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The Woman in Black

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Woman in Black* (2012), directed by James Watkins.

Hammer no doubt imagined that *The Woman in Black* would perform well: the play is the second longest-running play in the history of the West End; the book is probably Susan Hill's most known and with the recently finished *Harry Potter* series, the studio could bank on Daniel Radcliffe's fan base for ticket sales. However, they probably did not think that it would become the highest grossing British horror film of the last twenty years as well as the highest grossing Hammer horror in the U.S. ever. What is interesting is that *TWIB* did this without many of the modern genre's tropes: it is most certainly not torture-porn and does not contain 'gross-outs' (a la *Hostel* or *The Human Centipede*); it did not utilise 'shaky-cam' techniques or 'found footage' (a la *The Last Exorcism* or *Quarantine*) and the story is deceptively simple and traditional.

Arthur Kipps (Daniel Radcliffe) is an Edwardian lawyer who has recently lost his wife. Amid the turmoil of raising his child, financial worries and still occasionally seeing his departed beloved, he is tasked with dealing with the estate of the recently deceased Alice Drablow of Eel Marsh House in the small middle-of-nowhere village, Crythin Gifford. The titular Woman makes her appearance to Arthur during his first visit to the house, after he keeps hearing footsteps above him, standing outside. After reporting it to the local constabulary, a girl is brought in dying after apparently committing suicide and Arthur finds out why the locals treated him so coldly when he arrived: the people of Crythin Gifford believe that the Woman in Black (Alice's departed sister Jennet, we discover) haunts the town and causes the child of whoever sees her to kill themselves as revenge for her own lost child.

Needless to say, the supernatural occurrences continue and grow in intensity. Arthur finds out who the Woman is and just how her child died: due her apparent mental instability, Jennet's child was put in her sister Alice's care and died in an accident on the flooding marshes

that separate the house from the town. Jennet will ‘never forgive’. In an attempt to appease her vengeful spirit (in one of the more typical horror moments) Arthur finds the lost body of her boy (after witnessing him crawl out of the marshes previously) and summons her by placing him in his old nursery; the site of a lot of the activity up to this point. The Woman comes but she is not appeased. She comes the closest to physically harming Arthur due to this and then leaves. Arthur finally leaves the house and makes his arrangements to go back home. But as the camera rushes through the house, accompanied with whispers from the Woman, the audience knows the action is not over yet.

Heading to the station to meet his nanny and child, Arthur plans to get straight back on the next train to head home. However, he has seen the Woman and in true fashion, his son Nathaniel sees her as well. Like all the previous children have done so, Nathaniel gently slips away from his father unnoticed and descends onto the tracks ahead of a speeding train to his death. Arthur jumps down and attempts to save his son but he is too late. They awake together, alongside his wife, and walk into the beyond as a family, together. In a way, Arthur has won, but the Woman has had her revenge.

So why is this traditional ghost story suitable for religious discussion? It is a film solely concerned with death and death is one of the biggest subjects within all religions as well as Christian theology. According to the classification of horror films by exploration of fears laid out in his book *Sacred Terror*, Douglas E. Cowan would no doubt place *TWIB* within his category of ‘Fear of Death and Dying Badly’. *TWIB* would be prime material in discussing the idea that we appease our sub/conscious fears through submitting ourselves to horror movies in order to live them out. Religion provides this security by promising an afterlife and such, but in horror movies we can dare to consider what happens if there is not, or if it is not as we

imagined. Jennet cannot move on: due to her rage and suffering in life, she cannot do anything but repeat her pain in the lives of others. She is dehumanised completely and cannot be put to rest ever. Living out the worst moments of our life for all time is surely one of the worst hells imaginable: it is quite the depiction of existential terror. *TWIB* does however also confirm a positive afterlife in the ending. Arthur gets to be with his family again, for all eternity. In a way then, the film presents a dualistic eschatology similar to Christianity.

In Jennet's son, we have an example of improper burial. The fact that his body was never recovered and laid to rest with his mother's remains is the reason Arthur is convinced it will appease her. The fear of the consequence of improper burial is ancient and firmly imbedded in the religious rituals of today. Everything from burying corpses with payment for Charon to saying the correct words over gravesites have been conducted to ensure that death happened the right way for individuals and they did not become lost wandering souls or worse, like Jennet. It is interesting then that correcting her son's burial does not help her in any way as it often does in other films. *TWIB* presents a bleaker picture: she will 'never forgive', truly exemplifying the fears around improper burial.

In the West especially, we distance ourselves from death so much, that arguably encountering it more and reflecting upon it would make our lives better by being ready for it and realising it as the only permanent feature in human life. Unlike films that glorify violence or make light of death (*Scary Movie*, perhaps), *TWIB* is not another in the line of many examples that desensitises us towards death. The lack of gore in the film makes the actual deaths all the more shocking.

TWIB, along with most horror films, concerns itself with fundamental religious questions. When we go to see any film that affirms the world of the beyond in some form, we arguably have room for religious or theological discussion in one form or another. Despite often being brushed under the carpet as pulp fiction, horror movies do have a lot to contribute to the growing field of religion and film and as such should be considered more often. Today especially, in a period of secular domination, people are becoming more and more interested in their spiritual sides (the rise of modern witchcraft, tarot readings and horoscopes all point to a 're-enchantment of reality') and as such perhaps the surplus of horror films are helping to fill that gap that traditional religion may not be filling as much anymore. As long as there is the demand, it does not appear that the supply will be drying up any time soon: approximately a tenth of the highest grossing movies of 2011 were horror films (according to boxofficemojo.com) and like the Woman herself, they just keep coming back.