

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

STUDY GUIDE

MARCH 19–APRIL 11, 2015



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This guide compiled by Morgan Gregory and Anne-Marie Hanson for Royal MTC, February 2014.

Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre
Presents



A ghost play
Adapted by **Stephen Mallatratt**
from the book by **Susan Hill**

Director – Robb Paterson
Set & Costume Designer – Brian Perchaluk
Lighting Designer – Hugh Conacher
Sound Designer – John Bent Jr.
Dialect Coach – Shannon Vickers
Assistant Director – Charlene Van Buekenhout
Stage Manager – Karyn Kumhyr
Assistant Stage Manager – Michelle Lagasse
Apprentice Stage Manager – Ali Fulmyk

THE CAST
Arthur Kipps – Eric Blais
The Actor – Ross McMillan

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

"The theater is so endlessly fascinating because it's so accidental. It's so much like life." – Arthur Miller

Arrive Early: Latecomers may not be admitted to a performance. Please ensure you arrive with enough time to find your seat before the performance starts.

Cell Phones and Other Electronic Devices: Please **TURN OFF** your cell phones/iPods/gaming systems/cameras. We have seen an increase in texting, surfing, and gaming during performances, which is very distracting for the performers and other audience members. The use of cameras and recording devices is strictly prohibited.

Talking During the Performance: You can be heard (even when whispering!) by the actors onstage and the audience around you. Disruptive patrons will be removed from the theatre. Please wait to share your thoughts and opinions with others until after the performance.

Food/Drinks: Food and hot drinks are not allowed in the theatre. Where there is an intermission, concessions may be open for purchase of snacks and drinks. There is complimentary water in the lobby.

Dress: There is no dress code at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, but we respectfully request that patrons refrain from wearing hats in the theatre. We also strive to be a scent-free environment, and thank all patrons for their cooperation.

Leaving During the Performance: If an audience member leaves the theatre during a performance, they will be readmitted at the discretion of our Front of House staff. Should they be readmitted, they will not be ushered back to their original seat, but placed in a vacant seat at the back of the auditorium.

Being Asked to Leave: The theatre staff has, and will exercise, the right to ask any member of the audience to leave the performance if that person is being disruptive. Inappropriate and disruptive behaviour includes, but is not limited to: talking, using electronic devices, cameras, laser pointers, or other light- or sound-emitting devices, and deliberately interfering with an actor or the performance (tripping, throwing items on or near the stage, etc.).

Talkbacks: All Tuesday evening performances and final matinees at MTC feature a talkback with members of the cast following the show. While watching the performance, make a mental note of questions to ask the actors. Questions can be about the story, the interpretation, life in the theatre, etc.

Enjoy the show: Laugh, applaud, cheer and respond to the performance appropriately. Make sure to thank all the artists for their hard work with applause during the curtain call.

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THE NOVELIST - Susan Hill

Susan Hill was born in Scarborough, Yorkshire, England, “beside the North Sea,” a location that is featured imaginatively, and sometimes geographically, in her writing. She attended Scarborough Convent Grammar School, and later King’s College, London, where she read English, published her first book, and encountered “pea souper fogs, known as London Particulars.”

She has written acclaimed literary novels, ghost stories, children’s books, detective novels and memoirs, has won several prestigious awards and has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. While writing her 58 books, as well as being a reviewer for newspapers and journals, Susan Hill lived in various locations in England.

She has a husband and two daughters, and now lives in North Norfolk, once again near the sea. In her own words: “And I go on writing and reading – the one feeds the other every day, and the east coast and the sea sound through my dreams and my books, as they always did” (Hill *Susan Hill*).

To learn more about Susan Hill visit, <http://www.susanhill.org.uk/>

THE NOVEL - The Woman in Black

In 1983 Susan Hill wrote and published *The Woman in Black*, a ghost story set some time in the first few decades of the twentieth century and influenced by Victorian and Gothic literature.

On Christmas Eve in his country home of Monk’s piece, Arthur Kipps, “an even tempered man of predictable emotions” (Hill 18) is urged by his family to tell a ghost story. The request catapults Kipps into a panic because the one ghost story he has to tell is “a true story, a story of haunting and evil, fear and confusion, horror and tragedy” (Hill 18). He avoids telling the tale to his family, but he writes it down because “the way to banish an old ghost that continues its haunting is to exorcise it” (Hill 19).

After this introductory chapter, the novel recounts Arthur Kipps’ experiences as a young solicitor assigned to deal with the estate of one Mrs. Alice Drablow of Eel Marsh House. He is given a file, and told little beyond the strangeness of the deceased and her isolated, old house. He travels north to the town of Crythin Gifford, where he is met with half-hints and dark mutterings whenever the name of

Drablow or Eel March House is mentioned. At first, Kipps attributes the oddities to local legends and tales as if he has stepped into a Victorian novel.

With the local lawyer, Mr. Jerome, Arthur attends Mrs. Drablow's funeral. The only other mourner is a woman dressed in the deepest black. When Arthur asks after the woman in black, Mr. Jerome is deeply disturbed, saying that he saw no young woman. The next day, Kipps is taken by pony and trap across the Nine Lives Causeway to Eel Marsh House, described as astonishingly situated, isolated, uncompromising but also, handsome. There he finds papers, letters, receipts, legal documents and notebooks that will take him days to sort. Once again, he sees the woman in black. This time he is nearly paralyzed by a sense of desperate, yearning malevolence emanating from her. He approaches but, she steps behind a stone and, seemingly, vanishes.

Despite warnings, Kipps gathers supplies to spend a night or two at Eel Marsh House to sort the papers of Mrs. Drablow. What occurs forms the core of this tale of "haunting and evil, fear and confusion, horror and tragedy."

THE PLAYWRIGHT - Stephen Mallatratt

Stephen Mallatratt was born in Mill Hill, north London. He attended Orange Hill School, after which he worked a few odd jobs and trained as an actor at the Central School of Speech and Drama. It is thought that the playwright Alan Ayckbourn brought him to Scarborough, where he began, in earnest, his acting and writing careers. In 1987 he adapted Susan Hill's novel, *The Woman in Black*, for the stage, creating a dramatic version of the novel that is now the second-longest-running West End play. It has been translated into a dozen languages and produced in 40 countries. Mallatratt died of leukaemia in 2004 (Coveney).

THE PLAY - The Woman in Black

Peter Wilson writes of Stephen Mallatratt that "there aren't many writers around who could use so lightly the key tool of theatre - the audience's imagination" (*25 Years*). Wilson comments on the Chorus from Shakespeare's *Henry V* as being "the central inspiration" for the adaptation. Each act of *Henry V* begins with a speech from the Chorus, which urges the audience to let "imaginary forces

work,” to “sit and see,/ Minding true things by what their mock’ries be” (Shakespeare Prologues 1.18 and 4.52-53).

Accordingly, Mallatratt adapts the various narrative techniques at work in the novel into a staging that invites the audience to create not visual or visceral fear, but imaginative terror.

Darkness is a powerful ally of terror, something glimpsed in a corner is far more frightening than if it’s fully observed. Sets work best when they accommodate this – when things unknown might be in places unseen.

There are anachronisms and geographical inconsistencies within the text. These are not mistakes, but indications of the neverland we inhabit when involved with the *Woman in Black*. (Hill and Mallatratt)

Mallatratt maintains the idea that an old ghost that continues to haunt may be exorcised through the telling. He adjusts the convention of an individual writing to share a story, to an individual having written the tale and then wanting to tell it. The play is set in a Victorian theatre, and involves Arthur Kipps (as “Actor”) and an actor (as “Kipps”). They work together to adapt Kipps’s written story into a dramatic version, the action of the play being a single rehearsal over a few days. As this is a rehearsal, there is no audience, just a cluttered stage, Arthur Kipps and an actor... or so it seems.



“It must be told.” – Arthur Kipps

CONTEXT

Unlike a more traditional work of drama *The Woman in Black* exists in a kind of “neverland” (Hill and Mallatratt), a dimension that consists less of time and place and more of influence and feeling. This is not a play about a particular time and place, written in a particular school of thought or influence; this is a play written in the intellectual climate of 1983, set in an unspecified time in the first few decades of the twentieth century, placed inside a Victorian-style theatre, and influenced by Victorian ghost stories and Gothic literature.

Postmodernism

Theatre, like all literature of the period post-1960, is influenced by postmodernist thought. It is difficult to define postmodernism, but for enhanced viewing of *The Woman in Black*, what needs to be understood is that metadramatic gestures (elements of the drama that call attention to it as drama) are common, and that there will be a challenging or deconstructing of the usual barriers or borders. *The Woman in Black* can be considered postmodern due to the metadramatic element of two characters, who are presumably not characters, getting together to rehearse a play, which ends up being the play. The play also undermines certain usual barriers: between actor and character, audience and stage, and even stage and reality. Thus, it is a play about putting on a play, and it blurs the boundaries that most of us assume to be firmly in place in our lived lives.

The first few decades of the 20th Century

It is clear that the play takes place after the close of the Victorian era (1837-1901). The actor refers to “an Irving” (see Vocabulary), as if those involved with the theatre, including a general actor, are well aware of the famous Victorian actor. There are cars driven, but a pony and trap are still used regularly. In the novel, Arthur Kipps notes that his train had the Sir Bedivere as the engine (Hill 33); the Sir Bedivere was an engine in use between 1925 and 1961 (Wikipedia). These elements serve to situate the play in time, but in a broad time, somewhere in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Victorian & Gothic literature

As with postmodernism, a full account of what is meant by “Victorian” (1837-1901) is not possible here; however, certain aspects considered usual in Victorian fiction may help to illuminate a viewing of *The Woman in Black*. The narrator in Victorian fiction often directly addresses the reader, telling stories

for the betterment of the teller and the listener (Sanders). In Victorian fiction, there is often a bringing together, not without much tension, of the ancient and the modern, of the primal and the civilized, of the strange and the familiar, of the uncertain and the certain (Davis). The ghost story became very popular in the Victorian era, especially toward the end of the period. Charles Dickens's ghosts fall into categories of the unconscious, such as blood stains and eerie sounds, that repeat or reenact some past wrong or wickedness, and conscious, which are spirits that appear to an individual to right a wrong or to seek retribution or revenge (David).

"Gothic" is a term that has developed much connotative meaning in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, but it has particular meaning when applied to literature. The Gothic often blends together elements of the ancient and the modern, and in so doing enacts "an undamming of dark forces that rush into and insidiously undermine the order of everyday life" (Luckhurst). In the sense of the word's origins, as referring to any and all of the Goths, or uncivilized "barbarians," as called by the Romans, the word "stands for everything *not*: not modern, not enlightened" (Luckhurst).

Conclusions

Taken together, the play brings together a number of different ideas and traditions to generate a "neverland" that undoes usual times and places to create a *non*-dimension of feeling and tension, one that leaves the audience distinctly disturbed.



VOCABULARY

Barrister – a lawyer who has been called to the bar, and has the right of representing clients in the higher courts

Charnel House – a building or vault in which bones or dead bodies are placed

Counterpane – bedspread

Crewe – a railway town in the county of Cheshire in the North West region of England

Fatstock – livestock that is fat and ready for market

King's Cross Station – a railway station in central London

Ludo, Halma and Draughts– simple board games played with dice, counters or checkers

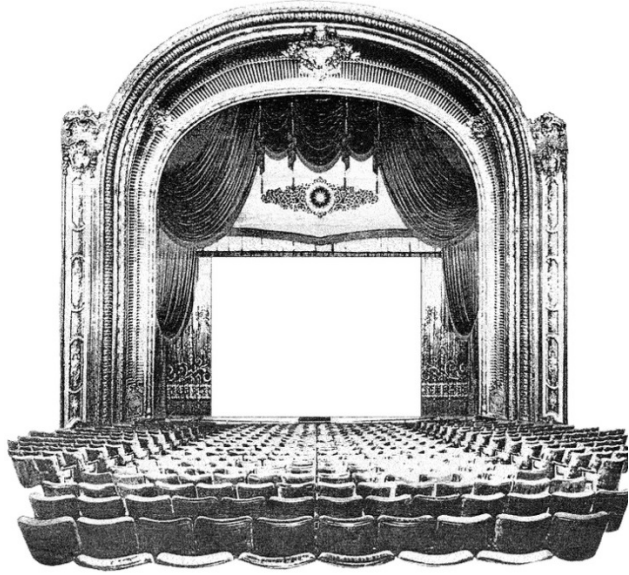
Martello tower – a circular, tower-like fort with guns on the top

Pariah – an outcast; a person, despised or avoided

Pea-souper – a heavy thick yellow fog

Pony and trap – a trap is a light, two-wheeled carriage





Proscenium – a proscenium theatre is a theatre space whose primary feature is a large frame or arch, which is located at or near the front of the stage. The audience directly faces the stage, which is usually raised several feet above the front row audience level. The main stage is the space behind the proscenium arch where there is often a curtain. The space in front of the curtain is called the apron. A proscenium arch creates a “window” around the scenery and performers (Phillips)

Rum ‘un – odd, strange

Sea fret – a fog that comes in from the sea

Skip – a large transportable container

Solicitor – a legal practitioner properly qualified to deal with conveyancing, draw up wills, etc.

Torch – flashlight

Homerby, Crythin Gifford, Eel Marsh and the Nine Lives Causeway – fictional locations

** Definitions are common knowledge or taken from the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.*

ALLUSIONS

Hamlet – a play by William Shakespeare. Actor reads lines from Act 1, scene 1, wherein the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears. The Ghost in Shakespeare's play speaks of a desire for vengeance.

Irving – one of the quotes from the play is "We'll make an Irving of you yet."- Sir Henry Irving (1838 – 1905) was an English stage actor of the Victorian era. He was known as an actor-manager, taking complete responsibility (supervision of sets, lighting, direction, casting, as well as playing leading roles) for many seasons at the Lyceum Theatre, establishing himself and his company as representatives of English theatre. He was the first actor to be awarded a knighthood (Phillips).



King Lear – a play by William Shakespeare.

Miss Havisham – in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, she is a wealthy, eccentric old woman who lives in a manor called Satis House; she often seems insane, wearing a faded wedding dress, keeping a rotting feast on her table, and is surrounded by clocks stopped at twenty minutes to nine. As a young woman, Miss Havisham was jilted by her fiancé moments before her wedding. She is motivated by her desire to inflict suffering on young men.

Sonnets – William Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets, often memorised by students and actors.

PRE-VIEWING

Tension is a core aspect of all literary art forms. It is generated on various levels and in multiple and diverse ways. Genre and dramaturgy are two sources of tension in *The Woman in Black*. Explorations of each area prior to the show will enhance a viewer's experience.

Suggested questions:

Stephen Mallatratt wrote that “the intent of the show is to frighten” (Hill and Mallatratt) and subtitled his script “a ghost play.”

1. How might a writer frighten his or her audience? Brainstorm and discuss specific examples of elements of ghost stories from stories, plays, and films you have experienced.
2. How might a dramatist use theatrical techniques to enhance the telling of a ghost story? Read the plot summary, and then predict how some of these techniques might be used in *The Woman in Black*.

Notes:

- Gothic and Victorian ghost stories often include a ghost or ghosts, real or imagined, mysterious or isolated settings (castles, houses, landscapes), preoccupation with the monstrous or supernatural, dreams, visions and hallucinations, a psychological splitting or doubling of characters, violence and imprisonment (David).
- Though your discussions may explore a wide variety of theatrical techniques used to generate tension and meaning, be sure to include sound, lighting, exits/entrances, blocking, and set design.

Suggested activity:

Have students, perhaps in pairs or small groups, create and tell ghost stories. They should attempt to use a few of the elements and techniques discussed to generate tension and to frighten their listeners. Be sure to work with students to design criteria and reasonable expectations.

DURING & POST-VIEWING

Viewers should read and consider the following questions prior to viewing the play. Doing so will enhance the experience and enrich subsequent discussions.

1. The gothic is concerned primarily with feeling, especially with fear and terror, in characters and in the reader or audience. In what ways does *The Woman in Black* generate fear and terror?
2. What theatrical techniques did you notice during the performance? How did these techniques generate tension in the audience?
3. Though the story involves many people and locations, the play uses only two actors, minimal lighting, a few sounds, a simple set, and one other important device – the audience’s imagination. What are the strengths and the limitations of this type of imaginative co-creation?
4. What elements of metadrama are at work in the performance? Did these add to or detract from your experience? Did these elements work with or against some of the central ideas and concerns of the play?
5. The story of the woman in black explores the boundaries between certain dichotomies, such as life and death, light and darkness, new and old, good and evil, real and imagined. How did the play stage some of these dichotomies? What did the play suggest about such categories and boundaries?
6. Though clearly set in a “real” place, a small Victorian theatre, how does the play create a “neverland,” a dimension of nothing, a non-place alongside the “normal” world?
7. One theory of literary meaning suggests that literature “makes the world strange” so that the reader or audience is disturbed from usual or habitual ways of being and understanding. How and to what extent is *The Woman in Black* disturbing?

FURTHER STUDY

1. Read Susan Hill's novel, *The Woman in Black*.
 - Consider how the novel generates tension, fear and terror.
 - Evaluate Mallatratt's adaptation for the stage.
 - Hill employs vivid imagery to generate atmosphere. Select key passages and create a visual representation of the novel's emotional landscape.
 - Carefully read the passages dealing with Eel Marsh House and its surroundings. Research Victorian architecture to determine the time the house would have been built as well as how well Hill has imagined it for her purposes.
2. Research the late Victorian preoccupation with ghost stories and supernatural phenomena. What is it that fascinated people about ghosts and the supernatural then? Are we still fascinated with such things today?
3. Revise and expand the ghost story you created and told to your classmates. Try to incorporate what you have learned about Gothic literature, Victorian literature, and the world of theatre to frighten your audience.
4. Research tales of ghosts and the supernatural in your community and/or culture. Consider the tales that reinforce what you believe and the tales that challenge the way you see the world. You could also consider why almost all places and cultures have tales that concern the supernatural.
5. Read, and if possible, view, a play by Stephen Mallatratt. What similarities and differences does it have to *The Woman in Black*?
6. Susan Hill has indicated that Henry James's famous story *The Turn of the Screw* inspired her to write *The Woman in Black*. Read Henry James's story and compare/contrast it with the play and/or the novel of *The Woman in Black*.
7. Read one or more Gothic or Victorian work, and then complete one of the above tasks or come up with your own idea for further study.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Short stories and Novellas:

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* or *The Haunted Man*

George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil*

Henry James, *Sir Edmund Orme*

Rudyard Kipling, *The Mark of the Beast*

Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*

John William Polidori, *The Vampyre*

Oscar Wilde, *The Canterville Ghost*

Novels:

Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*

Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*

Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian* or *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

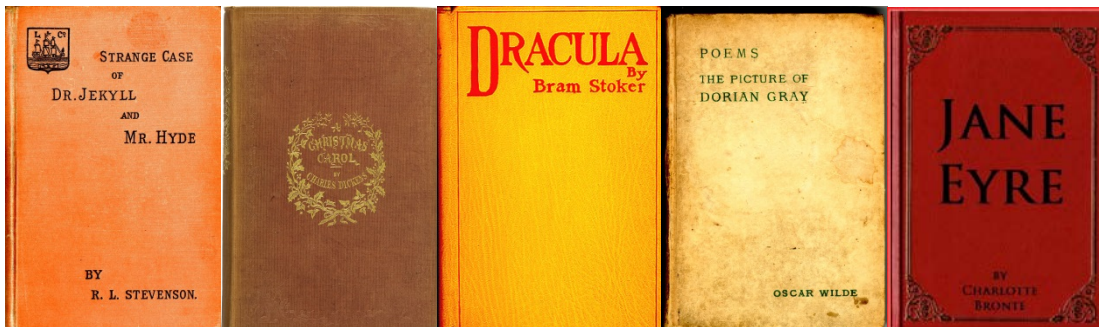
Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*

H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*



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