The Emperor: the Liberator

Kurt Vonnegut is known for his dark sense of humor. He takes the blackest parts of the human condition and forces the reader to acknowledge and come to terms with that darkness that lurks in the hearts of men, laughing all the while. While the actual text of “Harrison Bergeron” is hyperbolic, and is often simplistic in its construction, the themes of the story are certainly trying to speak to the heart. While examining “Harrison Bergeron,” it is important to consider the history of the man who wrote it. This is true more so of Vonnegut than many other authors; his themes took a turn when his mother committed suicide, and he had been taken prisoner by the Germans under Hitler. “The mediocrity depicted in this text is not of the future, but of the past and present” (Hattenhauer 390). Vonnegut did not write a cautionary tale; he is railing against the world as he perceived it already. “Harrison Bergeron” is bleak; it’s hopeless, but, (,) for a few moments, (,) it burns brightly. Vonnegut laughs at the sickness of it all, but remains ultimately optimistic. Superb!

Have a transition and introduce the quote “When I was captured by the Germans, and they asked me why I was fighting against my brothers, I thought it was hilarious. I felt no more closely related to them than I was to Bolivians” (Heckert 68). Knowing the history of Kurt Vonnegut is integral to? the understanding of his style of writing and themes he chooses to explore in “Harrison Bergeron”. He was a soldier in World War II, and was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge. Not six months before his capture, his mother had
committed suicide at their family home. He spent long months digging trenches and moving bodies. The whole time he was malnourished and watched his fellows die in droves. Patrick Parr describes Kurt Vonnegut’s homecoming in his article *Kurt Vonnegut Survives Humanity*, “On that drive back home with his uncle, he broke down and sobbed while driving. "The sons of bitches!" he repeated, through gritted teeth.”. While he never really recovered from these horrors, he never let them destroy his hope in humanity. Until the day he died, he preached the virtue of mercy. He would often reference the Beatitudes, “He spoke this simple yet profound statement: "Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far.”” (Parr 32).

Finding humor in hopelessness, beauty past the darkness, and something great inside of something terrible is the great hope at the heart of “Harrison Bergeron” and it isn’t hard to extrapolate that shades of these terrible things in Vonnegut’s life have coalesced into a story about the future that is critical of today. Interesting

Vonnegut was an intelligent man, who enjoyed growing his intellect and engaging in discussion with friends and family. However, there were those in his life that he felt only valued him for his fame of his works and not the content therein. Reading “Harrison Bergeron(,)” it is easy to see that he was frustrated by society-at-large for moving in a direction toward intellectual-levelling. “They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else.” (Vonnegut). The very first thing mentioned in a list of items is often the most pressing point the author is trying to bring to the reader’s attention. Everybody was equal, and in what way? Intelligence. The handicap that has the largest impact on the society of “Harrison Bergeron” is the levelling of the intellect. Ironically, this forced levelling is what makes it possible for the society to be largely incapable of stopping Harrison Bergeron himself from rampaging around the state. “...but because in their portrayal and criticism of it [Post-Modern
American culture], they [Vonnegut’s iconoclasm] help readers better understand themselves.”
(McCoppin 316) The purpose of “Harrison Bergeron” isn’t trying to make a grand, sweeping judgment on the whole of society. It is trying to show each individual who they are as part of this problem that Vonnegut says is already here. Is the reader Hazel, Diana Moon Glampers, or Harrison Bergeron himself? Excellent! What is the lesson we can learn from “Harrison Bergeron” with the titular character and superman dead on the floor? Awesome

The victory of the Handicapper General is shallow. If there was anything to be learned from “Harrison Bergeron,” it is that questioning dogma unflinchingly is an ideal to strive toward. Harrison shakes the earth with his footsteps and breaks his bonds by his strength alone. The breaking of his handicaps is a total rejection of the social contract to which he was born into. It is also important that he does these things on a live government broadcast. The broadcast continues, because those operating the equipment are too incompetent to know to cut it off. Others are freed and uplifted by Harrison, and he proclaims them his dukes and earls. He is allowed to run amuck for hours before the Handicapper General herself shows up. Who is with her? She is alone in a room full of enlightened individuals, some of them shown to be in possession of superphysical strength like Harrison Bergeron. “...the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun.” (Vonnegut). Even then, the broadcast continues. It is the Bergeron family television breaking, presumably due to poor manufacturing, that ends our view into the glory of Harrison Bergeron’s new order.

Harrison was never a character in the literary sense. Harrison was an event or a catalyst. The care taken in describing his sheer presence likens him to a god, divine in appearance and ability. Harrison set something in motion by proving a point, whether he lived or died ceased to
matter. It is telling that the narrator, without a hint of sarcasm, says the Emperor and the Empress lay dead. Their titles remain, even after their deaths. Lovely

Every aspect of “Harrison Bergeron” is steeped in hyperbole, but the story is fundamentally a lamentation. Despite his clear disgust with the problems he perceives in American culture, Vonnegut ultimately remains optimistic about human nature. Through the tortures he endured at the hands of his fellow man during World War II, to the simple disappointment he felt at feeling encouraged to hide his intellect, Vonnegut never loses that optimism no matter how jaded he becomes. “Harrison Bergeron” is a story about a social contract gone insane, and about how the freedom to grow will eventually outpace any attempt to level the field, “He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder” (Vonnegut).
Works Cited


John,

You have some really insightful and well worded sentences here. Terrific analysis and inclusion of quotes! Let's work on comma placement and when to place punctuation inside quotes. Also have your last name in the header instead of mine. A+