

# Influence of darwin's "origin of species" on literature



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Charles Darwin is known for his profound influence of the study of evolution. However, his contributions to 19th century society go beyond his scientific theories; it is undeniable that Darwin affected what writers wrote about life and what critics wrote about literature. During his famous voyage on the Beagle, Darwin concluded that the physical world had been and still was subject to continuous change through the action of natural forces, and that man is the product of these forces. No book has so profoundly affected the modern view of man as Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (1859).

An intellectual ferment caused by evolutionary theory presented in *The Origin of Species* during mid- and late Victorian England led to an ongoing controversy over religion and science. While some hailed the revelation Darwin's book explored, many resented it. It cast doubts on the traditional beliefs of the origin of life, essentially eradicated the need of a God, which was seen by some as ground-breaking and by others as blasphemous and unacceptable. He caused a sensation by refuting divine origin of man and suggesting man was a highly advanced and developed descendant of apes. Darwin shifted the teleological pattern of evolutionary theories, refusing to accept the orthodox views which was blindly followed by so many. According to him, we live in a sinister world where everybody fights each other as an incessant struggle for survival; later this concept was coined as survival of the fittest by Herbert Spencer. He thereby undermined the value of traditional religion and mortality which had been guiding mankind for centuries, revolutionizing mankind's perception of himself. Hence, his work brought about prompted a sharp reorientation of philosophical and moral attitudes.

As mentioned earlier, such work does not only interest scientists, but any intellectual thinker in society. For many late Victorians, the traditional teleological interpretation of the world lost its sense. Darwin's theories threw religion and science into open conflict in the nineteenth century. *Origin of Species* appealed to eminent scientists, such as the biologist Thomas Henry Huxley, the botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker and to several prominent novelists and poets. As a result, many Victorian writers dramatically modified their opinions about man's origins and the physical aspect of man's existence. The idea of evolution was the main element of Darwin's theory. He dedicated three chapters of his work to it, that is: "Struggle of Existence," "Natural Selection; or the Survival of the Fittest," and "The Laws of Variation." Several Victorian writers who were supporters of Darwin's work used his ideas to portray the behavior of their protagonists, writers such as Thomas Hardy, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Thomas Huxley and George Eliot and dealt with Darwin's ideas from the scientific point of view. Each of them responded to a different aspect of Darwin's work.

It was George Eliot who gave most importance to human relations regarding ideas presented in *The Origin of Species*. Publication of Eliot's novels brought new light to the Victorian novel. She not only moved into human thought by analyzing human behavior but also added modern theories to her writing. Her novels were not written to entertain but to raise uncertainty in the reader. The reader was to be presented with moral and religious inquiries and no certain answers. Her book *Middlemarch* is regarded by some as an exemplification of the ideas of social Darwinism. The main themes in the

novel all bear traces of influence of Darwin's work, most prominently the question of origin.

Thomas Hardy focused on the themes of man and nature inspired by Darwin's biologism; in fact, Hardy showed that man is the only animal for whom existence is a problem that he has to solve by his own choice and from which he cannot escape. Hardy uses Darwin when creating his universe, where chance reigns and nature is a central focus. According to Darwin, as species change through generations, so do behaviors, stratifications, and classifications. No civilization or system can last forever. There is no permanency, and no perfection, because change will continue indefinitely, and not always in a positive progression. This idea violated the Victorian ethos of self-determination and man's supremacy, and the theme is central to Thomas Hardy's understanding of human society. As his character's progress through the novel, they are thwarted both by those unaffected by change, and by their own role in the progression. This is seen in his novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, which depict a ruthless Darwinian world in which protagonists fail to survive because they cannot adapt to the changing social environment. As Hardy creates characters that are natural, and subject to change, he uses animal/human behavior characterizations from Darwin to define his protagonists as creatures of instinct.

H. G Wells took Darwin-inspired fiction in a completely different direction. The fact that we are bound by the same natural laws and processes as the rest of nature led Wells to speculate about the implications of Darwinism for the future of humanity. In *The War of the Worlds* (1898), he explores the

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prospect of human extinction, resulting from a conflict with a more advanced Martian race. These Martians represent the realization that the 'higher' aesthetic and moral characteristics on which humanity prides itself are of only limited value in the struggle for life. Wells makes the same point in his earlier futuristic novella, *The Time Machine* (1895), in which the Time Traveller, transported to the year 802,701, discovers a new race of humans called the Eloi who are beautiful and childlike. Wells' science fiction is as much about class politics as it is about science, but it is underlined by a Darwinian understanding of evolution as the branching of the tree of life, driven by competition and survival instincts. Similar futuristic speculations were continued in a geopolitical context by Olaf Stapledon, whose extraordinary future history *Last and First Men* (1930) reaches two billion years into the future, tracing humanity's evolution through no fewer than fifteen transformations into new species.