

Studying the Various Depiction of the ‘Supernatural’ Phenomena in Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar”, and Dickens’s “The Signalman”

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Introduction

This essay aims to examine the characterizations of supernatural elements in the short stories “The facts in the case of Mr. Valdemar” by Edgar Allan Poe, and Dickens’s “The Signalman”. A comparative analysis between these two stories, discussing the ways that the authors employed the supernatural images to convey their main ideas will be given. This study is trying to resolve the underlying meaning beyond using the supernatural elements in these two stories.

The current study will try to discuss the narrative techniques and the strategies that the authors used in narrating their stories and how these techniques aided them by establishing a suspension of uncertainty towards the events of the stories. For example, the unbelievable scientific facts, the symbols, and the supernatural phenomena that Poe offers during “The facts in the case of Mr. Valdemar” will be highlighted. Also, the interesting combination between the events of the “The Signalman” and the strange, odd and mysterious coincidences that Dickens used to build the sensation of uncertainty towards the story’s events will be discussed.

Poe’s narrative techniques in the “The facts in the case of Mr. Valdemar” were very exciting. The story had been narrated by an unnamed narrator whose name’s first letter is (P) and who is interested in mesmerism, particularly, mesmerising a person right before death. Mr. P aims to explore if mesmerism can arrest, death or not, and if so, for how long it can do this. To get answers to his questions, he decides to conduct his experiment on Mr. Ernest Valdemar. From the beginning of the story Mr. P seems indecisive. He is not sure whether what he is going to narrate about Mr Valdemar’s case is fact or not. Even though he was a witness to what had happened, he still could not believe it actually did. By offering a confounded narrator at the beginning of the story, Poe brings a feeling of suspense and uncertainty towards the story’s events, causing the readers to feel the same and ask themselves what had happened during this scientific process to led this logical into a state of unbelieving . We can see this in the following sentences:

“Of course I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion. It would have been a miracle had it not—especially under the circumstances..... It is now rendered necessary that I give the *facts*—as far as I comprehend them myself” (Poe, p. 1).

Poe pictures Mr Valdemar, the second main protagonists in the story, as a very sick man whose doctors have affirmed his death. He is educated with white whiskers and black hair and his hair looks like a wig. Mr. Valdemar appears to be accepting his death and talks about it as something which cannot be avoided and he is not the kind of person that can be controlled or influenced by mesmerism easily. Yet, when Mr. P offers putting him under hypnosis immediately before his death, Mr. Valdemar shows not only unexpected eagerness, but also cooperates with Mr. P during the mesmerism process.

As I approached M. Valdemar I made a kind of half effort to influence his right arm into pursuit of my own, as I passed the latter gently to and fro above his person. In such experiments with this patient, I had never perfectly succeeded before, and assuredly I had little thought of succeeding now; but to my astonishment, his arm very readily, although feebly, followed every direction I assigned it with mine (p. 6)

By describing Mr. Valdemar Poe established a feeling of contrast about his personality. For example, his white whiskers could refer to his body as if to say that his body is dying and he accepts his death, while the black hair can show that his soul is still young and he wants to be alive. This description gives a feeling that Mr. Valdemar fears death and he feels that mesmerism is his only chance to hold his death for a while or make it easier or more comfortable at least. Therefore, Mr.Valdemar shows unexpected eagerness when Mr. P offers to put him under. So, mesmerism’s ability to postpone death was not only the narrator’s expectation but also Mr.Valdemar’s. This expectation could refer to Poe’s belief that this scientific process could lead to supernatural circumstances.

The first signs of supernatural events in the story appeared when the narrator says that any supernatural phenomena will not be expected from MrValdemar. It seems that Mr. P is trying to say that according to the nature of Mr. Valdemar anything illogical will not be expected from his mesmerism process.

On two or three occasions I had put him to sleep with little difficulty, but was disappointed in other results which his peculiar constitution had naturally led me to anticipate. His will was at no period

positively, or thoroughly, under my control, and in regard to *clairvoyance*, (THE SUPPOSED POWER TO SEE THINGS BEYOND THE SENSES) I could accomplish with him nothing to be relied upon. (p.2)

Under hypnosis, Mr. Valdemar talks with Mr. P several times and during these conversations he focuses on saying do not wake me, "Yes; —asleep now. Do not wake me!—Let me die so!"(P. 6). Mr. Valdemar has changed in a mysterious way under mesmerism. Mr. P pictures his alternation by saying that the circular hectic spots which are in Mr Valdemar cheeks have suddenly vanished. Mr. Poe describes their disappearance as “the extinguishment of a candle by a puff of the breath” which means that the soul had left Mr. Valdemar’s body. In spite of the mysterious alternation, and Mr.P calling Mr.Valdemar “sleep weaker”, there is no clear evidence whether he changes into an unliving creature, his soul leaves his body and leaves him physically dead or that he simply dies because of his sickness. Yet, the image of this body can be considered as evidence of what happens to the human body after death.

The eyes rolled themselves slowly open, the pupils disappearing upwardly; the skin generally assumed a cadaverous (CORPSELIKE) hue, resembling not so much parchment as white paper; and the circular hectic spots which, hitherto, had been strongly defined in the center of each cheek, *went out* at once. I use this expression, because the suddenness of their departure put me in mind of nothing so much as the extinguishment of a candle by a puff of the breath. The upper lip, at the same time, writhed (TREMBLE) itself away from the teeth, which it had previously covered completely; while the lower jaw fell with an audible jerk, leaving the mouth widely extended, and disclosing in full view the swollen and blackened tongue. (Poe, p. 7)

After these appearances Mr. P and the other doctors concluded that MR. Valdemar had physically died and they ask the nurses to take care of him, but suddenly at this moment, Mr Valdemar makes a horrible sound and talks to Mr. P. He states that he had been sleeping and now he was dead. This horrified voice coming from a physically dead person who is not breathing confused Mr. P. He could not understand whether these sounds were signs of alternation to an inhuman being or if they were something else.

“As it would be madness in me to attempt describing... that the sound was harsh, and broken and hollow; but the hideous whole is indescribable, for the simple reason that no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ear of humanity... (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) (pp. 7-8)

This description is very interesting since it gives readers a feeling that something supernatural has appeared but there is no certainty of what it is. The story doesn’t establish this phenomenon as a ghost (Mr.Valdmar soul) or as an unearthly being.

During the story we can see that Mr. Valdemar sends a message to Mr. P informing him that his doctors expect his death tomorrow at midnight and asks him to come and mesmerize him before his death, yet Mr. P doesn’t mesmerize him because he wants “witnesses”. The questions coming to my mind are “why does he want witnesses?” “What does he expect?” Although Mr. P reveals that he doesn’t expect any supernatural phenomena from Mr. Valdemar, he seems suspicious about what his process will reveal. Poe structured his narrating to show an idea that the narrator had a previous perspective about what this process would bring him or what Mr. Valdemar would show under hypnotism and maybe this previous perspective affected his analysis on what would happen. This previous perspective can also be seen when Mr. P said that he had chosen Mr. Valdemar because he knew that he would not catch any “scruples from him”. This could mean that the narrator expected scruples morality issues from others. Moreover, the narrator expresses that Mr. Valdemar doesn’t have any relatives who can interfere with the experiment. Morality would bring the discussion of right and wrong and such discussions could prevent the experiment from happening.

Later, after the arrival of Mr P friend L.....I, the medical students and nurses, Mr. P hypnotizes Mr. Valdemar right before his death. Poe, by using a lot of medical elements such as the doctors, nurses and the medical students, and a lot of medical details about Mr.Valdemar’s sickness and his changing under the Mesmerism process, increases the reliability of the narrator and the scientific facts he narrates. Yet these facts were unbelievable even for the narrator himself and this established the suspicious of uncertainty toward the events of the story. Uncertainty has also appeared when Mr.Valdemar says my friend Mr. L-----I takes notes during the process of mesmerism and he records everything word to word. It seems that the narrator tries to make sure that he doesn’t imagine the circumstances he is narrating about. Mr. Valdemar stated that everything had been recorded by his friend and that there were witnesses. It seems that he tries to prove that what he is narrating about Mr. Valdemar’s case is the fact. Poe, by offering the confounded narrator, gives a feeling of suspense and makes the readers feel that something unexpected will happen.

In spite of Mr.Valdemar’s physical death, he is still talking with the narrator “yes; -- no; -- I have been sleeping __and now_ now_ I am dead” (p.8) [Sic]. Interestingly, how can a dead person talk? Maybe he just seems to be dying? What is happening with Mr. Valdemar? This feeling of suspense had been developed during the story when the readers feel that Mr.Valdemar himself seems to be aware of what is happening to his body.

Moreover, Mr. Valdemar stays dead but under mesmerism for seven months and during this time his body remains just as it was at the beginning of the experiment with no physical changes. It appears that mesmerism has prevented death for a while. Yet when Mr P asks Mr. Valdemar about his feelings when he decides to wake him, he says “For God sake quick quick put me to sleep –or quick waken me quick I say to you that I am dead” (p.10). When Mr. P awakes Mr. Valdemar from his mesmerism, the later says “dead” “dead” and the whole body turns into putrefying liquid which is something more horrible than the natural death of tuberculosis. It seems that although the narrator cannot see Mr. Valdemar’s soul, it is still aware and suffers from his alteration and the soul prevents the body from dissolution during the mesmerism period of seven months. Mr. P said that:

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of "dead! dead!" absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely *rotted* away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before the whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence. (ROTTING)

The alternation of Mr. Valdemar’s body into liquid gives a feeling that Mr. Valdemar was dead during all these seven months only physically, and mesmerism failed to restrict death or even make the moment of death easier. It appears that mesmerism separated Mr Valdemar’s mind or his soul from his dead body instead of arresting death and that made him suffer more. Poe by giving this mysterious ending led the readers to ask themselves what is the fact in the case of Mr. Valdemar? According to the title of the story “The facts in the case of Mr. Valdemar”, the readers expect to see a clear explanation about Mr. Valdemar’s case, but the main thing that I found was ambivalence and unbelievable facts of what was going on and of what had happened. This uncertainty in offering the facts, built the supernatural elements in the story as an explanation for the events but this explanation is not certain.

The narrator feels the necessity to give the facts of this mysterious case since the society had not believed him or what had happened. He tries to tell the reader that this is what happened; you can believe what you want to believe. Poe in “The facts of Mr. Vladimir” was very clever in combining the scientific experiment and supernatural images in his story. He used suspense while conveying the events of the story, leaving the final decision of believing in a supernatural image up to the readers

The strategy in creating the suspense about the supernatural elements in the short story “The Signalman” are similar to that in “The facts in the case of Mr. Valdemar”, but they have emerged from completely different circumstances. The story has been built on two main characters and a supernatural creature. This story also has been narrated by an unnamed logical narrator who meets a railway worker (the Signalman). It starts with the narrator trying to talk to a railway worker who doesn’t know him.

From the beginning there is a feeling that the railway employee was an occupied person. Thus, when the narrator calls out to the Signalman by saying Halloo! Below! Unexpectedly, the Signal man does not follow his voice and look up; instead he looks down the train line supposing the sound came from the train tunnel. It appears something occupies the Signalman and affects his ability to think logically. We can see this in the following:

Halloo! Below!

When he heard a voice thus calling to him, he was standing at the door of his box, with a flag in his hand, furled round its short pole. One would have thought, considering the nature of the ground, that he could not have doubted from what quarter the voice came; but instead of looking up to where I stood on the top of the steep cutting nearly over his head, he turned himself about, and looked down the Line (Dickens,p.1)

Later, the Signalman tells the narrator that he has seen a ghost in the shape of a man standing at the red light at the end of the train tunnel. Although the Signalman describes that supernatural creature as a ghost, the story doesn’t offer any clear evidence whether this creature is unearthly creature or a ghost. Interestingly, the creature uses the same words that the narrator used to call to him “Hallow Bellow”, therefore the Signalman was worried about his visit. What is interesting here is why or how the narrator uses the same words that the supernatural uses to call to the Signalman. If it was by accident what a remarkable accident it was!

On the narrator’s second visit, the Signalman explains what is on his mind and is troubling him. He tells the narrator of how he heard a man call out to him from the red light but disappeared when he got close to him and that six hours later a terrible accident had occurred on the train line. He states that the ghost had been trying to warn him about it by saying “Hallow Bellow look out look out”. He said that after each appearance of the ghost something bad happened, because the second time he saw the ghost it was silent and didn’t cry out and had both his hand in front of his face as if he mourning and on the next train a young lady died unexpectedly.

Dickens pictures the narrator as very logical man who resists believing the Signalman while talking about supernatural creature and thinks that the Signalman is imagining all of this. During the story, the narrator tries to find a reasonable explanation for what the Signalman has told him and he attributes his imagination to his personality or the negative environment that he works in. Also the narrator thinks that the Signalman was suffering from mind problems. Here, the question is if he imagines it, then why after each appearance of the

supernatural creature do horrible accident occurs? Again, does this happen by accident or does something supernatural occur? Dickens narrative techniques portray the narrator as a logical person increasing the reliability of the narrator, yet the odd mysterious coincidences built a sensation of uncertainty or disbelief in the events of the story.

Even the description of the Signalman himself increases the uncertainty of his claim of seeing a ghost. Dickens pictures the signal man as an isolated man who lives a boring routine. He was a dark sallow man with a dark beard and heavy eyebrows. He spends most of his time in his wet gloomy post, watching the train line carefully in order to warn the engineers of trains if something dangerous happens. His post was “a solitary and dismal place” and the narrator describes it as a “dungeon”. Also the narrator revealed that the post was viewed as a “gloomier entrance to a black tunnel”. This gloomy description of the Signalman himself and his post gives the readers a negative feeling about the Signalman’s life as if to say that he already looked and lived like a dead person and this had been revealed by the narrator’s saying “as if I had left the natural world”. Even the description of the path which the narrator used to arrive at the Signalman’s post supports the negative atmosphere of this place. The narrator showed that the path was very deep and it became wetter and oozier as he comes closer to the Signalman’s post, also he said that it was easier for him to mount than to descend as if he was going to death. With these descriptions, the reader can feel that there is something negative but not understandable and also mysterious about this person and this could be because there is something supernatural about this place. It seems that the Signalman’s job is killing his life and this has happened at the end. He seems to be waiting for someone to help him or guide him in order to understand what is happening with him. This has been disclosed when the narrator revealed that although the Signal man seems worried from the visit; he looks as if he is expecting this visit or eager for it. Later the Signalman used white light to guide the narrator’s way after his first visit. Dickens, by using the white light, may have meant that the Signalman thinks that the narrator is his guide who will save him.

Dickens’s language farmwork established the suffering of the Signalman from his job. Thus, the Signal man looks very worried about what is happening or will happen at the end of the train tunnel, particularly at the red light where he saw the ghost. He keeps watching this red light or as he describes it, “the Danger-light.”(p.20). The Signalman interest in watching the red light makes the narrator ask himself whether this light is a part of his job or not “That light was part of his charge? Was it not?”(p. 2) . It seems that the Signalman feels that preventing danger or death from happening is part of his job, therefore he keeps watching the red light, but actually this is not his job and accidents occur. In addition , he looks at the bell when it does not ring. It seems that the signalman feels that when it does not ring this means something wrong will happen. Moreover, He keeps asking himself “What can I do?” He feels that his duty is to keep the line safe. Instead of taking care of himself and his job; he keeps busy asking himself what to do.

What is its warning against? He said, ruminating, with his eyes on the fire, and only by times turning them on me. —What is the danger? Where is the danger? There is danger overhanging somewhere on the Line. Some dreadful calamity will happen. It is not to be doubted this third time, after what has gone before. But surely this is a cruel haunting of me. What can I do (Dickens, p. 11)

Therefore, it could be the bears of the Signal man’s responsibilities, the negative environment that he lives in, the thought of accidents, and how he has to control these accidents that has tortured him and affected his logical thoughts. The narrator shows that the Signalman is a very exact and careful person, but at the same time, he seems distracted and looks at the bell when it does not ring. Here there is a feeling of uncertainty. Either the supernatural creature is an image of the Signalman’s imagination due to his job’s responsibilities, loneliness and working in a cold and damp environment, and the narrator does not want to believe in it, or the logic of the narrator prevents him from believing the Signalman.

In a word, I should have set this man down as one of the safest of men to be employed in that capacity, but for the circumstance that while he was speaking to me he twice broke off with a fallen colour, turned his face towards the little bell when it did NOT ring, opened the door of the hut (which was kept shut to exclude the unhealthy damp), and looked out towards the red light near the mouth of the tunnel.

Another sign of attributing the Signalman’s talking to his imagination is when the Signalman tells the narrator that the ghost rings his bell. Since the narrator does not hear it, this gives him a logical reason not to believe the Signalman and he implies he is imagining things and that these tragedies are only coincidences, like his using the same word as the supernatural ceature.

Why, see, said I, —how your imagination misleads you. My eyes were on the bell, and my ears were open to the bell, and if I am a living man, it did NOT ring at those times. No, nor at any other time, except when it was rung in the natural course of physical things by the station communicating with you. (Dickens, p 11).

This dilemma in believing and not believing in the existence of a ghost and finding an explanation for what is happening in the story arises at the end of the story. On the day the narrator comes to visit the Signalman and take him to a doctor, he is surprised that the Signal- man has died. The Signalman was cut down by an engine;

interestingly the engine driver warned the Signal man by using the same words and gestures that the ghost had used. Therefore, even though he was known as a careful man, he ignored the engine driver's warning as he thought it was the ghost. That led the narrator to ask himself whether all these circumstances occurred accidentally, or was there something beyond a logical explanation.

“ I may, in closing it, point out the coincidence that the warning of the Engine-Driver included, not only the words which the unfortunate Signal-man 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”(Dickens,p.16).

Dickens by giving the mysterious ending puts a lot of ambiguity about the characteristic of the narrator, leading the readers to read the story back again in order to understand this character. The story doesn't establish the reason of why the narrator is visiting the Signalman who he doesn't know or even from where he exactly comes from. Moreover, only the narrator had actually attached the meaning of “for God's sake, clear the way” to the gestures of the ghost and that the ghost had not said exactly those words. Also, the narrator had understood that the meaning of the ghost's putting his hand in front of his face was a sign of death since he attributed this gesture to the figures on tombs meaning the Signal man had not known what the gestures had meant in the first place. And when the Signalman was struggling to understand the meaning of the ghost gestures, it seems that the narrator understood everything but he had concealed it. Actually, the narrator explained that he did not like the red light or the two sequences of accidents and he revealed this by saying “I see no reason to conceal that”. This is really interesting; it seems that there is a reason which prevents the narrator telling the signalman the meaning beyond the ghost's visits or what he understands from the ghost's gestures. What is the reason? Is it because he was a logical man and this prevents him in believing these things or is there something else beyond the logic, like his visit to the Signal man when the signal man was troubled in his “dungeon”, or how he was able to attach the meaning of the ghost or even how he used the same words as the ghost.

What is the fact in the Signalman's case? Dickens doesn't show a clear answer to this question. Instead he offers a lot of odd accidents during the story and no clear explanation for these accidents, causing a suspicious of disbelief of what is going on with the Signalman for the readers. The Signalman dies and although he spends his life warning others, he fails to understand the warning of the engine driver and again death is undefeatable. Despite the fact that the narrator in the Signal man couldn't see the supernatural phenomena, and the narrator in the fact of Mr. Valdemar witnessed the supernatural phenomena both of them couldn't come up with an understandable explanation of what was actually happening as in they couldn't decide if what had happened was because of a supernatural phenomena or not.

The two authors in “The facts in the case of Mr. Valdemar” and “The Signalman” share nearly the same narrating techniques while building the suspicious of uncertainty toward the supernatural elements of the stories, yet they emerge from different circumstances. However, the authors' language framework and symbolism increase the reliability of the narrator; and the supernatural events that the stories provide offering the confounded narrators depiction of the supernatural elements in an uncertain way. Also the unclear ending of the short stories led the reader to think again about what had happened in these two stories bringing about the uncertainty feeling about what had happened at the end of the stories. For example, the death of the signal man and how the narrator himself attached the meaning of the ghost's gestures to the words that the engine driver used brought about uncertainty at the end of the story, leaving the narrator asking himself whether the appearance and the warnings of the ghost before the accidents were coincidental or not. On the other hand, the unexpected occurrence of Mr. Valdemar's physical body changing into liquid shows an uncertain ending in the story. Both of the authors give details of the odd events, leaving the final interpretation of the supernatural images up to the readers.

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