



The Clock and the Machine: Nonlinear Storytelling in Harlan Ellison's Dystopian Futures

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Abstract

The research paper titled The Clock and the Machine: Nonlinear Storytelling in Harlan Ellison's Dystopian Futures, analyses the nonlinear narrative techniques employed by Harlan Jay Ellison in his stories to challenge traditional storytelling. The stories move through sudden jumps in time, has sharp images, and ironic tones. Nonlinear storytelling has repetition when a scene begins, it interrupt, then suddenly is cut off by another scene, then again it return in changed form. This broken narration can mirror the way human experience reality through distractions, sudden shocks, and moments of recall that arrive without warning. Ellison uses this approach in his stories to capture confusion, resistance, and the struggle of human beings against overwhelming forces. This paper is an attempt to depict the fragmented narrative techniques used by Harlan Jay Ellison in his writings.

Keywords: narrative technique, narrative structure, styles

Narrative techniques are the tools and method authors used to tell their stories and engage readers. This technique include six categories: narration style, tone, imagery, symbolism, character development, and story structure. Narrative structure is the blueprint of the story and narrative techniques are its building blocks. In dystopian literature narrative techniques play an essential role in creating oppressive worlds where freedom is limited, surveillance is constant, and humanity often faces control. Dystopian worlds are dominated by political, technological, or social forces. A linear narrative usually begins at a clear starting point, develops step by step in chronological order, and concludes at the end. Nonlinear narrative

especially fits this genre because it abandons straight lines of times and rejects the order of linear narrative. Nonlinear narrative may start in the middle or even at the end, it may move backward and forward in time, have interruptions, change voices, and fractured continuity. This mirrors the collapse of order that dystopia portrays.

Harlan Jay Ellison (1934 – 2018) was an American writer of short stories, novel, essays, and film scripts. He is one of the most provocative voices in twentieth- century speculative fiction, wrote dystopian tales that embrace the nonlinear style. His narrative style is dense, sharp, and often mocking with sudden shift of tone and perspective. His works



“Repent, Harlequin! Said the Ticktock man” and “I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream” displays the nonlinear structures and posthuman despair. His narrative style dismantles traditional storytelling order and immerses the reader into a world where both time and humanity are unstable.

Ellison uses quick images, and bold words to capture the readers' attention. His sentences tumble over each other that feels urgent and restless. He does not simply describe events in straight line, instead he cuts into the middle of an action, jumps forward, pulls back, and circles around again. This way of writing gives the reader the feeling that time itself has been broken apart and what remains is the broken mirrors of the world.

Ellison's descriptions are filled with striking images rather than careful details. Instead of patiently building a setting, he drops sharp fragments that stick in the readers' mind: a taste, a sound, a single violent picture that lingers longer than a full explanation. He often mixes cruelty with dark humor. He describes terror in words that almost sound playful turning pain into bitterly ironic. His style constantly unsettles never letting the reader relax into one single emotion.

Ellison's writing is the blending of human and machine, body and system. He describes technology and rules as if they are alive, breathing and hungry, while people are often seen reduced, pressed, or reshaped by forces outside themselves. His writing makes the readers feel that humanity is fragile, struggling to keep its identity inside a world that tries to slip it away. His descriptions are not just about the world of the story but about how that world changes the meaning of being human. Ellison builds dystopian worlds not only through what happens but also through how the stories are told.

One of Ellison's central techniques is nonlinear structure. He refuses to narrate from the beginning to end, he disrupts chronology, looping back and forth, and folding conclusion into openings. This decision mirrors dystopian time itself: in a society obsessed with the regulation of minutes as in “Repent, Harlequin!”, the refusal to tell a story in sequence becomes an act of rebellion. This technique not only challenges the reader but also mirrors the broken realities of characters. By refusing a straight timeline, Ellison shows that in dystopian worlds cause and

effect are not stable and time itself is under control of higher forces.

“Now begin in the middle, and later learn the beginning; the end will take care of itself.” (1)

This line is openly self-conscious about its own structure. It admits that the story will not unfold in a neat sequence. By doing this Ellison mocks the idea of order. In a world where the ticktock man rules time with deadly precision the story itself refuses to obey the clock.

Ellison also relies heavily on irony. Irony occurs when a meaning is given opposite to their surface or when a situation reveals deep contradictions. He often presents a line that means the opposite of what it seems forcing the readers to feel the gap between surface and reality. Irony becomes a way to show how dystopian systems pretend to create order while actually creating suffering. Ellison uses irony in “I have No mouth, and I Must Scream” To show the cruel contrast between what should be good and what is actually terrifying, he takes ideas that are normally comforting like God and twists into something horrifying. He highlights how powerless humans are and how completely a machine controls their world.

“If there was a sweet Jesus and if there was a god, the god was AM.” (5)

The line is ironic because it compares AM a cruel and torturing machine to a loving God. This shows how everything safe and good has turned upside down in the story.

Ellison also turns to symbolism transforming everyday objects into larger meanings. This allows him to make dystopian oppression visible through small, vivid images. Symbolism helps him to avoid flat description and turn everyday detail into a challenge against authority. In dystopian writing, symbolism gives weight to what seems trivial, showing how even the smallest element of life can become a site of rebellion or control as in “Repent Harlequin!”

“The jelly beans spilled down like a candy-coloured rain, and the machinery of time faltered for just a moment.” (1)

Here the jelly beans symbolize disorder in a world obsessed with order. But more than that the symbolism reflects how material objects begin to overpower human will. A single act of throwing



candy disrupts an entire social system, showing how fragile the human-centered world really is. This displacement of human importance shows Ellison's vision of a future where control and resistance no longer belong solely to human choice but to the unpredictable force of objects and systems.

Ellison also thrives on black humor, where comedy is twisted with horror. This laughter is never pure joy, it is a nervous reaction to brutality shows in "Repent, Harlequin!"

"The Harlequin said , 'Get stuffed'. And they laughed. They laughed, but it was not because it was funny. They laughed because they were afraid not to laugh." (5)

The humor is poisoned. The joke is shallow, but laughter becomes compulsory, a survival strategy in a system where refusal to laugh might mean punishment. Black humor highlights how human freedom is trapped even when laughter is directed, controlled, and shaped by fear. It is no longer the human's choice but the system's demand. Comedy becomes a weapon against humanity itself, revealing how deeply power governs not only actions but emotions.

Another strategy Ellison adopts is stream of consciousness, where thought and memory tumble without clear order. This creates a sense of collapse, a refusal of smooth narrative as in "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream".

"It was always now. It was never then. It was always AM. And AM was always, and AM was now, and Am was forever." (7)

This rushing chain of thoughts show how time collapses under AM's control. The narrator's mind loops endlessly, unable to escape the present. Stream of consciousness here becomes a prison of thought, where free memory or imagination no longer exist. The technique itself becomes an image of domination, as language mimics the endless cycle of technological power.

Ellison often uses satire to expose the absurdity of strict systems and the cruelty of unchecked power. His satire is not gentle but filled with exaggeration and mockery. He creates worlds where rules are taken to their extreme, and by showing how ridiculous they become, he criticizes the way real societies also lose sight of human values. The humor he uses is

sharp and sometimes uncomfortable, but it pushes the reader to see the truth hidden under the joke as shown in "Repent, Harlequin!"

"The entire culture was keyed to the minute; everyone had to be on time." (6)

This line sound simple, but it carries heavy satire. It exaggerates the idea of being punctual until it becomes a total way of life. By describing a culture that lives only by the clock. Ellison mocks how people allow schedules and rules to control them more than their own freedom. The humor is there, but behind it is a sharp criticism of how mechanical and inhuman society can become.

Ellison uses fragmentation as another defining technique. His sentences break apart, sometimes jagged, sometimes incomplete, forcing the reader to experience rupture rather than smooth storytelling seen in "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream".

"It did not end. It never ended. Pain and then more pain. Thought sliced into ribbon, into shreds, into particles that meant nothing." (9)

This fragmentation enacts the experience of torture. The human mind cannot form coherent sentences its thoughts are disassembled. Narrative structure mimics bodily destruction showing how both text and subject collapse. The technique reflects how narrative itself is altered under systems that refuse the human's desire for order.

Harlan Ellison's works show how powerful narrative techniques can shape the experience of a story. He uses broken timeline, symbols, irony, black humor, satire and fragmentation to create a world that feels unstable but deeply alive. His characters often live in extreme situations, struggling against systems larger than themselves, through them he shows both rebellion, and resilience. In this way Ellison demonstrates that the nonlinear form is the best possible way to capture a reality shaped by authority, and by fear. His use of nonlinear narrative is not just a matter of style but of meaning. Many readers and writers praised him because of his daring style. Writers like Stephen king and Neil Gaiman admired his language and storytelling style. Ellison's style does not tell stories but forces us to experience the pressure of time, the cruelty of machines, and the fight to stay human.



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