

HARRISON BERGERON SUMMARY

It's the year 2081, and George and Hazel Bergeron have a son, Harrison. Unfortunately for them, the government took him away when he was fourteen years old. See, someone once decided that George Bergeron is of above-average intelligence, so he's had a radio implanted in his ear. Piercing sirens, crashes, and booms go off periodically to hinder his thought process. (His wife, Hazel, on the other hand, is spectacularly average. No handicaps on her.)

Anyway, one night in 2018, the Bergerons are sitting in front of the TV watching ballet—bad ballet, with ballerinas wearing masks to hide their beauty and weights to hinder their grace and strength. This sounds like a bad episode of *Minute to Win It*, and no one wants to see that.

The Ballet is interrupted when one of the ballerinas has an urgent government news announcement to make. Harrison Bergeron has escaped! An escaped convict is just what any boring ballet, opera, or interpretive dance routine needs to liven things up a bit, and boy does it get lively when Harrison himself rips off the door to the stage and storms on screen.

He declares himself Emperor and takes one of the ballerinas as his Empress. Just what this society needs to pull it from its homogenized doldrums: a crazed monarchy.

Anyway, the two of them dance, fly through the air, kiss the ceiling, then kiss each other. There's a whole lot of kissing. But the Handicapper General, Diana Moon Glampers, doesn't seem to care much for kissing (in addition to discouraging strength, intelligence, and beauty), since she shoots them both dead with a shotgun.

The Bergerons' television blows out and goes dark. Must have been a faulty bulb—no way it was government intervention, right? But then it turns out that George had gone to get a beer, so it appears he missed the whole thing. Hazel cries, but soon can't remember why. Life quickly returns to normal.

- We're transported to the year 2081, and man, we wish we'd stayed home.

- There have been 213 amendments to the Constitution, and they're all to make people "equal."
- In this case, "equal" means that anyone who's above average gets handicapped in some way.
- For example, strong people might be crippled with weights; smart folk might be crippled by having horrible noises blasted in their ears.
- Anyone who's ever tried to study with a dog barking or leaf blower doing its thing will know how effective this is.
- (We have a feeling this isn't what people had in mind when they campaigned for the **Equal Rights Amendment**.)
- George and Hazel Bergeron are watching ballet on their TV.
- Oppressive, totalitarian government kidnappings always get us in the mood for **Swan Lake**.
- They're a little bummed, because the government took away their son Harrison when he was only fourteen years old.
- Well, actually, they don't seem as bummed as you might expect. See, because he's of above-average intelligence, George has piercing sirens going off in his brain.
- Thanks, government-installed mental-handicap radio!
- Hazel talks to George about changes she would make if she were the Handicapper General of the United States.
- Hm, how about wind chimes instead of hammers breaking glass? Might be more relaxing.
- George doesn't think it's a good idea to start breaking the rules. He's content where he is: writhing on the couch, clutching his head in pain every time a loud noise gets blasted into his ears.
- The ballet program is interrupted when one of the ballerinas has an urgent news announcement to make.
- Harrison Bergeron has escaped!
- They show a photo of Harrison and all his handicaps: heavy scrap metal to weigh him down, glasses to obscure his eyesight, and giant headphones to distract him mentally.
- Wow, if he's that decked out, he must be one special guy.
- Suddenly, Harrison himself rips off the door to the stage and storms on screen.
- What should be a liberating moment is kind of scary, as he announces not that he wants to free everyone, but "I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" (54).

- He then claims a ballerina as his Empress (to be fair, she volunteered for the job).
- The two of them dance, fly through the air, kiss the ceiling, and then kiss each other.
- This kind-of-romantic, kind-of-scary, all-of-weird moment is cut short when Diana Moon Glampers, Handicapper General, shoots them dead with a shotgun.
- Revolutions just aren't what they used to be.
- Just then, the Bergerons' television blows out and goes dark.
- George wanders back in—evidently, he had gone to get a beer during this whole kerfuffle.
- Hazel cries, but pretty soon she's forgotten why. George tells her to "forget sad things" (89), which she does almost instantaneously.
- Then the story ends with a cheesy rimshot: "I could tell that one was a doozy" (92), says Hazel. To which George responds, "You can say that again" (93).
- So she does. Word for word. Always doing exactly what she's told.

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HARRISON BERGERON THEME OF RULES AND ORDER

We're all for rules, to a point. The Bill of Rights is pretty darn spiffy, and we're definitely behind the 14th and 19th amendments. But 213 amendments to the Constitution? Yeah, that might be just a smidge too many. In Vonnegut's 2081, people have been beaten down by rules. They're literally wearing the laws in weighted sacks around their neck, and it makes them tired and useless, too exhausted to even imagine how life might be different. "Harrison Bergeron" shows us that when rules rule out any hopes and dreams, they've definitely gone too far.

Questions About Rules and Order

- What are the benefits of the rules of the Handicapper General? What are their drawbacks? What do you think about the way the H-G men enforce their rules?
- All the rules are in place so that people can be "equal." Do the rules succeed? Do you see any way that people can be made equal? Does it involve different rules or no rules at all? Are people in "Harrison Bergeron" really equal?

- George Bergeron believes that society needs rules to function. But does society actually function in the story? Do you agree? If so, is there such a thing as too many rules? If not, what is the alternative?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Poor Hazel Bergeron. If she were Handicapper General, she wouldn't abolish the rules. She would just change them. Talk about brainwashed.

In a world where everyone is equal, the Handicapper General is decidedly *not* equal. She's above everyone else.

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HARRISON BERGERON THEME OF COMPETITION

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The world is jam-packed with healthy competitions: the Olympics, Wimbledon, the World Cup, Sunday-morning pancake-eating contests, and Monopoly. Well, maybe not Monopoly. But the America of 2081 as depicted by Kurt Vonnegut in "Harrison Bergeron"—well, they don't care much for competition. This makes TV pretty boring. There aren't any "good" television programs, at least not any better than any others. We only get to watch a really boring, clumsy ballet. Sure, it's good to keep things friendly—but without competition, even with yourself, what's the point of getting off the couch?

Questions About Competition

1. Why is George Bergeron afraid of competition? Who does he see himself as potentially competing with?
2. Everyone in the story is "equal." Is any sort of competition possible when everyone is equal?
3. "Harrison Bergeron" only depicts what is going on in the U.S. in 2081. Would America be able to compete on a global scale if all its citizens were "equal"?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

In this world, everyone's a winner! And when everyone's a winner, everyone is also a big loser.

The story only tells us that *Americans* are equal, due to the Constitutional amendments. Other countries—China, we're looking at you—are going to kick America's butt.

HARRISON BERGERON THEME OF MANIPULATION

Having tons of rules is one thing. Making people actually believe that they're for the good of the people—that's something else entirely. George and Hazel Bergeron have bought into the Handicapper General's propaganda hook, line, and sinker. They think it's right that George has to wear weights that tire him out and an ear radio that blasts the noise of breaking bottles directly into his brain every 20 seconds. The mere thought of changing things? Blasphemy! In "Harrison Bergeron," everyone is content with their mediocrity because this government-imposed equality has been brought on not by good education to increase intelligence and rigorous exercise to increase strength, but by weakening those who are deemed smarter and stronger and prettier, bringing them down to the lowest common denominator. We guess that's one way to do it, but there has to be a better way.

Questions About Manipulation

1. George and Hazel seem pretty content with the way things are in the world, and Vonnegut doesn't give us any reason to believe that other citizens (aside from Harrison) think differently. Why are they satisfied with the status quo? Why doesn't anyone rebel against this oppressive government?
2. Do you believe that Harrison is as large and imposing as his mugshot makes him out to be?
3. Why does George believe that he, and everyone else, should be handicapped?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Lowering the strength and intelligence of the people is an almost foolproof way to prevent any uprisings.

You've heard the phrase "you are only as strong as your weakest link"? The American of 2081 is an entire nation of weak links. Or, as Aretha Franklin would say, **a chain of fools**.

HARRISON BERGERON THEME OF APPEARANCES

What's the first thing you notice when you first meet someone? Height? Eyes? Smile? Something below the chin? Chances are it's something visual. The world is a virtual smorgasbord of visual delights from beautiful people to sunsets to sleek electronics. Not in "Harrison Bergeron," however. As part of their equality project, the government is regulating beauty as well. We can imagine everyone's houses and living rooms looking exactly the same too. What's smart is that the government plays with this visual homogenization of society by making Harrison Bergeron look so radically different. In a dull, gray world, a seven-foot-tall clown wearing shards of scrap metal stands out like a palm tree in a snowstorm. No wonder we're paying attention.

Questions About Appearances

1. If Harrison weren't seven feet of solid handsomeness (for a fourteen-year-old), would he be compelled to rebel against the government?
2. The beautiful women of 2081 have to wear masks so as not to make other women feel self-conscious. Does beauty make people feel bad about themselves? Or does envy just mean you need to get over yourself?
3. What is the significance of Hazel Bergeron looking like Diana Moon Glampers?
4. How do you think Diana Moon Glampers defines the standards of beauty she uses to require some women to wear masks?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

Average-looking people wouldn't stand against the government because that means all the pretty people would get to take off their masks.

Not everything you see on TV is true. It's possible that Harrison's television appearance was staged.

HARRISON BERGERON

Harrison Bergeron is so frightening that he is arrested "on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government". A government news bulletin describes him as "a genius and an athlete, [...] under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous". We're told that "he had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up", and that he's "exactly seven feet tall". There's even a photo to prove it.

This fourteen-year-old boy is such a terrible threat that he's been shackled with more handicaps than anyone else. Giant earphones instead of the small ear radio his dad has. Giant Coke-bottle glasses to obscure his vision and give him headaches. So many weights that he "looked like a walking junkyard" (45). On top of it all, he's so handsome that they gave him a clown nose, shaved off his eyebrows, and blacked out his teeth. (We're thinking **Hobo the Clown**.)

This is society's way of equalizing everyone: not by trying to get other people to beef up and smarten up to Harrison's level, but by punishing Harrison and bringing him down to everyone else's level. While we're still not sure what Harrison did to deserve this treatment, we can plainly see that they mean to humiliate him in front of everyone.

Whatever you think about Vonnegut's intentions here, there's one thing that is clear: the whole weight thing totally backfired against the Handicapper General. Carrying around three hundred pounds of scrap metal on a daily basis isn't going to weaken you: it's eventually going to make you that much stronger.

Gee, that almost sounds like a metaphor: being weighed down by scrap metal is just like being oppressed. Suffer under repression for long enough, and you'll eventually be willing to do just about anything to be free.

- We learn early on that the Handicapper General has taken Harrison away for being way too smart, strong, and awesome.
- He breaks out and crashes the ballet party on television.
- After stripping himself of his handicaps, he declares himself Emperor and claims a beautiful ballerina as his Empress.
- He demands the orchestra play beautiful music and, with the ballerina, soars thirty feet into the air in an elegant dance.

- The Emperor and Empress kiss the ceiling and then kiss each other. Romantic, yes. Sanitary? No.
- Diana Moon Glampers, Handicapper General, shows up on stage with a shotgun and shoots them dead.
- Death: the ultimate handicap.

Third-Person (Objective)

Penny for Your Thoughts

It's a good thing we're *not* inside the minds of the characters, since those sirens and loud noises would get annoying really fast.

But that's not the only reason Vonnegut chose this perspective. A lot of the fun of analyzing "Harrison Bergeron" comes from trying to figure out just what the characters are thinking. Were they that dull *before* the handicaps? Why is Hazel crying all the time? And what's going through a fourteen-year-old boy's head when he declares himself Emperor on TV?

Well, we know the answer to that last question: Who *doesn't* want to rule the world at fourteen?

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Dystopian Literature; Satire and Parody

On the surface, the world of 2081 seems like the most dysfunctional of **dystopias**. But think about it: would it be that bad to just sit around and watch TV and never be sad? Who wants to worry about death and war? But Vonnegut seems to be satirizing this very attitude. It's the attitude that keeps people on their couch instead of protesting that their rights are being gradually infringed upon. And the end result? People can't even be *pretty* without being regulated.

But Vonnegut sympathized with socialism and socialists—so why would he warn against a system he believes in?

Well, some people think that the story is a jab at people who think socialism would be the end of society. If that's the case, then "Harrison Bergeron" is basically laughing at us: are we really stupid enough to think that this would happen?

Or perhaps Vonnegut thinks that socialism would work, if it weren't for the fact that people are just so stupid and lazy. He's been described as a "**misanthropic humanist**." In other words, he believed in humanity as a species—but maybe not so much as individuals.

So here's what we think: socialism puts decision-making power solely in the hands of the government. And who makes up the government? Despite all the pictures of elephants and donkeys, it's people. Just like you. And what makes government officials so special that they're allowed to make decisions for the rest of us? They make mistakes just like we all do. As Vonnegut said, "It's too easy, when alive, to make perfectly **horrible mistakes**."

Sure, any politician ever involved in a public scandal would agree with that one. But maybe Vonnegut is saying that *any* system of government can go wrong—socialism, monarchy, dictatorship, even democracy—if people stop caring.

Take a story's temperature by studying its tone. Is it hopeful? Cynical? Snarky? Playful?

Why So Serious?

"Harrison Bergeron" is so calm and deadpan, it's hard to know whether we're supposed to be laughing at it or not. Like, say, **this guy**: doing something totally absurd with a totally straight face.

When Harrison escapes, the TV reporter tries to read a bulletin on the air, but "It wasn't clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment". Or when George experiences a crippling noise, Hazel can only say "Boy [...] that was a doozy, wasn't it?".

Seriously, we're not sure whether to laugh or wince.

Or how about watching masked ballerinas who are weighted down with iron pellets around their necks trying to do a graceful dance? Or Harrison winging musicians around like batons?

Hilarious, right? But the tone isn't even tongue-in-cheek. It's deathly serious. Real. Which makes us think: maybe Vonnegut is warning us that this stuff could actually happen.

WRITING STYLE

Simple and Clean

Vonnegut's style is simple and plain. It's journalistic, even, in the quick, concise way it gets the facts of the story to us at about a fourth-grade reading level. This sparse style emphasizes just how sparse the 2081 lifestyle is. It's a life without flourish, without beauty. George and Hazel are watching TV and "on the television screen were ballerinas". That's the whole sentence right there; fill in the details yourself.

The only time Vonnegut gets a little wild with the thesaurus is when Harrison and his Empress take to the sky. "They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun". Ah, there's the flourish and beauty that is missing from 2081 life. It's only possible to live like that when not smothered by hundreds of rules.

ANALYSIS: WHAT'S UP WITH THE ENDING?

"Harrison Bergeron" ends with a happy little joke. Haha, just another evening at home with the Bergerons.

Oh, what's that you say? Hazel just saw her son shot on television? Yeah, that happened. Luckily, Hazel doesn't remember it. The ending shows just how beat down by society George and Hazel Bergeron are. On one hand, it's nice that they can just shake it off. But on the other, saner, hand, it's terrible how complacent they are with the status quo. The two of them sitting on the sofa together, watching TV, would make an idyllic little picture of 21st-century American life if it weren't for all the tragedy and oppression. We just can't forget as easily as George and Hazel do.

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