



Loss of Self-esteem in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss the loss of self-esteem in Kurt Vonnegut's first novel Player Piano. It deals with the danger of the excessive progress in technology and its impact on society as well as individuals. Owing to rise of technological progress, mechanization, and scientific advancement, people abuse their power at various levels. In this novel, the upper class people hope that machines have the ability to do more work quickly and effectively without any limit. It causes people lose their jobs and many people find themselves out of their works. Paul Proteus, the protagonist of the novel, revolts against the capitalism and managerial classes. But, Paul Proteus' revolution ends in failure and as a result he is disappointed. In this novel, Vonnegut explores the influence of the use of technology in the society that strips off the sense of self-esteem, and identities of the individuals, resulted in their disillusionment.

Key Words: *Progress of Technology, Mechanization, Abuse of Power, Loss of Self-esteem, Identity and Disillusionment.*

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) is a Science Fiction writer, black humorist, satirist, and one of the post modern writers of 20th century. Vonnegut's first novel *Player Piano* was published in 1952. Vonnegut was ignored by the public and the critics for almost ten years. After the publication of his sixth novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969, Vonnegut gains a name and fame in the public and his literary career begins to flourish in the field of literature. In *Player Piano*, he portrays the society, which is dominated by the machines that resulted in the dramatic divisions among the people. The narrator explains the three class as well as the geographical divisions of residence which reflect this society: "In the northwest are the managers and engineers and civil servants and a few professional people; in the northeast are the machines; and in the south, across the Iroquois River, is the area known locally as Homestead, where almost all of the people live" (1). This novel describes the class separation and the frustration of the lower class that lead to revolts.

Marx and Engels describe the Industrial Revolution, such as, “steam and machinery revolutionized industrial production. The place of manufacture was taken by the giant, Modern Industry, the place of the industrial middle class, by industrial millionaires, the leaders of whole industrial armies, the modern bourgeois” (*The Communist Manifesto* 770). Thus, The Third Industrial Revolution is developing in *Player Piano* as the action in the story takes place. Ultimately, this leads to the elimination of most engineers and managers. Some engineers find themselves without jobs as they invent machines that can do their own jobs better than themselves. As a result, engineers are placed in the same situation as that of the lower class people. In fact, the advancement in the technology should lead to the development of the people in all respects. It should ensure better future for all. Todd F. Davis also insists the same idea in *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade, Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism* that “[t]he master narrative of *Player Piano* is a myth common to America and often reified in the genre of utopian science fiction: Mechanical progress means a better future for all” (42).

Vonnegut instead seems to argue that mechanical progress leads to no future for any since ever the engineers find themselves in danger of losing their jobs. Vonnegut writes in *Player Piano* that the protagonist, Paul Proteus does not have a problem with science or progress, but is offended by the actions of the engineers and the managers. The members of the upper class in *Player Piano* hurl insults at the lower class, full of disrespect. Rigid laws keep them in a lower status of life and their occupations have certainly been “stripped” off their honor as they are replaced by machines. Because of the machines’ ability to do more work, it becomes more cost effective for businesses to buy machines than to employ individuals, resulting in job loss.

The most apparent oppression in *Player Piano* is a loss of personal identity and worth. With the extreme use of technology in the society, individuals are stripped of their sense of worth as they are replaced by machines. This fear of replacement is illustrated in the life of a housewife. Wanda laments after discovering that her husband is having an affair: “Nobody needs me. You or even little old Delores could run the house and all, it’s so easy. And now I’m too fat for anybody but the kids to love me. My mother got fat, and my grandmother got fat, and guess it’s in the blood; but somebody needed them, they were still some good” (167).

Here, Wanda demonstrates typical frustration with her aging-self, but she suffers further as she feels useless and without a purpose in her home because machines make housework easy enough for children. Marvin explains, “Even the nuclear family may be torn apart by the social forces created by technological progress” (32). While the managers and engineers justify taking people’s sense of worth away with the notion that the machines have made everyone’s lives better, Wanda does not support this idea. When one of her many appliances break, she does not fall to pieces with helplessness. Instead she remarks, “It’s kind of a relief. A body needs a change. I don’t mind. Gives me something to do” (165). Here, Wanda welcomes the change; the act of having to do her own work is a “relief,” not a burden. This would not be the case if the machines were not used to such excess. Segal writes that “[t]hey appreciate the material benefits of technology but resent their loss of meaningful labor and in turn of personal identity and social purpose” (163).

Wanda may have new, progressive technology in her house, but Vonnegut points out that it is at the cost of her own self-esteem. Paul Proteus, a top engineer and the protagonist of *Player Piano*, understands this as he explains to his wife, “In order to get what we’ve got, Anita, we have, in effect, traded those people out of what was the most important thing on earth to them the feeling of being needed and useful, the foundation of self-respect” (175). Without a purpose, the

people across the river lose their notion of self-esteem, causing depression and feelings of inferiority. The lower class in *Player Piano* is known to give in to their physical desires more than the upper class. Marx and Engels explain in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that “man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions, eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal” (767). The workers in *Player Piano* also seem to find satisfaction only in animalistic activities, especially consuming alcohol in bars.

This, however, is not seen as a negative trait of human being in *Player Piano*, but a state of being honest and true to oneself. Finnerty, who has left his place in the upper class as an engineer, argues his appreciation for the lower class, saying, “Those dumb bastards across the river—they’re *my* kind of people. They’re real, Paul, real!” (142). Although he appears to be insulting the working class, he also admires their honesty as opposed to the engineers and managers who politic and backstab to climb the social ladder. Paul Proteus also finds himself drawn to the “other side of the river” and frequently visits the bars before returning home. This, of course, is frowned upon by other members of the higher society since he is stepping outside of his class (102).

Thus, this dystopia produces many frustrations. As a result, a revolutionary group develops in the *Player Piano* culture. The members of this society believe that “the world should be restored to the people,” which sounds quite Marxist in the notion of redistributing wealth (287). The members of the society appeal to Paul Proteus since he is a well-known engineer who has resigned from his position. They petition for Proteus’ help, saying, “If a Messiah shows up now with a good, solid, startling message and if he keeps out of the hands of the police, he can set off a revolution, maybe one big enough to take the world away from the machines, Doctor, and give it back to the people” (291). They need Proteus only as a figure head and have the plans drawn out; they need only an influential mouth to place the words in. Susan Reid expands on Paul’s divided feelings in *Kurt Vonnegut and American Culture; Mechanization and Loneliness* in *Player Piano*, saying, “Paul would like to depend on the Company as everyone else does and feel secure in rank and sure of purpose, but he cannot. He is aware of a growing dissatisfaction, a rebellious streak within him” (50). Paul chooses to embrace the rebels instead of remaining with the Company. Agreeing to the rebels’ plan, Proteus sends out a message to the person, who mirrors Vonnegut’s convictions of the need for boundaries: “I deny that there is any natural or divine law requiring that machines, efficiency, and organization should forever increase in scope, power, and complexity, in peace as in war. I see the growth of these now, rather, as the result of a dangerous lack of law” (301).

Here, Vonnegut explains that indefinite progress should not be expected, but limitations must be established. If boundaries are not respected, regression will occur as well as the eventual apocalypse. Segal claims that “technological progress has not meant and probably will never mean equivalent social progress” (179). To avoid such a catastrophe and to dismantle the dystopian world, the Ghost Shirt Society offers this proposition: “I propose that the men and women be returned to work as controllers of machines and that the control of people by machines be curtailed” (302). This proposition seems simple enough, yet the companies in power do not agree, leading up to the inevitable apocalypse at the climax of the novel.

Machines in *Player Piano* do not kill the human beings. The people are certainly oppressed by the progress of technology and the elite is, in fact, armed with technology in a sense as the upper class people use the machines to establish their wealth and to promote class

divisions. Paul Proteus, the protagonist of the novel revolts against these activities of managerial classes, but unfortunately his revolution ends in failure. Proteus problem is not in progress of science and technology, but with the upper class people who misuse their powers in which people lose their self-esteem, identity, and finally, get disillusioned.

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