

## Introduction

In Frances Hodgson Burnett's beloved children's classic *The Secret Garden* (1911), the climax of the story has little to do with the titular garden or the ostensible protagonist, Mary Lennox, a sickly orphan who travels from her native India to her uncle's Yorkshire estate. Instead, the novel concludes with a dramatic faith healing. Mary's invalid cousin, Colin Craven, learns that he is not a hunchback, will not die young, and that contrary to his own and his doctor's belief, he *can* "run and walk like any other boy" (142). Colin's cure is accomplished not by mainstream medicine, but by a simple change of attitude, as the narrator explains: "He had made himself believe that he was going to get well, which was really more than half the battle" (143). As a symbol of his dramatic transformation, Colin, who once believed he had a life-threatening allergy to roses, plants his very own "rose in a pot" (134).

Burnett's novel raises some puzzling questions. Why do Mary and the garden itself, who dominate the first two thirds of the book, recede from view in the novel's dramatic conclusion? How could a once bedridden boy, whom experts believed to be dying, suddenly recover health and mobility merely by believing he is well? And why is the "rose in a pot" a triumphant expression of his recovery? These and many other aspects of the novel can be explained by Burnett's interest in Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, a faith-healing movement founded in Lynn, Massachusetts, in 1879 that discouraged followers from relying on medical doctors and promoted healing through prayer and right thinking. Burnett, who was born in Manchester, England, but moved to America in her teens, underwent Christian Science treatments for her depression and insomnia while staying in Boston and Lynn during the early 1880s (Griswold 237). She also read Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (first edition 1875), which followers refer to as the "textbook" of their faith. While Burnett never formally converted to the religion, she maintained a lifelong interest in Christian Science and admiration for its strong female founder, whose favorite flower was the rose.<sup>1</sup>

*Children's Literature and the Rise of "Mind Cure"* examines *The Secret Garden* alongside other British and North American novels that engage with Eddy's Christian Science and a related movement known as New Thought, which touted positive thinking, meditation, and prayer as a means to health and prosperity. New Thought or "mind cure," as it is sometimes called, consists in the belief that thoughts have the power to change the world. Dwelling on positive thoughts or uplifting words can supposedly bring about desired changes in one's life, while negative thinking allegedly causes sickness, poverty, and other catastrophic outcomes. According to this belief system, people can influence one another via mental telepathy, and by sending positive or negative vibrations (vibes) into the universe. These ideas were developed in mid-nineteenth-century New England by mesmerist Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866) and his students, Warren Felt Evans, Julius and Annetta Dresser, and Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910).

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Dressers, Evans, and Eddy – followed by *their* students, such as Emma Curtis Hopkins, Ralph Waldo Trine, and Henry Wood – attracted hundreds of thousands of followers with the promise that they, too, could change their lives through positive thinking. These leaders brought together strands of liberal Christianity, Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Transcendentalism to create an eclectic faith with broad appeal. By 1906, for instance, Christian Science alone boasted 86,000 followers, 72.4 percent of whom were female, while the broader New Thought movement reached larger and more diverse audiences (Satter 5; Albanese 299).<sup>2</sup> Historians suggest that New Thought flourished around 1900 because it harnessed the placebo effect to assuage ailments that nineteenth-century medicine could not treat (Harrington 65). Women were disproportionately attracted to the movement due to their dissatisfaction with mainstream medicine and their relative economic powerlessness. New Thought gave such women the illusion of control over their problems and allowed them to wield a variety of soft power within and outside of the domestic sphere.<sup>3</sup>

New Thought's broad appeal explains the movement's influence on classic children's books of the era, many of which were among the top bestsellers of their day (Griswold vii). These books have, in turn, spawned theatrical and film adaptations that have taken on lives of their own.<sup>4</sup> Take for instance, Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886) and *A Little Princess* (1905); Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903); L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and its many sequels; Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913); and Arnold Munk's *The Little Engine That*

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*Could* (1930). These works remain well known and influential today, though few recognize the faith-based messages they contain. If one expands this list to include books written *about* children but not for them, one might include Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), which mocks New Thought in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), whose all-female utopia revolves around maternity, child-rearing, and avoidance of "horrible ideas" (*Herland* 240).<sup>5</sup>

Most of the books listed above are survivals of a once popular genre known as the New Thought novel, whose heyday (from approximately 1880–1930) coincides with the most rapid growth of this emergent movement.<sup>6</sup> While some books in this vein were didactic, using "Christian Science," "New Thought," or related terms to describe the religious beliefs and practices they depict, by far the most successful and enduring have been those whose religious content is implicit rather than explicit.<sup>7</sup> By espousing tenets of this faith within an apparently secular tale, novelists could reach a wider swath of readers, including those belonging to other religious sects (some of whom may have disapproved of New Thought in its more obvious forms). Such readers might later embrace New Thought principles or practices while still considering themselves devout Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, or secular humanists.

*Children's Literature and the Rise of "Mind Cure"* argues that these New Thought children's books, read by generations of young and impressionable readers, have conditioned English-speakers worldwide to accept New Thought concepts in purportedly secular areas of life, especially psychology, self-help, and alternative medicine. Historians have ably described how New Thought permeates these realms as well as corporate culture, twelve-step groups, fitness fads, prosperity gospel, and entertainment.<sup>8</sup> Most visibly, television personalities like Oprah Winfrey and her protégée, Divine Science pastor and Yoruba priestess Iyanla Vanzant, bring New Thought into countless homes every day via their programming. For instance, Oprah's Book Club promoted Australian television producer Rhonda Byrne's self-help tome *The Secret* (2006), which sold over twenty-eight million copies by recycling New Thought platitudes for a new generation.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, an offshoot of New Thought called prosperity gospel – whose followers believe God wants them to be rich – flourishes thanks to televangelists such as Creflo Dollar, T.D. Jakes, and Joel Osteen, whose ministry reaches a monthly audience of twenty million and brings in ninety million dollars a year (Dias). According to a 2006 article in *Time Magazine*, nearly one in five American Christians supports the prosperity movement (Van Biema and

Chu 2). Followers of prosperity gospel are believed to be partly responsible for the election in 2016 of United States President Donald Trump, who is a disciple of mid-twentieth-century positive thinking guru Norman Vincent Peale and a friend of Osteen (Dias).

Even medical doctors have jumped on the New Thought bandwagon, despite the historical rift between medical practitioners and Christian Scientists. Physician authors like Andrew Weil, Deepak Chopra, and Bernie Siegel have endorsed New Thought practices such as positive thinking, daily affirmations, and creative visualization. Some of these doctors – such as Siegel in his book *Love, Medicine, and Miracles* (1986) – court controversy by suggesting that such methods can cure cancer and heart disease. Siegel, for instance, avers that “happy people generally don’t get sick” and encourages cancer patients to “picture . . . your white blood cells eliminating the disease” (76, 114). Using creative visualization techniques such as these, patients allegedly shrank the size of tumors and metastases and even completely recovered in some cases. Despite their modern medical terminology, stories of miraculous cures told by Siegel and his ilk recall Colin Craven’s faith healing in *The Secret Garden*.

Despite being widely influential in so many areas of modern life, New Thought is poorly understood and seldom studied outside of university theology and history departments. In these academic contexts, however, it has received substantial attention. Early histories of New Thought, such as Charles Braden’s *Spirits in Rebellion: the Rise and Development of New Thought* (1963), Donald Meyer’s *The Positive Thinkers* (1965), and Gail Thain Parker’s *Mind Cure in New England* (1973), emphasize twentieth-century New Thought writing about wealth and success. By contrast, Beryl Satter’s *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875–1920* (1999) traces nineteenth-century New Thought that privileged women’s health and spirituality over material concerns. Since then, Catherine Albanese’s *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (2007) situates New Thought within a range of new religious movements and occult trends, while Anne Harrington views New Thought in medical context in *The Cure Within: A History of Mind-Body Medicine* (2007). Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America* (2009) outlines the perils of New Thought when taken to extremes. Finally, Kate Bowler’s *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (2013) describes how early twentieth-century New Thought, Pentecostalism, and muscular Christianity combined to form modern prosperity gospel.

Research on Christian Science also falls under the broad umbrella of New Thought scholarship. Like me, most historians view Eddy's faith as an iconoclastic yet highly visible branch of the New Thought movement, though Christian Scientists themselves would deny this affiliation. Among the more even-handed histories of the faith is Steven Gottschalk's *Rolling Away the Stone: Mary Baker Eddy's Challenge to Materialism* (2006), the first book-length treatment of Eddy's life and work to make use of the Mary Baker Eddy Library Collection in Boston. Equally fair-minded and comprehensive is Gillian Gill's biography, *Mary Baker Eddy* (1999). Rennie Schoepflin's *Christian Science on Trial: Religious Healing in America* (2002) examines Eddy's beliefs through the lens of controversial legal cases wherein parents or Christian Science practitioners are accused of manslaughter or child neglect. Perhaps the most critical history of the faith is Caroline Fraser's *God's Perfect Child: Living and Dying in the Christian Science Church* (1999), which resembles muckraking journalism about Eddy written by Georgine Milmine, Mark Twain, and others in the first decade of the twentieth century. As a former Christian Scientist who left the fold, Fraser infuses her history with a degree of autobiography, aligning her book with memoirs by ex-Christian Scientists such as Lucia Greenhouse's *fathermothergod: My Journey Out of Christian Science* (2011) and Barbara Wilson's *Blue Windows: A Christian Science Childhood* (1998).

While historians gesture toward New Thought fiction, this topic is tangential rather than central to their arguments. Literary critics, meanwhile, have unjustly neglected New Thought, while writing voluminously on contemporaneous new religious movements such as Mormonism, Spiritualism, and Theosophy on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>10</sup> Related trends such as mesmerism and psychical research have also received considerable attention.<sup>11</sup>

Only recently have a few literary scholars begun to explore interactions between New Thought and American fiction. Key interventions include L. Ashley Squires's *Healing the Nation: Literature, Progress, and Christian Science* (2017), which traces the influence of Eddy's faith on Theodore Dreiser, Twain, and Burnett. Chapter six of Trysh Travis's *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (2009) examines New Thought in Oprah's Book Club; while chapter five of Claudia Stokes's *The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (2014) discusses Eddy's own poetry and short fiction. Finally, chapter eleven of

Jerry Griswold's *Audacious Kids: The Classic American Children's Story* (1992) examines Christian Science overtones of Burnett's *The Secret Garden*.

*Children's Literature and the Rise of "Mind Cure"* extends Satter's conversation about New Thought in middle-class domestic settings and builds on Squires's and Griswold's work on Burnett and Christian Science. Like these authors, I emphasize earlier, woman-centered varieties of New Thought that privileged health and spirituality over material gain. I also follow Harrington's lead in exploring connections between New Thought, popular psychology, and alternative healing. The resulting book stands at the crossroads of children's literature studies and medical humanities, fields that seldom intersect.<sup>12</sup> This juxtaposition of perspectives enables us to see how children serve as multivalent metaphors in adult-centered discourses about health and desire. For instance, Colin Craven's miraculous recovery in *The Secret Garden* might signal the triumph of mind over matter, the victory of positive thinking over male hysteria, or even the wish-fulfillment fantasy of Burnett's deceased son, Lionel, coming back to life.<sup>13</sup>

As this example suggests, New Thought literature circa 1900 was as symbolically rich as it was abundant. For every blockbuster like *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, there were a dozen more ephemeral literary productions in a similar vein, many of which now languish in archives. Some of these works were written by New Thought leaders with literary aspirations, such as Alice Bunker Stockham and Lida Hood Talbot's *Koradine Letters* (1893) and Helen Van Anderson's *The Story of Teddy* (1893), both aimed at youth audiences. These texts supplemented the many didactic New Thought novels written for and about adult women, as described in chapter four of Satter's *Each Mind a Kingdom*.

There is also a fascinating and understudied collection of early twentieth century Christian Science children's fiction housed at the Mary Baker Library in Boston. Some of these works sold well in their day, such as Clara Louise Burnham's *The Right Princess* (1902) and *Jewel* (1903) and Lilian Bell's *Carolina Lee* (1906).<sup>14</sup> A few remain popular among Christian Scientists, including *Jewel* and Katherine M. Yates's *On the Way There* (1904), a charming moral allegory reminiscent of *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Though never officially endorsed by Eddy or her Committee on Publication, such children's fictions occasionally received favorable notices in Church publications like the *Christian Science Sentinel* ("Slight Inventions"). There was even a short-lived magazine, *The Children's Star* (1907–1912), devoted to Christian Science poetry, games, artwork, and fiction for juvenile audiences, including short stories by Burnham and

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Yates. While such little-known works are not the primary focus of this book, this larger corpus of forgotten New Thought fiction demonstrates the surprising range and cultural influence of this genre around the turn of the twentieth century.

With this historical background in mind, *Children's Literature and the Rise of "Mind Cure"* aims to restore the New Thought context of novels like *Anne of Green Gables*, *A Little Princess*, and *The Secret Garden*, which most readers now view as secular, vaguely spiritual, or Protestant in nature.<sup>15</sup> And understandably so: because New Thought lives on in so many mainstream, secular contexts, it can be difficult to recognize *as religion* when glimpsed in fictional narratives. The next section of this introduction provides a brief overview of the faith movement, its history, and its literary manifestations in order to recapture the cultural milieu in which these novels were written. This information will also help explain how and why New Thought and New Thought fiction infiltrated twentieth-first-century popular culture, psychology, and self-help literature.

### **New Thought: An Overview**

At its core, New Thought is a form of magical thinking, which is “the belief, specially characteristic of early childhood and of many mental illnesses, that thoughts, wishes, or special but causally irrelevant actions can cause or influence external events” (OED). One need not look far to find examples of such behavior. A young child, for instance, might imagine that because he has covered his eyes, you can't see him, or that he might slip down the bathtub drain like a bubble or a sliver of soap. A sufferer from obsessive-compulsive disorder might avoid sidewalks out of a fear that stepping on cracks will break her mother's back. Such people grant thoughts and seemingly unimportant actions an agency they might not logically seem to possess. But magical thinking is not confined to children and the mentally ill, nor to an allegedly more primitive or gullible historical past.<sup>16</sup> Healthy adults continue to engage in this type of thinking in the context of certain religious practices, superstitious behaviors, and altered mental states.

New Thought is a specific, optimistic type of magical thinking that pervades North American culture and has made inroads worldwide.<sup>17</sup> In the words of Byrne's *The Secret*, “your thoughts become things” that “attract . . . like thoughts to you.” Therefore, “If you want to change anything in your life,” you must simply “[change] your thoughts” (25). Byrne here articulates so-called law of attraction, the New Thought idea

that positive thinking brings positive results. This philosophy suggests that you have only to visualize a desired outcome to achieve it: “Ask, believe, and receive,” as proponents are wont to say, or “Name it and claim it” (Ehrenreich 60). Millions of individuals have applied these practices in their own lives, hoping to attain improved health, financial prosperity, better relationships, or to meet specific goals such as weight loss. When they succeed, these New Thought enthusiasts chalk up their success to their mental efforts; when they fail, they often blame themselves for insufficiently sincere positive thinking. By such means, New Thought retains its hold on individuals who could seek more practical solutions to their problems (such as going to a doctor, joining a dating website, going on a diet, etc.). The seductive aspects of this philosophy include its hopeful affect, relative ease of application, and elevation of individuals to Godlike status through their alleged power to transform their surroundings.

While this type of positive thinking is ubiquitous in certain areas of modern life, most people do not realize that it has a name and a history dating back to nineteenth-century New England, nor that it began as a religious movement. New Thought also has ties to mesmerism, a pseudoscientific practice that began in Paris in 1778 and took root in America in 1836 following Caribbean slaveholder Charles Poyen’s successful US lecture tour (Ogden 25, 29).<sup>18</sup> Early mesmerists claimed to produce miraculous cures by manipulating a magnetic fluid inside patients. By passing their hands repeatedly over the patient or touching them with metal rods, mesmerists produced trembling and convulsions that “disrupted . . . unhealthy flows of animal magnetism,” with allegedly therapeutic effects (Harrington 44).

Eddy’s mentor and personal healer, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, practiced a modified version of mesmerism that inspired the first New Thought leaders. Instead of manipulating magnetic fluids through the laying on of hands, Quimby created a mesmeric-style clairvoyant rapport with patients in order to alter their beliefs. Specifically, he attempted to cure patients’ false belief in sickness: “Illness, he said, was caused by people’s false beliefs, their failure to recognize that the body was a reflection of the mind and that the mind was whole and perfect . . . change the mind, correct the beliefs, and the body healed of its own accord” (113).

Eddy channeled elements of Quimby’s philosophy when she argued that the body does not exist except in the mind and that all is Spirit, not Matter; sickness is thus an expression of a false belief that Matter is real.<sup>19</sup> Some, like Julius Dresser, claimed that Eddy plagiarized Quimby’s views in her magnum opus, *Science and Health*, an accusation that would haunt Eddy



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and her church for decades (Gill 138–146). But by aligning *Science and Health* with the Bible, Eddy took Quimby's principles in a more Christological direction than his other devotees, such as the Dressers or Warren Felt Evans, fellow patients who became New Thought pioneers in their own right (Squires, *Healing the Nation* 66). Meanwhile, Eddy attempted to distance Christian Science from its mesmeric roots by denouncing the practices of her rivals (especially competing New Thought sects) as “malicious animal magnetism,” contrasting their heterodox methods with her own Bible-based practices. Unlike Eddy, other New Thought leaders had “no codified religious doctrine”; instead, they liberally mixed heterodox religious traditions like Spiritualism, Theosophy, and elements of Buddhism and Vedanta with their own distinctive philosophies (66).

From these eclectic roots in mid-nineteenth-century pseudoscience and heterodox faith practices, New Thought would grow into a ubiquitous part of American life. Various official branches of New Thought survive today, the best known being Christian Science with tens of thousands of members worldwide – down from a peak of 269,000 in 1936 (Squires, *Healing the Nation* 3; Satter 5).<sup>20</sup> In addition to being more Bible-based than other branches of New Thought, Christian Science is more hierarchical and restrictive. Unlike members of other New Thought sects, Christian Scientists notoriously eschew mainstream medicine in favor of treatment by prayer. Although Eddy's Mother Church ostensibly leaves medical decisions up to the individual, Christian Science branch churches can strip members of leadership positions for undergoing surgery, taking painkillers, and so forth (Fraser 131). The gradual decline of this religion – suggested by dwindling subscriptions to church periodicals and the closing of branch churches – may have something to do with the increasing efficacy of mainstream medical care over the last century and a half (Fraser 399–400). Christian Science also faces competition from alternative health practices currently in vogue, including imports from the East. As of 2015, according to Steve Silberman, “Americans now consult their homeopaths, naturopaths, herbalists, acupuncturists, chiropractors, and Reiki workers more often than they see their primary care physicians” (70). This fact suggests that widespread distrust of mainstream medicine persists well into the twenty-first century. But skeptics are no longer flocking to Christian Science for answers.

Other prominent New Thought ministries active today include Divine Science Federation International, Religious Science, and Unity Church based in Kansas City, whose periodical *Daily Word* (1924–present) had

1.2 million subscribers as of 2002 (Albanese 434). Because these branches of New Thought tend to be more flexible in their application – with some, like Unity Church, calling themselves movements as opposed to religious sects – they may stand a better chance of long-term survival than Christian Science (430). New Thought also thrives outside of the United States, as suggested by the success of Tokyo-based New Thought organization Seicho-No-Ie, founded in 1930, which had 1.5 million members worldwide in 2014 (“Summary of Seicho-No-Ie”). Since the mid-twentieth century, Seicho-No-Ie (loosely translated as “House of Growth”) has been the largest organized New Thought sect in the world, with substantial followings in Japan, Brazil, the United States, and elsewhere (Braden 499). Although Seicho-No-Ie differs from other New Thought groups by incorporating aspects of traditional Japanese Buddhism, its teachings otherwise resemble those of Religious Science and Unity Church in the United States (496).

For members of these sects, New Thought consists of a set of beliefs and practices as well as a distinct religious outlook in which God is love, good is universal, and spirit (mind) triumphs over matter (one’s body and surroundings).<sup>21</sup> According to this view, sickness, death, and other evils are illusions generated by our flawed understanding of a perfect universe. These illusions can be corrected through continual prayer and right thinking. New Thought thus fostered “healthy-minded attitudes” and feelings of “courage, hope, and trust,” as Harvard psychologist William James wrote in his influential book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902 [91]). New Thought’s rosy perspective appealed to downcast Americans in the wake of their country’s devastating Civil War, especially to those afflicted by that quintessential disease of modern life, neurasthenia or “Americanitis,” as James called it (Beck). Symptoms of this condition, whose emergence coincided with the rise of New Thought, included depression, anxiety, headaches, insomnia, indigestion, and a host of other stress-related ailments. Physicians such as Silas Weir Mitchell and George Miller Beard attributed such symptoms to the increasing speed and complexity of urban life in Gilded-Age America.<sup>22</sup>

While New Thought’s hopeful tone comforted nervous Americans, the religious movement also provided them with welcome relief from the fire and brimstone Calvinism of their Puritan forebears, epitomized by Jonathan Edwards’s sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741). For instance, Eddy’s spiritual autobiography, *Retrospection and Introspection* (1891), describes her disillusionment with the Congregationalist faith of her youth, particularly its emphasis on predestination and its “belief in a final