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## Mediums Change, Fears Stay the Same

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Mediums Change, Fears Stay the Same

Lucy Wilhelms

Honors Thesis

2012

Professor Cedric Gael Bryant

Professor Laurie Osborne

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To my parents for their unflagging support; to my sisters for believing in me; to Grandpa RP with his ready smile; to my family for putting up with my esoteric babbling; to Grasshopper for his constant reassurance.

Words alone cannot convey my gratitude, but, perhaps, your name in print will help.

To Professor Cedric Bryant for giving me a chance; to Professor Laurie Osborne for taking time out of her busy schedule.

Through masters' hands, students may aspire to greatness. I could never have done this without you.

Thank you.

## I. Mediums Change, Fears Remain the Same

### An Introduction

“It was 9:30 on Christmas Eve” when Arthur Kipps begins to return to his past, a past haunted by a veiled ghost who extracts terrible vengeance on the world through the murder of children.<sup>1</sup> Despite ominous warnings of the specter, young lawyer Arthur Kipps agreed to visit the isolated Eel Marsh House to compile and organize the late Mrs. Drablow’s affairs, only to belatedly discover the potency of such “superstition and tittle-tattle.”<sup>2</sup> Although this tale is reminiscent of the gothic fiction that hit its pinnacle of popularity in Britain at the *fin de siècle*, Susan Hill’s ghost story, *The Woman in Black* (1983) was written nearly a century later and, despite its apparently anachronistic themes, the novel still holds popular appeal today.

Why does this modern example of archaic gothic fiction resonate with people in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries? Why was the book so popular that it was converted to a play (1987) a mere four years after its publication? Why has the play been continuously running in London’s West End for the past 22 years? Why is it now being adapted into a film (2012) starring Daniel Radcliff, *the* cultural icon of the children of the 1990s?

Susan Hill masterfully adopts the ghost story, a sub-genre of the gothic, to craft a tale that seamlessly merges Victorian nostalgia with modern feminism while placing the reader in mortal dread that never truly resolves itself. Just as novels dating back to *The Castle of Otranto* have attracted popularity by

employing gothic tropes as a mouthpiece to articulate the unspoken, *The Woman in Black*, to near-equal popular acclaim, is a ghost story which conveys modern moral crises that express the tacit fears of our era, garnering cultural resonance and, thus, popular appeal.

While Susan Hill reclaims the gothic by continuing use of genre trends started in the Victorian era, she also modifies the genre to fit the tastes of a modern readership. Hill adeptly creates a mediated narrative featuring an isolated, bourgeois, “haunted individual” in an ancient house on an eerie marsh facing off against a dark, long-dead, witch-like mother hidden behind a veil.<sup>3</sup> However, even as she embraces gothic tropes, Hill also critiques the gothic of the 1890s. Through Kipps, she writes against the “blood-curdling and becreeped” stories of the *fin de siècle*,<sup>4</sup> revising the gothic to vocalize her own unspoken feminist fears regarding the role of mothers.<sup>5</sup> Because Hill addresses timeless fears about parenthood, her novel gained cultural resonance.

Just as Disney World draws millions of people every year who seek to laugh and enjoy themselves, its theme park and roller coasters attract just as many who want to be frightened. People take pleasure in being scared, albeit temporarily in a safe environment. As Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall observe, “gothic horror fiction has a generic obligation to evoke or produce fear,”<sup>6</sup> which is, as demonstrated above, exactly what people want. Like Susan Hill’s *The Woman in Black*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) have a penchant for evoking fear, which led to reprints of these most famous gothic texts spanning this past century. Both *Frankenstein* and

*Dracula* have been adapted to different mediums, again like *The Woman in Black*. However, Shelley's and Stoker's novels are generally accepted as canonical for their language, style, and innovation, whereas Hill's text is occasionally perceived as one of her lesser works. If *The Woman in Black* is one of Hill's minor *œuvres*, why does it seem to share *Frankenstein's* and *Dracula's* cultural resonance?

Like Mary Shelley, Susan Hill drew from her own experience and nightmares when writing *The Woman in Black*. No stranger to the gothic genre, Hill has been writing chilling tales since age nineteen. However, Susan Hill's work turned semi-autobiographical when she lost a child in the late 1970s to miscarriage, providing horrific inspiration for the villain of her 1983 novel. Jennet Humfrye lost her son to the sucking bog surrounding Eel Marsh House, but, while the childless mother takes vengeance on those around her for the loss, Hill reflects that ultimately, "you have to let the dead go; you have to bury your feelings of fury and revenge."<sup>7</sup> But why should the fears surrounding parenthood, including the fear of the death of a child, be expressed in such a horrific manner?

### The Gothic and Its Appeal

Truly a literature of "nightmare,"<sup>8</sup> the gothic was most famously expressed as a genre in Horace Walpole's novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which featured madness, incest, and an exploration of self and other. Gothic tropes such as "closed worlds, mediated narratives, ancient houses, dark villains," and isolated landscapes<sup>9</sup> either originated in or were made famous by Walpole's work. However, what truly seized the attention of mid-18<sup>th</sup> century readers was

not the setting or the characters of the text, but rather that *The Castle of Otranto* “offered emotional confirmation of a social problem [familial abuse] that... was still being denied conscious public recognition,” acknowledging the ‘haunting’ “by this taboo topic.”<sup>10</sup> The fact that the first truly popular gothic novel contained an expression of then-current uncertainty suggests that a gothic text’s resonance depends greatly on an author’s ability to capture his or her cultural moment, and, like any timeless text, to render those themes applicable to all humanity. No small task.

With the publication of *Frankenstein* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), the gothic was surely on the rise as a popular genre, notably as a one representing women. Female authors were drawn to this apparently lowbrow form that offered a means of self-expression in a world that greatly limited the ways a woman might express herself. The gothic genre became a means to articulate not only fear, but also a socially marginalized perspective.<sup>11</sup> *Frankenstein* depicts a man who is suddenly able to create life independent from a woman’s involvement. Such a masculine dread of female creativity was not only internalized in the mid-1800s, it was a standard for publication. Shelley is able to depict the consequences of a male independently creating life; if women are excluded from the process of reproduction, monstrosity ensues. Frankenstein only ceases his efforts to appease his creation when he realizes the potential power of a female creature; she would somehow be more monstrous because she would have the potential to rob her mate of his power and to perpetuate a race of creatures. Just as Frankenstein sought to limit preemptively the productive power of such a

female creation, male publishers would try to contain female writers in an oedipal fear of castration—or a loss of power—in the literary world.

*Jane Eyre* furthers the question of dependence in a male-female relationship, but Brontë's novel uses positive reinforcement rather than negative example to address the question of man-woman dependence. By reversing customary gender roles, the novel suggests that men can find comfort in dependence on women; Jane only returns to Mr. Rochester once she has gained financial and social independence and he has lost his mansion, fortune, and sight. Jane becomes the master in the relationship, guiding the blind and helpless Mr. Rochester through each of their final days together.

By the *fin de siècle*, the gothic genre came to represent broader, more cultural fears in Britain as opposed to the inter-familial or inter-sexual concerns of the previous 150 years. Perhaps as a result, the gothic experienced an acme of production and popularity during the 1890s. India had just been formally adopted under the rule of Her Majesty Queen Victoria and British immigration to southern Africa was reaching a pinnacle; the gothic captured home-front fears about what the embrace of foreign populations would mean. Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) all deal with the evolving fear of the cultural Other. In *Dracula*, the Count's intention to move to England sets the stage for the ensuing conflict between British self and foreign Other. Similarly, one of *The Beetle*'s most horrific moments occurs when the characters realize the protean monster "has not remained in Egypt: she has invaded London,"<sup>12</sup> threatening England's very core. Again, in *The Turn of the*

*Screw*, the binary of self and Other evolves, conflating as the governess who tries to protect the innocence of her charges from spectral Others ends up corrupting the children with her imagined sightings. What truly makes this evolution of the gothic important is the realization that the horrors of the world are not as distant as they may seem; they are in our cities and even, as Emily Dickinson states, within “ourselves behind ourselves, concealed.”<sup>13</sup> The need for Self and Other to be located in different beings ceases to be essential, and our own internal Other rises to replace a physical *étranger*. As Clive Bloom observes of this decade, “the new gothic is the horror of the mind isolated with itself.”<sup>14</sup>

In the modern—by which I mean post-1980—resurgence of the gothic, the greatest overarching concern is retribution. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* (1991), the female protagonists search to avenge themselves against aggressors. The title character in *Beloved*, one of the best-loved novels of this age, seeks both revenge against and the love of her murderer/mother. Morrison masterfully draws into question the justice of punishment and the justness of crime, revealing the flaws in surface condemnation and fact-based retribution. Similarly, after killing the man who would have raped her, Gilda in *The Gilda Stories* exacts revenge, if passively, on those she judges sinners; Gilda “corrects” their flaws to her literal taste. In a world with over fifteen prime-time television shows dedicated to solving crimes and dispensing justice, it is impossible not to see the cultural importance of (legal) vengeance. However, the exact extent of punishment merited and the justness of a punishment regarding a crime are difficult measures for the reader to quantify. It

is within this grey-scape that the gothic finds play with the excess of meanings of both crime and punishment and the conflation of right and wrong. How can one decide the correct punishment for a child's death? What is truly right in a morally ambiguous situation? In the gothic, there is better form to probe the blurred boundaries between these binaries than an ethereal figure, a ghost.

### The Haunting Nature of the Ghost Story

The ghost story is, above all else, "a liberating... form."<sup>15</sup> As a sub-genre, one would suppose the ghost story is highly selective with its generic themes and very specialized regarding its characters and specter. However, in a way that few other sub-genres manage, the ghost story actually grants the author access to as many gothic tropes as she may choose. A ghost story can incorporeally incorporate ideas from the gothic tradition like isolation, estrangement between the sexes, conflation of the self and Other, and concern with the justness of vengeance. Ghost stories also have several characteristics unique to the sub-genre, including possession and uncertain or open conclusions. Corporeal possession, or even mental obsession, suggests "predestination, moral helplessness,"<sup>16</sup> which create lingering or haunting effects on an individual without real possibility for resolution. The gothic body, in ghost stories, becomes a contested space; incorporeal ghosts will possess corporeal bodies in an attempt to regain lost power to affect the physical world. Conclusions in horror fiction rarely leave the reader haunted by what might be after the conclusion; the pursuing monster, such as the creature who threatens physical danger in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, can be handled

with equal and reciprocal violence. An apparition in a ghost story threatens mental anguish from which there is no escape or respite. The ghost will continue to haunt its victim regardless of the violence he or she uses in attempts to destroy or deter the specter.

Aside from the opportunities of the sub-genre, why write a ghost story? Hill openly criticizes “becreepered and crude” ghost stories through Kipps, and yet she chose to subtitle her work “A Ghost Story.”<sup>17</sup> She actively avoids the horror sub-genre, claiming that “anyone going for horror will be disappointed; there aren't any vampires to be slain or monsters coming out of the marsh.”<sup>18</sup> In truth, a ghost story is remarkably commercially viable,<sup>19</sup> as demonstrated by the novel’s six reprints, its twenty-two continuous years on stage in the West End, and its adaptation into a film. The ghost story also succeeds in creating a lingering uneasiness in its audience unlike anything any other genre might generate; different from horror or *bildungsroman*, it leaves doors open and questions unanswered.

The ghost story holds an almost tacit power over its audience, crafting unease and mystery from the first moment’s hush to the few seconds of silence after the tale is finished. Julia Briggs argues that the chief source of this power—and, thus, appeal—lies in the tension between “certainty and doubt, between the familiar and the feared, between rational occurrence and the inexplicable.”<sup>20</sup> In Hill’s novel, the tension between these binaries mimics the tension between parental duty and individual calling, reinforcing the tale’s pervasive unease and supporting the power and appeal of the ghost story.

M. R. James, in his “Remarks on Ghost Stories,” retroactively goes one step beyond Brigg’s analysis, listing five key characteristics of an ideal ghost story.<sup>21</sup> First, the tale must incorporate the pretense of truth, which is to say that the chronicle is written as a confessional, usually in the first person. The first-person account offers the unique opportunity to question the veracity of represented events, and the confessional form enables use of a narrative frame. Both of these aspects elicit the reader’s sympathy and ally the reader with the narrator. Arthur Kipps meets these qualifications perfectly. Second, ghost stories provide a “pleasing terror,” which is to say the chill that thrills. The pleasing terror of *The Woman in Black* is the notion that the ghost exists beyond the enclosed world of the text. Third, the text is free of gratuitous violence, sex, and blood-shed. Ghost stories rely on suspense, unspeakable acts, and unexplainable phenomena to grip its audience. The only violence the reader is directly privy to in Susan Hill’s novel is the death of Kipps’ son at the conclusion of the novel. Fourth, there is no explanation of the machinery. The unaccountable phenomenon is left unsolved, enabling the mystery of the text to haunt the reader long after he has set down the book. Hill’s woman in black is not put to rest, but retains her power, an aspect perfected in Stephen Mallatratt’s theatrical adaptation when the ghost appears to the actor and ignored in James Watkins’ film adaptation when Jennet is apparently laid to rest. Jennet Humfrye’s ability to make the winds repeat the horrific sounds of the fateful night Nathaniel died is never explained. Finally, the setting is usually the author’s or reader’s “own day.” By setting the tale in the present,<sup>\*</sup> the ghost story’s author enables the ghost to step off the pages

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\* The “present” of M. R. James’ day was at the pinnacle of the production of gothic fiction; the

of the novel into the reader's own psyche. Ghost stories not only feature haunted individuals, but create them.

Because Susan Hill follows James' ghost story principles so closely, her central depiction of the tension between parental duty and individual calling becomes all the more apparent. However, to better understand Hill's message, we must also examine the evolution of the gothic genre in order to discover what is mere repetition and what is innovative revision.

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fact that many modern authors choose to situate their gothic texts between 1875 and 1925 is actually in line with M. R. James' stipulation because his "present day" was the gothic genre's "present"—and most appealing—day.

## II. Susan Hill and *The Woman in Black*: Repetition

Susan Hill and the Early Gothic: Walpole, *Otranto*, and the Self-Other Binary

Although Susan Hill wrote her novel in 1983, her principle themes and settings can be traced back to the mid-1700s. As Elizabeth MacAndrew observes, Hill is greatly influenced by the “closed worlds, mediated narratives, ancient houses, [and] dark villains of... Walpole.”<sup>22</sup> Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* not only creates the quintessential gothic setting, it also juxtaposes the resonating fear of self and other, just as *The Woman in Black* plays with this binary when Mr. Kipps arrives in Crythin Gifford. Kipps experiences a mild unease while attempting to settle down among the small town’s locals. What these men had left “*unsaid*”<sup>23</sup> regarding Mrs. Drablow places Kipps firmly in the social exterior of the community; he is ignorant of their history so he is left in the dark. In an effort to reassert his social prowess, Kipps aligns the locals with the “unsophisticated and primitive” men of the countryside,<sup>24</sup> repossessing his dispossession. Kipps decides these superstitious yokels can offer no stories that would unbalance such a “cosmopolitan” Londoner as himself.<sup>25</sup> In drawing a clear distinction between himself and the credulous rural folk, Kipps mirrors—though in reverse order of events—Walpole’s Theodore, who is initially dismissed as a servant, but who ultimately proves to be the true lord of the castle and, thus, the most powerful character in the novel.

However, despite his attempts to regain control of the social situation in Crythin Gifford, Kipps’ unease revives with a vengeance the next day. His

mourning clothing evokes fear and repulsion in the locals, whose stares make him feel as though he is a “pariah.”<sup>26</sup> In spite of his efforts to distance the locals as superstitious others compared to his sophisticated self, Kipps quickly realizes he is the one being treated as a foreign other, just as Walpole’s Theodore comes to realize he is the lord master, and Manfred is the usurping other.

Kipps’ delusion of urbane self among gauche others finally breaks down when he is overtly ostracized from a conversation for his impatient queries about Alice Drablow. Kipps demands that a farmer explain why the locals refuse to discuss Eel Marsh House: “I spoke rather sharply, for I was growing impatient of the half-hints and dark mutterings ... But, instead of replying to my question at all, [the farmer] turned right away from me and engaged his neighbor on the other side in a complicated discussion of crops.”<sup>27</sup> Kipps is physically cut out of conversation, very clearly drawing the boundary between Kipps, the first-person self, and the farmer, the Other. However, this farmer, not to mention the remaining close-mouthed townspeople, is native to Crythin Gifford while Kipps is the *étranger*. Just as Manfred in Walpole’s novel attempts to claim ownership of the Castle of Otranto, he is ultimately an intruding usurper. Although Kipps views each townspeople’s frigidity as strange and outlandish, he is, in fact, the intruder in their community.<sup>28</sup> By recasting the outsider, Hill deprives Kipps of a sense of self, turning him into a device to be acted upon; Kipps devolves from hero into a victim. In order to better understand the importance of anOther’s perspective, one must examine the Middle Gothic’s influence on Hill’s novel.

## Hill, Shelley, and Brontë: Minority Perspectives in the Middle Gothic

Kipps not only offers a foreign perspective in Crythin Gifford, but also a minority one. Just as Shelley and Brontë express cultural anxieties regarding the uncomfortable societal position of women, Kipps echoes Hill's own concerns regarding the role of women in 1983. When Susan Hill wrote *The Woman in Black*, feminism was at a crossroads; second-wave feminism had just suffered great conservative cultural backlash, and any woman who called for equal treatment in the workplace was labeled a "feminazi" or a "bra-burner." Immensely disheartening for any woman in the working world was the continued existence of workplace sexism. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's conservative government only exasperated the situation by drawing into question what motherhood entailed. Hill, as a publishing writer and active mother, would have been particularly concerned and affected. Thatcher promoted self-reliance and social responsibility in order to discourage "a dependency culture," meaning the British people's dependence on the garden, cleaning, and caretaking services of blue collar workers.<sup>29</sup> For working women, Thatcher's description of "a dependency culture" made direct reference to their reliance on nannies to care for their children and, though her personal opinions were not political procedures, they did drive her government's policies.<sup>30</sup> Hill had one child, a second on the way, and she worked from home; nannies for her children made her incredible literary productivity possible. However, as a direct result of the nannies' involvement with her children, Hill would have been perceived as a bad mother under Thatcher's government. Hill uses the gothic genre and *The Woman in Black*

to express and examine her internalized conflict between empowering self-fulfillment and being what is culturally considered a “good mother,” most notably in the powerful and transgressive figure of the title specter.

The woman in black is both a powerful, supernatural force which will not be ignored and a domestic mother obsessed with her child. The gothic genre enabled these twinned personalities to play out, from their moderate to their most extreme consequences. In Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the role of mother and father are similarly joined when Frankenstein creates life without the involvement of a woman, to a dreadful end. The woman in black has a god-like command over life and yet her core motivation is to seek revenge for her beloved son’s death. Where these two veiled faces conflate, Hill’s cultural commentary becomes apparent through her gothic mastery.

Kipps’ first impressions of the woman in black suggest her supernatural powers over the (in)corporeal and the natural world. The first time she appears to Kipps, the woman seems too ill to even stand; Kipps assumes she is approaching her own death.<sup>31</sup> The woman in black, despite apparent illness and probable grief, is capable of supporting herself through a funeral service and the cemetery burial. In this familial role as a grieving sister, the woman in black exudes an almost supernatural strength; through this image, Hill suggests that women in family roles possess great strength, a first step in her examination of family versus self.

The second time Kipps spots the woman in black is across the Eel Marsh near the Drablow family cemetery. Her apparent strength has increased; she not only seems to emanate malice, she also manages to disappear before Kipps can

reach her.<sup>32</sup> The woman in black now exists outside of her familial role and outside of the home. The fact that she disappears before Kipps' eyes suggests that she is stronger now in this role than she was in her capacity as mourning<sup>†</sup> sibling. By featuring the woman in black outside of her domestic, interior responsibility, Hill suggests the need for life beyond the home as an escape. Just as Jane Eyre flees her respectable employment with Mr. Rochester, the woman in black also escapes Eel Marsh House. As Lucie Armitt suggests, by "interrogating the existence of boundaries between interior and exterior worlds," the woman in black ultimately questions their necessity.<sup>33</sup> Not only does the woman in black prove herself—despite apparent disease—to be the physical equal of the male protagonist by strolling outside among the graves, she also manages to out-play him, disappearing before he has a chance to question her.

The woman in black reveals her strongest supernatural power in Kipps' third ghostly encounter. Shortly after setting out across the Nine Lives Causeway for Crythin Gifford by foot, Kipps is enmeshed in proverbially tangibly thick fog. As he stumbles about, Kipps begins to hear "the distant but unmistakable clip-clop of the pony's hooves and the rumble and creak of the trap," which soon inexplicably changes to "a curious draining, sucking, churning sound which went on, together with the shrill neighing and whinnying of a horse in panic, and then... another cry, a shout, a terrified sobbing... from a child, a young child."<sup>34</sup>

The woman in black is even more powerful outside of the domestic sphere than

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<sup>†</sup> The woman in black is attending Alice Drablow's funeral the first time Kipps spots her; she is fulfilling her sisterly obligation to attend the funeral (from beyond the grave). However, whether the woman in black is responsible for Alice Drablow's death is another matter entirely; the reader is never informed how Alice Drablow died or if the woman in black had any hand in her death.

Kipps had initially anticipated; she now has the capacity to affect the natural world, controlling the winds to project the sounds of a long-dead event. Jane Eyre is similarly capable of controlling, or at least interpreting, sounds on the wind; she hears Mr. Rochester calling for her across the marshes surrounding her cousins' home. Both Hill and Brontë suggest that women are strong in incalculable ways, notably when it comes to nature and, perhaps, natural needs. Hill uses the woman in black to convey that mothers, more in contact with natural needs, surely know whether it is acceptable for their children to have nannies. Arthur Kipps' reluctance to admit the supernatural strength of the woman in black reflects Hill's concern with Thatcher's conservative government's stance on motherhood and nannies.

As Kipps delves deeper into the mysteries of Alice Drablow and the woman in black, he discovers the woman in black's maternal side, which leads to the more extreme consequences of the binary between employment and motherhood posed to Susan Hill. Kipps' subsequent experience with the woman in black is in the dead of night when he hears a rhythmic bumping noise. Kipps describes the bumping as "a familiar sort of sound... a sounds that seemed to belong to my past, to waken old, half-forgotten memories and associations deep within me, a sound that, in any other place, would not have made me afraid but would... have been curiously comforting, friendly."<sup>35</sup> Shortly later, however, this comforting sound memory is destroyed by the wrath of a mother who cared too deeply for her child, and for nothing else. After two more incorporeal encounters with the woman in black, Kipps returns to the child's bedroom and the rocking

chair; the room “was in a state of disarray as might have been caused by a gang of robbers, bent on mad, senseless destruction... the rocking chair had been pushed into the centre, to preside, tall-backed and erect, like a great brooding bird, over the wreck.”<sup>36</sup> Through this violence, “the gentle earth-mother figure... reappear[s] as a wicked witch,”<sup>37</sup> embodying the “fear of the archaic mother,” a gothic trope developed in the mid-1800s.<sup>38</sup> The comforting, positive sensations raised by the rocking chair have evolved into absolute destruction, revealing that motherhood without distractions or self-fulfillment leads to obsession and madness.

Jennet Humfrye, Kipps soon discovers, was a mother with nothing to lose but her son. After his birth, Jennet’s letters to her sister, Alice Drablow, assert her love for and obsession with Nathaniel.<sup>‡</sup> However, Kipps is not left with a distant, bad memory of the woman in black; Jennet reasserts her capacity to terrify by leaving Eel Marsh House and even Crythin Gifford. She leaves behind her domestic sphere in a quest to attain self-fulfillment by taking revenge. As Lucie Armitt explains, “a Gothic text *becomes* a Gothic text only when such fixed demarcations [as interior and exterior] are called into question by the presence of an interloper who interrogates the existence of such boundar[ies].”<sup>39</sup> Jennet, in fact, travels as far as London in order to claim vengeance, and self-fulfillment, on Kipps. Many months after his return to London, Kipps visits a park with his wife and son, permitting the two to enjoy a ride on a pony and trap when, “quite suddenly, [he] saw her... It was she, the woman in black with the wasted face, the ghost of Jennet Humfrye. For a second, [he] simply stared in incredulity and

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<sup>‡</sup> Jennet exclaims in a letter, “he is mine, mine, he can *never* be yours” (Hill, Susan. *The Woman in Black*. Boston: David R. Godine, 2010. 96). If not obsessed, she is certainly possessive to a degree of madness.

astonishment, then in cold fear.”<sup>40</sup> As the pony and trap bearing Kipps’ young family passes Jennet, she spooks the creature who charges into a tree, killing both Mrs. Kipps and their son.<sup>41</sup> Motherhood and self-fulfillment conflate when Jennet finally reaches Kipps and murders his son and wife, revealing the most extreme consequences—madness and murder—of choosing to wholly devote oneself to parenthood as well as self-realization. Jennet removes the offensive cause of her resentment—parenthood where she lacks a child—and brings the grieving parents to her level, attaining self-fulfillment. Hill suggests that if one, possibly Thatcher’s government, tries to force motherhood and self-fulfillment to be the same thing, only destruction and agony will result. In the High Gothic, distinctions like the one above are universally collapsed, resulting in greater confusion between once clear oppositions like good and evil.

#### Jennet Humfrye and A Nameless Governess: Conflation of Self and Other in the High Gothic

At the peak of the gothic genre, one of the most commonly reiterated binaries was the self-other binary, originating in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, but evolved so the self and the other conflate to become one. Like Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle*, and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, *The Woman in Black* is replete with instances of confusion between the self and the other, mirroring the meshing of self-fulfillment and mOtherhood’s<sup>42</sup> obligations.

First, and most notably, Arthur Kipps arrives in Crythin Gifford with a “Londoner’s sense of superiority” that holds that the members of the community who hint at unspoken suspicions are “more superstitious, more gullible, more slow-witted” than city folk.<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Harker in Stoker’s *Dracula* is similarly a Doubting Thomas. Just as Kipps’ definition of cast-out other soon comes to represent himself, a stranger in a small town, his dismissal of the superstitions of others regarding ghosts—mere “extravagant folklore”—quickly changes to belief after three spectral experiences.<sup>44</sup> The unnamed governess in James’ *The Turn of the Screw* also arrives from the city to the country and also experiences local ghosts, though her specters have a different origin.

Kipps reluctantly must unite himself with the credulous countrymen, the other. His attempts at rationalization after his second encounter with the specter only serve to link him more closely with the locals of Crythin Gifford; Kipps keeps repeating “I did not believe in ghosts.”<sup>45</sup> The fact that he uses the past tense complicates his sentiment; although the narrative is written in the past tense, the verb “did” here suggests a change in sentiment and leaves ambiguous exactly when Kipps *did* start to believe in ghosts- immediately after his second sighting? or perhaps much later, after he leaves Eel Marsh House for the first time? In fact, when he does first depart Eel Marsh House, he admits that

the woman by the graves had been ghostly I now—not believed, no—I *knew*, for certainty lay deep within me... [the pony and trap] too, had not been real, not there, present, not substantial, but ghostly also. What I had heard, I had heard... what I had seen... I had seen. I would have sworn to

that on oath, on any testament. Yet they had been, in some sense I did not understand, unreal, ghostly, things that were dead.<sup>46</sup>

Suddenly, Kipps is forced to give up his cosmopolitan airs and embrace the primitive view of the countryside, completing his evolution into both self and other.

Self and other again conflate in Kipps when he becomes possessed with the determination to know what happened at Eel Marsh house and why it was haunted by the woman in black. To put it more simply, Kipps becomes possessed by (the notion of) the woman in black. After an initial decision to “seek out the ghosts” and thus eradicate their power to disturb him,<sup>47</sup> Kipps steadily succumbs to possession by the obsession to understand Jennet’s obsessive desire to possess her son. Hill here reflects *The Turn of the Screw* in which the unnamed governess gives in to obsession with the apparent possession of her charge, Miles. The mystery in Hill’s novel surrounding the “sense of oppressive hatred and malevolence, of someone’s evil and also of terrible grief and distress... seemed to invade [Kipps’] own soul and take charge of [him]” makes Kipps hesitate to return to Crythin Gifford.<sup>48</sup> “Although these [ghostly events] had been terrifying, and inexplicable,” Kipps explains, he thought he “could go over them again... because [he] had been growing more and more determined to find out what restless soul it was who wanted to cause these disturbances and why, *why*.”<sup>49</sup> Kipps, possessed by Jennet’s yearning malevolence, *needs* to understand what happened at Eel Marsh House and even goes so far as to take the documents most

likely to contain the answers with him for in depth study at a later time.<sup>§</sup> Kipps *must* possess the knowledge he cannot have, if he heeds the warnings of the community, just as Jennet longs to repossess that which she cannot have. Their shared agony links their souls and provides a strong enough bond for Jennet to follow Kipps to London.

Jennet's own character, however, provides the greatest example of conflated self and other. She is at once a mother and also the demonic other. As a maternal figure, she represents comfort. Kipps explains that the sound of her rocking in a rocking chair

meant comfort and safety, peace and reassurance, the regular, rhythmical sound at the end of the day that lulled [him] asleep and into [his] dreams, the sound that meant that one of the two people in the world to whom I was closest and whom I most loved was nearby... [the] memories aroused by the rocking sound were so positive and so powerfully strong that they overcame and quite drove out all that was sinister and alarming, evil and disturbed.<sup>50</sup>

Jennet could not be represented in a more maternal manner in this moment; her rocking soothes Kipps to such an extent that, even as a grown man, his eyelids become heavy with peaceful drowsiness. However, moments later, Jennet, an idealized mother figure, suddenly recaptures her terrifying supernatural attributes when Kipps steps into the nursery and lays eyes upon the rocking chair. "It rocked gently and with gradually decreasing speed, in the way any such chair will

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<sup>§</sup> In doing so however, Kipps is choosing self-fulfillment over his obligations to his fiancée in London or, in James Watkins' 2012 film adaptation, over his parental obligations to his son.

continue to rock for a time after someone has just got out of it. But no one had been there. The room had been empty... Gradually the chair rocked less and less... Then [it] stopped and there was absolute silence.”<sup>51</sup> The horror of a rocking unmanned rocking chair produces a delightful excess of meanings, the most significant of which is the conflation of the gentle mother of Kipps’ memory and a malevolent<sup>52</sup> specter. The calming mother-figure of the self is no more, replaced with an incorporeal mOther<sup>53</sup> who is incapable of offering any comfort, who only bestows grief.

#### Susan Hill Heralding the Modern Gothic

Hill, in bending the old gothic from its popular pinnacle to appeal to modern readers, not only adapts “the fantastic to the bourgeois,” but also experiments within the grey-scape of the justice of punishment and the justness of crime.<sup>54</sup> Equally apparent in later modern gothic novels such as *Beloved* and *The Gilda Stories*, the gothic finds play with the excess of meanings resultant from dissonance between crime and punishment and conflation of right and wrong.

Although child murder, as Josephine McDunagh observes, had been a prevalent aspect of British life during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>55</sup> the modern gothic reclaims the idea of infanticide and focuses on the thoughts of revenge surrounding the death of a child. Just as Morrison’s novel addresses vengeance for child murder, the woman in black yearns to avenge her own child’s death. Although anger at the loss of a child is reasonable, *Beloved* and the woman in black become possessed with this fury and warp it into violence. When Kipps sees

the woman in black a second time, he discerns the expression on her face, which he hesitatingly describes as “a desperate, yearning malevolence” coupled with “the purest evil and hatred and loathing” directed at whatever had separated her from her son.<sup>56</sup> The woman in black has conflated rightful anger at the loss of her young child and wrongful desire for misdirected murderous revenge. While the actual “crime” was committed by nature and was accidental, the woman in black not only naturally punishes those who were directly culpable for taking her child from her and putting him in a position to drown, but also unnaturally punishes ignorant neighbors who are guilty of no more than simply have young children in their families. Just as *Beloved* cannot accept that Sethe’s crime was justifiable, the woman in black cannot accept that other parents of young children are not responsible for her own loss.

In Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*, Gilda reads people’s souls when she drinks their blood and then she passes judgment on them, either punishing them with a sense of boundless guilt or leaving them desirous to reform what Gilda has deemed incorrect. The woman in black similarly passes judgment on those around her; however, although her criterion is more objective than Gilda’s (does this person have a young child?), the woman does not even examine a person’s guiltiness before punishing them. Kipps, even though he has returned to London and left the woman in black as a ghost of a memory behind him, is punished by the vengeful Jennet Humfrye for merely happening to have been assigned her sister’s account. After Jennet causes Kipps’ son’s death, Kipps laments “I had seen the ghost of Jennet Humfrye and she had had her revenge.”<sup>57</sup> Jennet views

Kipps' assignment as a transgression, though a justifiable one; Kipps was merely seeking to put Alice Drablow's affairs to rest. And yet, Jennet's response to this offense is the murder of a completely uninvolved child, an excessively harsh reply to such a minor affront. Justice and injustice conflate when the barest of transgressions is punished with murder, a crime in itself. Both Gilda's and Jennet's over-zealous responses to innocent crimes raise questions of true guilt in these supernatural beings.

Although Hill, Morrison, and Gomez are of different countries and of different ethnicities, all three women express gender concerns, such as motherhood and sexuality, in addition to having written three landmark gothic novels in the modern period. The fact that these three authors experienced great degrees of success attests to the fact that they accurately address modern concerns which generates cultural appeal. By examining the commonalities that these three authors express, one can find and trace cultural concerns of the modern era.

Both infanticide and crime-punishment dissonance are heavily involved in the modern gothic, of which Susan Hill was a pioneer. The play between Mother and Other in the former and justifiable crimes and unjust punishments in the later both define the period and express cultural obsession with law and order.\*\*

### Susan Hill's Intertextuality

Susan Hill's work was not merely influenced by the big titles and prominent themes of the gothic tradition. *The Woman in Black* also represents a

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\*\* The fact that *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), a cop show examining the officers' less-than-sparkling private lives in addition to their lawful public lives, and *Law & Order* (1990-present) have so many seasons attests to the mainstream popularity of crime drama.

more general, though highly literary, tradition. First, the death of children—be it accidental or infanticide—is a theme dating back to the tragedies composed by the Ancient Greeks. Second, Hill’s more explicit references, notably the black veil and several of her titles, reflect her literary influences. Third, the pervasive atmosphere of *Eel Marsh House* is reminiscent of some of the most famous titles in the English canon. Finally, some of Hill’s inspiration for this novel’s sub-genre can be tacitly traced to Shakespeare.

First, infanticide has perplexed and horrified humanity since the fifth century BCE. In the play *Medea*, the title character is told by her husband that he is leaving her for the princess of Corinth. Medea kills her children in revenge against her husband’s betrayal. Jennet Humfrye similarly murders children in search of revenge for her loss. Centuries later, in 1624, infanticide was publicly recognized in an “Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children” was put into effect in order to address infanticide.<sup>58</sup> Over three hundred years later, Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* concludes with the death of Miles at the persecuting hands of the unnamed governess, a maternal figure to the children until her wild accusations alienate them. Jennet was once a mother herself, but, like the governess, her actions in *The Woman in Black* render her a murderer.

Second, among Hill’s more explicit intertextual references, there are samples of Wilkie Collins, Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Eliot, an old folk song, and a work by M. R. James. To begin, the most noticeable of Hill’s references is to Wilkie Collins’ novel, *The Woman in White* (1859), which provides clear

inspiration for Hill's novel's title, in addition to adding a layer of meaning. When juxtaposed, the color difference between the two otherwise identical titles promptly jumps out. The image of a woman in black merely suggests mourning; however, when compared to the virginal, innocent image of a woman in white, the former woman's dress takes on a more sinister and ominous significance and raises the question of how the mourned died. Next, Hill's use of the highly symbolic veil reflects Nathaniel Hawthorne's and George Eliot's exploration of the human dual desire to at once hide and to uncover. As Clive Bloom explains, "the lifting of the Veil is one of our most fruitful symbols."<sup>59</sup> In Hawthorne's 1836 short story entitled "The Minister's Black Veil," the veil becomes more odious than the sin that apparently hides behind it; the veiled Minister claims that everyone is veiled to hide their sins, but his own veil makes his congregation overly-conscious of their own sins. Similarly, George Eliot in 1859 wrote the tale entitled *The Lifted Veil*, in which the protagonist is able to lift "the veil" and is granted foresight- the ability to predict death.<sup>††</sup> The woman in black's veil initially protects her from Kipps' prying eyes, but ultimately simply masks her malevolent intentions. Later, Hill makes reference to the Robert Burns folk song, "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You," composed in 1793, as well as to the title of an M. R. James ghost story published in 1904. The song encourages a secret lover's advances, but persuades him to hide their love. The ghost story features a whistle that summons an invisible specter who terrifies an academic. Hill actually admits that she finds M. R. James "frustrating, because he's *so* wonderful on the

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<sup>††</sup> Coincidentally, when a child is born with a caul veiling her face, she is believed to possess a supernatural insight or foresight.

atmosphere and the places,” but “his actual plots, or the actual denouement, [are] sometimes odd.”<sup>60</sup> The whistle that calls Spider in Hill’s tale, consequently, is an incorporeally-produced sound, rather than a material object like James’ whistle.

Third, the atmosphere surrounding Eel Marsh House, including these same deadly marshes with their frequent sea frets, were inspired by the poetry of John Clare, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1860-61), and by Graham Greene. Clare’s 1820 collection of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* paints nature as sinister and definitively opposed to mankind. In fact, Clare’s poetry is so antagonistic to nature that one might suspect his misleadingly pastoral title of sarcasm. Hill’s novel portrays nature similarly; the unstoppable tide isolates Kipps and the unpredictable sea frets nearly cause his death and have caused the deaths of others. Most notably, Kipps is reading Clare’s poetry to pass his unoccupied time in Eel Marsh House.<sup>61</sup> The eerie atmosphere is enhanced through the influence of Poe’s novel, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, in which the unnamed protagonist finds himself in a lonely mansion with the narcoleptic Madeline and the hypochondriac Roderick. After the premature burial of Madeline by over-anxious Roderick, the house is disturbed by strange and inexplicable sounds. Similarly, in *The Woman in Black*, Kipps hears baffling sounds of a drowning pony and child, a rocking chair, and a whistle drifting off the marsh and through the house.<sup>62</sup> Dickens’ novel, *Great Expectations*, describes Miss Havisham’s chambers as almost untouched since the date of her would-be wedding; cake sits deteriorating on a table, furniture is arranged to accommodate party guests, and Miss Havisham

still wears her wedding dress. In Hill's novel, Nathaniel Drablow's bedroom is similarly untouched, "fully furnished and equipped and in such good order that the occupant... might only have gone away for a night... [the toys] must have been here for half a century, yet they might have been played with this afternoon and tidied away tonight."<sup>63</sup> The eerie sense that one is intruding or that one is not as alone as one thought nicely support the central concept of the ghost story sub-genre; there is a ghost present and yet corporeally absent. Graham Greene's 1929 novel also plays into the ghost story sub-genre in that in *The Man Within*, he examines a protagonist who becomes possessed with the desire to understand fate, ultimately, and ironically, dooming himself. Hill explains that Greene has "been a great influence on me, all my writing life" because of his dark and pervasive atmosphere.<sup>64</sup>

Fourth, *The Woman in Black* is also influenced by the absent presence of ghosts in works such as *Hamlet*, "The Tapestry Chamber," *The Beetle*, and *The Turn of the Screw*. To begin, Hill admits to modeling Kipps on Horatio from *Hamlet* (1599-1601); Horatio is the original "Doubting Thomas" and, Hill explains, "you've got to have somebody who has to be convinced and is only convinced when the going really gets tough."<sup>65</sup> The audience most likely does not believe in ghosts so, in order to gain their sympathy, the protagonist must also be cynical on the subject; through the protagonist's own epiphany, the audience comes to believe in the ghost set before them as well. Several centuries later, Sir Walter Scott wrote "The Tapestry Chamber" (1829), which features the now-familiar lonely old mansion as well as a "fallen," corpse-like female ghost who

has committed terrible crimes. Aside from the similarity of the ghosts—Hill’s woman in black looks to be “suffering from some terrible wasting disease” that made her appear to be no more than ‘skin and bones’<sup>66</sup>—and the similarity of location—“Eel Marsh House is far from any neighbor”<sup>67</sup>—there is also the remarkable coincidence that Kipps is reading Sir Walter Scott’s novel *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) before bed in the evenings.<sup>68</sup> *The Heart of Midlothian*’s secondary plot concerns a case of accused infanticide, just as the woman in black herself is concerned with negligent infanticide. Later, reflecting the high gothic, the woman in black is similar to the specter in *The Beetle*: she does not stay in the countryside but invades London to fulfill her murderous, vengeful intent.<sup>69</sup> Hill’s affection for the high gothic and its attraction to ghosts is also reflected in James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, where even imaginary ghosts have the power to possess others; Hill’s own Kipps becomes possessed with the need to find out what happened to Jennet Humfrye.<sup>70</sup> Hill’s early drafts revealed this connection even more intimately; Nathaniel Drablow was still alive, though he would be possessed from time to time by a ghost. Hill decided against including Nathaniel and his possession because she wanted to “keep away from [*The Turn of the Screw*] a bit because it was almost the obvious role model;”<sup>71</sup> Hill wanted to be original rather than a revisionist. James’ novel also deals with the death of a child, though the consequences of Miles’ death are left unexplored. Hill’s own circumstances, coupled with the her warmth for James’ novel, lead to a perfectly complicated villain who is at once a sympathetic grieving parent and a reprehensible, morally corrupt murderess.

These intertextual references not only help create the ethereally ghostly atmosphere of *The Woman in Black*, but also permit the reader to situate the text amidst its peers and influences and distinguish Hill's own voice and opinions. Hill's apparent sources—Clare, Poe, Dickens, Scott, and James—prove particularly influential to her writing and creative process; however, these tales only paint an immediately relevant foreground for the woman in black. Less directly related stories from the Early, Middle, and High Gothic offer background, present and influential, but distant. Without the immediately apparent gothic references, the reader cannot distinguish Hill's opinions from their surroundings; without the influential gothic background, one cannot understand the woman in black as a cultural representation. Through careful examination of Hill's direct and distant influences, as well as close study of her inked deviations from and revisions of both, one can begin to understand her cultural appeal through the gothic medium.

### III. Susan Hill and *The Woman in Black*: Revision

#### Susan Hill's Revision of the Gothic: Introduction

Part of the reason the gothic has survived as a successful genre since the mid-1700s is because of its inherent adaptability. Because there are no strict guidelines regarding content, the gothic has been able to evolve to fit the needs and address the fears of each subsequent generation. The gothic retains its relevant cultural appeal by both repeating gothic tropes and by revising how and which fears are tackled in order to allow the consequences of cultural concerns to play out.

In order to gain popularity and to succeed as a gothic novel, a text must meet its present cultural moment's exigencies by addressing unspoken cultural concerns. Susan Hill, in addition to repeating gothic tropes such as the lonely house, mysterious sounds without apparent material source, and dismal, obscuring weather, also revises the gothic to make it apply to her own cultural moment. As Donna Cox observes, "Kipps writes his ghost story against the stereotyped conventions of the Victorian ghost story;"<sup>72</sup> Kipps even explains that real ghost stories are "nothing so... becreeped and crude—not so... so laughable" like the horror stories his step-sons tell.<sup>73</sup> Hill, as Kipps' own author, certainly then critiques the extant gothic, proceeding to rewrite it to suit her own taste. Her repetition ultimately reflects her own moment's urgent exigencies. Hill revitalizes the female specter, "liberating from repression" a woman who would, otherwise, be trapped in a trope, without power to affect her own fate, much less the fate of

those who surround her.<sup>74</sup> As Clive Bloom observes, the gothic is “disturbing in order to change” societal structures, notably how women were treated in early 1980s Britain.<sup>75</sup>

One of Susan Hill’s major contributions to the modern gothic is her reworking of conventional gothic tropes regarding cultural Others. Rather than choosing to follow the genre’s white male, anglo-saxon protestant convention of alienating a minority presence, she embraces and brings to the center of attention a marginalized, feminine perspective. Stoker in *Dracula* clearly paints the foreigner as the monstrous Other. In addition to ostracizing a foreign presence, *The Beetle* also illustrates the concept of Other through gender; the protean creature is feminine. According to Val Scullion, Hill exhibits a “continued preoccupation with enclosed and luminal spaces as a device for exploring the anxieties of outsiders, misfits and weaker members of society,”<sup>76</sup> most notably, women. Hill reports what the female marginalized perspective is feeling, articulating the unspoken.

#### Susan Hill’s Feminist Revision of the Gothic

As already discussed, Britain’s 1980s were difficult years for working women with families. Prime Minister Thatcher’s conservative policy against the “Dependency Culture”<sup>77</sup> drastically limited the power of working women and actually reinstated several Victorian-era preconceptions regarding the role of women. Thatcher reminded mothers that their primary duty lay in caring for their families and children, suggesting that women employed outside the home were

bad mothers and wives. Women's conflicted responses to this dictum that encouraged self-sacrifice and settling for less found an outlet in the early stages of the modern gothic.

For Susan Hill, a pregnant publishing author who already had one child, Thatcher's crusade against "a dependency culture"<sup>78</sup> meant internal war between empowering self-fulfillment warred with fulfilling cultural expectations. Hill's ambivalence regarding allying herself with the cultural norm at the expense of her rewarding career is readily apparent in *The Woman in Black*, which revises the hapless heroine of Victorian-era gothic literature.

Traditionally, in the gothic novel, women were financially or socially "vulnerable,"<sup>79</sup> 'trapped,'<sup>80</sup> but morally "perfect" or innocent,<sup>81</sup> disempowered and "idealized doll-like icons"<sup>82</sup> who were portrayed, at their best, as "victims" and, at their worst, as 'femmes fatales, hags, or whores.'<sup>83</sup> Jane Eyre, for example, is an orphan who is both financially and socially vulnerable, trapped first at school, then with Mr. Rochester and St. John Rivers. Powerless to understand or affect Mr. Rochester's emotions, Jane is a victim through most of the novel. Lucy in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is morally vulnerable as a result of her contact with Dracula; after she is bitten by the vampire, she becomes both a femme fatale, stalking children in the night, and a whore, giving herself as sustenance to Dracula.

However, by the 1980s, British society—not to mention Western society in general—was no longer as concerned with vulnerable females at risk of becoming fallen women; the sexual revolution of the 1960s had greatly altered the

way sexuality in women was perceived, from scandalous to natural. As evidenced by Hill's text, people were far more interested in what role was right and proper for women- domestic mother or bread-winner. The woman in black, Hill's title character, expresses this great divide between, in Thatcher's eyes, mother and cultural Other. Hill's title character embodies and expresses both these roles, to horrifying ends.

### The Feminist Gothic Mother

In a cultural resurgence of Victorian sentimentalism regarding a woman's domestic role, women were left behind socially<sup>84</sup> just as the world readied to leap into the highly progressive era of technology. Women felt a great sense of dislocation, temporally as well as morally. In addition to the century-old mores being thrust upon them, the decision to go to work every morning and leave a child in the care of another became fraught with moral misgivings. Hill plays with the concept of the absent mother in her novel by focusing on the circumstances surrounding an adopted child. In her tale's era, women were still generally expected to remain at home as loyal wives and devoted mothers; however, Jennet Humfrye had a child out of wedlock, whom she very reluctantly permits her sister to adopt.<sup>85</sup> Nathaniel, her son, both lacks a mother and has a mother, though one is less socially acceptable than the other.

Donna Cox observes that "maternal presence operat[es] as a schematic absence in Hill's text,"<sup>86</sup> meaning that the mother's absence post-adoption is laden with an excess of meaning. Nathaniel's absent, biological mother's

reluctance to leave his side evokes the devoted mother that Thatcher's administration idealized; however, Jennet's maternal devotion becomes demonic obsession: "I shall kill us both before I let him go... he is mine, mine, he can never be yours."<sup>87</sup> Temporarily loosening her obsession, Jennet yields to society's pressure and leaves her son in her sister's care, indirectly and negligently putting him in harm's way. Jennet's highly complicated character is based in the conflation of the binary of obsession and neglect. Additionally, the roles of mother and child conflate when, as Cox remarks, "the mechanics of maternal attachment, encountering the loss of the infant as object, loops back into infantile anger which is boundless and transgressive."<sup>88</sup> Hill's richly evocative text suggests that both Jennet's maternal obsession and child-like neglect of others' rights are most apparent when she returns to Eel Marsh House as a ghost, the most absent of all presences. However, should Jennet have flaunted society's rules and kept her child as a devoted single mother? Or should she have surrendered to society's mores and abandoned her child, allowing him to be adopted and put in harm's way? Hill suggests that there is no easy answer once in the choice between self-fulfillment and fulfillment of social obligation.

Similar to the excess of meaning produced by an absent mother figure is the excess of meaning that results from the murder of a child. While it is far easier and far more common in today's world than in times past to dismiss infanticide as meaningless cruelty, according to Josephine McDonagh, study of "the earlier period [1720-1900] reveals instead that child murder is invested with a bewildering excess of meanings."<sup>89</sup> In *The Woman in Black*, Nathaniel's death is

the catalyst for over 70 years of child murder in Crythin Gifford. As the first instance of a child's death in Crythin Gifford, Nathaniel's circumstances are the foundation for all ensuing instances of infanticide. Nathaniel is innocent of all crime, and yet he is the product of a highly illicit relationship.<sup>90</sup> When society deprived him of his mother in order to save his innocence from her contamination, Nathaniel died at the hands of a second socially acceptable, though highly negligent mother.<sup>91</sup> The loss of this innocent spawned decades of vindictive murder of more innocent children and lifetimes of mental anguish for their parents.<sup>92</sup> With his death, Nathaniel rendered his overly-devoted mother into an immoral other; Jennet becomes the mOther,<sup>93</sup> at once Hill's statement against Thatcher's policy and a revision of the female gothic trope.

#### The Modern, Gothic Feminist

The woman in black, in contrast to the vulnerable or fallen (and thus doomed) stock female character of the gothic of the 1800s, is a modern feminist representation, expressing "simple liberation from repression."<sup>94</sup> The woman in black transgresses the gender boundaries of the Victorian era and forces the contemporary reader to reexamine the culturally assigned gender roles of the 1980s. She is both in the domestic sphere and in the public one. She has supernatural powers and even the ultimate power of taking human life. As Val Scullion observes, Hill actively refuses "the disempowerment, which consistently configures women as victims" in the gothic genre.<sup>95</sup>

Hill's "fiction empowers the denigrated mother," Scullion continues, "to resist confinement and to move to and fro between... [once] separate masculine and feminine spheres."<sup>96</sup> Susan Hill empowers her female protagonist, enabling her to be both a domestic and a public presence. The first time Kipps sees the woman in black, she is in a cemetery, miles from Eel Marsh House.<sup>97</sup> It is not until his third encounter with the ghost that Kipps senses her in the house.<sup>98</sup> The woman in black is able to both participate in life outside the home as well as watch over her son's possessions in the home. Susan Hill is able to reconcile exterior self-fulfillment—by having Jennet Humfrye attend her sister's funeral—with internal cultural approbation—by showing Jennet Humfrye care for her son, even in his absence. However, Scullion locates separate gender spheres in the past, failing to grasp the implications of Thatcher's intent to return women to their children and their hearths. Domesticity, one of the four cardinal virtues of the cult of true womanhood during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>99</sup> was being reinstated more than a century later in an effort to eradicate a "dependency culture" and women's public roles.<sup>100</sup>

The woman in black is a far cry from the female victims of the gothic genre up until this point. Jennet Humfrye boasts supernatural powers beyond the corporeal and above nature. When her body becomes too diseased to enact her purpose, Jennet returns to the world as an untouchable ghost to wreak her vengeance. Her ghostly form is intangible and cannot grow sick, weary, or even be harmed. She can vanish without a trace and induce the winds to replay the fateful night her son died. Finally, she has the power to control death, murdering

children to satisfy her blood-lust. In specifically addressing Thatcher's policy, Hill sets the tone for future modern gothic feminist revisions that address the meaning of motherhood, including *Beloved*, which features a similar absent presence questioning a mother's protective-destruction of her child. Before *Beloved* materially returns to the world of the living seeking vengeance for her murder by her mother's hand, her present absence breaks mirrors and creates pools of light in house number 124. *Beloved* is an active player in life, not a woman to be married off and safely contained.

Just as *Beloved* will not be contained, the woman in black's absent presence is never resolved. Hill ends her novel with the conclusion of the framed narrative rather than the framing narrative. There is no bridge between the young, grieving Arthur Kipps and the aged Arthur Kipps who is re-telling the tale. His presence ends with the death of his first son while the woman in black is still at large, menacing anyone who happens to cross her path. Scullion observes that "the lack of restoration or closure result[s] in the subversion of patriarchal stereotypes of women."<sup>101</sup> Because the woman in black is not exorcised within the framed narrative and actually weakens, possibly unto death, Kipps in the framing narrative, she is still a real threat and menace, embodying M. R. James' fourth ghost story principle of unresolved machinery. Jennet is not safely contained within a coffin, her mouth stuffed with garlic *à la Dracula*, nor is she tucked away into a patriarchal institution, such as marriage or a convent. She is and continues to be a very real threat, rendering her all the more powerful.

The reader's lasting discomfort with the continued threat of Jennet Humfrye serves a key purpose in the gothic genre. She is "disturbing in order to change" society.<sup>102</sup> Through the woman in black, Susan Hill is able to question how a mother should feel and respond to accusations that self-fulfilling employment means her children are neglected. As already discussed, Jennet gave in to societal pressure, was demonically devoted to her son, and had a child-like sense of justice. What do these traits signify regarding Hill's central theme in her revision of the gothic genre? If a woman succumbs to societal pressure, she is not necessarily doing what is best for her child. As Scullion states, "mothers under extreme pressure have the potential, like any other members of the family, for cruelty to children."<sup>103</sup> If she does not accept her cultural obligations, she will be ostracized from society. If she chooses self-fulfillment, she initiates and perpetuates negligence of her child. However, if she chooses fulfillment of her cultural role, she sacrifices her own happiness and self-satisfaction. By raising these questions and following the various options to their conclusions, Hill demonstrates the flaws with Thatcher's proposed independence from a "dependency culture"<sup>104</sup> and captures the heart of all parents' fears about raising children. In the gothic tradition, Hill articulates and explores the universal fear regarding good versus bad parenting, appealing culturally to parents everywhere.

### The Gothic and Cultural Appeal

By addressing common fears, the gothic genre attracts popular attention and gains cultural appeal for examining tacit societal issues. Just as individuals

pursue the thrills resulting from time spent at theme parks or performing extreme thrill-seeking activities, people also seek out frightening literature. Dangerous—or even seemingly dangerous—physical activities induce an adrenal rush of fear; in gothic literature, there is a secondary level of trepidation. The gothic genre plays upon the cultural distinction between what is socially appropriate and morally deviant. In a culture so obsessed with identifying and clinging to the acceptable norm of cherishing one's family above all else, we crave the temporary socially-threatening experiences in the realm of aberrance that the gothic offers. Anita Gates minimizes this phenomenon by explaining a ghost story's effect as similar to the “pleasures [of] a gentle roller-coaster ride — not the sort of thing that produces bloodcurdling screams but a series of little surprises that make you laugh at yourself for having been afraid.”<sup>105</sup> Although empiricists would agree that fear induced by fiction is irrational and maybe even laughable, they would have a difficult time dismissing the necessity of such fears; if we fear nothing, we live without inhibitions, posing threats to not only ourselves but those who surround us.

Elizabeth MacAndrew comes closer than Gates to explaining our desire for terror. MacAndrew states that “gothic fiction symbolizes the unresolvable, shifting, but perpetual paradox of human nature. Until the human condition changes, we will need such fantasies to embody the dilemma of our existence, to confront us with it, so that we, too, may face the dark.”<sup>106</sup> At its base, the gothic is all about exploring the juxtaposition of life and death and, ultimately, often through negative example, how to live. The gothic genre offers one of a very few

ways to examine the consequences of excesses of life and death in mortality, immortality, decency, and immorality. We need the gothic to be able to “face the dark.”<sup>107</sup> Through the gothic’s examination of life, death, and spectral life after death, we can take lessons on how to live. *The Woman in Black* overtly shows the reader that one must accept death and continue living our own lives; more subtly, it reveals the importance of a healthy balance between domestic motherhood and empowering self-fulfillment.

#### Susan Hill and Cultural Appeal

Susan Hill’s *The Woman in Black* enables the reader to face the dark by studying the excess of meaning resulting from untimely death and unnatural life after death, as well as cultural obligations and personal interests of the 1980s British working woman. By addressing not only mankind’s general fears regarding life and death but also examining pertinent cultural concerns, Hill appeals to her cultural moment with the gothic sub-genre of the ghost story. By reiterating the “perpetual paradox of human nature,” Hill expresses humanity’s need to reexamine life and death. As Jerrold Hogle observes, “our continuing cultural investment in [the ghost story] is based in part on how we need to keep reenacting the contradictory impulses in modes of discourse based on specters or simulacra of the counterfeit.”<sup>108</sup> In essence, we must continue repeating conflicting urges—in this case, the beauty of brief mortality or the allure of immortality—because we need to discuss them in order to understand or at least cope with the discrepancy.

As MacAndrew hinted and Hogle suggests, the need to deal with life's binaries is eternal and the gothic is an adept genre to do so. The gothic's questions regarding human nature and life and death are timeless. Furthermore, as Clive Bloom elaborates, "creatures and forces of the supernatural have specific abilities to transcend both time and space."<sup>109</sup> Gothic monsters and specters are necessarily timeless because they reflect and exhibit play with timeless themes. Hill's ghost story, for example, reflects the excesses of meanings that result from the conflation of eternal death and everlasting life. Susan Hill's *woman in black* was just as culturally relevant in 1983 as she was in 1987, when Hill's novel was adapted into a play by Stephen Mallatratt, and in 2011-2012 when it will be adapted into a film.

In fact, only through the gothic, with its exploration of life's most meaningful binaries can we come to terms with our anxieties. First, as Valdine Clemens aptly puts it, "in frightening us out of our habitual 'wits,' Gothic fiction can actually shock us into using them in more viable ways."<sup>110</sup> In other words, through fear we can learn to better understand that which we fear, notably death and life. We are reminded what fear is by witnessing the *woman in black* cause Kipps' son's death, and, consequently, we are more conscious of children, symbols of our lives after our deaths and Hill's primary subject. Second, as Bloom asserts, the lifting of the veil separating life, death, and immortal life, "reveals reality."<sup>111</sup> We are forced to acknowledge the end—death—that awaits all humans and we are forced to yield to it; if we do not yield and strive for immortality, as *Dorian Gray*, *Dracula*, and *Gilda* do for example, we must suffer

for our unnatural longevity. Hill's Jennet Humfrye suffers an eternal "wasting disease" as well as perpetual anguish and malevolence for her continued, ghostly presence on earth, revealing the reality of the necessity of death.<sup>112</sup>

In fact, Heidi Kaye argues that "the monster [is what] makes the later [high and modern gothic] novels so adaptable to the fears of various times."<sup>113</sup> The monsters created in the high and modern gothic are so adept at capturing cultural fears that they become almost timeless in their ability to evoke horror and repulsion. The specters of the gothic do not merely represent timeless themes; they are themselves timeless because they *are* those themes. Like Frankenstein's creation, Jennet signifies both life and death. The monstrous echoes of Nathaniel Humfrye's death contrarily suggest the permanent nature of death. Even the humble man Kipps contributes to the timeless binary by making a life with Esmé after the deaths of Stella and his son, revealing the resiliency of life. The conflation of the life-death binary not only echoes the same ancient fears, it also exemplifies modern ones that bear repeating.<sup>‡‡</sup>

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<sup>‡‡</sup> For further reading, consider Julia Kristeva's "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection" and Stephen King's nonfiction text *Danse Macabre* (1981).

#### IV. Stephen Mallatratt and *The Woman in Black*: Repetition

Susan Hill, Stephen Mallatratt, and *The Woman in Black*: Introduction

Recognizing *The Woman in Black*'s timeless themes and cultural appeal, Stephen Mallatratt adapted Susan Hill's novel *The Woman in Black* into a play in 1987 by the same title. While many novel-to-stage or novel-to-film adaptations, such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1959), *Northanger Abbey* (1986), and *Count Dracula* (1970), barely capture the spirit of the original work, Mallatratt left the integral plot line intact and even appropriated much of Hill's original text.

One chief difference, however, is that Mallatratt's adaptation is highly self-aware. Instead of the novel's framing narrative of Kipps' second family gathered for Christmas, the play opens with the author Kipps approaching an actor to help him deliver his story (starting with the novel's framing narrative) to his family. After Kipps tries and fails to deliver the line "it was 9:30 on Christmas Eve" evocatively, the actor seizes the manuscript from Kipps and demonstrates how Kipps must play himself. For the rest of the play, the actor plays the role of Kipps (he is named Kipps in the script) and Kipps plays the roles of all the other characters (Mr. Bentley, Samuel Daily, Keckwick, etc.) that he encounters in his story (he is named Actor in the script). Many early scenes feature direct reference to a Mr. Bunce, provider of sound effects for the staged reading, and nearly every scene concludes with the actor bidding Kipps good night and encouraging him to continue his work on his lines. For set pieces, such as the integral pony and trap, a spare prop trunk receives the actor's blessing.

Additionally, the play concludes in a different manner from the novel, which is vastly important because, as Julia Briggs observes, “a story’s interaction with its frame might itself contribute to the tension between natural and supernatural explanations.”<sup>114</sup> While the book ends abruptly, leaving the framing narrative open, the play continues for nearly two more full pages, focusing on the title character. In the play, the actor notices a woman in black performing the ghost’s role and praises Kipps for finding a lady to play the part. Kipps, who has not seen the woman, assumes the actor’s praise is for having memorized his lines.<sup>115</sup> At the end of the play, the actor asks Kipps who the woman is. Kipps grows pale and responds just as Mr. Jerome did- “I did not see a young woman.”<sup>116</sup> The ghost has come to haunt the play,<sup>117</sup> rehearsing with the actor and Kipps her role in Kipps’ past. She leaves her textual enclosure to continue her reign of destruction, purportedly by haunting the actor. The play, because it is self-aware, enables the woman in black to assume a physical role that threatens the theater audience even more than the open framing narrative of the novel threatens its readers.

#### Mallatratt, Gothic Repetition, and Gothic Theater

Mallatratt’s decision to render the woman in black even more dangerous was firmly based within the gothic tradition. Just as Dr. Frankenstein seeks out his creation and Van Helsing pursues Dracula, Mallatratt has Kipps raise the woman in black. However, the consequences of bringing forth these supernatural creatures are often deadly. As a direct result of pursuing his creation and breaking

his deal with him, Dr. Frankenstein loses his new wife. In forcing a confrontation with Dracula, Van Helsing puts Mina in grave danger. Kipps, in resurrecting the woman in black, exposes the actor to the woman's dreadful vengeance. Donna Cox observes that "reading the 'story' raises the ghost while the act of writing is the exorcism"<sup>118</sup> The actor, like Kipps once did, has a child, a four-year old daughter, who is now in danger because of Kipps' quest to exorcise his own demon. As Anita Gates states, Kipps' decision "reflect[s] badly on [his] motives."<sup>119</sup> Kipps is no longer the victim of his demon's attacks; he has exposed others to his ghost's vengeance and is thus at least indirectly culpable for whatever happens to them. In emulating the gothic tradition, Mallatratt succeeds in representing it; victim and persecutor conflate in Kipps.

Furthermore, the high gothic intrinsically incorporates dramatic aspects that are highly adaptable to the stage. For example, *The Turn of the Screw*, one of Hill's major influences,<sup>120</sup> features a woman acting as though she is surrounded by ghosts with malicious intent. As Daniel R. Schwartz asks, "Does not *The Turn of the Screw* call attention to the aesthetic, the fantastic, the romantic, the gothic, and the performative?"<sup>121</sup> Similarly, *The Woman in Black* is also an apt adaptation to the stage in terms of its use of audience imagination. As Susan Hill herself observes of the theatrical adaptation,

it uses theater wonderfully for what theater is for. It involves the audience from the beginning. It is like a book in the sense that they have to use their imaginations... It also engages expectations, because it is supposed to be a frightening ghost story... [People go

in wanting to be scared or sure they won't be]... And it's *very* amusing to watch how they gradually change their attitude. I think it is genuinely frightening. It's unexpected... It's extraordinarily powerful in the way it uses every theatrical device—it's pure theater—to frighten, to engage, to excite, to mystify, to make you want to know what's going to happen next... you can't *not* be involved in it. It is completely true to the book... What happens is that the play trusts that the audience will *immediately* start to imagine. And the imagination, of course, is worse than anything the theater can do."<sup>122</sup>

Theatrical productions are unique because, unlike textual works and films in which the imagination is differently engaged in terms of portrayal of characters and events, the theater can only present so much to its audience; it is a limited medium in ways novels and movies are not. The theater demands audience participation in imagining scenery, atmosphere, and even off-stage events. If one is not willing to overlook the fact that visible lighting instruments cast an amber or blue glow over the stage as opposed to the sun, or that the sounds of the supposedly surrounding village originate from equally visible monitors, one can never appreciate theater. In order to enjoy a theatrical production, one must actively suspend disbelief and actively—and willingly—participate in the events of the production, just as the narrator in *The Turn of the Screw* suspends her disbelief in spirits and “sees” ghosts. This is why, Susan Hill states, *The Woman in Black* succeeds as a theatrical production; because the self-selecting audience

who wants to participate in a suspension of disbelief is prepared for the haunting ghost story they are about to witness.

However, early gothic theater was intentionally bowdlerized to accommodate the difficulty of suspension of disbelief as well as to hide the more horrific aspects of a play during the early days of Garrick's 18<sup>th</sup> century theatrical productions. Willard Thorp observes that every remotely frightening event or moment was removed from gothic theater as a "concession to a public which was not yet willing to suffer a romanticized theater."<sup>123</sup> Later, in recognition of the fact that "an audience would not show a proper alarm at stage[d] ghosts and horrors, they might be induced to laugh at them,"<sup>124</sup> dramaturges played supernatural events to comedic effect, reducing *The Castle of Otranto* to "a romantic tragedy of a wicked Count who tries to put away his wife that he may marry his dead son's fiancée, and of the sufferings of his daughter who loves a mysterious stranger, later discovered to be the rightful possessor of the Count's estate."<sup>125</sup> *The Woman in Black* is aware of the limits of theater, as well as the mental mechanics involved in watching a performance, just as early dramaturges adapting *The Castle of Otranto* were. It was not until under the direction of Matthew Gregory Lewis at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that an audience could be compelled to "accept, unquestioningly, ghosts and goblins, bleeding nuns who walk at midnight, wood demons and other horrors which in the theater of Garrick would have caused a riot."<sup>126</sup> In the spirit of 18<sup>th</sup> century productions, the horror of the children's deaths in the theatrical adaptation of *The Woman in Black* is primarily conveyed through the eerie sound effects, dim lighting, and the actors'

expressions as opposed to by physical actions or set pieces on stage. While Mallatratt was surely not concerned with terrifying an audience unaccustomed to the depiction of ghostly events on stage, his deletions suggest that he wanted the audience's boundless imagination fill in the blanks, ultimately making the scary moments more horrific than anything that could be presented on stage.

## V. Stephen Mallatratt and *The Woman in Black*: Revision

Mallatratt, Gothic Revision, and Gothic Theater

Unlike in *Dracula* or *Frankenstein* where the monster is confronted and confined, the woman in black is still horrifyingly free at the end of the play. In addition to the novel's abrupt conclusion, the play not only condemns the actor who has helped Kipps, but also, tacitly, the audience who also witnessed her presence. As Val Scullion observes, "The particular horror of *The Woman in Black* is that the ghost is not laid to rest."<sup>127</sup> She is no longer contained within the pages of a book; she is physically present and the audience has seen her. The story makes it abundantly clear that to see her is to catch her curse; no one is safe.

Additionally, gothic novels such as *The Turn of the Screw* and *Rebecca* focus on that which is so horrifying as to be unspeakable. Miles never fully admits "the bad thing" he said that resulted in his suspension from school in James' novel; those who do know will not explain because of moral constraints. Rebecca never confesses her motives for her provocative accusations and affairs that forced Maxim to murder her. However, in the play *The Woman in Black*, the unspoken is audibly expressed through the dramatically acknowledged work of Mr. Bunce.<sup>128</sup> The horrific moment in which the pony and trap bearing Nathaniel Drablow loses its way on the marsh, killing everyone, is no longer imagined on the winds, but is vocalized through the adept work of Mr. Bunce. The unspeakable is spoken.

Finally, in an amateur performance in 2008,<sup>§§</sup> the director of *The Woman in Black* chose to have the woman lift her veil and point at Kipps in the final scene of the framed narrative. As Clive Bloom explains, “the lifting of the Veil is one of our most fruitful symbols.”<sup>129</sup> Unlike the title character in Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil,” the woman exposes her face, and thus, symbolically, her heretofore hidden and truly malicious, sinful nature. The moment Kipps sees her face in his story is the moment his son dies. The actor, who has now seen the woman’s face, is equally doomed to lose his child, as is, by implication, the audience. Moreover, the program for that production did not list the character of the woman in black, nor the actresses who held the part, enhancing the idea that the audience has been cursed as well.

While the play’s success attests to the cultural appeal of both Hill’s original novel and Mallatratt’s adaptation, this cultural appeal is not limited to Hill’s motivating conflict between competing claims on women. As we become temporally more distant from the novel’s original conception, *The Woman in Black*’s timeless themes come to mean different things to new generations while maintaining their cultural appeal. The play opens the theme of the novel by focusing more closely on Arthur Kipps as a father than on the woman in black as a mother; the motivating theme behind the play thus becomes the concerns of parenthood and what it means to be a good parent. The film interprets the question of parenthood to reflect on the children affected by good or bad parenting.

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<sup>§§</sup> This production was performed by the student group Powder and Wig at Colby College in Waterville, Maine on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, and on November 1<sup>st</sup> of 2008.

## VI. James Watkins and *The Woman in Black*: Repetition

Susan Hill, James Watkins, and *The Woman in Black*:<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Introduction

While Stephen Mallatratt's theatrical adaptation of Susan Hill's novel obviously prizes textual accuracy, James Watkins, in his film adaptation of *The Woman in Black* (2012), chooses instead to emphasize genre conventions in film. As Heidi Kaye states, "Gothic films [create] spectacles and [excite] audiences' emotional responses, just as Gothic novels had always done."<sup>130</sup> While Hill's novel certainly generates sentimental responses such as horror and fear, not to mention raising the spectacle of a specter, Watkins alters the setting of the tale, changes the ghost's *modus operandi*, and stages a fiery conclusion to the ghost story that simply does not happen in the novel. Watkins' apparent intent is to interpret Hill's novel into a marketable, Hollywood-ized film that plays for the greatest emotional response.

Kaye assures her readers that all is not lost or altered in the hands of a film director. She states that "filming these Gothic novels immediately creates new meanings for the texts simply because of the characteristics of the different media."<sup>131</sup> Because it is a different medium from the original text, film will invariably change an adapted text. Mallatratt certainly altered the framing narrative of the novel; he also minimized the scenery in his theatrical adaptation. Watkins' own changes can be traced to the gothic genre's history, as well as to modern interpretations that reflect our cultural moment.

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> At the time of writing, the film has not yet been released. My analysis is based upon the careful study of the five extant trailers.

## Watkins, Gothic Repetition, and Gothic Film

Every film trailer is designed to attract an audience, and each of the five trailers for Watkins' *The Woman in Black* is geared towards a specific group. The first trailer, a 44 second teaser, is designed to whet the appetite of those who appreciate suspense. The second trailer, a 1:44 minute international ad, focuses heavily on the theme of childhood, appealing to people who enjoy the play between innocence and corruption. The third trailer, the second international preview, lasting 1:41 minute, attempts to interest those who derive pleasure from the gothic genre, even tagging the film as "the most chilling ghost story of our time." The fourth trailer, a one minute promotional sneak peak of the film, entices people who love the thrill of mystery. The final, fifth trailer, a 1:10 minute preview labeled "No. 2," appeals to fans of horror.

Watkins' adaptation, like the novel, contains aspects of suspense, corruption, the gothic, mystery, and horror; however, these key aspects are highly stressed in the film in ways they simply are not in the novel. Although one might argue the trailers use only the most spectacular scenes from the film by design, the fire, for example, shown at the conclusion of the final four trailers certainly originates in the film, though it is not an event in the original book. In addition to the concluding inferno, each of these trailers features moments that are unique to the film adaptation. These differences, however, do not merely exaggerate a thrilling genre; they very clearly reflect the influence of the gothic's long history.

One of the most noticeable alterations James Watkins made to the original story is regarding the woman in black herself. While, in the book, Jennet is a

silent, occasionally invisible supernatural force, she becomes a very physical presence in the film. In Watkins' adaptation, Jennet suddenly appears, literally, in Kipps' face as he peers through a zoetrope. There are at least two more instances where we see Jennet reach for Kipps from behind. Additionally, Jennet invisibly rings a bell, writes on a wall, and turns out lights. On stage, Jennet is portrayed by a live actress, however, she is never close to the actor and she is even made to appear invisibly in the rocking chair. In the film, her up-close-and-personal interactions with Arthur Kipps, while unique to Watkins' adaptation, conceptually originate in the Rising and High Gothic periods. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as well as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, interactions with the monsters are very personal and involve physical contact; the feared subject is not merely nearby, but can reach out and touch you, leading to horror of contamination. In Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, only when the corrupting governess clasps her innocent charge to her bosom that he dies. It is more thrilling, more terrifying to the audience is Kipps actually comes into physical contact with the abhorrent. Furthermore, each of these three Rising and High Gothic novels was ultimately turned into a film; as Heidi Kaye states, "it is the monster," not to mention what the monster represents, "that makes the later novels so adaptable to the fears of various times."<sup>132</sup> Each of the corrupting figures speaks to us and about us; they hold great emotional sway over flawed humanity that tries to remain innocent in the daily face of corrupting forces.

The details of the setting of Crythin Gifford and Eel Marsh House are also altered to fit the needs of the genre, if not to satisfy the specifics of the novel.

Crythin Gifford, described as a “little market town—indeed, it seemed scarcely larger than an overgrown village,”<sup>133</sup> would have an approximate population between 35,000 and 145,000 people.<sup>†††</sup> However, in the trailer, Crythin Gifford is a small gathering of about ten buildings; not quite the “overgrown village” Hill describes. Along the same lines, the Eel Marsh House of the film rests on a large, well-vegetated rocky island of approximately 25 acres rather than the small rise in the midst of a sea marsh that the novel describes.<sup>134</sup> The shrubbery and dense woods that surround Eel Marsh House of the film contrast the low, clear land that Kipps describes in the text when the woman in black first disappears from his sight.<sup>135</sup> Finally, in Watkins’ adaptation, everything in Eel Marsh House is covered in dust, dust cloths, and cobwebs, despite the fact that, in Hill’s book, Alice Drablow actively inhabited the house until her very recent death. All of these elements combine to create an atmosphere of isolation and loneliness. Watkins does not stay true to the original earthy, ethereal atmosphere of the novel, but each of his alterations reflects historically conventional gothic settings.

Similarly, Crythin Gifford’s representation in the film highlights the isolation of the small town, especially when compared to Kipps’ native London. The exaggerated lack of people as well as the understated size of the town also create an atmosphere of exclusivity; Kipps is unquestionably an outsider. In the most recent film production of *Jane Eyre* (2011) by Cary Fukunaga which accurately portrays the setting of the 1847 novel, every location Jane travels to or

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<sup>†††</sup> Modern small towns have a population of approximately 200,000 people. Scarborough, an isolated town on England’s east coast about 200 miles from London, near to Hill’s placement of fictional Crythin Gifford, has a current population of 50,000. England’s demographics reveal that the population has increased about 40.4% since the late 1910s. By comparing population growth with these two figures leads to my assessment of Crythin Gifford’s population in 1920.

through is barren and empty; there is only one building in each panorama or miles of tree-less scrub brush. Like the small town, Eel Marsh House is isolated, situated on a large, isolated island that rises well above the ocean and the causeway, a great distance from dry land. The Castle of Otranto is the original inspiration for a lonely castle as a peak on a rocky outcropping; Watkins merely reflected Otranto's tradition in his depiction of Eel Marsh House. The fact that the island is so large and so thickly vegetated only creates an aura of mystery. In the absence of sea frets (only one appears, in the second trailer), thick vegetation over a large expanse can be just as disorienting. In the high gothic period, time alone in nature often proved correspondingly disorienting. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane is terrified of her surroundings the night she sleeps in the forest. Lastly, the dilapidated interior of Eel Marsh House, while it does not reflect the text's reality of Alice Drablow's inhabitation, does echo the ghost story trope of abandoned, dusty, and dirty old houses, eerily—and overtly—testifying to a lack of life. Dracula's own abode was crumbling and disheveled, again suggesting a dearth of life or active presence.

The third principle difference between the text and the film might be traced back to Susan Hill herself.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> One of Hill's greatest influences is *The Turn of the Screw* and one of her favorite fictional characters is Miles, the apparently corrupt—and corrupting—child in a nameless governess' care. Hill states in an interview that she had initially planned to feature Nathaniel Drablow much more prominently in *The Woman in Black*; he was to be a possessed child whose eyes would change color as he was taken by a demonic other.<sup>136</sup> However, in an effort

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Although I can find no evidence at this time that Susan Hill was consulted on the production of the Watkins 2012 film, her interest in children as corrupted others is apparent in her interview in *Susan Hill: The Essential Guide*.

to avoid following James' work too closely, Hill buried Nathaniel, only to have him literally resurrected in Watkins' film. Not only does Nathaniel climb from his marsh grave, he also enters Eel Marsh House and confronts Arthur Kipps in the film. Like Nathaniel, the children of the village are similarly fore-grounded; the five trailers present us with nine separate children, while the novel only identifies two. Three girls in the trailers are somehow simultaneously possessed and obligated to walk towards windows with the apparent object of self-defenestration. A lone boy is depicted stepping into the street in front of a speeding car. Three other children are shown being herded into their house by a paternal figure. Arthur's infant son, yet another child figure in the film—who is technically not even conceived at the time of the main events of the novel—is about four years old when Kipps leaves London. Watkins gives the woman in black the new power of being able to coerce children, even multiple children at once, to commit suicide; in the novel, only one child at a time was killed, and usually through illness or accident indirectly caused by the woman in black. Watkins seems to want to portray the village's offspring as the ultimate victims of Jenet's rage, as opposed to Kipps. However, just as the novel *The Turn of the Screw* succeeded in targeting children, which places their tragedy before that of the narrator, the film *The Woman in Black* is geared to be similarly successful.

The final and most apparent difference between the novel and the film is the inferno in which Kipps finds himself near the conclusion of the trailers. The woman in black looks on as Kipps screams and dodges falling flaming rafters. Earlier in the trailers, there is a brief fiery scene in Crythin Gifford, as well as a

kerosene lamp smashing and bursting into flames. Whether these instances are linked remains to be seen when the film debuts on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012. The significance of the spectacular fire in which Kipps is trapped, like the film's foregrounding of children, can also be tied to Susan Hill herself.<sup>§§§</sup> In 1993, Hill wrote a sequel to Daphne de Maurier's 1938 novel *Rebecca*. At the end of this influential novel, Maxim de Winter's beloved estate Manderley goes up in flames; perhaps Watkins has a similar fate planned for Eel Marsh House. When the houses are burned to the ground in *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*, the protagonists are finally able to take possession of their lives and their loves; the fire cleanses their lives of gothic influence and allows the women a conservatively, domestically-bound ending. If Watkins does decide to burn Eel Marsh House to the ground, raising life from death, the audience may anticipate a happy, gothicly-correct—if textually inaccurate—conclusion for Arthur Kipps.

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<sup>§§§</sup> As already noted, I have yet to find any definitive evidence of Susan Hill's direct involvement with the production of the Watkins 2012 film, but Hill's attraction to *Rebecca* (1938) is evident and difficult to ignore.

## VII. James Watkins and *The Woman in Black*: Revision

Watkins, Gothic Revision, and Gothic Film

The gothic play between life and death comes to the forefront in James Watkins' adaptation of *The Woman in Black*, though it does so in a thoroughly modern manner. One of the most noticeable ways in which Watkins revises the novel and reflects the modern gothic movement is when Nathaniel Drablow rises from his marshy grave and, as a horrified Arthur Kipps looks on, approaches Eel Marsh House. While the novel examines the play between life and death in the spectral form of Jennet Humfrye, the film foregrounds the binary in physically resurrecting Nathaniel. The concept of a zombie is not original to this film, however it is certainly a representation of the modern gothic, which is a revised representation of its preceding genre eras. The idea that death is not permanent in zombie mythology attracts a large audience of people terrified of their own mortality. Zombies as iconic monsters suggest the hope that death is not eternal while simultaneously supporting the fearful concept that life beyond death is not desirable.

Although some critics, readers, and students might argue physical resurrection of a dead individual within the gothic dates to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the popularized concept of 'the walking dead' is distinctly tied to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bela Lugosi, famed star of *Dracula* (1931), spread the concept of zombies in his 1932 role in *White Zombie*; director George A. Romero turned the zombie into a household-name monster with his 1968 film *Night of the Living*

*Dead*. These new developments within the horror genre influenced the budding modern gothic movement. Play between hopeful desire and fearful repulsion, notably revolving around death, is evident not only in Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*, but also Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*.

In addition to representing the modern gothic, the concept of zombies revises the gothic genre in that it rewrites the way in which we think of death. Death is no longer permanent, but eternal life is no longer desirable. In *Frankenstein*, the creature is educated to a point where, if not for his appearance, he would be able to move freely in society. However, modern zombies—pioneered by Romero in film—are far less appealing; they are usually deaf and simply-minded, expressing only the need to kill and to consume human flesh. As one zombie explains in Dan O'Bannon's *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), the return to life is immensely painful and, by consuming human brains, the pain becomes more bearable.

Just as the differences between Romero's original zombie film and O'Bannon's sequel are revisions on the horror genre, the alterations from Hill's novel to Watkins' adaptation reflect revisions of the gothic ghost story. Survivors of zombie apocalypses—like Robert Neville in Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*—traditionally try to correct that which turned humans into zombies, while victims or witnesses of great, recurring tragedy attempt to undo the initial catalytic wrong that caused the successive misfortunes. In Watkins' *The Woman in Black*, Arthur Kipps disinters Nathaniel Drablow and reburies him with Jennet

Humfrye in an effort to lay both to rest.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Modern protagonists cannot help but try to right the wrongs of the past. Their authors' evident sensibilities reveal a great sense of cultural consciousness and even possible guilt regarding the tragedies of today. An example of a protagonist attempting to right the wrongs of the past can be found in Tim Burton's 1999 adaptation of *Sleepy Hollow*, which concludes with protagonist Ichabod Crane determining that the headless horseman will go back to his grave if his head is returned to him. Similarly, in *Hamlet II: Ophelia's Revenge* (2003) by David Bergantino, the only way to stop Ophelia's murderous ghost is to rebury her recently disinterred bones in the marshes of Denmark. However temporally popular, the reburying of Nathaniel with his birth mother suggests that the film has closure, in direct contrast with both the novel and the play; the ghost no longer is freed by an open narrative frame or an unexplainable stage sighting. She becomes trapped and her threat is irrevocably diminished. While there are virtually no examples of reburial of remains in the early gothic genre periods, the modern gothic moment is replete with these instances, most notably in adaptations. Watkins has diminished the formerly unrestricted power of the female ghost, limiting her influence outside the domestic sphere and assigning her a purely domestic role with the reburial of Nathaniel with her.

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<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> As I have not yet seen the film, this information is based upon Nathaniel rising to get in contact with Kipps, Kipps' opening of Jennet's grave, and a summary of the film based upon Jane Goldman's second draft of the screenplay.

## Watkins, Cultural Appeal, and Gothic Film

One of the most obvious ways in which Watkins' film has cultural appeal can be found at the top of the cast list; Daniel Radcliffe plays the lead role of Arthur Kipps. For people born between 1988 and 2004, the name Harry Potter has special meaning. My generation grew up waiting for that letter from Hogwarts, dismissing mere muggles, and waving sticks around crying "Expelliarmus!" Harry Potter, and all associated paraphernalia, defined social relationships and served as cultural currency. Despite the fact that the first Harry Potter novel came out in 1997, I personally find it incomprehensible when a person I'm speaking with has not read it. After the 2001 film based upon the first book was released, everyone quickly began to inherently associate the name Harry Potter with the face of Daniel Radcliffe. Millions of people around the world have watched Daniel Radcliffe grow up as Harry Potter and articles discussing "DanRad's" first experiences with love abounded as he hit puberty. Daniel Radcliffe is more than a famous actor; he is *the* cultural icon of my generation.

The fact that Daniel Radcliffe was cast as Arthur Kipps at once attests to the cultural appeal of Susan Hill's original story—they attracted such a famous actor to a low-budget film—as well as to the cultural appeal radiating from Radcliffe himself—the casting director could not have been unaware that Daniel Radcliffe's name on the show bill guarantees an audience.<sup>††††</sup> The casting directors saw something in Jane Goldman's screenplay and Susan Hill's novel

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<sup>††††</sup> Despite the fact that I have never met him, my cultural familiarity with Daniel Radcliffe is so great that I struggle to call him anything other than "Daniel Radcliffe." In fact, when taking notes on the trailers of Watkins' *The Woman in Black*, I found I could only refer to Daniel Radcliffe as Daniel or Daniel Radcliffe, never Arthur Kipps.

that called for a younger male actor, one who would have a happy nature if not for the events of the film or novel. The very name Harry Potter lends an air of youthful magic to Daniel Radcliffe, and it is nearly impossible to dissociate the blithe character<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> of the series from the actor. Because we see Daniel Radcliffe mature and become more complex and meditative, it is easy to transpose him into the role of Arthur Kipps. Radcliffe's background is suited to that of Kipps before the events in Crythin Gifford. Even after his arrival, Kipps' character offers parallels to Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. Harry's mother died to save him, yielding the idea of protection through destruction. The complicated relationship between mother and son in both novels renders Daniel Radcliffe one of the best choices for the actor to play Kipps.

The cultural appeal of Daniel Radcliffe is important to the casting directors. Because of *Harry Potter*, the name Daniel Radcliffe is guaranteed to draw an audience of tweens to young adults to whatever he is associated with; his name on the posters alone practically ensures a profit. In fact, Daniel Radcliffe is joined by fellow *Harry Potter* actor Ciaràn Hinds (Aberforth Dumbledore). Many people on the sites I browsed to study the hype surrounding the film specifically listed Daniel Radcliffe as the reason they wanted to see *The Woman in Black*. The vast majority of the population has never heard of *The Woman in Black*, much less read the novel or seen the play; they care more about the lead actor than the plot of the film. It is hard to blame these people when one considers that media attention to the film focuses more on Daniel Radcliffe's life and actions post-Harry Potter than the film itself. Ultimately, Daniel Radcliffe's presence in the

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<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Harry Potter could be considered "blithe" in the first four novels, if not the final three.

film will mean greater publicity for the film, greater audience for the story, greater fame of Susan Hill, and, if Watkins did not transform *The Woman in Black* into a horror story, perhaps greater respect for the gothic genre.

## VIII. Conclusion

### Concluding Thoughts

Susan Hill's novel *The Woman in Black* has been adapted into two different mediums, revealing significant cultural appeal—why produce a story if no one is interested? The ghost story clearly resonates with cultural fears such as being a bad parent or not being as morally good as we want to be. In order to better understand these concerns, we need to experiment with them and let the consequences of our fears play out. The novel, and the gothic in general, suggest that it is only through repetition that we can truly understand the extent, and even rationality, of our anxieties.

Susan Hill masterfully merged Victorian nostalgia with modern feminism by using the dated sub-genre of the ghost story to convey moral crises that express our unspoken fears. However, the ghost story ultimately proved the perfect medium to examine cultural concerns. Like the ghost herself, our anxieties are intangible and only tacitly acknowledged. Our fears, if played out, have the power to drive us to panic or insanity if we do not keep them in check. However, unexplored, they become all-consuming, leading to similar emotional meltdowns.

The gothic is ever changing and evolving, even as it repeats itself. Through this repetition, we can examine how interpretations and variations of the same gothic tropes have ultimately changed to reflect our complex, layered fears. For example, in the film adaptation of *The Woman in Black*, *The Castle of*

*Otranto*'s lonely rocky outcropping is reflected in a heavily wooded, rocky island. Anxieties of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century were investigated in an ominous setting of threatening, raw, powerful nature. In modern times, concerns of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century are similarly explored in a rocky, natural setting; however, instead of sheer cliff faces and lonely precipices, Eel Marsh House is set against, in Watkins' adaptation, a densely vegetated island that signifies wild and uncontrolled nature. From the above repetition/revision, we can see that what we fear has evolved, just as how we view and express those phobias has developed.

Because there is a theatrical and a film adaptation of the original work, we are able to compare apparently minor details such as setting in the three stories. Each of these alterations reveals cultural concerns, as well as a changing sense of cultural appeal; by tracing the revisions from the original to the theatrical, then to the film adaptation, the reader is able to assess what these differences reflect in terms of cultural anxieties. The novel is most concerned with what it meant to be a good mother and how to cope with loss. The play's most apparent cultural concern revolves around being a good parent and corrupting others. Both Hill and Mallatratt are concerned not only with parenting, but also with entertaining. This lesser, early concern finds its voice in Watkins' film adaptation which, to all appearances, with all its alterations, seems most concerned with entertaining the largest number of people possible in order to earn a profit.

As Heidi Kaye suggests, audience response is keenly important in translating a novel to a film or to a play. When the cultural concerns apparent in adaptations are taken into account, audience response merits new importance as a

way in which to quantify the significance of the events to the viewers. In a 2008 Halloween theatrical production of *The Woman in Black*, the 60 free-standing seats in a black box theater always ended up six inches further back than where they had started, as a result of the audience shifting backwards, away from the horror they witnessed on stage. In the trailers for Watkins' film *The Woman in Black*, the first time the viewer glimpses Jennet's eye through the zoetrope, when Jennet materializes in the apparently empty rocking chair, and when the screaming woman appears after Kipps touches the hand print on the window pane, the audience jumps, momentarily terrified—or at the very least, surprised—at the sudden appearances. By playing with our sense of reality, the film forces us to reexamine that which, outside the theater, would be completely unthinkable, both physically and morally; the theater creates a virtual realm in which one can indulge in the consequences of pursuing the extremes of gothic binaries.

As demonstrated specifically by the example of setting, the novel *The Woman in Black* also generally reflects who we are, what we value, and what we fear. We are an extremely mortality-conscious species that values progeny above almost all else. While insulation and indoor heating and cooling have diminished the threat and power of raw nature, uncontrolled nature, not to mention uncontrolled emotions such as Jennet Humfrye's vengeance, still pose a significant threat to us. Coupled with the threat of nature is the threat of the loss of progeny through death or bad parenting. The fact that Susan Hill's evident purpose in writing her novel in 1983 is still pertinent today<sup>§§§§</sup> reveals that we still

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<sup>§§§§</sup> Hill's purpose is still clearly pertinent today, as demonstrated by the fact that Hammer Films invested in the screenplay believing they can make a profit.

care about the division of familial responsibilities and self-gratification.

Ultimately, these cultural concerns indicate that we are still a very primal species that has not yet finished evolving.

The gothic genre's general dismissal from the English canon coupled with its continued popularity made me question the enjoyable genre's merit; I was convinced that there had to be something worth-while in the over-wrought, over-dramatic genre. The ultimate, physical repulsion of the audience against the evil expressed in all gothic media that convinces me that the gothic genre's ultimate purpose is negative reinforcement in order to encourage socially and morally responsible behavior. Gothic monstrosity pointedly illustrates the consequences of social or moral irresponsibility, but does it ultimately resolve the tension between self and society? The fact that *The Woman in Black* has been adapted twice in under 30 years suggests that we are still trying to understand how to be both socially responsible and true to ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

<sup>3</sup> Bloom, Clive. *Gothic Horror*. Ed. Clive Bloom. London: Macmillan 1998. 199.

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<sup>4</sup> Hill, Susan. *The Woman in Black*. Boston: David R. Godine 2010. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Cox, Donna. "'I Have No Story to Tell!': Maternal Rage in Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*." *Intertexts* 4 (1) Spring 2000. 75.

Scullion, Val. "Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*: Gothic Horror for the 1980s." *Women: a culture review* vol. 14 no. 3. 294.

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<sup>8</sup> MacAndrew, qtd. in Baldick and Mighall, "Gothic Criticism," *A Companion to the Gothic*. Ed. David Punter. Oxford: Blackwell 2000. 215

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* ix.

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- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 122.
- <sup>21</sup> James, M. R. *Some Remarks on Ghost Stories*. Edinburgh: Tragara Press 1985.
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- <sup>23</sup> Hill, Susan. *The Woman in Black*. Boston: David R. Godine 2010. 31.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 31.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 31.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 35.
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- <sup>34</sup> Hill, Susan. *The Woman in Black*. Boston: David R. Godine 2010. 61.
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- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 137-138.
- <sup>42</sup> Cox, Donna. "'I Have No Story To Tell!: Maternal Rage in Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*.'" *Intertexts* 4 (1) Spring 2000." 78.
- <sup>43</sup> Hill, Susan. *The Woman in Black*. Boston: David R. Godine 2010. 31.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 31.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 55.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 67-68.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 97.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 116.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 116.

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- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 100-101.
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- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 52.
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- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 102-103.
- <sup>64</sup> Briggs, Julia. "The Ghost Story" *A Companion to the Gothic*. Ed. David Punter. Oxford: Blackwell 2000. 129.
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- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 89.
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