

The Politics of Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron"

by Darryl Hattenhauer

According to all commentary on Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," the theme of this satire is that attempts to achieve equality are absurd. For example, Peter Reed says it "satirizes an obsession with equalizing . . ." (29). The critics have taken this text's absurd future utopia as representative of egalitarianism. For example, Stanley Schatt claims that "in any leveling process, what really is lost, according to Vonnegut, is beauty, grace, and wisdom" (133). But the object of Vonnegut's satire is not all leveling—"any leveling process" that might arise. Rather, the object of his satire is the popular misunderstanding of what leveling and equality entail. More specifically, this text satirizes America's Cold War misunderstanding of not just communism but also socialism. To argue that thesis, this article begins outside of the text by situating it in Vonnegut's oeuvre: his fiction, nonfiction, speeches, and interviews. Then this contextualization will attend to Vonnegut's audience. Finally, the analysis will turn to the internal evidence.

If "Harrison Bergeron" is a satire against the Left, then it is inconsistent with the rest of Vonnegut's fiction. For a view of his fiction's politics in general, one need only recall *Jailbird's* satire on conservatism and its sympathy with striking laborers, or the endorsement of income redistribution in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. A specific illustration of his politics occurs in the dedication of *Hocus Pocus* to socialist Eugene Debs, which quotes him: "While there is a lower class I am in it" (8).

Like his fiction, Vonnegut's non-fiction also satirizes the Right and endorses the Left. And the Left it endorses is not liberalism (America is one of the few nations where liberalism is not centrist). For example, "In a Manner that Must Shame God Himself," which he wrote in response to the 1972 Republican National Convention, claims that Democrats are only a little less Darwinist than Republicans. He satirizes not only the Republicans but also the Democrats as "bossed by Winners" at the expense of "Losers." He concludes, "THE WINNERS ARE AT WAR WITH THE LOSERS, AND THE FIX IS ON" (206). In "Yes, We Have No Nirvanas," he derides notions about "the fairness of the marketplace" (38). In *Fates Worse than Death*, he

refers to the British class system as “robbery” (132). And in his preface to *Wampeters, Foma and Granfaloon*, he enjoins his readers to “share wealth and work” (xxiv).

His spoken word is consistent with his fiction and nonfiction. In an interview, he said of George Orwell, “I like his socialism” (Clancy 53). He said in a commencement speech at Bennington College, “I suggest that you work for a socialist form of government . . . It isn’t moonbeams to talk of modest plenty for all. They have it in Sweden” (168). In an address at Wheaton College, he even quoted Karl Marx approvingly: “From each according to his abilities. To each according to his needs” (217). When asked in an interview how he would have campaigned against Nixon, he responded, “I would have set the poor against the rich” (“Playboy” 273).

In a letter to me, Vonnegut indicated that the foregoing sympathy with “Losers” influenced “Harrison Bergeron.” If the misreadings of this text were valid, then the implied author’s sympathy would be for Harrison Bergeron and his antipathy would be for Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General striving to prevent privilege. But Vonnegut suggests that the character he identifies with is not Bergeron but Glampers. He begins his letter by first situating himself as not only an author with both conscious and unconscious intent, but also a reader. He writes about not only what he consciously and unconsciously intended, but also what the resulting text actually is.

I can’t be sure, but there is a possibility that my story “Harrison Bergeron” is about the envy and self-pity I felt in an over-achievers’ high school in Indianapolis quite a while ago now. Some people never tame those emotions. John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald and Mark David Chapman come to mind. “Handicapper Generals,” if you like.

What the story is “about” has two meanings. The first is intent—the conscious mind’s intent (he could not remember everything about producing the text) and the unconscious mind’s intent (he is probably inferring it rather than relying on evidence such as dreams). Of course, intent does not necessarily establish effect; intent does not necessarily tell us what the text is “about.” But it might *lead* the reader to what a text is about—not just to its origins, but also to its implicit theme. Accordingly, this article argues that the author’s oeuvre, the author’s intent, and “Harrison Bergeron’s” internal evidence are all consistent with each other.

This absurd dystopia’s version of equality sounds like something from the pages of popular magazines during the Cold War—because it is. Vonnegut depended on those magazines to establish himself as a writer. (“Harrison Bergeron” first appeared in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.) Just as Twain could not have sold *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd’nhead*

Wilson if their sympathy with African-American characters had been obvious, so Vonnegut could not have sold a story overtly sympathetic to leveling. Instead, the Handicapper General apparently recalls the likes of John Wilkes Booth, proponent of slavery. (But the coming analysis will reveal that Harrison is the one who embodies a feudal society.) As a struggling writer, Vonnegut had to put a surface on this story that would appeal to his audience. And it did. More specifically, it did so because it appeared to rehearse central tenets of the dominant culture's ideology. It appealed to the literal-minded with such accuracy that William F. Buckley's *National Review* reprinted it as a morality tale about the dangers of forsaking private enterprise. Here is the narrator's presentation of this utopia's muddled definition of equality:

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 any smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. (5)

This definition codifies the common American objections not just to communist states, but also to socialist ones. The narrator begins with the widespread assertion that the United States not only can and does know God's law, but that God's favorite country is instituting it. (American history is replete with statements like Ronald Reagan's that his policies reflect God's will—see, e.g., his 1982 address to the National Catholic Education Association). So the narrator's definition of America's equality begins not by positing a future equality as much as exposing the misunderstanding of it in the past and present.

The narrator continues to give not a possible egalitarianism of the future (because, as will be noted, the text's version is physically impossible) but rather an enactment of how absurd society would be if egalitarianism were what America's dominant culture thinks it is. The narrator defines equality only in terms of intelligence, looks, and athletic ability. There is nothing about *kinds* of intelligence, or how it is used. Similarly, beauty includes only the human appearance; there is nothing about painting, architecture, etc. The first two concerns, intelligence and looks, address two of the traditional categories of philosophy: the true (epistemology) and the beautiful (aesthetics). The third category, the good (ethics), vanishes. Sport replaces it. No wonder there is nothing in the story about the ethics of spending huge amounts of time, money, and natural resources on sports.

Likewise, the story does not address the primary purpose of leveling in other countries: income redistribution. Since Hazel, Harrison's mother, wants the television announcer to get a raise, the definition of "equal every which way" cannot include incomes. According to the proponents of the

ideology of America's dominant culture, equal income redistribution would contradict the fact that some are smarter than others (the corollary: the rich are smart and the poor are dumb), and also contradict the fact that some are better looking or more athletic than others (the corollary: attractive and athletic people deserve wealth). Since the power of class and the benefits of income redistribution are obscured in the dominant culture's ideology, the inequalities caused by class differences are appropriately absent from this story. For example, there is nothing about equal access to education or medical care.

The mediocrity depicted in this text is not of the future, but of the past and present. And the cause is America's form of egalitarianism: anti-intellectual leveling. Since the age of Jackson, there has been no one so uncommon as the so-called "common man." The characters are not displaying the mindlessness of 2081; they are displaying the mindlessness of 1961, the year this story appeared. The reason Hazel wants the inept announcer to get a raise is that he tried his best. And George, Harrison's father, says, "Forget sad things" (10). Even if ignoring sad things leads to sadder things, ignorance is bliss. Moreover, the intellectual leveling of the past and present implies that ignorance is knowledge. Hazel asks, "Who knows better'n I do what normal is?" (6). Just because she typifies the normal does not mean she understands it. For Hazel, then, she has more expertise than any social scientist with a mountain of data.

It is fitting that the athletic characters in this text are held down by birdshot and that the plot resolution comes when the chief leveler, the Handicapper General, blasts Harrison and his intended with a shotgun. As Richard Slotkin has shown, it was during the frontier expansion that America extended its racist classism in part by developing its anti-intellectualism. Also appropriate is the fact that Harrison's parents are watching a televised ballet, thereby referring to the absurd position that economic leveling means there would be no competition and nobody would be any better than anybody else. The Russian ballet and Swedish theatre (two nations often cited at the time as exemplifying the absurdity of leveling) were highly competitive; they did not hold that all people are equally talented. According to the ideology of America's dominant culture, Russia and Sweden's expenditures on the arts were perverse because they were publicly funded, while America's were pure because they were privately funded—or, rather under funded. In America's master narratives, only the public sphere costs the citizens. (Currently, however, with the high cost of seeing either a doctor or a baseball game, more Americans understand that the citizens pay private sector costs.) That Hazel and George are watching television is another appropriate metonym of the contradictions of American ideology. In this story, interpellation is the function not of the private media but government-controlled media. The government manages the station on which George and Hazel watch the

ballet, and the headphone noises jamming George's thoughts come from a "government transmitter" (5). George misses the televising of his son's murder because George is in the kitchen getting a beer. Presumably he would not have missed it had it been on private television, for he could have left during a commercial.

Critics have missed the object of this text's satire because they miss the irony of the narration. They do not recognize the narration as unreliable. (Given what we know about the author, the narrator cannot be the authorial delegate.) Part of the reason they miss the narration's unreliability is that the plot hides the undeniability of the irony until the end. It is not until the plot resolution that the physically impossible happens. First, Harrison tears "straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds" (9). Then he and his intended defy gravity by hovering in the air. After that impossible event, the preposterousness of the preceding events emerges more clearly. For example, in a society in which no one is more intelligent than anyone else, everyone would be as stupid as the most mentally deficient person in the populace, and, therefore, all would be unable even to feed themselves. But the critics miss this plot development. For example, Roy Townsend claims that this is "effectively a 'no-plot' situation because nothing happens..." (99).

Perhaps such critics miss what happens and the unreliability of the narration because they are interpellated into the very ideology that the text satirizes. For example, Schatt refers to the handicapper General, Diana Moon Glampers, as "Glompers," perhaps associating the name with labor leader Samuel F. Gompers. (133). And Townsend contends, "The story is a satire, a parody of an ideological society divorced from common sense reality" (100). But the American common sense version of equality is nonsense. Townsend claims, "Vonnegut is appealing to an instinctive sense of what is right and decent" (102). The common sense notion that ethics are instinctive is common nonsense.

Those who hold Harrison up as a model of freedom overlook the fact that he is a would-be dictator. "I am the Emperor," he declares. "I shall now select my Empress." He tells the musicians, "I'll make you barons and dukes and earls" (9). Thus Bergeron endorses monarchy. If there is a reversion to medieval monarchy, there will be serfs—the functional equivalent of slaves.

So this story satirizes not just mistaken notions of equality. It also satirizes the American definition of freedom as the greatest good to the smallest number. The American myth is that only in a class society can everyone have an equal chance for achieving the greatest economic inequality.

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