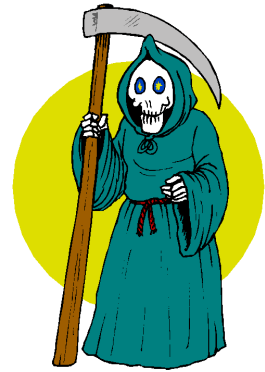


"A Twist in the Tale"

The Signal-Man by Charles Dickens

Suggested answers

1. The signalman is shocked when the narrator calls to him because he thinks the narrator is the 'ghost.' The narrator uses exactly the same words as the spectre ("Halloa! Bellow there!") before each accident. Therefore, the signalman is afraid that another disaster is about to happen.
2. The clues include the fact that the signalman looks down the line instead of at the narrator as if he is looking for something. Also, the signalman is described as having an attitude of "expectation and watchfulness," suggesting that something is going to happen. Another clue is the way the narrator describes the wind,



"it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world."

As well as this, the signalman speaks of the words the narrator used being conveyed in a "supernatural way."

The strange behaviour of the signalman, the steep slopes and darkness of the cutting and the eerie sound of the wind in the wires all help to convey a feeling of suspense and tension.

3. The story takes place in and around a deep railway cutting during the 19th century. The signals are controlled by sending telegraph signals up and down the line and communicated to the operator by a system of bells. The signalman has to change the signals mechanically by means of a set of levers.

The cutting itself is "extremely deep, and unusually precipitate." The narrator refers to the "clammy stone" and how "it became oozy and wetter as I went down."

The mouth of the tunnel is described as having "a barbarous, depressing and forbidding air."

These details, combined with the cold wind and loneliness of the place, add up to a feeling of dread and foreboding.

4. We learn that the signalman is conscientious and precise about his work. He becomes used to the monotony and loneliness of his occupation and passes the time learning a language and experimenting with algebra. In his youth he had been well educated although he had "run wild, misused his opportunities, gone down, and never risen again."

The narrator has the impression that the signalman is reliable and trustworthy,

I should have set this man down as one of the safest men to be employed in that capacity,"

which makes his story seem all the more incredible. The man is clearly distressed by the apparitions and the subsequent disasters, which the narrator explains as "the mental torture of a conscientious man, oppressed beyond endurance by the unintelligible responsibility involving life."

5. The signalman is afraid that the appearance of the ghost again means that there will be another terrible accident.
6. On the first occasion the ghost appeared there was a train crash in which many people died

"Within six hours after the Appearance, the memorable accident on this Line happened, and within ten hours the dead and wounded were brought along through the tunnel over the spot where the figure had stood."

7. On the second occasion a young woman died in mysterious circumstances

"That very day, as a train came out of the tunnel, I noticed, at a carriage window on my side, what looked like a confusion of hands and heads, and something waved. I saw it just in time to signal the driver, Stop! He shut off, and put his brake on, but the train drifted past here a hundred and fifty yards or more. I ran after it, and, as I went along, heard terrible screams and cries. A beautiful young lady had died instantaneously in one of the compartments, and was brought in here, and laid down on this floor between us."

8. An oncoming train killed the signalman when he stood in its path.

"He was cut down by an engine, sir. No man in England knew his work better. But somehow he was not clear of the outer rail. It was just at broad day. He had struck the light, and had the lamp in his hand. As the engine came out of the tunnel, his back was towards her, and she cut him down."

9. Give some examples of what you enjoyed or found interesting about the story. What do you think made the story difficult to understand- if anything?

10. I think that the story is really about the effect of technology and industrialisation on the human soul. The signalman is driven "mad" by the monotony and, at the same time, the awful responsibility involved in his work. He is "alienated" from his environment: he is an intelligent and imaginative man who is forced to live his life deprived of sunlight, with little to occupy his mind and always knowing that the smallest mistake will lead to terrible loss of life. The supernatural element reflects the Victorian fascination with the paranormal as a reaction against the rapid advances in science and technology during the 19th century that seemed to deny the existence of a spiritual dimension to life. The story is a true mystery; it can have no solution as it is about the impossibility of ever knowing what is real.

