

Wolfe's Lamarckism

The Urth list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 05 Jun 1998

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Craig Christensen — 05 Jun 1998, 13:41

Dan Parmenter,

You wrote here,

Maybe you can explain why Wolfe defends Lamarckism (explicitly and implicitly), but never really explains why.

and, I've read the same thing elsewhere in the archives. Could you point me to some examples of this? I'd like to read those over.

Craig Christensen

Mark Millman — 05 Jun 1998, 15:45 · follows Craig Christensen

Dan Parmenter and Craig Christensen wrote:
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Wolfe defends Lamarckism at least in part because he thinks that Jean-Baptiste Lamarck got a bad rap from modern science when the Darwinian model of evolution (there were several competing theories of evolution before Darwin's time; Lamarck's was among the front-runners) became the preferred--and by now, the only serious--forum for discussion of the development of species. He also claims to believe in it. I think that when he says this, Wolfe may be nipping a bit at our heels. To begin with, although Lamarckism is not, as Wolfe very correctly points out, the same as Lysenkoism (the latter claims that if you continue to cut the tails off mice, after many generations you will have tailless mice; Lamarck's contention is that if mice never use their tails for anything, the tails will eventually wither and disappear, yielding tailless mice; but if they begin to wrap their tails around objects, the use that the organ gets will stimulate its development, and it's this increased development that is passed on to the offspring, which will eventually give them prehensile tails; while Darwinian evolution says that the mice that can grip with their tails will, presumably, survive more often than the ones that can't, and the difference in mortality between the gripping mice and the non-gripping mice will ensure that there will be more gripping mice to have more--and healthier--offspring, eventually resulting in mice with prehensile tails), it's fairly clear that Lamarckism confuses cause with

effect. It would also require that changes in body parts could affect reproductive DNA, which does not happen. There is, however, a strong progressive element in Lamarck's own ideas--the ones that Wolfe claims to adhere to--and this progressive element (it suggests that life is always improving itself, and that the evolution of humans is, in a way, therefore inevitable) may appeal to Wolfe or to his religious beliefs. You can read more about Lamarck and Lamarckism, and about Lamarckism in nineteenth-century literature (which is probably relevant to Wolfe's ideas), on this very informative Web site: <http://www.clarehall.cam.ac.uk/~djhc2/index.htm> (click on the Biographies link for information about Lamarck himself and his original ideas).

Mark Millman

Craig Christensen — 05 Jun 1998, 16:14 · follows Mark Millman

Mark Millman,

Thank-you for the very clear explanation of Lamarkism. I thought I had a passing familiarity with it, but I confess I was lumping it together with Lysenkoism. I recall the story of the mice clearly.

But, what I was looking for were specific stories where Wolfe discusses or defends his belief in Lamarkism. Can you help me out here?

BTW, have you read DARWIN'S CENTURY by Loren Eiseley? He is another favorite author of mine. In this book he discusses all of the discoveries of others that Darwin built his own theory upon. I enjoyed it, but less than his collections of essays.

Craig Christensen

Mark Millman — 05 Jun 1998, 17:53 · follows Craig Christensen

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As far as I can recall there are no stories in which Wolfe explicitly discusses evolution at all (and now, no doubt, someone will post the titles of several), though he perhaps comes closest in "The Hero as Werewolf", "Tracking Song", and "Peritonitis". I do recall his having discussed the issue in the interview he granted to James B. Jordan (you can find it on Paul Duggan's Wolfe Web site at <http://world.std.com/~pduggan/gwjbj1.html#sci>; the link is directly to the part of the interview in which he discusses Lamarck) and, briefly, on page 15 of the Science Fiction Book Club edition of The Castle of the Otter.

I haven't read Darwin's Century, but I'll look for it now.

Mark Millman