THE ARSENAL

Augusta University's Undergraduate Research Journal

ISSN 2380-5064 | The Arsenal is published by the Augusta University Libraries | http://guides.augusta.edu/arsenal

Volume 3, Issue 1 (2020)

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Citation

Bertzfield, H. (2020). *The Secret Garden* and *Anne of Green Gables*: Nature versus nurture and childhood escapism. *The Arsenal: The undergraduate research journal of Augusta University, 3*(1), 26-34. http://doi.org/10.21633/issn.2380.5064/s.2020.03.26

ISSN 2380-5064 10.21633/issn.2380.5064/s.2020.03.26

The Secret Garden and Anne of Green Gables: Nature versus Nurture and Childhood Escapism

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ABSTRACT This literary analysis focuses on the protagonists of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* to examine the correlation between a child's nature, the presence of nurture within their immediate developmental environment, and the resulting tendency to use escapism as a coping mechanism. Similar to a mild form of dissociation, escapism is a means by which the adolescent consciousness protects itself against negative external stimuli that may have damaging effects on the child's psychological state. This is especially true when the child is subjected to severe trauma or prolonged, repetitive patterns of abuse or neglect. Regardless of the environment or the child's socioeconomic position, nurturing is a force which counteracts the effects of negative stimuli and diminishes the subconscious need to escape. However, when nurture is absent, the likelihood of a child to utilize escapism as a means of coping with their environment is wholly contingent upon the child's nature.

Keywords: nature, nurture, escapism, dissociation, childhood

Received: 01/16/2019 Accepted: 02/12/2019

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INTRODUCTION

Through their depictions of what on the surface appears to be the simple pleasures of childhood play and interaction with their peers, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* exhibit a correlation between nature versus nurture and childhood escapism. Both Mary Lennox and Anne Shirley are orphans displaced from the environments in which they were raised, but both have been acclimated to two very different modes of existence. One's understanding of her place in society is the utter inverse of the other's. Mary, born to relative luxury and a position of societal privilege, has no concept of poverty or subordination. Anne was born to parents "as poor as church mice" and has carried the damning stigma of orphan-hood since her infancy, depending upon the begrudging charity of others to have her most basic physical needs met (Montgomery, 1987, p. 46). The girls' dispositions and personalities are absolute opposites. Where one sees no reason to form connections with others, the other craves intimate interpersonal relationships. However, in spite of these integral differences, Anne and Mary have their similarities as well: neither of them has ever been the recipient of nurturing in order to foster their development, and, therefore, both girls use escapism as a means to exercise some level of control over their circumstances.

DEFINITION OF NATURE, NURTURE, AND ESCAPISM

In order to appropriately analyze the manner in which nature and nurture act as the determinants of how escapism manifests itself in Mary and Anne, it must first be established how each of these terms are used here. For the purpose of this analysis, "nature" refers to the biological, genetic composition that lays the foundation of an individual's physical characteristics, inherent personality traits, and basic morality, as well as the way in which these develop a person's character when one is confronted by external factors. The environment in which a child is raised dictates what external factors will cause an effect to what extent, which structures the growth of the child's nature. But no two natures are identical. Two people will not react to the same environment or external stimuli in exactly the same ways. This is the basis of individuality.

The most determining factor in a child's development is whether there has been exposure to a nurturing presence. Mary experiences this with the garden at Misselthwaite Manor and Anne through the people she comes to know and love in Avonlea. According

to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, food, water, and physical protection are the basic necessities required to sustain life in its most elementary form (Prince & Howard, 2002). "Nurture" is the amalgamation of these vital needs, which works to ensure a safe, encouraging foundation that fosters constructive physical and psychological development. In this vein, it becomes apparent that nurturing, when acting upon a compatible and willing nature, may counteract some of the otherwise detrimental effects of an unstable or even dangerous environment, so long as the child's basic physiological needs are met. When these needs cannot be adequately met, however, and the child's environment is unstable, dangerous, and devoid of nurturing, the amendable subconscious will instinctively do what it must to balance the deficit, be it physical, mental, emotional, or an amalgamation of the three. In some cases, this results in dissociation.

According to Ana Gomez (2013), dissociative processes are common instruments utilized by the adolescent brain to cope with external stimuli that cause severe physical and psychological distress. Gomez (2013) explains:

> Exploring all forms of trauma—including physical, sexual, emotional, witnessing domestic violence, medical illnesses, exposure to war or natural disasters, and accidents—their chronicity, and the familial responses are integral to assessing how a child defended against such experiences and whether dissociative processes were employed. (p. 132)

Gomez (2013) further explains that dissociation, like many cognitive disorders, exists on a spectrum of severity. On one end is the non-fragmentary tendency for "daydreaming or zoning out, fantasy, or absorption" in an activity that dislocates the consciousness from the body's physical surroundings. This typically has no adverse effects on the child's overall psychological development (Gomez, 2013). On the other end of the spectrum, fissures form in the child's consciousness, and there is a formation of one or more "self-states" that surface to stabilize the mind and body's psychophysiological processes during turmoil or times of distress—more commonly, though not clinically, known as having split personalities (Gomez, 2013). The pole towards which a child gravitates is contingent upon the severity of the trauma or neglect experienced and their natural capacity to cope without the utilization of a coping mechanism (Gomez, 2013).

This being said, it is imperative to specify here that dissociation is not the lens through which Mary and Anne will be evaluated, but rather it is a cognitive disorder comparable to how "escapism" is defined and applied in this literary analysis. While there are many parallels between the two, particularly in regards to Anne, consciousness and intent are the key factors that differentiate escapism from a mild form of dissociation, both of which are clearly exhibited by the girls throughout their respective narratives.

ISSN 2380-5064 10.21633/issn.2380.5064/s.2020.03.26

NATURE VERSUS NURTURE: MARY LENNOX

In the first chapter of *The Secret Garden*, Burnett (2000) introduces the reader to a "sickly, fretful, ugly" little girl whose outward appearance, as it is later described by other characters, seems to mirror the inherent traits that she has developed thus far in her young life (p. 3). The daughter of English parents living in India, Mary Lennox was born into a position of socioeconomic privilege by virtue of her father's unspecified position in the English government. Though few other specific details about her parents are given, aside from her mother's affinity for parties and socializing, their complete lack of involvement in their daughter's rearing is made clear. Burnett (2000) places particular emphasis on the mother's aversion to her daughter and the subsequent effects of failing to create a constructive developmental environment when she writes:

> 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…[Mary] never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants, and as they always obeyed her and gave her her way in everything, because the Mem Sahib would be angry if she was disturbed by her crying, by the time she was six years old she was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived. (pp. 3-4)

Much like Mrs. Craven's abandoned garden, Mary's natural inclinations were left to propagate unchecked for ten years. She was temperamental, selfish, and aggressive being by nature. More than once, Mary recalls her past verbal and physical mistreatment of her Ayah without remorse or fear of repercussions. Because of her parents' neglect, the native servants entrusted with her care were put in a position where they could do nothing else but see that she had all of her physical needs met, obey the whims of a spoiled child without question, and suffer her abuses for the sake of their own economic livelihoods.

With such intolerable qualities left uncurbed by any manner of discipline or redeeming traits, it is inevitable that the servants and her Ayah would want as little to do with Mary as possible. As a result, not only was her psychological development greatly hindered by a lack of discipline, but also by the deprivation of any form of nurturing as well. In *Disciplining Girls*, Joe Sanders (2011) postulates that affective discipline wields far more effective results than corporal punishment while also avoiding the negative psychological ramifications that normalizing domestic aggression and violence entail. In Sanders' (2011) work, "affective discipline" is achieved by means of moral persuasion through love, affection, and positive reinforcement—in essence, nurture. It is undeniable that Mary has never been subjected to it. Not only has this neglect left her with no concept

that negative actions result in unfavorable reactions, but there is also the even more harmful effect of not developing the social skills or sense of empathy necessary to form positive connections with others.

In the chapter entitled "Mistress Mary Quite Contrary," Burnett (2000) gives the reader the first real example of how Mary interacts with people to whom she has little reason to believe herself superior. Up until now, Mary has interacted only with people who were considered beneath her but who had no choice but to serve her. However, while the English clergyman Mr. Crawford and his family are poor, this was commonly the expectation of a missionary's family and would not have detracted from their social respectability in the heavily religious English society of the early twentieth century. Secondly, it may be safely assumed by the nature of the Crawford children's rowdy, teasing interactions with Mary that they were also of a socially advantaged European descent, which would eliminate any assumption of superiority based on ethnicity, which Mary had learned could be used over the Indian natives under her parents' employ. Yet, when acting as the beneficiary of their kindness, Mary shows no sense of understanding that the Crawford's provision was not owed to her. Instead, Burnett (2000) writes:

> Mary hated their untidy bungalow and was so disagreeable to them that after the first day or two nobody would play with her…They tried to be kind to her, but she only turned her face away when Mrs. Crawford attempted to kiss her, and held herself stiffly when Mr. Crawford patted her shoulder. (p. 9, 11)

Initially, this may seem like impudent behavior from an overindulged child; however, when taking Mary's nature and her limited experience into consideration, such responses to these unfamiliar encounters, particularly during a time when her life is in a state of uncertainty and upheaval (her parents have died and she's now an orphan), seem natural. Mary has never been familiarized with affection, so a display of it from a stranger would of course present itself as odd behavior that was foreign and beneath her. "Affective discipline" has no effect on Mary.

Nurture, however, is inclusive of other forms of discipline even that of simple intolerance for inappropriate behavior, and it is at Misselthwaite Manor that Mary first encounters it in Martha Sowerby, the scullery-maid. When Martha is open and cheery and talks to Mary as an equal, Mary is puzzled and indignant. Mary compares Martha's demeanor to the submissiveness of the Indian servants to which she was accustomed. When Mary considers the prospect of slapping Martha as she would have done to her Ayah, Mary acknowledges that, while Martha was a "good-natured looking creature…she had a sturdy way" about her that made Mary realize that the maid would likely slap her back (Burnett, 2000, p. 24-25). Here, Mary is forced by an instinctive suspicion of self-preservation to recognize, at least in some capacity, the humanity and autonomy of others.

ISSN 2380-5064 10.21633/issn.2380.5064/s.2020.03.26

NATURE VERSUS NURTURE: ANNE SHIRLEY

Conversely, Anne Shirley not only recognizes the humanity of others right from the start but also is an active observer of everyone and everything with whom she comes into contact. When Montgomery (1987) introduces Anne to the reader in *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne is described as a skinny, red-haired, freckled girl with an expressive face, wearing an old hat and a dress far too small for her (p. 19). More conspicuously, however, Montgomery (1987) goes on to blatantly tell the reader that "no commonplace soul inhabited the body of this stray woman-child of whom shy Matthew Cuthbert was so ludicrously afraid" (p. 19). Not only is the term "woman-child" in this passage unusual on a vernacular level, but the use of it as a term to refer to an eleven-year-old girl seems to imply that this particular adolescent "soul" harbors more experience than would be expected (Montgomery, 1987, p. 19). Details about Anne's life later revealed through recollection and implication in subsequent books of the series appear to solidify this sentiment.

As previously alluded to, Anne was orphaned at only three months old and has never known the security of a stable environment. Spending the first eight years of her life with the Thomas's, Anne is then passed on to the Hammonds with whom she spends more than two years before being sent to an orphanage. In talking about her past, Anne mentions how tiring it was to look after the many children present between these two households, which may seem like an obvious responsibility for a girl that, in a nurturing household, might be considered the equivalent of an elder sister. Considering that Anne is only eleven years old when she comes to Green Gables, however, it becomes clear that she has actually been playing the role of nanny since she was approximately seven years old, if not younger. Still, this might be considered commonplace for being part of a large family, especially being an orphan taken in and expected to earn her keep. The reality of these circumstances becomes disconcerting, though, when Marilla Cuthbert later asks Anne if Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Hammond were good to her. In answer, Montgomery (1987) writes:

> Her sensitive little face suddenly flushed scarlet and embarrassment sat on her brow. "Oh, they *meant* to be—I know they meant to be just as good and kind as possible. And when people mean to be good to you, you don't mind very much when they're not quite—always. They had a good deal to worry them, you know. …But I feel sure they meant to be good to me." (p. 48)

This response and the long silence that follows implies far more than what Montgomery (1987) reveals in the book. Implication, however, is a tool Montgomery uses often in her works to reveal with discretion unfavorable or delicate details that may have been deemed

inappropriate for children's literature in the conservative twentieth century. For example, in chapter four of *Anne of Avonlea*, Anne argues with Gilbert Blythe, Jane Andrews, and Mr. Harrison over the necessity of using corporal punishment to make their students behave (Montgomery, 1998, p. 27-29). While the latter three see its usefulness to varying degrees, Anne is adamant that it is wholly unnecessary—declaring that it is "a cruel, barbarous thing to whip a child…*any* child"—and swears that she will never use corporal punishment in her classroom (Montgomery, 1998, pp. 27-29). Her staunch insistence seems to suggest past personal experiences, and these implied experiences in turn seem to be an unconsciously learned behavior. When one of her students puts a mouse in her desk, Anne whips him in anger and is immediately ridden with an overwhelming sense of guilt (Montgomery, 1998, p. 97).

Another implication about her childhood is made much later in *Anne of Ingleside*, when her daughter, Diana, befriends a girl at school that tells exaggerated tales of woe to win sympathy (Montgomery, 1998, p. 245). Anne sees through the tales and warns Diana not to take everything the girl, Delilah, says to heart (Montgomery, 1998, 245). Diana is hurt and angered by Anne's lack of sympathy, and, in the throes of indignation, asks her mother if she has ever cried from hunger:

> "Often," said [Anne].
>
> Diana stared at her mother, all the wind taken out of the sails of her rhetorical question. "I was often very hungry before I came to Green Gables—at the orphanage…and before. I've never cared to talk of those days." (Montgomery, 1998, p. 245)

In this simple, honest response to her daughter's misguided antagonism, Anne reveals an abrupt, tangible sense of severity of the true circumstances of her childhood to which the reader has not yet been exposed throughout the series. Before Green Gables, Anne's circumstances had only grown more desolate, and yet it is not a sullen and withdrawn or angry and calloused creature that Montgomery introduces at Bright River Station, but a "flighty, fanciful little waif that speaks only of goodness and beauty in the world and of red hair, freckles, and shortcomings in herself" (1987, pp. 19-29). Anne has known nothing but poverty and neglect in her young life, but her faith in people's goodness is an unshakable force that gives her an unjustified and inextinguishable hope for a life with love and happiness interwoven with its difficulties.

BALANCING THE DEFICIT: SEEKING AND OBTAINING NURTURE THROUGH ESCAPISM

While any such hope or optimism about the goodness of people who "*meant* to be good to [her]" (emphasis added) (Montgomery, 1987, p. 48) seems like little more than

sheer ignorance and naivety, this outlook is the product of an alternate form of nurturing that Anne has actively sought and allowed to influence her psychological development. Literature and poetry are entities akin to gods in Anne's life throughout the series, and most especially during the times when she has no other form of emotional reinforcement. While projecting her imagination onto reality begins as a means by which Anne escapes her unstable physical environment, by the time she reaches Green Gables, the places and characters she has read about have become as real to her as consciousness will allow. The stories Anne cherishes become the lens through which she views reality and that she must consciously remove to see her world as it really is. However, as is often the case with any over utilized form of stimulus, it is often difficult for Anne to displace her escape-perspective completely, which results in a skewed perception of people and situations. For example, rather than recognizing Gilbert Blythe's teasing as nothing more than relatively harmless schoolboy bullying, Anne harbors an intense sense of victimization despite many apologies and displays of good intentions on his part over the course of several years (Montgomery, 1987, p. 114).

In comparison, Mary's escape from reality is a literal one, rather than figurative, but there is an almost supernatural element to the garden that is not present in Anne's "flights of fancy." While Martha, Dickon, and Mrs. Sowerby play an undeniable role in Mary's budding ability to form connections with other people, it is the garden and, by extension, nature itself that takes on the role of nurturer for the girl. From the very beginning, in spite of her hateful and selfish demeanor towards others, Mary exhibits an unconscious compulsion to nurture and cultivate life by making pretend flowerbeds (Burnett, 2000, p. 4, 10). This compulsion is counter-productively executed, however, when Mary fails to recognize that in creating her pretend gardens by plucking the blooms from living plants and thereby killing them, she is also in reality killing what she unconsciously wishes to nurture by acting so temperamental and selfishly (Burnett, 2000, p. 4, 10). When Mary is taken to Misselthwaite Manor, however, this desire compounds itself with an instinctive need to distance herself from the other inhabitants of the house—to escape.

Unlike Anne, Mary has never been a slave to her thoughts and emotions because they possessed none of the drastic fervor that is characteristic of Anne. Instead, Mary's need to escape to a place of solitude stems from a sudden shifting in her consciousness that she has never been faced with before. She is learning from Martha and Dickon that her old ways of imperiousness and abuse are not acceptable in this new social structure, a difficult fact to digest when she is accustomed to always having her own way and is devoid of any interpersonal relationships to which she might turn for reinforcement or guidance. Burnett (2000) illustrates the beginning of change in Mary's consciousness and disposition in chapter 12 when Mr. Craven kindly asks Mary what would make her most happy at Misselthwaite Manor, and she answers that her only desire is for "a bit of earth…[to] plant

seeds in—to make things grow—to see them come alive" (2000, p. 109). Here, the reader sees that the garden does not operate in terms of human interactions, and while Mary nurtures it back to health and bloom, the garden in turn instills in her a sense of nurturing in the form of internal complacency and fulfillment that she has never known before.

CONCLUSION AND CORRELATION

Despite the differences in their natures and the ways in which they utilize escapism as a means of controlling equally different environments, Anne Shirley and Mary Lennox both serve to exhibit the correlation between a child's nature and exposure to nurturing and their tendency towards childhood escapism. While Mary's basic physiological needs are met, the complete lack of nurturing needed to help mold and refine her natural inclinations causes her initial struggles to form bonds with others and exhibit basic human emotions of empathy and love. Anne, on the other hand, is a highly emotive and empathetic person by nature and is able to not only preserve this tenderness through years of poverty and struggle, but to also foster it and grow into an even better, more sympathetic person because of her experiences. The manner in which children will respond to any number of environments and circumstances is entirely contingent upon their nature and how they respond to external stimuli. Escapism, however, may present itself in all sorts of ways, and the extent to which children seeks to escape is dependent upon the severity of the circumstances that they are seeking in order to mentally and emotionally distance themselves.

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