

## **Analysis of Holistic Approaches in Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden: Body, Brain, and Mind Connectivity**

**Jae Young Jung\***

*Garden House School of New York, USA, Dance Specialist*

The purpose of the study is to provide readers with insight into how reading children's literature, such as the novel *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, can provide meaningful opportunities for developing children's awareness of healthy development. The study examined the efficacy of physical exercise and body-mind connectivity, Burnett's holistic approaches in the novel, perceptions of her era's medical treatment, her experience with mainstream treatments, aspirations for the novel by investigating analytical articles, literature reviews. Furthermore, the study introduces contemporary research and books that describe how physical exercise is associated with physiology and the brain, and culturally responsive teaching for children's healthy development. The study concluded that reading the novel could have a great impact on instilling the importance of physical exercise, social interactions, positive thoughts, emotional development, and nature in students. The book was first published in 1911 and there might be a concern that some aspects of the book may not be paralleled with contemporary educational circumstances and children's physical growth. However, after examining the literature review, the study proves that the book encompasses general principles of children's physical exercise and healthy growth. The study suggests promoting meaningful readings to children, such as Burnett's novel, positively influences children's awareness of physical exercise and healthy development.

Key words: Movement Science, Physical Exercise, Body-Mind Connectivity, Brain Development, Behavioral Science

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\* Corresponding author  
Email address: [jjj234@nyu.edu](mailto:jjj234@nyu.edu)

## Introduction

In the midst of the modern technological revolution, educators are aware that technological advances also have drawbacks for our children's healthy development. We can predict aspects of children's development as a result of being significantly affected by too much screen time, such as watching too many shows or playing video games. These experiences associated with the technological revolution may have shaped many areas of young children's bodies, minds, and many educators are concerned that this phenomenon also influences children's subsequent stages of development. As Zaretta Hammond (2015) advocates in her book, "*Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*", teachers should be aware of how our teaching and learning environment will affect our students. It can have an impact on healthy development including physical exercise, social interactions, positive thoughts, and engaging with nature. I chose Burnett's novel for this study because the book presents how children change their attitudes, recover from illness, and gain positive thoughts through physical exercise, social interactions, and cultivating the hidden garden.

*The Secret Garden* is seen as a classic of English children's literature. Many ideas in the novel are derived from eighteenth century Christian ideology, contemporary science, and medicine. Mary Lennox, the protagonist of the novel, is orphaned and sent to her uncle's house in England after the cholera outbreak in India. Burnett portrayed Mary as plain looking, unsympathetic, and having a superior attitude. Her family's wealth enables her domineering behavior to do whatever she wants. Throughout the story, characters in the novel improved their moods, attitudes, perceptions, and medical conditions after they started engaging in exercise, interacting with each other, and cultivating the garden. This made me want to know more about what inspired Burnett to create this novel for children promoting physical exercise, social interactions, and nature. Burnett seemed to have a deep understanding of how these elements have a great impact on children's healthy development.

Although research studies concerning *The Secret Garden* introduce many ideas including Burnett's depictions of anti-imperialism and gender roles, the study analyzes medical and social aspects of Burnett's novel and suggests meaningful readings for children have a great impact on their healthy development. Readings that portray the efficacy of physical exercise, social interactions, and engaging with natural environment will positively affect children's consciousness, which will contribute to changing behaviors.

The study sought to find out what inspired Burnett when she wrote *The Secret Garden* in the hopes of showing a glimpse of her experiences and perspectives on psychological, physical, and socioemotional aspects of human development. In the first part, the study examines articles concerning *The Secret Garden*, mainly focusing the analytical article, "Christian Science versus the Rest Cure in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*" by Anne Stiles (2015). Through this article, the

study came to believe that Burnett's awareness, inspiration, and experiences affected her holistic point of view on body-mind connectivity. The second part of the study discusses how physical exercise and ecological factors, such as gardening and socializing, affect the physiology of the brain, cognition, moods, behaviors, perceptions, and psychological affirmations. Lastly, the study concludes how Burnett's awareness of the connectivity between body and mind affected the story; that a variety of elements, including physical exercise and natural environment, helped create a magical story; and how contemporary research supports Burnett's holistic approaches for children's healthy development and growth. During research, the study used Brooklyn College search engine by using key words, including *The Secret Garden*, Frances Hodgson Burnett, movement science, physical exercise, behavioral science, body-mind connectivity, and the brain.

### **Medical and Social Aspects of *The Secret Garden***

In this part, the study will discuss, Christian Science versus the Rest Cure in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* by Anne Stiles (2015), which sheds light onto the medical aspects of the novel. Unlike other book essays that mainly emphasize nature as a way to transform people's minds and attitudes, Stiles argues that readers also need to pay attention to medical and social aspects in Burnett's novel. The study will examine how Stiles details Burnett's experiences with the rest cure, Christian Science, and New Thought.

#### *The Rest Cure: A Controversial Mainstream Treatment in the Late 19th Century*

According to Stiles (2015), the rest cure was originally designed by a Philadelphia neurologist, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, in the 1870s as a means of treating soldiers with serious nerve damage. The treatment required spending significant time, sometimes up to two months, resting in bed while intaking lots of nutrients. It also prevented patients from contacting their family and friends, and doing basic exercises such as sewing, reading, writing, or walking. Although some patients benefited from the treatment, many patients, especially active women, such as Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, detested the regiment of the rest cure and voiced their negative experiences with it. Stiles stated that Gilman wrote, "...came perilously near to losing my mind. The mental agony grew so unbearable that I would sit blankly moving my head from side to side." Stiles also explained Woolf went through severe depression and stated, "eating and resting made her worse" (Stiles, 2015, p.298).

The rest cure became popular for middle and upper-class women from the 1880s to 1920s, becoming a prevalent mainstream medical treatment. Stiles claimed that Burnett suffered from illnesses associated with the nervous systems such as insomnia and depression. According to Stiles, although

Burnett did not leave detailed medical records for her depression and insomnia, records of her inpatient treatment insinuate that Burnett might have been familiar with the rest cure.

Stiles contended that Burnett tried to convey her negative opinions about the rest cure through Colin Craven, who appeared to have had a similar treatment and was portrayed as a hysterical patient. In the novel, Colin's physician, Dr. Craven prescribed Colin to stay in bed and eat, prevented him from performing physical exercises to strengthen his back, and instilled fear in his mind that disengaged him from many activities. Stiles stated, Due in part to the writings of Gilman and Woolf, Mitchell's treatment is often cited as an example of nineteenth-century medical misogyny (Stiles, 2015, p.298). This explains Burnett's awareness of how a treatment like the rest cure has a significant negative impact on the body and mind.

#### *Christian Science and New Thought*

Stiles reported that Burnett's son, Vivian, shared his mom's relentless struggle with medical conditions such as insomnia and depression. Burnett stayed at clinics and underwent a modified version of the rest cure by Dr. Fowler in 1919. The treatment seemed very similar to the rest cure since patients stayed in bed and were discouraged from reading and writing. Despite several attempts to heal her illnesses with the aid of prevalent contemporary medicine, Burnett seemed unhappy with mainstream treatments. Stiles explained that Burnett started seeking alternatives to mainstream medical intervention, so she turned to Christian Science, which is a religion founded by New England homeopath Mary Baker Eddy.

Although Burnett did not consider herself a Christian Scientist, she was attracted to some of its principles. Stiles explained that Christian Science did not view the brain as an "organ of the mind", and Eddy did not acknowledge "neurological or psychological explanations for human behavior". Eventually, Burnett embraced New Thought, a derivative of Christian Science that emphasized, "thoughts have the power to shape reality and the power of positive thinking". Stiles explained that New Thought contained principles of the Christian church but established their own healing practices by cooperating with medical practitioners and neurological researchers. New Thought authors also critiqued the rest cure as "a self-indulgent practice that encouraged unhealthy preoccupation with the body".

Many readers recognized New Thought principles throughout *The Secret Garden*. Although Burnett did not clearly state her faith, she also admitted that New Thought was influential on the novel (305). Stiles also explained that Mary's garden contains several elements from New Thought. In the late 1890s, New Thought literature emphasized all matter has intelligence and life. This concept is reflected in *The Secret Garden's* descriptions of animals and plants. When Mary and Dickon Sowerby interact

with animals and plants, the personification of these non-human living creatures showed New Thought's "divine forces animating nature". Eddy's perspectives on disease and cure were represented when Colin's belief that he was ill actually caused his disease. Eddy emphasized that people's beliefs can improve their health and change the trajectory of their illness. As we can see in the novel, after Mary introduced Colin to the garden, Colin started realizing his illness was derived from his fear and not his physical condition. He started walking, cultivating the garden, and socializing with other people. Colin even changed his arrogant and hysterical attitudes toward others. The changes in Colin's physical condition, attitudes, perceptions, and social interactions highlight Burnett's holistic understanding of the body and mind connectivity.

### **How Physical Exercise Affects Brain and Mind**

In this part, the study will discuss how physical exercise affects our brain and mind. The study will also explain how ecological factors, such as gardening in natural environments with social engagement, affect the physiology of our brain, cognition, moods, attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, and psychological affirmation.

In the book "Spark", John J. Ratey and Eric Hagerman (2008) explain how and why physical exercise affects the way people think and feel through a scientific lens. The authors stated, "exercise increases levels of serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine which are important neurotransmitters that traffic in thoughts and emotions" (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008, p.14). They noted that a lack of those neurotransmitters is associated with depression and other cognitive issues. The authors also point out drugs that supposedly improve mental health may bring other side effects, so they recommend exercise for cognitive development and health (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008, p.62).

The book explained in detail how intense or complex movements affect the human body and mind, and the authors' message emphasized that they are connected rather than separate entities. The authors advocate that how people treat their bodies could transform their minds, which relates to *The Secret Garden*. Mary and Colin started changing their moods, attitudes, and perceptions after they engaged in physical exercise, socializing, and cultivating the secret garden. At the beginning of chapter five in the novel, Mary spent her days outside feeling the wind, running, and exploring nature. After playing outside, she had a better appetite in the morning than other days. Burnett described Mary's biological changes in appetite, writing, "she wakened one morning knowing what it was to be hungry". In another example, Burnett described Mary was becoming more pleased while cultivating the garden, and never felt tired (Burnett, 2008, p.102). In the novel, Mary said she did not like socializing with people before, but after she started cultivating the garden, she began to enjoy spending time with people around

her. According to Zaretta Hammond's book, "*Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain*", social interactions are associated with the effects of the Polyvagal nervous system by secreting neurotransmitters, such as oxytocin, to encourage bonding with others. This scientific effect helps explain how Mary's social interactions with others help change her attitude and become more positive.

In the article "How Body Affects Brain", Wendy A. Suzuki (2016) asserts that numerous studies show "physical exercise can affect a range of brain and cognitive functions". Furthermore, in the article "Cultivating Mary: The Victorian Secret Garden" by Danielle E. Price (2001), the author notes that exercise affected Mary's transformation. Price pointed out how Mary's exercises influenced her positive attitudes and perspectives, although the article focused on broader aspects such as gender, class, and imperialism (Price, 2001, p.7). Price also states, "love of landscape and gardens united English people of all classes", and emphasized engaging with nature and gardens can unite people and break other barriers.

It was also interesting to see that the garden means different things for two characters, Mary and her uncle, Archibald Craven. Although both Mary and her uncle lost family members, her uncle shut down from the garden due to memories with his wife, while the garden becomes a motivating and exciting place for Mary. Mary's reaction to the garden was different because Mary cultivated her physical experiences in a natural environment and gained positive thoughts that were transmitted to others, such as her cousin, Colin. In chapter 27, Archibald's perceptions were also affected after taking a long walk in a natural environment that made him want to go back to the garden in Misselthwaite Manor. He revisited the garden and accepted his wife's death. He also realized that his son Colin should not be associated with his wife's death.

### **Burnett's Awareness of the Connectivity between Body and Mind**

In this part, the study will discuss how Burnett's awareness of the connectivity between body and mind affected her story, and how her experiences shaped her views on holistic approaches in children's healthy development and growth.

Throughout the research, the study came to a better understanding of why *The Secret Garden* resonates with many readers all around the world. It was a great pleasure to see how children can develop their physical, psychological, and social attributes through physical exercise in natural environments. In addition, the study highlighted Burnett's challenges with illnesses throughout her life, and her attitudes toward mainstream medical treatments. The study also found that contemporary research supports Burnett's holistic point of view on the complex and intertwined relationship between body, and mind. Burnett told her son, Vivian, "With the best that was in me I have tried to write

more happiness into the world” (Stiles, 2015, p.299). Burnett's awareness derived from her empirical experiences, shaped her perceptions on children 's education, and motivated her to create a children's novel to bring happiness into her stories, which adapted positive aspects from New Thought.

## Conclusion

The study supports that Burnett's novel, *The Secret Garden*, reflects many values associated with her empirical social and medical aspects. The novel presents that physical exercise, social interactions, and engaging with nature contribute to children's healthy growth, cognitive development, and well-being. Burnett's novel provides children with a meaningful reading experience, which has a significant impact on their awareness of physical exercise, that will improve their well-being. Further studies with diverse approaches, including quantitative research, need to be conducted in order to study the efficacy of how children's consciousness are motivated by readings associated with physical exercise and healthy development.

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