



Mechanization of Human Life in Kurt Vonnegut's Player Piano

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"I'm the enemy of all technological progress that threatens mankind".

Kurt Vonnegut

ABSTRACT

The recently departed Kurt Vonnegut Jr. presents his earliest novel **Player Piano** to the America of 1952, forecasting its coming age of electronics. The novel which is considered in the views of most post-modern critics, the brilliant social critique of a technologically-dominated society, expressing the fear of changing the human life into inhuman mechanical miserable one; the machines are controlling everything in the world, making the human useless and helpless.

The present study is divided into three sections and a conclusion. Section one presents literary and historical background to the novel, examining its symbolic title. Section two explores the ills of technology: loneliness and idleness that clutch the modern man making his life like player piano. The solutions which are presented to the problems in times of peace are examined in section three, as an attempt to create new Utopia or find some hope. Finally, the conclusion which sums up the findings of the study.

1.1 Literary/ Historical Background

Player Piano is the first novel written by Kurt Vonnegut, it was published twice by Doubleday Science Fiction Book Club edition in 1953 and a Bantam Paberback with a new title, Utopia 14, in 1954. thus, this novel has enjoyed high success and categorized Vonnegut as a science-fiction writer (Reed, 1995: 248).

This novel can be considered a satire of modern American. It focuses on the danger of technology upon human life. The scene of the novel takes place in a near-future society where almost everything is done by machines, causing most human to become useless and helpless. This causes conflict between the wealthy upper class- the engineers and managers who run the society- and the working class, who has no more works to do; they have been replaced by machines.

Though Vonnegut was pacifist, he volunteered for the US Army in 1942 before his graduation from the college. In the army he received training as a mechanical engineer, at the Carnegie Institute in 1943. Continuing his M.A. study at the university of Chicago, his thesis was failed. Therefore he left to work at General Electric as a publicist. During the World War II the German



captured the American soldiers in 1945. They took the captured men to work in hard labor (Vonnegut, 2008: 73). Vonnegut was one of them. Actually, his personal experience in the army as a soldier and a prisoner of war had a profound influence on his later works, and was the inspiration for his famous novel **Slaughterhouse-Five** (1969) in which he exposes the violence of inhumanity of war and the dehumanization of human life, as seen in the destruction of Dredson.

In a 1973 interview Vonnegut discusses his inspiration to write **Player Piano**:

I was working for General Electric at the time, right after World War Two, and I saw a milling machine for cutting the rotors on jet engines, gas turbines. This was a very expensive thing for a machinist to do, to cut what is essentially one of these Brancusi forms. So they had a computer-operated willing machine built to cut the blades, and I was fascinated by that. This was in 1949 and the guys who were working on it were foreseeing all sorts of machines being run by little boxes and punched cards. (Playboy Magazine, quoted in Wikipedia, 2006).

Vonnegut responds to the implications of having everything run by little boxes. The idea of doing that made perfect sense. He has a stern and vicious feeling to see a little clicking box makes all the decisions. He suggests that is too bad for the human beings who get their dignity for their job.

1.2 Symbolic Title

The title of the novel is a rich and effective symbol. Each one knows that a piano player is a man who uses machine to create aesthetically pleasing music by his own making. The piano machine is useless without the creativity of the human. A player piano is a modified machine from its original design that it "plays itself", without the aid of the human. The human presence seems redundant (Ponniah, 2008: 229). The piano works in a special way, that its keys move according to a pattern of holes punched in an unwinding scroll. Its way is different from the music synthesizer, the electronic musical instrument that can produce the same sound. A player piano can be played by hand as well. When a scroll is run through the ghost-operated instrument, the movement of its keys produce the illusion that an invisible performer is playing the instrument (Wikipedia, 2006).

The title symbolizes the domination and control of the machines upon human existence. It exposes the undesirable inversion of the relationship between man and machine; the automation would replace the hands of human being, as Vonnegut forecasts, leaving the human feelingless of real pride.



2. Ills of Technology

The advancement and progress of technology and science change the future of American society. They determine its fate, culture, morality, social relationship and history. The term of "technological determination" is a theory used by American sociologist Thorstein Veblen (Chandler, 2002) and applied on the imaginative future of America painted by Vonnegut. The latter warns us from the danger of unstopped technology; the engineers and the managers are so dependent on the mechanization that makes one asking about how much control the average person has over their daily lives and how much is controlled by those on the higher and of the economic ladder. The idea of the unavoidable progress technology is called "technological imperative", which means that the human has the ability to create something, there is no reason forbids him from doing so, so he has to do it, and inevitably he will do it. Clearly there is nothing stand in the way of technological progress as Vonnegut views in **Player Piano**.

2.1 Loneliness

Vonnegut paints the future of America, machines enslave mankind. The Americans have no free will; the machines determine their status. They have replaced by men to the degree that every American has felt that they debased human values. The protagonist Paul Proteus feels isolation and disappointment; the society in which he lives has no free will, he feels himself detached from the others and he has no other choices to do just lives alone, and ignores the rules. He does a little because the computers and other machines do all the works instead of him. He feels that he lives boring and dull life. Paul, as an individual feels himself an individual, rather than a member of community with duties. Vonnegut shows the struggle of the individual against the machine-dominated society; he rises the question "How do we as human live in this world?" (Giannone, 2006: 219).

There is an attempt of Paul to escape the present life into the past, where there was no technological society. He tries to live in the earth which God has given it to man. Vonnegut assures the idea that man should feel his purpose on earth; to experience a "feeling of being needed on earth" and later he writes that it is "finding something to believe in" (Vonnegut, 1968: 94, 140). The technological mind abuses the freedom and gift of earth God has given the human creature to share life with limitations. Paul is charmed with the idea of farm life, of working with hands.

Paul expresses his sorrow to see that the perfection of machine has made a man imperfect. He portrays the American home represented by Edgar Rice Burroughs Hagstrohm and his family live a perfect house. He enjoys having car, furniture, and advanced computer. The computer which can do thousands works instead of man. Man has no purpose with the presence of machines. Another painful scene witnesses the machine dominated society is that in



destroying the house of Hagstrohm, a soldier who is the victim of technology. He escapes this system of technology running to the woods. He has no longer have the ability to face the unstoppable and unavoids progress of technology. He has no free will to determine his future or even his fate; he is trapped by technological determination. Vonnegut's demonstration upon this feeling of undergoing to machines is clear in many of his works, which employ science and fantasy techniques to communicate his concerns about the destructive capabilities of technology.

In a failed experiment by Paul and Finnerty to immortalize the workmanship of Rudy Hens, they discover that Rudy is as human being. He is the controller of machines and is not controlled by machines. "...This little loop in the box before Paul, here was Rudy as Rudy had been to him machine that afternoon-Rudy, the setter of speeds, the controller of the cutting tool. This was assense of Rudy as far as the machine was concerned" (Vonnegut, 1968: 58).

Machines clutch the will of human being, the widespread mechanization robs him from his real purpose and existence, especially the individual's need and struggle to prove his/her existence (for purpose) more than his need for a comfortable existence, and the search to overcome loneliness when marriages and friendship decline. He fears the result of breaking with the former friends and his quite environment.

2.2 Idleness

The pro-technology managers and engineers are proud in the advancement of technology; they see the Americans enjoy a complete conformity, a house full of machines that wash clothes and dishes, ticket machines at train stations, vending machines in the cafes and streets. These applications of technology are recognizable, but there are big machines stole the works of man putting the humanity under the curse of idleness. Machines took all the jobs where a man can be true to himself. Being an idle, with a little to do or may be nothing to do, does not mean that the individual will suffer hungry or poverty. On the contrary, living standards have never been higher and the Americans are paid low wages for complete house or flat.

The everyday feeling of uselessness is a horror which tortures and threads the value of human. Paul suffers from inner conflict whether to join the current status in life or to find away to change the system which changes the human into inhuman. Paul meets in the labor the down trodden biker, he was unstable about his son future because his son might no pass the civil service exam. Vonnegut satirizes the educational system of America which is also mechanized; one is classified according to the computer results exam, surely there are not many jobs left to do with most being taken by machines. If the



student has a low degree and he is not judged by the machines to be suited to any of few jobs left, he has to choose one of the three kinds of jobs, the reeks of wrecks, the job at the factory working with robots like Paul does, or the army. Even the army is mechanized, wars are fought by machines, so millions of soldiers remain idle. The efficiency of weapons determines the results of the battle. The strength of the soldiers wilts the face of the automated weapon.

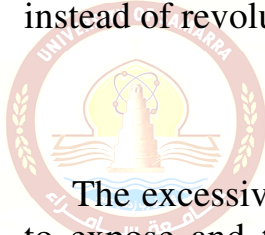
Everything is done by machines in new American world, there is no purpose for the human being. They have nothing to do just enjoy the luxury and domestic comfort which is created by the pro-technology, the engineers and managers who are unfortunately are being replaced by machines too. That miserable condition of the machine-dominated society changes the latter to become a machine making flawless music without the presence of human hands, called "Player Piano".

3. New Utopia

As the book opens, the reader knows that Paul is dissatisfied with the society; it lacks the human values. He is no more able to accept its ills, he feels as if he is in a dilemma whether to join his age of technology and get out of his humanity or escapes the society and lives in "the fantasy of the new, good life ahead of him. somewhere, outside the society, there was a place for a man and wife" (Vonnegut, 1968: 162) Paul searches for new Utopia. Actually, **Player Piano** is considered as Utopian and Dystopian Literature. It is significant to refer that the word "Utopia", is a term coined by Thomas More, a scholar in Greek and Latin. The meaning of this term is derived from a combination of two Greek words meaning 'no-place' and 'well-place'. Utopian Literature describes a non-existent perfect society, while Dystopian Literature is concerned with fictional society, **Player Piano** focuses on sociological themes rather than science and technology.

Paul ignores his unjust society, as an attempt to escape his miserable reality. Finally, he realizes that ignoring the society is not a solution to the problems, its' just an escape. Therefore, Paul decided to join a revolutionary organization called the Ghost Shirt Society and even becomes it is leader. The name of the revolution is taken from the Native American Ghost/Dance, its members compare the painful situation of the modern man to the Indians during the time of Independence. The Ghost Shirt Society is a motive for revolting against the debased values of the modern age. They yearn to the past and remember its beauty, values, and simplicity. They think that the religion will restore old values for people. They search for new Utopia where human's value and dignity are restored. The people take part in the revolution, they begin to destroy all the machines hoping to destroy the mechanized system which represent the inhumanity. Unfortunately, the revolution fail to achieve its aim. As the book closes, the reader knows that a robot helicopter flies over the destroyed

machines asking the leaders of the revolution to surrender. Suddenly, the mechanism in the helicopter failed (Ponniah: 231). This is a hint that the machines will never replace man, and the goal of revolution is to give man hope instead of revolutionized society.



CONCLUSIONS

The excessive replacement of human hands by machines, obliges Vonnegut to expose and tackle this existential problem; technology would rob human beings of a sense of purpose. All the humans are left with little to do or with nothing, except the creators of technology, the engineers and managers who feel pride by the levels of luxury, unaware that they will be sooner or later replaced by the same machines.

Vonnegut warns America from the coming age of advancing and progressing of electronics; it mechanizes each aspect of their life, leaving them lost, lonely and their human power ends in vain. They do nothing, so they are nothing more than toys; they have no free will because the machines determine their future and fate. Vonnegut suggests solutions to this dilemma, escaping the reality may be a solution to the individual himself but it never changes the society, on the contrary, it increases his isolation. Fighting the machines is a solution but it declines. The failure of one big machines, represented by the helicopter, gives hope to the new universe that machine is no longer control human life.

By Piano Player, Vonnegut sends a message to the modern American suggesting that the advancement of technology is not a measure to the advanced life; the security, freedom, health and equality are references to the advanced humanity then the advancement of whole society.

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