

The Woman in Black – The Sound of a Pony and Trap – Extract and notes.

Extract:

“Somewhere away in the swirling mist and dark, I heard the sound that lifted my heart, the distant but unmistakeable clip-clop of the pony’s hooves and the rumble and creak of the trap. So Keckwick was unperturbed by the mist, quite used to travelling through the lanes and across the causeway in darkness, and I stopped and waited to see a lantern – for he must surely carry one – and half wondered whether to shout and make my presence known, in case he came suddenly upon me and ran me down in the ditch.

Then I realised that the mist plays tricks with sound as well as sight, for not only did the noise of the trap stay further away from me for longer than I might have expected but also it seemed to come not only from directly behind me, straight down the causeway path, but instead to my right, out on the marsh. I tried to work out the direction of the wind but there was none. I turned around but then the sound began to recede further away again. Baffled I stood and waited, straining to listen through the mist. What I heard next chilled and horrified me, even though I could neither understand nor account for it. The noise of the pony and trap grew fainter and then stopped abruptly and away on the marsh was a curious draining, sucking, churning sound, which went on, together with the shrill neighing and whinnying of a horse in panic, and then I heard another cry, a shout, a terrified sobbing – it was hard to decipher – but with horror I realised that it came from a child. I stood absolutely helpless in the mist that clouded me and everything from my sight, almost weeping in an agony of fear and frustration, and I knew that I was hearing, beyond any doubt, the appalling last noises of a pony and trap, carrying a child in it, as well as whatever adult – presumably Keckwick – was driving and was even now struggling desperately. It had somehow lost the causeway path and fallen into the marshes and was being dragged under by the quicksand and the pull of the incoming tide.”

- This is perhaps one of the most terrifying and heart wrenching descriptions in the novel: the moment when Kipps thinks he has heard Keckwick and some unknown child sucked to their deaths by the sinking sand off the causeway.

- Throughout the description there is nothing to suggest that this is not really happening or that there is anything supernatural in the events that Kipps hears.
- Hill has set up the sudden danger of the sea fretts earlier in the chapter and by creating the thick fog limits Kipps and the reader to reliance on hearing to ascertain what is happening.
- This use of sound only in the description helps to convey Kipps' feeling of confusion and helplessness – events are again happening to him and he has absolutely no control over them – this adds to the sense of tension and terror for the reader in this chapter.
- At first we share a sense of relief with Kipps as he hears the sound of the pony and trap and understand that it can only mean one thing – Keckwick has returned through the fog to collect him: **“I heard the sound that lifted my heart.”** All the tension about the fog dissipates in the certainty that Kipps will soon be back on his way to safety.
- The reader understands that as Kipps cannot see what is happening out on the marshes his hearing becomes more acute and he is aware for the first time that the sound of the pony and trap is coming from the wrong direction – not from along the causeway but somewhere out on the marshes. There is no wind that can have distorted the sounds. He has to listen very carefully so that he does not miss anything. At this point that reader is as confused as Kipps about what is going on but the tension created by Hill in the scene has begun to increase and there is a general sense of unease here **“I stood and waited, straining to hear through the mist.”**
- There is still the sense of the unexplained in this section **“What I heard next chilled and horrified me.”** Kipps hears the pony and trap being sucked under the sands – a horrific image for the reader. There is enough detail in the description of the scene to paint a vivid picture for the reader of what is happening. The words used have a sense of onomatopoeia about them – **“draining, sucking, churning.”** The reader is easily able to imagine the sort of noise the trap is making as it is sucked beneath the sands.
- The words used to describe the panic of the horse make it seem pitiful and defenceless **“the shrill neighing and whinnying of a horse in panic”**. The fact that the noise is **“shrill”** means that is high-pitched and not the sound a horse would usually make – it is obviously very stressed and panicking. This is further reinforced by the fact that is **“whinnying”** a noise made by horses when they are frightened. This description adds intensity to the scene and helps to build the terror felt.
- It seems that what Kipps is hearing cannot get any worse until he hears sobs that are coming from a young child: **“I heard another cry, a shout a terrified**

sobbing – it was hard to decipher – but with horror I realised that it came from a child, a young child.” The reader will feel sympathy already here for the demise of the horse in such a horrible way but the death of a small child in this way is almost unbearable. Kipps realises what he is hearing and is absolutely powerless to do anything about it – he must listen in vain to what he knows is happening. The sense of the power of nature over man is very distinct here.

- Again Hill pulls the reader and Kipps away from any superstitious or supernatural explanation for the sounds the horror Kipps thinks he is hearing unfold is the death of Keckwick and some unknown child on the marshes. The logical explanations are just as horrific here as the true explanation of what is happening. The reader must live through the terror that Kipps as the narrator felt at the time this was happening to him.
- Kipps’ final sentence in the passage is an affirmation of the logical explanation of what has happened – that he has heard two people dying on the marshes – “”. The pace of the story here is deliberately fast – it is only when the reader and the narrator have pause of reflection that the true horror of what has happened is revealed.