**Discussion Pack**

**for**

**Emmy and the Iris:**

**A Fanciful French Twist on *The Secret Garden***

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**This pack includes:**

**Essay: Inspiration for *Emmy and the Iris***

**Discussion Questions**

**Essay: Inspiration for *Emmy and the Iris***

When reading this novel, you may realize that certain elements of the plot seem familiar. If so, it is because you have already read or heard of *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, published in 1911. Josy’s Little Library ([www.josyslittlelibrary.com](http://www.josyslittlelibrary.com)) has been created in the hopes of transmitting a mom’s love of literature and life lessons by writing books for her children. Sometimes this includes updating the classics to find new ways to communicate their timeless messages to current and future generations. Why has Frances Hodgson Burnett inspired *Emmy and the* *Iris* and why update *The Secret Garden*?

Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924) was born in England. Her family moved to the United States in 1865 due to financial hardship and the death of her father. She cultivated reading and writing as a passion, but when her mother passed away, Frances had to support her brothers and sisters through her writing. She quickly made a name for herself in both the US and England, and her two greatest literary triumphs included *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *The Secret Garden*\*.

*The Secret Garden* is a poetic story of a spoiled, disagreeable young girl named Mary who, following the death of her parents with whom she lived in India, goes to take up residence with her uncle in England. Disliked or ignored by adults, especially her grieving uncle, she discovers a secret garden that she goes about restoring with her cousin Colin. The experience is transformative for both children’s mental and physical health.

There are many reasons we chose to honor this novel and its author by placing the story into a more modern context. First, the novel is accessible to many age groups in terms of reading level and themes. Children, teenagers and adults can enjoy it in different ways. Children can enjoy the mystery and secret elements of a story concerning children of their own age through an uncomplicated storyline. Teenagers can appreciate the messages of hope and the healing power of nature while learning about the history of British colonialism in India. Adults can appreciate literary elements such as the gentle, soothing imagery of castles and gardens, and the themes of trauma or adverse life circumstances that can produce long-lasting effects. In any age group, it can be read therapeutically, as an escape from hectic, technology-driven modern life.

There have of course been critiques of Burnett’s version, notably that the portrayals of Indian servants are degrading and racist. Some also criticize Burnett’s “easy” solution to very real mental diseases such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders, and physical ones such as the spinal disorder from which Mary’s cousin suffers, as if they are “all in one’s head” and easy to cure (“Go out and get some sunshine! Play in nature!”). We know from a modern perspective, of course, that these diseases are much more complex to resolve. However, her message that a deeper connection to nature can have positive effects on one’s mood and energy still rings true. Consider the recent boom in “digital detox vacations”, proof that many people have realized that they are disconnected from nature while anxiously trying to keep up with their virtual lives, causing additional stress.

This version of *The Secret Garden* is therefore not an attempt to “best” the original version nor modernize every character and notion. The objective is to pay tribute to Burnett’s fabulous work and inspiring life by bringing her messages of nature, childhood, family, love, grief, and personal transformation into today’s world. France, a modern culture with a well-preserved ancient landscape, seemed like the perfect setting. While reading this new version, you can ask yourself many questions, depending on whether you have read the original. Which characters are based on the original ones? Which are new and how do they reflect our times? Which societal problems are mentioned in the book? What impact do grief and love have on the story and how do these feelings evolve by the end? Finally, if you haven’t yet read the original, don’t hesitate to do so. A more beautiful, touching, and eye-opening book is very hard to come by, indeed.

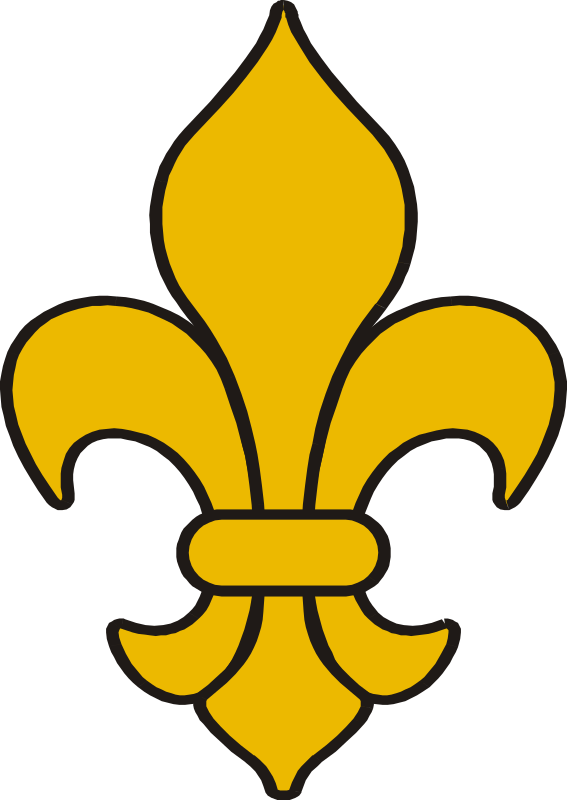
\*Source: https://www.deadtreepublishing.com/pages/frances-hodgson-burnett

**Discussion Questions**

1. Why is Emmy such a disagreeable little girl in the beginning? And Raymond?
2. What is Emmy’s opinion of the adults in their story and how do they view her? Do these feelings change over time?
3. In which ways do Emmy, Michaël and Raymond help each other to feel better in general?
4. “But Marin is naturally a patient, kind older brother. You can tell a lot about someone by how they treat their brother and sisters. And also by the loyalty they show, even when they are far away.”

Do you agree with Sarah? If so, can you give examples from your own life?

1. What sort of “sickness” do you think Emmy’s parents had?
2. How does the garden transform the children? Why do they miss it when they can’t go?
3. What role do animals play in the story?
4. Emmy doesn’t seem to like being watched, especially when many people are doing so at the same time. Describe the scenes where this happens. In your opinion, why does she react this way?
5. How do video games impact Raymond? Is it only a negative influence? What is the role of electronic devices in the story in general?
6. What is the connection between Laney’s personality and her past?
7. What finally helps Laney accept her past?
8. In your opinion, why did the author choose to focus the story on the iris? What does an iris represent? And the name Iris?
9. What do you know about the *fleur-de-lys*?



1. What is the role of family in the novel? Of empathy? Of guilt? Of forgiveness and self-forgiveness?
2. “We don’t travel, my family,” (Michaël) said. “It is much money. But that is okay. We live ’ere and it is beautiful and like a vacation every day! But you ’ave travelled from very far!”

Would you rather live in a place so beautiful that you never had to take vacation, or take vacations in different places from time to time? Why?

1. When difficult or sad things happen in life, should we discuss them or try to forget them? Why?