Unit focus: Evolution
Text focus: Biography (960L)

STAGE 6

Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin was born on the 12th of February 1809. He is most famous for being the English naturalist who first suggested the idea of natural selection.

As a child, Darwin was a disappointment to his father. He regularly failed to engage at school. His father famously wrote, “You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family.”

Part of the problem was Darwin’s love for natural history. However, to appease his father, he attempted to study medicine at Edinburgh University. He tried his hardest but was far too squeamish for the bloody nature of the course. After that, he tried his hand at studying law but left after he found it dull. In the end, he left university with a degree in divinity from Cambridge.

From there, the natural course of action would have been for Darwin to take up a position as a vicar in a small village somewhere. In fact, that was what Darwin seemed set to do before an offer came along that would change his life. Robert FitzRoy was the young captain of a ship named the HMS Beagle. The boat was a research vessel, and Darwin was offered the chance to join them on their next voyage. He was unpaid and was mainly there to keep the captain company.

Aside from entertaining the captain, Darwin had another benefit to the ship. FitzRoy was determined to find evidence around the world that the Bible’s story of God creating the world was true. Darwin’s degree in divinity made him the perfect choice to help with this. In the end, this proved to be a very ironic decision.

The voyage on the Beagle lasted from 1831 to 1836. During that time, Darwin was able to collect enough scientific specimens to make him a celebrity when he returned and to keep him busy until he died. He uncovered fossils, survived natural disasters and discovered new species.

Some people often confuse Darwin with coming up with the idea of evolution. He didn’t. The idea of evolution was already well-known by the time he set foot on the Beagle.

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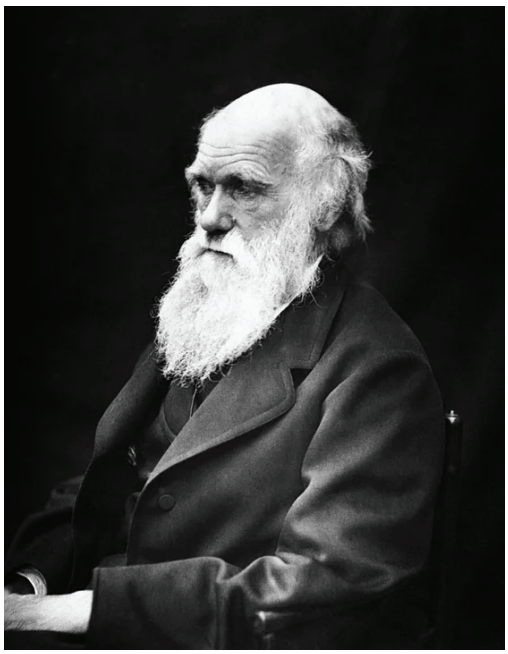
What Darwin did was to realise that animals with a specific advantage - a bigger beak, sharper teeth, faster speed etc. - were more likely to be successful and live longer and, more importantly, pass the same trait on to their offspring. In other words, it was “survival of the fittest”, although Darwin didn’t actually use that phrase.

In later life, Darwin suffered from a series of illnesses. By the time he died in 1882, he was unable to work for any length of time and had resorted to increasingly obscure treatments including ice baths and giving himself small electrical shocks.



The world was very nearly denied Darwin’s theory. He knew that his ideas went directly against the views of his religious faith and that it would upset most of the country. In 1844, he locked his ideas away and moved on. It wasn’t until somebody else very nearly published their own version of the idea that Darwin finally moved forward with On the Origin of Species.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Which word tells you how Darwin’s father felt about him?
2. What does the phrase “failed to engage” tell you about how Darwin behaved at school?
3. Find a word or phrase that tells you that Darwin did something to make his father happy.
4. Highlight the word that is closest in meaning to “boring”.
5. Write a definition for the word “offspring”.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R What was Darwin’s book called when he published it?

I How did Darwin feel about his new ideas? Why?

E How has the author used examples to make their point clearer?

S Write the subjects that Darwin studied at university in order.

R Why was Darwin invited to sail with the Beagle?

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Answers:

1. Disappointment
2. He didn't get involved or try his hardest
3. Appease
4. Dull
5. A child/children

R: On the Origin of Species

I: Conflicted/confused. He knew they were correct but he was also religious and natural selection went against that

E: The use of examples of specific advantages makes it clear what these might be

S: Medicine, law, divinity

R: To keep the captain company and because of his degree in divinity

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