

Book Review

Bridging the Two Cultures

A review of *A Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* by Joseph Carroll. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004.

David P. Barash, Department of Psychology, University of Washington, Seattle, Wa. 98195, USA.
Email: dpbarash@u.washington.edu.

A few years ago, on a backpacking trip, my daughter Nanelle mentioned that she needed to write a paper on *The Aeneid*, which she was studying in her AP Latin class. She noted how difficult it was to say anything new about Virgil's masterpiece, which has probably been more studied and commented upon than any other work in the Western literary canon. I responded, mostly in jest, that I bet no one had yet attempted a Darwinian analysis. This turns out to have been the case. Moreover, the idea prospered and expanded into an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Barash and Barash, 2002), and now promises – or threatens – to morph into a book (Barash and Barash, in press).

In any event, my young co-author and I believed that we were blazing a new conceptual trail: despite C. P. Snow's famous warning, the "two cultures" of science and the humanities still remain mostly strangers to each other, and whereas literature has been approached from perspectives that are Freudian, Marxist, feminist, Foucaultian, and Derridian, giving rise to New Criticism, New Historicism, old-fashioned "close reading" and new-fangled postmodern approaches that don't seem to involve any genuine reading at all, we were not aware that anyone else was seriously pursuing "Darwinian lit-crit." How wrong we were!

After our *Chronicle* piece appeared, I was e-mailed by Joseph Carroll, who graciously welcomed my daughter and I into his band of happy warriors, laboring – albeit with little notice from either the literary or biological establishments – to reconcile literature and evolution. Or, perhaps I should say: laboring to make evident the connection that has always existed.

In any event, Joseph Carroll, an English professor at the University of Missouri, is doubtless the leading scholarly apostle of this new movement (Carroll, 1995), and the recent reprinting of some of his articles – to which a few new pieces have been added – is especially welcome. Like all collections of previously published manuscripts, *Literary Darwinism* has some flaws, mostly a tendency to be

repetitively redundant and repetitious (get it?). Carroll is not to be faulted for having reiterated the same points in different articles, especially when they originally appeared in different journals, and for an audience composed almost entirely of English professors for whom the very idea of natural selection is typically either anathema or simply foreign. But the current volume would have profited from more attentive editing, at least from the publisher.

There are a few other problems. For one, the volume demonstrates the real problem of bridging so wide a disciplinary gap: Essays on Matthew Arnold, for example, and extended discussion of Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (neither of which, frankly, I had ever heard of until reading Carroll's book) are liable to leave evolutionary psychologists unmoved and, indeed, untouched. At the same time, the latter are likely to have already read Pinker, Tooby, and E. O. Wilson, such that they won't get anything new from Professor Carroll. In short, what's new is at risk of being *so* new as to be downright arcane, and what's familiar is at risk of being so familiar as to be unnecessary. Another problem is that it is difficult for evolutionists to get excited about the suggestion – evidently earth-shaking for many of our colleagues in the humanities – that human beings are organisms and that they can usefully be seen in relationship to their environments. But I suppose there are also a few flat-earthers out there, who would benefit from a lesson in basic astronomy.

I am often on guard when encountering a whole-hearted embrace from those trained in other disciplines, suddenly experiencing evolutionary enlightenment. But Joseph Carroll is clearly a very quick study, whose grasp of evolutionary biology seems impeccable; I did not encounter a single false note. (One exception: his contention – in the course of a brilliant critique of the renowned Gould/Lewontin spandrel essay – that calcium is white, whereas in elemental form it is silvery, like sodium; but that is chemistry, not biology.) Carroll is at his best (and that is very good indeed) when debunking and constructively criticizing the errors of others, notably the puffery of postmodernists and the sly misrepresentations of Stephen Jay Gould. Indeed, his concluding essay is the best, most forceful and, indeed, biologically informed take-down of “spandrels” and the like that I have ever read. It alone is worth the price of *Literary Darwinism*, and can be read with great profit by biologists no less than by literary theorists.

I can only hope that literarily-inclined biologists such as myself will write as thoughtfully about literature as Carroll does about biology.

And to what end? When Alice was lost in Wonderland, she asked the Cheshire Cat:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where - " said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

" - so long as I get *somewhere*," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

It isn't clear exactly where Darwinian literary analysis will lead us, although a growing band of merry pilgrims – evolutionary as well as literary – are starting the journey (e.g., keep your eyes open for Wilson and Gottschall, in press). My guess is that these voyages will inject new vigor, as well as rigor, into the concept of human nature. What, we might ask, makes literature great ... or even good? I suspect that there are two basic components: first – and probably most difficult to assess or analyze, from a biological as well as aesthetic perspective – is the sheer artistry and, in especially notable cases, brilliance with which a verbal representation is made. Second – and most amenable to evolutionary assessment – is the degree to which the characters are at least minimally “believable.” After all, one of the most damning critiques to be made of a novel is that it is somehow unbelievable, which is to say that the characters must at least accord with some minimum standard of what most readers know, intuitively, to comprise the behavioral repertoire of *Homo sapiens*.

This is not to claim that fictional figures ought to behave with perfect fidelity to the various icons of sociobiologic reality: kin selection, parent-offspring conflict, male-male competition, female choice, and so forth. After all, they are fictional! And literature is not photo-journalism or descriptive anthropology. Noted literary critic Harold Bloom has emphasized that to be enduring, literature must have about it a degree of “strangeness,” something uncanny that somehow unsettles the reader, making him or her sit up and take notice. I agree, but with this modification: it must not be too strange, not so uncanny as to be beyond the scope of intuitive sociobiology. Augustine famously asked God to give him chastity, “but not yet.” Great literature may well have to give us strangeness ... but not too much.

References

- Barash, D. P. and Barash, N. R. (2002). Evolution and literary criticism. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Oct 18 B:7-9.
- Barash, D. P. and Barash, N. R. (in press) *Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.
- Carroll, J. (1995). *Evolution and Literary Theory*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press.
- Gottschall, J. and Wilson, D. S. (Eds.) in press. *Literature and the Human Animal*. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press.