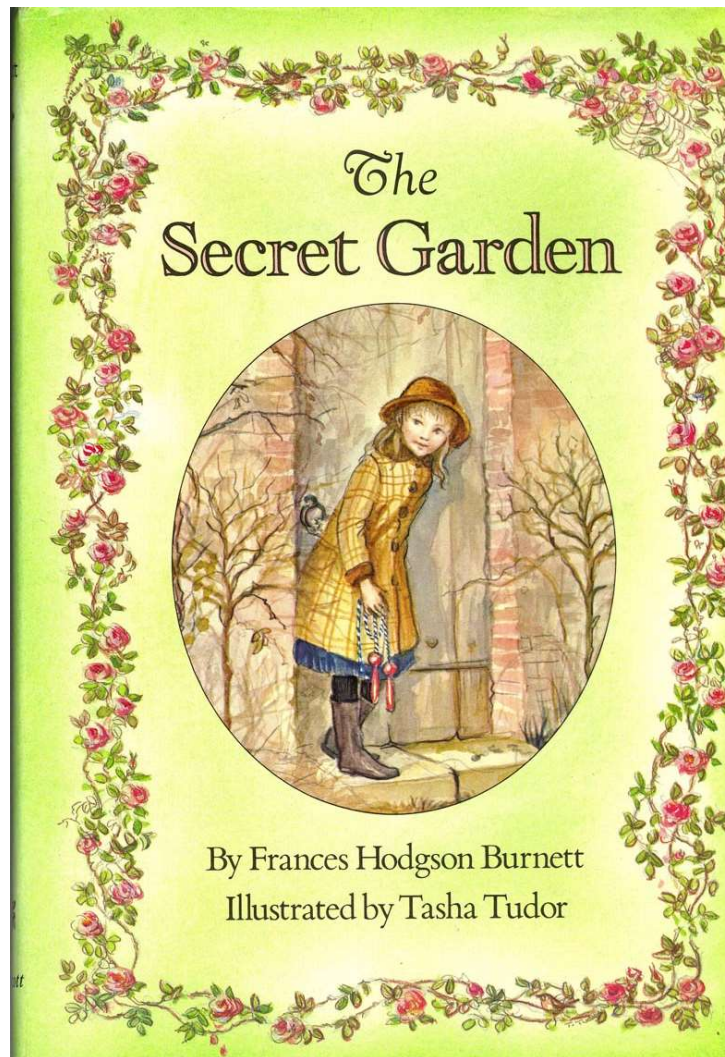


Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924): *The Secret Garden* (1911)



“When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child they’d ever seen. It was true, too. She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression.”

That’s the opening to *The Secret Garden*, and I was captivated as soon as I read it. The illustration by Tasha Tudor at the head of the chapter reinforces the description of Mary as an unpleasant child. Why did these first sentences draw me in so completely? Well, dear reader, although I blush to say it, I was not known amongst my family and friends as the most agreeable child. While I don’t think I scaled the heights of brattiness that Mary Lennox achieves, I threw ferocious temper tantrums. That an ill-favored, badly behaved, selfish, cranky child could be (as the first lines seemed to promise) the heroine of the book amazed and intrigued me. And those qualities turn out to have positive aspects! Bratty Mary is the only one who feels no compunction about going toe-to-toe with bratty invalid Colin, because she’s just as self-

centered as he is and has no intention of catering to his whims and attention-seeking scenes. She's used to being alone, so she doesn't mind working in the garden by herself. Eventually she is able to make friends and become one of a loving family—without losing her qualities of strength and perseverance.