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From Redemption to Realism: A Comparative Study of Child Characters in Frances Hodgson Burnett and Susan Hill

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Abstract
This article offers a comparative analysis of child character portrayal in the works of Frances Hodgson Burnett and Susan Hill, focusing particularly on The Secret Garden and A Little Princess by Burnett, and I'm the King of the Castle along with selected short stories by Hill. It examines the literary, historical, and psychological contexts that shaped each author's depiction of childhood, emphasizing contrasting views of the child as either a morally redemptive figure or a psychologically burdened subject. Burnett's Edwardian narratives frame childhood as a stage of healing and growth facilitated by nature and interpersonal care, while Hill's late twentieth-century fiction exposes the emotional fragility and trauma of children in oppressive or haunted environments. The article also analyzes narrative techniques, symbolic settings, and the critical legacy of both authors through feminist, psychoanalytic, and pedagogical lenses. By situating these texts within their respective cultural frameworks, the study reveals how evolving representations of children mirror broader societal shifts in understanding trauma, development, and emotional resilience.
Keywords: Frances Hodgson Burnett, Susan Hill, child characters, psychological realism, trauma fiction, children's literature, Edwardian fiction, Gothic narrative, narrative technique, symbolic setting, feminist literary criticism, psychoanalysis.

Introduction

The child figure in literature often reflects prevailing ideologies, psychological theories, and sociocultural tensions. In English fiction, the contrast between Frances Hodgson Burnett's early 20th-century portrayals and Susan Hill's late 20th-century representations offers a revealing cross-section of this evolution. Burnett's novels The Secret Garden and A Little Princess depict children as agents of healing, moral purity, and emotional restoration—symbols of hope amid adult disruption (Darcy, 2009; Ewing, 2022). Hill, by contrast, focuses on damaged or emotionally stunted children whose lives are shaped by psychological abuse, trauma, and domestic isolation, as in I'm the King of the Castle, The Brooch, and The Boy Who Taught the Beekeeper to Read (Zemanová, 2009; Deeb, n.d.).

This comparative study explores how each author constructs child characters in relation to the emotional and psychological landscapes they inhabit. Burnett's idealized children are often placed in restorative spaces—particularly gardens—where physical and moral renewal converge (Darcy, 2009). Critics have suggested that these spaces act as both literal and metaphorical representations of Edwardian hopes for healing and progress (Applebaum, 1998; Ewing, 2022). Hill's fiction, in contrast, is grounded in a Gothic tradition that positions children in psychologically charged, even haunted, environments, where innocence becomes blurred or even corrupted (Eriksson, 2014; Miquel-Baldellou, 2019, 2021).

By comparing Burnett's therapeutic child with Hill's psychologically complex or disturbed figures, this article investigates the literary and cultural significance of the

child as a shifting symbol—from Edwardian sentimentality to modernist alienation and Gothic disturbance. Through close textual analysis and reference to scholarly perspectives on childhood and trauma, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literary children function as vehicles for broader anxieties about identity, morality, and psychological resilience.

Literary and Historical Context

Frances Hodgson Burnett's works emerged during a cultural shift from the Victorian to the Edwardian period, when ideas about childhood underwent significant transformation. In both eras, childhood was increasingly viewed as a sacred and formative phase of life, influenced by religious, moral, and philosophical currents. Victorian literature often idealized the child as pure, innocent, and spiritually superior—a view inherited from Romantic thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and pedagogues like Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who advocated for nurturing environments that aligned with the natural development of the child (Darcy, 2009).

By the Edwardian period, these ideas were fused with the emerging field of child psychology, as writers and educators began to see children not only as moral beings but as complex emotional individuals. Burnett's fiction embodies this transition. Her portrayal of children reflects both Victorian sentimentality and Edwardian psychological sensitivity. In The Secret Garden (1911), Mary Lennox's journey from emotional detachment to empathy and social reintegration is framed by her engagement with nature—a space aligned with Rousseau's belief in the curative power of the natural world. The garden functions not only as a literal place of renewal but as a metaphor for emotional and psychological healing (Darcy, 2009; Ewing, 2022).

Similarly, A Little Princess (1905) exemplifies Edwardian ideals by positioning Sara Crewe as a moral exemplar who retains grace and dignity in the face of loss and adversity. Her inner strength and imaginative resilience illustrate the early 20th-century belief in the redemptive power of the child's mind. According to Ewing (2022), Burnett crafts these characters as "curative agents," projecting adult desires for order, morality, and emotional restoration onto the child.

Burnett's work was also shaped by her transatlantic identity—writing as both a British and American author—and by her own experiences with grief, illness, and maternal loss. These personal and historical factors contribute to a body of fiction in which children are at once idealized and psychologically complex. The child in Burnett's fiction is not simply a figure of innocence but a symbolic mediator between emotional trauma and spiritual healing—a notion deeply rooted in Edwardian cultural ideals (Applebaum, 1998).

The latter half of the 20th century, particularly the decades following World War II, saw a marked shift in the literary treatment of childhood. Unlike the idealized, spiritually redemptive children of the Edwardian era, late 20th-century child characters often embody psychological fragmentation, vulnerability, and emotional estrangement. Susan Hill's fiction, particularly I'm the King of the Castle (1970) and selected short stories such as The Brooch and The Boy Who Taught the Beekeeper to Read, reflects this cultural and literary transformation.

Hill's work is situated within a broader Gothic revival in British fiction, one that reappropriates domestic and psychological spaces as sites of unease and inner turmoil. As scholars such as Zemanová (2009) and Eriksson (2014) point out, Hill's children are frequently caught in oppressive adult

systems and emotionally repressive environments that offer no possibility of redemption. The home—traditionally a space of safety in earlier literature—becomes, in Hill's fiction, a psychologically claustrophobic setting where trauma festers.

This literary turn corresponds with the increasing influence of Freudian psychoanalysis and trauma theory in postwar British literature. Hill's child characters are marked by symptoms of repression, fear, and powerlessness, often shaped by emotionally distant or abusive parental figures. In I'm the King of the Castle, Edmund Hooper's cruelty and Charles Kingshaw's despair are not framed as moral failings but as psychological consequences of alienation, class tension, and emotional neglect (Deeb, n.d.). Miquel-Baldellou (2021) further identifies how Hill's use of child characters reflects deep cultural fears about aging, loss, and broken kinship structures.

Importantly, Hill's literary strategies differ from those of her Edwardian predecessors. Where Burnett offered pastoral restoration through nature, Hill replaces it with emotional stasis or haunting repetition. Her prose style—restrained, elliptical, and often laden with symbolic weight—accentuates the psychological complexity of her child protagonists. Rather than spiritual resilience, Hill's children often evoke existential fragility, mirroring a postmodern world bereft of clear moral resolution

Through such characters, Hill aligns herself with a modern tradition that questions the very notion of innocence. As Miquel-Baldellou (2019) asserts in her study of The Woman in Black, Hill frequently invokes folkloric or fairy-tale patterns only to subvert them, using the figure of the child not as a moral compass but as a haunted subject. In this way, Hill's fiction offers a stark contrast to Burnett's—revealing how literary portrayals of childhood have moved from redemption to rupture, from idealization to introspection.

Thematic Comparison

This section explores the central themes that shape the portrayal of child characters in Frances Hodgson Burnett's and Susan Hill's works. Through contrasting motifs—such as healing vs. harm, moral innocence vs. psychological burden, and imaginative escape vs. emotional entrapment—both authors reveal how children function as narrative vessels for adult anxieties, cultural values, and emotional truths.

Childhood as Moral Redemption (Burnett)

In Burnett's narratives, childhood is presented as a redemptive stage of life—morally pure, emotionally restorative, and symbolically aligned with natural or spiritual rebirth. As Darcy (2009) argues, Burnett reimagines the garden as a regenerative space, offering her child protagonists, like Mary Lennox and Colin Craven, the opportunity to repair their fractured psyches through care, attention, and play. The Secret Garden becomes an allegory of therapeutic transformation, where children can recover from neglect and grief by reconnecting with both nature and human companionship.

Sara Crewe, the heroine of A Little Princess, likewise embodies inner moral grandeur. Despite her fall from privilege and subsequent emotional hardships, Sara preserves her dignity and imaginative resilience. According to Ewing (2022), Burnett idealizes the child as a "cure" for adult sorrow and societal cruelty—capable of restoring order through grace, empathy, and storytelling.

These narratives reflect Edwardian ideals of the child as a civilizing and redemptive force, embodying the virtues lost in adulthood. They also align with Rousseauian and Romantic notions of childhood as a state of innate goodness and truth.

Childhood as Psychological Burden (Hill)

In contrast, Susan Hill's fiction dismantles the myth of childhood innocence. Her works portray children as emotionally endangered figures, burdened by adult dysfunction, psychological trauma, or existential isolation. In I'm the King of the Castle, Hill presents a bleak narrative of bullying, class anxiety, and parental absence. The relationship between Edmund Hooper and Charles Kingshaw reveals a cycle of cruelty and helplessness that culminates in tragedy, with no adult intervention or emotional closure (Deeb, n.d.).

Zemanová (2009) notes that Hill's children are often symbolically "trapped"—confined by environments, family dynamics, or their own psychological fears. This is evident in short stories like The Brooch, where silence and emotional repression dominate the mother-daughter relationship, and in The Boy Who Taught the Beekeeper to Read, where a child's presence brings buried grief and guilt to the surface.

Hill's representations suggest that childhood is neither redemptive nor idyllic; rather, it is a site of vulnerability, loss, and ambiguity. The Gothic overtones of her stories intensify this portrayal, casting childhood in the shadow of repressed trauma and unspoken emotion (Eriksson, 2014; Miquel-Baldellou, 2021).

Imagination: Escape vs. Haunting

Imagination plays a significant but divergent role in both authors' work. In Burnett, imagination is therapeutic—Sara's storytelling and Mary's fantasy of the garden allow them to maintain hope and endure suffering. Applebaum (1998) sees this as part of the "mentor-child" narrative structure, where storytelling becomes a moral and emotional guide.

In Hill's fiction, however, imagination frequently morphs into obsession or dread. Ghosts, memories, and symbolic objects—like the brooch or letters—haunt rather than heal. As Miquel-Baldellou (2019) shows, Hill's child characters are often subjected to adult fears that manifest through supernatural or psychological disquiet, suggesting that imaginative perception can be destabilizing rather than liberating.

Nature and Space: Sanctuary vs. Confinement

Burnett frequently uses nature—especially the garden—as a space of sanctuary and healing. In The Secret Garden, natural surroundings foster empathy, health, and social rebirth. Hill, however, reverses this relationship. Environments in her stories—homes, woods, towns—are not protective but claustrophobic and emotionally suffocating (Zemanová, 2009). These spaces reflect the internal states of the children and symbolize their psychological entrapment.

Psychological Development and Literary Techniques

The psychological portrayal of child characters in literature is deeply entwined with the narrative structures and stylistic choices of authors. In the works of Frances Hodgson Burnett and Susan Hill, the psychological development of children is constructed not only through content but also through form. This section examines how each author presents the inner lives of children—whether as stable and redeemable or fractured and unresolved—and how narrative techniques reinforce these portrayals.

Internal vs. External Development

In Burnett's fiction, psychological development is largely shaped by external forces—notably nature, education, and interpersonal relationships. The transformation of Mary Lennox in The Secret Garden is achieved through exposure to a healing environment. The act of nurturing the garden parallels her own moral and emotional restoration, a process also mirrored in Colin Craven's recovery from psychosomatic illness. As Ewing (2022) notes, Burnett's child characters often function as "curative symbols" whose

development is catalyzed by engagement with the physical world and guided by benevolent figures.

By contrast, Susan Hill's characters undergo internal disintegration. Emotional growth, if present, is frequently stunted, and resolution remains elusive. In I'm the King of the Castle, Charles Kingshaw's descent into despair is gradual and irrevocable. His psychological turmoil is not healed but intensified by the oppressive environment and his isolation from emotional support. Deeb (n.d.) describes Hill's child characters as "emotionally entrapped", with their development marked by powerlessness and mental anguish rather than resilience. Even in her short fiction, Hill resists closure: emotional traumas remain buried, repressed, or only partially disclosed, resulting in ambiguous psychological outcomes.

Narrative Methods

The contrast between Burnett and Hill is also evident in their narrative styles. Burnett adopts a third-person omniscient narrator, often with a linear and occasionally didactic tone. Her narration guides readers morally, offering insight into characters' motives while gently shaping the audience's emotional response. In A Little Princess, Sara's interior world is rendered with sympathy and moral clarity, reinforcing the author's message of endurance and grace (Darcy, 2009; Applebaum, 1998).

Hill, on the other hand, employs more modernist and psychologically nuanced techniques. She frequently uses free indirect discourse, allowing readers partial access to the consciousness of her child characters while maintaining narrative ambiguity. This technique contributes to the emotional claustrophobia of I'm the King of the Castle, where readers experience Kingshaw's dread and alienation without a clear narrative guide. Hill also deploys symbolism and Gothic imagery—such as decaying settings, silence, and ghostly absences—to externalize her characters' emotional trauma (Eriksson, 2014; Miquel-Baldellou, 2021). The unreliable or limited narration in many of her short stories intensifies the sense of uncertainty and psychological fragmentation.

Ultimately, while Burnett constructs her child characters through coherent, linear growth shaped by external care, Hill uses narrative fragmentation, symbolism, and psychological depth to depict children whose development is constrained by emotional damage and unresolved inner conflict.

Symbolism and Setting

In both Frances Hodgson Burnett's and Susan Hill's fiction, setting functions not only as a backdrop but as an active symbolic force in shaping the emotional and psychological development of child characters. These authors use space—gardens, homes, landscapes—not just to construct atmosphere, but as semiotic extensions of the child's internal world, offering insight into their mental and emotional states

Burnett: Nature as a Healing Space

Burnett's landscapes are richly symbolic, particularly in The Secret Garden, where nature becomes a site of moral and physical restoration. The walled garden, initially hidden and neglected, mirrors Mary Lennox's own emotional isolation. As she begins to care for the garden and engage with others, the space transforms alongside her, signifying growth, connection, and rebirth. Darcy (2009) emphasizes how Burnett draws on Romantic and Edwardian traditions, presenting nature as a moral force that "cures" the emotional wounds of childhood.

The use of sunlight, blooming flowers, and open space in The Secret Garden constructs a visual and emotional grammar of healing. Colin's recovery, too, is staged in sunlight and open air, reinforcing the Edwardian belief in fresh air and pastoral

surroundings as both physically and spiritually beneficial for children. In a semiotic sense, the garden serves as a metaphor for the child's potential—a contained but fertile space capable of regeneration (Ewing, 2022).

Hill: Setting as Emotional Confinement and Dread

In stark contrast, Hill's settings are gothicized and claustrophobic, operating as reflections of psychological dread and inner entrapment. In I'm the King of the Castle, Warings—the family home—is a cold, imposing structure that embodies emotional repression and absence. The house becomes a psychic prison for Charles Kingshaw, whose despair deepens within its walls. Zemanová (2009) argues that Hill uses domestic space not as sanctuary but as a theatre of psychological violence.

Hill extends this spatial symbolism to her short fiction. In The Brooch, the home is filled with silence, withheld emotions, and unspoken history, while in The Boy Who Taught the Beekeeper to Read, the rural landscape carries a residual grief that quietly infects adult-child interactions. Miquel-Baldellou (2021) suggests that these spaces are "haunted" not by supernatural elements, but by emotional residues—guilt, loss, regret—projected onto physical surroundings.

Hill's symbolic use of setting thus reinforces the emotional opacity and fragmentation of her child characters. Oppressive spaces stand in for unspoken trauma, unresolved tensions, and emotional paralysis, making physical environment a key to understanding character interiority.

A Semiotic Reading of Space

Through a semiotic lens, both authors use setting to communicate what their characters cannot articulate. In Burnett, spatial openness (gardens, light, fresh air) signifies emotional access, growth, and moral clarity. In Hill, spatial closure (gloom, silence, confinement) signals psychological blockage, fear, and emotional decay. These contrasting spatial grammars reflect deeper philosophical and cultural divergences in how childhood is imagined: Burnett sees space as transformational, Hill sees it as revelatory of trauma.

Critical Reception and Legacy

The critical reception of Frances Hodgson Burnett and Susan Hill highlights their distinct, yet equally influential, contributions to the literary portrayal of childhood. While Burnett helped shape foundational concepts of childhood innocence and emotional development in children's literature, Hill challenged those ideals by confronting the darker psychological realities of the child's inner world. Both authors have garnered attention from literary scholars—particularly feminist and psychoanalytic critics—for their nuanced and symbolic portrayals of young protagonists

Burnett's Influence on Children's Literature and Pedagogy

Burnett's legacy in the realm of children's literature is both literary and educational. Her novels The Secret Garden and A Little Princess have become canonical texts, admired for their narrative charm, moral clarity, and ability to present childhood as a transformative journey. As Darcy (2009) argues, Burnett was instrumental in shaping the Edwardian literary child—emotionally resilient, morally upright, and capable of healing adult dysfunction. These portrayals influenced not only literary conventions but also pedagogical models that emphasized the child's innate capacity for growth through empathy and imagination.

Ewing (2022) situates Burnett's work within a broader cultural project of idealizing the child as a "cure"—a figure capable of restoring balance, harmony, and moral order in fractured domestic settings. This conception, often embedded in educational discourse, contributed to early 20th-century models of child-rearing and the design of

children's spaces, particularly gardens and open-air classrooms that mirrored Burnett's fictional spaces.

Moreover, Burnett's female child protagonists—Sara Crewe and Mary Lennox—have been read by feminist critics as models of early agency, strength, and emotional intelligence. Applebaum (1998) reinterprets Sara as a "mentor" figure whose emotional leadership complicates traditional narratives of passive girlhood, anticipating later feminist revisions of the Victorian child heroine.

Hill's Contribution to Psychological Realism and Child-Centered Trauma Narratives

In contrast to Burnett's optimistic vision, Susan Hill's work has been critically recognized for its exploration of psychological trauma and emotional estrangement, particularly in child characters. Her novel I'm the King of the Castle remains a seminal work in British fiction for its unflinching portrayal of cruelty, alienation, and emotional neglect. According to Deeb (n.d.), the novel exposes the long-term psychological effects of emotional abuse in a way that was groundbreaking for its time.

Hill's short fiction has also attracted scholarly interest for its subtle use of symbolism and psychological tension. Zemanová (2009) identifies Hill's prose as deeply embedded in postmodern Gothic, where the child figure becomes a vessel for repressed trauma and existential dread. Eriksson (2014) emphasizes Hill's contribution to the tradition of moral ambiguity in ghost stories, showing how innocence and evil coexist within child characters, subverting expectations rooted in earlier literary traditions.

Psychoanalytic critics have drawn attention to Hill's engagement with themes of repression, maternal absence, and the uncanny, situating her within a lineage of trauma-centered storytelling. Feminist scholars like Miquel-Baldellou (2021) have explored how Hill's narratives interrogate intergenerational dynamics, emotional inheritance, and the spectral persistence of childhood fears. Her reinterpretation of domestic and emotional space challenges traditional gender roles and exposes the fragility of family structures.

Comparative Legacy

While Burnett's legacy lies in her contributions to the idealized, imaginative child of classic children's literature, Hill's work is more aligned with modern literary realism and psychological introspection. Both authors have left indelible marks on how childhood is written and understood—Burnett through redemptive storytelling and moral clarity, Hill through emotional ambiguity and trauma-laden introspection. Their combined influence spans literary studies, childhood education, feminist criticism, and psychoanalytic theory, offering enduring insight into the symbolic and emotional weight of childhood in fiction.

Table one: Child Characters in Burnett and Hill: A Comparative Framework

Aspect	Frances Hodgson Burnett	Susan Hill
Historical Context	Edwardian era; optimism and moral reform	Post-WWII era; psychological realism and disillusionment
Philosophical Foundations	Romanticism, early child psychology (Rousseau, Pestalozzi)	Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma theory
Core View of Childhood	Childhood as pure, redemptive, morally instructive	Childhood as emotionally complex, burdened by trauma
Developmental Arc	External healing through nature and social relationships	Internal disintegration, unresolved trauma
Key Themes	Moral growth, empathy, resilience, renewal	Alienation, powerlessness, emotional repression
Setting Symbolism	Gardens and sunlight as healing, open space as freedom	Gloomy houses and enclosed spaces as emotional prisons
Imagination	Used for survival, emotional	Used to evoke dread, repression, and blurred

	elevation, and moral guidance	psychological boundaries
Narrative Technique	Omniscient, linear, often didactic narration	Free indirect discourse, ambiguity, Gothic imagery, unreliable voices
Female Protagonists	Agents of kindness and internal strength (e.g., Sara, Mary)	Victims of emotional absence or unresolved grief
Influence on Literature	Foundations of children's literature and child pedagogy	Contributions to psychological realism and Gothic child narratives
Critical Reception	Celebrated for redemptive child figures and moral clarity	Valued by feminist and psychoanalytic scholars for complex portrayals

Conclusion

The literary child, as shaped by Frances Hodgson Burnett and Susan Hill, reveals two distinct yet profoundly insightful visions of childhood—one grounded in restorative innocence, the other in psychological vulnerability. Burnett, writing in the context of Edwardian optimism and influenced by Romantic and early psychological thought, crafted children as redemptive figures capable of healing themselves and others through empathy, imagination, and a connection with nature. Her narratives emphasize growth, moral clarity, and external transformation through nurturing environments, particularly the symbolic use of gardens and caretaking relationships.

In contrast, Susan Hill's portrayal of children reflects the darker undercurrents of post-war British fiction, where trauma, repression, and emotional isolation define the child's experience. Her child characters are marked by internal disintegration, shaped more by psychological forces than by moral instruction. Through techniques such as free indirect discourse, Gothic symbolism, and ambiguous narrative closure, Hill invites readers into the fragmented interiorities of children who are often powerless, haunted, or emotionally neglected.

Despite their differences, both authors foreground the child as a symbolic and narrative lens through which broader cultural concerns—whether moral, emotional, or psychological—are explored. Burnett's legacy endures in children's literature and educational philosophy, while Hill's contribution lies in her unflinching depiction of childhood trauma and her influence on modern psychological realism. Together, their works offer a rich literary continuum, moving from the idealized and spiritually redemptive child of the early 20th century to the haunted, emotionally burdened figure of the late 20th century. In doing so, they reflect changing attitudes toward childhood, family, memory, and the spaces—both physical and psychological—that children inhabit.

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