



Railways, Ghosts and Charles Dickens' "The Signalman"

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APA Citation:

Coşar Çelik, S. (2018). Railways, Ghosts and Charles Dickens' "The Signalman". *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 6(10), 124-132.

Abstract

As perhaps the leading symbol of industrialization, railway constructions changed Victorian Britain in many different ways. Railways not only transformed British landscape geographically, but they also shaped the attitudes of the Victorians towards developing transportation technologies. While the Victorians appreciated and enjoyed railway transformation, they were also traumatized because of tragic railway disasters. Different facets of the issue of railway safety, including not only the safe travel of passengers but also safe working conditions of railway employees, were hot topics of discussion throughout the railway age. Being a railway accident survivor himself, Charles Dickens was well aware of the weight of the issue. In the form of a Christmas ghost story, his short piece "The Signalman" (1866) directs attention to railway environments, working conditions of railway employees and their influence on the occurrence of railway accidents. This article thus intends to explore "The Signalman" in relation to such discussions regarding the railway phenomenon in Victorian Britain. Also, it will examine how and why the story combines rational and supernatural narratives through the voices of two main figures: the title character and the narrator.

Key Words: The Railway Age, Industrialization, Charles Dickens, Staplehurst Rail Crash, The Signalman

1. Introduction

In early 1820s, the railways started to transform Britain geographically, culturally and socially. The Victorians had contradictory reactions towards the railway constructions, though. On the one hand, they enjoyed fast travel and easier mobility thanks to the advantages of developing train transportation; on the other hand, they were at times scared of trains (Gardiner, 2002, p. 16). As one of the biggest achievements of the Industrial Revolution, the spread of railways was yet another sensational phenomenon in the Victorian age because trains generated keen public interest and curiosity. However, at the same time, many people developed dubious feelings towards this new form of transportation. Tragic railway accidents, which took the lives of many people and left others worried and anxious, confused people. Throughout the nineteenth century, there were numerous serious train accidents, whose casualties traumatized the Victorians. Charles Dickens survived one of these accidents, the Staplehurst rail crash on

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June 9, 1865 (Pope, 2001, p. 437). There was a track work in progress near Staplehurst, where the train was due to pass. Because the mechanic failed to read the timetables correctly, no one was aware of the approaching train, which carried more than a hundred passengers including Charles Dickens, his mistress Ellen Ternan and her mother. Unrepaired tracks caused a disastrous derailment, which killed ten people and injured several others. Only a year after this catastrophic event, Charles Dickens published one of his famous short stories titled "The Signalman" (1866).

The story first appeared as a ghost story in the Christmas issue of *All the Year Round*, a literary periodical founded and edited by Charles Dickens himself between 1859-1895. As a journalist and observer Dickens used periodicals as a kind of "forum for his ideas upon every sort of social question – poverty, crime, education, factory conditions, the position of women, divorce, foreign missions, housing, hygiene and sanitation, trade unions, administrative reform" (Wilson, 1970, p. 220). Yet, voicing his opinions regarding the problems of railways and train transportation¹ after the Staplehurst disaster was not easy because he was travelling with his mistress and preferred to avoid any possible publicity (Pope, 2001, p. 445). Thus, even though Dickens did not openly write about the Staplehurst train accident, it wouldn't be amiss to think that his experience as a deadly rail crash survivor might very likely have inspired him to pen "The Signalman."

Briefly, the story relates the tormented psychology of a signalman responsible for operating the train traffic by receiving and sending signals. The story is related from the voice and perspective of a first-person narrator, who is the only person whom the signalman is in interaction with. The story opens in an eerie atmosphere as the signalman behaves quite strange when he first encounters with the narrator in the isolated, desert-like place where he works. Later, when the signalman slowly confides in the narrator, their conversation reveals details about some otherworldly occurrences at the railway tunnel. The signalman thinks that the railway gorge is haunted by ghosts because he further tells that anytime he sees a specter, a tragedy at the railway strikes. First, a terrible accident happens², second, a young woman dies all of a sudden, third (and the last), the signalman himself dies. Even though the narrator tends to offer realistic and reasonable explanations to the supernatural visions that the signalman claims to have seen, the mysterious circumstances around the signalman's death at the very end of the story leave the narrator confused, too.

The story not only hints how Dickens himself might have been traumatized after the accident, but it also reflects contradictory nature of the railway craze in Victorian Britain. No doubt that trains thrilled the Victorians as perhaps the central symbol of industrialization and progress; yet, deadly accidents meanwhile cast doubts on the benefits that railways were believed to have brought. "The Signalman" in this sense is a perfectly apt example showing different facets of what is today called 'the railway mania' in the industrial Britain. Besides covering the then very hotly debated issues regarding the railway safety, Charles Dickens also combines two seemingly contradictory yet equally Victorian discourses in "The Signalman": (1) realist/rational discourse (the narrator's perspective and voice) and (2) the supernatural discourse (the signalman's perspective and voice). The way the realist narrative in the story interacts with the ghost narrative reveals the very zeitgeist of the Victorian era, which is what this article intends to explore. Before focusing closely on the story itself, an examination of the

¹ It is worthy of a brief note here that Charles Dickens was not always critical of railways and trains in his fictional or non-fictional works. For further discussion, see also "Excellent Monsters": The Railway Theme in Dickens's Novels" by Daragh Downes (2012).

² The first event in the story is believed to be based on Clayton Tunnel crash (1861), "at the time the worst railway accident in English history" (Pope, 2001, p. 441).

railway mania and the situation of railway employees in Victorian Britain is necessary in order to understand the background of the story better.

2. The Railway Craze and the Signalmen Phenomenon in Victorian Britain

Rapid industrialization in the nineteenth century brought together a series of developments and generated critical changes in diverse fields of life. The increase in the use of steam and steel power entailed the use of steamships at the sea and triggered the start of the railway craze on the land (Atterbury, 2001, p.152-157). Starting from the early nineteenth century, in addition to the factories in big industrial cities such as London, Liverpool and Manchester, railway constructions and rapid development of train transportation gained the Industrial Revolution another type of visibility in the English landscape; rail tracks and trains. The 1820s launched the railway age with “the opening of the Stockton and Darlington line in 1825,” which, according to Paul Atterbury (2001), marks “the start of the modern railway age” (p. 157). Several other railway lines were opened during the following three decades to connect once remote areas in England. It was an extremely fast process as stated by Atterbury: “[b]y 1845 some 2,441 miles of railway were open and over 30 million passengers were being carried . . . a considerable number of the visitors to the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 travelled on excursion trains” (2001, p. 158). This resulted in enormous changes in different fields of life in England because trains “altered the relation of town and country, created a tourist industry, introduced ordinary people to their heritage and geography” (Moran, 2011, p.55). Today, no one could deny the revolutionary contribution of the railway constructions to the industrialized Victorian Britain.

However, the Victorians had contradictory feelings and reactions towards the railways and train transportation, mainly because of disastrous accidents and derailments caused –most of the time— by high-speed trains, inadequately supervised train traffic and weak communication among various railway lines (Atterbury, 2001, p. 158). No matter how revolutionary and innovative they may seem when looked from today’s world, the first steam-engine locomotives were indeed primitive and hence they were at times dangerous to travel. While the Victorians enjoyed this historical moment, they also paid serious prices each time news of a train accident hit the newspaper headlines. Especially in some notorious cases, the death toll was so high that people were confused and anxious regarding the railway safety.

The causes of these accidents were manifold. First, boiler explosions were common and most of the time deadly, given the then-rudimentary nature of steam locomotives. Railway crashes and collisions were again frequent due to inept communication among train services. Derailments were fatal too, mainly because of poor quality roads, track works and high-speed trains. Atterbury further elaborates on the causes of train accidents in the Victorian era:

Accidents were frequent, the result usually of excessive speed, inadequate breaks and poor traffic control. Signaling was rudimentary until the electric telegraph and the block control system came into widespread use. The effects of accidents were often compounded by the fragile nature of the carriages, usually built of wood, and by the risk of fire that was frequently sparked off by the gas lighting. Despite availability of electric lighting from quite an early date, gas-lit carriages were still in use as late as 1928. (2001, p. 159)

There are also many cases where pedestrians were run over by speedy trains as they were crossing the rails. After all, the newly constructed railways divided broad green grassland where many rural people used to live and work. It took time for them to get used to their existence as the new outlook must have been extremely strange to the Victorians with rails looking like huge iron stacks ruining the vast green landscape. Regarding these and the like, Pope aptly writes

that "speed and complexity of Victorian railways were thus sources of both pride and alarm" (2001, p. 440). Hence, it was this atmosphere that generated mixed feelings regarding—conceivably—one of the major achievements of the Industrial Revolution in Victorian Britain, the railway boom.

There is no doubt that especially in the early days of railway transportation, signaling was a serious problem, first, because of technical matters which were yet to develop, and, second, due to the difficult and stressful nature of the signaling process. Signalmen and/or switchmen/pointsmen were employed at different railway lines and were supposed to operate railway traffic using rudimentary techniques³. No doubt that those employed in such positions were inexpert and untrained because the railway system itself was newly-emerging. In such circumstances, railway employments required strict precision and attentiveness. In "The Signalman," Dickens, too, briefly touches on what one may call a 'job description' of those employed as signalmen: "he had enough responsibility to bear; but exactness and watchfulness were what was required of him, and of actual work – manual labor – he had next to none. To change that signal, to trim those lights, and to turn this iron handle now and then was all he had to do under that head" (p. 871). Apparently, such positions necessitated physical and psychological strength, yet long working hours at –most of the time-isolated places were obviously no good to mental health. Therefore, there were frequent debates throughout the railway age regarding the significant role of signalmen, switchmen and drivers in the occurrence of fatal train accidents. For instance, an anonymous article titled "Sleepy Signalmen" published in *The British Medical Journal* in 1883 draws attention to the hardships of working as a signalman or pointsman within the railway industry:

Inquiries into railways accidents have shown, over and over again, that the safety of railway traveling is daily imperiled by the employment of railway signalmen and pointsmen under circumstances which render the exercise of vigilance in their very responsible duties difficult or impossible. Many a so-called accident, involving destruction of human life, has plainly arisen because an unfortunate signalman or pointsman has at last failed to be on the alert at his post, after twelve or more hours of continuous and exhausting night-work. In spite of repeated references in official reports on railway disasters to this lamentable and wholly preventable circumstance, some railway companies, blind alike to their own interests and to the perils of their passengers, appear to continue to overwork their servants in charge of points and signals. (p. 471)

Seemingly, working conditions of employees were a matter of discussion, especially with respect to their role in railway safety. Those employed in such positions often worked under stress and they had to cope with harsh physical conditions, loneliness and isolation, day and night. It was widely debated that railway employees working in such conditions in the railway industry were more prone to suffer from nervous breakdown and stress-related disorders. For example, another anonymous article titled "Engine Drivers and High Speed" published in *The British Medical Journal* in 1896 argues that "railway strain can have definitely injurious effects upon the nervous system" (p. 741). Also, the article further addresses weakened and unsteady conditions of signalmen:

A stationmaster seeing a man run over on the line himself fell down dead upon the platform. Here was a shock which permanently made his heart stand still; but how many times had not that man's heart stood still before? We may feel perfectly certain that if the major shock could kill, the minor *daily recurring shocks of a railway life* must have

³ For further discussion, see also "Dickens's "The Signalman" and Information Problems in the Railway Age" by Norris Pope (2001).

greatly damaged a heart so under the influence of the nervous system. Two trains collided at a junction. It was either the fault of the drivers or of the rails, certainly not of the signalman. The signals were right; yet when the box was entered the signalman was found to have gone mad, and had to be taken to an asylum, where he remained for long. He was broken utterly by the horror of the dilemma; but what shall we say about the smaller dilemmas which every hour of his working life he had had to solve? (p. 741, emphasis mine)

Apparently, daily railway events were considered extremely aggravating and stressful, and detrimental effects of “railway life” on workers’ psychological and physical health were debated frequently. As an inevitable result of the lack of technological devices, which would ease scheduling of trains and facilitate communication among different train stations, human force became the only way that safe travel could depend on. Thus, a slight mistake or negligence could result in dreadful consequences such as fatal collisions or derailments, which, in many cases, caused people their lives. The responsibility of signalmen in the prevention of such tragedies was of vital importance. Those employed in this position often worked alone in distressing conditions, which presumably validated the following observation:

A few years ago it was found that the sickness-rate among the signalmen of certain lines was becoming excessive, and it was determined to do away with the system of leaving to one man the whole responsibility of taking charge of a signal-box. At great expense every box along the line was supplied with two men. Great evil were prophesied; it was thought the men would talk, and lark and neglect their duties. This did not happen but the sickness stopped. (“Engine Drivers and High Speed” 1896, p. 741)

Such discussions reveal that many people were aware of nerve-racking working conditions of signalmen and tried to find alternative solutions to this. Engine drivers’ job was no less stressful because the Victorians were also concerned about the potential negative influences of high speed to the emergence of heart diseases among the drivers (“Engine Drivers and High Speed,” 1896, p. 740). There were also discussions regarding the possible detrimental effects of high speed-trains on passengers. As Moran notes, the Victorians even “feared that the speed of the train would draw the air from passengers’ lungs and kill them” (2011, p. 64). All in all, such debates demonstrate that in addition to the progressive and revolutionary aspects of railway constructions and trains, their destructive impacts on environment, railway employees and passengers were significant matters of discussion throughout the Railway Age. Railway constructions were perhaps the greatest achievement of the Victorian engineering as a product of human reason and intellect. However, the injuries they caused could not always be comprehended and explained in rational terms by ordinary people, which caused railways and trains to gain a somewhat otherworldly aspect in the eyes of the Victorians.

3. Charles Dickens’ “The Signalman”

In the form of a thrilling Christmas ghost story, Charles Dickens represents an otherworldly atmosphere in “The Signalman.” He subtly addresses the hot topics of his day in the story; working environments, mental conditions of the railway employees and the safety of passengers. The story pictures a psychologically disoriented signalman, whose deranged and delusional perspective presents an otherworldly railway atmosphere. On the other hand, the narrator’s perspective represents how reason may function to rationalize strange railway occurrences. The story opens with the narrator’s appeal to the signalman because he wants to

speak to the signalman about something not clarified in the story. The extent of both characters' acquaintance is not known. The signalman is not prompt; he does not respond instantly. Indeed, he is rather suspicious and he behaves strangely for reasons yet unknown. Up on a rocky height and trying to get at where the signalman stands, the narrator observes the territory and the working environment of the signalman:

His post was in as *solitary* and *dismal* a place as ever I saw. On either side, a dripping-wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky; the perspective one way only a crooked prolongation of this *great dungeon*; the shorter perspective in the other direction terminating in a gloomy red light, and the gloomier entrance to a black tunnel, in whose massive architecture there was a *barbarous, depressing, and forbidding* air. So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthy, deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, *as if I had left the natural world.* (p. 870-71 emphasis mine)

The narrator's observations at this early moment of the story reveal the concerns of the Victorians regarding the working conditions of people employed in several different positions in the railways. This is important because their job was the key to railway safety after all. However, especially the signalmen were not working in physically or psychologically decent conditions because most of the time they had to live and work in inhuman realms. Hence, the "great dungeon" is a perfectly apt metaphor for the places railway employees spend most of their times, which is why it was feared that they might have gradually developed various forms of psychological instabilities. After all, as the narrator observes, there was something unnatural about these places. They were the products of human reason; yet, paradoxically humans could not always survive in these places, which are often remote and secluded. As mentioned in the previous section, such depressing working conditions were debated by the Victorians with respect to the efficacy of the signalmen who were on duty.

Through the voice of the narrator, Dickens, too, attracts the attention to such discussions: "This was a lonesome post to occupy (I said), and it had riveted my attention when I looked down from up yonder. A visitor was a rarity, I should suppose; not an unwelcome rarity, I hoped?" (p. 871). Beyond doubt, the narrator does not find the signalman affable because he behaves unresponsive for no apparent reason. What is more, eerie behaviors of the signalman scare the narrator on their first encounter: "The monstrous thought came into my mind, as I perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face that was a spirit, not a man" (p. 871). But when he discovers that it is in fact the signalman who is scared, the narrator forces himself to look calm and stay sane. When the signalman invites the narrator to his little box, the narrator finally finds the chance to observe the signalman better. Even though they had no close interaction yet, the narrator realizes that there was something wrong with the signalman:

In a word, I should have set this man down as one of the safest of men to be employed in that capacity, but for the circumstances that while he was speaking to me he twice broke off with a fallen color, turned his face towards the little bell when it did NOT ring, opened the door of the hut (which was kept shut to exclude the unhealthy damp), and looked out towards the red light near the mouth of the tunnel. On both of those occasions, he came back to the fire with the inexplicable air upon him which I had remarked, without being able to define, when we were so far asunder. (p. 873)

This description not only serves to give the impression that the signalman behaves bizarre and unstable for some reasons, but it also prepares the appropriate setting for the ghost stories. The impression given in the story is that the narrator, too, feels uneasy and insecure. Still, when the signalman starts talking about the specter that he claims to have seen, the narrator behaves

matter-of-factly and tries to rationalize what he hears. Thus, their conversation pairs two paradoxical narratives: the supernatural and the rational. This makes “The Signalman” an unconventional ghost story in that the existence of ghosts could also be explained by the deranged psychology of the signalman because the ghost appears only to him. Yet still, each time the ghost emerges, it leads to dreadful accidents. While for the signalman there must be a connection between the ghost and tragedies, for the narrator this is mere coincidence.

When the signalman talks about the accident happened after the first time the ghost appeared, the narrator does not instantly believe in it. He forces himself to remain calm and he rather tries to explain what happened reasonably: “I showed him how that this figure must be a deception of his sense of sight; and how that figures, originating in disease of the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye” (p. 874). The narrator’s comment here makes an open reference to the real discussions regarding the psychological health of signalmen. As mentioned earlier, the influence of the psychological stability of signalmen on the occurrence of railway accidents were frequently discussed. This is because they were required to remain sane, vigilant and circumspect to operate the train traffic properly. However, the working conditions they were supposed to tolerate were challenging to remain so. Aware of these and the like details, the narrator shudders when the signalman further talks about the accident, but he represses the thrill. He thinks that the appearance of the ghost and the subsequent accident must be sheer coincidence because “men of common sense did not allow much for coincidences in making the ordinary calculations of life” (p. 874). That the narrator defines himself as a man of common sense is very typical of Victorian realism and positivism. Let us briefly mention that starting from the Enlightenment, science and scientific ways of seeing the world dominated the Western thought. Yet, it should also be remembered that the desire for the supernatural never diminished, not even today. Thus the co-existence of both rational and supernatural narratives makes “The Signalman” an unconventional ghost story, which subtly lays bare various facets of debates regarding the then developing train transportation.

The signalman continues to relate another strange event occurred after the second time the ghost appeared, which the narrator does not deem likely:

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 break 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 on this floor between us. (p. 875)

After listening to the details of the second ghost story, the narrator tries to convince the signalman that it is his imagination which misleads him (p. 875). The narrator again attempts to find logical explanations by referring to possible delusional visions that the signalman might have been seeing. From the narrator’s viewpoint, the signalman is suffering from the heavy burden of responsibility to protect the lives of passengers on trains: “His pain of mind was most pitiable to see. It was the mental torture of a conscientious man, oppressed beyond endurance by an unintelligible responsibility involving life” (p. 876). He indeed thinks that the signalman’s mental restlessness is the sole cause of these strange visions. The narrator feels that this is not only a personal problem of “a mere poor signalman on this solitary station” (p. 876). But rather, this is a matter related to “public safety”: “When I saw him in this state, I saw that for the poor man’s sake, as well as for the public safety, what I had to do for the time was to compose his mind” (p. 876). ‘Public safety’ is a key expression as it underlines the vital role of signalmen in the prevention of railway disasters. This is perhaps why even though he is an outsider, the

narrator feels the responsibility to take the signalman seriously. He does not treat the signalman as someone gone mad for some unknown reason, but he rather makes plans “to offer to accompany him . . . to the wisest medical practitioner,” which never happens (p. 877). Hours after the signalman reveals that the ghost has appeared for a third time, he is cut down by an approaching engine, leaving the narrator perplexed and confused.

The narrator’s observations and explanations throughout the story may sound too down-to-earth for a ghost narrative. This is because Dickens may have subtly directed attentions to the general opinion that unhealthy and unsteady conditions of signalmen were of utmost importance with regards to safe railway travels. Still, perhaps to meet the expectations of Christmas-time readers, Dickens did not offer a totally reasonable resolution for the story and preferred to feed the Victorian craze for the supernatural.

4. Conclusion

An endeavor to determine which literary figure quintessentially represents the spirit of the Victorian age can be quite challenging, given the miscellaneous facets of the period. As an adjective, the word ‘Victorian’ cannot be encapsulated in a few words. This is chiefly because it named a strikingly transitional period, which witnessed one after another many social, political, economic and technological developments and changes. Instead of using the word ‘Victorian’ as an all-inclusive definer, one should rather talk about separate multifarious Victorian scenes; the political scene, the imperial scene, the industrial scene, social & cultural scenes and the literary scene, to name a few. The last one, the literary scene was extremely vivid and lively and it is an inseparable part of other scenes because many literary works produced in this period inevitably reflect one or a combination of the issues that marked the era. The literary scene did not constitute a homogeneous body, which is perhaps why it is difficult to name a name that would best represent the Victorian era.

Speaking of Charles Dickens, John Gardiner (2002) suggests that Dickens is the most Victorian of all Victorian writers: “‘Dickensian’ often illuminates ‘Victorian’, rather than vice-versa” (p. 161). Charles Dickens was one of the masters of the Victorian fiction as a popular celebrity figure and a social critic, which is why he never lost popularity among his readership, back then and today. As an entertainer, Dickens always remained a best-seller and he appealed to the masses perhaps even more than any other Victorian writer. He knew the Victorian taste for everything scandalous, sensational and supernatural. He thus incorporated such instances into the Victorian realist tradition. As a social critic and commentator, Dickens was again very influential especially when he problematized various consequences of industrialization in his work, such as poverty, onerous working conditions of lower classes, child workers, the railway phenomenon and the changes it created both in the rural and in the urban.

Charles Dickens’ “The Signalman” can be thought of as a text representing the spirit of the industrial Victorian Britain. For many reasons, “The Signalman” is more than a Christmas ghost story. First, it brings together two important Victorian scenes: the ugly face of industrial scene through the representations of railways & trains and the fancy for the supernatural in the literary scene. As such, the story lays bare two sides of Charles Dickens; the social critic/observer and the entertainer. As a social critic and observer, he drew attention to a serious matter regarding safe railway travel: the condition of those employed as signalmen and their critical function in assuring life safety of passengers. That he addressed such serious matters in the form of a supernatural tale additionally reveals his genius as an artist. Second, the story very

well reflects the Victorians' mixed feelings regarding the railway boom because they were both excited and fearful regarding rapid railway constructions and developing train transportation. Co-existence of the rational narrative of the narrator and the supernatural atmosphere created by the signalman mirrors the difficulty that the Victorians felt comprehending the social, cultural, technological advances which both eased and –at times- traumatized their lives.

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