

English coursework – literary tradition essay sample



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We have studied the short stories "The Signalman" by C. Dickens and "The Red Room" by H. G. Wells. Both of these texts are short stories and as such follow the traditional short story writing form. They have a simple plot, an opening that catches the imagination, themes such as ghosts, witchcraft, love, fear hatred ect, very few settings; the action takes place in the same areas. Short descriptions; much is left up to the reader. Short dialogue, suspense or tension and an atmosphere created by characters and setting.

The Signalman

All stories follow the same general pattern of situation, conflict, main event and resolution. In the signalman the situation is our narrator, visits the signalman who is worried about a haunting. He is having visions of the supernatural. This obviously disturbs the signalman, he tells our narrator with a distinctive fearfulness and wary. The signalman is worried of a danger that the spectre could hold. The conflict is that the signalman believes the spectre is trying to warn him about something, but he can not work out what it is. This is what is causing him the most worry. The signalman wants to know what he can do to save people but he cannot work it out because the ghost's message is unclear to him. The main events in "The Signalman" follow a similar pattern.

First the ghost appears and within hours there is an accident on the line and people are killed and wounded. Some months later the ghost appears again and shortly afterwards the train is stopped near the signalman's box because a lady has suddenly died on it. The final resolution of the story occurs when the ghost appears again more than once over the course of one week and

the signalman is struck and killed by a train coming out of the tunnel. The driver of the train that killed the signalman said and did the same things as the ghost.

The story opens with the words “ Helloah! Below there!” this is narrator shouting to what will be our main character. The signalman doesn’t look towards the narrator however which makes us, as the reader wonder why straight away. The narrator also thinks it is strange that the signalman does not look straight at him. Then the narrator calls “ is there any path by which I can come down and speak to you?” This makes us wonder what the setting is. Then a train goes by so that we now know the true setting of the story. The theme to be developed is that the signalman hears and sees things that do not seem to be real. Violence is also present; the narrator the narrator says that “ vague vibration in the earth and air, quickly changing into a violent pulsation”. The place is described as a ‘ great dungeon’; traditionally dungeons are a place of violence and have negative connotations within the readers’ minds’.

The “ black tunnel” is described as having a ‘ barbarous, depressing, and forbidding air’ and the ‘ cold wind rushed through it’. This makes us think it is a dangerous and negative place. None of these images are ones we as the reader would enjoy. Dickens uses the first person narrative, this almost intimate closeness with the narrator helps us to empathise with him and understand the story more. It also lets the author say what is on the character’s mind more clearly which can only happen when you write in the first person. When the narrator begins to feel frightened due to this bond we too feel frightened. When the narrator says “ his manner seemed to make
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the place strike colder to me but I said no more than very well” we feel that he is frightened and so we are more frightened ourselves.

Usually there is not a great deal of scene setting involved because there is not time in a short story. Because the description is short the authors use power language such as onomatopoeia, alliteration to create a powerful mental image for the reader almost as if they watching themselves. The cutting where the signalman takes his residence is “ extremely deep, and unusually precipitous. It was made through a clammy stone that became oozy and wetter as I went down”. These images are all images that will unsettle the reader as words like clammy and ooze have negative and somewhat supernatural connotations. “ His post was in as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw. On either side, a dripping wet wall of jagged stone excluding all view but a strip of sky..” This reference to a thin strip of sky is unusual to the reader as we are accustomed to seeing the sky as a wide open plane.

This also helps to further the image of the dungeon as the view from a dungeon would only yield a small strip of sky. The narrator also notices that much of the tunnel is in shade most of the time, a further possible reference to the interior of a dungeon and we as the reader would prefer to be in the sunlight as we would feel safer that way. The one source of light that is repeatedly referenced to is the danger light at the end of the tunnel. People often see light as a source of safety, however in this story it is only the purveyor of danger and doom. We have a feeling that this place is not of our world. When the narrator says “ so little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthy deadly smell” this makes the reader call up images of a stark dangerous landscape, akin to the caves and dungeons of <https://assignbuster.com/english-coursework-literary-tradition-essay-sample/>

myth and supernatural activity. It is also commonly believed that ghosts appear when it is dark and not usually in the sunshine.

Usually in a short story there would only be one or two characters. This is because there is not enough time to get to know a lot of characters, and it is more important that the reader becomes emotionally involved and empathises with those few that are in the story; this is easier when the people in the stories are ordinary people as this makes it easier. A character would be described physically and then the emotions shown on his face will be described at different points in the story. There are only two characters; the narrator and the signalman. We don't know what the narrator looks like as it is in the first person but he describes the signalman as " a dark sallow man, with a dark beard and rather heavy eyebrows." The signalman appears to be a quite private man who may find it difficult to talk openly.

The signalman used to be contented but isn't anymore. We know this because when the narrator tells the signalman he thinks he is contented the signalman replied, " I believe I used to be so, but I am troubled sir I am troubled." When the narrator asks him what is troubling him the signalman replies, " it is very difficult to impart, sir. It is very, very difficult to speak of. If ever you make me another visit I will try to tell you". While at work the signalman had ' taught himself a language, worked at fractions and decimals, and tried a little algebra.'

When he had been young he had been student of natural philosophy but hadn't made the most of his education and so had ended up being a signalman but he was still philosophical about the whole situation, he

accepts what he has done the narrator says ‘ He has no complaint to offer about that. He had made his bed, and he lay upon it.’ He was polite whilst speaking to the narrator and took his duty as a signalman very seriously. Our narrator gives us an idea on his opinion of the signalman when he says, ‘ In a word, I should have set this man down as one of the safest of men to be employed in that capacity’.

In a short story, dialogue is often used to move the story forward, it tells the reader how a character feels and adds detail. This extract helps to move the story on and gives us some information:

“ I go off early in the morning, and I shall be on again at ten o’clock tomorrow night, sir.”

“ I will come at eleven.”

He thanked me, and went out at the door with me. “ I’ll show my white light, sir,” he said, in his peculiar low voice, “ till you have found the way up. When you have found it, don’t call out! And when you are at the top, don’t call out!”

His manner seemed to make the place strike colder to me, but I said no more than, “ Very well.”

“ And when you come down tomorrow night, don’t call out! Let me ask you a parting question. What made you cry, “ Halloa! Below there!” tonight?”

“ Heaven knows,” said I. “ I cried something to that effect -“

“ Not to that effect, sir. Those were the very words. I know them well.”

It tells us that they are going to meet again the following night, and we are interested to hear what the Signalman will say so this adds to the excitement. We also know that they will meet late at night, which is frightening. There is a reason why the Signalman does not want the Narrator to call out, but we do not know what this is yet. This adds mystery and adds to the atmosphere.

The Signalman asks why the Narrator used particular words and said that he knew them well. This also adds to the atmosphere as we are thinking why are those words so important? The reader feels the tension and suspense because they are already disturbed by the gloomy setting without much light. All the way through the story it is either night, or in the shadow near the track which is uncomfortable for the reader. The Signalman says strange things and the Narrator sometimes feels frightened. The reader feels the same as the Narrator because it is written in the first person.

The Red Room

“ The Signalman” and “ The Red Room” are very similar. The situation in “ The Red Room” is that a man is in a castle trying to investigate a so called haunted room. Both narrators have a similar style with a set of dialogue then a kind of inner running monologue. The conflict in “ The Red Room” is that the narrator does not believe in ghosts. He does not agree with the custodians who believe that the room is haunted.

This is reminiscent of the signalman as to begin with the narrator in that piece is unsure if there is indeed the spectre that the signalman believes in. For the main event the man goes to the castle and learns of the history,
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there has been a death in the room hence the reason the custodians believe it to be haunted. He spends some time alone in the room and the candles go out. The narrator becomes scared and flees the room, falling down the stairs as he goes. The resolution is that he survives and learns that there is no ghost, only fear itself.

The opening of "The Red Room" is straight in with dialogue instantly setting the scene. Our narrator then explains each of the characters in turn and whereabouts they are in this opening setting. "The Signalman" also opens with dialogue and moves on to description, in that respect the two are similar. The themes in "The Red Room" are fear and the supernatural. The beginning of this tale concerns the supernatural and steadily moves on to the theme of fear as the narrator enters the room and the main event happens. This is the same as in "The Signalman". Towards the beginning the signalman and the narrator discuss the supernatural with the atmosphere darkening later on in the story to become more about fear. The opening of "The Red Room" introduces the concept of the supernatural to the reader. We are first made aware of it with the first statement from the narrator claiming "it will take a very tangible ghost to frighten me".

This means that he doubts the ghost's existence and believes he will not be frightened by anything but conclusive evidence. By the end of the piece he is proven wrong. The old people he meets at the beginning, the custodians, remain very mysterious adding to the sense of the supernatural and scepticism. The way that the old man with the withered arm repeats "It is your own choosing" suggests that he knows something that our narrator does not, the phrasing used also explains to our narrator that if he chooses

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to go on that anything that happens is for him to deal with on his own. The sense of foreboding mystery is enhanced as our narrator explains his views on the old people. “ There is to my mind something inhuman in senility”. The unease shown here reinforces the atmosphere. If the narrator is frightened or unnerved, we as the reader are as well because of the first person bond I have already mentioned.

“ The Red Room” has only one setting. This is the castle. There are three subsections of the setting: the room where our narrator begins his story with the three old custodians, the corridor on the way to the red room and the haunted room itself. A large portion of this short story’s description is in the red room and the corridor to the room. In the corridor the narrator has been relieved of the three old custodians and so on his own his imagination is allowed to run unchecked. For a start he is in a castle.

Old castles are almost synonymous with mystery and the supernatural. As he walks down the corridor and up to the spiral staircase many of the (horror) genre’s staples are realised. There are candles in the walls at frequent intervals and reference is made to “ old fashioned furniture” and “ fashions born in dead brains”. These two references when combined with the setting of a castle convey a sense of almost being thrust back in time. In fact the next reference to anything modern is the narrator’s revolver “ lain ready to hand”. This is clearly a violent image jerking the reader back into, what was then, the modern day.

The character and the dialogue follow the tradition of short stories. The characters are described in the same way as in “ The Signalman” with

physical description coming before emotional or extra description. The author is very keen to get certain images across such as the man with the “withered arm” which is mentioned every time he has a line of dialogue. The dialogue is very effective in giving the reader an idea of the scene and sense of foreboding. As in all short stories the dialogue is full of powerful devices such as repetition, the man with the withered arm has the line “It is your own choosing” which he says three times over the course of two pages. The characters of the three custodians are typical of creepy castles and give a lot to the atmosphere. The man with the withered arm is described as such.

The old woman is said to have very “pale eyes” which are “staring hard into the fire”. This image is a very powerful one as it suggests the old woman has a dark wisdom that our young narrator (described by himself as “eight and twenty years” meaning twenty eight) does not possess. The third and final custodian is given the most description. He is described as “more bent, more wrinkled, more aged even than the first” in reference to the man with the withered arm.

This description is powerful because as the first man is portrayed as weak due to his withered arm to say that this newcomer into the room is more aged and withered than the first is an extremely powerful image that the reader would be able to relate with because of real life experiences, this story is meant for adults and so they will be more age conscious. In a way this adds to the horror. The three old custodians scare the narrator with their seemingly dark wisdom and frail forms being in such a frightening place.

In conclusion both stories share a similar theme. Both involve the supernatural, "The Signalman" has the spectre and "The Red Room" has the haunted room. Fear is also a theme as both narrators make specific reference to being afraid at some point. "The Signalman" opens with one bit of dialogue but then moves on to description, there is not much dialogue before the description. "The Red Room" also opens with some dialogue but moves on to the narrator setting the scene for us. "The Red Room" is set in an old castle and an old haunted room which is a traditional setting for a horror story. "The Signalman" is set in the signalman's box and on the train track near a tunnel. This was also a scary setting due to the lack of light.

The characters in "The Red Room" are to begin with numerous but quickly we are left with a single character: our narrator. In "The Signalman" we start off with just the two characters but more join in towards the end. The dialogue in "The Red Room" is quite short lived. They use short sentences and there is much repetition. In "The Signalman" the dialogue is much more complex and plays a larger part in advancing the story as the two main characters become closer. The atmosphere in "The Red Room" is thick and heavy, right from the very start we are made aware that there may be danger on ahead and so suspense is built up almost through the entire story. In "The Signalman" the sense of fear is also present from the beginning however the suspense is much more subtle and buried largely in the dialogue.

As a reader I prefer "The Signalman" as I found it much easier to empathise with the narrator and I found the description more useful in building up an idea of what was happening. I was also interested in what the spectre's

message was. Having the signalman wondering what the spectre meant also made me as the reader think more deeply about what was going on. I did not like the repetition of candles in “The Red Room”. Although it was a good device for atmosphere I found that it subtracted from the overall quality of the story.