

How Charles Dickens creates tension in his short story *The Signalman*



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“ Nothing to extravagant, no straightforward endings” this is how Susan Hill, the author of ‘ The Woman In Black’ describes a perfect ghost story. Her own advice obviously paid off, as her famous novel was turned into a West End production at the Fortune Theatre, London and has been running for a long fourteen years.

I have seen the play and can honestly say it was one of the most haunting things I have ever seen. Charles Dickens is famous for his novels and also wrote a few short stories. Dickens only ever wrote one ghost story and he called it ‘ The Signalman’. The story is everything Susan Hill describes as an effective scary story-“ It depends on atmosphere and sense of place”. This is how Charles Dickens creates tension in his short ghost story, ‘ The Signalman’. The first paragraph opens with ‘ Halloa, below there! ‘ This is a very effective start to the story because I think it’s as if it comes from nowhere.

The noise interrupts the silence. The first paragraph is very thoughtful and descriptive, and is all about somebody’s thoughts. At this point in the story there are no clues to identify the characters in the story, this creates tension because you do not know who the narrator of the story is and you don’t know whom he is talking about, and this makes it more mysterious. Something I found quite strange in the first paragraph was that it says ‘ one would have thought.

.. hat he could not have doubted from what quarter the voice came; but instead of looking up to where I stood on top of the steep cutting nearly over his head, he turned himself about and looked down the Line’ this is strange

because the man he calls, would automatically look up at the direction of the sound but I think its quite spooky that he looks in a different direction. Its like his subconscious mind telling him to look the other way, just like he has heard that same line before but it came from ' down the Line'.

There is a lot of description of the surroundings in the first paragraph and Dickens describes the sun as ' angry' which is very negative compared to a lot of description and is also personification. In the second paragraph you still do not know who the characters in the story are, you do not find out until the third paragraph when you find out the second mans job. But throughout the story you do not find out their names. The Signalman still hasn't even spoken yet; I think this creates tension because there is a sense of mystery left in the story. In the second paragraph the narrator describes the train, he describes it as ' a vague vibration in the air, quickly changing into a violent pulsation, and an oncoming rush that caused me to start back, as though it had force to draw me down' Dickens describes it as if it was very scary, like a monster. I think once again the train creates tension because it breaks a very quiet ambience.

When the man asks for directions, all the Signalman does is wave his flag, so he doesn't have to talk. I think he does this because he is wary of something around him, he is quite frightened, and this creates tension because the reader still does not know why, the Signalman is behaving in this manner.

The way the man talks to the Signalman suggests tension between the two men because the conversation is just coming from the stranger and not from the Signalman, also the Stranger was reluctant to repeat his question when it was not answered, perhaps because of a fear of upsetting the Signalman

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because he seems so tense. In the fourth paragraph there is more description of the surroundings, for example, ' the cutting was extremely deep and unusually precipitous.

... Clammy stone, that became oozier and wetter as I went down'. This shows that people rarely go down there so I think the Signaller and his home is very isolated.

This is spooky because you know that if anything went wrong there wouldn't be anybody there to help. It also makes you wonder why the Stranger went down there anyway, what was he doing wondering round the countryside in the middle of nowhere? The fifth paragraph shows the Signaller still being very strange and subdued, because when the stranger reaches the track, which is where the Signaller is stood his body language suggests that he is wary of the Stranger's presence. Also Dickens writes ' he was standing between the rails...

in an attitude as if he were waiting for me to appear. ' Dickens creates tension by suggesting that the Signaller knows something everybody else doesn't, including the Stranger. The next paragraph is a lot of description and nearly every other word is very pessimistic. Dickens describes the Signaller as a ' dark and sallow man' very negative and a bit dark and quite miserable. Dickens describes the surroundings again using words such as, ' solitary, dismal, dripping-wet, jagged' He refers to the area in which the Signaller lives as a ' great dungeon' but he still goes on referring to the area as ' barbarous, depressing and forbidding, earthy and deadly' There is nothing positive about this paragraph whatsoever so this is all building up a

spooky atmosphere, which is something Susan Hill said was required for a good ghost story.

Dickens keeps talking about how there is little sunlight that gets into the small 'valley' in which the Signalman, which means the place would be shady and quite cold even in the middle of the day, which I think creates tension and unease. In the seventh paragraph we see the first signs of movement and even the Stranger has noticed because he says 'before he stirred, I was near enough to him to have touched him. Not even then removing his eyes from mine, he stepped back one step and lifted his hand' this shows that the Signalman is definitely afraid of the Stranger but at this point the Stranger has given no reason for the Signalman to be worried so this makes us wonder why he is so frightened. But it seems that the Stranger is also quite afraid of the Signalman because he says 'there was something in the man that daunted me' so still there is a lot of personal tension between the two men, they have only just met but automatically fear each other, this is very strange.

The stranger says in the ninth paragraph 'I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in his mind. 'I'm not sure but I think this means that the Stranger doubts the Signalman's sanity. The after these thoughts the Stranger seems to become nervous of the Signalman because he has to force a smile when confronting the Signalman of his fear for him, this suggests the Stranger has become more edgy around the Signalman. But then for the first time in the story the Signalman speaks and he explains to the Stranger why he was quite so wary of him. The Signalman becomes

very serious but the Stranger brushes off his strange comments by being jolly and speaking as if the Signalman was being silly and talking nonsense.

Which at this point it sounds like he is, but now people think there is a twist. The tenth paragraph tells us about the Signalman's life and how he does not have much to do, but everything he does do is very important. Then the Signalman talks about his skills and what his childhood was like. This makes the Signalman seem more down to Earth, stops him sounding so strange. But the Signalman shows quite a talent and could be in a better job and this makes the reader wonder why. The Signalman admits to all his mistakes in life and seems to have many regrets, but this also shows the Signalman as honest.

At this point the Signalman is pouring his heart out to the Stranger, showing that he doesn't talk to many people. Everything in this part of the story is quite normal and there is no tension but then suddenly you see the Signalman acting oddly when he responds to the ring of a bell that was inaudible to the ears of the Stranger. Its like he knows something might happen, he is paranoid. At the end, the Signalman tells the Stranger how he is troubled but cannot describe how. This leaves the reader wondering. Before the Stranger leaves the Signalman asks him not to call out when he returns but does not say why, the Stranger does not question him suggesting he has become uncomfortable again.

The Signalman strangely refers back to the very first line, which was the Stranger calling out and asks him why he said it. The Stranger seems bewildered by his question but again brushes it off with a cheery answer as if

the Signalman was talking nonsense. But then for the first time in the story the Signalman mentions the word 'supernatural' and this makes the reader stop and think about what the Signalman could be talking about. But the Stranger just dismisses the comment.

The Signalman mentions immediately his troubles as soon as the man arrives the next day. He talks about how he saw a man covering his face and waving his arm, which is exactly what the Stranger motioned in the first paragraph. This creates tension because it is coincidental yet quite weird. The Signalman tells us how he saw a man one night, which shouted out the same thing as the Stranger and waved his arm the same but cried 'For God's Sake, Clear the Way' but then the figure disappeared.

This is very scary. This also scares the Stranger but he does not let it bug him as he tries to come up with a reasonable explanation to ease the Signalman, but also himself. But the Signalman wishes to continue, he really wants the man to listen to him. The conversation seems to scare both the Stranger and the Signalman. When the man asks whether another accident occurred the Signalman replies with three 'ghastly nods', rather than saying yes.

I think helps create tension because you assume it would be quite quiet and gloomy in the room and the Signalman would be quiet daunting. The Stranger is very obviously beginning to believe the Signalman and is becoming very edgy and frightened. The Signalman tells him how the Spectre rings the bell and then the Stranger catches on, he realizes that was who was ringing the bell the day before, and he starts to fit everything

together. He tells the Signalman how the bell did not ring but the Signalman is very defensive and becomes slightly agitated. The two of them go outside and once again there is description of the 'dismal mouth of the tunnel' and it all seems very eerie.

Dickens is building up the tension again but then it is dropped when the Signalman says he cannot see the ghost. In this paragraph the sentences are very short and descriptive all adding to the level of tension. The Signalman becomes panicky now he asks 'where is the danger? What is the danger? What can I do?' he gets a bit frustrated and all the Stranger can do is sit there, as he doesn't really understand the Signalman's story. The Signalman thinks he will lose his job because he thinks if he warns people of danger, nobody will believe him.

The whole story is captured in the next sentence 'His pain of mind was most pitiable to see. It was the mental torture of a conscientious man, oppressed beyond endurance by an unintelligible responsibility involving life' this is how the Stranger sees everything that has happened in the last two days and how he has analysed the Signalman. The next paragraph is all about the Signalman's pain and how he is suffering, he is letting everything out and all his sentences begin with 'why'. 'Why not tell me where the accident was to happen? Why not tell me how it could be averted?' The Signalman is working himself into a state and letting all his frustration out. He is feeling sorry for himself and he is very pitiful. All the Stranger can do now is reassure him everything is ok.

He says that public safety is his duty but appearances confuse him, he doesn't care whether it is true anymore he just feels he needs to 'compose his mind', he offers him a false sense of security. The next paragraph is when the Stranger is walking home but is now admitting to being scared and is now somewhat emotionally drawn in. The next few paragraphs are long sentences about how the Stranger is worried about the Signalman and wonders how to deal with the situation. He feels he is responsible for the Signalman in a way, but wonders how long the Signalman will keep his sanity. When he goes back the next day, he seems a lot happier than usual, Dickens writes about how it was a lovely day and he ventured out early, but maybe he left early for a reason he was not knowledgeable of yet. But then his happiness is replaced with overwhelming fear as he says 'I cannot describe the thrill that seized upon me' because he sees somebody stood at the mouth of the tunnel doing that same motion that the Signalman told him about.

Dickens describes the Strangers reaction as 'A nameless horror that oppressed me' and 'with an irresistible sense that something was wrong' The Stranger felt a sense of guilt and ran down to the Signalman faster than usual but the Signalman was dead. There is not really much tension in this part of the story as it is the end, but it everything starts fitting together. There is obviously something deeper than just the Signalman being knocked down because even the workmen admit that 'No man in England knew his work better', and that the Signalman was just to careful and good at his job to be knocked down. The Strange man believes there is only one explanation and everything points to The Spectre.

The train driver explains how the Signalman was stood on the tracks and how he called out to him ' below there! Look out! For God's sake clear the way! ' and how the train driver motioned with his arm covering his face as he waved. It is exactly how the Signalman describes it. This all is very daunting as the reader finds out just how everything the Signalman saw was real and how it caused his death.