

**“Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut**  
**Reading Guide**

How is the idea of equality different in 2081 than it is today?

What is implied about how much the Constitution has been changed by 2081?

How intelligent are George and Hazel Bergeron?

What technology does George have to wear and what is its purpose?

What can we infer from the fact that Hazel has tears on her cheeks but she has forgotten for the moment what caused her to cry?

How are the ballerinas handicapped, and why are they handicapped in the ways they are?

Besides the radio in his ear, what else is George wearing?

What is the purpose of each of George’s handicaps?

What would be the penalty for George attempting to lighten the load of the handicap bag he is required to wear around his neck, by removing one or more lead ball bearings from it?

What does George think of the handicapping system established by the government?

Why is the news bulletin unclear at first?

After about thirty seconds, what does the news announcer do, and why?

What can we infer about the beauty and natural strength and grace of the ballerina, and how do we know this?

What does the ballerina do regarding her beautiful voice?

Why does the description of Harrison spoken by the ballerina on television indicate that he is ‘extremely dangerous’ to the government?

Make an inference: based on what we know of this society, why is the picture of Harrison Bergeron that appears on the television screen upside-down, then sideways, then upside-down again, before finally appearing right-side up?

Describe Harrison’s handicaps. What has the Handicapper General’s Office required him to wear, and why?

When Harrison appears in the newsroom, what does he declare, and what does he do?

When Harrison offers to select as his queen the first woman who dares to rise to her feet, what happens then?

What offer/demand does Harrison make to the musicians?

When the musicians play normally—which is to say, in a manner that is cheap, silly, and false—what does Harrison do, and with what result?

Describe the way in which Harrison and the ballerina dance.

What does Diana Moon Glampers do upon arriving in the newsroom's television studio?

What do George and Hazel's reactions to Diana Moon Glampers's ultimate action against Harrison tell you about the government's influence on their thinking?

Compare the situation in this story to one in the real world. Your analogy need not involve government, but may concern any authority structure. What is the author trying to tell readers about human society?

In what ways do any of the characters change from the beginning of the story to the end? What is the author saying about the human condition based on the development of these characters?

What do you think of the approach this society has taken to achieving equality, bringing everyone down to the same low level instead of helping to build everyone up to higher levels (of intelligence, strength, grace, beauty, etc.)?

If this hypothetical society had just focused its time and energy on making sure every citizen was treated equally under the law, on overcoming racism, sexism, classism, etc., and closing the extreme gap between the wealthiest and the poorest people so that everyone would have all their basic needs met, how would that society be different?

### **Discussion Questions for “The Country of the Kind”**

What does the protagonist do to the car he drives up to the car lot, and why? (1)

He destroys the car’s axle and suspension and melts both the tires with a hand torch, out of sheer spite and a desire to destroy and ruin things. He can’t do violence to people so he destroys things.

What is the latest trend in housing? (1)

Underground housing; housing that is ‘sunk’ in the ground and/or hidden by shrubbery.

How do the two couples who are playing tennis react to the protagonist telling them that their game is over? (1)

They leave.

When the protagonist follows the blonde into her underground house, what does he do? (1-2)

He dials up the autochef to pour out lots of hot cheese, then splatters it everywhere, including up and down the walls next to the woman. He also insults her.

What had the protagonist wanted the woman to believe about the cold wine he splashed on her thighs, and what interfered with this? (2)

He had wanted her to think it was going to be the hot cheese that would scald her, but the man from the tennis court arrives and tells her to watch out for cold wine, so she is ready for cold wine and she isn’t afraid.

What happens to the protagonist when, in a rage, he attempts to throw a punch bowl full of scalding hot cheese sauce on to the man who had alerted the woman that it was just cold wine that was about to splash on her? (2)

He hears a buzzing noise and he collapses and loses consciousness.

When he wakes up, what does the protagonist do on the second floor (down) of the house? (2)

He empties the closets and bureau drawers of clothing, then stuffs them into a bathtub and turns on the water.

What does he do on the third floor? (2)

He turned the furnace on and set the thermostat up as high as it would go. He disconnected all the safety circuits and alarms. He opened the freezer doors and dialed them to defrost. He propped the stair well door open.

What does he do on the second floor on his way back up to the surface? (2)

He stopped long enough to open the stairway door there—the water was halfway toward it, creeping across the floor—and then searched the top floor. He opened book reels and threw them unwinding across the room.

What effect does the protagonist know his actions will have on this house? (2)

The house will flood and it will be a total loss.

How does the protagonist think of and refer to all other human beings besides himself? What name does he call them? (2)

He calls them 'dulls.'

What is the protagonist's earliest memory? (2)

Some woman staring at him with an expression of shock and horror.

How does he remember his life from the age of five to the age of fifteen? (3)

It was like a dream; floating in a pleasant, dim sea.

What had been his (and his peers') attitudes about pairing off with just one sexual partner for several months at a time, and what were the attitudes of the older generation towards this? (3)

It was the fashion in love-play for the young people to pair off for months or longer. The older people protested that it was unhealthy.

Make an inference: when Elen, the young woman with whom he had been "loving steady", broke it off with him, what had the protagonist done? (3)

He murdered her.

When he wakes up, where does the protagonist go? (3)

He goes to the pool in the commerce area.

Describe what the protagonist does with the young woman whom he finds doing her underwater dance, and how he feels about it. (3-4)

He does a playful underwater dance with her and he feels their souls spoke to one another.

When she realizes who it is with whom she had been dancing underwater, how does she react? (4)

She says "Pyah!" and is upset that she let him touch her; she walks away.

What information is in the slender brown pamphlet that the white-haired man gets for the young woman to read? (4)

It is a pamphlet about him, warning people to stay away from him and to shun him. It explains what he had done, what he was, and what had been done to him.

The information in the pamphlet tells us why the protagonist seemed to float in a dreamlike state from age five to age fifteen. What had been done to him for those ten years? (4)

He had been continually sedated.

Why did the authorities stop sedating him in his fifteenth year? (4)

Sexual reasons made it no longer practicable.

What three-fold solution did the authorities then adopt to deal with him and restrain him from acting violently? (4)

Excommunication, so that everyone will shun him; making it so that if he attempts to use violence he will have an incapacitating epileptic seizure; and making him stink (he can't smell his own stink) so people will know him by smell and can identify him so they can avoid and shun him.

What do we now understand about why the young woman at the pool wrinkled her nose and said "Pyah!" in disgust?

She had caught a whiff of his stench.

Why is the protagonist 'unique' in this world? Why will there never be another like him? (4)

The genetic and environmental accidents that combined to produce him are now understood, and so they will prevent anyone else like him from ever being born.

When the protagonist sees an outfit he wants in a display case, what does he do, and why? (4)

He breaks the display case open with a table and grabs it, because he doesn't have the patience to steal a contribution book from a passer-by.

What items does he pick up at the multi-outlet? (5)

Three knives of different sizes.

Where does he go after that to find wood? (5)

The workshop section of a warehouse up north in Kootenay.

How does he obtain the wood that he wants, and what does he do with it? (5)

He cuts apart some benches. He wants to make a sculpture, a figurine of a man.

Describe the figurine he carves. (5)

It's a man, sitting, with legs crossed and forearms resting down along his calves; his head is tilted back and his eyes closed as if he were turning his face up at the sun. One hand hangs loosely, the other is curled shut; in that hand he has placed the smallest knife, ground down to resemble a sword (relative to the size of the figure), which he smears with his own blood.

Where does he place his wooden figurine, and why does he put it in that particular place? (5)

A niche in an outcropping of rock, in a little triangular half-wild patch that had been left where two roads forked. This spot had been left to itself for a long time. It was the best he could do.

What else does he leave in that little niche in the rock, besides the statue? (5)

A piece of specially-treated paper with a message on it (that will stay legible a long time).

How many other statues like this has he made and where has he left them? (6)

He has made and left many of them all over the world, from Congo City and Cyprus to New Bombay and Chang-teh.

From the protagonist's perspective, what happens to prevent the boy from seeing his carved figurine and the message underneath it, and how does he feel about this? (6)

The boy's mother calls him and then the wind shifts, carrying his stench to the boy; he feels frustrated and angry, as if people and the wind are all against him.

When he takes the figurine from the niche in which he had placed it, and comes across the boy again as the boy is playing with a puppy, what does he attempt to do, and with what result? (6-7)

He shoves it in the boy's face and says "Look!" and the boy scrambles away into the house that is underground.

When the protagonist follows the boy down into his house, how does the entire family react to his presence? (7)

They are shocked; no one enters someone else's house without permission. It is not done. The adults tell the boy, Risha, to go below and not to speak to the protagonist.

When the boy has disappeared somewhere and the protagonist leaps at the woman, what happens to him? (7)

He blacks out again.

When he wakes up, what does he realize about the family? (7)

They had left and would never return because he had defiled their house.

Why does the protagonist not destroy this house as he did earlier to the other house? (7)

He didn't have the heart for it; he is too tired.

What is the message the protagonist is trying so desperately to get someone to read? (6-7)

TO YOU WHO CAN SEE, I OFFER YOU A WORLD . . . . YOU CAN SHARE THE WORLD WITH ME. THEY CAN'T STOP YOU. STRIKE NOW—PICK UP A SHARP THING AND STAB, OR A HEAVY THING AND CRUSH. THAT'S ALL. THAT WILL MAKE YOU FREE. ANYONE CAN DO IT.

In what way is the handicapping system of the protagonist in this short story similar to and different from the handicapping system in "Harrison Bergeron"?

In both cases people are prevented from being able to do things that they would otherwise have the ability to do; in “Harrison Bergeron,” however, the handicaps are for things like intelligence, athleticism, good looks, etc., while in “The Country of the Kind” the specific handicap is only to prevent the protagonist from using physical violence to hurt people.

Consider for a moment the real-life contemporary use of a process called ‘chemical castration’ that is used on some sex offenders. In some cases after a child molester or rapist has been released from prison after serving his or her sentence they are legally required to submit to ‘chemical castration’ in order to reduce the risk of the predator committing more sex crimes. This is not all that different from the authorities altering the protagonist of this short story so that any time he attempts to physically hurt someone he has a seizure that knocks him unconscious. The chemical castration and the induced seizures are both physical limitations imposed on people who would otherwise harm others, to make it much more difficult for them to be able to harm anyone. The protagonist is also altered so that he stinks, to warn people of who he is. This is not that different from sex offenders being legally required to inform their neighbors that they are sex offenders, and having their picture and name put on to websites that identify sex offenders. The idea is to warn other people about them and create a stigma that will effectively isolate them from others, who can then (and who most often do) choose to avoid them, refusing to speak to them, make eye contact with them, or acknowledge their existence unless it is to tell them to go away or to scream for help. Is this kind of approach to dealing with sociopaths, psychopaths, pedophiles, rapists, etc. fair?

Answers will vary.

Does freedom include the freedom to do violence? Should it?

Answers will vary.

If people are made physically incapable of harming others, is that a violation of free will?

Answers will vary.

If the technology used in this short story could be effectively put into use today on sociopaths, psychopaths, pedophiles and rapists, do you think that it would be used, and do you think that it should be used?

Answers will vary.

Is the punishment devised for this character better or worse than what we do to people like him now, which is either put them in prisons where they are routinely beaten up and raped and sometimes killed by fellow prisoners, or execute them using lethal injection, which, when done incompetently (as is often the case) totally paralyzes the person being executed so no witnesses can see his or her reactions to the intense pain (they cannot scream or writhe, etc.) as the chemicals that can feel like Drano or hydrochloric acid being put through their veins shut down their internal organs?

Answers will vary.

The protagonist of “The Country of the Kind” is not only destructive; he is also creative, in that he produces artwork, his sculptures, unlike the rest of humanity, which is content with drab

functionality in everything. Do you think that there is a connection between destructive and creative impulses; that violence and creativity are somehow linked?

Answers will vary.

<http://www.carlsworld.com/ideas/creativity.html>

<http://www.drstephendiamond.com/>

Are there circumstances in which being able to commit an act of violence would actually reduce pain or suffering?

Answers will vary.

*Equilibrium* is a film that is similar to this short story; it is set in a Utopian or Dystopian future (depending on how you look at it) where everyone is required to take pills that dull their emotions, because emotions were identified as the reason for war, crime, etc., and people thought that by dulling human passions and becoming completely logical we could do away with warfare and most violence and crime. They achieved this society, but the cost was great: they have banned all works of literature and art and music that might evoke an emotional response, and anyone who possesses this contraband is burned along with the illegal materials. In that movie, it is not only rage or violent feelings that are taboo: it is any emotion at all. The people are all 'dulls' because their emotions have been dulled down by the constant regimen of emotion-suppressing pills. Those who feel are committing a crime merely by feeling emotions. Would it be worth it to achieve a society free from violence if the price we paid was giving up all art, literature, music, creativity, and emotions?

Answers will vary.

If you liked this short story, you might enjoy *Equilibrium*, and the movie *Demolition Man*, which is set in a Utopian future free from violence until a homicidal criminal from the past emerges from suspended animation to wreak havoc on this helpless society, and also the novel and/or the film *A Clockwork Orange*, about a sociopath/psychopath who's forced to undergo behavioral reconditioning.