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MIND READING AND MIND BLINDNESS IN *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*. A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

I love that idea of a female voice, taking us through, very nicely, and setting us up for the fall. That's the whole thing. You get to trust the voice and then she does you in (...) like he gets done in.

(Martin Scorsese, on the use of a voiceover narrator in his filmic adaptation of *The Age of Innocence*)

At the very end of *The Age of Innocence* (1920) Newland Archer learns with surprise that his wife, May Welland, “had guessed and pitied” (Wharton 360) his unfulfilled love for Ellen Olenska. The reader meets this revelation with equal surprise, even so when only one chapter earlier May had been portrayed as the leader of a conspiracy to end Newland and Ellen’s presumed affair. She must have certainly guessed, then. If that is so, perhaps Newland’s (and the reader’s) surprise is undue. Or, is it? Set in the old patrician New York society of the 1870s *The Age of Innocence* depicts the frustrated love story between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, the eccentric cousin of his at first fiancée and then wife, May Welland. Throughout the novel, following Newland’s lead, May is successively seen as a dumb, naïve “product of the social system” (Wharton 40), as an artful and shrewd conspirator, and finally, as the insightful and compassionate woman that had “guessed and pitied” her husband’s predicament. There might be reasons for genuine surprise after all.

This essay explores the reasons for such surprise from a cognitive perspective. In so doing my intent is less to offer a description of cognitive mechanisms than to reflect on the narrative strategies through which writers capitalize on our cognitive proclivities to achieve a desired literary effect.

According to Sarah Kozloff, “the dramatic impact of the novel stems from the fact that the reader, in complicity with Archer, underestimates May” (275). Any reader of Wharton’s novel will easily agree with this statement. In the storyworld of *The Age of Innocence* Newland Archer does indeed (consciously or unconsciously) underestimate his wife. But what about the reader? Kozloff’s claim points to the fact that the narration is heavily focalized through Newland; the reader knows just as much or as little as he does. Now let me complicate the above argument with an apparently banal question: why should the reader underestimate a character in the first place, as if it were a real person? To adapt a line of argument that Lisa Zunshine introduced in literary criticism roughly a decade ago, in order to underestimate May the reader’s engagement with her fictional mind must very much resemble her engagement with real minds in real life, which implies that she recognizes May’s mind as different from her own and that she is able and willing to explain May’s behavior in terms of May’s “thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires” (Zunshine 2006, 6). This ability to understand other’s behavior in terms of underlying mental and emotional states, what cognitive psychologists call “theory of mind” (ToM) or “mind-reading,” is a fundamental practice of our everyday social cognition—such an everyday practice, an effortless and automatic one, that we pay little attention to it even as “Theory of Mind appears to be our key cognitive endowment as a *social species*” (8) and, crucially for my purpose, one that “makes literature as we know it possible” (10).

In what follows I propose that we pay more attention to the role that this cognitive predisposition of mind-reading plays both in the creation of literary worlds and characters and in the reader’s interaction with them. My focus on ToM, however, is rather directed at the ways in which it actually complicates our relationship with literary worlds. Even as it may be that ToM makes literature possible, we should not underestimate its

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“dark side.” As Lisa Zunshine notes,

Because mind reading is not telepathy but merely a far-from-perfect adaptation (they might as well have called it ‘mind misreading’), more often than not it actually *limits* our perception and interpretation and lures us into insidious cognitive traps. (Savarese and Zunshine 2014, 21)

Newland’s mind-readings of May reveal themselves, actually, as a chain of misreadings. But why should readers in turn misread a fictional mind? In what ways can literature play games with our theory of mind capacity? In the following pages I will explore the cognitive processes that lie beneath the misinterpretations that lead to the underestimation of May.

Cognitive literary critics often focus their attention on narrative gaps, or, to use Lisa Zunshine’s term, on writers’ strategies of “undertelling” (2006, 23). For some some critics indeed “the common currency of narrative [is not] its signifying marks, but its gaps” (Abbot 104). The interest in the untold hinges on the assumption that writers often seek to engage “the reader’s everyday readiness to recognize what fragmentary cues imply” (Auyoung 582). Of course there are many gaps, many fragmentary cues, and much “undertelling” in *The Age of Innocence*.¹ And yet I will focus rather on Wharton’s “overtelling”—on the many ways her narrator tells readers a bit too much, leaving them hardly any actual gaps to fill. In this way Wharton’s narrator apparently helps but actually teases our theory of mind, luring the reader into a perverse “cognitive trap.”

1. “Assisted” Mind-Reading—Are We Really Reading Minds?

As Lisa Zunshine’s seminal work in the field of cognitive literary criticism established, our ability to do ToM is the “default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment” (2006, 6). We practice mind-reading every day. We do it automatically, effortlessly, and in multiple different ways: when we infer mental or emotional states from outward behavior; when we analyze our own feelings on the basis of our proprioceptive and interoceptive awareness;² when we read between the lines of limited verbal expressions, to intuit more complex underlying mental states, and so forth. Interestingly enough, we appear to engage in mind-reading not only when dealing with the real world but also in our interaction with fictional worlds. As she points out, “[l]iterature pervasively capitalizes on and stimulates Theory of Mind mechanisms that evolved to deal with real people.” When dealing with fictional texts as readers, that is, we “invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generously call ‘characters’ with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires,” and then “look for the ‘cues’ that would allow us to guess at their feelings and thus predict their actions” (Zunshine 2006, 10). Accordingly, when encountering a fictional character, as readers and “creatures with a theory of mind” (Zunshine 2010, 208), we will automatically be prompted to read the characters’ actions and behavior as reflections of their mental states.

However, as is the case in real life, this “successful” ToM does not necessarily mean that our mind-reading will be “right.”³ On the contrary, misinterpretations are all too frequent. Every time that we explain observable behavior in terms of unobservable mental or emotional states we are “successfully” calling on a theory of mind but the accuracy of our guesses relies a great deal on the relevant information at hand. ToM is context-dependent and, by organizing or manipulating the context in multiple ways, writers of fiction can either help us in our guesses or complicate our mind-reading ability, testing its limits and leading us to blatant misreadings.

¹ Edith Wharton overtly alludes to these gaps, when she describes New York society as a hieroglyphic system, where the real thing was never said or done, as we shall see. Interestingly, as Porter Abbot reminds us, Edith Wharton’s literary associate and friend Henry James wrote in *The Portrait of a Lady* that “the *whole* of anything is never told” (qtd. Abbot 104. Original emphasis).

² Proprioception is the sense of movement, balance, and position of our body and bodily parts, while interoception refers to the sense of the physiological state of our own body.

³ For cognitive scientists, a successful ToM means, simply, that we will interpret outward behavior in terms of inward mental or emotional states, regardless of the accuracy of such interpretation. I will heretofore refer to “right” or “correct” ToM, conversely, to evaluate the accuracy of the interpretations.



Although we apparently need very little prompting to exercise our mind-reading proclivities,⁴ such proclivities are particularly and overtly summoned in *The Age of Innocence*. Wharton's narrator seemingly does not want us to forget that we are immersed in a "hieroglyphic world, where the real thing [is] never said or done" (Wharton 42). What cognitive scientists call theory of mind will be heavily needed, Wharton would seem to warn the reader, to decode the "atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies" (14) in which the novel unfolds. But is that really so? Actually, as it turns out, the reader has to make very little effort to read minds, for the narrator leaves her little gaps to fill. In the storyworld of *The Age of Innocence* ToM is explicitly thematized. The outward behavior of the characters is constantly unpacked for us by the narrator, who nicely steers our ToM easing our way through the intricate implications, the pointed silences, the blushings, and the gestures that constitute New York's "hieroglyphic world."

Consider for example how mind-reading is initially depicted in the very first chapter of the book:

Newland Archer, leaning against the wall at the back of the club box, turned his eyes from the stage and scanned the opposite side of the house (...) slightly withdrawn (...) sat a young girl in white with eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers. As Madame Nilsson's "M'ama!" thrilled out above the silent house (the boxes always stopped talking during the Daisy Song) a warm pink mounted to the girl's cheek, mantled her brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia. She dropped her eyes to the immense bouquet of lilies-in-the-valley on her knee, and Newland Archer saw her white-gloved finger-tips touch the flowers softly. He drew a breath of vanity and his eyes returned to the stage. (3-4)

A couple of paragraphs below May's faint blushing is plainly decoded for the reader in terms of her state of mind: "'The darling!' thought Newland Archer, his glance flitting back to the young girl with the lilies-of-the-valley. 'She doesn't even guess what it's all about'" (4).

The passage showcases a sample of theory of mind explicitly at work. Wharton's narrator carefully picks out the elements of May's outward body language that Newland will read in terms of her emotional state. Newland Archer automatically links May's bodily signs (her "eyes ecstatically fixed," her blushing, her dropping eyes and the soft touch of her white-gloved finger-tips) to outward signs of romantic love (the "stage-lovers," "M'ama!" sung on the stage, the bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley⁵), to infer an emotional state: the innocent excitement of a young woman experiencing love for the first time. This passage overtly stages Newland's theory of mind. In doing so Newland does the reader's job of decoding May's observable demeanor in unobservable terms—of "reading," that is, May's mind. The passage would have prompted us to exercise our ToM capacity anyway and we might have arrived at that same conclusion without Newland's cue—but we might also have not. The narrator, reporting Newland's thought, is certainly helping our theory of mind.

However, it is precisely this "helpfulness" of Wharton's narrator that ends up fooling the reader. In what follows I will try to elucidate the narrative strategies through which this trick is played on us by an apparently reliable narrator. I will first show how the use of a fluid shifting point of view, between omniscience and internal focalization, challenges our metarepresentational abilities and impairs a "correct" ToM. Secondly, I will describe how a heavy use of thought report that belies and obliterates a previous—and possibly correct—"mind-reading" results in a paradoxical "literary mind blindness."

2. Losing Track of Our Sources—Who Thinks What?

Let me go back for a minute to the passage discussed above. The scene is described by an omniscient third person narrator but Newland is clearly the internal focalizer: the reader reads May's mind through Newland's

⁴ According to Lisa Zunshine, "any indication that we are dealing with a self-propelled entity (...) leads us to assume that this entity possesses thoughts, feelings and desires, at least some of which we will intuit, interpret, and frequently, misinterpret" (2010, 202).

⁵ As we will learn later on in the novel, Newland sends a bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley to his betrothed every morning, in token of his love. The lilies-of-the-valley must be seen here as a metonymic trope of Newland's feelings for May.



eyes and mind. However, should you read the couple of pages in which this passage is inserted, you would notice how swiftly Wharton's narrator shifts from "zero focalization" to "internal focalization." May is first seen from Newland's point of view, as he looks at her from the club box opposite hers. After he draws his "breath of vanity" the perspective returns to the omniscient narrator, who authoritatively describes the stage and the setting of the New York Opera House. We then suddenly find ourselves in Newland's mind again, as he muses on his imminent fiancé's emotional state. So far, so good. Writers of fiction do this all the time, you might say. But how can this fluid focalization affect the cognitive processes underlying our interaction with literary works?

The narrator of *The Age of Innocence* oscillates constantly between these two positions. While it is always clear "who speaks," this fluid (and ambiguous) oscillation often makes it hard for the reader to distinguish "who sees."⁶ We often follow the narrator's voice as it explains in long passages the intricacies and universally shared views of New York's society, or as it rambles on the past of this or that character, to learn suddenly that "[Newland] mused on these things" (Wharton 12) or that they "passed through Newland Archer's mind" (59). In this way, we easily lose track of just how much information (and what information precisely) is actually filtered through Newland's point of view and we end up confusing and conflating the sources of every bit of information.

This might not seem of particular relevance—is it really that important to know who thinks what? Apparently it is, as Lisa Zunshine noted, relying on the work of evolutionary psychologists Leda Cosmides and John Tooby. They in fact posited a capacity to keep track of our sources ("metarepresentation") that allows us to store every piece of information under certain categories, thus "prevent[ing] the [information, or] representation from circulating freely within our cognitive system" (Zunshine 2006, 50). In their view, "metarepresentation" is not just a means of classifying information or representations, but a fundamental tool of our evolved cognitive architecture that is needed every time context-dependent information is required—as is the case with ToM.

Cognitive evolutionary psychologists have posited a human "improvisational intelligence" (Cosmides and Tooby 2007, 242) malleable enough to select the relevant information to deal with a potentially infinite number of challenges. This cognitive system relies a great deal on "information based on relationships that [are] only 'true' temporarily, locally or contingently, rather than universally and stably" (Cosmides and Tooby 2000, 57). Consequently, a potentially unlimited amount of information becomes available for a potentially unlimited number of uses. But this, too, has its "dark side." This expanded horizon of information creates "a vastly expanded risk of possible misapplications" inasmuch as information that might be useful in a particular set of conditions might be "false, misleading, or harmful outside of the scope of those conditions" (58). As Cosmides and Tooby put it, "[i]nformation only gives an advantage when it is relied on inside the envelope of conditions to which it is applicable" (58). It is therefore essential that we rely on a "scope-syntax"⁷ to identify which information is useful (or "true") for each particular occasion or scope (to enclose it in the "right envelope," so to speak), allowing the system to decouple uncertain or contingent information from certain or unconditioned, scope-free information. Otherwise, we would behave as the "naïve realist,"⁸ for whom, in absence of metarepresentational capacities for decoupling, "the world as it is mentally represented is taken for the world as it really is" (Cosmides and Tooby 2000, 60).

Every piece of information is for the "naïve realist" an "architectural truth" that is "allowed to migrate (or be reproduced) in an unrestricted or scope-free fashion (...) and to interact with any other [bits of information] in the system" (60-61). Conversely, our metarepresentational capacity "tags" our information/representations in different ways⁹ in order to render them available *only* to the temporal, local, contingent conditions where they

⁶ I am of course borrowing Genette's distinction between perspective or focalization ("who sees") and narration ("who speaks").

⁷ The concept refers to a "system of procedures, operators, relationships, and data handling formats that regulate the migration of information among subcomponents of the human cognitive architecture" (Cosmides and Tooby 2000 60). Metarepresentation is one of the fundamental tools that allow such system to function properly.

⁸ Cosmides and Tooby conceive of naïve realism as "the ancestral condition of all animal minds, and the default condition for the human mind as well" (2000, 60).

⁹ Cosmides and Tooby mention, among others, truth-value tags, source-tags (which include self vs. others; vision vs. memory, etc), scope-tags, time-and-place tags, reference tags (2000, 59).



will be needed and to prevent them from interacting horizontally with information that is tagged differently. Failure to tag the information—to “metarepresent”—increases the risk of misapplications of that information, which is then indiscriminately stored within our cognitive system as architectural truths and may thus be misleading and even harmful in everyday social cognition.

Now, what happens when, as readers of *The Age of Innocence*, we fail to correctly tag the representations we encounter according to their relevant sources? How can this affect the reader’s mind-reading (or misreading) of May? Being highly context-dependent, ToM relies a great deal on our metarepresentational capacity. Consequently, like theory of mind, metarepresentation deeply informs our interaction with literary texts. When we attribute mental states to the outward behavior of fictional characters, it is essential that we keep track of the sources of the information originating our representations. More so when such information will be integrated and transformed through inferences from which we will derive conclusion to regulate our own behavior—or to interpret other’s behavior. When dealing with fiction, as Lisa Zunshine argues, it is therefore crucial that we keep track of the sources of our representations, to discriminate our own representations from other characters’ or the narrator’s. We need to have a certain idea “of who thought, wanted and felt what, and when they thought it” (Zunshine 2006, 60). Otherwise, the reader will necessarily behave as a “naïve realist,” unable to draw any distinction between the (fictional) world as it is represented and the (fictional) world as it really is, to paraphrase Cosmides and Tooby.

If, as I have begun to suggest, in *The Age of Innocence* this metarepresentational ability is significantly compromised by a fluid focalization that covers up and confuses the tracks of the sources, the reader will have a hard time making out *who* thought, wanted and felt *what*. In this way, when the reader sees May depicted as “[t]hat terrifying product of the social system [Archer] belonged to and believed in” (Wharton 40), “the ‘meta’ part of the representation,” as Zunshine puts it, “that little ‘tag’ that specifies the source of the information” (2006, 50) drops and instead of the metarepresentation “Newland *thinks* that May is a product of the social system,” the reader will perceive the representation “May *is* a product of the social system.” Likewise, “Newland *believes* that his wife has led a conspiracy to end his affair with Ellen” will be perceived as “His wife *has led* a conspiracy to end his affair with Ellen” and so on. As we lose track of Newland as the source of the representations about May (and of our own inferences about her) such representations are perceived as “architectural truths” that hold any suspension of belief at bay. Instead of being processed as (meta)representations to be taken under advisement, they will be treated as architecturally true, being thus free to circulate in a scope-free fashion within our cognitive system and prone to corrupt our own subsequent inferences.

Why should the reader doubt that May is an artfully crafted product, that she lacks imagination or, conversely, that she is a shrewd conspirator, when the source of such inferences has been artfully hidden or inextricably conflated with the authoritative voice of the reliable narrator? Once that Wharton has fooled our capacity to store information under advisement, every statement will be processed as an architectural truth. Why should we doubt our own inferences when they are based on universal, architectural truths? Our mind-reading proclivities have been so deceitfully helped that they are paradoxically discouraged. We do not really need them: the truth is laid bare before our eyes—or so it seems. Whatever reasons Newland may have to underestimate his wife, the reader is trapped, unwittingly, in the same misreadings that Newland is, but there is more to it.

3. Losing Sight of Our Object—Is There a Mind to Read?

The fluctuating point of view adopted by Wharton’s narrator, I have argued, impairs the reader’s metarepresentational capacity thereby compromising her theory of mind. Since ToM is highly context-dependent we as readers will look for textual cues for our mind-reading activity. But when our metarepresentational abilities are not functioning properly, when we have been lured into believing that certain bits of information are undisputable truths rather than partial representations, we are unable to “discriminate among the streams of information” (Zunshine 2006, 60) in order to achieve a successful and correct ToM. Indeed, we might be even dissuaded from doing ToM at all—we don’t really need it.

However, the strategy described above works along with a second narrative device to potentiate the reader’s obfuscation vis-à-vis May’s mind. If mind-reading is crucial for our engagement with fictional texts, its



reverse—what is commonly known as mind-blindness¹⁰—can also play an important and meaningful role. I am not here referring to any kind of neurobiological condition consisting in an inability to engage in ToM,¹¹ but rather to a distinct phenomenon that Blakey Vermeule describes as a “genre of cultural expression” (2002, 89). Even as we are creatures with a theory of mind, that is, we also practice mild forms of mind-blindness deliberately in everyday life to achieve certain social purposes. For merely trifling, practical reasons but also for more strategic ones such as exertion of power or emotional self-defense, we sometimes prefer not to acknowledge (certain) minds. But does this apply to literary worlds too? How can what Blakey Vermeule terms “situational mind blindness” (87) be achieved in literary texts?

If by “situational mind blindness” we mean a “trope of dehumanization” whose aim is “to deny other people the perspective of rational agency by turning them into animals, machines, or anything without a mind” (Vermeule 2002, 87),¹² this may be done in multiple different ways and for different reasons. As Vermeule puts it, “[p]eople’s ontological categories are limited: we distinguish between person, animal, tool, plant, and natural object” (90). However, such categories are at once ingrained and permeable and “[m]uch of the surface of cultural play depends on a quick blurring of the line between persons and things” (91).

In *The Age of Innocence*, we see this blurring of lines at work—what Vermeule calls “ontological violation” (91). Newland Archer repeatedly moves May out of the category of person with a mind of her own to the category of object—a “cunningly manufactured (...) artificial product” (Wharton 43). This strategic refusal to acknowledge May’s body as animated by a mind permeates the entire narrative even if in a disguised fashion for, as I have pointed out, we frequently see Newland allegedly reading May’s mind. There seems to be an inherent contradiction in reading a mind that is not: how are we to reconcile these two opposing tendencies? Newland’s ToM is often very accurate, or so we can imagine in the light of the final revelation in the novel—that May had “guessed and pitied.” However, as often as not his insightful mind-readings are closely followed by a dismissive thought report. Consider the scene in which Newland proposes to hasten their marriage. Surprisingly, May takes the proposal as a token of his doubts about the marriage:

May Welland rose also; as they faced each other she seemed to grow in womanly stature and dignity. Both were silent for a moment, as if dismayed by the unforeseen trend of their words: then she said in a low voice: “If that is it—is there someone else?” (146-47)

Newland is startled by the “quiet lucidity” (147) of his wife-to-be, more so when she declares ready to break off their engagement. His feelings are then directly conveyed to the reader:

His surprise at discovering that her fears had fastened upon an episode so remote and so completely of the past as his love-affair with Mrs. Thorley Rushworth gave way to wonder at the generosity of her view. There was something superhuman in an attitude so recklessly unorthodox, and if other problems had not pressed on him he would have been lost in wonder at the prodigy of the Wellands’ daughter urging him to marry his former mistress. But he was still dizzy with the glimpse of the precipice they had skirted, and full of a new awe at the mystery of young-girlhood. (149)

Far from dehumanization, far from ontological violation, one might say. Rather, what Newland reads in her outward demeanor is an all too human (or, superhuman) idea of his future wife. However, Newland’s insights

¹⁰ I am retaining the term “mind-blindness” because it is commonly accepted and used to refer to the inability to attribute mental states to others. However, it reductively uses disability as a metaphor for deficit—as if blindness implied total lack of perception. Perhaps a better term should be coined.

¹¹ The condition has most famously been associated to autism, in particular following the publication of Simon Baron-Cohen’s *Mindblindness* (with the subtitle “an essay on Autism and theory of mind”) in 1997. And the association lingers today, despite increasing contrary evidence—or at least, evidence that prevents its generalization. Zunshine’s original work on ToM was indeed based on Baron-Cohen’s theory, but her perspective on the relations between autism and theory of mind has since changed, as she explicitly writes in the acknowledgments to the 2012 of her *Why We Read Fiction*.

¹² This assertion is partially based upon the notion that animals do not have a mind—a notion that is being increasingly disputed within post-humanist Animal Studies.



and his mind-reading are soon to be obliterated once again by his reported thoughts:

But in another moment she seemed to have descended from her womanly eminence to helpless and timorous girlhood; and he understood that her courage and initiative were all for others, and that she had none for herself. It was evident that the effort of speaking had been much greater than her studied composure betrayed, and that at his first word of reassurance she had dropped back into the usual, as a too-adventurous child takes refuge in its mother's arms. (149-150)

This last paragraph annihilates whatever rational agency May might have shown some paragraphs before and draws her closer to the image of the innocent and unimaginative artificial product that Newland once and again gives of her. Through this or analogous mechanisms, Newland repeatedly moves May out of the category of rational person to anything virtually without a mind—from an object to a child incapable of autonomous and mature reasoning.

But there are more ways in which May is dispossessed of a readable mind. Throughout the novel, Newland emphatically portrays her as blind in sharp contrast with his own self-professed foresight. In an eloquent parallel with a peculiar animal, “the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them,” Newland doubts the efficacy of his own mentoring influence vis-à-vis his wife: “What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open [her eyes], they could only look out blankly at blankness?” (81). The recurring trope of May's unseeing eyes alludes to the emptiness of a mind unfit to see and to understand her surrounding world and widens the gap between herself and Newland, the (apparently) insightful seer. What is more significant, Newland insists on May's “hard bright blindness” (351) even after she had been portrayed as a shrewd woman conspiring for “the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt” (338). Accordingly, whatever agency May might have been assumed to have in that climactic point is again obliterated and the remaining image of her will be that of a woman “so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change” (351).

One by one then, every glimpse of rational agency in May has been wiped out. Even though she is apparently the main object of mind-reading, she has been systematically dispossessed of a mind to read. Newland, never mind how much time he spends guessing at his wife's mental states, does not seem to ultimate care for a mind that is not there to be read in the first place. And recall, with a metarepresentational capacity compromised by an oscillating focalization, we as readers will perceive and store Newland's dismissive thoughts, his representations of May, as architectural, universal truths. Newland's mind-blindness is highly contagious to the reader: Why should we care for May's mind?

4. Conclusion

As readers of *The Age of Innocence* we have been, through different means, mind-blinded—Or, as Martin Scorsese would have it, we have been “done in.” In the preceding pages I have tried to unmask how certain narrative techniques may play games with our cognitive proclivities and, indeed, do us in.

Wharton's novel has been traditionally considered as a novel of manners but it might be also be considered as what Blakey Vermeule calls “Machiavellian narrative,” texts that “put extra stress on our mind-reading capacities” (2010, 224) to engage in the “extremely complicated dynamics of social interactions” (214).¹³ However, *The Age of Innocence* seems to be a particular case of Machiavellian narrative that at once summons and dismisses, assists and teases our mind-reading capacities to decode the hieroglyphic dynamics of New York society. Edith Wharton capitalizes on a paradoxical combination between our natural inclination to read minds and our occasional indulgence in situational mind blindness, between our tendency

¹³ Interestingly, she describes “Machiavellian Narratives” as being either “a comedy of manners or a revenge tragedy—and sometimes both.” Also, these narratives tend to feature a character “who sees or thinks he sees farther than anybody else” (very much like Newland), a figure that Vermeule calls the “mastermind,” and one or more “blocking figures,” who are particularly “blind or unresponsive,” (very much like May). Vermeule also lists a set of devices that indicate that we are in the presence of “high narrative reflexivity” (222), such as games, letters, gossip, labyrinths, which resonate with the hieroglyphic world of *The Age of Innocence*.



to fill the gaps of the narrative, and our occasional liability to mistake partial representations for architectural truths. Wharton's narrator artfully teases and challenges our cognitive endowments, turning an apparently easy task of mind-reading into a deceitful, unacknowledged case of mind-blindness. How could we not underestimate May? The final surprise seems, then, genuine: it is not every day that you see an object turn into a mind.

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