

The Lang-Lit Lab

Teaching Ideas 2

The Language of Horror

Here is a short post exploring the effects of using more or less specific language in a horror story. It starts from the premise that when writers choose to describe something they can do so in great or in minimal detail, inviting the reader to look at a scene with varying degrees of precision.

For example, a writer could choose to describe a thing someone sits on in the following ways:

1. object
2. furniture
3. chair
4. recliner
5. recliner in leather with well-padded seats, comfy back cushions and headrest support

and so on...

As we move down the list, each word or phrase adds a greater degree of specificity to the description: the most specific 'recliner in leather with well-padded seats, comfy back cushions and headrest support' presents the scene in high-resolution - the effect is similar to zooming in to focus on its minute details. In contrast, the least specific 'object' offers only a very general description - the effect is similar to looking from afar or having a restricted view so that only very coarse details are visible.

It's very easy to apply these ideas to analyzing texts, asking students to comment on how descriptions vary in their specificity and how these might create particular effects for readers. For example, here's an extract from John Connolly's short horror story 'The Inn at Shillingford' that could be used in class. At this point in the story, the main character, Adam Teal, hears a strange sound from a bathroom that connects his room to another in a spooky hotel.

Something warm and sticky touched Teal's bare feet, and he stepped back hurriedly to avoid the stream of viscous fluid that now poured slowly from the bathroom. The unseen presence struck the door, causing it to shudder, and then, as he watched, frozen despite himself, the knob slowly began to turn. Casting aside his lamp, Teal gripped the doorknob and pulled back with all his might. More clear liquid oozed from the bathroom keyhole, making his hands slippery. He felt a cry emerge from his lips, and began to shout.

'Help me,' he cried. 'Please help me. Someone is trying to enter my room!'
(Connolly 2004: 482)

Connolly initially describes the substance coming from the bathroom in very general terms: 'something warm and sticky' but then adds greater specificity to provide a more precise – and unpleasant - view of the scene: 'stream of viscous liquid', 'clear liquid' and 'sticky paste'. Equally, the more specific physical attributes of Teal that are mentioned, his 'bare feet' and the 'cry' he gives in fear, evoke an intensity in atmosphere.

A little later, Teal decides to kneel down and peer through the keyhole:

At first he thought he could see nothing, except a vague whiteness, and he thought the substance had clogged the aperture entirely. Then the whiteness shifted, and Teal caught a glimpse of scorched flesh, damp with the sticky mucus, and grey-green legs, mottled with decay, and a distended stomach, swollen with gas.
(Connolly 2004: 483)

When Teal looks through the keyhole, the way in which the scene is described to us corresponds to the increasing specificity with which Teal makes sense of what he can see so that the very general gradually becomes the very specific – and the very horrific!

'A vague whiteness'

'the substance'

'the whiteness'

'scorched flesh, damp with sticky mucus and grey-green legs, mottled with decay and a distended stomach swollen with gas'

Students could examine degrees of specificity with other horror or thriller-type texts to consider the ways in which writers invite readers to pay more or less attention to particular aspects of a scene and to think about what the effects of those descriptions might be.

An extended analysis and discussion of this extract can be found on pages 35-57 and 151-152 of *Cognitive Grammar in Stylistics: A Practical Guide* (Bloomsbury, 2018), by Marcello Giovanelli and Chloe Harrison