

The Old Nurse's Story



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson was the youngest of eight children, but only she and one of her brothers lived past infancy. Her father was a minister in Lancashire before becoming the Keeper of Treasury Records, and her mother came from a prominent family. Her mother died a little over a year her birth. Her father panicked and sent Elizabeth off to live with Hannah Lumb, her aunt on her mother's side. She would spend the rest of her youth living as a guest in her aunt and grandparent's home, causing her future to seem rather uncertain, as she didn't have any personal wealth or a permanent home. Elizabeth went many years without seeing her father, but her brother John visited her often until he went missing in 1827 while on an expedition with the Merchant Navy to India. Elizabeth received the standard education of a young woman from a wealthy family, and her father and aunt encouraged her to pursue her writing. In 1832, she married a minister named William Gaskell and settled in Manchester. Her first daughter was stillborn; however, she would go on to have four healthy daughters. In 1835, Gaskell started a diary to document her life as a parent and her observations of her children, specifically the relationship between her two eldest daughters. She co-authored a series of poems titled *Sketches among the Poor* with her husband in 1836. Her first work was published in 1840 under the authorship of "a Lady." In 1841, they moved to Germany, and the literature she encountered there influenced her short stories which she published under the pseudonym Cotton Mather Mills. The death of her infant son, William, inspired Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, which was very successful. In 1850, the Gaskells were back in Manchester, where she wrote the remainder of her works and became well-connected to other writers. She died of a heart attack in 1865.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Old Nurse's Story" was written in the Victorian Era, a defining time of change in England. In 1837, Queen Victoria took the throne as Britain began to grow in influence and expand its empire. However, in Britain itself, the 1840s presented failed harvests, earning them the title of the "Hungry Forties." Despite this famine and raging unemployment, the industrial revolution took off, and by the 1850s had Britain on an economic rise. This allowed for years of progress, especially in science, medicine, and technology. These advances did not bring about much change for women's role in society, however, as most women were still limited to marrying, childbearing, and

taking interest in their husband's occupations. Elizabeth Gaskell subverted these limitations on women's roles by giving "The Old Nurse's Story" a cast of female main characters who are strong and complex, a choice that would have been quite radical at this time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Charles Dickens edited a weekly English newspaper called *Household Words*, in which he published Gaskell's writing on multiple occasions, including her story "Lizzie Leigh" and her novels *Cranford* and [North and South](#). "The Old Nurse's Story" was also featured in Dickens's *A Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire*. Looking toward other works from the mid 1800s, Emily Brontë's novel [Wuthering Heights](#) shares similarities with "The Old Nurse's Story," in that it also takes place in a manor house in the countryside and involves the betrayal of a sibling and the presence of a ghost. The almost entirely female society featured in Gaskell's *Cranford* is also similar to the female-dominated cast of "The Old Nurse's Story," indicating Gaskell's overarching interest in closely examining women's lives in her stories. Lastly, Gaskell said that Jane Austen influenced her writing.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Old Nurse's Story
- **Where Written:** Manchester, England
- **When Published:** December 1852
- **Literary Period:** Victorian Literature, Gothic Horror
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Northumberland, England
- **Climax:** The east wing door opens, and the ghosts of Manor House reenact Miss Grace Furnivall's betrayal.
- **Antagonist:** Miss Grace Furnivall, Mrs. Stark, The Old Lord
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Lost to History. Charles Dickens suggested and wrote an alternative ending to "The Old Nurse's Story," arguing that the conclusion of Gaskell's draft dulled down the terror of the story. Gaskell went on to make edits to the ending, but not in the manner Dickens suggested. Unfortunately, the original draft did not survive, so it is unclear what Gaskell's original ending was.



PLOT SUMMARY

Hester, the old nurse, is telling Miss Rosamond's children a story from their mother's youth. In the story, Miss Rosamond's mother comes to the village school and chose Hester to be Miss Rosamond's nursemaid. When Miss Rosamond is four or five years old and Hester is eighteen, both of Miss Rosamond's parents get sick and die within a couple weeks of each other. Miss Rosamond's mother comes from an influential family, the Furnivalls, and her cousin, Lord Furnivall, arrives to handle affairs. It is decided that Hester will continue to care for Miss Rosamond at Manor House, the home of Miss Grace Furnivall (Lord Furnivall's great aunt) and Mrs. Stark (her maid). Hester initially finds Manor House to be a **cold** and gloomy place, neglected out in the wilderness. But by James, Dorothy, and Agnes (members of the staff) welcome her, and she and Miss Rosamond become comfortable there.

The house has two wings, and **the east wing** is locked and off limits. Hester and Dorothy become good friends, and Dorothy shares what she knows about the Furnivalls, namely identifying the portrait of Miss Maude Furnivall, Miss Grace's older sister. Dorothy is afraid to show this portrait to her and makes Hester promise to never tell anyone she had seen it. As winter sets in, Hester becomes convinced she sometimes hears someone playing on **the organ**, but the rest of the staff deny it. After interrogating Agnes, she learns that it is rumored that the old lord's ghost plays the organ on stormy winter nights, though Agnes does not know who the old lord is. Hester only half believes this story, until she opens the organ and sees that it is destroyed inside.

One night, Hester decides it is too cold to take Miss Rosamond with her to church and leaves her in the charge of Dorothy. However, when she returns, she discovers that Miss Rosamond is missing. They search the whole house until Hester finally spots a set of footprints in the snow outside from a window. She rushes out to intercept a shepherd carrying a nearly frozen Miss Rosamond. When Miss Rosamond finally regains consciousness, she tells Hester that she saw a little girl out in the snow, and that the little girl had walked her up the Fells to a crying lady who then rocked her to sleep. Hester doesn't believe her, but Miss Rosamond insists it's the truth. Miss Grace is terrified by Miss Rosamond's story and tells Hester to keep Miss Rosamond away from that "evil child." From then on, Hester never leaves Miss Rosamond alone.

In December, Hester and Miss Rosamond are playing together when suddenly they see the little girl out in the snow, banging on the window. Miss Rosamond runs to let the little girl in, but with a sudden blast of organ music, Hester realizes the little girl makes no noise, and that she is a ghost. She grabs Miss Rosamond before she can open the door and carries her off into the house.

Dorothy finally admits that the old lord who plays the organ is Miss Grace and Miss Maude's father, and that the old lord was too proud to ever allow anyone to marry his daughters. But when he invited a foreigner to play music in their home, both sisters fell in love with the same man. The foreigner brought the organ for the old lord to learn to play, and while their father was distracted, he flirted with both daughters. Miss Maude triumphed over her sister and secretly married the foreigner, later giving birth to a daughter (the little girl who became the ghost outside Manor House).

But jealousy grew between the sisters as the foreigner continued to flirt with both of them, and he eventually abandoned both sisters and his daughter. The two sisters retreated to their respective sides of the house, Miss Maude in the east wing and Miss Grace in the west. Miss Maude loved her daughter and decided to have her live secretly in the east wing with her. Rumor had it Miss Maude one day revealed to her sister that she had won and had married the foreigner in secret. This led Miss Grace and Miss Stark to spy on the east wing and discover the little girl. Miss Grace then told the old lord, who was furious and threw both Miss Maude and the little girl out into the snow. Miss Grace did nothing as the old lord ordered the staff not to help them, and ultimately Miss Maude and the little girl froze to death. The old lord never played his organ again.

Having heard this story, Hester guards Miss Rosamond even more vigilantly. One night, Hester, Miss Rosamond, Miss Grace, and Mrs. Stark are all in the drawing room when the wind begins to howl, and Miss Grace declares she can hear her father's voice. Miss Rosamond says she hears the little girl. They all hurry out into the great hall, the screams coming from the east wing. Suddenly, the east wing door slams open, and the ghost of the old lord drives the ghosts of Miss Maude and the little girl through it. They watch as the ghosts reenact the night that Miss Maude and the little girl died. As the old lord strikes the little girl with his crutch, Miss Grace begs him to spare the child, but then a phantom of her younger self appears and looks onto the scene coldly. Then, all of the fires go out, and Miss Grace is left lying on the ground. She is carried to bed and spends the rest of her days facing the wall, muttering, "what is done in youth can never be undone in age!"



CHARACTERS

Hester – Hester is the titular "old nurse" who helped raise Miss Rosamond and is now telling Miss Rosamond's children a story from their mother's youth. In Hester's story, Miss Rosamond's mother comes to the village school looking for a nurse for her baby on the way, choosing young Hester to fill the position. When Miss Rosamond's parents die, it is decided that Hester will continue to care for Miss Rosamond, a decision Hester takes no issue with. She is deeply devoted to Miss Rosamond

and her deceased mother, and she takes great pride in being a nursemaid. In contrast to Hester's poor parents in Westmorland, Hester now finds herself swept off to the Furnivalls' massive Manor House. At first this dark, gloomy place frightens Hester, but upon meeting Dorothy and James, she and Miss Rosamond feel welcome in their new home. Hester is especially close with Dorothy, who is also from Westmorland. When Hester learns that Miss Grace Furnivall (the lady of Manor House) had a sister, Miss Maude, and sees Maude's portrait, she doesn't understand Dorothy's nervousness regarding the painting. The rest of the staff's denial of **the organ** music that Hester hears around the house also confuses her. She soon discovers, however, that Manor House is haunted by the ghosts of Miss Maude, her daughter (the little girl), and her father (the old lord). This is because many years ago, after Miss Grace told the old lord about Miss Maude's secret marriage and child, the old lord banished Miss Maude and the little girl into the snow, causing them to die of exposure. When the ghosts lure Miss Rosamond outside in the **cold**, Hester's devotion to Miss Rosamond deepens. She intercepts a shepherd carrying her home and insists that she carry Miss Rosamond back herself, from then on determined not to leave her side. This resolution allows Hester to repeatedly prevent Miss Rosamond from going with the vengeful little girl's ghost, which ultimately saves her life. Hester's character is thus a foil for the cruel Miss Grace and the old lord, her self-sacrifice and unyielding loyalty contrasting with the Furnivalls' neglect and mistreatment of one another.

Miss Rosamond – Miss Rosamond is the little girl whom Hester, the titular "old nurse," cared for and is now telling a story about. In Hester's story, Miss Rosemond is only four or five when her mother and father die, and she's sent to live with wealthy relatives, the Furnivalls, at Manor House. While Miss Rosamond initially finds Manor House to be a daunting place, her lively spirit and energy bring the place to life. Even Miss Grace Furnivall (the lady of Manor House) and Mrs. Stark (her maid) seem heartened by Miss Rosamond's presence, in spite of their usual coldness. One night when Hester has gone to church, the ghosts of Miss Maude and the little girl vengefully lure Miss Rosamond out into the snow. When Miss Rosamond explains what happened, Hester does not believe her, but Miss Rosamond insists it is the truth. The next time she sees the little girl, Hester is with her and prevents Miss Rosamond from going to her. This throws Miss Rosamond into a fit, furious that Hester will not let her help the little girl, whose cries only she can hear. Even when Hester tries to teach her to pray, all she ever hears is the little girl's wailing. Her concern for the little girl is a testament to her kindness and compassion, virtues that she seems to have learned from Hester, who is unfailingly devoted to Miss Rosamond. Indeed, Hester has to pin her down when all of the ghosts appear at the end of the story, willing to hurt Miss Rosamond if it means keeping her safe from the ghosts. Miss Rosamond survives Manor House thanks to

Hester, and she goes on to have the children, who are the audience of Hester's story.

Miss Grace Furnivall – Miss Grace Furnivall is the lady of Manor House and Lord Furnivall's great aunt, making her Miss Rosamond's distant relative. She's about 80 years old when Miss Rosamond and Hester come to live at Manor House. Though Miss Grace seems "hard" and "sad," Miss Rosamond's company seems to bring her joy. In her youth, Miss Grace and her sister, Miss Maude, fell in love with the same man (the foreigner). Their father, the old lord, always praised Miss Maude as being more beautiful than Miss Grace. Both of these points of conflict fueled jealousy and coldness between the sisters, causing Miss Grace to retreat to the west wing of the Manor House with her maid, Mrs. Stark, whom she was always closer to than to her own sister. As the rumor goes, Miss Maude finally revealed to Miss Grace that she secretly married the foreigner. Upon discovering the little girl (Miss Maude and the foreigner's daughter) hidden in **the east wing**, Miss Grace was blinded by jealousy and hatred and told the old lord about Miss Maude's secrets. She stood by silently as the old lord threw Miss Maude and the little girl out into the snow, where they froze to death. Miss Grace regrets this moment for the rest of her life, especially as her family members' ghosts return to haunt the house. At the end of the story, when the old lord, Miss Maude, and the little girl's ghosts emerge to reenact the night Miss Maude and her daughter died, Miss Grace begs for the ghost of her father to spare the little girl. But she is forced to face the reality that some mistakes can't be fixed, and she retires to her room for the rest of her life, muttering "Alas! alas! what is done in youth can never be undone in age! What is done in youth can never be undone in age!" Her fate thus serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of pride and of making destructive decisions that can't be "undone."

Miss Maude Furnivall – The eldest daughter of the old lord, Miss Maude Furnivall was "Miss Furnivall" by right and was known to sterner and more beautiful than her younger sister, Miss Grace Furnivall. Miss Maude is dead in the story's present, but Hester learns about her from Dorothy. Determined to triumph over her sister in a race for the same man's love, Miss Maude married the foreigner in secret and gave birth to his daughter (the little girl). Miss Maude loved this girl dearly, and after the foreigner abandoned them, she decided to sneak her daughter into Manor House's **east wing** without telling Miss Grace and the old lord. However, in her determination to best her sister, Miss Maude revealed that she married the foreigner, and Miss Grace found out about the little girl and told the old lord. Miss Maude's disobedience infuriated the old lord, and he kicked both Miss Maude and the little girl out of the house. They both froze to death and have since returned as ghosts, seeking revenge on those who betrayed and abandoned them by trying to lure Miss Rosamond out into the snow for a similar fate.

The Old Lord – The old lord was Miss Maude Furnivall and Miss Grace Furnivall’s father. He is dead in the story’s present, but Hester learns about him from Dorothy. The old lord was excessively proud and didn’t think any men were worthy of his daughters’ hands in marriage. Though he had a reputation for violence and sternness, the old lord also loved music and invited a foreign musician to play at Manor House. The foreigner introduced him to **the organ**, which the old lord became so engrossed in that he failed to notice the foreigner flirting with both of his daughters. When he discovered Miss Maude’s secret marriage to the foreigner and their hidden daughter (the little girl), he drove them from **the east wing**, striking the little girl with his crutch and leaving them both to die outside in the **cold**. After this cruelty, the old lord never played the organ again. In the story’s present, though, his ghost haunts Manor House, and he comes back to play the destroyed instrument on stormy winter nights, like the one on which he sentenced his daughter and granddaughter to death.

The Little Girl – The little girl was Miss Maude Furnivall and the foreigner’s daughter. She died when the old lord discovered her secretly living in **the east wing** of Manor House and banished Miss Maude and the little girl, causing them to die out in the **cold**. In the story’s present, the little girl is a ghost who haunts Manor House, crying outside in the snow and demanding to be let into the house. At one point in the story, she lures Miss Rosamond to join her out in the cold, but Hester saves Miss Rosamond before she can suffer the same fate as the little girl. Miss Grace Furnivall sees the vengeful ghost as evil—but when the ghosts emerge to reenact the night Miss Maude and the little girl died, Miss Grace begs the old lord to have mercy on the innocent child.

The Foreigner – Many years before the story takes place, the old lord invited the foreign musician to Manor House to share his musical gift. While there, he got the old lord hooked on playing **the organ** and took advantage of the old lord’s distraction to flirt with both Miss Maude Furnivall and Miss Grace Furnivall, returning to Manor House annually for short visits. He married Miss Maude in secret, and they had a daughter (the little girl). However, the foreigner continued to flirt with Miss Grace, claiming it was only to conceal his marriage to Miss Maude. This behavior inspired vicious jealousy between the sisters, and the foreigner grew tired of their hostility and chose to abandon his wife and daughter.

Miss Rosamond’s Mother – Miss Rosamond’s mother is a dedicated and loving mother who adores her daughter. She first meets Hester when she is still pregnant with Miss Rosamond and is in search of a nursemaid. However, when Miss Rosamond is born, her mother is so attentive that Hester has very little to do. Miss Rosamond’s mother is the granddaughter of a Lord Furnivall of Northumberland (not to be confused with her cousin, who is also called Lord Furnivall) and grew up with that family. Because of this, Hester labels Miss Rosamond’s

mother as “a real born lady.” It was rumored that Lord Furnivall loved Miss Rosamond’s mother, but she ignored his interest, knowing his father would never approve. Hester finds these rumors doubtful. Miss Rosamond’s mother is pregnant with a second child when her husband dies, and this tragedy causes Miss Rosamond’s mother to be bedridden. Her second child is stillborn, and she clings to life only long enough to have the baby laid on her chest. On her death bed, Miss Rosamond’s mother asks Hester never to leave Miss Rosamond, a promise Hester is happy to make.

Lord Furnivall – Lord Furnivall is Miss Grace Furnivall’s great-nephew and Miss Rosamond’s mother’s cousin. He arrives upon Miss Rosamond’s mother’s death to handle affairs. He is stern and proud, just like all the Lord Furnivalls before him were known to be. It’s rumored that he loved Miss Rosamond’s mother, but that she ignored his interest, knowing his father would never approve. Hester doubts these rumors considering his lack of interest in Miss Rosamond. Either way, he never married. Lord Furnivall sends one of his servants to help Hester and Miss Rosamond with the move to Manor House; it is also one of his servants who possesses the only key to the house’s **east wing**.

Mrs. Stark – Mrs. Stark has been Miss Grace Furnivall’s maid since her youth, and because of this, she is more like a sister and friend to Miss Grace than a part of the staff. As old women in the story’s present, they spend most of their days working on a giant piece of tapestry together. Hester observes that Mrs. Stark looks like she has never loved anyone, except for Miss Grace, whom she also belittles at times. Mrs. Stark tries to keep Miss Grace’s regrets about the past at bay, ignoring her comments about a long winter ahead and hurrying Hester out of the room when Miss Grace has a meltdown about Miss Rosamond interacting with the little girl’s ghost out in the snow. Many years ago, Mrs. Stark was allegedly seen spying in **the east wing** before the little girl’s existence was revealed to the old lord, which ultimately resulted in Miss Maude and the little girl’s deaths.

Dorothy – A member of the staff at Manor House and James’s wife, Dorothy is a close friend to Hester and a doting caregiver to Miss Rosamond. Dorothy is from Westmorland like Hester, and James looks down on her for only having ever lived on a farm before coming to Manor House. Dorothy is well-educated in the history of the house and is the one who informs Hester about Miss Maude Furnivall and, eventually, the dark story of Miss Maude and the little girl’s deaths.

James – James is a staff member at Manor House and Dorothy’s husband. He looks down on Dorothy for having grown up on a farm, while he has spent his entire life living with the Furnivalls. James coldly dismisses Hester’s questions regarding the sound of **the organ** playing in the house, attempting to avoid the unnerving subject.

Agnes – Agnes is James and Dorothy’s servant. Hester sees Agnes as below her and only engages with her when she is unable to get information out of Dorothy about **the organ**. Unlike Dorothy, Agnes knows bits of the rumors but none of the specifics regarding the Furnivalls’ family tree and the origins of the ghosts that haunt Manor House.

TERMS

The Fells – Fells are mountainous, barren terrains in the countryside. “The Fells” referenced in “The Old Nurse’s Story” most often refer to the Cumberland Fells, though **Hester** also mentions that **Miss Rosamond**’s father’s parish is scattered throughout the Westmorland Fells.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MISTAKES AND REGRET

“The Old Nurse’s Story” suggests that mistakes tend to lead to more mistakes, and that irreversible choices can result in a lifetime of regret. The

Furnivalls, the family that the story centers on, each carry their own irreversible and haunting mistake. The old lord (the family’s patriarch) makes the initial mistake of refusing to let his daughters marry, believing that no men are good enough for them. Since his daughters, Miss Maude and Miss Grace, are so limited in their prospects, they both fall in love with the same foreign musician, who proves to be an untrustworthy person. He and Miss Maude secretly marry and have a little girl, but he continues flirting with Miss Grace and eventually abandons both sisters and his daughter. In this way, the old lord makes a mistake that leads Miss Maude to make a mistake of her own: rushing into marriage with a man who quickly betrays her trust. She then puts herself and her daughter at risk when she can’t resist competing with her sister, revealing her secret marriage to Miss Grace in order to prove that she won. This is another irreversible mistake, as Miss Grace soon discovers Maude’s daughter hidden in the **east wing** of Manor House (the Furnivalls’ home)—and out of jealousy and hurt pride, she reports her findings to the old lord.

But Miss Grace comes to regret this action for the rest of her life, as tattling on her sister leads the old lord to make the most devastating mistake of all: sending Miss Maude and the little girl out into the snow as punishment for Miss Maude’s lies, causing both of them to freeze to death. The Furnivall family’s

deadly chain of mistakes reflects the idea that destructive choices tend to snowball and influence others to make their own poor choices. In the story’s present, many decades after this night, the old lord, Miss Maude, and the little girl’s ghosts continue to haunt Manor House. The ghosts represent the idea that mistakes never fully go away—they continue to haunt the people who make them, just as a ghost haunts a house. And indeed, Miss Grace’s betrayal still haunts her in old age: she looks “hard” and “sad,” as though still plagued with regret. And in the final scene of the story, as the house’s ghosts reenact the night when Miss Maude and her daughter died, Miss Grace cries out for the old lord to spare the child. But at that exact moment, a vision of the young Miss Grace joins the scene and does nothing to help her sister and niece. Despite Miss Grace’s regret for betraying her sister, then, she cannot change the past. Instead, it plays out exactly the same. Finally, having been forced to face the mistake that’s haunted her for so long, Miss Grace has a nervous breakdown, retiring to her room for the rest of her life and muttering “Alas! alas! what is done in can never be undone in age!” Miss Grace’s fate serves as a moral for the reader, entreating them to make careful choices lest they end up like her, destroyed by regret over mistakes that they can’t fix.



WEALTH AND HAPPINESS

“The Old Nurse’s Story” centers on the 18-year-old nursemaid Hester and her charge, Miss Rosamond, whose mother and father die when Miss Rosamond

is a young child. After their deaths, Hester is almost entirely responsible for Miss Rosamond, and the girls are sent to live with the Furnivalls (Miss Rosamond’s wealthy relatives) at Manor House, their lavish home. As Hester and Miss Rosamond enter the Furnivalls’ grand and exclusive world, it becomes apparent that wealth does not guarantee happiness: Manor House looks luxurious, but its residents, Miss Grace Furnivall and her maid Miss Stark, are miserable. Miss Grace is “hard” and “sad,” and Mrs. Stark is “cold and grey, and stony as if she had never loved or cared for any one.” For all the Furnivalls’ wealth, Miss Grace and her maid don’t appear to lead happy or fulfilling lives—they merely project an image of success and contentment through the house. Yet this idea of false appearances extends to the home as well: only Manor House’s front entrance is manicured and free of weeds, while the other sides of the house are neglected and overgrown. This signals that the aim is not to preserve the home for those who live there, but instead to put forward a certain grand look for those visiting—and perhaps to hide a darker truth.

In fact, the entire **east wing** of the house is closed off, and it’s eventually revealed that this is because the ghosts of Miss Grace’s dead family members—her father the old lord, her sister Miss Maude, and Miss Maude’s little girl—haunt this part of Manor House. Miss Maude and her daughter died many

years ago because Miss Grace and Mrs. Stark revealed Miss Maude's secret marriage and child to the old lord, who cast Miss Maude and the little girl out in the snow as punishment, causing them to freeze to death. Rather than admit their dark past and the wrongs they committed, Miss Grace and Miss Stark emotionally and physically compartmentalize this part of their lives, literally shutting away their painful memories in the east wing and projecting an image of luxury and comfort that obscures the truth.

But Hester and Miss Rosamond are not fooled by Manor House's outer shell; they feel unwelcome as soon as they step across the threshold. In the end, it is precisely Hester and Miss Rosamond who are able to bring a glimmer of happiness to the home, not by indulging in its wealth but by fostering relationships. What transforms Manor House into a joyful place is the people in it: upon Hester and Miss Rosamond's arrival, James and Dorothy (Manor House staff members) make them feel safe in the looming mansion. And ultimately it is Miss Rosamond, "fluttering" through the house "like a bird," who brings all of the characters happiness. This is precisely why Hester wants to take Miss Rosamond away from Manor House when the ghosts try to lure her out into the snow, knowing that by choosing to remain in that house is to choose an easy lifestyle at the risk of losing Miss Rosamond. In the end, Hester would rather live modestly than put the little girl who she loves (and who is a source of real happiness) at risk.



GENDER

"The Old Nurse's Story" is set in the early 19th century, when women generally had fewer rights and societal privileges than men, and female characters were rarely protagonists or narrators in literature. Yet the story's female author, Elizabeth Gaskell, chooses to keep the male characters almost entirely out of sight throughout this story, which can be read as a subversion of how women at this time (both real and fictional) were often treated. In doing so, Gaskell implies that women's virtues tend to be underappreciated, and that women's lives are attention-worthy. While there are a few significant men in the story that the female narrator, Hester (the titular "old nurse"), tells her former charge Miss Rosamond's children, these characters are mostly relegated to the background. Miss Rosamond's father, for example, is never referred to by name and spends most of his time traveling away from his family. Lord Furnivall and his servant also drop into the story for a short while to facilitate Hester and Miss Rosamond's transfer to Manor House after Miss Rosamond's father and mother die, but they quickly disappear after that. James (a Manor House staff member) also plays a much less significant role in the story than his wife, Dorothy. Finally, the old lord who haunts the Manor House quite literally goes unseen, as a ghost playing the **organ**. In this way, the men in the story take on the passive role that women

more commonly take on in Victorian literature.

This reversal of gender stereotypes is meant to highlight how female characters (and indeed real-life women) tend to be brushed off or dominated by men. Hester, for instance, is worried that her listeners are disinterested in aspects of her personal story, reflecting the fact that significant moments in women's lives weren't always considered attention-worthy in this time period. Moreover, the old lord controls his daughters, Miss Grace Furnivall and Miss Maude Furnivall, by forbidding them to marry. But by keeping the focus on the story's female characters, Gaskell is able to elevate these women's experiences and character traits. Miss Rosamond's mother, for one, is affectionate and attentive to both Miss Rosamond and her stillborn child. Hester, too, is devoted and loyal to Miss Rosamond, a child who falls almost entirely into her care only after a few years of knowing the family. Even Miss Maude Furnivall, who at times seems to be a harsh woman, shows strength and selflessness when she defies her father in an attempt to protect her daughter (the little girl). All in all, these women are strong and determined yet flawed characters, and by allowing them to dominate the page, Gaskell encourages the reader to appreciate them in their full form.



PRIDE

"The Old Nurse's Story" suggests that unrestrained pride can lead to the loss of what one cares about most. Throughout the story, the Furnivall family's pride spreads from one family member to the next. First, The old lord refuses to allow his daughters to marry because he has deemed them too beautiful to find any man deserving of them and doesn't want anyone but himself to possess them. He's especially proud of his eldest daughter, Miss Maude Furnivall's, beauty, often emphasizing it as being even greater than her sister, Miss Grace Furnivall's. But the old lord's pride backfires in two ways: by inspiring jealousy between the sisters and by forcing them to seek out love in secret. These factors lead to both sisters pursuing the same man, the foreigner, with Miss Maude ultimately marrying him and having a daughter (the little girl) with him in secret. Miss Grace eventually finds out this secret, and her inability to let go of her pride leads her to tell the old lord about the secret marriage and the little girl. The old lord then casts Miss Maude and the little girl out into the snow—his own pride wounded by Miss Maude's disobedience—which effectively sentences them to death. The old lord dies soon after (it's implied that his daughter and granddaughter's deaths hasten his own), and years later, Miss Grace is driven mad by guilt when she sees Miss Maude and the little girl's ghosts. This tragic outcome shows how pride can hurt (or even kill) other people if left unchecked, and how the resultant guilt can eat away at prideful people in turn.

Hester's pride also features intermittently in the story. As the narrator of "The Old Nurse's Story," she chooses to include her

schoolteacher's praise, along with every other compliment she receives. She is clearly proud to be Miss Rosamond's nursemaid and is flattered that Miss Rosamond's mother trusts her with her child. This pride takes a turn for the worse, though, as she enjoys how people look at her when she thinks she and Miss Rosamond going to live in Northumberland after Miss Rosamond's mother and father die. But it is precisely this pride that confuses her about where they're headed, assuming she's destined for Northumberland only to end up at Manor House, which is run-down and dangerous because of the ghosts who inhabit it and try to lure Miss Rosamond out into the **cold**. Unlike the Furnivalls, however, Hester is able to keep her pride in check. She is thus able to focus entirely on keeping Miss Rosamond safe, ultimately saving her life by preventing her from succumbing to the same fate as Miss Maude and the little girl.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE EAST WING

The east wing of Manor House represents the burden of regret and people's inability to avoid facing their past mistakes. The east wing is where Miss Maude Furnivall lived and secretly raised her daughter (the little girl) until the old lord found out and threw them out of the house into the snow. They consequently died of exposure, and their deaths brought a cloud of guilt over Manor House for the old lord, the staff, and especially Miss Grace Furnivall (the one who told the old lord about her sister's secret marriage and child). In the story's present, the old lord, Miss Maude, and the little girl's ghosts haunt the east wing, but Miss Grace tries to pretend nothing ever happened by locking the door to the east wing and keeping the key out of the house with Lord Furnivall's staff. But the east wing always looms at the other end of the hall, a constant reminder of what Miss Grace did and cannot forget.

The locked door is not enough to keep Miss Grace's secrets in, as Miss Maude and the little girl's ghosts eventually venture out, trying to lure Miss Rosamond into a reenactment of their own fate and slowly bringing Hester closer to knowing the truth of the Furnivalls' dark past. At the end of the story, the door to the east wing finally bursts open, revealing Miss Grace's deadly mistake in full: the ghosts reenact the night Miss Maude and the little girl died, while a supernatural vision of the Miss Grace's younger self silently looks on. The east wing thus represents the fact that despite Miss Grace's efforts to compartmentalize her regret—both emotionally and literally, by closing off the east wing—she cannot ignore her past mistakes forever.



THE ORGAN

The old lord's organ symbolizes the consequences of neglecting one's relationships, and the regret that comes with such neglect. When the old lord was alive, the organ functioned as a distraction, and his dedication to the instrument allowed for the foreigner to pursue and eventually abandon both Miss Maude Furnivall and Miss Grace Furnivall without the old lord knowing. It also occupied his mind as his house quietly became divided, his daughters coming to hate each other and retreating into their respective wings. Upon discovering that Miss Maude's secret child (the little girl) had been living in his house without him knowing it, he condemns his daughter and granddaughter to death by forcing them out into the snow. Until his own death, he never plays the organ again, giving up what distracted and infuriated him but also giving up something he loved, just as he did when he banished Miss Maude.

In the story's present, the old lord is a ghost and has returned to playing his organ. Now, however, he plays as an expression of regret and a warning to others, to avoid repeating his mistakes and keep a close eye on the people one cares about. He plays louder and louder as the anniversary of Miss Maude and the little girl's deaths approaches, knowing that their ghosts are trying to hurt Miss Rosamond, and that Hester (Miss Rosamond's nursemaid) becoming inattentive could mean Miss Rosamond's demise. This is seen when the old lord plays loudly to snap Hester out of her trance when she first sees the little girls' ghost, causing her to realize that Miss Rosamond is in danger and allowing her to intervene in time to keep Miss Rosamond from letting the ghost in. Thus, while the organ represented neglect while the old lord was alive, it carries a warning against inattentiveness in his afterlife.



HEAT AND COLD

Throughout "The Old Nurse's Story," heat (most often from lit fireplaces) symbolizes the comfort of love and family, in contrast to the cold, which symbolizes betrayal and broken relationships. Passages in which a fireplace is lit are defined by warmth and comfort. For example, Hester and Miss Rosamond first feel welcome at Manor House when Hester sees the fires already lit for them in their bedrooms. Furthermore, the west drawing room has a lit fireplace, and its coziness contrasts with the gloomy main hall, which serves as a transition between the Manor House's west wing and the cold, neglected **east wing** that's haunted by the old lord, Miss Maude, and the little girl's ghosts.

On the other hand, moments of cruelty and betrayal in the story are consistently labelled as "cold." For instance, in the past, Miss Grace and Miss Maude grew "cold" to each other, which led them to hurt each other (by competing for the foreigner's affections). Then, when Miss Grace betrayed Miss

Maude's trust and told the old lord about Miss Maude's secret marriage and child, the old lord banished them out into snow, and Miss Maude and the little girl die in the cold. Finally, the Manor House first appears to be a "dark and gloomy" place because the fireplace on the east side of the hall is unlit—and even when it is lit, the fire gives off no heat. This fireplace in particular signals the possibility of love in Manor House, which was lost thanks to Miss Grace and the old lord's cruelty. It is possible for this central fireplace to be lit, to make Manor House a warm and comforting place at its core. But instead, it remains empty for most of the story, only lit during the ghosts' reenactment of Miss Maude and her daughter's banishment—and its cold flame is a reminder of the lack of love and familial compassion in that moment.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Penguin Book of Ghost Stories* published in 2010.

The Old Nurse's Story Quotes

☞ I thought I should like nothing better than to serve the pretty, young lady, who was blushing as deep as I was [...] However, I see you don't care so much for this part of my story, as for what you think is to come, so I'll tell you at once. [...] To be sure, I had little enough to do with her when she came, for she was never out of her mother's arms [...] and proud enough was I sometimes when missis trusted her to me.

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), Miss Rosamond's Mother, Miss Rosamond, The Old Lord, Miss Grace Furnivall, Miss Maude Furnivall

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Hester explains to Miss Rosamond's children how she came to be Miss Rosamond's nursemaid. Miss Rosamond's mother met Hester at the village school, and from then on, they were inseparable. Their mutual blushing signals the women's humility despite their class differences—they are free from the extreme pride that afflicts other characters in the story (the old lord, Miss Grace, and Miss Maude). Hester is only proud that Miss Rosamond trusts her to care for Miss Rosamond, a pride that is less about her own ego and more a gesture to the honor and importance of her duties.

This quotation highlights the importance of women and the work they do as mothers or caretakers—a radical choice given that most stories written at this time (the mid-19th century) centered on male protagonists and narrators. This is further emphasized when placed in contrast with Hester's audience's disinterest. In directly labelling aspects of her own story that are crucial to the main characters' backgrounds as unworthy of a listener's attention, Hester highlights how women's lives and efforts at this time were often brushed aside and disregarded.

☞ My master came home from one of his long rides, wet, and tired, and took the fever he died of; and then she never held up her head again, but lived just to see her dead baby, and have it laid on her breast before she sighed away her life. My mistress had asked me, on her death-bed, never to leave Miss Rosamond; but if she had never spoken a word, I would have gone with the little child to the end of the world.

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), Miss Rosamond's Mother, Miss Rosamond

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Hester is explaining how both of Miss Rosamond's parents died within a few weeks of each other when she was only four or five, leaving her almost entirely in Hester's care. Miss Rosamond's father and his death are characterized by his absence from the family's home and the story. This highlights the story's intentional focus on female characters, a choice that was uncommon in the 1800s when "The Old Nurse's Story" was set and published. It also points to the general separation between designated male and female worlds in the early 19th century, with most men working outside the home and most women doing domestic work inside the home.

In comparison to the abruptness of her father's death, Hester describes Miss Rosamond's mother's decline in detail and with admiration for her strength and determination to fulfill her duties as a mother. Furthermore, while Miss Rosamond's mother clung onto life long enough to hold her stillborn child and ensure Miss Rosamond's safety, her father died without a note of connection to his children or even his wife. In this context, the role of

mothers, nurses, and women in general is praised and portrayed as crucially important, if not heroic.

☝ But somehow it was settled that Miss Rosamond and me were to go to Furnivall Manor House, in Northumberland [...] I was well pleased that all the folks in the Dale should stare and admire, when they heard I was going to be young lady's maid at my Lord Furnivall's at Furnivall Manor [...] But I made a mistake in thinking we were to go and live where my lord did.

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), Miss Rosamond, Lord Furnivall, Miss Rosamond's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Following the death of Miss Rosamond's mother and father, Lord Furnivall (the mother's cousin) arrives to handle her parents' affairs and relocate Miss Rosamond and Hester. Rather proud of her position as Miss Rosamond's nursemaid, Hester makes the mistake of assuming that she and Miss Rosamond are of any importance to Lord Furnivall.

Her assumption that they will go to live in the historic Furnivall home is one drawn from her own pride, as well as excitement at the possibility of entering the Furnivalls' wealthy and prestigious world. This is especially captured in how she revels in the townfolks' reactions, feeling admired and envied for the first time in her life. Her pride has shifted from the importance of her work as a nursemaid to a pride in her association with upper-class people. In retrospect, Hester acknowledges that she "made a mistake" in assuming where she'd be living, suggesting that her pride clouded her ability to judge the situation accurately.

Indeed, Lord Furnivall isn't interested in Hester and Miss Rosamond's lives, quickly discarding them at his great aunt's house (Manor House) rather than having Miss Rosamond raised in her mother's childhood home. The way he treats them is an example of how female characters (and real-life women) were often brushed off and treated as unimportant at this time, a reality that the story tries to subvert with its continued focus on Hester and Miss Rosamond's experiences.

☝ No one seemed to take much charge of the place [...] Only in front of the house all was clear. The great oval drive was without a weed [...] For the house, although it was so desolate, was even grander than I expected.

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), Miss Rosamond

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation captures Hester's initial reaction to Manor House when she and Miss Rosamond arrive. While the house is "grander" than she expected, Hester focuses on the neglected aspects of the house's maintenance before admiring its luxuriousness. The house's unwelcoming aspects—its "desolat[ion]" and unkept yard—signal that all the wealth in the world won't make a house into a welcoming home.

Furthermore, the house is engulfed in unrestrained wilderness, except for the front, which is entirely manicured. This betrays that the Furnivalls prioritize superficial appearances over ensuring that their home is genuinely beautiful and welcoming. The word "desolate" in Hester's description signals both the unhappiness of Manor House's residents and the dismal emptiness that defines the house. As Hester and Miss Rosamond enter this environment, the question is presented of whether they will bring life and joy to this place or be sucked into the misery that pervades it.

☝ 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.

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), Miss Rosamond

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

As Hester narrates her arrival to Manor House, she includes this description of a garden that is never mentioned again in the story. By including it, she provides a

glimpse at both Manor House's past and its possible future. The possibility of a happy garden in spite of all the dark wilderness surrounding this house and its history points to a happier time, and the possibility that Hester and Miss Rosamond just might be happy here. But at the same time, the fact that few flowers can grow at the time of their arrival points to the unlikelihood of such an outcome. Just as it took effort to establish the garden, Hester and Miss Rosamond will have to carve out a small haven in their ominous environment.

Furthermore, the garden is marked as a distinctly feminine environment, in that it belonged to some previous "old Lady Furnivall" who wanted to make something beautiful in an otherwise untamed and somewhat threatening environment. Thus, the story defines the important task of bringing joy to a home as a definitively female responsibility.

☛ At one end of the hall, was a great fireplace, as large as the sides of the houses in my country [...] At the opposite end of the hall, to the left as you went in—on the western side—was an organ built into the wall, and so large that it filled up the best part of that end. Beyond it, on the same side, was a door; and opposite, on each side of the fire-place, were also doors leading to the east front; but those I never went through as long as I stayed in the house, so I can't tell you what lay beyond. The afternoon was closing in and the hall, which had no fire lighted in it, looked dark and gloomy, but we did not stay there a moment.

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), Miss Rosamond, The Old Lord

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This is Hester's description of the main hall in Manor House as she and Miss Rosamond enter for the first time. From the very introduction of the house, it is clearly divided into east and west. The east side is marked by an unlit fireplace, which unnerves Hester. The lack of fire defines not only the east wing, but also this main hall at the center of the house, as cold and unwelcoming. Furthermore, the fact that this fireplace (which lacks warmth) is the size of a house in Hester's modest village emphasizes that the mere presence of wealth does not guarantee happiness. Despite the

Furnivalls' prestige, even their fireplace lacks the joy and warmth of a loving home.

Meanwhile, the west side of the room is dominated by an enormous organ, which demands attention simply because of its size. As it mirrors the fireplace, the reader is led to wonder whether it reflects the same coldness or if it is a source of warmth, a question that is never quite answered. The reader eventually learns that the organ, which belonged to the old lord who ignored his daughters to play the instrument, represents a distraction from one's loved ones but also functions as a warning bell for when attention is most necessary.

The presence of the doors on either end of the hall signals the existence of rooms on both sides of the house. But Hester's lack of knowledge regarding the east side quickly frames it as a looming unknown that must eventually be addressed. Hester and Miss Rosamond are hurried out of this hall into the safety of the west wing, further emphasizing that something ominous is lurking on the east side.

☛ [Agnes] and me, and James and Dorothy, with Miss Furnivall and Mrs. Stark, made up the family; always remembering my sweet little Miss Rosamond! I used to wonder what they had done before she came, they thought so much of her now. Kitchen and drawing-room, it was all the same. The hard, sad Miss Furnivall, and the cold Mrs. Stark, looked pleased when she came fluttering in like a bird [...] I am sure, they were sorry many a time when she flitted away into the kitchen, though they were too proud to ask her to stay with them.

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), Miss Rosamond, Miss Grace Furnivall, Mrs. Stark

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis



As Hester and Miss Rosamond settle into their new lives at Manor House, Hester catalogues the makeshift family they've formed since joining Miss Grace Furnivall and all of the staff. Notably, this "family" crosses class boundaries, thanks to Miss Rosamond functioning as their common center point. Upon their arrival, the people in Manor House



were clearly organized by rank and wealth. But as Miss Rosamond runs through the house, spreading joy, that emphasis on class seems to slip away as they are united in that one source of happiness. This is a direct representation of the idea that personal connections, rather than wealth, are what create genuine happiness. On its own, the luxurious Manor House was a dreary and daunting place. With Miss Rosamond inside, it seems a bit more like a home than just an oversized, gloomy house.

One thing, however, puts this happiness at risk: pride. Miss Grace's pride stands in the way of what she wants, keeping her from admitting the joy Miss Rosamond brings and thus preventing her from fully enjoying it. While it is of no consequence in this context, this reaction is an early sign of how Miss Grace's pride has influenced her past decisions. Indeed, Hester characterizes Mrs. Stark and Miss Grace as "hard, sad," and "cold," similar to how she first perceived Manor House. There is a part of them both that Miss Rosamond's energy cannot warm.

☛ We could not find her. Miss Furnivall shivered and shook so much, that Mrs. Stark took her back into the warm drawing-room [...] I could see quite plain two little footprints, which might be traced from the hall door, and round the corner of the east wing. I don't know how I got down, but I tugged open the great, stiff hall door; and, throwing the skirt of my gown over head for a cloak, I ran out.

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), Miss Rosamond, Miss Grace Furnivall, Mrs. Stark, Miss Maude Furnivall, The Little Girl, The Old Lord

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis


This quotation takes place after Hester returns from church to find that Miss Rosamond is missing. When she informs Miss Grace and Mrs. Stark of her disappearance, Miss Grace "shivers" and "shakes" so violently that she must be rushed back to the "warm drawing-room." Her reaction foreshadows the eventual revelation that Miss Grace played a role in Miss Maude (her sister) and her niece dying of exposure many years ago. As a result of this tragedy, Miss Grace is haunted by guilt and afraid of the cold.


Miss Grace's reaction here is thus tied to her realization that Miss Rosamond, too, is out in the cold. Her footsteps event point directly to what the cold acts as a reminder of: the east wing, from which the ghosts of Miss Maude, the little girl, and the old lord will emerge at the end of the story. The cold thus not only literally reminds Miss Grace of the past, but it also represents Miss Grace's emotional coldness toward her sister so many years ago. Miss Grace can try to hide in the warmth of the west wing, but it will not hold back the cold, brutal truths that the east wing reminds her of.

On another note, Hester's heroic race into the cold displays her dedication to saving Miss Rosamond. Indeed, she is Miss Rosamond's only hope of survival, emphasizing the power that women wield and the importance of their roles as caretakers.

☛ The old lord summoned all his servants, and told them, with terrible oaths, and words more terrible, that his daughter had disgraced herself, and that he had turned her out of doors,—her, and her child [...] And, all the while, Miss Grace stood by him, white and still as any stone; and when he had ended she heaved a great sigh, as much as to say her work was done, and her end was accomplished. But the old lord never touched his organ again[.]

Related Characters: Dorothy (speaker), The Old Lord, Miss Grace Furnivall, Miss Maude Furnivall, The Little Girl, Hester, The Foreigner

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation comes from Dorothy's explanation of the Furnivalls' dark past to Hester. While the banishment of Miss Maude and the little girl occurred out of view, the old lord's explanation of the event identifies his motives behind such a cruel act: his pride. He was so proud of the image he has created and demanded of his daughters that he would rather cast out his favorite daughter and have her (and her daughter) die in the cold than accept that she undermined his authority by secretly getting married and having a child.



Miss Grace's presence further emphasizes the role of pride in Miss Maude and her daughter's demise: Miss Grace's pride was injured when she found out that her sister had


beaten her in their competition for the foreigner's affections. So, she told her father that Miss Maude secretly got married to the foreigner and had a child against the old lord's wishes, which led him to cast out Miss Maude and the little girl. Miss Grace's reaction at the end of her father's declaration signals a sense of triumph but a distinct lack of consideration for what she's actually done. Her goal was simply to get revenge—it seems unlikely that her final intention was to get her sister and her niece killed. Either way, she comes to regret this decision for the rest of her life, and it quite literally comes back to haunt her in the story's present.

That the old lord quit playing his organ hints at a similar feeling of regret or grief, both in recognizing the neglect of his family that his obsession with the organ caused and by choosing to abandon something he loves. Both the old lord and Miss Maude's actions clearly caused them misery and a regret over irreversible mistakes. If only they had been more attentive of one another other and fought off their pride, the little girl could have brought life to Manor House in the same way that Miss Rosamond does in the present.

“But that was not what killed it,” said Dorothy; “it was the frost and the cold; —every wild creature was in its hole, and every beast in its fold,—while the child and its mother were turned out to wander on the Fells! And now you know all! and I wonder if you are less frightened now?”

Related Characters: Dorothy (speaker), Miss Maude Furnivall, The Little Girl, Miss Grace Furnivall, Mrs. Stark, Miss Rosamond, The Old Lord

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis


After concluding her explanation of Miss Maude and the little girl's demise, Dorothy adds this final observation that emphasizes how unnatural it was for the mother and daughter to be forced out into the winter storm. Unlike other creatures kept warm and safe by their homes, Miss Maude and the little girl were forced from Manor House into the snow. Dorothy, however, does not specify that the cold that killed them was that of the outdoors. An equally valid claim is that their own family's emotional coldness is what killed them both. Where the Furnivalls could have


found joy in the little girl as the current occupants of Manor House do in Miss Rosamond, they were instead consumed by pride and envy until they sacrificed their only chance at happiness to the cold.

As Dorothy's final question indicates, Hester now has many reasons to be afraid. The most obvious reason for fear is the fact that the house is haunted by the vengeful ghosts of Miss Maude, the little girl, and the old lord. But Hester must also fret over the threat that the living family members, namely Miss Grace and Mrs. Stark, pose to Miss Rosamond. With possible sources of cruelty on all sides, Hester must be vigilant about Miss Rosamond's safety to ensure that she does not face the same fate as the little girl.

“All at once, the east door gave way with a thundering crash, as if torn open in a violent passion, and there came into that broad and mysterious light, the figure of a tall, old man, with grey hair and gleaming eyes. He drove before him, with many a relentless gesture of abhorrence, a stern and beautiful woman, with a little child clinging to her dress.

Related Characters: Hester (speaker), The Old Lord, Miss Maude Furnivall, Miss Grace Furnivall, Mrs. Stark, Miss Rosamond, The Little Girl

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis


This moment occurs right after Miss Grace, Mrs. Stark, Miss Rosamond, and Hester all rush from the warmth of the west drawing room to the main hall in pursuit of loud cries. Ever since the night many years ago when the old lord turned out Miss Maude and the little girl to die in the cold, the east wing has been kept firmly locked. It's significant that this part of the house is where Miss Maude retreated to when she and Miss Grace were fighting, as this detail symbolically links her to this half of the house. It's as if Miss Grace hopes that by keeping this wing locked, she can literally compartmentalize her guilt over her sister's death. The east wing's door bursting open, however, sends a clear message that secrets cannot be hidden away and forgotten, and that everyone must face their past mistakes eventually.


In excluding the names of the old lord, Miss Maude, and the little girl in this scene (instead referring to them as the “old

man,” “beautiful woman,” and “little child”), the story’s message seems more generic. This stylistic choice allows this terrifying moment to serve as a message for all families, rather than just this one. It paints a picture of how misguided pride can lead us astray and inspire cruelty even toward those we love most. The image is violent and brutal, allowing the true evil of the crime to take its final form in this scene.

●● It was the likeness of Miss Furnivall in her youth; and the terrible phantoms moved on, regardless of old Miss Furnivall’s wild entreaty, and the uplifted crutch fell on the right shoulder of the little child, and the younger sister looked on, stony and deadly serene. But at that moment, the dim lights, and the fire that gave no heat, went out of themselves, and Miss Furnivall lay at our feet stricken down by the palsy—death—stricken. 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!”

Related Characters: Hester, Miss Grace Furnivall (speaker), The Little Girl, The Old Lord, Miss Maude Furnivall

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

This passage closes the ghosts’ reenactment of Miss Maude and the little girl’s expulsion from Manor House by revealing the active role that Miss Grace had in convincing the old lord to cast them out into the cold to die. This moment creates a contrast between the present Miss Grace, begging for the child to be spared, and her past self, watching on mercilessly as the little girl was struck. This perfectly captures Miss Grace’s regret for her past actions and the irreversibility of the choices she made in the heat of injured pride and a desire for revenge.

As the fire and the candles all go out, the present Manor House embodies the cold, unloving environment of the past. The literal coldness represents Miss Grace and the old lord’s emotional coldness. Thus, Miss Grace’s punishment for the role she played in her sister and niece’s death is to spend the rest of her life preaching the irreversibility of past mistakes to the house’s walls, as if attempting to have that message infused in Manor House itself to ward off that cruel and deadly cold.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE OLD NURSE'S STORY

The narrator (whose name is eventually revealed to be Hester) is telling some children a story from their mother's youth. Hester reminds them that their mother had no siblings and lost her parents early in life too. Their mother's father was a clergyman in Westmorland, where Hester grew up.

Hester tells the backstory of how she met the children's mother, Miss Rosamond. Before Miss Rosamond is born, Miss Rosamond's mother visits the village school Hester is attending, looking for someone to be a nursemaid for the child she had on the way. The school mistress praises Hester, whose only flaw is having poor parents. The idea of serving Miss Rosamond's mother thrills Hester; both Miss Rosamond's mother and Hester blush when they meet each other. Breaking away from the story, Hester notes that her listeners, Miss Rosamond's children, are not interested in this background information. They are caught up in a later part that interests them more, so she skips ahead.

Back in her story, Hester moves in with Miss Rosamond's mother, and Miss Rosamond is born. Miss Rosamond's mother is very attentive to her new daughter, so Hester has very little to do, but she's extremely proud when Miss Rosamond's mother trusts her to take care of Miss Rosamond. (Hester praises Miss Rosamond as the best baby ever, even better than the children she is telling the story to in the present.)

Miss Rosamond is like her mother, who is "a real born lady," as the granddaughter of a Lord Furnivall of Northumberland. Hester is under the impression that Miss Rosamond's mother doesn't have any siblings and that she grew up with her grandfather's family until she married Miss Rosamond's father, who is the son of a shopkeeper. Now, he's a hardworking clergyman who is clever and manages his large, scattered parish in the Westmorland Fells well.

Given that Hester is telling these children a story, she is presumably the "old nurse" from the title. Most stories of this time period (the mid-19th century) had male protagonists and narrators, so the fact that Hester is female would have been a radical choice. Westmorland was an area in northwest England that Romantic writers poets favored for its scenic lakes and mountains. It's now a part of Cumbria.



Hester's pride peeks through as she includes these praises by her former school mistress in her story. However, this glimmer of pride is quickly counterbalanced by Hester and Miss Rosamond's mother's modesty. Although the school mistress believes Hester's poverty is a flaw, Hester and Miss Rosamond's mutual blushing frames them as equals. At the very least, they clearly respect each other.



Hester's pride in Miss Rosamond as a baby reflects both her admiration for Miss Rosamond's mother and her almost motherly dedication to Miss Rosamond. While Miss Rosamond's father isn't mentioned in these lines, Hester praises Miss Rosamond's mother's dedication and affection for her child. This provides a moment of appreciation for the importance of female caregivers, like mothers and nursemaids. Instead of being brushed aside or quickly summarized, the women's work and care is highlighted.



Being a "real born lady" means coming from a wealthy and prestigious family. However, Hester focuses on Miss Rosamond's humility and dedication to motherhood before recognizing her class, signaling that she thinks good character is more important than class status. The emphasis on Miss Rosamond's mother's lack of siblings and growing up with her grandfather until marriage indicates a possibly lonely life that was defined in terms of her male relatives.



When Miss Rosamond is four or five, both her mother and her father die in the same fortnight. Miss Rosamond's mother and Hester are preparing for Miss Rosamond's mother to give birth to a second child, but then Miss Rosamond's father returns from one of his usual long rides, becomes sick, and dies. Miss Rosamond's mother becomes bedridden and lives only long enough to give birth to a stillborn baby, having the baby laid on her chest before sighing out her last breath. On her death bed, Miss Rosamond's mother asks Hester never to leave Miss Rosamond, which Hester would have done even if she hadn't been asked to.

Miss Rosamond's mother's cousin, another Lord Furnivall, and Mr. Esthwiare, her husband's brother, arrive to sort out the affairs. Hester isn't sure who arranges it, but she believes it is determined that she and Miss Rosamond are going to move to Lord Furnivall's house in Northumberland. Hester interprets Lord Furnivall as implying that Miss Rosamond's mother wanted her child to grow up with his family, and that the addition of a few more people wouldn't even be noticed in such a big house. Hester feels this not the right way to view Miss Rosamond, who she has deemed to be "a sunbeam in any family" and her "bright and pretty pet." But Hester enjoys the way the townsfolk stare in awe now that they've heard that Hester will be Miss Rosamond's maid at Furnivall Manor.

However, Hester realizes she got it wrong: they're not going to live in Furnivall Manor. Apparently, no one has lived there in 50 years. Instead, they will live in Manor House, located at the bottom of the Cumberland Fells, with Miss Grace Furnivall, Lord Furnivall's great aunt. Lord Furnivall emphasizes that this is a "very healthy place" for Miss Rosamond to live for a few years. Hester thinks it is a grand home too; she only regrets Miss Rosamond not getting to grow up where her mother did.

Hester describes Lord Furnivall as a "stern proud man," like all the Lords Furnivall. He only says exactly as much as he has to. There are rumors that he loved Miss Rosamond's mother, but because she knew his father would never approve, she ignored him and married Miss Rosamond's father instead. Hester doesn't know if this is true, but either way, he never married. Furthermore, he doesn't take as much interest in Miss Rosamond as one would expect if he had loved her mother.

Rosamond's father's death is defined by his absence from the home, again relegating him to the background of the story. Her mother, however, survives just long enough to show devotion to both her living and deceased children. It's significant that she hangs on long enough to ensure that Hester takes over her motherly duties. Considering Miss Rosamond's mother's possibly lonely childhood and her inability to give Miss Rosamond a sibling, her insistence on Hester's commitment to Miss Rosamond makes sense. In her mind, it's of the utmost important that her daughter be surrounded by caring people—even more important, it seems, than ensuring that her wealth is passed onto Miss Rosamond.



Here, Hester's focus briefly shifts from devotion to Miss Rosamond to her own pride. She's aware that the townspeople admire her for being Miss Rosamond's caretaker and associating with the wealthy Furnivalls. Yet this passage subtly hints that Hester is mistaken about where she and Miss Rosamond are headed—that they aren't actually going to Furnivall Manor—which suggests that Hester's pride is clouding her judgment. Her descriptions of Miss Rosamond as a "sunbeam" and a "bright and pretty pet" again emphasize what a devoted caretaker Hester is and also symbolically associate Miss Rosamond with warmth and light.



It is more important to Hester that Miss Rosamond grow up surrounded by family than to grow up in a fabulous house. Lord Furnivall, however, sends them off to Manor House to live with extended family whom her mother assumably did not know. The physical and emotional distance between family members, and the fact that the Furnivalls have not lived in the Furnivall Manor for 50 years, implies that the Furnivalls probably have strained relationships with one another. As a result, Miss Rosamond and Hester may need to create their own family rather than depend on blood relations for love and support.



The "stern" pride that characterizes all Lord Furnivalls seems to make them somewhat cold and unsympathetic. However, the rumor of this Lord Furnivall's unrequited love for Miss Rosamond's mother suggests that he was a loving person in the past. Now, while Lord Furnivall has prestige, wealth, and power, he is isolated without a spouse, and his disinterest in Miss Rosamond signals no desire for children.



Lord Furnivall sends one of his servants to help Hester and Miss Rosamond move to Manor House and then return to him that evening, so “so there was no great length of time [...] before he, too, shook [them] off.” Hester is not even 18 years old, and now she and Miss Rosamond are alone in this new place. They both cry on the way there, even though they’re in Lord Furnivall’s fancy carriage, which Hester had previously admired so much. They arrive at Manor House in the late afternoon in September, and Lord Furnivall’s driver tells Hester to wake up Miss Rosamond so she can see the house and park as they approach. Hester dislikes this plan but does as she is told, out of fear of getting in trouble with Lord Furnivall.

The park in front of Manor House is wild, filled with rocks and running water and old, gnarled trees. Hester notes as the house comes into view that “no one seem[s] to take much charge of the place,” with trees and moss overrunning the sides of the house and only the front of the house having been cleaned up. Compared to the other sides, the driveway doesn’t have a single weed, and not a single tree touches the many windows across the front. While the house feels deserted, it is even grander than Hester anticipated. The Fells loom behind the house.

Hester eventually learns that there is a little old-fashioned flower garden to the left side of the house. A door in the west wing opens out onto it. The surrounding woods and wilderness had been dug away to create that small garden for some previous Lady Furnivall. But since then, the trees have overshadowed it once again, and few flowers can grow there.

Upon entering the house, Hester is afraid of getting lost in this place that is so “large, and vast, and grand.” She is amazed by the bronze chandelier, because she has never seen one before. At one end of the hall, there is also a **fireplace** the size of the side of a house in Westmorland. At the other end, to the west, is a built-in **organ** big enough to take up most of that end. There are doors by both the fireplace and the organ. (Hester notes she never ventured into the doors by the fireplace leading to **the east wing**, so she cannot describe what is behind them.) There is no fire in the fireplace, making the hall feel “dark and gloomy.”

Lord Furnivall quickly rids himself of Hester and Miss Rosamond, again characterizing him as rather cold and detached. Notably, Hester’s story remains focused on Hester and Miss Rosamond rather than the male characters who only briefly enter the story. As such, the story subverts the norm of female characters being cast aside (as Lord Furnivall tries to cast Miss Rosamond and Hester aside) by treating the male characters as relatively unimportant instead. Furthermore, neither the carriage that Hester previously admired nor the promise of a large house at the end of their journey brings Hester comfort. She places Miss Rosamond’s comfort and peace above the obligatory admiration of Manor House as they approach.



The contrast between the wilderness outside Manor House and its pristine entrance signals that the Furnivalls are more concerned with maintaining appearances than with actually making the house a beautiful, comfortable place to live. Though the mansion is grand, Hester thinks it feels like no one lives there—it is a massive house but not much of a home. Finally, with the Fells towering in the background and the wilderness concealing much of the house, there is a sense of suspense regarding the unknown and the unseen looming in the distance (or within the house itself).



The withered garden foreshadows that Manor House will be a similarly inhospitable place for Hester and Miss Rosamond to live. Indeed, the girls are like young flowers who must try to grow and survive in this daunting environment. Hester and Miss Rosamond, too, must try to carve out a place for themselves to grow and thrive here. It’s unclear what happened over the years to make the Furnivalls neglect the garden, but the environment subtly implies that the family members may have neglected one another just as they’ve neglected the house’s exterior.



While being sent to Manor House was initially a point of pride for Hester, now the house inspires fear. It is full of markers of wealth that she has never encountered before, but it is also unwelcoming. Indeed, the unlit fireplace and “dark and gloomy” atmosphere signal that Manor House lacks the warmth (both literal and figurative) that one might expect in a home. In this sense, the story begins to suggest that money can’t buy happiness, since even though this house is massive and luxurious, it isn’t particularly pleasant to be in. The fact that an entire wing of the house is closed off is suspicious—this detail will be important later in the story.



A servant arrives and takes Hester and Miss Rosamond through the door by **the organ**, leading them through many small passages to the west drawing-room, where Miss Grace Furnivall is waiting for them. Both Miss Rosamond and Hester cling to each other, feeling afraid and lost. The west drawing-room, however, is cheerful-looking and has a **fire** going.

Hester guesses that Miss Grace Furnivall is almost 80. Miss Grace Furnivall appears to be very observant, most likely because she is nearly deaf. Mrs. Stark, Miss Grace Furnivall's maid, is also there, working on the same great piece of tapestry as Miss Grace Furnivall. Hester thinks Mrs. Stark looks like she has never loved or cared for anyone and supposes she never has, except for Miss Grace Furnivall. Lord Furnivall's servant departs, ignoring Miss Rosamond stretching her hands out to him.

Hester and Miss Rosamond are sent to their rooms, which Hester is glad are close to the kitchen, once again afraid that she "should be lost in that wilderness of a house." Both of their rooms feature lit **fireplaces**. They meet James and his wife, Dorothy, staff members who make them feel comfortable in the house. Hester learns that Dorothy is also from Westmorland, and that gives them something to bond over. James has lived in Lord Furnivall's family almost his whole life and thus looks down on Dorothy a little for only ever having lived on a farm. They have a servant whom they call Agnes. Hester notes that Agnes, James, Dorothy, Miss Grace Furnivall, Mrs. Stark, and herself—and, of course, Miss Rosamond—"ma[k]e up the family."

Miss Rosamond and Hester do not feel welcome in this mansion, only able to find comfort by clinging to each other. The description of their winding path through the house's many hallways and the location of the organ at its center portrays the house as a kind of living body with extremities and a heart. Its west half is lively and warm, while its east neglected and dead. The stylistic choice of portraying buildings as character in and of themselves is a Gothic literary trope.



It easy to forget that Lord Furnivall's servant is even present until he departs, an exit defined by his neglect of Miss Rosamond reaching out for comfort. Once again, Hester's story portrays men's disregard for women and girls, but the way she emphasizes the female characters in her story subverts this tendency to brush women off. Miss Grace and Mrs. Stark's work on the same tapestry expresses their close relationship, creating a sense of cooperation and perhaps even dependency. Hester is quick to note how Miss Grace's quick eyes make up for her failing ears. Sound, or the lack thereof, will be a reoccurring detail throughout the story. The fact that Mrs. Stark looks so uncaring, meanwhile, foreshadows that she and Miss Grace may not be as welcoming and kind as the drawing room's warmth might suggest.



The "wilderness" that Hester observed outside the house is now described as enveloping the inside of Manor House as well. This creates a sense of looming uneasiness, in that the wild, harsh environment is inescapable. and being inside the house does not mean that Hester and Miss Rosamond are safe. Notably, like the west drawing room, fires burn in Hester and Miss Rosamond's bedrooms, creating a warm and welcoming environment in contrast to the "wilderness." The introduction to James, Dorothy, and Agnes outlines a clear hierarchy in Manor House, and Hester's closeness with Dorothy quickly establishes them as equals. James's condescending attitude toward Dorothy reflects both class and gender dynamics that he feels place him above her. Hester, on the other hand, groups them all together as a "family," with Miss Rosamond at their center. This undermines the emphasis on status and wealth and instead focuses on companionship as the defining feature of family.



Miss Rosamond brings life to the house, fluttering through it like a bird. Hester thinks Miss Grace Furnivall and Mrs. Stark enjoy Miss Rosamond's company, even if they're too proud to ask her to stay with them in the drawing-room. Miss Rosamond and Hester explore the entire house except **the east wing**, which is never opened and they never think of venturing into. They find all sorts of things, most notably old portraits of the Furnivall family members. Dorothy tells the girls who some of them were. They find a picture of Miss Grace Furnivall when she was younger, noting that then she was simply called "Miss Grace" then because she was the younger sister. Hester notes that she was beautiful, though she had a scornful expression, and she also notices Miss Grace's blue dress in the portrait.

Miss Rosamond's energy imbues Manor House with joy, implying a lack of joy prior to her arrival. Once again, it is other people rather than possessions that bring happiness into people's lives. However, Mrs. Stark and Miss Grace's pride stands in the way of their willingness to admit that they would like Miss Rosamond to stay with them longer. Miss Rosamond and Hester's adventures through every nook and cranny except the east wing makes this part of the house loom in the periphery like a dark, ominous unknown. Furthermore, the portraits they find frame the past as a frozen, finalized narrative, capturing both Miss Grace's former beauty and scorn. Dorothy's clarification that Miss Grace is technically not "Miss Furnivall" by right (since she's the younger sister) once again evokes a hierarchy, this time based on age.



In response to Hester's amazement at Miss Grace Furnivall's beauty in her youth, Dorothy remarks that "folks change sadly," and that the previous Lord Furnivall had always said Miss Grace Furnivall's older sister was even prettier than her. Dorothy says she will show Hester the portrait of the older sister, Miss Maude Furnivall, if she promises to never tell anyone she has seen it. Hester sends Miss Rosamond off to find a hiding spot, not trusting her to keep the secret. Miss Maude Furnivall's picture is not hung up like the rest, but on the floor facing the wall. Hester helps Dorothy turn it. Hester thinks Miss Maude Furnivall is even more beautiful and more scornful than Miss Grace Furnivall.

The previous Lord Furnivall was clearly prouder of Miss Maude than Miss Grace, a preference that he expressed publicly and likely fueled jealousy and competition between the two sisters. Dorothy's hesitation and discretion in showing Miss Maude's portrait to Hester hints at some sort of dark past involving this older sister, who went unmentioned until now and whose portrait is facing the wall rather than being hung up. Notably, Hester observes Miss Maude's scorn along with her beauty. Beauty and hate seem intertwined in both sisters, which perhaps conveys that their father's pride, along with their own, sullied their attractiveness with something hateful.



Dorothy is frightened after showing Miss Maude Furnivall's portrait to Hester and urges Hester to quickly find Miss Rosamond, warning that there are some bad places in the house that she wouldn't want Miss Rosamond to venture into. Hester thinks little of this concern and happily runs off to seek out Miss Rosamond.

Dorothy's worries confirm what Hester described as "wilderness" in the house: there is unseen danger that they need to be cautious of and protect Miss Rosamond from. This again hints that something sinister happened in the Furnivall family's past, which is perhaps connected to the east wing and Miss Maude's mysterious portrait. However, Hester seems to disregard Dorothy's worries; she is perhaps overly confident in her ability to care for Miss Rosamond and thus finds Dorothy's concerns silly. What is worth taking away from Dorothy's concerns is her recognition that Miss Rosamond is valuable and necessary to protect, more so than any of the material items in the house.



As winter slowly sets in, Hester becomes convinced that she sometimes hears someone playing on **the organ**, usually when she's putting Miss Rosamond to bed. However, when she asks Dorothy about it, James insists that all she heard was the wind. Her question scares Dorothy and Agnes, however. Hester tries to get more out of Dorothy later, but she won't tell her anything.

Hester tries to learn about **the organ** music from Agnes next, though she had always seen Agnes as her inferior, James and Dorothy being Hester's equals and Agnes being their servant. Agnes admits she's heard the music playing too, and that it occurs most often on winter nights before storms. Rumor has it that it is the old lord who plays the organ, though Agnes does not say who this old lord is. This doesn't scare Hester—she enjoys the music, noting that it “wail[s] and triumph[s] just like a living creature.” Hester thinks Miss Grace Furnivall might be the one secretly playing it, but when she learns that the inside of the organ is destroyed, she too becomes afraid.

Everyone loves Miss Rosamond, though Miss Rosamond enjoys spending time with Hester over the sad Miss Grace Furnivall and the dull Mrs. Stark. Hester stops caring about **the organ** music, seeing that it doesn't do any harm. Winter was already **cold** in October, but Miss Grace Furnivall implies that she is afraid they are headed for a “terrible winter” beyond just the cold weather. Mrs. Stark pretends not to hear her and changes the subject. Hester and Miss Rosamond are not worried about the cold and enjoy going up the Fells and running around. As the days grow shorter, Hester hears the organ music more and more.

As a massive, neglected instrument at the center of house, the organ is a relic of the past. And based on Dorothy and James's reactions to Hester hearing it played, it is a past that they all hope to forget.

James acts quickly to minimize Hester's observation, essentially treating her like she's stupid. While his declaration on the matter completely cuts off Dorothy as a source of information, Hester is unphased by his harsh response and continues to pursue answers.



Hester's sudden acknowledgement of the social hierarchy at Manor House emphasizes the pride she feels in not being at the very bottom of the ranking. Even though Miss Grace and Miss Rosamond are of higher status than Hester (since Hester is a nursemaid rather than a member of the family), she goes out of her way to emphasize that she sees herself as superior to Agnes. However, Hester is only able to get the information she needs by setting this pride aside and breaking social boundaries to listen to what Agnes has to say. Hester's pride reemerges, however, in her dismissal of Agnes's fear and warning. She only comes around when she sees for herself that the organ is destroyed and thus impossible to play now. This suggests that the past is somehow lingering in the present, and that the organ might be associated with some kind of supernatural presence—perhaps the ghost of the old lord. There is a clear tie between the organ music and winter storms, emphasizing that the cold is symbolically linked to this eerie music. The uncertainty of the old lord's identity also signals once again a desire to intentionally forget the past. Finally, the organ is characterized as a living creature that both “wails” and “triumphs,” emphasizing both despair and a determination to win.



While Miss Rosamond and Hester are energetic and entertaining, Miss Grace and Mrs. Stark are dismissed as “sad” and “dull.” While these pairings contrast each other, the relationships that bind them are similar: both pairs are a maid and her lady. In this sense, Mrs. Stark and Miss Grace could be seen as Hester and Miss Rosamond's potential future. The parallel thus emphasizes the importance of present choices that will inevitably shape the future. Meanwhile, Miss Grace's observation of the “terrible winter” hints directly that the winter and its frigid temperatures might mean more to her and Mrs. Stark than just the uncomfortable weather. Mrs. Stark's dismissal of this comment conveys a desire to forget or deny whatever Miss Grace is referring to. The increased playing of the organ, meanwhile, builds tension by creating the sense that something ominous is approaching.



One stormy November day, Hester decides it is too **cold** to take Miss Rosamond to church with her and asks Dorothy to take care of her after she grows bored of being in the drawing-room with Miss Grace Furnivall and Mrs. Stark. The sky is dark, and the snow is white. When Hester gets home from church, Dorothy tells her that Miss Rosamond never came to see her. But when Hester goes to Miss Grace Furnivall and Mrs. Stark, who are sitting in the drawing-room and looking into the fireplace, they say Miss Rosamond left an hour ago to find Dorothy.

Fear starts to set in, and Hester searches everywhere. However, when she suggests Miss Rosamond might have ventured into **the east wing**, Dorothy is certain that is not possible—the doors are always locked, and only Lord Furnivall's servant has the key.

When Miss Grace Furnivall hears they cannot find Miss Rosamond, she shivers violently, until Mrs. Stark takes her away from the search and back to the drawing-room. Hester then notices a set of little footprints in the snow outside, which go around **the east wing** and up toward the Fells. Hester sprints out into the **cold**, and as she approaches two holly trees that she and Miss Rosamond had seen previously in their adventures, she finds a shepherd carrying an unconscious Miss Rosamond. The shepherd says that he found her by the holly trees, the only bushes on the hillside for miles. Hester insists on carrying her back herself, calling Miss Rosamond her “little lady,” “lamb,” “queen,” and “darling.”

Significantly, it is the cold that separates Hester and Miss Rosamond for the first time in the story, which further establishes the cold as symbolic of emotional distance. In contrast, Mrs. Stark and Miss Grace sit in the drawing room staring into the fireplace, as if they hope the warmth will help them forget the cold looming outside and throughout the east wing. While the cold separates Hester and Miss Rosamond, it is this desperate attentiveness to the fire that seems to blind Miss Grace and Mrs. Stark to the fact that Miss Rosamond has gone missing.



This passage starkly illuminates the crucial role that Hester, and women in general, play in keeping children safe—in this instance, her work as a nursemaid is a matter of life or death. However, the fact that the key to the east wing isn't even kept in the house and is guarded by the patriarch of the family reveals a distrust of the women who live at Manor House. It also indicates that the Furnivalls are determined to cover something up, to cut off a large part of the house in hopes that doing so will erase the past.



It's significant that Miss Grace's response to hearing that the Miss Rosamond has disappeared is “shivering,” as this ties back to the story's repeated references to Miss Grace being afraid of the cold. This detail again hints that Miss Grace has some sort of traumatic memory associated with wintertime. Mrs. Stark is quick to hurry Miss Grace back to the fire burning in the west drawing room, but keeping her focused on the warmth there does nothing to protect or find Miss Rosamond. In short, hiding from the cold only hinders their ability to face reality. Though the door to the east wing remains locked, Miss Rosamond's path around the east wing signals that the characters are being drawn closer and closer to what lies within it, and that whatever secret is being kept is putting them in danger. In contrast to Miss Grace and Mrs. Stark, Hester shows no hesitation to face the cold in order to save Miss Rosamond. Miss Rosamond's survival seemingly depends on Hester's devotion, determination, and attentiveness.



When Miss Rosamond finally wakes up, she tells Hester that she was on her way to Dorothy when she saw a little girl outside in the snow, beckoning her to come outside. So, she went outside, and she and the little girl walked hand in hand up the Fells. The girl's hand was very **cold**, and she led Miss Rosamond to a lady crying under the holly trees. The lady stopped crying when she saw Miss Rosamond and looked at her proudly before taking her in her arms and rocking her to sleep. Hester accuses Miss Rosamond of telling stories, because she only saw one set of footprints in the snow, but Miss Rosamond insists she's telling the truth.

Since Miss Rosamond is young, it's unclear whether the little girl and the lady are real or imaginary (or, given the story's Gothic overtones, perhaps even supernatural). In any case, the little girl mirrors Miss Rosamond—but where Miss Rosamond brings life and warmth, the little girl is defined by sadness and coldness. The crying woman's "proud" gaze prior to rocking Miss Rosamond into a frozen sleep again emphasizes the dangers associated with pride, suggesting that following its lure will lead to ruin. The crying woman's motherly nature paired with the danger she is putting Miss Rosamond in is unsettling, because it defies assumptions about how mothers usually treat children.



Miss Grace Furnivall and Mrs. Stark summon Hester, and Hester fears that they plan to fire her. Hester tells them the whole story, but as she reaches the part about the little girl and the crying lady, Miss Grace Furnivall yells out, asking the heavens for forgiveness. Mrs. Stark tries to quiet her, but Miss Grace Furnivall demands Hester keep Miss Rosamond away from that "evil child" trying to lure her to her death.

Hester's fear of being fired reminds the reader that Hester is of a lower class than the Furnivalls—she's a member of the staff rather than the family. In begging for forgiveness, Miss Grace reveals that she has some regret about the past tied to the little girl and the crying lady. Mrs. Stark's attempts to quiet her signal a desire to keep these past mistakes and regrets a secret from Hester and perhaps the rest of the world. Miss Grace also labels the little girl as "evil," once again providing a stark contrast to how Miss Rosamond is perceived.



Mrs. Stark hurries Hester out of the room as Miss Grace Furnivall continues to ask for forgiveness. Hester decides never to leave Miss Rosamond alone after that, more concerned that Miss Grace Furnivall is mentally ill and that the illness might run in the family and have been passed down to Miss Rosamond. **The organ** plays a lot these days, but Hester follows Miss Rosamond everywhere, her love for Miss Rosamond greater than her fear.

Mrs. Stark is clearly trying to conceal a mistake from the past that only she and Miss Grace are privy to. Miss Grace's relentless and seemingly uncontrolled cries for forgiveness convey an overwhelming guilt and regret over something that happened in the past. Hester's duties as a nurse become more important than ever as she becomes determined to guard Miss Rosamond from being lured outside again. The idea that mental illness might run in the Furnivall family also offers the possibility that guilt could be transferred from one generation to the next—meaning that Miss Rosamond might be at risk of receiving the punishment that Miss Grace feels she deserves. The organ's incessant playing, meanwhile, continues to build tension and an eerie atmosphere.



In December, Hester and Miss Rosamond are playing together in the great hall when they both see the little girl out in the snow, crying and beating on the windows, asking to be let in. Miss Rosamond runs to let her in, but **the organ** suddenly sings out loudly, and Hester realizes that the little girl outside has made no noise, despite seeming to cry and bang on the windows. Hester catches Miss Rosamond and carries her away, but Miss Rosamond throws a fit, angry that Hester will not let her help the girl. Hester tells Dorothy she is going to take Miss Rosamond away, that it was better for them to live humbly and at peace than here. But Dorothy says she has no right to take Miss Rosamond away.

Hester demands that Dorothy tell her everything. Dorothy admits that the house has a bad reputation, which is why people don't visit anymore. The old lord who plays **the organ** is Miss Grace Furnivall's father. Miss Grace's sister is named Maude and is the true "Miss Furnivall" by right. The old lord was proud and would never let anyone marry his daughters. He was a cruel man, but he loved music and invited a foreign musician to play for them at Manor House. The foreigner played so well that the old lord demanded he come every year to play. Both sisters fell in love with this foreigner. He taught the old lord how to play the organ, and with their father distracted, he went for walks with both sisters separately.

Miss Maude Furnivall "won the day" and married the foreigner in secret. Before he returned for his next annual visit, she secretly gave birth to a little girl at a farmhouse, pretending she was away on a trip. Miss Maude Furnivall became deeply jealous of Miss Grace Furnivall because the foreigner flirted with her, claiming to do so to keep their marriage a secret. Miss Maude Furnivall grew to hate both her sister and her husband, but she loved her daughter. The old lord went on playing his **organ**, and the two sisters "grew colder and bitterer to each other each day" until they hardly ever spoke to each other. The foreigner visited again, but weary of the sisters' jealousy, he left and never returned.

The sudden blast of music from the organ is what makes Hester realize that the little girl makes no noise, which hints that she's some kind of phantom. The old lord's organ playing and the little girl seem linked by some unknown past. Hester's priority is protecting Miss Rosamond, and she is willing to abandon all the luxuries of living with the Furnivalls to do so. But Dorothy reminds Hester of where she stands in social hierarchy: Miss Rosamond is really Lord Furnivall's ward, and as a female staff member, Hester has no right to take her away.



The old lord's obsessive pride in his daughters' beauty inspired this messy situation of them being in love with the same man. Had he been less possessive, each sister could have flourished in her own way. But instead, the sisters were placed in comparison and competition with each other, fueling resentment and scorn as their own pride became enflamed. The old lord's obsession with the organ also distracted him from what he should have dedicated his attention to: his daughters. Instead, he neglected them, allowing the foreigner to pursue them both unnoticed.



Caught up in her pride and determination to triumph over her sister, Miss Maude found herself in a miserable marriage. Furthermore, the bitterness and secrets between the sisters eventually drove away the father of Maude's child. The one person Miss Maude did care for was her daughter, again emphasizing the role of mothers as being founded on love and devotion. With the foreigner only visiting briefly before abandoning the sisters altogether, it was Miss Maude who raised their child—she was entirely responsible for the little girl's survival. The father's role was negligible, and the same can be said for Miss Maude's own father, who continued to be oblivious of his granddaughter's existence, his daughters' love triangle with the foreigner, and the animosity between the sisters.



Miss Maude Furnivall now found herself abandoned by her husband, afraid of her father, hating her sister, and unable to live with her daughter. However, because the old lord continued to grow weaker and Miss Grace Furnivall lived in the west wing, while she lived in **the east wing**, Miss Maude Furnivall thought she could have her daughter live with her in secret. What happened from there, Dorothy does not know, insisting that only Miss Grace Furnivall and Mrs. Stark, who had been closer to her than her sister ever had, knew. But people supposed that Miss Maude Furnivall had told her sister she had “triumphed over her” by having married the foreigner in secret. Miss Grace Furnivall had been heard saying she would get her revenge, and Mrs. Stark had been seen spying on the east wing.

One night following New Year’s, the old lord’s voice filled the house with swear words, paired with the sound of a crying child and a woman’s defiant voice. Finally, there was the sound of someone being struck and then silence, as the sound of wailing disappeared over the hillside. The old lord told all the servants that Miss Maude Furnivall had disgraced herself, and that he had thrown her and her child out of the house and forbade the servants from helping them.

All the while, Miss Grace Furnivall stood next to the old lord, “white and still any as stone.” Once he finished his speech, she let out a sigh “as much as to say her work done and her end was accomplished.” The next morning, shepherds found Miss Maude Furnivall and her daughter, frozen under the holly trees. The old lord never played his **organ** again and died within a year.

Even though the Manor House is prestigious and luxurious, living here didn’t seem to bring the Furnivall family any joy. Only personal connections, like Mrs. Stark and Miss Grace’s friendship and Miss Maude and her daughter’s bond, brought happiness. But the toxic pride that defined the old lord affected his daughters as well, the rumors indicating that Miss Maude’s pride in “triumphing over” her sister was what drove her to reveal the secret marriage and put her daughter at risk of being discovered. With a doubt, Miss Maude would go on to regret this irreversible mistake of letting her pride get the best of her.



Once again, the story emphasizes power of sound, as the altercation in this passage is not seen but instead heard. This is what makes the sudden silence so suspenseful. The old lord was too proud of his perceived power over the household to tolerate Miss Maude’s disobedience. It was this pride that turned him vicious and led him to cast out his daughter and granddaughter.



Miss Grace’s willingness to allow the old lord to cast out Miss Maude and her daughter shows how far she, too, was corrupted by her pride. She was so caught up in seeking revenge that the deadly consequences of her decision to betray Miss Maude didn’t seem to sink in. Miss Grace presumably lived to regret her choice, which would explain her aversion to the cold and fear of the little girl in the present. Just because something is satisfactory in the moment, then, doesn’t mean it won’t cause guilt in the future. Finally, in giving up the organ, the old lord lost interest in the very thing that distracted him from his family.



Dorothy notes that while every animal and creature was in its home, the child and her mother were left out in the **cold**. After hearing this story, Hester closely guards Miss Rosamond, who still hears the little girl crying out, and avoids Miss Grace Furnivall and Mrs. Stark. But Hester pities Miss Grace Furnivall in her hopelessness and prays for her. She tries to teach Miss Rosamond to do the same, but when Miss Rosamond tries, she always hears the little girl crying outside.

Dorothy observes how unnatural it was for Miss Maude and the little girl to be forced out into the cold by family, while all other creatures were kept safe in their homes. This detail emphasizes Manor House's failure to live up to the qualification of a "home," lacking the warmth and safety necessary to be considered such. Unlike the old lord who became distracted by his organ and Miss Maude who was distracted by her pride, Hester is determined to never let her attention stray from Miss Rosamond. This once again emphasizes the importance of women's domestic work. While Hester fears the little girl, she is not afraid of Miss Grace, even after learning of her possible role in the little girl's death. In pitying Miss Grace, Hester frames her as a victim of her own regret rather than a guilty party. However, the little girl's crying, which interrupts Miss Rosamond's prayers, suggests that the victims of her crime aren't as willing to let her go unpunished.



On a night soon after New Year's, Hester, Miss Rosamond, Miss Grace Furnivall, and Mrs. Stark are all in the drawing room when the wind begins to howl violently. Miss Grace Furnivall suddenly stands up, declaring that she hears screaming and her father's voice. At the same time, Miss Rosamond wakes up suddenly, hearing the little girl in the snow crying. At first no one else can hear these voices, but then they begin to hear them too. Miss Grace Furnivall hurries to the great hall, all of them following. The screams sound like they're coming from **the east wing**, and a **fire** that gives off no heat burns in the hall fireplace. The east door shakes, and Miss Rosamond fights to escape Hester's arms and join the little girl. Hester holds onto her for dear life.

Miss Grace's bad hearing is overruled by the cries from the past. Miss Rosamond is also able to hear these cries, while Hester and Mrs. Stark are initially left in silence. This signals who is closely tied to the punishment that these ghosts are trying to pursue: Miss Grace is the source of their anger, and Miss Rosamond is the outlet for their revenge. The fire that gives off no heat signals the lack of warmth and love in Manor House at the time of Miss Maude's expulsion. The shaking east door conveys the determination of past secrets to be revealed in the present, suggesting that mistakes cannot simply be locked away and forgotten.



The east wing's door slams open, and the old lord's ghostly figure emerges, with Miss Maude Furnivall and the little girl in front of him. Miss Rosamond screams for Hester to let her free; she can feel Miss Maude Furnivall and her daughter, and she wants to go to them. As the ghosts reached the hall door, Miss Maude Furnivall turns defiantly toward her father, only to fail to protect her child from a blow from the old lord's crutch. As he strikes the child, Miss Grace Furnivall cries out, begging her father's ghost to spare the child. But then a new phantom emerges, one identical to the portrait of Miss Grace Furnivall in her youth. The ghosts ignore Miss Grace Furnivall's cries, and the younger version of her watches on "stony and deadly serene."

As past secrets break out of the east wing, Miss Grace is forced to face her guilt and her irreversible past actions, as she begs her father to spare the child while the image of her past self stares on indifferently. Notably, she only asks him to spare the little girl, hinting that even now, her pride might be overshadowing any desire to save her sister. Miss Maude's defiant turn toward her father also reveals pride, as she wants to show him that she's powerful in her defiance. But this gesture instead allows space for him to strike the little girl, reflecting how Miss Maude's pride put her daughter at risk in the past.



Then, the **fire** and candles all go out, and Miss Grace Furnivall is lying at everyone else's feet. She is carried to her bed, spending the rest of her days facing the wall, muttering, "what is done in youth can never be undone in age!"

All of the flames going out signals how Manor House lost all warmth and comfort with Miss Maude and the little girl's deaths. The old lord and Miss Grace's betrayal destroyed the love that family is meant to provide. Miss Grace's guilt crushes her, and she spends the rest of her days expressing her inability to undo her past mistakes. Only with age is she able to see the crime she committed, but that recognition doesn't allow her to change what happened. Instead, she mutters the lesson she learned into the wall, as if attempting to infuse this mantra into the walls of Manor House itself so that the same mistake never happens again. Her exclamation that "what is done in youth can never been undone in age" serves as the story's moral.





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