

EVOLUTION AND EMPATHY: A DARWINIAN APPROACH
TO THE CULTURAL "OTHER"

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EVOLUTION AND EMPATHY: A DARWINIAN APPROACH
TO THE CULTURAL "OTHER"

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my sister, Emily, who has shown me the truest meaning of strength, love, and above all, empathy—and who is the only person who understands the facets of life that words cannot express. Every accomplishment in my life is yours as much as mine.

If I could give an award for the best single idea anybody ever had, I would give it to Darwin, because his idea unifies the meaningless, mechanical physical sciences, and the world of meaning, culture, art and biology. –Daniel Dennett

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INTRODUCTION

The human species is uniquely endowed with the ability of consciousness, language, and the ability to produce and interact with art—or various representations of the world around us— in meaningful ways. Of the many types of art, including visual images, music, architecture, and other forms of human expression, perhaps one of the most widely practiced and cognitively beneficial is that of literature.

Stories have been a part of human history since before the advent of writing, and have been used to transmit important information such as morals and values, customs and beliefs—but ultimately stories provide human beings with important information about the human experience and the world around us. It is no wonder, then, that the transmission of fictional narratives is universally practiced and that certain themes are found to be constant cross-culturally. Though details will vary, possibly even, each time a story is told, skeletal structures and ultimate meanings of stories tend to be relatively stable.

Though the field of literary studies acknowledges cross-cultural similarities, as well as the seeming timelessness of certain stories and the widely practiced consumption and creation of literature, what literary studies has historically failed to question or answer is *why* human beings seem to have an innate desire to interact with fiction and what advantages doing so provides.

However, in the last decade or so, several literary critics such as Joseph Carroll, Denis Dutton, Brian Boyd, Nancy Easterlin, and Barbara Riesling as well as

evolutionary biologists such as E.O. Wilson, Eliot Sober, David Sloan Wilson, and others, have posited and championed the concept of literary Darwinism, which provides a theory of the mind that not only proves that human beings' "evolved cognition can explain particular features of texts or facts about reading or writing" (Kramnick 317), but also that understanding the adaptive value of literature can also help us analyze and promote the adaptive value of empathy and its ability to effect social change.

The Theory of Mind suggests that human beings developed cognitive ability that allowed the previously compartmentalized sections of the brain to interact; this was essentially consciousness. As part of complex cognitive machinery, art and literature emerged as forms of cognitive play, produced for the purpose of engaging with the imagined worlds in order to enhance inclusive fitness. As Joseph Carroll writes, "Natural selection operates by way of 'inclusive fitness,' shaping motives and emotions so as to maximize the chances that an organism will propagate its genes, or copies of its genes in its kin" (Carroll, *Literary Darwinism* 14). Carroll mentions that survival and reproduction are the primary motives to which all literature relates in some way, and thus literature is evolutionarily adaptive to our species.

Although literary Darwinism has gained recognition and momentum in the fields of evolutionary psychology and biology, as well as literary studies itself, there is still opposition from literary critics and others who question the ability of literary Darwinism to either provide answers about truth and meaning or even perspectives outside of the dominant paradigm. Poststructuralist critics have been widely addressed by Carroll, Wilson, Easterlin, Riebling and others, thus it is a discussion I

include in my first chapter. The opposition I wish to address more, however, is presented in an article by Amy Mallory-Kani and Kenneth Womack entitled “The Bottlenecks of Literary Darwinism.” They write,

is it even possible to compose a Darwinist “reading” of a postcolonial and/or colonial text? How [does] Darwin’s position as a white, imperialist male affect an analysis of a “classic” postcolonial work like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* [...] We can also extend these questions to works in which feminism or homosexuality are extant [because] natural selection and its ancillary theories seemingly exclude individuals who are “other” to the dominant norm. (231)

Because Mallory-Kani and Womack’s distorted portrayal of natural selection is informed by folk-knowledge and inaccurate, it is extremely engaging for critical analysis because the views they represent are widely held. For this reason, I wish to respond to their claims and challenges in order to demonstrate the wider application possibility for Adaptationist criticism in the field of literary studies. Because science *is* able to demonstrate that human beings are not necessarily naturally predisposed to egoistic motives and that literature is in large part responsible for shaping empathic social action, I believe literary Darwinism actually provides a crucially enhanced understanding about both literature and human nature.

However, there is also opposition to a Darwinian approach to literature from those who fear a scientific explanation of literature is inevitably reductionist and cannot possibly encapsulate the complexities and subjectivities of the human

species. In his book, *On the Origin of Stories*, Brian Boyd discusses such people, writing that

to concede that natural selection has shaped the structure and function not only of our bodies but also of our minds, they fear, would impinge on our freedom or our capacity to transform ourselves and our world. But as we shall see, their fears are misplaced: evolution can explain the bases not only of human behavior, from mating to murder, but also of culture and freedom. (3)

Thus, if the fields of literature and other humanities are to realize the goal of producing conscientious, empathic, well-adjusted citizens capable of effecting social change and empowering those who struggle to find their freedom, we must be able to stand on a foundation upon which we can make claims or condemnations about atrocities' such as the Holocaust or Apartheid. Though human thought is abstract, it was designed to operate in a very real world with genuine threats to survival. It is our drives shaped by natural selection that have progressed the species thus far, and by understanding that will we have the potential to shape the future and a world in which our species thrives both physically *and* cognitively. One promising way to help instill or introduce the values of Feminist, Postcolonial, Queer, or any variety of Other perspective is to recognize the underlying drives, desires, truths and universals inherent in human nature in order to achieve a shared experience. This is because

from the evolutionary perspective, culture does not stand apart from the genetically transmitted dispositions of human nature. It is, rather,

the medium through which we organize those dispositions into systems that regulate public behavior and inform private thoughts.

(Carroll 17)

With the theoretical framework of this thesis in mind, I now turn to a brief overview of the issues I hope to address and my purpose in analyzing these particular aspects of literary Darwinism.

In chapter one, I give an overview of the recently developed adaptationist criticism, whose critics seek to bring Darwinian concepts to bear on our understanding of the arts and humanities. I primarily present arguments made by biologist Edward O. Wilson and literary critic Joseph Carroll in order to provide a framework for understanding an evolutionary approach to literature. As Carroll and other critics such as Nancy Easterlin and Barbara Riesling seek to specifically address the current institutional paradigm in the field of literary scholarship, they take aim at poststructuralist critical theory. For this reason, I also offer a brief explanation of the relationship between Adaptationist criticism and poststructuralist criticism that is based on Ellen Spolsky's claims made in her article, "Darwin and Derrida: Cognitive Literary Theory As a Species of Post-Structuralism."

The current institutional position is detrimental to the humanities because it inevitably bars the progress of creating new and fundamentally important knowledge about literature and literary studies. Thus, by addressing the inherent problems in poststructuralism and posing the questions that poststructuralism fails to answer, but which a Darwinian understanding of literature *does* answer, I demonstrate the need for and value of a paradigm shift in literary studies.

In chapter two, I turn towards a textual application of literary Darwinism in order to demonstrate not only the possibility but the necessity of viewing postcolonial approaches from the perspective of evolutionary biology. Using Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the postcolonial texts directly referenced by Mallory-Kani and Womack, I offer a Darwinian reading that informs how literature is capable of shifting social consciousness through the adaptive emotional response of empathy. I chose this text in part because it provides an essential postcolonial perspective and serves as a significant canonical text. In this chapter I also offer a synthesis of recent findings about group selection and the importance of altruism, empathy, and social interaction in human survival and adaptation, which are discussed at length by David Sloan Wilson and Eliot Sober in *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* as well as E.O. Wilson in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*.

In chapter three, I again offer a Darwinian reading of a text written by and expressing the view of the Other. In this case, I take an Adaptationist approach to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," and demonstrate the value of Darwinian literary criticism. Using Nancy Easterlin's argument for the possibility of a Darwinian feminism in her article entitled, "What is Darwinian Feminism?" as well as emergent theories that Sarah Blaffer Hrdy discusses in *Mother Nature: A History of Mother's Infants and Natural Selection*, I respond to Mallory-Kani and Womack's request for a Darwinian reading of a feminist text and offer an updated view about natural selection and the importance of female equality for social interaction and

improved group selection that is much more in line with true Darwinian concepts than those cited by Mallory-Womack and Kani.

In this chapter, too, I argue that a feminist perspective is equally adaptive in literature, as it creates a necessary representation of the world that helps society progress towards an empathic and humanistic treatment of women, which proves beneficial for society as a whole. Thus, I show that in the face of recent scientific findings and a more comprehensive understanding of natural selection, Mallory-Womack and Kani's challenge is rendered impotent, and, indeed, a Darwinian approach to a feminist text is equally capable of generating new and important knowledge to literary studies.

In the concluding chapter, I open up analysis to the possibility of performing a Darwinian reading of a queer text, which I believe poses some complications, but is inevitably just as interesting and as informative as the readings I performed on "Other" texts, especially given recent scientific advancements in research that does indeed support the possibility for queer behavior in animals and its adaptive value in kin and group selection paradigms. In proving the legitimacy and institutional and humanistic value of literary Darwinism by responding to Mallory-Kani and Womack's ultimately inaccurate charges, I hope to offer a unique insight that opens up the possibilities for others to take these adaptationist ideas further and apply them to texts that are multiply Othered, such as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands: La Frontera*, which expresses a queer, feminist, Chicana viewpoint. I also look to other possibly applications for literary Darwinism that I hope to be able to answer myself one day or see answered by others who share the same vision for an increasing the

scope of Adaptationist literary criticism. Some of these questions pertain to such issues as film, the internet and other technological advances that have drastically altered the literary landscape, as well as how human cognition processes certain information.

CHAPTER I

AN ADAPTATIONIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE

Adaptationist criticism is a newly emerging field of literary studies that has gained momentum primarily during the last decade. Joseph Carroll, one of the leading critics in this field, explains the goal of these literary scholars, theorist, and critics. He writes,

adaptationist social scientists identify 'the adapted mind' as the foundation of human culture. Adaptationist literary scholars concur, and they seek to bring literature itself within the field of cognitive and behavioral features susceptible to an adaptationist understanding. They identify human nature as a biologically constrained set of cognitive and motivational characteristics and they contend that human nature is both the source and subject of literature. (*Literary Darwinism* vii)

With this principle in mind, literary scholars have helped to bridge the gap between science and the humanities, bringing evidence from evolutionary biology and psychology as well as from the field of cognitive sciences to bear on literature.

Because, as Carroll claims, the current institutional paradigm in literary studies does not or cannot explain human beings' interest and interaction with literature, there is a vital need for adaptationist literary critics and other scholars of the humanities to acknowledge the role that evolution plays in our production and consumption of art and the adaptive value such art provides our species. Carroll and others such as Nancy Easterlin, Barbara Riebling, and Alexander Argyros believe the current institutional paradigm does not offer a satisfactory foundation to make claims about the purpose and meaning of literature or the existence of human beings. Carroll writes

if literature is in any way concerned with the language, psychology, cognition, and social organization of human beings, all of this information should have a direction bearing on our understanding of literature. [...] Up to this point, contemporary literary theory has not only failed to assimilate evolutionary theory, it has adopted a doctrinal stance that places it in irreconcilable conflict with the basic principles of evolutionary biology. (*Literary Darwinism* 15)

Carroll seems convinced he and other adaptationist critics must effectively eradicate "the principles that dominate critical theory at present time [which] can be gathered under the heading of 'poststructuralism,'" from the landscape of literary criticism in order for an adaptationist criticism to be a successful form of literary scholarship, as he views poststructuralism and literary Darwinism to be diametrically opposed. He argues that poststructuralist theory, "a term here intended to indicate an essential continuity between the Derridean linguistic 1970s

and the Foucauldian political 1980s" (Carroll *Literary Darwinism* 15), not only fails to provide answers as to the relationship between human nature and literature, but fundamentally prevents an adaptationist understanding of literature and our species. He writes,

a fundamental premise of poststructuralist critical theory is that in all specific literary works meaning is preemptively determined by linguistic and cultural codes. Whether taken as purely semiotic textual systems or as ideological structures, from the poststructuralist perspective these codes appear to be constrained neither by individual identities nor by any natural order." (Carroll, *Literary Darwinism* 17)

However, Carroll's argument may be overzealous in light of the fact that the existence and perpetuation of poststructuralist thought itself can be explained through an adaptationist approach. Thus, over the course of this chapter, I will present an overview of literary Darwinism and the aims of adaptationist scholars, which will provide an explanation as to how evolutionary studies can enhance our understanding of literature and our species, while demonstrating that poststructuralist and adaptationist critical theory are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

As adaptationist critics understand, certain narratives are overwhelmingly successful because human's response to and engagement with them has been determined through the evolutionary process of natural selection. Edward O. Wilson is a prominent biologist and theorist in regards to the idea of what he terms "near-

universals.” Wilson argues that during human evolution, individuals varied in their “hereditary propensity to learn certain things and to respond by statistical propoundence in particular ways” (237). Thus, certain gene ensembles were repeated more often than others as evolution ensued and “natural selection [...] molded epigenetic rules, which are the inherited regularities of mental development that compose human nature” (237).

As a result of this process universals or near-universals emerged. Wilson explains:

Because of differences in strength among the underlying epigenetic rules, certain thoughts and behavior are more effective than others in the emotional responses they cause and the frequency with which they intrude on reverie and creative thought. They bias cultural evolution toward the invention of archetypes. (237)

Because natural selection functions to enhance the inclusive fitness of a particular species, it operates by “shaping motives and emotions so as to maximize the chances that an organism will propagate its genes” (Carroll *Reading Human Nature* 14). Thus, the archetypes that emerged over time were repeated because of emotional responses activated in the human mind, and the more beneficial these responses were in increasing humans’ inclusive fitness—the ability to pass genes on to the next generation—the more likely those genes were to survive.

According to Carroll, the main behavioral systems that enhance inclusive fitness are survival, reproduction, and social interaction (*Literary Darwinism* 79),

and he argues that cognition also ought to be considered a distinct behavioral system, claiming it is as advantageous to humans' survival as the other systems. Indeed, without cognition, the arts and language would not exist because the arts and language are important, complex tools with "which we cultivate and regulate the complex cognitive machinery on which our more highly developed functions depend" (Carroll, *Literary Darwinism* 63).

These "more highly developed functions," Steven Mithen argues in *The Prehistory of the Mind*, emerged through a physiological change in the brain that occurred between 30,000 and 60,000 years ago. Because of this adaptation, the human mind moved from being like a "Swiss army knife to [being] one with cognitive fluidity, from a specialized to a generalized type of mentality. This enabled people to design complex tools, to create art and believe in religious ideologies" (195). This event also suddenly allowed human beings to conceptualize and represent the human experience and the world around them.

Through this adaptation in mental machinery, human minds developed the ability to organize thoughts and direct them so as to send and receive information that ultimately helps our species to survive and reproduce. Art serves this function by being both a pleasurable and didactic form of transmitting important data.

In *The Art Instinct*, Denis Dutton discusses three types of advantages provided by fictions, including oral traditions, mythologies, novels, plays, operas, movies, even video games. He writes, "Stories provide a low-cost, low-risk surrogate experience. They satisfy a need to experiment with answers to 'what if?' questions that focus on the problems, threats, and opportunities life might have thrown before

our ancestors” (110). Furthermore, stories “can be richly instructive sources of factual [...] information. The didactic purpose of story-telling is diminished in literate cultures, but by providing a vivid and memorable way of communicating information, it likely had actual survival benefits in the Pleistocene” (Dutton 110). Finally, “stories encourage us to explore the points of view, beliefs, motivations, and values of other human minds, inculcating potentially adaptive interpersonal and social capacities. [...] Stories provide regulation for social behavior” (Dutton 110).

For Early Humans in the Pleistocene era, information such as migration patterns of animal herds, warnings about predators, weather, etc., gave obvious advantages to human beings who were capable of using cognitive abilities to better understand the world around them, and natural selection favored their survival over their peers who lacked—or simply possessed underdeveloped—cognitive abilities. Hence, these cognitive advantages are adaptive because they provide a store of experience for individuals that ultimately enhance survival and reproduction in their given environment.

However, human beings are not likely to respond to texts that are overtly or exclusively didactic because the human mind will not be engaged by a message that is “instant or insistent,” since there is no call for interpretation by the receiver (Ong 202), no call for cognition, and therefore, no chance for the brain to trigger the reward-response cognition provides. In fact, when an observer encounters this type of art (i.e. propaganda), the result is more often resistance rather than responsiveness to direct instruction. Echoing Ong’s claim that symbols must call for interpretation, Carroll reminds us, “units of cultural symbolism are repeated only if

they activate responses in a human mind” (*Literary Darwinism* xiv). This means that the instructions on a soup can label almost certainly fail to stimulate an audience enough to cause the imitation or transmission of that information beyond the one-time reception. This is because unless a message, text, or piece of art is appealing, complex, and pleasurable, it will fail to be adaptive, because in order to be adaptive, a message must elicit a reader to cognitively engage with it and, more importantly, repeat it, thereby enhancing the survival of the species.

However, there are those who attempt to mitigate the adaptive function of art, arguing that the arts are the equivalent of mental cheesecake, produced simply for the purpose of stimulating reward-responses. Carroll directly contests these claims, elucidating the importance that cognitive abilities had in enhancing our survival. He responds to Steven Pinker’s assertion that art, much like recreational drugs, is a “pure pleasure technology” (qtd. in Carroll, *Literary Darwinism* 65). Carroll rebuts this claim by pointing out that mind-altering drugs do not serve the beneficial purpose that art does, and sustained exposure to such substances would render one

incapable of adapting to the demands of a complex environment.

[...] More importantly, it seems very likely that people raised with no exposure to music, art, or literature would be psychologically and emotionally stunted. [...] Someone deprived of such experience would have artificially imposed on him a deficiency similar to [autism]. (65-66)

John Tooby and Leda Cosmides expand on this idea, explaining that our cognitive machinery “allows us to enter and participate in imagined worlds” (9) because it is evolutionarily beneficial to do so. They continue, “Our species-typical neural architecture is equipped with motivational and cognitive programs that appear to be specially designed to input fictional experiences and engage in other artistic activities” (Tooby and Cosmides 10).

In essence, we are designed to use our cognitive machinery to imagine alternate experiences to prepare ourselves for diverging possible scenarios. In much the same way, animals engage in the behavior of play, which allows them to “hone skills, widen repertoires and sharpen sensitivities. Play therefore has evolved to be highly self-rewarding” (Boyd 138) in addition to being highly adaptive, as it increases inclusive fitness because those “Creatures with more motivation to practice such behaviors in situations of low urgency on average fare better at moments of high urgency” (Boyd 138). Thus, the more humans “play” with art, the more likely they are to be well-suited to their environment, while conversely, drugs are likely to make humans far less-suited to environmental demands.

Art has a beneficial effect on the mind because of its function in sharpening “neural pathways that process key patterns in open-ended ways” (Boyd 138) through creative play. Those “key patterns” almost certainly relate to survival, mating, social interaction, or other behavioral systems that increase inclusive fitness; in fact, many could be considered near-universals.

Though there are a number of existing near-universals, Wilson has taken the practice of biological classification, known as “definition by specification,” and

applied it to the most commonly replicated themes in myth and fiction (244). This process has yielded roughly a dozen identifiable near-universals or archetypes. The following list constitutes the primary near-universals seen across cultures but is by no means all-inclusive: creation myths; pilgrimage myths; myths on meeting the forces of evil; a hero's exile to the wilderness, returning against all odds; the world ending in apocalypse; sources of great power found in rivers, rituals, or nature; a nurturing woman "apotheosized as the Great Goddess, the Great Mother"; a seer with special knowledge; the power of purity possessed by a virgin; the sexual awakening of a female through beasts, strangers, magical kisses, etc.; tricksters disrupting established order, liberating passion; and a monster who threatens humanity, "appearing as the serpent demon, dragon" etc. (224).

Of course, identifying and presenting evidence for these archetypes still does not answer the question as to why these themes are so successful, so likely to strike a cognitive chord and elicit a response that will engage the human mind—which is the essential criterion for the possibility of repetition or imitation. On this matter, Daniel Shanahan offers a view briefly aforementioned and echoed by Wilson, Carroll, Boyd, and others: our cognitive interest in any given piece of art is directly influenced by emotion.

In arguing his case as to how symbols came to contain meaning, Shanahan writes that "*meaning is a function of emotional content; any analysis of meaning 'construction' must [...] confront the role of emotion in that construction*" (9). Shanahan goes on to give an example—the phenomenon of lightning—to illustrate how emotional responses to certain phenomenon result in meaning or symbol

making. Shanahan argues that a hominid, upon encountering its prey, would “enhance its monitoring of the environment and engage a plan to capture or kill the prey” (12). Yet upon confronting an unknown but “seemingly threatening stimulus such as a flash of lightning,[the hominid] would have an emotional (as opposed to motivational response) and begin to monitor ‘internal configurations’” (Shanahan 12) in order to “maintain control over itself in the face of such stress” and to identify something familiar about the context in which the stimulus occurred. This focus on internal configurations is, as Shanahan contends, where “the emergence of symbolizing would seem to lie” (12). Over time, these emotional responses and subsequent internal focusing become associated with “images in the unconscious, and thereby become transformed into symbols” (Shanahan 13) such as the jagged line grapheme—like the one emblazoned on Harry Potter’s forehead—which we use to represent the meteorological phenomenon.

Essentially, certain images become emotionally saturated, and are transformed into symbols “by virtue of the transformation of their heavy emotional content into long-term emotional value and their interconnectedness with one another” (Shanahan 13). The emergence of symbolizing introduced the possibility of metaphors, of using familiar concepts to introduce or mediate complex ones, and most invaluable of all, the possibility of representing experiences and transmitting information that helps the species to survive.

Thus, the near-universals presented by Wilson are symbols that are successful because of the emotional response they elicit in the human mind, and the emotional responses are based on survival instincts related to inclusive fitness.

Thus, as adaptationist critics understand, natural selection helps to explain the success of certain narratives in literature and provides a foundation for understanding art, which highlights adaptationist criticism as an invaluable theoretical approach.

In light of this fairly recent evidence demonstrated by evolutionary and cognitive science, and given a closer inspection of its theoretical principles which undermine the possibility of “universals,” I now turn briefly to the issue of the institutional paradigm in order to examine poststructuralist critical theory and its function as an apocalyptic epic.

While it is accurate to say that there are no pure universals in the world—which even scientists and those who recognize the contribution of science to literary criticism do not purport to be the case—it is a mistake to rule out the possibility for language to transmit an essential or stable meaning altogether. Yet, arguing that language can provide reliable meaning proves to be a difficult task and is met with much opposition from the academy because, as Terry Eagleton writes in *After Theory*, “No idea is more unpopular with contemporary cultural theory than that of absolute truth” (103). In this case, Eagleton clarifies that absolute truth¹ “simply means that if a statement is true, then the opposite of it can’t be true at the same time, or true from some other point of view [...] This does not rule out the possibility of doubt or ambiguity” (105). This point about absolute truth is an important one to understand when considering scientific explanations of the world, because

¹ For further clarification of how Eagleton argues that “absolute” truth is not the same as incontrovertible truth, refer to his chapter entitled, “Truth, Virtue, and Objectivity” in *After Theory*.

although such naïve positivism may represent the popular view of science, it does not really characterize twentieth-century scientific theories. Therefore, the poststructuralist attack upon it can be seen as a dated and specious argument. More important, radical constructivism is not the only alternative to scientism: even though we must admit we cannot know *everything*, that is not the same as asserting that we cannot know *anything*. (Easterlin and Riebling 2)

And as many other critics of poststructuralism point out, eliminating the possibility of knowing “*anything*” is precisely what poststructuralism does by ruling out the potential for truth claims, especially about human nature.

There are two principal ways through which poststructuralism eradicates the criteria for the possibility of truth. The first is textualism; the second is indeterminacy. Textualism arises primarily as a departure from the structuralist philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure’s notion that language is a construct or “linguistic system” that does not exist independently and in which a sign, clarified by Derrida as being “put in place of the thing itself [...] represent[ing] the presence in its absence” (Derrida 284) never reaches that which is signified—or the thing the sign is taking the place of—“but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from that system” (Saussure quoted by Derrida 285). Saussure’s notion of structuralism lent itself to the creation of binaries—the idea that a thing, word, or idea only exists within its direct opposition or relation to another concept—through which no concept is free to stand alone. For this reason, language devolves

into an endless play of differences within its given system, a phenomenon that Derrida termed *différance*. Through this play of constantly deferred meaning, concepts in language can never be reduced to an isolated identity because “the identity of one term requires reference to and supplementation by an-other to be itself” (Rivkin and Ryan 300), and thus a sign, can never reach a teleological or transcendent meaning outside of that system.

Although Saussure’s argument pertains to the limitations of writing as a linguistic system and suggests that speech is granted primacy to the metaphysical realm of meaning, Derrida deconstructs Saussure’s claims, arguing that speech is also a linguistic construct subject to *différance*, and expels the notion of speech as having privileged access to ultimate meaning. Derrida writes:

this difference within language, and in the relation between speech and language, forbids the essential dissociation between speech and writing that Saussure [...] wanted to draw at another level of his presentation. The use of language or the employment of any code which implies a play of forms [...] also presupposed a retention and protention of differences, a spacing and temporalizing, a play of traces. (289)

Thus, Derrida defines all language, spoken and written, as being a representation in which ideas continually yield to the play of differences and never arrive at an essential meaning outside of the given language system.

Based on this claim of language as a semiotic system governed only by its internal principles, Derrida takes his deconstruction of language a step further with

the notion of indeterminacy—a concept to which he does not directly subscribe—in which signs themselves become meaningless even within the system of which they are part. He argues this ironically through the notion of the iterability—the ability for a sign to be repeated and recognized in a multitude of contexts—which gives the sign an essence, or stable identity. But ultimately, to Derrida, a sign is an identity devoid an incapable of meaning. Derrida writes,

Why is this identity paradoxically the division or dissociation from itself which will make of this phonic sign a grapheme? It is because this unity of the signifying form is constituted only by its iterability, by the possibility of being repeated in the absence not only of its referent [...] but of a determined signified or current intention of signification. (qtd. in Argyros 29-30)

Therefore, the idea that a sign can be removed from a context and repeated in various other contexts and still remain *that* sign allows Derrida to argue that even the construct of a system of signs is unstable. As Argyros explains, “if a context is understood as a set of implicit rules by which to interpret a sign, there is nothing to prevent the rules themselves from being interpreted according to another set of rules” (30).

However, Derrida’s assertions that he is neither arguing for complete randomness nor indeterminacy in language, but that he wishes to stress that chaos has always been inherent in the metaphysical condition, do not salvage his claims from the demise of their own premises. As Joseph Carroll argues in,

Together, textualism and indeterminacy eliminate the two

criteria of truth: the correspondence of propositions to their objects and the internal coherence of propositions. By affirming that texts do not refer to objects but rather constitute them, textualism eliminates correspondence, and by affirming that all meaning is ultimately contradictory indeterminacy eliminates coherence. (16)

Given this explanation, it is obvious that what poststructuralists seem to fail to recognize is that if the principles of textualism and indeterminacy *were* correct, neither Derrida nor any other deconstructionist could make any coherent—much less truthful—claims about the nature of language, reality, or the external world.

Although it is clear that the elimination of truth is both illogical and impractical, it is not altogether undesirable—at least for certain critics. As Carroll explains, “By eliminating truth, poststructuralism yields epistemological and ontological primacy to rhetoric or ‘discourse,’ and it simultaneously delegitimizes all traditional norms” (*Literary Darwinism* 16). And if all norms can be considered arbitrary, then poststructuralism “has a convenient application within the field of radical political ideology” (Carroll, *Literary Darwinism* 16).

Indeed, Foucault’s idea of political models maintains that truth “is simultaneously an effect of power and its mode of domination. It has no transcendent (essential) existence outside of power relations, and it can never be an instrument of individual or collective agency” (Riebling 178). Though to an extent Foucault is correct in his assertions that truth is a central pillar of political power, his theoretical shortcomings lie in his failure to explain “the kind of truth that can

bring down regimes and empower the powerless. Specifically, if we look at the history of 'the politics of conscience,' we can see that truth can *be* power; it does not simply reflect, enact, or perpetuate it" (Riebling 178).

Of course, one only has to look at empirical evidence to understand the limitations of Foucault's theory. Riebling cites an example that occurred during Argentina's "Dirty War" (1976-1983), in which of a group of Argentinean women whose children had gone missing "at the hands of Argentine junta [...] they stood with photographs of their missing sons and daughters" in the capital square. This act forced the people of Argentina "to face the truth about the junta," and ultimately, "the women's actions were a significant factor in its eventual collapse" (Riebling 178). This account is only one out of a plethora of instances in which "truth" appealed to the human conscience and effected significant political change, "serving to call into questions the crippling cynicism of Foucault's theory of power and truth" (Riebling 178).

Yet more important than acknowledging the ability for truth to bring about political and social transformation is understanding the implications of Foucault's alarmingly relativistic idea about truth. If his assumptions were correct, then there would be no possibility for anyone "to claim that apartheid is worse than European liberalism because there are no concepts in [the deconstructionist] toolkit to allow [the claim] that anything is better than anything else except insofar as value is provisionally determined by conditional, and eminently deconstructible, local contexts" (Argyros 4). It is obvious, then, that poststructuralism does not allow for any positive claims because, as the term "deconstruction" implies, the theory is an

exercise in endless regress. Thus, the poststructuralist stance cannot provide answers about the nature of our existence, and this theory may seek to reach some understanding of the world around us, poststructuralism ultimately does not possess that explanatory power that literary Darwinism does in regards to our preoccupation with explaining the world around us, and most importantly, the purpose of language and literature.

So why has a theory that does not provide these answers to some of the most important questions about the human condition remained so pervasive in literary criticism? The answer, ironically, is that poststructuralism is itself a grand narrative to which human beings are biologically primed to respond. Alexander Argyros writes,

Derrida's strength stems largely from his ability to weave apocalyptic declarations into rousing narratives about the end of philosophy. [...] Derrida's defense of radical contingency has flourished not because of its announced program but because it has ingeniously, though perhaps unwittingly, tapped into an ancient natural classical form, the apocalyptic epic. (2)

Thus, there seems to be little need for adaptationist scholar's a full-frontal attack on poststructuralist theory because the success of poststructuralism as a narrative actually serves to support claims about the appeal and likely propagation of certain universal themes.

Furthermore, I believe Ellen Spolsky's article, "Darwin and Derrida: Cognitive Literary Theory As a Species of Poststructuralism," offers salient points about the

parallels and potential possibility for a mutual understanding between poststructuralist and adaptationist criticism. She writes,

“the entirely defensible assertion that language representation is not stable was transformed by a kind of rhetorical hyperbole into the indefensible assertion that language cannot ever provide access to truth (even if there were any) [...] what has taken some time to establish, then, is not the error of the claim that representational systems such as language provide no access to a ‘real world,’ only the absoluteness of the claim and, further, the interpretations of that claim as cosmic or tragic. (51)

In Spolsky’s opinion, evolutionary theory does in fact rebuke the absoluteness of poststructuralist theory, but also serves to support poststructuralist claims about the instability of meaning.

Spolsky writes that it is

precisely because the human species and its ways of knowing are evolved by the accumulation of random mutations in interactions with changing environments rather than genetically engineered for the task of knowing, it is not at all surprising that they are unstable. [...]It is just this instability, however, that provides the possibility for advantageous flexibility. (52)

Thus, I believe that poststructuralist theory can exist as a critical approach within the context of literary Darwinism, as evolution and natural selection do reflect

poststructuralist principles of chaos and the idea of the environment as a context from which to draw meaning.

Though poststructuralism clearly does not pose the threat Carroll and other adaptationist critics believe it does, there are still those fear that an Adaptationist approach will prove too reductive and strip both the arts and artists of much-deserved appreciation and analysis, but this is simply not the case. To begin, the Adaptationist critics argue that successfully adaptive literature taps into common themes and human motivations, but the variations and innovations individual artists imbue into their works are infinitely varied. Wilson writes, “artists and writers know how to evoke emotional and aesthetic response [...] The arts are eternally discursive. They seek maximum effect with novel imagery. And imagery that burns itself into the memory, so that when recalled, it retains some of its original impact” (242). This means that every artist—or anyone using symbols to encode messages—will create a subjective representation. Spolsky similarly writes that “since a gap must be filled by an inference based on individual experience and memory, even in similar situations different people will make different inferences” (46). This means that while the themes may be stable, how they are represented and interpreted will vary between each individual. Artists who effectively combine unique, original ideas with standard, recognizable forms will be much more likely to have their ideas successfully reproduced, as different rhetorical patterns evoke different emotional responses.

For this reason, I wish to provide an adaptationist reading of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Charlotte Perkin’s Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* to

demonstrate how these two authors use different universals, rhetorical devices, and subject matter in order to create powerful, emotional surrogate experiences that ultimately provide an adaptive advantage to our species through their ability to create empathy and present the perspective of the cultural Other.

CHAPTER II

FALLING APART TOGETHER: AN ADAPTATIONIST APPROACH TO CHINUA

ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

In their critique of literary Darwinism entitled, “The Bottlenecks of Literary Darwinism,” Amy Mallory-Kani and Kenneth Womack pose the following challenge: “is it even possible to compose a Darwinist ‘reading’ of a postcolonial and/or colonial text? How do Darwin’s position as a white, imperialist male and the appropriation of his ideas for colonial supremacy affect an analysis of a ‘classic’ postcolonial work like Chinua Achebe’s *Things fall Apart?*” (231). To be sure, one should consider Darwin’s hegemonic position as a “white, imperialist male” who wrote his *Origin of the Species, etc.* during the age of British Imperialism; nevertheless, Darwin’s position is not cause for a complete dismissal of his theories.

Because Mallory-Kani and Womack lack a comprehensive understanding of natural selection and the insight provided by research from various scientific fields, including evolutionary biology and psychology, they speciously hone in on Darwin’s social standing as a reflection of, or even substitution for, his theories. In actuality, a Darwinian analysis of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is not only possible, but in fact offers an emergent insight into this “classic” postcolonial text and enhances our understanding of both the text *and* its adaptive value.

Again looking to Joseph Carroll, I argue that to properly use an Adaptationist approach, we must first realize,

There is no work of literature written anywhere in the world, at any time, by any author, that is outside the scope of a Darwinian analysis. To be susceptible to a Darwinian analysis, an author does not have to be a Darwinian. An author can be a pagan Greek, a Christian, a Muslim, or a Zen Buddhist [...] He or she can be heterosexual, bisexual or celibate. [...] If Darwinism gives a true account of the human mind, and if the human mind produces all literary texts, all literary texts are susceptible to a Darwinian analysis [...] to an analysis of the constraining psychological structures that regulate the production of all imaginative artifacts. (79)

To offer an analogy, whether or not one *believes* in or even subscribes to Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation has absolutely no bearing on the effects of gravity. That person will remain rooted to the ground because the scientific principles observed by Newton are irrefutable. Much the same way, natural selection is a process of which we have verifiable proof, and whether or not an author or audience believes in the process of natural selection is irrelevant. Human beings are all bound to certain biological processes that influence our behaviors, including our production of art, and as we realize this, we broaden the scope of our understanding of literature.

Thus, in demonstrating the application value of literary Darwinism within the field of literary studies, I hope to show both how and why this criticism is a

valuable resource that will positively inform literary theory and why it has much greater application possibilities, especially in regards to multicultural literature, than many critics allow. Such critics as Mallory-Kani and Womack write that “the colonialist efforts to make ‘inferior’ nations more ‘acceptable’ by transforming their citizens into imperfect subjects of this or that empire is certainly not natural. Is the oppression of humans by other humans part and parcel of human nature?” (230) It seems odd that the authors appear to directly contradict themselves in the previous statement, but the answer, according to many recent scientific findings, is that no, oppression and subjugation of humans by other humans is actually *not* behavior that is hardwired into our cognitive framework, but rather the opposite is the case; we are primed for feelings of empathy, mutual experiences, and concern for other members of our group.

However, the controversy over natural selection and its possible implications is, as I said, understandable to an extent. The theory of natural selection was used to support claims for racial supremacy as “civilized nations” were thought to be more fit than “barbarous” nations, and thus, justified in subjugating whole groups of people—in other words, making their culture and way of life extinct (Mallory-Kani and Womack 231).

Indeed, at the height of its power “the British Empire ruled roughly one-quarter of the earth’s land and population,” and “in many ways, colonialism was so brutal that if the conquering peoples had owned up to it, that might have led them to reject colonialism and give up the privileges of power” (Parker 240). Thus, in order to maintain and protect their political and economic interests, Westerners did *not*

own up to their colonialism and certainly avoided critical examinations of such imbalances of power between them and their colonies.

Yet, the point Parker makes is an exceedingly important one in light of Mallory-Kani and Womack's characterization of Darwin's theories about natural selection. If it were the case that the domination of one group by another were simply human nature, it would not be as devastating as Parker claims for the colonizers to acknowledge and reflect on their actions. But the fact that these actions were deliberately ignored or suppressed by colonizers highlights the very real threat that social consciousness posed and still poses to an imperialistic power.

This social consciousness is formed in large part through our production of art, the medium through which human experiences are transmitted. As more postcolonial writers emerged to contribute to the shift in social consciousness, in the 1970s, postcolonial studies, which "defines formerly colonized people as any population that has been subjected to the political domination of another population" (Tyson 417), began to gain momentum for its ability to respond to "a powerful sense of need as readers faced up to changes in world politics and the growing recognition of English as a language of international literature and international daily life" (Parker 241). This humanistic theoretical approach provided the framework for the possibility "of making literary study as international as literature itself, and so it holds a powerful appeal for readers who care about the state of the world and its writing" (Parker 241) through its reexamination of writing from both colonizing and colonized peoples, or, more broadly, "cultural and political

relations between more powerful and less powerful nations and peoples” (Parker 241).

Thus, as a postcolonial text by Nigerian-born Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* offers an important account of an African Ibo tribe before and during its colonization by Christian European settlers. Achebe depicts the tragic downfall of the protagonist, Okonkwo, through whom the reader has a surrogate experience of the postcolonial concept offered by Homi Bhabha of *unhomeliness*—whereby one belongs to neither the native culture nor the colonizer’s culture—and who ultimately struggles to reconcile his anxiety caused by “the trauma of the cultural displacement within which [he] lives” (Tyson 421). Achebe creates a vicarious experience for the reader through this character and, hence, allows the reader to better understand the plight of oppression and the cultural and political state of the world around him or her.

As Lyle Eslinger writes in “The Evolving Study of Literature,” the connection “between story and environmental processes lies near the centre of literature’s adaptive function” (173). If the arts’ adaptive function is derived from how successful they are in providing a representation of the world that helps us to make sense of our environment, and thus, enhances our inclusive fitness, then the arts must keep pace with the environment in order to provide an adequate representation.

Providing a representation that helps readers adapt to the environment depicted is not only the purpose of literature, but it is the aim of postcolonial writers and theorists as well. As Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan explain,

Each colonized nation also produced its own body of literature that dealt with the imperial experience or attempted to define a post imperial sense of national and cultural identity [...] to make sense of their history and their continuing experience of racism. (1072)

This is precisely what Achebe does in providing his account of Okonkwo and the Igbo tribe's demise. He both illuminates and complicates many of the issues surrounding a postcolonial culture in order to help represent, and, most importantly, give voice to that experience.

Before we begin a critical Darwinian analysis of the text, however, it is imperative that we discuss the nature of empathy and our notion about the essence of human nature as it relates to evolutionary psychology, cognition, and survival. In his book, entitled *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, Jeremy Rifkin explains that over the last ten years, there have been significant developments in a variety of fields, including neuro-cognitive science and evolutionary biology, which challenge long-held shibboleths about human nature, especially in regards to beliefs about our drive towards aggression, narcissism, selfish, behavior, and other Hobbesian¹ assumptions about human behavior (47). In fact, Rifkin's claims are well-supported in *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*. In their Introduction, David Sloan Wilson and Elliot Sober write,

The idea that human behavior is governed entirely by self-interest

¹ Refer to Perez Zagorin's *Hobbes and the Law of Nature* for an explanation of Hobbes' concepts about mankind's disposition and propensity for aggression, self-interest, and domination. See Chapter 2, "Enter the Law of Nature" 30-65.

and that altruistic ultimate motives don't exist has never been supported by either a coherent theory or a crisp and decisive set of observations. The entire debate has been characterized by an intellectual pecking order in which an egoistic explanation for a given behavior, no matter how contrived, is favored over an altruistic explanation, even in the absence of empirical evidence that discriminates between the two approaches. (8)

As Rifkin explains, a discovery in the 1990s using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans demonstrated that when human beings observe "other people's hand movements and facial expressions [...] a part of the brain, including the front cortex [...] would also activate in the same area as if they were making the hand movements or facial gestures" (82). What the scientists had discovered are called "mirror neurons," and they enable us to feel empathy and, more precisely, empathic distress. The discovery of these neurons also suggests that we are actually wired not for aggression, violence, or self-interest, but we are actually "wired for empathy—it is our nature and what makes us social beings" (Rifkin 84). Our desire to be part of a group is an *empathic* drive.

Rifkin explains the practical value of empathy for the first groups that existed in Early Human hunter/forager societies, in which communication only extended to the tribe, to blood ties (447-48). Everyone outside of this group was the alien "Other" (Rifkin 453). As humans evolved and adapted to a civilization of agriculture, written text allowed us to extend our group ties, and narratives—originally theological and eventually ideological narratives—"allowed individuals to identify

with non-kin and anonymous others and, by way of affiliation, incorporate them into the empathic fold”(Rifkin 451). He continues

empathy, then, in every culture, extends to the boundaries of its organizational domain. Inside the walls, empathy exists, if only in limited fashion. Outside the organizational boundaries is a no-man’s-land—a place beyond the empathic imagination. (451-52)

Thus, it becomes clear that narrative is one the organizational domain that delineates “us” from “them” and that narrative is extremely instrumental in creating empathy. Rifkin’s reference to written communication makes clear how large a role literature plays in shaping societies and enhancing their ability to adapt.

As Wilson, Sober, and many others suggest, altruism and empathy are not maladaptive as previously thought, but actually function to enhance the survival of the species—and literature is one of the primary tools that has enabled communication and created a consciousness that enhances our inclusive fitness.

Because group selection theory² affirms that it is in fact adaptive for humans to work and live collectively, we understand that empathy, too, is adaptive, as it allows us to broaden our groups through shared values. Of course, this explanation rests on the supposition of the existence of morality. A scientific understanding of morality provides that it is an adaptation that evolved because it enhances cooperation, and cooperation enhances genetic fertility. As E.O. Wilson and Michael Ruse explain,

² Refer to Richard Dawkin’s *The Selfish Gene* and Stephen R. Kellert and E.O. Wilson’s *Biophilia Hypothesis* for a comprehensive discussion and confirmation of the adaptiveness of group selection.

Human beings function better if they are deceived by their genes into thinking that there is a disinterested objective morality binding upon them, which all should obey.[...]What Darwinian evolutionary theory shows is that this sense of 'right' and the corresponding sense of 'wrong,' feelings we take to be above individual desire and in some fashion outside biology, are in fact brought about by ultimately biological processes. (qtd in Rolston 383)

Thus, morality is tied to our ability to empathize, and is dictated largely by emotional responses that have been shaped by natural selection to create the sense of "right" and "wrong."

While individual fitness is key for genetic survival, more recent research shows that the survival of the species as a whole is crucial for individual survival because of human beings' heavy reliance on social systems. Without the group, one's genes are not passed on because the individual cannot survive alone.

As the human population is ever-increasing and more and more often diverse groups of people are coming into contact with one another, Rifkin warns that if we are unable to begin viewing the entire human race as part of an extended family, the human race is in jeopardy. He insists that

we have to broaden our sense of identity. We do lose the old identities of nationhood and our religious identities and even our blood ties, but we extend our identity so we can think of the human race as our fellow sojourners. We have to rethink the human narrative. If we are truly *Homo Empathicus*, then we need to bring out

that core nature, because if it doesn't come out and it's repressed by our parenting, our educational system, our business practice, and government, the secondary drives come, the narcissism, the materialism, the violence, the aggression. (Rifkin *Ted Talk*)

In other words, embracing a postcolonial, multicultural view does not mean that we completely ignore our differences and consider every member of the human race to be essentially the same as we are, but rather, acknowledge our differences as well as our similarities in order to adapt to the reality of a multicultural society and avoid destructive behavior by minimizing conflict between groups. Thus, we should realize how important literature and the arts are to creating this experience of empathic distress and empathy for the Other.

In turning to an Adaptationist analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, we see that through its use of the near-universals shaped by natural selection, certain rhetorical and stylistic elements, and an objective, third-person omniscient narrator, Achebe's novel serves as an adaptive text for both hegemonic and subaltern audiences and successfully activates cognitive, empathic responses in Western readers, allowing them to extend their fictions and thus their group ties to the Other, which is crucial in order for this text to give a requisite and beneficial explanation of the postcolonial world.

In *The Literary Animal*, Joseph Carroll proposes five concepts that constitute the minimum requirement for a "literary analysis informed by a Darwinian understanding of human nature" (77). These include the concept that human nature consists of a hierarchy of motives (survival and mating, understandably, being at the

very top of this hierarchy); the concept that meaning is located within “three distinct centers of consciousness—that of the author, the characters, and the implied or projected audience” (77); the concept of human universals that function as a “frame of reference in relation to which authors identify their own individual identities and their own distinct structures of meaning” (77); “a set of categories for analyzing individual differences in identity” (77) ; and “the distribution of specifically literary meaning into [the] three dimensions” of theme, tone, and formal organization (77). Each of these principles can be applied to *Things Fall Apart* in order to provide an illustration of how this successfully adaptive piece of literature helps to shape social consciousness and thus promote the propagation of humankind, regardless, and far more likely because of its delineation as Other.

In the novel, Achebe avails himself of many of the near-universals discussed in the previous chapter in order to reinforce the appeal of the surrogate experience he provides. Achebe’s rendering of these universals enhances the adaptive success of his story because, as Carroll illuminates,

The behavior that is depicted in literary texts does not necessarily exemplify universal or species-typical behavioral patterns, but species-typical patterns form an indispensable frame of reference for the communication of meaning in literary representations. By appealing to this substratum of common human motives, authors activate a vein of common understanding in their readers. (*The Literary Animal* 92)

The universals Achebe uses activate responses in the reader because biological forces shape human motives. Therefore, Achebe's presentation of universals inevitably appeal to the human desire for a "what if?" experiment involving such threats as a tribe at war, exile, and most alarming of all, suicide.

One of the primary universals that Achebe avails himself of is that of a tribe at war. In "The Evolving Study of Literature," Lyle Eslinger points out that "perennial literary themes such as love and war" are influenced by "the basic responses and emotions deriving from the biological prime directives (survival and reproduction)" (172). By using this universal, Achebe helps ensure his story's adaptive value by appealing to his audience's cognitive processes and emotions. The story is even more successful, though, because Achebe because the tribe does not "triumph against heavy odds" (Wilson 244) but succumbs to violent oppression.

By challenging the audience's assumption about the fate of the Igbo, Achebe further increases the likelihood that the text will be both intriguing and complex enough to invite an audience's interpretation. Yet, the tribe does not go to war until Part 3 of the novel, which is another important rhetorical feature that helps to create meaning for the reader, for merely introducing a tribe already at war would be less effective on an audience than the approach Achebe takes, which is to introduce the tribe, their customs, language, stories, and struggles so that the audience becomes connected to and immersed in the Ibo culture and thus better able to relate the tribe's situation.

As the tale is transmitted via a third-person narrator, the audience is given a seemingly objective point-of-view through which to have a vicarious experience.

David Carroll writes that

the gestures, the ritual, the formal greetings are in no sense merely part of the African local color. We approach these meetings of the clan from the inside, from the point of view of the major characters. Then in the debates that follow we witness their private fears and hopes becoming formalized in the communal decisions. (37)

Therefore, when considering Joseph Carroll's three dimensions in which meaning is located, we see that the author distances himself from the text in order to obfuscate his presence, thereby minimizing the audience's perception of an author bias and simultaneously eliminating the cognitive distance between the tribe and reader.

Also, as David Carroll points out, the major characters act as the channels through which the reader processes external information, and the meaning the reader draws from the characters is, of course, dependent on the respective archetypes of each character. Okonkwo, obviously the most important character and protagonist, is the hero whom the audience is meant to identify with most. Thus, Achebe immediately introduces and defines Okonkwo so as to create an immediate bond between his character and the audience. For example, the novel begins, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements" (3). We see that this first line tells the reader of Okonkwo's importance not only in his local community but as a focus for the reader as well. Thus, when over the course of the novel the focus is shifted from the

tribe and “the narrator begins to delve into a single mind, we anticipate with foreboding an unpleasant turn of events” (David Carroll 39).

Accordingly, Achebe’s use of the hero universal is especially effective because he successfully uses a theme that primes the audience’s expectation and then counters this expectation with the novel’s resolution. As E.O. Wilson writes, “The hero [...] is exiled to wilderness, or experiences an iliad in a distant land; he returns in an odyssey against all odds [...] to complete his destiny” (244). Indeed, Okonkwo is exiled at the end of Part 1, but ultimately fails to realize his destiny.

Achebe writes, “The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land” (124). From a survival standpoint, being exiled from one’s group poses an immense threat to an individual’s wellbeing and, thus, the audience empathizes due to the biologically driven fear of isolation. Ultimately, though, Okonkwo does return to his tribe after the requisite seven years. Yet, while Okonkwo *physically* returns to his village, he is unable to ever return to his home. The community he has known is forever changed with the arrival of the Christian missionaries during Okonkwo’s time in exile. Thus, Okonkwo is trapped in a state of *psychological* exile. The tribe he returns to has

undergone such profound change that it was barely recognizable.

The new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people’s eyes and minds. There were still many who saw these new institutions as evil, but even they talked and thought about little else, and certainly not about Okonkwo’s return. (183)

As we see, Achebe does not have his character meet the archetypal expectation of fulfilling his destiny by returning from exile.

Rather, as Okonkwo faces the surmounting pressures of colonial power, he is overcome by his emotion at the loss of his tradition, his community, his life. Outraged by this loss, he “confronted the head messenger, unable to utter a word” and “drew his machete [which] descended twice and the man’s head lay beside the uniform body” (204).

Presented with such a graphic and startling scenario, the audience’s empathic response is primed to be alarmed at this type of aggression, but the audience is also forced to reexamine the perception of the colonizer. Because Okonkwo is the protagonist, the audience’s subjective position is situated so that the reader does not identify with the colonizer, but rather with Okonkwo.

Therefore, when Okonkwo ultimately commits suicide—“an abomination [...] an offense against the Earth” (207)—to avoid succumbing to the colonists, the audience undergoes empathic distress. The audience is forced to cognitively reconcile a situation in which suicide—something Okonkwo’s values (let alone biological drives) would normally never allow—is preferable to the ultimate drive to survive. Achebe’s alteration of the expected universal hero serves to place the audience in the same cognitive state as Okonkwo— and is effective because it plays on emotional responses human beings have towards the hero archetype and self-preservation, which is directly created through the surrogate experience. The unexpected twist Okonkwo’s fate thus calls for more interpretation from the reader and serves to increase the appeal and adaptive value of his story to an audience.

Okonkwo's suicide also crystallizes another significant point for interpretation, one informed by Carroll's concept of a set of categories—those which mark differences in identity. Achebe writes that

Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead. 'Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him,' said Obierika. 'We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming.' The District Commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs. (207)

The custom of not touching a body after suicide marks merely one of the categorical differences between the tribe and the outsiders, but it is a key difference, and its exposition at the very end of the story is critical. Okonkwo's death symbolizes the fact that the tribe's fate is sealed—rather than continuing to be a great warrior tribe, its future will be forever changed as the invaders replace traditional customs with their own. After his death, the customs of Okonkwo's tribe are honored one last time, to denote the end of the age of the hero as well as the way of life for the tribe.

Marking this difference in identity is also of utmost importance from a postcolonial perspective. Since, as Womack and Mallory-Kani claim, those nations that were 'civilized' used Darwin's theory to justify their conquest of 'barbarous nations,' (230) Achebe's presentation of the tribe's sacrosanct attitude towards death and their ensuing customs proves that the tribe is not uncivilized, primitive, or 'barbarous,' but possesses a clear and unique culture, and therefore, invalidates such the colonizer's justification of colonization.

The reader understands that if the tribe were truly savage, it would not be possible for Achebe to write an entire novel explaining their customs, beliefs, foods, cultural history, etc., and there is likely very little a more “civilized” culture to learn from them. Thus, the Commissioner’s wish to become a “student” while condensing the tribe’s description into a few remarks in his book reveals the lack of understanding on part of the colonizers and effectively marks them as outsiders. In this moment, the colonizers become the alien Other, and the audience ultimately identifies with the tribe. Achebe’s text thus serves to both broaden and alter social consciousness so that the audience is more likely to extend group association to the tribe.

As both *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* and *The Biophilia Hypothesis* explain, group selection is much more genetically adaptive than previously thought, and consequently humans rely heavily on social interaction and the acceptance, protection, and support a group provides in order to survive. However, this by no means eliminates competition, as David Sloan Wilson and Elliot Sober point out,

Group selection favors within-group niceness *and* between-group nastiness. Group selection theory does not abandon the idea of competition that forms the core of the theory of natural selection; rather, it proves an additional setting in which competition can occur.

(9)

As this passage illustrates, humans are social creatures and group selection theory affirms that cooperation within a group increases individual inclusive fitness. Thus,

we understand that group cooperation is extremely important for our survival. Achebe's text serves to create a surrogate experience for an audience, thus providing an internal perspective of the Ibo tribe with which the audience identifies.

Because the literature of the oppressor no longer sufficed as an acceptable representation of the postcolonial world, Achebe's text provides a perspective that is pertinent to human experience and adaptation as opposing cultures come into contact with one another. As Lois Parker points out, "Hybridity does not consist of a stalemate between two warring cultures but is rather a productive, exciting, positive force in a shrinking world that is itself becoming more and more culturally hybrid" (422). Thus, Achebe's novel helps present the complexity of a postcolonial civilization so as to accurately reflect the nature of human existence. He does not offer a judgment as to the "correct" way of life, but does provide an account that responds to the Westerners' depiction of reality.

Achebe very clearly positions his novel as a response to Western ideas about so-called primitive cultures. The very end of the story reads,

The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out the details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (209)

In this passage, Achebe is all but directly pointing to literature that inaccurately portrays tribal life and condenses the entire culture, values, and history of a tribe into propaganda that furthers colonial interest as his target. Thus, his novel is an explicit address to the dehumanization of people perpetuated by Imperial literature².

As Paulo Freire writes, "This then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, rape, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves" (44). Because, as Parker note, the colonizers went to extensive lengths to perpetuate mistruths about the indigenous peoples they conquered, it is no wonder they would lack the ability to liberate those they oppressed. Thus, Achebe's novel is vitally necessary from a postcolonial standpoint, as it provides a conduit for a surrogate experience, empathy on part of the reader, and inevitably, liberation as group association is extended.

This is the task not only of literary studies, but humanity as a whole. Only by studying and reflecting on social problems can we *understand* and, thus, *solve* them. Literature is one of the important artistic tools that helps us to do that, to awaken social consciousness. As E.O. Wilson points out

Humans can vastly expand the circle of reciprocal altruism, and
this is the basis of all cultural cooperation...persons today cooperate

² Achebe's essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad," discusses this type of literature as the target he is writing to address.

at work, in politics, at school...the small circles of reciprocal altruism in the world become national and international networks of cooperation. (Biophilia Hypothesis 400-01)

Thus, *Things Fall Apart* provides a significant potential for expanding cultural cooperation and for understanding the mechanisms of cultural cooperation through its illustration of Igbo culture and its inevitable demise. The novel proves its adaptive value as it conveys universal elements that attend to a strong human need to experiment vicariously with the world in order to gather useful information. Through this text, Achebe alerts his audience to the fact that rigid opposition to the “Other” will result in one group’s demise, and that “only if we understand transitions from one to the other, the compromises, the opportunities, the contradictions—both within our society and the individual—can we begin to move beyond” (David Carroll Preface) our assumptions of colonialism.

CHAPTER III

EMPATHY, INSANITY, AND EVOLUTION: AN ADAPTATIONIST ANALYSIS OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

In much the same fashion as they challenge the possibility for a Darwinian reading of a postcolonial text, Amy Mallory-Kani and Kenneth Womack write that we can also extend these questions to works in which issues of feminism or homosexuality are extant. If "human females have evolved a need to secure the bonded attachment of a male willing to invest resources in them and their offspring,' then where is the space for sexualities that deviate from this aspect of 'human nature? By depending on heterosexual procreation, natural selection and its ancillary theories seemingly exclude individuals who are "other" to the dominant norm. (231)

Indeed, their argument that a feminist or homosexual text would be marginalized or nonadaptive seems plausible given the notion that "survival of the fittest" aids humans in propagating genes through certain rigidly defined mating strategies.

It is important to note, however, that Mallory-Kani and Womack give an incorrect and antiquated view of Darwinian theory, which Sarah Blaffer Hrdy corrects in *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*. Hrdy

argues that the phrase “survival of the fittest’ [...] was introduced not by Darwin but by his prolific and widely read contemporary, the social philosopher Herbert Spencer” (13). Darwin adopted the phrase, intending it to mean

the survival of those best suited to their current circumstances, not the survival of the best in any absolute sense [...] But no matter.

Spencer and his followers were gratified that so celebrated a naturalist and experimentalist as Darwin would cite his views, accept his catchy phrase, and endorse heartfelt convictions about essential differences between males and females that derived from Spencer’s theory of a physiological division of labor by sex. (14)

For obvious reasons, Spencer’s concept sat well with Darwin’s “privileged audience in Victorian England and America” (13). As Hrdy explains, his views affirmed the success of the elite, and therefore were grafted onto Darwin’s ideas in order to perpetuate and legitimize certain forms of social Darwinism. Not only did Spencer’s phrase “survival of the fittest” become conflated with Darwinism, so, too, did his ideas that “The supreme function of women [...] was childbearing,” thus “precluding the evolution in women of higher ‘intellectual and emotional’ faculties” (Hrdy 14). This assumption led to women being denied education, and inevitably became a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” because without the opportunity of education, “how could women *not* fail to excel in [it]?” (Hrdy 14 emphasis original). These views consequently led to women being denied more than just an equal status in education, but in almost every other sphere of life outside the realm of domesticity as well.

However, Spencer's alterations to the theory of natural selection proved not only to be damaging, but erroneous, because, "by contrast, *Darwinism*—real Darwinian thought, correctly interpreted—ascribes no special place to anyone. No adaptation continues to be selected for outside the circumstances that happen to favor it" (Hrdy13). This is because, ultimately, environmental factors—which for humans include social conditions—influence which adaptations are selected. As environments shift, so, too, do the advantages for certain adaptations.

In a paper entitled "What is Darwinian Feminism?" Nancy Easterlin corrects views held by those such as Mallory-Kani and Womack when she discusses how changing environmental factors result directly in women's shifting responses to the environment. She writes,

research in the past thirty years has focused on *female choice* about when conditions are favorable for raising young to maturity [...] In the late nineteenth century [...] human life expectancy increased and, especially, infant mortality declined. Corresponding to these developments and probably as a result of them, women began to consciously control the number of offspring they produced. [...] Humans have altered their environment radically, and in response, people born and raised in that environment make reproductive and life choice decisions our ancestors could never have imagined.

(175)

Thus, the altered environment calls for adaptation to changing pressures, including adaptation in literature. In order to be adaptive, a text must be able to provide

information that helps the reader navigate or understand the environment portrayed. Hence, texts must be able to offer a representation of the world that keeps pace accordingly with environmental changes. Yet, in the 19th century, literature did *not* accurately reflect the environment, but was dominated by male writers, thoughts, and values.

Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan point out that “feminist scholars realized that the ‘canon’ taught in schools was overwhelmingly male” (Rivkin and Ryan 766) as female writers or texts that espouse a female viewpoint were historically nonexistent, or if they did exist, were forcibly silenced or disregarded.

This silence is precisely the plight of the Other, whether Otherness relates to culture, gender, ideology or other factors. As long as the Other remains alien and incapable of asserting an identity not created by an oppressor, the dominant power continues to enjoy its privileged status. Thus, the Other must establish an identity that challenges the dominant power in order to enhance its ability to survive.

Much like postcolonial writers who sought the authority to define an identity free from the colonial ideology, women also struggled to wrest their identity from male oppressors. As Lois Parker writes

patriarchal subjugation of women is analogous to colonial subjugation of indigenous populations. And the resultant devaluation of women and colonized peoples poses very similar problems for both groups in terms of achieving an independent personal and group identity; gaining access to political power and economic opportunities; and finding ways to think, speak, and create that are not dominated by the

ideology of the oppressor. (423)

Thus, we understand that texts in which feminist ideas are extant face much of the same issues as postcolonial literature when it comes to confronting the values of the hegemony, transmitting the experience of the Other so that it is one to which a reader can relate, and, ultimately, eliciting empathy from the reader. However, we also understand that it *is* indeed possible to use a Darwinian approach to postcolonial texts, we realize that feminist texts face the same obstacles and contain the same potential to overcome them. Because all literature is ultimately produced by and for the human mind, if it accurately captures and speaks to human nature, it is susceptible to a Darwinian reading.

Literature provides a powerful surrogate experience by appealing to drives that enhance inclusive fitness and by creating an empathic response in readers, thereby helping them not only understand the complex demands of a given environment, but also helping them extend group association through new fictions.

Given a closer, and most importantly, updated examination of evolutionary biology and psychology, I argue that is no less possible to perform a Darwinian analysis of a feminist text than it is for a postcolonial text because as Joseph Carroll has explained, literary texts are produced by the human mind, and the human mind is subject to certain biological processes that influence our behavior so as to enhance inclusive fitness. In fact, feminist criticism actually helps to inform Darwinian concepts about human nature and thus sheds light on the adaptive value of texts that contain views of or that are written by women.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an ideal candidate for an Adaptationist analysis. In fact, I argue that a Darwinian reading of a feminist text is not only possible, but essential, as an understanding of biological constraints and processes actually helps to expand our understanding, not only of Gilman's extraordinary work, but of the adaptive function of literature—even when written by or providing a viewpoint of the Other—and thus, realizes the goal of achieving positive criticism in literary studies.

"The Yellow Wallpaper," Thomas L. Erskine and Connie L. Richards write, is considered a key feminist text that has attracted varied critical elucidations. The most famous quoted text is *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. They place "The Yellow Wallpaper" in the tradition of [...] the

"enclosure and escape" mode, the narrator's choices being submission to male dicta or insanity.[...] Women's desire to escape their social conditions, like the narrator of Gilman's tale, leads these authors to believe that this is "the story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe.'" For them, the story is triumphant [...] for it recognizes women's needs to save and reveal themselves, and, by extension, "the progress of nineteenth century literary women out of the texts defined by patriarchal poetics into the open spaces of their own authority." (8)

Erskine and Richards' sentiment that women must "save and reveal themselves" echoes Freire's call to the oppressed to both liberate themselves and their oppressor. Again, it is the task of the oppressed because, "Who are better prepared

than [them] to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? [...] Who can better understand the need for liberation?" (Freire 45). Indeed, Charlotte Perkins Gilman understood the need for liberation precisely because of the treatment she received for her severe depression, which consisted of

extended bed rest, isolation from family, overfeeding, and massage—all of which tend to transform an adult woman into a dependant infant[...] Adhering to these prohibitions almost drove Gilman insane, and her autobiography contains details about creating a rag baby and retreating both literally and emotionally to closets in order to escape from her distress. (Erskine and Richards 6)

Undeniably, saving women from a fate similar to that of her own or the narrator's is exactly what "The Yellow Wallpaper" accomplished. By holding a mirror up to society and its chokehold on female intellect and identity, Gilman's text had a profound impact on the literary and medical field as well as many others.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ancillary article, "Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper," she writes

[The story] has, to my knowledge, saved one woman from a similar fate—so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered. But the best result is this. Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked. (Gilman, "Why")

Through giving her audience a more immediate sense of what insanity would be like, Gilman's story ultimately helps prevent such a fate for the audience by creating a powerful "what if" scenario, in which the question is, "What if nothing is done about society's treatment of women?" Thus, Gilman's story clearly enhances survival; by sparking recognition in and shifting the schema of social consciousness, her text actually helped influence medical and social practices to not only better the quality, but also *save* the lives of women. When women have a better quality of life, society as a whole benefits, but this is a topic I will reserve for later discussion.

It is important to first address the fact that feminist criticism is a broad term that refers to vying ideas under the label of feminism¹. One such perspective is that of the constructivist position which borrows from "the Post-Structuralist idea that language writes rather than reflects identities" (Rivkin and Ryan 768). At its most radical, this concept was used to foster the idea that language is inherently patriarchal, and thus female writers can never cast off their subordination through language because it is the very thing that imprisons them in a masculine structure.

However, language does *not* imprison its users and is ultimately not the source of thought. As Steven Pinker writes,

The idea that thought is the same thing as language is an example of what can be called a conventional absurdity[...] Think about it. We have all had the experience of uttering or writing a sentence, then stopping and realizing that it wasn't exactly what we meant to say. To

¹ Refer to Rivkin and Ryan's *Introduction to Feminism* for a discussion of different Feminist perspective, most importantly Essentialists v. Constructivists.

have that feeling, there has to be a “what we meant to say” that is different from what we said. Sometimes it is not easy to find *any* words that properly convey a thought. (57-58)

As this passage explicates, thought precedes language, and rather than dominating human beings, language actually serves as a tool to convey thought and liberate identity.

It is fair to say there can be a feminist approach to language, but to say we cannot escape patriarchy using the language currently available is logically unsound. The fact that we are able to discuss and demonstrate the problematic nature of patriarchy while affirming a distinct female identity using language clearly illustrates that language is not the oppressive structure that constructivist feminist critics claim it is. Hence, we understand that it is sufficient female writers *will* use language differently, but do not need a separate language entirely.

But the constructivist position proves problematic for Nancy Easterlin, too. She points out the inherent shortcomings of a constructivist feminist position, and asks, “Why is current feminist theory so far removed from apparent physical realities of human experience that obfuscates rather than clarifies the issues at stake?” (Easterlin 172). She argues that the constructivist feminist position radically opposes the concept of biologically-bound, essential differences to the detriment of a comprehensive understanding of both literature and society. She urges a paradigm shift that recognizes and appreciates the biological differences between men and women and helps us better understand human nature and interaction. Easterlin writes,

constructionism is crippling to feminism, in part because it forestalls causal explanation. An understanding of the *causes* of inequality, which may have something to do with a culture's intentional as well as unintentional manipulation of the differences between man and woman, is, arguably, vital to finding accurate solutions to problems of inequality. (173)

With the need for understanding how biology influences behavior, identity, and differences in male and female thought in order to solve the problems of social injustice in mind, I now turn to a practical application of *Darwinian* theory to Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." The story itself, as previously mentioned, is the product of Gilman's exercise in making sense of her environment and social, mental, and emotional constraints placed on her by a patriarchal society. Just as in emergent postcolonial environments in which those who were colonized must try to understand their new landscape, so too does Gilman give voice and interpretation to the consequences for women living in a patriarchal society. The story is Gilman's attempt to reconcile the injustice she faced by distancing herself from it and adding details that ultimately reaffirms her authority and sanity and proves the social structure to be insane. Thus, Gilman was able to cope with her experience, with "the story allowing Gilman to say in fiction what she cannot say in life"

The "The Yellow Wallpaper" is told in first person narration through the protagonist's diary. The fact that she is writing secretly in the diary is itself indicative of the oppression women faced from society; as they were "banished from education and from public life, women writers had found refuge in literary forms

despised by men, in diaries and letters and in sentimental fiction” (Rivkin and Ryan 766).

However, far from being the inferior literature that a patriarchal society might deem it, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is actually more rhetorically effective for its form as a quasi-epistolary narrative because it gives the reader a more intimate perspective of the protagonist’s mental state and subsequent psychological deterioration. Thus, the surrogate experience is intensified, and, moreover, increasingly effective, as it gives voice to many of the frustrations female readers face. But perhaps most groundbreaking—and, as I argue, most strikingly adaptive—is the surrogate experience that Gilman provides male readers by forcing them into a female subject position. Erskine and Richards understand the effect of this rhetorical device. They write,

“[women] forced to read [male-authored] texts are forced to become characters in those texts. And since the stories men tell assert as fact what women know to be fiction, not only do women lose the power that comes from authoring; more significantly, they are forced to deny their own reality and to commit in effect a kind of psychic suicide.

(183)

Thus, Gilman’s surrogate experience is deeply evocative and even revolutionary in its ability to offer a complete reversal of typical vicarious experiences. Because Gilman was one of the first female writers to accurately capture the plight of women and reflect it to society, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is

capable of (and was responsible for) effecting significant change in social consciousness.

Faced with the horrifying experience transmitted through the narrator, the audience undergoes much of the same reaction as it would to Okonkwo's suicide in *Things Fall Apart*, the experience of an emotional response driven by the fear of failing in self-preservation. It is precisely the experience of cerebral suicide that threatens the reader and triggers responses in the brain related to the inclusive fitness behavior of self-preservation.

Yet what is most notable about the universals in Gilman's text is the absence of the typical archetypes historically used for women. Gilbert and Gubar expound on Virginia Woolf's argument² that the dichotomy of "monster" and "angel" were the two aesthetic ideals generated by male authors to keep women subjugated, as both of these images create dehumanizing portrayals of women; stripping women of their humanity inexorably delineates them as Other and thereby reduces the cognitive ability to empathize with them. The angelic image distorts women into ideals of perfection that are above the realm of attainable human qualities; the image of the monster, conversely, distorts women into figures that are physically deformed or consist of various animal parts and whose deformity reflects their evil and malicious nature. Gilman's main character is neither a monster nor an angel, but a woman who is increasingly humanized through the portrayal of her worsening psychological state.

² The authors cite Woolf's "Professions for Women," in *Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), pp. 236-8.

Gilman thus creates a female identity free from the typically negative male characterizations, a female protagonist who escapes the static conventions previously offered. However, Gilman does still use the universal of the Trickster “who disturbs established order” (Wilson 244), the “great source of power [] found in the forbidden ritual” (Wilson 244)—which is the prohibited act of writing in her diary—and, finally, the narrator as the hero “in an odyssey against all odds [who faces] fearsome obstacles along the way” (Wilson 244).

Because the story is narrated in first person and we are given access to a the hero universal secret account in the diary, the reader’s vicarious experience is strengthened and thus the audience identifies with the protagonist and empathizes with her imprisonment. When she eventually is liberated at the cost of her sanity, though it is a fearsome scenario, she is ultimately “triumphant” as Erskine and Richards stated. Much like Achebe does with Okonkwo’s hero archetype in *Things Fall Apart*, Gilman also alters but is, in a sense, unable to “complete [her] destiny.” Like Okonkwo, it is only at the cost of her own wellbeing that the narrator is able to liberate herself from her oppressor. Thus, she is “triumphant,” but only ironically so.

In the story, the narrator has recently given birth to a child, a circumstance that is essential for two reasons. The first is that from a feminist perspective, it crystallizes the conflict that a patriarchal society creates for women, forcing them into maternal roles and disallowing identities outside of that role. It is also important because postpartum depression and lactational aggression occur just after childbirth. As Sarah Blaffer Hrdy notes, “that the arrival of the ‘bundle of joy’ should have such counterintuitive effects seems strange” (171).

Blaffer mentions a popular, early psychoanalytic explanation of postpartum depression was that mothers felt a “sense of loss at no longer being pregnant” (171). Hrdy quickly contests this idea, citing a natural dip in hormones that occurs with the expulsion of the placenta (153), which results in such symptoms as “anxiety, sleep disturbances, concern for the baby, depression, irritability, and hostility (171).

Hrdy also elucidates that it is no wonder Gilman’s protagonist is experiencing such anxiety, not only because of hormonal changes, but because of the effects of lactational aggression, which is a behavior that increases the mother’s desire to protect a child. She writes,

The root of [a postpartum mother’s] depression derives [...] from a fierce compulsion to protect [her infant] that fills her with hostility toward others. The worse off she is, or the more potentially threatened the mother feels, the more defensive she should be. [...] Nevertheless, such hostile emotions are rarely, in any human culture, considered exemplary in a woman. In many cultures (especially patriarchal ones) women are taught that they should never feel or behave aggressively, that they should cheerfully accommodate those around them. (Hrdy 173)

This conflict in maternal nature versus patriarchal power is what ultimately fuels the narrator’s psychological distress. Indeed, Gilman encapsulates this contradiction writing, “Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby. And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous” (33). The narrator’s social conditioning to be polite

causes her to commend Mary's caretaking, despite the angst that being isolated from the child causes the narrator. It also reflects a patriarchal view of motherhood.

Gilman's allegorical reference to the Virgin Mary exemplifies the idea that a "good" mother strives to be like the Biblical ideal, and because the narrator is clearly failing in her ability to mother, she deserves the treatment John prescribes.

At multiple instances in the story, the narrator tries to convince herself that the treatment *is* necessary for her "recovery." Gilman writes, "I wish I could get well faster" (38). Even so, the narrator clearly only wishes to be able to meet John's expectations, and does not necessarily accept anything is actually the matter with her. In fact, she begins to see her imprisonment as a saving grace, for

it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see. Of course I never mention it to them any more I am too wise—but I keep watch of it all the same. There are things in that wallpaper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. (39)

This passage illuminates the fact that the narrator, even when she has been stripped of all her agency, is still thinking of the wellbeing of her child. Unable to *actually* care for the child, she copes with her distress by convincing herself she *is* in fact protecting the child and making a sacrifice for its wellbeing.

This authentic depiction of the narrator's human drives allows the reader to understand her plight, recognize the consequences of it, and empathize with her. As Joseph Carroll points out, "successful parental care produces children capable, when grown, of forming adult pair bonds, becoming functional members of a community, and caring for children of their own" (111). It is evident that with the narrator's

complete mental collapse, she will remain unable to provide the necessary parental care for her child. In fact, the narrator herself is infantilized, kept in a room that “was a nursery first and then a playroom [...] I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children” (32). Thus, the narrator is artificially trapped in childhood. Because she herself is a child, the narrator is not even remotely capable of responding to an infant’s needs, though she clearly has the desire to do so.

Therefore, it is clear that the patriarchal constraints of society and the medical practice carried out by John are harmful not only to the narrator, but more importantly, to her and John’s child. It is unlikely the child will grow up well-adjusted or as adaptively able to meet the demands of life without the parental investment and resources that a mother provides. And as Nancy Easterlin argues,

the social competences more typically observable in women in men have been vastly underrated, to the detriment of modern society as a whole. Not only is nurture a foundation of species survival and later abilities but, in the larger picture, the normative psychological attributes of women—communality, cooperation, caretaking, and the like—serve to benefit our species in relationships with all others, not just with small children. (179)

Thus, as the reader recognizes, the implications for the negative effects of the patriarchal structure for society as a whole are quite clear. In ignoring the wellbeing of women and denying their authority to voice their identity, society ultimately suffers.

But Gilman is successful in her somewhat cautionary tale about the inevitable

psychological dissonance created by the conflicts for women in a patriarchal society, and both her subject matter and writing style create a distinct female identity, which is vital in awakening social consciousness to resolve injustices.

Rivkin and Ryan write, “feminine writing is exercised in a heterogenous style that deliberately undermines all the hierarchical orders of male rationalist philosophy by breaking for the ideal of coherent meaning and good rational style” (Rivkin and Ryan 767). Indeed, Gilman rails against coherence and rationality, both stylistically and ideologically through her line breaks, stream of consciousness, and other stylistic elements in her writing that reflect the vulnerable mental state of the narrator. In “Monumental Feminism and Literature’s Ancestral House: Another Look at ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” Janice Haney-Peritz writes,

what we want of woman’s writing is something different, a realization of that *écriture féminine* which figures so significantly in many contemporary attempts to specify what makes a woman’s writing distinctive [...] In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator’s labor of miming does seem to produce some such uncanny effect, for not only does her writing expose the “unheard of contradictions” in a man’s prescriptive logic but in dealing with those contradictory impasses by jumping from one thing to another, it also makes the reader aware of gaps in that discursive structure. (195)

Thus, Gilman effectively uses universals and human nature in order to inform her story, and by imaginatively retelling her experience, offers society a surrogate experience that is deeply powerful and evolutionarily adaptive. In the same way that

adaptive traits do not continue being selected when they no longer serve their purpose, texts will not be selected by an audience when they no longer accurately reflect the world or the world we *desire* at some point.

Precisely because a woman is denied the autonomy—the subjectivity—that the pen represents, she is not only excluded from culture...but she also becomes the embodiment of just those extremes of mysterious and intransigent Otherness which culture confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing. (Gilbert and Gubar *Literary Theory: An Anthology* 814)

By changing the literary landscape, culture accepts women as part of the group and not as “Other.” And as Gilbert and Gubar affirm:

By the end of the eighteenth century [...] women were not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised [...]. The old silent dance of death became a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, dance of authority. (814)

The very fact that we can compare the literary landscape that we have now and see immense differences in the canon as far as the multitude of and respect given to texts by and about women demonstrates that literature *does indeed* have the power to transcend the narrowly defined sex-roles created by society. Indeed, evolutionary biology and psychology merge with literature to prove that women are anything but the static, stupid, incapable creatures they have historically been illustrated to be in the literary canon.

Thus, Gilman eliminates the delineation of Other imposed on women by rewriting male images of perfection “angel” and “monster.” Eventually, audiences do not respond to those texts, but instead, respond to the texts that present images of women that reflect true human nature and allow women to be the fully realized intelligent beings they are, which in turn creates greater good for society.

Hence, as we see in Gilman’s narrator, her journal and her appropriation of speech, of defining herself ultimately gives her authority John is powerless to stop. Gilman is what David Sloan Wilson and Elliot Sober refer to as an evolutionary altruist. They write, “individuals who increase the fitness of others at the expense of their own fitness are (evolutionary) altruists, regardless of how, or even whether, they think or feel about the action” (134) Gilman ultimately took her own life, but despite being unable to save herself, she created a blueprint that helps women understand and navigate social interactions. Despite failing to fulfill her own self-preservation, Gilman ultimately adaptively benefitted society.

As Sloan Wilson and Sober point out, selfish societies, those ruled by domination, subjugation, and egoism, are ultimately less adaptive. Though it seems egoism would result in more offspring, “Adding the progeny of [selfish and altruistic types] together, however, we get the opposite answer; altruistic types have more offspring than selfish types. Thus, although altruistic individuals decline within groups, when compared to non-altruistic groups, altruistic individuals actually contribute to the survival of a greater number of offspring, as we can infer from Gilman’s article, “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper.” There is an account of at least one woman whose life was saved, and in the more than hundred years since the

publication of the “The Yellow Wallpaper,” it has doubtlessly saved many more. It would be naïve to think that men and women enjoy equal status in society today, but it is undeniable that women enjoy much greater freedoms than they did before “The Yellow Wallpaper” resituated female identity. In *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkin’s theories on meme selection affirms Gilman’s accomplishments in appealing to society so as to replace the patriarchal attitude create this, writing,

we have the power to defy the selfish memes of our indoctrination.

[...] We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth can rebel against the tyranny of those selfish replicators.” (201)

Thus, it is solely human beings who can create representations of and alter their environment to turn against tyrannical selfish drives and subvert oppressive regimes for the betterment of the group.

CONCLUSION

If literary studies is to remain a field that actually remains relevant and contributes to society as a whole, as it has historically, then the consilience E.O. Wilson envisions between science and the humanities must be realized, and the field of literary criticism must expand to accommodate evolutionary discoveries about human nature. He writes, “neither science nor the arts can be complete without combining their separate strengths. Science needs the intuition and metaphorical power of the arts, and the arts need the fresh blood of science (Wilson 230). I believe that Wilson’s vision of expanding the field of literary studies to include an Adaptationist approach is not only possible, but already in the process of coming about.

Even Mallory-Kani and Womack seem hopeful about the future application possibilities of literary Darwinism as they write, “implementing literary Darwinism into the sphere of contemporary critical theory, combining it with one or many of the other critical approaches to literature already circulating, could truly add something ingenious to the discipline” (231).

Though it would seem the humanities, and especially literature departments, would seek to embrace the humanistic and critical perspective that literary Darwinism provides, Terry Eagleton reminds us of the need to address certain

oppositions to this critical approach in the field of literary studies. He writes,

Another anti-theoretical stratagem is to claim that in order to launch some fundamental critique of our culture, we would need to be standing at some impossible Archimedean point beyond it. What this fails to see is that reflecting critically on our situation is part of our situation. It is a feature of the peculiar way we belong to the world [...] Without such self-monitoring, we would not have survived as a species. (60)

In this excerpt, Eagleton crystallizes not only the literary and humanistic value, but the actual *survival* benefit that literary Darwinism provides. And, as the preceding chapters have demonstrated, these survival benefits are not enjoyed strictly by the dominant norm, but by those who are the marginalized Other as well.

Thus, postcolonial, feminist, queer and various Other criticism must not be placed in contention with Adaptationist principles, but rather incorporated to give a more enriching and accurate representation of the world that helps the species to know more about the external world. Contrary to Mallory-Womack and Kani's claim that "by not engaging with representative texts from other theoretical paradigms in order to foment debate and forge alliances with them, literary Darwinism closes itself off from the truly radical dialogue that might ensue. And this is a shame, given that literary Darwinism remains one of the most liberating, progressive, and challenging of analytic modes" (233). Thankfully, Mallory-Womack and Kani's woeful lamentation of the "bottlenecks" of literary Darwinism is preemptive.

Indeed, as damning as literature can be for the identity of the "Other," it is

also its only saving grace. For example, Mallory-Kani and Womack write, “By depending on heterosexual procreation, natural selection and its ancillary theories seemingly exclude individuals who are ‘other’ to the dominant norm” (231). This argument is not in line with what the last ten years of scientific research have demonstrated. One has only to look at a number of recent studies demonstrating that “various forms of same-sex sexual activity have been recorded in more than 450 different species of animals by now, from flamingos to bison to beetles to guppies to warthogs” (Mooallem) to understand that nature certainly does not eliminate sexualities that “deviate from the dominant norm” (Mallory-Kani and Womack 231), consequently, literature should not eliminate these deviations either.

In part the version of natural selection Mallory-Kani and Womack present was so widely accepted and generated by scientists and others because, within the field of science, “There is still an overall presumption of heterosexuality [...] Individuals, populations or species are considered to be entirely heterosexual until proven otherwise [...]”(Mooallem), resulting in biases that repeatedly dismiss homosexual behavior or label it a fluke, or a “mock” sexual act. But, inevitably, scientists have not been able to merely dismiss these consistent and long-existent findings because

“The question is, why would anyone invest in sexual behavior that isn’t reproductive?”--much less a behavior that looks to be starkly counterproductive. Moreover, if animals carrying the genes associated with it are less likely to reproduce, how has that behavior managed to stick around? (Richard Prume qtd by Mooallem)

Because the existence of homosexual behaviors in other animals is irrefutable, scientists have been forced to reexamine these behaviors in order to understand the evolutionary role they might play within the context of individual species. Different ideas are emerging about how these behaviors could fit within that traditional Darwinian framework, including seeing them as conferring reproductive advantages in roundabout ways. (Mooallem)

Thus, as scientists continue to conduct research that at least acknowledges and attempts to avoid the heterosexist bias that has so long been present in the scientific community, a more comprehensive understanding of true Darwinism principles will emerge, and literary Darwinism will then be able to offer even greater insight into human nature and the texts we produce and consume.

However, in the meantime, enough research is currently available that challenges Mallory-Kani and Womack's dismissal of the possibility for a Darwinian reading of a "Queer" text. Furthermore, as I have shown in my discussion in Chapter 2 and 3, representing the marginalized viewpoint of the "Other" does not immediately eliminate the possibility of a Darwinian reading of that particular text, but, in fact, reinforces the value and positive knowledge that a Darwinian literary approach provides. Therefore, it is my hope that this thesis provides the basis upon which I or another scholar may perform a Darwinian reading of a Queer text and even further extend the critical application potential that I believe literary Darwinism possesses.

Literature is, by design, multicultural because humans constantly add to the repertoire—we still read the Bible *and* the plethora of texts that have been written

since—because the more representations of various possible “what if?” scenarios we have to choose from, the better equipped we are for our environment and the changes that occur within it. So even seemingly “marginalized” or nonadaptive texts *still* have a survival advantage—by offering additional viewpoints and cognitive blueprints that would aid survival in that particular environment.

As we recognize the importance of art in conveying life-or-death information that is relevant to various aspects of inclusive fitness by representing the world in complex and interesting ways that solicit interpretive response, we understand that fiction helps to organize, recall, and imagine instructive information. Without the conventions of literature, our species would be unimaginably less advanced and possibly would have gone extinct. There can be no denying the adaptive benefit of better understanding our world, which is why authors such as Chinua Achebe sought so desperately to transmit *their* message. He writes,

I would be quite satisfied if my novels [...] no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don’t see that the two need be mutually exclusive. (quoted in David Carroll Preface)

Indeed, it is because authors such as Achebe recognize the importance of combining essential information with art forms that human beings are evolutionarily disposed to respond so that human beings as a species have been able

to advance to the level of social consciousness and empathy we have currently achieved—recognizing and denouncing the oppression and subjugation of humans in instances such as British Imperialism and patriarchal/medical oppression.

However, in order for literary critics to reap the benefits that literary Darwinism provides, they must continue acknowledge and actively create scholarship that integrates various other critical perspectives with literary Darwinism to form a more complete picture of the world we actually live in, which is increasingly multicultural. Once literary critics realize the explanatory power of Darwin's theories and the evolutionarily adaptive value of literature, the possibilities for understanding and responding to literature in meaningful ways become endless.

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