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Narcissus Reaching Out: Colin's Sensory Reorientation in *The Secret Garden*

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Abstract: In *The Secret Garden*, Colin is initially confined to his sickroom, where his understanding of himself is shaped chiefly by illness, fantasies of death, and the indulgence of others. He repeatedly contemplates the image of himself as a dying child and, caught between fear, self-pity, and self-regard, gradually loses the capacity to sense the world beyond the room. Mary's intervention first fractures this enclosed mirror image. Sounds, scents, the moor, and the secret garden then bring the outside world before him, prompting him to breathe, listen, ask questions, and perceive his body anew. Once he enters the garden, Magic becomes a shared ritual and belief enacted by the children, enabling Colin to recover his vital strength through practice. His transformation encompasses physical recovery and a reconstruction of sensory orientation. Through this process, he moves from self-enclosure toward the world and from an imagined death toward a felt sense of life.

Keywords: *The Secret Garden*; Colin; sensory orientation; childhood development

1. Introduction

Published in 1911, *The Secret Garden* appeared toward the end of the first Golden Age of English children's literature. By this point, children's literature had begun to move beyond a predominantly didactic mode, and the child was increasingly understood as a subject with an independent capacity for feeling, imagination, and action. Childhood came to be valued as a positive phase of life worthy of celebration in its own creative terms. Roger Lancelyn Green, as quoted by Angela Sorby, captures this shift: "Suddenly children were no longer being written down to any more---they were being written up: you were enjoying spring in its own right and for itself, not looking on it anxiously as a prelude to summer" [1]. Since Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, spaces such as rabbit holes, gardens, islands, riverbanks, wildernesses, and secret rooms had repeatedly served as devices for organizing the imagination of childhood during the first Golden Age of English children's literature [1]. Such spaces temporarily remove children from the routines of adult life and organize childhood as a relatively autonomous domain open to exploration.

Existing scholarship has interpreted the novel's narrative of recovery chiefly through natural space, medical discourse, and child subjectivity. The garden has been read as a nurturing space of life that contrasts with the enclosed, empty manor and reanimates stagnant familial relations through natural growth [2]. Yet cultivation in the garden also carries a social meaning: as the children draw closer to nature, they are reincorporated into structures of gender, class, and empire. The secret garden therefore provides conditions for growth while also helping to shape the identities the children eventually acquire [3].

From the perspective of medical and affective experience, Colin's confinement to bed, isolation, and morbid self-absorption echo the late nineteenth-century rest cure. The novel rearranges the relation between body and treatment through belief, activity, and interpersonal contact [4]. The children's "Magic" has likewise been interpreted as a metaphor for positive emotion: surprise, joy, and hope interact with their experience of

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nature to drive changes in body and mind [5]. Such readings show that Colin's recovery emerges from the combined action of environment, emotion, and belief.

Disability studies has further argued that Colin's rise from his wheelchair and recovery of the ability to walk restore him to an able-bodied, commanding, upper-class masculine identity [6]. This perspective exposes the gendered and class-based norms embedded in the outcome of his recovery. It also brings a more specific narrative question into view: how does Colin move from certainty that he is about to die to belief in his capacity to live? Existing studies have established the garden's therapeutic significance and examined the roles of belief, emotion, and bodily ability in recovery, yet they have rarely treated the changes in Colin's sensations before and after his entry into the garden as one continuous process. His transformation begins well before he enters it. Mary's words first unsettle his conviction that illness and death define him. Sounds in the corridors, scents from the moor, and accounts of spring and the garden then draw his attention beyond the sickroom. Building on these observations, this essay asks why Colin initially finds it so difficult to enter the order of life represented by nature and the garden, and through what process the novel gradually enables him to sense the external world.

"Sensory orientation" here denotes the basic way a character receives and organizes bodily sensations, allocates attention, and comes to understand the relation between self and world through those processes. It encompasses concrete bodily experiences such as hearing, smell, breathing, and appetite, as well as the direction of attention and the forms of self-knowledge and relational awareness generated by those experiences. Colin initially concentrates his attention on illness, deformity, and death, repeatedly confirming the image of himself as a dying child through the fear and indulgence of others. Mary's intervention fractures this image; sounds and scents then redirect his attention outside the sickroom; and bodily activity and shared ritual in the garden gradually stabilize these momentary sensory changes. Colin's development thus unfolds as a reconstruction in which bodily sensation, the direction of attention, and self-understanding continually reshape one another.

The figure of Narcissus offers a particularly apt way to describe this transformation in sensory orientation. Narcissus here refers primarily to the mythical structure of self-contemplation, rather than to a psychological diagnosis of narcissism. The "mirror image" confronting Colin is likewise no literal reflection. It is a pathological self-image composed of rumors about his illness, the reactions of others, and his own imagination. Colin recognizes himself in this image and gradually becomes bound by it. "Reaching out" names the impulse to cross a boundary that lies latent within self-contemplation. As Mary, sounds, scents, and the garden enter his life in succession, Colin attempts to touch a world beyond his established self-image. This essay accordingly traces his movement from self-enclosure in the sickroom toward perception of the external world and examines how he re-establishes his relation to that world through bodily practice and shared belief.

2. The Sickroom as Mirror: The Imagination of Death and Colin's Self-Gaze

Colin first appears in *The Secret Garden* within the enclosed space of his sickroom. His long-secluded room, the drawn curtains, the lowered voices, and the servants and nurses who tense at the slightest provocation together form the environment in which he first understands himself. He has little genuine contact with the external world, and his self-knowledge derives largely from rumors, fears, and repeated fantasies circulating within the room. He believes that he will not live long, that a lump will grow on his back, and that death awaits him. Death is the most familiar subject of his daily life and the one he repeats most insistently. Susan Sontag argues that punitive and sentimental fantasies surrounding illness transform disease into a figure through which identity and moral judgment are organized [7]. In Colin's sickroom, repeated acts of telling likewise invest his "illness" with meaning until it becomes an idiom of identity through which he understands himself and controls others.

This fantasy of death clearly takes the form of self-contemplation. Colin's repeated talk of illness and death expresses genuine fear, yet it also cultivates an image of himself

as exceptional. He is the frail child, the dying child, the child around whom the entire manor must alter its voice and movements. Colin says, "I am going to die, " and later, "And I am going to die besides" [8]. Such utterances have become a means of confirming who he is. The sickroom functions as a mirror, enlarging his bodily fears into a fixed self-portrait. In that portrait he recognizes his singularity, while the alarm and indulgence of others repeatedly confirm it.

Colin's fantasy of death therefore contains pain together with a concealed pleasure that runs from self-pity to self-admiration and even a degree of narcissistic self-regard. Mary perceives this with striking acuity. When she hears Colin speaking of death, she does not immediately respond with sympathy. Instead, "She felt rather as if he almost boasted about it" [8]. When Colin insists, "Everybody says so," Mary answers even more directly, "I believe you're proud of it" [8]. Mary recognizes the performative element in his discourse of death. Colin dances with death: he fears it, yet also enjoys the attention, concessions, and power produced by imagining it. The more emphatically he declares that he is dying, the less willing those around him become to contradict him. The more he imagines himself as a patient destined for deformity, the more readily the inhabitants of the sickroom submit to that imagination.

Narcissus later became an emblem of narcissism: transfixed by the image in the water, he cannot turn away and finally withers under its spell. What deserves attention in the scene of reflection is the experience it creates for the subject. The subject may admire his own beauty and confront the pride and arrogance held in the admiring eyes; he may equally confront inner ugliness or a strain of madness. Colin's self-contemplation in the sickroom has a similar structure. The object of his gaze is far from beautiful, yet it possesses the same power of absorption. He sees himself as weak, deformed, and doomed to die. The longer he contemplates this image, the more fixed it becomes and the harder it is for him to leave the sickroom.

When Mary refuses to participate in his narrative of death, Colin immediately flies into a rage. The novel observes, "In spite of his invalid back Colin sat up in bed in quite a healthy rage" [8]. He shouts at Mary to leave and even seizes a pillow and throws it at her. The act is deeply ironic: in trying to prove his frailty and imminent death, he suddenly displays abundant anger and strength. Later, when he descends into screaming and crying, Mary forcibly renames his condition as "hysterics." She declares, "Half that ails you is hysterics and temper---just hysterics---hysterics---hysterics!" The novel continues: "'Nurse,' she commanded, 'come here and show me his back this minute!'" [8]. Colin eventually agrees because he still believes that his body will substantiate his pathological self-image. He wants Mary to see the lump---in other words, he wants an external gaze to ratify his fantasy of death.

At this very point, however, the mirror of the sickroom is disturbed for the first time. Mary's entrance breaks Colin's monopoly over his self-image. Her cruelty operates as a forceful intervention by reality. Confronted with another child who is equally stubborn and willful, the Narcissus-like self-contemplation of the sickroom begins to crack. For the first time, Colin discovers that his fantasy of death cannot entirely control either other people or reality.

Colin's transformation therefore begins in the sickroom, well before his entry into the garden. Its earliest turning point occurs when Mary refuses to join his game of death. The secret garden will later give him new air, seasons, and bodily sensations; Mary first shatters the enclosing mirror. Once the image of the self who is "going to die" begins to loosen, Colin can turn his gaze from his ailing body toward the moor, spring, and the garden beyond the room. Self-contemplation in the sickroom establishes the starting point of his sensory orientation. The first thing toward which Colin must reach is the pool of selfhood obscured by his fantasy of death.

3. Sound and Scent: The Possibility of Reaching Beyond

Before Colin physically enters the secret garden, the external world has already reached his sickroom in the forms of sound and scent. Diffuse, subtle, and difficult to

obstruct, they cross doors, windows, corridors, and curtains. The moor, the garden, animals, and spring thus enter Colin's breath and senses before he is capable of going out to meet them.

In his discussion of the senses, Georg Simmel observes that "According to its very nature, the eye cannot take without simultaneously giving, whereas the ear is the egoistic organ pure and simple, which only takes, but does not give"; because the ear cannot avert or close itself as the eye can, "it is condemned to take everything that comes into its vicinity" [9]. Smell possesses a comparable power of intrusion. Scents drift through the air, adhere to breath, and enter the body directly. In *The Secret Garden*, sounds and scents accordingly possess a greater penetrative force than sight. They make Colin aware that beyond his room lies a world that is growing, sounding, and giving off odors.

Colin's first intense perception of the world beyond the sickroom begins with smell. When Mary returns from outdoors, he immediately notices it and says, "You smell like flowers and---and fresh things," before asking what the scent is. He describes it as "cool and warm and sweet all at the same time" [8]. Later he exclaims, "You've been out! You've been out! There's that nice smell of leaves!" [8]. Scent here performs an identifying function and an alluring one. It supplies evidence that a more attractive form of life exists outside the sickroom. It also carries a powerful bodily suggestion. Cool, warm, and sweet act directly upon the senses, drawing Colin for a moment out of the abstractions of death and into a concrete, vivid bodily experience.

Mary's act of opening the window widens this sensory channel. Once the window is open, "freshness and softness and scents and birds' songs were pouring through" [8]. The verb pouring captures the abundant force with which spring enters the sickroom. Mary then asks Colin to breathe deeply and relays Dickon's words: "He says he feels it in his veins and it makes him strong and he feels as if he could live forever and ever. Breathe it and breathe it" [8]. Breathing becomes an exercise in understanding life anew. Colin has repeatedly used speech to confirm that he is about to die; he now begins to sense through breath that he can go on living. A felt sense of life enters his body with the air and gradually takes form through images of the chest, the veins, and bodily strength.

Sound immediately joins this process. Mary first asks, "Did you hear a caw?" and then, "Do you hear a bleat---a tiny one?" [8]. For a child who has spent years indoors, hearing the rook's call is an almost unprecedented experience. Sound brings distant animals close and introduces another layer of external space into the room. Later, on the path to the garden, "his big eyes looked as if it were they which were listening---listening, instead of his ears" [8]. Sound mobilizes Colin's entire body; he receives the life outside the room with his whole being.

Through the recognition of scent and the act of listening, Colin gradually becomes a new kind of questioner. His questions turn away from his spine, symptoms, and death toward "What is it you smell of?" and "What is that scent the puffs of wind bring?" [8]. As the direction of his questions changes, the structure of the self begins to loosen. Attention now reaches toward the far side of sound and scent. There are Dickon as described by Mary, the gorse flowering on the moor, Soot the rook and the lamb, and the spring day fine enough to bring out the bees.

This questioning accompanies a new recognition of Colin's own vital condition. He later complains, "I do wish the slices of ham were thicker, and one muffin each is not enough for any one" [8]. Mary teases him with the discourse of death that once dominated his speech: "It's enough for a person who is going to die, [...] but it's not enough for a person who is going to live. I sometimes feel as if I could eat three when those nice fresh heather and gorse smells from the moor come pouring in at the open window" [8]. Colin's vigorous appetite now contrasts sharply with his former insistence that he is about to die. The body is generating needs once again, and those needs mark an active claim upon life and its future. Through sound and scent, the dying figure in the sickroom becomes a child who asks, hungers, and looks forward to the world outdoors.

Modernist revisions of the myth, particularly Valéry's, recast Narcissus as a figure of self-consciousness and inward contemplation, turning reflection beside the water into an

inquiry into the self [10]. Colin also passes through a phase of self-contemplation, yet he does not remain absorbed in the inward contemplation of the sickroom. His responses to sound and scent begin to establish a form of intersubjectivity by directing his attention toward other lives and the external world. These sensory encounters turn him away from contemplation of his own image and break the static pose of Narcissus beside the water. An open window, the influx of air, and a body stirred into response replace the sealed surface of the pool. The world reaches the subject through sensory experiences he cannot wholly control, and through that contact he recognizes himself anew. Colin thus realizes another possibility within the figure of Narcissus: starting from the self, he comes to understand himself as a life still in the process of growth.

4. Crossing the Surface: The Moor and the Secret Garden

Colin's entry into the secret garden gives spatial form to the sensory changes that have already begun within the sickroom. The novel repeatedly foregrounds doors, walls, corridors, keys, and a locked garden, positioning its characters at points of passage between enclosure and openness, stasis and growth. Farah Mendlesohn's concept of the "portal-quest fantasy" offers a useful reference for this spatial structure: a character crosses a portal into a relatively unfamiliar space and comes to understand both self and surroundings anew through exploration [11]. *The Secret Garden* remains within a realist world, while its locked door, key, enclosing walls, and hidden passage invest entry into the garden with the force of crossing a boundary between worlds. For Colin, passing through the garden door also changes the direction of attention. He leaves behind the sickroom's repeated fantasies of the diseased body and death and begins to sense sunlight, air, growing plants, and the activity of others. The crossing of a spatial boundary thus becomes the outward form of a change in his sensory orientation.

The moor first performs this boundary-making function. When Mary travels from India to England and then from the railway station to Misselthwaite Manor, she must cross an unfamiliar expanse of moorland. From inside the carriage she asks, "What is a moor?" [8]. The carriage lamps illuminate the rough road; bushes and coarse grass stretch into the darkness; and the wind produces a fierce, low roar unlike any sound she has heard elsewhere. Before Mary can understand the moor, it bears down on her through darkness, sound, and apparently limitless scale. She then imagines it as the sea: "the wide, bleak moor was a wide expanse of black ocean through which she was passing on a strip of dry land" [8]. At the level of physical geography, the moor belongs to the Yorkshire landscape. In Mary's perception, however, it becomes a sea that must be crossed. Hearing, sight, and fear reorganize space, giving the real world the quality of a fantastic threshold.

The moor is the liminal space through which Mary enters the world of Misselthwaite, and her crossing of it resembles a rite of passage. She has left a colonial household in India for Yorkshire. Her former life, shaped by servants, illness, and emotionally barren relations, has been interrupted, while her new life has yet to begin. The carriage moves through a dark moor where everything remains strange and difficult to identify. This spatial uncertainty corresponds to Mary's temporary loss of a fixed position. The moor bears the traces of the life she has left behind while carrying her toward a new structure of relations at the manor. It opens the conditions for the connections she will later form with nature and other people. In Turner's terms, Mary occupies a liminal interval in which the old state has fallen away and the new one has not yet been secured [12].

Colin's experience of the boundary ultimately centers on the secret garden. At first, the moor can enter his imagination only through Mary, Dickon, and the sounds and scents carried by the wind. The secret garden offers a more concrete response to his self-contemplation in the sickroom. It has been locked and left unentered for ten years, and this history of closure establishes a correspondence between the garden and Colin's room. The sickroom seals away Colin's fantasies of death and deformity; the garden seals away the memory of Mrs. Craven's death and the manor's arrested emotions. When Colin enters, life in the garden has already begun to return under Mary and Dickon's care. For him, however, it remains a space long confined and forgotten, unknown and waiting to reveal

itself. As the door opens, the garden passes from imagination into a reality available to the senses. Colin begins to understand himself through renewed contact with nature and other people. Narcissus-like self-contemplation gives way, by degrees, to a felt sense of life directed toward the external world.

Mary's and Mr. Craven's experiences of the moor bring this spatial mechanism into sharper focus. Mary initially encounters the moor as dark and strange; over time, its wind, flowers, animals, and openness transform her. Mr. Craven, who has long fled the manor by traveling abroad, also feels his body and mind loosen in the presence of natural scenery and forms new thoughts on his journey home. Before clear running water and forget-me-nots, "Something seemed to have been unbound and released in him, very quietly" [8]. His experience echoes Colin's transformation in the garden. Spatial boundaries in *The Secret Garden* act upon more than Colin alone. The moor, the garden, and the manor together constitute a mechanism of transition. Mary's transformation anticipates Colin's, while Mr. Craven's return extends the garden's experience of rebirth into the adult world. Both the moor and the secret garden function as liminal spaces: the moor forms the outer threshold into the world of the manor, and the secret garden forms the inner threshold by which Colin leaves the mirror of the sickroom. Together they trace a path from an arrested order toward an order of healing.

5. The Self in Bloom: Magic as Ritual

After Colin enters the secret garden, the transformation of his sensory orientation reaches its final stage. In the garden, he begins to affirm himself through a repeatedly enacted set of rituals. Catherine Bell's account of ritualization shows that ritual exceeds a body of ideas: bodily postures, spatial distinctions, repeated acts, and collective performance generate a practical sense of ritual and produce what she calls a "ritualized body" [13]. Seen in these terms, the children's particular ways of acting collectively establish a ritual order in the garden. Within that order, Colin acquires a new form of belief.

Secrecy first performs a ritual function. Walls surround the secret garden, a locked door seals it, and the children guard it carefully. Its secrecy imbues entry with a sense of reverence. Even before Mary tells Colin about the garden, Dickon sees the robin nesting and warns her, "We munnot stir. We munnot scarce breathe." He goes on: "They've got their way o' thinkin' and doin' things an' a body had better not meddle" [8]. When Colin later enters the garden, he too must submit to the same low voices, waiting, and restraint. Such care gives the experience of the garden a ritual character: only by respecting the rhythms of other lives can the children approach the life unfolding there.

This ritual quality also changes Colin's relation to other people. In the sickroom, he requires others to obey him; in the garden, he must observe rules held in common. He has to speak quietly, wait for the right moment, and listen as Dickon explains the ways of birds, plants, and animals. Colin delights in the air of mystery and works to accommodate himself to the garden's rules. Roy Rappaport argues that ritual consists in relatively invariant sequences of acts and utterances and that their joint performance entails acceptance of an order [14]. Low voices, waiting, observation, and bodily exercises draw Colin into just such a collectively observed order.

Within the garden's order, Colin remains proud and retains his habit of issuing commands. His commands, however, no longer serve only the willfulness and desire for control that ruled the sickroom. They now enter the children's shared practice of protecting the garden. Colin asks the others to believe in Magic and asks himself to concentrate his thoughts and practice walking. The will that once operated chiefly by controlling others begins to take the form of self-discipline; it also becomes a force for organizing his companions and advancing his recovery.

The rules observed in common, the words repeatedly spoken, and the bodily exercises continually performed gradually constitute the ritualized practice of the garden. "Magic" gives this practice a single name and a shared meaning. Colin first declares, "Something is there---something!" and Mary replies, "It's Magic, but not black. It's as white

as snow" [8]. In the children's understanding, the germination of seeds, the growth of branches, the strengthening of the body, and changes in mood can all be explained by Magic. The word gathers natural change, bodily sensation, and the desire for recovery into a common direction. Magic thereby becomes the language of belief within the garden and connects the children's observations, speech, and bodily actions.

Colin has a particular need for this language. Once inside the garden, he tells himself again and again, "Magic is in me! Magic is making me well! I am going to be as strong as Dickon, as strong as Dickon!" [8]. These words constitute a promise to the self and an act of ritualized speech. Through repetition, they redirect attention toward an image of health. Through sound, they mobilize the body, allowing Colin to believe that the wish he voices can pass into action. He calls the process a scientific experiment, a revealing description that turns ritual into a practice open to repetition and verification.

This practical dimension becomes most evident in the "Magic ceremony." The children gather under the plum tree canopy while Colin concentrates all his thought on Magic. He even asks Mary, "Shall we sway backward and forward, Mary, as if we were dervishes?" He then begins to chant: "The sun is shining---the sun is shining. That is the Magic. The flowers are growing---the roots are stirring. That is the Magic. Being alive is the Magic---being strong is the Magic. The Magic is in me---the Magic is in me" [8]. These sentences connect sun, flowers, roots, body, health, and mind. The form of a doxology lends Magic solemnity and places Colin's desire for recovery within a repeatable vocal rhythm. Mary listens in a state of absorption, finding the chant strange and beautiful. Her response indicates that the ceremony has acquired genuine affective force within the children's world.

The sacred resonance of the garden community also emerges through the roles of Dickon and Susan Sowerby. Dickon's intimacy with birds, animals, and plants gives him the narrative function of a guide. Susan, in her maternal role, supplies a name for Magic, calling the power that makes seeds swell, the sun shine, and Colin well "th' Big Good Thing" [8]. She often appears in a blue cloak. This use of color invites a Marian association, though it does not warrant identifying Susan as a type of the Virgin Mary or equating the garden's Magic directly with Christian belief. Such restraint accords more closely with the novel's openness in giving several names to the same vital force.

Magic cannot remain within chants and acts of naming. It has to return to Colin's bodily movements and be felt repeatedly. Dickon reminds him, "Eh! tha' mustn't begin by sayin' tha'rt tired. Tha' might spoil th' Magic" [8]. Colin later summarizes the principle: "The Magic works best when you work, yourself. You can feel it in your bones and muscles" [8]. Magic thus moves from abstract belief into muscle, bone, and labor. The more Colin practices walking, the more strongly he feels his body growing, and the firmer his belief in Magic becomes. Ritual, belief, and bodily experience reinforce one another in a self-fulfilling cycle. In the myth, Narcissus finally becomes a flower. Colin undergoes an analogous transformation in *The Secret Garden*. After reaching out, he replants himself in the world through the rituals of the garden.

6. Conclusion: After Narcissus Reaches Out

Children possess no automatic access to nature or inexhaustible vitality. Colin reminds us that childhood can also be besieged by fear, the language of illness, and images of the self. The capacity to sense the world is something a child may lose; it must then be reawakened through the touch of others, the opening of space, bodily practice, and shared belief.

Colin's development therefore extends beyond the recovery of physical health. In the novel, health first signifies a restored capacity to sense the world, and this sensory capacity forms part of the capacity for life itself. When a child turns out of an enclosed self-image, grows interested in the external world, begins to ask questions, and receives the responses of others, the self can be organized anew.

Must growth always appear as moral improvement, increased bodily strength, or mature character? We may also ask how children acquire ways of sensing the world. What

media do children in different texts depend upon to understand themselves? How are they trapped within a particular self-image, and how do other people and the world awaken them again? Such questions take us a step beyond narratives in which the child is educated or cured and allow us to see the reconstruction of the self through which a child subject forms the capacity to sense. Once Narcissus reaches out, the mirror image shatters, and with that shattering comes the possibility of a more substantial rebirth.

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