Michelle Binnun

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Ms. Zollner

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An Uncomfortable Death

There are many short stories in literature that share a common theme presented in different ways. A theme that always keeps readers’ attention is that of death because it is something that no one wants to face in real life, but something that can be easily faced when reading. “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut and “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson both exemplify how two authors use a common theme of death to stand as a metaphor for dystopian societies.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote novels and short stories with a darker tone. Vonnegut was a prisoner of war during World War II. He witnessed the firebombing of Dresden, Germany, which according to him changed his life forever. While a prisoner, he spent a few years working for Nazis in an old meat house where animals were slaughtered. That is where the basis of his novel *Slaughterhouse Five* came from. Due to the horrible things he took part in during World War II, many of his novels are related to wrong-doings or dysfunctional societies (Smith par 8-9). His short story “Harrison Bergeron” is about a society in the future who is more than controlled by the government. The government wants to make everyone equal and attempts to do so through changing a person’s intelligence level and other minor qualities such as strength or social class. What was interesting was that fact that rather than making the weak stronger, the stronger were made weak. It is clear this is a satirical piece of literature for the reason that when reading this, it is obvious the future was embellished and it was not going to be how the story portrayed it.

“Vonnegut has shown a disdain for social Darwinism, the theory that individuals or groups achieve advantage over others as the result of genetic or biological superiority” (Alvarez par 11). Joseph Alvarez disagrees with Darwinism and also disagrees with the dystopian way of people dying and nothing being thought of it. I agree with Alvarez because I don’t understand the way dystopian societies function. I do believe everyone should be equal, but not to the extent that people are forced to change for the worse. Everyone had to lower their standards of intelligence and not be as smart as they could be. While I did not like the fact that Harrison was murdered and in front of his own family, I like how he stood up for what he believed in. Even though he was trying to start a revolution, revolutions have not always been a bad thing for good has been created from them such as making people realize certain things are wrong. What I didn’t like was the fact that he tried to reach out to people through means of television. Even though this story is fictional, there is some truth in the story even though it was written over thirty years ago. It is extremely true that television is one of the most popular ways to reach viewers because everyone watches television. Unfortunately, Harrison was murdered by the government on television during his broadcast which in a way further proved his point that the government was corrupt and had taken over everyone’s lives.

In similarity to Kurt Vonnegut’s short story, “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson also represents a dystopian society where a person is killed with their friends, family, neighbors and strangers witnessing their death. “The Lottery” is one of Jackson’s most well-known pieces. This story brought about much controversy at the time it was written because it made people fearful of society. The short story is about a particular town that is having a lottery drawing and the person who is drawn then has someone out of their family chosen to be the “winner.” The person who wins the drawing is then stoned to death. At this drawing, Mrs. Hutchinson is stoned by the people in her town who happen to be her family and friends, no matter the age. Peter Kosenko wrote in the New Orleans Review that one of the underlying messages about this society is how men are more than in charge and are the authoritative figure. The people in charge of the lottery were three men, and a man was not killed, but a woman because she is of less importance. Also, when the boys are picking up stones and their mothers call out to them, they don’t fully acknowledge their mothers. I think there was foreshadowing throughout the story hinting that a woman would be killed. By men always being at a higher ranking than woman, it is clear that women are not equal to men, leading to a woman’s death because it’s believed woman can’t work as hard as men.

It appears that in order for the town to function properly and get tasks accomplished, the town was basically scared into getting their chores done by threats of death. I think the point of the lottery drawing is to motivate people to perform their tasks. When the drawing was occurring, people were asking who was drawn and the two names the crowd was yelling where of two people who could not deliver 100 percent hard work. Therefore, the drawing motivates the townspeople to do their share within the town, and hopefully the next year they will be safe from the lottery. I did not like this story because I did not see a point in it. However, I do agree that this story would stir up much disagreement between people during the time the story was written due to what was going on in the United States. World War II had ended a few years prior to the story being published so people could have been worried that the slightest upheaval would send people into chaos.

“Harrison Bergeron” and “The Lottery” share similarities such as death, but the stories as a whole both are metaphors for the ideas and concepts of dystopian societies. Dystopia is stemmed from the word “utopia” which stands for something ideal. Dystopia is the idea that there are wrong-doings within what is presented. In regard to dystopian literature, “[d]ystopian literature offers such characterization of setting, but in a dark, cautionary fashion” (Dube par 1-3). This idea is shown in both short stories. Kurt Vonnegut was a prisoner during World War II, which allowed him to experience dystopian society first-hand. Therefore, he was able to use his first-hand knowledge and experience when writing novels and short stories. Both short stories possess a sinister tone. Within the first few paragraphs of “Harrison Bergeron” it is visible that the society was forced into being equal to one another because of the government. When Harrison’s father is required to listen to a sharp piercing noise in his ear to distract his thoughts, you can tell it was against his will because of his reaction. In “The Lottery,” it is easy to tell throughout the story that the lottery drawing is not a positive thing. People are eager to find out if they are the lottery winners because they are waiting to find out if they will die. Their tone is out of desperation in hopes of living for the reason that they do not want to be stoned.

I do believe that dystopian literature possesses some flaws because it could be unethical to the viewer; however, the dark and weary tone throughout the stories kept me wanting to read more. Even though the deaths of Harrison and Mrs. Hutchinson were brutal, it brought together the piece as a whole to make it a part of dystopian literature. In the future, if I were to write something, I now have some knowledge on the concept of dystopia which could allow for a better piece of literature.

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