Rumble and Memos from Purgatory Short Guide

Rumble and Memos from Purgatory by Harlan Ellison

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Contents

Characters

I nRumble the conceptions of the characters are limited, and they lack the kind of psychological conflicts which create real empathy in the reader. Although Ellison may have intended the novel as a criticism of the social conditions which produce juvenile delinquents, the characters are too one-dimensional to evoke much sympathy.

Subsequently, however, Ellison tries to rework the same material in the fictionalized autobiography, Memos from Purgatory. And here his main problem as a writer emerges: He wants to write social criticism and fiction at the same time. Unfortunately, Memos from Purgatory fails to fuse these conflicting intentions into a convincing whole. On one hand, the autobiographical story in Memos from Purgatory has journalistic, sociological pretensions in its attempt to get the reader to empathize with the members of the street gang, but on the other it is an autobiographical story of the author himself, who for the first half of the book, conceives of himself as a street-gang hero of the adventures he recounts. Furthermore, the phoniness of the situation destroys the credibility of the narrator as a fictional hero. The reader can never forget that, unlike the other characters, the story's narrator is not really a "prisoner of the streets" at all and that the autobiographical "Harlan E." joined the gang for journalistic reasons in the first place. Then, as the novel progresses, the narrator becomes more and more a moralist, frequently denouncing "the system" which has imprisoned him. But by this time Memos from Purgatory has degenerated into a cacophony of conflicting narrative voices: the brash, street-wise punk, the frightened victim of dehumanizing social institutions, and the outraged social critic.

Social Concerns/Themes

Ellison's first novel Rumble is a violent revenge fantasy based on material he gathered after joining a Brooklyn street gang in the late 1950s. As an evocation of the brutality and excitement of street-life, the novel succeeds fairly well, and the protagonist, Rusty Santoro, is a reasonably credible, if one-dimensional, character. However, intense although it is, Rumble lacks insight into the psychology of its characters, and, therefore, their victimization by an inhumane, depersonalized society is not very profoundly expressed. Rumble seems to be merely a violent tour de force, which focuses on the repellent details of the gang's everyday existence. In short, Ellison's first novel reveals little sense of meaningful human action, suffering or transcendence.

Techniques

Ellison's place in the vanguard of fantasy writing is largely due to his radical and conscious experimentation with technique in fiction writing. His stories always seem to break new ground or to redefine parameters of the genres in which he works. And, although this often makes his stories difficult to categorize — are they, for instance, science fiction or fantasy? —

it is probably his incredible eclecticism and idiosyncrasy which make him so readable and popular. Ellison himself considers his main contribution to be his "urging other writers — through speeches and articles and the implied directives of Dangerous Visions — to break free, experiment, stretch their muscles . . ." Experimentation has characterized his work from the beginning, and, although it adversely affected some of his earlier fiction, Ellison's willingness to take authorial risks and to transcend the forms of more conventional science fiction results more often in success than failure.

Ellison's characters range from cynical, confused human beings who inhabit a realistic society, like the narrator of "Jefty Is Five," to the grotesque "survivor," named Ted, who tells his story in "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream." However, no matter how diverse Ellison's characters are, they are all passionate, usually driven by some horrible guilt, obsession or pain.

Ellison is a master at creating succinct dialogue, and even his most bizarre characters, like Bedzyk in "The Discarded" speak with passionate human voices. Furthermore, unlike Frank Herbert's Dune (1965), in which plots and characters tend to get bogged down in confused action and abstract ideas, Ellison's stories are disturbingly lucid and incisively plotted. Critics have sometimes complained that he does not write "pure" science fiction — which does not bother Ellison in the least — but none of them have found him boring.

Although Memos from Purgatory is clearly a failure, it shows the conflicting strains in Ellison's temperament and defines, albeit confusingly, the different "voices" which he assumes in the various types of writing he undertakes. As his writing matures, he becomes increasingly able to choose and develop a single controlling point of view in his work or to combine these different intentions more coherently.

Even in his best more recent fiction, Ellison is never far away from social criticism, but he becomes increasingly able to express his criticism through fully realized characters who develop in the context of well-conceived plots.

Memos from Purgatory actually introduces the outraged voice of the critic of television, which is heard later in "The Glass Teat," and it also reveals the tendencies which Ellison has to restrain in order to write good fiction. However, in his most successful early nov

el, Rockabilly (1961), Ellison succeeds in combining social commentary with fiction to create a dark and disturbing vision of the emergence of American popular culture.

Literary Precedents

Harlan Ellison's fiction has been influenced by everything from the Bible — the Old Testament in particular — to The National Enquirer. The prefaces which he has taken to writing for his later short stories not only blur the lines between autobiography and fiction but also warn the world of impending doom. His social criticism often becomes jeremiad, and he does indeed sound like a latter day Job crying in a wilderness. Although Ellison is clearly an extreme agnostic, if not an atheist, his stories frequently draw on Christian symbolism, and he is much concerned with the illogic of religious behavior. Like Mark Twain's dark vision, Ellison sometimes envisions a cosmos in which man is essentially the victim of some sort of cruel, cosmic joke. Twain's later, more despairing stories, such as "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1900), and "The Mysterious Stranger" (1916), anticipate both the tone and message of many of Ellison's fantasies. However, unlike Twain, Ellison is much more convinced that man plays the joke on himself. Ellison's characters often struggle with a cruel destiny, like that imposed upon the heroes of the Old Testament, and this suggests that the "god" figures in his stories are indeed akin to the "malign thug" which Twain suspected of controlling the universe.

However, Ellison's literary precedents really begin with the philosophical skepticism found in earlier forms of romantic literature.

Because Ellison's stories — his later ones especially — frequently verge on myth, their themes and dynamics often remind one of William Blake's apocalyptic poetry. Blake also concerned himself with Biblical themes, and, like Ellison, he also dealt with the implications of these themes — guilt, sin, repression — as evils which humans at least to some extent impose upon themselves. Like Blake, Ellison seems to believe that man creates his own suffering because he will not accept the fact that the power to be redeemed exists only within himself. Because man is afraid of his existential loneliness, he creates false, limited gods who in turn imprison his desires and his imagination. In this sense, Ellison's monster computer, AM, is merely a latter day Urizen, Blake's wholly rational, system-building version of the Old Testament God. In short, Ellison's fiction is about human consciousness in the romantic sense; that is, as the ground upon which man struggles to find his destiny alone.

Another interesting precedent is the work of Herman Melville. Melville wrote fantasies of his own, and such works as Billy Budd (1924) and Moby Dick (1851) present existential struggles in which man finds himself the prisoner of repressive forces which he can neither fully comprehend nor control.

Melville's brilliant study of obsession in the character of Captain Ahab is something of a prototype for Ellison's obsessive protagonists. Melville's protagonists, like Ellison's, are also frequently trapped and ultimately destroyed by flaws in their own characters. Furthermore, Ellison shares with both Melville and Twain a profound cynicism — even despair — regarding the significance of human experience in the cosmos. Other American transcendentalists, such as Thoreau and Emerson, anticipate Ellison's attack

on repressive social institutions and attitudes which threaten to destroy the individual; however, Herman Melville is his true spiritual predecessor.

Ellison's fiction also recalls the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, and, in fact, some of Ellison's stories, such as "Rat Hater" from The Deadly Streets (1958) collection, seem to be updated versions of Poe's stories. Ellison is not essentially a writer of horror stories — although he can be pretty horrifying when he wants to be — but he seems to have inherited from Poe the same ability to create horror, guilt, and obsession in the minds of his protagonists. Also, like Poe's, Ellison's short fiction is often brilliantly plotted, so that his fantasies present a well-conceived narrative from a convincing, although often deranged, point of view.

During the late 1970s, Ellison became so disillusioned with writing for television that he almost abandoned it. Since then he seems to have become increasingly conscious of his literary influences and predecessors, most notably the German writer, Franz Kafka. Ellison has always been concerned, not with the superficial "terrors" induced by the plethora of monsters who fill today's movie screens, but with the ultimate fears that are endemic to the human condition. Characters like Gregor Samsa, who awakens one morning to find himself a huge bug, or Joseph K., who penetrates into the reaches of a mysterious legal "system" he can never understand, express the kind of existential isolation and despair that lies at the heart of Ellison's later work.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994