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**EQUALITY AND EQUITY FROM ORWELL AND VONNEGUTS'S
PERSPECTIVES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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Abstract

To better understand equality and equity, both chosen stories highlight flaws with equality as a concept via social critique. Harrison Bergeron is meant to be viewed as political and social criticisms of America in general and in the sixties. Vonnegut's story depicts a government founded on egalitarian principles, emphasizing on equality. Equality is a principle enshrined in the Declaration of Independence (All men are created equal) but Vonnegut hints at the dangers of egalitarian ideals if implemented literally. Orwell's Animal Farm, on the other hand, is a direct form of criticism towards Stalin's rule, albeit in the form of a fable. Both stories were chosen for the similarities in setting and context, where they are essentially focused on this line from Animal Farm: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." This essay shall discuss the reasons behind the impracticality of equality, and how equity is more important than equality

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1. Introduction

The importance of acknowledging the need for equal treatment has always been something civil rights activists have fought for since time immemorial. However, in these fights to achieve equality, it is often found that equality is difficult to achieve due to our fundamental differences. Is equality alone therefore sufficient? The rationale behind the chosen texts can be seen through the author's intentions via social critique. *Harrison Bergeron* (1961) is meant to be viewed as political and social criticisms of America in general and in the 1960s by depicting a government founded on egalitarian principles, emphasizing on equality. Equality is a principle enshrined in the Declaration of Independence (All men are created equal) but Vonnegut hints at the dangers of egalitarian ideals if implemented too literally. The government in the story is, therefore, enslaving its own people to mediocrity for the sake of maintaining complete equality, and it shows how equality taken to an extreme is not feasible and risks wiping out individuality. It has even gone to the extent of altering the genetic code, where people born during the time of the amendments are quite literally mediocre, as shown by Hazel and her average intelligence. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) on the other hand, was selected for similar reasons, but the other point of interest comes from the phrase "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." The stories being analysed in this essay indicate otherwise, for equality does not seem to function well enough on its own. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) is a good example of why equality, as promised, is often not enough. Equality may be promoted as the solution to many problems faced by individuals in society, it is important to note that "individuals" are not equal to the masses and therefore need different treatment in order to advance. This essay shall discuss the reasons behind the impracticality of equality, and how equity is more important than equality.

2. Problem Statement

The concept of equality remains idealistic and just, but the problem arises when we try to implement such measures to eradicate real-world problems: In *Animal Farm*, the animals faced oppression by the humans, being forced to work but receiving close to nothing for their labour. In *Harrison Bergeron* on the other hand, we see the emergence of a paradox: equality is then applied to an extreme, because humans are not born equal, even biologically. Therefore, the paper attempts to address this discrepancy in attempting to enforce equality as the best possible solution to problems faced by society. The analysis examines how the practice of equality and equity are executed in the works of fiction by George Orwell and Kurt Vonnegut pose as standard forms of oppression and subordination. Using textual analysis, the theme of equality, the abuse of power, and the indoctrination of commandments will be used to highlight the issues pertaining to the weakness and the impracticality of equity and equality.

2.1. Literature Review

Equality' (or 'equal') signifies correspondence between a group of different objects, persons, processes or circumstances that have the same qualities in at least one respect, but not all respects, i.e., regarding one specific feature, with differences in other features (Gosepath, 2001). Equity deals with

difference and takes into consideration the fact that this society has many groups in it who have not always been given equal treatment and/or have had a level field on which to play (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The theory used in this essay, that is Marx's Class Theory as stated in *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context, 2nd Ed* states that Marx's class theory rests on the premise that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." According to this view, human society has remained fundamentally divided between classes who clash in the pursuit of class interests. Coser (1977) continues by saying that:

In the world of capitalism, for example, the nuclear cell of the capitalist system, the factory, is the prime locus of antagonism between classes--between exploiters and exploited, between buyers and sellers of labor power--rather than of functional collaboration. Class interests and the confrontations of power that they bring in their wake are to Marx the central determinant of the social and historical process (p.48-50).

Dickstein (2007) supports that *Animal Farm* showed how the initial idealism of the revolution decayed by steps into inequality, hierarchy and finally dictatorship, and mentioned how Orwell would have likely blamed "the work of intellectuals, whose theoretical minds, fervently committed to higher goals yet often blinded by self-interest, allowed for behaviour from which most people would instinctively shrink" on the failure of the Russian Revolution. Previous studies on Harrison Bergeron includes Johar (2014) who states that Harrison Bergeron reflects Vonnegut's humanist stance on human development, by mentioning that humans have natural abilities due to individual uniqueness. It is because of this inherent uniqueness of each individual that restraining them would result in disastrous outcomes. The other study by Alexander (2016) takes brief examples from texts that depict gross violations of equality as a concept and argues that "the pursuit of equality beyond equality before the law and a generous safety net is to be resisted. That pursuit tends to produce impoverishment and repression. And it is at odds with the pursuit of excellence, beauty, individuality, and achievement. A state of true equality is a dystopian spectre." Harrison Bergeron, he states, "is a vision of what a truly egalitarian society would look like." Pelissioli (2008) analyzed both novels and connected it to Orwell's personal experiences with totalitarianism as reflected in his work, showing how his use of allegory in *Animal Farm* was an effective manner of showing the horrors of a system gone wrong. Monica (2011) in her thesis "Tyrannical Control over the Proletariat in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*" primarily focuses on Mr. Jones and Napoleon, and has observed how both represent a ruling class that mistreats the proletariat. In spite of having their differences, they both eventually share a similar system of oppression that exploits the working class, as per her analysis in a Marxist context.

3. Research Questions

This article will answer the following research questions

- 3.1. How the impracticality of equality has been presented in Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*?
- 3.2. How the concept of egalitarian societies has been depicted in Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*?

- 3.3. To what extent the practicality of equality and equity can be practiced in real circumstances as depicted in Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to fulfil the following purposes:

- 4.1. To examine the impracticality of equality practices presented in Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*.
- 4.2. To compare and contrast how the concepts of equality and equity through the representation of egalitarian society being depicted in Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*.
- 4.3. To discuss the effectiveness and the shortcomings of equality and equity as presented in Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*.

5. Research Methods

The research methods used in this study are:

5.1. Thematic Analysis

Using thematic analysis, this paper analyses how the concepts of equality and equity depicted in two different societies by Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron* (1961). The theme of idealist egalitarian society promotes individuals' freedom of choice which proves to be impractical to practice. The implementation of authoritarian power which promotes the domination of a demonic leader practiced in both societies exposed the vulnerability of basic human rights for freedom of speech and freedom of choice. Using textual analysis, the theme of equality, the abuse of power, and the indoctrination of commandments will be used to highlight the issues pertaining to the strength and the impracticality of equity and equality.

5.2. Textual Analysis

The textual analysis of the novel will answer the research question: What are the reasons behind the impracticality of equality, and how equity is more important than equality in both *Animal Farm* and *Harrison Bergeron*? As a qualitative research, the thematic analysis will examine how the government bodies manipulate the concept of equality and equity. Based on Marx's Class Theory, the discussion will show how equality alone is problematic and difficult to achieve, completely. Thus, textual analysis is employed to investigate and fulfill the research objectives.

6. Findings

To begin with the result of this study can be divided into two:

6.1. Equality and Equity in a nutshell

This essay focuses on the impracticality of equality, by using Harrison Bergeron to compare what a fully restricted society looks like when equality is taken literally. Equality is defined as:

Ensuring that every individual has an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents, and believing that no one should have poorer life chances because of where, what or whom they were born, what they believe, or whether they have a disability. Equality recognises that historically, certain groups of people with particular characteristics e.g. race, disability, sex and sexuality, have experienced discrimination. (Understanding equality, n.d.)

Equity, on the other hand, differs from equality, in the sense that it may be more beneficial to its recipients because it is tailor made to consider the shortcomings of the person in question. This is done to ensure that the person has what they need in order to obtain the same quality of life or the same opportunities as everyone else, because giving someone the same thing as everyone else may not be enough. Fairness here is then able to be distributed better, than equality.

To do so, the argument will focus on the failure of Animalism in the phrase “All Animals Are Equal” to prove how the modified, “corrupted” version of Animalism as shown in “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” will forever ring true, and that due to circumstances, it cannot be changed if equality is focused on instead of equity.

The modified “all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell, 2014, p. 25) is essentially the ultimate example of the pig’s abuse of language and the manipulation of power to control their regime. This reduction of the Seven Commandments in Chapter X shows how the animals have reverted to their initial system which is made worse by the pigs being in power. However, it also highlights the reality of the world, in which there are different or varying levels of equality even in society, the way colours can be gradable on a scale (more colourful, moderately colourful).

The revised phrase points to a specific form of ideological corruption where despite the inclusivity of the original phrase as coined by Old Major, it is proven to be highly idealistic and not plausible due to two factors: the differences in animals as a species are even more varied than humans, and that there is a limit to what the animals can do to improve themselves physically. Unlike the humans, in Harrison Bergeron, humans have mostly similar traits in terms of physique, apart from what may differ per genetics. But the handicapping was conducted in a more uniform and effective manner because of the uniformity of humans as a single race or species.

6.2. Compare and Contrast the concepts of Equality and Equity in Animal Farm and Harrison Bergeron

In contrast, “All Animals Are Equal” is likened to what is said in the American constitution, “All men are created equal” and despite this, there will still be people who are left out by the existing systems

due to the lack of equity. Vonnegut's dystopia features an extreme egalitarian approach where above the average people are assigned physical handicaps. This shows that true equality is only achievable through oppression and the suppression of individual uniqueness. He thus argues that total equality is an ideal not worth striving for, and it is an ideal that cannot, in reality, be achieved, and that it is a mistake that should not happen. To achieve complete and utter equality, the American citizens are tortured by the government: the beautiful wear masks or disfigure themselves (A ballerina with a beautiful voice is forced to speak with an unattractive "grackle squawk"), and the intelligent are assigned radios that emit ear-splitting noises meant to scatter thoughts and impede their thinking ability. The strong or graceful are made to wear weights filled with birdshot on the body at all times. Equality here is then used as a form of propaganda that dumbs down the general population, who in turn also hide their true talents out of fear of the government.

This uniformity of self-flagellation has turned into a defeatist mentality that also affects the animals in *Animal Farm* (1945). The animals are in constant fear, yet they are poisoned by their perceived goal of Animalism. This form of brainwashing is done wilfully by the citizens themselves (in both stories). Both have not considered their strength in numbers and how they can overthrow their oppressive regimes. America thus becomes a land of stupid, slow people where these handicaps have even begun to interfere with nature, producing people like Hazel Bergeron who are "extremely average" in intelligence and cannot think in anything more than "short bursts". Hazel's character is similar to that of Clover the horse, who is actually aware of the abuses of the Commandments, but convinces herself or blames herself for not being able to remember them properly. Yet, unlike Hazel who was naturally born with average intelligence, Clover represents the minority of people who refuse to think for themselves, and thus become enablers in oppressive regimes by refusing to allow themselves to think critically.

This can be further contrasted with the brainwashing of George Bergeron, who is trying to justify his own oppression by the US government: "If I tried to get away with it," then other people had get away with it and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't like that, would you?" Competition here is viewed extremely negatively, as it would mean the complete loss of equality for all. However, if Napoleon's view is taken into consideration, his manner of manipulating the masses stems from him being the leader who supposedly has his subjects' best interests at heart, and removes competition initially through the charisma of Squealer and later, through fear. Fear, in this case, is used as an inhibitor for rebellion, just like Vonnegut's dystopia.

How then does equity come into question? In the context of Harrison Bergeron, it would mean that people are given the right things to in order to advance and improve their quality of life, and this is especially true if it concerns mental capacity like intelligence. Despite looks giving someone a slight advantage, it does not really matter because there is a higher need or emphasis on intelligence in general. For this to be achieved, the education system would need reformation, and consideration has to be given to the underprivileged group with their various backgrounds (they may be slow in class, or lacking in funds for basic necessities). Thus, the care given to these people must be appropriate to their needs.

Equality is also very impractical in Orwell's dystopia because there are little the animals can do to change themselves, physically. Unlike humans, the varying species and diversity of the animal kingdom make it difficult for there to be uniformity, beyond job specification. All in all, Animalism was doomed to

fail from the start, due to the imbalance in power and the advantage the pigs had from the very beginning. Harrison Bergeron's society, on the other hand, did the converse by applying equity in tandem with equality to produce a mediocre population instead of a smarter one.

While it can be argued that Animalism is a failed ideology because of the execution and the fact that the animals were not prepared for that form of freedom, parallels can be drawn between the animals and the humans in today's society. The animals can represent the human's desire for equality, but our differences are not necessarily physical. There are also other factors that can be taken into consideration, such as socioeconomic background, biological roles, and cultural background. Each individual has different needs and these needs would have to be addressed when equality is promised as each individual is expecting to have a fair starting point, and therein lies the problem with the equality.

Equality bears the promise of giving everyone equal treatment, but the mechanism of delivering equal treatment needs to be addressed as well. Harrison Bergeron's dystopia can also be interpreted as a direct critique of the communist ideology. This futuristic society, therefore, operates on communist principles, supporting the idea that equal distribution of wealth and power promotes the ideal society, and those class hierarchies should not exist. Through his story, Vonnegut argues that the classless society is unreasonable and foolish and that the distribution of wealth and power equally is not feasible, and only by handicapping the best or better citizens, can equality truly be achieved. While the political undertones of both stories do not bear much significance in this study, the other factor to consider is the clamping down on individual liberties and individuality, which needs to be sustained. Earlier it was mentioned that this effective, systematic dumbing down of the citizens results in the production of a genetically altered, mediocre human race.

7. Conclusion

Equality is often used interchangeably with equity and it can be very problematic because both words contain different connotations and meanings. If it is used in relation to issues of social justice, equality is impossible to be practiced because equality means different thing to the commoner in comparison to upper class/leaders. While equality promises every individual right to equal distributions, if practiced properly, equality benefits all. Both stories depict the ugly reality of manipulated equality. Conceptually, equality requires the government to apply its laws even-handedly.

The government in *Animal farm* and *Vonnegut* exercise discrimination against the masses and prioritize the elite class. This then relates to the paradox of what equality and equity may bring when the implementation of equality is manipulated and the fruits of equality were not distributed equally to benefit everyone. The analysis of the stories serves as means to warn about the dangers of total equality as an ideology and its impracticality, as shown by Vonnegut that like Animalism, egalitarianism can also be taken into extremes, and is at its most effective when used in tandem with equity.

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