

The Horrors of Nature: The Dark Side of Victorian Fairy Painting

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The Victorians, like the generations before them, were equally interested in the unknowable Other and fantastic creatures, particularly malicious ones. This obsession in literature and art with the darker realms of Faerieland can in part be explained by the influence of German 19th-century culture, above all in such sources as the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. Although the Germanic influence was considerable, the Victorians created their own version of Faerieland, which resulted in an explosion of fairy-themed art in the 1850's. Fairy painting provided a passage into the fears and desires of the Victorian through unusual means; and indeed, fairy painting is an ideal source for Victorian cultural studies. The introduction of Darwin's theories to the Victorian world altered the previous conceptions about man's place in nature by proposing a connection between animal and man. The fears of suddenly having primitive emotions and actions based upon primal connections and losing the previously secure position in nature were reflected in art and books in the forms of scary monsters, goblins, darkness, and the grotesque. Late eighteenth-century artist, Henry Fuseli, Victorian fairy painter, John Anster Fitzgerald, and fairy illustrator Arthur Rackham all include elements of the gothic and the grotesque in their art. As nineteenth-century British society changed, fairyland adapted and projected the contemporary fears of the era through grotesque beings of various sorts. Fuseli's *The Nightmare* dwells on the incubus figure enticing primitive sexual dreams. *The Artist's Dream* by Fitzgerald depicts horrific goblins as symbols of a concern over hidden primitive urges released by dreams. Finally, Rackham reveals the influence of Darwin in his anthropomorphic trees in scenes from *Rip Van Winkle*. Ultimately, the dark side creates a cultural phenomenon resulting in a society concerned about their place in nature and their eagerness to reassert that order in their art.