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The Darwinian world of the COVID-19 pandemic in Jodi Picoult's *Wish You Were Here*: An evolutionary perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to demonstrate how Jodi Picoult's *Wish You Were Here* (2021) exposes the conflict between humankind and the contagious COVID-19 virus within an evolutionary framework. Since the outset, the narrative is overwhelmed by Darwinian symbols and motifs; hence, it provides a Darwinist approach through which the events of the narrative are examined. Nevertheless, in this study "Darwinian" addresses not only Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection but also Brain Boyd's concept of evocriticism, a more contemporary manifestation of Darwin's evolutionary assumptions. Within the Darwinian worldview the narrative establishes, I argue that the struggle between human beings and the COVID-19 pandemic is an evolutionary struggle for existence in which only the fittest survives. To prove this premise, this study first introduces the Darwinian and evolutionary background the narrative reinforces, highlighting Darwin's theory of evolution and such emerging literary schools of literary Darwinism and evocriticism. Then, it explores how the narrative applies the same evolutionary notions to both the virus and characters by identifying how the virus tries to spread as fast as possible to ensure its survival and how characters, on the other hand, evolve adaptive behaviors to fight the pandemic. Most crucially, the study shows how Picoult evokes a more optimistic attitude toward the future of the pandemic. Finally, it illuminates the adaptive function of this piece of fiction stemming from its simulative ability.

Keywords: Darwinism, evocriticism, COVID-19 Pandemic, adaptation, Jodi Picoult

1. Introduction

In 1859, the English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882) identified the theory of biological evolution in his masterpiece, *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin (2009) refers to this book as "one long argument" (p.404) of "descent with modification" (p.418), affirming that individuals of species are susceptible to variation and competitive struggle. He points out that evolution occurs in consequence of natural selection, a process that emanates from two basic facts regarding the existence on the surface of the earth. First, living organisms are clearly variable; some of such variations must be inheritable. Secondly, owing to the infinite expansion in the number of descendants as well as the insufficient resources and food, every living organism must undertake a struggle for existence. The consequential procedure is identified by Darwin (2009) along these lines:

> Owing to this struggle for life, variations, however slight, and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to the individual of a species, in their infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to their physical conditions of life, will tend to the preservation of such individuals, and will generally be inherited by its offspring. The offspring, also, will thus have a better chance of surviving, for, of the many individuals of any species which are periodically born, but a small number can survive. I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term of Natural Selection, in order to mark its relation to man's power of selection. (p. 49)

Darwin (2009) asserts that natural selection helps the world become better adapted to its surroundings in due course, "as natural selection acts by competition, it adapts the inhabitants of each country only in relation to their co-inhabitants" (p. 414). In their struggle for life, living organisms that have genes best suited to their environment are more apt to survive because they are able to find food and resources, escape predators, and overcome viruses and illness. According to Darwin (2009), those organisms that have the tendency to be more adapted have the ability to reproduce and pass their genes on to their generation, whereas those that are less adapted to their environment may not be able to reproduce and survive. In other words, well-adapted beings are more apt to survive than their competitors who are in danger of extinction.

At times, one feels uncomfortable because of Darwin's hypotheses in which he describes how all living individuals pursue "one general law," that is to "multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die" (Darwin, 2009, p. 234). Accordingly, life appears to be an arena of "the survival of the fittest" (Spencer, 1898, p.467), a phrase first introduced by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer in his 1898 book, *Principles of Biology* and later employed by Darwin himself, by which the strongest and most adapted will typically weed out the weakest and worst adapted. On the other hand, Beer (2009) stresses that Darwin's assumptions show him as much a supporter of cooperation as of callous struggle and competition. Darwin (2009) confirms that he employs the notion "struggle for existence in a large and metaphorical sense" which considers living beings' dependency on one another as well as the ability to leave offspring (p. 50). To put it another way, "struggle" as a metaphor denotes multifaceted relationships of mutualism, cooperation, and reproduction.

In spite of the fact that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is still exceptionally applicable, it necessitates some sort of modification when eliminated from the raw natural setting and applied to literary texts. In recent decades, a small group of literary critics has expressed a renewed interest in how individuals have "evolved through an adaptive process by means of natural selection" (Carroll, 2016, p. 1103). They have exerted ambitious efforts to apply Darwin's theory to literary works in a more comprehensive approach by investigating Darwin's notable impact on literature and looking at Darwin's works as a piece of literature. These critics, affiliated with the evolutionary worldview, now constitute a movement in the sense that they integrate literature with evolutionary human science by looking for instances of behaviors within literature that coincide with predictions made by Darwin's theory of evolution as well as other evolutionary theories. They observe "how evolution has shaped human bodies, minds, and behavior; how culture has emerged out of nature; and how culture has equipped us to modify our behavior" (Boyd et al., 2010, p. 3). Moreover, they declare that they have the empirical tools to carry out scientific study of the interaction among writers, characters, audience, and literature itself. Phrases that are commonly employed to refer to this school include "biopoetics," "adaptationist literary study,"

"biocultural critique," "evolutionary literary study," and "literary Darwinism" (Carroll, 2018, p. 425). Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, Jonathan Gottschall, Gillian Beer, John Tooby, George Levine, and Nancy Easterlin are amongst the most prominent representatives of this school. Moreover, there are other intellectuals who have a great impact on this school such as the American biologist, E. O. Wilson, the evolutionary natural scientist, Richard Dawkins, and the cognitive psychologist, Steven Pinker.

The American professor Joseph Carroll is considered the pioneer of the field of literary Darwinism. In *Literary Darwinism*, he brings to light the promising field of literary Darwinism in which he stresses the significance of culture and society when applying natural selection to events outside of the natural world. Carroll (2004) asserts that "culture conditioning" has the upper hand in forming the behavior of human beings and forcing selective pressures that affect survival because "people in reality do not simply exemplify common, universal, patterns of behavior" (p.187). Further, he sees that emphatic criticism should pinpoint the connection between literature and biological evolution. In *Reading Human Nature*, Carroll (2011) summarizes this approach:

> To qualify as Darwinist, a reading would have to bring all its particular observations into line with basic evolutionary principles: survival, reproduction, kinship (inclusive fitness), basic social dynamics, and the reproductive cycle that gives shape to human life and organizes the most intimate relations of family. (p. 80)

Hence, Carroll as well as other Darwinist critics agree on a basic assumption, stemming from cognitive and evolutionary psychology, that literary texts are liable to genetic psychology and evolutionary science.

The most recent comprehensive approach for analyzing literature within the framework of Darwinian and evolutionary theory is developed by Brian Boyd in his influential 2009 text *On the Origin of Stories*, where he synthesizes all preceding evolutionary approaches, critically investigates them, and even criticizes some. Boyd's assumptions center around literary Darwinism but go beyond it to include all the disciplines influenced by evolutionary science including biology, neuroscience, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and anthropology. Thus, Boyd (2009) no longer refers to himself as a literary Darwinist but rather invents a new term,

"evocriticism" or evolutionary literary criticism (p. 385). Cooke (2011) comments, "Brian Boyd's new book is a major achievement for evolutionary criticism. It is a nearly comprehensive and quite convincing presentation of how natural selection can explain important features in all of the arts (and especially in narratives)" (p.305). Evocriticism focuses on two areas of concern; the first applies some concepts of Darwinian and evolutionary science to both art and literary texts. The second, however, clarifies how literature and art can be adaptive mechanisms that would be beneficial to one's own survival and achievement. Moreover, Boyd (2009) points out that evocriticism has the ability to:

> link literature with the whole of life, with other human activities and capacities, and their relation to those of other animals, as they compete, cooperate, and play, as they observe, understand, and empathize with others. It can reconnect literature with the whole range of human experience, and especially with what matters most in literature and life—and not just the features of life closest to animal existence. (pp.384-85)

Evocriticism calls attention to the correlation between what is stated or implied in a literary work and what is existent in real life, highlighting the connection between culture and biology, both of which have a great impact on the behavior and conduct of individuals. Evocriticism, further, integrates some notions of evolutionary psychology and biology with cultural studies to perceive the cohesive system that shapes people's manner and behavior in a more refined way. While the majority of the studies on literature almost rely on half the equation, employing culture to analyze whatsoever is related to humanity, and while various sciences have formerly overlooked cultural settings to center completely on chemical and biological analysis, evocriticism approaches both and brings them into play. As an approach to analyze literary texts, evocriticism is newfound and still being explored. It can be seen as a theory of the adaptive values of literary works as well as a method of analyzing and scanning literary texts.

To apply Darwinism and evocriticism to literature, Jodi Picoult's *Wish You Were Here* is examined in this study. As a matter of fact, numerous studies have been proposed to explore the impact of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection on literature. Among the most prominent studies is Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* (2009) in which she explains the origin, language, and metaphor of Darwin's evolutionary assumptions, and

their influence on the literary culture of the Victorian age in England. She pays particular attention to Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, whose works are shaped by Darwinian ideas. "Darwin in the Novels: Tolstoy's Evolving Literary Response" is another study conducted by Anna A. Berman in 2017 in which she argues that Tolstoy is, like his Victorian contemporaries, obsessed with Darwinian ideas in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Berman (2017) explores how the Darwinian thought is apparent in the themes as well as the narrative techniques of these two novels. Since the emergence of literary Darwinism school, further recent papers have been invoked to investigate the breadth of Darwin's impact on literature; amongst these studies is a paper entitled "Humanity Biologised: The Re-definition of Human Ethics in Ian McEwan's Enduring Love." This 2018 study applies Literary Darwinism to Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* and examines how the novel "re-defines human ethical qualities within a Darwinian framework" (Amjad et al., 2018, p. 154). Another recent study is conducted by Omid Hamedani in his 2020 paper entitled "Evolution and the Cognitive Function of Fictional Narrative: A Darwinian Perspective." In this paper, Hamedani (2020) discusses Boyd, Carroll, Gottschall, and Pinker's concepts of Darwinism to prove the cognitive features of literary fiction.

It is noteworthy that none of the previous studies has tackled the Darwinian influence on pandemic fiction. Additionally, because evocriticism is an emerging approach, few studies have applied this concept to literary works. This paper, however, comprehensively explores this approach, along with Darwin's theory of evolution, to highlight one of the most contemporary topics that is of great concern to the globe. The study is approached through the scopes of struggle, survival, and adaptation in an attempt to explain how Darwinism and evocriticism can explain the evolutionary conflict between humans and the COVID-19 pandemic as reflected in Picoul's *Wish You Were Here.*

The COVID-19 virus first emerged at the end of 2019 in Wuhan City in China. This city witnessed the outbreak of a mysterious and infectious disease characterized by pneumonia, sore throat, fever, running nose, and headache (Wu et al., 2020). The investigations expose that a novel coronavirus is the causative agent of such symptoms, which is subsequently named "Coronavirus Disease-2019" or "COVID- 19" (Wu *et al*., 2020, p. 217). Since then, COVID- 19 has speedily stretched around

the globe, leading the World Health Organization to officially classify it as a global pandemic. At that point in time, millions have been infected worldwide, and hundreds of thousands have passed away (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Most crucially, not all people exposed to COVID-19 are infected, and not all infected patients develop excessive inflammation. At first, scholars are confused over who are the fittest to survive; it is not inevitably the youngest, strongest or most athletic ones who are guaranteed to survive this pandemic. Consequently, they conclude that the fittest are those with "a specific adaptive immune response who are able to recover quickly without mounting severe respiratory illness, which can end one's life" (Shi et al., 2020, p. 1451). In *Wish You Were Here*, Picoult documents humankind's struggle for existence to overcome the pandemic. In the characters' interactions with the COVID-19 virus, one can observe the process of natural selection, as formulated by Darwin, plays out in the narrative. The virus is portrayed as the antagonist that controls the fate of all the characters in the novel. At the same time, the characters fall into two categories: the winners and the losers in the game of survival. The winners overcome the pandemic and stay alive, whereas the losers pass away.

2. Textual analysis

As a consequence of the COVID-19 virus that struck the world in 2020, various pandemic-related narratives come into focus because such texts may well perceive real-world pandemic events. Jodi Picoult's *Wish You Were Here* falls into the category of such works. Born in 1966 in New York, Picoult is known for "her interest in and passion for contemporary issues" (Hamilton & Jones, 2010, p. 317). Posing controversial societal issues and awareness of multiple global interests, Picoult becomes one of the *New York Times* best-seller authors. She is acknowledged for her "keen aptitude for exposing the complexities of individual existence" as well as her relevant, well-researched topics (Hamilton & Jones, 2010, p. 316). That is why her novels have gained such a popular interest that most of them are translated into many languages. Inspired by the worldwide spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, Picoult has made up her mind to write a novel that tackles the interactions between humankind and the pandemic. In November 2021, *Wish You Were Here* is published to be

classified among the most recent and popular COVID-19 pandemic novels.

Actively engaged with Darwin's theory of evolution and adaptation, Picoult starts *Wish You Were Here* with an epigraph that includes Leon C. Megginson's well-quoted speech about Darwinian evolution:

> According to Darwin's *Origin of Species,* it is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself. (Megginson, as cited in Picoult, 2021, p. 6)

The function of this initial paratext, as put by Genette (2001), is to control the entire interpretation of the book. Basically, Picoult wants to inform her readers about the theme of her narrative before reading it, allowing them to actively engage in interpreting and contextualizing the events of the novel as they read. Her direct reference to Megginson's extract clearly demonstrates that human beings who are able to survive are those who have the ability to successfully adjust to the changing environment in which they live. From the starting point, Darwinism has provided the readers with a plethora of insight into the characters' evolution, survival and adaptation during the pandemic. Darwinian concepts are, further, mentioned in another paratext at the end of the novel. In the "Author's Note," Picoult mentions that she is affected by Darwin's theory of evolution that "tells us that adaptation is how we survive" (Picoult, 2021, p. 285). Obviously, Darwinism provides Picoult with the theoretical perspective required to portray the conflict between humankind and the virus by reconsidering such notions of evolution and adaptation.

To begin with, the plot of the narrative runs parallel to Darwin's conception of evolution. There are some similarities in the novel that correspond with the theory of Darwin. The most essential analogy is the setting of the first part of the narrative, Galápagos. Galápagos is precisely the same island investigated by Darwin during his voyage of exploration around the world. Picoult purposely chooses it in order to allow her audience to link the island with Darwin and form a Darwinian worldview. The narrative follows the narrator Diana O' Toole to Isabela Island in the Galápagos, where she is stuck because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Diana's attitudes to life evolve in the Galápagos, a Darwinian universe,

where she is caught in human race experience over which she has no hegemony. Significantly, Picoult finds the Galápagos an appropriate symbol that allows her to introduce issues of evolution and adaptation to her readers.

Along the same line, Galápagos finches are another analogy in the narrative that associates with Darwin's ideas of evolution and adaptation. Darwin (2009) observes that nearby islands in the Galápagos have analogous but nonidentical groups of finches living on them. Further, he asserts that each finch species is better adapted to its surroundings and function. Some have powerful beaks adapted for eating hard large seeds, while others have small thin beaks for feeding on small insects and seeds, and still others have parrot-like beaks for eating fruits and buds. Diana's discussion of such observations with Gabriel Fernandez is relatively significant. She rehearses how Darwin has come to the Galápagos on the *HMS Beagle* and how the finches help him formulate his theory. She recalls, "by studying the variations in finches he developed his theory of natural selection: that species change to adapt to their circumstances—and that the adaptations which make life easier are the ones that stick" (Picoult, 2021, p. 100). Diana's exceptional interest in adaptation and evolution is here portrayed to relate to her obsession with Darwin's notions. Casting herself as an unbiased scientific scrutinizer, she calls attention to the Darwinist motifs in the novel quite rationally and plainly. From evocritical perspective, this helps readers "understand events in ways similar to but richer than those of other animals" (Boyd, 2009, p. 130). In other words, readers would be able to comprehend integral parts of Darwin's theorization and link it with the sequence of events in the narrative in a way that is pertinent to the experience of the characters as human beings. Like Galápagos finches, all characters in the novel try to adapt to the pandemic changing environment. Definitely, they develop an adaptive behavior so as to be fit to overcome the COVID-19 virus.

One further aspect of the narrative's parallel with Darwin's theory is Picoult's language of description which is derived from Darwin's. Picoult's observing narrator obsesses over the adaptive traits of some kinds of species; she contemplates "the hollow bones of birds, of the long

necks of giraffes [,] the changeable skin of leaf frogs, [and] the insects that disguise themselves as twigs" that enable them to "adapt in order to survive" (Picoult, 2021, p. 116). The Darwinian touch here is expressed by the description and well-designed language that shows Diana's contemplation of the adjustment of such species. Boyd (2009) stresses that "many aspects of language seem especially well designed not merely to represent events, but to move an audience to all sorts of possible, rapidly shifting, vantage points on events or circumstances" (p. 175). Picoult's language of description offers an important vantage point that highlights the Darwinian events in the narrative. Further, it exposes Picoult's extensive searching while writing the novel. She cleverly fuses the description of the adaptive characteristics of some species into the narrative, as explained by Darwin, in an appealing and accessible way to general readership. Such coherent language of description makes it easy for readers to better understand Darwin's theory of evolution and adaptation, which is significant in their interpretation of the events of the novel. Moreover, it reinforces their interest in the Darwinist theme in the narrative.

Emphasizing the Darwinian theory of natural selection, Picoult designs her narrative with the idea that the struggle between humans and viruses is a struggle of life. She pours her idea into the voice of Finn Colson who represents the physicians' "frustration, … exhaustion, and … determination not to let this damn virus win" (Picoult, 2021, p.286). Starting in March 2020, the narrative depicts the struggle for existence in the midst of the most terrible and critical environment in New York in particular and the whole world in general; it identifies the evolutionary conflict between human beings and COVID-19 that emerges under the guise of evolution by natural selection in which those who have advantageous traits have an opportunity to survive, while those who have unfavorable attributes are guaranteed extinction. On one hand, COVID-19 quickly adapts to attack people by evolving symptoms like sternutation and coughing that allow it to attack a new non-immune person. As a result, the virus begins to spread "like a storm that just won't ease up" (Picoult, 2021, p. 63). Hospitals are full of patients who are "unable to breathe" (Picoult, 2021, p. 63). They are about to "run out of beds" and

COVID-19 tests (Picoult, 2021, p. 64). Moreover, in order for the process of natural selection to occur, a variation within living organisms should be existent that pinpoints that some organisms are ill-suited to survive. In the Darwinian world of Picoult's novel, the socially underprivileged people carry this unfortunate trait. According to Finn:

> The hardest hit are Hispanics and Blacks. They're the essential workers, the ones who are in the grocery stores and mailrooms …, even cleaning the hospital rooms we're using. They take public transportation and they're exposed to the virus more frequently and there are often multiple generations living under one roof, so even if a teenage Uber Eats driver contracts Covid and doesn't show symptoms, he might be the one who kills his grandfather. (Picoult, 2021, p.70)

Along these lines, the economically disadvantaged suffer more from COVID-19 than the economically more prosperous people. Such lower-class citizens are not only more susceptible to the risk of infection, but also they are more liable to become sources of infection to more people in their communities.

On the other hand, the NYC government does its best to fight this pandemic battle showing numerous forms of evolutionary struggle that can be formed out of Darwin's concept of adaptation. At first, Picoult (2021) portrays how citizens exert collective efforts of evolutionary adaptation that allow them to appropriately react to weaken the spread of the pandemic. Boyd (2009) refers to evolutionary adaptation as a "feature of body, mind, or behavior that exists throughout a species and shows evidence of good *design* for a specific *function* or functions that will ultimately make a difference to the species' survival and reproductive success" (p. 80, emphasis in original). As soon as the medical crisis emerges in NYC, Picoult (2021) depicts how the government begins to instigate its citizens to make a number of cooperative acts including keeping a social distance, limiting large gatherings, washing hands, reducing face touching, wearing masks and using sanitizers. Such protective and adaptive behaviors come to be the new routine. Besides, borders are closed, "there are no flights out, and none in" (Picoult, 2021, p.104). Moreover, Picoult (2021) shows how the world cooperates with each other by sending aids such as beds and gloves to overcome the virus. Further, Finn demonstrates how scientists eagerly observe the evolution of the pandemic and almost change the treatment daily (Picoult, 2021). Boyd

(2009) refers to such solidarity and cooperative behavior as mutualism in which "individuals help one another merely as each pursues its own interest" during their adaptive response and struggle-for-existence phase (p. 54). Accordingly, within the Darwinian moral perspective of *Wish You Were Here*, people simply are "selfish cooperators," to employ Dawkins's term (1998, p. 210). Their mutualism or any cooperative behavior is just a rational option when it finally results in the continued existence of the self. To put it differently, human beings are provoked to behave according to what helps them move ahead in the struggle for survival while avoiding behaviors that threaten their existence.

As citizens are promoted by the evolutionary principles to cooperate and follow shared guidelines that guarantee their survival, their discriminative behavior against those who are detected to be in touch with the virus is justifiable. This behavior is called social stigma in which a person is negatively evaluated. Although stigma is a negative behavior, the Darwinian approach explains why individuals in a given society have shared values or preferences regarding who should be avoided. In the context of the narrative, physicians, foreigners and patients are highly stigmatized not basically because they are devaluated or have a contaminated identity, but rather because they are health risks that pose threat to one's survival. For example, when the waitress learns that Finn is a physician, she takes a step back and avoids dealing with him as if he is "one of those patients, alone in a room with nothing but stigma" (Picoult, 2021, p.73). Moreover, when Diana travels to Isabela Island, she is stigmatized as being "Maldita turista [damn tourist]" who intends to bring the virus to the island (Picoult, 2021, p.35). Furthermore, when one of Finn's patients, a nun, died of COVID-19, all priests apologize to come to perform the last rites because she can be a potential source of infection. What is more, Finn states that people consider those who have common flue as if they are "terrorist[s]" (Picoult, 2021, p.63). Accordingly, "evolution will favor" stigma "if it motivates adaptive behavior" that dictates survival (Boyd, 2009, p.205). Speaking from an evolutionary perspective, stigma is an adaptive behavior that results from the process of natural section.

While Darwin (2009) gives fair warning that "natural selection will not necessarily lead to absolute perfection" (p. 166), there is some kind of self-interest/empathy dichotomy in the narrative. Picoult's depiction of the conflict between empathy and self-interest that exists in the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients is clearly Darwinian. Natural environment is obviously amoral; living beings basically pursue survival by any available mechanisms that are ethically conflicting only when perceived through a human moral prism. Finn is caught in such ethical conflict as he blames himself for opting out one of his patients who is suspected of COVID-19. He laments, "instead of thinking of her health I was thinking of mine" (Picoult, 2021, p. 20). Boyd (2009) stresses that the main principle of evolution is the self-interest and selfishness instinct because "genes are 'selfish' only in the sense that they prosper according to what benefit them in successive reproductive rounds, and not necessarily according to what benefits the organisms in which they reside" (p.26). Finn's selfish gene and instinctual impulse drive him to abandon his patient care responsibility in order to ensure his own survival and advance his genetic fitness even at the expense of the survival of his patient.

On the other hand, the more Finn becomes familiar with the emerging threats of COVID-19, the more his emotional state evolves. Boyd (2009) comments, "as creatures began to act in more complex and flexible ways, nature evolved emotions to motivate better decisions" (p. 403). Based on Boyd's evocritical clarification, Finn's emotional state evolves through three stages. The first stage, which starts with the outbreak of the virus, is imbued with the defensive reaction of fear. Finn feels powerless to take any action because there is not much information accessible regarding the new virus. He fears of losing his own life, "I know I took an oath. Do no harm and all that. But I don't remember saying I'd kill myself to do it." (Picoult, 2021, p. 105). In the second stage, Finn experiences moral injury stemming from caring for patients with insufficient equipment, being helpless to give proper care to unwell patients, being compelled to reach decisions that influence the survival of patients, and working long hours (Picoult, 2021). Moreover, his feeling of guilt becomes intense after Diana's infection. He confesses to her, "I'm the reason you got sick" …

[because] some people are carriers and they never show symptoms. I work in a hospital … "I could have caught this at work or on the subway" (Picoult, 2021, p.188). In the third stage, his own approach to life begins to take another direction because the majority are infected even his beloved one. As "feelings evolved as a guide to behavior," (Boyd, 2009, p. 228) Finn experiences ethical recovery in which his reciprocal obligations towards his patients are perfectly met as Diana expresses while "I've been fighting for my life [,] Finn has been fighting for other people's" (Picoult, 2021, p. 216). The challenging environment of COVID-19 powerfully raises his empathy. Dawkins (2016) remarks that a morality-related evolution carries a great benefit to society:

> If you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to *teach* generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our selfish genes are up to, because we may at least have the chance to upset their designs, something that no other species has ever aspired to. (p. 3, emphasis in original)

Finn's behavior echoes Dawkins's words that self-interest is natural, while empathy is an acquired attribute.

The ultimate instance of a healthcare worker approaching COVID-19 patients in a very altruistic manner is the nurse who works with Finn in the hospital. Her altruism is conceivably the most obvious in the narrative, as Finn wonders:

> I realized that the nurse was still in that room, with all those airborne molecules of virus. She was stroking the patient's arm, and I saw her brush a tear from the man's cheek, even though he was fast asleep. She was talking to him, even though he was sedated and couldn't hear her … she was providing real, true patient care … She's the fucking hero. (Picoult, 2021, p. 45)

Right from the outset, the nurse shows no fear of passing away; she makes up her mind to abandon her instinct of self-interest to empathize with patients. Although her behavior may expose her to extinction, it could guarantee the survival of her patients. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin explains the evolution of altruistic conduct among human beings. At the personal level, this conduct is unfavorable because "he who was ready to sacrifice his life, as many a savage has been, rather than betray his comrades, would often leave no offspring to inherit his noble nature"

(p. 163). Darwin (1871) then attributes altruistic behavior to natural selection at the group level, asserting that when groups compete, the fittest group is the one that has the greatest number of men who are eager to collaborate and defend each other. Groups that consist only or primarily of self-centered people would be more susceptible to extinction than those who cooperate and show altruistic behavior. Along the same line, the nurse abandons her self-preserving instinct for the greater good of her patients.

In the struggle-for-existence terminology, patients develop survival mechanisms. People whose immunity can fight COVID-19 are less affected than those whose death is attributed to their unfitness. Diana is on the brink of losing the struggle for existence. She is badly infected by COVID-19 and has been ventilated for five days after which she is improved. This improvement is due to the emergence of particular immune response that is called antibodies. Boyd (2009) explains that the:

> Darwin machine [of] the human immune system … cannot predict exactly which pathogens individuals will happen to meet in their lifetimes, especially as bacteria and viruses evolve so fast, it *generates* a massive array of possible antibodies. Only when the environment tests positive, when antibodies meet pathogens they can fit and therefore disarm, are they selected for massive short-term *regeneration*. (p. 352, emphasis in original)

Picoult echoes Boyd's view, as evident in Diana who eventually generates antibodies that fight against the virus and start to get rid of that viral infection. She proudly claims, ""my veins must be full of antibodies … I'm basically a superhero"" (Picoult, 2021, p. 216). Feeling confident that her antibodies would protect her against the risk of re-infection, she visits COVID-19 patients.

Obviously, Diana's behavior appears to be paradoxical in a Darwinian world because visiting COVID-19 patients may expose her to re-infection; thereby threatening her survival and those who contact her. Although Finn warns her that her antibodies may not protect her against re-infection, she visits her Covid-positive mother while being unmasked, violating the moral code and pandemic global guidelines. As fighting COVID-19 necessitates large-scale cooperation that charges people to bear a personal cost to help others, Diana prioritizes her own over universal interest.

"Motivated by an evolved sense of outrage" that results from her "uncooperative act" (Boyd, 2021, p. 64), Finn quarrels with Diana and accuses her of being selfish, "you weren't thinking of about me … Because now I have to quarantine and get tested. How many patients am I not going to be able to take care of" (Picoult, 2021, p.268). The impact of evolutionary principles on this dialogue shows the moral dimension of the conflict. Diana's failure to cooperate is perceived by Finn as a deliberate choice. Being fit for survival in the Darwinian universe of COVID-19, she is no longer concerned about the risk of her own infection, and, at the same time, does not bear in mind the health of those who surround her. Boyd (2021) stresses that "conflicts arise from purposes not quite shared or even radically opposed, and the advantages of cooperation can always be exploited by those who accept the benefits without paying their share of the costs" (p. 101). In accordance with Boyd, Diana is a self-centered and socially-irresponsible whose antisocial behavior poses a great risk to her community. She may be unconscious of carrying the virus; however, she could be a source of infection. Conversely, Finn shows collective interest and pro-social behavior by adhering to protective measures. Considering the worst-case scenario, though it is indecisive, promotes his unselfish and health-responsible behaviors. His impulse to be quarantined and tested is augmented by community health influences more than by private health influences.

Picoult deftly portrays Diana's near-death experience which is evolutionary in various ways. She depicts how Diana's mind evolves through the process of natural selection to carry out definite adaptive functions. Being in a coma, Diana undergoes an out-of-body experience, "in which a person seems to be awake and sees his body and the world from a location outside his physical body" (Bünning & Blanke, 2005, p. 331). Diana's near-death experience prompts her mind to make rescue action to help her wake up from the comma as Boyd (2009) notes, "our minds, like every other organ, have surely evolved in response to specific problems" (p. 43). Above all, Wilson affirms that the brain should be scrutinized "as a machine assembled not to understand itself, but to survive" (Wilson, 1999, p. 105). As a survival tool, Diana's mind evolves by falling into a state of dissociation which helps her cope with the coma,

let alone a more successful life. Elaborating on the reason behind Diana's disassociation, Dr. DeSantos, Diana's therapist, comments, "What you keep referring to as another life … was a defense mechanism" (Picoult, 2021, p.236). Thus, Diana's defense mechanism against the infection poses a sort of advantage by enhancing her survival chance and promoting faith in the evolutionary human nature.

By the novel's end, Picoult adopts a more positive turn by evoking an optimistic attitude toward the future of the pandemic. Generally, Darwin's theory does not give a glimpse of an infinite design of contingency; the future is unforeseeable apart from being a forward movement towards well adaptation and survival. It is obvious that the sequel of the natural selection process will be advantageous to living organisms; otherwise, they are going to vanish. This is, in fact, the starting point of Darwin's assumption. Basically, Picoult portrays human beings as survivors who are capable of adapting to any sort of change. She comes to an end that the evolutionary struggle between the COVID-19 pandemic and humankind is settled in favor of human beings. The narrative closes in May 2023 when Diana gives promising details of the development of the pandemic:

> It took a while for the country to reopen, and even longer for the borders to do so. I had to gather the courage to take the smallest of steps: Eat inside a restaurant. Not freak out when I left my mask at home. Fly on a plane. (Picoult, 2021, p. 279)

In this way, one can perceive that the pandemic is eventually going to be a controllable matter.

Along with the evolutionary influence on the narrative, *Wish You Were Here* may serve adaptive functions to readers as well. From the standpoint of evocriticism, Boyd highlights the adaptive values of fictional narrative as it helps readers' mind forecast potential "scenarios testing possible courses of action and their consequences" (Boyd, 2009, p. 81). Picoult's representation of crucial real-life events such as the COVID-19 pandemic in her narrative has adaptive functions on readers who may develop mental simulation of the whole fictional world. This simulation gives readers both "information" and "experiences" that "*improve* [their] capacity to interpret events" (Boyd, 2009, p. 139, emphasis in original) to

be well prepared for the struggle in the real world thus guaranteeing their survival. Skilfully, Picoult is able to provide her readers with as much adaptive information-related COVID-19 virus as possible, which helps their "rapid understanding of real-life social situations, activating and maintaining this capacity at high intensity and low cost" (Boyd, 2009, p. 139). Moreover, through the characters' experiences, readers are able to predict how the pandemic stands in real life as "stories employ words and conventions, but long before most narrative conventions emerged, we evolved a capacity not only for reexperiencing the past in memory but also for flexibly reconfiguring it to offer concrete simulations of future situations" (Boyd, 2009, p. 157). *Wish You Were Here* creates a worldview for readers by juxtaposing their recalled past, experienced present, and projected future. Further, the optimistic mood that the narrative provides, in the end, creates an imaginative transference into a world free of Covid-19-related stress that may worry the audience in actual life and may therefore provide a tool to cope with the pandemic and its consequences. By looking at the bright side, readers' psychological well-being may be achieved.

3. Conclusion

Set in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic predicament, *Wish You Were Here* depicts, through a first-person narrator, humans' struggle against the COVID-19 virus. Yet, the purpose of this study is to shed light on the interaction between the fictional characters and the virus within Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection as well as Boyd's concept of evocriticism. Darwin's influence on Picoult is observable in the narrative which is structured on both principles and events that corroborate with Darwin's assumptions. The conflict between the COVID-19 virus and characters is depicted in this study as a manifestation of the evolutionary arms race that occurs as a consequence of natural selection. The study illustrates the evolutionary nature of COVID-19, the human behavior in responding to its danger, and the interpersonal relationships within the narrative. Moreover, it shows the adaptive mechanisms that help the characters ensure their survival during the outbreak of the pandemic. Likewise, poverty-stricken districts are depicted as the worst adapted in the Darwinian world of the narrative; thereby, the

most exposed to infection. The evolutionary approach is further elaborated in this study to explain why physicians, foreigners, and patients in the novel are exposed to the process of stigmatization. Additionally, the study shows to what extent the environment inside NYC hospitals poses an immense challenge for the healthcare professionals working there as their Darwinian nature oscillates between self-interest and empathy. What is more, the paper points out how Picoult depicts the protagonist's near-death experience in an evolutionary fashion, offering a more promising future in which human beings are the fittest to overcome the pandemic. Finally, it supports Boyd's belief that narrative could serve adaptive functions by running lifelike simulations of the Covid-19 pandemic experience and preparing for real-world actions. Readers, thereby, are able to perceive the real-life experience of the current pandemic.

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