

Lesson Three and Four

The Woman in Black by Susan Hill

'The Woman in Black' was written in 1983, but mimics the style of much older Gothic horror stories from the nineteenth century. The plot concerns a small English town haunted by a mysterious spectre, the titular Woman, and foretells the death of children. Arthur Kipps, a young solicitor, is intrigued by the mystery and stays the night at Eel House, the home of the Woman in Black. In this extract, he details his first night in the house.

As you read the extract, make notes on your first impressions of Eel Marsh House.

During the night the wind rose. As I had lain reading I had become aware of the stronger gusts that blew every so often against the casements. But when I awoke abruptly in the early hours it had increased greatly in force. The house felt like a ship at sea, battered by the gale that came roaring across the open marsh. Windows were rattling everywhere and there was the sound of moaning down all the chimneys of the house and whistling through every nook and cranny.

At first I was alarmed. Then, as I lay still, gathering my wits, I reflected on how long Eel Marsh House had stood here, steady as a lighthouse, quite alone and exposed, bearing the brunt of winter after winter of gales and driving rain and sleet and spray. It was unlikely to blow away tonight. And then, those memories of childhood began to be stirred again and I dwelt nostalgically upon all those nights when I had lain in the warm and snug safety of my bed in the nursery at the top of our family house in Sussex, hearing the wind rage round like a lion, howling at the doors and beating upon the windows but powerless to reach me. I lay back and slipped into that pleasant, trancelike state somewhere between sleeping and waking, recalling the past and all its emotions and impressions vividly, until I felt I was a small boy again.

Then from somewhere, out of that howling darkness, a cry came to my ears, catapulting me back into the present and banishing all tranquillity.

I listened hard. Nothing. The tumult of the wind, like a banshee, and the banging and rattling of the window in its old, ill-fitting frame. Then yes, again, a cry, that familiar cry of desperation and anguish, a cry for help from a child somewhere out on the marsh.

There was no child. I knew that. How could there be? Yet how could I lie here and ignore even the crying of some long-dead ghost?

"Rest in peace," I thought, but this poor one did not, could not.

After a few moments I got up. I would go down into the kitchen and make myself a drink, stir up the fire a little and sit beside it trying, trying to shut out that calling voice for which I could do nothing, and no one had been able to do anything for ... how many years?

As I went out onto the landing, Spider the dog following me at once, two things happened together. I had the impression of someone who had just that very second before gone past me on their way from the top of the stairs to one of the other rooms, and, as a tremendous

blast of wind hit the house so that it all but seemed to rock at the impact, the lights went out. I had not bothered to pick up my torch from the bedside table and now I stood in the pitch blackness, unsure for a moment of my bearings.

And the person who had gone by, and who was now in this house with me? I had seen no one, felt nothing. There had been no movement, no brush of a sleeve against mine, no disturbance of the air, I had not even heard a footstep. I had simply the absolutely certain sense of someone just having passed close to me and gone away down the corridor. Down the short narrow corridor that led to the nursery whose door had been so firmly locked and then, inexplicably, opened.

For a moment I actually began to conjecture that there was indeed someone—another human being—living here in this house, a person who hid themselves away in that mysterious nursery and came out at night to fetch food and drink and to take the air. Perhaps it was the woman in black? Had Mrs. Drablow harboured some reclusive old sister or retainer, had she left behind her a mad friend that no one had known about? My brain spans all manner of wild, incoherent fantasies as I tried desperately to provide a rational explanation for the presence I had been so aware of. But then they ceased. There was no living occupant of Eel Marsh House other than myself and Samuel Daily's dog. Whatever was about, whoever I had seen, and heard rocking, and who had passed me by just now, whoever had opened the locked door was not "real." No. But what was "real"? At that moment I began to doubt my own reality.

The Women in Black: Text-focused questions

1. Hill opens the extract with 'During the night the wind rose.' Find two more pieces of evidence in the first paragraph which detail this increased force of the wind.
2. The house is first described as feeling 'like a ship at sea'. What does this simile suggest about the experience of being in Eel House during the storm?
3. In the next paragraph, Hill describes the house to have stood for many years 'as steady as a lighthouse'. How does this simile demonstrate the changing feelings about the house?
4. Hill writes 'Then yes, again, a cry, that familiar cry of desperation and anguish, a cry for help from a child somewhere out on the marsh.' What is the effect of repeating the word 'cry' in this sentence?
5. The dog is called 'Spider'. Why do you think Hill chooses this name for the dog?
6. Hill writes 'I had seen no one, felt nothing. There had been no movement, no brush of a sleeve against mine, no disturbance of the air'. What is the effect of repeating the word 'no' throughout this passage?
7. Hill uses several questions throughout this extract. How does this help to present the narrator's thoughts as he spends the night in Eel House?

Extended Writing Challenge

Write a story with the title: 'The Storm'. You could use 'The Woman in Black' as an inspiration for a storm on a dark night, or you could interpret a storm in a different, more creative way. Write in 1st person and make sure to focus more upon engaging the reader by using lots of thoughtful, descriptive details. Aim to write at least 200 words but try to aim for 350.