

The signalman by charles dickens – college



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

For our chosen text we read "The Signalman" by Charles Dickens. This short story was written about one hundred and fifty years ago, therefore it was written for a purpose that we would not write for today. Dickens would have written this story to be read out to a public audience. This was because it was impossible to print many copies of the same book to be sold in shops. The opening of the story is straight to the point. The first thing we encounter is the narrator addressing the Signalman. In the first paragraph we are given an eerie confusion of the narrator.

Although the Signalman can definitely hear the narrator, he seems to ignore the calling. This creates a mystery in itself, as we need to think why the 'shadowed' figure is not responding to the narrator's call. Is the Signalman waiting for a train to go past, or is he just being rude. The second time that the narrator called, the Signalman 'turned himself about,' and noticed the narrator's 'figure high above him.' We are given a very good description of the terrain with just a few short simple statements.

This is a great way to keep the reader, and audience interested, as we do not have to sit for too long listening to, or reading endless paragraphs of pointless description. These are a few good examples that show exactly what I mean: '... steep cutting...' '... a rough zigzag-descending path...' '... extremely deep, and unusually precipitous...' These create mystery because we wonder whether or not the narrator will be safe to walk to the bottom of such a dangerous place. Dickens uses a well thought of distraction that makes us think further about the Signalman's original ignorance. A train goes by.

We have to remember though that this would have been an old-fashioned steam train and would have taken quite a while to go past. This small event is described with powerful adjectives. The sentence is as follows: ' Just then there came a vague vibration in the earth and air, quickly changing into a violent pulsation... ' The characterisation in this story is very unusual as we aren't given names for the two main characters in the story. We aren't given much information about the narrator himself. In a way, we don't really need too many details about this person, considering this is a short story.

Too much information would result in the reader and audience becoming bored. However, we are given some minimal but essential facts about the narrator. The narrator appears to be a man who cares about the Signalman's problem, and a man who is willing to do something about it. The narrator appears to be a very observational person, taking a mental note of his surroundings, absorbing any unusual details. The Signalman, however, is portrayed more so than the narrator. The narrator, on the first meeting of three, notices the Signalman's ' fixed eyes and saturnine face,' which makes him think the Signalman, may have ' infection in his mind.

This is a fairly deep observation of a man who we have only just been introduced to, proving the point that we are given quality information in small sections of text. The narrator tells us that the Signalman studied natural philosophy, and even attended lectures. In terms of character, although we are told many things about the Signalman we are still only given basic facts. But later on in the story, mystery strikes us. The Signalman admits his concerns to the narrator: '... but I am troubled sir, I am troubled. '

This opens a door to us, a door that makes us wonder about the Signalman's mental stability.

The Signalman has difficulty explaining his problem so he arranges to meet the narrator again. The only character in the story that is identified with a name is an engine driver, called Tom. But why is it that we are only told the name of one person in the story? We don't really know why, but we sense an atmosphere of ever growing mystery. The setting and environment are described in high quality and sufficient detail to give us a good understanding and mental picture of the area. Dickens describes the cutting with strong and precise adjectives.

We aren't told any city or town where this story is set, but this doesn't matter. I think that the description of the tunnel entrance is very good. Here are some of the phrases of the description that I think work well: '... solitary and dismal... ' '... dripping-wet wall of jagged stone... ' '... crooked prolongation of this great dungeon... ' '... gloomy red light... ' '... gloomier entrance to a black tunnel... ' These phrases work effectively because they give good, deep, and meaningful pictures to be conjured in our imaginations.

Although this paragraph, shows good facts about the location, we aren't really left in a feeling of suspense after reading it. We are told that the Signalman's box is in a ' steep cutting. ' This shows us that the Signalman's working environment is lonely and isolated. This is good for mystery because we are left thinking about how many visitors the Signalman really does get. Is he really a lonely man in a solitary environment? The language and structure of this story is very well presented. Dickens uses long adjectiveful

sentences to give detailed description, and shorter, more to the point sentences where necessary.

An example of one of the longer sentences would be: ' I resumed my downward way, and stepping out upon the level of the railroad, and drawing nearer to him, saw that he was a dark sallow man, with a dark beard and rather heavy eyebrows. ' One of the shorter sentences, which I like, is a rather effective metaphor, which describes the Signalman's point of no return in his education: ' He had made his bed, and he had lay upon it. ' This basically means that once you have gone as far as lying on your bed, or in the Signalman's case, misusing opportunities, you can't turn the clock back.

I think that this would be a typical example of a metaphor from one hundred and fifty years ago, and I think it may have been regularly used in appropriate situations. There are also a few rhetorical questions placed around the story. These are extremely good for creating both mystery and suspense as they make the reader think about the events that are taking place. A strong rhetorical question that the narrator asks is: ' But what ran most in my thoughts was the consideration how ought I to act, having become the recipient of this disclosure? '

This question asks to think whether or not the narrator is going to act upon the visions that the Signalman so strongly believes in, or will the narrator witness one of these warnings with his own eyes. Dickens uses fate in this story to good effect. It plays an extremely important part in making his story mysterious and exciting. In most stories fate is used to an extent in which we can foresee what is coming, and to whom it is coming. However, the fate in

this story is almost impossible for the reader to figure out until we reach the last section of the story.

Earlier in the story, the Signalman believes that he is troubled. The Signalman thinks this because he sees a man who shouts a warning to him, but nothing happens. The warnings are of danger, of course, but nothing ever immediately occurs after this man appears and disappears. The fatal incidents happen a few hours after the Signalman is warned. This makes the Signalman believe that he is becoming mentally unstable. These warnings happen three times. On the first two warnings nothing immediately happens to endanger anyone. However, on the third warning it is not the same man who had warned the Signalman previously.

It is the driver of a steam engine on a direct collision course with the Signalman. The Signalman ignores this warning as he thinks it is the man that had warned him on past occasions. However, the Signalman's fate is already decided, and the train kills him. When asked later on by the narrator, Tom, the engine driver says his exact words were: ' Below there! Look out! Look out! For God's sake clear the way! ' This quote makes it remarkably obvious why the Signalman didn't move, and explains the story's major twist in just one short phrase.

The tale has an unexpected ending in my opinion. When I was reading the story I had no idea whatsoever that the Signalman's life would come to such a tragic end. I think that this is an extremely good use of imagination. I think this because Dickens has managed to lead us down the wrong path, and when least expected, sprung a huge surprise upon us. There is a paragraph

at the very end of the story that, if read twice or thrice, and with great attention, drops a hint that maybe the narrator is going to experience the same problems as the Signalman did.

We are left to wonder if the Signalman's problems were just a figment of his imagination, or if they really were true warnings. The lonesome job and harsh environment probably contributed to the Signalman's mental instability. The Narrator clearly thinks so, leaving him in doubt of his own sanity. In comparison to other short stories, I thought this was a rather good tale. Unlike other tales, the ending of the Signalman is very hard to predict, whereas in the other stories, the endings are those that are typically expected from these types of story.

Though the language was fairly advanced, it was easier to understand than the language used by Kate Chopin in *The Awakening*'s *Baby*. The general plot of the story was very clear, as a pose to the not so obvious plot in *The Red Room*. My own initial response to this story was of confusion. I did not really understand the twist in the tale's tail until I had read it once or twice more. I thought this was quite an interestingly and well-written short story. I found it difficult to read, but this doesn't really matter as the story made me want to keep reading. I liked the way the story was organised.

By this, I mean the fact that Dickens wrote his story in the form of three meetings. I found the story more interesting than the other short stories that we read, as the plot was very imaginative. My conclusions on this story are those of which could be called regular. I do believe that Dickens creates an atmosphere of mystery and suspense in his story to such an extent that the

reader is almost confused. I think that Dickens wrote this story particularly well according to his target audience, and his world recognition was earned using a high extent of literary skills.