

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Secret Garden (Unabridged) by Frances Hodgson Burnett

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## Book Information

Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden  
(Unabridged)

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Book Level: 6.3

Interest Level: MG

Mary moves to a huge estate to live with her mysterious uncle, his ailing son, the servants--and a secret garden.

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## Main Characters

Ben Weatherstaff the gruff gardener of the manor

Colin Mr. Craven's son who has been treated as an invalid since birth

Dickon Sowerby a boy who has a rare gift with animals and plants and who befriends both Mary and Colin

Martha Sowerby a pleasant young servant of the manor and Dickon's sister

Mary Lennox the principal character of the story, who discovers and nurtures the secret garden and welcomes Colin into it to experience the magic

Mr. Craven Mary's uncle and Colin's father who was made miserable by his wife's death

Mrs. Medlock a housekeeper in the manor

Mrs. Sowerby the wise and loving mother of twelve children, including Dickon and Martha

## Vocabulary

**doxology** any of several short hymns or verses in praise of God

**fakir** in the Muslim or Hindu religion, a begging monk

**harangue** long, noisy speech

**mantle** long, loose cloak

**obsequious** too ready or eager to please

**wraith** a ghostly image of a person who is about to die or who has just died

## Synopsis

When cholera strikes her home in India, Mary Lennox's life changes dramatically. Mary's mother, father, and her servant, called an Ayah in India, die from the disease. After officers find ten-year-old Mary in her deserted house, her legal guardian and uncle, Archibald Craven, is notified. Soon after, Mary goes to live with her uncle at his Misselthwaite Manor located on the moors of Yorkshire, England.

Although she never knew her parents' love and affection in India, Mary had been accustomed to having her every whim satisfied by her Ayah. At first, Mary struggles with her new lifestyle at Misselthwaite. For instance, when she first arrives at the manor, she is unable to dress herself. She expects to be waited on and is vexed when the servants don't comply. The servants find her to be spoiled.

Adapting to the manor house itself presents a challenge for Mary as well. The house is filled with mystery with its locked doors and its elusive owner, Mr. Craven. When Mary first arrives at the manor and for some time afterward, her uncle refuses to meet her. During that lonely time, a pleasant servant girl named Martha tells Mary about a secret garden--a garden whose door has been locked for ten years. Martha explains that the door was locked by Mr. Craven himself upon the death of his wife, Mrs. Craven. She adds that Mr. Craven has been in misery since his wife's death.

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With nothing else to do for amusement, Mary explores the manor's other gardens. A robin shows her the location of the secret garden's buried key. Later, she finds the garden's hidden door. Although the garden is dormant when Mary first sees it, she is entranced by it. She recognizes the promise of beauty it holds and is elated that she has found a place to call her own--secret place.

Eventually, Mary shares her secret place with Dickon, Martha's brother. The two work side-by-side to return the garden to its former glory. As the garden flourishes, so does Mary. The invigorating moor air, good food, and her new friends greatly improve both her health and her disposition.

Another character that benefits from the "magical atmosphere" of the garden is Colin Craven, Archibald's son. After hearing cries in the night, Mary explores the manor's hallways and eventually finds Colin's room. Bedridden since his birth, Colin has been hidden away for years. His father, grieved by his wife's death, wants nothing to do with his son. Fearing that Colin will end up a hunchback like himself, he treats the boy like an invalid and expects the servants to do the same.

Like Mary, Colin is stubborn and spoiled. However, his friendships with Mary and Dickon hearten him. Eventually, Mary and Dickon take him to the secret garden. There, Colin begins to grow stronger. With daily visits to the garden, Colin gradually is able to walk on his own and, finally, to run races.

While touring Europe, Mr. Craven experiences some magic of his own. He hears the voice of his dead wife calling him home to the garden. A letter from Dickon's mother urges him to go home as well. When he arrives at Misselthwaite, he walks to the garden. As he reaches to open the door, a boy races out--his healthy and vigorous son, Colin.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

After a few visits to the garden, Colin strengthens in mind, body, and spirit. As a result of his garden walks and fresh air, he notices his appetite increasing. Why, at times does he continue to pick at the food his servants bring him?

*He wants to keep his good health a secret from the servants. He wishes to surprise his father when he returns home. If the servants discover his progress, they will spoil his secret by notifying his father. To keep the servants guessing, he often refuses his meals and pretends to be sick, when, in fact, he is eating great amounts of food prepared by Mrs. Sowerby.*

### Literary Analysis

When Ben Weatherstaff, the gardener, sees Mary in the secret garden for the first time, he becomes very angry and shouts at her. Why is he so upset?

*Ben knew and admired Mrs. Craven before she died. He knew Mrs. Craven loved the garden. In fact, she had asked him to take care of it if something would happen to her. Weatherstaff had worked the garden over the years to keep most of the roses from dying. He felt close to Mrs. Craven there and felt some ownership of the garden as well.*

### Inferential Comprehension

When Colin is in the garden, he speaks of the "Magic" he feels there. His mind, body, and spirit become stronger because of this magical force. While Mr. Craven is touring Europe, he, too, feels a magical energy that makes him "feel alive." How can this "Magic" be explained?

*The book makes several references to Mrs. Craven's spirit being alive. Mrs. Sowerby mentions that she is in the garden. Colin explains that he felt "Magic" in his bedroom one night and felt drawn to the drape that covered his mother's portrait. He pulled the cord and felt his mother's presence as he looked at her face.*

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## Constructing Meaning

In one scene of the book, Colin has a tantrum because he thinks he has a lump growing on his back. When Mary enters the room, she is very unsympathetic and says, "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!" She shows no mercy for Colin. Yet, she calms him down. Why do you think her approach to his tantrum works?

*Colin has been used to people being fearful of him and giving him his way when he acts up. When Mary confronts him, he is shocked. Also, he admires her and most likely wants to please her.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Mary moves from the hot climate of India to a Yorkshire moor. There are several descriptions of the moor in the book. Mrs. Medlock calls it a "wild" and "dreary" place, while Martha comments that she "wouldn't live away from th' moor for anythin'." Have students research the Yorkshire moors. Ask them to find pictures of the land and of the plant life that grows there. Heather, gorse, and broom are three plants mentioned. As an extension activity, research the climate and geographical features of India as well. Compare the two lands. Ask the students to write about which of the two places they would choose to live and why.

**Making Predictions** While Colin is growing healthy and strong in the secret garden, his father, in Europe, feels himself growing stronger and calmer as well. He has the sense of "coming alive." After hearing his dead wife's voice in a dream and receiving Mrs. Sowerby's letter, Mr. Craven desires a second chance with the son he has neglected for ten years. When he reaches the secret garden, his son rushes out and the two talk, walking back to the manor house. The book ends with the servants watching father and son strolling together. The reader concludes that father and son will bond and begin a happy life together. Ask the readers to write a page about the futures of Mary and Dickon. What is their next

chapter?

**Understanding Dialog** Throughout the book, the servants, Dickon, Mrs. Sowerby, and even Mary speak a Yorkshire dialect. Explain that throughout a country, people usually speak the same language, yet in different areas of that country, they may speak with different tones and pronunciation. Discuss the different dialects one may hear in different regions of the United States. Read aloud some of the book's passages containing Yorkshire dialect and discuss their meaning.

**Responding to Literature** The beauty and magical quality of flowers is clearly a theme of the book. Crocuses, daffodils, snowdrops, lilies, irises, roses, delphiniums, and columbine are some of the flowers described in the book. When Colin first visits Mary, he brings her white poppy and blue larkspur seeds. Have the students research several of the flowers mentioned. Have them take note of the following: What type of soil and climate is needed to raise each type of flower? Are the flowers grown from seeds, bulbs, or cuttings? What care do they need? Would these flowers grow in your area? Grow a few of the flowers in the classroom. Perhaps a class garden could be created on the school grounds with the plants grown.