

World Literature II

Charles Darwin

It may be helpful to understand as you begin reading Darwin that the prevailing view of living species in the 19th century was -- as it had been since the Middle Ages -- one based on the *scala natura* or the "Great Chain of Being." According to this ancient model of the universe, all things were created by God in ascending order of excellence: lowest on the scale were inanimate things (minerals, stones, etc.); above these were the plants; next came the animals, then human beings, followed by angels; God the Creator -- Himself Uncreated -- was at the very top of the Chain. Each species was, according to this model, separately created and defined by a fixed essence that characterizes all individuals of that species. The Chain of Being was static: species did not develop or intermix, nor did they disappear. In the 19th-century, proponents of "Natural Theology" (most famously expounded by a clergyman named William Paley) asserted that each species is perfectly adapted to its environment, and that the study of these adaptations reveals God's purposeful design at work in nature; indeed, Natural Theology went so far as to argue that belief in God could be founded upon study of nature (aside from any revelation such as that provided by scripture). Clearly, Darwin's theories of natural selection and evolution fly in the face of such a system.

Note, too, as you read, that Darwin does not refer to *evolution* in *The Origin of Species* until the very end of the book (when he used the word "evolved"). The concept is implied in his discussion of the "struggle for life" and "natural selection," but it is not directly defined.

Other questions to ponder as you work on the reading assignment:

1. How do Darwin's "incipient species" (varieties) become species? Summarize Darwin's theory.
2. What is Darwin's definition of the "struggle for life"? What is his evidence that such a struggle characterizes the relationships among living beings on earth? Is natural selection always an *individual* struggle for existence?
3. Is natural selection purely a matter of chance? How are random and non-random factors combined in the process of natural selection?
4. What is the net result of natural selection?

Discussion Questions: Darwin's *Descent of Man*

1. Describe some of the evidence Darwin offers to demonstrate his claim that man has descended from a lower form. Do you think his examples are compelling? Explain.
2. What is the significance of Darwin's observation that humans, like animals, are sometimes covered with hair?
3. Darwin discusses the principle of correlation and the effect that it has had on his thinking about evolution. What is it and how has it changed his thinking since writing *The Origin of Species*? What is the significance of these changes in his thinking?
4. How does Darwin construct his argument that "there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental facilities"? What assumptions does he make in his argument?
5. Darwin refers to Man as "the wonder and glory of the Universe." Do you find this statement consistent with the rest of his writings in *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*? Why or why not?
6. In the conclusion to *The Descent of Man* Darwin discusses differences between the two sexes and his theory of sexual selection. He writes (for example), "Hence in most cases the young of both sexes resemble each other; and the female somewhat resembles her young offspring throughout life". He goes on to describe the role of female passivity in sexual selection. Given that these two statements seem to reflect common social attitudes about gender roles, does this weaken his overall argument for you? Why or why not?
7. In his conclusion, Darwin encourages his readers to be conscious of their active participation in the "advancement of the welfare of mankind", alluding to Malthusian ideas of overpopulation and poverty. Yet, he has some reservations about this practice. Why? How does this relate to his theory of evolution and the racism, classism, and able-ism that surfaces in his writing?