Evolution and Victorian Literature

Questions to Consider

• In general, what was the impact of 19th-century scientific developments on Victorian literature?
• How is the specific idea of evolution an important influence on Victorian literature?
• How did Darwin's contributions to evolutionary thought influence Victorian literature?

Essay

How did Darwin's contributions to evolutionary thought influence Victorian literature?

Evolution is Charles Darwin's theory about how species are all interrelated and have evolved or adapted from common ancestors. It also includes natural selection and survival of the fittest that certain traits or characteristics that are favorable to one's environment will endure, whereas those who don't help it survive will die out. Evolution suggests that the world is in a constant change and emphasizes scientific discovery over God's intervention and creation. During the Victorian period, writers struggled to maintain their religious conviction in the face of new scientific discovery. For some writers, this was possible. For Tennyson, he kept his religious faith. For example in Lyric 55 in "In Memoriam", he writes that nature is evil when he says "50 seeds and only 1 to bear." This describes nature's struggle with death and competition (or survival of the fittest). Tennyson had religious doubt throughout his life, and he believed it was better to doubt and question things. While he kept his religious faith, he did not fiercely reject evolution, but rather found it a subject for constant thought and discussion.