

Popular Culture

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Introduction

Darwinian perspectives can be used to examine any number of cultural products. Although most of the research, as seen here, focuses on literary products, other cultural entities such as plays, film, music, and sports are also ripe for investigation. Evolutionary analyses can also take on new depth and direction (as seen here) as pop culture products such as novels and plays are based on Darwinian ideas or even, in some cases, misunderstandings of evolutionary concepts.

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.

A number of researchers have argued for the adaptive value of storytelling while others have suggested that fiction plays more of a "cheese-cake" role (as does pornography), triggering a reward system meant to promote ancestral fitness goals. Singh argues that fiction, in particular the "sympathetic plot," engages two adaptive mechanisms. The first is our mechanism for learning and problem-solving, which is activated by a protagonist who successfully solves the problem they face. The second is the sympathetic joy evoked by the success of a protagonist who is seen as an ideal cooperative partner, and whose success is perceived as pleasurable (as if the consumer was helping a coalition member succeed). The ubiquitous nature of such narratives is highlighted and a number of testable predictions are offered.

Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, Jens, Anne Fiskaali, Henrik Høgh-Olesen, John A. Johnson, Murray Smith, and Mathias Clasen. 2021. "Do Dark Personalities Prefer Dark Characters? A Personality Psychological Approach to Positive Engagement with Fictional Villainy." *Poetics* 85:101511. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101511.

This paper tests two competing hypotheses about positive engagement with villainous characters. One suggests that positive engagement with villains is best explained by the ability of such characters to get things done: their agentic ability. The other is focused on explaining individual differences in the appeal of the villain, in particular the role of the Dark Triad in villain positivity. The results supported the second of these hypotheses, as psychopathy and Machiavellianism were significant predictors of villain positivity along with gender and age such that younger males reported higher levels of villain positivity (beyond what would be accounted for by higher levels of psychopathy and Machiavellianism among male participants). While some villains may be appealing to a broad audience despite their immoral behavior, some consumers may be *attracted* to villains because of their immorality, that is, attracted to traits they share.

Ania Grant and Daniel J. Kruger. 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* (Sep 13). <https://doi.org/10.1037/ebs0000271>.

Grant and Kruger bring an evolutionary perspective to the works of Jane Austen. In addition to analyzing *Emma* using evolutionary theory, they provide an analysis of the Big Five personality traits and how they are portrayed in the novel. This latter part builds on Grant's previous research (Grant 2020) suggesting that Austen is skilled at making her characters likable, even as they compete for status and mates. Emma stands out as the character's portrayal verges on antagonistic. Emma as a character transforms on several key personality traits as she navigates adaptive struggles, and these shifts in character make her a far more likable heroine. Interestingly, Grant and Kruger bolster their analysis with insights on personality change from the perspective of life history theory.

Kazzazi, Seyedeh Anahit. 2021. "Timberlake Wertenbaker's *After Darwin*: Identity and Ethics in the Interplay of Theatre and Science." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 10 (3): 54-61. doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.10n.3p.54.

Kazzazi provides an elaborate, multilayered analysis of Darwin and popular culture as she analyzes Darwin's theory as presented in Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *After Darwin*, which is itself the depiction of a play about Darwin featuring actors reacting to and embodying Darwinian concepts. This analysis is just as spiraling as it sounds, as Wertenbaker's play is meant to be an examination of Darwin's effect on popular culture portrayed in a play about Darwin himself. Kazzazi takes it a level further by discussing the effect the play has on

popular culture as well, including how Wertenbaker "not only suggests the durability of the theory of evolution but also its inseparability from human life: the fact that it defines our existence as human beings" (56). The play, and the analysis, have their shortcomings as they both lean into the perspective that evolution focuses more on selfishness than cooperation, but this competition lends itself well to the drama of the play.

Stow, Simon. 2021. "On Mockingbirds and Finches: Charles Darwin, Eugenics, and the Title of Harper Lee's Most Famous Novel." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* (July 13): 1-5. doi:10.1080/0895769x.2021.1945908.

Stow examines another interesting effect of Darwin on popular culture; that of the depiction of eugenics in Darwin's distant cousin, Harper Lee's, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Stow goes into extensive detail on eugenics in the novel and how Darwinism shaped the setting of early twentieth-century American South where it was written. It is not until late in the analysis that Stow clarifies Darwin's actual opinion on eugenics and social Darwinism, and Lee's probable misunderstanding of evolution and eugenics, but he makes the very important point that misunderstandings of Darwin's work can have deep, negative effects on culture, including the products of popular culture. Just as Darwinian theory can be used to interpret popular culture, misinterpretations can shift how popular culture views Darwinian theory.

Conclusion

This latest selection of articles is particularly interesting, as they themselves create a narrative. Singh examines the evolutionary basis of the allure of fiction, while Kjeldgaard-Christiansen

and colleagues investigate the allure of fictional villains and Grant and Kruger discuss how authors shift the personality traits (and life history strategies) of characters to make them more likable. Kazzazzi and Stowe both examine how the theory of natural selection, or the misperception of it, influences culture and cultural products. Together they paint a multifaceted perspective on the effects of evolution on fiction.

The idea of examining literary characters, not just through evolution, but through life history theory specifically is exciting. Future analyses of various characters, their life history, and their choices is needed, and the relationship between

a character's popularity and life history is particularly intriguing. In addition, little evolutionary literary research examines villains; this work seems to be done by a handful of researchers (Jonason et al. 2012; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2016). As most analyses are focused on heroes and their struggles, the allure of villains is an interesting direction. Finally, a more careful examination of the accuracy of depictions of Darwinian theory in works of popular culture is vital, as such works impact education on, and perception of, evolutionary theory. This is particularly important in academic and educational realms, as faculty will have to address misperceptions.

WORKS CITED

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