

## Chapter 2

# Darwinian Literary Analysis of Sexuality

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Literary Darwinists draw upon research and theory from evolutionary psychology to analyze fictional, dramatic, and poetic representations of human behavior. A product of imaginative and aesthetic energies, literature offers special insight into universals of human nature. In the arena of literary make-believe, characters confront choices and difficulties mimicking those in real life, enabling readers to rehearse behavioral options, ponder social complexities, and study hypothetical life histories. From problem-solving to wish-fulfillment, art consistently engages deep-seated human concerns. Prominent among these is a preoccupation with the human condition itself. Literature serves as a forum in which writers and readers can examine, celebrate, question, deplore, and defy the forces constraining their existence. Individual texts do not merely illustrate the operations of evolved adaptations; they scrutinize and evaluate these in specific environmental contexts. They offer fascinating glimpses into the psyche of an animal intelligent enough to discern and assess the workings of its own mental and emotional processes.

Literary plots and themes focus with unsurprising persistence on activities with direct or indirect impact on fitness. Given the evolutionarily central role of reproduction in all plant and animal life, a concentration of interest on behavior that facilitates the passing on of genes is only to be expected. Historically and cross-culturally, human narratives return with unfailing regularity to topics emphasizing erotic desire, courtship tactics, marital strife, and parental commitment. Relations between the sexes, including the imperfect overlap of male and female reproductive interests, are by turns exalted, lamented, and ridiculed in countless poems, plays, and tales. Sexual passion, together with cultural norms regulating its expression, serves as the stuff of genres ranging from tragedy and romance to comedy, satire, and farce. Because human sexual behaviors entail complex assessments and inter-

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actions, including strategic choices influenced by environmental and phenotypic considerations, literary depictions of erotically driven behaviors and choices are correspondingly complex and varied. Deft handling of rhetorical devices such as point of view, metaphor, allusion, and irony enables writers to explore the multifaceted psychosocial impact of sexual impulses and choices. Darwinian literary criticism examines richly detailed, artfully indirect representations of eros in literary works, remaining alert to the evolutionary implications of the feelings and actions described.

Organized around different types of sexually motivated behavior, from mate selection and courtship to infidelity and mate-poaching, the discussion that follows is intended to be representative rather than exhaustive. Its purpose is twofold: first, to confirm the pervasive presence of sexual concerns in literature, and second, to show Darwinian literary criticism in action, clarifying its methods and purposes. Literary Darwinism, also known as evolutionary criticism or biopoetics, has established itself in recent decades as a fast growing sub-discipline, attracting notice and stimulating debate. Theoretical questions concerning the origin and adaptive value of art have drawn substantial scholarly attention; interrelationships between imagination, aesthetics, and other aspects of human cognition likewise have undergone exploration. Because contemporary evolutionary studies is an essentially interdisciplinary endeavor, it has stimulated fruitful collaboration across traditional disciplinary boundaries, bringing literary scholars together with cohorts from psychology, anthropology, linguistics, economics, philosophy, and numerous others fields. Appendix A lists important foundational works in Literary Darwinism, particularly those with strong interdisciplinary or theoretical emphasis; Appendix B lists works of practical Darwinian criticism, materials featuring illustrative analyses of individual texts. These are selective surveys, intended to provide useful points of access to an internationally active, rapidly growing field of study.

## ***Section I: Bateman's Principle: Male Ardor and Female Reserve***

When choosing and pursuing mates, men and women invoke criteria and employ strategies that are only partially congruent. A difference in lifetime reproductive potential accounts in large part for the asymmetry: men are limited in the number of children they can sire chiefly by the number of women to whom they gain sexual access, whereas, women are limited by the physiological demands of ovulation, pregnancy, and lactation. Unlike men, women cannot increase their reproductive success simply by increasing the number of their sexual partners. Given the finite limits to the number of offspring potential mothers can conceive and bear, each reproductive effort is critical: the costs of poor mating decisions are much higher for women than for men (Buss 2003, pp. 19–20, 45). It proves adaptive, typically, for women to proceed circumspectly when choosing a mate, taking time to assess genetic quality, resource access, and character traits. Men, in contrast, can compensate for less selective mating choices by employing mating strategies that emphasize frequency, quantity, and variety. Bateman's principle sums up the implications of these fundamental sex differences: men tend to be sexually eager, often recklessly

so, while women tend to be sexually cautious (Buss 2003, p. 77). These divergent, sex-based tendencies exercise influence on all aspects of mating, from courtship to fidelity. Literary texts frequently focus on these differences, as well as on the inter-sexual conflict they precipitate.

Well-known poems by Andrew Marvell and Robert Herrick present the conflict between male ardor and female reserve from the male point of view. The speaker in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (1681) reproaches his beloved for her "coyness," albeit mockingly (line 2). Her reserve is slowing down the progress of his courtship, and the poem expresses his consequent frustration. Evidently she has been enforcing a careful and deliberate pace in their courtship. This is adaptive for her, as she takes time to assess his qualities as a partner, but it interferes with the quick access to a mating opportunity that would better serve his evolutionary interest. He attempts to increase the pace she finds comfortable by emphasizing the brevity of mortal existence: "Time's winged chariot" is "hurrying near," he warns her (line 31). If death is close at hand, it follows that there is no "time" for protracted courtship (line 1). Because of the woman's delaying tactics, he furthermore insists, they risk losing all opportunity to consummate their love. As he puts it, "the grave's a fine and private place/ But none, I think, do there embrace" (lines 30–31). With the humorously grotesque image of her "long preserved virginity" yielding only to the "worms" that will penetrate her decaying corpse, the speaker underlines the futility of prolonged hesitation (lines 27–28).

It's worth noting that he does not offer as inducement any promises of long-term commitment; he emphasizes instead the gratification of proximal impulses, i.e., "all [his] lust" (line 30). Like "amorous birds of prey," he tells his beloved, they should "devour" the pleasures of their intimacy all at once (line 38):

Let us roll all our strength and all  
Our sweetness up into one ball  
And tear our pleasures with rough strife  
Through the iron gates of life. (lines 41–44).

This final set of images emphasizes immediacy, invoking a *let's have it all right now and never mind the future* spirit. Instead of appealing to female interests by depicting a future of mutual fidelity, the speaker concentrates on the fulfillment of distinctly masculine desires. The goal of deriving maximum enjoyment from one brief but gloriously satisfying expenditure of sexual energy is not calculated to appeal to a woman's point of view. She is not likely to embark upon a sexual encounter, however potentially pleasurable, if afterwards she might find herself pregnant with no committed partner, no dependable access to resources. Marvell's speaker presents an unapologetically masculine perspective on courtship and mating, and readers sense that he is, at least to some extent, inviting mockery of male eagerness. His failure to present arguments against "coyness" that a female addressee might find seriously persuasive, together with his hyperbolic evocations of tombs and worms, suggests that his plea is tongue-in-cheek. The poem is a vehicle for a fantasy of male wish-fulfillment, allowing him to imagine the pleasures of immediate gratification if only he could infect his beloved with masculine haste and eliminate the strategic interference her reticence represents.

Like Marvell's poem, Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" (1646) seeks to undermine female reserve by emphasizing the rapid passage of time. The speaker presents himself as an avuncular advisor rather than a suitor. He speaks to all young women, with ostensibly disinterested purpose. He counsels them to "use [their] time" properly and choose mates without undue hesitation, since those who "tarry" past "their prime" likely will be doomed to spinsterhood (lines 13, 15). Thus he reminds young girls that markers of female fertility—youth and beauty—peak early in adulthood, declining thereafter: "that age is best which is the first" (line 9). He attempts to foil the female inclination to court slowly—that is, to compare the potential advantages of various mating options before making a selection—by instilling a sense of urgency. Like the rosebuds to which he compares them, the girls are losing the first freshness of youth, and he exaggerates the rapidity of that aging process: time is not merely passing, it is "a-flying" (line 2). Taunting the girls with the transience of their physical loveliness, he indicates that remaining "forever" unmated is the just fate of those exercising selective caution (line 16).

That his audience might need his warning seems unlikely: every young woman is aware (although perhaps not consciously) that she is balancing a limited period of fertility against the need to choose wisely before committing her reproductive resources. In counseling more speed and less care in the female selection process, Herrick's speaker is promoting his own interests. He stands to benefit if his advice creates a less reserved, less choosy population of young girls. Reduced to its essential message, the poem attempts to frighten girls into behavior that would serve male evolutionary interests more than their own. Almost certainly, as the speaker seems aware, his efforts to modify female mating strategies are unlikely to succeed: the poem is playful in tone and intention. The poet-speaker appears to be offering his counsel as a tactical move in the eternal mating game, a competition in which members of each sex seek to foster their own advantage. Lyric poetry provides him with a culturally acceptable, appealingly aesthetic framework for presenting his only half-serious, transparently selfish propositions.

## ***Section II: Mate Selection and Courtship***

The mechanisms motivating male ardency and female reserve also guide preferences for mate selection and courtship styles more generally. Men who secure a relative abundance of female reproductive resources leave the largest genetic legacy; a potential partner's probable fertility is a *sine qua non*, therefore, in male choice. In seeking mates, men are alert to signs of fertility—most obviously, to health and youth. Research suggests that female beauty is largely defined by these qualities: a waist-hip ratio consistent with fecundity, childbearing, and lactation, together with the hair color, skin tone, and physical vitality associated with young adulthood, comprise crucial components, cross-culturally, of female attractiveness (Buss 2003, pp. 50–58). It is easy to see why Edgar Allan Poe declares in "The Philosophy of Composition" that "the death of a beautiful woman" is the "most poetical topic

in the world" (1846, p. 1621). The physiological and temporal costs of female reproduction, from large eggs to gestation and lactation, render women the limiting resource in human reproduction: female fertility is precious. The death of a "beautiful" woman, that is, a young and fertile woman whose residual reproductive potential still encompasses many years, is poignant because it represents the loss of this resource precisely at its moment of greatest value. Such loss is a topic calculated to evoke aesthetic and emotional intensity.

In literature, as in life, we observe a strong male tendency to focus on the physical attributes of potential mates. Other criteria also come into play, particularly in the context of long-term commitment—intelligence, empathy, humor, compatibility, for example—but these play a secondary role in comparison with fertility. When the scholarly Roger Chillingworth from *The Scarlet Letter* seeks to marry "in the autumn of [his] days" and "already in decay," he does not select a middle-aged lady who shares his intellectual interests; despite his "misshapen" torso and small stature, he chooses the "budding" Hester, whose "youth and beauty" constitute significant appeal for him (Hawthorne 1850, p. 1392, 1445). In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the "ugly and learned" Reverend Casaubon, a "dried bookworm towards fifty," whose face is disfigured by "two white moles with hairs on them," similarly selects the youthful, lovely Dorothea Brooke as his wife (1871–1872, p. 35, 17, 15). Gilbert and Sullivan stage a farcical version of this mate selection pattern in *The Mikado* (1885). This comic opera opens with preparations for a marriage between the nubile Yum-Yum, only just out of school, and Ko-Ko, her middle-aged and physically unprepossessing guardian. In all these cases, the markers of fertility evident in the much younger woman's figure and face override considerations of compatibility.

Sonnets by Petrarch, Spenser, and countless other male poets' lavish praise upon female bodily beauty: bright eyes, rosy cheeks, full lips, glossy hair, full bosom, narrow waist, and rounded buttocks all are celebrated, along with grace and ease of movement. Literary narratives of mate quests likewise reflect these male preferences. Sickly female characters typically are not successful in attracting suitors, even when they display other valued qualities such as status, wealth, intelligence, or kindness. Young Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, slightly "crippled" physically and "a little peculiar" in personality, is unable to attract the eligible "gentleman callers" her mother so desires for her (Williams 1945, scene 1). Miss Anne De Bourgh, Darcy's sickly cousin in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, likewise fails to win suitors. Her mate selection standards (and her mother's on her behalf) arguably are too high, but she is a conspicuously wealthy, upper-class young lady: one might anticipate that she would at least have the pleasure of refusing impecunious and ambitious men yearning to profit from her social status and material resources. In a community full of men seeking rich brides with substantial dowries, Anne nevertheless remains unsought: her defective health suggests all too strongly that she is reproductively unviable. Preferring Elizabeth Bennet to his invalid cousin, despite family pressures to wed Anne, Darcy finds himself drawn at the outset to Elizabeth's physical energy as well as to her vivacious personality. Her ability to walk several miles across uneven, muddy terrain wins masculine approval: he notes that

her “fine eyes” are “brightened by the exercise” (Austen 1813, p. 26). The “loveliness” attributed to Emma Woodhouse similarly is grounded in excellent health: she presents “the complete picture of grown-up health” (Austen 1816, p. 68).

In her 1925 novel, *The Mother's Recompense*, Edith Wharton presents an intriguing plot to underscore the robustness of male preferences. She introduces readers to a mother and daughter, Kate and Anne Clephane, who resemble each other to a remarkable degree. In the course of the narrative, the two love and are loved by the same man, Chris Fenno, whose age puts him approximately mid-way between them: he is 13 years younger than Kate, 10 years older than Anne. Engaging in a romance with the divorced Kate that lasted three or four years, when he is aged approximately 26 to 28, she approximately 39 to 41, Chris ends the affair—to Kate's intense disappointment. Not long thereafter he meets her 21 year-old, look-alike daughter Anne and instigates a serious courtship ending in engagement and marriage. This long-term commitment contrasts with his earlier decision to discard the middle-aged Kate, whose residual reproductive value rapidly is approaching zero. Indeed, given the absence of reliable contraception at the time, Kate's failure to become pregnant during the 3 years of their intense involvement provides a powerful signal of diminished fertility. The physical resemblance between mother and daughter, reaffirmed by at least one character who mistakes Anne for Kate, enables Wharton to come as close as possible to suggesting that the two women are almost indistinguishable. What would happen, she asks, if a man had to choose between *two versions of the same woman*, each representing a different stage of life? Age, she concludes, would be the deciding factor. A man will follow evolutionary self-interest by choosing the woman whose reproductive value is higher; this is a cruel inevitability. Chris is able to “love” Kate as much as Anne, evidently, and to value the personal qualities of both perhaps equally, but he makes his long-term mating commitment to the younger version of the pair. Wharton's narrative promotes empathy with the plight of aging women who must learn that potential partners will reject them in favor of the young and the fertile—even when the attractions offered by those younger rivals do not in other respects exceed their own.

Female courtship behavior is influenced in numerous ways by these critical male preferences (Buss 2003, p. 133). Women enhance bodily shape with corsets, bustles, and other undergarments or draping effects designed to suggest ideal waist-hip ratio (i.e., WHR). They employ cosmetics to improve the appearance of skin, disguise wrinkles, minimize complexion flaws, or enlarge the appearance of eyes. Literature repeatedly illustrates women's anxiety about their ability to attract men based on their physical traits: characters agonize over flaws, real or perceived, in their own appearance; they worry about comparisons between other women's looks and their own; they expend time and energy acquiring clothing and accessories; they lament the appearance of grey hair or wrinkles. Such preoccupations are often stereotyped and ridiculed: “a woman's dress, at least, is never done,” Thoreau derisively comments (1855, p. 1883). Just as often, however, women's obsessive interest in their outward appearance is presented sympathetically, as a realistic feminine concern. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton shows the beautiful Lily Bart's aghast reaction to the first indications of aging: “she was frightened by two little lines



near her mouth, faint flaws in the smooth curve of the cheek” (1905, p. 43). Lenina Crowne from *Brave New World*, attractive though she is, frets that a lover may find her “too plump” (Huxley 1932, p. 93). Elizabeth Bowen’s story “The Needle Case” sketches the plight of upper-class, impecunious girls whose chances to marry suitably are imperiled by deficiencies in wardrobe. The family estate no longer generates sufficient income to maintain itself (“this well of a house drank money”), and consequently, “its daughters were likely to wither” for want of ‘advantages’ (1934, p. 456). “Balked” by the inability to dress with sufficient allure, one sister voices her desperation to the seamstress hired to refurbish her shabby old gowns for the summer season: “I’ve got to look nice” (p. 456).

Women’s efforts to maximize their physical attractions are so extreme, at times, that they cross the boundary between enhancement and deception. Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* worries about her advancing age and takes obsessive interest in her looks: “you’ve got to be ... attractive,” she laments, “and I—I’m fading now! I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick” (Williams 1947, scene 5). She takes steps to conceal her age, particularly in the presence of Mitch, whom she has singled out as a potential husband: “I want to *deceive* him enough to make him—want me,” she explains (scene 5). She refuses to go out with him by daylight, and she covers the light bulb in her sister’s apartment with a “colored paper lantern” to ensure that he will see her only dimly illuminated (scene 3). Louisa May Alcott’s gothically inspired “Behind the Mask” speaks to this same theme. Alcott introduces a “haggard, worn woman” whose misleadingly youthful appearance is created by an astonishing array of artificial aids. Her “scanty locks” have been replaced by a wig of “long abundant braids”; her smile is augmented by “several pearly false teeth”; her cheeks are rouged “pink”; her scarred breast is concealed by an attractive gown (1866, p. 12). Such duplicitous self-presentation targets male fears that women may disguise their physical imperfections, particularly signs of aging, so successfully that they foil male reproductive agendas.

Duessa from *The Fairie Queen* is a still more horrifying agent of male fears, a female figure who misrepresents her bodily decay in order to captivate, exploit, and destroy men. With “forged beauty,” Duessa seeks to win lovers by means of “guile” and “hellish science” (Spenser 1596, 36, line 1; 28, lines 3, 4). Seen in her true form, she is “a filthy foule old woman,” repulsive to men: “euer to haue toucht her, I did deadly rew” (40, line 9). Her reproductive organs in particular (“neather partes”), are described as “hideous,” “misshapen, monstrous” (41, lines 1, 3). Here, an older woman who succeeds in creating a false impression of youth is associated with moral and spiritual evil; she is a sorceress wielding wicked powers. Such a character triggers evolutionarily based male anxieties. Since female fertility is the key to men’s genetic legacy, any tactics that trick men into choosing post-reproductive women as long-term mates represent deadly danger, threatening a duped man’s hope of biological continuity.

Just as men focus for evolutionarily sound reasons on fertility when selecting a mate, women focus on resources (Buss 2003, p. 22). Given men’s typically life-long production of sperm, women do not need to worry much about a potential mate’s ability to impregnate. They are concerned instead with an access to critical material

assets, such as food and shelter, which will enable them to survive pregnancy and raise offspring through infancy and early childhood. Women seek partners who have resources on hand and who possess, in addition, character traits associated with the ability to manage existing resources wisely and to obtain more over time. Various kinds of competencies, depending on physical and social environmental context, may prove relevant to the mate quest; typically women judge that men with flexible intelligence, persevering ambition, and income-generating education or skills will make suitable mates. Social dominance also is associated with the ability to command resources and thus enhances a man's attractiveness to women (Buss 2003, pp. 23–35).

As frequently as literature documents and sometimes satirizes male emphasis on women's physical attributes, it illustrates and sometimes mocks the equally conspicuous female demand for plentiful resources. Dorothy Parker, for instance, pokes fun at the avaricious inclinations of her own sex in a poem. The speaker laments men's tendency to woo women with romantic offerings—"one perfect rose"—in place of more substantial courtship gifts such as "one perfect limousine" ("One Perfect Rose," 1944, lines 4, 10). As Jane Austen wryly observes, "it is a truth universally acknowledged" that unmarried women strive mightily to attract the attention of "a single man in possession of a good fortune" (1813, p. 1). Even before she has met the two Bertram boys, Mary Crawford from *Mansfield Park* feels a "presentiment that she should like the eldest best," since it is he who will inherit a title and large estate (Austen 1814, p. 80). Trying desperately to find husbands for her five daughters, Mrs. Allaby from *The Way of All Flesh* is happy to snatch at the "second son" of a man so rich that even a younger son "should have something very comfortable" (Butler 1903, p. 70). The appearance of wealthy young Percy Gryce in upper-crust New York social circles is greeted with great enthusiasm by marriageable girls and their mothers in *The House of Mirth*. Even though he is socially insipid, personally dull, and a bit of a Mama's boy, altogether lacking in traits suggestive of dominance, Percy is regarded as a highly desirable catch; his material resources are so enormous that they offset his personal deficiencies. Friends assist Lily Bart to win Percy's favor, even as they lament her probable fate with a husband so lacking in companionable appeal: "What an awful life you'll lead [with him]" (Wharton 1905, p. 72).

Male courtship tactics respond to women's preferences: when seeking to impress potential mates, men flaunt wealth or reputation—or both (Buss 2003, p. 99). Othello woos Desdemona with a classic display of male dominance, for example, describing confrontations with human enemies and natural disasters; his account includes fierce battles, "hairbreadth 'scapes," and adventures with "cannibals" (Shakespeare 1602, I, iii, lines 136, 143). His ability to triumph over "insolent foe" and "disastrous ... accidents" renders him desirable to Desdemona (lines 135–136, 137). Bold, brave, and persevering, he has demonstrated the physical prowess and mental toughness necessary to achieve high male ranking in this social environment. She loves him, Othello explains, "for the dangers" he has so gallantly surmounted and so effectively reported to her (line 167).



Taking an equally adaptive approach, Jay Gatsby targets the female concern with resources: in his courtship of Daisy Buchanan he commits himself to the accumulation and display of wealth. He spends years building a vast personal fortune, showcasing his success with conspicuous examples of material luxury: a European-style mansion, fancy cars, expensive clothing, and elaborate parties featuring “celebrated people” (Fitzgerald 1925, p. 90). He plans his reunion with Daisy carefully, ensuring that she will see his fantastically “huge” dwelling—and thus grasp the extent of his wealth—immediately. Taking her on a tour of his “Marie Antoinette music-rooms and Restoration salons,” the “period bedrooms” and “sunken baths,” he shows off his exquisite possessions in loving detail (pp. 90, 91). Moving deliberately from the exterior to the interior of his home, he ends the tour in his bedroom, tacitly inviting Daisy to associate his riches with sexuality and mating opportunities. He shows her his “toilet set of pure dull gold” and is delighted when she immediately begins to smooth her hair with his brush, a subtle sign that she is responding positively to this spectacular display of resources. The scene reaches its well-known climax when he piles his high-priced British shirts before her in “many-colored disarray”: the intimate extravagance of this “soft rich heap” of “beautiful shirts” moves Daisy to stormy tears (p. 92). Exhibiting magnificent apparel that has clothed his own body, Gatsby triggers an emotionally intense reaction that promises to lead, as it in fact does, to a romantically charged sexual affair.

### ***Section III: Mate Value and Competition for Mates***

Although fertility and resources—together with related attributes such as health, vigor, competence, status, or dominance—emerge as centrally important mate selection criteria for men and women, respectively, members of both sexes seek other qualities in long-term mates as well. Worldwide, as Buss has demonstrated, men and women value traits such as dependability, kindness, generosity, intelligence, honesty, humor, and social skills in their partners. They also value compatibility, as measured by shared interests and values and by similarity in social background and status (2003, pp. 35–38, 179–181, 210). The quest for a long-term mate requires individuals to assess their own qualities as well as those of potential mates. Since very few individuals possess every desirable feature in equal measure, it is necessary to weigh the importance of one quality against another, to decide whether evident deficits are sufficiently offset by other advantages. Plentiful resources may compensate for social ineptness; youthful beauty may compensate for a moody temperament; dependability may compensate for mediocre social status. When Ben Franklin discovers, for instance, that his perceived value is lower than he had imagined, “the Business of a Printer being generally thought a poor one,” he is forced to downgrade his demands for a dowry: “I was not to expect Money with a Wife, unless with such a one as I should not otherwise think agreeable” (*Autobiography* 1794, p. 56). A match is judged to be suitable, as Franklin implies, when both parties are satisfied that they have obtained a partner whose value, overall, equals or exceeds their own (Buss 2003, pp. 37–38).

In *The House of Mirth* (1905) Edith Wharton portrays two characters engaging in explicit discussions of their relative mate values. Simon Rosedale makes a proposal of marriage to Lily Bart that sounds very much like “a plain business” arrangement: he considers her genteel background and social skills equivalent in worth to his self-acquired fortune (p. 285). Combining his money and business know-how with her respectability and elegant social presence will give both of them, he suggests, exactly what they want in life. Unwilling to assess his mate value as high as her own, Lily refuses the *nouveau riche* outsider. Many months later, however, her reputation and finances have suffered severe blows; she has been dropped by most members of her social circle and disinherited by her aunt. She decides, in consequence, that marriage to Rosedale will solve her problems, and she informs him that she now is prepared to accept him as a husband. Due to her damaged reputation, however, she no longer can help him gain entrée into elite social circles, and her value to him as a potential wife has dropped decisively:

Last year I was wild to marry you, and you wouldn't look at me; this year—well, you appear to be wiling. Now, what has changed in the interval? Your situation, that's all. Then you thought you could do better; now—“You think you can?” broke from her ironically. “Why, yes, I do.” (p. 412).

Both participants in this conversation recognize marriage as an exchange of benefits, a partnership to which each person brings a variety of assets and seeks equivalent value.

Mistakes in assessing potential mates typically prove costly in terms of both individual and inclusive fitness; thus mating decisions are among the most important any individual makes in the course of a lifetime. At the same time, however, it is difficult to assess the complex constellation of traits presented by others, and even more difficult to assess one's own with accuracy. Theory of Mind plays a critical role in mate selection, both in penetrating the deliberate deceptions of others and in assessing the probable reactions of others to one's personality, reputation, and appearance. Hence, the conflicts central to literary plots frequently highlight the causes and consequences of mating mistakes. Dorothea Brooke and David Copperfield illustrate the painful results of inaccurate assessment, indicating that youthful inexperience can lead even intelligent people toward poor choices. Edward Casaubon lacks the noble qualities of mind and character Dorothea naively attributes to him: his scholarship proves to be mostly sham; he fears and repels emotional warmth; he is capable of mean-spirited jealousy (Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 1871–1872). Like Dorothea, David Copperfield discovers only after marriage the unsuitability of the partner he chose with unquestioning fervency: not only does Dora lack domestic skills and financial prudence, she is wholly unable to share his intellectual and creative interests (Dickens 1850). Both protagonists are released from their unsuitable marriages by the death of their spouses; relatively early in life, they are allowed by their creators to profit from their experience and select new mates from a more mature vantage point. These novels present the mating errors of these central characters with a mixture of exasperation and sympathy.

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