

Sarah Gutierrez
Dr. Karina Jakubowicz
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The Sisters of Furnivall Manor: The Old Nurse's Story Film Adaptation

Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" is a tale of ghosts, secrets, and the troubled pasts of a wealthy family in the Victorian era. Gaskell's radical choice of excluding male characters and using a female narrator's perspective adds a compelling framework for my film adaptation's exploration of themes of gender inequality and the patriarchy during the 19th century. The patriarchal society of the period was built around the subjugation of women, and the film aims to expose the emotional and psychological toll this took on them. The original story's focus will be shifted to Miss Grace Furnivall and Miss Maude Furnivall as the main protagonists, and it will take place decades before Hester and Miss Rosamund's arrival at the mansion. The arthouse film adaptation would be a haunting and atmospheric exploration of the psychological trauma inflicted by a patriarchal society on the lives of Miss Maude and Miss Grace Furnivall. The film is comprised of a combination of genres, including psychological horror, drama, and romance. The aesthetic of the film could be described as gothic, with a dark, foreboding atmosphere, as captured in my mood board.

In my version of the story, the sisters were once inseparable, bonded over their detachment and fear towards their apathetic father, the old lord. The sudden death of their beloved mother, Lady Adeline, however, drives a wedge between them. Miss Maude, being the eldest sister, reluctantly assumes the role of the Lady of the manor in her absence. Though their mother's cause of death is unclear, it was said that she died of a broken heart at the hands of the old lord's cruelty. (Gaskell) The sisters' attempts to cope with their grief and regain a sense of normalcy is disrupted by the haunting presence of the ghost of their late mother. The arrival of

the foreign musician and his organ from London would complicate things further, as both sisters fall in love with him. As the story unfolds, Lady Adeline's ghost becomes increasingly malevolent, a reflection of the sisters' own inner turmoil and desperation, and a metaphor for the suffocating and unforgiving nature of high society, especially for unmarried women. The film would explore the societal pressures that the sisters face as women, and their father is the embodiment of the patriarchal society's oppression. The rest of the original story's key events- the foreigner secretly marrying Miss Maude before disappearing, and Miss Maude being thrown out of the house once her daughter is discovered by Miss Grace- are kept the same, only after the death of Miss Maude and her child, Miss Grace's guilt manifests itself in more frequent appearances of her mother's ghost. The men of the story will remain nameless, to emphasize the focus on the women and their experiences in the film. As a result of the men being unnamed, the focus remains on the relationships between the sisters, rather than on their father or on their shared lover. This approach will highlight the ways in which women navigated their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers in the 19th century, without being overshadowed by men. The male characters' lack of names and identities can serve as a commentary on the ways in which women were usually relegated to the background of historical narratives, while men were typically given more prominent roles. It is also important to note that the story of Miss Maude and Miss Grace provides an excellent opportunity to explore the intersection of gender and class in the film, as both women are members of the upper-class, but are still subject to the same societal restrictions as their lower-class counterparts.

In Gaskell's story, Miss Maude Furnivall and Miss Grace Furnivall are described as beautiful and prideful, but not much else is given about their personalities. Regarding the sisters, Gaskell states "No one was good enough to wed them, although they had choice enough; for they

were the great beauties of their day.” However, in my film adaptation, the sisters have more distinct characteristics that set them apart from each other. Miss Maude is characterized as a strong-willed woman, driven by a sense of duty to her family’s reputation and social status. She feels burdened by the responsibility of managing the household, and Lady Adeline’s ghost is a constant reminder of her absence and the weight of her duties. While she appears to be in control on the surface, she longs for love and a sense of freedom from the constraints of her position. Her rebellious streak is evident in her passionate pursuit of the foreign musician, as well as their secret marriage, which directly subverts the expectations of Victorian society. During the 19th century, it was inappropriate for women to focus too obviously on finding a husband, as it “suggested a worrying sexual appetite” (Hughes), so an elopement would have been widely condemned at the time. Regarding her physical appearance, Miss Maude has a tall, statuesque figure and a regal posture. Her sharp, angular features convey her strength, and her piercing eyes give her an intense, commanding presence. Her hair is dark, often pulled back as she is often busy fulfilling household tasks. She favors muted, understated colors in her clothing, preferring tailored, high-collared blouses, and long, flowing skirts that give her an air of refinement and sophistication. Miss Maude bears a striking resemblance to her late mother- a fact that her father secretly loathes- which serves as a representation of the way in which societal pressures placed upon women in the 19th century were inherited from previous generations. Her resemblance to Lady Adeline also works to add another layer of complexity to the old lord’s banishment of Miss Maude and her child, who in my adaptation is named Charlotte. When the old lord throws them out into the snow, and ultimately to their death, the old lord is symbolically casting his wife away for a second time.

On the other hand, Miss Grace is characterized as being more emotionally vulnerable and sensitive than her older sister. She is deeply affected by her mother's death and is driven by a sense of loss that causes her to act impulsively and irrationally. Her jealousy of Miss Maude's competence grows as she seeks attention and affection. Her intense grief makes her more susceptible to the presence of her mother's ghost, and her paranoia and fear exacerbates the rift between her and her sister. Miss Grace is slightly shorter than her sister as a result of her being younger in age, with a more delicate frame, and soft, rounded features that give her a gentle, ethereal quality. Her hair is lighter than Miss Maude's and her eyes wider- more expressive. She favors softer, more feminine clothing, with pastel colors and flowing fabrics that give her a dreamy, romantic look. These details differ greatly from her older appearance and less emotive characterization when we meet her in Gaskell's original story. It is almost as if she is corrupted by her guilt over her sister and niece's deaths, both psychologically and physically as she ages. Miss Grace's appearance in her youth captures the societal ideal of feminine beauty during the Victorian era, intentionally emphasizing qualities such as gentleness, softness, and passivity. As Miss Grace epitomizes the feminine ideal, she represents "youth, purity, and virtue" (Sydel)- all of which are juxtaposed with her conflict and envy of Miss Maude. As mentioned earlier, Gaskell writes that the two sisters had many suitors, yet none were worthy enough to have their hands in marriage. Despite their line of suitors, her beauty, her status, and her wealth, Miss Grace never marries, counteracting the expectations set for her completely. This expectation for women is outlined in Philippa Levine's article, "Marriage and Feminism in the Later Nineteenth-Century England". Levine explains that "For the woman who did not marry, whether by choice or by chance, spinsterhood marked her as one of society's unfortunates, cast aside from the common lot of the sex..." (Levine, 1)

Like the style of my mood board, in my film adaptation, the Furnivall's manor exudes a haunting charm, but there is also an unexplainable unease that hangs in the air of the home. The interior is adorned with exquisite antique furniture, an abundance of ornate portraits, and intriguing artifacts as a display of the family's riches. The dim lighting with the flickering of candles, casts shadows on the walls that beckon the audience to explore further. The sound design includes effects such as the howling of storm winds outside and creaking doors, for instance, to create a palpable sense of unease that grips viewers, heightening the tension to build a sense of dread.

Also integral to the story's tone and theme, is the use of music in the film. The score is incredibly important to the story because of music's role in the progression of the plot of Gaskell's original story. Music is also important to the film because it is an expressive language that can be used to portray complex emotions that may be lost in translation as it is adapted from Gaskell's writing to a film on the screen. Miss Maude's leitmotif would be a haunting melody played on a solo violin. The use of a violin could represent the elegance and refinement of Miss Maude's character, and the eerie quality of the melody could reflect her inner turmoil. The melody itself would be slow and mournful, to emphasize her melancholy. The use of a solo instrument as opposed to a complete orchestra, creates a sense of intimacy and introspection. In the original story, Gaskell says that Miss Maude was not softened after becoming a mother and a wife, and instead she was "...as haughty and passionate as ever; and perhaps more so, for she was jealous of Miss Grace..." (Gaskell) In my film, however, I want Miss Maude's leitmotif to get noticeably softer when she is around her daughter, Charlotte, a tangible symbol of the innocence and tenderness of motherhood. In my adaptation, Miss Maude adores her child. The music could be orchestrated with a lighter, much slower tempo, emphasizing the warmth and

gentleness of the character with Charlotte. This use of a softer melody would contrast Miss Maude's strong and determined personality, highlighting the vulnerability and tenderness that motherhood brings out of her character. It would also create a deeper emotional connection between her and the audience.

Miss Grace's leitmotif would be different from Miss Maude, with a more delicate and more airy quality than that of her sister. The instrumentation could include a harp and a flute to build a dreamy and romantic atmosphere associated with her character. As she develops throughout the film, her leitmotif could undergo subtle changes that reflect her growth and change in emotional state. As she becomes increasingly haunted by Lady Adeline's ghost, the music could become more dissonant and unsettling with her growing paranoia. This creates another contrast with the more stable and controlled leitmotif associated with Miss Maude, emphasizing the sisters' different responses to the haunting. As she pursues the foreign musician, however, her leitmotif will begin to incorporate bits of piano. Despite his secret marriage with Miss Maude, Gaskell writes that he continued to flirt with Miss Grace. Whether or not this connection was genuine, I want it to reflect upon Miss Grace's leitmotif. As she becomes more infatuated with him, her leitmotif would begin to incorporate elements of the foreign musician's. As a skilled musician, he would likely be drawn to the sound of the piano, thus the later addition of the piano in Miss Grace's leitmotif could be seen as a musical representation of her allure.

Costume design wise, the fashion choices of the sisters in the film would be heavily influenced by the social norms of the 19th century. As members of the aristocracy, the women would be expected to dress in a way that befits their status and family's reputation. Miss Maude would be dressed in luxurious fabrics, such as silk or velvet. As previously mentioned, the colors of her dresses would be muted and elegant, including shades of deep blue, forest green, or

burgundy, for example, to reflect her reserved nature. Miss Maude's dress sense could be characterized as understated yet elegant, and never frivolous. Despite their lack of brighter colors, her dresses would be adorned with lace, embroidery, and other ornate details as reflections of the Furnivall's great wealth.

Miss Grace would dress similarly to her sister style wise, but with more romantic touches. She would prefer lighter colors and pastels, like light pinks, periwinkles, and lavenders to stand out against her sister's deeper hues. Unlike her sister, Miss Grace's costumes would include different accessories, such as jewelry pieces, ribbons, and details like small flowers in her hair. Miss Grace would wear Lady Adeline's dresses, as a way to hold onto her mother's memory, a source of comfort during her grief. In my film, even though the two sisters live their lives separately in opposite wings of the manor, Miss Maude dresses her daughter like Miss Grace, whether this is a subconscious decision or an intentional one is not explicitly stated in the film. In the original story, Gaskell describes Miss Maude as "...living with a father whom she feared, and a sister whom she hated." In my film adaptation however, I want it to be clear that despite their differences, deep down the sisters have an undeniable love and respect for one another but are far too proud to show it. This makes the Miss Maude's death more impactful on Miss Grace. This act of dressing Charlotte in a fashion reminiscent of Miss Grace could represent the love Miss Maude still has for her sister, despite their fractured relationship. This styling of her daughter could also show Miss Maude's willingness to embrace a softer, more emotional side of herself that she had suppressed in the past.

In conclusion, my film adaptation of Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" would blend elements of horror, romance, and tragedy to create a haunting and visually striking story. Through the complex and nuanced characters of Miss Maude and Miss Grace Furnivall, the film

explores themes of grief, jealousy, and familial bonds, while also aiming to subvert the societal expectations of Victorian-era femininity and comment on the repression of women during the 19th century. The use of music, particularly the unique leitmotifs associated with the two sisters, adds an additional layer of emotional depth and complexity to the story. Overall, the film concept's interpretation of Gaskell's Gothic tale is a testament to the enduring power of genre and medium in modern storytelling.

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