

# THE NEVER ENDING STORY

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*The Cultural Evolution  
of Narratives*



*Part III...*

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*The Cultural Evolution  
of Narratives*



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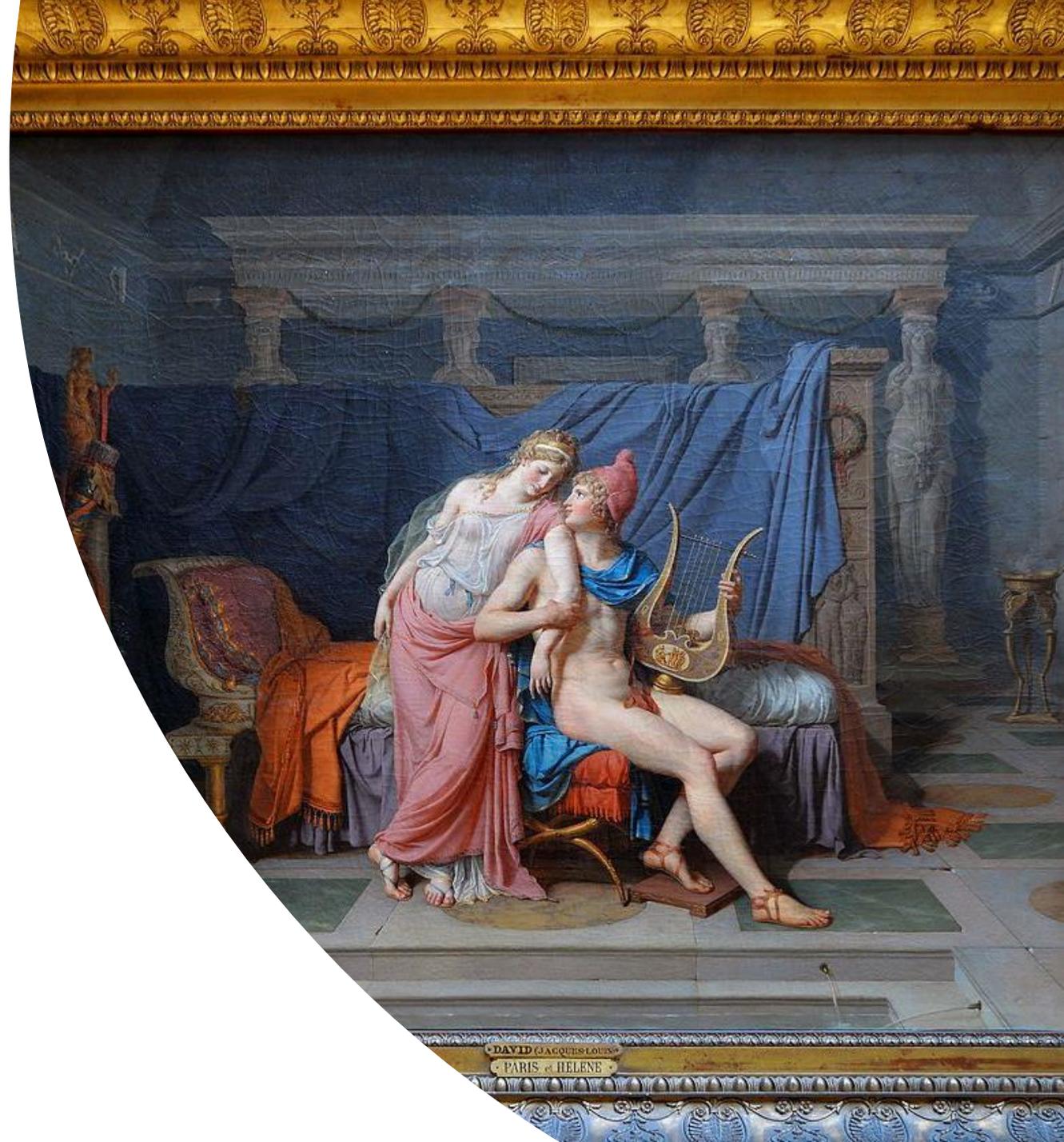
# Romance



# Romance in Fiction

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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)

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## Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures

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**Abstract:** Contemporary mate preferences can provide important clues to human reproductive history. Little is known about which characteristics people value in potential mates. Five predictions were made about sex differences in human mate preferences based on evolutionary conceptions of parental investment, sexual selection, human reproductive capacity, and sexual asymmetries regarding certainty of paternity versus maternity. The predictions centered on how each sex valued earning capacity, ambition-industriousness, youth, physical attractiveness, and chastity. Predictions were tested in data from 37 samples drawn from 33 countries located on six continents and five islands (total  $N = 10,047$ ). For 27 countries, demographic data on actual age at marriage provided a validity check on questionnaire data. Females were found to value cues to resource acquisition in potential mates more highly than males. Characteristics signaling reproductive capacity were valued more by males than by females. These sex differences may reflect different evolutionary selection pressures on human males and females; they provide powerful cross-cultural evidence of current sex differences in reproductive strategies. Discussion focuses on proximate mechanisms underlying mate preferences, consequences for human intrasexual competition, and the limitations of this study.

**Keywords:** assortative mating; cultural differences; evolution; mate preferences; reproductive strategy; sex differences; sexual selection; sociobiology

### 1. Introduction

Mate preferences acquire importance in at least three scientific contexts. First, they can affect the current direction of sexual selection by influencing who is differentially excluded from and included in mating (Darwin 1871). Favored mate characteristics that show some heritability will typically be represented more frequently in subsequent generations. Individuals lacking favored characteristics tend to become no one's ancestors (Thornhill & Thornhill 1983). Second, current mate preferences may reflect prior selection pressures, thus providing important clues to a species' reproductive history. Third, mate preferences can exert selective pressures on other components of the mating system. In the context of intrasexual competition, for example, tactics used to attract and retain mates should be strongly influenced by the mate preferences expressed by members of the opposite sex (Buss 1988). Because of the powerful reproductive consequences of preferential mating, it is reasonable to assume that mate preferences will depart from randomness and evolve through sexual selection (Darwin 1859, 1871; Fisher 1930). This assumption, first advanced by Darwin, has been documented empirically for a variety of nonhuman species (e.g., Bateson 1983; Majerus 1985).

In spite of the importance of mate preferences, little is known about precisely which characteristics in potential

mates are valued by human males and females (Buss 1985; Thiessen & Gregg 1980). Particularly lacking are good cross-cultural data. Cross-cultural studies become crucial for testing evolution-based hypotheses that posit species-typical or sex-typical mate preferences. Recent theoretical work by Trivers (1972), Williams (1975), Symons (1979), and Buss (1987) provides a foundation from which specific evolutionary hypotheses about mate preferences can be derived. [See also multiple book review of Symons's *Evolution of Human Sexuality*, *BBS* 3(2) 1980 and Hartung's "Matrilineal Inheritance" *BBS* 8(4) 1985.]

#### 1.1. Predictions from parental investment and sexual selection theory

Trivers (1972) posits that sexual selection is driven in part by different levels of investment by males and females in their offspring (Bateman 1948). In humans and other mammals, male parental investment tends to be less than female parental investment (Fisher 1930; Trivers 1972; Williams 1975). Mammalian fertilization occurs internally within females, as does gestation. A copulation that requires minimal male investment can produce a 9-month investment by the female that is substantial in terms of time, energy, resources, and foreclosed alternatives.

Investment, of course, does not begin with fertilization, nor does it end with parturition. Trivers describes

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

		Physical attractiveness			Wealth/status			Kindness		
		Male % (N)	Female % (N)	Z score	Male	Female	Z score	Male	Female	Z score
Overall folk	tales	56 (246)	23 (278)	7.78**	9	26	-5.03**	35	51	-3.51**
Regions	South America	65 (48)	51 (39)	1.26	13	23	-1.28	22	26	-0.29
	Circum-Mediterranean	42 (68)	15 (77)	3.68**	6	15	-1.68	52	70	-2.28*
	East Eurasia	58 (47)	24 (59)	3.71**	11	27	-2.25*	30	49	-2.08*
	Africa	63 (16)	35 (20)	1.96*	19	40	-1.45	18	25	-0.3
	Insular Pacific, etc.	84 (19)	13 (24)	6.67**	5	38	-2.90**	11	50	-3.18**
Cultural complexity	Bands/Tribes	67 (114)	33 (94)	5.01**	9	34	-4.47**	25	33	-1.89
	Preindustrial states	50 (115)	17 (140)	5.74**	8	21	-3.18**	43	61	-3.05**
Western literature		42 (188)	11 (121)	6.84**	21	31	-2.07*	37	58	-3.61**

*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



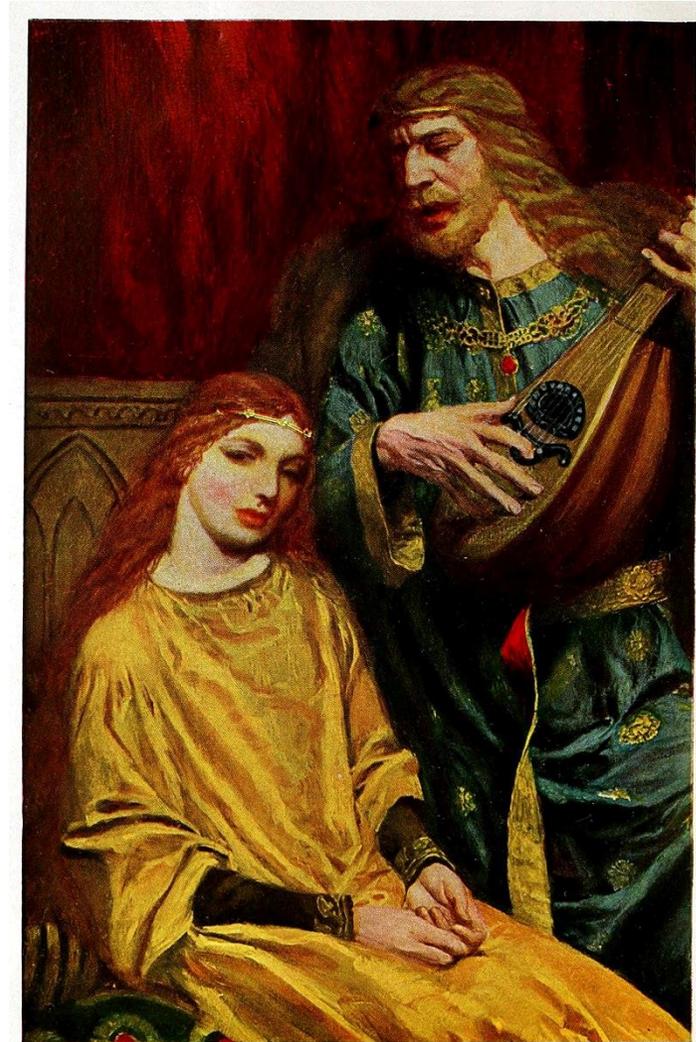
# The Romantic Love Debate

Is romantic love a human universal?

Cultural constructivists see RL as a western literary invention dating back to 12<sup>th</sup> 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)*



Painting by Howard Pyle

# The Romantic Love Debate

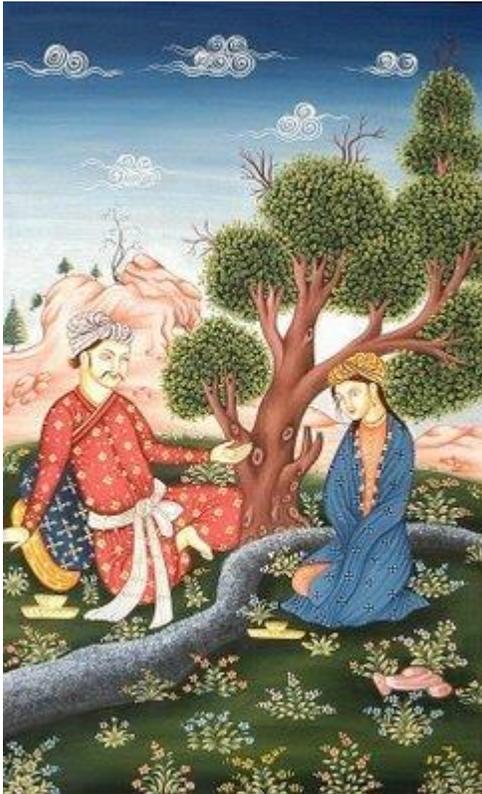
Is romantic love a human universal?

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

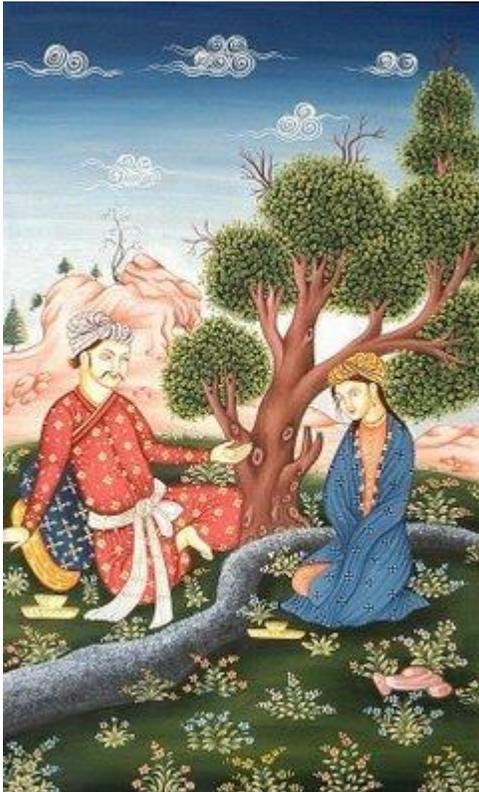


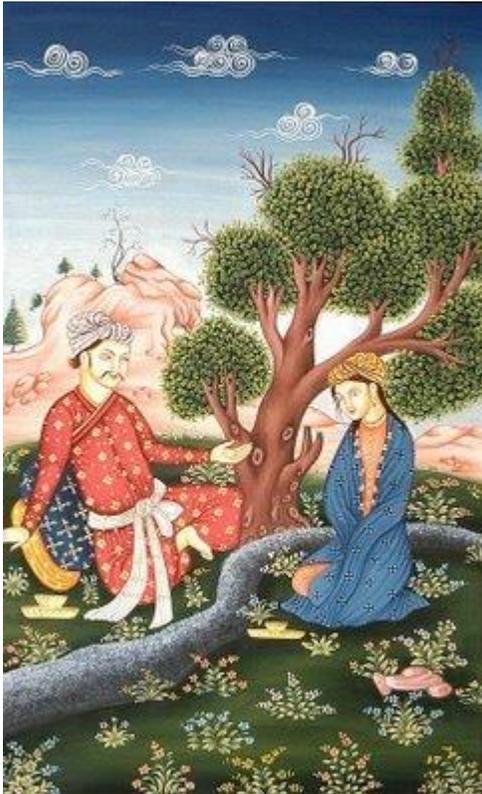
Table 1. Results by broad cultural groupings and sub-groupings

	References to Romantic Love	Average References Per Collection
OVERALL (N=79)	263	3.32
Asia (N=16)	94	5.88
India (N=8)	28	4.67
Japan (N=6)	37	6.17
Africa (N=5)	8	1.60
Hausa (N=3)	6	2.00
Europe (N=8)	31	3.75
Middle East (N=6)	23	3.83
Oceania (N=10)	19	1.90
Aboriginal Australia (N=4)	7	1.75
Hawaii (N=3)	6	2.00
Philippines (N=3)	0	0.00
North Amer. Indian (N=25)	75	3.00
Arctic Coast (N=5)	4	0.80
Northwest Coast (N=11)	68	6.18
Pueblo (N=3)	3	1.00
South America (N=9)	13	1.44
Maya (N=4)	8	2.00
Yanomamō (N=3)	3	1.00

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?

