Romanticism vs. Empire in *The Secret Garden*

Literary and historical discussion of British imperialism in writing for children from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century concentrates upon those texts that embody the values conducive to promoting the expansion and support of the empire (see for example Eldridge 1996 and Richards 1989). The focus falls upon the adventure stories for boys and domestic fiction for girls. Adventure stories for boys, typified by Ballantyne’s *Coral Island* (1857) and Henty’s *Clive of India* (1884) represent models of patriotic, imperialist adventurers, who are certain of their actions, and unquestioning of their values. A similarly pro-imperialist position emerges in the critical discussion of domestic fiction for girls, demonstrating the production of a model of femininity compliant with the values of British imperialism (Richards 1989). The anti-imperialist position, which becomes more evident at the turn of the century, is readily examined by critics through Rudyard Kipling’s adventure story, *Kim* (1901), which is set in India under British rule. In the genre of domestic fiction of the *fin de siècle*, Frances Hodgson Burnett is also arguing an anti-imperialist position. Both *The Secret Garden*, published in 1911 and *A Little Princess*, published in 1905, take British imperialism in India as their context.

In *The Secret Garden* Burnett initially positions her protagonist, Mary Lennox, as the innocent victim of British imperialism. She does this by constructing the character and childhood experiences of Mary as negative projections against an idealised model of the Romantic child, which is initially implied, rather than stated in the text. The Romantic child would be expected to have a quality of innocence; to be imaginative and playful, and also to display an intuitive relationship with nature. The embodiment of these
abstract aspects would be symbolised by an attractive personality and the physical beauty associated with childhood. Ideally these positive qualities would be nurtured by a loving and caring family which also allowed the freedom for the child to explore physically and intellectually. As a result of Mary’s early childhood in India, her character has sadly developed in a contrary way to the suggested ideal model which underpins Burnett’s text. Mary is a physically unattractive, lonely and unhappy child who has not known the pleasures of childhood because she has been emotionally neglected by her parents. The reasons for such neglect are directly related to British imperialism in India. Her father, as an administrator of imperialist power, was too involved with the work of British government, or too ill, to have time for his daughter. Her mother was also part of the invasive imperialist machinery of government social life. She was so entranced with the trappings of rule, the Government dinner parties and balls, that she ‘had not wanted a little girl at all’ (Burnett 1987: 1).

Mary, the unwanted child, is estranged from her parents by the demands and attractions of imperialist rule. Instead of being cared for by her mother, Mary is given over to an Ayah. (An Ayah is an Indian nurse who has the status of a servant.) As a consequence of this denial of parental responsibility, Mary learns to be a ruler, rather than a child. She commands her native servants in an imperious manner, insulting them as she sees fit. Mary has no reason to govern herself, and is therefore emotionally self-indulgent, engaging in self-centred fits of rage. She is also indulged by having servants, consequently she is not required to do anything for herself, not even to dress herself. The circumstances of life under imperialist rule have emphasised the negative and antisocial qualities in Mary, and have prevented her from learning the positive traits which are ideally developed in childhood, such as love, laughter, playfulness and a positive sense of self. She is further ‘deskilled’ by her early childhood experiences in that she has not learned to take care of herself practically. The circumstances of imperialism have produced a child who is emotionally isolated and yet physically dependent.

The opening Indian section of the novel presents a sad and diseased image of childhood symbolised by the episode of the cholera epidemic which strikes down Mary’s parents and her Ayah. The orphaned Mary consequently arrives in England unprepared for the emotional and social expectations of English society. She has been brought up as an ‘English’ child in India, but this cultural
construction is one which is dissociated from the realities of English life. In truth, Mary is neither English, nor Indian, but is caught between two cultures, belonging to neither. Mary has to learn to position herself as an English person living in England. On her arrival in England the weather, the landscape, the Yorkshire dialect and the behaviour expected of an English child within the class system are foreign to her. Burnett uses the Yorkshire moorland in particular, to demonstrate poor Mary’s dislocated state of being. What Mary knows is that she is being taken to live in ‘a house standing on the edge of a moor’ (Burnett 1987: 19); however, she does not know what a moor is, and so asks Mrs Medlock, who answers: ‘Look out of the window in about ten minutes and you’ll see,’ . . . ‘You won’t see much because it is a dark night, but you can see something’ (Burnett 1987: 19).

Mrs Medlock’s refusal to explain the meaning of the word ‘moor’ means that Mary has to learn what it is through her own observations. When they reach the moorland, Mary cannot read the signs she is receiving from this strange environment. Her confusion is both emphasised by, and symbolised by, the darkness of night.

The carriage lamps shed a yellow light on a rough-looking road which seemed to be cut through bushes and low growing things which ended in the great expanse of dark apparently spread out before and around them. A wind was rising and making a singular, wild, low rushing sound.

‘It’s – it’s not the sea is it?’ said Mary . . .

‘No, not it’, answered Mrs Medlock, ‘Nor it isn’t fields, nor mountains, it’s just miles and miles and miles of wild land that nothing grows on but heather and gorse and broom, and nothing lives on but wild ponies and sheep.’

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.

(Burnett 1987: 21)

This is a strange world where Mary cannot decipher the information fed to her senses. She is a traveller in a foreign sensory landscape. Intuition will not suffice, for Mary has to learn the language of this unfamiliar landscape. She must learn what the sounds of the wind mean; how to distinguish between land and sea. Burnett ends this episode with the comment ‘It was this way Mistress Mary arrived
at Misselthwaite Manor, and she had perhaps never felt quite so contrary in all her life’ (Burnett 1987: 23).

Caught in this state of conflict which Burnett sums up as being ‘contrary’, curiosity is Mary’s saving attribute. She wants to know; she needs to learn, and is therefore willing to undergo a process of change, even if she is somewhat reluctant at first. Such reluctance is understandable, for there is so much for Mary to learn and assimilate. She has to shed the destructive imperious authority learned in the hierarchical power structures of India under British rule, and learn to be both cooperative and independent. Burnett ‘re-educates’ Mary through the relationship with Martha, the good-natured serving girl, and through her relationship with the landscape of the Yorkshire moors. Martha is a caring person who responds to Mary and tries to understand the poor child’s situation, gently leading her out of her state of isolation and confusion. The basis of power relations – ruler over servant – are reversed because it is Martha who has more knowledge, and therefore more ‘power’ than Mary. Burnett’s point here is that Martha is willing to share her knowledge, rather than use it as source of power over the child. On her first morning at Misselthwaite it is Martha who gives Mary information about the nature of the moor, and begins that process of the movement for Mary from ignorance to knowledge; from strangeness to familiarity; from isolation to belonging.

‘What is that?’ she (Mary) said, pointing out of the window . . .

‘That’s the moor,’ (said Martha) with a good-natured grin.

‘Does tha’ like it?’

‘No,’ answered Mary. ‘I hate it.’

‘That’s because tha’rt not used to it,’ . . .

‘I just love it. It’s none bare. It’s covered wi’ growin’ things as smell sweet. It’s fair lovely i’ spring and summer when th’ gorse and broom an’ heather’s in flower. It smells o’ honey an’ there’s such a lot o’ fresh air – an’ th’ sky looks so high an’ th’ bees an’ skylarks makes such a nice noise hummin’ an’ singin’. Eh! I wouldn’t live away from th’ moor for anythin’.’

(Burnett 1987: 25)

Martha’s enthusiastic description of the moor is filled with energy and sensual experience, offering a wholesome and stimulating image to Mary, which puzzles her at first. This initial interaction with Martha fuses together the focal point of Mary’s problems inherent
from her previous experience in India: the dislocation between self, landscape and society. Martha presents a positive model for Mary, and also offers the lonely child love. From this first positive encounter Mary also learns to recognise and appreciate servants as people. There is a clear parallel drawn here between Martha and the Indian Ayah, as Mary reflects on their differences in behaviour:

She wondered what this girl (Martha) would do if one slapped her in the face. She was a round, rosy, good-natured looking creature, but she had a sturdy way which made Mistress Mary wonder if she might not slap her back – if the person who slapped her was only a little girl.

(Burnett 1987: 25)

Mary is already beginning to move from the unnatural position of ruler to the natural one of being a child.

With Martha’s help, support and love Mary’s curiosity about the moorland leads her to a state of enhanced physical well-being. A chain reaction begins; Mary meets Martha’s brother, Dickon. Dickon will become her mentor. He is, in many ways, her opposite, for he is the idealised Romantic child: loving and understanding nature; patient and at one with his environment. Through him the seeds of childhood are allowed to grow in Mary as they discover and restore the secret garden together.

The garden, like Mary, is a neglected place; left uncared for, behind the imprisoning walls, it has become a tangle of thorns and briars. Nurture, care and love restore the beauty and freedom of this wilderness. In turn Mary blossoms into a natural and healthy child, and is able to share this healing experience with Colin, her cousin. The critique of imperialism is continued through Mary’s relationship with Colin. He also displays the crippling consequences of neglect. Whereas Mary was abandoned for the projected patriotic ‘love’ of the mother country by the administrators of imperialism, Colin is rejected because of the misplaced love for his mother, who is but a ghost. Both children suffer as orphans of absent mother figures. Colin is imperious in his behaviour, mirroring the self-indulgent and sickly child Mary once was when in India. He is as ignorant of the real world of England beyond the self-elected prison of his bedchamber as Mary was when she first arrived. Burnett’s critique of imperialism is continued through her characterisation of Colin. He is described as ‘A Young Rajah’,
commanding attention, and in danger of degenerating even further into physical debilitation by his misplaced judgement, his fears of becoming a hunchback. Through the interaction between Mary and Colin, Burnett makes it clear that she is principally attacking British imperialism and the abuse of power rather than Indian culture. By the time Mary is able to have a positive effect on Colin, she has been through the learning process which has separated out her Indian experience into that which was resultant of the negative power structures of British imperialism, and that which is to be valued in the true culture, i.e. the native culture of India. She can, therefore, identify Colin’s misbehaviour as being like a young Rajah, because she understands the destructive use of power:

'Once in India I saw a boy who was a Rajah. He spoke to his people just as you spoke to Martha. Everybody had to do everything he told them – in a minute. I think they would have been killed if they hadn’t.'

(Burnett 1987: 146)

The Rajah, like the English in India, wields power over the common people. Burnett has developed her political argument, removing imperialism from being solely a phenomenon of Englishness to a form of rule arising in other cultures: the imperialist Indian Rajah rules his fellow Indian. Mary can understand the dangers of Colin’s behaviour because she is able to relay it through her knowledge drawn from India. Her early foreign experiences are now working positively because they are set within a framework of understanding. She is no longer the English child from India who has a centre of ignorance. That positive knowledge is also transposed through language, whereas previously her ignorance was realised in language, as in the instance of her first encounter with the moor cited above. Mary can now tell stories about India, which fascinate and calm Colin. Her background of strangeness, of otherness, is now a positive source of knowledge because she can set her ‘Indian-ness’ against a social and physical context of English reality which she now understands. Colin is able to become a passive adventurer through Mary’s stories of the outside world, and to gradually turn to the real adventures of growth which are embodied in the recovery of the secret garden.

Mary’s journey of discovery through The Secret Garden is one where she will learn to be a child growing through her early damaging
experiences. In India her garden could only be a dusty and unsatisfactory foreshadowing of the glorious garden the children will finally enjoy in England, because, like her, it was out of place in that environment. Shakespeare referred to England as ‘This royal throne of kings’, ‘this other Eden’. Frances Hodgson Burnett believed in rescuing Eden from the ravages of imperialism. She produced a fictive trio of children who metaphorically learned to uproot the ravaging weeds of imperialism, prune out social division, and from chaos created harmony: peace in the revisioned Eden. Burnett’s achievement is not one of a postcolonial position, for at the turn of the century this was not a viable vision. She does, however, move the consciousness of the coming generation toward a more equitable position of power relationships where the sense of self could be at peace with the landscape, finding a place where they truly belonged. The peace of the garden was no longer an unattainable secret, but a blossoming reality.