

The presentation of the woman in black essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

'The Woman in Black' is written in the style of a classic ghost story. There must always be a purpose for the ghost to haunt, atmosphere, a haunted house and a sceptic who does not believe in ghosts. The woman in black has a serious underlying purpose. The novel starts with a scene so normal, so familiar, so safe and builds up to a frightening crescendo that will "haunt" the reader long after the book is put down. The Woman in Black is presented throughout the novel as a woman seeking revenge on the innocent. She is angry with society and instils fear, tension and horror in all who come into contact with her.

I am going to explore the appearances of the woman in black and how she affects both the reader and other characters within the novel. It was at the funeral that Arthur Kipps first saw the tall, emaciated woman dressed in black. The mood is solemn, cold, sad and mournful in contrast to the previous chapter which emphasises warmth, comfort, and a feeling of general well being. As Arthur Kipps leaves the hotel, a sense of encroaching sadness and isolation is created. This takes the reader from one extreme to the next.

When the woman in black appears, she is presented as a 'living' person, Arthur Kipps even hears the 'rustle' of her dress. The choice of adjectives that Susan Hill uses to describe her, (pg49) 'only the thinnest layer of flesh was tautly stretched and strained across her bones.. ' 'victim of starvation' ' the black of her clothes contrasting against the blue-white sheen of her skin' . provide the reader with a frightful image. Hill uses narrative strategies to create a sense of a strange and threatening reality that cannot be spoken of and that lies just beyond the threshold of normality.

Susan Hill encourages the reader to feel sympathetic towards the woman in black even though they are repulsed by her. Arthur Kipps also appears to feel sympathetic towards her believing her to be another mourner at the funeral. There is a developing irony that the reader is beginning to understand more than Kipps does, an impression which is strengthened by Mr Jerome's reaction when Kipps asks about her on (pg 51-53), and by the farmer's reaction over lunch on (pg 56-57). Mr Jerome, portrayed as courteous and businesslike, like nothing could shake him! (pg47).

However, upon Kipps mentioning the woman in black, he ' looked frozen, pale, corners of his lips tinged with blue' ' as though making an extreme effort to pull himself together after suffering a momentous shock'. Powerful words chosen by Hill, the reader can actually see an image of Mr Jerome in tremendous fear. Kipps is getting agitated of ' the half-hints', ' superstition and tittle tattle' (pg57) or at least this is what he is choosing to believe at this stage. It is cleverly chosen words that provide images for the reader, creating fear, suspense and mystery.

Who is this mysterious woman... is she is a ghost? As Kipps arrives at Eel Marsh house (pg 61), just before the second appearance of the woman in black, Hill creates an emphasis on Kipps's five physical senses. ' I want to wander about freely and slowly, take it all in through every one of my senses. ' Does this by implication also include his ' sixth sense'? Throughout the novel there are hints that Kipps has a sixth sense but that he distrusts it. Hill builds tension in the paragraphs on (pg 62-65) (from ' But I did not go inside... ') leading up to the second appearance.

The name 'Eel Marsh House' itself is a play on words, it sounds eerie and ghastly, its description, cold and chilling 'isolated', in flat, 'bleak', marshy wetlands plays heavily on atmosphere and mood. She brings the black moors surrounding the House to life with vivid imagery. Hill suggests the evil nature of the woman in black on (pg 65-66) 'desperate, yearning malevolence, hatred' 'eyes sunken' which suggests a ghostly apparition. Kipps was afraid, 'never known my knees to tremble and my flesh to creep' 'heart pounding in my chest like a hammer on an anvil.

Hill uses similies to make the image more vivid and real, the reader can imagine how Kipps was feeling. Kipps is angry now she has gone, perhaps because of the emotions that she aroused in him. He is starting to wonder 'who she was - or what' (pg 66), although being a rational man, he doesn't want to believe that she is a ghost. The effect that she had on him was of 'indescribable repulsion and fear'. This second appearance of the woman in black has a completely different effect on Arthus Kipps and us, the readers.

Whilst we felt sympathetic towards her before, now she conjures up a vision of pure terror and evil. Kipps actually begins to question whether or not she is in fact a ghost. The narrative appears to play on our ironic sense that Kipps is an innocent who is in more danger than he realises. The experience of evil is by its nature mysterious. Kipps comment that 'the words seem hopelessly inadequate to express what I saw' (pg65) acknowledges the problem of expressing a sensation that seems to lie beyond words.

Evil is suggested by Hill using a combination of images, symbols, situation, atmosphere and principally a focus on the effects on a character who

experiences it. The third time we are aware of the woman in black is when Arthur Kipps hears the accident with the pony and trap, (pg 74-75) ‘ the shrill neighing and whinnying of a horse in panic’ and ‘ a cry, shout, a terrified sobbing’ believed to come from a child. The narrative creates a sense of distorted perceptions on (pg 73-75).

Initially, Kipps thinks it is a real accident and is horrified that he was unable to help. Shaken by his experiences, Kipps becomes angry at his foolishness in ignoring ‘ all the hints and veiled warnings’ he had received about Eel Marsh House ‘ and to long – no, to pray – for some kind of speedy deliverance and to be back in the safety and comforting business and clamour of London, among friends – and with Stella’ (pg 76-77) However, as the opening chapter suggested, he will never regain the normality he craves; he now knows too much.

Kipps noticed in Keckwick that he knew something had happened to him, “ his manner also told me unmistakably that he did not wish to hear what it was, to ask or answer questions (pg 80-81). Kipps is starting to realise that the pony and trap accident had not been real, it was ‘ ghostly’ (pg 82) Hill creates a vision of darkness, mystery and suspense for the reader not to mention intense fear as to what is happening to the child. Although Kipps did not actually see the woman in black, it is evident that she is now playing mind games to terrify him.

She is still causing things to happen creating a different sense of terror and fear of the unknown. Kipps realises that both Keckwick and the landlord put up ‘ a barrier against all inquiry’. Kipps did not ask any questions, which

creates more suspense for the reader. What is the secret that everyone is trying to hide? At this point, Kipps is psychologically affected, he is having nightmares, it is like he is going mad, keeps hearing over and over again the pony and trap accident.

He senses her powerful presence in his dreams, this really unsettles the reader. (pg152). Kipps is also having nightmares, 'in mental turmoil' 'the woman in black seemed to haunt me, even here, to sit on the end of my bed, to push her face suddenly down close to mine'. This experience of the woman in black is more frightening than the last for both the reader and Kipps. Hill has used alliteration with the 'clip clop' of the pony's hooves, (pg115), a sound that stays with the reader as it does with Kipps throughout the rest of the novel. The final sighting of the woman in black is at the end of the novel, (pg 158).

I looked at her and she at me' 'I felt the renewed power emanating from her, the malevolence and hatred and passionate bitterness. ' 'Our baby son had been thrown clear, clear against another tree. He lay crumpled on the grass below it, dead. ' Hill uses extremely powerful words in this horrific ending. She uses short, sharp sentences, strong description to add to the impact. The woman in black has finally acted out her curse and goes on wreaking revenge on the innocent for what has happened to her, even after her death. She has never let go, can never move on.

As she could not in life, so she cannot after life (Susan Hill). Kipps concludes of the woman in black that 'her bitterness was understandable, the wickedness that led her to take away other women's children because she

had lost her own, understandable too but not forgivable' (pg155). The woman in black can be interpreted as a story of lost innocence. It is an atmospheric, supernatural tale of evil, terror and revenge which sent chills down my spine on more than one occasion. The story unfolds and builds the mystery and horror up to a crescendo that almost leaves one gasping.

Hill starts the novel with the narrator an old man living at Monk's Piece with his stepfamily. The name ' Monk's Piece' is a play on words. He is content, happy and peaceful, perhaps this is an attempt to give the reader hope that whatever happens throughout the novel, in the end he does find peace. The book's strength is in the character of Arthur Kipps. He is immensely likable and level-headed. It is easy to relate to him. He's naturally sceptical when first presented with the possibility of a haunting but eventually he accepts the evidence.

When he sets off to spend a few days in the isolated mansion, you feel like shouting, " Are you crazy? Don't stay there overnight," You feel for Arthur Kipps in his trials and tribulations dealing with the Woman in Black. I particularly liked the way the spectral happenings were presented. There was no blood, no gore, just a brooding sense of evil and mystery. I also enjoyed the relationships Arthur establishes with the kindly Samuel Daily and the little dog Spider that Samuel lends to him to keep him company in his ill-advised sojourn to the haunted house.

Stella always remains on the edge of the story, a part of the normal world that Kipps has temporarily left behind. Susan Hill packs this novel with twists, turns and the unexpected at almost every turn of the page. The description

of the brooding countryside, the house and surrounding marshes is at times beautiful, but always spooky, chilling in a manner far more piercing than the cold marsh mists integral to the plot. That unexpected final twist will keep this story in your subconscious for a long time.