

Big Ideas and Key Understandings

- Through excessive regulation and oppression, society—not just the individual—sacrifices religion, culture, artistry, beauty, and greatness.
- Television, as a main-stream media source, has the power to enforce a particular propaganda.

Synopsis

In “Harrison Bergeron,” Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. uses irony to illustrate how enforcing absolute equality would require a ridiculously totalitarian society. This story begins with introducing George, who is forced to wear handicaps by the government, to prevent him from thinking or having physical abilities “above average.” His wife Hazel is not handicapped, and to the reader seems very unintelligent. Their son, Harrison, has been taken away by the government and later in the story, revolts and is killed as a result. Vonnegut uses the characterization of Harrison, Hazel, and George to show how conformity stifles individualism and is detrimental to society.

A love of equality destroys all possible human excellence and produces souls without aspiration or longing—it dehumanizes people.

Text Dependent Questions

Text-dependent Questions	Evidence-based Answers
<p>Citing examples from the text, what can you infer about the type of government that was in existence in the year 2081? (Pg. 21)</p>	<p>One can infer that through multiple amendments to the constitution “All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution,” that society has changed dramatically. It is stated that people were “equal in every which way.” The government and the United States Handicapper General, aid in keeping the society equitable: “unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.” The statement that “everybody was finally equal” suggests that the process of creating absolute equality was a measurement of society’s progress and success. This would emphasize that having total equality in this society is a life-long achievement: the ultimate achievement.</p>

<p>What are some human qualities the author highlights as characteristics that would give one person an “unfair advantage” over someone else? What did the U.S. Handicapper General do to counter these traits in order to establish equality amongst all? Cite specific examples from the text. (Pgs. 21-24)</p>	<p>Some characteristics that might give someone an unfair advantage would be beauty, intelligence, strength, and skill/talent in a particular area. There are handicaps placed on certain people. “Government transmitters” are placed on those who have a high intelligence level which send out “sharp noises to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.” Another handicap would be the government implementing “sashweights” to keep those who are strong at an average, equitable level of strength. In addition, beauty is equal in this society, as well. “And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.”</p> <p>When Harrison revolts, he and the ballerina are shot and “dead before they hit the floor.” Vonnegut presents a totalitarian government in this futuristic society of 2081.</p>
<p>In the first paragraph, Vonnegut uses the words “unceasing vigilance.” What do these words mean? What implications do they have in the text?</p>	<p>“Unceasing” means not stopping, or unending. “Vigilance” means watchfulness or alert attention. The use of these words helps to establish a setting and tone for the piece. Vonnegut makes his reader aware of the restrictive and oppressive nature of the government. People in this futuristic society seemingly cannot do anything outside of the watchful eyes of the government.</p>

Indirect characterization is when an author develops the character through his actions, dialogues, thoughts, appearance, other character reactions. How does Vonnegut use indirect characterization to create sympathy for George and Hazel? Use textual support. (Pgs. 21-26)

We are intended to have sympathy for George and Hazel, who are subject to a government attempting to equalize its citizens through artificial means. The dialogue the author employs shows that George and Hazel, presumably typical citizens, have limited capacity to engage in intellectual conversation. Hazel, who has 'perfectly average intelligence' (21) is incapable of sustaining any thought for more than a short period of time (21). Her sentences are short and use informal language, mirroring her brief bursts of thought and inability to express herself well. This is especially heartbreaking when she can't even remember or articulate why she's been crying after she's just witnessed the murder of her son. She can only say that it was "something real sad on television" (26). George, on the other hand, would have the capability to engage in intellectual thought, but is handicapped by "a transmitter (that) would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of the brains" (21). When he begins to really consider an issue, such as "toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped" (22) he is hit with the transmitter in his brain, which deflects that thought. Because they are unable to deeply consider, either through lacking encouragement to grow (Hazel) or forcible repression (George), they are limited in their scope of understanding of their world, both in how they can intellectually process and how they can emotionally process their world. As limited as they are in envisioning their world and their circumstances, we as readers have sympathy for them because they are trapped in their plight and have no way to recognize or escape from the status quo.

George Bergeron wears a radio that broadcasts various noises to prohibit him from developing any intellectual thoughts. Trace the increase intensity of these noises that George hears throughout the story. How do the noises parallel the escalating tragedy of George's and Hazel's lives?

1. Buzzer sound and bottle being smashed with a hammer interrupts his thought of the ballerina to prevent him from making any kind of evaluative thinking
2. 21 gun firing interrupts the thought of his son; this is a foreshadow of Harrison's death later in the story
3. Siren sound interrupts his thought of the laws of equality and competition; this symbolizes the literal notion of the government becoming the thought police
4. Car crash interrupts the visual of Harrison on TV; this symbolizes the multiple injuries that occurs during the broadcast
5. After Harrison's death, the sound that George hears is described as simply a "handicap signal." This symbolizes the vagueness, confusion, and indescribable thoughts that was going through George's head at the time.

<p>How does Harrison’s rebellion reveal his character and his values? Support your opinion with evidence from the text.</p>	<p>Harrison’s rebellion reveals his value of individuation and competition in a society. Harrison shouts, “I am the emperor” and “watch me become what I <i>can</i> become.” The text states that “Harrison tore the straps of his handicap like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.” This shows that he’s freeing himself from the imposed handicaps that the government placed on him. In addition, he “snatches” musicians to play music that is not “cheap, silly, false” and “slammed” them back into their chairs, so that he may dance as he wants, not how the government has controlled the societal arts. It is said he and the Ballerina, “reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun,” which supports his individualism and rebellion against the government regulations. Both his words and actions support that Harrison is a rebel and non-conformist in this futuristic society.</p>
<p>On page 26, Vonnegut uses the term “neutralizing gravity.” What does “neutralizing” mean? Why does he use this term here, and how does this word choice emphasize his point?</p>	<p>Neutralizing means making something ineffective or harmless by applying an opposite force. The term is significant here because Harrison’s and the ballerina’s rebellion is strong enough to render gravity useless. This, of course, is not realistic, or physically possible; however, Vonnegut creates this image of defying gravity to show just how powerful it is for people to live to their full potential. What things we can accomplish if we are allowed to excel!</p>

Identify some figurative language in the description of the scene with Harrison and the dancing Ballerina. How does the language affect the tone of the piece, and what does it reveal about what Vonnegut values? (Pgs. 25-26)

There are multiple uses of figurative language in the description of Harrison and the Ballerina dancing, such as “the ballerina arose, swaying like a willow,” “Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played,” “listed to the music for a while---listened gravely, as through synchronizing their heartbeats with it,” and “they leaped like deer on the moon.” These examples shape the tone of suspense. The language used presents a surreal, rebellious situation. Harrison and the ballerina seem to be dancing high in the air, close enough to “kiss the ceiling,” and in the air dancing while defying the “laws of the land,” “law of gravity,” and “the laws of motion.” This surreal scene is abruptly ended with two shots from Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, with a “double-barreled ten-gauge shot gun” and the tone shifts to complete astonishment. This contrast illustrates that Vonnegut does not value a society in which the government continues to instill equity, at all cost, which stifles individualism.

The entire narrative takes place as George and Hazel sit in front of the television. What is Vonnegut’s purpose in having the television set as the primary setting? Cite textual evidence for the significance of the television.

1. Numbs the viewers: Hazel’s crying about something she sees, but she doesn’t know why she’s crying.
2. Government uses it to enforce laws: There are warnings about how dangerous Harrison is because he possesses superior traits
3. Intimidate viewers: pictures of Harrison is display to show the handicap that is given to someone who doesn’t suppress their own abilities
4. Terrorizing the citizens: Harrison’s live execution is shown to all to witness as an example of what will happen to citizens who do not obey government laws

On page 26, Vonnegut says, “It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.” How does this paragraph compare to the description of the dance that comes before it? How does the shift in tone here support the theme?

The tone of the prior description is one of awe, amazement, and splendor. The author uses imagery such as, “They leaped like deer on the moon,” and “neutralizing gravity with love and pure will” to create an almost surreal and fantastical feeling to the action taking place. Vonnegut loses the imagery and figurative language immediately in the next paragraph, and the tone shifts suddenly to one of shock and sadness. The significance of the shift is crucial to the theme. He uses the beautiful images to exemplify and glorify Harrison’s behavior, thus applauding his desire to be great and reach his full potential. The sudden murder that happens represents the negative, oppressing role of the government in this society. The author is using contrasting word choice in these sections to shift tone and emphasize his message.

On page 25, just after watching the televised murder of his son, George hears “the sound of a riveting gun in his head.” Why does Vonnegut reference this particular kind of tool? How might this multiple meaning word enhance the themes in the story?

A riveting gun is a power tool, one which is loud and is used here to distract George from the thoughts beginning to form in his mind. An additional meaning, which adds an additional layer to the image here, is *arresting*. Vonnegut uses this particular word to underscore an almost immobilization that George feels as this ‘impediment’ reaches his brain, keeping him frozen and inactive. When one of the most devastating things that a parent can ever experience—the death of one’s child—unfolds before George’s eyes, his arrested humanity renders him incapable of any real response.

What do you think Vonnegut might be trying to say about today's society and the role a government can play in achieving equality among people? Use examples from the story to support your opinion.

Vonnegut is warning us that an interpretation of an 'equal' society could reinforce an oppressive and totalitarian government. It also begs the question, if everyone is 'equal,' who, in fact, is in charge? Presumably there is someone, or a group of people, who would need above average intelligence in order to maintain regulation. All of the impediments which are government-mandated are not likely to be controlled by someone like either George or Hazel, who, when confronted with an ethical question, are not able to formulate a coherent response. The exposition reads, "If Hazel hadn't been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn't have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head" (23). Rather than allow individual expression and full realization of each person's ability, the government, who wants to retain control, is forced to oppress any semblance of true thought or idea that could conceivably be a threat to the existing order, which is why Harrison's televised rebellion, consisting of merely attempting to become his real self was met with "The Handicapper General, (who) came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun" (26). When she wordlessly guns down the Emperor and the Empress, she solidifies Vonnegut's warning that a society that discourages true thought and emotion, even in the name of 'equality,' must do so through fear and oppression, and ultimately sacrifices humanity itself.

Culminating Writing Task

The United States has often been called the land of opportunity. This suggests that individuals are free to pursue their dreams to the best of their abilities, which may differ greatly. At the same time, our Declaration of Independence states that all people are created equal. How does Vonnegut use characterization and word choice to warn his readers of the potential drawbacks of a truly “equal” society? Support your claims with valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence from the text, including direct quotes and page numbers.

<i>Evidence Quote or paraphrase</i>	<i>Page number</i>	<i>Elaboration / explanation of how this evidence supports ideas or argument</i>
“You been so tired lately—kind of wore out,” said Hazel. “If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out of few of them lead balls.”	23	Hazel’s speech (incorrect grammar) suggests that she is “of average intelligence,” which paints a picture of what “equality” looks like in this society. Is this what we want for everyone? This choice of words develops Hazel’s character and contributes to his theme.
“George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn’t be handicapped. But he didn’t get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.”	22	In George, Vonnegut creates a character that could potentially become “dangerous” to this society. He has thoughts that might challenge the government and its ways, and he could be an agent for change. However, that never happens, because the government has found a way to stop him: a thought-destroying radio transmitter.

<p>“Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood in the center of the studio. The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers covered on their knees before him, expecting to die.”</p>	<p>24</p>	<p>The characterization of Harrison does two things: first, his presence and the other citizens’ reaction to it demonstrates how the government has labeled Harrison and his greatness as something to be feared; second, Vonnegut makes him larger than life and almost unrealistic. This fantastical element just helps to really emphasize how powerful an individual can be if he is allowed to live to his full potential.</p>
<p>The description of Harrison and the ballerina dancing (pg. 26) sharply contrasts their murder that follows immediately thereafter.</p>	<p>26</p>	<p>The word choice in these two parts is very powerful. Vonnegut uses this beautiful imagery and flowing sentences to describe the awesome dance, and then he uses the concrete language and a dramatic shift in tone to describe the murder. This helps to support is message about a dangerously oppressive society.</p>
<p>“Forget sad things,” said George. “I always do,” said Hazel.</p>	<p>26</p>	<p>The simple, short sentences here continue to develop and support the idea of the “average” citizen. Also, the fact that Hazel has been crying—but doesn’t remember why—and George tells her to forget about it suggests that almost everything human about this society has been lost. People aren’t even allowed to remember or dwell upon the loss of human life.</p>

- Sample Answer

Feminist writer Frances Wright once said, “Equality is the soul of liberty; there is, in fact, no liberty without it.” This is a principle with which most people would agree. But what should that equality look like? How should it be established? Who determines the rules for such equality? In his short story, “Harrison Bergeron,” Kurt Vonnegut presents his readers with a future society that struggles with these very concepts. As the members of this society progress toward a more equal society, they somehow find themselves with fewer rights and freedoms than ever before. Vonnegut uses skillful development of characters and intentional word choice in order to warn his readers of the dangers of understanding the word *equal* to mean *same*, and he challenges the reader to consider the beauty, greatness, and freedom that lie in individuality.

In the beginning of the story, Vonnegut introduces his readers to Hazel Bergeron, a rather dull and unimaginative member of society. She is identified as the mother of Harrison Bergeron, who has been taken away—for unknown reasons at this point in the story. Hazel, however, “couldn’t think about it very hard,” because she “had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn’t think about anything except in short bursts” (21). This description of Hazel immediately establishes the idea that something is lacking in this society. What kind of world embraces as *average* the mother who can’t even think too hard about the loss of her own son? In Hazel’s character, Vonnegut sends a powerful message about the inhumanity of forcefully keeping people *equal*. In fact, by the end of the story—after Harrison has been shot and killed—Hazel can scarcely recall what she has just witnessed. Her husband, George, asks her if she has been crying, and she replies with a casual, “Yup.” He then tells her to “Forget sad things,” and she responds with “I always do” (26). The message here is that the government has taken such great steps in order to prevent thinking, reacting, or rebelling, that it has effectively removed from the people their right to even feel or emote. This dim-witted and uncomprehending woman has now become the ideal citizen in this supposedly equal society. What a sad picture this portrays: exactly what Vonnegut would like his reader to consider.

In George Bergeron, Vonnegut creates a slightly more complex character. Like his wife, Hazel, George is unable to think very hard about anything; however, he is actually inclined to do so, and a government-issued radio transmitter intermittently interrupts his thoughts. Early in the story, as George and Hazel watch some ballerinas dance on the television, George “was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn’t be handicapped” (22). George seems to understand that dancers should be beautiful and that people should be able to appreciate their talent, but he cannot entertain that thought for long, because “another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts”(22). George becomes a character in the story that represents the idea of potential “danger” to an equal society. Left unchecked, his thinking could lead to questioning, which could then lead to rebellion. Handicaps become a necessary tool for the government because of George and others like him. Vonnegut suggests that a man like George might have the potential to bring about change, but due to the heavy restrictions of the government—all in the name of equality—this will never happen. Even George’s potential for intelligent thought is rendered useless by the end of the story when, after having seen his own son killed on national television, he mindlessly goes into the kitchen for a can of beer (26). Again Vonnegut presents his reader with the sad inhumanity that comes along with an overly rigid and controlling government.

Finally, the author presents Harrison Bergeron, who becomes the symbol for everything that stands in direct opposition to this controlling government. Harrison is tall, strong, intelligent, powerful, and handsome. “He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder” (25). Harrison Bergeron is portrayed as a man who essentially has it all, especially the power to become great. The descriptions of Harrison are vivid, colorful, powerful, and breathtaking. Vonnegut uses figures of speech and vibrant imagery to create a brilliant picture of this larger-than-life character. He states that “Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds” (25). While dancing with the ballerina in the last scene, “Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of

motion as well. They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun” (26). These vivid descriptions of Harrison actually make him unreal. He is exaggerated, and this only further supports Vonnegut’s message: the impossible can happen if people strive to be the best that they can, if society’s ultimate goal becomes greatness, not just equality or *sameness*. Unfortunately, the government of Harrison’s time did not embrace this idea, and at the end of the story, in the middle of Harrison’s beautiful, gravity-defying dance, he is shot dead. “It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor” (26). Just like that, all of the potential for greatness and beauty is killed by the government. The quick change of tone in this scene is Vonnegut’s way of emphasizing the sharp contrast between the beautiful, artistic, and powerful energy of Harrison and all he stands for, and the cold, restrictive, oppressive rule of the government.

Vonnegut cleverly uses language in order to help him create the characters for this seemingly simple story. The message of this seemingly simple story, however, becomes a profound statement about the careful balance that a government must strike: a balance between seeking equality and seeking greatness. The author suggests that we must not attain solely one of these if it becomes detrimental to the other. For all three of the major characters in the story, the outcome is dismal: George and Hazel remain stagnant and unfeeling—shackled by the restrictions of the government, while Harrison breaks the rules to reach his great potential, only to be destroyed by that same government. The message here is clear, and Vonnegut would likely wholeheartedly agree with the statement made by Barry Goldwater: “Equality, rightly understood as our founding fathers understood it, leads to liberty and to the emancipation of creative differences; wrongly understood, as it has been so tragically in our time, it leads first to conformity and then to despotism.”