

How did charles  
dickens create an  
atmosphere of  
tension and mystery  
in the short ...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

This story has two main characters, the narrator and the signalman. The signalman lives in his hut by a rail tunnel, with a steep cutting above it. The narrator goes to visit the signalman every day, and there are many ways in which Charles Dickens creates a genuine atmosphere of tension and mystery in this short story 'The Signalman'. We never know who the narrator actually is - although he is obviously a mysterious character because we don't find out any information about him as the story progresses.

There are several explanations as to what he might have been; perhaps he was a ghost who never fulfilled his purpose in life because he got knocked down on the rail track, or more likely, the narrator resembles the 'Grim Reaper' and has come to subtly tell the signalman that his time in life is up. He doesn't give a reason for being there either, and we never find out his name. We also know very little about the signalman - but what we do know we find out from the narrator asking him.

He had been, when young (if I could believe it, sitting in that hut - he scarcely could), a student of natural philosophy, and had attended lectures; but he had run wild, misused opportunities, gone down, and never risen again. He had no complaint to offer about that. He had made his bed, and he lay upon it. It was far too late to make another." The fact that we know very little about the two main characters in the story makes it very mysterious right from the very beginning. Early on in the story, the signalman makes a point for the narrator to go down in order to meet him.

He had to go down a cutting to reach the signalman. This cutting was extremely deep, unusually precipitous, made of clammy stone that became

oozier and wetter as he went down the cutting. This presents to us an image of the cutting being deep, dark and like a grave. This makes the reader think that the place is dull, but also mysterious, so therefore a reader would want to read on. When they first met, the signalman was very nervous about the presence of the narrator. He looked down the tunnel's mouth and made a curious look towards the red light near it.

He seemed to think something was missing from it, and started to look at the narrator and talked in an extremely low voice. The following quote is what goes through the narrator's mind after he had witnessed the signalman's strange actions: "The monstrous thought came into my mind, as I pursued the fixed eyes and the saturnine face, that this was not a spirit, not a man." This is a very interesting thing to say, and is the first point in the story when the narrator thinks that the signalman isn't a normal human being trying to lead a normal human life.

It is clear he has a purpose in life, and resembles a pawn in a game of chess being played out by fate and destiny. There are several moments when a reader would feel tension in this story, and one is best described in the middle of the story, when the signalman has a premonition of his own death. The first words of the story are 'Halloa! Below there!'. In the following quote, the signalman has just asked the narrator why he said that: "Heaven knows," said I. 'I cried something to that effect -' 'Not to that effect, sir. Those were the very words.

I know them well. 'For no other reason?' 'What other reason could I possibly have?' 'You had no feeling that they were conveyed to you in any

supernatural way? ' ' No. ' This is a long and interesting quote, and presents an image of tension and mystery in particular. The signalman clearly thinks that he has heard the words ' Halloo! Below there! ' but at this point, we do not know when or where he heard those words. It is around this point in the story when the signalman tells the narrator that he is troubled, and it isn't long until we find out the reason why.

We find out that a while ago, he heard a voice cry " Halloo! Below there! " and saw a person waving just as the narrator did at the beginning of the story. The signalman panicked, and he ran to where the person was and vocally expressed his concern by saying: " What's wrong? What has happened? Where? ". On the very same day, he saw a confusion of hands and heads and a person waving on the track. He signalled for the train to stop. The train applied the breaks, but drifted past for a hundred and fifty yards or so.

He ran after the train but heard terrible screams, and saw a beautiful young lady in one of the compartments, who had died. This was why the signalman was troubled. After hearing the words " Halloo! Below there! ", he had a premonition of his own death and the reason why is fairly simple. He was a professional at his job, albeit not a challenging job, however it was a job that involved a great deal of responsibility and attention. If he didn't pay attention to the signals and the lights then the people's lives would be at risk.

He thought that the girl who died on the track was his fault, and he wasn't prepared to risk another person or other people die, therefore he would put

his own life at risk to save them. He thought by hearing the narrator say "Halloa! Below there!" that there was going to be an accident soon, and that he would have to risk his own life to do what effectively was his job. Towards the end of the story, the narrator goes to visit the signalman. It was a lovely evening and he left early to see the signalman. He decided to extend his walk by an hour before he went to see the signalman.

The narrator went to the point where he was at the beginning of the story. At the mouth of the tunnel he saw the appearance of a man, passionately waving with his right arm. He noticed that the danger light was not yet lit and that a new hut had been made with wooden supports and was no bigger than a box (this must represent a coffin). The narrator believed that fatal mischief had come of his leaving the man there. He ran down the cutting as fast as he could and asked a group of men what the matter was.

"Signalman killed this morning, sir. ' ' Not the man belonging to that box? ' ' Yes, sir. " The narrator found out that an engine cut down the signalman because he wasn't clear of the rail despite it being a broad day. The train driver said "Below there! Look out! Look out! For God's sake clear the way!" Although 'The Signalman' isn't perhaps the most interesting story, it is well written, to the point and does make the reader feel tension and mystery as to what is going to happen next. The story creates an image of tension and mystery due to the constant coincidences of the call "Halloa! Below there!" and the detail in which the story is written despite it being a short one.