

Excessive Exegesis and Forlesen

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 16 Oct 1998

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1193>

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Peter T. Cash — 16 Oct 1998, 00:07

Rostrum said:

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?)

I couldn't agree more. I think that the search for "hidden meanings" must have a stopping point, or it distracts you from the life of the story. It's regrettable that Wolfe himself has made comments that encourage this kind of overly exhaustive exegesis, that encourage approaching his work as though it were a code that must be broken. When I read Wolfe, I let the story flow over me. He makes me almost-remember things, makes me see things I almost recognize, makes me see the outlines of ideas and references I almost understand. I like this ambiguity. I know I'm missing stuff that others enjoy finding...but I really don't care. (Of course, I must confess that often when I'm done reading, I wonder, "Now what the hell was that really about?". I never figure it out...but it doesn't bother me...much.)

I think that there are some Wolfe works that not only contain puzzles, but where the puzzle is the point. For example, one is bound to wonder how many nights are really contained in "Seven American Nights". That's a question central to the story. Paradoxically, I don't think there's a right answer to this question (despite the fact that I once argued vociferously with alga about precisely this). I think that what's important about this kind of literary puzzle isn't finding the "right" answer, but looking at it from different aspects, and seeing how many different good answers you can find. I guess I think that this story is more like a kaleidoscope (a little psychedelic allusion here) than a puzzle. You look through the tube, and the pattern fascinates you; you are convinced it is the pattern, the truth. Then the pattern shifts, and you see a new one--and fall in love with it.

As for Forlesen, I think that the theme of memory (or forgetfulness) is an important one in this story. Like Latro, Forlesen can't remember the day before; he can't remember if there was a day before this one, and he can't remember who he is. (We are told that Forlesen remembers his name, but not even what a human looks like.) I would say that the name "Emanuel" is indicative of divinity, and that it may be that Wolfe wants to remind us that we are divine creatures who are at risk of losing their link to God if we forget ourselves. Then we are truly in Hell.

Sgt. Rock

Alex David Groce — 16 Oct 1998, 12:30 · follows Peter T. Cash

In substance, I think that rather than being a puzzle piece where we have to determine "what's really going on," Forlesen is just what Clute calls it in the Wolfe article in the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction--a superb Kafkaesque PARABLE. The hell hints are there, but they don't mean "he's in Hell! That's what's really happening!" Ditto the computer hints. It's not as if in The Penal Colony you should be trying to figure out where the colony is.

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