

# Harrison Bergeron

Short Story by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

## What if everyone were **THE SAME?**

### COMMON CORE

**RL 1** Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. **RL 3** Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot. **L 5** Demonstrate understanding of word relationships.

What would the world be like if everyone were the same—average in intelligence, talents, appearance, and strength—and no one was better than anyone else? How do you think people would feel and act toward each other? Would they be happy and satisfied?

**BRAINSTORM** With your class, brainstorm possible advantages and disadvantages of a world where everyone is the same—exactly average. Try to generate as many ideas as possible.

Advantages	Disadvantages
no more jealousy	nothing to live up to

## Meet the Author

### ● TEXT ANALYSIS: PLOT AND CONFLICT

The plot of a story is driven by a **conflict**, or struggle between opposing forces. In some stories, the conflict is between the main character and society. In “Harrison Bergeron,” for example, the title character struggles with U.S. society in the year 2081. As you read, notice ways in which Harrison and the government oppose each other. Follow events to see who prevails.

### ● READING SKILL: DRAW CONCLUSIONS

When you **draw conclusions**, you make judgments based on story details and your own prior knowledge. Use the following strategies to draw conclusions about the society depicted in “Harrison Bergeron”:

- Note what results from the society’s practices and laws.
- Apply your own knowledge to speculate about the motives of its officials.

As you read “Harrison Bergeron,” use a chart like the one shown to make notes about the society. Also include your own thoughts or reactions about the information.

<i>Details About Society</i>	<i>My Reactions</i>
<i>Constitutional amendments make everyone equal in every way.</i>	<i>It would be hard to enforce equality.</i>
<i>My Overall Conclusions</i>	

### ▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Vonnegut uses the following words in relating his futuristic tale. To see how many words you already know, substitute a different word or phrase for each boldfaced term. Write your answers in your *Reader/Writer Notebook*.

1. **vigilance** with the children crossing the street
2. **wince** in pain after the injection
3. filled with **consternation** at the thought
4. **cover** in the corner
5. **synchronize** our watches
6. **neutralizing** the impact



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

1922–2007

### Serious Humor

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was one of the most acclaimed satiric writers in America. After working briefly as a journalist, he began writing short stories in the late 1940s 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. But 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 to the novel that it was about “the inhumanity of many of man’s inventions to man.” Vonnegut’s early work was not well received by critics, but since the 1970s he has been regarded as a major American writer.

### BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

#### What’s Your Handicap?

If you have ever run a footrace or played golf, you might know the sports term *handicap*. It refers to a way to even up a game so that good, average, and poor players can compete as equals. In a footrace, for example, faster runners might handicap themselves by giving slower runners a head start. In “Harrison Bergeron,” people are given handicaps in daily life so that no one will be any stronger, smarter, or better looking than anyone else.

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KEYWORD: HML10-37



# Harrison Bergeron

Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing **vigilance** of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April, for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter.<sup>1</sup> Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains. **A**

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas.

A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm.

"That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did," said Hazel.

"Huh?" said George.

"That dance—it was nice," said Hazel.

"Yup," said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good—no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights<sup>2</sup> and bags of birdshot,<sup>3</sup> and

**vigilance** (vĭj'ə-ləns)  
*n.* alert attention,  
watchfulness

## **A** DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 1–17. Cite specific details that describe society in 2081. What is your opinion of the society so far?

## Analyze Visuals ▶

Examine the image of the television announcer and the picture behind him. What does this painting suggest about television?

1. **transmitter**: an electronic device for broadcasting radio signals.

2. **sashweights**: lead weights used in some kinds of windows to keep them from falling shut when raised.

3. **birdshot**: tiny lead pellets made to be loaded in shotgun shells.

Detail of *TVTime-Announcer* (2002), Charles Foster-Hall. Acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20", 41cm x 51 cm. © Charles Foster-Hall.





TV TIME



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. 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.

George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him **wince**. Having no mental handicap herself, she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

"Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer,"<sup>4</sup> said George.

"I'd think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds," said Hazel, a little envious. "All the things they think up."

40 "Um," said George. **B**

"Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?" said Hazel. Hazel, as a matter of fact, bore a strong resemblance to the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. "If I was Diana Moon Glampers," said Hazel, "I'd have chimes on Sunday—just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion."

"I could think, if it was just chimes," said George.

"Well—maybe make 'em real loud," said Hazel. "I think I'd make a good Handicapper General."

"Good as anybody else," said George.

50 "Who knows better'n I do what normal is?" said Hazel.

"Right," said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison, but a twenty-one-gun salute in his head stopped that. **C**

"Boy!" said Hazel, "that was a doozy, wasn't it?"

It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling, and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes. Two of the eight ballerinas had collapsed to the studio floor and were holding their temples.

"All of a sudden you look so tired," said Hazel. "Why don't you stretch out on the sofa, so's you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows, honeybunch."

60 She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag, which was padlocked around George's neck. "Go on and rest the bag for a little while," she said. "I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while."

George weighed the bag with his hands. "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me."

"You been so tired lately—kind of wore out," said Hazel. "If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few."

"Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain."

**wince** (wĩns) v. to shrink or flinch involuntarily, especially in pain

## **B** DRAW CONCLUSIONS

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

## **C** PLOT AND CONFLICT

George's thoughts reveal more about the conflict between Harrison and the society. On the basis of what you've read so far, what behavior do you think might be viewed as abnormal and illegal?

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4. **ball peen hammer**: a hammer with a head having one flat side and one rounded side.

70 “If you could just take a few out when you came home from work,” said Hazel. “I mean—you don’t compete with anybody around here. You just set around.”

“If I tried to get away with it,” said George, “then other people’d get away with it—and pretty soon we’d be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

“I’d hate it,” said Hazel.

“There you are,” said George. “The minute people start cheating on laws, what do you think happens to society?”

80 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.

“What would?” said George blankly.

“Society,” said Hazel uncertainly. “Wasn’t that what you just said?”

“Who knows?” said George. **D**

The television program was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. It wasn’t clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment.<sup>5</sup> For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, “Ladies and gentlemen—”

90 He finally gave up, handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

“That’s all right—” Hazel said of the announcer, “he tried. That’s the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard.”

“Ladies and gentlemen—” said the ballerina, reading the bulletin. She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred-pound men.

100 And she had to apologize at once for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody. “Excuse me—” she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive.

“Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen,” she said in a grackle<sup>6</sup> squawk, “has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous.” **E**

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen—upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right side up. The

#### **D** DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 68–85. What do you think of George’s reasons for not lightening his handicap bag?

#### COMMON CORE L5

#### Language Coach

**Antonyms** Reread lines 95–96. An **antonym** is a word that means the opposite of another word. Which word in this sentence is an antonym for *beautiful*?

#### **E** PLOT AND CONFLICT

Here the **rising action** begins. What more do you learn about the conflict between Harrison and the society?

5. **speech impediment** (ɪm-pɛd’ə-mənt): a physical defect that prevents a person from speaking normally.

6. **grackle**: a blackbird with a harsh, unpleasant call.



*TVTime 2* (2002), Charles Foster-Hall. Acrylic on canvas, 16" × 28", 41 cm x 72 cm. © Charles Foster-Hall.

110 picture showed the full length of Harrison against a background calibrated in feet and inches. He was exactly seven feet tall.

The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever born heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides.

Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but 120 Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random. **F**

"If you see this boy," said the ballerina, "do not—I repeat, do not—try to reason with him."

There was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges.

Screams and barking cries of **consternation** came from the television set.

The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, 130 as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

### ▲ Analyze Visuals

How would you describe the figures watching television? How well do they represent George and Hazel?

### **F** PLOT AND CONFLICT

Why has Harrison been so handicapped by the government?

**consternation**  
(kŏn'stər-nā'shən)  
*n.* confused amazement or fear

George Bergeron correctly identified the earthquake, and well he might have—for many was the time his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. “My God—” said George, “that must be Harrison!”

The realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living, breathing Harrison filled the screen.

Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood in the center of the studio. **G**

The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers **covered** on their knees before him, expecting to die.

“I am the Emperor!” cried Harrison. “Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!” He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

“Even as I stand here—” he bellowed, “crippled, hobbled, sickened—I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I *can* become!”

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.

Harrison’s scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall.

He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

“I shall now select my Empress!” he said, looking down on the cowering people. “Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!” **H**

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow.

Harrison plucked the mental handicap from her ear, snapped off her physical handicaps with marvelous delicacy. Last of all, he removed her mask.

She was blindingly beautiful.

“Now—” said Harrison, taking her hand, “shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!” he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. “Play your best,” he told them, “and I’ll make you barons and dukes and earls.”

The music began. It was normal at first—cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He slammed them back into their chairs.

The music began again and was much improved.

#### **G** GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread line 138. Notice how Vonnegut uses the **precise adjectives** *clanking*, *clownish*, and *huge* to create a vivid image of Harrison’s appearance.

**cover** (kou’er) v. to crouch down in fear

#### **H** PLOT AND CONFLICT

Reread lines 142–158. Notice how Harrison views himself in relation to other people. How do his views put him in conflict with the government?



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.

180 They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling.

They kissed it.

And then, **neutralizing** gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time. **I**

190 It was then that 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.

Diana Moon Glampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.

It was then that the Bergerons' television tube burned out. **J**

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George. But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. "You been crying?" he said to Hazel.

"Yup," she said.

200 "What about?" he said.

"I forget," she said. "Something real sad on television."

"What was it?" he said.

"It's all kind of mixed up in my mind," said Hazel.

"Forget sad things," said George.

"I always do," said Hazel.

"That's my girl," said George. He winced. There was the sound of a riveting gun<sup>7</sup> in his head.

"Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

210 "Gee—" said Hazel, "I could tell that one was a doozy."  **K**

**synchronize**  
(s'ɪŋg'krə-nīz') v. to match the timing of

**neutralize** (nōō'trə-līz') v. to counteract or cancel the effect of

**I DRAW CONCLUSIONS**  
Reread lines 177–188. What words and phrases indicate how the **narrator** views this breaking of the laws?

**J PLOT AND CONFLICT**  
How is the conflict resolved?

**K DRAW CONCLUSIONS**  
Why do George and Hazel react this way to their son's death?

7. **riveting** (rīv'ɪ-tīŋg) **gun**: a power tool used to hammer bolts (called rivets) that are used in construction work and manufacturing to fasten metal beams or plates together.

## Comprehension

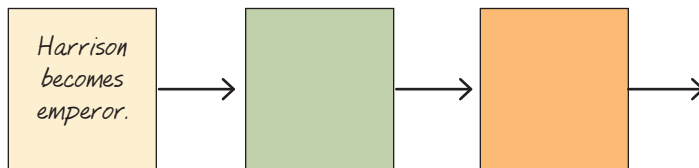
1. **Recall** Why does the government handicap George but not Hazel?
2. **Recall** Why is the government looking for Harrison?
3. **Recall** What does the Handicapper General do to Harrison?
4. **Clarify** Why don't Harrison's parents respond with more feeling to what they have seen?

### COMMON CORE

**RL 1** Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. **RL 3** Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot.

## Text Analysis

5. **Analyze Plot and Conflict** Summarize the main conflict in "Harrison Bergeron." How is this conflict resolved? How does the resolution help to make the story successful?
6. **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 this story?
7. **Draw Conclusions** Look back at the chart you created as you read. What overall conclusions can you draw about the society depicted in the story? Consider how people must function and what has become "normal."
8. **Interpret Theme** What is Vonnegut saying about improving society by making everyone average? Support your opinion with evidence from the story.
9. **Evaluate** Would society have been better off with Harrison in charge? Using a chart like this one, predict the effects of Harrison's becoming emperor.



10. **Synthesize** Think about the criticisms of society made in "Harrison Bergeron." What aspects of today's society seem open to Vonnegut's criticisms?

## Text Criticism

11. **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? Support your opinion.

### What if everyone were **THE SAME**?

Would you be happier if no one were better (or worse) than anyone else?

## Vocabulary in Context

### ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Write the letter of the word that is most different in meaning from the others.

1. (a) vigilance, (b) attention, (c) alertness, (d) laziness
2. (a) grin, (b) flinch, (c) wince, (d) shrink
3. (a) joy, (b) consternation, (c) happiness, (d) elation
4. (a) tower, (b) crouch, (c) cower, (d) cringe
5. (a) time, (b) synchronize, (c) set, (d) separate
6. (a) neutralize, (b) worsen, (c) lessen, (d) decrease

#### WORD LIST

consternation  
cower  
neutralize  
synchronize  
vigilance  
wince

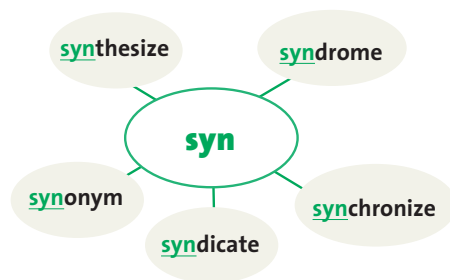
### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING

• affect • communicate • definite • establish • identify

**Identify** the social tendencies Vonnegut is warning against in “Harrison Bergeron.” Analyze the flaws of the society he depicts and discuss with a partner what Vonnegut seems to be recommending. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your discussion.

### VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THE GREEK ROOT *syn*

The vocabulary word *synchronize* contains the Greek word root *syn*, which means “together” or “similar.” This root is found in a number of English words. To understand the meaning of words with *syn*, use context clues as well as your knowledge of the root.



**PRACTICE** Write the word from the word web that best completes each sentence. Use context clues to help you or, if necessary, consult a dictionary or glossary.

1. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a group of symptoms that together indicate a disease.
2. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a word that has the same or a similar meaning to another word.
3. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a company that is made up of different parts, such as a newspaper, a magazine, and a TV network.
4. Swimmers often \_\_\_\_\_ their movements in an underwater ballet.
5. To \_\_\_\_\_ something is to combine separate elements to form a whole.

#### COMMON CORE

**L.4c** Consult reference materials to determine or clarify a word’s meaning or etymology.

Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central

Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com).  
KEYWORD: HML10-46



# Language

## ◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Use Precise Language

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 43. Vonnegut creates effective images, such as the image of Harrison in the TV studio, by using **precise adjectives**. When describing people, places, and events in your own writing, choose adjectives that allow readers to easily visualize them. Avoid using such adjectives as *good* and *nice*, which are too general to give readers a true sense of what is described.

Here are two examples of Vonnegut’s use of precise adjectives:

*She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous.* (lines 95–96)

*Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody.* (line 101)

Notice how the revisions in blue make this first draft more descriptive. Revise your own writing by using more precise adjectives.

**STUDENT MODEL**

Harrison Bergeron has a <sup>difficult</sup> big problem. He’s <sup>smarter, stronger, and more attractive</sup> better than everyone else, and the government says that’s <sup>illegal</sup> bad.

## COMMON CORE

L3 Apply knowledge of language to make effective choices for meaning or style.

## READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Increase your understanding of “Harrison Bergeron” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

WRITING PROMPT	REVISING TIP
<p><b>Short Constructed Response: Description</b></p> <p>Imagine that a film version of “Harrison Bergeron” is being released and you have been assigned to write a blurb, or brief description, for a local newspaper. In <b>one or two paragraphs</b>, describe the plot and conflict in a way that makes people want to see the movie.</p>	<p>Review your response. How have you used precise adjectives to describe the people, places, and events in the film?</p>

Interactive Revision **THINK central**

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