Discussion Questions (Taken from Lit Lovers)

1. Mary and Colin are often described as being unpleasant and rude. Martha, in fact, says Mary is "as tyrannical as a pig" and that Colin is the "worst young newt as ever was." Why are both of these children so ill-tempered? Whom does Burnett hold responsible for their behavior—themselves or their parents? How does this fit into one of the larger themes of the novel, that of the "fallen world of adults"?

2. Why does Mary respond so well to Martha? What characteristics of Martha's personality are responsible for awakening the gentleness hidden in Mary? Compare Martha's treatment of Mary to Mary's treatment of Colin. Does it have the same effect on Colin as it does on Mary?

3. Upon Mary's first encounter with Dickon, Burnett describes the boy in this way: "His speech was so quick and easy. It sounded as if he liked her and was not the least afraid she would not like him, though he was a common moor boy, in patched clothes and with a funny face and a rough, rusty-red head. As she came closer to him she noticed that there was a clean fresh scent of heather and grass and leaves about him, almost as if he were made of them." What is significant about this passage? Are there any particular motifs that seem to be connected specifically to Dickon?

4. Compare Dickon's upbringing with Mary's and Colin's. How is it different? Is it important, or just incidental, that Dickon is a "common moor boy" rather than a member of the "privileged class"?

5. Could Mary and Colin have found the path to spiritual and physical healing without Dickon?

6. Is Colin's deceased mother's spirit present in the book? Where and when do you sense it the most? Who does she employ as her "agents" of goodwill in the book?
7. Misselthwaite Manor is a house of masculine rule, whether it be Mr. Craven’s or Colin’s rule. The garden, however, is a place of fertility and regrowth. This type of symbolism structures the novel. Where else is this structure manifested in the novel?

8. In its theme of the mind’s potential for regeneration, The Secret Garden has often been considered a tribute to the “New Thought” movement, which included ideas of Christian Science and Theosophy. How do you feel about this? Do you think that the “magic” employed by Colin was as crucial to his healing as was communion with nature and other living things?

9. Discuss the regionalist aspects of the novel, such as the Yorkshire dialects. How do they contribute to the overarching themes of The Secret Garden?

10. In your opinion, does Mr. Craven, after subjecting his son to years of neglect, deserve redemption?

11. Which narrative features were employed by the author to make The Secret Garden speak to children? Why do you think this novel appeals to an adult audience as well? What makes it a classic?

Summary
Mary Lennox has no one left in the world when she arrives at Misselthwaite Manor, her mysterious uncle’s enormous, drafty mansion looming on the edge of the moors. A cholera epidemic has ravaged the Indian village in which she was born, killing both her parents and the “Ayah,” or Indian servant, who cared for her.

Not that being alone is new to her. Her socialite mother had no time between parties for Mary, and her father was both too ill and too occupied by his work to raise his daughter. Not long after coming to live with her uncle, Mr. Craven, Mary discovers a walled garden, neglected and in ruins.

Soon she meets her servant Martha’s brother Dickon, a robust country boy nourished both by his mother’s love and by the natural surroundings of the countryside; and her tyrannical cousin Colin, whose mother died giving birth to him. So traumatized was Mr. Craven by the sudden death of his beloved wife that he effectively abandoned the infant Colin and buried the keys to the garden that she adored. His son has grown into a self-loathing hypochondriacal child whose tantrums strike fear into the hearts of servants.

The lush garden is now overgrown and all are forbidden to enter it. No one can even remember where the door is, until a robin leads Mary to its hidden key. It is in the “secret garden,” and with the help of Dickon, that Mary and Colin find the path to physical and spiritual health. Along the way the three children discover
that in their imaginations—called "magic" by Colin—is the power to transform lives. (From the Penguin edition—image, top-right.)

Author Biography

• Birth—November 24, 1849
• Where—Manchester, England, UK
• Death—October 29, 1924
• Where—Plandome, New York, USA

Frances Hodgson Burnett was an Anglo-American playwright and author. She is best known for her children's stories, in particular The Secret Garden, A Little Princess, and Little Lord Fauntleroy.

She was born in Cheetham Hill, Manchester, England. Her father died in 1854, leaving her mother to support five children. They had to endure poverty and squalor in the Victorian slums of Manchester.

In 1865, at age 16, Frances emigrated to Knoxville, Tennessee in the United States. The move, which the family made at the request of an uncle, did not alleviate their poverty, but they were now living in a better environment. She lived in a house in New Market, northeast of Knoxville (off of 11E; in front of the house there is a sign which contains details).

Following the death of her mother in 1867, the 18-year-old Frances became the head of a family of two younger siblings. She turned to writing to support them all, with a first story published in Godey's Lady's Book in 1868. Soon after she was being published regularly in Godey's, Scribner's Monthly, Peterson's Ladies' Magazine and Harper's Bazaar. Her main writing talent was combining realistic detail of working-class life with a romantic plot.

She married Dr. Swan Burnett of Washington, D.C. in 1873. Her first novel, That Lass o' Lowrie's, was published in 1877 and was a story of Lancashire life.

After moving with her husband to Washington, D.C., Burnett wrote the novels Haworth's (1879), Louisiana (1880), A Fair Barbarian (1881), and Through One Administration (1883), as well as a play, Esmeralda (1881), written with William Gillette.

In 1886 she published Little Lord Fauntleroy. Althugh originally intended as a children's book, it had a great appeal to mothers. It created a fashion of long curls (based on her son Vivian's) and velvet suits with lace collars (based on Oscar Wilde's attire), which became a stereotypical image for children of the
wealthy. The book sold more than half a million copies. In 1888 she won a lawsuit in England over the dramatic rights to *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, establishing a precedent that was incorporated into British copyright law in 1911.

In 1898 she divorced Dr. Burnett. Two years later married Stephen Townsend, her business manager. This second marriage would last less than two years, ending in 1902.

Her later works include *Sara Crewe* (1888), later rewritten as *A Little Princess* (1905); *The Lady of Quality* (1896), considered one of the best of her plays; and *The Secret Garden* (1911), the children's novel for which she is probably best known today. *The Lost Prince* was published in 1915, and *The Head of the House of Coombe* in 1922. *The Making of a Marchioness* was published in 1911 and was one of Nancy Mitford's favorite books, mentioned in *Love in a Cold Climate*.

In 1893 Hodgson published a memoir of her youth, *The One I Knew Best of All*. From the mid-1890s she lived mainly in England, and in particular at Great Maytham Hall (from 1897 to 1907) where she really did discover a secret garden, but in 1909 she moved back to the United States, after having become a U.S. citizen in 1905.

After her first son Lionel's death of consumption in 1890, Burnett delved into Spiritualism and apparently found this a great comfort in dealing with her grief (she had previously dabbled in Theosophy, and some of its concepts are worked into *The Secret Garden*, in which a boy who has been an invalid for a long time helps to heal himself through positive thinking and affirmations). During World War I, Burnett put her beliefs about what happens after death into writing with her novella *The White People*.

Frances Hodgson Burnett lived for the last 17 years of her life in Plandome, New York. She is buried in Roslyn Cemetery nearby, next to her son Vivian. (*From Wikipedia.*)

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**Book Reviews**

(Older works have few, if any, mainstream press reviews online. See Amazon and Barnes & Noble for helpful customer reviews.)