



## The Absence of Madness: Altered States in James Tiptree, Jr.'s Short Fiction

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*Abstract:* Speculative fiction opens a window into the cultural resonances of madness, drug trips, and dreams. Thematic nuance may arise from the stylistic specifics involved in representing these states of consciousness. This paper presents a case study of two of James Tiptree, Jr.'s short stories, focusing on her representation of altered states. A quantitative, computational approach is combined with a qualitative, stylistically framed reading. The reading locates the absences that typify Tiptree's portrayal of altered states in the text and relates these depictions to contemporaneous ideas about mental illness.

*Keywords:* James Tiptree, Jr., Stylistics, Madness, Computational analysis

### **Introduction**

Madness, drug trips, dreams – altered states have fascinated people for millennia. Such states of consciousness and their resultant behaviours have been variously stigmatised and celebrated. Fiction may open a window into the cultural resonances of these states, but speculative fiction especially may also postulate alternate ways they could function in or be perceived by society. During the 1960s and 70s public perceptions of mental illness were largely negative. The closing of institutions and the move towards community care in the 50s and 60s had increased visibility of the mentally ill. However, the discussion accompanying this shift often revolved around perceived risks. Depictions of the mentally ill in the popular media of the time reinforced associations between mental illness and violence. While the exact causes are not clear, the social distance between the mentally ill and society in general expanded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Rössler 1251). During the 1960s and 70s in particular, speculative-fiction works increasingly began to employ altered consciousness as a window into political, social, and gender issues as the genre transferred focus from adventure and technology-driven narratives to questions of human concern.

Speculative fiction bears a special relation to both altered states and style. While the language of psychiatry speaks about altered states, it is only in the language of literature, in the patterns created by the style of a text rather than in the particular meanings of its words,

that altered states can be represented (Felman 62). Felman argues that style and theme have a clear, if to her mind hierarchical, relationship. Style is subordinate to theme, reinforcing it and serving as a channel for its delivery. The thematic import of altered states in a text is accessed, therefore, through the play of signs, the lexical relationships at the patterned level of style, rather than at the level of meaning. The language of fiction is a conduit for altered states that cannot be expressed in language otherwise than fictionally. Paraphrasing Derrida, Felman states that madness, as essentially silent, is not present “in the *logos* of the book but *rendered present* by its *pathos*, in a *metaphorical* manner, in the same way that madness, *inside of thought*, can only be evoked through *fiction*” (47). In other words, altered states, although they may connect to theme and meaning within a text, reside within style.

Mandala opens her monograph on style in speculative fiction with the observation that despite the legitimisation of the genre through increasing critical attention over the last 50 years, studies focusing on style in works of speculative fiction are relatively rare (2). Yet, in his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Broderick demonstrates that style played a key role in speculative fiction’s transformation into a literary genre in the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast to the science- or pseudoscience-driven narratives of the previous decades, speculative-fiction writers, situated within the culturally broader New Wave movement, “took, as their model, narratives drenched in artful subjectivity” (Broderick 56). The stylistic experimentation embraced in these decades and the relative paucity of stylistic criticism invites investigation.

The short stories of James Tiptree, Jr., provide fertile ground for such investigation of style as it relates to the representation of altered states. Tiptree’s depiction of altered consciousness illuminates the desire to escape oppressive gender roles, commenting on contemporaneous views of altered states and offering alternate interpretations. While Tiptree echoes the scepticism about psychiatry and the negative assessment of mental illness common in the 1970s (Rössler 1251), her portrayal of this altered state is more sympathetic than many contemporaneous depictions. She views it as consequent of, rather than a rupture with, social and gender constructs. Tiptree locates negativity in the vulnerability of the mentally ill rather than in the supposed dangers they pose. To understand how she communicates this attitude towards mental illness, it is essential to understand the style she uses to convey it relative to the style she uses to indicate default states. In fact, thematic nuance in certain of Tiptree’s short stories relates to the stylistic specifics of the representation of default and altered states.

This paper analyses two of James Tiptree, Jr.’s short stories: “Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light!” (hereafter “Faces”) and “The Women Men Don’t See” (hereafter “Women”). To analyse “Faces”, depictions of altered and default states of consciousness are compared to elucidate features particular to the author’s style of representing altered states. As Felman observes, “Madness integrated into literature immediately raises the question of how the unreadable can as such be read: How and why does nonsense produce sense? We cannot gauge the import of delirious language without reflecting simultaneously on the language we call ‘normal’” (104). Understanding what elements of a style are specific to the representation of altered consciousness hinges on comparison to default-state styles in the same text. However, representations of default-state consciousness themselves often are shaped to accommodate and accent the representations of altered states that accompany them in a text. Altered states are read not in relation to a linguistic “norm”, but bracketed by a state that is contrastive, one that has been crafted to present altered states to the reader at the angle the author desires. For this reason, analysing how a particular author represents default consciousness in a text that contains limited and thematically unaccentuated representations of altered states, as in “Women”, can further illuminate the styles she produces when she does depict altered consciousness.

This study aims to underline the importance and relevance of style in speculative fiction, demonstrate the richness of altered states as a thematic element, and provide an example of how computational approaches may be fruitfully wedded with traditional analyses, building a bridge between distant and close reading methods. Tiptree’s concept of mental

illness as an essential lack and her practical yet sympathetic attitude towards it as a byproduct of socially constructed gender inequalities are demonstrated.

## Methods and Materials

This study employs the terms *default* and *altered* to distinguish states of consciousness to avoid connotations of hierarchical or moral judgement that terms like *normal* and *abnormal* may carry. While this study focuses on a depiction of mental illness, “altered state” is a more broadly applicable term that encourages future investigation of similarities with other forms of altered consciousness.

William Lowe’s Yoshikoder loaded with Colin Martindale’s Regressive Imagery Dictionary (RID) is used in this study. The program tags the words of a text according to the categories provided by the dictionary and outputs the frequencies with which words in these categories occur. The RID is designed along broadly psychoanalytical lines, and its use in literary studies has been well documented. David Kaufer and Suguru Ishizaki’s DocuScope 3.21 is also used. The DocuScope 3.21 2012 dictionary is designed to identify rhetorical features of a text, tags strings as well as individual words, and can differentiate between word senses. Both dictionaries have nested structures, facilitating movement between general and fine-grain analyses. This quantitative approach is similar to the content-analysis methods used in the social sciences. Here, the computational reading serves as a guide that directs, focuses, and supports the human-performed stylistic analysis. According to Hockey, computers are more suited than human readers to detecting patterns and features within a text, literary or otherwise, and to collecting *all* occurrences of such patterns and features. The resultant collection of target features creates a more accurate view of a text at a general level and may point to features in a text that a human reader might have passed over but are worth investigating. Complemented by other methods, the computational approach can facilitate the study of literature (66).

Although Yoshikoder offers integrated percentage difference and risk-ratio calculations and DocuScope provides a suite of statistical analyses, this study does not attempt to statistically establish a significant difference between passage types within the text for each category. Calculating the risk ratio can establish that a percentage change is statistically significant. Establishing statistical significance demonstrates that a change in the frequency of some category has a low likelihood of being a product of chance; in other words, it establishes author intention or the degree to which a reader can detect such a change. Yet, whether as a result of author intention or chance, words from certain lexical categories exist in differing distribution patterns in the text. An examination of style through human reading reveals whether the difference in percentage is meaningful. Demonstrating both the significance of this distribution and the ability of a human reader to detect it depends on the researcher. This inquiry is founded on anchoring changes in lexical category distribution in the text as a whole through an analysis of style by traditional methods.

Only categories with a frequency of 1% or higher and differences in frequency greater than 1% were considered in this study. At some point, a lexical pattern becomes too scant to be perceived by a human reader; similarly, a computer-detected “pattern” comprised of only a few words is far more likely to be coincidence than an element of a style. The following example illustrates what constitutes a percentage noticeable by the reader. In “Faces”, Tiptree distinguishes altered from default-state passages by a reversal of emotional valence. The focalising character of the altered-state passages, a woman undergoing hallucinatory madness, believes that she inhabits a world of possibility and adventure where everyone is her friend. The default-state passages shift perspective between a series of characters expressing anger, disgust, and distress at the madwoman’s flight from reality. The human reader easily detects the emotional valences of both passage types without the aid of computational reading. However, the RID registers a corresponding shift in the Affection and Aggression categories of

the Emotion summary category. Altered-state passages contain 1.13% Affection category words and less than 1% Aggression category, whereas default-state passages contain 1.05% Aggression category words and less than 1% contained in the Affection category. Therefore, a frequency of around 1% is a pattern noticeable to the unaided human reader.

First published in 1976, “Faces” alternates between passages representing altered consciousness focalised through a woman who thinks of herself as a westward-travelling courier and passages of default consciousness focalised through multiple characters who have met the woman or who are searching for her. The courier is revealed to be a young suburban housewife who has retreated into delusion after the birth of her child. She has been institutionalised and treated with electroconvulsive therapy, but after escaping the hospital, she travels westward through a Chicago half-ruined and filled with abandoned junk that she imagines as inhabited only by women. It is to her mind a happy world devoid of men. This has left women free to share knowledge, wander, and experience sisterhood in safety and peace. In the end, she is pursued, and it is implied that she is killed, by a group of men whom she believes to be a pack of wild dogs.

“Women” also chronicles an escape, literal rather than figurative. Published in 1973, “Women” is one of Tiptree’s most-studied stories. It follows two ordinary women as seen by the male focaliser, Don Fenton, as they snatch the opportunity to leave earth with extraterrestrial explorers, convinced that a world without male humans is likely to be preferable to Earth. In contrast to the courier in “Faces”, who travels through a city, the women move through the wilds of the Yucatan after their small plane crashes, stranding them. The mother, Ruth, displays many of the same knowledge domains and competencies as the courier, unimpeded by the courier’s inability to grasp reality.

## **Style and Altered Consciousness in “Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light!”**

Tiptree indicates the shift between representations of default and altered states by a pronounced shift in style. While “Faces” is a polyvocal text, the sane voice of the main focaliser, the courier, is never encountered. The courier’s mad perception is contrasted by and commented upon by a handful of sane characters who briefly focalise the text. The style in altered-state passages in “Faces” is oppositional in many respects to the style in default-state passages.

The courier moves constantly toward “points west” through a cityscape partially reclaimed by nature. Her experience of the world is direct and physical, at times almost sensual:

Beautiful cool clean breeze on her face, and clouds are breaking up. Old moon is trying to shine out! The path is deep in leaves here, okay to get the sandals off and dry them awhile. She balances one-legged, unbuckling. The left one is soaked, all right. She hangs them over her pack and steps out barefoot. Great. (Tiptree “Faces” 113)

Tiptree uses uncomplicated lexis rich in nature and body words. Repetition is, however, avoided: though “sandals” could appear as many as five times in this passage, she uses a variety of pronominal references and omission in all instances but the first mention. The syntax is also simple and direct. Telegraphic constructions, in which a finite verb or subject is dropped, add a vigour to the style that is compounded by the use of specific verbs of physical action, such as “are breaking up”, “balances”, and “steps out”.

Yet the same structures that impart a sense of vigour also convey a sense of absence. What is done or who has done it are frequently left unsaid. Paired with more directly stated uncertainties in the altered-state passages, such as an inability on the part of the courier to specify exact time or the distance she has covered or to identify an object of which she is having

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immediate experience, this absence creates an unanchored, indeterminate quality in the altered-state passages, despite the use of concrete, specific nouns and verbs of physical activity:

Lightening [sic], growling noises – in a minute it fades away. A deer, maybe, she wonders, rubbing her head. But what was the noise? One of those dogs, maybe? Could it be a dog pack? (113)

Of the 33 words in the quote, eight, nearly a quarter, are concrete nouns. Of the five verbal forms, three are specific and active versus one copula and a modal construction. Yet whatever has passed directly in front of the courier remains indeterminate.

Computational analysis with the RID reveals a corresponding pattern. The altered-state passages of “Faces” contain 5.52% Concreteness subcategory words, a 1.87 percentage point increase compared to the default-state passages. Concreteness belongs to the category Regressive Knowledge, and it contains words of spatial reference, mostly prepositions and adverbs of place (Martindale and West 381). Such words map the setting and create a pattern of movement that grounds the reader in the fictional world. Similarly, altered-state passages in “Faces” contain 4.15% Sensation words, a category containing subcategories pertaining to the five senses, which in turn contain concrete nouns and adjectives related to touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound. Default-state passages contain 1.16 percentage points fewer Sensation words than altered-state passages.

Both Concreteness and Sensation words are necessary in fiction to enable the reader to experience the fictional world and orient herself within it. The greater frequency of these words in the altered-state passages creates a feeling of richness and immersion. As noted, the style in the altered-state passages displays a tension between strongly sensory language and absence. Similarly, while Concreteness subcategory words do orient the reader in the text, they lack specificity. Although the courier bounds over, roams through, and ducks under, there is a paucity of concrete landmarks in an area she claims she has come through before. She orients herself to the Dan Ryan Expressway, a landmark never actually reached, but she expresses uncertainty about the name of the nearby Great Lake, and she names no other landmarks (Tiptree, “Faces” 108, 112).

Sane characters experience objects and with a greater degree of specificity in the default-state passages. Brand names and locations are stated:

She undoes her plastic Rainflower bonnet. “Oh God, my set.”

“You don’t usually pick up hitchers, Mom.” Bee is sitting *in* the dinette, doing her nails with Plum Love.

“It was starting to storm,” the mother says defensively, hustling *into* the genuine Birds Eye kitchen area....

“I dropped her right *at* Stony Island. That’s as *far* as we go, I said. (110, emphasis added)

Concreteness subcategory words are still frequent. The added italics demonstrate that “in”, “into”, “at”, and “far” would be counted, but they head prepositional phrases that contain a noun denoting a specific location, such as “the genuine Birds Eye kitchen” and “Stony Island”. Objects are preceded by particular brands, which occasionally stand for the object name itself, as in the case of “Plum Love”. Indeterminacies and absences as found in the altered-state passages are lacking.

In the altered-state passages, the courier is pursuing her madness as much as she is traveling westward. The happiness the courier feels, as reflected by the frequency of RID Affection category words, is secured by repeatedly willing herself not to experience what is truly there:

Even the memory of the deer seems strange, as if she'd glimpsed some kind of crazy machine with a sister riding on it. Crazy! The uproar around her has voices in it too, a ghostly whistle blows.... Go away, dreams.... (113)

In the altered-state passages, Tiptree's style of absence, in which richly described sensory experience veils a lack of concrete or precise objects, underscores the futility of the courier's journey. The courier's "points west", never named, can never to be reached. Tiptree portrays madness as the lack of vital knowledge. While characters in default-state passages possess brand-name items, rather than sensually experiencing nature, and Aggression category words are the dominant descriptors of their emotions: it is their acceptance of specifics, however unfulfilling or negative, that preserves them. The courier's denial, present at both the story and style levels, leads to her death. Thematically this suggests a view of altered states as a fruitless and dangerous escape. The courier's journey across Chicago mirrors her journey further into her madness, a wilful denial of what is there. Her act of walking alone in the city as well as her refusal or inability to acknowledge and identify a gang of criminals result in the courier's violation and possible murder.

### **Style and Default Consciousness in "The Women Men Don't See"**

In contrast to the altered-state passages in Tiptree's "Faces", specific place names, objects, occupations, and historical events occur frequently in "Women". However, the tensions between men and women and women's need to escape an oppressive system are themes in both stories. Unlike the courier, Ruth Parsons, the main female character in "Women", is never the focaliser. The reader views her and her daughter Althea from Don Fenton's male point of view. Despite the specificity of the text's language, the female characters remain indeterminate, reflecting Fenton's character rather than the women's nature. The ending of the story reveals the female characters' actual consistency as well as the gaps in Fenton's ability to view and understand them.

Focalised through Fenton, the narrative contains an overdetermined specificity and concern with what is concrete and able to be categorised. The character uses place names, historical reference, and cultural generalisations to convey his familiarity with the foreign setting and his competence to meet the trying circumstances within the story:

The coast on our right is the territory of Quintana Roo. If you haven't seen Yucatán, imagine the world's biggest absolutely flat green-gray rug. An empty-looking land. We pass the white ruin of Tulum and the gash of the road to Chichén Itzá, a halfdozen coconut plantations, and then nothing but reef and low scrub jungle all the way to the horizon, just about the way the conquistadors saw it four centuries back. (Tiptree, "Women" 89)

An urge to name and a preoccupation with history rather than the immediate circumstances mediates Fenton's experience. The 75-word quotation above contains four place names, comfortable reference to three landscape features unusual to an average North American like Fenton, and one mention of history. The style associated with his character, rich in exotic place names and historical monuments, recalls the frequency of named products and places in the default-state passages of "Faces".

Fenton also addresses an indefinite you, a feature typical of his focalisation. The frequency with which the character uses the indefinite you gives some passages a patronising and didactic flavour. The description of the aftermath of his plane crashing in an isolated mangrove swamp typifies this: "If you've been in one of these things, you know the slow-motion inanity that goes on" (90). Reference to the crash is offhand ("one of these things"),

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the word “inanity” conveys a sense of boredom, and the two uses of “you” impart a patronising familiarity. However, the overall effect is to depict a man who is fighting to stay in control of circumstances increasingly beyond his abilities, experience, and knowledge. Tellingly, Fenton’s injury of his knee, a turning point after which he loses a great deal of physical control over his situation, contains the thickest occurrence of the indefinite you:

For instant basket-case you can’t beat kneecaps. First you discover your knee doesn’t bend anymore, so you try putting some weight on it, and a bayonet goes up your spine and unhinges your jaw. Little grains of gristle have got into the sensitive bearing surface. The knee tries to buckle and can’t, and mercifully you fall down. (96)

“You” occurs seven times in the quotation, displacing the traumatic event onto an unreal other and asserting an illusory control through the didactic tone.

While Fenton experiences his physical and social environment categorically and displaces sensory experience, the glimpses of Ruth Parsons seen through the Fenton-focalised narration show her observing the environment and interacting with it physically. The lexicon associated with her is rich in DocuScope’s Sensory Language dimension words. The difference between the earlier discussed Sensation category and the Sensory Language dimension should be noted. The RID’s Sensation category captures embodied experience, while DocuScope’s Sensory Language dimension captures representations of the exterior world. In the altered-state passages of “Faces”, the action or object described by Sensation words is often missing, which conveys a sense of absence. In “Women”, no such absence exists in the diction, but Sensory Language dimension words relate to clearly stated objects and actions and convey a sense of presence, indirectly representing Ruth Parsons as a grounded character. Her sensory experience demonstrates an understanding of her environment, as in the following quote:

She’s *making a smudge* of chaff and *twigs* to singe the *fillets*, *small hands* very quick, tension in that female *upper lip*. The *rain* has eased off for the moment; we’re *sluicing wet* but *warm* enough. Ruth brings me my *fish* on a *mangrove* skewer and sits back on her heels with an odd *breathy* sigh. (97; emphasis added)

Like the courier, Ruth is active. Her activity, however, is aimed at a real, concrete goal: to secure the survival of herself and her daughter. Correspondingly, the Sensory Language words describe specific actions directly perceived and partaken in, in contrast to the courier. The quotation highlights the variety of sensory stimuli evoked. Touch, smell, hearing, and even implied taste all occur, strengthening Ruth’s situational immersion.

In thinking first of her position in the world rather than viewing it through a veil of history and categories, Ruth avoids the blindness of the courier and often preempts Fenton. Several times a problem will occur to him, immediately followed by Ruth Parsons acting of her own initiative to solve the unspoken problem:

...But what about drinking water?  
There’s a small splat! behind me. The older woman has sampled the bay. (91)

The Sensation category words in the text often describe Fenton’s perceptions. These perceptions are presented confidently and are tightly aligned with Fenton’s specific, categorical language. Fenton misses essential information, but the specific language paired with the Sensation words masks that absence of knowledge, whereas the high frequency of Sensation category words without clear referent associated with the courier reveals the same lack. Thematically, this lack of knowledge is in both cases critically dangerous, and is the point at which the style of representing madness and the themes linked to madness meet. In this meeting, Felman argues, the rhetoric or style of the text itself becomes mad. In her conception, “the infinite” refers to the altered consciousness’s inability, as manifested in the style, to fix on

one concrete sign: “The infinite is not a thematic excess: It is, on the contrary, the rhetorical *lack* that makes the discourse function. The infinite is composed not of an excess of signified, but rather of a *missing signified*, of an *excess of signifier*” (Felman 87, emphasis original). Even though Fenton’s perception, as represented by the Sensation category words, is flawed, his signifiers point to a signified, contributing to a style that suggests a default-state consciousness. The altered-state passages of “Faces”, however, are often lacking what is signified. In this way, the theme of the danger posed by a lack of knowledge may be manifested also in a default-state passage without disrupting the overall interpretation of Fenton’s consciousness as sane. However, the suggestive power of this lack should be noted: while the style in which Fenton is portrayed reads as default, it is viable to question how firm a grip on reality the character actually possesses.

Fenton demonstrates lack of knowledge in two other ways throughout the story. His attempts to understand the female characters are limited by his view of women which, when he notices them at all, has a tendency to veer toward the carnal:

The woman doesn’t mean one thing to me, but the obtrusive recessiveness of her, the defiance of her little rump eight inches from my fly.... Like the butterfish that float around a sated barracuda, only to vanish away the instant his intent changes, Mrs. Parsons knows her little shorts are safe. Those firmly filled little shorts, so close.... (Tiptree, “Women” 95)

While the indeterminacy with which Fenton views Ruth Parsons momentarily collapses as she is reduced to an object of sexual desire, the experience itself is always conveyed through metaphor.

Similarly, in his attempts to understand the other characters in “Women” nonsexually, Fenton relies on categories of ethnicity and occupation. Tiptree uses a higher frequency of DocuScope’s Person Class words, which refer to categories of occupation, race, social class, and so forth, than Person Pronoun cluster words. As Kim Kirkpatrick notes of Fenton’s focalisation of Ruth, “He switches his definition for Ruth from Mother Hen to Librarian to Girl Scout to Female Predator Preying on Poor Unsuspecting Men to Man-Hater to Insane Other.... He is incapable of dealing with her directly, and asking her what she is thinking and why” (62). Fenton runs through a series of interpretations of Ruth, trying to understand her as a type because he is unable to relate to her as a human person in her own right. However, Fenton’s inability to relate extends beyond the female characters. The male captain of the plane, Estéban, a man of Mayan descent, is consistently described in terms of his race. Person Class words have been italicised in the following quotation:

[Althea:] “He’s a *Mayan Indian*, isn’t he? The *pilot*, I mean.”

“Right. The real thing, straight out of the Bonampak murals.... Have they told you that *Maya mothers* used to tie a board on the infant’s forehead to get that slant? They also hung a ball of tallow over its nose to make the eyes cross. It was considered *aristocratic*.”

She smiles and takes another peek at Estéban. “People seem different in Yucatán,” she says thoughtfully. “Not like *the Indians* around Mexico City. More, I don’t know, independent.”

“Comes from never having been conquered. *Mayas* got massacred and chased a lot, but nobody ever really flattened them. (Tiptree, “Women” 91, emphasis added)

While Althea Parsons attempts to move the conversation beyond types and discuss personality traits of real, present-day people, Fenton brings the conversation repeatedly back to race, particularly as historicised. Althea Parsons opens with three Person Class words (“Mayan”, “Indian”, and “pilot”), but goes on to discuss “people” as “different” and “independent”. Fenton



immediately relates Estéban to an ancient painting, transitioning to a discussion of history through three more Person Class words (“Maya”, “mothers”, and “aristocratic”). Notably, while Althea Parsons uses the masculine third-person pronoun during the conversation, Fenton employs only pronouns with explicit or potential inanimate meaning to refer to people.

Estéban is also reduced through Fenton’s sexual imagination to an object. As with his sexualisation of Ruth Parsons, metaphor obscures the imagined act.

Captain Estéban’s mahogany arms clasping Miss Althea Parsons’s pearly body.  
Captain Estéban’s archaic nostrils snuffling in Miss Parsons’s tender neck.... The memory of Honduran mahogany logs drifting in and out of the opalescent sand comes to me. (99)

As Ruth Parsons is metaphorically reduced to a fish in the earlier quotation, Estéban becomes a log. Rather than use male or female third-person pronouns, Fenton repeats Person Class words such as “Captain” and “Miss”. This move from category to object, from captain to log, illustrates the core of Fenton’s inability to understand his situation. The human participants are no more than objects to him.

While the stylistic specificity that creates a sense of rationality and sharp perception in “Women” is similar to the specificity in the default-state passages of “Faces”, it masks a lack of deep understanding in Fenton similar to the courier’s lack of knowledge. Tiptree sets sane Fenton apart from the mad courier, however, in part by a lower frequency of the RID’s Emotion summary category words in “Women” than in the altered-state passages of “Faces”. This lessening of the emotional qualities of the text is one stylistic choice that creates the impression of a rational default state. While altered-state passages of “Faces” contain 3.98% Emotion summary category words, default-state passages contain 2.75%, and “Women” contains a nearly equal frequency, 2.72%.

As Fenton’s control begins to slip, more emotion words enter the text. In evaluating a difficult, potentially frightening situation in a scene near the beginning of “Women” when Fenton still feels in control, the language indicates very little emotion and contains no Emotion summary category words:

Furthermore, the diesel-truck noise on our left is the Caribbean piling back into the mouth of the bay. The wind is pushing it at us, and the bare bottoms on the mangroves show that our bar is covered at high tide. I recall seeing a full moon this morning in – believe it, St. Louis – which means maximal tides. Well, we can climb up in the plane. (91)

After Fenton injures himself and loses a great deal of control, the language of his focalisation becomes much more tinted with emotion. Tellingly, the most emotionally charged passage occurs at the one point in the story that might be read as altered-state. Fenton has taken a large dose of the analgesic Demerol, an opioid with potential consciousness-altering side effects:

“Ruth!” My voice cracks. “Ruth, get over here behind me!”  
She doesn’t look at me, only keeps sidling farther away. My *terror* detonates into *anger*. “Come back here!” ...At this moment the nearest white monster *whips* into a *great* S-curve and sails right onto the bank at her, eight feet of snowy *rippling horror*. (103, emphasis added)

In addition to Emotion summary category words like “terror”, “anger”, and “horror”, phrases such as “white monster” suggest disgust. The number of question marks in the passage from which the quotation was drawn and of exclamation points in the quotation itself is much higher than previously in the story.

Passages of high emotion are brief in “Women”, but in the use of Emotion words, exclamation points, and partial sentences they resemble the altered-state passages in “Faces”. The majority of the text in “Women” is closer akin to the default-state passages of “Faces”, with a lower frequency of emotion words. While Fenton and the courier share a flaw, the styles in which Tiptree portrays them differ to depict the sanity of the former and the altered mental state of the latter.

## Conclusion

The courier journeys literally across Chicago and metaphorically further into her madness. The plot moves from one scene of attentional blindness to another, which creates the theme of the absence of knowledge, even as the style is built around absent grammatical elements and lack of specificity. The style of representation of this altered state is oppositional to the specific style of the default state. At the story level, default consciousness is grounded in scenes built on the stylistically delineated and fully perceived elements of the fictional world. The opposition is complete and the connection between the two states of consciousness has been severed. Altered and default consciousness encompass two different worlds. In Tiptree’s conception of altered consciousness, the stylistic and thematic absences are irrecoverable disjoints.

The courier’s altered state arises from an internalised absence imposed from outside: a lack of agency dictated by gender and social norms. In “Women”, Ruth independently makes decisions and takes action. However, to maintain this agency, Ruth constantly preempts and deflects men. Her defensive attitude is portrayed as reasonable; when confronted with aliens, it is Ruth that Don Fenton shoots (103). Her exercise of agency, counter to expected gender roles, is more monstrous than apparent monsters. Ruth has organised her life outside of gender and social norms in defence of her agency, and the resolution of “Women” is an escape from human society that is a dramatic exercise of her agency. The courier’s participation in social and gender norms prior to her mental illness ensures her lack of agency, a state intolerable for her. Unable to recover agency within social constructs, she transfers its absence to her perception and thought. It is the resultant rupture with default consciousness, rather than the act of escape, that Tiptree portrays as an unsustainable strategy.

Tiptree’s view aligns with feminist views of mental illness in women that had been developed during the 1960s and 70s. Whereas popular psychology held that women were physiologically disposed to mental illness (Roth and Lerner 792–93), feminists argued that social oppression created stress, resulting in higher occurrence of mental illness among women. Marital roles were viewed as a particularly potent stressor (Busfield 523, 525). Tiptree’s depiction of psychiatry as repressive, even abusive, towards women also fits with feminist ideas of her time (530) that arose in response to the conception of a healthy woman’s psychological makeup as “more submissive, less independent, less adventurous, more easily influenced, less aggressive, less competitive, more excitable in minor crises, more easily hurt, more emotional, more vain, and less objective” (Roth and Lerner 795) compared to men.

Comparison of altered and default styles in “Faces” and “Women” reveals how Tiptree decouples this lack of agency, a stressor that produces mental illness, from gender. This move counters contemporaneous popular views that would label susceptibility to stress as particular to feminine physiology. Stylistically, the representation of Fenton most resembles the representation of the courier when his agency is the most reduced. Unable to act effectively in the outer world, characters shift this absence to thought and perception, creating at least the illusion of agency. The theme of thwarted agency accompanies a shift in style towards that of an altered state. In line with feminist thought of the day, Tiptree portrays women as particularly susceptible to altered states, as social forces constantly mitigate their agency, while she counters popular ideas of natural susceptibility. Her speculative fiction becomes a vehicle for contemporaneous feminist ideas about mental illness that differed significantly from popular conceptions.

This study has demonstrated how an author may craft certain aspects of her styles and examined the thematic significance of stylistic choices. Speculative fiction is far from a genre in which focus on ideas and themes supersedes any serious style (Mandala 18–19): its authors make varied and ample use of styles to convey their ideas and themes. Tiptree’s apprehension of altered consciousness has been elucidated through an examination of her style, connecting her understanding of altered states to the social and human themes of her short stories.

More could be said about Tiptree’s styles in “Faces” and “Women”. Indeed, the styles are so rich that multiple analyses employing different approaches most likely would produce novel results. This study serves to illustrate the importance of style in representing altered states in speculative fiction, and indicates one method by which further research into the subject might proceed.

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