

# 2081 | Teaching Guide

## Lesson 4: Why should we resist oppression?

Study Guide: Lesson 4	2
Compelling Questions	3
Lesson Concepts & Vocabulary	3
Lesson 4 Background Essay: The Power of the Individual to Resist	4
Discussion/Writing Prompt Questions	9
Activity 1: Creative Writing and Performance Piece:	10
Activity 2: Text Analysis: The Declaration of Independence	11
Standards Alignment	15

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 4

### Students will:

1. Create a written or spoken work that communicates an understanding of oppression;
2. Analyze primary sources;
3. Draw conclusion about the nature of oppression.

Lesson Component	Description	Instructional Time
2081 (Film)	A short film adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron"	25 min
Supplementary Video 4: Why should we resist oppression?	A short supplementary video exploring the question, "Why should we resist oppression?"	5 min
Lesson 4 Study Guide	Expands concepts/lessons with a background essay and vocabulary list.	10-30 min
Activity 1: Creative Writing and Performance Piece	Students create a soliloquy exploring the internal motivations of characters who have resisted oppression.	25-45 min
Activity 2: Text Analysis	Students deeply analyze the second paragraph of the American Declaration of Independence	25-35 min

## Compelling Questions

1. Should people resist oppression? Why or why not?
2. What is Harrison's ultimate purpose?
3. Is Harrison's resistance an act of futility?
4. Did Harrison fail?

## Lesson Concepts & Vocabulary

Acquiescence

Injustice

Resistance

Dystopian

Jim Crow

Tyranny

Equality

Miscegenation

## Lesson 4 Background Essay: The Power of the Individual to Resist

by Dr. Sarah Skwire<sup>1</sup>

For as long as humans have been telling stories, we have been inspired by tales of one person setting out to change the world by defying a large and oppressive group. Whether it is Prometheus stealing fire from the ancient Greek Gods so he can give it to humanity, or Harry Potter standing up to Voldemort, we like the thought that one person's actions can change the world for the better.

The film *2081* presents us with a dramatic portrait of an individual resisting tyranny. In the year 2081, we are told, everyone is finally equal. But that equality has been achieved through extreme measures. Beautiful people wear masks to make their appearance equal to others. Athletic and graceful people wear weights to slow their bodies down to average levels of skill. And smart people have unpleasant noises played into their ears, decreasing their ability to think until they are only as intelligent as the average person.

While this short film doesn't give us a look at the world that Harrison Bergeron and his family inhabit, we can be fairly certain that most people in the America of *2081* are like Harrison's mother. They may have some sympathy for friends and family members who are heavily handicapped in order to achieve equality. They may even have some small suggestions about how to make them more comfortable. But on the whole, they quietly acquiesce and don't think much about what's happening.

Harrison's mother, Hazel, for example, suggests replacing the unpleasant sound effects that Harrison's father, George, hears with chimes on Sunday, "kind of in honor of religion." She further suggests that Harrison's father find a way to rest his handicapping weights on some pillows, or to secretly lighten them. She is not, in other words, without sympathy for how her husband suffers. But she

---

<sup>1</sup> 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 Vocabula Review*. She graduated with honors in English from Wesleyan University, and earned a MA and PhD in English from the University of Chicago.

never questions that his suffering is the right thing. In fact, she even suggests that she would make a good “Handicapper General” if she were in charge of all the handicapping.

George is clearly much smarter and more capable than Hazel. He is heavily handicapped, while she wears no handicaps at all. Also, George is able to see the flaws in Hazel’s helpful suggestions. He points out that while chimes on Sundays might seem like a nice idea, they would still allow him to think, and would thus be an insufficient handicap. And he notes, in the film, that resting his weights or reducing them would make him want to have that relief all the time.

George: Hazel, if I take them off, I’m gonna want to keep them off. And we both know how we would feel about that.

Hazel: I’d hate it.

In Vonnegut’s original story, George adds that the penalty for removing weight from a handicapping bag is “Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out.” But whether it is to keep the peace at home or to avoid punishment from the government, George goes along with his handicapping, no matter how unpleasant and difficult he finds it.

Most of the people who inhabit the world of 2081 are probably like George and Hazel. But Harrison is different.

Harrison takes action.

We might take issue with the violence Harrison uses to fight back. But we cannot help but be inspired by his willingness to take a stand for what he knows is right—even though it will probably get him killed.

We also see that Harrison’s actions spur others to act. He persuades one of the ballerinas to dance with him in a beautiful, if painfully brief, moment of artistic protest against the handicaps that have held them back for so long.

It’s not enough. The pair of rebels is destroyed, and the Handicapper General’s office shuts down people’s abilities to think about what they saw. Even Hazel and George, Harrison’s own parents, cannot quite manage to discuss the tragic death of their son.

Hazel Bergeron: Hon'? You look upset; what's wrong?

George Bergeron: (all choked up) I don't know. Something, uh...sad...on the television, I think.

Hazel Bergeron: Oh, well, you should forget sad things, anyway; I always do.

The handicaps that have rendered everyone in *2081* equal have also rendered nearly all of them incapable of sustaining a thought or a feeling long enough to understand or act upon it.

Happily, we do not live in the world of *2081*. And while resistance to oppression does not always meet with success, we have enough examples of times when it does succeed to inspire us to speak out when we must.

One of those times was a morning in China in 1989. The Chinese army had suppressed student protests against government oppression. As columns of tanks rolled into the giant public space called Tiananmen Square, a man wearing a white shirt and black pants, carrying two shopping bags, stepped in front of the tanks and blocked their movement. The image—a perfectly average, anonymous person standing silently but stubbornly in front of the power of an entire country's military—has become one of the defining images of the twentieth century. We still do not know who "Tank Man" was. All we know is what he did, and the example that he set.

Rosa Parks is one of the most famous American examples of this kind of individual resistance. In the American South of the 1950s, African American citizens had to use water fountains, restaurants, bathrooms, and hotels that were separate from white citizens. They were also required to ride in the rear section of the bus, and were expected to give their seats to white passengers if the white section was full. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give her seat to a white passenger when the bus driver asked her to.

Her action, simple as it was, started a court case and a boycott of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus system. It was an important individual act of defiance, but also a symbolic moment that, in many ways, began the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. Parks' quiet gesture of defiance signaled the

beginning of the end of the “Jim Crow” segregation laws that had long kept races separate in Southern states.

In 1967, Mildred and Richard Loving’s interracial marriage spurred a similar moment of resistance. At the time of their marriage, it was illegal in the state of Virginia for a white person and a person of color to be married, to live together, or to have children together. Arrested for “miscegenation,” which was the crime of mixing racial groups, the Lovings were sentenced to one year in prison, with that sentence suspended on the condition that they leave Virginia for at least 25 years. Six years later, Mildred Loving brought a court case that helped end laws against interracial marriage throughout the United States.

It is worth noting that the recent Supreme Court decision that made same-sex marriage legal throughout the United States based much of its reasoning on the Lovings’ case. That means that the Lovings’ decision to object to an injustice is still affecting us 50 years later.

But peaceful protest and lawsuits are not the only ways individuals can make change happen. There is also art.

In 1776, Thomas Paine published a small pamphlet modestly titled *Common Sense*. In it, he argued that the common people of the Colonies were morally and politically obligated to fight for independence from England. That was treason! Paine could have been condemned to death for his words! But he wanted to be sure that--no matter how dangerous--his words could be understood by everyone. He used clear and simple language, and wrote in phrases that were familiar to people from the sermons they heard on Sundays. An artful, compelling case for independence, the pamphlet was a bestseller. It was read out loud in public places from taverns to town halls. And it is still in print today.

Thomas Paine’s decision to print his small pamphlet was one crucial piece in starting the American revolution and in gaining America’s independence from England.

In 1852, the school teacher and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe published a novel called *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In it, she detailed the cruelty and injustice inflicted on slaves by slave owners. The book’s dramatic plot and emotional impact made it hugely popular. It inspired several plays, and was the best-selling

novel of the nineteenth century. It popularized the abolitionist cause and was probably a key factor in the Civil War. It is even said that when Abraham Lincoln met Stowe, he exclaimed, “So this is the little lady who started this great war.” While the story doesn’t seem to be true, it’s significant that people thought it could be true ... and that you can still hear people today say that it really happened.

Thomas Paine’s and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s decisions to turn their outrage into art spurred great actions and inspired real and lasting changes. And art and literature are a great place to find inspiration for thinking about the power of the individual to resist.

Contemporary literature also provides examples of this kind of resistance. There is, of course, “Harrison Bergeron”, the short story by Kurt Vonnegut on which *2081* is based. But the mid-twentieth century was marked by an increase in the publication of dystopian novels written in response to the rise of tyranny across the globe. George Orwell’s novels *Animal Farm* and *1984*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, are the most famous of these. But the Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote a novel called *We* set in a world somewhat similar to *2081*. In *We* equality has been achieved so completely that people no longer see themselves as individuals, and any attempt to be different or to identify as a discrete, unique person is viewed as a sickness.

The early twenty-first century is seeing a surge in dystopian novels and films written for young adults. That suggests there is still a hunger for stories about rebellious individuals standing up against oppression. Today, the message comes through Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*, Jonas from *The Giver*, and Lena Haloway from *Delirium*. It comes from countless movies about underdog superheroes like Daredevil or Jessica Jones standing up against people who want unlimited power over others. The names of the heroes and the details of their stories change, but the message that the individual can and should resist tyranny remains the same.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Section \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Discussion/Writing Prompt Questions

1. Tank Man and Rosa Parks demonstrated non-violent resistance. By contrast, there is considerable violence in *2081* from both the government and Harrison. Should Harrison have resisted nonviolently? What would that have looked like?
2. Think about Harrison's parents. His mother is not smart, but she seems content. His father, judging from his many handicaps, is very smart and talented, but he seems miserable. Does Vonnegut think that talent and intelligence doom you to misery? Why is the government threatened by intelligence? Do intelligence and talent carry responsibilities with them?
3. It would be easy to see *2081* and think that the message of the film is that we should not resist. The forces poised against us are too powerful, and we will only lose if we try to confront them, just like Harrison does. How do we know this is not the message of the film?

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Section \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Activity 1: Creative Writing and Performance Piece:**

*What makes a person stand up to oppression? This activity will give you the opportunity to explore the motivations of individuals who resist.*

#### **Step 1: Choose a subject**

In the background essay, “The Power of the Individual to Resist,” Dr. Skwire gives a number of examples of people who have resisted oppression throughout history.

Choose one that you would like to portray.

#### **Step 2: Research**

Research the person and his or her context.

#### **Step 3: Write a 2-4 minute soliloquy.**

Write a two- to four-minute soliloquy from the perspective of a historical figure who has resisted oppression. Think about the arguments and emotions you imagine your subject would have. Take care to convey the motivations for why your chosen individual seeks to resist or overcome oppression. Make sure to take these things into consideration when choosing the structure and making word choices.

#### **Step 4: Present your soliloquy to the class.**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Section \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Activity 2: Text Analysis: The Declaration of Independence

*One of the greatest examples of individuals standing up to an oppressive regime is the American Revolution. As Abraham Lincoln wrote, "To-day, and in all coming days, [the Declaration of Independence] shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression. ...applicable to all men and all times."*

Read the Declaration of Independence. For each sentence in the second paragraph (reprinted below):

1. Summarize the argument it makes for why individuals should resist oppression;
2. List any questions you have about it and look up any unfamiliar words;
3. Decide whether you find the ideas compelling and explain why.

*Optional: Discuss your findings as a class or in small groups.*

### United States Declaration of Independence

**Sentence 1:**

**We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.**

Summarize the argument it makes for why individuals should resist oppression:

Vocabulary and questions about this section:

Do you find these ideas compelling? Why or why not?

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Section \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Sentence 2:**

**That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness**

Summarize the argument it makes for why individuals should resist oppression:

Vocabulary and questions about this section:

Do you find these ideas compelling? Why or why not?

**Sentence 3:**

**Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.**

Summarize the argument it makes for why individuals should resist oppression:

Vocabulary and questions about this section:

Do you find these ideas compelling? Why or why not?

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Section \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Sentence 4:**

**But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.**

Summarize the argument it makes for why individuals should resist oppression:

Vocabulary and questions about this section:

Do you find these ideas compelling? Why or why not?

**Sentence 5:**

**Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.**

Summarize the argument it makes for why individuals should resist oppression:

Vocabulary and questions about this section:

Do you find these ideas compelling? Why or why not?

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Section \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Sentence 6:**

**The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.**

Summarize the argument it makes for why individuals should resist oppression:

Vocabulary and questions about this section:

Do you find these ideas compelling? Why or why not?

**Sentence 6:**

**To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world. [What follows this line is a list of specific complaints of oppression that the authors believed justified their resistance.]**

Summarize the argument it makes for why individuals should resist oppression:

Vocabulary and questions about this section:

Do you find these ideas compelling? Why or why not?

# Standards Alignment

## English/Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.9

Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).

## 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.