

## Evolutionary Psychology

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### Book Review

#### A trumpet with an uncertain (but compelling) sound

A review of Jonathan Gottschall, *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities*. Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008, 240 pp., US\$26.95, ISBN 978-0230609037.

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Jonathan Gottschall does not mince words: *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* is a manifesto along the lines of Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* or the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album. The book is "a call for upheaval; for new theory, method, and ethos; for paradigm shift" (p. xii). This is a big job, and it comes with a substantial burden of proof. Like any revolutionary, Gottschall must first establish the failure of the *ancien régime* and then move on to demonstrate that his program offers something better. These two objectives frame the two principle divisions of the book.

The first section, "On Theory, Method, and Attitude," lays out the case for change. The case is not a particularly new one; it echoes (and occasionally reprints) many of the claims and observations found in Gottschall's edited collection *The Literary Animal* (2005) and repeated in feature articles about Gottschall and others in *The New York Times Magazine* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The narrative goes something like this: something is rotten in the state of literary criticism. For a generation, professors and students have been mired in various Sloughs of Ideological Despond masquerading as interpretive techniques. Marxism, feminism, structuralism, post-structuralism, and all of the other -isms have taken over the classrooms and the research agendas of the professoriate, and, as a result, no actual knowledge is getting produced. The answer is not (as earlier cultural warriors believed) to retreat back to the belletristic scholarship of yesterday. Rather, scholars of literature need to forge ahead and adopt the techniques that have successfully produced meaningful knowledge in so many other disciplines. Literary critics, in other words, need to be more like scientists.

Gottschall's argument goes well beyond the claim that literary critics need to incorporate the results of scientific inquiries into their own scholarship. It is one thing to say that critics writing about human nature should have a passing familiarity with the immense body of scientific work on the topic. Such an argument would be controversial enough, as it would require many academics to rethink some of the genuinely silly positions that they hold—such as the claim that gender is entirely a social construction or

the belief that territorial behavior, in the words of Oscar Hammerstein, “has to be carefully taught.” But Gottschall goes much further. It is not enough for critics in the humanities to be aware of science; they, or at least some of them, must also learn how to produce it.

As Gottschall sees it, literary criticism finds itself in the wilderness because it lacks “the ability to systematically and decisively narrow our allotted portion of possibility space—to zoom in toward truth in the immense, multidimensional hyperspace of error and vacuity . . . We have not developed ways of putting our ideas to rigorous tests” (p. 9). To his credit, Gottschall does not offer scientific methodology as a universal panacea. He acknowledges, or at least “suspect[s] that there will always be vital humanities questions that deflect every tool and device in science’s organon” (p. 10). But he does argue that scholars in the humanities must quickly get down to the business of producing real knowledge, which means experimentally testable knowledge, and he devotes a great deal of energy to anticipating and answering the objections of those who view the study of literature, and the humanities in general, as fields that fall outside the scope of scientific inquiry.

While the first section of the book calls for a revolution, the second, “Case Studies at the Nexus of Literature and Evolutionary Science,” demonstrates the kind of literary analysis that might constitute a response to such a call. This demonstration comes in the form of four previously published content analyses of folk and fairy tales drawn from cultures around the world. The first two studies use naïve student coders to track plot and character elements in hundreds of different folk tales. In the first, the tales were analyzed to determine whether or not female main characters acted in ways predicted by evolutionary psychology (selecting mates, being altruistic towards kin and so on). The second study uses the same methodology and set of tales to test the claims of feminist scholars that European folk tales “reflect and perpetuate the arbitrary gender norms of Western patriarchal societies” (p. 116). The next two studies use word-frequency analyses to test whether two common folk tale elements—female beauty in the third study and romantic love in the fourth—are distributed evenly or unevenly across cultural divides.

For someone like me, Gottschall’s argument succeeds or fails with these demonstrations of his methodology. I completely agree with two of the main points of the book: 1) literary critics often spend a whole lot of time making pointless and often ridiculous ideological arguments that are only vaguely related to literature, and 2) the results of recent scientific inquiries—especially as they relate to the evolutionary underpinnings of human cognition—have the potential to be enormously valuable to literary studies. I am much more skeptical, however, about the more comprehensive claim that humanistic scholars should themselves get into the business of conducting experiments and reporting results. I am certainly willing to be persuaded, however, but it will take more than just an abstract argument. To be convinced of the value of quantitative/scientific literary studies, I need to see evidence of such studies really adding to my understanding of literary texts. Unfortunately, the four examples that Gottschall provides do not do nearly enough overcome my skepticism.

My first concern with Gottschall’s approach is that it does not draw a clear distinction between using a scientific methodology to interpret a literary text and using a literary text to support a scientific theory. Both are worthy goals, but only the first falls within the job description of a literary critic. I would argue that the primary failure of some of the critical schools that Gottschall attacks in his first section is that they have neglected

their responsibility to interpret literary texts and instead see literature as evidence for their larger social, cultural, and ideological claims. But this is precisely what Gottschall does in his folklore studies. None of his analysis gives us tools for interpreting the stories themselves. Rather, the tales become pieces of evidence for larger claims about human nature and the biological basis for behavior, such as the concluding claim of his second study that his findings “challenge what has been the central dogma of the dominant brand of feminist scholarship in the humanities: that chromosomal sex and socially constructed gender are, at most, distantly related” (p. 125).

There are two problems with this line of reasoning. First, it does not really produce any new knowledge. The claim that gender conventions have a biological basis is a cornerstone of modern evolutionary psychology and has been supported time and again with much more impressive data than Gottschall marshals. If the objective of a “new humanities” is simply to demonstrate how literature supports the foundational claims of evolutionary psychology, then I fear that this new field of study will soon run out of useful work; there are only so many times that these claims need to be tested and proved. To remain vital for very long, quantitative literary theory will have to develop interesting ways to interpret literature.

Even if they take Gottschall on his own terms and grant the usefulness of the studies he proposes, though, many readers will still sense a disconnect between the grandiose claims of the first part of the book and the very modest attempts at knowledge-creation represented by the studies in the second part. Much of this disparity stems from the fact that Gottschall’s supposedly objective experimental methods are saturated with so much subjective fuzziness that they rarely deliver the kind of rigorous hypothesis testing that the first part of the book advocates. In the first two studies, this fuzziness comes in the form of subjective judgments that go into placing certain plot and character elements into specific categories of narrative. Since all of the coders bring their own biases and cultural narratives to the task of making these judgments, it is very difficult to argue convincingly that their findings represent true human universals.

The greater problem, however, is that nearly all the source texts for all four articles have been translated into English. This is an especially serious problem for the studies that rely on word-frequency analysis. Gottschall does acknowledge this difficulty head on (pp. 165-167), but he does not attempt to control for it in his studies. Rather, he argues that “one way to assess how serious this translation problem has been is to move from statistical analysis to closer, more qualitative consideration of a few examples” (p. 167). I disagree. The close textual reading that follows can do many things, but it cannot help gauge the validity of a word-frequency study with translated texts, since the same translations are used for the close readings. Whatever translator biases crept into the texts and the level of individual can only be multiplied when these words are expanded into stories.

On a deeper level, Gottschall has not grappled adequately with the problem of whether or not translated, culturally diverse folktale collections can prove anything at all about cultural universals. This is a hotly debated question in folklore studies, and it is by no means self-evident that similarities in the content of folk tales stems from similarities in cultural beliefs, values, or perceptions. Gottschall would do well, for example, to consider the work that Jack Zipes (2001) has done on cross-cultural connections, which suggests that similarities in theme, plot, and character can be best explained by cultural diffusion. He might also consult the early content analyses of folk tales by Antti Aarne and Stith

Thompson (1964), whose painstaking classification of folktale motifs is still in wide use, and whose work supports Zipes' thesis and documents the patterns of dispersion for specific tales and tale types. I am not saying that Gottschall must agree with these studies, but he should not ignore them. A big part of the scientific methodology that this book argues for is a literary review that acknowledges the work already done in a field and situates a specific project in a larger conversation. The skimpiness of the literature reviews offered in these studies weakens both the specific arguments and the larger methodological claims that Gottschall makes.

In spite of these reservations, I enjoyed *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* and will gladly recommend it to colleagues and students. The theoretical arguments are often quite profound, and the actual studies demonstrate a realm of possibilities that many critics have never considered. Ultimately, I believe, Gottschall's argument works well when its claims are modest: that quantitative analysis can play a part in the humanities alongside other methods of inquiry, that statistical methods are not inherently hostile to the work of humanists, and that scientific studies in the humanities can provide research that everyone can build on to make their analysis more concrete, more interesting, and more likely to endure. I wholeheartedly agree. But this is a far cry from the radical paradigm shift that Gottschall promises us in the introduction.

The more forcefully Gottschall presses his case the weaker his argument becomes. The methods he showcases are well suited to the task of swelling a progress, but they are not ready to take center stage. And they don't need to be. Contrary to Gottschall's most dire warnings, the study of literature and culture is actually quite healthy. Teachers continue to teach, students continue to learn, and interesting scholarship continues to be written from a number of theoretical perspectives. The quantitative humanism that Gottschall imagines in this book can have a bright future in this environment, even if it never becomes the dominant gorilla in the forest.

## References

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