

Making the Invisible Visible: The Interdependence of Invisibility and Disability in *The Secret Garden*

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Introduction

Although the concepts of disability and invisibility have received general attention in academic research, the main focus so far has been on invisible disabilities, meaning bodily or mental impairments that are not discernible to the outside world. That is to say, the degree of perception of a particular disability is linked to (in-)visibility.¹ The notion of invisibility has, however, also been taken up by researchers advocating for a more authentic depiction of disability in different literary genres and media. In particular, they criticise the lack of media representation of disability, as well as its common and unquestioned treatment as an exclusively medical issue.² In this respect, invisibility remains connected to a visual absence of disabled people altogether. However, there seems to be a scarcity of research on the relation of disability and invisibility in terms of socially created constructs. Increasing research suggests interpreting disability as a social construction rather than an inevitable consequence of physical or mental impairments.³ Yet, invisibility as a social construct has been insufficiently explored to this day. For these reasons, the aim of this article is to delve into the recurring concept of invisibility in Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 novel *The Secret Garden*, and to reveal its effect on representations of disability. The analysis, consisting of a close reading of a few selected scenes, seeks to specifically deal with the following research question: How does the recurrent concept of invisibility in *The Secret Garden* shape and affect representations of disability with regard to the novel's protagonist Mary and her cousin Colin?

For the purpose of this analysis, a social-constructionist approach is adopted and both characters

will be assumed to be disabled. Indeed, due to being surrounded by people who treat him as if he has a crooked back just like his father, Colin internalizes this belief and is convinced of being severely restricted in mobility. Mary, although not physically or mentally disabled as such, shows signs of emotional neglect, which have caused her to behave oddly in social situations and makes her appear contrary. People around her perceive Mary as other and make her feel like she does not comply with the norm that would be expected of a typical child in terms of behaviour, appearance, and attitude. This in turn renders her an outsider, like Colin. The main aim of this article is to show that invisibility is a construct that is closely connected to how a character is presented with regard to disability. The analysis will be guided by the hypothesis that the less disabled Mary and Colin are depicted, the more visible they seem to be to the household servants, as well as to Colin's father.

The first section of the article will provide the theoretical framework, while the ensuing sections are devoted to the interpretative analysis of Mary and Colin, respectively. It needs to be noted that the article is based on a specific and narrow focus and is limited in scope, which is why the role of British Colonialism in the novel is deliberately excluded. Lastly, the article concludes with a discussion of the research question.

Approaching Invisibility and Disability

While there is a comparatively clear answer to what invisibility is, disability seems to engender a lively debate as to what exactly is meant by it. The former can most basically be defined as the state of not being seen, recognised, or perceived. In this

¹ Ann Davis, "Invisible Disability," *Ethics* 116, no. 1 (2005): 154.

² Leslie Fiedler, "Pity and Fear: Images of the Disabled in Literature and the Popular Arts," *Salmagundi* no. 57 (1982): 59–60.

³ Gareth Williams, "Theorizing Disability," in *Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001), 125.

visual sense, invisibility is absolute indiscernibility of objects and points in another person's perceptual field.⁴ Invisibility can, of course, also be applied to living beings, as they can literally be prevented from being seen by deliberately hiding them from the eyes of others.⁵ However, for the purpose of this article, invisibility may also be interpreted on a social basis, meaning that the term is strongly associated with any individuals that deviate, in whatever form, from the norms of society. According to Herzog, invisibility then becomes a "socially created capacity 'to look through' the other even when physically present."⁶ He elaborates that this form of invisibilisation, of being rendered invisible by deliberate will and corresponding behaviour, tends to overlook the complexity of human beings and primarily occurs with marginalised, stigmatised, and socially vulnerable groups.⁷ This is the line of argument that is of most interest when analysing the novel. Taking a constructionist approach into account, invisibility will be treated as a social construct in this article.

Closely connected to the constructionist perspective on invisibility is the notion of disability as a socially created and accepted construct.⁸ This article explicitly refrains from providing a comprehensive overview of the myriad of definitions that circulate around the concept of disability. Instead, the focus is placed on Critical Disability Theory and its view of disability as a social construct. As claimed by Hosking, there is a balance of factors equally contributing to disability, namely impairment (physical level), personal reactions to the impairment (individual level) and environmentally caused barriers (social level).⁹ Hence, disability is differentiated from the actual impairment of a person, which lends itself very well to this analysis.

The approach further mirrors the bio-psycho-social model the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) suggested as a response to the incompleteness of previous models. In models such as the medical and the rehabilitation model, disability is treated as a disease and defective condition that has to be healed or repaired.¹⁰ In contrast, the bio-psycho-social model does take the medical aspect into consideration but attempts to concentrate more on disability as a social, as well as a cultural construction.¹¹ Disability is primarily perceived as a form of experienced restriction caused by society.¹² Yet, the social environment is not the only factor involved in constructing disability, but so is the culture that determines what is "normal" and accepted. Both disability and invisibility are therefore regarded as socially and culturally created constructs. As Honneth puts it: "The 'making visible' of a person," then requires that "the person is noticed affirmatively in the manner appropriate to the relationship in question."¹³ It is not just about visually perceiving a person but actively setting actions and displaying behaviours that affirm the presence of a fellow human being. Those actions and behaviours, in turn, are shaped by different underlying attitudes towards disability, and can either help visibilise or invisibilise disabled people.

For the purpose of this analysis, Mary and Colin are both treated as displaying some kind of disability, even though neither of them does in fact have an actual impairment. It is this circumstance that foregrounds the power and influence of the social environment on the construction of disability and invisibility in the novel.

Introducing Mary

Burnett introduces Mary as the "most disagreeable-looking child ever seen" with a "little

⁴ Axel Honneth, "Recognition Invisibility: On The Epistemology Of 'Recognition'," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary* 75, no. 1 (2001): 112.

⁵ Benno Herzog, "Invisibilization and Silencing as an Ethical and Sociological Challenge," *Social Epistemology* 32, no. 1 (2018): 18.

⁶ Herzog, "Invisibilization," 17.

⁷ Herzog, "Invisibilization," 17.

⁸ David Hosking, "Critical Disability Theory," A paper presented at the *4th Biennial Disability Studies Conference* at Lancaster University, UK (Lancaster University, 2008), 7, https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/disability-conference_archive/2008/papers/hosking2008.pdf.

⁹ Hosking, "Critical Disability Theory," 7.

¹⁰ Edward Brandt, Andrew MacPherson Pope, and Institute of Medicine (U.S.), *Enabling America: Assessing the Role of Rehabilitation Science and Engineering* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1997), 64.

¹¹ Maria Berghs, Karl Atkin, Hilary Graham, Chris Hatton, and Carol Thomas, "Implications for Public Health Research of Models and Theories of Disability: A Scoping Study and Evidence Synthesis," *Public Health Research* 4, no. 8 (2016): 38; Hosking, "Critical Disability Theory," 8.

¹² Berghs et al., "Implications," 25; Lennard Davis, "Crips strike back. The Rise of Disability Studies," *American Literary History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 507.

¹³ Honneth, "Recognition," 115.

thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression.”¹⁴ From the very beginning, she is portrayed in an extremely unfavourable manner. The readers learn that she has been unwanted since birth, because her mother wanted to remain childless. Mary was always “kept out of the way,”¹⁵ and solely accompanied by her servants. It already becomes clear from these introductory lines that the little girl has never been truly looked at but only looked through her whole life.¹⁶ Although she always got her will and everyone around had to please her, she was never affirmatively recognised as a human being in her own right. Intriguingly, Herzog argues that “this ‘looking through’ is more likely to occur with people of lower social status”.¹⁷ Mary actually comes from a rich family and therefore has a high social status. However, the statement makes sense if read it in the context of Mary being marginalised within her own family structure. While she does not have an impairment as such, Mary obviously experiences emotional neglect, which causes her not to be properly socialised and leaves her unable to connect with other people. It makes her a “tyrannical and selfish [...] little pig,”¹⁸ who is even forgotten when the cholera takes almost all the lives in her estate.¹⁹ It can be argued that this lack of proper socialisation is what makes the girl appear disabled and adds to the reason why people throughout her life have deliberately overlooked her and effectively made her invisible. Due to constant parental neglect, Mary started to develop certain patterns of behaviour, which eventually earned her the nickname Mistress Mary Quite Contrary. This contrariness, however, can be seen as being grounded in an impairment, provided that the lack of affection and its impact on Mary’s socio-emotional development are interpreted as a form of disability. By applying the concept of disability to Mary, it gradually becomes apparent that it is the

environment that excludes her and actively constructs her invisibility. Here, the emotional neglect causes Mary’s invisibility, which can in turn be equated to a form of disability.

When Mary arrives in England, she seems even more disconnected from her surroundings, as evident in the narrator’s observation that “Mistress Mary arrived at Misselthwaite Manor and she had perhaps never felt quite so contrary in all her life.”²⁰ This feeling is reinforced by the conduct of the servants who want Mary to behave as unobtrusively as possible and therefore, again, keep her out of sight. She is right away told that she should not “expect that there will be people to talk to.”²¹ This is reminiscent of her childhood days in India. The social environment contributes to this process of invisibilisation, which constructs Mary as an outsider.

Moreover, Critical Disability Theory explicitly points to the fact that disability is largely determined not only by social factors but also by cultural environment.²² This becomes most apparent when, after Mary asks who will dress her and Martha, the housemaid exclaims “Canna’ tha’ dress thysen!”²³ Back in India, the fact that she cannot dress herself would not have made her appear queer in any way, because it was simply acceptable behaviour. Mary even addresses this directly with the words “[i]t is different in India.”²⁴ The English culture, on the other hand, expects a certain degree of independence from children at age ten. In this respect, Mary can be interpreted as disabled, and this perceived disability is constructed through the difference of cultural norms. The label “disabled” is imposed on her, which highlights its social and cultural constructedness.

The key scene where Mary is, for the first time, actively needed and therefore looked at, is when her cousin is experiencing a tantrum and cannot be calmed.

¹⁴ Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (South Caroline, USA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 5.

¹⁵ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 5.

¹⁶ Herzog, “Invisibilization,” 17.

¹⁷ Herzog, “Invisibilization,” 17.

¹⁸ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 6.

¹⁹ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 6.

²⁰ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 15.

²¹ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 12.

²² Berghs et al., “Implications,” 38.

²³ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 16.

²⁴ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 17.

The servants turn to her in the hope that she will have an impact on him. From this moment on, Mary's invisibility successively lessens. This is especially reflected in bodily changes. She puts on weight, her skin colour becomes brighter and rosy, and she also learns to appreciate her meals.²⁵ Mary adopts a more positive view on life in general and takes notice of it. Presumably unintentionally, she uses a metaphor to describe this change: "The grass is greener and things are sticking up everywhere and things are uncurling and green buds of leaves are showing."²⁶ This seems to be not only about the garden but also about her transformation.

Mary is actively recognised by others, whereby Colin, as well as Martha and Dickon, Martha's twelve-year-old animal-loving brother, play a vital role in deconstructing her invisibility and thus her perceived disability. In the course of the novel, Mary begins to explore her surroundings and successively opens up and enjoys herself. She is, in a way, able to overcome what previously disabled her. People cease to construct her as being disabled and instead refer to her as "a sort of blessing,"²⁷ thereby focusing on her improving conduct and character. Especially due to Colin's insisting on seeing Mary on a regular basis, he is a key factor in her increased visibility. The way the environment responds to Mary simultaneously allows for the interpretation that the reason for her outsider status is not grounded in an impairment, but rather, to a large extent, in invisibility as a social construct. Assuming that, in Mary's case, the impairment is a lack of socio-emotional skills, it is the social and cultural environment which construct her as disabled and, therefore, invisible.

Meeting Colin

The readers only learn about Colin because of she hears time and again. Quite some efforts were

made to hide him from the rest of the world. This is shockingly evident in the fact that the only way to his room leads through a tapestry door. Deliberately neglected by his father, who cannot bear to look at him because of the fear that his son will develop a hunchback like him, Colin has been confined to his room since early childhood. He has no contact with the outside world, except with his servants, who have received the strict instruction to refrain from talking about him.²⁸ Although everybody seemingly knows of his existence, he is concealed and overlooked. Colin, a slim, sharp-faced, and ill-looking boy, is strongly convinced that he "shall have a hunch on [his] back and then [he] shall die."²⁹ The physical impairment he describes excludes and separates him from society. At this point, a parallel can be drawn to Mary's experiences. Colin, too, is rendered invisible by the behaviour and responses of his social environment. The reason for doing so seems to be the wrong conviction regarding his physical impairment. Since all Colin ever hears is that he will soon die, he eventually starts to internalise this firm belief and becomes "accustomed to the idea."³⁰ Cameron argues that "[t]he meaning attributed to impairment profoundly determines the sense that can be made of the experience of living with impairment."³¹ As for Colin, he attaches too much weight to what others say about his alleged illness, which results in his moodiness. He is described as being fretful, passive, weak, miserable, and dependent—all negative stereotypes associated with the portrayal of disability in the early 20th up until the 21st century.³² These perceptions serve to construct Colin's disability and even his impairment, which is, in fact, non-existent.

Speaking on a meta level, the novel contributes to a discourse on disability, whereby the only character that displays an actual impairment is Colin's father. This reinforces the perspective of this article to interpret disability as a socially fuelled construction

²⁵ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 42.

²⁶ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 78.

²⁷ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 76.

²⁸ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 64.

²⁹ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 89.

³⁰ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 65.

³¹ Colin Cameron, "Impairment," in *Disability Studies: A Student's Guide*, ed. Colin Cameron (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 77.

³² Alexandra Valint, "'Wheel Me Over There!': Disability and Colin's Wheelchair in *The Secret Garden*," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 41 (2016): 263.

that can be imposed even on individuals who do not have impairments. Especially in Colin's case, disability is something that others repeatedly ascribe to him, which in turn results in a child that ceases to question his condition and instead wallows in self-pity and depression. Because of his hysterical behaviour and tantrums, he is quickly stigmatised. Goffman introduced the phrase "spoiled identity" in relation to stigma, which is seen as an attribute responsible for reducing a person "in others' minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one."³³ Both Mary and Colin are repeatedly described as spoiled, which suggests a link between disability and their identities or character traits. Both are made invisible due to their otherness and supposed impairments. Here again, disability and invisibility are strongly inter-related as one is mutually dependent on the other.

Another aspect worth analysing is the novel's premise that disability can and needs to be overcome or cured. This holds especially true for Colin, who has been receiving medical treatment since birth. Brisenden challenges this model and points out that "medical treatment is in itself one of the most disabling factors about being disabled."³⁴ Colin is largely seen as disabled because of the medical interventions he has received since early childhood. The doctors considered it necessary to keep him in bed and move him around as little as possible in order not to aggravate his condition. As a result, his back muscles and limbs have become weak and his whole musculature is presumably shortened. His weak body is not a consequence of biological or inherited dispositions but, in this particular case, rather the result of unnecessary medical treatment. Colin's social environment, which is limited to the manor's service staff and his more or less absent father, is greatly involved in constructing him as disabled on the basis of an alleged impairment. Due to the fact that his father

has a crooked back, it is assumed that the boy must also develop back problems. Curiously enough, even his own father, who does have a physical disability, perpetuates this misbelief. From infancy onwards, he is put in a sick role, which, according to Green and Barnartt, equals the (still) widespread medical model of disability.³⁵ This perspective on disability is, in turn, associated with primarily passive, infantile, helpless, and even whiney behaviour. It can be argued that Colin is trapped in a vicious circle of external medical misconceptions and internal incapacitating beliefs, which he cannot escape on his own.

This is the point where Mary is given a vital role in de-constructing his state of invisibility. After having discovered Colin, Mary excitedly exclaims "I looked at him all the time and he looked at me. We stared!"³⁶ She is the first person that not only dares to look at him directly and without any fear, she also is the first one to doubt his disability. When he and Mary are having their first quarrel, Colin throws in that he is going to die soon anyway. Mary immediately counters this argument with the words "I don't believe it!"³⁷ A little later, she finally convinces him that most of his illness is created by his misbelief taken over from others, and instils courage and hope in him, most evidently in his tentative question: "Do you think—I could—live to grow up?"³⁸ Mary lays the ground for Colin to become visible again by explicitly telling him that she does not believe in his alleged crooked back and short life span.

In line with the rehabilitation model, Colin wants to overcome his disability. Intriguingly, he decides to hide his healing process. It can be argued that he imposes invisibility on himself because no one should see his progress until he decides otherwise. Valint observes that Colin "performs a 'helpless' and pained invalid body."³⁹ Colin almost stages his healing, and his progress is first only visible to Mary and Dickon. Eventually, when Colin is able to stand up and walk,

³³ Erwin Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, [1963] 1990), 12, quoted in Colin Cameron, "Stigma," in *Disability Studies: A Student's Guide*, ed. Colin Cameron (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 147.

³⁴ Simon Brisenden, "Independent Living and the Medical Model of Disability," in *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Tom Shakespeare (Continuum: London, 2000), 25.

³⁵ Sara Green and Sharon Barnartt, "Introduction: A Historical Overview of Sociology Looking at Disability: What Did We Know and When Did We Know It?," in *Sociology Looking at Disability: What Did we Know and When Did we Know it?* ed. Sara Green and Sharon Barnartt (Bingley: Emerald Group PL, 2017), xviii.

³⁶ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 70.

³⁷ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 85.

³⁸ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 90.

³⁹ Valint, "Wheel Me Over There!" 273.

he is no longer portrayed as a childish, needy, and weak boy but as “strongly and steadily as any boy in Yorkshire,” as “Master Colin.”⁴⁰ Both his invisibility and disability are overcome, and he is positively and actively affirmed in his presence.⁴¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that invisibility is a recurrent concept in *The Secret Garden*, which is strongly associated with disability. Mary and Colin experience a state of invisibility, which is imposed on them by others. Invisibility is regarded as a social construct and, in the context of the novel, as a concomitant of disability. With reference to the research question, it can be concluded that invisibility affects representations of disability insofar as it reinforces negative depictions of Mary and Colin. This is discernible in the fact that both children are represented in a negative and unfavourable way. While Mary is introduced as socio-emotionally disabled, selfish, and contrary, which is probably to do with parental neglect, Colin is described as a weak, dependent, and choleric little boy, whose existence is concealed with all available means. A parallel can be drawn because, based on an alleged impairment, both are rendered invisible through the actions of the people around them. Especially in the case of Colin, the social environment actively constructs his disability and prevents him from participating in society. Disability has an effect on how visible Colin is to his environment. For these reasons, disability and visibility can be considered interdependent. The analysis suggests that the less disabled a character is perceived and portrayed, the more visible he or she is to the social environment.

⁴⁰ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 147.

⁴¹ Honneth, “Recognition,” 115.

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