



I Who Cares about the Evolution of Stories?

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Critical Response

I

Who Cares about the Evolution of Stories?

Paul Bloom

The most popular leisure activity is not sex, eating, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, socializing with friends, participating in sports, or relaxing with the family. Rather, when we are free to do what we want, our most popular choice is indulging in pleasures of the imagination. We immerse ourselves in other worlds—including those of our own creation, as when we daydream and fantasize, and those created by others, as with movies, video games, television (about three hours a day for the average American), and literature. From an evolutionary perspective, this is a puzzle. One would expect us to be motivated to spend our valuable time eating and drinking and fornicating, establishing relationships, building shelter, and teaching our children. Instead, three-year-olds are transfixed by the little engine that could, young parents hide from their three-year-olds to read novels, and many men spend more time viewing internet pornography than interacting with real women. These tastes are universal; humans everywhere, including those in small-scale societies, are obsessed with imaginative pursuits, including the production and consumption of fictional stories.¹

In his provocative and thoughtful article, Jonathan Kramnick focuses

I am grateful to Jonathan Kramnick for encouraging me to write this essay and to the members of my Mind and Development lab for valuable discussion.

1. See Paul Bloom, *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like* (New York, 2010), pp. 155–76.

on the specific puzzle of literature, attacking a group of scholars he describes as literary Darwinists.²

It's important to be clear what the disagreement is about because Kramnick sometimes gets it wrong, saying that the literary Darwinists think "reading literature is as much a part of our biology as fearing snakes or loving children," and they believe that "the reading and writing of literary texts" are "'inherited characteristics'" ("ALD," pp. 323, 324). But that would be a mad position to hold; obviously, reading and writing are recent human inventions, not adaptations. Charles Darwin was clear about this: "Man has an instinctive tendency to speak, as we see in the babble of our young children; while no child has an instinctive tendency to brew, bake, or write."³ Later, Kramnick provides a better summary of the position he disagrees with:

The idea is that a certain cognitive mechanism—liking stories or being good at telling stories—is present in us now because it conferred a fitness advantage in the past. We like to read and write novels, say, because our very distant ancestors liked to tell stories, and their telling stories provided some sort of advantage for their survival. So their storytelling genes were passed on to their descendants and, like snake-fearing and child-loving genes, are still with us today. ["ALD," p. 325]

A successful adaptationist theory of this sort must be explicit about the specific function (or functions) of telling stories and listening to stories and must explain how specific aspects of these traits follow from their evolutionary history. As an example, the best current theory of the visceral response of corporeal disgust—the feeling one gets from a whiff of rotten hamburger—is that it evolved to ward us away from certain sorts of contagion. This nicely explains the sorts of things that disgust us, the conditions under which we are most easily disgusted, when disgust emerges in young children, and so on.⁴ For some traits, the fitness advantage is hard to miss; it's no mystery why humans and other primates are predisposed to fear spiders and snakes. For others, such as color vision, female orgasm, the

2. See Jonathan Kramnick, "Against Literary Darwinism," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Winter 2011): 315–47; hereafter abbreviated "ALD."

3. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York, 1871), p. 53.

4. See Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon, "A Perspective on Disgust," *Psychological Review* 94, no. 1 (1987): 23–41, and Bloom, *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human* (New York, 2004).

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precise timing of puberty, religious belief, and our universal love of stories, the function is less obvious.

Also, adaptation isn't the only option; many traits, perhaps including some of those listed above, have no function in a biological sense; they are by-products or accidents. Kramnick cites a well-known example by Steven Pinker: Many people love strawberry cheesecake, but this is not because our cheesecake loving ancestors out-reproduced their cheesecake shunning conspecifics. Rather, we possess certain adapted tastes, such as a love of sweets, and cheesecake was invented to push these evolved buttons.⁵

Kramnick argues that literature is like cheesecake. It is a biological accident, a byproduct of other capacities. I think he is probably right, but I want to make a few remarks about his arguments.

The first has to do with how he frames his proposal. In the course of his fairly energetic critique, he often attacks evolutionary approaches more generally, and the terms *literary Darwinism* and *Evolutionary Psychology* are sometimes used interchangeably.⁶ Most of all, he presents his attack on the literary Darwinists as if this was the first, citing nobody else in support. All of this would give the naive reader the impression that evolutionary psychologists are united in their enthusiasm for adaptationist theories of literature.

But, in fact, Kramnick's concerns are shared by the very researchers he cites as the leaders in the field of evolutionary psychology. The cheesecake analogy, for instance, was presented by Steven Pinker, in *How The Mind Works*, in the context of a discussion of the arts, including literature. Pinker's position, and that of the field in general, is summarized nicely by the two scholars who are most associated with evolutionary psychology, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides:

We still consider the byproduct hypothesis to be the default hypothesis, with a great body of logic and evidence in favor of it. Steven Pinker has recently argued this position with great cogency, suggesting that many of the arts are technologies that “pick the locks” that

5. See Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York, 1997), p. 525.

6. For reasons of space, I won't dwell on Kramnick's general criticisms of evolutionary psychology except to note one thing: Kramnick raises several issues, including the distinction between adaptations and by-products and the fact that humans sometime create the environments that they must adapt to. Kramnick summarizes these well, but he mistakenly frames them as criticisms of the evolutionary psychology program, while in fact they are perfectly mainstream views in the field—Evolutionary Psychology 101, as it were. To be fair, the same mistake is made in some of the secondary sources he draws upon, especially in David J. Buller, *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005). Other examples of this confusion are discussed in Robert Kurzban, *Why Everyone (Else) Is a Hypocrite* (Princeton, N.J., 2010).

safeguard the brain's pleasure circuits (Pinker, 1997). Pinker sketched out how many well-known features of the visual arts, music, and literature take advantage of design features of the mind that were targets of selection not because they caused enjoyment of the arts, but because they solved other adaptive problems such as interpreting visual arrays, understanding language, or negotiating the social world.⁷

Pinker recently returned to the issue in his review⁸ of the edited collection that Kramnick describes as the “manifesto-anthology” of literary Darwinism⁹ and tentatively entertains various adaptationist hypotheses. But he shares with Kramnick the worry that some scholars are too willing to assume the truth of such hypotheses. He lists three beliefs, including “there is good evidence that art in fact is an adaptation” and then adds “I think all three beliefs are false, and that ultimately they may damage this nascent field. A glib acceptance of them could embolden the many critics who would love to strangle this discipline in its cradle, using the clichéd criticism of evolutionary theories, namely that they are a bunch of after-the-fact just-so stories.”¹⁰

From my perspective, the most interesting part of Kramnick's article is his argument against the view that there is an innate literary module akin to a language module. His discussion here is appropriately modest in scope. Kramnick doesn't present evidence against the modular view, but he argues, persuasively in my view, that there is as yet little good evidence for its existence and hence little support for the notion that a capacity for literature evolved in the same sense as a capacity for language.

Still, though, even if no such module exists, the literary Darwinians could still be right. One plausible theory is that the evolved neural mechanisms relevant to stories have to do with motivation, not representation. Stories would be akin to sex and sweets, not language and vision. Kramnick doesn't discuss this possibility, nor does he present any nonadaptationist theory for why we like to listen to and tell stories.

Such theories do exist. I developed one in detail in my recent book *How Pleasure Works*, drawing upon psychological research and philosophical argument suggesting that “our minds are partially indifferent to the contrast between events that we believe to be real versus those that seem to be

7. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, “Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds? Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Aesthetics, Fiction, and the Arts,” *SubStance* 30, nos. 94–95 (2001): 11.

8. See Pinker, “Toward a Consilient Study of Literature,” *Philosophy and Literature* 31 (2007): 161–77.

9. See *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (Evanston, Ill., 2005).

10. Pinker, “Toward a Consilient Study of Literature,” p. 169.

real or that are imagined to be real.” With regard to fiction, then, “once you have a creature that responds with pleasure to certain real-world experiences and doesn’t fully distinguish reality from imagination, the capacity to get pleasure from stories comes for free, as a lucky accident.” And this captures the sorts of stories we enjoy: “there is no story organ or story module. Stories are similar because people have similar interests. The popularity of themes having to do with sex and family and betrayal, for instance, is not due to some special feature of the imagination, but rather because people are obsessed, in the real world, with sex and family and betrayal.”¹¹

Still, I am not as confident as Kramnick that such an account is sufficient. For one thing, as Kramnick himself suggests, humans might have a special innate system for pretense and imagination, a view also endorsed by Tooby and Cosmides.¹² This is not the same as a dedicated evolved system for fictional stories, but it does meet the literary Darwinists halfway, as it would entail that a taste for the unreal has its own distinct evolutionary history. For another, there are certain puzzles of fictional pleasure that are not explained by any existing account, such as the enjoyment many of us take in aversive fictions, such as tragedy and horror.¹³

These are fascinating issues, but Kramnick turns away from them toward the end of his article. For him, there is more at stake here than competing claims about cognitive structure and evolutionary history. Rather, this is yet another battle in the Science Wars. Some literary Darwinists have nasty things to say about the humanities—such as “floundering, aimless, and increasingly irrelevant.” Kramnick has some sharp things to say in return. He concludes that, despite all the seemingly nuanced proposals about evolutionary function, what’s *really* going on is this: “Casting about for a function specific to literature, the friends of adaptation seem to settle for it making us better, more decent, or more complete human beings.” He sees this as “tender-hearted”—and not in a good way (“ALD,” p. 345).¹⁴

Scholars on both sides apparently believe that the facts of evolution matter deeply for the discipline that Kramnick describes as “academic literary criticism.” I find this puzzling. Why would a certain evolutionary theory be seen as dangerously corrosive to the humanities?

11. Bloom, *How Pleasure Works*, pp. 169, 173, 165.

12. See Tooby and Cosmides, “Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds?”

13. See Bloom, *How Pleasure Works*, chap. 7.

14. This rather dismissive analysis is incorrect for at least some of the proposals that Kramnick discusses, such as the thoughtful and rich theory by Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York, 2009).

It might be some scholars have fallen prey to a common confusion: the word *adaptation* carries multiple meanings, and it's easy to slip from *adapted* in the biological sense, which has to do with differential reproductive success, to *adapted* in the more usual sense, which has to do with goodness and improvement. This is why some laypeople are offended by the notion that religion isn't an adaptation; they think that it demeans religion. It is why, as Pinker points out and I've experienced personally, some artists and musicians get upset when you suggest to them that art and music are biological accidents and not adaptations; they take it as implying that art and music are somehow unimportant.¹⁵ But the two senses of *adaptation* are unrelated; some terrible human traits—such as racism—are likely to be adaptations, and some of our finest traits—such as kindness to distant strangers, reading and writing, and, yes, music—are likely to be biological accidents.

Once you put aside this confusion, what reason is there to believe that the evolutionary debate has any significance for the humanities? Surely the contemporary human's love of literature has to have *some* evolutionary history, just as it has a cultural history, just as it has an instantiation in the brain, just as it emerges in the course of child development, and so on. Consider, as a concrete example, the proposal by the English professor Lisa Zunshine. She argues that humans have evolved a taste for stories because they exercise the capacity for social reasoning or theory of mind.¹⁶ Suppose, contrary to my own by-product view, Zunshine is correct. Why should this matter to your average Jane Austen scholar (to use a common synecdoche for English professors everywhere)? It would seem to be relevant in exactly the same way as finding that stories are processed in a certain part of the frontal lobe—that is, not at all.

While literary critics can safely ignore those interested in theories of the origin and nature of stories, the converse isn't true. Anyone interested in where stories come from and why we like them would benefit hugely from input from scholars who are experts on how stories work, including those involved in literary criticism. Scholars such as Jonathan Kramnick, that is. This is one reason why his discussion of these issues is very welcome. It is, I hope, the first of many.

15. See Pinker, "Toward a Consilient Study of Literature," p. 170.

16. See Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, Ohio, 2006).