



Literary Studies

# An Overview of Darwinian Literary Studies: A New Science-Based Approach to Literature

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**A B S T R A C T**

This article discusses a newly emerging branch of literary criticism, Darwinian literary studies, an approach with a serious ambition to change the landscape of literary studies. It seeks to outline some of the approach's key contributions, such as explanations of possible origins of narrative and adaptive functions of literature as well as novel ways of interpreting individual works. This piece of writing also explores the controversies surrounding the approach, namely the stance that the approach takes against the postmodernist establishment and the criticism it receives. Regarding both the main ideas and the controversies, this paper seeks to answer and whether or not this approach is useful or relevant at all in today's modern world.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1980s, literary studies have been dominated by approaches such as deconstruction, new historicism, feminism, queer theory, and postcolonialism. All of them see culture as a site of power struggles between the ruling group and the marginalized one. With the spirit of their underlying philosophy, post-structuralism, each approach celebrates the plurality of meanings and "liquid" identities as an attempt to resist dominant ideologies. Culture, meanings, and identities are constructions, and the way to resist tyranny is to be aware of the "constructedness" of everything. Although appears nihilistic, poststructuralism does help promote pluralism, tolerance, equality, and progressive "cultural" politics.

In the following decade emerged an opposing alternative trend called Darwinian literary studies or literary Darwinism. Its proponents, such as Joseph Carroll and Jonathan Gottschall, consider contemporary literary studies, with its insistence on relativity and their obscure postmodernist jargons, to be in deep crisis. They believe humans possess shared dispositions that limit and inform cultures, challenging the poststructuralist idea of cultural relativity. For them, any approach that does not

take into account this objective reality will fail to explain literature. Carroll even claims that the field of literary studies, under the influence of post-structuralism, is "unable to contribute in any useful way to the serious world of adult knowledge" (Carroll, 2011b, p. 277).

Darwinian literary studies, as the name suggests, is influenced by Charles Darwin's evolutionary biology. To be more precise, this approach draws on sociobiology and evolutionary psychology in that it posits that like biological organs, the human mind has "evolved through an adaptive process using natural selection" (Carroll, 2011b, p. 7). Culture in general and literature, in particular, are the products of the evolved mind and are the results of our species adapting to the world. Literature, narrative, and fiction contribute to the survival of this species. They are also understood as the medium in which human nature is reflected; the basic human tendencies to produce offspring, to avoid dangers, to gain power, and to make alliances, for example, will always be the main themes of literary works.

Literary Darwinists have huge claims on the future of literary studies and humanities. With the slogan from the world-renowned evolutionary biology figure E. O. Wilson, "science and the humanities

unite!” (Wilson, 2005, p. vii), they promote a paradigm shift in humanities, and this means that they are challenging the dominance of post-structuralism. For some literary Darwinists, the new approach is not just one of the approaches available in literary theory and criticism, but it will *absorb and supplant every other form of literary study (and) will assimilate all the existing concepts in literary studies* (Carroll, 2011b, p. 84).

With such a large claim concerning the future of the humanities and given its role as an alternative method to the mainstream post-structuralism, literary Darwinism has yet to enjoy a strong following. A discussion of the approach and the mapping of its ideas are necessary, and this paper will try to do so. It is hoped that the discussion of this theory answers the questions that arise from the controversy of this claim. What does literary Darwinism have to offer regarding the explanation of literature (in this case the origins of literature, its adaptive function, and interpretative methods)? If it is a threat to poststructuralism, is this approach also a threat to its humanistic concerns like diversity and tolerance? Can a science-based approach to literature give us more than explanation and offer us values? Literary Darwinism must answer these questions satisfactorily if it were to be considered at all.

Before going over the theories and addressing the questions, it helps to look at the position of Literary Darwinism in the landscape of literary studies. Although the movement has significantly grown since their early days in the 1990s, it has never entered the academic mainstream. One reason is perhaps the movement’s unique belief of human nature which is at odds with prevailing concepts in literary studies. The literary Darwinists are also openly critical of the status quo, believing that the prestige of literary criticism was waning and that the dominant “critical schools of thoughts presented nothing more than a series of fashion statements devoid of self-correctiveness” (Parish, 2014, p. 649). The movement is never short of critics themselves. Among them is Jonathan Kramnick who wrote an article aptly called, “Against Literary Darwinism”. Kramnick believes that “literary Darwinism has surprisingly little to say about literary texts or forms” (Kramnick, 2011, p. 344) and Darwinian interpretations insist on the same, overused Darwinian themes: “The Darwinian saga somehow becomes the very story of most fictions”

(Kramnick, 2011, p. 344).

Despite the criticisms, literary Darwinists keep marching on. Some releases enjoyed success as popular books, especially Jonathan Gottschall’s *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (2012) which was a New York Times Editor’s Choice Selection (Eagleman, 2012). *The New York Times* have also covered this movement and its ideas with the 2005 article “The Literary Darwinists” by D.T. Max. The movement has also attracted some scientific journal magazines, such as *Science* magazine which featured “Red in Tooth and Claw Among the Literary” in May 2011 and *Nature* with “Textual Selection” (2006). There have been journals dedicated solely to literary Darwinism and related fields; the most recent one being *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* (Academic Studies Press, 2022).

## II. ADAPTIVE FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE

Literary Darwinism is perhaps the only approach to literature that can effectively shed light on the origin of narrative. It’s not surprising that “adaptation” is the keyword here. In Darwinian point of view, the existence of literature or narrative arts in general is closely linked to problem of adaptation or survival. Narrative is a tool that helps our species to survive, reproduce, and ultimately create civilizations.

Narrative here can be compared to organs such as the human’s thumb and the elephant’s trunk. Each organ is the result of the accumulation of the adaptation process, and they still exist now because they are useful for the survival of each species. In other words, the thumb in humans and the elephant’s trunks are adaptive. The same can be said of universal human behaviours. Why humans love to play, share stories, draw, or perform rituals can be explained within the context of adaptability. Just like biological organs, each of mental features and tendencies was and is being shaped by the process of adaptation called natural selection. These universal features of our species (including creating art and stories) are adaptive; they help us adapt and survive.

There are several explanations of the adaptive functions of narrative. On this occasion we shall outline three main theories, namely 1) narrative as the main cognitive structure, 2) narrative as a problem simulator, and 3) narrative as social glue.

In the first theory, the narrative is seen as our

species' way to give meanings and shapes to reality. This theory is proposed by the father of Sociobiology E. O. Wilson in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998). According to Wilson, with extraordinary mental capacity, humans can see many possibilities and anticipate future events (e.g., if I plant this seed, then it will grow) (Wilson, 1998). However, this useful cognitive ability poses problems. With so many possibilities and lack of information about the reality and future, humans are faced with confusion, uncertainty, and fear (Is it going to grow? What if it does not rain?). This is when art in general, or narrative specifically, plays its role. By creating imaginative stories, we give ourselves explanations about the present, the past and the future; and with that comes certainty and confidence (If I sacrifice my cattle to god A, then it will surely rain). For Wilson, religions and arts were created to avoid uncertainty and confusion (Carroll, 2004, p. xx). In the same vein, Joseph Carroll argues that "*Literary works can be understood as products of an adaptive need to make sense of the world in emotionally and imaginatively meaningful ways—to produce cognitive order*" (Carroll, 2004, p. 162). Without stories, a human being would not know what her life purposes were, as well as her place in the universe. Humans would also hesitate in interpreting problems and events in their lives if there were no narrative structure to explain the puzzling sea of reality.

The second theory assumes that narrative's main function is to "*provide information for adaptively relevant problems*" (Carroll, 2011a, para. 13). One of the proponents of this theory is the renowned psychologist, Steven Pinker. He argued that by simulating what might happen, narrative helps us see the possible causes and effects of actions. Brian Boyd summarizes Pinker's argument as follows: "*Narrative, he concedes, may serve an adaptive function in enabling us to develop scenarios to test possible courses of action and their consequences without risking real-world harm*" (Boyd, 2005, p. 153). In this point of view, reading literature is an exercise in which we witness and learn from fictional characters about life problems.

The third theory emphasizes the social function of the narrative. The main assumption is that art and narrative provide "adhesives" for individuals in order to form communities. A community here can be interpreted from a hunting group in prehistoric times, to the global community in the 21st century.

Each community needs stories that they believe in. The stories act as "glue" and allow people to unite in responding to life's challenges. Two examples can be given here: the colonized people in Asia and Africa probably would not have felt the need to unite without a narrative named nationalism, and a great civilization like the ancient Greek may not have been created without a narrative in the form of mythology. The narrative also provides the values that a group of Homo Sapiens believes in; something that facilitates cooperation. Two figures who support the view of "social cohesion" is Jonathan Gottschall and Ellen Dissanayake. The former argues in his book *The Storytelling Animal* that the function of stories is to bind society "*by reinforcing a set of values and strengthening the ties of common culture*" (Gottschall, 2012, p. 137).

### III. INTERPRETIVE TOOL: HUMAN NATURE AND LITERATURE

The most common interpretative method in Literary Darwinism is the one developed and promoted by Joseph Carroll in which literature is seen as the reflection human nature as understood by evolutionary psychology. Its basic assumption is that humans as a species share human nature, which is believed to be the "*source and subject of literature*" (Carroll, 2004, p. vi). In analyzing literary works, a literary critic looks at how this shared nature plays a key role in understanding characters' behaviours and the overall meanings of works.

In applying this method, we are expected to have a fairly good understanding of evolutionary psychology. Humans are understood to be creatures with basic motivations which they share with mammals or other primates, such as avoiding harm, breeding, and gaining status. Humans also have their distinctive features such as creating art and stories and accumulating knowledge. In *Reading Human Nature*, Carroll lists basic human motivations from the perspective of evolutionary psychology:

- Survival (fending off imminent physical danger or privation)
- Finding a short-term romantic partner
- Finding or keeping a spouse
- Gaining or keeping wealth
- Gaining or keeping power
- Gaining or keeping prestige
- Obtaining an education or culture

- Making friends and forming alliances
- Nurturing/fostering offspring or aiding other kin
- Aiding non-kin /
- The building, creating or discovering something
- Performing routine tasks to gain a livelihood

(Carroll, 2011b, p. 157)

A literary critic using this method will explain the characters and conflicts in literary works by relating them to universal human motivations. In other words, literature is read in the context of human nature. John Whitfield sums up this method as follows:

*“Literary Darwinists believe that literature reflects a universal human nature shaped by natural selection, and as a result, read texts regarding animal concerns such as mate choice, relations between kins and social hierarchies”* (Whitfield, 2006, p. 388).

With this method, literary Darwinism has offered new interpretations of great works. For instance, the war in Homer’s *Illiad* is interpreted as a conflict motivated by reproductive interests (Whitfield, 2006, p. 388). The relationship between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is consistent with Darwinian ideas: a) woman seeks a high-status male to ensure the success of raising a child later, b) in romance, two lovers each spend time testing and assessing whether the partner is for the short term or long-term relationship, c) parents want their children to marry due to their genetic interests (Max, 2005, p. 1).

It is tempting to say that literary Darwinian interpretation of this kind overgeneralizes human motivations and overlooks historical details. However, what it actually does is quite the opposite. Seeing how universal human themes (let’s say violent conflicts among males or parenting) are manifested differently throughout the world and across time may very well inform us about the richness of our history. In short, human nature *enhance* our understanding of historical and cultural variations. This is demonstrated by a wide range of literary darwinists’ works, most notably Brian Boyd’s brilliant *Origin of Stories* (2010).

#### IV. ANGUS FLETCHER’S “ANOTHER” LITERARY DARWINISM

An alternative method that deserves serious

attention is the one developed by Angus Fletcher. Unlike Joseph Carroll, Fletcher does not rely on findings of evolutionary psychology. He places more emphasis on ethical functions of literature and art in a Darwinian world of competitions, uncertainty, personal interests, and conflicts. Drawing inspirations from the famous pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, Fletcher in *Evolving Hamlet: Seventeenth Century English Tragedy and the Ethics of Natural Selection* formulated a type of literary Darwinism that might not necessarily conflict with the current interests of the current trend of humanities. He makes three claims regarding art and literature:

*“First, that art offers an effective means of communicating the experience of ethical problems; second, that this communication can encourage communities to practice pluralism; and third, that this plural practice has a progressive purpose in an ever-changing physical world.”* (Fletcher, 2011, p. 12)

Fletcher believes that like evolved organs of a living being, works of art exist to tackle adaptive problems. They explore real human problems especially specific ethical issues by communicating them. The process of communicating the problems (which invites readers to look and a range of possibilities and to see from different angles) and the ability of works art of showing the various solutions to them (instead of just one), in turn, will foster pluralism. This will ultimately lead to a better, tolerant, and progressive society.

In this view, art or narrative deals not only with what is universal (human nature and struggles of existence), but also specific ethical issues. Today’s world is faced with intolerance, violence, greediness, the dissemination of false information, and hatred; it is only natural that contemporary works explore and tackle these issues by promoting pluralism, understanding, critical thinking, and tolerance.

In his article “Another Literary Darwinism”, a response both to Kramnick’s criticism and Carroll’s brand of Darwinian literary studies, Fletcher again promotes this moral function of literature. He posits that the function of literary Darwinism should be: “to identify literary forms that increase our ethical range by inhibiting intolerant behaviors” (Fletcher, 2014, p. 468). In this view, literature is seen as cultural and ethical response to the harsh Darwinian reality and homo sapiens’ selfish behavior such

as, in today's context, hostility to immigrants and religious absolutism.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

While literary Darwinism occupies a marginal position in literary studies, it undoubtedly has merits and strengths. One can even say that it has "adaptive features" that will allow it to survive and thrive in the world of literary criticism.

The first notable feature is its convincing and flattering account of the nature of literature. Literary Darwinism does not only offer us powerful explanations of the origin and the adaptive functions of art and literature, but it also puts them on a high pedestal by claiming that they are central to the survival of our species. Such status is probably what the discipline needs right now. Critics and the public must realize that the claim that literature matters (that it transforms lives and shapes society) now has scientific justifications.

The second strength is its new methods of interpretation that focus on human nature and the uses of literature. Joseph Carroll's method allows us to see the universal and underlying motivations

that underlie literary characters' actions. Angus Fletcher's method makes it possible for us to address specific ethical and social problems in Darwinian framework.

While Carroll's method seems to be guilty of overgeneralization and oversimplification of human desires, it actually provides readers with the widest possible context of reading: our species and its place in the universe. Fletcher's method is surprisingly humanistic, a trait that it shares with other methods of interpretations in the humanities, proving that this approach may not be so alien after all. The fact that Fletcher seeks to promote tolerance and pluralism is a testimony to this approach's relevance in today's divided world.

Poststructuralism may outshine this new approach and perhaps the claims that it will subsume other approaches might seem grandiose to some. However, it is hard to deny that it is a worthy addition to the ever-evolving discourse of literature. One can even say that it offers literary studies what it needs right now: a solid scientific reasoning of literature's worth, a tool to connect what seems to be endless variations of human cultural practices, and laser-like focus on tackling the world's evil.

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