

American Film Adaptations of The Secret Garden: Reflections of Sociological and Historical Change.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**American Film Adaptations of *The Secret Garden*:
Reflections of Sociological and Historical Change**

Julaine Gillispie (bio)

The creative team behind Marsha Norman's 1991 Broadway musical of *The Secret Garden* often joked about "*The Secret Garden* club," whose members, upon mention of Frances Hodgson Burnett's children's classic, purportedly gasped, reached toward their hearts, and passionately declared, "That was my *favorite* book" (qtd. in McGee 64). No doubt the prospect of having such ardent, die-hard fans in the musical's audience was daunting, to say the least. If asked, the filmmakers who have chosen to adapt Burnett's work (or any other perennial favorite, for that matter) probably would admit to some concerns about pleasing the legion of *Secret Garden* devotees. Douglas Street, for example, opens his introduction to *Children's Novels and the Movies* by discussing the particular problems inherent in adapting cherished childhood novels into film (xiii). He likens filming a children's classic to moving a Victorian home to a modern location. He writes, "Ultimate success is dependent upon the perceptive preservation of original feeling and attraction in harmony with requirements necessitated by the new, cinematic setting" (xviii). Indeed, the director's ability to remain true to the sense of the literary original and concurrently update it to reflect contemporary *mores* and cinematic techniques plays a major role in determining whether an adaptation becomes a classic or fades into obscurity.

Several scholars, including Morris Beja, George Bluestone, Judith Mayne, and Sergei Eisenstein, study adaptation, exploring the relationship between novels and films.¹ While there is, in general, concurrence among scholars about the common qualities of the two—such as narrative and point of view—novels and films are, nonetheless, different media. **[End Page 132]** Morris Beja points out, "If narrative literature and film share, indeed by definition, the basic element of the story, they do not 'tell' the story in the same way or in the same 'language'" (54). Consequently, filmmakers must alter the original work to fit their cinematic medium (hence, the name adaptation).

Despite the potential difficulties of successfully condensing and

converting Burnett's almost three-hundred-page novel into approximately one hundred minutes of celluloid, several directors have attempted to do so. In fact, the work's continued popularity among children and adults makes this children's classic a candidate for multiple adaptations by different media: drama, electronic multimedia, musical theater, opera, and film.² *The Secret Garden* (1911) inspires these multiple adaptations in part because directors aspire to stamp their unique, creative genius and society's current cultural perspectives on the text—the enchanting tale of the regeneration of two children, Mary Lennox and Colin Craven, through a garden near the moors of Yorkshire, England. Burnett's book, like all great works of literature, appeals to its audience in different ways through an ample assortment of themes: child neglect, class differences, mystical faith, the value of friendship, the healing power of positive thinking, self-reliance, healthy living, and nature. This gives *The Secret Garden* the chameleon-like ability to change to match its environment.

This dynamic quality enables box-office conscious filmmakers to tailor the story to suit a specific era. The films of the American society, in and of their time, provide a glimpse of the nation's cultural, social, and political ideologies. Traditionally, film content is a product of these shifting views and contemporary concerns. A close examination of three American live-action features of *The Secret Garden*—the 1949 Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) film, the 1987 Hallmark Hall of Fame television production, and the 1993 Warner Brothers (American Zoetrope) movie—reveals that each version remains reasonably faithful to the chronology of the original and heightens the Gothic elements of the text; conversely, each adaptation's interpretation is radically different, reflecting the historical and sociological changes in American society.³

Just as films are often time capsules, literature, too, can function as a “cultural reference point” (qtd. in [Manna 58](#)). Certainly *The Secret Garden* is an exemplar of this truth. As many returning-adult readers and critics note, the novel begins as Mary's book and ends as Colin's story.⁴ Although scholars' opinions about the impetus for...



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