

Player Piano Study Guide

Player Piano by Kurt Vonnegut

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Plot Summary

In a future America after the third great war, machines have taken all dignity from the working man. Doctor Paul Proteus is an up-and-coming engineer and manager who is in charge of the Ilium Works. His father helped establish the machines that now run the economy, and Paul is slated to follow in his footsteps. Paul, though, is overcome with doubts about the new world his father imagined, and his doubts make him vulnerable. Before he knows it, he's lost his wife and his job, and he's been conscripted as the leader of the revolution of man against machine.

As the novel begins, Doctor Paul Proteus is manager of the Ilium Works, the highest paid and most powerful man in Ilium, New York. He also has the highest IQ in Ilium, in a world where your opportunities are decided by machines, based on your IQ and your performance on aptitude tests. Paul is married to Anita, a competitive, ambitious woman whose IQ was too low for her to go to college. Anita mistakenly (or connivingly) told Paul that she was pregnant, prompting his marriage proposal. Later they discovered that Anita is barren.

Paul is vaguely dissatisfied with his life and the world, and he longs for a simpler, nobler life. His old friend Finnerty appears at Paul's house. Finnerty had been promoted higher than Paul, to Washington, D.C., but he's even more dissatisfied. He's quit his job and given himself over to drunkenness. Finnerty causes Paul to get into trouble with the law, and then disappears into the "average man" world across the river from the Ilium Works, where the people displaced by machines are paid minimal wages by the government to do unnecessary work.

Paul has already decided to quit his job and become a farmer when his bosses try to recruit him as a spy. Finnerty, they say, has become a radical rebel leader, part of an underground movement against machines called the Ghost Shirt Society. They plan to pretend to fire Paul, so that he can infiltrate the rebel organization as a spy. Paul tries to quit, but his bosses don't believe him. They think he's just playing along with their scheme. Paul's wife, Anita, after hearing he's been fired, leaves Paul for her new lover, one of Paul's competitors.

Alone and purposeless, Paul wanders into a bar. His drink is drugged, and the next thing he knows, he's in the headquarters of the Ghost Shirt Society. As predicted, Paul is being recruited. More than that, because Paul's father was so important and famous, the Ghost Shirt Society has Paul slated as their figurehead. They've already announced to the world that Paul is leading the rebellion against machines controlling mankind. Paul is arrested, but his bosses still believe he's acting as a spy. When they ask him to inform on the conspirators, Paul realizes he believes in the Ghost Shirt Society and refuses, taking on his appointed role as leader.

Paul is tried for treason, and in the middle of his trial, the rebellion begins. Paul is whisked out of the courtroom by the rebels. Ilium is overtaken. Once the rebellion starts, though, the leaders can't stop it. The people rise up and begin destroying all the



machines, without preference. Although the Ghost Shirt Society is successful in a few cities, the rebellion is quickly squashed. Ilium is the last stronghold. As a new day dawns, the people put themselves to work, rebuilding what they've just destroyed. The leaders are distraught, seeing that human nature makes men build and build, without thinking about what they are building. Finally, the leaders give themselves over to the authorities, becoming martyrs to their cause.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

In a future America, after the third great war, machines have taken all dignity from the working man. Doctor Paul Proteus is an up-and-coming engineer and manager who is in charge of the Ilium Works. His father helped establish the machines that now run the economy, and Paul is slated to follow in his footsteps. Paul, though, is overcome with doubts about the new world his father imagined, and his doubts make him vulnerable. Before he knows it, he's lost his wife and his job, and he's been conscripted as the leader of the revolution of man against machine.

The novel begins with a description of Ilium, New York, which is divided into three areas. One area is the Ilium Works, the great manufacturing plant that generates goods. The second is where all the managers and engineers who run the plant live, and the third is where all the average people live, across the river. During the next war after World War II, all production was taken over by machines, and there was no work left for average people. Paul Proteus's father, George Proteus, was one of the men responsible for this new industrial revolution.

Dr. Paul Proteus runs the Ilium Works, and now, he is introducing a cat to the plant as a mouser. His secretary, Dr. Katherine Finch, who seems to spend most of her time conversing with her fiancé, Dr. Bud Calhoun, who works at the plant, reminds Paul that one of the machines at the plant is producing a lot of rejects. Paul goes out to check the machine, remembering that it's one of the first that he and his college buddies Finnerty and Shepherd, put together. They recorded the actions of a master machinist, Rudy Hertz, and then used the tape to automate the movements of the machine. That put the master machinist and all other machinists out of work. Paul is now head of the Ilium Works. Finnerty has been promoted to Washington, and Shepherd works below Paul in the Works, always looking for a chance at promotion.

Paul has taken the cat with him to review the malfunctioning machine, which is just worn down with age. The cat escapes and is sucked up by a cleaning machine. Before Paul can catch the cat, it has electrocuted itself on the outer fence of the plant in its hurry to escape. Paul asks for the cat's body to be taken to his office.

Katherine congratulates Paul on his speech for tonight, which she is typing. There's a dinner in honor of the Ilium Works, and Paul will give a talk about the Second Industrial Revolution, where machines took over the routine jobs of running production machines. Kroner and Baer, important officials above Paul, will be there. Paul's wife, Anita, calls to tell Paul that his old friend Finnerty is coming and tells Paul to pick up some Irish whisky for Finnerty. She also prompts Paul about convincing Kroner to give him an open promotion to director of the Pittsburgh Works.



After Paul hangs up with his wife, he can't remember why he asked for the dead cat to be brought to his office. He asks Katherine to have the cat buried and tells her that the malfunctioning machine is just old and that any day now, it will die.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 is complex and contains a lot of information, setting up the background for the story. Paul Proteus, an important and successful man and son of an important and successful man, is vaguely dissatisfied with his life. He focuses his efforts on a stray cat, but he unwittingly leads the cat to a bad end. The cat is symbolic of what's happened to society. Average working men have been chewed up and spit out by machinery, and Paul is partly to blame. He works for a system that has stolen meaning from men's lives.

The story of Rudy Hertz is also symbolic. The master machinist was thrilled to be recognized for his work, but his own talent put him, and all other machinists, out of work. The idea of men's own talent putting them out of work will be repeated throughout the book.

Notice that Katherine Finch, though she has earned a Ph.D., is still a secretary. This book was written in 1952, when men's and women's workplace roles were deeply divided. In the alternate future of this book, the women's rights movement never took place, and women function as housewives and secretaries.



Chapters 2 - 3

Chapters 2 - 3 Summary

Dr. Ewing J. Halyard works for the State Department as a tour guide for important visitors. He is showing the Shah of Bratpuhr, leader of 6 million people, and his nephew/interpreter Khashdrahr Miasma, around the country. Currently, they are touring Ilium, New York. Halyard explains that anyone who can't do a job better than a machine must join either the army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, a public works department.

The Shah at first thinks the system is communism, but Halyard corrects him. Then the Shah thinks the people are slaves, and Halyard realizes that he'll never get the Shah to understand. He tries to explain the concept of "citizen," and the Shah learns his first American word, translating "citizen" as his native word for "slave."

The story returns to Paul Proteus. Instead of buying a new, expensive car appropriate to the position of head of the Ilium Works, Dr. Proteus drives an old, rundown Plymouth with a broken headlight. He's got a disused pistol in the glove box, left over from the old days of riots and saboteurs attaching the manufacturing facilities. He knows it's not safe to leave a pistol there, but he leaves it there out of habit.

Whenever Paul drives across the river into Homestead, where the average people live, he takes off his coat and tie and replaces them with a leather jacket that he keeps in the trunk of his Plymouth. Today, he is driving across the river to pick up Irish whisky for his friend Finnerty.

On the bridge, Paul must slow down for a large crew of men from the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, popularly known as the Reeks and Wrecks. There are far more Reeks and Wrecks than there are actual jobs for them to do. Forty men are all assigned to fill one small pothole in the road ahead. Most of them are doing nothing. As Paul drives past, one of them lets him know that his headlight is out.

Paul goes to a bar near the bridge to get Irish whiskey for Finnerty. He's uncomfortable among the discontented average people, who have no useful work because of engineers like him. One of the customers recognizes Paul. The man turns out to be Rudy Hertz, who does not seem to realize that the recording Paul made of him put hundreds of men (including himself) out of work. Rudy is just proud that he was chosen as the most talented machinist. As Rudy announces to the bar who Paul is, Paul becomes more and more uncomfortable.

One of the men tells Paul that his son has failed the exams, and that the boy's only two choices are the Army or the Reeks and Wrecks. Paul lamely suggests that the boy, who is good with his hands, could open a repair shop, but the man scoffs. There are more repair shops than things to be repaired.



After the bartender brings Paul's whisky, Paul tries to leave, but Rudy insists on playing a song in Paul's honor on the player piano. As soon as the song is over, Paul runs out.

Chapters 2 - 3 Analysis

Halyard experiences great frustration trying to convey to the Shah the idea of "citizen," which he thinks is beyond the Shah's ability to grasp. The Shah persists in seeing the average men, forced to work for the government, as slaves. This interpretation is meaningful because the Shah is right. Men are left without choices in their lives. They are slaves to their test scores and to the machines that assign each one a role in the society. The Shah's first interpretation of the system, communism, is also appropriate. The government is so intertwined with the corporate entity that controls the whole economy from a central location that Halyard's distinction, that it's not communism because the economy is run by a joint corporate group, is meaningless.

Meanwhile, Paul is brought face to face with the truth about the world he's helped to build during his foray into Homestead. The bridge that divides the two worlds creates a division between the two well-defined social classes. On one side live people with nothing useful to do and no purpose in life, and on the other side live people with useful jobs of engineering and managing. The pointlessness of the government jobs created to support the unemployed masses is highlighted by the forty Reeks and Wrecks, all assigned to fill one pothole and mostly doing nothing at all.

In the bar, Paul is brought face to face with the men he's put out of work. Rudy Hertz represents a bygone era, when men were master craftsmen who took pride in their work. Ironically, Rudy's own accomplishments, his own mastery of his craft put him out of work. Rudy doesn't seem to realize the significance of the recording he made, but Paul does. Talking about it makes him more and more uncomfortable.

The player piano symbolizes exactly what's happened to the society, and the book is named after it. All of the endeavors of mankind, from operating a lathe to playing the piano, have been given over to machines.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Paul comes home to his wife Anita. Finnerty has arrived, and Anita says she's sent him on to the celebration at the club. Anita hates Finnerty. He's dirty and badly groomed, and she doesn't like his attitude. She pretends he's her friend as he has an important position in the company.

Finnerty has always been an outsider and rebelled against the proper conduct for one of the elite managers and engineers. Paul's old car is a minor rebellion in relationship to Finnerty's conduct and deportment. Paul traces Finnerty's behavior back to the fact that Finnerty's parents were poor, with low IQs. Finnerty is only an engineer by the fluke of his intelligence.

Paul tells Anita about his experience in Homestead, and she chides him for letting it upset him, saying that it sounds like the men were honored to meet him. She has all of Paul's clothes laid out for him, and she's full of advice on how to try to convince Kroner that Paul should have the job of Pittsburgh manager.

When Paul goes upstairs to get dressed, he finds Finnerty there. Finnerty has quit his job. He says that he couldn't face another year at the Meadows, the yearly company morale-building camp. Being invited is an honor, only for people with promising careers.

Anita comes in the room and finds that Finnerty is there. She and Finnerty fight, with Finnerty saying that he could create a machine to be as good a wife as Anita. Anita takes off for the club.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Finnerty embodies discontent and rebellion. He purposefully defies the social expectations of his class. After all, he was not raised in the class of engineers and managers. His background ties him more to the people of homestead.

Anita also comes from the lower class, but she serves as a literary foil for Finnerty. While Finnerty feels kinship with the lower classes and a horror at the social niceties of the wealthy and privileged, Anita strives for nothing more than to be the wealthiest and the most privileged. She embraces all of the niceties required by society, striving to dress perfectly and act perfectly, according to the social rules around her. To Finnerty, this makes her a robot, responding by rote to a complex system of rules and priorities. Anita is not an individual, but a person governed by the society's class system. Like the machines, Anita lacks individuality.



Chapters 5 - 6

Chapters 5 - 6 Summary

Paul runs after Anita, and he drives with her to the dinner. Paul and Anita greet Kroner and Baer. Kroner is a fatherly figure, and he was a good friend of Paul's father. He makes Paul feel like a child. Paul and Anita learn that there have been rumors that Paul is mentally unwell, and Baer lets it slip that Shepherd told them. Shepherd was one of Paul's college friends, and they started at Ilium together. Shepherd is fiercely competitive, but he has never been as successful as Paul or Finnerty. Embarrassed that Paul knows Shepherd informed on him, Shepherd takes a walk out on the golf course.

Fred Berringer, a young engineer whose test scores are barely good enough for his job but who comes from a well-placed family, challenges Paul to a checkers match. Paul is the local checkers champion, and all of the young, new engineers try to beat him. The match is scheduled for later in the evening.

At the dinner, Paul sees that Shepherd isn't at his place. Paul goes out to the golf course to find him. Anita trails behind Paul, urging him to fire Shepherd or at least make him pay for what he's done. Paul makes her stay behind when he goes to Shepherd. Paul isn't mad and doesn't plan to fire his old college friend, but Shepherd insists on a transfer. On the way back into the dinner, Shepherd fights with Anita. Then, everyone covers up the incident by pretending Shepherd is ill.

Paul gives his speech about the Second Industrial Revolution, and Finnerty shows up, drunk. After dinner, Paul goes to play in the chess match. Berringer brings in his secret weapon, Checker Charley, a checkers-playing computer designed by his father. At first, Paul wants to quit. Then, Finnerty convinces him to play and takes bets on Paul against the machine. Surprisingly, Paul begins winning the game. Then, something goes wrong, and Checker Charley catches fire. Berringer accuses Finnerty of sabotaging the machine, but Finnerty reveals that he simply noticed that one of the wires had a loose connection. Berringer is angry that Finnerty didn't tell him, and everyone wants their money back. Finnerty refuses to return his winnings and walks out.

Later, as Paul and Anita lie in bed, Anita tries to dissect Kroner's invitation for Paul to come see him next week. Paul just wants to sleep, but Anita is only concerned with the Pittsburgh job. Anita blames Finnerty for ruining the evening, and Paul tells her that Finnerty quit his job.

Anita tells Paul that his father would want him to become manager of Pittsburgh. Anita seems to idolize Paul's father, whom she didn't know. Paul, also, barely knew his father, who was always gone. Still, Paul's position as the great George Proteus's son had a lot to do with his advancement. Before finally falling asleep, Anita notices how, at the right moment, Shepherd seems to look like Paul's father.



Chapters 5 - 6 Analysis

At the dinner, the reader learns that the intelligence-based system that is supposedly run without bias by machines does have bias. Berringer does not really deserve his position. He only has it because of his family's position. When he challenges Paul to a checkers match, it is clear that Berringer could never beat Paul on his own. Checker Charley is not even Berringer's own machine. By using the machine, Berringer is feeding off of the work and intelligence of someone else, relying on his father's abilities and efforts to advance himself.

If Berringer's father had been at the checker match, he would have probably noticed the short circuit and fixed it before the game. Berringer, though, is a usurper, someone who takes advantage of what others had done instead of doing things himself. He feels entitled to success that he hasn't earned, and he shows this feeling of entitlement in his anger at Finnerty for not telling him that the machine had a short. Why is Berringer entitled to benefit from Finnerty's superior knowledge and abilities? Why is Berringer entitled to benefit from his father's superior abilities? In a way, machines make everyone a usurper of someone else's work and ability. This robs people of the pride in doing their own work, and it also creates people like Berringer who take advantage of the system to advance without earning their position.

Paul's father embodies the new system, where machines govern people's lives. Paul's whole life has been merely a shadow of his father's. Although Paul has brains and ability, his powerful position is just as much a product of nepotism as Berringer's position at the plant. Paul is one of the favored few, since he has the personal attention of Kroner, his father's close friend. Anita's feelings for Paul seem to be a kind of transference of her admiration of his father. She doesn't seem to really know her husband. Instead, she sees him as a new version of his powerful father, a man she only knows from his official record.



Chapters 7 - 8

Chapters 7 - 8 Summary

The Shah of Bratpuhr watches a parade display of a division from America's large standing army. Private First Class Elmo C. Hacketts, Jr. is one of the soldiers. He hates the Army and looks forward to his retirement in twenty-three years. In the meantime, he does only what he's ordered to. Inwardly, he imagines insulting his superiors. His weekend pass has been suspended because, at inspection, his fly was open. The Shah insists that these men, also, are slaves. He also says that, with everything Americans have changed, they haven't changed the Army.

Meanwhile, Paul heads off to work the morning after the celebration at the club. His car won't start, and he discovers that Finnerty has used all his gas. The gun in the glove compartment is also gone. Paul siphons some gas into the car and heads to work. On the way, his car begins to stall out. One of the Reeks and Wrecks discovers the problem, a bad gasket, and improvises a new one out of a piece of leather. The rest of the crew tries to find jobs that need to be done on the stalled out car. Paul gives some money to the man who fixed the gasket, and he says, "First money I've earned in five years." Paul lies that he owns a grocery business, and the man gives Paul his contact information in case he ever has a job opening.

When Paul arrives at his office, he finds that Bud Calhoun is out of a job. Bud designed a machine that could do his job, and the company took the plans and fired all of the people filling Bud's position. Even though Bud's a genius at designing machines, his test results say he's not qualified for design. Now, he's out of a job, and he'll have to work for the Reeks and Wrecks. At least he got a \$500 bonus for designing the machine. Paul can't help Bud because the computers limit whom he can hire.

The guards at the front gate buzz Paul's office because Finnerty has showed up, asking to tour the plant. Visitors must be accompanied by a guard, according to policy, but one of the guards is sick. Paul gives Finnerty permission to tour the plant without a guard. The situation gives Bud an idea. He thinks he could create an automated system to decide who could enter the plant. That way, the guards wouldn't have to take up Katherine and Paul's time. Katherine gets upset because Bud is talking about automating her job, the same thing that got him fired.

Paul leaves the couple to fight it out, and he gets a call from his wife. Anita complains about Finnerty, and then she wants to rehearse with Paul what he will say to Kroner about the Pittsburgh job. He avoids the conversation. Then, Shepherd calls Paul. He's found Finnerty walking around the plant, without a guard, and making drawings of the layout and machines. Berringer is also on the line. Paul admits that Finnerty is there, against policy, on his orders, and he takes full responsibility. As Paul hangs up, he hears Bud saying that Paul, too, could easily be replaced by a machine.



Chapters 7 - 8 Analysis

In the world of the novel, the people do not expect any future wars. The previous war was won by mechanized production producing weapons and a huge army of soldiers who used the weapons. During peacetime, the standing Army has nothing to do. It has become a government-run holding ground for people who aren't smart enough to compete with machines. Like the Reeks and Wrecks, the soldiers are pointless and embittered. Unlike the Reeks and Wrecks, the Army maintains strict discipline and ekes out punishment for minor infractions, like accidentally leaving your fly undone. Hacketts' bitter monologue shows the seething anger just beneath the surface of the "average man."

Paul makes a mistake when he allows Finnerty access to the plant. Shepherd and Berringer are now Paul's enemies, and they will surely report Paul's lapse to Kroner. Allowing Finnerty free access to the plant is the action of a fallible human being, something that could be avoided by simply replacing Paul with a machine. His action is akin to a master machinist who moves his arm the wrong way by mistake and creates a reject. A machine simply follows orders, rules, and routines. As Bud says, Paul could be replaced by a machine, and no such mistakes would be made.

Bud's position, in fact, is universal. A clever enough man with clever enough technology could make all human jobs obsolete. Then, all people would find themselves in the same situation as Bud, with nothing but a pink slip.

Still, Bud's situation highlights the fact that, as much as mankind relies on its system of machines, the machines are not infallible. Like Checker Charley, the machines that are designed to perform perfectly have subtle malfunctions. Bud is a genius at design, but he's not qualified to design because of the machine's analysis of his abilities. Therefore, there must be a flaw in the analysis, a flaw in the system that leaves geniuses like Bud out in the cold. Meanwhile, nepotism is still hard at work keeping undeserving people like Berringer in high positions. Is this really an ideal, efficient society, where each person is justly evaluated for his ability to contribute? Because the system and the machines are created by fallible people, they are inherently flawed.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Finnerty, who still has his keys to Paul's office, comes to see Paul later in the afternoon. Paul goes with Finnerty to have a drink, and although Paul plans to go to the club, as usual, Finnerty directs him across the bridge to the bar where Paul bought the Irish whiskey. Finnerty confesses that he took Paul's gun. He says that he considered shooting himself and that he threw the gun in the river.

When Finnerty and Paul get to the bar, Paul recognizes the man who said his son had failed his college exams. Paul had said he'd ask one of the higher-ups what the man's would do, and Paul hasn't done so. He hopes the man doesn't recognize him. Finnerty and Paul order drinks, and a huge parade begins passing the bar. Each group in the parade represents a lodge, and they display bright costumes and secret symbols.

The man who Paul spoke to before sits down with Finnerty and Paul, and Paul asks about his son. The man says that his son, left with no choices, hanged himself. Paul begins to sob, blurting how sorry he is. The man reveals that he made the son up entirely, just to see how Paul would react. Finnerty tells the man that Paul's not the average engineer, and Finnerty reveals that he's an engineer, too, and that he has quit his job. The man introduces himself as a Protestant minister and anthropologist, Reverend James J. Lasher.

Lasher lectures Finnerty and Paul on the evils of the current system and how average men have been deprived of the dignity of having a useful job. The people are discontented. Lasher believes that a revolution is coming and that a messiah will arise who can lead the people to revolt against machines. He speculates that everyone with an IQ above 110 will get massacred.

Lasher introduces Finnerty and Paul to Luke Lubbock, who borrows their booth to change costumes so that he can join a different lodge group in the parade. Luke is a consummate joiner who holds positions of honor in many lodges, but he's not very bright. His IQ is around 80. He's one of the few people satisfied with the dignity that comes from lodge honors.

Lasher reminds Paul that there are real men whose sons kill themselves because they can't pass the college exams. He gives Finnerty his address and leaves.

Paul and Finnerty also meet Alfy, who makes a living by betting on what song is playing on the TV. Alfy has taught himself to recognize songs based on the musicians' movements. He started out as a pool shark, but there were too many competitors in that field.

Meanwhile, Paul has been getting drunk. He calls Anita and lets her know he'll be late. She says that getting drunk will help him blow off steam, but she begs him to get



Finnerty to move out. When Paul gets back to the booth, he sees that Finnerty has picked up two women. The women seem antagonistic to the two engineers, and Paul tries to make friends. He gets more and more drunk. Finally, he stands on the table to make a speech. The table collapses, and Paul loses consciousness.

When Paul awakes, Finnerty is composing impromptu music at the player piano. Finnerty refuses to leave with Paul. He appears to be staying with Lasher. Paul drives away alone.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The visit to the bar in Chapter 9 highlights the social hierarchy of the society. Lasher functions as the voice of the opposition to the current system, and as he points out, IQ is not a much better criterion for dividing people into classes than wealth is. A man has an opportunity to make more wealth, but in the current system, no one has an opportunity to change their IQ or qualifications. As the reader has seen in the case of Bud, the IQ system is hardly perfect.

Luke and Alfy function as literary foils. Luke is not too bright, and he is easily appeased by cheap glitter and meaningless titles. He is a joiner, happy to be part of any community. Because his identity is wrapped up in things outside himself, instead of in his inner worth, Luke is content. Alfy, on the other hand, is extremely bright. He prides himself on his work and his intelligence. He is by no means a joiner, thumbing his nose at the Army and the Reeks and Wrecks and instead using his intelligence to find a niche for himself. Alfy judges himself only by his inner worth. Oddly, he, too, is content, because he does not depend on a job or societal approval for his self-worth.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Paul shows up to work late, with a hangover. He finds that Shepherd has usurped his desk and his job. He's busy signing papers "Lawson Shepherd, in absence of P. Proteus." Shepherd has also taken calls from Kroner and the police, and he let them know that Paul hadn't shown up yet. Apparently, the police have found Paul's gun and want to question him about it.

Paul calls Kroner back, and Kroner asks Paul and Anita over for dinner. Paul notices that Shepherd has searched his desk and found the empty whisky bottle in the bottom drawer. Paul kicks Shepherd out of his office and orders Katherine to shoot Shepherd if he returns. Then, Paul leaves for the day.

Anita is at home in the kitchen that she redecorated herself. Her neighbors have dubbed it artistic. It's done over in a Colonial style, and Paul fantasizes about living a humble life, living off of the land with his wife. His fantasy is interrupted by the automated washing machine, which spits out clean clothes.

Shepherd has already informed Anita that she and Paul are invited to Kroner's. She has his clothes ready for him. She quizzes him about what he did the previous night and about the women at the bar. Finally, Anita presents Paul with an outline of how to behave and what to say at Kroner's in order to get the Pittsburgh job. Before Paul heads upstairs, Anita returns to the subject of the women at the bar. Over Paul's protest that he did nothing wrong, Anita airs her real concern: Did anyone important see Paul with the women? The question drives Paul to lie and say he slept with one of the women, and Anita seems unconcerned. When he says that Shepherd saw him, though, she cries out. Paul admits that he's joking.

As Paul goes upstairs to change, he wonders whether he has enough money to quit his job and live a simple life away from society.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Shepherd's competition with Paul has come to a head. He has been informing Kroner of Paul's misdeeds, and he's been talking with Paul's wife. Meanwhile, Anita proves herself more concerned with Paul's advancement than with a loving marriage or a meeting of the minds with her husband. She's more concerned with whether anyone saw Paul with another woman than with whether Paul sleeps with someone else.

Paul's reaction to his worsening situation is to withdraw from society. He envisions himself working with his hands and hunting his own food. He even envisions Anita living a pioneer life and cutting up a bear to store the meat for the winter. Anita, who does the

laundry with a touch of a button, would be poorly suited to a pioneer life, and Paul does not seem to realize how deep the divide between them really is.



Chapters 11 - 12

Chapters 11 - 12 Summary

Doctor Ewing J. Halyard shows the Shah of Bratpuhr the giant computer that calculates all the necessary factors of the economy and makes decisions, large and small, about production. The computer is called EPICAC XIV, and it is built within Carlsbad Caverns. The massive computer spreads out over several chambers.

President Jonathan Lynn is at Carlsbad Caverns to dedicate the newest section of EPICAC XIV. Lynn is an ex-television actor and only a figurehead in running the country. The country is really run by EPICAC and industry. Lynn exists to make glowing speeches in front of television cameras.

When Halyard explains EPICAC to the Shah, the Shah asks the computer a riddle that will supposedly be answered by a god prophesied to come. The riddle is: "Silver bells shall light my way, / And nine times nine maidens fill my day, / And mountain lakes will sink from sight, / And tigers' teeth will fill the night." The computer, not surprisingly, has no answer. The Shah doesn't realize that all questions need to be fed into the computer on punch cards. The Shah calls EPICAC a false god.

Meanwhile, Paul and Anita go to visit Kroner and his wife, fondly known as "Mom." According to the Kroner tradition, the men separate from the women. Paul and Kroner go to see Kroner's gun collection, an excuse to talk among themselves. Kroner cleans his gun as he talks. He knows that the police found Paul's gun, and the gun had Finnerty's fingerprints all over it. Also, Paul is in trouble for letting Finnerty roam the plant unguarded. Shepherd has been informing on him. Still, Kroner believes in Paul. Paul expresses his doubts about the current system. Kroner tells Paul that what they're doing is more than just making machines, and Paul looks to Kroner to show him what Paul has been missing, the knowledge that will make him believe in their mission. All Kroner has, though, is the same meaningless propaganda.

Kroner says that Paul is still in the running for the Pittsburgh job, along with Fred Garth, an unobtrusive man, liked by everyone and good at his job. Kroner mentions that Paul's recent activities could land him in jail and says that the Pittsburgh job will be Paul's if Paul will testify that Finnerty and Lasher are traitors and saboteurs. Baer comes into the room and congratulates Paul on getting the Pittsburgh job. Kroner mentions that Paul has doubts of whether progress is good, and it seems that this is a new question to Baer. The men rejoin the women. Anita has been explaining that Finnerty invited himself to their house. Then, the group listens to Kroner's new phonograph.

Chapters 11 - 12 Analysis

The name "EPICAC" is very similar to the word "ipecac," a substance that makes people vomit. The name reveals Vonnegut's feelings about a computer that makes



important decisions about the world. EPICAC is far more powerful than President Lynn is. The computer is the true ruler of the land, and the Shah is insightful in calling it a false god.

By today's standards, EPICAC is hopelessly outdated, composed of vacuum tubes, fed information with punch cards, and sprawling out over a huge cavern. EPICAC, though, has more power than any modern computer, since it controls the lives of every person in the United States.

In Chapter 12, Kroner shows himself to be unthinking and blind. Kroner knows what's going on and listens to Paul's doubts, but he has no response to him. Paul is looking for an argument on the side of the system or on the side of the machines that he can believe in, and he finds nothing but empty propaganda.

The gun and the phonograph, the two things Kroner loves, are both machines. The guns intimidate and represent power. The phonograph plays "Stout-Hearted Men," a fight song. Kroner is a true believer, and he has a powerful, intimidating fighting force behind him. Although Kroner never overtly threatens Paul, he uses intimidation and blackmail. Paul's choices are promotion or jail. Kroner never seems to doubt for a moment what Paul will choose.

Kroner's treatment of Paul also highlights the cronyism and nepotism of the current system. Kroner is willing to forgive almost any behavior of Paul's. Nothing matters but Paul's IQ and test scores, which portray a Paul of many years ago, and Paul's position as Kroner's good friend's son.



Chapters 13 - 14

Chapters 13 - 14 Summary

Paul and Anita lie in their beds. Paul figures out that, with all his property, he has about \$750,000, enough to quit his job and retire. He hasn't let Anita know his position, because he wants to slowly acclimatize her to the idea. Anita is bubbling over about the visit to Kroner's and the Pittsburgh job. He is afraid of losing her. When Paul thinks of his love for Anita, he thinks about her sexual abilities, her planning, and that he has nothing else but her.

Paul secretly continues planning to quit his job. He reads books about strong men who do real, out-of-doors work. Paul's shirts to wear to the Meadows arrive. Each team wears a different color of shirt, and Paul discovers that he is the captain of the blue team, a position of honor. Shepherd is captain of the green team, a big honor for a man in Shepherd's position, even though the green team is the least prestigious. Paul also receives a songbook with fight songs for each team in it.

Katherine is going to the Mainland, a camp for wives, children, and female employees that's across from the Meadows. She tells Paul that Bud will probably be put to work in the Reeks and Wrecks.

Finnerty comes to borrow Paul's car to get his things from Paul's house and take them across the river. Finnerty seems to know everything that's going on, and he's somewhat distant from Paul. Then Kroner calls and tells Paul that their plan to arrest Finnerty and Lasher will have to wait. The people in Washington think that Finnerty and Lasher are involved in something bigger, and Kroner says he'll talk to Paul about it at the Meadows. Then, the conversation devolves as Kroner and Baer start a playful competition about which team will win, the blue team or the white team.

Paul dejectedly realizes that he has no choice but to go to the Meadows, and he thinks about what he will do in the future. He thinks of farming and arranges to see an old farm that's for sale. It's the only piece of farmland that's not part of the huge mechanized farm run by the company. A man named Gottwald bought it years ago and kept it as an old-fashioned farm, and in his will, he decreed that the farm couldn't be changed. It's remained on the market for fourteen years. Paul arranges with the real estate agent to go visit the farm.

Chapters 13 - 14 Analysis

Paul's feelings for Anita are explored in Chapter 13. Paul has reached the end of his rope. He does not want to become a witness against his friend Finnerty, and Kroner has no arguments to make Paul believe in the current system. Paul doesn't seem to take the idea of jail seriously; it's too far away from his existing reality. How could someone as rich and important as Paul go to jail?



Paul's inclination is to drop out. He knows that this could easily drive Anita away, but he argues to himself that he can slowly win her over to his plan. This seems overly optimistic, based on Anita's character. Paul's love for Anita also seems shallow. She has attracted him through her sexuality, which seems like a tool Anita uses to get what she wants. She shields Paul from reality to some extent, by running his life. Paul is afraid of having nothing and of being exposed to reality, so he tells himself that he loves her.

The books that Paul reads are fantasies about men who work with their hands and have real purpose in their lives. These books are popular because they fulfill the desires of the people who have been robbed of their purpose by the machines. They idealize work that Paul is not suited to do, however. Paul has grown up in a world of machines. Could he function in any other type of world?

While Paul fantasizes about his life after retirement, the rest of the company is caught up in the mystique of the Meadows. The artificially fostered competition is intended to bolster morale, but the games are meaningless underneath the surface glitter of the uniforms and fighting songs. Like the standing army or the Reeks and Wrecks, the men of the company don't have any real purpose at the Meadows, only an artificially generated competition. Paul craves something based in solid reality, like farming.



Chapters 15 - 16

Chapters 15 - 16 Summary

Paul visits the Gottwald farm. The farm is in poor shape, filled with antiques in their original condition, but Paul loves it. The real estate agent is against Paul taking the farm, saying that it would not be suitable for someone in his position, but Paul tells the agent, Doctor Pond, that the farm will only be a hobby. Pond drops the price down to \$8,000.

Paul meets the caretaker of the farm, Mr. Haycox. Haycox scoffs at the real estate agent and the engineer calling themselves "doctor." The only real people who are doctors, Haycox says, are vets, dentists, and physicians. Pond defends the integrity of a Ph.D., but Haycox doesn't put any stock in it. Haycox says that Gottwald promised he could still run the farm for the rest of his life, but Pond says that Paul isn't bound by that promise. Paul promises to keep Haycox on.

Paul continues making plans to retire and become a farmer, leading a simple life on his new farm. He goes to visit the farm and finds it exhausting working alongside Haycox. He reminds his wife that the anniversary of their engagement is coming up and that he's planned a surprise. They've never celebrated their engagement, since Paul only proposed to Anita after she told him, falsely, that she was pregnant. Anita is more concerned with the upcoming Meadows competition than with their anniversary, and she compares Paul with Shepherd. She thinks they should spend their time preparing instead of celebrating their anniversary. In the end, Paul puts his foot down, insisting that they will go out to celebrate on Wednesday.

Chapters 15 - 16 Analysis

Haycox represents the type of man that Paul would like to be. He has no use for doctorates, only for people who can work with their hands. He tends the farm, cares for the animals, and maintains the property. Haycox is one of the few characters in the book who seems to respect himself and be happy in his life. Like Alf, Haycox has work that suits him and supports himself.

Doctor Pond surprises Paul by declaring that his integrity won't allow him to sell Paul the farm. Paul realizes that many people, like Pond, believe in the current system with its class divisions. Pond's integrity is sincere if misguided.

Paul and Anita do not communicate with each other. Anita is concerned with the Meadows competition, and she's been talking more and more with Shepherd, who is a competitor like her. Paul has turned his back on competition and is only concerned with converting Anita to his new life. He doesn't seem to see how wide the gap between them has become.



Chapters 17 - 18

Chapters 17 - 18 Summary

The Shah of Bratpuhr has asked to visit an average Chicago resident, and the computers select Edgar R. B. Hagstrohm as completely average, with an average IQ of 83, average height, weight, number of kids, bedrooms, and years of marriage.

The Shah comes to see Hagstrohm's house, which is full of gadgets to do all the housework with a press of the button. He asks what they do with all the time saved by these devices, and they answer, lamely, that they live, mostly meaning that they watch TV. The washing machine is broken, and the wife reveals she washes the clothes by hand, happy to have something to do.

Hagstrohm has been having an affair with the wife of a friend who recently died. After the Shah leaves, Hagstrohm and his wife have a scene, and she cries because she has nothing to offer him and serves no purpose. The house runs itself, so no one needs her.

Rejoining Paul's story, on Wednesday, Paul calls Haycox on the phone to ask him to get the farm ready for him and Anita. Haycox refuses until Paul asks him as a favor, instead of ordering him as part of his job.

Paul brings Anita over the bridge to see what the society they've built has done to the people. Anita thinks he's trying to punish her by reminding her that she would be living on this side of the river if Paul hadn't married her. She thinks he's angry and suspects her of having an affair with Shepherd. They get into a fight, and Paul ridicules the idea that Anita would ever cheat on him with Shepherd. Hurtfully, Paul reminds Anita that they're only married because she (falsely) said she was pregnant.

Although the first part of the evening hasn't gone as Paul planned, Paul drives Anita to his new farm, which Haycox has cleaned up. Anita is enthralled and can't believe that Paul managed to buy such priceless antiques for only \$8,000. However, when Paul tells her that he bought the farm to live in and that the farm can't be changed or modified, Anita is horrified.

Paul tells Anita that he's quitting his job, and Anita says that Shepherd told her Paul was a quitter. Paul tries to make Anita understand, but she won't be swayed from her point of view. She ends the evening by seducing Paul, making him swear not to quit, to take the Pittsburgh job, and to win at Meadows.

Chapters 17 - 18 Analysis

The Shah of Bratpuhr is traveling the country to gain insight into America and its people, and his journey does the same for the reader. Vicariously, the reader journeys through this imagined future to find out what life is like. Hagstrohm is completely average in



every way, and so he represents the people who work for the Reeks and Wrecks and live in the carefully planned society. Hagstrohm's wife has been robbed of all purpose by the machines, and the true tasks of living are taken away. Without meaningful work, there is nothing to fill the people's time but television. Hagstrohm's affair is symptomatic of the fact that there is nothing else to give his life meaning.

The divide between Anita and Paul only gets wider. Paul can't make Anita see the bigger picture of society or anything beyond her personal problems and ambitions. She only wants to make her own life better, and she doesn't care what happens to others.

Paul has been blind to the reality of Anita. Even after their fight in Homestead, he doesn't realize that he could never convince her to come away with him to live on a farm. Similarly, he is blind to Anita's unfaithfulness. Anita has begun comparing Paul to Shepherd, and her guilt makes her believe that Paul is punishing her because of her relations with Shepherd. Perhaps Anita hasn't had an affair yet, but it's clear that she has feelings for Shepherd, who has an ambitious nature similar to hers. In the end of the chapter, Anita uses her ultimate weapon on Paul, her sexuality. Paul has potential for great power, and Anita wants it. She uses sex to get Paul back on the path to power.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Leaving Anita at the Mainland camp with the other women and children, Paul crosses the river to the Meadows. Fireworks greet the guests. Everyone seems in high spirits, and the company has hung banners and signs to encourage competition among the teams. Paul just rolls in with the crowd, not getting into the spirit or making any effort.

Kroner personally welcomes Paul to the Meadows. The events are closely structured, and the loudspeaker herds the men from one activity to another, constantly reminding them to meet new people and network, but barely giving them time to say two words to each other.

Paul finds that his roommate is Fred Garth, his competitor for the job at Pittsburgh. Garth wants to be liked by everyone, and so he is not controversial. He continues to be promoted as a compromise candidate when the other candidates are too hotly debated. Paul likes Garth and greets him warmly. Garth tells Paul that his son failed the college entrance exams, but he's being given another try.

Kroner tells Paul that they will meet the next day. The head of the organization is coming. Paul sees that Berringer is there and remarks that the system of choosing men for their ability is apparently defunct. Paul meets a young engineer, Dr. Edmund L. Harrison from Ithaca.

The group holds a memorial service at an old oak tree to honor people in the company who have died in the last year. It is the only solemn time in the retreat. The oak is a symbol of the company. Paul tries to get into the bar, but it is not open yet.

Chapter 19 Analysis

The company retreat moves so quickly that the men hardly have time to breathe. Paul lets himself be pulled along with the flow, and the current is strong enough that he doesn't have to do anything to succeed. The retreat is like the company (and the whole movement of mechanization) in miniature. Everyone, including Paul, is swept along with the tide, without having to give thought to what they are doing.

Both Garth and Berringer show how the mechanized system of rule is breaking down. Garth is not an exceptional man, and yet he gains promotion after promotion instead of exceptional men. The exceptional men are too controversial, and Garth is simply offensive to no one. Berringer is being honored because of his father and his family, and Paul sees that this is nepotism. He doesn't stop to consider, though, that his own quick rise is also due to nepotism.



Chapters 20 - 21

Chapters 20 - 21 Summary

The Shah of Bratpuhr visits a barbershop to get his hair cut. Barbers are one of the few professions that haven't been mechanized, but they will be soon. Though the Shah doesn't understand English, the barber tells the Shah the story of a barber who was afraid someone would invent a barbering machine. The man kept thinking of things a barber did that no machine could do, and then at night, he would dream of how a machine could do that thing. This went on until the barber had designed a machine that could do everything a barber did. He sold his design for a small fortune, and now all barbers are being put out of work. The barber cutting the Shah's hair is old enough to retire.

Meanwhile, the Shah's guide, Dr. Ewing J. Halyard is brooding over a letter he's received. Through an administrative error, Halyard was falsely credited with passing PE in college. Now that the error's been discovered, his bachelor's degree and subsequent master's and doctorate have been revoked. Halyard will need to make up his PE requirement at Cornell in order to keep his current position.

Back at the Meadows, since Paul doesn't care about the competition and simply plays to play, he leads his team to victory on the first day of competition. Shepherd tries too hard, attempting to do everything himself, and his team is failing. At the end of the day, the company assembles to watch a play.

The play's simple message is that mechanization is good and that discontent is fomented by a few radical rebels. In a mock courtroom, an everyman character comes to testify. The radical examines him, leading him to say that he earns less money now than before the war and that he has no respect from the engineers and managers. The representative for the system then leads the everyman to admit that he has more material goods than before, as well as a secure retirement and health care, all taken out of his wages before he receives them. The representative then goes on to testify that everything the managers and engineers do is for the people and convinces the man that this constitutes their highest respect. The radical is chased from the courtroom, and the system triumphs. Paul remembers seeing practically the same play when he was a youth and feeling swayed by its interpretation of the world, leading to a moment of closeness with his father.

After the play is a bonfire. An actor dressed as an Indian compares the engineers' mission to that of Indian braves back when a Native American tribe lived on the island.

Chapters 20 - 21 Analysis

The story of the barber who invents a barbering machine is much like the story of Bud Calhoun. Unlike Bud, the barber is afraid of being put out of work, but he invents a



barbering machine, anyway. Also unlike Bud, the barber gets a hundred thousand dollars plus royalties for his machines, which highlights how usurious Bud's employer is. Bud receives only \$500 for his machine. When the barber sells his machine, he avoids his own fear of being out of work, but he dooms all other barbers to the fate he feared. In this way, the nameless barber is like Anita, thinking only of himself and not of society as a whole.

At the Meadows, Paul's victory is easy, while Shepherd, the only one competing, continues to lose. Paul is disheartened with everything at the Meadows. When he was a child, he believed in the impressive play and the Indian, but now everything has degraded. He sees the arguments of the play as shabby and cheap, disconnected from reality. The same actor plays the Indian, and now he is gaining weight and getting old. The whole system has degraded with age. Interestingly, the play itself talks about how ideas, movements, and social systems get old and die. The people in the company, though, cannot see or admit that their experiment in mechanization has degraded in the same way as past movements. They choose to measure their success by the number of washers and dryers that people have, instead of the happiness of the people.



Chapters 22 - 23

Chapters 22 - 23 Summary

Paul meets with Kroner and the top brass of the company, including Dr. Francis Eldgrin Gelhorne, National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resources Director. The heads of the company believe that Finnerty and Lasher are involved with the Ghost Shirt Society, a radical rebel group that is headquartered in Ilium. Kroner reveals the plan to pretend to fire Paul, hoping that he will be taken into the Ghost Shirt Society. Then, Paul can become an informant. His reward will be the Pittsburgh job.

Paul is finally at the end of his rope. He quits his job, but no one believes him. Kroner and the heads of the company believe that Paul is simply taking on his role as spy.

Paul goes to the Meadows bar, but the bartender won't give him a drink. Everyone already knows that Paul has been fired, and the bartender has orders not to serve him. Paul insults the bartender and turns to go, but the bartender confronts Paul. They argue, throwing more insults, chief among them "saboteur." Paul hits him, and then the bartender knocks Paul out.

Paul wakes at the dock, prepared to board the last ship to the Mainland. Harrison, the young engineer Paul met earlier in the day, sympathetically brings Paul a drink. Harrison says it was Kroner's idea. Paul advises Harrison to either make up his mind to be an engineer or to quit now, before he gets caught up in the system.

Paul gets on the ship that will carry him back to the Mainland. Back at the Meadows, Berringer and a group of drunken engineers discover that someone has removed a circle of bark around the great oak tree, killing it. Over the loudspeaker, a voice warns everyone of the Ghost Shirts.

Chapters 22 - 23 Analysis

Kroner's blindness to problems continues in this chapter, as Paul finally builds up his inner drive enough to quit his job. Paul is too well caught-up in the flow of the system, though. His role, the role that Kroner sees him in, is the up-and-coming young son of George Proteus. Paul cannot escape this role because no one at the corporation believes that Paul would give up everything he has.

The opposition to the mechanized society is at last given a name, the Ghost Shirt Society. Still, no real details are revealed except that the group is headquartered in Ilium.

Paul has been sunk in apathy, refusing to take a real stand either with Finnerty and Lasher or with Kroner and the company. When Paul does not make a choice, though,



his choices are made for him. He finds himself pushed along with the tide of progress, set in motion by the system and by extension, by Paul's father. In a way, Paul's father is still governing Paul's fate. Paul warns Harrison not to be caught in the system as he was, but to take a stand for whatever he truly wants.

The destruction of the oak is the first real inkling of destructive action by the Ghost Shirt Society. The oak is a symbol of the company and its system, a sacred thing. The act of destroying it is an act of war.



Chapters 24 - 25

Chapters 24 - 25 Summary

Halyard is accompanying the Shah of Bratpuhr to a doctor to treat the Shah's head cold. On the way, the Shah picks up a woman off the street. She has resolved herself to sell her body to the Shah, but she breaks down and starts crying. She tells the Shah her story. Her husband is a writer, and he's just finished his first novel. It was rejected by the committee, not because it was badly written, but because it was too long, because the language was too difficult, and because it was anti-machine. Only novels that will be popular with the masses that will fit in one of the twelve book clubs, and that support the system will be published. Paintings are produced in a similar manner, mostly copies of famous art.

The writer doesn't want to be made happy by a psychiatrist, and he has refused to work in public relations. His housing and his retirement and health package are all being taken away. The woman wants to make money so she and her husband can survive, so she is prostituting herself. Halyard is horrified, but the woman insists that her husband has dignity. The Shah gives the woman a valuable ring and lets her out of the car.

Meanwhile, Paul arrives at the Mainland, but he finds that his wife is not there. Anita has gone for a walk, a usual habit of hers, the workers say. Paul knows that Anita doesn't usually go for walks. Paul goes outside to wait for her, fantasizing again about his life as a farmer. Paul sees a couple, obviously lovers, run out from the woods. The last boat is just leaving for the Meadows, and the man gets on after kissing his woman goodbye. As the woman comes back toward Paul, he sees that it is Anita. She's wearing Shepherd's shirt.

Anita attacks Paul for being fired, and Paul attacks Anita for being unfaithful. Anita tells Paul that she's useless to him and begins to cry. She says that she loves Shepherd. After one last kiss goodbye, Paul asks Anita to come with him, but she refuses.

Chapters 24 - 25 Analysis

Chapter 24 examines the fate of the arts in a machine-run society. Only books and artwork that are palatable both to a mass market and to the system itself are allowed to be produced. An artist or a writer has no ability to create new, innovative artwork because it's not efficient to produce. Art can no longer point out flaws in the system or make statements about politics. Art cannot express the individual. The individual has been completely suppressed by the system. The woman feels that prostituting herself is more respectable than going into public relations for such a corrupt system.

Chapter 25 resolves Paul's relationship with Anita. Anita's affair with Shepherd has been clearly foreshadowed to the reader, but Paul is caught completely unaware. Up until the last moment, even after Paul has discovered the affair, Paul thinks he can convince



Anita to come with him to live a simple, farming life together. Anita, though, has found a soul mate in the competitive Shepherd, a man who wants to play the political game in the company. In the end, she and Paul are too different to be together. Without his job, and the potential for advancement and power, Paul holds no attraction for his wife.



Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Paul rides the train back to Ilium. He sits next to a man who used to be a conductor on the train and complains about the mechanization of the railroads. The trains are completely automated, and no one can get on or off at a station without a ticket coded for that station. Occasionally, an old woman will lose her ticket and be trapped in the train until a Reeks and Wrecks crew discovers her.

A group of soldiers sits behind Paul, playing poker. He listens to their conversation. The sergeant tells a story from the war. His unit was surrounded and without power, so none of their mechanized weapons would work. A corporal stole a generator, and the unit hooked up the power, defeating the enemy. Paul thinks that the men had nothing to do in the war except power the machines. The conversation also reveals that PFC Hacketts is shipping out for the Sahara desert.

When Paul gets off the train as Ilium, there are no cabs at the station. He begins walking back to his house. A woman propositions him, and Paul accepts. He spends his first night back in Ilium with a prostitute.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Paul is at his lowest depths. He is surrounded by the effects of machinery on society. He notes that people complain about how the machines malfunction, such as leaving women stranded on the train, but not about the mechanization itself and how it has robbed them of their work and dignity. Even the soldiers don't realize that their role on the battlefield was reduced to caretakers of machinery. The soldiers don't have real fighting to do, because the machines are the ones that kill the enemy. Without a power source, the soldiers are useless, as all men in the society have become useless and idle in this world of machines.



Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

Paul tries to go to his farm, but he finds that he's not up to the task of being a farmer. He lives, alone, in his house. He discovers that daytime television presents a uniform message, that having a high IQ doesn't make you happy and that it's okay to be an average person.

A policeman comes to the door to remind Paul that he must register with the police now that his employment status has changed. Paul goes to the police station and fills out a long series of forms. His answers are fed into the computer, and the computer marks him as a potential saboteur. At the police station, Paul sees Fred Garth hauled in under arrest, but no one will tell him what's going on.

Paul goes to the bar. Alfie is there and tells Paul that the blue team is winning, while Shepherd's green team is losing under Shepherd's overzealous leadership. The staff was all sent off the island because of suspicion that one of them had killed the oak tree. Paul meets Alfie's brother, who is trying to make his living at bar games. Paul asks about Finnerty, but no one admits to having seen him. The bartender gives Paul a drink, and after taking a few sips, Paul loses consciousness.

Chapter 27 Analysis

Paul has fantasized about what it would be like to quit his job and live on his own, but the reality does not live up to the fantasy. Paul has lost Anita, and he finds out what the reader suspected all along, that Paul isn't suited to a farming life. He's spent his whole life around machines, and now Paul cannot do real labor anymore.

Paul also learns that almost all ex-engineers are considered security risks by the computers, and the computers are usually right. His own plight is symptomatic of the plight of other engineers, who are becoming dissatisfied with the system and beginning to see through the propaganda that promotes it.



Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

The football coach and director of physical education at Cornell, Doctor Harold Roseberry, is examining two letters. One explains that Halyard is coming to Cornell to take his PE test. The coach has other things on his mind, though. He was hired to give Cornell a winning football team, and the university spent the money to get the coach's dream team. Still, that was five years ago. The team has been winning, and the investment has paid off, with enough returns to build new buildings for the university. The players are beginning to get old, though, and the coach hasn't had any more money to buy new players.

The coach plans a letter to the alumni to raise money, but he also has a trick up his sleeve. He saw a promising young player named Buck playing football with his fraternity. The coach plans to buy Buck's services cheaply, before anyone else discovers the boy's talent, and sell two of his older players to Harvard, the bottom of the barrel for football.

The coach asks Buck to meet him at a local bar, and while he's waiting, the coach sees the two older players he plans to sell. They're saying to each other that men can play college football until they're 45 or 50, at least. The men haven't saved any of their handsome salaries, so after football, there's not much left for them.

The coach meets Buck, an engineering student, and offers him \$30,000 to play for the football team. Buck wants to continue to get his engineering degree, but he is not allowed to go to school if he plays football. The coach offers him \$35,000.

While Buck and the coach are talking, a drunken engineer interrupts them. Buck is awed when the man says he was at the Meadows. The man advises him that engineering will leave him despondent and tells him to take the football money while he can and escape the system. The engineer turns out to be Dr. Ed Harrison.

Another stranger interrupts the coach's conversation. This time, it's Halyard, who mentions to the coach that he will be making up his PE credits while he's in town. The coach asks Halyard to look at the letter the coach was reviewing earlier. It's a letter of complaint that Halyard sent about the football team the first year that Roseberry was coach. Halyard realizes, seeing the letter, that the coach will not be letting Halyard pass his PE test.

When the coach is alone with Buck again, he ups his offer to \$36,000, and Buck takes it.



Chapter 28 Analysis

Chapter 28 emphasizes how everyone in society ends up dissatisfied and unable to do what they want. Because of a bureaucratic mix-up and because of a letter of no real consequence that Halyard wrote years ago, he is now going to lose his degree, his title, and his position. It's very easy for someone to get shut out of the system, something that's already happened to Bud.

No matter which path Buck chooses, his future doesn't seem bright. All the football players, no longer students at the university but now paid professional players, end up with nothing in front of them after their glory years but second-hand teams and the Reeks and Wrecks. They desperately try to hang on to college football as long as they can.

The engineers, though their future seems more secure, end up disillusioned. The ennui that attacked Paul at the beginning of the novel is clearly affecting many engineers. Engineers who leave their jobs are flagged as potential saboteurs. Finnerty is a discontent, as is Harrison; Garth is in jail. The system seems to catch up with everyone in the end.



Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

Paul finds himself drugged and answering questions under the influence of truth serum. He tells his captives all about the plan to pretend to fire him, and he tells how he quit, though no one believed him. Paul says that he's not on the side of the corporation, and his questioner, Finnerty, says that means that Paul is on the side of the Ghost Shirt Society.

Finnerty and Lasher explain to the drug-addled Paul that the Ghost Shirt Society is named after the Ghost Dance religion. When the Native Americans were being overtaken by the white men, the Ghost Dance religion became popular. It preached that the Native Americans would take back their rightful place in the new world. The Ghost Shirt was supposed to be a magic shirt that the braves would wear to fend off bullets and defeat the white men.

The Ghost Shirt Society is planning a revolution, and Paul is slated to be the leader. Because of Paul's position, history, and family, Lasher believes that he can motivate people to rebel and that the Ghost Shirt Society can overthrow the machines. Finnerty and Lasher leave Paul a captive in a locked room.

Chapter 29 Analysis

Again, Paul's destiny is not truly decided by his personal choice, but by the forces around him. Because of Paul's name and Paul's family, Paul finds himself the leader of a rebel society that he knows nothing about and that he's only just heard of. Paul never says that he supports the Ghost Shirt Society, and he never makes a decision to join. As Finnerty tells Paul, if he's not with the machines, then he's with the Ghost Shirts. Paul literally has no choices as he is drugged and locked up in a room.

Throughout the novel, Paul tries to walk a line between the two extremes. He wants to be left alone, without taking sides in the battle that's raging around him. Paul found, though, that by not taking sides, he became swept up in the system of the corporation. Now, Paul is swept up just as completely by the other side.



Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

Paul is kept captive by Finnerty and Lasher until he is finally brought to a meeting of the Ghost Shirt Society. In addition to Finnerty and Lasher, the attendees include Bud Calhoun, Katherine Finch, Luck Lubbock, and Mr. Haycox. Paul also recognizes Professor Ludwig von Neumann, a former political science professor who has been displaced by machines.

Katherine reports on the progress on making ghost shirts as uniforms, and Bud Calhoun talks about the plans for a machine to break into the works. He also sketches out plans for bombs disguised in soda cans to booby trap all the soda machines in EPICAC so that they can blow up the giant computer. Alfie is the one person who won't join the Ghost Shirt Society, since he's too independent to join anything.

The plan for the revolution is simple. The organization is recruiting members of every club in every city. On a day still to be determined, the members will call emergency meetings of their clubs, and then they will lead whoever will follow to take over the factories and towns. The news is spreading that Paul is their leader.

Professor von Neumann reads a letter that's been sent, ostensibly from Paul, to all the high-ranking engineers and managers as well as to the media. The letter condemns machines being in charge of men's fates and proclaims that mankind's flaws and foibles are good things. Paul offers to sign it, but the letters have already gone out. The meeting is raided by the police, and everyone escapes except Paul.

Chapter 30 Analysis

Paul gets his first look behind the scenes at the mysterious Ghost Shirt Society, and he finds that it's a perfectly businesslike organization. Katherine seems just as in-place as she did as Paul's secretary. Bud is doing what he's always done, designing anything and everything that anyone can suggest, with extra bells and whistles.

A number of the members of the Ghost Shirt Society are engineers, like Bud, Paul, and Finnerty, who have deserted engineering to join the rebellion. Vonnegut emphasizes the discontent among the engineers throughout the novel. It shows that the system is breaking down from within, not being broken down from without.

Paul easily accepts his role of the leader of the Ghost Shirt Society. Although he's not one of the brains behind the society, he takes on the role that others have given him. This is something that Paul does throughout the book. He takes on the role of engineer that his father gives him, and he takes on the role of up-and-coming Wunderkind that Kroner and Anita give him. Once he breaks free of those roles, he still finds himself taking on the persona that others force upon him.



Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

Paul is thrown in jail. His cellmate, Harold, is a black man in jail for destroying a public service announcement machine outside his house. The machine had a motion detector, and it activated every time someone walked by, even in the middle of the night. The machine loudly and annoyingly dispensed usually inappropriate and inane advice, like telling stray dogs not to drink and drive. Harold chooses to serve jail time instead of apologizing for breaking the machine.

Paul hears Morse code from the cell next to him. He finds that Garth is in the next cell. Garth was the one who destroyed the oak tree. He explains that he did it because his son failed his college entrance exams again. The men at the Meadows were horrified when they found out Garth had done it and promised him all kinds of punishment. Garth was arrested and brought to jail, but then the police realized that there wasn't much to charge him with. All he did was kill a tree.

Paul is taken out of his cell to meet with Anita and Kroner. Anita is contrite. She's learned of Paul's role as spy and is prepared to return loyally to his side. Baer apparently read the Ghost Shirt Society letter and promptly quit his job. If Paul turns in the other members, he will get Baer's job, a huge promotion. The letter is being suppressed by the government instead of answered to the people.

Paul is finally at a moment of decision. He must either turn informer and be rewarded with wealth and power, or he must turn his back on the system and be jailed and possibly executed. Paul finally makes his choice and confesses that he is the leader of the Ghost Shirt Society.

Chapter 31 Analysis

Finally, Paul takes positive, decisive action by admitting that he is the leader of the Ghost Shirt Society, even though he can reclaim everything he's ever had and more. However, Paul hints at a desire for a society where there are not only two choices: with us, or against us. He wishes that the government did not merely suppress the letter from the Ghost Shirt Society, but instead answered and debated it. He wishes that Baer didn't just quit his job, but had someone responsible there to discuss and debate the question.

Paul hints at this nebulous other way of doing things throughout the book. When he is drunk, he calls for the engineers and the common men to meet together at the center of the bridge. He realizes right away that this is impossible and that no one wants to come together in unity. Paul still craves discussion, compromise, and unity, even now when he takes on fully the role of leader of the Ghost Shirt Society.



Chapters 32 - 33

Chapters 32 - 33 Summary

Paul is tried for treason as the leader of the Ghost Shirt Society. He is convinced that it is, honestly, treason, since the government is so closely tied to the corporate-run machines. Paul parrots Finnerty, Lasher, and von Neumann's words at the trial. He's hooked up to an elaborate lie detector that can tell with perfect accuracy whether he's lying, telling the truth, or telling a half-truth. Paul uses the opportunity to argue the case for revolution against the machines.

The prosecutor questions Paul about his motives for leading the Ghost Shirt Society. Paul is surprised when his answers begin registering false on the lie detector. The machine has detected something that Paul hasn't yet admitted to himself, and the prosecutor finally draws out that Paul's chief motivation for leading the rebellion is anger at his famous but distant father. Paul admits that he's human and has human motivations, but he says that it is a good thing to have human motives and not to be a machine. His motives don't invalidate the ideas of the Ghost Shirt Society, Paul claims. As Paul is testifying, a group of rebels breaks into the courtroom and whisks him away.

Meanwhile, Ewing J. Halyard, the Shah of Bratpuhr, and Khashdrahr Miasma are riding in their limousine across the river in Ilium. Halyard's look and attitude have changed since he failed his physical education exam. Without his Ph.D., Halyard is being sued by the State Department for fraud to recover all his past wages. Still, Halyard mechanically urges the Shah to remember only the best about the United States.

The limousine is overtaken by what Halyard at first thinks is a parade. Instead, it's the beginning of the rebellion. They drive to the courthouse in time to see a group of rebels break in and come out carrying Paul above their heads. Halyard is knocked unconscious in the chaos. The Shah and his nephew are mistaken for two lodge-members in uniform and sent off to join their lodge. Oakland, Salt Lake City, and Ilium have fallen. Paul, Finnerty, von Neumann, and Lasher try to keep the people in check, but once the rebellion begins, the leaders cannot control it. Instead of simply taking over the targets, the people destroy every machine they can see.

Chapters 32 - 33 Analysis

At Paul's trial, his deepest motives are revealed. Paul is acting out a lengthy revolt, not against the machines, but against his father. Paul's father made Paul who he is today and handed down to him power and position. Paul never wanted those things. Paul's father didn't give Paul time, attention, and love, the things that Paul actually craved. These feelings have been writhing in Paul's subconscious, driving him to be discontented and finally to fall into the hands of the Ghost Shirt Society.



The rebellion cannot be contained and controlled rationally. The oppressed people have built up a hatred for the machines that run their lives, and once they are set loose, the leaders can't control them. Unthinkingly, the people destroy the machines that create food and drink and dispose of waste. Human nature seems, at heart, unthinking. Paul was unconscious of his own motives instead of led by rational thought. Bud is somehow driven by his nature to design machines, and he never thinks about the consequences of what he designs. The people, let loose on their society, don't stop to think about the consequences of destroying the machines that they hate and yet depend upon.



Chapters 34 - 35

Chapters 34 - 35 Summary

The revolution has failed in Pittsburgh, Seattle, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Chicago, Birmingham, Boston, and New York—everywhere except for Ilium, Salt Lake City, and Oakland. The attack on EPICAC has failed. Lasher does not seem upset, though. The leaders have resigned themselves to the unexpected viciousness of the people, who have destroyed machinery throughout Ilium. A helicopter flies overhead, asking for Ilium to give up Finnerty, Paul, Lasher, and von Neumann. The government announcement says that Salt Lake and Oakland have been taken back. Paul and Finnerty remember their happy, untroubled days as young engineers, so involved in their work that they didn't see the social consequences. They ask Lasher what happened to the original Ghost Shirts and the Ghost Dance religion. Lasher reveals that they were defeated by the white men, and he never expected the revolution to be successful. Paul is horrified. He asks why Lasher led them into defeat, and Lasher says that he had to take a stand "for the record."

In the aftermath of the Ilium rebellion, destroyed machinery and wrecked parts cover the streets. Paul, Finnerty, Lasher, and von Neumann survey the damage. The town is surrounded by the authorities, who plan to besiege it for six months. The leaders plan to create a Utopian experiment in those six months, with men living without machines. They find, though, the townspeople gathered around a soda machine. The man who fixed Paul's gasket is there, fixing up the machine to provide soda to the waiting people. Another boy is gathering broken parts to build a new machine. The group leaders, seeing this, start out toward the government troops to give themselves up and become martyrs to their lost cause.

Chapters 34 - 35 Analysis

The revolution has been defeated. Ilium is the last stronghold, and the leaders of the Ghost Shirt Society have little control over what is happening. The attack quickly degraded into chaos, an outpouring of people's anger at the machines that have been controlling their lives. Lasher, a religious leader, believes that the mechanized society is the work of the devil, and he fights against it on principal. It doesn't matter to Lasher whether he wins or loses, only that his voice be heard in battle against evil. Even a failed battle has some purpose. People will hear about it and learn the ideas that the Ghost Shirt Society represents. As Paul's letter had the power to make Baer resign, perhaps the ideas of the revolutionaries will live on long beyond the revolution and gain future victories against unthinking mechanization.

Meanwhile, the people have reverted to their natural state, unthinkingly building and putting together machines. The drive to build and to make things seems inherent to the human condition. The fond days that Paul and Finnerty remember, when they were



young engineers, were spent unthinkingly building. They were so involved in whatever project was in front of them that they couldn't stop to ask themselves whether it was a good idea. This drive to create, without thought, is what made Bud create a machine that made his job obsolete. Ultimately, it makes the machine-less paradise an impossibility, and the leaders of the Ghost Shirt Society are left with only one option, to become martyrs.



Characters

Doctor Paul Proteus

Paul Proteus is the son of George Proteus, one of the men who engineered an economy that is completely run by machines. Because of his family connections and high intelligence, Paul is slated for a powerful position in the new world order. Paul, however, experiences vague dissatisfaction. He has a rebellious streak and an apathetic attitude.

Throughout the novel, Paul is pushed to side either with the giant corporate entity that runs the economy and employs him as head of the Ilium works or else to side with the Ghost Shirt Society rebels, who are trying to overthrow the machines. Paul is moved along by the current of society around him instead of making a choice until finally he must decide whether to turn informant on the Ghost Shirts.

Paul ultimately sides with the Ghost Shirt Society, but at his trial, the lie detectors ferret out the truth. Paul is motivated by childhood anger at his father, who was never around because he was always occupied by work. Still, Paul stands by his decision. His motivation was purely human, but Paul contends that there's nothing wrong with being human.

Paul seems to crave some sort of compromise or middle ground between the two sides of the issue, but he is constantly faced with a hard and fast choice to side either with the corporation that runs the world through machines or the rebellion. Ultimately, Paul truly does become leader of the Ghost Shirt Society and a martyr to his cause when the rebellion fails.

Doctor Edward Francis Finnerty

Finnerty is an old friend of Paul's from college. Finnerty has always been an outsider. He was born to a poor and unintelligent family, but because of his brilliant mind, he went to college and became an engineer. Finnerty is brilliant at everything, and he is an accomplished musician. He never feels like he fits in with the engineers because of his background, and he goes out of the way to be socially unacceptable. He doesn't dress in clean clothes or groom himself, and he spends money on liquor and women. Still, he continues to be promoted because of his brilliant mind.

Finnerty was promoted to Washington, D.C., but he comes back to visit Paul after quitting his job. Finnerty is fed up with the system, and he hopes that Paul is also ready to quit. Finnerty quickly gets sucked into the Ghost Shirt Society by Lasher. He has always been a rebel, and he is more than willing to join an organized rebellion.

Finnerty seems to do everything he can to bring down his friend Paul. He takes Paul's gun and leaves it where the police will find it. The gun has Finnerty's fingerprints on it.



Finnerty gets Paul drunk and introduces him to women. Finnerty wants to pull Paul into his world and away from the corporation. Finally, Finnerty has Paul drugged and taken captive so that Paul can lead the Ghost Shirt Society.

Anita Proteus

Anita was born to average parents, and so if she hadn't married Dr. Paul Proteus, she would be living in Homestead among the average people. Anita is an ambitious woman, though, and she uses sex as a weapon and a tool. She told Paul that she was pregnant, and he proposed to her. The pregnancy turned out to be false. Paul seems to believe that Anita honestly thought she was pregnant, but Anita's ambitious personality seems to indicate that she lied to acquire an up-and-coming husband.

When Paul becomes mentally shaky and his career seems to start falling apart, Anita begins getting friendly with one of Paul's rivals, Dr. Shepherd. Shepherd, like Anita, is ambitious and interested in playing the political game. Although Shepherd is not as successful as Paul, Anita has an affair with him. She is attracted to his competitive temperament.

Although Anita professes to love Dr. Shepherd, when Kroner tells her that Paul is not really fired but has been acting as a spy for the corporation, Anita is willing to crawl back apologetically to Paul's side.

Doctor George Proteus

Paul Proteus's famous father was instrumental in creating the system that put machines in charge of men's lives.

Doctor Lawson Shepherd

Shepherd came to the Ilium Works as a young man with Paul and Finnerty. He is intensely ambitious, competing with Paul at every opportunity. He succeeds in stealing Paul's wife Anita away from him.

Doctor Berringer

Berringer's assessment scores are barely high enough to qualify him for a job at the Ilium works, but because Berringer comes from a powerful family background, he gets a job at Ilium and is invited to the Meadows.



Doctor Katherine Finch

Katherine is Paul Proteus's secretary. Only the most important men have secretaries now, as status symbols. Katherine is engaged to Dr. Bud Calhoun.

Doctor Bud Calhoun

Bud is a genius at designing machines, but his aptitude tests don't classify him as a designer. Bud eventually designs a machine to do his own job, and he's given a \$500 bonus and then fired, along with all the other people doing the same type of job. Bud joins the Ghost Shirt Society and puts his genius to work designing bombs.

Rudy Hertz

In Rudy's younger days, he was a master machinist. Paul, Finnerty, and Shepherd recorded his movements and used them to automate the machine that eventually put him, and all other machines, out of work. Rudy, now an old man who spends his days drinking in a bar, doesn't see the bigger picture but is proud of his status as the master machinist who was chosen for the recording.

Doctor Kroner

Kroner is one of the highest officials in the company. He is a true believer in the system of machines that now runs the economy. Kroner seems blind to anything that he doesn't want to see.

Mom

Mom is Kroner's motherly wife.

Doctor Baer

Baer is a brilliant engineer and Kroner's partner as high officials in the company. Baer is an honest but socially awkward man who approaches any problem thoughtfully and without bias. When the Ghost Shirt Society releases its argument against machines running the economy, Baer is convinced and quits his job.

The Shah of Bratpuhr

The Shah is the religious and political leader of a sect of 6 million people. He is on a tour of the United States. His tour leader cannot convince the Shah that the average



people employed by the Army and the Reeks and Wrecks aren't slaves, and the Shah equates the word "citizen" to his native word for "slave."

Khashdrahr Miasma

Khashdrahr is the Shah of Bratpuhr's nephew and interpreter.

(Doctor) Ewing J. Halyard

Halyard works for the State Department as a tour guide. He shows the Shah of Bratpuhr around the United States. Halyard finds out that, due to an administrative error, he's missing credits for Physical Education for his undergraduate degree at Cornell, and so his master's and doctorate are invalid. Because Halyard once wrote a letter of complaint about the behavior of the Cornell football team, the football coach makes sure that Halyard fails his Phys Ed exam, losing his degrees and his job. The government begins to prosecute Halyard for fraud because he has been working for the State Department without a Ph.D.

Private First Class Elmo C. Hacketts, Jr.

Hacketts is one of the average people, not smart enough for college, who joined the Army. He hates the Army with a passion, and he can't wait until, twenty-three years from now, he can retire and be free to tell army officers what he really thinks of them. Hacketts longs for something meaningful to do and requests a transfer overseas. Eventually, Hacketts is transferred to the Sahara desert.

Alfy

Alfy makes his living by betting on what song is playing on the TV at the bar with the volume turned off. Alfy has taught himself to recognize tunes based on the musicians' movements. He refuses to join the Ghost Shirt Society, because he's too independent.

President Jonathan Lynn

President Jonathan Lynn's real name is Alfred Planck, and he is an ex-television actor. As President of the United States, Lynn is nothing more than a figurehead.

Professor Ludwig von Neumann

A displaced professor of political science, von Neumann is one of the leaders of the Ghost Shirt Society.



Doctor Fred Garth

Fred Garth is an engineer who wants to be liked by everyone, and so he is not controversial. Garth continues to be promoted as a compromise candidate when the other candidates are too hotly debated. Garth is Paul's competition for the Pittsburgh job. As Garth's son fails his college entrance exams, Garth finally takes a stand. He kills the old oak tree at the Meadows and gets arrested for the crime.

Doctor Pond

Doctor Pond is the real estate agent for Ilium.

Mr. Haycox

Mr. Haycox is the caretaker of the Gottwald farm. The farm belonged to Haycox's family before Gottwald bought it, and Haycox works the farm. Haycox has a purpose and dignity that most other men in the society lack.

Edgar R. B. Hagstrohm

Hagstrohm is selected as a completely average Chicago resident for the Shah of Bratpuhr to visit.

Doctor Edmund L. Harrison

Harrison is a young engineer who Paul meets at the Meadows. Harrison seems sympathetic to Paul and brings him a drink after Paul is fired.

Doctor Francis Eldgrin Gelhorne

Gelhorne is the National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resources Director. He is the most powerful man in the huge, mechanized system that governs the economy.

Doctor Harold Roseberry

Roseberry, whose classification is PE-002, is the football coach and director of physical education at Cornell University.



Buck Young

Buck is a promising young football player who Coach Roseberry wants to recruit for his football team.

Harold

Paul's cellmate after he's arrested as the leader of the Ghost Shirt Society is a black man named Harold. Harold was arrested for destroying a public service announcement machine outside his house. The machine would activate every time someone walked by it, giving inane and usually inappropriate advice to the passersby. Harold chooses to go to prison instead of apologizing for destroying the machine.



Objects/Places

The Ilium Works

The Ilium Works is a huge manufacturing complex in Ilium, New York. All the manufacturing is done by the machines, and the plant is run by a few human managers and engineers. There are similar plants in cities across the country.

Homestead

Most of the people of Ilium, New York, live in Homestead, across the river from the Ilium Works and the large, expensive houses of the engineers and managers.

The Bridge

A bridge separates Homestead, where all the average people live, from the Ilium Works and the expensive houses of the managers and engineers. The bridge is a symbol of the division between the two classes. Usually, it is blocked by a large group of Reeks and Wrecks with nothing much to do.

The Bar

At an unnamed bar near the bridge between the Ilium Works and Homestead, Paul and Finnerty become embroiled with the revolutionaries who run the Ghost Shirt Society.

The Player Piano

In the bar in Homestead, there is a player piano, a symbol of the accomplishments of mankind becoming mechanized and automated.

The Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps

Popularly known as the Reeks and Wrecks, the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps is a huge force of workers with almost nothing to do. Anyone who has been replaced by a machine is employed in either the Army or the Reeks and Wrecks.

The Army

The government employs a large standing army in order to provide work for the many people who have been replaced by machines. Soldiers are not allowed to carry



weapons while in the U.S. as they would pose a danger to society, potentially becoming saboteurs. The soldiers themselves hate the Army.

The Meadows

The Meadows is an island where, every year, the company holds a retreat for all up-and-coming employees.

The Oak

An oak tree is the logo of the massive corporate entity that runs the whole American economy. At the old oak tree standing in the middle of the Meadows, the company men have a ceremony remembering people who have died over the last year. Fred Garth, when he finds out his son has failed his college entrance exams for the second time, kills the oak by removing a circle of bark from the tree.

Checker Charley

Checker Charley is the checkers-playing machine that Berringer tries to use to defeat Paul as checkers champion. Due to a loose wire, Checker Charley self-destructs.

Psychiatrists

In the future world of the novel, psychiatrists have the ability to make anyone forget his troubles and become unnaturally happy and well-adjusted.

IQs

Everyone's IQ, or Intelligence Quotient, is measured and kept on public record. In the novel, the characters' IQs and aptitude tests determine what jobs they can have.

Classification Numbers

Every person in the novel is classified according to profession and rank in that profession. Finnerty is a EC-002, the second highest engineering rank. Lasher is an R-127. The "R" indicates religion, and "127" indicates Lasher's specific profession as a Protestant minister, 127 rungs down the hierarchical ladder. Higher numbers represent more prominent and important jobs. R-001 is reserved for the Pope.



EPICAC XIV

EPICAC XIV is the massive computer, housed deep in Carlsbad Caverns, that calculates every factor of the economy, deciding what to produce and how many people to employ.

The Ghost Shirt Society

The Ghost Shirt Society is a group of rebels who plan to take over the U.S. by force and remove the tyranny of machines. The group is named after the Ghost Dance religion, a popular movement in Native American society when it became clear that the tribes were being overtaken by the white men. The Ghost Shirt was supposed to be a magic shirt that would protect warriors from bullets. Like the Ghost Dance religion, the Ghost Shirt Society is ultimately defeated.

The Gottwald Farm

Gottwald bought an old farm as a hobby, and he kept it as an old-fashioned, human run farm with a caretaker. In his will, he forbade anyone to update or change the farm. Paul buys the farm, hoping to retire there to work the land, but Paul discovers that he is ill-prepared for a farming life.

Takaru

Takaru is the Shah of Bratpuhr's native word for "slave." The Shah translates "takaru" to the English word "citizen."



Themes

Machines Enslaving Mankind

In Vonnegut's imagined future, machines enslave mankind. They determine the destiny and status in society of every American. The machines themselves are not artificial intelligences or robots; they're just machines that make calculations and perform functions that were once done by men. Everything is filtered through an efficient system.

Throughout the first part of the book, Paul does not make choices for himself. He does the minimum that he can do. In fact, he seems to spend more time away from his job than at his job. He carouses with Finnerty, drinks excessively, and ignores rules. Still, Paul's destiny seems determined, not by his individual performance, but by the machines that govern the society. Whatever Paul does or says, his IQ and aptitude scores say that Paul is a promising, up-and-coming engineer, and so Paul is slated to take over the Pittsburgh manufacturing facility and even bring down the Ghost Shirt Society.

Similarly, Bud's destiny is governed by the computers. Although he clearly has aptitude for design, his tests don't qualify him for design and the computer rejects him for a design job. Paul is helpless to give Bud a job, because the computer will reject him for any available job.

The machines insure that Garth's son is destined for the Reeks and Wrecks or the Army. They decide what kinds of houses and cars and machines the average person will own. Kroner says glibly that engineers and managers open doors for the march of progress, but in reality, the machines only close doors of opportunity for people.

Over Time, Systems Degrade

In the novel, the system of a machine-run economy has been in place for just about thirteen years. The first generation of advocates, who put the system into place, are now the old establishment, and young, up-and-coming men are on the road to replace them. Paul and his father George are representational of these two generations. George Proteus was the old order of idealists who envisioned a mechanized utopia. Now, he is dead, but his legacy lives on, forming the society.

Unfortunately, as time passes and as the system grows, it begins to become corrupted. It begins to degrade. The system is supposed to operate purely on merit, putting people into positions where they're most suited. However, flaws come to light, more and more over time, that show how the system doesn't work. Bud's classification is clearly wrong. Berringer is given special privileges because of his family. More than that, deep, underlying flaws are exposed. The system leaves most people feeling useless and pointless, and it destroys individuality and creativity.



One of the large problems with the system is that there is no way to address errors or problems. In fact, the old order, particularly Kroner, does not want to hear any problems or questions about the system. Kroner only wants to blindly promote the system as the perfect solution to society. All of his answers to questions become reduced to sound bites. Surely, when the mechanized system was first put into place, the organizers carefully examined it to make sure it was the best system possible, but over time, that examination stopped. By holding so closely to the "ideal" system, without questioning and modifying, Kroner contributes to its downfall, which is clearly coming.

The new generation, represented by Paul, feels dissatisfied and concerned. Ex-engineers are considered security risks. The ranks of the Ghost Shirt Society are filled in with former engineers. Even Baer quits his job after reading Paul's letter. More than the revolution itself, the lack of belief in the system among the engineers that run it is likely to bring about change and a new system for the future.

Uselessness

Human beings in the book have an inherent need to feel useful. The machines take over all of the necessary jobs, so the people feel useless. They feel that their lives are pointless. When Hagstrom's wife realizes that he is cheating on her, she cries because she has no use for anyone. The house, she says, runs itself, so her family doesn't even need her as a housewife. Hagstrom himself feels useless in his job, and his affair seems to be the only thing he has in his life. The Reeks and Wrecks despise their jobs because they know that those jobs serve no useful function.

Bud represents the engineers, and he is only happy when he has a problem to work on and something to build. He also represents the result of this desire for usefulness. Finally, Bud builds and designs himself out of a job, as has the whole human race.

In the end of the book, the people of Ilium are pleased with the wreckage of the machines, not because they don't want machines, but instead because they now have something to do. They can rebuild and be useful. Their useful rebuilding, though, is just like Bud's constant designing. The people are leading themselves back into uselessness.

Style

Point of View

The story is told by a third-person semi-omniscient narrator. Throughout most of the book, the narrator takes the point of view of Doctor Paul Proteus, seeing the world from his perspective as events unfold around him. Paul is in a position of power, and so he is able to show the reader the inner workings of the corporation and of the Ilium Works. However, Paul's discontent gives the reader an opportunity to see into Homestead and understand the social problems caused by mechanization. The reader discovers the Ghost Shirt Society along with Paul and experiences his frustration with the corporation and the mechanized society.

However, when the novel leaves Paul's storyline, it also leaves his point of view. The narrator moves into the mind of other, minor characters to tell their stories. This gives the reader multiple points of view of the society and shows how widespread the problems are. The reader experiences chapters from the points of view of Doctor Halyard, PFC Hacketts, Edgar R. B. Hagstrom, and Doctor Harold Roseberry.

Halyard's point of view gives the reader another example of how people's lives are governed by machines, since his whole world is stolen from him by a computer error. Yet, Halyard also shows that Americans' patriotism remains unmarred, and Halyard can simultaneously believe in the system while being ruined by it. Hacketts shows the seething anger that exists under the surface of many people, who have few choices in the current system, while Hagstrom's tale is of a man driven to an extra-marital affair by the hopelessness he feels. Even Roseberry, who is successful and respected, reveals to the reader the constant fear of losing his place in society.

Setting

Most of the novel is set in Ilium, New York. Ilium's physical layout is important to the novel, because the social classes are divided not only by social structure, but also physically. The lower class lives in Homestead, which is separated from the rest of the city by the river. The Ilium Works manufacturing facility and the large houses of the elite engineers and managers are across the river. Crossing the bridge between the two is like crossing between two worlds. As mechanization continues, the upper class becomes smaller and the lower class becomes bigger.

The Shah of Bratpuhr allows the reader to visit points throughout the United States, including a college campus, a barbershop in Florida, an ordinary family in Chicago, and the central economic computer of the corporation, EPICAC XIV, in Carlsbad Caverns. The reader is transported around the United States to get a thorough picture of how life everywhere is governed by machines and how people everywhere experience despair and uselessness because of the machines.



The most important element of the setting is the machines. Machines contrast with the colonial look of Anita Proteus's carefully designed kitchen. There are machines on every street corner, to give manicures and to provide public safety announcements. The trains are run completely by machines. Soda machines dispense drinks, and book machines dispense books. In his youth, Paul even designed a mechanized bar, but its cold, mechanical atmosphere made it a failure.

In contrast to the machines, the setting of the bar is very human and messy. It seems warm, even though it is full of noise and uncomfortable. Even the bar, though, is decorated with a player piano, reminding the reader that machines infiltrate every corner of the society.

Language and Meaning

Vonnegut uses language to convey important elements of society. Everyone who has a good job carries the title "Doctor." A real estate agent is a Doctor of Realty. Paul is a Doctor of Engineering. The title doctor is so overused that it almost becomes meaningless, as Haycox points out when he says that he only considers physicians, dentists, and veterinarians to be real doctors.

Vonnegut also invents a system of letters and numbers that designate every person's position in society. Individuals are reduced to these designations by the computer-run economy. People with lower numbers have a higher prestige in society, making the hierarchy of the society rigid and solidified.

The corporation uses inspirational language to promote itself. The play that's put on at the Meadows uses rhetoric to disguise real social issues, and the workers are encouraged to sing fight songs, which artificially promote a sense of community and belonging.

The most interesting use of language occurs in the Shah's interpretation of American words. The Shah learns the word "citizen" as equating to the word "slave" in his own language, since from everything he sees, average American citizens are nothing but slaves.

Structure

The structure of the novel is chronological, beginning at a point when Paul Proteus is mired in apathy and undirected discontent and moving forward as Paul is drawn into a battle between two forces. He is forced to pick one side, although he feels a desire to unite the two. The climax of the story is Paul's trial for treason and the revolt of the Ghost Shirt Society.

The chronological storyline of Paul Proteus's journey to become the figurehead of the Ghost Shirt Society rebels, however, is broken by the stories of minor characters, such

as the Shah of Bratpuhr. These minor storylines intertwined throughout the main story give the reader a complete picture of society.

Again and again, Vonnegut shows similar stories happening throughout the country. Everywhere, people are displaced by machines. Everywhere, people are discontent. Everywhere, people are busy building more machines to cause more displacement and discontent. The repetition of similar stories all over the country shows how widespread and inescapable the difficulties of the mechanized society are.



Quotes

"Anita had the mechanics of marriage down pat, even to the subtlest conventions. If her approach was disturbingly rational, systematic, she was thorough enough to turn out a creditable counterfeit of warmth." —Chapter 1, page 25

"'Ahhhhh,' said the Shah. 'Ci-ti-zen.' He grinned happily. 'Takarū—citizen. Citizen—Takarū.'" —Chapter 2, page 29

"The music stopped abruptly, with the air of having delivered exactly five cents worth of joy. Rudy still shouted. 'Makes you feel kind of creepy, don't it, Doctor, watching them keys go up and down? You can almost see a ghost sitting there playing his heart out.'" —Chapter 3, page 38

"Paul wondered about his own deep drives as he realized how much pleasure he was getting from recollections of Finnerty's socially destructive, undisciplined antics." —Chapter 4, page 41

"Hacketts did not bow back because he wasn't supposed to and he wasn't going to do a goddamn thing he wasn't supposed to do and he had only twenty-three more years to go on his hitch and then he was through with the Army and the hell with it, and in twenty-three years if some sonofabitching colonel or lieutenant or general came up to him and said, 'Salute me,' or 'Pick up that butt,' or 'Shine your shoes,' or something like that he'd say, 'Kiss my ass, sonny,' and whip out the old discharge and spit in his eye and walk away laughing like crazy because his twenty-five years was up and all he had to do was hang around with the old gang in Hooker's in Evansville and wait for the old pension check and to hell with you buddy because I don't have to take no crap from nobody no more because I'm through and—" —Chapter 7, page 69

"A couple of soldiers and a large number of men from the Reeks and Wrecks heard him insult their organizations, and they did nothing but nod, sharing his contempt." —Chapter 9, Page 101

"'This is EPICAC XIV,' said Halyard. 'It's an electronic computing machine—a brain, if you like. This chamber alone, the smallest of the thirty-one used, contains enough wire to reach from here to the moon four times. There are more vacuum tubes in the entire instrument than there were vacuum tubes in the State of New York before World War II.'" —Chapter 11, page 115

"Kroner turned his back to Paul, assumed a ready stance with the shotgun, and picked off an imaginary bird flushed from behind the desk. 'Kaplowie!' He ejected an imaginary shell. 'These are dangerous times—more dangerous than you'd suspect from the surface. Kaplowie! But it's also the Golden Age, isn't it, Paul?'" —Chapter 12, page 126

"More remarkable than the way the house had relieved its stresses was the way it conformed to Paul's particular, not to say peculiar, needs. Here was a place where he



could work with his hands, getting life from nature without being disturbed by any human beings other than his wife. Not only that, but Anita, with her love for things colonial, would be enchanted, stunned, even, by this completely authentic microcosm of the past." —Chapter 15, page 149

"The crisis was coming, he knew, when he would have to quit or turn informer, but its approach was unreal, and, lacking a decisive plan for meeting it, he forced a false tranquility on himself—a vague notion that everything would come out all right in the end, the way it always had for him." —Chapter 19, page 179

"'No reflection on you,' said the sergeant patiently. 'Nobody's said you are. It's all automatic. The machines do it.'" —Chapter 27, page 251

"'It has all the characteristics of a lynching,' said the professor. 'It's on such a big scale, though, I suppose genocide is closer. The good die with the bad—the flush toilets with the automatic lathe controls.'" —Chapter 24, page 311



Topics for Discussion

Compare technology in the future society that Kurt Vonnegut imagined in 1952 to today's technology.

If Paul Proteus had played by the society's rules and continued to be promoted, could he have ultimately done more good from inside the high ranks of the company?

If the computer system could be improved so that everyone's talents were measured truly and accurately, would the society portrayed in the novel be acceptable? Why or why not?

What do you think the consequences of the Ghost Shirt Society rebellion will be?

Why does Lasher think it is important to rebel "for the record," even though he knows that he won't succeed? Do you agree or disagree with his position?

Why would well-paid, respected engineers like Paul and Finnerty become dissatisfied with their lives?

Explain the significance of the title Player Piano.

In what ways is the class system in the novel better than and worse than a class system based on wealth?

How is Paul Proteus a slave to machines?

Compare the society in Vonnegut's novel to communism.