

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

born in 1922



The writing of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., defies simple classification. When his stories examine the moral implications of technology, they are called science fiction. When they make comedy out of the horrors and absurdities of the human condition, they are called black humor. With his deceptively simple style he entertains his readers, while he considers "what machines do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us."

The son and grandson of architects, Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, the youngest of three children. He has said that he owes his scientific bent to his father, a true believer in technology who insisted that his sons study "something useful." As a result, after high school, where he edited the daily paper, Vonnegut went to Cornell University to study biochemistry. "I was delighted to catch pneumonia during my third year, and, upon recovery, to forget everything I ever knew about chemistry, and go to war."

An infantry combat scout in World War II, Vonnegut was captured by the Germans and assigned to a prisoner-of-war work group in Dresden, Germany. What happened there profoundly affected his life and work. Dresden, then the most beautiful baroque city in Europe, with no military significance, was for some reason annihilated by the Allies in a massive firebombing that became "the largest single massacre in European history," with more victims than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. When he and his fellow prisoners emerged from their detention in an underground meat locker, "everything was gone but the cellars where 135,000 Hansels and Gretels had been baked like gingerbread men. So we were put to work as corpse miners, breaking into shelters, bringing bodies out." Vonnegut eventually came to terms with that experience in his sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), which became a best-seller and a movie and added considerably to his reputation.

After the war, Vonnegut studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, working at the same

time as a police reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau. He then took a public relations job for the General Electric Company, but after three years he began to sell short stories to the slick magazines and science fiction journals. He quit his job, moved with his family to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and has been a freelance writer ever since. He is married to Jill Krementz, the noted photographer.

In addition to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, some of Vonnegut's novels are *Mother Night* (1961), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), and *Galanagos* (1985).

In spite of Vonnegut's apparently pessimistic philosophy, in which human beings are victims of circumstance in an indifferent universe, he believes strongly in the value of kindness and is preoccupied with moral issues. He says that he would like to reach people with his books while they are still in school, "before they become generals and senators and Presidents, and poison their minds with humanity."

Harrison Bergeron

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 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, and 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, as the ballerinas came to the end of a dance.

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 dragged 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 ballpeen hammer," said George.

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

"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 pe'ple'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 is 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 borne 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 besides. The spectacles were intended not only to make him 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 snaggletooth 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 weight 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 drink.

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

"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."

Getting at Meaning RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. Describe the American society of 2081. Explain the Handicapper General's job.

2. What is the function of George's handicap radio? Why does he have to wear a forty-seven pound handicap bag? Why doesn't Hazel have any handicaps?

3. Explain how the dancers are handicapped. How are the announcers handicapped? What are Harrison Bergeron's handicaps?

4. Describe Harrison's rebellion. What is he trying to do to the society? Why does his rebellion fail?

Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Science Fiction.** Explain how this story fits the definition of science fiction. How does the setting contribute? In what ways does the story draw imaginatively on scientific knowledge and theory in its plot and characters?

2. **Satire.** Satire is a form of literature that ridicules foolish ideas or customs, most often through exaggeration. The purpose of satire is usually to get people to examine their foolishness and to change their ways, or perhaps to avoid repeating mistakes of the past. Sometimes, however, satire ridicules aspects of human nature that are probably beyond remedy.

What tendencies in American society does Kurt Vonnegut satirize in "Harrison Bergeron"? How does he make fun of government agencies? of the belief that absolute equality is desirable? According to Vonnegut in what direction does our society seem to be moving? How does Vonnegut employ exaggeration for satiric effect?

3. **Irony.** Notice the irony of Hazel's tears at the end of the story. Her son is destroyed on television before her very eyes, and she cries. When George asks her why she has been crying, she says, "I forget. Something real sad on television." What has become of all worthwhile emotion and activity in this society? Why? Identify other major ironies in this story. What is ironic about the entire central situation? What is ironic about the reasons for which Harrison is killed?

4. **Figurative Language.** Vonnegut uses some graphic figurative language in "Harrison Bergeron." Discuss how each specific figure of speech that follows helps to develop character or theme in the story:

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

Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody.

The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

Developing Vocabulary

Latin Phrases in English. An important technique in satire is *reductio ad absurdum*, meaning in Latin "reduction to absurdity." This technique disproves a proposition or makes fun of an idea by showing the absurdity of its inevitable conclusion. Discuss how Vonnegut reduces things to a level of absurdity in "Harrison Bergeron" in order to develop his satiric points.

The following Latin phrases should also become a part of your working English vocabulary. After you have found each phrase in a dictionary, record its meaning and use it in an original sentence.

prima facie *quid pro quo* *sub rosa*

Developing Writing Skills

See **Handbook: How To Write About Literature**, << page 888, Lessons 1-6

Writing a Satire. Write a satiric sketch about some aspect of school life or American culture. It may be either serious or humorous. Employ exaggeration and the technique of *reductio ad absurdum* to help establish your points. If you like, you may also turn your piece into science fiction.