

# HARRISON BERGERON

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by 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. 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.

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 and bags of birdshot, and 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," 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."

"Um," said George.

"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.

"Who knows better than 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.

"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, 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." 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."

"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?"

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.

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. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, "Ladies and Gentlemen."

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.

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 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."

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

"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, as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

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. The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers cowered 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!"

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.

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 girls 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.

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.

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.

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.

"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 rivetting gun in his head.

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

"You can say that again," said George.

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

# Harrison Bergeron: Completely Equal

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Answer the following questions as thoroughly as possible.

1. Describe the state of the U.S. society as described in the first paragraph. How has “equality” been achieved?
2. Consider the characters of George and Hazel. Why isn’t Hazel handicapped?
3. How does George seem to feel about his handicaps?
4. Consider the character of Harrison in terms of both his physical qualities and personality traits. Why is he considered a threat to society?
5. In your opinion, what is the shedding of Harrison’s handicaps symbolic of?
6. What is the significance of the dance that Harrison performs with the ballerina? How does the style in which the story is written change in this passage?
7. Why do you think the Vonnegut decides to write dance scene in this way?
8. How do George and Hazel react to the televised murder of their son? What connections can you make between this scene and *Fahrenheit 451*?
9. What do you consider to be the message of *Harrison Bergeron* (there are multiple)? What leads you to this understanding of the text?
10. Reread the first column of the story. What revelations occur to you now that you know the ending?

# Brave New World: An Introduction

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The World State Motto: COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY. In your groups, find a quote that briefly describes your topic, then write a response underneath that explains to the class how your topic promotes "**stability**" in that society.

Development of The Bokanovsky Process

Creation of Alphas, Betas, Deltas, Gammas, and Epsilons

Use of "Hypnopedia"

"Everyone belongs to everyone else."

Removal of "mothers" and "fathers" from society

Creation of increasingly complex sports and games

## Writing Analysis: What Does Writing Style Do?

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Commenting on author's decisions to confuse readers!

In the space below, draw a diagram of chapter 3 from *Brave New World*:

What are the overall effects of this writing style? What could it be compared to in our society today?

Why does Aldous Huxley use this "experimental" structure? What are the benefits of writing in this way?

# Scientific Allusions in Brave New World

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Important science allusions that would be missed if you weren't smart...and stuff.

Sigmund Freud:

BNW Connection:

Ivan Pavlov:

BNW Connection:

Henry Ford:

BNW Connection:

Thomas Malthus:

BNW Connection:

# Hypnopaedia in Today's Society

Take notes on the behavior the 1950s instructional videos are trying to mold in our modern society. **After viewing, ask yourself if you disagree with the delivery of the message, the behavior, or both.**

| Core Message of Lesson | Rewritten in Hypnopedias | Behavioral Outcome |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
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# Types of Propaganda

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**PROPAGANDA:** The use of a variety of communication techniques that create an emotional appeal to accept a particular belief or opinion, to adopt a certain behavior or to perform a particular action.

**BANDWAGON:**

**TESTIMONIAL:**

**TRANSFER:**

**GLITTERING GENERALITIES:**

**NAME-CALLING:**

**PLAIN FOLKS APPEAL:**

**ELITIST APPEAL:**

**FEAR:**

**LOGICAL FALLACIES:**

**EITHER/OR:**

**STEREOTYPES:**

**GUILTY BY ASSOCIATION:**

Other Notes from Mr. Randon

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# Propaganda in Political Attack Ads

Propaganda is the use of a variety of communication techniques that create an emotional appeal that convinces the masses to accept a particular belief, to adopt a certain behavior, or to perform a particular action.

| Summary of Advertisement: | Propaganda at work: | Goal of propaganda tactic: |
|---------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
|                           |                     |                            |

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# Propaganda in Brave New World

Now let's look at examples of propaganda in *BNW*. We can use the World State's slogans as examples.

| Propaganda example used in <i>Brave New World</i> : | Name for propaganda example: | Goal the propaganda technique is trying to accomplish: |
|---|------------------------------|--|
| "Cleanliness is next to Fordliness"                 | "Transfer"                   | This slogan connects...                                |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| "Everyone belongs to everyone else."              |  |  |
| "A gramme is better than a damn."                 |  |  |
| "Civilization is sterilization."                  |  |  |
| "When the individual feels, the community reels." |  |  |

## Propaganda in Advertising Brainstorm

As a group, brainstorm a list of popular slogans that have become prevalent in our society today. Are there slogans from our society that you can repeat without having to think about it very much? List them below:

# Mustapha Mond's Department of Propaganda

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As we have talked about, Brave New World is obsessed with creating economical stability through consumerism. In your groups, use the propaganda techniques (and others you may know naturally from watching commercials), and create a public service announcement for your assigned department.

Congratulations on your job offer and welcome to Mustapha Mond's Department of Propaganda! As a new employee, it is imperative that you understand clearly and completely your role in our brave new world of stability, harmony, and never-surpassed human happiness. Please read the following closely:

The Department of Propaganda plays a key role in maintaining the paradise we have constructed. This world of ours did not come about by accident - in fact, mankind almost destroyed itself first, and only the prospect of imminent extinction through instability and war brought about the necessary changes leading to a better tomorrow. We have less freedom now than in previous societies, but we are happier and more stable for it; in fact, we have discovered that stability is more important than freedom. Our way of life is controlled and planned down to the smallest details, and endless attention and care is required if society is to maintain its steady progress towards an ever improving quality of life. Hence your job in the Department of Propaganda. You play a vital role in the health of our state. In attending to the organization and rationale of our society, we can never rest in our efforts to ensure stability through social engineering and advanced science.

As you know, our slogan repeats: "No civilization without stability. No social stability without individual stability." Individual citizens need to know their role in society and how to fulfill their expectations; everyone must be reminded how to keep happy, stable, and how thereby to keep the gears of our social machine running smoothly. Your job is precisely to remind them of this correct way to live. Virtue and sanity in our world rely, in large part, on how well you do your job. You must supply the healthy thoughts that will occupy the minds of our citizenry. You must craft the powerful words and dynamic images that effortlessly but effectively persuade and therein ensure obedience. Your efforts here at the Department of Propaganda are central to the stability and strength of our civilization. The ideas you fashion and then communicate are the glue which helps hold our social structure together, the grease that keeps the machine humming smoothly and contentedly. Good luck!

You will be assigned to one of four Department of Propaganda subdepartments responsible for reinforcing correct thought and correspondingly correct behavior:

## **Better Living Through Test Tubes Subdepartment:**

Everyone belongs to everyone else! And all have a role and a function in society. Everyone has to do their part! To understand and act on this is to be happy and to live healthily. One cannot be reminded of this long enough - or forget the ugliness, squalor, and irrationality of the old family-model based on [sic] "parents"!

## **Never a Dull Moment Subdepartment:**

Whether it be the Obstacle Golf, Orgy Porgy, or the Feelies, a normal person just wants to have non-stop 24-7 fun! Sensory stimulation is the highest pursuit of the best form of happiness. Don't be the last to indulge in the latest greatest amusement! And let's all do it TOGETHER!

## **Happiness is a Pill Subdepartment:**

Feeling a bit under the weather? Gloomy thoughts clouding your day? Take a Soma vacation! Pop a pill(s) and kiss those rain clouds good-bye. Relief is just a dose away! What are you waiting for? TAKE IT NOW!

## **Shop 'til You Drop Subdepartment:**

You are responsible for promoting the idea that an increase in production and consumption lead to happiness and virtue. Newer is better! More is best! Old is horrid!

## Mustapha Mond's Department of Propaganda (Part II)

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With the resources and virtually unlimited media access of the State, your job is to help design a public service announcement for your subdepartment to be broadcast over the hypnopaedic airwaves, and displayed prominently in all World State "literature." It must effectively and dramatically convey the message that obedience to the World State values and organization of our society leads to individual virtue and sanity, thereby bringing about stability and happiness for all. The announcement should be perfectly understandable and equally digestible to both an Alpha-Plus and Delta-Minus. Your message will be broadcast tens of thousands of times over weeks and millions of viewers will be exposed to it, so your work must be of the highest quality. It cannot seem stale and boring after only a handful of viewings. Be advised!

In selecting you to work in his Department of Propaganda, Mustapha Mond has the highest confidence in your ability to produce creative work realizing (and even surpassing!) these high expectations. In particular, he wishes that you not lose sight of the following questions:

- How can you fashion your message so as to gain maximum acceptance by the target audience?
- What tricks can you use to make your message seem reasonable and not overbearing?
- What techniques can you use to influence people without their feeling controlled?
- Is your message upbeat and is the tone appropriate to our brave new world?
- Will your slogans and/or jingles stay in people's minds afterwards?
- Are they simple?
- Are they catchy?

Mustafa Mond wishes you good luck in the discharge of your duties, among the most important in our brave new world of order and happiness! In having given you full reign to be creative and develop your own ideas of exactly how to get our message across in the video, Mond hopes to be pleasantly surprised by your work. Don't let him down:

- 8x11 paper...no posters!
- An eye-catching image that **reinforces** *BNW* values
- An appealing **new** slogan that the citizens would accept and repeat
- Full use of propaganda techniques to develop your message

\*If you must, you can create an original product to center your message around.

## Mr. Randon Notes and Brainstorming

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## *Brave New World* Character Sketch

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Draw an outline of your character's body. Find quotations to illustrate at least 5 of the following body parts in preparation for talking to the class about what your character symbolizes. Place the quotations around the character's outline with the page number. Each group will present its sketch to the class. **At the top of the page, write the idea that your group thinks your character symbolizes.**

**Head** – Intellectual side of the character – What are his dreams? Visions? Philosophies he keeps inside?

**Eyes** – Seeing through the character's eyes – What memorable sights affect him? How?

**Ears** – Hearing through the character's ears – What does he notice and remember others saying to him? How is he affected?

**Nose** – Smelling through the character's nose – What smells affect him? How?

**Mouth** – The character's communication – What philosophy does the character share/espouse? What arguments/debates? What song would symbolize the character's philosophy of life? What lyrics/images from the song would symbolize his or her philosophy?

**Arms** – Working – What is the character's relationship to work in general? To specific work?

**Hands** – The practical side of the character – What conflicts does he or she deal with? How?

**Heart** – The emotional side of the character – What does he or she love? Whom? How?

**Torso** – The instinctive side of the character – What doesn't he or she like about himself or herself? What does he or she hide? What brings the character pain? What does he or she fear? (Describe his or her "dark" side.)

**Legs** – The playful side of the character – What does he or she do for fun? What are his or her avocations?

**Feet** – The character's mobility – Where has he or she been (literally/figuratively)? How has he or she been affected by travel or setting?

**"Wings"** – The character's future – Where is he or she going?

# Symbolism in *Brave New World*

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| <b>Soma</b>  | <b>Bokanovsky Process</b>  |
|--|--|
| <p>What is important about this object:</p><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><p>What ideas could it symbolize:</p> | <p>What is important about this object:</p><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><p>What ideas could it symbolize:</p> |
| <b>Solidarity Service</b>  | <b>Savage Reservation</b>  |
| <p>What is important about this object:</p><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><p>What ideas could it symbolize:</p> | <p>What is important about this object:</p><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><p>What ideas could it symbolize:</p> |
| <b>Light House</b>   | <b>Whip</b>  |
| <p>What is important about this object:</p><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><p>What ideas could it symbolize:</p> | <p>What is important about this object:</p><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><p>What ideas could it symbolize:</p> |

## Brave New World Essay

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Your prompt:

In *Brave New World*, John tries to free the citizens of the World State from “slavery” by destroying their soma tablets. In the conversation afterward, Mustapha Mond’s argues that individual freedoms must be removed for the good of society. Is Mond’s view too singularly focused? Is John any freer than the World State members?

Write a structured essay in which you argue for freedom **or** stability. Be sure to use evidence from the novel to prove your thesis to be true.

## Thesis Check

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Before we start writing I hope to meet individually to discuss your thesis. I will be checking your thesis to make sure that the basis for your entire paper makes sense, sounds good, and looks provable.

Thesis Due: \_\_\_\_\_

## Mr. Randon’s Help

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## To Enhance, or Not to Enhance—A Mr. Randon Discussion

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Respond to the following statements and be prepared to discuss with the class.

1. Science should progress without fear of consequences.
2. The government should decide the ethics of genetic manipulation.
3. Humans should strive to better themselves.
4. Bestowing enhancements on some humans is unfair.
5. If people are not “created equal,” the constitutional phrase should be changed to read: “made equal.”
6. Genetic advancements would create a larger gap between rich and poor.
7. Genetic enhancement alone can create a race of superior humans.