

The text and the British Empire

At its height the British Empire stretched over several continents.

The Secret Garden (1911) by Frances Hodgson Burnett was written at the height of the British Empire. The story starts in India where the main character, Mary, lives the first years before she is sent to live with her uncle at Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire after her parents die in a cholera epidemic. The story is a proof of the impact of the Indian colonisation on the imagination of authors and people in general.

India was an exotic place where stories took place much like “Once upon the time in a far away country”

The author and the novel *The Secret Garden*

Frances Hodgson Burnett 1849-1924. She was a successful adult novelist before she started writing for children, but she is best remembered for her children’s books – *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886), *A Little Princess* (1905), and *The Secret Garden* (1911).

Her father had an ironmonger business in Manchester, but died when she was three. The family sold the business and moved to the USA when she was a teenager. Through her writing she helped support her family. Frances Burnett married twice, and eventually settled in England, Kent, where she took a very keen interest in gardening. The novel *The Secret Garden* reflects this passion and perhaps also Burnett’s longing for a happy family life.

The novel is considered a classic piece of writing in children’s literature with patterns of myths and literary references. The adult world is mostly portrayed as cold and corrupted. The female element is lacking, and only through entering the Secret Garden of femininity, fertility and growth can both children and adults find redemption and happiness.

References: Build Critical Thinking Skills With Classic Literature Guides (see resources in the lesson plan).