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Short Answer Response

Mrs. Williams, Period 4

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Fear: The Force that Drives “Harrison Bergeron”

The overarching concept that best reflects Kurt Vonnegut's satirical short story “Harrison Bergeron” is fear because the populace lives in fear of competing with one another, the government is run by a handicapping dictator who dreads the loss of control, and fear prevents citizens from revolting. Fear is quickly established as a central concept in relation to the text because the entire society seems quite fearful of competition. Even George states that if anyone had any perceived advantage over others “pretty soon [they’d] be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else” (Vonnegut 347). Clearly, citizens are afraid of how they would feel if they were not the best at a particular job, sport, talent, et cetera. This generalized fear of failure also demonstrates itself in the characters’ mindsets regarding competition and is what drove them to attempt to remove it from their society altogether. The second reason that fear is so central to the story is that the Handicapper General reserved all of the power for herself, likely in trepidation that she would be overtaken if she gave citizens power comparable to her own. In fact, as soon as she feels threatened by the eponymous Harrison Bergeron, she enters a room and “fire[s] twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor” (Vonnegut 351). Ultimately, fear of losing her authority is what caused her to be such a harsh and demanding dictator who was compelled to blatantly execute those who posed a threat to her authority. Lastly, fear is a vital element of the story because fear is what prevented the citizens, as a whole, from rebelling; George was not oblivious to the feeling that

the current system had flaws, yet he was too afraid of the consequences of even simple acts, such as removing some of the weight from his birdshot bag, and preferred to suffer instead of face the penalties. The harshness of the punishments, which included ludicrous penalties such as “Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball [taken] out” (Vonnegut 347), resulted in a fear of fighting against perceived injustice. Fear is evidently the motivating factor for all of the characters in Vonnegut's story and most plot elements can be traced back to the concept of fear. Indeed, fear is a powerful emotion capable of controlling lives and crippling progress.