



THE PROCESS OF MARY LENNOX'S PERSONALITY TRANSFORMATION IN FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT'S *THE SECRET GARDEN* (1911)

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Abstract

This article examines the personality transformation of the main character in *The Secret Garden* (1911) by Frances Hodgson Burnett from being spoiled, selfish, and stubborn to becoming more independent, environmentally aware, and capable of objective thinking, through Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the id, ego, and superego. Using a qualitative descriptive design with close reading, this study identifies textual evidence reflecting the character's inner conflict and transformation, with data categorized into the id as instinctual drive, the ego as rational control, and the superego as moral awareness. The analysis reveals that the character's early behavior is dominated by the id, marked by anger, selfishness, and isolation; however, as she builds relationships and connects with nature, the ego begins to balance her impulses with reason, followed by the emergence of the superego, reflected in her empathy and sense of morality, indicating her psychological growth. The study concludes that *The Secret Garden* portrays a process of emotional healing and personal maturity achieved through interaction, environment, and self-reflection.

Key words: Psychoanalysis, Freud, id- ego superego, character transformation

INTRODUCTION

There are various ways to create a sense of peace, one of which can be found in community-based green spaces such as the Helmsley Walled Garden in England. This garden has evolved into a therapeutic environment that promotes both physical and emotional well-being through horticultural practices, offering a calm atmosphere that supports visitors' psychological health. This phenomenon demonstrates that gardens can function as a medium for shaping human emotions and have become an important focus in psychological studies.

Psychological health issues have increasingly become a global concern. According to the World Health Organization (2022), more than 970 million people worldwide experience mental disorders such as depression and anxiety. This number

rose by 25% during the COVID-19 pandemic, worsening levels of anxiety and depression in society during its first year. This increase indicates that social and environmental pressures strongly influence personality formation and transformation, making this topic increasingly important to study.

Personality in this study refers to Gordon Allport's opinion that "personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behavior and thought," (Allport, 1961, p. 28). This definition means that personality is a dynamic organization formed within an individual, involving the interaction between physical (body) and psychological (mind) aspects. Through this organization, psychophysical systems work together to shape patterns of behavior and ways of thinking that are unique to each individual. In other words, personality is not static but continues to develop along with a person's experiences and habits.

Since personality is a dynamic organization that develops over time, its formation is influenced by multiple interacting factors. Biologically, genes are the basic units that guide the development of human brain and body functions (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 583), which explains how genetic inheritance affects susceptibility to mental conditions such as depression and anxiety. Psychologically, cognitive distortions contribute to anxiety, as individuals tend to assume negative possibilities that may not occur (Kuru et al., 2018, p. 2). Social factors, especially those found in the immediate environment such as family, also play an important role, as parenting styles like parental rejection can impact symptoms of depression across different stages of life (Rohner & Britner, 2002, p. 27). These interactions show that psychological dynamics result from the relationship between biological, psychological, and social factors.

Several researchers have shown that psychological dynamics are influenced by social conditions and life experiences. Emotional conflicts are closely related to social problems, as stated by Patel et al., who argue that "Research consistently showed a strong association between social disadvantage and poor mental health. Poverty, childhood adversity, and violence emerged as key risk factors for the onset and persistence of mental disorders" (Patel et al., 2018, p. 5). This highlights that emotional conflicts are not only caused by internal factors but are also shaped by social contexts. Human personality vulnerability can be explained through Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework, which describes personality as consisting of the id, ego, and superego. These three components continuously interact in shaping human behavior and emotional life. Freud explains that "From the other point of view, however, we see this same ego as a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego." (Freud, 1927, p. 82). This indicates that failure to balance these three elements can lead to inner conflict and psychological problems. To manage these tensions, the ego develops defense mechanisms, emphasizing its role in maintaining balance between instinctual drives, moral demands, and external reality.

Freud's concept of personality dynamics is not only relevant in psychology but also applicable in literary studies. Literary works often present social realities related to inner conflicts, personality dynamics, and transformation processes. Through psychoanalysis, particularly the concepts of the id, ego, and superego, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the internal conflicts that influence characters' actions and development.

One literary work that illustrates character development is *The Secret Garden* (1911) by Frances Hodgson Burnett. This novel tells the story of an orphan girl who at the beginning is portrayed as spoiled, selfish, and stubborn due to the absence of parental love. Over time, she undergoes a transformation into a more empathetic individual after moving to a new environment and interacting with other characters, including the secret garden she discovers. This transformation reflects personality dynamics that can be analyzed using Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

Previous studies have examined *The Secret Garden* from various perspectives, including characterization and motivation by Yapin et al. (2023), ecocriticism by Putri (2022), ecological consciousness by Günday (2025), and therapeutic interpretation by Almond (1990). These studies highlight themes such as healing, identity, interpersonal relationships, and the role of nature in psychological transformation. However, they tend to focus more on external aspects or general psychological interpretations rather than applying Freud's structural model systematically.

However, although psychological interpretations have been conducted, limited attention has been given to a systematic analysis of the main character's personality transformation through Freud's structural model, particularly the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego in relation to her social interactions. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining how the interaction of these three personality structures contributes to the main character's transformation from egocentrism to empathy.

METHOD

This research applies the qualitative research design to collected the data. In qualitative research, data is commonly collected through activities such as analyzing documents directly, observing behaviours and conducting interviews (Creswell, 2013). The technique of data collection through several technique (1) read the novel *The Secret Garden* several times with the close reading method to analyse data by focusing on specific lines in the novel, (2) after multiple readings of the novel *The Secret Garden* with close reading method, quoted or highlighting texts that contained topics related to Freud's theory specifically id, ego, and super-ego, (3) label the keywords that are meaningful in the text contained the categories of id, ego, and super-ego, (4) the data that has been collected is then grouped based on the similarity of meaning in analyzing the text that is the object of research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personality Transformation of the Main Character

Early Stage

The main character is portrayed as a child controlled by id. The way the main character was raised shaped her sense of superiority and self-centeredness, which separated her from those around her. Living in an environment that always gave her everything she wanted and never set any boundaries, the main character grew up without understanding the meaning of empathy or discipline. She was accustomed to being in a position of power, where her will was always considered absolute and no one dared to oppose her. This is clearly illustrated when Burnett writes:

“She never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants, and as they always obeyed her and gave her her own way in everything, because the Mem Sahib would be angry if she was disturbed by her crying, by the time she was six years old she was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived.” (Burnett, 1911, Ch. 1, p. 2).

This quote illustrates that since childhood, main character has lived in an environment that completely spoils her. She is surrounded by servants who always obey her every command, not out of love, but out of fear of her mother's wrath. This situation has shaped a very one-sided relationship pattern that main character is accustomed to being the centre of attention and the decision maker, without ever learning to pay attention to or consider the needs of others. Her “tyrannical and selfish” attitude shows that she sees the world only as a means to fulfil her desires. She does not recognize the boundaries between herself and those around her, there is no empathy, no sense of social responsibility. Therefore, from an early age, the main character was accustomed to living in a circle of selfishness that blinded her to social realities and the feelings of others. She did not interact, but commanded, she did not understand, but demanded.

The main character indifference towards those around her also reflects how her family environment shaped her cold and emotionally closed personality. She grew up without love or sincere attention, leaving her unable to form emotional bonds with others.

“She wondered also who would take care of her now her Ayah was dead. There would be a new Ayah, and perhaps she would know some new stories. Mary had been rather tired of the old ones. She did not cry because her nurse had died. She was not an affectionate child and had never cared much for anyone.” (Burnett, 1911, Ch. 1, p. 6-7).

This quote shows that main character lacks the ability to feel empathy or sadness for the loss of others. Her indifference to the death of her nurse confirms that she grew up in an environment that did not encourage compassion or emotional closeness. When someone close to her died, she did not respond with grief, but with indifference, even thinking about herself and who would become her nurse. This was formed from her habit of living in emotional isolation. This attitude shows how far the main character is from general social and moral norms, revealing her selfishness, where loss usually evokes sympathy and sadness. This flat

and cold response reflects her view of the world that human relationships have no meaning other than the extent to which others can fulfil her needs.

The main character grew up as a child who knew only the unlimited fulfilment of her own desires. She placed herself at the centre of the world and viewed others merely as tools to fulfil her needs. A spoiled upbringing and a lack of affection meant that the main character never learned to understand the feelings or needs of others. Freud explained that in the early stages of personality development, the most basic part of the self-functions entirely on the basis of instinctual drives and seeks pleasure without regard for reality or morality. As Freud explained, “the pleasure principle serves the id as a compass” (Freud, 1923, p. 46). In this context, main character’s selfish, stubborn, and insensitive behaviour reflects a life still controlled by these basic drives. She is not yet familiar with social boundaries or moral norms, and all her actions are directed toward the pursuit of personal comfort. Thus, Burnett presents main character at the beginning of the novel as a vivid portrayal of an individual who is completely controlled by primitive drives, an early phase before the process of consciousness and self-control begins to develop in the following chapters.

Middle Stage

The main character personality transformation in *The Secret Garden* did not happen suddenly, but through a long process that began with her self-awareness and continued with her ability to control her emotions and adapt to her environment. Through her social interactions at Misselthwaite Manor, the main character slowly transforms from a selfish and angry child into a more self-aware, reflective, and thoughtful individual. This is evident in several key moments that illustrate her psychological growth.

“This was plain speaking, and Mary Lennox had never heard the truth about herself in her life. Native servants always salaamed and submitted to you, whatever you did. She had never thought much about her looks, but she wondered if she was as unattractive as Ben Weatherstaff and she also wondered if she looked as sour as he had looked before the robin came. She actually began to wonder also if she was “nasty tempered.” She felt uncomfortable.” (Burnett, 1911, Ch. 4, p. 51).

At the beginning of her transformation, the main character began to recognize herself through the eyes of others. In this quotation, it is seen that she was confronted for the first time with a truth that made her uncomfortable. Before coming to England, the main character was accustomed to being praised and obeyed by servants in India, so she had never truly assessed herself objectively. When she heard honest criticism about her character, a new emotional reaction arose, not anger, but reflection and discomfort at the possibility that she was indeed disliked. This moment became the starting point where the main character began to realize that she was not the centre of everything, and that her actions and character could affect how others viewed her.

This transformation grew as main character began to reflect more deeply on herself. In her conversation with Martha, she admitted that she did not like herself.

“I like Dickon,” added Mary. “And I’ve never seen him.”

“Well,” said Martha stoutly, “I’ve told thee that th’ very birds likes him an’ th’ rabbits an’ wild sheep an’ ponies, an’ th’ foxes themselves.

I wonder," staring at her reflectively, " what Dickon would think of thee?"

"He wouldn't like me," said Mary in her stiff, cold little way. " No one does."

Martha looked reflective again.

"How does tha' like thysel'?" she inquired, really quite as if she were curious to know.

Mary hesitated a moment and thought it over.

"Not at all really," she answered. "But I never thought of that before." (Burnett, 1911, Ch. 7, p. 78).

In this quotation, it is clear that the main character has undergone emotional development and is now capable of deep self-reflection. When Martha asks her if she likes herself, the main character reflects on her feelings toward herself for the first time, something she had never done before. Her admission that she "does not like herself" shows that she has begun to recognize her shortcomings and bad traits, which she had previously ignored. This reflective reaction shows that the main character has moved away from a defensive attitude and is beginning to understand that the cause of her dislike for the outside world actually stems from disharmony within herself. This kind of awareness signals an important change: she no longer blames others for her loneliness, but has begun to see that improvement must start with herself.

The main character's inner transformation reached a more mature stage when she began to show self-control and the ability to communicate with empathy.

"Mary was silent for a minute and then she said something bold. "You might - sometime.'" (Burnett, 1911, Ch. 14, p. 182).

The main character showed changes in the way she spoke and interacted. The silence before she spoke showed that she had learned to think before acting, resisting spontaneous impulses and choosing her words carefully. Her firm but not harsh words showed a balance between courage and consideration. She no longer spoke to dominate, but to express her opinion wisely and politely. This attitude marked her complete emotional maturity that main character was now able to adapt to her social environment without losing her personal identity.

The transformations the main character undergoes demonstrate a complex psychological development process from a child initially ruled by desires and emotions to an individual capable of thinking, considering, and controlling herself. Through experience and social interaction, main character learns to adapt to reality and channel her inner drives in a more positive direction. This journey is in line with Freud's view that "the ego develops from perceiving instincts to controlling them, from obeying instincts to inhibiting them." (Freud, 1923, p. 55-56). In this context, main character's behavioural changes are not only a sign of emotional maturity, but also evidence that she has achieved a balance between impulses, consciousness, and adaptation to the environment, the core of the ego's function in the human personality structure.

Final Stage

The main character personality transformation did not stop at the stage of self-awareness and emotional control, but continued towards the formation of moral values and social empathy. At this stage, she not only understood herself, but also began to understand others, considering what she wanted and what was appropriate to do. These moral values grow along with her closeness to Dickon and Colin, two characters who influence her views on life, friendship, and kindness. This change marks the emergence of ethical awareness in Mary, where she begins to behave based on empathy, honesty, and social responsibility.

"See here," she said. "Don't let us talk about dying; I don't like it. Let us talk about living. Let us talk and talk about Dickon. And then we will look at your pictures." (Burnett, 1911, Ch. 14, p. 184-185).

The first transformation that demonstrated main character's moral maturity occurred when she attempted to comfort Colin by shifting the conversation from sad topics to something more enthusiastic and livelier. It was evident that the main character had begun to pay attention to the emotional state of others. She does not focus solely on her own feelings, but chooses to create a more positive atmosphere for Colin. This action shows sincere empathy, a form of social sensitivity that marks a major advance in the main character's emotional and moral development. She now understands that her words and actions can affect other people's feelings, and from this awareness comes the ability to act for the common good, not just for personal gain.

The main character ability to judge behaviour based on kindness is also evident in her thoughtful interactions with Colin.

"I'm glad you said that," answered Mary, "because - because -" Quite suddenly it came into her mind that this was the minute to tell him. Colin knew something new was coming.

"Because what?" he cried eagerly.

Mary was so anxious that she got up from her stool and came to him and caught hold of both his hands.

"Can I trust you? I trusted Dickon because birds trusted him. Can I trust you for sure - *for sure*? she implored." (Burnett, 1911, Ch. 18, p. 237).

In this quote, main character demonstrates a deep understanding that trust is an important moral value in building relationships. She no longer judges people based on their status or appearance, but on their integrity and sincerity. When she says she trusts Dickon because "the birds trust him," it illustrates a moral awareness that is sensitive to concrete actions and harmony in relationships between living beings. The main character now sees trust not as a risk, but as a form of appreciation for the goodness in others. Thus, she has moved from suspicion and fear to an understanding of the value of honesty and mutual respect.

The main character's moral awareness then reached its peak when she chose to tell the truth even though it could have consequences for her.

"Mary hesitated about two minutes and then boldly spoke the truth.

"I had seen it and I had been in," she said. "I found the key and got in weeks ago. But I daren't tell you I daren't because I was so afraid I couldn't trust you for sure!" (Burnett, 1911, Ch. 18, p. 238).

In this quote, the main character shows the courage to admit the truth. Her honesty here did not stem from fear or pressure, but from an inner urge to do the right thing. She understood that a sincere relationship could only be built on trust and openness. This confession marked the main character transition from a child who hid the truth for her own comfort to an individual who understood the moral value of honesty and responsibility. In other words, she now acts not only based on her desires, but also based on an ethical awareness of what should be done.

The point of emotional maturity that the main character reached after going through a long process of inner change can be seen in the following quotation:

"Colin turned his head, frowning.

"Am I queer?" he demanded.

"Yes," answered Mary, "very. But you needn't be cross," she added impartially, "because so am I queer and so is Ben Weatherstaff. But I am not as queer as I was before I began to like people and before I found the garden." (Burnett, 1911, Ch. 23, p. 294).

This statement shows that the main character has achieved a deeper understanding of humanity and herself. She no longer judges others negatively, but sees them as individuals who have both flaws and the potential to change. Her gentle and honest words show her ability to empathize, accept, and understand that kindness and change come from openness to relationships with others. The statement that she is "not as strange as she used to be" after starting to like other people and finding a garden illustrates that she has instilled the values of compassion, acceptance, and inner balance. The main character now lives not only for herself, but also for others.

The main character psychological journey reaches its peak when she begins to live according to moral values, empathy, and awareness of goodness. However, this process also shows that the morality she builds does not come instantly, but through an inner struggle to balance her own desires and social demands. At this stage, she learns that true goodness is not only about obeying rules or doing what is socially right, but also about understanding the meaning of love and humanity. This is in line with Freud's view that "the super-ego can be super moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be" (Freud, 1923, p. 54). This statement emphasizes that extreme morality without love can turn into rigidity and harsh judgment, something that main character slowly avoids through the empathy and love she finds in her secret garden. Thus, the development of the main character's superego not only marks moral maturity, but also a balance between the demands of morality and the warmth of humanity that makes her a whole person.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the psychological transformation of the main character, the protagonist in Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden* (1911), using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory (1961), particularly the concepts of the id, ego, and superego.

The primary aim is to analyse how main character transformation at the beginning of the narrative, is primarily governed by her id. She is portrayed as a stubborn and self-centred child who insists that her desires be fulfilled. This behaviour exemplifies the id's focus on instinctual gratification without regard for reality or morality. As the narrative progresses, main character demonstrates the emergence of the ego. She adapts to her new environment, interacts with others, and reflects on her experiences. The development of the ego is evident in her increasing ability to regulate instinctive impulses by considering reality and her personal experiences. The superego becomes apparent as main character exhibits concern, responsibility, and a desire for self-improvement. She shifts her focus from herself to caring for other characters, including Martha and Colin. This moral motivation suggests that the main character has internalized social and ethical values, prompting her to become more compassionate and empathetic. The maturation of the superego ultimately completes the main character's psychological transformation from an egocentric child to an emotionally and socially mature individual.

However, several limitations remain, providing opportunities for future research to expand and deepen the analysis. Future research should integrate Freud's psychoanalysis with additional psychological theories. Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, for example, can trace the stages of main character's identity development from childhood to adolescence. John Bowlby's attachment theory is also relevant for analyzing the impact of parental absence on main character's personality and the formation of her new emotional bonds with Dickon, Colin, and the secret garden. The scope by comparing *The Secret Garden* with other literary works that depict the psychological transformation of child characters. Such comparative analysis would enrich the literary context and offer a broader understanding of how themes of growth, self-awareness, and morality are addressed in different texts. In addition, applying a feminist literary perspective can reveal how main character's representation as a young female character reflects or challenges the social construction of women's roles in the early 20th century.

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