

A dystopian society in harrison bergeron story

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Known for publishing numerous satirical works, Kurt Vonnegut continues this writing trend in his short story “Harrison Bergeron”. Vonnegut writes about a dystopian society in the future and although the events in the story are serious, it can be found humorous when comparing the story to reality. For example, the idea of handicapism is constantly brought up. In the story, handicapism is when a member of society who is above average, wears a government product to create equality, forcing him or her to be average. Complete equality, however, may not be as good as it sounds. In “Harrison Bergeron”, Kurt Vonnegut exposes the many negative aspects of an overly equal society through the use of humor, irony, satire, and symbolism. These literary devices allow the reader to easily identify its downfalls while naturally drawing parallels to our own society.

Imagine a world where everyone was equal; not one person being smarter or stronger than the other. In Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron”, the Handicapper General created a system for equality to ensure that not one person has an advantage over another. The year is 2081 and all who are intelligent are required to wear radios that play sounds frequently to interrupt the train of thought, forcing them to think averagely. People who are stronger than the average person, must wear weights on his or her shoulders to be sure that his or her strength is equal to average. Someone who is attractive even has to wear a mask on his or her face which is shown during the televised ballerina production. As far as the readers know, this system is effective until George and Hazel Bergeron’s fourteen year old, Harrison, rebels. Harrison was taken from his family because of his superiority. He was assigned to wear 300 pound weights, huge earphones,

glasses to blind him and induce headaches, a rubber nose, caps for his teeth, and his eyebrows are shaved. Harrison escapes from the government, goes to the ballerina performance, rips off all of his handicaps, and takes charge. He announces “ I am the emperor! Everybody must do as I say at once!” (Vonnegut 234). Harrison selects an empress who removes her handicaps as well until Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicap General, kills them both with a shotgun.

Kurt Vonnegut’s writing, in general, is considered humorous. P. L. Thomas refers to Vonnegut in his article *Lost In Adaptation*, as a “ jokemaker”. Thomas also refers to Vonnegut clarifying that his humor is not intended to offend any of his readers. Vonnegut proclaims, “ Laughter is the soul seeking some relief” (Thomas 85). Vonnegut creates humor in “ Harrison Bergeron” by almost poking fun at the meaning of being handicap. When a person is handicap, it usually is not by choice, it is something one is born with or develops due to a potential tragedy. In the story however, handicaps are forced upon the above average to create equality in order to the below average from feeling bad about themselves. This concept is so clever that it is humorous. The handicaps and humour also tie together when George and Hazel are watching TV, and see their boy get killed, but due to Hazel’s natural stupidity and George’s handicap, the couple is unable to remember what caused the feelings of grief and sorrow. It’s as if Hazel and George almost forget their son exists.

Some may be a little confused when reading “ Harrison Bergeron” because of the idea of handicapism he or she may already have. Handicaps generally

create sympathy and people who suffer are encouraged to overcome his or her handicaps. Ironically, this idea is twisted in this overly equal society. The handicaps are supposed to encourage the inferior to feel better about themselves, by making others feel worse about themselves. One of the most messed up parts to this concept is that the Handicap General is clearly superior to all, but isn't required to wear any handicaps. She is pushing for a equal society by simultaneously looking down at everyone else because they are below her. In Anderson's " American Humor, Handicapism, and Censorship", she explains how some may poke fun at the disabled and will look down on them (Anderson 79). However, in " Harrison Bergeron", society almost looks up to people with handicaps. Those people are the ones who are originally superior. Society will also look up to the average or below average. For example, Hazel notices how the reporter had to pass the microphone down to a ballerina to read the news because of a speech impediment. Hazel makes a comment about how the reporter deserves a raise for trying even though he couldn't complete his job (Vonnegut 233). Using irony, Vonnegut portrays the negative aspects of being too equal.

Satire is used throughout " Harrison Bergeron" and found in many of Kurt Vonnegut's literature. It can be described as using humor and irony to expose and criticize. " In Harrison Bergeron the theme of this satire is that attempts to achieve equality are absurd" (Hattenhauer 387). Hattenhauer idea that the attempts to achieve equality are absurd relates to my thesis. I find it very hard to believe that a society would allow someone to take over and tear people apart by degrading them with weights and radios. Of course, this is only fiction, but leave it to Vonnegut to go beyond. Hattenhauer also

compares this story to politics. He says that it tends to favor one side while attempting to maintain equality. In this case, the Handicapper General is being favored because she isn't directly affected by her laws (Hattenhauer 388). Although Vonnegut is being humorous, he is indirectly pointing out a flaw in reality in the case of politics, doing so using satire.

Many traces of symbolism can be found in this short story if one is looking close enough. For example, on page 232 of "Harrison Bergeron", Hazel suggests that on Sunday's, she would make sure chimes were played on the radios in honor of religion if she was the Handicapper General and would make them real loud so the people hearing the noises can't think.

Symbolically, it has been said that churches brainwash to enforce ideas and beliefs. Kevin Boon shares a similar thought in his book, "At Millennium's End". He explains the idea, "if religion is chimed in our ears loud enough, we will lose the ability to think, and we will all become the same" (Boon 189). In the long run, losing the ability to think for oneself or being smart, how is a society supposed to grow? In the next generations, the members of society will be completely brainwashed and dependent on a leader, but who is to lead after Diana Moon Glampers passes away since no one is smarter than another. It seems that the society will die out and it was only a matter of time before someone noticed this and rebelled [Harrison]. Hopefully, some were able to catch on from the audience at the ballet and start a revolution in honor of Harrison Bergeron since he is longer able to. Harrison, himself, symbolized an uprising by showing that someone else can be a leader and that it is unnecessary to have that much equality. Vonnegut uses symbols to show the dangers of an overly equal society.

Through the use of humor, irony, satire, and symbolism, “Harrison Bergeron” can be better understood by connecting and comparing to reality. This society is a dystopia meaning it is an imaginary, unpleasant place. Vonnegut does a good job of showing the ridiculousness of this society through humor and satire. He also connects the noises that are heard through the radios and the meaning of church bells using irony and symbolism. By comparing this society to the United States of America, it can be concluded that many would rebel just as Harrison Bergeron did.