



THE WOMAN IN BLACK KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

Context – *The Woman in Black* was written by Susan Hill and was published in 1983.

Susan Hill – Susan Hill CBE (born 1942) is an English author of both fiction and non-fiction works. Many of her texts are written in a descriptive gothic style. She has expressed a keen interest in the traditional English ghost story, enjoying its use of suspense and atmosphere to create an impact. Her novella *The Woman in Black* was turned into a play in 1987 and has continued to run in the West End since.



Unwed Motherhood – To give birth out of wedlock was frowned upon as recently as the mid-twentieth century. However, in the Victorian era, the situation was even worse, as many unmarried women were forced to give up their babies for adoption. It was deemed that no woman could raise a child born outside marriage and remain in 'polite society.' In *The Woman in Black*, the unmarried Jennet is forced to give up her child.



The Victorian Era – The Victorian era describes the period in which Queen Victoria sat on the English throne – between 1837 and 1901. Whilst this was a time of industrial revolution, it was also an extremely harsh time to live, and the differences between the lives of the richest and the poorest were exacerbated. The Victorian era was a period of great change. In this time, the population of England doubled – from 16.8 million 1851 to over 30 million in 1901. Many of the events of *The Woman in Black* take place in this harsh period of English history.



Health and Death – Healthcare was more of a luxury at the time, and medicine was nowhere near as advanced today. Many diseases were rife, and childbirth and poverty were very real dangers to people living in the era. As a result, a middle class person may expect to live to 45 at the time, whereas a working class person would have been lucky to live half that time. In *The Woman in Black* Jennet Humfrye dies from a wasting disease at a relatively young age – this would have been far more common than now.



The Supernatural – In the Victorian era and the early twentieth century (when the different plot elements of *The Woman in Black* take place) science and understanding of the world was far less advanced than in the present day. As a result, people at the time would be far more likely to believe that unexplained events were the result of supernatural activity. This lack of scientific enlightenment makes the era highly suitable for a story featuring supernatural elements.



The North of England – The setting for Eel Marsh House is in the north of England. Even today, the north of the country is far more sparsely populated than the south, but in the time when the story was set, this would have been even more so the case. This idea of remote isolation adds to the cold, ghostly atmosphere that runs throughout the novella. Susan Hill herself was born and raised in Scarborough, a seaside town in North Yorkshire.



Main Characters – Consider what Hill intended through her characterisation of each of the below...

Arthur Kipps – Arthur is the main protagonist of the story. He tells the events several years later, although he is clearly still internally haunted by the events at Crythin Gifford many years earlier, when he visited Eel Marsh House as young solicitor. He is rational and pragmatic, who at first casts aside apparitions as features of reality. In the end, he has his wife and young child unfairly taken from him.

Quote: "I clung to the prosaic, the visible and tangible."

Mr Jerome – Mr Jerome is a local land agent, who dealt with Alice Drablow before her death. Throughout much of his appearances in the book, Jerome lives in fear of the Woman in Black (there is even a chapter named 'Mr Jerome is Afraid') although crucially, he never reveals the cause of his fear to Arthur. Jerome often appears as a 'broken man' – it is later revealed that he lost a child to the woman.

Quote: "I'm afraid I can't offer you help, Mr. Kipps. Oh, no."

The Woman in Black – The Woman in Black is the ghost of Jennet Humfrye, filled with anger and vengeance over the death of her young son years before. She is bitter about giving up her child to Alice Drablow, and this increases exponentially after she watches him die in Alice's care. As the Woman in Black, she returns as the pale, wasted version of herself from just before her death, and causes the death of a child every time that she is seen.

Quote: "I shall kill us both before I let him go."

Sam Daily – Sam is a large, friendly, prosperous local man who befriends Arthur on his trip to Crythin Gifford. Aside from Keckwick, he is the only person in the town who offers to help Arthur. He returns to Eel Marsh House to help him when worried about his welfare and lends Arthur his dog, Spider, to keep him company. In the end, he is the character who reveals the truth to Arthur.

Quote: "big man, with a beefy face and huge raw-looking hands"

Keckwick – Keckwick is the driver of the pony and trap, who delivers Arthur to and from Eel Marsh House – the only character (barring Sam Daily at the end) who will set foot near the place. He is a quiet character, who barely says a word to Arthur throughout their journeys. However, he does represent Arthur's one link to the town – helpful when considering his father died in the marshes.

Quote: "For answer, he simply pulled on the pony's rein"

Mr Bentley – Mr Bentley is Arthur's employer, who is the one who sends Arthur off to Crythin Gifford in the first place. Although Arthur doesn't blame Bentley for the events that follow, it is clear that Bentley at least partially blames himself. Through compliance towards his boss's orders, not only did Arthur need to venture north to Eel Marsh House, but he also remained there even when it was clear that something was wrong – he felt a need to get the job done.

Quote: "He had always blamed himself for what happened to me."

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Isolation – The Woman in Black is set pretty much in the middle of nowhere, near an extremely remote coastal town in the north. Eel Marsh House itself is separated from both the town and the rest of the world by the fogs and bogs of its tidal causeway. This sense of extreme isolation adds to the feeling of melancholy and despair. Even as an older man, Arthur is isolated by the thoughts of his horrific past.

Revenge – Jennet Humfrye commits her hauntings after death, each time causing the death of a child. She does so, seemingly, in revenge for the death of her own son, Nathaniel. Even though his death was an accident, Jennet's anger at not being allowed to raise her child herself causes her to take revenge on other people's children, even Arthur's in the end.



Mental and Physical Illness – Witnessing her son Nathaniel's death drives Jennet Humfrye to both mental and physical sickness – mental illness in the sense that she longs for revenge and becomes obsessed with others suffering the same pain as her (even after death) and physical because she contracts some form of violent wasting disease, which makes her skin shrink to her bones until her death.

The Supernatural – The presence of both the Woman in Black herself and the pony and trap add supernatural features. Arthur becomes aware of this despite the fact that he previously did not believe. As an older man, he finds it insulting when others tell grotesque stories of horror and gore, knowing that these are nowhere near as painful or horrific as a 'real-life' haunting such as his.



Chapter-by-Chapter Summary – Alongside key quotations from each scene.

Christmas Eve/ A London Particular

Arthur Kipps is at home with his family at Christmas Eve, when his wife's children, when they begin telling ghost stories. Arthur grows increasingly uncomfortable with their stories, and eventually storms out of the house, clearly disturbed. This is when he decides to write down what happened to him many years ago. Arthur tells how when he was 23 years old, he was a young solicitor in London. He is sent on a business trip by his boss, Mr Bentley, to attend her funeral and sort out her affairs. She lives in a remote place called Eel Marsh House, a few miles from a town named Crythin Gifford. He sets off north on the train.

"I was the one who, to judge by my agitation of this evening, was still affected by it deeply, it was from me alone that the ghost must be driven."



The Journey North/ The Funeral of Mrs Drablow

Arthur experiences an increasingly cold and uncomfortable trip up north. He is reading through Alice Drablow's files when a man introduces himself as Sam Daily. He takes some interest in the file, and complains about life in the countryside. He offers Arthur a ride in his automobile. Arthur is dropped at the hotel, where the innkeeper acts strangely when he tries to speak about Alice Drablow. Arthur sleeps well and is picked up by Mr Jerome the next day. Almost no one is at the service but Arthur sees a young woman dressed all in black, who is suffering from a wasting disease. Mr Jerome acts extremely distressed when Arthur mentions the lady, claiming he saw no one. Arthur departs for Eel Marsh House.

I began to be less comfortable, for here the air was a great deal colder and blowing in gusts from the east with an unpleasant rain upon its breath'



Across the Causeway/ The Sound of a Pony and Trap

A man named Keckwick takes Arthur to Eel Marsh House. It is over a causeway, and becomes separated from the mainland when the tide comes up. Keckwick leaves. Arthur is looking over the grounds, when he finds a burial ground. As he looks at some graves, he sees the woman dressed in black again in the distance. This time she is looking at him, malevolently. He runs over, but can't find her. He starts to think she may be a ghost. He goes into the house. He realises it will be a long job, and Keckwick will return soon, so he begins to walk across the causeway. Along the path, he hears the sound of a pony and trap sinking in the mud and a child dying. He runs back inside, tries to get into a door (that is locked) and then falls asleep on the sofa. Keckwick picks him up at 2am.

"It was as though she was searching for something she wanted, needed—must have, more than life itself, and which had been taken from her."



Mr Jerome is Afraid/ Spider

Arthur decides that he wants no more to do with the Drablow affair, and attempts to get Mr Jerome to sort the papers instead. However, Jerome seems terrified by the idea and refuses. He says vague things about stories and ghouls. Arthur then writes a letter to Mr Bentley to tell him that the Eel Marsh House job may take a while. Arthur has a bike ride, and then has dinner with Sam Daily. Arthur decides to spend the next two nights at Eel Marsh House to get the work done. Sam doesn't think that it is a great idea to go alone and so lends him his dog, Spider. Spider is only a small dog, but offers Arthur some comfort.

"and because the cry of that child would never, I was sure, leave me for the rest of my life."



In the Nursery/ Whistle and I'll Come to You

Arthur returns to Eel Marsh House with Spider. He goes through the papers, and studies the graves once more, before going to bed. He awakes in the middle of the night with Spider standing at the bedroom door, growling. He follows Spider down the corridor to the locked room, and hears a sound behind him. Spider then calms down. After returning briefly to town the next day, Arthur finds some letters to Alice from someone named Jennet. It seems Jennet gave up her child for the Drablows to raise. Spider then hears a noise and they race outside – it is the ghostly noise of the pony and trap again. Returning back to the house, Arthur finds the formerly locked door wide open. In the room is a nursery, with a chair rocking by itself. He can't figure it out, so returns to bed. When he awakes, it's windy and dark. He takes Spider outside. Spider hears a whistle and races into the marsh – Arthur has to struggle to save her from sinking. As he is walking back to the house with Spider, Arthur looks up and sees the Woman in Black watching him from the nursery window.

"My whole body was trembling, my mouth dry, the palms of my hands sore where I had dug my nails into them as I had stood..."



A Packet of Letters/ The Woman in Black

When Arthur awakes, Sam Daily is at the house. Arthur explains all that he has seen to Sam, and they return to Crythin Gifford. Back at the inn, Arthur finds the death certificate of Nathaniel Drablow – Jennet's son, who died in the marsh. Sam confirms that Jennet got pregnant out of wedlock, and so Alice adopted the boy. Jennet came to live with them to see the boy, but he died whilst playing in a pony and trap as it sunk in the marsh. Jennet saw from the window and it drove her insane. She kept haunting the town after she died – every time she has been seen in the town since, a child has soon died. Arthur leaves Crythin Gifford, marries a woman named Stella, and has a child named Joseph. One day, outside of London, Stella and Joseph ride a pony and trap at a fair. Arthur is watching them being driven around before seeing the Woman in Black watching him. She steps in front of the trap and causes a massive accident – Joseph dies at the scene, whilst Stella dies in hospital weeks later. Arthur says that this is the end of his story.

"There was no expression on her face and yet I felt all over again the renewed power emanating from her, the malevolence and hatred and passionate bitterness. It pierced me through"



Hill's Descriptive Devices

Simile

"never known my knees to tremble and my flesh to creep, and then to turn cold as stone"

Metaphors

never known my heart to give a great lurch, as if it would almost leap up into my dry mouth"

Alliteration

"stretched and strained across her bones, so that it gleamed with a curious, blue-white sheen, and her eyes seemed sunken back into her head"

Varied Adjectives

"so pathetically wasted, so pale and gaunt with disease"

Features of the Gothic Novel

Horror

Details are included to deliberately make the reader feel tense or scared, for example the description of the woman's 'malevolent' look or her pale, wasted face.

Death

Gothic texts often deal with the issue of death, and *The Woman in Black* contains horrific scenes of death as Nathaniel Drablow and Arthur's wife and child are horrifically killed.

Settings and Supernatural

A gloomy, decaying setting is used in Gothic texts, (e.g. Eel Marsh House) as are elements of the supernatural (ghosts and apparitions)