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Nataliia BANIAS,

orcid.org/0000-0002-6974-0790

Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor,

Associate Professor at the Philology Department

Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University

(Berehove, Transcarpathian region, Ukraine) banyasz.natalia@kmf.org.ua

Kateryna LIZAK,

orcid.org/0000-0002-7873-0535

Associate Professor at the Philology Department

Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University

(Berehove, Transcarpathian region, Ukraine) lizak.katalin@kmf.org.ua

Daniela VASHKEBA,

orcid.org/0009-0001-7046-1318

4th year student of Philology at the English Department

Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University

(Berehove, Transcarpathian region, Ukraine) vaskeba.daniala.b22an@kmf.org.ua

GOTHIC SPATIALITY AND THE POETICS OF SETTING IN SUSAN HILL'S *THE WOMAN IN BLACK*

The article examines the representation and functions of Gothic space in Susan Hill's novel "The Woman in Black" (1983), focusing on the relationship between spatial organization, atmosphere, narrative tension, and the supernatural. The study argues that setting in Hill's novel should not be regarded merely as a passive background against which the events unfold. Instead, geographical, architectural, domestic, and natural spaces actively participate in the construction of Gothic meaning and shape the protagonist's psychological experience. Particular attention is paid to Eel Marsh House, the surrounding marshes, the causeway, the village of Crythin Gifford, London, and the recurring motifs of fog, water, darkness, isolation, and restricted visibility. Eel Marsh House is analysed as a central Gothic locus in which domestic space is transformed into an uncanny and hostile environment. The marshes and the sea further destabilize the opposition between land and water, safety and danger, familiarity and otherness. The causeway functions as a particularly significant liminal space because its periodic disappearance under the tide undermines the protagonist's confidence in rational control and creates a material boundary between the ordinary world and the supernatural realm.

*The article also considers the interaction between natural and architectural spaces, demonstrating that weather, landscape, water, and darkness contribute to the novel's Gothic agency. Consequently, spatiality in *The Woman in Black* becomes a means of representing trauma, memory, isolation, and the persistence of the past. The study concludes that Hill's Gothic setting constitutes an active narrative mechanism through which psychological fear is transformed into a spatial experience.*

Key words: Susan Hill, *The Woman in Black*, Gothic fiction, Gothic spatiality, setting, Eel Marsh House, landscape, ecogothic.

Наталія БАНЯС,

orcid.org/0000-0002-6974-0790

кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,
доцент кафедри філологіїЗакарпатського угорського університету імені Ференца Ракоці II
(Берегове, Закарпатська область, Україна) banyasz.natalia@kmf.org.ua**Катерина ЛІЗАК,**

orcid.org/0000-0002-7873-0535

доцент кафедри філології

Закарпатського угорського університету імені Ференца Ракоці II
(Берегове, Закарпатська область, Україна) lizak.katalin@kmf.org.ua**Даніела ВАШКЕБА,**

orcid.org/0009-0001-7046-1318

студентка IV курсу відділення англійської мови

Закарпатського угорського університету імені Ференца Ракоці II
(Берегове, Закарпатська область, Україна) vaskeba.daniala.b22an@kmf.org.ua

ГОТИЧНА ПРОСТОРОВІСТЬ ТА ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ХУДОЖНЬОГО ТЛА В РОМАНІ СЬЮЗЕН ГІЛЛ «ЖІНКА В ЧОРНОМУ»

У статті досліджено особливості репрезентації та функціонування готичного простору в романі Сьюзен «Гілл *The Woman in Black*» («Жінка в чорному», 1983) з акцентом на взаємозв'язку просторової організації твору, атмосфери, наративної напруги та надприродного. Обґрунтовано, що художній простір роману не є пасивним тлом, на якому розгортаються події, а виступає активним засобом формування готичного значення та визначає психологічне сприйняття дійсності головним героєм. Особливу увагу приділено Іл-Марш-Гаус, навколишнім болотам, дамбі, містечку Критін-Гіффорд, Лондону, а також мотивам туману, води, темряви, ізоляції та обмеженої видимості.

Центральним готичним локусом постає Іл-Марш-Гаус, де традиційно безпечний домашній простір перетворюється на загрозове й моторошне середовище. Болота та море додатково руйнують бінарні опозиції між сушею і водою, безпекою та небезпекою, знайомим і чужим.

Особливого значення набуває дамба, яка періодично зникає під водою та функціонує як лімінальний простір між раціонально впорядкованим світом і надприродною реальністю. Встановлено, що природні й архітектурні простори роману взаємодіють у процесі формування готичного ефекту: погода, ландшафт, вода, туман і темрява набувають своєрідної наративної активності. Просторовість у романі водночас репрезентує травматичну пам'ять, ізоляцію, страх і нездатність минулого залишитися в минулому.

Дослідження доводить, що готичний сеттинг Гілл є активним наративним механізмом, за допомогою якого психологічний страх перетворюється на просторовий досвід.

Зроблено висновок, що готичний простір «Жінка в чорному», є не лише елементом хронотопу, а важливим структурним механізмом, за допомогою якого психологічний страх перетворюється на безпосередньо пережитий просторовий досвід.

Ключові слова: Сьюзен Гілл, «Жінка в чорному», готична література, готична просторовість, художній простір, Іл-Марш-Гаус, ландшафт, екоготика.

Problem Statement. The Gothic tradition is particularly dependent upon the construction of meaningful spaces. Castles, abandoned houses, ruins, graveyards, forests, underground passages, isolated islands, and hostile landscapes traditionally function as important components of Gothic narrative. Nevertheless, Gothic space cannot be reduced to a catalogue of frightening locations. It is a structural and semantic category through which narratives articulate fear, memory, trauma, repression, social exclusion, and the confrontation between rational and irrational forms of experience.

Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* provides a particularly productive example of spatially organized

Gothic fiction. Published in 1983, the novel deliberately revives conventions associated with Victorian ghost stories while introducing a modern psychological sensitivity. Scholarship has already examined the novel from feminist, historical, narratological, psychological, intertextual, and ecocritical perspectives. Scullion (Scullion, 2003), for example, interprets the novel as a radical form of Gothic horror connected with anxieties surrounding motherhood, autonomy, and the family. Miquel-Baldellou (Miquel-Baldellou, 2021, 2023) examines its Gothic archetypes, ageing, gender, and the relationship between past and present.

The problem addressed in this article is therefore the insufficiently systematized interpretation of Gothic spatiality as an active narrative mechanism in *The Woman in Black*.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications.

Critical approaches to Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* have developed in several interconnected directions. Early scholarship primarily emphasized the novel's Gothic conventions, feminist implications, social criticism, and representations of motherhood. Donna Cox's study, "I Have No Story to Tell!": Maternal Rage in Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*, examines the relationship between maternal suffering, rage, and the supernatural (Cox, 2000). Val Scullion's influential 2003 article interprets the novel as Gothic horror shaped by the social and political anxieties of the early 1980s, particularly those surrounding motherhood, autonomy, and the family. "Susan Hill's novel is a radical example of Female Gothic Horror. As well as being a popular ghost story, successfully adapted for television, stage and film, it offers a social critique of motherhood and contemporary rhetoric surrounding the family" (Scullion, 2003: 1).

Later criticism increasingly explored the novel's relationship with Victorian Gothic archetypes and contemporary cultural discourse. Miquel-Baldellou approaches the *Woman in Black* as a reinterpretation of the Victorian "fallen woman," connecting the character with Gothic archetypes such as the ghost, vampire, madwoman, and witch. "In particular, the character of the *Woman in Black* presents significant parallels with Victorian portrayals of "the fallen woman," insofar as Victorian representatives of this myth are often depicted through mythemes pertaining to Gothic archetypes" (Miquel-Baldellou, 2021: 166).

Miquel-Baldellou's study develops this perspective by examining ageing, gender, intertextuality, and the Gothic archetypes of the ghost, vampire, and double. Importantly for the present research, the study also emphasizes the novel's frame narrative and the relationship between past and present.

Recent scholarship has increasingly foregrounded environmental and spatial aspects. Shakeel's 2026 article argues that nature in *The Woman in Black* should be interpreted not as passive scenery but as an active component of Gothic experience. Weather and the sea contribute to the novel's representation of ecological instability, human vulnerability, and uncanny affect. "...weather and the sea operate as modes of haunting, thereby inducing a fear of the nonhuman, or ecophobia, in Arthur Kipps" (Shakeel, 2002: 204)

The present article builds upon these approaches but shifts the primary focus to the novel itself. It proposes that architectural, geographical, natural, and

liminal spaces form an interconnected Gothic system in which the boundaries between psychological experience and external reality become increasingly unstable.

Aim of the Article. The aim of the article is to investigate the functions of Gothic spatiality and setting in Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* and to demonstrate how architectural, natural, domestic, and liminal spaces participate in the construction of Gothic atmosphere, psychological tension, and supernatural meaning.

Outline of the main material. Susan Hill builds Gothic horror in *The Woman in Black* primarily through place: the novel's fear is not only *in* the landscape, but produced by how the landscape is arranged – its distances, barriers, emptiness, and exposure. Physical space becomes an active force that isolates Arthur Kipps, distorts perception, and turns ordinary travel into a threatening ritual.

Hill opens with Monk's Piece as a seemingly protected, warm home—yet even here the atmosphere is shaped by weather and geography. Arthur steps outside "to smell the air" (Hill, 2013: 9) and "look about... into the darkness ahead", and listen for "the moaning rise and fall of the wind", and "cries of nocturnal creatures" (Hill, 2013: 10). The detail matters: Hill establishes that space is felt through the senses, and that darkness is not empty but full of sounds that can suggest unseen presences. Even the house's position contains a Gothic paradox: it is near towns, "two miles from a good-sized village", but still carries "an air of remoteness and isolation" (Hill, 2013: 11). This shows Hill's method: she makes isolation psychological as well as geographic, the landscape creates separation even when civilization is technically close.

Hill repeatedly uses weather to change what space means. Before the clear night, the countryside is reduced by mist: "the view stretched no farther than a yard or two" (Hill, 2013: 10). The house itself is invaded by the environment: walls were "oozed damp and smelled sour", and fires "sputtered and smoked" (Hill, 2013: 10). This turns space into something hostile and contaminated, a classic Gothic move: the outside world does not stay outside. Reduced visibility is especially important because Gothic fear thrives when the mind must fill gaps, fog compresses space, erases boundaries, and makes movement uncertain.

As Arthur travels north, Hill makes geography steadily more bleak and uncomfortable. The modern, busy station feels "cozy and enclosed", but the branch line to Homerby shifts into discomfort: "here the air was a great deal colder and blowing in gusts", "unpleasant rain", and "ancient, comfortless carriages" (Hill, 2013: 23). This is not just

travel description—it is spatial storytelling. Each stage removes warmth, light, and community, pushing the protagonist toward a landscape where help and clarity disappear. The most powerful Gothic geography is the marshland surrounding Eel Marsh House. Hill describes an environment of extreme exposure: “*all around and above and way beyond there seemed to be sky... and only a thin strip of land*” (Hill, 2013: 33). Arthur notes the “*sense of space*” and “*vastness*”, and even calls it “*startling beauty*”, but that beauty is unstable—because it is also emptiness. He observes “*scarcely a tree*”, “*no farm or cottage*” and that “*all was emptiness*” (Hill, 2013: 34). Gothic horror often relies on cramped corridors and locked rooms; Hill flips this by making open space terrifying. The marsh offers nowhere to hide, no landmarks, and no reassurance of human presence—only “*weird cries from birds near and far*” (Hill, 2013: 34). Sound replaces society.

Hill turns a natural feature into a mechanical horror device: the Nine Lives Causeway. Arthur sees “*a narrow track leading directly ahead, as if into the estuary itself*”, and realizes that “*when the tide came in, it would quickly be quite submerged and untraceable*” (Hill, 2013: 34). This is crucial: the horror is built into the map. The causeway is a temporary road; time and tide control it. The setting therefore creates a repeating Gothic condition: crossing becomes dangerous because return is not guaranteed. The geography enforces isolation, so the supernatural threat does not need to “chase” Arthur, space itself can imprison him. When the house appears, it is described as if it rises from the hostile environment: “*as if rising out of the water itself, a tall, gaunt house of gray stone*” (Hill, 2013: 34). It is “*isolated, uncompromising*” positioned like a sentinel facing the “*wide expanse of marsh and estuary*” (Hill, 2013: 34). Hill uses hard materials (stone, slate, steel-like light) and vertical imagery (“*tall*”, “*gaunt*” to make the house seem severe and unwelcoming. Importantly, it is not embedded in a village, it stands on a “*little island*” of “*salt-bleached grass*” (Hill, 2013: 34) reinforcing that the building belongs to the harshness of the marsh rather than to human community.

Hill increases Gothic intensity by adding older spaces near the house: “*fragmentary ruins of some old church or chapel*” and a burial ground of “*old grave-stones... leaning over or completely fallen*”, “*names or dates... not decipherable*” with “*a decayed and abandoned air*” (Hill, 2013: 36). These details create a sense of time-thickness: the landscape carries remnants of belief, death, and neglect. The burial ground is not merely creepy décor; it signals that the area is historically cut off and forgotten, and that death is literally part of the terrain. Even nature becomes ugly:

the “*satanic-looking*” bird, croaking and nesting among filth, makes the ruin feel profaned, not peaceful (Hill, 2013: 35).

Hill carefully stages the first clear sighting of the Woman in Black within the most desolate geography—dusk, ruin, burial ground by estuary. The landscape prepares Arthur’s body for panic: “*the last light went... the wind rose*”, and the setting becomes “*bleakness and eeriness*” (Hill, 2013: 36). Then he sees her face with “*a desperate, yearning malevolence*” (Hill, 2013: 36). The space matters because it intensifies helplessness: he is far from safety, surrounded by marsh, and evening is closing in. His reaction is physical and absolute, he feels paralyzed. Hill shows how environment triggers terror: the supernatural is frightening, but it is the setting that makes escape, certainty, and support feel impossible. Through Monk’s Piece, the journey north, the marshes, the causeway, Eel Marsh House, and the ruined burial ground, Hill makes geography a Gothic engine.

Eel Marsh House functions as the central Gothic structure in Susan Hill’s *The Woman in Black* because its physical characteristics and location generate the core conditions of Gothic narrative: isolation, exposure to uncontrollable nature, restriction of movement, and the impression of decay and abandonment. Hill adapts the traditional Gothic building (castle, abbey, or ruined monastery) to a modern setting without losing the genre’s architectural logic. Instead of mountainous height, fortified walls, or labyrinthine corridors as the primary threat, the novel uses a house that is geographically trapped and visually stark, surrounded by marshland that acts as both barrier and amplifier of fear.

The first view of Eel Marsh House establishes its Gothic status through imagery of isolation and severity. Arthur sees it “*as if rising out of the water itself*”, a “*tall, gaunt house of gray stone with a slate roof*”, which “*gleamed steelily in the light*”. (Hill, 2013: 35) The house is not presented as a comfortable domestic space but as a hard, cold structure defined by verticality («tall») and thinness («gaunt»). In classic Gothic fiction, castles and abbeys often appear as monumental silhouettes that dominate the landscape and suggest an oppressive past. Hill achieves a comparable effect with scale and stance: the house “*stood like some lighthouse or beacon or martello tower, facing the whole, wide expanse of marsh and estuary*” (Hill, 2013: 35). This simile aligns Eel Marsh House with defensive or warning structures associated with danger and vigilance, paralleling the traditional Gothic castle’s role as a place of confinement and threat. The building is also “*isolated*” and “*uncompromising*” (Hill, 2013: 34), terms that emphasize its separation

from ordinary life and its refusal to accommodate human presence.

A defining Gothic feature is that the building is not merely in a remote area; it is physically difficult to reach and can become inaccessible. Eel Marsh House is approached only via the Nine Lives Causeway, which Arthur describes as “*a narrow track leading directly ahead, as if into the estuary itself*” (Hill, 2013: 34). He recognizes that “*when the tide came in, it would quickly be quite submerged and untraceable*” (Hill, 2013: 34). This detail replaces the castle gate, drawbridge, or locked abbey door with a natural mechanism that controls entry and exit. The causeway creates a structural condition equivalent to imprisonment: even without human captors, the protagonist can be cut off by the sea. In classic Gothic settings, storms often trap characters in castles or monasteries; Hill makes entrapment routine and predictable through the tides, which introduces a recurring, factual limitation on movement. The result is a setting where isolation is not symbolic but logistical, and this logistical isolation supports Gothic suspense.

The surrounding marshland intensifies the house's Gothic power by removing signs of community and by creating a bleak, open environment that can shift rapidly in mood. Arthur notes that after leaving the town “*all around and above and way beyond there seemed to be sky*” and that he passed “*no farm or cottage, no kind of dwelling house at all, all was emptiness*” (Hill, 2013: 34). The emptiness functions like the desolate landscapes around many Gothic ruins, but Hill's marsh is distinctive because it is flat and exposed rather than mountainous or forested. This openness does not reduce fear; instead, it increases vulnerability. The marshes are “*silent, still and shining*”, and they “*seemed to stretch in every direction... and to merge without a break into the waters of the estuary*” (Hill, 2013: 33). By erasing boundaries, the landscape makes orientation difficult and reinforces the sense that the house exists on the edge of the inhabitable world. The line “*we seemed to be driving toward the very edge of the world*” (Hill, 2013: 34) frames the approach as a movement away from normal space and toward a liminal zone, similar to the symbolic threshold-crossing into castles or abbeys in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic novels.

Eel Marsh House is also linked to decay and death through nearby structures that resemble classic Gothic ruins. Arthur sees “*fragmentary ruins of some old church or chapel*” and later enters a burial ground with “*old gravestones, most of them leaning over or completely fallen*”, “*covered in patches of greenish-yellow lichen and moss*”, and “*stained by years of driven rain*” (Hill, 2013: 36). He adds that “*no names*

or dates were now decipherable, and the whole place had a decayed and abandoned air” (Hill, 2013: 36). This scene directly parallels the ruined abbeys and graveyards that appear in classic Gothic fiction, where crumbling religious architecture and neglected tombs signal both historical depth and spiritual disturbance. Hill does not require a medieval monastery as the main building because she places religious ruin and burial space beside the house, allowing Eel Marsh House to inherit the Gothic associations of abbeys: the proximity of corrupted sacred space, the presence of the dead, and the implication of forgotten histories. The burial ground's physical deterioration also provides an objective correlative for the novel's moral atmosphere: neglect, loss, and unresolved trauma are materially visible in the landscape.

Compared with classic Gothic castles, Eel Marsh House is smaller and not fortified, but it performs the same narrative function: it becomes a closed world governed by its own rules. Traditional castles often contain secret passages, locked chambers, or dungeons; Hill's house is dominated by a different kind of enclosure, produced by geography and atmosphere. The sense of being cut off is reinforced when Keckwick leaves Arthur behind: the pony and trap become “*smaller and smaller figures in the immensity and wideness of marsh and sky*” (Hill, 2013: 35). The «immensity» surrounding the house makes it feel unprotected and unreachable. Where a castle's thickness and walls create confinement from within, Eel Marsh House is confined from without, surrounded by water and marsh that restrict help, rescue, and escape. This shift modernizes the Gothic structure while preserving its essential effect.

In sum, Eel Marsh House is a central Gothic structure because it combines architectural severity with extreme isolation and a restricted approach, and because it is embedded in a landscape of emptiness, ruin, and death. Hill's comparison with classic Gothic castles and abbeys is structural rather than superficial: she reproduces their core functions, that is, separation from society, control over movement, association with decay and burial, and concentration of haunting, by using a marsh-surrounded house and nearby religious ruins instead of medieval fortifications. This adaptation preserves the Gothic tradition while creating a distinct, modern form of architectural horror.

A defining feature of the Gothic landscape in the novel is spatial separation. After leaving Crythin Gifford, Arthur observes that “*all around and above and way beyond there seemed to be sky, sky and only a thin strip of land*” (Hill, 2013: 33). This description emphasizes disproportion between human space and natural vastness. The repetition of «sky» suggests

exposure without protection, while the «thin strip of land» indicates fragility. The landscape appears open, yet this openness creates vulnerability rather than freedom. The absence of habitation removes the possibility of assistance or refuge. Entrapment therefore results not from walls but from distance and abandonment. The marsh intensifies this condition by erasing clear boundaries between land and water. It “*seemed to stretch in every direction... and to merge without a break into the waters of the estuary*” (Hill, 2013: 33). Without visible limits, orientation becomes uncertain. The merging of elements produces a landscape that appears unstable and undefined. In Gothic tradition, labyrinthine castles disorient characters; in Hill’s novel, flatness and continuity create a similar effect. The environment offers no landmarks that confirm direction or safety. The visual monotony contributes to psychological unease because it prevents reliable navigation.

Weather further transforms the landscape into a mechanism of fear. Fog plays a crucial role in distorting perception. When mist descends, visibility diminishes and sound becomes amplified or displaced. The marsh, previously described as wide and open, becomes disorienting and threatening. Reduced visibility limits spatial awareness and increases dependence on uncertain sensory impressions. Gothic fear frequently depends on obscurity, and here natural conditions provide it. The landscape changes rapidly, demonstrating that it cannot be controlled or predicted.

The Nine Lives Causeway represents the clearest structural expression of entrapment within the landscape. Arthur describes it as “*a narrow track leading directly ahead, as if into the estuary itself*” and recognizes that “*when the tide came in, it would quickly be quite submerged and untraceable*” (Hill, 2013: 34). The causeway’s disappearance under the tide creates a temporary but absolute barrier. Entrapment is not metaphorical; it is geographic. Once the tide rises, Eel Marsh House becomes inaccessible. The term «untraceable» indicates that the route cannot even be located beneath the water, eliminating the possibility of escape. The landscape thus imposes strict limitations on time and movement. Arthur learns that the causeway remains passable only “*till five*” (Hill, 2013: 34), showing that natural forces dictate human action.

The auditory dimension of the landscape also contributes to Gothic fear. Arthur hears “*sudden, harsh, weird cries from birds near and far*” and later the “*faint keening of the winter wind that came across the marsh*” (Hill, 2013: 34). These sounds are not extraordinary in themselves, but within an isolated setting they acquire disturbing significance. The absence of human voices makes natural sounds more pronounced

and unpredictable. In moments of heightened tension, disembodied cries across the marsh intensify terror because they cannot be localized. The flat terrain allows sound to travel without visible source, reinforcing helplessness. The landscape therefore shapes fear by amplifying auditory uncertainty. The burial ground near the marsh further integrates landscape and Gothic atmosphere. Arthur encounters “*old gravestones, most of them leaning over or completely fallen*”, “*covered in patches of greenish-yellow lichen and moss*” with “*no names or dates... decipherable*” (Hill, 10: 36). The physical decay of this space signals abandonment and historical erasure. Situated near the estuary and exposed to “*years of driven rain*” (Hill, 10: 36) the burial ground demonstrates how the landscape contributes to deterioration. Death and neglect are materially embedded in the terrain. The setting thus reinforces themes of loss and unresolved past events, which are central to Gothic narrative.

The landscape also produces fear through its indifference to human presence. When Keckwick departs, the pony and trap become “*smaller and smaller figures in the immensity and wideness of marsh and sky*” (Hill, 10: 35). This image emphasizes scale: human beings are diminished within the environment. The marsh does not respond to or acknowledge human vulnerability. Its vastness remains constant regardless of individual distress. Such indifference heightens anxiety because it suggests that nature offers no protection or moral order. Importantly, the landscape creates a cyclical pattern of confinement. Each crossing of the causeway depends on the tide; each change in weather alters accessibility. This repetition ensures that isolation is not a single event but an ongoing condition. The environment repeatedly reinstates the possibility of separation and danger. Gothic tension is therefore sustained through natural processes rather than sudden architectural barriers.

Conclusions. In conclusion, the landscape in *The Woman in Black* functions as a Gothic space through its vast emptiness, merging boundaries, unstable weather, tidal submersion, and acoustic distortion. The marsh and surrounding terrain create entrapment that is physical, temporal, and psychological. Fear arises not solely from the supernatural figure but from a landscape that isolates, disorients, and renders the individual powerless within an immense and indifferent natural world.

The analysis demonstrates that spatiality in the novel is inseparable from memory and trauma. Locations preserve the traces of past events and make those events capable of returning to the present. The Gothic haunting is therefore simultaneously a haunting of people and places.

The study concludes that the poetics of setting in Hill's novel is based on the systematic destabilization of spatial boundaries. Familiar becomes unfamiliar, domestic becomes threatening, landscape becomes uncanny, and physical distance fails to separate the

present from the past. In this respect, Gothic space in *The Woman in Black* represents not simply a location of horror but a material and symbolic structure through which trauma, memory, isolation, and the persistence of the past are made perceptible.

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