



# Equality versus Freedom in “*Harrison Bergeron*” by Kurt Vonnegut: A Study of Dystopian Setting

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## Abstract

This article is devoted to the analysis of one of Kurt Vonnegut’s dystopian short stories, *Harrison Bergeron*, through the setting analysis focusing mainly on the use of media as a means of creating mono logical setting and discussing the dance scene as an act of escape from this mono logical setting. Kurt Vonnegut, a contemporary American novelist and short story writer, using his experiences during World War II, reflects on the post war American society especially through his satirical works about power structures. And in this short story he satirizes the forced equality in an imaginary American society.

**Keywords:** Media, Monological setting, Equality, Bakhtin, Dance.

## 1. Equality vs. Freedom in Mono logical setting

“To be, is to communicate”. (Bakhtin, 1984)

The story of “*Harrison Bergeron*”, concerns a society in which the government has enforced the equality laws on peoples’ lives. “They weren’t only equal before God and Law; they were equal every which way.” But this equality is achieved \_or better to say: is forced into the people’s minds by making them think so\_ through “the 211th and 212th and 213th Amendments to the Constitution”. So anyone who is more than average in intelligence, beauty, or strength is forced into wearing handicaps which makes them be NORMAL. Being normal is getting deformed in a way .So equality and freedom are achieved through governmental force, becoming unnatural and manmade. In this way this equality needs to be checked by the agents of the government Handicapper General, in order to stop any missteps from growing any sort of ideas even in their self-thoughts. In this way how can freedom be a value?

It seems that these people have no tendency toward changing this forced handicapcy, as George in reply to Hazel’s suggestion in order to “make a little hole in the bottom of the bag and just take out a few of the lead balls; Just a few” says first “two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out”; confirming their fear of punishment by the rules set by H-G. George goes on saying that “if I tried to get away with it then other people would get away with it- and pretty soon we’d be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing everybody else.” George as the every man in this story doesn’t question the existence of such handicaps in the first level; rather he has this belief that by standing this burden, he is doing his duty as a citizen; as if using his natural, God given abilities is a crime. Not only does he act natural but he also sees competition as a sign of barbarism, as an evil act against the current society or as Becker (1963) says “moral panic” which he says “typically focuses on evildoers or supposed evildoers who come to be defined as the enemy of the society.” He won’t take the responsibility of being the first man who makes the burden less heavy, rather he is more relaxed with the burden but not the responsibility.

E. J. White in her article on “A Philosophical and methodological route to dialogue and difference” says “Mono-logism, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, represents the shutting down of dialogue and its alteric potentials” and “the dangerous consequences on mono logism is “the loss of freedom.” A short look at the dialogues Hazel and George have during the story shows how meaningless their conversations have become. George mostly replies with a “yep” or “huh” or “um”; and Hazel, being less intelligent than George, can’t even remember what she wanted to say. On the other hand bakhtin defines mono logism as the denial of the existence outside oneself of “another I with equal rights” (Bakhtin, 1984). When Diana Moon shoots the dancing couple dead, she kills the chance for new meanings, insisting on the “finalized meanings” which are already defined by her. In *Harrison Bergeron*, the dancing, happy, powerful, freedom-seeking Harrison and Ballerina are shut to death so that the viewer wouldn’t even have the chance to develop any kind of identification with them which would even least probably make them want to be real humans.

On the other hand, for Bakhtin, the voice of the person is inseparable from the dialogue between I and Thou, the person does not dwell within himself but on the boundary; for his self-consciousness is constituted by his relationship to Thou

(Bakhtin, 1984). This is what really goes on in Harrison Bergeron, where no one is actually a ONE, they are all forced into apparent equality and have no unique personality, and George thinks that ballerinas shouldn't wear handicaps! Hazel thinks George's burden is too much! But they cannot go farther as the others are not much different: they are all handicapped, they all share the same unseen problem, which cannot be seen by these people for they aren't allowed to see someone different, there is no OTHER shape in front of them to compare, they are suffering from equality. And even if they CAN think a little bit about the situation, they are not allowed to do so as we see during the dance show, George had this thought for a second that "maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped." But the radio transmitter sent out some noise not to let George misuse his brain; the situation which is the exact case for Bakhtin's "Absolute death which is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered" (Bakhtin, 1984). These people can't have a word in any part of their lives or the social issues, they can't even recognize their own son, and Hazel can't tell why she is crying after her son's death.

Bakhtin offers an alternative route for this monological system through his philosophy of dialogism: "In dialogism there is always room for debate; in a dialogical setting no single voice like Diana Moon and the Handicapper General would come to determine the others yet ideas and perspectives are always piercingly debated, presenting a world in which no individual discourse can stand objectively above any other discourse; all discourses are interpretations of the world, responses to and calls to other discourses" (Bakhtin 1984). If people don't have this sort of interaction they will turn into absolute puppets who lack personality like those in Harrison. "Unity appears from plurality, out of an encounter with others (Game, 1998). In HB there is no social interaction between people, because in that case the voices would disrupt the authority or centrality of the single voice which, in this story, is for the Ruler – Diana Moon. So people believe and do what they are told to, especially through TV, and have nothing coming from their individuality, as if there shouldn't be any such individuality; So that the ruling government can have its authority.

And yet it is important to note that dialogism does not concern simply the clash between different character-centered discourses; dialogism is also a central feature of each character's own individual discourse. As Bakhtin states: "dialogic relationships can permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word, as long as two voices collide within it dialogically" (Bakhtin 1984). The different times that George is interrupted from thinking, and his inner monologue is cut, we have a sort of stopping his having dialogue with himself. So he can't have a unique personality, which itself involves his worldviews.

Being considered as a common norm, no one even questions the situation seriously, though in some sentences we see the instances of their deeper consciousness which questions the possibility of other probable ways as we see George wonders if the ballerinas couldn't be free of the handicaps! This may be explained through Lacan's theories on the relation between one's psychological character and the ideology which is not our discussion here.

## 2. Dystopian society and Media

Mass media are considered to be tools for manipulating the audience and in this story, through the setting, Vonnegut renders the greatest theme in the story. First of all as the story starts we see that Hazel and George are in front of TV watching a dance show. This television-watching setting goes on all over the story, and they even watch their son's murder on TV. The influence of TV on Hazel Bergeron, Harrison's mother, is to the extent that as she witnesses the murder of her own son on television, she cries but can't remember why! Here Vonnegut portrays television as a means to block thinking. This will happen to average intelligent people as is the case with Hazel. The story uses TV programs to prevent people from thinking.

"It is universally accepted that mass media hold great power, as they transmit information to the public and are free to highlight certain news items and ignore others, setting the agenda of public life and creating consensus or disagreement on certain issues" (Andina-Diaz 2007) as Handicapper General uses the news about Harrison's escape to create THE picture in audiences' minds about his being a threat to everyone.

Furthermore as Lazarsfeld et al (1954) expressed: "most individuals expose themselves most of the time to the kind of material with which they agree to begin with" and in this short story there is no channel change because normally "viewers choose to channel hop to minimize the inconsistency between the information (opinions) got from the media and their already existing opinions", and in this society there exists nothing like a personal idea, so why would they even change channels, let alone asking this question that: are there any more channels!? Apparently not more than one channel is needed. Besides this one-channeled television, there are the radio transmitted noises which we believe work on eliminating any possible differentiation of opinions.

Hazel's words who is watching an incapable news reader, approves of "persuasive mass communication" which "functions far more frequently as an agent of reinforcement than an agent of change". The news reporter's try despite his inability in even accurately pronouncing the words is believed by Hazel to be with what god had given him; "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". So weakness is god given, one cannot go beyond it no matter how hard he tries, there won't be any change. This idea is implanted in their thoughts by Diana Moon and she is using news reporter for further establishing it by sending him as a message to reinforce the previously implanted ideas. Or as Louis Althusser in his works, especially For Marx (1965) and Reading "Capital" argues: a society's worldview is craftily shaped by a complex network of messages sent to each individual through the elements contained in the superstructure.

Aside from sending special messages through the news reporter, TV show has been used to direct the meaning and the conclusions the audience make. This method of control is seen in the news about Harrison's escape. We see the

announcer says that Harrison "should be regarded as extremely dangerous", -the word "should" indicates that this advice is beneficial if listened to- and "If you see this boy, do not - I repeat, do not - try to reason with him." As Bourdiou puts it in his "The Power of Television"... "What men and women can or cannot do is largely determined by the structure in which they are placed and by the position they occupy within that structure". They are told not to reason with him, their ideas are dictated through television programs which is in the hands of ruling Diana Moon. There are also photos of him on the screen in his deformed handicapped appearance. As is said in the story: "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". H-G wants the public to see him as a scary, illogical, dangerous person. As if the threat to the government is a threat to the public too. As we see there are "Screams and barking cries of consternation" coming "from the television set" as soon as they (the ballerinas and the people on the television show) see the real Harrison; and this is what the audience is supposed to do, too. Many critics suggest television programming desensitizes people to real life, in part because it requires nothing of the viewer.

Harrison is considered as a threat and is kept in jail but no one in the society is aware of this person until the news about him is on television screen and the society gets to know him through the words and pictures and descriptions in the news, and their accuracy is taken for the granted. Although no one in this society is a real character, how can H.G picture him like that?

More surprisingly Harrison himself believes in the power of television as he himself goes to the television station to make his words publicly known. He claims "I am the Emperor!" Again this is a reinforcement Vonnegut makes on the role TV has on public knowledge.

### 3. Freedom and Dance

Considering the fact that recent studies on dance anthropology show dance as a way to reflect the relations of power and protest, the dance scene and that Vonnegut chose Ballet dance show as his setting where Harrison first appears on screen has a significant role in the theme analysis.

When Harrison appears on the show and starts his words about being an "Emperor", his words cannot establish a communication with these people as even Vonnegut's description is about a fearful figure, but as soon as he asked for her mate: "Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!" ,and the way he treated the lady with "marvelous delicacy" , he started his speech through his body with all its softness, synchronized heartbeats, joy, and grace. They "shifted their weights to their toes" and "into the air they sprang", by which "Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well" , so as Lewis says while some aspects of the experience of dance may engender kinesthetic sensations of power, control, transcendence, and divine union, other aspects may locate it within paradigms of ideological repression or subordination (Lewis 1999) . In Lewis's research on Afro-Brazilian cultural style, he considers dance movements as the actual display of the dancers' desire to show the need to "escape and liberation and freedom". Seeking for the freedom which they couldn't fight for with words "in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang" to show the desired liberty with their body language. The body which "reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun and leaped like deer on the moon" proving they can do whatever they want to as "neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling" causing their death; "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" reasserting the rules she had set already.

(Omitted and changed)Colonial administrations often perceived indigenous dance practices as both a political and moral threat to colonial regimes (Comaroff 1985, Kaspin 1993). Considering the society in HB, settled through forced equality in which at least one person dares to protest, we can refer to Harrison's dance as a threat to the regime, which makes Diana Moon kill the dancing couple who could possibly cause her more troubles as Reed says, "dance was also a site of desire, and colonial accounts record that male colonists were often captivated by "native dancers," sometimes even joining them in dances. Thus, in many colonial arenas, dance tended to generate multiple and contradictory policies and attitudes" (Reed 1998) as the dance show didn't seem to be a threat as long as the ballerinas were on stage. The ballerinas' dance wouldn't be as significant as it became as soon as it coupled the boy's dance "in which a sense of unity and power was heightened, potentially spawning uprisings against colonial rulers or slave masters" (Reed 1989). The dance retained much of its significance as a means of gaining individual status and power when we heard "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.

(Omitted and changed)On the first hand the ballerinas are also wearing handicaps, even heavier, which alters their beauty, and in this way everybody can be the ballerinas and they wouldn't be prettier or more talented or better dancers. On the second hand this dance is basically for the sake of appreciating the beauty "that rhythmic motions of the body have their physiological foundation in being natural and helpful to man" but we know that here it's just a means of passing their time otherwise the HG wouldn't eliminate all the beauties of ballet.

As we saw earlier in part 1, radio transmitters are used to stop the people from having any sort of deviation in their paralyzed sort of thinking Diana expects them to have and here The real dance cannot be permitted by Diana Moon as "pleasure is not the sole nor the first psychological motive for dancing"( Engel 1920). "Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while-listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it" watching this scene turns these peoples' abnormal bodies into their natural place, where will indeed, like Harrison, be stopped. In

order to stop them from getting into any “attitude of attack” the dance needs to be deformed through the television show.

#### 4. Conclusion

To live means to engage in dialogue, to question, to listen, to answer, to agree but this is a fact that the dominant ideology within society frequently argues that there is only one unified and unifying language. In “Harrison Bergeron Vonnegut wrote a critique of the influence of media on the public world-view, by means of controlling, not only, what they should see, but also how they should feel about the things they see and by so doing shows that the concept of equality is used by the government as a means to turn the human society into a clump of soulless, robot like creatures. Harrison Bergeron is a concise depiction of a dystopian society in which people, being deprived of their right for normal dialogues, use nonverbal ways like dancing to communicate their thoughts and feelings as much as they can and even then they are repressed by the ruling power. ” Vonnegut has satirized this ideology by depicting a life without a right to live like a real human and not even being allowed to escape.

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