

TEACHER'S GUIDE

BASED ON KURT VONNEGUT'S
"HARRISON BERGERON"



2002 Filmore Avenue
Erie, PA 16506
Phone: (888) 242-0563
www.izzit.org

© 2014 Volume XLVI, LLC - "2081" has been repackaged for classroom use with permission from Volume XLVI, LLC;
© 2011, 2014 cover and disc face design - izzit.org®

2081
Teacher's Guide

MATURE AUDIENCE ADVISORY:

**Teachers are strongly encouraged to preview *2081*.
Some scenes, while brief, may be too intense for
young students.**

This classroom version of *2081* includes three different video introductions to the film. Preview them all and then select the intro that works best for your students.

For a list of additional resources for use with this video, see www.izzit.org/products.

2081

Intro #1: A World without Heroes

Teacher Activity

Show students this intro, then pause and discuss the following with students before showing the rest of the film:

- Who do you look up to? Why?
- List some qualities that lead to academic, athletic, or other kinds of success. List some that lead to failure. Do these capabilities occur equally throughout the population?
- Should the smartest students in class tutor the slower students or should they be able to move ahead at their own pace?
- Do schools and society have an interest in keeping people equal or maximizing each individual's talents? Should successful companies be held back so that emerging companies can compete more equally?

2081

Intro #2: Equal Grades for All

Teacher Activity

Before showing this intro and the film, and without discussing with the class:

- Take an assignment that was previously turned in and grade it; record the grade at the top of the front page of the assignment.
- Determine the class average, and then “level the grades.” For those who achieved *above* the average, subtract the requisite number of points to bring them down to the class average.
- For those who achieved *below* the average, add the points to their grade to bring them up to the class average.
- Now show the class this intro to the film. Pause after the intro.
- Pass out the papers with the adjusted grades and explain that equality is important in society; after all, everyone needs to graduate.
- When the better students complain of their points being deducted, needle them about being greedy. Why must they have so much, when others are struggling? Do they really need so many points? Won't a high 'B' do instead of an 'A'?
- Explain to the students who received points that education is a right, no longer a privilege for the elite. They are entitled to some equality.
- Ask students of both groups what happens to their motivation under such a system.
 - High-achieving students typically argue that in the future they will not work past whatever gets points deducted.
 - Low-achieving students typically argue that they won't work any harder either; after all, they didn't work particularly hard and they got additional points.
 - Since the work ethic of both groups declines, we now must take points from the 'A' students *and* the 'B' students, in order to compensate for the lower production of the class.
 - We are all still “equal” but the class average – due to decreased work ethic – drops about a letter grade.
- Discuss this with the students; then view the rest of the film.

2081

Intro #3: The Reward of Risk

Teacher Activity

Show students this intro, then pause and discuss the following with the class prior to showing the rest of the film:

- What do you think it means to be equal in all respects? How do you think the government will go about ensuring this in the movie?
- If government succeeded in making everybody equal, would it eliminate risk?
- What would the world be like if no one took risks?
- Is the possibility of failure the cost of the possibility of success?
- Should government manage the extremes of success and failure, so that we have greater equality in society?

2081

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions, Page 1

1. What happened in 2081?
2. What did the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution achieve?
3. How did the Handicapper General accomplish this?
4. Why could Harrison's father not properly remember Harrison being taken from their house?
5. Why does Harrison's mother, Hazel, say that she would "hate it" if her husband took off his handicaps?
6. If handicaps could be removed in private homes, why must they be worn in public?
7. Why was a severe stutterer allowed to be the news broadcaster?
8. Should the newscaster get a raise, as Hazel suggested, just for trying so hard?
9. What is an anarchist? Why was Harrison Bergeron labeled an anarchist?
10. Why was there only one channel on TV?
11. What were the charges against Harrison Bergeron?
12. What talents did Harrison have that made him such a threat to society and equality?
13. Was there any symbolism in Harrison wearing a yoke?
14. Harrison purposely arranged for the event to be on live TV. His intent of the evening was captured when he said:

"If it is greatness that we must destroy, let us drag our enemy out of the darkness where it has been hiding. Let us shine a light so that at last all the world can see."

What did he mean?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions, Page 2

15. Harrison spray-painted on the wall where the bomb was: “Live free or die: Death is not the worst of evils.” *Live free or die* is now the motto of the state of New Hampshire, and the full phrase comes from General John Stark’s toast celebrating the reunion of the Battle of Bennington in the American Revolutionary War. Why do you think Harrison selected this phrase as a motto?
16. Why did the ballerina agree to remove her handicaps and dance?
17. Why did the government disable the broadcast before they arrested Harrison? Did they achieve their goal? Explain.
18. Why did the Handicapper General shoot Harrison (and the ballerina)?
19. Did the Handicapper General or the other government workers wear handicaps?
20. What do you think the cello player being the first and last musician to keep playing symbolized?
21. Was Harrison wrong for removing his handicaps in public?
22. What was the significance of the fact that it took 213 amendments to the Constitution to finally make people equal?
23. If you were appointed Handicapper General, would you accept the job? Why/why not? What would you do?
24. Can the conflict between freedom and equality be avoided? Explain.

2081

For Further Discussion, Page 1

1. What is equality?

- a. What did the American Founders mean by “All men are created equal...”?
- b. From *2081*: “They weren’t only equal before God or the law, you see...”
 - i. In what sense are people equal before God or equal in dignity? Does the drive to achieve equality “every which way” fulfill or deny people’s equal dignity? Explain.
 - ii. What does it mean to be equal before the law? If everyone is required to play by the same rules, will there be equal outcomes? Explain.
- c. Is it fair that some people are healthier, stronger, faster, more creative, more attractive, or more intelligent than others? What if these abilities are due to genetics or luck rather than to extra effort on their part?
- d. Can we reduce suffering and alleviate poverty without trying to ensure that “everyone is finally equal”? What are some ways that people voluntarily go about this? How is helping others different from trying to eliminate inequality?
- e. Can you think of examples of forced equality that exist today? In school? In sports? In other areas?

2081

For Further Discussion, Page 2

2. **Is excellence a good thing?**
 - a. Have you ever been mocked for being good at something?
 - b. Have you ever made the highest grade in the class? If so, was the reaction of other students positive or negative? If not, have you ever reacted negatively to a classmate making a good grade?
 - c. What do people mean when they say a top student “has no life”? Is there envy involved?
 - d. When we see the value of a trait and like a person for having it, we call that admiration. When we see the value of a trait and *dislike* a person for having it, we call that envy. Have you noticed people using the word “envy” when they should be using the word “admire,” e.g. “Oh Rebecca, I’m so envious of your new promotion”?
 - e. Have you ever seen someone apologize for being good at something? Have you seen reverse snobbery, i.e. people bragging about being unaccomplished in an area, pressuring others to look down upon achievement?
 - f. At some schools, advanced classes have been criticized or eliminated because they are considered elitist and undemocratic. What do you think about this?
 - g. Why would the talented people in *2081* accept handicaps from the government?

For Further Discussion, Page 3

3. Equality and society

- a. What did Aristotle mean when he said, “The worst form of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal”?
- b. Karl Marx argued that society should be governed by this maxim: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” How well do you think this would work as the basis for society?
- c. Thomas Jefferson said, “There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents.” How is this natural aristocracy different from the traditional aristocracy?
- d. Do things feel better when they are earned or given? Consider the following quotes for discussion:
 - i. “Earned success is the elixir of joy.” – Arthur Brooks
 - ii. “What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly.
Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods;
and it would be strange indeed,
if so celestial an article as Freedom
should not be highly rated.” -- Thomas Paine
- e. Why do you think Harrison Bergeron felt justified in removing his handicaps?

For Further Discussion, Page 4

4. “The Trees” by Rush

- a. The rock band *Rush* wrote the song “The Trees” as a metaphor for forced human equality. Read the lyrics and discuss the metaphor as it exists in society today.

There is unrest in the forest
There is trouble with the trees
For the maples want more sunlight
And the oaks ignore their pleas.

The trouble with the maples
(And they're quite convinced they're right)
They say the oaks are just too lofty
And they grab up all the light.
But the oaks can't help their feelings
If they like the way they're made
And they wonder why the maples
Can't be happy in their shade.

There is trouble in the forest
And the creatures all have fled
As the maples scream "Oppression!"
And the oaks just shake their heads

So the maples formed a union
And demanded equal rights
"The oaks are just too greedy
We will make them give us light."
Now there's no more oak oppression
For they passed a noble law
And the trees are all kept equal
By hatchet, axe, and saw

- b. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “One also encounters a depraved taste for equality in the human heart that brings the weak to want to draw the strong to their level and that reduces men to preferring equality in servitude to inequality in freedom.” How does this quote relate to the lyrics in “The Trees”?

2081

DYSTOPIAN NOVELS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A dystopia is, in literature, an often-futuristic society that has degraded into a repressive and controlled state, often under the guise of being utopian. Dystopian literature has underlying cautionary tones, warning society that if we continue to live how we do, this will be the consequence. A dystopia, thus, is regarded as a sort of negative utopia and is often characterized by an authoritarian or totalitarian form of government. Dystopias usually feature different kinds of repressive social control systems, a lack or total absence of individual freedoms and expressions.

- *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley
- *Anthem* (1938) by Ayn Rand
- *Darkness at Noon* (1940) by Arthur Koestler
- *Animal Farm* (1945) by George Orwell
- *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell
- *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury
- *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding
- *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) by Ayn Rand
- “Harrison Bergeron” (1961) by Kurt Vonnegut
- *Logan's Run* (1967) by William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson
- *The Stepford Wives* (1973) by Ira Levin
- *IQ 83* (1978) by Arthur Herzog
- *The Running Man* (1982) by Stephen King under the pseudonym Richard Bachman
- *V For Vendetta* (1982–1988) by Alan Moore and David Lloyd
- *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood
- *Dystopia* (1989) by Dennis Jürgensen
- *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry
- *Utopia For The Devil* (2010) by James Parkes

2081

Suggested Answers for Post-Viewing Discussion Questions, Page 1

1. People were finally equal. Not just before the law, but every which way.
2. Nobody was smarter, better looking, stronger or quicker than anybody else.
3. The strong wore weights to make them weaker; the intelligent wore earpieces to prevent them from taking unfair advantage of their brains. The beautiful sometimes wore masks in situations where their beauty might be too distracting.
4. The earpiece sounds kept interfering with his “thinking straight.”
5. Possible answer: Hazel would feel inferior if George removed his handicaps.
6. To ensure that no one gains an advantage over others, and to keep envy in check.
7. To demonstrate that no one is better at anything than anyone else.
8. Answers may vary. Students should give reasons to support their answers.
9. a) One who rebels against any authority, established order, ruling power; one who uses violent means to overthrow the established order.
b) Harrison upset the order of society and challenged the society’s fundamental premise of total equality.
10. To enforce total equality, information would have to be controlled by the government.
11. Propagandist vandalism, broadcast piracy, refusal to report for quarterly handicapping evaluation, and blatant removal of handicaps in a public place.
12. He was both a genius and an athlete.
13. Answers may range from being yoked like a beast of burden, to being chained like a slave, to being crucified.
14. On the surface, Harrison seems to be accepting his society’s belief that excellence is criminal; actually, he is being ironic, hoping that when he confronts people with excellence, they will respond with admiration and appreciation rather than envy.
15. Answers will vary.
16. She was willing to take the risk in order to taste freedom.

2081

Suggested answers for Post-Viewing Discussion Questions, Page 2

17. a) To avoid the public seeing and possibly responding positively to the demonstration of exceptionalism; to prevent Harrison from becoming a hero.
b) No, because Harrison had arranged for the broadcast to resume.
18. Harrison was a fugitive who dared to defy the government by being exceptional. His example threatened to shatter the public's belief in the ideas the government was based on.
19. They did not appear to.
20. Answers will vary.
21. Answers will vary. Students should support their answers.
22. The fact that there had been 213 amendments indicates not only how far the country had moved away from the original Constitution, but also that the change from a free and open society to a repressive, totalitarian system happened gradually and incrementally rather than suddenly.
23. Answers will vary, but bonus points should be awarded to those students who examine the moral questions facing the Handicapper, not just the most efficient ways he/she can perform his/her given task.
24. Answers will vary.



We are very interested to learn how you use our material. Please share your experiences or lesson plan ideas by visiting us at **www.izzit.org**.



2002 Filmore Avenue
Erie, PA 16506
Phone: (888) 242-0563
www.izzit.org