

**A WITCHCRAFT AND THE GOTHIC: AN EXPLORATION OF THE  
SUPERNATURAL IN MRS. GASKELL'S SHORT STORIES**

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The Victorian Age produced giants like Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Kingsley, Bronte sisters and among them, Mrs. Gaskell a well-known writer of social realism and a biographer of Charlotte Bronte also tried her hands on ghost stories. Witchcraft mystery, social norms and family curses were the themes of her short stories. Best known for her debut novel *Mary Barton* she was one of the pioneers of short stories. Many of her short stories were published in collaboration with Dickens in weekly magazines like 'Household Words' (1850-59) and 'All the year Round'(1859-1895). As a creative artist she had a distinctive characteristic of naturally narrating a story. Angus Easson has rightly said, "Elizabeth Gaskell found it natural to tell stories and she told them well because she was a natural(not an artless story teller" Further a friend Susanna Winkworth adds to her power and art: "No one ever came near her in the gift of telling a story. In her hands simplest incident –a meeting in the street, a talk with a factory girl a country walk, an old family history became picturesque and vivid and interesting."

Some of Mrs. Gaskell's stories are Christmas stories; some are stories of superstition, some are full of suspense, depicting sensation mystery, fear, horror and witchcraft. These stories were popular in the Victorian age. Religion and Church taught that the ghosts existed in the world and people believed in ghosts and witchcraft. Many scientific theories challenged the existing beliefs of the people but could not shake their

faith in religion completely. Belief in the supernatural made people feel that how vampires and ghosts haunted the palaces, castles, mansions and public places and the parks. Screaming sounds could be heard, something walking in white and invisible hands could be seen. They were the devils who ran around. Even in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century black plague ghost stories were shared and talked about in whispers.

My Article explores the idea of supernatural and such practices prevalent in the Victorian Age. The supernatural short stories are critiques of human behavior in a particular society; such stories could show the individuals psychology and psyche.

One of Mrs. Gaskell's a true horror short story, *The Old Nurse's story* was published in 1852 could be marked as a classic ghost story in which ghostly apparition appear from time to time. The narrator of the story is an old nurse named Hester who narrates the old mysterious happenings faced by her to Rosamond the children of Rosamond. Rosamond after her parents death came to stay Furnivall's Mansion. Rosamond, in fact was a child under Hester's care. Rosamond then becomes a mother of several children for whom Hester had again became a caretaker. One of the mysterious happenings which took place in the Furnivall's mansion was a strange sound heard from the old playing organ placed in the mansion's hall. After sometime, Rosamond mysteriously disappeared staying at the manor house. Hester experienced very weird and terrifying shrieks inside the house. Mrs. Maude and Miss Grace were the two daughters of Lord Furnivall. One of them, Miss Maude was married to a foreign musician in a secret manner. After her marriage she became the Mistress of Furnivall's house and gave birth to a girl child who later died. It was assumed that the phantom of this dead child used

to haunt the house and a weird kind of sound could be heard. Hester narrates her experience that, "As winter drew on, and the days grew shorter I was sometimes almost certain that I heard a noise as if someone was playing on the great organ in the hall. I did not hear it every evening but certainly, I did very often usually when I was sitting with Miss Rosamond." Other weird happening in which apparition was seen is depicted very well 'Oh Hester! Hester! Cried Miss Rosamond. It's a lady!' the lady below the holy trees and my little girl is with her. Hester! Hester! Let me go to her; they are drawing me to them. I feel them - I feel them. I must go!"<sup>1</sup> "The terrible phantoms moved on". This is how Mrs. Gaskell had a fascination for narrating these kinds of weird and freaky stories.

The other short story 'Lois the Witch' was first published serially in 1859 in the periodical, *All the Year Round* edited by Charles Dickens. This short story is set in the year 1691, depicts religious intolerance in the community of Massachusetts Salem where people were controlled by superstition. In fact, "Mrs Gaskell, gained a lot of her material for Lois the Witch from the book lectures on witchcraft: comprising a History of the Delusion in Salem in 1692 by Charles Upham which was written in 1831." When Lois Barclay, an Anglican orphaned young girl came to stay with her uncle's family from Old to New England, she finds that the entire atmosphere of her uncle's family was depressing. Cousins of Lois had their own fears and frustrations who did not willingly accept Lois' stay at their home. The story revolves around the central character Lois and moves ahead with other characters, Faith and Prudence, female cousins of Lois

and her male cousin Manasseh. Though Manasseh had a soft feeling for Lois and he wanted to marry her as his wife, but his efforts landed in futile. Both female cousins were jealous of Lois and had a bad feeling for her. One of the reasons of fears of Faith was that Lois may not come in between her love for a young Pastor Mr. Nolan. Faith is the one who accuses Lois Barclay of witchcraft. Accusation of witchcraft came from both the cousins. They sarcastically remarked "'Take care, another time, how you meddle with the witches things, 'said Faith, as one scarcely believing her own words, but at enmity with all the world in her bitter jealousy of heart. Prudence rubbed her arms and looked stealthily at Lois. 'Witch Lois! Witch Lois!' said she at last, softly pulling a childish face of spite at her." This is how the rumour of witchcraft for Lois erupted from her uncle's family. The story is written in a historical context. As "The rumour of witchcraft was like the eco of thunder among the hills. It had broken out in Mr. Tappau's house and his two little daughters were the first supposed to bewitched; ..." Faith with her wretched feelings for Lois, cried "'Let the witch hang! What care I? She has done harm enough with her charms and her sorcery on Pastor Tappau's girls. Let her die,.."' Lois, when accused by the judges utters in pitiable words. "'Sirs, I must choose death with a quiet conscience, rather than life to be gained by a lie. I am not a witch. I know hardly what you mean when you say I am." Angus Easson has rightly said, "Belief in witchcraft is a force that feeds upon the entwined desires of those in community, township and family, feeds too upon the individual heart, which is powerful for wickedness as well as for love, and the story insists upon the tragic consequences for Lois" .

By presenting such kinds of stories Mrs. Gaskell wanted to raise a kind of a question and tries to find a solution to this kind of evil and satanic thinking. The purpose of the story is to condemn these kinds of religious persecution and mass hysteria. Rebecca Styler very well said that, "Gaskell sees the root of evil as societies placing a barrier between themselves and the other." As Mrs. Gaskell has a humanitarian outlook she somehow has regretted this kind of cruel human behavior.

**References:**

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