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Book Review

Using Darwin to explain Hamlet and Superman¹

A review of William Flesch, *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, 264 pp., US\$42.00, ISBN-10: 0-674-02631-4 (hardcover).

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As we proceed through Darwin's 200th anniversary year, any contribution of originality documenting the universality of the evolutionary paradigm is unlikely to be overlooked. And yet, it seems to be the case with the remarkable book *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction* by William Flesch. An obvious reason may certainly be the fact that an English professor is unlikely to exploit Darwinian insights. More widely read individuals, however, are aware of the recent evolutionary awakening in the field of literary criticism, which has produced a number of attempts to understand the emergence and function of fiction from an evolutionary perspective. The strongly adaptationist core of most of these proposals has culminated in the buzzword "literary Darwinism" (Carroll, 2004). *Comeuppance* has been born out of dissatisfaction with this general trend conflicted by a deep passion for the potential of an evolutionary perspective to explain the satisfaction that comes with creating, narrating, and consuming fiction. *Comeuppance* has earned strong praise among literature analysts. It therefore seems unfortunate that this innovative bridge-building book has received little attention by evolutionary biologists so far.

Flesch's core objective is to "attempt to use evolutionary psychology to account for the surprising fact that humans can become so emotionally absorbed in stories we know to be fictions" (p. 1). There is an ironic twist to this agenda. Flesch committed to this mission despite having major reservations about evolutionary psychology. He shares the general feeling in the liberal arts that "the people tempted to apply evolutionary psychology to the explanation of literature tend to be extremely reductive" (p. 1) and sorts them into two camps. One school

¹ From the Book Review Editor: It is not the policy of *Evolutionary Psychology* to publish more than a single review of a book. However, this second review of *Comeuppance* (see <http://www.epjournal.net/filestore/EP06502505.pdf> for first review) was inadvertently solicited due to the recent change in the Book Review Editor position. Because the perspective provided in this second review is distinct from the perspective provided in the first review, we are comfortable presenting this second review to our readers.

understands narrative capacity as a behavioral trait that must have been selectively advantageous per se. While granting select merits, adaptationist theories have still failed at fully explaining the origin and function of literature's complexity and sophistication in Flesch's mind. Taking up on Gould and Lewontin's (1979) critique of the adaptationist paradigm, Flesch argues that the diversification of a trait may be driven by factors very different from those that brought it to life, and that those factors may be matters of historical contingency and functional constraint instead of immediate adaptive advantage. Halfway along this line, the second school claims that literature was, and still is, a neutral byproduct of adaptive evolution. The implication is that little advancement can be made in trying to understand its evolutionary underpinnings. Here Flesch points out the problem that the indifferent character of a neutral byproduct aligns badly with the emotional involvement with which fiction is produced and consumed. Well aware of the dynamite in related scientific discussions past and present, Flesch compressed the detailed explanation of his position in a tense footnote (pp. 205-209). While exceptionally long, it is only one of many in this superbly rendered and referenced book.

The shortcomings of evolutionary attempts on fiction notwithstanding, Flesch fell in love with evolutionary biology's insights and its implications for understanding the experience of narrative. An important clarification by which he distinguishes himself from both the adaptationists and neutralists is that he does not set out to explain the evolution of narrative itself, but of its "psychological and biological conditions of possibility" (p. 4) – that is, which aspects of human nature are essential for the desire to and pleasure in experiencing literature, and how the origin of these aspects can be explained in evolutionary terms. Focusing on this target, Flesch arrives at a new understanding of the power of literary works ranging from Sophocles to Superman.

What is the method? Flesch first disputes by way of phenomenological analysis the view that narrative experience is attractive and causes emotions because we have the ability to and longing for identifying with literary characters. He argues that we stay emotionally invested observers without slipping into the shoes of fictional protagonists. Having reopened the question of where our interest in fiction comes from, Flesch takes a new approach by treating the production, content, reception, and communication of fiction separately as specific social processes, which together form a complex web of social interactions. Realizing the social nature of affairs leads to the question of whether the interest in and the various impacts of fiction can be explained by evolutionary insights into our sociobiological constitution and origins. To this end, Flesch complements his expertise in literature and philosophy with a masterly command of evolutionary game theory, sociobiology, and psychology. Drawing on the work of the likes of Robert Frank, Elliot Sober, David Sloan Wilson, Ernst Fehr, Geoffrey Miller, Robert Axelrod, William Hamilton, and most importantly perhaps Amotz and Avishag Zahavi, Flesch develops a mechanistic model of the possibility of fiction which he tests and elucidates on the fly in the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, Proust, and Homer, but also more contemporary classics such as Hitchcock and J. K. Rowling.

Flesch's argument begins with the notion that we are a social. As such, our individual

evolutionary success, and that of the genetic makeup encoding it, is the combined outcome of selfish and altruistic actions. We are faced with the conflicting choice of enhancing reproductive success by taking advantage of others' energy and resources (cheating) or engaging in altruistic behavior, which is beneficial by either fostering shared genetic ancestry in genetically related group members (indirect fitness) or the increased likelihood of reciprocal response from genetically unrelated group members (true altruism). Importantly, there is no escape from becoming an expert in reading the social inclinations of others whether we tend to cheat or cooperate. Cheaters can only subsist in a community that is predominantly composed of altruists. And they have to be able to tell altruists from fellow cheaters. Altruists need to minimize the waste of energy by avoiding cheaters' traps. It is for these conditions that our mind has been evolutionarily trained to engage in constant social scanning. We can't help it. We are destined to track social interactions and to assess signals indicating true altruism or cheating, no matter whether they are real or fictional. Hence our knack for fiction. The essential ingredient of a page-turner is a plot, which keeps our innate social scanning device hooked.

Being equipped with a strong disposition to engage in the experience of fiction is the primal condition of narrative experience, but only one aspect of the author-reader-fictional protagonist interaction web, which Flesch disentangles for us. The emotional impact of narrative on the reader, such as the tears for a character, which only exists in the fictional world of the tearjerker, is caused by our evolutionary disposition to volunteer altruistic signals. Volunteered affect has evolved because successful social interaction is based on signal exchange. That is, the individual needs to collect evidence on other group members' trustworthiness just as much as he needs to send signals of trustworthiness. Hence the reader's emotion can be seen as a derived form of volunteered affect. In order for this information to form our behavior, it generates specific emotional reactions such as compassion or the urge to take revenge on behalf of others. Not surprisingly anymore, strong attractants of negative or positive volunteered affect are the fiction's villain and hero, respectively. The former is a cheater that needs to be punished to preserve group coherence. The latter excites our emotions because he excels in altruistic punishment, the critical glue of group cohesiveness. But it takes three to tango for this plot to work. The villain-hero relationship is established by an innocent victim, on behalf of which the villain and hero can prove themselves. Flesch suggests that the victim-hero-villain triangle is the essential ingredient of successful fiction. This may sound dangerously close to self-refuting reductionism. But Flesch is tireless in demonstrating that the diversification of fiction into its modern complexity has been driven by the tricky and irresistible game of creating, deciphering, and contemplating the endless variations of true and false altruistic signaling.

In the final steps of his analysis, Flesch integrates the author into the evolutionary framework of fiction. Writing narrative, he argues, represents an act of costly signaling of fitness. The costs come in many forms, such as simply the energy and time invested in the process of writing. The quantitative fitness signal readout is determined by how masterfully the author can generate a plausible story that leaves the audience guessing as to who the true and false altruists in the plot are, or whether vindication can still be achieved. The art of generating a

captivating story demonstrates a superior understanding of social signaling. The author can even engage with the reader in more drastic ways. One signal of author's prowess is to allow the plot to thicken until all exits seem to have closed, but then to impress the reader with a hard-to-imagine way out. A perfect variation of this, not cited in the book, is open-ended TV shows such as *24*, where the writers feel confident enough to take the risk of a story line not fully developed. Flesch goes even further to suggest that the author's costs can come in the form of physical or mental risks to confront extreme human experience such that the story can be told. The paragraph, which discusses the consistency of this thesis with previous ideas in literature theory, belongs to one of the most astonishing sections of the book. Similarly corresponding conclusions from humanity based thinkers and evolutionary theory surface in many places in *Comeuppance*, when Flesch reveals consistent views in the writings of Hume, Wittgenstein, Freud, and others that had been derived in a prescient manner as Darwin's inference of descent by modification without the knowledge of genetics.

What makes *Comeuppance* a must-read for evolutionary biologists and avid readers in general? It provides a new entry point for understanding a defining element of human culture and its evolutionary underpinnings. Flesch focuses his discussion on the literature of the European heritage. The more universal claims of his conclusions are therefore testable. Comparative analyses of other streams of narrative represent an obvious step in this direction and promise further insights, perhaps also in ethnographic nuances of social signaling. Flesch's components of captivating narrative could also be assessed in psychological test settings by comparing the effects and efficiencies of different story plots. Academic agenda aside, the reader will find that *Comeuppance* changes the way we look at books, plays and gossip, and reviewers will come to discover that the satisfaction of their business derives from the execution of volunteered affect.

References

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