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Kingsley's *The Water Babies*: A Parable for His Time

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☐ ABSTRACT ☐

This study seeks to demonstrate that Charles Kingsley's The Water Babies, like most mid-Victorian literary writings for children, is used as a vehicle for its writer's social, moral, and religious ideas. More importantly, the novel shares with much mid-Victorian fiction the quality of being used as a parable. The Water Babies is patterned after Christian and Bunyanesque traditions. Like the heroes of the works of such traditions, Tom is engaged in an educative quest or pilgrimage that ultimately leads to his salvation. However, the parable is secularized by the introduction of a combination of Carlylean and Wordsworthian notions, as well as Kingsley's own Christian socialism. This combination of significant contemporary values, together with the allegorical function of most other figures in the novel, makes the novel a good example of a parable for its time.

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(أطفال المياه): موعظة لزمان كينغسلي

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□ الملخّص □

تحاول هذه الدراسة الإبانة أن رواية (أطفال المياه) للكاتب الإنكليزي تشارلز كينغسلي هي بمثابة أداة لإيصال أفكار كاتبها الاجتماعية والأخلاقية والدينية، مثلها في ذلك مثل معظم الكتابات الموجهة للأطفال في منتصف العصر الفكتوري. علاوةً على ذلك، تشترك (أطفال المياه) مع غيرها من روايات منتصف العصر الفكتوري في كونها حكاية وعظية. فالرواية تحاكي التقاليد المسيحية وأفكار جون بنيان، وعلى غرار أبطال الأعمال الأدبية لهذه التقاليد، يشرع بطلها توم في رحلة تثقيفية ينشد في ختامها الخلاص. لكن كينغسلي يضفي صبغة علمانية على تلك الحكاية الوعظية من خلال توظيفه لمفاهيم كارلايل وويردزويرث بالإضافة إلى اشتراكيته المسيحية. إن وجود هذا المزيج من القيم المعاصرة بالإضافة إلى الوظيفة الرمزية لمعظم الشخصيات هو الذي يجعل من (أطفال المياه) حكاية وعظية توائم عصرها.

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As its title suggests, Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* is primarily intended for children. In fact, the novel is dedicated to Kingsley's son, Grenville, and through him to all children and grown-ups. The "you," which keeps recurring in the marrative, marks Kingsley's stepping into the events directly to communicate the message of any particular incident or situation, the aim being to "give an account of the education of the child to become the honest English gentleman that was Kingsley's ideal." (1) Like any children's book, *The Water Babies* is entertainingly fanciful as well as instructive. More significantly, it shares with most mid-Victorian literary writings for children the quality of being used as a vehicle for its writer's moral and religious beliefs. Whatever the technique adopted, be it fantasy, dream or nonsense, most of the children's books of that period embrace moral or religious values. As it is remarked to Alice by the Duchess in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, "everything's got a moral, if only you can find it." (2) *The Water Babies* ends with a "moral" in which Kingsley addresses children and adults to be kind to underwater creatures, "the efts," and to "stick to hard work and cold water." (3) Elsewhere Kingsley clarifies his message further; it is "wonder" at God's creation. As he explains in a letter to F. D. Maurice, "I have tried in all sorts of queer ways to make children and grown-folks understand that there is a quite miraculous and divine element underlying all physical nature." (4) According to Kingsley, the universe is not solely governed by scientific or natural laws as many Victorians declared: the supernatural, the miraculous, the invisible and the ultrahuman do exist in the same way as the human, the natural and the visible. And the whole is an expression of Almighty God. In the same letter, Kingsley reinforces his message, this time by focusing upon the technical means of achieving it: "I have wrapped my parable in seeming Tomfooleries." (5) Put differently, Kingsley adopts the technique of parable or fantasy so that he can manipulate the logic of events according to which parabolic elements of change of heart, conversion, rebirth, and salvation of character can easily and quite suddenly be effected.

Kingsley's description of his novel as a parable is also significant, because it squarely places *The Water Babies* within a tradition which is central to the Victorian novel according to Barry Qualls. In his book *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction*, Qualls argues that the novels of Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte are patterned after Christian and Bunyanesque traditions. However, he particularly underlines the secularization of the Victorian *Bildungsroman* by the introduction of William Wordsworth's and Thomas Carlyle's commitment to "natural supernaturalism" and by the social and economic conditions of Victorian England. (6) Charles Kingsley is not included in Qualls' study, but Kingsley's work, especially *The Water Babies* presents a good example of a secularized Victorian parable. In terms of its structure, *The Water Babies* is akin to comic parable in that the hero's pilgrimage ends happily. Like Christian in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Tom in Kingsley's *The Water Babies* sets out on a quest which leads to his salvation in "paradise," represented by his marriage to Ellie. However, Tom's essentially religious pilgrimage is modified by the infusion of contemporary secular values into it. This paper attempts to identify the parabolic elements in *The Water Babies* and demonstrate how they are combined with contemporary secular values, especially Wordsworth's, Carlyle's and Kingsley's own, so as to make of the novel a parable for the time. In the process, the paper further underlines the parabolic nature of the education Tom receives at the hands of some characters, including the fairies, as well as the allegorical function of those figures.

Carlyle's impact is felt in both the social and the quest parts of the tale, while Wordsworth's influence is more explicit and more significant to the object of the quest or pilgrimage. Kingsley is not the only Victorian novelist to be influenced by Wordsworth. For instance, George Eliot's *Silas Marner* shows the Wordsworthian concept of the redemptive values of innocent childhood. However, in Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, the child is to be redeemed against a background of Wordsworthian symbolism of the elements of nature. Throughout the different stages of Tom's quest, metaphors become symbols pregnant with associations. In the first part, for instance, the metaphors used express Kingsley's Christian socialism, particularly his plea for the improvement of the conditions of chimney sweeps (7) for whom "being hungry" and "being beaten" are, as Tom's experience proves, "the way of the world, like rain and snow and thunder" (p.2).

The plot of *The Water Babies* expresses these facts by offering a mechanical illustration of Tom's exploitation, restriction, dehumanization and victimization at the hands of Mr. Grimes who stands for the Victorian system of nineteenth-century England. The misery and ill-treatment inflicted on Tom are dramatically illustrated in his being beaten up while on his way to Harthover, and in his sweeping the chimneys of that palace, not to mention his long journey on foot to Harthover. The metaphors express Tom's flight and have a Carlylean force. Tom's trade, his chimney-sweeping business dehumanises him. He is turned into a scavenger of the dark world. For instance, while cleaning the chimneys of Harthover we are told that:

> Tom fairly lost his way in them; not that he cared much for that, though he was in pitchy darkness, for he was as much at home in a chimney as a mole is underground; but at last, coming down as he thought the right chimney, he came down the wrong one, and found himself standing on the hearthrug in a room the like of which he had never seen before. (p. 23)

Tom is forced or pushed down to this status by the social establishment represented by his master Mr. Grimes whose name is indicative of his approach. Thus, allegorically or religiously, Harthover appears to be the labyrinth, the wilderness or the City of Destruction from which Tom is to escape. The darkness of the chimneys suggests the harshness of Victorian society, its exploitation of children and more importantly, Tom's moral darkness and his spiritual void. Dirt is, therefore, at once an emblem of Tom's social inferiority and his religious deprivation. Foregrounding the latter point, however, appears to be Kingsley's main preoccupation. This is the impression one receives in the early pages of the tale, and especially with the introduction of the Irishwoman. Kingsley's and the Irishwoman's concern over Tom's lack of religion becomes a matter of self consciousness on Tom's part in Harthover, especially in Ellie's room to which he falls after losing his way in the chimneys of the palace. Tom wonders at seeing the picture of Jesus Christ on the cross hanging on the wall of Ellie's room, and thinks that "it was some kinsman of hers, who had been murdered by the savages in foreign parts, and she kept it there for a remembrance"(p.24). Tom's increasing awareness of his position and of the dangers of dirt recalls Christian's recognition of his sinful nature in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and reaches its peak moments afterwards when Tom sees the reflection of his own body in Ellie's mirror. Tom is horrified at realising that the "little ugly, black, rugged figure, with bleared eyes and grinning white teeth... was himself; reflected in a great mirror, the like of which Tom had never seen before" (p.26). Tom's escape is,

therefore, mainly a flight from his dirt associated with his low position and ignorance of religiosity.

Structurally, the escape marks the transitional link between the social part of the tale and the fantastic or allegorical section. This transition from the real to the unreal in *The Water Babies* is artistically expressed in the montage technique Kingsley adopts in depicting the scenes of Tom's hunting simultaneously paralleled by the scene in which the Irishwoman is said to be invisibly walking behind Tom to protect him. The Irishwoman turns out to be the head of the fairies who transform Tom into a water baby. Tom's obsession with the removal of his dirt culminates at Vendale, when "half asleep," he hears the sounds of the church bells, and decides to go there: "But the people would never let him come in, all over soot and dirt like that. He must go to the river and wash first" (p. 55). Tom therefore darts off to the river repeating, "I must be clean, I must be clean." Thus, the religious symbolism of water surfaces more clearly this time, especially when we are told that the Irishwoman changes her position and for the first time goes ahead of Tom. She wades into the river and orders her fairy subjects not to mix with Tom, smoothly preparing for Tom's metamorphosis and the transition of the scenes to the underwater.

When Tom steps into the river the reader is suddenly informed that Tom is turned into a water baby. The transformation sounds miraculous, mythic and supernatural. This technique is, however, the staple of fantasy, parable and children's stories. But with Kingsley this incident acquires a new dimension. He immediately jumps in to justify the transformation and clarify the underlying moral structure of *The Water Babies*:

> A water-baby? You never heard of a water-baby. Perhaps not. That is the very reason why this story was written. There are a great many things in the world which you never heard of; and a great many more which nobody ever heard of; and a great many things, too, which nobody will ever hear of, at least until the coming of the Cocqcigrues. (p. 67)

According to Kingsley, then, Tom's transformation is a natural phenomenon. Therefore, this incident, together with what Tom meets during his underwater life, is designed to evoke "wonder at nature" (8) and "to make God the end point of argument." (9) God is the only supernatural being controlling the universe; and everything else is an expression of that divine being.

Tom's metamorphosis is allegorically and symbolically essential to his parabolic rebirth. His hunters are led to believe that he is dead, while Kingsley confirms in his authorial intrusion that because the fairies had washed him "Tom was quite alive; and clearer, and merrier, than he ever had been"(p.76). The baptismal symbolism of Tom's washing is quite obvious, with his apparent death actually signifying his rebirth. This religious symbolism is skillfully combined with romantic and particularly Wordsworthian imagery to which there are many allusions throughout *The Water Babies*. These Christian and Wordsworthian implications have already been conspicuously demonstrated by the song of the river which Tom hears shortly before his transformation:

> Strong and free, strong and free,
> The floodgates are open, away to the sea,
> Free and strong, free and strong,

Cleansing my streams as I hurry along.
To the golden sands, and the leaping bar,
And the taintless tide that awaits me far.
As I lose myself in the infinite main,
Like a soul that has sinned and is pardoned again
Undefiled,for the undefiled;
Play in me, bathe in me, mother and child. (p. 44)

Indeed, Kingsley's embrace of the religious view that Tom's death is his rebirth appears to have a strongly Wordsworthian tinge:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath elsewhere had its setting,
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home. (10)

On the other hand, the water being a river, enhances this implication of Tom's rebirth. In *The Water Babies*, Kingsley adopts Wordsworth's concept of the river as a symbol of man's journey of life on earth. The river terminates in the sea, which in turn stands for man's life after death. Thus, Kingsley skilfully models his parable to draw upon this symbolic tradition. St. Brandan, which is the place of Tom's salvation, is supposed to be somewhere in the sea.

It is worth mentioning here that Kingsley is not the first Victorian novelist to use the river as a means of conversion. This concept runs through many Victorian novels like Eliot's *The Mill on The Floss* as well as Dicken's *David Copperfield, Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend.* Moreover, it is important to point out that the Wordsworthian element in Tom's rebirth transcends the river metaphor and symbolism partly to account for Tom, being a representative Victorian child. The Victorian concept of the child is emphasized in "the innocent yet guilty" orphan, which is actually a combination of religious and romantic attitudes towards children: "The Victorian amalgamation of these desperate images suggests the precarious balance authors and readers struck between the religious and Romantic heritages." (11) In other words, the Wordsworthian and religious views are fused throughout the stages of Tom's journey of education. However, "The child... must learn to control his body as well as his spirit; he is in need of physical, moral, and intellectual discipline or training". (12) Thus, Tom learns through experience and is punished in the process with punishment equal to the sin committed. Therefore, Tom's episode with the Caddis brings him punishment, while his help to the lobster results in his introduction to the community of the water babies.

However, Tom's introduction to the community of water babies is the event that foregrounds the allegorical implications of Kingsley's doctrine. This is represented by the work of the abstract figure of the fairy Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, who says of herself: "I work by machinery, just like an engine; and am full of wheels and springs inside; and am wound up very carefully, so that I can not help going"(pp.196-7). But this stern mechanistic law of punishment necessitates a figure

for rewarding Tom when he does good. Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid adds that her sister Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby: "Begins where I end, and I begin where she ends; and those who will not listen to her must listen to me, as you will see" (p.178). The function of those fairies is, therefore, purely allegorical. The ensuing process of education Tom undergoes at their hands is primarily moral and religious:

> The 'moral' education Tom undergoes at St. Brandan's Isle with Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, with the stealing of the sweets and its prickly consequences, can be seen as both a necessary part of Nature's teaching (and thus an expression of divine law), and, at the same time, a psychological discovery of sin and guilt. (13)

But this discovery does not generate Tom's repulsion from sin, as happens to Bunyan's Christian, for instance, or to Tom himself at Harthover. Instead, Tom is made to abhor sin by a careful and long course of instruction by his appointed teacher, Ellie, who helps him shake off the prickles and inspires him to go to the place which she usually visits on Sundays.

Tom's educative process suggests not only that "the Quest part is aesthetically inferior to the first, the escapist part," (14) in that it does not promote the structure of *The Water Babies*, but also a weakness in the parabolic or allegorical handling of the novel. According to the fairies' probationary plan, Tom is to go to the "heavenly" place, where Ellie comes from, but he has to do something he does not like. The man to be helped or freed is Mr. Grimes, his cruel master, who is then imprisoned in The Other End of Nowhere. Kingsley could have promoted the allegoric significance by, say, devising Tom's discovery of Mr. Grimes imprisoned in the chimney, pitying and forgiving him, and thus attempting to release him. Instead, Tom almost unwillingly accepts the challenge and it does seem that he has accepted it only because the fairies have assured him of joining Ellie. Nevertheless, Tom's rescue attempt of Mr. Grimes does induce the final touch of his conversion, which has a Carlylean tinge. Tom's journey to the Other End of Nowhere- involving "pain and despair"- prepares for his soul's cleansing in "the taintless tide." Tom must suffer rare humiliation by doing "the thing he did not like," by killing his selfish desire, by sacrificing, as Sartor recommended in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, "the pursuit of pleasure to the love of God."(15) This act of self-denial for an altruist cause creates in the figure of Tom an example of the pure, innocent, Wordsworthian child, who is well-qualified to marry the angelic Ellie. Therefore, underlying Tom's Christian education, there is the intention of showing Tom developing according to Wordsworthian and Carlylean principles.

On the other hand, the education Mr. Grimes implicitly undergoes is very substantial in parabolic terms. Within this context the Irishwoman's warning proves to be prophetic: "You will both see me again before all is over. Those who wish to be clean, clean they will be, and those that wish to be foul, foul they will be"(p.13). Mr. Grimes does not care for such a warning; he ill-treats Tom and totally deserts his mother. Grimes' punishment is therefore a result of that double offence. This situation presents a striking similarity with Luke's parable of Lazarus. In this parable, the poor man Lazarus is rewarded after death and is carried to heaven, while the rich man who mistreated Lazarus is carried to hell. Refusing a plea for help from the then repentant rich man, Abraham explains:

> Remember my child, that all the good things fell to you while you were alive, and all the bad to Lazarus; now he has his consolation here and it is you who are in agony. But that is not all: there is a great chasm fixed between us; no one from our side who wants to reach you can cross it, and none may pass from Your side to us. (Luke 16: 19-31).

However, Kingsley's didactic education leads him to modify Luke's parable. Unlike the rich man's request, which is turned down by Abraham, Grimes' is granted. He is given an opportunity once more to lead a moral life. It is his seeming late recognition of guilt that saves his soul from everlasting perdition. The Irishwoman assures Mr. Grimes that it is not too late for him to recant:

> No more was it too late. For, as poor Grimes cried and blubbered on, his own tears did what his mother's could not do, and Tom's could not do, and anybody's on earth could do for him; for they washed the soot off his face and off his clothes; and then they washed the mortar away from between the bricks; and the chimney crumbled down; and Grimes began to get out of it. (p.319)

Mr. Grimes does seem to have benefited much from this lesson. In fact, this incident generates his rebirth. *The Water Babies* ends up with a note that Grimes is still sweeping the "crater of Etna."

But the real parabolic rebirth is symbolically effected through the agency of the fairies. They represent every social, moral, religious and divine element *The Water Babies* suggests. On the one hand, the fairies appear to reflect the moral and spiritual process undergone by both Tom and Grimes; and on the other hand, they exhibit the underlying divine work of nature. In the first part, the mainly social one, the Irishwoman's appearance does reveal Grimes' diabolical, hypocritical and despotic nature as well as Tom's oppression, his religious ignorance and symbolically his desire to get rid of that. However her warning shows a character who speaks from a position of divine authority. This fact is demonstrated by her invisibility while guiding the escaping Tom. Under the water, the Irishwoman becomes Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Bedonebyasyoudid whose task is to educate Tom. On the other hand, there is clear evidence that the authority of the fairies is also strongly present above water, punishing the bad and rewarding the good. Thus, Mr. Grimes is carried to hell while Ellie is carried straight to heaven. This in the end suggests the symbolic omnipotent authority of the fairies: they stand for God's divine law. Moreover, the fairies never appear together, which testifies that they are one figure. The metaphorical form in which a fairy appears to any of the characters mirrors that character's action and his or her moral and spiritual life. At the end, when all characters seem to have realized the existence of divine good, and they themselves become good, one figure personifying all the fairies appears. That figure is metaphorically a rainbow, though originally one colour, it reflects a variety of colours: the united Tom and Ellie see that figure with the colours of the rainbow shining bright. They see in the figure of the fairy, the Irishwoman, Mother Carey, Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby: "And when they looked, she was neither of them, and yet all of them at once"(p.326). Thus, the fairy has

certainly undergone a parabolic rebirth, which is undeniably an emblem of Tom's accomplishment of rebirth, too. After all, his marriage to Ellie is authorised by the fairy herself.

Moreover, the fairy's oneness is, as I have just suggested, a symbol of God's oneness and a reflection of the divine law embodied in nature. Kingsley's intention behind *The Water Babies* is to demonstrate "that there is a quite miraculous and divine element underlying all physical nature." Life underwater, the strange creatures Tom encounters there, and above all the fairies themselves, all according to Kingsley, do exist like any other natural phenomenon. In his intrusion Kingsley inductively justifies his argument. Of the fairies, for instance, he says:

> There is life in you; and it is the life in you; which makes you grow, and move, and think: and yet you can't see it. And there is steam in a steam-engine; and that is what makes it move: and yet you can't see it; and so there may be fairies in the world, and they may be just what makes the world go round. (p.60)

Kingsley had already propagated this concept of "natural supernaturalism" in 1842 when he said:

> When I walk the fields I am oppressed every now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning, if I could but understand it. And this feeling of being surrounded with truth, which I can't grasp, amounts to indescribable awe sometimes. Everything seems to be full of God's reflex if we could but see it. (16)

Stephen Prickett has referred to this as having clear "echoes of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode.'" (17) Similarly, Kingsley appears to be echoing Carlyle's idea expressed in *Sartor Resartus* that the invisible is as real as the visible; everything is a symbol of God's presence; the only reality is the reality of the spirit: "Spirit is the only reality. Visible things are but the manifestations, emblems, or clothings of spirit. The material universe itself is only vesture or symbol of God." (18) Accordingly, though basically written for children, Kingsley's *The Water Babies* equally addresses issues of crucial contemporary importance for adults. In fact, it is the successful combination of those values which makes the novel an example of a parable for its time.

Notes

1. Gillian Avery, *Nineteenth Century Children* (London, 1965), p.49
2. Lewis Caroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* (Harmondsworth, 1962), p.118.
3. Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (London, 1920), p.329. Further citations in the text are to this edition.
4. Mrs. Kingsley, ed., *Charles Kingsley, His Letters and Memories of His Life* (London, 1908), p.245.
5. Ibid., p. 245.
6. See Barry Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 35-6.
7. It is worth mentioning here that Kingsley is not the first Victorian writer to point to this social problem. The humanitarian concern about the child-sweepers' plight attracted considerable attention from the second half of the eighteenth-century onward. Charles Lamb, for instance, wrote an article in praise of chimneysweepers. William Blake also devoted some of his poems to this problem –though he uses the figure in a predominantly symbolic way. The poem entitled "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence*, where Blake provides a visionary and religious solution to the problem, seems to appeal to Kingsley's Christian socialism as presented in *The Water Babies*. In fact, the hero of Blake's poem is also named Tom, and it, too, like *The Water Babies*, is full of parabolic elements.
8. C. N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge, 1979), p.34.
9. Ibid., p.35.
10. "Wordsworth," in *The Penguin Book of English Romantic Verse*, edited by David Wright (Harmondsworth, 1973), 107-145 (p. 135).
11. Barry Qualls, p.5.
12. Jo-Ann Wallace, "De-Scribing *The Water Babies:* 'The Child' in Post-Colonial Theory," in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Texuality*, edited by Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (London, 1994), pp 171-184 (p. 174).
13. Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy* (Sussex, 1979), p.170.
14. Louis Macneice, *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge, 1965), p.85.
15. Jermone Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper* (Harvard,1969) p.99.
16. Mrs. Kingsley, ed., p.77.
17. Stephen Prickett, p.159.
18. W. H. Hudson, in his introduction to Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus, on Hero and Hero-Worship* (London, 1954), p.x.

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