

*A Corpus-based Study of Negative Shading in the Short
Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*

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Introduction

Simpson (1993; 2004) describes negative shading as ‘a narrative modality where an often “bewildered” narrator or character relies on external signals and appearances to sustain a description’ (2004, p.127). Such epistemic modality is assumed to be characteristic of Gothic or existential styles of fiction (Simpson 1993; 2004; Clark 2007; Gregoriou 2008; Parina & Leon 2014) Using WordSmith on two corpora of Poe’s stories, this study reveals that negative shading is more common in Poe’s adventure stories than in his Gothic or existential writings.

Narrative Shading

The concept of narrative shading is a term used to describe modality within narrative prose. In broad terms, modality is the speaker/writer’s expression of their attitude toward a situation or event. Where a narrator uses deontic and boulomaic modality, the discourse is said to be binding, obligatory and assertive and is considered positive shading. With such shading the expression of wishes, obligations and opinions are foregrounded. Where a narrator uses epistemic perception modalities, the discourse reflects a lack of confidence, denoting alienation and uncertainty and is described as negative shading. This type of shading is epistemic in that it involves the narrator’s questioning of his or her knowledge, and at the same time it involves perception related to this knowledge or lack knowledge.

Here is an example of negative shading from Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ (cited in Simpson, 2004):

Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principle features seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discolouration of ages had been great. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling of the individual stones. (my underlining)

In following the annotation styles used by Simpson (1993; 2004) and (Gregoriou 2008), key phrases have been underlined to illustrate the linguistic cues which render this passage negative shading dominant.

The final category in Simpson’s paradigm is neutral shading. This can be described as having no modality and few modalised verbs or evaluative adjectives and adverbs. According to Simpson (2004), homodiegetic neutral shading has ‘a flat or unreflective first-person narration, characteristic of much “hard-boiled” detective fiction’ (p. 75). Yet, as this paper will demonstrate, it can also be dominant in Gothic and existential fiction.

To recap what is meant by narrative shading, its relationship to the more familiar grammatical concept of modality is summarised in the Table 1 below.

Modality	Narrative Shading
Deontic	Positive
Buloumaic	
Epistemic	Negative
Perception	
None	Neutral

Table 1 Narrative shading defined in terms of modality

Methods

Word frequencies and KWIC (Key word in context) analyses with WordSmith were conducted on two corpora of Poe’s short stories. The first corpus was composed of eight Gothic and existential stories, and the second corpus of stories that have been categorised as comedies,

adventure stories and love stories; though it should be noted that ‘The Balloon Hoax’ first appeared as a news story under another name. Excluded from this study have been Poe’s thrillers and detective stories, as these could form a third corpus that presumably uses a mix of shading narratives. Deciding the genre categories of these stories was determined in large part from the many reader and fan websites of Poe’s work (e.g. ‘Poe Stories.com’) as well as anthologies and critical books (e.g. Hayes 2002). Table 2 summarises the content of the first and second corpora:

Corpus 1 (gothic and existential) Tokens=30393 Types=5106	Corpus 2 (adventure, comedy and love) Tokens=30344 Types=4985
Berenice	The Angel of the Odd
The Black Cat	The Balloon Hoax
The Fall of the House of Usher	The Oval Portrait
The Facts in the Case of M Valdemar	Eleanora
The Tell-Tale Heart	The Gold Bug
The Premature Burial	Never Bet the Devil Your Head
Silence	
The Man of the Crowd	

Table 2 Content of the two corpora of stories

Findings

The two corpora were compared by considering the occurrence of negative shading in each corpus. Discounting grammatical words, proper names and nouns indicative of the genre (such as ‘blood’ and ‘dead’ in Corpus 1), the most frequent words to occur, which could be indicative of negative shading were considered. Examining these KWIC, it was clear from the onset that modal lemmas typical of negative shading could also appear in phrases of neutral shading. These uses were distinguished in order to summarise the initial findings, listed in Table 3.

Lemmas	Corpus 1 (gothic and existential)		Corpus 2 (adventure, comedy and love)	
	Negative	Neutral	Negative	Neutral
Seem	28	1	31	8
Apparent	16	0	13	2
Perhaps	14	0	18	0
Appear	13	1	15	4
Strange	9	0	9	2
Mystery	8	0	4	0
Resemble	6	0	8	2
Possible	6	2	7	6

Table 3 Negative and neutral shading lemmas in both corpora

Analysis of Corpus 1

Negative shading, although not as dominant as hypothesised of Corpus 1, did occur in ways typical of the genres. Consider the example below from ‘The Man in the Crowd’, considered an existential story:

If jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers, and appeared overwhelmed with confusion.

This particular example not only shows a verb that suggests negative shading, ‘appeared’, but also the adjective phrase ‘overwhelmed with confusion’. Moreover, the first two clauses of this sentence, which in terms of narrative modality would be considered neutral shading, describe behaviour that says something about the characters’ states of mind; people are being pushed by others and then apologising to those who pushed them, perhaps because of their state of confusion.

Where negative shading occurred in Corpus 1, it was often dominant for an entire passage of text, such as a paragraph, as in this example from ‘Berenice’:

Was it my own excited imagination - or the misty influence of the atmosphere - or the uncertain twilight of the chamber - or the gray draperies which fell around her figure - that caused in it so vacillating and indistinct an outline? I could not tell.

As seen with other of Poe's Gothic stories, the key and climatic passages are ones where negative shading returns to the story.

For instance, In 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' negative shading is rare, used on only five occasions in the story. More interestingly, positive shading does not appear to exist at all. In this story, neutral shading occurs from the start as a self-assured narrative describing the murder he committed. For the most part what makes this story chilling is its neutral shading in describing a heinous act:

The night waned, and I worked hastily but in silence. First of all, I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

What is missing from this description is the horror and nervousness of the narrator as readers might suspect.

Negative shading also occurs in 'The Tell-Tale Heart' briefly at the climatic conclusion:

Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! - no, no! They heard! - They suspected!

The two existential stories in Corpus 1, 'Silence' and 'the Man of The Crowd, depict paranormal events by narrators who either accept the situation as normal, or have been made numb by them. The encounter and surrounding scenes are perhaps strange or bewildering in the real world of the reader but described in non-modal terms as if normal within the world of the text.

Analysis of Corpus 2

Where negative shading occurs in Corpus 2, it is mostly in the 'adventure stories', with only a couple of occurrences in the comedy and love stories. Unlike negative shading in the texts of Corpus 1, which occurred early in a text and/or at its climax, these occurrences were spread throughout at different points of the two adventure stories. Examples of negative shading in the adventure stories included the following:

Here was indeed a mystery which I felt it impossible to explain; but, even at that early moment, there it seemed to glimmer, faintly, within the most remote and secret chambers of my intellect, a glow-worm-like conception of that truth which last night's adventure brought to so magnificent a demonstration. (The Golden Bug)

We have passed over some 20 or 30 vessels of various kinds, and all seem to be delightfully astonished. (The Balloon Hoax)

As noted above, words that would be expected of negative shading, such as *seem*, also occurred in neutral shading in this Corpus, as in this example from the comic ‘The Angel of the Odd’:

...with a pipe in his mouth, at which he puffed leisurely, he seemed to be upon excellent terms with himself and the universe.

In this instance, the use of ‘seemed’ reflects comic understatement, as if there were a doubt, but this doubt does not actually exist, and epistemic perception modalities are not being implied.

Conclusions

By using corpus tools this investigation has demonstrated that the assumption that negative shading is characteristic of Gothic and existential writing needs to be reconsidered. This analysis of Poe’s writings has shown that negative shading occurred more often in his adventure stories.

In this study, investigating assumptions about the concept of negative shading has been the primary goal, but as it has involved looking at the works of one author, it is also hoped that for scholars of Edgar Allen Poe the findings presented here contribute to a deeper understanding of his work as well.

References

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