

Literature Unit 1: *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill (Longman)

Skills targeted:

AO1 Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations

AO2 Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

Why study this text?

Ghost stories and the appearance of ghosts and phantoms in all drama, prose and poetry form a powerful and compelling part of the history of literature and act as a mirror to reflect the fears and paranoia of society. Great ghost stories such as Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* also achieve the feat of seeming to believe in a paranormal malevolent force whilst questioning the sanity and stability of the character who 'sees' the ghosts. The power and quality of *The Woman in Black* is that it is written in a deliberately 'Victorian' style while analysing the emotions and reflections of the narrator from a more modern psychological perspective. The gothic elements of the tale prepare students well for the AS Literature Syllabus A (Option1 Victorian Literature) and the A2 Love Across the Ages theme.

Students will be very familiar with stock ghost stories and will have heard many urban myths such as the ghostly hitchhiker through oral retelling of common plots based on traditional tales. Charles Dickens wrote a number of deliberate 'ghost' stories for his monthly magazines (using the device most explicitly in *A Christmas Carol*) and there are ghostly elements in classics such as *Wuthering Heights* and the short stories of M.R. James; the Victorian age was very drawn to tales of the supernatural. Students will be enthralled by the careful and deliberate portrayal of the ghost in this novel, 'haunted' by the sheer fear and horror that the narrator, Arthur Kipps, suffers both in the experience at Eel Marsh House and in the retelling and reliving of his all-too real nightmare. For a generation accustomed to having their imagination hijacked by the overt realism of film, *The Woman in Black* is an excellent short novel, exploring the potential malevolence of what may or may not have been the spirit of a woman driven to despair at the death of her child and intent on revenge on the world. Students will enjoy the gothic style of Susan Hill's novel and intense internalisation of Kipps' fear and dread of the 'woman' – not to mention the shock of the final pages and the realisation that Kipps has suffered more than just a haunting. The powerful and evocative sense of place and the strength of characterisation will make this novel a shared icy cold chill down the spine of the classroom.

Background and context

Susan Hill's introduction to the text makes very clear her intentions when setting out to write the novel. Her inspiration for the novel was her love for *The Turn of the Screw* and notes that she admired 'how brilliantly James creates the atmosphere of the house called Bly in which it is set'. She set herself the challenge to write a ghost story with the express intention of creating something for which there was no 'straightforward' explanation or which was inhabited by fantastic creatures or 'monsters'. The crucial element of a ghost story is a ghost, and this means, as Hill explains it, 'a human being who appears in recognisable form after death and is seen at certain particular times'. She allows herself certain criteria and parameters within which to create a 'classic' ghost story, the most important of which is the sensible and ordinary nature of the narrator and the sheer plausibility of the tale. The novel is structured through the clear characterisation of Kipps as an eloquent narrator, a man finally compelled to tell his tale after many years of silent personal torment and nightmare. The story can be seen as an attempt to exorcise or therapeutically draw this particular ghost from his mind and memory: but there is little solace in the final pages. The

novel celebrates the Victorian ghost story in the late twentieth century in a style that is perhaps more internal and even psychological as well as powerfully evocative of atmosphere and place, of cold fear and self-doubt.

Discussion points

Spirit of place

The setting of Eel Marsh House is a crucial element in creating the environment where Arthur Kipps, cut off from the mainland when the causeway is covered by the tide, suffers the nightmare visitations of the woman in black. An effective ghost story has to have a powerful setting and Eel Marsh House has been consciously crafted to live in the minds of the reader as much as it haunts the memory of the narrator. Arthur is sent on his mission from London by his employer, Mr Bentley and there is a foreshadowing of the sea-frets, which masked the repeated phantom deaths on the causeway, in the description of the London fog. The fog is anthropomorphically evoked as a character 'hanging', 'creeping' and 'seething – like sour breath'. The very city is portrayed as conspiring against its citizens who stumble and clutch their way to work and home. The malevolent forces hinted at in London are brought to their full force in the walls of the house. Eel Marsh House, at once 'claustrophobic' and 'hollow-feeling' draws out all the primal fears from Kipps, especially the locked and then capriciously unlocked nursery, the centre of the manifestations within the house. The power and spirit of place is evident in all the settings in this novel, the graveyard and the ruins, the Inn and the causeway – and the house.

The existence of evil

The existence of the 'other' in terms of an opposite or contrasting force or enemy is a prerequisite of all human conflict – often leading to war. The existence of 'evil' as an objective and tangible enemy is one of the main tenets of most religions, including Christianity. The opposition to evil is collectively accepted as rational, while the celebration of evil and evil acts is viewed as abnormal bordering on the sociopathic. In the novel Arthur Kipps is confronted, not only with the manifestation of the woman in black but also what appears to be her evil intent in wishing harm on others as some form of revenge for what happened to her during her mortal existence. Her 'evil' nature, described by him as 'something emanating from her still, silent presence' is given some credence by what may have been her attempt to drive him out into the mud where he saved the dog and himself only to find the nursery destroyed on his return. By the end of the novel Kipps believes that she is guilty of wilfully causing the accident in which his wife and child died. Students may wish to develop their views of whether or not evil can be defined, and the way the word is understood and used in our present society; as well as discussing the portrayal of the woman as malevolent – can we have any sympathy with her predicament?

Fear

The most powerful theme in the novel is the individual fear of the unknown shown by Kipps and the collective fear of what is known (but not discussed) by the residents of Crythin Gifford and the surrounding area. When Kipps first mentions his sighting of the 'young woman with the wasted face' to Mr Jerome at the funeral of Mrs Drablow, there is a 'silence so deep' that he can hear his own pulse and see Mr Jerome's inability to speak, later described as having a 'sickly greyish pallor' when discussing the sighting of the woman. The fear that clearly grips and silences Mr Jerome also keeps Mr Keckwick silent about his role in the affairs that led to the death of the child on the causeway. Kipps himself is exposed to the terror caused by the unknown during the episode involving the rocking chair in the nursery. He is possessed by fear at the thought of what he will meet inside the room whose door has mysteriously opened and later is chilled by the cry of the child on the wind. The ghost of Eliza Humfrye is the source of all the fear and repulsion in the novel, not only for her spectral presence but for her deliberate act leading to the death of Kipps' wife and child – foreshadowed by the warning from Mr Daily that a child died whenever she appeared. Students can discuss the fear of the unknown and the fascination with death common to

all cultures leading to different beliefs about mortality and what happens after death. Susan Hill has created a novel here that almost reeks of fear and is introduced by the narrator himself as a means for the ghost to be 'driven' from his memory, to lay to rest the past through a frank exposure of what had remained hidden for years – an attempt to live the rest of his life without the weight of fear.

Example tasks

The woman in black – role and significance of her visitations

Students should work in pairs or larger groups to discuss the role of the ghost of Eliza Humfrye in the novel.

Depending on their ability and level of confidence in dealing with the text, they can be left to interrogate it themselves; or they could be given clear guidance on sections of the text where she appears, beginning with the chapter dealing with Mrs Drablow's funeral and on to the sighting on the island amid the ruins and the haunting of the Nursery. Guided questions could be used to develop students' understanding of the dramatic importance of the appearance of the ghost both before and after we learn that she is a ghost and to promote speculative thinking about the writer's method, e.g.

- Why do you think Susan Hill portrays Arthur Kipps as so sympathetic towards someone who he feels is a mourner with a wasting disease (pages 31-35)?
- How does the writer create a sense of foreboding on the island and at Eel Marsh House? How do we know that this is a place Arthur should have avoided?
- What do we learn about the woman from her appearances in the novel?

Students can create their own questions, based on their discussion and ideas and then ask other groups to offer their thoughts – gradually building an array of responses, reflecting personal interpretations and impressions of the text and the way that the woman is presented through Kipps' recollections.

Analytical/creative approaches

The importance of the locals

Arthur Kipps relates his journey to Crythin Gifford in the novel and describes the people he met who framed his experience at Eel Marsh House.

Students can work in groups to collect evidence from the text to explore the characterisation of the locals such as Mr Jerome, Keckwick and Mr Daily. What do they add to the story and the development of the mystery of the woman? This can be presented as a series of notes for others to use, or as a podcast to be broadcast in class, taking on the air of an investigation into the role of the characters. Pupils achieving at the lower levels will be able to understand the basic influence of the characters in the novel and perhaps begin to think speculatively. Pupils demonstrating the highest level of performance will extensively explore the significance and relative complexity of these minor characters leading to a confident and convincing personal analysis with close reference to the text and perhaps to plot structure and stylistic devices.

Hot-seating characters

Pupils can show their understanding of characters and key events in the novel through role-play and discussion.

In groups, pupils can be asked to devise a series of questions that they would wish to direct to Eliza Humfrye. The group should be able to consider how they believe the character would answer the question based on their knowledge of the plot and the way the character has been portrayed. In this case there is plenty of scope for pupils to explore the malevolence of her nature as consistently portrayed in the novel, or, a more sympathetic characterisation of the 'woman in black'

as a mother whose child has died and who has never recovered from the grief. There is plenty of opportunity for quite dramatic responses as each 'role' of Eliza is explored through role play and intelligent questioning. This can be conducted through different characters and perhaps by those characters asking questions of Eliza – even Arthur himself?

Pupils can be assessed across the entire range of Speaking and Listening assessment objectives on their ability to contribute effectively to the discussion, while listening to the views of others and developing their own views about the characters in the novel. Responses at the lower levels of achievement will range from the merely descriptive and largely narrative to the emergence of some analysis with justification from the text. Higher level answers will explore thorough and complex perspectives of the different character-constructs, leading to a confident and convincing personal 'voice'.

Key issues for improving grades

Answers should:

- be relevant – you don't need to write everything you know about the text, only the things that relate to the question
- be sufficiently detailed- it is better to give a lot of detail about a small part of the text than trying to cover lots of different points
- be well structured- with a clear introduction which addresses the question and a clear conclusion that returns to the question
- use effective vocabulary- including literary terms where relevant
- use well chosen evidence/quotations to support points.

To gain a top grade candidates should show an enthusiastic and critical personal response. The best candidates will write about the author's methods and achievements and will concentrate on comment, not content.

Nelson Thornes resources to support this unit

Interactive resources to support a selection of the set texts will be available via Nelson Thornes' online learning space, *kerboodle!* The resources will support text comprehension, exam practice and revision. The texts covered are:

Mister Pip

Romeo & Juliet

Martyn Pig

Of Mice & Men

An Inspector Calls

Lord of the Flies

Author: Adrian Cropper