Victorian Counter-Worlds and the Uncanny: The Fantasy Illustrations of Walter Crane and Arthur Rackham

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Background

Fantasy literature began as a grand escape, an inventive strategy to Houdini one’s way out of the quickly transforming and fast-paced world of Victorian Britain by simply turning the pages of a book. By 1850, more than half of Britain’s population lived in cities, and the Industrial Revolution demanded much from a developing and exhausted middle class. Fantasy offered the British transportation to exotic lands and separate dimensions and often explored past worlds graced by a purity and richness only dreamed of by the Victorians. While spanning counter-worlds (worlds that function under different rules and reason than our own), fantasy literature from the Victorian era also approached a number of new and adventurous themes such as the uncanny, which utilizes magic, imaginary creatures, and the anthropomorphism of animals. Elements of the uncanny appear in fantasy literature when something familiar to everyday life is suddenly transformed by the author or illustrator in a shocking but not always unpleasant manner.

Walter Crane (1845-1915)

Born in Liverpool, England on August 15, 1845, Walter Crane was the third of Thomas and Marie Crane’s five children. Having access to pen and paper early on, Walter’s talent as an artist became evident when he was just six years old, and his father (also an artist) began helping him develop his skill and knack for detail to give the beast an approachable feel to child readers. Crane’s use of fantasy from the Victorian Era also approached a number of new and adventurous themes such as the uncanny, which utilizes magic, imaginary creatures, and the anthropomorphism of animals. Elements of the uncanny appear in fantasy literature when something familiar to everyday life is suddenly transformed by the author or illustrator in a shocking but not always unpleasant manner.

Arthur Rackham (1867-1939)

Born on September 19th of 1867, Arthur Rackham was the fourth child of Anne and Alfred Thomas Rackham, who would later have eight more children. Arthur Rackham never enrolled in art classes full-time; he preferred to work day jobs to help pay for his schooling. Therefore, in 1884 Rackham enrolled in Lambeth School of Art part-time, and finally, at age 27, he illustrated his first book, To the Other Side as well as the poem “To Spring” by Richard Le Gallienne. On July 16th of 1903 Arthur Rackham married Edyth Stanke who matched Rackham’s loving, charismatic nature and artistic eye. Rackham’s way with lines and watercolors as well as his pleasant personality lead to years filled with so many commissions he was forced to turn work down frequently. Rackham’s illustrations never lost their sense of wonderment or their ability to transcend the affairs and issues of the real world. Rackham left this world permanently in the fall of 1939 shortly after completing his final illustrations for The Wind in the Willows, which was published posthumously.

Rackham’s Style

In 1875, Walter Crane’s Beauty and the Beast was released by Routledge and Sons, and more of his imaginative, anthropomorphic illustrations entertained the public. Crane’s Beast takes the form of a bear-like animal with great big teeth and a trunk for a snout. Despite his wild, animal looks, the beast maintains impeccable posture and wears magnificent clothing. Furthermore, instead of drawing the beast as a frightening monster, Crane uses his skill and knack for detail to give the beast an expression of harmlessness. Suddenly, a character capable of inspiring nightmares is approachable to child readers. Crane’s use of the uncanny is particularly noteworthy in the illustration featured to the left. Crane transforms the extraordinary—a gruesome beast—into something that appears quite ordinary. In the picture, the beast sits with Beauty on an elegant sofa. His bearing is relaxed as he wears a monocle on his eye and grasps a fashionable hat with his hoof. The exaggeration of the beast’s human qualities allows the reader to imagine the Beast—who belongs to a counter-world—in the context of Victorian Britain. Of course, the Beast’s faniful attire as well as his palace’s very Victorian decor are not only meant to confuse reality and fantasy; these details also serve as effective humor.

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