

Horror stories

Literature



Horror stories are always set in an ordinary or extraordinary setting. They do this for the following reasons; an ordinary setting, such as that used in the darkness out there is used to deceive the reader into a false sense of security, but also, I believe, to make us think irrational thoughts. We wouldn't automatically judge Kerry, but he appears suspicious in such an ordinary environment. This couples with Sandra's judging commentary to automatically prejudice us. When an ordinary setting is used the author then uses apparently subtle hints to increase the suspense.

An extraordinary, such as the cutting in the signalman is used to put the reader immediately on edge. Hints in the descriptions of such places give the reader a feeling of the atmosphere. In the Signalman Dickens used the fears of the Victorian age to instil fear into the reader of the time. Steam Trains were very new and were labelled machines of hell. This ties in very closely Dickens's theme for the cutting in which the story is set. Many horror books and films today are set where we have the most interest and fear in, the future. The story is set in a deep railway cutting, hewed into " precipitous" stone. Dickens is ruthless in his use of adjectives.

Most have some Relation to hell, anger or evil. His referral to an " angry sunset" is strange; sunsets are usually things of great beauty. This shows that this particular cutting is a place of evil and abnormality. The fact that the signalman is steeped in this light associates this evil with him, steeped being used to make the light feel unholy. The description of the train leaving the tunnel is clever as pulsation, and vapour are also associated with hell.

The tunnel itself is the gateway to hell, metaphorically, the site of the haunting, and literally, we see that the tunnel itself can be hell, extremely dangerous. Dickens uses this bombardment of adjectives to encourage the reader to be suspicious of everything in the cutting including the signalman; in this manner he builds suspense. As I have said before *The Darkness Out* There is set in an ordinary environment. This is so that Penelope lively can build up suspense for the reader. She uses subtle hints of abnormality. The first hint that something is not right is Sandra's referral to packers end.

The stigma she attaches to it is to distract us from the fact that the real evil is Mrs Rutter not the wood. It is also to make us aware of the story, letting us know what Mrs Rutter is talking about. The description of Mrs Rutter is particularly interesting. " She seemed composed of circles, a cottage-loaf of a woman, with a face below which chins collapsed one into another, a creamy smiling pool of a face in which her eyes snapped and darted. " This shows that although Mrs Rutter appears old and slow, a lovely woman, her eyes show an insight to her personality.

She is really intense, fast and clever, as further reading will reveal. The signalman is also intelligent but he is, to a certain extent, eccentric. You can tell this from the narrator's description of his duties and his spare time. The signalman had created his own language and learned algebra. The biggest sign of his eccentricity is his seeing of the ghost, he believes it is real and does not strive to explain it as the narrator does. The description of the signalman at the beginning is interesting because the narrator sees the signalman as a dead man.

He describes him as a "dark sallow man". The narrator mistakes the signalman for a ghost "The monstrous thought came into my mind, as I pursued the fixed eyes and the saturnine (dead) face, that this was a spirit, not a man." This statement leaves us questioning the mortality of the signalman until the end, making the ending unexpected. In this way Dickens builds tension hugely Sandra's behaviour, language and appearance are very important to the story line. Sandra is very pretty, she says so herself. Looks are important to her; her judging of Kerry proves this.

She is a very false person, her importance of looks, her joining of the neighbours club just because it is the "cool" thing to do. This means that Mrs Rutter can manipulate her later on in the story. Mrs Rutter manipulates Sandra by complements, so Sandra will do what she wants. This shows that Mrs Rutter is not as nice as she seems, in-fact her mind is far more potent that we can imagine. Kerry on the other hand is far different to Sandra, he is not pretty, he is not from the right part of town but he is a very kind person.

This is shown by his gesture of giving some of his chocolate to Sandra. In-fact if we read deeper we can tell Kerry is a genuine character. He has given up his time (and his money) at the mechanics to be at the neighbours club, and as he is a social outsider, he is not doing it to be "cool". The signalman himself is filled with great fear and anxiety, nothing like either Sandra or Kerry. It leaves the reader wondering what he fears and then, when the bells does or does not ring, when he loses complexion in his already sallow face, the reader become even further intrigued.

This loss of colour brings the signalman's mortality into question again, could a ghost lose colour? This point would have been particularly tantalising for a Victorian audience, they were extremely interested in the question of mortality. The leaving comments of the signalman are interesting; the signalman warns the narrator "do not call out", as if he does not want the narrator to call once again the words of the ghost. Next comes the description of the accidents and their relation to the ghost, the signalman's fear is shown in these accounts, the narrator and the Signalman talk about the ringing of the bell.

The narrator insists "it did not ring", he tries to explain the apparition of the ghost and the bell in normal terms, but fails to change the opinion of the Signalman, we have seen that the signalman is a regular person, and through his duties quite reliable, so we find it hard to believe that he is making this up, the signalman believes that he saw the ghost, and whether he did or whether it is part of his active imagination is irrelevant, every time that the ghost appeared, through supernatural means or not, an accident occurred.

Because the signalman is sure he saw the ghost, and is sure in the relation between the ghost and the accidents, Dickens convinces the reader to believe this extremely reliable man, thus building tension, the reader now knows, or at least believes, that another accident is coming. Penelope Lively approaches the building of tension in a completely different way. She first deceives us with the description of Mrs Rutter, although she does tell us she is not as lovely as she seems.

You can also see her checking Kerry out, "above her eyes examined him". We already start to see that Mrs Rutter is far more clever and perceptive than she seems, she sees that by complementing Sandra she can get her to do what she wants, "" Like bees round a honey pot, they'll be" The girl blushed". We can see that Mrs Rutter's compliment "hit the spot" because Sandra then admires her young body. Mrs Rutter also understands that she cannot do this to Kerry, so she puts him in the garden.

As the references to the Second World War begin, the story begins to unfold itself, when we discover that Mrs Rutter's husband was killed in the war. Sandra is troubled by this news, she lives in a perfect world, where nothing like death occurs, this is why she is so genuinely scared. As Mrs Rutter talks about the tragedies of the war she says she has "a sympathy with young people" this is extremely ironic as it shows that she is trying to manipulate both Sandra and Kerry, but also that she didn't have a sympathy with the young German she killed, she obviously didn't see him as a person.

As Sandra walks down the path we have further evidence that she lives in a dream world, as we hear about her dream of a country house we can see how conceited she is, how she longs for a perfect life that will never be true. We also get another insight into Sandra's naive perspective on life, as she mentions the fact that "boys matured later" when Kerry was being far more mature and perceptive. We can see that Sandra is really naive and I wondered why lively had placed such a narrow-minded character into the story. Kerry enters the house with the coalscuttle and kindling.

Kerry seems to have worked out the connection between Mrs Rutter and Packard's end, he is suspicious and so starts questioning her. So far we have seen Mrs Rutter and Sandra to be quite alike, however we now see that Sandra is merely innocent and Mrs Rutter is more sinister, this change builds tension, we are finally getting to the crux of the story. The narrator's attitude in "The Signalman" is very interesting. The narrator continually tries to justify the signalman's revelations with science "I showed him how the figure must be a deception of his sense of sight".

By playing the two characters against each other Dickens creates suspense and tension. The reader is not sure quite what is causing the ghost. It also reveals the Victorian fascination with trying to explain mortality. As the story progresses and the narrator becomes more and more convinced that the ghost is real, it makes the reader feel that if he now believes, after doubting, that they also feel that they should be convinced. As the story closes the reader already knows that some tragedy will occur, but is waiting to see what it will be.

This sort of suspense is typical of Victorian literary traditions. Dickens made his name in monthly periodicals, each chapter was released monthly, the author had to build a cliffhanger if he wanted the reader to buy next month's issue, Dickens was an expert. It is ironic that on the signalman's first meeting with the narrator the sunset is angry, and that evening was brooding with evil. On this day however the evening is beautiful, this change alerts the reader to the inevitable, the tension that has been built is to be released; now the reader's hopes or fears are going to be answered.

As the narrator looks over the edge of the cutting and looks down he thinks he sees the ghost. This shocks that reader, now that the narrator sees the ghost what does it mean? I believe that Dickens placed this twist in the story to confuse the reader, as we expect a disaster. However the narrator recognises his mistake and then the reader sees that a disaster has occurred. It is ironic that the narrator describes the structure that hides the signalman body as a " bed".

The signalman has now found peace from the ghost, and his duties, in his sleep, this also links very closely with the Victorian obsession of mortality, is death like sleep? The final irony of the story is the action of the engine man; it mirrors the actions of the ghost and poses an unanswered question for the reader. Was the ghost warning the signalman of the accident or was the ghost the cause? What caused the train driver to say the words he did, perhaps it was the same supernatural force that caused the narrator to do so?

The narrator sums up these points, leaving the reader feeling estranged from the plot, which has come to a sudden end, I felt the story lacking in explanation in its conclusion which disappointed me, in fact I believe that Dickens was so skilful in building tension that the ending of the story was a let down One final thing that I noticed was that we are never revealed the signalman's nor the narrator's names, where as we are revealed the train drivers, perhaps Dickens meant the pair to seem isolated and also to consider their mortality.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish" sums up Mrs Rutter's view of Germans, she sees them as scum and she treats them accordingly, she sees her action toward the German as "tit for tat" nothing more. She talks about the plain crash in a nonchalant almost jubilant manner. Mrs Rutter describes why she "couldn't," report the crash; she shows her bias towards the Germans once again "we didn't know if it was one of ours or one of theirs". We are starting to lose the picture of Mrs Rutter as the lovely woman who is perhaps a bit quicker than she seems, to a prejudiced vengeful woman who is spiteful and conceited we go into the culmination of the story.

Kerry shows his good nature by trying to point out that it doesn't really matter who's plane it was, but he is interrupted by Mrs Rutter, perhaps a sign of guilt. The fire sighs and heaves as a sign of the tension building in the room; Kerry shows his signs of disbelief by giving Mrs Rutter a second chance, however, she continues to her story of leaving the pilot. The pilot is not old as he is muttering about his mother, but Mrs Rutter has a "sympathy" with young people.

The story of the pilot is irrelevant to the story, Lively is really interested in the way characters react, and how they feel at the end of the story. This is known as enjambment. Kerry feels disgusted but deep down he always knew there was something wrong, it is on Sandra that the events have the biggest effect she realises, as does the reader that the darkness isn't out there its inside everyone, and everyone is evil, and the world isn't simple and easy, it wasn't the darkness of shadow and nightmare, but the shadow in ones head.

Both Lively and Dickens use tension to make a story more interesting, they do so by subtle suggestion and description. Dickens plays on the fears and interests of the Victorian age; this is why *The Signalman* may seem a bit unrealistic to me. I didn't enjoy it because it leaves many questions unanswered to the reader. *The Darkness Out There* is far more modern; it is a psychological thriller and plays on the fears of the modern age. Lively uses manipulation of Sandra, and thus the reader, to build tension, I enjoyed *The Darkness Out There* due to its summary which explains all the questions I needed answered.