

## Background on “Harrison Bergeron”

Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on November 11, 1922. Vonnegut emerged as a novelist and essayist in the 1960s, and penned the classics *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* before 1980. He is considered one of the most influential American novelists of the twentieth century because of his **satirical** literary style. He became known for his unusual writing style—long sentences and sparse punctuation, as well as his **humanist** point of view. He blended literature with **science fiction** and humor, the absurd with pointed social commentary. Vonnegut died in New York City on April 11, 2007.

“Harrison Bergeron” is one of Vonnegut’s most important short stories. It was first published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in 1961 and was later republished as part of the short-story collection *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1968). Set in a **dystopian** America in 2081, it is often interpreted as a blistering critique of authoritarian governments. In its blend of satire and science fiction, “Harrison Bergeron” typifies Vonnegut’s work.

### Vocabulary

1. Satire- any writing that holds up someone or something to ridicule or serious criticism to effect change
2. Science fiction- genre of fiction in which the stories often tell about science and technology of the future.  
\*It is important to note that science fiction has a relationship with the principles of science—these stories involve partially true partially fictitious laws or theories of science. It should not be completely unbelievable, because it then ventures into the genre fantasy. Science fiction texts also include a human element, explaining what effect new discoveries, happenings and scientific developments will have on us in the future.
3. Humanist (adjective), Humanism (noun)- a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism, empiricism) over acceptance of dogma or superstition.
4. Dystopia (noun) / dystopian (adjective)- a futuristic, imagined universe in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control. Dystopias, through an exaggerated worst-case scenario, make a criticism about a current trend, societal norm, or political system.