A Stylistic Analysis of Dickens’ “No. 1 Branch Line: The Signalman”

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No. 1 Branch Line: The Signalman presents the struggling life of London people. This story looks like an episode of a drama, as this story begins with a dialogue, 'Hallona! Below there!'

This dialogue is used many times in the story. This dialogue is very important in this story because the signalman heard this dialogue many times, he was very attentive and all his concentration went to this voice, when he performed his duty and a single mistake in his work, result any accident. He lives in a hilly area as Dickens tells us that he found a rough zigzag, descending path notched out, which he followed. The cutting was extremely deep, and unusually precipitate. It was made through a clammy stone; that became oozier and wetter as I went down. For these reasons, he found the way long enough to give time to recall a singular air of reluctance or compulsion with which he had pointed out the path.

He lived in a very slippery area; he was a dark sallow man, with a dark beard and rather heavy eye brows. His post was in a solitary and dismal place, and on the other side, a dripping wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky Dickens himself writes about the dirty place that:

"... the perspective one way only 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 light sunlight found its way to this spot, that it had an earthly, dead smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world".

This displays the living place of the signalman that he lives in a dark slummy, lonely area outside the natural world. As Dickens's age has been considered a time of ugliness, 'there was ugly religion, ugly law, ugly relation between the rich and the poor, ugly clothes, and ugly furniture'. And Dickens also put his hero in very ugly place. He himself was a writer of lower middle class and never lost his sympathy for the poor and he presents the life of the signalman in that slummy area. Dickens said that this was a spirit, not a man. He responds with readiness and in well-chosen words, which shows his exactness and watchfulness. His work is to change that signal, to trim those lights, and to turn the iron handle and then. He tried a little algebra and gave his answers in low voice.

Dickens tells us about his work and his house, minutely that:

"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".

Dickens presents the struggling life of a dutiful signalman. Dickens emphasis upon the story, not the hero, only one hero completes the story by telling his dangers to the writer. He lives outside the natural world and a spectra disturbs him and nobody helps him during the need of hour. At last he was cut down by an engine because of coincidence of the two voice he was confused with the voice of engine with the voice of spectra, he finds himself unable to identify the warning of the engine driver. The story ends with tragic death of the signalman. The writer writes in the last:

"He was cut down by an engine, Sir. No man in England knew his work better. He had struck the light, and had the lamp in his hand. As the engine came out of the tunnel, his back was towards her, and she cut him down".

As the story begins with a dialogue, shows dickens's different ways of introducing the story. The dialogues and coincidence are very important in this story. The plot of this story is irregular, loose and incoherent very small description is given about the past life of the hero. The small incidents are joined to complete the story, every events has its own importance and gives the complete meaning to the story.

As David Cecil Says,
“Dickens may not construct the story well but he tells it admirably.”

Dickens was more interested in man than manner. His interest was in character rather than incident. In his work, the character is main thing and the plot is subordinate to character. Though Dickens is not a master of plot construction, yet as a narrator of his tales he is admirable. When the first sense of the story, he grips the attention of the reader and does not allow it to loosen till the end. He introduces enough of thrill and excitement, to keep up the excited interest of his readers.

Dickens presents the sufferings of lower class people and miseries in No. 1 Branch Line; the Signalman. In this story he talks with the hero of the story, came to know the real dangers of a duty man in London. He tries to present the real picture of London life of contemporary society. Dickens first tell us about the first experience when he met with Tom, he writes that:

“The monstrous thought came to my mind, as I perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face that this was a spirit; not a man ... In discharging of his duties; I observed him to be a remarkably exact and vigilant, breaking off his discourse at a syllable, and remaining silent until what he had to do was done ...”

Dickens presents the tragic end of a dutiful person, who loses his life on their duty and never care about dangers. A spectra comes again and again to disturb him because his duty is near a dark tunnel. He gives signal to the train and lives outside the natural world. One day he finds himself unable to identify the warning of engine driver because he thinks that this is the voice of spectra and he ignore it and this is the reason, he meets a tragic end, cut by an engine. Dickens himself writes that:

“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 I saw that this appearance of a man was indeed to whom he seemed to be rehearsing the gesture he made."

Dicken's Signalman, Tom met with a tragic end lost his life on duty. He lived in a tunnel, outside the natural world. Dickens himself describes his native place that:

"His post was in a solitary and dismal place as ever I saw. One other side, a dripping wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky; the perspective one way only 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 light sunlight found its way to this spot, that is had an earthly, dead smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world."

Dickens tried to show his critical condition at his post, in a very slippery or damp area near a tunnel. He struggles throughout the life and never tries to escape from the reality or the dangers of life and face every danger but his life presents the picture of a poor person, nobody helps him in the hour of need.

"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."

He performs his duty faithfully and never complaints to anybody. A spectra disturbs him many times. This story shows his struggling life and at last, he meets a tragic end. He was cut down by an engine driver because he finds himself unable to identify the warning of engine driver.

"He was cut down by an engine, Sir. No man in England knew his work better. He had struck the light, and had the lamp in his hand. As the engine came out of the tunnel, his back was towards her, and she cut him down."

Dickens used very short dialogues in his story and when we go through the story, we feel like talking on telephone, one is asking the question and other is giving response. There is repetition of dialogue. For example:

"Hallona! Below there!"
"Look out! Look out!"
"Hallona! Below there! Look out! Look out! What's wrong? What has happened, where? And at other place he says, "That mistake?"
"No. That someone else."
"Who is it?"
"I don't know".
"Like me?"

Dickens used very short sentences in his story and here is a logical connection between every paragraph. The story runs smoothly, language is very simple and compelled the reader to complete the story in one sitting.

Dickens uses his best device, coincidence in this story and makes the story tragic. The tragic end of the Signalman, creates the feeling of pathos in our heart, and compels us to think over this point in order to improve the condition of poor people at work. It makes us realize the worse condition of the poor people and nobody gives him reward for this. Really it is a very pathetic story.

References