

Harrison Bergeron by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

Background

Utopian Society The story describes an attempt to create a Utopian, or perfect, society in the United States by abolishing all kinds of competition. For centuries, writers have described perfect societies: Plato wrote about one in *Republic*. The word Utopian comes from Sir Thomas More's book *Utopia*. George Orwell and Aldous Huxley both wrote famous satires on Utopian societies. This story is written in the same tradition.

About the Author

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922-2007)

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was one of the most acclaimed writers in America. After working briefly as a journalist, he began writing short stories in the late 1940's and continued writing stories, novels, dramas, and essays for more than 50 years. His fiction deals with sobering topics—war, brutality, and fear of technology. Vonnegut writes with dark humor and elements of fantasy and even absurdity, which have given his writing lasting appeal.



Voice of Experience During World War II, Vonnegut was held as a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany. The city was leveled by a fierce firebombing, and the destruction and horror of that event became the focus of his most famous novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*. Vonnegut wrote in a preface of the novel that it was about “the inhumanity of many of man’s inventions to man.” Vonnegut was awarded the Purple Heart, a badge of military merit, after sustaining wounds when captured by German soldiers during WWII

Quotes:

“Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up afterward.”

“A purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved.”

“I urge you to please notice when you are happy, and exclaim and murmur or think at some point, ‘If this isn’t nice I don’t know what is.’”

Plot and Context

The plot of a story is the action that takes place. The plot is driven by a conflict, or struggle between opposing forces. This might be a struggle between two characters, between a character and nature, within a character, or between a character and society as in the story, “Harrison Bergeron.”

Directions: In the chart, record the ways in which Harrison and the government oppose each other.

What the Government Believes	How Harrison is Different
Everyone should be average	Is a genius and an athlete

Reading Check

Directions Recall the events from this short story by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Then answer the question in complete sentences.

1. How does the society affect the thoughts and reactions of the people? How does it influence their job performance?

2. What is the purpose of the handicaps?

3. Why does the government handicap George but not Hazel?

4. What keeps happening to George that prevents him from finishing his thoughts?

5. Why is the government looking for Harrison?

6. Why has Harrison been so handicapped by the government?

7. Notice how Harrison views himself in relation to other people. How do his views put him in conflict with the government?

8. What does Handicapper General do to Harrison?

9. Why doesn't Harrison's parents respond with more feeling to what they have seen?

Literary Analysis

10. **Analyze Plot and Conflict:** Summarize the main conflict in “Harrison Bergeron.” How is this conflict resolved?

11. **Recognize Climax:** Recall that the climax, or turning point, is the high point of interest and tension in a story. What is the climax of the story?

12. **Interpret Theme:** What is Vonnegut saying about society by making everyone average? Support your opinion

13. **Evaluate:** Suppose Harrison took over the county. What might happen?

14. **Synthesize:** In “Harrison Bergeron,” everyone is forced to be the same. What is one place today where people are forced to be the same? Explain your answer.

Name _____

Hour _____

Date _____

15. **Critical Interpretation:** One critic has argued that Vonnegut portrays television as “a kind of desensitizing, numbing, and clearly thought-stifling, rather than thought provoking, medium” that is partly responsible for the state of society. Do you agree or disagree that television or technology is partly to blame for the society portrayed in the story? Support your answer.

