

Charles dickens – the signalman



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a) Based upon Massaud Moisés' definition, we can affirm "The Signalman", by Charles Dickens, belongs to the Gothic Fiction genre. For it has most of the elements that belongs to Gothic writing, such as mystery and horror in the plot, the presence of the supernatural, and the absence of light in a gloomy setting, which elements will be analyzed below in combination with their relating passages.

For instance, just at the beginning of the story, when the narrator presents the signalman character, he is inside a tunnel, aparted from the outside world, isolated in a gloomy setting so that "his figure was foreshortened and shadowed".

Besides, the setting becomes more and more gloomy as the narrative proceeds and the narrator carry on the description of the signalman and his box, "Was it necessary for him when on duty, always to remain in that channel of damp air, and could he never rise into the sunshine from between those high stone walls?"

Therefore, the presence of the supernatural is vivid all along the narrative. In fact, it is the very theme of the story, although the investigative narrator kept rationalizing that the strange facts the signalman had seen were a result of some mental illness, the outcome of the narrative revealed they were not. Even if we considered the outcome as a result of a growing illness in the signalman's mind there are too many coincidences that points out supernatural facts.

"The nameless horror that oppressed me, passed in a moment, for in a moment I saw that this appearance of a man was a man indeed..."

“ The man, who wore a rough dark dress, stepped back to his former place at the mouth of the tunnel.

‘ Coming round the curve in the tunnel, sir,’ he said, ‘ I saw him at the end, like as if I saw him down a perspective-glass. There was no time to check speed, and I knew him to be very careful. As he didn’t seem to take heed of the whistle, I shut it off when we were running down upon him, and called to him as loud as I could call.’

‘ What did you say?’

‘ I said, Below there! Look out! Look out! For God’s sake clear the way!’

I started.

‘ Ah! it was a dreadful time, sir. I never left off calling to him. I put this arm before my eyes, not to see, and I waved this arm to the last; but it was no use.’”

Even the early description of the train passing through the tunnel is somewhat supernatural: “ Just then, there came a vague vibration in the earth and 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”. It is a description that clearly leads us to the next goal of the gothic fiction: frightening the reader and keeping him in suspense. The suspense tone is also present throughout all the story, resulting in cohesive and effective events. As the writer composes a first-person narrative, which leads the reader through the perception of the narrator, making him doubt if the signalman is really mad or if there were actually happening supernatural events inside the tunnel.

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b) First of all, what is expected from a text in order to consider it as serious fiction?

I believe serious fiction is any written text that helps us to perceive the world and ourselves in a different light, as though we were looking at the world with a child's eyes, for the first time. Serious fiction should also make us feel differently, think differently about ourselves, other people and the world around us.

Literature is said to imitate life; Oscar Wilde would say that life imitates art, meaning perhaps that we project our ideas outward to perceive reality according to our beliefs, opinions and cultural conditioning. In any case, literature should move us emotionally, helping us to better understand human experience and the joys, the sorrows, the suffering and exaltation that are associated with it from day to day. In short it should enable us to comprehend life's underlying truths and thus better understand ourselves. Effective literature, the kind that we can read and reread without getting bored, should, I think, move us emotionally. It should open the doors to human perception : emotional, psychological, mystical, or other.

Serious fiction calls attention to itself as a medium. The literary work must satisfy the reader aesthetically, otherwise the reader will unconsciously feel that something essential is lacking. Literary discourse is characterized by systematic and organized foregrounding. Any item in discourse that attracts attention to itself for what it is, rather than acting merely as a vehicle for information, is foregrounding. Foregrounding inevitably involves a distortion

of language to attain its specific end which is often the expression of the universal in the particular, or the infinite in a special grouping of words.

We are not merely called upon to decode the literary text, we are encouraged to interpret it; and often, we derive more from it than the writer was conscious of expressing. Serious fiction invites us to explore the multiplicity of interpretations, and in fact, requires it, whereas the minor fiction text usually does not.

Does "The Signalman" fulfill these requirements? Of course it does. Above all, Dickens had managed to create a desired effect from his work. We could use Edgar Allan Poe's famous review-essay of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in order to corroborate our judgments about Dickens, since the extract below could also have been written for him:

"A skillful literary artist has constructed his tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect."

Moreover, Dickens creates its unity of effect, he involves the reader, alarm him, incite him and frighten him throughout its unity of effects, which was reached through foregrounding and all the elements already discussed in item a.