

Movie: The Woman in Black (2012)

Synopsis

The Woman in Black is a film adaptation of the 1983 Horror novel by Susan Hill. It centers on Arthur Kipps, a young lawyer struggling with the loss of his wife who is assigned to travel to the obscure village of Cryphon Gifford to prepare the home of the recently deceased Mrs. Drabow. Upon his arrival, Kipps encounters uneasy townsfolk who seemingly hide a dark secret. Kipps soon finds his job has grown more perilous as he discovers the legend of the Eel Marsch House and the evil entity that haunts it.

According to local legend, the Woman in Black was once a young woman named Jennet Humfrye. Jennet became pregnant out of wedlock as was forced to give up her son, Nathaniel, after being deemed mentally unfit to raise a child. Alice Drabow, Jennet's sister, and her husband adopt Nathaniel and raise him as their own. Much to Jennet's fury, the Drabows barred her from contacting Nathaniel and would not give Nathaniel the birthday cards she sent him. One day a horse and carriage carrying Nathaniel across the causeway sank into the marshes, killing the boy. Jennet hangs herself in the nursery, vowing never to forgive Alice. After Jennet died, she returned to haunt Eel Marsh House and the town of Crythin Gifford, as the malevolent Woman in Black. According to local tales, a sighting of the Woman in Black presaged the death of a child.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

Jennet's tragic story from which the legend of The Woman in Black was born suggests that she could have suffered from Borderline Personality Disorder. From the letters discovered by Arthur Kipp, we get a glimpse of the sad life of Jennet Humfrye. We see the intense relationship with her sister and how their relationship turned into extreme dislike and anger. Although we don't know the circumstances surrounding her pregnancy, one can imagine that she had engaged in impulsive behavior and unsafe sexual practices. We also see her frantic efforts to avoid abandonment by trying to remain in her child's life any way she can. Upon learning of her son's death she commits suicide - her soul left to continue her endless search for her lost child. As a result of the tragedies that haunted her in life, she holds onto intense feelings of rage in the afterlife manifested by inflicting hurtful revenge on the world around her.

Beginning with the provisional diagnosis of a personality disorder, one must always rule-out that the etiology of her maladaptive traits is not an active mental disorder. Jennet was deemed "mentally unfit" as an antecedent to giving up her child. Accordingly, Major Depressive Disorder, postpartum onset, adjustment disorder, and bereavement must all be considered in the differential diagnosis of Jennet's behavior.

The Woman in Black is a great example of our innate tendency to make up myths and stories to make sense of the world we live in, especially when that 'world' is plagued with traumatic events. A myth is a traditional story explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events. Myths serve to ease anxiety and emotional pain by fitting painful events into a narrative. This movie takes place in 19th century England, a time when early mortality was the norm. Such is taking place in the town of Crythin Gifford, a community stricken with a series of child deaths for which they have no explanation. From a mythic point of view, the story of the Woman in Black is an interesting blend of folklores from around the world, including the Irish legends of the banshee, a woman whose terrifying wail is a portent of death and doom, and the legend of La Llorona, the Hispanic Weeping Woman who drowned her children and returned as a vengeful ghost. These folklores, handed down from generation to generation, illustrate how we have this inherent desire to create stories to cope with what has yet to be scientifically unexplained. Given the epidemics of the 19th century, the legend of Crythin Gifford likely explained the deaths of children from typhus or smallpox, the latter of which killed an estimated 400,000 Europeans annually during the 19th century including 80% of all the children who were infected.

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