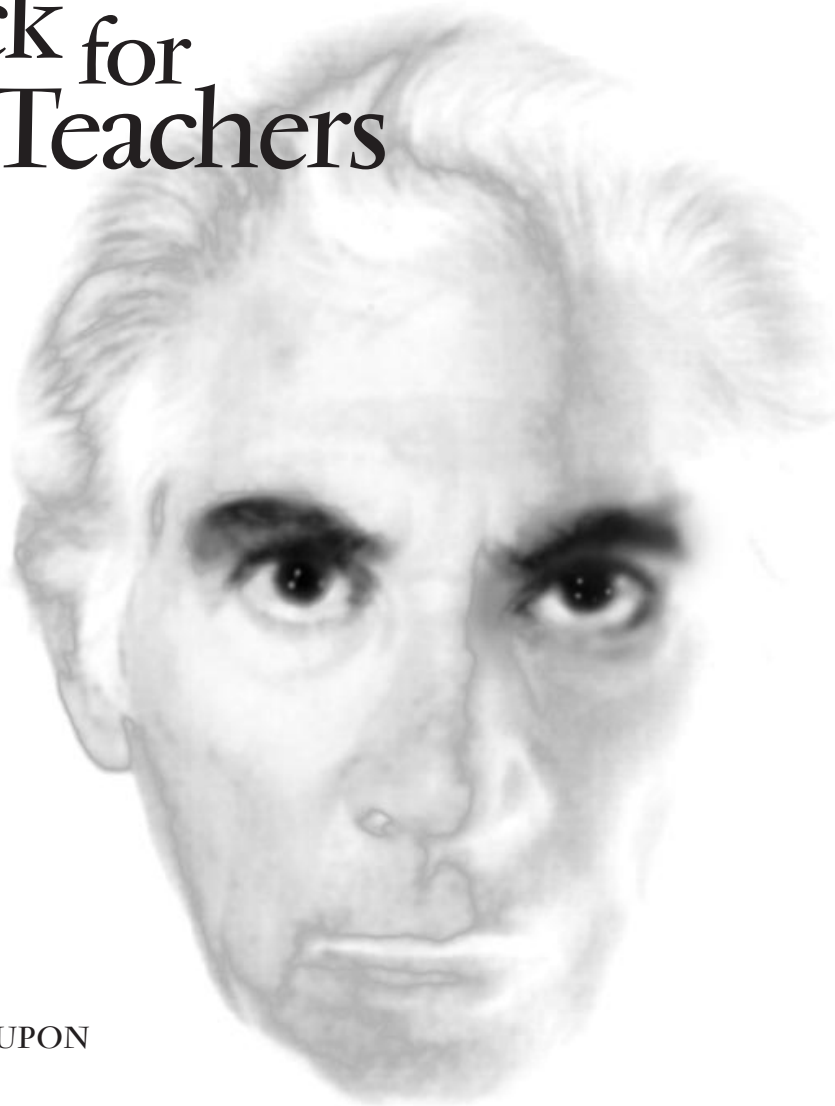


TELLING TALES

A Resource
Pack for
Teachers



BASED UPON

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

A GHOST PLAY

Adapted by Stephen Mallatratt from the book by Susan Hill

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THE WOMAN IN BLACK

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Written and researched by Kim Greengrass ©1998

Introduction




Storytelling lies at the heart of *The Woman in Black* - both the novel and the play. This teachers' pack takes telling tales as its central theme, offering a variety of ideas for work to supplement your theatre visit. The pack includes interviews, background information, discussion points and practical storytelling exercises. All of the materials are intended to help your students to explore the play and the issues raised by it, more deeply.

The pack can be used both with classes who are studying Susan Hill's novel and with Drama or Theatre Studies groups who may be seeing the play as part of a more general course of theatrical studies. Most of the material is easily adapted for students of different ages and levels of ability. Suggested activities and discussion points are indicated throughout the pack. Many of these activities and discussion points could, if you wish, be used as the basis for later written work.

The pack is divided into four main parts:

- 1 Section One: The Original *Woman in Black*** offers interviews and background materials to help students examine the inspiration and ideas which lie behind Susan Hill's novel. This section aims to stimulate debate about how ghost stories are told and why they continue to be enjoyed.
- 2 Section Two: The Adaptation Process** encourages students to engage fully with the theatrical experience of Stephen Mallatratt's adaptation of *The Woman in Black* and to analyse the differences between storytelling on the page and on the stage.
- 3 Section Three: Reflection and Analysis** is intended to provoke debate about some of the issues tackled in the play; their relevance to contemporary audiences; and the implications of the adaptation process.
- 4 Section Four: Practical Approaches to Storytelling** suggests practical, drama activities to help your class explore a variety of storytelling techniques. The exercises can be used to examine particular issues raised by the play, to encourage detailed analysis of the production or to inspire students to create their own theatrical ghost stories.

The Original Woman in Black: Ghostly Beginnings



"One evening I was browsing along my bookshelves trying to hit upon just the right thing to read when I came to *The Turn of the Screw* [by Henry James] and as I settled down to re-read it, I thought how much I had always admired it and how brilliantly James creates the atmosphere of the house called Bly in which it is set: out of the blue I thought 'I wonder if I could write a ghost novel myself?'"

Susan Hill

Once Susan Hill had decided she would like to try her hand at a ghost story, she approached the task almost as a literary game: **"I really wrote it as an exercise almost. I love traditional English, classic, ghost stories, particularly Victorian ghost stories which are virtually always dependent upon atmosphere... I wanted to see if I could take all the ingredients of those classic ghost stories and rework them. The first thing was to make a list of what the ingredients of the classic English ghost story are."**

Voracious reading of ghost stories, new and old, allowed Susan Hill to select what she thought the essential components of a successful ghost story might be. She believes strongly that **"the ghost story must impart a strong sense of place, of mood, of the season, of the elements, and so the traditional haunted elements - old isolated houses, lonely churchyards, castles and convents and empty, narrow streets at night - are heavily relied upon. The worst writers of the Victorian ghost story, of course, simply piled on every spooky detail indiscriminately, in an effort to send shudders up the spine of the reader. The best writers are very carefully selective."**

In evoking an atmospheric setting for *The Woman in Black*, Susan Hill returns to **"the sort of English landscape I love and know well and also find powerfully atmospheric, beautiful and sometimes sinister. It could be anywhere on the East coast, the flat marshes of Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk or even up near Holy Island in Northumberland".** She feels that **"there are very few places more spooky than marshy places with mist rising; those flat, watery, misty places. Then you also need the classic location which gets cut off in some way - in the middle of a moor, in the middle of a storm - and where nobody can get away."** Add to this an ancient graveyard, strange noises in the night and a conspiracy of silence, and, as Susan Hill declares, **"the story just wove itself"**.

As she was tackling her own ghost story, Susan Hill was all too aware that the traditional tale of the supernatural has been superseded in recent years. **"I'd always enjoyed traditional ghost stories and was rather sad to see their decline. It's not been a popular genre since tales of terror and tales of horror overtook it."** She **"was sure there were important differences between a ghost story and a tale of terror or horror"** and she was therefore anxious to draw a distinction between the different genres. Above all she was determined that there should be **"no vampires, monsters, werewolves or creatures covered in slime"**.

What *is* required is **“a real ghost. It’s got to be something which is seen now, but is the image of somebody who is known to have existed and is known to have died. It may be a child, adult or animal; it may be seen or heard; but it is certainly more than just in someone’s imagination.”**

Part of the difficulty with horror stories, as Susan Hill explains in her introduction to *Ghost Stories*, is their increasing sensationalism:

“Grim and dreadful and hair-raising incidents must be piled one on top of the other; blood must flow and be seen to flow, wounds must gape and stakes be driven through hearts. It was said that, as readers became more sophisticated and more informed about real, horrifying events in this world - and, also, as they distanced themselves from superstitions and belief in a supernatural order - they became far less easily frightened, and so more and more grotesque and savage tales had to be fabricated before any flesh could be made to creep...

“In fact, laughter is precisely what is provoked by the horror film. As the incredible, grisly incidents are multiplied and become ever more fantastic and divorced from imaginable reality, the audience finds its release in mockery and gales of derisive laughter, rather than in shudders of fear.”

Susan Hill feels that with horror stories becoming more outlandish and more laughable they lose any sense of credibility, because **“when you see horror stories, particularly those about aliens, we *know* they couldn’t exist, so ultimately they don’t frighten us.”** Ghost stories, on the other hand, contain a core of credibility so that the reader feels that “this could just happen. It could be our lives. Ghost stories happen in a normal context. It is, after all, a relatively normal context that a young man goes off to sort out someone’s papers - it just happens to be a slightly spooky setting. He is a young cheerful fellow but the supernatural creeps into his ordinary life.

“I also think that ghost stories have to have a point beyond frightening. It’s all very well to be frightened, but there has to be a point and I never really write anything which hasn’t got a point. I do think that there is a moral point to *The Woman in Black*, but that came later.”

Quotations are taken from a 1998 interview with Susan Hill, and from her introductions to Ghost Stories (Hamish Hamilton, 1983) and to The Woman in Black (Longman Imprint edition, 1989).

Activities and Discussion Points

- Using Susan Hill's account of the novel's beginnings as well as students' own knowledge of ghost stories, ask the class to write their own lists of the essential elements of a traditional ghost story. This is a particularly useful exercise if the class has not yet seen the play and is unfamiliar with Susan Hill's novel.
- After seeing the production you can use the lists to consider the following questions: Which of these elements appear in *The Woman in Black*? Are these conventions fully exploited in the play? Are any of the traditional ghost story elements given an original slant in Susan Hill's story?
- Students can also carry out the same exercise for other traditional genres with which they are familiar. Good ones to try include detective stories, horror stories, school stories, Mills and Boon novels or even the photo-love stories in teenage magazines.
- What is the difference between making use of literary conventions and descending into formulaic storytelling or cliché?
- When creating a story which draws upon all the traditional elements of a particular genre there is always a potential risk of the story turning into a parody. Although Susan Hill's novel began life as a list of traditional ghost story conventions, these elements are always used for genuinely chilling effects rather than to poke fun at the genre. Think about how she succeeds in doing this. Do any elements of the story acknowledge the literary basis of the novel? If so, what effect does this have? (You may wish to read the following section, **Literary Links**, before considering these questions).
- Using some of the lists which the students have created about the typical conventions of particular genres, ask them, working in groups of four or five, to create a brief improvisation of the opening of a typical story in their chosen genre, trying to play it for laughs. After watching the results, challenge the class to try the more difficult task of devising a similar opening scene which is deadly serious.
- Think about why parody is an easy option in this kind of exercise. It might also be useful to look at Tom Stoppard's play *The Real Inspector Hound* for a witty example of a theatrical parody of the detective story genre.
- Do you agree with Susan Hill's assertion that ghost stories are more credible than horror stories? Think particularly about contemporary reactions to horror films; about the popularity of *Point Horror* novels; and about recent television series such as *The X-Files*.

The Original Woman in Black: Literary Links

Susan Hill took the traditional elements of Victorian ghost stories as her starting point for *The Woman in Black* but the novel also draws upon a wide range of other literary sources and inspirations. Here are a few examples:

The Woman in White

Susan Hill's title is a deliberate echo of Wilkie Collins' famous novel of sensation, *The Woman in White*. Published in 1860, Collins' novel begins on a lonely road with a startling midnight encounter between the drawing master Walter Hartright and a mysterious and frantic woman dressed entirely in white, who is escaping from sinister pursuers. As in *The Woman in Black*, the unfolding mystery in *The Woman in White* is narrated in the first person, but by a series of different characters, including Hartright himself.

Mr Kipps

The solicitor hero of Susan Hill's novel shares a name with the hero of H.G. Wells's 1905 novel, *Kipps*. While Kipps the solicitor finds his life disrupted by the estate of the strange Mrs Drablow, Wells's Kipps is an aspiring draper's assistant whose life is thrown into turmoil by an unexpected inheritance.

Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad

This famous ghost story written by M.R. James and first published in 1904 is described by Susan Hill as "**one of the best ghost stories ever written**". She uses an abbreviated version of the story's title in *The Woman in Black* as a heading for the chapter in which Spider the dog is summoned by a mysterious whistle and finds herself trapped in the bog:

"From far out on the marshes, I heard, unmistakably clean and clear, the sound of someone whistling, as one whistles to summon a dog. Spider stopped dead in her tracks for a split second and then, before I could restrain her, before I had fully gathered my wits, she set off, as though after a hare, running low and fast away from the house, away from the safety of the grass and out across the wet marshes... I could see no one out there, but the whistle had been real, not a trick of the wind. Yet I would have sworn it had not come from any human lips."

Susan Hill, *The Woman in Black*, **Whistle and I'll Come to You**

Charles Dickens

Susan Hill declares Charles Dickens to be her "**greatest literary hero**" and many of the character names in *The Woman in Black* - Keckwick, Drablow, Tomes - have an unmistakable echo of Dickens. A more direct Dickensian influence can be found in the description of the nursery at Eel Marsh House, as Susan Hill acknowledges in her introduction to the Longman Imprint edition of the novel: "**I think the nursery with everything left as it was owes something to Miss Havisham's room in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, which was all laid for her wedding feast years before and never since disturbed.**"

Several of these literary influences are directly acknowledged in the novel. Sometimes Kipps himself is aware that his story bears all the hallmarks of classic Victorian novel. At first he is able to see the funny side of these literary resonances: **“The business was beginning to sound like something from a Victorian novel, with a reclusive old woman having hidden a lot of ancient documents somewhere in the depths of her cluttered house. I was scarcely taking Mr Bentley seriously.”** (Susan Hill, *The Woman in Black*, A London Particular)

The familiarity of some of the literary conventions is occasionally used for humorous or frightening effect. For instance, having provoked a real curiosity about the mysterious, isolated home of Mrs Drablow, Susan Hill deliberately subverts our expectations of what Mr Kipps will find inside the house. Both Mr Kipps and the reader are surprised to discover that the house’s interior is not like something from a Dickens novel!

“After what I had heard from Mr Bentley and from other people once I had arrived, about the late Mrs Drablow, I had had all sorts of wild imaginings about the state of her house. I had expected it, perhaps, to be a shrine to the memory of a past time, or to her youth, or to the memory of her husband of so short a time, like the house of poor Miss Havisham. Or else to be simply cobwebbed and filthy, with old newspapers, rags and rubbish piled in corners, all the débris of a recluse - together with some half-starved cat or dog. But, as I began to wander in and out of morning room and drawing room, sitting room and dining room and study, I found nothing so dramatic or unpleasant.”

Susan Hill, *The Woman in Black*, *Across the Causeway*

It is only later that Kipps discovers a room which *is* sinisterly preserved like that of Miss Havisham: the ghostly nursery at the top of the house.

Discussion Points

- How do literary references and allusions affect the reader’s response to the novel?
- Is it essential for the reader to recognise the literary allusions?
- What is the effect of having the novel’s narrator, Mr Kipps, aware of the literary qualities of his own story?

The Original Woman in Black: Things That Go Bump in the Night



The *Woman in Black* forces audiences to confront quite basic feelings about fear. What does it mean to be frightened? How do we react? Do we all fear the same things? Does the supernatural still have the power to frighten us? If so, why? Use the following quotations to stimulate a discussion about our attitudes to fear.



"Since I wrote *The Woman in Black* I've often been asked whether or not I believe in ghosts. I think the answer must be that I do, I have to. I have never seen one, and I don't know anyone who has and I think you can explain away 99 per cent of the ghost stories that are told - they will, if carefully investigated, admit of a ready explanation. But the remaining one per cent? That there are ghosts and haunted places, that people have seen and been in them occasionally I have no doubt. But how? Why? I don't know. Do you?"

Susan Hill, introduction to *The Woman in Black*

***"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."***

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.5.

"The intent of the show is to frighten - so if it doesn't, it's nothing. The fear is not on a visual or a visceral level, but an imaginative one. There are no gouts of blood nor any but the simplest of special effects."

Stephen Mallatratt, introduction to *The Woman in Black: A Ghost Play*

"Even if we do not believe in the external existence of a ghostly spirit of some person, now dead, who is appearing to us, in spectral shape, we believe in evil, and in forces within ourselves which can be externalised, actually or, at the very least, symbolically."

Susan Hill, introduction to *Ghost Stories*

"The truth is perhaps that we have become fundamentally sceptical. Mrs Radcliffe [the celebrated English author of Gothic novels in the late eighteenth century] amused our ancestors because they were our ancestors; because they lived with very few books, an occasional post, a newspaper superannuated before it reached them, in the depths of the country or in a town which resembled the more modest of our villages, with long hours to spend sitting over the fire drinking wine by the light of half a dozen candles. Nowadays we breakfast upon a richer feast of horror than served them for a twelvemonth. We are tired of violence; we suspect mystery."

Virginia Woolf, *Henry James's Ghost Stories*, 1921





“I think when young people go to the theatre now they want more than just fun and frolics, they want something meaty and they find that there is a lot to talk about with this show [The Woman in Black]. What frightens us? Why does it frighten us? What is being frightened? Afterwards can you learn something from how frightened you have been? Either about yourself or whether there is a lesson to be learned about life, which I think in this instance there is. There is a lot of meat on it and that seems to satisfy people; that’s why they go back.”

Susan Hill

“Ghost stories... tell us about things that lie hidden within all of us, and which lurk outside all around us. They show human beings in the grip of the extremes of powerful emotions, at key moments and turning points in their lives. They also frighten delightfully, give shape, form and substance to our darkest and most primitive and child-like fears and imaginings, and, perhaps most importantly of all, they entertain.”

Susan Hill, introduction to **Ghost Stories**

The Adaptation Process: The Setting



When Stephen Mallatratt first suggested the idea of adapting *The Woman in Black* for the stage, novelist Susan Hill was rather bewildered by the request: **“I couldn’t see how it would work in the theatre. I could see how it might work on the screen - you just re-create the whole thing. But I thought Stephen was mad to suggest putting the novel on the stage. How do you put the house on stage? and the pony and trap? I was being completely literal, you see, forgetting the power of theatre... As soon as I read the stage adaptation I thought it was absolutely brilliant because it is totally theatrical. I could see straight away that it would work. It is like the beginning of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*: we just imagine that it is all there.”**

The key to Stephen Mallatratt’s adaptation is the decision to set the play inside an empty, Victorian theatre - a device which immediately and brilliantly solves a whole range of potential problems. As Stephen Mallatratt explains, **“as soon as the idea came of admitting that we were on a stage, all the other problems solved themselves. The imagination does everything in this play.”** However, this inspired theatrical device originally arose for entirely pragmatic reasons.

The play was first written as a Christmas show for the studio theatre at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough and, as Stephen Mallatratt readily admits, the theatre setting arose because he was wondering **“how to do it very cheaply, to be honest! We had no money and I was wondering how we could pretend that these characters are playing so many different parts when we only had a minimum number of actors? I think it was at that stage that I started thinking, ‘let’s acknowledge that they are actors - let’s own up’. I think it came from that.”** When he began writing, Stephen Mallatratt knew that he had three or four actors at his disposal, but as the theatre setting developed, he realised **“that we could do the whole thing with two”**.

One of the play’s most chilling elements - the mysterious and ‘real’ ghost - evolved during the writing process, as Stephen Mallatratt explains, **“I remember that the idea of the ghost not being seen by the genuine Mr Kipps grew gradually. At first she was going to be another actor - they were going to give her directions on where to move and so on. Then I realised that the best way to do it is for her to appear by magic and not be seen by the older Mr Kipps.”**

Discussion Points

Use the quotations on the following page to help the class to think about the following questions.

- Why do you think the play's setting in an empty Victorian theatre is so effective?
- Many theatres claim to have resident ghosts. Why should this be?
- What characteristics of an empty theatre help to create a ghostly atmosphere for the play? (These might include the lack of windows, the dependence upon artificial light, the total silence of the empty seats, the number of nooks and crannies in which ghosts might hide, the fact that the theatre is a place of the imagination etc.)
- Susan Hill has watched the play many times and is now able to predict the points at which the audience will react audibly. She explains that, "everybody always laughs nervously after the first scream - the actors know to wait for that." Were there moments in the production when audience members screamed, gasped or cried out? Why? And why do people laugh nervously afterwards?
- What practical problems of adaptation and performance are solved by setting the play within an empty theatre? Can you think of specific examples from the production?
- Does this theatrical setting bring any additional resonances to the drama?

Ghosts and the Theatre

“Do you believe in ghosts? Maybe not in broad daylight, but in that strange form of communal seance we call drama, I suspect you do.”

Michael Billington, Country Life, 26 January 1989

“Theatre, we know, is larger than life – a place where imagination is nurtured and stretched, and where superstition abounds. This receptive atmosphere, coupled with that element of ‘magic’, opens a door to the past – to a storehouse of memories... and to the spirit world.”

Roy Harley Lewis, Theatre Ghosts

“Darkness is a powerful ally of terror, something glimpsed in a corner is far more frightening than if it’s fully observed.”

Stephen Mallatratt

“Like the spectator in the back row who screamed, I felt an icy, unseen hand upon my shoulder. I am convinced that ghost stories work because of the atmospheric power of theatre (have you ever been in a lonely playhouse at night?)... Isolated from trivial everyday pursuits and stripped of our fake sophistication, we return in the theatre to a state of childlike credulity. We don’t stop to question the reality of the Ghost in Hamlet. Likewise in The Woman In Black, we momentarily believe that the wasting figure hovering in the aisle may indeed be a grieving revenant.”

Michael Billington, Country Life, 26 January 1989

“Rife with superstition, the playhouse provides an environment in which we are encouraged to suspend reality; where every effort is made to attain the conducive air of ‘magic’ conjured up by the ‘live’ performance. Obviously, for much the same reason, a substantial number of rumoured [ghostly] sightings must be attributed to figments of such heightened imagination, or even wishful thinking. Yet... the majority of established resident ghosts cannot be shrugged off lightly. If only a quarter of the reports were to survive the most thorough evaluation, they would provide more than enough evidence of a special relationship between theatre and the supernatural.”

Roy Harley Lewis, Theatre Ghosts

The Adaptation Process: The Time

"Mr Mallatratt adds... deliberate environmental anachronisms. The rehearsals are taking place in a Victorian theatre, but at no specified time; there are electric torches, modern clothes, pre-recorded sound effects. The action is thus hoisted into a theatrical zone which obliterates any implausibility in the basic situation."

Irving Wardle, *The Times*, 19 January 1989

The historical setting of *The Woman in Black* is something which has intrigued audiences and reviewers since the play's first performance in 1987. Adaptor, Stephen Mallatratt, admits that **"there are anachronisms and geographical inconsistencies within the text. These are not mistakes, but indications of the neverland we inhabit when we are involved with the Woman in Black."**

In setting his play in a vaguely turn of the century world, Stephen Mallatratt is following the example of the original novel which, as Susan Hill explains **"is not set in Victorian times but I suppose is turn of the century. I wanted to set it in some kind of vague, indeterminate past before the tale of horror took over and the ghost story fell out of favour. Horror stories stop being frightening because they are so over the top. We all used to go along and laugh at the *Hammer House of Horror* films. The more grotesque they get the more laughable. I wanted to bring back the idea that you can frighten delightfully - like in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* - with the very smallest conjuring up of an atmosphere, a sound, a creak, something seen in the mist."**

Discussion Points

- Can you think of elements of the play which would help to pinpoint when the action is taking place?
- Does it matter if the audience is uncertain of precisely when the story is set?
- Do you think this kind of ghost story would work equally well in a modern setting? What elements would need to be different?

The Adaptation Process: The Storytellers

Many of the best-known, classic ghost stories are set within a storytelling framework. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, for instance, is read to a Christmas party from an old manuscript by a long-dead author. Susan Hill was determined that *The Woman in Black* should be no exception to this convention. "I quite like a story within a story: I've often used it. It's a good way of telling things. Things can get quite complicated but it helps retain some interest in the narrative. Ghost stories are always told by somebody; it is a very traditional way of doing it."

Having read a huge number of ghost stories while researching *The Woman in Black*, Susan Hill was convinced that the novel's narrator should be "someone of the most unimaginative and straightforward kind, a plain man not easily frightened, who, if you were to ask him, would say with a laugh that he most certainly did not believe in such things as ghosts". In the novel, Susan Hill entrusts the narrative to the sober and reliable solicitor, Mr Kipps, who flees from the frivolous, Christmas Eve ghost stories of his stepchildren in order to write down, and finally exorcise, the horrific events in his past.

Discussion Points

- Why does Susan Hill believe that the narrator of the ghost story should be someone who does not believe in ghosts? Does this affect how we respond to the story?
- Do we feel we can rely upon Mr Kipps account of events. If so, why?
- Does it make a difference, hearing a story from someone to whom it has happened? (Think about 'urban myths' which have always, apparently, happened to a friend of a friend).

In his stage adaptation of the novel, Stephen Mallatratt takes a slightly different approach. By making use of two, contrasting narrators who share the storytelling, he is able to add an additional dimension to his re-telling of the tale.

The play begins as a dialogue between the real Mr Kipps, a man with the compelling need to recount his story, and the professional actor, a man with the theatrical abilities to tell the tale effectively. Each of the men has a different interest in the story but together they gradually negotiate a way of recounting the horrific events of the past.

As the two men argue over the telling of the story and over the purpose of the performance for which they are rehearsing, Stephen Mallatratt's play simultaneously dramatises the ghost story **and** analyses the very process of adaptation. Ultimately, as the critic Irving Wardle declared in *The Times*, 19 January 1989, "the play... reveals itself as a sinister comment on the whole nature of storytelling".

Activities and Discussion Points

- In the stage directions of Stephen Mallatratt's play, the *real* Mr Kipps, the older of the two men, is referred to as 'The Actor'. The professional actor, the younger of the two, is referred to as 'Mr Kipps'. Why do you think the playwright adopts this convention?
- Can you think of any characteristics which the two men share?
- Does their relationship change during the course of the play?

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- Encourage your class to use the following quotations from the play to help them think about the conflicting aims and agendas of the two characters.
Remember throughout that the speeches labelled Actor are spoken by the real Mr Kipps, while those labelled Kipps are spoken by the professional actor!

Extract A

Actor: *Sir, I am not a performer... And this must not be entertainment. Those most horrible events will not be treated as amusement or diversion. I insist, sir!*

Kipps: *And I insist, that you consider your audience. No matter how horrible, if your tale is to be heard, it must be offered in a form that is remotely palatable.*

- As a member of the audience for this storytelling, where do your sympathies lie? With the sincere solicitor who does not wish his story to be made into an entertainment, or with the professional actor who sees the potential for a thrilling evening at the theatre?
- Is it ever right to use real-life stories for entertainment?
- Can you think of any present day examples of when this has been done?

Extract B

Actor: *I have no desire to be an Irving. All I wish, implore, is that this tale of mine be told. Be told and - laid to rest. God willing. So I may sleep without nightmares.*

Actor: *This audience you speak of - it is to be just my family and friends? You don't intend to make a public spectacle -*

Kipps: *"Good heavens, no. Your family, your friends. Perhaps the odd theatre manager; but..."*

- Can you imagine what the objectives of the professional actor and of the real Mr Kipps might be at the beginning of the play?
- Have they achieved these objectives by the end of the play?

Extract C

Kipps: *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.*

Kipps: *You think to stand up, recite your tale, and have your audience hang upon your words. As if that's all it takes.*

- What else does it take to transform Kipps' story into a compelling performance for an audience?
- During the play does the professional actor help the real Mr Kipps to achieve it?
- If so, how?

The Adaptation Process: From Page to Performance



In adapting Susan Hill's novel for the stage, Stephen Mallatratt was determined to adhere as closely as possible to the original words of the novel. He believes strongly that, **"the real power of the book (and of course this is true of any good book), was the way it had worked on my imagination. When we read it's as if the author is painting pictures in our minds, and I believe those pictures are the very best illustrations a story can have. Susan Hill had done such a good job at painting pictures in my mind that I wanted the audience to see those pictures, and I knew the best way for that to happen was for her words to speak to the audience just as they'd spoken to me. If that could happen there'd be little need for things like scenery, or ponies or dogs; all those things would be there - and real - in the mind of every person in the theatre."**

When Susan Hill first saw a copy of the script she was amazed at how faithful the adaptation was: **"I did examine the script closely to see how Stephen had done it and how much of the novel he had kept. And it is astonishing how much he has kept."**

Inevitably, however, some episodes in the novel had to be abbreviated or adapted. Stephen Mallatratt was particularly sorry to lose the section of the novel in which Kipps cycles across the open marshes towards Eel Marsh House. **"I remember thinking it will be a wonderful moment when we have him pedalling across the salt marshes on the bicycle. I was really looking forward to writing it, but when I came to it, it just didn't work. He never cycles in the play. The script just says 'next morning he crosses to the house on a bicycle lent him by his landlord', but all the way the time I was writing, preparatory to that, I had had this wonderful image of the bicycle on the marsh road!"**

These opposing impulses in the adaptor - the desire to be as comprehensive and as faithful as possible to the original, and simultaneously to pare away the novel's prose in order to uncover its truly theatrical elements - are actually dramatised in the opening section of the play. The opening scene takes the form of an uneasy reading of the novel's opening paragraphs by the inexperienced solicitor, while the professional actor criticises, offering the opinion that the material will need more radical cutting and a more dynamic performance before being suitable for presentation on stage. In this opening section of the play, a scaled-down process of adaptation takes place before the eyes of the audience.

Activities and Discussion Points

- Compare the following two extracts from Stephen Mallatratt's play. They offer two different approaches to the opening of the story. Which is the more theatrical, and why?
- If possible compare extract B to the opening pages of Susan Hill's novel. What is omitted in the professional actor's version? What is gained theatrically by omitting these elements? And what is lost from the novel?

Extract A

In the play, the real Mr Kipps begins his story by reading carefully from his manuscript. His opening speech is exactly the same as the opening paragraph of Susan Hill's novel:

"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."

Extract B

The professional actor later offers his own version of the opening paragraph:

"It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I opened my front door and stepped outside 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 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 the 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 piece 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 acquaintance with mortal dread and terror of spirit, would have seemed at that moment impossible."

- After seeing the play, if students are familiar with the novel, make a list of those elements which Stephen Mallatratt has chosen **not** to include in his stage adaptation. Why do you think these changes were made?
- Ask the students, working in groups of two or three, to create a still picture or tableau to represent a moment from the play which particularly stays in their minds. If they wish, they should use vocal sound effects but no words to accompany the still image. Look at the resulting tableaux and discuss why these moments in the play were so theatrically powerful.

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- One crucial difference between the novel and the stage adaptation is the ending of the story. Allow the class to experiment with reading aloud the following two extracts - the final paragraphs of Susan Hill's novel and the final scene of the stage adaptation - before considering the questions which follow.

Extract A: Susan Hill, *The Woman in Black*

"Our baby son had been thrown clear; clear against another tree. He lay crumpled on the grass below it, dead.

This time, there was no merciful loss of consciousness, I was forced to live through it all, every minute and then every day thereafter, for ten long months, until Stella, too, died from her terrible injuries.

I had seen the ghost of Jennet Humfrye and she had had her revenge.

They asked for my story. I have told it. Enough."

Extract B: Stephen Mallatratt, *The Woman in Black: a Ghost Play*

Kipps: *Our baby son had been thrown clear; clear against another tree. He lay crumpled on the grass below it, dead. And ten months later, Stella too, died from her terrible injuries. (Pause) I had seen the ghost of Jennet Humfrye, and she had had her revenge. You asked for my story, I have told it. Enough.*

Silence. Then Kipps crosses and switches on the workers [the lights on stage]. The Actor comes to him, and in silence shakes his hand

Actor: (at length) *Thank you.*

Kipps: *Thank you. (Pause) And is it done, d'you think? Will it now be laid to rest?*

Actor: *I pray it will. I think you for your trouble - your enthusiasm - and your effort. Your emotion is just now - it was as if I watched myself.*

Kipps: *I imagined my own child...*

Actor: (quickly) *Yes. (He shudders involuntarily) I pray that when we show it to our audience, at last it will be done with.*

Kipps: *Who is she?*

Actor: *I beg your pardon?*

Kipps: *Your surprise. She is remarkable. Where did you find her?*

Actor: *I'm afraid I don't understand.*

Kipps: *Your surprise, Mr Kipps - the surprise you found for me.*

Pause

Actor: (puzzled) *My surprise was that I'd learnt my words.*

Kipps: *Yes, yes, you learnt them expertly, but the woman you found - the actress. The woman in black. (Pause) Who was she? (Pause) You organized it as a complete surprise - you had her come here and go through her part and... a young woman. With a wasted face - she...*

Silence. The Actor is staring at him in horror

Actor: *A young woman?*

Kipps: *Is there anything the matter? You look unwell.*

Pause

Actor: (at length) *I did not see a young woman.*

As the Lights fade, we hear again the rhythmic bump, bump, pause... bump, bump, pause...

Black-out.

Discussion Points

- What changes has Stephen Mallatratt made to the ending, and why?
- How effective is the play's final twist?
- What theatrical techniques are used to reinforce the horror of the play's final plot twist?
- What is the mood of the novel's ending? How does this compare with the mood of the play's ending?
- How does the atmosphere of the play change during these final moments?

Reflection and Analysis: The Playwright on the Novel

Stephen Mallatratt speaks about what attracted him to Susan Hill's novel.

Why did you think of adapting the novel for the stage?

“Most people, including Susan Hill, thought my idea of adapting *The Woman in Black* for the theatre was crazy. But I was working for the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough and we needed a Christmas show, and I thought: what better than a ghost story at that time of year - and what better than *The Woman in Black*, which was one of the most frightening books I'd ever read. So I asked for and, slightly to my surprise, was given Susan's permission to try to do it.”

What first attracted you to Susan Hill's novel?

“I remember reading it first on a beach in Greece in just about the worst conditions you could have to read an English ghost story. I was lying there in the sun on a baking hot day and yet I felt really chilled, really frightened, when I was reading it. It was terrific.”

What do you think are the strengths of the novel?

“I read a lot of classic ghost stories at the same time as I read *The Woman in Black*. I honestly think Susan's was the best I had ever read and I still do. It is a terrific story and it has got heart. I think that is the greatest strength of *The Woman in Black*: that you genuinely feel for the woman. You understand why she went barking mad and you understand why she couldn't quit this earthly coil in the way that most people do. What happened to her is quite appalling and I think that is why the novel works so well. Jennet Humfrye is so damaged. In a strange way I think it is a terribly human story.”

The novel isn't an obvious choice for stage adaptation, is it?

“No maybe not but I do like plays which use the imagination, rather than showing everything. I think if you are in the theatre you might as well do that because you can do visual things so much better on film. The imagination does everything in this play.”

The first quotation is taken from an article in the Longman Imprint edition of The Woman in Black (1989). Other quotations are from a 1998 interview with Stephen Mallatratt.

Reflection and Analysis: The Novelist on the Play



Susan Hill talks about her reactions to Stephen Mallatratt's stage adaptation of her novel.

How do you feel about your novel being transformed into a different medium?

“Once I have finished a book it is not mine any longer. Everyone who reads a book recreates it in their head anyway - their setting doesn't look like mine. No, I never mind this process of adaptation because the original is still there: it is not as if the book has been banned now that we have the play. I like to think that the story has enough interest and life in it for someone else to want to take it over.”

Would you have liked to adapt the novel yourself?

“I can't go back over my own work: frankly I find it rather boring. I can't rework my own things in another form because I can't see it detachedly again. Some people can adapt their own work but I just want to move on. And anyway, Stephen had this brilliant idea of how to do it - setting it in a theatre with the man telling his tale helped by the actor. Those ideas aren't given to you every day.”

Has the stage adaptation affected your own perception of the novel?

“I tend to keep the two quite separate. I did examine it closely to see how he had done it and how much he had kept - and it is astonishing how much he has kept. But they are separate. You can go and see the play - you don't have to have read the book - there is nothing that you miss really; you can read the book without seeing the play. I think that is how it should be. On the other hand I do think that they cross fertilise and enrich each other when you do see both. They are certainly not dependent upon each other. The play is a separate piece of work in its own right.”

Do you enjoy watching the stage production?

“Goodness knows how many times I've seen *The Woman in Black* on stage and each time I go I think that I am sure to be bored this time because I have seen it so many times! I never am bored. Two minutes into the play and I am gripped. Mainly because I like to see what the actors do with it; how they make it their own; how they are different from others. That's always fascinating.”

How does it feel to be the author of a 'set text'?

“You ought to be extremely flattered that your novel hasn't just died the death like 99% of novels, and that it has enough life and interest in it to stimulate people to want to learn about it, teach it, examine it. What I always say about any of my works which are set texts is don't think when you leave school that I am only a set book. In the end, it is a story to read and enjoy and to encourage you to move on to other books.”

All quotations are from a 1998 interview with Susan Hill.

Reflection and Analysis: The Secret of Success



The Woman in Black has been phenomenally successful, both as a novel and as a play. Susan Hill's book has been translated into several languages, while Stephen Mallatratt's stage adaptation has been playing continuously in London's West End for almost ten years. Over two million people have seen the play, and many of them return to see it again and again. But what is the secret of its success? Why do readers and audiences continue to find *The Woman in Black* such a compelling experience?

Susan Hill believes that the moral core of the story is a crucial part of its attraction. It is not simply a scary story, **"there is definitely a point to it. Jennet Humfrye has a real reason for haunting: vengeance for the death of her child. She cannot forgive; she cannot move on; she has to remain in this terrible sort of hell, an endless recycling of the accident, the grief and the vengeance. She is caught in it forever. The moral point, I suppose, is that you have to let go... The grief and the blame *have* to stop. So it is quite a serious story. It is her tragedy really. She is in a time warp of endless grieving and the endless exaction of revenge."**

This moral centre to the story means that the novel and the stage adaptation can be both entertaining and thought-provoking: for Susan Hill, **"one of the great things about the play is that it holds you in your seat - it rivets you - but when you come out, you think about it still. That's what all good theatre should do. It is not totally ephemeral, even if you only think about how frightened you were and how the process of making you frightened worked."**

During its long run in the West End, the play has gone through many cast changes, always attracting actors of considerable talent to its main rôles. This, Susan Hill believes, is another reason for the play's continuing success. **"It lends itself to good acting. Those are two terrific parts for actors. I've seen it done dozens of times by different actors and it is always different - each actor brings something new to it."**

The play is also deceptive in its simplicity. **"The staging is incredibly simple - a bare stage, two actors and the woman who appears silently - and yet technically it is incredibly complicated. I've been backstage many times and I am amazed - there is an awful lot happening."** This technical complexity and the subtlety of the way the play is structured is often a reason why people come to see the show more than once. **"Sometimes,"** Susan Hill says, **"people find that the next time around, having found out the basic story, they see more about what lies behind the story and about the ways the story is told."**

Susan Hill continues to marvel at the success of the stage adaptation. **"It is amazing and I can't see any reason for it ever to stop. It is done all over the world - Tokyo, Barcelona, Vienna, America, Australia - and it is on permanently in Mexico. There is even a website devoted to the Mexican production! Each time they make it their own in the sense of the language, but I do think that the traditional English setting plays a part. It works better in winter - the traditional time of ghost stories."**

Activities and Discussion Points

- Why do you think the play has been so successful? (You might like to think about the reasons people go to the theatre as well as about elements of the play itself.)
- Allocate a short section of Stephen Mallatratt's play script to each member of the class. Within their three or four page section, students should make a list of all the lighting and sound cues which they think are indicated in the text, either stated or implied. Compare the students' sound and lighting lists to the detailed plots at the end of the published play script. Remember that the sound and lighting plots in the script are merely suggestions to help companies who are approaching the play for the first time - it is not the only way of designing the lighting and effects. Discuss any differences between the script's cue lists and those produced by the students. Encourage the students to think about why they have chosen to make particular decisions.

Practical Approaches to Storytelling



Storytelling lies at the core of *The Woman in Black* - both the novel and the play. This section suggests a series of practical, drama activities which can be used to help your class explore a variety of techniques and approaches to storytelling. Many of the exercises can be used on their own to examine particular issues raised by the play and to stimulate discussion about the production. Alternatively, the different activities can be used together to build a workshop or series of workshops which investigate the theme of storytelling more deeply.

a) Storytelling Brainstorm

A class 'brainstorming' session is an excellent way to begin to consider the different ways in which stories may be told. See if your class can generate as many answers as possible to the following questions. It can be useful to have one student writing down all the ideas and suggestions for future reference.

When and where are stories told?

eg. children's bedtime; Bible readings in church; novels, plays and poems; film and television dramas; computer games where the player helps to determine the story's progress; in a comedy club by a stand-up comedian; gossiping with friends; television advertisements; at a Halloween party; a charity appeal which uses a case study of a potential recipient of the charity; Crimewatch-style reconstructions...

Why are stories told?

eg. to entertain, to divert, "to frighten deliciously" (as Susan Hill hopes to do in *The Woman in Black*), to educate, to warn...

Discussion Points

- Do any of your discoveries from the brainstorming session help you in considering the aims of both the novel and the stage version of *The Woman in Black*?
- In the play what does Mr Kipps the solicitor hope to achieve in telling his story?
- And the professional actor?
- In the novel, Mr Kipps spurns the Christmas Eve storytelling games of his stepchildren, retiring to his room to write down his own ghost story. What effect does this contrast between two different types of storytelling have?

The next three exercises offer some ways to initiate an improvised story. Even students with little drama experience should find that these techniques allow them to create spontaneous and powerful moments of storytelling. After experimenting with these exercises you might like to move on to more extended dramatisations of some of the stories which have been created; to written work inspired by the stories; or simply to the discussion points which follow.

b) Creating stories: Photograph Memories

Divide the class into groups of three or four. Cut some sheets of plain A4 paper into quarters and give each group some of the small pieces of paper. Each group should imagine that the pieces of paper are photographs and that each photograph will bring back a particular memory for a member of the group.

Group members take it in turns to pick up a 'photograph' from the pile. As soon as a student looks at their chosen 'photograph' they should react to it, speaking to the rest of their group about the feelings which the photograph arouses. Photographs might bring back happy memories such as a special birthday, unhappy memories such as an argument, or bitter sweet memories like remembering a long-lost love.

This simple improvisation exercise can stimulate very powerful moments of storytelling. By using the device of an imaginary photograph, even the weakest students will have a starting point for a brief improvisation. The 'photographs' also act as a distancing mechanism, so that students can choose to make use of a real memory - happy or painful - or an imaginary event without having to reveal whether their story is true or not.

c) Creating Stories: Lost Letters

In *The Woman in Black*, Kipps' discoveries about the past come about as a result of his exhaustive search through Mrs Drablow's correspondence. Use this improvisation exercise to allow students to uncover their own compelling tales.

Working in threes or fours, students take in turns to act. The other group members act as audience to their solo improvisation. Before the actor begins, each audience member must suggest a location where the improvisation will take place - in the street, in the headteacher's office, or in the car perhaps. Explain to students that there is no need for them to compete to offer the most outlandish locations - even the most ordinary suggestions can lead to very interesting scenes.

The actor selects one of the suggested locations and improvises a short scene in which they discover a letter in that location - a postcard dropped in the street, a private letter on the headteacher's desk, a secret note lost under a seat in the car. They read the letter and must react to it.

Try to encourage the actors not to decide in advance what the letter will say. It is only when they pick up and read the letter (most students find it helpful to have a blank, folded piece of paper as a prop) that they realise what it is. Students do not have to improvise reading the letter aloud - though of course they can do so if they wish - but they should certainly express their reactions to its contents in a way which will make the contents of the letter clear to their audience.

d) Creating Stories: Object Reminiscence

Place a varied selection of small objects in a cardboard box. A typical selection of objects might include a glove, a pen, an address book, a small teddy bear and a pocket watch. A volunteer takes the objects out of the box one by one, using them to inspire an improvised recollection of the person to whom they once belonged. As the volunteer speaks they should gradually build an imaginative picture of the objects' owner. The volunteer might also wish to invent a reason for the objects being in the box - moving house, clearing a flat after the death of the occupant etc. Allow other volunteers to try the same exercise but with a different selection of objects.

Using objects as inspiration is an excellent way to create varied and imaginative storytelling. If students are inexperienced in improvisation, then you can allow two volunteers to share the storytelling. The selection of objects in the box, offers volunteers several potential approaches to the reminiscence. When the opportunities offered by one object have been exhausted, another object can provoke a whole new set of memories or tales.

Discussion Points

- What is it that makes one story compelling and another dull? Think about the way the story is told, the perspective of the storyteller, and the amount of detail included, as well as the content of the story.
- Does it make a difference whether the storyteller is relating a tale about themselves or about someone else?
- In the stage adaptation of *The Woman in Black* the character who assumes the rôle of Mr Kipps is only an actor who is being paid for his work, while the 'real' Mr Kipps, plays the more minor rôles. Does this make a difference to how the story is told? Does it make a difference to how much we believe in the truth of the story? Can the professional actor ever share any of Mr Kipps' real emotion about the ghostly events?

e) Owing the Story

Ask students to think of an incident from their childhood which they remember clearly - something which made a big impression upon them perhaps because it frightened them or made them laugh, or perhaps because it was a moment of realisation or discovery.

Working in pairs, the students should tell their story to their partner, including as much detail as possible to help evoke the atmosphere and the emotion of the incident. When listening to their partner's story, students will have to pay very close attention as they will be asked to re-tell their partner's story to another pair.

Each pair should then join up with another pair and share one of their two stories with the new group members. This time, however, no one tells their own story - they leave

it to their partner to re-tell the story as faithfully as possible. Their partner should tell the story in the first person - as if it had really happened to them. Students shouldn't be tempted to prompt their partner or to correct any errors (unless their partner gets in a complete muddle!) - they should just sit and listen quietly.

The storytelling might go something like this. Tracy tells Dan a story about the first time she went swimming. Dan tells Tracy about when his pet cat died. The pair then join up with Ryan and Chloe. Tracy tells the story of the cat's death to Ryan and Chloe - but relates it in the first person, as if it had happened to her rather than to Dan. Dan should not prompt or correct her while the tale is told. Ryan then shares Chloe's story with Tracy and Dan - again telling it in the first person, as if it had happened to him rather than to Chloe.

The groups of four then select one of the two stories which have been shared and devise a method of performing the story for an audience - acting it out in mime or with dialogue, maybe using sound effects or including a narrator to link different events. The students can be as imaginative as they like in transforming the story into a mini-drama. When they perform their story, it is important that the original teller of the tale does not play him or herself or act as narrator or even as director. For the exercise to work, it is vital that the students understand that they no longer 'own' the story - the other members of the group have as much right as they have to make suggestions about the dramatisation and performance. After watching some of the students' presentations, the class might find it useful to consider some of the following questions:

Discussion Points

- What is the difference between telling your own story and seeing other people perform it?
- Which do you think is the more effective presentation of the tale - the performance, or the simple storytelling by a single speaker?
- How do you feel when you see people relating or dramatising 'your' story?
- Is it annoying when they change things, forget details or fail to understand significant facts?
- Or does it help you to see your own memories in a different perspective?
- Do you have different priorities when telling your own story compared to when you are relating someone else's story?
- Is it justified to make use of other people's experiences for entertainment?
- Using your discoveries from this exercise, think about the following issues in the play:
How might the real Mr Kipps feel when the actor plays him on stage, telling his story in the first person?
Do Kipps and the Actor have different reasons for telling the story? What does each hope the storytelling will achieve?

f) Cliff hangers

The whole class sits in a circle and one student begins to tell a story, starting with the traditional “once upon a time...”. The storyteller continues speaking until they reach a decisive moment in the story - this doesn’t have to be a major climax, merely a moment at which a decision must be made. The speaker then pauses and allows the next student to continue the story until they reach a decisive moment when they too must stop to allow the next student in the circle to carry on the tale.

To begin with, this exercise is usually most productive when each student’s contribution to the story is quite brief. Working this way means that the story is passed on quickly and no one feels that they have to plan what to say in advance. Try to encourage students to let their imaginations run riot, saying the first thing that comes to mind rather than ‘censoring’ themselves or thinking long and hard about what is the wittiest or cleverest way of continuing the story.

A typical first story might go something like this: “Once upon a time there was a dog which... only had one leg. The dog had some difficulty moving around and so... it had a personal chauffeur named Joseph to take him from place to place in the kingdom. One day Joseph was driving the dog to the vet’s he noticed that... the car was beginning to turn green. The tyres were swelling up to an enormous size and the bonnet was starting to emit smoke. And then all at once... the car began to float upwards like a balloon, rising higher and higher over the rooftops until Joseph and the dog could see...” and so on.

Students will find that the stories acquire their own momentum, and will develop in all sorts of weird and wonderful directions. When the students have experimented with one or two of these stories, then ask them to try again, this time with each student keeping possession of the story for slightly longer. Encourage them to fill in as much detail as possible while they tell their story, thinking about creating a mood or atmosphere as well as a diverting narrative.

This fun exercise is an excellent way of showing narrative ‘cliff hangers’ at work. Students should develop a feel for which moments in the story have most potential for creating suspense and which moments can be used to take the story in an unexpected direction.

Discussion Points

- Why do you think Susan Hill’s novel is divided into quite short chapters?
- What is the effect of breaking up the story in this way?
- How does the author make use of the chapter endings to make transitions in time and place and mood and to encourage the reader to continue?
- Does the stage adaptation reflect the structure of the novel?
- How can the stage adaptation make use of ‘cliff hangers’? Can you think of any examples which worked particularly well?

g) Something from Nothing 1: Warm up game

It is best to start with this simple warm-up game before leading on to the second exercise. Ask the class to begin to walk round the room. Encourage the students to keep changing direction and not simply to walk round in a circle. As they walk you should call out a number and, as quickly and quietly as possible, the students should get into groups of that size. Try this a few times using different numbers. Each time you should impress upon the students that the groups should be formed quickly and without discussion - they need to have their wits about them in order to see which groups to join, rather than be called over to a group by their friends. You might find it useful to stipulate that each group should include both boys and girls in order to encourage the class to mix fully.

Once the class has mastered the idea of getting into mixed groups, quickly and quietly, then you can make the game slightly more complicated. This time, call out a number and two parts of the body. You might, for instance, say, "Groups of six, nose to elbow". The students divide into sixes and find a still pose in which everybody's nose is touching *someone else's* elbow! Try this a few times with different group sizes and different body parts. Finish the warm up game with the class in groups of about five, and ask them to remain in these groups for the main exercise.

h) Something from Nothing 2

Having used the warm-up game, the class should not only end up in more varied groups, but they should also have absorbed the idea of working quickly and quietly and should be less nervous about the idea of using their bodies to create theatrical effects.

Challenge the students to create a object or environment of your choosing, using only their bodies. The students should work in their groups of five and you should allow them no more than twenty seconds to create their final, still image. Suggestions might include: a tractor, a horse race, a three-piece suite, a supermarket check out. It is usually best to select objects or environments where most of the students will have to pretend to be inanimate objects or, at least, non human.

After trying five or six of these 'something from nothing' challenges, ask some of the groups to share their solutions with the rest of the class.

Discussion Points

- Can you think of moments from the production when objects on stage were used imaginatively?
- How well did these moments work?
- How else did the actors indicate the different settings for each scene?
- What did the storytelling gain by not having a set which reproduced every location in precise detail? (You should consider both practical and artistic elements.)

i) Ghost stories

Having used the previous exercises to think about the power of stories and about the variety of storytelling techniques, challenge your class to come up with their own adaptations of some classic, short, ghost stories. There are many excellent anthologies of these stories - some are suggested in the **Selected Further Reading** section of this pack.

When Stephen Mallatratt reflects on the theatrical setting of his adaptation - admitting that the story is being told in a theatre space by a professional and an amateur actor - he believes that **“in hindsight it is a terrific device. I think it could work for an awful lot of other stories.”** Your students may wish to see if this device does work for other stories, enabling them to make use of a minimum number of actors and some improvised locations similar to those which they created in the **Something for Nothing** exercise.

Alternatively, students could see if they can obtain the maximum effect from the story simply by telling it rather than acting out scenes. Even if they choose this option students will have to consider the theatrical elements of their storytelling. Where is it best to have the audience? Facing front? In a circle? How bright should the lighting be? Should the blinds or curtains be drawn? Can you make use of other source of light such as electric torches? How is the story shared between narrators? Where do the storytellers stand? Do they all enter at once or are there some surprise entrances? How can you make the most of climaxes in the tale? Is there a place for sound effects? How can they be created? Where should sound effects come from?

While working on this exercise students should keep in mind the following advice:

“The fear is not on a visual or a visceral level, but an imaginative one.”

Stephen Mallatratt

“I think that ghost stories have to have a point beyond frightening.
It’s all very well to be frightened by there has to be a point.”

Susan Hill

“Imagination is everything.”

Stephen Mallatratt

“Draw on your emotions, and on our imaginations.”

Kipps in The Woman in Black: A Ghost Play

Good luck!

Selected Further Reading

Rex Collings, ed.,
Classic Victorian and Edwardian Ghost Stories,
(*Wordsworth Classics, 1996*)

This budget-priced anthology contains a varied selection of classic ghost stories.

Roy Harley Lewis,
Theatre Ghosts
(*David and Charles, 1988*)

A full guide to haunted theatres round the country, written by a firm believer in the supernatural.

Susan Hill, ed.,
Ghost Stories
(*Hamish Hamilton, 1983*)

The novelist's own interesting selection of classic ghost stories by such writers as M.R. James, Rudyard Kipling, Elizabeth Gaskell and J.S. Le Fanu, along with an introduction outlining her views on the genre. The anthology is currently out of print but can be obtained from libraries.

Susan Hill,
The Woman in Black
(*Longman Imprint edition, 1989*)

Specially designed with students in mind, this edition includes an introduction by the author and an article by Stephen Mallatratt as well as points of discussion and suggestions for writing.

Susan Hill,
The Woman in Black
(*Mandarin, 1997*)

This paperback edition of the novel is easily obtainable from bookshops.

Keith Johnstone,
Impro
(*Methuen, 1989*)

This classic guide to improvisation may inspire further ideas for storytelling work

Stephen Mallatratt,
The Woman in Black: a ghost play, adapted from the book by Susan Hill
(*Samuel French, 1989*)

The full script of Stephen Mallatratt's stage adaptation.

Jonathan Neelands,
Structuring Drama Work, edited by Tony Goode
(*Cambridge University Press, 1990*)

An accessible guide to the variety of ways in which improvisations and dramatic stories may be constructed.

Teacher's Resource Pack

EVALUATION FORM

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

Please would you take a few moments to complete this form.

Name: _____

School/College Address: _____

Tel No: _____ Fax No: _____

Date you attended production: _____

Venue: _____

Ticket price: _____

Comments on the production: _____

Have you used this pack: _____

If yes, has it been useful?: _____

What did you particularly like/dislike about the pack?: _____

Any other comments: _____

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