

## The Secret Garden



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

## Cast

Dixie Egerickx as Mary Lennox

Colin Firth as Lord Archibald Craven

Julie Walters as Mrs. Medlock

Edan Hayhurst as Colin Craven

Amir Wilson as Dickon

Isis Davis as Martha

Maeve Dermody as Alice

Gemma Powell as Grace

Directed by Marc Munden Produced by David Heyman & Rosie Alison  
Co- Producer: Jane Robertson Production Design by Grant Montgomery  
Screenplay by Jack Thorne Cinematography by Lol Crawley Music by  
Dario Marianelli Editing by Luke Dunkley Costumes by Michele  
Clayton Filming Locations: Yorkshire, Devon, Wales and Wiltshire  
Production Company: StudioCanal Released On: 7<sup>th</sup> August 2020 Time:  
99 minutes Rating: 85%

## Review

In cinematic history few films have been so fortuitously released to meet human needs as *The Secret Garden* – and yet so few films have been so disastrously timed in terms of economics.

Fortuitous? First the need for optimism for those in lockdowns, unemployment and pandemic strains was fortuitous. Filming, by starting in 2018, predates the late 2019 beginning of COVID-19.

Across the world traumatised people are in claustrophobic lockdowns as COVID-19 hits. They need the colour, the scenery and the happy ending this film vicariously provides. Even more than those qualities, they need the lesson the film gives, that although great sadness is inevitable, it can pass and life can be wonderful.

Economically disastrous? Across the world cinemas have been hit by lockdowns. One cinema chain in the USA has permanently closed five hundred cinemas. Not since the advent of commercial television in the second half of the 1940s has the film industry been hit by such a crippling disaster – and that hit much more slowly. This film deserves a better fate than to be a financial disaster; hopefully dvd sales and downloads will prevent that as more people use these options because they have to stay home.

*The Secret Garden* started life as a best-selling children's novel, being published in 1911. Writer Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924) depicts wealthy, but traumatised children finding a wondrous, but run down and overgrown, locked up, never entered secret garden on their guardian's dreary and overly regimented estate. Being in the garden regularly, they gradually heal and enjoy life again.

Within eight years of its publication the first of many screen adaptations appeared. So far four full-length films, an opera, a television series and at least one stage play version at least have been made.

So why make another?

Everybody sees culture through their own time and while this version follows the novel's essential framework, it does so differently. First the story is updated to some extent by setting it in 1947, a very different world from the Edwardian world of 1911. The second difference emerges as of more importance. While earlier versions go for a chronological clear as a bell narrative, this version mercifully does not. We frequently see the world through the eyes of Mary Lennox, (Dixie Egerickx) sometimes seeing her world through the moment she is in, sometimes through her imagination and at other times through her memories and night dreams. What appears as unclear to her appears unclear to the audience, although clarity eventually comes to her and to us as the narrative's puzzles emerge and are later made clear. Even in those scenes where we see her, perceptions often appears as hers.





*Courtesy StudioCanal free images: Alone in her parents' mansion.*



*Courtesy StudioCanal free images: Child evacuees at Bombay (Mumbai)*

The film starts in the dying days of colonial India as it is being partitioned between predominantly Hindu India and Moslem Pakistan. In an opulent mansion the colours and furnishings are bright and the garden and grounds are luxuriant, but the place is empty except for Mary Lennox, playing with puppets and telling herself stories. Time obviously unfolds in subsequent scenes as her previously clean dress now looks dirty, food appears as stale and the mansion now seems well on the way to being decrepit. A soldier appears and in another scene we hear soldiers in the background filling us in. Mary's parents were stricken with cholera and died in hospital. In a later flashback we see the house servants fleeing in panic because the mother was stricken with cholera. The early scenes of a solitary Mary are explained and the soldiers' next talk tells us they are sending Mary to an uncle England. We see her amidst other children being evacuated from an India in crisis. The film moves so fast that viewers can only be puzzled again as the face of a strict woman dominates the next scene in a train going through the English countryside.

This is Mrs. Medlock, her uncle's housekeeper (Julie Walters). She escorts her to the rambling gloomy mansion of her Uncle, Lord Archibald Craven (Colin Firth) who was married to the sister of Mary's mother. Now a widower, he seems a miserably unhappy man who has forgotten how to smile, while Mrs. Medlock appears as so controlling, dreary and repressive that she may not have ever known what a smile is. This type always dislike children and she makes this obvious to Mary. Nearly as depressing is her petulant, incapacitated cousin Colin Craven (Edan Hayhurst) who virtually lives in his bed in yet another gloomy, almost dilapidated bedroom.

The only smiles we see are on the face of one of the house servants Martha (Isis Davis) and even these are sometimes fading. Initially cheery when she first welcomes Mary, we see Mary in a different light in their first scene together. The girl tells the servant that she has bacon and eggs for breakfast, not the porridge Martha has brought her and as in India she expects to be dressed by her as she is a servant, to which a puzzled Martha responds with why can't you dress yourself? After more of Mary making it clear who is boss Martha states that she *had* been looking forward to having another child in the house to bring some cheer, then she walks out. The scene goes against the image of Mary given in so many other scenes, but it serves a purpose, showing what having adults



serving children can do to character and showing the frequently brattish ways of ruling class children.



*Courtesy StudioCanal free images both pictures Colin Firth and Julie Walters*

*Both pictures show the unhappy adults in their gloomy, decaying, cluttered surroundings.*





*Both pictures Courtesy StudioCanal free images: Mary finds the secret garden*





*Healing in the garden. Both images Courtesy StudioCanal free images.*







*The two sisters, mothers of Colin and Mary, appear in a recollection. The babies are Mary and Colin. The setting is a corner of the garden. The time; some years before 1947.*







*The Secret Garden. Both images Courtesy StudioCanal free images: In such a setting, how could anyone be unhappy? Lord Craven is and with good reason.*







*The contrast between light and dark, dull and bright, happy and sad, young and old continues throughout the picture and is typified in these stills. Above is Lord Craven. Below is Dikon. Courtesy StudioCanal free images*

Mary hungers for life and colour, as when she sees white birds on the wallpaper and they suddenly become alive or she dreams of her bright

orange and red Indian bedroom. Wandering around the property, she befriends a dog and follows it to a high wall and climbs over it, finding a secret garden, but why is it locked, and why would Lord Craven and his son prefer to be in the dreary, cold, dark mansion, when they could be in this sunny, bright, beautiful place?

The film eventually provides an answer, but in the meantime Mary is joined by Dikon, who seems to be an estate boy and they romp around the garden together. They persuade Colin to join them. These three unhappy children who have lost connections with the adult world find healing and happiness in their secret solace.

Despite a fiery disaster the film ends on an upbeat note: yes there can be joy in life and problems can be solved. Fortunately it shows this without contrivance or sentimentality or miraculous healing Their healing process and that of Lord Craven only starts as the film concludes.

However...





*Despite being in a wheelchair Colin comes out of his anger and depression, and begins to exercise his legs, regaining strength, aided by Mary and Dikon. Courtesy StudioCanal free images*



*Disaster. Ironically despite all the adults frequently warning the children about being unsafe and indulging in dangerous ways, an adult playing around causes the fire. Below: The final scene. Both images Courtesy StudioCanal free images*



In reality how many children can enjoy a secret garden covering what must be acres? How many have rich uncles in the British peerage? To create this image of the film's glorious garden several famous British gardens were used. Presumably they were roped off for filming because one 1980s visitor to Britain came back claiming that England's public gardens were too overcrowded to be enjoyed.

The same was obvious in Athens where residents yearned for gardens and lawns, as they demonstrated by crowding out the parks to the extent that they stood up eating trying not to bump other. Grass could not be seen for people. While people could with some difficulty sit to eat, essentially the same situation was evident in Kiama's seaside park by the 1980s. This is a beach town about seventy miles south of Sydney Australia, in the countryside in supposedly the continent with the lowest population density. By 2012 in Sydney bulldozers had recently ripped through around fifteen thousand homes with gardens to make way for high rises which sell for extortionist prices. More money for builders, real estate agents and councils who get rates, right? So you want to see grass and flowers, go to Kiama right? Around the same time in Ottawa, Canada another supposedly low demographic density nation, to get a scarce unit in a high rise couples had to agree not to bring in or have children. When one woman fell pregnant other couples sued.

In the nation next door people who want to enjoy the serenity of many national parks have to fill out forms and wait, some claim for years. In Delhi-New Delhi and Cairo, cities once famed for their gardens, pollution has become so thick that it can be seen from kilometres off. It kills humans in large numbers, let alone lawns and plants, assuming some survive what the world describes as development and others say is vandalism with bulldozers.

With the world's population rising by over two hundred thousand a day there an inevitability emerges with all this. In the 1970s the actor Peter Ustinov stated that in the twenty-first century the sign of being rich would be to own your own house and garden. So it seems, but not even the rich can always have this. By the time Ustinov said this, nobody no matter how rich, could live in a house with a garden in many European



cities, Stockholm or Athens being known examples. In both places millionaires got the penthouses.

As early as 1937 in the Hollywood film *Lost Horizon* this problem was addressed when a group of travellers find themselves in the secluded valley of Shangri-La. Here as in *The Secret Garden* beauty, space, material abundance and decency abound. Like the Craven children the entranced travellers think they have paradise, but here the similarities end. When the hero, "Glory" Conway (Ronald Coleman) praises all he finds in Shangri La he adds a caveat, that the only thing wrong with this paradise is that not everybody on earth can share it. True enough, which is why that conclusion was edited out of several versions of this film: it is not what people want to hear.

Yes *The Secret Garden* shows us the power of love, optimism and nature combining to bring out the best of life, but we live in a world where such possibilities dwindle as with ever expanding populations we lose the material resources of nature and will be left with only vicarious images of what once was.

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