

The Victorian Gothic Short Story

Lecture - 05

Charles Dickens 'The Signal Man' Lecture Summary and Character Sketches

Good morning. This session will give a short summary of the lectures that have been covered so far on *The Signal Man* by Charles Dickens, along with a few character sketches from the story. There were two railroad accidents in 1861 and 1865 which can lead us to speculate, if Dickens took inspiration from these real life incidents to compose this gothic narrative in 1866. In the story, the train figures as a major character. The story opens with 'Halloa below there' which turns out to be a refrain with supernatural significance. The sinister silence, solitude and the feeble red lamp at the entrance of the tunnel, paint the setting in gothic light.

The narrator calls down to the signal man from the top of a steep cutting, from where the signal man's figure looks foreshortened and shadowed. This is the kind of distortion associated with gothic fiction and it could also be a distortion of the human psyche. The train is invested with gothic characteristics. It comes with a vague vibration in the earth and the air, which quickly changes to a violent pulsation as though it had the force to draw the narrator down.

The signal man's station is located in a deep trench. This symbolizes the underground; the unreasonable, the space of the other which is an aberration from the norm. The narrator finds the air barbarous; depressing and forbidding as if he had left the natural world. The cutting is described as extremely deep and unusually precipitate. The terrain is clammy, wet and oozy. The narrator calls the station a great dungeon and the lone strip of sky visible from there is but a prolongation of the great dungeon.

It appears as if the figure of the signal man himself could be such a prolongation of this dismal and solitary setting. Both of them doubt if the other is a spirit and not a man. This points to the foremost position that the supernatural occupied in the minds of that age even with the influx of new technology like railways. The narrator calls this a monstrous thought. He also sees the fear in the signal man's eyes. He wonders, if there may have been an infection in his mind. This speaks again for the distortion of the human psyche. The infected mind that is characteristic of the gothic setting. The signal man's life has

been shaped into that dismal, but exact and vigilant form by the coming of the railways and technology.

He has to remain in that channel of damp air. The narrator asks him if he does not rise into the sunshine, from between those high stone walls. When the signal man is a little above these lower shadows, which is yet another suggestion of his occupying a place that is below the normal, he listens with redoubled anxiety to the electric bells summoning. It is suggested that the signal man's state of mind is also influenced by the conditions and demands of his work.

The narrator ensures the readers' sympathy for the signal man by setting him apart from the rest of the working class with his vigilance and exactitude in work. It is also said that he was once a student of natural philosophy. The narrator is inviting us to not doubt the sanity of the signal man by providing us these details, even as the narrator hears about the signal man's apprehension of the spectre, which is yet to come.

However, when the signal man glances at the bell when it is not ringing and by the anxiety he shows, it also seems as if there is something troubling him; as if he is in some kind of mental duress. When the signal man discloses his anxiety to the narrator, we come to know that he has seen a spirit, the face of which is not known to him. The signal man talks through gestures and the narrator grows familiar with the way in which the signal man sees the spirit and the words that he hears from the spirit.

The description is eerie. The signal man initially suspects the ghost to be a man. But the vision moves away as he tries to approach it. The narrator's attempt is to explain the vision as a deception of the senses. The narrator tries to remain rational, even if he grows vary by listening to the signal man's descriptions. However, the narrator learns of the accidents that happened on the line, every time after the visitation of the spectre and we see that the signal man fears for a real physical tragedy every time he encounters the supernatural vision. He is haunted by the fear that he is unable to discern the warning correctly, so as to prevent the tragedy which is about to occur. With the descriptions that involve the death of a beautiful young woman, a perfect gothic atmosphere is built up. Even when the narrator continues to be rational, there is something inexplicable about these tragedies. The society tends to categorize anything that cannot be rationally explained under the supernatural. Hence, this gothic preoccupation.

The signal man says that he has been seeing the ghost by fits and starts all week and since it appears near the danger light, it is to him a certain warning. The spectre says 'For God's sake, clear the way'; the specter is very human. The signal man enacts the spectre with such intensity that he himself appears to embody the supernatural.

The narrator objects to the claim that the spectre was calling this signal man while he was talking to him. However, the signal man says that he has never confused the ring of the spectre with the ring of a man. There are two voices here; one is the narrator's rational voice and the other is the signal man's voice which has faith in the supernatural. The narrator takes him out to examine the dismal mouth of the tunnel and confirms that the signal man is not hallucinating.

The narrator finds the signal man's eyes prominent and strained as he looks for the spectre, which can also be a description of the mental state of the man. We can see that the signal man does not want to be taken for mad. He is aware that he cannot report the danger without real facts. The narrator attributes the signal man's pressures to an unintelligible responsibility involving life. In this unintelligibility, the supernatural operates. Coincidentally, all the signal man wants is for the unintelligibility to be cleared.

He wishes for the spectre's warnings to be clear. The unintelligible creates the possibility of some tragic repetition. This trope of repetition plays an important role in creating the gothic aspect or effect of the story. The narrator is not comfortable when he leaves the signal man's cabin because he feels that there is an intangible connection between the setting, the signal man and the two accidents that occurred on the railway line. The red light even to the narrator is an eerie light. The narrator thinks that the spectre is the outcome of a diseased mind that the signal man now possesses. He thinks that this intelligent and vigilant man is under some kind of mental duress. The narrator plans for a medical solution while keeping the signal man's secret.

The medical solution is called a middle ground. The narrator becomes the problem solving figure here, who is keen to help the signal man. Going back to the same point from where he had seen the signal man for the first time; deep in the trench, he sees close in the mouth of the tunnel the appearance of a man with his left sleeve across his eyes and passionately waving his right arm. However, this was not a spectre. It was a man indeed, who seemed to be rehearsing the gesture to his onlookers. The narrator was

concerned about the responsibility that the signal man held for the safety of lives. And now, he feels a self reproachful fear. He thinks that he should have sent someone to overlook or correct the signal man and he now feels responsible. We also realize that the narrator is from the upper class or from the upper middle class as he is addressed as sir by the working class figures present at the railway line. The narrator is informed of the signal man's death. We also come to know that the signal man's face was quite composed as he met with his death. He was cut down by an engine. Here we have assertions that the signal man was very careful about his work and that the driver had tried to signal him with the whistle and by calling out to him.

However, when the engine gives the whistle, he pays no heed just as he had paid no heed the very first time the narrator called out to him from above the deep cutting. The engine driver said he had called 'Below there, look out; look out for god's sake, clear the way'. The narrator starts when he hears this and learns that the driver had put one arm in front of his eyes and had waved the other to the very last, just as the spectre in the signal man's visions had done. The repetition is perhaps what killed the signal man. These were the same words that the narrator had used to call out to him.

The narrator has never seen the spectre, but he has as a consequence of his conversation with the signal man, begun to attach those words with the gesticulation that the engine driver had imitated. The question comes back time and again, whether the signal man was hallucinating. There is an implication in the story that the technology is causing the loss of lives and the psychic disturbance that caused the signal man to not stop himself from getting killed.

The themes include the power of technology, isolation and loneliness. Unlike the train, human presence of the landscape is sparse and scattered, which is suggested as the landscape of modernity itself. On the one hand, we have a rational explanation and on the other, we have the supernatural. There are also suggestions of sanity and insanity. The tunnel is an unfathomable space and the red light denotes danger and death.

The repetitions in narrative language and exactness prove fatal in the narrative. The signal man is a hybrid term. There is no name for the man. What we have is a reference to his job and therefore, we have reason to wonder if it was his job that caused his death. He is a hybrid figure where technology, poor working conditions, lower social class, the

rational and the supernatural are played out. Going to the character sketches, the rational first person, narrator acts as a tool to explore the other world. The narrator proves to be loyal, a man of integrity; he also symbolizes the normal in the society.

He seems to be a tourist into the other world. The narrator is rational and often acts as a problem solving figure. His analysis is less about the supernatural and more about the working conditions which seemed to be diseasing the signal man's mind. He calls the signal man sick. He calls the signal man's condition the mental torture of a conscientious man. He comes off as an empathetic character. Through the course of the story, the narrator is definably sane, as opposed to the suggested insanity of the signal man.

The narrator belongs to the upper echelons of society and his interest in helping the signal man and his interest in helping the signal man are partly altruistic and partly out of his concern for public safety. One gets the feeling that the narrator himself is unable to decide whether the spectre is real or if it is just a hallucination of the signal man until the very end, when the supernatural significance of the spectre is impressed upon him by the repeated words and gesticulation.

The signal man is a figure that needs to be seen in conjunction with the setting of the railways. He is not high up in class, but he serves a function of trust and importance as he is responsible for the lives of many. He does hold himself accountable for receiving spectral warnings and yet being unable to act upon these warnings and thus, prevent the railroad accidents. The narrator takes care to convey to the reader that the signal man is otherwise intelligent, as he was once a student of natural philosophy and is a conscientious worker. He is exact and vigilant in his duty.

The reader takes this trustworthiness for granted, when viewing the signal man. One cannot see the signal man in isolation from his milieu, as this figure that lacks a proper name could also be a type-- one among the many signal men. As said earlier, he is a hybrid figure and just as his working atmosphere is shaped by technology, his death seems to have been done, has seems to have been borne out of this very working atmosphere.

The spectre that the signal man sees is another interesting character, as the spectre is mourning, sympathetic and also ineffectual much like the bystander that the signal man is. The specter could, in that sense, be an extension of many psychic anxieties. The

causality of the accidents is explored through the figure of the spectre. It is all the ways trying to warn the signal man, although he does not know of what.

The spectre seems to have certain human compunctions as it tries to cover its eyes to spare itself the sight of death and that concludes this short session with a brief summary and a few character sketches in relation to *The Signal Man* by Charles Dickens.

Thank you.