

Background 1

Susan Hill

Susan Hill was born in Scarborough on 5 February 1942. She was educated at Scarborough Convent School and later at a grammar school in Coventry when the family moved house, before reading English at King's College, London from where she graduated in 1963. Her first novels, written while she was at school between O and A levels, were published in 1961 when she was still a student.

Susan Hill worked as a freelance journalist between 1963 and 1968 and became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1972. She is a prolific writer and has received several literary awards such as the 1971 Somerset Maugham Award for *I'm the King of the Castle*, the 1972 Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for *The Albatross*, and also in 1972 the Whitbread Novel Award for *The Bird of Night*.

Susan Hill was a presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Bookshelf* programme from 1986 to 1987. In 1996 she started her own publishing company, Long Barn Books, editing and publishing a quarterly literary journal, *Books and Company*, in 1998. Her most recent work is a series of crime novels (five to date) featuring Detective Chief Inspector Simon Serrailer, which has been bought for television adaptation, and *Howard's End is on the Landing* in which Hill writes about her passion for books and the authors who have seriously influenced her life.

Dickens, Brontë and Henry James are among Susan Hill's greatest influences. She became interested in writing a classic ghost story as she felt that this particular genre was being neglected since the rise in popularity of the horror genre. The fact that *The Woman in Black* (1983) is still running as a stage adaptation in London's West End is an indication of her success as a writer. See the *Philip Allan Literature Guide for GCSE* on *The Woman in Black* for more information about the background to Susan Hill's writing.

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- 1 Write a paragraph summarising the ways in which Susan Hill's background influenced her writing of *The Woman in Black*.

2 Read Chapter 1 of *The Woman in Black*, looking carefully at the background information about Monk's Piece and Arthur Kipps' life there. Answer the following questions by circling true or false and write down a short quotation from Chapter 1 as evidence to support your answer.

a Mr Bentley encouraged Kipps to buy Monk's Piece. True/False

b Monk's Piece is built on the banks of the River Nene. True/False

c Esmé, Kipps' second wife, was the widow of Captain Ainley and the mother of Isobel, Oliver, Will and Edmund. True/False

d Isobel is married to Aubrey Pearce and the mother of three boys when Kipps decides to write his story. True/False

e Arthur Kipps holds traditional Christian beliefs. True/False

Extension activities

3 The weather plays an important role in the novel. Make a note of the references to the weather in Chapter 1 and record the page and line numbers.

4 As you read the first chapter, on a separate sheet of paper, sketch a diagram of the inside of Monk's Piece and the surrounding area.

5 Learn the seven lines of Shakespeare on page 23 and write out the meaning in your own words.

Chapter notes and activities

Chapter 1: Christmas Eve

The novel begins by describing the feelings of Arthur Kipps, a retired solicitor, as he begins to spend the Christmas holiday with his wife, Esmé and semi-grown-up stepchildren at his home, Monk's Piece, which is situated in a rural location on the banks of the fictional River Nee. It introduces several characters: 24-year-old Isobel; her brothers Oliver (19), Will (18), Edmund (15); her husband, Aubrey Pearce; and her three young sons who are asleep. These are not main characters and they are included only to set a context for the main story, which begins in Chapter 2, A London Particular.

In Chapter 1, Arthur Kipps is bringing himself to write about his terrifying supernatural experiences which took place approximately 30 years previously and which clearly have had profound consequences on his mental health and subsequent relationships.

Kipps tells the story from the perspective of a man in his middle years who has prematurely aged. In subsequent chapters, he captures the viewpoint of the young Kipps who was an innocent abroad. The key theme is introduced through mention of his stepsons competing to tell the most gruesome ghost stories, little knowing that their stepfather's reluctance to join in the activity is due to the fact that his true story is the most terrifying of all and the fear has not left him, even after so many years. Towards the end of the chapter, Arthur Kipps resolves to write down his experiences in order (he hopes) to exorcise the woman in black for ever. See the accompanying *Philip Allan Literature Guide* and www.philipallan.co.uk/literatureguidesonline for a more detailed summary of this chapter.

1 a Who says 'Now come, stepfather, your turn,'?

b Who was with Arthur Kipps when he first set eyes on Monk's Piece?

c What was Arthur Kipps' former profession?

d Where and what was Oliver Ainley studying?

e How does Kipps describe the ghost-story-telling session?

f How does the reader become aware that Arthur Kipps becomes increasingly uncomfortable with this activity?

g Look carefully at the end of this chapter. What evidence is there that Arthur Kipps has been tormented for years?

2 Draw a diagram of the Ainley/Kipps family tree from the information you have been given in Chapter 1, Christmas Eve.

3 Work in pairs.

a Close your copies of the novel and read the following passage. Fill in the missing words. Use both your memory and your imagination, but keep as close to the meaning of the original as you can.

‘They had me with being a spoilsport, tried to me to tell them the one ghost story I must surely, like any other man, have it in me to tell. And they were Yes, I had a story, a true story, a story of and , and and But it was not a story to be told for casual entertainment, around the fireside upon ,’

b When you have finished, go back to the text and compare your version with the original on page 21 of the Vintage edition (ISBN 978-0-099-51164-9).

c What effect do you think Susan Hill is trying to achieve in this extract? Discuss why she chose the words that she did. Think about the use of three adjectives or phrases and how this technique is used to add emphasis.

Role play

- 4** In groups of seven, act out the ghost-story-telling scene. Take one role each and make up the dialogue to reflect the way you see your character and the role he or she plays in this scene.

Extension activity

- 5** There is a lot of background about the setting of Monk's Piece in this chapter. Imagine you are an estate agent putting the house up for sale. Using only the information in this chapter, write a leaflet to attract a discerning, potential buyer.

Whole-text activities 7

Characterisation: the women characters

Stella, Mrs Daily and Esmé are all presented in a supporting role. They are very much stereotypical wives rather than women. The tendency of so many authors to categorise women as either angels or devils — known as the ‘virgin/whore dichotomy’ — is a long-standing literary tradition.

- 1 Read the whole of this question before you begin and write your answers in the table below.
 - a List five fiction books you have read.
 - b Next to each title, write down the names of the main female characters.
 - c Think about whether they can be classified as angel, demon or neither and colour code them accordingly. Remember to include a key.
 - d Find out and make a note of when each text was written.
 - e Discuss your answers in groups of three.

Book title	Date written	Female characters	Angel/demon/neither
1			
2			
3			

Exam practice 5

Essay openings

No extra marks will be awarded for copying the question in your opening sentence or paragraph. Instead, your introduction should:

- answer the question briefly, setting out your thesis or line of argument
- introduce a reference to the text to ground your thesis and show the examiner you have an overview of what you are being asked to do
- focus on key words of the question
- flag up the author

Remember that the examiner is looking for elements that score marks. You will score marks for making informed analytical comments. Do not waste your limited time writing anything else.

Four possible introductions for an essay answering the following question are given below.

How does Kipps change from the young enthusiastic lawyer to the mature stepfather featured in Chapter 1 of *The Woman in Black*?

Introduction 1

Kipps changes considerably during the course of the novel as a result of his experiences in Crythin Gifford and the London park. This is made evident by Hill through the ways in which she reveals what happens to him over a few months. There are three major points in the novel: his expectations when given his task by Mr Bentley, his encounters with the woman in black and the older Kipps as presented in Chapter 1.

Introduction 2

This question suggests that Susan Hill has built into the novel a developmental path for Kipps. I agree that she has shown the gradual changes which result from his experiences in Crythin Gifford though there is a big gap in his development between the death of his son and the older Kipps as presented in Chapter 1.

Introduction 3

The key word in this question is 'change'. One of Susan Hill's great achievements in *The Woman in Black* is not only to get right into Kipps' mind so that we understand how it feels to be frightened of the woman in black but also to take us on a journey through his terror leading to the older man who decides to exorcise his ghost through writing his story.

Exam practice 10

Sample C-grade essay

- 1 Read the question below and the C-grade essay in response to it. (Note to the teacher: if you intend to use Homework 14, do so before issuing the class with this annotated version of the essay.)

Show how Susan Hill builds tension and suspense by the way she presents two of the following characters: Jerome, the landlord, Samuel Daily and Keckwick.

- 1 Important point to start — tension and suspense are key words

Susan Hill builds tension and suspense by the way she presents all four of these inhabitants of Crythin Gifford more by what they don't say than what they do.¹ All the inhabitants of Crythin Gifford seem to be bound by a conspiracy of silence but I shall concentrate on Samuel Daily and Keckwick because I think they were the two who helped Kipps the most.

- 2 Missing comma between 'talkative' and 'friendly'

At first Susan Hill presents Samuel Daily as a very talkative friendly² character. He first meets Kipps on the train from Homerby and seems to want to talk when he notices the envelope with Alice Drablow's mane³ on it, Kipps is curious to fin⁴ out more about her but Susan Hill plants the first seed of mystery when daily⁵ makes a cryptic comment about Eel Marsh House. Kipps is anxious for him to explain but he doesn't.⁶

- 3 Spelling mistake
 4 Spelling mistake
 5 No capitalisation
 6 Could use a quotation here

"Come," I said smiling, "you're not going to start telling me strange tales of lonely houses?" He gave me a straight look. "No," he said, at last, "I am not." For some reason then, I shuddered, all the more because of the openness of his gaze and the directness of his manner.⁷

- 7 Quotation too long

This is the first sign of tension and Susan Hill creates it by using a technique called foreshadowing.⁸ Kipps shudders unexplainably so we know that there is something not right about the house.

- 8 Refers to author's style

9 Effective embedded quotations

Keckwick is the very opposite of Daily in some ways as he hardly says anything at all. Susan Hill builds mystery around him more by what others say about him. Jerome says he knows everything there is to know about Eel Marsh house, again suggesting that there is something nobody is telling Kipps. Jerome says he is ‘not very communicative’⁹ and Kipps smiles and says ‘Oh, I am getting use to that’.¹⁰ At this point Kipps is very suspicious and Susan Hill keeps up the tension.

10 Missing quotation mark

11 Colloquialism

When Kipps first sees Keckwick Susan Hill relaxes the tension by suggesting he looks like his pony which is quite cute¹¹ but she builds it later on when his cap slips and she describes his face which is covered in bumps and lumps and warts. He is so ugly that it is a dark red colour, it is no wonder¹² that he keeps it covered with his hat and coat pulled up round his neck. This is quite sinister.

12 Colloquialism

13 Keeps referring back to the question

The tension and suspense build to a climax¹³ when Kipps is alone at Eel Marsh House and hears what he thinks is Keckwick and the pony and trap sinking in the marshes on the way back to fetch him. But he is puzzled by the cries of the child. Kipps is terrified. Then Keckwick rings the doorbell in the middle of the night, he has come to fetch him and Kipps doesn’t know what is going on.¹⁴ The tension and the suspense is quite high at this point but then Susan Hill releases it by saying

14 Storytelling — but used to illustrate a point

‘All seemed quite real, quite normal’.

She then goes on to describe the beautiful landscape in the moonlight and the contrast between this and the earlier sea fret which seemed to trap Kipps like a spider’s web is very strange.

15 Useful reference to the reader

At this point the reader¹⁵ must be asking why Keckwick came back and didn’t wait until morning. Kipps can’t believe it’s him but Keckwick ignores his questions and the state he is in and only says:

‘I wouldn’t have left you over the night. I wouldn’t have done that to you.’