



Emerging Voices

David Beagley, editor

The Secret Garden and the Gaze

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Introduction

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) suggests that acts of looking are seminal to the communication of ideals surrounding gender in the text. The acts of looking – which this paper will refer to as the gaze – to which Mary Lennox introduces her cousin Colin Craven direct him toward a model of masculinity characterised by its emphasis on power.

The importance attributed to acts of looking in *The Secret Garden* has (ironically) been largely overlooked in scholarship surrounding the text. Scholarship focusing on Burnett's text has emphasised the myriad ways in which *The Secret Garden* represents both Mary and Colin being "healed", and by extension, introduced to the normative gender roles they display at the text's close. Significantly, scholars have engaged in debates about the role mothering, nationalist sentiments and, most notably, the titular secret garden play in the text. While myriad factors play a role in altering Mary's and Colin's behaviour throughout the text, this paper asserts that acts of looking ultimately provide the impetus for the alterations both Mary and Colin experience in *The Secret Garden*.

'Tyrannical and selfish' (3) Mary Lennox is sent to live with her uncle Archibald Craven at Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire after her parents die of cholera in India. After Mary unearths the buried key to the secret garden at Misselthwaite, she works in it along with Dickon, a 'moor boy' (58), becoming healthier and stronger as the text progresses. Mary also discovers she has a cousin, Colin Craven, whose presence had been hidden from her. Sickly and pampered Colin believes – along with his father – that he will not live to reach adulthood. As Mary and Colin work together in the garden, both children are emotionally and physically transformed so that by the text's close, a healthy Colin gains the ability to walk and, importantly, to win a race against Mary (171). 'Master Colin' (173) dominates the close of *The Secret Garden*, with Mary disappearing from the final chapters of Burnett's text.

The Gaze

This paper will utilise feminist critical theory surrounding the concept of the gaze to discuss the importance attributed to acts of looking in the text. J. A. Cuddon asserts that the gaze 'refers to the hierarchical and ideological ways in which spectators view images of people' (296, my emphasis), and this paper will demonstrate the way in which the gaze facilitates Mary's and Colin's respective transformations in the text.

While discussions of the gaze have primarily been utilised in film studies, this paper will utilise critical discussions of the gaze as a model through which to explore how acts of looking function as socialising processes within Burnett's text. Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" posits binaries inherent in the act of looking: Mulvey notes that in 'a world ordered by sexual imbalance' the act of looking has been split between 'active/male and passive/female' (19). While the woman functions as (erotic) spectacle for both the characters within a film and the spectators within the audience, man is unable to 'bear the burden of sexual objectification' (Mulvey 20). John Berger similarly summarises the gendered split inherent in looking to state that 'men act and women appear' (47), emphasising the way in which the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 19) prompts women to survey themselves (46-7).

However, a number of scholars have questioned this binary and have, as J. A. Cuddon asserts, 'reject[ed] the implicit essentialism of Mulvey's characterisation of men and women as respectively active and



passive' (296). E. Ann Kaplan's "Is the Gaze Male?" discusses masculine and feminine roles in relation to the gaze: notably, Kaplan asserts that while 'women have been permitted in representation to assume (step into) the position defined as masculine', men must step into 'her position' – a feminised position – in order to 'keep the whole structure intact' (215). Notably, Kaplan asserts that while the gaze is 'not necessarily male (literally) ... to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position' (216). However, Kaplan ultimately emphasises the need to move beyond such 'long-held cultural and linguistic patterns of oppositions' (219).

While discussions of the gaze are inextricably connected to film conventions – Mulvey's discussion of the 'extra-diegetic' (20) gaze provides a notable example – and are primarily (although not exclusively) employed in film theory, this paper will utilise the term 'gaze' to refer to ways of looking in *The Secret Garden* due to the notions of power highlighted in scholarship surrounding the gaze.

'I looked at him all the time and he looked at me': Mary Lennox and Colin Craven

Both Mary Lennox and Colin Craven are conspicuously removed from sight when they are introduced in Burnett's text. While the narrator describes Mary as 'the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen' (3) in the opening sentence of the narrative, Mary is largely invisible at the beginning of *The Secret Garden*. Mary's Ayah is made to understand that, in order to please Mrs. Craven, she must keep Mary out of her mother's sight (3). Similarly, the two officers who discover Mary alone in the bungalow after her parents' death describe Mary as "'the child no one ever saw'" (6). Colin's invisibility is even more marked as the servants at Misselthwaite hide Colin's existence from Mary (81) because he 'won't let people see [him] and talk [him] over' (74). Colin comments that his father Archibald Craven avoids looking at him because doing so makes him "'wretched'" (75), and insists on his mother's portrait being covered by a curtain because he doesn't like 'to see her looking at [him]' (80).

Mary is subjected to the gaze as soon as she is discovered alone by two officers in her parents' bungalow. Mary is dubbed "'Mistress Mary Quite Contrary'" (7-8) and is discussed, rather than being ignored (8-9). Characters who survey Mary encourage her to examine herself: Martha, a 'Yorkshire rustic' (19), asks why Mary does not dress herself (18-19) and Ben Weatherstaff, a gardener who exercises the 'Yorkshire habit' of speaking with 'blunt frankness' likens Mary to himself: "'We're neither of us good lookin' an' we're both of us as sour as we look'" (25-6). Mary becomes transfixed by portraits of a 'stiff, plain little girl rather like herself' (34), and comments that the girl, who seems to stare at her, makes her "'feel queer'" (34). Lori N. Brister links this 'queer' feeling to the uncanny, and asserts that the paintings Mary encounters function as a Lacanian mirror – allowing Mary self-identification, but in a rather unpleasant form (110). Brister asserts that Mary 'sees herself as "stiff" and "plain," much as Ben Weatherstaff describes her' (110), and it is precisely because Ben has gazed at her that Mary is able to identify these purported similarities between herself and the portrait. In surveying the painting, Mary is surveying herself, occupying a feminised position in the gaze.

Once Mary accepts the gaze, she introduces Colin to it. As Colin throws a tantrum, claiming he can feel a lump on his back (102-3), Mary demands to see Colin's back (103), then subjects him to intense scrutiny – 'Mary looked up and down his spine, and down and up, as intently as if she had been the great doctor from London' (104) – before telling him she is unable to see a lump 'as big as a pin' (104). Mary also uses the gaze to alter Colin's "'rude'" (135) behaviour:

[S]he sat and looked at him curiously for a few minutes ... She wanted to make him ask her why she was doing it and of course he did.

"What are you looking at me for?" he said (my emphasis, 135).

The passage explicitly demonstrates how Mary, having been socialised through the work of the gaze, turns the gaze upon Colin. Mary uses a look to capture Colin's attention, and to incite a change in his behaviour, telling him he is 'queer' (136). Michelle J. Smith asserts that 'Mary's function resembles that of a mother whose imperial responsibility it is to raise healthy children' (126), and discusses how her 'support and guidance allow Colin to ... develop sufficient strength of body and character to indicate that he will be able to become the ruler of Misselthwaite as an adult' (126). Meredith R. Ackroyd also highlights Mary's mothering function in the text, asserting that 'Mary is ... best able to provide Colin with protection, nurture, and training because she is the only mothering figure to whom Colin is receptive' (59). Mary's mothering work is significant as she utilises the gaze to heal the malaise from which Colin suffers.

Colin is initially presented as unfit to function as master of Misselthwaite. Jerry Phillips understands Colin's subjectivity as inextricably connected to Misselthwaite, with his fears of developing a hunchback functioning as 'a none too subtle way of stating that he carries the paralysis of the Craven estate on his back' (179). Colin's presentation as a 'sickly weak-backed boy' (143) symbolically connects him to a Gothic model of femininity. Maureen M. Martin and Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina also link Colin's 'insane



tempers' – which Mary famously dismisses as "just hysterics – hysterics – hysterics!" (Burnett 103) – to ideas of femininity (144; 37). *The Secret Garden* is conspicuously concerned with the Gothic: Charles Butler and Hallie O'Donovan have identified Gothic tropes such as 'forbidden passages, locked doors, tragic secrets, powerlessness and incarceration' (129) in the text, and Jerry Phillips classifies Misselthwaite – "a big grand place in a gloomy way" (10), which is located on the "wild, dreary" moor (14) – as a quintessentially Gothic house (172-3). Such Gothic imagery has important implications for the presentation of Colin's gender. David Punter and Glennis Byron assert that fears about the breakdown of traditional middle-class gender ideologies were manifested in images of powerful women presented as alien or monstrous (40). While he avoids being looked at, and makes futile attempts at exercising power, Colin is presented as monstrous due to his lack of power.

While male subjectivity need not be characterised by violence – notably, Maureen M. Martin highlights how Colin rejects Ben's suggestion that he will become a boxer (146) – masculinity was presented as synonymous with power throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers discuss the father's legal right to punish and his concomitant responsibility to protect his family (4), with both punishment and protection implying power. Megan Doolittle also notes the father's inviolable power within the family, which was so pervasive it was invisibly built into wider social institutions (31). Claudia Nelson details how the ability to influence others functioned as a marker of manhood (57-8), and Martin asserts that Colin is only able to 'grasp the reins of power, domestic and political, that he will inherit' as he 'heals' (144). *The Secret Garden* suggests that in order to embody an acceptable model of male subjectivity, Colin must develop the ability to 'grasp the reins of power' Martin discusses, and become 'Master Colin' (173) of Misselthwaite.

Colin's lack of power is revealed by his relationship to the servants of Misselthwaite. Mary notes, as she rushes to confront Colin during a tantrum, that '... all the grown-up people were so frightened ...' (102). As Mary yells at Colin, Mrs. Medlock, Martha and the nurse stand still, 'huddled together' and 'gasp[ing] with fright' (103). Their behaviour reveals the futility of Colin's attempts to exercise power: the nurse comments, "No one can do anything with him" (my emphasis, 102). Rather than stirring them to action, Colin's outbursts paralyse the staff with fear. Colin is able to terrorise, but cannot exert effective power.

Colin's ability to exert power in the household alters as soon as he accepts the gaze. Colin's newfound power, and its explicit connection to the gaze, is especially evident on two occasions: when Colin meets the head gardener Mr Roach, and when Colin meets Ben Weatherstaff. Colin welcomes the gaze on both occasions, and in doing so, he challenges Laura Mulvey's gendered discussion of the gaze. Colin does not simply 'connote to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 19) here, but instead utilises the gaze as a means through which to acquire power in the narrative.

Colin's journey into the titular garden is purportedly secret, but in order to travel to the garden, Colin must confront the gaze of the head gardener, Mr. Roach. The importance of this meeting is indicated in the text:

... Mr. Roach was startled one day when he received orders from Master Colin's room to the effect that he must report himself in the apartment no outsider had ever seen ...
"Well, well," he said to himself as he hurriedly changed his coat, "what's to do now? His Royal Highness that won't be looked at calling up a man he's never set eyes on" (119).

Burnett's description highlights how, in requesting to meet Mr. Roach, Colin is beginning to accept the gaze to which Mary introduced him. Colin's meeting with Mr Roach explicitly addresses Colin's newfound power: 'The young Rajah turned and looked his servitor over' (120, my emphasis). Colin both gazes and is gazed at here, and Mr Roach notes the power implicit in Colin's actions as he comments, "My word! ... he's got a fine lordly way with him ... You'd think he was a whole Royal Family rolled into one" (121). Colin's newfound power is also evident in the narrator's descriptions, as Colin is consistently described as a 'Rajah'.

The connection between Colin's willingness to accept the gaze and his increased power is also evident when he meets Ben Weatherstaff. As Mary, Colin and Dickon work in the secret garden, Ben looks over the wall (128). Ben is both angered and shocked to see the children in the garden, but the symbols of Colin's power are especially significant: Colin beckons 'imperiously' to Dickon, moves toward Ben in his 'wheeled chair ... looking rather like some sort of State Coach', extends his hand 'haughtily' to Ben and is once again described as a 'Rajah' (129). Ben repeats the 'labels of disability' (Brister 113) he has heard applied to Colin, and Ben's comments prompt Colin to stand up and demand that Ben gaze at him: 'Look at me!' he flung up at Ben Weatherstaff. "Just look at me – you! Just look at me!" (130). Both Colin's position within the gaze and his subsequent power are evident here. Brister asserts it is at this moment that Colin begins issuing orders to Ben, who readily concurs (Brister 113), and Colin's power is strikingly evident as he comments, "I'm your master ... and you are to obey me" (131). The gaze is once again linked to Colin's power here – Colin indeed functions as a 'young Rajah' (129).



'Master Colin': The close of the text

The close of *The Secret Garden* reinforces the ideological work that has been conducted by the gaze, as Mary – fulfilling her role as socialising agent and mother – has directed Colin toward a model of male subjectivity characterised by its emphasis on power. The final chapters of Burnett's narrative see Mary's role in the text diminish as greater emphasis is placed both upon Colin's improved health and his newfound ability to function as master of Misselthwaite Manor. Mary is absent as Colin is reunited with his father, and as the pair walk from the secret garden to Misselthwaite Manor together (171-3).

The implications of *The Secret Garden*'s connection to the Gothic become clear with Mary's absence at the end of the narrative, evoking the Gothic renunciation of the feminine. Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* provides a useful model for reading Mary's absence, for although Creed focuses on horror films, she details how the feminine – specifically in relation to mothering – is renounced under patriarchy. Creed asserts that it is woman's maternal functions which facilitate her presentation as monstrous. Notably, Creed asserts that while woman is not monstrous in herself, the project of the horror film (and Gothic narratives such as *The Secret Garden*) is to perpetuate the idea that woman's monstrosity arises from her difference from man (83).

Importantly, while this patriarchal ideology 'denigrates' woman, it must nevertheless be communicated, and hence endorsed, through her (Creed 165). As Mary mothers Colin, prompting him to accept the gaze and encouraging him to appropriate characteristically male power, she communicates this patriarchal ideology. However, in order for Mary's and Colin's relationship to progress normally under the dictates of patriarchy, Mary must be distanced from Colin at the conclusion of this project (38). Mary's absence at the end of the text symbolically suggests this separation between Mary and Colin/mother and son. Meredith R. Ackroyd also discusses this separation:

Mothers may protect, nurture, and train their children in nontraditional situations and with nontraditional sentiments, but still they so do within a cultural framework that circumscribes and shapes their work as mothers and then appropriates the products – both labor and children – to meet the demands of patriarchy and ensure its reproduction in the future (47).

Having fulfilled her mothering role in assisting Colin to gain power, Mary is not only distanced from Colin, but also from the gaze – the means through which she socialised him – as she disappears from the close of the text.

In contrast, Colin is highly visible at the close of the text, as the servants stare at him (173). The framing of the text itself is also pertinent here. Anna Krugovoy Silver notes that *The Secret Garden* opens with an image of Mary and closes with an image of Colin (199), indicating his prominence. Colin's position in the gaze does not feminise him – with 'his head up in the air', walking 'strongly and steadily', 'Master Colin' (173) emanates the power Mary's mothering has awarded him. Colin has embraced the male subjectivity that accompanies the gaze in Burnett's text. The gaze functions as the primary socialising agent in *The Secret Garden*, moving the mothering Mary and 'Master Colin' (173) into the normative gender roles they embody at the text's close.

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