

Classic Novel Opening Studies 5 – The Secret Garden

When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. It was true, too. She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression. Her hair was yellow, and her face was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another. Her father had held a position under the English Government and had always been busy and ill himself, and her mother had been a great beauty who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people. She had not wanted a little girl at all, and when Mary was born she handed her over to the care of an Ayah, who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Mem Sahib she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible.

- 1) The writer goes to great lengths to present Mary in a negative way. How is this achieved?
- 2) How do the characters of mother and father contrast with one another?
- 3) Why is the mother advised to keep the child out of sight? Suggest two reasons.
- 4) Mary's mother is referred to as a 'great beauty' yet she appears to have an 'illness of the soul'. What might this mean?
- 5) How does this opening shape the initial atmosphere of the story?



Writing Task

Rewrite this passage imagining that the narrator presents Mary in a positive light. What might this look like?