

How stories the swan
and the



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' The Swan' by Roald Dahl and ' The Signalman' by Charles Dickens are two stories which create an atmosphere of tension, fear and danger. ' The Swan' is a late twentieth century story about a small boy who is severely bullied by two older and bigger boys. ' The Signalman' is a nineteenth century ghost story of a man who feels that he is being haunted which drives him to his death. These stories have similarities in the characters, but also have differences of their settings and language used. The reader of both these stories can compare the opening of the stories; the different settings; the structure of the stories; the characters, and the narrative style.

Firstly, I will compare the opening sections of both stories. The first line of ' The Swan' intrigues the reader;" Ernie had been given a . 22 rifle for his birthday." (P. 82)This makes the story tense immediately as the reader has a few questions. The reader wants to know who Ernie is, how old he is and why he has been given a gun.

As the gun is mentioned in the first line, the reader expects that there will be violence as the story progresses. The first pages of ' The Swan' concentrate on the characterisation of Ernie and his father;" Like his truck-driver father, he had small slitty eyes set very close together...

His mouth was loose, the lips often wet." (P. 83)This creates a visual image and makes the opening of the story tense. Ernie's eyes are described as if they are glaring and evil-looking. The description of his lips makes the reader think that he lacks intelligence. This is because his lips are described as an animal.

This creates fear as Ernie has a gun and is described as having very little, if any, sense. The first line of 'The Signalman' creates confusion for the reader;" Halloa! Below there!" (P. 105) This typical nineteenth century phrase throws the reader into the story and encourages them to read on. Even after reading the first page, the story is mysterious to the reader.

This is because there is not a clear beginning to the story and the reader is not entirely sure what it is about. This makes the reader want to read on so they can find out what is happening. 'The Swan' builds more tension than 'The Signalman' in the opening section of the story. It also builds the readers expectations more as they have found out that a boy has a gun. For this reason, the reader expects the boy to use the gun to create violence.

The setting of 'The Swan' is natural;"...the countryside was beautiful...

the chestnut trees were in full flower...round the big lake where wild ducks and moorhens lived." (P. 84) This beautiful setting does not give a tense or fearful atmosphere.

However, when juxtaposition is used, it creates a strong contrast with the violence that occurs;"...using the knife, he proceeded to sever the great white wing from the swan's body...

soon the wing came away all in piece." (P. 101) The reader would feel very shocked at the violence the two boys can make. This creates a dangerous and tense atmosphere. As the boys can use the gun, the reader expects that there could be more violence as the story progresses.

This makes the reader want to read on. In 'The Signalman', the setting is very different. As this is a ghost story, it depends on the setting to create an atmosphere. This atmosphere is tense;" On either side, a dripping-wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky...

terminating in a gloomy red light, and the gloomier entrance to a black tunnel..." (P. 106) This gives an image that the setting is dark and unhealthy. The red light symbolises that there is a dangerous atmosphere and it creates an image for the reader who will expect something dangerous to happen.

The repetition of gloomy reinforces the darkness of the setting, making a tense atmosphere. The setting is also "barbarous and depressing" with a "forbidding air". This shows that the environment is violent and it affects the characters' mood, as if they were cut off from the "natural world". This is an effective setting for a ghost story as it creates an atmosphere that is mysterious and frightening. Trains are used in both 'The Swan' and 'The Signalman' as a threat of danger.

In 'The Swan', the train is a "screaming murderous monster" that goes over Peter who is tied to the railways. The personification, alliteration and similes used to describe the train create a visual image and a frightening atmosphere;" The train came over him like an explosion. It was as though a gun had gone off in his head..

. a tearing and screaming wind that was like a hurricane blowing down his nostrils and into his lungs. (P. 94) This makes the train seem very dangerous. The language used creates a tense atmosphere as it helps the reader to

understand the story more and they will realise how dangerous the bullies can be.

‘The Signalman’ uses less personification. Instead, repetition of the train creates a tense atmosphere. Every time the train appears, something dangerous happens, usually death. This worries the reader as they expect something bad to occur. The historical context of ‘The Signalman’ also adds to the tension.

In 1866, railways were new, impressive and mysterious and they were feared. Dickens combined this technological symbol with the ghost story. By adding the narrator to this ghost story, Dickens is contrasting the mysterious with the scientific. This creates fear as the Signalman’s job itself was thought to be dangerous.

The plot and structure of both stories are similar, as tension builds up from one incident followed by an even worse one. However, they also have differences. ‘The Swan’ has no clear sections, but tension and violence are steadily built up as the story progresses from firstly shooting little sparrows; to a wild duck; “a magnificent white swan”, and then to shooting Peter. The reader would feel horrified at reading this story and that the violence is growing worse. At the beginning of the story, they discover that Ernie can be violent with or without a gun.

The reader then actually sees Ernie using it as he tied each bird he killed “by the legs to a line of string”. It is then not before long before the two bullies tie the dead swan wings to Peter’s arms. This all creates a tense

atmosphere that becomes even more tense as the story progresses. 'The Signalman' has three clear sections.

Tension builds up as the three visits from 'the ghost' links to the appearance of the train and then death. As the train and death is linked, after the second incident, the reader and characters expect the third visit to be worse. Small events are also repeated which create mystery. The bell builds tension as every time it echoes, the Signalman sees the ghostly image.

Also the repetition of the red danger light emphasises the danger of the story. Both 'The Swan' and 'The Signalman' use repetition to create a tense and fearful atmosphere. 'The Swan' repeats the juxtaposition of a beautiful countryside to "heavy and loutish", violent boys. As this repeats, the contrast becomes stronger. The reader feels more tense as Ernie torments Peter by using repetition;"..

. I ain't exactly sure 'ow much clearance them trains've got underneath. You 'appen to know, Raymond, 'ow much clearance them trains got underneath?" (P. 90) This sarcastic attitude and the slang accent build tension as it reminds the reader that Ernie lacks intelligence. The repetition that Ernie uses strengthens the tension as Peter is tied to the railway lines. It frightens the reader, as the bullies seem to be having fun when they are endangering Peter's life. 'The Signalman' repeats language to create tension;" I think I may...Yes; I am sure I may" (P.

107) This shows that the Signalman is convincing himself that the narrator is not the ghost. As he repeats it, he starts to relax and believe himself. The

characters in ' The Signalman' and ' The Swan' have both similarities and differences. Firstly, the reader can compare Peter and the Signalman as they both reflect tension and danger.

They are vulnerable and lonely. Peter is the type of person who would be known as a typical bully's victim;" He had a small frail body. His face was freckled and he wore spectacles with thick lenses. He was a brilliant pupil...

he was quiet and polite." (P. 85)This helps to create a tense atmosphere, as Peter is similar to the birds that Ernie and Raymond have shot. They are both defenceless and the bullies take advantage of this. They harm them because they are bigger than them and they have a weapon. The Signalman is lonely as he has a job on the railways where he stays all day and night and " a visitor was a rarity".

This makes the reader wonder whether something will happen to him because he is always on his own. Both characters also shout when under extreme pressure;" When you have found it, don't call out! And when you are at the top, don't call out! (P. 110)The exclamation marks emphasise his desperate tone. It can also show anxiety as the Signalman first thought that the narrator was the ghost he has been seeing. The repetition in these sentences emphasise that the Signalman is very cautious. In ' The Swan', the reader can see that Peter is shouting;" This is murder!.

.. Let me go! Please let me go! I'll be killed if a train comes along!" (P. 90)The repetition informs the reader that Peter is also desperate and is pleading as he thinks he is going to be killed.

It shows that Peter is scared. The reader would be appalled at the bullies' behaviour, whereas they would be sympathetic towards Peter. The reader can also compare the intelligence of Ernie with the intelligence of the narrator in 'The Signalman'. The reader can see that Ernie lacks intelligence by his image; "His mouth was loose, the lips often wet." (P. 83) This is a visual image for the reader as loose lips are animal-like.

It also suggests that he lacks intelligence and could cause violence. This creates a tense atmosphere as a senseless boy has a gun. The narrator, however, is completely the opposite. He is educated and logical; "..

. how your imagination misleads you." (P. 114) The narrator is trying to be logical about what the Signalman sees.

He tries to persuade him that it is just his imagination. As the narrator is logical, it creates tension for the reader when he is frightened; "Oh, how did this happen, how did this happen?" (P. 117) The repetition emphasises that even though the narrator was logical at the beginning, he cannot help thinking that there is a supernatural force. 'The Swan' is third person narrative, whereas 'The Signalman' is first person narrative. 'The Swan' uses the characters and their actions to create emotions, as this story is not emotive.

It focuses the reader on Peter's experience of being a victim. The events in this story are dangerous, but if seen through Ernie's eyes, the events would be enjoyable. These events are discovered by the reader at the same time as Peter, so this creates an image of the reader being or feeling like Peter. As

Peter is a logical thinker, using third person narrative is more interesting as he takes the reader through his thoughts.

Roald Dahl also uses free indirect discourse; "All he could do would be to turn and run, and that was pointless. They'd catch him in seconds. And if he shouted for help, there was no-one to hear him." (P. 87) This is direct style (first person narrative) and indirect style (third person narrative) combined. This makes the reader feel like Peter.

I think 'The Signalman' is more tense as it uses first person narrative. The reader sees the story through the narrator's eyes. This adds tension as the reader sees his point of view and his reactions to what he sees. This story focuses on emotions as well as description. Also, the narrator's mood affects the reader. Out of both stories, I find that 'The Signalman' is more mysterious.

I think this because when the Signalman thinks he sees the 'ghost' waving to save lives, it actually causes death to the passengers of the train and later the supernatural causes his own death. It is more mysterious as it puzzles the reader. They do not know whether it was just the train driver who waved each time, the Signalman's imagination or whether it was really the supernatural. However, I prefer 'The Swan'.

It creates a more dangerous atmosphere. There is more description and physical violence, which helps the reader to create a visual image. It is also easier to understand whereas 'The Signalman' is confusing. In conclusion, I think that 'The Signalman' is more tense. Even though it is difficult to

understand, as the Signalman is mentally distressed, a tense atmosphere is built as neither the reader nor the Signalman know what to expect.

I found that 'The Swan' builds a dangerous and fearful atmosphere, as it is more descriptive. It does also create a fair amount of tension, especially in the opening of the story. 'The Signalman' creates more tension than 'The Swan' in its use of trains. Every death that occurs in the story is linked to the train. After comparing the two stories, I have come to the conclusion that even though 'The Swan' carries the most danger, 'The Signalman' creates a more tense and fearful atmosphere.