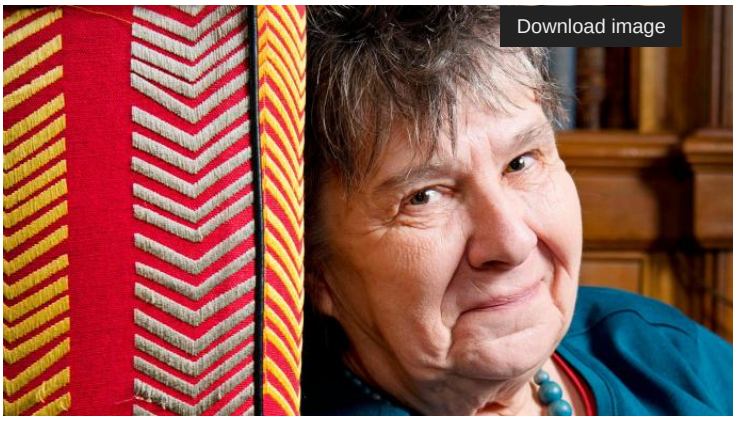
Susan Hill



Place and year of birth: Scarborough (North Yorkshire, England) 1942

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON SUSAN HILL'S WORK:

Susan Hill has so far written some sixty works covering different genres such as the novel, the short story, non-fiction, as well as autobiographical works. After having suffered different traumatic personal experiences, which deeply marked her, as the death of her fiancé, David Lepine, due to a serious illness and the death of her second daughter, Imogen, a few days after birth, Susan Hill published her novel "*The Woman in Black*" (1983) when she was 40 years old; a work that represented a turning point in her career as a writer.

In the wake of her most popular novel, "*The Woman in Black*", which became a literary, theatrical and cinematographic phenomenon, in a more recent stage of creativity, Susan Hill has published a series of novels and an anthology of short stories that fall within the Gothic genre and, in particular, within the genre of ghost stories. On several occasions, the writer has declared her intention to pay tribute to classics of the genre that were, for the most part, published during the Victorian era. Susan Hill's most recent work in this genre includes Neo-Victorian-style ghost stories that attempt to recreate and pay homage to the classic tales of the genre written by Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, M.R.James, and Henry James, among others, and that present a constant intertextuality with works from the nineteenth-century Gothic tradition.

In her autobiographical writings, such as her work "*Family"* (1989), the author narrates in first person the tragedy of losing her second daughter, Imogen, and her constant desire to become a mother after suffering several miscarriages. Her Gothic fiction stories, precisely because of their great psychological depth, reflect these themes in a significant way to the point that her most recent Gothic work is susceptible to being interpreted from an autobiographical and gender perspective.

In her Gothic narratives, the interaction between memory and imagination also occupies a central place, as well as the superimposition of different vital stages that bring to light the artificiality of the temporal divisions in relation to age and ageing. Although they can be identified how, in narratives told by different characters, the past and the present are constantly interspersed. The life stages are often intermingled through homodiegetic storytellers who recall their youth and are described as young characters who are suddenly affected by maturity and ageing due to traumatic personal experiences.

In the author's gothic works, there is also a proliferation of older characters who are either infantilized through the portrait made of them or are artificially rejuvenated, as well as characters who, despite their childhood, age prematurely. Likewise, in the author's late Gothic work there are a number of important older characters whose portraits perpetuate Victorian archetypes of old age present in novels by the writer Charles Dickens. Hill has declared great admiration for Dickens and his characters such as Ebenezer Scrooge in Christmas Carol or Miss Havisham in Great Expectations. There is also a legacy of popular tales, some of these characters, described through their old age, resemble archetypes very present in the imaginary collective, as is the case of the archetypes of the wise man or the witch, which manifest an eminently ambivalent characterization of old age.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL QUOTES:

Influence of the classic stories of Victorian ghosts:

"The traditional, classic English ghost story, like the traditional classic English detective story, has its origins in the nineteenth century […] as we recognise the forms, they were really Victorian; that period was when they were formed, that was when every self-respecting writer, good and bad, turned his or her hand to one, or both. […] The classic ghost story still has tremendous power to chill and alarm, to make us turn our heads to look behind us and dread to walk up the dark staircase to bed at night. That is partly because its strength lies in under — not over — statement. Its art is the art of omission, of suggestion, not of crude and explicit description. But, even more important, it is frightening because it has its roots in the real world." (Susan Hill. "Introduction." *Ghost Stories Collected by Susan Hill*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983. 9-11)

"All writers are asked about their influences and it is a hard question to answer correctly because almost everything we read is an influence, and usually quite unconsciously. Other people's ways of writing can surface in one's own years later, influences but barely recognisable as such. But a few are known and those few are the ones that strike a chord at the moment of reading." (Susan Hill. *Howards End is on the Landing: A Year of Reading from Home*. London: Profile Books, 2009. 142)

The experience of motherhood and the loss of her second daughter Imogen:

"I did manage to write another book, a ghost novel called *The Woman in Black* […] I wrote my book in seven weeks — and at every available opportunity, quizzed Julie about obstetrics and gynaecology, fertility and infertility. I was obsessed by my need to become pregnant and, in a strange way, that is what the desire becomes — not for a baby so much as simply to succeed in getting pregnant, being in that state." (Susan Hill. *Family*. London: Penguin Books, 1989. 114)

"For about a year, I was depressed — not just a bit miserable, a bit low, but properly, clinically depressed. When I woke each morning, a sense of doom and misery that there was another day to face seemed to lie like a stone in the pit of my stomach. I had no interest in anything very much — family, work, the world around me, holidays, friends, — everything was an effort, a drag. I was irritable, and short tempered. I nagged at Stanley, turned on Jessica, could not bear anyone's company for long, but was afraid to be mysefl for fear of —? Of nothing, really. Just fear. I was gripped several times a day by uncontrollable fear, panic, when I wanted to run away somewhere, pull a blanket over my head and hide." (Susan Hill. *Family*. London: Penguin Books, 1989. 121)

"For my own part, I learned a great deal about myself, and the experience was more than worthwhile. I learned about the strengths of my own feminine and female needs, about the passionate desire to bear a child and how it can overcome any obstacles and dominate your life and every waking thought, and take over your reason. It is a force for which I now have the utmost respect." (Susan Hill. *Family*. London: Penguin Books, 1989. 286).

"And Imogen. Oh, I remembered Imogen, I looked round for her in the garden, for she was always there, somewhere just out of reach, out of sight, always with me. She was who she was, entirely herself, for that brief time, though who knows what she, too, would have become? In her, I saw perfect, holy innocence." (Susan Hill. *Family*. London: Penguin Books, 1989. 294).

QUOTES FROM SUSAN HILL'S NOVELS:

Superimposition of different vital stages:

"They led here, to this woman with beginnings of grey hair, staring out of the mirror. They were that person. Me. And yet they were not, they were ghosts, and they had vanished, Where to? Where? They were not dead, as she was dead, but they no more existed than the newborn baby or toddling child I had also once been. How many selves do we contain, like Russian dolls concealed within one another?" (Susan Hill. *Mrs de Winter*. London: Vintage, 1999. 324-5)

“The age did not matter, I knew now that one some days I was older than my mother had been, as old as it was possible ever to be, and on others, a very few — today was one — I was the age I had been when I had met Maxim, and would never alter or grow older. Most of the time, if I thought of it at all, I was some dull, indeterminate middle age.” (Susan Hill. *Mrs de Winter*. London: Vintage, 1999. 193)

Young narrators aged due to traumatic experiences:

“Telling the story had been like a purgation and now my head felt curiously light, my body in that limp state such as follows upon a fever or a fright. But I reflected that I could, from this moment on, only get better, because I could only move step by steady step away from those awful happenings, as surely as time went on.

‘Well,’ he said at last. ‘You have come a long way since the night I met you on the late train.’

‘It feels like a hundred years ago. I feel like another man’.” (Susan Hill. *The Woman in Black*. London: Vintage, 1998. 145)

Ghostly characters, young only in appearance:

“Though not any medical expert, I had heard of certain conditions which caused such terrible wasting, such ravages of the flesh, and knew that they were generally regarded as incurable, and it seemed poignant that a woman, who was perhaps only a short time away from her own death, should drag herself to a funeral of another. Nor did she look old. The effect of the illness made her age hard to guess, but she was quite possible no more than thirty.” (Susan Hill. *The Woman in Black*. 49)

“The body was that of a young woman aged around twenty-five to twenty-eight. She was severely malnourished, but this would not have accounted for her having the vocal cords, larynx and lungs of someone over seventy years, who had been a heavy tobacco smoker.” (Susan Hill. *Printer’s Devil Court*. London: Profile Books, 2014. 82-3)

Childhood and youth aged prematurely:

“When we had both looked at it at last we were children and the doll was a baby doll, with staring bright blue eyes, a painted rosebud mouth and a smooth china face, neck, arms, legs and body. It was an artificial-looking thing but it was as like a human baby as any doll can ever be.

Now, we both stared in horror at the thing on table in front of us. It was not a baby, but a wizened old woman, a crone, with a few wisps of twisted greasy grey hair, a mouth slightly open to reveal a single black tooth, and the face gnarled and wrinkled like a tree trunk, with lines and pockmarks. It was sallow, the eyes were sunken and the lids creased with age, the lips thin and hard.” (Susan Hill. *Dolly*. London: Profile Books, 2013. 115)

“I felt as if I were dissolving, or perhaps shrivelling. I was not faint or light-hearted. I had a feeling that I was decaying. It is the only way I can describe it. I was becoming old and I was dying, slowly. Oxygen was giving out, though I could still just breathe, but when I did, the air smelled noxious. I had a sensation of creeping flesh and of things squirming beneath my feet. Everything was being absorbed into this horrible disintegration — the walls and stairs, the doors and the ceiling, the light fittings, the floor. And my own body. There seemed to be not only no clean air but no hope, no future, nothing joyous or pleasant left in existence. I was becoming mould. I looked at the backs of my hands and they were a greenish-white, with a bloom like the surface of mushrooms which have begun to turn. It was a terrifying, horrible sensation, and I could not get away from it or struggle out of it. How long I stood on the stairs in its grip I do not know — it felt like eternity but I actually think it was only a fleeting second. Time had expanded and contracted and I was totally confused.” (Susan Hill. “Alice Baker.” *The Travelling Bag and Other Ghostly Stories*. London: Profile Books, 2016. 102-3)

Older characters rejuvenated or infantilized by grotesque portraits:

“I guessed that she must be well into her nineties. Sitting next to me, she seemed more like a moth than a bird, with the brilliant blue eyes glinting at me out of the pale skin, but I noticed that she was made up with rouge and powder and that her nails were painted. She had a high forehead behind which the hair was puffed out, and a beaky, bony nose, a thin line of mouth. Her cheekbones were high, too, and I thought that, with the blue of her eyes and with flesh on her distinguished bones, she might well have been a considerable beauty in her youth.” (Susan Hill. *The Man in the Picture*. London: Profile Books, 2008. 62)

“She looked up at me. Her eyes were watery and pale, like the eyes of most very old people, but there was something about the look in them that unnerved me. Her skin was powdery and paper-thin, her nose a bony hook. It was impossible to guess her age. And yet there was a strange beauty about her, a decaying, desiccated beauty, but it held my gaze for all that. She seemed to belong with those dried and faded flowers people used to press between pages, or with a bowl of old potpourri that exudes a faint, sweet, ghostly scent when it is disturbed. Yet when she spoke again her voice was clear and sharp, with an elegant pronunciation.” (Susan Hill. *The Small Hand*. London: Profile Books, 2010. 142-4)

“‘Solange! Come in. Is everything all right for you? Would you like some coffee?’

Solange looked slowly round the room, eyes resting on every surface, every object, and then out of the window onto the garden, and then back to Belinda. Hers were odd eyes, pebble-coloured with a needle of yellow at their centre.

Belinda cleared her throat. ‘Do come and sit down.’

‘There’s a nasty draught in that room.’

‘Is there? I’m sorry, Solange. I’ll check your windows and if it isn’t that, Norman will have a look when he gets home.’

‘Nobody comes.’

‘Solange, don’t just stand there — talking of draughts. Come in and have coffee.’ (Susan Hill. “The Front Room.” *The Travelling Bag and Other Ghostly Stories*. London: Profile Books, 2016. 160-1).

The archetype of the witch:

“I had had all sorts of wild imaginings about the state of her house. I had expected it, perhaps, to be a shrine to the memory of a past time, or to her youth, or to the memory of her husband of so short a time, like the house of poor Miss Havisham.” (Susan Hill. *The Woman in Black*. London: Vintage Books, 1998. 69)

“I saw a round table and, beside it though set back a little, a chair, in which sat an old woman. The glow came from a single dim lamp which stood on the table, its lights veiled by some kind of reddish-coloured cloth. The woman wore a scarf, tied gypsy-fashion about her forehead, and she seemed to be dressed in shawls of some dark flowing stuff. All of this I no more than glimpsed at me, though how much she could see of me in the dimness I do not know. But I saw her. I saw the black pits of her eyes with a pin-prick gleam at their centre, and a swarthiness and greasiness about her skin; I saw her hands laid on top of one another, old, scrawny, claw-like hands they seemed to me; and the flash of a spark from some jewelled or enamelled ring.” (Susan Hill. *The Mist in the Mirror*. London: Profile Books, 1999. 39)

The archetype of the wise man:

“The story was told to me by my old tutor, Theo Parmitter, as we sat beside the fire in his college rooms one bitterly cold January night. There were still real fires in those days, the coals brought up by the servant in huge brass scuttles. I had travelled down from London to see my old friend, who was by then well into his eighties,

hale and hearty and with a mind as sharp as ever, but crippled by severe arthritis so that he had difficulty leaving his rooms. The college looked after him well. He was one of a dying breed, the old Cambridge bachelor for whom his college was his family. He had lived in this handsome set for over fifty years and he would be content to die here." (Susan Hill. *The Man in the Picture*. London: Profile Books, 2007. 1)

"Fergus never looks old. Fergus is ageless. He will look the same when he is ninety as he did the day I met him, when we were both eighteen and in our first week at Balliol. He has never left Oxford and he never will. He married a don, Helena, a world expert on some aspect of early Islamic art, they live in a tiny, immaculate house in a lane off the lower Woodstock Road, they take their holidays in countries like Jordan and Turkistan. They have no children, but if they ever did, those children would be, as so many children of Oxford academics have always been, born old." (Susan Hill. *The Small Hand*. London: Profile Books, 2010. 38)

PUBLICATIONS:

Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "'I wanted to be old': Gender and Aging in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Susan Hill's *Mrs de Winter*." (pendiente de publicación)

Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "'Old, scrawny, claw-like hands they seemed to me': Folktale Witches and Fairies in Susan Hill's Gothic Narratives." (pendiente de evaluación)

Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. 'It made her age hard to guess' Evoking *Dracula* through Images of Aging in Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*." (pendiente de evaluación)

Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "'The business was beginning to sound like something from a Victorian novel': Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* in the Victorian Mirror." (pendiente de evaluación)

Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "'Now, I was that old man': Images of Aging and the Mirror of Old Age in Susan Hill's *The Mist in the Mirror*." (pendiente de evaluación)

Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "'I do feel a bit responsible… She's well over eighty': Ambivalent Portrayals of Old Age in Susan Hill's Later Fiction." (pendiente de evaluación)

Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "Age Frozen in Art: Subverting Age in Susan Hill's *The Man in the Picture* and *Dolly*." (pendiente de evaluación)

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