

The Victorian Gothic Short Story
Prof. Divya A
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture – 02
CHARLES Dickens 'THE SIGNAL - MAN' - Close reading and the anxieties of the age

Hello and welcome to this lecture on Charles Dickens's The Signal Man. This is a very famous story of Dickens and it is a gothic story where the supernatural gets a very intense treatment as you will know if you have read the story. So, I am going to do a bit of close reading and also connect the implications to the meanings in terms of the gothic as well as try to look at the anxieties of the age that are reflected in the story.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:51)

The Signal-Man

- 1866
- Mugby Junction
- Christmas Edition *All the Year Round*



So, a little bit of background information in terms of the story. It was published in 1866 and it is part of his collection called the Mugby Junction. This story was published in the Christmas edition of this magazine which he edited called All the Year Round.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:15)

the Clayton Tunnel crash, 1861
Staplehurst rail crash on 9 June 1865.



I am going to show you two illustrations here. The first one is a picture of the Clayton Tunnel crash; there was a train crash at this locale in 1861. And the second one is an illustration of the Staplehurst rail crash in which Dickens himself was involved and critics say that these two train crashes the one in 1861 and 1865 could have influenced Dickens to come up with this fantastic gothic story in 1866, where the key figure in the story becomes the train. Of course, there is also the specter which I will come back to, but the train becomes an important plot element. In fact, it is associated with the way the plot develops and ends.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:21)

Charles Dickens and The Railways

- Railway age
- Dombey and Son; "Symptom of an exuberant, forward-looking age"
- Hustle and bustle



Let me talk a little bit about Charles Dickens and the Railways. So, Dickens does capture the imagination associated with the railway age in his work, especially in terms of his fiction *Dombey and Son*, where the railways come to represent an exuberant forward looking age. So, it is associated with progress and it kind of celebrates indirectly the technological advancement of that period, there is a lot of hustle and bustle, sound and noise linked to the railway transport network.



So, things are looking up in terms of the railways in this particular fiction *Dombey and Son*. Dickens of course goes back to the stagecoach most often in the majority of his works.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:27)

Gothic setting and atmosphere

- "Sinister silence
- Solitude
- Faint light of the stars
- Feeble Red lamp at the entrance to the tunnel"

Gothic motifs



Now, when it comes to this particular story *The Signal Man*, what dominates the story is a sinister silence-- Sinister is something that is threatening-- an insidious silence, a dangerous silence. And of course, there is a lot of solitude there. It is set in a place where there is not a lot of human presence, as you will know if you read the story, it is an isolated spot, where it is just a signal man, his signal- the red signal and his small cabin by the side of the tunnel.

So, it is an isolated spot and when I mention these two points you will immediately remember the gothic motifs. The gothic motifs associated with setting. Isolated castles, country houses, other domestic spaces which are not amidst the hustle and bustle of the

city or the town. And, what we do have here is the faint light of the stars and the feeble red lamp, which is at the entrance to the tunnel.

So, these are the presences, these are the factors in terms of the setting of the story, we do not have a lot of human figures except in moments where there is some kind of catastrophe going on in terms of the narrative.


(Refer Slide Time: 04:59)

The Signal-Man

- "Halloa! Below there!"
- When he heard a voice thus calling to him, he was standing at the door of his box, with a flag in his hand, furling 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.

Handwritten annotations:

- metaphors → Hell itself?
- Refrain → Signification
- Small passage or expected work?
- First person Narrator
- Amass
- possible



Now, The Signal Man begins with these words 'Halloa! Below there!' A fantastic opening in a short story and this becomes even a refrain-- a repetitive set of words used by someone, and somehow this reference comes to have a particular signification. 'Below there,' it can be either literal something deep down, in the depths and it could be metaphoric, if it is metaphoric, then the question is, is it alluding to hell itself.

When he heard a voice thus calling to him he was standing at the door of his box with the flag in his hand furling 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.

So, we have a first person narrator who is going to tell us the story of his experiences with a particular man, I will come to him in a minute.

We have a first person narrator who is calling to someone who is standing below and that is this signal man, the one who is in charge of the signals by the side of a tunnel. So, that is the setting. And, the narrator tells us that he called out to him, but instead of looking up at him, who is standing at a height and this figure looks down the line, the railway line. Why is he not turning in the direction where the sound is coming from? So, that in itself is a puzzle.

So, something is amiss. The signal man does not behave in expected ways. There is something odd about him. And, this oddity will increase as you read the story.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:45)

The Signal-Man

his figure was foreshortened and shadowed, down in the deep trench, and mine was high above him, so steeped in the glow of an angry sunset, that I had shaded my eyes with my hand before I saw him at all.

"Holloa! Below!"

Classical terms - Underworld/Hell

Norm - The Ordinary Reasonable

Distortion -> Gothic Fiction?
Distortion of the human psyche.
Thematic.

The narrator tells us that his figure was foreshortened and shadowed, down in the deep trench. You need to understand that this railway line is at the bottom of a trench. It is in a valley like situation and this narrator is standing at the top of a cutting and he is looking down.


So, he says that 'the signal man's figure was foreshortened and shadowed down in the deep trench and mine was high above him, so steep in the glow of an angry sunset that I had shaded my eyes with my hand before I saw him at all. "Holloa! Below!"' So, again this refrain as I pointed out is very important to the story and we will come to know that it is associated not only with this narrator, but also with the specter which is going to haunt this story. Now, let us look at the symbolic significances. The first one, what does it remind us of? It reminds us of another story called The Red Room by H.G. Wells

where we will see the narrator being distorted in the reflection of a mirror. So, some kind of distortion is associated with gothic fiction. So, is this again symbolic of the distortion of the psyche-of the human psyche? Is that what is probed or explored in gothic narratives? So, it can be a thematic of gothic fiction. Now, again the deep trench could signify once again the underworld or hell in Christian terms, underworld in classical terms. And, this narrator is standing on a high ground.

So, he could represent the norm. The ordinary, the reasonable, who is coming into contact with all things contrary to this. So, the signal man is associated with an extraordinary world. It is associated with the unreasonable, the spiritual, the supernatural, and it is not the norm. It is something highly exciting and not usual. He has to shade his eyes to look at him because there is an angry sunset. Again this is very interesting the glow of an angry sunset perhaps mentions that, even the elements are hostile.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:55)

The Signal-Man




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.

Down

Train

*Supernatural
object / figure
→ Symbolic*

*Speed
Mystical / Violent*



Just then there came a vague vibration in the earth and air, quickly changing into a violent pulsation. So, as he is shouting down to the figure of the signal man in the deep trench there is a sound, a vague vibration, a movement in the earth and air, which turns into a violent pulsation, violent movement, and an oncoming rush that caused me to start back, as though it had the 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.

So, what happens is that it is just a simple incident of a train passing by, but the train does make a lot of movement and sound and noise and it affects the narrator. So, there is some kind of violence, which is interesting. And, these are associated with the train. Violence and some kind of vagueness, it is as if the train itself becomes a supernatural object/figure and this is symbolic of course. And, this affects the narrator. He starts back; he is not expecting that train and so, he is affected and he feels as if the train had the force to draw him down. So, if he comes down of course, he will meet with an accident.

So, the train is somehow violently attracting or trying to attract this narrator. And, look at this word vapour. Vapor is the steam that comes out of the engine. And, now it becomes very clear what the function of this 'he' is. He is a man who is in charge of the signal at the tunnel. Rapid train, again that is very interesting, it is associated with a lot of speed. So, train is associated with speed, it is associated with something almost mystical in its power. I am kind of interpreting it in this way because it is associated with violence as well. Violent pulsation is used by Dickens to talk about the train.


So, we want to come to a conclusion about what the significance is or what the anxieties that this train embodies for the Victorians are.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:39)

The pathway

- 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, I found the way long enough to give me time to recall a singular air of reluctance or compulsion with which he had pointed out the path.
- His attitude was one of such expectation and watchfulness that I stopped a moment, wondering at it.

Handwritten notes:
 Precipitate -> Precipitous
 Clammy -> Gloomy
 Oozier -> sticky
 Wetter -> damp
 Reluctance or compulsion -> reluctant
 Such expectation and watchfulness -> tense
 Trenches - dangers
 Gloomy -> unpleasant spaces



The cutting was extremely deep-- the trench was extremely deep-- and unusually precipitate- it is sharp. So, it is there is not a smooth incline from bottom to top, it is sharp, it was made through a clammy stone, it was cut through a sticky wet damped

stone, that became oozier and wetter as I went down. For these reasons, I found the way long enough to give me time to recall a singular air of reluctance or compulsion with which he had pointed out the path.

So, what happens at this point of time in the story is that the narrator called to this signal man and the signal man responds to the question of the narrator, which is that is there a path to below from where he is standing, and the signal man points out to a particular path, and the narrator is coming down from his height. So, that is what is happening. So, he is kind of coming down below from the top. And, as he is walking the path becomes oozier wetter and I want you to think about this word clammy as well.


So, he is moving to the bottom from his height. And, as he is walking down he thinks about the demeanor or the attitude of the signal man, which is one of reluctance, or compulsion he does not want this man to come down, but he has no choice because he wants to come and visit him. And, again the narrator points out that his attitude was one of expectation and watchfulness. He is looking at the newcomer with a lot of curiosity and the newcomer is aware of it and wonders what caused it.

So, I want you to think about the setting of this particular trench, which is associated with dampness. And, again the signification is that it is not a pleasant space, it is unpleasant. Unpleasant spaces, something that is bleak and gloomy, and again the word hostile-- not conducive to human comfort-- are associated with the gothic settings.

Now, the question is it is in this particular space we have this modern transport of the train network. So, you can see a very close connection between the past and the present. How close have these two modes of life come together and when they come together is there a conflict? So, that seems to be one of the thematic points of view of this particular story.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:49)


The Signal-Man



Scientific connection
Hudson
Franchise

Tunnel
Cellars
Underground
Passages
Red Room

Settings
↳ Gothic
Narratives

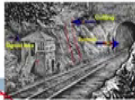


Okay, I have an image of a Signal-Man with a flag there and there is this very disturbing red lamp, just with a faint reddish glow, and there is darkness of the tunnel.

So, the tunnel is an interesting space. So are cellars, underground passages, rooms called red, red room so, all these settings are perfect spots for gothic narratives. And this particular tunnel is very interesting because the tunnel here has a scientific connection too; because it is associated with modern transport isn't it?

(Refer Slide Time: 17:55)


The Signal-Man



dark
red light

he was a dark-sallow man, with a dark beard and rather heavy eyebrows. His post was in as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw. On either side, a dripping-wet wall of ragged 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.

unnatural word (underworld) Spirit world / Hell ?



Now, what kind of a man is this signal man? 'He was a dark sallow man, with a dark beard and rather heavy eyebrows. 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 the 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. So, much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world.' It is a very interesting last comment in this particular world, it is as if he has left the natural world, and come into an unnatural world, underworld, the world of superstition, spirits, the spirit world, or again symbolically hell. So, again this passage is about the setting of this particular tunnel which has in one direction the disturbing red light and in the other direction, it has this massive tunnel, which is barbarous, depressing, it is very bleak and forbidding. It kind of makes you feel frightened.

So, there is a threatening air to this dark tunnel, that uh that the writer is at pains to point to us. And, again the setting if you look at the way the sides of the passage are described--it is dark, it is solitary it is dismal, it is wet. The walls are dripping wet. And jagged stone, sharp stone, which might injure someone who is not very careful as he or she is walking by and the sky is excluded, you can just see a strip of the sky.

So, perhaps it is also-- as I pointed out it is dark-- there's perhaps a twilight sense here. And he says that the architecture is also massive to strike fear in the person who is witnessing it and little sunlight ever finds its way to the spot. All this makes this place have a deadly smell as well. Not a very happy smell, it is a deadly smell, and it is as if it does not belong to the earth itself and again makes us think about other spaces. And, it is cold it is not warm. It is cold and nobody is comfortable.

So, this is a perfect, perfect gothic setting the only odd thing about it is the fact that it is modernity that is kind of passing through this odd setting. So, I have an image here, which should give you a sense of what the location is like. So, this is the part which he describes as being wet and full of jagged stones and since this is a narrow passageway there is hardly any sunlight. And, this is a signal box where this man spends his time the

signal man spends his time and the narrator comes from the top and down below to meet the man.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:03)

The Signal-Man



So, here is an image which kind of indicates how the scene might have looked like and here is the signal man with the narrator meeting him.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:15)

Rarity

□ This was a lonesome post to occupy (I said), and it had riveted my attention when I looked down from up yonder. A visitor was a rarity, I should suppose; not an unwelcome rarity, I hoped? In me, he merely saw a man who had been shut up within narrow limits all his life, and who, being at last set free, had a newly-awakened interest in these great works. To such purpose I spoke to him;

limited

his life, professional pursuits

⏪ ⏩ 🔍 🔄



This was a lonesome post to occupy I said, the narrator said, and it had riveted my attention when I looked down from up yonder. A visitor was a rarity, I should suppose;

not an unwelcome rarity, I hoped? In me, he merely saw a man who had been shut up within narrow limits all his life, and who being at last set free, had a newly-awakened interest in these great works. To such purpose I spoke to him.

So, when the narrator comes down to speak to the signal man, he says the usual things. He says that you know perhaps a visitor is very rare in this particular setting. And he says that this place looks like as if it is very lonesome, isolated. Now, the narrator guesses what the thoughts of the signal man could be about this visitor.

So he writes that the signal man may think that the narrator is a man who had been shut up within narrow limits. The narrow limits could be his life in general, with his professional pursuits and other related activities, and this could be very limited. That is the guess of the signal man about this newcomer, this visitor.

And, this is an interesting point if you think about the preoccupations of the gothic which is supposed to tell the reader, that there are more things in heaven and earth than are to be met with in ordinary walks of life. So, the narrator also kind of indicates that this entire world is completely new to him, that he has newly awakened to such great works associated with the railway and other attendant issues.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:27)

Monstrous thought...

- 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.
- In my turn, I stepped back. But in making the action, I detected in his eyes some latent fear of me. This put the monstrous thought to flight.

Spectre — Ghost
minds of the people
↳ the society :



Now, it occurs to the narrator, that something is terribly amiss with this signal man who is not very welcoming to put it plainly. 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. And in turn I stepped back, but in making the action I detected in his eyes some latent fear of me. This put the monstrous thought to flight. So, these two statements must be kind of read together and analyzed together, because we have this newcomer, the visitor, the narrator, thinking that the signal man himself could be a spirit, not a man.

And, then he realizes that perhaps it is a man whose mind may have been infected, there could be something wrong with this signal man, in terms of his psyche. And, in turn what he understands from the face of the signal man is this, that the signal man thinks that the narrator could be a specter. So, both of them are thinking that the other could be a supernatural spirit. So, once the narrator realizes that this signal man is afraid of him, he lets go of this monstrous thought.

So, you can see the mirroring of ideas here in these two figures right? And, what it tells us is that the idea of the specter or some kind of ghost is foremost in the minds of the people in this narrative; it is foremost in the mind of the society of this period. So, there is a greater preoccupation with the dead or with the spiritual, with the occult, with the mystical. So that preoccupation could lead to narratives such as what Dickens have produced for us.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:43)

The Signal-Man



Now, the two figures are having a conversation in the signal man's place in that cabin and here is an illustration which gives you a sense of this kind of meeting between the two.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:59)

Exactness and Watchfulness

□ but exactness and watchfulness were what was required of him, and of actual work — manual labour — he had next to none. To change that signal, to trim those lights, and to turn this iron handle now and then, was all he had to do under that head. Regarding those many long and lonely hours of which I seemed to make so much, he could only say that the routine of his life had shaped itself into that form, and he had grown used to it.

*eachers or observers ← professional classes ← Working classes
Not entirely belonging to this class*



Now, what kind of a signal man is he, what kind of work does he do? He has to do a lot of communication with other centers in relation to the smooth transport of the railway. So, this passage tells us of the kind of work in which he is engaged in. Exactness and watchfulness were what was required of him, and of actual work, manual labor he had

next to none. To change that signal, to trim those lights, and to turn this iron handle now and then, was all he had to do under that head. Regarding those many long and lonely hours of which I seemed to make so much, he could only say that the routine of his life had shaped itself into that form, and he had grown used to it.

So, what kind of work does he do? He has to watch out for the signal, he has to change the lights, and he has to turn the iron handle so that everything runs smoothly in terms of the train. So, that is most of his work. And that is very very little manual labor, that is something we need to note, and the rest, the long hours, that he spends in the cabin is something that he has gotten used to according to the signal man. I want to come back to this point about manual labor. Why is Dickens at pains to talk about it? So, manual labour is usually associated with the working classes especially in that period- in the Victorian period.

So, he wants to tell the reader that this man is not a figure who is entirely a working class figure, not entirely belonging to this class. And, he has associations with the professional world, with the professional classes, in which most of the middle class can be contained. What are the signifiers that are associated with this class? They are exactness and being very very observant.

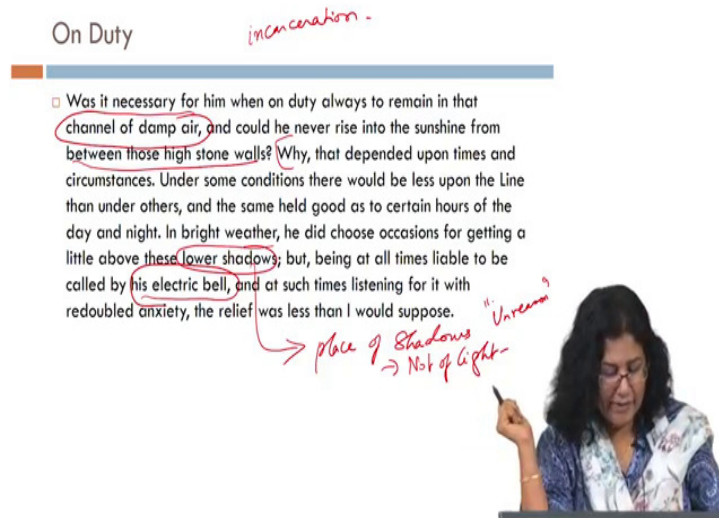
So, Dickens wants to make the reader look very kindly on this working class-cum professional class figure here in this particular story, which is why he says that he did not have to do a lot of manual labor.

(Refer Slide Time: 29:55)

On Duty *incarceration -*

□ 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 these 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. *Unreason*

place of shadows → Not of light



Now, this narrator quizzes him further in terms of the details associated with his work and the questions go like this: when on duty should he always 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. This is the answer of the signal man. He says that that depends. Under some conditions there would be less traffic 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 these 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. So, the narrator is trying to figure out the day to day routine of this particular signal man and he is obsessing with the particular nature of this space. He says this is a channel of damp air. Cannot you get out into the sunlight, cannot you get away from between these stone walls? The implication is that he is in a very very unpleasant space. It is a space which reminds one of incarceration.

The signal man tells him that it depends on the hours, it depends on how busy he is and sometimes he did get out from these lower shadows. Look at the way the setting is described as a place of shadows, shadows-- something that is not of light, not of light would imply there is a lot of 'unreason' and he has to constantly think about the electric

bell through which the other centers would communicate with this signal man to make sure that the train goes by smoothly.


So, the electric bell is very very interesting as well, because the electric bell is an object of technology, which is kind of exploited in this gothic narrative for supernatural purposes as you will know when you read the story.

(Refer Slide Time: 32:21)

Signal man
↳ incongruity

□ On my trusting that he would excuse the remark that he had been well educated, and (I hoped I might say without offence) perhaps educated above that station, he observed that instances of slight incongruity in such wise would rarely be found wanting among large bodies of men; that he had heard it was so in workhouses, in the police force, even in that last desperate resource, the army, and that he knew it was so, more or less, in any great railway staff. 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.

Symbolically & literally



Now, this passage once again connects us to the earlier point about this figure not being entirely from the working classes. So, we have further information to suggest that he could be from a sophisticated or a better family. On my trusting that he would excuse the remark that he had been well educated, and I hope I might say without offense perhaps educated above that station, he observed that instances of slight incongruity in such wise would rarely be found wanting among large bodies of men that he had heard it was so in the workhouses, in the police force even in that last desperate source, the army. And that he knew it was so, more or less, in any great railway staff. 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, he lay upon it. It was far too late to make another. So, this passage does tell us that this man was once a student of natural philosophy. He did study the sciences- the natural sciences- he in fact, went to attend lectures, but then he kind of abused his opportunities, he ran

wild. He was not disciplined. And therefore, he has gone down in the world, he is pointing to the way in which he fell through the social ladders, and he has literally come down to this trench where he is a signal man attending to the trains.

He is not able to rise again in society, symbolically, and literally as well. And, he also tells us that in the army, in the railway, in the work houses you can find people who are somewhat educated and who were once well educated, but have a lost the opportunities that have been given to them. So, such incongruity can be found in such settings. So, what we are to understand is that this signal man is also such an incongruity.

(Refer Slide Time: 35:07)

□ He was several times interrupted by the little bell, and had to read off messages, and send replies. Once he had to stand without the door, and display a flag as a train passed, and make some verbal communication to the driver. In the discharge of his duties, I observed him to be remarkably exact and vigilant, breaking off his discourse at a syllable, and remaining silent until what he had to do was done.

*Sandy
premise:* *Perfect professional
Cautious.*



He was several times interrupted by the little bell, and had to read off messages, and send replies. Once he had to stand without the door, and display a flag as a train past and make some verbal communication to the driver.

In the discharge of his duties, I observed him to be remarkably exact and vigilant, breaking off his discourse at a syllable and remaining silent until what he had to do was done. So, this passage once again tells us that he is the perfect worker. A perfect professional and if you read this passage closely you will understand the word exact coming up once again. He is vigilant and exact, he is extremely cautious and he does his job perfectly without any hitch.

So, what we are to understand that is that he is a man who is very very organized and who is not very undisciplined. So, this is the setup that the narrator is trying to impress on the reader so that we are not going to doubt about his sanity. That is the premise. He is an excellent worker and he is not from the lower walks of life. So, these two should make us buy or accept the statements and the viewpoints that the signal man is going to tell us as the story progresses.

Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.