Abstract

Although there have been a large number of studies on the works of Frances Hodgson Burnett, who was born in England and later became a naturalized American citizen, few attempts have so far been made to examine her ghost stories. This paper is intended as a study of Burnett’s view of death and life, and of an after-life, analyzing *The White People*, one of her ghost stories with Gothic elements. The purpose is to explore a little further into Burnett’s literary technique as seen in the creation of her attractive characters, her narrative construction and her creation of a unique atmosphere.

Introduction

Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924) made her name as the author of the books for children, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886), *A Little Princess* (1905), and *The Secret Garden* (1911). They have run into numerous editions and have been adapted for plays, have been made into movies, and have recently been produced as animation features for television. Among these, *The Secret Garden* is now the most highly valued by researchers. Burnett is best-known as one of the most successful writers of children’s literature; however, few are aware she made her debut as a writer of short stories for women. Moreover, even fewer know that she also wrote some ghost stories.
with Gothic elements. In this paper I discuss *The White People* (1917), a novel describing psychic phenomena. Burnett wrote the work for her son Lionel, who died of consumption at fifteen. *The White People*, which today is scarcely read, and *The Secret Garden*, her masterpiece, have many points in common. I will consider what life and death are to Burnett. I will also explore how she grasps the question of life after death and what she wants to convey to us through this unique novel.

1. The Moor

Among Burnett’s works, the scenes of *The White People* and *The Secret Garden* are set in the moorland. In the latter, the moor is set up as the background rather than the scene of action, and the main stage is the garden. The heroine, with her impetuous nature and her mysterious experiences, remind us of the Brontës’ *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Some critics agree that *The Secret Garden* takes some hints from the Brontës and inherits some traditional elements of Gothic Romance, as the following quotation shows:

The large house, the winding corridors, the locked rooms and the forbidden chambers which comprise Misselthwaite Manor, are also staple features of Gothic fiction, and they endorse the sense of uncertainty and loss of identity that Mary experiences in the early states of the novel. As a number of critics have noted, several elements in *The Secret Garden* are reminiscent of Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*: the desolate location on Yorkshire moorland, the great house from which the master is absent for long periods, and the mysterious behaviour of the servants who are guarding a secret which is withheld from the heroine, the strange cry in the night, and the hysterical figure confined to a locked room to which only privileged servants have access.¹

*The Secret Garden* is modeled on an old house called Maytham Hall in Kent where Burnett had lived for some years. In fact, she has little knowledge of Yorkshire, or the
moorland, and never lived in Scotland. Therefore, her setting owes more to her reading of the Brontës' works than to real life.

The moors in *The Secret Garden* are described as a gloomy place at the beginning of the story. Their boundless vastness and the noise of the winds make the story much darker and more frightening, and the great hall where the heroine and other characters live stands uncannily on the moors.

‘... and that's gloomy enough, too. The house is six hundred years old, and it's on the edge of the moor, and there's near a hundred rooms in it, though most of them's shut up and locked.'²

‘... it's just miles and miles and miles of wild land that nothing grows on but heather and gorse and broom, and nothing lives on but wild ponies and sheep.'³

The heroine, Mary was an unhealthy child with nothing lovely in her at first, but has been changing into a different person, a bright girl full of energy, as the story develops. As Mary grows stronger, the moors become brighter and more beautiful.

The far-reaching world of the moor itself looked softly blue instead of gloomy purple-black or awful dreary grey.⁴

..., and a great waft of fresh, scented air blew in upon her. The moor was blue and the whole world looked as if something Magic had happened to it.⁵

Mary at the beginning of *The Secret Garden*, feels a sense of incongruity with the moors, and is aware of their cold, fearful power, while Ysobel, the heroine in *The White People* feels at ease on the moors as if they were her friend or her protector. Ysobel, who is a plain, undersized little child like Mary, pays a hearty tribute to the moors. Ysobel tells why she is fascinated by them, in the following quotation:

It was long before I was old enough... I began to feel that the
moor was in secret my companion and friend, that it was not only the moor to me, but something else.⁶

First I noticed and liked it [the moor] some day, perhaps, when it was purple and yellow with gorse and heather and broom, and the honey scents drew bees and butterflies and birds. (p.13.)

To Ysobel, “There is a sort of unearthly loveliness in it [the moor] all.”(p.126.) Her life has been assimilated with the moor since she was born. That is to say, she cannot live if she leaves the moor. Once she was forced to reside in London following her guardian’s instructions, but she fell ill because of her wretchedness before two months had passed. The doctor who examined her said that she would die if she were not sent back to Muircarrie. In short, she could not endure the city life any longer.

It will be clear from these examples that the moor is a part of Ysobel, and the reader is reminded of Johanna Spyri’s Heidi (1880). Heidi, whose condition deteriorates while she is living in Frankfurt, far away from her Swiss Alps, overlaps with Ysobel. Some critics say that Burnett stole plot devices from earlier authors and lacks originality, and this may be an example.⁷ Mary and Dickon helping Colin to walk on his own feet remind us of Heidi and Peter urging Clara up out of her wheelchair; Mary sometimes hears Colin cry from a distant bedroom, just like Jane Eyre who hears the cries of Mr. Rochester’s mad wife.

Ysobel did not fall ill simply because she was born and bred in the clear air and was unable to become acclimatised to the polluted, smoggy London air, nor because she was estranged from her family. Ysobel had no family, being taken care of by a distant cousin, another distant relative and some servants. The air on the moor has a mysterious force or a magic power beyond our imagination. In other words, the moor is part of Ysobel. Hector MacNairn, a writer, understands that as soon as he visits Muircarrie for the first time, saying “It is all here. . . . . It is what made you Ysobel.”(p.118.)

What in the moor is Ysobel so attracted to, both mentally and physically? Some people feel happy in close contact with nature. In Burnett’s case, she used to spend
her happiest hours in being alone in the woods in Tennessee.

She wandered through the woods, and soon she could recognize the trees: sassafras, sumac, and dogwood, growing together over blackberry bushes. Frances often lay in the grass, reading, writing, or just daydreaming. Soon squirrels ignored her and rabbits hopped close by.

Frances was never happier than in these years she later called her “Dryad Days.” A dryad, in Greek mythology, is a lovely, godlike maiden who takes care of forests and trees.  

Wandering on the outskirts of farms not too long ago hacked out of the wilderness, she gazed in awe at the soaring trees that met overhead, hiding the sky. Beneath her feet rose the pungent scent of centuries-old leaf mold and the bewildering beauty of tangled vines, tall ferns, and flowering shrubs. A greater contrast to the neat fields and tidy cottages of the rural England she had left could not have been found.

What would Burnett, when she was a small girl, have thought about in those woods that no one set foot in? She would have realized what a tiny human she was and how narrow was her living world, watching the vast wilderness and clouds whose shapes continually vary and move. She also would have recognized before her the unlimited expanse of the world connected with herself and would have felt that she could be set free from many of the restrictions in this world. In folk tales or fairy stories, the wood fills a mysterious role as a fairyland, but the moor is not given so much attention, and is only a place where grass grows and which most people give a wide berth to. For the young Burnett, the woods in Tennessee were like the ancient forests of England, peopled with griffins and dragons, while the moors in Scotland are alive for Ysobel. Ysobel has realized since she was small that there is some strange life on the moor that one cannot see, hear, or touch.
2. The Life-force

Strangers say that Muircarrie moor is the most beautiful and the most desolate place in the world, but it never seemed desolate to me. From my first memory of it I had a vague, half-comforted feeling that there was some strange life on it one could not exactly see, but was always conscious of. I know now why I felt this, but I did not know then. (p.14.)

As mentioned above, Ysobel feels there is some strange life, or some sort of supernatural life-force on the moor around her castle. The life-force seems to have something to do with the mist covering the whole moor. In other words, the mist and the moor blend with each other. Ysobel cannot distinguish the moor from the mist. The mist gets heavy or light, thick or thin, twists or joins and so on. In this way, changing its shape just like clouds, the mist suggests that it keeps something from our eye. To Ysobel, the mist is a living thing:

How young was I that afternoon when I sat in the deep window and watched the low, soft whiteness creeping out and hovering over the heather as if the moor had breathed it? I do not remember. It was such a low little mist at first; and it crept and crept until its creeping grew into something heavier and whiter, . . . . It mounted and mounted, and sometimes a breath of wind twisted it into weird shapes, almost like human creatures. It opened and closed again, and then it dragged and crept and grew thicker. . . . , it mounted still higher and got hold of the moor and hid it, hanging heavy and white—and waiting. That was what came into my child mind: that is had done what the moor had told it to do; had hidden things which wanted to be hidden, and then it waited (pp.13-14.)

In accord with the Bible saying that the sun, stars, clouds, trees and men are equally created by God, we can consider the moor as a life-force whose shape is changeable. On the other hand, the moor may be regarded as another world whose dimension is different from our own. Viewed in this light, the mist might be a veil forming the
boundary between two different-dimensional worlds. Since she was in her mother's womb, Ysobel has adjusted herself to or integrated with the moor. She has neither parents nor family, and has a pure and simple heart; she knows little about the real world; she has no doubts about anything and can take things as they are. Thus, we see that she is a character who is close to death (which does not mean that she is dying). As a matter of fact, she has no fear of death, or she cannot believe in death at all. To her, both the living and the dead are all beings. To put it another way, she can look into another world and can have contact with those who belong to it.

Turning now to another world whose dimension is different from ours. Who or what exists there? We must consider what Ysobel sees in the story. This will lead us further into Burnett’s view of religion. As Burnett was getting busier in and more weary from writing, she became ill and no longer able to write. Her illness could be called a “nervous prostration.” At that time, Burnett “became interested in theosophy, which teaches that meditation leads to a better understanding of life.”

She also studied spiritualism and attended séances. Later, she studied the religion of Christian Science and took some courses in “mind-healing.” She never became a Christian Scientist, though her son, Vivian did. “She had long since given up membership of any church. But she had a strong religious sense and a continuing desire to see some purpose in life. Her Bible was well used and marked in many places with notes and the dates on which particular texts had helped her.” Therefore, it is no wonder that strange life-forces suggesting spirits and another world are well represented in her works.

It [The moor] was like a thing alive—a huge giant lying spread out in the sun warming itself, or covering itself with thick, white mist which sometimes writhed and twisted itself into wraiths. (pp.12-13.)

Here, we notice that the word “wraith” appears for the first time in The White People. Since we can regard wraiths as a form of spirits, their shapes are changeable, just like the mist.

An ordinary person would be seized with fear if he or she heard or saw something
strange when alone on a lonely moor. In some cases, he or she may be stricken by a panic or be mentally drained. He or She may be unable to cast an eye in the direction of the moor. Yosbel, however, “had never been afraid that anything on the moor would hurt [her].” (p. 20.) That is to say, she neither feels terror nor has shameful curiosity. As she realizes on instinct that there is some life on the moor, she only listens to the moor. Maybe the life on the moor had spied on Yosbel since she was a baby and sees from her behavior that she regards it with affection.

So on this day I speak of we did not turn back when we found ourselves in the midst of a sudden mist. (p. 19.)

I was not an adventurous child. I was, in fact, in a more than usually quiet mood that morning. The quiet had come upon me when the mist had begun to creep about and inclose us. I liked it. I liked the sense of being shut in by the soft whiteness I had so often watched from my nursery window in the castle. (p. 20.)

Yosbel has a complete trust in and a sense of closeness to the moor, and the moor intimates its secret to Yosbel, creeping up on and enclosing her. Yosbel unconsciously makes efforts to assimilate herself to the moor.

..., and I would wander about and play in my own way. I do not think it was in a strange way. ..., I only remember one thing which was not like the ordinary playing of children. It was a habit I had of sitting quite still a long time and listening. That was what I called it—“listening.” I was listening to hear if the life on the moor made any sound I could understand. I felt as if it might, if I were very still and listened long enough. (pp. 18-19.)

I knew that I only heard them because I had been listening. (p. 21.)

Yosbel’s mother, in the same way, did the above, just before her death. She lay cold and white as stone, listening to something and waited for her husband’s spirit to call for her, because he had died a little earlier than she. Yosbel’s father had become
something like a spirit, so no one except her mother saw him.

“. . . I have never told man or woman. It was my secret and hers. I can tell you, Ysobel. The change I saw was as if she [Ysobel’s mother] was beginning to listen to something—to listen.

“It was as if to a sound—far, far away at first. But cold and white as stone she lay content, and listened. In the next hour the far-off sound had drawn nearer, and it had become something else—something she saw—something which saw her. First her young marble face had peace in it; then it had joy. She waited in her young stone body until you were born and she could break forth. She waited no longer then. (p.11.)

Then she was gone from her body because she knew he was waiting for her—she passed away. Inheriting her mother’s mysterious power and concentrating her attention, Ysobel soon can see some spirits in human form. Later, she can easily focus her mind and see spirits not only on the moor but even on the train and in another family’s garden. This kind of magic power is not possessed by everyone. Ysobel knows that.

Perhaps the things which happened could only have happened to me. I do not know. I never heard of things like them happening to any one else. But I am not sorry they did happen. I am in secret deeply and strangely glad. . . . To most people everything is so uncertain that if they could only see or hear and know something clear they would drop upon their knees and give thanks. That was what I felt myself before I found out so strangely, and I was only a girl. (pp.1-2.)

Ysobel herself cannot grasp her own supernatural power. Her telling of a story is not reasoned; nevertheless, there is some truth in what she says.

It was as though he were calling on something in my nature which I did not myself comprehend, but which his profound mind saw and knew was stronger than I was. (p.90.)
“... You [Ysobel] have always seen what the rest of us did not see, my bairn always.”

I stammered out a few words, half in a whisper. “I [Ysobel] have always seen what you others could not see? What—have—I—seen?” (p.141.)

In Scotland, where this story is set, it is traditionally said that a very few people have this sort of supernatural power that is called clairvoyance or the second sight. Ysobel has been brought up, listening to the people who have this second sight. So she herself does not feel this power to be strange, although she is not fully conscious of having this supernatural potential. She only wonders if she is not different from other children:

I say that perhaps these things could only have happened to me, because, as I look back over my life, I realize that it has always been a rather curious one. Even when . . . , I had begun to wonder if I were not different from other children. That was, of course, largely because Muircarrie Castle was in such a wild and remote part of Scotland that . . . . (pp.2-3.)

It is not only the moor but also the old castle where she was born and has lived that has cultivated her special power. Muircarrie Castle had long been home to her ancestors, who had lived there and had been deeply connected with its past. The castle “was in such a wild and remote part of Scotland”(p.3) that few people visited there. It is surrounded by the moor, that is to say, is guarded by nature. It follows from what has been said that it is sacred ground or a holy place and the journey from London to the castle is like a pilgrimage. And besides, with the moor surrounding the castle, this holy site is the most suitable place for the dead to remain.

3. The Communication with the White People

Ysobel has called the spirits the “White People” ever since she saw a spirit on the
moor as a young girl. The spirits Ysobel see are fair, nearly transparent people and she did not know they were spirits until she grew up.

“It is only my way of thinking of those fair people one sees, those very fair ones, you know—the ones whose fairness looks almost transparent. There are not many of them, of course; . . . . I always call them, to myself, the White People, because they are different from the rest of us. . . . .” (p.56.)

Burnett uses “fair” and “pale” as well as “white” when she describes the White People as follows:

They were all pale. . . . . (p.22.)

“She’s one of the fair ones,” . . . . (p.26.)

. . . she . . . with . . . the fair, transparent face, the very fair little face. . . . I occasionally saw other persons with the same sort of fairness, . . . . (p.29.)

It was a little, lily-fair creature. . . . . (p.44.)

It turned its fair little face and smiled at me. (p.45.)

. . . the poor little fair child. . . . . (p.55.)

“It was one of those very fair children one sees now and then.” (p.55.)

“. . . she was fair like that, fairer than any one I had ever seen; . . . .” (p.62.)

The girl, who was a lovely, fair thing. . . . . (p.77.)

“Yes. You see how fair she is,” . . . . “And she has that transparent look. It is so lovely. . . . . She is one of the White People.” (p.78.)
“She looks like a white iris herself, doesn’t she?” (p.78.)

“The tall, very fair one in the misty, pale-gray dress,” . . . (p.79.)
(The underlining is my own.)

The images of the color “white” suggest fear, death and ghosts. A body becomes extinct after death and only the soul exists as a spirit. Then the soul or spirit needs no colors. “White” concluding in a pale and transparent tint is very suitable for the spirits called the White People. The reason Burnett uses “fair” more often than “white” is that the soul or spirit has an image of beauty and sublimity the living do not have.

Ysobel never exchanges words with the White People; no voice of them is heard and described. Sometimes only Ysobel sees the White People, while they do not notice her. How can Ysobel communicate with them without words?

Because I realized then, for the first time, that we had said no words at all. But I had known what she wanted me to understand, and she had known what I might have said to her if I had spoken—and no words were needed. And it was better. (p.27.)

I knew he [the spirit] heard me, because he turned and looked at me with the most extraordinary smile. (p.132.)

. . . , because I was so happy with my memories of Wee Brown Elspeth [the spirit] and the certainty that she would come again. It was not Jean’s words which had made me sure. I knew.

She came many times. Through all my childish years I knew that she would come and play with me every few days . . . . Children who play together are not very curious about one another, and I simply accepted her with delight. Somehow I knew that she lived happily in a place not far away. She could come and go, it seemed, without trouble. Sometimes I found her—or she found me— upon the moor; and often she appeared in my nursery in the castle. (p.28.)

It will be clear from these quotations that Ysobel can play with the girl spirit without
saying a word. Somehow she knows that the girl spirit will come back again and is living in a place not far away from Muricarrie Castle. Thus, Ysobel neither looks for the place nor visits the girl; she does not need to do so.

On the other hand, the spirits in *The Secret Garden* and *In the Closed Room*, have a voice: they speak to the living people who pay no attention to them or do not notice them. The following passages are quoted from *The Secret Garden*. Mr. Craven, who is staying in Switzerland far away from his home, hears the sweet and clear voice of his dead wife, which makes him return home to Yorkshire.

He thought that as he sat and breathed in the scent of the late roses and listened to the lapping of the water at his feet, he heard a voice calling. It was sweet and clear and happy and far away. It seemed very far, but he heard it as distinctly as if it had been at his very side.

‘Archie! Archie! Archie!’ it said, and then again, sweeter and clearer than before ‘Archie! Archie!’

He thought he sprang to his feet not even startled.

It was such a real voice and it seemed so natural that he should hear it.

‘Lilias! Lilias!’ he answered. ‘Lilias! where are you?’

‘In the garden,’ it came back like a sound from a golden flute. ‘In the garden!’

Mrs. Craven, as a spirit, has been wandering in the garden after her death, being anxious about her son. One interpretation is that she has been waiting for her son and husband to come back to her garden, and it is no wonder that her voice, even if she is a spirit, carries a long way to her husband. On the other hand, it is likely that the voice is not hers, but Mr. Craven’s inner voice, because he received a letter from Mrs. Sowerby saying he had better come back to Yorkshire just when he heard a strange voice. Otherwise, Mr. Craven may have had an inexplicable telepathic experience, as when Mr. Rochester calls Jane Eyre from a distance in *Jane Eyre*.

In another story, *In the Closed Room*, the girl spirit can be seen only by a girl named Judith. The spirit talks to Judith, in full sentences.
“You have come to come to play with me,” she said.\(^\text{13}\) 
“It was my garden,” the little girl said. “It has been so hot and no one has been near to water them [flowers], so they could not live.”\(^\text{14}\) 
“It’s time for you to go to sleep.”\(^\text{15}\)

Comparing these three works, *The Secret Garden* (1904), *In the Closed Room* (1911), and *The White People* (1917), the number of the words uttered by spirits decreases the later they are published. In *The White People*, more than ten spirits appear, but not one says a word. Among the spirits in the three works, it is those spirits who say no words, rather than those who speak, that make their presence felt. As they have no words, Ysobel has to concentrate on the spirits in order to understand what they are telling her or what they are thinking.

The spirits are supposed to exist in a place which is not so far away from our world, but we cannot get into it. Burnett did want to enter the place to search for Lionel, her dead son. She could not meet him again after his death, but “sometimes she felt as though he were still with her. She wrote to him in a notebook, as though talking to him in heaven. She thought of him constantly.”\(^\text{16}\) Burnett expressed her own straightforward feeling, to echo the mother whose dead daughter is a ghost in *In the Closed Room*, “[He] has been here—to show me it is not so far!”\(^\text{17}\)

4. An Ideal Mother and an Ideal Child

In this story, two pairs of mother and child appear. The first pair is seen by Ysobel on the train bound for London: the poor mother in mourning who has just lost her child and the child spirit who clings to its mother and kisses her as if wanting to comfort her.

When the poor woman in mourning almost stumbled into the carriage, . . . . She had stumbled because her eyes were dim with dreadful crying, and she could scarcely see. It made one’s heart stand still to see the wild grief of her, and her unconsciousness of the
world about her. The world did not matter. There was no world. I think there was nothing left anywhere but the grave she had just staggered blindly away from. (p.42.)

Burnett knows from her own experience the sorrow of the mother who does not care about the world and people around her. At that time when Burnett lost her elder son, Lionel, her sadness at his death was overwhelming. She lost interest in living. We can easily picture how the mother felt and her state of mind. A mother would hope her loving child is still endearing even though it were a spirit. That is Burnett's own earnest entreaty. The following portraits of the child spirit describe the innocence and loveliness of children.

It was a little, lily-fair creature not more than five or six years old and perhaps too young to express what it wanted to say. (p.44.)

It [The poor thing] turned its fair little face and smiled at me. (p.45.)

“... Its white little clinging hands were so pathetic when they stroked and patted her,”... “It was one of those very fair children one sees now and then. It was not like its mother. She was not one of the White People.” (p.55.)

(The underlining is my own.)

The child spirit is trying very hard to comfort its mother, as though it does not realize it is dead itself. The mother, however, cannot notice the child beside her. The mother, who gives herself over to grief immediately after her child's death, only mourns and neither sees nor hears anything. That Burnett fully realizes. Looking back upon bygone days when Lionel died, Burnett romanticizes his death and believes that he is still alive near her. The mother and her child in The White People also remind us of Mrs. Errol and Cedric as can be seen in the following quotations:

"It [The child] only clung to her [the poor mother] and patted her black sleeve and kissed it, as if it wanted to comfort her. I kept
expecting it to cry, but it didn't. It made me cry because it seemed so sure that it could comfort her if she would only remember that it was alive and loved her. . . .” (p.57.)

Then suddenly his [Cedric's] loving little heart told him that he'd better put both his arms around her [his mother's] neck and kiss her again and again, and keep his soft cheek close to hers; and he did so, . . . .

. . . . 'I [Cedric's mother] am sure he is trying to help me in his innocent way—I know he is. He looks at me sometimes with a loving, wondering little look, as if he were sorry for me, and then he will come and pet me or show me something. He is such a little man, I really think he knows.'

Let us now return to the child spirit. One interesting point is that Ysobel uses 'it' or 'the creature' to express the child spirit, not using the words 'the boy'(he) or 'the girl'(she). Ysobel might unconsciously realize the child she saw on the train is not human. Or, the fair and transparent child looks, to Ysobel, like an angel, ageless and sexless. Lionel, who died at only fifteen, is really an angel to Burnett. In the eyes of a mother, a fifteen-year-old boy and a five-year-old child are the same.

If the son had escaped his death and grown up, what sort of adult would he have become? Probably Burnett must have imagined and dreamt of that again and again. The dead son had become a full-fledged man, who was all the more idealized because she was disappointed in her husband. After Lionel died, no one and nothing could drive a wedge between him and his mother, Burnett. In her imaginary world, the adult son and his mother console and understand each other, wordlessly as though they were lovers who are tied to each other by close and strong bonds of affection and respect. In *The White People*, the ideal son who has grown up appears as Hector MacNairn, a great writer. (In fact, Burnett's second son, Vivian was a writer who was not so gifted as she. Perhaps, her first son, if he had not died, may have become a writer, too.) The heroine, Ysobel offers him her deep platonic love and respect. Mr. MacNairn is a successful and famous writer and may be in his thirties or forties. He has an
extensive knowledge and is a courteous and mild-mannered gentleman. Somehow, he has remained unmarried and leads a peaceful life with his beautiful and elegant mother. His mother seems to keep her son all to herself.

“We [Mrs. MacNairn and her son] two have been more to each other than mere mother and son. We have been sufficient for each other. ....” (p.99.)

Such a few words made his mother quite clear to me [Ysobel]. They loved each other in an exquisite, intimate way. .... He and she were completely happy when they were together. (p.66.)

It is natural that we judge the MacNairn mother and son as equivalent to the Burnett mother and son. The strong bond between mother and son, however, may not be mutual, because her son is dead and she cannot be sure of his real feelings for her. The mutual affection between mother and child is depicted so deeply that an incestuous atmosphere runs through the work. Hector MacNairn is an ideal and perfect man for the heroine, Ysobel, while his mother, Mrs. MacNairn is the ideal lady who Burnett herself had long wished to be. Mrs. MacNairn is so beautiful and attractive that no one imagines she has a middle-aged son.

..., the first things which struck me were her height and slenderness and her light step. Then I saw that her clear profile seemed cut out of ivory and that her head was a beautiful shape and was beautifully set. Its every turn and movement was exquisite. (p.73.)

On the other hand, Burnett is the exact opposite of Mrs. MacNairn in the appearance.

She had grown stout, but her posture was excellent, and she still wore elaborate dresses. Her hair was a new color of red, and she wore rouge like an actress. Makeup was considered shocking for “proper” ladies at this time.21
Frances had never been a beauty, and now she was stout, roughed and unhealthy. It was said that she wore a wig. Certainly her hair colour owed more to henna than to nature. Burnett was not tall, but stout, and decked herself out in accessories, while Mrs. MacNairn is tall and slender, with graceful manners. In other words, those who meet Mrs. MacNairn are fascinated by not only her looks but also her manners. Her human charms seem to come through clearly in her whole body.

She talked wonderfully, and her friends’ joy in her was wonderful, too. It evidently made people happy to be near her. All she said and did was like her light step and the movements of her delicate, fine head—gracious and soft and arrestingly lovely. (p.75.)

And the greatest praise of her charms is seen in her son’s words: “She is not merely beautiful; she is Beauty—Beauty’s very spirit moving about among us mortals; pure Beauty.”(p.73.) These words are those Burnett herself wished to hear directly from her dead son while he was alive. Therefore, she would make Hector MacNairn, who is regarded as a grown-up son in her imagination, say these words, because she fully realized she was not a good mother. When her children were small, writing and traveling kept her so busy that her sons often complained that they never saw their mother or that she had not written. Thus, the praise also must be Burnett’s desire or hope. People say that Burnett led a comfortable life, being endowed with literary talent, though she had assigned to destiny the loss of her beloved son at fifteen. In Mrs. MacNairn’s case, like Burnett’s, her son, Hector has a heart disease and is on the brink of death. This cruel fate both Hector and his mother know. Mrs. MacNairn said to Yosbel, “There is some fatal flaw in his heart. At any moment, . . . , he may—cease. It will just be ceasing. At any moment. He cannot stay.” (p.101.)

Burnett wanted to be a perfect mother just like Mrs. MacNairn, and at the same time she also wanted to be her son’s platonic lover. In this work, Yosbel is Hector’s platonic lover. Hector MacNairn appears Yosbel’s ideal man at the beginning, so she falls in love soon after she meets him. Hector is to Yosbel what Yosbel is to the White People.
It seemed at those times as if he sat near me in the dim glow and we understood each other’s thoughts without using words, . . . only this was a deeper thing. (p.38.)

At the time when Hector meets Ysobel, Hector is on his deathbed. In other words, he is joining the White People. Ysobel, who can make friends with spirits, is Burnett’s ultimate person. Both Ysobel and Mrs. MacNairn are ideal parts of Burnett herself.

As Shirley Foster says, “in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s fictions boys, sensitive, caring and imaginative, are in fact frequently girls,” the male characters in this work do not make us feel masculine. We could say they transcend the male gender. Hector MacNairn does not make us feel alive and male. Angus Macayre, who lives in Muircarrie Castle as Ysobel’s tutor and Feargus, Ysobel’s piper, are sexless, too. The same may be said, no doubt, of other male characters in Burnett’s other works for children.

Ysobel is never unhappy, being surrounded only with platonic love and consideration. This may be the reason she can see the White People. Only the innocent can see them.

5. Death and an After-Life

What is death? What becomes of a man after his death? The question has been asked all over the world through the ages, but, it is not yet solved. To clear up the mystery, countless people have read or deciphered the Bible, have practiced asceticism, have held séances, have been hypnotized to learn of their previous existence and have done much else besides. As I mentioned before, Burnett herself had read her Bible again and again, and joined some séances in Washington. Furthermore, she devoted herself to Christian Science at one time, though she never became a member of its church. She had been interested in mind-healing because she suffered from the effects of strain and overwork.

At the same time the episode of Colin’s illness functions as a
critique of current medical practice, with its emphasis on medication and rest cures, in favour of alternative holistic approaches. In 1884, Burnett had become interested in the work of Mary Baker Eddy, whose Christian Science principles had helped her to recover from a debilitating attack of nervous exhaustion. Suffering from the effects of strain and overwork, she had responded positively to a course of treatments from a Boston mind-healer, a neighbour of Eddy’s and a Christian Science follower. Although Burnett never formally converted to the Christian Science Church, the impact of its teachings remained a powerful influence on her thinking, clearly inspiring The Secret Garden’s message of the interdependence of physical and psychic well-being.

This idea of Christian Science Burnett adopted through the children in her works, using the word “magic,” in her own style. In The Secret Garden, Colin, who is an invalid, confined to bed, unable to walk, is able to recover and his father, Mr. Craven has a psychic experience in Switzerland, because of this “Magic.” “Magic” can be understood to mean Nature, though it seems to be a kind of supernatural power. The Secret Garden is a story which “follows a regenerative path, with pervasive images of death and debility transformed to those of life and energy.”

It is difficult to determine who influenced Burnett most, among many writers who describe the world after death. On the way to New York for their honeymoon in 1873, Burnett and her husband, Swan, met George MacDonald (1824-1905) through Richard Gilder, her editor at Scribner’s. MacDonald was on a lecture tour. Burnett had been a great reader since she was a child, so she could have read MacDonald’s works, in all likelihood.

George MacDonald’s influence seems to be present too: Misselthwaite Manor with its immense numbers of unexplored and uninhabited rooms, and its endless corridors and statues, is surely the castle from The Princess and the Goblin, while Mary’s discovery of the key and her search for the lock that will fit it recalls MacDonald’s ‘The Golden Key’.
As mentioned above, *The Secret Garden* has been influenced by MacDonald, and the same may be said, no doubt, of *The White People*. In *The White People*, the moor covered by mist is described as another world, and *Lilith* (1895) by MacDonald "touches on the notion of several different worlds or time zones co-existing on the same physical plane; . . . ." Moreover, books and the library in the castle are valuable and play great roles in both works. To Ysobel, the book-walled library is as good as her own room; in *Lilith*, "the character of Adam himself, the first man, takes the form of Mr Raven, a librarian in a castle." MacDonald himself took a job cataloguing a neglected library in some great mansion or castle in the far north of Scotland. Just as MacDonald's discoveries in that library galvanized his imagination, the library is an important place to Ysobel, second only to the moor. She spends a lot of time studying with Angus Macayre, her tutor, taking walks and riding a pony on the moor. Angus, who took care of the library, "had been a profound student and had lived among books all his life."(p.31.) He resembles Mr. Raven in *Lilith* closely.

Very probably in the library, MacDonald found the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), which had an influence on his metaphysical and scientific speculations. William Blake (1757-1827) also made a deep mark on him. Through MacDonald's stories runs the notion of death not as an end but as a process of cleansing and revitalizing. Two heroes, Anodos in *Phantastes* (1858) and Mr Vane in *Lilith* die to rise again. Diamond's death at the end of *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) means his return to the North Wind's mysterious world, which is considered not as Heaven but as one place before entering Heaven. In this way, MacDonald speculates that death is a sort of door or gate or entrance to another mysterious realm from this world. His view of death and after-life affects Burnett's, and expands to Christian Science, and moreover to New Thoughts.

New Thought was a spiritual movement that was gaining in popularity in America at that time, even though it had its roots in the mid-nineteenth century with thinkers such as Emanuel Swedenborg, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the magnificently named Phineas Parkhurst Quimby. Henry James's brother, the Harvard
professor William James, was also associated with New Thought, which had certain affinities with Christian Science. Its basis was in the link between spiritualism and the physical world, the power of belief and the power of the human mind. . . . . Frances's fictionalized formulation of her “new thought” planted the seed that would influence her writing for years. 30

By the time Ernest first became sick at the end of 1918, Frances had become completely confident in the belief system she'd so carefully worked out over the years. This belief system—part New Thought, part Christian Science, part positive thinking, and part fairy story—she expressed succinctly in her 1909 children's book The Land of the Blue Flower. 31

Burnett's acquaintance with Henry James (1843-1916) must be recalled here, as it is a well-known fact that James wrote about ghosts. “When she was living at Maytham Hall in Kent, she was only six miles from James's summer home. They saw each other at intervals and they corresponded.” 32 It is likely that Henry James, George MacDonald, Emanuel Swedenborg, among others, influenced Burnett to some degree.

Ysobel faces death naturally and calmly and never fears it. She never grieves over nor mourns her parents' death. She says, “It [Death] never seems real to me at all.” (p.87.) To Ysobel, death is part of life, or its sequel. That is to say, death is not the end of all. This is why she is not afraid of death at all. That is Burnett's desire. She does not want to admit the fear of death, for Lionel and for herself; however, she fears death. Therefore, she takes up death repeatedly as a theme.

“. . . . I wish, I wish death did not make feel as if it filled all the world—as if, when it happens, there is no life left anywhere. . . . ." (pp.57-58.)

They [Mr. MacNairn and his mother] were not as afraid of The Fear as most people are, because they had thought of and reasoned about it so much, and always calmly and with clear and open minds.

By The Fear they meant that mysterious horror most people feel at the thought of passing out of the world they know into the one they
don't know at all. (p.84.)

...“if one only had some shadow of a proof that the mystery is only that we cannot see, that we cannot hear, though they are really quite near us, with us—the ones who seem to have gone away and whom we feel we cannot live without. If once we could be sure! There would be no Fear—there would be none!” (p.86.)

“If, after it was over, a man awakened as you said and found himself—the self he knew, but light, free splendid—remembering all the ages of dark, unknowing dread, of horror of some black, aimless plunge, and suddenly seeing all the childish uselessness of it—how he would stand and smile! How he would stand and smile!” (p.130.)

Burnett could never been released from the bitter and strict world and her endless, hard labors as long as she lived. Therefore, she wished she could get free in the fictional world depicted by her pen.

It may be worth pointing out, in passing, that Burnett never wrote of the death of a child in her children’s books, though there are many off-stage deaths of parents. Cedric’s father is dead; Colin’s mother is dead. So is Marco’s in The Lost Prince (1915). Mary Lennox and Sara Crewe are both orphaned, so are the two little pilgrims in Two Little Pilgrims’ Progress (1895). However, in In the Closed Room, Judith, the heroine, a girl whose parents are alive and normal, dies at the end of the story, as though she were tempted into death. The ghost girl named Andrea invites Judith to play in a locked room. There the two girls had a good time, as if they were in the Secret Garden. Finally, Judith goes off to play with the ghost forever.

In The White People, young Ysobel often plays with a ghost girl named Wee Brown Elspeth who was a victim of the clan battles between about five hundred years previously. Another ghost child, as I mentioned before, comforts her living mother in a railway carriage, regardless of not being noticed by her. We can say that Burnett finally could accept her son’s death and overcome her grief. Probably she felt as though Lionel’s soul was still with her until she died.
Conclusion

A man enters another world after death, unafraid. In another world, everyone is fair and pale, never forgets his or her family and tries to comfort those who are overwhelmed with grief.

Ysobel cannot distinguish this world from the next, and need not do so. She is living in peace and quiet. What sort of person is Ysobel on earth?

I had always seemed so detached from every one. I had not been miserable about it, and I had not complained to myself; I only accepted the detachment as part of my kind of life. (p.74.)

She is an ordinary person who is estimated to be eighteen, judging from her character, appearance and brains. She is unfortunate and must endure isolation, having neither parents nor brothers and sisters. However, she is sufficiently blessed with fortune to live comfortably in her castle to the end of her life and with a few relatives who love and cherish her. Her lonely living situation and fate is, probably, a necessary and sufficient condition for communication with the White People.

No wicked men appear on this work. Only good men do. They are well off and show no sign of working or having a job. The moments of grief and agony the good characters experience are only through losing their family members. Such grief and agony comes to anyone, so the good characters are not unhappy. Excepting the scenes which depict the fear of death, or a feud waged between two clans for three generations, Ysobel’s castle, like Mrs. MacNarin’s garden, resembles a paradise or Shangri-la. Ysobel herself, the people who live in or around her castle, and Hector and his mother are all gentle and mild. We can see or feel no violence or rudeness throughout this work. No characters are aware of the grim realities of life, its severe social conditions, or the passage of time. There seem to be few differences between the living characters and the White People whom only Ysobel can see. In other words, some characters in this work are near death or make us feel as if they were the dead. This work is sentimental and gothic beyond imagination, compared with Burnett’s other novels.
whose heroines are active and strong and lead a stormy life.

What I feel sure I know by this time is that all the things we think happen by chance and accident are only part of the weaving of the scheme of life. When you begin to suspect this and to watch closely you also begin to see how trifles connect themselves with one another, and seem in the end to have led to a reason and a meaning, though we may not be clever enough to see it clearly. Nothing is an accident. We make everything happen ourselves: . . . . (pp.103-104.)

There is a suggestion here that we all are part of great nature (some people call nature God), and nature, in turn, is part of us. Our soul is immortal and love is undying. If you think so, you do not have to fear death. Burnett, when she wrote The White People was sixty, an age that was not too old for death at that time. Burnett would by then have already experienced many deaths. Twenty years had passed since her loving son Lionel died, and she may have recovered from the trauma and sorrow and was prepared to accept death calmly. It is likely that she never felt her son had gone far away from this world, but believed he remained still close to her. In fact, however, she could never meet him again in this world. That is why Burnett herself created a chance of meeting her son again in her own works. This was a form of “pretending” or “imagining,” as in children’s play. Burnett, in her childhood, would play her “pretend” games in which she was a fairy godmother who could do everything.33

The White People is so natural, so simple and so ‘sweet’ a work, whose intention seems to be to escape from realities, yet it challenges death head on. We find a reassurance that death is not to be feared, and sense Burnett’s conviction regarding an after-life.

Notes

1 Shirley Foster and Judy Simons, What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of ‘Classic’ Stories for


3 Ibid., p.25.
4 Ibid., p.55.
5 Ibid., p.126.

6 Frances Hodgson Burnett, The White People (New York: Aeon, 1917) p.12. Subsequent quotations from this same book will be referred to by page number only in the main body of the text.


8 Angelica Shirley Carpenter and Jean Shirley, Frances Hodgson Burnett: Beyond the Secret Garden (Minneapolis: Lerner, 1990), p.22.


10 Carpenter and Shirley, p.48.


13 Frances Hodgson Burnett, In the Closed Room (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004), p.17.

14 Ibid., p.18.
15 Ibid., p.24.
16 Carpenter and Shirley, p.80.
17 Frances Hodgson Burnett, In the Closed Room, p.29.
18 Carpenter and Shirley, p.79.


21 Carpenter and Shirley, p.98.
22 Thwaite, p.190.
23 Carpenter and Shirley, p.46, Thwaite, p.125.
24 Foster and Simons, p.187.
25 Ibid., p.185.
26 Ibid., p.172.

28 Ibid., p.72.
29 Ibid.
30 Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, Frances Hodgson Burnett: The Unexpected Life of the Author of The
32  Constance Buel Burnett, pp.153-54. According to Gerzina, “She and Henry James, too, extended their friendship in joking notes and social engagements.”(p.192.)