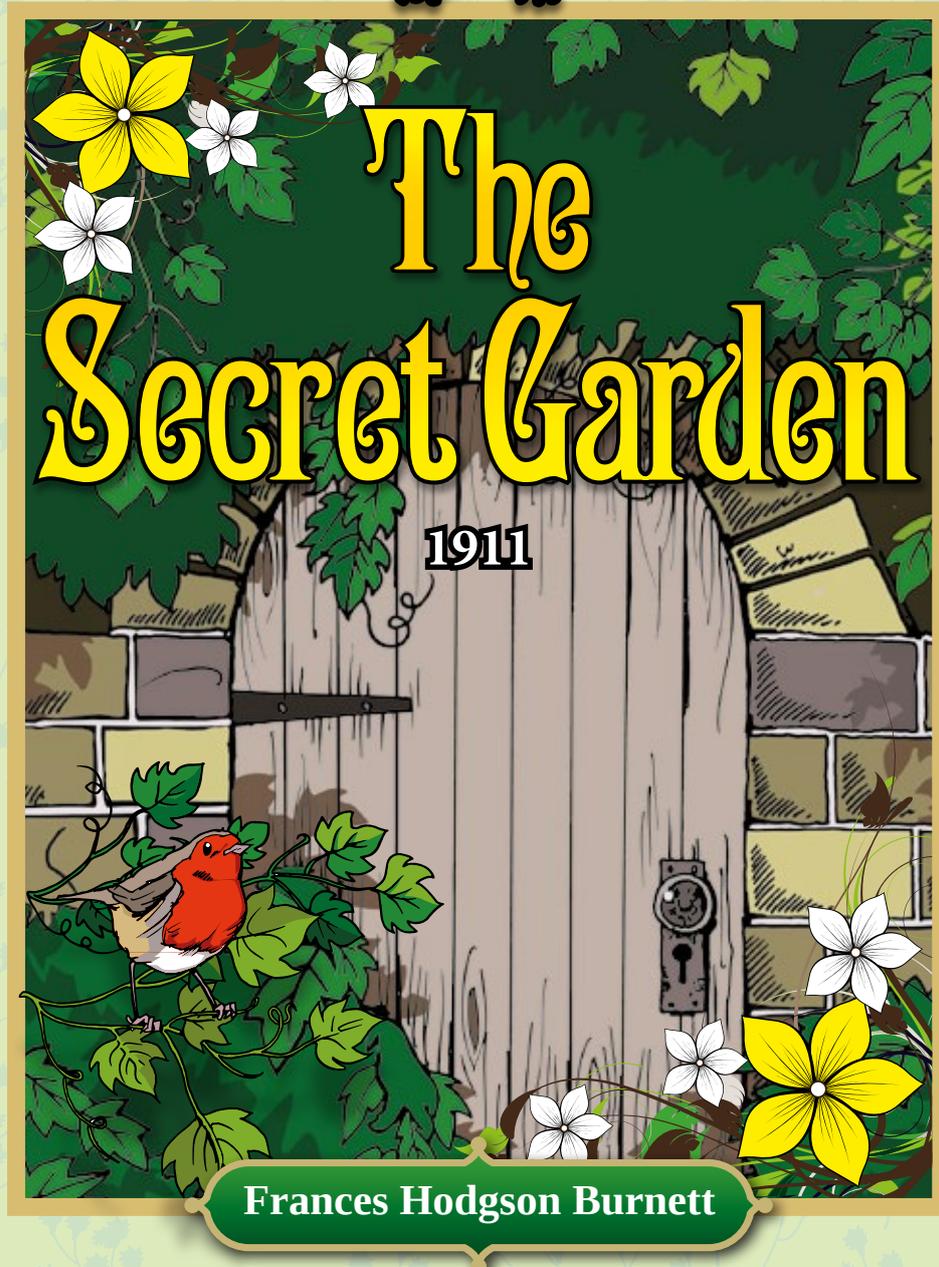


# Love to Read



*A novel of change and recovery with some fantastical elements woven into the real world of a Yorkshire manor to intensify Burnett's Christian Science ideas and to appeal to the imagination of children. To enhance the enjoyment and understanding of the story some social and historical contexts will need to be explained.*



# CONTENTS



## Overview for teachers

Page

**Context** ..... 2–3

- About the author
- What's the story about?
- Themes to look out for

**Literary techniques** ..... 4–10

### Characters

- Mary Lennox
- Dickon Sowerby
- Colin Craven
- Archibold Craven
- Martha Sowerby
- Ben Weatherstaff
- Mrs Sowerby/Mother

### Setting

- India
- The Moors
- Misselthwaite Manor
- The Secret Garden

### Narrative techniques

#### Structure

#### Language

#### Special feature

- Symbolism



## Activities for children

► **Before reading** ..... 12–13

**Ideas for getting started** – Engaging with the world of the novel

- Social and historical context
- Debate
- Pictures and objects
- Facts

► **During reading** ..... 14–19

**Stopping places** – Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques

- 1 End of Chapter 3 *Across the Moor*
- 2 End of Chapter 6 'There Was Someone Crying - There Was!'
- 3 End of Chapter 9 *The Strangest House Anyone Ever Lived In*
- 4 End of Chapter 13 'I am Colin'
- 5 End of Chapter 17 *A Tantrum*
- 6 End of Chapter 22 *When the Sun Went Down*
- 7 The end of the novel

► **After reading** ..... 20–21

**Create and imagine** – Developing a personal response to the novel

- Naturewatch
- My secret garden
- Be a zoologist!
- Book or film?



# Overview for teachers

*When Mary Lennox was sent to  
Misselthwaite Manor to live with her  
uncle, everybody said she was the most  
disagreeable-looking child ever seen.*

## Context

### *About the author*

Born in Lancashire in 1849 to a fairly wealthy, socially prominent family, Frances Hodgson Burnett's father died suddenly of a stroke when she was very young catapulting the family into financial difficulties. At the age of 15 her mother sold the business she had kept going after her husband's death and moved the whole family to Knoxville, Tennessee. Frances was a prolific reader and writer from an early age and had her first book published at the age of 18, though it was not until the serialisation of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* in 1885 did Burnett's reputation as a children's literary author become established. She followed these up with two other classics: *A Little Princess* in 1905 and *The Secret Garden* in 1911.

She married and had two children although the elder child, Lionel, died of tuberculosis, plummeting Burnett into depression. She later scandalised society by divorcing her husband and moving in with her lover before marrying him. The second marriage was short lived and they divorced one year later.

Although she travelled to England and Paris for a while, the United States was her home and she remained there until her death in 1924.

### *What's the story about?*

Mary Lennox, a ten-year-old spoilt, sour girl, unwanted and plain is orphaned by an outbreak of cholera and sent to live with her reclusive uncle Archibald Craven at the grand, gothic Misslethwaite Manor in Yorkshire. After an incredibly indulgent upbringing in colonial India where servants catered to her every whim, the moors and the people at Misslethwaite prove to be a challenging culture shock.

Liking no one and no one liking her, she is very much left to her own devices at the eerily empty manor until a begrudging friendship with Ben Weatherstaff, the gardener, develops, and with a little, human-like robin red-breast. From Martha Sowerby, a maid, she begins to hear about the tragic story of the house and the secret garden that was once lovingly tended by the much-loved Mrs Craven, but had been shut-up by her husband since her accidental death. With a little magical guidance from the robin, Mary discovers the buried key and enters the secret garden and from-here-on-in the garden's magic weaves its life-affirming, fantastical spell over her and she begins to change for the better: enjoying life, liking people and things, becoming more thoughtful of others, less sour, less unattractive.

She becomes friends with Dickon, Martha's universally-liked, twelve-year-old brother, and together they begin to restore the garden. In the meantime, Mary uncovers the other mystery in the manor: the sound of crying in the night-time. It is her cousin, Colin, confined to his bedroom, emotionally rejected by his father and repeatedly told from an early age that he has spine problems and will not live. Mary, however, passionately shows him that he is not ill and instills in him a positive sense of self-belief and confidence. Slowly throwing off his fears, he ventures outside with Mary and Dickon into the secret garden where he learns to be a strong, healthy child: running, laughing and having adventures.

As Colin becomes stronger, Mr Craven, on an extended excursion around Europe in an attempt to overcome his debilitating grief, mystically hears his wife calling his name urging him to return to the garden. It is at this point, that the first glimmer of joy re-enters Mr Craven's soul and he immediately returns to Misslethwaite Manor, to the secret garden - now filled with life and laughter - where he is finally re-united emotionally with his son.

### *Themes to look out for*

- Loneliness
- Trust
- Grief
- Recovery
- Self-belief
- Change



## Literary techniques

### Presentation of character is achieved through

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other characters say about them
- How other characters react to them
- How they are described in the narrative



## Characters

### Mary Lennox

A sour, plain, spoilt, demanding and unwanted child, Mary, invigorated by the outdoors and the garden, is transformed into a stronger, less plain child who finds enthusiastic enjoyment in life, a natural affinity to animals and birds and discovers a liking and feeling for others. She adores Dickon and is a match for the equally spoilt Colin, acting as a catalyst for his eventual recovery.

### Dickon Sowerby

A universally-liked and trusted, one-dimensional figure – more of a symbol than a developed character. A St. Francis figure, he is guileless and a friend to all – charming animals and people alike. Always on the moor, Dickon is an example of the benefits of having a symbiotic relationship with nature. Colin and Mary are so enamoured with him that they begin to imitate his Yorkshire dialect towards the end of the novel – condescending or flattering?

### Colin Craven

Sharing a similar experience with Mary, neglected, sickly, spoilt and disliked, Colin is beset by self-pity, torments and fears - not all his own fault. And like Mary, he is transformed by the secret garden and being outside enjoying nature. He has a 'rajah' style manner when addressing servants and interestingly addresses the 'common moor boy' Dickon, though 'friends', in a more commanding manner than he does Mary, his social equal. Through Colin, Burnett explores the ideas of Christian Science and the power of positive thinking in aiding recovery and indeed, Chapter 23, *Magic*, is dominated entirely by a speech delivered by Colin on this subject.

### Archibald Craven

Colin's father, Mary's uncle and a widower, he is physically crooked and emotionally crippled by grief. Not meaning to be cruel, he provides everything in his power materially to satisfy Colin, but is distant and neglectful of his son because he reminds him too much of the beloved wife he lost.

### Martha Sowerby

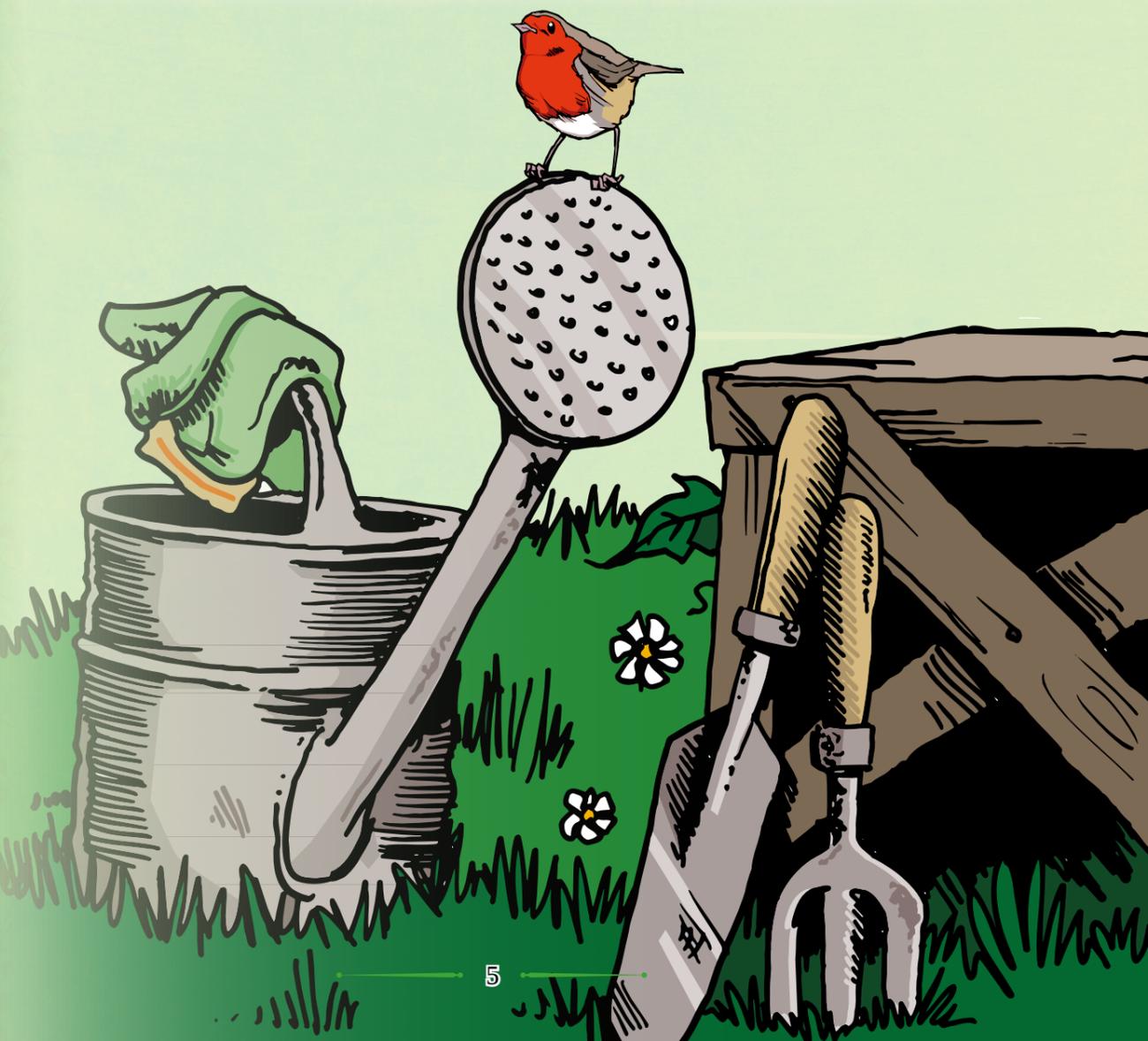
A cheerful maid servant whose gentleness begins the process of change in Mary and precipitates a change of tone in the novel as well as acting as structural device, filling in Mary (and the reader) as to the story behind the secret garden.

### Ben Weatherstaff

Curmudgeonly, sour and temperamental, though inherently kind and loyal, Ben is the elderly, rheumatic gardener at Misslethwaite, kept on because he was a favourite of the late Mrs Craven. He introduces Mary to the robin and surreptitiously continued to maintain Mrs Craven's roses in the secret garden until he became too ill to do so.

### Mrs Sowerby/Mother

Presented through the stories of others for most of the novel, Mrs Sowerby becomes enshrouded with a touch of mythology, an ideal mother adored and respected by all and always talking sense. When the reader finally meets her she is dressed in a hooded blue cloak, deliberately associating her with the Christian Virgin Mary as a way of reinforcing her goodness.



# Setting

## *The setting can*

- Be a backdrop to the action
- Reflect characters' experiences
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Have its own culture and values
- Cause conflict and distress



## *India*

A stiflingly hot place mentioned briefly at the beginning of the novel, but serves to explain some of Mary's unappealing characteristics. Having servants who '...always obeyed her and gave her own way...' so that her crying wouldn't disturb her mother resulted in the development of a spoiled, snobbish, lonely child unable to think of anyone but herself. As the novel progresses, references to India appear now and again to highlight the conflict caused by the differences in lifestyle and customs experienced by Mary.

## *The Moors*

A hostile, desolate place giving Mary a literal and metaphorical 'big jolt' into her new world. To begin with it is described as a wild land, bleak and relentlessly dark, heightening Mary's vulnerability in her new setting. But as the novel progresses the moor takes on spiritual, life-affirming qualities - invigorating Mary and making her healthier, stronger and brighter.

The moor and the weather on the moor is a device used by the author to introduce a change of tone to the novel and to reflect a change in a character's disposition. At the beginning it is bleak and foreboding, the weather dismal and grey, reflecting Mary's character and situation at that point in the novel. As she settles into Misslethwaite, the weather becomes sunny and beautiful and Mary learns to love the moor, indicating a more positive, cheerful section of the novel where Mary discovers she enjoys things and begins to like people and so they begin to like her. Initially, bedbound Colin finds the moors 'dreary' but soon begins to appreciate them as he ventures outside and he too becomes invigorated by the outdoors.

## *Misslethwaite Manor*

Described using language to do with the enormity of its size, it is overwhelming and austere, filled with objects, furniture, pictures and tapestries, highlighting Craven's obvious wealth, yet it lacks vitality and warmth: 'In this queer place once scarcely saw anyone else' and 'it all seemed so empty...', reflecting the loss and grief of Archibald Craven.

Inhabited by people who are suffering, the isolation of the manor reflects the isolation of the people who live there - Mary is friendless, Colin is confined to his bed and Mr Craven is reclusive.

## *The Secret Garden*

A magical garden that adopts a mystical, myth-like status providing physical and spiritual nourishment for Mary and Colin. Within the walls of this 'Garden of Eden' the children's development is aligned with the growth of the garden through the seasons. All is grey in the winter for the garden and for Mary; spring sees the beginning of Mary's, Colin's and the garden's rejuvenation; in summer, the children and the garden are literally and metaphorically blooming and when Mr Craven returns to find them in the garden in the autumn their rebirth is finally complete 'their late glories had revealed themselves'. The garden is described in hallowed terms as a 'temple of gold' suggesting that they have all finally achieved redemption and reached nirvana.

## Narrative techniques

One of the narrative features of the novel is to sometimes adopt the voice of characters in the story to show ideas and feelings from their point of view or to satirise values held, as seen in Chapter 8, when Martha is showing Mary how to skip, the narrator states that the old portraits seemed to stare at Martha and '...wonder what on earth this common little cottager had the impudence to be doing under their very noses...'. Rather than mocking Martha, Burnett is instead ridiculing the snobbish notions and values possibly held by those of a superior class.

In order to speak to children, the narrator also takes on the voice of the robin, giving insight into his thoughts and feelings. In Chapter 9, the little robin, on seeing Mary begin weeding around the bulbs, proclaims that 'He was very much pleased to see gardening begun on his own estate...'. In this case, the narration has a child-like, magical tone to its voice that is captivating and fantastically innocent to read. This is developed further towards the end of the novel, when the robin is protecting its 'eggs' and the reader sees the world from its point of view, highlighting the value of life to all.



# Structure

**Structure is the order or pattern in which a novel is put together and should**

- Maintain the interest of the reader
- Move the action from one episode to the next
- Arouse a reader's interest in character or situation
- Create a moment of crisis
- Create expectation or surprise



Beginning with the focus on Mary, but ending with the focus on Colin, the novel takes place over the course of a year, following the seasons (as described in Setting) in order to show how the development of the children and the garden are inextricably intertwined.

Martha is a character who acts as a structural conduit, explaining to Mary and the reader what's going on in the house. As she explains to Mary about the story behind the secret garden in Chapter 6, so she explains to the reader. The tales of her family also have structural resonance since they used to show the differences between a loving, warm home and the sterile, loveless existence Mary has been used to.

In order to build up suspense and to not dilute the impact the garden has on Mary, the author introduces the garden through Mary's reaction to it followed by a description, rather than the other way round. This way, the reader sees how much it means to Mary first and adds anticipation for the reader; we now want to see it.

# Language

The author describes the house in terms of size: a 'huge, rambling house', 'enormous hall', 'massive door', 'big bedroom', 'great iron bars' and juxtaposes this with opposites to increase the sense of enormity of the place: Mary looked 'very small' in comparison.

Burnett uses language associations to help depict her characters. For example, Dickon, always surrounded by animals, is described in terms associated with nature and life, '...his eyes like a bit of blue sky' and his cheeks are '...as red as cherries'. His dialogue is full of verbs of life and activity reflecting his own vitality. This is in stark contrast to Colin, whose language associations are those of death, gloom and illness.

As Mary begins to enjoy life at the manor, so the verbs change to reflect her new vitality: instead of standing stiffly, she runs, flies, scrambles and springs.

In Chapter 17, *A Tantrum*, Burnett manipulates punctuation and sentence structure to heighten the intensity of the argument between Mary and Colin. She uses short sentences and lots of exclamation marks or longer sentences with little punctuation, but repetitive conjunctions to show a lack of control, as seen in Mary's speech to Colin below:

'You stop! I hate you! Everybody hates you! I wish everybody would run out of the house and let you scream yourself to death!'

'If you scream another scream...I'll scream, too – and I can scream louder than you can, and I'll frighten you, I'll frighten you!'

At the end of the chapter, when the two are reconciled, Burnett slows the pace down, returning to long, complex sentences, omitting exclamation marks, but using hyphens instead to show thoughtful pauses instead.



## Special feature

### *Symbolism*

*Symbolism in literature is when objects or people are used to represent ideas other than their face value. You can begin to get an idea of when symbolism occurs in literature by the frequency in which it is mentioned and/or the detail in which it is described.*



**Robin red-breast:** The robin is an essential bridge between the natural, life-enforcing world of the secret garden and the confining, domesticated world outside. The robin communicates to Mary where the key and the door to the garden are, urging her to get well. It is the first living thing in the novel that likes her, relieving her of her loneliness and prompting her to become more self-aware and it shows her how to enjoy life.

**The robins' eggs:** Symbolic of the importance of life in all its forms and levels within nature. Burnett highlights that although a hierarchy may exist in the human sphere, in nature all things living are precious and equal.

**The secret garden:** Described in vivid detail, the garden is a sanctuary, symbolic of life, re-birth, redemption and love.

**Mrs Sowerby and motherhood:** Through the character of Mrs Sowerby, Burnett presents the universal ideal of a mother - caring, trusting, generous, selfless and clever - and her children have thrived as a result. This is in stark contrast to Mary's superficial mother, willfully negligent of her daughter because she was ugly and cried resulting in a sour, dislikeable child.



# Activities for children



## Before reading

### Ideas for getting started

Engaging with the world of the novel

#### Social and historical context

*Research colonial India. What was the lifestyle like for the British? For the Indians? How long did it last? Why did it happen? When did British rule end and why?*

*What were the differences in lifestyles between the rich and poor living in rural areas of Britain in the 1800s.*

#### Debate

*Is it a good thing to hear the truth about yourself, even if it might not be flattering?*

*What is loneliness? Can a person change? How important is family?*

*How powerful is mind over matter? Does positive thinking work?*

*When do you feel most alive?*

#### Pictures and objects

*Look at a range of portraits of people. What's their story? What adjectives would you use to describe them?*

*Explore different pictures of gardens. Which would you choose as your secret garden and why?*

*Look at pictures of flowers: snowdrops, crocuses, narcissus and lilies, delphiniums, snapdragons and columbines. Which one resembles your personality most and why?*

*Find out what flowers symbolise.*

*Look closely at photos depicting the four different seasons. What words do you associate with them? Which is your favourite season and why? How do the different seasons make you feel?*

*Examine pictures of a range of landscape types from around the world. Discuss how they differ to one another and how each landscape compares to your area.*

*Which do you prefer?*

#### Facts

*Find out what you can about cholera. What it is?*

*How does it affect people and how it is treated? Where does it occur?*

*What is a mahout and a palanquin?*

*What is a rajah? What did they wear? How did they behave?*

*Find out about animals, birds and insects found in India and in the UK.*

*How does snake charming work?*

*Where is India?*

*Where are the moors? What are the moors like?*

*What's the countryside like where you live? Find out.*



## During reading

### Stopping places

Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques

# 1

#### Read to the end of Chapter 1 *Across the Moor*

Focus on...

- First impressions of Mary and her family
- First impressions of Mr Craven
- The presentation of the moors
- First impressions of the Misselthwaite Manor



#### Things to discuss

**Character:** What are your first impressions of Mary? Do you blame her for the way she behaves? Who is most to blame? Do you have any sympathy for her? Does she have any redeeming features? Is she an interesting character? How does she compare to other heroines in novels you have read so far?

What do you think of her mother and father?

How does the author make Mary appear vulnerable?

What kind of character do you think Archibald Craven will be?

**Setting:** What must her life in India have been like?

Do you think her life in Misselthwaite will be similar?

How were the moors presented? Why did the author present them in this way?

What are your first impressions of the manor? Do you think Mary will be happy here?

**Prediction:** Whose light do you think it was glowing in the dark? Can you find other examples of mystery created by the author in the first three chapters?

# 2

#### Read to the end of Chapter 6 *'There Was Someone Crying - There Was!'*

Focus on...

- Change of tone
- Change in Mary
- Mystery
- Dickon's character
- Symbolism



#### Things to discuss

**Structure:** How does the introduction of Martha begin to change the tone of the novel?

Why do you think the reader keeps hearing about Dickon? Do you expect him to appear? What role might he play if he did? What kind of character do you think he is from the things he does? Do you want to meet Dickon?

Why has the reader not met Archibald Craven yet? Do you think he will ever make an appearance in the novel? Do you want to meet him?

**Symbolism:** What might the red robin, the Moors and the secret garden symbolise?

**Setting:** What more do you learn about Mary's life in India? Do you envy her life or feel sorry for her?

What do you imagine the secret garden to have once looked like? What do you think it looks like now?

What are the mysteries in the house? What questions would you like answering?

**Prediction:** What do you think will happen in the next chapter? Would you reveal who is crying?

#### You could...

Find examples of how Mary is beginning to change and discuss why you think this is happening.



# 3

## Read to the end of Chapter 9 *The Strangest House Anyone Ever Lived In*

### Focus on...

- The continued change in Mary
- The presentation of the secret garden
- Structural techniques
- How the weather reflects the mood of the novel



### Things to discuss

**Symbolism:** The weather changes in Chapter 7 and becomes beautiful and sunny. What might this signify? What other changes might it symbolise? Look back in the novel when the weather was mentioned before, discuss how it was described and what effect it had on the tone of the novel then.

**Character:** What changes do you see in Mary now? How has the author shown this? Think about the way she behaves and what she says and how others react to her now.

How would you describe Martha and Mary's relationship? How do you think it might develop?

Why do you think the author is presenting Martha's family in such detail?

**Structure:** Why is the crying in the night not alluded to until Chapter 9? Do you like it that you were left wondering or do you want answers straight away? What are the advantages and disadvantages of both techniques?

Why does the reader get Mary's reaction to the secret garden first before it is described to the reader?

**Setting:** The garden is revealed in a magical way rather than a believable way. Do you agree? Why?

What are your first impressions of the garden? Does it match what you thought it might look like?

### You could...

Collect words and phrases to do with the weather as you read the novel and discuss how the characters were feeling at these points. This could be presented in the form of a graph.



# 4

## Read to the end of Chapter 13 *'I am Colin'*

### Focus on...

- First impressions of Dickon, Colin and Mr Craven
- Mary's relationships



### Things to discuss

**Character:** What are your impressions of Dickon, Mr Craven and Colin? How are they presented? The reader had heard a lot about Dickon and Mr Craven before we were actually introduced to them. Did anything about them surprise you or are they what you expected?

Discuss the presentation of Mary's relationship with these new characters as well as her growing relationship with Ben.

Who is your favourite character so far?

Do any of the characters have anything in common?

Has anything surprised you?

What do you think of Martha's family?

**Structure:** Why do you think the author has waited till nearly halfway through the novel to introduce these new characters and for Mary to finally meet her uncle?



# 5

## Read to the end of Chapter 17 *A Tantrum*

### Focus on...

- Language used to create hysteria
- Language associated with Dickon, Colin and Mary
- Colin and Mary's relationship
- The idea of 'show not tell'



### Things to discuss

**Character:** Do you feel any sympathy for Colin and his situation? What do you think you would do and feel if you were in his situation?

Was Mary right to stand up to him? How did you feel about her when she did so?

**Language:** In Chapter 17, Mary is really angry with Colin, but later calms him down and lulls him to sleep. Look at the two different sections in the chapter and discuss how the writer has shown this through the use of punctuation and sentence structure.

### You could...

Collect examples of words and phrases associated with Dickon, Colin and Mary and discuss how the children compare and contrast.

# 6

## Read to the end of Chapter 22 *When the Sun Went Down*

### Focus on...

- The change in Colin
- Presentation of Dickon
- The secret garden



### Things to discuss

**Character:** What do you think of the depiction of Dickon? How far do you think he is an angel?

How is Colin beginning to change? Do you like him any more now? What techniques does the author use to show how he is changing?

How do you feel about Mary talking in Yorkshire dialect?

**Symbolism:** What does the secret garden mean to the different characters?

What might the planting of the rose by Colin symbolise?

Did anything surprise you?

**Prediction:** What do you expect to happen next? What evidence do you have to support your ideas?

### You could...

Collect examples of language used to describe the garden in Chapter 20. What do you imagine in your mind? Do you know a place like this? Do you wish you were there?

# 7

## Read to the end of the novel

### Focus on...

- How the novel ends
- Your response to the novel as a whole



### Things to discuss

**Character:** In your opinion, who's the most important character in the novel?

Do you think Mary, Colin and Dickon will remain friends into adulthood?

Look at the different ways Colin addresses people - is this right?

How influential was Dickon on other characters and events in the novel?

**Setting:** How far is the secret garden magical rather than real?

Why did the garden need to be a secret?

What might Misslethwaite Manor represent?

What difference would it make to the novel if 'India' were removed?

**Language:** What does the use of dialect add to the novel?

Why do you think Mary and Colin begin to adopt a Yorkshire dialect at the end of the novel?

**Narrative:** What did you think of the narrator describing the children and the action from the robins' point of view.

Why do you think she did this? How did it make you feel about the story?

Who do you think the narrator blames for Mary and Colin's pre-secret garden disposition?

**Structure:** Where, in your opinion, is the turning point in the novel?

Why do you think the novelist waits until half way through the novel to introduce Colin?

The story begins by focusing on Mary, but ends with the focus on Colin. Do you like this? How does it affect the way you feel about the novel and the two characters?

The novel is quite different in its focus from Chapter 23 onwards. Discuss in what ways it differs from the rest of the novel.



## After reading

### Create & imagine

Developing a personal response to the novel

#### Nature journal

Keep a nature journal over a period of time, recording what you see and how you feel about what you notice. You could include photos, pressings or cuttings from magazines about birds, insects or plants you like.

*This could be in the back garden or the school grounds.*

### My secret garden

Plan your own secret garden, thinking about what the design will be like and what you will plant in there. You can support your planning ideas with drawings or cuttings from magazines if you like!

*Perhaps you could even try out some of your ideas in a real garden!*



### Be a zoologist!

Write an entry for a children's encyclopedia about an animal, bird or insect found in Britain, India or from your own nature watch. You'll need to do some research first!

### Book or film?

There are films and a TV series of *The Secret Garden*. Watch one of them and compare it with the book. Decide which one you prefer and give some reasons why.



## Memorable quotes

*'People never like me and I never like people,' Mary thought.*

*...by the time she was six years old she was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived.*

*'And there's nothing likely to improve children at Misslethwaite - if you ask me!'*

*It sounded like something in a book and it did not make Mary feel cheerful. A house with a hundred rooms, nearly all shut up and with their doors locked - a house on the edge of a moor - whatsoever a moor was - sounded dreary.*

*'And you mustn't expect that there will be people to talk to you. You'll have to play about and look after yourself.'*

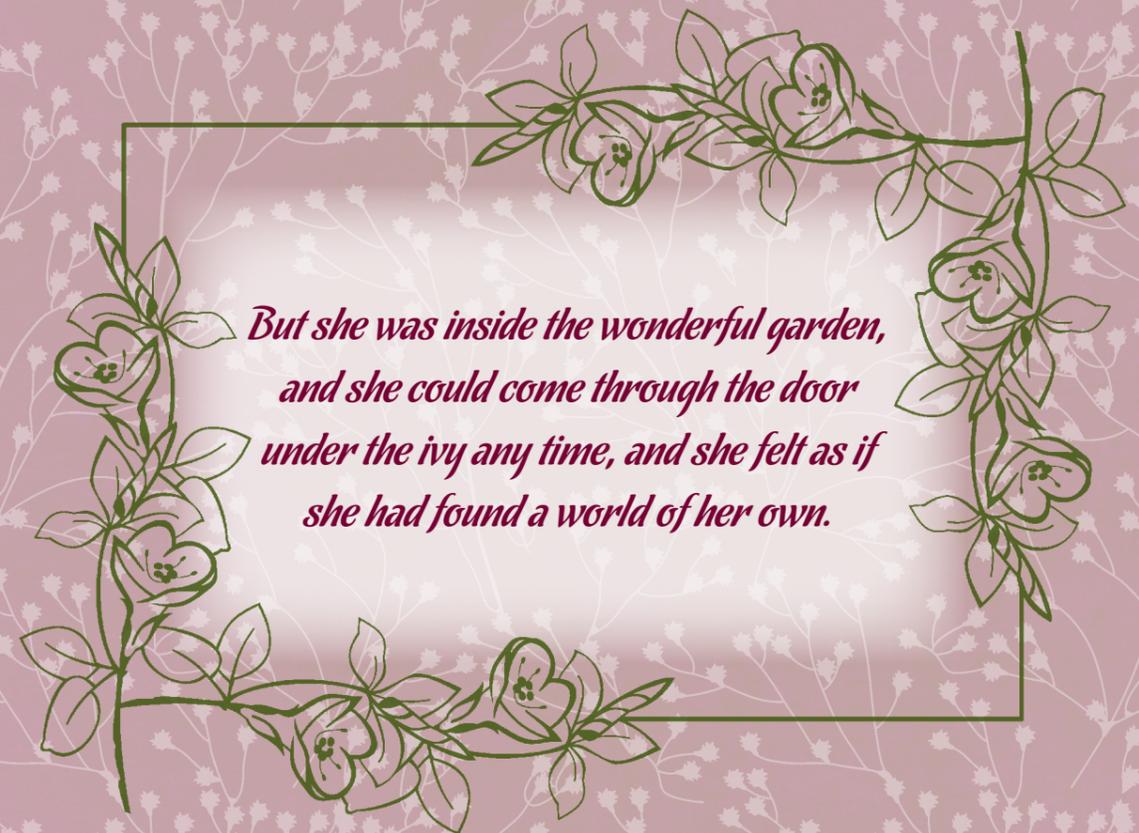
*Mary felt as if the drive would never come to an end, and that the wide, bleak moor was a wide expanse of black ocean through which she was passing on a strip of dry land.*

*Martha had 'buttoned up' her little sisters and brothers, but she had never seen a child who stood still and waited for another person to do things for her as if she had neither hands nor feet of her own.*

*So she began to feel a slight interest in Dickon, and as she had never been interested in anyone but herself, it was the dawning of a healthy sentiment.*

*She stopped and listened to him, and somehow his cheerful, friendly little whistle gave her a pleased feeling, - even a disagreeable little girl may be lonely, and the big closed house and big bare moor and big bare gardens had made this one feel as if there was no one left in the world but herself.*

*'Oh what a queer house this is!' Mary said. 'What a queer house! Everything is a kind of secret. Rooms are locked up and gardens are locked up - and you! Have you been locked up?'*



*But she was inside the wonderful garden,  
and she could come through the door  
under the ivy any time, and she felt as if  
she had found a world of her own.*

*'I've stolen a garden,' she said very fast. 'It isn't mine. It isn't anybody's. Nobody wants it, nobody cares for it, nobody ever goes into it. Perhaps everything is dead in it already; I don't know.'*

**Mary Lennox, *The Secret Garden*.**

*'I love this story. I feel like a part of it.'*

**Sadi, age 10**

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