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The Water-Babies as Catechetical Paradigm

John C. Hawley

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Water-Babies as Catechetical Paradigm

John C. Hawley, S.J. (bio)

Does not each of us, in coming into this world, go through a transformation just as wonderful as that of a sea-egg, or a butterfly? and do not reason and analogy, as well as Scripture, tell

us that that transformation is not the last? and that, though what we shall be, we know not, yet we are here but as the crawling caterpillar, and shall be hereafter as the perfect fly.

(The Water-Babies 87)

Tutor to the Prince of Wales and first Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, Charles Kingsley (1819-75) was well-known in his own day as an educator and as a strong advocate for Thomas Arnold's educational reforms. Kingsley became especially vocal as a proponent of the Greek ideal of forming a sound mind in a sound body—so vocal, in fact, that his suggestion that sports should play a major role at Eton, Harrow, and the other training grounds for the leaders of the Empire became caricatured as "muscular Christianity."

As the tag suggests, however, the goal of education for Kingsley, whether it was to be education of the mind or of the body, was ultimately religious. He was, after all, an Anglican clergyman and chaplain to Queen Victoria, and the emphasis in his pedagogy is highly moral: while granting that any knowledge, even religious, must be based on observation (*Letters 2: 303*), he writes that the principal aim of education is to "enable us hereafter to make ourselves and all around us, wiser, better, and happier" (*Letters 1: 60*). If more empirical knowledge does not produce a better human being, it comes under Kingsley's attack.

Furthermore, like Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) and *Hard Times* (1854), he worries that schools have been taken over by the "reforming," statistics-minded educators—the Gradgrinds and the M'Choakumchilds. What is required to reverse this deadening trend, he feels, is not more "facts" but a love of learning, and this can best be nurtured by exploiting the child's natural inclination for the fanciful. At the same time, in preparation for the highly moralistic goal that Kingsley sets for education, the student must first be *taught* to see. While encouraging the development of the imagination, therefore, Kingsley did not conceive of children's literature as a refuge from the real world. It was to be a non-threatening, imaginative preparation for the assumption of

one's Christian responsibilities in a world of real, complex, and sometimes fearsome adult problems. "Correct" perceptions in childhood—that is, perceptions that had been coached and clarified by the narrator—would prompt strong emotions in the young reader; these emotions, in turn, would compel moral actions in the same readers as adults.

Charles Kingsley was best known in his own day as a preacher and as the author of six highly polemical novels. Since he held such strong views on the philosophy of pedagogy, however, it is not surprising that he is today most widely appreciated as the author of a delightful children's book. Since it was written, in 1863, *The Water-Babies* has been dramatized, animated, filmed, and televised, and many adults, if they know nothing at all about Kingsley's other works, still fondly recall the compelling fantasy of this story, the fine original illustrations by Linley Sanbourne (who became, in 1900, the chief cartoonist for *Punch*), and the even happier world that Jessie Willcox Smith evoked with her colorful drawings for the 1916 edition. Thirty-five years after its publication his tale of a little boy who plunges beneath the water into a world as colorful as Alice's Wonderland remained among the ten most popular children's books in England, and it is today still available in three editions.

The Water-Babies offers a classic example of children's literature employed to disarm and to teach. C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Antoine de Saint Exupery and many others after them have used this Kingsley as a model: writing a nonsensical story supposedly for children, fully aware that it will be read aloud by adults. Since Kingsley's own earlier...

Wood, J. G. *White Animals*. (London: 1869-71). Philadelphia: Bradley, Curran & Co., 1873.

_____. *Half-Human with a Nantucket Rabbit Nose*. (London: 1855). New York: Thomas Whitaker, 1887.

Alex Rowc is a doctoral candidate in English at Rutgers University. His dissertation is on Romanticism. He has an article on Bruce Springsteen forthcoming in *American Studies*.

The Water-Babies as Catechetical Paradigm

by John C. Masley, S.J.

Does not each of us, in coming from this world, go through a transformation: just as wonderful as that of a sea-egg, or a butterfly, and do not reason and pry, as well as Scripture, tell us that that transformation is not the last? and that, though what we shall be, we know not, yet we see here but as the crawling caterpillar, and shall be hither as the perfect fly. (*The Water-Babies* 67)

Junior to the Prince of Wales and first Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, Charles Kingsley (1819-75) was not known in his own day as an educator and as a strong advocate for Thomas Arnold's educational reforms. Kingsley became especially vocal as a proponent of the Greek ideal of forming a sound mind in a sound body—to vocal, in fact, that his suggestion that sports should play a major role at both Harrow and the other training grounds for the leaders of the Empire became caricatured as “*muscular Christianity*.”

As the tag suggests, however, the goal of education for Kingsley, whether it was to be education of the mind or of the body, was ultimately religious. He was, after all, an Anglican deacon and chaplain to Queen Victoria, and the emphasis in his pedagogy is rightly ecclesial: while granting that any knowledge, even religious, must be based on discernment (Loves 1: 503), he writes that the principal aim of education is to “enable us heretofore to make ourselves and all around us, who ‘batter and hurt,’” (Loves 1: 50). If, non-exceptionally, knowledge does not produce a better human being, it comes under Kingsley's attack.

Furthermore, like Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) and *Head-Town* (1841), he worries that schools have been taken over by the “reforming,” statistics-minded educators—the G. ad. g. eds and the M. Ch. ac. re. ch. eds. What is required to reverse this dehumanizing trend, he feels, is not more “facts” but a love of learning, and this can best be nurtured by exploiting the child's natural inclination for the fanciful. At the same time, in preparation for the highly moralistic goal that Kingsley sets for education, the student must first be taught to see. While encouraging the development of the imagination, therefore, Kingsley did not discount of children's literature as a refuge from the real world. It was to be a non-threatening, imaginative preparation for the assumption of one's Christian responsibilities in a world of real complexities and sometimes-framing adult problems. “Correct” perceptions in childhood—that is, perceptions that had been nourished and clarified by the narrator—would prompt strong emotions in the young readers; these emotions, in turn, would compel moral actions in the same readers as adults.

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The Water-Babies offers a classic example of children's literature employed to disarm and to teach. C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, *Amélie de Launay*, *Esperanza* and many others after them have used this Kingsleyan model: writing a non-moral story supposedly for children, fully aware that it will be read aloud by adults. Since Kingsley's own, earlier works had been serious and carefully researched, *The Water-Babies* surprised many nineteenth-century readers, who enthusiastically welcomed that remarkably light-hearted new novel. As unusual and unconventional as the wacky world of Kingsley's novel may be, however, this priest's method sure does succeed in showing readers young and old something very familiar and even comforting in the strange and mysterious, suggesting a path he considers necessary medicine for his generation of readers.

Like Pope-Hennessy, one of Kingsley's biographers, contends that this approach to children in the literature he wrote for them was new, seeking to “awaken in [them] a sense of wonder, to call out their powers of observation, and teach them ‘without their knowing it’ they were learning.” Kingsley was the first to succeed in making such instructions entertaining. “Now if you don't like my story,” he starts readers of *The Water-Babies*, “then go to the schoolroom and learn your multiplication-table, and see if you like that better. Some people, no doubt, would do so. So much the better for us, if not for them. It takes all sorts of ways to make a world.” (93). This underlining of a naturalistic reliance on statistics and a ridicule of rote recitation set the tone for much subsequent children's literature in England, and it was one to the delight of every, but to the annoyance of a great many others.

While negative critics generally agree that Kingsley is a natural teacher and praise the energy and wit in his books,



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