The mysterious woman in black

In the exam you might be asked about the character of the woman in black. You will gain higher marks if you include a range of comments about her character rather than simply re-telling the story. Think about who she is and what she does. It is other people’s reactions to the woman in black which reveal a lot about her character.

Answer the questions below to help you develop a set of notes on her character to use in the exam:

1. What effect is created by referring to her as ‘the woman in black’ rather than by her real name?

2. Re-read the vivid description of her in the chapter ‘The Funeral of Mrs Drablow’ when Arthur Kipps first notices her. Pick out three significant details about her appearance and comment on the effect of each one.
   e.g. ‘thinnest layer of flesh was tautly stretched and strained across her bones’ – the verbs ‘stretched’ and ‘strained’ suggest her appearance matches her emotions. Her experiences have left her in a similar taut state.

3. Arthur Kipps’ first reaction to the mysterious lady is one of sympathy – ‘I intended to wait for the sick-looking woman and offer my arm to escort her’ and ‘poor thing.’ What do readers think about her at this point?

4. Mr Jerome’s reaction to the mysterious lady at the funeral is one of shock and horror. ‘Mr Jerome looked frozen, pale, his throat moving as if he were unable to utter.’ What do readers think about her at this point?

5. The second time Arthur Kipps sees the woman in black in ‘Across the Causeway’ he reacts differently towards her. Describe his reaction and try to explain why he reacts like this now.

6. Jennet Humfrye had written in a letter, ‘Why should I not have what is mine?’ Why is this a key line in the novel?

7. Kipps declares, ‘I felt sorry for J, as I read her short, emotional letter over again.’ What effect is created by referring to her as J?

8. Just before the murder of Arthur Kipps’ wife and son he describes the woman in black’s emotions as a mixture of ‘hatred’, ‘bitterness’ and ‘malevolence.’ She is still reliving the emotions she felt when she gave up her child. Re-read the first and final chapters of the novel. How does Arthur Kipps react to watching his wife and child die?

**Essay questions**

Use your notes to answer one of the essay questions below:

- How does Susan Hill present the woman in black as a figure of mystery and fear? Refer to the text in your answer.
- ‘Jennet Humfrye was justified in her revenge.’ Argue for and against this statement with reference to the text.