THE NEVER ENDING STORY

The Cultural Evolution of Narratives

By

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Romance

Image by Glenn Wolk
Romance in Fiction

Courting and mating are key themes of fiction: attraction, mate competition, relationships, marriage, infidelity...
Romance in Fiction

Human mating psychology likely to be a key selection pressure on the cultural evolution of romantic tales

Romantic tales which reflect evolved mate preferences and cultural taboos likely to be culturally successful
Evolved Mate Preferences

David Buss (1989)

• Cross-cultural survey of 37 populations

• Men value cues of reproductive capacity (youth, beauty)

• Women value cues of resource acquisition (ambition, status, wealth)
Key question:
Do narratives reflect these preferences?
Evidence from Folklore

Gottschall et al. (2004): tested whether mate choice preferences of characters in folktales conformed to predictions derived from evolutionary psychology
Evidence from Folklore

Gottschall et al. (2004)

• Test for sex differences in mate choice criteria in 658 tales from 48 culture areas
• 15 mixed sex readers asked to code what single trait seemed most important to a character in assessing a mate: 1) kindness 2) wealth/status 3) beauty 4) other 5) n/a
• Data gathered on 246 male and 278 female characters
Evidence from Folklore

Gottschall et al. (2004)

- Male characters 2.5 times more likely to prize beauty
- Female characters 3 times more likely to prize wealth/status
- Both men and women value kindness highly (especially women)
Evidence from Folklore

Table 1
Percentage of male and female characters identified as placing primary emphasis on given mate preference criteria in samples of folk tales and classic Western literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Physical attractiveness</th>
<th>Wealth/status</th>
<th>Kindness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male % (N)</td>
<td>Female % (N)</td>
<td>Z score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall folk tales</td>
<td>56 (246)</td>
<td>23 (278)</td>
<td>7.78**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>65 (48)</td>
<td>51 (39)</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circum-Mediterranean</td>
<td>42 (68)</td>
<td>15 (77)</td>
<td>3.68**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Eurasia</td>
<td>58 (47)</td>
<td>24 (59)</td>
<td>3.71**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>63 (16)</td>
<td>35 (20)</td>
<td>1.96*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insular Pacific, etc.</td>
<td>84 (19)</td>
<td>13 (24)</td>
<td>6.67**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural complexity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bands/Tribes</td>
<td>67 (114)</td>
<td>33 (94)</td>
<td>5.01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preindustrial states</td>
<td>50 (115)</td>
<td>17 (140)</td>
<td>5.74**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western literature</td>
<td>42 (188)</td>
<td>11 (121)</td>
<td>6.84**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N is number of story characters.
(See Appendix for listing of cultural groups in each region and in each level of cultural complexity).

* P < .05.
** P < .01.
Evidence from Romance Novels

Cox & Fisher (2009)

- Analysis of titles published by Harlequin Enterprises
- World’s largest publisher of romance novels – 114 international markets and 28 languages
- 90.5% of audience are women
- Analysed 9,267 titles published between 1949 – 2009
- 20 most frequently used words related to long-term commitment and reproduction
- Thematic analysis – Titles displayed themes related to reproduction, resources, and long-term commitment
The Romantic Love Debate

Is romantic love a human universal?

Defining Romantic Love:

• Intense, erotically-charged passion and powerful empathy for another
• Emotionally experienced as ecstasy and longing
• Imaginatively experienced as the transcendent idealisation of the beloved – a quasi-religious experience
• Distinct from attraction, lust, and attachment (‘fondness’)
The Romantic Love Debate

Is romantic love a human universal?

Sociobiological explanation sees RL as a proximate mechanism of monogamous pair-bonding. Inhibits promiscuity and promotes commitment.
The Romantic Love Debate

Is romantic love a human universal?

Cultural constructivists see RL as a western literary invention dating back to 12th century France.

“The clanship structure and social life of most primitive societies provide a wholesale intimacy and broad distribution of affection; Western love, with its especially close and valued ties between two isolated individuals is neither possible or needed”

_Hunt (1959)_
The Romantic Love Debate

Is romantic love a human universal?

Conflicting results from ethnographic surveys
• Jankowiak & Fischer (1992) found evidence of RL in 89% of 166 cultures = “near universal”.
• Lindholm (2006) using stricter criteria (basis for marriage, suicide) found a more restricted distribution: 21/248 cultures
The Romantic Love Debate

Gottschall & Nordlund (2006): Comparative Folklore

- 79 e-texts of folktale collections from 7 major cultural areas
- Tagged 59 words semantically related to RL using “Find & Replace”
- 17 coders used tags and surrounding context to classify presence/absence of RL based on criteria of intrusive thinking, emotional dependence, empathy, commitment and exclusivity
### The Romantic Love Debate

Gottschall & Nordlund (2006): Comparative Folklore

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>References to Romantic Love</th>
<th>Average References Per Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL (N=79)</strong></td>
<td>263</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia (N=16)</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India (N=8)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan (N=6)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa (N=5)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hansa (N=3)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe (N=8)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East (N=6)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania (N=10)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Australia (N=4)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii (N=3)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines (N=3)</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Amer. Indian (N=25)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arctic Coast (N=5)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest Coast (N=11)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>6.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pueblo (N=3)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America (N=9)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya (N=4)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanomamó (N=3)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=Number of collections per grouping.
The Romantic Love Debate

Gottschall & Nordlund (2006): Comparative Folklore

- Strong support for RL as a “literary universal”
- Europe not exceptional in references to love. More refs in India, Middle East and NW Coast
- Examples of each criteria – e.g. Maori myth of Sun weeping the oceans after separation from Earth (dependence)
- But NB potential translation problems (e.g. like/love)
Conclusions

• Stories dealing with romance and relationships are prevalent across the world
• Key to their cultural transmission and evolution is appealing to widely held mate preferences
• Depictions of romantic partners in international folklore and romance novels reflects the predictions of evolutionary psychology
• But are they truly universal?