

"repent harlequin!
said the ticktockman"
by harlan ellison
essay sample



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Conformity. Noah Webster defines it as “ action in accordance with prevailing social standards, attitudes, practices, etc.”. When a man conforms he displays obedience towards the regulations of the society into which he has been planted. Harlan Ellison writes of conformity in his epic entitled “‘ Repent Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman”. And it is through his piece that he paints the idea of non-conformism. Ellison implements in media res organization, crafts a programmed society, interpolates monotonous diction, and alludes to Thoreau’s “ Civil Disobedience” in respect to serving society; all in an effort to stir in readers the true danger that goes hand in hand with depravity in leadership, while also magnifying the importance of a single voice in such a setting.

“ Now begin in the middle, and later learn the beginning: the end will take care of itself”, writes Ellison as he prepares to begin his epic. By introducing the piece in this manner, he offers a signal to the reader of the non-conformity that he will model throughout. The middle of the story comes first, as Ellison promised- as the futuristic setting is introduced. Through describing the emotionless abode, he creates in the reader a disliking of the mechanical nature of the place. A fear of sorts is stirred in the reader as the Ticktockman comes into play, his coldness ever so present from the start. He then moves to the metropolis and its clockwork nature. We envision the orderly denizens, moving throughout their pre-programmed lives and lacking diversity altogether. It is eerie, in a sense, to ponder this society in its robotic form; and this creates unfamiliarity within the reader. By creating this

uncomfortable feeling within the audience, Ellison sets up the welcoming disruption that comes from the Harlequin.

As he commits the mischievous act, the reader finds himself delighting in the presence of the rebel. He offers a hint of familiarity in a world that seems foreign to the reader so far. Ellison then moves to describe the repercussions of the Harlequin's act in throwing off the society's schedule. It is through this clever sequence that Ellison first sows the seeds of non-conformism in the reader. We immediately begin to dislike the system and all that it represents. The author then builds upon these initial feelings by moving to the beginning of the tale- going in-depth into the society's regulations. With every notion of punctuality, the reader becomes more and more in disaccord with how the community is driven. Next, we are introduced to a routine tragedy within this society, as Marshall Delahanty is "shut-off" for tardiness- causing the reader further uneasiness with regards to the Ticktockman and the vile institution that is the government. Finally, Ellison ends by glorifying and martyring Harlequin, creating a climax of emotion within the reader.

It is through Ellison's creation of a robotic and emotionless society that the reader comprehends the necessity of change. As I previously mentioned, the reader quickly becomes uneasy and suspicious towards the society as Ellison paints the scene as the story begins. We first envision the Ticktockman, standing high above everything and everyone, offering a dark shadow over the setting. Ellison then describes the "cubicles of the hierarchy", creating a cold and businesslike foundation for the rest of the community. He creates in the reader a sense that there is deep corruption present in the high levels of this place. After crafting this eerie and almost sadistic hierarchy, we then are

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introduced to the area below. It is here that the systematic nature of the place becomes evident. Lines of mindless men march synonymously, shift after shift.

It is much like a machine, with each anonymous gear moving in fluidity with the next in order to keep the mechanism running smoothly. The totalitarianism of the society is ever clear as we picture this scene in its entirety. A lone man stands high above thousands of followers- all of them held in check by fear. Fear of the state to which they serve, fear what non-conforming actions may bring, fear of unfamiliarity- much like any functioning dictatorship that has ever or will ever exist. Ellison is paralleling this particular society to that of a Cuba, an Iraq, a North Korea. We as readers know very well the dangers of this type of organization. We recognize its flawed nature, its obvious need of repair and reform. We know that this type of systematic totalitarian rule is neither acceptable nor free from imperfection.

Ellison elects to employ bleak, mechanical diction juxtaposed with glimmers of uniqueness in order to contrast the ideas of individuality and uniformity. He begins by offering us the dark and bland description of this society by using words such as "cubicles of the hierarchy"[2], "metronomic"[2], and "practiced motion"[3]. Line after line is sprinkled with bleakness as the reader finds no appeal in the conforming society. He then juxtaposes the mechanical and uniform diction with that of color, joy, and hope. This is first expressed in the mention of "jelly beans"[4]. This particular word appeals to the emotions of the reader and brings out feelings of happiness, fun, and uniqueness. We favor the Harlequin over the Society. We grow fond of what <https://assignbuster.com/repent-harlequin-said-the-ticktockman-by-harlan-ellison-essay-sample/>

he represents. This is only furthered later on in the tale as Ellison continues to insert a plethora of diction choices that further darken the corrupt totalitarian regime. Ellison also conveys the idea of repetition through the phrase " And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes"[5].

He continues to attack the systematic approach to life later on as he describes the expiring of the tardy Marshall Delahanty. He describes the event as " traditional" with " immediate recognition"[7] which portrays the society's downplaying of human life. What is also interesting is the use of quotation marks in the phrase " look of sorrow" [7] when describing the messenger delivering Mr. Delahanty's turn off notice. This infers that it is a programmed " look" of sorrow, rather than an actual genuine emotion of remorse. This is further supported by the words which follow- " plastered hideously". Sorrow is not an actual feeling, but rather a mask that is worn to portray a regret that does not actually exist. This is contrasted in the lines that follow as Harlequin speaks to the crowd of drones occupying the marketplace. Here, he shows his deep and sincere concern for the afflictions and abuses that plague each and every one of them. Ellison uses the word " enjoy"[7] as an encouraging offer from the Harlequin- portraying his wish for reform.

He also uses " why let them..."[7] to illustrate Harlequin's frustration in the state of the society. Further on down the line, Ellison employs the phrase " they used..."[8] to describe the extent to which the Ticktockman went to retrieve the Harlequin. By beginning each clause with this similar phrase and inserting a different method into them all, he emphasizes the dedication of those in authority to crush the rebellion. This anaphora leads to the <https://assignbuster.com/repent-harlequin-said-the-ticktockman-by-harlan-ellison-essay-sample/>

intriguing phrase "...he wasn't much to begin with, except a man..."[8]. This clearly differentiates the importance of the movement as compared to that of Harlequin himself (I will touch upon this idea later). As the piece concludes, Ellison chooses the word "destroyed"[9] to describe the state of Harlequin(now revealed as Everett C. Marm). In doing so, he martyrs the revolutionary- concluding his actions several lines later with the phrase "in every revolution, a few die..."[9]. Harlequin had played his roll.

In tapping into Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience", Ellison portrays three types of men in society to paint for the reader a picture of the true necessity of the revolutionary as pertaining to corruption. Thoreau identifies the first type of man as that of whom serves the state with his body. He portrays them as thoughtless pawns of a higher ideology. They submit fully to authority without the slightest hint of doubt or caution. They make neither moral distinctions nor personal judgments and demonstrate utmost loyalty to those of whom they serve. "Men of straw", "lumps of dirt" [1], with a similar worth to "horses and dogs"[1], is what they are, explains Thoreau. Yet although they are the ones who keep society running smoothly, they are the ultimate victims of their own poison. They must exist in the corrupt setting to which they wholeheartedly support. They have drained themselves of individuality, of freedom, of happiness, of morality, of worth, of emotion altogether. Ellison parallels this particular type of men as the average denizen of the totalitarian metropolis; the empty faces that march punctually to their shifts. Mrs. Delahanty is one of these.

As she received her husband's turn-off notice, she hoped with everything inside of her that it was not for her. This portrays the lack of morality in her

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perversion of maternal and family instinct. This comes off as quite alarming to the reader. The second type of man that Mr. Thoreau sculpts is the citizen who serves the state with his head. They are the respected figures in society, the educated, the upper-class, the power-holders. They are the ones to whom the body answers. For it is the head which controls the actions of said body. However, they are no better than those that were previously spoken of. " Yet such as these..."[1] says Thoreau. These men, although considered above the body, actually mirror it. Moral distinctions are absent. Individuality is deprived. These oppressors are they themselves oppressed in the society to which they choose to keep so. They fear the body, for they know what it is capable of. The obvious Ellison parallel would be the Ticktockman. He presides as the Master Timekeeper, maintaining the corrupt system to which he is praised for.

He knows of the power of Harlequin, he knows of the deceit of his actions- yet he hides behind his mask, plaguing the society with his near omniscience. He is the corrupted dictator, heavily intoxicated by his zeal for control. Yet his power is indeed limited, and there is one to whom he must even answer. Thoreau's final type of man is that of who serves the state with his conscience. They are the ones who elect to make a difference. They are the ones who do what morality and sensibility calls them to do. They are " a very few"[1], states Thoreau, and they are treated as expatriates amongst their peers. These are the highest of men, the purest of men, the most complete of men. They are a necessity to the survival of civilization, and it is through them that the mind and body are held in check.

Ellison's Harlequin is a perfect paradigm of such a man. He enters a society that is morally defunct, joy-deprived, and uniformity-plagued. However, he does not conform to the system. He makes a stand. He becomes a martyr for individuality, a martyr for joy, a martyr for morality, a martyr for all of whom he serves. In fact, he is even a martyr for the head which smites him. As Christ died for those who crucified him, Harlequin died for those who exterminated him. It is the conscience that saves the mind and the body from utter destruction. It was Harlequin who would topple the first domino [4] in a line of many that will eventually lead to the destruction of the institution of totalitarianism and blind conformism. It was Harlequin who would do what he was called to in order to bring about reform. However, Harlequin cannot carry on the sequence in which he began.

"...You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, and in every revolution, a few die who shouldn't, but they have to..."[9]. Ellison is making quite a profound summation here. Harlequin laid his life down for the movement. He was the spark; the match that burns out yet ignites the flame. It can be taken from this that no reform can be made without sacrifice. The egg must be cracked to make the omelet. And it is through loss-and only loss- that change comes. Minority rights would not have evolved in the manner that they did without the assassination of Martin Luther King. The Reformation would not have caught fire in Europe if it was not for the exile of Martin Luther. Christians would be without hope if Christ had not been crucified. And conformity would continue to plague Ellison's society if Harlequin had not been destroyed. It is the loss that inspires, the martyr that gives hope, the sacrifice that atones.

Throughout the piece, Ellison projects the flaws of conformity and uniformity-all to emphasize the need for change. We see Harlequin as the way society should be. However, we cannot achieve his vision without his loss, without his suffering. The conscience must show the way to the mind and the body, but it cannot lead the state to perfection. Much like Moses of the Old Testament who was able to lead his people to the Promised Land yet could not enter. Martin Luther could begin the Reformation, but he could never see his church in action. Martin Luther King could begin to struggle for his people's rights, but could never witness his movement reach its goal. For as the old saying goes- " You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink"; the revolutionaries can show the way and open the door for the mind and body, but, in the end, it is the mind and body themselves who must bear the torch and carry out the movement. If they cannot do so, then the spark is just that...a spark. And nothing more.