

## **SECRETS, LIES AND UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT'S *THE SECRET GARDEN* AND ALEXIA CASALE'S *THE BONE DRAGON***

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### **Abstract**

Secrets and lies are a reoccurring motif within children's and young adult literature. Indeed, psychology considers the keeping and sharing of secrets to be an important part of children's social development. This article explores the role and function of secrets, lies and unreliable narration in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and Alexia Casale's *The Bone Dragon*. In *The Secret Garden*, male upper-class secrets and lies are designed to exclude others. In contrast, the secret and lies of the children and working-class characters, where the narrative voice includes the reader, bear nurturing traits. However, although they initially empower the children to reinvent gender roles, they eventually result in the restoration of patriarchal structures. As an estranging unreliable narrator, *The Bone Dragon's* protagonist Evie reluctantly shares her secrets arising from sexual abuse with the reader and with other characters. Nevertheless, the reader might recognise aspects of reality which Evie cannot acknowledge. Subversively, her secrets allow her to commit the perfect crime. Although the novels' approaches to secrets and lies differ, both agree that sharing secrets further interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, both depict how secrets and lies associated with trauma lead to social isolation.

AS STUDIES HAVE shown that normally developing children have, by the age of five, acquired all cognitive skills that are necessary 'to understand secrecy and to keep a secret,' it is no surprise that children's literature targeted at this age group and older children deals with this issue (Anagnostaki et al. 2013, 329).

Broader definitions of the word 'secret' such as something that is 'remote from human frequentation or notice' do not include the social and active component that is highlighted in psychological approaches (Merriam Webster 2018). Anagnostaki et al. assert that '[s]ecrets involve deliberately hiding information from other people' (2013, 317). Therefore, secrecy might be achieved by withholding information, or by purposely distorting it so that a lie is created.

Like lies, which are morally condemned in general but might be regarded as acceptable when they function pro-socially, secrets might be evaluated in different ways (cf. Wilson et al. 2003, 22). Anagnostaki et al. explain that whereas secrets that arise from trauma can be 'toxic or dangerous,' 'keeping everyday secrets [...] is considered part of normal development' and sharing them is 'a significant factor in the growth of relationships' (2013, 317).

Literary texts are able to explore secrets and lies in a way that moves beyond communication between characters and into relationships between narrator and reader. For instance, by employing unreliable narration, a text aims to deceive the narratee who, in this case, is equivalent to the reader. This essay will examine the role of secrets, lies, and unreliable narration in children's and young adult literature by looking at Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) and Alexia Casale's *The Bone Dragon* (2013).

In *The Secret Garden*, the keeping, sharing and revealing of secrets is the major driving force of the plot. The novel does not take a univocal stance towards secrets but unveils the nurturing and destructive power that secrets can hold. In general, secrets kept by male upper-class members and those withheld from children are depicted as toxic and even fatal. Both the garden that Mr. Craven has locked up and Colin, who is secluded from society and from his cousin Mary, are remote from human frequentation and literally left to die. Colin lies to himself about his health and physical condition; his fears of becoming a hunchback and of dying soon are deepened by the secretive whispering of adults around him (Burnett 1911, 176). Furthermore, Colin's self-deception is aided by Dr Craven, who after Colin is next

in line to inherit Misselthwaite Manor, he reminds Colin that 'he must not forget that he [is] ill' (180). After Mary has confronted Colin with the truth, the omniscient narrator comments that '[i]f he had ever had any one to talk to about his secret terrors [...], he would have found out that most of his fright and illness was created by himself,' thus, highlighting the importance of revealing toxic secrets (213).

Alison Lurie labels *The Secret Garden* as one of the 'sacred texts of childhood' that encourage 'concealing one's private thoughts and feelings from unsympathetic grown-ups' (1991, x). These texts, she argues, are 'subversive [...] because [their] values are not always those of the conventional adult world' and 'act as a force of change' (1991, xi). Indeed, the secrets of the working class and those of the children exhibit cultivating and nurturing features. Dickon exclaims that "[the garden] wouldn't have been as wick as it is" if Ben Weatherstaff had not secretly attended it, and Mary's secret visits reinvigorate the garden and Colin (Burnett 1911, 272). The children's gardening is reciprocally beneficent. The 'yellow-faced, sickly, bored and wretched child' (333) Mary, and the 'hysterical, half crazy little hypochondriac' (333) Colin, become, as Ulf Boëthius observes, 'not only stronger and merrier but also less selfish, less spoiled, and more disposed to care about other living creatures' (1997, 192). The secret about the garden gives the children space to heal and develop, to deepen their friendship, and to experiment with established gender roles. Anna Krugovoy Silver asserts that:

Burnett's ideology of maternity progressively revises Victorian sex roles. Mary and Dickon's [and later Colin's] restoration of the garden indicates that Burnett values the

kind of day-to-day nurturing that both flowers and children need and that both men and women can provide. (1997, 198)

In the end, however, the patriarchal system in Misselthwaite Manor is restored. Starting with Colin's statement that "it's [his] garden now," the narration focuses more and more on Colin at the expense of Mary (Burnett 1911, 217). The novel's last words, 'Master Colin!' show that the story is ultimately not about Mary but about the future patriarch of Misselthwaite Manor (352). Danielle E. Price observes that:

[Mary] becomes a girl who, like the ideal garden, can provide both beauty and comfort, and who can cultivate her male cousin, the young patriarch-in-training. The text, therefore, establishes a crucial itinerary, in which, step by step, the development of a young girl is used to further male power. (2001, 4)

The lies that are employed in *The Secret Garden* can be evaluated similarly to the secrets that they seek to protect. Whereas Martha's and Mrs Medlock's lies are designed to exclude Colin and cause Mary to become 'pale with rage,' the children's 'play actin'' in front of the adults is an inclusive, communal experience that serves as 'one of [the children's] most thrilling sources of entertainment' (1911, 75, 298, 75). In addition, the children's withholding of information enhances the surprise of Mr Craven and the other adults when they discover Colin's ability to walk.

The discovery and sharing of secrets is not restricted to character level engagement. The omniscient narrator involves the reader in the children's secrets, following them into the

secret garden. Moreover, as Boëthius observes, ‘the novel is full of gaps, omissions, [...] incomplete events’ and ‘hidden intertexts’ that only an experienced adult and not a child reader can recognise and draw new interpretations from (1997, 188, 194). Boëthius identifies, amongst others, Émile Zola’s *La faute de l’abbé Mouret* as an intertext of *The Secret Garden* (1997, 188). He claims that, similar to Zola’s work, the description of nature in *The Secret Garden* bears strong sexual connotations (1997, 188). For instance, he argues that the phallic imagery of the ‘swelling leaf-buds on rose branches’ (Burnett 1911, 190), which Dickon shows to Mary, is emphasised by being set in the context of the children’s consultation about whether people are to be kissed like flowers (Boëthius 1997, 192).

Unlike the narrator in *The Secret Garden*, Evie, the protagonist and first-person narrator in *The Bone Dragon*, is uncooperative and unreliable. James Phelan argues that unreliability can occur across what he calls the ‘three main axes of communication’: ‘the axis of facts and events’ (underreporting), ‘the axis of under-standing and perception’ (misreading), and ‘the axis of values’ (underregarding/misevaluating) (2008, 224). Evie is reluctant to speak about anything that she associates with her traumatic experience of being sexually abused by her grandfather. She remarks that ‘[s]ome things should never be said [...] You talk around them. You leave gaps and blanks’ (Casale 2013, 60). Throughout the story, the reader has to construct what has happened to her by picking up fragmentary cues in conversations and Evie’s memories and associations. In this regard, Evie fits Phelan and Martin’s category of an ‘underreporting’ narrator (cited in Nünning 2008, 94).

The identification of Evie as an unreliable narrator is related to questions about whether the Dragon (a bone ornament Evie carves from her broken rib) comes alive or not and, thus,

questions about the novel's genre. Although the novel's title and categorisation as YA literature might provoke a reading of the novel as fantasy, there are aspects that suggest that the Dragon coming alive is a fabrication of Evie's mind. This is due to the parallels created by the production of the dragon; Evie's imagination is sparked by Uncle Ben's story of Eve being created from Adam's rib. The Dragon serves as a wish fulfillment device for Evie and she describes how she 'make[s] the dragon realer and realer' (Casale 2013, 12). In addition, the fact that Evie 'know[s] [...] what [the Dragon] means to say [...] except that it doesn't speak' illustrates that Evie imaginatively constructs the conversations with the Dragon (38).

Due to Evie's account of the Dragon, she is, according to Phelan and Martin's model, an 'underregarding' and 'misevaluating' narrator (cited in Nünning 2008, 94). Her interaction with other characters and the reader indicates, however, that she does not necessarily intend to deceive the reader but actually believes the Dragon is a living separate entity. Sissela Bok claims that 'lying requires a *reason*, whilst truth-telling does not' (1989, 22). Evie does not hide her hatred towards her mother and grandparents and confides in her teacher Ms Winters about her plans for revenge against classmate Sonny Rawlins. She even tells her that she wishes him dead (Casale 2013, 115). Moreover, Evie reveals to the reader that she longs to be 'powerful' and how upset she is that she 'never get[s] to hurt anyone half as much as they hurt [her]' (159). As the reader is aware of her violent inclinations, Evie perhaps has no reason to pretend that a fantastical creature is responsible for her actions. Instead, Evie needs to believe in the Dragon to '*gather strength*' (244) for her revenge on her grandparents. The arson, which results in the death of Evie's grandparents, is meticulously planned and carried out, so that there is no evidence of a crime. Even after her revenge, Evie

believes in the Dragon as her accomplice, as indicated by her question of why a dragon would need matches to start a fire (296).

Since the reader sees that Evie misinterprets Sonny's attitude towards her, she can also be categorised as a 'misreading' narrator (cited Nünning 2008, 92). Because Evie doesn't know that the botanical name of the poisonous nightshade means 'beautiful woman,' which Casale highlights in her author's note, she misinterprets Sonny's Valentine's Day present as a scheme against her (Casale 2013, 297, 113). From then on, she understands everything that Sonny communicates to her as an offensive act. Although Evie knows her friend Lynne's and Ms Winters' assumption of Sonny's romantic interests in her, she will not alter her views of him. All in all, Evie's narration is estranging along all three axes of communication, meaning that 'the discrepancies between the narrator's reports, interpretations, or evaluations and the inferences about those things made by the authorial audience leave these two participants in the communicative exchange distant from one another – in a word, estranged' (Phelan 2008, 225).

Nevertheless, even a reader who recognises the protagonist as an unreliable narrator might bond with her by degrees. The first-person narration in the present tense creates an immediacy that draws the reader into the story and reveals the 14-year-old girl's vulnerability that takes on a psychological and also a physical dimension reflected by the pain in Evie's ribs. The reader witnesses the effects of her deep trauma, such as her panic attacks which blur her vision and her habit of ripping off her fingernails or hurting herself otherwise when she struggles to talk about anything she associates with the assault. Thus, the reader's judgment of her due to her unreliability is partly 'washed away by pity' like the

words of Mrs Pool, who initially planned to scold Evie for mocking Sonny Rawlins and his friends (Casale 2013, 121). Furthermore, Evie's murder of her grandparents might be considered as 'Lady Justice taking a hand and setting things to rights' as Paul, who throughout the whole novel is described as being good, caring and affectionate, comments (282). Lastly, the reader might admire Evie for her resourcefulness. Her revenge is well-planned, and she seizes every opportunity to obtain the equipment that she needs to commit the perfect crime. Shortly after she brings the Dragon to life, she takes matches home from a Chinese restaurant, which she will use to light the cigarette that she makes Sonny Rawlins hand to her for a dare. When Paul has the fire alarms replaced, Evie convinces him to let her have an old one, with which she will learn how to manipulate fire alarms. She knows where her grandparents keep the key to their house in the garden and in order to not spread fingerprints, she wears plastic gloves that were given to her for applying an anaesthetic cream. After all, the police conclude that the fatal fire was an accident, caused by a burning cigarette that ignited a stack of newspapers. However, Evie also employs her cunningness in order to help the people she loves. For instance, she sets up situations leaving her widowed uncle Ben and Ms Winters alone with each other resulting in them becoming a couple.

In *The Bone Dragon*, characters do not only keep secrets from each other, but they also discuss the ethics and effects of secrets. Whereas Paul feels guilty keeping the purpose of his and Ben's nightly trips secret from Amy, Ben thinks that it is necessary to protect his sister from worrying too much (Casale 2013, 238). Ms Winters, on the other hand, morally differentiates between secrets and lies. She seems to share Ben's opinion that 'Secrets aren't bad in themselves' but tries to convince Evie that she 'shouldn't let [her] close friends



believe a lie' (238, 129). Evie, however, emphasizes the importance of secrets and proposes that lies are a justified means for keeping them. Because of the secret of her abuse Evie feels distanced from 'normal' people (129). She fears that confiding the truth about her rib injury to her friends, who think she had a car accident, would damage their relationship since it would make 'everything awkward' (129). Furthermore, she does not trust her friends to keep her secret. In contrast, Evie's friend Phee thinks like Paul that close relationships are based on sharing secrets. She assesses that Evie sometimes feels excluded from Lynne and her because Evie 'never tell[s] [them] anything important' (268). When Phee tells Evie about her fear that her father will forget her due to her mother's illness, Evie recognises the destructive power of her lie, and, thus, discloses it. As a result, Evie realises that she has taken steps to 'close [...] the gap' between her and Phee and concedes that '[she is] *not so different and distant from Phee and normal people after all*' (233, 232).

To conclude, both novels have a differing approach to the issue of secrets and lies. *The Secret Garden* differentiates between the positive secrets and lies of children and working-class members and the negative secrets and lies of the male upper-class. The children's secrets have cultivating traits for both the object and the keepers of the secret. Furthermore, they are inclusive as they are willingly shared with trustworthy characters and the reader. Although *The Bone Dragon* highlights that secrets are not harmful in general, Evie's secrets cause her to feel isolated from society and people who are close to her. Unlike the children in Burnett's novel, Evie shares her secrets reluctantly. Via means of unreliable narration the reader is often excluded from Evie's secrets but can observe her inability to see the truth about the Dragon and Sonny Rawlins. Although the children's secrets and lies in *The Secret Garden* are partly subversive as they empower them and give them the

opportunity to break with traditional gender roles, they eventually result in the restoration of patriarchy in Misselthwaite Manor. On the contrary, in *The Bone Dragon*, Evie, being an estranging unreliable narrator, clashes with the values and norms of the reader, who nevertheless might sympathise with her. Both novels, however, show how sharing a secret deepens interpersonal relationships.

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