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Critique of Anthropocentrism in *The Water-Babies*

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Abstract

The Victorian era marked the zenith of the British Industrial Revolution, yet it also gave rise to a series of environmental crises and social problems. Taking *The Water-Babies* as its object of inquiry, this paper employs the method of close reading and, centering on the critique of anthropocentrism, examines the anthropocentric values embodied in and criticized by this work. It further argues that the work can provide a paradigm for cultivating children's ecological personhood and offer significant literary insights for realizing the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature.

Keywords

Anthropocentrism; The Water-Babies; Humanity and nature

1. Introduction

The Victorian era was a critical period marked by the rapid development of British industrial civilization and drastic transformations in the natural ecological environment. The advancement of the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of urbanization greatly enhanced humanity's capacity to transform and dominate nature. Consequently, during this period, anthropocentrism—a value system centered on human interests and regarding nature as an instrument—gradually became the dominant cognitive paradigm of society. This value system positioned humanity and nature in an antagonistic relationship, denied the independent intrinsic value of all natural beings, and subordinated the meaning of nature's existence to human survival and developmental needs. This not only triggered ecological crises such as the plundering of natural resources and the destruction of the ecological environment, but also established a hierarchical order in which humanity occupied a superior position while nature was relegated to an inferior one. This hierarchical order existed not only in the relationship between humanity and nature but also permeated the internal structure of human society, giving rise to social problems such as class oppression. Kingsley acutely recognized the ecological problems and oppressive relations under industrial civilization, and in his fairy tale The Water-Babies, he presented the ecological crises and social oppression driven by anthropocentrism, while undertaking profound reflection and critique.

2. Dark Images in *The Water-Babies*

The Victorian period coincided with the development of the Industrial Revolution. During this era, various industrial machines replaced manual production, and industrial civilization reached considerable heights. However, while the highly prosperous industrial civilization brought social progress, it was accompanied by ecological destruction. Dark images recur throughout the fairy tale The Water-Babies. On the surface, the emergence of these dark images stem from the visual blackness produced by the massive use of coal during the Industrial Revolution; in essence, however, they represent an ecological crisis generated under the dominance of anthropocentric values. These dark images concretize industrial pollution and ecological decline into polluted and lifeless natural landscapes, symbolizing the destruction of nature by industrial civilization. This constitutes a conspicuous marker of the intense conflict between industrial civilization and nature, and reflects the selfish desires of humanity under anthropocentrism to pursue its own progress while disregarding the development of nature. Dark images recur throughout The Water-Babies, representing the antagonistic conflict between industrial civilization and nature.

2.1. Black Dusty Road

At the opening of the novel, Kingsley sketches the dark undertones of the industrial town in concise language:

“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, 2018, p.15）

In this passage, black becomes the dominant visual image. In Kingsley's depiction, the "black dusty road" is not merely the transformation of nature by industrial civilization; they are, more importantly, the spatial concretization of anthropocentric values. These images demonstrate that industrial civilization has intruded upon and covered natural space with its distinctive color. This black road did not exist naturally; it is the product of human industrial activity. At that time, Britain was in an era of massive coal consumption, and coal had become the lifeblood of the nation. As early as the beginning of the eighteenth century, coal already accounted for a considerable proportion of Britain's total energy consumption. In 1700, coal consumption accounted for 49.7% of Britain's total energy consumption during the same period (Wrigley, 2010). By 1850, coal's share of British energy consumption had reached nearly 92%. Britain's coal output doubled in the half-century between 1750 and 1800, yet increased twentyfold during the nineteenth century; by 1848, Britain's coal output accounted for two-thirds of the world's total production (Briggs, 1991). Between 1829 and 1879, coal consumption in London alone increased approximately fivefold, reaching over

ten million tons per year (Mitchell, 1988). It can thus be seen that during this period Britain forged the glory of its empire on the foundation of burning vast quantities of coal. The mining and burning of coal sustained the operation of steam engines, the iron-smelting industry, and transportation, but at the same time produced enormous quantities of coal ash and slag.

Against this industrial backdrop, the "black dusty road" in the novel is precisely the product of the massive combustion of coal. The waste formed by the accumulation of coal ash and slag after coal combustion covered the original land, stripping the road of its natural color. These industrial wastes not only produced visual blackness but also affected the entire ecosystem. When such industrial waste covers the land, the surface layer prevents rainwater from infiltrating, thereby disrupting groundwater circulation; the heavy metals and harmful substances contained in coal ash and slag directly harm soil organisms, rendering most plants unable to grow and soil microbial activity unable to proceed, ultimately affecting the circulation of the entire ecosystem. The image of the "black dusty road" reveals the process by which nature is covered and alienated. Soil is originally a living substance that nurtures plants and microorganisms and participates in the material circulation of the ecosystem. But when soil is covered by coal ash and dyed black, its vitality is extinguished: black soil cannot grow plants or nurture life, and thus becomes severed from the natural world. Through his depiction of the black image of the dusty road, Kingsley constructs a world remade by the logic of plunder. The "black dusty road" is the trace of nature being covered and alienated, and a representative of nature being encroached upon and plundered by the human world.

2.2. Dark Flue

Kingsley also extends dark imagery to the chimney. “He cried when he had to climb the dark flues, rubbing his poor knees and elbows raw; and when the soot got into his eyes, which it did every day in the week”（Kingsley, 2018, p.2）The "dark flue" that appears in this passage is a product of industrial civilization's plundering of nature; the blackness of the flue is not natural but results from the adhesion of soot after coal combustion. The flue itself is a symbol of industrial civilization: towering into the clouds and discharging smoke into the sky, it represents industrial progress, yet at the same time it releases vast quantities of smoke and dust containing large amounts of harmful gases such as carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and sulfur trioxide. These gases not only harm plants and animals but also cause substantive damage to urban buildings; high concentrations of sulfur dioxide and smoke particles corrode building surfaces and blacken exterior walls. The dark image not only visually displays the consequences of large-scale industrial production in external appearance but also indirectly reflects the air pollution and health problems faced by Victorian society at the time. In that society, coal smoke was discharged day and night; industrial cities such as London were shrouded in thick smoke, dense fog

often lingered in winter, and the air was filled with foul odors. The unrestrained emission of coal smoke not only posed a serious threat to the environment but also induced health problems among local people: lung disease, bronchitis, and tuberculosis became common diseases in industrially polluted cities. The incidence of tuberculosis and coughing among London residents was higher than anywhere else in the world; particulate matter in coal smoke, upon entering the respiratory system, could further induce bronchitis, pneumonia, and other diseases. The massive emission of coal smoke cast British society under an enormous shadow. At that time, British society prioritized economic development and discharged harmful gases into the air without restraint; the consequence of this logic of dominating nature was a dual crisis of nature and the human body.

3. The Critique of the Predatory Attitude of the Human World in *The Water-Babies*

Anthropocentrism positions humanity and nature in an antagonistic relationship; in essence, it is a hierarchical and instrumentalizing logic of domination. This value system—in which the strong become masters and the weak are reduced to instruments—while continuously destroying natural ecosystems and generating environmental crises, also permeates the internal structure of human society, constructing a system of oppression and exploitation among people. In The Water-Babies, Grimes poaches living beings in nature; as Tom's master, he fails to fulfill his responsibility to help his apprentice and instead exploits and oppresses him by virtue of his status as master. Even Tom, the oppressed, is ultimately influenced by this logic of oppression: he begins to desire to oppress others as Grimes does, and after entering the water world and becoming a water-baby, he likewise bullies the creatures of that world. Therefore, behavior driven by this hegemonic logic of anthropocentrism is unjustified. When human beings habitually regard nature as an object and an instrument and subordinate the value of nature's existence entirely to human interests, the strong within social groups will likewise uphold the same hegemonic logic and treat vulnerable individuals as instruments for profit, ultimately producing a dual crisis of ecological imbalance and human oppression.

3.1. Grimes's Predatory Attitude

In the novel, Grimes's poaching is a direct embodiment of humanity's plundering of natural beings

“With a park full of deer, which Tom believed to be monsters who were in the habit of eating children; with miles of game-preserves, in which Mr. Grimes and the collier lads poached at times, on which occasions Tom saw pheasants, and wondered what they tasted like.” (Kingsley, 2018, p.14）

This passage demonstrates humanity's oppression of natural beings in order to

satisfy its own desires. Just as Schwartz and Hans treat animals in The King of the Golden River, Tom and Grimes likewise ignore the value inherent in natural beings and display a predatory attitude toward natural life. A pheasant is originally an animal with an independent life: it forages and builds nests in the forest and has its own behavioral patterns and survival needs. Yet in Tom's eyes, it is reduced to mere food; upon seeing it, he can only guess at its taste. The value of the pheasant lies not in its being a link in the ecosystem, nor in the beauty of its feathers, but solely in the edibility of its flesh—in the fact that its existence can be converted into human benefit. In addition, Kingsley places particular emphasis on Grimes's poaching. Grimes's poaching takes place in a game preserve, an artificially demarcated protected area that represents the law's limited protection of natural beings. Such protection, however, relies solely on law and punishment rather than on any genuine human recognition of nature's value. When Grimes chooses to poach, he challenges not only the law but also the very question of whether natural beings possess a value independent of human interests.

Anthropocentrism places humanity at the center of all things. This manifests not only as humanity's conquest and extraction of nature but also as the exploitation and oppression of the weak by the strong. When human beings become accustomed to treating nature as an instrument, they also become accustomed to treating other people—especially the weak—as instruments. When human beings believe themselves to be the masters of all things, the strong likewise believe themselves to be the masters of others. As Tom's master, Grimes's exploitation of Tom is all-encompassing. At the opening of the novel, Kingsley describes the oppressive relationship between Grimes and Tom:

“He cried when he had to climb the dark flues, rubbing his poor knees and elbows raw; and when the soot got into his eyes, which it did every day in the week; and when his master beat him, which he did every day in the week; and when he had not enough to eat, which happened every day in the week likewise. “ (Kingsley, 2018, p.9）

This passage presents Tom's living conditions at the opening of the novel. It depicts Tom's daily life, and the phrases "what happened every day" and "the things that happened day after day" indicate that such behavior occurred repeatedly. In traditional narrative, violence is often presented as a special event—for example, the atrocities of villains or sudden conflicts—so that readers may expect violence to end someday and may imagine an ending in which the villain is punished and the victim is rescued. Through the expression "happened every day," however, Kingsley breaks this expectation. Tom's suffering is not accidental but long-standing, and such suffering cannot be redeemed. Grimes beats and scolds Tom not because he is in a bad mood but because he is the master and Tom is the apprentice; this distorted relationship is the inevitable product of a power relation. Although Tom does the work of sweeping chimneys, he never has enough to eat day after day; this hunger is artificially produced. Tom's hunger is not because he is lazy or incompetent but

because the fruits of his labor are ruthlessly stripped from him. Grimes squeezes the fruits of Tom's labor and cares nothing for Tom's health, treating him merely as a tool for making money. This indifference to life is exactly the same as the industrialists' indifference to nature: in order to satisfy their own industrial production needs, industrialists will not acknowledge nature's intrinsic value but will ruthlessly exploit nature to the very last moment. Tom's plight reveals the dual operation of anthropocentrism in the relations between people and between humanity and nature. In the relation between humanity and nature, anthropocentrism demeans nature to the status of a resource whose value lies solely in whether it can satisfy human needs; in the relations among people, the strong demean the weak to the status of tools whose value lies solely in how much economic benefit they can generate.

3.2. Tom's Predatory Attitude

After Tom becomes a water-baby, he takes pleasure in tormenting and chasing animals: “But I am sorry to say, he was too like some other little boys, very fond of hunting and tormenting creatures for mere sport.” (Kingsley, 2018, p.172)

This scene may appear to be a display of childish mischief, but in fact it carries profound ecological implications. When Tom inflicts violence on aquatic creatures in the name of play, he demeans natural life to the status of a tool for satisfying human desires and reduces the existential value of other species to whether they can provide humans with entertainment and diversion. Although Tom has left the oppressive environment of human society, he still treats natural life with a predator's attitude. Tom's behavior is not motivated by survival needs but purely by the pursuit of amusement—by the desire to experience the pleasure of power that comes from dominating others. This kind of harming other creatures for entertainment reveals the arrogance of anthropocentrism even more clearly than hunting for survival, for it implies that human beings not only have the right to use nature but also have the right to take pleasure in nature and to treat nature's suffering as diversion.

As an oppressed person, Tom is likewise influenced by Grimes's logic of oppression. “And thought of the fine times coming, when he would be a man, and a master sweep, and sit in the public-house with a quart of beer and a long pipe, and play cards for silver money, and wear velveteens and ankle-jacks, and keep a white bull-dog with one gray ear, and carry her puppies in his pocket, just like a man. And he would have apprentices, one, two, three, if he could. How he would bully them, and knock them about, just as his master did to him; and make them carry home the soot sacks, while he rode before them on his donkey, with a pipe in his mouth and a flower in his button-hole, like a king at the head of his army.” (Kingsley, 2018, p.9). This passage reveals the internalization of the logic of plunder. As an oppressed person, Tom does not question oppression itself; instead, he longs for the day when

he will become the oppressor. He cannot change his fate of being oppressed, but he can obtain psychological compensation by fantasizing about oppressing others someday. Tom imagines himself becoming a chimney sweep master, wearing high-top leather boots and velvet clothes, and longing to possess status. He sits in a tavern smoking a long pipe, playing cards and gambling for silver coins, drinking beer, and enjoying leisure and pleasure—which also means that the fruits of his labor will no longer be stripped from him. He would keep a white bulldog, a display of wealth. These things represent the highest success an oppressed person can imagine—namely, becoming the oppressor. Tom longs to become the strong, just as humanity longs to become the master of nature.

The oppressive relations within society under anthropocentrism are manifested in the predatory attitude of the human world toward nature and toward other people. At the level of the relationship between humanity and natural beings, Grimes poaches pheasants, and Tom, even after becoming a water-baby, still takes pleasure in tormenting aquatic creatures; these acts all symbolize the deprivation of the subjectivity of natural beings, which are reduced to objects of oppression, amusement, and entertainment. At the level of relations among people, human beings also turn their own kind into objects of plunder: as long as their own interests are satisfied, the interests, labor value, and dignity of others can all be exploited. These two forms of exploitation represent the two faces of the anthropocentric value system. When human beings regard themselves as the masters of all things, nature is regarded as a resource and the weak are regarded as tools; when human beings become accustomed to conquering nature, they also become accustomed to conquering their own kind. The oppressive behavior of Tom and Grimes is itself wrong, and their oppressive behavior ultimately brings punishment. Grimes is finally imprisoned at the top of a chimney, trapped in coal ash and darkness, while Tom's tormenting of underwater creatures leaves no creature willing to be his friend. It can thus be seen that the value system dominated by anthropocentrism ultimately causes those who commit violence to bear the consequences, and cannot bring benefit indefinitely.

4. Conclusion

This paper offers a critique of the anthropocentric values in Kingsley's The Water-Babies. At the level of dark images, the "black dusty road" and the "dark flue" in the novel are by no means mere descriptions of the industrial landscape; rather, they constitute the spatial and visual concretization of anthropocentric values. By objectifying industrial pollution and ecological decline into polluted and lifeless natural landscapes, the dark images serve both as a conspicuous marker of the intense conflict between industrial civilization and nature and as a reflection of the air pollution and public health crises confronted by Victorian society, thereby constituting a dual crisis of nature and the human body.

At the level of the logic of plunder, the novel reveals the dual operating mechanism of anthropocentrism. Grimes poaches pheasants in a game preserve, depriving natural beings of their subjectivity; as Tom's master, he further treats Tom as a tool for making money and squeezes the fruits of his labor. After Tom becomes a water-baby, he in turn takes pleasure in tormenting aquatic creatures and fantasizes about one day becoming a master who oppresses others—which demonstrates that the oppressed do not question oppression itself but instead internalize the oppressor's logic. The oppression of nature and the exploitation of fellow human beings follow the same logic of domination, in which the strong become masters and the weak are reduced to instruments.

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