

## Harrison Bergeron by Kurt Vonnegut

Dystopian societies are no fun. The clothes are drab. The TV shows are all reruns. And that whole having-no-rights thing is a real pain in the neck.

Utopias are where it's at. So, how about a place where everyone is equal? A place where no one is better than everyone else, and everyone has the same opportunities for fun, happiness, and success? Our bags are packed, and we want to go to there. We'll send you a postcard.

Well, not so fast. In "Harrison Bergeron", Kurt Vonnegut wonders if EQUALITY is all it's cracked up to be. The basic idea is this: It's the year 2081 and everyone is equal. Great! But what happens when one person tries to rise above the rest? Let's just say, it's not pretty.

"Harrison Bergeron" was first published in Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine in 1961 when issues of equality and fairness were on a lot of people's minds, and this story struck a nerve. It's been hailed as "a prime example of where the ills of socialism could lead."

Socialism is a system of government in which the government controls a nation's means of production in order to create a society **without huge inequalities**.

Central to the American creed is the principle of **equality**, beginning with the notion that **all human beings possess certain fundamental rights and equal standing before the law**. Our concern for equality has expanded over the past half century to focus also on inequalities in opportunities, wealth, achievement, and social condition. What good is an equal right to pursue happiness if one lacks the native gifts or the social means to exercise it successfully? In this satirical story (1961), set in a future time in which "everybody was finally equal . . . every which way," Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922–2007) **challenges our devotion to equality and invites us to consider the costs of pursuing it too zealously**. Although the story is not explicitly about racial, ethnic, or gender equality, the questions it provokes about the kind of equality we should want, and the costs of pursuing it, are relevant also to campaigns to eliminate inequalities among racial and ethnic groups or between the sexes.

### WHY SHOULD I CARE?

It's time to face a cold, hard fact: somewhere in the world there is somebody who is better than you. In fact, there's probably someone in your school better than you. Okay, maybe not in everything, but definitely in something you really care about: football, video games, math, singing, fashion, scrapbooking.

Totally frustrating, right? You try your best, but someone is still better. If only they weren't so awesome—then you'd be number one!

We've all had these kinds of selfish thoughts. If Perfect McSuperface wasn't around, we could be football captain, head of the debate team, or leader of the makerspace squad. The only real solution we can offer is work harder and stop measuring yourself against other people.

But what if the LAW was to make everyone else worse? To bring everyone down to the same level? We'd all be on an equal playing field. Dancers would all be clumsy; singers would all be tone deaf; math whizzes would all be... well, not math whizzes. That's the kind of world "**Harrison Bergeron**" presents, and it's not a pretty one.

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Things to think about as you read:

1. The tagline for the 1995 movie version of "Harrison Bergeron" was: "All men are not created equal. It is the purpose of Government to make them so."
2. Think about the word "handicap." Move beyond the idea of physical handicap. Can we impose handicaps on others? For example, if you were to be given a Language Arts test in Mandarin Chinese would that be a handicap to you?
3. Would you object if society sought equality not by handicapping the gifted as in the story, but by lifting up the not-gifted, say through genetic engineering or biotechnological enhancement?

QUESTIONS: Answer the following questions:

1. What has guaranteed equality in the story?
2. How old is Harrison?
3. What has happened to Harrison and why?
4. How has the government made George and Hazel equal? What does George have to wear? And what does this do?
5. What does Hazel say she would do if she were Handicap General?
6. What is the name of the Handicap General?
7. What is the consequence for lessening the weight of the handicap bag?
8. What reason does George give for not trying to cheat?
  - Because of this reason, what can we infer about George's opinion of the current laws?
9. Why wasn't the news bulletin clear at first to the George and Hazel and other viewers?
10. Why did the ballerina apologize about her voice?
11. What is the news bulletin?
12. Describe Harrison Bergeron with all of his handicaps?
13. What does Harrison declare on television?
14. What happens to Harrison? Be specific.

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Themes:

“Equal is not always fair in ‘Harrison Bergeron’”: The Declaration of Independence states “all men are created equal.” Some, including the government in “Harrison Bergeron,” misunderstand the meaning of equality, thinking it guarantees equal results as opposed to equal opportunity under the law and in the eyes of God.

The Dangers of Big Government: “Harrison Bergeron” explore the dangers of giving government too much authority.

Irony: The irony is obvious—dancers who can’t dance, announcers who can’t speak, smart people who can’t think. Everyone has an artificial handicap, except for the Handicapper General who enforces the laws.

Satire: Vonnegut pokes fun at government policies that punish the gifted and successful, redistribute resources, and encroach upon civil liberties. The tone is satirical; the theme is serious.

[The United States Constitution](#) - Even the U.S. Constitution, a document created to limit government, has been turned into an instrument of oppression by Diana Moon Glampers and her ilk by adding 186 amendments to it.

What does the story warn against? To what extent do television, radio, and the mass media generally function like George's mental handicap radio? (Consider Neil Postman's observation in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*: "this ensemble of electronic techniques called into being a new world—a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child's game of peek-a-boo, entirely self-contained. But like peek-a-boo, it is also endlessly entertaining")