

Points to Ponder-The Old Nurse's Story

1 As this is often classed as a Ghost story, Hester's initial description of the manor is particularly significant, setting the scene for the whole story. What impressions do you get about the house and its inhabitants from this passage? (I have highlighted some significant parts).

The road went up about two miles, and then we saw a great and stately house, with many trees close around it, so close that in some places their branches dragged against the walls when the wind blew; and some hung broken down; for no one seemed to take much charge of the place;—to lop the wood, or to keep the moss-covered carriage-way in order. Only in front of the house all was clear. The great oval drive was without a weed; and neither tree nor creeper was allowed to grow over the long, many-windowed front; at both sides of which a wing protected, which were each the ends of other side fronts; for the house, although it was so desolate, was even grander than I expected. Behind it rose the Fells; which seemed unenclosed and bare enough; and on the left hand of the house, as you stood facing it, was a little, old-fashioned flower-garden, as I found out afterwards. A door opened out upon it from the west front; it had been scooped out of the thick, dark wood for some old Lady Furnivall; but the branches of the great forest-trees had grown and overshadowed it again, and there were very few flowers that would live there at that time.

2 What dramatic effect is created in this passage and how does Gaskell create dramatic tension?

One fearful night, just after the New Year had come in, when the snow was lying thick and deep; and the flakes were still falling—fast enough to blind anyone who might be out and abroad—there was a great and violent noise heard, and the old lord's voice above all, cursing and swearing awfully, and the cries of a little child, and the proud defiance of a fierce woman, and the sound of a blow, and a dead stillness, and moans and wailings dying away on the hill-side!

3 You may remember a story Gaskell tells of a visit to The Street a stately home in Anglezarke near Rivington where:

Lord Willoughby, The President of the Royal Society, ...left two daughters, and the estates were disputed and passed away to the male heir by some law of chicanery. Legend says that 'Lord Willoughby walked, and every evening was heard seeking for law-papers in the rooms where all the tattered and torn writings were kept (L. 12).

If Gaskell used Willoughby as a model for Lord Furnivall, how does the substitution of the organ and the music for legal documents change the focus of the story?

4 Why does she choose servants, the old nurse and Dorothy, to tell this story?

6 Who is haunted in this story and what haunts them? Does ECG reveal anything surprising here?

7 What themes do we see here that are also present in her longer works?

10 The story opens: You know, my dears, that your mother was an orphan, and an only child; and I daresay you have heard that your grandfather was a clergyman up in Westmoreland, where I come from.

And closes: Yes! she was carried to her bed that night never to rise again. She lay with her face to the wall, muttering low, but muttering always: 'Alas! alas! what is done in youth can never be undone in age! What is done in youth can never be undone in age!'

Here we see a circular rather than a linear narrative as the ending, with its emphasis on youth, takes us back to the beginning. Breaking away from linear narrative is common in women's writing, although perhaps less common in 1852. What effect does this narrative style have on our interpretation of the story, its ending and its generic associations?

Finally, if you were asked to categorise this tale into a specific genre, which would you choose and why?

