

Tradition and the Individual Talent of Frances
Hodgson Burnett: A Generic Analysis of Little
Lord Fauntleroy, A Little Princess, and The
Secret Garden.

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 **Tradition and the Individual Talent of Frances Hodgson
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Princess*, and *The Secret Garden***

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

Tradition and the Individual Talent of

Frances Hodgson Burnett:

A Generic Analysis of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *A Little Princess*, and *The Secret Garden*

Phyllis Bixler Koppes (bio)

Frances Hodgson Burnett's lasting contribution to children's literature consists of three books, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886), *A Little Princess* (1905), and her best work, *The Secret Garden* (1911). This was Marghanita Laski's assessment in 1951, and subsequent critical opinion has usually agreed with her.¹ Burnett's individual achievement in these books can be described by placing them within the appropriate literary traditions. In *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *A Little Princess* Burnett combined two genres she knew as a child: the fairy tale and the exemplum. In *The Secret Garden* she continued to use themes and motifs from these genres, but she gave symbolic enrichment and mythic enlargement to her poetic vision by adding tropes from pastoral tradition at least as old as Virgil's *Georgics*. Previous descriptions of development in Burnett's three best known works have focused on the increasing depth and subtlety in the portrayal of her main child characters.² While this approach highlights a special strength of *The Secret Garden*, it fails to explain why *A Little Princess* and especially *Little Lord Fauntleroy* remain "curiously compelling"³ now that beautiful, innocent children are not as fashionable as when Burnett was writing. The following analysis of Burnett's earlier works as fairy tale-exempla, on the other hand, avoids using standards of psychological credibility in characterization more appropriate to realistic novels of child life. Moreover, a discussion of Burnett's use of mythic and pastoral traditions in *The Secret Garden*, shows this work to be her masterpiece not just because its main child characters are multi-faceted but because the work as a whole is richer than its predecessors in thematic development and symbolic resonance.

Both the exemplum and the fairy tale made a deep impression on Burnett as a child. In *The One I Knew Best of All: A Memory of the Mind of a Child* (1893) Burnett was highly critical of the exempla she had read. She

described them as "horrible little books" [End Page 191] given by "religious aunts," books "containing memoirs of dreadful children who died early of complicated diseases, whose lingering developments they enlivened by giving unlimited moral advice and instruction to their parents and immediate relatives."⁴ In "Little Saint Elizabeth" (1890), the story of a child whose good instincts are warped by her aunt's religiosity and by the many "legends of saints and stories of martyrs" she has read, Burnett similarly scorned the excesses of the religious exempla as well as the attempts to imitate them too literally and self-consciously.⁵ Despite such harsh criticism, however, Burnett returned to this genre repeatedly in her memoir; like Little Saint Elizabeth, she had been much affected by the religious stories she read. "There was nothing she would have been so thankful for as to find that she might attain being an Example," Burnett said of herself as a child; but self-examination had told her that she could not match the fictional children in their high standards of conduct or in their ability to effect instant conversions in others (*The One I Knew Best*, pp. 188-189). Fairy tales, on the other hand, provided Burnett with more affectionate memories. As an adult, she had friends on two continents scouring old bookstores for a particular collection of tales which she had owned, memorized, and then lost when she was seven or eight years old. She was retelling the stories to children and was about to publish them when someone found her "Lost Fairy Book." In 1904 she wrote an appreciative preface to a new edition of this work, *Granny's Wonderful Chair* (1856) by Frances Browne.⁶

Browne's fairy tales—which are at the same time parables against greed and pride—could well have pointed Burnett toward the combination of fairy tale and exemplum she achieved in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *A Little Princess*.⁷ From the religious exemplum she took the child paragon who has a beneficial influence on those around him; her narratives are secularizations of the story about...

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Phyllis Dixler Koppes

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