

The Secret Garden

a Wheelock Family Theatre Study Guide
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Jane Staab and Susan Kosoff's musical adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* combines a lively score with a faithful rendering of this much-loved tale. Students should be encouraged to compare this production with the film version, as well as the novel itself. The roots of all three gardens remain the same: neglect overcome, and the growth, rebirth, and new life made possible through love and friendship.

We pass secret gardens in the city every day without a second glance. Simply part of the landscape, deserted lots sprawl beyond barbed wire, abandoned and alone. Battalions of weeds run wild inside, fighting grass seed for the land and throttling the few remaining cultivated plants. An apple or pear tree stands to one side, unpruned and unencouraged, a carpet of wasted fruit spread beneath it. And yet, one day in hundreds, we may be drawn to stop and look again. A stand of purple wildflowers may catch our eye, grown from seed scattered by a visiting bird. A patch of bright yellow daffodils, planted by a caring hand long ago, may sprout up near the metal fence, and we see the forgotten garden as it was, or as it could grow to be. The messages of all these secret gardens are not confined within their walls: it is never so clear that the world is what we make of it than when we look into a garden or the eyes of a child.

When we visit *The Secret Garden* we see children and nature reclaimed and renewed. Frances Hodgson Burnett gives us the gift of watching growth and healing occur. We peer through the keyhole and see possibilities realized. Mary and Colin become whole and happy and thrive on sunshine, fresh air, and the magic formula Mary discovers: love. Roses come to the children's cheeks as roses come to the garden again, and love is both their fertilizer and their magic wand. The loveliest seedling is the hope planted in the reader's and the audience's hearts. If a forlorn, crabby little girl can find the key to happiness for herself and others, perhaps we all can—with a little cultivation.

secret spots

*Look what I've discovered
A world full of wonder
A secret garden
A place all my own
I'll come every day
And bring it back to life*

Activity and Questions for Discussion

Ask students to locate one place (a “secret spot”) in their neighborhood that does not seem to belong to someone else. Have them look at the place and write a brief, thorough description of it. Then, have them answer the following questions:

- Where is your “secret spot”?
- What does your secret spot look like?
- How do you feel when you look at it?
- Do you like the spot the way it is? Why or why not?
- What does it mean to “neglect” something?
- What would you do to make this spot better (as Mary, Dickon, and Colin make the secret garden better)?
- Why do you think the spot in your neighborhood looks like it does now?
- Why do you think the secret garden looks as it does in the beginning of the play?
- Do you think that people are neglected sometimes?
- Who are some people you think are neglected, and why?
- Do you think there are any characters in the play who are neglected? Which ones? Why?
- How does being neglected make them feel and act?
- How do you think being neglected would make you feel?

Silent Acting Exercise

Pretend that you are approaching your special secret place and that you don't want anyone to see the secret entrance. Quickly enter and, as you turn around to see and feel the magic of the place once again, silently show—don't tell—some specific details about the place. Use mime to help you make audience members feel as if they are there with you.

Reading Suggestions

Greening the City Streets: The Story of Community Gardens by Barbara A. Huff

Lots of brightly colored photographs illustrate this informative and easy-to-read account of how some city communities are reclaiming and rehabilitating wasted land.

Secret Spaces, Imaginary Places: Creating Your Own Worlds for Play by Elin McCoy

Exciting activities and “blueprints” designed to help students create their own hideaways. Clearly written instructions.

character focus: mary

*I can see, it's plain to me
Tha' as stubborn as a mean old mule
An' as sour as a lemon, but yer nobody's fool
Let me guess. It's just a guess
Tha' thinks tha'rt the Queen of the May
An' tha's got a nasty temper
If tha' don't get tha' way*

Use the following series of questions to help students focus on the character of Mary.

- What country did Mary live in before moving to England? What was life like in this country, and what relationship did this country have to England at the time of this play?
- What was Mary's life like before she moved to England?
- What is Mary like in the beginning of the play?
- What kind of clothes does Mary wear?
- Do you think they are comfortable clothes?

- Would you be comfortable wearing her clothes or playing in her clothes?
- Would you want to be a young girl at the time Mary is a young girl? Why or why not?
- How do you think Mary feels at the beginning of the play?
- How do you think Mary feels at the end of the play?
- Would you want to be Mary's friend at the beginning of the play? Why or why not?
- Does Mary change over the course of the play?
- If Mary changes, why do you think she does?
- Does anyone help Mary change?
- Who (or what) do you think helps Mary change the most?

Reading Suggestions

The Secret in Miranda's Closet by Sheila Greenwald

A forbidden doll helps a young girl feel better about herself, get to know her mother a little better, and face up to the challenges in her life.

The Secret Soldier: The Story of Deborah Sampson by Ann McGovern

The true story of an adventurous young Massachusetts woman during the Revolutionary War; Deborah Sampson had quite a different, but equally interesting, kind of secret. She, like Mary, is a spirited protagonist.

the robin

*I found it myself
With the help of the robin, my only
friend
A secret garden*

Use the following questions to help students think about the role the robin plays in *The Secret Garden*.

- Do you think the robin is as important a character as Mr. Craven or Dickon? Explain your answer.
- Is the robin important to Mary? Explain your answer.
- If you do not know the special meaning robins have in our society, find out. Compare the role the robin plays in *The Secret Garden* with the special meaning robins have in our society.
- Has an animal, bird, or reptile ever been your only friend?
- Are animals sometimes better friends than people? If so, how?

Two-Part Animal Exercise

- Choose an animal, bird, or reptile to imitate. Try to make your portrayal real, not silly or exaggerated. After you have moved as your creature for a while...
- ...find a partner and together enact a first meeting where the two animals become friends.

Reading Suggestions

Ghost Eye by Marion Dane Bauer

An intriguing, slightly spooky tale of a lost, lonely cat who finds happiness with the help of some unusual animal and human friends.

Every Living Thing by Cynthia Rylant

Twelve sweet short stories revolving around the theme of animals bringing new life, hope, and happiness into people's lives. Good stories to discuss.

behind the scenes: an activity for students

Wheelock Family Theatre had to have a robin made especially for this production. Ask students the following questions, and assign them the task of designing a robin for their own production of *The Secret Garden*.

You are putting on a low-budget production of *The Secret Garden*. How do you go about casting the part of the robin? Which of the following solutions makes the most sense to you?

- A) Find a trained robin who will do everything you need him/her to do on command.
- B) Have someone dress up in a robin costume and act out the part.
- C) Make a robin puppet.
- D) Make a robin marionette.
- E) Take the robin out of the play.
- F) Make up your own solution.

Look for the letter below (A-F) that matches the letter of the solution that made the most sense to you. Do the activities listed for the letter and answer the related questions.

- A) Write to or call animal trainers and see if they have trained robins.

How much do you have to pay an animal trainer?

Are there any in the Boston area?

What are the benefits and risks of this choice?

Would the ASPCA, or other groups, be mad if you use a real robin?

- B) Design a robin costume.

Choreograph how the person in the costume will move.

How can you make the person in the costume appear to fly?

Are there any plays that you have seen in which characters appear to fly?

How do actors and actresses appear to fly?

Is "stage flying" ever dangerous?

- C) Look at some books about how to make puppets and design a robin puppet, including selecting the materials it will be made of and measuring out its exact dimensions.

How will you make your robin fly?

Why did you select these materials for your robin?
How long do you think it would take you to make your robin?

D) Look at some books about marionettes and design a marionette.

What is a marionette?
How do you make one?
How big will yours be?
How will you make it appear to be birdlike?

E) If you decide that you want to remove the robin from the play, go find a copy of *The Secret Garden*. Look through the book and write down on a piece of paper every page on which the robin appears, and what happens when it appears. Think a little about all the times the robin appears.

If you cut the robin out, would the ending be the same? Why or why not?

Do you think the robin is responsible for anything important happening? If so, give specific examples. If not, give specific examples.

Write a brief outline of what a robinless *The Secret Garden* would be like.

F) If you have come up with a different solution for what to do about the robin, make your own mini-activity for a classmate. Write your idea down, write down instructions to follow, and then make up four questions about the activity.

the moor

Flowers in bloom
Heather an' broom
The moor looks to me
Like an endless, dull sea
I hate the moor
I love the moor

Use the following series of questions to discuss English moors with students.

- What is a “moor”? Find a book with photographs of moors and look at the pictures. Draw your own picture of a moor.
- What kinds of plants and animals can be found on a moor?

- Can any of the plants and animals be found in fields in the United States?
- Have you ever seen any of the plants or animals that can be found on a moor?
- Do you think moors are like “endless dull seas”? Explain your answer.
- Why does Mary hate the moor so much at first?
- Why does Martha love the moor?
- Would you love or hate living near a moor?

Environments Exercise

Once you know details about what a moor is made up of, pretend—silently—to move through a moor. Afterward, talk about what you saw, heard, smelled, touched.

Now, try moving through contrasting environments—a desert, a rocky mountaintop, and a swamp, for instance.

gardens & growth

*Oh please might I have
A bit of earth
A bit of earth
Is what I need
To plant some seeds
And make them grow
So the garden
And I can come alive*

Use the following series of questions to stimulate a discussion with students about change and growth in *The Secret Garden*.

- Why do you think the secret garden is so important to Mary?
- How does the garden help Mary “come alive”?

- What effect does Mary’s discovery of, and work in, the secret garden have on the other characters in the play? Include all characters in your answer.
- Does Mary help Colin “come alive”? If so, how?
- Have you ever had a garden? If so, how did it make you feel?
- Is gardening hard work? Explain your answer.
- Is gardening good exercise? Explain your answer.

Reading Suggestions: Gardens and Growth

Anna’s Garden Songs. Poems by Mary Q. Steele, illustrated by Lena Anderson

A rollicking batch of poems that focus on the growth of a young girl’s grandfather’s vegetable garden. Humorous and imaginative illustrations.

Linnea in Monet’s Garden by Christina Bjork, illustrated by Lena Anderson

Garden aficionado Linnea tours giddily around France with her friend Mr. Bloom, on the trail of Monet’s garden. A colorful, informative, and slightly gossipy book filled with photographs, drawings, and Monet’s work.

Flowerpot Gardens by Clyde Bulla

Gardening projects for beginning gardeners. Clear directions.

Fun-time Window Garden by Emogene Cooke

More gardening projects for beginning gardeners. Step-by-step instructions, simple materials.

The Happy Garden by Jamie Potter and Janet Powers

A cheerful walk through the garden, with the young reader’s attention called to all the things that lead to thriving plants, animals, and humans.

dreams

*Imagine friends forever by your side
A secret garden where we'll run and hide
Imagine roses blooming all around
There should be roses bursting from the ground*

*I once remember hearing someone say that dreamers
Change the world
Could you and I?
Only if we try*

Use the following series of questions to discuss hopes and dreams as they relate to *The Secret Garden*.

- Do you think that in the beginning of *The Secret Garden* many characters seem to have lost hope of anything good happening?
- If so, which characters appear to have lost hope? Do they find hope again? If so, how?
- Make a list of the characters. Write down what you think each character has lost and what you think each character finds at the end of the play.
- Is it bad to be a dreamer? Explain your answer.
- Do you think that “dreamers change the world”? Explain your answer.
- Is it ever scary or risky to be a dreamer? Why or why not?
- Have you ever been called a dreamer? If so, when and why? Was it meant in a nice or a mean way?
- Do people lose the ability to dream and hope sometimes? If you think they do, why do you think this is?
- Have hopes and dreams ever gotten you through a tough time?

Reading Suggestions: Dreams

Applemando's Dreams by Patricia Polacco

A vividly illustrated fantasy story about a young boy who dares to dream big and the complications and wonderful things his dreams create.