

2081 | Teaching Guide

Lesson 3: Do we need equality?

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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:

- Use summarizing techniques to enhance comprehension of philosophies of equality;
- Synthesize information to form and present arguments on the nature of equality.

Lesson Component	Description	Instructional Time
2081 (Film)	A short film adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron"	25 min
Supplementary Video 3: Do we need equality?	A short supplementary video exploring the question, "Do we need equality?"	5 min
Lesson 3 Study Guide	Expands concepts/lessons with a background essay, vocabulary list, questions.	10-30 min
Activity 1: In-Class Discussion	Read an excerpt from <i>Democracy in America</i> and discuss	25-45 min
Activity 2: Personal Essay	Develop a personal essay addressing the implications of different definitions of equality	25-35 min

Compelling Questions

1. What is equality?
2. Can the government make us equal?
3. What makes an issue worthy of Constitutional amendment?

Lesson Concepts & Vocabulary

Cultural Revolution

Equal Rights

Inequality

Equality of Condition

Equalitarian

Rights

Equality Under the Law

Egalitarian

Lesson 3 Background Essay: A Brief History of Equality

by Dr. Sarah Skwire¹

Even people who aren't that familiar with American history know that the Declaration of Independence says that "all men are created equal." That focus on the equal rights of citizens has been central to American politics and American culture since the colonies sought to gain independence from England.

But in the film *2081*, and in Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," the short story on which the film is based, we are told that it is not until 2081 that "everyone is finally equal." How can it be that humans, despite believing in equality, have struggled so long to bring it about?

Part of the reason is that we haven't always believed in equality. For most of human history, most people believed that factors like gender, race, wealth, family history, and religion should determine the kinds of rights you had. So your ability to participate in the political process, the jobs you might be able to get, the amount of money you were able to earn and to save, the places you were allowed to live, the schools you were allowed to go to—all of these things were largely determined by things that were completely beyond your control.

Ancient inequalities are familiar. In the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and up through most of the Victorian Age, women were not permitted to own property, particularly after they were married. Medieval peasants were usually not

¹ Dr. Sarah Skwire is a Senior Fellow at Liberty Fund, Inc., a non-profit educational foundation, and the co-author of the college writing textbook, *Writing with a Thesis*, which is in its 12th edition. Dr. Skwire has published a range of academic articles on subjects from Shakespeare to zombies and the broken window fallacy, and her work has appeared in journals as varied as *Literature and Medicine*, *The George Herbert Journal*, and *The Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*. Her poetry has appeared, among other places, in *Standpoint*, *The New Criterion*, and *The Vocubula Review*. She graduated with honors in English from Wesleyan University, and earned a MA and PhD in English from the University of Chicago.

permitted to move to a different place to find better work—unless they could make their way to a city and live there for a year and a day. Children were considered the property of their parents, and could be beaten, sold into short-term slavery or “indentured servitude,” or married off without their consent.

But inequality doesn’t magically disappear when we get to the modern age. Citizens of North Korea have very few choices about how they live, what jobs they have, and where they travel. China blocks its citizens from much of the Internet and monitors their activities on the websites they are allowed to use. Even in the US modernity did not bring equal rights for all. For example, until 1978 women in the United States could be fired from their jobs for getting pregnant, and until 1974 American women could not apply for a credit card or a mortgage in their own name. They needed a man to sign the loan with them.

Until 1965 and the end of the state and local laws that enforced racial discrimination in the Southern United States, black and white citizens in the South were required to have separate schools and separate seating areas on public transportation, as well as separate restrooms, water fountains, and restaurants. Until 1965, in fact, black citizens weren’t even guaranteed that their voting rights would be respected! The separation between races was so strongly enforced that one publisher put out a travel guide called “The Negro Motorist Green Book” that told African American motorists which restaurants and hotels would serve them in various parts of the United States.

These discriminatory laws have since been overturned and replaced by laws that guarantee equal legal treatment for voting rights, education, employment, and housing. But there are people who would argue that we still don’t really have a society where “all men are created equal” or where all of us are treated equally.



High-school students, for example, are subject to locker searches, to censorship of their school newspapers, and sometimes even to censorship of things they say off-campus. These are all violations of rights that adults have, but because students are minors and schools stand “in the place of their parents” while students are in school, courts have granted them extra powers over students. Some people think this is an important part of keeping kids safe at school. Others see it as a violation of the idea that “all men are created equal.”

So, if we believe that all men (and women) are created equal and that one of the core principles of the United States is to recognize that equality, what should we do to make sure that happens?

There are private responses to some kinds of inequality. Businesses in my neighborhood often display signs that say “This business serves everyone.” Many houses of worship make a point of clarifying that they open their doors to anyone—of any race, sexual identity, or country of origin—who wants to worship with them.

Public, or government, responses to inequality generally involve changes to laws—like the Civil Rights Act that ended the Jim Crow segregation laws or the Constitutional amendments that recognized voting rights for women and for African Americans. Sometimes those laws need to be upheld with force—the laws that required the desegregation of American public schools sometimes needed the national guard to make sure they were being followed.

Some governments have decided that the way to create equality is to completely control the lives of their citizens. When Mao Tse Tung led China from 1949 until 1976, he decided that that the best way to create equality in China was through the “Cultural Revolution.” City-dwellers, intellectuals, artists, and academics were moved outside the cities to work on farms in order to

compensate for the advantages of their former lifestyles, while rural workers were brought into the cities in exchange. Cultural treasures and libraries were destroyed as symbols of the old inequalities, and there were mass riots and violence. It is possible that after the Cultural Revolution people in China were more equal. But they were not better off.

And that's the problem with the plan for making everyone "finally" equal in 2081 and in "Harrison Bergeron." First, it's an equality that has to be enforced with violence. It's an equality that tries to completely control the lives and choices of citizens. Last, it's an equality that seems to have left no one better off. The America of 2081 looks poorer, duller, and grimmer than the America of today. The people seem unhappier. They are finally equal. But, far from enhancing the quality of life, their equality has lowered it.

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____

Discussion/Writing Prompt Questions

1. What problems do you see with the way the government of 2081 tries to create equality?
2. Are there different kinds of inequality? Are all of them problematic or are some of them okay?
3. What do you think is the best way to ensure equality?
4. In what ways are people in your communities equal? In what ways are they unequal?

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____

Activity 1: In-Class Discussion

Read the following excerpt and discuss the question,

“In what ways does the passion for equality threaten freedom?”

Extension Question: Drawing from what de Tocqueville has said and from the events depicted in *2081*, answer “What qualities must people possess to preserve liberty?”

“Why Democratic Peoples Show a More Ardent and
More Enduring Love for Equality Than for Liberty”

[Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition*, vol. 3](#) (1840)

The taste that men have for liberty and the one that they feel for equality are, in fact, two distinct things, and I am not afraid to add that, among democratic peoples, they are two unequal things. ... only attentive and clear-sighted men see the dangers with which equality threatens us, and ordinarily they avoid pointing these dangers out. They know that the miseries that they fear are remote, and they imagine that those miseries affect only the generations to come, about whom the present generation scarcely worries. The evils that liberty sometimes brings are immediate; they are visible to all, and more or less everyone feels them. The evils that extreme equality can produce appear only little by little; they gradually insinuate themselves into the social body; they are seen only now and then, and, at the moment when they become most violent, habit has already made it so that they are no longer felt.

The good things that liberty brings show themselves only over time, and it is always easy to fail to recognize the cause that gives them birth.

The advantages of equality make themselves felt immediately, and every day you see them flow from their source. ...

Name _____ Section _____ Date _____

Democratic peoples love equality at all times, but there are certain periods when they push the passion that they feel for it to the point of delirium. This happens at the moment when the old social hierarchy, threatened for a long time, is finally destroyed, after a final internal struggle, when the barriers that separated citizens are at last overturned. Men then rush toward equality as toward a conquest, and they cling to it as to a precious good that someone wants to take away from them. The passion for equality penetrates the human heart from all directions, it spreads and fills it entirely. Do not tell men that by giving themselves so blindly to one exclusive passion, they compromise their dearest interests; they are deaf. Do not show them that liberty is escaping from their hands while they are looking elsewhere; they are blind, or rather they see in the whole universe only one single good worthy of desire....

I think that democratic peoples have a natural taste for liberty; left to themselves, they seek it, they love it, and it is only with pain that they see themselves separated from it. But they have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion for equality; they want equality in liberty, and if they cannot obtain that, they still want equality in slavery. They will suffer poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not suffer aristocracy.

Standards Alignment

English/Language Arts

1. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2
Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
2. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2
Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

History

1. National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Theme: CULTURE
Cultures are dynamic and change over time.
2. National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Theme: INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY
Personal identity is shaped by an individual's culture, by groups, by institutional influences, and by lived experiences shared with people inside and outside the individual's own culture throughout her or his development.
3. National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Theme: INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS
It is important that students know how institutions are formed, what controls and influences them, how they control and influence individuals and culture, and how institutions can be maintained or changed.

AP Government & Politics

1. II. Political Beliefs and Behaviors
Individual citizens hold a variety of beliefs about their government, its leaders, and the U S political system in general; taken together, these beliefs form the foundation of U S political culture
2. VI. Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
An understanding of United States politics includes the study of the development of individual rights and liberties and their impact on citizens Basic to this study is an analysis of the workings of the United States Supreme Court and familiarity with its most significant decisions Students should examine judicial interpretations of various civil rights and liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly, and expression; the rights of the accused; and the rights of minority groups and women For example, students should understand the legal, social, and political evolution following the Supreme Court's decisions regarding racial segregation