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Abstract		People read literature because they want to understand their own experience and the experience of others. Literature contains much violence because violence reveals the underlying conflicts in all social relationships. Evolutionary psychology offers the best explanatory framework for understanding social conflicts, but evolutionary psychology is still in the process of formulating theories about the way core motives interact with specific cultural constructs. To explain the significance of violence in particular works of literature, critics must analyze the interactions between human life history, specific cultural values, individual differences in authorial vision, and relations between the minds of authors and readers in response to characters. This chapter offers examples of that kind of analysis for three works of literature: Grimms' "Little Red Riding Hood," Angela Carter's "The Werewolf," and Shakespeare's "King Lear." The analysis of "Little Red Riding Hood" identifies fear of predation and fear of strangers as core concerns in the story and examines the way symbolic images affect the emotions of child readers. The analysis of "The Werewolf" contrasts the author's relations with characters and audience in that story with the authors' relations with characters and audience in the other two works. The analysis of *King Lear* contrasts the emotional effects of tragedy with the emotional effects of action movies, identifies normative human universals as the basis for audience response, examines the way characters in the play and critics of the play seek meaning through religious ideas, contrasts religious ideas with Shakespeare's naturalistic worldview, and argues that intuitive insights into human life history form the moral core of the play.
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Chapter 3
Violence in Literature: An Evolutionary Perspective

Joseph Carroll

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> Murder gives us an X-ray of the inner core of human nature. It lays bare the things that matter most to humans everywhere—the necessities of survival, the attainment of status, the defense of honor, the acquisition of desirable partners, the loyalty of our lovers, the bonding of our allies, the vanquishing of our enemies, the protection of our children, and the successes of the carriers of our genetic cargo. These are the things that we humans and our astonishingly victorious ancestors have always been willing to kill and die for. (Buss The murderer next door: Why the mind is designed to kill, 2005, p. 244)

Core Motives, Culture, and the Adaptive Function of the Arts

Violence is pervasive in literature because literary authors and their readers want to get at the inner core of human nature. All human interests are set in conflict with the interests of others. Even among the closest kin, fitness interests partially overlap and partially conflict. Between parents and children, siblings, spouses, coalitional partners, and members of one's own tribe, shared fitness interests prompting love or friendship clash with individual interests prompting suspicion, envy, resentment, anger, and sometimes hatred. Violence is the flash point at which the tensions aroused by conflicting interests reach critical mass. In literature as in life, violence reveals the underlying structure of human motives and passions.

This chapter first describes the way core motives interact with imaginative cultural constructs, explains the crucial importance of point of view in creating literary meaning, and then examines specific instances of violence in literature.

The basic motives identified by Buss fit together into the larger logic of human life history (Kenrick 2011; Muehlenbein and Flinn 2011). That larger logic is governed by inclusive fitness, differential parental investment, and the dynamics of social interaction: dominance, reciprocation, cooperative group effort, and competi-

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26 tion between groups (Boehm 1999; Kurzban and Neuberg 2005). Relative to body
27 size, humans have uniquely large brains, and they display extended cultural phe-
28 notypes vastly more complex than those of any other species. Those human pecu-
29 liarities have not cancelled the constraining force of evolved primate dispositions,
30 but they have altered the ways those dispositions manifest themselves in human
31 behavior and human experience (Buss 1997). A comprehensively adequate account
32 of human evolution will thus necessarily include a theory of "gene–culture coevo-
33 lution" (Carroll 2008c, pp. 318–326; Cochran and Harpending 2009; Hill 2007;
34 Lumsden and Wilson 1981; Richerson and Boyd 2005). Regrettably, ideas about
35 gene–culture coevolution are still in a rudimentary stage of development. Kim Hill
36 gets this problem into sharp focus:

> 37 Given the recent convergence of evolutionary psychology and human behavioral ecology–
> 38 sociobiology, one might expect that the next generation of researchers will rapidly untangle
> 39 all the major mysteries of human behavior and cognition. Unfortunately, I do not think
> 40 that this will happen quickly. The main reason is that no branch of the evolutionary social
> 41 sciences has an adequate understanding of human culture. Culture is a product of evolved
> 42 cognitive mechanisms, but its existence may significantly alter behavioral patterns from
> 43 those normally expected (from non-cultural organisms), and its emergence has probably
> 44 uniquely shaped evolved human cognition and emotion. (Hill 2007, p. 351)

45 Some nonhuman animals make tools, share information, and learn behaviors from
46 observing each other. Because of their expanded neocortex, humans have been able
47 to develop these capabilities in three ways either unique to human culture or ex-
48 ceptionally developed in human culture: (a) they produce art (Brown 1991; Dis-
49 sanayake 2000; Dutton 2009); (b) they retain and develop social, mechanical, and
50 intellectual innovations, adding new innovations to old (Richerson and Boyd 2005;
51 Sterelny 2003; Tomasello et al. 2005); and (c) they extrapolate general ideas (Bau-
52 meister et al. 2011; Chiappe and MacDonald 2005; Geary 2005; Hawkins 2004).
53 Through cumulative innovation, humans have transformed techniques into technol-
54 ogy, tribes into civilizations, discoveries into progressive sciences, and artistic nov-
55 elties into aesthetic traditions. By extrapolating general ideas, they have produced
56 theology, philosophy, history, the sciences, and theories about the arts. Animals of
57 other species produce emotionally expressive vocalizations and engage in play. Hu-
58 mans alone produce oral narratives and visual artifacts designed to depict objects
59 and actions, evoke subjective sensations, and delineate through symbols the salient
60 features of their experience.

61 Distinguishing human culture from the transmission of information among non-
62 human animals, Hill observes that only humans use signals to communicate and
63 enforce social "norms." In Hill's conception, human culture embodies "the moral-
64 ity of a social group," that is, "rules of behavior" that are communicated through
65 "rituals (religious practices) and ethnic markers" (p. 353). This formulation rightly
66 identifies culture as an adaptively significant form of behavior, but it leaves out
67 much of what counts as culture. The Ten Commandments and other such regulative
68 codes are part of culture but not the whole of culture. Imaginative constructs like
69 pictures, songs, and stories sometimes contain moral lessons, but they appeal also to
70 impulses of cognitive play, emotional responsiveness, and aesthetic pleasure (Boyd

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2009; Dissanayake 2000; Roth 2007). Works of fiction situate individual characters in relation to both the particular cultural norms and the primal passions that form the core features of human nature (Boyd 2009; Carroll 2011; McEwan 2005). Epics, novels, stories, plays, and poems sometimes affirm specific cultural norms but also sometimes resist those norms.

The largest purpose of the representational arts is to evoke and depict the qualities of experience. The arts influence behavior not only by transmitting culturally specific codes of conduct but also by influencing the way people perceive the world and their own experience in the world. Some such wider conception of the arts has entered into many arguments that the arts are adaptively functional (Boyd 2005, 2009; Carroll 2008c, pp. 349–368, 2011, pp. 20–29, 2012a; Carroll et al. 2012, pp. 81–92; Dissanayake 2000; Gottschall 2012; Salmon and Symons 2004; Scalise Sugiyama 2005; Tooby and Cosmides 2001; Wilson 1998, Chap. 10).

The Interplay of Perspectives in Literature

Fictional stories create virtual worlds and enable people to explore possible forms of experience. Authors of stories and plays typically have exceptional insight into the sources of human behavior and the qualities of experience. Usually, readers are invited to share vicariously in the experience of characters and to respond emotionally to the characters. Since imagined worlds bear the impress of the minds that created them, readers are also invited to share in an author's feeling and judgment about the events of a story. To read a fictional story is, thus, to engage in an emotionally responsive simulation of a social interaction (Mar and Oatley 2008).

All experience ultimately takes place in individual minds. As Tooby and Cosmides observe, "what mostly remains, once you have removed from the human world everything internal to individuals, is the air between them" (Tooby and Cosmides 1992, p. 47). There is, consequently, only one possible location for "meaning" and "effect" in a story: the perspectives of authors, characters, and readers. Characters have impressions about one another; authors have impressions about characters; and readers have impressions about both characters and authors. Authors anticipate the responses of readers. Even if readers reject an author's values and beliefs, they register what authors intend them to feel and think. Good interpretive criticism tries to get at the interaction among all these perspectives.

In the interaction between author and reader, the author gets the first word, but the reader gets the last. The author fabricates a situation—characters, setting, and interlaced events (plot)—and conveys his or her own attitude toward that fabricated situation. An interpretive critic working at the highest level evaluates as accurately as possible what the author means readers to understand but also situates the author's intended meaning within the critic's own theoretical framework.

Critics use explanatory ideas from other disciplines to provide conceptual content for interpretive commentaries on literary works. The most commonly used explanatory ideas derive from various forms of psychology, social theory, and philosophy.

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Most academic literary critics at the present time adopt a theoretical framework cobbled together from Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist social theory, feminist gender theory, and deconstructive epistemology (Boyd 2006; Boyd et al. 2010, introduction; Carroll 1995, 2004, 2010, 2011, 2012c, in press; Culler 2011; Menand 2005). This standard amalgam has various labels: "poststructuralism," "new historicism," "cultural materialism," "Foucauldian cultural critique," or, most simply, "Theory." Despite differences in labels and differing points of emphasis, all versions of "Theory" share one crucial characteristic: they all presuppose the blank slate model of the human mind. They all suppose that human nature is an empty vessel into which culture pours all particular content. Evolutionary literary critics reject the blank slate model and use findings from the evolutionary social sciences to replace the obsolete forms of psychology, sociology, and epistemology that make up poststructuralism.

Three Examples from Literature

Violence in literature has no inherent valence or significance. Violence can be heroic, triumphant, cruel, vicious, or futile and ineffectual. The value attached to any particular instance of violence derives from occasions and circumstances, the motives of characters, the author's attitude toward the depicted characters, the author's general outlook on life, and the responses of readers.

A previous essay by this author offered a survey of violence in world literature (Carroll 2012b). This current chapter takes a different tack: giving a close comparative look at violence in just three works: two versions of the "Little Red Riding Hood" story and Shakespeare's play *King Lear*. The two versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" are those of the brothers Grimm and of Angela Carter, a contemporary writer. These three works have been chosen to illustrate the proposition that the significance of violence in any given work depends on the interactions between core human concerns, specific cultural values, individual differences in authorial vision, and relations between the minds of authors and readers in response to characters.

The Grimms' version of "Little Red Riding Hood," though polished by literate adult tellers of tales, emerged from the folk psychology of a largely illiterate peasant population (Crick 2009; Dundes 1989a). It captures the imagination of children and invites them to identify with its protagonist. Angela Carter's retelling of the story is aimed at adults and invites its readers to share the ideological standpoint of its author. Both versions of the fairy tale are short, and both involve a limited range of motives for violence.

King Lear offers a full spectrum of violence—parents against children and children against parents, siblings against each other, suicide (violence against the self), violence to assert and resist domination within a social group, and violence between social groups. Since *King Lear* is a play, it has no overt declarations by a narrator, but it does have an implied author whose own perspective on the depicted events can be inferred from the relations among characters and the responses of readers. We can make reasonable suppositions about the impact the author intends to have

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on his audience. Shakespeare appeals to an audience that shares with him basic values centered on family bonds and social obligations. Like the brothers Grimm, and unlike Carter, Shakespeare invites readers to participate empathically in the experience of the depicted characters.

The action of *King Lear* is fast and violent, but the play is also reflective and meditative. The characters are occupied not just with attaining goals such as sex and power but also with understanding the meaning of life. In *Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life* (2011), Douglas Kenrick suggests that "the meaning of life" can be found in meditative attention to the core concerns of human nature and the rhythms of human life history. Shakespeare suggests something very similar. In folk traditions, this kind of moral vision is often characterized as a form of "wisdom."

Violence in Grimms' "Little Red Riding Hood"

"Little Red Riding Hood" is a particular version of a common folk tale motif: a protagonist swallowed by a predator but then rescued (Bolte and Polívka 1963; Dundes 1989a; Sugiyama 2004). In Europe and the Anglophone world, the most familiar version of this story is that produced by the brothers Grimm in their 1812 collection. (Their title is more properly translated "Little Red Cap," but "Little Red Riding Hood" is the title by which the story is universally recognized.) In the Grimms' version, Little Red Riding Hood's mother tells her to take cake and wine to a sick grandmother, who lives in the woods, and warns her not to stray from the path. On the way, the girl meets a wolf, who encourages her to dally, picking flowers. The wolf precedes her to the grandmother's house, swallows the grandmother whole, dons the grandmother's clothes, and climbs into the grandmother's bed. When the girl arrives, she engages in a dialogue with the wolf:

> Oh, grandmother, what big ears you have!
> All the better to hear you with.
> Oh, grandmother, what big eyes you have!
> All the better to see you with.
> Oh, grandmother, what big hands you have!
> All the better to grab you with!
> Oh, grandmother, what a horribly big mouth you have!
> All the better to eat you with!
> The wolf had scarcely finished speaking when he jumped from the bed with a single leap and ate up poor Little Red Cap. (Grimm and Grimm 1998–2011)

The wolf falls asleep. A hunter passes by, cuts open the wolf's belly, and frees the two people. The girl puts stones in the wolf's belly. When he wakes and tries to run away, he falls down dead.

To understand the significance of violence in fairy tales, we have to understand how they affect children's imagination—how symbolic meaning works in them and how they affect children emotionally. Efforts to understand how fairy tales work have proceeded through three main historical phases: mythic, Freudian, and evolutionary. The Grimm brothers and many of their successors envisioned fairy tales

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as demotic versions of myths such as the ancient Germanic myths or solar or lunar myths (Bettelheim 2010; Dundes 1989a; Grimm and Grimm 2012). For the past half century or so, symbolic interpretations of the Grimms' fairy tales have been dominated by Freudian readings, supplemented in recent decades by feminist commentaries emphasizing gendered power relations (Dundes 1989b; Zipes 1993). Specifically evolutionary theories about imaginative processes are still under construction but have already made important advances over previous efforts.

Evolutionary literary scholars typically reject Freudian developmental psychology and in its place use evolutionary concepts of childhood development (Boyd 2009; Carroll 2008a; Scalise Sugiyama 2001). The evolutionary critic Scalise Sugiyama argues that oral and written narratives, even fairy tales, function chiefly by transmitting practical information on such adaptively important matters as resource acquisition, predator avoidance, and social interaction. Literature and its oral antecedents are, she proposes, "an information acquisition strategy" (Sugiyama 2006, p. 319). "Little Red Riding Hood," she explains, "packs a double emotional wallop by combining our evolved fear of being harmed by animals with our evolved fear of being harmed by strangers" (Sugiyama 2004, p. 123). So far as it goes, that explanation is clearly correct. Invoking adaptive concerns grounded in forager conditions and in evolutionary developmental psychology offers a valuable corrective to claims that the story reflects lingering "oedipal attachments" (Bettelheim 2010, p. 171) or that it is "a parable of rape" (Brownmiller 1975, p. 310). However, the story does more than teach children to distinguish wolves from grandmothers and it conveys practical lessons about avoiding strangers. A purely didactic interpretation cannot account for departures from strict realism, and such departures are, of course, a defining feature of fairy tales. More importantly, a didactic interpretation fails to explain how the story provides emotional and imaginative satisfaction for children.

The most influential Freudian theorist of fairy tales, Bruno Bettelheim, is wrong to affirm that "the oedipus complex is the crucial problem of childhood" (2010, p. 38). He is right, though, to affirm that fairy tales have psycho-symbolic meanings and that they influence emotional development:

> For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. (Bettelheim 2010, p. 5)

Many thinkers who are not Freudians have recognized that fairy tales are the richest literature of early childhood. (Tatar [2012] offers a compendium of statements by writers about how fairy tales affect childhood development.)Stories that merely conveyed information or taught lessons in an overt, didactic way would have little interest for children and would have little impact on their emotional development.

"Little Red Riding Hood" seems aimed at a very young child, a child young enough to envision someone being swallowed whole by a wolf. For a child, between, say, the ages of 2 and 7, the greatest source of fear, apart from the immediate fear of death, would be separation from kin. "Little Red Riding Hood" climaxes emotionally in the revelation, step by step, that the grandmother is the wolf. De-

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240 tailing the parts of the wolf makes Little Red Riding Hood, and child readers who
241 identify with her, linger in slow motion, with a sensation of strangeness and horror,
242 at the blended images. Superimposing the image of a wolf over the expected image
243 of the grandmother creates emotional and cognitive dissonance for the child. That
244 kind of confusion, the inability to distinguish loving kin from predatory strangers,
245 is bad in itself. Behind that confusion, there might be a hint of a still greater fear, the
246 fear that the adults on whom one relies can turn vicious and predatory.

247 The child's terror, climaxing in being swallowed, is followed by the relief of
248 escape, and then emotional tension is defused by the comic denouement. Simply
249 killing the wolf would have eliminated the danger. Playing a joke on him by placing
250 stones in his belly enhances the relief and satisfaction produced by his death, chang-
251 ing him from a figure of terror into a comic butt. By placing stones where she was
252 herself trapped, the girl replaces the image of herself, helpless and terrified, with the
253 insensate mass of the stones. She acts out symbolically a transformation from being
254 a terrified and helpless victim to an active agent of revenge and justice. The story
255 as a whole, thus, enacts an emotional process through which the child, as reader or
256 listener, achieves mastery over the fear elicited by the wolf in grandmother's cloth-
257 ing. At the end of the story, the grandmother is restored to her rightful place; the
258 menacing stranger is replaced by a beneficent stranger; and the terror produced by
259 the wolf is transformed into comedy, self-assertion, and ethical triumph.

260 The story elicits fear in a child and then relieves that fear, returning the child to
261 emotional equilibrium. It might be that such forms of vicarious emotional play are
262 a kind of practice that builds emotional resilience when a child is faced with actual
263 danger. The story also subliminally enacts a crucial phase in social development. By
264 depicting a shift from the menacing stranger to the beneficent stranger, the story sim-
265 ulates the emotional process in which a child eventually replaces a fear of all strang-
266 ers with a willingness to engage in social interactions outside the immediate family.

267 At the end of the Grimms' version of the story, Little Red Riding Hood draws
268 a moral: "As long as I live, I will never leave the path and run off into the woods
269 by myself if mother tells me not to." Scalise Sugiyama supplements this purely
270 didactic conclusion with specific practical lessons: avoid wolves and be careful of
271 strangers. However, if the story were only didactic in purpose, then the tale could
272 have ended with Little Red Riding Hood's death—a more effective way to scare
273 children into caution. And indeed, the first literary version of the tale, Perrault's
274 version written for the court of Louis XIV, ends with the death of the child (Perrault
275 2009). In the Grimms' version that has become canonical, the emotional lesson is
276 that dangers can be overcome, that enemies can be defeated and rendered harmless,
277 and that the wider social world holds promise of beneficent interactions.

278 *Violence in Angela Carter's "The Werewolf"*

279 Angela Carter started publishing in the 1960s and died in 1992. Writing in 1995,
280 Salman Rushdie observes that "she has become the contemporary writer most stud-
281 ied at British universities" (Rushdie 1997, p. xiv). Rushdie defends her against the

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charge of "political correctness" (Rushdie 1997, p. xiv), but it is quite certain that no politically incorrect writer could be the centerpiece of contemporary literary education in Britain. Suffice it to say that she is highly attuned to contemporary ideological attitudes in academic literary study in the Anglophone world.

In contrast to the story told by the brothers Grimm, Angela Carter's version of the Little Red Riding Hood story, "The Werewolf," does not invite simple emotional involvement in the trials and tribulations of the protagonist. Instead, Carter invites readers to share in her own ironic contempt for her characters: brutish medieval people who believe in witches and a psychopathic little girl who exploits their superstitions.

The Carter story is very short, 826 words. It consists of three parts. The first part is an introduction in which Carter describes life in an impoverished medieval village—"harsh, brief, poor lives" (1995, p. 210). The second part is the main narrative sequence. Little Red Riding Hood goes to visit her grandmother, meets a wolf, cuts off its paw, finds her grandmother ill in bed, missing a hand, discovers that the wolf's paw has turned into the missing hand, and calls out to the villagers, declaring that her grandmother is a witch. The villagers stone the old woman to death. The third part is a single sentence, the last sentence in the story. "Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered" (p. 211).

It is not until that last sentence that readers are let in on the secret that the main narrative sequence has been a false story, a lie. There never was a wolf. The main body of the narrative about the wolf and the grandmother, we are to understand, was the story Little Red Riding Hood told the villagers. The final sentence is enough to identify the main story as a lie because Carter has already indicated, in the introductory section of the story, that witches, in this story, do not exist:

> At midnight especially on Walpurgisnacht, the Devil holds picnics in the graveyards and invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them. Anyone will tell you that.
>
> Wreaths of garlic on the doors keep out the vampires. A blue-eyed child born feet first on the night of St John's Eve will have second sight. When they discover a witch—some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbors' do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! Follows her about all the time, they strip the crone, search her for marks, for the supernumerary nipple her familiar sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death. (p. 210)

This introductory passage establishes a division between the villagers' beliefs and the author's beliefs. Carter gives big nudges and winks to clue readers in to her beliefs. She sneers at the triviality of the villagers' reasons for believing in witches—cheeses ripening, a black cat—and underscores her scorn with the sarcastic phrase "oh, sinister!" In the main body of the narrative, the seemingly magical events—the wolf's paw turning into an old woman's hand and the grandmother missing a hand—create a moment of cognitive dissonance. The last sentence resolves the dissonance. The aim of the story is to make us feel that we share with the author a special insight into the true story behind the fabrication foisted off on the villagers.

The resolution in the final sentence of the story would be satisfying chiefly for readers who are primed to participate, consciously or not, in a specific ideological construct: the idea that social interactions involve three main kinds of persons: ma-

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nipulative oppressors, innocent victims, and shrewd intellectuals who see into the manipulations. That construct is characteristic of the poststructuralist mindset that has dominated the humanities for the past three decades. Michel Foucault, the most prominent and influential poststructuralist theorist, offers representative formulations. Foucault asserts that "power is always exercised at the expense of the people" (1977, p. 211). "The intellectual's role," he explains, is to engage in "a struggle against power, a struggle aimed at revealing and undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious" (p. 207, 208).

It is in the nature of fairy tales to suggest archetypal, mythic conditions. Their characters and situations seem to embody universal psychological truths about human experience (Bettelheim 2010, p. 26, 58; Grimm and Grimm 2009). Carter's story has the same effect, but only for readers who have internalized the Foucauldian mindset—a world reduced to three possible perspectives: the perspective of evil oppressors; the perspective of a deluded and exploited populace; and the perspective of intellectuals who are morally and intellectually superior to the world they observe.

In the folk versions of the story, the threat of violence against Little Red Riding Hood is frightening, and the violence done to the wolf, at the end, offers the satisfaction of dispatching a devious enemy. That kind of emotional response is simple, basic, and universal. In the Carter story, Little Red Riding Hood experiences no fear. The tone of the scene in which she cuts off the wolf's paw is flip, comic.

> The child had a scabbby coat of sheepskin to keep out the cold, she knew the forest too well to fear it but she must always be on her guard. When she heard that freezing howl of a wolf, she dropped her gifts, seized her knife, and turned on the beast.
>
> It was a huge one, with red eyes and running, grizzled chops; any but a mountaineer's child would have died of fright at the sight of it. It went for her throat, as wolves do, but she made a great swipe at it with her father's knife and slashed off its right forepaw.
>
> The wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem. (pp. 210–211)

The violence against the wolf is cartoonish, inviting only laughter. The main violence in the story, in Carter's version, is the violence done to the grandmother:

> They know the wart on the hand at once for a witch's nipple; they drove the old woman, in her shift as she was, out into the snow with sticks, beating her old carcass as far as the edge of the forest, and pelted her with stones until she fell dead. (p. 211)

This scene does not invite readers to share vicariously in the grandmother's terror. It invites readers to feel indignation at injustice and wanton cruelty. If readers accept the role Carter tacitly assigns to them, then they can feel intellectually superior to the populace and morally superior to both the populace and the psychopathic child protagonist. They do not share the perspective of any character. Instead, they form a community of feeling with the author and with other readers.

In its full flowering, a poststructuralist way of thinking implies a utopian worldview in which violence is merely a product of moral and intellectual failure (Carroll et al. 2012, pp. 160–161). In the world of the classic fairy tales, in contrast, violence is a natural outcome of ineradicable conflicts. No form of violence is more basic or more common, across the whole animal kingdom, than the conflict between predators and prey.

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372 ## *Violence in* King Lear

373 Like Carter's "Werewolf," Shakespeare's *King Lear* reworks an old tale; and like
374 Carter, Shakespeare creates a circle of privileged understanding between himself
375 and his audience—an understanding greater than that of any character in the play.
376 Unlike Carter, though, Shakespeare does not stand apart from his characters. He
377 feels with them and is, thus, able to evoke their inner lives—their inmost thoughts
378 and emotions. No one character is able to take in the full scope of meaning in the
379 story, but some characters are in close touch with the values that Shakespeare ex-
380 pects to share with his audience. Those values tie in closely with what Buss calls the
381 core features of human nature, especially the bonds of family.
382 *King Lear* has many characters and a fast-moving, complicated plot. Before fur-
383 ther interpretive comment, it would be helpful to identify the main characters, de-
384 scribe the setting, and give a summary of the action.

385 ### The Main Characters

386 *King Lear's family and associates*

387 Goneril, Lear's oldest daughter, married to the Duke of Albany
388 Regan, Lear's second daughter, married to the Duke of Cornwall
389 Cordelia, Lear's youngest daughter, married to the King of France
390 The Earl of Kent, a loyal retainer
391 The Fool, Lear's court jester
392 Oswald, Goneril's servant, killed by Edgar

393 *The Earl of Gloucester's family*

394 Edgar, product of a lawful union, Gloucester's legitimate son and heir,
395 Edmund, an illegitimate son, sought in marriage, ultimately, by both Goneril and Regan

396 ### The Historical Setting

397 Historical period is notoriously vague in *King Lear*. The source story is set in a pre-
398 Christian era. Except for one glancing reference to God in the singular, Shakespeare's
399 characters refer only to pagan deities. However, the ranks, titles, military accoutre-
400 ments, and matters of daily life depicted or mentioned in the play are more appropriate
401 to the sixteenth century than to a barbarous British antiquity. By blurring historical pe-
402 riod while simultaneously invoking multitudinous images of nature, animals, and the
403 human body, Shakespeare directs attention away from any culturally specific setting
404 and directs it instead toward human universals—toward physical sensations (especial-
405 ly pain), basic motives, basic emotions, intimate family relationships, and elementary
406 principles of social organization. (On the animal imagery, see Bradley 2007, pp. 244–
407 245; Holloway 1961, pp. 80–84; Knight 1949, pp. 205–211; Spurgeon 1930, p. 342.)

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408 **A Summary of the Action**

409 Despite moments of humor and tenderness, the dominant emotions in *King Lear* are
410 rage, resentment, vindictiveness, fear, jealousy, hatred, outrage, anguish, remorse,
411 and grief. Betrayal and cruelty dominate the action, which centers on the disintegra-
412 tion of two families, those of King Lear and the Earl of Gloucester. By the end of
413 the play, Lear and all three of his adult daughters are dead. One daughter poisons the
414 other and then commits suicide. Gloucester and one of his sons is dead, one brother
415 having sought the life of the other and then been killed by the other. Along the way,
416 other lives are swallowed up in this vortex of family violence. The play concludes
417 in a battle and its aftermath. In the final scene, the stage is littered with corpses,
418 including those of Gloucester's second son and all the members of Lear's family.

419 At the beginning of the story, Lear is more than 80 years old and becoming men-
420 tally infirm, liable to fits of reckless and impulsive behavior. He proposes to divide
421 his kingdom into three parts, giving one part to each of his adult daughters, Goneril,
422 Regan, and Cordelia. He plans to retire and live with Cordelia, his youngest and
423 most beloved. In a freak of fancy, he subjects the three daughters to a love test. Each
424 is to outvie the others in declaring their love for him. The two oldest daughters,
425 Goneril and Regan, flatter him shamelessly, declaring they love him more than life
426 itself. Cordelia says only that she loves him in the measure and quality appropriate
427 to their filial relationship. Lear foolishly believes the older daughters, or at least
428 enjoys their flattery, and he flies into senile rage over Cordelia's "plainness" of
429 speech. He disinherits her and declares he will alternate between living with his two
430 older daughters, transferring to them all his power and wealth but stipulating that
431 he will keep a hundred knights as retainers, his "train." The Earl of Kent, a loyal
432 and honest follower, tries to intervene and prevent the folly. Lear banishes him. The
433 King of France elects to marry Cordelia without a dowry, and they leave for France.

434 While this main plot is being set in motion, the subplot also gets started. Edmund,
435 the bastard son of Gloucester, tricks his father into believing that the legitimate son,
436 Edgar, wishes to murder Gloucester so as to acquire his title and property before the
437 old man dies a natural death. Gloucester puts out a writ on Edgar's life, who escapes
438 by disguising himself as a mad beggar. Gloucester says he will make Edmund his heir.

439 Lear begins his sojourn with Goneril, who quickly strips him of power, treats
440 him contemptuously, and demands that he reduce the number of his followers. En-
441 raged, Lear invokes the gods to curse Goneril with sterility and leaves to go live
442 with Regan. To announce his arrival at Regan's, he sends Kent, who has disguised
443 himself and become one of Lear's followers. To avoid receiving Lear, Regan and
444 Cornwall leave their home and go to visit the Earl of Gloucester. Lear follows them
445 there. Before Lear arrives, Kent, in disguise, meets Goneril's servant Oswald and
446 attacks him. Cornwall has Kent put in the stocks, an outrage against Lear's dignity.

447 When Lear and his two eldest daughters are together at Gloucester's, the daugh-
448 ters join together in stripping him of the rest of his followers. They mock and hu-
449 miliate him. Again enraged, and beginning to lose his wits, Lear runs out into the
450 heath in the midst of a violent thunderstorm, accompanied only by his court jester
451 and the disguised Kent. They come across Gloucester's son Edgar, disguised as a
452 mad beggar. Lear, by now fully deranged, has a long dialogue with the mad beggar.

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Cornwall, Regan, and Goneril have shut their gates and have issued a declaration that anyone giving aid to Lear will be executed. Gloucester nonetheless secretly leads Lear to shelter. He also confides in his illegitimate son Edmund that he has received a secret message that Cordelia is returning to England with an army to rescue her father. Edmund turns the letter over to Cornwall, who gouges out Gloucester's eyes. When one of Cornwall's servants tries to stop Cornwall from gouging out Gloucester's second eye, the servant and Cornwall fight with swords. The servant is killed but wounds Cornwall, who later dies from the wound. Gloucester, blinded, is set free. His legitimate son Edgar, disguised as the beggar, leads him toward Dover, where Cordelia's army is landing. Gloucester now knows that Edmund has betrayed him and also that Edgar had been falsely accused. Overcome with despair and remorse, he attempts to commit suicide but is prevented by Edgar. Later, after Edgar reveals his identity, Gloucester dies, shattered physically and emotionally.

Goneril's husband Albany is mild-tempered and morally sensitive. He severely disapproves of the way Goneril has persecuted her father. He nonetheless gathers an army to defend England from Cordelia's army. Both Goneril and Regan (now a widow) are sexually attracted to Edmund. Goneril sends a letter to Edmund suggesting that he should murder Albany, thus making her a widow, and then marry her. Oswald, Goneril's servant, is carrying the letter when he comes across Gloucester, wandering on the heath, and tries to kill him to gain favor with Goneril and Regan. Edgar kills Oswald instead, finds Goneril's letter, and gives it to Albany, as proof of Goneril's treachery.

Cordelia and Lear lose the battle. Edmund secretly orders a soldier to murder them in prison. Goneril, jealous of Regan and determined to prevent her from marrying Edmund, poisons her. Edgar appears, challenges Edmund to single combat, and mortally wounds him. Albany produces Goneril's letter revealing her plot against his life. When confronted, she stabs herself to death. Edmund, before dying, discloses his command to have Lear and Cordelia executed. The soldier has already hanged Cordelia and has in turn been killed by Lear. Lear dies in grief over Cordelia's body.

Action Movies, Tragedy, and the Adaptive Function of Literature

To narrow down the way violence works specifically in *King Lear,* we can compare it to the way violence works in action movies. In action movies, as in "Little Red Riding Hood," the audience is expected to identify with the protagonist and to experience vicariously the pleasure of triumphant self-assertion. The victims of violence are reduced to the status of automatons, little more than animated targets. In *King Lear,* the audience is invited to see into the inner lives even of antagonists, and sympathy for the protagonists involves more suffering than pleasure. Violence gives expression to emotional stress, and the consequences of violence, practical and emotional, are carried through to their necessary conclusions.

Action movies typically induce a contraction in sympathy. Tragedies like *King Lear*, in contrast, typically induce an expansion in compassionate understanding. When Lear is cast out into the storm, deprived of all social standing and power, he recognizes the plight of "Poor naked wretches" who have no protection from the elements (Shakespeare 1997, 3.4.28). Gloucester, after he is blinded, takes comfort in

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496 the thought that his misfortune will benefit a mad beggar. Edgar, betrayed and hunted,
497 describes himself as a man whom sorrow has made "pregnant to good pity" (4.6.219).
498 These statements are made by Shakespeare's characters; they are not his own di-
499 rect pronouncements. Nonetheless, we can say with confidence that the ethos of the
500 play—Shakespeare's own ethos—includes a sense of universal human compassion.
501 Action movies are like pornography. They are fantasies designed to simulate
502 pleasurable sensations (Ellis and Symons 1990; Pinker 1997; Salmon 2003). Trag-
503 edy does not simulate pleasurable sensations. It does exactly the opposite. Why do
504 audiences willingly endure simulations of painful experience? To answer that ques-
505 tion, one must almost necessarily invoke the idea that literature and its oral anteced-
506 ents serve an adaptive function: they help humans organize motives and emotions
507 and, thus, direct behavior in adaptively functional ways (Boyd 2005; Carroll 2008b,
508 pp. 119–128, 2008c, pp. 349–368, 2012a; Dissanayake 2000; Dutton 2009; Salmon
509 and Symons 2004; Tooby and Cosmides 2001). In lay terms, literature and its oral
510 antecedents help provide a sense of meaning and purpose to behavior. Humans have
511 a unique need for meaning and purpose because their behavior, unlike behavior
512 in animals of other species, involves flexible choice among competing alternative
513 scenarios. All human action takes place within imaginative structures that include
514 past and future, locating present action in relation to an awareness of a continu-
515 ously developing individual identity (McAdams 2008, 2011). That sense of identity
516 includes internal conflicts and concerns, relations to other people (both living and
517 dead), relations to nature, and relations to whatever spiritual forces people might
518 imagine to exist. Tragedy puts the heaviest possible pressure on the human need to
519 find meaning and purpose in life.

520 **Normative Universals and the Responses of Readers**

521 *King Lear* contains a great deal of violence and cruelty, but it does not invite its
522 audience to participate vicariously in the enjoyment of sheer malevolence. Some
523 readers with a sadistic streak might thrill with pleasure when Cornwall sneers at
524 Gloucester's eye, "Out, vile jelly,/Where is thy lustre now?" (3.7.82–83). How-
525 ever, such readers would be responding in an emotional key out of harmony with
526 the larger emotional orchestration of the play. When Cornwall's servant takes up a
527 sword to defend Gloucester, and is killed, there is no voice in the scene to honor
528 his heroism. Cornwall dismisses him with the utmost contempt. "Throw this slave/
529 Upon the dunghill" (3.7.95–96). A reader who is attuned to the larger emotional
530 orchestration in the play will nonetheless stand apart from Cornwall, registering the
531 values of courage and decency that correspond to the sympathies activated in the
532 play as a whole.
533 In anticipating emotional responses to the action of his play, Shakespeare could
534 confidently depend on dispositions that are so basic a part of human nature that they
535 appear in all known cultures (Brown 1991). For forms of value that have universal,
536 cross-cultural force, we can use the term "normative" universals. Normative uni-
537 versals include horror at the murder of kinsfolk, respect for family obligations, and
538 appreciation for honesty in social relations.

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When Goneril and Regan persecute their father and then seek his death, they violate moral dispositions deeply rooted in human nature. When Goneril poisons Regan out of jealousy, most readers can only be appalled at the quality of mind she reveals—the coldness of heart, the murderous viciousness of the sibling rivalry, and the absence of any moral component in her estimate of what makes a man desirable. Her willingness to poison a sister is concordant with her passion for a man willing to murder his brother. Though highly articulate, Goneril seems scarcely human. Gloucester and Albany are right to characterize her as a savage beast. In contrast, when Cordelia and Kent remain loyal to Lear despite his senile rages, and when Edgar remains loyal to his father despite his father's attempt to have him executed, Shakespeare can anticipate that most of his audience will resonate to their motives.

Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall speak hypocritically, using honorable words to characterize morally depraved behavior. The use of honorable words reveals their awareness that their actions violate public norms. Indeed, they remark, toward the end of the play, that their rule has excited widespread public unrest. The public that dislikes both depravity and hypocrisy includes not only their contemporaries but also most readers over the past four centuries. By definition, true normative universals transcend variations in culturally specific systems of value. Shakespeare could not have anticipated the cultural changes that would take place over a period of four centuries. Nonetheless, because he appeals to normative universals, for modern readers, his anticipations of audience response continue to operate as he intended.

The normative universals that make readers disgusted with the antagonists have, of course, a converse effect in responses to Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool. Those characters remain "true" in both social commitment and manner of speech—loyal to the people they love and honest in their dealings with others. Shakespeare can depend on his audience to respond with admiration to those qualities.

The Largest Frame of Meaning in *King Lear*

No character in *King Lear* takes in the whole tragic vision Shakespeare shares with his implied audience. Two factors limit the scope of understanding in the characters: the action is too broad and complex for any one character to be involved in all of it; and many characters adopt religious or metaphysical ideas out of keeping with Shakespeare's naturalistic perspective. Like those characters, many of Shakespeare's critics, even among the most astute, have sought consolation through metaphysical or religious ideas that are not in accord with the action of the play. By providing a thematic framework adequate to the whole scope of the play, an evolutionary perspective can help us approximate more closely to Shakespeare's own encompassing vision of human life.

From an evolutionary perspective, life is a mechanical and blindly developing process. More organisms are born in any generation than can survive and reproduce; organisms vary in the traits conducing to survival and reproduction; the or-

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580 ganisms that possess more favorable variations reproduce at a higher rate and also
581 transmit their more favorable characteristics to their offspring. This simple causal
582 sequence entails no cosmic purpose for the evolution of life. Nor does it entail a
583 divine source for human motives and values. From an evolutionary perspective, if
584 we wish to justify ethical values, we can look for justification only within a purely
585 human context.

586 At one time or another, Lear, Kent, Edgar, Albany, and Gloucester all affirm that
587 human lives are governed by divine justice. For instance, on hearing that Cornwall
588 has died from the wound given him by his servant, Albany declares, "This shows
589 you are above,/You justicers, that these our nether crimes/So speedily can venge!"
590 (4.2.79–81). All such proclamations generalize beyond the facts of the play. The
591 antagonists unleash violence that rebounds lethally against themselves, but that
592 same violence takes the lives of Cordelia, Lear, Gloucester, Cornwall's servant, and
593 probably the Fool (he disappears after the third act). Kent, too, is so shattered that
594 he anticipates death. Among the major characters, only Albany and Edgar remain
595 standing. A naturalistic view of human social relations can easily enough make
596 sense of these outcomes. A providential worldview cannot. Shakespeare under-
597 stands the human need to project human values into the cosmic frame of things, but
598 he evidently does not himself require that basis for moral judgment.

599 Since the end of the eighteenth century, few readers have tried to defend the
600 idea that rewards and punishments correspond to merits and faults. Modern read-
601 ers have, though, softened the painfulness of *King Lear* by emphasizing themes
602 of redemption—Christian or quasi-Christian ideas that take two forms: either the
603 idea that through suffering characters achieve a sublime vision of a transcendent
604 spiritual order, or the idea that a character like Cordelia gives evidence of that spiri-
605 tual order (Bradley 2007; Dowden 1918; Knight 1949). (For critical commentar-
606 ies on such readings, see Everett 1960; Foakes 2004, pp. 45–54; Vickers 1993,
607 Chap. 7.)Shakespeare himself is more tough-minded than that. Gloucester is talked
608 out of committing suicide but dies from stress and shock. Lear has a reconciliation
609 with Cordelia, acknowledges that he has been foolish and unjust, and asks for for-
610 giveness. He nonetheless dies in torment. Regan has no moment of moral transfor-
611 mation. She pursues a course of lust and viciousness and then is poisoned. Goneril
612 defies all moral judgment—"the laws are mine" (5.3.156)—and then stabs herself.
613 Kent, crushed by the death of Cordelia and Lear, is unable to bear life longer. Ed-
614 mund, as he is dying, concurs with Edgar's delusional belief in poetic justice. He
615 tries unsuccessfully to save Lear and Cordelia from the executioner, but few readers
616 would argue that this one moral impulse gives evidence of a transcendent spiritual
617 order. Despite having proclaimed a faith in divine justice, Edgar and Albany find
618 little reason to rejoice in the final scene. They are humbled and subdued amid the
619 destruction.

620 True tragedy does not absolve the grief produced by destructive human impulses;
621 but neither is it nihilistic. Nihilism renders human concerns trivial and insignificant.
622 Tragedy makes us feel their weight and significance.

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623 **Human Life History and Moral Judgment**

624 Though appealing to no higher spiritual order, Shakespeare tacitly affirms an ethos
625 of domestic and social order grounded in a sane understanding of systemic relations
626 in human life history. The central theme of the play is announced in Cordelia's first
627 speech to Lear, refusing his demand for flattery:

628 I love your majesty
629 According to my bond, no more nor less….
630 You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
631 Return those duties back as are right fit,
632 Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
633 Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
634 They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
635 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
636 Half my love with him, half my care and duty. (1.1.92–102)

637 Had Cordelia thought a little further ahead, she might have added that once she had
638 children, she would have to further subdivide her love, leaving a third, or perhaps
639 less than a third, for Lear. She could also have added something about her engage-
640 ment with the wider social world. Though her statement is schematic and incom-
641 plete, Kent is right to praise it for justness of thought. Cordelia, here, enunciates
642 the central principle that is violated in the play: due proportions in the phases and
643 offices of life: the balance in attention and concern distributed among parents and
644 children, marital partners, and the larger community (Holloway 1961, pp. 94–95).
645 Cordelia is not of course an evolutionist; nor is Shakespeare. They are both intui-
646 tive folk psychologists. Even so, the wisdom of their moral sense depends on their
647 intuitive insight into human life history. The significance of the violence in *King*
648 *Lear* depends on normative values rooted in human life history. The destructive
649 violence inflicted by the protagonists takes its evil cast from the breaking of family
650 bonds integral with the logic of human reproduction. The defensive violence of the
651 protagonists takes its moral coloring from a commitment to family bonds and the
652 extension of those bonds to a wider social network.
653 Though four centuries old, and set within systems of belief and social organiza-
654 tion long obsolete, *King Lear* can still speak to modern audiences. In becoming
655 modern, humans have not escaped from human life history. Their passions and their
656 moral judgments are still rooted in the reproductive cycle. The meaning they give
657 to violence now, as always, can be traced back to the core concerns of human life.

658 **Conclusion**

659 "Little Red Riding Hood" and *King Lear* are both classics. They have had enduring
660 appeal and have crossed many boundaries of language and culture. Classic works
661 of literature typically penetrate below the surface of conventional beliefs and evoke
662 passions embedded in ancient, evolved features of human nature. Violence is not

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absolutely indispensable for evoking those passions, but a great many works that we identify as classics do in fact contain lethal violence (Carroll 2012b). Conflict is inherent in life and in human nature. Violence pushes conflict to its extreme and, thus, reveals the underlying forces that govern our lives. We read great literature chiefly because we feel a compelling need to understand our own experience and the experience of others.

Carter's "Werewolf" is not yet a classic. Only time can make that distinction. One can speculate, though, about how well the story will wear over time. I think it unlikely that Carter will endure, even in the small way that classic short stories have endured—stories like those of Poe, Maupassant, or Hans Christian Andersen. Carter's story does not transport us to the state of mind of medieval people. The characters in her story are thrust off into an alien distance, condemned and despised for their lack of modern enlightenment. We are thus restricted, while reading Carter, to her own mind, and that mind is too self-regarding and self-congratulating to take us deep into our shared humanity. Works that endure typically do not restrict their imaginative scope to contemporary ideological constructs nor aim chiefly at flattering the vanity of their audience.

Because humans have evolved as social animals, great literature almost necessarily appeals to normative universals grounded in positive social relationships. Since those relationships always involve conflict, and the ultimate forms of conflict involve violence, violence can serve as a touchstone for evaluating literature. Plays and stories that have most fully satisfied the imaginative needs of most readers register the tensions that sometimes erupt into violence, but they also encompass those tensions within a generous understanding of human nature, including the bonds of family and friendship.

King Lear moves one step beyond those core features of human nature and takes in also our need to make sense of the world. Though Shakespeare does not share the belief in divine justice to which some of his characters appeal, his scope, like theirs, takes in the whole of nature. For those of us who are atheists or agnostics, Shakespeare's naturalistic worldview has a special value. In *King Lear,* he gives evidence that one can accept the vast bleak indifference of the cosmos and still feel the force and necessity of intimate human connections.

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Chapter 3: Author Query

AQ1. 'sympathy' or 'empathy'. Please check.

AQ2. Please provide complete details for the reference "Carroll in press".