

# Harrison Bergeron (Kurt Vonnegut)

## Teaching notes by Tim Sprod and Jenny Morgan

The full text of the story can be found in:

Vonnegut, Kurt, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, various editions (originally published 1968).

It can also be found on the internet, via a search, though probably in breach of copyright.

Although the story is reasonably short, you and the class need only read to the line: *'Good as anybody else,' said George*. This will set up the issues sufficiently.

### Themes

**Major:** Equality, Freedom, Reverse discrimination

**Minor:** Justice, Law, Rights, Morality

### Discussion guides

#### Equality

Clearly, the major theme in this first part of the story is equality. Vonnegut takes a simplistic interpretation of equality – that everyone should be brought to the same level – and entertainingly draws out the implications.

#### Types of equality

'Equality' is a contested concept, so if we make the claim that 'everyone is equal', there are a number of ways that equality can be interpreted. One strategy for exploring the concept of equality is to ask the class to get into small groups and write down as many different definitions of equality as they can (*what is equal?*).

Each of the possible interpretations has certain advantages and disadvantages, which can then be drawn out in discussion. Here is a list of some of the interpretations that your students could advance. If some are missed, then you may be able to draw them out of the class through further discussion.

- *Equality as identity*. Everyone is identical in every respect.
- *Equality of outcome*. Everyone ends up with the same – but of what?
  - Versions*
  - Equality of income (everyone is paid the same).
  - Equality of housing (everyone lives in the same type of house)
  - Equality of ability (the basis of Vonnegut's story)
  - ...and so on.
- *Equality of opportunity*. Nobody is prevented from access to any of the opportunities for a good life, such as schooling. What are the important opportunities that must be open to all?

- *Equality of provision.* Everyone is provided with certain basics of life – food, health etc – but which basics and to what level? This goes further than equality of opportunity, because it implies that, not only should you be allowed (say) to go to a private school, but that you should not be prevented from doing so by being poor. Is there any justification for a government taking action to give people something that they haven't 'earned'?
- *Equality of respect.* Everyone is treated with equal respect as a human being – but what does this entail? It might mean that everyone is treated the same when in the same circumstances – but how do we decide which circumstances are the same?
- *Equality before the law.* Everyone has the same legal rights and responsibilities; everyone is treated in the same way by the law. Are there any circumstances when the same offence should not bring the same punishment? What sorts of differences, and what degree of different treatment is justified? Why?
- *Equal rights.* Having 'equal rights' may differ from having equality before the law if rights are not just legal rights, but universal human rights. What are these rights? Where do they come from?

### **Equality and freedom**

The slogan of the French Revolution was 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité' (liberty, equality, brotherhood/solidarity). We can ask whether these three – especially the first two – are compatible. In much political rhetoric, it often seems to be assumed that they are. Here is a line of questioning that might help open up these issues.

- Is everyone in the story equal?
- Does everyone in the story have freedom?
- What effect has the attempt, in the story, to increase equality had on freedom?
- Should everybody be equal?
- Should everybody be free to make life better for themselves?
- How can everybody be equal if some are born smarter than others?
- How can everybody be equal if some are born richer than others?
- How can everybody be equal if some are better at earning money than others?
- Should a government restrict the freedom of some (*eg* by taxation or by making certain actions illegal) in order to increase equality? If so, what restrictions are justified? What sorts of equality should be increased?

### **Reverse discrimination**

Notice that 'discrimination' can have two meanings. The dominant one in today's society seems to be treating someone less well (racial discrimination, sex discrimination etc).

However, discrimination also means to distinguish between two things on the grounds that they are different. We do this all the time, and it is often perfectly legitimate. For

example, we discriminate between cold and warm water when deciding whether to swim in a pool or the sea. In social terms, judges discriminate between guilty and innocent people, when deciding who to send to jail.

The first mentioned meaning of 'discrimination' is a sort of shorthand. It indicates that the different treatment is unfair, or unjustified, because the difference between the two is not relevant to the decision being made. For example, it is not acceptable to discriminate between two applicants for a job because one has darker skin than the other, but it would be fine to discriminate between them because one is much better at doing the job than the other.

Some differences, or inequalities, seem to be unavoidable: some people are born taller or more beautiful than others. Other inequalities seem to be the result of social differences which, perhaps, need not exist: some are born poorer than others. Some differences that seem to be unavoidable (such as gender or skin colour) probably ought not to make a difference to one's chances, but under certain social conditions, they do.

In the latter two cases, it can be argued that we should make up for the social disadvantages by discriminating in favour of those who have been discriminated against. An example: a student from a poor background who scores 80 ought to be given a university place before a student from a rich background who scored 85. The reasoning is that, had the poor student had been given the advantage of a rich background, they probably would have scored more than 85. This is called reverse discrimination.

Here are some questions to open up this issue.

1. If Joe has to go to a badly-run school because he is poor, should he be given special consideration when he applies to university? If you think he should, what are your reasons?
2. If rich Fred misses out on a university place because Joe was given it, even though Fred had better marks, is that fair?
3. If Susan is given a place to study engineering, because girls were discriminated against in the past in engineering, even though there were boys with better marks, is that fair?
4. Does it make a difference if girls have suffered historically from discrimination, but Susan personally has not?
5. Is reverse discrimination fair to the advantaged individual who doesn't get a job, or fails to get into university because the job or place goes to a less well qualified member of a disadvantaged group?
6. Is it fair that rich people can buy advantages (like a good education) that poor people can't?