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# Attributing minds to vampires in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*

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**Abstract**

For Palmer (2004, 2010), and other proponents of a cognitive narratology, research into real-world minds in the cognitive sciences provides insights into readers' experiences of fictional minds. In this article, I explore the application of such research to the minds constructed for the vampire characters in Richard Matheson's (1954) science fiction/horror novel *I Am Legend*. I draw upon empirical research into 'mind attribution' in social psychology, and apply Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 2008), and its notion of 'construal', as a framework for the application of such findings to narrative. In my analysis, I suggest that readers' attribution of mental-states to the vampires in Matheson's novel is strategically limited through a number of choices in their linguistic construal. Drawing on online reader responses to the novel, I argue that readers' understanding of these other minds plays an important role in their empathetic experience and their ethical judgement of the novel's main character and focaliser, Robert Neville. Finally, I suggest that the limited mind attribution for the vampires invited through their construal contributes to the presentation of a 'mind style' (Fowler, 1977) for this character.

## 1 Introduction

In cognitive approaches to literature our processing of fictional minds and real-world minds are said to share fundamental similarities (Herman, 2003, 2009, 2013; Palmer, 2004, 2010; Zunshine, 2006). While fiction might be set apart from real-life in allowing readers privileged, intimate access to 'transparent minds' through forms of consciousness representation (Cohn, 1978), much of our experience of fictional minds –

as for real minds – comes from simply observing them in action. For example, despite the absence of any linguistic representation of thoughts or perceptions for the characters in the sentence *The girl chased the cat into the road and the driver skidded to a screeching halt,* we can still infer mental-states for each of them (e.g. innocent unawareness for the girl and shock for the driver). Not only are we able to construct these minds, but this construction is crucial to our understanding of the causality of the events portrayed, and their contribution to a plot. For Palmer (2004), this observation presents a challenge for analysts of literature: 'We need to look more closely at the sets of instructions that relate to mental functioning in fictional texts' (2004: 12). Previous approaches in narratology, he argues, including those dealing with focalisation, characterisation and (in)direct representations of thought, fail to add up to a 'coherent and complete account' of fictional minds (2004: 12). Palmer proposes that we broaden our study of fictional minds by taking into account cognitive scientific research into aspects of real-world minds that are 'outer, active, public, social, behavioral, evident, embodied, and engaged', or what he refers to collectively as *social minds* (2010: 39).

In this article, I explore the application of such a broadened understanding of fictional minds, and its significance for readers' experiences of Richard Matheson's (1954) science fiction/horror novel *I Am Legend.* My analysis of this text, and the 'sets of instructions' through which it manipulates the minds constructed for its characters, draws upon research into our everyday attribution of real-world minds in social psychology, the stylistic application of which to narrative is supported using the framework of 'construal' in Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987, 1991, 2008). Through this analysis, I suggest that readers' attributions of mental-states to the vampire characters in *I Am Legend* are strategically limited through a number of choices in their

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linguistic construal, and that this manipulation of mind attribution contributes significantly to a readerly empathetic experience of the novel's main character and focaliser, Robert Neville, and the impact of the dramatic plot twist found at its conclusion. Furthermore, I suggest that, when attributed to the focalised perspective of Neville, the limited engagement with other minds invited at key points in the narrative contributes to the impression of a 'mind style' for this character (Fowler, 1977).

Before presenting my analysis of several extracts from *I Am Legend*, in the following three sections I firstly introduce the novel and the characters under consideration, the empirical work in social psychology which provides the background for my analysis, and the cognitive grammatical framework through which it will be applied.

## 2 *I Am Legend*

Richard Matheson's (2001[1954]) novel *I Am Legend* portrays a world in which a mysterious virus has transformed the population into murderous vampires. The story has seen numerous film adaptations, including *The Omega Man* (1971) and *I Am Legend* (2007), and is often regarded as a significant milestone in horror and Gothic fiction (Oakes, 2000; Clasen, 2010: 313).

Robert Neville, the novel's main protagonist, is 'the last man on Earth' (Matheson, 2001: 94), and engaged in a constant struggle for survival: trapped and preyed upon by hordes of vampires in his barricaded Los Angeles home by night, hunting and killing dormant vampires by day. While battling with depression and alcoholism, Neville attempts to uncover the scientific cause of the pandemic, carrying out experiments on infected individuals which lead to an increasing understanding of

the various 'living' and 'dead' varieties, and more efficient ways of destroying them. After three years, Neville meets an apparently uninfected woman, Ruth, who ultimately reveals her true identity as a vampire and spy, sent to observe him. In the final 30 pages of the novel, during which Neville is captured and imprisoned, Ruth explains that the vampires have developed medication to allow them to live with their disease and have begun to build a new society. For the members of this society, Neville is a killer who comes by day to destroy their loved ones; a source of terror and superstition. The novel closes with Neville's transformed understanding of the vampires' thoughts and feelings as he looks out of his cell window and faces his execution.

Readers often report an empathetic relationship with this main character, whose loss of his wife and daughter to the virus is portrayed in a flashback part-way though the novel. For Robert Bloch, 'Matheson's skill at creating empathy lends special strength to his work' (cited in Wiater, 1998: 12), while Clasen (2010) attributes its psychological realism and resulting empathy to the 'intuitive understanding of human nature' which Matheson invokes in his readers (315). Supporting such analysis, the most frequent reader response in online reviews of the novel on *Goodreads* (2014) concerns the impact of this empathetic experience:

> The novel had me so tense in places that I was almost screaming out at the pages of the book. I felt the main characters pain, solitude and deep sadness at the loss of his love, life and the horrific existence he now endured. ('Patricia Smith', *Goodreads*, 2014)

More broadly, readers report a feeling of 'suspense' and 'horror' alongside this character during their reading of the text, and 'surprise' at the new perspective revealed in its ending (*Goodreads*, 2014). Significantly, this character appears to invite empathy even as aspects of his personality are observed that are unlikeable. Readers often describe strong negative feelings towards this character, his angry outbursts and apparently sexist attitudes in particular, which render the empathetic experience invited by Matheson an uncomfortable one. 'Patricia Smith' (2014) goes on to comment: 'Despite that I found it hard to like him. Maybe I wasn't suppose to like him' (sic.), while another reader observes that:

> from what I can tell, its peoples' views on the Neville character that polarize the reviews so much. People who love the book like being in Neville's head. People who hate it can't stand being in Neville's head. I fell into the latter category. ('Grace S', *Goodreads*, 2014)

Such empathy for Robert Neville can be related to the internal focalisation of this character in the 3rd person throughout the narrative, and the representation of his beliefs, perceptions and emotions through direct, indirect and free indirect thought. Forms of access to the inner life of a character have long been regarded in narratology as a significant device for the facilitation of empathy (e.g. see van Peer and Pander Maat, 2001: 230; Keen, 2006: 219-220). Booth (1987: 278), for example, argued that 'inside views can build sympathy even for the most vicious character'. For Leech and Short (2007: 277) forms such as free indirect thought and direct thought, in particular, represent a departure from the 'norm' for thought representation (indirect thought)

which invites a sense of increased vividness in our access to the mind of a character and a movement towards empathetic alignment. In the opening chapter of the novel, these forms of consciousness representation soon reveal the characteristic frustration and sarcasm with which Neville confronts his daily existence: 'After violent attacks, the planks were often split or partially pried off, and he had to replace them completely; a job he hated. Today only one plank was loose. Isn't that amazing? he thought' (Matheson, 2001: 7).

Forms of consciousness representation might be further analysed in terms of their contribution to readers' complex empathetic experience of this character. Also significant, however, and my focus in this article, are the fictional minds constructed for the other characters in this fictional world: the vampires responsible for these attacks. Though focalised externally through Neville, following Palmer's (2004) approach, the presentation of these characters' behaviour can be seen to initiate mind construction in readers. In the following section I introduce research in social psychology through which the attribution of minds to these characters, and its consequences for readers' experiences of the fictional world, might be understood in greater detail.

## 3 Real minds

Since the seminal psychological study by Heider and Simmel (1944), our ability to attribute mental-states to behaviour has been recognised as an important means through which we impose structure on experience, without which the interactions between entities around us, and by extension those in fiction, would appear random and incomprehensible. The mechanisms underlying this attribution of mind, however, are far from agreed upon in the cognitive sciences. In one influential account, a process of

'mindreading' or 'mentalizing' is underpinned by an innate, specialised ability known as 'Theory of Mind', reliant on folk psychological knowledge or a simulative capacity (e.g. Malle and Hodges, 2005). Recently, the existence of this inferential capacity has been questioned, with more basic enacted or socio-cultural mechanisms proposed, and the term 'Theory of Mind' discouraged in favour of broader terms such as 'intersubjectivity' (Zlatev et al., 2008). Carrying such ongoing debates with it, the application of this concept to literature faces a number of potential problems (as discussed by Belmonte, 2008; Stockwell, 2009: 140; Palmer, 2011: 209).

A more immediately productive area of research for the investigation of fictional minds, I propose, is that concerned with the *factors* affecting this process, or the cognitive phenomenon that is here generally termed 'mind attribution'. Categories of entities differ in terms of the type of mind that we typically attribute to them: human beings are usually perceived as having more complex mental lives than animals or robots. However, as research in social psychology shows, our attribution of mind is highly variable and somewhat subjective. To some extent, 'mind is in the eye of the perceiver' (Waytz et al., 2010: 384). Moreover, mind attribution is not a binary situation, but a continuum with varying degrees of richness and complexity (Haslam et al., 2005; Morewedge et al., 2007). Studies have shown that participants' positioning of an entity along this continuum (usually measured by ratings of mental-states such as 'feels pain', 'possesses beliefs' etc. along a point scale) is influenced by a range of factors. As my analysis will demonstrate, many of these factors, including the perceptual features of the entity in question, and the knowledge, motivations and attentional dispositions of the perceiver, are directly applicable to our conceptual experiences of fictional characters.

Social psychology also offers insights for the *consequences* of mind attribution. Neuroscientific research suggests that our attribution of mental-states is closely related to our experience of empathy (Hooker et al., 2008). In Hodges and Wegner's (1997) model, empathy is a state of mind that may be automatically stimulated by mental-state 'cues' in our environment. Significantly, these cues may be perceptual (e.g. seeing someone crying), or conceptual – located in our knowledge and experiences (e.g. a personal memory of pain). Following this view, it is a desire to avoid a vicarious sharing of thoughts and feelings that causes me to look away from a murder scene in a horror film (or put down a horror novel) – to divert attention away from the cues for mind attribution and opportunity for empathy with the suffering it presents.

The richness of the mental-states we attribute also has important consequences for our ethical judgements (Gray et al., 2007). In everyday life, many sensitive ethical debates about the rights and responsibilities of individuals in society centre on matters of mind attribution. For example, positions on animal rights and abortion often hinge on the degree to which the animal or foetus is attributed some kind of consciousness. Through empirical study, researchers in social psychology have shown that our attribution of mental-states is bound-up with our basic appreciation of ethics (Gray et al., 2012).

## 4 Mind construal

In fiction, a significant source of cues for the attribution of mental-states, according to Palmer (2004), is the observation of characters *in action*. Language offers writers a range of choices for the description of actions, varying in the extent to which the

motives and feelings which underlie them are made prominent within the reader's attention:

> In the case of a death by shooting, do you define the action of the killer as the twitching of the finger, the pulling of the trigger, the firing of the gun, the killing of a person or the murdering of a person? These descriptions differ to the extent to which they ascribe consciousness to the agent, take account of the consequences of the physical movement, and assign responsibility to the agent for those consequences. (Palmer, 2004: 119)

Applying Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987, 1991, 2008), such descriptions reflect our capacity for *construal*, or 'our manifest ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways' (Langacker, 2008: 43). In Cognitive Grammar, our linguistic portrayal of a situation is said to draw upon the same mechanisms involved in our wider embodied cognition, including attentional processing in visual perception. 'In viewing a scene,' Langacker observes, 'what we actually see depends on how closely we examine it, what we choose to look at, which elements we pay most attention to, and where we view it from' (2008: 55). These choices, termed *specificity*, *focusing*, *prominence* and *perspective* respectively, are 'applicable to conceptions in any domain', including the conceptualisations formed by producers and receivers of language. This model of construal has been shown to be particularly applicable to our mental representations of literary texts (Stockwell, 2009; Herman, 2009; Harrison et al., 2014).

One important way in which construals differ, I propose, is in the degree of mind attribution prompted in readers. In Palmer's 'shooting' examples, these construals

differ in terms of the portion of the action which readers are invited to attend to – or their variable *profiling* of an *action chain* for this event (Langacker, 2008: 356). In other words, the linguistic construal of an action constitutes a 'set of instructions' (Palmer, 2004) for readers' ascriptions of a fictional mind as part of their conceptualisation of a scene (cf. Langacker's (2008: 460) description of construals as discursive 'instructions').

It has been argued that cognitive developments in literary study are in danger of neglecting the textual focus at the heart of stylistics (Gavins and Stockwell, 2012). Rundquist (2014: 161), for example, views the discussion of fictional minds in terms of real minds as 'deprioritizing the mechanics and effects of linguistic variations in their textual construction'. Extending the dialogue with the cognitive sciences in a linguistic direction offers one means of addressing such concerns. By presenting a direct link between linguistic choices and our embodied attentional processing of our real-world environment, the dimensions of 'construal' modelled in Cognitive Grammar offer a structured framework for application of the factors affecting mind attribution in social psychology to the linguistic construction of fictional minds.

In the following section I explore the application of such research to readers' attribution of minds to the vampires in *I Am Legend*, and its consequences for their experience of its main character.

## 5 Attributing minds to vampires

### 5.1 Limited mind attribution and empathy

A basic factor affecting our psychological judgements of other entities observed in social psychology is the presence of anthropomorphic features, i.e. the

extent to which the entity looks or acts like a human and more specifically, our human-prototype, ourselves. In particular, certain kinds of 'self-propelled' motion and 'goal-directed' action seem to act as strong cues for the attribution of rich mental-states (Premack and Premack, 1997; Luo and Baillargeon, 2005; Morewedge et al., 2007). In the opening chapter of *I Am Legend*, Matheson's description of the vampires' behaviour and appearance backgrounds or reduces attention to these mental-state cues within the conceptualisation invited in the reader.

One way in which readers' attention to these cues is reduced in this opening chapter is through what Langacker terms 'subjective construal' (2008: 77). In the subjective construal seen in extracts (1) and (2), our attention to the 'object of conception' (the vampires outside Neville's house) is distracted by the prominent 'on stage' presence of the 'subject' of this conception (Neville, who sits indoors trying to ignore them):

(1)

From the speaker over the hallway door, the music of Schönberg was playing loudly.

Not loudly enough, though. He still heard them outside, their murmuring and their walkings about and their cries, their snarling and fighting among themselves. Once in a while a rock or brick thudded off the house. Sometimes a dog barked.

And they were all there for the same thing. (Matheson, 2001: 12)

(2)

[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)

The description of the vampires in both passages can be described as instances of 'summary' writing and 'iterative frequency' (Genette, 1988), in which story events inferred as taking place over an extended period of time are compressed into a single impression in the thoughts of this character. Analysed using Cognitive Grammar, such descriptions can be considered in terms of their effects upon the attentional processing of the reader. Use of the present participles 'murmuring', 'snarling and fighting among themselves' (1), 'prowling', 'looking ceaselessly', 'crouching', 'glittering', 'grating' (2), the temporal adverbs 'once in while', 'sometimes' (1), the quantifier 'some of them' (2), and nominalisations 'walkings about', 'cries' (2), all invite the reader to conceptualise the vampires' behaviour through a process of 'summary scanning' (Langacker, 2008: 111). In Cognitive Grammar, this involves examining multiple targets in a cumulative manner, building up to a gestalt conception which is apprehended whole, and provides an alternative to 'sequential scanning' (the prototypical means through which we track events through real-time). By inviting readers to apprehend the vampires' actions in this way, this construal can be said to 'atemporalize' these processes and reduce attention to their component states as part of an 'attenuated' simulation (Langacker, 2008: 537). In addition, the present participle form is said to present a 'limited scope' on the process conceptualised, which excludes

the source and goal of the action (or agent and patient) from its conceptualisation (2008: 120). Consequently, instead of conceptualising the vampires' self-propelled, goal-directed behaviour directly, we are invited to experience it as Neville does from inside the house: as a vague, ongoing, holistic impression in the background of our focused attention. Through its focussing of reader attention, I propose, this subjective construal suppresses the cues for mind attribution this behaviour presents, and hence limits readers' understanding of the vampires' actions in terms of thoughts, feelings and motivations.

Another basic factor in our attributions of mind is our pre-existing categorical knowledge and expectations of the entities involved (e.g. Gray et al., 2007). A further potential limitation of reader mind attribution in this opening chapter is through a lack of 'specificity' seen in the vampires' construal (Langacker, 2008). The vampires are first referred to using the pronoun 'they', which lacking an antecedent, cues an indistinct, undetailed conceptualisation of these characters in the mind of the reader. This gradually gains in granularity as the chapter progresses through references to 'filthy bastards' (Matheson, 2001: 11), 'the women' (p. 12), 'men' (p. 16), before 'they' are finally resolved as 'vampires' in chapter two (p. 21). This is significant as, once specified, readers' attribution of minds for these characters will draw on their schematic knowledge of such fictional entities and their associated emotions, or what we might term, following Culpeper (2001), their *vampire schema*. By delaying such naming, Matheson can be seen to add an element of uncertainty to readers' understanding of these characters in the opening chapter. Although readers may suspect, through inferencing, that the 'thing' they are 'there for' in extract (1) is to kill Neville, they are

given little opportunity to confirm this attributed intention at this point in the novel, nor gain any kind of rich understanding of the thoughts and feelings which accompany it.

Once activated, this schema is not straightforward in terms of expectations of mind. The vampire 'violates our intuitive expectations of biological agents, and blurs the taxonomic line between human and animal' (Clasen, 2010: 324). Moreover, Matheson's science fictional adaptation of this myth disrupts such culturally-acquired knowledge. While Stoker's Dracula, satirically cast aside within the narrative (Matheson, 2001: 23), is cunning and passionate, Matheson's vampires are more ambiguously minded, as Neville's own attempts at mind attribution suggest: 'Why didn't they leave him alone? Did they think they could *all* have him? Were they so stupid they thought that? Why did they keep coming every night?' (p. 14).

In social psychology, mind attribution is motivated by our desire for 'effectance' or a sense of 'understanding, predictability and control over one's environment' (Waytz et al., 2010: 412). In the opening chapter of *I Am Legend*, disruptions of reader mind attribution, I suggest, play a significant role in the establishment of an empathetic relationship with Neville, by contributing to a felt lack of effectance alongside this character. The unfocused and non-specific construals of these figures though the mind of this character, and the uncertainty this evokes, can be seen to contribute to the experience of 'suspense' which the *Goodreads* (2014) readers describe in relation to this text, and the fear which characterises it as 'horror'.

As the text continues, this lack of certainty as to the nature and richness of the mental-states of the vampires is maintained. As Neville learns more about their condition, the mental lives of these characters (and their categorisation) comes increasingly into question: 'all the living who came to his house at night were insane,

thinking themselves true vampires although actually they were only demented sufferers' (Matheson, 2001: 109). In addition, linguistic choices in their construal continue to disrupt mind attribution in readers. Extracts from the narrative in which such limited mind attribution has particular significance, analysed in the following section, are those in which Neville's actions towards the vampires are raised for ethical questioning. In such scenes, anticipating the novel's conclusion, Matheson's strategic manipulation of mind attribution has further consequences for readers' experience of this main character.

### 5.2 Conflicting mind attribution and ethics

In extract (3), the description of Neville's destruction of *living* vampires reveals his doubts regarding the logic and morality of his actions (underlining added for ease of reference in my analysis):

(3)

There were two of them. In the living room, lying on a couch, was a woman about thirty years old, wearing a red housecoat. Her chest rose and fell slowly as she lay there, eyes closed, her hands clasped over her stomach.

<u>Robert Neville's hands fumbled on the stake and mallet</u>. It was always hard when they were alive; especially with women. He could feel that senseless demand returning again, tightening his muscles. He forced it down. It was insane, there was no rational argument for it.

She made no sound except for a sudden, hoarse intake of breath. As he walked into the bedroom, he could hear a sound like the sound of water running.

Well, what *else* can I do? he asked himself, for he still had to convince himself he was doing the right thing.

He stood in the bedroom doorway, staring at the small bed by the window, his throat moving, breath shuddering in his chest. Then, driven on, he walked to the side of the bed and looked down at her.

Why do they all look like Kathy to me? he thought, <u>drawing out the second stake with shaking hands</u>. (Matheson, 2001: 20, *underlining added*).

Suppression of mental-state cues for the vampires is seen here through the reduced attention invited to their role as the object or goal of Neville's actions. Neville's killing of the woman and child is presented intransitively, through goal-less references to the 'instruments' involved in this material action process: 'the stake and mallet', 'the second stake', and Neville's 'hands', which take the place of Neville himself as a form of 'meronymic agency' (Simpson, 2004: 76). Similarly, following this passage we learn that 'After lunch, he went from house to house and used up all his stakes. He had forty seven stakes' (Matheson, 2001: 22). Applying Cognitive Grammar, these descriptions can be said to restrict readers' attention to a specific portion of the 'action chain' conceptualised here, in a restricted 'profile' which excludes (or backgrounds) the 'agent', 'patient' and very 'trajectory' of this self-propelled, goal-directed activity (Langacker, 2008: 356). In particular, the vampires are extremely non-prominent participants in this scene – the sounds of the woman's grisly death are presented indirectly in the third paragraph through negation and simile: 'no sound except..', 'a sound like the sound of water running', while the young girl must be inferred from references to 'small bed', 'her', and a comparison with Neville's lost daughter 'Kathy'

in the final two paragraphs. Through such attentional backgrounding, the mental-states

which underlie this action – the intentions, sexual desires and perhaps even enjoyment

of this violence by Neville, and the thoughts and feelings of the vampires as its

recipients – are less likely to be perceived, and to a lesser degree of richness.

This passage reflects another factor affecting mind attribution. In social

psychology, studies into 'objectification' have shown that focused attention upon the

bodies of individuals (e.g. women in the media) reduces the complexity of the mental-

states attributed to them (Loughnan et al., 2010; Gray et al., 2011). Broadly speaking,

'objectification' might be associated with the effects of meronymic agency, e.g. the

actions of the vampires' 'eyes' and 'teeth' in (2). In (3) the extensive attentional

focusing on the body of the woman ('chest', 'eyes', 'hands', 'stomach' in the first

paragraph) and Neville (hands', 'muscles', 'throat', 'chest' throughout) also reflects

Neville's 'senseless' desire for this woman. Such attentional focussing of body parts,

and the reduced mind attribution it invites for both Neville and the vampires, is found in

other morally-problematic scenes within the text, such as those in which Neville is

experimenting on female vampires (4), or contemplating killing them (5):


(4)

> Her hands closed over his wrists and her body began to twist and flop on the rug.
>
> Her eyes were still closed, but she gasped and muttered and her body kept trying
>
> to writhe out of his grip. Her dark nails dug into his flesh (...) Usually he felt a
>
> twinge of guilt when he realised that, but for some affliction he didn't
>
> understand these people were the same as he. But now an experimental fervor

had seized him and he could think of nothing else. (Matheson, 2001: 34, *underlining added*)

(5)

His eyes ran over the robe, resting a moment on the slight prominence of her breasts, dropping then to the bronzed carves and ankles, up to the smooth kneecaps. She had a body like a young girl's. She certainly didn't look like the mother of two. (Matheson, 2001: 126, *underlining added*)

Matheson's manipulation of the minds we construct for these characters can be seen to have significant effects for our ethical judgements of such scenes. In their psychological study, Gray, Gray and Wegner (2007) found that the attribution of mental-states associated with 'experience' (such as hunger, fear and pain) correlated with participants' judgements of entities as *moral patients* – in Aristotle's sense – who might have right or wrong done to them. Meanwhile, attribution of states associated with 'agency' (such as thought, planning and memory) correlated with judgements of them as *moral agents*, whose actions might be right or wrong. Applying such findings to *I Am Legend*, by reducing reader attributions of mind to Neville as an agent with intentions, beliefs and responsibility in (3), (4) and (5), their judgement of his actions as a *moral agent* might also be weakened. In the case of the female vampires, readers' sense of these characters' ability to experience emotions and pain and thus hold rights as *moral patients* is also likely to be less prominent. Through this construal, I would suggest, Matheson is therefore able to alleviate a potentially negative ethical judgement of Neville's actions to some extent in readers.

However, as I have previously stated, readers also draw upon their individual knowledge as the basis of mind attributions. In addition, differences in motivation for effectance and empathy amongst perceivers also affect mind attribution (Waytz et al., 2010). In these extracts, details such as 'thirty years old', 'housecoat', 'small bed' (3), 'mother of two' (5), and the observation that 'but for some affliction he didn't understand these people were the same as he' (4) can be seen to invite an inferential fleshing out of these characters as human beings, and a degree of mind attribution in readers, which will vary according to their individual identity, motivations and attentional dispositions. The resulting experience for many readers, I would suggest, is a sense of the ethical turmoil reflected in Neville's own thoughts: 'It was always hard when they were alive', 'Well what *else* can I do?' (3) and the 'twinge of guilt' he suppresses (4). It is through such manipulations of mind attribution, I would argue, that readers are encouraged to empathise with Neville, and the psychological struggle he experiences, despite the ethically questionable nature of his actions. Differing in degree amongst readers, however, this conflict may contribute to the sense of discomfort expressed by readers such as 'Grace S' (seen earlier) to this invitation for empathy (*Goodreads*, 2014). Indeed, readers specifying the source of their dislike for Neville in his treatment of the female vampires (notably describing these characters as 'women' and moral patients) lend support to this analysis:

> This sole survivor is a misogynistic man who seems to be dancing on the line of justifying rape, in addition to thinking of women as idiots who should be used. ('Nisha Panchal', *Goodreads*, 2014)

> the way he objectified the vampire women, that's just really not my thing.. ('machinaheart', *Goodreads*, 2014)

In general this was not a good book to be a woman in; whether human, vampire or somewhere in between. ('Jennie', *Goodreads*, 2014)

## *5.3 Group minds*

A further aspect of the text's construal of significance for mind attribution is the construal of the vampires as part of a group. For Palmer (2004, 2010, 2011) 'intermentality', or thinking that is 'joint, group, shared, or collective' (2010: 41), represents a key aspect of 'social minds' and a significant 'set of instructions' to be examined in fiction.

This aspect of fictional minds can again be supported by drawing on empirical research in social psychology, where perception of groups of targets has been shown to result in attributions of 'group mind', or collective mental-states (Bloom and Veres, 1999). Furthermore, in recent work, the perceived 'entitativity' or cohesiveness of such groups, manipulated in terms of gestalt properties such as similarity, proximity and common fate, has been found to affect the degree to which a group and its members are attributed minds (Morewedge et al., 2013). The relationship between these two kinds of mind attribution reflects a 'trade-off' whereby 'the more a group is attributed a group mind, the less members of that group are attributed individual minds, and vice versa' (Waytz and Young, 2012: 83). One explanation for this phenomenon is again rooted in attention. Groups perceived as a single, cohesive unit or gestalt, it is proposed, are processed holistically, with reduced attention to individual members (Morewedge et al., 2013: 1196). By manipulating the gestalt properties of groups both visually and verbally, Waytz and Young (2012) were able to manipulate attributions of mind, and the associated ethical judgements of groups as moral agents.

In *I Am Legend*, Palmer's 'large intermental unit' category (2010: 48) must be dramatically extended. Here, the entire population of Earth is presented – at least initially – as a homogenous group, with the single shared intention of killing Neville. In extracts (1) and (2), collective references to the vampires as 'they', and the summed conceptualisation of their collective movements and mental-states, 'their snarling and fighting among themselves', 'they were all here for the same thing', reflects the wider construal of these vampires as a single agentive unit. This is foregrounded in the text by a military metaphor: 'the dark figures stood like silent soldiers on duty' (Matheson, 2001: 17), 'a battalion of bloodsuckers' (p. 24). Also notable is the tendency to construe the vampires that Neville intends to stake, burn or experiment on, as part of such a group. At the start of extract (3), the woman and child are conceptualised as a group prior to their individuation ('There were two of them'), and it is the vampire children as a collective 'they' who 'always look like Kathy'. Similarly, when carrying out experiments on one woman, Neville thinks of her as 'one of them':

(6)

> All right, she's suffering, he argued with himself, but she's one of them and she'd gladly kill you if she got the chance. You've got to look at it that way, it's the only way. (Matheson, 2001: 34)

Such a collective construal might be said to induce a 'group-member mind trade off' in readers (Waytz & Young, 2012), whereby the perception of a 'group mind' for the vampires reduces our attention to the mental-states of the individuals involved. In cognitive-grammatical terms this construal might be understood as involving an

increase in the 'prominence' of the group relative to its individual participants, as part of a basic reversible figure-ground relationship. This linguistic manipulation of mind attribution again has consequences for our empathetic and ethical experiences of such scenes. By reducing attention to the individual vampire's suffering in extract (6), this collective construal could be said to alleviate readers' ethical judgements, inviting them to empathise with Neville and his terrible circumstances, as opposed to his victim.

This construal might also be said to contribute to the sense of 'suspense' and 'fear' discussed previously. The presentation of targets as an entitative group has been shown to increase the application of stereotypical knowledge in the process of mind attribution (Dasgupta et al., 1999; Hamilton et al., 2004). In addition to the vampire schema, likely to hold negative associations of evil for most readers, this collective construal may also evoke our stereotyped perception of groups in general as 'capable of threat, hate and retaliation even in the absence of diagnostic information' (Dasgupta et al., 1999: 1000). In this text, Matheson draws explicitly upon such general tendencies of group mind attribution in his development of the military metaphor (2001: 106-109). Taking into account the novel's Cold War context, the extrapolation of 'ordinary, realistic anxieties' in relation to recognisable groups within society (Clasen, 2010: 314) can be seen to give Matheson's imagined future its horrific impact for readers at the time of its production, and today still.

### 5.4 The twist

Finally, through its manipulation of mind attribution, the novel sets readers up for its final twist. The final chapters of the novel reveal that far from being the mindless entities suggested by their focalised construal, the vampires are thinking, feeling beings

with complex motivations, fear and beliefs. In the final pages of the novel, we are confronted, alongside Neville, with the rich minds of these characters:

(7)

> They all stood looking up at him with their white faces. He stared back. And suddenly he thought, I'm the abnormal one now. Normalcy was a majority concept, the standard of many and not the standard of just one man.
>
> 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. He was an invisible spectre who had left for evidence of his existence the bloodless bodies of their loved ones. And he understood what they felt and did not hate them.
>
> (…)
>
> Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever.
>
> I am legend. (Matheson, 2001: 160)

In this conclusion, the attentional construal of the fictional world is dramatically shifted, as Matheson reverses its perspective in a radical realignment of figure and ground. Having been invited to conceptualise the fictional world up to this point with the standard of this 'one man' as the prominent subject of our conception, these closing paragraphs invite readers to re-conceptualise this world from the perspective of the vampires. In this new subjective construal, it is the vampires who are prominent, and it

is their lack of mind attribution for Neville, and their resulting uncertainty and fear that we are now invited to recognise. Coming 'full circle' from the opening chapter, Neville is now an attenuated 'spectre' and 'legend', just like the myth or vampire schema which readers have been invited to draw upon during reading. Significantly, it is through an appreciation of the rich mental lives of these vampires, enabled for the first time by attention to the mental-state cues in their faces, which brings about this empathetic understanding in Neville, and which we are invited to share as readers.

Having invited readers to empathise with Neville throughout, this ending emphasises the ethical importance of empathising with *both* Neville and the vampires in reading the text. Indeed, these two perspectives come together to create the defamiliarising statement that forms both the title and closing line: 'I am legend.' By manipulating readers' attributions of mind through the linguistic choices made in its construal, however, Matheson's novel invites readers to overlook these other minds to some degree during reading, and draw upon their pre-existing expectations and fears in relation to group minds. In doing so, the novel raises the variable degree to which we attribute minds to others in our everyday lives for critical examination.

Finally, this conclusion lends the construal of the vampires identified across the extracts examined here, and the limited mind attribution it consistently invites, a further interpretative significance. Once attributed to the flawed perspective of Neville, this construal, and its resulting pattern of mind attribution, can be identified as part of a 'mind style' for this character, defined by Fowler as the 'impression of a worldview' created by '[c]umulatively consistent structural options, agreeing in cutting the presented world to one pattern or another' (Fowler, 1977: 73). In her development of this notion, Semino (2002) applies cognitive theories in order to specify the 'conceptual

structures and cognitive habits' which make up character worldviews (p.95). In the extracts considered here, limited engagement with the minds of the vampires can be interpreted as a distinctive cognitive habit for Neville, and one which can be associated with both his restricted understanding in the early parts of the novel, and his increasing need to alleviate a negative ethical judgement of himself, or guilt, as his understanding develops. While critical readers such as those identified at the end of section 5.2 may recognise this mind style during a first reading of the text, for a large proportion of readers, I would suggest, the attribution of this construal to Neville's mind style will emerge during their second reading, as part of a radically altered experience of this character and the vampires he plagues.

## 6 Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the stylistic manipulation of reader mind attribution for the vampires in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend.* Though externally focalised, readers' understanding of these fictional minds, and more specifically, its strategic limitation at key points in the narrative, was said to contribute to the establishment of an empathetic relationship with its main character-focaliser, and the maintenance of this (sometimes uncomfortable) relationship as this character's actions are raised for ethical questioning. Finally, it was suggested that this limited mind attribution, brought about by various aspects of the vampires' construal, may contribute to the presentation of a distinctive mind style for Neville, reflecting his engagement with other minds as part of his conceptualisation of the fictional world.

In the course of this analysis I have shown how empirical research on the subject of 'mind attribution' in social psychology can be applied to our experiences of fictional

characters. While the mechanics of this processing, or Theory of Mind, remain a matter of debate within the cognitive sciences, I have suggested that beneficial insights for literary study might be drawn from empirical research into the factors affecting this process, and its consequences.

This analysis has also explored the use of Cognitive Grammar as a stylistic tool for the application of such research to narrative. For Rundquist (2014), Palmer's proposed broadening of the narratological study of fictional minds is a departure from the principled linguistic focus of literary stylistics. As I hope to have demonstrated, application of the concept of 'social minds' does not entail a departure from stylistics since, like the categories of thought representation, the cues for their construction during reading can be analysed linguistically. Through its fundamental link between language and cognition, Cognitive Grammar, I have argued, offers an effective framework for the interdisciplinary study of fictional minds.

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