

HARRISON BERGERON

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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.¹ 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. **A**

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

20 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 sashweights² and bags of birdshot,³ and

vigilance (vĭj'ə-ləns)
n. alert attention,
watchfulness

A DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 1–17. Cite specific details that describe society in 2081. What is your opinion of the society so far?

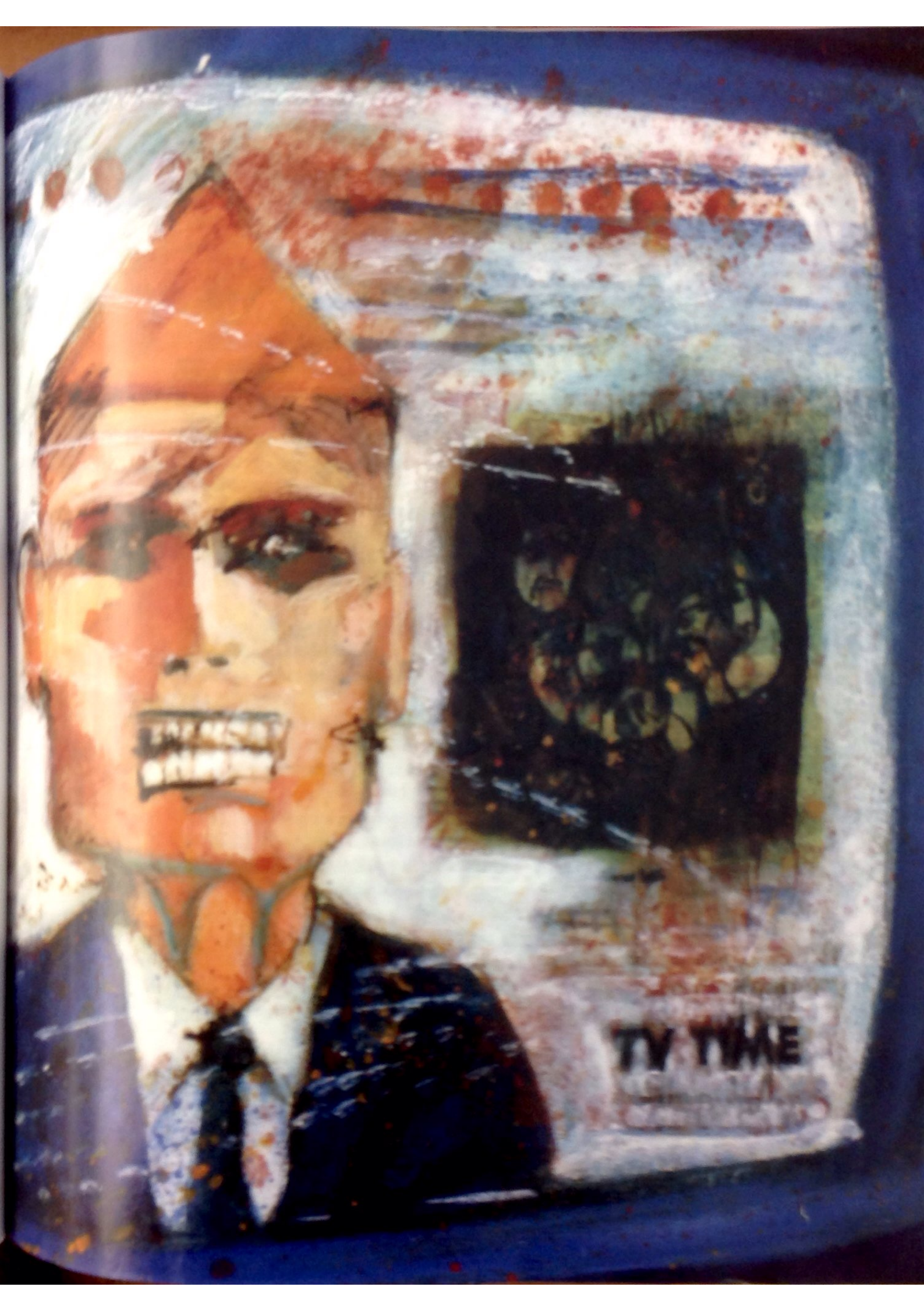
ANALYZE VISUALS

Examine the image of the television announcer and the picture behind him. What does this painting suggest about television?

1. **transmitter**: an electronic device for broadcasting radio signals.

2. **sashweights**: lead weights used in some kinds of windows to keep them from falling shut when raised.

3. **birdshot**: tiny lead pellets made to be loaded in shotgun shells.



TV TIME

their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a
30 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,"⁴
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."

40 "Um," said George. **B**

"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.

50 "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. **C**

"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 and 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."

60 She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a 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."

wince (wɪns) v. to shrink
or flinch involuntarily,
especially in pain

B DRAW CONCLUSIONS

How does the society
affect the thoughts and
reactions of the people?
How does it influence
their job performance?

C PLOT AND CONFLICT

George's thoughts reveal
more about the conflict
between Harrison and
the society. On the basis
of what you've read so
far, what behavior do you
think might be viewed as
abnormal and illegal?

4. **ball peen hammer**: a hammer with a head having one flat side and one rounded side.

70 “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?”

80 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. **D**

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.⁵ For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, “Ladies and

90 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.

100 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 grackle⁶ 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.” **E**

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen—upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right side up. The

D DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 68–85. What do you think of George’s reasons for not lightening his handicap bag?

E PLOT AND CONFLICT

Here the **rising action** begins. What more do you learn about the conflict between Harrison and the society?

5. **speech impediment** (īm-pēd’ə-mənt): a physical defect that prevents a person from speaking normally.

6. **grackle**: a blackbird with a harsh, unpleasant call.



TVTime 2 (2002), Charles Foster-Hall. Acrylic on canvas, 16" × 28". © Charles Foster-Hall.

110 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 born 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
120 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. **P**

"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,
130 as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

ANALYZE VISUALS

How would you describe the figures watching television? How well do they represent George and Hazel?

P PLOT AND CONFLICT

Why has Harrison been so handicapped by the government?

consternation
(kɒn'stər-nā'shən)
n. confused amazement or fear

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. **G**
The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas,
140 technicians, musicians, and announcers **covered** 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.

150 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!” **H**

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

160 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.”

170 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.

G GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread line 138. Notice how Vonnegut uses the **precise adjectives** *clanking, clownish, and huge* to create a vivid image of Harrison’s appearance.

cover (kou’ar) v. to crouch down in fear

H PLOT AND CONFLICT

Reread lines 142–158. Notice how Harrison views himself in relation to other people. How do his views put him in conflict with the government?

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.

180 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. **I**

190 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. **J**

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.

200 "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 gun⁷ in his head.

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

"You can say that again," said George.

210 "Gee—" said Hazel, "I could tell that one was a doozy." **K**

synchronize
(sɪŋ'krə-nīz') v. to
match the timing of

neutralize (nōō'trə-līz') v.
to counteract or cancel
the effect of

I DRAW CONCLUSIONS
Reread lines 177–188.
What words and phrases
indicate how the narrator
views this breaking of
the laws?

J PLOT AND CONFLICT
How is the conflict
resolved?

K DRAW CONCLUSIONS
Why do George and Hazel
react this way to their
son's death?

7 **riveting** (rīv'ī-tīŋ) **gun**: a power tool used to hammer bolts (called rivets) that are used in construction work and manufacturing to fasten metal beams or plates together.