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NATURE AND HUMAN INTERACTION DEPICTED IN FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT'S THE SECRET GARDEN: HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH ANALYSIS

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Abstract. This study examines the influence of historical and biographical contexts on the themes, episodes, and settings in Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden*. The study aims to uncover the historical factors and the author's personal experiences that underlie the novel's composition, as well as their impact on the narrative structure of the story. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with historical and biographical approaches in literary discourse analysis. Data were obtained from the novel *The Secret Garden*, articles, books, and various relevant supporting sources. The data were analysed using the story grammar model proposed by Renkema. The results indicate that the novel's central theme is individual transformation and healing through interaction with nature and the social environment. Historically, the novel reflects a shift in societal perspectives from the Victorian era toward the Edwardian era, which placed greater emphasis on children's emotional and psychological needs. Biographically, Burnett's personal experiences with loss, life's hardships, and her passion for gardening also influenced the themes and symbolism of the secret garden in the novel. This study concludes that *The Secret Garden* serves as both a representation of the author's personal experiences and a reflection of the socio-historical conditions of the early 20th century.

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengkaji pengaruh konteks sejarah dan biografis terhadap tema, episode, dan latar dalam novel *The Secret Garden* karya Frances Hodgson Burnett. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap faktor-faktor sejarah dan pengalaman pribadi penulis yang mendasari penulisan novel tersebut, serta dampaknya terhadap struktur naratif cerita. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan sejarah dan biografis dalam analisis wacana sastra. Data diperoleh dari novel *The Secret Garden*, artikel, buku, dan berbagai sumber pendukung yang relevan. Data dianalisis menggunakan model tata bahasa cerita yang diusulkan oleh Renkema. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tema sentral novel ini adalah transformasi individu dan penyembuhan melalui interaksi dengan alam dan lingkungan sosial. Secara historis, novel ini mencerminkan pergeseran perspektif masyarakat dari era Victoria menuju era Edwardian, yang lebih menekankan pada kebutuhan emosional dan psikologis anak-anak. Secara biografis, pengalaman pribadi Burnett terkait kehilangan, kesulitan hidup, serta kecintaannya pada berkebun juga memengaruhi tema dan simbolisme taman rahasia dalam novel tersebut. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *The Secret Garden* berfungsi sebagai representasi pengalaman pribadi penulis sekaligus cerminan kondisi sosio-historis pada awal abad ke-20.

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays an essential role in human life because it functions not only as a means of communication but also as a medium for transferring knowledge and preserving culture. According to Barzani (2020), language contributes to communication, education, and social interaction, while Susianti et al. (2024) explain that language also reflects and maintains cultural identity. In education, literature has an important role in language learning because literary texts provide authentic language exposure and cultural understanding. Mitsigkas (2015) states that literature supports language proficiency and competence in second and foreign language learning. Similarly, Kaowiwattanakul (2021) argues that literary texts improve learners' reading abilities, critical thinking, and reflective engagement with language. Through literary works such as novels, poetry, and short stories, students learn vocabulary, grammar, and cultural values simultaneously.

Several scholars emphasize the educational benefits of literature. Saidi (2021), referring to Maley (2001), identifies seven benefits of literature in language learning: universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power, and ambiguity. Tiwari (2025) further explains that literature supports higher-order thinking skills, motivation, and interpretive abilities, while Jabar (2025) highlights its contribution to authentic language exposure and communicative learning. Collie and Slater (1990, as cited in Karakaya & Kahraman, 2013) also state that literature provides authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment, and personal involvement. Literary texts expose students to real-life language and encourage emotional engagement with the story. Fakhriddin and Dilshodbek (2025) further note that literature encourages learners to interpret, evaluate, and reflect critically on texts, contributing to both linguistic and cultural development.

One approach that can support literary understanding is discourse analysis. According to D. R. Putri (2025), discourse analysis examines how language shapes social reality beyond its literal meaning. Fairclough (1995) explains that discourse analysis studies how language is shaped by and simultaneously shapes social practices. In literary texts, discourse analysis helps reveal how authors construct meaning, ideology, and social values through narrative and dialogue. Passandaran et al. (2025) demonstrate that language in literary texts represents ideology, power relations, and cultural norms hidden within the narrative structure. In language learning, literature also encourages critical thinking and emotional engagement. Hussein (2025) explains that literature in EFL and ESL classrooms improves cultural understanding, vocabulary development, analytical skills, and learner motivation. Therefore, literature contributes not only to language acquisition but also to students' cognitive and emotional development.

One literary work that strongly reflects themes of healing, childhood, and the relationship between humans and nature is *the Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Published in 1911, the novel portrays emotional and physical transformation through the relationship between the characters and nature. The hidden garden functions not only as a setting but also as a symbolic healing space for Mary Lennox, Colin Craven, and Mr. Craven.

Previous studies have discussed *The Secret Garden* from ecocritical and psychological perspectives. Herdiana (2019) explains that nature functions as a healing force for the characters' physical and mental recovery. Dybvik et al. (2018) highlight the therapeutic value of nature in emotional healing, while Günday (2025) examines the relationship between orphaned children and nature through an eco-psychological perspective. R. P. Putri (2022) also analyses pastoral imagery and natural healing in the novel. However, these studies mainly focus on themes of nature and healing and rarely discuss the historical and biographical factors that influenced Burnett in writing the novel. As a result, the relationship between the author's personal experiences, the socio-historical context of the early twentieth century, and the construction of episodes and settings in the novel has not been thoroughly explored.

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This gap indicates the need for research integrating discourse analysis with historical and biographical approaches. Unlike previous studies that mainly emphasize ecocritical and healing perspectives, this study specifically examines how Burnett's life experiences and historical background influence the narrative structure of *The Secret Garden*, particularly the construction of episodes and settings. This approach offers a new perspective by connecting literary discourse with the author's biography and the socio-historical realities surrounding the creation of the novel. Based on the background above, this study focuses on the historical and biographical aspects behind the writing of *the Secret Garden*. The study attempts to answer two main questions: (1) why Frances Hodgson Burnett wrote the theme presented in *The Secret Garden* and what historical and biographical backgrounds inspired the novel, and (2) how the author's historical and biographical backgrounds construct the episodes and settings within the story.

In line with these problems, this study aims to reveal the historical and biographical factors that motivated Burnett in writing *the Secret Garden*. In addition, this study seeks to explain how the author's personal experiences and the socio-historical context of the early twentieth century influenced the construction of the novel's episodes and settings. Through this analysis, the study attempts to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between literary texts, authorial experience, and historical context.

Overall, this study is expected to contribute to literary studies by demonstrating that literary works are closely connected to the author's personal experiences and social environment. Furthermore, this research is expected to enrich discourse analysis studies in literature and provide insights for language and literature learning, particularly in understanding how literary texts construct meaning, cultural values, and historical perspectives through narrative structure and language use.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design using literary discourse analysis to examine Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden*. The study focused on analyzing the narrative structure of the novel through historical and biographical approaches proposed by Davis et al. (1979). and combining it with the structural analysis proposed by Renkema (2004) story structure model, consisting of setting, beginning, simple reaction, goal, attempt, outcome, and ending, was used to analyze the narrative elements systematically.

The subject of this study was the novel *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Supporting data were collected from books, journal articles, and historical references related to literary discourse analysis, story grammar, and the author's biography. The research was conducted through several stages, including close reading, story segmentation, data classification, and interpretation. The researcher identified narrative elements, dialogues, descriptions, and episodes related to the research focus. The collected data were then analysed using story grammar analysis and interpreted through historical and biographical approaches.

The primary instrument of this study was the researcher, supported by data recording sheets used to organize quotations and narrative elements. The data were collected through documentation and close reading techniques. To ensure data dependability, repeated reading, audit trail, theoretical triangulation, and peer debriefing were applied throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. RESULTS

1. Finding the theme

This study found that the central theme in *The Secret Garden* revolves around the process of individual transformation through interaction with the social and natural environments. The changes experienced by the characters are not only physical but also psychological and emotional. The natural environment in the novel serves not merely as a setting but as an active element

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shaping character development. Through the relationship between humans and nature, Frances Hodgson Burnett depicts a gradual process of healing, growth, and personality transformation.

This theme emerges through the life journey of Mary Lennox, who initially grew up as a hot-tempered, withdrawn child, indifferent to others due to a lack of affection from her parents. After moving to Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire, Mary begins to transform her interactions with Martha Sowerby, Dickon, Colin Craven, and especially with the secret garden, which becomes the focal point of the story's development.

Synopsis

Mary Lennox was a girl born and raised in India to an English family. She grew up without affection because her father was busy working as a government official, and her mother spent more time attending parties than caring for her daughter. Mary was raised by a nanny and grew up to be a selfish, hot-tempered, and withdrawn child.

When a cholera epidemic struck India, Mary's parents both died. Mary was then sent to England to live with her uncle, Archibald Craven, at Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire. In that cold and quiet mansion, Mary felt increasingly isolated. She lived with the servants, such as Mrs. Medlock and Martha Sowerby. Unlike her nanny in India, Martha was warm and friendly, gradually changing Mary's attitude.

Mary's curiosity began to grow as she often heard mysterious cries at night. In addition, she heard stories about a secret garden that had been locked since the death of Archibald Craven's wife, Lilias Craven. While exploring the grounds of Misselthwaite Manor, Mary met Ben Weatherstaff, an elderly gardener who had worked on the estate for many years. Although Ben initially appeared unfriendly, he gradually became more accepting of Mary. Through her encounters with Ben and a friendly robin that often accompanied him, Mary became increasingly interested in the hidden garden. The robin eventually led her to a buried key and later to a hidden door, allowing her to discover the long-forgotten secret garden.

After discovering the garden, Mary was determined to restore it. During one of her rare visits to the estate, her uncle unexpectedly asked to see her. It was on this occasion that Mary asked for a small plot of land so she could plant flowers and plants. Archibald granted her permission without realizing that Mary actually intended to revive the secret garden.

In the garden, Mary began to experience a new life. She befriended Dickon Sowerby, a nature-loving boy who could interact closely with animals and plants. Together with Dickon, Mary tended to the long-neglected garden. These activities gradually transformed Mary's physical and psychological condition, making her healthier, more active, and more caring toward others.

Mary later discovered that the mysterious crying came from Colin Craven, Archibald Craven's sickly son, who was always confined to his room because he believed he would never be able to walk. Mary and Dickon eventually took Colin to the secret garden. Through fresh air, interaction with nature, friendship, and physical exercise, Colin slowly recovered until he was able to walk and run.

At the end of the story, Archibald Craven returns to Misselthwaite Manor after a long period of grief following his wife's death. He finds the secret garden restored to life and sees that Colin is healthy. Mary, Colin, and Archibald experience an emotional and psychological rebirth, while the secret garden becomes a symbol of healing and new life.

Simple story

To make it easier to follow the plot, the story can be simplified into the following main stages:

1. Mary Lennox grows up in India
2. Mary loses both her parents to a cholera epidemic.
3. Mary's journey to Yorkshire
4. Mary begins her lonely life at Misselthwaite Manor.
5. Mary meets Martha Sowerby

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6. Mary hears a mysterious crying sound at night.
7. The story of the locked secret garden.
8. Mary meets Ben Weatherstaff,
9. Mary befriends a robin
10. Mary finds a key
11. Mary finds a hidden doorknob
12. Mary discovers the secret garden
13. Mary befriends Dickon and together they tend the garden.
14. Mary meets Archibald Craven
15. Mary finds her cousin Colin Craven
16. Mary and Dickon encourage to visit Colin the secret garden.
17. Mary and Colin begin to recover physically and mentally through their interaction with nature.
18. Archibald Craven returns and finds his son has recovered.

This sequence of events illustrates the story's progression from a state of isolation toward a process of transformation and healing.

Story grammar

Using the story grammar approach in psycholinguistic analysis, this study found that the beginning section of the story plays a crucial role in establishing the novel's central theme. Three key events form the basis for the development of this theme: Mary's confinement to her room, her encounter with Martha Sowerby, and the mysterious crying she hears.

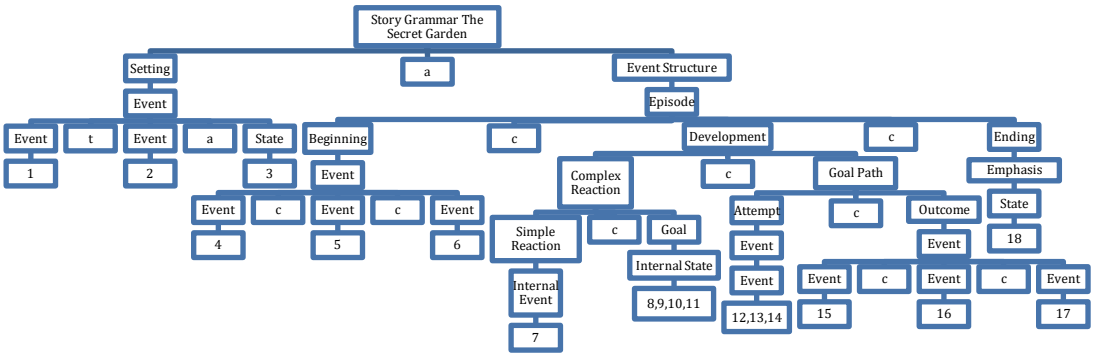


Figure 1 Story grammar of The Secret Garden

First, the event of Mary being locked in her room depicts a closed environment with minimal social interaction. This situation intensifies Mary's sense of loneliness following the loss of both her parents. Psychologically, this environment shapes Mary's cold and withdrawn behaviour.

Second, Mary's encounter with Martha Sowerby marks the starting point of her social and emotional transformation. Martha offers warm and open communication, prompting Mary to begin learning to interact with others in a more positive way.

Third, the mysterious crying sound piqued Mary's curiosity and prompted her to begin exploring her surroundings. This exploration eventually led to the discovery of the secret garden and Colin Craven, who became central to the unfolding conflict and character transformation.

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Based on this analysis, the novel's theme becomes evident from the very beginning of the story: that both the social environment and nature exert a significant influence on an individual's physical, emotional, and psychological development.

The theme

The analysis reveals that the central theme of *The Secret Garden* is the positive impact of physical and psychological interaction between humans and nature on individual development, particularly that of children. This theme is consistently developed from the beginning to the end of the story through the transformation of the characters Mary, Colin, and Archibald Craven.

2. Historical and biographical context

Historical context

This research found that The Secret Garden was heavily influenced by the social and cultural conditions of the Victorian and Edwardian eras in England. In the Victorian era, children were viewed as individuals who needed to be shaped through strict discipline, moral codes, and social control. Education at that time emphasized obedience and character building over children's psychological development.

However, as the Edwardian era approached, views of children began to change. Children began to be understood as individuals with emotional needs, imagination, and an inner life that needed to be addressed. This change coincided with the emergence of educational reforms and attention to children's physical and mental health.

The social conditions in England at that time were also influenced by the Industrial Revolution, which resulted in crowded, dirty cities with sanitation problems. This situation gave rise to the idea that nature and fresh air could be a means of restoring health. This view is reflected in The Secret Garden through Mary and Colin's healing process in the secret garden.

In addition to England, the novel's Indian setting is also influenced by the British colonial context. Metcalf and Metcalf (2012), in their book *A Concise History of Modern India*, India was under the rule of the British Raj at that time and became an important center of the British economy and politics. The term refers to the period of direct British rule over the Indian subcontinent under the British Crown from 1858 to 1947, following the end of the rule of the British East India Company after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The British Raj was characterized by a rigid social hierarchy in which British officials and their families occupied privileged positions, while Indian servants and local workers were often placed in subordinate roles. During this period, many British families living in India employed numerous servants to manage household duties and childcare. The colonial system created a clear social divide between the colonizers and the local community.

Thus, this study shows that the theme of healing through nature in the novel cannot be separated from the historical conditions of the early 20th century, which began to emphasize the importance of health, the environment, and children's psychological development.

Biographical context

In addition to historical factors, Frances Hodgson Burnett's personal life also had a significant influence on the novel's content. Burnett, whose full name was Frances Eliza Hodgson Burnett, was born on November 24, 1849, in Cheetham, Manchester, England. After her father passed away when she was a child, her family's economic situation deteriorated drastically. The experiences of loss and life changes from childhood influenced her perspective on grief, loneliness, and the emotional needs of children.

As a teenager, Burnett moved to the United States with her family due to economic difficulties (Gerzina, 2004). Amidst these difficult circumstances, she began writing to help support her family. This life of struggle taught Burnett the importance of hope and the process of emotional healing.

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Burnett's personal life was also filled with losses, including the death of her son, Lionel, which significantly affected her psychological well-being. This profound grief is reflected in the characters of Archibald Craven and Colin Craven, who live with trauma and isolation.

Burnett's experience living at Great Maytham Hall also directly influenced the creation of the secret garden in the novel. There, Burnett discovered an old garden overgrown with weeds and began to nurture it. This real-life experience served as a primary inspiration for the depiction of the secret garden as a symbol of new life and healing.

Through historical and biographical analysis, this study finds that The Secret Garden is not simply a children's story about gardens and friendship, but also a reflection of Burnett's personal experiences and the social conditions of her time. The novel demonstrates how the environment, loss, and humanity's relationship with nature can shape the process of emotional recovery and individual development.

B. DISCUSSION

1. Reasons for writing the theme and historical and biographical background

Based on the research findings, the main theme of *The Secret Garden* is character transformation through interactions with nature and the social environment. This theme did not emerge by chance, but was influenced by the historical setting and life experiences of Frances Hodgson Burnett.

Historically, this novel was born during the transition from the Victorian to the Edwardian era. In the Victorian era, children were viewed as individuals who needed to be shaped through strict discipline and moral control. However, with the advent of the Edwardian era, a new awareness emerged that children have important emotional and psychological needs that require attention. This shift in perspective is reflected in the development of the characters Mary Lennox and Colin Craven, who experience positive changes through affection, friendship, and closeness to nature.

Furthermore, this novel also reflects the "back to nature" idea that developed in the early 20th century in response to the negative impacts of industrialization. Nature is seen as a means to better physical and mental health. In the novel, the secret garden serves as a healing space that allows Mary and Colin to experience recovery and character growth.

From a biographical perspective, Burnett's life experiences also shaped the novel's themes. He experienced various losses throughout his life, including the deaths of his father, mother, and eldest son. His family's unstable economic situation and life in crowded, industrially polluted Manchester also influenced his perspective. These experiences fostered Burnett's sensitivity to themes of loneliness, loss, the need for affection, and the healing process.

Burnett's closeness to nature deepened when he lived at Great Maytham Hall and discovered a hidden garden, which became the direct inspiration for *The Secret Garden*. Therefore, the garden in the novel serves not only as a setting but also as a symbol of hope, growth, and restoration. Thus, the themes in *The Secret Garden* are a combination of the social changes of the time and Burnett's personal experiences.

2. The influence of historical and biographical context on episodes and settings

The historical and biographical setting not only influences the themes but also shapes the episodes and settings in the novel. The initial setting of the story, which takes place in India during the British Raj, demonstrates the influence of the British colonial system. English family life in the colonies, heavily reliant on servants, led to strained emotional bonds between parents and children. This is evident in Mary's life, raised by a governess without parental attention, resulting in her becoming spoiled, withdrawn, and lacking empathy.

The cholera outbreak that killed Mary's parents has a strong historical basis, as cholera was one of the major epidemics of the 19th century. In the novel, this event becomes a turning point that changes Mary's life and begins her journey of transformation.

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The shift in setting from India to Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire presents a clear contrast. The manor is depicted as a large, quiet, and enclosed house, reflecting the life of the English upper class during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, which was characterized by social hierarchy and emotional distance between family members. This is evident in the relationship between Archibald Craven, Colin, and the servants, which demonstrates a clear division of social roles.

In contrast, the secret garden is an open, free, and vibrant space. The contrast between the enclosed manor and the open garden reinforces the theme of transformation experienced by the characters. It is in this garden that Mary, Colin, and Archibald Craven experience physical and emotional changes.

Burnett's personal gardening experiences also directly influenced the development of key episodes in the novel. Mary and Dickon's activities of cleaning the garden, planting, and tending the plants mirror Burnett's own experiences tending the garden at Great Maytham Hall. Therefore, the garden serves not only as a setting for the story but also as a means of healing and character development.

Overall, the episodes and settings in *The Secret Garden* are shaped by a combination of the historical context of the British Raj and early 20th-century England with the life experiences of Frances Hodgson Burnett. These settings play an active role in shaping the characters, conflicts, and plot development, allowing the novel to be understood as both a social reflection and a representation of the author's personal experiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

A. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, this study reveals that Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* is not only a children's novel about healing and nature, but also a literary representation shaped by the author's historical background and personal life experiences. The shift in social perspective from the Victorian to the Edwardian era, particularly regarding the psychological and emotional needs of children, significantly influenced the novel's thematic construction. This shift is reflected in the development of Mary Lennox and Colin Craven, whose emotional and physical recovery occurs through affection, social interaction, and their relationship with nature.

The findings also indicate that Burnett's personal experiences contributed substantially to the novel's narrative construction. Experiences such as family loss, economic instability, life in the industrial Manchester area, and her involvement in gardening at Great Maytham Hall influenced the emergence of themes related to healing, growth, and the restorative power of nature. Therefore, the novel can be understood not only as imaginative fiction but also as a reflection of Burnett's emotional experiences and worldview.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the author's historical and biographical background shapes the episodes and settings within the story. The depiction of Mary's childhood in colonial India reflects the social hierarchies and parenting patterns influenced by the British Raj. The cholera outbreak, which has historical roots, serves as a narrative turning point that initiates Mary's transformation. Furthermore, the contrast between Misselthwaite Manor and the secret garden symbolizes the opposition between isolation and freedom, illness and healing, and emotional emptiness and personal growth. Through these narrative elements, Burnett constructs the garden not only as a physical setting but also as a symbolic space of transformation and restoration.

Related to the objectives proposed in the introduction, this study has uncovered the historical and biographical factors that motivated Burnett to write *The Secret Garden* and explained how these factors influenced the construction of the novel's episodes and settings. The study also highlights that literary works are closely connected to the author's personal experiences and the socio-historical realities surrounding the creation of the text. Thus, this study contributes

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to literary studies by integrating discourse analysis with historical and biographical approaches in examining children's literature.

B. SUGGESTIONS

While this study provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between Frances Hodgson Burnett's life experiences, historical setting, and the narrative structure of *The Secret Garden*, several limitations remain and open up opportunities for future research. Because not all historical and biographical sources related to Burnett are publicly accessible, future researchers are encouraged to explore archival materials and broader references to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the author's life and literary background.

Furthermore, this study primarily focused on themes, episodes, and settings related to the historical and biographical context. Future studies are expected to expand the discussion to other aspects such as moral values, character development, gender representation, reader responses, or the pedagogical use of *The Secret Garden* in literature and language learning. Furthermore, future researchers are encouraged to apply different theoretical perspectives, such as ecocriticism, psychoanalysis, feminism, or postcolonial studies, to generate broader and more diverse interpretations of the novel.

Finally, this study is expected to encourage further interdisciplinary research connecting literature with history, psychology, education, and cultural studies. This approach can enrich the understanding of literary texts not only as fictional narratives but also as reflections of human experience and social reality.

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