

The Origin Short Guide

The Origin by Irving Stone

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Characters

Stone helps to demythologize the great naturalist and thus make him more accessible to the reader by presenting him within the circle of brilliant scientists of nineteenth-century England such as Charles Lyell, Joseph Hooker, Thomas Huxley, and Alfred Wallace. While presenting these learned men in terms a twentieth century reader can understand, Stone evokes Darwin's character, making him warmly, humanly appealing as well as possessing characteristics of a genius.

Stone captures Darwin's exterior defenses, the socially retiring modesty which his visitors often took as genuine simplicity; his private life is also illuminated as the biographer presents a man devotedly loved and nursed by a loving wife who feels the strain of her husband's work.

As various critics point out, Darwin, a man full of contradictions, was not an easy fellow to capture. He was a gregarious recluse; an energetic in valid; modest yet eager for scientific immortality; meticulous over observation and fact, yet hesitant to publish or to acknowledge his mentors and predecessors. Perhaps the key to capturing this paradox lay in Stone's sensibilities about him. The biographer rejected prior diagnosis of eye strain, of an "inherited peculiarity of the nervous system," of an unconscious desire to kill his father (transferred to an attempt on "the Heavenly Father") and of an infection of the protozoan *Trypanosoma cruzi* which causes Chaga's disease. He decided, instead, in favor of chronic overwork and severe anxiety, induced by an understandable apprehension of the probable effects of altering mankind's perception of itself.

Because the reader can identify more readily with this latter choice, Stone is successful in placing Darwin within the reader's grasp and allowing the causes of these contradictions to be at once clear and, although not always understandable, at least acceptable.

Social Concerns/Themes

The Origin, the principal character of which is Charles Darwin, is biohistory writing on a grand scale. Darwin, by proving that the only constant force in nature is change, caused theorists to question if the world was created by a single, instantaneous act of God, or by a series of acts each time the creator changed his mind. The drama of The Origin is that Darwin, for years after his world-circling voyage on the Beagle, developed a theory about the origin of species, their development and differentiation through processes of natural selection and survival of the fittest. In time he came to believe that man was included in the ascent through the same kinds of evolutionary processes. The release of this information in "The Evolution of the Species" caused an uproar around the world.

Darwin's overpowering research was made over a period of years and, in The Origin, Stone develops a manner through which he made much of this information available to the public.

Utilizing the great minds of the naturalist's time and exploring their effect upon Darwin's ultimate theories, Stone sets out to paint a picture that is more than a portrait of a scientific genius. It is also a panorama of the intellectual landscape of his time.

Techniques

According to some critics, Stone has been remarkably restrained both in his choice of title for this massive novel, and in the selection and presentation of its contents. They believe that he successfully joined together the three genres of biography, history and fiction and solved the problem of crossbreeding through his lucid narrator, the structure of the novel, and the handling of details.

The structure of the novel is built to introduce the reader first to Darwin, the fact-finder and scientist, then later to Darwin, the family man. In the first section of the novel, Stone describes Darwin's off-shore and on-shore experiences on a surveying trip to South America. Describing the journey in lavish detail, he gives proper emphasis to the visits that young Darwin took to the Galapagos Islands and the data he found there which ultimately sowed the seed for "The Origin of Species."

(Stone even furnishes a clear map of the voyage for the reader's benefit.)

The reader is able to understand how the trip trained the potential scientist's mind, building onto his love of science habits of concentrated attention, observation, fidelity to nature, and patient induction through long, hard, and solitary work. When he returns from the Beagle voyage, he is armed with bits and pieces of natural history and the desire to resolve their puzzle.

The second section involves Darwin's family, scientific associates, study, writing, and his long struggle with delicate health. Stone explores Darwin's thinking as it developed from doubts about fixity of species to convictions of some theory of organic descent, to the development of a coherent theory of selection (with the help of Molnius' work). Each step is logical and consistent. Then, five years after the voyage, Stone settles Darwin into the life of a happy husband and successful author-naturalist, before precipitating (and finally weathering) a storm of controversy with his outrageous theory of evolution.

A few critics say that Stone's objective to characterize Darwin gets lost as he concentrates on detail in the "multitudinously different minutiae of the external world." They point to a few errors: There are no lions in South Africa and the "stinkhorn mushroom" is not a mushroom at all but a toadstool. Some critics object to the "lists" Stone uses to categorize various sections of his information in the novel.

Others say he has a fussy gathering of historical detail and instead of breathing life into his characters, he stores them away in a museum. Nevertheless, The Origin has much to offer a twentieth-century reader who wishes to learn about the man who changed the theory of "the origin of man," perhaps forever.

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