TEACHERS’ RESOURCE PACK
Gothenburg English Studio Theatre
To be used with the theatre production The Woman in Black
Introduction

Hi,
We’re hoping that this Resource Pack will help you and the students to prepare for your theatre visit and to further explore what you have experienced by watching The Woman in Black.
Please use parts 1-4 before your visit the theatre and part 5 after you have seen the play.

For the students to get the best theatre experience as possible, we recommend not to watch the film nor read the book before seeing the play. If you however strongly feel that your students need a lot of preparation in beforehand we recommend to read the book rather than watching the film.

If you have any questions please don’t hesitate to contact us.

Kind regards

Kristina Brändén Whitaker, Executive Artistic Director
Amanda Wigand, Production Manager
031 42 50 65, info@gest.se

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PART 1 About GEST

GEST - Gothenburg English Studio Theatre was founded in 2005 with the aim of providing quality, contemporary and award-winning theatre in the English language. GEST is the only professional English speaking theatre in Western Sweden. Celebrated by audience and critics alike, GEST brings the very best of contemporary drama from the British Isles and farther afield to Scandinavia. GEST invites actors and directors from the British Isles to work with a Swedish/English production team. We aim to produce theatre of the highest standard and often present Scandinavian premieres.

Gothenburg English Studio Theatre is an intimate 70-seater, situated on Chapmans Torg in the heart of Majorna in Gothenburg.
PART 2. About The Woman in Black

By: Stephen Mallatratt and Susan Hill

Performed at:
Gothenburg English Studio Theatre 10–29 November
Borås Stadsteater 13–14 November
Vara Konserthus 27 November
Kulturhuset Stadsteatern, Stockholm 3–13 December

Directed by: Gary Whitaker and Johan Friberg

Cast:
Arthur Kipps played by: David Whitworth
The Actor played by: Gary Whitaker

Production Team:
Stage Manager: Rike Berg
Assistant Stage Manager: Elizabeth Neale
Production Manager: Amanda Wigand
Set Designer: Ger Olde Monnikhof
Lighting Designer: Patrick Najman
GEST’s Executive Artistic Director: Kristina Brändén Whitaker

SUMMARY

Solicitor Arthur Kipps is summoned to attend the funeral of an old lady, unaware of the tragic secret that lies behind her death. When he glimpses a wasted young woman dressed all in black at the funeral, a creeping sense of unease begins to take hold. A feeling that is only deepened by the reluctance of the locals to talk of the woman in black – and her terrible purpose.

Years later, as an old man, he recounts his experiences to an actor in a desperate attempt to exorcise the ghosts of the past. The play unfolds as the two men act out the solicitor’s eerie experiences all those years ago.

ABOUT THE PLAY

THE WOMAN IN BLACK was adapted by Stephen Mallatratt as a low-budget ‘filler’ for the Christmas season in Scarborough, where it opened to rave reviews on 12 December 1987. It arrived in London’s West End in January 1989, opening at the Lyric Hammersmith before transferring to The Strand and The Playhouse and then taking up residence at The Fortune Theatre on 6th June of the same year.
Decades later, the play is still going strong, with producers cheerfully inviting audiences to experience “The most terrifying live theatre experience in the world”! Plaudits from the critics have continued throughout the run of THE WOMAN IN BLACK and audiences and critics alike have left the theatre having experienced one of the most terrifying nights of their lives.

THE WOMAN IN BLACK was first published as a novel by Susan Hill in 1983. She did not plan her story in any great detail, beyond having listed the key elements of a successful ghost story before she started.

“I have no plans or intentions when I write... I make none, I just follow my nose. I tell a story... it just comes out the way it does. Anything else that may be there may indeed be there but was not my conscious intention.”

From interview with Susan Hill, 2008

What she created, however unintentionally, was:

“a rattling good yarn, the sort that chills the mind as well as the spine.”

The Guardian

In fact, in many ways, THE WOMAN IN BLACK is more than just a ghost story - it is a story of human tragedy.

Stephen Mallatratt read THE WOMAN IN BLACK on a beach in Greece, not the most conducive environment, he later conceded, for being drawn into Susan Hill’s misty, terrifying world, and yet he was. He remembered this effect when he was commissioned by Robin Herford to come up with a Christmas show for the small theatre in Scarborough that he was then running. As his season was ending, Herford had little money to spare for the production and told Mallatratt to restrict himself to just four actors and minimal sets. In a flash of inspiration, Mallatratt determined to admit to his audience that they were in an empty theatre, thus dispensing with the need for all but the most minimal of scenery. And he remembered the effect that Susan Hill’s novel had on him when he originally read it, on the beach in Greece, with sunbathers and holidaymakers surrounding him.

“The initial triumph of the book, for me, was that, in spite of all that, it frightened.”

From THE WOMAN IN BLACK programme notes, written by Stephen Mallatratt, 1988

His imagination carried him through the story, painting the pictures of Susan Hill’s distant coastal town, the eerie isolation and grandeur of the empty house, the graveyard, the marshes and the horror that pervades. Stephen Mallatratt realised that the imagination of his audience could work in the same way, creating a truly theatrical experience which Robin Herford, who also became the director of the play in Scarborough and subsequently of every cast in the West End, calls “a crossover of mutual respect and acceptance”. Thus, the audience willingly submits to the make-believe, suspending their disbelief and yet is totally absorbed in the magic and the horror of the events that are so simply and effectively acted out in front of them.

From the moment THE WOMAN IN BLACK opened in Scarborough in 1987, audiences were enthralled, and have continued to be so as this truly unique play has been performed worldwide ever since.
PART 3. Useful Vocabulary in The Woman in Black

Listed by order of appearance. The words marked in blue are those who we think are essential for following and being able to visualise the play.

Fatstock
Livestock (the horses, cattle, sheep, and other useful animals kept or raised on farm or ranch) that has been fattened for market.

Fatstock prices
The price to which one sell its fatstock at the market.

Sir Henry Irving
An English stage actor in the Victorian era (Born 1838, dead 1905) and the first actor to be awarded a knighthood.

Reproval
To voice disapproval of, to find fault with. Antonym = Approval

Palatable
Pleasant to taste/acceptable or satisfactory.

(Sea) Frets
A wet mist or haze coming inland from the sea

Forte
Something in which a person excels (a good singer might say: “singing is my forte”)

Solicitor
A lawyer who traditionally deals with any legal matter including conducting proceedings in court.

Clerk
A worker who conducts general office tasks.

Rum’un
A term used in Northern England for someone who is either weird/strange or rude/misbehaving.

Tides
The rise and fall of sea levels caused by the combined effects of the gravitational forces exerted by the Moon and the Sun and the rotation of the Earth.

Jaunt
A short trip or excursion, usually for pleasure.

Causeway
A road or railway route across a broad body of water or wetland raised up on an embankment. Some causeways may only be usable at low tide (as the Nine Lives Causeway in the play, leading up to Eel Marsh House)

Pony and trap
A small carriage drawn by one or two horses.

Finicky
Fussy about one’s needs or requirements / Showing or requiring great attention to detail.

Marsh
A type of wetland, often at the edges of lakes and streams, dominated by grasses, rushes or reeds.

Recluse
A person who lives in voluntary isolation from the public and society.

Pry
Inquire too inquisitively into a person’s private affairs. (“I’m sick of you prying into my personal life”)

Scrutiny
A close, careful examination or study / Close observation; surveillance

Pariah
Outcast

Coup de theatre
A theatrical trick or gesture, something staged for dramatic effect.

Decipherable
To read or interpret (ambiguous, obscure, or illegible matter), decode.

Yearning
Having an intense feeling of loss or lack and longing for something

Malevolence
Viciousness, evilness

Reverie
A state of being pleasantly lost in one’s thoughts; a daydream
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stifling</td>
<td>Make (someone) unable to breathe properly; suffocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quicksands</td>
<td>A bed of loose sand mixed with water forming a soft shifting mass that yields easily to pressure and tends to engulf any object resting on its surface.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animosity</td>
<td>Strong hostility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volatile</td>
<td>Inconstant; fickle, tending to vary often or widely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exude</td>
<td>Discharge slowly and steadily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persevere</td>
<td>Continue in a course of action even in the face of difficulty or with little or no indication of success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cursorily</td>
<td>Performed with haste and with little attention to detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tedium</td>
<td>The state of being tedious (too long, slow, or dull).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lethargy</td>
<td>Tiredness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estuary</td>
<td>Where a river meets the sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterpane</td>
<td>A cover for a bed; a bedspread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desolation</td>
<td>Misery, loneliness, devastation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floundering</td>
<td>Moving or acting clumsily and in confusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinster</td>
<td>A woman who has remained single beyond the conventional age for marrying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity</td>
<td>A natural attraction, liking, or feeling of kinship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treacherous</td>
<td>Not to be relied on; not dependable or trustworthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spectre</td>
<td>A ghost, a phantom</td>
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PART 4. Going to the Theatre

You as an audience play a big an important part in the theatre performance. Many students have never had the opportunity to go to the theatre before and it might be their first visit. We are delighted to introduce the theatre world to young people, as it can have a very strong effect and be a very important and joyful experience. It would be great if you had an opportunity to go through this chapter with your students prior to the theatre visit. It might help them to get the most of the play and to get a deeper understanding of how the theatre world works. Below are some examples of discussion topics, observation exercises and useful vocabulary used in the theatre.

Discussion topics:

--What are the differences between live theatre and cinema?
Things to bear in mind: Two dimensional vs. Three dimensional; larger than life on the screen vs. life-size; recorded vs. live, etc. Discuss the nature of film as mass-produced, versus the one-time only nature of live performances. Which do they feel is more valuable? Why?

--What is the role of the audience in a live performance? In what ways can you as an audience member affect the play and the performances from the actors? Do you think a non-attentive audience will affect the actors? In what way can it disturb the actors if they hear audience members talk, see them text etc? How will it effect the audience if someone walks out in the middle of the performance? How will it affect the play if the audience is attentive and listening?

-If you (the students) were going to but up a play on a small stage and you had an audience attending, how would you like the audience to be like? Discuss in groups and write a list of etiquette rules for the audience. Compare the rules with the other groups and with the example given below written by a student attending a previous GEST play
Theatre Etiquette Example

One Rule To Rule Them All And In The Darkness Bind Them: Remember that you are in the same room as a lot of other people, including actors, who can both see and hear you.

All else follows from this.

Rule 1. Turn off any electronic devices about your person, and leave them off. Embarrassment Moment No. 1 is your phone ringing during a play. An actor might even break the fourth wall and comment on your solecism from the stage, thus holding you up to public mockery and ridicule.

Rule 2. Checking email, Twitter, messages and so on during the show is right out. Lighting designers spend a lot of time getting their lighting right, and a constant bloom of flickering smartphones in the auditorium stuffs it right up, especially in that carefully crafted blackout. And no, you’re not allowed to take photos.

Rule 3. Even if everything that is happening on stage makes you shrivel with horror and/or boredom, refrain from expressing your outrage and disappointment out loud until the show is finished. Unless, that is, you are invited by the performers to do so, in which case go right ahead.

Rule 4. If the boredom, horror and detestation get overwhelming and you have to leave, do so with as little disturbance to your fellow audience members as possible. Does the rest of the audience need to know how appalled you are? No. They might even be enjoying themselves.

Rule 5. Leave your handicrafts at home. No knitting, crocheting or whittling allowed.

Rule 6. Even the best-intentioned theatre goers can be ambushed by a cough. Carry a kit of Anticol and tissues. If you have a very bad coughing fit that can't be controlled, leave the theatre until it is over.

Rule 7. Keep your attention on the play and not on your friends, then you will enjoy it. If you fall asleep, don’t snore. Make a pact with a companion to wake you up if your snorts start rippling through the auditorium. Speaking of which: isn’t the theatre an expensive place for a snooze?

Rule 11. Don’t eat anything in the theatre. Other audience members don’t like the smell and it can be off putting for the actors. So don’t snack. I promise you will not starve to death.

Rule 12. Silence in a theatre is okay. Really, it is.
Observation exercises that you can use when attending a play

--When you get into the theatre, look around. What do you see? Observe the lighting instruments around the room and on the ceiling. Look at the set. Does it look realistic or abstract? Try to guess how the set will be used during the show.

--Discuss the elements that go into producing a live performance: The lights, set, props, costumes, and stage direction. All the people involved in the “behind the scenes” elements of the theatre are working backstage as the play unfolds before the students’ eyes. Tell them to be aware of this as they watch the show. Observe the lighting cues. How do special effects work? How do the actors change costumes so fast.

--To “understand” theatre Often we think that there is ONE correct interpretation of what a play is about, when really there are very few questions in life to which there is only one, unambiguous answer. A play is the result of many people’s thoughts and interpretations. The director, the actor or the set designer may not hold the same answer to what the performance really is about, and your thoughts as an audience member are as important than anyone else’s!

Quite often it can be more fruitful to ask yourself what the play made you feel or think, rather than focusing on what the play was about or what the playwright really meant. Remember that in the arts, there are no wrong answers!
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<th>Vocabulary Used in the Theatre</th>
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<td><strong>Antagonist</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Aside</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Backdrop</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Black Box</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Blocking</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Casting</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Center Stage</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Characters</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Critique</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Dialogue</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Director</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Exposition</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Foreshadowing</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Improvisation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Lighting</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Mime</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Monologue</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Pantomime</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Playwright</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Plot</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Props</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Program</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Rehearsal</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Reversal</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Role</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Script</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Set</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Soliloquy</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Stage</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Stage Left</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Stage Right</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tension</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theme</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Usher</strong></td>
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1. Genre analysis

See Appendix 1: First five pages of the script for the play, and Appendix 2: First chapter of the book by Susan Hill. If you want to you could also let your students watch the first 5 minutes of the film The Woman in Black from 2012

--Group discussion: Ask students to compare the respective openings of the play, the novel and, possibly, the 2012 film. Although Mallatratt uses the same words, his situation differs significantly - Kipps is in an empty Victorian theatre rather than in the comfort of his home at Monk’s Piece which features in Susan Hill’s original.

In your groups, ask students to create a list of elements for comparison: character, setting, events, for instance. They should complete their table firstly with reference to the first chapter of the novel, the first five pages of the playscript (and the first five minutes of the film.)

Ask students to consider why the three are so different. Does the fact that Esme is not mentioned in the play matter? In the novel, Kipps is settled and reasonably happy at Monk’s Piece, around 26 years after the events at Crythin Gifford and Eel Marsh House. In the play, he is less than content, nervous and edgy. Although he talks about his family, there is no mention of a new wife. Why is this? In the film version, things are different again. Which version is most successful? Why?

--Written exercise in groups or individually: Ask students to write a new version of the opening of the play, this time with no restriction as to the number of characters and no requirement for a play-within-a play.

They should choose an appropriate setting – Monk’s Piece or elsewhere. Their characters could include Kipps, Esme, Isobel, Oliver, Will and Edmund (Esme’s children by her first marriage to Captain Ainley) and Isobel’s husband Aubrey. Students’ most significant challenge is to create the atmosphere of a ghost story. This will come through the successful construction of their opening to the play.
2. Structure, atmosphere, tension and climax in order to create suspense in a story

Much of the success of THE WOMAN IN BLACK comes from the manipulation of the audiences’ expectations - loud screams followed by moments of silence, repetition of events, climax and anti-climax.

--Group discussion: Discuss these elements with students, asking them to reflect honestly on their own expectations during the play, when they got what they expected and when they did not. Consider, for instance, Kipps asleep in Eel Marsh House with Spider the dog. Most audiences are perfectly well aware that the actor playing Kipps will make them jump when he wakes up - they wait in the silence for it to happen, knowing that it will come and they are not disappointed. Interestingly, despite knowing that it will happen, most members of most audiences are startled nevertheless. Why?

--Written exercise: Ask students to create their own piece of drama that must build up an atmosphere and in some way surprise their audience. It does not have to be a ghost story, or indeed anything related to THE WOMAN IN BLACK, but they must use what they have learned about audience expectations to tell a story in which something unexpected occurs.

3. Writing a monologue/ghost story

Stephen Mallatratt’s adaptation of THE WOMAN IN BLACK includes the drama technique of monologue, as both The Actor and Kipps use this method to tell the story of the events at Eel Marsh House. In fact, the ghost story genre provides an excellent focus for the study of monologue.

--Discuss with students why this technique is so successfully employed by Stephen Mallatratt. His adaptation is unusual in that many of Susan Hill’s descriptive passages are retained and the audience has to work hard, using their imaginations, in order to picture the various different scenes.

--Written exercise: Ask students to write their own ghost story in the form of a letter. They should imagine that they are an old man or woman, living alone in a remote house in a distant corner of the country. It is important to them that the terrible events that have taken place in this house are relayed to their family, all of whom live miles away from them and rarely visit, but who will eventually inherit this home. Their letter must explain the story of the house and their life within it, what they have had to suffer and what they want to happen to the house after their death.

--Drama exercise to follow: Once this is completed, offer students a chair in the middle of your classroom or studio. If possible, blackout the room and light the chair with a solo spot. A torch would equally work really well for this. Ask students, individually, to perform the monologue that comes from reading their letter out loud. In terms of adaptation of a novel and direction of a play, students need to understand why some elements are changed from the original.
4. From the point of view of the two mothers
Part of the study of teenage issues in society today involves students understanding that choices are not always simple and that there are different sides to every story.

--Group discussion: Ask students to in smaller groups study the story of Jennet Humfrye. What, if anything, would be different if Jennet were a teenager in the 21st century, going through the experience that she went through according to THE WOMAN IN BLACK? Is the answer different for teenagers living in different cultures around the world? Ask students to think of the following key moments in the story of Jennet Humfrye in their discussion:

- The teenage Jennet discovers that she is pregnant.
- Jennet’s old-fashioned parents react badly.
- Jennet is sent to live away from her family and away from the boy who got her pregnant.
- Jennet receives a letter, telling her that the child is to be adopted. She has no say in the matter.
- The child is born and taken away from her. She can’t stand to be without him.
- The child, Nathaniel, is adopted by Jennet’s older married sister Alice.
- Jennet runs away to be with the child, renting a poky one-roomed flat to be near to him.
- Jennet threatens violence when her sister will not allow her to see her child.
- Eventually, Jennet is allowed to visit occasionally, but she is not allowed to see him alone or to say who she really is.
- Nathaniel turns out to look like Jennet and the bond between them grows.
- Nathaniel begins to act increasingly coldly towards Alice.
- Jennet begins to make plans to steal the boy away to live with her.
- A fatal accident occurs in which the child is killed. Jennet watches the accident but is unable to do anything to prevent it.

--Group discussion and written exercise: Using the bullet points in above and the outcome of your discussion as a guide to the order of events, ask students to produce a series of diary entries that Jennet Humfrye might have written. These should make clear the changes in her state of mind throughout the experience and how she feels about the various different people that are involved in her life - her parents, her sister Alice and Alice’s husband Morgan, as well as Nathaniel, her son. At the end of the story, Jennet blames Alice for the fatal accident, although Samuel Daily maintains that “it was no-one’s fault, the mist comes without warning.” Jennet’s diary, however, should reflect her belief in what happened and who was responsible.

As an alternative excersie ask the students to write a letter as Jennet Humfrye, pleading to her sister to get to visit her son

--Group discussion and written exercise: Once this is achieved, ask students to repeat the exercise, this time from the point-of-view of Alice Drablow. They must decide how Alice feels about her sister at the various different points in the story. Is Alice complicit in Jennet’s suffering, or an unfortunate accessory in a difficult situation? Does she sympathise with her sister, or does her sister become a nuisance to her as she tries to bring up the little boy as her own?

As an alternative ask the students to write a letter as Alice Drablow explaining to her sister why she can’t see her son.
--Drama exercise: In pairs, improvise a scene where Jennet Humpfrye comes to Alice Drablow's house asking her to see her son. As the character of Jennet explain your needs to see your son, the importance for your son to know her real mother and try and convince your sister. As Alice try and make Jennet understand why she can’t see her son. Try and make her see her point of view of why it might not be healthy for Nathaniel and confusing difficult for him.

--Group discussion: Finally, ask students to compare and contrast the two versions of events and discuss who or what would need to change in order that the story might turn out more happily than it does in THE WOMAN IN BLACK.

--Drama exercise: Using what you have discussed, improvise a scene where Jennet and Alice meet and after listening ad discussing their own point of views, they finally come up with a middle way and a good compromise that works for both sisters.

5. The grief of losing a child

--Group discussion: In the play we hear and see the grief of Jennet and Arthur losing their own child. Discuss different ways that people grieve and how we deal with grief. Compare the different ways that Jennet and Arthur deal with their grief. Talk about how it can cripple a person and totally change their behaviour. Discuss and reflect how you would react if you were put in a situation of losing your child and that you know that someone else was to blame for its death. Would you feel the urge of revenge?

--Improvise A - Jennet and a friend: Improvise a scene where Jennet goes to her best friend for comfort and where she talks about her grief of death of her son. As a friend you give her advice. Jennet talks about how she finds it difficult to cope, maybe she talks about her urge for revenge. As a friend your try and steer her away from those thoughts.

--Improvise B - Arthur and a friend: We learn from the play that Arthur has not talked about the terrible events of first losing his son and then his wife. Improvise a scene where he confides in a friend and tells him/her what has happened and he talks about the Woman in Black. As a friend you don’t believe in ghosts and you think it’s his grief talking and maybe you even believe that he’s losing his mind. Perhaps, You try and advice him to see a grief councillor. As Kipps you are terrified to talk about the about what’s happened and the Woman in Black with anyone as you believe that she will start the haunting again.

6. Writing exercise “Theatre review”

Write a review of the play. On the next page are some guidelines of how to write a theatre review and at the resource pack you’ll find examples of two reviews of The Woman in Black (from the original production)
Guidelines for Writing a Review of a Live Theatre Performance

1. Introduction: Tell your reader what you saw, where and when. Describe in detail what kind of play this was (drama, comedy, Shakespeare history play, farce – be as specific as possible). Tell your reader what your general response to the production was. Did you find it an enjoyable experience? Why exactly? Did it give you food for thought? About what and why? What did you learn about modern theatre practices?

2. The Direction: The director is the person who, in the end, is responsible for what you see on stage. What meanings in this play were emphasised. How did the design, staging, and character and acting style choices draw attention to these? Were these choices successful in creating the impact on the audience you thought the director and creative team intended?

Did the theatre itself and the playing area suit the production? Why or why not? Were the stage pictures interesting and/or attractive as well as meaningful? Was there an interesting and varied use of stage space? Was the focus generally where it should be? What did you think about the pace of the production?

3. The Acting: Discuss the acting. Was it of a particular kind? Stylised in some way, using masks, very physical, reminded you of circus performers, very melodramatic, realistic or ‘fourth wall’ (these are only a few of the possibilities). What can you say about the kind of acting in this production compared with the kind of work you've seen in other productions and done yourself? Was the style of acting appropriate to the kind of play and style of production? Why or why not? Which performances did you particularly admire? Be very specific in saying why.

4. The Design: How did the design contribute to the production’s meanings? Describe the sets, lights and costumes. What kind of a statement did each of these make.

5. Conclusion: You might want to elaborate on your production. What did you particularly like about the production? How did it illumine your understanding of life?
ACT ONE

A small Victorian Theatre

The Proscenium has its gilding and its cherubs, and the curtains are gathered at the sides revealing a stage that is unprepared for performance and devoid of scenery. On the stage is a clutter of cloths, boxes and furniture. This clutter will evolve according to the needs of the performance — though should include a couple of chairs, a rocking chair, a high stool, a blanket and a large skip or trunk. A gauze divides the upstage area from the downstage. Beyond it, though unseen until lit, odd shapes of furniture are shrouded in cloths. The action, until stated, takes place in the downstage area and in the aisle of the theatre. A door is placed at the side of the stage. This door, which is presumably a remnant from some previous production, stands firmly closed.

The House lights dim to half.

A middle-aged man enters. He carries a manuscript. He stands on the stage. This man, whose name is Kipps, will not be referred to as “Kipps” but as “Actor” — even though he clearly isn’t one.

Working lights come up on stage.

At the back of the theatre, in amongst the seats, a young man enters. This man, who is an actor, will not be referred to as “Actor” but as “Kipps”. (See Director’s note below **)

The House Lights remain on as the Actor on the stage begins to read from his manuscript.

** Since the young actor spends the majority of the play playing the part of Kipps, this is not as crazy a notion as it at first appears

ACTOR (reading) It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I crossed the long entrance hall of my house, on my way from the dining-room, where we had just enjoyed the first of
the happy, festive meals, towards the drawing-room and the fire around which my family were now assembled, I paused, and then, as I often do in the course of an evening, went to the front door, opened it and stepped outside.

KIPPS (from the body of the theatre) This is intended to be of interest I take it?

ACTOR Why yes, of course.

KIPPS Then why announce it as if it were the fatstock prices?

ACTOR I'm afraid I don't understand

KIPPS Let us see this entrance hall, let us see this house, let us taste and smell this happy, festive meal!

ACTOR But that's impossible.

KIPPS No, sir! Draw on your emotions, and on our imaginations.

ACTOR Forgive me, I am not an actor.

KIPPS No. (pause) Again. Try it again.

ACTOR (Reading) It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I crossed the long entrance hall of my house, on my way from the dining-room, where we had just enjoyed the first of the happy, festive meals –

Kipps comes up on stage

KIPPS You will excuse me. I know that what you read holds particular significance for you. That it is possible it will cause you some distress. But I must implore you: have sympathy for your audience.

ACTOR Audience?

KIPPS Just now we are alone here in this theatre. These rows of empty seats are unlikely to protest as you hum and mumble through your lines. But believe me, sir, speak them thus before an audience and you'll see them one by one expire with boredom.

Pause

ACTOR It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I crossed the long entrance hall of my house, on my -

KIPPS Long entrance hall?

ACTOR That's right.
KIPPS         Why long?

ACTOR         Because it is.

KIPPS         Have sympathy for your audience. Are they interested in its length?

              Pause

ACTOR         I apologise. I am clearly wasting your time.

He makes to put his manuscript in his briefcase and move to leave

KIPPS         Stay where you are.

ACTOR         This is a foolish adventure. I should never have come.

KIPPS         You did, however. And you have paid me for the day. I have no intention of not giving you full value.

ACTOR         Please, I—

KIPPS         No, sir. Attempt to leave and I will leap upon you and compel you to recite the Sonnets in their entirety!

ACTOR         I—

KIPPS         No! We’ll make an Irving of you yet.

ACTOR         I have no desire to be an Irving. All I wish, implore, is that this tale of mine be told. That’s all. Be told and — laid to rest. God willing. So I may sleep without nightmares.

KIPPS         Which is why you came to me.

ACTOR         Yes

KIPPS         As one practised in these things.

ACTOR         Yes

KIPPS         As one who will impart to you the rudiments of public speaking, who will offer advice as to expression and delivery, and, above all, instil in you the confidence to stand up and make a go of it!

ACTOR         Confidence?


A pause. The Actor summons up his energies.
It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I crossed the long — the — entrance hall of my house, on my way from — on my way...  (Pause)  It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. (Pause)  It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve —

KIPPS
What time was it?

ACTOR
Nine-thirty —

KIPPS
Not on Christmas Eve by any chance? Good gracious!

ACTOR
I’m very sorry, this clearly isn’t a success, I —

KIPPS
You see, it doesn’t come in five minutes. You think to stand up, recite your tale, and have your audience hang upon your words. As if that’s all it takes. In which case, why d’you come to me for help? So that I’ll say “yes, wonderful, without a flaw”? Believe me, sir, performing is an art acquired with tears and time.

The Actor makes to leave

I would be encouraged, sir, if every time I offered some advice you would not put up your manuscript and make to leave the stage!

ACTOR
Advice?

KIPPS
Yes! Advice!

ACTOR
It sounds more like reproval.

KIPPS
I promise you that as the day goes on it’s likely to sound more so.

ACTOR
May I just say — it’s not a performance that I wish to give. No. I think we are at a misunderstanding in that respect. I wish to — speak it. No more. For my family, only. For those who need to know. I am not a performer — I have no pretensions to be — nor inclination — but — those terrible things that happened to me — they must — I have to — let them be told. For my health and reason.

KIPPS
You say you’re not a performer.

ACTOR
Oh truly.

KIPPS
In your hand is a manuscript which, on estimate, will take five hours to read. If you, as an acknowledged non-performer, should stand before an audience, however friendly, and drone at them for longer than it takes to play King Lear, I trust you will be unsurprised if by the end of it they’re either fast asleep or at your throat.

ACTOR
Five hours?

KIPPS
At least
ACTOR  Good heavens. (Pause) I’d no idea – I – five hours? (Pause. He slumps in a chair) I cannot possibly. (Pause. At length he looks up. Addressing Kipps) It must be told. I can not carry the burden any longer. It must be told.

Black-out. When the Lights return, the House Lights stay off. Kipps is now on the stage, with the manuscript. Kipps reads it rather well. A bit actorish, certainly, but with enthusiasm and skill. The Actor makes his way to the back of the theatre to listen. Kipps relinquishes the script almost immediately; he has clearly learnt this.

KIPPS  (reading) It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I opened my front door and stepped outside I smelt at once, and with a lightening heart, that there had been a change in the weather. All the previous week we had had thin chilling rain and a mist that lay low about the house and over the countryside. My spirits have for many years been excessively affected by the weather. But now the dampness and fogs had stolen away like thieves into the night, the sky was pricked over with stars and the full moon rimmed with a halo of frost. Upstairs, three children slept with stockings tied to their bedposts. There was something in the air that night. That my peace of mind was about to be disturbed, and memories awakened that I had thought for ever dead, I had, naturally, no idea. That I should ever again renew my acquaintance with mortal dread and terror of spirit, would have seemed at that moment impossible. I took a last look at the frosty darkness, sighed contentedly, and went in, to the happy company of my family. At the far end of the room stood the tree, candlelit and bedecked, and beneath it were the presents. There were vases of white chrysanthemums, and in the centre of the room a pyramid of gilded fruit and a bowl of oranges stuck all about with cloves, their spicy scent filling the air and mingling with the wood-smoke to be the very aroma of Christmas. I became aware that I had interrupted the others in a lively conversation. “We are telling ghost stories – just the thing for Christmas Eve!” And so they were – vying with each other to tell the horridest, most spine-chilling tale. They told of dripping stone walls in uninhabited castles and of ivy-clad monastery ruins by moonlight, of locked inner rooms and secret dungeons, dank charmel houses and overgrown graveyards, of howlings and shriekings, groanings and scutternings. This was a sport, a high-spirited and harmless game among young people, there was nothing to torment and trouble me, nothing of which I could possibly disapprove. I did not want to seem a killjoy, old, stodgy and unimaginative. I turned my head away so that none of them should see my discomfiture. “And now it’s your turn.” “Oh no,” I said, “nothing from me.” “You must know at least one ghost story, everyone knows one.” Ah yes, yes, indeed. All the time I had been listening to their ghoulish, lurid inventions, the one thought that had been in my mind, and the only thing I could have said was ‘No, no, you have none of you any idea. This is all nonsense, fantasy, it is not like this. Nothing so blood-curdling and becreepered and crude – not so … so laughable. The truth is quite other, and altogether more terrible.” “I am sorry to disappoint you” I said. “But I have no story to tell!” And went quickly from the room and from the house. I walked in a frenzy of agitation, my heart pounding, my breathing short. I had always known in my heart that the experience would never leave me, that it was woven into my very fibres. Yes, I had a story, a true story, a story of haunting and evil, fear and confusion, horror and tragedy. But it was not a story to be told around the fireside on Christmas Eve.

Pause. Kipps looks out to the Actor, who is now at the back of the theatre.
CHRISTMAS EVE

It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I crossed the long entrance hall of Monk's Piece on my way from the dining room, where we had just enjoyed the first of the happy, festive meals, towards the drawing room and the fire around which my family were now assembled, I paused and then, as I often do in the course of an evening, went to the front door, opened it and stepped outside.

I have always liked to take a breath of the evening, to smell the air, whether it is sweetly scented and balmy with the flowers of midsummer, pungent with the bonfires and leaf-mould of autumn, or crackling cold from frost and snow. I like to look about me at the sky above my head, whether there are moon and stars or utter blackness, and into the darkness ahead of me; I like to listen for the cries of nocturnal
creatures and the moaning rise and fall of the wind, or the patterning of rain in the orchard trees, I enjoy the rush of air towards me up the hill from the flat pastures of the river valley.

Tonight, I smelled at once, and with a lightening heart, that there had been a change in the weather. All the previous week, we had had rain, chilling rain and a mist that lay low about the house and over the countryside. From the windows, the view stretched no farther than a yard or two down the garden. It was wretched weather, never seeming to come fully light, and raw, too. There had been no pleasure in walking, the visibility was too poor for any shooting and the dogs were permanently morose and muddy. Inside the house, the lamps were lit throughout the day and the walls of larder, outhouse and cellar oozed damp and smelled sour, the fires sputtered and smoked, burning dismally low.

My spirits have for many years now been excessively affected by the ways of the weather, and I confess that, had it not been for the air of cheerfulness and bustle that prevailed in the rest of the house, I should have been quite cast down in gloom and lethargy, unable to enjoy the flavour of life as I should like and irritated by my own susceptibility. But Esmé is merely stung by inclement weather into a spirited defiance, and so the preparations for our Christmas holiday had this year been more than usually extensive and vigorous.

I took a step or two out from under the shadow of the house so that I could see around me in the moonlight. Monk’s Piece stands at the summit of land that rises gently up for some four hundred feet from where the little River Nee traces its winding way in a north to south direction across this fertile, and sheltered, part of the country. Below us are pastures, interspersed with small clumps of mixed, broadleaf woodland. But at our backs for several square miles it is a quite different area of rough scrub and heathland, a patch of wildness in the midst of well-farmed country. We are but two miles from a good-sized village, seven from the principal market town, yet there is an air of remoteness and isolation which makes us feel ourselves to be much further from civilization.

I first saw Monk’s Piece one afternoon in high summer, when out driving in the trap with Mr Bentley. Mr Bentley was formerly my employer, but I had lately risen to become a full partner in the firm of lawyers to which I had been articled as a young man (and with whom, indeed, I remained for my entire working life). He was at this time nearing the age when he had begun to feel inclined to let slip the reins of responsibility, little by little, from his own hands into mine, though he continued to travel up to our chambers in London.
at least once a week, until he died in his eighty-second year. But he was becoming more and more of a country-dweller. He was no man for shooting and fishing but, instead, he had immersed himself in the roles of country magistrate and churchwarden, governor of this, that and the other county and parish board, body and committee. I had been both relieved and pleased when finally he took me into full partnership with himself, after so many years, while at the same time believing the position to be no more than my due, for I had done my fair share of the donkey work and borne a good deal of the burden of responsibility for directing the fortunes of the firm with, I felt, inadequate reward – at least in terms of position.

So it came about that I was sitting beside Mr Bentley on a Sunday afternoon, enjoying the view over the high hawthorn hedgerows across the green, drowsy countryside, as he let his pony take the road back, at a gentle pace, to his somewhat ugly and over-imposing manor house. It was rare for me to sit back and do nothing. In London I lived for my work, apart from some spare time spent in the study and collecting of watercolours. I was then thirty-five and I had been a widower for the past twelve years. I had no taste at all for social life and, although in good general health, was prone to occasional nervous illnesses and conditions, as a result of the experiences I will come to relate. Truth to tell, I was growing old well before my time, a sombre, pale-complexioned man with a strained expression – a dull dog.

I remarked to Mr Bentley on the calm and sweetness of the day, and after a sideways glance in my direction he said, 'You should think of getting yourself something in this direction – why not? Pretty little cottage – down there, perhaps?' And he pointed with his whip to where a tiny hamlet was tucked snugly into a bend of the river below, white walls basking in the afternoon sunshine. 'Bring yourself out of town some of these Friday afternoons, take to walking, fill yourself up with fresh air and good eggs and cream.'

The idea had a charm, but only a distant one, seemingly unrelated to myself, and so I merely smiled and breathed in the warm scents of the grasses and the field flowers and watched the dust kicked up off the lane by the pony's hooves and thought no more about it. Until, that is, we reached a stretch of road leading past a long, perfectly proportioned stone house, set on a rise above a sweeping view down over the whole river valley and then for miles away to the violet-blue line of hills in the distance.

At that moment, I was seized by something I cannot precisely describe, an emotion, a desire – no, it was rather more, a knowledge, a simple certainty, which gripped me, and all so clear and striking that I cried
out involuntarily for Mr Bentley to stop, and, almost before he had time to do so, climbed out of the pony trap into the lane and stood on a grassy knoll, gazing first up at the house, so handsome, so utterly right for the position it occupied, a modest house and yet sure of itself, and then looking across at the country beyond. I had no sense of having been here before, but an absolute conviction that I would come here again, that the house was already mine, bound to me invisibly.

To one side of it, a stream ran between the banks towards the meadow beyond, whence it made its meandering way down to the river.

Mr Bentley was now looking at me curiously, from the trap. ‘A fine place,’ he called.

I nodded, but, quite unable to impart to him any of my extreme emotions, turned my back upon him and walked a few yards up the slope from where I could see the entrance to the old, overgrown orchard that lay behind the house and petered out in long grass and tangled thicket at the far end. Beyond that, I glimpsed the perimeter of some rough-looking, open land. The feeling of conviction I have described was still upon me, and I remember that I was alarmed by it, for I had never been an imaginative or fanciful man and certainly not one given to visions of the future. Indeed, since those earlier experiences I had deliberately avoided all contemplation of any remotely nonmaterial matters, and clung to the prosaic, the visible and tangible.

Nevertheless, I was quite unable to escape the belief—nay, I must call it more, the certain knowledge—that this house was one day to be my own home, that sooner or later, though I had no idea when, I would become the owner of it. When finally I accepted and admitted this to myself, I felt on that instant a profound sense of peace and contentment settle upon me such as I had not known for very many years, and it was with a light heart that I returned to the pony trap, where Mr Bentley was awaiting me more than a little curiously.

The overwhelming feeling I had experienced at Monk’s Piece remained with me, albeit not in the forefront of my mind, when I left the country that afternoon to return to London. I had told Mr Bentley that if ever he were to hear that the house was for sale, I should be eager to know of it.

Some years later, he did so. I contacted the agents that same day and hours later, without so much as returning to see it again, I had offered for it, and my offer was accepted. A few months prior to this, I had met Esmé Ainley. Our affection for one another had been increasing steadily, but, cursed as I still was by my indecisive nature in all personal and emotional
matters, I had remained silent as to my intentions for the future. I had enough sense to take the news about Monk's Piece as a good omen, however, and a week after I had formally become the owner of the house, travelled into the country with Esmé and proposed marriage to her among the trees of the old orchard. This offer, too, was accepted and very shortly afterwards we were married and moved at once to Monk's Piece. On that day, I truly believed that I had at last come out from under the long shadow cast by the events of the past and saw from his face and felt from the warmth of his handclasp that Mr Bentley believed it too, and that a burden had been lifted from his own shoulders. He had always blamed himself, at least in part, for what had happened to me – it had, after all, been he who had sent me on that first journey up to Crythin Gifford, and Eel Marsh House, and to the funeral of Mrs Drablow.

But all of that could not have been further from my conscious thought at least, as I stood taking in the night air at the door of my house, on that Christmas Eve. For some fourteen years now Monk's Piece had been the happiest of homes – Esmé's and mine, and that of her four children by her first marriage, to Captain Ainley. In the early days I had come here only at weekends and holidays but London life and business began to irk me from the day I bought the place and I was glad indeed to retire permanently into the country at the earliest opportunity.

And, now, it was to this happy home that my family had once again repaired for Christmas. In a moment, I should open the front door and hear the sound of their voices from the drawing room – unless I was abruptly summoned by my wife, fussing about my catching a chill. Certainly, it was very cold and clear at last. The sky was pricked over with stars and the full moon rimmed with a halo of frost. The dampness and fogs of the past week had stolen away like thieves into the night, the paths and the stone walls of the house gleamed palely and my breath smoked on the air.

Upstairs, in the attic bedrooms, Isobel's three young sons – Esmé's grandsons – slept, with stockings tied to their bedposts. There would be no snow for them on the morrow, but Christmas Day would at least wear a bright and cheerful countenance.

There was something in the air that night, something, I suppose, remembered from my own childhood, together with an infection caught from the little boys, that excited me, old as I was. That my peace of mind was about to be disturbed, and memories awakened that I had thought forever dead, I had, naturally, no idea. That I should ever again renew my close acquaintance, if only in the course of vivid recollections and
dreams, with mortal dread and terror of spirit, would have seemed at that moment impossible.

I took one last look at the frosty darkness, sighed contentedly, called to the dogs, and went in, anticipating nothing more than a pipe and a glass of good malt whisky beside the crackling fire, in the happy company of my family. As I crossed the hall and entered the drawing room, I felt an uprush of well-being, of the kind I have experienced regularly during my life at Monk’s Piece, a sensation that leads on naturally to another, of heartfelt thankfulness. And indeed I did give thanks, at the sight of my family ensconced around the huge fire which Oliver was at that moment building to a perilous height and a fierce blaze with the addition of a further great branch of applewood from an old tree we had felled in the orchard the previous autumn. Oliver is the eldest of Esmé’s sons, and bore then, as now, a close resemblance both to his sister Isobel (seated beside her husband, the bearded Aubrey Pearce) and to the brother next in age, Will. All three of them have good, plain, open English faces, inclined to roundness and with hair and eyebrows and lashes of a light chestnut brown – the colour of their mother’s hair before it became threaded with grey.

At that time, Isobel was only twenty-four years old but already the mother of three young sons, and set fair to produce more. She had the plump, settled air of a matron and an inclination to mother and oversee her husband and brothers as well as her own children. She had been the most sensible, responsible of daughters, she was affectionate and charming, and she seemed to have found, in the calm and level-headed Aubrey Pearce, an ideal partner. Yet at times I caught Esmé looking at her wistfully, and she had more than once voiced, though gently and to me alone, a longing for Isobel to be a little less staid, a little more spirited, even frivolous.

In all honesty, I could not have wished it so. I would not have wished for anything to ruffle the surface of that calm, untroubled sea.

Oliver Ainley, at that time nineteen, and his brother Will, only fourteen months younger, were similarly serious, sober young men at heart, but for the time being they still enjoyed all the exuberance of young puppies, and indeed it seemed to me that Oliver showed rather too few signs of maturity for a young man in his first year at Cambridge and destined, if my advice prevailed with him, for a career at the Bar. Will lay on his stomach before the fire, his face aglow, chin propped upon his hands. Oliver sat nearby, and from time to time a scuffle of their long legs would break out, a kicking and shoving, accompanied by a sudden guffawing, for all the world as if they were ten years old all over again.
The youngest of the Ainleys, Edmund, sat a little apart, separating himself, as was his wont, a little distance from every other person, not out of any unfriendliness or sullen temper but because of an innate fastidiousness and reserve, a desire to be somewhat private, which had always singled him out from the rest of Esmé's family, just as he was also unlike the others in looks, being pale-skinned, and long-nosed, with hair of an extraordinary blackness, and blue eyes. Edmund was then fifteen. I knew him the least well, understood him scarcely at all, felt uneasy in his presence, and yet perhaps in a strange way loved him more deeply than any.

The drawing room at Monk's Piece is long and low, with tall windows at either end, close-curtained now, but by day letting in a great deal of light from both north and south. Tonight, festoons and swags of fresh greenery, gathered that afternoon by Esmé and Isobel, hung over the stone fireplace, and intertwined with the leaves were berries and ribbons of scarlet and gold. At the far end of the room stood the tree, candelit and bedecked, and beneath it were piled the presents. There were flowers, too, vases of white chrysanthemums, and in the centre of the room, on a round table, a pyramid of gilded fruit and a bowl of oranges stuck all about with cloves, their spicy scent filling the air and mingling with that of the branches and the wood-smoke to be the very aroma of Christmas.

I sat down in my own armchair, drew it back a little from the full blaze of the fire, and began the protracted and soothing business of lighting a pipe. As I did so, I became aware that I had interrupted the others in the midst of a lively conversation, and that Oliver and Will at least were restless to continue.

'Well,' I said, through the first, cautious puffs at my tobacco, 'and what's all this?'

There was a further pause, and Esmé shook her head, smiling over her embroidery.

'Come....'

Then Oliver got to his feet and began to go about the room rapidly switching off every lamp, save the lights upon the Christmas tree at the far end, so that, when he returned to his seat, we had only the immediate firelight by which to see one another, and Esmé was obliged to lay down her sewing – not without a murmur of protest.

'May as well do the job properly,' Oliver said with some satisfaction.

'Oh, you boys....'

'Now come on, Will, your turn, isn't it?'

'No, Edmund's.'

'Ah-ha,' said the youngest of the Ainley brothers, in an odd, deep voice. 'I could an' if I would!'
‘Must we have the lights out?’ Isobel spoke as if to much smaller boys.
‘Yes, Sis, we must, that’s if you want to get the authentic atmosphere.’
‘But I’m not sure that I do.’
Oliver gave a low moan. ‘Get on with it then, someone.’
Esmé leaned over towards me. ‘They are telling ghost stories.’
‘Yes,’ said Will, his voice unsteady with both excitement and laughter. ‘Just the thing for Christmas Eve. It’s an ancient tradition!’
‘The lonely country house, the guests huddled around the fireside in a darkened room, the wind howling at the casement…’ Oliver moaned again.
And then came Aubrey’s stolid, good-humoured tones. ‘Better get on with it then.’ And so they did, Oliver, Edmund and Will vying with one another to tell the horridest, most spine-chilling tale, with much dramatic effect and mock-terrified shrieking. They outdid one another in the far extremes of inventiveness, piling agony upon agony. They told of dripping stone walls in uninhabited castles and of ivy-clad monastery ruins by moonlight, of locked inner rooms and secret dungeons, dank charnel houses and overgrown graveyards, of footsteps creaking upon staircases and fingers tapping at casements, of howlings and shriekings, groanings and scuttlings and the clanking of chains, of hooded monks and headless horsemen, swirling mists and sudden winds, insubstantial spectres and sheeted creatures, vampires and bloodhounds, bats and rats and spiders, of men found at dawn and women turned white-haired and raving lunatic, and of vanished corpses and curses upon heirs. The stories grew more and more lurid, wilder and sillier, and soon the gasps and cries merged into fits of choking laughter, as each one, even gentle Isobel, contributed more ghastly detail.
At first, I was amused, indulgent, but as I sat on, listening, in the firelight, I began to feel set apart from them all, an outsider to their circle. I was trying to suppress my mounting unease, to hold back the rising flood of memory.
This was a sport, a high-spirited and harmless game among young people, for the festive season, and an ancient tradition, too, as Will had rightly said, there was nothing to torment and trouble me, nothing of which I could possibly disapprove. I did not want to seem a killjoy, old and stodgy and unimaginative, I longed to enter into what was nothing more nor less than good fun. I fought a bitter battle within myself, my head turned away from the firelight so that none of them should chance to see my expression which I knew began to show signs of my discomfiture.
And then, to accompany a final, banshee howl from Edmund, the log that had been blazing on the hearth collapsed suddenly and, after sending up a light spatter of sparks and ash, died down so that there was near-darkness. And then silence in the room. I shuddered. I wanted to get up and go round putting on every light again, see the sparkle and glitter and colour of the Christmas decorations, have the fire blazing again cheerfully, I wanted to banish the chill that had settled upon me and the sensation of fear in my breast. Yet I could not move, it had, for the moment, paralysed me, just as it had always done, it was a long-forgotten, once too-familiar sensation.

Then, Edmund said, 'Now come, stepfather, your turn,' and at once the others took up the cry, the silence was broken by their urgings, with which even Esmé joined.

'No, no.' I tried to speak jocularly. 'Nothing from me.'

'Oh, Arthur . . .'

'You must know at least one ghost story, stepfather, everyone knows one . . .'

Ah, yes, yes, indeed. All the time I had been listening to their ghoulish, lurid inventions, and their howling and groans, the one thought that had been in my mind, and the only thing I could have said was, 'No, no, you have none of you any idea. This is all nonsense, fantasy, it is not like this. Nothing so blood-curdling and becreepered and crude – not so . . . so laughable. The truth is quite other, and altogether more terrible.'

'Come on, stepfather.'

'Don't be an old spoilsport.'

'Arthur?'

'Do your stuff, stepfather, surely you're not going to let us down?'

I stood up, unable to bear it any longer.

'I am sorry to disappoint you,' I said. 'But I have no story to tell!' And went quickly from the room, and from the house.

Some fifteen minutes later, I came to my senses and found myself on the scrubland beyond the orchard, my heart pounding, my breathing short. I had walked about in a frenzy of agitation, and now, realizing that I must make an effort to calm myself, I sat down on a piece of old, moss-covered stone, and began to take deliberate, steady breaths in on a count of ten and out again, until I felt the tension within myself begin to slacken and my pulse become a little steadier, my head clearer. After a short while longer, I was able to realize my surroundings once again, to note the clearness of the sky and the brightness of the stars, the air's coldness and the crispness of the frost-stiffened grass beneath my feet.

Behind me, in the house, I knew that I must have
left the family in a state of consternation and bewilderkment, for they knew me normally as an even-tempered man of predictable emotions. Why they had aroused my apparent disapproval with the telling of a few silly tales and prompted such curt behaviour, the whole family would be quite at a loss to understand, and very soon I must return to them, make amends and endeavour to brush off the incident, renew some of the air of jollity. What I would not be able to do was explain. No. I would be cheerful and I would be steady again, if only for my dear wife’s sake, but no more.

They had chided me with being a spoilsport, tried to encourage me to tell them the one ghost story I must surely, like any other man, have it in me to tell. And they were right. Yes, I had a story, a true story, a story of haunting and evil, fear and confusion, horror and tragedy. But it was not a story to be told for casual entertainment, around the fireside upon Christmas Eve.

I had always known in my heart that the experience would never leave me, that it was now woven into my very fibres, an inextricable part of my past, but I had hoped never to have to recollect it, consciously, and in full, ever again. Like an old wound, it gave off a faint twinge now and again, but less and less often, less and less painfully, as the years went on and my happiness, sanity and equilibrium were assured. Of late, it had been like the outermost ripple on a pool, merely the faint memory of a memory.

Now, tonight, it again filled my mind to the exclusion of all else. I knew that I should have no rest from it, that I should lie awake in a chill of sweat, going over that time, those events, those places. So it had been night after night for years.

I got up and began to walk about again. Tomorrow was Christmas Day. Could I not be free of it at least for that blessed time, was there no way of keeping the memory, and the effects it had upon me, at bay, as an analgesic or a balm will stave off the pain of a wound, at least temporarily? And then, standing among the trunks of the fruit trees, silver-grey in the moonlight, I recalled that the way to banish an old ghost that continues its hauntings is to exorcise it. Well then, mine should be exorcised. I should tell my tale, not aloud, by the fireside, not as a diversion for idle listeners – it was too solemn, and too real, for that. But I should set it down on paper, with every care and in every detail. I would write my own ghost story. Then perhaps I should finally be free of it for whatever life remained for me to enjoy.

I decided at once that it should be, at least during my lifetime, a story for my eyes only. I was the one who had been haunted and who had suffered – not
the only one, no, but surely, I thought, the only one left alive, I was the one who, to judge by my agitation of this evening, was still affected by it deeply, it was from me alone that the ghost must be driven.

I glanced up at the moon, and at the bright, bright Pole star. Christmas Eve. And then I prayed, a heartfelt, simple prayer for peace of mind, and for strength and steadfastness to endure while I completed what would be the most agonizing task, and I prayed for a blessing upon my family, and for quiet rest to us all that night. For, although I was in control of my emotions now, I dreaded the hours of darkness that lay ahead.

For answer to my prayer, I received immediately the memory of some lines of poetry, lines I had once known but long forgotten. Later, I spoke them aloud to Esmé, and she identified the source for me at once.

'Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
This bird of dawning singeth all night long,
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No Fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is that time.'

As I recited them aloud, a great peace came upon me, I was wholly myself again yet stiffened by my resolution. After this holiday when the family had all departed, and Esmé and I were alone, I would begin to write my story.

When I returned to the house, Isobel and Aubrey had gone upstairs to share the delight of creeping about with bulging stockings for their young sons, Edmund was reading, Oliver and Will were in the old playroom at the far end of the house, where there was a battered billiard table, and Esmé was tidying the drawing room, preparatory to going to bed. About that evening's incident, nothing whatsoever was said, though she wore an anxious expression, and I had to invent a bad bout of acute indigestion to account for my abrupt behaviour. I saw to the fire, damping down the flames, and knocked out my pipe on the side of the hearth, feeling quiet and serene again, and no longer agitated about what lonely terrors I might have to endure, whether asleep or awake, during the small hours of the coming night.

Tomorrow was Christmas Day, and I looked forward to it eagerly and with gladness, it would be a time of family joy and merrymaking, love and friendship, fun and laughter.

When it was over, I would have work to do.
I’m ashamed to admit that although it has been running in the West End for more than 13 years, I have never previously seen The Woman in Black. Many readers will, therefore, be able to retort, “We know already, you tardy oaf” when I retort that the show, cunningly adapted by Stephen Mallatrat from a novel by Susan Hill, is one of the most brilliantly effective spine-chillers you will ever encounter.

A new cast has recently joined the production, and, if you haven’t seen the show already, you are missing a real treat. I’d particularly recommend the show to families with children who have outgrown panto and The Lion King – and shy young couples on their first date.

You remember that awful moment when you agonisingly try to pluck up the courage to put your arm round your companion? Believe me, during the thrillingly executed surprises of The Woman in Black you will be leaping into each other’s arms without even thinking about it. I have never witnessed an audience jump and gasp in such genuine shock as they do here.

What I like best about the show is that, as-well as containing all the ingredients of a classic ghost story, complete with deserted mansion, haunted graveyards, and locals who don’t dare breathe a word of the horrors they have witnessed, it also celebrates the imaginative possibilities of theatre itself.

The action takes place in the very theatre in which we are sitting, a marvellously dusty and godforsaken place in Michael Holt’s gauzy, cobwebby design. A middle-aged London solicitor, Arthur Kipps, is seeking the advice of a younger actor on how best to tell the tale of terrible events he experienced thirty years earlier for an audience of family and friends. The actor has no time for Kipp’s excessively wordy monologue, and together they begin to act out the story, with the solicitor gradually revealing a gift for the thespian craft he had never previously suspected.
This is a classic example of less meaning more in the theatre. A change of coat means a different character, an old wicker props basket does duty for a desk, a train carriage and a horse and cart. Even the coups de theatre couldn’t be more simpler or more effective.

The actor plays the young Kipps, while Kipps himself plays all those he encountered on his fateful trip to the remote North East of England when he was required to attend the funeral of one of his firm’s clients and tidy up her papers.

Mrs Drablow lived alone for more than 60 years in a gothic mansion on an island accessible only by a causeway at low tide. Something awful happened there, and, when he arrives at the house himself, awful things start to happen to Kipps too, not least the appearance of the woman in black, with her pale, wasted face and expression of desperate, yearning malevolence. It would be a crime to give away any more. Suffice it to say that the narrative taps straight into primal fears and that there is a terrific twist in the tail.

Robert Demeger is superb as Kipps, looking, with his hollow eyes and woebegone countenance, like a man who has supped far too full with horror, though he discovers a kind of exultation in confronting his demons. Timothy Watson is first-rate too as the initially supercilious actor who finds himself sucked into the vortex of horror, while Robin Herford’s production builds up the tension with cruel and ingenious finesse. This is deliciously old-fashioned popular entertainment at its very best.

Monday September 3rd 2002

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