

Short Story 12: House of Ancestors

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Marc Aramini — 02 Apr 2012, 02:07

House of Ancestors

This first appeared in IF in 1968. It is on pages 150-177 in *Endangered Species*.

SUMMARY:

A rather stern fellow named Joe shows up to the world fair of 1991 or thereabouts with his pregnant wife. Her brother is involved with the plastic company which has made a gigantic skyscraper style building that represents a double stranded DNA molecule, which will be the highlight of the fair. Joe feels like something of an embarrassment at times to his wife and when he catches some people staring at her he thinks about starting a fight with them, but does not, because he does not want to intentionally add to her shame. "For himself he did not care if someone did get tough. Not that he wanted to die." (Which in Wolfe is pretty much coming out and saying he has a death wish.) It is clear that the misfortunes in Joe's life, which include not getting the education he wants and a work accident that left a nail spike in his heart, have left him envious of his brother in law.

Joe is receiving worker's compensation and this is his justification for not getting the surgery to remove the spike which could move and kill him at any time — he justifies this by claiming that with his poor insurance at least Bonnie has that compensation coming in while he is alive.

Joe meets with his brother in law Chuck and they discuss the molecule's construction and the implications of its existence — whether it is modeled after a real DNA molecule or not. Chuck is a bit of a derisive prick, and this seems to instigate Joe's later disdainful treatment of the robots in "the Thing", as if they were talking down to him as Chuck does.

There is a bit of a spiritual rumination on the molecule from its electrical engineer, Baker: "Would the molecule itself recognize its own structure the way that a set of cell transducers read the history of gene structure" There must be a logic to the geometry we are completely incapable of recognizing; but it is the logic that makes all life possible, and the human race only stays alive because it's capable of duplicating itself endlessly ?

When they approach the entrance to the door, it sticks, but instead of following his wife and the others back to get someone to open it, Joe feels dizzy and then pushes it open. He passes through some sort of photocell, then is greeted by an automaton who instructs him the tour must wait two more minutes. There are huge mutated fruit flies on the floor and a gigantic transparent egg that shows the development of a White Leghorn Chicken. Joe responds to the automaton's tour with anger:

"You meant this chicken here goes up through evolution from just one little blob like a germ. So why couldn't you say so instead of all that junk about family trees" If that was true it would mean everybody has their father and grandfather and all that inside them. — He resents being treated as a moron. Joe regales the automaton with random facts that the automaton does not know, some culled from living in the real world, then he goes to the next cell conveyor which

will have a different guide, which proves to be Mendel.

He encounters a familiar girl there with his mother's name, Mary Hogan, and Mendel goes over pea plant genetics. When Mary seems impressed Joe tells her this robot did not really do it, Joe then feels bad. She asks her son to beg Fr. Mendel's blessing, and like an actor playing the pope who can only bless a doll, Mendel blesses Mary instead. In the next room they come across a damaged Lamarck, with a cloth around his eyes and a missing hand with blue and yellow wires sticking out. Joe's doppelganger has done the damage. Another woman has joined them from further back in Joe's family tree. He goes to chase his doppelganger with visions of the spike clogging his heart, but Lamarck tells him that if he leaves without seeing his section of the cell, [he] will miss the point of it all.

Joe bolts to the next room to find Darwin demolished on the floor. He grabs one of the spikes from Darwin's chest to confront himself. With every cell that he passes through, more ancestors follow him.

Finally he confronts the doppelganger over an open holed cell, and drags it back from the edge. He threatens it with the spike, not realizing that it is pressing into his own chest. Mary explains that all the robots are from his cells, that every characteristic from conception is passed on. Spiritually she is the woman who will become his mother. She claims "For a long time it has been known that a person's will to die could actually produce the death, and to do that it must effect a change in certain cell structures."

He contemplates his death wish for a while. The scene shifts to his wife finding him outside the Thing waiting — in Mendel's room he reveals he will have the surgery to have the spike removed.

ALLUSIONS: The robot Mendel and Lamarck who appear as tour guides are pretty classic Wolfe. The developmental concept that an embryo passes through evolution from the ground up seems to interest Wolfe. Mendelian genetics are of course from his studies with pea plants and involve the sexual segregation of genes through meiosis and mitosis. Lamarckian genetics are a bit less scientifically supported (that an individual's life and behavior can influence the development of his children), though the field of epigenetics in which environmental factors can turn genes "on" or "off" for individuals seems like a combination of the two principles.

I feel like any SF which has flirted with the idea of racial memories and inheritance like *Dune* might be somewhere in this tale's family tree.

COMMENTARY:

To some degree this story involves the mystery of where life really comes from — even dealing with chicken and egg, and one of the ideas that must be explained is that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. A developing fetus will climb up its evolutionary chain, as there are no "selective" forces at work to change that fetus early in its cellular replication. This story confronts that in symbolic form, and the mystical idea that an adult organism can somehow also effect changes in the genome in a very, very mysterious fashion, possibly back through time itself. By mentioning that people who want to die can often die, the story posits that Will can affect the physical body. Spirit and desire change matter.

It is in this story that we see a resonance between representation and that which is represented — the rumination that this DNA double helix could be exactly the same as one that exists, calling out to it in resonance — seems an important one to the symbolist and structuralist in Wolfe. Yet with the appearance of Joe's Death-wish self inside the helix, could it not be that rather than one of Joe's brain cells or his heart it is in fact that of his gestating child? This is secondary to the actual mechanism of the machinery scan described more fully in the book —

that Joe walking in alone resulted in every protoform robot being imbued with the memories from his genome. More likely the transtemporal resonance indicates it is a brain or heart cell of Joe himself.

The story is bookended with the offhand reminder that Bonnie is pregnant.

The question is — does Joe go in “the thing” or not? At the end, the comments of Baker make it seem as if Joe never went in the door, and his dizziness a kind of hallucinatory self-examination. However, the external reference that opens the story shows a 3rd person description of Joe struggling with himself: “For a few seconds a figure stood at one of those holes; then another who struggled with him; then both were gone.” This gives the events some kind of external reality.

Also, his memories of childhood with his mother involve a flashing blue and yellow sign, and Lamarck’s damaged hand has blue and yellow wires dangling from it, perhaps showing that Lamarck’s ideas are the guiding principle here.

Joe has been changed by the knowledge of all his forebears, possibly at the genetic level — their memories of standing with him are echoes in his own head: “He could sense her beside him in the blackness; and unexpectedly, overwhelmingly, the certainty came to him that they had waited together like this before, and that the sensation he now felt was familiar through countless repetitions.”

I think that to Wolfe both Darwin and Mendel, while scientifically valid, are symbols of hard determinism — as things are written, so they shall be, until random changes occur that then become the law. Lamarck’s inheritance is more like free will — the decisions that we make can influence the physical world and the future, and I think this is the philosophical appeal. Of course, in this case, Lamarckian ideas are operating across the barrier of time. So Spirit and Will are operating ACROSS time to effect changes.

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS: Mary as the name of his mother seems religious, and his name starts with a J. We don’t know his last name. [Hogan means young or mortal]

FUTURE ECHOES: The idea that the smallest part of a man contains all of that man and all his forebears is certainly confronted in *The Book of the New Sun* in the conversation between Ultan and Severian — where does a man’s being reside? That a face can endure through generations?

Also, here we have an event in which cause and effect seem ridiculously reversed: his ancestors remember standing with him to change his death wish, and he is changed, probably at the cellular level, by an event casting a shadow backwards in time- sounds even more like *New Sun*.

No doubt this is the basis for many of Wolfe’s ideas about heredity and spirit and how they are actually tied to the physical structures of the body. I believe that Wolfe repeats the ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny trope over and over in his fiction, especially in *Short Sun* and the mating rituals of the inhumani in which they pretend to be humans, but most don’t agree with my take on that.

There are two “signatures” in Wolfe’s work — the well documented Wolf and the less well-documented inherited Gene. In this one, the gene and its role gets a major play (I forgot to mention the Warg that showed up in “Trip, Trap”) so we should be on the lookout for the mystical nature of genetic inheritance and its importance to Wolfe.

Next is *Changeling in Castle of Days*.