

Liev's Postpostulate

The Urth list — 22 messages, 9 voices, 10 May 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3248>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Adam Stephanides — 10 May 2002, 00:55

On p. 255 of the Ace edition, Victor in his cell writes "I know who I believe the Free People to be: I call it Liev's Postpostulate"; but he never says what Liev's Postpostulate is. Somebody once suggested, iirc, that it was "the humans killed the abos." After reading the book again, I now think this is only half the story. Veil's Hypothesis is "the abos killed the humans and took their places"; so logically Liev's Postpostulate should be "the humans killed the abos and took their places." That is, the people who now call themselves the "Free People," among whom are Victor's mother and Victor himself, are not the descendants of the original Annese. Rather, they are descendants of French colonists who had given up "civilization" to live in the "back of beyond" (as some North American colonists joined the Indians), and these descendants have come to believe that they are actually indigenous Annese. Victor shared this belief until sometime between Marsch's death and the writing of those words.

In addition to being logical, this interpretation ties in with Victor's remark just before he mentions Liev's Postpostulate: "The question is not, as I once thought, how much the thoughts of the Shadow children influence reality; but how much our own do." (I admit I don't know how Mrs. Blount's interview fits into this.) It also is the only way I can think of to account for Victor's statement to Number Five: "The abos are gone." (75) You could argue that this is just Victor's way of rejecting Number Five's charge that he is an abo; but if he believes the Free People are abos, then not only does his statement to Victor contradict the story he tells his interrogator, but it leaves him having done three years of fieldwork with nothing to show for it.

So Victor believes that the Free People are not Annese, but humans believing themselves to be Annese. But is it true? I don't know, but I suggest it's quite possible.

Pro: It's certainly more plausible than either prehistoric waves of colonization (in either direction) or genetically unrelated Annese who can interbreed with humans.

Pro: For those into this sort of thing, "Liev" can be unpacked as "unveil," though I don't put too much weight on this argument.

Con: Wolfe's interview, quoted by Borski. But it's clear that Victor is not actually a Shadow child; and if Wolfe mistakenly referred to an Annese as a Shadow child, he could have mistakenly referred to a human believing himself Annese as a Shadow child. And, as I said before, the interview was twenty-six years after the books were published, so his memory may not be completely accurate.

(It may seem that I'm being hypocritical, since I've declared myself an intentionalist. But I never said this meant that whatever an author says about his or her work must be taken as gospel, which is obviously an untenable position.)

--Adam

Michael Straight — 10 May 2002, 03:05 · follows Adam Stephanides

This theory would also account for the difficulty we've been having pinning down how much manual dexterity the abos have. As much or as little as the person thinks an abo would have. If a pseudo-abo really wants to write or shoot or cook, he can convince himself that an abo could do it, but with lousy handwriting or poor aim. And at the same time believe himself unable to use a shovel.

-Rostrum

Andy Robertson — 10 May 2002, 07:24 · follows Michael Straight

----- Original Message -----

From: "Michael Straight" <straight at email.unc.edu>

This theory would also account for the difficulty we've been having pinning down how much manual dexterity the abos have. As much or as little as the person thinks an abo would have. If a pseudo-abo really wants to write or shoot or cook, he can convince himself that an abo could do it, but with lousy handwriting or poor aim. And at the same time believe himself unable to use a shovel.

Just a simple point. Abo lack of dexterity might be due to lack of practice, nothing else.

The abos have a largely tool-less culture. If they do come from prehistoric drifts, from early Starcrossers flung through Shadow Child space warps and back in time, or from hapless humans sucked through Dreamspace from early Europe, it is quite possible that they would lose their technology entirely.

hartshorn

Adam Stephanides — 10 May 2002, 13:46 · follows Andy Robertson

on 5/10/02 2:24 AM, Andy Robertson at andywrobertson at clara.co.uk wrote:
Just a simple point. Abo lack of dexterity might be due to lack of practice, nothing else.

The abos have a largely tool-less culture. If they do come from prehistoric drifts, from early Starcrossers flung through Shadow Child space warps and back in time, or from hapless humans sucked through Dreamspace from early Europe, it is quite possible that they would lose their technology entirely.

This wouldn't account for Victor's "inability" to hold a pen correctly, though, since he received the same instruction all the other children did.

Were the Australian aborigines, or other hunter-gatherers, ever believed to be unable to use tools?

--Adam

Tony Ellis — 10 May 2002, 15:31 · follows Adam Stephanides

Sorry to seem at loggerheads with you again, Adam, but a few quibbles spring immediately to mind:

If Victor thinks he is descended from French settlers gone native, why, when he thinks no one is

reading what he writes any more, does he cite Dollo's Law as the reason for his bad penmanship? We can't be expected to believe that the French all unevolved the ability to use tools in a few generations.

How come all the people we think of as Annese seem to have the ability to change how they appear? Cassilla seems to have it, Victor's mother had it, and Victor writes that he has "the same ability, though not to the extent she did." I've never been able to come up with a satisfactory reason why the descendants of prehistoric humans should have this ability either, but at least they had the time period in which to evolve it. And why the green eyes thing?

'Liev' implies a reversal of Veil's Postulate, it's true, but it's possible Wolfe only used Liev so that he could work in the pun "I am Liev and I have left." 'Postpostulate' suggests, at least to me, something that goes beyond Veil's Postulate, rather than reversing it.

I admit I don't know how Mrs. Blount's interview fits into this.

Mrs Blount doesn't just talk about the Annese or Shadow Children her father shot. She also says:

"When I was growing up those little French girls that had been too small to fight was growing up too, and weren't they the cutest things? They got most of the handsome boys, you know, and all of the rich ones. You could go to a dance in your prettiest dress, and one of those Frenchies would come in, just in rags, you know, but with a ribbon and a flower in her hair, and every boy's head would turn."

That has always sounded to me like another example of the Annese ability to look more attractive at will. When I read it and then flip back to the passage that sent me there -- "I have read the interview with Mrs Blount - a hundred times when I was in the hills - and I know who I believe the Free People to be," -- the implication seems pretty strong that he means the Free People are, or are now, human-Annese half-breeds like himself. The 'French' girls were either Annese or, which seems more likely to me, themselves the children of Annese-settler interbreeding.

Possibly we're supposed to read the Mrs Blount passage as meaning that the little French girls are French settlers who went native and are now coming in from the cold again, but I can't really see how we or Victor are supposed to draw that conclusion from what is said.

Andy Robertson — 10 May 2002, 18:11 · follows Tony Ellis

----- Original Message -----

From: "Tony Ellis" <LittleSense at necronomicon.co.uk>
Sorry to seem at loggerheads with you again, Adam, but a few quibbles spring immediately to mind:

If Victor thinks he is descended from French settlers gone native, why, when he thinks no one is reading what he writes any more, does he cite Dollo's Law as the reason for his bad penmanship?

Note, Dollo's law is about degeneration: the way an evolutionary talent, once lost, is never regained.

This tells us something Victor at any rate believes.

The abos once had human manual dexterity and then lost it. They lost it
genetically - for some unknown reason - in the same way they gained their odd talents of
mimicry.

Possibly they were an ancient human colony or abductee group that went through a
evolutionary bottleneck. Or possibly Victor merely believes this.

hartshorn

Jeff Wilson — 11 May 2002, 04:58 · follows Andy Robertson

From:
"Andy Robertson" <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk>

----- Original Message -----

From: "Tony Ellis" <LittleSense at necronomicon.co.uk>

Sorry to seem at loggerheads with you again, Adam, but a few quibbles
spring
immediately to mind:

If Victor thinks he is descended from French settlers gone native, why,
when
he thinks no one is reading what he writes any more, does he cite Dollo's
Law as the reason for his bad penmanship?

Note, Dollo's law is about degeneration: the way an evolutionary talent,
once lost, is never regained.

This tells us something Victor at any rate believes.

The abos once had human manual dexterity and then lost it. They lost it
genetically - for some unknown reason - in the same way they gained their
odd talents of mimicry.

Possibly they were an ancient human colony or abductee group that went
through a evolutionary bottleneck. Or possibly Victor merely believes
this.

But Dollo's law is crap; it's violated by marine mammals, and moths that alight on trees in
once-polluted areas.

Jeff Wilson
How Am I Posting? 1-800-555-6789
"If your SecOp can see you, so can the enemy." -Cpt Law

--

Andy Robertson — 11 May 2002, 07:49 · follows Jeff Wilson

----- Original Message -----

From: "Jeff Wilson" <

Possibly they were an ancient human colony or abductee group that went
through a evolutionary bottleneck. Or possibly Victor merely believes
this.

But Dollo's law is crap; it's violated by marine mammals, and moths that
alight on trees in once-polluted areas.

No, it's not crap, but like most things about biology it is a rule rather than a law. But of course this is significant for what it tells us about Victor's assumptions, not the fictitious real biology of Saint Anne

hartshorn

Jerry Friedman — 13 May 2002, 21:58 · follows Andy Robertson

--- Andy Robertson <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk> wrote:
----- Original Message -----
From: "Jeff Wilson" <
Possibly they were an ancient human colony or abductee group that went through a evolutionary bottleneck. Or possibly Victor merely believes this.

But Dollo's law is crap; it's violated by marine mammals, and moths that alight on trees in once-polluted areas.

No, it's not crap, but like most things about biology it is a rule rather than a law. But of course this is significant for what it tells us about Victor's assumptions, not the fictitious real biology of Saint Anne

Indeed, Victor could be telling us the story of his own writing career: for some reason he lost the opportunity to write the normal way, and once he learned to hold the pen the wrong way, he could never regain the normal function.

Jerry Friedman

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 15 May 2002, 16:08 · follows Jerry Friedman

Jeff Wilson claims that

Dollo's law is crap; it's violated by marine mammals, and moths that alight on trees in once-polluted areas.

...well, no; it isn't.

In the case of peppered moths, no lost organs are reappearing; the a:A balance of certain alleles is shifting due to natural (or, I suppose, semi-artificial) selection. The "dark" genes had always been present as a minority in the "gene pool," became a far more prominent proportion of the gene pool when industrial pollution caused the trees they sit on to become darker in color, and once again became less common as pollution control allowed the trees to regain their former light color. The basic papers on this, by Kettlewell's and Haldane, are both easily available in the Oxford reader on "Evolution," edited by Mark Ridley.

In the case of marine mammals, what has happened is that the lost organs have exactly failed to reappear -- all marine mammals still must come to the surface to breathe; no gills have reappeared. And, while the modified fins we call legs have re-modified themselves to a more fin-like structure, this isn't a case of anything lost reappearing. The only thing that might be considered as a reappearance is the dorsal fin on some marine mammals; I don't know enough about how those evolved to give a legitimate answer to this.

Mark Millman — 15 May 2002, 17:47 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Blattid,

In sharks and bony fish the dorsal fin is part of the skeleton, while the dorsal fins of cetaceans (and, for that matter, of their reptile analogues the ichthyosaurs) are not. That fact alone is sufficient to demonstrate that the cetacean dorsal fin is not a reappearance of a previously lost organ.

But now we're straying off-topic; my apologies.

Mark Millman
(Nacre)

On Wed, 15 May 2002, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes (Blattid) wrote:
Jeff Wilson claims that

Dollo's law is crap;
it's violated by marine
mammals, and moths that
alight on trees in once-
polluted areas.

...well, no; it isn't.

[snip re: peppered moths]

In the case of marine mammals, what has happened is
that the lost organs have exactly failed to reappear
-- all marine mammals still must come to the surface
to breathe; no gills have reappeared. And, while the
modified fins we call legs have re-modified themselves
to a more fin-like structure, this isn't a case of
anything lost reappearing. The only thing that might
be considered as a reappearance is the dorsal fin on
some marine mammals; I don't know enough about how
those evolved to give a legitimate answer to this.

--Blattid

Adam Stephanides — 20 May 2002, 01:14 · follows Mark Millman

on 5/10/02 3:31 PM, Tony Ellis at LittleSense at necronomicon.co.uk wrote:
If Victor thinks he is descended from French settlers gone native, why, when
he thinks no one is reading what he writes any more, does he cite Dollo's
Law as the reason for his bad penmanship?

I never bought the theory that Dollo's Law is a coded reference to either the abo's shapeshifting
or the prehistoric colonists' evolution. As Jerry Friedman suggested, he only means to say that
having learned to write holding the pen the wrong way, he now cannot write holding it the right
way.

We can't be expected to believe
that the French all unevolved the ability to use tools in a few generations.

How come all the people we think of as Annese seem to have the ability to
change how they appear? Cassilla seems to have it

I vaguely recall something like this being discussed, but don't recall any of the arguments for it.
The only thing I can find which could even be thought to suggest that she is either Annese or
can change her appearance is the statement "In the bright daylight he could see fine wrinkles
near her eyes; the girl was aging" (267), and to me it seems far more likely that this means no

more than what it says.

Victor's mother had it,
and Victor writes that he has "the same ability, though not to the extent
she did."

That leaves only two people with the ability, and from the way Victor and his father describe it,
it doesn't seem beyond human capacities.

And why the green eyes
thing?

I don't know, but recall that Marsch had them too. I don't know if we can be sure whether the
Free People really all had green eyes, or whether that was Victor's extrapolation from himself
and his mother; but if they did, it could have arisen from genetic drift (far more plausibly than
descendants of human colonists losing the ability to lose tools).

I admit I don't know how Mrs. Blount's
interview fits into this.

Mrs Blount doesn't just talk about the Annese or Shadow Children her father
shot. She also says:

"When I was growing up those little French girls that had been too small to
fight was growing up too, and weren't they the cutest things? They got most
of the handsome boys, you know, and all of the rich ones. You could go to a
dance in your prettiest dress, and one of those Frenchies would come in,
just in rags, you know, but with a ribbon and a flower in her hair, and
every boy's head would turn."

That has always sounded to me like another example of the Annese ability to
look more attractive at will.

I don't think so.

When I read it and then flip back to the
passage that sent me there -- "I have read the interview with Mrs Blount - a
hundred times when I was in the hills - and I know who I believe the Free
People to be," -- the implication seems pretty strong that he means the Free
People are, or are now, human-Annese half-breeds like himself. The 'French'
girls were either Annese or, which seems more likely to me, themselves the
children of Annese-settler interbreeding.

Even if we're supposed to take the "French" girls to be Annese, I don't see how it would follow
that the Free People are human-Annese hybrids. It would be the descendents of the English
colonists and "French" girls--i. e. today's "civilized" settlers--who would be hybrids, not the Free
People.

A more plausible guess at the interview's significance for Victor is that the difference between
the settlers and the Free People is one of behavior, not appearance or genetics. Mrs. Blount was
in no position to know whether the "abos" were really human or not; nor, presumably, was her
father (unless he had dissected one of them). The "abos" looked just like the French, and the
French were also poor and landless, but because they behaved like animals (from the settlers'
perspective), they were considered to be animals and treated as such.

If this is correct, it could explain something that had been bothering me: why Victor tells
Number Five that the abos are all dead, but later in his cell states that he is an animal and
doesn't really speak: it is his "animal" behavior, not his genes, that makes him an animal in his
own eyes.

--Adam

Jeff Wilson — 20 May 2002, 06:03 · follows Adam Stephanides

From:

"Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>

Jeff Wilson claims that

Dollo's law is crap; it's violated by marine mammals, and moths that alight on trees in once-polluted areas.

...well, no; it isn't.

In the case of peppered moths, no lost organs are reappearing; the a:A balance of certain alleles is shifting due to natural (or, I suppose, semi-artificial) selection. The "dark" genes had always been present as a minority in the "gene pool," became a far more prominent proportion of the gene pool when industrial pollution caused the trees they sit on to become darker in color, and once again became less common as pollution control allowed the trees to regain their former light color. The basic papers on this, by Kettlewell's and Haldane, are both easily available in the Oxford reader on "Evolution," edited by Mark Ridley.

In the case of marine mammals, what has happened is that the lost organs have exactly failed to reappear -- all marine mammals still must come to the surface to breathe; no gills have reappeared. And, while the modified fins we call legs have re-modified themselves to a more fin-like structure, this isn't a case of anything lost reappearing. The only thing that might be considered as a reappearance is the dorsal fin on some marine mammals; I don't know enough about how those evolved to give a legitimate answer to this.

In that case, I sit corrected but I don't see the relevance; the function returns even if the anatomical detail doesn't. The Frenchmen don't give the suspected abos a medical exam, they test their limbs' function. Human hand or polymorphed pseudopod, if it can make nets it ought to be able to work a shovel.

Jeff Wilson

How Am I Posting? 1-800-555-6789

"If your SecOp can see you, so can the enemy." -Cpt Law

--

Tony Ellis — 20 May 2002, 10:49 · follows Jeff Wilson

Adam Stephanides wrote:

I never bought the theory that Dollo's Law is a coded reference to either the abo's shapeshifting or the prehistoric colonists' evolution. As Jerry Friedman suggested, he only means to say that having learned to write holding the pen the wrong way, he now cannot write holding it the right way.

Then why not say that, using just those simple words? Why instead cite, at length, a specifically evolutionary process?

In any case, this is the answer which Victor has already dismissed as "an explanation that does not explain," because it doesn't tell us why he was unable to write by holding the pen the right way in the first place. Wolfe goes out of his way to show us that Victor was beaten until he bled for getting it wrong: that's a pretty powerful incentive for getting something right if it is

physically possible to do so.

I find it hard to believe that, in a story where tool-use is of crucial significance, Wolfe has devoted a whole page to the phenomenon of Victor's bad handwriting, and topped it off with a paragraph-long definition of Dollo 's Law, in italics yet, just to say "Victor's poor handwriting was a bad habit."

How come all the people we think of as Annese seem to have the ability to change how they appear? Cassilla seems to have it

I vaguely recall something like this being discussed, but don't recall any of the arguments for it. The only thing I can find which could even be thought to suggest that she is either Annese or can change her appearance is

the statement "In the bright daylight he could see fine wrinkles near her eyes; the girl was aging" (267), and to me it seems far more likely that this means no more than what it says.

In a different story, perhaps. But in one where a key theme is spot-the-alien, and where we've already been given the example of Victor's supposedly Annese mother making herself look older to avoid sleeping with men she didn't like, it's a detail that assumes far greater significance.

Roy C. Lackey — 21 May 2002, 05:48 · follows Tony Ellis

Adam Stephanides quoted:

on 5/10/02 3:31 PM, Tony Ellis at LittleSense at necronomicon.co.uk wrote:

If Victor thinks he is descended from French settlers gone native, why, when he thinks no one is reading what he writes any more, does he cite Dollo's Law as the reason for his bad penmanship?

Adam then wrote:

I never bought the theory that Dollo's Law is a coded reference to either the abo's shapeshifting or the prehistoric colonists' evolution. As Jerry Friedman suggested, he only means to say that having learned to write holding the pen the wrong way, he now cannot write holding it the right way.

What Jerry wrote was:

Indeed, Victor could be telling us the story of his own writing career: for some reason he lost the opportunity to write the normal way, and once he learned to hold the pen the wrong way, he could never regain the normal function.

Victor never "lost the opportunity to write the normal way"; he had the opportunity and was even punished for not doing it the normal way. He didn't do it the normal way because he couldn't. The "normal way" of writing involves using the opposable thumb to grip, support, and guide the pencil. Without an opposable thumb, it is impossible to control the pencil while attempting to write in the normal way, resulting in "weak and wiggling lines", and that only by moving the pencil using the whole arm, rather than the muscles of the hand. The best way that Victor found to hold the pencil was to clamp it between his second and third fingers "with my thumb quite free to do whatever it wishes".

Wolfe doesn't make many things any clearer than that. Victor is well aware that it is his inability to control his thumb as a human does that is the cause of his poor penmanship. It is also why Dollo's Law was cited immediately after relating his writing woes. Dollo's Law does not address recalcitrance or bad habits; it addresses lost function and the inability to regain it. The Annese,

though otherwise quite human, somehow lost the normal human usage of their thumbs. It's that simple.

The story of the cat bite affecting his ability to write well is just a piss-poor excuse for a scholar from Earth not being able to write worth a damn; Victor needed some excuse for his poor handwriting once he assumed Marsch's identity. The real cause is the same as for all the other lack of manual dexterity attributed to the Annese--their thumbs are all but useless.

-Roy

Jeff Wilson — 22 May 2002, 05:15 · follows Roy C. Lackey

From:

"Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net>

Wolfe doesn't make many things any clearer than that. Victor is well aware that it is his inability to control his thumb as a human does that is the cause of his poor penmanship. It is also why Dollo's Law was cited immediately after relating his writing woes. Dollo's Law does not address recalcitrance or bad habits; it addresses lost function and the inability to regain it. The Annese, though otherwise quite human, somehow lost the normal human usage of their thumbs. It's that simple.

I thought we just worked out that Dollo's Law is =not= about function; dolphins swim just as good as fish if not better.

Jeff Wilson

How Am I Posting? 1-800-555-6789

"If your SecOp can see you, so can the enemy." -Cpt Law

--

Roy C. Lackey — 22 May 2002, 07:12 · follows Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson quoted and wrote:

Wolfe doesn't make many things any clearer than that. Victor is well aware that it is his inability to control his thumb as a human does that is the cause of his poor penmanship. It is also why Dollo's Law was cited immediately after relating his writing woes. Dollo's Law does not address recalcitrance or bad habits; it addresses lost function and the inability to regain it. The Annese, though otherwise quite human, somehow lost the normal human usage of their thumbs. It's that simple.

I thought we just worked out that Dollo's Law is =not= about function; dolphins swim just as good as fish if not better.

"if the offspring return to a mode of life in which the vestigial organ had an important function, the organ does not return to its original state, but the organism develops a substitute." (Ace, 231)

I wasn't really debating Dollo's Law but, yes, it is about function. An organ which loses a function never regains that function. The organism may develop another organ, or adapt an existing organ to compensate for the lost functionality of the original organ, but once an organ loses a function it is lost to that organ forever. The ability of a mammal to return to the sea and thrive there does not contravene the law.

-Roy

Jeff Wilson — 23 May 2002, 05:29 · follows Roy C. Lackey

From:
"Roy C. Lackey" <rlackey at stic.net>

Jeff Wilson quoted and wrote:

Wolfe doesn't make many things any clearer than that. Victor is well aware that it is his inability to control his thumb as a human does that is the cause of his poor penmanship. It is also why Dollo's Law was cited immediately after relating his writing woes. Dollo's Law does not address recalcitrance or bad habits; it addresses lost function and the inability to regain it. The Annese, though otherwise quite human, somehow lost the normal human usage of their thumbs. It's that simple.

I thought we just worked out that Dollo's Law is =not= about function; dolphins swim just as good as fish if not better.

"if the offspring return to a mode of life in which the vestigial organ had an important function, the organ does not return to its original state, but the organism develops a substitute." (Ace, 231)

I wasn't really debating Dollo's Law but, yes, it is about function. An organ which loses a function never regains that function. The organism may develop another organ, or adapt an existing organ to compensate for the lost functionality of the original organ, but once an organ loses a function it is lost to that organ forever. The ability of a mammal to return to the sea and thrive there does not contravene the law.

The mammal's return shows that the function can return, even if the original organ does not. The dolphin's dorsal serves in place of a fish's, even though the original bony structures are long gone. So why can't a shapeshifting abo likewise manifest new appendages to do the work of human hands it may have had long ago?

Jeff Wilson
How Am I Posting? 1-800-555-6789
"If your SecOp can see you, so can the enemy." -Cpt Law

--

Roy C. Lackey — 23 May 2002, 07:04 · follows Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson quoted and wrote:

I wasn't really debating Dollo's Law but, yes, it is about function. An organ which loses a function never regains that function. The organism may develop another organ, or adapt an existing organ to compensate for the lost functionality of the original organ, but once an organ loses a function it is lost to that organ forever. The ability of a mammal to return to the sea and thrive there does not contravene the law.

The mammal's return shows that the function can return, even if the original organ does not. The dolphin's dorsal serves in place of a fish's, even though the original bony structures are long gone. So why can't a shapeshifting abo likewise manifest new appendages to do the work of human hands it may have had long ago?

Given time (it's been less than 200 years since the French landing), and a new need to handle tools, the abos might well evolve other means of handling them. But, in terms of evolutionary time spans, the abos haven't had time to adapt, even if they needed to. Also, there is no evidence presented in the text of abos actually being able to shapeshift. I suspect that if they really could morph into another shape that their genetic makeup would be so different from that of humans as to make interbreeding impossible.

-Roy

Adam Stephanides — 23 May 2002, 14:30 · follows Roy C. Lackey

on 5/20/02 5:49 AM, Tony Ellis at LittleSense at necronomicon.co.uk wrote:
Wolfe
goes out of his way to show us that Victor was beaten until he bled for getting it wrong: that's a pretty powerful incentive for getting something right if it is physically possible to do so.

A psychological inability to do something can be just as real, and just as resistant to being overcome by force, as a physical inability.

I find it hard to believe that, in a story where tool-use is of crucial significance, Wolfe has devoted a whole page to the phenomenon of Victor's bad handwriting, and topped it off with a paragraph-long definition of Dollo's Law, in italics yet, just to say "Victor's poor handwriting was a bad habit."

In fact Dollo's law refers not to organs that have lost their function, but to organs that have physically shrunk or disappeared. Presumably you aren't going to argue that the prehistoric colonists went through a stage when they had tiny or no hands.

I think you're right, though, that there must be a larger reason why Victor cites Dollo's law. I'd suggest that it's connected to his statements that he is an animal and does not really speak: having raised (he thinks) as an animal, he now cannot become a human, but can only imitate a human. Or perhaps at this point he still believes himself an aborigine. But in any case, I don't think he's referring to the evolution of the Annese' hands.

I vaguely recall something like this being discussed, but don't recall any of the arguments for it. The only thing I can find which could even be thought to suggest that she is either Annese or can change her appearance is
the statement "In the bright daylight he could see fine wrinkles near her eyes; the girl was aging" (267), and to me it seems far more likely that this means no more than what it says.

In a different story, perhaps. But in one where a key theme is
spot-the-alien

It's a key theme on this list; I'm not convinced it's a key theme in the book itself. The only "alien" whom there's much evidence for is Victor; the other alien candidates have been extrapolated based on one or two tiny details.

and where we've already been given the example of Victor's supposedly Annese mother making herself look older to avoid sleeping with men she didn't like, it's a detail that assumes far greater significance.

But Cassilla looks worn after she's slept with two men, not before. If she were able to make herself look unattractive at will, like Victor's mother, she presumably wouldn't be exploited as much as she is.

The theme of slavery and exploitation is far more prominent in 5HC than is "spot-the-alien," and my reading of the quote fits this theme very well, indicating that Cassilla is worn out by her abuse.

--Adam

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 23 May 2002, 19:36 · follows Adam Stephanides

Roy C. Lackey wrote...

Given time (it's been less than 200 years since the French landing), and a new need to handle tools, the abos might well evolve other means of handling them. But, in terms of evolutionary time spans, the abos haven't had time to adapt, even if they needed to.

Let's be a bit more quantitative about this ...

"Evolutionary time" isn't really measured in hours, days, or years, but in a combination of generations, selection pressure, and rates of mutation, which can then be translated into a timeframe.

Assuming the abos to be humans or human-descended, and to have human generation times, 200 years is at most about 15 generations ... which would be insignificant even with high mutation rates and strong selection pressure. The only way you could expect anything significant in 15 gens would be if the favorable mutation(s) were already present in the population (which eliminates mutation rate entirely as a factor) and the selection pressure was simply overwhelming.

Now, on the hypothesis, it is quite possible that genes for manual dexterity of the tool-using variety would not have been entirely extincted in the abos. In fact, there is no plausible reason to assume that they would have been: it's hard to imagine evolutionary pressures which would select against manual dexterity. Then the best case to be made for actual extinction would be a complete lack of selection in either direction, combined with "neutral drift;" which only becomes plausible if we assume a very small population ... not actually all that improbable on the face of it ...

Similarly, if the "shovel test" shibboleth story is accepted as true and taken at face value, then there was in fact an overwhelming pressure -- use a shovel or die! -- favoring tool-using dexterity. (This would be a clear case of artificial selection...)

Making matters somewhat more complicated, we're also probably talking about several genes rather than one, and all of them would have to be coselected in order for tool-using dexterity to reappear in any significant way, which greatly adds to the most-probable timeframe...

(This discussion, by the way, entirely ignores the question of adaptationism, which -- pace and RIP Steven Jay Gould -- I would just as soon ignore.)

Also, there is no evidence presented in the text of abos actually being able to shapeshift. I suspect that if they really could morph into another shape that their genetic

makeup would be so different from that of humans as to make interbreeding impossible.

You'd think so, wouldn't you? But in a universe where you can gain a person's memories by eating his brains, or her personality by drinking her blood, well. Besides, if we can accept a crossing with cuproglobous Vulcans... well... It's probably best to just assume that the abos _are_ human-descended. Probably from a colony planted during the Monarchal age, long before the New Sun came and created the continents we know today. 8*)

Tony Ellis — 23 May 2002, 17:40 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Adam Stephanides wrote:

I think you're right, though, that there must be a larger reason why Victor cites Dollo's law. I'd suggest that it's connected to his statements that he is an animal and does not really speak: having raised (he thinks) as an animal, he now cannot become a human, but can only imitate a human.

That's Nurture. The law he is citing concerns Nature, or heredity.

But in any case, I don't think he's referring to the evolution of the Annese' hands.

Neither do I. He's talking about why he could never write when he held a pen properly. I think he is either citing Dollo's Law as an analogy for what has happened, i.e.: 'just as an organ can atrophy during evolution, so can a higher, human, capability', or the 'organ' he is thinking of is the human brain (or some tool-coordinating part thereof).

Either way, having spent the best part of a page begging the question 'why can't I write when I hold a pen conventionally?' Victor concludes with a law which specifically concerns evolution.

Of the spot-the-alien theme:

It's a key theme on this list; I'm not convinced it's a key theme in the book itself.

In the story we are discussing it is precisely what Marsch has come to St Anne to do.