

CHILD MOTHERS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:
VICTORIAN GENDER NEGOTIATIONS IN BURNETT'S
GIRLHOOD FICTION

by

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For Bre Crosby-Martinez, sister of my heart

ABSTRACT

Victorian girlhood literature frequently reflects and reinforces the dominant gender ideology of English culture by constructing female protagonists who are ultimately rewarded for conforming to the domestic ideal of the Victorian era. Through the medium of children's literature, writers and publishers responded and contributed to the discourse on women's roles in Victorian society, reacting to—and often against—the Women's Rights Movement and the rise of The New Woman by targeting The New Girl. The object of my research is to examine (1) the ways in which Francis Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*, as well as *The Girl's Own Paper* assess female value by the standard of motherhood; and (2) how these texts offer models to girlhood readers both contemporary and modern. The texts work paradoxically both to question and reinforce dominant Victorian gender ideology. More importantly, these portrayals work to influence the identity formation of their readers, imparting to them what it means to be a good and successful female and thus limiting their choice in identity construction. This study reveals the female-centered gender ideology present in these texts and how/why it impacted readers. This is accomplished through close readings utilizing historicist and feminist lenses, as well as using studies conducted on the impact of literature on identity construction in adolescents. Through further research and dissemination of this knowledge, classics such as Burnett's girlhood fiction may be read and taught within their historical contexts and modern writers may create a wider array of female models for readers to choose from.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of family and the traditions of domestic life during the early and mid-Victorian period cannot be understated; it was understood that the family was at the core of a strong English society. In an age of Empire, the female in the domestic sphere was the moral center of the family and, as such, the mother in her traditional role was highly valued. However, as the century wore on, and the Women's Rights Movement gained momentum, anxiety about the proper place of women led to debate: what would happen to family (and thus society) if women were let out of the house? Traditional concepts of middle-class femininity were inseparable from those of the home. A woman was largely—if not entirely—removed from the public sphere, sexually ignorant, enclosed in the safety of the home of her father and then the home of her husband, and fully expected to be gracefully adept at household duties and motherhood. These duties included creating a happy space of moral serenity in which her children found comfort and her husband found refuge.

By the mid-century, the measurement of femininity by these standards became increasingly problematic as attention was drawn to the fact that it was not only impossible for all women to marry, but highly probable that many would not. Not only was the survival rate of female infants higher than that of male infants, but with the Empire's colonization efforts fully underway, many English men of marriageable age were abroad. On English soil, it was considered "improper" for middle-class women to be in the workplace, and the very idea was scandalous to many. And yet, the question of

how these single women might support themselves and maintain their propriety went unanswered. In short, societal expectations asked for the impossible and provided no alternative. Among those who felt that women should have options available to them for a happy and productive life without marriage were the New Women. Often characterized by conservative factions as man-eating, bicycle-riding, wild politicians, the New Woman was self-identified as educated, self-supporting, and independent. As discussion was carried forth in public venues concerning the role of women and what to do with those who were unmarried, more focus on the issue shifted to a newly developing category of females: girls and girlhood.

Previously in the period, the term *girl* had been largely a signifier of social status or age. Whereas the term *young lady* was applied to middle and upper-class females who were no longer children, *girl* referred to prepubescent females or females of the lower class (Hunter 393). However, as public education became increasingly regularized in Victorian society, it became necessary to have a term for respectable females who inhabited the middle ground between childhood and adulthood. The term *young lady* became unsuitable due to its connotations with a purely leisurely or domestic lifestyle, a lifestyle which no longer applied to girls who were earning an education outside of the home. In 1880, elementary education was no longer simply available to all children in England: it was compulsory (Mitchell 7). This elementary education generally ended around the age of ten. While some girls would have continued their education to a higher level, the end of their *required* educational years seemed to mark off the age of childhood. As girls either went on to secondary school or occupied themselves at home until they married, an increasingly identifiable girls' culture emerged. This culture of

girlhood seems to have been roughly centered on females ranging in age between twelve and twenty-five, and even if they were not in school, they were often referred to as school-girls, or New Girls, an uneasy term that connected them to New Women. Although they certainly were not as radical as their New Woman counterparts, the potential was there; they were in the process of developing a culture of their own, and this culture was largely based on the evolving understanding that their parents' wants were perhaps different from their own, or the realization through education that there were options available for their futures that lay outside of the home. This budding New-Womanism in girlhood culture made society-at-large uncomfortable. After all, it was a popular view that the New Woman was a blight on civilized society, and these women did not simply materialize from thin air: they were girls that grew up to be New Women. Indeed, those who were still convinced that women belonged in the home, and only in the home, were wary of even educating girls beyond the domestic skills they would need to successfully run a household.

Despite mixed opinions on the subject, by the 1870s secondary schools for girls became more common (Jordan 441). As the century went on, more and more girls were being educated through a curriculum similar to that of boys, even attending the state-owned secondary schools or boarding schools boys did (Jordan 440). Those wanting this change faced a challenging task: tradition made it clear that women belonged in the home and needed to know only how to run it, while men needed education for their future careers outside the home. Those opposed to women entering the public sphere shared the common anxiety that girls who were educated like boys would grow up to want a career outside the domestic sphere, stealing work from men.

Those attempting to renovate girls' education found roadblocks at every turn: in short, the dominant ideology of Victorian culture was seemingly immovable, and the claim that girls needed or deserved access to the same education that boys were given was not well-received. Ultimately, those fighting for girls' education had to bring their goals in line with those of the dominant ideology, and they began to make progress once they did so. Ellen Jordan, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Newcastle, Australia, explains:

Their assertion that their aim was making good wives and mothers was in these cases a reference back to a more general argument: a woman should, according to the current gender ideology, be a companion to her husband, a teacher to her children, and the pervasive moral influence within the home; but only an educated woman could perform these functions adequately; therefore academic education was in fact the best preparation for marriage and maternity. (442)

If women were expected to be helpmates to their husbands, educators of their children, and moral guides within the home, they had to have refined minds. This argument proved effective and slowly education for girls came more in line with that of boys. Nonetheless, although girls could have education, that education was for one purpose and one purpose only: to provide them with the skills that would enable them to be good wives and mothers. As their education beyond the elementary level began to be viewed as more important to their success as mothers and wives, girls began to have more educational years intervening between their exit from the elementary school and their entrance into marriage.

This development became a concern for society: what might these girls be exposed to in this delicate stage of life? It was important to keep them sheltered from the public sphere, but that became increasingly difficult as the strict line of separation between domestic and public spheres began to blur. These girls were not, as traditional

girls of the early century were, kept at home with mainly their mother and sisters as company, and their brothers and father as the only men they knew or conversed with. These girls attended boarding schools or, for a smaller fee, public high schools, which may have been open to both male and female students (Hunter 224). Girls were starting to interact with comparably large numbers of people outside of the home.

It was in this social context that publications targeted toward a young female readership became popular and began to thrive. Much—if not all—of this reading material had one thing in common: it worked to reinforce the dominant gender ideology in the culture. This girlhood literature frequently produced female characters that exemplified the traditional characteristics of the domestic female, or Coventry Patmore’s “Angel in the House.” Although the writers of fiction for girls may not always have intended to take part immediately in the debate and discussion of women’s place in society, they certainly did so. This reading material provided society with a highly-valued service in that it was cultivating proper and desired identity formation in its young, female readership.

This study will explore fictional portrayals of female characters from girlhood literature of the period, including *The Girl’s Own Paper* and selected works by Frances Hodgson Burnett. In each of the selections, the works interact to a great extent with contemporary views on women’s roles and work paradoxically to both question and reinforce dominant gender ideology. More importantly, the study will look at the ways that these portrayals work to influence the identity formation of their readers, imparting to them what it means to be a good and successful female.

This study will focus on the thirty year period spanning 1880 to 1910, which encompasses the birth of *The Girl's Own Paper* and the publication of Burnett's *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*. These texts emerge from the turn of the century as vivid examples not only of the new girlhood literature genre, but also work as mirrors of the period's social and cultural turmoil as the dominant and traditional gender ideology was being challenged and was experiencing a gradual shift. The New Woman and her sympathizers were slowly earning more freedoms and rights for women, bringing them closer to equality with men. This allowed many women to support themselves outside the home and made possible the option of unmarried prosperity.

The emergence of the New Woman, for this faction, meant freedom and prosperity for women who could not, or chose not, to marry. She was an intellectual individual who believed in the value of education, equal rights, and freedom of choice in career, living arrangements, and love. Despite the progress the women's rights movement was making—or perhaps because of it—there remained within conservative society a desperate clinging to old ideals. The term “New Woman” was, for these people, one of scathing disrespect for those who, as anti-feminist Eliza Lynn Linton claimed in 1870, “[...] in gaining independence will gain also hardness and coarseness, and for every intellectual increase will lose correspondingly in womanliness and love” (“Revolt” 160). In this form, the New Woman was an icon of all that threatened traditional gender roles, the ordered structure of the patriarchy, and thus society itself.

Those concerned that society would crumble without the moral and domestic fiber of the maternal female holding it together found it important to establish traditional values in girls to ensure that they would not grow up to be the threatening, seemingly

sexless female, the New Woman. The editor and founders of *The Girls Own Paper* were of this faction. Others, like Burnett, however, seem to less pointedly espouse the values of dominant gender ideology, yet inevitably end by reinforcing the importance of domestic life through character and plot development. Even when these reading materials push against tradition in subversive ways, they ultimately reinforce the concept that the purpose and goal of being female is to be a good wife and mother.

To better situate the texts and the importance of what they were reinforcing and reflecting, this study will first examine the socio-cultural changes that gave rise to “girlhood” culture and the “New Girl,” including education, home life, and work. Chapter one will provide a sense of the readership that was being impacted by the literature, why they were being targeted, and the social debate the literature was entering.

Frances Hodgson Burnett’s literature is an important part of late nineteenth and early twentieth century literary culture. Although she was best known in her own time as a writer of adult fiction, it was Burnett’s children’s piece, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, which was her most contemporarily successful work, comparable in popularity to J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series today. Despite her fruitful writing career, however, Burnett is now primarily remembered for *The Secret Garden* and *A Little Princess*, both of which have been cherished as classics for generations, being recreated in film and on the stage. As her biographer, Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, writes,

Burnett published more than fifty novels, most of them for adults, and wrote and produced thirteen plays. She was the highest-paid and best-known woman author of her time, and from the time that she was eighteen and published a short story in *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* her work was never turned down by any publisher. (“Preface” ix)

Because Burnett was a popular writer and had a prolific publishing career, reaching large numbers of readers, her work is of particular use in the context of studying Victorian girlhood literature. Chapters two and three will therefore look at Frances Hodgson Burnett's works, *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*. The two texts contain very different female protagonists and comment in varying ways on the nature of being female; however, both novels ultimately argue that it is through the act of mothering that the girls will find security, happiness, and identity. In this way, Burnett enters the vast and complex debate on the role of women in Victorian society.

A great amount of critical attention has been given to the cultural shift at the turn of the century concerning the place of women in society and the New Woman movement. Notable scholars such as Sally Mitchell, Claudia Nelson, Terri Doughty, Lynne Vallone, and Jane Hunter have begun to piece together what it meant to be a girl during this time of social unrest, a time that birthed girlhood culture. Perhaps because of the rising interest in children's literature as undeveloped ground for criticism, new attention has also been given to what children were reading during this era by scholars such as U.C. Knoepfmacher, Elizabeth Rose Gruner, and Lois Rauch Gibson. While these and others have discussed the ways that Victorian children's literature dealt with the mother archetype and stereotypes, little attention has been given to the ways that female children within children's literature act as mothers. In particular, Burnett's works for children have received scant investigation in this area.

The popularity and success of *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden* have been spurred on over the last century by dedicated readers rather than any significant amount of positive critical attention (Lundin 285-86). Only recently have critics begun to explore

these two works. Phyllis Bixler's work on *The Secret Garden*, in particular her critical overview in Twayne's masterwork study, has garnered new attention for the work of Burnett. Focusing on themes of nature and magic within the text and briefly exploring the portrayal of gender, Bixler labels Mary as a therapist and claims that, as she grows up, she gains the womanly ability to nurture those around her (Bixler, *The Secret* 48-51). It is in her article, "Gardens, Houses, and Nurturant Power in *The Secret Garden*," that she more closely explores themes of motherhood within the texts of both novels. In it, Bixler reveals a "mothering community," which Mary only joins when she brings Colin to the garden ("Gardens" 292). In the same article, Bixler notes that Sara from *A Little Princess* arrives on the scene with her nurturant abilities firmly established, but struggles to find the mothering community, or "women who effectively mother her" at Miss Minchin's school (295). Bixler's identification of a "mothering community" within the text of *A Little Princess* can be transferred to *The Secret Garden* and holds implications for Mary and Sara's positions within this community.

Of equal importance to *A Little Princess* is Roderick McGillis's *A Little Princess: Gender and Empire*. McGillis examines the various power structures at work in the text, noting the driving economic or class forces behind character actions and points out that Sara is rewarded for maintaining a cheerful outlook. He writes that "little Sara is something of a Crusoe at home in that she manages to construct for herself civilized living space in a modern urban wasteland..." (13). McGillis's study gravitates towards themes of the home and city in reflections like this, and while he does not directly analyze contemporary gender ideology as a driving force behind characters in the text, his observation about Sara's domestic activities as contrasted to her activity outside of the

home is useful in that he has recognized the friction present in the narrative concerning these two spaces.

McGillis does not examine how Sara maintains her behavior by striving to meet middle-class Victorian gender expectations. Similarly, while Bixler identifies both Mary and Sara as characters that are enmeshed in themes of motherhood and nurturance, she has not closely examined how the characters, as children, are pushed into mothering roles, nor how they contribute to the conflicted discourse on gender ideology that the turn of the century was engaged in. Bixler's and McGillis's analyses are a starting point for considering how these characters operate within domestic spaces and a community of mothers, which then contributes to an analysis of how the portrayals of Mary and Sara affect the identity of Burnett's readers.

This study seeks to begin to fill these gaps by exploring the connection between Victorian girlhood culture, the reading material being supplied for girls, and the way that this literature influenced their identity formation by reinforcing dominant cultural ideologies. By portraying their female protagonists in conventional modes of femininity, or by rewarding Sara and Mary with traditional domestic bliss in the conclusion of their stories, Burnett and the writers of *The Girl's Own Paper* are participating in the discourse on women's roles, responding to and influencing the cultural understanding of what it means to be female.

CHAPTER ONE: VICTORIAN GIRLHOOD AND *THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER*

Although the subculture of girlhood began to emerge earlier in the century, by 1880 it had become a category that was socially recognized and commonly understood. Fashion, periodicals, and novels began targeting girlhood consumers. The emergence of girlhood culture and the ways that these products appealed to them can be largely connected to the reformation in education for girls.

In 1880, it became legally required that all children, including girls, attend elementary school, whether it be private or state-owned. Although this meant that mothers at home lost the helping hands of their daughters for part of the day, the girls would have been young enough that they would not have contributed largely and wouldn't have been bringing in wages to the family. However, the exit from elementary school generally marked the transition of girls from childhood into adulthood, which was around eight to ten years of age (Mitchell 7).

Earlier in the period, this would have been the time when the girls began earnest training at home with their mothers, acquiring domestic skills and preparing for marriage. Those of the upper class might continue their education through private tutors, governesses, or expensive boarding schools that taught feminine "accomplishments," such as dancing, music, drawing, and French, but secondary education was largely out of reach for girls of the middle-class (Mitchell 75-76). Not only was their work needed at home, but many middle-class girls in their teens brought in wages that the family relied on through jobs that required domestic skills, like sewing or light housework (Gorham

11). Those seeking educational reform for girls argued that there was little value for middle class girls in the subject areas of dancing, music, drawing, or French. They sought a secondary school curriculum similar to that which boys were receiving.

As early as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, those who were trying to reform girls' education argued that intellectually rigorous education was necessary both for society as a whole to progress forward, and for a woman to adequately perform as the helpmate of man. Regarding social progress, Wollstonecraft claimed:

To render mankind more virtuous, and happier of course, both sexes must act from the same principle; but how can that be expected when only one is allowed to see the reasonableness of it? To render also the social compact truly equitable, and in order to spread those enlightening principles, which alone can ameliorate the fate of man, women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is scarcely possible unless they be educated by the same pursuits as men. (qtd. in Jordan 445)

Those with more conservative and traditional gender ideologies, Ellen Jordan writes, had similar arguments, couching them in terms of women's ability to better serve men as moral guides in their roles of wife, mother, sister, daughter, and teacher (442).

Regardless of the slant, the argument that women needed a more rigorously intellectual education to make them fit for the roles awaiting them eventually brought change in the form of day schools.

The first day school was founded in 1850 and was called the North London Collegiate (Mitchell 75). The term *college* at this time was essentially synonymous with what Americans currently consider high school, or secondary school. North London Collegiate was the first school of its kind for girls, which, for a fee, taught girls an academic curriculum during the morning, and sent them home in the early afternoon. This arrangement, unlike the boarding schools that taught feminine accomplishments,

allowed girls to receive an education similar to that of boys, while also being trained in the afternoon in household duties by their mothers. Because the girls would not be boarding at the school, the tuition was considered reasonable and affordable for a middle-class family. The fact that it was a private school, however, meant that it could be selective in the students it accepted. Sally Mitchell reports that after roughly fifteen years of operation, The Schools Inquiry Commission recommended that public, fee-paying schools modeled on North London Collegiate be established in “every town of more than four thousand inhabitants,” and, in 1872, the first public day school was founded (76). With the establishment of public, academically-oriented secondary schools for girls, a quality education was now available for girls after they exited elementary school. This meant that girls that had been leaving school at the age of eight to ten to begin their domestic training as future wives and mothers now had more opportunity to continue their education, postponing their at-home domestic training, which then postponed the age at which they married.

Although Sally Mitchell estimates that by the end of the century only twenty-five percent of girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen attended school, she also points out that during this time, there was an unprecedented readership for girlhood literature, which included school-girl stories that made the new girlhood culture as accessible for the unschooled readers as for those who were attending secondary schools (74). This reading material united girls of this age group in shared values, mores, and experiences.

The schoolgirl, the New Girl, and girlhood culture had presented themselves on the stage of Victorian society. More importantly, girlhood had become a category that society slowly turned its eye to with concern. Schoolgirls spent more time out of the

home and in the company of their peers, both male and female, and were experiencing an extraordinary amount of social interaction regardless of whether they attended co-education schools or all-girl ones. With this new social life, it steadily became more acceptable to interact outside of the domestic sphere without the attendance of an adult chaperone, something that would have been viewed as shocking only twenty years previous. Still clinging to traditional notions of what was appropriate for young ladies to do, and indeed, what was safe, many were concerned about the effect this unsupervised socializing and freedom might have upon girls.

It was in this social context that *The Girl's Own Paper* was founded in 1880 by the Religious Tract Society (Doughty 7). Although there had been other periodicals targeted toward girlhood readerships, the *GOP* was significantly more successful, reaching a circulation of 250,000 and quickly surpassing the popularity and success of the paper's predecessor, *The Boy's Own Paper* (Doughty 7). So successful was *The Girl's Own Paper's* combination of stories, advertisements, advice, and imagery, that the targeted audience of middle-class English girls were not the only readers: the audience expanded to boys, men, and to other countries, including Germany, Canada, Austria, South Africa, Australia, India and the United States to name a few, as evidenced by those who wrote in to the paper (Drotner 94).

Although the paper was founded by the Religious Tract Society, the editor, Charles Peters, made the controversial decision not to include overtly religious content. This choice not only broadened the potential audience, but made the paper more appealing to the girls reading it. The paper was marketed toward the middle-class, the portion of society that had the most girls who may have been influenced negatively by

the changing times. Specifically, it targeted the middle-class girls that were attending secondary schools alongside boys and interacting outside the home in broadened social spheres without adult accompaniment. After all, upper-class girls were privately tutored or sent to expensive all-girl boarding schools and while they may have been exposed to similar reading material, their lifestyle kept them more sheltered from the public sphere, and thus society was less concerned about them. The girls targeted by the *GOP* were the girls who were state-school educated and thus immersed in the rising girlhood culture; furthermore, they were becoming aware of the social commentary that illuminated options other than marriage for them, and therein lay the problem. According to Peters,

The Girl's Own Paper would endeavor to be to girl readers “a Counsellor, Playmate, Guardian, Instructor, Companion, and Friend. It [would] help to train them in the moral and domestic virtues, preparing them for the responsibilities of womanhood and for a heavenly home.” (qtd. in Doughty 7)

In seeking to do all of these things, the paper ended up participating in the cultural dialogue about what it meant to be female. More specifically, it created a cultural sorority by identifying what was properly female and labeling everything that didn't fit into this category as foreign, unnatural, and undesirable. However, in catering to the market of girlhood, the paper purposely illuminates—and makes exciting—exactly that which it claims to be morally against: New Girl culture.

The Girl's Own Paper reflects the purpose—and product—of girls' education: to sculpt the future wives and mothers of England. Yet it was this education and reading material that exposed them to what their culture then claimed they couldn't have. Flipping through the pages of the paper, one finds short stories, serial romances or adventures, tips and tricks for cleaning, cooking and sewing, advertisements for the latest fashions, and patterns for toys, clothing, and popular hair styles, as well as prolific

imagery that supported its overarching message. The imagery alone was very appealing to the readers, and reinforced the domestic message being sent via the text of the paper. In many of the short stories, there are images of the main characters that glorify the ideal female in the home, showing her as beautiful and happy within the domestic sphere. Perhaps the most successful part of the paper was the way that it catered to the New Girl culture with a seemingly progressive attitude, while simultaneously containing the New Girl by reinforcing dominant gender ideology and stressing the importance of the domestic sphere. In a charged cultural atmosphere, the *GOP* provided safe reading material for New Girls who were in danger of growing up to be New Women.

Prior to the publication of the *GOP*, girls were reading *The Boys Own Paper*, eagerly devouring the adventure stories printed there along with reprints of earlier novels such as *Robinson Crusoe*. Clearly, girls needed reading material that provided scope for their imaginations and escapist adventures; however, stories for boy readers were certainly not appropriate for girls to be reading because they motivated the reader to exit the home, to work, and to travel abroad. This problem of girls reading boy stories may have provided a motivation for creating the *GOP*. Looking through its pages, it is obvious that the periodical was putting forth a great deal of effort to entertain (or contain the energies of) its readers, giving them adventure stories with romantic overtones. This romantic emphasis is naturally a marked difference from the stories found in boy literature, but on closer inspection, the stories vary in more dramatic ways: all have very different endings from the ones featured in boys' novels and *The Boy's Own Paper*. As Terri Doughty notes,

There are plenty of "madcaps" and rebels in *Girl's Own* serials, with titles like "Wild Kathleen" [...] and "Ethel Rivers' Ambition" [...but] without exception in these stories, willfulness, ambition, and "unwomanliness" are punished. (8)

In essence, the periodical provides exciting stories that entice girls; the stories seem to satisfy the adventurous cravings of its girlhood readership, but inevitably they contain the New Girl by reasserting in "happily-ever-after" endings that these adventures are mistakes of fallen characters, who can only be redeemed through family and domesticity. The nonfiction of the periodical conveys similar messages.

As late as 1896, in an instructional article titled "Queen Baby and Her Wants," Mrs. Orman Cooper addresses the delights of making baby clothes. She opens her article by commenting,

Perhaps there is no subject more fascinating to the ordinary woman than that of baby-clothes! Of course 'the new woman' finds no charm therein. I am not writing for that modern production, only for those sweet, womanly souls who have the instincts of motherhood implanted in them. (qtd. in Doughty 29)

Cooper's opening not only intimately addresses her girlhood readers, inviting them into the demure club of "ordinary women," but also ostracizes the New Woman, dehumanizing her as a "production" of the age and labeling her as unnatural and unfeeling. After clearly demarcating "us" from "them," Cooper goes on to impart the secrets of domestic life, offering advice on how to buy or create baby clothes, costs of cloth, care of the clothing, Queen Baby's preferences, and providing the patterns. Here, as in other places throughout the paper, the writer addresses the girl readers, and, while offering domestic advice, subtly—or not-so-subtly—condemns New Woman and New Girl concepts, ushering the reader away from such dangerous philosophies, into more safely domestic realms.

In another short piece, entitled “The New Girl,” the writer opens by remarking that,

There has arisen in this country of ours, and very recently, the new girl. Of course, she is but a second edition to the new woman. Just an imbecile off-shoot. But these new girls—and Heaven forbid that you, dear reader, should be one of them—foolishly imagine that they can go anywhere and do anything that young men can do. (qtd. in Doughty 54)

The writer then goes on to point out that these “tom-girls” make for bad wives, and often are directly avoided by sensible young men as they search the marriage market.

Pieces such as these appear in the *GOP* as verbal weaponry designed to combat the other side of the social discourse, which girls may have been reading or otherwise exposed to in “inappropriate” or sensational popular novels, radical periodicals, or through friends (which were now not so easily filtered by mothers). It was difficult in this time of popular print culture to find a periodical that did not address women’s issues. Eliza Lynn Linton, avidly conservative and violently opposed to New Woman ideology, wrote many essays attacking the New Woman and her supporters, including “The Girl of the Period,” “The Modern Revolt,” and “The Wild Women” sequence, which were published in various periodicals such as *Nineteenth Century*, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, and *Saturday Review*. In all, she labels the New Woman as a wild construction of a dangerous modern age. As the New Girl emerged, Linton was quick to spot her deficiencies, denouncing her in the *Saturday Review* as early as 1868:

She pleases them [men] as little as she elevates them; and how little she does that, the class of women she has taken as her models of itself testifies. All men whose opinion is worth having prefer the simple and genuine girl of the past, with her tender little ways and pretty bashful modesties, to this loud and rampant modernization, with her false red hair and painted skin, talking slang as glibly as a man, and by preference leading the conversation to doubtful subjects [...] all we can do is to wait patiently until the national madness has passed, and our women

have come back again to the old English ideal, once more the most beautiful, the most modest, the most essentially womanly in the world. (“The Girl” 150)

Linton’s outrage at the loss of “tender ways” and “bashful modesties” to modern evolutions of the girl as conversant and energized are typical of the latter half of the century. By the end of the century, girls and women were finding—largely through their education and broadened social spheres—increased support for their progressive causes and strong voices reacting to anti-feminists like Linton. In March of 1894, for example, Alys Pearsall Smith wrote “A Reply from the Daughters” for *Nineteenth Century*. In it, she addresses the possible causes of rebellious daughters who—by choice or by chance—remain unmarried and unhappily contained in the domestic arena:

These girls are withering because they are not allowed to live their own lives, but are always compelled to live the lives of other people. They have no chance of self-development, no work or pursuits of their own; their especial talents are left to lie dormant, and their best powers are allowed no sphere of action. They must continually crush back the aspirations of their own natures, and must stifle the cry of their own individuality [...] The time of unmarried daughters at home is often entirely spent in domestic and social duties or pleasures, agreeable or distasteful as the case may be, imposed upon them by the authority of those around them. (Smith 443)

Smith gives voice to the situation that faced many women. It was expected that middle-class sons would go to school and then have industrious careers; their sisters either married, or stayed at home. Although work was a reality for many lower middle-class girls and most of the working-class, to work when it was not necessary was considered improper to a class that wanted its women to mirror the ladies of the upper classes. Work was, however, a necessity facing many “young ladies” and as the century came to a close, this was being increasingly recognized even by conservative factions.

The Girl’s Own Paper continued to flourish and remained a staunch supporter of girls making the domestic sphere their priority, but it also had to cater to the New Girl

culture, a culture of girls who were educated and yearned, as Smith argued, for some form of independent occupation. The paper also realized that a large percentage of its readership was composed of girls who needed to work. Still clinging to the domestic ideal of womanhood, the paper chose to do what it could to meet both the demands of its readers and its own moral/ideological goals. In a compromise between the two, it offered advice to girls who needed to work for a living, including highlighting the possible jobs that would allow them to remain womanly, such as seamstress work, teaching, gardening, office work, and nursing.

In the September 4th 1886 edition of the paper, an article titled “Between School and Marriage” appears, the title alone targeting exactly the group of readers in the most danger of succumbing to such things as working for money or being seduced by other, perhaps even more scandalous, New Woman concepts. In it, the anonymous writer advises that

When the financial resources of her father are slender, a girl is quite right to seek for some employment by which she may earn her own living, and perhaps help her brothers and sisters; but when this is not the case, let no feeling of quixotic restlessness induce her to rashly leave home. (qtd. in Doughty 65)

The piece clearly instructs girls to stay at home where they belong, leaving the safety of the domestic sphere only as a mode of self-sacrifice for her family, and not in pursuit of personal satisfaction. The writer goes on to say that wanting to earn money to help the family is a noble endeavor, but if possible, a girl should

Pay her way by filling in the little spaces in home life as only a dear daughter can, by lifting the weight of care from her mother, and by slipping in a soft word or a smile where it is like oil on the troubled waters of a father’s spirit. (qtd. in Doughty 65)

With the closing of the century, the paper—and society—could no longer refuse to acknowledge the fact that some women simply *had* to work; not all families were from the upper-middle class, and thus all girls did not have the luxury (or curse) of staying in their father's home, knitting lace while waiting for suitors. Furthermore, with educational advances and ongoing expansion of career options, many New Girls grew into women who could stay at home but didn't want to, and no longer had to. The traditional conservative stance presented by the paper had to then shift on the subject of work in order to maintain its success, appeal to its readers, and continue to influence them on an ideological level. To influence its audience, and maintain this appeal, the *GOP* had to offer something unique.

While other girlhood periodicals failed after short publication stints, the *GOP* was incredibly successful, and this was due not simply to the reading content, but to its visual appeal. Unlike many periodicals from the same time period, the *GOP* is laid out in two or three columns. This allows for a readable print size almost akin to a book. Perhaps more importantly, the paper has beautiful accompanying pictures on many of its pages, visually engaging the reader, especially if that reader happens to be a young girl. Because of the size and quality of the images, it becomes fairly obvious that they are a definite focal point for each story. And if the essay, fiction, or advice piece lacks a large picture, it often begins with an artfully illuminated letter.

It has already been made clear that the Religious Tract Society wanted to provide its female readers with safe reading material that would contain their restless spirits while guiding them towards a respectably traditional and able womanhood. The periodical had adventure stories, and romances, but in these stories the hero/heroine does not conquer or

triumph in arenas of the wild or the city, but rather, triumph in spheres domestic and moral. As the stories worked to establish the proper sphere for girls/ladies/women, so too did the accompanying imagery. All of the imagery features women in respectable modes: they are always well-groomed; often there are children around them; they wear the latest of modest fashions; they are active and healthy but graceful; they are serving men their afternoon tea (whereas the men's work is physical or intellectual); they always wear an expression that is calm, neutral, graceful, relaxed, and at times, have the hint of a smile hovering about their lips. The *GOP* was directed at Victorian girlhood and provides images that reinforce the message that females should be domestically pure while arguing via visual rhetoric that if work must be done, it must be done in a feminine manner.

To better understand how the visual and textual aspects of the paper worked together to influence the reader, we may look to the example of "The Child: How Will She Develop?," which appeared in volume 16 of *The Girl's Own Paper* in 1894 (Doughty 10-11). This series of small drawings is situated to frame a column of writing. The writing itself is unrelated to the imagery presented, but addresses domestic topics of interest to girls. The images frame this column of advice, and appear in seven pairs. Each of the sketches illustrates the life of the female in various stages, and each pair is juxtaposed against each other: one showing the proper and domestic path while the other illustrates the path of the New Woman.

The sequence begins with the schoolgirl, an age that the readers would immediately identify as representative of themselves. On the one side is a girl that is liked by all, on the other, one that is disliked by her schoolmates. In the beginning of the sequence, the female reader is introduced to visual rhetoric that informs her that she must

strive to please others. The second image is of the girl as she attends college (secondary school) while the other stays at home, wasting her time reading French prose. These images imply that it is perfectly acceptable and feminine to earn a degree (a diploma) and that it is preferable to fill one's head with useful information, rather than French romance. In this way, the imagery appeals to New Girls who want to go to school. The sequence is designed to make New Girls desire the path opposite of the New Woman.

The third image-pair begins to curve back towards the domestic. In the first, the young lady attends her old mother, while the second shows a woman walking away from her infirm mother with a distinct lack of sympathy. The unsympathetic woman wears a coat-jacket and hat, a neck-tie firmly in place, all of which were readily identifiable components of New Woman fashion. The concluding frames show the girl who chose the domestic path surrounded by children and grandchildren, while the New Woman stewes in bitterness and old age, alone in a rocking chair. It is interesting that the advice column in the center of the illustration is seemingly unrelated in content, yet both educate and advise the girlhood readers to make proper life-choices; that is, education is all well and good, but there comes a time to set that aside, and enter a duty-filled, purely domestic adult life. In this way, the paper draws in the girlhood readers through imagery and text. It offers tantalizing tastes of New Girl culture that girls identify with by proffering heroines in adventure stories or championing education in advice columns. Once hooked, the paper takes these away and contains the girl by having the heroines come to domestic happy endings once they reach womanhood.

The Girl's Own Paper, from the beginning, worked to reflect the dominant gender ideology, impressing upon its girlhood readership domestic values, while castigating

those of the New Woman. As a slow shift in thought occurred in England, the periodical altered its pages to reflect this shift. It did so by carefully approaching subjects that were of unavoidable interest to its readers, such as education, work, and home-life. It then offered advice that reinforced the message that educational or career pursuits were acceptable (because they were no longer completely avoidable), so long as domestic goals were the motivating factor, and self-sacrifice was always topmost in one's mind. The paper served as one more avenue through which Victorian girlhood was being educated and immersed in cultural values. Although at times the paper addressed ideologies that ran counter to the dominant, it repeatedly made it clear that femininity required domesticity, and that a home and family should always be the goal behind all actions a girl pursued. Because *The Girl's Own Paper* was so immersed in—and such an important part of—girlhood culture, the girls reading it learned from its pages what it meant to be female. In essence, the paper helped to sculpt the identities of thousands of girls in Victorian England by first making them identify with the characters in stories and illustrations, and then providing those characters with “happy” endings that always involved giving up personal pursuits and ambitions for those of the home.

With 250,000 subscriptions, *The Girl's Own Paper* was clearly marketing to an audience that was not only vast, but eager for reading material (Doughty 7). Because of the educational reforms already discussed, the literacy rates had increased significantly in England and its colonies. As a consequence—and perhaps also due to the growing view of childhood as an idyllic stage of life—the second half of the nineteenth century produced the Golden Age of children's literature, for the first time supplying abundant reading material for young readers. Because girlhood was understood as a stage spanning

anywhere from age ten to twenty-five, much girlhood literature was considered synonymous with children's literature. Just as *The Girl's Own Paper* was read by many and instilled cultural values, so too did the girlhood novels of the period. Jack Zipes remarks that,

In Victorian England, children's literature became a central tool for the education of children scattered throughout the British Empire, a means by which the young (and old) colonized subjects were taught the colonizer's language and culture. (xxviii)

While children's literature may have been used to instill English cultural values in the non-English colonial subject, it worked as a conduit of cultural knowledge and expectations for the next generation of English citizens as well. This literature, like *The Girl's Own Paper*, first captivated the reader by making them identify with the child protagonist and then went on to model what English culture expected one to be and become.

Among the vast numbers of books for children produced in this "Golden Age" stand the works of Frances Hodgson Burnett, including *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*. These two novels, like the stories and illustrations that appear in *The Girl's Own Paper*, transfer cultural knowledge about the role of women in society to girlhood readers. Furthermore, they are marketed to girlhood readers (and operate) in much the same way: *A Little Princess* offers a tragic adventure story that ends in happy domestic enclosure while *The Secret Garden* offers an anti-heroine that captivates readers with her rotten behavior, but is then reformed to the ideal domestic female.

CHAPTER TWO: BURNETT'S GIRLHOOD LITERATURE: MOTHER FIGURES
AND MOTHER FAILURES

Frances Hodgson Burnett's biographer comments that, for a popular and successful Transatlantic author of fifty-two novels and thirteen plays—most of which were written for adult audiences—Burnett would, in all likelihood, be astounded to discover that today she is remembered most as the beloved author of *The Secret Garden* and *A Little Princess*, books that were the lesser known of her works during her lifetime (Gerzina, *The Annotated* xiii). The two novels remain classic literature for children and young adults today, easily reaching readers from across the years with seemingly timeless themes and characters. *The Secret Garden*, which “regularly tops lists of most influential books,” shares common thematic ground with *A Little Princess* (Gerzina, *Unexpected* xiv). Both novels have central female characters that operate in spheres that seem to lack male influence, which highlights Burnett's focus on, and development of, female roles.

Writing in a time of social change and rigid gender expectations, Burnett herself struggled—and often failed—to conform to the Victorian model of femininity. She was in a unique position as a transatlantic author in that she straddled both the English and American cultures as they dealt with “the woman question” and shifting gender ideologies. Roderick McGillis, author of *A Little Princess: Gender and Empire*, writes:

In *The One I Knew Best of All* [Burnett's autobiography] she speaks (in the third person) of her relationship with the younger of her two brothers: “As she was only a girl, he despised her in a fraternal British way, but as she was his sister he had a

kind affection for her, which expressed itself in occasional acts of friendly patronage” (36). Just prior to this passage, in a parenthetical aside, Burnett writes, “(Being an English little girl she knew the vast superiority of the male).” Her irony is apparent. (10)

Here, as McGillis observes, it is clear that Burnett finds the “vast superiority of the male” to be nothing less than silly. In fact, in an interview for *Idler* magazine, Burnett said, “It is my opinion that the ideal woman, among quite a number of other things, should be a ‘perfect gentleman’” (qtd. in Gerzina, *Unexpected* 188). Her answer suggests that the “ideal” woman should expand her qualities outside of conventional, mutually-exclusive set of characteristics.

These accounts of Burnett’s feelings on the topic of women and gender roles show that she was not blind to issues related to the women’s movement. And how could she be? As a female author, widely published in both America and Britain, Burnett moved in intellectual circles that contained some of the more liberal and active minds of the day. She also travelled a great deal without her husband and children (at times staying away for years), and was the bread-winner not only for her immediate family, but for extended family members as well.

Despite Burnett’s own failure as the ideal Victorian female, and her great career success because of it, neither Sara Crewe from *A Little Princess* nor Mary Lennox from *The Secret Garden* finds her identity or success on English soil through an industrious working career: it is their ultimate conformity to the dominant gender ideology of Victorian England that brings them peace, fulfillment, security, and happiness. In the novels, Burnett provides numerous models of both the ideal domestic female and her antithesis, in the form of mother figures. These figures not only reflect ideologies from the turn of the century, they also provide cultural education to contemporary—and

modern—readers; they teach the reader what it means to be a successful female and stress the importance of domesticity as an entranceway to self-discovery and happiness.

Although both novels, as classics, have received a fair amount of critical attention in recent years, the limited female models Burnett offers her readers, specifically mother figures, has been largely overlooked or given only cursory attention. However, before looking at the ways that Mary and Sara, as children, come to develop domestic or motherly identities within the novels, it will be helpful to first look at the adult models that appear in the texts. In constructing her female characters, Burnett was drawing on the gender ideologies that ruled her life. Because of the clear-cut stereotypes of femininity that were part of her culture, her characters—although at times quite round—tend to mirror these two-dimensional types, reflecting the cultural understanding of gender roles.

One motivating factor or argument that English culture clung to when faced with the Woman Question (as it was called in the late Victorian press) was what would happen to society—and even mankind—if women were let out of the house, if they had careers in the workplace, or if they chose not to marry. This study has already looked at how this concern surfaced in the rhetoric of *The Girl's Own Paper* and other essays from the period, but how did it appear in Burnett's girlhood fiction? The character of Miss Minchin from *A Little Princess* provides a good example.

Perhaps the only character that can be described as a clear antagonist and even a villain within the two novels, Miss Minchin is the owner and headmistress of the “select seminar for young ladies,” the London boarding school in which Sara Crewe's father enrolls her (Burnett 7). As the headmistress of an all-girl boarding school, Minchin has

been entrusted with not only the education of the girls enrolled in her school, but also the all-around development of their characters. She presides over the school and instructors as an authority figure, but also rules over the girls much as a mother in a household would rule over her children. In this way, Minchin is constructed and identifiable as a mother figure in *A Little Princess*; however, Burnett constructs her as the antithesis to the ideal domestic female. Phyllis Bixler argues:

Burnett did not intend Miss Minchin to be a sympathetic character. In this variant of the Cinderella tale, Miss Minchin is cast in the role of the wicked stepmother; thus, it is her lack of nurturant power rather than economic power that Burnett stresses. (“Gardens” 295)

Bixler rightly identifies Minchin as a step-mother figure, or the anti-mother in a long literary tradition; however, her claim that Minchin’s lack of economic power is not of importance to Burnett is challenged by Burnett’s portrayal of Minchin first and foremost as a businesswoman. She owns and operates the school not as a moral or philanthropic endeavor, but to make money. She is described by Sara as much like the house itself,

tall and dull, and respectable and ugly [...] She had heard a great many desirable things of the young soldier from the lady who had recommended her school to him. Among other things, she had heard that he was a rich father who was willing to spend a great deal of money on his little daughter. (Burnett 8)

Whatever the recommender had told Minchin, the fact that had not escaped her attention was Captain Crewe’s money. It is Miss Minchin’s preoccupation with economic power that unquestionably marks her as an anti-mother figure from the outset of the novel.

While Bixler argues that Burnett is *not* focused on Minchin’s lack of economic power, but on her lack of mothering power, she overlooks the way that Burnett has constructed Minchin’s pursuit of economic power to then *produce* her lack of nurturant power.

Minchin's selfishness, greed for money, and lack of sympathizing sensibilities makes her the precise image of woman that Eliza Lynn Linton feared would take over the country when she wrote in 1870 that,

[...] in gaining independence [women] will gain also hardness and coarseness, and for every intellectual increase will lose correspondingly in womanliness and love. ("Revolt" 160)

Linton was not alone in the belief that middle-class women, upon entering the workplace, would essentially unsex themselves, losing the delicate and feeling qualities that had come to be viewed as the chief superiorities of English women. Following Linton's lead, Burnett paints Minchin as the worst possible example of corroded feminine sensibilities. This is never more evident than when Captain Crewe is reported not only dead, but financially ruined.

Now Miss Minchin understood, and never had she received such a blow in her life. Her show pupil, her show patron, swept away from the Select Seminary at one blow. She felt as if she had been outraged and robbed, and that Captain Crewe and Sara and Mr. Barrow were equally to blame [...] "If you think she is to be foisted off on me, you are greatly mistaken," Miss Minchin gasped. "I have been robbed and cheated; I will turn her into the street!" (Burnett 59-61)

Advised that she can work Sara and get some worth out of her, Minchin heartlessly reports the death to Sara during her birthday party while her guests look on and strips her of all her possessions, moving her to the garret attic next to the scullery maid, a place that is spatially and socially as different from her parlor room as possible. Burnett constructs Minchin as so selfish and business-driven that she cannot feel in the least for Sara, offer her comfort, or even break the news to the child carefully. Elisabeth Rose Gruner writes that "Miss Minchin is always, defiantly, unmarried 'Miss,' and she never acts as a surrogate mother to her charges" (176). Miss Minchin has been placed in the position of

mother over the girls that attend her school, but because she occupies this position for monetary gain, and not because she is an authentic mother, she fails as a mother figure.

Contrasted in the novel to Miss Minchin is Mrs. Carmichael, the mother of the family that shares the square with the school. She is described as “stout” and “rosy” while Minchin is “dull” and “ugly” (Burnett 91). In addition to her own personal attributes, her family speaks to her success as a mother figure. The eight children are described as always doing something enjoyable: going for drives with their mother, on walks with nurses, laughing, tumbling, and frolicking about as healthy children of the fin de siècle would. More pointedly, Mrs. Carmichael has a mother’s feelings and sensibilities, which Burnett highlights when Sara is discovered at the end of the novel by the late Captain Crewe’s business partner for whom Mr. Carmichael works:

Then Mrs. Carmichael came in. She looked very much moved, and suddenly took Sara in her arms and kissed her. “You look bewildered, poor child,” she said. “And it is not to be wondered at.” [...Mrs. Carmichael] was crying as she kissed her again. She felt as if she [Sara] ought to be kissed very often because she had not been kissed for so long. (Burnett 172)

Mrs. Carmichael displays pristine feminine qualities: she understands children, is highly observant of Sara, sympathetic to her situation, and ready to physically and verbally comfort the girl, despite Sara not being her own child. In displaying these qualities, she is marked as the domestic ideal, whom the reader will automatically view as a savior to Sara after her harsh physical and emotional treatment at Minchin’s hands.

In *A Little Princess*, it becomes clear that giving birth, or being an authentic mother, is the measuring stick by which all women are judged. Miss Minchin is villainized as the anti-mother because she is not authentically a mother, despite operating in what should be a mothering role to her pupils. Conversely, the domestic ideal female

is celebrated in Mrs. Carmichael—an authentic birth mother—and her happy English children. In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett provides more varied models of motherhood.

Although Sara's deceased mother in *A Little Princess* is only vaguely alluded to, the mothers of Mary and Colin in *The Secret Garden* are characterized in more detail, impact the narrative more certainly (despite being deceased), and have influenced their children in tangible ways. This representation of motherly influence in the novel serves as a reflection of the Victorian understanding of the importance of mothers; that is, mothers were directly responsible for the construction and health of the members of English society.

The opening line of the novel explains that Mary Lennox is the “most disagreeable-looking child ever seen” by the people at Misselthwaite Manor when she arrives, and the narrator is quick to assure the reader that they were quite correct in their observation (Burnett 3). However, the narrator is also quick to provide the cause of the child looking so disagreeable, and that cause is her mother:

[...] her mother had been a great beauty who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people. She had not wanted a little girl at all, and when Mary was born she handed her over to the care of an Ayah, who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Mem Sahib she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible. (Burnett 3)

Already, by her apparent disappointment in having a child and her evident distaste for even seeing Mary, Mrs. Lennox is identified as one of those women not belonging to the domestic sorority of idealized Victorian females. As Eliza Lynn Linton comments in her essay “The Girl of the Period,” this attitude towards child-bearing and rearing was one more aberration caused by the modernization of women in the later half of the century:

Formerly children were desired by all women, and their coming considered a blessing rather than otherwise: now the proportion of wives who regard them as a

course is something appalling, and the annoyance or despair, with the practical expression, in many cases, given to that annoyance as their number increases, is simply bewildering to those who have cherished that instinct as it used to be cherished. (“Girl” 153)

Despite having no children herself, Linton’s commentary on shifting attitudes is illuminating and was certainly not the only one of its kind. Ann Heilmann and Valerie Sanders, in their examination of Victorian women writers, note that,

[...] for Eliza Lynn Linton, Charlotte Mary Younge and Mary Ward (1851-1920), the concept and performance of femininity—in theory, if not always in practice—entailed being good wives and mothers at home, using their “influence” in public life to do good to others, rather than to satisfy their own personal ambitions [...] They wanted women to be “ladylike” in the sense of being modest, gentle, tasteful and unselfish, though without also being weak and dependent. (291)

The progress in women’s education and women’s rights was allowing for a more open discussion for those who were dissatisfied with their situation as overburdened mothers but also gave voice to those who felt otherwise, for whom motherhood was the chief duty of women, and a source of social power. In the height of colonialism and empire, the duty of supplying the nation with colonizers fell on women’s shoulders. These colonizers were expected to be brought up by mothers who instilled them with a strong sense of Englishness.

When Mary is older and characterized as being disagreeable and “contrary,” one female character observes that “Perhaps if her mother had carried her pretty face and her pretty manners oftener into the nursery Mary might have learned some pretty ways too” (Burnett 8). The direct impact of mothers upon children is here made very explicit.

Mary’s father is not mentioned as having had anything to do with Mary’s upbringing or character, but the absence of Mrs. Lennox in the nursery is targeted as the direct cause of Mary’s unpleasant character and contrary ways. It is, of course, unclear if Mary’s ruin is

caused simply by the absence of Mrs. Lennox in her upbringing, or if it is also due to her being raised—and seemingly only interacting with—the Indian servants, in particular, her Ayah.

The concern about what influence lower-class nurses or non-English servants might have upon the identity formation of the next generation of colonizers was an important contributing factor to middle-class family values. The idea was that if a middle-class mother—embodying the characteristics of the Angel in the House—was the one rearing the child, girl-children and boy-children alike would develop as proper English citizens, understanding their duty and place in society. Mrs. Lennox has made it clear to her non-English servants that they are to keep Mary quiet and out of sight. She has literally positioned a human barrier between herself and her child. This barrier, as Victorians understood it, not only obstructs the natural relationship between a mother and child, but removes Mary from the cultural education that a responsible English Mother would have given her.

Although she clearly understands herself to be superior to her servants, Mary knows very little about what it means to be English. In fact, once she has been orphaned, she is informed that she is to be sent home, to which Mary responds, “Where is home?” (Burnett 8). Basil, her seven-year-old informer, finds her ignorance unbelievable: “She doesn’t know where home is! [...] It’s England of course” (8). Victorian society was so concerned about maintaining English cultural values in the midst of other cultures, that it had become tradition in the colonies for the better-off families to send their children back to England to attend boarding schools in their formative years (much like Captain Crewe did with Sara). They would often stay at these schools for years at a time, ensuring that

they were properly immersed in English cultural values. However, even at home in England, the mother in her child-rearing role was seen as something that was under threat and in need of protection. Linton exclaimed in her 1870 essay “The Modern Revolt”:

This delegation of the mother’s duty to servants is as amazing in its contravention of instinct as the revolt against maternity [...] and the absolute surrender of them while young, and therefore while most plastic, into the hands of servants, is too patent to be denied. (153-54)

Linton’s notice that the practice was becoming alarmingly common is one more example of the changing trend in women’s roles. Even women who are not categorized as anti-feminists like Linton held strong convictions about the importance of motherhood. Margaret Oliphant, for example, maintained “her commitment to ideal motherhood” throughout her career as an essayist and reviewer for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (Heilmann and Sanders 290). Nonetheless, like Mrs. Lennox, many women left their children to be raised by specialized servants, or governesses. As domestic expectations and women’s roles began to shift in the later part of the century, it became increasingly important for those against the shift to firmly establish what was and was not feminine and thus correct. While it had been traditionally acceptable to have a governess raise your children, mothering one’s own children became a significant attribute of the ideal domestic female. In this role, Mrs. Lennox fails dreadfully.

Mary’s mother is not only a failed mother figure because of her influence on Mary, she also fails to embody other qualities that were necessary components of the ideal female construct; she is materialistic and vain, as well as selfish. In essence, Mrs. Lennox shuns the domestic sphere in favor of interaction within the social sphere, thus neglecting her English duty as a wife and failing in domestic industriousness. She fails as a mother not because she has never given birth, but because she is in India, estranged

from the culture that would cultivate in her an authentic English motherliness, and has neglected her English motherly duties. Unlike Basil's mother, Mrs. Lennox has failed to transfer cultural identity to Mary; even worse, she has left Mary under the influence of foreigners.

Lilias Craven, Colin's deceased mother and Mary's aunt, however, perfectly embodies the essence of the ideal Victorian female. Mrs. Medlock, the housekeeper of Misselthwaite Manor, tells Mary that her aunt

was a sweet, pretty thing and he'd [Mr. Craven] have walked the world over to get her a blade o' grass she wanted. Nobody thought she'd marry him, but she did, and people said she married him for his money. But she didn't [...]" (Burnett 11)

From several different servants, Mary learns that Lilias and her uncle were very much in love, and would shut themselves up for hours in her walled garden, "readin' and talkin'" and tending to the garden (30). It was in the garden that Lilias fell while pregnant, which brought on the premature birth of Colin and her death.

Despite Craven being a hunchback, Burnett makes it clear that this beautiful, young girl loved him deeply and that spending time with her husband, alone in their garden, was her chief joy in life. Although they were clearly wealthy, Lilias is not portrayed as having been interested in society, parties, or expensive clothing, but rather family and the domestic sphere, including the walled flower garden. With her death, Craven is left a tortured man and Colin a confined invalid, yet she seems to watch over them from beyond the pale.

When Mary meets Colin, he instructs her to pull a curtain aside, revealing his mother's portrait:

It was the picture of a girl with a laughing face. She had bright hair tied up with a blue ribbon and her gay, lovely eyes were exactly like Colin's unhappy ones, agate gray and looking twice as big as they really were because of the black lashes all round them. (79)

Colin reports that he had her portrait covered because he didn't like how she always smiled down on him. It seems in this way that even after death, Liliias watches over her child. In his wretched loneliness, Colin resists the company of his mother's smile because he resents that she is not there to care for him in person, but as I will discuss later, Colin happily gives in to his mother's ethereal attention once he receives some amount of healthy mothering in reality.

Unlike Mary's mother, Liliias did not abandon her child willingly. She was a devoted wife, and it is presumed that she would have been a devoted mother. It is clear that Liliias was a feeling woman, deeply attached to her husband and blind to his physical deformity. She is characterized as beautiful, loving, gentle, and joyous, embodying all attributes of the domestic ideal expected of upper-middle class women. Because of the strength of Burnett's characterization of Liliias as the ideal female, many scholars have identified her as a spiritual power behind the seemingly magical garden. Anna Krugovoy Silver, Danielle E. Price, and others have theorized that the spirit of Liliias remains in the secret garden to care for the children, a reading that recognizes Burnett's intent to emphasize Liliias as an ideal mother figure.

While Liliias Craven and Mrs. Lennox represent extreme models of motherhood, Burnett also provides living mother figures that are less dichotomized. Mrs. Medlock, as housekeeper of Misselthwaite Manor, is the only mother figure that Colin Craven is likely to have interacted with on a regular basis. Similarly, once Mary comes to reside at the manor, Medlock becomes the primary female authority figure in her life. Because

Mrs. Medlock is not an authentic mother, she falls short of attaining an ideal domestic status, although it is clear (particularly in the case of Colin) that she has the children's best interests at heart. Because she has not given birth, her motherly sensibilities fail when it comes time to interact with the children, and she often consults a schoolgirl friend, Susan Sowerby, on the subject.

Although clearly from the lower middle-class, Susan Sowerby exemplifies the type of mother that was valued by English society at the turn of the century. With twelve children, Mrs. Sowerby is domestically industrious, managing to clothe and feed them all, while remaining sturdy and cheerful herself. More importantly, despite the fact that money is scarce in the Sowerby family, Susan does not enter the social sphere as a worker; her job is raising her children and taking care of their small house. Even when managing this is difficult, she reaches out to Mary and Colin through her son Dickon and her daughter Martha, feeding them, assisting them in their plans, and even buying Mary a skipping rope to help her get exercise and play as a turn-of-the-century child should.

Not only does Burnett provide a clear impression to her readers about what makes a successful mother in the forms of Susan Sowerby, Mrs. Carmichael, and the deceased Lilius Craven, she also creates what would have been well-recognized models of the anti-mother: Miss Minchin fails because she is not an authentic mother and is in the position of mother figure for economic profit, not because of driving nurturant sensibilities; Mrs. Medlock, like Miss Minchin, is not an authentic mother, and thus tries and fails as a mother figure to Colin and Mary; Mrs. Lennox, unlike the other two, is an authentic birth mother, but fails as a mother figure because she is not immersed in an English cultural environment that connects her to the values of authentic English motherliness.

Eliza Lynn Linton, always outspoken about the role of women in the family and in society, reminds us that “[w]hen women are bad, all is bad” (“Revolt” 159). By “bad” it would appear that Linton means anything that disrupts the status quo of the middle-class. The failed mother figures within these novels operate in much the same way that the New Woman does within the pages of *The Girl’s Own Paper*: she is held up as a straw figure or bogey, a warning of what not to be or become. In both instances, these women figures disrupt traditional gender roles that stabilize the patriarchal society of Victorian England. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was exactly this disruption of the status quo, this shift in gender ideology, which caused social discomfort. In an effort to contain or control this change, works like *The Girl’s Own Paper* and Burnett’s girlhood literature provide models or types for the benefit of the reader. By using motherhood as a standard by which all women are judged, and vilifying those who fail by this standard, traditional gender roles are maintained and transmitted to the reader. Within the confines of the narrative, both Mary and Sara are exposed to this standard via these models and learn from their example what is desirable and what is not as they develop into members of Victorian English society. In fact, in both novels, the two girls are judged and developed around this standard of motherhood.

CHAPTER THREE: CHILD MOTHERS IN BURNETT'S GIRLHOOD LITERATURE

Although neither *The Secret Garden* nor *A Little Princess* received a great deal of contemporary critical attention, the story and characters of both have made them popular to child and adult readers for generations. The former, first serialized in 1910, is viewed by many as the crowning jewel of Burnett's writing career, while the latter evolved from 1887 to 1905, a time that experienced significant shifts in gender expectations. Both novels are products of the boom in girlhood culture and the Golden Age of children's literature. As important pieces of popular print culture, they provided contemporary female readers with protagonists that modeled late Victorian gender expectations. While Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden* and Sara Crewe in *A Little Princess* are vastly different characters, both struggle to adhere to traditional gender roles. Commenting in varying ways on the nature of being female, both novels ultimately argue that it is through the act of mothering and the adherence to conventional gender expectations that one finds security, identity, and happiness. Although the novels achieve this through the use of both successful and failed mother figures, it is primarily through utilizing the characters of Mary and Sara that Burnett instills the importance of domesticity in her girl readers, influencing their identity formation.

After its original serialization in a children's magazine in 1887, the short story of *Sara Crewe* was reworked by Burnett five years later into a successful play. Perhaps because of its theatrical success, or her own interest in the tale, Burnett expanded the piece, publishing *A Little Princess: Being the Whole Story of Sara Crewe Now Told for*

the First Time in 1905. Unlike the later publication, *The Secret Garden, A Little Princess* was revisited and revised over a span of eight years. Through the slow molding of this tale, Burnett had time to carefully craft the character of Sara. It is the way that she developed this heroine as a model of Victorian femininity that illuminates the influential ideologies present in the narrative.

Almost from the very first, Burnett lets the reader know that Sara—despite being seven years old—acts as the lady of her father’s Indian household. When her father delivers her to the English boarding school, Sara is distressed at their impending separation, but Captain Crewe reassures Sara that her time in England will go quickly, and that very soon, she will be able to “come back and take care of papa” (7). This thought comforts her: she would like “[t]o keep the house for her father; to ride with him, and sit at the head of his table when he had dinner-parties; to talk to him and read his books [...]” (7). It is clear to the reader that Sara arrives in London with domestic skills well in hand, or at least a good idea of what it means to be the lady of a house. She already has some knowledge of mothering from taking care of her father. Sara is described by the narrator as unlike the small child she is: “She was such a little girl that one did not expect to see such a look on her small face. It would have been an old look for a child of twelve, and Sara Crewe was only seven” (5). It seems as if, because her mother was absent, Sara has had to fill the adult female position in her home early in her life. Although her father does not neglect her, there is a clear role reversal in that Sara is the one parenting, and her father is the one being parented.

The seemingly natural way that Sara takes on this role constructs her as a model of the ideal middle-class female. The initial implication of her character as an “Angel in

the House” figure is then carried forth throughout the novel, further developing her as the heroine that readers are meant to like immediately, and aspire to emulate. As a “little princess,” Sara exemplifies ideal characteristics expected of middle-class women: being patient, loving, non-assertive, deeply feeling, selfless, controlled, and inherently nurturing. As the ideal, Sara seems to be innately possessed with these qualities, but nonetheless she is enrolled at a London boarding school meant to further foster feminine qualities.

Because Sara comes from a well-off, middle-class family, she does not need a formal education to support herself; instead, she must learn to be a companion for her father, and acquire skills that make her valuable on the marriage market. As the future wife of a man from a similarly classed family, Sara must learn to entertain guests at dinner parties and carry on conversations. The school that Sara attends is the Select Seminary for Young Ladies, the name alone suggestive of the curriculum that Sara will be exposed to. The school is the type that many viewed as useless, instilling middle-class girls with an air of the gentility through the teaching of French, dancing, drawing, and music. Being molded into the ideal lady, Sara should conform to societal expectations for women of her class. This school is not of the sort adopted later in the century, modeled after successful boys’ schools with a practical, intellectually challenging curriculum. Sara’s education is preparing her to marry well and to then successfully perform as a wife and mother.

With the abrupt turn in her fortunes, Sara’s class status also changes: she must now earn her living through work. This change in social-class and the removal of accompanying privileges drastically changes not only the future that Sara was being

prepared for, but the ease with which she may remain aligned with middle-class ideals of femininity. Throughout the novel, even in moments of utmost hardship, Sara still manages to maintain her alignment with middle-class gender ideologies. Several scholars have argued that Sara maintains control over her identity through her powerful imagination, suggesting that this then manifests the happy ending she finds herself in at the conclusion of the novel. U.C. Knoepfelmacher, a leading scholar on children's literature, comments on the primary transmission of cultural identity from mother to daughter. He writes that:

In *A Little Princess*, however, such a matrilineal transmission has become exceedingly problematic. For the “odd” and “queer” Sara Crewe, first seen as a seven-year-old with the “old look” of a grown-up woman, lacks such a living maternal mentoria [...] It is her patrician imagination, therefore, rather than an actual female mentoria, that allows her to maintain, throughout adversity and degradation, her self-chosen identity as “princess.” (30)

Knoepfelmacher points to the way that literature provides models of identity to its readers both within the confines of this narrative, but also outside of it. His and others' analysis of Sara as utilizing her powerful imagination to maintain her identity overlooks how her imagination lends itself to her self-image as a mother figure and not just a “princess.”

More specifically, Sara mothers those around her, using her imagination as a means of escape from her new working-class identity and exercising her now-impossible future identity as a middle-class wife and mother. While Knoepfelmacher makes an excellent point about Sara's “self-chosen identity,” he does not address what other identities Sara's reading (and culture) gave her to choose from: none. In lieu of a mother figure to transfer a feminine identity, Knoepfelmacher claims Sara constructs one from her reading (30). Sara's reading consists of history books and fairy tales, none of which provide her with female models that have bad tempers or work as drudges for their entire

lives. Thrust into a working-class life of labor and hunger, Sara must draw her identity from what models she has: princesses and queens, all of whom conform to the domestic ideal by maintaining their good behavior during times of trial with the expectation that all will end happily ever after. Sara Crewe then passes her own model on to the readers of *A Little Princess*, and that model also maintains ideal behavior and grace regardless of personal suffering, neglect, and trying circumstances.

From the opening scene of the novel, the reader knows that Sara is used to—and happy—mothering her father. In his absence, Sara transfers her mothering behavior to those around her despite not receiving any reciprocity. She takes the youngest girl in the school, Lottie, under her wing when she discovers that Lottie’s mother is also dead, distracting her with stories, and saying “I will be your mama [...] We will play that you are my little girl” (34). Sara’s success in dealing with Lottie not only illustrates her innate ability to perform the domestic ideal, but is directly contrasted to the methods of Miss Minchin and her sister Amelia, both of whom attempt and fail to quell the child’s screaming fits. Miss Minchin simply proclaims “She ought to be whipped [...] You *shall* be whipped you naughty child!” and stomps out of the room when Lottie fails to respond, while,

Poor plump Miss Amelia was trying first one method, and then another. “Poor darling!” she said one moment; “I know you haven’t any mamma, poor—“ Then in quite another tone: “If you don’t stop Lottie, I will shake you. Poor little angel! There—There! You wicked, bad, detestable child, I will smack you! I will!” (31)

Sara’s natural fitness as the domestic ideal is also exhibited by her friendship with Ermengarde, the most bullied girl in the school, whom she successfully tutors in French when regular lessons prove ineffective. Her behavior towards Ermengarde displays the kindness and understanding that was important in the ideal Victorian woman. It was

expected that the mother of a household would be the moral tutor of her children, and the moral center of the family, but also the first educator the children would have, and a natural tutor to them outside of school. Even *The Girl's Own Paper* pushed the importance of being well-liked by one's peers in its content, including the instructional illustration sequence, "The Child: How Will She Develop?" discussed previously, in which the first illustration on the positive path shows a girl surrounded by friends, clearly liked by all of her schoolmates, as contrasted to the image of a girl on the wrong New Woman path, who stands alone, disliked and thus ostracized from her schoolmates (Doughty 10). Regardless of Sara's popularity among her schoolfellows, her successful mothering of Lottie, and her tutoring of Ermengarde, after her father dies and she becomes a servant, Sara no longer has open access to these girls due to their differing socioeconomic class.

In her new life, with the loss of those she had mothered, Sara repeats to herself that she must maintain her princess-like behavior, a mantra that evokes connotations similar to those of the Angel in the House: being kind and generous to others, hiding her own misery and hunger behind a happy or contented exterior, and fulfilling her duties to the best of her abilities, despite the lack of appreciation and cruelty of her superiors. Sara struggles to maintain "proper" Victorian femininity amidst the trials of a working-class lifestyle. Clinging to her previous identity even as she toils as a maid-of-all-work, Sara continues to mother those around her, including Becky the scullery maid, a beggar girl on the street, and the rat that lives in her bedroom walls, which she feeds even when she herself is starving. These imaginative performances of mothering act as escapes that allow Sara to forget her current circumstances as a member of the working class.

Although Sara craves someone to care for her, often fantasizing her own inclusion in the Carmichael family she watches across the square, she must rely on herself and utilize her imagination to focus her attention on others in need instead of on her own situation. In this way, despite her circumstances, she maintains the angelic or princess-like behavior expected of middle-class Victorian girls and women. In the close of the novel, when Sara is redeemed after two years of servitude, Miss Minchin asks her mockingly, “I suppose [...] that you feel now that you are a princess again” (178). Sara is somewhat embarrassed at this outburst, but responds, “I—tried not to be anything else [...] even when I was coldest and hungriest—I *tried* not to be” (178). At thirteen years old, Sara vocalizes the struggle she has undergone trying to conform to middle-class expectations of femininity under the strain of a working-class lifestyle.

Sara is rewarded for maintaining her middle-class feminine identity in the face of adversity. She is restored to the wealthy social class, rests at the knee of her new guardian, reads to him by the fireside, and is secure once again in the Victorian domestic ideal. From the start, Sara Crewe has been introduced as a model of the ideal, someone meant to be immediately liked by the reader. The obstacles she encounters that endanger her ability to perform as the ideal are met and overcome, proving her quality and natural position in society. Mary Lennox from *The Secret Garden* is constructed very differently.

When the reader first encounters Mary, the narrator specifically announces how unpleasant she is. The first lines of the novel report:

When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. It was true, too. She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour

expression [...] by the time she was six years old she was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived. (3)

As explained previously, it is also made clear that Mary's disagreeable nature is largely due to her mother's neglect, yet Burnett does not initially construct Mary to draw the sympathy of the reader. Mary's development as an unsympathetic character takes considerable effort on Burnett's part; after all, Mary is a child who has just been orphaned and sent off to a country that is foreign to her and to an uncle who—like her mother—leaves strict instructions that he is not to be disturbed by her.

Using the illustration sequence, “The Child: How Will She Develop?” from *The Girl's Own Paper*, as a guide of what was expected from girls of Mary's age, it becomes clear that she is not on the ideal path. She should be “friends with all” but is instead on the wrong, New Woman path and “disliked by most” (Doughty 10). The *GOP* illustration has identified this characteristic as one that may develop into dangerous New Womanism given time. The introduction of Mary as a female antihero leaves the reader wondering how she will develop as the protagonist of the novel. In fact, an anonymous reader reviewed the book in 1911 for *Outlook*, and begins by enthusiastically noting that,

When, in [Burnett's] new story, “The Secret Garden,” she introduces us to a boy and girl quite disagreeable, we know that she will remodel them before our eyes, as it were, into lovable little human beings. (qtd. in Gerzina, *The Secret Garden* 267)

The expectation is that disagreeable children must be made to reform, but it is interesting that what makes the children agreeable is their adoption of strong English identities and behavior.

When she arrives at Misselthwaite Manor, her new home in England, Mary finds it to be a lonely and strange place located on the moors in Yorkshire, a country setting

that contrasts sharply with the dry and infertile sands of India. Because Mary understands both places to be essentially desolate and lonely, she initially voices no preference for either. In India, when Basil tells Mary she is going home, he is shocked to find that she has no understanding of England as their true home and this lack of proper English identity is part of what makes Mary disagreeable. With the coming of spring to the moors, Mary's understanding changes: she has begun to form her English identity by taking interest in the English countryside:

She had been running and her hair was loose and blown and she was bright with the air and pink-cheeked, though [Colin] could not see it. "It is so beautiful!" she said, a little breathless with her speed. "You never saw anything so beautiful! It has come! I thought it had come the other morning, but it was only coming. It is here now! It has come, the Spring! (114)

This description of a strong, healthy child proclaiming exuberant delight in the coming of Spring in no way matches previous descriptions of Mary as a sullen, sallow, and taciturn child who shows little interest in anything. It is with her immersion in cultural values, and, more particularly, her new nurturant relationship with English soil that Mary begins to change. It is not enough to simply exist on English soil; when Mary discovers the locked-up garden and Colin, a secret invalid cousin, her self-transformation is fully underway. Both the garden and Colin are in dire need of care, and it is as Mary mothers both that she herself begins to grow and thrive.

Much critical attention has been given to themes of nature and its power to heal in this text, and several critics have interpreted the garden itself as a nurturing space that cares for the children. Most of these readings identify the garden as a possible representation of the deceased Lilies Craven (who created the garden), or simply as

Mother Nature herself, nurturing the children in lieu of their absent parents. As Jane Darcy writes:

The narrative brings together a neglected garden and two neglected children and shows how their growth is interdependent. The garden needs the children to love and care for it and they need the garden for the sense of purpose it gives them and for its walled security and beauty. (77)

Darcy goes on to note how the garden nurtures the children, largely by inspiring beauty and positive thoughts. Similarly, Gwyneth Evans, in her article “The Girl in the Garden: Variations on a Feminine Pastoral,” argues that the garden acts as spiritual mother to Mary. Although both scholars identify the important themes of nature and mothers within the text, they do not identify a deeper causality in the healing of both children by looking beyond the beauty of the garden as the cure.

What these scholars begin to reveal is Mary’s mothering of the garden, which gives her the skills to then mother Colin. Unlike Sara Crewe, Mary Lennox comes to England without any innate sense of maternal or domestic skills, and it is only when the garden catches her interest and awakens the desire to nurture that she is provided with mentors in the maternal arts in the characters of Susan Sowerby and her son Dickon. Susan Sowerby works through her daughter, Mary’s maid, to develop her into a healthy English child, urging her to play out of doors, buying her a skipping rope for exercise, and assisting Mary and Colin in their secret-keeping. However, it is Dickon (a future tenant on Archibald Craven’s land) who teaches Mary about caring for the garden.

Mary’s success in tending the garden is an important step towards her successful alignment with tradition Victorian gender ideology. Danielle E. Price explains in her article “Cultivating Mary: The Victorian *Secret Garden*” that during the Victorian and early Edwardian periods the enclosed garden was viewed as an extension of the home,

and thus a domestic space to be run and occupied by women. In the walled garden, women cultivated all things feminine for the pleasure of the viewer. These walled gardens were never useful, Price notes; that is, they were not vegetable or herb gardens that produced useable goods: they were flower gardens, meant for visual delight only (5). The walled garden would have had immediately recognizable domestic and feminine connotations for the contemporary reader.

Price observes that at the turn of the century, the popularity of gardens had been growing for some time and had reached an all-time high, largely because of their relationship to colonialism. Public gardens and private gardens alike “stood as vivid reminders of the reach of the English imperial hand and its power to put the foreign on display” (4). Plants and flowers from all over the world were brought back to the motherland and displayed for the viewing pleasure of the colonizer. Price continues:

By 1880, there were more than ten newspapers and periodicals devoted to horticulture, and, in the same year, the *Quarterly Review* proclaimed that “never, perhaps, was the art of gardening so popular.” (4)

Burnett herself wrote a guide book on gardening, which was posthumously published in 1925 (Bixler, *The Secret* xv).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were still doubts as to whether or not gardening was a proper activity for women. After all, it often involved being outside the house and working in dirt. However, by the second half of the century, gardening had become not only a suitable hobby for women, but an activity that became more and more gendered as feminine. While flower gardens were useless and decorative, Price reflects, they were perfectly suited “for certain classes of women, who, we might say, were being trained in the fine art of uselessness” (5).

In its April 1905 issue, *The Girl's Own Paper* published a piece titled, "Gardening as a Profession for Girls," which explores the merits of Swanley, an all-girl horticulture college in Kent that provided professional education in the science of gardening (Doughty 97). The writer, Lena Shepstone, reports that at Swanley girls receive practical instruction for gardening careers, which graduates had secured "in all parts of the country, and also in the colonies" (qtd. in Doughty 97). Gardening became a feminine accomplishment because of its decorative nature in the mid-century, but as the demand for female jobs grew (and the popularity of gardens), gardening emerged as a career option that even conservative groups viewed as appropriately feminine.

Mary's entering the walled garden, her development of nurturing skills within its walls, and her subsequent success at reviving the garden, all point to her growing success as a domestic figure. Anna Silver agrees that it is in the garden that Mary learns traditional female values, including "patience, self-control, [and] how to nurture another human being." It is in the garden that "Mary learns to mother the earth and, later, Colin" (195). Silver identifies the garden as the source of Mary's initial mothering skills, and also notes that her identity as a mother figure comes into full bloom when she applies those skills to her cousin Colin.

When Mary first encounters Colin, he is a bed-ridden invalid, and announces to her candidly that "If I live I may be a hunchback, but I shan't live" (74). Burnett's development of Colin after this uncomfortable introduction makes it clear that he is every bit as disagreeable as his cousin. Despite Colin being unlikeable, the reader feels sympathy for this bed-ridden child who has been constantly reminded by the adults around him of the likelihood of his premature death.

When his doctor discovers Colin's interaction with his cousin, he reminds the nurse that Colin "must not talk too much; he must not forget that he was ill; he must not forget that he was very easily tired" (88). Colin replies: "I *want* to forget it [...] She makes me forget it. That is why I want her" (88). Unlike the adults around Colin, Mary distracts him from his ill health, rather than emphasizing it. Ten years previous to the publication of *The Secret Garden*, Burnett's son Lionel had died after a long and drawn-out illness. Burnett had kept the fact that he was dying a secret from him and believed that it was her duty as a mother to carry the painful knowledge alone (Gerzina, *Unexpected* 141-42). It is interesting then, that ten years later, she crafted a heroine who arrives on the scene to distract a boy from his ill health, an action she herself viewed as the epitome of motherly duty. While this scene is not conclusive, it offers evidence that Burnett purposely constructed Mary as a developing ideal mother figure, and certainly a mother to Colin.

As Mary interacts with and distracts Colin, she gives him a reason to live that no morbid adult ever could. With her encouragement and camaraderie, Colin begins to enjoy life and ceases to regret being born. With Mary's care, he begins to get well, including going out-of-doors for fresh air, where he enters the garden and announces, "I shall get well! I shall get well! [...] Mary! Dickon! I shall get well! And I will live forever and ever and ever!" (124). As Colin becomes well, he eventually draws aside the curtain covering his mother's portrait and keeps it open. The image of his mother smiling down on him used to upset him, but now pleases him (156). Though Lilies Craven's portrait watches over Colin regardless of his state, Colin is uncomfortable with it until he

experiences the companionship and caring of another person, Mary, who helps him understand what the portrait of his mother, and her smile, represent.

In Colin's triumphant climax, meeting his father in the garden as a healthy young man instead of a bed-ridden invalid, he tells Archibald Craven that "It was the garden that did it—and Mary and Dickon and the creatures—and the magic" (171). Mary's success in mothering the garden produces a beauty that inspires Colin with the will to live and flourish. The skills she attains while tending the neglected garden also transfer to the mothering of her neglected cousin: she patiently tends flower beds and then is patient with Colin, she clips back wild roses and then calms his wild hysterics, and she gently encourages the growth of crocuses and then promotes his physical development.

When readers are first introduced to Mary, Burnett describes her as one of the most contrary and unpleasant-looking children we are likely to have met. Furthermore, she has horribly unattractive "ways" of behaving (11-12). With her transfer to England, there is little change in her disposition and appearance until she begins caring for the garden and for Colin. It is only with her assumption of motherly habits and her alignment with traditional English expectation of feminine behavior that her looks suddenly improve. She is no longer described as unpleasant or disagreeable, but healthy and pretty as she takes on characteristics of the Victorian domestic ideal. Mrs. Medlock reports to Colin's doctor towards the end of novel that Mary has "begun to be downright pretty," a dramatic change from the "plain sallow child" she had described to Susan Sowerby when Mary first arrived at Misselthwaite Manor (151, 160).

The more Mary becomes aligned with dominant gender ideology, the more approving descriptions she receives in the novel. Mary's mastering of the domestic space

of the garden—her achievement of proper mothering skills—allows her to flourish and be healthy on English soil and in English culture. Her ways are no longer unpleasant and the novel closes with a warm affirmation of the rewards of a nurturing spirit: not a future of social action or a career, but a family. While Burnett makes references to Colin's possible future as successful scientist, Mary's is not even mentioned. Instead, she is left with a future of minding the domestic space of the garden. This happy ending reinforces for the readers of the novel that the domestic space and family security are the "happy ending" that all girls should aspire to securing. Furthermore, the transformation Mary undergoes makes it clear that little girls who are kind, generous, pretty, and nurturing are rewarded.

CONCLUSION

Although multiple factors have been identified as contributing to gender identity formation in children and adolescents, many scholars agree with Lana Zannettino, who conducted a study on the impact texts have on girls' identity formation. She reports:

Popular cultural texts play a significant role in the construction of adolescent female identity, and that such texts work in a complex relationship with girls' conscious and unconscious desires. (465)

Zannettino examines the way that texts (both literary and filmic) influence the way that girls imagine their future adult selves, which then impacts their identity construction.

She concludes her study by noting:

The girls' practice of reading and viewing fiction is an important process in the assimilation of dominant cultural meanings about gender, making literary and filmic texts a significant instrument of cultural reproduction. [...The girls in her study] used the protagonists and stories contained in their favorite texts to construct their gendered identities [...]. (477-78)

In the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, what constituted proper gender roles was being debated. When girls began attending public schools, often alongside male students, they were no longer safely contained within the home and educated entirely by their mothers. This concerned many Victorians, and it was because of this concern that *The Girl's Own Paper* was created, marketing itself to the newly emerged, possibly dangerous, New Girl culture. Like the girls in Zannettino's study, the paper attempted to influence the gendered identity construction of its readers. As its editor, Charles Peters, remarked that the paper sought to "[...] train them [girls] in the

moral and domestic virtues, preparing them for the responsibilities of womanhood and for a heavenly home” (Doughty 7).

As the paper came to embody and represent Victorian girlhood, it worked to maintain traditional Victorian values—particularly gender roles—in its readers, the next generation of wives and mothers. Because girls read the paper voraciously and talked about the stories and characters with their female peers, it helped to connect them as a culture through shared values and expectations. These values were transmitted in different ways depending on the print product. Where *The Girl’s Own Paper* worked through a combination of stories, images, advertisements, and advice pieces, other girlhood print culture, such as novels, worked primarily through plots and characters that readers could identify with: schoolgirl stories and/or female characters that triumphed in domestic spheres.

As Zannettino found, the female protagonists in texts were the factors that greatly influenced her subjects’ desires for their future. As is the case with *The Girl’s Own Paper*, the literature of Frances Hodgson Burnett acted as a conduit of cultural knowledge and expectations; her characters act as models for her girlhood readers. Like many stories found in the pages of *The Girl’s Own Paper*, Burnett’s novels contain elements of New Girl culture, which make them appealing to her girl readers and reflect the shift in ideology from the middle to the turn of the century.

The character of Sara Crewe, which was originally created in 1887, offers a very different model from that of Mary Lennox, created thirteen years later. The earlier model, Sara, conforms more closely to the dominant and traditional gender ideology, and at seven years old, is introduced to the reader as one who already knows her place of

subjectivity in a patriarchal world. As Carol Dyhouse succinctly summarizes, “Women were expected to occupy themselves in providing an environment—a context in which men could live and work” (26). Sara’s inclination to care for those around her reveals Sara’s motherly nature, but her intense yearning to care for the men in her vicinity also exhibits her inherent knowledge of—and comfort in—her proper place in Victorian society: the home.

When displaced from her privileged position in the upper-middle class, Sara’s great challenge is maintaining her identity as the Angel in the House: a little princess. Her natural desire and her heroic effort to do so are then rewarded in the conclusion of the tale, when her imaginative adoption of Mr. Carrisford across the square turns into reality. She is reinstated as care-giver, entertainer, and companion to a man. Characterized as the perfect Victorian female, she triumphs in the domestic sphere throughout the novel.

Mary Lennox, who first appears in serial print in 1910, offers very different commentary on what it means to be female. Slightly older than Sara when we first meet her, Mary is introduced as the antithesis to the ideal Victorian female: she is unattractive, ill-tempered, and selfish. It has never occurred to her to be *anything* to her father (or anyone else), let alone a companion or care-taker. In Burnett’s creation of Mary, she has entered the discourse on the place of women in Victorian society and also the nature of being female; she has offered the suggestion that perhaps not all women are born with innate mothering skills. Decidedly bereft of any domestic skills or inclinations at the outset of the novel, Mary eventually learns how to mother from characters around her, practicing on the garden and then on her cousin. This shift, from one female protagonist

who innately embodies the virtues of feminine domesticity to a heroine who struggles to find that identity, is reflective of the changing concept of what it meant to be female in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Nevertheless, both novels work similarly to the stories found in *The Girl's Own Paper*, which manage the cultural shift in gender roles through the use of a paradox.

The Girl's Own Paper, *A Little Princess*, and *The Secret Garden* were all popular with female readers. In all three, the girl protagonists transgress proper middle-class gender roles or call into question the place of women in Victorian society. In *The Girl's Own Paper* stories, the girls have wild adventures or enter the public sphere, while in Burnett's fiction they have tempers and disagreeable behavior or struggle to act as an Angel in the House ought. Because of this, the readership (largely composed of New Girls) identified with these characters or situations, which allowed them expression of or release from their own discontent. Despite the use of progressive commentary such as this, Burnett and the writers of the *GOP* ultimately reinforce the dominant gender ideology of the era by containing this New Girl identity in the closure of their narratives.

Girlhood culture separated itself from childhood and adulthood, and became an identifiable group with shared experience and values. Sally Mitchell and others have made note of this new cultural awareness on the girls' part. They were

Consciously aware of their own culture and recognized its discord with adult expectations. They perhaps suspected that they could be (new) girls for only a few brief years, before they grew up to be (traditional) women. (3)

“Without exception,” Terri Doughty writes about *The Girl's Own Paper*, “in these stories, willfulness, ambition, and ‘unwomanliness’ are punished” (8). Similarly, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser writes of Burnett that “like other women writers (great ones

such as the Brontes and George Eliot as well as minor ones such as Alcott and Ward), she chastened her self-assertive female characters” (10). These texts balance a divided audience: they appease both the New Girl culture by providing girl protagonists who transgress traditional gender roles, and the conservative Victorian culture by containing these transgressors within traditional gender roles in the conclusions. By doing so, the texts reinforce the dominant gender ideology and teach their readers what is desirable and proper for Victorian women and reflect the way that Victorian culture dealt with the rise of the New Girl. It became acceptable for girls to operate outside of the domestic sphere, to explore work and educational activities, and to experiment with independence. However, it was understood that once the age of “girlhood” was over, these girls would set aside this identity and enter womanhood, where one was expected to maintain traditional gender roles.

When school ended and girls went home, as one father put it to his reluctant daughter in 1859, they would need to surrender their identities as “mere school girls” and prepare to assume their status as “true women” in the “drama of life.” (Hunter 6)

This expectation that girls would surrender to traditional roles as wives and mothers was an important and dominant part of the way that Victorian society, in the latter half of the century, negotiated the challenge to and shift of subjective gender roles. Victorian girlhood print culture reflects and contributes to this management of shifting ideology.

Sara is rewarded for her persistent effort to maintain her middle-class female identity in *A Little Princess* with a new father figure to care for, as well as an upper middle-class home in which she can maintain her domestic sensibilities. Mary, while the antithesis of the ideal at the beginning of the novel, acquires mothering skills throughout *The Secret Garden*, eventually mastering the domestic space of the garden and

successfully mothering Colin into an appropriate male role as a healthy English citizen. These conclusions, and those like them in the *GOP*, are posited as “happily-ever-after” endings. Burnett’s girlhood fiction impresses upon the reader that the ultimate reward for a female is a home and family, and that the most desirable future is within the domestic space. The novels also make it clear that the way to achieve this desirable future is through self-sacrifice, patience, and domestic industriousness: in essence, the characteristics exemplified by the ideal Victorian middle-class female.

Aside from the models of “proper” identity formation in the characters of Mary and Sara, Burnett also constructs examples of inappropriate identity formation in the characters of Mrs. Medlock, Mrs. Lennox, and Miss Minchin, all of whom are villainized to some extent. The reader is encouraged to dislike these figures who fail by the standards of motherhood and womanliness, while rejoicing in the happy conclusions awarded to Mary and Sara for their successful conforming to traditional gender ideology. These characters and conclusions reinforced to contemporary readers that girlhood was a sanctioned period in a female’s life where adventure and deviance was allowed to a limited extent, with the understanding that upon entering womanhood, it was no longer acceptable to stray from the dominant or traditional gender roles.

Understanding how these characters conveyed cultural expectations to their readers and thus impacted their identity formation is an important part of understanding Victorian girlhood literature and culture, as well as the social tensions concerning gender roles at the turn of the century. More importantly, this understanding holds implications for our reading and teaching of these texts today. Because both novels regularly appear on lists of classic and popular children’s literature, it is important for teachers to approach

them from a socio-historical perspective. Being cognizant of the impact fiction has on young readers' identity formation is one step towards providing varying models for them to emulate. Sara and Mary have only one "proper" female identity to choose from within the cultural contexts of their narratives; their representation offered contemporary girl readers an equally limited choice of identity. However, in teaching modern readers, alternative models can be suggested by examining, discussing, and writing about these gendered characters.

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