

"Harrison Bergeron"

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1961)

"Harrison Bergeron" is a story which is set in the future, when Constitutional Amendments have made everyone equal. Often these people are made equal with devices which bring all citizens down to the normalcy level in the story, a level which is actually below-average in intelligence, strength and ability.

Vonnegut is best-known as a satirical writer, someone who was able to masterfully comment on society's vices, follies, abuses and shortcomings. He looked at many elements in his world and held them up to ridicule, with the intent on shaming into improvement.



"Harrison Bergeron" does this same thing....

Themes within "Harrison Bergeron"

The story of "Harrison Bergeron" has multiple themes, but we will be focusing on two of the major themes: freedom and civil rights.

Freedom:

Although freedom is a theme that remains in the background of the story, it is certainly prevalent. Freedom is no longer the bedrock American value; enforcing the law that makes those who are "above normal" equal to those who are "normal" has become the major social value. Vonnegut suggests that freedoms can be taken away relatively easily, especially since the forced equality in the story has been authorized by Amendments to the Constitution.

Civil Rights:

This theme is probably the most blatant within the story, as civil rights have become extinct. The culture values such mediocrity to the point that oppressive means are widely accepted in the name of equality.

Harrison Bergeron

The Assignment

Provide your answers in a typed response and either email the complete assignment in, or hand in a printed copy.

- 1) The Declaration of Independence contains the phrase:

"All men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Create a short response (one to two paragraphs), discuss the following questions. You must provide support for your answers by using appropriate and specific examples from "Harrison Bergeron."

- a) What did Thomas Jefferson and other founding fathers mean?
 - b) How have modern politicians warped the expression?
 - c) Has equality under the law been obtained?
 - d) Can equality truly be reached?
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- 2) In a similarly sized response (one-to two paragraph), respond to the following question:

Imagine that you were in the same situation as Harrison Bergeron. Would you have acted the same way that he did, or would you have done something different? Why?

- 3) At this point you should be very familiar with thesis statements for essays. Short stories revolve around similar statements called theme statements, although they aren't obvious in the work (like thesis statements are). A successful theme statement is general enough to capture the overall meaning of the work, but specific enough so that it conveys the meaning of your interpretation.

Write a one-sentence theme statement for "Harrison Bergeron."