



Analyzing Vonnegut's View of the Future and his Commentary on the Present in "Harrison Bergeron"

Resource ID#: 48865 Primary Type: Lesson Plan

This document was generated on CPALMS - www.cpalms.org

In this lesson (lesson one in a two-part unit), students will read Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s short story "Harrison Bergeron" examining the usage of literary elements in order to develop an objective summary describing how the author uses language to portray characterization, impact tone and mood, and develop the central ideas of the text. Students will be able to remark upon/critique the author's criticism of society through his combination of the above elements.

Subject(s): English Language Arts

Grade Level(s): 9, 10

Intended Audience: [Educators](#)

Instructional Time: 1 Hour(s) 30 Minute(s)

Freely Available: Yes

Keywords: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Harrison Bergeron", literary elements, literary devices, objective summary

Instructional Component Type(s): [Lesson Plan...](#)
[Assessment](#), [Formative Assessment](#)

Resource Collection: CPALMS Lesson Plan Development Initiative

ATTACHMENTS

[Harrison Bergeron Inference Chart.docx](#)

[Literary Elements Chart Harrison Bergeron.doc](#)

[Summative Assessment Rubric Harrison Bergeron.pdf](#)

LESSON CONTENT

Lesson Plan Template: General Lesson Plan

Formative Assessment

Prior to reading the text, the instructor should prompt students to respond in writing to the key idea (guiding question): "What makes us individuals?" Students should use an adequate amount of support to justify their remarks. A short paragraph should suffice, though it is not necessary for the instructor to formally review each response at this point. Rather, the instructor could monitor students' progress (pausing to read several "in-the-works" responses/engage in brief verbal dialog regarding the prompt) while circulating around the room. The instructor should use this formative assessment to evaluate understandings of basic concepts related to the text's theme/central idea prior to the reading. Students should be given an opportunity to share their responses and learn from their peers by reviewing the prompt either in whole-group or small-group discussion.

While reading [Vonnegut's short story, "Harrison Bergeron"](#), students will complete a "[Literary Elements: "Harrison Bergeron"](#)" graphic organizer to help note literary elements/devices that are present, as well as the relationships established between elements.

Students will also complete an "[Inference Chart](#)" to help note conclusions they can draw about elements of the futuristic society and the author's attitude toward the subject through his treatment.

Students will analyze the author's choice of figurative and descriptive language as it relates to characterization, detailing the features present in the description of the title character by drawing their interpretations of his physical appearance.

Teachers can use the formative assessment data from students' work on the literary elements chart and inference chart to provide feedback and correct misconceptions before students complete the summative assessment.

Feedback to Students

Throughout the lesson, the instructor will provide feedback and engage in discussion to ensure:

1. Appropriate comprehension of Vonnegut's text in regard to plot development and character traits

Instructor should probe to verify that students possess a strong understanding of literary elements unique to the text, but can also explain the relevance of the included details in connection with the futuristic society depicted.

- Students should be able to explain how the elements of this utopian society propel the plot forward (Harrison is at conflict with the government; his escape from prison and subsequent appearance on television lead to the story's climax).
 - Can students logically predict the text's ending using valid evidence to support their theories? If not, identify points of confusion, and clarify for students.
2. Accurate interpretation of literary devices and literary elements employed

For example, does the author incorporate comic relief just before the climax of the text only to heighten the feeling of despair/hopelessness at the end?

- Can students articulate appropriate themes developed in the text? Can they evaluate the text's use of irony?
3. Correct use of "[Literary Elements](#)" graphic organizer and "[Inference Chart](#)" to organize notes in a useful manner

Are the organizers being used as activities or as tools to help students grapple to find meaningful connections between the text and contemporary society? Ask students to make connections between world issues prevalent around the time the text was published (post-World War II/Cold War Era) and world issues affecting our government today. Some scaffolding might be necessary depending on students' familiarity with United States/world history.

4. Correct interpretation of word choice and its impact on the text

This applies particularly to the mini-activity asking students to draw Harrison based on the text's description of his physical features.

- Ask, "Based on this description, what can be inferred about Harrison's physical and intellectual characteristics?" "What type of tone does the author convey when describing the H-G men's treatment of Harrison?" Scaffold, if necessary, by posing questions such as, "Is the author objectively stating the facts? Is he critical of the government's actions?" Ask students to support their responses with evidence from the text.
5. Students are engaged, on task, and possess an awareness of each task's instructions/relevance

Instructor should periodically check in with students while circulating the room, asking them to clarify for instructor (or peers) the directions of the task they are working on and the reason for doing so. Provide clarification individually or to the whole group as necessary.

Summative Assessment

Students will use their "[Literary Elements](#)" graphic organizers and "[Inference Charts](#)" to develop an objective summary describing how the author uses language to portray characterization, impact tone and mood, and develop the central ideas of the text. Students should remark upon/critique the author's criticism of society through his combination of the above elements.

Teachers can assess students' summaries using the provided [rubric](#).

Learning Objectives: What should students know and be able to do as a result of this lesson?

Students will be able to use evidence from a text (the short story, "Harrison Bergeron") to support their analysis of the work's central point or theme.

Students will be able to make inferences regarding the utopian society presented in the text, citing evidence to support their analysis.

Students will be able to draw conclusions based on their interpretation of the text regarding the author's message.

Students will be able to evaluate to what degree various characters progress the text's plot and/or develop the theme.

Students will be able to describe the impact of figurative and descriptive language on the work's meaning and tone.

Students will write for a variety of purposes.

Guiding Questions: What are the guiding questions for this lesson?

What makes us individuals?

If in order to make everyone equal, measures are taken to hinder those who are more privileged rather than elevate the less fortunate, should the fight for equality still be pursued?

How does the author's depiction of the work's setting help to evoke a hopeless mood in a utopian society?

In what ways does our society's view on normalcy compare or conflict with that of the utopian society of the setting in the text?

Are the terms "protagonist" and "hero" interchangeable in this work? Should they be?

How does language impact meaning in the text? How does word choice impact the relationship between conflict and plot in the text?

Prior Knowledge: What prior knowledge should students have for this lesson?

1. Students should have a basic understanding of plot stages (introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution) as well as types of conflict:

- Internal - character vs. himself
- External - character vs. character, society, fate, nature

2. Students should be familiar with the relationship between setting, conflict, plot, and mood in certain texts, in particular that:

Time period (as an element of setting) can drive plot in unique ways

- A story set in New York City in the 1700s would likely be quite different than a story set in the same city in the year 2350 A.D.

- A story set in the past might also create conflict for certain characters who would not experience the same conflict in contemporary society (women's suffrage movement)

Such conflict helps the plot progress (plot is dependent on conflict; without a problem, there is no story)

Setting can have a direct impact on a text's mood

- For example, the setting of a story in which the main character finds himself on a deserted island creates a tense, desperate mood.

3. Students should recall that **authors tell us about characters through both direct and indirect methods.**

4. Students should understand what allusions are, and that authors often incorporate allusions to draw attention to symbolic representations in their works or help readers activate background knowledge/engage in the work.

5. Students should be familiar with how to identify a theme in a literary work, understanding the concept of universal themes (i.e., "Love conquers all", "Beauty is on the inside", etc.)

Teaching Phase: How will the teacher present the concept or skill to students?

Bell Work:

The instructor should prompt students to respond in writing to the key idea (guiding question) "What makes us individuals?" Students should use an adequate amount of support to justify their remarks. A short paragraph should suffice, though it is not necessary for the instructor to formally review each response at this point. Rather, the instructor could monitor students' progress (pausing to read several "in-the-works" responses and engage in brief verbal dialog regarding the prompt) while circulating around the room. The instructor should use this formative assessment to evaluate understandings of basic concepts related to the text's theme/central idea prior to the reading. Students should be given an opportunity to share their responses and learn from their peers by reviewing the prompt either in whole-group or small-group discussion.

Before Reading:

I do: The instructor should preface that Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s short story focuses on individuality (specifically, one person's attempt to preserve his own individuality). Ask students to be prepared to analyze this text for the author's use of literary elements/devices including plot, conflict, and setting, as well development of a central idea/theme.

Distribute copies of the "[Literary Elements Chart: "Harrison Bergeron"](#)" handout. Inform students their goal is to analyze the text, taking notes to refer to when creating a summary of the work later on. Also distribute copies of the "[Inference Chart](#)". Discuss the skills of making inferences/drawing conclusions and ensure students understand the importance of bringing background knowledge/experience to new situations/texts. Explain this is a critical process employed by skilled readers and a way for readers to interact with a text.

Without referring to the actual text yet, ask students to examine the examples provided on both the "Literary Elements" and "Inference" charts. Ask students to predict what the focus of this story will be (This can easily be accomplished through whole-group or small-group discussions). Ensure student responses are supported with logical evidence to support their conclusions (i.e., students are able to back up the idea the text is set in the future based on the notes in the "Inference Chart"). Wrap up this anticipatory discussion by explaining to the students they just practiced the skill of making inferences about the text based on the content documented in the organizers.

During Reading:

Using the gradual release method, the instructor will model appropriate use of both the "Literary Elements" and "Inference" charts to assist students organize features present in the text and their analysis of such inclusion. Begin reading the narrator's introduction, stopping after the first paragraph. Model appropriate use of the "Literary Elements" chart to note elements related to the text's setting, as those elements are provided early on. Clarify any misconceptions students might have regarding setting (ask what two elements contribute to a text's setting), then ask students to anticipate potential conflicts this particular setting (or the plot details revealed so far) might create.

- Students might respond by asserting conflict could emerge as characters become bored with the equality provided to them.

Continue reading through the end of the fourth paragraph, then pause and model expected procedures for completing the "Inference Chart" through think-alouds, also demonstrating rereading portions of the text to gather evidence/clarify misconceptions. For instance, the instructor could review the fourth paragraph, noting the tears on Hazel's cheeks could indicate she had remembered (only for a moment, apparently) the moment her son was taken from her. Model how to break these elements into the appropriate circles on the "Inference Chart", then return to the text (See "Guided Practice: During Reading" below).

Guided Practice: What activities or exercises will the students complete with teacher guidance?

During Reading:

We do: Using the gradual release method, continue with the text, but incorporate a healthy balance of pausing to check for understanding and allow students to reflect/discuss.

Remind students to look for the elements noted on their "[Literary Elements](#)" charts, and return to their "[Inference](#)" charts when the text triggers an appropriate thought. Give students the option to use the blank boxes on the second sheet of the chart to record "miscellaneous notes" while reading. Some suggested stopping points and discussion prompts include:

- What measures does the government take to ensure everyone is equal?
 - Students should be able to list/explain the rationale behind each action as they are presented in the text.
- Does the act of physically and mentally "handicapping" citizens to lower them to a level of equality contradict the connotations often associated with "freedom" and "equality"? - Encourage students to add to their charts based on the resulting discussion.
- In what ways is George handicapped? What inferences can be made about his character? - Encourage students to determine if these observations/reflections are appropriate for inclusion in their "Inference" chart or perhaps in the "Characterization" box of the "Literary Elements" chart.
- Hazel's mention of the "ball-peen hammer" sound. Ask students who can hear the noise in the text and whether it's significant that the noise meant to handicap George is so loud his wife can hear it. Ask students if this detail should be noted anywhere in their charts, perhaps in the "Mood", "Conflict", or "Characterization" boxes. Discuss how this change impacts the audience's interpretation/understanding of the text's setting if students demonstrate confusion.
- Is there a contrast between the notion of complete equality for all as the foundation for the futuristic government and the authority given to the Handicapper General? Could this be considered an example of irony
- What keeps George from removing or tampering with his handicaps? How does this reveal complications between the government and the people? - Students should

recall George will be imprisoned and fined for attempting to make himself above average.

- What would be the effect of giving the broadcaster a raise for doing his best as Hazel suggests? Is this likely to happen? - Students should be able to draw upon elements of the futuristic society presented in the text, and note if equality is critical, this man will likely earn only as much money as everyone else.
- Describe the actions of the ballerina while reading the news bulletin. Why does she apologize? What inferences can be made about her based on the handicaps she is described as having?

After the description of Harrison's physical appearance, stop and discuss with students the purpose of descriptive language/imagery. Ask students to share whether imagination-inspiring details and vivid imagery enhance a text or detract from it. Reread Harrison's physical description, asking students to sketch (quickly, as the details are presented at an overwhelmingly fast pace) their interpretation of what Harrison looks like. Read the description for the third and final time, allowing students to identify elements they may have missed previously.

Markers/colored pencils heighten the visual interpretation of the activity, although, again, the focus should be on incorporating the details presented through the author's inclusion of word choice/imagery. A document camera could be utilized to help students share their interpretations and make connections between the imagery/figurative language used by the author and readers' imagination. Otherwise, a [gallery walk](#) would help complete the same.

Students should be able to note similarities between their sketches. Most will likely draw Harrison as a fairly tall character and incorporate the clown nose and black-capped teeth handicaps. As students note these commonalities, explain this is a testament to the power of precise verbs/word choice and the students' ability to make inferences.

- Use this activity to ensure correct interpretation of word choice and its impact on the text
 - Ask, "Based on this description, what can be inferred about Harrison's physical and intellectual characteristics?"
 - If this figure confronted you, how would you react?
 - In contrast, if this figure confronted one of the "average" citizens in the text, what reaction would result? - Prompt students to examine the notion that the citizens of the future might not be able to recognize when to be fearful. Ask students to support or refute this notion using textual evidence.
 - Use the resulting discussion to transition into the examination of the author's use of tone/critical remarks. Ask, "What type of tone does the author convey when describing the H-G men's treatment of Harrison?" Scaffold, if necessary, by posing questions such as, "Is the author objectively stating the facts? Is he critical of the government's actions?" Ask students to support their responses with evidence from the text.

As students continue progressing through the text, the teacher should monitor students as they document the text's literary elements and devices (as well as inferences that can logically be drawn from them) on the appropriate charts. Some suggested stopping points and discussion prompts include:

- Why does Harrison declare himself "the Emperor" (line 142)? What does this indicate about the way Harrison views himself? How does this "position" differ from the role of the Handicapper General? *The final question might require additional scaffolding (perhaps modeled rereading?) for students to make an appropriate inference.
- Why does the ballerina agree to Harrison's proposal? What does this indicate about her character? Are such actions on par with her character, or is there a shift?

Informal Writing Prompt:

Stop reading at the moment Harrison and the ballerina "kiss" the ceiling. This scene serves as the story's climax. Ask students to predict how the story will end. To assist with this process, students should examine their "Inference" charts. When students have had an opportunity to respond (using sufficient evidence to support their predictions), ask them to share responses in whole-group or small-group discussions. For students presenting notions of a happy ending for Harrison and his Empress, ask if the text supports this (refer students to their "Inference" chart notes as well as the notes on the "Literary Elements" chart). Does the text set itself up to end in any way other than the defeat of the protagonist (Harrison)? Ask if the author incorporates foreshadowing to hint at the text's ending, again referring students to their "Literary Elements" chart.

Have students finish reading the text, then review the discussion of the students' predictions for the story's ending. Ask students to debate whether the ending was satisfying. Ask further whether the story possesses a concrete resolution. Guide students to an appropriate understanding by reviewing the text's ending. By the time George and Hazel's television fades to black, Harrison's coup is foiled by Glampers and he is murdered as a result. Is there any evidence to indicate Harrison did not die in vain? Or that his actions will lead to lasting change and a better life for the citizens of the United States in 2081 and beyond? Ask students to describe what George and Hazel are doing in their living room at the end of the story. Then, ask students to describe what George and Hazel were doing at the beginning of the story. Is there any hope of change now that Harrison is dead?

At the end of the text, encourage students to share these and other observations/reflections in small groups or aloud to the class.

Independent Practice: What activities or exercises will students complete to reinforce the concepts and skills developed in the lesson?

You do: Using the gradual release method, the instructor will direct students to respond to the prompt at the bottom of the "Inference" chart regarding drawing conclusions. Support students as necessary, but ask them to continually refer to their inferences noted on the chart.

- While monitoring for student progress, the instructor should ensure students are making connections that are both relevant and sufficient in detail.
- As students demonstrate an appropriate level of understanding (the chart is complete with relevant details; students can explain their rationale verbally), they should proceed with the summative assessment.

Closure: How will the teacher assist students in organizing the knowledge gained in the lesson?

Students can respond to an Exit Slip asking what parallels between our society and the one presented in the text the author wants readers to draw upon. Is there a specific type of, or aspect of government the author criticizes?

ACCOMMODATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Accommodations:

While progressing through the text, be sure to incorporate a healthy balance of reading and pausing to check for understanding. This will allow students to reflect, digest, and discuss the text.

If it appears students miss a critical contrast as it is presented in the text, pause, and probe students to see if they merely overlooked the detail or failed to see the relevancy and engage further discussion as appropriate.

Chunk information into digestible bites for students, providing the background necessary (if it appears some students do not possess such prior knowledge) to allow students to access the lesson.

- For instance, probe with a key idea/essential question about individual choice/freedom. Ask whether our society/government seems to advocate individuality or adherence to the status quo. Explain that in the perspective of the government, Harrison is a criminal for failing to conform to regulations stripping him of individuality. Ask students whether the text encourages readers to view Harrison's law-breaking behavior as a heroic or criminal act.

Using graphic organizers (like the ones provided in this lesson) can help struggling students maintain organization, focus, and understanding of the text/skills and concepts covered in the lesson.

Model how to practice skills (and transfer the use of these skills to students) using the gradual release method ("I do", "We do", "You do".) For this lesson, begin by thinking aloud as you read text to the students while practicing skills. *Note, reading aloud passage serves as a way to model fluent reading as well. Later, ask students to practice the skill (either in small groups or independently) as you monitor progress, providing assistance/support/feedback to ensure successful application of the skill. Finally, allow students to practice completely independent of your guidance, effectively allowing them to demonstrate mastery of the skill/concept.

Extensions:

Students could develop and examine theories surrounding the author's purpose, presenting their findings in writing or a brief report (perhaps using multimedia presentation tools, i.e., [Prezi](#)/PowerPoint presentations).

- A guiding prompt for exploration might be: If the author is criticizing aspects of our society/government, does he do so publically or under some sort of protective guise? Is he, in essence, using the same protections he condemns in the text to express his them?
- Another prompt for exploration might ask students to examine the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution ("The Bill of Rights"). Students should analyze the language employed in "The Bill of Rights", noting some of these rights are often considered "negative rights" in that they prohibit the government from interfering in certain regards through the passage of restrictive laws. From this perspective, students should argue (in writing, debate, presentation, mock trial, etc.) whether the passage of the "211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments" violated certain protections outlined in "The Bill of Rights." Challenge students to make connections between a seminal U.S. document (the "United States Constitution") and Vonnegut's treatment of specific foundational elements from it ("Self-evident that all men are created equal").

Special Materials Needed:

Instructors will need to provide students with access to [copies of the text](#).

For the character description drawing activity, markers/colored pencils heighten the visual interpretation of the activity. A document camera could be utilized to help students share their interpretations and make connections between the imagery/figurative language used by the author and readers' imagination. Otherwise, a [gallery walk](#) would help complete the same.

When modeling the use of the graphic organizers, it is generally helpful to display the think-aloud process using a document camera or SmartBoard for the students. The same effect could be created by drawing the diagrams on a whiteboard or chart paper.

Further Recommendations:

Cross curricular connections with social studies teachers would certainly enhance students' understanding of the concepts addressed in the work. A prior understanding of United States government/economics would help students examine possible statements Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. expresses.

Additional Information/Instructions

By Author/Submitter

Source: Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr. "Harrison Bergeron" 1961. Lexile: 1050L. This lesson is part one in a two-part unit. Lesson two has been attached as a related CPALMS resource.

SOURCE AND ACCESS INFORMATION

Contributed by: Wayne Beck

Name of Author/Source: Wayne Beck

District/Organization of Contributor(s): St. Johns

Is this Resource freely Available? Yes

Access Privileges: Public

License: [CPALMS License - no distribution - non commercial](#)

Related Standards

Name	Description
LAFS.910.RL.1.1:	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
LAFS.910.W.4.10:	Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
LAFS.910.RL.1.2:	Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
LAFS.910.RL.1.3:	Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
LAFS.910.RL.2.4:	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).
	Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

[LAFS.910.W.3.9:](#)

- a. Apply grades 9–10 Reading standards to literature (e.g., “Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work [e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare]”).
- b. Apply grades 9–10 Reading standards to literary nonfiction (e.g., “Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning”).