

The old nurse's story,
by elizabeth gaskell
and the axe, by
penelope fitzgerald



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

English ghost stories became popular in 1855 when a tax reform brought about the withdrawal of duty on newspapers. This brought about a magazine boom that fed the large literate middle class who were thirsty for sensation. To satisfy their readers, magazines needed stories and promised “fiction of powerful interest”. Charles Dickens owned one of the most popular periodicals of the time - All the Year Round, first published in 1859. Dickens filled the bumper Christmas editions with his stories, forgoing the Christmas link to ghost stories for the modern age.

They were a popular feature for the season where “pocketbooks were opened a little wider than usual”. Ghost stories were much more popular in the 1900s because there were few forms of entertainment. They were a lot more effective in those days - the typical flickering candlelight and crackling fires provided a suitable atmosphere for its transmission. According to Jung, television and cinema has dampened our “primitive feelings and apprehensions”. Despite some people's beliefs that civilisation has bred the ability to be scared out of us, a well-written ghost story will still have the desired effect.

For this to happen there are important ingredients one must include. A strong sense of place or of the elements is essential and every detail must be carefully selective. Of course, there must be a classic location that gets cut off; typically, it has always been a gothic tower or a cemetery, but a suburban house could work equally as well. A ghost story would not be satisfying without a real ghost - an image of someone who has died - and a reason for the ghost to haunt - effects on the past and present.

A moral would be preferable, as there would be added satisfaction if there were a point to the story besides scaring the reader. To be truly frightening the story has to contain a core of credibility and should have a slow build up of tension and mysterious or unexplained events. Lastly, the narrative style of the story is important. The author should think carefully about how it will be told, by whom and why. After reading the two ghost stories *The Old Nurse's Story* and *The Axe*, I have found that there are many differences and similarities between them.

The Old Nurse's Story had a very strong sense of the elements. "... the sky hung heavy over the white earth, as if night had never truly gone away; and the air, though still, was very biting and keen.

" The story takes place in winter, around Christmastime in late afternoons and nights. Christmastime was a popular theme for nineteenth century ghost stories to be set. Night-time arrives earlier in winter and the chill, creeping shadows and brittle, claw-like trees set the ideal atmosphere for sinister events. There are reoccurring mentions of the holly trees: "

.. lack marks on the hillside, where no other bush was for miles around..

. " These tie in with the Christmas theme and could also be a subtle symbolism of danger. Holly trees are prickly and have poisonous berries. Perhaps these dangerous plants are the only things that dare grow on the barren Northumberland Fells. Also, holly trees are evergreen, like the ghosts.

In direct contrast, there is little sense of the elements in *The Axe*. We only know that it is set in summer because of: "... the irritation of damp in the office this summer..

. " The author does not expand on this comment. There is none of the visual detail that is dispersed throughout *The Old Nurse's Story*. This could be because the majority of modern readers do not want to plough through a myriad of descriptions that may slow down the pace of the story.

They can get impatient because they are used to visual detail being provided on the television and at the cinema. In the nineteenth century a person would need a clear picture because it would have been unlikely that they ever travelled out of their immediate area, which would have been nowhere near as grand as, say, *Furnivall Manor*. A comment from Hester in *The Old Nurse's Tale* proves this. There was a chandelier all of bronze, hung down from the middle of the ceiling; and I had never seen one before.

.. " The readers would need the descriptions because, like Hester, they would have had no idea as to what the setting was like. *The Axe* is set at night-time, in a deserted office block, which immediately provokes thoughts of fear and isolation. " The early cleaners will not be here for seven hours.

.. " This enhances this feeling, even though the office block is in the middle of a populated town. *The Old Nurse's Story* was more literally isolated. " We had left all signs of a house, or even a village.

.. It is the classic location for a ghost story – a place cut off from civilisation. In the journey to the manor Hester is leaving what she finds familiar and comforting. “.

.. not like the parks here in the south..

. ” The mood is solemn and miserable, almost as though the occupants of the manor have been drained of life. There is a palpable tension and a certain secretiveness about the place that immediately makes the reader curious as to what is being hidden. “ James said...

I was a gowk to take the wind soughing among the trees for music; but I saw Dorothy look at him very fearful, and Bessy... aid something beneath her breath, and went quite white.

“ There were many mysteries about the old manor – the out-of-bounds east wing, the portrait of Miss Furnivall's sister, the organ player, to name but a few. The end satisfactorily ties up most questions that arise. A similar enigmatic air was present in *The Axe*. It is bleak, even mundane, at the beginning, which contrasts greatly with the end, where the story reaches its chilling climax.

Unlike *The Old Nurse's Story*, *The Axe* is very ambiguous. There are many things mentioned that seem significant at the time, but come to nothing at the end. The damp is an example of this. “.

.. the peculiar smell (not the smell of ordinary damp)... ” The damp is frequently mentioned in *The Axe*, but is never explained at the end.

Perhaps it was a dead body buried underneath the floorboards; maybe it was nothing but the author adding to the uneasiness of the reader. Either way, the author manages to make the reader increasingly wary of what is unravelling. The tension in both stories is built up slowly. In *The Axe* there are subtle mentions of the damp smell and many references to death that may not be picked up on the first reading.

For example, the 'severance pay' and when the boss says that: "Nobody's fault is nobody's funeral." They are morbid comments that add to the tension that the reader already feels. *The Old Nurse's Story's* tension is built up similarly - very slowly, with many subtle hints up to the last scene, which can be described as the final stab. When there is a particularly exciting scene taking place we find that the author uses long paragraphs and little punctuation so as not to break the tension by making the reader stop and start. It is an effective way to write and makes the reader subconsciously read faster, making the heart race.

The Axe is made increasingly ambiguous by the fact that we do not know whether the ghost is a real ghost or a figment of the narrator's imagination. I would lean towards it being the product of the narrator's over-active imagination. The ghost appears at the end in the form of Singlebury (whom the narrator had recently sacked) with a severed head. Perhaps the narrator was suffering from over-work or tiredness - he was working over-time until eleven o' clock at night - or simply paranoia. We do not hear the story from anyone else's point of view so we do not know whether the narrator exaggerated some scenes or imagined apparitions like the blood on his coat.

If Singlebury was really a ghost could it have been something to do with the history of the office? “.

.. in 1942 the whole building had been requisitioned by the Admiralty...

relatives had been allowed to wait or queue there in hope of getting news of those missing at sea... ” We are never told and there are plenty of arguments for and against the whole story being an over-reaction of the narrator's to Singlebury's severance from the company. This could increase the reader's interest in the story as the enigmatic atmosphere increases. In direct contrast, *The Old Nurse's Story* has ghosts that all of the characters can see.

They take the forms of Lord Furnivall, his daughter Miss Grace and her daughter. The effects of the past on the present are obvious - the theme of revenge is the main reason the ghosts haunt. There is also an effect of the present on the past. The ghosts were always in the manor, but did not make their presence so evident until Miss Rosamond arrived. They did not stop haunting until revenge was taken and old Miss Furnivall had died.

The ghosts would have had a much more terrifying effect on nineteenth century readers than on twentieth century readers. Years ago, religion was a part of everyday life and people feared the dead. “ Oh! Heaven, forgive! Have mercy! ” As Miss Furnivall shouts this it would have sent a shiver down the reader's spine - if only Heaven could forgive the old woman she must have done a terrible thing. Nowadays, not everyone is Christian and so the role of religion in society is perhaps less powerful.

People are a lot more relaxed about supernatural things and the thought of ghosts no longer terrify people as they once would have done. I don't think a nineteenth century reader would have been impressed with *The Axe*. It leaves too many unanswered questions and lacks an obvious moral. A modern reader does not expect a moral, whereas a Victorian reader would have done.

In *The Old Nurse's Story* Miss Furnivall's last words were: "What is done in youth can never be undone in age!" This is a good, solid moral that, although may seem a little harsh or exaggerated, Victorian readers would have taken to heart. *The Old Nurse's Story* was didactic - it teaches you a lesson and is entertaining. Both stories have a core of credibility. *The Axe* is set in an office block, which is an everyday workplace for a modern reader. Although the final ghost may be a little unbelievable with its severed head and dripping neck the fact that it is in a recognisable location would add to the fear.

Being set in a manor house, *The Old Nurse's Story* loses some of its credibility. A modern day reader would rarely visit, let alone live, in a creaky old manor. Even a tour of such a house would diminish the uneasiness it could evoke, because lighting and crowds of chatting tourists would chase away the shadows and drown out the creaking floorboards. It makes up for some of this by having real people from the past coming back to haunt with a reason to do so. I think that both stories are effective in their own way, but that, for a modern day reader, *The Axe* is slightly more so.

I think this because it is set in a recognisable location – one where the majority of adults set foot in every day. It may not fulfil every criteria for a ‘good ghost story’ – it, for example, does not have a moral or a classic location – but this gives it its own originality. The description of the final ghost is horribly realistic: The eyes were thickly filmed over, as one sees in the carcasses in a butcher's shop. ” It is related to something we can easily imagine and this gives us a frighteningly vivid mental image of the ghost. The enigmatic and ambiguous atmosphere to the story also adds to its effectiveness. Despite The Axe being very effective as a ghost story, I preferred The Old Nurse's Story.

I found The Axe a little mundane. It did not interest me from the beginning as The Old Nurse's Story did. The latter story had interesting characters that were well-developed for such a short story. The setting, although not as effective now as it would have been in Victorian times, had some wonderful visual detail. What I liked most about The Old Nurse's Story was that it had a point to it.

There were real ghosts with real histories and reasons for haunting the old manor. While The Axe could have had a point, it was unclear as to what it was. At first, the enigma of the story was intriguing, but when most of the subtle hints came to nothing, it became irritating. For these reasons, I personally preferred reading The Old Nurse's Story.