

The supernatural and  
rational  
interpretations that  
seem to explain  
events in the ...



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The stories ' The Signalman' by Charles Dickens and ' The Red Room' by H G Wells are similar in the balance between the supernatural and rational. In ' The Signalman' there is a ghost or vision that gives warnings to an impending accident on the train line. After various warnings the signalman, who sees the visions is killed by a train. The story leads us down a path, which never reveals which explanation the writer wanted the story to be based around.

This is similar to ' The Red Room'. It also has a story that mixes the rational and supernatural, without telling the reader which one to believe. The story is of a man, who is trying to prove that a room in a mansion is not actually haunted, by staying in the room over night. During the night various things happens, leading to the man being injured and knocked out.

In both stories the mix of rational and supernatural are combined so you are never sure which one to believe.

In ' The Signalman' you are told of two visions witnessed by the signalman. The signalman tells the narrator that after each of the visions there have been deaths on the line.

On both the visits the narrator is told of the incidents, which both seem to worry the signalman. In the first incident the signalman tells of approaching the figure when it just disappeared from in front of his eyes. Following this incident there was a train crash, and the victims were laid in front of the signalman's box.

The second sighting of the spectre made him feel faint, as if he knew that the vision had a meaning of impending doom on the line. Soon after this vision there was in fact an accident, which involved the sudden and untimely death of a young woman in a train just down the line from the box. Her dead body was then lain inside the signalman's box.

Both these stories give a supernatural feeling, as if these visions are connected to something that can see into the future, which is a supernatural thing to be able to do.

When the narrator and the signalman talk, the signalman would just suddenly get up and take a look down the line. When asked what this was all about the signalman replied that his bell rang informing him of an incoming train, however, the narrator did not hear the bell either time. Both times the signalman heard the bell, and went to see; he saw the vision warning him of impending danger. At this point, the words ' For God's sake, clear the way' came into the narrators head, but he did not speak them out loud.

Also, when the narrator enters the signalman's cutting he feels different. He feels as if he has ' left the natural world'. This adds to the supernatural feel of the story. This is added to by the strange presence of the signalman. The narrator believes that the signalman may himself not have been totally natural: ' there was something in that man that daunted me'.

The second story we read was ' The Red Room' by H G Wells. It is about a house that was abandoned by its owners 18 months ago, because of supposed supernatural happenings in the house, especially in one room, the red room. The happenings ended in the death of a young duke.

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One man decides he will try to live out the night in the haunted Red Room in order to prove that it is not in fact haunted. Even as the man is walking up to the room, he begins to become scared in himself. The objects in the corridors produce shadows, which cover up corners of the room, causing the narrator to become slightly jumpy and anxious. When he enters the room it all seems to be normal, however, when the candles he filled the room with begin to go out in quick succession, you realise that it is not just the wind blowing them out as the narrator first thought, but actually some sort of ghost.

The language suggests that the narrator begins to feel slightly nervous, when he says 'a lurking, living thing' you realise that even a man that doesn't believe in ghosts is starting to feel a presence in the room. The man was in 'considerable nervous tension' when the candles began to go out one by one but quickly in succession. The ghost was not just blowing the candles out but it was 'as if the wicks had been suddenly nipped between a finger and thumb', which suggest that it was not a draught, as it left 'the wick neither glowing nor smoking'. As the candles go out, there were more shadows in the room, causing more fear in the man. As the 'shadows seemed to take another step towards (him)', he begins to become more agitated. This adds to the supernatural feeling of the story.

To balance out the supernatural in both stories there are many rational excuses for the happenings in both stories.

In 'The Signalman' most of the happenings are explained with a rational excuse, usually by the narrator. After the signalman explained the first story of the vision followed by the accident the narrator dismisses the incident as

a 'remarkable coincidence'. The signalman continues to the second story of the death of the woman, preceded by a vision. However, after listening to both stories, the narrator now has 'nothing to say' and cannot dismiss them both as a coincidence.

The narrator also tries to tell himself that the signalman may actually just be mentally disturbed and the visions were 'infection in his mind'. He is trying to dismiss them as not actually true. He also tries another excuse. He believes that the visions may be a 'deception of his sense of sight' and based on shadows and light causing strange shapes. The signalman himself does not dismiss this interpretation, but also does not agree.

The narrator also tries to put the sounds that the signalman heard when he saw the vision down to the wind. He tells the signalman to 'do but listen for a moment to the wind in this unnatural valley'.

The narrator obviously does not want to believe the visions were real, and tries as many excuses as possible to put his mind at ease over the situations.

In 'The Red Room' it is a similar case. The narrator tries had to put his mind at rest over the situation by making out that everything that happens is just normal and can be explained.

At the beginning of the story the narrator says that he has yet to see a ghost in his life. This is his way of saying that if anything happens in that room then it is all due to a natural circumstance.

When the narrator enters the room he does a 'systematic examination' of the room. This was a rational thing to do and puts his mind at ease after he <https://assignbuster.com/the-supernatural-and-rational-interpretations-that-seem-to-explain-events-in-the-signalman-and-the-red-room-essay-sample/>

has checked out the room and there is nothing in there. This shows that nothing is in the room so everything that happens must be down to a natural occurrence.

More excuses start to be made when the man begins to spend the night in the room. When the candles begin to go out the narrator blames a draught in the room for blowing out the candle. When he rises and moves to re light it two more candles suddenly go out. He then says ' Did I do that myself in a flash of absentmindedness?' in order to make himself think that it was just the breeze he made when walking. However, he is now beginning to doubt himself over the excuses he made.

Later on in the room when all the candles have gone out he walks into the bed hurting himself, he is then struck again, but he is not sure what by. He tries to say that he ' struck (himself) against some other bulky furniture'. He is now trying to put this down to his own mistake.

H G Wells is also trying to stop the reader deciding on whether it was a supernatural being or just a natural occurrence.

The endings of the two stories lead to doubt in the narrator's minds about whether everything is actually has a rational explanation. In ' The Signalman' there is a large twist in the ending. You find out that the visions the signalman saw were actually nothing to do with the accidents that happened after them, however, they all showed the exact fashion in which the signalman himself would die.

Also, the narrator is told of the words ' For God's sake, clear the way'. Earlier in the story the narrator had thought of these words in his head after he is told about the second vision. The driver of the train shouted these exact words before the signalman was ' cut down'. The narrator puts this down to ' coincidence', but surely it was not.

The last paragraph leaves doubt in the reader's mind about what the narrator thinks. He does call them ' curious circumstances' yet also claims that it was ' coincidence' that he said those words. By leaving the narrator in mixed minds about the true reasons for the visions or deaths, the writer also leaves the reader in two minds about what happened.

In ' The Red Room' the narrator tries to reject the idea of a supernatural presence in the room. When he is asked if it is a ghost that is present in the room, he replies that ' there is no ghost there at all'. But after he says this he feels the bandages the housekeepers put over his wounds. This leads the reader to think that there was a presence in the room in order to give the man wounds. The narrator tries to dismiss the idea of a ghost as actually just ' Fear' that is only in the minds of the people who enter the room. Was it ' fear' of there actually being a ghost that caused the man to make himself go delirious and blow the candles out himself with the breeze he produced? The narrator himself is believes that it was the fear in his head that caused him to be scared and knock himself out.

However, the writer again leaves it up to you to decide which interpretation to believe, as in ' The Signalman'. Both stories leave you a balanced

interpretation of what happened and it is up to the reader to decide what one they wish to believe in.