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The Victorian Education through
the Eyes of Charles Kingsley and
Lewis Carroll in *The Water Babies*
and *Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland*

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Abstract

Ever since the appearance of *The Water Babies* (1863) and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) children's fantasy books started to be praised for their ability to distance themselves from reality. England's youngest generation was soon captivated by entertaining storylines in which the most bizarre happenings clashed with the strictness of the Victorian society they were brought up in. However, even if at first they were regarded as such, magic lands were often not able to be in complete isolation from the real world. Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll, the writers of the aforementioned books, knew that, for the most part, their stories would be transmitted from parents to offspring, reaching both children and adults alike. Taking advantage of those circumstances, fantasy served two major functions: while it proposed entertainment to the younger audience it could also hide a lesson for elder readers. On this basis, the aim of this dissertation is to analyze how both authors by denouncing the educational practices that were being conducted around the country found in their works the key to raising awareness on the necessity of protecting future generations. In order to grasp the meaning behind their words, it will first be necessary to understand their socio-historical context regarding education which would be closely linked to the reasons that may have prompted the creation of children's fantasy literature. By doing so, after analysing their works, I will illustrate how, even if they shared different views, the origin of their stories was conditioned by the same concern.

Key words: Charles Kingsley; *The Water Babies*; Lewis Carroll; *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; Children's literature; fantasy; education in the Victorian Age.

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0. Introduction

Influenced by their socio-historical context throughout history writers all over the world found in their works a place to capture their concerns or beliefs. In this sense, whether it was used as a means of denunciation or to support one's ideas, any genre was suitable for fulfilling their ideological purposes. As a matter of fact, for many years not even children's literature was exempt from conveying indoctrinating messages which were believed to help in their upbringing. However, as the idea of protecting childhood started to gain more and more supporters, using literature to shape infants was no longer praised. For that reason, the first books that left ideology behind and tried to fuel children's imagination by immersing them in alternative realities marked the beginning of a new era.

From that moment onwards children started to get used to the idea of growing up reading stories by which they could travel to diverse lands inhabited by talking animals, witches or fairies. It is because of their fantastical elements that they were at first never approached as realistic portrayals of the world and thus, the intention behind the authors' words was never in doubt. Nevertheless, does the fact that they did not rely on a familiar reality consequently make them immune to the transmission of their author's beliefs? Were they only written for entertainment purposes?

Many of the stories that are still present in the everyday life of a child's infancy were written as a result of living in a period of social and political turmoil. As a matter of fact, the authors belonging to what has now been coined as the "golden age" of children's literature were brought up under the strict rules of the Victorian society (Carpenter x). Consequently, conditioned by very restrictive circumstances they found in their fantasies the perfect solution to foster their concerns by hiding messages that were not necessarily intended for children, but for the parents themselves. That was, in fact, the case of the authors I shall analyze in this work. Even if Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll, in *The Water Babies* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, were able to approach children in a more engaging and less indoctrinating style, they were unable to create stories which were isolated from the real world. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyze how both authors through their characters tried to condemn the educational practices that were taking place inside and outside classrooms, and propose alternatives.

Accordingly, in order to understand the source of their disconformity, I will first detail the most relevant changes that shaped education in the Victorian Age. Secondly, I will focus on the circumstances that were necessary for the creation of the genre of children's fantasy literature, so as to comprehend the reasons that led both Carroll and Kingsley to develop their stories. Thirdly, by taking into account their own statements regarding education I will proceed to analyze both their works. Finally, in the conclusions I will discuss their differences and similarities.

Throughout the essay, Modern Language Association (MLA) style will be used for quoting and referencing sources.

1. Children's education in the Victorian Age

Throughout history the acquisition of knowledge has always been at the center of many educational debates. However, it was not until the 19th century when in England the opening and attendance to schools unleashed a national debate (Sturt 1). In fact, the crowning of Queen Victoria in 1837 was the beginning of "an era of enormous change" (Stewart 10, 12), where social and political reforms regarding universal education started to sound more realistic (Sturt 1). Unfortunately, the first years of what would later be known as the Victorian age were far from being egalitarian. At the beginning of the century, only a small percentage of the population could afford the expenses of receiving any sort of schooling. The state did not find any benefit in financing a school system and thus, only the upper class was eligible for considering the option of sending their children to educational institutions (2).

In the case of girls, even if for a long time they shared the same educational rights as the working class, if their economic circumstances allowed it, they could benefit from being taught by "a governess" or even attend a public school (Mitchell 182). In most cases, a woman would come to their house and instruct them in what parents considered being fundamental (183). Lessons would not necessarily have to be based on "intellectual qualifications" (182), but on a set of rules regarding mannerism or Victorian etiquette (183). In fact, mothers usually expected their daughters to acquire certain social skills that would turn them into the proper ladies, granting more importance to "posture, speech, manners, taste and personal presentation" than to a more academic training (183). Nevertheless, upper-class girls would still receive a certain amount of general

knowledge similar to the one that boys were receiving. Music lessons, “arithmetic, history [or] geography” are just a few examples of the wide range of subjects their curriculum could offer (184).

In that sense, while a small minority spent the first years of their lives inside schoolrooms, the greater part of the country’s infants were in charge of supplying the nation’s needs through hard work (Sturt 2). Almost ten years had to go by for the members of the Parliament to reconsider reforms (Stewart 40). Even though many were still afraid of granting the working class the choice of education, as they believed it would destabilize their social and economic system, the ending of the 1830s brought new viewpoints (Sturt 4). Adam Smith, a famous economist and philosopher, saw in educating the masses a source for “political stability” — although the state would not receive direct compensation for their teaching, learning would make them less ignorant and consequently, it could be beneficial in preventing future upheavals (qtd. in Sturt 5).

Influenced by the latest currents, “Ragged Schools” made their first appearance around the country (Paterson 67). Aiming to instruct all children no matter their background, unpaid workers started to offer classes where they would introduce participants to religious and moral knowledge (67). Nevertheless, the Parliament had not yet reached a common consensus which meant that the educational improvements which were being conducted around the nation were neither official nor was there an established system that every school should follow (Mitchell 169). Under those circumstances, reformists started to question the importance of having a similar curriculum across the country (173). As a matter of fact, the usefulness of what was being studied inside the classroom was a very controversial topic that divided intellectuals into two different sides. As Black states, education was formed by “both utilitarian and evangelical impulses” (431). While obtaining knowledge was for the former a means for social progress, the latter considered education a moral and religious path (431). In this sense, attempting to create the perfect children the government tried to find a balance between both influences.

The most decisive experiment occurred in the 1860s and consisted in the implementation of a new system (Horn 2). The government, which had begun to grant small sums of money to schools a few years earlier, decided to approve an alternative policy that would help both financially but also in the standardization of the curriculum (2). From that moment onwards, schools depended on the attendance and productivity of

their students in order to receive economic aid. Known as “payments by results” the law urged teachers to base their lessons on the “three Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic [*sic*]” (2). At the end of every academic year, children would be assessed by school inspectors on their level of literacy (2). If they did not pass the examination, the government would be obliged to penalize the institution (Mitchell 173). In the course of time, more disciplines were introduced into the funding system (3). On this basis, between 1867 and 1875 the teaching of what were considered “specific subjects” started to be a possibility (3). However, the instruction on “English grammar, geography [...], history, Latin, mathematics, sciences, domestic economy, and modern languages” continued to be almost nonexistent (3). As a matter of fact, most schools were determined to include in their programs only what was strictly necessary to receive the state grant (5).

Even though the system was believed to bring equality among all children, as teachers would instruct all students, not only the ones with the best results, it was also the beginning of obsolete educational methods with very questionable outcomes (Horn 6). For over a century, students would suffer the direct consequences of a school system driven by economic benefits. In fact, the implementation of the new policy which was mainly based on obtaining successful results created obsessed teachers who contributed to the transformation of schoolrooms into scary and dreadful places (Mitchell 174). On account of this, in the daily life of a Victorian schoolchild there was no place for originality as the only method known for learning was based on repetition (Horn 7). Students would suffer the pressure not only of having to learn under very strict conditions, but also of being able to demonstrate their acquired knowledge on their examinations (8). In addition, as Horn reflects, the system presented disadvantages for both children and professors (8). While pupils would have to cope with severe punishments if the accomplished results were not the desired ones (8), teachers would also experience the stress of not knowing if they had done enough, in which case their “salary” would be affected (9).

Still, by the end of the century, many people already knew how to read and write (Horn 34). As a matter of fact, the increasing government involvement culminated with the “education bills [of] 1870 and 1880” by which the schooling of all children became a primordial event for the Victorian society (Stewart 40). Nevertheless, the beginning of universal education did not decrease the pre-existing problems. In an era of progress all children, no matter their background, were believed to be a key figure in the advancement

of society (Egoff 36). For that reason, whether it was by the memorization of what was considered to be general knowledge or by their early introduction to manners, since being born, they were already instructed into being perfect adults (38). The restless attempts to shape in exactly the same way the future leading generation scared and enraged many authors and scholars who were very skeptical of the experiments that were taking place inside and outside classrooms. Because of this, as I will explain in the next section, many authors found in writing a way of protecting their innocence which gave rise to the first expressions of children's fantasy literature.

2. Fantasy for children in the Victorian Age

For many years the realm of children's literature was not significant enough to be considered a necessary field by writers. Childhood was not a concept present in the everyday life of the younger generation. Instead, children were supposed to behave and act like little adults. It is for that reason that, as Carpenter indicates, the majority of the books written for young readers and published "between the 1740s and 1820s" hid a moral message very much influenced by "evangelical" ideals (2). Books meant to entertain were almost nonexistent and the small amount that were able to reach the public were severely criticized by the fierce supporters of didacticism (2). In fact, for a long time adults believed in the ideas spread by Puritans that considered children to be "sinful" (Reynolds). In their view, humans were perverse since the very moment of birth "as a consequence of mankind's 'Fall' " and, for that reason, in order to guide infants into the proper path they needed to be instructed from an early age (Reynolds). Nevertheless, spurred to a great extent by the Romantic movement, by 1825 the concept started to be replaced by an opposite current (Sandner 6).

Wordsworth and Blake described for the first time a view of children and childhood which would mark the beginning of a new era (Sandner 6). Infants were no longer connected to adults and instead, they represented their own entity. For them, the first years of a newborn were to be treasured. In fact, it was only during that time that humans could remain innocent and in possession of an endless source of imagination (8). Opposite to previous concerns, Romantics turned adults into students that should learn from the experiences of their descendants and, as Prickett writes, "the worlds of children and adults which had seemed in the eighteenth century to be growing farther and farther

apart had suddenly begun to come together again” (8). Praising imagination and children alike was the last step towards the creation of a new literary genre (Sandner 8).

As Sandner acknowledges, not only was the Romantic movement responsible for disdaining obsolete childhood principles, but as an indirect result, it also reassessed the importance of reading as a triggering factor of imagination (4). However, children would not find in their poetry appropriate reading material and it would not be until “the mid 19th century” when, inspired by the rise of fairy tales, fantasy as a children’s genre would start to materialize (5). As a matter of fact, “children fantasy’s direct literary antecedents lie not in English Romantic poetry, but in fairy tales, especially the collected folk and fairy tales and literary fairy tales of Germany” (5). When in 1823 the works of the Grimm brothers started to be translated into English and managed to capture readers across England, the previous disapproval of this kind of literature started to disappear (Carpenter 3). Nevertheless, not being clearly directed towards younger readers, there was still an audience which was not being covered. The unforeseen popularity of fairy tales led English authors to an increasing interest in the genre which inspired them to write their own stories while intending them, for the first time, to be read by a broader audience (Prickett 64). That was the case of John Ruskin, who in 1851, after observing Hans Christian Andersen’s recognition with his *Wonderful Stories for Children*, decided to publish what could be considered the first “original English fairy story”: *The King of the Golden River* (64). Yet, even though some clear advancement were being made in children’s literature, by 1860 the market continued to be very undeveloped and it would not be until two years later when a wave of fantasy writers started to emerge (Carpenter 10).

Why was Britain the main country to explore the children’s imaginary world and what was the cause of its delay? These are still frequently debated topics amongst scholars. Carpenter believes that even if by 1830 writers were already prepared to understand children’s necessities, their perspective of the world was very different from what would take place in the upcoming years (11). In fact, they would have to wait until 1860 to realize that the “adult world” was not as “hopeful” as they had predicted (11). In order to escape the harsh reality, they turned to a different universe where not only children, but also the authors themselves could be safe from a very restrictive society (11). Russel, on the contrary, focuses on more economic reasons (12). The educational acts that took place during the late 19th century, taken together with a more efficient

publishing industry, were one of the main contributions to a greater accessibility of literature for the younger readership (12). Therefore, as the literacy rate was reaching its peak and more and more children were starting to benefit from the advantages of reading, it no longer was a worthless business (12). Furthermore, both Russel and Carpenter support that the decrease in “birth rate” resulted in the disappearance of the traditional large families (Russel 12; Carpenter 18). From now on, the classical family would no longer consist of having many children, but on establishing a bond between a family of four or five members (Carpenter 18). Added to the unpredictability of the era, parents with scarce offspring saw it necessary to protect their childhood at all costs (19).

That was the case of the first wave of fantasy children’s writers. As a matter of fact, many of the world-famous stories were not initially intended to be published and were not, at first, motivated by economic forces. Instead, they were inspired and written for a specific person (Egoff 46). Kingsley and Carroll started their stories with the sole intention of entertaining a significant person in their lives, for the former his son and for the latter the daughter of a close friend (46). Without attempting to do so, they were responsible for creating a new market in which, even if some characteristics of fairytales still remained, as Egoff asserts, they managed to “[break] through the limitations that had been set by reason, opening the doors to other dimensions of time and space, and to dreams and visions” (76).

However, while the entire purpose of writing to a younger audience was to create stories that did not focus on the real world, more often than not writers could not restrain themselves from trying to contribute to social change (Egoff 36). Even if, in contrast to their predecessors, for the most part, they did not plan to give moralizing lessons to children, as it has been previously mentioned the Victorian Age was driven by social unrest and thus, knowing that their stories could reach both children and parents, many authors tried to raise public awareness through their fantasies (76). As will be discussed in the next sections, both Kingsley and Carroll, one of the first promoters of children’s fantasy in England, were responsible for creating books that were meant to entertain children while, at the same time, they advocated for certain social changes. In fact, by hiding their message in the fantasy worlds of *The Water Babies* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, they both denounced the absurd treatment children were receiving by a deeply flawed society.

3. *The Water Babies*

After being encouraged by his wife and with the main purpose of entertaining his youngest son, Charles Kingsley decided to embark on writing a story in which both his concerns at the time and fantasy intermingled (Kelly 29). Without knowing that it would be the highlight of his career, in 1863 his book, which was initially intended only for one reader, reached the youngest generation in Britain who witnessed what would be one of the first expressions of fictional worlds¹: *The Water Babies* (Kelly 31). Tom, the protagonist of the story, is a chimney-sweeper who has always been mistreated by the world. As his cruel master accuses him of being a thief he runs away, but falls into a stream. It is at that moment when he turns into a water baby and starts his new life in a magical underwater world shared by mysterious creatures and talking sea animals. With the help of two fairies, Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby, he gets to learn what they failed to teach him on earth and eventually, he manages to become a respectable and educated man. By following his learning process, the writer makes the reader aware, in a highly ironic tone, of his views of the recent educational changes while proposing what he believes to be the right path. In fact, as Kelly indicates, “as the work progresse[s] it move[s] beyond a simple fantasy designed for a young boy to a complex, intellectual, and satiric parable meant for the general public” in which Kingsley complains in a “unique and imaginative style” about how the future leading generation was being treated inside and outside schoolrooms (30).

In that sense, under the pretext of being a fairy tale, a genre that is “manipulated” throughout the entire story (Kelly 31), the writer excuses the narrator’s digressions. From the very subtitle “A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby” to the chosen opening words “once upon a time” Kingsley is already affirming the kind of story we are about to read (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 1). However, as I have mentioned in the previous section, traditional fairy tales used to convey some sort of moral message by which children were supposed to acquire useful knowledge. That does not seem to be the case of *The Water Babies*, or, at least, that is what the author constantly tries to assure the reader of: “Don’t you know that this is a fairy tale, and all fun and pretence; and that you are not to believe one word of it, even if it is true?” (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 76). Likewise, the same exact words

¹ Before the publication of *The Water Babies* some authors had already tried to explore the fantasy genre such as the aforementioned John Ruskin with *The King of The Golden River* in 1851, William Morris with *The Hollow Men* in 1856 and George Macdonald with *Phantastes* in 1858 (Stableford xxiv).

are reiterated in the final passage of the story entitled “moral” in which ironically he encapsulates the message that can be grasped after reading the book.

Even if due to his changing position regarding didactic novels Kingsley could seem to be a hypocrite, the stance that he takes in this story could also be considered the reflection of what he used to preach regarding books and learning. Kingsley was a man of words. In fact, not only did he write more than fifty books, but he was also very fond of learning and education (Rapple 52). However, he was very concerned with finding the right way to do it and, contrary to the Victorian trends, in his view books did not hold all the answers (53). As he himself argued in a lecture at Wellington college in 1863, the number of books a man may have read during a lifetime did not make him any more clever, for frequently reading was not a synonym of knowing. He then proposed the only way in which he believed reading to be useful and that was through “the art of observing” (Kingsley, *Charles Kingsley* 331). There was no point in reading if we did not know the world that surrounded us and, for that reason, in order to acquire useful information it was very important to “walk with open eyes” (331).

In this respect, by constantly reminding the reader of the novel’s nature he seems to imply that even the facts that can be obtained by reading *The Water Babies* are useless if the reader cannot relate them to the real world. As exemplified in the story, a government teacher most certainly will know the definition of an amphibious: “Adjective, derived from two Greek words, amphi, a fish, and bios, a beast.” (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 83). However, they would very likely fail to identify them outside a classroom.

Unfortunately, his ideas were not shared by the government. As described above, aiming to create a unified, compulsory and free education system, the policy best known as payments by result was introduced. Kingsley was not completely against the government’s plans. In fact, he was a fierce supporter of free education (Rapple 52). He believed that, as in the protagonist’s case, turning the back on the working class could lead to the involution of the race. In fact, when Tom looks at himself in the mirror for the first time, he does not see a human but an ape: “what did such a little black ape want in that sweet young lady’s room? And behold, it was himself, reflected in a great mirror the like of which Tom had never seen before” (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 26). For that reason, in order for them to progress and evolve into their best self education was a

primary step. Nevertheless, it is no surprise that a system mainly based on memorization and book learning would never have Kingsley's approval. In *The Water Babies*, he found the perfect opportunity to satirize the new policy while accusing it of being outrageous and inefficient (Straley 57)

It is, in fact, in chapter 8 when the author deviates from mere entertainment making the fantastic storyline take a more cautionary tone. When Tom finally arrives at the Isle of Tomtoddies he is instantly approached by its residents, former students whose excessive studies have made them turn into different types of vegetables (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 299). As Tom soon learns, their only concern seems to be pleasing an examiner for whom there seem to never be enough facts to accumulate. Consequently, the turnips and radishes spend all night and all day memorizing everything they encounter while they repeat what seems to be both a song and a mantra: "I can't learn my lesson: the examiner's coming!" (299).

With this in mind, it is not difficult to find a parallelism between the population of the Isle and the situation the real English children were facing in their country. By the questions a particular turnip keeps inquiring Tom about, the writer gives a hint of how students were filling their heads with unnecessary facts that would never be of utility. The most satirical part of their dialogue takes place when the vegetable formulates his last two questions: "How long would it take a school-inspector of average activity to tumble head over heels from London to York?", and "Can you tell me the name of a place that nobody ever heard of, where nothing ever happened, in a country which has not been discovered yet?" (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 300). Even if the system may be effective at a superficial level, in the long term its consequences could be irreversible. In the same way that the Turnip's brain ended up "running away, from being worked so hard" (301), students could conclude their educational path without being able to remember anything.

Consequently, in contrast to what evangelicals used to support, as Rapple asserts Kingsley did not believe in the "perfection of parents and the evil of children" (49). Instead, only adults and government were to blame for children's development (49). In *The Water Babies*, parents do not seem to understand the authentic necessities of their offspring. For instance, in the isle of Tomtoddies, as their families considered it to be unnecessary, there is a big fence forbidding any sort of activity that could be related with playing (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 300). Because of being too focused on lessons and

examinations and not doing any sort of exercise eventually they lose their legs. Furthermore, their long hours of studying are not productive because what they really need is to be outdoors. In another instance, a couple seems to be enraged with their “little radish” for not being clever enough. However, they do not know that the whole reason why their child cannot retain any information is because “there [is] a great worm inside it eating out all its brains” (302). Kingsley also makes a special mention to “cruel schoolmasters” who believed to have the right to punish and hit innocent students (200). However, being a fantasy novel set in a fictional reality, in this world the ones punished are not children but the adults who, abusing their superiority, do not behave with them properly.

Arising out of this, Kingsley also remembers to tackle the issue of punishments in *The Water Babies*. The Victorian Age was mostly known by its severe and strict social manners that children had to adapt to from birth. For many years, learning the proper code of conduct was closely linked with a consequence and reward method which involved physical punishments in order to understand how they were supposed to behave. As portrayed in his book, Kingsley saw no point in following such extreme tactics. When Tom’s cruel master wants to make his apprentice aware of how he has to act he does so by “knock[ing] [him] down” as “young gentlemen used to be taught at public schools” (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 5). Despite this, his actions seem to be pointless because as Tom later explains, “he would have done and behaved his best, even without being knocked down” (5).

The consequences of punishments were, in Kingsley’s view, all negative. Firstly, instead of confessing their acts they would learn to hide them (Rapple 48). In fact, they would be too scared of the outcome of their deeds and thus, instead of fighting against what he considered to be one of the most fearsome sins, he believed that through punishments “lying” was being praised (48). Secondly, as he had seen proven many times, infants would not fear their wrongful actions but the consequences that followed them (48).

With this in mind, he proposes a much more efficient system: learning through experience (Rapple 57). As the narrator of the book affirms “it [was] not good for little boys to be told everything, and never to be forced to use their own wits” (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 185). Therefore, it would be more productive if a child would “learn his

lessons for himself by sound and sharp experience” (92). In *The Water Babies*’ realm, fairies seem to be the only ones to understand the uselessness of punishments when it comes to children. When Tom steals all the lollipops, in contrast with what most parents would agree with, she not for a second thinks of “catch[ing] him by the scruff of the neck, hold[ing] him, howk[ing] him [...], sett[ing] him on a cold stone to reconsider himself and so forth” (214). Instead, she claims that children are not to be treated in such a deplorable way as it “is not even the way in which a colt should go” (216). In order for him to understand that his actions may have been wrong, the fairy decides to ignore him until he is ready to confess his sins. For a man that was born in the Victorian Age positioning himself against any kind of physical abuse and approving transgressive educational techniques meant that Kingsley, without even knowing it, was already thinking ahead of his time (Rapple 64).

Moreover, he also shared very progressive ideas regarding the school curriculum. As discussed in the first section, schools in England were more concerned with reading, writing, and arithmetic than with science. Consequently, for most of the 19th century and “especially after the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*”, students around the country were not able to be instructed in this field (Rapple 54). By contrast, Kingsley, even if he was a true Christian believer, had no fear of science. As a matter of fact, he regarded it as an opportunity that could bring humans closer to God since “by studying science one was in effect studying the work of God and getting to know him better” (55). Darwin’s evolutionary theory was, for him, another example that proved that God not only had the power to create the earth but also to provide all the creatures that he had also created with the ability to evolve (Kelly 269). For that reason, he believed that the introduction of science was going to be of benefit for the students in the sense that they would be able to comprehend both the power of God and the inner process of nature. Nevertheless, in order for it to be a successful field, it was necessary to make those who could become scientists in the future understand from the very beginning that it also had its restrictions (Kelly 269).

In this respect, instead of prohibiting its study, schools across the country needed to make very clear that science would never be able to hold all the answers. In his book he highlights this idea by stating that his purpose when writing it was to demonstrate that not everything had to be proven to make its existence viable (Rapple 55). In fact, in his opinion even water babies could be real: “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, and no one has a right to say that no water-babies exist, till they have seen no water-babies existing” (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 68). On account of this, in order to make the scientific field less restrictive schools needed to instruct children into being more open-minded because as stated in the book “the wiser men are, the less they talk about ‘cannot’. That is a very rash, dangerous word, that ‘cannot’” (70). As history had proven more than once by the appearance of unimaginable beings, he found nature to be too unpredictable for someone to have the right to “settle what is not” possible (72). If education was to follow his indications the next generation would be comprised by adults that, as Tom himself, would never dare to deny God’s powers.

Lastly, not only did he support scientific knowledge as a means of getting closer to God, but also so as to reconnect with the long-forgotten nature. Following very Romantic ideals, Kingsley was certain that the bond between humans and nature could not be broken if progress was to be made. However, schools and society in itself were not following that principle. With the approval of free education each day more and more children were spending countless hours locked up inside classrooms where the remotest sign of nature could even be considered a miracle. For that reason, from the very first days of life children all over the country were already losing their attachment to the earth.

In *The Water Babies*, Tom, being a chimney sweeper, has never received any kind of formal education. Nonetheless, it is not his lack of school attendance that seems to worry Kingsley, but his almost nonexistent contact with the natural world. At the beginning of the story the protagonist is often overwhelmed by the size of trees or the color of the water (Kingsley, *The Water Babies* 16). By his reaction to the natural world we can infer that in his time on earth the instances he has spent outdoors have been minimal. As his journey goes on, he suddenly realizes he is happy but he does not seem to understand what may have prompted the change. Kingsley, however, does not hesitate to highlight that his happiness may be very related to his surroundings. He left a world of chaos and industrialization to find a place where he could observe “the moonlight on the rippling river, and the black heads of the firs, and the silver-frosted lawns” while “listen[ing] to the owl’s hoot, and the snipe’s bleat, and the fox’s bark, and the otter’s laugh” (129). As a result, in Kingsley’s view in order for children to become proper adults, nature’s help was indispensable. In Tom’s case after being banished from

a society that had failed to teach him the necessary attributes to progress in life “it is only by receiving a ‘natural’ education as he travels downriver, that he can finally become a man” (Straley 58).

4. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

A few weeks before the publication of *The Water Babies*, like every other evening, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was having a pleasant boat ride down the river in the company of three little girls: Lorina, Edith and Alice Liddell (Carpenter 44). In what had already become a tradition for the four of them, Dodgson, making use of his vast imagination, started to narrate a new story in which this time Alice was the protagonist (Carroll). In contrast to many of the tales he had shared with them before, for the first time, on the request of his young friend, he decided to make his words last longer by writing them down (Carroll). With the sole intention of entertaining the girls and even if, in principle, it was supposed to be nothing more than an innocent pastime, he was responsible for creating one of the first fantasy stories that deviated from traditional fairy tales. However, three years had to go by since the story first came to his mind for it to see the light of day. In fact, it was not until 1865 when, after adapting and completing the original manuscript, he decided to publish *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll (Carpenter 44). Soon after its publication readers all over the country were already amazed by the bizarre story of the girl who, after falling down a rabbit hole, has to adapt to a world very different from the one she was brought up in. Time did not make its success decrease and if anything, over the years there was a growing interest not only in the story, but also in what was believed to be behind it.

Even if since its first appearance it has been considered a nonsensical novel, for many scholars the story is far more than pure entertainment. As a matter of fact, as Matthews argues labeling his work nonsensical in its entirety would be a result of only focusing on the surface details and thus, not appreciating the creative powers of the writer (106). Unlike many other novels that belong to the same genre, nonsense is not a constant current throughout the story and instead, is “incidental”, making the protagonist always aware of the lack of coherence of certain situations (107). Carroll is, in fact, very meticulous with his use of language and seems to know very clearly when he wants to make use of this device. For the most part, the absurd situations in which Alice seems to always be present could be a clear ironic representation of the difficulties of growing up

in a very strict Victorian society. As explained before, the Victorian Age was an era where perfection and composure were highly regarded. Children, who were not exempt from learning and following certain rules of etiquette, were bombarded with books and lessons who promised to turn infants into the socially accepted version of adults (110). Being the son of a clergyman, Carroll experienced from a very young age how manners were always put in a first place, and probably as a result of the excessive discipline he grew up with, he later developed, as portrayed in the story, a very judgmental attitude towards trying to shape children at all cost (110).

Knowing that the true inspiration behind the character was the daughter of the dean of Christ Church it is very likely that the Alice we find in the book to belong to the upper class of society (Susina 76). In this respect, the young girl follows the perfect example of how a Victorian proper lady should be: she knows how to act in every situation, she is very considerate towards other characters and even if she has to face very frustrating situations she never forgets the importance of manners (Susina 81). However, it is in her perfection where Carroll seems to find the greatest danger. While trying to adapt to the adult world, as society required them to, children would often forget how young they were by leaving their childhood aside (84). In Alice's case, even if she is no more than seven years old, she is constantly trying to reason and to behave as if she would be an adult.

On account of this, from the very moment she is falling down the rabbit hole, even if given the circumstances it would be perfectly normal to worry, she does not let herself lose her composure (Matthews 112). When out of desperation she starts to cry she instantly gives herself a reprimand and urges herself to stop, for “a great girl like [her] [...] ought to be ashamed of [herself]” for acting in such a childish way (Gardner 21)². When she finally gets to know Wonderland and its singular inhabitants she tries to apply what she has learned in the real world and teach them the manners that they all seem to be missing. However, she soon realizes that the rules she had to learn are different in this world.

One of the most representative examples takes place in chapter 7 when she attends the famous “mad tea-party”. Carroll was very familiar with the excessive etiquette codes

² For the purpose of this dissertation, when analyzing *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* the annotated version of Martin Gardner will be used and thus, it will be referenced as such.

that meetings or celebrations involved and he knew, from his own experience, that those who wanted to belong to a higher social class needed to follow them (Eplett). Not being very fond of the increasing obsession with established protocols, before the publication of the book a new chapter which mocked the most symbolic custom of Victorian Britain was added (Gardner 72n1). After facing the most unusual experiences, Alice is relieved to finally encounter a recognizable activity that makes perfect sense in her reality. Innocently, she joins a party to which she has not been invited and thus, she breaks one of the most important rules (Eplett). From that point onwards, she gets caught up in a very contradictory conversation. The party's hosts are very different from what she would have expected. In fact, Alice is very surprised when even if the cups are empty they keep offering her to "take some more tea" or when, contrary to the conventions, they do not make her part of the conversation: "really, now you ask me" (Gardner 78). Enraged and confused by their constant interruptions and their impolite attitude she is forced to leave a party where manners seem to have been forgotten.

As a result, as her journey advances, she is constantly confronted with situations where "familiar social customs [are] reduced to an absurdity" (Matthews 115). From disastrous tea parties to unconventional conversations with almost every character, Alice often finds herself in a position where, surprisingly, she is the one having to explain her manners (116). However, out of all her encounters she always reaches the same conclusion: her manners do not seem to have an explanation. In chapter 5, for example, she fails to find a reason as to why the caterpillar needs to answer who she is first (Gardner 50). Similarly, in chapter 8 when they are playing their version of cricket, Alice appears to be the only one troubled by the fact that they are not following any rules (88). It is not until the end of the story when, tired of being the only one trying to bring some sense into an irrational world, her disconformity takes over her manners (Dougherty 31). Nevertheless, the persistence that a child like Alice shows almost throughout the entire novel represents how rooted manners and etiquette must have been for the higher class of the Victorian Age's society and how much that affected children's perception of the world. Unfortunately, having a good education was not the only requirement that children had to follow. If they were to maintain their social position education played an indispensable role.

As Susina suggests, through Alice's constant necessity to demonstrate her level of knowledge Carroll finds an effective resource to both mock and denounce the

educational practices that were taking place at the time (75). Even if, given their economic circumstances, their access to educational institutions was easier, for the children of wealthy families maintaining their social position posed added difficulties. From her very first appearance in the story to the very last, Alice always finds a “good opportunity for showing off her knowledge” to the extent that the actual understanding of her words is not as important (Gardner 13). For that reason, sounding like “grand words to say” despite not knowing “what Latitude was, or Longitude either” she decides to randomly insert them in conversations (13).

Likewise, most of the encounters in the book are a direct consequence of characters wanting to be notorious for their cleverness. By the nonsensical conversations that can be read in the book such as “the mouse’s history lesson, the Hatter’s riddles, the Caterpillar’s questioning, and the moralizing of the Duchess” Carroll tries to show the pointlessness of a system only based on false superiority by which the main purpose of learning was being left behind (Susina 75). For the upper class of the Victorian age, education was no longer about progress and instead, it was seen as an identity sign. As a matter of fact, Alice seems to only find assurance of being herself by constantly testing her abilities (75). If she is able to remember what she has learned in her geography classes or the multiplication table she would be certain of not having changed. However, if she fails to do so, she would find it very likely to have shifted bodies with Mabel, a girl who, living in a “poky little house”, probably belongs to a lower social class and thus, in contrast to Alice, “knows such a very little” (Gardner 23). Even if she is very proud to use words “that very few little girls of her age [would know] the meaning of” (115), and she is enraged when despite “having gone to a day-school” her education is still underestimated (101), throughout the story Carroll seems to hide a message in which the usefulness of their studies is put into question.

In addition, he also shares his thoughts on the implementation of rote learning. Alice has her head filled with knowledge that is always proven to be either incorrect or incomplete. Even though she attends daily lessons where she is introduced to a vast variety of fields she still mistakes basic facts such as believing London to be the capital of Paris, and Paris the capital of Rome (Gardner 23), or confusing historical events “for, with all her knowledge of history, Alice had no very clear notion how long ago anything had happened” (26). Her imprecisions are a clear indicator of the failure of a system that,

as the protagonist acknowledges several times, is far from being entertaining or interactive.

As a consequence, the lack of educational resources is mocked throughout the entire story by including a very modified version of traditional poems that by their memorization were meant to instruct children (Leach 91). On more than one occasion Alice, in order to measure her intelligence, stands and “cross[es] her hands on her lap, as if she were saying lessons” (Gardner 23), while she tries to remember what she has probably had to repeat many times before. However, every time she attempts to do so, her words differ very much from the actual ones in the poems. Instead of the encouraging verse lines about work and productiveness of Isaac Watts’s “How doth the little busy bee” Alice replaces them by the actions of a less active crocodile. In a similar way, the father that Southey writes about in his didactic poem “Father William” is more charismatic than the one Alice remembers who almost seems tired of giving advice to his son (Leach 91). By using Alice’s difficulties in remembering the right lessons Carroll seems to imply the pointlessness of the excessive study not only of poems but also of books (91).

As previously mentioned, for a long time children’s literature was known for the increasing market of fairy tales whose main aim lay not in entertaining but in the introduction of morals. As mocked through the Duchess’ character the school instructors of the time strongly defended that “everything [had] a moral if only you could find it” (Gardner 95). For that reason, although a less instructive genre was starting to find its place, the houses and schools of the Victorian Age children were still filled with indoctrinating stories (Carpenter 10). However, Carroll was quite certain that didactic literature should not be used as a learning method as children would never grasp the true meaning behind the words. When Alice has just fallen through the rabbit hole she stumbles upon a bottle by which a “drink me” note hangs. Even if the most prudent attitude would be not to drink it by trusting what she has read in “several little stories about children” as the “bottle was not marked poison Alice venture[s] to taste it” (Gardner 17). In this sense, instead of being of help, reading didactic literature led Alice to not contemplate the idea of the drink being dangerous even if it was not labeled as poison (Sedlacek 110).

Hidden behind Alice’s adventures Carroll not only criticizes the education of the time, but he also presents the reader with an alternative method. As Wakeling asserts,

before becoming Lewis Carroll, Dodgson was very fond of mathematics, having from a very young age an extremely “logical mind” (135). His fascination never decreased and as his interest in children grew he developed a sense of educational responsibility towards whom he considered the most vulnerable part of society. On that pretext, he spent most of his life captivated by the study of “deductive reasoning” which he believed to be of essential importance in formal schooling (134). Even if in most classrooms Britain had already implemented lessons on geometry or coherent reasoning they were, for the most part, lacking their more practical side (135). Carroll, who spent some years teaching in that same field, was very much against the treatment those subjects were receiving. He believed that the whole purpose of introducing children to logical studies was pointless if students did not learn to think of all the different alternatives that a given situation might imply (134).

Arising out of this, by using nonsensical sentences the writer wants to make both Alice and the reader realize that what really matters does not necessarily have to be the response to a certain question but the “reasoning” that has preceded its solution (Sedlacek 53). As a matter of fact, contrary to the education of the time Carroll believed in the existence of multiple solutions to the same reality. When in chapter seven the Hatter challenges Alice to find an answer to his riddle not only the protagonist, but also the readers of his time were astonished to learn that the proposed enigma did not have a clear solution at all (Gardner 75n5). After being the cause of many intellectual debates the writer himself decided to suggest an answer but not before clarifying that his proposal was “merely an afterthought; the riddle as originally invented, had no answer at all” (75n5). In Sedlacek’s view, his ultimate goal with the introduction of an unsolvable riddle was for it to raise awareness on the importance of having a sharp mind (54). In this sense, particular emphasis needed to be placed on having the right reasoning for defending one’s answer (54). The usefulness of a solution that could not be either proved or explained was non-existent (53). For that reason, the memorization systems that were being used in classrooms failed to acknowledge that their answers would always be incomplete if they were not followed by a proper argumentation (54).

5. Conclusion

Even if for many years children's fantasy literature was believed to be unrelated to reality, after analyzing *The Water Babies* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* it is impossible to confirm the veracity of those words. Both Kingsley and Carroll have always been praised for being responsible for the creation of some of the first stories officially aimed at children. Although their contribution to the genre is undeniable, their investment in the upbringing of their relatives prevented them from achieving a complete distancing from their stories. As a matter of fact, arising out of their disconformity with the latest social reforms, both writers failed to leave their adult perspective aside and tried to tackle the issue of education through their protagonists.

On the one hand, by focusing his story on the experiences of a working-class child Kingsley is able to denounce how society was supporting a deficient system by which neither the nation nor children themselves were going to be able to find any benefit in the long-term. Through the narrator's convenient digression and Tom's innocent reflections, by the end of the novel the reader is left with a very clear notion of the harmful effects that the implementation of the new policies could unleash.

On the other hand, unlike Kingsley Carroll chooses an upper-class girl as the vehicle of his story. By doing so, he manages to propose a similar idea through a different perspective. By following Alice's adventures the reader soon learns that, unfortunately, the working class children were not the only victims of disastrous learning methods. However, instead of intervening through the narrator Carroll lets the protagonist have complete freedom and shares his thoughts in a more subtle way. As a matter of fact, it is only by his use of nonsense that the audience can grasp his true intentions. In this sense, while Kingsley takes a stand against rote learning and positions himself in favor of science and nature, Carroll criticizes the pointlessness of protocols and etiquette to defend an education based on logical reasoning in which lessons are not motivated by class identity.

As a result, they both make Alice's and Tom's life abruptly stop when they literally and metaphorically fall into a different world. However, while they travel to unknown lands they make sure to warn their audience of the real problems they will have to face once they finish reading their stories. As a matter of fact, as they soon realize, in

a realm ruled by fairies and queens, not even water babies, mock turtles or lobsters seem to be exempt from the harmful effects of the latest educational methods.

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