

THE SECRET GARDEN

[1993]

by

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The Secret Garden [1993]. Directed by Agnieszka Holland. Screenplay by Caroline Thompson, from the novel by Francis Hodgson Burnett. Production designed by Stuart Craig.

The Secret Garden uses the garden as its central symbol. Thrust into England, Mary, no longer a powerful young white woman among the compliant natives of India, is a spoiled, truculent brat, and thus the weed-infested garden becomes an apt metaphor for her. She then meets a young man her own age, Colin Craven, who, in his own way, is as spoiled as she. The choice of his last name says it all. His hypochondriasis is reinforced and encouraged by his uncle and the repressive household staff – all except Mary. As Mary adjusts, the garden blooms, and now becomes a metaphor for *his* cure. And once the uncle has seen his “crippled” son walk, he too throws down both his cane and his sense of doom and blossoms like everything else in the film.

Optimistic almost to a fault, *The Secret Garden* is nevertheless an interesting film, even beyond being appropriate for children – no violence, no swearing, no horror. Even Michael Medved and his arch-conservative religious financiers would be pleased. The film holds out hope for a successful transition from childhood to adulthood, the power of healing oneself and, thereby, healing others. While I have no arguments with the film’s text – we certainly need more hopeful films, no matter how blind they are to global realities – the subtext of *The Secret Garden* is more interesting (some may find objectionable): a strong thread of religious symbolism.

Let me point out a few of the religious symbols and the traditions behind them. Mary, a name with obvious religious connotations, has been one of the most popular girl’s name for the past two centuries. Without some corroborating evidence, we can take it no further. However, we do not have to look far, for when Mary arrives in England, she is adopted by a sister-figure, Martha. John 11:1,2 says that “Bethany, [was] the village of Mary and her sister Martha.” The Biblical relation between Mary and Martha is clearly echoed in the film. Further, John says of Mary that her, “brother Lazarus was sick.” In *The Secret Garden*, sick brother Lazarus has been split into psychosomatically sick

cousin Dickon and psychologically sick uncle Craven. And, paralleling the Bible, both are cured. The uncle even boldly states, “You brought me back from the dead, Mary. I didn't think anyone could do it.”

The “Four Marys” of the New Testament have always been confused and blended: The Mary who is the mother of Jesus, the Mary of the Ointment and sister to Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the wife of Clopas who witnesses the Crucifixion and Resurrection. This blending of the Four Marys, which occupies so much of Maryology, continues in *The Secret Garden*. It also continues in the symbolism of the garden itself and the plantings inside.

Gardens are very potent symbols. They are where we began, the Garden of Eden, and they are our terminus, Paradise. The “Gardener” is often the creator and in the center of the garden grows the life- and/or knowledge-giving tree. As a symbol of the soul, the activities of the garden – the taming and the nurturing – are typically processes that lead to salvation. More specifically, enclosed gardens are representative of the feminine, protective principle, especially virginity. In Christian art, the closed garden is a symbol of the Virgin Mary. In *The Secret Garden*, as in medieval images of the Virgin in the garden taming the wild unicorn, the animals in Mary's garden (foxes, rabbits, geese, goats ... a veritable domestic zoo) are not only tamed but give up their natural predation habits. In a paean of Messianic prophecy, Isaiah predicts that “The wolf and the lamb shall graze together ... They shall do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain ...” (Isaiah 65:25).

The ancient Roman understanding of the closed garden was quite different from the Christian. Enclosed gardens were typically funereal and thus places of death. If we are willing to project this into the film (which may not take a very great effort), we can see that Mary converted the garden and those associated with it from Pagan beliefs of death and stasis to Christian principles of life and resurrection, an appropriate role for any of the Biblical Marys.

If you are not yet convinced, then consider what Mary plants in the middle of her garden: a lily. The lily, in addition to being a symbol of the Virgin Mary, means purity and innocence. According to Christian tradition, its straight stalk symbolizes the Virgin Mary's godly mind, its pendant leaves her humility, its fragrance her divinity, and its whiteness her purity. It is the symbol of the Annunciation and all the virgin saints. And, appropriately for the film, it is also the flower of Easter, symbolizing the transformation of death into life.

Using subtle or hidden religious symbolism is one way to bolster a film's popularity. It worked for *E.T. – The Extra-Terrestrial* [1982] which is little more than the recounting of the life of Jesus – healing, resurrection, assumption, and all. The river journey of *Apocalypse Now* [1979] recounts the world of Moses: sacred tablets, sacrificed cows, and a chat with a burning Brando substituted for a burning bush as the source of wisdom. These are, of course, in addition to the films that have blatant theological references, like *It's a Wonderful Life* [1946] with its association of angels and capitalism (the first bell that rings is that of a cash register – thus making money causes the creation

of angels). Thus, depending on your particular religious leanings (or lack thereof), you might want to have a serious discussion with young viewers of *The Secret Garden* about the presence of religious thought in both the everyday world and the world of film. However, the messages of hope and healing in this film are both laudatory and universal.

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