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Conforming to dystopian ideals: "Harrison Bergeron"

Kurt Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron" shows a very different United States in the year 2081. Individualism has been defeated and conformity is favored. People who are smarter, more beautiful, stronger than average are given handicaps that make them at an equal level with everyone who isn't above average. The story takes place in the Bergeron's living room as George and Hazel are watching a television program. Their son Harrison has been taken away by the Handicapper General's men years earlier. Hazel is described as being "perfectly average" (Vonnegut 1328), while George is "above average" and must wear an ear transmitter that sends out signals every twenty seconds to disrupt his thoughts. He also wears weights to slow down his strength. As they watch the television program of dancing ballerinas, a news bulletin interrupts and tells of Harrison's escape from jail and how he is extremely dangerous. Immediately after the bulletin is given, Harrison enters the studio and declares himself Emperor. He takes off his many handicaps and picks one of the ballerinas as his empress. As they begin to dance, they start to fly above the crowds, defying not just the laws of the land, but the laws of gravity. In the end of the story, Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, enters the studio and shoots down the dancing couple. Hazel Bergeron begins to cry as she sees her son killed, but soon forgets why she is crying and cannot explain to George what just happened on the television.

"Harrison Bergeron" details a dystopian society that has gone to extremes to make every citizen equal. But who can say what is equal, and is this forced equality a bad thing, or is it good?

In her essay "Teaching Conformity in Kurt Vonnegut's 'Harrison Bergeron'," Lexi Stuckey, an English professor at the University of Central Oklahoma, presents the idea that Vonnegut was not

necessarily writing against this forced equality, but rather for it. She and Darryl Hattenhauer, another Vonnegut expert, both mention that Vonnegut himself was a liberal. In a letter he wrote to Hattenhauer, Vonnegut explained that he believed he was more like Diana Moon Glampers than Harrison Bergeron, and that this story is about “envy and self pity” towards overachievers (Hattenhauer 388). From this statement, it can be seen that Vonnegut was a proponent for conformity.

Stuckey outlines in her essay how Vonnegut uses diction to prove that conformity is best. She refers to how Hazel Bergeron does not have “‘completely’ or ‘totally’ average intelligence,” but rather is “perfectly” average and is in a “blissfully ignorant state...lived within the status quo” (Stuckey 86). Stuckey also explains that George even accepts the handicaps, because without them, everyone would be in competition with each other, just like in what he calls “the dark ages” (Vonnegut 1329). Stuckey suggests that because George refers to pre-handicap times as “the dark ages,” he views “the current system as proper and correct, put in place to protect individuals” (Stuckey 87). This shows that negative connotations are placed on the individualist ideas, whereas positive connotations are placed on the ideals of the conformist.

Stuckey continues this idea as she discusses Harrison Bergeron himself. She suggests Harrison’s declaration that he is the “Emperor” creates another negative connotation because he doesn’t want to use his extreme strength and intelligence to free those under handicaps, but rather to “use his superiority to rule society,” just an emperor in feudal times would rule over the peasants (87). Even though Harrison is supposed to be the hero of this tale, he is presented in a negative way, as he is ultimately shot down for his defiance. This final scene shows that this story is not a commentary on corrupt government, but rather it presents the moral “be content in mediocrity” (88).

Stuckey presents a convincing interpretation of Vonnegut’s short story “Harrison Bergeron.” Although this story is typically taught as an attack on conformity, she uses specific

evidence from the text to show that was not necessarily Vonnegut's plan in writing this story.

However, even though she presents this information, she makes a contradictory statement in her

final paragraph. She still suggests teaching individualism with this short story and warns to not

"become Diana Moon Glampers, Handicapper General, in our classrooms, shooting nonconformists

out of the sky"(89). This final paragraph takes away a bit of her credibility, as she goes against

everything she just argued about through her entire paper. This may show that even though there is

significant evidence not just from the text itself, but also Vonnegut's personal views, it is still hard

to disregard individualism and embrace conformity.

Works Cited

Hattenhauer, Darryl. "The Politics of Kurt Vonnegut's 'Harrison Bergeron'." *Studies in Short Fiction* 35 (1998): 387-92. *EBSCO*. Web. 3 November 2012.

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Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. "Harrison Bergeron." *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Ed. Ann Charters. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 1328-32. Print.