The Signalman

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES DICKENS

Born to a navy clerk, Charles Dickens spent his early childhood in Kent, England. When Dickens was 10 years old, the family moved to London, and his father was thrown in debtors' prison. Dickens left school and worked in a boot-blacking warehouse to help support his household. He later returned to school but left at age 15 to work as a law clerk, a court reporter, and a political journalist before devoting himself to writing full-time. His books were wildly successful both in England and in the United States, and they include classics like *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House*, and *Oliver Twist*, which are still popular today. Dickens also founded a theater company and a magazine, *All the Year Round*. He was unhappily married to Catherine Hogarth, with whom he had 10 children. Dickens was still writing when he died in 1870 and is buried in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rail travel was common during the 19th century, and Victorian literature often centered around increased industrialization. While "The Signalman" doesn't explicitly critique industrialization, it was likely inspired by the human cost of industry. On June 9, 1865, Charles Dickens survived a rail crash later known as the Staplehurst rail crash. His train was derailed due to missing railroad tracks; a man with a red flag waited on the tracks to warn the conductor, but he was standing in the wrong place, and the train didn't have enough time to stop. The crash was fatal, as 10 passengers died and 40 were wounded—Dickens attempted to help his fellow passengers, but some of them died while he was tending to them. Dickens was deeply impacted by the accident, and many believe it prompted him to write "The Signalman," which questions the titular signalman's responsibility for mysterious accidents on his rail line. Dickens avoided train travel whenever possible from that day on, and he died exactly 5 years after the crash. Another inspiration for the story may have been the Clayton Tunnel rail crash, which occurred on August 25, 1861; a train ran into another train, killing 23 passengers and wounding 176 more. Though Dickens wasn't involved, the accident was famous and his readers would have naturally associated "The Signalman" with it—particularly because a confused signalman caused the Clayton Tunnel crash, misinterpreting a signal and giving the final train the all-clear.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

While "The Signalman" is part of the Victorian literary tradition, it also aligns with the Gothic tradition, which emerged in the 16th century and became popular during the 19th century. The Gothic often involves death, gloomy settings, intense emotion and the supernatural, all of which are present in "The Signalman." Dickens loved Gothic romances as a teenager, and he incorporated elements of mystery and horror in some of his most famous novels, such as *Bleak House*, *A Christmas Carol*, and his unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. *A Christmas Carol* was Dicken's first ghost story, and the consecutive hauntings in the novel are similar to those in "The Signalman," though events in "The Signalman" are less clearly resolved. Dickens is widely believed to be the most famous Victorian writer, along with peers such as William Thackeray, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* perhaps best exemplifies the Gothic genre: like "The Signalman," the story features a ghost that may or may not be real, a gloomy setting, and a skeptical narrator.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Signalman (also stylized as "The Signal-Man")
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1866
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A signalman's train station, tunnel, and box
- **Climax:** The narrator learns that the signalman was killed by a passing train.
- **Antagonist:** The ghost
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Ghost Club. Charles Dickens is said to have been a founding member of London organization known as "The Ghost Club," which investigated and discussed alleged supernatural hauntings; other famous members included Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Though Dickens was fascinated by ghosts, he was never a firm believer or a firm skeptic. Instead, he took the middle ground: regarding the supernatural, he once wrote that "I do not in the least pretend that such things are not."

Magic Touch. In addition to being a celebrated novelist, Charles Dickens was an amateur magician, performing tricks for his family and for the public. He spent a great deal of time practicing, and many speculate that magic influenced Dickens' stories and novels.

PLOT SUMMARY

At a rail station, an unnamed narrator cheerfully greets a train signalman by yelling down to him, "Halloa! Below there!" Though the signalman is initially stoic and unfriendly, he reluctantly allows the narrator to approach him at his post in a trench below ground. The narrator immediately notices how dismal the signalman's working conditions are: the signalman can barely see the sunlight and has to face a **red light** near a tunnel all day. Because he's newly interested in the railroad industry, the narrator questions the signalman about his job, but the signalman seems frightened—he believes he's met the narrator before, which the narrator denies.

After this, the signalman then grows friendlier, inviting the narrator into his **box** (the small room he works inside near the train tracks) and describing his duties. The narrator wonders why the signalman is so well educated, and the signalman explains that he was once a natural philosophy student but squandered his professional opportunities. He has no resentment about this and explains that "he had made his bed, and he lay upon it." After watching the signalman work, the narrator believes that he's "exact and vigilant" in attending to his duties. However, the signalman also seems distracted, twice looking to the red light even when no trains are there. The signalman tells the narrator that if he comes back the next night, he'll explain why.

As promised, when the narrator returns, the signalman reveals the full story. The reason he was unfriendly when the narrator first appeared, and the reason he thought they'd met before, is that the narrator's greeting ("Halloa! Below there!") yesterday was identical to the greeting of a ghost who visited the signalman months before. Standing near the red light by the tunnel, the ghost waved its arm across its eyes, a gesture the narrator thinks is akin to saying "For God's sake, clear the way!" The signalman telegraphed an alarm to other stations, who replied that nothing was wrong. But just six hours after the haunting, there was a fatal rail crash.

Half a year later, the ghost appeared at the red light again, this time silently covering its face in what the narrator describes as "an action of mourning"—the next day, a young woman collapsed and died in a passing **train**. And the hauntings still aren't over. The ghost reappeared a week ago, and the signalman has been haunted in "fits and starts" ever since. This explains why he was so distracted yesterday: he kept seeing the ghost by the tunnel.

The narrator, always logical, tells the signalman that the hauntings are all in his head, but the signalman isn't convinced. Instead, he wants the narrator to help him figure out what the hauntings mean, particularly because a third accident will surely occur. He's especially confused about why the ghost is coming to him—the warnings are never specific enough to prevent an accident, and if he sounded a vague alarm, he'd be fired. He believes it's a "cruel haunting": he's forced to know about disaster ahead of time, but he's helpless to stop it. As a result, he feels responsible for the deaths of others.

Convinced that the signalman has lost his mind, the narrator realizes that the man may be a danger to the passengers on his rail line: if he's distracted and unable to do his job properly, an accident could occur. After leaving the signalman, the narrator decides that he'll offer to bring him to a doctor the following evening "for the public safety." But when he returns, a crowd of workers tell him that the signalman was killed by a passing train near the tunnel. Moments before the crash, the engine-driver, Tom, had yelled at the signalman, "Below there!" and "For God's sake, clear the way!" Hearing these events recounted, the narrator is alarmed to remember that he's connected to both of these phrases: he used the first to greet the signalman when they first met, and he assigned the second to the ghost's gesture. However, he never spoke the second phrase out loud—he only *thought* that was what the ghost looked like it was saying. He decides to end his story without "dwell[ing] on any one of its curious circumstances."

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator, a cheerful and logical man, befriends the signalman at the start of the story. Because he was sheltered for much of his life, the narrator is now interested in the "great works" of the railroad industry. He's fascinated by the signalman's many duties, which include monitoring and directing passing trains, and shocked by his dismal working conditions underground. The narrator's surprise implies that he is likely upper class and wealthy; the signalman has many responsibilities, but the narrator seems to have very few. Maybe because of his interest in industry, the narrator is highly observant of the signalman, even noticing that he's distracted while working. But once the signalman tells the narrator that a ghost is haunting him, skepticism becomes the narrator's most significant characteristic: he doesn't believe the signalman's story and thinks the signalman is losing his mind. Though the signalman insists that the narrator is somehow involved in the hauntings—the ghost at one point spoke the narrator's exact greeting of "Halloa! Below there!"—the narrator remains certain that this is only a coincidence. After trying and failing to convince the signalman that the ghost is a figment of his imagination, the narrator nobly decides to take responsibility for the situation the same way the signalman takes responsibility for his passengers. The narrator plans to accompany the signalman to a hospital before he can accidentally hurt anyone, but before the narrator can do so, the signalman is killed by a passing train. As the train passed, its driver, Tom, yelled, "For God's sake, clear the way!"—the same words the narrator earlier assigned to the ghost's

movement, but never spoke out loud. The coincidence hints at supernatural involvement, and the narrator's earlier skepticism fades away. That the narrator thinks the ghost might be real after all suggests that he no longer believes he can singlehandedly control events—there are forces, perhaps even supernatural forces, at work in the world that are out of his control. At the end of the story, he seems to accept his own helplessness in the face of the unknown.

The Signalman – The signalman, a "dark sallow" man who reluctantly befriends the narrator, monitors **trains** passing through a tunnel: he's responsible for guiding them safely and preventing major accidents. While speaking to the narrator, he often breaks off conversation to attend to his duties, suggesting that he understands the life-and-death importance of his job. His position means that he's working class, but he wasn't always—he's well educated and once studied natural philosophy, but he squandered his professional opportunities. The signalman seems to willingly accept his bleak situation, which requires spending most of his time underground, believing that he's helpless to change his fate. As he later explains to the narrator, this unhappy fate includes the supernatural: the signalman thinks he's being haunted by a ghost, who stands by a nearby **red light** and warns of impending accidents on the rail line. Without more details about where or when these accidents will occur, the signalman is powerless to prevent them, but he still feels responsible for the casualties. As a result, he believes there must be a deeper meaning to the hauntings and wants to figure out why they're happening. Before he can, a passing train hits him while he's standing near the tunnel, which implies that he may have gone looking for the ghost, or may have believed he was supposed to die and allowed the train to hit him. This confirms his helplessness to avoid a dismal fate, and it disproves his belief that he could understand the supernatural—in fact, this belief may have inadvertently caused his death.

The Ghost – The ghost is a mysterious figure that haunts the signalman (or so he claims), always appearing by the **red light** near the tunnel and always covering its face, either with its hands or by waving. After the first haunting, there was a train accident on the signalman's line; after the second, a young woman died in a passing **train**. When the signalman meets the narrator, he's being haunted by the ghost in "fits and starts." At first, the signalman even mistakes the narrator for the ghost; when they first meet, the narrator greets the signalman using the exact same phrase ("Halloa! Below there!") that the ghost once uttered to the signalman. At the end of the story, a passing train kills the signalman, suggesting that the final haunting foretold his own death. While the ghost's purpose is to warn about accidents, it doesn't seem to want to *prevent* them—as the signalman explains to the narrator, the ghost's information is never specific enough to shut down the rail line (the signalman doesn't know where or when they'll happen), so the warnings do nothing but torment the signalman. In every haunting, the ghost waves to get the signalman's attention; at the end of the story, the engine-driver, Tom, mimics this movement right before his train kills the signalman. Like the narrator's repetition of the ghost's greeting, the ghost's gesture is ultimately unhelpful—Tom can't get the signalman's attention, so his waving arms serve only to disturb the narrator the same way the narrator's greeting disturbed the signalman. Because of its unclear motivations, the ghost personifies the supernatural and unknown—Charles Dickens never clarifies whether or not the ghost was real, and he implies that it's better to be uncertain.

Tom – Tom is the engine-driver whose **train** kills the signalman. Tom tells the narrator that he attempted to warn the signalman of the train's approach by yelling and waving his arms, but the signalman didn't seem to hear him. Tom eerily spoke the narrator's own thoughts out loud as the train passed, yelling "For God's sake, clear the way!" Earlier in the story, the narrator assigned this phrase to the ghost's waving gesture, which the signalman demonstrated. Tom appears confused about the signalman's death, which seems to have been preventable. However, his choice of words implies that the supernatural was involved.

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.

RESPONSIBILITY AND GUILT

In "The Signalman," an unnamed narrator strikes up an acquaintanceship with a railroad signalman, whose job is to monitor **trains** passing through a station. Although the narrator is impressed by the signalman's commitment to keeping people safe, the signalman feels guilty about accidents that have occurred on his watch; even though these tragedies were seemingly random, he feels somehow responsible for them. Later, when a passing train hits and kills the signalman, the narrator questions whether he himself responsible for the signalman's death. By leaving the consequences of the characters' actions unclear, Dickens questions the extent to which anyone can shoulder responsibility for another person's well-being. The story seems to suggest that it's impossible to take full responsibility for other people's lives, and that doing so only leads to inevitable failure and guilt.

At the beginning of the story, the signalman seemingly has a clear-cut duty to keep train conductors and passengers safe.

The narrator, who admits that he's been sheltered and free of responsibility for his whole life, has a "newly-awakened interest" in the signalman's duty to keep train passengers safe. During their first conversation, the signalman tells the narrator that his job is to monitor and direct all the trains that come through his station, which sets him up as a character with an immense responsibility to protect other people's lives. The signalman acknowledges that "exactness and watchfulness" are required for his job, and he indeed proves himself to be extremely watchful. He sacrifices a lot to monitor the station, working long hours below ground and constantly listening for trains with "redoubled anxiety" whenever he leaves his post. As the signalman speaks to the narrator, he simultaneously displays flags and speaks to conductors, even dropping off in the middle of a sentence to do his work. The narrator is impressed by the signalman's commitment to the job, calling him "exact and vigilant."

But it's not always possible for the signalman to protect people, which suggests that even the most dutiful person can't always take full responsibility for others—and that trying to do so will inevitably lead to guilt. The signalman tells the narrator that recently, a ghost appeared near the end of the train tunnel and mysteriously warned him to "Look out." When this happened, the signalman believed that it was his responsibility to prevent an accident. He telegraphed a warning to other stations, asking if anything was wrong, but they responded that everything was okay. Just six hours later, however, a train accident happened anyway, which the signalman was unable to prevent despite upholding his duties and following protocol. Seven months later, the ghost reappeared—and the next day, a young woman died in a train as it passed the signalman's station. The signalman tried to get the train to stop, noticing the woman waving through the window, but he was too late to prevent her death. He must have been watching the train carefully in order to spot her, but his sense of responsibility couldn't save her. Still, the signalman seems to blame himself (at least partially) for these two tragedies, and he feels incredibly guilty and upset about them. The signalman explains to the narrator that he can't heed the ghost's warnings, which continue even now: none of the workers at other stations will listen to the signalman if he asks trains to be shut down for an accident that hasn't happened yet, and he'd be fired for the false alarm. If he's fired, he won't be able to help anyone. It's an impossible situation with no clear solution—and although the narrator doesn't believe the signalman's ghost story, he notes that the signalman is "oppressed […] by an unintelligible responsibility." In other words, the signalman's responsibility to keep everyone safe is perhaps unrealistic—it leads to the signalman feeling "oppressed" by his duties, since even the ghost's forewarnings about the accidents can't prevent them from happening.

As the story progresses, the narrator becomes responsible for the signalman—and this switch-up of duties further complicates the question of how much responsibility any one person can take on. Having heard the signalman's bizarre story about the ghost that seemed to foretell train accidents, the narrator assumes that the signalman is losing his mind. And because monitoring trains is important work, the narrator decides that, "for the public safety," he has to escort the signalman to a mental institution. By making this decision, the narrator effectively assumes responsibility for the safety of the all the passengers who come through the signalman's station. The next day, when the narrator sees a crowd at the signalman's post, he worries that people died because he left the signalman unattended—and thus, that he failed at his self-appointed duty to keep the train passengers safe. But instead, the narrator learns that the signalman was hit and killed by a train. The narrator took on the wrong responsibility: it wasn't the passengers who needed protection, but the signalman himself. The narrator, like the signalman, tried to take on the immense responsibility of protecting other people's lives—but he inevitably fails and ends up feeling guilty.

The story doesn't provide any definitive judgment about the narrator's responsibility for the signalman's death: although he perhaps misjudged the signalman's mental health, there's no clear indication that the narrator could have foreseen the accident that occurred the following day. Readers are thus left wondering whether the narrator was, however indirectly, responsible for the signalman's death—and whether the signalman was, indirectly, responsible for the deaths that the ghost warned of. By leaving the ending ambiguous in this way, Dickens implies that it's not always possible to determine what a person is and isn't ethically responsible for—and that trying to do so often leads to uncertainty and guilt.

HELPLESSNESS, FATE, AND DEATH

Throughout the story, the signalman feels helpless: it's his job to keep **train** passengers safe, yet he couldn't prevent the mysterious accidents that recently happened on the railway. In contrast, the narrator believes that he can help both the signalman and the train passengers who depend on him. But the narrator soon learns that he was always as helpless as the signalman, as he's unable to prevent the signalman's death at the end of the story. Furthermore, the railway accidents—including the signalman's own death—may have been predetermined. By implying that neither the signalman nor the narrator had a chance of preventing the accidents in the story, Dickens suggests that everyone is equally helpless in the face of death—and that believing otherwise is tempting fate.

The signalman understands and accepts his own helplessness, though he wishes he could change it. According to his conversation with the narrator, helplessness has always been part of the signalman's life. He was once a philosophy student, but he squandered his educational and professional

opportunities. Instead of trying to change his situation, he believes that "he had made his bed, and he lay upon it." The signalman seems to accept his bleak fate willingly instead of fighting against it. This helplessness also forms the basis of the signalman's relationship with the narrator. The narrator's first appearance shocks him, as the signalman later reveals that a ghost recently greeted him the same way that the narrator did—yet the signalman doesn't prevent the narrator from approaching him. The narrator notices that the signalman watches him with "expectation," suggesting that the signalman knows he can't prevent whatever mysterious fate the ghost represents, although he's frightened of it. The signalman tells the narrator that the ghost seems to be warning him about something—and indeed, tragic accidents have occurred on the railway both times the ghost appeared. However, the ghost's warnings haven't been specific enough to warrant the signalman sounding an alarm. Furthermore, the signalman isn't powerful enough to shut down the train line on his own; if he did, he'd be fired. Thus, he's forced to watch the deaths happen, and he can't do anything more. In fact, he questions whether the accidents were preventable at all: he wonders why the ghost doesn't show him how the crises "could be averted—if it could be averted," meaning he thinks that they might be fated to happen and thus impossible to prevent.

The narrator, on the other hand, doesn't believe that either he or the signalman are truly helpless. Just as the signalman's background explains his helplessness, the narrator's background explains why he *doesn't* feel helpless. He's presumably wealthier than the signalman and seems to have had an easy life—which is why he's shocked by the long hours and weighty responsibilities that the signalman's job requires. The narrator can't imagine that the signalman is helpless or weak in any way, given how "exact and vigilant" he is in carrying out his many duties. Perhaps because of the signalman's sharp mind and competence at his job, the narrator doesn't buy into the ghost story—or, by extension, the signalman's helplessness to remedy the situation. Instead, the narrator tries to solve the signalman's problem by attributing the ghost sightings to mental illness, saying that the signalman's "imagination misleads [him]" and that he shouldn't "allow much for coincidences" when evaluating the situation. Although the signalman refuses to be dissuaded from his story, the narrator still believes he can help him: he plans to have the signalman institutionalized. This is both for the signalman's benefit and for the good of the public, who depend on the signalman for their safety. This decision is the narrator's way of taking control of the situation and proving that he has some level of agency over what's going on.

But ultimately, Dickens suggests that all the events in the story were predetermined from the start, meaning that neither the narrator nor the signalman could have changed them. The reason the signalman was afraid of the narrator at their first meeting was because the narrator cried, "Halloa! Below there!" which were the same words that the ghost uttered. The signalman doesn't think this is a coincidence—he suggests that the words may have been "conveyed" to the narrator in a "supernatural way." This suggests that the narrator was fated both to meet the signalman and to say these words, and that the ghost predicted this in advance. Soon after this, the engine-driver, Tom, whose **train** hit the signalman tells the narrator that, in an attempt to warn the signalman to move out of the train's path, he yelled "For God's sake, clear the way!" The narrator remembers how, earlier, he himself imagined that the ghost uttered this same phrase. However, the narrator never spoke this phrase out loud—and this mysterious, supernatural connection again suggests that the signalman's death was somehow predetermined or fated to happen. This time, the narrator's own thoughts came *before* the catastrophe rather than after (unlike his use of "Halloa! Below there!")—but this doesn't stop the signalman's death, which the ghost seems to have warned about through the narrator's thoughts. The narrator was indeed helpless to prevent the signalman's death all along; the control he tried to exert over the situation was illusory.

Flipping the order of events in this way implies that the order doesn't actually matter—the signalman's death couldn't have been prevented either way. The narrator believed that he could help the signalman, but he was always equally helpless, his fate equally sealed. And although the supernatural events of the story may seem far-fetched, Dickens's underlying implication—that people are powerless in the face of death—is very much real. After all, everyone is fated to die, and no one knows exactly when or how their death will occur. The story's morbid ending sends the rather fatalistic message that trying to overcome this helplessness will only usher in what's fated to happen.

THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE UNKNOWN

The titular signalman in the story is responsible for keeping people safe by monitoring the **trains** that come through his station. However, two mysterious train accidents occurred before the events of the story, which the signalman believes were caused by supernatural forces—a ghost supposedly warned him about the accidents in advance. But the narrator doesn't believe the signalman's ghost story, instead assuming that the signalman has lost his mind. At the end of the story, however, the signalman is killed by a passing train, and the details surrounding the accident suggest that the ghost may have predicted his death as well. Readers are thus left to wonder whether the signalman's death was a simple tragedy or a supernatural event. By leaving room for both possibilities, Dickens suggests that the supernatural is fundamentally unknowable, and that trying to understand and

analyze it does more harm than good—doing so may have even caused the signalman's death.

Although the narrator doesn't believe him, the signalman is certain that supernatural forces caused the deaths on the train line—and he wants to find out how and why. The signalman's certainty is based on compelling evidence: he tells the narrator that a ghost appeared at the end of the train tunnel six hours before a train accident occurred nearby. Then, the ghost appeared a second time, just one day before a woman died on a train passing through the signalman's station. Furthermore, when the narrator first meets the signalman, he apparently repeats the same words that the ghost uttered ("Halloa! Below there!")—so if the ghost story is true, then the narrator is part of the haunting, which validates the signalman's belief in the supernatural. The signalman is already certain that the ghost is real, so he confides in the narrator in hopes of figuring out why the hauntings are happening. He tells the narrator that "what troubles [him] so dreadfully is the question: What does the spectre mean?" In other words, the signalman hopes that the narrator will help him better understand the supernatural, demonstrating his belief that the supernatural *can* be understood.

But instead of confirming the signalman's belief, Dickens provides alternative explanations through the narrator, who is certain that the supernatural is *not* involved. The narrator seems to be a trustworthy source of information; though he can be condescending, he judges the signalman fairly, praising his "exact and vigilant" nature and paying close attention to his story. As a result, the narrator's later skepticism seems credible and unbiased: he acknowledges the strangeness of events, saying that the train accidents are a "remarkable coincidence." However, he denies that this coincidence is significant. Because of the narrator's logical nature, his disbelief casts doubt on the signalman's certainty. The narrator explains away the hauntings by claiming that the deaths are a coincidence, and that the wind in the train tunnel mimicked the sound of a cry. Later, he determines that the signalman has lost his mind as a result of his dismal living situation and high-stress job. The narrator is as certain about the signalman's mental state as the signalman is about the ghost, and both men provide evidence to prove their point, attempting to analyze the situation according to their own beliefs.

Rather than explaining the true cause of events, Dickens suggests that both the signalman and the narrator's efforts to understand the situation are futile—and even harmful. Because the narrator is certain that the supernatural is not involved in the railway accidents, he leaves the signalman alone overnight, planning to return the next day to take him to a mental institution. But before he can, a passing train kills the signalman. Though his death may or may not have been an accident, the narrator's certainty led to a false sense of security, which could have allowed the ghost to harm the signalman in the narrator's absence. On the other hand, the signalman's certainty that the supernatural was involved in the accidents could also have caused his death. After all, his death doesn't fit the pattern he described to the narrator: the first two accidents came almost immediately after the ghost appeared, but this time, the ghost returned a week before the signalman died. The signalman's manner of death was also different: he didn't move out of the way after multiple warnings from the engine-driver, Tom, and he died in the same spot the ghost always appeared. It's possible that the signalman interpreted the ghost's warnings to mean that he was supposed to die and allowed the train to hit him. Alternatively, the signalman may have been searching for the ghost, too distracted to notice the train. In both cases, his belief that he understood the supernatural, or his belief that he could understand it, may have indirectly led to his death.

In the story's final paragraph, the narrator explains that the engine-driver whose train hit the signalman spoke his own thoughts out loud: earlier in the story, the narrator assigned the phrase "For God's sake, clear the way!" to the ghost's gesture, and the driver yelled this phrase to the signalman. Despite the suspicious coincidence, the narrator chooses not to "dwell on any one of [the] curious circumstances," never clarifying whether or not he now believes the signalman. Yet he provides no other explanation, implying that he's uncertain about the truth. By ending the story with a logical character's uncertainty, Dickens suggests that supernatural events are impossible to understand, like the signalman tried to, or to explain away, like the narrator tried to—neither man's certainty was beneficial. Instead, accepting uncertainty may be the proper course of action when it comes to the unknown.

SYMBOLS

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

THE RED LIGHT

The red light that the ghost stands by whenever it haunts the signalman comes to represent the unavoidability of death. The signalman explains to the narrator that the first time he saw the ghost, it waved and cried out. The second time, it covered its eyes, and in recent hauntings, it gestured frantically. Though the ghost's exact behavior differs, two things remain constant: the ghost is always standing by the red light, and someone always dies in the aftermath. In this way, the red light, or "Danger-light," warns of approaching death.

However, the red light serves a practical purpose as well, warning the signalman of approaching **trains**; though it may be tied to the supernatural, the light is actually part of a functional safety system. But while the signalman should be able to stop a

train's approach if there's danger, he can't avoid the supernatural deaths on the rail line, even though they're indicated in advance by the same warning system of the red light.

Despite his inability to stop the first two accidents, the signalman fixates on the ghost and the red light—because he's certain there will be a third accident, he thinks it's his responsibility to stop it. Unfortunately, while he's standing by the red light, likely looking for the ghost, the signalman is killed by a passing train. Because the ghost appeared near the red light during the third haunting, the light was presumably warning the signalman about his own death—the signalman misinterpreted its purpose, believing that he was supposed to stop that death the same way he would stop a faulty train. The light was built to prevent accidents, so humans like the signalman falsely believe that, with tools like this, they have control over death and can therefore avoid it. But the signalman's final position near the red light ironically reveals that, while the light is supposed to warn about death in an attempt to prevent it, it actually played a role in the signalman's death, luring him to the tunnel with the misguided hope of helping. His foretold death was unavoidable not in spite of the red light's warning, but because of it. After the signalman's death, the narrator notices that the red light is off, suggesting that it fulfilled its true purpose: not prevent death, but to mock humans with death's unavoidability.

THE TRAIN

Every death in "The Signalman" is caused by a train-related accident—though trains are meant to serve as a means of transport, in the story they represent the crushing power of industry. (While many Victorian writers critiqued industrialization, Dickens had extra motivation to do so; he survived the 1865 Staplehurst rail crash, which killed 10 passengers.) In "The Signalman," the narrator is initially interested in speaking to the signalman because of his own interest in industrialization, which he refers to as "these great works" (e.g., trains and other machinery). Working from a **box** alongside the tracks, the signalman is supposed to serve as the human branch of industry, controlling and monitoring trains as they pass through a tunnel by waving flags and shining lights. But the recent accidents on the signalman's rail line imply that controlling trains is impossible. Though a ghost warns the signalman of the accidents in advance, and though there's protocol in place to prevent crashes (like the **red light** that warns of approaching trains), the signalman can never manage the trains effectively enough to save anyone. The first time, this resulted in a major crash; the second time, a woman died inside a train, and the signalman couldn't get the train to stop in time.

The signalman's job working with trains suggests that humans are defenseless in the face of industry: though the signalman is supposedly an expert (a worker later tells the narrator that "no man in England knew his work better" than the signalman), the trains are too powerful for him. They were built to serve humans but seem to have a life of their own—the first time the narrator feels the "violent pulsation" of a train, he worries that he'll be dragged downward. Though the signalman believes supernatural forces are causing the accidents, this only amplifies the power trains already possess.

The signalman's comparative powerlessness is solidified at the end of the story, when he's "cut down" and killed by a passing train. Though the engine-driver, Tom, saw the signalman in advance, he couldn't "check speed" in time to stop the train, implying that he actually has very little power over the train's movements. The signalman and the engine-driver both controlled trains professionally but were ultimately helpless to stop them, implying that any control humans believe they have over industry is false.

THE BOX

Because the signalman has to spend his days and nights below ground watching for approaching **trains**, he lives and works out of a structure that the narrator calls a box, which represents the signalman's limbo state between life and death. The box is a world unto itself, and includes a fire, a desk, an "electric bell" and other tools. As a result, the signalman almost never leaves his post; even when he has a break and can move above ground, he's constantly thinking about approaching trains and is "liable to be called" by the box's bell at any time. His job forces him to remain in the box, and his choices force him to remain in his job—he once lived a well-rounded life and was planning to enter the field of natural philosophy, but he tells the narrator that he squandered his opportunities. Now, the possibility of that life is gone. Because he can't leave his box, trains perpetually pass him by while he waits in it, suggesting that life passes him by as he waits for things to happen.

However, this waiting isn't passive. The signalman's job requires him to constantly be thinking about death, in the form of normal train accidents and accidents that may have been caused by the supernatural—as he tells the narrator, a ghost warned him in advance about two casualties on the rail line. After the second, a woman's dead body was laid down on the floor of the signalman's box, suggesting that death is beginning to encroach on the signalman's limbo state, and that he'll soon have to leave that limbo state behind. The signalman also tells the narrator that the ghost is warning him about a third accident, even ringing his bell to get him to leave his box and look out. But when the signalman eventually leaves his box, presumably to investigate the ghost, he's killed by a passing train, implying that the predicted third death was his own. Because the signalman may have been fated to die, his time in

the box was a temporary limbo between his life, or his time before working as a signalman, and his death. The ghost disrupts the signalman's normal routine by forcing him to leave the box, therefore leaving his limbo state behind.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves* published in 2018.

The Signalman Quotes

Just then there came a vague vibration in the earth and air, quickly changing into a violent pulsation, and an oncoming rush that caused me to start back, as though it had force to draw me down. When such vapour as rose to my height from this rapid train had passed me, and was skimming away over the landscape, I looked down again, and saw him refurling the flag he had shown while the train went by.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Signalman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the beginning of the story, when the narrator has introduced himself to the signalman and asked if he can come down into the signalman's trench so that they can chat face to face. Before the signalman can reply, a train passes through the station. Though this should be an unremarkable and unsurprising occurrence—it's the signalman's job to monitor trains, and the narrator is interested in the railroad industry—the train's approach is "violent" and overwhelming to the narrator. This introduces the symbolism of trains in the story, which represent industrialization's power over humans. After all, the train only appears dangerous once it's near humans—before it reaches the station, the narrator registers it as merely a "vague vibration." But once the train is near, it's obviously stronger and more powerful than the narrator; he involuntarily "start[s] back," while the train is entirely unaffected by their encounter, able to "skim" away. Humans are helpless to stop it, which is an idea that will reappear in a big way at the end of the story.

This passage also establishes the signalman's underground surroundings as hellish—the narrator's conviction that the train could "draw [him] down" below ground confirms not only that the train has hostile intentions, but that those intentions would place him on the same level as the narrator, who Dickens later suggests lives in a figurative limbo state, separate from the world of the living.

The signalman's response to the train is equally significant. While the narrator accepts and reacts to the train's overwhelming power instinctually, the signalman's job means that he's responsible for controlling the train. The narrator notices the signalman "refurling" a flag, meaning that he held the flag for the train's driver, presumably to signal him into the station. But because the narrator has experienced the train's power firsthand, this action seems futile—the train is stronger than the signalman, and the signalman is helpless to actually control it.

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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Signalman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator has just climbed down into the signalman's trench and pauses to observe the signalman's working conditions. Though the narrator is likely wealthy and would probably find any workplace "dismal," there's definitely something off about the signalman's trench: he can't see the sunlight, and the only way to leave his post is either to return above ground or to move into the "black tunnel." As with his introduction of trains, Dickens personifies the tunnel by suggesting that it causes violence—the tunnel's "barbarous [...] air" implies that it has

bad intentions towards humans like the signalman and narrator, beyond just "forbidding" them from entering. Later, the signalman explains to the narrator that many people have died in or near the tunnel, confirming the narrator's initial foreboding. This passage also introduces the symbol of the red light, which comes to represent the unavoidability of death. The signalman eventually explains that it's a warning system, but the light's connection to the "barbarous" tunnel is enough to warn readers that it exists to harm, rather than help.

After taking in the scenery, the narrator's conclusion that the trench isn't part of the "natural world" seems apt: no sunlight reaches the space, it smells "deadly," and it's strangely cold. This strengthens the idea that the trench is hellish, and that the signalman's fixation on the tunnel is a fixation on death. Dickens will later demonstrate that the signalman's life is a kind of limbo state, but for now, it's obvious that his workspace resembles the world of the dead more than the world of the living, which the narrator comes from.

> The monstrous thought came into my mind, as I perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face, that this was a spirit, not a man. I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in his mind.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Signalman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator is in the middle of an awkward encounter with the signalman: the signalman seems suspicious of him, fixating on the red light and implying that the narrator somehow understands its significance. The signalman thinks the narrator is the ghost that's been haunting him—the ghost appears near the red light and warns about deaths on the line. But the narrator is not aware of this, and he instead observes the signalman's strange behavior and appearance. This passage introduces the concept of the supernatural, as the narrator reflects on the possibility that the signalman is a "spirit, not a man"—an observation similar to his earlier idea that the trench may not be part of the natural world. He again provides evidence for his claim, noting the signalman's oddly focused eyes and "saturnite," or gloomy, face.

However, this quotation also introduces the narrator's skepticism, which will become crucial after the signalman discloses that a ghost is haunting him. Though the narrator acknowledges in this passage that supernatural forces may be at play, he refers to this as a "monstrous" thought, implying that he is harming the signalman just by thinking it. This explains why he immediately dismisses his own claim—he interprets the odd encounter by saying that the signalman may have had "infection in his mind." In other words, he suggests that mental illness or disease caused the signalman's strange appearance, rather than the supernatural.

Because this passage implies that the narrator is telling his story in retrospect (his claim that he has "speculated since" implies that there's a distance of time, as does his narration in past tense), his shift from an acknowledgment of the supernatural to a dismissal of it suggests that his skepticism remains a dominant force in his life, even after the story is over. The signalman attempts to control events throughout the story, but he eventually accepts his own powerlessness in the face of external forces. However, this passage—which reminds readers that the story's events occurred some time ago—implies that the narrator's newfound uncertainty may not last, and that he may not have totally accepted the unknown.

> Was it necessary for him when on duty always to remain in that channel of damp air, and could he never rise into the sunshine from between those high stone walls? Why, that depended upon times and circumstances. Under some conditions there would be less upon the Line than under others, and the same held good as to certain hours of the day and night. In bright weather, he did choose occasions for getting a little above those lower shadows; but, being at all times liable to be called by his electric bell, and at such times listening for it with redoubled anxiety, the relief was less than I would suppose.
>
> He took me into his box, where there was a fire, a desk for an official book in which he had to make certain entries, a telegraphic instrument with its dial, face, and needles, and the little bell of which he had spoken.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Signalman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation comes after the signalman has warmed up to the narrator and decides to answer questions about his job. The signalman's duties take up his entire life—as he explains to the narrator, even when he leaves the trench, he's thinking about trains on the line. This means that he's always tied in some way to his "box," or central work station, which comes to symbolize his limbo state between life and death. The narrator's earlier conclusion that the signalman is a "spirit" doesn't seem too off-base: because of his job, the signalman must remain distant from the outside world, which is represented as a place of "sunshine," or life—he lives in a world of "shadows," or approaching death in the form of rail accidents. Because he doesn't know when that death will occur, he exists in a perpetual state of anticipation, which he describes as "anxiety."

Compared to the scary tunnel, the inside of his box seems relatively tame, filled with ordinary tools like a book and a "telegraphic instrument." However, the box also includes the "electric bell" that can call him back from the outside world, or world of the living, at any time. This physical tether to the box strengthens the idea of limbo: the signalman never gets to mentally leave that limbo even when he can physically leave it.

The signalman's deeply ingrained sense of responsibility is also introduced here. This is the only signalman the narrator has met, but it's safe to assume that the signalman *is* unusually dutiful—not only does he monitor the line carefully, but he allows thoughts about the line to consume all aspects of his life. This suggests that he's especially attentive to his responsibilities and takes his job seriously—as he should, because a train crash could be a matter of life or death for passengers. But this conscientiousness and dependability ultimately tortures the signalman, because as he later reveals to the narrator, many people have died on the line as the result of supernatural forces. He couldn't have prevented their deaths, but because he's so dutiful, he feels responsible.

❝ He had been, when young (if I could believe it, sitting in that hut—he scarcely could), a student of natural philosophy, and had attended lectures; but he had run wild, misused his opportunities, gone down, and never risen again. He had no complaint to offer about that. He had made his bed, and he lay upon it. It was far too late to make another.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Signalman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which takes place during the signalman's conversation with the narrator, establishes a key aspect of the signalman's character: he's a passive person, and accepts that he's helpless to change his fate or situation. His assertion that he has "made his bed" and can't "make another"—that is, he created the circumstances that led to his dismal job as a signalman, and he can't change them—implies that he believes this job, and by extension his limbo state between life and death, is his ultimate fate, and that nothing can sway him from that path.

But in many ways, the signalman's certainty that he's helpless to "make another" path doesn't make sense. He acknowledges that he created the circumstances which led to his downfall: he acted out during school, squandered his opportunities, and never recovered. Logically, this should mean he has the power to create new circumstances, the same way he created his current circumstances—the signalman doesn't "complain" that fate caused his downfall, and instead thinks he was the agent of destruction in his own life. His belief that his circumstances are fixed doesn't fit with this logic.

Later, he will tell the narrator that he wants to figure out why the ghost is haunting him, which also doesn't fit with the signalman's worldview: if the signalman believes that circumstances are fixed, then it seems that he would accept the hauntings passively. This disparity between the signalman's words and actions implies that although the signalman believes his own fate is fixed, he thinks he has the power to alter the fate of others by preventing accidents on the rail line. Ultimately, this belief will be his downfall, as he's killed by a passing train while presumably investigating the hauntings near the tunnel.

Ironically, this might suggest that the signalman *did* "make another" path, forcibly exiting his limbo state. But more likely, the signalman simply misinterpreted his own fate: the story suggests that he was perhaps destined not to remain in perpetual limbo as a signalman, but to die on the line.

‘[…] Let me ask you a parting question. What made you cry, “Halloa! Below there!” tonight?’

‘Heaven knows,’ said I, ‘I cried something to that effect—’

‘Not to that effect, sir. Those were the very words. I know them well.’

‘Admit those were the very words. I said them, no doubt, because I saw you below.’

‘For no other reason?’

‘What other reason could I possibly have?’

‘You have no feeling that they were conveyed to you in any supernatural way?’

‘No.’

Related Characters: The Narrator, The Signalman (speaker), The Ghost

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place as the narrator is preparing to leave the signalman’s trench for the night—the signalman has promised to explain why he seems distracted if the narrator returns the next day, and warned the narrator not to cry out when he arrives at the trench. Earlier in the night, the narrator greeted the signalman by saying, “Halloa! Below there!” which disturbed the signalman—readers later learn that a ghost has been haunting the signalman using the same greeting.

This conversation hints that there’s something suspicious about either the signalman or the narrator: the signalman seems to believe that the narrator spoke the words, “Halloa! Below there!” with bad intentions, and he decides to interrogate and correct the narrator about it (“Not to that effect, sir”). Meanwhile, the narrator is confused by this line of questioning—he believes that he greeted the signalman by saying “Below there!” simply because the signalman was literally below him in the trench.

Notably, this dialogue contains no narration, so readers don’t have access to the narrator’s thoughts. As a result, the signalman’s belief that the phrase “Halloa! Below there!” may have been “conveyed” to the narrator in a “supernatural way” seems plausible. Those words were the first line of the story, so the narrator *could* have been visited by a supernatural being without readers being privy to it. Meanwhile, the narrator doesn’t deny the signalman’s charge in his own head, and instead just says “No” out loud. Though the narrator doesn’t seem distressed by the interaction, the signalman’s insistence that he knows the ghost’s words “well” suggests that fate may be at play—the ghost might have spoken the narrator’s exact words out loud, knowing in advance that the narrator would eventually say them.

“‘One moonlight night,’ said the man, ‘I was sitting here, when I heard a voice cry, “Halloa! Below there!” I started up, looked from that door, and saw this someone else standing by the red light near the tunnel, waving as I just now showed you. The voice seemed hoarse with shouting, and it cried, “Look out! Look out!” And then again, “Halloa! Below there! Look out!” I caught up my lamp, turned it on red, and ran towards the figure, calling, “What’s wrong? What has happened? Where?”

[…]

‘I ran on into the tunnel, five hundred yards. I stopped, and held my lamp above my head, and saw the figures of the measured distance, and saw the wet stains stealing down the walls and trickling through the arch. I ran out again faster than I had run in (for I had a mortal abhorrence of the place upon me), and I looked all round the red light with my own red light, and I went up the iron ladder to the gallery atop of it, and I came down again, and ran back here. I telegraphed both ways. “An alarm has been given. Is anything wrong?” The answer came back, both ways: “All well.”’

Related Characters: The Signalman (speaker), The Ghost, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is the signalman’s description of his first haunting: he saw a figure near the tunnel and red light, yelling, “Halloa! Below there!” This explains why the signalman was so alarmed by the narrator’s first appearance—the narrator greeted him by calling out the same phrase, so the signalman initially believed he was the ghost.

Throughout this passage, Dickens juxtaposes the supernatural with the rail line’s manmade tools and human-designed protocol. For instance, the signalman sees the ghost near the red light, so he takes his own red lamp with him, which creates an association between the two. As

readers later learn, these two red lights are not remotely similar—the red light near the tunnel symbolizes unavoidable death, while the signalman's red lamp is supposedly meant to help him prevent death. But although the signalman is oblivious of this, he does seem to understand that the tunnel, and by extension the red light, are associated with death—he should be used to both by now, having worked as a signalman for so long, but tells the narrator that he has a "mortal abhorrence" of the tunnel.

Even while subconsciously acknowledging the presence of the supernatural, the signalman fixates on logical tasks, once again proving how responsible he is. He scans the scene and telegraphs to other stations, which is likely the typical protocol for a situation like this. But the signalman eventually reveals that there was a train accident six hours after this haunting. In hindsight, this passage proves his helplessness: even when taking all the proper precautions and when warned in advance about an accident, the signalman is helpless to control trains, or to control supernatural events.

> He touched me on the arm with his forefinger twice or thrice, giving a ghastly nod each time: '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.'

Related Characters: The Signalman (speaker), The Ghost, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is part of the signalman's description of the second accident on his line, which happened half a year after the first. The ghost again appeared near the red light, this time silently covering its face—the narrator didn't follow it, and a day later, the accident he describes occurred. His description reemphasizes his deep-seated sense of responsibility, which is still in full force even after the first accident, which he couldn't prevent. He must have been watching the train very closely to notice a "confusion of hands" in the carriage window in time to signal to the driver. His close attention to the passing trains suggests that he still believes he's responsible for preventing accidents on the rail line, even if the supernatural is involved.

However, this passage proves that the signalman does *not* have control, either over the supernatural or simply over trains. Though he signals to the driver, and though the driver "shut[s] off" the train immediately, the train has a life of its own, coasting "a hundred and fifty yards" with the engine off. Humans' powerlessness in the face of industry is apparent here: the signalman should have the power to signal to the driver, who in turn should have the power to stop the train at will. But the massive train has power of its own, which overrides them both and results in a woman's death. The signalman is helpless, even though he's directly responsible for the safety of passengers.

This quotation also hints at the signalman's eventual fate. After the accident, the woman is brought into the signalman's box. Because the box represents the signalman's limbo state between life and death, the encroachment of death in the form of the woman's dead body suggests that the box may no longer be a totally neutral space in between the two spheres. This foreshadows the signalman's eventual death, which permanently removes him from his limbo state.

> 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.
>
> 'When it first stood under the Danger-light,' he went on, putting his dark hair back from his head, and drawing his hands outward across and across his temples in an extremity of feverish distress, 'why not tell me where that accident was to happen—if it must happen? Why not tell me how it could be averted—if it could have been averted? When on its second coming it hid its face, why not tell me, instead, "She is going to die. Let them keep her at home?" If it came, on those two occasions, only to show me that its warnings were true, and so to prepare me for the third, why not warn me plainly now? And I, Lord help me! A mere poor signalman on this solitary station! Why not go to somebody with credit to be believed, and power to act?'

Related Characters: The Signalman, The Narrator (speaker), The Ghost

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the signalman has just explained that he can't stop accidents on the train line, even though he's forewarned by the ghost: if he gave too vague of a signal, he might be fired, and the ghost's information is never specific enough to avoid this possibility. Because the signalman is such a responsible person—the narrator describes him as a "conscientious man"—the hauntings are particularly "tortur[ous]." His job monitoring trains means that he always has a "responsibility involving life," but now, that responsibility seems "unintelligible," or impossible to understand. It's worth noting that, although he sympathizes with the signalman, the narrator doesn't actually believe the signalman's story at this point. This means the narrator thinks the two accidents on the line were ordinary—and, by extension, that the signalman *was* directly responsible for them. But according to the signalman, his responsibilities are more muddled: he's responsible for "life," but is currently without the "power" and information necessary to fulfill that responsibility. While his duties were previously clear-cut, they truly are "unintelligible" now.

Throughout this passage, the signalman attempts to puzzle out what the hauntings mean and what their purpose is. Though he previously told the narrator that he knows there will be a third accident, he's unsure about what his role should be. In fact, he seems to be unsure about whether or not he's responsible for preventing the accidents at all, telling the narrator that the ghost should have given him more details if the accident "could be averted." This implies that he thinks it may not have been possible to avert it—in other words, that the accidents were fated to happen, and the signalman was always powerless to help.

However, though he believes he's powerless, this doesn't stop him from attempting to help later, and he's ultimately killed while presumably investigating the ghost. The signalman's demise confirms that he was helpless all along, and the mention of the "Danger-light" in this passage—another term for the red light—foreshadows this, since the red light represents the unavoidability of death.

> 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. Therefore, setting aside all question of reality or unreality between us, I represented to him that whoever thoroughly discharged his duty must do well, and that at least it was his comfort that he understood his duty, though he did not understand these confounding Appearances.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Ghost, The Signalman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23-24

Explanation and Analysis

This passage follows the signalman's description of the two accidents on his rail line, as well as his explanation that he's powerless to prevent these accidents. During their conversation about the hauntings, the narrator previously tried to convince the signalman that they were the result of an overactive imagination. Now, however, the narrator realizes that this won't work, and that he should "compose [the signalman's] mind" instead. Interestingly, he chooses to do so by telling the signalman that he performs his duties well, and that this means that the signalman "understood his duties," though he can't understand the hauntings.

But based on the signalman's story, this comfort is totally false: the signalman *can't* thoroughly perform his duties, which involve keeping people safe from train accidents, and he can't understand what his duty is supposed to be, since he has no power to stop the accidents but is nevertheless forewarned of them. The narrator's insistence that the signalman has power over his situation and isn't totally helpless feels hollow, especially because the signalman's responsibilities are no longer as clear-cut as they initially seemed. He's always been responsible for human life, but now he's both responsible *and* unable to help.

The narrator's comment that he has to comfort the signalman "for the public safety" suggests that the narrator doesn't believe either of them are helpless. He later resolves to take the signalman to a mental institution, therefore taking responsibility for the lives of the signalman's passengers. Even though the signalman has just explained that he's powerless to save others, the narrator still believes that humans can be responsible for each other's lives.

But what ran most in my thoughts was the consideration how ought I to act, having become the recipient of this disclosure? I had proved the man to be intelligent, vigilant, painstaking, and exact; but how long might he remain so, in his state of mind? Though in a subordinate position, still he held a most important trust, and would I (for instance) like to stake my own life on the chances of his continuing to execute it with precision?

Unable to overcome a feeling that there would be something treacherous in my communicating what he had told me to his superiors in the Company, without first being plain with himself and proposing a middle course to him, I ultimately resolved to offer to accompany him (otherwise keeping his secret for the present) to the wisest medical practitioner we could hear of in those parts, and to take his opinion.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Signalman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator has just left the signalman's trench, unable to convince the man that the hauntings are a figment of his imagination. The narrator, who presumably had very little responsibility before meeting the signalman (he's likely wealthy, given his reference to the signalman's "subordinate position") now decides to take responsibility for the passengers on the signalman's line by institutionalizing the signalman. The narrator seems to believe that humans can and "ought [...] to" be responsible for each other: the train passengers don't "stake [their] own [lives]" on the efficiency of their train or on fate, but rather on the signalman specifically. In turn, the narrator taking responsibility for the signalman means he takes responsibility for countless others.

But it's clear even in this passage that such interconnectedness won't work. After all, the narrator has competing responsibilities—his responsibility to the signalman means he shouldn't report the signalman's mental state to "his superiors in the company," but doing so would surely be a more effective way of taking responsibility for the signalman's passengers. Through this confusion, Dickens hints that humans can't effectively assume responsibility for the lives—or deaths—of others.

This passage also demonstrates the narrator's false certainty in his own observations. His description of the signalman's best qualities ("intelligent, vigilant, painstaking, and exact") *should* complicate his assumption that the signalman invented the hauntings. However, his close observation instead leads him to believe that the signalman has lost his mind. This illogical leap demonstrates that the narrator will adopt false certainty instead of confronting the unknown.

Before pursuing my stroll, I stepped to the brink, and mechanically looked down, from the point from which I had first seen him. I cannot describe the thrill that seized upon me, when, close at the mouth of the tunnel, I saw the appearance of a man, with his left sleeve across his eyes, passionately waving his right arm.

The nameless horror that oppressed me passed in a moment, for in a moment I saw that this appearance of a man was a man indeed, and that there was a little group of other men standing at a short distance, to whom he seemed to be rehearsing the gesture he made. The Danger-light was not yet lighted. Against its shaft a little low hut entirely new to me, had been made of some wooden supports and tarpaulin. It looked no bigger than a bed.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Ghost, The Signalman, Tom

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place the day after the signalman reveals he's being haunted, and the narrator returns to the trench, planning to escort the signalman to a mental hospital. He "mechanically," or automatically, assumes the same position he was in when he first saw the signalman, but this time experiences the signalman's frightened emotional state for himself. At the beginning of the story, the signalman believed the narrator was the ghost he'd been seeing. Though the narrator doesn't explicitly state it, it's clear that in this passage, he's afraid that the "appearance of a man" waving his arm near the tunnel is the ghost, since these are the exact behaviors the signalman described. This demonstrates that the narrator's disbelief in the supernatural is subconsciously beginning to fade away.

However, the narrator soon realizes that this is not the ghost, but a train worker demonstrating a waving gesture

for a group of other people. Later, the narrator learns that this man is an engine-driver named Tom, and that Tom is demonstrating the way he waved to the signalman before his train hit and killed him. This suggests that the narrator's instinctual impression of "nameless horror" is actually a correct one, since supernatural forces may have been involved in the signalman's death.

The narrator's observation that the "Danger-light," or red light, is off is significant: because the red light represents unavoidable death, its absence in this passage shows both that there has been an unavoidable death and that the light fulfilled its purpose of predicting that death. It may even be mocking the signalman—after all, the signalman fixated almost exclusively on the red light in his final days, and it shut off only after he was already dead.

Finally, the narrator's comparison of the new "low hut" to a bed recalls the signalman's passive acceptance of his fate earlier in the story: he told the narrator that he had "made his bed," meaning that his circumstances were fixed. The narrator soon learns that this particular hut contains the signalman's body, adding ironic significance to the bed: the signalman's circumstances *were* fixed, but not in the way he imagined.

> 'Coming round the curve in the tunnel, sir,' he said, 'I saw him at the end, like as if I saw him down a perspective-glass. There was no time to check speed, and I knew him to be very careful. As he didn't seem to take heed of the whistle, I shut it off when we were running down upon him, and called to him as loud as I could call.'
>
> 'What did you say?'
>
> 'I said, "Below there! Look out! Look out! For God's sake, clear the way!"'
>
> I started.
>
> 'Ah! It was a dreadful time, sir. I never left off calling to him. I put this arm before my eyes not to see, and I waved this arm to the last; but it was no use.'
>
> Without prolonging the narrative to dwell on any one of its curious circumstances more than on any other, I may, in closing it, point out the coincidence that the warning of the engine-driver included, not only the words which the unfortunate signalman had repeated to me as haunting him, but also the words which I myself—not he—had attached, and that only in my own mind, to the gesticulation he had imitated.

Related Characters: The Narrator, Tom (speaker), The Ghost, The Signalman

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place after the narrator has learned that a passing train killed the signalman. The train's engine-driver, Tom, is explaining how the accident happened, and his description demonstrates once again that trains are more powerful than humans, and that humans are helpless in the face of both industry and fate. While Tom doesn't realize it, he provides two reasons why the accident *shouldn't* have happened: he saw the signalman well in advance of the crash, and the signalman was "very careful." Though both were experts in their field, the train hit the signalman anyway—Tom didn't have the power to "check speed," and the signalman didn't move out of the way. In other words, the train was more powerful than both of them combined.

Tom doesn't give a reason why the signalman wouldn't move, and his description of the incident implies that he finds it strange: the signalman was "careful," the whistle was initially on, and Tom called to him "loud[ly]." It's possible that the signalman was distracted, and that supernatural forces caused the accident—he died by the tunnel, which implies that he was likely investigating the ghost. However, it's also possible that he realized the ghost had been predicting his own death, and as a result, he allowed the train to kill him, believing it was fated to happen.

Tom then says that as he passed, he yelled "Below there! [...] For God's sake, clear the way!" Earlier in the story, the signalman revealed that the ghost initially spoke the words "Below there!" and the narrator eerily repeated them. The signalman also told the narrator that the ghost often waved its arms—he demonstrated the gesture, and the narrator decided it looked like the ghost was saying, "For God's sake, clear the way!" However, the narrator never said this out loud, explaining why he jumped when he heard Tom's revelation. If the signalman's story is true, and if Tom's story is true, then the narrator's words were involved in *two* supernatural incidents: the first time, the ghost spoke the words "Below there!" and the narrator spoke them after, and the second time, Tom repeated the narrator's words after he thought them. The order of events doesn't seem to matter, implying both supernatural involvement and the involvement of fate. Tom's description also explains why he was demonstrating his wave in the previous passage, and why the narrator believed it was the ghost at first—Tom

waved in the same manner as the ghost.

The narrator's decision not to "prolong" the story seems to fit with his character; he never wants to dwell on the unknown. However, this time, he provides no alternative explanation for the strange coincidences on the rail line, and in fact "point[s] [them] out" to readers. By ending the story on this note of uncertainty from a normally certain character, Dickens implies that the narrator has accepted both the unknown and his own helplessness. It remains unclear who, if anyone, was responsible for the accidents on the line and for the signalman's death, but the narrator's potential involvement complicates the matter even further.

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.

THE SIGNALMAN

The narrator calls out to a signalman working below ground in a trench, yelling, "Halloa! Below there!" The signalman, instead of looking up immediately, glances toward the train tracks, which the narrator finds strange—it seems obvious to the narrator that his voice is coming from above. Eventually, though, the signalman spots the narrator above him. The narrator asks whether he can come visit the signalman in the trench, and a **train** passes with a "violent pulsation," which the narrator almost believes will drag him downward. The signalman guides the train through his station with a flag.

The physical position of the signalman and narrator establishes their dynamic and respective social positions: the narrator seems to be casually passing by the signalman's trench, suggesting he has some free time. The signalman, meanwhile, works below ground—his social position is literally below the narrator's, and he stands below him at the start of the story. The narrator's decision to greet the narrator seems to be an impulsive one; because the first line of the story is "Halloa! Below there!" readers aren't privy to his reasoning. The signalman's instinctive reaction, which leads him to look toward the tunnel instead of at the narrator, suggests that something is amiss. But only thing that immediately appears to be amiss is the passing of a "violent" train, which symbolizes the crushing power of industry over humans. The narrator's fear that the train will harm him by dragging him down—presumably to where the signalman is—establishes the signalman's trench as a hellish landscape where someone would go only if forced.

After the narrator repeats his question, the signalman points out a path leading down to his post—the narrator notices that the signalman does so reluctantly and awaits the narrator's approach with "expectation." Once the narrator is below ground, he notices how bleak the signalman's surroundings are: the stone walls block the sky, and the only thing to look at is a black tunnel with a **red light** above it. Even the smell is "deadly," the air is cold, and the narrator almost feels that he has "left the natural world."

The narrator has to descend below ground to visit the signalman at his post, again suggesting the signalman's trench is in some way akin to Hell. Because the signalman doesn't actually want the narrator to visit him, the way he awaits the narrator with "expectation" suggests that he's waiting for some grim encounter and isn't trying to stop it. The narrator's observations about the signalman's trench seem to confirm that it is a hellscape, since the narrator observes that there's no sign of life there: the signalman can't look up at the sky, it smells "deadly," there's no warm air, and the place seems to be separate from the "natural world."

The narrator tries to make conversation; after living a sheltered life, he's now interested in the railroad industry. But the signalman keeps looking at the red light and then back at the narrator. The narrator asks whether **the red light** is part of the signalman's job, and the signalman strangely replies, "Don't you know it is?" The narrator notices that the signalman seems afraid of him, and the signalman tells the narrator that they may have met before, near the red light. The narrator replies that he's never been there before, which the signalman accepts.

This passage confirms that the narrator is likely wealthy. His life experience has been limited, and he wanted to talk to the signalman because of an interest in trains and industrialization. However, this interest seems superficial, not only because he was so frightened of the train only moments before, but also because he asks the signalman whether monitoring the red light is his responsibility, implying he has no knowledge of the signalman's job (presumably, the red light warns of approaching trains). But strangely, the signalman's response suggests that he believes that the narrator does *have some previous knowledge about the red light, which seems to be a fixation of the signalman's—eventually, the red light will come to represent the unavoidability of death. The signalman's belief that he's met the narrator before explains why he was so reluctant to let the narrator visit, but he's apparently wrong or misinformed.*

Friendlier now, the signalman answers the narrator's questions about his job. The signalman acknowledges that monitoring **trains** requires "exactness and watchfulness." It's lonely, but he says that he's used to it—he's dabbled with hobbies, but ultimately, his work has to be his priority. Even when he's able to go above ground to see the sunlight, he can be called back by his bell at any moment, and as a result is always listening for it anxiously.

The signalman is clearly a very responsible person. If he failed at his job, there might be a train accident, and passengers could be injured or killed—this is why his job requires "exactness and watchfulness." While the sacrifices the signalman has to make seem extreme—he can never mentally leave his post, even when he can physically leave, because the bell might call him back—those sacrifices also seem necessary, given that the signalman is responsible for the lives of others. Even his anxiety upon leaving his post is a testament to his responsible character, since it means he cares about his job and the safety of passengers. But the signalman's job means that he's essentially tethered to his post underground and can't escape, strengthening the association between the trench and Hell. The fact that the signalman accepts these bleak circumstances implies that he's a pretty passive person.

The signalman takes the narrator into his **box** (the little room he works in near the tracks), which contains the bell that warns of approaching **trains**. The narrator remarks that the signalman seems unusually well educated, and the signalman tells him that he was once a natural philosophy student but squandered his opportunities. He doesn't resent this, and he explains that "he had made his bed, and he lay upon it"—there's no way to change his circumstances now.

The signalman's box—the structure he lives and works out of—comes to represent his limbo state between life and death: he has to watch trains pass him by from his room and must look out for the safety of passengers, who might otherwise die. But he can never travel himself and have new experiences, since the box's bell will always call him back.. The signalman's passivity is again on display here, as he believes his fate is sealed. But he contradicts himself by saying that he "made his bed," or fixed his circumstances, by squandering his educational and professional opportunities. If he really believed he was helpless to the workings of fate, he wouldn't admit that he singlehandedly created his current circumstances.

The narrator finds the signalman to be humble and responsible: during their conversation, the signalman sometimes has to leave to fulfill various tasks, such as displaying flags and speaking to train drivers. In this, the narrator notes that the signalman is "exact and vigilant," even stopping in the middle of a syllable to fulfill his duty. However, the narrator also notices that the signalman is distracted. Twice, the signalman stops speaking, turns pale, and looks toward the silent bell. He then opens the door of his box and looks toward **the red light** before returning inside, clearly shaken.

This passage proves that the narrator is both highly observant and a fair judge of character. He watches the signalman carefully and comes to a final judgment about him: that he's responsible, so "vigilant" in his duties that he prioritizes the safety of passenger over finishing a word or sentence. Though the two men come from different walks of life, the narrator's balanced observation of the signalman leads readers to trust his judgement—he seems to be a reliable narrator, and his observations about the signalman are likely unbiased. But because the narrator is so observant, he also notices that the signalman is upset about something, unduly fixated on the bell and red light. Since the narrator has watched the signalman carefully and concluded that he's almost overly responsible, the signalman's distraction suggests that something is seriously wrong.

Hoping to get him to speak about this distraction, the narrator tells the signalman that he seems content. The signalman replies that he was once but is now "troubled," and he says that he'll explain why if the narrator visits again tomorrow. The signalman warns the narrator that if he does visit, he shouldn't call out this time. He then asks why the narrator said "Halloa! Below there!" The narrator doesn't know, but the signalman wonders whether the words may have been "conveyed" to the narrator in "a supernatural way." The narrator denies this and leaves the trench.

The narrator's observation that the signalman seems content is a bit of reverse psychology: he wants to get the signalman to tell him what's wrong. Meanwhile, the signalman's insistence that the narrator not call out if he returns reminds readers of their strange meeting. This is the first explicit mention of "supernatural" forces, but the narrator's claim that he didn't say "Halloa! Below there!" because of those forces seems true, especially because readers are predisposed to believe the narrator, who observes the world around him carefully and rationally.


The next night, the two men sit in the signalman's **box** again, and the signalman reveals that when he first saw the narrator, he mistook him for someone else. Though the signalman doesn't know this other person's face, they waved to him; the signalman demonstrates the gesture, which the narrator thinks looks similar to saying "For God's sake, clear the way!" The figure called to the signalman one night, standing near **the red light** and yelling, "Halloa! Below there!" and "Look out!" The signalman followed the figure into the tunnel, but it disappeared. The signalman left the tunnel, which frightened him, and telegraphed an alarm to nearby stations, who replied that nothing was wrong.

The signalman's story explains why he was initially frightened of the narrator, and why he looked toward the tunnel when the narrator greeted him instead of looking above. The mysterious figure he saw greeted him the same way as the narrator, yelling "Halloa! Below there!"—but the figure stood near the red light by the tunnel. This association between the red light, which has already unsettled the narrator, and the mysterious figure hints that the figure's appearance is likely harmful. It also suggests that the figure means to warn the signalman of something—the red light, while frightening, is also part of the rail line's warning system. This is heightened by the narrator's description of the figure's gesture; if the figure appears to be saying "For God's sake, clear the way!" it likely believes there will be a crash on the rail line. The signalman, true to character, acts responsibly by telegraphing an alarm. But his fear of the tunnel confirms that something is strange about this visitation, even though the other stations claim that nothing is amiss. The signalman should be comfortable with the tunnel, given that his life is dedicated to staring at it. His fear suggests that, while this visitation appears to be a warning, it might be meant to unsettle rather than help.


The narrator tells the signalman that this encounter must have been a figment of his imagination, especially because the wind in the "unnatural valley" of the trench could sound like a cry. But the signalman continues his story, saying that six hours after the encounter, there was a crash on the train line, which killed and wounded passengers. The narrator agrees that this is a coincidence but says that the signalman shouldn't dwell on coincidences in his life.

The narrator's impulse is to explain away evidence of the supernatural and the unknown, to the point where he no longer trusts his own instincts. From the beginning, he noticed something was strange about the trench, even referring to it as an "unnatural valley" in this passage. But he still claims that the figure's cry was the wind. His certainty that the figure was a figment of the signalman's imagination is at odds with the signalman's horrific story. Instead of accepting uncertainty, the narrator insists not only that the crash was a coincidence, but that coincidences shouldn't affect the day-to-day lives of humans—in other words, that humans should be able to control their responses to events, even if they can't control the events themselves. No matter what the signalman says, the narrator seems ready to dismiss him.

Undaunted, the signalman reveals that six months after the accident, the figure—which he now believes is a ghost—appeared at **the red light** again. This time it was silent, holding its hands over its face in an "action of mourning." The signalman retreated into his box. The next day, he noticed hands waving in a passing **train**; he ran after the train, signaling the driver to stop, but the train drifted many yards before stopping. By the time the signalman reached the train, a young woman had died and was laid down in the signalman's **box**.

The fact that the ghost—which, based on its position near the red light, should be warning the signalman about accidents—adopts an "action of mourning" before any accident occurs hints that the train crashes aren't actually preventable and are instead fated to happen. The signalman's helplessness in the face of the train's power also suggests this. Though the signalman must have been watching the passing train closely and responsibly in order to notice waving hands in the window, and though he signaled to the driver immediately, neither of them were able to stop the train in time, which drifted even with the engine off. The train seems to have more power than humans, which means that the ghost's "warning" is useless—the signalman is clearly unable to heed it. It's also noteworthy that after the woman dies on the rail line, she's brought into the signalman's box, which represents his limbo state between life and death, and thus suggests that the signalman's limbo might be coming to an end.

The signalman presses on with his story, telling the narrator that a week ago, the ghost returned at **the red light** and has been haunting him in "fits and starts" ever since. The ghost gestures with the motion the narrator believed to mean "For God's sake, clear the way!" and yells "Below there! Look out!" The narrator realizes that the signalman was distracted last night because he heard and saw the ghost, which the signalman claims rang his bell (though the narrator never heard it). In an attempt to prove that the signalman's hauntings are imaginary, the narrator takes the signalman out to look at the red light, and the ghost isn't there.

Though the narrator doesn't notice it, there are now a few holes in the signalman's story. This third haunting breaks all previous patterns; after the first haunting, people died within six hours, and after the second, someone died within a day. This time, the ghost is haunting the signalman continuously, in "fits and starts." It's possible that this foreshadows a particularly important or gruesome death, which would add significance to the mysterious bell. Previously, the bell tethered the signalman to his box, or his limbo state underground—whenever he went above ground, he'd have to listen for it. Now, because only he can hear it and because it rings to announce the ghost's presence, it tethers him to the tunnel and red light, which represents unavoidable death and implies that his limbo state will soon end. It's also possible that the narrator is right to doubt the signalman. The narrator's attempt to explain away the hauntings by looking out at the red light with the signalman seems pointless—the signalman made it clear that only he can see the ghost—but this third haunting is different than the first two, which could imply that the ghost really is just a figment of the signalman's imagination.

While the narrator thinks about other ways to convince the signalman, the signalman tells the narrator that he wants to figure out what the ghost means and what it's warning him about, because he's now certain that there will be a third accident. He believes that this is a "cruel haunting": if he telegraphed an alarm, he wouldn't be able to give specifics and might be fired. The narrator notes that the signalman seems to have an "unintelligible responsibility involving life." The signalman wonders why, if the accidents were preventable, the ghost wouldn't give him more details, or wouldn't notify someone with more power than him.

The signalman has already proven himself to be a passive person, willing to accept his fate. However, he still seems to believe that he has some power over what happens on his rail line, and that he can understand the supernatural by figuring out the hauntings' purpose. This attitude is contradictory, especially because he questions whether the hauntings are preventable at all, implying that he thinks they might not be. The signalman believes that he has a "responsibility" to the passengers on his line. But he also acknowledges that he's helpless in this situation; if he tried to shut down the rail line based on the ghost's vague warning, he'd be fired. He feels guilty about the hauntings, but still thinks they might serve a purpose, though he admits that they seem "cruel." Because he's fixated on discovering the purpose of the hauntings, it doesn't occur to him that the ghost may be taunting him, and that the cruelty could be the point.

The narrator decides that he should try to calm the signalman, rather than convince him the hauntings aren't real. He tells the signalman that even if he doesn't understand the hauntings, he at least "understood his duty." After leaving, the narrator reflects that the signalman's story is disturbing but is primarily concerned about his ability to do his job: though the signalman is careful now, he might grow more distracted and accidentally cause a rail accident. The narrator decides that the next day, instead of expressing his concerns to the signalman's boss, he'll offer to accompany the signalman to a doctor.

The narrator's claim that the signalman at least "understood his duty" is ironic—the signalman's duties on the rail line are clear, but his duties related to the accidents are not. The signalman isn't sure whether he should be trying to stop the accidents or whether he's helpless to do so, and either way, he feels responsible for the loss of human life. The narrator—who likely has little responsibility in his life—decides to take responsibility for both the signalman and the passengers on his line, who might be hurt if the signalman's mental health left him unable to carefully monitor trains. Of course, there have already been at least two accidents on the signalman's watch that the signalman was unable to prevent, suggesting that the narrator's attempt at responsibility is misguided—even someone in a lucid state of mind might not be able to help others. Still, the narrator believes that he needs to institutionalize the signalman for everyone's benefit, and in his certainty, he doesn't even consider the possibility that the signalman may be telling the truth about the hauntings.

However, when the narrator arrives at the signalman's station, he notices a man waving his arms near the tunnel and is temporarily frightened. This turns out to be a train worker, standing with a group of other workers, apparently demonstrating the gesture. **The red light** is off, and the narrator notices a hut made out of wood "no bigger than a bed." Climbing down to the scene, the narrator worries that there's been a rail accident, and that it was his fault for leaving the signalman alone.

The narrator's initial impression of this scene places him in the signalman's shoes, though he views it from above ground. It's obvious that, for a split second, he thought he was seeing the ghost, which always appeared near the tunnel and often waved its arms. The fact that the narrator is in the same location he was in when he first greeted the signalman adds significance to this impression, because the signalman thought the narrator was the ghost at first—now, the narrator knows what that uncertain experience was like. It's also noteworthy that the red light is off—because the red light was so closely tied to the hauntings and symbolizes unavoidable death, it seems that something horrible has happened if the red light no longer signals anything. Readers are given a subtle clue about what that "something" might be: the narrator's claim that the wooden hut looks like a bed recall's the signalman comment that he had "made his bed," or fixed his lot in life. But the narrator doesn't pick up on this, and he instead worries that train passengers died on the signalman's watch, meaning that he failed at his newfound responsibility—if there was an accident, it would be the narrator's fault for leaving the signalman alone the previous night.

Instead, one of the workers tells the narrator that the signalman was "cut down" and killed by a **train** earlier that day. He was standing outside the tunnel with a lamp, and the train hit him after emerging from the tunnel. The engine-driver, Tom, who was conducting the train, demonstrates where the signalman was standing. Tom had no time to "check speed," and the signalman seemed not to hear the whistle, so he turned it off, instead waving his arms and yelling, "Below there! Look out! […] For God's sake, clear the way!"

Crucially, the signalman died near the tunnel—because that's where the ghost always stood, it's likely that he died while investigating the hauntings. But his manner of death is odd: the signalman should have heard the train's whistle, heard Tom's cry, or seen Tom's wave. There are two possible reasons for his death: either the signalman died because he was trying to understand the supernatural and was distracted, or because he believed he did *understand the supernatural and interpreted the ghost's third warning to mean he was fated to die. Regardless of the signalman's manner of death, it seems likely that the supernatural was involved: Tom unconsciously mimicked the ghost's behavior by yelling "Below there!" and waving, and he even gave voice to the narrator's own musings. Earlier in the story, the narrator thought that the ghost's gesture seemed like it was saying, "For God's sake, clear the way!" but he never said so out loud, making Tom's words particularly eerie. This passage also proves that humans are powerless in the face of industry: even though he saw the signalman well in advance, Tom couldn't "check speed" in time to stop the train. And even though the signalman was an expert in trains, he failed to jump out of the way in time.*

The narrator decides to end the story without "dwell[ing] on any one of its curious circumstances," but he reminds readers that Tom's words included both his initial greeting to the signalman ("Below there!") and the phrase he assigned to the ghost's gesture ("For God's sake, clear the way!"). However, the narrator never spoke the second phrase out loud.

The narrator's decision to end the story quickly without analyzing the "curious circumstances" of the signalman's death at first seems like his dismissal of the supernatural. But his reiteration of the coincidence—that Tom spoke both the narrator's greeting the narrator's own thoughts out loud—suggests that he may now believe the signalman, or may at least be uncertain about whether or not the hauntings were real. After all, he provides no alternative explanation, which seems to be an acknowledgment of his own helplessness—throughout the story, he attempted to control and explain events, but now realizes he can't do so. Because the narrator is tied to the signalman's death through his greeting and thoughts, it's unclear whether he's somehow responsible for the tragedy. The story ends on a note of uncertainty, and Dickens lets the reader decide who was responsible, and whether the hauntings were real.

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