

Forlesen Follow-up

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 15 Oct 1998

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Michael Straight — 15 Oct 1998, 15:22

I was out of town during the discussion of this story in late September and just now have a chance to reply.

I thought Mr. Borski's lists of hell and computer imagery interesting, but they didn't go anywhere. They seemed like evidence in search of an argument. Is Forlesen in hell? Is he a computer program? If so, what's the point? How does that make more sense of the story or give it greater meaning? Can you go any farther down any of these trails?

My own thought (and maybe this is all you were saying and I missed it) is that these details are merely allusive. Wolfe is trying to make us think of a hellish, mechanized, inhuman society (and to make us consider to what extent our own society is influenced by these forces). I don't think we're supposed to decode that Forlesen is "actually" damned or imprisoned in a computer (except to the extent that we are meant to ask ourselves, Are we damned? Are we trapped in a computer? Is there a meaning to all this?)

Mantis, on the other hand, made the hair stand up on the back of my neck with the list of how the yes/no answers match up with original nine explainers. No argument is necessary; it fits so well that it's obviously right and in one swoop transformed the ending from confusing to strangely satisfying. (I can think of only two other online discussions that have so allowed a story to retroactively explode in my brain. Many thanks.) The novelist (Wolfe) is, of course, the one who says "maybe"! And we should therefore expect no more or less from "Forlesen" itself.

It's also interesting that the Actor says 'yes'--do you think that is meant to be the authentic 'yes' of the priest/theologian or does it refer to the Hollywood ending, the possibly crowd-pleasing 'yes' of the the National Hero? It's easy to interpret it cynically, but I wonder if Wolfe might be suggesting that performers have some insight (or some need to believe) that is more like a priest than a novelist?

Prion, your observation that the story seems to occupy more than one day is interesting and makes me want to go back and check and see what I think. To be honest, my first reaction is to wonder if that isn't a typo! It seems so central to the story that it be a single day, that Forlesen be born, spend a day confusedly /in medias res/ and then die.

I think it would weaken the story considerably to imagine there are mornings Forlesen wakes up knowing where he is (at least to the extent that he'd been able to discover the day(s) before), remembering where he goes to work, etc. Unless, that is, there is some counterbalancing significance to there being several days. Do you see any?

I think the spelling "ours" for time units is just an elegant way of making a word that is easily recognized as a time period, but is different from an hour. Changing time to work on some kind of decimal system is a common SF trope for a society organized around machines rather than people. 240 ours/day not only sounds more decimal, but also creates the feeling of a long,

overworked day (I put in 240 hours today!) -- a connotation that would be lost if you divided the day into 240 centons.

Prion noted regarding "Emanuel Forlesen":

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.

"Manual readout" sounds like a computer term, but judging from AltaVista, it is more likely used in engineering when you have to go to a site to read an instrument instead of having the data sent/recorded automatically. So perhaps Emanuel Forlesen must discover/experience any meaning life may have for himself, rather than having it reported to him. (I think that may be stretching too hard. "God with us" is probably more significant.)

-Rostrum

Tony Ellis — 16 Oct 1998, 08:08 · follows Michael Straight

Rostrum wrote:

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Absolutely. The story is allegorical, and to collapse it down to a single, mundane "this is what is -really- going on" explanation is greatly to diminish it. I don't see -any- evidence that this is the interpretation Wolfe wants us to make.

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Agreed, again. Which sounds the more satisfactory: "Forlesen: the story of a man lives his life in a day" or "Forlesen: the story of a man lives half his life in a day, goes home, has his tea, sleeps, then lives the rest of it the next day"?

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Here I disagree. I have always assumed that this is another of the story's many puns. The tone of the how-to-live-your-life manuals Forlesen reads is very dictatorial, reflecting the dehumanized, corporate world he's living in: Don't speed. Don't be late to work. Don't turn left out of your driveway. "ours" is a way of saying your time doesn't belong to you, either. It's "ours."