The Woman in Black by Susan Hill

Exploring the novel

NB All quotes and page references are taken from the Vintage 2007 edition.

Chapter 1: Christmas Eve

‘My spirits have for many years now been excessively affected by the ways of the weather …’

1. Find three key images from pp.9-10 and explain how each one is effective in establishing the reader’s interest.

2. How does Hill engage the reader’s interest in the first ten pages? Think about foreshadowing, hints, characterisation, setting etc.

3. Why do you think Arthur reacts as he does to the requests for a story?

4. What do you think is the relevance of the poem on p.23?

5. How effective is Chapter 1, in your opinion? Link your ideas to specific quotations.

Chapter 2: A London Particular

‘It was a yellow fog, a filthy, evil-smelling fog …’

1. What sort of tone is established on pp.25-26 of the novel? Give evidence for your ideas, and explain how you came to your conclusions.

2. What do we learn about Arthur’s work life in this chapter?

3. Find three quotations that build tension from pp.26-31. For each one, explain how it works and why it is effective.

Chapter 3: The Journey North

‘I shuddered, all the more because of the openness of his gaze and the directness of his manner.’

1. How does Hill use the train journey to convey a growing sense of unease?

2. Sketch out the description of Samuel Daily on pp.36-7. Label with key quotations from the chapter, describing his personality as well as his appearance.

3. How do you respond to this character? Give reasons for your ideas.

4. What do we learn about Mrs Drablow in this chapter?

5. Pick four quotations you feel help to illustrate the character of Arthur in this chapter. Explain each one.
Chapter 4: The Funeral of Mrs Drablow

‘I was still all in a state of innocence, but that innocence, once lost, is lost forever.’

1. How does the description of the Gifford Arms contrast with the settings used so far in the novel?

2. ‘His face flickered with ... what? Alarm, was it? Suspicion? I could not tell, but the name had stirred some strong emotion in him, all signs of which he endeavoured to suppress at once.’ (p.42)

How does Hill build tension for the reader in this quotation?

3. How does Hill create a sense of the isolation of Crythin Gifford, and why is this important?

4. What do we learn about Mr Jerome in this chapter?

5. Sketch the woman described on pp.48-49. Add quotations and comment on the way the reader responds to the character in this chapter.

6. What new information do we get about Samuel Daily in this chapter? How do you think we’re supposed to feel about this character at this point?

Chapter 5: Across the Causeway

‘I felt a strange sensation, an excitement mingled with alarm.’

1. Find two quotations that show the marshes in a positive way. Explain the effect of each.

2. What effect do these natural images have?
   - sand/grass
   - the pony
   - birds/bird sounds
   - water
   - fish

3. What is the impact of the woman’s second appearance on a) Arthur and b) the reader?

4. In what ways does Hill present the house as a sanctuary?
Chapter 6: The Sound of a Pony and Trap

‘I stumbled, praying to reach the house, which was farther away than I had imagined.’

1. Explore how Hill uses each of the following to establish and raise the tension in this chapter. Include a key quotation and explain the impact it has on the reader:
   - fog
   - noises
   - isolation.

2. Do you think Arthur is himself to blame for what happens to him in this chapter? Explain your answer.

3. How is Keckwick presented in Chapter 6? Include key quotations and an exploration of the impact he had.

4. How does the character of Arthur change in this chapter?

Chapter 7: Mr Jerome is Afraid

‘His pale domed forehead was beaded with perspiration.’

1. Why does Arthur decide to stay? Does this seem like a good decision?

2. How is Mr Jerome presented in this chapter? How does he react when Arthur asks him for help?

3. Why does Arthur decide to go back to the house even if it does mean going alone?

Chapter 8: Spider

‘At my feet stood a sturdy little terrier with a rough brindle coat and bright eyes.’

1. Is the description of Arthur as a ‘fool’ fair in your opinion?

2. What does Daily’s house tell us about his character?

3. Why do you think Arthur shows so much trust in Daily?

4. What clues are there that Daily is concerned about Arthur?

5. Why do you think Daily offers Spider to Arthur? What good will she be?
Chapter 9: In the Nursery

‘When I awoke – or was awakened – very suddenly, I felt somewhat stunned, uncertain ...’

1. What does Arthur do to try to limit his fear in the house?
2. In what ways is Spider an important character in this chapter?
3. Pick two details from pp.108-109 that help to build tension and explain how they work.
4. What are the key pieces of information from the letters?
5. Why is the open door scary?
6. Create a labelled sketch of the nursery.
7. Why did Arthur find the sound of the pony and trap worse than seeing the woman?

Chapter 10: Whistle and I’ll Come to You

‘I ran as I have never run before, heedless of my own safety, desperate to go to the aid of the brave, bright little creature ...’

1. What effect does the description of the storm have?
2. Why is Arthur glad of Spider’s company on p.126?
3. Why does he return to the nursery? How is the reader supposed to react?
4. What effect does the nursery have on Arthur? Why do you think this is?
5. How does Spider get into danger and how does Arthur react? Pick a vivid image from this scene and explore its effect.
6. How do you respond to the final sentence of the chapter?
Chapter 11: A Packet of Letters

‘If I could uncover the truth, perhaps I might in some way put an end to it all forever.’

1. What is the effect of Daily’s return upon Arthur?
2. Why did Daily return? Do you find this a convincing reason?
3. What has happened to the nursery? What effect is this intended to have on the reader?
4. What new information does Arthur learn in this chapter?
5. Why do you think Daily still avoids telling Arthur everything he knows?
6. What do we learn about Jennet from Daily?

Chapter 12: The Woman in Black

‘They asked for my story. I have told it. Enough.’

1. How does Hill want us to feel when Arthur leaves Crythin Gifford?
2. What details does Hill use to make links between the opening and ending of the novel?
3. Why does the happiness described on pp.156-157 seem out of place for this story?
5. Why do you think this story ends so abruptly?
6. Is this a satisfying ending to the novel? Explain your answer.