

## Setting in The Woman in Black – Eel Marsh House.

When considering an answer to this question there are three main areas to consider:

- 1) The geographical setting of Eel Marsh House in the country – i.e – in the north, on the coast.
- 2) The area immediately surrounding the house and how this contributes to the overall sense of loneliness and isolation.
- 3) The house itself on the island at the end of the Nine Lives Causeway.

Geographical setting.

- The house, as far as the reader can tell, is somewhere in the far north-east of England, on the coast. There is no specific location provided by Hill in the novel.
- The sense of how far-flung Crythin Gifford is begins in the chapter entitled 'The Journey North', when the reader discovers that Kipps has to change trains twice on the way – once at Crewe on to a smaller line, and again at Homerby onto a 'branch' line – one that ran between provincial towns and villages at the time.
- The reader can make the contrast between what Kipps has left behind him in London and this very small place he is about to arrive at.
- Although Eel Marsh House itself is not in the village of Crythin Gifford, the reader picks up on the reference to the village being "inward looking", and, as Mr Bentley points out, "It's a far-flung part of the world, we don't get many visitors."
- The sense of isolation seems to be one that the villagers actively encourage – the idea that outsiders aren't that common or welcome adds to the overall atmosphere of loneliness and isolation: "We tuck ourselves in with our backs to the wind, and carry on with our business." Again, Mr Bentley forewarns Kipps of what sort of place he is visiting.
- These early descriptions build up suspense and the idea that something very wrong is afoot in Crythin and the surrounding area is not hard to believe.
- Using this technique of drip-feeding the reader with small snippets of information, Hill creates not only a sense of isolation but an atmosphere of mystery around Eel Marsh House.

### 2) The area surrounding Eel Marsh House.

- Most of the description of the surrounding area comes in the chapter entitled 'Across the Causeway'.
- This part of the story is important because it reinforces everything that the reader already suspects about the position of Eel Marsh House and provides the reader with specific detail to do with the isolation of the place.
- The main literary techniques used by Hill in this section of the novel are **contrast** and **pathetic fallacy**.
- She particularly uses the changing weather as an important feature in her narrative. This is particularly realistic for the geographic situation of the house – on an estuary, surrounded by marsh land that is completely flat and offered no protection by trees.
- The house and surrounding area are completely at the mercy of the elements and the weather systems would be constantly changing due to winds and its location next to the sea.
- The realism created in this section by Hill makes the supernatural sections more believable as the story is by no means far-fetched or fanciful. This has the effect of drawing the reader in and making the events that follow even more shocking.
- After the gloomy occasion of Mrs Drablow's funeral, Kipps makes his way across the causeway to Eel Marsh House for the first time. The weather plays an important part in setting the tone of this section of writing:
 

*"Today was all bright and clear, and there was a thin sun overall, though the light was pale now; the sky having lost the bright blue of morning, to become almost silver"*

Colour is very obviously used for effect in this piece of description. The setting of the house seems here to be bright and beautiful. The use of silver to describe the sky makes the reader feel that the air is cold – this is used again later in the description of the house and its surroundings. It is part of the grey colour spectrum – one that matches to what happens at the house and creates a sense of gloom.

The description of the sun as being "thin" suggests that the warmth that it is giving is very fragile and could easily be disturbed or damaged. This is a reflection of the peace that Kipps is feeling – his happiness is a thin veneer that at any moment will be shattered by the events that are to unfold. It also suggests that the beauty to be found in the natural surroundings is temporary and could be easily fractured by a storm.
- The area surrounding Eel Marsh House is very pale. Everything seems to have had the colour drained from it in the same way as the Woman in Black.

- All of the colours used in Hill's description are either cold or of the blue/grey colour spectrum – easily associated with cold, death and the supernatural.
- Much of the description of the land surrounding the house seems alien to the average reader as it is describing an area that is not found much in England. The landscape is very flat, without trees to break up the horizon and is very wet. It has lots of dykes and ditches in amongst the vegetation as well as the estuary. The lack of distinguishing features such as trees make the horizon seem endless and it is difficult to distinguish where the sky ends and the land begins. It is very like the landscape of Holland that is found in many Dutch paintings:

*“The marshes seemed to stretch in every direction, as far as I could see, and to merge without a break into the waters of the estuary, and the line of the horizon.”*

- The sense of wonder at the natural landscape is one that is shared by the reader and Kipps – it is a journey of discovery into an unknown landscape.
- Kipps says of the experience:  
*“I would have travelled a thousand miles to see this. I had never imagined such a place.”*

The setting is meant to be extraordinary – somewhere that allows the supernatural to flourish and seem almost ordinary. The landscape makes the reader feel that the places described are quite beautiful and idyllic but also the sort of places that harbour secrets and shy away from communication with the rest of the world.

In fact, Hill creates a setting for her story that fulfils the conventional expectations of the gothic horror story but manipulates the setting so the reader feels it is different from anything else they have read.

- The pale beauty of the surrounding marshes is juxtaposed next the house and the horror that occurs within it. The reader can see the contrast between the two and is also aware that the boundaries between the outside and inside worlds of the house are blurred when the sea fretts come down, closing off the outside world as surely as if a wall had been built.
- The ‘Nine Lives Causeway’ cuts through the middle of the marshes, providing the only access to Eel Marsh House. It is dependent on the tides and so can only be crossed when the tide is out at certain times of the day. It is full of hidden dangers when the tide comes in or when one

of the sea frets comes down, making navigation impossible and veering off the causeway into the marshes a real danger.

- The causeway is not just surrounded by marshland, but by sinking sand that will suck objects into oblivion, and if it is a living thing, it will be drowned by the sand. Once something has become stuck in the sand there is very little possibility of it being pulled free.
- The causeway is a conduit for evil – the evil that is in the house travels along the causeway to Crythin Gifford and the causeway itself is the home to many ghosts.

### 3) Eel Marsh House

- The house stands alone, a significant feature in the barren landscape, rising out of the marshes for all to see.
- Hill uses the house as a contrast to the earlier description of Monk's Piece. At Monk's piece she paints a picture of a family home where the atmosphere is peaceful and tranquil. It is separate from the outside world but in a much less sinister way than Eel Marsh House.
- The name Eel Marsh House has been deliberately chosen by Hill to reflect where the house is situated – in the middle of an eel marsh – and also to suggest something sinister and uninviting about the location generally. House names are usually positive or historic – perhaps this one is what the locals call the house.
- The reader first sees the house through the eyes of Arthur Kipps – he gives his own reactions to the first sighting of it. Susan Hill wants the reader to share Kipp's sense of astonishment at the location of the house.
- Colour and imagery are again used in the description to set the atmosphere of this part of the story and make the reader feel uneasy about the place even before anything has happened there.
- At first glance the house looks as if it is not built on land but actually rises up out of the marsh itself. Hill begins by making the house appear odd and unusual – unlike other houses. The fact that it is **“rising out of the water itself”** creates an atmosphere of unreality which fits in with what is to happen there later.
- Hill personifies the house through the use of the adjective **“gaunt”**, which if applied to a person would mean that they were overly thin or emaciated and bony. In terms of describing the house it indicated that it is desolate or especially bleak. The use of this term reminds the reader of the woman in black and they begin to make a subconscious connection between the two. In the earlier description of the woman in the church

the phrase “**so pale and gaunt**” is used to describe her. The repetition of the word is deliberate and important.

- The house itself, just like its former occupant, seems to be drained of any lifelike colour or warmth. The colours that dominate in this description are: “**grey, slate, steel and bleached.**” Just like the woman the house is drained of anything warm or life-like. Again there is a clear link made by Hill between the two things. She is making the house seem sinister and cold, thereby setting the atmosphere for what is to happen there later, and also providing a suitable setting for what has gone before. The house is a variation of the typical ‘gothic ghost house’, but has been altered enough to make it fresh and interesting for the reader because of its location.
- The house is compared to a “**lighthouse**”, a “**beacon**” and a “**martello tower**”—a tower used for coastal defence. This comparison reinforces the notion of the house rising up out of the marshes just as the towers mentioned would rise up out of the sea. The reader is also reminded that the sea surrounding these towers is full of hidden and potentially fatal dangers – rocks- just as the area surrounding Eel Marsh House is also full of hidden danger – sinking sand. In addition to this the area surrounding a lighthouse may have hidden wrecks in just the same way that the marsh hides the pony and trap. In her use of the comparison Hill reinforces the idea of isolation, and the fact that anyone living in such a place would be cut off from the rest of the world.
- In this Chapter Hill builds up the tension she has started to create. The house interests and repels the reader; making them feel drawn towards it because it is odd and strangely beautiful, but at the same time sinister and cold.
- The inclusion of the ruins of the old monastery adds a touch of typical gothic to the scene and reinforces the sinister nature of the place. It also raises the question of who would choose to live in a house built on the site of an ancient church or chapel, with the implications of history all around.
- The area immediately surrounding the house is important in terms of description and what it adds to the overall picture of the house. There is very little living in the area surrounding the house – no gardens or anything to make it more attractive or comfortable for the person living there. It gives the atmosphere of being uncared for by the occupant or it could indicate that the ground is barren and nothing will grow there.
- Even the ruins of the old church are “**fragmentary**” –so incomplete and decaying just like the house, the people and the marsh. It also indicates

that previous occupants of the house have not bothered to maintain the place and let it fall into decay. It pre-empts the decay that is to be found within the house.

- The words used by Kipps to describe the house are “**astonishing, amazement, excitement and alarm**”. These are the reactions that Hill has used the description to set up in the reader, so the entry to the house is a shared experience and the sense of trepidation that is felt by Kipps is shared by the reader.