

# Compare and contrast the signalman by charles dickens essay



The tradition of the mystery story begins with Gothic writing, around 1810. From the Gothic story sub-categories were then created through a progression of stories. These further categories were ghost story, horror and detective. Each different category has some common key features which help to distinguish them and some other, now well known, stereotypical characteristics. For instance, the ghost story can often be associated with the haunted house or such like. However, these are not set boundaries and can be manipulated by the author to whatever extent they feel is necessary.

The first Gothic (horror) story that started the tradition was “ The Castle of Otranto” by Horace Walpole in 1765. This style of writing is therefore relatively new in comparison to other literacy styles. It paved the way for some of the timeless classics that we are so familiar with such as the Sherlock Holmes series, probably the most famous detective series. The style became very popular and some of the most famous stories that fall under these categories were written in the mid 1800’s.

Some of the world’s greatest authors soon adopted this style and altered it to their needs, as it left a lot of scope and open boundaries. Two of Britain’s most renowned authors who wrote stories that fall into the mystery story category were Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. They have both written some of the most famous and enjoyable stories ever read, and their mystery stories are no exception. The two stories analysed for this essay were “ The Withered Arm” by Thomas Hardy and “ The Signalman” by Charles Dickens, both prime examples of the mystery story tradition written in the 1800’s.

The first story that was analysed was “ The Signalman”. It is apparent from the very beginning that it is encompassed by an air of tension and ambiguity, making it the mysterious and intriguing read that it is. The scene is set in a dark and ‘ unusually precipitous’ railway cutting with a solitary figure, the signalman, standing by the line monitoring the track. A key theme, which is present throughout the story, is apparent from this very first scene – a feeling of isolation.

One of the most important features of the ghost story is an unholy or spooky setting, which evokes a feeling of tension in the reader. This is achieved with the darkness and isolation portrayed by the railway cutting, as the signalman is cut off from the rest of civilisation. The possible outcomes from this ideal setting are numerous and keep the reader guessing. The railway cutting is the equivalent of that of a haunted house in the typical horror story, perfect for supernatural happenings. It is important that such a provocative setting is achieved at the start of the story as it entices the readers.

The setting will also mirror that of the atmosphere and a vague likelihood of possible outcomes. Dickens creates the scene very well, describing it through the observations of the narrator. For some reason the narrator is calling to the signalman “ Halloo! Below there! ” and these are the first words at the beginning of the story which have little or no explanation. This immediately sets our minds wondering what he could be doing, and it is a technique also used by Dickens to capture the attention of the reader from the beginning.

After some time it becomes apparent that it is a signalman he is calling to, but the tension is increased by the way the signalman reacts to the other man's call, ' instead of looking up to where I stood, he turned himself about and looked down the line', and even then ' there was something remarkable in his manner of doing so'. Already it is apparent that something is not right and Dickens has managed to create an atmosphere of tension, suspense and mystery, all in the first two paragraphs. An important and effective technique used by Dickens is the way in which the story is related to the reader.

Initially we are introduced to everything and the scene is set through the narrator, of whom we never know the actual identity. He is a sceptic of such supernatural circumstances and happenings and tries to offer a more realistic point of view. In essence he tries to explain the inexplicable. With an apparent medical background we look to him as a reliable character who is always in touch with reality. The signalman sparks in the narrator an unusual interest or possibly even pity for him, so much so that he decides to revisit him.

By this time an extremely vivid image of the railway cutting has been described with the added effect of darkness and night time. This is very common to the ghost story - using night time to heighten the sense of eeriness. Once again a strong sense of isolation is portrayed by the signalman, as he has had to work all alone and in the dark, away from the hustle and bustle of the outside world. So understandably the prospect of a little conversation with the narrator is not turned down. It is at this point in the story that the supernatural elements are first revealed, and not directly through the narrator.

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Dickens uses a sophisticated method to reveal the mystery elements. The narrator speaks of what the signalman preached, and it is through this that we find out about the apparition. The only main characters portrayed in the story are the signalman and the narrator. We know little of their past, in fact all we know about them is a little of their personality which is displayed through their interaction with one another. Dickens has purposefully done this as it is only a short story and he has therefore selected what he has considered to be the relevant information.

There also remains an element of mystery about the characters with the little knowledge that we have of them. It later becomes apparent what the "spectre" had shouted to the narrator: "Halloa! Below there!" The whole phrase is the same as that shouted by the narrator, adding to the mystery of the story. Dickens has produced an ideal setting and victim for the supernatural happenings to revolve around. The signalman himself is somewhat isolated in his train cutting at night, and he is therefore vulnerable in the mystery story tradition, and Dickens does not let us down.

A chain of events, supernatural or otherwise, continues to intrigue the narrator and he pursues his curiosity in an attempt to find a logical explanation. The story has combined some of the key elements of the ghost story with some of the elements of a detective story. The signalman poses the question "What does the spectre mean?" but the narrator has no answer. The signalman goes on to talk about how much it troubles and haunts him and wonders what he can do. The narrator offers to stay, but the signalman will not hear of it and he leaves, wondering what he should do.

The next evening the narrator returns to the cutting and he can see the appearance of a man, at the mouth of the tunnel, with his left sleeve across his eyes, passionately waving his right arm. When he goes to find out what has happened, he learns that a train has killed the signalman earlier that morning. The man in the dark dress says that when he came round the curve in the tunnel the signalman didn't seem to take heed of the whistle and he shouted to him as loud as he could. The narrator is quick to ask what exactly he called and he replies ' Below there!

Look out! For God's sake clear the way! '. The narrator finishes the story by explaining that these are the very words that the signalman had told the narrator were haunting him and that the narrator had called to the signalman when they first met. The ending is short and tragic, and, although we have learnt why most of the events took place, there is still that idea of mystery as to why the signalman and the narrator were brought together in the first place and why both men became so involved with what now seems was a warning of what was later to come.

This is one of the features that can often make a mystery story so much better, by the author still leaving some element of doubt or some unanswered questions. It is a short story, but one that is certainly full of mystery and Dickens uses the characters, setting, the supernatural and the unexplained superbly well in creating an excellent story for this book. There is no doubt that Dickens stuck to the mystery story tradition, while adding his own personal touch and creating what some would argue is the best ghost story ever written.

The second of the short stories analysed in class was “ The Withered Arm” by Thomas Hardy. Hardy came from the county of Dorset, and grew up in a rural setting. Thus it is from Dorset that a lot of Hardy’s stories derive their setting. However, they are given the name of Wessex, a fictional area created by Hardy in which he can manipulate the surroundings and atmospheres as he sees fit for the stories. “ The Withered Arm” is a tale based on a strong sense of supernatural happenings which are left largely unexplained throughout the story.

Similar to the theme in “ The Signalman” is the strong sense of isolation – far away from the rest of civilisation. The story begins in the dairy with a number of milkmaids: “ He do bring the bride tomorrow I hear. ” It is here that one of the main characters is first mentioned – Gertrude Lodge. In one corner of the dairy sits Rhoda, milking, listening to the gossip of the other milkmaids. She too had a relationship with Farmer Lodge and a resulting child. From hearing about the farmer’s new wife she begins to harbour an ongoing hatred for the women who she believes is stealing him away.

The setting at this point is insignificant in its location, other than its isolation. It is the situation between those living on the farm that sparks the supernatural chain of events. Rhoda is overcome with a sense of curiosity about the new wife and feels she must know everything about her, as she feels insignificant and worthless with the arrival of a new woman. She feels challenged and comes out of her isolation with the unhealthy interest she has in Gertrude. Rhoda sends her son to find out all of the possible information about the new love interest.

By this point in the story there is no strong sense of it falling under the mystery story category, other than the title. Up until this point it seems to be a fairly normal drama. However, upon hearing about Gertrude's beauty, Rhoda has an immeasurable amount of hatred targeted towards the new wife. Her emotions are so strong that they even reveal themselves in her dreams. One night, while asleep, Rhoda dreams of the farmer's wife waving her wedding ring in her face. Overcome with anger she grabs Gertrude's arm and flings her over her shoulder.

However, this incurs terrible effects in reality. Through some supernatural powers, Rhoda somehow manages to inadvertently inflict the wounds onto Gertrude. This demonstrates one of Thomas Hardy's key beliefs and is a metaphor for the very real effects that human emotions can precipitate. However, this is the most important element of the tale, setting the story in motion. The supernatural powers displayed by Rhoda show an element of witchcraft that can often appear in the mystery story tradition. From this point onwards Gertrude's arm begins to deteriorate and "wither".

In an attempt to find out more information about Gertrude, Rhoda had previously asked her son to find out and report back to her on the new wife, and as a result inadvertently caused Gertrude to visit with new shoes for her son. Upon meeting, Rhoda realises that Gertrude is not actually the evil person that she had believed her to be. A friendship begins to form between the two main characters, to the extent that Rhoda aids Gertrude in her mission to heal her arm. This is through an extreme feeling of guilt on Rhoda's behalf. The whole story uses a third person narrative structure.



This is ideal for the story line, as the reader is not influenced by a biased opinion, as it offers a clear and straightforward story telling. However, this does mean that we are not fully informed about several events. No doubt this was planned by Hardy to keep the reader guessing about certain aspects of the story. On a mission to seek a cure for the ailment, they visit Trendle the Conjuror. Gertrude does not want her husband to know about such dealings so deceives him. This is the first of a number of deceptions that she feeds to her husband.

Although she lies to him in order to try and heal her arm, she is doing so for his benefit, as he has lost interest in her and is even embarrassed by her and her unsightly arm. Upon meeting Conjuror Trendle, he immediately states that there is nothing he can do, and that the wound has been inflicted upon her by a powerful enemy. There is tension as Rhoda feels guilty and Gertrude feels demoralised. Months pass and the arm continues to deteriorate. The isolation that was apparent for Rhoda has now been inflicted upon Gertrude and her arm. The environment is tense as Gertrude is persistent with her attempts to try and have her arm healed.

In contrast to "The Signalman", the setting has no real effect on the overall atmosphere and events of the story other than the isolation. A second visit to Trendle by Gertrude alerts her to a possible cure known as "Turning of the blood". This is achieved by touching the ailment to the neck of a man who has been hung. The mystery story tradition is now more apparent as the possible cure is so obscene and daunting. Gertrude persists with her mission nevertheless. Once in town she finds the gallows and obtains access to the chamber where the dead man will be held after the hanging.

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The setting is at its most mysterious at this point. The gallows offers a horrid reality of what she must do. After all the anguish she has been through she must perform this one last act to be rid of her wound and therefore her anguish. Once again, she has to lie to her husband in order to attend the ghastly exhibition. Once the hanging is complete she approaches the body and presses her arm against the neck of the dead boy. At this point a twist in the story startles the reader as we find out the boy is actually Rhoda's son.

A scream from Rhoda confirms this as she watches Gertrude try to heal her arm. The turning of the blood goes horribly wrong and Gertrude dies as a result. This is an unexpected ending with a huge twist which is largely unforeseen by the reader. Hardy has ended the story with a climax, which does not disappoint the readers. A long line of deceptions led to this final act, all stemming from Farmer Lodge. It is he who has a relationship with Rhoda and a resulting child out of wedlock. Even after this he decides to marry another woman, angering Rhoda.

Once Gertrude's arm begins to deteriorate, his love for her is greatly diminished, causing her to deceive him to try and heal the arm. The tension and suspense gradually increases as the tale unfolds and the reader is once again left with some unanswered questions at the end of the story. Both "The Withered Arm" and "The Signalman" are exceptional short stories that comply with the mystery story tradition.

"The Signalman" has more obvious and direct connections to the ghost story, with elements of the detective story, both of which are fundamental to the success of this story within the mystery tradition. "The Withered Arm", on

the other hand, mixes elements of the supernatural into a drama type situation to produce a thoroughly enjoyable and enticing story. It does not directly fall into any of the main categories of the mystery stories that are briefly explained in the introduction, but uses broader boundaries to achieve its sense of mystery. Both were written around the same time and each is renowned in its own way for being some of the best in the mystery story tradition.