Sample essays

Question 1

How does Susan Hill present the theme of the supernatural in *The Woman in Black*?

**Grade-A* answer**

Susan Hill weaves an awareness of the supernatural throughout the story through the plot, the structure, the use of language and imagery. *The Woman in Black* is a ghost story and therefore the idea of the supernatural is intrinsic to the whole work. The whole point of a ghost story is to frighten, thrill and entertain. Before the reader starts the story, he or she has to put aside any disbelief he or she may have in the supernatural in order to enjoy the experience.

The classic ghost story has many elements, the main one being the ghost itself, in this case, the woman in black. A ghost is the spirit of a dead person who comes back to earth in order to settle old scores and complete any unfinished business. The woman in black is the spirit of Jennet Humfrey whose child was twice cruelly taken from her. For this, she (unreasonably) blames her sister Alice Drablow and has returned to earth to haunt her and exact revenge on all who are involved in her affairs.

The word ‘supernatural’ means beyond what is natural, and in the novel supernatural events are seen as products of evil. Arthur Kipps is haunted mercilessly by the woman in black until he is filled with terror and loses all that is dear to him. In the nursery, the rocking chair moves on its own, making a sinister rhythmic sound. An eerie whistle which Kipps knows does not come from human lips.

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1. Clear beginning, which addresses task immediately.
2. Understands the conventions.
3. Defines terms.
lures Spider to his near death. The nursery door is mysteriously locked although it has no lock or bolt and then, just as mysteriously opened. All these events defy reason and are therefore supernatural in nature.

The opening chapter of the novel provides a framework for the story. In it the idea of a ghost story is introduced. The reader is familiarised with the background of Kipps, his state of mind, his belief in his own sixth sense and his willingness to accept Christmas is a holy time where the innocent are protected from evil. The quotation from Hamlet which he recalls from his school days acts as a comfort to him at this holy festive time, though he is uneasy when his step-sons begin to tell ghost stories. The real ghost story begins in Chapter 2.

A ghost story relies on atmosphere, often conveyed through physical phenomena such as the weather, gothic buildings, vivid settings, and on hints and half suggestions such as those made by the landlord in The Woman in Black. The one thing that human beings do not know is what happens when we die. Ghost stories feed that fascination with the after-life and because of that very often have a Christian moral. Susan Hill presents the theme of the supernatural from a Christian perspective. She sees the world struggling between the forces of good and evil, and although good prevails (Arthur Kipps survives his ordeal because he is essentially good and innocent) innocent people pay a dreadful price. Many people in Crythin Gifford have suffered the loss of young children in violent circumstances, including Mr Jerome.

Throughout the novel Susan uses the weather to signal when terrible things are about to happen. Kipps’ journey begins in a peasouper, a London fog, which suggests that his journey is to be clouded in mystery and he travels to a place with an eerie name: Crythin Gifford. Other places have a connection with the supernatural, for example Nine Lives Causeway (a cat is said to have nine lives and thus escapes death regularly) and Gapemouth Tunnel (which suggests the jaws of Hell). Kipps’ destination is shrouded in mist. There appears to be a conspiracy of silence surrounding Drablow’s affairs, and nobody will help Kipps — all he receives is warnings and evasions.

Susan Hill’s use of pathetic fallacy is particularly effective when Kipps spends the night alone in the haunted Eel Marsh House. The

4 Gives examples of supernatural.

5 Shows how Hill presents the theme through the structure of the plot.

6 Shows depth of understanding of events.

7 Hill’s skilful use of pathetic fallacy (the attribution of human emotions or characteristics to inanimate objects or to nature).

8 The place names reflect the supernatural.
The first time the ghost appears to Kipps is at Alice Drablow’s funeral, where she seems like a harmless sick young woman. He (and the reader) is caught unawares but there are clues that she is a ghost. She seems to appear and disappear without movement. Her appearance is juxtaposed by the line of serious-looking children at the school railings headed by a boy who does not return Kipps’ smile. One interpretation is that they too are apparitions — ghosts of all the children who have died in unnatural circumstances. Sceptics point out that school playgrounds often adjoin churchyards and that children are naturally curious and have a taste for the macabre. 9

The reader is however drawn towards belief in the supernatural. None of the characters appear to be particularly fanciful, interesting or imaginative. 10 Indeed, Samuel Daily (who, as his name suggests, is an everyday sort of man), when the question is put to him as to whether the deaths of children may be genuine accidents, says simply, with a ‘set and resolute face’:

“You may find it hard to believe. You may doubt it… We know.” 11

The climax of Arthur Kipps’ story is when Kipps’ young son is catapulted from a pony trap and dies instantly as he hits a tree when the ghost steps out in front of the horse. Kipps is forced to witness this event as Jennet Humfrye was compelled to witness the drowning of her young son in the marshes off the Nine Lives Causeway. In this way, Hill presents the supernatural through careful manipulation of plot and structure as these two events are like a mirror image of each other. This provides symmetry to the structure.

In comparison to other novels, The Woman in Black is relatively short. Susan Hill’s strength as writer is in creating atmosphere where the reader is seduced into a terrifying supernatural experience. The structure of the novel is carefully crafted to this end, the effects are created through skilful use of language and there is no unnecessary development of the minor characters as this would detract from her purpose to thrill, chill and terrify. 12

Sophisticated awareness of alternative interpretations.

Understanding of characters.

Skilful use of quotation.

The ending is a touch contrived but this can be overlooked given the constraints of exam conditions.
Summative comment

- considered/qualified response to text
- details linked to interpretation
- appreciation/consideration of writer’s uses of language and/or form and/or structure and effect on readers/audience
- thoughtful consideration of ideas/themes/settings
- information is presented in a way which assists with communication of meaning
- syntax and spelling are generally accurate

Mark awarded from the top of Band 6.

Question 2

Is either the woman in black or Jennet Humfrye a victim to feel sorry for or someone to despise because she causes the deaths of little children and terrorises adults?

Grade-C answer

Jennet Humfrye (JH) and the woman in black (twib) is not the same. JH was a person; twib is the ghost of JH, not a person. To answer this question I think you have to believe in ghosts or at least accept the possibility that they exist. But this is only a ghost story and it is meant to frighten and entertain. You have to believe that it could have happened because the circumstances are possible.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, when JH was alive, there were very harsh rules regarding sex and she broke them and was punished by having her illegitimate son taken away and adopted. She wasn’t allowed to see him for ages, she was very poor, the father of her baby had gone away and her family had abandoned her. Kipps (AK) found out from Alice Drablow’s (AD) letters that JH pleaded with her sister Alice to take him as she was desperate. AK found the tone of the letters heartbreaking: ‘I felt sorry for J, as I read her short, emotional letters over again.’

He describes the anger and the despair and the love for the child which comes through, and it fills him ‘with sadness and sympathy.’

In modern times this would not have happened. Social services offer support to unmarried mothers and consider that normally the best

1 Question is clearly thought out. Candidate is aware of a story as a construct.

2 Vague and colloquial.

3 Uses embedded quotation well.
place for a child is with his mother. Anyway it violates a mother’s human rights to take away her child unless she has committed a crime so it must be against the law. However, women didn’t have many rights in those days. Nevertheless AK does consider that compared with other women of that time, she could be considered better off because at least she knew what happened to her baby and that he was safe and well looked after, that is until the tragic accident.

When the accident happened, Samuel Daily (SD) tells Kipps that ‘From that day JH began to go mad.’ AK is sympathetic and is filled with sorrow and pity for the poor mother who had lost her child but Daily says no ‘it was nobody’s fault the mist comes out of nowhere’ but JH was ‘mad with grief and mad with anger’ and a desire for revenge and she blamed her sister for letting Nathaniel go out that day.

In some ways Jennet Humfrye is to be pitied because she lost her child in tragic circumstances but normally bereaved people learn to deal with their grief in time even though they never get over it. On the other hand she must have been really evil because it took twelve years for her body to decay and SD says, ‘She died in hatred and misery.’ Susan Hill emphasises this by using both a simile and a metaphor: ‘She looked like a walking skeleton — a living spectre’ (a spectre is another name for a ghost).

For most of the book the reader has to have sympathy with JH because we are only given AK’s point of view and he is a good Christian person who likes to forgive everybody. Susan Hill is a Christian writer but she lives in the real world and knows life is not that simple. She believes there is a battle between good and evil, and that evil is very powerful and we should be scared of it.

My view is that she wasn’t to be pitied; JH really was evil because she knew about pain and suffering and it didn’t make her a stronger, more sympathetic person, she wanted revenge. She must really have been eaten up with hatred for her sister. She was so full of desire for revenge that even when she died her spirit couldn’t rest. The woman in black haunted Alice Drablow and anyone who helped her. She terrorised Crythin Gifford because nobody knew whose child she would take next.
Summative comment

A strong personal response backed up with textual evidence. Though it relies heavily on plot, it shows the following:

• sustained response to text
• effective use of details to support interpretation
• some explanation of effects of writer’s uses of language, but less on structure and/or form
• appropriate comment on themes/ideas/settings
• information is usually presented in a way which assists with communication of meaning
• syntax and spelling are generally accurate

Mark awarded from the middle of Band 5.