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The Feed: Conform and Feed It, or Rebel and Starve It?

Conformity and rebellion seem to be polar opposites, but they come from the same source. Conformity and rebellion are both responses to social pressures. Conformity reflects a desire to hide, while rebellion reflects a desire to escape. In M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, conformity is what saves Titus and his friends, because they stand with the majority, while rebellion is what kills Violet, because she stands alone. However, through Violet's influence, Titus' conformity changes from informational conformity, which is based on ignorance, to normative conformity, which is based on peer pressure.

Throughout human history, conformity has been the means of survival. People form groups based on similarities, and if they do not have enough similarities to begin with, they will change their own behaviors and thoughts to blend in with the people around them. Titus and his friends formed their own group, and were also part of the larger group of society in general. Overall, they tended to follow trends and do whatever kids their age did, be it partying, going into mall, getting lesions, and following the feed in general. Larger groups usually have better chances of survival. People who conform to fit a group increase their own chances of survival. It all can be traced back to the basic urge to survive.

People who rebel or refuse to conform often find themselves standing alone, left to fend for themselves, like Violet was as she rebelled against the feed. However, rebellion is a manifestation of the same basic urge to survive. This time instead of finding safety in numbers,

rebels cannot find people to ally themselves with and have to settle for escaping whatever the perceived threat is. Violet, who had gotten the feedware when she was seven, had grown up in a different environment from Titus and his friends, who all had it installed when they were born, and therefore had different views on the world they all lived in. Violet saw the feed as an oppressive and overbearing system that was raising people to do nothing but shop, and that was destroying the environment to grow itself. When she first starts talking about rebellion to Titus, she describes the feed, saying “they try to figure out who you are, and to make you conform to one of their types for easy marketing” (Anderson 97).

At one point in the story, Violet gets fed up with everyone conforming, going on a furious rant, screaming “You don’t have the feed! You are feed! You’re feed!” (Anderson 202) to everyone in the party before the stress of it all overloads her brain and her feed, causing her to go into seizure. On the other hand, Titus and his friends all saw the feed as the norm in their lives, the same way that people today see smartphones and the ever growing internet, and Titus’ friends could not understand why she was so upset. It is often hard for conformists to understand why rebels do what they do, but after forming a close relationship with Violet, Titus was able to look into her world and see things through her eyes.

While Titus followed informational conformity at first, unaware of a life without the feed, and unaware of anything bad about the feed, his relationship with Violet changed him. Her rebellion against the feed gave him ideas of rebellion. At first, he only listened to her because he wanted to get her to like him, but as they spent more time together, he started to pay more attention. He started to realize that she might have a point, and as he listened to her more and more, he started taking her side over his friends’ more often. She teaches him, but for the most

part, he still conforms. By now, his conformity is normative conformity, conformity sparked by peer and social pressures. He is no longer ignorant, but he still values his friends and his own safety enough to conform to the norm.

Violet sees rebellion as the right choice, as a chance to assert her individuality. The feed is too powerful for her liking, so she does what she can to rob it of its power, even if she can only affect its power over her and her alone. However, typical facets of rebellion show up in her behaviors. She starts experimenting with high-risk excitement, rejecting safe rules and restraints, and ultimately displays self-destructive behavior, as the feed refuses to help her, due to her actions. Perhaps if she had had more people on her side, and more people who actively rebelled against the feed the same way she did, she might have been successful in at least creating a dent in the system. Unfortunately, her struggle only affected her, her father, and Titus, as she acted alone.

Titus started to rebel by the end of the story, but by then it was too late to save Violet. He started to really question the system after he broke up with Violet. “It was like I kept buying these things to be cool, but cool was always flying just ahead of me, and I could never really catch up to it. I felt like I’d been running toward it for a long time” (Anderson 279). He had always tried to conform to what was cool, but the feed knew that if he caught up to what was cool, he would no longer feel the need to buy things. They knew the same was true for his peers, stringing them along, always holding their goal of being cool, accepted, liked, and of establishing their identity right out of reach. Every time people started to catch up, something else would become cool and everyone would go chasing after it. The feed depended on the money people paid, and it knew how to keep them spending.

Titus' friends continued to conform throughout the story. They conformed to the feed, they conformed to each other, and they conformed to what other people their age were doing. While they may have thought that they were being rebellious by going to parties, going into malls, getting lesions, and wearing riot gear, they were still conforming to their peers. In a way, rebellion in a large enough group can become a new sense of conformity. Titus' friends all felt safe with each other. They all felt liked, accepted, and noticed. If they wanted attention from their peers, they had to keep up with the trends. If they fell behind, they risked being rejected and becoming outcasts, starved of the basic human need for attention. In the party, before Violet lashes out on everyone, Quendy comes in, covered in lesions. While chatting Violet, Titus says "it's all for Link. I guess she wanted to outdo Calista" (Anderson 192). The sole purpose of Quendy getting so many lesions was for attention. She felt like Link was ignoring her, so she solved it in what she figured would be the most effective way; by conforming to the trends set by the feed.

In Anderson's *Feed*, a main theme is highlighted. Those who conform are safe, but often cowardly or ignorant, while those who rebel are in danger, because they demonstrate knowledge and bravery that higher powers do not want them to have. This is seen quite frequently in the real world, but not all conformists are cowardly or ignorant, and not all rebels are smart and brave. In choosing either side, one must be prepared to face both the good and the bad consequences, even consequences as extreme as death.

Works Cited

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