

## “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

### A Radical Introduction

I'm afraid Kurt Vonnegut may be slightly overrated – at least as an author. Perhaps he is America's best satirist, but all that is satire is not gold. In “Harrison Bergeron,” Kurt creates a future dystopia in which the humanistic concept of equality becomes so misunderstood and contorted that it now means all men and women must be forced to become physically and mentally equal, and since the strong, smart and ‘pretty’ ones cannot be made stronger and prettier, everyone must, by force, be made as weak, stupid and ugly as the weakest, stupidest and ugliest.

What a ridiculous premise for a story.

Kurt Vonnegut lived in the most aggressively capitalistic nation on earth, a nation where political and economic inequality are rampant and staggeringly insane, but he finds time to twist and mock the concept of equality.

The story might also be read as a parody of the working-class man's dream of escaping from slavery, that is, of escaping from the literal weight and symbolic burden of his working-class life. Once freed from his burden, Harrison exclaims, “I am the emperor! ... Everyone must do what I say at once!” Apparently, every working man and every victim of a capitalistic empire secretly dreams of becoming a tyrant and despot. Sounds like the story supports the elitist belief that the existing ruling class is uniquely qualified to rule.

The brutal manner in which Harrison is executed might be interpreted as an invitation to sympathize with Harrison, but I doubt that was Vonnegut's intention. More likely, he simply wished to argue, with his mad fiction, that belief in equality must lead to murder and madness.