



Beyond the Social: A New Perspective on Character Analysis through Evolutionary Psychology

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Abstract

This study explores how evolutionary psychology can offer a complementary perspective on character analysis, especially for feminist literary criticism, in American literature. Feminist criticism provides a valuable framework for understanding how gender roles and patriarchal structures shape literary texts, often interpreting character behavior through social and cultural norms. However, evolutionary psychology provides the opportunity to evaluate characters' decisions and relationships from a broader perspective, through biologically based instincts such as mate selection, status seeking, sexual competition, and parental investment. This article analyzes F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" through the lens of evolutionary psychology, primarily drawing on David M. Buss's *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind*. *The Great Gatsby* is examined through Gatsby's and Daisy's mate selection and competition between men; the psychological disintegration of the female protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is addressed not only within the framework of patriarchy but also evolutionarily derived vulnerabilities. This article challenges biases against evolutionary psychology, bridges it with feminist theory, and offers a multi-layered approach to character analysis, proposing evolutionary psychology as an alternative tool for literary studies.

Keywords: Evolutionary Psychology; American Literature; Feminist Criticism; Character Analysis; Literary Analysis

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1. Introduction

Students who take courses in analysis and interpretation of literary works at universities utilize various sociological, anthropological, and psychological approaches to conduct more effective, comprehensive, and in-depth analyses. Feminist and gender-focused analyses examine the power balances and social roles in fictional worlds that overlap with real life, and for this reason, they are considered among the most important approaches in contemporary literary studies. It is crucial to maintain a neutral approach in such analyses, as a single approach may be insufficient to provide a comprehensive

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perspective. Since results in the social sciences generally cannot present absolute truths, different perspectives are required for a comprehensive understanding. Based on this reasoning, this article argues that the evolutionary psychology perspective can be valuable in literary analysis, that it does not contradict feminist analysis, but rather complements it by offering a deeper understanding, and that it can deepen character analysis by offering new and different perspectives on the literature.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Evolutionary Psychology

Evolutionary psychology essentially argues that the behaviors, decision-making mechanisms, and motivations of living beings, including humans, have evolved in a manner similar to biological mechanisms. For living beings, biological evolution occurs over millions of years through various adaptation challenges faced by the ancestors of a species, mutations, and sexual selection. All biological traits are essentially inherited from ancestors who survived; psychological mechanisms, which are products of adaptation, are also inherited like biological ones. Thanks to these mechanisms that helped them survive in primitive times, humans also share many common traits; the most obvious example is having two ears, two eyes, and two arms. Evolutionary psychologists say that a similar process has occurred for human psychology (Buss, 2024).

As Darwinist philosopher Helena Cronin said: “We are walking archives of ancestral wisdom” (as cited in Buss, 2024, p. 17). In other words, according to Cronin, humans are essentially trying to live in the modern world with primitive minds. That's why we struggle to make sense of some of our behaviors in today's world.

2.2. Partner Jealousy/Mate Guarding (as an example)

Evolutionary psychologists often use partner jealousy as an example of evolved psychological adaptations. Men and women living in primitive times shared various tasks within their relationships in order to survive. Women generally took on the roles of childcare and gathering; men generally hunted and provided protection. If these partners did not feel jealous of each other, a malicious individual among them could exploit this to their own advantage. For example, a woman could use a man's resources and become pregnant by another man with better genetics. In this case, the original partner would be unaware, meaning all the effort invested in the offspring would be wasted. In the opposite scenario, the male could shift his investment to other females; at this point, the mother could completely lose the protection of her child. At this point, evolutionary psychologists argue that the evolution and universalization of partner jealousy are inevitable because non-jealous partners would be deceived and eventually their lineages would die out (Buss, 2024).

2.3. *Core Concepts of the Study*

This article utilizes three popular evolutionary psychology concepts to examine literary texts: “Mate Selection,” “Status Competition,” and “Partner Jealousy/Mate Guarding.”

a. Mate Selection

The concept of mate selection highlights the characteristics people focus on in potential partners. For example, evolutionary psychology predicts that a man will pay attention to a woman's fertility; this is generally based on characteristics such as the woman's youth and the symmetry of her body and facial features. Similarly, a woman may be more inclined to choose a stronger, higher-status man in order to raise her child better (Buss, 2024).

b. Status Competition

The concept of status competition highlights people's efforts to increase their own value in order to find better partners. For example, a man may strive to acquire resources or attain higher status in order to find a better partner. This creates intra-gender competition among other men (Buss, 2024).

c. Partner Jealousy/Mate Guarding

Partner Jealousy, also known as Mate Guarding, draws attention to actions taken to prevent losing one's partner (Buss, 2024). For more detailed information, see the paragraph that gives examples of evolved psychological adaptations.

2.4. *Feminist Criticism*

Feminist criticism primarily interprets works through the lens of gender relations. Patriarchy constitutes the main problem of feminist criticism; therefore, literary text analyses generally focus on women's psychology, how male-dominated structures constrain women, and how they shape their behavior. In this way, it offers a window into society, which is why it is considered a valuable tool in literary analysis. It differs from other approaches in its ability to reveal social roles and hold up a mirror to readers. Furthermore, feminist theory has a flexible structure that can be examined alongside many different perspectives. It branches into dozens of different fields. But in general, they avoid biological explanations and focus primarily on character behavior in a social and cultural context. That is, biological drives, psychological mechanisms, and possible gender differences are often ignored (Tyson, 2006). However, to understand human behavior, evolutionary processes must be considered as well as social structure. Therefore, by merging with feminism, evolutionary psychology not only fills the gaps, as this article aims to do, but also provides a supportive and explanatory framework on many issues.

3. The Literary Works Analyzed

3.1. *F. Scott Fitzgerald – The Great Gatsby (1925)*

F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* explores class divisions, moral decay, and the corruption of the American Dream in the first quarter of the 20th century through the tragic love story of its main character, Gatsby. The novel focuses on the story of Gatsby, a representative of “New Money” (new wealth), who amasses a fortune for the sake of his obsessive love for Daisy, who is married to Tom Buchanan, a representative of “Old Money” (established wealth). Although Daisy harbors intense feelings for Gatsby in the novel, at the end of the story, she chooses Buchanan, who is actually not a good or faithful husband to her (Fitzgerald, 1925/2019). The work is traditionally read as a social and class critique, but this triangular dynamic between the characters provides an extremely fertile ground for examination through the concepts of “mate selection” and “status competition” in evolutionary psychology.

3.2. *Feminist View*

Feminist criticism interprets Daisy's choice of Tom Buchanan as a result of the “patriarchy.” Tom Buchanan is seen as a representative of the patriarchal power structure because he is “old money”; therefore, Daisy views Buchanan as a source of social status and security, even if he is not faithful, because society imposes this on women through roles and expectations. As a woman, Daisy must compromise her own will at this point, meaning she cannot choose Gatsby. Furthermore, a relationship with Gatsby could damage her reputation; this leads us to conclude that patriarchy restricts women. At this point, the feminist perspective offers readers a very clear window; that is, from this point on, it is possible to examine the story in many ways through the lens of patriarchy. However, explaining the situation solely through social pressure may not be sufficient at this point, because if the impact of this complex series of events on the decision-making mechanism is explained only through society, the question arises: “Why does society impose this?” Evolutionary psychology helps answer this question.

3.3. *Evolutionary Psychology View*

Evolutionary psychology suggests that women's mate selection is largely driven by the pursuit of resource security and status in order to reproduce more successfully. According to evolutionary psychology, this is a biological and psychological strategy; it is a strategy that is mandatory when considering the odds (Buss, 2024). In this work, it is possible to say that the reason Daisy chose Buchanan over Gatsby may actually be due to his greater social security and more reliable resources. No matter how strong the love

and passion, what made Daisy choose may have been that Buchanan was “old money” rather than “new money”; because if she had a child with Buchanan one day, that child would be more likely to have a better standard of living and status. At the same time, if it were to come out that the wife of a well-known and respected name like Buchanan had a relationship with another man, even someone with “new money,” it would also damage Daisy's status within society. Evolutionary psychologists suggest that this is because our ancestors valued faithful spouses more (Buss, 2024). Combining these two reasons, Daisy is forced to turn a blind eye to Buchanan's infidelities and his failure to meet her expectations.

Feminist criticism and evolutionary psychology converge at a common point in the analysis of this text. In summary, it is possible to observe the “status competition” in evolutionary psychology between Buchanan and Gatsby in this text, particularly through the lavish parties Gatsby throws to impress Daisy. The various and necessary reasons for “mate selection” can be interpreted through Daisy. While feminist criticism shows the reader the pressure society imposes on Daisy, evolutionary psychology helps us understand the origins of this pressure and individual motivations.

3.4. Charlotte Perkins Gilman – “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) depicts a woman suffering from postpartum depression who gradually loses her sanity as a result of the rest cure administered by her husband John, a doctor. The unnamed narrator is deprived of intellectual and physical activity during this process. As she begins to lose her sanity, she starts seeing hallucinations of “imprisoned women” in the yellow wallpaper of the room she is confined to (Gilman, 1892/2019). It is considered one of the foundational texts of feminist criticism.

3.5. Feminist View

Feminist criticism uses this text to critique the patriarchal order and its oppression of women. The women depicted on the wallpaper actually represent all women under the patriarchal order, including herself. The power imbalance between her and her husband is also evident in their dialogue. Her husband regularly refers to her as “little girl.” When his wife worries about anything or senses a problem, John constantly reassures her that everything will be fine without sharing her feelings. In other words, the man takes away her decision-making power “for her own good.” Even the restriction of the simplest actions, such as writing and thinking, is a result of this male-dominated system silencing women. Additionally, it offers a critique of the woman being seen as “weak” and “in need of care.” In other words, it draws attention to the fact that John's seemingly loving behavior is a result of the patriarchal, paternalistic power relations

inherent in the system. At this point, a question arises, as in the previous text: “Why have men tried to control women so much throughout history?” At this stage, evolutionary psychology helps us understand the psychological background.

3.6. Evolutionary Psychology View,

The restrictive “treatment” John applies to his wife is termed “partner jealousy/mate guarding” in evolutionary psychology. According to this strategy, the reason John pressures his wife so much is based on men trying to be sure of fidelity; that is, at its core lies the “paternity uncertainty problem.” Confining his wife to the home increases the man's chances of being certain he is the father; through this behavior, the man attempts to guarantee his genetic investment (Buss, 2024). John's behavior here is an unconscious strategy, which is why he distances his wife from even the smallest activity. Furthermore, treating his wife as someone far below his level – or making her appear that way by restricting her behavior – will allow him to control her more easily and guarantee his own genetic investment. That is why characters like John see women gaining independence as a threat; a genetic need for security triggers this on an unconscious level. The fact that society has similar unconscious mechanisms allows culture to oppress women, and patriarchy exerts its influence most effectively on women. Protective mechanisms can lead to excessive control and oppression in the modern world. This accelerates a woman's psychological collapse, because a woman who is confined to her home, unable to see her own child or raise it herself, will also be unable to effectively implement her own reproductive strategy. In other words, John will take away both a woman's freedom and her psychology for the sake of guaranteeing his own genetic investment.

As a result, when the two approaches are combined, feminist theory reveals John's control in a social context, while evolutionary psychology explains the biological and psychological causes of this control by tracing them back to their origins.

3. Conclusion

The two works examined in this article share a common theme: the complex motivations behind human behavior. In *The Great Gatsby*, these are social pressure, resource security, mate selection, and the pursuit of status, while in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, they are patriarchy and mate guarding. Since the complex structure of human beings is also reflected in their works, using multiple perspectives rather than sticking to a single one in order to understand human behavior can be a very effective way to remain objective and provide in-depth analysis. The use of evolutionary psychological approaches in the education of literature students at universities helps

them to understand these characters and their motivations not only within a social framework but also from a psychological perspective. This provides an opportunity to better understand both the texts and the people who created them. In conclusion, this article demonstrates that evolutionary psychology is not opposed to feminist criticism; in fact, it can complement it. Thus, for literature students, the literary analyses they learn in their education are not merely “words on a page.” Because the way to “understand texts” is to “understand people.”

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