

2081 | Teaching Guide

Lesson 1: Two Interpretations: “Harrison Bergeron” and 2081

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The attached lesson plans are designed for use in English and Social Studies classrooms. Through discussion points and activities they help students explore the remarkable complexity of 2081, a short film adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron.”

Study Guide: Lesson 1

Students will:

- Compare and contrast key themes and interpretations in *2081* and “Harrison Bergeron”;
- Use summarizing techniques to enhance comprehension;
- Build critical-thinking skills by analyzing the aesthetic qualities of *2081* and “Harrison Bergeron”;
- Synthesize information to form and present arguments.

Lesson Component	Description	Instructional Time
<i>2081</i> (Film)	A short film adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's “Harrison Bergeron”	<i>25 min</i>
Supplementary Video 1: A Tale of Two Harrisons	A short supplementary video exploring differences between <i>2081</i> and “Harrison Bergeron”	<i>5 min</i>
Activity 1: Literary Analysis Essay with Graphic Organizer	Supported by a graphic organizer, write an essay comparing and contrasting one scene from the film and the story	<i>30-45 min</i>
Activity 2: Exploration of Creative License	By analyzing an exclusive interview with the director, explore the responsibilities of art adaptation	<i>20-30 min</i>

Compelling Questions

1. Does a change in medium (written story v. movie) change a work's effect on the audience? How or why?
2. What are the different questions that the film and story ask us to think about?
3. How do the film and story define freedom differently? Individuality?
4. Which version is a better telling of the ideas? Why?

Lesson Concepts & Vocabulary

Abomination

Adaptation

Comedy

Comparative Analysis

Literary Devices

Oppression

Parallelism

Point of View

Propaganda

Resistance

Rhetorical

Scene

Theme

Tragedy

Unjust

Word Choice

Lesson 1 Background Essay: Two Interpretations

by Dr. Sarah Skwire¹

Any time a story changes form—when a written tale becomes a movie, or a movie becomes a TV show, or a show becomes a video game—it’s a good time for the people involved in that change of form to think about how the content of a story might need to change as well.

While we didn’t get to sit in on the conversations that happened as the filmmakers were deciding what would need to change as they were transforming Kurt Vonnegut’s short story “Harrison Bergeron” into the movie *2081*, we can look at some of the changes that they decided to make to Vonnegut’s story and think about the effect those changes have in the final film.

HARRISON’S AGE

Many of the most substantial differences between the story and the film affect the character of Harrison himself. In Vonnegut’s short story, Harrison is only fourteen. In *2081*, he is clearly older—probably somewhere in his early 20s.

Changing the age of a character might not seem such a big difference, but I can think of a few reasons why the filmmakers might have chosen to make Harrison older than fourteen in their version of the story. First, and most practically, casting an older actor as Harrison probably gave them a wider set of actors to choose from. Perhaps the opportunity to cast Armie Hammer—then a little known but fast rising star—as lead was enough to persuade the filmmakers to think about making Harrison older.

More seriously, though, given the amount of violence involved in the film—both violence aimed at Harrison and violence incited by Harrison—seeing a child as the center of that violence might have upset a lot of viewers. The early scene

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where we see Harrison forcibly removed from his home by a crew of uniformed “HG” men from the Handicapper General’s office would be quite different and much harder to watch if Harrison were only fourteen. The violence used in the film still seems excessive, but not unbearable, when turned on an adult. While the goal of the film is surely to awaken viewers to the horrors of the oppressive government operating in 2081, the filmmakers couldn’t risk making things so bad that viewers would decide not to watch to the end of the film.

Lastly, films that have children as lead characters are often dismissed as movies that are “for children” and thus as films that aren’t worthy of serious attention. Perhaps the filmmakers had this in mind. *2081* is anything but a story for children, and having an adult in the lead may have helped it attract a wide audience.

THE HANDICAPS

But making Harrison older isn’t the only way that the filmmakers change the character. In Vonnegut’s short story, Harrison’s handicaps include being required to wear “a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.” Obviously, the filmmakers chose not to disfigure their lead actor this way. I doubt, though, that it was just Mr. Hammer’s good looks that drove the decision.

It is very important for the success of this story that Harrison’s suffering, his rebellion, and his defiant final speech be taken seriously. It would be hard to make that happen if he was wearing a clown nose and fake teeth. While the description of these humiliating disfigurements works on the pages of Vonnegut’s story as a way to increase our sympathy for Harrison, in the filmed version we would have to hear the silly teeth get in the way of his words and watch the rubber nose bounce as he spoke. We would be unable to take him seriously, and the message of the film would be lost.

The filmmakers chose, instead, to focus on the heavy weights and chains that Harrison has to wear. This decision allows them to still present him as someone who has been persecuted and held down by an unjust system, without making him into a figure of fun.

Both the changes made in Harrison's age and the changes made in his appearance help us to think about the biggest change between the filmed Harrison and the Harrison in Vonnegut's original story.

THE SPEECH

In Vonnegut's work, when Harrison breaks into the studio and begins broadcasting during the ballet performance he gives a dramatic speech, just as he does at the climax of the film *2081*. But in Vonnegut's story, Harrison's speech is much more in keeping with the younger, foolish looking Harrison that Vonnegut describes.

"I am the Emperor!" cried Harrison. "Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

"Even as I stand here" he bellowed, "crippled, hobbled, sickened - I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I can become!" ...

"I shall now select my Empress!" he said, looking down on the cowering people. "Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!" ...

"Now-" said Harrison, taking her hand, "shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!" he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. "Play your best," he told them, "and I'll make you barons and dukes and earls."

Harrison here is hardly more than an angry kid having a temper tantrum. He stamps his foot. He shouts, more or less, "You're not the boss of me!" That kind of visceral resistance against oppression is completely understandable in the context of Vonnegut's story. Sometimes one is so beaten and silenced that no response but a barbaric cry seems possible. But it seems to me that the filmmakers wanted something a little different from their version of Harrison.

The filmed version of Harrison is given a more complicated and sophisticated speech, one that is also far more threatening.

QUIET!

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN...DISTINGUISHED GUESTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD...MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE!

There's a BOMB beneath this theater, and there's a DETONATOR in MY HAND.

So, I STRONGLY SUGGEST that you remain in your seats.

Now...my apologies for interrupting this evening's entertainment, hopefully I can provide you with some of my own. My name is Harrison Bergeron.

I am a fugitive and a public threat. I am an abomination of the able. I am an exception to the accepted. I am the greatest man you have never known.

And for the last SIX YEARS I have been held prisoner by the State...sentenced without trial... to TORTURE without end.

They had hoped to destroy in me any trace of the extraordinary, and in time, I came to share that hope. But the extraordinary, it seems, was simply out of their reach. So, now I stand before you today: beaten, hobbled, and sickened. But sadly, not broken. And I say to you, that if it is GREATNESS we must destroy, then 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!

Unlike Vonnegut's original Harrison, the Harrison of *2081* doesn't merely crash through the door of the TV studio and interrupt a broadcast. He interrupts the broadcast to tell the audience that there is a bomb beneath the theater and that he is prepared to trigger it. The stakes of this speech are much higher than the stakes of the speech in the short story. There is no danger here that the audience will misread Harrison as comic or childish. Their lives are, quite literally, on the line.

Even the fine details of the speech from *2081* indicate the concerns the filmmakers must have had about making sure that Harrison's character is seen as a man who is—all at once—dangerous and thoughtful, threatened and

threatening. We are told in the news broadcast announcing Harrison's escape from custody that he is a "genius." (Vonnegut also calls Harrison a genius in the short story.) The details of his speech are clearly crafted in order to give a careful viewer of the film evidence of that genius.

Look at all the wordplay the speech contains, for example. Harrison calls himself an "abomination of the able" and "an exception to the accepted." Those subtle puns—ABomination/Able and EXCEPTion/ACCEPTed—signal Harrison's masterful use of language.

Harrison plays with repeated phrasing in his speech as well. He was "sentenced **without trial** to torture **without end.**" That kind of repetition of structure (your English teacher will call it parallelism) is incredibly effective in speech-making. Think about all the repetition in Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream." Over and over again, he tells us, "I have a dream that one day...." Or think about the parallel phrases in Lincoln's "Government of the people, by the people, for the people" from the Gettysburg Address. In such moments, these famous speeches become almost like chants. Audiences are swept along by them. Harrison's repetitions are a reference to that kind of speech-making, and an attempt on the part of the filmmakers to give Harrison's speech that same kind of power.

But Harrison's rhetorical fireworks wouldn't be worth much without a good argument to persuade people that he is right to object to how the government tries to create equality and that they ought to object alongside him. Having crashed through the studio door, dragged a guard around, and warned people of the bomb he is ready to detonate, Harrison has capably demonstrated the danger he presents. He acknowledges that danger, but at the same time he explains that he has been imprisoned without trial and tortured for six years.

The torture, he tells the audience, "hoped to destroy in me any trace of the extraordinary" and, over time, as the torture began to break his will, he also began to hope to be made ordinary, average, and equal. Presumably, it would at least make people stop hurting him.

But the torture doesn't work. Harrison says he stands in front of the audience, "beaten, hobbled, and sickened. But sadly, not broken."

Why is he sad to be unbroken? Isn't Harrison the great hero of freedom, fighting against an unjust system? Shouldn't he be proud to be still resisting? Maybe. But maybe Harrison is as exhausted as he is proud. Maybe dragging around 300 pounds of weight for six years has taken its toll. Maybe he doesn't really think his last stand will change anything about that system that tortures him. Maybe he's prepared to die—even eager to die—in one sacrificial display of greatness.

“Sadly” is one small word in a long speech. But I think it's a very important one. I think Harrison comes into that room knowing that he won't leave it alive. And I think that he has decided that whether his death changes the world or whether it just stops his own torment, it's worth it.

Why do I think so? Well, in the film, one of the charges for which Harrison was imprisoned was his creation of anti-government propaganda. His clever use of language throughout his final speech hints to us how effective that propaganda may have been.

A glimpse of some of that propaganda at the end of the film gives us even more evidence for that. Did you spot it? Stenciled on Harrison's bomb are the words “Live free or die.” Below, on the floor, it continues: “For death is not the worst of evils.”

If we have come to this grim a conclusion at the end of *2081*, we can see, again, how the small changes made to Harrison's age and appearance, and the larger changes made to his final speech, have been hugely important for transforming the more childish Harrison of Vonnegut's story into the tragically heroic Harrison of *2081*.

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____

Discussion/Writing Prompt Questions

1. Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" and *2081* present different versions of their main character's age, appearance, and final speech. What other differences do you notice between the story and the film? Why do you think the filmmakers made those changes? How do you think they change the effect of Harrison's story?

2. The government and society of the short story and the film will go to almost any length to make people equal. Which version of Harrison's character do you think is more likely to have arisen from such a culture? In other words, is the short story or the film more "realistic" in the kind of person Harrison would be? Why do you think so?

3. "Live Free or Die" is the state motto of New Hampshire. Patrick Henry famously said, "Give me liberty or give me death." Is Harrison's willingness to die for his freedom a particularly American quality? Do Vonnegut and the filmmakers mean for us to think it is?

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____

Activity 1: Literary Analysis Essay with Graphic Organizer*Write an essay comparing and contrasting one scene from the film and the story.***Step 1:**

Before beginning your essay complete the following in the graphic organizer

1. Identify one key scene in the story and one in the film that you wish to compare and contrast.
2. Identify elements of dialogue, description, or visual depiction from those scenes to compare and contrast.
3. Use the tools of literary analysis to identify key similarities and differences.

Scene	Literary Devices Used	Effect of the device on you, the audience	How is the element different in each version

Appendix 1: Q&A with Chandler Tuttle, director of 2081

Chandler Tuttle is president and chief of content at Freethink, a media company that has worked with publishers such as National Geographic, Upworthy, Popular Science and Fast Company. Prior to joining Freethink, he studied film at NYU, and worked at Focus Features (Lost in Translation, Brokeback Mountain). Tuttle has also served as the creative director for the Oslo Freedom Forum, an international human rights gathering described by The Financial Times as “Davos for Dissidents.” 2081 was his first film; it premiered at the Seattle Film Festival in 2009.

1. Why did you decide to adapt “Harrison Bergeron” to film? What attracted you to the story?

I fell in love with “Harrison Bergeron” the first time I read it — it struck me as beautiful and funny and sad and thought provoking all at the same time. Vonnegut is a master of dark satire, and I felt that the absurdity of the premise made the tragedy of the thought experiment all the more powerful. But perhaps more than anything, I was really drawn to the characters of George and Hazel Bergeron. The subtext of their conversation implied a backstory that felt especially tragic and powerful, and I was eager to explore their relationship in my own way.

2. In crafting your adaptation, you necessarily had to make some changes to Vonnegut’s story. What are some of the changes you made, and why did you make them? Which were the hardest to make and why? Which were most important and why?

I faced a few key challenges adapting “Harrison Bergeron” for the screen.

The first, was that the story was written in the 1960s, and as a result the central action took place during a live studio broadcast of a ballet. In the 1960s, that no doubt seemed plausible — live broadcasts were the norm, and they mostly took place in TV studios — but today it is hard to imagine anyone tuning into a broadcast of that kind unless it was of a major production being performed before a live audience in a major venue.

That small but important change necessitated a variety of other changes. Once I staged the action in front of a live audience, it was clear Harrison needed some leverage over the audience, otherwise he could easily be carted off by security or overpowered by the thousands of people in attendance.

Furthermore, it seemed unlikely that the authorities would permit the broadcast of a hostage situation like that to continue for very long, so I needed to introduce a mechanism for Harrison to regain the upper hand once they cut him off.

After exploring a number of ideas, I came up with the idea of the decoy bomb coupled with a pirate broadcasting device. Then I added a history of “communications piracy” to Harrison’s back story, which hopefully helped to enhance the payoff.

Putting those pieces in place also gave Harrison a more focused set of goals, which I felt would enhance the tension and drive the narrative in the second half of the film.

The second major challenge was incorporating the exposition necessary to set up the rather unusual premise of the story. In the book, the narrator does all the work, but I felt that persistent narration in the film would make it harder to get lost in the story. So I developed a hybrid approach: I used narration from the book during the opening sequence to establish the premise in Vonnegut’s signature, poetic style. Then I combined that with a series of flashbacks which both gave us information we needed about Harrison’s arrest while also helping us understand the unique nature of the earpieces that kept George from “taking unfair advantage of his brain.” For the final bits of necessary exposition, I was able to leverage and expand the “breaking news” broadcast that announced Harrison’s escape in the middle of the film.

But perhaps the most significant change I made to the original story was to enhance the tension between George and Hazel. In Vonnegut’s version, George and Hazel come across as more or less similarly confused and/or saddened by the events transpiring around them. But I liked the idea of exploring a relationship where the two of them were dealing with their shared tragedy very differently: George is trying to remember while Hazel is trying to forget. For me, the tragedy was made all the more powerful by the fact that neither of them was succeeding.

3. When adapting an author’s work for the screen, how do you decide what’s okay to change and what isn’t?

It’s often said that the best adaptations are the freest, and I tend to agree. Books and film are fundamentally different mediums, so in my view, you do the underlying drama in a book a disservice if you focus too much on the specific devices the author uses to explore that drama. Vonnegut’s version of “Harrison Bergeron” isn’t going anywhere, and I’m thankful for that. I still return to it often and I still find it every bit as beautiful, funny, sad and thought provoking as I did the first time. For people who have never read the

original story, I hope *2081* leads them back to it. For those who discover *2081* after having already read “Harrison Bergeron,” I hope they find something interesting in it that makes them love the original even more.

4. In your opinion, do the story and the film have essentially the same “moral” or message? If so, what would you say that is? If not, how do they differ, and why?

When we first posted the trailer online, an early commenter made the observation that “this appears to be a deadly serious adaptation of ‘Harrison Bergeron.’” While I hope I was able to translate some of Vonnegut’s devastating humor to the screen, I do think the commenter’s assessment is about right. If Vonnegut’s original is a dark satire, *2081* is more of a satirical drama. Nevertheless, I do think the underlying moral messages in both are similar: when we sacrifice freedom in the pursuit of justice, we’re left with neither and the world is an immeasurably darker place for it.

5. If there is one thing — an idea, a question, a thought — that you’d like people to take away from your film, what is it?

I think my answer to the previous question is probably the appropriate answer to this one too, so I’ll go back to the original text instead. No matter what the future may hold for all of us, some things will surely never change: April for instance, will always drive people crazy by not being springtime.

Appendix 2: Standards Alignment

English/Language Arts

1. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.7
Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*).
2. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
3. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)
4. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5
Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
5. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6
Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).
6. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7
Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

Appendix 3:

2081 Screenplay

HARRISON BERGERON

screenplay by
Chandler Tuttle

based on the short story
"Harrison Bergeron"
by Kurt Vonnegut

OVER BLACK

NARRATOR (V.O.)
The year was 2081, and everybody
was finally equal...

FADE IN:

INT. APARTMENT - DAY (FLASHBACK)

SLOW MOTION. The TV glares at GEORGE BERGERON. It is large and futuristic, but also oddly designed and seemingly counter-functional. It flickers.

George is 58, balding and overweight. He has the look of an ex-linebacker -- hulking and broken. In one hand he holds a beer, in the other a remote.

He's dressed casually but has all manner of odd hardware strapped to him -- these are his HANDICAPS, and they give him the appearance of something like a workhorse in a yoke and bridle. He shifts in his chair a little, sinking under their oppressive weight...

There is no sound in the scene, but a SOFT MELODY plays over it, lilting along with the SLOW MOTION photography like a dinghy on a slow river...

NARRATOR (V.O.)
They weren't only equal before God
and the law you see; they were
equal every which way... Nobody was
smarter than anybody else. Nobody
was better looking than anybody
else. Nobody was stronger or
quicker than anybody else...

Through an open door, HAZEL BERGERON works clumsily in the kitchen. Her fumbling is given a disconcerting beauty by the SLOW MOTION photography -- something like an ugly ballet. She too wears handicaps, but hers are much smaller and fewer in number.

Outside, rain pours down the window even as sunshine pours in.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
...and all this equality was due to
the 211th, 212th, and 213th
Amendments to the Constitution, and
to the unceasing vigilance of the
United States Handicapper General.

We watch for a moment as George and Hazel putter about in their infinite complacency...

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Indeed... it was the Golden Age of
equality...

The SLOW MOTION continues, but suddenly the everyday scene is violently interrupted: down a hall, the front door to the apartment BLASTS open.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Some things about living still
weren't quite right, though.

Men in futuristic SWAT gear come pouring through the doorway by the dozens. These are the H.G. MEN.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
April, for instance, continued to
drive people crazy by not quite
being springtime.

George turns, confused and absent to look at the commotion, and Hazel comes rushing out from the kitchen.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
And it was in that clammy month
that the H.G. Men came to take
George and Hazel Bergeron's son,
Harrison, away...

One by one the H.G. Men turn down a hall toward some unseen destination, their SLOW MOTION assault lilting along to the time of the soft music...

But SUDDENLY, a loud noise, like a SIREN, violently interrupts the image and the music...

CUT TO:

INT. SAME APARTMENT - NIGHT

George winces, seemingly from the LOUD NOISE. He grabs reflexively at a device he has strapped to his right ear, but after a moment, the pain passes...

What we just witnessed was clearly a distant memory of his. Shaking it off, he refocuses, but is confused to find himself crouched by the TV with a huge florescent tube in his hands. He looks up at Hazel, who is now sitting in an adjacent chair, busy with her knitting...

Without missing a stitch, she answers his unspoken question...

HAZEL

You were fixing the TV, dear.

Ah, yes, that sounds right. George steals a glance back in the direction of the front door, but the men are gone and the apartment is still, so he returns to his work...

The same gentle music from the previous scene now emanates from the TV, but the screen has gone completely dark. George inserts the florescent tube he's been holding into a bank of tubes that stands behind the TV, and having done so, the whole thing SPRINGS back to life like a string of Christmas tree lights whose lone defective bulb had rendered the rest useless.

With the TV now re-lit, we can at last see the source of the music that we've been hearing: a televised ballet...

HAZEL

I bet that was a real pretty dance,
that dance he just did.

GEORGE

Huh?

HAZEL

That dance -- I bet it was nice.

On screen, a male dancer is exiting the stage. He stumbles a bit as he does...

GEORGE

...Oh.

His repair finished, George returns to his chair and his beer. He looks up at the TV to get his bearings. The ballerinas flop around on stage, weighed down by their handicaps.

The TV still flickers, another tube threatening to shut off at any moment. George's thoughts do the same...

FLASHBACK

We return to the opening scene. The SLOW MOTION continues as one by one the H.G. Men turn down the hall toward some unseen destination... and one by one they are tossed like rag dolls back into the main hall.

Finally, George rises from his seat to intercept the intruders, but another LOUD NOISE interrupts the moment before we can see what happens next...

REALITY

George winces again.

HAZEL
Oooh, what was it this time?

GEORGE
It was loud. Same as last time.

HAZEL
It sounded a little like somebody
hitting a milk bottle with a ball-
peen hammer from here...

GEORGE
Uh-huh...

HAZEL
Well I think it'd be real
interestin'... hearing all the
different sounds... all the things
they think up--

GEORGE
It isn't...

HAZEL
--only, if I was Handicapper
General, you know what I would do?
I'd have chimes on Sunday -- just
chimes. Kinda in honor of religion.

GEORGE
I could think straight if it was
just chimes.

HAZEL
Well... maybe make 'em real LOUD,
then...

George winces at that.

HAZEL
I think I'd make a good Handicapper
General...

GEORGE
You would.

George looks over at her, but Hazel just continues to knit,
oblivious to the slight. Amazing...

So instead, George turns back to the entryway where he attempts to re-board his train of thought...

FLASHBACK

Again, one by one, the H.G. Men are tossed back into the hall in SLOW MOTION. Finally, after much effort, they pull their as-yet unseen opponent into view...

...and we see HARRISON BERGERON for the first time. He looks young, perhaps 19, but at 6' 6" and 300 pounds of solid muscle he is quite simply an Adonis -- even with ten men, they're barely able to manage.

Hazel and George rush into the fray, but if Harrison can't hold them back, no one can...

A LOUD NOISE interrupts the scene once again...

REALITY

George winces -- *hard* this time.

HAZEL

Boy! That one was a doozy, wasn't it?

George responds quietly...

GEORGE

Yeah...

He shakes it off, but only to return his attention yet again to the empty entryway...

HAZEL

You seem real distracted hon -- what are you thinkin' about?

He watches the hall with focused intensity... but there is nothing there...

GEORGE

I dunno... Can't quite keep it straight in my head... (Pause) But somethin'...

George trails off pathetically.

HAZEL

You must be tired... why don't you stretch out on the sofa so you can rest your handicaps on the pillows.

GEORGE

I'm fine...

HAZEL

But you're always so wore-out... If there was just some way we could lighten--

GEORGE

There isn't.

On screen, the very average looking PRIMA BALLERINA (whose handicaps are the lightest of them all) falls clumsily, taking a SECOND BALLERINA down with her. Then, the TV flickers again as though it were another domino in their chain of failure.

HAZEL

Well, I'm not saying all the time -- maybe just, ya know... when you're settin' around the house...

George responds wearily...

GEORGE

--Hazel, if I take 'em off, then I'm going to want to keep 'em off...

He lets the statement hang in the air like a threat. Then he looks right at her.

GEORGE

And we both know how you'd feel about that...

She takes the bait...

HAZEL

I'd hate it.

On the TV, the two ballerinas stumble back to their feet as the crowd applauds them in polite encouragement...

The audience is all dressed in high formal attire. They too wear handicaps, but theirs are much fancier -- looking more like jewelry. Regardless, they appear no less heavy for all their bejeweled adornment...

Back on stage, the Prima Ballerina preens at the crowd's attention, while the Second Ballerina (whose handicaps appear to be the *heaviest* of them all) glares at her in annoyance...

GEORGE

Well... nothing to be done then...

Another LOUD NOISE. George winces. So does the ballerina with the heavy handicaps. The Prima Ballerina does not.

HAZEL

No, I guess there isn't.

GEORGE

Huh...? Isn't what?

HAZEL

Anything to be done... isn't that what you just said?

can't remember. Maybe...? But just then, the music stops abruptly, and a graphic fills the TV screen indicating an announcement:

TV VOICE

We interrupt our broadcast of The National Ballet's Sleeping Beauty for important breaking news.

Hazel looks up, brow furrowed.

HAZEL

I don't understand why they should have to interrupt such a nice ballet... just to tell us the same old news.

She returns to her knitting.

GEORGE

What does it really matter if they're just performing the same old ballets...?

On screen, a meek looking man appears. This is the station's NEWS ANCHOR...

NEWS ANCHOR

G...g...g...goo...gooo...gooo...d..
gooooo...eeee...eev...vvvv...

Another graphic flashes up: Please Stand By.

HAZEL

That's all right -- he tried.
That's the big thing. He should get
a nice raise for trying so hard.

She holds up her knitting project to look at it: the beginnings of a sweater -- but it has three arms. She furrows her brow in mild disappointment, then shrugs. George just looks at her, *utterly bewildered...*

HAZEL

Well... I think I'll get started on
the dishes...

She sets it down and grabs a plate from George's side table on her way into the kitchen.

George just sits quietly staring at the entryway like a house cat who thinks he remembers having seen a mouse there once...

IN THE KITCHEN

Hazel starts the FAUCET, drowning out all other sound. But over her shoulder and through the open doorway, WE CAN SEE the standby graphic on the TV disappear and another man take the News Anchor's place...

IN THE LIVING ROOM

...the replacement anchor wears studio headphones around his neck and is not dressed for on-air appearance -- he's a studio technician. He proceeds with the announcement nonetheless but is clearly annoyed at the whole routine...

TECHNICIAN

Good Evening.

His voice is a deep, rich, anchorman's baritone. George returns his attention to the TV.

TECHNICIAN

We've just received warning from
the office of the Handicapper
General that suspected anarchist,
Harrison Bergeron has escaped from
custody.

The news slaps George in the face.

KITCHEN

Hazel continues washing dishes, unable to hear the TV over the faucet. Instead she hums the silly music from the ballet to herself.

Through the open doorway, a police photograph of Harrison appears on screen -- first sideways, then right-side up...

LIVING ROOM

Harrison's appearance is all Halloween and hardware -- nobody has ever borne heavier handicaps.

TECHNICIAN (CONT'D)

Arrested 6 years ago on charges of handicapping violation, propagandist vandalism, communications piracy and high treason, Mr. Bergeron had been awaiting trial in a maximum security prison here in Washington, D.C. when he miraculously disappeared from his cell earlier this evening -- 6 years to the day after his arrest.

At that, George looks reflexively at the entryway...

TECHNICIAN (CONT'D)

Please be advised that Bergeron is a genius and an athlete, is underhandicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous. If you see this man, please contact your local authorities immediately.

We will of course be keeping you updated throughout the evening as this story unfolds.

The ballet returns to the screen and with it, the silly MUSIC from before again fills the room. George sits very still.

KITCHEN

Hazel washes dishes in the kitchen, humming to herself, still unable to hear anything over the faucet...

LIVING ROOM

Finally, George turns to call for her, but he is stopped short, mouth open, by another LOUD NOISE. He winces, as usual, but then realizes that this time it's coming from the broadcast, not his earpiece...

The sound of CRASHING METAL like a FREIGHT TRAIN echoes out from the TV... The cameras search the theater for the source. Frightened faces look around, look to one another, but there is nothing... Then, a series of loud BOOMS like the footfalls of a giant beast...

SLOW PUSH IN on George, who looks as though he's waking from a long sleep...

GEORGE

Harrison...

CUT TO:

INT. NATIONAL BALLET THEATER - THAT MOMENT

Murmurs fill the audience...

A line of ushers stationed at the theater doors in the back look to one another unsure of what to do...

The TV cameramen race blindly to find the source of the sounds...

Then SUDDENLY, the main theater doors swing open, knocking one of the ushers to the wall, and a hulking figure comes CRASHING through.

Obscured by shadow, the monstrous HARRISON BERGERON makes his way down the center aisle with a pencil-necked "security" guard held helplessly in the grip of his giant hand.

The audience watches in confused horror as he charges through the theater...

Reaching the stage, he leaps up without even breaking his stride -- an astounding 5-foot vertical leap -- and then crashes down with another thundering boom. Ballerinas and musicians cower before him.

He paces for a moment like a lion in a cage. The ground shakes with his every step, as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake. Screams and barking cries of consternation fill the audience...

HARRISON

QUIET!

His voice thunders as loudly as his footsteps.

Clanking, clownish... HUGE -- we now see Harrison for the first time in full light. Scrap metal hangs off him like tinsel. The chiseled perfection of his face is hidden by a mask with the frozen visage of a frighteningly average man. While others' handicaps are seemingly worn voluntarily, like jewelry, Harrison's are shackled to him like chains of bondage.

Finally, the theater settles, and Harrison continues with the slightly unhinged flair of a circus announcer...

HARRISON

LADIES and GENTLEMAN...
distinguished guests from AROUND
the world... may I have your
attention please...

He releases the security guard with a small thud, almost as though he had forgotten about him, and as the poor little fellow scurries off on his hands and knees, the other guards reluctantly begin advancing from the sides of the stage, billy clubs drawn and trembling...

HARRISON

There is a bomb beneath this
theater and there is a detonator in
my hand...

Harrison holds out his left hand to reveal a small device strapped to it like a glove. In the center there is a trigger...

HARRISON

So I STRONGLY suggest that you all
remain in your seats...

The other guards turn in pathetic retreat at the news, happy to be relieved of their duty.

The audience gasps and murmurs. Harrison waits patiently for silence... with another stomp of his foot, he gets it. He then continues with a more formal composure..

HARRISON

Now... my APOLOGIES for
interrupting this evening's
entertainment, but perhaps I can
offer you some of my own...

(MORE)

HARRISON(cont'd)

My name is Harrison Bergeron.

I am a fugitive and a public threat. I am an abomination of the able. I am an exception to the accepted. I am the greatest man you've never known...

And for the last six years I have been held prisoner by the state... sentenced without trial... to *torture* without end.

Harrison loses steam for a moment, dropping some of the pomp in his manner...

HARRISON

They... had hoped to destroy any trace of the extraordinary in me... and in time, I came to share that hope... But the extraordinary, it seems, was simply beyond their reach...

So now I stand here before you tonight -- beaten, hobbled, sickened... but *sadly*, not yet broken -- and I say to you, that if it is GREATNESS that we must destroy, then let us *drag* our enemy out from the darkness where it has been hiding...!

Harrison breathes in deep...

Let us shine a LIGHT upon this monster ... so that *AT LAST*, ALL THE WORLD can SEE.

At that, Harrison begins tearing the straps of his handicap harnesses with overwhelming force, shredding them like wet tissue paper.

He thrusts his thumbs under the bar that secures his head harness and it CRACKS like celery. He SMASHES his headphones and eyepieces against the stage floor. He WRENCHES a cage of weighted bars from across his chest. The whole place echoes with the SCREAMS of TWISTING metal. A veritable SYMPHONY of destruction shakes the theater to its foundations.

Finally, he begins to pull away his mask, and its iron harness SCREECHES as it yields to his power.

Then, with a final CRY of surrender, the harness snaps and the whole apparatus CRASHES to the floor, revealing a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

IN THE AUDIENCE

As the ECHOES of the crash die out, there is nothing left but deafening, reverent silence.

AT THE BERGERON'S

George sits, eyes wide, before a giant image of his son, completely unshackled for perhaps the first time ever. A tense pause... Harrison is hardly able to control the awesome power within him. Like a deflated balloon suddenly filled with air, he seems about to burst... then... he breathes in deep...

BACK IN THE THEATER

...and snatches his pile of handicaps from the stage floor...

HARRISON
DO YOU SEE?!?!

... he hurls the lot of them, perhaps a quarter ton in total, into the back rows of the theater with incredible force. The theater THUNDERS with their impact.

The audience recoils at the display.

At the back of the theater, a chunk of one of Harrison's handicaps is lodged into the wall a mere six inches from a now *utterly* panicked USHER, who then stumbles out the theater door in reflexive retreat...

INT. LOBBY

Immediately upon exiting, the usher runs into a sea of H.G. Men stationed with military precision at every entrance and throughout the hall... dozens of them, hundreds even... swarming... And in the center of it all stands a woman in a business suit. Her badge reads DIANA MOON GLAMPERS, HANDICAPPER GENERAL, and at her side, a LEAD H.G. MAN listens to an earpiece and directs the action...

WE HEAR snippets from his radio conversation CRACKLING in... "Unit B in position on the southeast stairwell..." "Units A and D in position in the northeast corridor..."

LEAD H.G. MAN
Copy that. Unit E what is your
status...

INT. BASEMENT MACHINE ROOM

A group of heavily-armored bomb specialists huddle around a huge device, working feverishly to disarm it. One of them responds, breathlessly:

BOMB SPECIALIST
Uh.. need a little more time...

WE PULL OUT to take in the room. Huge machinery fills the space...

The bomb itself is strapped to the base of what appears to be a massive boiler, and spray-painted across the tank above it reads a dire warning: LIVE FREE OR DIE

AT THE BERGERON'S

On the TV, Harrison stands heaving. He surveys the crowd with a dangerous smirk. Everyone waits on pins and needles...

HARRISON
AND NOW... *for my next trick...*
I'll need a volunteer...

He waits for a moment... silence.

HARRISON
NO ONE?! *Come now...*

He turns to face the group of cowering ballerinas huddled at the far end of the stage, and the TV CAMERA ZOOMS OUT to capture them...

BACK IN THE THEATER

... surveying the lot of them, Harrison catches sight of the only one who is not cowering before him: it's the heavily handicapped ballerina from before. She just sits there calmly... waiting...

HARRISON
One of you perhaps.

Though he is seemingly speaking to the crowd of them, he is clearly looking only at her. He waits...

...and she picks up the gauntlet, swaying a little as she rises under the weight of her handicaps. As she steps out of the pack, she steps past the Prima Ballerina who remains cowering on the floor.

Harrison begins removing her handicaps with effortless speed and marvelous delicacy, saving her mask to remove last: beneath it, she is of course blindingly beautiful.

He then pulls her close and whispers something into her ear -- the quiet exchange of co-conspirators. Finally, he turns back to the stage...

HARRISON
(He growls to the
orchestra)
MUSIC!

IN THE LOBBY

Long lines of anxious officers stand locked in formation and resonating with tension.... at the theater doors... on the staircases... down every corridor. They are everywhere.

The Lead H.G. Man stands calmly in the eye of the storm... and at Ms. Glampers side.

Finally, a radio transmission breaks the silence: "...we're clear...!"

IN THE BASEMENT MACHINE ROOM

One of the bomb specialists sits next to Harrison's bomb with a wire cutter and severed wire in hand...

BOMB SPECIALIST
The device has been disarmed.
Repeat: the device has been
disarmed...

Over the radio, we hear the Lead H.G. Man respond with his next order: "Copy that. Unit C, kill the broadcast..."

BACK IN THE THEATER

The musicians are playing, but it is only normal - in other words, it is cheap, silly and false. They all play absently, their eyes fixed with terror on Harrison.

But through this symphony of the mediocre, Harrison focuses in on the melody from a single violin.

And we SLOWLY PUSH IN, past the frightened faces of the rest of the orchestra, to find a LONE VIOLINIST playing with focused intensity.

HARRISON

Enough.

Harrison waves off the orchestra, then points at the Lone Violinist.

HARRISON

Just you.

The violinist acknowledges him with a simple nod of acceptance, then slips off his handicaps before beginning again...

Spare and clean but resonant with power, a new melody fills the quiet theater...

The audience seems lulled by it, forgetting for a moment their fear...

Harrison and his ballerina listen intensely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it.

AT THE BERGERON'S

George too seems transfixed, watching with breathless anticipation....

But then SUDDENLY, the music stops and the image is replaced with a large PLEASE STAND BY. The sound of the kitchen faucet fills the maddening silence like static...

George lurches forward in reflexive protest, as though there were something he could actually do about it...

IN THE LOBBY

Back in the theater lobby, Ms. Glampers and the Lead H.G. Man wait patiently for confirmation... and then finally, another radio snippet breaks in to deliver it... "Confirmed: we are broadcast dark." At that, the Lead H.G. Man turns to Ms. Glampers and nods, then continues into the radio with his next order...

LEAD H.G. MAN

Copy that. All units stand by for entry...

BACK IN THE THEATER

The music SWELLS. Harrison steps to his dancer's side, assuming a formal pose with his left arm behind his back...

But behind him, we can see that he has opened his palm to reveal the detonator, and with his thumb he is carefully moving-in to flip the safety switch off. As he does, we shift into SLOW MOTION... CLINK...

With that, there is NO SOUND. All we can hear now is the Lone Violinist's NEW MELODY, continuing as a score over the subsequent scenes...

IN THE BASEMENT MACHINE ROOM

In the basement, WE PUSH PAST the exhausted Bomb Specialists, the bomb, the boiler and the warning: LIVE FREE DIE.

WE PUSH PAST it all and through a forest of machinery into the cavernous room... and there, deep in the shadows, WE FIND another device attached to a large pipe that leads up the back wall.

Above it, another spray-painted message picks-up where the first one left-off: FOR DEATH IS NOT THE WORST OF EVILS

IN THE LOBBY

Ms. Glampers simply nods at the Lead H.G. Man, and he, in turn, begins ordering the assault...

BACK IN THE THEATER

Harrison takes in the moment... Through a tiny window in one of the theater doors, a sea of H.G. Men rise and fall like the tide. It's time.

Behind his back... Harrison presses the button...

IN THE BASEMENT MACHINE ROOM

With that... the hidden device switches on, emitting a soft escalating WHIR as it powers up...

Then, with a CLICK, a small surge of electricity passes into the pipe, running up and out of the basement. There is no explosion, but...

CUT TO:

THE BERGERON'S

... on TV, the STAND BY begins to breakup as an image stutters onto the screen.... Finally, it SNAPS into focus, and Harrison Bergeron stands in full view. The broadcast is restored.

Harrison looks directly at the camera... and at his father. They both smile...

QUICK CUTS

ON STAGE IN THE THEATER: Finally, the dancers shift their weight to their toes... and in an explosion of joy and grace, they spring into the air.

They reel, whirl, gambol, and spin. It seems as though not only the laws of the land are being abandoned, but the laws of physics as well...

IN THE AISLES: At the rear of the theater, the H.G. Men BURST through the doors and begin pouring in with their guns trained on the couple.

IN THE AUDIENCE: But among the crowd, fear has been replaced by awe and they all remain completely transfixed by the performance even as the H.G. Men pour past them.

AT THE BERGERON'S APARTMENT: George watches speechlessly from the living room, while in the kitchen, Hazel finally turns off the faucet. She starts drying the dishes, but her back remains turned to the events on TV...

ON STAGE: Harrison and his Ballerina perform nearly impossible feats of grace. The violin music builds in intensity, and after a moment, a few other violinists join in, this time playing with the same focused intensity as their new leader.

AUDIENCE: One by one, the audience members begin removing their handicaps to better take in the spectacle...

BERGERON'S APARTMENT: George watches quietly and sadly, with equal parts hope and despair in his eyes.

Hazel is putting away dishes in the cupboards, oblivious, as always, to everything...

AISLES: Dozens of H.G. Men now line the aisles awaiting their orders.

ON STAGE: The theater ceiling is thirty feet high, but each leap seems to bring the dancers nearer to it. More of the orchestra joins the music, all playing as they have never played before...

AISLES: Down one of the aisles of H.G. Men, Ms. Glampers calmly charges the stage, double-barreled shotgun in her hand.

ON STAGE: At last, the full orchestra is playing together, and for perhaps the first time ever, they achieve perfect symphonic harmony...

AUDIENCE: The audience sits watching it all, eyes wide, like children...

AISLES: Even the lead H.G. man, standing alone at the rear of the theater, finally begins to take note of the remarkable spectacle...

...but his escalating state of awe is suddenly interrupted when something breaks in over his radio. Though we cannot hear the transmission, whatever it is, it sends him sprinting down one of the aisles after Ms. Glampers, barking orders into his radio as he goes...

ON STAGE: Harrison and his ballerina leap again, landing in a perfect embrace...

AISLES: Ms. Glampers finally reaches the stage and begins to take aim, but can't -- she stops and has to remove her own handicap lenses first...

BERGERON'S APARTMENT: George, watching helplessly from home, finally has to lower his eyes, bracing for what is sure to come next...

ON STAGE: Harrison and his ballerina move in to kiss one another, but instead Harrison suddenly swivels them around, putting his back to the audience... and to Ms. Glampers aim...

Having done so, he quickly presses his lips to hers before...

AISLES: ...Ms. Glampers fires.

ON STAGE: And at the sound of the BLAST, the orchestra dies out... except for the Lone Violinist, who continues unaccompanied and undeterred.

Ms. Glampers steps up to Harrison's lifeless body. His ballerina stands next to him, proudly awaiting her fate. Ms. Glampers takes aim to deliver it.... but the Lead H.G. Man finally reaches her and relays a message into her ear.

She turns in shock to see the cameras trained on her.

The theater watches in silent horror, their judgmental gaze piercing her flimsy armor.

Caught there, in the spotlight, she stands utterly paralyzed.

Finally, the violinist concludes his performance, and looking up from his work, he adds his stare to that of the audience.

The theater goes dead quiet. WE PULL OUT....

CUT TO:

THE BERGERON'S APARTMENT

... and back at the Bergeron's we see Ms. Glampers standing alone on the screen. Then... predictably, the image stutters out and is replaced with another PLEASE STAND BY.

SILENCE. George sits with tears in his eyes... he can hardly breathe...

But another LOUD NOISE quickly hits him, and he doubles over in pain. When he emerges from it, he actually looks sick to his stomach...

In the kitchen Hazel puts away the last dish, then re-enters the living room at long last and sits down with her knitting...

HAZEL

That last one sounded kinda like a gun shot.

George says nothing for a long moment.

Finally, Hazel looks over and sees the tears on his face...

HAZEL

Aww, hon... you look upset. What's wrong?

He thinks, but...

GEORGE

I... um... I'm not sure...
something sad on television, I
think...

He really doesn't know... she returns to her knitting.

HAZEL

Well... you should forget sad
things anyway... *I* always do.

She starts HUMMING again, but this time it's the new melody
from the Lone Violinist. George just stares at the blank TV.

Long pause.

Finally, he gives up remembering and takes another sip of his
beer, finishing it. He gets up for a replacement, and another
LOUD NOISE shakes him up on the way into the kitchen.

HAZEL

Gee -- I could tell that one was a
doozy.

From the kitchen:

GEORGE (O.S.)

Yeah... (He sighs) You can say that
again.

Hazel does *just that*...

HAZEL

Gee -- I could tell that one was a
doozy.

... and then she resumes her humming...

CUT TO BLACK.

OVER BLACK

The humming continues for a moment over black as she
concludes the tune.