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Eating Political Correctness for Breakfast

The short story “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut and the article “The Menace of Political Correctness” by Joseph Epstein both explore the idea of enforced equality as an authoritarian concept that comes at the cost of personal freedom and individuality. As a satire, “Harrison Bergeron” aims to highlight the issues with this extreme pursuit of fairness by humorously exaggerating them to absurdity, revealing the flawed logic of its proponents. Published in the early 1960s, the piece came at a time of great social upheaval in America, when cultural issues of the time brought greater attention to civil rights and racial inequalities – to some extent, Vonnegut underlines a fundamental issue with the way society amended this problem, by supporting equal outcomes between people rather than equal opportunities for all of them. He characterizes these measures as authoritarian, echoing the widespread fear of Soviet authoritarianism and suppression of speech at the height of the Cold War. In contrast, Epstein’s piece on political correctness is contemporary, having released in 2019 and during the presidency of Donald Trump. It displays this in its reactions from a conservative perspective to social changes of the time, including the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements, that enforce a greater awareness of inequities and offensive behavior – to Epstein, this awareness has led to a tight control over speech. Unlike “Harrison Bergeron,” the piece is argumentative, not satirical. Although they discuss similar themes, Vonnegut’s piece is ultimately more effective since it

employs a detached, humorous tone that critiques institutions and not individuals. On the other hand, Epstein, with his self-righteous and condescending tone, weakens its argument by focusing on the beliefs of individuals with which he disagrees instead of the institutions that uphold them, failing to justify that political correctness is authoritarian.

As a satire, “Harrison Bergeron” uses exaggeration and irony to criticize the draconian nature of those who over enforce the societal need for equality, but the reductive and overly dismissive tone of Epstein’s article contrasts with the humorous and lighthearted tone of “Harrison Bergeron,” making Epstein’s work appear targeted while Vonnegut’s as universally applicable. To Epstein, those concerned about political correctness are “virtuecrats” concerned only with extolling their moral superiority, setting a tone of condescension for the movement and delegitimizing its origins (Epstein). By ending the term with “crats” he makes a snide reference to the Democratic party, giving the piece a heavily partisan flair. Vonnegut has a more forgiving approach in his criticism of a similar concept, introducing it as a well-intentioned struggle to make everyone “finally equal” (Vonnegut). His piece takes equality to a *reductio ad absurdum* by humorously portraying society if it were excessively enforced. The burlesque nature of a news announcer with a stutter, or a ballerina who cannot dance, allow a laugh and a thoughtful consideration of the issues with preserving equity. Vonnegut ironically turns the term “mental handicap” on its head, where in the society of “Harrison Bergeron,” they restrict people with abilities rather than delineating those without – the image of large “sashweights” preventing autonomy symbolize measures like affirmative action that hurt privileged groups while helping marginalized ones. In this way, the story displays the logical inconsistencies of political correctness in a way that is more humorous than disdainful (Vonnegut). However, Epstein displays his disdain when he critiques social movements like Black Lives Matter, which he states

are built by "self-righteous" individuals and "victims" who seek attention through moral posturing instead of addressing real issues (Epstein). He thus frames the promoters of political correctness as pretentious and self-serving, to reduce it to a form of cultural elitism. This concept of an educated elite class enforcing political correctness over an indifferent majority permeates the text, and so do other binaries: traditional versus progressive, "victims versus victimizers, and woke versus deplorables" (Epstein). In this way, he sweepingly fits both sides of the political correctness debate into two antithetical groups that go beyond politics, reinforcing the divisive nature of the article. The word "deplorables" is most likely an allusion to a gaffe made by Hillary Clinton in her 2016 presidential campaign – this adds a political punch to the article and suggests it may be targeted against the Democratic party rather than the abstract concept of political correctness. On the other hand, "Harrison Bergeron" is more universal in his treatment of the issue, stating that it effects "everyone" regardless of "God or the law" – in this way, Vonnegut shifts focus to the idea instead of its intended audience (Vonnegut). His positivity does not accord with Epstein's apocalyptic attitude towards political correctness, who emotionally frames its destruction as a moral imperative. To him, the restriction on speech is a "weapon" of its proponents that creates a "flattening" of society – in the end, its adoption will "extend the boundaries of hell" (Epstein). The statement is so absurd that it is surprising that it does not appear in a satire, since it almost paints political correctness as an instrument that counters the will of God. This religiously charged rhetoric allows Epstein to close off further discussion by morally indicting those who disagree, reducing the article's argumentative effectiveness. For Vonnegut, the end state of political correctness is not the end of the world – in fact, the piece takes place 100 years after it was written. A freedom of expression is portrayed as a glorious privilege rather than the standard, where a temporary moment of dominance for Harrison

Bergeron leads him to “spring” into the air with “joy” and spontaneously kiss a ballerina (Vonnegut). This lack of pessimistic attitude towards forced equality makes Vonnegut’s piece a superior argument because it is not distracted by petty hatred and dogma.

Epstein’s tonal issues are exacerbated by thematic problems. Both pieces are about the fight between freedom and control of speech, but Vonnegut broadens his critique to look at systemic problems while Epstein stays focused on cultural issues and behaviors of specific groups. Vonnegut clearly states the target of his satire at the beginning when he assigns the role of enforcing equality to the “United States Handicapper General” (Vonnegut). In this way, the piece affirms that restrictions on personal freedoms require institutional support. On the other hand, the culprits in Epstein’s piece on political correctness range from “professors” to “victim groups” to “the Democratic party” (Epstein) – he blames ordinary people as much as he blames larger organizations, supporting the notion that the piece serves as a criticism of certain groups that Epstein deplors instead of authoritarianism. The piece uses passive voice throughout for the actions that reinforce political correctness, where minority groups “are protected,” and diversity “is enacted” (Epstein). In fact, Epstein frequently personifies political correctness itself. This deliberate vagueness ensures that the piece can attach the moniker of “politically correct” to whomever Epstein wills, and not on any centralized institution. The lack of an enforcing body for political correctness takes credibility away from the article, as it ensures the article describes a cultural grievance rather than an authoritarian injustice. In addition, the very existence of the article helps invalidate its rhetorical ability. The piece confirms that many of its statements are not politically correct, yet it is still published by a major think tank. If political correctness was as all-encompassing and uncompromising as the article claims, this would not be possible. Despite the article’s faith in the “totalitarian” nature of political correctness in the modern United

States, it still regards the issue as having two distinct “sides” (Epstein) – is political correctness relentless and universal, or is it limited to one side of the political aisle? By focusing on political opponents, the piece loses some of its punch. In “Harrison Bergeron,” however, the hand of equality is impossible to escape, even at home in the form of handicaps. Attempting to subvert these measures would result in “Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine,” a hyperbolic way of criticizing the extreme consequences of enforced equality (Vonnegut). The arc of Harrison Bergeron is only a brief respite from this authoritarian state and proves its unforgiving nature. Bergeron momentarily gains a delusion of power, yelling that he is the “Emperor” – but the insidious Handicapper General shoots him with a shotgun. The intent is exaggeration and shock value, but also powerful emotional statement that unchecked institutional power leads to authoritarianism. Nobody is immune to institutions in the piece, not even everyman George, who fears the “dark ages” of the past that he has been told to fear (Vonnegut). This universality strengthens Vonnegut’s satire, making it a broader commentary on authoritarianism and the loss of individuality. The authoritarian control has become so ingrained in society that it is no longer questioned: Hazel and George do not even realize that their son was killed on television. Epstein’s vaguer and more fragmented argument undermines his critique of political correctness by failing to identify a similarly pervasive or unified force.

The satirical approach of “Harrison Bergeron” which criticizes systemic issues differs heavily from the combative, argumentative way in which Epstein deplores cultural shifts in “The Menace of Political Correctness.” Epstein’s characterization of political correctness as a dark, shadowy force ultimately undermines his ethos by failing to justify its authoritarianism. “Harrison Bergeron” offers the more compelling critique, using humor to exaggerate the pervasive nature of enforced political correctness. The absoluteness of this enforcement and its

control over life show that fighting political correctness is about more than free speech: it is a matter of preserving one's individuality.

Works Cited

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