

Perceptual and relational deictic shift and the development of 'atmosphere' in H.P. Lovecraft's short story The Colour Out of Space

Brian P. Elliston

This study investigates how deictically generated 'point of view' contributes to the development of atmosphere in H.P. Lovecraft's short story *The Colour Out of Space*. It begins with a review of previous research in the field and the terms involved. It proceeds to introduce the target narrative and the underlying assumptions of the study. A detailed analysis of seven typical extracts follows and in conclusion some suggestions for further research are offered.

Stockwell (2002:45-46) proposes six categories of deixis (positional signalling or 'pointing') within a narrative: 'perceptual', guiding readers on the 'perceptive participants' in the text, 'relational' concerning 'social viewpoint and relative situations', 'textual' deixis which 'foreground[s] the textuality of the text', 'compositional' deixis, of genre and literary conventions, and 'temporal' and 'spatial' deixis encoding time and place respectively. When, in reading, we 'enter into' a text, it is these deictic categories which signal the 'deictic centre' from which we begin to perceive the narrative. Such markers pointing in unison to the same centre are said to form a 'deictic field'.

Originating in the work of Duchan et al (1995), Stockwell describes how changes in a deictic centre can lead to 'deictic shift', where the reader cognitively moves to a new deictic position. If such shift moves the reader to a new level contained within the current field, a 'push' is said to have occurred, if the move is 'upwards' or out a level, it is termed a 'pop'. Pops and pushes can be seen regularly in the text under analysis here. Defining what constitutes deixis I take instances of *any* shift in perspective (or 'point of view') perceived by a reader to be fundamentally *deictic in nature*.

Dry (1995) has shown how ambiguity in deixis can develop our perception of a character, while Stockwell (2002:49) has demonstrated how it enables different themes to be pursued in a novel. This study analyses a short story where neither of these aspects is of particular importance, and instead considers how deictic shift helps achieve 'atmosphere'.

This potentially vague term and the motivation underlying this research can be clarified by employing for analysis a piece of *genre* fiction, from which any reader *expects* to experience a *particular set of emotions*. The study examines H.P. Lovecraft's 'horror' short story, *The Colour Out of Space* ([1927] 2000b). S.T. Joshi (2001:256) quotes Lovecraft's letter of 24th March 1927 to the writer Clark Ashton Smith in which Lovecraft describes this story as an 'atmospheric study'. Lovecraft himself in his essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' ([1927] 2000a:427) writes of weird (i.e. 'horror') fiction that 'Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation ... We must judge a weird tale not by the author's intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point'.

All readers recognise that a huge range of textual effects contribute to 'atmosphere', so the pertinent question is not *what* generates atmosphere, but *how*. The focus here is on precisely how deictic shift plays its part in this process, by an examination of certain typical points of shift in 'point of view', and an exemplification of how these shifts help develop atmosphere. To isolate the effects of the *deixis* is of key importance if the results are to be reliable. Bruder and Wiebe (1995:341) note 'the WHO is perhaps the most complex of the components of the DC [deictic centre]'. For this reason the study concentrates on the effects of perceptual and relational deictic change.

In *The Colour Out of Space* (1927), a surveyor working on a new reservoir hears strange rumours about a peculiar piece of 'scorched' farmland and seeks out the last survivor of the time, when, following the landing of a meteorite in 1880 (47 years earlier) Nahum Gardner and his family mysteriously disappeared. He speaks with 'old Ammi Pierce' who tells him the story of what happened back in 1880. The narrative we read is a mixture of first person 'I narration' (hereafter IN) by the surveyor and (mostly) *his* third person reporting of Ammi's story which charts the gradual destruction of the Gardner family by an alien entity from within the meteorite.

One assumption underlying this analysis is Simpson's (2004:85) argument that, 'As a broad principle, when a character's speech or thought are represented, we see things, even if momentarily, from that character's point of view'. This position, also taken by Segal (1995b:68) with particular reference to deixis theory, is necessary if we are to accept deictically marked changes in point of view as having sufficient linguistic influence to help build 'atmosphere'. Galbraith (1995:46) notes that deictic shift theory 'bases its notion of the presence or lack of a SPEAKER ['character'] or narrator on specific deictic indicators in a text rather than on a priori argument based on an analogy with ordinary human experience', so *any 'voice' must be deictically marked*, there is no meta textual logic to bring to the presence (or not) of certain 'voices'. The term 'voice' is used here to refer to 'stylistic attributes of a linguistics expression which conjure up attributes of a speaker' (Galbraith 1995:38).

Extract A

The trees budded prematurely around Nahum's, and at night they swayed ominously in the wind. Nahum's second son Thaddeus, a lad of fifteen, swore that they swayed also when there was no wind; but even the gossips would not credit this. **Certainly, however, restlessness was in the air. The entire Gardner family developed the habit of stealthy listening, though not for any sound which they could consciously name. The listening was, indeed, rather a product of moments when consciousness seemed half to slip away.** Unfortunately such moments increased week by week, till it became common knowledge that 'something was wrong with all Nahum's folks'. (Lovecraft 2000b:247 line24)

Extract A illustrates a number of deictic shifts in perspective, beginning with the IN's retelling of Ammi's story. There is no deictic shift to 'the gossips'' point of view, the modal 'even' keeping the centre on the storyteller by emphasis on his/her perception. However, the segment in bold sees a relational shift away from 'Ammi's story' through a contrary reflection on the preceding text. Modal ('certainly') and epistemic ('was, indeed') markers overtly change the authority of this section while 'rather' simultaneously contrasts the 'habit of stealthy listening' with an epistemically more authoritative interpretation of this behaviour *and* in so doing implicates the authority of this voice as being *greater* than the Ammi/IN voice. The authority within this voice is also marked by its access to knowledge, feelings and perspective beyond any 'character', making it unattributable to any 'character' by the reader. The end of this omniscient narratorial voice (hereafter ON) is signalled by a sentence break and modally by 'unfortunately' which in marking an *emotion* shifts the deictic centre back to a 'character'.

This contrast between modality and authority is crucial in creating ON. Short (1996: 288-325) discusses representation of speech (and in parallel, thought) as existing on a scale from direct speech (the exact words) to narrator reported speech, where only the very act of uttering is represented. Lovecraft uses a high proportion of indirect speech/thought (e.g. 'Thaddeus...swore that they swayed also when there was no wind...'), and narrator reported speech acts ('Ammi advised his friend to dig another well' (see Extract B)). These representations are judged by Short (*ibid*) to project less accurately on what is being reported. Short, Semino & Wynne (2002:335-336) have marked however, that in third person fictional narratives (where readers more easily enter into the discourse as an ongoing, 'here and now' event), there is an increased tendency for the faithfulness of the discourse to be accepted. The increased use of modality can be said to 'tip the balance' towards a subjective, 'coloured' viewpoint and we can therefore state that a relational deictic shift is indeed occurring at points when the narrative moves from the uncertain 'modalised' to the authoritative voice.

In discussing examples from Steinbeck of deictically anonymous narratorial 'voices', Galbraith (1995:57) asserts that 'The voices do not belong to people speaking in the NOW of a narrative; rather, they paint a picture of what a place is like without enacting any narrative story-line. The voices illustrate a general atmosphere rather than a particular event.' She acknowledges the 'atmospheric' role of such voices but places them functionally only as building background milieux. Zubin (1995:141) highlights 'voiding' in deictic shift theory, where for a time a deictic component may 'become indeterminate if the presence and identity of a WHO, WHAT, WHEN, or WHERE is not relevant at that point in the narrative'. Omniscient narration within an essentially first person narrative may be conceived as a synthesis of these two ideas (though for a different perspective see Fludernik 1996:192-217).

Another shift to ON follows Ammi's discovery that Nahum's well water is not good.

Extract B

It had an evil taste that was not exactly foetid nor exactly salty, and Ammi advised his friend to dig another well on higher ground to use till the soil was good again. Nahum, however, ignored the warning, **for he had by that time become calloused to strange and unpleasant things**. He and the boys continued to use the tainted supply, drinking it listlessly and mechanically... (Lovecraft 2000b:251, line 26)

The adverbial in bold is potentially ambiguous discourse. Lee (1995:117) has argued for the use of sociolinguistic knowledge in the determination of whether a reader perceives a 'character' or 'narrator' at ambiguous points. Ammi's voice (an observation on Nahum) would more naturally be represented with a modal qualifier in interpreting a friend's mental state, while if Nahum were consciously aware of the problem enough to acknowledge it he would 'logically' 'take Ammi's advice'. If we assume the more 'natural' reading therefore to be that this segment is an ON's interjection into Ammi's story, explaining a motivation which could not be articulated, or probably even known fully by any particular 'character', then it becomes more than just a comment on the well water. It is an 'atmospheric marker' signalling a stage in the frightening degeneration of the remaining Gardners, Mrs Gardner by this stage having gone mad and been locked in the attic. It highlights Ammi's ignorance and impotence in the face of the Gardners' suffering. In generating atmosphere an important role is played by foregrounding characters' vulnerabilities and weaknesses, especially those they may only be partially aware of, and shifting the deictic centre to the ON 'function' activates this.

Sudden and brief deictic shift to an ON also permits hypothetical conjecture. Extract C (ibid:256, line 18) reads, 'Strange colours danced before his eyes **and had not a present terror numbed him he would have thought of the globule in the meteor**...As it was he thought only of the blasphemous monstrosity which confronted him...' Obviously neither Ammi, nor by implication the IN could reasonably say what Ammi *would* have thought given different circumstances. Additionally, ON allows for 'extra narratorial' comment without requiring a 'pop' to the 'IN's 1927 deictic field' with its potential to 'disrupt' atmosphere.

The ON can also provide *atmospheric description* removed from any character's perspective so in Extract D (ibid:261, line 20) '...everyone went indoors and conferred in the ancient sitting room **while the intermittent light of a spectral half moon played wanly on the grey desolation outside**.' The marker 'while' informs us of an upcoming deictic shift. 'Outside' triggers the shift as perceptual and spatial to a location or scene neither Ammi nor the IN could communicate. This instance of ON bears close resemblance to Galbraith's (1995:57) 'atmospheric background'.

Extract E

[Ammi has visited Nahum at home] When night approached, Ammi managed to get away; for not even friendship could make him stay in that spot when the faint glow of the vegetation began and the trees may or may not have swayed without wind. **It was really lucky for Ammi that he was not more imaginative. Even as things were, his mind was bent ever so slightly; but had he been able to connect and reflect upon all the portents around him he must inevitably have turned a total maniac.** In the twilight he hastened home...

(Lovecraft 2000b:253, line 32)

In Extract E, 'It was really lucky' uses evaluative modality of Ammi and shifts the deictic centre back to the IN (the surveyor/storyteller character). The bold segment is a perspective from the point of view of this 'character'. This relational shift is maintained modally by 'Even' and 'must inevitably' (which can be taken as less authoritative and more opinion bearing than a term such as 'would' might be), but also reflectively. It speaks to the reader of Ammi's honest ignorance, but in contrast with an *envy* of this ignorance and an implication that the IN, by virtue of an ability to 'reflect upon all the portents', *could himself* turn 'total maniac'; readers share perspective with a *vulnerable* narrator. However, this shift to IN does *not* necessitate a shift of the deictic field back to the narrator's '1927' voice because as Segal (1995b:70) says, 'even the fictional narrator can make a deictic shift into the time of the events he or she is describing'. No 'pop' back from the third person narrative in which we are immersed is signalled, maintaining the 'ongoing' atmosphere.

Extract F follows Ammi's discovery of Nahum's grotesquely transformed wife: 'Ammi would give me no added particulars of this scene, but the shape in the corner does not reappear in his tale as a moving object. There are things which cannot be mentioned, and what is done in common humanity is sometimes cruelly judged by the law.' (Lovecraft 2000b:256, line 28).

It follows a long section deictically centred on Ammi, and at this 'climactic stage' the centre suddenly shifts to the IN, marked by the self referential 'Ammi would give me'. This constitutes a rare textual (as well as relational) shift, where deixis stops the flow of the story and *explicitly* pops *both* IN (as reflector) and Ammi (from character in, to teller of, his story) from 1880 to the 1927 deictic centre. Pragmatically and cognitively it also constitutes a shift from the graphic to the atmospheric, where inference rather than description takes over for the reader.

The frequency with which the text revisits the IN's 1927 deictic field is also a notable atmospheric device. Left long enough such a field can disappear from the reader's deictic construction of the narrative Both Galbraith (1996:48) who terms this phenomenon 'decay', and Stockwell (2002:49) ('decomposition') note this. Importantly, atmosphere is seen here to be manipulated both by allowing *and* preventing decomposition.

Finally, we see passages of the reporting of Ammi's story where ambiguity of thought or speech representation adds atmosphere. In Extract G, Nahum's son Merwin has vanished while visiting the well. Nahum tells Ammi's wife what he found. Sentences and some clauses have been numbered.

Extract G

(1a)Nahum was past imagining, (1b)Mrs Pierce was blank and (1c)Ammi, when he had reached home and heard the tale, could give no guess. (2a)Merwin was gone, and(2b)there would be no use in telling the people around, who shunned all Gardners now. (3)No use, either, in telling the city people at Arkham who laughed at everything. (4)Thad was gone, and now Merwin was gone. (5)Something was creeping and creeping and waiting to be seen and heard. (6)Nahum would go soon, and he wanted Ammi to look after his wife and Zenas if they survived him.

(Lovecraft 2000b:254, line 27)

Parts 1a, 1b and 1c all have the potential to be viewed from different perceptual deictic positions. They may each represent a character *focalizing* perspective (the view of a character), or a *focalized* perspective (one character's reading of *another's* view). 2a, 2b, 3, and 4 suggest Nahum's perspective but also have potential as representing the consensus of discussion or thought amongst all three present characters. Line 5 forms an ON interjection marked epistemically, and by creating what Bakhtin (1981) terms double voicing; the sentence simultaneously raising the 'voice' of the alien entity from the meteorite. Direct lexical echoing in 'Merwin was gone'/'Nahum would go' directly links 4 and 6. Line 6 definitively returns the reader to Nahum and the text continues from his perspective. Deictic shift here takes on a 'fluid' quality, the lack of clear markers to either maintain or shift deictic centre creates a cognitive confusion and ambiguity in reading which mirrors the characters' own bewilderment.

The use of ambiguity in the deictic centre forces us, in our desire to empathise, to imagine, or 'fill in the gaps'. The same effect is achieved by the frequent switching of the deictic centre where characters' points of view are often not fully explicated or resolved. By constant shifting of this centre, the identification with and the 'sympathy' and empathy the reader has for each character is additionally kept *fresh*. This prevents the atmosphere from withering; if the whole story was told from Nahum's perspective for example we would soon lose the aching poignancy of his position. By repeated shifting of the perceptual and relational deictic centre the emotions experienced when reading (as we do) from 'within' a character, are *renewed*.

Equally, the 'external voice' of the ON provides readers with greater awareness (e.g. of consequence or motivation) *without* 'leaving' the character - we know how bad things are for a character even when they *don't*. We become powerless observers and

Elliston, B. P. (2008), *Perceptual and Relational Deictic Shift and the Development of 'Atmosphere' in H.P. Lovecraft's Short Story 'The Colour Out of Space'*. Unpublished manuscript. Available from <http://www.brianelliston.com/my-research.html>

'experiencers' of the events in the story shifting repeatedly and in a manner outside our control - a form of ambiguity and major contribution to the atmosphere within a reading.

Atmosphere is in essence a set of emotional responses in the reader to a text. A brief study such as this cannot consider atmosphere in its more detailed sense, as the individually identifiable components of that set. Nor can it consider in detail the different mechanisms (such as characterisation or development of the background milieu) through which it is here claimed that deictic shift achieves atmospheric effects. Comparing reader reactions to modified, as against original versions of the story would be insightful and future research could profitably consider the way deixis functions in combination with other textual features to build atmosphere, or even how far the devices linking deictic shift and atmosphere are unique to this particular narrative (or genre) and how far universal in fiction.

However, this study *has* done two things. Test deictic shift and its role in identifying different perspectives (the omniscient narrator position being of particular interest), and link these voices to a function in the narrative, specifically development of atmosphere. Together, these challenge the flexibility and range of deictic shift theory, which has been shown robust enough to maintain its integrity when pushed to provide insight into readers' emotional experience of a fiction text.

The creation of atmosphere is a crucial skill for authors, especially of certain fiction *genres*. It is a literary effect easily noticed by a reader but relatively imperceptible in a studied textual examination. Despite that, I believe this study shows that deictic shift is stylistically identifiable through a detailed analysis of the network of textual devices available to author and reader, as playing a proven role in building the atmosphere within a narrative.

Elliston, B. P. (2008), *Perceptual and Relational Deictic Shift and the Development of 'Atmosphere' in H.P. Lovecraft's Short Story 'The Colour Out of Space'*. Unpublished manuscript. Available from <http://www.brianelliston.com/my-research.html>

Bibliography

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981), 'Discourse in the Novel', in M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bray, Joe (2007), 'The 'dual voice' of free indirect discourse: a reading experiment', *Language and Literature*, 16:37-52.
- Bruder, Gail A. and Janyce M. Wiebe (1995) 'Recognizing Subjectivity And Identifying Subjective Characters In Third-Person Narrative', in Judith F Duchan, Gail A. Bruder and Lynne E Hewitt (eds), *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, Hillside NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 341-355.
- Burleson, Donald R. (1993), 'Lovecraft's The Colour Out of Space', *The Explicator*, 52:48-50.
- Culpepper, Jonathan, Mick Short and Peter Verdonk (eds) (2006), *Exploring the Language of Drama: From Text to Context*, London: Routledge.
- Dry, Helen A. (1995), 'Free Indirect Discourse in Doris Lessing's 'One off the Short List': A case of designed ambiguity', in Peter Verdonk and Jean Jacques Weber (eds), *Twentieth-Century Fiction: From Text to Context*, London: Routledge, 96-112.
- Duchan, Judith F., Gail A. Bruder and Lynne E Hewitt (eds) (1995), *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, Hillside NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Emmott, Catherine (1999), *Narrative Comprehension: A Discourse Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Emmott, Catherine (2003), 'Reading for Pleasure: a cognitive poetic analysis of 'twists in the tale' and other plot reversals in narrative texts', in Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen (eds), *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, London: Routledge, 145-159.
- Fludernik, Monica (1993), *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction*, London: Routledge.
- Fludernik Monica (1996), *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, New York: Routledge.
- Fowler, Roger (1996), *Linguistic Criticism*, Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Galbraith, Mary (1995), 'Deictic Shift Theory and the Poetics of Involvement in Narrative', in Judith F Duchan, Gail A. Bruder and Lynne E Hewitt (eds), *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, Hillside NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 19-59.
- Gavins, Joanna and Gerard Steen (eds) (2003), *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, London: Routledge.
- Joshi, S.T. (2001), *A Dreamer and a Visionary: H.P. Lovecraft in His Time*, Liverpool: Liverpool UP.

Elliston, B. P. (2008), *Perceptual and Relational Deictic Shift and the Development of 'Atmosphere' in H.P. Lovecraft's Short Story 'The Colour Out of Space'*. Unpublished manuscript. Available from <http://www.brianelliston.com/my-research.html>

Lee, David A. (1995), 'Language and perspective in Catherine Mansfield's 'Prelude'', in Peter Verdonk and Jean Jacques Weber (eds) (1995), *Twentieth-Century Fiction: From Text to Context*, London: Routledge, 113-125.

Levinson, Stephen. C. (1983), *Pragmatics*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Lounsberry, Barbara et al. (eds) (1998), *The Tales We Tell: Perspectives on the Short Story*, Westport CT: Greenwood Press.

Lovecraft, Howard Phillip (2000a), 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', in *The H.P. Lovecraft Omnibus 2: Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*, London: HarperCollins, 423-512.

Lovecraft, Howard Phillip (2000b), 'The Colour Out of Space', in *The H.P. Lovecraft Omnibus 3: The Haunter of the Dark and Other Tales*, London: HarperCollins, 236-271.

Oatley, Keith (2002), 'Emotions and the Story Worlds of Fiction', in Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey J. Strange and Timothy C. Crock (eds), *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*, Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 39-66.

Salomon, Roger B (2002), *Mazes of the Serpent: An Anatomy of Horror Narrative*, Ithaca NY: Cornell UP.

Segal, Erwin M. (1995a), 'Narrative Comprehension and the Role of Deictic Shift Theory', in Judith F Duchan, Gail A. Bruder and Lynne E Hewitt (eds), *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, Hillside NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 3-17.

Segal, Erwin M. (1995b), 'A Cognitive-Phenomenological Theory of Fictional Narrative', in Judith F Duchan, Gail A. Bruder and Lynne E Hewitt (eds), *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, Hillside NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 61-78.

Semino, Elena and Mick Short (2004), *Corpus Stylistics: Speech, Writing and Thought Presentation in a Corpus of English Writing*, New York: Routledge.

Short, Mick (1996), *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*, Harlow: Longman.

Short, Mick, Elena Semino and Martin Wynne (2002), 'Revisiting the notion of faithfulness in discourse presentation using a corpus approach', *Language and Literature*, 11:325-355

Simpson, Paul (1993), *Language, Ideology, and Point of View*, New York: Routledge.

Simpson, Paul (2004), *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students*, New York: Routledge.

Stockwell, Peter (2002), *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*, London: Routledge.

Stockwell, Peter (2005), 'Texture and Identification', *European Journal of English Studies*, 9(2):143-153.

Tsur, Reuven (2003), 'Deixis and abstractions: adventures in time and space', in Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen (eds), *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, London: Routledge, 41-55.

Elliston, B. P. (2008), *Perceptual and Relational Deictic Shift and the Development of 'Atmosphere' in H.P. Lovecraft's Short Story 'The Colour Out of Space'*. Unpublished manuscript. Available from <http://www.brianelliston.com/my-research.html>

Verdonk, Peter and Jean Jacques Weber (eds) (1995), *Twentieth-Century Fiction: From Text to Context*, London: Routledge.

Werth, Paul (1995), 'World enough, and time': Deictic space and the interpretation of prose', in Peter Verdonk and Jean Jacques Weber (eds) (1995), *Twentieth-Century Fiction: From Text to Context*, London: Routledge, 181-205.

Zubin, David A., and Lynne E Hewitt (1995), 'The Deictic Center: A Theory of deixis in Narrative', in Judith F Duchan, Gail A. Bruder and Lynne E Hewitt (eds), *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, Hillside NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 129-155.