

Harrison Bergeron

by Kurt Vonnegut (1961)

I'd like you to read this famous story and think about whether Nietzsche wasn't on to something when he criticized the naive idea of human equality.

THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April, for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas.

A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm.

"That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did," said Hazel.

"Huh?" said George.

"That dance – it was nice," said Hazel.

"Yup," said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good – no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap herself she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

"Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer," said George.

"I'd think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds," said Hazel, a little envious. "All the things they think up."

"Um," said George.

"Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?" said Hazel. Hazel, as a matter of fact, bore a strong resemblance to the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. "If I was Diana Moon Glampers," said Hazel, "I'd have chimes on Sunday – just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion."

"I could think, if it was just chimes," said George.

"Well – maybe make 'em real loud," said Hazel. "I think I'd make a good Handicapper General."

"Good as anybody else," said George.

"Who knows better'n I do what normal is?" said Hazel.

"Right," said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison, but a twenty-one-gun salute in his head stopped that.

"Boy!" said Hazel, "that was a doozy, wasn't it?"

It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes. Two of the eight ballerinas had collapsed to the studio floor, were holding their temples.

"All of a sudden you look so tired," said Hazel. "Why don't you stretch out on the sofa, so's you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows, honeybunch." She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in canvas bag, which was padlocked around George's neck. "Go on and rest the bag for a little while," she said. "I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while."

George weighed the bag with his hands. "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me."

"You been so tired lately – kind of wore out," said Hazel. "If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few."

"Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain."

"If you could just take a few out when you came home from work," said Hazel. "I mean – you don't compete with anybody around here. You just set around."

"If I tried to get away with it," said George, "then other people'd 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?"

"I'd hate it," said Hazel.

"There you are," said George. "The minute people start cheating on laws, what do you think happens to society?"

If Hazel hadn't been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn't have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head.

"Reckon it'd fall all apart," said Hazel.

"What would?" said George blankly.

"Society," said Hazel uncertainly. "Wasn't that what you just said?"

"Who knows?" said George.

The television program was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. It wasn't clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, "Ladies and gentlemen – "

He finally gave up, handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

"That's all right –" Hazel said of the announcer, "he tried. That's the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard."

"Ladies and gentlemen" said the ballerina, reading the bulletin. She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred-pound men.

And she had to apologize at once for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody. "Excuse me – " she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive.

"Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen," she said in a grackle squawk, "has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous."

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen – upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right side up. The picture showed the full length of Harrison against a background calibrated in feet and inches. He was exactly seven feet tall.

The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever worn heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides.

Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.

"If you see this boy," said the ballerina, "do not – I repeat, do not – try to reason with him."

There was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges.

Screams and barking cries of consternation came from the television set. The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

George Bergeron correctly identified the earthquake, and well he might have – for many was the time his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. "My God –" said George, "that must be Harrison!"

The realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living, breathing Harrison filled the screen.

Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood in the center of the studio. The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers cowered on their knees before him, expecting to die.

"I am the Emperor!" cried Harrison. "Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

"Even as I stand here –" he bellowed, "crippled, hobbled, sickened – I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I *can* become!"

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.

Harrison's scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall.

He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

"I shall now select my Empress!" he said, looking down on the cowering people. "Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!"

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow.

Harrison plucked the mental handicap from her ear, snapped off her physical handicaps with marvelous delicacy. Last of all, he removed her mask.

She was blindingly beautiful.

"Now" said Harrison, taking her hand, "shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!" he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. "Play your best," he told them, "and I'll make you barons and dukes and earls."

The music began. It was normal at first – cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He slammed them back into their chairs.

The music began again and was much improved.

Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while – listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it.

They shifted their weights to their toes.

Harrison placed his big hands on the girl's tiny waist, letting her sense the weightlessness that would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!

Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it. It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling.

They kissed it.

And then, neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Glampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.

It was then that the Bergerons' television tube burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George.

But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. "You been crying?" he said to Hazel.

"Yup," she said,

"What about?" he said.

"I forget," she said. "Something real sad on television."

"What was it?" he said.

"It's all kind of mixed up in my mind," said Hazel.

"Forget sad things," said George.

"I always do," said Hazel.

"That's my girl," said George. He winced. There was the sound of a riveting gun in his head.

"Gee - I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

"Gee -" said Hazel, "I could tell that one was a doozy."

Marek Vit's KURT VONNEGUT CORNER

Uniformity and Deformity in "Harrison Bergeron"

An exploration of the main theme of "Harrison Bergeron"
Marek Vit

In this essay, I will attempt to explore what Kurt Vonnegut illustrated in his short story "Harrison Bergeron"--the fact that uniformity (of any kind) leads to the loss of individuality, and therefore to absolute deformity of humanness.

"The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal," the story begins. "They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal in every which way." (Vonnegut 1968:7) In this haunting story, Vonnegut probably wanted to warn our society of similar kind of equality, equality that can be fatal for human race.

The theme of absolute equality has already appeared two years before "Harrison Bergeron" was published for the first time in *Fantasy and Science-Fiction Magazine* (1961). It was Vonnegut's novel *The Sirens of Titan*. However, in this work the theme is only a minor feature and is not really developed (see Vonnegut 1975:158). The idea probably intrigued Kurt Vonnegut and forced him to develop it into a short story. Those who are familiar with Kurt Vonnegut's writing will certainly recognize some other themes of this story. For example the fear of de-humanization of human beings, being stuck in amber (Harrison's inability to overthrow the system) and so forth.

In "Harrison Bergeron", Kurt Vonnegut presented a scary view of a future society, where everyone was equal. "Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else." (Vonnegut 1988:7). It was the job of the agents of the United States Handicapper General to keep it this way. Beautiful people had to wear ugly masks. People not heavy enough had to wear handicap bags full of lead. Clever people had to wear a radio in their ear tuned to the government transmitter, which sent out sharp noises to keep people from taking advantage of their brains. It was a world where competition was the greatest of

sins.

I think that this view can be very easily related to modern society. People are striving for equality of some kind--equality of races, sexes etc. People try to eliminate racism, sexism, lookism, ableism, ageism. Even the word speciesism starts to appear in modern dictionaries of Politically Correct language. The society in "Harrison Bergeron" succeeded in eliminating these prejudices--everybody got the same opportunity to do anything--and the result was fatal.

When the power got into the hands of stupid people unfit for governing the country, they had to find a way to protect their position. So they came with the idea of handicaps, which brought all the above-average people and the average people to the level of the below-average ones. Thus, their position of power was preserved. The result was that people lost their individuality, lost their humanity.

Theodore Sturgeon's novel *Godbody* deals with a problem seemingly distant from this, yet I think it is very similar. It deals with human sexuality and nakedness. In the introduction to this book, Robert A. Heinlein said:

"God must love skin since he makes so much of it. Covering it with cloth or leather or fur in the name of 'decency' is a vice thought up by dirty old men; don't blame it on God." (Heinlein in the introduction to Sturgeon)

A great example of such an indecent (or perhaps more importantly, envious) character in "Harrison Bergeron" is Diana Moon Glampers. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, she is described as a "sixty-year-old virgin who, by almost anybody's standards, was too dumb to live." (Vonnegut 1978:56) "No one had ever loved her. There was no reason why anybody should. She was ugly, stupid, and boring." (Vonnegut 1978:56) In "Harrison Bergeron" she got a position at the top of the society and she wanted to keep it. That's why she killed Harrison and the girl he danced with. They represented a great danger. Had they succeeded in overthrowing the system, she'd be just an unsuccessful woman on the bottom of the society. It was vital for her to shoot them and preserve the monstrous society.

There is a certain resemblance of the story and several periods of human history. Dictatorships worked, and still work, this way. A wonderful example is the communist system in some eastern-european countries (e.g. the Czech Republic) which was, fortunately, overthrown in 1989. People were discouraged from thinking by themselves, discouraged from forming their own opinions. Children were "processed" in schools to be all uniform in mind and opinion. People were then more easily manipulable, which was the goal of the communist party.

And this is probably what Kurt Vonnegut tried to warn us in "Harrison Bergeron". Don't let anything or anyone deprive you of your individuality. Otherwise you will lose your humanity as well. If we continue in striving for equality, we could end up like the society in "Harrison Bergeron". If we get as far as eliminating speciesism, we can end up like in the short story by Kilgore Trout "Hail to the Chief", where a chimpanzee became the President of the United States.

"The chimpanzee wore a little blue blazer with brass buttons, and with the seal of the President of the United States sewed to the breast pocket. It looked like this:



Everywhere he went, bands would play 'Hail to the Chief.' The chimpanzee loved it. He would bounce up and down." (Vonnegut 1992:88)

References:

- Sturgeon, Theodore *Godbody*
New York:
- Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. *Breakfast of Champions*
London: 1992; Cox & Wyman Ltd.
- Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*
New York: 1978; Dell Publishing
- Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. *The Sirens of Titan*
London: 1975; Coronet Books
- Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. *Welcome to the Monkey House*
New York: 1988; Bantam Doubleday, Dell Publishing
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Lesson Plan #1

A Study of Kurt Vonnegut's 'Harrison Bergeron'

Approximately 80 minutes

I. New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards:

- 3.1: (Reading): All students will understand and apply the knowledge of sounds, letters, and words in written English to become independent and fluent readers,

- and will read a variety of materials and texts with fluency and comprehension
- D1: Read grade-level text orally with high accuracy and appropriate pacing, intonation, and expression.
- 3.4: (Listening): All students will listen actively to information from a variety of sources in a variety of situations.
 - B2: Exhibit proficiency in integrating oral reading with listening, writing, and viewing.

II. Behavioral Objectives

- Students will evaluate the merit of specific choices and decisions and formulate the best conclusions.
- Students will demonstrate their understanding of the short story 'Harrison Bergeron' during a classroom discussion on the story.
- Students will answer provocative questions by relating them to their own lives and society.
- Students will discuss and answer questions about 'Harrison Bergeron' in pairs of two.
- Students will gain proficiency and comfort in teamwork scenarios.

III. Materials

- Handout of 'Harrison Bergeron' by Kurt Vonnegut
- 'Anticipation Guide' worksheet
- 'Harrison Bergeron Discussion Questions' worksheet
- pens/pencils

IV. Motivation (**Approx. 15 minutes**)

This lesson will begin with the students filling out the 'anticipation guide', which will touch on several of the themes that this unit will cover. The students should be told to answer the questions on the sheet as well as they can. Following this, the students should be asked for their choices and why they chose what they did.

V. Instruction/Activities/Technology

- Following the ‘Anticipation Guide’, the students should be informed that they will be reading a short story about a society where everyone is equal. The short story ‘Harrison Bergeron’ should then be handed out to the students. Since this story is rather brief, yet contains many difficult-to-grasp ideas and concepts, it is suggested that the instructor reads the story aloud to the class. **(Approx. 20 minutes)**
- After completing the reading of ‘Harrison Bergeron’, the instructor should hand out a copy of ‘Harrison Bergeron Discussion Questions’ to each student. Following this, the instructor should tell the students that they are to find a partner to help complete this worksheet, which will be discussed afterwards. During this activity, the teacher should ‘float’ from pair to pair, offering suggestions and help where necessary. **(Approx. 20 minutes)**
- When it seems that the students have finished up the worksheet, the teacher should guide the students through the question sheet, asking for the students’ responses to the questions. In addition to the questions on the page, the teacher should bolster these questions with more involved questions, relating them to the students’ own lives whenever possible, as this will all serve as preparation for reading The Giver by Lois Lowry. **(Approx. 20 minutes)**

VI. Questions

The following questions will be addressed in this activity:

- Where do I stand on certain issues?
- What do I think the role of the government should be?
- What is an ideal society?
- What is the importance of defiance?

VII. Special Education Modifications

- Students with auditory difficulties should be situated near the front of the classroom.
- Students with visual difficulties should be situated in the front of the classroom.

VIII. Assessments

The assessment in this lesson will be demonstrated throughout the 'Harrison Bergeron Discussion Questions' section of the lesson. Both the students' ability to work efficiently and diligently with their partner and the quality of their written responses will be taken into account. The 'participation' aspect of this, the group dynamic and class participation, will be assessed using a check-plus/minus scale, while the questions will be graded both for content and construction (grammar).

IX. Homework

The homework assignment for this lesson is a written (one or two paragraph) response to the question "Imagine that you were in the same situation as Harrison Bergeron. Would you have acted the way he did, or would you have done something different?" These responses will be collected at the beginning of the next class period and will be weighed as one homework assignment.

Supplementary Materials:

[Anticipation Guide](#)

['Harrison Bergeron' by Kurt Vonnegut](#)

['Harrison Bergeron' discussion questions](#)

['Harrison Bergeron' reading response](#)

Mr. Morone

8-4

Anticipation Guide

For the following questions, check the appropriate box for whether you agree or disagree with the statement.

AGREE

DISAGREE

1. In an ideal society, everyone is equal.

2. It is better to be ignorant and happy than to be aware and upset.

3. The government knows what is best for us.

4. Rules exist to help us live our lives properly.

5. The police should be allowed to do whatever they can to protect the community.

6. You shouldn't have to be around people that you don't agree with.

7. It is alright to upset some people as long as

you're doing what is best for society.

8. If you know you are right, you shouldn't

listen to anyone else.

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“Huh?” said George.

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“I am the Emperor!” cried Harrison. “Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!” He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

“Even as I stand here –” he bellowed, “crippled, hobbled, sickened – I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I *can* become!”

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.

Harrison’s scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall.

He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

“I shall now select my Empress!” he said, looking down on the cowering people. “Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!”

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow.

Harrison plucked the mental handicap from her ear, snapped off her physical handicaps with marvelous delicacy. Last of all, he removed her mask.

She was blindingly beautiful.

“Now” said Harrison, taking her hand, “shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!” he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. “Play your best,” he told them, “and I’ll make you barons and dukes and earls.”

The music began. It was normal at first – cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He slammed them back into their chairs.

The music began again and was much improved.

Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while – listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it.

They shifted their weights to their toes.

Harrison placed his big hands on the girl’s tiny waist, letting her sense the weightlessness that would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!

Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it. It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling.

They kissed it.

And then, neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Glampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.

It was then that the Bergerons’ television tube burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George.

But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. “You been crying?” he said to Hazel.

“Yup,” she said,

“What about?” he said.

“I forget,” she said. “Something real sad on television.”

“What was it?” he said.

“It’s all kind of mixed up in my mind,” said Hazel.

“Forget sad things,” said George.

“I always do,” said Hazel.

“That’s my girl,” said George. He winced. There was the sound of a riveting gun in his head.

“Gee – I could tell that one was a doozy,” said Hazel.

“You can say that again,” said George.

“Gee –” said Hazel, “I could tell that one was a doozy.”

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Mr. Morone

8-4

‘Harrison Bergeron’ Discussion Questions

Using your knowledge of the short story ‘Harrison Bergeron’, answer the following questions in full sentences.

1. In 'Harrison Bergeron', certain people are 'handicapped', they have to carry around heavy weights and have loud noises blasted into their ears. Why do you think the government does this?

2. Why was Diana Moon Gompers, the Handicapper General, so afraid of Harrison Bergeron breaking free of his handicaps?

3. Why was the killing of Harrison Bergeron so **significant**? Did Harrison have to die for the sake of the society?

4. At the end of the story, George says to Hazel, "Forget sad things." To which she replies, "I always do." Why is this dialogue, or conversation, so important to the story?

5. Do you feel that Harrison Bergeron acted heroically by going against the rules of the society? Why or why not?

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Mr. Morone

Name: _____

8-4

'Harrison Bergeron' Reading Response

The short story 'Harrison Bergeron' by Kurt Vonnegut raises a lot of interesting questions about people's role in society. I'm sure it also made you consider how you would react in a similar situation. In your own words, write a short (one to two paragraph) response to the following question:

"Imagine that you were in the same situation as Harrison Bergeron. Would you have acted the way he did, or would you have done something different? Why?"

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