The Lang-Lit Lab

Research Digest 2

Mind Style Revisited

In our previous digest, *Getting Inside a Character's Mind*, we introduced the concept of **mind style** and gave an overview of Christiana Gregoriou's research that explored how the workings of three unusual fictional minds (Bruno in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Camille in *Sharp Objects* and Susie in *The Lovely Bones*) are presented to us. Gregoriou demonstrated how specific language choices are used to give the reader insight into how these characters view the world.

In this digest, we return to mind style, this time looking at a paper by Louise Nuttall that explores Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*. In the novel, Robert Neville, the only human survivor of a plague that has turned the rest of the population into vampires, attempts to understand the cause of the outbreak and find a cure whilst at the same time battling the constant threat of the vampires.

Nuttall frames her approach to mind style within research in cognitive and social psychology. She outlines that we respond to fictional minds in the same way as we do the minds of real people. So we make inferences about the mental state of a character (for example how she might be thinking or feeling or be motivated to do something) using the same cognitive processes as we would in our everyday lives, for example when we see someone walking into a shop and infer that they want to buy something. Nuttall shows how this ability of **mind attribution** is concerned with both empathy (how we relate to the way a person or character is feeling) and with ethics (the extent to which we think something is right or wrong based on the effect it may have on someone). Nuttall shows how actions often influence the attribution of a particular mental state and that in literary texts the different ways in which actions are presented can influence the extent to which mind attribution occurs.

Subjectivity

In her analysis of the novel, Nuttall suggests that Matheson's language constrains the kinds of mental states we infer to the vampires with the result that we find it difficult to empathize with them. In contrast, drawing on critical responses and online reader reviews, Nuttall shows how readers often feel a sense of empathy with Richard Neville. As an example, Nuttall focuses on an extract where the vampires' actions are described to the reader and argues that presenting the scene through the viewpoint of

Neville and with heavily subjective language means that it is difficult for us to attribute minds to them.

[T]he silence didn't really help. He could still see them out there, the white-faced men prowling around his house, looking ceaselessly for a way to get in at him. Some of them, probably, crouching on their haunches like dogs, eyes glittering at the house, teeth slowly grating together; back and forth, back and forth

(Matheson 2001: 16)

In this extract, the language used draws our attention to Neville's *evaluation* of the vampires rather than the vampires themselves through an abundance of subjective words and phrases: 'white-faced men', 'prowling', ceaselessly', 'get at him', crouching […] like dogs', grating together', 'back and forth, back and forth'.

Omission

Nuttall also shows how Matheson both leaves out critical moments that might encourage us to attribute mental states to the vampires and downplays Neville's agency in particular actions so as to make it difficult for the reader to side with the vampires. For example, here are two extracts from an episode where Neville kills some vampires:

(1) 'After lunch, he went from house to house and used up all his stakes. He had forty seven stakes' (p.22)

(2) 'Robert Neville's hands fumbled on the stake and mallet' (p.20)

In (1), the killing of the vampires is not explicitly stated and the acts themselves are not described, making it difficult for the reader to side with the vampires. In (2), Neville's agency is downplayed; his 'hands' rather than him are the subject and agent of the clause connected with the killing (a technique is called **metonymic agency**). This might prevent us from attaching blame to Neville and feeling sympathy for the vampires.

The ending

Abruptly that realization joined with what he saw on their faces – awe, fear, shrinking horror – and he knew that they were afraid of him. To them he was some terrible scourge they had never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with.

(Matheson 2001: 161)

Nuttall shows how manipulating readers' ability to attribute minds to the vampires sets up the powerful ending to the novel, where we come to understand that the vampires do in fact have complex minds and a range of feelings and emotions. The power of the ending comes from our own realization that, having shared Neville's perspective throughout the novel, we now share the horror in having got it so wrong.

This is a digest of the following publication:

Nuttall, Louise. 2015. 'Attributing minds to vampires in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*', *Language and Literature* 24(1): 23-39.

Trying It Out

Here are some further ideas for exploring mind style with your students

1. Examine the representation of the vampire (and other supernatural entities) in other literary texts. Students can consider the extent to which the reader is encouraged or denied the opportunity for mind attribution? Do these observations match what literary-critical or reader reviews of the books say about feeling empathy for a particular character?

2. In our previous post we demonstrated how mind style may be analysed across different language levels; in this digest we outline how Nuttall draws attention to subjective language and the omission of content and agency. In what other ways can students see this working in texts they have read?

3. How does constraining mind attribution work in non-literary texts? Can students find examples in advertising, for example, where the text manipulates how we might attribute mental states to groups of people? This might form the basis of a NEA investigation.