

How tension and suspense are created in two short stories



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We will be examining how tension and suspense are created in two short stories. I will analyse the use of language, setting, characters and plot to see where tension has been created for the reader. We are looking at 'The Signalman', which is a pre-1990 Dickens' story and 'Lamb to the Slaughter', a more modern story written by Roald Dahl. Charles Dickens would have written 'The Signalman' for a Victorian audience who were very interested in science and paranormal. So Dickens wrote the story with a supernatural mood and with the upmost intent to create fear for the reader.

He has also written the story in a railway setting, which was central to Victorian life. Roald Dahl's desire within 'Lamb to the Slaughter' is to make people smile at the humorous, ironic twist at the end. Dickens chose to write 'The Signalman' in first person so that the reader would experience what the narrator was feeling, allowing Dickens to be able to create tension. Dahl has written 'Lamb to the Slaughter' in third person as the only character that remains throughout the story is Mary Maloney and Dahl would have had to expressed her emotions before and after the murder, which would have spoilt the comical twist due to the complexity.

Also Dahl would have to explain why Patrick Maloney wanted to leave Mary. I think Dickens has left this out so that we don't feel sorry for Patrick, as then we would not smile at the comical twist. 'Lamb to the Slaughter' is set in a normal family home. "The room was warm and clean, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight". From the quote we can tell that it is a loving home by Dahl's selected use of language. This normal setting makes the reader consider the title, 'Lamb to the Slaughter', which suggests something bad making the reader anticipate something bad is going to happen.

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We can tell that there is a tranquil atmosphere by how Mary Maloney is described. " There was a slow smiling air about her... ". The fact that she is sewing makes the reader feel relaxed, as she is acting perfectly normal. " She bent over her sewing". Dahl has produced this tranquil atmosphere to shock the reader when she murders her husband. ' The Signalman' is set in a strange cutting and we are not really told where it is which adds to the tension. " Down in the deep trench". Even the sunset hints at tragedy. " Glow of an angry sunset". Dickens use of vocabulary creates a sense of menace or violence.

Dickens describes the place with many menacing phrases. " Great dungeon". " Barbarous, depressing and forbidding air". " Earthy deadly smell". " Solitary and dismal place". Dickens makes the setting come alive and turns it into a place where something terrible could happen. This creates tension for the reader as they can sense something malicious could happen. You get the feeling that he is getting drawn into the cutting but he has reluctance as he feels there is something strange about the place and the Signalman. Due to the narrator being in first person the readership will also experience reluctance about the cutting.

The ' Lamb to the Slaughter' setting is very relaxed but the ' The Signalman' setting is much more menacing. ' Lamb to the Slaughter' only has one main character throughout the story. I think Dahl has done this to make the story as simple as possible to allow the focus to be on the twist. Dahl has made Mary Maloney a person of habit so that the readers notice something different about the day, which builds the suspense. An example of this is when she notices the change in the way he drinks and how the ice cubes fall

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back to the bottom of the glass. She heard the ice cubes falling back against the bottom of the empty glass”.

She is a very loving wife but when he comes home she fusses about after him. “ She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Then she walked over and made the drinks.. “. Dahl has done this as I have said not to feel angry with her later on. Her husband seems a very cold person as seen by how he talks to her using short sharp sentences. “ I don’t want it! “. This adds to the sympathy you feel towards Mary. Patrick is selfish and Mary is selfless.

Dickens describes the Signalman as a mysterious man, which adds to the tension.

We sense that the narrator is scared of the signalman. “ Something in the man that daunted me”. “ Infection in his mind”. “ Fixed eyes and the saturnine face”. Dickens really emphasises the strangeness of the signalman so that the reader senses fear. We are also told that he was once a normal and clever man. “ Educated above that station”. “ Run wild, misused his opportunities, gone down”. The Signalman is very melodramatic. “ Wiped the drops from his heated forehead”. “ Drawing his hands outward across and across his temples in an extremity of feverish distress”.

Dickens does this simply as it builds tension. Dickens was fond of melodrama, as were many Victorian theatre audiences. In ‘ Lamb to the Slaughter’ we aren’t told why the husband wants to leave. Dahl has done this so we don’t feel sorry for Patrick, which would spoil the ironic twist. The murder is also described with little emotion so we don’t feel angry with Mary. “ Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without a pause swung the

big frozen leg of lamb high into the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head”.

I think this story has a good plot, for example how she puts the meat in the oven, which defrosts it and makes it a completely innocent weapon. The story contains tantalising ironic moments. “ It’d be a favour to me if you’d eat it up”. In ‘ The signalman’ the narrator goes the first time then decides to come back the next day. Which builds tension, as the reader knows that something is going to happen when he comes back. The Signalman sees three visions the first we are not told the details about, the second is when the woman is found dead in the carriage and the third is when he is killed.

When the Signalman first of all looks into the tunnel he stands on the track, which echoes the ending, when he is killed. He gets a warning and then the accident happens with the time in between shortening, thus building tension. The spectre puts his arm in front of his face which at first we think represents him hiding his identity, but then we find out it does it so it doesn’t see the tragedy. Dickens also uses repetition to create tension. “ Don’t call out, don’t call out, don’t call out”. The Signalman repeats this to emphasise the fact that it is important that he does not call out as he might think it is the spectre.