

# Research shows reading classic literature can improve personal ethics

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A team of researchers, including John Johnson, professor of psychology at Penn State DuBois, have discovered that literature may inspire readers to be ethical members of society. "As an evolutionary psychologist," said Johnson, "I am especially interested in the impact of literature on the emotions of the reader, and in what function these emotions serve."

Johnson and fellow psychologist, Dan Kruger from the University of Michigan, teamed up with English professors Joe Carroll from the University of Missouri and John Gottschall from Washington and Jefferson College to complete this research and draft an article on their findings. Their article, "Hierarchy in the Library: Egalitarian Dynamics in Victorian Novels," appeared in the December issue of *Evolutionary Psychology*.

Johnson said human nature is constantly expressed in literary works. Beneath the story line there are often subtle social messages. Concentrating on 19th century British novels, the team found that readers vicariously participate in a world that resembles the social dynamics of hunter-gatherer societies. The data confirms that the protagonists in these stories exhibit good morals and behavior, while the antagonists demonstrate status-seeking and dominant behavior. Johnson and his colleagues believe the classic good guy/bad guy tales appeal to readers in specific ways.

"We were not surprised to find that protagonists evoked feelings of

fondness and admiration, while protagonists aroused feelings of anger and contempt,” Johnson said. “But two deeper questions are, first, what is it about good guys and bad guys that stir up different feelings in the reader, and, second, what is the purpose of literature that arouses these feelings? Our data indicate that readers like protagonists because they have more mild-mannered personalities and are motivated by a desire to help others and build alliances. Antagonists, on the other hand, are disliked because they are more aggressive and are motivated by self-interest, by the acquisition of personal wealth, power, and prestige. We believe that the purpose of this kind of literature is to activate emotions that encourage people to engage in ethical behaviour in real life.”

To reach this conclusion, Johnson and his colleagues departed from traditional methods of literary studies and adopted a scientific approach. They gathered literary character ratings from more than 500 literary scholars, and tested specific hypotheses about Victorian novels.

Their article can be found at  
[www.epjournal.net/filestore/ep06715738.pdf](http://www.epjournal.net/filestore/ep06715738.pdf) .

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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