

# The Water Babies and Aesthetic Modernity

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## Abstract

Darwin's *The Origin of Species* came into the world in 1859. The evolution theory in the book triggered anxiety among the British at that moment. Therefore, Charles Kingsley wrote the book *THE WATER BABIES*, a Children's Literature, to express his own views. Nowadays, scholars have realized contributions the book made to the evolution theory. They prefer to analyze Tom's experience (from human being to a water baby and from the water baby to human being) to demonstrate the meaning of the book. However, previous writings ignore the truth that *THE WATER BABIES* also has an influence on Aesthetic modernity. This thesis tries to understand the book from the perspective of modernity.

Key Words: *THE WATER BABIES*; Aesthetic modernity; Charles Kingsley

## 1. Introduction

Victoria Era was a stage in which aesthetic modernity contradicted with mechanic modernity and headed for independence. On the one hand, mechanic modernity with process as its core dominated British society and became a universal ideology. On the other hand, in the art field aesthetic modernity with rebellion as its core rose against the main trend. Charles Kingsley(1819-1875), a distinguished British writer in Victoria Era, wrote a book *The Water Babies*. There are some scenery describing the influence made by industrial evolution in this book. It reflects the aesthetic modernity to some point.

## 2. Background

Ethical Literary Criticism holds the point that literature is a unique form of expression of ethical ideas and moral life in a specific historical period. It is emphasized that we are supposed to understand the work from the real situation of that time. *THE WATER BABIES*, masterpiece of Charles Kingsley, was first published in 1863. That totally belongs to Victorian Era. Victorian Era is defined by the reign of Alexandriana Victoria, which began in 1837 and ended in 1901. During that period, England was in paradigm shift, from agricultural civilization to industrial civilization. Victorian had faith in science. They were optimistic about the industrial revolution. The advent of the steamboat led to an unprecedented boom in trade. Extensive railway traffic spread all over the country. Discourse of progress dominated the society. The first Industrial Revolution did give England a new appearance. But at the same time, bad things followed. People wanted to conquer the nature. Plenty of wastes of factories harm the environment. Nihilism existed. Utilitarians believed it is absolutely right to pursue the profits which can meet the need of the majority of people. Therefore, some far-sighted writers were acutely aware of this change. They criticized the so-called "discourse of progress", product of mechanic modernity. George Eliot, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray(*Vanity Fair*), Thomas Hardy(*Far from the Madding Crowd*) and Charles Kingsley were all the pioneers.

## 3 Aesthetic Modernity and Mechanic Modernity

Modernity is the philosophical thought that answers what is modern value and modern thinking. Modernity

is an indispensable modern cultural thought and modern consciousness (Tong, 2008, p.3). It is an ideal blueprint for the future proposed by Enlightenment thinkers under the passion for change.

### 3.1 Basic concepts

Matei Calinescu, an American writer, wrote in his book *FIVE FACES OF MODERNITY* "What is certain is that at some point during the first half of the nineteenth century an irreversible split occurred between modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization -- a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism -and modernity as an aesthetic concept. Since then, the relations between the two modernities have been irreducibly hostile, but not without allowing and even stimulating a variety of mutual influences in their rage for each other's destruction." (Calinescu, 1987, p.41)

As Matei Calinescu's description, the first one is Mechanic Modernity (Philistine Modernity, Bourgeois Modernity). Believing in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, it is featured by the doctrine of progress. By contrast, the other is Aesthetic modernity. It hates the values of middle class, and expresses its disgust through the most diverse means. There are many representatives of the aesthetic modernity around the world. For example, Gustave Flaubert and Charles Pierre Baudelaire in France, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky in Russia, Franz Kafka in Austro-Hungary and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in German. But this thesis focuses on Charles Kingsley and his work *The Water Babies*.

### 3.2 The origins of modernity

The modernity stemmed from the Enlightenment Movement, which is the struggle that the progressive class of the bourgeoisie fight against the feudalism. Its peak in England is from 17th century to 18th century. The exciting words, "Science", "Reason", "Knowledge" and "Progress", formed the grand narrative of the Enlightenment. It presented a promising and beautiful future. Under the doctrine, someone was inspired and became successful, while someone was at loss and suffered failure. Based on that, the media contributed to the development of modernity as well. The opportunistic publisher began the practice of cheap reprints, providing the yellowback series to working class and extending the reading market.

### 3.3 The reasons why people advocate the Aesthetic modernity

First, in Victoria Era, Science was emphasized excessively. When all the people think that science is equal to truth and order, then new kind of superstition appears. And the great narrative of Enlightenment is by nature fraud. Second, The mechanic modernity believes the perfectibility of man, holding the point that man are flawless as same as robot and progress is inevitable. So they put forward that human being is capable of defeating poverty, weakness, disease and even death. That view obeys law of nature.

## 4. Exemplifying with Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*

*The Water Babies* is considered as a milestone that marks the liberation of children's imagination. It expounds adult problems from the perspective of children. Different from others, it is an innovation.

### 4.1 The images

*The Water Babies* is a fairy tale for land babies. It, of course, comprises many creatures living in water, such as seals, salmon, trout and bass. However, we are supposed to notice other images. The first one is chimney. Before becoming a water baby, Tom was a chimney-sweeper. Under the cruel governess of Grimes, he is responsible for cleaning endless chimneys. Tom has to climb the dark flues, and the soot got into his eyes. In the book the chimneys are always dirty and sordid. It is these chimneys that make him like a little black ape. The second one is ship. In the chapter 7, Charles Kingsley mentioned the ship and described it as an ugly sight. As we all know, England finished the First Industrial Revolution in 1840s. People racked their brains to make progress, even at the expense of the environment. Both the chimneys and the ships are the symbols of Victoria

Era and the results of the bourgeoisie's pursuit of profit. When Charles Kingsley described them, he was inclined to choose the negative words. This implies Kingsley's attitude toward Bourgeois modernity to a certain degree.

#### 4.2 The environment

Apart from the images, there are some interesting and convincing sentences in the book. I would like to choose three of them to be examples. At the beginning of the book, Grimes and Tom are on the road to Harthover Place. The following sentence is what they saw. "They passed through the pitmen's village, all shut up and silent now, and through the turnpike; and then they were out in the real country, and plodding along the **black dusty** road, between black **slag** walls, with no sound but the groaning and thumping of the pit-engine in the next field" (Kingsley, 1863, p.6). these words, "Black", "Dusty" and "Slag", reveal the author's dissatisfaction. Coal was the main energy source of the First Industrial Revolution. It stood for Bourgeois modernity and its excessive use brought harm to the earth. Then, when Tom tries to find the way to Shiny Wall, he meets an old lady, the last of the Gairfowl. The old lady complains about her experience to Tom. "But men **shot** us so, and **knocked** us on the head, and **took** our eggs...At last, there were none of us left...for one day, when I was quite a young girl, the land rocked, and the sea boiled, and the sky grew dark, and all the air was filled with smoke and dust..."(Kingsley, 1863, p.124). "shot", "knocked" and "took", these three verbs that are juxtaposed reveal the people at that time were nonchalant to the nature. It is also a manifestation of Bourgeois modernity. The following is another example showing the indifference of Victorian. "...lest men should go there and shoot the birds, and stuff them, and put them into **stupid** museums..."(Kingsley, 1863, p.126). In our common knowledge, museum is modern, having no relations with "stupid". Obviously, Kingsley expressed his hates by using such an emotional word.

### 5. Conclusion

During the period of Victorian Era, England was in paradigm shift, from agricultural civilization to industrial civilization. Discourse of progress dominated the society. However, in the art field aesthetic modernity with rebellion as its core rose against the main trend. *The Water Babies* is an example. The images and environmental descriptions in the book reflect Charles Kingsley's Aesthetic modernity advocacy.

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