

How does dickens create suspense in the signalman



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Suspense is created through supernatural, horror and ambiguity. Dickens' 'The Signalman' has all of these factors, which combine together excellently for a thrilling suspense story. The novel opens with the quote "Halloa! Below there!" This short, but effective line becomes very decisive as the story unfolds.

We don't know who is speaking and so it already creates a suspicion, which is initially adding tension. The man he is shouting at below "Looked down the line". In most circumstances, any person would look upwards in response to this. Dickens has initially created the unexplainable which builds up the tension and suspense further. At this time we don't know who the men are.

What Dickens' is attempting to do is to make you curious, to make you think as the plot unfolds which adds suspense. Dickens then goes on to describe the man below "There was something remarkable in his manner of doing so". Once the reader has figured this novel contains a ghostly theme, Dickens lets the reader assume that he is possibly the ghost because of his weird actions. The actions create mystery which is effective to create the overall suspense. Also, Dickens hasn't made any kind of a physical description of the signalman, so at this time the reader does not even know if he is human or not and rather than making a rash decision the reader is forced to read on to find out more about the two characters. This novel was set in the nineteenth century, a time when supernatural powers were still believable, so someone who was reading 'The Signalman' at the time would arguably feel more tension, because the story could have elements of truth in it.

The scene is set within a deep cutting at twilight, and because of the darkness the two men don't get to see each other properly until they are face to face, which is too late if one man kills the other. " I was near enough to have touched him". It gives you the feeling that he should not have gone down there so tension builds up more and more the closer they get to one another. Just before he goes down the man feels a cutting of " Vague vibration in the earth and air".

Dickens also uses effective adjectives like " Violent pulsation. " This captures the senses whilst the tension is building. This could be the final climax to the building pressure, but it ends up as being a train. Dickens by this stage has got the reader enthralled, and he has created a suspense which worked against the reader's wishes of a climax to happen.

Dickens' anti-climax worked perfectly to add to the tension. The cutting would be pretty dark; this darkness creates the suspended mood. It is also described as being " Extremely deep and unusually precipitous" and " Solitary and dismal". It seems like the place is very isolated and cut off from the real world, the perfect place for supernatural happenings like the " Great dungeon". The tunnel also creates suspension; the reader would now be questioning why he looked down there in the first place and what could be down there. This is described as " Barbarous, depressing and forbidding".

The smells and surroundings make him an " Air of reluctance", which means that he was reluctant to move onwards. The story is only spread over a couple of days, but that is all it takes for him to get involved, also the story only ever takes place within the cutting. This is so none of the tension is lost

“ but I expressly intend to make you another visit”. The two men meet both times at the bottom of the cutting at night “ I will come at eleven”. The fact that the scene was set at night adds more tension, in contrast to meeting in the middle of the day where tension would be lost.

This is because darkness blurs the narrator’s vision so he can’t be sure what is out there. The signalman is evidently going to be an important character once they start talking and his actions are purposefully odd. He stands intently in the railway “ Before he stirred I was near enough to have touched him”. When they do meet he makes no attempt to start the conversation, instead he “ Look towards the red light. He seems of a very mysterious and unpredictable character. As they begin to talk again the man becomes slightly hostile and the narrator speculates that “ This was a spirit”.

This is a very tense point in the novel because the ghosts’ identity may have already been revealed, but the signalman begins to show fear and asks if they have met before. It makes you think, why should the signalman show any fear? After their conversation the man leaves and the signalman tells him that on his return journey not call out those words. “ Halloa! Below there! It builds tension over what these words really mean to the signalman and why he is scared of them. The signalman himself looks like “ A dark sallow man”.

This description would add to the reader’s suspense and build up the tension as he gets closer. They retreat to the signal box and from his long description you realise that he “ Worked at fractions and decimals”. If he is so clever why is he a signalman? He is also the “ Safest of men to be

employed. " These questions add mystery to his identity which in turn builds up the suspense. Within their talk, the signalman looks outside toward the tunnel more than once. This creates expectancy of what is going to happen.

In the first conversation he tells the man that he is " troubled". This makes you ask the question what is he troubled about and does it have anything to do with his weird actions previously? Could he know who the ghost is? These questions make you think about what is to follow in the plot. All the time Dickens is aiming to build up suspense. When the man returns he is told about the mysterious figure and how " It was gone". This long passage describing the ghosts' actions adds tension and expectancy that it will come again.

He also clears up his odd actions (when he looked down the tunnel). The ghost says those very same words. We now know that he is not the ghost so some tension is shifted from him to the curiosity of if the man will see the ghost and what it will say-despite Dickens toiling with the tension and curiosity, none is lost. He also tells the man of the lady who died in the carriage " Within six hours after this appearance, the memorable accident happens". You begin to associate the spectre with death and whose death will it contribute to next.

The story is written in first person so it feels like it is actually happening at the same time you read it-despite the book being written in the nineteenth century. This is evident when he talks with and about the signalman " You look at me as if you had a dread of me". The reader and the man don't know

what the response is going to be. His manner is described as “ seemed to make the place strike colder to me, but I said no more”.

He describes his character weirdly as it happens which adds suspense, because the reader is thinking that he may be the ghost. As you hear about the ghost, the gentleman’s actions are very dismissive. This would be the natural response, but as they are in a deep cutting which hasn’t much human contact you begin to believe him. The man has the same reactions when he hears about the second ghost. You have the same time to make a decision as he does, but you already know there will be a ghost.

The man seems brave and dismissive of things which could potentially harm him. Maybe too dismissive and this could lead him into trouble, but he doesn’t seem like he is a victim. Instead the signalman holds this role. When the plot unfolds it is the gentleman’s fault that the signalman dies because if he hadn’t called down to him in the first place, the signalman would have looked up as the train came down the tunnel.

“ Halloo! Below there! ” The first words of the story are the most decisive words of the story. The reader is questioning if it could have been fate, and if his death could not have been prevented. “ The words which I myself - not he - had attached”. He obviously feels responsible for his death and you feel that if he hadn’t associated himself with the man none of this would have happened. This is quite a mysterious and even scary thought. It is evident that Dickens creates a lot of suspense throughout the story with the opening words and as he descends the cutting, looking at the signalman whose action is very weird.

Suspense is also created as the signalman tells the gentleman of the weird happenings recently. The settings are very mysterious and even prone to something similar to this happening. With this nineteenth century novel, Dickens' has used his ability to bring mystery, the unexplainable and first person narrative into a story which is then filled with suspense.