Still Scary After All These Years:
Gothic Tropes in Stephen Mallatratt’s *The Woman in Black*
DRAFT (please do not reference this version)
Beth A. Kattelman

Stephen Mallatratt’s play, *The Woman in Black*, a Gothic thriller adapted from Susan Hill’s popular book, has the distinction of being the second-longest-running, non-musical production on London’s West End. The record for the longest run is firmly held by Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap* which has been playing on the West End continuously since 1952. *The Woman in Black* arrived on the West End in January 1989, opening at the Lyric Hammersmith before transferring to The Strand and The Playhouse. On June 7, 1989 it moved to the Fortune Theatre where it has continued to thrill audiences ever since. Described as “spine-tingling,” “terrifying,” and “shocking,” it is an effective piece of theatre that has played to “over seven million people” to date, yet due to an academic bias against the exploration of popular productions, *The Woman in Black* has received little attention from theatre theorists or historians. As Alan Woods notes in his article on “Emphasizing the Avant-Garde,” the history twentieth-century theatre has most often been recorded as “a series of avant-garde movements,” thus causing theatre historians and theorists to ignore the more conventional forms of theatre and to explore instead the new manifestations of the art form.¹ Thus, *The Woman in Black* has been overlooked. It does not receive a mention in the volume of *The Cambridge History of British Theatre* which covers British theatre of the twentieth century, and it does not appear in the book *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics* or Theodore Shank’s 1994 volume devoted to *Contemporary British Theatre*. 
The success of the stage play, *The Woman in Black* is unusual in today’s theatrical world. As the public increasingly turns to television, film and online video for entertainment, many theatrical productions cannot draw the audiences needed to sustain an extended run, especially if they do not feature dazzling special effects and multimedia spectacle. *The Woman in Black* is not a spectacle-filled or edgy example of the theatrical art; rather, it relies on many long-standing, conventional elements to create its theatrical magic. The novel uses many familiar Gothic tropes to create suspense and tension, and these tropes have been effectively adapted by Stephen Mallatratt in his stage version of the text. It is an example of a theatrical piece that “works,” thus, the central question of my investigation is, “How have the Gothic tropes of Susan Hill’s novel been employed to create this effective and frightening stage play and how do the production’s theatrical elements (particularly lighting and sound) support and enhance the formal structures designed to induce tension in an audience?” It seems that audiences still like to be frightened, and somehow *The Woman in Black* has managed to consistently do just that for more than two decades. It is still scary after all these years.

**The Book**

Susan Hill’s novel tells the story of Arthur Kipps, a young solicitor who is sent to settle the estate of Mrs. Alice Drablow, a reclusive widow who has recently passed away. In order to complete his task Kipps must first travel to the small town of Crythin Gifford where he is to represent his firm at the funeral. He also must spend some time going through papers at Mrs. Drablow’s isolated estate, Eel Marsh House, a sinister-looking place that is situated a few miles outside of the town. The sole land access to the house is
via a thin causeway that is only passable during low tide. When the tide is in, the
causeway is covered by water and the house is cut off from the mainland until the tide
recedes. While on his assignment Kipps encounters a malicious presence that manifests in
the form of a mysterious spectral figure – the woman in black. He first sees her while
attending Mrs. Drablow’s funeral, although on this encounter he assumes that she is just a
woman who is in very ill health:

[A]lthough I did not stare, even the swift glance I took of the woman showed me
enough to recognize that she was suffering from some terrible wasting disease, for
not only was she extremely pale, even more than a contrast with the blackness of
her garments could account for, but the skin and, it seemed, only the thinnest layer
of flesh was tautly stretched and strained across her bones, so that it gleamed with
a curious, blue-white sheen, and her eyes seemed sunken back into her head.²

After the funeral, Kipps tries to seek out the poor woman, but she is nowhere to be found.
Later, while at Eel Marsh, Kipps once again encounters the woman in black lurking in the
run-down cemetery that sits on the estate’s edge. Eventually Kipps experiences many
unusual and unsettling things at Eel Marsh. Strange sounds emanate from a securely-
locked room; a door that Kipps has been unable to budge is found standing open; an
empty rocking chair inexplicably begins rocking. And most distressing of all, one day,
while wandering the grounds during a thick fog he hears the horrific sound of a pony and
trap falling off of the causeway and into the marsh. He can hear the screams of the horse
and riders as they panic and momentarily fight for their lives until they are sucked into
the water of the marsh and silenced by death. What disturbs Kipps most, however, is that
he is certain that some of the screams are those of a young child. As the strange events
multiply, Kipps becomes obsessed with trying to unravel the story of Eel Marsh House
and of the woman in black. When he tries to discuss the strange events with the
townspeople of Crythin Gifford, however, he finds that they are unwilling. It is from Mrs.
Alice Drablow’s private papers that Kipps eventually pieces together the tragedy that has seemingly brought about the haunting. Within the papers, Kipps discovers that the woman in black is the ghost of Jennet Humfrye, sister to Mrs. Alice Drablow. Years earlier Humfrye had born a son out of wedlock, an untenable situation for an aristocratic young girl of those days, so she was forced to give the boy to her the sister. The Drablows would occasionally allow Humfrye to visit her son, Nathaniel, but only under the strict edict that she not disclose her relationship to him. She agreed, but the arrangement caused her much anguish and distress. One day when Nathaniel was six years old he was drowned in a horrible accident in which the pony and trap he was riding slid off the causeway into the marsh. Humfrye never forgave the Drablows for the death of her son, and she vowed vengeance on them and on the townspeople of Crythin Gifford. Humfrye died from a horrible wasting disease twelve years later, but has continued her vendetta from beyond the grave. As one of the locals tells Kipps, “Whenever she has been seen . . . in some violent or dreadful circumstance a child has died.”

According to Susan Hill, the tenaciousness of Humfrye’s hatred is part of what makes the novel so gripping:

“A fictional ghost has to have a raison d’etre otherwise it is pointless and a pointless ghost is the stuff of all the boring stories about veiled ladies endlessly drifting through walls and headless horsemen . . . for no good reason, to no purpose. My ghost cannot let go of her grief or her desire for revenge, she has to go on extracting it…”

Even after Kipps returns home, the woman takes her revenge upon him by causing the death of his young wife and infant son. Since then Kipps has remarried and has become stepfather to his new wife’s children, yet he has not been able to move past the haunting events and tragedy caused by the woman in black.

Gothic Tropes and the Abject
So why does *The Woman in Black* resonate with readers? For one thing, it effectively employs familiar Gothic tropes and conventions that have already been embraced by fans of the genre such as darkness, isolation, revenge, death, the afterlife, the blurring of fantasy and reality, the descent into madness. The story is set in an isolated location, and filled with lush descriptions of eerie settings such as a run-down graveyard, a sinister house, a fog-choked causeway; and it employs the narrative framing device of having Kipps tell his story several years after it has taken place in hopes that he might exorcise his horrific memories. The use of a narrative frame is common in Gothic tales as it allows for the story to be filtered through a character’s mind, thus opening the door for the mixing of subjective and objective reality. The technique adds an expressionistic element that contributes to the tension between natural and supernatural explanations. Often, a Gothic story will employ several nested frames such as when the line between madness and sanity is blurred or when a character is unsure if they are asleep or awake. These nested frames further obscure the border between fantasy and reality.

*The Woman in Black* is also effective on a thematic level because it deals with loss, something everyone can relate to. Here the power of the story can be explained by looking to Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject. In her influential essay, “The Powers of Horror,” Kristeva explores how horror is brought about by an encounter with the abject, a concept which means something that must be “expelled” “thrown off” or “thrust aside” in order for a human being to maintain a cohesive subjectivity. Kristeva explains that we first encounter the abject at birth when are momentarily both inside and outside of the mother’s body at the same time. Prior to that moment we have literally been a part of the mother, but after birth we must abject the mother in order to form a unified, objective
identity as a human being. Although we must try to push the mother away, we are also still drawn to her. Thus, we become caught in an ambiguous situation that is an integral part of the human condition. As Steven Bruhm notes in his article on the contemporary Gothic:

We come then not to be mere victims of the last object – the mother – but active agents in the expulsion of that mother. We are creatures of conflicted desires, locked in an uncanny push-me-pull-you that propels us toward the very objects we fear and to fear the very objects toward which we are propelled. We must bond with our parents, but not too much; we must distance ourselves from our parents, but not too much.6

The abject confronts us with ambiguity and threatens the concepts upon which we base our identity as human being; but our relationship with the mother is not the only situation that brings about this ambiguity in our lives. Confrontation with anything that causes us to question the borders that help us to organize and categorize our world brings about terror and dread. We are both repulsed and fascinated by things that represent a violation of those borders: me versus you, inside the body versus outside the body, life versus death. The object that Kristeva describes as the “utmost of abjection,” for example, is the cadaver, because it forces us to confront the borders of our own existence:

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.7

It is this fascination with the abject that is at the heart of The Woman in Black’s popularity. The dialectic of attraction-repulsion is strongly at work in Hill’s novel. In fact, it comes up in numerous passages where Kipps’ describes his emotional response to the woman in black. In one particularly pointed description he directly acknowledges that she is a liminal figure whose appearance creates psychological distress because she forces an

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encounter with something that lies at the border of understanding. Although he tries to
downplay the threat, Kipps is forced to admit to himself that something sinister is
activated by her appearance:

I was trying to make light of something that we both knew was gravely serious,
trying to dismiss as insignificant, and perhaps even nonexistent, something that
affected us both as deeply as any other experience we had undergone in our lives,
for it took us to the very edge of the horizon where life and death meet together.8

The encounter with the abject is a common theme in all Gothic texts because they deal
with those macabre moments in life when a character is emotionally torn asunder.
Through her skillful use of the concept of abjection, Hill animates the very best of the
Gothic genre and gives readers a satisfying experience, one that has made The Woman in
Black a longstanding favorite.

The Play

While Susan Hill’s novel is full of detailed descriptions of locations and
characters, Stephen Mallatratt’s adaptation for the stage strips the story of the realistic
settings while still managing to maintain the atmospheric trappings. The stage production
is a “bare-bones” affair featuring only two actors who recreate the story of Kipps’
encounters with the woman in black in an attempt to assuage his tormented memory of
the incidents. This framing-device works in a similar way to that which is employed in
the novel as it allows for the mixing of fantasy and reality. The conceit of the play is that
Kipps has already written the story and has hired a young actor to perform it, in hopes
that this ritual will exorcise the demons and allow Kipps to purge his painful memories.
Thus, the Actor whom Kipps has hired ends up representing Kipps in the play-within-a-
play, while Kipps portrays all of the other characters in the story. The two men reenact
Kipps’ story on using only a minimum of props. The stage is almost bare except for a
door frame and a few items that appear to be properties from previous productions. An
upstage area that is separated from the audience by a gauzy scrim also contains what at
first appears to be theatrical clutter. With strategic lighting, however, this cluttered area
transforms into a graveyard and a nursery as the play progresses. It is the simplicity of the
play that provides its power. The play relies upon the actors’ ability to tell a powerful
story. It is reminiscent of a ghost story told around the fire.

In addition to enhancing the storytelling aspect of the play, the sparse stage also
allows the production team to carefully direct the audience’s focus. Subtle changes in
light and shadow can be controlled so that what is concealed can be revealed at precisely
the right moment. By carefully controlling what is veiled or unveiled, the visual design of
the production creates tension and a feeling of dread within the audience. In the script,
Stephen Mallatratt’s “Adaptor’s Note” directly addresses the importance of this visual
control, “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.”

The stage adaptation of The Woman in Black works on both a psychological level
and an aversive reflex level. The narrative is effective on a psychological level because it
presents the audience with an intriguing puzzle to solve, but the story also plays upon the
emotions of the audience because it presents sympathetic, complex characters; and the
play works on a reflexive level because some of the production elements bring the
autonomic nervous-system into play by activating a startle response. A complex,
atmospheric sound design helps the audience to imagine the various settings of the story,
and it also creates some unnerving moments when the audience is jarred with loud sound effects. Using the startle effect alone, however, is not enough to sustain a popular and long-running production. Many frightening entertainments, especially films, have relied too heavily on making an audience jump and have been denigrated for it. In order to attain a truly popular production that receives not only great word-of-mouth, but also repeat attendance and critical praise, a play must also have good story. On this account, *The Woman in Black* delivers. As Susanna Clap observes, “Like all really good ghost stories *The Woman in Black* is grounded not in horror but in human pain and loss.”

Both the novel and the play use the technique of narrative framing not only to blur the subjective and the objective, as noted above, but in order to set up their respective, yet very different, twist endings. In the novel we learn that the woman in black did indeed exact her revenge against Arthur Kipps years after he returned home by causing the death of his wife and infant son; in the play Mallatratt sets up a very different turn. Although the stage reenactment of Kipps’ story is supposedly taking place years after he has said farewell to Eel Marsh house, the woman does indeed make several appearances during the production, despite the fact that she does not appear in the cast list. This conceit allows Mallatratt to set up the clever twist ending that only works in the stage version of the story. By not listing the performer playing the woman in black in the program, the production conflates the spectral character in the play with an actual specter. The audience sees a performer who, according to the established conventions of the theatre, should not be in the production. Thus, when it is revealed in the final moment of the play that only the Actor has seen the specter while Kipps has not, the audience realizes that the woman has been exacting her curse upon the young performer; and she has
simultaneously been exacting it upon us. The implication is that the young performer has been cursed and so have we. His son is now doomed, and perhaps our children are as well.

**Conclusion**

The combination of the effective use of Gothic tropes, the foregrounding of the attraction/repulsion element elucidated by Kristeva’s notion of the abject and the simple theatricality and cleverness of Stephen Mallatratt’s stage adaptation have made the West End production of *The Woman in Black* a favorite among theatregoers for more than two decades. The play has garnered great reviews from not only the professional critics, but from a wide array of fans. In, *Front Row*, for example, noted author Beryl Bainbridge recounts an after-show incident that reveals how word of mouth has helped to spur the play’s reputation, “I came home in a taxi driven by a chap who had already seen the play. He’d enjoyed it so much he’d recommended it to his parents and then his in-laws.”

Susan Hill’s clever story still continues to fascinate. A new film version was released by CBS Films this year starring Daniel Radcliffe, and the West End production continues to pull in audiences. *The Woman in Black* is a simple, effective novel that presents the best a Gothic story has to offer, and it has been transformed into an effective play that proves that some good, old-fashioned storytelling, coupled with the judicious use of theatrical effects can still have popular appeal. And, of course, the fact that the play is downright scary does not hurt either. As the theatre critic for the *Daily Telegraph* says, *The Woman in Black* is “one of the most brilliantly effective spine-chillers you will ever encounter.”