

Machine-Made Loneliness and Mechanization of Human Life in *Player Piano*

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the surrender of man to machine in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*. The novel attempts to restore the dignity of man by making him realize that machines are controlling everything in this universe and he has no free will. The Ghost Shirt Society fights against the machine-dominated society but it fails to restore man from the clutches of machines. Throughout the novel, Vonnegut presents the plight of man by highlighting his surrender to machines but he concludes the novel with a positive note by describing the failure of machines. The end of the novel reveals that man will be restored from machines in the future.

The themes of *Player Piano* spring from the horrors of the contemporary society. Machine-made loneliness, mechanization of human life and the dehumanization wrought by technology are the main themes of the novel. Kurt Vonnegut, in this novel, attempts to restore man from the clutches of machine. Machines have replaced men in the modern world to such a degree that even engineers and managers of machines have felt that they have debased human values. Paul Proteus, the protagonist of the novel, feels alienated because the society in which he lives is under the clutches of machines and man has no freewill.

Paul tries to assert his beliefs in the machine-dominated society that has won war by the miracle of machine with little manpower but is unable to overcome the sense of loneliness. As he is fed up with the alienated society, he attempts to withdraw from the present and the progressive moment of his technological society by escaping into the past. He wants to experience the "earth as God had given it to man" (Vonnegut, 1959). "In mythic terms, that God-given Earth was originally an agricultural nation of two" (Muztazza, 1990).

Paul is unhappy with the present society because machines are not controlled by men but by other machines. They regulate even human beings and sometimes they themselves have become pieces of machinery. Chapter seventeen of the novel satirizes the typical home life of the average man in America. Edgar Rice Burroughs Hagstrohm and his family live in a self-cleaning M-17 house. He has equipment, furniture, car and automatic pay roll deduction payments in

the house controlled by the advanced computer or machine God EPICAC XIV. The computer EPICAC XIV can do hundreds of work or even thousands simultaneously without any confusion. As a result of it, human beings have no work to do. The perfection of machine has made man imperfect.

The conflict of man versus machine continues to be the subject matter of *Player Piano*. Vonnegut chooses prose romance form to report the surrender of human beings to their own technology in the twentieth century. Vonnegut uses symbols to satirize man's surrender to machines. The title of the novel, *Player Piano* is an effective symbol. Tony Tanner reveals the nature of this symbol by giving a definition of both player and piano. He says that a piano player is a man consciously using a machine to produce aesthetically pleasing patterns of his own making. A player piano is a machine, which has been programmed to produce music on its own, thus making the human presence redundant. Another important symbol in the novel is the cat that Paul finds in Illium. Paul takes the cat with him to Building 58. The cat tries to escape from the Building 58. It falls on the electrified wires of security fence and dies. The cat symbol implies that death is the only way to escape from the trap that man has created for himself. It is again a symbolic reference to animal life of man for he has no free will to think on his own and to do any work creatively. Everything is done by machine in the mechanized world.

Unheroic role of man in the machine-dominated society and the loss of human dignity

are illuminated in the novel. The Shah of Bratpukur, a spiritual leader, accompanied by Halyard, watches an army parade given in his honour. Shah senses the emptiness in American life after the parade because a computer discovers that Halyard has not completed the requirements for the physical education for his B.A. Therefore, he cannot go in for any higher studies. Hagstrohm, a soldier, is also a victim of technocracy. He rebels against technocracy by destroying his house and runs into the woods. Neither Halyard nor Hagstrohm has withstood the pressures of the society. At this critical moment, Paul Proteus attempts to create a new society, in which people are more important than machines and a society that upholds the worth of human beings. Paul is not satisfied with the society that has made human beings almost obsolete. He tries to reassert his message to humanity.

Paul occasionally thinks of the experiment conducted by Shepherd Finnerty and himself. They try to immortalize the workmanship of Rudy Hens. "... This little loop in the box before Paul, here was Rudy as Rudy had been to his machine that afternoon-Rudy, the setter of speeds, the controller of the cutting tool. This was the essence of Rudy as far as the machine was concerned" (Vonnegut, 1959).

In the course of the experiment, Paul and Finnerty find Rudy as a human being. He is the controller of machines and is not controlled by machines. Vonnegut includes this episode in the novel to make people realize that they should not feel proud of their jobs. The experiment is the indication of the danger if man remains in an atmosphere where machines do all pieces of work. Paul's doctor, Frankenstein, feels proud of creating a machine that functions like a man. Creation of the Robot like machine deadens his feelings and turns him into another Berringer, the dull-headed engineer. Berringer has no concern for man and has enthusiasm for the wonders of science.

Proteus feels that people are becoming inhuman. He is not happy to live in a society void of human values. Therefore, he is in a dilemma whether to accept his age of science as a paradise or to leave the society. Finally, Proteus rejects the society and lives in "the fantasy of the new, good life ahead of him. Somewhere, outside of society, there was a place for a man and wife" (Vonnegut, 1959). Paul ignores the demands of the unjust society. Refusal to take part in the sufferings of

people is not the solution to the problems of man. It is essential to live with people and to share their sorrows and sufferings. Ignoring the society will give happiness to the protagonist but he cannot change the society.

Ignoring the society is not the surprising decision taken by Paul Proteus. He feels that if people are not able to comprehend the society, it is better to ignore it. When Paul learns that his friend has quit his job, he is very happy. Resigning from the duties of the unjust society is one of the solutions given by Vonnegut. He gives another example of Paul's desire to reject the unjust society. Paul desires to drive occasionally across the river to Ilium where engineers have never visited. When Paul removes his engineer's coat and wears an old leather coat, he symbolically rejects the values of his own society. He tells his friend Finnerty that a psychiatrist will interpret this action as Paul's eagerness to reject the values of the society. Anyhow, Paul cannot move from the values of his society to another as easily as he changes clothes. When Paul sees unemployed workers helping common people, he feels guilty and has the desire to share his love with them. He identifies him with the downtrodden people. He spends all his life away from his fellow beings but now "he had come among them, shared their hopes and disappointments, understood their yearnings, discovered the beauty of their simplicities and earthly values. This was real, this side of the river, and Paul loved these common people" (Vonnegut, 1959).

Paul becomes a member of The Ghost Shirt Society, a revolutionary group. They compare the modern man's situation with that of the Indians during the time of Independence. The Ghost Shirt Society encourages people to revolt against the worthless values of the modern times. It defends old values. Paul, the messiah of the religion, preaches that the religion will restore old values for people. Paul believes that The Ghost Shirt Society is a weapon for changing the machine-dominated society. But this society fails to restore human dignity. "The Ghost Shirt Society, which represents human opposition to the machines, is just as effectively ironic because it is an institution resurrected from the past in order to bring about a change in the present. Instead of providing a romantic escape from reality, the society allows a brutal confrontation with reality" (Mustazza, 1994).

The setting of one of the key scenes in *Player Piano* is in meadows. It is a place where managers annually spend two weeks drinking, playing team sports and renewing faith in the system. Vonnegut satirizes the meeting conducted once in a year in General Electric at Association Island. The one week programme is a "morale-building operation for General Electric, and deserving young new were sent up there for a week and played golf and there were archery contests" (Stanley, 1976). General Electric abandons this tradition of having entertainment shortly after the publication of *Player Piano*.

The young managers on the Island are eager to take part in ball and they are very much interested in spending their time with girls. They then sing a hymn:

*Fellows at the meadows,
Lift your tankards high;
Toast our living symbol, reaching toward the sky,
Grown from but an acorn,
Giant now you are;
May you never stop growing,
Rise to the stars!
Proud sy-him-bol-a-bov (Vonnegut, 1959).*

On such an occasion, the young managers want to renew their system. The meadow scene is ironically presented by Vonnegut to satirize the modern man.

In the end of *Player Piano*, people take part in the revolution against machines. They run through the streets and destroy all the machines. After the protest, Lasher declares that even though people have failed to destroy the machine-dominated society, they express their discontent. He feels that the society will be freed from the clutches of machines in the future. But here Vonnegut is not so optimistic as Lasher

because he sees the same mob reassembling the machine that has made them obsolete.

Vonnegut creates caricatures to elucidate how men are crazy about machines. Paul's boss, Kroner, has faith in the progress of technology. Paul's subordinate, Bud, represents the "self-destructive American love for gadgetry that results in his automating his job out of existence" (Stanley, 1976). Bud relies on computers. He is passive, lifeless and mechanical. His machines represent humanity for they do the work of man. Sometimes, machines dance like human beings. Paul, after observing the dance of the machinery, is horrified to see a monstrous sweeper attacking a cat. Vonnegut mourns if men are interested in the technology-oriented society, it will turn man away from jobs.

The novel concludes with a revolution that has failed to alter the existing system. When the revolution of The Ghost Shirt Society fails, a robot helicopter flies over the destroyed machinery and asks the leaders of the Ghost Shirt Society to surrender. When announcing the message, the mechanism in the helicopter failed. Here, Vonnegut describes the failure of machine. Vonnegut feels that machine cannot replace human beings. If it replaces human beings, it will end in the destruction of humanity.

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