

## 1 Summary

In recent years, a number of literary scholars and social scientists have attempted to cross the gap between the “Two Cultures” described by C. P. Snow in 1959, the humanist-literary and the technical-scientific ones. Thoroughly dissatisfied with contemporary, postmodernist humanist scholarship and theorizing, these bridge-builders – whether trail-blazing or delusional – have looked to evolutionary biology and psychology in their attempts to ground the study of literature in the *terra firma* of the natural and social sciences. They proceed from the premise that the human mind, no less than the human body, is a product of evolution by natural selection.

This movement is commonly known as literary Darwinism or evolutionary literary studies, and its theoretical underpinning is the approach to psychology known as evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychologists study the mind in the light of the selective pressures which presumably “designed” it in our long evolutionary history as hunters and gatherers. Evolutionary psychology, a not uncontroversial science still in its adolescence, regards the human mind as an information-processing device. In this view, the mind consists of a number of functional modules or “psychological adaptations” which were installed by natural selection in our ancestors as they increased their chances of survival and propagation, and which are still part of our genetic make-up. Thus, evolutionary psychologists argue against the so-called “Standard Social Science Model,” according to which the mind is a blank slate.

Literary Darwinists note that storytelling is a true human universal, and they ask whether it is an adaptation or a by-product of adaptations which evolved for other reasons. They attempt to study literature through a Darwinian lens, interpreting works of art in the light of models of human behavior and human nature gleaned from evolutionary psychology.

The Darwinian study of supernatural horror fiction, although a very fertile area of research, is largely uncharted territory. The hypothesis running through this thesis is that horror fiction is crucially dependent on evolved properties of the human mind. The monsters of horror are products not of nature but of the human mind, and as such they ought to be able to tell us something about the minds that produce them and the minds with which they have such an eerie resonance.

I argue against traditional historicist and psychoanalytical approaches to horror, claiming that it is a “natural” genre rather than an entirely cultural construction. Implicit in many historicist

accounts of the genre is the notion that horror and the things we fear – the fears that are symbolized or channeled by the monsters of the genre – are infinitely variable. This follows from a view of the mind as a *tabula rasa* which can be taught to fear anything poured into it by culture. However, building my claim on evolutionary theory, I argue that we are “hard-wired” or biologically prepared to fear certain things which played a vital part in our evolutionary past, and that these things – in more or less “tweaked” version – are over-represented in horror fiction, even as they play little or no part in present-day mortality statistics. Thus, horror fiction varies within a narrow range, since there are only so many effective ways of scaring the human animal.

I also take from the cognitive study of religion the insight that category-violating concepts are particularly salient and memorable, noting that horror monsters commonly confuse or violate the categories of our intuitive, innate ontology. This makes them remarkably interesting and attention-grabbing, and may partly explain the genre’s appeal.

Supernatural horror fiction appears to be a kind of “pleasure technology,” a non-adaptive use of an adaptive system, a technology which takes advantage of the way that our minds are constructed in order to procure an ultimately pleasurable response. It features dangerous and often disgusting animals or animal-like creatures which engender powerful, unconditioned responses. Alternatively, horror fiction might be an outgrowth of an adaptive tendency to engage in play behavior and exploration, a way of gaining emotional flexibility and charting the outskirts of one’s inner landscape.

I apply this theoretical apparatus – the *Homo Timidus* theory of horror – to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. I attempt to understand the novel as a work of horror, that is, as a fiction which is designed to scare and disturb its audience, and I am particularly interested in the way that Stoker chose to endow his central villain, Count Dracula, with certain animal characteristics. Conceivably, the predatory vampire evokes an innate fear of large alpha predators in the reader. And the fact that Dracula has a range of counterintuitive properties makes him particularly attention-demanding. Perhaps Stoker was unconsciously channeling an ancestral fear of predators when describing Dracula, and perhaps he was deliberately making a context-dependent statement on the possible degeneration of the human race. At any rate, Stoker’s king vampire is representative of horror monsters in that he strikingly combines animal features with counterintuitive, attention-demanding characteristics.