Victorian Women in Gaskell's Gothic Tales: A Study on "Lois the Witch," "The Grey Woman" and "The Old Nurse's Story"

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Abstract: Elizabeth Gaskell, a famous and prolific Victorian novelist, known as much for her involvement in the society around her as for her use of her fiction to criticise it, published several Gothic tales in which she pays special attention to the situation of Victorian women. In these texts, she took refuge behind a genre which, thanks to the distance it offers from reality, as well as its fantastic nature, as opposed to the realism of her novels, gives her greater freedom to aim her sharp and accurate satirical remarks at the patriarchal society of the nineteenth century and its values. Nevertheless, as in her longer works, Gaskell once again shows her knowledge of human nature by portraying the world as a vast mosaic of greys in which not every man is a tyrant and not every woman a poor, helpless victim. This study will therefore allude to three of Gaskell's gothic stories, "Lois the Witch," "The Grey Woman" and "The Old Nurse's Story," in which the author shows, among other things, how Victorian women were not only victims, but could also be vile and ruthless.

Keywords: Elizabeth Gaskell, Gothic literature, social criticism, Victorian women.

Las mujeres victorianas en los relatos góticos de Gaskell: Análisis de "Lois the Witch," "The Grey Woman" y "The Old Nurse's Story"

Resumen: Elizabeth Gaskell, famosa y prolífica novelista victoriana, conocida tanto por su implicación en la sociedad que la rodeaba como por el uso de su ficción para criticarla, publicó un buen número de cuentos góticos en los cuales presta especial atención a la situación de la mujer victoriana. En estos textos, se parapeta tras un género que, gracias al distanciamiento que este ofrece de la realidad, así como su carácter de fantástico, en oposición al realismo de sus novelas, le da mayor libertad para apuntar sus afilados y certeros dardos contra la sociedad patriarcal del siglo XIX y sus valores. No obstante, y como hace también en sus obras más extensas, Gaskell muestra una vez más su conocimiento de la naturaleza humana al retratar el mundo como un enorme mosaico de grises en el que no todo hombre es un tirano ni toda mujer una pobre víctima desvalida. En este estudio se aludirá, pues, a tres de los relatos góticos de Gaskell, "Lois the Witch," "The Grey Woman" y "The Old Nurse's Story," en los que la autora muestra, entre otras cosas, cómo las mujeres victorianas no sólo eran víctimas, sino que también podían ser viles y verdugos.

Palabras clave: Elizabeth Gaskell, literatura gótica, crítica social, mujer victoriana.

1. Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell is a famous and fruitful Victorian novelist. As a realist author, she is known both for her involvement with the

surrounding society and her use of her literary production as a way of criticising the social woes of her time. Her novels' main themes include masters versus workers, women's situation and their rights in this period, and the living conditions of the poorest in large industrial cities, such as Manchester.

Gaskell lived in Manchester all her married life, and as the wife of a Unitarian minister she was involved with all kinds of people: poor and wealthy, masters and labourers, unknown social outcasts and renowned authors such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Martineau, William and Mary Howitt, and John Ruskin, among others. So, it can be said that her position as a minister's wife gave her first-hand knowledge of both human nature and Victorian society.

Although Gaskell is mainly known as the author of *Cranford*, her two so-called 'social novels' *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, and the first biography of Charlotte Brontë, she was also a prolific short story writer. In her novels and novellas, readers can observe Gaskell questioning of several Victorian standards and showing how other reality was possible. Thus, she created strong female characters, such as Margaret Hale (*North and South*) or Molly Gibson (*Wives and Daughters*), who do not fit the Victorian stereotype, just as she presented kind male characters, concerned by their family, who raise and protect their children, let their daughters act with an unusual freedom, etc., like John Barton and Job Leigh in *Mary Barton*, or Mr Hale in *North and South*, who do not fit the Victorian tyrannical male standard. Together with this, Gaskell shows that, when the traditional family fails, other possibilities arise—as Haefele-Thomas points out. She also focuses on the importance of marriage and the family, the respectability of spinsterhood (*Cranford*) and the fallen woman's possibility to improve her behaviour and amend her life (*Ruth*). Thus, through her stories and characters, Gaskell hinted that not everything in life was black or white (life was not a collection of established and immovable clichés), but a huge mosaic of greys in which not every man is a tyrant and not every woman a poor, helpless victim.

Nevertheless, Victorian readers not always were prepared to accept these facts or ideas, as attets the fact that her novel *Ruth* was burnt by some people. Thus, this could be the reason why Gaskell seems to be more subtle in her novels, turning to the Gothic tale as a means to express her sharper criticism. In this vein, it would also be interesting

to have a look to what Diana Wallace establishes in her *Female Gothic Histories: Gender, History and the Gothic*, as commented by Carolyn Lambert in her review of Wallace's text:

> Wallace's chapter on Gaskell focuses on the short stories. She claims that Gaskell understood from early in her writing career that Gothic and historical fiction could be used to say the unsayable. It was in her short stories that Gaskell was able to explore and test controversial ideas more freely, and, as Wallace notes, these are replete with Gothic motifs and conventions. Gaskell re-historicises the Gothic and in doing so, offers "a searing proto-feminist indictment of the vulnerability of women and children within structures which support and even encourage male power and violence". (Lambert 143)

As mentioned above, Gaskell was a prolific short story writer, and among the more than forty stories she published, there are several Gothic tales. Gaskell's talent for frightening and wild tales appears early in her literary career, starting with her school days' essay 'Clopton House', so, as Tracy Nectoux points out, '[b]y the time she wrote *The Old Nurse's Story*, Gaskell's skills at writing ghastly, yet entertaining, supernatural tales had been honed to perfection' (26). On her part, Shirley Foster alludes to how her shorter works 'show Gaskell at her most original and inventive, experimenting with genre and narrative methodology, and dealing with topics which, though also explored in her novels, often have a sharper impact in the more restricted space' (Foster 108). Here it should also be remembered that Dickens referred to her as his "dear Sheherezade," and that there are several anecdotes mentioned by various of her contemporaries:

> An 1859 letter to her from William Wetmore Story, her friend in Rome, for example, recalls nostalgically how she had entertained them on a visit: "let us see your face and hear your voice again… Will you not tell us more of your charming stories – and give us some more living sketches of character." … An early biographer reports that she was famed as "an excellent narrator of stories… A gentleman in Manchester, who was a frequent visitor at the house, told me how Mrs. Gaskell had once kept him up through

> many a night while she told ghost stories, of which she possessed a goodly store." Gaskell herself recounts how, when Charlotte Brontë was staying with the Gaskells in April 1853, she had to stop telling "some dismal ghost story" because the younger woman was afraid of being kept awake all night by it (LCB, II, 12: 406). (Foster 108-109)

Gothic was a popular literary genre throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, elements considered to be typical of Gothic literature, such as castles, shadowy characters, or ghosts, can be found in Victorian literary works which belong to other genres. Andrew Smith and William Hughes claim that 'It is important to acknowledge the diverse ways in which the Victorian Gothic was manifested. To that end there are contributions … which explore its presence on the stage, in poetry, and in specific textual formations such as the ghost story' (6). Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy state that the Gothic has been defined according to its emphasis on the returning past just like to its interest in transgression and decay, its aesthetics of fear and its combination of reality and fantasy (1). Referring to Victorian Gothic, Alexandra Warwick says that '... in the popular imagination Victorian is in many ways the Gothic period, with its elaborate cult of death and mourning, its fascination with ghosts, spiritualism and the occult ...' (29). She also alludes to the fact that, throughout the century, there were a great number of writers who were interested in the Gothic, even though they were more frequently associated with realism, mentioning George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Disappearances* (1851) as examples.

Victorian Gothic articulated the political and social matters of the time in contemporary settings, but the anxiety of the legacies of the past also remains, now intensified by the self-consciousness of modernity. Warwick mentions that '[t]he earlier work of Dickens and the Brontës has enabled the Gothic to come home, from the cultural, geographical, religious and chronological margins to permeate every area of Victorian life: domesticity, the family, the streets, the empire, the future' (35). Warwick also refers to the Brontë sisters' depiction of domestic spaces, marriage, and family life —all supposedly safe and peaceful spaces— as terrifying places where mean events happened.

In addition to this, Warwick alludes to the way they address gender issues in their fiction:

> The novels are full of images of doors and windows, with women inside prevented from leaving and the same women outside, barred from entering. Their desire to be inside or outside switches constantly through the narratives, and the consequences are shown as potentially fatal to the women. The ambivalent desires are associated with Gothic images: the crazed laughter from the attic in *Jane Eyre* (1847); the desperate ghost in *Wuthering Heights* (1847); the dead nun in *Villette* (1853). The Brontës' novels take up the questions of gender that are apparent in earlier Gothic, but within the highly wrought drama of the stories the heroines are modern women seeking a place for themselves in a world that is hostile to them. (31)

As in the case of the Brontë sisters' writings, we can also observe that social evils of different nature are present in all of Gaskell's literary works. Sometimes they appear openly and with a clear authorial intention of denouncing them. In other texts, their presence is subtle, but they are always there. Within her major novels, we find the conflict between masters and labourers; the living conditions of the poorest in large industrial cities; the social and cultural differences between the north and the south of the country; or women's situation and their rights (or lack thereof). This latter issue, which appears intermingled with others in Gaskell's social novels, becomes the main topic of her short fiction, especially her Gothic tales, in which Gaskell confronts the reader with questions such as girls' lack of education, male tyranny exerted over women by fathers and husbands, and the female rivalry that arises as a result of the so-called "marriage market."

It is worth noting Laura Kranzler's introduction to her edition of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Gothic Tales* (2004), where she underlines the fact that, in Gaskell's Gothic stories, female characters often appear as victims of male characters. In these stories, the domestic space is the place where women are most vulnerable and threatened by danger, a danger that comes from men who exercise tyrannical authority over them, supported by the patriarchal Victorian society in which they live. Like those of the Brontë sisters, Gaskell's Gothic narratives

depict that, in the nineteenth century, danger for women came from home, a supposedly peaceful and safe place, an idea supported by several critics, like Julia McCord who, in her analysis of "Lois the Witch" and "The Grey Woman," states that "[i]n an extension of the Brontë sisters' pioneering fiction of the 1840s, Gaskell resituates Gothic villainy in these stories within domestic spaces and familial relationships" (McCord 59).

Kranzler links Gaskell's Gothic narratives to her concern for women:

> In Gaskell's Gothic scenarios, it is usually the female characters who are victimized by the males, and it is this investment in exposing the conflict between the powerful and the powerless that links the stories and novellas most explicitly with the themes of her better-known full-length works. ... Part of what constitutes the Gothic experience in these stories is the split between different forms of identity and between different forms of authority—in terms of gender, history and textuality—and how those boundaries are themselves transgressed. In Gaskell's stories and novellas, what has been repressed continues to return, fact continually merges into fiction, and it is these shifts between what is real and what is imagined—seeing that ghost in the everyday street—that makes these stories so compelling. (Kranzler xi–xii)

However, as will be seen throughout this study, Gaskell also demonstrates that when the standard family fails, other family possibilities emerge, and she presents a deep analysis of human nature, displaying how men did not have the exclusive right to evil and tyranny, but women could also exercise them.

2. Gothic Features in Gaskell's Texts

Regarding Gothic features, Warwick's words are worth recalling here. When referring to Victorian Gothic, this scholar maintains that '... in the popular imagination Victorian is in many ways the Gothic period, with its elaborate cult of death and mourning, its fascination with ghosts, spiritualism and the occult ...' (29). This comment leads us to the ghosts in "The Old Nurse's Story," two of them female and the

other male. The two female ones, who belong to Miss Maud Furnivall and her daughter, are spirits seeking revenge for what they suffered as living souls, coming out against those who caused their sufferings and deaths. Therefore, they appear to torment Grace, Maude's younger sister, for her past actions, as it was her who told her father that Maud was secretly married to their piano teacher, and this led to both Maude's and her daughter's death, as we can see at the end of the tale:

> … 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 …
>
> She lay with her face to the wall, 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!' (Gaskell 31-32)

As for the male ghost of this story, who belongs to Lord Furnivall himself, we encounter a punished soul condemned to wander eternally as punishment for his cruelty. This is due to his discovery of his daughter Maude's secret marriage to a foreign gentleman. As a result of this marriage, Lord Furnival threw Maude and her daughter out of his castle on a dark and stormy night. This led to the death of the child and, subsequently, to Maude's descent into madness and eventual death. In addition to this, Gaskell underscores the point that social condition does not matter: if we act cruelly, sooner or later, we are going to pay for our sins and crimes. Beside the three ghostly figures, this narrative, which is pervaded with mystery and some terror, is made up of elements such as the gloomy castle, mysteries, secrets, and issues not to be talked about, forbidden wings of the castle, stormy nights, lightning, thunders, and music that seems to come from nowhere. All these features remind us of Spooner and McEvoy's statement that Gothic is defined by its interest in transgression and decay, its aesthetics of fear and its combination of reality and fantasy (1).

Warwik's allusion to Victorian fascination with spiritualism and the occult, together with the Gothic's emphasis on the returning past (cf. Spooner and McEvoy 1), brings us back to "Lois the Witch," a text in which witchcraft, the supernatural, the rational versus the irrational, curses, forests, and darkness, form the setting for a story that is set at the time of the famous Salem witch trials of the seventeenth century. Here, Gaskell presents a young woman, Lois, harassed by her cousin Manasseh, a young man disturbed and tormented by the clash between his puritanical morality and his most primitive instincts, and his two sisters, Faith and Prudence, who denounce Lois for witchcraft and thus cause her death. In this story, Gaskell places us before the Gothic topic of "the curse," as Lois had been damned by a woman condemned for witchcraft, when she was a child as vengeance on Lois's father, who refused to help to save that woman from death:

> 'They are fearful creatures, the witches! and yet I am sorry for the poor old women, whilst I dread them. We had one in Barford, when I was a little child. ... I saw old Hannah in the water, her grey hair all streaming down her shoulders, and her face bloody and black with the stones and the mud they had been throwing at her, and her cat tied round her neck. I hid my face, I know, as soon as I saw the fury —poor, helpless, baited creature! —and she caught the sight of me, and cried out, "Parson's wench, parson's wench, yonder, in thy nurse's arms, thy dad hath never tried for to save me, and none shall save thee when thou art brought up for a witch." Oh! the words rang in my ears, when I was dropping asleep, for years after. I used to dream that I was in that pond, all men hating me with their eyes because I was a witch; and, at times, her black cat used to seem living again, and say over those dreadful words.' (Gaskell 149–150)

So, it could be said that Lois's suffering is the result of that spell, which she recalls when she is later accused of witchcraft:

> Lois did not know if the words were in her favour or not. She did not think about them, even; they told less on her than on any person present. She a witch! and the silver glittering Avon, and the drowning woman she had seen in

> her childhood at Barford, —at home in England, —were before her, and her eyes fell before her doom. (Gaskell 205)

The use of a malediction that punishes a daughter for the sins of her father is especially interesting considering that Gaskell argued the idea that descendants should not be penalised because of their parents' faults, an idea previously shown by the author in *Ruth* (Williams 111-114). By using the curse as the possible origin of Lois's fate, Gaskell is once again criticising the fact that Victorian society tended to punish someone because of their parents' sins.

Additionally, Gaskell writes here a tale where lonesomeness is the only companion of the main characters. Manasseh is completely alone in his madness, while his family tries to deny his illness and pretends nothing is wrong. None of his relatives pays real attention to his revelations, and when Lois dies, he leaves, never to return. Faith and Prudence seem to have no friends or anyone to rely on, and when they find that 'someone' in their cousin Lois, they finally betray her causing Lois's death by accusing her of witchcraft. Lois herself is completely alone in a foreign and strange country, surrounded by people who do not like her and treat her as a disturbing burden. Gaskell describes both how she feels completely alone, helpless and condemned by her relatives, and how she longs to be back in England, in the place she actually feels to be her home and with those who really love her. The whole text conveys a strong sense of loneliness, as well as an anguishing atmosphere of tension and pressure.

Finally, something similar happens in "The Grey Woman," where the cruel husband isolates Anna in an old castle, full of intricate passages and unexpected doors, installing her in a suite of rooms set apart. Here, again, isolation and loneliness are Anna's companions, as her husband prevents any contact with her family or anyone else apart from him and his butler.

While reading these tales, readers find gloomy castles and forests, mysteries, secrets that should not be told, stormy nights, lightning, thunders, mysterious music, curses and darkness, all of them Gothic elements used by the author as tools to create the appropriate settings for her tales, settings which help her to achieve her actual intention of

denouncing the social problems of her time. Moreover, it can be argued that Gaskell understood fiction as "one way of telling the truths that cannot be expressed in other ways … and "the Gothic as both a mode of history and a symbolic language of the psychological which could convey the female experience repressed in other modes of writing" (Wallace 67). And it is not only the Gothic itself that gives Gaskell the opportunity to tell such otherwise inexpressible truths, but also the fact of setting the action outside England (as in "Lois, the Witch" and "The Grey Woman") or in the distant past (as in "The Old Nurse's Story"). Thus, as Haefele-Thomas explains:

> In some ways, it could be said that Gaskell was 'playing it safe' by placing the action of "Lois the Witch" and "The Grey Woman" outside England, and thus away from the British imagination. There is, however, a way to read her tales as direct commentaries on many of the controversial social and cultural issues of the day in England. Gaskell's foreign settings enabled her to explore some of these issues that haunted Victorian Britain in the late 1850s and early 1860s more fully. Gaskell's unconventional narrative style – she often ends her tales abruptly – functions much like her setting of the action outside of England in that she breaks the bounds of confinement (which is also particular to Gothic), reiterating on a structural level the layered possibilities for complex queer readings. (50)

3. Gaskell's Gothic characters: neither tyrants nor innocent angels

Within the different Victorian social situations which Gaskell repeatedly denounced through her literary works, male tyranny and female rivalry can be mentioned as those that Gaskell primarily criticises and condemns in the three tales studied here. According to Kranzler (xiii-xiv), Warwick (35), McCord (59), or Ludlow and Styler (9), in the line of the Brontë sisters' and Dickens' earlier work, Gaskell presents the domestic space as the place where women are most vulnerable and threatened by danger, a danger that comes either from men (fathers, lovers, husbands…) who exercise tyrannical authority over them, supported by the patriarchal Victorian society in which they live, or from female family members (sisters, cousins, sisters in law…) moved by jealousy. Therefore, Gaskell's

Gothic tales suggest that in the nineteenth century, danger for women came from home, a place supposedly peaceful and safe.

In "The Old Nurse's Story," Gaskell portrays the competitive dynamics that emerge between women in the pursuit of a marital partner, particularly when they are simultaneously courted by the same man. It is necessary to remember here that nineteenth-century girls were mainly educated with the purpose of finding a husband in the so-called "marriage market" and becoming devoted wives. In "The Old Nurse's Story," Gaskell goes a step further, as in her story those competing for the man in question are sisters, Grace and Maude. Both women are seduced by the same man, a music teacher who, despite marrying Maude in secret, continues courting and giving hope to Grace. When Grace finally discovers her sister's secret marriage, she reveals their relationship and the existence of Maude's daughter to her father, Lord Furnivall. As we have already seen, Grace's revelation leads to the death of both Maude and the child.

It could be suggested here that the lack of female positive alliances may be a result of patriarchy, which permeates society and isolates women, not allowing them to be conscious both of their situation and of their possibilities to change the status quo, but Gaskell's narrative is full of examples of different kinds of female friendships and alliances, such as *Cranford* and its society mainly ruled by women, or the friendship between Molly and Cynthia in *Wives and Daughters*. Gaskell may be criticizing not only Victorian stereotypes and strict social rules, but also those people who, male or female, act with malice, hiding behind those rules and standards. As an example, we can pay attention to the following quote from "The Old Nurse's Story," where we can see a young Grace "with a look of relentless hate and triumphant scorn" while her father drove Maud and her daughter away as a punishment to Maud for her secret marriage:

> 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. ...

> But just then I saw—we all saw—another phantom shape itself, and grow clear out of the blue and misty light that filled the hall; we had not seen her till now, for it was another lady who stood by the old man, with a look of relentless hate and triumphant scorn. ... It was the likeness of Miss [Grace] 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. (Gaskell 30–32)

Jealousy is also the main cause why Lois is denounced for witchcraft in "Lois the Witch." In this case, readers find a young woman, Faith, who, thinking of Lois as a rival for Pastor Nolan's love, accuses her of being a witch (Gaskell 198-201), which finally brings about the death of the latter.

> 'Spare thy breath, cousin Lois. It is easy seeing on what pleasant matters thou and the Pastor Nolan were talking. I marvel not at thy forgetfulness. My mind is changed. Give me back my letter, sir; it was about a poor matter—an old woman's life. And what is that compared to a young girl's love?'
>
> Lois heard but for an instant; did not understand that her cousin, in her jealous anger, could suspect the existence of such a feeling as love between her and Mr Nolan. ...
>
> 'Take care, another time, how you meddle with a witch's 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 arm and looked stealthily at Lois.
>
> 'Witch Lois! Witch Lois!' said she at last, ... (Gaskell 198-201)

Another example of feminine rivalry and jealousy can be found in "The Grey Woman," where Babette's jealousy causes Anna's journey to visit a friend in Carlsruhe, where she meets de la Tourelle, who will end up becoming her husband. In this tale Gaskell presents a situation that

differs from the previous ones. Here Anna and Babette are not rivals in the search for a husband, since Babette is already married and is Anna's sister-in-law, but she is constantly jealous of the latter: "That Babette Müller was, as I may say, the cause of all my life's suffering. … Babette Müller looked upon me as a rival" (Gaskell 292). First, she tries to force her engagement to Karl so that Anna will leave the family home: "And then came thy uncle Fritz's marriage; and Babette was brought to the mill to be its mistress. … by-and-by I began to see that Babette was egging on Karl to make more open love to me, and, as she once said, to get done with it, and take me off to a home of my own." (292-293); afterwards she supports Anna's trip to Carlsruhe:

> Things were in this way when I had an invitation to go to Carlsruhe to visit a schoolfellow, of whom I had been very fond. Babette was all for my going; … When this was ascertained, my father made no opposition to my going; Babette forwarded it by all the means in her power, and even my dear Fritz had his word to say in its favour. … I yielded to circumstances—to the pulling of Sophie and the pushing of Babette. … (293)

And finally, she forces a hasty marriage between Anna and de la Tourelle, not allowing it to take place in Anna's home:

> There was some difficulty, which I afterwards learnt that my sister-in-law had obviated, about my betrothal taking place from home. My father, and Fritz especially, were for having me return to the mill, and there be betrothed, and from thence be married. But the Rupprechts and Monsieur de la Tourelle were equally urgent on the other side; and Babette was unwilling to have the trouble of the commotion at the mill; and also, I think, a little disliked the idea of the contrast of my grander marriage with her own. (297)

Gaskell demonstrates how a young and inexperienced woman in the ins and outs of Victorian society is compelled to an unwanted betrothal to de la Tourelle. When Anna meets him, he seems to be head over heels in love with her, and everybody around her thinks that Anna should feel happy because he has a small chateau, is the owner of some land,

and has a large income, besides being handsome and polite. So, Anna is encouraged to get engaged to de la Tourelle:

> When he was gone away, Madame Rupprecht congratulated me on the conquest I had made; for indeed, he had scarcely spoken to anyone else, ... He was a propriétaire, had a small chateau on Vosges mountains; he owned land there, but had a large income from some sources quite independent of this property. Altogether, he was a good match, as she emphatically observed. She never seemed to think that I could refuse him after this account of his wealth, nor do I believe she would have allowed Sophie a choice, even had he been as old and ugly as he was young and handsome. ... He loaded me with presents, which I was unwilling to take, only Madame Rupprecht seemed to consider me an affected prude if I refused them. ...; by accepting these I doubled the ties which were formed around me by circumstances even more than by my own consent. ... I learned from Madame Rupprecht that she had written to my father to announce the splendid conquest I had made, and to request his presence at my betrothal. I started with astonishment. I had not realized that affairs had gone so far as this. But she asked me, in a stern, offended manner, what I had meant by my conduct if I did not intend to marry Monsieur de la Tourelle—I had received his visits, his presents. All his various advances without showing any unwillingness or repugnance— ... what could I do but hang my head, and silently consent to the rapid enunciation of the only course which now remained for me if I would not be esteemed a heartless coquette all the rest of my days? (Gaskell 297)

These words illustrate Gaskell's denouncement of the Victorian idea of marriage as what every woman should aspire to. Somehow, Madame Rupprecht leads Anna into an unwanted marriage, maybe also moved by jealousy, as it is Anna and not her daughter Sophia who marries de la Tourelle. At this point, it is important to emphasise that Gaskell strives to make clear that danger for women is not only caused by tyrannical

men, but also women. As we have already seen, she repeatedly shows that women are perfectly able to inflict grief, execute wicked actions, cause others' misfortunes, etc. The author also hints that jealousy is a dangerous companion as it can lead a woman to her evillest version.

However, Gaskell does not neglect to deal with male tyranny, which is also exposed and denounced in other writings. We can point out that, after her marriage, Anna moves to live with her husband in his castle. She fears him because after their marriage he becomes rude and bad-tempered, and turns out to be an authoritarian and tyrannical man: "These little events and plans were the only variations in my life for the first twelve months, if I except the alternations in M. de la Tourelle's temper, his unreasonable anger and his passionate fondness" (303). Moreover, de la Tourelle forces Anna to cut off contact both with her family and her friends, compelling her to an isolated life. When Anna discovers that her husband is, also, the leader of a gang of murderers and that he killed his former wife because she knew too much, she is forced to run away to save her life. In her escape, she is assisted by her maid, Amante. It should be mentioned here that both, Amante and her relationship with Anna, have been usually studied by critics as a consequence of the maid's name; her role, as she plays both male and female roles throughout the narrative; and the relationship that flourished between the two characters throughout the story (Reddy (1985), Nectoux (2001), Foster (2013), McCord (2015), among others). In this vein, Haefele-Thomas (2012) points out two different types of relationship between both characters, first a mother-daughter one, while they are still in de la Tourelle's home and at the first steps of their fled, and then a love relationship "through the course of their wanderings as husband and wife" (68), once both cross-dressed entering the queer space of a heterosexual couple. Now, beyond the possible sentimental relationship between Anna and Amante, what Gaskell illustrates here is that other families, beyond the traditional one, are possible. This can also be seen in the novels *Ruth* and *Cranford,* and in "The Old Nurse's Story," as Hester takes care of little Rosamond, and later considers Rosamond's children her own grandchildren. In this regard, we can again mention Haefele-Thomas, who states that:

> Whereas, in "The Old Nurse's Story" and "The Grey Woman," Gaskell takes her critique a step further when she not only exposes the weakness of biological family

> bonds, but through her Gothic kinships, looks to the strength and the tenacity of chosen families that are forged through adversity.
>
> Through those who are truly 'most intimately concerned' – the plucky Hester and the daring Amante – Gaskell exemplifies the ways that emotional ties rather than legal or familial ones can act as revolutionary examples of the ways that 'family' can be defined. These two tales illustrate the ways that gender, class and subversions of 'normative' heterosexual family structures could function together to create transgressive critiques and narratives.
>
> These 'devious' families actually prove to be much more loyal and loving than the ones society then (and now, for that matter) would deem 'normal' and 'good'. For Gaskell, love makes a family. (45)

As a final note on "The Grey Woman," we should mention that Gaskell presents fear as a crucial element in this tale, where she portrays Anna as a character consumed by her persistent fear from her wedding day till the end of her days: fear of her husband, fear of running away, fear that her husband will find and kill her, and fear that the creature that grows inside her (given that at the moment of escape she is pregnant) will be a boy who can follow in his father's footsteps. All these fears end up turning Anna into the grey woman of the title, with a ghostly appearance.

> … But the perpetual state of terror in which I had been during the whole months succeeding my escape from Les Rochers made me loathe the idea of ever again walking in the open daylight, exposed to the sight and recognition of every passer-by… (336)
>
> … there I lived in the same deep retirement, never seeing the full light of day … my yellow hair was grey, my complexion was ashen-coloured, no creature could have recognized the fresh-coloured, bright-haired young woman of eighteen months before. … They called me the Grey Woman. (339)

Another example of male tyranny, as discussed above, is that of Lord Furnivall in "The Old Nurse's Story." Lord Furnivall is described throughout the tale as a fierce, severe old man, eaten up with pride (26), to the point of throwing Maude and her daughter out of his castle when he discovers her secret marriage:

> Once fearful night, just after New Year had come in, when the snow was lying thick and deep, and the flakes were still falling—fast enough to blind anyone who might be about and abroad—there was a great and violent noise heard, and the old lord's voice above all, cursing and swearing awfully, and the cries of a little child, and the proud defiance of a fierce woman, and the sound of a blow, and a dead stillness, and moans and wailings dying away on the hill-side! Then 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 out of doors—her, and her child—and that if ever they gave her help, or food, or shelter, he prayed that they might never enter heaven. (28)

Although in Gaskell's Gothic tales women usually appear as victimized by men (Kranzler, xi), she also shows through her narrative the existence of men such as Lois' father and her beloved, or Anna's father and the doctor to whom she finally marries (Dr. Voss), all of them described by the author as goodhearted, friendly, and affectionate men concerned with the welfare of those around them. In this regard, and after Amante's death, Anna gets married again to a young and tender doctor. He knows Anna's whole story, as Amante tells him on her deathbed, and wants to marry her and protect her and her daughter.

It is interesting to remind the following words of Julia McCord, who defends that:

> Gaskell moves beyond typical feminist critiques of male power within the family and shows women's vital and powerful role in replicating the oppression of the public world within the private sphere ... Stoneman argues,

> Gaskell's inclusion of female tyrants represents "a rational challenge to the institutions of the family and the law ...".
>
> Indeed, Gaskell complicates gendered boundaries in order to deconstruct a Ruskinian notion of home as sanctuary ... Home is not always a refuge, even in the absence of the tyrannical authority wielded by villains of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction ... Patriarchy is not just a problem of male authority, in other words, but instead an invasive and systemic problem within the family structure itself ... (70)

It can be suggested that one of the main intentions of Gaskell's writing is to show that not everything was so polarized in the Victorian period, a time maybe characterised by more greyness than what has traditionally been assumed. And to do so, Gaskell goes beyond the typical feminist critique and shows in her works the vital and powerful role of women. Thus, the fact that Gaskell complicates gendered boundaries through the representation of not just strong and powerful women, but also wicked ones, as well as presenting men who do not fit to the villain stereotype, rather than a challenge to the institution of the family, it can be considered an example of the greyness she tries to reflect.

Gaskell believes in the institution of the family, but she is also aware of its imperfections and dangers and, as the realist author she is, she exposes them in her writings. Furthermore, both in her major novels and in her tales, Gaskell always confronts the reader with characters that do not follow the Victorian stereotypes, as *effeminate* men (Mr Hale in *North and South*, Osborne Hamley in *Wives and Daughters*, de la Tourelle in "The Grey Woman"), *manly* women (Amante in 'The Grey Woman'), kind and good-natured men (Job Legh in *Mary Barton*, doctor Voss in 'The Grey Woman', …) alongside cruel and tyrannical ones (de la Tourelle in "The Grey Woman", young Mr Carson in *Mary Barton*, Bellingham in *Ruth*, ...), and strong and independent women (Mary in *Mary Barton*, Margaret in *North and South*, Molly in *Wives and Daughters*, …) among others, and being all of them examples of the fact that Victorian period, as we have just mentioned, was perhaps a time characterised by more greyness than what has traditionally been assumed.

4. Conclusion

Issues such as domesticity problems, the dark side of female identity, and the tyranny of a patriarchal society like the Victorian one, which victimised and subjugated its women, are the main problems that Gaskell presents and condemns in her short fiction, where danger for women comes from home, a supposedly peaceful and safe space. This danger is even more interesting to find in the works of a writer like Gaskell, who is known for her defence of marriage and domestic life. In addition, the threat comes not only from tyrannical fathers or husbands but also from sisters, female cousins, or sisters-in-law. Thus, through these stories Gaskell denounces the social problems of her time by giving voice to silenced women. It can be concluded that the importance of Gaskell's Gothic tales lies in the fact that, in her texts, what is truly terrifying is the actual possibility of their realisation. More than the supernatural elements, gloomy castles, and tense atmospheres, which are mere settings or consequences of evil acts, what are frightening are their causes: jealousy, revenge, tyranny, etc. These are, culturally and socially speaking, the evils of her time, and what Gaskell actually denounces in her works. The choice of a non-realistic genre such as the Gothic may have made it easier for readers to accept and assimilate what she wanted to denounce. And, as Elizabeth Ludlow and Rebecca Styler state, "The form of the short story is not accidental to these Gothic themes, since it could evade the pressure towards resolution that novels were bound by to please the popular taste pandered to by circulating libraries" (10). As Margaret Davison has pointed out, the Gothic "serves as a barometer of socio-cultural anxieties in its exploration of the dark side of individuals, cultures and nations – to interrogate socially dictated and institutionally entrenched attitudes and laws relating to gender roles, identities and relations" (125), to explore new ways to convey social criticism and reach the public.

Thus, we can finally conclude that Gaskell was aware of the world in which she lived and clearly denounced the woes of her time in all her texts, condemning, as we have seen, male tyranny and the situation of Victorian women, thus giving voice to the voiceless. But, as a woman who was aware of the world around her, she also criticised those who, moved by jealousy, envy, pride... acted maliciously, regardless of their sex or status, thereby showing that not every man was a tyrant and nor every woman an innocent victim. And, to this end, she turned to the

Gothic since, thanks to the distance the genre itself establishes between reality and fiction, it allowed her to launch sharper and more incisive criticism.

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