

Harrison Bergeron by Kurt Vonnegut Jr

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Narrative Context and the Dystopian Vision of Equality

Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s short story "Harrison Bergeron" is a powerful work of dystopian fiction that presents a future society obsessed with complete equality. The story has been selected for analysis because it explores important themes such as government control, forced equality, individuality, freedom, oppression, and the danger of making everyone the same. Vonnegut uses exaggeration, satire, and dark humor to criticize the idea that equality should mean the destruction of personal talent, beauty, intelligence, and strength. Through the tragic story of Harrison Bergeron and his family, Vonnegut shows that a society that tries to make all people equal by force can become cruel, unnatural, and deeply unjust (Vonnegut).

The narrative opens by presenting a world in which everyone is supposedly equal because of government control. This equality is not based on fairness, opportunity, or justice. Instead, it is created by weakening anyone who is above average. The government does not try to help weaker citizens improve their lives. Rather, it forces gifted people to become less intelligent, less beautiful, less strong, or less talented. Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, is responsible for enforcing these laws of equality. Her role represents the extreme power of the government over individual lives. She makes sure that no person is allowed to appear superior to others.

The story then shifts to George and Hazel Bergeron, who are sitting at home watching television. Their situation shows how this society affects ordinary people. George is an intelligent man, so the government forces him to wear a mental handicap radio in his ear. This device sends sharp noises into his head whenever he tries to think deeply. The purpose of the device is to prevent him from using his intelligence. George also wears heavy handicap bags because he is physically strong. These weights are meant to make him weaker so that he cannot be better than anyone else. In contrast, Hazel has average intelligence and does not need to wear any mental handicap. She represents the kind of "average" citizen that the government's system tries to protect.

Harrison Bergeron and the Threat of Individual Excellence

George and Hazel's son, Harrison Bergeron, has been taken away by the H-G men because he is considered extremely dangerous. Harrison is only fourteen years old, but he is described as unusually

strong, intelligent, handsome, and talented. Because he is superior in many ways, the government sees him as a threat. His desire to overthrow the government makes him even more dangerous in the eyes of the authorities. Harrison's imprisonment shows how this society treats exceptional people. Instead of valuing his abilities, the government fears them and tries to suppress them.

While George and Hazel are watching a ballerina performance on television, the program is interrupted by a news bulletin announcing that Harrison has escaped from prison. This moment creates tension in the story because Harrison becomes a symbol of rebellion against the government's forced equality. Soon after the announcement, Harrison appears on the television screen. He is wearing many heavy handicaps, but he removes them in front of everyone. By taking off his handicap bags and other devices, Harrison reveals his true strength, beauty, and power. This act is symbolic because it shows his rejection of the society that tries to limit him.

Harrison then declares himself emperor and chooses one of the ballerinas to be his empress. He removes her handicaps as well, allowing her beauty and grace to be seen. Together, they dance in a way that seems almost supernatural. Their dance represents freedom, individuality, creativity, and human excellence. For a brief moment, the audience sees what human beings can become when they are not forced to hide their gifts. However, this moment of beauty and rebellion does not last long. Diana Moon Glampers enters with a shotgun and kills both Harrison and the ballerina. Their deaths show how violently the government protects its system of forced equality.

Memory, Conformity, and Emotional Control

After Harrison is killed, the broadcast is interrupted. Hazel has seen her son die on television, but she quickly forgets what happened. George, who had left the room for a moment, returns and does not understand why Hazel has tears in her eyes. Because of her average intelligence and the society's emotional numbness, Hazel cannot hold onto the memory of the tragedy. This ending is deeply disturbing because it shows that the society has not only controlled people's bodies and minds but has also weakened their emotional awareness. Even the death of a son cannot be fully remembered or understood.

Vonnegut's short story critiques society and its attitude toward the concept of equality. From the story, it can be observed that attaining absolute equality by force is impossible and dangerous. Equality is usually considered a positive ideal because it suggests fairness, justice, and equal rights. However, Vonnegut shows a distorted version of equality in which everyone is made the same by lowering the abilities of the talented. This kind of equality does not create justice. Instead, it creates oppression. The government does not allow people to develop their natural gifts or express their individuality. It destroys excellence in the name of balance.

The story suggests that every person is different, and these differences should not be treated as threats. Some people are more intelligent, some are stronger, some are more beautiful, and some are

more artistic. These differences are part of human nature. A healthy society should provide equal rights and opportunities while still allowing individuals to develop their unique abilities. Vonnegut criticizes the idea that society should force everyone to become average. He shows that when equality is misunderstood, it can lead to cruelty and the destruction of human potential.

Rebellion and the Defence of Individual Freedom

Harrison's rebellion is important because he tries to break free from the shackles of society. His removal of the handicaps is a direct challenge to the government's authority. He refuses to accept the idea that he must hide his abilities to make others feel equal. In this sense, Harrison represents individuality, freedom, and resistance. However, his rebellion is quickly crushed. His death shows that oppressive systems often use violence to silence those who challenge them. Vonnegut uses Harrison's fate to show how dangerous a society can become when the government has too much power over individual freedom.

George's character also plays an important role in the story. He is intelligent enough to question the system, but his mental handicap prevents him from thinking deeply for more than a few seconds. Whenever he begins to reflect on the unfairness of the handicaps, a loud noise interrupts his thoughts. This shows how the government controls not only behavior but also thought. George's intelligence is treated like a crime. Instead of being allowed to use his mind, he is punished for having one. His condition reflects the danger of a society that fears independent thinking.

Hazel's character is equally important because she represents the average citizen who accepts the system without questioning it. She is not cruel, but she is unable to understand the full injustice of the society in which she lives. She even suggests that George should rest his handicap bag, but George refuses because he fears punishment and believes society would collapse if people disobeyed the rules. Hazel's forgetfulness at the end of the story shows the emotional and intellectual emptiness created by this system. She is not harmed by handicaps in the same way George is, but she is still a victim of a society that has reduced people's ability to think, feel, and remember.

Authoritarian Power and the Violence of Forced Equality

Diana Moon Glampers represents the authoritarian power of the state. As Handicapper General, she is responsible for enforcing equality, but her actions are violent and unjust. She does not hesitate to kill Harrison and the ballerina when they display freedom and excellence. Her character shows that government power can become dangerous when it is used to control every part of human life. Vonnegut uses her as a symbol of extreme authority that destroys individuality in order to maintain social order.

The handicaps in the story are powerful symbols. The weights represent the burden placed on strong people. The masks worn by beautiful people represent the suppression of beauty. The mental handicap radios represent the destruction of intelligence and independent thought. These devices are meant to create equality, but they actually create suffering. They show that forced equality does not raise people up; it drags people down. Vonnegut uses these symbols to criticize systems that punish achievement and difference.

The story also criticizes media and passive spectatorship. George and Hazel watch the events on television, but they do not take action. Even when Harrison appears and is killed, the moment passes quickly, and life returns to normal. This suggests that people in this society have become passive and emotionally disconnected. Television becomes a tool through which people witness violence without responding to it. Vonnegut may be warning readers about the danger of becoming too passive in the face of injustice.

Equality, Liberty, and the Meaning of Vonnegut's Warning

At the same time, "Harrison Bergeron" should not be read as a rejection of equality in every form. Vonnegut is not arguing against fairness or equal rights. Instead, he is criticizing an extreme and artificial version of equality that destroys freedom and individuality. True equality should mean that people have equal dignity, legal rights, and opportunities. It should not mean that all people must become identical. The story warns that when equality is misunderstood as sameness, it can become harmful.

In conclusion, Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s "Harrison Bergeron" is a sharp criticism of a society that tries to achieve equality by force. Through the characters of Harrison, George, Hazel, and Diana Moon Glampers, Vonnegut shows the dangers of government control, the loss of individuality, and the destruction of human excellence. Harrison's rebellion reveals the beauty and power of freedom, but his death shows how oppressive systems silence those who resist them. The story argues that human differences should be respected rather than suppressed. Vonnegut's message remains important because it reminds readers that a just society should protect both equality and individuality. Equality should not require people to hide their talents, limit their thoughts, or sacrifice their freedom.

Works Cited

Vonnegut, Kurt. "Harrison Bergeron." <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/harrison.html>