

Almost as soon as Darwin published the *Origin of Species*, thinkers across the world began to ponder the consequences of the theory of evolution. In Lesson Eleven, we saw how Darwin's ideas were received by a variety of theologians, and in Lesson Thirteen we saw how Chauncey Wright and William James used natural selection in their philosophical writings. In this lesson, we'll examine two social projects that used evolutionary thought to pursue harmful ends: **Social Darwinism** and the **eugenics movement**. While the history of these ideas is unpleasant, we need to examine it to see what we can learn from it about the dangers of applying scientific ideas uncritically.

Let's begin by reading a short excerpt from a book written in 1883 by **William Graham Sumner**. Sumner, who was one of the most popular professors at Yale during the late 19th century, published numerous articles in both academic journals and popular magazines. He was heavily influenced by **Herbert Spencer**, the most famous of the Social Darwinists.

- **Reading: Excerpt from *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (Course Reader, pp. ?-?).**

As this short passage illustrates, Social Darwinists attempted to use natural selection to explain how society had gotten to where it is. While Social Darwinism was a powerful intellectual movement from about 1860 to 1900, after 1900 it was largely overshadowed by the organized eugenics movement. Like their Social Darwinist colleagues, eugenicists also borrowed ideas from Darwinian evolutionary thought. Unlike the Social Darwinists, though, eugenicists were heavily influenced by Mendelian genetics, and they believed that Mendel's Laws provided guidelines for changing human society through selective human breeding.

The following short article, written by historian Garland E. Allen, will help you understand the historical roots of the eugenics movement:

- **Reading: "Social Origins of Eugenics," Garland E. Allen (Course Reader, pp. ?-?).**

What role did the scientific ideas we've studied play in the eugenics movement? This short article by Elof Carlson will provide an answer by describing the work of **Francis Galton**, the most prominent theorist of eugenics:

- **Reading: "Scientific Origins of Eugenics," Elof Carlson (Course Reader, pp. ?-?).**

By now, you're probably wondering how it is that the best and brightest minds of the period could possibly have accepted such dangerous and destructive visions. To understand why they believed what they did, the following short article examines how their research was presented to the scientific community:

- **Reading: “Eugenics Research Methods,” David Mieklos, (Course Reader, pp. ?-?).**

Where did the eugenics researchers go wrong? This next article reconsiders their methods, and also discusses why biologists eventually abandoned eugenic research:

- **Reading: “Flaws in Eugenic Research,” Garland E. Allen, (Course Reader, pp. ?-?).**

Lesson Activity

Founded in 1910, the **Eugenics Records Office (ERO)** was the most important eugenics organization in the United States. Its director, **Charles Davenport**, was a Harvard-trained biologist who contributed to genetic and evolutionary research before turning his full attention to eugenics.

The historical records of the Eugenics Records Office are held today by the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, a major genetic research institution in Long Island, New York. To instruct the public about the tragic history of eugenics, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory has digitized many of these records and made them available online.

Part 1:

- Visit the *Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement* that Cold Spring Harbor has made available at <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list3.pl/>
- Along the left-side of the screen, you’ll see a series of Virtual Exhibits that include text and images about the eugenics movement. Click on each of these exhibits and carefully read the articles. As you’re reading, take time to look at the images that have been included.
- As you’re reading the Virtual Exhibits, make a list of all the ways in which eugenic thought had real-world consequences for people living during the time period. Be as specific as possible. Keep this list, for you will use it again in Part 3 of this activity.

Part 2:

- Along with Virtual Exhibits, the *Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement* has also made available many different sets of Topics. Go to the list of Topics at http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list_topics.pl/
- Examine any of these Topic pages that you find interesting. View at least 4 or 5 of them, but feel free to look at them all if the topic interests you.
- As in Part 1, continue your list of real-world consequences that eugenic thought had for people living during the period.

Part 3:

- Look at the list of real-world consequences that you’ve generated while browsing the *Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement*. Can you organize the many specific cases you’ve listed into broader categories? What are those categories?
- Based on the research you’ve just undertaken, prepare a visual display that can be used to teach someone who is not familiar with the history of the eugenics movement about the real-world consequences of eugenic thought.

Short Essay #4

Answer **1** of the following **3** questions with a short essay of approximately three double-spaced pages. Your essay should include an introduction and a conclusion. The essay should directly answer the posed question with specific details that you've encountered in the course of this and previous lessons. Before you begin writing, prepare an outline of your essay.

Question 1:

Pragmatists and eugenicists both claimed to be Darwinists, yet these two groups of thinkers came to radically different conclusions. How were their ideas similar and how were they different?

Question 2:

In Lessons Fourteen, Fifteen, and Sixteen, we examined theories of Progress and their relation to Darwinism. Did the eugenicists believe in human progress? Answer the question by referring to specific examples of eugenic thought from the *Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement*.

Question 3:

In Lesson Four, you learned about how biologists of the Modern Synthesis merged Darwin and Mendel to create a new theory of biology. Most eugenic research occurred before the Modern Synthesis. How did the research of the Modern Synthesis undermine eugenic research? Answer by thinking about what the eugenicists were arguing and how the Modern Synthesis dealt with populations.

[Note: This question would depend on information presented in Lesson Seventeen on Scientific Racism as well as Lesson Eighteen.]

Rubric to Evaluate Essay

Darwin's Drama will include detailed guidelines at the beginning of Part Two about how to write an essay. Included with these guidelines will be a detailed rubric to guide those evaluating student work. Since the same rubric will be used for all four short essays, it will be possible for an instructor to track student progress and to make specific recommendations at the end of the course. To see examples of previous writing guidelines and a writing rubric that I've developed, please consult the **Sample of Previous Curriculum Development Work** that I've included with this proposal.

At the start of each lesson in Part Two of *Darwin's Drama*, students will be asked to respond to a question in their journals. They will also be given an image and asked to write about it in any way they please. Since journal entries and image prompts will be based on the lesson of the previous week, I'm including what the prompts might be following the lesson on Social Darwinism and Eugenics.

Journal Prompt for Lesson Nineteen

Could something like the eugenics movement occur today? Why or why not?

Image Prompt for Lesson Nineteen



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**Contestant in a Better Babies contest, sponsored by a eugenics organization.
Louisiana State Fair; Shreveport, Louisiana
Circa 1910**