

NEW MILLENNIUM CHRONICLES

A LITERARY ODYSSEY

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CHAPTER 11

A Psychological Exploration of Gothic Elements in Susan Hill's '*The Woman in Black*'

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ABSTRACT

Dame Susan Elizabeth Hill, Lady Wells is an English author of fiction and non-fiction works. She was born in England, on 1942. She is a author of numerous novels, collections of short stories, non-fiction, gothic fictions and children's fiction as well as respected reviewer, critic, broadcaster and editor. She received the Somerset Maugham Award in 1971. She also won the Whitbread Novel Award in 1972 for 'The Bird of Night', which was also shortlisted for the Booker prize. Her major works are 'The Woman in Black', 'The Small Hand', 'The Man in the Picture' and Ghost stories. This paper explores the rich tapestry of gothic elements in "The Woman in Black," a novel that masterfully intertwines gothic and horror genres. The story is steeped in classic gothic motifs, creating an atmosphere of dread and suspense.

Keywords : Gothic Elements, Ghost, Psyche.

The Woman in Black was written by British writer Susan Hills. It was a 19th century gothic novel that portrayed the culture of the Victorian era during that period. The period was considered being the age of industrial revolution, the scientific revolution and the development of new technologies. The people were moved from rural to urban areas. The main focus of the period was science, psychology and medicine. This period paved a way for gothic fiction to create thrillers, haunted and horrifying experiences through writings.

The protagonist and narrator, Arthur Kipps, reflects on his horrifying and unforgettable experiences during a Christmas evening gathering. A successful lawyer living in the English countryside, he joins his family in the drawing room after their Christmas Eve dinner, where they engage in the ancient tradition of sharing ghost stories. When the children encourage him to contribute, Arthur becomes agitated and insists he has no story to tell, abruptly leaving the room. Alone, he contemplates the very real tale of horror and tragedy from his youth. Aware that these memories prevent him from feeling truly joyful even during the holidays, he resolves to write down his story, hoping this act will help to exorcise the demons that have haunted him throughout his adult life.

Arthur's narrative begins on a bleak November afternoon, with London enveloped in a thick, sulfurous fog that has lingered for days. Despite the ominous atmosphere, he feels no fear as he makes his way to King's Cross station to catch a train north. His boss, Mr. Bentley, has instructed him to travel to Crythin Gifford, where one of the firm's oldest clients, the eccentric and reclusive Mrs. Drablow, has recently died. She was the owner of Eel Marsh House, a manor isolated from the town by a long, narrow causeway that becomes impassable at high tide. Mrs. Drablow left behind numerous papers and important documents that Arthur must sort through and returns to London.

The long journey to Crythin Gifford requires Arthur to make two transfers, and by the final leg of his trip, he feels cold and weary, alone in a drafty train car with just one older gentleman, Mr. Samuel Daily, for company. As they strike up a conversation, Arthur learns that Samuel, a longtime resident of Crythin Gifford, knows quite a bit about Mrs. Drablow and her estate, yet he seems hesitant to discuss her. As the train approaches the town, Samuel offers to drive Arthur to the inn where he will be staying. Arthur enjoys a cozy night at the inn and finds good company with the landlord. When he mentions he is in town for Mrs. Drablow's funeral, the landlord quickly bids him goodnight, clearly unsettled by the mention of her name.

The next morning, Mr. Jerome arrives to escort Arthur to the funeral. They sit through the somber service in silence. Toward the end, Arthur hears a rustling behind him and notices a woman in black entering the church. Dressed in outdated mourning attire with a tall bonnet that obscures her face, she appears to be in her thirties, sickly, pale, and alarmingly thin. She attends Mrs. Drablow's burial but vanishes while Arthur has his eyes closed in prayer. After the service, he mentions the woman to Mr. Jerome, who becomes visibly frightened. At Jerome's insistence, they quickly return to town, where Jerome informs Arthur that a driver named Keckwick will soon arrive to take him across the causeway to Eel Marsh House, and back each night. When Arthur suggests he stay at Eel Marsh for a night or two, Mr. Jerome advises him that he would be more comfortable at the inn.

Keckwick soon arrives, driving a pony trap a small, two-person horse-drawn carriage and takes Arthur across the causeway. The marsh's strange, ghostly allure captivates him, and he finds the manor itself to be "rare and beautiful." While exploring the grounds, Arthur discovers a dilapidated graveyard, which he assumes is

the Drablow family plot. At the edge of the yard, he sees the woman from the funeral once again, still clad in mourning attire. Arthur feels a “desperate, yearning malevolence” emanating from her. Frightened, he runs to the house and locks himself inside. Though he has never believed in ghosts, he now concedes that the woman he encountered must be a spirit. He hears the eerie sounds of a pony trap sinking into the marsh, accompanied by the desperate whinnying of a horse and the horrific cries of a child. Overwhelmed, Arthur retreats to the house and falls asleep in the drawing room, exhausted and terrified. The sound of the doorbell jolts him awake; Keckwick is there, alive and unharmed. Relieved, Arthur hurries into the carriage to return to town.

The following day, Arthur tells Mr. Jerome that he will need an assistant to help sort through Mrs. Drablow’s papers. Mr. Jerome explains that no one in town is willing to cross the causeway to the manor, revealing his own deep fear of Eel Marsh and the woman in black. Arthur returns to the inn and writes to Mr. Bentley, informing him that he will be in town longer than expected. That afternoon, he takes a bicycle ride to a nearby town, feeling refreshed and invigorated. Determined to confront whatever lies within Eel Marsh and finish sorting through the papers, Arthur runs into Samuel Daily on his way back. After inviting him to dinner, Samuel warns Arthur that returning to Eel Marsh House would be foolish. Realizing he cannot change Arthur’s mind, Samuel offers him the company of his terrier, Spider, and Arthur heads back to the inn with the little dog in tow.

The next morning, Arthur rides his bicycle back to town for food and supplies before returning to the manor to continue sorting through the papers. He discovers a packet of letters addressed to Alice Drablow from someone named Jennet, who is clearly a relative of Mrs. Drablow. The letters reveal Jennet’s heartbreaking story

of having an illegitimate son, whom she was forced to give up for adoption to Mrs. Drablow and her husband. Although the letters are filled with affection, there is a dark undertone, as Jennet warns Alice that the boy will never truly be hers. Soon after, Arthur hears Spider's low growl and the unsettling bumping noise from upstairs. He heads to a shed to grab an axe to break down the locked door, but while outside, he hears the terrifying sounds of the pony trap accident once more. Realizing that these noises, much like the woman in black, are ghostly echoes, he rushes back inside only to find the door slightly ajar.

Entering, he sees a rocking chair gently swaying in the corner, as if someone has just risen from it. The room is an immaculately preserved nursery, filled with beautiful toys, clothes, and books, but it carries a sad, desolate air that makes Arthur step back into the hall, momentarily feeling himself again. The following morning, Arthur takes Spider for a walk around the grounds. Suddenly, a whistle echoes from the marsh, causing Spider to bolt toward it. She gets stuck, and Arthur barely manages to pull her from the muck. As he carries the frightened dog back to the house, he catches sight of the woman in black watching him from the nursery window. Overwhelmed, Arthur collapses and loses consciousness just as the sounds of a pony trap begin again.

When he awakens, Samuel Daily is standing over him. Concerned for Arthur's well-being, Samuel had come to check on him and found him unconscious on the lawn. Feeling safe in the Dailys' home, Arthur returns to the letters from Jennet and finds three death certificates attached: one for Nathaniel Drablow, who drowned at six; another for his nanny, who died on the same day; and finally, one for Jennet Humfrye, who died a spinster in her thirties from heart failure. Arthur realizes that Jennet was Nathaniel's mother, who likely fell ill and possibly went mad after her child's death in the pony

trap accident. He confesses to Samuel that he feels a sense of relief in the “calm after the storm,” but Samuel remains troubled, revealing that Jennet’s story is well-known in town. Her ghost has haunted the village since her death from a wasting disease, and each time she appears, a child in town suffers a violent accident or sudden illness. Fearing that the woman in black’s cycle of vengeance will never end, Arthur falls ill with fever, tormented by painful nightmares of her for five days.

After nearly two weeks, just as he begins to recover, Arthur’s spirits lift when his fiancée, Stella, arrives to take him home to London. Before they leave, he asks Samuel if any children in town have suffered or died; Samuel replies that none have, leading Arthur to believe the curse has finally been broken. Stella and Arthur return to London and hastily marry; Arthur has learned to embrace joy whenever he can. Within a year, they welcome a child and make Samuel the godfather. Just over a year after their son’s birth, Arthur and Stella take their child to a fair on the outskirts of London, where Stella and the baby enjoy a pony trap ride around the fairgrounds. While watching them, Arthur suddenly sees the woman in black lurking behind a tree. Their eyes lock, and he feels an overwhelming sense of malevolence radiating from her. As Stella and the baby make their way back in the pony trap, the woman in black steps out in front of the horse, causing it to rear and run wildly; the carriage crashes into a tree, leaving Stella paralyzed and killing the child. Ten months later, Stella succumbs to her injuries. The woman in black has exacted her revenge.

Gothic elements refer to events and phenomena that cannot be scientifically explained and often occur in mysterious or unknown realms. Writers and filmmakers are adept at using these elements to craft scenes, whether in narrative form or visually in movies, to evoke the human fear of good and evil. Supernatural aspects in

Gothic works include both benevolent and malevolent forces, such as ghosts, vampires, zombies, werewolves, occult energies, and spiritual powers like those of God. Gothic novels are a rich source of themes and elements, with these Gothic features heavily influencing the narrative. Gothic elements include eerie settings, an atmosphere of mystery and suspense, ancient prophecies, inexplicable occurrences, intense and heightened emotions, women in distress, gloomy and horrific events, and exaggerated language.

Arthur Kipps confronts the tragic truth of Jennet's sorrow and the destructive cycle of vengeance that follows her appearances. The relentless atmosphere of dread is further amplified by the gothic elements woven throughout the narrative, underscoring the themes of loss and isolation.

As Kipps learns more about the history of Eel Marsh House and its tragic inhabitants, the mansion itself transforms into a character, steeped in its own ghostly tales. The desolate marshes surrounding the house evoke a sense of entrapment, as if the land itself is a barrier to escape from the horrors that lie within. The oppressive weather often described as dark and stormy mirrors Kipps's growing despair and fear, creating a visceral connection between nature and the psychological turmoil experienced by the characters.

Thus, the use of the supernatural, represented by the ghostly figure of the *Woman in Black*, serves to heighten the emotional stakes. Her presence is not just a source of terror but also a manifestation of unresolved grief, highlighting the destructive consequences of societal oppression and familial loss. The atmosphere created by the careful selection of vocabulary and descriptive imagery deepens the sense of hyperreality, blurring the lines between the natural and the supernatural.

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