The Woman in Black

‘Whistle and I’ll Come to You’ (C10)

After the previous chapter, which is relatively long and detailed, this chapter is quite short and easy to overlook when writing about the novel as a whole. Tension and unease are created immediately through the description of the weather that opens the chapter. Once again, Hill relies on what Kipps can hear and feel to create fear, rather than what can be seen. She also uses the two senses separately in this chapter – nature makes it impossible for Kipps to see what is happening for much of the time – either everything is shrouded in fog or it is dark. Only at the terrifying end to the chapter does she allow Kipp to both see and hear what is happening.

Use of pathetic fallacy to create a tense and gloomy atmosphere:

“During the night the wind rose. As I had lain reading I had become aware of the stronger gusts that blew every so often against the casements. But when I awoke abruptly in the early hours it had increased greatly in force. The house felt like a ship at sea, battered by the gale that came roaring across the open marsh. Windows were rattling everywhere and there was the sound of moaning down all the chimneys of the house and whistling through every nook and cranny.”

Throughout the story the descriptions of the weather are detailed, accurate and realistic for the place the Hill has created. She wants the reader to believe in the place that Eel Marsh House is situated and the weather is an important factor in the building up of tension.

In the passage from the beginning of the chapter Hill starts off simply, using everyday language and a simple sentence structure. As her description progresses the sentences become more complex and the description more elaborate. This reflects the build-up of the storm and adds tension for the reader. By the end of the passage the house itself seems to be possessed.

The simile of the house as a ship seems to be particularly apt here – if the reader can conjure up the image of a ship battling against a storm, in a violent and inhospitable sea, the house can be given all of the attributes of the ship being tossed and battered in the storm. It also brings to mind the idea of the house being lonely and isolated in its position on the marshes – it is at the mercy of the elements and this adds to the menacing atmosphere being created.
The marshes themselves contribute to the wildness of the scene, with the wind roaring across them like some wild animal, with nothing to stop it or to protect the house.

Hill again uses sound, rather than sight to give her description life. The wind is the cause of the sounds heard by Kipps, as it builds up throughout this paragraph. The wind wakes him in the middle of the night so the sounds would appear amplified as he wouldn’t be able to see anything. The verbs used to describe the wind make it sound menacing: “roaring, moaning and whistling”. These sounds are more usually made by a person. It feels as if the wind is attacking the house, trying to destroy it. It also builds towards the appearance of the woman in black, the reader expecting her appearance at any moment.

Hill again makes the comparison of the house to a lighthouse, just as she did in her first description of it. This time the comparison highlights the sturdy nature of the building:

“Eel Marsh House had stood here, steady as a lighthouse, quite alone and exposed, bearing the brunt of winter after winter.”

There is reassurance in this statement – that the house has withstood all that nature can throw at it. It feels oddly comforting, given what has been happening in and around the house. Kipps is lulled into a false sense of security by the memories the house triggers – of being warm and safe as a child at home when there was a storm outside. Hill uses this technique to make the reader feel the same as Kipps does – as if nothing terrible can happen in such a protective place.

The noise Kipps hears next is not a new one. Hill builds up his terror by repeating the sound he heard out on the causeway in the previous chapter:

“A cry, that familiar cry of desperation and anguish, a cry for help from a child somewhere out on the marsh.”

Sound is very important again, as the emotion of the person is interpreted from the tone of the cry they are making. The idea of the cry being desperate and anguished underlines the idea that the person making the sound is frightened and suffering. The impact is made greater by the knowledge that it is a child making these noises.

When Kipps leaves the room Hill does not allow any light into the scene so her descriptions still rely on sounds. Kipps feels certain that someone has just gone past him down the corridor to the locked door. He does not see or feel anything just has a sense that this has happened. Simultaneously a gust of wind makes all the light go out, leaving Kipps in literal and metaphoric darkness. Kipps has been built up as a man of realism all the way through the story – trying to explain the
inexplicable using logical arguments and sound reasoning. This reasoning has been gently eroded by the mystery of everything he has witnessed; much of which has been masked by darkness or fog. It is only at this point that he begins to doubt the reality of everything that has happened:

"Whatever was about, whoever I had seen, and heard rocking, and who had passed me by just now, whoever had opened the locked doors was not 'real'. No. But what was real? At that moment I began to doubt my own reality."

All the way through the story Kipps has presented as a strong character and a man not to be easily frightened. Her he begins to be truly afraid as the realisation of what is happening begins to dawn on him. He is a character who inspires great sympathy and fondness in the reader. Here is a rationally-minded young man just trying to do his job – there is nothing for the reader to dislike and plenty that can be readily related to in him. His fear in this section inspires fear in the reader. It is a key point in the text and represents a change in atmosphere. All of the worst things the reader had feared are confirmed in this section:

"I was lost to everything but my own fears, incapable of decisive, coherent thought, let alone movement."

This short statement sums up the nature of fear itself, that it renders a person incapable of logical thoughts or action, that it somehow freezes part of the brain. Everything that has happened to Kipps seems to find a focal point her in the story when all his experience in and surrounding the house come together to overpower him – the cries of the child, the rocking chair, the sense of someone else being there, the darkness and the weather all combine into an overwhelming force at this one moment.

The tension of the chapter breaks here and Kipps gradually begins to calm down and return to his more logical self.

Kipp later recalls the feelings that he experienced in the nursery:

"an overwhelming grief and sadness, a sense of loss and bereavement, a distress mingled with utter despair."

The effect on the reader of these emotions is to make the story more believable, and, therefore more frightening. It is important that the writer has described emotions other than just fear and it makes us connect more with the character. It is also more likely that the reader will have experienced some of these emotions. The detail given to this particular moment is important. It makes the reader recognise that the emotions felt by Kipps are very complicated and multi-layered, just as real emotional situations are. It also provides some middle-ground
emotionally for Kipps – he doesn’t just go from being fine to being terrified – this is part of his emotional journey.

Kipps struggles to understand his emotions – he feels different to how he felt before, and he knows that it stems from being in the nursery:

“\textit{I was confused and puzzled, not knowing any reason at all why I should be in the grip of such desperate anguish and misery. It was as though I had, for the time I was in the room, become another person.}”

He goes on, characteristically to explain how this all makes him feel. We know that Kipps is not easily scared or given to flights of fancy about what he has seen and heard, and here he confirms himself as quite a logical person:

“\textit{It was as alarming and strange an occurrence as any of those outward, visible and audible that had taken place over the last few days.}”

Any person in this situation would be scared, and it is this sense of normality shared with Kipps that builds up the tension in this section of the story. Couple with this the fact that it is still the middle of the night and the sense of trepidation increases. It is also interesting to note that he doesn’t come to any conclusion about this at this point he just leaves everything for the reader to ponder and moves on with his narrative.

Immediately he begins to build up to the scene where spider nearly drowns and he sees the woman again. The time is now \textit{a washed out dawn}, and at first he just lets the dog out to relieve herself. The normality of this part of the description makes what is to happen next all the more unexpected and terrifying. The sound of someone whistling for the dog immediately makes the reader conclude that Sam Daily has come back. However the reality is much worse. The idea of losing the dog would make Kipps even more isolated and his immediate reaction is to try to save her. Nature is again used as something quite terrifying in its own right and the description of his, and the dog’s struggle to be free from the sinking sand underlines this:

\textit{“I ran as I had never run before, heedless of my own safety, desperate to go to the aid of the brave, bright little creature who had given me much consolation and cheer in that desolate spot.”}

Hill devotes two pages to the description of the struggle in the marsh, building up the tension with the idea that one, or both of them might drown. Finally, she releases the tension in the moment they both get out of the sinking sand.
“But she was alive and so was I and, gradually, a little warmth from each of our bodies and the pause revived us and, cradling spider in my arms like a child, I began to stumble back across the marshes towards the house.”

It is only here, after the reader has been lulled into a false sense of security by the escape that Hill delivers the killer blow:

At one of the upper windows... I caught a glimpse of someone standing. A woman. That woman. She was looking directly towards me."

Her use of short sentences reflects the breathlessness of Kipps at the time. It also makes the reader slow down. This adds emphasis to what is being read and also emphasises the significance of it. No description is required and the writing is better for this lack of embellishment – she doesn’t need to say any more – the reader understands perfectly well from these few short phrases. The only difference from the other times he has seen the woman is that she is looking directly at him as if challenging him in some way.

Hill then further develops the terror by adding in the sound of the pony and trap – making it feel like his senses are being over-loaded and linking the sounds and the sight of the woman together in the climax of the chapter.