

# CULTURAL POLARITIES IN FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT'S CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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## ABSTRACT

Frances Hodgson Burnett was the product of two cultures, British and American. An interest in the relations between these two cultures pervades her work and forms a significant thematic thread. This article investigates the articulation of such tensions in Burnett's three most famous children's books. The cultural polarities at issue in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* ([1886] 1899), the earliest of the three novels under consideration, are closest to the tensions in Burnett's own life as a British American. In this novel, Burnett manages to reconcile the American egalitarianism of the protagonist's early childhood values with an almost feudal concept of *noblesse oblige*, and it is suggested that this conceptualisation remains imperative also in her later works. In *A little princess* ([1905] 2008) and *The secret garden* ([1911] 1968), imperial India is set against England as the primary polarity. Burnett's exposition is shown to conform to Edward Said's notions of Orientalism, showing India to constitute an almost archetypal image of the Other, yet the novels are critical of imperialism as causing the distortion of

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the imperialist as would later be defined by Orwell in *Shooting an elephant and other essays* (1950). It is suggested that in spite of an ostensible classlessness, the novels express a profoundly conservative and hierarchical vision.

**Keywords:** classlessness, Frances Hodgson Burnett, hierarchical vision, imperialism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Frances Hodgson Burnett was the product of two cultures, British and American. It is therefore not surprising that cultural polarities and tensions would form a significant thematic thread in her work. This article investigates the articulation of such tensions in Burnett's most famous children's books in the context of the social and political structures of the time and discusses the implications of their development and possible resolution.

Born in 1849 in Manchester, England, Frances Hodgson was the daughter of an affluent English ironmonger and silversmith who supplied luxury items to the upper classes and thus secured a position in the prosperous middle class for himself and his family. He died, however, when she was four years old, causing the family to fall into financial difficulties. As their financial position declined, the widowed Mrs Hodgson insisted on standards of conduct and behaviour appropriate to their former status rather than their new straitened circumstances (Parsons 2002, 250), in order to sustain the middle-class sense of identity of the family. Initially trying to maintain the family business, Mrs Hodgson was eventually forced to sell it and accepted an offer from her brother to join him in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the United States (US). The family emigrated in 1865, when Frances Hodgson was nearly 16 years old. However, economic difficulties in the South after the Civil War prevented the uncle from providing for them and their straitened circumstances continued to prevail. Frances Hodgson started to publish stories in magazines at the age of 18 in order to help support the family and quickly achieved success. When her mother died in 1870, she was left responsible for the family, but her siblings soon established themselves either through marriage or by embarking on careers.

In 1873, Frances Hodgson married Swan Burnett, a neighbour and young doctor and moved with him to Paris, France, where he continued his medical studies. They returned to Washington, DC, in the US, where he practised and she established a literary salon, continuing to write novels at a brisk rate, ensuring her family's financial well-being. Her biographer, Ann Thwaite, refers to her as a 'pen-driving machine' as she published 59 books and 13 plays between 1877 and 1925 (ibid., 251–252). For the 20 years from 1887 to 1907, Burnett lived mainly in England, the land of her birth, and for the last nine years at Great Maytham Hall, a large country house in Kent. Burnett cherished the rural lifestyle and the Hall gardens are generally taken to have inspired *The secret garden* (ibid., 251). Her stay in England

was interrupted by visits to the continent and some extended visits to the US where for some time she maintained a house in Washington, DC. She returned permanently to the US in 1907 and settled on Long Island where she lived until her death in 1924.

## 2. CULTURAL POLARITIES IN FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT'S CHILDREN'S BOOKS

While she wrote many novels for adults, Burnett's lasting fame rests on three of her children's books: *Little Lord Fauntleroy* ([1886] 1899), *A little princess* ([1905] 2008) and *The secret garden* ([1911] 1968),<sup>1</sup> generally regarded as her masterpiece (Koppes 1978, 191). These three novels have all achieved classic status in the field of children's literature and have been the objects of considerable critical scrutiny. Critical responses to Burnett's work have often focused on issues of gender, class and imperialism (Price 2001, 4). It is interesting that in terms of the latter focus, Burnett's work has been claimed to be both pro-imperial or pro-colonial and anti-imperial or anti-colonial. So, for example, Thacker and Webb (2002, 95) refer to *The secret garden* as a 'critique of imperialism' and Toth (2003, 117) speaks of Burnett's 'anti-imperialism', while Kutzer (2005) and Phillips (1993) read Burnett's work as sustaining the imperial project. While gender is somewhat marginal to my project – the consideration of cultural polarities in the three texts – issues of class and Empire are relevant.

### 3. *LITTLE LORD FAUNTLEROY*

The cultural polarities at issue in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, the earliest of the three novels under consideration, are closest to the tensions in Burnett's own life as a British American. In the novel, a small American boy, Cedric Errol, unexpectedly becomes the heir to his irascible, self-centred and violently anti-American grandfather, the Earl of Dorincourt, after the death not only of the little boy's father but also his two uncles. The Earl's anti-Americanism was so emphatic that he disinherited and banished from his home the only son of whom he had vaguely approved, Cedric's father, when the latter informed him of his marriage to an American woman, whom the Earl immediately deemed a fortune hunter. After this turn of events, Cedric is bidden to go to England to take up his position as heir to the enormous property and wealth of his grandfather. While his mother can accompany him to England, she is not allowed to visit the Earl's (and the boy's new) home, nor meet the Earl, but the boy would be allowed to visit her in a house provided for her near the Castle. From the beginning a tension is thus set up between England and America, and soon an opposition is posed between a democratic, egalitarian American culture and a hierarchical British ethos. Cedric declares his engagement with the American polity early in the novel when he tells Mary, the family's servant:

'I'm very much interested in the 'lection,' sez he. 'I'm a 'publican, an' so is Dearest [his mother]. Are you a 'publican, Mary?' 'Sorra a bit,' sez I [Mary]; 'I'm the bist o' dimmycrats!' An' he looks up at me wid a look that ud go to yer heart, and sez he: 'Mary,' sez he, 'the country will go to ruin'. (Burnett 1899, 9)

Hunt's (1995, 236) essay on 'Children's literature in America 1870–1945' significantly refers to Cedric as 'a dispossessed English Lord *brought up in the democratic streets of New York*' [my emphasis]. When the Earl's emissary to America, his lawyer, Mr Havisham, tries to explain an earl's function and position to the little boy, Cedric translates every aspect he mentions into more democratic, egalitarian American terms. When Mr Havisham tries to explain the noble origins of the aristocracy by referring to great deeds or service to the monarch, Cedric compares it to the American Presidency: 'When a man is very good and knows a great deal, he is elected President' (Burnett 1899, 38). When Mr Havisham suggests that an earl 'is a very important person', Cedric stoutly counters: 'So is a president' (ibid., 39). When he refers to the 'very ancient lineage' (ibid., 39) of earls, Cedric compares it to 'the apple woman', an elderly fruit-seller who must be 'a hundred, I should think' (ibid., 40). When Mr Havisham proposes that the nobility has comprised 'brave men [who] fought in great battles' (ibid., 41), Cedric links bravery to 'the soldiers in the Revolution and George Washington' (ibid., 41). The anti-American sentiments of the Earl and his cohort are balanced in the novel by the anti-British, anti-aristocratic sentiments of Cedric's American friends, particularly Mr Hobbs, a benevolent grocer, who is Cedric's oldest friend and with whom he shares patriotic sentiments sitting on a high stool in the grocer's shop. Mr Hobbs 'had a very bad opinion of the British' (ibid., 10) and 'said some very severe things about the aristocracy' (ibid., 11): '... but they will get enough of it some day, when those they've trod on rise and blow 'em up sky-high – earls and marquises and all!' (ibid., 12). When Cedric suggests that perhaps 'they wouldn't be earls if they knew any better', Mr Hobbs responds contemptuously, 'They just glory in it! It's in 'em. They're a bad lot' (ibid., 12).

Burnett deftly manages to reconcile these two opposing, apparently hostile value systems by appealing to an older concept, feudal in origin, of a symbiosis between the landed aristocracy and the working class. That this concept, however ancient, still had some currency in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, albeit somewhat elegiacally, is evident from the work of novelists such as Vita Sackville-West, Hugh Walpole and Nancy Mitford, who, aristocrats themselves, pondered the role of the aristocracy in their works. In Sackville-West's novel, *The Edwardians* (published in 1930 but set in the first decade of the twentieth century), Sebastian, the young duke, declares:

I will agree that Chevron [the ducal seat], and myself, and Wickenden [the estate carpenter], and the whole apparatus are nothing but a waxwork show, if you like. Present-day conditions have made us all rather meaningless. But I still think it is a pity. I think we had evolved a good system on the whole, which made for a good understanding between class and class.

Nothing will ever persuade me that the relations between the squire and the craftsman, or the squire and the labourer, or the squire and the farmer, don't contain the elements of decency and honesty and mutual respect. I wish only that civilisation could have developed along these lines. (Sackville-West 1988, 247)

In *Wintersmoon*, Walpole (1972, 54) expresses a similar aristocratic sentiment:

... [We] believe that our class and its traditions means a lot to England, and that if you keep the fine side of it you'll be making better history for England than if you let it go... We keep our class with all that's been best in it for hundreds of years and co-operate with the other classes for the good of all of us.

Similar sentiments are expressed in Mitford's comic novels. In *Pigeon pie* ([1940] 1976) she suggests the cordiality of relations between aristocrats and the peasantry in England when the Russian Princess Olga Gogothsky refers darkly to her cousins in Russia having been 'given to the peasantry to do as they like with' and the English Lady Sophia replies that:

There must be something wrong somewhere. If the duchess of Devonshire, for instance, was handed over to the peasantry to do as they liked with, they would no doubt put her in the best bedroom and get her a cup of tea. (Ibid., 47)

In Mitford's more famous novel, *The pursuit of love* ([1945] 1980), she contrasts the attitudes of the money-grubbing London banker, Sir Leicester Kroesig, to the landed nobleman, Lord Alconleigh, who makes his living from the land and puts a lot back into the land, for whom the land is 'something sacred, and, sacred above that was England' (Mitford 1980, 88–89). Lord Alconleigh devotes a lot of his time and energy to voluntary activities for the well-being of his people for which he receives no material reward (ibid., 124–125). The centrality of the land in this symbiotic existence of different classes is also suggested in a nineteenth-century garden book, contemporaneous to *Little Lord Fauntleroy*:

As long as the British nobleman continues to take an interest in his avenues and hot-houses – his lady in her conservatories and parterres – the squire overlooks his labourers' allotments – the 'squires and squirins' betake themselves and their flowers to the neighbouring horticultural show – the citizen sets up his cucumber-frame in his back-yard – his dame her lilacs and almond-tress in the front-court – the mechanic breeds his prize-competing auriculas – the cottager rears his sun-flowers and Sweet-Williams before his door – as long, in a word, as the common interest pervades every class of society, so long shall we cling to the hope that our country is destined to outlive all her difficulties and dangers. (Sedding 1891, 238 in Price 2001, 9)

According to the tenets of this philosophy, the Earl of Dorincourt in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* is a denatured nobleman, failing in his obligations to care for his land and the people on it; he is only interested in himself, his own desires and comforts, rather like the (often middle-class) characters contrasted to these noble ideals in the above-

mentioned novels. It is the egalitarian values of the American characters, Cedric and his mother, which bring about a restoration of that aristocratic order. When Mr Havisham offers Cedric money to gratify any particular desire he may have (in order to create a positive perception of the Earl), he immediately thinks of others needing sustenance, a brick-layer, an aged fruit-seller and a boot-black and asks nothing for himself. He continues in this vein once he is in England; by his enthusiasm and care for others he shames his grandfather – of whom he expects only the best – into resuming his benevolent duties as landlord and nobleman. Cedric intervenes for a tenant farmer whose rent is in arrears, for a crippled boy on the estate, and for the tenants condemned to the ‘tumble-down, miserable cottages, and the bad drainage, and the damp walls and broken windows and leaking roofs, and all the poverty, the fever and the misery’ (Burnett 1899, 180) of a particular village which is an eye-sore on the estate. Moreover, Cedric’s mother with her American respect for all people regardless of class, slides naturally into the traditional role of the caring lady of the estate in terms of the idealistic concept of symbiosis between nobility and peasantry as her inherent compassion and relative means lead her to respond with care to ‘sickness or sorrow or poverty in any house’ (ibid., 175) at Dorincourt. It almost appears to be a sleight of hand by which Burnett blends American egalitarianism seamlessly into a hierarchical aristocratic dispensation of *noblesse oblige*.

### 3.1. The redemptive child

From this improbable conflation emerges what Hillel (2003, 59) calls the ‘redemptive child’, an agent for benevolence and the transformation of others, a concept that relates philosophically to the Rousseauian idea of the innate goodness of humanity which may manifest itself in a child not yet corrupted by society as all humans eventually are. The Earl of Dorincourt is transformed by the child’s innocent expectations of goodness in him: ‘To see each of his ugly, selfish motives changed into a good and generous one by the simplicity of a child was a singular experience’ (Burnett 1899, 139). It leads him to the unaccustomed action of critically examining his own behaviour, confronting ‘the curious question whether he was exactly the person to take as a model’ (ibid., 142). By refraining from behaviour that would shake his grandson’s faith in his benevolence, the Earl is transformed from a ‘denatured’ nobleman, failing his obligations as a caring benefactor and protector of those in his care, to a model aristocrat whose land will flourish, as will the people on it.

The ‘redemptive child’ becomes a favoured motif for Burnett, making an appearance in all three of the novels under consideration. He or she functions in an ostensibly classless sphere, treating all human beings with kindness and respect, although this classlessness can have its core in an aristocratic sense of *noblesse oblige*, as in *A little princess*, Burnett’s next famous novel, which appeared almost 20 years after *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. While American values would not figure overtly in the

two later novels under discussion, the classlessness within an aristocratic structure attendant on the 'redemptive child' in each of them does suggest the origins of the idea for Burnett in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, in the infusion of American democratic egalitarianism into a feudal concept of aristocratic responsibility and benevolence. Burnett (1899, 264) confirms this when the narrator says about Cedric:

It was really a very simple thing, after all – it was only that he had lived near a kind and a gentle heart, and had been taught to think kind thoughts always and to care for others. It is a very little thing, perhaps, but it is the best thing of all. He knew nothing of earls and castles; he was quite ignorant of all grand and splendid things; but he was always loveable because he was simple and loving. To be so is like being born a king.

The integration of democratic American values into the hierarchical concept of *noblesse oblige* is anticipated when the Earl, confronted by Cedric's American patriotism, thinks 'that so good an American might make a rather good Englishman when he was a man' (ibid., 101), and is emphasised at the conclusion of the novel, when Mr Hobbs, the most outspoken egalitarian American, having rushed to England out of personal loyalty to come to Cedric's defence when an impostor threatens the little lord's inheritance, decides to settle in England, and spends hours in the picture gallery in the Castle, admiring the lordly depictions of Cedric's noble ancestors.

Sara, the 'little princess' of the eponymous novel, is in many respects a female counterpart to Cedric. Born to enormous wealth as the daughter of a British officer in India, Captain Ralph Crewe, she is sent to school in England as virtually all colonial children in India are at the time. The wealth is not explained, but as it is not commensurate with the pay of a military officer, it is presumably inherited. In England she is cosseted and favoured by the teachers at the select seminary because of her status as an heiress. When Captain Crewe dies suddenly, having invested his fortune in diamond mines on the advice of a school friend, his fortune appears to have been lost, and Sara is reduced from the indulged favourite of the Misses Minchin to an abused servant in the household, a person of no means whatsoever. This is where she demonstrates herself as a 'redemptive child'. Sara, however, unlike Cedric who acts from spontaneous innocence, is aware of her role; she is self-conscious with regard to her actions and a sense of *noblesse oblige*. This probably harks back to Burnett's own experience when the family lost their money and her mother insisted on high standards of social conduct in the face of poverty. Having earned the epithet of 'the little princess' as a wealthy heiress at the school, Sara clings to that identity as a moral compulsion during her time of servitude:

'Whatever comes,' she said, 'cannot alter one thing. If I am a princess in rags and tatters, I can be a princess inside. It would be easy to be a princess if I were dressed in cloth of gold. But it is a great deal more of a triumph to be one all the time when no one knows it'. (Burnett 2008, 164)

Behaving according to this standard involves an unflappable courtesy, even towards her persecutors, an undeviating dignity under all circumstances (which infuriates Miss Minchin, her chief tormentor) and an awareness of the needs of those other than herself. In spite of being cold and hungry all the time, she still cares for the well-off but motherless Lottie and Ermytrude, a struggling pupil whom she helps with her lessons, among her former school friends, and befriends Becky, her fellow servant in the neighbouring garret room. When through a stroke of good fortune she is able to buy six hot buns, she gives five of them away to a beggar-girl, whom she recognises as being even hungrier and needier than she is. Part of her role as a little princess, and indeed as a redemptive child, is to function in a benevolent sphere not attaching any significance to class, except as a moral obligation for herself. Cedric is a Rousseauian innocent who acts naturally and instinctively, merely expressing his innocent nature and the values garnered in his American childhood, quite unaware of showing up the defects in the comportment of his grandfather, who had not known 'how tender and faithful and affectionate a kind-hearted little child can be, and how innocent and unconscious are its simple, generous impulses' (Burnett 1899, 98). Sara, on the other hand, deliberately and consciously adopts a policy of *noblesse oblige*, of behaving like a princess with kindness and dignity. As 'redemptive children', they both effect transformation in the lives of others, for Cedric principally his grandfather (although others are also affected positively), while Sara transforms the lives of Becky, Lottie, Ermytrude and most of all, Mr Carrisford, her father's friend, who, devastated by his experience in India, is brought back to health and happiness and (proxy) fatherhood by 'the little princess' whose immense fortune he restores in the fairy-tale ending. With her wealth restored she forgets none of her friends or obligations and continues to be a benefactress to many as befits her self-adopted aristocratic role.

#### 4. A LITTLE PRINCESS AND THE SECRET GARDEN

While I would argue that Sara's character is a development of Cedric's and that the latter is constituted by the confluence of American democratic ideals with a culture of European aristocratic *noblesse oblige* as explained above, the cultural tension in *A little princess* and in *The secret garden* is not between England and America, but between England and India. *A little princess* starts with Sara's arrival in England from India and the first chapter and a half of *The secret garden* is actually set in India, though the main narrative also unfolds in England. In both these novels India is depicted as an unhealthy environment for little English girls. In *A little princess*, the narrator notes that the 'climate of India was very bad for children, and as soon as possible they were sent away from it – generally to England and to school' (Burnett 2008, 3). In *The secret garden*, this information is presented much more graphically and the pernicious influence of the 'climate' is much more evident. Mary Lennox's physical appearance reveals a great deal: 'She had a thin little face and a thin little



body, thin light hair and a sour expression. Her hair was yellow, and her face was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another' (Burnett 1968, 7).

Not only is she 'the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen' (ibid.), but her behaviour is equally disagreeable:

She never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the native servants, and as they always obeyed her and gave her her own way in everything, because the Memsahib would be angry if she was disturbed by her crying, by the time she was six years old she was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived. (Ibid.)

The Indian environment is therefore depicted as being unhealthy, not only in terms of the physical, but also of the psychological and spiritual well-being of the girl. In Orwell's *Shooting an elephant and other essays* ([1936] 1950), based on his own experiences as a policeman in Burma, he considers the fate of the English sahib in the imperial situation, suggesting that he is forced into patterns of behaviour that may be alien to his own nature because his role in the imperial scheme demands it and that he then becomes denatured by these patterns of expectation and action. Orwell (1950, 6) compares it to putting on a mask to cover one's own natural disposition and then growing to fit the mask, ending up a distortion of one's natural self: 'I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys'.

This perception can be applied effectively to Mary, except that she cannot remember a time when she did not wear the mask. It is clear that her own childish nature has become distorted by her life in India, with every whim being satisfied by native servants who do not dare to contradict her. So, rather like the Earl of Dorincourt has to be transformed from his denatured state as a selfish and uncaring landowner to a responsible and caring peer and father figure, so Mary is clearly in need of transformation from a denatured, yellow, 'Oriental' despot to a natural, spontaneous English girl, and to a large extent the plot of the novel follows this trajectory. It is interesting that Sara, who has likewise been exposed to a world in which she 'had been used to seeing many servants who made salaams to her and called her 'Missee Sahib' and gave her her own in everything ... and an ayah who worshipped her' (Burnett 2008, 3), does not show the same distortion of nature that Mary does. The reason for this would probably be that Sara's close and loving relationship with her father is her primary template for human relations, just like Cedric in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* who 'had lived near a kind and a gentle heart, and had been taught to think kind thoughts always and to care for others' (Burnett 1899, 264). In *The secret garden*, the disruption of the family order, as Mary's parents appear to have no interest in her and pay no attention to her, distracted as they are by their imperial roles, forms a parallel to the disruption of a wider social order in the imperial Raj, causing the distortion and disruption of positive human values. In

*Little Lord Fauntleroy*, the restoration of the Earl to his proper benevolent position in society is also accompanied by a restoration of the family unit, when he humbly requests Cedric's mother to join him and the boy in the Castle. The way he phrases the invitation to Mrs Errol clearly suggests that this is a restoration of what should have been all along, but had been prevented by his denatured state of hatred: 'We have always wanted you, but we were not exactly aware of it. We hope you will come' (ibid., 256). The three novels all conclude with some movement to the re-establishment of family structures.

In his influential book, *Orientalism*, Said (2003) notably draws attention to traditional polarities between the West and the Orient, suggesting that the Orient has been conceived by Westerners as being that which the West is not, and the West has in turn defined itself in terms of not being like the Orient. Said states that for Westerners, the Orient has been 'one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience' (ibid., 1–2). The Orient is thus reduced to being seen only in terms of the primary existence of the European or Westerner and is not granted a primary existence of its own. Said (ibid., 7) refers to a 'hegemony of European ideas about the Orient ... reiterating European superiority'. Burnett's use of India conforms to this pattern. India is identified as the Other, corruptive, unhealthy, unnatural for the English characters concerned, and the plot of *The secret garden* traces a process of healing for Mary, in which she is to be weaned from her Oriental background to grow into her true, healthy and happy English nature.

After her parents' death from cholera (more evidence of the pernicious nature of India), Mary is sent to her uncle, Archibald Craven, (about whom she knows nothing) at Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire to live. She is entirely ignorant of England and her relation to it. When the son of the clergyman who takes her in after her parents' death tells her after a tiff that he is glad that she will be sent 'home' at the end of the next week, the sour little girl responds, 'I am glad of it too ... Where is home?' (Burnett 1968, 14). She has no sense of an English identity and knows herself only in the distorted despotic colonial master guise, the 'mask' she has worn in her case since birth. Just as the Earl in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* has to move from a denatured position to an assumption of his natural role and obligations according to Burnett's concept of class symbiosis, so Mary has to be 'naturalised' in both senses of the word: she has to discover her English identity and she has to create a life attuned to nature and the English rhythms of nature. Webb (2003, 53) comments that the 'great quest that Burnett sets for her flawed heroine is to discover her natural self beneath the trappings of imperialism, which imprisons the child'.

The bracing climate of Yorkshire, both physically and spiritually, sets Mary on a course of recovery. Her new life is implicitly presented in a constant balance of contrast with her life in India. Her first intimate encounter with a Yorkshire person is with Martha, the housemaid who looks after her room and guides her first steps in

the unfamiliar environment of the English country house. When Martha innocently reveals that she thought Mary might have been an Indian, Mary reacts with the imperial indignation of the colonial master: ““What!” she said. “What! You thought that I was a native. You – you daughter of a pig!”” (Burnett 1968, 28). But her outburst is not met by the subservience she is used to from her Indian servants but by a common-sensical rebuttal from Martha. She also does not dare to slap Martha as she ‘had always slapped her ayah in the face when she was angry’ (ibid., 26), because she has already sensed that Martha ‘might ... even slap back’ (ibid., 27). The seeds of a healthier mutual respect are sowed.

Martha and her mother, Susan Sowerby, who is depicted as a wise woman attuned to a natural and healthy way of life, send Mary into the gardens with a skipping rope, where she soon works up a hunger, starts eating better and improves in health and happiness. The process is facilitated by the real ‘redemptive child’ in the novel, Martha’s brother, Dickon, a boy who lives so close to nature that he talks to birds and other animals and is accompanied by a wild pony he has tamed, a lamb he has saved, a little red fox, a crow and two tame squirrels who are all his intimate friends. Dickon represents life completely attuned to a benevolent nature. He presides over the return of Mary and her cousin, Colin Craven, to a state of moral and spiritual health in the eponymous secret garden, a walled garden at Misselthwaite that has been locked and abandoned for ten years until Mary discovers a way in.

As suggested earlier, Mary’s recovery is counterpointed by references to her Indian life. As she discovers the natural world in the gardens of Misselthwaite Manor, it is noted that in ‘India she had always felt hot and too languid to care about anything. The fact was that the fresh wind from the moor had begun to blow the cobwebs out of her young brain and to waken her up a little’ (ibid., 45). When Mary exclaims, ‘I never saw [the spring] in India, because there wasn’t any’ (ibid., 178), it clearly has metaphoric implications: the miraculous English spring that brings alive the dead garden represents the awakening of vitality and health in the denatured children, Mary and her cousin, Colin, within their proper environment, England. The crucial presence of the garden in the process of achieving physical, moral and spiritual health echoes the crucial position of land in the symbiotic cooperation of the classes suggested in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. Mary’s physical recovery of health and vitality is consistent with her achievement of an English identity. As Hillel (2003, 59) comments:

Mary is initially described as a sour little thing with yellow skin and lank, brown hair. The path of her own redemption is plotted in part by her physical transformation as she becomes prettier and fatter, and with better skin and prettier hair. Better skin here is tantamount to becoming pink and white, more ‘English’. Discourses of racism and redemption intersect here; Mary needs to be *deorientalized* in order to be good enough to function as a redeemer’ [my emphasis].

Mary's cousin, Colin, is as denatured as she is. As his mother (who had lovingly tended the secret garden) died in his birth, his father has kept him at arm's length just as he also locks up the garden and buries the key. The healthy interaction of familial love, so crucial in the make-up of the 'redemptive children' Cedric Errol and Sara Crewe, is as absent in Colin's life as in his orphaned cousin Mary's (whereas Dickon comes from a working-class family with 12 children where affection and attachment are expressed as naturally as breathing out and in). Because Colin is believed to be a moribund invalid (by himself and all those around him) his every whim is indulged and he grows into as self-centred a tyrant, exercising his unhappy caprices with no consideration for anyone else, as Mary was with regard to the Indian servants about whom she exclaims: 'They are not people – they're servants who must salaam to you' (Burnett 1968, 28). Inglis (1981, 112) comments that 'in a brilliant insight [Burnett] makes Colin into a hypochondriac hysteric, thus providing a real consequence and a metaphor for the distortions wrought by Victorian family life'. While Colin has never been to India, with his unnatural, distorted sense of self and family life he belongs to the same denatured sphere that Mary has to be weaned from and this is suggested symbolically when Mary compares him to 'a young Rajah', categorising him symbolically with the disrupted and denatured condition associated with imperial life in India in the novel:

'Once in India I saw a boy who was a rajah. He had rubies and emeralds and diamonds stuck all over him. He spoke to his people just as you spoke to Martha. Everybody had to do everything he told them – in a minute. I think they would have been killed if they hadn't.' (Burnett 1968, 124)

As an afterthought she adds, 'I was thinking ... how different you are from Dickon' (ibid., 125), suggesting the trajectory they both have to complete in order to achieve moral, physical and spiritual health. Dickon and symbolically the garden provide them with examples of and criteria for a natural and fulfilled life:

'Am I queer?' [Colin] demanded.

'Yes,' answered Mary, 'very. But you needn't be cross,' she added impartially, 'because so am I queer ... But I am not as queer as I was before I began to like people and before I found the garden.'

'I don't like to be queer,' said Colin. 'I am not going to be,' and he frowned again with determination.

He was a very proud boy. He lay thinking for a while and then Mary saw his beautiful smile begin and gradually change his whole face.

'I shall stop being queer,' he said, 'if I go every day to the garden.' (Ibid., 199)

On their first encounter, Dickon also says to Mary, 'I think tha' art th' queerest lass that I ever saw' (ibid., 96). To stop being queer is to stop behaving like a young Rajah, or a tyrannical colonial 'Missee Sahib' and to move into the charmed, normative world of Englishness. Although Mary is on her own trajectory of naturalization, she

also becomes an agent for the transformation of Colin. Responding to a fit of anxiety in the 'young Rajah', Mary's irate common sense acts as a salutary remedy for Colin: 'And she was so un-hysterical and natural and childish that she brought him to his senses and he began to laugh at himself' (ibid., 162). A process of 'naturalization' in a new environment also involves learning the language of one's new 'country' and it is striking that Mary and Colin learn to speak Dickon's native Yorkshire dialect, which becomes emblematic of their re-discovered English identity. As it is the language of the workers on the estate, it also signifies closeness to the healthy rhythms of nature. Price (2001, 8) comments that: 'The lower classes, who speak the Yorkshire dialect in this text, are associated generally with a wholesomeness not found in life in India and more particularly with a certain folk wisdom and the exercise of the body', all of which are relevant to Mary and Colin's journey to a healthy English identity. Again, well-balanced and healthy members of society appear to co-exist without suffering the divisions of class which was so much a part of Victorian and Edwardian existence in England. Price (ibid.) goes on to say that many Victorian writers 'believed that a love of landscape and gardens united people of all classes'. It is clear that this classless communality is contrasted to the hierarchical structures of imperial India in the novel. As Toth (2003, 144) also points out, 'the 'Yorkshire habit' of 'blunt frankness' in speech is contrasted with the Indian custom of servitude and its contrived formulae of communication ...', adding that the 'Yorkshire of Misselthwaite Manor is clearly the language of love, belonging, nature and equality, and Mary and Colin as impressionable children acquire it in the course of the healing process' (ibid.). Speech in the Yorkshire dialect invariably signals a restoration of psychological and spiritual health. Mary discovers early in the novel that she likes nobody, including herself. It is significant that the first words that she speaks in the Yorkshire dialect, addressed to Dickon, are: 'Does tha' like me?' His response, 'Eh! ... that I does. I likes thee wonderful, an' so does th' robin, I do believe' (Burnett 1968, 96) indicates that Mary is on her way to establishing a healthier interaction with her environment. Later Dickon admonishes her, 'Tha mun' talk a bit o' Yorkshire like that to Mester Colin ... Tha'll make him laugh an' there's nowt as good for ill folk as laughin' is' (ibid., 159). And it is when he is lying in the secret garden, experiencing the awakening of an English spring for the first time that Master Colin also breaks into Yorkshire, 'Does tha' think ... as happen it was made loike this 'ere all o' purpose for me?' (ibid., 183), suggesting a sense of homecoming to rural England from the unhealthy hysterical state he has inhabited as the 'young Rajah'.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Many commentators have noticed the apparently classless ambience that appears to surround the 'redemptive children' in their restoration of moral and spiritual health among those they interact with. This seems anomalous in books of this era as class

distinctions were immutably entrenched in Victorian and Edwardian society and Burnett's novels do not appear to challenge the established status of the nobility, the gentry or the wealthy but rather appear to revel in tales of lords, gentlemen and millionaires. Toth (2003, 144) remarks that Burnett 'creates a pervasive atmosphere of restorative equality'. Parsons (2002, 259) comments that '[c]lass distinctions are undermined beginning with Mary's arrival at the manor and continuing in the garden'. Even Phillips (1993, 187), who regards the Indian room in Misselthwaite Manor as its defining space and reads the novel as an articulation of British imperialism, concedes that 'throughout *The Secret Garden* a theme of spiritual egalitarianism consistently undercuts the realpolitik of class-based elitism' (ibid., 179) – he later adds, however, that '*The Secret Garden* is a richly confused text' (ibid., 187). Inglis (1981, 112) suggests that in the 'Eden' of the secret garden, 'nature dissolves class'. He (ibid., 109) refers to the 'metonymy' of 'the secret garden of childhood and of England' and interprets the garden as combining 'the ideal remembered holiday in a golden age ... with a classless, reasonable, and joyous Utopia for the Future' (ibid., 113; cf. Keyser 1983, 12).

What are we to make of this? Do the novels suggest that Burnett is a kind of 'sleeper' revolutionary, planting the seeds of a future socialist, egalitarian society without ruffling the feathers of her own time too much? Is Jerry Phillips right that her work conveys a 'richly confused' vision in conveying contradictory messages? An investigation of her treatment of cultural polarities in her three most famous texts suggests that Burnett is indeed critical of the empire, in particular the Raj, and regards it as a disrupting, distorting force, corrupting the healthy 'Englishness' of those actively involved in the enterprise. This is not only the case with Mary and her parents, but also Mr Carrisford, the 'Indian gentleman' in *A little princess*, who can only recover from the trauma of his Indian experience (which results in 'brain fever', probably a Victorian euphemism for a nervous breakdown) and be restored to health back in England and through the mediation of the 'redemptive child', Sara. In both Mary's and Mr Carrisford's case the restoration to physical health is significantly accompanied by the restoration of a healthy family context, as Mr Craven in *The secret garden* also returns to Misselthwaite and presumably resumes a paternal role towards the two children. India moreover becomes a metaphor for an unnatural, distorted existence in the case of Colin, typified as 'a young Rajah'. I would therefore agree with Toth and with Webb that the tenor of Burnett's work is 'anti-imperial'. This does not excuse her work from the charge of 'Orientalism' in Said's sense of the word, though: the Indian empire is depicted only with regard to its damaging effect on English characters; no real interest or concern for the effect of the imperial project on the lives or well-being of the colonised people is revealed; India is merely represented as an unhealthy and disfiguring theatre for English activity. As far as a future or classless, socialist Utopia is concerned, I would suggest that far from being a revolutionary, Burnett reveals herself as deeply conservative, interlocking her

American egalitarianism into a feudal structure of *noblesse oblige*. In these novels she, in fact, demonstrates a hankering after a pre-imperial, pre-industrial England where all English people can coexist in a kind of pre-lapsarian bliss. With regard to the role of Susan, Martha and Dickon Sowerby in *The secret garden*, Goodwin (2011, 112) comments that rather than undermining the class system, 'the tenants are instrumental in 'cultivating' the upper-class children and ensuring that they flourish, thus reinforcing the existing class structure'. Burnett suggests that when all Englishmen and women live close to the rhythms of nature and the land and in accordance with their 'natural' allotted places in society and its structures – including its class structures – sound moral values will prevail and class distinctions will not be suspended, but will not irk or constrain, as everyone will be part of a symbiotic natural order constituting the living and flourishing eternal garden of England, or for that matter, Eden.

## NOTE

1. The original publication dates are given in square brackets and all quotations are taken from the later editions.

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