Individual Differences in the Achievement of Evolutionarily Relevant Goals in Victorian Novels

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Research Assumptions

• Presumes consilience (E. O. Wilson, 1998):
  – all knowledge ultimately coherent and integral
  – empirical methods applicable to literature
  – denies that humanities constitute a separate magisterium

• But why bother with books?
  – Other than endorsement from Starkey (1964):
  – "You can learn from books. Books are good."
What Can We Learn from Books?
• We agree with Ringo that books are good.
• But what are books good for?
• Good for revealing *folk psychology*, *viz.*, an implicit theory of human nature
• All literature embodies a folk psychology
• To what degree does a period’s folk psychology reflect
  – An accurate view of human nature?
  – An arbitrary view peculiar to a time/place?
• Empirical question addressed by study
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carroll &amp; Gotschall 2004</th>
<th>Present Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>270 characters from 44 canonical British novels</td>
<td>2100 characters (446 to date) from 200 novels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rated by 12 students from novel summaries</td>
<td>939 ratings from people who have read the book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal finding: found expected male/female differences, but agonistic status more important</td>
<td>Principal focus: whether folk psychology mirrors evolutionary psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hello, thank you very much for your interest in our study. We would like your help in describing characters from about 200 British novels written between 1800 and 1914. Click here to see the principles of selection for novelists and novels. Click here to find out more about the purpose of the study.
Rater Characteristics

• Mean age 41.7 years (SD = 14.4)
• 530 female, 409 male
• Education
  – 51% doctorate
  – 23% master’s
  – 15% bachelor’s
• 86% read book within past five years
• Referral
  – 35% direct contact from us
  – 41% from literary listserv or discussion board
  – 17% heard about project from a colleague
Breakdown of Agonistics Roles

• “Good guys”
  – Protagonists 90 (24%)
  – Friends of protagonists 183 (48%)

• “Bad guys”
  – Antagonists 75 (20%)
  – Friends of antagonists 32 (8%)

• Missing 66 (disagreement on status)

• Protagonists & Antagonists often extreme versions of good guys and bad guys
Agonistic Status Determines Mate Values

Bar chart showing the comparison of different traits among male and female protagonists and antagonists.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survival (fending off imminent physical danger or privation)</td>
<td>Surviving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a short term romantic partner</td>
<td>Reproducing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding or keeping a spouse</td>
<td>Reproducing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining or keeping wealth</td>
<td>Getting ahead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining or keeping power</td>
<td>Getting ahead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining or keeping prestige</td>
<td>Getting ahead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtaining education or culture</td>
<td>Getting ahead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making friends and forming alliances</td>
<td>Getting along</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing/fostering offspring or aiding other kin</td>
<td>Getting along</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiding non-kin</td>
<td>Getting along</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building, creating, or discovering something</td>
<td>Innovating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing routine tasks to gain a livelihood</td>
<td>Subsisting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Agonistic Status Determines Goals

- Male Protagonists
- Female Protagonists
- Male Antagonists
- Female Antagonists

- Finding or keeping a spouse
- Gaining or keeping wealth
- Gaining or keeping power
- Gaining or keeping prestige
- Obtaining education or culture
- Making friends and forming alliances
- Nurturing/fostering offspring or aiding other kin
- Aiding non-kin
Predicting Goal Achievement

- Goal achievement regressed on sex, agonistic status, personality
- Beta weights
  - Sex -.05 ns
  - Agonistic status -.20*** $p < .001$
  - Personality
    - Extraversion .04 ns
    - Agreeableness -.01 ns
    - Conscientiousness .03 ns
    - Emotional Stability .25*** $p < .001$
    - Openness to Experience .06 ns
Interpretation

- Victorian writers’ folk psychology fails to reflect human nature as we know it.
- Characters embody moral prescriptions rather than natural descriptions.
- Intelligence and kindness in a mate matter more to protagonists than physical attractiveness or power. For antagonists, the reverse.
- Antagonists pursue vulgar goals (marriage, wealth, power) and often fail.
- Protagonists successfully achieve higher goals: prestige, education, friends, family, altruism.
Questions

• What are Victorian authors’ motives for promoting particular values over others?
• Why do audiences resonate to this type of moralizing?
• What are your questions?