

Literature

Mads Larsen

Introduction

How does our evolutionary past influence how we experience plot, character, politics, and morals? In *Emotion Review*, Manvir Singh investigates the ubiquitous “sympathetic plot” to offer his opinion on fiction in the adaptation-versus-byproduct debate. In *EBS*, Ania Grant and Daniel Kruger expand on the Jane Austen study of Carroll et al. (2012) by gathering character evaluations of the protagonist both early and late in *Emma*. In *Frontiers in Psychology*, Mads Larsen explores how agonistic structure in Nordic fiction informs the region’s preference for social democracy. For the same Research Topic in *FiP*, Teasdale et al. experiment with theater audiences to establish that character identification correlates with moral approval.

Singh, Manvir. 2021. “The Sympathetic Plot, Its Psychological Origins, and Implications for the Evolution of Fiction.” *Emotion Review* 13 (3): 183–98. doi:10.1177/17540739211022824.

Made-up stories often follow what Manvir Singh terms “the sympathetic plot.” A goal-directed protagonist overcomes obstacles to win rewards, an outcome that evokes sympathetic joy from readers, listeners, or viewers. To make these audiences invest in the story, protagonists are portrayed as ideal cooperative partners. Such characters being orphaned or suffering misfortune appeals to brain mechanisms that make us want to help them. Singh argues that *Homo sapiens*’s capacity for fiction is not an adaptation but a byproduct. Similarly, the ubiquity of the

sympathetic plot across time and culture stems not from its utility. The capacities that make such stories pleasurable evolved for learning and cooperation but were co-opted for entertainment. Singh holds that most fiction merely masquerades as useful information. He competently situates his argument in more than a century of scholarship and offers literary examples from across the world. His conclusion is not the final word in the adaptation-byproduct debate.

Ania Grant and Daniel J. Kruger. 2021. Advanced publication, September 13, 2021. “‘Such an Alternative as This Had Not Occurred to Her’: The Transformation of Jane Austen’s *Emma* as Understood from an Evolutionary Perspective.” *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*. doi:10.1037/ebs0000271.

With the protagonist of *Emma* (1815) being so unlikely, why is Jane Austen’s novel so popular and acclaimed? Ania Grant and Daniel Kruger open up their evolutionary tool kit to examine Emma’s journey toward likeability—and literary immortality. While she starts off with traits and strategies more commonly found with antagonists, her psychological transformation aligns her with what readers expect from protagonists. Grant and Kruger share 300-word descriptions of Emma with 221 undergraduates at an American university. Emma from early in the book is evaluated differently from Emma near the end. She changes along all Big Five dimen-

sions, growing more agreeable, conscientious, and open, while her extraversion and neuroticism diminish. By shifting to a slower life strategy, Emma becomes more prosocial and thus likeable. These findings align with those of Carroll et al. (2012) who assigned only one score based on each novel as a whole. By gathering evaluations of Emma early and late in the story, the authors engender interesting insights into how Austen turned an antagonistic character into a protagonist with enduring appeal.

Mads Larsen. 2021. "The Lutheran Imaginary That Underpins Social Democracy." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12:746406. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2021.746406.

As Western politics move toward the cliff, Scandinavian social democracy is increasingly upheld as an alternative that could reform capitalism. Income equality, low-conflict politics, and prosperous economies with generous benefits contribute to Nordics being among the happiest people in the world. Mads Larsen accounts for how the Nordic Model is made possible by the region's Lutheran past. The Protestant creed that Nordics embraced in the sixteenth century produced norms and values that carried into the modern era, making possible social democracy's distinguishing features: fascist corporatism and socialist redistribution. Larsen analyzes works of fiction to substantiate that the Nordic Model's means are unlikely to be cross-culturally salient. The region's storytelling—from fairy tales to literature, film, and reality TV—embodies an agonistic structure of egalitarianism. Eighteen American remakes of Scandinavian films attest to how *the Scandinavian super underdog*, who expresses the social democratic ethos, is less compelling in more individualistic cultures. Larsen argues that social democracy, while its means may offend the cultural intuition of

non-Lutherans, produces an outcome that aligns with our species' fission-fusion baseline. Populations who seek greater equality should therefore consider the Nordic Model—even if its particulars feel instinctually wrong. Analyzing fiction can help us see how a culture's religious past imposes prejudices that can prevent populations from achieving the goals they desire.

Mads Larsen. 2021. "Evolutionary Insights Into a Maladapted Viking in *Gísli saga*." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 120 (3): 302–25.

The protagonist of *Gísli saga* has long puzzled scholars. The superior young man leaves feuds and Viking raids behind to farm in Iceland. When romantic jealousy triggers a new feud, Gísli acts in accordance with the honor code that dominated in older kinship societies, but that in Iceland leads to his demise. Scholars using a variety of frameworks have failed to make sense of Gísli's self-destructiveness. By applying the evolutionary framework of *devoted actors*, Larsen compares Gísli's psyche to those of suicide terrorists and other particularly dedicated combatants. Fighting groups under prolonged mortal threat can develop *identity fusion*, a visceral form of in-group identification. When such groups unite around *sacred values*, members can become devoted actors willing to sacrifice anything—even after the group has disbanded. This framework explains Gísli's behavior throughout the second half of the saga. Larsen argues that viewing the protagonist as such a devoted actor makes it obvious which of the saga's two extant prologues is the more authentic one, a position that future translators should adopt.

Ben Teasdale, Laurie Maguire, Felix Budelmann, and Robin Dunbar. 2021. "How Audiences

Engage with Drama: Identification, Attribution and Moral Approval.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12:762011. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2021.762011.

When you enjoy fiction, are you more morally approving of characters with whom you identify? Ben Teasdale, Laurie Maguire, Felix Budelmann, and Robin Dunbar seek to answer this and other questions in an experiment on 83 participants, mostly university students, who watch the opening scenes of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Sophocles’s *Antigone*. The researchers find that audience identification with a character correlates with their moral approval of the character’s actions. Whether identification or approval comes first remains unclear. How theater audiences understand character motivation does not correlate with their identification and approval. Teasdale et al. suggest that such objectivity helps people, in real-life contexts, offer sensible advice also to those to whom they are emotionally bound. Both plays were staged in two different versions shown to distinct

groups. The words characters spoke were the same, but directors and actors sought to portray certain characters as good in one staging while bad in the other. This had little effect on audience judgment. While in real life how something is said often matters more than the words themselves, that was not the case in this experiment. The researchers suggest that for live performance, the script matters more for how we perceive characters than what actor or director intervention does—at least in works by accomplished playwrights like Shakespeare and Sophocles. The article offers an impressive overview of relevant literature and convincingly situates its findings in this context.

Conclusion

This issue’s selection of evolutionary research on literature attests to the increasing usefulness of the field’s expanding tool kit. Empirical approaches to audience reception continue to fill gaps in our understanding of how our evolutionary past influences how we absorb fiction.

WORK CITED

Carroll, Joseph, et al. 2012. *Graphing Jane Austen: The Evolutionary Basis for Literary Meaning*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

