

The signalman and
the darkness out
there essay essay
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Both “ The Signalman and The Darkness Out There have unexpected endings. Compare the way tension is built up in both stories so that the reader is surprised by how the stories end. In the first sentence of ‘ The Darkness Out There’ a romanticised field is described which is calm, tranquil and serene. ‘ She walked through the flowers, the girl, ox-eye daisies and vetch and cow parsley, keeping to the track at the edge of the field’. ‘ Mrs. Rutter, Pat had said, “ Mrs. Rutter at Nether Cottage, you don’t know her, Sandra? She’s a dear old thing, all on her own, of course, we try to keep an eye. ““

The contrast between this and the first sentence of the story is that it sounds mundane. Then immediately the author gives an impression of old people as ‘ dear old things’. This is a stereotype. The author describes the person who runs the Good Neighbours Club as ‘ not very nice looking’. This shows that even though the story is told in the third person, it is still Sandra’s point of view that runs throughout the story. This is furthermore backed up by ‘ Are people who help other people always not very nice looking? ‘ This is a further stereotype that shows that Sandra is self-opinionated.

She looked down at her legs, the girl, bare brown legs brushing through the grass, polleny summer grass that glinted in the sun. ‘ Here the writer gives us quite subtle ways of creating mood. The technique is used a lot in poems and is rarely used in novels unless for a specific reason. The author uses heavy alliteration, repetition and strong imagery to create an idyllic atmosphere. Then we have a re-visiting of the mundane ‘ doing the floors and that’, followed by another stereotype ‘ the jokey cartoon drawing of a dear old bod with specs on the end of her nose and a shawl’.

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We see opposition to this banal and standardised image ‘ one or two of the old people had been a bit sharp about that’. Sandra is mundane and ordinary. This makes the unexpected ending more extraordinary in such a quiet country village. In the next paragraph a slightly unprecedented thing happens. An apprehensive mood is created. The mood is created by words such as ‘ dark’ and ‘ light’. ‘ The dark reach of the spinney came right up to the gate there so that she would have to walk by the edge of it with the light suddenly shutting off the bare wide sky of the field.

Reference to colours, darkness and light recapitulate randomly within the story creating an eerie mood. The paragraph is summed up by a discontinuous fragment ‘ Packer’s End’ that compliments the mood created. “ You didn’t go by yourself through Packer’s End if you could help it, not after tea-time, anyway. A German plane came down in the war and the aircrew were killed and there were people who’d heard them talking still, chattering in German on their radios, voices coming out of the trees, nasty, creepy.

People said. The tone that has been set is somewhat interrupted by the author putting across Sandra’s frivolous, immature and childish idea that the German plane’s occupants were still alive after the incident that occurred. This spoils the mood to a certain extent, but also slackens the tension created in the previous paragraph. There are waves of tension being created. ‘ Flowers with corn running in the wind’ is calming but immediately followed by ‘ dark slab of trees’, ‘ a rank place, all whippy saplings and brambles’, and ‘ bones’.

This is interspersed with ‘bird song – blackbirds and thrushes and robins’. Even though there is tension created by the use of dark imagery, the colloquial style of the language hinders and thwarts the tension that is being built up. Alliteration is used also to create a dark mood: ‘small, six and seven’, ‘scared stiff’, ‘witches and wolves and tigers’, ‘sometimes’, ‘several’, ‘skittering’, ‘shrieking’, ‘scary’, ‘shapes’. This use of alliteration to create mood is spoilt again by the use of colloquial language and by Sandra’s exaggerated stance on the subject of Packer’s End.

Sandra believes: ‘But after, lying on your stomach at home on the hearth rug watching telly with the curtains drawn and the dark shut out, it was cosy to think of Packer’s End, where you weren’t’. Sandra believes that she can separate the dark and light or ‘black and white’ in her mind and that objects and people can be categorised in this way (as stereotypes). For Sandra, the darkness is ‘out there’. She is naïve. The alliteration returns, but this time it is more subtle: ‘swimming in warm seas’; ‘she put her hand on the top of her head and her hair was hot from the sun’.

This is to impart a calming atmosphere and provides a contrast to when the helpers enter the house. ‘She would walk like this through the silken grass with the wind seething the corn and the secret invisible life of birds’. Sandra is idealistic to ridiculous levels. This adds to the contrast when the helpers enter the house. As the two helpers draw near to the house, we get a stereotypical opinion from Sandra of the fellow helper she meets on the way to Nether Cottage. Although the story is told in the third person it is still Sandra’s perspective: ‘Not Susie. Not Liz either.’

Kerry Stevens from Richmond Way. Kerry Stevens that none of her lot reckoned much on, with his blacked licked-down hair and slitty eyes. Some people you only have to look at to know they're not up to much. ' For Sandra, everything has to be nice. The idyllic atmosphere that was created outside the house changes once the youngsters enter the house. This is done in a subtle yet pervasive way. ' 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. The predatory language creates tension.

This is expanded on by the author describing the house in an odd way. ' The room was stuffy ... there was a smell of cabbage'. This creates a claustrophobic atmosphere. The unexpected ending to the story is spoilt. The tension is dissipated by the prolonged conversation between Sandra and Mrs. Rutter about mundane things. The author does build tension to a certain extent. However, the story fundamentally fails as a piece of fiction. It fails because of the endless colloquial language.

The story makes you want to stop reading, instead of reading all the way to the end. ' The Signalman' was written at a time when there was a fascination with the supernatural and the Gothic. In the opening of ' The Signalman' an odd thing happens: " One would have thought, considering the nature of the ground, that he could not have doubted from what quarter the voice came; but instead of looking up to where I stood on the top of the steep cutting nearly over his head, he turned himself about and looked down the Line. ' This captivates the reader, because what the signalman does is strange.

The narrator is intrigued by the signalman but he does not know why: ' There was something remarkable in his manner of doing so, though I could not have said for my life what. ' The narrator's interest in the signalman is compelling. While the narrator walks down the zig-zag path of the cutting he ponders on the signalman's behaviour: ' I found the way long enough to give me time to recall a singular air of reluctance or compulsion with which he pointed out the path. ' He cannot figure out what is strange about the signalman.

This makes the reader want to find out what is so strange about him. ' His attitude was one of such expectation and watchfulness that I stopped a moment, wondering at it. ' The signalman has two different stances of reluctance and expectation. This interests the reader because you are not told exactly what the signalman's stance is. A dark mood is created by Dickens, using lots of adjectives: ' a gloomy red light, and the gloomier entrance to a black tunnel, in whose massive architecture there was a barbarous, depressing, and forbidding air.

So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot that it had an earthy, deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world. ' These adjectives are not used with metaphors, similes or alliteration. This creates a realistic, non-abstract effect. The morbid mood is set for the rest of the story. The signalman says:" It is very difficult to impart, sir. It is very, very difficult to speak of. If you ever make me another visit, I will try to tell you. '

The signalman telling the narrator that he will tell of his plight when he returns makes the reader wonder what he is troubled about. The anticipation of another visit by the narrator adds intrigue. The signalman is a relatively uneducated man who cannot think of another explanation as to why he keeps seeing the spectre other than that it is an apparition. "It stood just outside the blackness of the tunnel. I advanced so close upon it that I wondered at its keeping the sleeve across its eyes.

I ran right up at it, and had my hand stretched out to pull the sleeve away, when it was gone. "The narrator is a more educated man who thinks that there must be a rational, scientific reason for the signalman's plight. "

Resisting the slow touch of a frozen finger tracing out my spine, I showed him how that this figure must be a deception of his sense of sight; and how that figures, originating in disease of the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye, were known to have troubled patients".

Even at the end of the story the narrator still believes that what has happened is just a coincidence. When the narrator describes the environment that the signalman is in, he refers to it as a 'great dungeon'. He seems to be trapped in a prison that he cannot escape from. This makes the reader speculate as to whether the 'spectre' could be in his mind, or whether it could be the ghost cursing him. He is trapped by something or someone that is beyond his control. The train that rumbles by is almost personified. This suggests that the train is a dying person.

The tunnel that is described is almost like the tunnel of death that people talk about when they have been unconscious and had a near death

experience. The absence of plants and animals in the cutting makes it seem detached from the rest of the world. The environment is purgatory, the path between heaven and hell. The uneasy and disturbing mood that is created from the start by Dickens in 'The Signalman' makes the ending more effective and surprising. In 'The Darkness Out There' the mood changes which destroys the tension that Penelope Lively tries to build up.