

ANNA KĘDRA-KARDELA
Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej*

Fear in Gothic Fiction: A Cognitive Poetic Analysis of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

Abstract

Based on the Deictic Shift Theory as adopted by cognitive poetics (Stockwell 2002), this paper offers an account of fear generating mechanisms involving spatial, temporal, perceptual, relational and compositional deictic shifts in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. Focusing on the ways the reader gets involved in the terrifying story of Carter's protagonist, the paper uncovers the complex mechanism of the "production of horror" in the text.

* Instytut Anglistyki Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej
pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4A, 20-031 Lublin
e-mail: annakardela@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

Introduction

In his study *Geometries of terror. Numinous Spaces in Gothic, Horror and Science Fiction*, Manuel Aguirre asks the following questions: “[H]ow is horror produced on the page [in Gothic fiction]? What textual mechanisms account for emotion? By what sleight of hand do writers get readers to collude with them in the raising of passion?” (Aguirre 2008: 2). The most important factor in creating fear in Gothic fiction, Aguirre argues, is the movement between two spaces: the familiar space of everyday world, that is, “the human domain of rationality and intelligible events”, and the terrifying numinous space “which transcends human reason” (Aguirre 2008: 3). Gothic plots, which entail transition between the two spaces, involve, Aguirre contends, “a transgression, a violation of boundaries” (Aguirre 2008: 3). Based on the Deictic Shift Theory as developed by Cognitive Linguistics and adopted by cognitive poetics (Stockwell 2002) for the purpose of literary investigation, the paper offers an account of the fear generating mechanism involving the spatial, temporal, relational and compositional deictic movement (or shift), in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, a modern rewrite of the Bluebeard tale. Focusing on the ways the narrator implicates the reader in her terrifying story, the paper describes the mechanism of “horror production” in fiction.

Deictic Shift Theory

The importance of deixis as a mechanism “subjectifying” linguistic expression has long been recognized (Galbraith 1995: 23)¹. Owing to deixis, the identification of the reference point — “I/here/now” — “orients us within a situation”, makes us “enter it mentally”, and thus helps us “move” within the story world of a narrative². Deixis, Galbraith observes, is “a psycho-linguistic term for those aspects of meaning associated with self — world orientation[;] [it] is a language universal [...] that orients the use of language with respect to a particular time,

¹ The analysis of deixis in a literary text developed in this study is couched in terms of the theory of cognitive poetics and not in strictly linguistic terms as envisioned by Bühler (1934/2011) and Levinson (1983/2010).

² Based on Hamburger’s argument concerning fictional narration, Galbraith argues that “the notions of HERE, NOW, and SELF are constituted in fiction on the plane of the story rather than in the act of narrating” (Galbraith 1995: 25).

place, and person” (Galbraith 1995: 21). Owing to deixis, an imaginative construction such as a narrative text can be made sense of thanks to the transposing of “our own bodily orientation and experience” (Galbraith 1995: 24). Deixis, Tsur notes, “instructs the reader to construct from the verbal material a situation in which such denotations are pertinent” (Tsur 2003: 41).

By being involved in the analysis of a literary text and getting “immersed in the world of the text”, which is an inseparable part of “the experience of reading literature”, the readers, Stockwell claims, “project their minds into the other world” — that is, the story world — and by “anchoring the meaning to the context, move mentally within this world” (Stockwell 2002: 41). In order to be able “to enter” the text mentally, to move within it and to “construct a cognitively negotiable world”, the reader has to identify the *deictic centre*, represented by the “speaking, writing, or thinking voice”, in relation to which he/she will position him/herself (Stockwell 2002a: 78). According to Stockwell (2002: 47),

- i. “[t]he world of a literary text consists of one or more *deictic fields*”;
- ii. the deictic field is constructed by means of expressions which relate to the same deictic centre;
- iii. deictic fields are often related to characters, narrator or narratee, the pivot-figures in the text. Deictic fields can also be built around other role-holders, such as animals, plants and other objects.

In order to “see things through the eyes of the other”, to adopt “a textual role” of a character, narrator or narratee, the reader has to follow the “movement of voices” (Stockwell 2002a: 78), a movement which, according to the deictic shift theory, takes place between deictic centres as determined by the expressions used in the text. The latter function as “deictic shift devices” (Stockwell 2002: 53), enabling the reader to develop a mental contact with the story world and to “see things [...] from the perspective of the character or narrator inside the text-world, and construct a rich context by resolving deictic expressions from that viewpoint” (Stockwell 2002: 47). This being the case, the deictic shift devices can be treated as a means of *subjectivizing* the text, whereby, in Stockwell’s own words, the reader gets

immersed in the world of the text, relating to characters, scenes and ideas [...] as if a threshold [was] crossed [so that readers] can project their minds into the other world, find their way around there, and fill out the rich detail between the words of the text on the basis of real life experience and knowledge. (Stockwell 2002: 41)

Deictic Shift is a complex mechanism and is performed in a number of ways. Stockwell (Stockwell 2002, 2002a) distinguishes six types of deixis and — respectively — six types of Deictic Shift (Stockwell 2002a: 78–79):

- i. *perceptual shift* — concerns “the movement between perceptual viewpoints, usually introduced and maintained with personal pronouns, noun phrases, perception and mental predicates”;
- ii. *spatial shift* — relies on “locative expressions, movement predicates, spatial adverbs” [...];
- iii. *temporal shift* — is denoted “by locative expressions, as well as tense and aspect shift and chaining”;

- iv. *relational shift* — “refers to the encoded social relationships of the voice and its attitude to other entities”. Relational deixis manifests itself also through “[n]ames and address forms, evaluative adverbs and adjectives, verb choices, modalised expressions and encoded social politeness”, which are means of marking relational deixis and relational deictic shifts;
- v. *textual shift* — concerns “the materiality of the medium” and involves such features of the text as chapter titles, division into paragraphs, reference to other chapters, and other parts of the text (cf. Stockwell 2002: 55);
- vi. *compositional shift* — relates the text “to the generic tradition, intertextuality and conventions of the speaking voice, essentially through all the register choices of lexicogrammar”.

Reading a literary text requires not only “following the instructions” provided by it with a view to constructing a story world in which the reader will mentally move, but it also involves, as Emmott puts it, “empathising with characters, about understanding their motivations, and about judging the effect of the actions of one character on other characters in the context” (Emmott 1997: 16–17). This also involves “sharing” emotions, including emotions characteristic of Gothic fiction such as fear and horror.

The Bloody Chamber — analysis

Narrated in retrospect by the protagonist, *The Bloody Chamber* features a seventeen-year-old girl who gets married to a much older Marquis, three times a widower, “the richest man in France”, whose last wife died in “a boating accident, at his home, in Brittany” (Carter) only three months prior to his current marriage. Brought to his castle situated on an island, the protagonist gradually discovers her husband’s perversity and realizes that she is going to become his next victim, to be added to his gallery of dead wives. She narrowly escapes death, saved by her mother, who unexpectedly arrives at the last moment. Throughout this story, told by the protagonist-narrator, tension is built involving the reader, who, by adopting the narrator’s perspective, and equipped with his/her own knowledge of life and literary genres and conventions, gets more and more anxious as to what is going to happen to the girl, who, in contrast to the reader, is not fully aware of the danger she is facing. I believe that by applying the Deictic Shift Theory to the analysis of Carter’s story, the fear-generating mechanism can be explained.

The opening paragraph in the story establishes the deictic centre: the first-person narrator begins with the words:

I remember, how that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, *away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the enclosed quietude of my mother’s apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.* (emphasis added)

While the deictic centre is created around the protagonist-narrator (“I”), in the temporal “now” signalled by the use of the present tense (“I remember”), a twofold shift — perceptual and temporal — is immediately suggested by the word “remember”. The word implies

both retrospection (i.e. the temporal shift) and perceptual shift to the protagonist's former i.e. younger self. The spatiotemporal dimension of "here" and "now" of remembering is established as the point of reference for the recollections concerning the protagonist's journey — both literal and figurative. By the reference to the past a temporal shift is performed and a separate deictic centre is established, anchored in the past: "then" — i.e. before the departure from home, and "there" — i.e. in the protagonist's mother's home in Paris, which the narrator left to join her husband on the island. The departure from home and the travel to Marquis's castle denote spatial shift. The first part of the narrative oscillates between these two definite points of reference: "here and now" versus "there and then", or, in other words — two deictic centres, shifting the reader's cognitive stance from one focal point to the other.

The journey the narrator reports in the first paragraph implies several shifts to be performed, including:

- perceptual shift suggested by the words "away from girlhood", into maturity, which gradually changes the protagonist's perception of the world;
- spatial shift signalled by the expression: "away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment";
- relational shift determined by the phrase: "into the unguessable country of marriage," which implies a change of social relations. Denoted by spatial metaphors ("away from girlhood," "into the unguessable country of marriage"), the relational shift is made: from being a daughter (dependent on the social relation to her mother) to being a wife (thus related to her husband and no longer equally strongly attached to her mother, who stays far away).

These three major shifts, let us call them "global shifts," define the schema of the story, to be elaborated by "local" shifts (e.g. the movement of the protagonist within the four walls of the castle). It is the local shifts that account for gradually involving the reader in the story world and inducing in him/her empathetic emotions of fear as experienced by the protagonist.

After the temporal and spatial shift evoked by the repetition of the expression "I remember" in the first paragraph of the story, the second paragraph introduces the protagonist's mother's deictic centre. By quoting her question reiterated twice: "Are you sure you love him", the protagonist refers to her mother's fears. For a brief while the reader is "mentally transferred" from the protagonist's deictic centre to her mother's. The spatial shift (to the protagonist's mother's home) and the further temporal shift (to the time before leaving Paris) is paralleled by the perceptual shift to a different deictic centre — that of the protagonist's mother. By following these shifts the reader is able to adopt a dual perspective empathising thereby with the daughter on the one hand and with her mother, anxious about her daughter, on the other. The mother's question: "Are you sure you love him?" (to which the protagonist responds: "I'm sure I want to marry him" [Carter]), creates the tension, enhanced additionally by the phrase repeated twice: "Are you sure". In this way the mother's perspective indicates her sense of uncertainty as to her daughter's future:

And I remember I tenderly imagined how, at this very moment, my mother would be moving slowly about the narrow bedroom I had left behind for ever, folding up and putting away all my little relics, the tumbled garments I would not need any more, the scores for which there

had been no room in my trunks, the concert programmes I'd abandoned; she would linger over this torn ribbon and that faded photograph with all the half-joyous, half-sorrowful emotions of a woman on her daughter's wedding day. And, in the midst of my bridal triumph, I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife.

Are you sure, she'd said when they delivered the gigantic box that held the wedding dress he'd bought me, wrapped up in tissue paper and red ribbon like a Christmas gift of crystallized fruit. *Are you sure you love him?* There was a dress for her, too; black silk, with the dull, prismatic sheen of oil on water, finer than anything she'd worn since that adventurous girlhood in Indo-China, daughter of a rich tea planter. My eagle-featured, indomitable mother; what other student at the Conservatoire could boast that her mother had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I?

'Are you sure you love him?'

'I'm sure I want to marry him', I said.

(Carter; emphasis added)

The concern about the protagonist's future in marriage is also expressed by her nurse, whose comment on the girl's receiving an opal ring from her fiancé is reported by the narrator: "My old nurse, who still lived with my mother and me, squinted at the ring askance: opals are bad luck, she said" (Carter).

Throughout the story, the protagonist-narrator — the speaking voice in the story — remains the focal point of the deictic centre. Also, it is her perception that dominates the story; it is from her perspective that the Marquis's appearance and strange behaviour is described. Thus consider the following passage, which contains relational deixis: the Marquis wants his wife to behave precisely the way he expects her to behave. The words "betrayed", "shock", "I was forced", in the first paragraph of the passage, and the phrase "his strange, heavy, waxen face" in the second, define the narrator's ambivalent attitude to her spouse prefiguring the growth of horror in the story as a result of the gradual discovery of the menace:

He had loved to surprise me in my abstracted solitude at the piano. He would tell them not to announce him, then soundlessly open the door and softly *creep up* behind me with his bouquet of hot-house flowers or his box of marrons glacés, lay his offering upon the keys and clasp his hands over my eyes as I was lost in a Debussy prelude. But that perfume of spiced leather always betrayed him; *after my first shock, I was forced always to mimic surprise, so that he would not be disappointed.*

He was older than I. He was much older than I; there were streaks of pure silver in his dark mane. But his *strange, heavy, almost waxen face* was not lined by experience. Rather, experience seemed to have washed it perfectly smooth, like a stone on a beach whose fissures have been eroded by successive tides. And sometimes that face, in stillness when he listened to me playing, with the heavy eyelids folded over *eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light, seemed to me like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me, before, even, I was born, as though that face lay underneath this mask.* Or else, elsewhere. As though he had laid by the face in which he had lived for so long in order to offer my youth a face unsigned by the years.

And, elsewhere, I might see him plain. Elsewhere. But, where?

(Carter; emphasis added)

The next passage relates the protagonist's visit to the opera and the gift of a dress and a necklace, a choker of rubies, she received from the Marquis on that occasion: "His wedding

gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat” (Carter). The narrator retains here the protagonist’s perceptual deictic centre, introducing for a while a dual perspective: the protagonist sees the Marquis watching her in the mirrors. This evokes the feeling of discomfort and fear, all the more so that the couple do not keep eye contact with each other:

I *saw* him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the *assessing eye* of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, *inspecting* cuts on the slab. *I’d never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it; and it was strangely magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye.* When I *saw him look at me* with lust, *I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror.* And I *saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me,* my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.

The next day, we were married.

(Carter; emphasis added)

In her recollections, the protagonist, who becomes a Gothic “damsel in distress”, gives an account of her marriage. After the wedding she moves to the Marquis’s place, to his ancient castle, formerly called “The Castle of Murder” — a fact which is revealed later on. At this point a spatial shift occurs. The Marquis’s wife abandons the familiar space of her mother’s home and travels to a distant place, separated from the mainland by the ocean, whose tide enhances the sense of isolation, a feeling typical of a Gothic horror story. The shift is implemented gradually: the narrator recounts the train journey, focusing mainly on her ruminations concerning her past and her future. Perceptual and relational deixis remain anchored to the same centre, with the protagonist as the focal point, the spatial shift which takes place is related to her movement to the new place, the place which is one of exile.

Upon arrival at the castle she explores the rooms one by one and her detailed account creates suspense making the reader apprehensive as to what might happen to the seventeen-year-old naïve and inexperienced girl. The expressions: “solitude”, “misty”, “cut off by the tide from land”, “mysterious, amphibious”, present the castle as a hostile place for the girl:

And, ah! his castle. The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewing about its attics, the casements opening on to the green and purple, evanescent departures of the ocean, cut off by the tide from land for half a day... that castle, at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves, with the melancholy of a mermaid who perches on her rock and waits, endlessly, for a lover who had drowned far away, long ago. That lovely, sad, sea-siren of a place! (Carter)

The protagonist’s progress through the castle, suggesting the (local) spatial shift, brings her to the library, where she opens a bookcase to discover strange-looking volumes. Although the authors’ names do not sound familiar to her, nor are the titles of the books self-revealing, the reader realizes that the Marquis is a pervert. Among the books she finds are Eliphaz Levy’s *The Initiation*, *The Key of Mysteries*, *The Secret of Pandora’s Box* and a “rare collector’s piece” — *The Adventures of Eulalie at the Harem of the Grand Turk* — printed in Amsterdam in 1748, containing a steel engraving: *Immolation of the wives of the Sultan*: “I knew enough for what

I saw in that book to make me gasp”, she says (Carter)³. The compositional shift which takes place, marked by the reference to the authors and titles, introduces the convention of a horror story. Based on the reader’s experience of literary genres, literary tradition (e.g. the fairy tale tradition), and literary history, this shift appears to rely to a greater extent on the reader’s ability to make references to the frames of knowledge than the other types of deictic shift.

The newly-wed wife makes another important discovery when the Marquis leaves home upon receiving the alleged phone call from his agent in New York. He gives her the keys to all the rooms in the castle, including the key to the room she is not supposed to open and enter. It is “the key to my enfer”, he explains. And goes on to add, “Every man must have one secret, even if only one, from his wife” (Carter). This episode in *The Bloody Chamber* evokes in the reader associations with the Bluebeard, which relocates the story into the familiar fairy tale convention and thus contributes to building the tension. Once the reader knows the ending of the Bluebeard story, the subsequent events in *The Bloody Chamber* can be predicted: there is no doubt the woman is in peril. It remains to be seen whether the protagonist will be rescued in the “Bluebeard style” or not. This is another horrifying moment in the story.

As befits the Bluebeard tale, The Marquis’s wife cannot resist the temptation of exploring his secret room, situated at the distant end of the castle:

Yet all it is is the key to a little room at the foot of the west tower, behind the still-room, at the end of a dark little corridor full of horrid cobwebs that would get into your hair and frighten you if you ventured there. Oh, and you’d find it such a dull little room! But you must promise me, if you love me, to leave it well alone. It is only a private study, a hideaway, a “den”, as the English say, where I can go, sometimes, on those infrequent yet inevitable occasions when the yoke of marriage seems to weigh too heavily on my shoulders. There I can go, you understand, to savour the rare pleasure of imagining myself wifeless. (Carter)

The description of the protagonist’s slow progress through the castle is another example of the (local) spatial deictic shift, which strongly builds tension: the Marquis’s wife gradually gets to the centre of the secret chamber only to discover a sophisticated catafalque with the embalmed dead body of the opera singer, one of the Marquis’s former wives. The dead bodies of the remaining two wives turn out to be there, including the body of a Romanian countess, who had died only three months prior to the meeting of the protagonist with the Marquis. The countess’s name was Carmilla, which immediately evokes the eponymous female vampire from the story by Sheridan le Fanu. Here we have a clear case of compositional deixis and compositional shift which connects Angela Carter’s heroine with the tradition of vampire stories.

Contrary to what the Marquis told his wife — that he had planned to be six weeks away from home — he soon returns to his Castle of Murder, fully aware that his wife has not resisted the natural temptation of opening his secret room. At the moment of intimacy, he demands the keys he had left with her before his alleged departure for New York. At this point a relational shift takes place in the story: now that she has learned the Marquis’s secrets, she assumes a new posture vis-à-vis her husband. She no longer feels she should behave like a wife who has been waiting for her husband to return from a trip; just the opposite — filled with fear, she would now be ready to kill him, circumstances permitting.

³ For the comment on the books and paintings collected by the Marquis, see Moore 2009.

I forced myself to be seductive. I saw myself, pale, pliant as a plant that begs to be trampled underfoot, a dozen vulnerable, appealing girls reflected in as many mirrors, and I saw how he almost failed to resist me. If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then.
(Carter)

With the Marquis's predictions concerning his wife's curiosity confirmed, he is now determined to kill her by decapitation and starts making suitable preparations to do this. He fails to murder her though, as his mother-in-law, guided by "maternal telepathy" (Carter) (based on a telephone conversation she had with her daughter) arrives unexpectedly and kills him by shooting in the head: "Now, without a moment's hesitation, she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irrefragable bullet through my husband's head" (Carter)⁴.

At the end of *The Bloody Chamber*, "the order of things", violated as a result of the infelicitous marriage, is restored in the protagonist's life. The deictic shifts, defining the experience of horror in the story, have been "undone", as it were. The protagonist returns to her mother's home in Paris (which is a clear indication that a spatial shift has taken place). She gets married to a piano-tuner. With the Marquis's death, and through the new marriage, her social relations are redefined, which marks the occurrence of the relational shift. Together with her husband, she sets up a music school on the outskirts of Paris. Commenting on this change in her life, she says:

We lead a quiet life, the three of us. I inherited, of course, enormous wealth but we have given most of it away to various charities. The castle is now a school for the blind [...]. I felt I had a right to retain sufficient funds to start a new music school here, on the outskirts of Paris, and we do well enough. (Carter)

This last statement can be seen in terms of a perceptual shift: the protagonist's perception of the world changes and becomes wholly mature. She is transformed from a naïve, inexperienced girl into a grown-up woman who is capable of making decisions about her life.

Conclusion

By applying the Deictic Shift Theory to *The Bloody Chamber* we have made an attempt to unravel the cognitive processes underlying the fear-generating mechanism in Angela Carter's story. We have shown how, by adopting a "cognitive stance within the mentally constructed world of the text" (Stockwell 2002: 46–47), the reader is able to follow the protagonist's experience and thus "share" her fears and anxieties. By the same token, we hope to have addressed and answered Maguire's questions: "What textual mechanisms account for emotion?" and "By what sleight of hand do writers get readers to collude with them in the raising of passion?"

⁴ For a discussion of the modern transformations of the Bluebeard story, including *The Bloody Chamber*, see Hermansson 2009, especially Chapter 10.

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