

# Analyzing *The Secret Garden* through the Transitivity System of the Systemic Functional Theory

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## Abstract

This paper applies Halliday's Systemic Functional Theory to a discourse analysis of *The Secret Garden*, a classic children's novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett. With a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods, we selected typical episodes and analyzed them in terms of their story plots. By examining the data from the perspective of transitivity system's ideational function, we explore how the author guides readers in understanding character roles, experiencing their charm, and how to portray lively and impressive personas. The results indicate that characters' personalities are primarily manifested through the material and verbal process within the transitivity framework. This study represents a novel approach to analyzing children's literature, contributing to a deeper understanding of literary works as well as the improvement of writing skills.

Keywords: Systemic functional theory, Experiential function, Transitivity system, *The Secret Garden*

## 1. Introduction

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, romantics were dissatisfied with the rationalism advocated by the Enlightenment and worried about the environment. Under such circumstances, *The Secret Garden* was created in the course of the Romantic Movement. *The Secret Garden* is one of American writer Frances Hodgson Burnett's representative works. A mass of researchers and critics, both domestic and international, are devoted to its study from different facets. They study the novel from the aspects of human and nature, translations based on various theories, feminism, and the exploration of gothic elements. Experiential function, working with logical function, is a portion of ideational function. In daily life, languages work as a communicative tool when people talk with others about things, modality, time in the subjective and objective world and the understandings of the world from feelings, information and thoughts etc. Transitivity system on experiential function is primarily applied to the discussions of translations, novels, some speeches, advertisements and news.

This paper will explore *The Secret Garden* from the perspective of Halliday's Systemic Functional Theory on transitivity system, which is as a part of experiential function. Meanwhile, this point is innovative because not many researchers study *The Secret Garden* in this way. Based on the theory, the linguistic features can be discussed and the practicability can be testified. As a work of children's literature, the reading group of *The Secret Garden* is mainly children who are very young and their language skills have not developed well, so it is helpful for children to clear the story line, understand the characters' thoughts, perceive the characteristic change, and feel the charm of roles. Through some detailed analysis, how to portray a lively and impressive character will be learned in this paper. In conclusion, a studying of this novel is beneficial for a further understanding and an exact interpretation of children's literature from an objective point of view. What's more, the thesis of this book continually proves that the theory is feasible and applicable to the study.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Domestic and Foreign Studies on Transitivity System

Interpersonal function, ideational function and textual function, the universal functions of culture reflected

in language, are called three metafunctions of language. Transitivity system on ideational function is mainly applied in this paper. *Xiang* (2022) makes an in-depth transitivity analysis of the inaugural speech of Joseph Robinette Biden managing to reveal how English hides ideology in political speeches and proves the practicability of Systemic Functional Grammar in political discourse analysis. *Su* (2021) studies the 2018 State of the Union Address by President Donald Trump. It mainly analyzes the transitivity process, main participants and environmental factors embodied in the speech, and gets the intention that Trump wants to prove himself to win support. *Gong & Liu* (2018) make a transitivity analysis of a story (*Our Way of Life Is Piling Pressure on Ecosystems*) on the website of the United Nations Environment Programme, in order to improve people's ecological awareness. Several scholars doing Chinese-English translation research from the transitivity viewpoint have become a major part. For example, *Xiao Junyi* (2022) analyzes the Chinese translation of *The 2019 USMC Air Force Program*. *Ma Chunyan* (2016) studies from the theory to conduct a comparative study of two reports on the appreciation of the Chinese yuan in *China Daily* and *The New York Times*. *Tong Tianpeng* (2016) selects the inauguration speeches and their Chinese translations of US Presidents Obama (2009) and Roosevelt (1933), as well as British Prime Ministers Churchill (1940) and Cameron (2010), as the corpus to discuss. Scholars also study novels based on transitivity system. *Xu Bailin* (2014) discusses the portrayal of the characters in the *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* from the linguistic level and effectively verifies the correctness of the reader's subjective impression of the characters in the novel.

Researchers mainly apply it to studies on speeches and translations. The number of scholars who make use of transitivity system in analysis of novels is less. It is a fresh idea to analyze the character's personalities about the transitivity system.

## 2.2 Domestic and Foreign Studies on Children's Literature *The Secret Garden*

Frances Hodgson Burnett is best known for children's books, especially *The Secret Garden*, *A little Princess* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. *The Secret Garden* was created in 1909 when she arranged her own garden on Long Island, New York. This book was first published in 1911 and soon was in big demand in America and Britain. Since then, this novel was adapted to plays, movies and so on. In one hundred years, it was translated to more than fifty languages. Mary Lennox is the major character, a female character totally different from others. She is a heroine who changes and saves her uncle's family. The girl, born and living in India, was eccentric and lonely. Her parents did not accompany her and threw her to their maids. Gradually, she had a bad temper and was easily annoyed. Because of an accident, she became an orphan and was sent to her weird uncle, Mr. Archibald Craven. Mary found a secret garden there. With the help of Mary, Colin who was a hunchback resembling his father and Dickon who was positive and had a wonderful relationship with animals, this abandoned garden resumed to be clear, beautiful and teemed with lives. At last, doing physical labour and surrounded with delight, Mary became kind, beautiful, and mentally and physically healthy, as well as Colin and Mr. Craven.

*The Secret Garden* is a masterpiece of children's literature. The foreign scholars propose their own ideas. For instance, *Opperman* (2018) interprets that Burnett uses several typical techniques of detective novels in *The Secret Garden*, namely clues, secondary secrets, interrogation, and Gothic elements, so as to introduce the theme of tension and puzzles to solve her masterpiece. *Thomas* (2016) discusses this book in the view of cognitive behavioral therapy. *Nikolajeva* (2013) believes that through reading children's literature, such as *The Secret Garden*, emotional literacy can be enhanced through the reading of fiction. *Goodwin* (2011) says that Mary Lennox is an orphan in the Indian colony. She can only resume after receiving "education" in the British countryside. It is to trace the class structure, gender, family relations, educational standards and imperial identity which existed in the last decades of the 19th century. In China, there are also lots of scholars studying this book. Several researchers analyze from the perspective of reading teaching. For example, *Zhou Liping* (2023) discusses *The Secret Garden* as an example of the English reading lessons to achieve the value of textual content for the growth of students' lives by focusing on the symbiosis of various elements in reading teaching. More scholars research the novel from the perspective of feminism. *Li Xin & Pei Fei* (2018) write that in *The Secret*

*Garden*, the girl Mary leads two boys against tradition and explores the Forbidden Garden, which conflicts with the social ethics that men are superior to women at that time. Zhang Ying & Su Fang (2009) propose that they attempt to interpret the novel from three aspects: the characters, the types of the novel and the metaphorical meaning of the garden. Besides, several scholars discuss this novel from the perspective of translation. For example, Xiong Mi (2019) studies the translation from the perspective of Bakhtin's Dialogue Theory.

It is clear that those discussions about *The Secret Garden* are varied. Scholars seldom study this novel by Systemic Functional Grammar. But their interpretations can help me to understand the book. Therefore, the study is innovative.

### 3. Research Questions and Methods

There are research questions: 1. How are the images of roles reflected more vividly; 2. How does the author help readers to understand roles and feel their charm; 3. How do people portray a lively and impressive character.

This paper mainly uses qualitative approach and quantitative approach. Some typical discourses will be selected in this novel and classified according to different story plots. For the research questions, the processes of transitivity system will be collected, so as to analyze the personality of characters. According to different descriptions of the processes, the descriptions will be arranged that used for the same purpose and analyzes these one by one. In order to get a better understanding of this analysis, figures and tables are given if necessary, so that the explanation would be more visualized.

### 4. Research Findings and Discussion

In this part, the author analyzed Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* from transitivity system.

#### 4.1 First Part's Analysis of *The Secret Garden*

In this part, it mainly talks about chapter 1. The processes are divided into two parts: Mary and other characters. The content of this chapter is relatively long, so it principally selects representative contents for analysis. Chapter 1 is Mary's introduction. There are 28 material processes in total describing Mary and a few other processes talking about her. The major process, relative to other characters, is also material process. That mentioned at times is the mental process. These processes give an impressive image of Mary, that she is an unattractive child. For Mary, her appearance seems to make her disagreeable. As is mentioned:

**Example 1:** "*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 ... had always been ill in one way or another.*" (Burnett, 1911, chapter 1)

People around her only express indifference and dislike. They always ignore her as much as possible. When mom sees Mary, she will be angry. In such cases, servants try their best to prevent Mary from meeting her mother. Even worse, Mary's governesses also give her up.

**Example 2:** "*her father ... had been busy and ill himself, and her mother... who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people. She had not wanted a little girl at all.*" (Burnett, 1911, chapter 1).

Those may be the reasons why Mary has a bad temper.

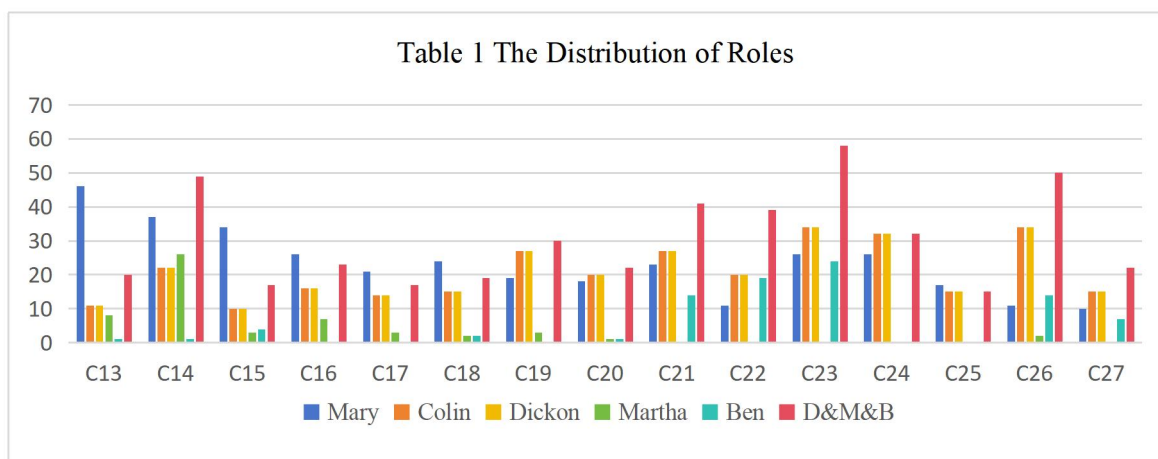
**Example 3:** "*Mary threw herself into a passion and beat and kicked her*" And she uses the most insulting words in their area to curse, "*Pig! Pig! Daughter of Pigs!*" (Burnett, 1911, chapter 1).

Together with disagreeable appearance, indifference from people, an annoying character is created.

From the foregoing analysis, Mary's personality and the reason why Mary is unlikable is clear. The sentences in the novel present readers a detailed background about her family and her living environment, shaping an impressive role, and make them feel compassion for her, arousing readers' interest in what will happen to Mary.

#### 4.2 Second Part's Analysis of *The Secret Garden*

The second part chosen is chapter 13 which tells the first meet of Mary and Colin. Table 1 shows the reason why we choose chapter 13 to be analyzed.



According to the above data, chapter 13 is less interference from other characters. Meanwhile, Mary and Colin have more conversations in chapter 13. Therefore, chapter 13 is selected. In chapter 13, it deals chiefly with verbal process and material process. The material process of Mary and Colin each appears 22 times and 20 times. In this chapter, the verbal process, which appears each 42 times and 50 times, has a larger proportion. This is the first meet of Mary and Colin. They have never seen each other since Mary lives here. In those verbal processes, it is easy to get that Colin does not get any love from his father after his mother's death. This is one of the common features between Mary and Colin that they are loveless. For instance:

**Example 4:** *"Sometimes. Generally... I am asleep. He doesn't want to see me."* (Burnett, 1911, chapter 13)

**Example 5:** *"My mother died when I was born and it makes him wretched to look at me. He thinks I don't know, but I've heard people talking. He almost hates me."* (Burnett, 1911, chapter 13)

The second similarity is the bad-tempered personality. The loveless life is the first reason. Another reason is his bad health. He cannot walk himself because of his sick back which makes him hopeless. Colin also likes commanding others and he thinks the servants must listen to him. Similarities help two poor children to huddle together. It helps readers to understand why they become friends. Everything happens reasonably.

Mary exposes her secret -the abandoned garden in the manor.

**Example 6:** *"He hates the garden..., 'said Mary half speaking to herself. 'What garden?' the boy asked."*

Colin and other people living in the manor all know the abandoned garden, but it is not allowed to be mentioned. That is the most important factor that makes them become closer friends. In their continuing efforts to restore the secret garden, it comes alive.

According to the analysis of processes, characters' personalities become more vivid and clearer. At the same time, the reasons-similar experiences and character-why Mary and Colin make friends is tractable to get. They are both lonely, no matter from mentality or physicality.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on Systemic Functional Grammar, this paper analyzes *The Secret Garden* from the perspective of transitivity system on ideational function. The following findings are concluded. Firstly, the analysis of *The Secret Garden* can help us understand the narrative. The thesis primarily focuses on the verbal process and material process, which contribute to the portray of authentic and impressive characters. Secondly, the novel provides abundant information about the two main characters. The author offers a detailed background and establishes similarities between the characters, thus ensuring a smooth story line. Writing a novel requires logic where every event happens for a reason. Thirdly, due to their shared experiences and similar dispositions, Mary and Colin turn to be friends. The warm and sunny Dickon, who comes from a healthy family with a loving atmosphere, attracting them as a magnet. As a piece of children's literature, it spreads positive attitudes, allowing children to find happiness, love and warmth in the secret garden.

Transitivity system provides a unique perspective for interpreting *The Secret Garden*. When an author

wants to depict a poor character, merely stating their lack of money or insufficient food. Providing a character with a detailed background may leave a lasting impression on readers. Therefore, describing a character with abundant and complicated characterization is a crucial step that can deeply resonate with a broad readership. Halliday's Systemic Theory can not only be utilized to the realm of novels, but can also be applied in English teaching and translation.

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