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The Female Explorer in George MacDonald's "The Day Boy and Night Girl" and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*

Pallabi Gupta

George MacDonald, one of Frances Hodgson Burnett's revered "literary lions," has had an influential presence in her works.¹ Critics indicate and examine this presence in a series of careful intertextual scrutiny. Kathryn Lindskoog identifies MacDonald as a figurative root to the tree that we celebrate today as the Burnett corpus. Claiming an unmistakable connection between MacDonald's "The Carasoy" (1871) and Burnett's classic *The Secret Garden* (1911), Lindskoog establishes MacDonald's orphaned protagonist Colin as a literary ancestor to Burnett's cherished character of the same name by citing remarkable similarities in their manners and attitudes. Lindskoog also claims that Burnett's *The White People* (1917), a story that depicts the life of an author very similar to MacDonald, is "a fictional tribute to MacDonald" (Lindskoog 100). Biographer Phyllis Bixler identifies MacDonald's presence in Burnett's literature in the same spirit and reads Burnett's *In the Closed Room* (1904) alongside MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871). More recently, John Pennington enhances this reading by placing the two authors alongside each other again by introducing MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* as a key and "overlooked" (90) intertext that, he claims, helps readers better comprehend Burnett's authorial sentiments regarding life and death. According to him, MacDonald's work "may have convinced Burnett that death is another form of living worth celebrating" (90). Hence, critics, in this—what Pennington calls—"fruitful line of inquiry" (89), discover how the inspiration of *The Secret Garden* can be traced back to MacDonald's authorial sentiments.

The inquiry is indeed fruitful. In reading Burnett's works alongside MacDonald's, critics not only contribute to studies that investigate cycles and traditions of literary influences, but also bring two stylistically different Golden Age authors of children's literature writing in different time periods, on the same page.² My essay participates in this endeavor by reading MacDonald's "The Day Boy and the Night Girl" (1879) alongside Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. In doing so, it divulges a significant, unconventional, and critically under-explored archetype of the *female explorer* that assertively appears in both the novels. By discoursing this archetype, I demonstrate how MacDonald constructs one of the first successful female explorations in

children's literature.³ Moreover, by sighting the same archetype in Burnett's novel, I validate how MacDonald's changing attitudes toward Victorian gender roles is progressive as well as influential.

In "The Day Boy and the Night Girl," MacDonald wakes a female character named Nycteris and in *The Secret Garden*, the classic that arrived thirty two years later, Burnett unearths the character of Mary Lennox. Together, the girls redefine the conventional heroine of children's literature in primarily two ways. First, they disrupt the social ideologies that associate women (and girls) of Victorian societies with the domestic space, and second, they establish themselves as imperialist explorers.

Marah Gubar's reflection on the Golden Age authors' unique capacity to explore avant-garde themes and introduce unconventional child characters in their works serves as an observation that my essay aims to exposit. Gubar writes:

In my readings of individual texts by Golden Age authors, I have tried to demonstrate that rather than producing an escapist literature that idealized the child as a wholly natural being, children's writers from this era frequently represented young people as complex, highly socialized individuals who (like adults) had to struggle with thorny issues of pressing contemporary relevance, including gender trouble, class division, ambivalence about imperial expansion, and the question of how much agency one can have as an acculturated subject. (181)

In this passage, Gubar speaks of *what* Golden Age authors do. My essay describes *how*. MacDonald, writing at the heart of the Golden Age, insistently confronts the Victorian ideals in his fairy tales and as Gubar mentions, complicates the child character by infusing it with nuances that are worthy of critical investigations. In "The Day Boy and Night Girl," Nycteris violates a core Victorian social norm that not only associates females with domestic space, but also believes that any socially unsanctioned digression a woman makes, results in either death or doom. Nycteris, the explorer, successfully traverses the boundaries of her designated domestic space and ultimately, following her impulse for adventure, helps save herself and Photogen, the male protagonist in the story, from their captor. What Burnett's *The Secret Garden* borrows from MacDonald's tale is the very spirit of Nycteris, i.e., a girl who is hungry for knowledge, unafraid to travel, who questions the norm, escapes subjection, and finally, rescues a male (Colin Craven) from his social and physical circumstances. MacDonald's Nycteris and Burnett's Mary Lennox, thus, elucidate Gubar's claim that the authors of the Golden Age not only treat their contemporary social issues convincingly, but also examine them objectively through their child protagonists. Mary, therefore, stands as a significant cultural descendant to Nycteris making

Burnett, a faithful literary descendent of MacDonald.

The oxymoronic nature of the term *female explorer* for a Victorian audience and MacDonald's assertive use of the archetype demonstrates how he uses his fiction to question convention. In his fairy tales, although the plots operate within a genre that is familiar to his Victorian readers, the characters are remarkably novel. Their journeys are foreseeable, but their temperament, unconventional. A believer of self-governance, biographers claim that MacDonald was an avid denier of social norms that were restrictive of human freedom and critics have regularly noticed the reflection of this trait in his writing. Jack Zipes speaks of this as he states, "[MacDonald] often turned the world upside-down and inside-out in his fairy tales to demonstrate that society as it existed was based on false and artificial values" (xxiii). Zipes later claims that the writer "was . . . interested in the reformation of social character" (107). In that light, Cynthia Marshall claims that "The Day Boy and the Night Girl" "subverts numerous expectations a reader might bring to the genre" (57). Pennington associates MacDonald to a "Dickensian social critic" (312) and Richard Sturch confesses that for a Congregationalist minister, the author's views are "too liberal" (3). In conclusion, critics detect MacDonald's continuous dissatisfaction with conventional social outlook along with his regular and artistic efforts to break away from them, making way for characterizations like Nycteris's.

Female explorer is indeed an oxymoronic term when the idea appears in Victorian literature and MacDonald exhibiting the archetype is also a response to Victorian understanding of gender roles. Domestic values of the period ensured that women did not explore and children did not wander. This is because the nineteenth century British society divided a typical space into the private and the public, creating a social ideology based on two spheres. The ideology, or doctrine, of the separate spheres that therefore dominated the Victorian perception of gender roles believed that women are associated with the domestic world, and men essentially belong to the market or the trade world.⁴ That is, women belong to the inner and private sphere of the society (the home) and men control the public one (outside home). John Ruskin, in "Of Queen's Gardens" (1865), expounds this concept. Ruskin claims that a home, for a Victorian woman, is "a sacred place," and states that the world outside it is full of "terror, doubt, and division" (1588). He clarifies that "home," instead of being the rigid, material, tangible dwelling place from where a person can physically enter or exit, is rather an aura created by an ideal, angelic woman.⁵ According to Ruskin, a typical "angel in the house" is capable of transforming any space into a home by endowing it with her virtues and values. Furthermore, it is the "active, progressive, defensive" man's duty, explains Ruskin, to protect the women in his family from the "danger and temptation" (1588) that the outer world provides, ensuring in

every manner that a woman's true space is only that which is walled by her home. One understands from these explanations how the time and society in which MacDonald was writing his novel assigned distinct spaces exclusively for the two genders to operate in.

The primary spaces that the narrative of "The Day Boy and the Night Girl" stands upon reflect the Victorian separate spheres that MacDonald eventually aims to disrupt. In the story, there are two regions—the topmost story of Watho, the witch's, castle and the chambers beneath its nearby northeastern tower. Photogen, a young boy Watho raises from infancy, grows up in the sunlit story and Nycteris, Watho's another such foster child, grows up in the dark vicinities of the chambers. While the sun eternally shines in Photogen's life, it never appears in Nycteris's. That is, Photogen gets trained by Watho and his caretaker Fargu to "never [sleep] during the day and never [wake] during the night" (MacDonald 171). Conversely, Watho and Nycteris's caretaker, Falca, ensure that she sleeps by the day and wakes by the night so she "never see[s] any light" other than the lamp they place in her chamber (171). Like a warrior, Photogen is taught how to ride horses, perform archery, and hunt. His bringing up "was equal to anything in that kind which the country produced" (172), claims the narrator. Evidently, MacDonald infuses strength and resilience in his male protagonist. Nycteris, the "Night Girl," on the other hand, leads a submissive life, fervently controlled and restricted by Watho. She is only allowed a lamp as a source of light and a musical instrument for pleasure. Hence, at first, MacDonald's novel submits to the idea of separate spheres. Photogen is the child of the public space and Nycteris, evidently, belongs to her home. Photogen frequently visits the outdoors and the space where he regularly wanders contains "rich grass and flowers . . . outlying colony of a great forest" (172). He rides ponies and hunts in the forest. He befriends castle guards and thus gains access to other human beings. In this manner, Photogen is exposed to nature and the habitat outside the four walls of Watho's castle. On the other hand, Nycteris only lives within them. Her chamber represents her 'home,' her literal as well as figurative private sphere. She searches for "more room" (158), but the distance she can travel is readily marked by the radius of the light from her lamp. She thinks of her dwelling space as her "prison" (182). In addition to dividing the novel's environment into two spaces, MacDonald clearly indicates that the public space is brighter than the private one. Arguably, by pairing the sun (day time and light) with the boy's sphere and pairing darkness and gloom with the girl's, in the very beginning of the novel, MacDonald sheds light upon Britain's existing social conditions.

Eventually, MacDonald blurs the boundaries of the two spheres in his novel, and in doing this, he hints at the failure of contemporary gender conventions. At first, Nycteris fits the role of a Victorian woman, but readers

soon discover that she is a desire-infused traveler. A Victorian children's tale that begins with a female protagonist inside a house has its readers typically predict that if she travels outside without the consent of her guardian, she is sure to face social censure.⁶ This is because of the many Victorian stories that discourage the image of a female traveler, or much worse, a female wanderer.⁷ Deborah Epstein Nord explains the nineteenth century idea of female wanderers. She states, in the Victorian period, "the figure of the observer—the rambler, the stroller, the spectator, the flaneur—is a man" (Nord 1) and claims that any woman "of the streets" (Nord 2) is typically regarded fallen.⁸ Nord further asserts that for a nineteenth century onlooker, the *flaneur* can only be a man and there was a "virtual impossibility of the flaneuse" (Nord 11) because "if one could identify the female version of flanerie, it would be prostitution" (Nord 11). Although Nycteris does not wander the streets of a city, her defiance of Watho's order followed by an aimless journey outside of her designated sphere symbolically marks a physical digression of a similar kind. Although Watho ensures that Nycteris is well trained in those seemingly appropriate duties of a young Victorian girl, Nycteris decides to break away as a result of her disapproval of her current living conditions. Speaking about her displeasures, the narrator states,

[Nycteris] knew nothing of the world except the tomb in which she dwelt, and had some pleasure in everything she did. But she desired, nevertheless, something more or different. She did not know what it was, and the nearest she could come to expressing it to herself was—that she wanted more room (MacDonald 173)

Shortly after, Nycteris decides to leave her room.

Nycteris ignores Watho's rules and teachings by persistently wanting to "go out," a desire that the narrator says was "irresistible" (MacDonald 174) to her. Intriguingly, in her understanding, the meaning of *going out* not only suggests going out of the room, but once her lamp breaks and Falca tells her that it has gone out, Nycteris associates *going out* also with death. Presenting such articulation, MacDonald demonstrates how, under Watho's and Falca's care, Nycteris has to associate *going out* with two ideas—leaving her designated space as well as dying. Unafraid, MacDonald's heroine boldly looks for the wall through which Watho and Falca make their entries and exits. She decides to make the trip outside in a particularly dark night. As she accidentally steps on the broken pieces of her fallen lamp, Nycteris understands that the lamp has *gone out*. After mourning its death, she continues with her expedition. Immediately after, she reaches the garden from where she sees the moon and believes that it is "the mother of all lamps" (176). Simultaneously, the narrator, relaying Nycteris's thoughts, states that "*out* was very much like *in*" (MacDonald 175). Hence, by immediately reviving the dead lamp in a new, more glorifying one and by making Nycteris

realize that the outside space is no different than the inner one, MacDonald makes his heroine unrepentant. Not only does he establish the idea that outside is similar to the inside, he also suggests that outside can be a creation of the mind. The narrator asks, “What was it? Was it outside of her, or something taking place in her head?” (MacDonald 176), hinting at Nycteris’s inability to comprehend her newly discovered surrounding. In this way, MacDonald blurs the boundary between the inside and the outside sphere and makes his heroine successfully and impenitently transition from one space to the other.

By introducing the figure of a female explorer, MacDonald does more than confront gender conventions. He engages his narrative with nineteenth century British imperialism as well. MacDonald wrote “The Day Boy and the Night Girl” at a time when British imperialism was at its prime.⁹ Moreover, critics claim that late nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw literature irrepressibly iterate imperialistic themes in them. Perry Nodelman famously writes: “Children’s literature are imperialistic activities” (33). Other critics frequently note and analyze children’s stories under imperialistic themes. For instance, M. Daphne Kutzer notes that children’s stories written in the latter half of the nineteenth century “reflect imperialism and empire as a normal part of the world and often encourage child readers to accept the values of imperialism” (Kutzer xiii). Patrick Brantlinger identifies these child readers as “the future rulers of the world” who, he claims, are the exact people the imperialistic texts aimed to pursue and educate (190). Empire and imperialism is, in Kutzer’s words, “ubiquitous[ly] present” (Kutzer xiv) in literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Imperialism appears in an array of ways in Victorian children’s stories. Typically, a noble male hero leaves home and encounters foreign beings whom he rescues from their conditions. Such narratives occur in works of Haggard Rider. In some stories, the male protagonist rescues them from foreign attacks. Works of H. G. Wells fit such storyline. Although “The Day Boy and the Night Girl” is not a full exception to the trend, intriguingly, Nycteris and Photogen questions some of the conventional imperialistic notions rather than submitting to them.

Kutzer admits that “finding a critique of empire in a children’s text is rare” (Kutzer xiii). However, MacDonald critiques the commonly held ideas regarding empire and imperialism by questioning the fixed patterns of plot and characterization in a typical children’s story that engages with the theme. He proposes that a female character is as much capable of exploring a new space and conquering it as any typical Victorian male. Nycteris’s ambitious movement outside of her sphere, her discovery of new and foreign objects and people, and ultimately, her role in saving Photogen display an innovative take on a children’s imperialist text because in this one, the explorer is female. In the beginning, the narrator introduces Photogen as the

quintessential explorer. There are no limits to where he can go and as Watho and Fargu show him only sunlight, arguably, Photogen, the eponymous “Day Boy,” is comparable to an imperialist who lives in a region where the sun never sets (the region being comparable to the British empire).¹⁰ However, in MacDonald’s perspective, the true explorer does not necessarily rely on the sun, but is capable of moving through the darkness as well. Nycteris is the “Night Girl” who MacDonald initially presents as the exact opposite of the typical explorer, Photogen.

Through Nycteris, MacDonald communicates his progressive ideas on feminine space and femininity by aiming to blur the boundaries not only between gendered spaces, but also between gendered identities. Just like he suggests that for a girl, her inside sphere (home) must not necessarily be different from the outside sphere, he also hints that when performing an action infused with ambition, a girl is not necessarily a very distinct being than a boy. She too can partake in a successful adventure. MacDonald showcases this argument in the scenes that follow Nycteris and Photogen’s meeting. After seeing Photogen for the first time, Nycteris notices that he is frightened of the night. While she comforts him, she utters the words, “You must be a brave girl” (186). To this, Photogen reacts infuriatingly and exclaims, “If you were a man, I should kill you” (186). Immediately after, he admits, “I am not a girl . . . although . . . I have given you too good reason to call me one” (186). While Photogen associates masculinity with strength and femininity with weakness, Nycteris demonstrates that she finds both beings equal and does not consider bravery a gendered trait. Eventually, the narrative furthers the idea by exposing the characters to different times and situations where each of them shines and saves the others as a result of their unique skills and capacities. Being a creature of darkness, Nycteris is able to accompany Photogen by keeping him safe through the night, and having been brought up only at the day time, Photogen helps Nycteris survive the sunlight. In this manner, MacDonald blurs the concepts of gendered traits and spaces and focuses on his characters’ individual abilities.

Following her brief excursion in the narrative, Nycteris soon becomes more and more akin to an explorer as the narrative embeds additional imperialistic qualities to her journey. She is not scared when she steps out of her room and reaches the garden, but only more curious about what she encounters. For instance, as she climbs the stairs, the narrator describes that she has a “curious sensation” (MacDonald 176). When she meets Photogen, she thinks that he is “curiously dressed” (MacDonald 186). In fact, she finds everything about him curious. Her response is thus comparable to how, typically, the British imperialists viewed the native people of the lands they aimed to colonize as told by Brantlinger. As he reflects on the accounts narrated by nineteenth century explorers, Brantlinger

writes:

[They] move from adventure to adventure against a dark, infernal backdrop where there are no other characters of equal stature, only bewitched or demonic savages. Although they sometimes individualize the Africans they encounter, explorers usually portray amusing or dangerous obstacles or *objects of curiosity . . .*" (181; emphasis added)

Unmistakably, Nycteris's exploration follows a similar pattern and feel. When Nycteris first steps out of her room, she does not even know what the wind is. As a gush of wind passes her, she associates it with a "woman's breath" (MacDonald 177). When she sees the moon, she is unable to recognize it, and therefore, names it from an object that she is familiar with. She calls the moon, "[her] lamp" (MacDonald 173). In this manner, the explorer shows that she is uninterested in acknowledging that the foreign objects she encounters indeed have their own identities. Instead, she associates their identities with that of the things she herself knows. John Clement Ball speaks of this imperialist tendency to see foreign beings and objects in a generalized rather than an individualized manners in stories that feature imperialist characters. Hence, while discussing Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), he writes that for the imperialist Max, "the wild things remain unindividualized and unnamed; known only as a collective, they have the 'generic' interchangeable quality" (170).¹² Like Max, Nycteris refuses to give individual names and qualities to what she encounters. That is why, after running into Photogen's nearly unconscious body, Nycteris plainly assumes that he is a girl, just like herself.¹³ The narrator writes, "Reaching it, she stood amazed. Another girl like herself! But what a strange-looking girl!" (MacDonald 186). Seeing the unconscious Photogen, Nycteris receives an urge to tend to him, and therefore, after pulling his head on her lap, she starts caressing him. Her immediate instinct and action reflects Brantlinger's note on missionaries of colonial Britain who explored new places with the idea that the ignorant and the innocent beings of the foreign lands require their help and support—"missionaries see weak, pitiable, inferior mortals who need to be shown the light" (181) and in MacDonald's story, Nycteris acts like one. In this manner, like a Victorian male imperialist and explorer, Nycteris discovers a new world outside of her own, names and confirms its existence using her own vocabulary and knowledge, and finally, realizes that she is the savior of the only other living being she encounters.

Another successful female exploration occurs thirty-two years later when Burnett writes *The Secret Garden* and uses the character of Mary Lennox as a tool to break the boundary between the two gendered spaces of society. Mary, just like Nycteris, defies the rules set by her elders and steps out of the zone she is instructed to remain within. She looks for a hidden

garden, claims the space as her own after discovering it, and ultimately, helps Colin Craven, the novel's male protagonist, survive an illness. If Nycteris's is one of the first female explorations in children's literature that is not a part of a young girl's imagination and at the same time also does not meet with any form of deathly ending, Mary's adventure is definitely a close second. However, what does this kind of similarity between MacDonald and Burnett's storytelling mean? The beginning of this essay presents a brief account of intertexts on Burnett's novel. Arguably, "The Day Boy and the Night Girl" is another such "hidden" intertext that is under-explored in *The Secret Garden's* intertextual analysis. Burnett borrows the essence of Nycteris in her story, and more importantly, gives Mary Lennox, Nycteris's literary descendent, a more compelling storyline. In what follows, Mary's narrative undergoes thematic to structural similarities with Nycteris's.

Mary Lennox, the daughter of an English government official working in India, becomes orphaned very early in the novel. Her uncle, the mysterious Archibald Craven, sends for her from Yorkshire and gives her shelter in the grand Misselthwaite Manor by the moors. Although he is Mary's official guardian, Mr. Craven refuses to meet with her and assigns Mrs. Medlock to look after her. Mrs. Medlock, the stern housekeeper who Mary finds very disagreeable, sets rules for Mary and appoints Martha Sowerby, the kitchen maid, to make sure she follows them. Mary is allowed to play outside in the gardens, but Mrs. Medlock forbids her to explore the inside chambers of the manor. After Mary hears that the compounds of the manor host a secret, hidden garden that has been locked ever since Mrs. Craven died ten years ago, Mary devotes her every waking hour to look for the garden and the key that opens its door. Meanwhile, Mary encounters two boys. First, she meets Dickon, Martha's brother, who is a child of nature in every way. Dickon carries extensive knowledge on plants and animals and eventually, he teaches Mary to communicate with birds and plant seeds in the gardens. Mary also discovers Colin Craven, Mr. Craven's ailing, ten-year-old son. Colin, she learns, has always been hidden from outsiders and therefore, has never been out of the manor. Colin tells Mary that everyone in the manor, himself included, and the doctor who sees him, believe that he won't live very long. With a red robin's help, Mary discovers the secret garden and with Dickon's help, Mary urges Colin to visit the garden. Gradually, the fresh air and the beauty of the garden that the children call magic, and that the children discover once belonged to Colin's mother, help the crippled Colin recover and able to walk.

One of the first things that attracts Mary about Misselthwaite manor is the number of rooms it has. Mrs. Medlock tells her, "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" (Burnett 14). Just

like Nycteris discovers that there has to be “more room,” Mary, in awe of the numerous rooms in the manor, begins exploring the house despite facing discouragement from the staff. At the same time, just like Watho, the primary, but absent warden, with Falca’s help, restrict Nycteris from travelling about, Mr. Craven, the absent guardian, is unable to encourage Mary to explore and Mrs. Medlock, Mary’s immediate caretaker, restricts her movements to a great degree. Eventually, both the girls reach a garden and while one is aided by a firefly, the other is helped by a redbreast robin. One of the most noticeable difference between their explorations is that Nycteris wanders aimlessly in search of more space and freedom. On the other hand, Mary fosters great ambition and intention within her to find the secret, locked garden. In their explorations, both the girls meet with an ailing boy. While the night is an unfamiliar time and space for Photogen, the outside and the daylight is an unfamiliar and untrodden space for Colin. Eventually, both Nycteris and Mary help their companions conquer their fear and live.

MacDonald uses his heroine to fade the boundaries between the private and the public sphere. Similarly, Burnett’s heroine skillfully negotiates her position between the two spaces as well. Mary constantly questions rules and conventions and expresses her dissatisfaction with them. By speaking of girls and their necessity to limit their minds as well as steps during the time these stories were written, Mary Jeanette Moran writes: “According to patriarchal standards, women develop a bad reputation by ‘knowing’ too much, whether that knowledge is about sexuality, politics, or science” (33). However, Burnett makes her character very curious and hungry for knowledge. At a point, hearing Mary’s endless questions, Ben Weatherstaff, the old gardener, exclaims, “Don’t tha’ ask so many questions. Tha’rt th’ worst wench for askin’ questions I’ve ever come a cross” (Burnett 70), in his native Yorkshire tongue. The elders in the manor, like Mrs. Medlock and Ben Weatherstaff, and even Martha Sowerby, discourage Mary’s need of knowledge. However, intriguingly, every time Mary receives an answer from a question she has been discouraged to ask, she benefits physically as well as mentally from it. For instance, when Mrs. Medlock and Mary first travel toward Yorkshire, Mary asks the meaning of moors, as she had never seen them before, but she receives no answer from Mrs. Medlock. Upon seeing the moors herself the next day, Mary is delighted by them. Mary frequently asks Martha if she can hear someone crying and Martha always states that she cannot. When Mary finally discovers the source of the cry she always heard, she discovers Colin and eventually finds out that he is her very own cousin. Mary is also immensely curious about Dickon, and after she meets him, the two develop a deep bond of friendship. Mary endlessly wonders about the secret garden and naturally, following the pattern of curiosity leading to a happy discovery, finding the garden becomes her

greatest accomplishment in Misselthwaite Manor. In this manner, it is Mary's constant curiosity and what Moran calls, "active knowledge at work" (33), and *not* her ability to become an "angel in the house," that helps her turn Misselthwaite into her home.¹⁴

Mary's attitude toward the gender norms differs as much as Nycteris's does and her adventure at Misselthwaite is as imperialist in nature as Nycteris's is in Watho's castle. In fact, Mary starts representing a colonizer so much that when Mr. Craven once asks what she wants, she directly asks for land:

"Is there anything you want?" [Mr. Craven asks] as if a sudden thought had struck him. "Do you want toys, books, dolls?"

"Might I," quavered Mary, "might I have a bit of earth?"

In her eagerness she did not realize how queer the words would sound and that they were not the ones she had meant to say. Mr. Craven looked quite startled.

"Earth!" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

"To plant seeds in—to make things grow—to see them come alive," Mary faltered. (Burnett 86)

When Mary asks for the "bit of earth," she already has her eyes set on the particular land she wants to use for herself. Hence, the meeting with Mr. Craven and her asking for permission is, possibly, comparable to a typical scene of negotiation between a colonizer and a native personal. Bratlinger explains: "Early Victorians did not call themselves imperialists or bang the drum for territorial expansion – they travelled the world as advocates of free trade" (55). In Mary's case, she holds a conversation with Mr. Craven in similar vein:

"Do you—care about gardens so much," he said slowly.

"I didn't know about them in India," said Mary. "I was always ill and tired and it was too hot. I sometimes made little beds in the sand and stuck flowers in them. But here it is different."

Mr. Craven got up and began to walk slowly across the room.

"A bit of earth," he said to himself, and Mary thought that somehow she must have reminded him of something. When he stopped and spoke to her his dark eyes looked almost soft and kind.

"You can have as much earth as you want," he said. "You remind me of some one else who loved the earth and things that grow. When you see a bit of earth you want," with something like a smile, "take it, child, and make it come alive."

"May I take it from anywhere—if it's not wanted?"

"Anywhere," he answered. (87)

Mary takes careful attention in not revealing that the earth she wants has already been claimed by her and she has already started to plant flowers in

it, without seeking the owner's permission. She has even appointed Dickon as her confidant and a helping hand for her work at the garden. However, while speaking with Mr. Craven, Mary hides some details conveniently in the conversation such that if he ever is to discover Mary has invaded his secret and forbidden garden, Mr. Craven isn't able to charge her for it. Although performed involuntarily in Mary's part, the scene also witnesses a silent trade between the two speakers. In return for the permission to personalize "a bit of earth [from] anywhere" in the Misselthwaite compound, Mary bestows the widower Mr. Craven with good memories of his deceased wife. Hence, in exchange for a brief moment of happiness, Mr. Craven gives Mary his permission.

Although as explorers, both Nycteris and Mary encounter a new world in a garden, their response towards the newly discovered space is different. As discussed before, Nycteris refuses to give the objects and people she encounters individuality and attempts to define and describe them in her own terms and words. Mary, on the other hand, behaves like an experienced colonizer. She demonstrates this by attempting to learn Dickon and Martha's native Yorkshire tongue despite having initial trouble with it and lacking respect for it. When Martha first asks Mary a question in her native tongue, Mary says, "What do you mean? I don't understand your language" (Burnett 22). However, when Mary realizes that she wants Martha's brother Dickon's help, she begins learning and speaking Yorkshire. As Mary once seeks to ask Dickon a question, the narrator says, "Then Mary did a strange thing. She leaned forward and asked him a question she had never dreamed of asking any one before. And she tried to ask it in Yorkshire because that was his language, and in India a native was always pleased if you knew his speech" (Burnett 80). Thus, to speak with the native people in their own language is not an impulse, but Mary's strategic move.

From converting gender expectations to distinguishing themselves as *female* imperialists in successful missions, Nycteris and Mary come to children's literature as strong and influential heroines. While Nycteris, preceding Mary by three decades, influences her creation, Mary, a part of a children's classic, influences the rest to come. For instance, Moran speaks of Nancy Drew, the young, late twentieth century fictional girl detective, in the same light. Comparing her with Mary, Moran expresses that Nancy's popularity lies in her unfemininity (Gavin and Routledge 33). However, a celebration of unfeminine traits was highly criticized at the time Burnett wrote fiction. Moran also evokes Shirley Foster and Judy Simons's account on how nineteenth century and early twentieth century female authors, especially those who wrote for children, faced censure on multiple levels. Foster and Simons write: "Women writers of juvenile fiction in the period under discussion constituted a specially marginalized group writing for an

equally disregarded audience” (20). Furthermore, the critics express that not only did the market and the editors put women writers of children’s literature at the bottom of the “literary hierarchy,” but their contemporary societies contributed to the authors’ “self-deprecating views of their own achievements” (20) as well. Hence, if we are to truly understand under what conditions Burnett created the unruly and arguably unfeminine Mary Lennox and succeeded to turn her story into a children’s classic, any sign of influence, self-assurance, and encouragement she has received from her predecessor (MacDonald) suggests that without it, the classic would not even have been attempted in the first place. While looking at *The Secret Garden’s* intertexts, Pennington thoughtfully concludes: “Intertextual references connect the novel to the larger literary tradition and weigh the text with a kind of gravitas that cements it as a literary classic” (89). Closely following this observation, I claim that in addition, the intertextual references also help trace the beginnings of a literary lineage that produces innovative characters. The lineage strengthens as it continues and with every addition to the line, the predeceasing characters gain newer meanings and interpretations as well. My argument follows the ideas on literary figures and influences presented in T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1921) very closely. In the essay, Eliot famously writes: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead . . . (38). Therefore, seeing the innovative female characterization in Burnett’s novel, this essay identifies MacDonald as the metaphorical “dead poet” that has to be valued to fully comprehend Burnett’s genius. Eliot further adds:

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them . . . the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. (38)

The archetype of the female explorer, thus, begins with Nycteris and Mary continues the lineage. Together, they form the “existing monuments” and any female character that enters the line, not only strengthens it, but also makes it possible for scholars to critically investigate newer nuances to the predeceasing character.

Endnotes

1. In her biography of Frances Hodgson Burnett, Ann Thwaite mentions Burnett’s letter sent to Manchester in 1872 where she writes that she was rejoiced by the sound of “literary lions roaring in the drawing-rooms” (Thwaite 44) upon meeting and hearing the conversations of George MacDonald, Bret Hart, and W.

H. Auden.

2. According to Humphrey Carpenter, “The expression ‘Golden Age’ is often applied to the period of English children’s books from Carroll to Milne. In his notes, Carpenter traces the use of the term back to Roger Lancelyn Green’s essay, “The Golden Age of Children’s Books” (1962).
3. By successful, I look at those adventures by female characters that do not happen in their dreams or any other figment of imagination (like Alice’s in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* [1865] by Lewis Carroll). Also, these adventures do not harm or kill the female characters like what happens to the Lady in Alfred Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1832).
4. The way Victorians viewed the separate spheres was arguably different from what Jurgen Habermas expresses in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) about the concept in the eighteenth century. Erika Rappaport reminds us that Habermas “understood the public as a realm that emerged in the eighteenth century, in the ‘world of letters’—in the press, the coffeehouse, clubs, discussion societies and salons” (78). She further explains, “Habermas wrote of the public as the space between the private world of the economy and the home and the public world of the state” (78)
5. In 1854, Coventry Patmore, an English poet, wrote a narrative poem titled, “Angel in the House.” Captivated by his wife’s virtues, Patmore dedicated his entire work to his wife, Emily Andrews. The poem tells how Emily continually proved that she is a woman righteous enough to be compared with an angel. “Her countenance [is] angelical,” Patmore writes in one of the cantos. Writing intensely about Emily’s merits as a wife, Patmore indicated that Emily is an ideal Victorian woman. Although at that time, the poem was primarily a man’s expression of admiration and gratitude towards his wife, in the later years, “Angel in the House” became more than just a poem. It became a popular term for Victorians, and especially for the critics of the following centuries, to assess the womanly virtues of any Victorian lady.
6. For instance, Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862)
7. Namely, Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Bleak House* (1853), Alfred Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1842), Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Ruth* (1853), George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), D. G. Rossetti’s “Jenny” (1848), Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862)
8. Amanda Anderson states that fallen woman is “a wide umbrella term” that applies to “a range of feminine identities: prostitutes, unmarried women who engage in sexual relations with men, victims of seduction, adulteresses, as well as variously delinquent lower-class women” (2). Fallen women, thus, were the victims of varieties of social situations. Typically, a fallen woman is a title given to a woman who undergoes a sexual transgression. She is someone who has become ‘impure’ by having lost her innocence (virginity) before marriage. In the nineteenth-century society, a fallen woman was regarded as someone who

has fallen from her moral status because she has entertained her sexual desires outside of the sanction of the society.

9. In 1867, Queen Victoria was crowned the empress of India.
10. During Great Britain's rule, the country's colonies ranged from East to West, making the statement "the sun never sets on the British empire" possible and true. Although there is still debate on who coined the phrase, Scottish author, John Wilson, is often given the credit for coming up with it in *Blackwood Magazine* in 1829.
11. In Roderick McGillis's interpretation of the scene, he claims that MacDonald's representation of Photogen is "queer" rather than "feminine" (88).
12. Ball associates his observation with JanMohamed's "colonialist discourses of alterity" (170) in his essay, "Economy."
13. Although she realizes that Photogen is a human being, she calls him a creature: "What great huge breaths the *creature* took! And what were those curious things it carried?" (MacDonald 176; emphasis added).
14. As mentioned in the text, Ruskin states that a true Victorian angelic woman doesn't have to find a home, but her virtues have the capacity to build a home around her, wherever she is.

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