

**What Judges Your Story?  
Moral Deixis and Readerly Orientation  
SANAS 2022**

**Carnophallogocentrism and  
Vegan Narration:**

**From Emotional to Moral Deixis in  
Alice Walker's 'Am I Blue?'**

Deborah Madsen  
Department of English, University of Geneva

The “big” question engaged in this paper is: how does a narrative establish the moral environment of the storyworld, how does this intersect with the moral compass articulated by the narrative, and how might deixis be involved? If deictic markers function to establish spatial and temporal environments, anchored in deictic centers, how do narrative judgments participate in this functionality? Personal, spatial, and temporal deictic markers are well known: pronouns and proper nouns clearly establish inter-personal relations; expressions like here and there, or near and far, provide spatial anchors while yesterday and tomorrow imply “today” as the point of reference and establish the temporal point that is “now.” Do narratives use similar deictic markers to establish moral and ethical orientations?

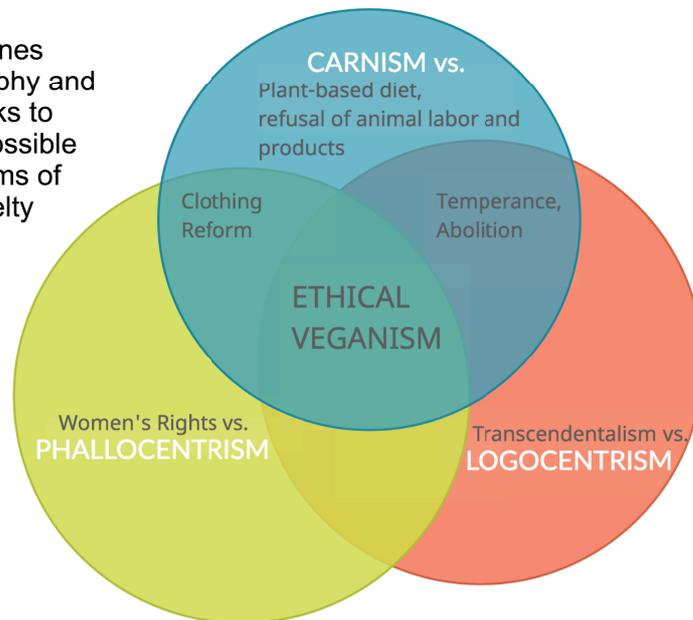
In this presentation I am using terminology from Peter Stockwell's *Cognitive Poetics: A New Introduction* (2020). Stockwell distinguishes six kinds of deixis. 1) **Perceptual deixis** or expressions encoded in pronouns, demonstratives, definite articles, verbs of mental states, etc. 2) **spatial deixis** which are locatives, verbs of motion, spatial adverbs, etc. 3) **temporal deixis** or temporal locatives, temporal adverbs, verb tense, “story-now” vs “discourse-now,” etc. 4) **social deixis** or expressions that encode the social relationships and situations of authors, narrators, characters, and readers, including point of view and focalisation, naming conventions, etc. 5) **textual deixis**: expressions that foreground the textuality of the text, including explicit “signposting” such as chapter titles and paragraphing, co-reference to other stretches of text, reference to the text itself or the act of production and 6) **compositional deixis**: elements of the text that foreground the texture of the text, that manifest the generic type or literary conventions, and might include intertextuality, allusion, or generic tradition. (54) To these can be added **moral and ethical deixis**: expressions that encode the moral viewpoint and ethical values of authors, narrators, characters, and readers. To Stockwell's 6 categories of deixis I must add two further definitions, carnophallogocentrism and ethical veganism, in order to explore in Alice Walker's narrative the moral and ethical tension between the carnophallogocentric storyworld and the apparent ethical veganism of the narration, a tension that is conditioned by the use of deixis.

**Carnophallogocentrism** (Jacques Derrida 1991)  
the sacrificial consumption of the other/less-than-human in the constitution of the sovereign (rational white male) human subject.

**Ethical Veganism**

The Vegan Society defines veganism as “a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude - as far as is possible and practicable - all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals.”

*Dietary* vegans are motivated primarily by health issues and **ethical** vegans by animal rights, environmentalism, or social justice



**Ethical Veganism** The Vegan Society defines ethical veganism as “a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude - as far as is possible and practicable - all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals.” *Dietary* vegans are motivated primarily by personal health issues and **ethical** vegans by animal rights, environmentalism, and other social justice issues.

**Carnophallogocentrism** Is defined in Jacques Derrida's 1991 interview, entitled “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject,” as the intersecting patriarchal dominations of women and animals that produce the sovereign Western subject. The complex intersectionality that produces this (actually) very simple concept is described by Carol J. Adams & Matthew Calarco in their 2017 essay, “Derrida and *The Sexual Politics of Meat*”: **Logocentrism** generates the “privileges and priorities granted by Western philosophy to the rational, self-aware, self-present, speaking subject.” Self-presence is rationality, reason, speech (the Enlightenment subject, possessed of full human rights); **Phallogocentrism** adds “the quintessentially virile and masculine aspects of Western social institutions and conceptions of subjectivity”; and **Carnism** demands anthropocentrism, human superiority, and the literal as well as figurative consumption of flesh. Thus, **Carnophallogocentrism** is an active process that creates the subject as “a fully self-present, speaking, masculine subject but also as a quintessentially *human, animal-flesh-eating* subject.” While meat-eating is the paradigm, carnophallogocentrism instantiates the right to consume all living entities, which are rendered into objects that are usable and killable (Giorgio Agamben's “lives that do not deserve to live”), by powerful discursive processes such as **animalization**.

## The “mule of de world” vs. “de ruler of everything,” OR the Thematic Logics of “Am I Blue?” (1986)

1) The proposition that the enslavement of humans and the enslavement of animals are enabled by the ideology of carnophallogocentrism:

“... the exploitation and torture of nonhuman animals come from the same master/oppressor ideology that created atrocities such as African slavery ...”  
A. Harper Breeze, *Sistah Vegan*, 12.



AND

2) A refutation of the claim that this comparison implies the animalization of formerly-enslaved humans:

“Comparing the suffering of animals to that of Blacks (or any other oppressed group) is offensive only to the speciesist: one who has embraced the false notions of what animals are like. ... To deny our similarities to animals ... is to continue actively struggling to prove to our oppressors, past or present, that we are *similar to our oppressors*, rather than those whom our oppressors have also victimized.”

Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*. 1988. 25. Original emphasis.

The image of the African-American woman as the “mule of the world” of course comes from Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and stands for the complex situation of Black women, where race and gender intersect to multiply the association with animality. Patriarchal whiteness underpins the distinction between human and animal; the challenge posed by “Am I Blue?” is to move beyond the personal to engage the systemic nature of intersectional oppression. To do this, a double thematic logic is required.

The proposition that the enslavement of humans and the enslavement of animals are enabled by the ideology of carnophallogocentrism: as A. Harper Breeze notes in *Sistah Vegan*, “... the exploitation and torture of nonhuman animals come from the same master/oppressor ideology that created atrocities such as African slavery ...” (12). Incidentally, this image appears on the cover of Marjorie Spiegel's 1988 book, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*, for which Alice Walker provided a preface, two years after the first publication of “Am I Blue?” In this context, Walker's narrative has been accused of reinstating the animalization and dehumanization of women of color. The challenge of the narrative then is to resist this accusation while exposing the common source of the oppression of people of color and animals; to show that carnophallogocentrism is the **cause** of, not the cure **for**, dehumanization. Thus, the second thematic logic pursued by the narrative is

A refutation of the claim that this comparison implies the animalization of formerly-enslaved humans. As Spiegel argues, “Comparing the suffering of animals to that of Blacks (or any other oppressed group) is offensive only to the speciesist: one who has embraced the false notions of what animals are like. ... To deny our similarities to animals ... is to continue actively struggling to prove to our oppressors, past or present, that we are *similar to our oppressors*, rather than those whom our oppressors have also victimized.” (25. Original emphasis).

SPOILER ALERT: I am going to argue that the narrative fails to achieve this and the analysis of deictics shows why.

## Deixis in “Am I Blue?” (1986): 8

And so Blue remained, a beautiful part of our landscape, very peaceful to look at from the window, white against the grass. Once a friend came to visit and said, looking out on the soothing view: “And it would have to be a white horse; the very image of freedom.” And I thought, yes, the animals are forced to become for us merely “images” of what they once so beautifully expressed. And we are used to drinking milk from containers showing “contented” cows, whose real lives we want to hear nothing about, eating eggs and drumsticks from “happy” hens, and munching hamburgers advertised by bulls of integrity who seem to command their fate.

As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out.

Deictic markers:

textual perceptual spatial temporal social-perceptual compositional

The final passage of the text reads:

And so Blue remained, a beautiful part of our landscape, very peaceful to look at from the window, white against the grass. Once a friend came to visit and said, looking out on the soothing view: “And it *would* have to be a *white* horse; the very image of freedom.” And I thought, yes, the animals are forced to become for us merely “images” of what they once so beautifully expressed. And we are used to drinking milk from containers showing “contented” cows, whose real lives we want to hear nothing about, eating eggs and drumsticks from “happy” hens, and munching hamburgers advertised by bulls of integrity who seem to command their fate.

As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out.

On this slide I have color coded the different kinds of deixis that appear in the final passage of the text; and I will remark briefly on each, in turn.

## Textual Deixis in “Am I Blue?” (1986)

And so Blue remained, a beautiful part of our landscape, very peaceful to look at from the window, white against the grass. Once a friend came to visit and said, looking out on the soothing view: “And it *would* have to be a *white* horse; the very image of freedom.” And I thought, yes, the animals are forced to become for us merely “images” of **what they once so beautifully expressed**. And we are used to drinking milk from containers showing “contented” cows, whose real lives we want to hear nothing about, eating eggs and drumsticks from “happy” hens, and munching hamburgers advertised by bulls of integrity who seem to command their fate.

As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out.” (8)

starting with **Textual deixis**,

- the phrase “And so” is what Stockwell calls a “pop” or move to a higher level of narrative ontology; here, the text moves from action to narratorial commentary.

-the phrase “What they once so beautifully expressed” is an internal reference, a flashback to the narrator's description of Blue's “look of independence, of self-possession, of inalienable *horseness*” (6) which contributes to the human-animal dynamics created in the passage.

## Perceptual Deixis in “Am I Blue?” (1986)

And so Blue remained, a beautiful part of **our** landscape, very peaceful to look at from the window, white against the grass. Once a **friend** came to visit and said, looking out on the soothing view: “And **it** *would* have to be a *white horse*; the very image of freedom.” And **I** thought, yes, **the animals** are forced to become for **us** merely “images” of what **they** once so beautifully expressed. And **we** are used to drinking milk from containers showing “contented” **cows**, whose real lives **we** want to hear nothing about, eating eggs and drumsticks from “happy” **hens**, and munching hamburgers advertised by **bulls** of integrity who **seem** to command **their** fate.

As **we** talked of freedom and justice one day for **all**, **we** sat down to steaks. **I** am eating misery, **I** thought, as **I** took the first bite. And spit it out. (8)

**Perceptual deixis** works to instantiate a structural human / animal binary: (I+us+our) vs. (them+their). This is developed through

- the “friend” who de-subjectifies Blue and who is, via this designation as “friend,” aligned with the narrator; and then note that
- only animals are named by species and humanity functions as the invisible norm.

## **Spatial Deixis in “Am I Blue?” (1986)**

And so Blue remained, a beautiful **part** of our landscape, very peaceful to look at **from** the window, white **against** the grass. Once a friend **came** to visit and said, looking **out on** the soothing view: “And it *would* have to be a *white* horse; the very image of freedom.” And I thought, yes, the animals are forced to become for us merely “images” of what they once so beautifully expressed. And we are used to drinking milk from containers showing “contented” cows, whose real lives we want to hear nothing about, eating eggs and drumsticks from “happy” hens, and munching hamburgers advertised by bulls of integrity who seem to command their fate.

As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat **down** to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it **out**. (8)

**Spatial deixis** further deepens the human/animal binary:

- Blue is assimilated to “nature” via the landscape (part, against)
- Blue offers a spectacle for the human viewers (looking out) who are placed at a distance (from) and above (looking “on” the scene which suggests superiority)
- even the spitting “out” of animal flesh suggests an inside/outside dichotomy, dramatized through abjection, that preserves the separation of the human vs. animal

## Temporal Deixis in “Am I Blue?” (1986)

And so Blue **remained**, a beautiful part of our landscape, very peaceful to look at from the window, white against the grass. **Once** a friend came to **visit** and said, looking out on the soothing view: “And it *would* have to be a *white* horse; the very image of freedom.” And I thought, yes, the animals are forced to **become** for us merely “images” of what they **once** so beautifully expressed. And we are **used to** drinking milk from containers showing “contented” cows, whose real lives we want to hear nothing about, eating eggs and drumsticks from “happy” hens, and munching hamburgers advertised by bulls of integrity who seem to command their fate.

As we talked of freedom and justice **one day** for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the **first** bite. And spit it out. (8)

**Temporal deixis** works to fix the human/animal binary within an objectifying temporality:

- Blue is rendered static: he “remained” stuck in the present;
- the flashback to the friend's visit (“once” in the past) is echoed with a difference in the phrase “**one day**” that characterizes a future of “justice for all” but
- the word (“once”) is repeated exactly in order to locate, in the past, the possession of sovereignty by non-human animals (Blue's “inalienable *horseness*”). Between “**then**” (the “once” of both Blue's horseness and the friend's carnism) and “**now**” (where Blue “remained”) several processes of transformation have occurred:

- 1) animal “becoming” - animals being transformed into images for human consumption, and
- 2) the human normalization of animal sacrifice.

The passage starts in the present, moves to the past, then into the future, back to the present with “**first** bite” - which suggests the first of many future refusals to eat flesh. This then is the 3) third process of transformation.

## Compositional Deixis in “Am I Blue?” (1986)

And so Blue remained, a beautiful part of our landscape, very peaceful to look at from the window, white against the grass. Once a friend came to visit and said, looking out on the soothing view: “And it *would* have to be a *white* horse; the very image of freedom.” And I thought, yes, the animals are forced to become for us merely “images” of what they once so beautifully expressed. And we are used to drinking milk from containers showing “contented” cows, whose real lives we want to hear nothing about, eating eggs and drumsticks from “happy” hens, and munching hamburgers advertised by bulls of integrity who seem to command their fate.

As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery\*, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out. (8)

\* note the absence of quotation marks or “scare quotes”

**Compositional deixis** indicates the narrator's apparent shift from carnism to veganism through the absence of punctuation around “misery,” in contrast to the use of quotation marks for direct speech and as “scare quotes.” The shift is emotional (via the term “misery”) rather than logical, personal rather than political, and individual rather than systemic.

## Social-Perceptual Deixis in “Am I Blue?” (1986)

And so Blue remained, a beautiful part of our landscape, very **peaceful** to look at from the window, white against the grass. Once a friend came to visit and said, looking out on the **soothing** view: “And it *would* have to be a *white* horse; the very image of freedom.” And I thought, yes, the animals are forced to become for us merely “images” of what they once so beautifully expressed. And we are used to **drinking** milk from containers showing “contented” cows, whose real lives we want to hear nothing about, **eating** eggs and drumsticks from “happy” hens, and **munching** hamburgers advertised by bulls of integrity who seem to command their fate.

As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am **eating** misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out. (8)

**Social-perceptual deixis** makes explicit the hierarchical species separation of the human and the animal:

- “peaceful” is an adjective, “soothing” is a transitive verb : both indicate focalization through the “friend.” But the objectification of Blue goes beyond seeing him as an “image” or icon -- the story of Blue's traumatic experience and suffering, which the narrator has witnessed and the telling of which has just concluded, contrasts profoundly with these descriptors (peaceful and soothing) and highlights by contrast the narrator's previous emotional identification of the horse, Blue, with her enslaved ancestors.

- The present participles (drinking, eating, munching) sustain the human/animal binary through grammatical word order: “we” is the subject and animals/meat are the object in relation to the continuous form of the verb :

we drink milk

we eat eggs

we munch hamburgers

human subject – verb – animal object

The narrator tells a story of animal and human enslavement, in the interests of “justice for all,” but the telling of the story is located within a human/animal binary that implicitly validates carnophallogocentrism even while the narrative explicitly rejects it.

## Carnophallogocentrism and Vegan Narration

And so Blue remained, a beautiful part of our landscape, very peaceful to look at from the window, white against the grass. Once a friend came to visit and said, looking out on the soothing view: “And it would have to be a white horse; the very image of freedom.” And I thought, yes, the animals are forced to become for us merely “images” of what they once so beautifully expressed. And we are used to drinking milk from containers showing “contented” cows, whose real lives we want to hear nothing about, eating eggs and drumsticks from “happy” hens, and munching hamburgers advertised by bulls of integrity who seem to command their fate.

As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out.

Deictic markers:

textual perceptual spatial temporal social-perceptual compositional

This creates a narratological inconsistency that has significant implications for the moral and ethical effectiveness of the text, shown by a recent quantitative study of the capacity of the narrative to change readerly attitudes. The work by W.P. Małecki, Alexa Weik Von Mossner, and Małgorzata Dobrowolska indicates that for the majority of readers “Am I Blue?” turned out not to have a positive impact on attitudes toward animals in general” (369), but did have an impact on attitudes towards horses specifically (370). The function of deictic markers helps to explain the ineffective evaluative or judgmental workings of this narrative, which seeks the “abolition” of animal slavery by identifying it with historic human chattel slavery.

As Alexa Weik von Mossner claims, Walker evokes readerly empathy through 1) autobiographical narration and 2) anthropomorphism or “the attribution of mental and emotional states to the horse itself, inviting the reader to experience trans-species empathy directly, without the detour through the human interlocutor.” (372-73) This may be true of *emotional* empathy – but, in the context of *cognitive* empathy, the ultimate **cause** of these emotions is located in the narrator's continual flashbacks to human enslavement and parallels with the enslavement of non-human animals. That is, the exposure of systemic, carnophallogocentric abuse is obscured – even contradicted – in the narrative by the deictic field of the human narrator and her discourse of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism can be a productive strategy for representing animal sentience if, as David Herman counsels in *Narratology Beyond the Human*, it is applied critically. He explains: “This means anchoring anthropomorphic statements and inferences in our knowledge of species’s natural history, perceptual and learning capabilities, physiology, nervous system, and previous individual history.” (5)

“Am I Blue?” does not do this; the histories and epistemologies attributed to Blue are human, situated in the narrative's single deictic field (that of the narrator), despite the narrator's explicit recognition of what she calls his “inalienable *horseness*.” (6) Thus, while appearing superficially to articulate a moral compass that is determined by the values of ethical veganism, on the level of the deep structure that is exposed through deictic analysis the narration is aligned with the carnist storyworld. It is ironic that this narrative has become (in)famous as a banned “vegan” text, when readers necessarily fail to empathize with the values of anti-anthropocentrism that are central to the philosophy of ethical veganism but are structurally superficial and marginal in Walker's narrative.

## Works Cited

Adams, Carol J. & Matthew Calarco. "Derrida and *The Sexual Politics of Meat*." *Meat Culture*, ed. Annie Potts. (2017): 31-53.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995).

Breeze, A. Harper. Ed. *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society* (2010).

Derrida, Jacques. "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." *Who Comes After the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (1991): 96-119.

Herman, David. *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life* (2018).

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

Malecki, W.P., Alexa Weik Von Mossner, and Małgorzata Dobrowolska. "Narrating Human and Animal Oppression: Strategic Empathy and Intersectionalism in Alice Walker's 'Am I Blue?'" *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. 27. 2 (Spring 2020): 365-384.

Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics: A New Introduction* (2020).

Walker, Alice. "Am I Blue?" (1986) *Living By the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987* (1988): 3-8.