

Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen

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The human rights discourse in dystopian literature

*A reading of John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* and Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron"*

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Introduction

Dystopian literature speculates on what the future could become when humanity decides to take a certain path. Many dystopian stories are thought experiments that try to illustrate a future for humankind, which is often dark and pessimistic. However, dystopian writers do strive to give people a positive message, because they offer humanity an escape from that undesirable future by showing that morose side of it. According to Fátima Vieira in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, dystopian novels aim to be “didactic and moralistic: images of the future are put forward as real possibilities because the utopist wants to frighten the reader and to make him realize that things may go either right or wrong, depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens” (Vieira 17). The dystopian novel is an important medium to make people think about pressing issues in the world, such as the notion of equality. This is still of great importance in today’s society. Discussions about equality currently emerge everywhere in the media. For example, the debate about refugees here in the Netherlands. Many people think refugees should not be equally treated like the rest of the inhabitants of the Netherlands and should not get financial help and should be given permanent housing.

Creative writers can play with predictions about the future which are recognizable and understandable. This is hardly possible to do through, for example, legislative articles or journalistic work, because they lack a certain amount of imagination needed to pass the message. Through creative imagination, dystopian literature is able to draw attention to problems in the ‘real world’, such as the violation of human rights and make people understand the issues in certain debates. John Wyndham (*The Chrysalids*) and Kurt Vonnegut (“Harrison Bergeron”), the novelists discussed in this thesis, draw attention to the human rights issue of equality. They also demonstrate the complications of physical sovereignty, freedom and individuality in relation to (complete) equality.

Equality as a concept is at itself problematic, because many people have different standards for equality and there exist different kinds of equality. Being equal does not mean being the same, as Stefan Gosepath states, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “equality implies similarity rather than ‘sameness’”. This means that equality between, for example, people mean that they have one or more features that are corresponding. They are not identical, because then all features would be the same. This is an important distinction to remember while reading this thesis, because even though the populations in Wyndham’s *The Chrysalids* and Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” are to be equal, they are not to be the same in every aspect.

One of the questions invoked by this is in what respect are people equal in the two stories? In *The Chrysalids* people are only equal when they can be classified as human according to the

Definition of Man and in “Harrison Bergeron” people are only equal when they wear handicaps making them conform to a standard decided upon by the government. As Gosepath explains, equality has been closely connected to morality and justice. Equality is considered “an issue of social justice” and plays an important role in many legislative discussions resulting in texts, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In both stories by Wyndham and Vonnegut the right to be free of bodily harm and thought, as is stated in articles 1 and 3 of the UDHR, is violated either by not accepting physical differences or by adjusting them.

Siri Gloppen and Lise Rakner state in *Human Rights and Development* that “rights are legitimized as protection against socially produced threats, as an answer to the circumstances of justice. Human rights norms and an apparatus for the implementation of these rights, are necessary as result of the “conditions of justice” in a pluralistic world community” (Gloppen and Rakner 29). According to this statement, the dominant ideology in “Harrison Bergeron” would be legitimate, because the right to equality is a protection to the socially produced threat of envy, however the right to individuality is completely lost in this vision. This individuality is important in human rights discourse, as Neil Walker explains in *Human Rights: Old Problems, New Possibilities*. According to Walker, there exists an internal connection within human rights between the idea of human rights “with its strong suggestion of the equal worth of all humans [...] and a common standard of protection, with all that this connection implies by way of universal claims” (Walker 89). However, the political modernity “namely equal value and equal respect for all expressions of individual and collective autonomy in contradistinction to the pre-modern emphasis upon conformity to a pre-given ‘order of things’” should be taken into account. Human rights need to “accommodate difference, and so particularize, in a manner that qualifies or even challenges the underlying universalism” (Walker 90). This difference no longer exists in “Harrison Bergeron” or *The Chrysalids* which makes these texts good sources for discussing the issue of equality and of human rights, which will be demonstrated in the following chapters.

In this thesis I will research how the human rights discourse is related to dystopian literature by using two post-World War Two literary works, the novel *The Chrysalids* by John Wyndham and the short story “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut. I have chosen these two works because they show similarities in their content, they both address issues of human rights and show a comparison in questioning equality. Both fictional societies presented in the novels discriminate against any physical deviations, claiming it to be a means to equality and purity. By discrimination differences they lose the principles they aim at, because they lose freedom and individuality. In both stories the population is artificially made equal either by handicapping those with special talents or by eliminating any deviations from the norm. The question that I will research in this thesis is: How do

the two literary case studies illustrate the discussion about human rights in their content, form and style and how does this further our understanding of equality?

Part One: John Wyndham - *The Chrysalids*

In this chapter I shall focus on the novel *The Chrysalids* (1955) by John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (1903 – 1969) who used many pseudonyms, of which John Wyndham is the most well-known. He was a British science-fiction writer who was classified by Brian Aldiss as a writer of “‘cosy catastrophes’” in a *Billion Year Spree: the true history of science fiction*. Aldiss states that Wyndham’s novels are “‘totally devoid of ideas but read smoothly, and thus reached a maximum audience who enjoyed cosy disasters’” (Aldiss 315). However, novels that discuss human rights and sociological problems can hardly be called “‘totally devoid of ideas’”. In his novels, Wyndham offers a variety of critiques and new ideas. In *The Chrysalids* he presents ideas about Darwinian evolution, human rights and religious behavior and because of those ideas, Wyndham does not deserve to be called a writer of cosy catastrophes, but rather a writer who offers a critique on different subjects, such as human rights and equality, and that is what will be researched in this first chapter.

The entry for John Wyndham in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* states that he wrote in a “‘post-trauma middle-class UK style of response to the theme of disaster, whether caused by the forces of nature, alien invasions, evolution or man’s own nuclear warfare’” (1354). One of the novels which has some of these themes is *The Chrysalids*. The novel is set in a post-apocalyptic society where any physical deviations are considered erroneous and are forbidden by law. The story is set in Labrador and the inhabitants believe that they are going through “‘Tribulation’”, a punishment brought by God and not by humankind itself. During Tribulation the true form of man must be preserved and variations are believed to be caused by immoral behavior and the devil.

The children in Labrador go to ethics class (Wyndham 40) where they learn the rules of the Bible and the law from a young age. They learn that “‘the duty and purpose of man in this world is to fight unceasingly against the evils that Tribulation loosed upon it. Above all, he must see that the human form is kept true to the divine pattern...’” (Wyndham 41). This means that children are indoctrinated into believing that any variation of the ‘divine pattern’ is unethical and therefore wrong. Deviations from the true human form are not only unethical from a religious perspective, but because religion has been so strongly incorporated in everyday life, it has also influenced the law, which made deviations illegitimate.

The law in Labrador is greatly based on the Bible and on *Repentances* written by Nicholson. Inspectors protect the law in Labrador and are primarily focused on keeping life pure and devoid of mutations. One of the most important laws in Labrador is about Deviations. Any deviations from the

'Definition of Man', as prescribed by *Repentances*, is considered an Offence or, if it is a human deviation, a Blasphemy (Wyndham 19). The 'Definition of Man' describes precisely what a human being should look like: "man should have one body, one head, two arms and two legs: that each arm should be joined in two places and end in one hand: that each hand should have four fingers and one thumb: that each finger should bear a flat finger-nail..." (Wyndham 10-11). There is some controversy about the 'Definition of Man' in the novel, because it has been written by Nicholson and the Definition does not occur in the Bible. Nicholson might be mistaken, because he thought that what he saw was the true image, but what he saw might as well be deviations and not the true image at all (Wyndham 63). So the inhabitants of Labrador might be hunting down and eliminating deviations, while they could be the deviations themselves. This question is raised by the character Axel, who has seen many different kinds of people, who all think they are the true image (Wyndham 63). By raising this question, Wyndham debates the Norm as it is composed by the government/society in the novel and draws attention to the debate in the 'real' world about (not) accepting anyone who is physically different.

Wyndham incorporated the human rights issue of equality in the novel by having the protagonists struggle for their right to live. It may not be obvious that the right to live in *The Chrysalids* is connected to equality rights, but the core of the question is about equality, because all forms of life, even those who are genetically evolved, should have the same rights as others. The protagonists, or mutants, consider themselves human and they should not be excepted from having equal rights just because they are genetically different. As Neil Walker states in *Human Rights*, to be able to be equal and at the same time to be different is one of the fundamental components of contemporary human rights discourse. This notion is also closely connected to science fiction novels, such as *The Chrysalids*.

Deviations, individuality and uniqueness are not accepted in Labrador and this causes problems. An example of this is an incident with David's aunt. David's mother and her sister have a baby around the same time. The baby that David's mother gives birth to appears to be normal and is therefore able to get a Normalcy Certificate (Wyndham 70 - 71). The Normalcy Certificate proves to the government that the child is not a Blasphemy and does not need to be killed. However, the sister's baby is a mutant and she would not be able to acquire a certificate. She begs her sister to switch the children, so she could get the certificate and so the child would not have to be killed. This fails, because David's mother is repelled by the idea of saving a Blasphemy and her sister ends up drowned in a river, either because of suicide or because she was killed by the authorities. If mutants were accepted in society, this would never happen, but because of the indoctrination of what is

wrong and right, David's mother refuses to help her sister and the baby. This shows how fearful and rigid the society is, when it comes to differences.

The Chrysalids is a first person narrative, narrated by David. This gives the reader a more close insight in what David feels and thinks and poses several critical questions about equality. David is a mutant himself and questions if Labrador's laws are as righteous as they are presented. Even though it is in first person narrative, the novel focuses on sociological and psychological problems in society and not per se in characters. The novel gives a more general impression of the fictional world, but without many descriptive passages, because they are unnecessary. Labrador is much like our own society and therefore does not need much explaining.

David is the only round character in the novel due to the perspective it has been written in. All the other characters are one-sided characters and fall into different groups. The characters are held together by groups such as the inhabitants of David's town, the group of mutants and the group of people who live in the Badlands. David and the other main characters are, as David Ketterer describes in *A Companion to Science Fiction*, "post atomic war radiation mutants, [who] are shunned victims who possess talents that betoken a new stage of human evolution" (Ketterer 383). They do not look like mutants, but they are still biologically different from others and are therefore considered Blasphemies. In the story these mutants must survive their differences and eventually they must escape from the fundamentalist government, who do not consider them human.

Perhaps the mutants are not considered human, because the 'humans' feel like they are competition. Due to a Darwinian evolution David and his friends have evolved from the 'normal' human beings into a different species. The fear that the inhabitants of Labrador experience could come from the Darwinian "idea that all children could be regarded as a successor species" (Ketterer 383). The genetics of the protagonists might be different, but they are still human beings. Perhaps they are a different and even a new species of human kind, but that does not mean they should be classified as non-human. One of the characters in the novel describes that what makes a man, a human being is not his physique, but it is his mind:

Would a dozen of arms and legs, or a couple of heads, or eyes like telescopes give him any more of the quality that makes him a man? They would not. Man got his physical shape - the true image, they call it - before he even knew he was man at all. It's what happened inside, after that, that made him human. He discovered he had what nothing else had, mind.

(Wyndham 80)

The mutants' minds are different from the minds of 'normal' human beings, because they can communicate through telepathy with each other, but they still have minds and that alone should classify them as human.

As A. E. Levin and Yuri Prizel state in 'English-Language SF as a Socio-Cultural Phenomenon', the genre of science fiction, which includes *The Chrysalids*, speaks up against "intolerance and coercion, obscurantism and racism" (Levin and Prizel 251). Wyndham shows in his novel how intolerant humans could become if they hold on too tightly to their principles. Mutants need to hide their true selves, because otherwise they will be persecuted, banished or even killed. This results in a lack of freedom and is a barrier for any personal diversity. To maintain equality, or as it is put in *The Chrysalids*, to maintain purity, individualism cannot be permitted. Labrador's society prevents any individuality and any physical uniqueness by removing those who are different. This removal is one of the critiques in *The Chrysalids*. Mutants are made infertile and are exiled to the Badlands, a part of the land where deviations are much more frequent than anywhere else. This is an important element in the novel, because the deportation of people who are different has happened many times in our history as well. People who do not fit the norm are treated poorly and are even prosecuted or executed. There is a clear connection detectable with the Second World War, as *The Chrysalids* was written not too long afterwards. In the novel biological deviations are banished and the same thing happened in WWII with the Jews, Gypsies and other ethnical groups who deviated from the Aryan race (norm) in Nazi Germany. This however shall be discussed further in part three.

Wyndham does not only criticize the banishment of all that is different. *The Chrysalids* is also a kind of satire. As Ruben Quintero describes in *A companion to satire*, satire is "a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn" (Quintero 137). Wyndham satirizes religion and by doing so criticizes people who blindly and uncompromisingly devote themselves to something or someone. Wyndham does this through one of the characters in the novel: David's father, Joseph. Joseph personifies the perverted ethics of Labrador and its religion and he is shown as a frustrated and dangerous man. There are a few satirizing passages about David's father, one of which involves great-horses. These are government approved horses, which are bred to have enormous proportions. However, Joseph concludes that they must be Deviations and that they are not according to the Norm (Wyndham 36). He immediately reports to the inspector, who will not hear his objections due to another incident with an unjust killing of a neighbor's cat. Joseph was convinced it was a Deviation, because it had no tail, but after killing it he realized that the cat just lost its tail in an accident. Joseph made a fool of himself then, and will do so again now. Wyndham's satire points out the shortcomings of Labrador's society and our own society as well.

As a conclusion it could be stated that Wyndham wrote a fictional story resolving around 'real' problems, inspired by what the Nazis did during the Second World War to anyone who did not fit in their picture. He illustrates what the consequences of fundamentalism are and how a population could be repressed keeping it fitted to a certain norm. Wyndham poses questions relevant to the present by showing the reader a dystopian future where any diverse embodiment is repressed. He criticizes the human tendency of repressing and not accepting those who are physically (or in the case of *The Chrysalids*, mentally) different from the majority.

Part Two: Kurt Vonnegut – “Harrison Bergeron”

In this chapter I will focus on the short story, “Harrison Bergeron” which was published in *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1968) by Kurt Vonnegut Junior (1922 – 2007). In this chapter I will illustrate that the story satirizes the human rights notion of equality and offers a critique on egalitarianism. The short story “Harrison Bergeron” is one of the critical stories Vonnegut wrote. The story addresses political and social critique by setting it in a future America where people are forced into being average on the pretence of creating equality and where highly superficial criteria is used for that equalization. The person in control is the Handicapper General who is in charge of keeping everyone equal by handicapping them. The Handicapper General is represented as something negative. When she appears in the story she kills Harrison and his companion without hesitation and threatens the musicians to put their handicaps back on or she will kill them as well. She clearly controls and suppresses people that disobey the law and herself. The Handicapper General makes beautiful people wear masks, has intelligent people wear electronic devices in their ears which prevent them of thinking too much and makes those who are stronger or better build than others wear heavy bags to compensate that strength. The people in “Harrison Bergeron” are made this way so no one is better than the other and jealousy and conflict are avoided. Free will no longer exists and when someone has a will and it is different from the majority, then they are to be eliminated. The people wear heavy bags to show how they are repressed and so they are unable to rise up against this society. People are literally weighed down and repressed in the story.

Todd Davis describes in *The Cambridge Companion to American Novelists*, that Kurt Vonnegut was a critical writer whose fiction has “a consistent morality that might best be called postmodern humanism” (Davis 241). According to Davis, Vonnegut tries to make the world a better place by writing. He wants make us realize what is wrong with the world by writing humanizing stories (Davis 247). Vonnegut tries to do this by using the stylistic elements of black humor and satire in his stories, including in “Harrison Bergeron”. Darryl Hattenhauer explains in “The Politics of Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron”” that “the object of his [Vonnegut] satire is the popular misunderstanding of what leveling and equality entail” (Hattenhauer 387). It is a satire of the notion that everyone should be equal and shows a world where this has been brought about. Vonnegut shows that making everyone equal, as is done in “Harrison Bergeron”, is not beneficial to equality, because leveling everyone is not the same as creating equality.

Vonnegut does not satirize equality as a whole, but he satirizes the way people can become obsessed with equality and turn equality into something undesirable. Equality becomes something undesirable due to the misguided definition in a particular context. Hattenhauer states that “the narrator’s definition of America’s equality begins not by positing a future equality as much as exposing the misunderstanding of it in the past and present” (389). Hattenhauer also states that the satire in “Harrison Bergeron” is not about egalitarianism, but that it is about how ridiculous and absurd the egalitarian ideas of the American society is now (389).

Rebekah C. Sheldon states in *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction* that “the post–World War II period was especially prolific in imaginations of disaster mapped around the axis of social control and liberal individualism” (209). “Harrison Bergeron” is an example of such a work. In the story a dystopian society has emerged where everyone should be entirely equal. Anyone that is intelligent, beautiful or physically fit above average must be equalized into an average person by the government.

The following quote brings out the concept of equality in “Harrison Bergeron”: “THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. 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” (Vonnegut 7). This concept of equality is ambiguous. Complete equality could be considered as an ideal and as a way to end certain sociological problems, however, as is demonstrated in “Harrison Bergeron”, the same ideal could become a nightmare. It could become an ideology that promotes the elimination of everyone who does not want to conform to the norm. As is already mentioned in the first part and shall be discussed further in the third part, this elimination of anyone that does not fit the norm has close ties to what happened in Nazi Germany during WWII.

The narrator never judges the characters, but reports to the readers what is happening. The story has short and simple sentences which gives it a journalistic feel, but the language is also poetic with repetition and rhythm, which is clearly present in the first passage of the story: “everybody was finally *equal*. They weren't only *equal* before God and the law. 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*” (Vonnegut 7 Emphasis added). Vonnegut starts the story with, as Artur Blaim describes in *Mediated Utopias*, “a poeticized, rhythmic flow of narration sustained by repetitions and accumulation of liquids” (Blaim 190). By repeating the words “equal” and “anybody else”, the emphasis is put on these words and its meaning.

People are equal “every which way”, which means that they must not only have equal rights (or lack of rights), but that must also mean that there is a “intellectual and/or physical equalization of all citizens” (Blaim 190). Hattenhauer describes this equalization in ‘every which way’ in his article as follows: “the narrator defines equality only in terms of intelligence, looks and athletic ability.” (Hattenhauer 389). What makes people equal in “Harrison Bergeron” is only physical and mental. In the first part of “Harrison Bergeron”, the emphasis on the three important aspects of humankind becomes clear; no one is smarter, better looking, stronger or quicker than anybody else (Vonnegut 7). Intelligence, physical beauty and strength are the three elements of a person that seem to decide how equal they are. There are no references made to any other forms of inequality, such as race, gender and income. This does not seem of importance to the notion of equality in Harrison’s America. Financially there exists inequality, because at some point in the story, the character Hazel proclaims that a newsreader deserves a raise. This means that America’s society is not equal in ‘every which way’, because there are financial differences. This focus on intelligence, physical beauty and strength are part of Vonnegut’s satire. His satire illustrates how superficial certain concepts of equality are and shows that some people are misunderstanding political ideas, such as communism and socialism.

In “Harrison Bergeron” Vonnegut seems to suggest that a superficial equality, brought about in the thoughtless way it is done in the story, is not something anyone should desire. Vonnegut creates a story where equality is being corrupted into something perverse when it is defined the wrong way. In future America equality is achieved, but it has a high cost. Freedom and individuality cannot exist in this kind of society.

The character Harrison seems to be the only one who wants to break free from this corrupted kind of equality. He rebels against the performance of conformism in his society and considers himself superior to others. Freedom in “Harrison Bergeron” is a problematic theme, because Harrison announces becoming the Emperor and therefore decides to rule the country without (democratic) consent from the citizens. He essentially decides to become a dictatorial monarch and the American people would still not be free from someone ruling them.

“Harrison Bergeron” is a critique on the American idea of equality of the 1950’s. Equality is an important principle in the American law. The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal”¹. Vonnegut however warns the American people that this should not be taken too literally, as the egalitarians do, and illustrates in the story what the result could be if it is taken literally. In the story citizens are being forced or even tortured into being average. People try to be as average as they can possibly be, because of fear for the government or because they have been

¹ "The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." *National Archives and Records Administration*.

manipulated into truly believing that an egalitarian society is the utopia they have been wishing for. The result of this equalization is that those who are gifted and will not change, such as Harrison, are killed by the government.

“All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General” (Vonnegut 7). This means that this equalization is lawful, but as Blaim states as well, the American law must radically change in the future due to the immense increase of amendments in the constitution (190). The Handicapper General and the H-G men have the lawful right to adjust people physically and mentally to the average norm. This is an intrusion of the physical, and more importantly the mental, independence of humankind.

The people in Vonnegut’s story are completely controlled by the government. The government decides what the norm is. Removing a handicap could result in a fine or even in jail time (Vonnegut 9). The citizens of America have to be careful not to break any laws by being less equal (or average) than others. There are agents at work led by the Handicapper General, who check if you wear your handicaps. The United States Handicapper General is the main enforcer of the law, focusing on equality. In “Harrison Bergeron” there is no private physicality, because the Handicapper General decides what average is and decides if your body conforms to the norm or if it should be adjusted to it. People no longer have the right to be who they are born to be. For example, if they are born with genes for an above average muscular body, they must be altered, so that they do not become physically stronger than is lawfully allowed.

The people are manipulated into thinking that inequality is erroneous and not desirable. One of the ways in which people are being restricted in their freedom is by making people’s minds more equal. Intelligent people have to wear electronic devices that make noises, as a result that those people are unable to concentrate and think about challenging topics. By using “mental handicapped radio” intelligent people are made average due to disorientation and lack of concentration and prevents any critical thinking. Blaim describes this as a “purposeful impairment of human fitness and skills” (Blaim 189). Harrison’s father is an intelligent man, but cannot think about anything substantial, because of his mental handicapped radio. Every time he starts to think about his life and society, his radio broadcasts sounds and noises, which divert his thoughts (Vonnegut 8). These sounds are broadcasted by the government, which means that the government ultimately controls someone’s mind.

Not only these mental impairments influence people. Media plays an important role in the manipulation of the American citizens. The government controls the media and broadcasts misinformation and propaganda. Through the news people are manipulated into thinking that

Harrison and his individualistic way of thinking is criminal. In the narrative, the television is ever present. George and Hazel see Harrison perform on television, but Harrison is never presented in person. The reader only knows what George and Hazel are seeing on the screen. The government uses the television to indoctrinate its citizens and to warn them about gifted people, like Harrison, and about what could happen to people that do not want to be average.

“Harrison Bergeron” is a story that coins a discussion about human rights by posing the question how the human right to equality should or should not take form. In the story people are restricted from being an individual and they no longer have any corporate sovereignty due to the decisions made by the Handicapper General. People are also deprived of their right to freedom of speech, since the government decides what is allowed to be broadcasted. No one is capable of forming any kind of critical thought due to the mental handicapped radio’s.

Vonnegut utters a critique on human rights discourse and warns of a society where equality has finally been reached by satirizing this society and illustrating that these ideas could be dangerous. He questions if a society where everyone is made equal, even if it is only in certain aspects such as beauty and intelligence, is really beneficial for humans and their rights and if equality and peace should outweigh the human right to individuality and freedom?

Part Three: Comparison between literary texts

This chapter contains a comparison of *The Chrysalids* and “Harrison Bergeron” with regards to style, narrative and critique of human rights and societies. *The Chrysalids* and “Harrison Bergeron” have several stylistic elements in common. The most important stylistic element in both stories is the use of satire. Satire ridicules ideas and actions in the text with the aim to make people think about them and to make them realize how ridiculous some ideas could be. As has already been analyzed in the previous chapters, Wyndham and Vonnegut satirize certain ideologies on equality by illustrating what the consequences could be. In *The Chrysalids* the idea of not accepting evolution and trying to keep the world from changing is being satirized and in “Harrison Bergeron” an egalitarian ideology that was dominant in America is made ridiculous.

Another similarity in the stories is the relation to the same themes, such as equality, freedom and oppression by the ruling powers. Both stories clearly show how far societies and humans can go to enforce their ideals, in this case not accepting individuality and equality. The narratives illustrate how society restricts any individuality and how societies could be focused on ‘the normal’ and try to limit those with extraordinary gifts. In “Harrison Bergeron” people are being discouraged from using their talents by making it punishable with fines and prison time. In *The Chrysalids* this takes a more extreme form and deviations are kept from reproduction and are exiled or even killed. In both stories society is being kept according to a norm by removing or restricting anything abnormal.

In the stories everyone is equal, yet there is also a lack of equality. A society of equality is created by eliminating all that do not fit the norm. When speaking of equality it is important to consider that there are different terms and meanings for it. Equality of opportunity and equality of outcome are two important terms in this discussion. Equality of opportunity, as described in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, is “a political ideal that is opposed to caste hierarchy but not to hierarchy *per se*.” In a society run by the principle of equality of opportunity no one is born into a certain status, but anyone can have the social status they desire. “The assignment of individuals to places in the social hierarchy is determined by some form of competitive process, and all members of society are eligible to compete on equal terms.” There is equality of opportunity in “Harrison Bergeron”, but in a distorted way. Anyone could become anything they aspire, since no one is born into a certain position. However, positions are not acquired by competition, because this society tries to eliminate that from the process by equalizing everyone’s competences.

Equality of outcome is an approach that is “meant to equalize outcomes, insofar as they are the consequences of causes beyond a person’s control.” This kind of equality is present in *The Chrysalids*, because people are genetically equalized by eliminating the ones that are born with deviations and are therefore unequal to those born ‘pure’.

Another important similarity in the stories is the fear that abnormalities bring about. In *The Chrysalids* abnormality is everything that deviates biologically and physically from the norm and in “Harrison Bergeron” abnormalities are people who do not want to wear their handicaps and conform to the established norm. Abnormalities are considered a threat to society and to the ruling powers. In both stories that fear expresses itself by governmental repercussions of fines and jail time in “Harrison Bergeron” and exile and death in *The Chrysalids*. This fear has been taught to the people of those societies. In *The Chrysalids* children are taught from a young age that Deviations and Blasphemies are to be feared and are to be rooted out and the same happens in “Harrison Bergeron”, where people are indoctrinated by the media not to accept underhandicapping and extraordinary behavior, as has already been stated in the previous chapters.

The governmental structure is similar in both societies, as they are both ruled by a dictatorship. However, when applying Siri Gloppen and Lise Rakner’s model of different types of regimes, from *Human Rights and Development*, to Vonnegut’s and Wyndham’s texts, there does appear a difference between the two dictatorships. The regime in “Harrison Bergeron” is in their terms a totalitarian regime “built on a holistic ideology that also comprises the private sphere” (Gloppen and Rakner 46), which pursues utopian goals. The regime in *The Chrysalids* is a more communitarian regime. This regime gives priority to the community in an ideological and practical way. The individual is less important than the state and “individuals are entitled to respect only as members of the group or society, in accordance with the duties and roles ascribed to them.” (47) In the case of *The Chrysalids* it is the religious majority that rules the population, sets the norm and punishes those who do not fit the norm. In “Harrison Bergeron” it is the government (the Handicapper General) who decides which handicaps people need to wear and decides when someone is underhandicapped and needs to be punished for that. Both these dictatorial institutions want equality and purity in their societies, however, as already stated, they have different ways of achieving this. In Wyndham’s novel Blasphemies are stopped from reproducing and are removed from society. In “Harrison Bergeron” there is a different method of controlling people that is less severe. Anyone who deviates from the norm can conform themselves to the norm by using handicaps and so no one has to be removed from society, except if you do not conform and rebel against the government. Which is exactly what the protagonist Harrison does. He tries to break free from the society he lives in, rebels against it and tries to change it from the inside. In *The Chrysalids*

the protagonist and his friends do something similar. However, instead of trying to change their society, they try to escape by fleeing the country. The difference in the stories is that Harrison does not succeed in changing his society and he eventually pays for his rebellion with his life, while a part of the group from *The Chrysalids* do succeed and escape from their deaths in Labrador to start a new life.

Both Wyndham and Vonnegut are English language writers with a critique on society and on WWII. Both case studies were post World War Two, *The Chrysalids* being published in 1955 and “Harrison Bergeron” first published in 1968, and were influenced by the events during the war. During WWII people who were different from the Aryan norm, such as Jews, handicapped people and other ethnic people, were being removed from society by placing them in separate camps and killing them. According to the Nazi regime, these people should not be part of society and are therefore removed. The same thing happens in *The Chrysalids* where any deviations from the norm are considered undesirable and are removed from society and in “Harrison Bergeron” anyone who disagrees with the ruling norm is put to death as well. Georg Lohmann explains in *Human Rights and Human Nature* that after the Second World War the concept of human dignity became an international subject of discussion. The horrific acts of the Nazi’s during the war triggered a response about human dignity. The point of the discussion about human dignity regarding the two case studies is that “this post war idea of “human dignity” – initially defined as a legal notion – declares humans self-understanding and recognizes that every person is a bearer of essential human rights” (Lohmann 164). This is an important point in both “Harrison Bergeron” and *The Chrysalids*, because the stories show individuals who claim their rights by rebelling against those who repress them.

There is however another difference in critique between the two case-studies and in connection to WWII. *The Chrysalids* is focused on the genetic issues of evolution, while genetic critique is not part of Vonnegut’s story. There are no genetic modifications made to the humans in “Harrison Bergeron”. In *The Chrysalids* any biological or genetic diversities from the norm are prohibited. This coincides with the Nazi ideology where any genetic deviations, such as being handicapped, were not allowed either. As a result of such atrocities and others, UNESCO has established the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights. The human dignity that Lohmann mentions is also mentioned in the declaration: “That [human] dignity makes it imperative not to reduce individuals to their genetic characteristics and to respect their uniqueness and diversity” (42). In the declaration it is stated that humans with genetic deviations should not be discriminated against based on the deviations (article 6), which is exactly what happens in *The*

Chrysalids. In *The Chrysalids* people are discriminated when it comes to their genetic differences, while genetics should not define who a person is and what rights they should have.

The human rights discourse is rather fragile and literature shows how fragile it really is by presenting it in an imaginative medium. Gloppen and Rakner write about the fragility of human rights: “The conditional nature of the legitimation of universal human rights bids us to be cautious” (Gloppen and Rakner 31). While it may be legitimate to employ human rights as universal standards, that universalism needs to be defined in such a way that diversity can be accommodated. This point is shown in both case studies, since in both “Harrison Bergeron” and *The Chrysalids* the equalization has gone too far from both a legal perspective and a cultural perspective. Both societies show that when a certain concept is dictated, it could very well go very wrong.

In this thesis I tried to answer the question: How do Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” and John Wyndham’s *The Chrysalids* illustrate the discussion about human rights in their content, form and style and how does this further our understanding of equality? As a conclusion I can state that even though both case studies have a lot in common when it comes to critique and questioning equality, they both approach the issues in different ways, with Vonnegut focusing on egalitarianism and Wyndham focusing on the consequences of genetic ‘equality’. However both still show human rights, such as equality, but also freedom and individuality, in a relatable way by which the reader can identify and recognize the issues and is therefore able to speculate on these questions. Literature, especially speculative and dystopian, can show the reader what the consequences of some ideologies and ideas are. Both case studies show that even though creating equality in a society is a noble cause, it could very well be a threat to other human rights, such as individuality and freedom. When one right has more importance in society, other rights suffer because of it.

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