

Forlesen

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 26 Sep 1998

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Robert Borski — 26 Sep 1998, 22:23

For a long time my favorite explanation for the events that transpire in "Forlesen" was provided by the undertaker-type character at the story's end--namely, that Emanuel Forlesen has been "revived by unseen aliens who, landing on the Earth eons after the death of the last man, have sought to re-create the life of the twentieth century." Kind of GW's version of THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION, so-to-speak, with Dilbert as Lobey. On the other hand, for Wolfe to be so generous as to actually provide an explanation for one of his more enigmatic pieces, seems so uncharacteristic of him that this, as well as the other explanations offered, are almost certainly misdirection. I've therefore gone back to the text to see if I could find yet another platform for what happens--one more implicit and subtextual than outright given to us. I guess--to use the parlance of the story--that makes me an Explainer. Should you find my version wanting, you might considering writing your own, and we can add it to those provided by the novelist, aged loremaster, National Hero, warlock, actor, etc.

The first interesting datum, I'm going to argue, originates in the name of the title character. As has been mentioned before, forlesen means "to lose completely;" and "perdition." Valid as well is its German equivalent, vorlesen (pronounced exactly the same, since v = f in German). But not only does vorlesen mean "read aloud," (I believe Sgt. Rock mentioned this earlier), but also "to read out; to retrieve information from a computer." Is it therefore possible Forlesen somehow combines the ideas of damnation and computers, a la Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream"? Given the plethora of both computer and hellish imagery all through the story, I'm going to argue yes.

First, let's consider the hellish imagery.

One of the books that Forlesen finds in his house has a red cover with "a group of men surrounding a winged being." It's supposed to tell you how to be good, according to Edna, but its left side is printed in a scarlet unknown language. The red book is later associated with Revelations, i.e., the Apocalypse.

Forlesen sees something upsetting under the concrete ramparts of the highway, but is "not sure if the casters of these shadows (whatever they might be) were themselves bowed, twisted and deformed." Could these be demons or something akin to Hieronymous Bosch's various grotesques?

On the front of the factory into which the mustangs are being herded, Forlesen sees a picture of "a dog's head in a red triangle on a field of black." Could this be my old friend Cerberus?

Smoke from a stubby flue blows across Forlesen's parking place.

One of the passageways contains "the burnt metal smell of arc welding." Its floor is suggestive of "charred wood."

The windows are boarded up.

A drill operator burns his hand on a smoking drill.

Company executives at Model Pattern Products have the option of being cremated and interred on site.

The referee of Bet-Your-Life wears a red jacket.

Frick's fellow executives sit in his office smoking and knocking out pipes.

The undertaker tells Forlesen that he "may have been oppressed by demons."

And lastly the word "hell" itself is mentioned six times in dialogue, and one of Forlesen's first utterances is "Where in hell am I?"

Now for the computer imagery.

Forlesen's eggs and coffee taste of motor oil.

The sidewalks are stenciled with the following: Go To Your Right--Not To Your Left (which echoes an earlier guidebook caveat: Do Not Go To The House On The Left). This same message appears nonsensical--well, upside down anyway--to someone going sinisterly. Binary notation, of course, must be read left to right in order to yield valid information.

The address of Model Pattern Products is incredibly high (19000370 Plant Parkway) and reads more like a sector address on a huge mainframe.

On his way to work, Forlesen sees diamond-shaped signs that read Hidden Drives. Not driveWAYS, but drives, as in disk drives.

The traffic signals alternate between red and green at 1/4 second intervals, something a human would have trouble processing, but not a machine.

All the character names follow a rigid, hierarchal pattern based on alphabetization. Last names begin with one letter later than first names, and each new generation appears to be named one letter later. E.g., G1«, G2¼, G3Í, G4P, and G5ï, which is Forlesen's generation. Similar organizational trees are used by computers.

[Curiously, while we meet members of generations both before and after Forlesen's, we don't encounter any others, with the exception of Abraham Beale (aka Adam Bean, the founder of MPP). Beale also has more of a history than any other character, having been a lawyer, soldier, cowboy, lumberjack, railroad worker and a farmer. He's also far exceeded his lifespan since each generation seems limited to a single day's duration. Since he's living a vagabondish lifestyle I'm tempted to identify him as the archetypal Wandering Jew. "Abraham" and "Adam," on the other hand, suggest paternity (I also note that each name begins with A and ends with M, recalling Harlan's Ellison's cybermonstrosity, AM). Could he be the engineer/programmer who created the computer housing the events in "Forlesen"? Is he the embodiment of the computer itself? Or is he indeed Ahasuerus, awaiting the Second Coming--"Emanuel" in the Bible is identified as the future Messiah, but Forlesen seems a poor Christ.]

The cop car which stops Forlesen is painted with wholly abstract symbols. ASCII characters?

Driving, Forlesen imagines himself "a mouse descending a clear stream in half an eggshell."

Abraham Beale mentions, "We had as tree once on the farm, a apple tree--McIntoshes I think they were." He also remarks about his father's farm, "That's Dad's farm, them little numbers in the book."

Numbers, indeed, run rampant through the narrative. We're also told that "Waits and Measures" are much more important than any of the other information provided by the guidebooks.

Also frequently mentioned once we reach MPP is its metallic nature, from the building itself to various doors, desks and chairs.

Forlesen's desk speaks to him, but he can find no speaker in it.

People appear differently when seen through glass: i.e., after they've been siliconized. Are they electrons in motion?

Fairchild, in commenting on the Sample Leadership Problem Forlesen attempts to solve, says, "I don't know what the right answer is, only the machine does."

A film on creativity is a re-creation of an actual meeting of real teachers that they photographed and taped, "then had the actors reproduce the debate." Are the events in "Forlesen" similar computerized re-creations?

"A glacial corridor, filled with quiet wind and memory of ice" very eerily recalls the ice caverns of Ellison's "I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream."

As Forlesen is returning home, he sees orange and black machines eating the houses just beyond the light. Anybody ever watch the visual representation of their disk defragmenter at work?

Forlesen's coffin may be a little tight about the shoulders, "but it's got a hell of a good engine."

And lastly there are the final words of the undertaker, in answer to Forlesen's wanting to know if his life has been worth anything: "No," says he. "Yes. No. Yes. Yes. No. Yes. Yes. Maybe." But surely, this mishmash is binary notation, where no=0 and yes=1, don't you think?

Robert Borski

mary whalen — 30 Sep 1998, 17:48 · follows Robert Borski

This is Sean Whalen (prion).

I read this story for the first time today because of the recent discussion of it. First of all, I'd just like to make a minor correction to what Robert Borski recently wrote. He said that the first and last names of the generations of people went AB, BC, CD, DE, EF, etc. Actually, as far as I can see, it just goes in the pattern AB, CD, EF, GH, etc. That is, we meet people with names like Adam Bean, Cappy Dillingham, Enid Fenton, and George Howe. Since E. Forlesen replaces Cappy Dillingham and is replaced by George Howe, I think this those are all in the series. Also, the story seems not to just happen in one day, but to be at least two days, and possibly more. On the first day, he goes home to eat lunch, then goes back to work at 129 "ours" or a little

later. When he arrives, he finds out that he's been promoted. Then there is a break in the text, and the next paragraph has him at the time 125 ours, presumably of some latter day (there are only 240 hours in a day, so this is not the second 125 in the first day).

I also have a few observations. Part of the story seems to be about what Wolfe regards as the loss of personal freedom in the modern world, especially in the section when Forlesen is reading the pamphlet on how to drive a car. Also, I'm surprised that no one has mentioned the possible significance (since this is Wolfe) of the name Emanuel. First of all, it resembles the word "manual" so this might have added significance with the German word *vorlesen* (to read out), a manual readout, or something, of a computer. But also, Emanuel (or Immanuel) is supposedly the name that Christ was to be given (if I remember correctly, it means "God will save us" or something similar).

Finally, what does it signify that the units of measurement of time are called "ours?"

prion