

Contemporary Literary Criticism Approach: Darwinian Literary Studies and Its Application to Classic Western Picture Books

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ABSTRACT

The debate among academics regarding Darwinian literary theory suggests the importance of exploring its effectiveness through careful examination. Discussion and transformation of the ideas in this approach are deemed necessary due to the lack of research applying the theory. This study aims to map the core ideas in Darwinian literary studies by examining classic picture books (illustrated children's literature). The works to be discussed include: Curious George (1940) by H.A. Rey, Make Way for Ducklings (1941) by Robert McCloskey, Where the Wild Things Are (1963) by Maurice Sendak, The Giving Tree (1964) by Shel Silverstein, and Love You Forever (1986) by Robert McCloskey. This study used qualitative methods through literature studies and Darwinian literary theory to analyze the data. The results of the study indicate that the five selected works of literature present universal themes experienced by the human species, including survival, reproduction, alliances, raising offspring, natural attitudes in learning about the world, the logic of cause and effect, and providing assistance or aiding non-kin. From this study, Literary Darwinism can be applied well to the five selected classic children's works. This approach allows readers to understand the basic motivations of the main characters and the moral implications of each work within the context of real-world human issues. However, further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of this theory in discussing works for adult readers, especially postmodern works with much more complex themes.

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1. Introduction

Darwinian literary studies, or literary Darwinism, emerged as an alternative trend in literary scholarship that challenged the dominance of poststructuralism. Proponents such as Joseph Carroll and Jonathan Gottschall believe that culture and meaning are not the result of linguistic construction, but rather the process of human adaptation, characterized by fundamental traits or tendencies (human nature). Darwinian literary studies is a theory influenced by biological science and related to sociobiological ideas, which assume that human thought results from evolution through the adaptive process of natural selection (Carroll, 2011). In the literary field, this idea is often reflected in literary works, highlighting themes resulting from this adaptive process of human thought, such as the fundamental human tendency to procreate, avoid danger, gain power, and form alliances to solve problems (Abbas et al., 2024; Nahdhiyah et al., 2022; Junaid & Andini, 2026).

As a controversial approach, existing writing on Darwinian literary studies, or literary Darwinism, is divided into two camps: those who support this approach's ideas, particularly regarding the adaptive function of literature and their critique of the "relativity" of postmodernism, and those who strongly oppose it. The first group's argument, as expressed by Alex C. Parrish in his article in the journal *Literature Compass* (2014), is that a) literary studies have experienced a decline in prestige due to the dominance of post-structuralism, which prioritizes relativity and politics over scientific truth, and b) literary studies must be integrated with an approach rooted in scientific thought, namely Darwinian literary studies. According to this group, themes in literary works are variations of basic human nature (e.g., procreation, competition for power and dominance, and cooperation for survival), and literature has an adaptive function. Without it, humanity might have become extinct.

The opposing group argues that Darwinian literary studies reduce the meaning of works to mere reflections of basic human nature, thus stifling diversity in the practice of literary interpretation and criticism. One vocal critic is Jonathan Kramnick, whose article, "Against Literary Darwinism" (2011), appeared in the journal *Critical Inquiry*. He argues that behind its anti-relativistic rhetoric, proponents of literary Darwinism are also trapped by relativism because they rely on broad generalizations about human nature in literary works whose claims are not scientifically proven. According to Kramnick, the theory assumes that human instincts are fixed, unchanging, and universal.

The differences among these experts' arguments make this theory worth exploring further. Therefore, this study will map the core ideas in Darwinian literary studies. The roots of his theoretical argument can be traced to Charles Darwin's work in *The Descent of Man*, and *Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) and later evolutionary psychology, which assumed that the human species possesses fundamental tendencies or traits regardless of the culture in which they live or when they live. These traits exist because they help them survive as individuals and groups. Thus, the argument is that, like bodily organs, fundamental traits, instincts, and universal human tendencies (including creating art and storytelling) serve a function in the pursuit of survival.

In literary studies, these basic assumptions are applied to literature in general and narrative (story) in particular. One fundamental argument is that narrative and literature, as universal human creations (present in every era and in every community), possess an "adaptive" nature. There are several reasons why literature is considered "adaptive," one of which is that narrative unites a human community with shared values and goals, enabling people to work together more effectively and survive as a community. A second argument is that humans across every era and culture share fundamental traits, which must be taken into consideration when reading literary works (Weda et al., 2022; Junaid et al., 2026).

With such high claims for the future of the humanities and considering its role as an alternative method to mainstream post-structuralism, it is regrettable that many academics, especially in Indonesia, remain unfamiliar with this approach. Several articles written by Indonesian academics that use this theory include *Lavene as A Victim of Darwinian System: A Study on David Mamet's Glengarry Glen Ross* (2008) by Sebastianus Jony Yudyantara and *Love as Darwinian Survival Mechanism In John Green's The Fault In Our Stars* (2022) by Muhammad Iqbal. In addition to these two studies, this theory has been applied by international academics, such as *Ineradicable Humanity: Literary Responses to Darwin in Zola, Hardy, and the Utopian Novel* (2016) by Niall Sreenan and *A brief overview of literary Darwinism and a Darwinian perspective on The Road by Cormac McCarthy* (2021) by Malina Zaluzna-Luczkiwicz. From these studies, in addition to the limited research on literary Darwinism, the use of objects in children's literature has also not been found to apply this theory. Thus, a discussion and mapping of the ideas in this approach is deemed necessary, and this research will attempt to do so.

Literary Darwinism needs to be tested for its effectiveness as an analytical tool if it is indeed worth considering. In this opportunity, the researcher used works that have stood the test of time and are intended for children, namely, picture books (illustrated children's literature) with classic status. The reason for choosing classic works is to see whether Darwinian literary studies can reveal the greatness of these works from their own perspective (given the assumption that works achieve classic status because they have something special). Meanwhile, the reason for choosing works for early childhood is to see the validity of the claim that this approach can explain all human works (given the assumption that children's literature is not typical literary works like complex novels).

2. Methodology

This research begins with library and internet research to gather materials related to Darwinian literary studies theory, examples of its application, and children's literature in the picture book genre. The works to be discussed include: *Curious George* (1940) by H.A. Rey, *Make Way for Ducklings* (1941) by Robert McCloskey, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) by Maurice Sendak, *The Giving Tree* (1964) by Shel Silverstein, and *Love You Forever* (1986) by Robert McCloskey. The next step is to map and summarize the theoretical ideas and interpretative methods within these approaches, and to critically review them. The next stage is to conduct a qualitative textual analysis of these picture books, which already have classic status, using these interpretative methods. Darwinian literary studies theory is applied to analyze the stories. The final step is to conclude qualitatively about the interpretative strengths and limitations or weaknesses of the theory in its application.

3. Results and Discussion

This study examines five classic 20th-century picture books from the perspective of Darwinian literary studies. These five works have iconic status, and the application of Literary Darwinism will likely provide new and interesting

interpretations. This controversial approach presents figures with their own emphases and provides additional explanations for the adaptive function of literature. They also offer diverse methods for studying literary works and their readers. Joseph Carroll, in his book *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1995), a pioneering work in Darwinian Literary Studies, criticized postmodernism and poststructuralism, which argued that everything in culture is the result of arbitrary construction. In contrast, Carroll promoted an evolutionary view, arguing that humans have a fundamental nature that shapes the culture they create. In his book *Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice* (2011), he emphasized the importance of reading literature by examining basic human traits and motivations as the subtext (hidden themes) of each literary work.

The application of Literary Darwinism requires a fairly good understanding of evolutionary psychology. In *Reading Human Nature* (2011), Carroll provides basic human motivations from an evolutionary psychology perspective: (1) Survival (fending off imminent physical danger or privation); (2) Finding a short-term romantic partner; (3) Finding or keeping a spouse; (4) Gaining or keeping wealth; (5) Gaining or keeping power; (6) Gaining or keeping prestige; (7) Obtaining education or culture; (8) Making friends and forming alliances; (9) Nurturing/fostering offspring or aiding other kin; (10) Aiding non-kin; (11) Building, creating, or discovering something; (12) Performing routine tasks to gain a livelihood.

It is worth noting that Joseph Carroll's module does not ignore cultural diversity and the individuality of authors. For a complete understanding of literary works, both culture and individuality must be considered. However, these two categories are certainly influenced by the primary category, human nature. There are many different cultures, and each writer has unique characteristics. However, it is important to understand that no culture or individual is free from the influence of biological foundations.

3.1 Literature is Universal: Human Nature in Five Children's Books

Make Way for Ducklings (McClosekey, 1941), a story about a family of ducks, perfectly embodies Darwinian themes. The story revolves around how Mr. and Mrs. Mallard, a pair of ducks, find a new home and navigate their daily lives. Nothing much happens outside of the ordinary, except for an interesting scene where Michael and another police officer help the ducklings cross the street.

The story begins with a survival issue (motivation 1, Survival (fending off imminent physical danger or privation)), with Mr. and Mrs. Mallard embarking on an adventure to find a new home. They do not want to live near turtles and foxes, the ducks' natural predators. They find a pond in a Boston park, but end up having to move, nearly run over by a cyclist. At this point, we learn that the ducklings are looking for a place to lay their eggs and raise their young (motivation 9, Nurturing/fostering offspring or aiding other kin): "*This is no place to rush babies with all those horrid things rushing about. We'll have to look somewhere else*" (McClosekey, 1941). They continued searching for a new, safe, and comfortable place to lay their eggs until they found a small island in the Charles River and built a nest there. On the riverbank, they met Michael, a police officer who gave them peanuts every day (motivation 12: Performing routine tasks to gain a livelihood; motivation 8: Making friends and forming alliances).

Mrs. Mallard laid eggs and then raised and taught eight ducklings various survival skills, from swimming to avoiding danger, while Mr. Mallard explored the river (motivation 9, Nurturing/fostering offspring or aiding other kin, and motivation 1, Survival). One morning, Mrs. Mallard and her ducklings, who were learning to line up, were about to cross the road. Michael helped them by stopping the car. He then called his police friends who were in the area to help the ducklings cross (motivation 10, Aiding non-kin). With the police's help, the ducklings traveled safely until they returned to their small island, where Mr. Mallard was waiting.

This book, with its very simple story, brilliantly demonstrates Darwinian logic: (1) Every living creature wants to survive, find a safe and comfortable place to live, and raise and educate its young; and (2) in life, finding friends and getting help from them is essential to survival. This book may be about ducks, but it conveys a universal message about living things. Perhaps this is where its appeal lies.

Curious George (Rey, 2001) is an iconic character beloved by Western audiences. In the first book, we see how the Man with the Yellow Hat finds George, takes him to a town where George repeatedly gets into trouble, and ultimately rescues him and puts him in a zoo. While the public loves this book, literary critics have criticized it, viewing it as a metaphor for the relationship between Western colonialists and African people. George is likened to a native who was kidnapped for slavery. Maya Terhune, in a journal article, argues:

Only pages into the book, the story of George's capture eerily mirrors that of the millions of Africans who, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, were forcibly stripped from their homes

and, like cattle, were packed into ships and transported across the Middle Passage portion of the Atlantic slave trade (Terhune, 2015).

A Darwinian perspective offers a more nuanced interpretation. George is not seen as an enslaved person or as an Eastern subject confronting Western civilization. He is seen as a child who wants and needs to learn more about his world. This reading, of course, makes more sense from the perspective of both the child reader and the parent reading it.

The human nature reflected in George is curiosity. This relates to motivation 7 (Building, creating, or discovering something) and motivation 8 (Obtaining education or culture). Curiosity is necessary for gathering data about our surroundings. Without it, humans would not gather enough information about the social and natural worlds to survive and create. This is why young children are full of curiosity and enjoy experimenting with the objects around them.

George's curiosity is presented with humorous effect. Throughout the story, George is shown to be constantly curious and gets into trouble because of it:

1. At the beginning of the story, he gets caught because he is curious about the yellow hat worn by the Man with the Yellow Hat.
2. On the ship, he wonders how birds fly, imitates one, and falls into the sea.
3. George wants to know how the telephone works and calls the fire department.
4. George is curious about a balloon and gets carried away.

From a Literary Darwinism perspective, *Curious George* is a story about an adventure driven by curiosity. Curiosity may get him into trouble, but only through it can George learn and experience adventure, a universal lesson for children.

Love You Forever, *The Giving Tree*, and *Where the Wild Things Are* present the dynamics of parent-child relationships. Each parent figure is driven by the motivation of nurturing/fostering offspring or aiding other kin, but interestingly, the types of relationships presented vary.

The Giving Tree (Silverstein, 1964) presents a tree figure that can be interpreted as a mother who always gives everything to the child character. The child plays with the tree, eats its fruit, and, as an adult, uses the tree's branches and cuts the trunk to make a boat. All that remains is the tree stump and the now-elderly child sitting on it.

What Darwinian literary studies can answer is why the tree is willing to give anything, just like real-life parents, and why the child is selfish. From a Darwinian perspective, every living creature has a primary mission to create genetic copies through reproduction, and when an animal or human has a child, the relay for reproduction is passed on to the next generation. This makes the parent figure do whatever it takes to ensure the child's reproductive success. In this book, the tree not only gives fruit, but also branches and even its trunk. The child here clearly displays the tendency of the "selfish gene." Because reproductive responsibility now rests on him, he feels extremely important and will do anything to get what he needs to marry a woman he wants and support his family, including exploiting his "mother."

In contrast to *The Giving Tree*, *Love You Forever* (Munsch, 1986) presents a healthier relationship. The story depicts a mother holding her child as the child sleeps soundly and saying, "I love you forever. I like you forever. As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be." (1986). She continues to do this even after the child is grown. At the end of the story, the grown child does the same for her ailing mother. The story concludes with the child holding her child, her mother's grandchild. In this story, the "relay" of reproduction is presented in an idealized way: children reciprocate parental affection and produce offspring.

Unlike the two stories above, *Where the Wild Things Are* (Maurice, 1963) focuses solely on an afternoon. A child named Max is scolded by his mother for misbehaving and sent to his room, with the penalty of not getting dinner. The child embarks on an imaginary adventure and encounters a group of monsters called the Wild Things (his mother had previously called him "Wild Thing" when scolding him). He is crowned king by the Wild Things and plays around before finally having to leave them (there are indications the Wild Things want to devour him) and return to his room. It turns out his mother has prepared dinner.

In this story, the mother is presented as a disciplinarian. Discipline and punishment are part of preparing children for the social world, but here, ensuring the child's food needs are prioritized.



Figure 1. Max's Mischief (Maurice, 1963)

A more interesting conflict occurs between Max and the Wild Things. There are four things worth noting about *Max and the Wild Things*: (1) Max's mischief is a natural part of a child's experimentation with the world and assessing his strength. The Wild Things represent the tendency of human children (and other mammals) to play. (2) Max's being crowned king by the Wild Things demonstrates a child's early desire for power (motivation 5, gaining or keeping power). In this case, Max feels overly controlled by his mother and wants to be his own "king." (3) The Wild Things, which possess predatory characteristics, are a threat to Max, so he must leave them (motivation 1, survival). (4) The act of running away from the monsters and returning to "reality" indicates a tendency to follow the rules set by the caregiver (read: mother).

Max's adventure can also be seen as a simulation he created in the form of a story about the question: "*Can I continue to live a happy life and escape from my mother and rules?*" With his escape from the Wild Things and his return to "reality," the answer is no. A child may be free to imagine, but he basically needs a parental figure, even if the price he has to pay is following the rules.

3.2 Literature is Useful: Humanity's Problems and Solutions in Five Books

While reading Joseph Carroll's module helps us understand literary works through Darwinian themes, reading Angus Fletcher's module does not explicitly emphasize Darwinian topics. The basic arguments used are indeed Darwinian: (a) the struggle for survival is a characteristic of life, and (b) literature has an adaptive and practical function in human life by providing solutions to problems. However, Fletcher's reading is also influenced by a trend in the humanities, namely pluralism. This reading method invites us to reflect more deeply on the relationships between groups in the work and to examine the ethical solutions it offers for a harmonious pluralist society.

The Giving Tree presents a one-way, exploitative relationship in which one party gives while the other demands. The tree figure here can be interpreted as a mother, nature, or other figures, but structurally, we can see the figure being exploited. Character A (the child) always takes from Character B (the tree). Character B always gives his best to character A, while character A shows no gratitude. The story ends when Character A stops demanding, and both characters are left with nothing but each other.

The ethical solution offered is empathy and an awareness of others' importance. Throughout the story, we are taught to empathize with the suffering tree, and at the end, we are taught that such an exploitative relationship is unhealthy for both parties. When the child (now an old man) sits on the stump (what remains of the tree), we realize that they still have one.

Love You Forever also demonstrates a parent's dedication. The story highlights the changes in the mother-child relationship (the child becomes a teenager and grows up) and what remains unchanged (the affectionate bond between the two). What is interesting is how each character responds to change. The mother continues to love her child, even when the child misbehaves and follows new trends that previous generations would not have understood. The child welcomes the role change at the end of the story: it is her turn to carry her child. The ethical solution here lies in how to respond to

change. Change occurs not only in families but also in society. A mature approach to change is to welcome it and prioritize compassion and tolerance.

Make Way for Ducklings is a good example of how to treat others. The ducklings are newcomers (read: immigrants), and in their new home, they are accepted and helped when they are in trouble. They are not cast out or suspected; a beautiful allegory of pluralism.



Figure 2. Michael Helping Another Species (McCloskey, 1941)

Curious George also explores the challenges faced by someone (represented by George) facing a completely new world. George, who previously lived in the forest, must adapt to the city, with its unfamiliar surroundings and rules. Living in a completely new place is certainly not easy, especially when faced alone. Once, the naive George landed in jail after accidentally calling the fire department. George's troubles ended when The Man with the Yellow Hat rescued him and took him to the zoo. The story's lesson is the importance of a protector and savior for less experienced individuals.

Where the Wild Things symbolically represents a child's anger through the figures of monsters called Wild Things. The parallels between Max and the wild things can be seen in the animal costumes he wears, his mother's call of him "Wild Thing" when angry, the drawings he creates, and his uncontrollable behavior. It is told that after being scolded by his mother, Max visits the Wild Things, plays and parties, and then runs away from them, who seem to want to eat him. Max and the Wild Things can teach us a lesson about the role of imagination in dealing with problems. Max's adventures with the Wild Things are stories he creates and serve as an outlet for his anger. By the end of the story, the mother and Max's anger have both subsided, and he gets dinner. Anger does not have to mean hurting each other. This book also helps us understand social life. What we label as wild, exotic, and strange is often just a projection of our inner selves and a product of our imagination.

4. Conclusion

Literary Darwinism, or Darwinian literary studies, is a new approach based on ideas from evolutionary science and its derivatives (including evolutionary psychology) regarding the universal nature of the human species and the adaptive function of human thought. Literary Darwinism offers several new reading methods. Two of these are the method developed by Joseph Carroll, which examines how literature reflects fundamental human nature, and the method developed by Angus Fletcher, which understands literature as a response to real problems by providing ethical solutions that support the existence of diversity. In this study, the effectiveness of these two methods was tested using five modern-day Western picture books with classic or iconic status.

Joseph Carroll's reading of the five selected works of literature demonstrates universal themes experienced by our species. *Make Way for Duckling* addresses the most basic aspects of life, such as survival, reproduction, alliances, and assistance. *Curious George* explores curiosity in the quest to understand and learn about the world. *The Giving Tree*

demonstrates parents' tendency to sacrifice for their children. This can be explained by the Darwinian concept that each individual is genetically dictated to invest fully in procreating and raising their offspring. *I Love You Forever* illustrates the cycle of regeneration: parents raise and love their children, and then the children take on the same role. *The Wild Things Are* explores parental discipline, mischief as a natural way to learn about the world, the logic of cause and effect, and the human tendency to create stories to explore possibilities.

The use of Fletcher's method yields insightful readings of human relationships. Both *Make Way for Ducklings* and *Curious George* explore the challenges of adapting to new environments and the importance of newcomers seeking help from others. *The Wild Things Are* explores anger and the role of imagination in taming it so we can avoid violence. *I Love You Forever* addresses the importance of accepting change and the importance of compassion in human relationships. *The Giving Tree* teaches lessons on the importance of empathy and the awareness of our mutual need.

Literary Darwinism can be effectively applied to the five selected classic children's works. This approach allows readers to see the main characters' underlying motivations and the moral function of each work in the context of real human issues. However, further research is needed on the effectiveness of this theory in discussing works for adult readers, especially postmodernist works with much more complex themes.

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