Harrison Bergeron

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KURT VONNEGUT

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., was born in Indianapolis, studied chemistry and engineering at Cornell and other universities, and entered the Second World War as a private in the US Army. In the Battle of the Bulge he was taken prisoner by the Germans, and his experiences in Dresden during and after the firebombing of that city form some of the factual basis for *Slaughterhouse-Five*. After the war, he studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, worked as a reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau, and later moved to New York State to write for General Electric as a public relations man. Vonnegut had seven children (three biological, four adopted) and was married several times. He taught at various institutions, including the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His work is celebrated for its dark humor and the anti-war sentiments in his writing remain relevant today. Over the course of his career, Vonnegut published popular work across several genres, including novels, short stories, plays, and nonfiction works. His two most popular novels, *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, brought Vonnegut national recognition and a wide readership, which continue up to and after his death in 2007.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Given the time of Vonnegut's writing, the dystopian tone of Harrison Bergeron reflects the growing fears of totalitarianism amongst Americans in the aftermath of WWII. As the story's ending frames the triumph of state violence over individual dissent as a moment of loss and tragedy, Harrison Bergeron can also be read as a comment on the suppression of dissent during the "Red Scare" in America circa the Cold War. Finally, the problematic nature of absolute equality in Vonnegut's futuristic America relates to the fundamental ambiguity of the notion of "equality" in the American constitution.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Harrison Bergeron can be read alongside a series of other dystopian novels written in the same post-WWII time period, including George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. These works explore the horrors of unchecked authoritarianism through literary satire and absurdity. At the same time, these stories can be read as political allegories about the relationship between citizens and the state under totalitarian regimes and the proliferation of nationalist propaganda. Vonnegut's *Sirens of the Titan* (1959) is a dystopian novel about a Space Wanderer who explores a futuristic version of Earth where all people are rendered equal due to the proliferation of physical handicap devices. In *Sirens of the Titan*, people wear handicaps not by law, but as a gesture of commitment both to the Church and to society as a whole.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Harrison Bergeron
- **When Written:** 1961
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1961
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern, Contemporary
- **Genre:** satire, science fiction
- **Setting:** America in the year 2081
- **Climax:** Harrison Bergeron is shot and killed by the Handicapper General
- **Antagonist:** Dianna Moon Glampers
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Real World Applications. In a 2005 Kansas Supreme Court case on public school financing, attorneys arguing against equal funding for all public schools quoted "Harrison Bergeron" to claim that a statewide requirement for equal school funding would result in an unconstitutional deprivation of resources from students in wealthier districts. Vonnegut responded on the record, stating that he believed the attorneys misinterpreted his story, which is more concerned with talent and ability than it is with wealth.

Pop Culture. Harrison Bergeron has been the source of several TV and film adaptations, including adaptations for PBS and Showtime.

PLOT SUMMARY

The year is 2081, and as a result of a series of constitutional amendments, all people living in the United States are absolutely equal. In order to ensure equality amongst citizens, extraordinary individuals must wear mental and physical **handicap devices** that limit their special gifts and talents, and extraordinarily attractive folks must wear disfiguring makeup and accessories to make them look less attractive. Handicaps are regulated by the US Handicapper General, Diana Moon Glampers, who is responsible for maintaining equality across society.

George and Hazel Bergeron, the parents of Harrison Bergeron, are watching a ballet performance on television. George, a person with above-average strength and intelligence, must wear mental and physical handicaps at all times, while Hazel is naturally perfectly average, and therefore doesn't need to wear handicaps. Although George and Hazel do not mention their fourteen-year-old son, readers learn that Harrison has recently been arrested by the Handicapper General's agents.

While George and Hazel watch television, George's thoughts are frequently interrupted by his mental handicap device—a radio transmitter that airs a series of loud, invasive noises, intended to disturb his train of thought. At one point, George begins to wonder whether the dance program would be better if the ballerinas were unhandicapped, but an interruption coming from his mental handicap prevents his pursuit of this thought.

At one point, Hazel notices that her husband looks tired and she suggests that he rest his physical handicap—a canvas bag filled with heavy lead balls, padlocked to his neck. George refuses this offer, reminding his wife of the fines and jail sentence he would receive if he were caught disobeying the Handicapper General. He asks Hazel, rhetorically, what she thinks would happen if people disobeyed the laws set by the HG, and she answers, "Reckon it'd fall apart."

The ballet program on television is interrupted by a news bulletin, which informs viewers that Harrison Bergeron has recently escaped from jail. Harrison's photo appears on-screen: he is seven feet tall, and his body is covered with grotesque handicap devices made to hamper his extraordinary strength, intelligence, and natural beauty. In the news bulletin, Harrison is framed as a dangerous criminal wanted "on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government."

The bulletin is interrupted by the noise of Harrison Bergeron tearing down the door to the television studio on-screen. Harrison declares himself Emperor and proceeds to destroy all of his mental and physical handicaps in front of the television cameras. He selects a ballerina to be his Empress and destroys all of her handicaps, as well. Harrison then removes the handicap devices from the musicians in the studio and instructs them to play music as he dances with his Empress. The pair sways to the music and eventually Harrison and the ballerina spring in the air and float to the ceiling. They kiss the ceiling and then each other, all while floating in thin air.

Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, barges onto the scene with a shotgun. She shoots and kills Harrison and the ballerina, and instructs the musicians to put their handicaps back on or face the same fate. The scene is cut short when the Bergerons' television burns out.

George, who had left the living room to get a beer, returns to find Hazel in tears, but Hazel cannot remember why she is crying. George urges Hazel to "forget sad things," and Hazel replies, "I always do." The exchange is interrupted by George's mental handicap device, which transmits the sound of a "riveting gun." The story ends with Hazel's comment on the latest soundwave, stating "Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy."

CHARACTERS

Harrison Bergeron – Harrison Bergeron is the 14-year-old son of George and Hazel Bergeron who, at the beginning of the story, has been taken away by agents of the U.S. Handicapper General. Harrison is an extraordinarily smart, athletic, handsome individual who faces extreme governmental regulations on his natural gifts and abilities, including severe physical and mental **handicaps** to limit his nearly-superhuman strength and intelligence. Harrison's refusal to accept the government's regulations on himself and society leads to his imprisonment, though he escapes from prison, removes his handicaps, and—in an act of dissent against the government—un-handicaps a ballerina and a ballet orchestra to stage a transcendent dance performance on live TV. Harrison's dissent, which relies on the power of individualism and art to reach oppressed citizens watching TV from home, ends when the Handicapper General executes him in the midst of his dance. While Harrison clearly views his actions as a heroic coup against the totalitarian government, his own parents' inability to remember—let alone find meaning in—their experience of Harrison's art and their subsequent grief at his death puts into question whether his sacrifice of his life to oppose the government will have any effect at all. Though Harrison represents the power and beauty of art and individualism in a society in which everyone is forced to be mediocre and alike, Vonnegut's ending is somewhat pessimistic, in that Harrison's life and death seem not to have been particularly impactful on society overall.

George Bergeron – George Bergeron is the father of Harrison Bergeron and the husband of Hazel Bergeron. Although George is characterized by his strength and "way above normal" intelligence, his state-issued mental and physical **handicaps** limit his talents, making him equal to everybody else. George's attitude towards forced equalization is ambivalent. He abides by the law of the Handicapper General, declining his wife's suggestion that he rest his handicaps while at home because he's afraid of punishment, and he also suggests, while watching the handicapped ballerinas on TV, that their handicaps are in his best interest, since their mediocre dancing makes sure that nobody watching feels inferior to them. However, George does have an inkling that their dancing is bad and it might be worthwhile to see unhandicapped dancing—a thought that is interrupted by his mental handicap before he can follow it any further. Although George is upset by the imprisonment and murder of his son, his loyalty to the state and

his inability to think for himself make it difficult for him to find any meaning or political resolve in the experience of losing his son. George's conformity to the law of the Handicapper General represents a passive mode of citizenship that neglects to critique authority in society.

Hazel Bergeron – Hazel Bergeron is the mother of Harrison Bergeron and the wife of George Bergeron. Unlike her husband and son, Hazel is described as having "perfectly average" strength and intelligence (she is unable to "think about anything except in short bursts"), so she is not subjected to any mental or physical **handicaps**. Hazel has a loving, supportive presence throughout the story, and although she never speaks directly against the Handicapper General, she laments the fact that her husband and son are burdened by the law. She suggests, for example, that her husband rest his handicaps, stating, "I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while," though she concedes that if people broke the law then society would fall apart, which shows her ambivalent relationship to the status quo. Hazel cries after the murder of her son, but due to her inability to focus on a single thought for more than an instant, she is unable to recall why she is upset once the television burns out.

Ballerina/Empress – The Ballerina is one of the dancers in the televised dance performance that George and Hazel Bergeron watch throughout the story. Initially, she is subject to extreme mental and physical **handicaps**, as well as a disfiguring disguise. When Harrison Bergeron storms onto the stage and commands, "Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne," this ballerina is brave enough to stand, and so she becomes Harrison's Empress. Harrison removes all her handicaps, revealing her "blindingly beautiful" looks, and the two of them dance wonderfully together before Harrison and the Empress are shot and killed by Diana Moon Glampers in order to quell their dissent.

Diana Moon Glampers (Handicapper General) – Diana Moon Glampers is the Handicapper General of the United States. She is responsible for regulating the minds and bodies of all American citizens in order to ensure that all people are absolutely equal. In "Harrison Bergeron," Diana Moon Glampers' character represents the oppressive authority of the totalitarian government. She is responsible for shooting and killing both Harrison Bergeron and the Ballerina on live television in order to quell their dissent and send a message to all citizens that displays of individualism and talent will not be tolerated.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

EQUALITY VS. INDIVIDUALISM

In the futuristic world of "Harrison Bergeron," the government applies physical and mental **handicaps** to individuals with above-average strength and intelligence in order to guarantee that all people in society are equal. While equality is often regarded as a positive condition of democratic society, Vonnegut's dystopian portrayal of an absolutely equal society reveals how equality must be balanced with freedom and individualism in order for society to thrive.

Although in the story all people are "finally equal" in "every which way," Vonnegut suggests that forbidding individualism causes society to suffer. For instance, the distribution of mental handicaps prevents citizens from thinking critically or creatively. In the case of George, who has "way above normal intelligence," citizenship in an equal society comes at the price of his ability to critically question the world around him. George clearly has the impulse to question the invasive nature of government regulations on equality, particularly with regards to the handicaps' negative effects on the arts (he watches shackled dancers on TV who are forbidden from displaying any above-average talent), yet the presence of his own mental handicaps prevents him from pursuing this line of thought: "George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped," Vonnegut writes. "But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

Harrison Bergeron is the only character in the story who defies the government's handicap regulations, and the degree to which the government and news media villainize him shows that individualism, in addition to making society more vibrant, has the power to challenge the totalitarian government. Harrison proves capable of disrupting state power through demonstrations of his individuality—both in strength (his escape from jail and destruction of "scrap-iron handicaps") and intelligence (his ability to think for himself and rebel against the government). The state recognizes that Harrison's individuality will threaten the status quo of society, and the administration justifies his imprisonment and eventual murder on the grounds that he is "extremely dangerous" and is "plotting to overthrow the government." From this, readers can assume that Harrison's displays of individualism are deeply threatening to the efficacy of a government that seeks to maintain equality.

The interplay between individualism and equality is clear in the juxtaposition between Harrison and his father George. Harrison's embrace of his extraordinary strength and genius mark him as an outlaw, while his father's acquiescence to the law of the Handicapper General (despite his above-average strength and intelligence) renders him ordinary. While Harrison is considered dangerous for his difference, he is also

capable of extraordinary feats, such as his escape from jail and his ability to think for himself. Conversely, although George is able to fit into society, he loses his ability to think or act for himself. By the end of the story, Harrison's death, coupled with his parents' inability to mourn or question the nature of his death, suggests that individualism has been lost to absolute equality.

By exploring the suppression of individualism in favor of equality under a totalitarian government, Vonnegut reveals that governments that do not balance their pursuit of social equality with a commitment to personal freedom and individualism can impede the well-being of a state and its citizens. Given the time of Vonnegut's writing (post-WWII and during the Cold War), his story can be seen, in part, as a comment on the danger of totalitarian regimes that suppress expressions of individualism and dissent on the ideological grounds that invasive governmental policies are for the "common good" of the country.

MEDIA AND IDEOLOGY

In "Harrison Bergeron," the totalitarian state regulates the minds and bodies of its citizens to ensure statewide equality. In addition to distributing **handicap devices** to lower the physical and/or mental strength of above-average citizens, the government maintains equality among citizens through ideologically-charged media that encourages citizens to consent to the invasive practices of the US Handicapper General. By showing propaganda as an equally powerful and invasive force as grotesque physical devices, Vonnegut suggests that propaganda is violent and all-consuming, even if its effects aren't physical or even outwardly sinister.

George and Hazel's relationship to television is probably representative of the media consumption of most citizens in this dystopian future: they passively consume government media constantly, absorbing ideological messages that encourage them to accept their difficult lives. The extent of their indoctrination is clear when George and Hazel watch a televised performance by a troupe of mediocre ballerinas, and George thinks that all of them are handicapped so that nobody watching at home would be made to "feel like something the cat drug in." Despite his vague inkling that ballerinas shouldn't be handicapped and his knowledge that he's not witnessing good dancing, George sees the handicaps as the government protecting his well-being rather than consolidating power through not allowing citizens to imagine other possibilities for their lives.

Furthermore, after George and Hazel see their son murdered by the government on national television, the combination of their indoctrination and their physical handicaps prevents them from processing what would normally be one of the most traumatic events of a person's life. After seeing Harrison die, Hazel retains only a limited memory of what happened, noting that she saw "something real sad on television," and George responds that she should "forget sad things." That not even their son's execution galvanizes George and Hazel to question—let alone fight back against—the government shows the profound success of their indoctrination by the media.

The media coverage of Harrison's escape from jail and his subsequent death at the hands of the state presents a concrete example of how propagandistic media creates passive, unquestioning citizens. When the ballerina delivers the news bulletin about Harrison's escape, her audience learns that Harrison is "under-handicapped" and "extremely dangerous;" the conflation of these characteristics teaches the TV audience that Harrison's dissent from the law is a threat to society as a whole. Subsequently, the graphic coverage of Harrison's assassination on television teaches viewers that dissent is punishable by death. Given the tendency for normal citizens to passively consume national media, it is probable that the coverage of Harrison's death would impel citizens to continue following the law for fear of punishment.

While the handicapping devices and the media are, in some ways, two separate prongs of totalitarian power, Vonnegut subtly blurs the line between physical devices and media propaganda. Citizens with above-average intelligence receive "ear radios" that blast them with distracting noises every few seconds so that they cannot focus, thereby rendering their intellect useless. These radio blasts are synchronized, as is apparent when several ballerinas on TV and George at home simultaneously react to the noise. Therefore, the mental handicap is a sinister form of syndicated media, like a radio station but with the explicit purpose of inhibiting critical thought.

The fact that the handicapping devices resemble media operations shows that media is the central form of manipulation and control in this dystopian future, and it's clearly an effective one. George, an intelligent man with inklings that all is not well in his society, has been so thoroughly indoctrinated that he even refuses to break the law innocently. When Hazel suggests that he rest on the couch to relieve the burdens of his physical handicaps, he responds in the best way the government could hope, saying, "The minute people start cheating on laws… [society would] fall apart."

DISSENT VS. AUTHORITY

For the brief moments when Harrison proclaims himself Emperor, destroys his state-issued **handicaps**, and dances beautifully on state TV, the government's power is lost. Although the moment is short-lived (a government agent shoots Harrison dead while he's dancing), his dissent nonetheless shows that individuals might still have power under totalitarianism. Harrison's exceptional existence proves that equality isn't absolute (or else he wouldn't have

been able to achieve such an extraordinary feat), and therefore that the state's power is not omnipotent. However, even though Harrison Bergeron is an extraordinary individual whose very existence poses a serious threat to the totalitarian government of Vonnegut's story, his execution by the government and his parents' subsequent inability to recall witnessing his murder ultimately suggests that, once the government has consolidated enough power, individual dissent has little effect.

Vonnegut writes that, as Harrison danced, "Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well." The language and imagery of weightlessness (the destruction of physical handicaps; the physical "neutraling [of] gravity with love and pure will" as Harrison and the ballerina float to the ceiling) surrounding Harrison's performance suggests that dissent can bring freedom for those who are subjected to state authority. Indeed, just as Harrison's dancing suggests broader liberation, he physically liberates others during his brief dissent: he removes the handicaps of the ballet orchestra members and of the ballerina who becomes his Empress.

Governmental authorities regard Harrison Bergeron as an "extremely dangerous" person, and they respond swiftly and aggressively to his escape from jail. Given the state's violent reaction to Harrison's sedition, Vonnegut asserts that acts of dissent pose a fundamental threat to totalitarian regimes. By declaring himself "a greater ruler than any man who ever lived," Harrison's status as Emperor at the ballet exists in opposition to the power of the state. Although Harrison's reign as Emperor is short-lived, the power takeover is fundamentally troublesome to a regime that claims utmost authority. Consequently, the climactic event of Harrison's death at the hands of the Handicapper General attests to the irreconcilability of totalitarianism and dissent.

However, the value of Harrison sacrificing his life to protest totalitarianism is uncertain. Harrison's own parents cannot even remember that Harrison has died after the television burns out, and they certainly haven't been galvanized to question or act against the government, even though they're the two people in the world who are most likely to care about Harrison's performance and death. This suggests that other citizens are also unlikely to be affected by Harrison's dissent. Vonnegut, then, is cynical about the power of dissent once a government has consolidated power to the degree it has in the story.

Though the totalitarian government's insistence on suppressing dissent and artistic talent strongly suggests that individualism and dissent are threats to the state and therefore powerful, the actual impact of individual dissent in the story is shown to be limited—the government, in other words, seems to have won. Therefore, Vonnegut's story—itself a work of art and an expression of individualism and talent—is a cautionary tale. Vonnegut hopes that his story will lead readers to understand the value of dissent in a democracy *before* the government consolidates power to the extent that dissent becomes meaningless.

THE POWER OF THE ARTS

Though state media insists that Harrison has plans to overthrow the government, his act of rebellion is not a traditional coup: he dances beautifully on national TV with a ballerina whom he has liberated from her **handicaps**, to music from an orchestra he has also un-handicapped. In other words, Harrison's dissent is an artistic performance unencumbered by forced equality, which suggests that artists can disrupt state authority through the power of performance.

Before Harrison takes over the televised dance performance, George and Hazel are watching the handicapped dancers from their living room. Both agree the dance is "nice," and George notes that the ballerinas are "no better than anybody else would have been" due to their intense physical and mental handicaps: they are burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in." Here, the totalitarian state regulates the minds and bodies of artists in order to curb their potential for extraordinary artistic expression—after all, a citizen witnessing moving artistry might begin to question the value of forced equality, thereby undermining the state's power. The intense regulation of artists, then, is a reflection of the state's recognition of the power of the arts.

Harrison's transcendent performance with the ballerina, televised on state TV for all citizens to see, is a political act meant to disrupt the totalitarian regime. When Harrison enters the ballet, he declares himself Emperor. In response, all witnesses "cowered on their knees before him," which signifies Harrison's effective displacement of governmental authority. This initial power-takeover grounds Harrison's artistic performance as political. Harrison destroys several state-issued handicaps on himself, the ballerina, and the musicians in order to perform to his personal standards. The ease with which "Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper" suggests that his rebellion has potential, as this act symbolizes that the government control that seems all-consuming is actually somewhat flimsy. In addition, Harrison tells the musicians to "play your best…and I'll make you barons and dukes and earls," which shows that Harrison imagines the new social order will enshrine individual talent rather than forced equality.

Ultimately, Harrison's performance is cut short by his death at the hands of the state. The very fact that Harrison is killed on the spot by Diana Moon Glampers (the Handicapper General) herself—someone who would presumably only handle the most

grave events—speaks to the political significance of Harrison's artistic expression. Harrison's choice to express his politics and enact his rebellion through artistic performance demonstrates that art is a powerful political tool that encourages critical thought.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HANDICAP DEVICES

In the world of "Harrison Bergeron," the U.S. government requires all Americans with any above-average quality (strength, intelligence, beauty, etc.) to wear a handicapping device at all times. Designed to ensure that all Americans are perfectly equal, the handicapping devices are visual symbols of the power of the totalitarian government, and they demonstrate the perverse underbelly of valuing equality above all else: enforced equality leads to the suppression of individuality, the disfigurement and torture of innocent people for their innate qualities, and the forced mediocrity and terror. The prevalence of handicapping devices shows the intrusion of government into the private lives of citizens, as well as the cruelty and malfeasance of a government that forces its citizens to be in constant physical discomfort in order to prevent them from accessing their natural gifts. Furthermore, the result of these handicaps—that nobody can focus on thoughts, be considered beautiful, cultivate talents, or differentiate themselves from others in any way—is a society that is thoroughly mediocre. The arts have languished, professionals are not rewarded for being good at their jobs, and individuals lack interests or defined personalities. Not coincidentally, this mediocrity makes it easier for the government to consolidate and enforce its power. Since the handicapping devices are emblematic of the ideology of this dystopian society, as well as visual symbols of the government's power, Harrison's destruction of his handicap devices on live TV is a public act of dissent against the totalitarian government. The symbolism of his dissent is so dangerous to the status quo that he is publicly executed for his behavior.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Delta Trade Paperbacks edition of *Welcome to the Monkey House* published in 1998.

Harrison Bergeron Quotes

❝ George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

Related Characters: George Bergeron

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

As George watches the ballet, he can't help but notice how the dancers' handicaps inhibit their performance and his thoughts begin wandering towards a critique of absolute equality as it exists under the HG's rule. However, this critique is interrupted before it begins when George's mental handicap device interrupts his thoughts. The noise coming through George's radio exemplifies the powerful interrelation between governmental authority, national media, and ideology which ultimately prevent citizens from being able to form dissenting opinions or even having minor criticisms of the status quo. In this quote, while George has a flicker of recognition that equality comes at the cost of art and individualism, this never develops into a deeper thought, which shows readers that critical thought is another cost of enforced equality.

❝ "The minute people start cheating on laws, what do you think happens to society?" If Hazel hadn't been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn't have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head. "Reckon it'd fall all apart," said Hazel.

Related Characters: Hazel Bergeron, George Bergeron (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange of dialogue occurs just after Hazel suggests that George rest his physical handicaps while they're home

alone. Rather than take Hazel up on her offer, George instead chides her for suggesting that he break the law, reminding her, in this quote, how the order of society depends on the law of forced equality. Still, given the absurd, over-the-top laws that require citizens to hamper their minds and bodies for the sake of "equality," George's response to Hazel's suggestion reveals the extent to which citizens in "Harrison Bergeron" become diligent subjects of the Handicapper General's authority. As George reminds his wife why the law is important, he reinforces national ideology that quells all difference and dissent in the name of equality. In this instance, George's diligent adherence to the law reveals the compromise between individualism and equality at play in the story, while highlighting the ideological potency of the totalitarian government in power.

The music began again and was much improved. Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while-listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it. They shifted their weights to their toes. Harrison placed his big hands on the girl's tiny waist, letting her sense the weightlessness that would soon be hers. And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang! Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

Related Characters: Harrison Bergeron, Ballerina/Empress (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This moment illustrates the power of the arts to disrupt the power of the state (at least temporarily). Harrison's treasonous act is a beautiful artistic performance, the nature of which is so moving and other-worldly that it renders all other laws or modes of power irrelevant—even physical laws, which suggests that the arts have a supernatural and sublime power that exists above all else.

The beauty of this artistic performance is linked indelibly to politics because it is Harrison's mode of dissent. In a society in which equality is enforced, showing off individual talent and embracing artistic expression is akin to challenging the fundamental premise of public life. Indeed, Harrison seems to believe that showing his individualism to television viewers will challenge the government by forcing people at home to consider what is lost with forced equality, vesting the power to overthrow the government in an artistic performance.

Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Related Characters: Ballerina/Empress, Harrison Bergeron, Diana Moon Glampers (Handicapper General)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Diana Moon Glampers shooting Harrison Bergeron is the climax of the story, a moment which also distills the ongoing conflicts between dissent and authority, as well as individualism and equality. The H-G's gun symbolizes the power of the authoritarian state, and her use of the gun to kill Harrison and the ballerina marks the reinstatement of authority through the suppression of dissent. Similarly, as the gunshot puts an end to Harrison and the ballerina's extraordinary dance performance, this moment restores order insofar as special individuals are violently removed from an otherwise equal society. This moment attests to the notion that special, seditious individuals like Harrison Bergeron cannot coexist with an authoritarian society that seeks to make everybody exactly the same. Moreover, the violent means through which Harrison's dissent is quelled speaks to the enormous threat that individual dissent poses to totalitarian regimes.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

HARRISON BERGERON

The year is 2081, and all people living in the United States are absolutely equal "in every which way"—they are equally smart, equally attractive, and so on. This is due to a series of amendments to the Constitution, and to the vigilance of the United States Handicapper General.

In the opening of the story, Vonnegut presents an idealistic reality in which all citizens are equal. This might seem fantastic, but there's a hint that something sinister is afoot: the mention of handicapping, coupled with the word "vigilance" and the focus on government interference makes this world seem, perhaps, authoritarian.

Despite the nation's sweeping equality, all is not wholly perfect—"H-G men" have taken away George and Hazel Bergeron's teenaged son, Harrison. Though this is tragic, the Bergerons "couldn't think about it very hard," since Hazel can't think about anything very hard and George, who has above-average strength and intelligence, must wear mental and physical **handicaps** at all times. While George and Hazel watch television, George's thoughts are frequently interrupted by his mental handicap device—a radio transmitter that airs a series of loud, invasive noises, intended to disturb one's train of thought.

Harrison's imprisonment, alongside George's diligent use of state-issued handicaps, attest to the authoritarian nature of the government. Meanwhile, the compromised state of George's strength and cognition reveals the price of equality in Vonnegut's dystopia. It's worth noting, too, that George and Hazel are introduced in the context of media distracting them from the loss of their son. They watch TV together, and George's thoughts are interrupted by a radio. Media, then, is shown to be a major way of placating them.

The TV is broadcasting a dance performance and, though Hazel says the dance is "nice," George begins to wonder whether it would be better if the ballerinas weren't burdened by **weights and masks** designed to make sure that those watching won't feel like "something the cat drug in" by comparison. However, an interruption coming from his mental handicap prevents his pursuit of this thought. As George reacts to the invasive noises, two of the ballerinas onstage simultaneously wince. Hazel, unaffected by the mental handicaps, makes shallow remarks on the nature of the noises her husband is subjected to, wondering aloud about "all the different sounds" her husband listens to, and commenting "Boy! That was a doozy!" whenever she notices George's reactions to his handicap.

George's disappointment with the ballet again reveals the ways in which absolute equality exists at the cost of creativity and individual talent, and his inability to sustain critical thoughts highlights the extent to which state authority quells dissent. The role of George's mental handicap radio in disrupting his critical thoughts attests to the potent presence of national media in controlling the thoughts of its citizens. It seems as though the mental handicap is literally a syndicated radio broadcast, as the dancers onscreen are wincing in tandem with George.

Noticing that her husband looks tired, Hazel suggests that he rest his physical **handicap** (a canvas bag filled with heavy lead balls, padlocked to his neck) on the sofa, going so far as to suggest that he remove a few of the lead balls while they're at home. George refuses, reminding his wife of the punishment he would receive if he were caught disobeying the Handicapper General: "Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out." He asks Hazel, rhetorically, what she thinks would happen if people disobeyed the laws set by the HG, and she answers, "Reckon it'd fall apart." This line of conversation ends when George loses his train of thought and the pair continues to watch television.

George's resistance to Hazel's suggestion that he rest his handicaps attests to the authoritarian power of the government, since even George buys into the importance of maintaining his own handicaps. This seems to be partly out of fear (he talks about the punishment) and partly out of a sense of duty to society (he prompts Hazel to concede that society would "fall apart" if people weren't handicapped, which shows that they both buy into the ideology behind handicapping). In other words, George and Hazel seem to have been brainwashed.

A news bulletin interrupts the ballet performance, but the actual news is delayed as the announcer's voice is hampered by a speech impediment, so a ballerina reads the bulletin instead. She informs viewers that Harrison Bergeron has recently escaped from jail after being "held on suspicion of overthrowing the government." He is described as an extremely dangerous and under-**handicapped** genius and athlete. Harrison's photo appears on-screen. He is seven feet tall, and his body is covered with grotesque handicap devices made to hamper his extraordinary strength, intelligence, and natural beauty. Among these handicaps, Harrison wears large earphones and blinding glasses as mental handicaps, costume makeup and a red rubber nose to offset his handsome looks, and over 300 pounds worth of physical handicap devices. The ballerina instructs viewers not to reason with Harrison if they see him.

Harrison, a seditious individual with extraordinary strength and smarts, is framed as a dangerous threat to the government. This establishes the relationship between Harrison and the state as a dichotomy between authority and dissent. The degree to which the Handicapper General's current regulations attempt to hamper Harrison's natural capabilities (his handicaps are excessive and onerous) again reveals the price of absolute equality. Finally, the perpetuation of Harrison's image as a criminal exemplifies the role of news media in shaping national ideology.

A loud noise interrupts the bulletin, the source of which is Harrison Bergeron tearing down the door to the television studio on-screen. Harrison declares himself Emperor and proceeds to destroy all of his mental and physical **handicaps** "like wet tissue paper" in front of the television cameras. He then calls for an Empress, stating, "the first woman who dares rise to her feet [will] claim her mate and her throne!" A ballerina rises to join him, and Harrison destroys all of her handicaps as well, revealing her natural state as "blindingly beautiful." Harrison then removes the handicap devices from the musicians in the studio and instructs them to play music as he dances with his Empress.

When Harrison declares himself "Emperor," it becomes clear that the broadcaster was right—his ambition is to overthrow the government, since he's placing himself in a position of authority and defying the dictates of the totalitarian state by un-handicapping himself and others. His rebellion against the government isn't a traditional coup, though—it seems that he believes that simply dancing beautifully on television will be enough to disrupt the status quo, hinting at the extraordinary power Harrison sees in the arts.

The pair sways to the music, and eventually, "in an explosion of joy and grace" Harrison and the ballerina spring in the air and float up to the ceiling. They kiss the ceiling and then each other, all while floating in thin air. The performance "neutrali[zed] gravity with love and pure will," and Harrison and the ballerina remain "suspended in thin air" while they continue kissing.

The fantastical suspension of gravity highlights the potential for the arts to disrupt governmental authority and this moment is also an ode to human creativity and individual potential. Once people in society are allowed to embrace their talents and be themselves, they literally transcend the laws of physics.

All of a sudden, Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, barges onto the scene with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She shoots Harrison and the ballerina, who die before they hit the ground. She then instructs the musicians to put their **handicaps** back on or face a similar fate. The scene is cut short when the Bergerons' television burns out.

The H-G's gun symbolizes the totalitarian power of the state, and her use of the gun to kill Harrison and the ballerina quells dissent while reinstating her authority. Harrison's death symbolizes the loss of individualism as the price of absolute equality. Simultaneously, the H-G's presence on-scene reveals the grave stakes in Harrison's dissent—if the top authority was summoned to kill him, Harrison must have been quite a danger to the status quo.

George, who had left the living room to get a beer, returns to find Hazel in tears, but Hazel cannot remember why she is crying. George urges Hazel to "forget sad things," and Hazel replies, "I always do." The exchange is interrupted by George's mental **handicap** device, which transmits the sound of a "riveting gun." The story ends with Hazel's comment on the latest soundwave, stating "Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy."

George and Hazel, as Harrison's parents, are the two people most likely to be affected by Harrison's performance, but here they are not only unmotivated to rebel against the government—they are also so brainwashed that they cannot even remember that their son has died. This is a pessimistic ending to a dystopian story, since if George and Hazel are unmoved, the rest of society likely will be unmoved, too, and Harrison will have died for nothing. Vonnegut seems to believe that this society has gone too far down the rabbit hole of totalitarianism to be saved.

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