

# “Repent, Harlequin!” Said the Ticktockman



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HARLAN ELLISON

Harlan Ellison was a prominent and prolific author and editor working in the genre of speculative fiction during the mid- to late twentieth century. Before becoming a writer, Ellison held a variety of odd jobs including as a tuna fisherman, truckdriver, and cook; he also told a Cleveland newspaper that he was once a runner for the local mob. While a student at Ohio State University, he punched an English professor who denied his writing talent; Ellison left university after two years and would go on to send that same professor his published works. The author of over 1,700 works of fiction and criticism, Ellison won numerous awards for his writing, including the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award, both among the highest honors in the speculative fiction genre. His work also included scripts for film and television, including *Star Trek*. Ellison was also an active member of the speculative fiction community, and, despite his stature in the field, was especially noted for his combative personality and controversial remarks and behaviors. He passed away in June of 2018 at the age of 84.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Written as Cold War tensions continued to rise, the story reflects a pervasive concern with the power of totalitarian governments to control their populaces. In addition, the story’s negative portrayal of industry and technology serves as a reflection of the continued post-war industrialization in America and the increasing reliance on technology in everyday life. Ellison also wrote during a time in which speculative fiction was moving beyond its pulp roots and experimenting in form and style. Both in his own fiction, and in his role as an editor of anthologies such as *Dangerous Visions*, Ellison helped usher in a new era of speculative fiction writing.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ellison wrote during the so-called “new wave” of science fiction, a period during the 1960s and onward characterized by formal experimentation and literary flair. This period came after the “golden age” of science fiction, characterized by an emphasis on hard science and dominated by figures such as Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, and Isaac Asimov. In contrast, the “new wave” was less focused on hard science and more influenced by postmodernism and experimental literary fiction. “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” by speculative fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin, also deals with a supposedly utopian and orderly world with a dark, dystopian underbelly, highlighting the ways in which society willingly goes along with

those in power. “The Night That All Time Broke Out,” written by Brian W. Aldis and included in an anthology edited by Ellison, also deals with a futuristic society in which time can be manipulated, although with much different consequences than “Repent...” Ellison’s own story, “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” is another dystopian short story that deals with the oppressive power of technology and a bleak dystopian future. Ellison’s story “The Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World” also reflects a pessimistic view of humanity in a futuristic society that is both highly technologized and deeply amoral.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman”
- **When Written:** 1965
- **When Published:** December 1965
- **Literary Period:** mid-twentieth century speculative fiction
- **Genre:** Science Fiction
- **Setting:** A futuristic society in which timeliness is strictly enforced
- **Climax:** The Harlequin is captured by the Ticktockman
- **Antagonist:** The Ticktockman
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Written in a single session:** The story was reportedly written in a single six-hour period. Ellison submitted it to a Milford Writer’s Workshop for critique the next day.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In a futuristic world, time is highly regulated and tardiness results in a subtraction of minutes, days, or years from an individual’s life. Habitual tardiness can even result in death, implemented via a form of technology called a cardioplate that can remotely stop the beating of the heart.

The Harlequin is a man who struggles to fit into the mold of this society and is constantly late. Dressed in a jester’s costume, he rebels against the order that he finds so constricting by engaging in acts of non-violent domestic terrorism—making people late, fooling authorities, and interrupting the highly regimented flow of things. The lower classes view him as a hero, while the wealthy and powerful see him as a dangerous nuisance.

One day, the Harlequin drops thousands of **jelly beans** onto the automatic conveyor belts taking workers to and from their

factory shifts. The colorful beans delight the workers but jam the belts, ultimately disrupting the day's schedule by seven minutes. This "disaster" brings the Harlequin to the attention of the Ticktockman, a solemn figure in charge of ensuring that order is maintained and responsible for utilizing the technology that metes out time.

Because he does not know the Harlequin's real name, the Ticktockman cannot remotely turn off his cardioplate. The Harlequin evades capture for a time, though the Ticktockman eventually hunts him down. While interrogating the Harlequin, whose real name is Everett C. Marm, the Ticktockman insists that most people appreciate an ordered society. The Harlequin replies that he'd rather die than live in this unnatural, tyrannical world.

The Ticktockman sends Marm to a reeducation camp, where he is brainwashed in a manner that the narrator indicates is similar to the methods used in [1984](#). When he returns, he is filmed repudiating his earlier actions and endorsing his support for the Ticktockman and for the order of society as a whole.

Nevertheless, his rebellious actions are suggested to have had an effect on society, possibly the first small rumblings of an avalanche of change, as the Ticktockman himself has become late, throwing the schedule off irreparably by a few minutes.



## CHARACTERS

**The Harlequin** The Harlequin is the alias of Everett C. Mann, the protagonist of the story. Perpetually late, and therefore a misfit in his highly regimented society, the Harlequin engages in acts of minor domestic terror in order to disrupt the system and express his individuality. The Harlequin is dating Pretty Alice, who is frustrated with his idiosyncratic character and his inability to act normally or to be on time. As part of his assumed identity, the Harlequin dresses in a jester's motley, both in order to disguise his real identity and so that his acts of disruption are easily identifiable. While the Harlequin doesn't cause anyone any overt harm to anyone, he plunges the day-to-day operations of the world into chaos, encourages rebellion, and poses a threat to the established order. For the Harlequin, his acts of resistance are both absurd and deeply serious; he is at once a tongue-in-cheek joker and a determined rebel.

Because of this, the Harlequin is the nemesis of the Ticktockman, who is in charge of regulating time and punishing the infractions of citizens. The Harlequin is in many ways the opposite of the Ticktockman, and serves as a challenge to his dominion over society. Even when the Harlequin is captured by the Ticktockman, he refuses to capitulate, choosing any punishment the Ticktockman can offer over renouncing his own acts of rebellion. Though he is ultimately brainwashed into repenting, the final moments of the story, in which the Ticktockman himself is late, suggest that the Harlequin has

indeed sown the seeds of this society's destruction.

**The Ticktockman** The Ticktockman is the highest authority in the world of the story, an imposing masked figure able to control the technology that regulates times and metes out life and death to citizens. If someone is tardy too many times, the Ticktockman has the power to turn off his "cardioplate," essentially stopping his heart and killing him. While this technology infuses every level of society, the Ticktockman is the only one who understands and controls it. As with the Harlequin, the Ticktockman's name is an alias. Subordinates whisper the nickname behind his back and call him Master Timekeeper to his face. That his real name is never revealed suggests that the man underneath the mask is irrelevant, and that the Ticktockman is larger than life and symbolic of this society's frighteningly oppressive and authoritarian nature; even his own coworkers fear him. The Ticktockman is thus directly threatened by the Harlequin's subversion and hunts him down in order to quash the challenge to the status quo that he represents. The Ticktockman does succeed in capturing and subduing the Harlequin, but by the conclusion of the story it's implied that the Ticktockman's world has been thrown slightly off-kilter, as the Ticktockman himself is shown to be several minutes late.

**Pretty Alice** Pretty Alice is the Harlequin's girlfriend, and is in some ways representative of an average citizen in the Harlequin's world. While she appears to feel affection for the Harlequin, she is also frustrated by his idiosyncrasies, in particular his habitual tardiness and his inflected speech. Later in the story, the Ticktockman implies that Pretty Alice has turned the Harlequin in, indicating that she values herself and the orderliness of the system that she is a part of over her relationship with the Harlequin.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### INDIVIDUALITY AND RESISTANCE

In the world of "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman," society's extreme emphasis on timekeeping and orderliness has resulted in an obedient, conformist population in which people rarely distinguish themselves from one another. One notable exception, however, is the Harlequin, so named for his jester-like costume. The Harlequin not only flouts the rigid schedules of the Ticktockman—an authority with the power to "turn off," i.e. kill, those who fail to be on time—but also actively engages

in defiance and disruption of this system, despite the potentially fatal consequences. Through the character of the Harlequin, Ellison emphasizes the importance of individuality as an act of resistance in an intensely homogenous, totalitarian world.

Time and tardiness represent the ultimate manifestation of conformity or lack thereof in the story. Ellison uses these examples to highlight the way in which any sign of individuality, however innocuous, is punished in a totalitarian society. In one example, Gerold Atterly is suspended from school not because of poor grades or bad behavior, but because he is habitually late. Here Ellison emphasizes the fact that any positive qualities a person might have don't necessarily outweigh the consequences of individualism; Gerold is an excellent student, but that doesn't matter to the Ticktockman. His parents receive a stern letter informing them that Gerold will be suspended unless "some more reliable method can be instituted guaranteeing he will arrive at his classes on time. [...] his constant flouting of the schedules of this school makes it impractical to maintain him in a system where the other children seem capable of getting where they are supposed to be on time and so it goes." Individuality is thus presented as being distinctly harmful to others. That the Harlequin is a distinct personality, then, is not just an unusual quirk; it's actively disruptive and unacceptable to a society that relies upon the predictability of conformity in order to function.

The Harlequin's nonconformity is reflected directly in his appearance: he wears full "motley" (a traditional medieval fool's costume), has a "thatch" of auburn hair, and his "elfin grin" has "a tooth missing back there on the left side." He makes exaggerated facial expressions as he effectively pranks his fellow citizens—"inserting thumbs into large ears," sticking out his tongue, and rolling his eyes as he drops a mass of colorful **jelly beans** on the unsuspecting commuters below (which he alternately refers to as ants or maggots).

Most offensive in this world, of course, is the fact that the Harlequin is perpetually late—which at first seems not a deliberate intention but a natural inclination; that is, merely a mark of who he is as a person. He is unable to conform even in his personal relationships, made evident in his conversations with his partner Pretty Alice. The Harlequin is habitually tardy with Alice, marking himself as different even when he doesn't mean to. For instance, after she scolds him for telling her when he'll be home given that he knows he's always late, the Harlequin thinks to himself, "*I'll be late. I'm always late. Why do I tell her these dumb things?*" Alice further laments that the Harlequin (whose real name is Everett C. Marm) speaks "with a great deal of inflection"—another indicator of his individuality.

Because he is never able to assimilate into the militantly timely society of the Ticktockman, the Harlequin is an outcast and de facto rebel almost by necessity. In such a conformist society, the story thus suggests, even the simple assertion of

individuality is an act of resistance. Indeed, the narrator states early in the story that the Harlequin "had become a personality, something they had filtered out of the system many decades before," adding, "He was considered a Bolivar; a Napoleon; a Robin Hood; a Dick Bong (Ace of Aces); a Jesus; a Jomo Kenyatta." The narrator thus emphasizes the Harlequin's status as a singular shaper of history, and immensely influential man whose assertion of a belief—in this instance, merely the fact that people are not meant to live their lives by an inflexible schedule—can inspire the masses.

Indeed, when the Ticktockman has caught Harlequin and is interrogating him, the Ticktockman says that "most people enjoy order," implying that it's normal to conform, not the other way around. Harlequin resists this argument, however, insisting that he and most people he knows would rather be individuals than adhere to an imposed and artificial regimen. And when the Ticktockman accuses him of being "a non-conformist," the Harlequin simply responds, "That didn't used to be a felony," going on to express his hatred for the "terrible world" that now surrounds him.

By exploring the conflict between conformity and individuality, Ellison highlights the ways in which the Harlequin's defiance is disruptive to the society in which he lives, and the extent to which totalitarian states rely on conformity in order to maintain the status quo. The narration of the story itself displays many idiosyncratic or unusual elements, further emphasizing the value of refusing to conform to arbitrary norms. These include a lengthy exposition on jelly beans, which is mostly run-on sentences and flouts many common stylistic rules, and which mirrors the way that the jelly beans within the story itself disrupt the rigid schedule of the factory workers. The story is also told in a mix of styles and begins in the middle before jumping to the beginning and then the end, again illustrating a refusal to obey the so-called "rules" of storytelling. Finally, the narrator frequently breaks the fourth wall to address the reader directly, encouraging them to think critically about the contents of the story and the medium itself—underscoring its status as a tale of warning about the perils of conformity.



### THE POWER OF ANONYMITY

In "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman," the Harlequin is unacceptable to society because he is an individual in a world that has effectively outlawed individuality. Even more dangerously, however, he is able to assume a specifically *anonymous* identity, which both gives him enormous symbolic power and puts him on a level with the only other anonymous actor, the Ticktockman. Here Ellison highlights the subversive nature of an anonymous identity in a technologized, informational world where everything else can be known, calculated, and controlled.

Part of the threat that the Harlequin poses to the Ticktockman and to the orderliness of society itself is that he is anonymous

and, therefore, easily becomes symbolic. The Harlequin's assumed name, **mask** and costume, and larger-than-life acts of defiance elevate him above the status of an individual to that of a dangerous idea and burgeoning movement. Because of this assumed character, Harlequin is seen as a hero by the common people in a way that he otherwise might not be. They are able to identify him with the ultimate symbol of resistance. Similarly, the upper classes of society, who benefit tremendously from the order imposed by the Ticktockman, fear and hate the Harlequin because of the disorder, social unrest, and potential for change he represents.

The Ticktockman is agitated by the Harlequin's existence particularly because of his anonymous nature and resolves to find out who Harlequin really is: "This time-card I'm holding in my left hand has a name on it, but it is the name of *what* he is, not *who* he is," he says. "The cardioplate here in my right hand is also named, but not *whom* named, merely *what* named. Before I can exercise proper revocation, I have to know *who* this *what* is." On a literal level, the Ticktockman needs this knowledge to access the technology to "turn off" (kill) the Harlequin; figuratively, though, this represents his awareness that there exists a man apart from the powerful anonymous symbol that is the Harlequin.

Yet as a masked figure with immense power himself, the Ticktockman's identity also readily becomes symbolic. He is not only the bureaucratic arbiter of time, but also the representation of time and regimentation itself. Even to those deeply enmeshed within the bureaucracy of this society, the Ticktockman still inspires fear due to his anonymous nature. The narrator notes, "You don't call a man a hated name, not when that man, behind his mask, is capable of revoking the minutes, the hours, the days and nights, the years of your life. He was called the Master Timekeeper to his mask. It was safer that way."

Whether called the Ticktockman or Master Timekeeper, the character's various names give nothing away about the person behind them. The Ticktockman is larger than life, and comes to embody the power of this society as a whole rather than the power of one person. This is illustrated particularly at the end of the story, when, although the Ticktockman is now several minutes late, he refuses to believe this is the case. Because the Ticktockman essentially *is* the schedule itself, he cannot fall behind. While the disruption caused by the Harlequin *has* in fact altered the timeliness of the Ticktockman, to acknowledge this disruption would be to diminish the Ticktockman's enormous symbolic power.

The Harlequin loses some of his own symbolic strength, meanwhile, when he is demoted to merely Everett C. Marm. In a society where everything is known and calculated, anonymity provides the opportunity to cultivate a deviant and unique identity while at the same time escaping consequence. When this anonymity is stripped away, however, an individual is

reduced to a known quantity without significant power.

That is why, once the Ticktockman has found and identified the Harlequin, the latter is no longer able to resist. The Ticktockman now has the power to kill Everett, but no longer needs to. Instead, he sends him to a reeducation camp. While the Harlequin's defiance is symbolic and grandiose, Everett's defiance is described as merely a flaw of character: "After all, his name was Everett C. Marm, and he wasn't much to begin with, except a man who had no sense of time." The narrator further highlights that individuals can die in a way in which symbolic characters cannot: "So Everett C. Marm was destroyed, which was a loss, because of what Thoreau said earlier, but 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, because that's the way it happens, and if you make only a little change, then it seems to be worthwhile."

In destroying the symbol of the Harlequin, the Ticktockman is able to successfully reassert his power over society and to reestablish the order and synchronization that allows it to function properly. The Harlequin is diminished to a mere man, meanwhile, and is no longer representative of the kind of chaos that poses a real threat to the Ticktockman's world. However, the symbolic power of the assumed identity of the Harlequin *has* still had a real effect on that world—disrupting schedules, inspiring citizens, and even, ultimately, resulting in the tardiness of the Ticktockman himself. In exploring the anonymity of both Harlequin and the Ticktockman, Ellison emphasizes the way in which a larger-than-life identity can transform individuals into symbols and imbue them with power.



### ORDER, CLASS, AND AUTHORITY

Throughout "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman," rigid adherence to an imposed order is characterized as necessary for the continued maintenance of society. This order, in turn, is inextricable from the class structures of the dystopian world that Ellison has created. In the society of the Harlequin and the Ticktockman, order—and timekeeping in particular—is used both to control individual citizens and to uphold an established social hierarchy, suppressing the lower classes and keeping those in power at the top. Ellison's story, then, illustrates the way in which stringent order and authority are distinctly unnatural and often parasitic means to consolidate upper-class power while disenfranchising the masses.

It's implied throughout the story that the common people are unhappy with the highly regimented nature of their world and would change it if they were able. The Harlequin is representative of this desire for change and freedom. The narrator describes the lower class of people as rooting for Harlequin and identifying him with a succession of influential, disruptive historical figures: "But down below, ah, down below, where the people always needed their saints and sinners, their

bread and circuses, their heroes and villains, he was considered a Bolivar; a Napoleon; a Robin Hood; a Dick Bong (Ace of Aces); a Jesus; a Jomo Kenyatta.” For the lower classes, the Harlequin is an inspirational revolutionary figure, and one who is symbolic of the possibility of real change.

The Harlequin echoes the sentiments of the lower classes in his conversation with and defiance of the Ticktockman: “Scare someone else. I’d rather be dead than live in a dumb world with a bogeyman like you.” Here, even when facing death, the Harlequin still recognizes that the rigid adherence to order that is a fundamental part of the Ticktockman’s world will never benefit him or people like him. For the Harlequin, it is better to die trying to resist this order than to capitulate and live in a world that the Ticktockman controls absolutely.

The regimented nature of society enforces a hierarchy built on adherence to rules, lack of deviation, and brutal punishment for those who refuse to conform. Those who profit from the system, however, are unlikely to change it, and consequences at the bottom strata of society seem much higher than those at the top. The narrator describes the upper-class reaction to the Harlequin as one of fear and distaste because of the threat he represents to their established, comfortable position: “And at the top—where, like socially-attuned Shipwreck Kellys, every tremor and vibration threatens to dislodge the wealthy, powerful, and titled from their flagpoles—he was considered a menace; a heretic; a rebel; a disgrace; a peril.” The contrast in reaction between these different classes underscores the fact that this orderly world benefits those at the top while taking advantage of those at the bottom rungs of society.

Throughout the story, timekeeping is specifically shown as a mechanism those in positions of authority use to keep people in line and maintain hierarchies. The narrator poignantly describes the ways in which an industrialized sense of time slowly enslaves the populace, “until it becomes more than a minor inconvenience to be late. It becomes a sin. Then a crime.” It’s clear that the state has slowly gained the power to punish citizens for even minor infractions, and ultimately has assumed total control of their lives.

The narrator describes the devious method of social control through the allotment of time: “What they had done, was to devise a method of curtailing the amount of life a person could have. If he was ten minutes late, he lost ten minutes of his life. An hour was proportionately worth more revocation. If someone was consistently tardy, he might find himself, on a Sunday night, receiving a communique from the Master Timekeeper that his time had run out.” Not only does the state have complete control over and knowledge of the actions and infractions of individuals, but they also have the power to mete out life and death.

Yet when addressing the people, the Harlequin highlights the artificial and harmful nature of this imposed order, asking, “Why let them order you about? Why let them tell you to hurry

and scurry like ants or maggots? Take your time! Saunter a while! Enjoy the sunshine, enjoy the breeze, let life carry you at your own pace! Don’t be slaves of time, it’s a helluva way to die, slowly, by degrees ... down with the Ticktockman!” By highlighting the relationship between order and authority throughout the story, Ellison emphasizes the ways in which those in power use rules and regulations in order to control those below them and maintain their own influence. Conversely, he also shows the ways in which a defiance of order is, by necessity, a defiance of authority.



## TECHNOLOGY, PRODUCTIVITY, AND TOTALITARIANISM

In the world of “Repent, Harlequin!” Said the Ticktockman,” the technology employed by the Ticktockman and his minions serves to both characterize and maintain their power. In particular, this technology allows them to control the populace with lethal force, and to ensure the productivity of workers and the economy. Ellison highlights the ways in which technology—including industrial technology and timekeeping, along with their resultant emphasis on productivity and uniformity—can lead a society toward totalitarianism and a lack of regard for human life.

Technology gives the Ticktockman the ultimate power over citizens of his world, nipping their ability to resist in any way in the bud. The technology of timecards and cardioplates lets the Ticktockman literally confer life and death upon his subjects. Citizens are only granted a finite allotment of time, and each instance of tardiness, noted from the timecard, can subtract from that allotted time. If a citizen is habitually tardy, they can even have their cardioplate shut off, stopping their heart and killing them. The Ticktockman has the ability to track even minute infractions, so that the state is able to effectively punish even minor transgressions and failures of the citizens to adhere to the established order. This technology is only available to the Ticktockman, however, and is shrouded in mystery to the extent that only he has full control over it, further increasing his totalitarian hold on society.

The technology used by the Ticktockman is also impossible to escape, as illustrated by the example of the husband who flees to “deep in the Canadian forest two hundred miles away” after receiving his “turn-off notice”—yet who is instantly killed regardless because the Ticktockman still has access to his cardioplate. This again underscores the horror of totalitarian control made possible by certain dystopian technological advances.

The order imposed by the Ticktockman not only results in a society that is controlled by technology but is also completely *dependent* upon the correct functioning of that technology. For instance, when the Harlequin dumps thousands of **jelly beans** from the sky and disrupts the conveyor belt-like moving

sidewalks that propel workers to and from their factory shifts, he is able to significantly alter the schedule for the day and to cause a major disruption to the Ticktockman's order. The cascading effects of this minor disturbance emphasizes the ways in which any slight technological failure has the potential to create a big impact in the society as a whole. That this failure is due to something as ridiculous as jelly beans further suggests a certain precariousness to a society so reliant upon technology for even minor, mundane aspects of life; had citizens simply walked to work, the Harlequin's practical joke would not have had nearly such destructive power. Yet citizens have clearly become slaves to technology in nearly every facet of their lives. Here Ellison implicitly connects technology to lack of independent thought or self-reliance, which in turn makes the populace easier to control.

In addition to disrupting the schedule, disturbances like that of the jelly beans also disrupt the chain of supply and demand of the industrialized economy, resulting in unforeseen shortages and surpluses that wreak havoc on profit in this world. The Harlequin is therefore a threat to society not just because of what he symbolizes, but because of the tangible negative effect he has on industry. Technology, order, and industry go hand in hand—and a threat to one of them is a threat to all of them. In fact, order, economy, and technology are all conflated in the totalitarian society of the Ticktockman to the point that disobedience in any one area is an affront to patriotism itself: "It was, after all, patriotic. The schedules had to be met. After all, there was a war on!" In the society of the Ticktockman, economic productivity is of the highest value because it makes the country stronger; technology that enables such productivity is thus vaulted while anything that gets in the way of that productivity must necessarily be eliminated—even if that means robbing life of spontaneity, creativity, and individuality. To depart from the established order in any way poses a severe threat to society precisely because the world of the Ticktockman is finely tuned to maximize production and minimize natural human difference.

Throughout the story, Ellison emphasizes the ways in which those in power wield technology for totalitarian ends, in a way that ultimately serves as a warning against both technology and authority. Written in 1965 during an era that saw the increasing presence of technology in everyday life as well as the ongoing Cold War, Ellison's story reflects a heightened anxiety concerning the spread of totalitarianism, and the ways in which technology and authoritarian overreach can exacerbate each another.



## JELLY BEANS

In the story, the Harlequin uses "one hundred and fifty thousand" **jelly beans** in order to disrupt the movement of a conveyor belt leading workers to and from their factory jobs. The colorful candies serve as a physical representation of the kind of chaos and joviality the Harlequin is capable of, while also implicitly highlighting the precariousness and cruelty of a society that so rigidly adheres to an artificial order. The jelly beans disrupt the movement of the workers—who break ranks amidst the colorful deluge—thus disrupting the finely tuned chain of supply and demand regulating the entire society, and, therefore, disrupting the order of society itself. The jelly beans—which are brightly colored, flavored, and entirely silly—manage "to work their way into the mechanism of the slidewalks," causing "a hideous scraping as the sound of a million fingernails rasped down a quarter of a million blackboards, followed by a coughing and a sputtering." The subsequent seven-minute delay is described as a "disaster"; that such tiny, silly objects can so easily derail efficiency-focused technology implicitly devalues this technology while also underscoring the precariousness of a society that crumbles in the face of even the most minor delay.

Ellison further underscores the sheer ridiculousness of the beans' presence through his effusive and descriptive prose, writing, "Jelly beans! Millions and billions of purples and yellows and greens and licorice and grape and raspberry and mint and round and smooth and crunchy outside and soft-mealy inside and sugary and bouncing jouncing tumbling clittering clattering skittering [...] Jelly beans!" That they fill "the sky on their way down with all the colors of joy and childhood and holidays" highlights their association with a time before the rigid monotony of the Ticktockman's intensely structured society. While the jelly beans may pose a threat to the established order of things, they are also random and fun, as evidenced by the workers' reactions to their surprise deluge: this "torrent of color and sweetness out of the sky from above" causes the workers to laugh as they tumble off their conveyor belts, escaping, for a moment, the humdrum demands of this dystopia as they pop "little jelly bean eggs of childish color into their mouths. It was a holiday, and a jollity, an absolute insanity, a giggle." Childhood and holidays are both characterized by joy for joy's sake, meaning the jelly beans directly challenge this world's extreme emphasis on efficiency and productivity that effectively reduces human workers to homogenous machines.



## MASKS AND COSTUMES

In the story, both the Harlequin and the Ticktockman disguise themselves and assume a larger, symbolic identity. These masks and costumes represent the ways in which anonymity can lend greater power to individuals, allowing them to appear larger than life. The



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

Harlequin's court jester costume and anonymous nature grants him symbolic resonance both for the lower classes, who view him as a sort of folk hero, and for the upper classes, who view him as a threat to their established power. Without his costume the Harlequin is simply Everett C. Marm, someone who "wasn't much to begin with, except a man who had no sense of time." Assuming the guise of the Harlequin turns this character flaw into a potent symbol of rebellion. This, in turn, is what makes him a threat to the Ticktockman; while the Ticktockman has the technology to stop any individual's heart, he is powerless to stop more nebulous things like the beliefs, hopes, and dreams of citizens who wish that the world were different. Moreover, the Ticktockman cannot use his lethal technology until he figures out the Harlequin's true identity. The Harlequin's masked nature thus poses a double threat and gives him immense power in a society where the Ticktockman knows almost everything.

The Ticktockman himself is another masked character whose anonymity allows him to become larger than life. His real name is never revealed in the story, and he is only ever referred to as the Ticktockman behind his back and "Master Timekeeper" to his face. As with the Harlequin, the Ticktockman's masked nature enables him to become more than just an individual. Instead, he is representative of an oppressive, authoritarian society as a whole. Because he is conflated so directly with society itself, he seems almost impossible to defy or destroy, which makes the Harlequin's resistance all the more startling and meaningful.

This early quote introduces the Harlequin as an anomaly in the world of the Ticktockman. While most of this society has succumbed to rigid order and uniformity, the Harlequin is seen as an anachronistic throwback to a time before everything was so meticulously controlled because he is an individual personality. At least according to those in power, individuality and personality are undesirable characteristics for a citizen to have, and make the Harlequin dangerous. While it is unclear exactly how the Harlequin came to be this way, it is clear that he is very different from most other people in his world.

The quote also shows the ways in which different classes have different reactions to the Harlequin. He is described as someone who offends the polite sensibilities of the middle class, precisely because of the ways he is not afraid to have an individual personality and to push back against the status quo.

☞ And at the top—where, like socially-attuned Shipwreck Kellys, every tremor and vibration threatens to dislodge the wealthy, powerful, and titled from their flagpoles—he was considered a menace; a heretic; a rebel; a disgrace; a peril.

**Related Characters:** The Harlequin

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 29

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote further establishes the class hierarchy of this dystopian world, in which those at the top benefit most. While the middle classes of the Ticktockman's society may consider the Harlequin disgraceful, he is especially loathed by those at the very top because he threatens to topple them from their privileged positions completely. These upper classes are described as "Shipwreck Kellys" in reference to Alfred Kelly—a man famous for polesitting in the 1920s and '30s. The implication is that the upper class is teetering at the tops of flagpoles, trying to stay there for as long as possible and petrified of being made to fall.

The Harlequin poses a threat to the upper classes precisely because he represents the capacity for change that may cast them from their high-up positions, whether that change is regression to an earlier time of individuality or the precursors of a revolution that will bring something new. Either way, the Harlequin is dangerous to them and must therefore be eliminated as soon as possible, before he



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Open Road edition of *Paingod and Other Delusions* published in 2014.

### 'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman Quotes

☞ He had become a *personality*, something they had filtered out of the system many decades before. But there it was, and there *he* was, a very definitely imposing personality. In certain circles—middle-class circles—it was thought disgusting. Vulgar ostentation. Anarchistic. Shameful.

**Related Characters:** The Harlequin

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 29

### Explanation and Analysis

causes any further disruption to their world. He is no longer just a joke or an anomaly—he is a threat.

☞ But down below, ah, down below, where the people always needed their saints and sinners, their bread and circuses, their heroes and villains, he was considered a Bolivar; a Napoleon; a Robin Hood; a Dick Bong (Ace of Aces); a Jesus; a Jomo Kenyatta.

**Related Characters:** The Harlequin

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 29

### Explanation and Analysis

Having described the middle- and upper-class reactions to the Harlequin, Ellison turns to the lowest rungs of society. The lower classes are described as rooting for and nearly worshipping the Harlequin, as he is representative of the possibility of change. The quote suggests that it seems to be characteristic of the lower classes to always need a hero to look up to, as indicated by the examples of Napoleon, Robin Hood, etc. Each of the figures listed were singular men who nevertheless sparked enormous societal change—individual personalities of the kind this dystopian world seeks to stamp out.

For the lower classes, the Harlequin and his antics also represent a kind of entertainment, someone that they can watch and cheer on as he performs his spectacles. At the same time, the Harlequin's acts of defiance represent a distinct subversion of the social order, and give the lower classes hope that one day the system that keeps them at the bottom might be changed for the better. The lower classes love the Harlequin for the same reason that the upper classes fear him: because is emblematic of the possibility of change.

☞ “This is *what* he is, said the Ticktockman with genuine softness, “but not *who* he is. This time-card I'm holding in my left hand has a name on it, but it is the name of *what* he is, not *who* he is. The cardioplate here in my right hand is also named, but not *whom* named, merely *what* named. Before I can exercise proper revocation, I have to know *who* this *what* is.”

**Related Characters:** The Ticktockman (speaker), The Harlequin

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 30

### Explanation and Analysis

The Ticktockman, having become aware of the Harlequin's disruptive antics, focuses on the nature of the Harlequin's identity and specifically the power of his anonymity. While the Ticktockman theoretically has power over the whole of society, including the power to end any citizen's life at any time, he doesn't have this power over the Harlequin because he doesn't have access to his real identity. While the Ticktockman may know “what” the Harlequin is, he needs to know “who” he is in order to control and suppress him.

This suggests that the Harlequin is dangerous precisely because of the anonymous identity that he wields, which transforms him into a larger-than-life figure. His anonymity gives him the ability to become a symbol of rebellion and to subvert the Ticktockman's power by committing acts of defiance against society. It is only through finding and exposing the identity of the Harlequin that the Ticktockman can reassert his own power and eliminate the threat that the Harlequin represents.

☞ The System had been seven minutes worth of disrupted. It was a tiny matter, one hardly worthy of note, but in a society where the single driving force was order and unity and equality and promptness and clocklike precision and attention to the clock, reverence of the gods of the passage of time, it was a disaster of major importance.

**Related Characters:** The Harlequin

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 32

### Explanation and Analysis

After the Harlequin dumps jelly beans on the conveyor belts bearing workers to and from their jobs, he generates a sizeable amount of disruption and confusion that reverberates throughout the entire society. While the disruption only goes on for about seven minutes, this has an

enormous cumulative effect on the finely-turned systems of the Ticktockman. The Harlequin's disruption, however small, is enough to seriously throw off the schedule of the day. This suggests that the rigid order of this world is in fact far more precarious than it may appear.

Even more, the Harlequin's actions have enormous symbolic significance, that makes it even more disruptive than just seven minutes of lost time. Because time is so carefully regulated in this society, a disruption in time is seen as an affront to order itself. The delay caused by the Harlequin is a "disaster" in the eyes of society and of the Ticktockman himself because it is representative of a profound disrespect for the thing that is valued most in this world: timeliness.

☝ And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes goes goes goes goes tick tock tick tock tick tock and one day we no longer let time serve us, we serve time and we are slaves of the schedule, worshippers of the sun's passing; bound into a life predicated on restrictions because the system will not function if we don't keep the schedule tight.

Until it becomes more than a minor inconvenience to be late. It becomes a sin. Then a crime.

**Related Characters:** The Harlequin

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 33

### Explanation and Analysis

While the state of affairs in the story may be a dramatic extreme, here the decent toward a tyranny of time is characterized as a slippery slope, one that progresses from schedules to inconveniences to crimes with surprising ease. This passage represents the culmination of examples in which minor incidences of lateness are slowly criminalized.

Because the society places a priority on time and timeliness, it begins to devalue human life and freedom for the sake of productivity and efficiency. In such a society, it no longer matters whether life is enjoyable or whether or not the systems that have been put in place serve human interests. Rather, the highest good is timeliness, orderliness, and keeping to schedules. The Harlequin stands as a symbol of resistance to all of this, and encourages members of his society to consider how society could be made to serve *them* instead of the other way around.

☝ "Why let them order you about? Why let them tell you to hurry and scurry like ants or maggots? Take your time! Saunter a while! Enjoy the sunshine, enjoy the breeze, let life carry you at your own pace! Don't be slaves of time, it's a helluva way to die, slowly, by degrees . . . down with the Ticktockman!"

**Related Characters:** The Harlequin (speaker), The Ticktockman

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 37

### Explanation and Analysis

In another act of defiance, the Harlequin perches on top of a shopping area and addresses passerby, causing additional disruption and confusion. In this speech, the Harlequin places obedience to order and the Ticktockman in direct opposition to enjoying life and living it on one's own terms. If disorder and freedom are synonymous with pleasure and with life, then the order of the Ticktockman is synonymous with suffering and death. The Harlequin sets up this binary as a deliberate critique of the Ticktockman, encouraging those beneath him to think critically about their roles in society.

The passerby do not seem to take the Harlequin particularly seriously as he makes these suggestions, but they nevertheless pay attention to him, planting the seeds of disruption that are so damaging to the Ticktockman and his order. The Harlequin's speech is an act of disruption in and of itself, regardless of how seriously the passerby below take it. What matters is that they are listening at all, and that they have paused the routines of their day in order to do so.

☝ After all, his name was Everett C. Marm, and he wasn't much to begin with, except a man who had no sense of time.

**Related Characters:** The Harlequin, The Ticktockman

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 38

### Explanation and Analysis

Once the Harlequin is captured by the Ticktockman, his identity is reduced from that of a symbolic, larger-than-life figure to that of a simple individual with no symbolic power. While the Harlequin's defiance of the orderliness of the

Ticktockman challenges the order of society as a whole, Everett C. Marm's defiance is a personal failing rather than a meaningful rebellion.

The Ticktockman's capture strips him of his anonymity and transforms him into just one person, so that he is no longer a threat. Without his anonymous costume and assumed character, Everett C. Marm is much more easily fit back into society, where individuals who step out of line or disrupt the orderly flow of time can be appropriately punished by the Ticktockman through the technology of timecards and cardioplates. Moreover, Everett C. Marm has no ability to inspire a crowd in the way that someone like the Harlequin can. Even so, Ellison later notes that though Edward C. Marm is defeated, the rebellion the Harlequin represented lives on because it's much harder to kill a symbol than a man.

“I hate it. It's a terrible world.”

“Not everyone thinks so. Most people enjoy order.”

“I don't, and most of the people I know don't.”

**Related Characters:** The Ticktockman, The Harlequin (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 38

### Explanation and Analysis

When the Harlequin is finally captured and brought before the Ticktockman, the Ticktockman urges him to repent and to renounce his earlier actions and proclamations. The Harlequin, however, refuses to do so, arguing that he doesn't agree with anything that the Ticktockman stands for, and that the world is terrible.

The Ticktockman argues that “most people enjoy order,” implying that most citizens are happy with the way things are and the status quo. There are not many citizens who openly rebel against this way of living, and at minimum most go along with it. The Harlequin disagrees, however, arguing

that most people actually don't enjoy the order of the Ticktockman. For the Harlequin, his dissatisfaction with society may be a mark of his individuality, but it is a dissatisfaction that he implies is much more widespread than the Ticktockman thinks it is, and actually is felt by most people.

“Uh, excuse me, sir, I, uh, don't know how to uh, to uh, tell you this, but you were three minutes late. The schedule is a little, uh, bit off.”

He grinned sheepishly.

“That's ridiculous!” murmured the Ticktockman behind his mask. “Check your watch.” And then he went into his office, going mrmee, mrmee, mrmee, mrmee.

**Related Characters:** The Ticktockman (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 39

### Explanation and Analysis

At the conclusion of the story, the Ticktockman has captured the Harlequin, sent him to a reeducation camp, and made him renounce his views on a broadcast. For all intents and purposes, it seems that the Ticktockman has won. It's not quite so simple, however, as is illustrated by the Ticktockman's interaction with one of his minions in the closing words of the story. The worker timidly asserts that the Ticktockman is three minutes late and that the schedule is therefore off.

The Ticktockman rejects this claim immediately and ignores the implication that the entire system has been subtly shifted by the Harlequin's actions. While this mistake seems insignificant in the grand scheme of things, it nevertheless shows a small, tangible effect thanks to the Harlequin's disruptions, an effect that may spiral into a more significant difference as time goes on. While the Harlequin himself may have been vanquished, his actions still send ripples out into the world.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## ‘REPENT, HARLEQUIN!’ SAID THE TICKTOCKMAN

The story opens with a passage from Henry David Thoreau’s essay *Civil Disobedience*, in which Thoreau decries those “good citizens” who mindlessly serve the state without genuine independent thought. Truly great men—often reformers or martyrs—follow their moral consciences even if that means resisting and becoming enemies of the state.

The Harlequin has come to the notice of authorities as a potential deviant. A rebel who is symbolic of disruption and a defiance of order, the Harlequin has become a “personality”—“something they had filtered out of the system many decades ago.” While middle-class individuals find his antics vulgar, those “down below” consider him “a Robin Hood ... a Jesus.” The wealthy and powerful at the top, meanwhile, think him a dangerous menace. Now that he has become something of a notorious celebrity, officials have turned the case over to the Ticktockman.

A tall, silent presence behind a mask, the Ticktockman is called only “Master Timekeeper” to his face; no one wants to offend the man with the power to revoke the minutes, days, or even years of one’s life. Upon reviewing the Harlequin’s file and “cardioplate.” The Ticktockman decides that the rebel must be captured and subdued—but to do so, he must learn the Harlequin’s true identity.

Meanwhile, the Harlequin—an auburn-haired man dressed in fully “motley”—is flying his “air-boat” over the city, listening to “the metronomic left-right-left” of workers heading to and from their factory shifts via conveyor-like belts. With an “elfish grin,” he releases “one hundred and fifty thousand dollars’ worth of **jelly beans**” from his plane. Millions of beans rain down with “a torrent of color and sweetness” that brings the automatic walkways to a screeching halt, causing workers to tumble off in fits off laughter. They pop the “little jelly bean eggs of childish color into their mouths,” feeling as though it’s “a holiday, and a jollity, an absolute insanity, a giggle.” Though lasting only seven minutes, this disruption is a “disaster” that jams up the entire finely-tuned system that the Ticktockman runs. Because of this, he is ordered to appear before the Ticktockman.

*In opening with a quotation from “Civil Disobedience,” the story emphasizes the ideas of resistance to order and the importance of individuality up front. Like the great men featured in Thoreau’s essay, the Harlequin makes the dangerous but ultimately admirable choice to follow his own conscience, no matter the consequences.*



*Ellison continues to build his dystopian future, highlighting the class hierarchy that has been preserved even as things like “personality” have been stifled. The Harlequin is shown to be dangerous on multiple fronts: first, he is individualistic in a way that is deviant and regressive, and second, he is an inspiration to the lower classes, who view him as a kind of folk hero. While the Harlequin is not overtly violent or dangerous, his symbolic power makes him a significant threat to the power of the Ticktockman.*



*The Ticktockman is introduced here as a threatening and sinister overlord. While he ostensibly stands for order and peace, even those who are also enmeshed in his bureaucracy live in fear of him. The Ticktockman is masked and therefore anonymous, making him less a person and more a symbol of power and control. Similarly, the Ticktockman is uniquely threatened by the Harlequin because he, too, is imbued with immense symbolic power.*



*“Motley” refers to a jester’s costume. The Harlequin’s spontaneous disruption of the routine workday is both a powerful symbol of resistance and an absurd, delightful prank. While the consequences of the release of the jelly beans are materially significant in that they disrupt the order of the day, interfering with the smooth production cycles and the finely-tuned system of the Ticktockman, they have an even more important symbolic effect upon the workers whose days have been suddenly disrupted. In dropping the jelly beans on their unsuspecting heads, the Harlequin awakens them to the pure pleasure of the random, the absurd, and the non-scheduled, which is ultimately a much more significant threat to the power of the Ticktockman than any material calamity.*



An adherence to timeliness at all costs has slowly warped the society in which the Harlequin lives, from examples of students who get good grades but are kicked out of school for tardiness, to the slow criminalization of all forms of lateness and disorder, the punishment of which is, eventually, death. This problem is shown to be pervasive and deeply entrenched, to the point where ordinary citizens can no longer imagine lives where this kind of social control is absent. Only a few—the lower classes, the misfits, the Harlequin himself—are fully aware of the constricting nature of the Ticktockman's order.

After the stunt with the **jelly beans**, the Harlequin, whose real name is Everett C. Marm, discusses his wanted status with his girlfriend, Pretty Alice. Pretty Alice is frustrated with his habitual lateness and his mannerisms, and they get into a minor argument. While Pretty Alice is ostensibly in a relationship with the Harlequin and feels affection for him, she is deeply frustrated by his inability to be on time, his affected manner of speaking (he uses “inflection”), and his unpredictable character. It seems that Pretty Alice would prefer it if the Harlequin were slightly more normal, less disruptive and more in harmony with the status quo. She exclaims at him, “Oh for God's sake, Everett, can't you stay home just *one* night! Must you always be out in that ghastly clown suit, running around annoying people?” After their argument, the Harlequin leaves to continue running afoul of the authorities.

The Harlequin executes another stunt to disrupt the order of things, broadcasting his intent to attend the International Medical Association Invocation. When police lie in wait for him, expecting him to be characteristically late, he instead shows up early, turns their own traps against them, and delights the attendees of the conference. His unique style of nonviolent protest is illustrated in the way in which he springs the police's traps, giant spiderwebs: “blowing a large bullhorn, he frightened and unnerved them so, their own moisturized encirclement webs sucked closed, and they were hauled up, kicking and shrieking, high above the amphitheater's floor.” The gathered physicians laugh, and the Harlequin gives exaggerated bows as the policemen hang in the air.

*In these examples, the steady encroachment of the control of the powerful against the powerless, those who make the orders and those who are subjected to them, is laid bare. Technology and capital play a significant part in this progression, as an adherence to productivity as the singular goal of a society goes hand in hand with the technological ability to police even minor instances of noncompliance. While in the world of the Harlequin this progression is taken to an extreme conclusion, it is implied that the seeds of such a society are already present in the America of today.*



*This scene reveals the regular man behind the Harlequin's mask. The Harlequin's relationship with Pretty Alice explores the tension between accommodating individual, personal relationships with the need for power and anonymity that is necessary for the Harlequin's acts of resistance to have their desired effect. While the Harlequin feels bad about disappointing Pretty Alice, there is ultimately no way that he can cede to her requests without changing who he is as a person and trying to conform to the society of the Ticktockman. The characterization of Pretty Alice also illustrates the ways in which, in a totalitarian society obsessed with conformity and regulation, even normal citizens carry out enforcement on behalf of the state.*



*Another way in which the Harlequin is threatening to the Ticktockman and his bureaucracy is because of his sheer unpredictability. He is difficult to capture because his movements cannot be predicted and he is not bound by any sort of pre-established order. Moreover, his altercation with the authorities at the conference emphasizes the ways in which the Harlequin's protest is symbolic and structural rather than simply violent. The Harlequin's clown-like persona, and the joy he takes in thumbing his nose at those in power, open up a way for actions of resistance that take place outside the strictures already set in place by the Ticktockman. Without resorting to violence, the Harlequin neatly shows how foolish those in power can be made to look, and how delightful an unexpected and absurd surprise can be.*



Meanwhile, in another part of the city, a wife receives a death notice for her husband and is secretly glad that it isn't for her. When she receives the letter, she thinks, "brutally, realistically," to herself, "Let it be for Marsh ... or one of the kids, but not for me, please dear God, not for me." Upon opening it, she finds that it is indeed for her husband and she is "at one and the same time horrified and relieved." While Marsh tries to escape the justice of the Ticktockman by fleeing deep into the Canadian forest, his heart is stopped by his cardioplate in the Ticktockman's possession nevertheless and he is ultimately unable to escape his final punishment. This anecdote, the narrator notes, illustrates what would happen if the Ticktockman ever finds out the Harlequin's real name. He instructs the reader not to laugh.

The Harlequin's next act of defiance involves appearing at the top of a shopping complex, distracting shoppers and encouraging them to engage in activities that flout the order of the Ticktockman. He calls out to them, "Why let them order you about? Why let them tell you to hurry and scurry like ants or maggots? Take your time! Saunter a while! Enjoy the sunshine, enjoy the breeze, let life carry you at your own pace! Don't be slaves of time, it's a helluva way to die, slowly, by degrees . . . down with the Ticktockman!" Construction men are dispatched to capture the Harlequin but fail to do so. The Harlequin's distractions end up causing further delays to the system, resulting in widespread malfunctions in the chain of supply and demand, which only further enrages the Ticktockman

The Ticktockman grows angrier with each of the Harlequin's continued acts of subversion and renews the intensity of the search for him. He uses every method at his disposal, a litany of innovative and banal methods of control, from "dogs," to "torture," to "treachery," to "applied physics." When they finally succeed in capturing the Harlequin, it seems inevitable, as one person would have to be exceptional to escape the Ticktockman's pursuit. The Harlequin, however, is not exceptional, except for what he represents. He is simply a person, one who has trouble conforming to the status quo, but still just a man: "After all, his name was Everett C. Marm, and he wasn't much to begin with, except a man who had no sense of time."

*As in the Harlequin's interactions with Pretty Alice, this anecdote about ordinary citizens in another part of the city serves to highlight the ways in which the influence of the state creeps into even the most intimate of relationships and values. Even the idea of resistance has been sapped from Marsh's wife, so that she would rather betray her dearest family members rather than defy the Ticktockman in any way. Furthermore, although Marsh himself tries to escape his death sentence, the Ticktockman's technology is able to reach him no matter how far or how fast he runs. In this world, power is brutal, swift, and absolute, and therefore incredibly difficult to resist in any significant fashion. The narrator's address to the reader, meanwhile, underscores the patent absurdity of this world.*



*As in the other examples of his acts of resistance, here the Harlequin is again seen to disrupt the order of things on two fronts: he messes up the finely tuned order of consumer capitalism, and he also encourages those around him to acknowledge their own subjugation to the Ticktockman and to consider other ways of life. The nonviolent nature of these protests in some ways makes them even more threatening, as they emphasize the ways in which the Ticktockman's greatest weakness is not some sort of violent uprising but just any kind of dissent at all. The society can only function if all of its members agree to the terms—and the Harlequin shows just how disadvantageous those terms are to the average person.*



*The powers at the Ticktockman's disposal are ultimately shown to be absolute. While the Harlequin is able to resist capture for a little while, it's a state of affairs that could never last long. The Ticktockman not only has the symbolic power of his mask behind him, but he also has the entire apparatus of a technocratic police state at his disposal. While the Harlequin's unpredictability and anonymity make him more difficult than most to capture, Everett C. Marm is just a person, and ultimately no match for the Ticktockman.*



The Harlequin and the Ticktockman finally confront each other face to face. The Ticktockman urges him to repent, and gives an exact accounting of all the time he has wasted: “You’ve been late a total of sixty-three years, five months, three weeks, two days, twelve hours, forty-one minutes, fifty-nine seconds, point oh three six one one one microseconds. You’ve used up everything you can, and more.” The Harlequin remains steadfast in his defiance, insisting that it is better to die resisting the Ticktockman than to live in such a totalitarian world: “Scare someone else. I’d rather be dead than live in a dumb world with a bogeyman like you.” The Ticktockman says that Pretty Alice gave up Marm’s whereabouts, because she—like most, the Ticktockman insists—“wants to belong, wants to conform.” He says, “Repent, Harlequin!” but the latter simply responds, “Get stuffed.”

The Harlequin is sent to a reeducation camp, one that is implied to use similar methods to those used against “Winston Smith in [1984](#),” as “the techniques are really quite ancient.” After this process, the Harlequin appears in a broadcast during which he renounces his old defiance and praises the society of the Ticktockman. Those who view the broadcast largely view the Harlequin’s repudiation of his former views as genuine, and use it as an excuse to justify their continued inaction and complacency. To them, further resistance seems foolish at best, and dangerous at worst. It’s much easier and safer to continue to maintain the status quo.

While the Harlequin has been vanquished, his effect is nevertheless felt in the ripples in time he has left behind. “Marm was destroyed, which was a loss, because of what Thoreau said earlier, but you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs,” the narrator notes, adding that “in every revolution, a few die who shouldn’t, but ... if you make only a little change, then it seems to be worthwhile.” Effectively illustrating the incremental power of this sort of change, a sputtering underling tells the Ticktockman that he is “three minutes late” and that the schedule is now off. The Ticktockman insists that is “ridiculous” before muttering to himself and entering his office.

*Perhaps the idiosyncrasy that most distinguishes the Harlequin from his peers is, ultimately, his lack of fear of death itself. Because the Ticktockman possesses the ultimate power over life and death, most people are unable to resist him in any meaningful way because they are not willing to risk their lives. The Harlequin, however, more closely resembles Thoreau’s great man in that whatever consequences the Ticktockman might mete out cannot scare him. Continuing to live in such a corrupt world is a greater punishment than anything the Ticktockman could dream up. This scene also gives the story its title, while the Harlequin’s response to the Ticktockman’s lofty order to “repent” is comically brash, again underscoring the patent absurdity of this society.*



*George Orwell’s [1984](#), published in 1949, is set in a dystopian future marked by extensive government surveillance; protagonist Winston Smith is ultimately tortured into betraying his beloved fellow conspirator and embracing the “Big Brother” state. In declining to kill the Harlequin, and instead opting to send him to a reeducation camp, the Ticktockman effectively destroys the very thing that makes the Harlequin so dangerous: his ability to think freely and to encourage others to do the same. Killing the Harlequin might have made him onto a martyr, but having him parrot back praise for the status quo effectively eliminates him as a meaningful symbol of resistance.*



*The conclusion of the story illustrates the ways in which small changes made by individuals can have an impact, however minor, upon the world. Though the man Marm is gone, the possibilities symbolized by the Harlequin remain; one cannot kill a symbol. And while the Ticktockman’s society is still bleakly authoritarian, the actions of the Harlequin prove that it is not, in fact, invulnerable. In this way, the lesson that Thoreau’s quote and the story itself seek to impart is that incremental, seemingly futile change can have a rippling set of consequences, and that even the most entrenched systems of power are not immune to change.*





## HOW TO CITE

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