

## Book Review

### Sexual Selection and the American Novel

A review of *Evolution and "the Sex Problem": American Narratives during the Eclipse of Darwinism* by Bert Bender. Kent State University Press, 2004.

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In the middle and late 1990s when I was pursuing a PhD in English, my fixed interest in evolution and human behavior was so outré that I quickly learned to avoid mentioning it to my peers and professors. My intellectual isolation was made bearable only by the new prevalence of email, which allowed me to hook up with kindred heretics around the world, and by a small handful of relatively obscure but thoroughly Darwinian works of literary scholarship. I learned much from Robert Storey's *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation* (Northwestern 1996) and from Joseph Carroll's landmark *Evolution and Literary Theory* (Missouri 1994), which combined a cruelly honed polemic against postmodernism with an inspiring call to situate literary scholarship within the emerging evolutionary paradigm. Though it lacked the revolutionary energy of Storey's and Carroll's offerings (Storey goes so far as to call Foucault an "ass" for his argument that man is a "recent invention" of the last several centuries, p. 59), I also took interest in Bert Bender's *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926* (Pennsylvania 1996). Bender documented the ways that late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century American novelists struggled to come to grips with the new Darwinian worldview, especially with the implications of the theory of sexual selection. Beyond these books and some scattered journal articles there was little in the world of contemporary literary scholarship that managed both to approach the Darwinian perspective on human behavior and psychology in an ideologically neutral way and to meaningfully incorporate some of its insights.

Now Bender has published, in *Evolution and "The Sex Problem": American Narratives During the Eclipse of Darwinism*, what could be (but isn't) called Part Two of *The Descent of Love*. In these two volumes, Bender has produced an exhaustive and impressively scholarly history of how major American fiction writers engaged in debates over Darwinism at a time when the whole world was reeling from the immediate impact of the "biological blow to human narcissism." Bender's thesis in *Evolution and "The Sex Problem"* is sweeping: he charges modern literary

historians and critics with a general failure to see that American writers were thoroughly preoccupied with problems raised by Darwinian—and various anti-Darwinian—theories of common descent. He begins: "American novelists have long explored human nature in the light of Darwinian thought. Indeed, aside from religious beliefs, no other idea or cluster of ideas has ever provoked so strong and sustained a literary response as Darwin's theory of evolution" (p. 1). And the authors weren't merely reflecting the debates. Rather, as active participants they were helping to shape and direct them. Each of the fifteen authors Bender surveys in *Evolution and "The Sex Problem"* were, as he says of Hemingway, "important contributor[s] to our culture's long meditation on the meaning of our common descent, of man's place in nature, and of the nature of the human mind" (p. 24). To give just one example, Bender portrays Jack London as a kind of bulldog for Darwin; one of his characters calls Henri Bergson (an early 20<sup>th</sup> century proponent of an alternative evolutionary scheme) a "charlatan" whose popularity derives from his having "rosied" over the disagreeable aspects of Darwinism (p. 96).

If Bender is right—if American writers circa 1890-1950 were so preoccupied by the host of "sex problems" raised by Darwinism generally and sexual selection theory specifically—why have modern scholars and critics largely failed to appreciate and remark upon it? I find Bender's response to this obvious question persuasive. He argues that modern literary scholars' general attitudes of disengagement and/or hostility toward the field of evolution and human behavior have caused them to overlook a major preoccupation of American novelists and to "badly" misunderstand certain novels (e.g., p. 77). To phrase Bender's case somewhat more bluntly than he does, modern literary scholars don't know enough about late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century debates over natural and sexual selection to notice them raging through the pages of period novels.

The main thesis of *Evolution and "The Sex Problem"* is persuasively argued and well supported. However, I believe that one significant methodological pitfall is inherent in Bender's project that he neither sufficiently acknowledges nor adequately confronts. *Evolution and "The Sex Problem"* is divided into twelve chapters, each one examining how specific authors channeled scientific and political debates over the significance of evolution. Bender's general pattern is to first seek to establish an authors' interest in the evolutionary debates before meticulously combing their fiction for evidence that the author had something to say on the matter. The potential pitfall of this methodology is wide and deep: much fiction that preceded the Darwinian revolution is nonetheless consistent with predictions of evolutionary models of behavior and psychology. If Darwinian theory is generally accurate in its fundamentals, and if successful fiction writers are good observers of human behavior and psychology, then literary depictions of human activity produced before 1859 should be broadly consistent with Darwinian expectations. And, generally speaking, they are. It would be easy to assemble a vast collection of passages, even from the world's most ancient and culturally diverse narratives, that would appear to give evidence that their authors were steeped in Darwinism.

So Bender's challenge is to judge when "evolutionary themes" in literature result from authors holding up mirrors to scientific theory and when they result from authors holding up mirrors to nature as usual. It seems to me that this problem requires a conservative methodology, one that prefers the error of failing to credit an author's valid engagement with scientific debates to the error of crediting a specious reference. But Bender's approach to his evidence is not, to my mind, sufficiently conservative. A representative example of this problem can be found in the introduction, where he identifies Frank Norris's reference to "a confused tangle of waving arms...[and] waving legs," London's description of a girl with "flowing and tangled hair," Fitzgerald's descriptions of Daisy's "evening dress tangled among dying orchids," and other similar passages, as echoes of Darwin's "tangled bank of life" (p. 7). Perhaps. But here and elsewhere he does not satisfy me that he has sufficiently considered the alternative hypothesis: perhaps not. In his exuberance for his subject, Bender seems to occasionally forget that an tangled dress is sometimes just a tangled dress.

This problem makes one suspicious of some of Bender's supporting evidence, but it does not compromise the soundness of his overall case. While the exhaustiveness of Bender's study will tire many general readers, *Evolution and "The Sex Problem"* will join *The Descent of Love* as a useful resource for specialists in literary biography, literary criticism, literary history, and the history of evolutionary science.

## **References**

- Carroll, J. (1994). *Evolution and Literary Theory*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Storey, R. (1996). *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
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