

The signalman and the yellow wallpaper essay



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The short stories 'The Signalman,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper' can be both categorised as gothic horror, as various elements of horror can be found within. The authors, Dickens and Gilman successfully convey this to us through their concepts, their use of language, as well as their characters, which are all significant components of the story. In 'The Signalman', Dickens shows us a disturbed man with intangible theories, whereas Gilman uses a woman gradually driven to sheer insanity in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'.

Although these concepts are very different, the vivid use of language and dismal setting are where the similarity between the two stories lies, as well as an uncompleted ending that successfully conveys a sense of mystery that lies haunting in our minds. The two stories have similar settings, as both are situated in a desolated, dingy place. In 'The Signalman', the narrator begins his journey from the 'top of the steep cutting' above the signalman's head, and starts his way down a 'rough zigzag descending path', which can correspond to the concept of heading down to hell or one's fate. The narrator then heads down towards a dark tunnel where the signalman is situated, and describes it as a 'great dungeon'. Immediately, an eerie atmosphere is set here, as the place is dark and isolated – both common features of a typical horror story. As the narrator arrives to the 'dungeon', Dickens repeats the word 'gloomy': once on the 'gloomy red light', and then again to describe the 'gloomier entrance to a black tunnel'.

This is highly effective as it is a significant omen to the readers that something dreadful is about to happen. In addition, the narrator claims that there was a 'barbarous, depressing, and forbidding air, as well as an 'earthly, deadly smell' in the 'black' tunnel, which gave him the feeling as if

he had 'left the natural world.' This suggests that the location is extremely hell-like. The use of these daunting adjectives one after the other puts emphasis on the sinister tone.

Furthermore, Dickens also uses personification on the setting, such as the 'tunnel's mouth', which is powerful as the tunnel can seem to gobble up anything that enters its mouth. Therefore, Dickens' use of a powerful ghastly setting is one of the ways that he creates a sense of horror. 'The Yellow Wallpaper' on the other hand, holds less detail on the setting compared to 'The Signalman', but still consists of a similar sinister and ominous atmosphere. The story starts off in a 'colonial mansion, a hereditary estate', in which the narrator refers to it as a 'haunted house', claiming that 'there was something queer about it' due to the fact that it had 'stood so long untenanted'.

This provides a clear idea to the readers that this story is situated in somewhere isolated and grave, therefore building a forbidding atmosphere based on the narrator's thoughts on this 'haunted house'. Moreover, the house is said to be 'quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village' which illuminates the desolation of the house. The narrator then reiterates her thoughts on the house when she moves into it, declaring that 'there is something strange about the house', and that she could 'feel it'. This is particularly potent as the narrator's thoughts reflect on ours, leading us to think that there may be something truly uncanny within the mansion. Building onto the setting, Gilman states that the narrator had 'watched the moonlight on that undulating paper' till she felt disturbed. The

word ' moonlight' is evidence to show us that this happens at night - where it is dark, sinister and mysterious.

Although Dickens and Gilman both convey a sense of horror in their story, the characters and concepts within are quite different. In ' The Signalman', the signalman in Dickens' story is initially shown as a ' dark sallow man', with his figure ' foreshortened and shadowed down in the deep trench. ' The words ' dark', ' shadowed', and ' deep' are particularly compelling as it portrays the signalman as sinister, mysterious and ghastly. This aura extends when the narrator - a complete stranger to the signalman - is shown to be expected by the signalman, ' in an attitude as if he were waiting for' the narrator ' to appear. Dickens develops the horror by using the narrator's frightened thoughts towards this.

He had ' perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face,' of the signalman, thinking that he may be a ' spirit, not a man'. The tension intensifies when the signalman tells the narrator that he was ' doubtful' whether he ' had seen' the narrator before - from the ' red light' in the dark tunnel. This creates a sense of mystery as we are then filled with suspicion about the signalman - could he really be a spirit? Is there some special connection between the narrator and him? The questions build on as he then talks about his ' troubles', which involve an Appearance that he encounters, each time with a warning from it -the frantic waving or calling out- and a death following right after it. This subject of this character encountering uncanny coincidences is one of the ways Dickens use to make the story haunting and full of riddles.

Gilman's character on the other hand expands the horror through a different way. As the narrator of the story, she naturally has an impact on our emotions. Rather than creating a sense of horror through a character's supernatural and physical features such Dickens' signalman, Gilman conveys the horror through her narrator's state of mind, creating a psychologically eerie story. In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', we first learn that the narrator has a 'temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical tendency', according to her doctor and husband.

However, this deteriorates greatly when the narrator moves into the mansion and starts to perceive strange shapes on the wallpaper. The dim shapes get clearer every day' is a sign that the narrator is gradually falling into mental illness each day, as the peculiar shapes are actually only figments of her imagination. The dim pattern then gradually becomes regarded as a woman behind the monstrous pattern, and then more of them appear- some hidden in the wallpaper whereas others are seen creeping on the land outside her barred window. She believes that 'there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one,' and claims that 'she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over'. The word 'crawling' is repeated many times within the story to develop the sinister mood, as it is usually creepy insects or mysterious creatures that crawl.

Gilman then shows that the narrator had completely lost it when she had torn herself away from the real world, drowning into her own imaginary one. Towards the end of the story where the narrator saw the nonexistent woman behind the wallpaper 'crawl and shake the pattern', she had 'got up and ran to help her' as she 'shook' and the woman 'pulled', tearing the wallpaper

down as a result of her madness. This creates a psychologically horrifying feeling as Gilman shows the narrator cannot distinguish between fiction and reality anymore. In this way of horror in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is created through the psychotic mind of the narrator. Besides using her deteriorating insanity, Gilman makes use of her eerie illusions and describes them with visual details to cement this.

In the story, the narrator sees the pattern on the wallpaper 'strangle' heads off and 'turn them upside-down' as well as 'making their eyes white'. The graphic description of torture going on in the narrator's mind highlights the horror effectively, as words such as 'strangle' depicts an unpleasant, vivid image. On a similar basis, the narrator believes that the patterns on the wallpaper seem to have 'bulbous eyes' and strangled heads' that 'shriek with derision'. The use of language is immensely disturbing as it suggests how the narrator sees the wallpaper's pattern as something monstrous and murderous.

Even worse, the narrator's hysterics eventually turn life threatening as she becomes mad enough to desire suicide. Near the end of 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the narrator was 'getting angry enough to do something desperate', and had described that jumping out of the window would be an 'admirable exercise'. She even believed that she had come out of the wallpaper, along with all her other imaginary creeping women. Her conviction is what creates the ghastly feeling as she has torn herself away completely from the external world. Moreover, Gilman repeats the word 'creeping' numerous times to illuminate the essence of insanity, from where the

narrator saw 'creeping women' to becoming one of them herself. The concept in 'The Signalman' is however dissimilar.

Although the narrator had suspected that 'there may have been infection' in the signalman's mind at first, the haunting illusions of the signalman's turned out to be from supernatural causes, and not a figment like the narrator's from 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. The main concept of the story lies on the eerie coincidences that the signalman comes across. It is shown that each time an Appearance is seen, horrible deaths would trail after it, leaving the signalman in distress. The spectre that the signalman claimed to have seen had its 'left arm across the face,' with the arm 'violently waved' and had on other times yelled out, "Below there! Look out! Look out!" which were all actions that the train's operator had made to the signalman before killing him, thus developing an uncomfortably familiar feeling. When the narrator could not 'describe the thrill that seized upon' him when close at the mouth of the tunnel he 'saw the appearance of a man, with his left sleeve across his eyes, passionately waving his right arm', we will then understand that the signalman's visions were all valid, thus creating a sense of horror.

The main subject could be then seen as the supernatural since the concept in Dickens's story is mostly revolved around the signalman's spectre and clairvoyance to generate a grim atmosphere. It is effective as the familiar gestures bring us back to the front of the story, thus making it rather haunting. Nevertheless, the endings in the short stories are similarly compelling, as they both consist of an unfinished complication, succeeding to creating a sinister mood. In the final part of Dickens' story, the narrator

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heads off to seek for the signalman just to find out that he was killed by a train. The man who drove the train had warned the signalman beforehand with his "his left sleeve across his eyes," and "waving his right arm".

This familiar gesture is the twist of the story, as the sense of de ja vu comes from well-known gestures that the signalman had previously mentioned, meaning that his warnings had turned out to be true. It was however the signalman himself who had died in the final incident, leaving the narrator speechless in the final line as he was shocked by the "gesticulation he (the driver) had imitated". There is no conclusion to the story as the narrator is left there oppressed by the horror, leading us to think of what is to happen next ourselves. The Yellow Wallpaper' on the other hand ends with the narrator creeping on the floor, determined that she is the woman from the wallpaper and had escaped from the "pattern". The story closes with her husband fainting from shock and the narrator's only intention was to "creep over him every time".

The way that these two endings are intentionally left without being concluded is a powerful way of finishing the story, as we are left wondering about the aftermath of the story, with the haunting imageries still left in our minds which creates a sense of insecurity, and is how many horror stories successfully convey their sense of fear.