Life in Misery

Both “Oliver’s Evolution” and “Harrison Bergeron” share similar themes of having factors in life that limits one from being truly happy. The characters from both stories either had physical or mental barriers preventing them from living the life they desired. Oliver’s challenging childhood kept him from living a joyful life; he lacked love, guidance, and affection. The characters in “Harrison Bergeron” all had challenges that kept them from living a purposeful life; they had handicaps, weights, and agonizing alerts going off in their heads, making life unenjoyable. Both Oliver and Harrison took a chance at finding what makes their lives meaningful. The authors of these stories prove that life will continue to be miserable if no one allows changes to be made.

Moreover, Oliver has encountered many challenges since the moment he was born. These challenges were all factors that made life so hard on him. He was born with a birth defect causing his feet to grow inward. Due to this medical condition, it probably played a role in the parents being less attentive to him. Oliver was also abused and neglected as a child, which put him in dangerous situations. This is shown when the author states, “One day in his infancy, they found him on their dressing-room floor with a box of mothballs, some of which were wet with saliva; in retrospect, they wondered if there had really been a need to rush him to the hospital and have his poor little stomach pumped” (para. 2). In this life or death situation, most parents would not even hesitate or question taking their child to seek medical attention. Luckily, Oliver
survived and later on grew stronger from this misfortune. Catherine Sustana states “Oliver has achieved what, for many people, is simply an ordinary life, but it was so far beyond his reach that it's a cause for celebration -- a reason to be optimistic that anyone might evolve and overcome the patterns that seem inevitable in their lives” (Catherine para 19). Oliver’s childhood played a huge role in him being unable to find happiness. Believing he would always live a worthless life, he later discovered that a change needed to be made in order for him to find his purpose.

Unfortunately, the neglect of his parents continued causing Oliver to lead himself down a troubled path. He had no one to show him the good in life. He became a reckless individual that did not care about the consequences of his actions. Updike states of the father, “It was he, and not the boy, who was at fault, really, when the bad grades began to come in from day school and then from college, and Oliver broke his arm falling down the frat stairs, or leaping, by another account of the confused incident, from a girl's window. Not one but several family automobiles met a ruinous end with him at the wheel, though with no more injury, as it happened, than contused knees and loosened front teeth” (para 4). Oliver had no reason to strive to become better. He learned no lessons from his mistakes until later in life. His poor choices created barriers that prevented him from living a joyful life. This is seen when Sustana states,” As Oliver moves into high school and college, his grades drop, and he has multiple car accidents and other injuries related to his reckless behavior” (Sustana para 5). Oliver did not see a point in charting his own path during this stage in life. He did not even take the time to imagine how great his life would be if he put his happiness in his control.

Fortunately, Oliver met a lady that helped put a stop to his poor choices and helped him turn his life around. Seeing that the woman had suffered from various battles just like he did,
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Oliver finally found someone he could build a true relationship with. The author writes, “The girl, Alicia, was as accident-prone as he, given to substance abuse and unwanted pregnancies” Updike (para 5). They grew a bond together and positively influenced each other. In the end, Oliver and his wife became the parents he never had but always wanted. Oliver finally found the joy he has been missing his whole life. Hedonic Treadmill states, “Research shows that happiness is not the result of bouncing from one joy to the next; achieving happiness typically involves times of considerable discomfort” (Treadmill para 2). According to this article, it takes understanding hardships to achieve true happiness. Oliver suffered from many challenges, physical and mental, that kept him from finding delight in his life. His wife and children became the root of his happiness.

Likewise, the characters in “Harrison Bergeron” all faced hardships that prevented them from finding their happiness. The husband, George, was labeled as a criminal for being intelligent. He was considered gifted because he had an advantage over society. The one’s that were labeled gift had to wear heavy weights making life harder on them. The more advantages one had over society, the more punishments they had to endure. Like Oliver, George could not help the fact that he was a little different; they both were punished for it. George heard disruptive and disturbing noises that prevented him from having access to his brilliant thoughts. The author states, “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” (Vonnegut 1). The alarming noises made George lose his train of thought and made him a miserable person. He would rather stay congruent with the rest of society than to suffer the consequences of expressing his true self and being happy. According to Peter J. Reed and John L. Grigsby, “Such methods of control include mental handicap radios in ears which emit ghastly sounds to interrupt and control
thought” (Reed & Grigsby para 1). George did not have the chance to utilize his talents and enjoy his life the way he wanted. Unlike Oliver and unlike his son, Harrison, he did not take a chance at finding what makes his life fulfilling. He continued living a life that limited him from happiness.

Furthermore, George’s son, Harrison, was punished for his intelligence as well. He was sentenced to prison and was forced to carry heavy weights at all times. He decided he would take the chance to live free from his misery, regardless of the consequences he would have to face, so he broke out of prison. Vonnegut states, “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” (Vonnegut 3). Harrison had the chance to feel freedom outside the prison walls, but it soon came to an end when he was shot dead. Even though his life came to an end, he did get the chance to experience a moment of joy. Similar to Oliver, Harrison found a woman in the end to share his happiness with. Reed and Grigsby state, “During the dance by these two beautiful and gifted people, and at the moment of their kiss, the dancers are shot dead by the Handicapper General” (Reed & Grigsby para 1). Harrison was able to put aside his reputation of being troublesome and to share a delightful moment with a ballerina. Harrison and Oliver both had the chance to share their happiness with someone. In many ways, they are alike. They both were abandoned by their parents and lack that emotional support they desperately needed. Just like Oliver, Harrison took that chance at changing how he lived life. He risked his life for a moment of happiness. He broke free from his days of being chained and being restricted from doing what made his life worth living. Who would have known his last day would be his happiest?
Lastly, the ballerina in “Harrison Bergeron” also had to go through hardships before she encountered true happiness. The ballerina that danced with Harrison was punished for her uniqueness. She was forced to wear heavy weights as punishment for being gifted. When Harrison offered someone to dance with him, she saw that as an opportunity experience joyfulness. Reed and Grigsby states, “Harrison… encourages one exceptionally beautiful (and onerously handicapped) female dancer to throw off her handicaps and dance with him and be his empress” (Reed & Grigsby para. 1). She danced with Harrison and they both shared a moment of freedom up until their death. They wanted happiness so bad that they both risked their lives just to have a taste of it. The author states, “She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor” (Vonnegut 5). She wanted to express and enjoy her skillful talent instead of having to abide by a boring routine. But, unfortunately, her actions resulted in the loss of her life. She made a decision to put an end to what dictated her life and decided she would be in control of her happiness.

In conclusion, all characters endured negative factors that prevented them from experiencing happiness. Oliver, George, Harrison and the ballerina all were missing a motivation to want better for themselves. Oliver turned his life around the moment he met his wife. Having someone, such as his wife, going through similar events as he made it easier for Oliver to form a bond with her, leading him to happiness. Even Harrison and the ballerina discovered their happiness in the end, despite the price they had to pay. The moment they all encountered what truly made them happy was the moment they discovered what they were needing to fulfill their life. No matter the situation, finding joy is not out of reach.
Work Cited


