

## «I know I'm fatter»: hunger and bodily awareness in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article analyses the connection between food, hunger, and child health in Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 children's novel *The Secret Garden*. It combines food in children's literature theory, medical history, and body studies, and specifically it draws from Pasi Falk's concept of *corporeality*, which conceives the human body as a sensual and sensorial entity (1994). Within this theoretical framework, the article reads *The Secret Garden* as the account of the two child protagonists' corporealization, that is, their transition from incorporeality (which coincides with lack of hunger, disconnection from one's own body, and illness), to corporeality (which coincides with hunger, awareness of one's physicality, and health). Tracing the two children's progress from illness/incorporeality to health/corporeality, the article contributes to position the novel within the Victorian and Edwardian medical discourse about child nutrition and healthy child physicality; in this analysis food emerges as a key-element to both the corporealization process in the story, as a sensorial stimulant, and to the novel's engagement with debates about child nutrition and health in its cultural and historical context.

**Key Words** – Food studies; children's literature; medical history; Victorian culture; Frances Hodgson Burnett; corporeality

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## 1. Observing corporealization in *The Secret Garden*

The Romantic notion of childhood, popular throughout the nineteenth century, conceived the child as an inherently innocent and pure source of beauty and wisdom<sup>2</sup>. To those familiar with this idea, the opening lines of Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden* (1911) may sound somewhat startling:

When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle, everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. It was true, too. She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression. Her hair was yellow, and her face was yellow, because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another. (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 1)

Studies on *The Secret Garden* often remark on this opening<sup>3</sup>, and with reason: that a children's author should make a central character so unpleasant from the very first page is surprising, even more so since said author is the same who penned saintly, beautiful, and thoroughly likeable Cedric Erroll, the titular character of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1884). Mary Lennox, instead, is *not* likable, and the narrator drives the point home stating that her disagreeableness was not just a misguided opinion, but was «true, too» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 1). At the beginning of the book, Mary is indeed despotic, rude, selfish, and violent; however, while introducing her character, the narrator does not discuss her personality, but minutely describes her sickly body, which is explicitly «disagreeable-looking» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 1). In *The Secret Garden*, Hodgson Burnett is invested in discussing healthy-versus-unhealthy physicalities and mental states. Scholars have noted connections between the novel and Victorian and Edwardian medical debates around healing and chronic illness, that locate it within the wider early-twentieth-century debate about medicine and invalidism<sup>4</sup>. Combining food in children's literature theory, medical history, and body studies I address the narrative's engagement with these debates reading *The Secret Garden* as a novel about physical healing.

In an age in which interest in child health was increasing among medical people and the lay public alike, thanks to the popularization of science, Hodgson Burnett depicts Mary Lennox and her cousin, Colin Craven, as two unhealthy children. They are unhappy, too, because their parents, who should care for them, deny their existence. Their bodies are therefore not only unhealthy but quite insubstantial, and uncared for, also by Mary and Colin themselves, who begin their respective journeys unaware of their own bodily feelings and needs. By the end of the narrative, they become aware of their physical bodies, which heal, and so do their minds. This process happens simultaneously to the resurrection of the eponymous secret garden, which was locked and left to wither and die by Colin's father; it is perhaps because of the high degree of symbolism in this revivification that scholars tend to focus on the psychological side of Mary and Colin's healing, and consider their physical healing an outward sign of their inner evolvment<sup>5</sup>. By contrast, this article foregrounds physical healing to better locate the novel and its interest for un/healthy bodies within the debate about the nature of childhood and un/ideal child physicalities in Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

I shall focus on the narrative's discussion of un/healthy child bodies and compare it to popular medical literature on child health. Specifically, I argue that descriptions of un/healthy bodies in *The Secret Garden* constitute the observation of a corporealization process. The term corporealization I use here derives from the concept of *corporeality* theorized by Pasi Falk (1994), which considers the body, not solely a biological entity, but one characterized by «experientiality», a «sensory and sensual

<sup>2</sup> See for example Daniel (2006: 12) and Hunt (1991: 59).

<sup>3</sup> Some examples include: Lennox Keyser (1983); Wilkie (1997); Price (2001); Holmes (2011); Bakshi-Hamm (2012);

<sup>4</sup> Holmes (2011); Stiles (2015); Valint (2016).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Phillips (1993) and Wilkie (1997).

being» that is impacted by, and connected with, a network of «social and cultural liaisons» (1994: 2 author's emphasis). Observing how Mary and Colin's bodily descriptions evolve through their narrative arcs, it is possible to trace a change from a ghostly state of physical and social non-entity, caused by parental rejection and coinciding with a state of unhealth, to a physically present and aware state coinciding with the recovery of health. I will trace this path concentrating on one pivotal aspect of the human physical experience of the world, namely, food and eating. The two children move from rejecting food and feeding, i.e. sustenance, to developing a healthy crave for nutritious food to feed their increasingly strong bodies, and to partaking into veritable orgies of food as they bloom together with the secret garden. I contend that, from this perspective, the novel is as much about mental healing as it is about, literally, acquiring substance. Indeed, mental and physical healing intertwine in the narrative in a positive cycle that combines movement, hunger, and happiness that reflects Victorian and Edwardian popular medical advice about child nutrition and health.

### 1.1 Medicine, food, and the healthy child

The conversation about child health in nineteenth-century Britain involved different spheres, from medicine to politics, from pedagogy to philanthropy, and originated in the movement of rediscovery of childhood started in the previous century, with the rise of the nuclear family formed by parents and children. From the eighteenth century onwards, medical progress, and the improved life conditions industrial revolution created, decreased child mortality rates; parents invested more time and money in children's well-being and education, and the child acquired increasing prominence both within the family and in society. Greater prominence meant greater attention; the nature of childhood and childrearing methods became objects of debate, generating two opposing views on childhood: the Romantic view believed children's closeness nature made them *naturally* innocent and wise; the opposite, informed by Evangelical notions about sin and self-control, maintained that children's closeness to nature made them *naturally* wild and sinful, and in need of guidance. The first considered childhood a privileged condition; the latter perceived it as a dangerously primitive state. This second view sometimes reverberated in nineteenth-century scientific discourses about children. Katharina Boehm (2013) examines the diffusion, in mid-nineteenth-century, of medical manuals on child health among a non-specialist public, which I would read as a consequence of parents' increased personal investment in children's health. As Boehm notes, the medical authors of these texts often compared sick children to animals, foreign countries, and foreign people, particularly from cultural contexts that Victorians considered underdeveloped – the so-called savages (2013: 49-51). These comparisons to entities that mainstream culture perceived as inferior othered children's bodies in scientific discourse (Boehm 2013: 13). Later in the century, Social Darwinism, which aimed to harness Darwin's theories of evolution (1859) to obtain an ideal society, raised concerns about the possibility that children, from their liminal state, might not step upwards, towards culture, but downwards, towards animality and savagery, impacting the successful evolution of the British race<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, from a scientific and social perspective, children generated two chief anxieties: first, would they survive their first year of life, and second, in case they did, how were adults to prevent them from degenerating into savages, with dire consequences for society?

Food and nutrition played a crucial role in addressing this twofold problem. Correct nutrition ensured a strong frame and prevented digestive complications, particularly dangerous for infants and

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<sup>6</sup> In this article, the term *race* refers to the concept related to Victorian colonialist ideology and its use in nineteenth-century scientific discourse; it does not reflect the author's own views on ethnicity and cultural diversity. For a discussion of the impact of Social Darwinist theories on childcare and children's publications, see Moruzi (2012).

regarded as problematic throughout childhood<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, as scholars from different areas observe, it is through food and eating practices that children first learn, I would say literally assimilate, their culture. Food historian Massimo Montanari defines food as an inherently cultural object whose processes of production, preparation, and consumption are rooted into culturally-determined choices about what to eat and how (2006: xi–xii). Studies on food in children’s literature also stress the cultural dimension of food: Carolyn Daniel emphasizes the didactic role of this element in children’s narratives, arguing that food scenes «teach children how to be human», conveying basic nutrition rules (2006: 12). Keeling and Pollard define food a «prime cultural mover» in children’s books: as they write, «[f]ood makes things happen» (2009: 13).

Therefore, in relation to children food assumes a didactic function that works at different levels, including character formation: British Victorian and Edwardian pedagogy, dating back to Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), and drawing from Evangelical views of children as sinful, was mostly devoted to controlling children’s appetites, to check their alleged natural savagery and untamedness and build their character (Daniel 2006: 41-42). Daniel notes the impact of this idea on child health texts, notably on Sir William Cadogan’s *Essay Upon Nursing* (1748) and the extremely successful *Advice to a Mother on the Management of her Children* by Dr Pye Henry Chavasse (1868) (2006: 65). Medical authors, indeed, addressed nutrition with a moralistic attitude: Andrew Combe, for example, advises parents never to give children «wine, fruit, and confections» because «nothing but mischief can follow from the indulgence»: «[t]he mere sight of food or drink is an infallible stimulus to the infant appetite» (1860: 193). Chavasse, similarly prejudiced against sweet foods, states: «If a child be never allowed to eat cakes and sweetmeats, he will consider a piece of dry bread a luxury, and will eat it with the greatest relish» (1868: 108). From these passages emerges a general notion of the child as the triumph of flesh over will, of instinct over reason, hence their appetite must be checked.

So, what *did* children eat? According to common Victorian and Edwardian practice, informed by medicine and Lockean pedagogy – not much, really. Of course, class made a considerable difference: working-class and poor children had access to much less food, and of far inferior quality, compared to their better-off counterparts. This article, however, concerns middle-to-upper class children and their diet, because both children’s books and child health manuals targeted the middle- and upper-class public, and Mary and Colin, the child protagonists of *The Secret Garden*, are upper-middle-class children. Within the secluded space of the nursery, where in well-to-do Victorian households children lived under the care of a nanny, not to interfere with the adults of the family, a child would receive fare that, though planned to keep them healthy, lacked variety and taste. According to Chavasse,

[a youth] should have plenty of plain wholesome nourishing food, but no rich dishes [...] Let him have only plain roast and boiled; no rich stews, or rich hashes, or highly-seasoned soups or gravies. A joint, a pudding, and one or two kinds of vegetables, are all that are necessary for a boy or girl. (1868: 139)

The joint, he explained, should change daily from beef, to mutton, to lamb, and sometimes veal (1868: 140). For children, instead, Chavasse advised a dinner of «meat, either mutton or beef, daily, which [...] should be mixt with mealy *mashed* potato and gravy» (1868: 102, emphasis in original). In case nothing else was available, «a grilled mutton chop, or a lightly-boiled egg» would do (1868: 103). Besides the omnipresent potato, a child could have «asparagus, or brocoli, or

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<sup>7</sup> In *On the Management of Infancy* Charles Hogg defined infancy as «that period of life which extends from birth to the end of the second year» (1849: 14). Childhood, however, was a fluid concept for Victorians: Boehm observes that Victorian medicine’s idea of child «could easily extend into the twenties», although for example the Great Ormond Street Hospital conceived childhood «as the age between two and twelve» (2013: 12).

cauliflower, or turnips, or French beans», but only «occasionally» (1868: 103); both breakfast and supper consisted of boiled milk poured on sliced bread and bread and butter (1868: 98; 105).

Observing the inherent moral component of the nursery regimen, Daniel argues that its true purpose was not good health, but good morals (2006: 68). On the other hand, towards the end of the century, in *The Essentials of School Diet*, Clement Dukes, physician at Rugby School, declares that his book's purpose was «the production of the finest specimens of the race» (1899: viii). I would therefore venture that, in children's diet, the moral component and the appropriately strong and healthy body were indeed inseparable.

## 1.2 Food in *The Secret Garden* – inappetence and excess, savagery and health

To scholars approaching *The Secret Garden* from a food studies angle, it appears evident that food scenes here present much larger portions and far richer dishes than what was common in British nursery fare. Mary starts by refusing to eat her breakfast porridge and ends up feasting on roast eggs and buttered potatoes; we meet Colin as a fastidious eater, and we leave him gorging himself on fresh milk and currant buns. Several factors in this change relate to the medical and food culture outlined above.

First, there is the matter of the author's own upbringing: even in the absence of hard proofs, there is room for speculation about the impact of some events of her life on food scenes in *The Secret Garden*. Frances Hodgson Burnett was born and raised in England until she was fifteen, then her mother moved the family to America where she hoped to improve their economic situation. The transatlantic move, however, did not produce the expected results, and the family lived in poverty, until Frances started writing stories for ladies' magazines; Hodgson Burnett, in short, had a background as a poor, hungry child<sup>8</sup>. Daniel identifies food fantasies as a typical trait of British children's literature, where the author conjures delicious food to make up for a past situation of deprivation – be it a famine, poverty, or the austere nursery regime (2006: 62-64). I would venture that food in *The Secret Garden* is an example of just such instance, and for this reason I slightly disagree with Gillian Avery's reading of the impact of Hodgson Burnett's American experience. The American nursery diet encompassed a wide range of foods most of which were rich and caloric beyond a British child's wildest dreams (Daniel 2006: 64-71; Avery 1994: 158). Avery acknowledges the role of food in contributing to Mary and Colin's «metamorphosis», but she reads its incongruous American richness as a lustful remembrance of childhood food, which «betray[s] Mrs Hodgson Burnett's American background» (1994: 158). While I do agree with Avery on the importance of food in Mary and Colin's evolution, given Hodgson Burnett's underprivileged childhood I would suggest it is more likely she encountered the rich American child fare while raising her own children, whose upbringing was far more comfortable than her own.

Another point to consider, which I will discuss in the next pages, is the nature of food in *The Secret Garden*, where *nature* is a crucial word. The novel emphasises the genuineness of the food Mary and Colin consume in the garden: it is sweet, nutritious, home-made food provided in secret by Susan Sowerby, a working-class woman living in the Misselthwaite estate and mother to Martha and Dickon, two key-characters in Mary and Colin's development from unhealthy to healthy. Under her care, Mary and Colin consume «rich new milk with cream on the top of it» drinking it straight from the pail, and «cottage-made currant buns folded in a clean blue and white napkin» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 290). Notably, this genuine food is associated to a working-class woman of limited means and her healthy children. Boehm summarizes the notion of ideal middle-class childhood as being «antithetical to the experience of the poor» (2013: 82); *The Secret Garden* challenges this class prejudice, juxtaposing Mary and Colin to the Sowerby children. Upper-class Mary and Colin have

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<sup>8</sup> The biographical details of Hodgson Burnett's life in this article are from Carpenter and Shirley's *Frances Hodgson Burnett - Beyond the Secret Garden* (1990).

been raised in their respective nurseries by dedicated staff, and yet, these apparently ideal environments are unfit for children. Mary, born and raised in India, is the daughter of an English government official and his pretty, socialite wife. The first is too busy with his work, and the second with her parties, to care about Mary: indeed, Mary's mother «had not wanted a little girl at all» and thrust the baby in the care of her Indian Ayah, whose task is to keep Mary out of sight and earshot, lest she disturbs «Memsahib» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 1). Mary grows up a tyrannical, self-centred child who verbally and physically abuses her carers. The hot Indian climate makes her languid and spoils her appetite, and the novel frames her thin, small, bilious body as a direct consequence of such circumstances. As for Colin, he was born the day his mother died, his premature birth a consequence of her fall from a tree in the eponymous secret garden; everybody is certain he will not survive childhood, that his spine will deform and he will die. His father Archibald, distraught with grief and unable to bear the sight of Colin's eyes, «so like and yet so horribly unlike» his late mother's (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 330), recoils from the child, entrusts him to the care of his servants and spends his time travelling Europe. Colin's lonely, heavily medicalized upbringing is marked by eavesdropped conversations about his imminent disability and death. He becomes a despotic, self-centred hypochondriac prone to violent tantrums. Mary and Colin are, in short, feral children, even though they are the product of ostensibly well-to-do domestic environments. Their nature of domestic feral children is juxtaposed to that of the Sowerby children: Martha, who becomes Mary's maid at Misselthwaite, Dickon, a boy of twelve with an almost preternatural connection with the moor's nature, and their eight siblings. The Sowerbys are poor cottagers and food at home is scarce; yet, the children present a «collection of sturdy little bodies and round, red-cheeked faces» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 332). Their health and happy disposition is ascribed to their living mostly outdoor: as Martha says, «they tumble about on th' moor an' play there all day, an' mother says th' air of th' moor fattens 'em. She says she believes they eat th' grass same as th' wild ponies do» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 34). Not for the little Sowerbys the sheltered environment of the nursery, then, but the open space of nature, where their unchecked tumbling and playing, like wild ponies, reframes the savagery connected to childhood in a positive key. I would contend that *The Secret Garden* identifies two juxtaposed manifestations of children's not entirely civilized nature, only one of which is acceptable: *wildness*, where the child adopts the carefree but innocent behaviour of free wildlife and is in a good position to be gradually acculturated; and *savagery*, which instead denotes the feral child who rejects culture. While the two states echo the Romantic-Evangelical polarization addressed above, the novel suggests that the controlling space of the nursery does not necessarily produce ideal children, and those growing outside of it are not necessarily savage<sup>9</sup>. What interests me here is that the wild-savage dichotomy corresponds to two opposed physical manifestations of healthy childhood: while the first is associated with health, healthy hunger, and an aware experience of the world, the second is marked by lack of health, a preoccupying lack of appetite, and disconnection from the world and one own's bodily experience of it.

At the opening of the narrative, Mary and Colin have not yet met. When a cholera epidemic wipes out her whole Indian household, leaving Mary the only survivor, she is sent to England to live with her Yorkshire uncle, Archibald Craven, at Misselthwaite Manor. In this Gothic space, labyrinthine and full of locked rooms, she learns that local maids and menservants are entirely unimpressed by her rudeness. The rustic but kind Martha Sowerby, her new maid, first spurs Mary to play outside the house, exposing her weak body to the invigorating freshness of the moor wind. During her lonely perambulations, she starts looking for the mysterious garden that her uncle has locked, burying the key afterwards, out of grief for his wife's death. Though she has been forbidden to explore the spaces beyond the nursery, stubborn and independent Mary goes exploring nonetheless, and makes two

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<sup>9</sup> For studies on nature as an ideal, idyllic space for growth in *The Secret Garden*, see for example: Phillips (1993); Darcy (1995); Goodwin (2011).

discoveries. The first is the buried key and door to the secret garden. The plants in there seem dead, but her new friend, Dickon Sowerby, assures her they only need a little care to be brought back to life; the garden becomes a safe space where Mary performs healthy gardening activities that soothe her mind and strengthen her body. The second discovery is the source of the mysterious voice Mary has heard crying pitifully through the night: it belongs to her cousin Colin, who lies bed-ridden at the heart of the gloomy manor and is as violent and temperamental as Mary was in India. Frances Dolan observes, however, that readers almost expects Mary and Colin to improve, perhaps due to the «long didactic tradition in children’s literature» (2013: 206). Indeed, as one with the secret garden, revived through a combination of gardening skills and «Magic», a word that in the novel merges positive thinking and supernatural paganism<sup>10</sup>, weak, sickly, and disagreeable Mary and Colin become healthy, strong and happy. At the end of the story, Colin triumphantly walks on his own legs out of the secret garden, running straight into the arms of his bewildered father, who has returned after dreaming that his late wife called to him from the garden. Father and son return to the manor, where Colin will take his rightful place as prospective lord of Misselthwaite. Mary is conspicuously absent from this scene: she gradually fades from the narrative, until only a glorious, masculine, and powerful Colin is left. The book does indeed open with «When Mary Lennox» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 1) and closes with «Master Colin!» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 341).

Scholars divide themselves between positive and negative interpretations of Mary’s absence. Dolan notes that readers tend to forget Mary’s progressive disappearance (2013: 206); Lennox Keyser attributes this to Colin becoming «less memorable» as he grows «conventionally attractive» (1983: 3), while strong, independent Mary sticks to readers’ memories. I would agree that Colin’s ascent to self-crowned spiritual and intellectual leadership of the group in the garden, composed of himself, Mary, Dickon, and Ben Weatherstaff the gardener, paradoxically makes him far less likeable compared to his reclusive, hypochondriac self. Again, however, I would suggest that we can better understand Mary’s apparent decline and Colin’s rise looking at their respective narrative arcs as corporealization narratives. As I discuss later, Mary and Colin’s corporealization turns them into two ideal Victorian/Edwardian children, who must conform to certain health and gender norms. From this perspective, Mary has an initial advantage over Colin, her stubbornness and strength allowing her to move towards healing and complete corporealization much faster than her cousin. From this viewpoint, Colin’s corporealization is a greater success to celebrate for the narrative.

## **2. Unideal and unhealthy: ghostly children and unperceiving bodies**

### **2.1 Revenants and disembodied voices: Mary and Colin as ghosts**

Goodwin identifies a tripartite spatial division in *The Secret Garden*: India, where «deadly vapours and punishing heat» cause «physical, moral and spiritual lassitude»; Misselthwaite Manor, «whose inmates languish in a Gothic maze of dark lonely rooms»; and the gardens and natural landscape, «alive with secret power to breathe spirit back into dying matter» (2011: 106). The «dying matter», I would say, includes Mary and Colin, as they begin their respective narrative arcs as two ghostly children. They are unwanted, hidden, and silenced or unheard by the people who should care about their wellbeing; the staff charged with their care dislikes them: Mary is aware that her Indian Ayah «didn’t like [her]» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 45), and the Misselthwaite staff is «tired» of Colin’s tantrums (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 203). Their bodies become matter out of place and are kept out of sight, until the manifestation of their presence becomes a frightful event. At the beginning of the

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<sup>10</sup> On the combination of quasi-religious thought and the supernatural in *The Secret Garden*, see for example Wilkie (1997) and Stiles (2015).

novel, Mary wakes up alone in her nursery and she hears strangers' voices in her house. It would be reasonable for her to be scared, under the circumstances; instead, it is her sudden appearance that startles the two officers who have come to inspect the bungalow after the cholera epidemics:

Mary was standing in the middle of the nursery [...]. She looked an ugly, cross little thing and was frowning because she was beginning to be hungry and feeling disgracefully neglected. The first man who came in [...] looked tired and troubled, but when he saw her he was so startled that he almost jumped back.

[...] 'There is a child here! A child [...] in a place like this! Mercy on us, who is she?' (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 7)

The cry reads far more alarmed than the sudden appearance of a child would warrant. The man's fright, his allusion to Mary's house as «a place like this» – as if his loath were too big for words – and Mary's unnerving looks lend to stuffy India a hint of Gothic atmosphere. As for Misselthwaite Manor, it is haunted by its own ghost: Colin first enters the novel as an eerie disembodied wail in the night:

[...] as she was listening to the wind [Mary] began to listen to something else. [...] It was a curious sound – it seemed almost as if a child was crying somewhere. Sometimes the wind sounded like a child crying, but presently Mistress Mary felt quite sure that this sound was inside the house, not outside it. She turned round and looked at Martha.

'Do you hear anyone crying?' she said.

Martha suddenly looked confused.

'No,' she answered. [...]

And at that very moment [...] a great rushing draught blew along the passage and the door of the room they sat in was blown open with a crash, and as they both jumped to their feet the light was blown out and the crying sound was swept down the far corridor, so that it was to be heard more plainly than ever. (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 56-57)

Out of sight, but not quite out of mind, these two children resemble more family ghosts, than fulcra of family attention, as Victorian and Edwardian children were supposed to be. Their disembodied presence turns them into the stuff of legend for people outside their household: in India, Mary overhears the two officers talking about her: «I heard», says one, «there was a child, though no one ever saw her» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 7). Like a ghost or a creature from local lore, Mary has been heard of, but never actually seen; the officer's words deny her bodily presence in the world, so when he asks aloud «who is she?», Mary declares «I am Mary Lennox» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 7) in a weak attempt to assert herself as an individual occupying space. Likewise, people living around Misselthwaite who, like the officers who discover Mary, have heard about Colin but never seen him, believe that he is «a cripple» and «a half-wit» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 260).

The suggestion of something eerie and preternatural about the two children emerges also in how people perceive their bodies. Right from the start, Mary's looks trigger an instinctive dislike in the onlooker, which, combined with her being the sole survivor of a deadly disease, reminds one of a revenant; Colin's pale complexion, lank hair, disproportionate eyes and skeletal frame make him all but a corpse, so everyone considers his death as certain. When Mary and Colin meet, the first words they utter to each other make their reciprocal ghostly conditions explicit:

'Who are you?' he said at last [...] 'Are you a ghost?'

'No, I am not,' Mary answered [...] 'Are you one?'

[...] 'No,' he replied [...] 'I am Colin.'

'Who is Colin?' [...]



‘I am Colin Craven. [...] You are real, aren’t you? [...] I have such real dreams very often. You might be one of them.’ (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 141-142)

As Mary did in India, Colin too states his full name to affirm his existence, which is possibly, this passage suggests, one of the very few things he has a solid grasp on: he doubts his own perception of reality. I would contend that, reading this scene through Falk’s definition of corporeality as influenced by one’s «social liaisons», Colin’s flimsy connection to reality follows his father’s and household’s denial of his existence. As I shall explain now, being unseen and spoken of, but never acknowledged as physical presences, impacts also on Mary and Colin’s connection with their bodies as sensory entities, making them very much unskilled at perceiving reality through them.

## 2.2 Sickly, disconnected, hunger-less: the disembodied child

In the mercilessly minute opening description of Mary’s body, the thrice-repeated word «thin» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 1) conveys an impression of gracelessness and general ill-health, and the twice-repeated word «small» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 1), one of stunted growth. The insistence on the yellowness of Mary’s complexion, combined with her «sour» expression (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 1), reminds one of jaundice, a condition involving also weakness, constipation, and lack of appetite (OED 2020). Her looks, in brief, are crafted to make an unfavourable first impression on the reader, especially the original intended reader. Victorian and Edwardian views about feminine beauty entailed that lack of it was, not just unfortunate, but disrespectful; for example, Gordon Stables, the surgeon who provided health advice on *The Girl’s Own Paper*, a popular girls’ magazine of the time, stated: «To look her best is the desire of every young girl, but I will [...] say that [...] it is also her duty, for the sake of those around her» (1880: 130). In Stables’ view, a girl’s chief attraction was a good complexion, which came from healthy eating and taking regular exercise (1880: 130). Chavasse also comments on the effects of want of exercise on children’s complexion, which cause «a yellowness of face and a melancholy expression» (1868: 147-148).

To an early-twentieth-century reader, then, yellowish Mary appeared wanting in beauty, health, and disposition all at once. The narrator explains her looks saying that «she had been born in India». Bakshi-Hamm (2012) analyses the racial and imperialist Orientalist discourses in *The Secret Garden*, which pose India as the polar opposite of the garden: if the garden is a place of «health and healing, nature and bounty, creativity and self-expression» (2012), India is a numbing, barren space of disease. I would add that this «artistic[ally] construct[ed]» India (Bakshi-Hamm 2012) adds a further layer to the construction of Mary’s character: Mary is Indian-born, and as India is a space of sickness, sickness is part of Mary’s essence.

Colin has not been born in India, but he makes as poor a picture of ideal child health as Mary does:

The boy had a sharp, delicate face, the colour of ivory; and he seemed to have eyes too big for it. He had also a lot of hair which tumbled over his forehead in heavy locks and made his thin face seem smaller. He looked like a boy who had been ill [...] (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 141)

Again, although the narrator uses softer tones than in Mary’s description, colours and shapes are all wrong in this boy: thinness of face and discoloration of skin are signs of weakness and stunted growth, and indeed Mary immediately associates his looks to illness. Even more than his waxen skin, Colin’s evident weakness and diminutive body make him an unhealthy, unideal child. Physical exercise was considered the basis of healthy masculine development, as Chavasse wrote: «If a boy be delicate, it is not nourishment alone that will give him strength [...]; exercise [...] is far more strengthening» (1868: 148-149). Delicateness, therefore, was worrying in a child, not only as concerned life

expectancy – a weak child might not survive illness – but also as regarded class and nationalist discourses. Indeed, Colin’s diminutive body and protruding bones place him closer to children living in the poverty spectrum: relating his medical experience, John Pereira observed that he usually found poor children «smaller and shorter for their age, more frequently distorted and more readily fatigued» than middle- and upper-class ones (1843: 474). Dukes classifies the diet of poor and working-class children, especially the ones hosted in charity institutions or prisons, as the «lowest standard» (1899: x)<sup>11</sup>, while upper-class boys in public schools, being «the future men of the nation», should be «enable[d] [...] to attain their highest state of perfection in growth and development» (1899: 81). Therefore, Colin’s body, like Mary’s, does not meet society’s expectations.

Their ill-health is connected to a lack of awareness about their bodies and their experience of the world through their senses. Against all evidence, Colin is convinced of his imminent death: he has for too long «lain on his back in the huge closed house, breathing an atmosphere heavy with the fears of people who were most of them ignorant and tired of him» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 203). He explains to Mary, with an ennui surprising in a ten-year-old, that he does not want to live, but does not want to die either (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 149). The locked and hostile domestic environment smothers Colin’s connection to reality and will to live, until he feels closer to death than life and is unable to acknowledge his true state of health. His spectacular tantrums, involving pillow-pummelling and screaming, would be impossible if he really were terminally ill, at least without immediate fatal consequences: Colin is perfectly unaware of his own bodily strength, and his mistaking Mary for a dream suggest he is not sure about the stimuli he receives from his own senses.

Mary too seems rather disconnected from her own physical stimuli. During her first breakfast at Misselthwaite, she refuses to eat porridge. Martha scolds her and, in a typically guilt-inducing disciplining strategy, declares her hungry little siblings would be happy to eat porridge if they only could; but Mary replies: «I don’t know what it means to be hungry» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 36). This sentence immediately triggers both Martha and the omniscient narrator’s negative judgement: the narrator declares Mary speaks these words «with the indifference of ignorance», and Martha exclaims «Well, it would do thee good to try it [...]» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 36). Their comments frame Mary as an uncharitable child, at best, and at worst, as a cruel and indifferent one. However, Mary *does* know what it means to be hungry, as in the first chapter we witness her hunger twice: the first time, while cholera is raging through her house, forgotten and unwanted Mary steals to the dining room and eats the scraps of a meal left on the table. Feeling thirsty, she also drinks some wine left on the table, which makes her fall asleep in drunken stupor. When she wakes up in the nursery, she feels cross and neglected, but also hungry, again. Despite these recent (at least on the page), distressing hunger experiences, Mary denies *knowing* hunger, a powerfully physical sensation in a child, who depends on others for nutrition. In so doing, Mary downplays her feelings, both physical and emotional, which bespeaks her lack of awareness about herself and her physical experience of the world.

Mary and Colin’s disconnection from their physical sensations, paired with their remarkable – for middle-class children – thinness frames them as two incorporeal entities. They do not acknowledge the physical reality of their bodies, and they occupy little physical space in the world due to thinness, segregation, and immobility. As the narratives develop, Mary and Colin rediscover movement and start acknowledging and responding to their physical stimuli. This healing process is marked by a progressive acquisition of substance; as we shall see, food, a powerful sensorial stimulant, is key to this process.

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<sup>11</sup> Which he deemed, however, counter-productive, as poorly developed, weak and numbed working-class children would make equally weak adult workers (1899: x).

### 3. Fatness, awareness, and food orgies: corporealization in *The Secret Garden*

#### 3.1 Learning how to be hungry: feeding and moving as a positive cycle

Mary and Colin's healing follows almost to the letter advice provided in nineteenth-century popular childcare manuals. Since they both do not take enough exercise, they are not hungry, so they do not eat, which further decreases their energies. We witness Mary, and then Colin, break this downward spiral and start a positive cycle: they move their weak bodies, which stimulates their hunger; more food means more energy that strengthens their frames and makes movement easier and more enjoyable, which provokes even greater hunger, and so forth until complete healing. It is Mary's first encounter with food and hunger that starts this cycle, even though in this occasion she rejects food and the hunger in question is – ostensibly – not hers.

During that first breakfast at Misselthwaite, Martha Sowerby's unrefined but refreshing frankness leads Mary to question herself for the first time. Martha first tries to coax her into eating porridge, but then loses her patience: «I can't abide to see good victuals go to waste. If our children was at this table they'd clean it bare in five minutes. [...] They're as hungry as young hawks and foxes» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 35). Mary's unhappy remark about not knowing about hunger prompts yet more indignation from Martha: «My word! don't [sic] I wish Dickon and Phil an' Jane an' th' rest of 'em had what's here under their pinafores» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 36). Finally, Mary condescends to «[drink] some tea and [eat] a little toast and some marmalade» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 36). This scene is crucial: for the first time, Mary is made to think seriously about hunger as a bodily feeling. Martha paints vividly her siblings' hunger, comparing them to «young hawks and foxes»; a few pages earlier, she compared them to wild ponies, likewise part of the moor's wildlife. However, while the little Sowerbys are again framed as moor wildlife, in this case the comparison is with carnivore, predatory animals; they are also «young», which hints at the even greater hunger that characterizes growing members of a species. While echoing discourses relating children's hunger and untamed animal instinctivity, the comparison suggests that it is Mary who is behaving inappropriately. Her rejection of porridge is not just uncharitable, but unnatural, as Martha's marvel – «Tha' doesn't want thy porridge!» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 35) – hints. As a child, she is supposed to be hungry and crave food, and she is supposed to have an almost natural connection with the porridge bowl, a ubiquitous presence in British child diet. The little Sowerbys' predator-like hunger might sound startling, but apparently not as much as Mary's flat rejection of food. Martha tries to make Mary hungry by sympathy, and perhaps she succeeds to a limit, since Mary eats; then, spurred by Martha, she leaves the house.

The narrator surveys with quasi-clinical tones the effects of Mary's first attempts at outdoor exercise on her body: the strengthening of her frame, the change in her complexion and in the alertness of her gaze, which are followed by another positive change:

[A]fter a few days spent almost entirely out of doors, she wakened one morning knowing what it was to be hungry, and when she sat down to her breakfast she did not glance disdainfully at her porridge [...], but took up her spoon and began to eat it and went on eating it until her bowl was empty.

'Tha' got on well enough with that this mornin', didn't tha'?' said Martha.

'It tastes nice today,' said Mary, feeling a little surprised herself. (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 50)

The change from «not knowing» to «knowing» hunger surprises Mary, as it involves new sensations: the world tastes new, and she starts feeling the same hunger as the Sowerby children. «Knowing what it is to be hungry» means knowing one has a body to feed. To this discovery follows a gradual awakening of her curiosity towards the world, and of her conscience. She learns rope-skipping, yet

another step towards reconnecting with her body of ten-year-old child, which leads her to the buried key to the secret garden. Rope-skipping was deemed an excellent healthy exercise for a young girl, as it «throws back her shoulders — it developes [sic] her chest — it circulates her blood» (Chavasse 1868: 153). Its effects on Mary are immediate:

The skipping-rope was a wonderful thing. She counted and skipped [...] until her cheeks were quite red, and she was more interested than she had ever been since she was born. [...] 'Well' [Ben Weatherstaff] exclaimed. 'Upon my word! P'raps tha' art a young 'un, after all, an' p'raps tha's got child's blood in thy veins instead of sour buttermilk. Tha' skipped red into thy cheeks [...]' (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 83)

As the gardener observes, Mary, who did not look, nor behave, as a child, is learning how to be one. This change is powerfully physical, almost as if rope-skipping is changing her blood, previously poisoned and «sour», turning it into «child's blood». Mary's body gradually assumes those traits, such as the rosy cheeks, that were associated with healthy childhood. Finally, when she finds the garden and starts her gardening activities, the change is complete: «[s]he could run faster, and longer, and she could skip to a hundred» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 101). It is Ben Weatherstaff, again, who notes the transformation:

'Tha's a bit fatter than th' was an' tha's not quite so yeller. Tha' looked like a young plucked crow when tha' first came into this garden. Thinks I to myself I never set eyes on an uglier, sourer-faced young' un.'  
Mary was not vain, and [...] she was not greatly disturbed.  
'I know I'm fatter,' she said. 'My stockings are getting tighter. They used to make wrinkles. [...]' (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 104)

Between increased appetite and exercise, Mary is acquiring substance, a body that is fit for life as a child, and she knows it. It is at this point that she finds Colin, triggering his own change. He too needs to gain a healthy appetite, consume food, and start moving, and this process is introduced with the lamb-feeding scene, where Colin first reconnects with the world outside his stuffy bedroom.

To coax him out of his isolation, Mary arranges for Dickon to come visit Colin in his room. Scholars have amply commented on Dickon's role as a pagan-like godly entity connected to nature and fertility<sup>12</sup>. Here I am mostly interested in Dickon as a provider of nourishment for the two weak and disconnected children at the manor, a role that, I would contend, starts when he brings a motherless lamb to Colin's room, and, lifting the lamb's head «with a gentle brown hand», «pushed the rubber tip of the bottle into the nuzzling mouth and the lamb began to suck it with ravenous ecstasy» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 229). Anna Silver argues that Dickon's role as carer and nurturer, both of plants and nature, and of Mary and Colin, «underscore[s] the novel's argument that motherhood is not an essentially female activity but a human one» (1997: 196). I agree that Dickon stands in the place of mother for many different life forms in the novel, and I would argue that in this scene his covert purpose is to communicate this to Colin: Dickon says that he «knewed» Colin would like to see the lamb feed (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 229), which I would venture refers to both the curiosity Colin might feel for the novelty, and the pleasure he may derive from vicariously feeding through the lamb. Colin, like the motherless lamb he is, is promised as much nurture and care if he only joins the world outside, to which Dickon and the lamb belong. Indeed, as soon as Colin steps into the garden, he changes: as he sits basking in the sun in his invalid chair, he «looked so strange and different, because a pink glow of colour had actually crept all over him – ivory face and neck and hands and all. 'I shall get well! [...] And I shall live for ever and ever and ever!'» (Hodgson Burnett

<sup>12</sup> See for example: Phillips (1993); Darcy (1995); Silver (1997); Wilkie (1997).

2019: 143). This surge of awareness tramples the rumours about his certain death: Colin has found his will to live. Like Mary did before him, he soon learns that all living creatures must feed.

### 3.2 The ravenous hunger: food orgies and escaping adult control

As soon as Mary and Colin start acting like children in the secret garden, they experience a burst of healthy hunger, and start eating more. This could spoil Colin's plan to keep his healing a secret and be the first to tell his father, so Dickon's mother, Mrs Sowerby, starts secretly providing the children with home-made food. In the garden the children partake of veritable food orgies, where they consume rich food with unrestrained relish. Laura Tosi remarks on the Victorian tendency to consider food the only legitimate source of appetite in a child (2018: 91), and Alexandra Valint reads the «awakening garden» as a «coded sexual experience», a euphemistic representation of the children's own sexual awakening as they «physical[ly] and sensual[ly]» connect with the garden and assume typically Victorian gender roles (2016: 269–270). These eating experiences indeed tap into the sensual and physical dimension that characterizes Mary and Colin's immersive experience of the garden. The food scenes Hodgson Burnett describes are undeniably very sensual «food ekphrases», a concept Gitanjali Shahani uses to indicate the detailed description of food in novels, which the reader «pauses» to take in (2018: 3), as they would with descriptions of artwork. In the part of the story where Mary and Colin burst with healthy hunger, we can indeed talk of food ekphrases, as food descriptions become longer, more detailed, and positively mouth-watering: while at the beginning of the novel the narrator does not elaborate on Mary's «good substantial breakfast», now we learn the two cousins breakfast on «home-made bread and fresh butter, snow-white eggs, raspberry jam, and clotted cream» and of «delicate slices of sizzling ham sending forth tempting odours from under a hot silver cover» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 289). Adjectives are lavishly poured over each «tempting» item in the menu, exalting their colour, smell, and texture – all qualities connected with the sensual and sensorial experience of food. But, as Mary states: «It's enough for a person who is going to die [...] but it's not enough for a person who is going to live» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 289). This sentence reveals that Mary and Colin are at the peak of their corporealization process, and they are now experiencing the world through their bodies and their senses, which is a condition beyond the mere survival that characterized their ghostly existence, as it requires substance and sustenance. Mary's remark also foregrounds the American-British food culture clash in the novel: as Avery notes, it was unlikely for any of these foods to appear in a British nursery, let alone a child's sickroom. The Great Ormond Street Hospital's *Pharmacopoeia*<sup>13</sup> provides examples of typical sickroom foods: whether on milk, fish, or meat diet, a child would invariably have had either milk or cocoa and bread and butter for breakfast (*Pharmacopoeia of the Hospital for Sick Children - Great Ormond Street* 1891: 27-28); other sickroom staples were the ever-present beef tea (which indeed even Mary and Colin receive) and barley water (*Pharmacopoeia ...* 1891: 30-31). Only exceptionally children would be prescribed the «fancy diet», where they could eat «whatever [they could] take » (*Pharmacopoeia ...* 1891, 29). While American manuals recommended not to force a sick child to eat more than they could, and considered «animal soups» with rice or barley highly beneficial, the «light diet» in illness included soups, fruit, eggs, toast, pudding, beef, oysters, and sweet or savoury jellies (Hogan 1902: 72-73). A child «who [was] going to die» would not, in brief, have been «tempted» with bacon and jam in Victorian Britain.

Such overabundance of food attests to Mary and Colin's newly found health: they are «going to live» now, so they seek more substantial food, which is not to be found in the fare they receive at the manor, however un-Britishly rich, but in the secret feasts in the secret garden:

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<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to the Great Ormond Street Archives for granting me access to their material and guiding me through it prior to their relocation, which would have prevented me from studying it for the foreseeable future.

The morning that Dickon [...] went behind a rose-bush and brought forth two tin pails and revealed that one was full of rich new milk with cream on the top of it, and that the other held cottage-made currant buns folded in a clean blue and white napkin, buns so carefully tucked in that they were still hot, there was a riot of surprised joyfulness. [...] How good the buns were! And what delicious fresh milk!

‘Magic is in [Dickon’s mother] just as it is in Dickon,’ said Colin. ‘[...] Tell her we are grateful Dickon – extremely grateful. [...] Tell her she has been most bounteous and our gratitude is extreme.’

And then forgetting his grandeur he fell to and stuffed himself with buns and drank milk out of the pail in copious draughts [...]’ (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 290)

Concerned that Mrs Sowerby might be depleting her numerous family’s scanty resources to feed them, Mary and Colin contribute to the expenses with their own pocket money, asking her to buy with them potatoes and eggs – another sign that they are connecting anew with their world and their «social liaisons», in Falk’s words – and, with the help of an ingenious earth-oven Dickon builds, they discover more delicious food: «[r]oasted eggs were a previously unknown luxury and very hot potatoes with salt and fresh butter in them were fit for a woodland king – besides being deliciously satisfying» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 291). The vocabulary in these passages again taps into the bodily, sensual, and sensorial dimensions of the eating experience, dimensions that were not normally part of nursery food culture: richness and deliciousness were not to be readily associated with boiled mutton and plain milk pudding, and luxury was decidedly frowned upon. In the garden, though, restraint has no place: the «riot of joyfulness» gives way to mouth-stuffing and milk-chugging, decidedly unchecked food attitudes that comically contrast with Colin’s attempt at sounding grand and adult-like. Indeed, his «fall to» riotous eating (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 290) is clearly framed as the positive wildness of the natural child. Again, the food ekphrasis invites the reader to partake into the richness of the creamy milk, the warmth of the buns, the sweetness of both, in an attempt to awaken a response of the kind that Roland Barthes defines «jouissance», which Daniel contends is particularly effective when it taps into readers’ previous experiences such as the pre-oedipal mother-child bond established through of breastfeeding, which reading of sweet, creamy food could revive (2006: 78). Daniel discusses the popular notion of the love-sweet food link (2006: 34), and relates «food provided by the cheerful motherly figure», which is mostly «rich, sweet and creamy», to the idea of «maternal comfort», especially attractive «for children whose mothers were [...] literally or emotionally absent» (2006: 76). I would say the food scenes in the garden, besides attempting to awaken jouissance in the reader, represent a prime example of this instance. Colin, whose mother died in childbirth, must have had a wet nurse or, being weak, was perhaps fed with a bottle. We can presume that Mary’s Ayah, to whom Mary’s mother «handed over» her baby immediately after birth (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 1), was also her wet nurse; however, Mary says her Ayah «did not like» her (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 45), and Ben Weatherstaff’s comment on Mary’s blood being like «sour buttermilk» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 83) hints that Mary’s breastfeeding experience might not have been especially positive for either nurse or baby. Childcare manuals dedicated whole chapters to breastfeeding, wet nurses, and bottle feeding, and mother’s milk (specifically the birth mother’s) was invariably presented as the best food for a baby<sup>14</sup>. Within this mindset, Mary and Colin’s mothers are ineffectual nurturer, the one by being virtually dead to her daughter until she actually dies, and the second by being dead from the start: be it emotional or physical, death cannot give life.

The «riotous joy» the children express before the rich sweet food motherly Mrs Sowerby provides and their obvious enjoyment in partaking of it hints also to the added value of these secret banquets, namely: they escape the control of the adult enclave at Misselthwaite Manor. The lack of restraint

<sup>14</sup> See for example: Combe (1860: 101-107); Barker (1865: 8-10); Chavasse (1868: 25).

that characterises these food orgies places them in opposition to the nursery, where food intake was so thoroughly checked to prompt Herbert Spencer to compare «over-legislation in the nursery» to «over-legislation in the State» (1861: 149). Control over children expressed itself in control over what they could eat. Except for Martha, nobody really cares about Mary and Colin's lack of appetite early in the novel, but when they start to eat more and gain weight, Mrs Medlock (the governess), the nurse, and Doctor Craven (Colin's uncle) start worrying because, I would contend, they feel they are losing control over them. Called by the suspicious nurse to investigate upon Colin's mysteriously improving conditions and appetite, Doctor Craven is puzzled; Colin tries to distract him, suggesting that his greater appetite might be «unnatural» and that his increased weight and better colour means that he is «bloated and feverish» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 287). The adults are not convinced, but Mary and Colin frustrate their attempts to take back control by stopping altogether to eat the food provided at the manor, while feasting on Mrs Sowerby's delicacies.

Having now completed their change from domestic savages to free wild creatures, the complicate, artificial food of the manor no longer tempts them. By leaving it untouched, they show to be attuned both to their tastes and to their feelings, refuting the common idea that children, unable to check themselves, tend to overeat and make themselves sick; moreover, choosing Mrs Sowerby's food over the manor's, they re-establish a mother-child «cultural liaison» (Falk 1994: 2) in their own terms with a nurturing motherly figure of their choice. They are, in brief, taking charge of their bodies and their place in the world. In another typically clinical survey of child health, the narrator describes the effects of this change on Colin's body:

The waxen tinge had left Colin's skin and a warm rose shone through it; his beautiful eyes were clear and the hollows under them and in his cheeks and temples had filled out. His once dark, heavy locks had begun to look as if they sprang healthily from his forehead and were soft and warm with life. His lips were fuller and of a normal colour. (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 294)

The adults end up producing their own explanations, which include the clinical survey of Mary's own improvement:

‘Is there any way in which those children can get food secretly?’ Dr Craven inquired of Mrs Medlock.  
 ‘There's no way unless they dig it out of the earth or pick it off the trees [...]’  
 ‘Well,’ said Dr Craven, ‘so long as going without food agrees with them, we need not disturb ourselves. The boy is a new creature.’  
 ‘So is the girl,’ said Mrs Medlock. ‘She's begun to be downright pretty since she's filled out and lost her ugly little sour look. Her hair's grown thick and healthy looking and she's got a bright colour. The glummiest, ill-natured little thing she used to be, and now her and Master Colin laugh together like a pair of crazy young ones. Perhaps they're growing fat on that.’ (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 295-296)

### **3.3 Where is Mary? Gender, corporealization, and the ending of *The Secret Garden***

Like Mrs Sowerby's children, who seem to get fat on moor grass, as their mother says, Mary and Colin's fatness is likewise inexplicable to the adults in charge of them, who choose to believe that abstinence is the source of their improvement. These passages attest to the two children's transformation into real children, as Colin says: «Now that I am a real boy [...] my legs and arms and all my body are so full of Magic that I can't keep them still» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 301). This statement implies his previous condition, and, I would say, Mary's too, was un-real: when they were in their ghostly state, they might have technically been children, but they did not look like ones, nor they were recognised as such by adults. Now the two children fulfil the requirements of health and

beauty ascribed to childhood in Victorian and Edwardian culture; however, examining the passages above and considering the different «clinical surveys» and bodily descriptions analysed elsewhere in this article, a plain gender difference emerges between the corporealization processes the two children underwent. Mary's foremost feature was always ugliness, while Colin's was his debilitating hypochondria. These correspond to gendered perceptions of ideal childhood that emerge in medical advice offered in popular publications. As we have seen, the *Girl's Own Paper* posed beauty (and health) as duty, and indeed many of Stables' articles offered beauty advice on hair, skin, feet, hands and so forth, more than medical advice. Moruzi argues that this kind of advice had a Social Darwinist element (2012: 83-84), and indeed Dukes affirmed girls should be «encouraged to produce the best specimens of their race, not only for their own sakes, but for the benefit of the subsequent generation» (1899: 157-158).

It is therefore unsurprising that what adults note about Mary's healing is her becoming prettier. What stands out the most about Colin, by contrast, is his new strength and the loss of his sickly looks. With Dickon's help, both children perform physical exercises to strengthen their muscles, but as Dickon explains, they are mainly intended for Colin, to help him walk better. Indeed, the boy who runs into Mr Craven, returned to Misselthwaite, is «a tall boy, and a handsome one», «glowing with life», who has just won a race (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 336-337). Chavasse advised parents to focus more on their boys' physical exercise, than on an excess of intellectual effort: «O that parents would think more of bodily than of mental cultivation! Then, instead of having a race of pigmies, we should have a nation of giants» (1868: 152). Strong boys were therefore a prime goal for British society, as much as weak and sickly ones were a concern. A young girl needed promise to become a healthy enough woman to bear children, but it was at young boys that society looked so that said children were «giants» – and healthy Colin's foremost feature is tallness, which emerges as soon as he stands up from his invalid chair in the garden, «looking strangely tall» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 256).

I would suggest that the gendered dimension of the corporealization process helps us interpret the much-debated conclusion of the novel, with its increasing focus on Colin and dwindling attention to Mary. The conclusion happens mostly outside the garden: Colin runs out of it and meets Mr Craven, who he takes for a tour in the garden only to walk out of it again, father and son, master of Misselthwaite and his heir. Mary is not with them, so she did not leave the garden and she did it, I would say, on purpose. While I concede that Victorian and Edwardian views of the garden as an extension of the female domestic space may be at play here, I would say that the two children's healing and corporealization processes had different purposes and outcomes, and the choice of space Mary and Colin make, explicitly and implicitly, at the end of the novel, depends on this difference. At the beginning of the novel, Mary felt she did not «belong» to anyone (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 14): her existence denied, her body displaced and incorporeal, she must find a place where she belongs, and she does so because, while her looks and manners do not recommend her, she is strong, stubborn, independent and vocal about her dislikes. Her early family experiences having been unsuccessful, she does not look for a family, but she needs friends and a project, and she finds them in the Sowerbys and the secret garden she unlocks. As mentioned above, Mary is akin to a revenant: her survival to cholera suggest she is impervious to death, as if her stubbornness and spite kept her alive – dying for her was never an option. The formidable energy that characterizes Mary, which is truly revealed when she stops using it to close herself to the world and starts getting back in touch with it, fuel her healing and corporealization. As Moruzi notes, in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period energy and activity were perceived as positive womanly qualities, to the extent that some physical activities that were previously a male prerogative were adapted for girls (2012: 83). Mary only needs a push outside the door to start taking healthy physical exercise and pick up gardening, a feminine pastime for which she had showed a precocious, though clumsy, inclination since her life in India (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 3; 10). The seeds of Mary's childishness and acceptable femininity, to extend the garden



metaphor, were there and only needed fresh air and proper nutrition to start growing. Colin's case was different because from the start he is doomed to die. His hypochondria places him within the sphere of hysteria, considered an eminently female illness (Mary remarks to him: «Half that hails you is hysterics and temper» [Hodgson Burnett 2019: 201]). He is much farther from the Victorian and Edwardian masculine ideal than Mary is from the feminine one; therefore, his healing and corporealization is indeed the novel's biggest project, and his triumph over those who were sure of his death («I shall live for ever and ever and ever!», Hodgson Burnett 2019: 143) the novel's greatest success. This success, however, implies that he fulfils certain expectations, and these include leaving the secluded space of the garden and become master of Misselthwaite. Mary, on the other hand, does not have to. The garden, no matter how grandly Colin states that it is «[his] garden now» (Hodgson Burnett 2019: 261), is Mary's place, and indeed it is Colin who leaves it in the end. He can come and go as he pleases, but he cannot stay. Mary, by contrast, has earned a right to stay there: outliving or outsmarting those who denied her presence in the world, she unlocks the garden, a place whose existence was also denied, and brings it back to life, causing her own body to come alive in response. The garden is her own, earnestly earned place, exactly as it was Frances Hodgson Burnett's, the rich and generous author with the past of a hungry child.

#### 4. Conclusions

Over the years, *The Secret Garden* received attention from a range of critical perspectives, but studies of this novel generally tended to foreground issues of race and gender. More recently, scholars started paying attention to health discourses in this narrative, framing the book and its author within the Victorian and Edwardian medical and scientific discourse. Drawing its theoretical purpose from this latter strand of inquiry, my analysis concentrates on the un/healthy body dialectic in the narrative, reading the story as the relation of a corporealization process. Reading Mary and Colin's physical healing in the light of Falk's conception of the body as a sensual and sensorial entity interwoven with a social and cultural system (1994), I identified a pattern of development from incorporeal/unhealthy to corporealized/healthy in their narrative arcs. Food is key to this process, as it is through the sensorially stimulating action of eating that the two sick and insubstantial children acquire substance within the narrative, rebuilding their fragmented network of social and emotional bonds and reconnecting with their bodies and the world surrounding them. The fragmentation of Mary and Colin's social «liaisons», to use Falk's term (1994: 2), entails rejection from parental figures, both biological (Mrs Lennox and Mr Craven) and surrogate (Mary's Ayah and Misselthwaite staff surrounding Colin). Lacking nurturing, maternal figures, the two children wither in stuffy environments and repulse strangers, who see in them images of death and disease. As soon as they reconnect with the reality of their senses and are nourished by a nurturing mother figure, Mary and Colin become healthier, fatter, and stronger, finally aware of themselves and the world around them.

This transition places the novel in dialogue with late-Victorian and Edwardian childcare notions, from regimen to exercise, whose impact emerges in different aspects of the corporealization process. The narrator's quasi-clinical tone in describing the signs of health or lack thereof in Mary and Colin's bodies – complexion, texture of hair, eye lustre, bodily frame and so forth – echoes constructions of normal and abnormal states of child health circulated in popular medical manuals. From these surveys emerge several interlocked cultural discourses about the nature of childhood: what expectations boys and girls should meet to be considered healthy; what a child should eat, and whether children should be allowed to eat their fill or not; if a certain degree of wildness was acceptable, indeed desirable in a child, as a sign of good health, and when instead this became savagery, which was both unhealthy and undesirable. As Moruzi, Boehm, and others showed, scientific and medical discourses about

children did have an impact on literature, though Boehm addresses child figures in Dickens's work and Moruzi focalises on periodicals. My analysis shows that the diffusion of medical knowledge about children among the general public may echo not only in popular publishing, but also in such children's literature classics as *The Secret Garden* – yet another proof that children's literature, far from being childish, is connected to the wider, complex system of social and cultural discourses relating to context-specific notions of childhood, but also of un/healthy society, of gender expectations, of race and ethnicity. Food as a vehicle of culture plays a crucial part in this: this article shows how Victorian and Edwardian popular medical notions about child nutrition resonate in *The Secret Garden*, showing different, sometimes conflicting, views on appropriate child diet, and popular ideas about the centrality of food and eating to childhood. The food ekphrases, in Shahani's words, that dominate Mary and Colin's successful transformation into «real», happily wild children invite the reader to share their healthy hunger and feel satisfying jouissance as the two protagonists freely partake of delicious food. An author with a background such as Hodgson Burnett's own certainly knows the power of imagined banquets on one's mind. *The Secret Garden*'s imagined banquets, arriving for Mary and Colin after a long stretch of emotional and actual malnutrition, attest to the importance of the food-feeding-emotion connection in Victorian and Edwardian child health discourses.

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