

The Authenticity Of Religious Belief Of Modern American Society In Kurt Vonnegut's Player Piano

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ABSTRACT

Of course, major American writers have rarely achieved great popular success within their lifetimes, so the oddity is perhaps that Vonnegut was talked about so much for so many years, not that his works no longer provoke Hemingwayesque discussion. Certainly it should not surprise us that Vonnegut's critical reputation is now unstable, for its earlier fluctuations are among the most pronounced in American literary history. Almost totally ignored for the first twenty years of his career, Vonnegut suddenly became, in the late 1960s, the sort of writer whose portrait graces the cover of Harper's and whose books are reviewed everywhere. In the 1970s and early 1980s Vonnegut popularity translated into a vast critical industry that produced 265 critical studies, including eight books and two journal issues almost entirely devoted to his works.⁴ If such massive evidence of critical interest has begun to abate, this may only mean that a lot of people have had their say about Vonnegut. In any case, the following account of Vonnegut's critical reputation will chart the curves of his fascinating career in order to characterize 'what has already been said and what perhaps still needs to be said about one postmodern American novelist who really matters.

Player Piano was Vonnegut's first novel, and it earned many positive reviews. Several critics suggested that it announced the arrival of an important American novelist. In *Player Piano*, Vonnegut introduces many of the themes that are central to his later novels.

Player Piano is set in the future after a fictional third world war. During the war, while most Americans were fighting overseas, the nation's managers and engineers developed ingenious automated systems that allowed the factories to operate with only a few workers. The novel begins about ten years after the war, when most factory workers have been replaced by machines. Critics have often compared *Player Piano* with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's 1984. The three novels are categorized as "utopian" because they describe future worlds where all-powerful governments attempt to control every aspect of human life. Utopian novels take their name from Thomas More's *Utopia*, which described an ideal human society based on reason and logic. More recent utopian novels, such as those by Vonnegut, Orwell, and Huxley, describe how governments can use technology to control individuals, and all three authors predict a bleak future for humankind if current trends continue.

But upon closer inspection, *Player Piano* is not really about a distant, high-tech future. *Player Piano* is a satire on post-World War II America. Rather than focusing on amazing technological innovations, the novel describes the logical consequences of social forces already apparent in the 1950s. These forces include an uncritical faith in technology and "progress", an insatiable desire for material possessions, a lack of interest in politics, and a deliberate effort to encourage women to leave the work force.

Player Piano takes these entire social trends one step further and asks, what will America look like if we continue down the path of mechanization? The novel describes an almost fully mechanized society run by a small, elite corps of managers and engineers. The entire economy is managed by an enormous computer that determines how many television sets and toasters the nation needs. Computerized tests determine who gets into college and which of the college graduates may go on to earn the doctoral degree that is required for all but menial work. Even those with doctorates are at the mercy of machines that decide who is fit for what job based on their records and test scores. Those who are not chosen for the few positions available in the manager-engineer elite are given two options: the army of the “Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps” (20). Known as the “Reeks and Wrecks”, these men who have been rejected by the system spend their days filling potholes and flushing storm drains. The sexist assumptions of the 1950s that tended to limit employment opportunities for women seem to have been written into law in *Player Piano*. Aside from a few female secretaries for top male executives, only men work outside the home.

In *Player Piano*, Vonnegut created a vision of the future that was intended to warn 1950s America about the perils of their worship of technological progress. Although some of the details, like computers running on vacuum tubes, seem dated to the contemporary reader, Vonnegut’s indictment of our unquestioning faith in science and technology is more relevant than ever in the twenty-first century.

Player Piano develops two parallel plot lines that converge only briefly, at the beginning and the end of the novel. The most important plot line tells the story of Dr. Paul Proteus, an intelligent, thirty-five-year-old factory manager. The second plot line describes the American

tour of the Shah, spiritual leader of six million residents of a distant, under-developed nation. Although the two plot lines are almost entirely independent of one another, they work together to paint a more complete picture of American society than either one could produce alone. Proteus lives and works within the system, but the Shah is a visitor from a very different culture. The parallel plot lines allow Vonnegut to show how the system looks from the inside and from the outside.

Paul Proteus is the ultimate insider. His father was the first “National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resources Director” (2). As his lengthy title suggests, Dr. George Proteus had almost complete control over the nation’s economy and was more powerful than the President of the United States. As its first director, Paul’s father is widely regarded as the father of the unified industrial system that was created during the Third World War. Paul is expected to follow his father’s footsteps, and as the novel opens, he seems ready to do just that. At the relatively young age of thirty-five, he is already in charge of an enormous, almost completely automated factory, the Ilium Works. But in spite of his good fortune, Paul is vaguely dissatisfied with the industrial system and his place in it. Throughout the novel, he considers alternatives, but the system is so large and complex that there are few opportunities to live outside of it. Paul considers buying one of the few farms that has not been absorbed by the agricultural industry, but he realizes that he lacks the skills to do the wealth that he has accumulated, but a life with no work seems even worse than his current dilemma. Paul feeds his fantasy life with novels about barrel-chested frontiersmen who survive by their strength and cunning and revel in the freedom of unspoiled nature.

A visit from an old friend, Ed Finnerty, shakes Paul out of his dream world. Finnerty has risen to the top of the system because of his brilliance, even though he refuses to play by the rules. He is a rebel looking for a cause, and he sense a rebellious streak in Paul that he hopes to develop. When he shows up at Paul's door, he has quit his important job in Washington, D.C., and he intends to live outside the system, just as Paul has dreamed of doing. Paul and Finnerty visit a bar in the "Homestead" section of town, where workers who have been displaced by machines live out their meaningless lives in shoddy, mass-produced houses. There they meet an Episcopal minister with an M.A. in anthropology named Lasher who puts into words the unfairness of the system that the two engineers have only vaguely sensed. Lasher tells them that his son, who did not pass the entrance exams for college, hanged himself rather than face a meaningless life in the army or the "Reeks and Wrecks". In fact, Lasher has so son, and he tells Paul the story as a kind of psychological experiment, but it still has a powerful effect on Paul. He realizes that by taking away their jobs, the system has robbed men of their dignity, and even of the will to live.

The story strengthens Paul's resolve to quit the system, but he is not bold enough to make a clean break as Finnerty has done. Finnerty is disappointed with Paul and takes up with Lasher, who is the leader of a rebel group known as the "Ghost Shirt Society". When Paul's superiors ask him to betray Finnerty and Lasher, he finally summons the courage to quite. Soon after, he is given a drugged drink and captured by the Ghost Shirt Society. They intend to use his famous name by making him the official leader of the organization. But Paul is a leader in name only. The Ghost Shirts keep him in a small, locked room for his own protection and allow him out only to appear at meetings.

One of these meetings is raided, and Paul is captured by the police. At his trial for treason, Paul responds to questions by reciting answers that have been carefully scripted by Lasher and Fineerty to serve as an indictment of the system. But the prosecutor forces Paul to abandon his script by asking him about his relationship with his famous father. Because he is wearing a lie detector, Paul is unable to deny that his hatred for the system is based on his hatred for his father, who was too busy running the country to attend to Paul when he was a boy.

The trial is cut short when the Ghost Shirts rise in rebellion and seize control of Ilium. The displaced workers smash the machines that took their jobs without stopping to consider which machines are useful, even critical, to human life. Paul and the other leaders of the Ghost Shirts retreat to his old office and view the destruction from afar. Other cities also rebel, but their rebellions are quickly put down, and Ilium is isolated. The next day an automated helicopter broadcasts a tape that demands that the people turn over their “false leaders”, but most people are too busy repairing the machines they so recently smashed. As the city smolders and its residents enjoy their newly regained creativity, Paul and the other Ghost Shirt leaders turn themselves in to face certain execution as traitors.

The second plot line describes the Shah of Bratpuhr’s visit to the United States. Both satirical and utopian novels often use visitors as a plot device because as the society is explained to the visitor, it is also being explained to the reader. A visitor who does not share the culture and values of the society provides a different perspective, which enables the satirist to point out the shortcomings of the system. For instance, when the Shah sees a crew from the Reeks and Wrecks working on the road, he calls them “Takarū”, which means “slaves” (22-23). Although his guide struggles to convince him that the men are not slaves but “citizens”, the Shah insists on calling

them slaves, and his mistake makes an important point. Although they are still officially citizens of the United States, the industrial system does not allow them to make any significant choices and has, in effect, reduced them to the status of slaves.

The Shah's tour of the United States also allows Vonnegut to describe aspects of life that escape the notice of Paul Proteus. The Shah visits the home of a statistically "average" American citizen, a typical university, a barbershop, and even Carlsbad Caverns, the home of EPICAC XIV, the supercomputer that runs the American economy. More importantly, the Shah's reactions provide ironic commentary on the American gospel of technology and progress. When he visits the home of the "average American", his guide proudly displays the "ultrasonic dishwasher and clothes washer" that allow the housewife to complete her chores "in a matter of seconds" (164). The Shah is not impressed. He wants to know why she is in such a hurry to finish her work. The only answer he can think of is that she has plenty of time to watch television. The Shah's perspective allows Vonnegut to highlight the banality of middle-class American life. Appliances save time, but people do not know that to do with the time they have. As the Shah leaves, he has one word of advice for the couple, "Brahouna!" – "Live!" (165).

To Shah begins and ends his trip in Ilium, which provides a physical connection to the main plot line. More important are the thematic connections between the two plot lines, and these will be discussed in the section on thematic issues. Dr. Paul Proteus is the protagonist, or main character, of *Player Piano*. As the son of Dr. George Proteus, the first director of the national industrial system, Paul seems destined to rise high in the organization. He is intelligent and fortunate that his skill as an engineer and manager are just what the employment machines require. But as the novel opens, he is troubled by a vague sense of dissatisfaction with his job,

his life, and the system in general. As he goes through the motions at work, he is “annoyed, bored, queasy” (7).

Paul’s unusual name, “Proteus”, may provide some clues to his character. In Greek mythology, Proteus is a sea monster that can change his shape at will. His battle with Odysseus is found in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In a sense, Paul Proteus also lacks a definite shape. He has no true identity but changes to suit the circumstances. When he goes to Homestead, he takes an old, beat-up car and replaces his business suit with a leather jacket in a desperate attempt to blend in with his surrounds. However, unlike the original Proteus, Paul’s changes are forced on him by circumstances beyond his control. He spends most of the novel looking for something to believe in and waiting for someone to give him orders so that he will not have to take responsibility for his actions. In his youth, the industrial system provided him with a ready-made set of beliefs and told him what to do, but he has lost faith in the system.

Paul’s later involvement with the Ghost Shirt Society repeats the same pattern of unquestioning allegiance to a large organization. For Paul, the main appeal of the Ghost Shirts is that they force him to do what they want or be killed. Rather than resenting this loss of freedom, Paul finds it “liberating” because he no longer has to make his own decisions and take responsibility for his choices (297). After the revolution fails, Paul finally recognizes his motives for joining the Ghost Shirts. He was “eager to join a large, confident organization with seeming answers to the problems that had made him sorry to be alive” (334).

Not surprisingly, Paul does not have much insight into other people, even those who are closest to him. As he indulges his fantasy about living the life of a frontier farmer, he imagines

that his status-conscious wife Anita will love the ramshackle farmhouse he intends to buy. Although she has decorated their home in colonial style, behind the antique facades she has stashed all of the modern conveniences. She may love the colonial look, but she is unwilling to abandon the modern world. Paul imagines that with his superior brainpower he can “subtly re-educate” Anita, as if this will be as simple as reprogramming a computer (135). But as the novel reminds readers again and again, human beings are more complex than machines. Paul’s inability to recognize this dooms all of his plans to failure.

Paul gains some insights into his own motives during his trial near the end of the novel. Under cross-examination and connected to a lie detector, he is forced to admit that his hatred for the industrial system comes from an unacknowledged hatred for his cold, emotionally distant father. The prosecutor hopes to use this admission to discredit the whole rebel movement, but Paul points out that we are all “motivated by something pretty sordid” and this is an essential part of what makes us human (317). In this moment, Paul becomes a representative man of the machine age. His lack of a stable identity, his inability to understand himself or others, and his desire for a powerful organization that can answer his nagging questions are revealed to be symptomatic of the times, and not just personal failings. Through the characterization of Paul Proteus, Vonnegut has shown the debilitating effects of living in a technological age that has lost touch with humane values.

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