Mrs Darwin

SUMMARY

The poem begins by indicating the specific day it takes place: April 7, 1852 (a few years before the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*). The speaker, revealed by the title to be Darwin's wife, succinctly recalls going to the zoo with her husband. She remembers pointing out a nearby chimpanzee and telling her husband that there was something about the ape that resembled him.

THEMES

THE OVERLOOKED IMPACT OF WOMEN ON HISTORY

"Mrs Darwin" is written as a fictionalized diary entry by the wife of Charles Darwin, the naturalist famous for his theory of evolution. In the poem, "Mrs Darwin" (whose real name was Emma) recounts a trip to the zoo where she pointed out a chimpanzee that reminded her of her husband. The poem implies that her comment is what sparked Charles Darwin's theory that human beings descended from apes. By cheekily imagining that it was really Darwin's *wife* behind this world-changing idea, "Mrs Darwin" highlights how women's contributions to history have often been overlooked by society, if not outright taken credit for by the men in their lives. At the same time, it subtly subverts such men's self-importance, reminding readers that they're as apelike (which is to say, as human) as everybody else.

The poem imagines that the Darwins' trip to the zoo takes place in 1852, seven years before Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*. As such, the poem's implication is that Emma Darwin's comment—"Something about that Chimpanzee over there reminds me of you"—is what puts the idea of human evolution into her husband's head.

This trip to the zoo isn't meant to be taken literally. Rather, it's a funny, made-up scene that comments on the ways women's contributions to history tend to get silenced or ignored. Maybe the speaker was making a scientific observation, or maybe she was just ribbing her husband; either way, she never gets any credit for her comment. She doesn't even get a proper name in the poem, for that matter, and instead is referred to only in terms of her relationship with her more famous husband.

In addition to implying the overlooked importance of women, "Mrs Darwin" is also a humorous reminder of the frequently overstated genius of men. The poem's speaker refers to her husband as "Him," that capital H indicating how Darwin was (and sometimes still is!) seen as an almost god-like intellectual figure. The speaker seems to use the capital letter ironically, however, in order to point out the distance between the public perception of her husband as a towering genius and the actual, flawed, normal man she knows.

Indeed, by comparing her husband to an ape, the speaker brings him down to earth and subtly undermines his authority. The speaker may even be suggesting that her husband is a little uncivilized or oafish! More broadly, the imagined scenario in "Mrs Darwin" suggests that many of the most famous men throughout history were in fact regular, flawed human beings—and that without women like Emma Darwin by their side, these men may not have gone down in history at all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

7 April 1852. ...
... to the Zoo.

The Mrs. Darwin of the title, and the speaker of the poem, is Emma Darwin, wife of the famed naturalist Charles Darwin.

The poem itself then opens rather unusually: "*7 April 1852*." Sometimes poets include a date underneath a poem's title (before the first line) or at the very end of the poem (after the last line). That date usually indicates the day the poem was finished, and sometimes poets include the place of composition too. But in this case, "*7 April 1852*" is the actual first line of "Mrs Darwin," indicating that the poem is taking the form of a diary entry.

The second line is then is short and bluntly descriptive: "Went to the Zoo." The brevity here adds to the sense that Mrs. Darwin quickly jotted these lines down in her journal at the end of the day.

Also notice how line 2 lacks a subject: the speaker implies that *Charles and I* or *We* went to the zoo, but doesn't actually say so (that confirmation will come in the next line). The implied subject contributes to the poem's off-hand, informal tone, which is appropriate for a diary entry. On a formal level, these first two lines are short and strongly end-stopped with periods, and they don't follow any particular meter. These qualities, like the second line's implied subject, add to the poem's informal feel.

The lines do, however, share a subtle end rhyme between the

"two" in "*1852*" and "Zoo." (There's also an internal rhyme in line 2: "Went to the zoo.") The rhyme is subtle; readers might almost miss it on the page given that it relies on a numeral. Still, it's a good reminder that, despite the poem's appearance as a diary entry, "Mrs Darwin" is still a *poem*—it would be odd for an actual diary entry to rhyme!

The tension between the poem's imaginative artfulness, on the one hand, and its historical plausibility, on the other, helps create much of the irony and humor that make "Mrs Darwin" so clever and memorable.

LINES 3-4

I said to Him— ...
... me of you.

After establishing "Mrs Darwin" as a casual diary entry, the speaker confirms exactly *who* "[w]ent to the zoo": the speaker herself, Emma Darwin ("I"), and her husband, Charles ("Him").

It's curious that Emma refers to Charles as "Him" with a capital H, an honor usually reserved for deities. The capital H presents Charles as a god-like figure, though the speaker isn't necessarily indicating that she sees him this way. Rather, she's probably making an ironic critique of his own inflated ego and/or of the social and gender norms of Victorian England, which generally dictated that women were lesser than, and subservient to, the men in their lives. In particular, wives were expected to defer to their husbands and even treat them as if they were gods or kings of the household.

The contrast between Emma's apparent respect for Charles in line 3 and her comparing him to a chimpanzee in line 4 brings the famous scientist down to earth. That is, propping "Him" up in line 3 as a god-like figure makes the revelation, in line 4, that he's actually an ordinary, somewhat ape-like man all the more humorous and impactful.

On a formal level, these lines are similar to lines 1 and 2: they don't follow any regular meter and are both end-stopped. Yet while line 3, like lines 1 and 2, is quite short, line 4 is very long. This dramatic contrast in line lengths highlights the poem's sense of humor and surprise; line 4 arrives like the punchline of a joke. Also note how the last word of line 4, "you," chimes with "*1852*" and "Zoo" of lines 1 and 2, making the poem an AABA quatrain (or stanza with four lines).

The poem suggests that it was Emma, not Charles, who first suggested the connection between humans and great apes. Perhaps, the poem imagines, the revolutionary scientific idea that made Charles's 1859 masterpiece *On the Origin of Species* so world-changing and controversial wasn't actually Charles's idea to begin with. This subversive possibility critiques a world that overlooks the contributions of women, in history and still today, and especially draws attention to how men often take credit for women's ideas.

There's another way to read the speaker's comparison of Charles to a chimpanzee, however. While 1852 is indeed well before the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*, it's also long *after* Charles's travels to South America on the *Beagle*, which first prompted his ideas about evolution. And scholars know from his papers, journals, and letters that he was developing his theory well before 1852. On the whole, then, it seems unlikely, and probably downright impossible, that Emma Darwin *actually* sparked the idea that humans are descended from great apes (and if she did, it would have been long before 1852). That being said, the poem leaves open the possibility that Emma already knows about Charles's developing theory and is simply using it against him in a playful, joking way.

In the end, it's up to readers to decide wheter the speaker had a true moment of scientific breakthrough or is simply ribbing her husband by reminding him that, in her eyes, he's *not* always the god-like, enlightened genius society thinks he is.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"Mrs Darwin" makes little sense to readers without its context. The poem alludes to actual people: Charles Darwin, the famed naturalist who proposed the theory of evolution, and his wife, Emma.

While the people in the poem are real, it's important to remember that the specific events of the poem are not. And while Emma and Charles may very well have visited zoos together (especially the London Zoo), the actual incident the poem describes isn't based on an actual outing. Rather, the poem *imagines* this trip to the zoo in order to make a humorous point.

The poem takes place on a specific date (April 7, 1852), but there's no evidence that anything especially noteworthy happened on that day in the Darwins' actual lives. Duffy likely chose the year because "two" rhymes with "Zoo" and "you," and because it preceded the 1859 publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.

"Mrs Darwin" also contains an implicit literary allusion to this famous book, which argues that human beings evolved from apes. Though the poem doesn't mention Charles's famous book by name, the joking implication that it may have been Emma who first suggested the book's central idea, seven years before its publication, is clear.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4

END-STOPPED LINE

All four lines of "Mrs Darwin" are firmly end-stopped, coming to

a clear pause via a period or em dash. These end-stopped lines play up the poem's resemblance to a diary entry, and they also create a straightforward, no-nonsense tone that adds to the poem's pithy humor.

For one thing, the hard stops emphasize the very short length of the first three lines. Those short lines, in turn, make the very long line 4 feel a little like the long-awaited punch line of a joke.

These end-stopped lines also mimic the casual sort of writing people tend to use when recording the day's events in a diary. It sounds like the speaker was just quickly jotting something down without too much thought or need for fancy descriptions. This, in turn, adds to the poem's sense of irony: these clipped, seemingly off-hand lines, the poem implies, sparked Darwin's world-changing theory.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "1852."
- **Line 2:** "Zoo."
- **Line 3:** "Him—"
- **Line 4:** "you."

ASSONANCE

"Mrs Darwin" contains several instances of assonance. The repetition of the long /oo/ sound in lines 1, 2, and 4 helps give the poem a formal shape and connects the first two short lines with the last, very long one.

The repeated sound also serves as a subtle reminder that though "Mrs Darwin" seems to mimic an actual diary entry—with its exact date, simple language, and casual tone—it *is* still a poem, the artistic product of the author's imagination.

Do note that this assonance is also an example of end rhyme. The rhyme is a little buried, given that it's relatively unusual to see a number ("1852") in a rhyming position. Still, the poem has an AABA rhyme scheme, which the assonant "to" in line 2 reinforces. (There is, of course, another "to" in line 3—"to Him"—but this sonic echo is more subtle, given that there's no end rhyme here.)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "1852"
- **Line 2:** "to," "Zoo"
- **Line 4:** "you"

IRONY

"Mrs Darwin" imagines that it was Emma Darwin, and not her far more famous naturalist husband, who first suggested (or prompted) the idea that humans evolved from apes. The poem ironically presents Emma's comment, which sparks Charles's world-changing idea, as an offhand remark—and perhaps even as a sly insult. The contrast between Emma's casual comment and the civilization-altering magnitude of Charles's theory is funny. It also acts as a subtle critique of the ways women's contributions to history, and to the men around them, are often overlooked.

There's one more possible layer of irony in the poem. While the primary point seems to be that Emma's low-key insult *suggested* the idea of human evolution to Charles, it's also possible to read her comment as *using* Charles's own ideas about evolution against him. In this reading of the poem, Charles had already formulated his ideas on April 7, 1852—a scenario that squares with actual history. In this light, Emma is ribbing Charles and implying that for all his brains, he's still ordinary and perhaps even a little apelike. In other words, no amount of scientific brilliance can change the fact that Charles Darwin is just a man.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4

VOCABULARY

7 April 1852 (Line 1) - This date, set in italics, is also the first line of the poem, indicating that "Mrs Darwin" takes the form of a diary entry. The date's specificity makes the poem seem more believable, though it doesn't appear that anything especially important actually happened in the lives of Emma and Charles Darwin on April 7, 1852. What is important about this date is that it comes well before the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

Him (Line 3) - This refers to the speaker's husband, the famous naturalist Charles Darwin. By using a capital H, usually used when talking about God, the speaker draws attention to the fact that Charles Darwin has become a legendary, towering figure. She may also be suggesting that Charles sees himself in this way.By ironically using the capital H and then comparing Charles to a chimpanzee in the very next line, the speaker deflates her husband's perhaps outsized ego, brings him down to earth, and questions the social norms of her patriarchal society.

Chimpanzee (Line 4) - A species of great ape native to Africa. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution proposed—radically, for its time—that humans were descended from apes.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mrs Darwin" consists of a single, four-line stanza (a.k.a. a quatrain). The poem mimics the form of a diary entry: the first line establishes a date for the entry (*7 April 1852*) and the lines that follow describe, in simple language, the Darwins' visit to

the zoo. Though this particular visit is fictional, the poem's form makes the trip to the zoo *seem* like a real historical event.

The lines don't have a regular meter, instead following the natural rhythms of everyday speech. Lines 1, 2, and 4 do share an end rhyme, however, adding some playful music to this humorous poem.

There's one more notable formal aspect of "Mrs Darwin." The first three lines are very short (just three or four words), while the last line is very long (ten words). The exaggerated contrast in line lengths highlights the irony of the final line. Much like the punch line of a joke, the very long line 4 cheekily draws attention to itself and to its subversive suggestion: that even "great" men, such as Charles Darwin, can be a little ape-like—and that the women who support those "great" men deserve a lot more credit for their hard work.

METER

"Mrs Darwin" doesn't have a regular meter and its lines feature dramatically different lengths (nine, four, four, and twenty-one syllables, respectively). "Mrs Darwin" takes the form of a diary entry, and the lack of regular meter reflects the casual, off-hand tone that people tend to use in diaries.

RHYME SCHEME

"Mrs Darwin" follows an AABA rhyme scheme: "1852," "Zoo," and "you" all rhyme.

This pattern of rhyme is fairly common in quatrains, and it helps to hold the stanza together (by sonically linking the last line with the first two) while allowing for expressive variation (since the third line doesn't rhyme with anything).

This pattern allows the word "Him" at the end of line 3 to stand out to the ear, given that it's the only word at the end of a line that doesn't share that /oo/ sound. By making "Him" sound a little awkward or out of place, the speaker subtly emphasizes Charles's presence in the poem.

Though it's safe to call this AABA rhyme, some readers might insist that the rhyme in line 4, on "you," is really a kind of rhyming assonance. Rhyme traditionally depends on a shared vowel sound preceded by a contrasting consonant (like how the "two" in "*1852*" and "Zoo" share the vowel /oo/ but differ in their consonants, /t/ and /z/). Since "you" doesn't really have a consonant at the beginning, rhyme sticklers could insist that this isn't proper rhyme.

However one prefers to think of it, there's no doubt that the shared vowel /oo/ adds some playful music to the stanza. It reminds readers that "Mrs Darwin" is a *poem*; even though it looks like a diary entry, most actual diary entries don't just happen to have three out of four rhyming lines!

SPEAKER

"Mrs Darwin" makes no attempt to obscure its speaker's identity: the Mrs. Darwin of the poem's title is in fact Emma Darwin, the wife of the famous naturalist Charles Darwin.

"Mrs Darwin" appears in Carol Ann Duffy's 1999 collection, *The World's Wife*, which is full of poems spoken by women famously linked with historical and mythical men (for example, "Anne Hathaway" and "Circe"). That Emma's given name doesn't appear anywhere in the poem or its title reflects that women's stories are often overshadowed by those of the men in their lives.

Though Emma Darwin is clearly the poem's speaker, it's important to note that the poem is spoken in the voice of Emma Darwin *as imagined* by the poet, Carol Ann Duffy. That is, while "Mrs Darwin" presents itself as a diary entry—complete with a specific date—the poem is a fictional text, not a historical document.

The Emma of this poem might be making a keen scientific observation of the similarities between human beings and apes. She also might be ribbing her husband for his ape-like manners. Or she might cleverly be doing both things at the same time! It's also up to readers whether the capital "H" in "Him" is meant to be ironic or not. That is, it sure *seems* like Emma is poking fun at her husband's inflated ego, but Duffy might simply have written the line this way to emphasize the patriarchal nature of the Victorian society in which the real Emma Darwin lived.

It's worth noting that the real Emma Darwin was critically important to Charles's personal happiness and professional success. She took notes for him, assisted with his correspondence, and entertained his friends and colleagues—all the while attending to her own affairs and giving birth to 10 children!

SETTING

Given the poem's resemblance to a diary entry, it's safe to assume that the poem takes place on or shortly after April 7, 1852, following the Darwins' (fictionalized) trip to the zoo. Readers can imagine Emma Darwin sitting down to jot a few thoughts in her journal after this event.

This places the poem in the middle of England's Victorian era, which emphasized strict moral and social codes for women in particular. Women at the time were expected to defer to and support their husbands (notice how Emma, perhaps ironically, refers to Charles as "Him," with a capital H—as though he were God).

Do note that there's nothing to indicate that April 7 was notable in the lives of the *actual* Darwins; Duffy is imagining a funny scenario to make a point about women's overlooked

contributions to history.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy is among the most acclaimed and high-profile poets in the contemporary UK. Born in Scotland in 1955, she became the UK's first female poet laureate in 2009 and served in the position for the next 10 years.

"Mrs Darwin" first appeared in Duffy's 1999 collection *The World's Wife*, which features poems written from the perspectives of the wives, sisters, and female contemporaries of famous and infamous men from history and myth. Some of Duffy's characters in the collection include Mrs. Sisyphus, Mrs. Midas, Mrs. Faust, Circe, Medusa, Anne Hathaway (Shakespeare's wife), and Mrs. Aesop. These poems implicitly challenge patriarchal social norms and highlight the ways in which women's experiences and contributions to art, science, and beyond have often been overlooked, or even outright taken credit for, by the men in their lives.

The World's Wife can be considered a work of feminist revisionist mythology, an approach dating back roughly to the 1960s in which writers engage with fairy tales, religious stories, and myths through a feminist lens. Duffy's work in this vein connects her to poets including Anne Sexton, Muriel Rukeyser, Alicia Ostriker, Eleanor Wilner, and Alice Notley.

Duffy was especially influenced by the writings of Sylvia Plath, whose *Collected Works* she received for her 25th birthday. She would go on to edit an edition of Plath's poems, and to write a piece for *The Guardian* about how Plath's work, with its revolutionary interest in women's internal lives, blazed a trail Duffy would follow in her own poetry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Mrs Darwin" is dated April 7, 1852, a day that appears to have been chosen by the poet more or less at random for its rhyme with "Zoo" and "you." Though the visit to the zoo the poem describes doesn't seem to have occurred on that day (and may *never* have occurred just as it does in the poem), it's certainly possible (and, in fact, likely) that Charles and Emma Darwin visited the London Zoo, where they would have seen chimpanzees. In 1852, they were living in a small village called Down, about 16 miles outside of London, which gave Charles the peace and quiet he needed to work but allowed for trips to London.

It's important to note that 1852 is several years before the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*, Charles's masterpiece describing his theory of evolution (which included the revolutionary idea that humans are descended from apes). In this sense, the poem nods toward the possibility that Emma's comment to Charles at the zoo may have sparked his revolutionary idea. That being said, Charles went on his famous voyage aboard the *Beagle* in the 1830s, and throughout the next two decades was continuously forming his theory of evolution. Ultimately, then, it's historically impossible that an 1852 comment could have given Charles the idea of human evolution; he'd already been working on his theory for many years by that point.

Nonetheless, the poem doesn't seem too concerned with actual history; it's a humorous poem pretending to be a diary entry in order to make a point, not an actual historical document. In any case, the historical record strongly shows the many ways Emma Darwin supported her husband's professional endeavors: she took notes for him, often wrote letters on his behalf, and generally organized his life—all while bearing him 10 children!

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Carol Ann Duffy on "Great Women poets" — Listen to an interview with Duffy on the day she became the first female poet laureate of the UK. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnt5p1DGD9U)
- The Lost Lectures: Carol Ann Duffy — Hear Duffy read from her work and discuss her artistic inspirations. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSyii8Sp-pk)
- Who Was Emma Darwin? — A short biography of Emma Darwin from the University of Cambridge. (https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/emma-darwin)
- Carol Ann Duffy's Life and Work — A short biography of Duffy from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- The Theory of Evolution — Learn more about the world-changing theory that Duffy pokes gentle fun at here. (https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/theory-evolution/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- A Child's Sleep
- Anne Hathaway
- Before You Were Mine
- Circe
- Death of a Teacher
- Demeter
- Education For Leisure
- Foreign
- Head of English
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Little Red Cap

- Medusa
- Mrs Midas
- Mrs Sisyphus
- Originally
- Prayer
- Stealing
- The Darling Letters
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer
- We Remember Your Childhood Well

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