How It Happened

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Born on May 22, 1859 in Edinburgh, Scotland, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a writer and physician best known for his detective stories featuring the character Sherlock Holmes. He was educated at Stonyhurst College and the University of Edinburgh, where he studied medicine. After he graduated, he worked as a ship's doctor and later set up an unsuccessful practice in Plymouth, England. He wrote fiction in his free time, and in 1886, he published his first Sherlock Holmes story, "A Study in Scarlet," in *The Strand Magazine*. The story was an immediate success, and Doyle went on to write many more stories featuring Holmes and his sidekick, Dr. John Watson. The Sherlock Holmes stories are considered some of the greatest works of crime fiction of all time and have been widely adapted for stage, film, and television. Beyond the popular Sherlock Holmes series, Doyle was also a prolific writer of science fiction, fantasy, and historical novels, as well as plays, poems, and romances. In addition to his writing career, he was an avid supporter of social and political causes, including the rights of prisoners and the promotion of the British Empire. In his later years, Doyle became an increasingly devout follower of spiritualism, likely influenced by the death of many of his loved ones in the first two decades of the 20th century. He died on July 7, 1930, at the age of 71.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"How It Happened" was published on the eve of World War I, and its themes reflect the anxieties of the time regarding the possibility of conflict. Not only does the story revolve around the themes of death and resurrection, but it directly references the Boer War, an early-20th century conflict that Doyle himself participated in. Considering the growing Germanophobia of the time (which Doyle heartily participated in), it also seems little coincidence that the "killer vehicle" in the story, a Robur, is of German make. Of course, the recent emergence and popularization of automobiles like Ford's Model T was itself an influential historical event and offers another explanation for the story's fascination with automobiles. Doyle himself famously drove a 16-horsepower Dietrich-Lorraine in the 1911 Prince Henry Tour, and the story reflects Doyle's enthusiasm, as well as anxiety, about the impact of this new technology. "How It Happened" was also heavily influenced by spiritualism, a movement that was a trademark of the Victorian and Edwardian Eras and blurred the lines between science and the supernatural. As early as the 1880s, Doyle personally attended several seances and sittings with mediums out of curiosity, and his interest only grew with time. Perhaps influenced by the deaths of many loved ones, by the mid 1910s Doyle had officially declared himself a spiritualist.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

By the time "How It Happened" was published, Doyle had already established himself as a major writer with his stories about Sherlock Holmes. Though "How It Happened" features many of the same genre tropes as this older series, it seems to backtrack on Sherlock's Holmes staunch commitment empiricism. In particular, while supernatural events are always explained by science or logic in Sherlock Holmes, "How It Happened" treats the supernatural as real. This pro-spiritualist stance is also a hallmark of many of Doyle's later works, particularly his non-fiction work, *A History of Spiritualism*, and his 1926 novel, *The Land of Mist*, both published in 1926. Though the latter of these features another one of Doyle's recurring pro-science protagonists, Professor Challenger, it breaks from its more Holmes-like predecessors in *The Lost World* and *The Poison Belt* by entertaining the possibility that supernatural events like seances might exist. While a few of Doyle's earlier works like the mummy horror story "Lot No. 249" entertain similar possibilities, it wasn't until Doyle's conversion to spiritualism in the mid 1910s that science finally took the backseat to the supernatural in his work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** How It Happened
- **When Published:** 1913
- **Literary Period:** Late Edwardian Era
- **Genre:** Supernatural, Spiritualism
- **Setting:** Outside London, England in the early 20th century
- **Climax:** After crashing his car, the narrator realizes he is dead.
- **Antagonist:** Arrogance
- **Point of View:** First Person and Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Historical Novels. Though most famous for his Sherlock Holmes stories, Doyle considered his best work to be his historical novels. He published seven of these novels between 1888 and 1906.

Inspiration. Two of Doyle's most famous characters—Sherlock Holmes and Professor Challenger—were directly based on real people. Sherlock Holmes was based on Dr. Joseph Bell, one of

Doyle's former professors at medical school. Professor Challenger was based on both Percy Fawcett (a famous British geographer) and William Rutherford (a Scottish physiologist and physician).

PLOT SUMMARY

Though "How It Happened" is narrated in the first person by an unnamed male character, readers are told at the beginning that the tale itself has actually been set down by a writing medium. This creates some ambiguity as to the nature and source of the narrator and his narrative, but it eventually becomes clear that the writing medium is using her supernatural powers to tell the story on behalf of the narrator, who is dead.

The narrator's story begins with a reflection on his shaky memory of a specific evening and the challenge it poses in narrating the story. He recounts certain events vividly, while others are hazy, as if they're from a dream. Nevertheless, he recalls everything that happened after he arrived at a country station from London. He recounts being picked up at the station by Perkins, his chauffeur, in his (the narrator's) new 30-horsepower **Robur**. Perkins advises the narrator not to drive as the car's gears are unfamiliar, but the narrator ignores his warning. They drive home without any problem, until they begin their descent down Claystall Hill, which the narrator says is one of the worst in London. Here, the narrator recounts the harrowing descent, describing how both the car's brakes fail as they are accelerating down the hill. After navigating through two difficult curves in the road, Perkins offers to take the wheel and let the narrator jump. The narrator refuses and returns the offer to Perkins, who also declines. As they hurtle toward a third curve, the narrator admires the deathly beauty of the automobile.

The car clears the corner but crashes into the pillar of the narrator's home gate. The narrator flies through the air and goes unconscious. When he wakes, he notices a man standing next to him whom he recognizes as his old friend from college, Stanley. He is surprised to see him but does not question it after the excitement of the car crash. He observes the scene of the crash and hears an injured Perkins calling after him, though neither Perkins nor any of the bystanders appear to hear him when he calls back. Stanley asks if there is any pain, and the narrator says no. Stanley, for his part, isn't surprised to hear this, merely noting that there never is any pain in situations like the narrator's. This prompts the narrator to remember that Stanley died in the Boer War years before. Startled, he says, "Stanley, you are dead," to which Stanley smiles and replies, "So are you."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The narrator is the main character in "How It Happened," though he remains unnamed throughout. He tells his story through a writing medium, recounting the events that led up to and following his death in a car accident. The narrator is wealthy, as shown by his expensive car, gated residence, and chauffeur, though his occupation is never mentioned. His privilege and entitlement fuel his arrogance and impulsivity, causing him to believe that he can act without consequence, never having to pay the "full price" for his actions. This belief is disproven, however, when he ignores his chauffeur Perkins's warnings and chooses to drive his new car, leading to his own death and Perkins's injury. The car accident serves as a reminder that arrogance and impulsivity come with a price and can have grave consequences. Nevertheless, the consequences of the narrator's actions do not follow him into the afterlife. The narrator passes away peacefully and painless and is greeted warmly by his deceased friend, Stanley.

Perkins – Perkins is the narrator's chauffeur. At the start of the story, he comes to pick the narrator up from the train station, driving the narrator's new 30-horsepower car. He advises the narrator not to drive the car due to its unfamiliar gears, but he ultimately relents when the narrator refuses to listen to him. Later, when the car begins to careen down a hill, Perkins displays calmness and clarity, recommending that the narrator jump to safety while he takes control of the car. However, the narrator refuses this offer and instead offers to let Perkins jump out, which Perkins also refuses. This reveals a great degree of loyalty and professionalism on Perkins's part, for, while he is not responsible for the dangerous situation, he still decides to "stick it out" with his employer. This loyalty is further demonstrated at the end of the story when Perkins dismisses his own injuries to inquire about the narrator's whereabouts and wellbeing. Ultimately, Perkins's good actions and loyalty are rewarded, as he survives the car crash while the narrator does not. This suggests that good deeds are ultimately rewarded in the long run, while bad ones—like the narrator's arrogant and reckless decision to drive the car—are punished.

Stanley – Stanley is the narrator's old friend from college who appears after the narrator's car crash. At first, the narrator is startled by Stanley's presence, but he's also happy to see him and his characteristic wistful smile. However, as the conversation progresses, the narrator begins to sense that something is not quite right. Despite his initial confusion after the car crash, the narrator comes to realize that Stanley has been deceased for years, having died in the Boer War. Stanley confirms this and reveals that the narrator is also dead, having passed away in the car crash. Ultimately, Stanley's presence softens the blow of the narrator's death, suggesting that death is not so different from life. Stanley effectively ensures that the

narrator won't feel alone in death.

The Writing Medium – The writing medium is an unnamed character who is responsible for transcribing the narrator's story. She appears to have a connection to the afterlife, as she can access the world of the dead and tell their stories. Her enigmatic and supernatural presence serves to deepen the overall eerie and otherworldly tone of the story.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Lodgekeeper – The lodgekeeper arrives at the scene of the car crash and helps Perkins get out from under the car.

The Lodgekeeper's Wife The lodgekeeper's wife arrives at the scene of the crash and, along with her husband, helps Perkins.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PRIVILEGE, ARROGANCE, AND CONSEQUENCES

In "How it Happened," the narrator's privileged arrogance endangers both his own life and that of his chauffeur, Perkins. Despite having no experience driving his new car, the narrator insists on driving himself, knowing full well that this might put his and Perkins's lives in jeopardy. As a person of wealth and status who does not "often have to pay the full price" for his "foolish" actions, the narrator disregards the danger and ignores Perkins's warning, believing himself to be exempt from any consequences. Later, when they reach Claystall Hill, the narrator does not hand control of the car over to Perkins, despite knowing that the hill is one of the most dangerous in London. This arrogance ultimately results in the car crashing, killing the narrator and injuring Perkins. The fact that the narrator dies but Perkins survives, however, suggests that, while privileged people often escape the consequences of their actions, their actions will ultimately catch up with them. The world of "How It Happened," in other words, is a world governed by moral principles in which even wealthy, high-status people eventually get what is coming to them, and the narrator is no exception. Despite the narrator's arrogant belief that he is exempt from the consequences of his actions, he ultimately pays the full price for his reckless behavior.

HUMANS AND TECHNOLOGY

One of the central themes in "How It Happened" is the relationship between humans and their technology. In particular, while machines are often seen as beneficial for their human users, this story suggests that there might be a darker side to the relationship. The narrator's enthusiasm for his new 30-horsepower **Robur**, for instance, leads him to drive a car which he is not able to operate safely. Because he forgoes safety precautions, his new car ironically proves to be less safe than his older, less technologically advanced car: despite its superior handling, 30-horsepower engine, and bright headlights, the narrator cannot stop the car from crashing, killing him and injuring Perkins. Thus, while the narrator is at fault for his own arrogance, the story suggests that the car's advanced technology is also to blame: the appeal of the new, flashy car encourages the narrator to act recklessly and foolishly.

As the story unfolds, the dangerous aesthetic appeal of the car becomes even more apparent. As the car careens down the hill, the narrator finds himself admiring the beauty of their perilous descent, imagining how they would appear to anyone watching as a "great, roaring, golden death." In this way, the narrator's relationship to the car becomes self-destructive as he associates the deadly nature of the car with its aesthetic appeal, even as it threatens to kill him. Accordingly, the story serves as a cautionary tale about how technology can be just as deadly as it can be useful. As a story written at the end of the First World War, a conflict in which machines were used to kill millions of people, this moral should come as no surprise: it reflects Doyle's having seen firsthand the damage that the combination of technology and human hubris can do.

LOYALTY, SELFISHNESS, AND INEQUALITY

In "How It Happened" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the narrator fails to reciprocate the loyalty and respect of his chauffeur, Perkins, suggesting that the narrator does not see Perkins as an equal. In the beginning of the story, for instance, the narrator disregards Perkins's warning about the dangers of driving the new car, revealing a lack of respect for Perkins's counsel in addition to his wellbeing. Later, when they are in a dangerous situation while driving down Claystall Hill, Perkins offers to take control of the car and let the narrator jump to safety. Given that he has no personal responsibility for the situation, this offer reveals a great degree of loyalty on Perkin's part; he is willing to risk his life for someone who, on an arrogant whim, has endangered him. Like his earlier dismissal of Perkins's warning, however, the narrator rejects this offer, arrogantly believing that he is just as capable as Perkins of driving them to safety. Though both may have survived if the narrator let Perkins take the wheel, the narrator himself fails to recognize the wisdom of Perkins's offer, resulting in his death and Perkins's injury. Likewise, though the narrator reciprocates Perkins's offer, the gesture does not have the same significance because the narrator has already

committed to staying in the car: whether or not Perkins jumps has no impact on the narrator's own wellbeing, so the narrator's offer isn't a true sacrifice—it's just a hardheaded refusal to relinquish control of the car. While both men make gestures of loyalty that might seem similar, then, it is only Perkins who shows true loyalty. In fact, the narrator's offer only emphasizes his position of authority, as he refuses to give up control even in a crucial moment. As such, the story highlights the stark contrast between the narrator and Perkins, suggesting that the narrator's power as an elite employer leads him to disregard Perkins's wellbeing while also foolishly putting himself in danger.

DEATH AND THE SUPERNATURAL

In Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "How It Happened," the narrator experiences a seamless transition into death. Not only is there no pain, but the narrator emerges much the same as before. Though other humans can no longer see or hear him, he can still see and hear them, and he still inhabits the same body and world as before he died. Nor is the narrator alone in the afterlife—his friend Stanley warmly welcomes him, suggesting that there can be human community and connection even in death. Through this portrayal of the afterlife, Doyle plays with the idea that death might be neither a foreign nor frightening experience, but rather a continuation of life.

Doyle's use of the writing medium to tell the narrator's story from beyond the grave further strengthens this idea. It implies that the worlds of the living and the dead are not only similar, but also accessible to one another. All that is needed to bridge the gap is a medium—or, in this case, an author to transcribe the tale. Depending on the reader's belief in the supernatural, then, "How It Happened" can be interpreted either as a true supernatural artifact, faithfully transcribed by Doyle, or a story that demonstrates the power of narrative to seemingly resurrect the dead. In either case, Doyle suggests that the dead are never very far from the living.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ROBUR (THE CAR)

The narrator's new car, a Robur, symbolizes the dangers of technology in "How It Happened." With its polished brass exterior, bright headlights, and 30-horsepower engine, the narrator's car is designed to be flashy and fast but not necessarily safe. Not only do its fancy new gears prove difficult to control, but both of its brake systems fail in a moment of crisis. Thus, while it is aesthetically pleasing, it proves unreliable, ultimately killing the narrator. While technology is usually seen as useful to humans, then, the narrator's new car suggests that this might not always be the case.

In this way, the car also symbolizes the relation between aesthetics and danger. While the failure of the car's safety is in part responsible for the crash, it is arguably the aesthetics of the car that first tempt the narrator to drive it—in other words, the car appeals to the narrator's vanity, tempting him to act against his better judgment. Though he knows he is unfamiliar with its controls, he is seduced by its new, flashy features, resulting in his death. This relationship between aesthetics and danger is further illustrated by the narrator's admiration of the car's beauty during its descent down Claystall Hill. Even as it sends him to his death, he cannot help but appreciate the car as one would appreciate a piece of art, thinking of it as a "great, roaring, golden death." In turn, he romanticizes his own demise, allowing the car to play into his own arrogance as somebody who would like to think of himself as just as flashy and impressive as a new and enviable piece of technology, regardless of what this might mean for his own wellbeing.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Poisoned Pen Press edition of *The Parasite and Other Tales of Terror* published in 2021.

How It Happened Quotes

She was a writing medium. This is what she wrote: –

Related Characters: The Writing Medium

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the first and last time in "How It Happened" that the writing medium is mentioned, as well as the only part of the story not told by the narrator. It also establishes the story as an epistolary piece, which is a story told through a document, like a letter or a diary entry. Here, the story is presented as the transcript of a writing medium, adding a supernatural twist to an otherwise ordinary literary device. This creates a sense of unease and mystery for the reader, as it is not clear yet why the narrator would need to be introduced this way. Though it is not until the end that the narrator is revealed to be dead, this quote suggests that the narrator might not be what he initially

seems. When the narrator is later revealed as a ghost (or a voice speaking from beyond the grave), the meaning of this opening section finally becomes clear, creating a sense of closure and epiphany for the reader. As such, much of the suspense of the story, as well as the reader's ultimate sense of revelation, is directly tied to this terse but enigmatic opening.

> *I can remember some things upon that evening most distinctly, and others are like some vague broken dreams. This is what makes it so difficult to tell a connected story.*

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Writing Medium

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Having just been "introduced" by the writing medium, the narrator begins his story by reflecting on the inconsistency of his memory. Though this is a strange opener for a storyteller, it ironically lends an air of credibility to the narrator's story. By admitting to his own unreliability, the narrator shows himself to be an honest, if perhaps unconventional, source: the reader can trust that what he *does* remember is true. Were he trying to be deceptive, he would never admit to being unable to tell a "connected story."

Still, there are parts of this quote that remain mysterious even at the end of the story. It is hard to tell, for instance, why specific events are only rememberable as "vague broken dreams" while others the narrator can remember moment by moment. Furthermore, the narrator's use of the phrase "that evening" suggests some sort of prior dialogue between the narrator and the writing medium to which the reader is not privy. Thus, while the story's central mystery is resolved by the revelation of the narrator's death, many details are still left uncertain, producing a lasting sense of unease for the reader. As such, Doyle makes the supernatural seem both comprehensible and plausible while still preserving its essential mystery.

> *Then I remember the big motor, with its glaring headlights and glitter of polished brass, waiting for me outside. It was my new thirty-horse-power Robur, which had only been delivered that day.*

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator recalls seeing his new car for the first time, referring to it not as a car, but as a "big motor." This is an example of a synecdoche, a figure of speech in which a part is used to reference a whole, and the narrator's use of it gives the reader insight into his psyche. It suggests that what the narrator cares most about in his car is the size and power of its engine, an ironic preference given the failure of the car's brakes later in the story. Had the narrator cared more about the car's safety features and less about the way it looked, perhaps he might not have died the way he did. In fact, aside from the motor, the only thing the narrator really seems to care about is the car's appearance, particularly its "glaring headlights" and "polished brass" exterior. He does not seem to care about how the car drives, only how he looks driving it. This foreshadows the rather morbid turn that the narrator's interest in the car's appearance takes later in the story as he and Perkins are careening down Claystall Hill. Here, the narrator imagines how a bystander might see them, and he seems to revel in the idea that the car would look fiery and deadly as they descend.

> *"I'll try her myself," said I, and I climbed into the driver's seat.*
>
> *"The gears are not the same," said he. "Perhaps, sir, I had better drive."*
>
> *"No; I should like to try her," said I.*

Related Characters: The Narrator, Perkins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

Despite Perkins's warning that the car's gears are new and unfamiliar, the narrator insists on driving the car himself. This highlights not only the narrator's pride and arrogance, but also his selfishness: his unjustified confidence that he

can drive the car safely puts both him and Perkins in danger. Furthermore, by not trusting Perkins's professional advice— advice that has implications for the narrator's own safety—the narrator shows that he does not see Perkins as an equal. While the narrator is admittedly Perkins's superior professionally, his disregard for both Perkins's opinion and safety suggests that his professional superiority extends into the way he views Perkins as a human being. As such, this moment reveals the darker side of the narrator's personality: seduced by the car's aesthetic appeal, the narrator acts arrogantly and selfishly, putting Perkins's life in danger and treating him as a second-class citizen. That the car eventually crashes, killing the narrator but saving Perkins, serves as a cosmic indictment of these very flaws.

> *It was foolish, no doubt, to begin to learn a new system in the dark, but one often does foolish things, and one has not always to pay the full price for them.*

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator admits that his decision to drive the car despite his lack of knowledge about how to work the gears was foolish. Despite this admission, however, the narrator still tries to explain himself, claiming that "one does not always have to pay the full price" for one's "foolish" actions. As such, the narrator tries to have his cake and eat it too: he wants to admit to being foolish while simultaneously making it seem as though anyone in his situation would have made the same decision. His use of the more general pronoun "one," for instance, instead of "I," is an attempt to make it seem as though his experience of not having to "pay the full price" for his actions is a universal one. In reality, it seems far more likely that, as a person of wealth and privilege, the narrator has not often had to pay consequences of his actions; he has always gotten away with foolish things. His attempt to explain himself, in other words, only emphasizes his flawed thinking.

> *"I'll keep her steady," said he, "if you care to jump and chance it. We can never get round that curve. Better jump, sir."*
>
> *"No," said I; "I'll stick it out. You can jump if you like."*
>
> *"I'll stick it out with you, sir," said he.*

Related Characters: The Narrator, Perkins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

Even though narrator is responsible for putting them in this dangerous situation, it is Perkins who first offers to let the narrator jump to safety. This shows an incredible degree of selflessness and loyalty on Perkins's part, especially given the fact that he warned the narrator against driving in the first place. As such, Perkins's selfless offer goes well beyond his professional duties as the narrator's chauffer; it would be entirely reasonable of him to not offer at all, since he's the one who has been endangered. If anyone should make the offer first, then, it should be the narrator.

Thus, while the narrator does return Perkins's offer, it does not carry the same weight as Perkins's offer. Furthermore, the fact that the narrator rejects Perkins's offer in the first place shows once again how little regard he has for Perkins's counsel. It is conceivable that, had the narrator ceded control of the car, Perkins could have safely driven the car down the hall without crashing. Due to his arrogance and inflated pride, however, the narrator rejects the offer, resulting in his own death and Perkins's injury.

> *I remember thinking what an awful and yet majestic sight we should appear to any one who met us. It was a narrow road, and we were just a great, roaring, golden death to any one who came in our path.*

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Perkins

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator's earlier fascination with the car's aesthetics takes a dark turn. What was once an innocent admiration for the car's pleasing appearance has now become a kind of morbid obsession with its aesthetic appeal, even as it careens toward catastrophe. The car's seductive appearance, in other words, has overridden all of the narrator's other concerns, including his own survival; his desire to be seen driving an impressive car has made him embrace even the most dangerous situations as an artistic or aesthetic event. As such, the narrator's excited vision of the car as a "great, roaring, golden death" signals him completely succumbing to technology—technology that, at first glance, would seem to be about improving human life, not destroying it. In this way, technology is revealed to be just as dangerous as it is helpful. While new and flashier technologies can make one's car faster or safer, they can also make one more reckless and careless than they would be otherwise.

> *At the present moment I was surprised to see him, but I was like a man in a dream, giddy and shaken and quite prepared to take things as I found them without questioning them.*

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Stanley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Having just been thrown from the car, the narrator suddenly finds himself in the presence of his old college friend Stanley. Though Stanley is clearly someone the narrator respects and cares for, this fact does very little to dismiss the strangeness and inexplicableness of his arrival at the scene of the car crash. This is true not just for the narrator, who presumably has not seen Stanley in a long time, but also for the reader, who has heard nothing about Stanley until now in the story. In this context, Stanley's arrival seems somewhat off; it just doesn't make sense that he would be here, nor that he would not have been mentioned by the narrator yet in the story. Though we later learn that this is because both Stanley and the narrator are now ghosts, in the moment, this passage serves to clue the reader in to the fact that something is not quite right in the story. The accident has shifted the natural logic of the world, putting the reader on high alert for any further strangeness.

Still reeling from the excitement of the crash, however, the narrator himself apparently doesn't recognize just how strange his circumstances have become.

> *"Here I am," I answered, but they did not seem to hear me. They were all bending over something which lay in front of the car.*

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Perkins , The Lodgekeeper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Following Stanley's unexpected arrival, this moment offers the second major clue to the reader that everything is perhaps not what it seems. Though the narrator hasn't realized it yet, the bystanders cannot hear the narrator's voice for a very simple reason: he is dead and, thus, no longer able to communicate with the living. As such, he is invisible to the people at the scene of the crash. In fact, it seems likely that the thing they are all "bending over" in front of the car is none other than the dead body of the narrator himself, though he feels as if he's standing elsewhere.

Beyond adding another clue for the reader, this moment also functions as a symbolic commentary on what happens to those who are overly prideful or arrogant. As though a cosmic punishment for his sins, the narrator's expectant and egotistical remark—"Here I am"—is met with only silence. In this way, he is made to feel invisible, the ultimate punishment for a person convinced of their own importance.

> *"Stanley! I cried, and the words seemed to choke my throat – "Stanley you are dead."*
>
> *He looked at me with the same old gentle, wistful smile.*
>
> *"So are you," he answered.*

Related Characters: The Narrator, Stanley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

This is a moment of revelation for both the reader and the narrator. Prompted by the narrator's recollection that he, Stanley, died long ago in the Boer War, Stanley reveals that the narrator is *also* dead. Suddenly, the logic behind all of the strange events—Stanley's arrival, the narrator not being heard, etc.—begins to make sense, and it becomes clear why a medium was needed to tell the story in the first place: a dead man cannot tell the story of his own death.

Furthermore, this revelation reveals a lot about how Doyle wants the reader to think about death. Though the narrator acts immorally and irresponsibly and pays with his life for it, for instance, he is not punished beyond the grave. In fact, the narrator is met warmly by an old friend, Stanley, suggesting that death is a seamless and redeeming process; even though the narrator has left the world of the living, he can now converse and exist among the dead. In other words, Doyle wants his readers think of death as being not so different from life, nor something that one need be afraid of. This is arguably also the deeper reason behind the writing medium. Not only does she allow a dead man to tell his story, but she shows how permeable the fabric is between life and death.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

HOW IT HAPPENED

A writing medium tells a story. The narrator of the medium's story begins to recount an evening from the past. However, his memory is fuzzy, and he struggles to piece together all the details of the story. He has trouble remembering specific reasons for going to London and coming back late, but he can vividly recall everything that happened after arriving at the country station. His memory is so clear that he claims he could relive every moment of it.

By presenting this tale as something that has come from a writing medium (that is, somebody who can communicate with the dead and write down the results), "How It Happened" creates a sense of mystery for the reader from the very start. This sense of mystery is further compounded by the narrator's inexplicably inconsistent memory. His inability to remember why he went to London contrasts with his sharp recollection of the ensuing evening, suggesting that something memorable or even traumatic must have happened. Combined with the puzzling presence of the writing medium, this sets an ominous tone for the rest of the story, foreshadowing the mysterious and supernatural events that will take later place.

The narrator remembers reading the station's clock and wondering whether he could get home by midnight. He then remembers that his new car—a 30-horsepower **Robur**—was waiting for him outside. He proudly relates the flashy new features of the car, detailing its powerful headlights, large motor, and polished brass exterior. He remembers that, when asked, his chauffeur Perkins reported that the car had driven "excellent."

Foreshadowing his beautiful but apocalyptic vision of the car later in the story, the narrator admires the Robur's flashy new features. Though they seem to embody technological progress, the car's new "features" ultimately become monstrous and deadly. As such, this scene sets the framework for the narrator's fatal attraction to his car's aesthetic qualities and hints at the dangers of technology when seen as an aesthetic object.

Perkins offers to drive due to the narrator's unfamiliarity with the new gears, but the narrator refuses, insisting on driving **the car** himself. The narrator compares the gears of the new car to those of his old car, recalling how he thought he had figured out how to operate them at the time. In hindsight, he admits it was foolish to try and learn a new system in the dark, but he defends himself by saying that people don't often have to "pay the full price" for "foolish" mistakes. Despite his unfamiliarity, the narrator successfully drives the car until he arrives at Claystall Hill, which he describes as one of the worst hills in England. His house is located at the foot of the hill, and he will have to drive over it to get home.

The narrator proceeds to drive his new car and is lured into a false sense of confidence. Though in retrospect the narrator admits it was foolish to try and drive, he justifies his actions by saying that people do not often have to "pay" for the consequences of their "foolish" actions. As such, the relationship between the narrator's arrogance and privilege becomes apparent here. While he does not explicitly say it, it seems that this belief stems from his experience as person of privilege—his wealth and social class have always allowed him to get away with his mistakes. This is further illustrated in the narrator's decision to continue driving, despite knowing how dangerous Claystall Hill is. The narrator feels invincible, and he does not believe that anything bad could happen to him.

The narrator is driving **the car** down Claystall Hill when the brakes fail. Despite his efforts to stop the car using both the footbrake and the side-brake, both systems fail, and the car continues to accelerate down the hill. The narrator successfully navigates the first two curves but realizes he will have to negotiate a mile of straight road with a third curve at the end before he reaches the safety of his driveway. He believes that if they can make it to the driveway, the slope up to the house should bring the car to a stop.

Despite the car's superior technological features and handling, both of its breaks fail under the narrator's supervision. This is ironic, given the narrator's insistence on driving the car despite Perkins's warnings not to, as well as the fact that the car is supposedly so advanced and capable. Furthermore, this scene suggests that contrary to the narrator's belief, people do in fact have to pay for the consequences of their actions. Though his wealth and privilege may have protected him before, the narrator's rank and status can do nothing to stop the car now. That the narrator's arrogant indifference to danger threatens both his and *Perkins's downfall also shows the narrator's selfishness.*

The narrator admires Perkins's calm demeanor during the crisis and, in the story's present, notes that he would "like that to be known." Perkins advises the narrator not to drive onto the banks because the car will flip over. The narrator agrees, and Perkins then offers to take the wheel and let the narrator jump out to safety, saying they will not be able to get around the third and final curve. The narrator refuses to abandon the car and instead suggests that Perkins jump out if he wishes. Perkins also refuses, saying he will remain with the narrator.

Once again, Perkins gives the narrator sage advice, but this time the narrator actually takes it. This improves their situation, but only momentarily. When they both refuse to jump, it might seem as if there's an equal amount of respect and loyalty between them, but the circumstances reveal that this isn't quite the case. Whereas Perkins immediately thinks to sacrifice himself for his master, the narrator only makes his offer after Perkins has already done so. Furthermore, the gesture is made meaningless by the fact that he was already planning on staying in the car; offering to let Perkins jump requires no real sacrifice on his part.

The narrator describes what he would have tried with his old car to improve the situation. As it is, however, he admits he is "helpless." Perkins leans across **the car** to help, but the car is moving too fast for him to do anything. Though the car is groaning from the strain of its large frame moving at such a speed, the narrator cannot help but admire its steering abilities and bright lights. He fantasizes about how they would look to a bystander, imagining them as a "great, roaring, golden death."

Faced with his inability to rectify the situation, the narrator admits he is helpless. His confidence and arrogance from earlier are completely gone, and he can only passively sit back and watch what is happening to him. Accordingly, the narrator's wealth and privilege are stripped away, showing them to be useless in saving him from disaster. As such, this scene is a perfect example of cosmic irony: the narrator's arrogant dismissal of Perkins's warning has backfired, and now he is forced to face the consequences of his actions. This irony is true also of the narrator's relationship to his car, and therein, technology. What initially seemed like a beacon of human progress has now become monstrous and deadly.

Despite the narrator's attempts to navigate **the car** around the third curve, they end up running one of the wheels up onto the bank. The narrator fears the car will flip over, but the car rights itself and continues on its way. As they come down the main road, the narrator tries to turn the car towards the open gate on the left, but the damaged steering makes it difficult to control the car (or so he claims). Despite his efforts, the car crashes into the right-hand pillar of the narrator's own gate at a high speed, causing the narrator to be thrown from the car.

After narrowly avoiding crashing several times, Perkins and the narrator are confronted by their last obstacle: the front gate of the house. The narrator, speaking now in the present tense, claims that he might have been able to save them had the steering not been broken. There is no way of knowing whether this is true or not, but this does register as another instance of the narrator's arrogance and selfishness. Having already admitted his helplessness, he wants to continue to distance himself from the blame of an accident that is almost entirely his fault. In spite of this, the universe seems intent upon highlighting his culpability in the whole affair by sending the car crashing into the pillar of his own gate.

The narrator wakes up from the crash in a pile of brushwood to find a man standing next to him. He thinks it's Perkins at first, but he soon realizes it's Stanley, an old college friend whom he has great affection for. He describes the fondness he feels for Stanley and feels pride that Stanley might feel the same about him. The narrator is surprised to see Stanley but is disoriented after the car crash and unprepared to question the circumstances. He describes himself as "giddy" and "shaken," like a "man in a dream."

This scene returns to the dreamy and mysterious atmosphere that started the story. Not only does the narrator suddenly emerge into consciousness feeling like a "man in a dream," but he does so to find his old friend, Stanley, waiting for him. Though this in part reemphasizes the theme of loyalty, Stanley's unexpected and inexplicable appearance mainly functions to once again instill a sense of unease in the reader. Even the narrator admits his surprise at finding Stanley standing there, though in the excitement of the crash he readily brushes this off. For the reader, however, Stanley's sudden arrival raises questions, reminding the reader that everything might not be what it seems. Like at the beginning of the story, this scene suggests that something strange—and potentially supernatural—is taking place.


The narrator comments on the intensity of the crash. His friend Stanley nods in agreement, smiling his characteristically wistful smile. The narrator is unable to move, but he does not want to. His senses are sharp, however, and he sees the car wreck in the lantern light. There is a group of people speaking softly near the wreckage, and he identifies them as the lodgekeeper and the lodgekeeper's wife, plus a few others. They appear not to notice the narrator, however, seeming preoccupied with the car. The narrator hears a cry of pain.

After recovering from the surprise of seeing Stanley, the narrator notices some more strange things about his circumstances: namely, that he's unable to move and that nobody seems to notice him. Though he brushes these details off, they begin to seem more and more suspect, especially after the inexplicable arrival of Stanley. Something seems to have happened to the narrator during the car crash, though it is not yet clear what.

The narrator hears a voice instruct someone to lift something off "him." The narrator recognizes Perkins's voice exclaiming that it's just his leg and asking where his master is. The narrator calls out, but no one appears to hear him. They seem preoccupied with something lying in front of **the car**. Stanley touches the narrator's shoulder reassuringly, which makes the narrator feel better. The narrator tells Stanley that there is no pain, to which Stanley enigmatically responds, "there never is." The narrator suddenly remembers that Stanley is dead, having died of enteric disease in the Boer War. In shock, the narrator tells Stanley of his revelation. Stanley looks at the narrator with his kind, melancholic smile and tells him that he, too, is dead.

The narrator's increasing confusion transforms into a revelation at the end of the story, as he finally realizes he's dead. The strange phenomena which the narrator had been experiencing up to this point—like not feeling his body or not being heard—suddenly become legible as cleverly placed "clues" of his death in the car accident. As a ghost, the narrator no longer has a body, nor can he directly communicate with the living world—only with other ghosts like his long-deceased friend Stanley. This also explains the presence of the writing medium at the beginning of the story: without her, it would be impossible for the narrator to narrate the events leading up to and after his own death. The "consciousness" which the narrator wakes into after the car crash, in other words, is that of the narrator's ghost or spirit. As such, this section deals heavily with the themes of death and supernaturalism. Though he is dead, the narrator's ability to communicate with readers suggests that the dead might not be as distant—nor as different—as we might typically think.

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