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Equality Means Oppression in Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron"

"Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. is a short story that sarcastically depicts a futuristic society in which complete equality has finally been achieved. In the story, the citizens in this futuristic society must wear "handicaps" to cover up or hinder aspects that might make them "better" than someone else. When one person (Harrison Bergeron) tries to rebel against these rigid standards of equality, he is quickly done away with. Through this story, Vonnegut seems to be claiming that complete equality within a society can only be achieved through oppressive means.

The exposition at the beginning of the story clearly expresses this theme. The first paragraph of the story states:

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. (Vonnegut)

This opening paragraph sets the scene for the story as a whole. It explains that the idea of equality has stretched far beyond equal rights. Equality in this futuristic society encompasses every aspect of a human being. It is complete equality. In addition to defining the intensity of the equality in this futuristic society, this first paragraph gives the reader a glimpse of a strict government regime. With the mention of the “211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments,” the reader can see that there are nearly eight times more Amendments in the fictional future than there are presently in our United States Constitution. This paints a picture of a society in which there are more laws than personal freedoms. The idea that there is an entire government agency tasked with enforcing these “equality” laws makes Vonnegut’s picture of oppression even more clear.

The many handicaps portrayed in this story show the ridiculous extent of the “Handicapper General’s” control. Good looking people are forced to wear masks, “so that no one, seeing a [...] pretty face, [will] feel like something the cat drug in” (Vonnegut). Strong people are required to have bags full of birdshot latched to their bodies to hinder their strength (Vonnegut). At one point in the story, George, the protagonist of the story and the father of Harrison, seems so burdened by the “forty-seven pounds of birdshot [...] padlocked around [his] neck” that his wife Hazel suggests that he should take a few of the lead balls out of the bag (Vonnegut). He quickly responds saying “Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I [take] out [...] isn’t a bargain” (Vonnegut). The image of a large weighted bag chained to a man’s neck is a vivid symbol of bodily oppression, and the exorbitant punishment for such a small crime depicts the ruthlessness of the government regime.

Perhaps the most unsettling handicap mentioned in the story is the mental handicap. The mental handicap is a small radio that intelligent people are “required by law to wear at all times” in their ears (Vonnegut). Every few seconds, a government controlled transmitter sends loud and

abrasive sounds through the radio devices, distracting anyone from any significant idea they might have (Vonnegut). This device is so effective that, at one point in the story, it prevents George from thinking a subversive thought. When George watches a bunch of heavily handicapped ballerinas plod around on TV, he “[toys] with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn’t be handicapped,” but before he can think more deeply about this idea, “another noise in his ear radio [scatters] his thoughts,” and he forgets the idea completely (Vonnegut). This mental handicap seems to be the ultimate symbol of oppression. It removes a human being’s most personal and powerful freedom, the freedom to one’s own opinion.

The climactic scene of this story shows just how ruthless an oppressive power can be when it is threatened by any form of rebellion. In this scene, Harrison Bergeron, a young man who has miraculously overcome all of his handicaps and broken out of jail, muscles his way into the TV station and rips off his handicaps live on air. He also persuades one of the handicapped ballerinas to remove her handicaps, and they dance together on screen, showing the world how beautiful life without complete equality can be. But their dance is cut short when “Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, [comes] into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun, [... fires] twice” and kills Harrison and the handicap-free ballerina (Vonnegut). Harrison and the ballerina receive no fair trial or jury, a right that has traditionally been protected by the Constitution of the United States. Instead, this futuristic society’s exaltation of complete equality has destroyed all personal freedoms and Constitutional rights, and the symbol of an oppressive government, Diana Moon Glampers, acts simultaneously as judge and executioner.

While this story seems fantastical and improbable, at its core, it seems to be a cautionary tale. Through the plot and symbols in his story, Vonnegut seems to be saying that while equality is an important American value, we should not be willing to give up personal freedoms and give

in to an oppressive government to achieve this value. Instead, we should leave equality at the steps of “God and the law” and be satisfied.

Works Cited

Vonnegut Jr., Kurt. “Harrison Bergeron.” <https://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/harrison.html>.