

## Kurt Vonnegut “Harrison Bergeron”

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### I. About the Author

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922–2007) was born and raised in Indianapolis and later left college to enlist in the US Army during World War II. He spent time as a German prisoner of war and won a Purple Heart, a distinction he later mocked. After the war, he worked as a newspaper reporter and in public relations before selling his first story to *Collier's* magazine in 1950. Shortly thereafter, he quit his regular job and embarked on a literary career, taking part-time jobs to pay the bills. Only with the publication, eighteen years later, of his second collection of stories, *Welcome to the Monkey House*—which included “Harrison Bergeron,” first published in 1961—did he gain some positive critical attention. A year later his autobiographical novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, made him a literary celebrity, a status he held for the rest of his life. Vonnegut was politically active in many liberal-left political causes, giving numerous speeches on political issues of the day: He was, among other things, an ardent defender of free speech, an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War, and an advocate of socialism. His political views sometimes made it into his stories, which often combined science fiction, satire, and dark humor. His much-loved “Harrison Bergeron” is no exception, though there is considerable disagreement regarding the political message—if any—that Vonnegut was attempting to convey. Whatever the author’s intention, the story demands both careful reading and thoughtful reflection regarding the issues it raises.

### II. Summary

“Harrison Bergeron” is a satire, set in the United States of the future (2081), when, thanks to our own legislative process—the passage of Constitutional Amendments 211, 212, and 213—and to the leveling interventions and vigilance of the Handicapper General and her agents, everyone is finally equal, not just before the law or before God but “every which

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way.” No one is smarter, stronger, or more beautiful than anyone else. The beautiful ones are made to wear ugly masks, nose balls, false teeth, and the like; the strong and speedy are made to wear sash-weights and bags of birdshot; the naturally smart are made to wear radios in their ears, which, tuned to a government transmitter, emit “sharp noises” to disrupt their thoughts every twenty seconds or so.

In the “clammy” month of April, Harrison Bergeron, a fourteen-year-old, seven-foot-tall boy of superior brain, beauty, and brawn, is in jail, accused of trying to overthrow the government. His parents, George and Hazel Bergeron, are at home watching handicapped ballet on television and talking about the mind-numbing sounds that George, who is natively highly intelligent, endures from his radio transmitter. Hazel, average and unhandicapped, suggests that George bend the rules for the sake of comfort, but George defends the society and its laws: He does not want to go back to the “dark ages” of competition.

Suddenly, a news bulletin interrupts the dance program to announce Harrison’s escape from jail. Immediately thereafter, he bursts into the television studio, declaring his intention of becoming emperor. Harrison sheds his prodigious handicaps, appearing like a god. He selects his empress from among the ballerinas, instructs the musicians to play their best, and with his counterpart, leaps and dances gracefully and beautifully up to the ceiling, their love defying even the laws of gravity and motion. The Handicapper General arrives to shoot down Harrison and his partner. Hazel, witnessing her son’s death, is briefly sad. As the sound of a gun goes off in his head, George advises her to forget sad things. And so they do.

## III. Thinking about the Text

Kurt Vonnegut’s story paints a picture of a society that few of us would gladly embrace, even those of us who care deeply about social equality. It thus invites us to think about the society presented; its rebellious genius, Harrison Bergeron; as well as Vonnegut’s purpose.

### A. The Society

1. Describe Vonnegut’s America.
2. Why do you think it adopted its practices of making everyone equal in brains, beauty, and brawn?

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3. Is it a good thing for people to believe that no one is better than anyone else? Would it be a good thing if, in fact, no person were better than any other person?
4. Are there positive aspects of this society?
5. What is lacking?
6. Why exactly do you dislike it?

## IN CONVERSATION

*In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Vonnegut's story with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and James W. Ceaser, professor of government at the University of Virginia.*

**Diana Schaub:** Every good and worthy thing is missing from this society. There is no aspiration, no excellence, no love, no family, and at the end you see a kind of disruption of the family. Every good thing other than a certain kind of equality is missing.

**Amy Kass:** There is no joy, no memory, no real civic life in any sense.

**Leon Kass:** I do not disagree with you, but we should at least mention a few things. There are no people worse off than anybody else; there is no envy; there is no resentment. Well, there is a tiny amount of envy, but when compared to our society, there is virtually none. People seem to be content with their lot. They have a kind view of the people who struggle with their handicaps to do their best.

**Diana Schaub:** Yes, there is a kind of civic peace, but I do not think that this is a society entirely without envy. In fact, this is a society that was founded on envy as a political principle, and even though it was founded on that principle, the people that it is supposed to benefit still feel envy. The first thing really said about Hazel is that she is envious of the interesting noises going off in her husband's head.

**Leon Kass:** I agree with that, but Americans from the beginning are taught to embrace the view that no one is better than anyone else, at least in certain respects. We do not live in a world in which some people are by nature fit to rule

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over us, and we are rather proud of our sense of equal self-worth. Vonnegut's society is a society which has enabled people to feel no worse than anybody else—admittedly by making everybody worse.

**Amy Kass:** But we are also a society that seems to esteem a certain kind of excellence.

**Leon Kass:** To be sure. But, again, it would not be interesting if the story did not somehow speak to certain things that attract many Americans a lot of the time and probably all Americans at least some of the time.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at  
[www.whatsoproudlywehail.org](http://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org).*

## B. Harrison Bergeron, the Character

1. What do you make of Harrison Bergeron himself? Is he an example of human excellence? Does he represent the American dream to “be all you can be”?
2. Do you cheer for his success? What do you admire about Harrison? Are there aspects of his behavior that concern you?
3. Do we have any idea of what sort of ruler he might have been and toward what end he would have ruled? Would he (and his goals) be better or worse than (those of) the Handicapper General and her agents?
4. Is his desire—and his capacity—to rule an expression of the problem that made the push for equality necessary?

## IN CONVERSATION

**Amy Kass:** I would give Harrison a couple of cheers. Harrison Bergeron seems to stand for the rule of the best in the name of excellence, and insofar as I esteem excellence, I would like him to succeed. I would like to watch beautiful ballet on television instead of handicapped ballet. And yet there is an aspect of Harrison Bergeron that you certainly cannot cheer for. What is the first thing that he says when he comes in? “I am the emperor, and you’re going to do the exact thing I

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say, and if you do that, you can become a duke or an earl.” He plans to establish an equally intrusive kind of government, only it is going to be *his* rule—and that I object to, of course.

**Diana Schaub:** I am not sure it will be equally intrusive; it will be the reintroduction of aristocracy.

**Amy Kass:** The government is not simply the best. It is Harrison who is going to tell you what the best is.

**Leon Kass:** You have a tiny clue as to what Harrison stands for when he declares himself emperor and he jostles the musicians and tells to them to play their *best*. He does not want mediocrity, and he will reward excellence. Being an American, I am not in favor of monarchy, never mind tyranny, and I am not in favor of aristocracy. But I do admire excellence. While I wish he had come to the throne and liberated everybody else so that everybody could pursue this, and he came out as a champion of freedom, nevertheless, I sort of cheer for him with at least two cheers. He and his partner defy the laws of gravity and dance to kiss the ceiling. In a way, that is not human excellence. That is supernatural because real ballet depends upon gravity. You cannot try to escape to some other place. But the story seems to suggest you either must have everybody squashed down to the floor where the state holds them even lower than gravity would, or the only possible alternative is this kind of inhuman escape, and it seems to me that the truth is somewhere closer to the way we now live, where all the full range of human possibilities are there, partly weighted down with cares and failure, but with a real opportunity for a human success.

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## C. “Harrison Bergeron,” the Story

1. With whom do you think Vonnegut sympathizes in the story? Does he present Harrison as a hero, or is the story heroless? Why?
2. What is being satirized in this story? Why do you think Vonnegut wrote it?

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3. Is Vonnegut's story finally a cautionary tale about the importance of freedom? Of individuality? Of excellence? Or is he aiming at something else?
4. What is the relation between the sort of equality attained in the story and the sort of equality that you regard as most important?

## IN CONVERSATION

**Diana Schaub:** I did come across a little quote from Vonnegut where he indicated that the feelings that he put himself in touch with while he wrote this story were the feelings that he himself experienced as a boy in high school when he was not part of the in crowd. As a young person, Vonnegut was very aware of these feelings of envy and tapped into what might motivate both Hazel and Diana Moon Glampers. As an adult, then, he must have gained some perspective on those feelings, and so he really is writing a kind of dystopia of what political order would look like when motivated by envy.

**Amy Kass:** I think that if we take his socialism seriously, he is trying to show you that a socialist society would not necessarily look this ridiculous.

**Diana Schaub:** Right, because socialism *would* be motivated by some understanding of social justice. And I do not actually see any sort of real concern for social justice in this story; it just seems to be this hatred of excellence.

**Leon Kass:** Sometimes authors write a story with one intention, and the story they produce gets away from that intention. I do not think anybody reading the story today would say, "Here's Vonnegut caricaturing those people who say that this is what socialism will look like. That's what you people think is socialism—and that is not socialism." So that is not the story we have. The story we have shows that the love of equality destroys all possible human excellence, and it produces souls without aspiration or longing. There is no love, and it absolutely dehumanizes people. That is the story Vonnegut has produced, and it should be chastening for us lovers of equality to wonder about whether the praise of equality in this day and age would not in a

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way lead us to countenance this, unless we are careful.

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## IV. Thinking with the Text

Vonnegut's satire invites us to think, first and foremost, about the implications of the pursuit of equality in relation to the American creed. But the way of life he depicts also invites us to think anew about the meaning and importance of the "American Dream," and about whether technology helps or hinders the American character and our prospects for happiness.

**A. Equality and the American Creed (For these questions, consider the story in conjunction with the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address.)**

1. What is the American ideal of equality as conceived in both the Declaration and the Gettysburg Address? Where does it come from, and what does it look like? Do the two documents differ? What does it mean when we say that "all men are created equal" or that they are all "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights" (Declaration of Independence)?
2. Is the society described in Vonnegut's story a fulfillment of the American principle or ideal of equality or a perversion of that principle or ideal?

### IN CONVERSATION

**Amy Kass:** If you take your bearings from the Declaration of Independence—"all men are created equal"—I suspect that this society does not fit that idea. That idea seems to be coherent with a kind of political equality, but not the social equality that is enforced and insisted upon in this society.

**Diana Schaub:** Vonnegut is well aware of that distinction. In the opening lines, he says they were not only equal before God and the law, which I'd take to mean

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the original founding understanding of equality, but instead he says they were equal “every which way.” The fact that it takes the 211th, 212th, and 213th amendments to the US Constitution in order to achieve this seems to indicate the distance between the original principles and this distortion or perversion.

**Leon Kass:** But it did take the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to in fact make good on the principle of equality in those other respects. So you could say, look, the idea of all men being “created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” that is very good. But suppose somebody says, “I have the right to pursue happiness, but I do not have the opportunity do so.” You say, “All right, we will provide you with minimum education at public expense, we will be sure you are vaccinated and receive the minimum amount of health care so you are not harmed by your lack of health, and we will even provide you with unemployment compensation if you cannot get a job, and we do all this so that we help to improve your opportunity to seek happiness.” And it turns out that the real obstacle to your obtaining happiness has to do with the fact that you do not have the internal gifts to have happiness in a big sense. So somebody will say look, this right to pursue happiness, to enjoy happiness, that is all rather hollow unless I have the equipment to do so. And since you cannot give me the equipment to make me equal to the rest in the race of life, let us not just level the playing field, but let us level the players, let’s eliminate the game, and we can all go about our business and watch handicapped dancing on television.

**James W. Ceaser:** I would say that equality of opportunity, even if you bring people up to begin the race, is really a soft name for inequality. Equality of opportunity means you start at a certain point, the race begins at a certain point, but then the race results in vastly different outcomes—and that seems to be the original meaning of equality. It is almost an aristocratic principle, or it at least allows for great differences.

I’m not sure that all Americans accept this. A large number of people in Western society are sliding slowly toward this other view, that it is the equality of results that is important. And perhaps that is what this story points to—that at some point, slowly, slowly, slowly, two hundred amendments down the line, we are



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going to get there, unless we realize the different character of those principles. And not just the *different* character of these principles, because it is one thing to say it is yours by tradition, but you would have to say why one was better than another. That still remains.

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1. What is the relation between the kind of equality pursued in Vonnegut's fictional society and the *political* idea of equality described in the Declaration of Independence or the democratic *social and cultural* ideal of equality discussed, for example, by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*? See, in particular, Volume II, Book 2, Chapter 1, "Why Democratic Nations Show a More Ardent and Enduring Love of Equality Than of Liberty":

*It is possible to imagine an extreme point at which freedom and equality would meet and blend. Let us suppose that all the people take a part in the government, and that each one of them has an equal right to take a part in it. As no one is different from his fellows, none can exercise a tyrannical power; men will be perfectly free because they are all entirely equal; and they will all be perfectly equal because they are entirely free. To this ideal state democratic nations tend. This is the only complete form that equality can assume upon earth; but there are a thousand others which, without being equally perfect, are not less cherished by those nations.*

*The principle of equality may be established in civil society without prevailing in the political world. There may be equal rights of indulging in the same pleasures, of entering the same professions, of frequenting the same places; in a word, of living in the same manner and seeking wealth by the same means, although all men do not take an equal share in the government. A kind of equality may even be established in the political world though there should be no political freedom there. A man may be the equal of all his countrymen save one, who is the master of all without distinction and who selects equally from among them all the agents of his power. Several other combinations might be easily imagined by which very great equality would be united to institutions more or less free or even to institutions wholly without freedom.*

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4. Is the possession of a right to pursue happiness hollow if we lack the wherewithal to exercise it? Do the sharp divisions between haves and have-nots—whether of wealth, opportunity, or native gifts—render problematic *in fact* the American dedication to the proposition of human equality?
5. Why do Americans love equality? Should we? Can the desire for it ever be satisfied?
6. What do we owe those of our fellow citizens who are worse off through no fault of their own? What do we owe those of our fellow citizens who were dealt a poor hand of native gifts?
7. Is it true that a society riven by inequality—based especially on the inequality of talents—cannot cultivate the virtues required for citizenship and cannot retain the attachment of all of its citizens?
8. Does the love of equality (or the push for “social justice”), if pursued single-mindedly, implicitly accept the flattening of human possibility as an acceptable price to be paid for eliminating invidious distinctions, envy, resentments, and feelings of inferiority? If the two ideals—human excellence and equality—are in conflict, which one should we hold more dear? Must one be pursued at the expense of the other? Are there some areas in life in which we wish for equality more than human excellence and others we don’t?
9. In what way(s) or under what circumstances might the love of equality be compatible with competition? With the pursuit of excellence?
10. Can the private pursuit of happiness, in the absence of standards of excellence and of social judgments ranking better and worse paths to happiness, lead to a society in which all are equally debased?

## **B. The American Dream**

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.” Under such a view, what happens to the “American Dream”—that anyone can rise and prosper as a result of hard work and the application of his or her God-given talents?
2. What happens to the American Dream if it should turn out that God-given talents are profoundly unequal in their allotment?
3. Is the love of material comfort and prosperity—and the possibility of socioeconomic mobility—in tension with a commitment to equality?
4. Is the American Dream fair or just?

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5. Which should society reward and respect most: personal effort or actual accomplishment?

### C. Technology and the American Character

1. Would you object if society sought equality not by handicapping the gifted but by lifting up the not gifted, say through genetic engineering or biotechnological enhancement?

#### IN CONVERSATION

**Amy Kass:** What if we leveled up in a very benign way? Instead of manipulating genes, we can just alter the food supply or recommend a certain kind of diet for all pregnant women so that the next generation through diet will have all the benefits of intelligence and brawn and so on. Would that be equally objectionable?

**Leon Kass:** Well, some people are born with wonderful teeth and do not get cavities, but we now fluoridate the water so that everybody can have teeth that get fewer cavities. While that is small change compared to the things that are talked about here, let's assume that you really could lift up, without coercive means. Do we have objections to equalization of talents as such? Do we like the fact that some people are vastly more gifted than others? Or would you like a world in which everybody starts not only on a level playing field, but with the same internal equipment—and then you will find out what they will make of themselves? And the internal equipment includes, by the way, not just smarts, but drive, desire, will, and those sorts of things which make a telling difference with respect to the results.

**James W. Ceaser:** This brings us to the point where we are asking whether there is such a thing as nature or not. Whether there is some limit beyond which, even if we wished, we could not make happen without changing nature. It does seem to me that nature gives us these differences, or at least some of them, which cannot ever be eradicated. To alter this might be a hope that someone has in a fantasy, but which would fundamentally change everything we know about human beings

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and society and the world we have come to know. In some ways, it is almost a vain exercise to speculate, but if I had to choose, I would say no, I prefer to keep the world we live in.

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2. In May 1961, about five months prior to the appearance of Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," Newton Minow, then chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, gave a memorable speech titled "Television and the Public Interest," which challenged his audience as follows:

*I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.*

*You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder . . . and cartoons. And endlessly commercials—many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all boredom. True, you'll see a few things you will enjoy. But they will be very, very, very few. And if you think I exaggerate, I only ask you to try it.*

Since 1961, TV has grown in leaps and bounds, making Americans even more addicted to it than George and Hazel and their society were. But has it remained the "vast wasteland" that Vonnegut parodied and of which Minow spoke?

3. Do other technologies like the Internet, Twitter, or instant messaging improve the American character? Our prospects for happiness? If so, how? If not, why?