

WHY WE READ FICTION

THEORY OF MIND AND THE NOVEL



*Lisa Zunshine*



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WHY DID PETER WALSH TREMBLE?

Let me begin with a seemingly nonsensical question. When Peter Walsh, a protagonist of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, unexpectedly visits Clarissa Dalloway "at eleven o'clock on the morning of the day she [is] giving a party," and, "positively trembling" and "kissing both her hands" (40), asks her how she is, how do we know that his "trembling" is to be accounted for by his excitement at seeing his old love again after all these years and not, for instance, by his progressing Parkinson's disease?

Assuming that you are a particularly good-natured reader of *Mrs. Dalloway*, you could patiently explain to me that had Walsh's trembling been occasioned by an illness, Woolf would have told us so. She wouldn't have left us long under the impression that Walsh's body language betrays his agitation, his joy, and his embarrassment and that the meeting has instantaneously and miraculously brought back the old days when Clarissa and Peter had "this queer power of communicating without words" because, reflecting Walsh's own "trembling," Clarissa herself is "so surprised, . . . so glad, so shy, so utterly taken aback to have [him] come to her unexpectedly in the morning!" (40). Too much, you would point out, hinges on our getting the emotional undertones of the scene right for Woolf to withhold from us a crucial piece of information about Walsh's health.

I then would ask you why is it that had Walsh's trembling been caused by an illness, Woolf would have had to explicitly tell us so, but as it is not, she simply takes for granted that we will interpret it as having been caused by his emotions. In other words, what allows Woolf to assume that we will automatically read a character's body language as indicative of his thoughts and feelings?

She assumes this because of our collective past history as readers, you perhaps would say. Writers have been using descriptions of their characters' behaviors to inform us about their feelings since time immemorial, and we expect them to do so when we open the book. We all learn, whether consciously or not, that the default interpretation of behavior reflects a character's state of mind, and every fictional story that we read reinforces our tendency to make that kind of interpretation first.<sup>1</sup>

Had this imaginary conversation about the automatic assumptions made by readers taken place twenty years ago, it would have ended here. Or it never would have happened—not even in this hypothetical form—because the answers to my naïve questions would have seemed so obvious. Today, however, this conversation has to continue on because recent research in cognitive psychology and anthropology has shown that not every reader can learn that the default meaning of a character's behavior lies with the character's mental state. To understand what enables most of us to constrain the range of possible interpretations, we may have to go beyond the explanation that evokes our personal reading histories and admit some evidence from our evolutionary history.

This is what my book does. It makes a case for admitting the recent findings of cognitive psychologists into literary studies by showing how their research into the ability to explain behavior in terms of the underlying states of mind—or *mind-reading* ability—can furnish us with a series of surprising insights into our interaction with literary texts. Using as my case studies novels ranging from Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* to Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*, I advance and explore a series of hypotheses about cognitive cravings that are satisfied—and created!—when we read fiction.

I divide my argument into three parts. The present part, "Attributing Minds," introduces the first key theoretical concept of this book: mind-reading, also known as Theory of Mind. Drawing on the work of Simon Baron-Cohen (*Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind*), I suggest that fiction engages, teases, and pushes to its tentative limits our mind-reading capacity. Building on the recent research of Robin Dunbar and his colleagues, I then consider one particular aspect of Woolf's prose as an example of spectacular literary experimentation with our Theory of Mind (hence, ToM). Finally, I turn to Steven Pinker's controversial analysis of Woolf in *The Blank Slate* to discuss the possibilities of a more profitable dialogue between cognitive science and literary studies.

The second part, "Tracking Minds," introduces my second theoretical mainstay: metarepresentationality. I base it on Leda Cosmides and John Tooby's exploration of our evolved cognitive ability to keep track of sources

of our representations (i.e., to metarepresent them). I begin by returning to the point made in the first part—which is that our ToM makes literature as we know it possible—to argue that the attribution of mental states to literary characters is crucially mediated by the workings of our metarepresentational ability. Fictional narratives, from *Beowulf* to *Pride and Prejudice*, rely on, manipulate, and titillate our tendency to keep track of *who* thought, wanted, and felt what and *when*. I further suggest that research on metarepresentationality sheds light on readers' enduring preoccupation with the thorny issue of the "truth" of literary narrative and the distinction between "history" and "fiction." I conclude with the case studies of two novels (Richardson's *Clarissa* and Nabokov's *Lolita*), showing how several overlapping and yet distinct literary traditions are built around the narratives' exaggerated engagement of our metarepresentational capacity.

The third part, "Concealing Minds," continues to explore the exaggerated literary engagement with our source-monitoring capacity by focusing on the detective novel. Following the history of the detective narrative over one hundred and fifty years, I show that the recurrent features of this genre, including its attention to material clues, its credo of "suspecting everybody," and its vexed relationship with the romantic plot, are grounded in its commitment to "working out" in a particularly focused way our ToM and metarepresentational ability. I conclude by arguing that the kind of cognitive analysis of the detective novel advocated by my study (and, indeed, the analysis of *any* novel with respect to its engagement of our Theory of Mind) requires close attention to specific historical circumstances attending the development of the genre.<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis on historicizing is in keeping with my broader view on the relationship between the "cognitive" and other, currently more familiar, approaches to literature. I do not share the feelings (be they hopes or fears<sup>3</sup>) of those literary critics who believe that cognitive approaches necessarily invalidate insights of more traditional schools of thought.<sup>4</sup> I think that it is a sign of *strength* in a cognitive approach when it turns out to be highly compatible with well-thought-through literary criticism, and I eagerly seize on the instances of such compatibility.<sup>5</sup> Given that the human mind in its numerous complex environments has been the object of study of literary critics for longer than it has been the object of study of cognitive scientists, I would, in fact, be suspicious of any cognitive reading so truly "original" that it can find no support in any of the existing literary critical paradigms.<sup>6</sup>

But, compatible with existing paradigms or not, any literary study that grounds itself in a discipline as new and dynamic as cognitive science is

today takes serious chances. In the words of cognitive evolutionary anthropologist Dan Sperber, “[O]ur understanding of cognitive architecture is [still] way too poor, and the best we can do is try and speculate intelligently (which is great fun anyhow).”<sup>7</sup> I proceed, then, both sobered by Sperber’s warning and inspired by his parenthetical remark. Every single one of my speculations resulting from applying research in cognitive psychology to our appetite for fiction could be wrong, but the questions that prompted those speculations are emphatically worth asking.