Elizabeth Gaskell was a Victorian English writer active during the mid-1800s. Her chilling tale *The Old Nurse’s Story* begs the question: what are ghosts, and why? Inspired by the sordid events of the past, Gaskell’s ghosts reach desperately for the living. Furnivall Manor House has been transformed from a place of domestic placidity, to a realm of ghastly torture. The titular nurse must compete with the spirits for control over her young ward. Both sides vie passionately, but in the end, the living must trump the dead.

The ghosts of Gaskell’s story have two functions. First, they are there to literally scare the living. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, they serve to enforce the Victorian ideals of class and gender. Throughout this presentation, I will argue for the idea that Gaskell’s ghosts act to represent rifts in class within the grand Victorian household. As I move forward with my presentation, consider what you already know about ghosts (or what you suppose to know). Think about them as objects moving through the world, creating chaos in the wake of orderliness. These presuppositions of ghostly behavior are the basis for my argument.

To begin, I will take you through a tour of the Victorian house and Furnivall Manor House, wherein Gaskell’s story takes place. It is important to consider the home when analyzing this kind of story, because it has been effectively poisoned by the dead. The home is as much wracked with the guilt of the dead as the dead themselves. The Victorian household was a zone of order. To violate the laws of this zone was to become nothing more than a crook, a wretch, and even a phantom. Hester, the narrator and nurse, happily muses about the fame and upkeep of Furnivall Manor House. This is to be where she will raise her ward, little Rosamond. However, when the pair comes upon the grounds of the property, Hester remarks, “We had left all signs of a town, or even a village, and were then inside the gates of a large wild park—not like the parks
here in the north, but with rocks, and the noise of running water, and gnarled thorn-trees, and old oaks, all white and peeled with age” (Gaskell 3). Some of the values maintained by the Victorian upper-classes are all-too apparent here.

When Hester describes Furnivall Manor as a park, she is basically describing a wild land. Quirks which we might associate with natural growth and peace are here associated with unnatural wildness. The running water is noisy, the rocks and the old trees are unsightly—this is no place to raise a child. It is also true that the income of a home like Furnivall Manor would imply well-kept grounds, but Hester describes a “park” in complete disarray. Not only are the grounds of Furnivall Manor in complete disarray, but the interior state of the home is also called into question. After Hester and Rosamond are shown their rooms, Hester remarks that, “I began to think I should be lost in that wilderness of a house” (Gaskell 4). The home’s interior, although maintained by servants, is marked by a confusing layout and old, dark furniture. There is an oppressive quality to the rooms and fixtures. It is perhaps the perfect setting for a ghost story. Something has gone wrong for this once stately home to fall into a zone of disorder.

The ideal Victorian house was meticulously maintained for expressing status and material wealth. The disarray with which Hester and Rosamond are faced proves that something is wrong with the manor socially. For the Victorian middle- and upper-classes, the house was a mask. It spoke more to outsiders about the lives and habits of the inhabitants than perhaps did the inhabitants themselves. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue that, “Great effort went into creating a life programme which would at once guide their own aims and behaviour while proclaiming status and spreading influence to others” (Davidoff and Hall 357). This “life programme” that Davidoff and Hall mention was key for the survival of the Victorian lifestyle. There was once a semblance of a guided lifestyle within this home. Old Lord Furnivall, who I
will discuss in greater detail later, was firmly set in his upper-class ways. Despite his once-rigid rule, at the current Furnivall Manor House, there seems to be no life program at all. In fact, with the entire place surrounded by disarray, it seems that there is something terribly wrong.

The disintegration of this life program can be traced back to the secret marriage between Miss Maude—an expired lady of the Furnivall family—and a mysterious “dark foreigner,” who once acted as a music instructor to the Furnivall family. This marriage resulted in the birth of an arguably mixed-raced child, and eventually, mother and child would perish together. After the deaths, the little girl would return to haunt the dying mansion. My argument is that the Furnivall ghosts represent rifts in the culturally established class hierarchy, and the appearances of this little girl throughout the story prove this point. If her death was restful and not the result of her mother’s social wandering, she would have no reason to beg for recognition from Rosamond and Hester.

Being a creature born of a woman of high rank, and a basically servile father, this girl is in-between classes. During the era of the Victorians, this notion of classlessness was unheard of. In fact, the way she goes about the Manor property is all-too telling of her external class confusion. Upon seeing the girl fully, Hester remarks, “I turned towards the long narrow windows, and there, sure enough, I saw a little girl…crying, and beating against the window-panes, as if she wanted to be let in” (Gaskell 12). No proper little girl would be outside unsupervised, especially within the wintry realm of this tale. Her desperate attempts to infiltrate Furnivall Manor House are not just a tactic for spooking the living. She is unconsciously struggling to climb the social ladder from beyond the grave. Her lineage, however, fully blocks her from entering the relative comforts of the Manor. Even in death, she is but a dirty imp in the blizzard.
Her existence, at first, is a puzzle for Hester. She cannot see this little girl until the tale winds towards its end, but Rosamond has repeatedly whined about the presence of a sobbing little girl left out in the cold. As a ghost, the little girl is clearly not bound by the earthly laws of mortals. It could very well be that she had no desire to appear in full power before a strange adult. However, I argue that her “choosiness” in who she appears before has nothing to do with her own will. She cannot appear before Hester in full power because she would not be able to even as a living human. Even when Hester does attest to seeing the ghost, the experience is missing vital information. Hester explains, “although the Phantom Child had seemed to put forth all its force; and, although I had seen it wail and cry, no faintest touch of sound had fallen upon my ears” (Gaskell 12). The little girl’s status as a mixed-child of illicit breeding would mean that any self-respecting adult would have avoided her in life, or she would have avoided them. Hester cannot hear her because she would not have deigned to hear her anyway. Her mixed blood has poisoned all her opportunities. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—she was struck down before she could taste the true exclusivity of Victorian class.

While this little ghost girl is at one end of the Victorian class spectrum, the other chief specter of the tale is at the opposing end. Old Lord Furnivall, who I had mentioned earlier, thunders about Furnivall Manor House with as must gusto as the little girl beating at the fringes. His role in the hauntings serves to further establish Victorian class ideals. He was once the patriarch of the house, but even in death, he still clings to the role by channeling his energy through the hefty organ. His sounding off on the organ is the very first sign of the paranormal that Hester encounters. Upon investigating the organ herself, after extracting rumors that Lord Furnivall’s ghost was to blame, Hester discovered that “it was all broken and destroyed inside, though it looked so brave and fine” (Gaskell 7). In life, Lord Furnivall had been very attached to
the instrument and played at it whenever the mood struck. In terms of the literal ghostly affect here, it should be obvious: haunted instruments are scary, but a haunted organ encroaches upon the pinnacle of fear.

As I mentioned before, the roles of the ghosts within this story are two-fold: they are meant to scare, and they are shrouded in hidden social meaning. In the case of Lord Furnivall and his organ, the pair represent the dominance of the male within the Victorian household. What makes this interpretation particularly interesting is that the house was undoubtedly the sphere of the woman. This cantankerous old man, even in death, cannot shed his thirst for control. According to Aviva Briefel, the haunted instrument is a common trope among Victorian ghost stories. She writes, “The rhetoric of haunting readily lends itself to describing furniture possessing the agency to define its owners in moral and aesthetic terms” (Briefel 211). Briefel’s analyses of haunted furniture plays easily into my analysis of Lord Furnivall and his dreaded organ. Just as Briefel states in the previous quote, Lord Furnivall’s personality is perfectly encapsulated within the body of the organ.

While this may seem like a trivial point, don’t let the innocuousness of a self-playing organ fool you. To imagine an organ is to imagine power, grace, and luxury. It is possible that only the wealthiest classes in Victorian England could afford such an instrument. Lord Furnivall’s phantom smashes at the organ, and this relationship between spirit and instrument enforces the strict Victorian class ideals. Lord Furnivall will not let death stop him from ringing out his wealth and power around the house. No servile spirit could let loose on those keys. That right was reserved for the wealthy elite only.

The organ is not the only incident of haunted objects within this tale. Towards the end of the story, Hester encounters a chilling scene of unreality when she comes across the great room
fully lit, but cold as ice. She relates that, “I noticed that the great bronze chandelier seemed all alight, though the hall was dim, and that a fire was blazing in the vast hearth-place, though it gave no heat; and I shuddered with terror” (Gaskell 17). While this kind of haunting seems distant from the social importance carried within the humanoid ghosts, it is socially important in a not-so different manner.

Function within the Victorian home was important not just for the latent reasons of comfort and safety. Functioning objects were key in maintaining social order and status. The organ plays despite being broken, and the flames in the great hall burn but afford no comfort. These objects are dysfunctional. In the literal sense, they are frightening in their dysfunctionality. In the social metaphorical sense, their dysfunctionality speaks to the social transgressions within Furnivall Manor House. As Hester and Rosamond noticed on their foray through the wilderness-like grounds of the home, something is very wrong here. Objects should function. If the objects within Furnivall Manor refuse to function normally, then the people and spirits within are granted license to behave however they wish.

Ghosts fascinate. Their presence is a grim reminder of what lies beyond, be that extended torment or rage satisfied. Throughout this discussion, I’ve argued that the ghosts of Elizabeth Gaskell’s The Old Nurse’s Story exist as representations of the strict and unstable class ideals of the Victorian era. I’ve also argued that the setting of the tale, Furnivall Manor House, has bred this dysfunction by being dysfunctional in and of itself. The ghosts have free reign to continue the class debate from beyond the grave, whether they are conscious of this or otherwise. If ghosts weigh in on our ideas of class, they certainly inhabit a realm far from our own.