

Compare and  
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dickens' the  
signalman and  
catherine storrs  
crossing...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Charles Dickens wrote “ The Signalman” in the 1860s, at a time when ghost stories, the supernatural and the gothic were very popular with the Victorians. Many short stories during this period were written in this genre and this interest was probably inspired by the “ Penny Dreadfuls” magazine, which contained many short gothic stories, for example Bram Stokers’ “ Dracula” and Mary Shelley’s “ Frankenstein. ” Many of Dickens’ stories contained complex plots, intrigue and suspense. “ The Signalman” is a story involving a railway signalman and a narrator. Ghosts appear at several moments to warn the signalman of impending danger.

The setting for “ The Signalman”, a railway line and railway tunnel, is also significant because the story was written in the steam age, when railways, a relatively new invention, were simultaneously considered to be a popular yet dangerous and mysterious addition to people’s lives. By contrast, “ Crossing Over” was written in the second half of the 20th century and has a much more modern, urban feel to it. The audience that Catherine Storr was writing for would have been therefore more interested in extra sensory perception and the workings of the mind than ghouls and spectres.

This idea of existing in different dimensions and the phenomenon of extra sensory perception is a topic of great interest to modern readers, as this is shown in the production of the recent film “ The Sixth Sense. ” “ Crossing Over” is minimalistic and much less complex than “ The Signalman,” which is typical of 20th century ghost stories. It involves a young girl who is involved in community service and a dog which she later, wrongly believes has been killed in a road traffic accident.

The plot is well constructed and the ending, resulting in the young girl discovering she is in fact the ghost, is added to show that sometimes the things we perceive as real, turn out to be illusions. Interestingly, despite the difference in the time when they were written, both “ Crossing Over” and “ The Signalman” are similar because they use forms of transport as the basis to their plot, which in “ Crossing Over” is a car, at a road junction. Both the train in Victorian times and the car today could be considered to be dangerous modes of transport.

In this essay I will evaluate the features of both stories and conclude which one is the most effective ghost story. An effective ghost story, regardless of the time in which it was written, is one that contains an original and unpredictable plot, believable and interesting characters, a credible narrator and creates terror, suspense and intrigue. A ghost story should involve a ghost or the possibility of a ghost and leave the reader slightly confused and uneasy at its conclusion. I intend to analyse both stories with these criteria in mind.

The setting of “ The Signalman” is described in great detail by Dickens, which is characteristic of his writing. The narrator of the story uses vivid, descriptive words such as “ forbidding,” “ barbarous” and “ depressing” to describe the railway cutting and thus produces a sense of darkness and gloom. He uses the repetition of the word “ gloomy” to build up the suspense and create a feeling that something evil or dangerous is about to happen. The narrator also says that the cutting has an “ earthy, deadly smell” and the tunnel is a “ great dungeon.

A reference is also made to the “ glow of an angry sunset” to describe the atmosphere at the beginning of the story. This is a conventional setting for a 19th century ghost story, as it is a remote place that is not commonly seen every day. This setting helps to create lots of fear, mystery and suspense. In contrast to “ The Signalman” there is very little detail given in “ Crossing Over” as to the outcome of the story. There is very little fear, mystery or suspense created by the modern, urban, well-known setting, which is extremely common for a 20th century ghost story. This makes the sudden ending extremely surprising and unexpected.

The only similarity in the setting between “ Crossing Over” and “ The Signalman” is that there is a reference to the weather. This is the only mention that something ominous is about to happen, as the weather is described as “ beginning to get dark,” and that the “ sky was overcast. ” However, this reference is only important in retrospect and at the time it is not so obvious. Dickens also uses vivid description to describe the two characters in “ The Signalman. ” The narrator describes the main character, the signalman, as being “ foreshortened” and “ shadowed” to create fear and unease for the reader.

The narrator comments that there was “ something remarkable in his manner” to stress that the signalman is different from everyday people and is a somewhat unusual character. The signalman blends in with his surroundings, as he is described as “ dark,” “ sallow” and there was “ something in the man that daunted me. ” We learn that the signalman is intelligent, well-educated, but squandered his opportunities earlier in his life.

He is, however, not resentful of his life and is happy with his job as a signalman.

This type of detailed descriptive information about the signalman helps to build up a clear, picture to the reader about his character and therefore the reader can understand him better as the story progresses. The character of the signalman is also intriguing to the reader and adds to the sense of mystery created by the unusual setting, drawing the reader into the story. The narrator also tells us that the signalman is “ remarkably exact and vigilant, conscientious and wants to do a good job. ” However, the reader learns that a reoccurring ghost troubles the signalman, which eventually builds up to his death.

He demands that the “ Lord help me! A poor signalman on this solitary station! ” to show how distressed he has become by the ghost. Dickens delays the revelation of why the signalman is troubled until several pages into the story to heighten the tension and create suspense. Although plenty of information is given about the character of the signalman, the character of the narrator is hardly described or mentioned in the book, even though he is the other major character. This, although used to create mystery, is applied to make the reader focus on the main character of the signalman throughout the story.

Despite the significant lack of description, the narrator is believable and like the character of the signalman, makes the reader become drawn into the story. The characters in “ The Signalman ” assist in creating some fear and unease, as they use vivid description and have the unusual character of the

signalman. In comparison to “ The Signalman” “ Crossing Over” contains one central character and the minor characters of Mrs Mathews and Togo the dog. The central character, an ordinary girl, is a typical character of a 20th century ghost story, in that she is very believable, ordinary and there is very little description about her character.

Catherine Storr takes the reader into the girl's thoughts, which helps us to identify with her, by saying, “ she almost believed that he had a spite against her. ” This central character creates little fear or unease and therefore this makes the sudden ending extremely surprising and unexpected. The similarity between the two main characters is that both are very devoted to their job. The signalman is described as “ exact and vigilant” whilst the girl in “ Crossing Over” says that she won't go back on her promise to do voluntary work even though it is a “ disagreeable task.

The plot for “ The Signalman” is highly conventional, complex and typically gothic, involving an unknown ghost or unusual character. This plot is also similar to many of Dickens short ghost stories. Throughout the story, Dickens lays down many clues as to the outcome of the ending, such as repeated appearances of ghosts and the repetition of the word “ danger,” to create a sense of foreboding. In similarity to “ The Signalman” “ Crossing Over” also has many subtle clues in its plot about the outcome of the story.

The first of these is the comment by the girl's father that “ pedestrians on the road were not easy to see” and suggests that an accident may happen, although nothing is said about to whom it will happen. Just after the accident has taken place, Catherine Storr uses the word “ further,” rather than “

other,” in the phrase “ on the further side of the road,” to cleverly suggest that the girl has perhaps crossed to another dimension. The girl hears “ the two-note call of an ambulance,” which suggest that something serious has taken place.

Catherine Storr uses the quote “ walking really fast” to reinforce the feeling that the girl has crossed to a new dimension, where time and distance are not proportional. There is also the suggestion that “ Paradise Row,” the street where Mrs Mathews lives, could be a metaphor for the journey to heaven, along which the girl is travelling. The most apparent clue is introduced to the reader towards the end of the story. The opinion of the girl that “ Sybil seemed not to have seen her” is clearly used to indicate that the girl has perhaps passed to a new dimension.

Because of its ability to create suspense in many different ways throughout the story, in my opinion, “ Crossing Over” has the most effective plot. To increase the amount of dialogue and create more mystery, the narrator of “ The Signalman” is highly involved in the story and in the conversations with the signalman himself, although there is little description about his character. In contrast, the narrator of “ Crossing Over” is not involved in the story under any circumstances, which focuses the reader’s main attention on the girl.

The similarity between the narrators of the two stories is that they both draw the attention of the reader towards the main character. The character of the narrator is much more involved in “ The Signalman” than in “ Crossing Over” and therefore in my opinion, “ The Signalman” has the most effective

narration of the two. The ending of an effective ghost story has the potential to create fear and mystery and it is usually the place in the story where the ghost is revealed. The ending to " Crossing Over" is dramatic, as the identity of the ghost is suddenly revealed to the reader in the last line.

This delayed revelation of the identity of the ghost creates suspense. The ending to " The Signalman" is more conventional because the identity of the ghost is revealed over the last few pages. However, what happens to the signalman is shocking and powerful, although somewhat predictable because of the repeated clues. The similarity in the endings between the two stories is that the main character is killed or becomes a ghost. This is a theme common to many successful ghost stories, regardless of the time in which they were written.

Because of the period in which it was written and the audience it was written for, " The Signalman" may not appeal to a modern audience, because of its complex plot and mysterious character. Because I am also writing from a modern perspective, I am therefore more likely to prefer " Crossing Over" to " The Signalman. " In my opinion, " Crossing Over" is the most successful ghost story because it contains a believable setting and credible character, a surprising and uneasy ending and it is carefully structured and written economically, allowing the reader to become personally involved and drawn into the story.