

## The scrambling consciousness of Blindsight headquotes

“Imagine you are Siri Keaton” (Watts 25) is a metaphor for approaching Blindsight by Peter Watts, where one might recognize patterns symbolized by these quotes. The quotes mark the beginning of each chapter and act as a transitional phrase, for example, joining Siri’s flashback to his childhood to his stasis resurrection aboard the Theseus. Initially, the quote provides a sort of blindsight, a phenomenon where blind patients with no vision can unconsciously guess the shape of something (Werth 1). Similarly, these quotes Watts provides may enable us to tap into our unconscious and, even without reading the chapter, have a foreshadowed vision of what will happen, making the transition between chapters easier and allowing us to categorize each chapter into pieces similar to how protagonist Siri compartmentalizes things using algorithms without consciously understanding them (Watts 18). However, through reading the corresponding chapter, we gain better insight into the meaning of the quotes or what may functionally be algorithms that structure the novel and its message.

The quote preceding the prologue, “Try to touch the past. Try to deal with the past. It’s not real. It’s just a dream” by Ted Bundy (Watts 17), invokes in us a first instinctual impression that the prologue, and possibly the entire novel, will be about Siri, a broken person characterized by his lost empathy and humanity symbolized by a pre-operation childhood past. This is shown by Siri observing and rationalizing himself into saving Robert Paglino from childhood bullies and also when Paglino states, “I think you did die... I think Siri died, they scooped him out and threw him away... You’re not the same. Ever since” (Watts 20). This Ship of Theseus scenario, or question that if parts of an object or person are replaced, are they still the same person (Yavuz 8), relates to the quote regarding a lost, inaccessible past. Blindsight is the unconscious processing of visual stimuli (Werth 17), and the quote, which is visually structured in a different

font and format at the beginning of each chapter, causes us to process the plot that follows in the shape of the quote's themes, even if those themes might only be half-truth assumptions or Siri's perception of them. We are forced to interpret the rest of the chapter in terms of the quote and can't escape Siri's associations with Ted Bundy when he defends Paglino using violence. Had we not seen the quote, our conscious perception of Siri may have been of a reluctant hero and a victim of personality-altering surgery rather than a possible serial killer.

This form of out-of-story narration helps in the transition between two unrelated themes as we get to the next quote, "Blood makes noise" by Susanne Vega (Watts 20). With the sudden shifting of setting, the quote is a guidepost, preparing our unconscious for the next theme of blood and how it relates to resurrection, sociopaths, and vampires. The quote refers to a song with the same name, with notable sections also including "It's a ringing in my ear...And I can't really hear you in the thickening of fear" and "But there's something in my blood...Denies the memory of the acts" (Vega). Through the theory of the quote tapping into our unconscious, Watts may have been trying to invoke a gothic feeling of resurrection with the 1992 song rhythmically incorporating rock percussion instruments that simulate the beating of a heart and the circulation of blood, though this is a lost cultural reference incorporated into a 2006 novel. As Siri and his team comprising Isaac Szpindel, Susan James, Amanda Bates are all resurrected (Watts 27), you can almost feel the melody of Vega's song playing in the background as they rasp to life while being rhythmically pumped by blood. Absent is the leader Jukka Sarasti, a vampire whose silence could be effectively replaced by Vega's song as a leitmotif, drawn to their blood and fear as quoted by Siri, "I could have sworn I smelled raw meat on his breath" (Watts 32). The example provided shows that our consciousness draws patterns to the quotes depending on our cultural references, but like Siri, we might be in our head too much and assume things

without sufficient evidence. Instead, when we observe the headquote retrospectively after reading the chapter, its role may be simply transitional, but it is because of cultural references to Ted Bundy and Susanne Vega that our conscious scrambles our understanding.

A significant event in the novel where everything changes is the introduction of the Fireflies, which is preceded by the chapter quote, “When it is dark enough, you can see stars” by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Watts 36). More significantly than the previous quotes by Bundy and Vega, the theme of this quote is strictly correlated with what happens in the chapter that supports the theory where the headquotes summarize the plot of the chapter. An example in the chapter is where Siri’s mother Helen possibly places herself as the star of her virtual utopia, in which “She’d built no windows into the world she occupied...” and “...There was nothing in there but her” (Watts 38). Possibly an even more important example is the alien first contact with the Fireflies, making everything look dark in comparison and acting like falling stars, “...the whole planet had been caught in some great closing net, the knots of its mesh aglow with St. Elmo’s fire. It was beautiful. It was terrifying” (Watts 40). We commonly attribute the theme of the quote to optimism with seeing hope in the darkest situations. In the chapter, it takes on a different theme, showing that it isn’t until facing the darkest or most impactful situations that everything else is put into perspective. This is shown where “Somehow, though, the presence of real aliens had changed the dynamics of the equation. Mere observation didn’t satisfy any more” (Watts 42) and “...It had cost us so much, this overnight inversion of global priorities, these breakneck measures making up for lost initiative” (Watts 46). The dark, world-changing situation also makes Siri’s father drop his loyalty to his work’s confidentiality, “Because when my father went on the job, he went dark. He never called his family” (Watts 48), and almost makes Siri emotional and empathically connect to his father: “I love you, son. Where are you?

Are you coming back?” (Watts 51). The headquotes have the role of summary while also showing Siri’s interpretation of events and possibly his self-inadequacy as a synthesis compared to the rest of the Theseus’s talented star crew in the quote, “Maybe the Singularity happened years ago. We just don’t want to admit we were left behind” (Watts 53). Throughout the rest of the novel, the quotes might give insight into the assumptions that Siri holds but aren’t always accurate, and, through our conscious interpretation, interfere with the reality of events in Blindsight.

### Works Cited

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