



The Intertwined Construction Of Identity And Dwelling In Mary Lennox's Character In The Secret Garden

Mutiara Luthvianie Syifa¹, Husni Thamrin¹, Irfan Rifai^{1*}

¹Universitas Pasundan Bandung, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: Irfan.rifai@unpas.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Mary Lennox, the central figure in the novel *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, undergoes an intertwined construction of identity and dwelling. Utilizing Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Greg Garrard's ecocritical concept of dwelling, this article explores how Mary's identity is constructed through performativity and her interactions with the natural environment, notably the secret garden itself. This article employs a qualitative descriptive methodology and close reading technique to trace how Mary's identity constructs from a disagreeable child into a cheerful and expressive individual. The findings indicate that Mary's identity is not fixed but an ongoing construct rooted in how she interacts with the environment around her. The secret garden remains a crucial setting for Mary to forge her identity through emotional connection, belonging, and healing. This article contributes to the field of children's literature studies by explaining how performativity and dwelling intersect in the construction of character identity.



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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary literature studies, identity is no longer perceived as a biologically predetermined or fixed characteristic. Rather, it is increasingly recognized as a construct shaped by social, cultural, and performative factors. *Social Identity Theory*, defined by Tajfel and Turner (1986), posits that an individual's identity is profoundly shaped by the social groups. This perspective underscores the relational and dynamic essence of identity, which may fluctuate based on group memberships and social settings. Furthering this perspective, Judith Butler (1990) proposed the theory of performativity, contending that identity is not an inherent truth, merely constructed via repeated social behaviors. These performances are part of normal processes, and through repetition, they start to seem "natural." Thus, identity is formed through representations, physical acts, and emotional connections that are shown in certain spatial and cultural settings.

In addition to social dimensions and performativity, identity can also evolve through interactions with the physical surroundings. In literary narratives, location and setting frequently serve as dynamic forces in character development. Ecocriticism offers an important lens to examine how literature portrays the relationship between human identity and nature. As Glotfelty (1996) defines, ecocriticism explores the interconnection between humans and the natural world as represented in literature. Greg Garrard (2004) extends this framework by introducing the concept of dwelling, which refers to the emotional, ethical, and practical engagement individuals develop with a specific place. This attachment influences how individuals perceive themselves in the world and how space participates in shaping identity. In Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden*, nature, particularly the secret garden, plays a transformative role in Mary's identity.

The character of Mary Lennox, who undergoes this transformation, has a unique appeal that warrants further study. As a result, many previous studies with various perspectives have contributed to the writing of this article. Sembiring et al. (2023) focus on the characterization of Mary Lennox using Duane P. Schultz's personality theory, concluding that environmental changes significantly influence Mary's transformation—from a rude and spoiled child to someone who is caring and emotionally open. Cesar (2018) similarly discusses how parental neglect and

psychological trauma affected a child's development, showing Mary's attachment to the secret garden is a metaphor for her healing journey. Hidayat and Wulansari (2016) conduct a comparative analysis between the novel and its film adaptation, showing shifts in Mary's characterization given the different ways the story is told in each medium. Meanwhile, DiGiulio (2014) argues that Mary's identity in *The Secret Garden* is, in fact, constructed between nature (garden) and culture.

Previous studies have contributed to grasping Mary Lennox's psychological and emotional journey. However, none of the previous studies have explicitly integrated Judith Butler's theory of performativity with Greg Garrard's ecocritical concept of dwelling to explain how identity is both socially performed and ecologically rooted in *The Secret Garden*. Therefore, this article aims to fill this gap by analyzing how Mary's identity is constructed through repeated actions but also ecologically rooted through her emotional connection to the secret garden

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This article employs Creswell's (2014) qualitative descriptive methodology, which focuses on close reading as a technique to analyze the text. The primary source of data is the novel *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. The selected texts are those that relate to and show the identity and relationship between Mary and nature, especially the secret garden. The data were considered in a way that focused on depth, coherence, and how well they fit with existing theories.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Mary Lennox undergoes a complete transformation in her identity construction at the end of the narrative. Mary's identity no longer shows the colonial influence on her life in India. Mary is now portrayed as having an identity with a bright and cheerful face, expressing her happiness, and being able to participate with nature and society in her new environment, Misselthwaite Manor. This development is in line with Judith Butler's (1990) concept that identity is not a stable core but is formed through "ritual repetition" of socially constructed actions. In addition, Greg Garrard's (2004) concept of *dwelling* suggests that human connectedness to meaningful living spaces has an important role in the formation of ecological identity. People around Mary, who observe her changes, indirectly validate Mary's significant identity shift.

1. Gesture and Physical Changes

Mary's construction identity is clearly depicted through her physical gestures and bodily expressions. Formerly living in colonial India and rarely playing outside, she is now portrayed as having a much healthier physique and being full of energy. The following quote perfectly captures this transformation:

"She had been running and her hair was loose and blown and she was bright with the air and pink-cheeked, though he could not see it." (Burnett, p. 194)

The description depicts Mary's identity that moves freely, with her loose hair and bright face, in contrast to the past when Mary was described as a plain and sour-faced child. Butler (1990, p. 33) interprets this physical change as a representation of the body's transformation into a "site of becoming," a product of continuous performative actions:

"There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."

Butler's statement emphasizes that identity is not something that precedes actions but is the result of continuous, social expressions. In accordance with Mary's identity, she was initially described as rigid, but after the process of dwelling, through interaction and involving physical labor in the garden and social interaction with the surrounding people. Her body heals biologically and becomes a performative medium through which a new identity is enacted and recognized. The garden thus becomes a site not just of physical activity, but of embodied becoming.

2. Dwelling

In addition to the physical transformation, Mary's identity construction is also strongly influenced by her relationship with nature at Misselthwaite Manor, especially with the abandoned secret garden that she discovers and eventually takes care of. The process of caring for this secret garden illustrates the process of dwelling, which is a way of living that is not just about occupying space but involves emotional, ethical, and existential attachments. Mary does not just come to see the garden but directly cares for it and experiences a deep emotional connection with it. The following narrative quote illustrates this profound connection:

"However many years she lived she could never forget that first morning when her garden began to grow. She might not have seen it, but it was there, down below the earth, hidden and secret, growing strongly." (Burnett, p. 103)

This moment shows that the secret garden is not simply a setting for Mary's activities but part of her growth process. The phrase "*hidden and strong*" captures both the literal growth of the garden and the symbolic emergence of Mary's identity—gradual, quiet, but deeply rooted. The garden becomes an affective space that holds memories, closeness, and a symbol of the changes she experiences internally. In this context, Garrard's (2004, p. 108) concept of dwelling becomes particularly relevant:

"Dwelling implies an emotional, ethical, and practical engagement with a place—a way of living in the world that goes beyond mere occupancy."

Mary not only occupies the space of Misselthwaite Manor but also establishes a meaningful and sustained relationship with the secret garden. It becomes a site of healing, relational discovery, and emotional grounding. She cares for it, spends time in it, and makes the garden a place to recover and grow. It transforms into a pivotal moment where she discovers relationships, love, and life's purpose that were previously unfamiliar to her.

4. CONCLUSION

The construction of Mary Lennox's identity the story of *The Secret Garden* demonstrates that identity is not a fixed characteristic or unchangeable; rather, it is fluid depending upon the circumstances. Mary transforms from an emotionally aloof and physically weak child into a cheerful and expressive one by repeatedly engaging in the same activities and forming meaningful connections with nature, especially with the secret garden. Her body becomes a means of expressing change, and the secret garden is a real and metaphorical place to live, where identity is planted and rooted. Combining Butler's theory of performativity with Garrard's ecocritical concept of dwelling gives a better overall grasp of how characters are formed, especially in texts where space, care, and change are important. In the future, writers may look into how these kinds of connections work in other children's literature when identity and environment come together.

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