

**Saunders, Judith. 2018. *American Classics: Evolutionary Perspectives*.**

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William E. Cain

"This collection of essays," says Judith Saunders as she begins her new book, "offers evolutionary analysis of a dozen works from the American literary tradition. The aim is to create an interdisciplinary framework for examining key features of the chosen texts, offering an accessible introduction to Darwinian literary critical methodology in tandem with new insights into acknowledged classics" (x). Saunders fulfills this promise in an impressive way: *American Classics: Evolutionary Perspectives* is a very interesting and discerning study, cogently argued, well-written, propelled by Saunders's knowledge of theory and research in evolutionary biology, post-Darwin. She has made a noteworthy contribution to evolutionary criticism, and, more, generally, to our understanding of American literary and cultural history. *American Classics* also has important—and controversial—implications for scholarship and teaching, which I will comment on below.

*American Classics* includes an introduction and conclusion, and twelve chapters, six of which have been published elsewhere in earlier versions. The authors examined are Franklin, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, Twain, Wharton, Sherwood Anderson, Fitzgerald, Millay, Hemingway, Hurston, and Billy Collins. Nearly all of these chapters are rewarding and will advance discussion of the authors. I especially enjoyed and learned from Saunders's responses to Wharton, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway. I found her energetic investigation of the "male-centric environment" that Whitman creates in "Song of Myself" to be provocative too.

The sole exception to this level of insight and argument is the chapter on Collins. As a writer he is not as challenging and complex as the others whom Saunders considers, and she gives him only six hurried pages. To move her selection of authors into the present, Saunders would have done better to select a more intellectually formidable figure, such as Toni Morrison or Don DeLillo, and accordingly provided the same detail and depth of treatment she displays in her other chapters.

The introduction is brief, and I can imagine someone saying that Saunders should have opened the book with a more complete statement of her methodology, setting out the influences and contexts through which she has formed and developed it. But I think that the choice she makes to foreground the literary works, inspecting them closely, is effective: it makes her method feel organic, as if emerging from the novels, stories, and poems themselves.

In this respect, and to her credit, Saunders does not seem to be applying a method (as if from the outside) to a literary work—a maneuver that has been all too common since the heyday of deconstruction. It is also to Saunders's credit that she is attentive to the secondary sources dealing with her authors and texts. She is helpful, and illuminating, in demonstrating how her evolutionary-angled ideas bear on the topics that American literature scholars have delved into and debated about these authors, and she imparts to us new perspectives on them.

In her introduction, Saunders says: "A central premise throughout is that literary works reflect—and reflect upon—universal attributes



of an evolved human nature.” She continues: “From problem-solving to wish-fulfillment, art consistently reflects 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 consider, celebrate, question, deplore, and defy the forces constraining their existence” (x–xi). Drawing on evolutionary biology, Saunders contends that what we experience in literature is the representation of “universal human nature” (xii). She returns to this point, with a boost from a quote by Wallace Stevens, in the conclusion: “Evolutionary theory and research provide solid foundation for studying literary representations of any and every aspect of the human condition—physiological, emotional, and social—with special emphasis on the painfully perplexed, playfully inventive, self-scrutinizing and self-justifying activity of ‘the never-resting mind’” (262).

These are major claims, and Saunders succeeds through *American Classics* in making a compelling case on their behalf. But in a way this fine book is significant not only for what it does, but also for what it does not. There is no entry in the index for “identity.” Saunders uses the word itself, in this book of almost 300 pages, only a dozen times or so. Meanwhile, as we know, this is the term that at the present time is featured everywhere in academic books and articles and in college and university classrooms. The concept of human nature is regarded with suspicion: in fact, it has been this way for many years, which is the consequence of much work in literary theory, cultural critique, gender studies, and race and ethnicity studies. Identity is at the fore, and often in charged, polemical fashion.

One of Saunders’s chapters is devoted to Hurston’s “The Gilded Six-Bits” (1933). The story begins: “It was a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement that looked to the payroll of the G and G Fertilizer works for its support.” From the start, we are located in the midst of African American characters in an

African American community, in a text written by an African American author. Saunders pays no attention to the racial dimension of this text. You would barely glean from the chapter that Hurston and her narrative are African American in any way at all.

This sounds like I am making a negative judgment, but the striking thing about the chapter is that it is incisive just as it stands, as Saunders explores Hurston’s story from the point of view of evolutionary criticism. There are many other scholars who have focused on Hurston as an African American writer. Saunders is doing something else, and what she is doing is rewarding, and, I want to add, it is crucial as an intervention amid the identity-based inquiry that we have been embracing and perhaps overemphasizing in literary studies.

Identity, racial and ethnic identity in particular but other kinds—this is significant, yet there are other themes and issues that are significant too. We need and want to know who we are in our differences from one another—true enough. But the purpose of Saunders’s enterprise is to show us the sameness that we share. She is saying that we have a common human nature and can find connections to one another evocatively expressed in literary works. We therefore should study what makes us different, and, just as much and maybe more, we should study what makes us the same.

Saunders, for example, characterizes Ben Franklin’s autobiography as “the story of an individual, rooted in a specific time and place, wrestling with universal problems.” It is “a reflection of a particular time and place, and its author interprets his experience in light of values and assumptions shared by his contemporaries.” But the more crucial point, ultimately, is that Franklin’s book “shows an individual confronting adaptive problems that have characterized human life since Paleolithic times” (1, 21–22).

Others have made eloquent versions of this call for evolutionary literary criticism as a theory and interpretive practice—among them Joseph Carroll, Robert Storey, Brian Boyd, Bert



Bender, Nancy Easterlin, and Saunders herself in *Reading Edith Wharton Through a Darwinian Lens: Evolutionary Biological Issues in Her Fiction* (2009). But in *American Classics*, Saunders sets out, with special skill and distinction, an array of textual interpretations, close readings of American authors, a detailed series of model case studies that are stimulating and persuasive. She convinces me that her approach can make familiar literary texts feel new, reanimating them, impelling us to peruse and ponder them in a new light.

Yet I need to say still more about the challenges that Saunders and other scholars in evolutionary literary criticism will confront, that indeed they have been confronting for some time—the resistance, the opposition. I admire this book, as I have said, for its insistence on the primacy of a shared human nature. But I also know that many have disputed, and will forcefully dispute, any claims for an essential nature, for it implies to them that one kind of nature, represented by one group, is being made normative at the expense of other groups. They will perceive the arguments that Saunders makes to be ideologically conservative, even reactionary—the denial, the suppression, of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference. Which approach, difference or sameness, should we advocate for? Which is more urgent? Can we pursue both, or if we pursue one, must it be at the cost of the other?

These questions may complicatedly arise for readers when they are in the midst of Saunders's chapter on Thoreau. Invoking Edward O. Wilson and evolutionary biology, Saunders presents a penetrating account of this writer's "biophilia"—that humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. "Recognizing Thoreau's multifaceted engagement with nature as the expression of a human universal," Saunders states, "enables readers to probe the adaptive significance of his radical reassessment of human purpose" (37). She lays this out, in an argument that serves also as a celebration of Thoreau.

What is our response to this thesis about Thoreau? Sexual power and competition, mate selection and retention, male and female agency, sexual partnering, family, reproduction. Thoreau neglects all of this, as Saunders concedes: "He pays scant attention in *Walden* to mating and parenthood, issues generally regarded as central to human endeavor" (52). She maintains that in Thoreau's view, what matters is the life of "the planet as a whole," and hence any individual and any individual's familial and kinship lives matter very little (52–53). But to me Saunders here is failing to engage the mockery, scorn, and derision that Thoreau communicates about lives that are different from his own, choices that differ from those he adamantly has made for himself. He shows minimal sympathy for other people and little to no understanding of them. They exist for him not as persons with hearts, minds, and souls but, rather, as targets for social protest and condemnation.

Frequently it seems that Thoreau's fascination with and absorption in nature function for him as a machine for repression: this prevents him from entering into and dealing with dimensions of human experience that he does not know how to grasp or talk about. Thoreau, that is, opens himself to nature because he then will be empowered to detach himself from the wide world of human beings who seek relationships, marry, have sex, raise families, and labor to pay the rent and put food on the table. This world frightens Thoreau; he fears being in it and seeks protection from its pressures on his personality and temperament, its obligations. Thoreau does not have the mind of a novelist. He exhibits an extraordinary imagination in his books and journals when he scrutinizes and contemplates nature—it is a thrill then to read him. But Thoreau cannot deal with people. He is not imaginative or empathetic enough to consider how the choices that other people make might dramatize the limitations of his own.

Saunders is only able to write about Thoreau as she does by skimming past, not taking up,



his exclusions. Even as she bestows praise on him from her evolutionary critical perspective, she cordons him off from the terms, themes, and issues that she vividly and comprehensively describes in her chapters on Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Millay, and others. I am tempted to say that if Saunders actually interpreted Thoreau through the terms that she uses for her other authors, she would be led to see him suspiciously and evaluate him severely. It is conceivable that we should esteem Thoreau, but, if

obliged to make choices, should lower his rank in the American canon because, guided by evolutionary literary criticism, we perceive that he leaves out far too much.

It is a tribute to Saunders's achievement in *American Classics* that readers will be prompted to consider possibilities as bold as this. I look forward to the next stage of her research, and to the new directions in the field of evolutionary literary criticism that she is expertly helping to chart and explore.

