

The Poverty of Equality: A Critical Discourse Analysis of *Harrison Bergeron*

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Abstract: This paper makes a Critical Discourse Analysis of how Vonnegut (1961) represents power in *Harrison Bergeron*, a dystopian-science fiction short story that tries to achieve equality through authoritarian and cruel means. Fairclough's (1992, 2009) Dialectical-Relational Approach was employed as the theoretical framework. The TRANSITIVITY analysis following (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) reveals the backgrounding of actor by the author as to hide the agency and dismiss it from any form of accountability and responsibility. On interdiscursivity, the two dominant topoi identified are the discourse of media and discourse of law.

Keywords: CDA; Dialectical-Relational Approach; interdiscursivity; TRANSITIVITY

1. Introduction

In the science fiction story of *Harrison Bergeron* (Vonnegut, 1961), everyone has been made equal. Vonnegut imagines a future where equality is achievable, but only through cruel, authoritarian means – as a way to level the playing field, those considered to have extraordinary abilities whether it is to be stronger, smarter, better looking, more talented than others, are made to wear handicaps in order to exhaust and stamp out their abilities.

It is 2081, and everyone is equal not just before the law, but before God as well. With the introduction of the 211th, 212th and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, the law has been mandated so as to justify the use of brutal force on the innocent citizens of this dystopian society. At first read, the story might seem like a ridiculous exaggeration, but after a critical analysis, *Harrison Bergeron* reveals how policies that appear well-intentioned can have disastrous effects on society. This study aims to critically assess the purported notion of equality, power and other ideologies present in Kurt Vonnegut's dystopian short story, *Harrison Bergeron*. The analysis of the story will describe the presence of textual, discursive, and social practices. This research intends to investigate how the author represents power in the short story.

There have been studies carried out to investigate the political, social, and equality aspects of Kurt Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron* (see Joodaki & Mahdiany, 2013; Hattenhauer & Darryl, 1998). Most of these studies only focused on the literary analysis to discover the construction of political, social, and equality aspects. However, these studies are only prominent in the area of literature and available tools of analysis are limited for literary analysis. Thus, we hope to shed light on the representation of power in Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron* by using a linguistic approach. This study is hoped to provide a more critical analysis of this short story from a CDA perspective.

1.1 Discourse Analysis (DA)

According to Brown and Yule (1983), "discourse analysis, which has been widely defined as an investigation of language in use and which is fundamentally interested in the extra-

sentential levels, is all in all regarded as a recent field of linguistics” (p. 318). As Horvarth (2009) argues, DA is a broad concept that comes with a plethora of different definitions and different sub-branches. More often than not, DA will cross other linguistic fields thus making it inter-disciplinary.

van Dijk (2003) argues that in DA, there is a tangible relationship between text and context, hence, the term “discourse” comes into the picture. In addition, Fairclough (as cited in Al-Haq & Al-Sleibi, 2015, p. 318) defines “discourse as a term referring to the whole process of the social interaction of which a text is just part or segment affected by other super-linguistic components such as the speaker, audience, and occasion”. In short, DA is such a broad term that encompasses many definitions which “integrate a whole palette of meanings” (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 42).

1.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

van Dijk’s (1993) works have led to the emergence of CDA. He further argues that CDA is not just about a unified model, but it is extended to semiotics, linguistics, and even DA. Fairclough and Wodak (as cited in Al-Haq & Al-Sleibi, 2015, p. 318) “suggest that what is crucial for critical discourse analysts is the explicit awareness of their role in society.” CDA is an analytical investigation which considers “the way the social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are totally incorporated, reproduced, and resisted by, say, the text and talk in certain contexts such as the social and political contexts” (van Dijk, 2000).

The most notable figure in CDA is Norman Fairclough, who has developed Dialectical-Relational Approach (DRA) as an approach to CDA. The aim of this theoretical framework is to look at three different levels of analysis; text, discourse practice, and social practice. One of the most prominent linguistic theories, which has been largely adopted in CDA as a tool of analysis is that of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Linguists such as (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992; Kress, 1985) have supported the use of SFL in their textual analyses because of its role in critical interpretation of various discourses.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study is aimed at investigating how power is represented in Vonnegut’s *Harrison Bergeron*, and in order to represent our data in the most comprehensive of ways, we have used Dialectical-Relational Approach (DRA) from Norman Fairclough (1992, 2009) as our method of analysis. Fairclough’s (1992, 2009) DRA consists of three dimensions:

1. Description

This stage is concerned with the formal properties (linguistic features) of the text.

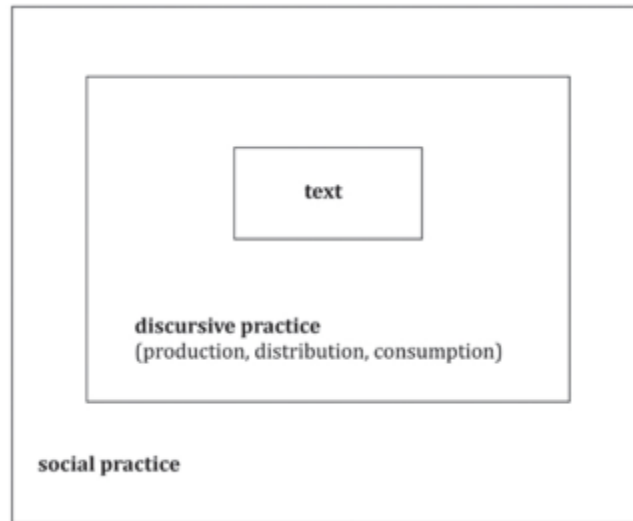
2. Interpretation

This stage is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction.

3. Explanation

This stage is concerned with the “relationship between interaction and social context – with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation, and their social effects” (Fairclough 1989, p. 26).

Figure 1: Representation of Fairclough’s diagram of “social theory of discourse” (Fairclough, 1992: 73)



Fairclough emphasises close textual analysis as being the main apparatus to finding critique in ideology, but to perform an analysis close to the text, Fairclough has adopted Halliday’s TRANSITIVITY to Systemic Functional Linguistics (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The approach originated by Michael Halliday is what we will also draw upon. For the TRANSITIVITY analysis, the Processes that we have analysed are Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal, and Behavioral. The Existential Process was not analyzed as it examines the existence of things, which does not help to answer our research question. The frequency of all processes was calculated to display an overview of processes throughout the short story.

Figure 2: The formula to calculate the processes

$$\frac{\text{Total number of each process in the short story}}{\text{Total number of all processes in the short story}} \times 100\%$$

We focus on conflict present in the social setting of the story, and analyse the elements of power, resistance, and dominance that exist alongside the story’s corrupted notion of equality.

3. Findings and Analysis

This part of the paper presents and analyses the findings of the study. The first part of the study focuses on the textual analysis by examining the different processes occurred in the text by using TRANSITIVITY as the analytical tool. The second part of the analysis focuses on the discursive practices present in the story. The final part of the analysis focuses on the social practice where we examine the short story from a macro perspective.

3.1 Textual Analysis
3.1.1 TRANSITIVITY

Table 3.1.1 Percentage of distribution of processes

Processes	Percentage
Material	40%
Mental	37.8%
Relational	13.33%
Verbal	6.77%
Behavioral	2.22%
Total	100%

TRANSITIVITY analysis is employed to answer the research question: How does the author represent power in the short story? Table 3.1.1 indicates the frequency of the distribution of processes in the short story. Material Process marks the highest frequency of 40%, followed by Mental Process of 37.8%. The higher the frequency of processes implies ‘the main types of process in the TRANSITIVITY system’ (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The findings show that Material Process and Mental Process are the most dominant processes occurred in the short story. The other processes namely Relational Process shows a percentage of 13.33%, Verbal Process with 6.77%, and subsequently Behavioral Process of 2.22%. These Processes prove to be secondary processes to the dominant processes in which they are ‘not so clearly set apart, but nevertheless recognizable in the grammar as intermediate between the different pairs – i.e: Behavioral: Material + Mental’ (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014).

3.1.2 Material Process

The Material Process records the highest process in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Harrison Bergeron*. In this short story, the author mainly describes how the people are treated in the name of equality. The purported idea of equality and freedom does not really translate well in the author’s narrative of the short story. In analyzing the Material Process, we have found that in many instances, the actor was backgrounded by the author as to hide the agency and dismiss it from any accountability and responsibility.

Extract 1: He was required by law to wear it at all times (p. 1).

He	was required	by law	to wear it at all times
<i>goal</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>actor</i>	<i>circumstance</i>

Extract 2: ...the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains (p. 1).

...the transmitter	would send out	some sharp noise	to keep
<i>actor</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>circumstance</i>	<i>process</i>

people like George	from taking unfair
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	advantage of their brains.
<i>goal</i>	<i>circumstance</i>

Based on the Material Process, it is apparent that the government is misusing the power they have to treat certain people like George, Harrison, and Ballerina dancers differently by forcing them to wear “handicaps”. The true spirit of equality is to empower people with their God-given abilities but in this short story, the author has represented this form of equality in a very askew manner where these people are punished for the talents. In Extract 1, we can see how the inanimate actor “the law” does the action of forcing “he” (George) to wear the handicap at all times. It is also apparent in Extract 2, the government transmitter would send out sharp noises to people like George to avoid people like him from taking advantage of their abilities. This does not only show the misuse of power on the side of government, it also strips people off of their freedom of choice to live their lives.

Extract 3: It was tuned to a government transmitter (p. 1).

It	was tuned	to a government transmitter
<i>goal</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>circumstance</i>

Extract 4: They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot (p. 1).

They	were burdened	with sashweights and bags of birdshot
<i>goal</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>circumstance</i>

Based on these extracts, we can see how the actors are omitted from these two instances. The passive agent deletion is commonly used across discourses. One of the main reasons why authors normally background actors is to get away from any responsibility or accountability. Hence, it raises the question as to who is responsible for such actions. Based on the examples, even though the actors are omitted, we would still believe the one responsible behind these acts is the government in this short story. This is due to the fact that the narratives in this short story mainly revolve around how the government is treating the people by forcing them to wear handicaps such as a government transmitter or sashweights and bags of birdshot.

3.1.3 Mental Process

Mental Process is recorded relatively high in this short story with 37.8%. Based on this Process, the author employs the Mental Process to express Hazel’s hypothetical thoughts.

Extract 1: I’d think it would be real interesting (p. 1).

Cognition:	I’d	think	it would be real interesting
	<i>senser</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>phenomenon</i>

Extract 2: All the things they think up (p.1).

Cognition	All the things	they	think up
	phenomenon	senser	process

Based on the Mental Process, Hazel who is George’s wife, in many of the instances tried to understand what her husband is going through on a day-to-day basis. She thinks about a lot of hypothetical questions and scenarios in order to express her sympathy to her husband.

3.1.4 Relational Process

Relational Process sits in the middle of the five processes analyzed with the percentage of 13.33%.

Extract 1: They were equal every each way (p. 1).

They	were	equal every which way
<i>carrier</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>attribute</i>

Extract 2: Nobody was stronger... (p. 1).

Nobody	was	stronger...
<i>carrier</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>attribute</i>

Extract 3: Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence (p. 1).

Hazel	had	a perfectly average intelligence
<i>carrier</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>attribute</i>

Based on the Relational Process, the author characterizes every character being equal in a very contradictory manner. Based on the extracts, the author has made a concession that “Nobody was stronger...” and “They were equal every each way.” However, when we analyzed the short story, the idea of equality is rather misrepresented in a way because if your intelligence is average, then you are safe to live your life. However, if you are above average, you are punished with “*handicaps*”.

3.1.5 Verbal and Behavioral Processes

For Verbal Process, there is nothing substantive from the short story other than realization of sources from the author. For example, “*“That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did,” said Hazel.*”

As for Behavioral Process, only one instance was analyzed. For example, “*“All of a sudden you look so tired,” said Hazel.*” Based on the Behavioral Process, we can see George’s behavior after being punished for being above average than the rest.

3.2 Discourse Practices

3.2.1 Interdiscursivity

The two dominant discourses present in *Harrison Bergeron* are the discourse of media, and discourse of law. The media is used as a megaphone to society's thoughts and worldview (see 3.3.2). Discourse of law, however, is one of the main components that make this society tick. Handicap General Diana Moon Glampers uses her professional authority, as well as the authority held above all society, to keep them in place. When she shoots Harrison and his Empress at the end of the book, she is upholding the Amendments to the Constitution, and the rebels are rightly taken out. When George is asked by Hazel to remove some of the lead weights padlocked around his neck, he cites the law of the authority as a reason not to do so.

3.3 Social Practices

3.3.1 Equality and Power in a Dystopian Society

Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron* explores the concept of social structures. According to Young and Harrison (2004), social structures are conceptualised as things that people do, or the "rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction". In relation to ideology and power, hegemonic structure for total equality has brought the destruction of society. Vonnegut satirizes a society where laws of equality have been imposed upon it by total government control. Those considered to have exceptional - or even just above average - characteristics of beauty, intelligence or strength have been made to wear handicaps to make them as unexceptional as the rest of the people living in this society. Freedom and equality are no longer ideals to strive for, as they are now 'granted', now an unnatural product of man. The notion of freedom as a value has been done away in this short story, as agents of the government, called Handicapper Generals, constantly surveil that equality is in order. Vonnegut writes, "They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal in every which way." However, being equal in this society was equivalent to having a deformity of sorts forced upon your body, which will be listed below.

(a) Earpiece handicap

"[George] began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, but a twenty-one-gun salute in his head stopped that." Forced upon people with above average intelligence, this device (tuned to a government transmitter) limits thoughts by emitting loud, violent sounds, "to keep people from taking unfair advantage of their brains" (p. 1).

(b) Bags of birdshot

"She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag, which was padlocked around George's neck." Filled with lead balls, the bag inhibits people of above average strength their movement, power and grace, and the removal of the lead balls would cost them "two years in prison and two thousand dollars" for every ball removed (p. 2).

(c) Facial handicaps

"She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous." Those considered to be more attractive than others were made to wear deformities to mask their beauty such as masks, "spectacles with thick

wavy lenses”, “eyebrows shaved off”, “teeth covered with black caps at snaggle-tooth random” among others (p. 4).

These handicapping devices serve to demonstrate the authoritarian power of the ruling government. Harrison, the titular character of the story, is weighed down by the most handicaps, as he is portrayed to be extraordinarily strong, immeasurably intelligent, and beautiful beyond words. Speech that must have been eloquent once, are reduced to “uh” and “um” and “huh” due to the ear handicaps shortening out live thoughts (p. 1, p. 3, p. 6).

Aside from the display of governmental power, these handicaps also serve to erase individual attributes each member of the society had, from dancers’ grace to George’s strength and intelligence; from the smooth and crisp voice of the newscasters to Harrison’s amazing abilities. The playing field has now been leveled out, and the citizens are fed the narrative that whatever limited functions they had now were all attributes given to them by God (“He’s just trying to do the best with what God gave him.” (p. 2)).

3.3.2 Use of Media in a Dystopian Society

Mass media serves to affect manipulation on audiences, often “penetrating deeply into the mechanics of everyday life” to “change the conditions and rules of social interactions” (van Dijk & Poelle, 2013), and Vonnegut has made it one of the central themes of the short story. In the beginning, George and Hazel are watching a dance show on television. The theme of television as a way to hinder thought is explored in such instances as Hazel and George watch their son, their own flesh and blood, murdered on live television, and yet unable to remember why they are crying just a moment later.

When Harrison escapes from prison, news of his escape is broadcast on television, interrupting the dance show. Andina-Diaz (2007) cites the great power mass media holds, and how the public is fed information that has been manipulated to put to the foreground specific news, and de-emphasise or even ignore other news. The lives of society have their agendas set for them as the mass media they surround themselves with creates a cycle of ideology on certain issues relevant to the structure of their society. In broadcasting news of Harrison’s escape, the audience is told how dangerous Harrison is, and how they should regard him as such, and even use repetitions of how they should not – “I repeat, do not” (p. 4) – try to reason with him. The audience are dictated the narrative that it is essential and beneficial that they listen to the advice of the news station, as what people of a society do is largely determined by the structure they are in and their position in that structure (Bourdieu, 1998). The news station proceeds to broadcast pictures of his face, ugly and deformed, and his body, clownish and weighed down by sashweights, birdshot, and other such handicaps, so the public then buys into the ideology that Harrison is an insane, dangerous, and frightening criminal, and whatever is deemed a threat to the government must also be a threat to the people.

Before Harrison’s news update, no one in society even knows or remembers him, until it is shown on television. The only information society is given of him is through the words and images produced on the screen, and they accept this information without questioning its accuracy, which is prevalent in many of our societies today. Due to the programming of their television, George and Hazel, once intelligent citizens with their own will and thoughts, are now desensitized to the cruelty of not just their television screen, but of real life as well.

4. Conclusion

Society should not put on a pedestal the ideology of making people equal in every aspect. Given the individual attributes we were bequeathed by our Creator. Trying to equalise outcomes based on attributes alone is the absolute opposite of justice and fairness, tenets of equality that is often voiced to empower.

In *Harrison Bergeron*, the critique Vonnegut wrote of the damning consequences of media on worldviews highlights how to truly have freedom, one must question and engage in the narratives present around them. By writing of a dystopian society in which people cannot live like real human beings, Vonnegut has made this ideology of equality into a satire that we must take as a cautionary tale.

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