Title of Paper: **Book Review of Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children’s Literature by Jessica Straley.**

Author: Heidi Turner, M.A.
Affiliation: Independent Scholar
Section: Reviews
Date of Publication: April 2018
Issue: 6.1

Abstract: *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children’s Literature* by Jessica Straley outlines the effect of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* on the Victorian understanding of the child. She argues that Victorian children’s literature was written to a thoughtful, engaged audience, rather than passive readers as previously assumed. She goes through Victorian understandings of child development and explains their relationship to the portrayals of children and the writing style of children’s novels. Throughout, she aligns scientific understanding with its immediate implications on Victorian pedagogical practice. Ultimately, she argues that Victorian children’s literature was written with moral development in mind, but not to the exclusion of all else.

Author Bio: Heidi Turner is an independent scholar from Maui, Hawaii. She earned her Master’s in English from Azusa Pacific University, where she studied postsecularism, creative writing, and the Inklings in depth, focusing on the historical relationships of contemporary developments. Her academic work has been published here in *The Victorian* as well as in *War, Literature, and the Arts*.

Author email: [hbturner13@apu.edu](mailto:hbturner13@apu.edu)
Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children’s Literature demonstrates the effect of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* on the Victorian understanding of the child. Jessica Straley first explains the Victorian notion that children were closer to animals than adults—that the process of maturation was a recapitulation of the evolution of *homo sapiens*. Throughout the book, she cites examples from known children’s authors, such as Lewis Carroll, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and Rudyard Kipling, as well as the pedagogical ideas set forth by Herbert Spencer and Matthew Arnold, related to the aforementioned theory. When necessary, she includes explorations of the competing scientific understandings influencing the Victorian mindset and the place of natural theology within the era’s educational and literary communities.

Straley’s Introduction lays the historical groundwork on the above idea of development. She notes:

Between the publication of *The Origin of Species* and the beginning of the twentieth century, the association of babies and monkeys, children and animals, and boys and barbarians ceased to be mere metaphorical formulation and became a morphological ‘fact’ with vital psychological, moral, pedagogical, and literary consequences (Straley 3).

Straley emphasizes the educational changes brought about by the implication of this theory and asserts that the emphasis placed on science at the heart of Victorian education led to the rise of Victorian children’s literature. These works were written, in part, in an attempt to show the humanization of the child and to defend against educators’ assertions that reading hindered children’s development. Throughout, Straley argues against the passive child reader, assuming the works discussed are written to intelligent, literate youngsters.

The first three critical chapters discuss the interweaving of changing evolutionary theory, pedagogy, and literature while evolutionary theory was coming into the popular understanding; the latter two critical chapters bring emphasis to the declining British empire and the possible role the un-humanized child may play in it. The first chapter, “The child’s view of nature: Margaret Gatty and the challenge to natural theology,” gives context to the changing scientific landscape and the resulting re-packaging of natural theology (the belief that science provides evidence of God), pointing out the closeness between Darwinian evolution and contemporary ideas of revolution and the right to conquer as evidenced by success. Gatty’s work, *Parables from Nature*, ultimately uses literary re-imaginings of nature as the vehicle through which children should understand nature, rather than nature itself, both defending and updating natural theology for a post-Darwinian mindset. Straley points out Gatty’s understanding of how both natural theology and Darwinian theory would collapse in understanding humanity: “becoming human means being unnatural” (Straley 48). The following chapter, “Amphibious tendencies: Charles Kingsley, Herbert Spencer, and evolutionary education” demonstrates Kingsley’s acceptance of recapitulation as the an extension of natural theology through his novel, *The Water-Babies*, which parodies Victorian educational practice and, according to Straley, argues that children ought to re-trace human evolution during the growing-up process, not that they do by necessity—thus adopting and entirely revolutionizing Spencer’s theories on education (themselves a response to the growing criticism of education administered primarily
by the Anglican church) based on Darwinian evolution. Spencer’s extolling of the
scientific method as the basis of education is echoed by Kingsley while subverted
through his practical application in the world of fantastical change he proposes.
Chapter three, “Generic variability: Lewis Carroll, scientific nonsense, and literary
parody” highlights Carroll’s parody of Victorian education through its utter
uselessness to Alice once in Wonderland; here, Straley argues that Carroll (a critic of
evolution) finds science almost useless in developing understanding of one’s own
humanity, and demonstrates the usefulness of literature through parody. Straley notes,
“the Alice books foreground the gap between language and nature to question whether
we understand ourselves primarily as linguistic constructions or as physical realities,”
and later argues that adulthood is a transformation, perhaps parody, of childhood itself
in Carroll’s works (93). Straley argues that the parodic elements were intended for the
child reader, and that both natural theology and evolutionary theory fail in human-
making (for Carroll) before the face of linguistic-based meaning.
“The cure of wild: Rudyard Kipling and evolutionary adolescence at home and
abroad” marks a shift toward the changing ideas of recapitulation as the Empire needed
to reassert itself. Kipling, Straley argues, uses The Jungle Book to revise recapitulation,
making Mowgli grow into the ideal man and not the degenerated European; this wild
adolescent was more suited to the interests of the Empire (in Kipling’s view) than the
Christian gentleman. Rather than arguing for an idealized hybridity, Straley argues
that Kipling is drawing Mowgli into states of liminality and heterogeneity in
establishing his (Mowgli’s) dominance; this is compared to Edgar Rice Burroughs’s
Tarzan. It should also be noted that this chapter discusses contemporary American
perspectives running parallel or inspired by Kipling’s. The fifth chapter, “Home
grown: Frances Hodgson Burnett and the cultivation of female evolution” turns to the
consequences of recapitulation on the concept of the female child (Carroll’s Alice
does not emphasize, in Straley’s reading, Alice’s femaleness). Straley argues that
Burnett is forming an imaginative and aesthetic path to humanity for The Secret
Garden’s Mary Lennox, in which she both completes the prescribed path to adulthood
and does so in her own fashion, one that closely resembles the Girl Scouts and similar
organizations founded, in part, to help develop strong women capable of bearing
strong sons and formed in response to the male-centric recapitulation theories
proposed. Straley argues that Burnett uses this model while modifying it, allowing
Mary to choose Colin as a foster son (with Dickon serving as father) rather than her
choosing between the boys (a strictly eugenic or evolutionary choice). In her
conclusion, “recapitulation reconsidered,” Straley notes the heirs of recapitulation:
Freudian psychoanalysis, elements of modern education, and notable works gleaning
from theories built upon Victorian understandings of development.

As Straley points out early on, she is joining others in arguing for an
understanding of the crafting of Victorian children’s literature through an
evolutionary lens, but she is alone in asserting that the evolutionary elements were
visible to the child reader and were intended for their benefit. Here, she traces early
versions of the post-Darwin version of the notion that literature (and art in general) is
what makes human beings truly human. The pedagogical conflict between the arts and
sciences continues, and here, Straley re-captures the significance of the Victorian
The Victorian pedagogical assertions, techniques, and literary strategies that still inform both children’s education and the very genre of children’s literature as well as our understanding of the child-reader. Ultimately, Straley argues that the Victorian children’s writers understood that literature and the arts are the means for human development, not the end, and her conclusions bring forth valid arguments against the abandoning of the STEM fields as well as the arts, framing the analysis of the Victorian children’s novel in an immediate and pressing context.