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Fantasy in Children's literature from the Victorian Era: Why was it so effective in getting the lessons across?

Robert Louis Stevenson and Christina Rossetti from the Victorian Era used fantasy in some of their children's literature to attract children to the stories so that they could instill the lessons the stories had to offer into their innocent minds. This is clear in "The Land of Nod" by Stevenson and "The Goblin Market" by Rossetti. In contrast, Stevenson also used non-fantasy methods to write children's literature in "Whole Duty of Children." I don't believe that poem was as successful as "The Land of Nod" or "The Goblin Market" because "Whole Duty of Children" explicitly tells children what they should and should not do, whereas the other two give their lessons using fantasy, which makes gives the child more interest in them.

"The Land of Nod" by Stevenson, though subtle, has the lesson that children should not fear their dreams, nor should they become too attached to them. He begins by setting the scene of the make-believe "land of Nod" by describing how he gets there. "From breakfast on through all the day/ At home among my friends I stay,/ But every night I go abroad/ Afar into the land of Nod." In this stanza, the speaker tells the reader when he can go to the "land of Nod" and makes it clear to the reader that the "land of Nod" is not real, because he can only go there in his dreams. In the second stanza he gives a metaphoric scene of what the "land of Nod" looks like.

“All by myself I have to go,/ With none to tell me what to do --/ All alone beside the streams/  
And up the mountain-sides of dreams.” Here the speaker talks about the streams and mountain-sides of dreams, giving more fantasy to the picture because though we can imagine streams and mountain-sides, we cannot imagine how they look in his dreams because anything can happen in a dream. Bringing the dream world to life for children gains their interest because they can all relate to it and connect it to their own dream worlds. He then begins the lesson by saying what he finds there. “The strangest things are there for me,/ Both things to eat and things to see,/ And many frightening sights abroad/ Till morning in the land of Nod.” He tells everything he finds in the “land of Nod,” including those that frighten him, and then he ends the stanza with a reassurance that it only lasts until morning. This reassurance is the first instance of the poem’s lesson. By reassuring the children that they will wake up, it tells them both not to become too attached to the “things to eat and things to see,” and not to be frightened by the things they might find there. To further explain that the land is imaginary, he explains that “Try as I like to find the way,/ I never can get back by day,/ Nor can remember plain and clear/ The curious music that I hear.” The idea that he can never hear the “curious music” from his dream gives the reader the impression that the music was never there in the first place, only in his head, which gives a further understanding that the “land of Nod” is not real and should not be taken seriously.

“Goblin Market” by Rossetti has several lessons in it, including the value of sisterhood and the importance of not giving in to temptation. However, instead of inventing a make-believe world, Rossetti used a common fantasy villain and gave it an image. “One had a cat’s face, One whisked a tail,/ One tramped at a rat’s pace,/ One crawled like a snail,/ One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,/ One like a ratel tumbled hurry-scurry.” Here she creates a different kind of goblin than we are used to reading about or seeing in movies. The normal goblin might

have green skin with boils on it and be very large, but Rossetti's goblins are described as men with characteristics of different kinds of animals. The intrigue of man being combined with animal draws children in as they try to imagine what they might look like, it peeks their curiosity just as it does one of the sisters, Laura. "Laura stretched her gleaming neck/ Like a rush-imbedded swan,/ Like a lily from the beck,/ Like a vessel at the launch/ When its last restraint is gone." This stanza tells of when Laura first succumbs to her curiosity, which eventually causes her pain and almost kills her. When she gives in and sells a lock of her hair for the goblins for some of their fruit, she falls in love with it and becomes addicted to it (another lesson of the poem). She is happy until the next day when she realizes she can no longer see or hear the goblins and can't get any more of their fruit. Therefore, she becomes depressed and slowly starts to die. "She never spied the goblin men/ Hawking their fruits along the glen:/ But when the noon waxed bright/ Her hair grew thing and gray;/ She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn to swift decay, and burn/ Her fire away." These lines describe her punishment for giving into the goblins temptation. As the poem goes on, it seems Laura will not recover until her sister Lizzie decides to do something about it. "Till Laura, dwindling,/ Seemed knocking at Death's door:/ Then Lizzie weighed no more/ Better and worse,/ But put a silver penny in her purse,/ Kissed Laura, crossed the heath with clumps of furze/ At twilight, halted by the brook,/ And for the first time in her life/ Began to listen and look." This shows Lizzie taking the situation into her own hands to save her sister, giving an introduction into the strong bond she has with Laura and how important it becomes in Laura's life. The goblins, the fruits, and the idea that giving into fruit from goblins can kill you are what draw children into the story so they can learn the lessons of it.

On the other side of children's literature from the Victorian era, there was "Whole Duty of Children," which came from the same book as "The Land of Nod" by Stevenson. The

difference in this poem is that it has no fantasy and really no imagination at all. It simply states what children should do. "A child should always say what's true/ And speak when he is spoken to, And behave mannerly at the table;/ At least as far as he is able." The absence of a draw-in for children might hinder it from sticking its lessons into the children's minds.

Fantasy was used in much of the children's literature from the Victorian Era to draw children into the story and engage them for the greater purpose of teaching them a lesson. Realism could not pull children in like that, as shown in "Whole Duty of Children" simply because it would have bored them. The fantasy aspect allows the text to relate to the child's imagination, giving him or her a greater chance of remembering the story and its lessons.