Player Piano

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KURT VONNEGUT

The youngest of three siblings, Kurt Vonnegut grew up in Indianapolis and went on to attend Cornell University. He studied biochemistry for just two years before dropping out in 1942, at which point he joined the Army and was trained as a mechanical engineer. In 1944, shortly after his mother took her own life, Vonnegut was sent abroad to fight in World War II. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was captured by German soldiers, who took him to a prison camp in Dresden. During the allied bombings of Dresden, Vonnegut survived by hiding underground in the meat locker of a slaughterhouse—an experience that informed his most famous novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut escaped Germany and returned to the United States in 1945, marrying his high school girlfriend, Jane Marie Cox, soon after he came home. They had three children while Vonnegut supported his fledgling writing career by working various jobs. He published his first novel, *Player Piano*, in 1952, after working for General Electric for several years (the novel was partially inspired by his experience at this job). This was the beginning of a fruitful career, as Vonnegut published 13 other novels and multiple short story collections, plays, and essays. His final novel appeared in 1997, ten years before he died at the age of 84, having sustained head injuries after a fall.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Player Piano imagines a society in which an extreme form of automatization has taken place. This builds on the same ideas that drove the First and Second Industrial Revolutions, in which the invention of new machines increased production and streamlined efficiency in the workplace. The First Industrial Revolution (which spanned roughly from 1760 to 1840) introduced machines that made it easier for laborers to quickly complete various tasks. Things like the power loom and the steam engine, for instance, took pressure off of manual labors by limiting the amount of physical effort required to do their jobs. The Second Industrial Revolution (1870-1914) built upon this progress, especially since the use of electrical power in factories became widespread, further diminishing the amount of work necessary to manufacture certain products. *Player Piano* pushes all of these strides to the extreme, imagining a world in which machines have *completely* replaced any kind of grunt work. It also plays on the fact that war often leads to vast changes, since the war in the novel is what leads to such widespread mechanization. Similarly, the American workforce drastically changed during World War II, when women started working in large numbers for the first time. The difference, of course, is that the inclusion of women in the workplace was an undoubtedly positive development, whereas the machines in *Player Piano* end up creating a divided, dystopian society.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In many ways, *Player Piano* set the tone for Vonnegut's entire career, debuting not only his humor, but also his slightly cynical outlook on the world. He was often interested in examining class divides, as is the case not only in *Player Piano*, but also in his novels *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *The Sirens of Titan*, both of which question whether or not wealth actually leads to happiness. Vonnegut was also strongly influenced by George Orwell, who was his favorite author; he even said that Orwell's *1984* directly inspired *Player Piano*, as did Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Like *Player Piano*, these novels imagine dystopian futures that feel disconcertingly familiar. In terms of *Player Piano*'s humor and parody of corporate life, it makes sense to consider it alongside Herman Melville's *Bartleby, The Scrivener*, a story in which the protagonist defies his boss's requests by repeatedly saying, "I would prefer not to." The novel's cartoonish depiction of a ridiculous system of government also recalls Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, which shows the absurdities of military life. And, in more recent times, the author George Saunders has often been compared to Kurt Vonnegut, since he—like Vonnegut—writes stories set in strange but believable alternate realities.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Player Piano*
- **When Written:** Around 1950
- **When Published:** 1952
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Speculative Fiction
- **Setting:** The fictional town of Ilium, New York, at some point in the future
- **Climax:** As Paul stands trial for treason, the Ghost Shirt Society begins its revolt and breaks into the courthouse to free him.
- **Antagonist:** Doctor Lawson Shepherd, Kroner, or—more broadly—the entire corporate mentality that values machines over human beings
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Eureka! While working for General Electric in 1949, Kurt

Vonnegut saw a machine designed to cut blades for airplane rotors. Impressed by this advanced technology (for the time), he imagined a world in which machines could manufacture anything on their own—a thought that inspired him to write *Player Piano*.

Utopia 14 A paperback edition of *Player Piano* was released in 1954 under the name *Utopia 14*, which the publisher thought would attract science fiction fans.

PLOT SUMMARY

Player Piano takes place in a future reality in which machines have replaced the majority of human laborers in the United States. This automatization developed during a devastating war, when the country had to sustain production while workers went to battle. This meant engineers became the most important members of society—an elite reputation that remained even after the war. These days, everyone is required to take a test that determines the field they should go into and whether or not they're intelligent enough to go to college. Anyone who doesn't pass the test must either join the Army or a public works organization called the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps. The people who *do* pass the test, on the other hand, mostly become managers and engineers, working at a large national company that is more powerful than the government.

The divide between college-educated engineers and everyone else is stark in Ilium, New York, where Doctor Paul Proteus lives with his wife, Anita. Paul is the manager of the Ilium Works, which means he's the most powerful man in town. He and Anita live in a neighborhood full of other managers and engineers. Anyone who didn't go to college lives in Homestead, a town on the other side of the Iroquois River. The two populations rarely interact.

Despite his success, Paul is unhappy. Anita is obsessed with his career and status, wanting him to advance through the company, but he feels drained by the corporate world. However, his mood picks up when his old friend, Ed Finnerty, comes to visit. He and Finnerty started at Ilium Works together 13 years ago, but Finnerty was promoted to a big job in Washington, D.C. Finnerty has never conformed to the boring corporate lifestyle—something Paul has always admired about him.

Finnerty tells Paul that he quit his job in Washington because he couldn't stand it anymore. He clearly hopes Paul feels the same way, but Paul isn't ready to admit his true feelings about the corporate world. Still, Finnerty's discontent has a strong impact on him, rattling him before he leaves for a company dinner at the local Country Club, where he gives a speech about the importance of engineering. Anita is particularly invested in this speech, wanting it to go well because she hopes Paul will make a good impression on his bosses Kroner and Baer. Kroner, in particular, has high expectations for Paul, and Anita hopes Paul will use this to his advantage to get promoted.

Paul's speech leads to a discussion in which Kroner praises the many benefits of mechanization. Toward the end of the evening, though, Finnerty arrives and drunkenly points out that automatization has actually *harmed* society by putting so many people out of work. Anita is devastated by this, hoping Finnerty's words won't ruin the evening and, in turn, destroy Paul's chances of getting promoted to the position of manager at the Pittsburgh Works. But Finnerty isn't the only person hurting Paul's chances of promotion: Doctor Shepherd, Paul's second-in-command, is eager to get the job himself, so he has been talking to Kroner and Baer about Paul's unreliability. Much to Anita's dismay, Paul hardly does anything to refute this, refusing to compete with Shepherd.

The day after the speech, Finnerty visits Ilium Works and wants to roam the grounds. It's forbidden for unauthorized people to do this, but Paul orders the guards to let him in. When Shepherd hears about this, he calls Paul and strongly insinuates that he plans to tell Kroner, but Paul ignores him.

At a bar in Homestead that evening, Paul and Finnerty meet a man named James Lasher, a reverend in the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps who also happens to have a master's degree in anthropology. As they drink, Lasher insists that the stark societal divide will surely lead to some kind of revolution, arguing that a "Messiah" will emerge and lead the people of Homestead in a revolt against the elite upper class.

Finnerty is taken by this idea, finding Lasher deeply fascinating. Even Paul resonates with Lasher's points, which help him see that machines have not only put people out of work, but—in doing so—have taken away their sense of self-worth and "dignity." People like to feel as if they have a purpose in life, Lasher notes. Later, Paul gets so drunk that he stands on a table and yells that he will lead everyone to the middle of the bridge over the Iroquois River, promising to bring the two sides of Ilium together. But everyone just looks at him, and then he falls off the table and passes out. When Paul wakes up and goes to leave, Finnerty says he isn't coming—he'll be staying with Lasher.

The next day, Kroner invites Paul and Anita over for dinner. As Anita sits in the living room with Kroner's wife, whom everyone calls Mom, Kroner takes Paul to his study. While showing Paul one of his many hunting rifles, Kroner says the Pittsburgh manager position has come down to two people: Paul and Fred Garth, the manager of the Buffalo Works. However, Kroner really thinks Paul's the right one for the job. The only thing, he says, is that Paul has been making questionable decisions lately—like, for instance, letting Finnerty into the plant unsupervised. Another problem is that Paul's government-issued gun was found on the banks of the river (because

Finnerty stole it and later threw it in the river). This offense could lead to Paul's arrest. As Paul tries to explain himself, Kroner waves him off, assuring him that he's not overly concerned. In fact, he'd still like Paul to have the Pittsburgh job. All Paul has to do is become an informant, gathering information on shady characters like Finnerty and James Lasher. Before Paul can respond, Baer bursts in and congratulates him on the promotion, though Kroner says that nothing has been set in stone.

Paul decides to quit his job, since he can't imagine betraying Finnerty. But he keeps this to himself for a while, wanting to slowly acclimate Anita to the idea of leading a different lifestyle. With this in mind, he secretly buys an old farm that has remained untouched by machinery, planning to become a farmer when he leaves the Ilium Works. Meanwhile, everyone around him prepares for the yearly corporate retreat to an island called the Meadows, where employees are grouped into teams that compete against each other in various sports. The whole idea of going to the Meadows exhausts Paul, but he has to feign enthusiasm because he has been named captain of the Blue Team—something that is, supposedly, an honor.

At the Meadows, Kroner and Paul sneak off to have a meeting with the most powerful man at the company, Doctor Gelhorne. Gelhorne says there's a group called the Ghost Shirt Society that wants to dismantle the country's use of machinery, effectively challenging everything the company stands for. Lasher and Finnerty belong to this society, and since Paul knows them, Gelhorne and Kroner want him to infiltrate the group as an informer. To make this believable, they'll have to fire him; they've even started circulating rumors that he's a "saboteur." Paul tries to quit when they tell him this, but they think he's just playing along with the plan. They also promise to promote him to manager of the Pittsburgh Works after he completes this assignment.

On his way off the island, Paul sees Anita and Shepherd in a romantic embrace. They've been having an affair, but Anita doesn't feel remorseful. Instead of trying to cover up her infidelity, she accuses Paul of never actually caring for her, and though he refutes this, she doesn't listen.

Back at home, Paul goes for a drink at the bar in Homestead, where the bartender knocks him out by slipping a drug into his whiskey. When he regains consciousness, he's with Finnerty and Lasher, who tell him about the Ghost Shirt Society and its plan to destroy the country's machinery. The goal is to restore a sense of purpose to the people who have been replaced by machines. More importantly, Paul will be the face of the revolution. He doesn't have to do anything, though—his reputation will be enough to help the society recruit members. After agreeing to go along with this plan, Paul attends his first Ghost Shirt Society meeting and learns that the revolution will take place across the entire country, as multiple chapters of the society march against the machines.

Suddenly, police burst into the Ghost Shirt meeting. Paul tries to flee but gets arrested and thrown in jail. However, it's not long before Kroner and Anita visit him, telling him that he's done a wonderful job and that he's getting promoted to Baer's old job—Baer read a letter by the Ghost Shirt Society and thought it made some good points, so he left the company. Anita is thrilled and has decided to take Paul back. All Paul needs to do now is talk on the record about Lasher and Finnerty's plans. But he refuses, choosing instead to stand trial as the head of the Ghost Shirt Society.

The Ghost Shirts begin their revolt during one of Paul's court hearings, ultimately managing to break him free. They carry him into the chaos of the streets, where revolutionaries are busy destroying machines and upending the entire social order. They completely overtake Ilium, but the movement isn't as successful in other cities throughout the country.

That evening, Paul and Finnerty survey the damage, which quickly got out of hand because the Ghost Shirts were too excited about breaking things. As the entire city shudders with the sound of far-off explosions, the police announce over loudspeakers that Ilium will be cut off from the rest of the country if the leaders of the movement—Paul, Lasher, Finnerty, and a professor named von Neumann—don't turn themselves in. At first, Lasher and the others like the idea of living without machines, thinking of it as a way to demonstrate to the world that such a thing is possible. But when they see their fellow Ghost Shirts excitedly foraging through the broken machinery and trying to make it work again (seemingly just for the thrill of it), they realize that their little isolated society will inevitably rebuild itself, since it's human nature to build, tinker, and work toward progress. With this in mind, they turn themselves in, feeling proud that they at least tried to upend an unjust system.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Doctor Paul Proteus – The novel's protagonist, Doctor Paul Proteus is the most important manager in Ilium. But despite his corporate success, Paul is depressed with his station in life. He used to believe in the value of engineering and automation, but now he's skeptical of the inequality it has created in society. Still, though, he half-heartedly climbs the corporate ladder because he's in line for a promotion and is constantly spurred on by his industrious, status-obsessed wife, Anita. Torn between his own apathy and Anita's constant motivation, Paul's misgivings about his job become even more pronounced when his friend and former coworker, Ed Finnerty, visits and slowly helps him see the absurdity of his corporate life. As Finnerty gets involved with an anti-automation revolutionary group called the Ghost Shirt Society, Paul is instructed by Kroner (his boss) to infiltrate the organization and become an informer. To

make it believable that Paul would want to do this in the first place, the company pretends to fire him—what they don't know, though, is that he has actually decided to quit. He thus joins the Ghost Shirts for real, working alongside Finnerty and a righteous reverend named James Lasher in an effort to overthrow the country's highly mechanized system. For the first time in his life, Paul feels like he's working toward something he actually believes in, and though the revolution ultimately fails, he takes comfort in the fact that he tried to do something to make the world a better place. His journey from important manager to revolutionary showcases the book's cynicism about corporate life and, more specifically, the many downsides of technological progress.

Doctor Ed Finnerty – Ed Finnerty is a former engineer and Paul's best friend. He was promoted several years ago to an important job in Washington, D.C., but has since quit because he finds corporate life deeply unrewarding. Finnerty and Paul came to the Ilium Works together as young men, when they were both enthusiastic about creating useful machines. Even then, though, Finnerty purposefully rejected the predictable life most people led in Ilium, refusing to get married and often going around in dirty clothes. He has therefore always been a contrarian figure, urging Paul to see the flaws in society that most powerful people overlook. He doubles down on these beliefs when he shows up at Paul's house after quitting his job in D.C., trying desperately to get Paul to admit how depressing and lonely it is in the corporate world. While at a bar one night, the two men meet James Lasher, a charismatic reverend who hypothesizes that a revolution is coming and that the current societal conditions are ripe for class war. This idea deeply resonates with Finnerty, who helps Lasher establish an anti-automation group of revolutionaries called the Ghost Shirt Society. Finnerty fully commits himself to this cause, eventually convincing Paul to join and helping the group take over Ilium. And though the revolution doesn't actually work, Finnerty is proud of the overall effort, happy to have delivered a "savage blow" to society.

Anita Proteus – Anita Proteus is Paul's wife. Unlike Paul, Anita never went to college, and Paul believes this is why she vehemently detests the people on the other side of the river (people who, like her, didn't go to college). In Paul's mind, Anita resents these people because she fears that she herself would be living amongst them if she hadn't married Paul. They first met during the war, when Anita worked as Paul's secretary at the Ilium Works. They slept together after an office party celebrating the end of the war, leading Anita to believe she was pregnant with Paul's child. Because of this, she and Paul got married, though they later discovered she wasn't actually pregnant—in fact, Anita and Paul have *never* been able to have children together. All the same, Paul is more or less happy in his marriage, even if Anita seems overly concerned with his reputation and social status. She constantly urges Paul to do whatever he can to advance his career, even trying to compensate for his apathy by speaking to people like Kroner (his boss) on his behalf. In this spirit, she has frequent conversations with Lawson Shepherd, Paul's second-in-command, apparently paying no attention to the fact that Shepherd clearly wants to undermine Paul. To that end, as soon as Paul loses his job at Ilium Works, it emerges that Anita and Shepherd are having an affair, and Anita announces her intention to marry Shepherd, perfectly exemplifying how she prioritizes power, status, and success over all else.

Reverend James J. Lasher – James Lasher is a reverend who lives in Homestead (on the other side of the river from where Paul lives). Unlike most of the people in Homestead, he went to college. In fact, he earned a master's degree in anthropology, but because the country is so focused on production and money, there's very little anthropological work to do, so Lasher serves as a chaplain in the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps. Paul and Finnerty meet Lasher at a bar one night, buying him drinks and listening to him talk about his vision of the future. The divide between the educated upper class and the disenfranchised working class, he says, is sure to lead to conflict. By replacing manual laborers with machines, he argues, the country has stripped many of its citizens of their sense of dignity, leaving them with little self-worth and setting society up for a class war. By articulating these ideas, Lasher becomes a moral compass of sorts in the novel, encouraging Finnerty (and, later, Paul) to open his eyes to the intense class division in society. Lasher and Finnerty end up working together to establish a group of anti-automation revolutionaries called the Ghost Shirt Society, which Paul soon helps lead. The revolution overtakes Ilium but fails to mount a country-wide victory. Still, Lasher is happy simply because he stood up against injustice, explaining to the others that, because he's a reverend, the only thing that matters to him is that they at least *tried* to take a stand against immorality.

Kroner – Kroner is a high-ranking official at the company that employs Paul. The manager of the entire Eastern Division, he works alongside the Chief of Engineering, Baer, and though their personalities are extremely different, everyone sees them as inseparable. Kroner is a large, serious man who believes in the value of automation and productivity more than anything else. Because he was the late George Proteus's good friend, Kroner sees himself as a father of sorts to Paul, who in turn views him as a perfect example of the "corporate personality." Kroner does everything he can to help Paul rise in the company, leading to an absurd, humorous dynamic: the less Paul does, it seems, the harder Kroner tries to promote him. Eventually, though, Kroner orders Paul to find out information about what Finnerty and James Lasher are up to, promising him a promotion in return. When Paul eventually claims to be the leader of Finnerty and Lasher's group of anti-automation revolutionaries, Kroner is mystified because he simply can't

understand why anyone would want to upend society's existing power structures. In this way, he's a good representation of how people in positions of power often have trouble recognizing that their success has caused others to suffer.

Baer – Baer is the Chief Engineer of the entire Eastern Division at the company that employs Paul. He works alongside Kroner, and everyone sees them as a perfect duo. They are, however, quite different from each other, since Kroner is serious and authoritative while Baer is talkative, socially awkward, and eccentric. Paul notices that Baer will always give a problem—*any* problem—his full consideration, even if someone like Kroner would simply ignore it. When the Ghost Shirt Society sends out a letter outlining all the ways automatization has ruined lives, then, Baer reconsiders his role as Chief Engineer and decides to quit. He is therefore the rare example of someone in a position of power who is willing to consider how his own success has affected others.

Doctor Lawson Shepherd – Lawson Shepherd is Paul's second-in-command at the Ilium Works. A deeply competitive man, Shepherd resents that Paul got the manager job, thinking that *he* should have gotten it himself. For this reason, he hates working for Paul and is eager to get transferred to another branch. But Paul can't be bothered by Shepherd's competitive spirit. He even wants to stay on friendly terms with him, since they've worked together ever since they both started at Ilium as fresh, impressionable young engineers. Shepherd, however, seems determined to smear Paul's name with people like Kroner and Baer, going out of his way to tell them that Paul's nerves have been troubling him. He also makes a habit of visiting Anita and filling her in on everything Paul does that might hurt his chances of landing the open manager position in Pittsburgh. Paul eventually discovers that Shepherd and Anita are having an affair, but Anita shows no remorse. Later, while Paul is on trial for treason, she makes a point of announcing to the press that she and Shepherd intend to marry as soon as possible.

The Shah of Bratpuhr – The Shah of Bratpuhr is the spiritual leader of a fictional place called Bratpuhr. The fact that he's a Shah suggests that this made-up region is somewhere in Iran, since "Shah" is a title used in that part of the world (it was also used in Afghanistan until the 1970s). However, it's also possible that Kurt Vonnegut simply misspelled Bharatpur, which is a real city in the Indian state of Rajasthan (though this wouldn't make sense of the "Shah" title). Either way, the Shah is a powerful leader who visits the United States with his translator, Khashdrahr Miasma. The purpose of his visit is to tour the country, supposedly to survey the United States's successful use of machines to create a streamlined, highly productive economy and government. As Doctor Halyard takes the Shah and Khashdrahr around the country, he finds himself having to confront many cultural differences, especially because the Shah assumes that anyone who isn't in the elite upper class must be enslaved (or, in his words, a "*Takaru*"). Halyard vehemently refutes this, but the Shah's observations about the strict hierarchies in the United States feel uncomfortably accurate, even if they're outlandish. Toward the end of the Shah's visit, he and Khashdrahr get swept up by members of the Ghost Shirt Society, who mistake them as fellow anti-automation revolutionaries. The Shah is last seen sleeping in a trench near a blockade after the Ghost Shirts overtake Ilium.

Khashdrahr Miasma – Khashdrahr Miasma is the Shah of Bratpuhr's translator and nephew. Although he speaks perfect English, he has never ventured beyond the confines of the Shah's palace—until now. A polite young man who deeply reveres the Shah, Khashdrahr accompanies his leader on a visit to the United States, where he acts as an interpreter between the Shah and everyone he meets. When angry Ghost Shirt revolutionaries block the limousine escorting the Shah, Khashdrahr, and Halyard, Khashdrahr viciously defends the Shah with a knife. This, however, doesn't save them from the enraged mob; the Shah and Khashdrahr end up getting dragged into the uprising, since they are mistaken for Ghost Shirts themselves. They later find themselves lying in a trench near a blockade built to keep the police out of Ilium during the overthrow.

Doctor Ewing J. Halyard – Doctor Halyard works for the State Department as a tour guide for foreign officials. A reserved but self-important man, he takes important visitors on long trips across the country, all the while singing the praises of technological advancement. This is what he does for the Shah and Khashdrahr, showing them things like a military parade, a centralized computer network called EPICAC, a barbershop in Miami, and Cornell University. Despite his best efforts, though, he has trouble convincing the Shah of certain things, such as that the social structure in the United States is egalitarian. Still, Halyard is very invested in the social system at work in the United States, wholeheartedly believing in the benefit of machines replacing human laborers. This is a relatively easy thing for him to think, considering that he—as someone with a PhD working in a position that can't be automated—doesn't have to worry about getting replaced. However, the central machines that run the country eventually discover that Halyard never passed his college's physical education test, meaning that his diploma is illegitimate. Halyard travels with the Shah to Cornell to retake the test, which he fails miserably. He is thus stripped of his title, a fact that demonstrates just how petty and bureaucratic this system really is.

Doctor Katharine Finch – Doctor Katharine Finch is Paul's secretary at the Ilium Works, where she's the only female employee. Paul sees her as more of a "symbol of rank than a real help"; in other words, he thinks that just *having* a secretary makes him seem important, even if he also believes that a machine could do her job more efficiently. Still, she often covers for Paul when he decides to leave work early—something a

machine clearly couldn't do. Katharine is in a relationship with the gifted manager Bud Calhoun, who's always hanging around in her office, which is attached to Paul's. When Bud is replaced by a machine that he himself invented, Katharine is distraught and eventually shows her contempt for the system by joining the Ghost Shirt Society (along with Bud) and helping them plan a revolution against the machines.

Doctor Bud Calhoun – Doctor Bud Calhoun is the manager of the "petroleum terminal" at the Ilium Works. Bud only has to work whenever shipments come in or go out, so he spends most of his time flirting with Katharine, wooing her with his smooth Georgia accent. Even though Bud is always lounging outside his office and talking to Katharine, Paul is clearly fond of him, especially since Bud is so skilled and intelligent. He can, Paul knows, design and build nearly any machine. Simply put, Bud loves to tinker and can't keep himself from getting excited about the mere idea of an interesting new project. But this works to his disadvantage when he's ordered to design a machine that will more efficiently do his *own* job. Unsurprisingly, Bud comes up with a perfect design, creating a machine that puts him and 71 other employees out of work. And though Bud is a brilliant designer, he can't get a new job because the central machines have concluded that the company has no use for him anymore. Consequently, he joins the Ghost Shirt Society, where he helps the revolutionaries come up with boobytraps to take down the country's infrastructure. After the Ghost Shirts successfully destroy all the machines in Ilium, though, Bud enthusiastically begins to rebuild them in front of an eager crowd, unable to stop himself from salvaging the debris littered all over town.

Fred Berringer – Fred Berringer is a young engineer who's eager to make a name for himself at Ilium Works. Although he barely graduated college, Kroner gave Berringer a job because he comes from a long line of respected engineers and managers. Hoping to assert himself as someone worthy of respect, Berringer challenges Paul—the reigning checker champion—to a checker game at an important company dinner. When Paul sits down to play, Berringer and his friends wheel out a giant machine that his father built called Checker Charley—a machine that calculates the best move a player could possibly make. Paul objects to this, but everyone urges him to play. Berringer acts smug and confident, but this attitude fades when Checker Charley starts losing to Paul. Soon enough, smoke pours from Checker Charley's insides, and then the machine catches fire. Berringer is distraught, saying that Checker Charley was his father's pride and joy, but Finnerty (who placed bets against the machine) is overjoyed, eventually saying that he noticed before the game began that the machine had a loose connection. Berringer doesn't take this loss in stride, instead acting petulant and bitter. He later joins forces with Shepherd to undermine Paul by smearing his name at the company.

Doctor Fred Garth – Doctor Fred Garth is the manager of the Buffalo Works. Garth is an older man whom everyone views as "steady and reliable," even if he isn't particularly innovative. Kroner tells Paul that the decision about the manager job at the Pittsburgh Works has come down to Garth and Paul. However, Kroner also admits that Garth doesn't have Paul's "technical imagination," even if he's a great manager. The thing he *does* have, though, is an unflagging sense of commitment to the company and the entire corporate system—something Paul clearly lacks. All the same, Kroner would rather give Paul the job. When the company holds its yearly retreat at the Meadows (a nearby island), Paul and Garth are put in the same tent, but they don't viciously compete with each other, as one might expect. Instead, they maintain a friendly relationship, as Garth tells Paul that his eldest son failed the General Classification Test (which determines if someone is qualified for college) and will be retaking it. Later, when Garth finds out that his son failed the test once again, he destroys the **oak tree** on the island—a tree that symbolizes the company's strength and vitality. Although this isn't much of a crime, he's arrested and thrown in jail, where Paul eventually encounters him once again when he himself gets arrested.

Rudy Hertz – A former machinist, Rudy Hertz is now an old man who lives in Homestead and spends his time drinking at the bar with his blind dog at his side. When Paul, Finnerty, and Shepherd were still young engineers, they were tasked with visiting a machine shop and recording the physical movements of the best machinist. These movements were then put on a tape and played through a machine that, in turn, recreated the laborer's movements. To this day, Rudy Hertz is still proud that Paul, Finnerty, and Shepherd chose him to be the one they recorded. When Paul sees him for the first time in many years at a bar in Homestead, Rudy speaks admiringly of him in front of everyone else, making Paul extremely uncomfortable because it's clear that the other customers despise him (since he's part of the elite class that forced them out of work by designing so many machines).

Luke Lubbock – Luke Lubbock is a strange, impressionable man who lives in Homestead and spends his time joining various causes and blending into groups by donning their uniforms. When Paul goes to Homestead and witnesses a "parade competition," Luke Lubbock is the leading star of almost every parade. Unsurprisingly, he later joins the Ghost Shirt Society.

Professor Ludwig von Neumann – Professor von Neumann is a former professor of political science at Union College in New York. When the social sciences building was destroyed in order to make way for a new laboratory, though, von Neumann found himself without a job. This is why he joins the Ghost Shirt Society, where he becomes one of the leaders, along with Lasher, Finnerty, and Paul.

Doctor Francis Eldgrin Gelhorne – Doctor Gelhorne is the "National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs,

and Resources Director" at the company that employs Paul. This is the highest position in the whole company, but Gelhorne didn't secure his power in the same way as his coworkers, all of whom attained upward mobility by earning advanced degrees and becoming managers and engineers. In fact, Gelhorne didn't even go to college—all of his degrees are honorary. The reason he's been so successful is simply that he has a shrewd business sense and managed to work his way to the top of the company during the war, when the industry was volatile and it was still possible to use an entrepreneurial spirit to advance through the ranks. Nowadays, this would be impossible, since machines determine whether or not people are qualified for certain jobs. Paul reflects on this when he and Kroner secretly meet up with Gelhorne at the Meadows. At this meeting, Gelhorne—who was close friends with Paul's father—tells Paul about the Ghost Shirt Society and instructs him to infiltrate the group.

Doctor Edmund L. Harrison (Ed Harrison) – Doctor Ed Harris is a young engineer who works at the Ithaca Works. Harrison meets Paul during dinner on the first night of the Meadows, when everyone is required to talk to somebody they don't already know. At first, Harrison seems just like all the other young engineers: eager and full of company spirit. When Kroner and Gelhorne fire Paul at the Meadows and spread the rumor that he's a "saboteur," everyone turns on him—except for Harrison, who brings him a drink and asks what he did to receive this treatment. In response, Paul advises him to either fully commit to the corporate life or get out now. It's too hard, he says, to have misgivings about the job while continuing to do it day in and day out. Harrison takes this advice, leaving behind his life of engineering and planning to move to someplace where there are no machines.

Alfy – Alfy lives in Homestead and makes his money by betting on what song is playing on the bar's television. With his uncanny knack for identifying a song just by watching the orchestra on television (even when it's muted), he's able to make his entire living this way. He's also an incredibly independent person, which is why he eventually refuses to join the Ghost Shirt Society.

Doctor George Proteus (Paul's Father) – Doctor George Proteus was Paul's father. He was the former "National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resources Director," which is the title Doctor Gelhorne now holds. This job is perhaps the most powerful position in the entire country—on par with the President of the United States. Although she never met him, Anita is obsessed with the idea of Paul's father, loving the idea that Paul will follow in his footsteps. But Paul knows this is absurd: his father was deeply motivated by all things business, committing himself to the "corporate personality." Paul, on the other hand, can't bring himself to care about his job. Still, even Kroner expects Paul to go down the same path as his highly successful father.

Doctor Harold Roseberry – Doctor Harold Roseberry is the football coach at Cornell University. Several years ago, the university bought him an expensive team of non-student athletes, so the Cornell football program has gone undefeated in recent seasons. But Roseberry is frustrated because Cornell hasn't bought him any new players since then, and he fears this season won't be as successful. This is why he tries to recruit Buck Young, a talented football player who has chosen to focus on his studies instead of playing sports (players aren't allowed to study and vice versa). Roseberry is also the one to give Doctor Halyard a fitness test, which Halyard needs to pass in order to stay in his job. However, Roseberry knows that Halyard spoke badly of him to the university's president, so he makes sure Halyard fails the test.

Private First Class Elmo C. Hacketts, Jr. – Private First Class Elmo C. Hacketts, Jr., is a member of the Army. When Halyard takes the Shah to visit the Army, Hacketts and his fellow soldiers show him an example of a military parade. All the while, Hacketts daydreams about the day his service finally comes to an end.

Mom (Janice Kroner) – Janice Kroner, whom everyone calls "Mom," is Kroner's wife. In the same way that Kroner acts in a fatherly way toward all of his employees, Mom treats everyone as if they're her children (as made clear by her nickname). She especially likes when people tell her their problems, listening as if she is, of course, their mother.

Doctor Pond – Doctor Pond is a real estate agent who works for the Ilium Real Estate Office. When Paul wants to buy a rundown farmhouse that has remained untouched by machines, Pond tries everything he can think of to convince him to purchase something nicer—something that would better suit the most powerful man in Ilium. Eventually, Paul lies and says he's only buying the farm as a vacation home, which puts Pond at ease.

Mr. Haycox – Mr. Haycox is an elderly member of the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps. Unlike other workers in the Corps, though, he has a very specific job, which is to serve as caretaker for an old farm. The farm's previous owner, Gottwald, stipulated in his will that the farm must be left in its antiquated, pre-machine state. As such, Mr. Haycox is tasked with running the land the old-fashioned way, devoting himself to the outdated practice of farming—something that entices Paul and compels him to buy the property.

Gottwald – Gottwald is the previous owner of the farm that Paul buys. Gottwald included a clause in his will saying that the farm has to stay the exact way it has always been, without any kind of mechanization. This is why Mr. Haycox is tasked with keeping up the property by farming the land and caring for the house. Paul finds this machine-free environment extremely appealing, so he buys the farm.

Edgar R. B. Hagstrohm – Edgar Hagstrohm works for the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps and lives in a suburban

housing area called Proteus Park in Chicago. Because Edgar is exceedingly average (as determined by a group of machines), Halyard takes the Shah to visit his household, hoping to show him the life of a run-of-the-mill American worker. What the machines that chose Edgar don't know, though, is that he's cheating on his wife, Wanda, and that he's not very happy.

Wanda Hagstrohm – Wanda Hagstrohm is married to Edgar Hagstrohm. When the Shah visits her household and asks what she does with all the time saved by the various machines that do the housework, one of the only things she can think to say is that she watches a lot of television. Later, Edgar tells her he's having an affair, but she isn't surprised—she even tells him that she understands and then tries to move on, apparently not wanting to unsettle their lives.

Buck Young – Buck Young is a student at Cornell University. Although he's studying to be an engineer, he plays football for fun with his fraternity. Doctor Roseberry—the university's football coach—sees him play one day and is astounded by his talent, but Buck refuses to halt his studies in order to join the team (students aren't allowed to play college sports). Eventually, though, Roseberry convinces him to quit engineering school, wooing him away with a high salary.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Doctor Ned Dodge – Doctor Ned Dodge is the manager of Proteus Park, the cluster of houses in which Edgar and Wanda Hagstrohm live. Along with Halyard, he takes the Shah on a tour of the area.

Checker Charley – Checker Charley is a checker-playing machine built by Fred Berringer's father. Due to a loose connection, Checker Charley bursts into flames while playing checkers against Paul at the Country Club.

Homer Bigley – A barber in Miami, Homer Bigley cuts the Shah's hair while talking extensively about automation and his fear of being replaced by machines.

President Jonathan Lynn – Jonathan Lynn is the President of the United States. Despite this impressive title, he doesn't hold much power, nor does he know much about how the country operates.

TERMS

EPICAC – EPICAC is an "electronic computing machine" that basically functions as an electronic brain. It is extremely large and is stored in the Carlsbad Caverns, where its main job is to determine how many products consumers will buy in a given year. EPICAC also decides how many managing and engineering jobs are available at a given time.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

TECHNOLOGY AND PROGRESS

Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Player Piano* illustrates the many downsides of technological progress. The protagonist, Paul Proteus, lives in a near future in which American society values technological advancement more than anything else—including actual people. Because the entire country is controlled by machines, physical laborers have been forced out of their jobs. This leads to booming economic growth, but it also strips many people of their livelihood and takes away their sense of purpose in life. As these people feel increasingly devalued and expendable, the elite class of engineers prides itself on making great strides. But these strides are limited, since the corporate world focuses solely on financial and technological growth, ignoring more meaningful things like how machines have impacted people's lives. By illustrating the toll mechanization has taken on actual human lives, the novel implies that progress (at least in terms of technology) isn't *always* a good thing. But when anti-automation revolutionaries finally destroy the machines, they end up immediately trying to rebuild them—an indication that, for better or worse, humans naturally gravitate toward technological invention and discovery.

Automation benefits the corporate world because it's extremely efficient, eliminating the imperfections of human labor and creating a reliable, streamlined system. In the world of *Player Piano*, American society has taken this desire for efficiency to the extreme, replacing anyone whose job could be done by a machine. The corporate environment to which Paul belongs sees this as the ultimate form of progress, since machines can create superior products at a lower cost. Human laborers, on the other hand, are messy and unreliable. Before he loses faith in the value of automation, Paul points out that humans are affected by petty things like "hangovers, family squabbles, resentments against the boss, debts," and virtually "every kind of human trouble"—all of which eventually show up as flaws in the products themselves. It's therefore most cost effective for Paul's company to use machines instead of manual laborers, which is why people like Kroner (Paul's boss) see automation as a tangible form of progress. Machines increase profits and diminish the many challenges of the workplace, so the strides technology has made seem like obvious improvements on modern life.

This kind of technological progress, however, doesn't actually

advance society as a *whole*. It might allow certain things like the manufacturing industry to function a bit more smoothly, but productivity and financial success aren't the only measures of an advanced society. To that end, very few people in Paul's hometown of Ilium are genuinely happy. This is because the laborers who have been forced out of work by machines have lost their "dignity." As Lasher—a cynical reverend Paul meets in a bar—puts it, a sense of being "needed and useful" in life is the "foundation of self-respect." Taking jobs away from people thus means robbing them of their self-respect, since it's difficult for people to feel "needed and useful" when society acts like they're easily replaceable. With this in mind, it's hard to argue that any country is particularly advanced if large numbers of its citizens are miserable and lack self-respect.

Along with all this unhappiness, there's also a terrible rift in society between the corporate elite and the former manual laborers. This division is the direct result of automation, since forcing people out of their jobs is a perfect way to emphasize class disparities, basically drawing a clear line between the fortunate engineers who get to stay in their careers and everyone else. The highest paid person in Ilium, Paul can't even walk into a bar without feeling everyone's resentment, since he represents corporate success. This makes it uncomfortably clear that the so-called *progress* society has made is limited to its technological advancements, which have mainly led to unhappiness and division amongst the social classes.

Because of all the downsides of automation, society is perfectly poised for revolution and class war—a sure sign that all this progress has actually caused more harm than good. Unhappy with his life as a manager, Paul helps lead a group of revolutionaries called the Ghost Shirt Society. One of this group's most compelling arguments against automation is that human beings are naturally "imperfect" and that, instead of trying to avoid this imperfection, society should *embrace* it. According to the Ghost Shirts, manufacturing human incompetence out of the workforce isn't really a form of progress, since it just creates so many other societal problems. And yet, people like Kroner just assume anything that increases production is beneficial to society and thus counts as progress.

Despite the book's critical attitude toward automation, it also explores the idea that this kind of technological progress is unavoidable. This is apparent when the very same Ghost Shirt revolutionaries who destroy all the machines in Ilium end up excitedly rebuilding them. Although their main goal was to fight against automation in order to live in a machine-free society, it only takes a few hours before they find themselves in a blissful state of creativity as they try to get the broken machines working again. For example, Bud Calhoun—a gifted former engineer—uses scraps of discarded equipment to fix a busted soda machine while a crowd of his fellow Ghost Shirt members watch and applaud his work.

This speaks to an observation Finnerty makes in the aftermath of the failed revolution: "Things don't stay the way they are," he says. "It's too entertaining to change them." The implication here is that humans are naturally inclined toward progress. Even though people like Bud Calhoun know that machines have had a harmful overall impact on society, he and the other Ghost Shirts still try to rebuild the very things they themselves destroyed. This suggests that technological progress is an inevitable fact of life, since humans will always work toward change—even against their better judgement.

HAPPINESS, SELF-WORTH, AND PASSION

Player Piano highlights the relationship between happiness and a strong sense of self-worth. As a result of widespread automation in a futuristic United States, many people no longer have jobs. Because a person's value in this society is mostly determined by their career, putting people out of work robs them of their pride and dignity, making them feel like they're no longer "needed on earth." And yet, the novel also indicates that having a good job won't automatically lead to happiness, either. After all, Paul Proteus has the most important job in Ilium, and he's still unfulfilled by his station in life. This is because he's uninspired by his job—he doesn't believe in what he's doing, regardless of how high he has climbed on the corporate ladder. This underlines the idea that happiness doesn't just depend on self-worth, but also on a sense of passion. In order to be happy, the novel intimates, people have to feel both useful and passionate about what they're doing.

It's implicit in the novel that the people who have lost their jobs are unhappy. Their options in life are severely limited, since the only viable way of supporting oneself without a college degree is to join the army or a public works organization called the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps (the "Reeks and Wrecks"). This means that everyone in the non-engineering class is unable to practice the trades they originally devoted their lives to.

For instance, when Paul's car breaks down one day, a man working on the side of the road for the Reeks and Wrecks pauses to help, and it turns out that he's an extremely creative and talented mechanic. It's obvious that this man used to make his living working on cars. Now, though, he has to do roadwork because machines have replaced all the mechanics in Ilium. The novel doesn't explicitly state that this man is unhappy with his position in life, but it's reasonable to assume that he'd rather be practicing his actual trade than doing roadwork, especially since he's apparently so gifted at working on cars. This demonstrates one of the biggest impacts of automation on personal happiness, illustrating that mechanization has made it impossible for people to do the things they love.

Additionally, the prospect of upward mobility in this society is

wildly unrealistic, since nobody without a college degree is eligible to hold a powerful position. As a result, the working class has nothing to work toward. It's not just that they can't do what they're passionate about, but also that they can't even focus on advancing their careers. It's therefore essentially impossible for them to attain a genuine sense of fulfillment, at least as far as their working lives are concerned.

But, as Reverend James J. Lasher makes clear, it's not just the lack of a good career path that makes people unhappy—it's that working-class people have lost their self-worth. This is because, at least according to Lasher, people tend to derive a sense of "dignity" from their jobs. Or, in the words of the anti-automation group called the Ghost Shirt Society, "Men, by their nature, seemingly, cannot be happy unless engaged in enterprises that make them feel useful." In a society in which value is so heavily determined by progress, money, and "usefulness," taking jobs away from people leaves them with virtually nothing. It's like robbing them of their ability to feel important or worthy of respect, and this understandably makes it difficult to be genuinely happy.

At the same time, having a good job won't magically make a person happy, either. Paul and Finnerty are perfect examples of this, since they both have powerful corporate positions but are completely discontent, proving that even the most seemingly important and respected jobs aren't always emotionally rewarding.

The root of Paul's unhappiness as manager of the Ilium Works likely has to do with how little he actually does at the plant. Rarely throughout the book does he do anything other than answer the phone or talk with Katharine, his secretary. The one time he goes to check up on a malfunctioning machine, he tries to pawn the task off on his second-in-command, forgetting that Shepherd is out sick that day. This suggests that he's not used to doing any work himself. Furthermore, when he finally looks at the malfunctioning machine, there's nothing he can do to fix it, since it's simply too old. Despite his powerful position, then, it's unlikely that he could possibly feel very "useful." In this way, he has something in common with the people who have been replaced in the workplace by machines—just like them, he no longer has a clear sense of purpose.

Even if Paul were useful at his job, he doesn't truly believe in the value of the work. This has changed over his career, since he and Finnerty used to strongly believe in the importance of engineering. During the war, they used to come up with designs for machines that helped the economy stay on track. "Happiest I ever was," Finnerty says of this period in his life. Now, though, the war is over, and society is already extremely automated. With nothing of real importance left for Paul and Finnerty to do, they become unhappy.

In fact, it isn't until they join the Ghost Shirt Society and become leaders of a revolution against automation that they finally feel alive and happy again. When Paul agrees to join, he takes comfort in feeling like he can now "belong and believe" in something, suggesting that he feels as if there's a place for him amongst these revolutionaries—a group in which he can serve a tangible purpose and work passionately toward something worthwhile.

CLASS DIVISION AND COMPETITION

In Player Piano, the country's obsession with efficiency has led to very divided social conditions, since the population has been grouped into two categories: those who are of use to the economy and those who are not. This structure makes sense for a nation that prioritizes economic productivity, but it creates tension between the elite and everyone else. For example, certain opportunities are only available to people with high IQ scores, leading to resentment among people who aren't intelligent in the traditional sense. This IQ-based system of categorization makes sense from a business standpoint, but it sends a harmful message to anyone who isn't deemed smart enough to hold an important job: namely, that they're useless and insignificant. Meanwhile, powerful managers like Paul are forced to prove themselves to their superiors time and again, always fighting to stay afloat in the competitive atmosphere of the corporate world. Company officials see this competitive spirit as a healthy way of increasing productivity, but it just fatigues and annoys Paul, driving him further away from the company. It's clear, then, that the emphasis on efficiency in this futuristic United States has not only led to an inhumane system of job placement, but also to division and resentment across all levels of society, creating widespread—and unnecessary—social strife.

The country's system of categorizing people is extremely demoralizing. James Lasher points this out to Paul and Finnerty, noting that the use of IQ tests to determine a person's value to the economy is a great way to stir up discord. It is, according to Lasher, "grade-A incitement to violence," since anyone who doesn't have a high IQ will naturally resent the smarter citizens who have better jobs. After all, this system implies that "the smarter you are, the better you are."

In addition to making people feel inferior, this system is rigid and unforgiving. Lasher speaks to this when he notes that the entire IQ-based system is "built on more than just brain power—it's built on special kinds of brain power. Not only must a person be bright, he must be bright in certain approved, useful directions: basically, management or engineering." This implies that even intelligent people are excluded from powerful positions if they don't show an aptitude for a very narrow, specific field. In other words, very few people can join the elite class of valued workers—a fact that is surely dispiriting to anyone who isn't lucky enough to possess the very specialized intelligence deemed valuable to the economy.

Because this system of categorization makes it so difficult for people to succeed, it's unsurprising that it leads to significant

backlash against the upper class. The Ghost Shirt Society—a group of anti-automation revolutionaries—mounts a large-scale attack on the country's power structures, but resentment of the elite also shows up in smaller, more everyday circumstances. For instance, when Doctor Halyard gives the Shah of Bratpuhr a tour of Ilium on behalf of the State Department, a member of the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps (a public works organization) spits in his face. This happens as Halyard drives by in a limousine while the laborer works on the side of the road. The juxtaposition between the luxury of Halyard's career and the difficulty of this man's job is quite glaring, as Halyard's limousine calls attention to the obvious disparity between the fortunate upper class and everyone else. What's more, the worker's disdain for Halyard—whom he doesn't even know on a personal level—reveals that this unequal societal structure has led to intense animosity.

Society's fixation on efficiency and productivity also creates internal division amongst the elite class of managers and engineers. Paul experiences this firsthand, since the company he works for intentionally stokes the fires of competition. The purpose of this is to encourage employees to work harder, but the whole competitive atmosphere feels draining to people like Paul and Finnerty. In fact, Finnerty even decides to quit when he receives his invitation to the Meadows, a yearly corporate retreat where a select number of employees are invited to participate in various competitions. Finnerty tells Paul that, when he got his invitation to the retreat, "something snapped." "I realized I couldn't face another session up there," he says. "And then I looked around me and found out I couldn't face anything about the system any more." Although the company's competitive spirit might seem playful and good-natured, the mere thought of engaging in these competitions depresses Finnerty. Indeed, the idea of attending the Meadows drives Finnerty to quit, suggesting that this emphasis on competition actually hurts the company instead of benefitting it.

Another problem with this competitive spirit is that it pits people against each other, and this division makes its way into multiple aspects of the job. For instance, when Paul first started at Ilium Works, he was equals with Finnerty and Shepherd. Right away, though, Shepherd made it clear that he saw Paul and Finnerty as rivals, which is why he has been ruthlessly competing with Paul for the past 13 years. He even tries to ruin Paul's name by speaking badly of him to the bosses. It's therefore obvious that he's not engaged in friendly competition; he just wants to succeed at Paul's expense.

This individualistic, cutthroat mentality is a symptom of society's tendency to prioritize the smartest people over everyone else. According to this societal structure, the most skilled, intelligent people should have the best jobs. And since Shepherd thinks he could do Paul's job better than Paul himself, he feels emboldened to do whatever it takes to succeed. By spotlighting Shepherd's ruthless attack on Paul, then, the novel demonstrates that the division in this society isn't limited to the rift between the lower and upper classes—rather, this divisive mentality brings itself to bear on everyone, regardless of their status.

CORPORATE LIFE VS. HUMAN CONNECTION

In Player Piano, a dedication to business and corporate life often keeps people from genuinely connecting with one another. Paul experiences this firsthand, since everyone around him in Ilium only seems to care about things like productivity or career advancement. But because Paul isn't particularly interested in these things, he doesn't have many people he can relate to. Even his wife, Anita, cares more about whether or not he lands a big promotion than about their actual relationship, as made clear by the fact that she leaves him as soon as he falls out of his company's good graces. His old friend Finnerty is one of the only people Paul can actually connect with, but this is because Finnerty himself shares his jaded attitude toward the corporate world. By highlighting the way people in Paul's life fixate on upward mobility and success, the novel presents a cynical view of corporate life, implying that it can overshadow more important things—like, for instance, building and maintaining strong personal relationships.

Paul has a hard time finding happiness in his job because he doesn't see the point of prioritizing work over everything else in life. In contrast, all of his colleagues are seemingly willing to fully devote themselves to work and the company as a whole. But Paul lacks "the ability to be moved emotionally, almost like a lover, by the […] the corporate personality." To Paul, his job is just that: a job. People like his father, on the other hand, gave themselves entirely to the company, and though Paul is perfectly capable of carrying out the tasks required of him, he doesn't have "what made his father aggressive and great: the capacity to really give a damn." He simply can't bring himself to care that much about his job.

Instead, Paul seeks out human connection, investing himself not in the company he works for, but in his personal relationships. For example, instead of training for the competitions that will take place at the Meadows (a corporate retreat), he decides to take Anita on a romantic evening to celebrate the anniversary of their wedding engagement. However, Anita doesn't have the same priorities as Paul; whereas Paul cares more about their romantic bond, all Anita thinks about is making sure Paul succeeds in his career. For this reason, she tries to convince him to skip their anniversary, wanting him to rest up so that he'll be able to prove himself a worthy competitor at the Meadows—a good illustration of how she'd rather Paul focus on improving his status at the company than on strengthening their relationship. In keeping with this, she leaves Paul as soon as she finds out that he has been fired,

announcing her intention to marry Shepherd, who is just as preoccupied with corporate success as she is.

On a broader level, the novel shows corporate life to be emotionally shallow and surprisingly lonely. Finnerty comments on this in a conversation with Paul, saying that it was the deep sense of loneliness that led him to quit his high-powered job in Washington, D.C. He says that he was "crazy with loneliness" back when he had his old job in Ilium, but he assumed that his promotion to the Washington job would help him find people he "admired." Instead, he got to Washington and found nothing but "stupid, arrogant, self-congratulatory, unimaginative, humorless men." All of these adjectives hint at the kind of traits that come along with what the book calls the "corporate personality"—a personality based on little more than an unquestioning dedication to a company and the pursuit of a successful career.

To that end, Paul and Finnerty have trouble establishing meaningful relationships in the workplace because most of their coworkers only think about the company and their own careers. This is why everyone immediately turns their back on Paul when Kroner and Gelhorne spread the rumor that he has been fired for collaborating with anti-automation revolutionaries. Within the course of a single day, he goes from being one of the most widely respected people at the company to a complete outcast, illustrating just how much his status dictates the way others treat him in the corporate world.

The fact that Paul's coworkers collectively disown him also sheds light on the company's strangely cultish environment, since everyone immediately bands together to turn against him. Out of everyone at the Meadows, only Ed Harrison—a young engineer Paul sits next to at dinner one night—shows him anything in the way of compassion. While everyone else keeps their distance from him once he's been fired, Harrison brings Paul a whiskey and asks what he did to deserve such harsh treatment. This might seem unremarkable, but it's actually a significant display of empathy, since the expectation at the company is that everyone should disassociate themselves from Paul. Harrison, though, cares more about reaching out to Paul on a personal level than he cares about his own career. This gesture thus serves as an example of how people can keep the corporate world from overshadowing their compassion for others. The first step, it seems, is simply trying to be a good person over trying to be a good employee—something that is unfortunately rare in this corporate environment that unquestioningly ostracizes Paul.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE PLAYER PIANO

The player piano—which sits in the bar Paul often visits in Homestead—symbolizes the strange connection that exists between humans and machines. Although machines have replaced so many people in the workforce, they wouldn't even exist if humans hadn't invented them—and since they were designed to recreate or emulate the movements of a skilled laborer, there's actually something surprisingly human about the way they function. The player piano is a perfect representation of this, since it can play songs in the same way that a real, living musician once played them (in many cases, the songs in a player piano are re-creations of a live performance). Similarly, some of the machines at the Ilium Works were programmed to carry out the precise motions of a human laborer. Many years ago, for instance, Paul, Finnerty, and Shepherd recorded Rudy Hertz's movements and designed a machine that could reproduce those movements over and over. Of course, the machine itself is completely nonhuman, but it wouldn't function without the template of Rudy's craftsmanship. In the same way, the player piano can play a song all by itself, but it can only do this because a human originally played that same song. This, then, embodies the strange fact that these machines wouldn't exist in the first place without the very people they've replaced.

THE FARM

The farm that Paul buys symbolizes how life would be if society hadn't made so much technological progress. Because its original owner stipulated in his will that the property had to stay *exactly* the way it has always been, this farm has remained entirely untouched by automation—it is, in other words, a microcosm of the past. This is why it appeals to Paul, since he's eager to live a machine-free life. However, he soon realizes the many downsides of giving up the conveniences of technology, which make life undeniably easier. When he leaves his job, he spends no more than one day working on the farm, even though he's been looking forward to farm life for quite some time. He quickly learns that "the charming little cottage he'd taken as a symbol of the good life" is nothing more than a tired old shack that requires serious work. In this way, it becomes clear that Paul has romanticized the idea of a machine-free existence, naively assuming that this old-fashioned lifestyle will make him happy. In turn, the farm itself comes to represent not only how far society has come from a technological standpoint, but also how easy it is to idealize the past.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the The Dial Press edition of *Player Piano* published in 1999.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Ilium, New York, is divided into three parts.

In the northwest are the managers and engineers and civil servants and a few professional people; in the northeast are the machines; and in the south, across the Iroquois River, is the area known locally as Homestead, where almost all of the people live.

If the bridge across the Iroquois were dynamited, few daily routines would be disturbed. Not many people on either side have reasons other than curiosity for crossing.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening paragraphs of *Player Piano*. Right off the bat, they establish the stark division that exists in the town of Ilium, New York, which is literally divided into three separate sections. This separation is geographical, but the physical layout of Ilium has important implications for the greater rifts at play in the society as a whole.

First of all, the order in which the novel lists each section of Ilium is revealing, since this order calls attention to the hierarchical structures at play in the community: first there are the "managers and engineers," then there are "the machines," and—finally—there's everyone else. The fact that the book mentions machines before the majority of Ilium's ordinary people hints that technology takes precedence over the average citizen. The only people who are as important as these machines, it seems, are the engineers who built them and the managers who oversaw the process.

To add to this, the elite managers and engineers rarely interact with anyone else, as evidenced by the fact that hardly anyone would mind if the bridge connecting the two parts of town were "dynamited." This sense of separation sets the stage for the book's exploration of class division, making it abundantly clear that each faction of this society is deeply entrenched in its own little world.

During the war in hundreds of Iliums over America, managers and engineers learned to get along without their men and women, who went to fight. It was the miracle that won the war—production with almost no manpower. In the patois of the north side of the river, it was the know-how that won the war. Democracy owed its life to know-how.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This passage provides some historical context that helps explain why this futuristic version of the United States has so much class division. A war took place before the beginning of the book, and this ended up changing the face of American society. Because so many people were called to battle, the country had to figure out how to keep producing the weapons and machines necessary to win the war. The answer was for engineers to design machines that could keep up with production demands without relying on "manpower," or actual physical labor. This means that engineers played a vital role in helping the country win the war, which is why they now enjoy a privileged position in society. What's more, society has come to value intelligence more than anything because people believe that "know-how"—that is, an understanding of technology—is what ultimately won the war. This history is important as the novel progresses, since it helps make sense of why, exactly, engineers like Paul are valued more highly than physical laborers.

Where men had once howled and hacked at one another, and fought nip-and-tuck with nature as well, the machines hummed and whirred and clicked, and made parts for baby carriages and bottle caps, motorcycles and refrigerators, television sets and tricycles—the fruits of peace.

Related Characters: Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears as Paul stands in his office at the Ilium Works and looks out the window, surveying the land beneath him. This land has a history of violence, since it's the site of multiple battles between Native Americans and the white settlers who massacred them in the process of forming the United States.

The novel's recognition of this violent past does two things. First, it creates a stark juxtaposition between the dangerous chaos of this history and the apparent comfort and luxury of Paul's modern-day life, which is full of convenient household

appliances and entertaining things like "television sets."

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the mention of this history invites readers to consider the fact that any supposed progress American society has made came at the expense of great violence and cruelty. This indicates that societal progress often causes people to ignore questions of morality, instead focusing solely on the idea of bringing about change at any cost. Ironically, then, the "baby carriages and bottle caps" and other products made here at the Ilium Works aren't the "fruits of peace," but the result of horrific violence.

❝ Paul sometimes wondered if he wouldn't have been more content in another period of history, but the rightness of Bud's being alive now was beyond question. Bud's mentality was one that had been remarked upon as being peculiarly American since the nation had been born—the restless, erratic insight and imagination of a gadgeteer. This was the climax, or close to it, of generations of Bud Calhouns, with almost all of American industry integrated into one stupendous Rube Goldberg machine.

Related Characters: Doctor Bud Calhoun, Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Paul thinks about Bud Calhoun, one of his coworkers at the Ilium Works. Bud is extremely imaginative and can come up with a design for almost any kind of machine. It's not exactly clear why Paul believes Bud might have been happier in a different time period. However, he possibly thinks this because he knows Bud would have come up with world-changing inventions if he'd lived earlier, before society's most important pieces of technology had been invented.

All the same, Bud fits right into the current society, since he has the "restless, erratic insight and imagination of a gadgeteer." In other words, people like Bud excel in this highly mechanized society—a society in which it pays to be someone who likes to fiddle with technology without end. While this is all well and good for Bud, the novel subtly implies that this inventive spirit is no longer all that necessary. It *used* to be a big deal for someone to come up with new ideas, but now that most of the important machines have already been invented, there's not much for engineers to do. This is why "American industry" has turned into a "Rube Goldberg machine"—an unnecessarily complicated machine that, though impressive in its design, doesn't actually do anything of value.

❝ Some people, including Paul's famous father, had talked in the old days as though engineers, managers, and scientists were an elite. And when things were building up to the war, it was recognized that American know-how was the only answer to the prospective enemy's vast numbers, and there was talk of deeper, thicker shelters for the possessors of know-how, and of keeping this cream of the population out of the front-line fighting. But not many had taken the idea of an elite to heart. When Paul, Finnerty, and Shepherd had graduated from college, early in the war, they had felt sheepish about not going to fight, and humbled by those who did go. But now this elite business, this assurance of superiority, this sense of rightness about the hierarchy topped by managers and engineers—this was instilled in all college graduates, and there were no bones about it.

Related Characters: Doctor George Proteus (Paul's Father), Doctor Lawson Shepherd, Doctor Ed Finnerty, Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears shortly after Paul sees an overly confident group of young engineers and finds himself resenting their swagger. The reason they're so sure of themselves, he knows, is because of the country's history and how it uplifted engineers during the war. This war called nearly all of American society to the frontlines, but it also turned engineers into an "elite" class, since they were the ones who kept the country afloat and helped win the war by designing machines that supplied the military with weapons.

Paul was one of those engineers who worked during the war, but this experience never made him feel like he was above anyone. In fact, he's actually insecure about not having served in the war, suggesting that he's skeptical of the idea that engineers deserve so much praise and respect. Unlike him, though, the new generation of engineers are eager to see themselves as the most important members of society, even though they didn't contribute to the war

effort. This shows that engineers (and managers) are now considered elite simply by default, regardless of whether or not they're actually contributing to society in meaningful ways.

"It seemed very fresh to me—I mean that part where you say how the First Industrial Revolution devalued muscle work, then the second one devalued routine mental work. I was fascinated."

[...]

"Actually, it is kind of incredible that things were ever any other way, isn't it? It was so ridiculous to have people stuck in one place all day, just using their senses, then a reflex, using their senses, then a reflex, and not really thinking at all."

Related Characters: Doctor Katharine Finch (speaker), Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Paul's secretary, Doctor Katharine Finch, says this after typing up the speech Paul's planning to give at a dinner that night. Katharine takes particular interest in the idea—which is laid out in the speech—that the First and Second Industrial Revolutions "devalued" different aspects of the workforce. Paul's general point is that the First Industrial Revolution (which took place between 1760 and 1840) rendered "muscle work" unnecessary, since people invented machines capable of completing physical grunt work. The Second Industrial Revolution (1870-1914), on the other hand, did away with repetitive "mental work," meaning that there were even more inventions—many of them involving electricity—that saved people from having to complete boring, arbitrary cognitive tasks.

It's a little ironic that Katharine is so impressed by this idea, since her own job consists of nothing *but* "routine mental work." In fact, the other managers at Ilium Works all have machines instead of human secretaries. Still, she sings the praises of the two Industrial Revolutions, believing that they saved humanity from the drudgery of unrewarding work. When she marvels at the fact that people used to sit "in one place all day" and carry out the same task over and over, it becomes clear that people in Paul's society are extremely intolerant of anything that seems inefficient—an indication of just how obsessed everyone around Paul is with productivity.

"[...] Hangovers, family squabbles, resentments against the boss, debts, the war—every kind of human trouble was likely to show up in a product one way or another." He smiled. "And happiness, too. I can remember when we had to allow for holidays, especially around Christmas. There wasn't anything to do but take it. The reject rate would start climbing around the fifth of December, and up and up it'd go until Christmas. Then the holiday, then a horrible reject rate; then New Year's, then a ghastly reject level. Then things would taper down to normal—which was plenty bad enough—by January fifteenth or so. We used to have to figure in things like that in pricing a product."

Related Characters: Doctor Paul Proteus (speaker), Doctor Katharine Finch

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Paul says this to Katharine, explaining what it was like before the workforce was almost entirely automated. Because humans are naturally prone to imperfection, it was inevitable that manual laborers would make mistakes. Although Paul eventually believes that the corporate world should allow for humans to make mistakes, he says this to Katharine before he has completely lost faith in the value of automation. Therefore, he argues for the value of mechanization, saying that human error used to come in all forms, since employees had emotional baggage that inevitably affected their work.

What's notable about this little monologue is that Paul focuses on the importance of productivity, placing this over human happiness and only seeming to care about what will help the company achieve efficiency—a reminder that he has been part of the corporate world for a long time. Although he's skeptical about certain aspects of his working life, he still—at this point—has a very business-oriented set of values.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"[…] we've raised the standard of living of the average man immensely."

Khashdrahr stopped translating and frowned perplexedly. "Please, this *average man*, there is no equivalent in our language, I'm afraid."

"You know," said Halyard, "the ordinary man, like, well, anybody—those men working back on the bridge, the man in that old car we passed. The little man, not brilliant but a good-hearted, plain, ordinary, everyday kind of person."

Khashdrahr translated.

"Aha," said the Shah, nodding, "*Takaru*."

"What did he say?"

"*Takaru*," said Khashdrahr. "Slave."

"No *Takaru*," said Halyard, speaking directly to the Shah. "*Ci-ti-zen*."

"Ahhhhh," said the Shah. "*Ci-ti-zen*." He grinned happily. "*Takaru—citizen. Citizen—Takaru*."

"No *Takaru!*" said Halyard.

Khashdrahr shrugged. "In the Shah's land are only the Elite and the *Takaru*."

Related Characters: Khashdrahr Miasma, The Shah of Bratpuhr, Doctor Ewing J. Halyard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Halyard, the Shah, and Khashdrahr have this conversation while riding through Ilium in a limousine. Having just explained how the American workforce functions, Halyard claims that automation has greatly improved the "standard of living" for the "average man." The fact that Khashdrahr and the Shah don't understand what he means by "average man" leads to a funny cross-cultural miscommunication, but it also reveals Halyard's incorrect assumptions about his own society.

Halyard thinks he lives in an egalitarian country, where "average," everyday citizens have everything they need. In reality, though, his society has been divided into two disparate groups: the elite and the lower class. The people in the lower class have been replaced in the workforce by machines, so they have no choice but to serve in the army or in a public works organization. Halyard sees this as an efficient way for the country to operate, but the fact is that the people in the working class have much harder lives than elite people like Halyard himself. This is why the Shah views the "average man" as a "*Takaru*," or an enslaved person: most of the citizens in the United States lead lives that are severely limited, meaning that they don't actually have the freedom Halyard thinks they have.

Chapter 3 Quotes

There were a few men in Homestead—like this bartender, the police and firemen, professional athletes, cab drivers, specially skilled artisans—who hadn't been displaced by machines. They lived among those who had been displaced, but they were aloof and often rude and overbearing with the mass. They felt a camaraderie with the engineers and managers across the river, a feeling that wasn't, incidentally, reciprocated. The general feeling across the river was that these persons weren't too bright to be replaced by machines; they were simply in activities where machines weren't economical. In short, their feelings of superiority were unjustified.

Related Characters: Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

When Paul visits a bar in Homestead to buy a bottle of whiskey, he interacts with a bartender who treats him much better than the other customers. This makes Paul uncomfortable because it calls attention to the fact that he's from the elite class of managers and engineers, whereas everyone else in the bar belongs to the lower class.

More importantly, though, this passage shows that the division in this society doesn't just exist between the working class and the elite—it also exists amongst people within the same communities. For all intents and purposes, the bartender's station in life isn't that different from the people he serves, but he's deeply proud that he hasn't been replaced by a machine. This causes him to be "rude and overbearing" with anyone who doesn't belong to the elite, acting as if he's better than them simply because he has avoided the perils of automation.

However, it's actually pretty arbitrary that the bartender hasn't lost his job—it doesn't mean he's brilliant or particularly gifted at what he does, it's just a simple financial matter: it wouldn't be "economical" to have machine bartenders. All the same, he wields his sense of superiority over the people in his own social circles, demonstrating that automation has created so much division that it negatively

impacts people at the same levels of society.

Chapter 4 Quotes

"Sick of it," he said slowly. "The pay was fantastically good, ridiculously good—paid like a television queen with a forty-inch bust. But when I got this year's invitation to the Meadows, Paul, something snapped. I realized I couldn't face another session up there. And then I looked around me and found out I couldn't face anything about the system any more. I walked out, and here I am."

Related Characters: Doctor Ed Finnerty (speaker), Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Finnerty says this to Paul, trying to explain why he quit his high-powered job in Washington, D.C. He admits that he was paid "ridiculously" well, making the slightly off-color joke that he used to earn the kind of wages a famous television star with big breasts would make. This clarifies that Finnerty didn't care much about money. He didn't leave the company for financial reasons, but because he suddenly felt like he couldn't "face" his corporate life anymore.

It's significant that Finnerty had this realization after receiving an invitation to the Meadows, a yearly corporate retreat where employees are expected to compete against each other in various sporting events. Just thinking about attending the Meadows made "something snap[]" inside Finnerty, suggesting that he'd been unhappy at the company for a while but had never let himself act on this unhappiness—quite similar to how Paul feels about his own job. On the whole, Finnerty's unwillingness to keep tolerating his job suggests that there's something about the corporate world (or, at least, the version of the corporate world in this book) that wears on people, grating on them until they can't even bear the idea of staying in their jobs.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"Just to sort of underline what you're saying, Paul, I'd like to point out something I thought was rather interesting. One horsepower equals about twenty-two manpower—*big* manpower. If you convert the horsepower of one of the bigger steel-mill motors into terms of manpower, you'll find that the motor does more work than the entire slave population of the United States at the time of the Civil War could do—and do it twenty-four hours a day."

Related Characters: Kroner (speaker), Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Kroner says this after Paul gives a speech about automation at the local Country Club. The point he makes "underline[s]" the idea that automation has led to extremely efficient modes of production, but it also reveals his narrow-minded focus on productivity over all else. Although he might be right that "one horsepower" (a unit used to measure the power of an engine) can create the same amount of energy as 22 human laborers, he fails to grasp that this isn't an intrinsically *good* thing. He notes that a large "steel-mill motor" could complete the same amount of work as the entire population of enslaved people at the time of the Civil War. This analogy implies that Kroner thinks about things only in terms of productivity; since the United States no longer enslaves people, this means that machines have taken away the livelihood of thousands of paid workers who depend on that income. Kroner, however, only considers the amount of work society is now able to accomplish, overlooking the broader implications of automation and the ways it has made life harder for so many people.

"[…] The Atomic Age, that was the big thing to look forward to. Remember, Baer? And meanwhile, the tubes increased like rabbits."

"And dope addiction, alcoholism, and suicide went up proportionately," said Finnerty.

[…]

"That was the war," said Kroner soberly. "It happens after every war."

"And organized vice and divorce and juvenile delinquency, all parallel the growth of the use of vacuum tubes," said Finnerty.

"Oh, come on, Ed," said Paul, "you can't prove a logical connection between those factors."

"If there's the slightest connection, it's worth thinking about," said Finnerty.

Related Characters: Doctor Paul Proteus, Doctor Ed Finnerty, Baer, Kroner

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place at the local Country Club in Ilium after Paul gives a speech about automation. As Kroner and the others discuss how far technology has come, Finnerty drunkenly bursts in and suggests that all of this progress has actually harmed society. Kroner, for his part, is content to simply speak nostalgically about how vacuum tubes (a source of electrical power) took over the world and changed the face of technology. But Finnerty believes that this technological progress coincided with things like drug addiction, suicide, and crime—all of which he believes indicate societal unhappiness and discord. This conversation is important because it challenges the widespread assumption that technological progress is always a good thing. At this point in the novel, though, Paul still believes in the value of automation, which is why he says that Finnerty can't prove "a logical connection" between all these negative developments and the advancement of technology. This, however, is just a good excuse to avoid having to honestly assess the situation—something Finnerty calls out by saying that these matters are "worth thinking about" even if there's only the "slightest" chance that they're true.

Chapter 6 Quotes

When Paul thought about his effortless rise in the hierarchy, he sometimes, as now, felt sheepish, like a charlatan. He could handle his assignments all right, but he didn't have what his father had, what Kroner had, what Shepherd had, what so many had: the sense of spiritual importance in what they were doing; the ability to be moved emotionally, almost like a lover, by the great omnipresent and omniscient spook, the corporate personality. In short, Paul missed what made his father aggressive and great: the capacity to really give a damn.

Related Characters: Doctor George Proteus (Paul's Father), Doctor Ed Finnerty, Doctor Lawson Shepherd, Kroner, Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Anita has just mentioned that Paul's father expected him to become manager of the Pittsburgh Works someday, prompting Paul to consider how he compares to people like his father, Kroner, or Shepherd. He recognizes that there's a fundamental difference between him and all of these people: he doesn't have a "sense of spiritual importance" in his job. The phrase "spiritual importance" suggests that the people who succeed in Paul's line of work give themselves over completely to their jobs. They have so much faith in the value of what they're doing that it's almost as if their work is a religion of sorts. Paul, on the other hand, can't even bring himself to "give a damn"—he can complete the tasks assigned to him, but he doesn't get anything out of doing this. Another way of putting this is that he isn't "moved emotionally" by "the corporate personality." The fact that this personality is described as an "omnipresent and omniscient spook" suggests that it's like an ever-present ghost that haunts people, possessing them and controlling their emotions. And this, in turn, frames the "corporate personality" as a somewhat ominous thing with the power to completely overtake people.

Chapter 8 Quotes

"Ah haven't got a job any more," said Bud. "Canned."

Paul was amazed. "Really? What on earth for? Moral turpitude? What about the gadget you invented for—"

"Thet's it," said Bud with an eerie mixture of pride and remorse. "Works. Does a fine job." He smiled sheepishly. "Does it a whole lot better than Ah did it."

"It runs the whole operation?"

"Yup. Some gadget."

"And so you're out of a job."

"Seventy-two of us are out of jobs," said Bud.

Related Characters: Doctor Paul Proteus, Doctor Bud Calhoun

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Bud Calhoun tells Paul that he's "out of a job" because he's been replaced by a machine—a machine that he himself invented. This calls attention to the lose-lose situation that some unlucky engineers might find themselves in: their jobs require them to come up with clever, well-functioning designs, but if they do this *too* well, they might end up creating something that renders them obsolete. This is the irony of a workforce that prioritizes automation. Before long, there will hardly be any workforce left at *all*, since the faster technology advances, the less need there will be for even the most important employees. The question becomes, then, where society will draw the line, or if it will simply continue to automate every aspect of the workforce until there's nobody left to replace.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"It's the loneliness," he said, as though picking up the thread of a conversation that had been interrupted. "It's the loneliness, the not belonging anywhere. I just about went crazy with loneliness here in the old days, and I figured things would be better in Washington, that I'd find a lot of people I admired and be- longed with. Washington is worse, Paul—Ilium to the tenth power. Stupid, arrogant, self-congratulatory, unimaginative, humorless men. [...]"

Related Characters: Doctor Ed Finnerty (speaker), Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Finnerty explains to Paul in this passage why he was so unhappy with his corporate lifestyle. The main reason he quit his well-paid job is that he felt extremely lonely. He felt this way in Ilium, too, but he assumed that his job in D.C. would provide him with the kind of company he yearned for. And yet, he discovered it was even worse in D.C., where everyone was more "arrogant" and "unimaginative" than the people in Ilium. This all suggests that Finnerty just wants some human connection, which is severely lacking in the corporate world. And though Paul hasn't yet given up on his career at this point in the novel, this is an important conversation because it speaks to the feeling of isolation that he, too, feels in life: he's never quite able to make a meaningful connection with people like Kroner or Shepherd, who are focused solely on business and corporate success.

"[...] When I had a congregation before the war, I used to tell them that the life of their spirit in relation to God was the biggest thing in their lives, and that their part in the economy was nothing by comparison. Now, you people have engineered them out of their part in the economy, in the market place, and they're finding out—most of them—that what's left is just about zero. A good bit short of enough, anyway. [...]"

Related Characters: Reverend James J. Lasher (speaker), Doctor Paul Proteus, Doctor Ed Finnerty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Lasher says this to Finnerty and Paul when they ask him what he has against the managers and engineers who live across the river from Homestead. He explains that he is a reverend and that he used to tell his congregation that the most important thing in their lives was their relationship with God. This point, however, has been harder to make now that automation has replaced most people in the workforce and stripped them of their livelihood. Now that people no longer have their careers to cling to, they feel like they have nothing left in life, causing them to wonder if their relationship with God was ever actually enough to sustain

them. The underlying point here is that jobs mean more to people than they might think. Indeed, Lasher's implication is that people allow their careers to give them an almost religious sense of purpose in life—and without those jobs, they feel spiritually lost.

"Sooner or later someone's going to catch the imagination of these people with some new magic. At the bottom of it will be a promise of regaining the feeling of participation, the feeling of being needed on earth—hell, *dignity*. [...]"

Related Characters: Reverend James J. Lasher (speaker), Doctor Paul Proteus, Doctor Ed Finnerty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

This is something that Lasher says to Finnerty and Proteus when they first meet him at a bar in Homestead. Having just argued that the current societal structure has created so much division that the country is perfectly poised for a class war, Lasher hypothesizes that the person to motivate the lower class toward rebellion will do so with a "promise of regaining the feeling of participation." In other words, the leader of the impending revolution will appeal to the masses by vowing to restore their sense of purpose in life. This is one of the novel's central ideas—namely, that in order to feel happy, people must feel "needed on earth." This is why automation has brought about so much discontent, since forcing people out of their jobs makes them feel expendable and insignificant. Soon, though, Lasher believes a leader will come along who can help everyone reassert their sense of personal value in the world.

Chapter 12 Quotes

Paul was amazed. By some freakish circumstance he'd apparently clinched the job—after having arrived with the vague intention of disqualifying himself.

Related Characters: Kroner, Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Paul is at Kroner's house and has just learned that he will almost certainly receive the promotion to the position of manager at the Pittsburgh Works. This catches him by surprise, since Kroner has just revealed that he knows all about Paul's mistakes in the past few days, saying that he not only heard about Paul letting Finnerty into the Ilium Works unescorted, but also that he gave Finnerty his gun even though only certain registered people are allowed to handle weapons. Both of these things are grounds for Paul's arrest, but Kroner surprisingly overlooks these hiccups and, instead of punishing Paul, gives him the benefit of the doubt.

The fact that Paul first came to Kroner's for dinner with the "vague intention of disqualifying himself" for the promotion is significant because it sheds light on his feelings about his job. Although Anita wants nothing more than for him to get this promotion, he apparently wants to sabotage his own career, suggesting that—even if he's not ready to fully admit it to himself—he's so unhappy with his corporate life that he's no longer enticed by the prospect of upward mobility.

Kroner looked at him with surprise. "Look, you know darn good and well history's answered the question a thousand times."

"It has? Has it? You know; I wouldn't. Answered it a thousand times, has it? That's good, good. All I know is, you've got to act like it has, or you might as well throw in the towel. Don't know, my boy. Guess I should, but I don't. Just do my job. Maybe that's wrong."

Related Characters: Baer, Kroner (speaker), Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Kroner and Baer. Baer has just burst into Kroner's study and congratulated Paul on his promotion, though Kroner has to remind him that this hasn't been finalized yet. He then tells Baer that Paul voiced some misgivings about technological progress and its impact on society, and when Baer wonders aloud if "progress is bad," Kroner says that history has "answered" that question "a thousand times." This might seem like a good answer, but it's actually very vague—after all, Kroner doesn't actually say which historical events prove that progress is a good thing.

Perhaps because Kroner's response is so wishy-washy, Baer speaks candidly about the nature of progress, appearing to genuinely consider whether or not the company is doing a good thing by constantly striving to create change. In the end, though, he can't come up with a good answer, indicating that he's not used to thinking about such things. Instead, he admits that he just does his job without considering its impact. This, in turn, shows how easy it is to get sucked into a job without thinking critically about how it might affect the surrounding world (a process of reflection that Paul is only now undergoing himself).

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Of all the people on the north side of the river, Anita was the only one whose contempt for those in Homestead was laced with active hatred. She was also the only wife on the north side who had never been to college at all. The usual attitude of the Country Club set toward Homesteaders was contempt, all right, but it had an affectionate and amused undertone, the same sort of sentiment felt by most for creatures of the woods and fields. Anita hated Homesteaders.

Related Characters: Anita Proteus, Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

This passage helps explain why Anita is so hung up on the supposed importance of wealth, power, and status. The reason she wants Paul to rise through the ranks of the company, it seems, is because she wants to distance herself from her own humble background. This, however, also means that she has some misplaced resentment and hatred for the people who live in Homestead, perhaps hoping that her vehement disdain for them will prove—to others or to herself—that she doesn't belong amongst them. This shows the complicated social dynamics that have accompanied all of the class division in this society. It also suggests that Anita's cruelty toward anyone who isn't in the elite upper class comes from a place of insecurity, and this humanizes her a bit, making it a little easier to grasp why she's so singularly focused on Paul's career.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ "What am I going to do? Farm, maybe. I've got a nice little farm."

"Farm, eh?" Harrison clucked his tongue reflectively. "Farm. Sounds wonderful. I've thought of that: up in the morning with the sun; working out there with your hands in the earth, just you and nature. If I had the money, sometimes I think maybe I'd throw this—"

"You want a piece of advice from a tired old man?"

"Depends on which tired old man. You?"

"Me. Don't put one foot in your job and the other in your dreams, Ed. Go ahead and quit, or resign yourself to this life. It's just too much of a temptation for fate to split you right up the middle before you've made up your mind which way to go."

Related Characters: Doctor Edmund L. Harrison (Ed Harrison), Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

This is a conversation between Paul and Ed Harrison. Right before Paul leaves the Meadows, Harrison seeks him out even though everyone has ostracized him for supposedly becoming a "saboteur" against the company. When Harrison speaks admiringly about the idea of farming for a living, Paul interrupts him and warns him about deferring his "dreams" while he toils away in the corporate world. This advice speaks to the lesson Paul himself has learned: a successful career won't make a person happy if that person doesn't care about the work itself. If Harrison has reservations about spending his life at the company, he should do himself a favor and quit now, since it's too easy to spend an entire life drifting along in mild unhappiness, always wondering what could have been. Above all, this advice underlines the fact that Paul has finally recognized that the root of his unhappiness has been his inability to leave behind his corporate life.

Chapter 28 Quotes

"What have you got against machines?" said Buck.

"They're slaves."

"Well, what the heck," said Buck. "I mean, they aren't people. They don't suffer. They don't mind working."

"No. But they compete with people."

"That's a pretty good thing, isn't it—considering what a sloppy job most people do of anything?"

"Anything that competes with slaves becomes a slave," said Harrison thickly, and he left.

Related Characters: Buck Young, Doctor Edmund L. Harrison (Ed Harrison) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

This is an exchange between Buck Young (a promising student and talented football player) and Ed Harrison, who has recently quit his job because of the advice Paul gave him at the Meadows. Now that he's turned his back on the corporate world, Harrison tries to warn Buck about the perils of getting swept up in the life of an engineer. More broadly, he tries to explain that automation isn't necessarily as beneficial to society as it seems.

This conversation recalls Kroner's earlier statement about how a large machine is capable of completing the same amount of work as the entire population of enslaved people at the time of the Civil War. Buck, for his part, doesn't think this is especially problematic, since machines don't have feelings and thus "don't mind working." Harrison's counterpoint, though, emphasizes the drawbacks of society's competitive nature, noting that these unbeatable machines end up competing with actual human beings. And though the machines "don't mind working" around the clock, it's impossible for humans to keep up with this pace. Automation is therefore an unsustainable model for society to run on, since it forces people to work so hard that their quality of life diminishes considerably. This is the meaning of Harrison's dark conclusion that "Anything that competes with slaves becomes a slave."

Chapter 30 Quotes

"Men, by their nature, seemingly, cannot be happy unless engaged in enterprises that make them feel useful. They must, therefore, be returned to participation in such enterprises.

"I hold, and the members of the Ghost Shirt Society hold:

"That there must be virtue in imperfection, for Man is imperfect, and Man is a creation of God.

"That there must be virtue in frailty, for Man is frail, and Man is a creation of God.

"That there must be virtue in inefficiency, for Man is inefficient, and Man is a creation of God.

"That there must be virtue in brilliance followed by stupidity, for Man is alternately brilliant and stupid, and Man is a creation of God. [...]"

Related Characters: Professor Ludwig von Neumann (speaker), Doctor Paul Proteus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

These words are from a letter that the Ghost Shirt Society sends out bearing Paul's signature. The purpose of the letter is to spread word about the anti-automation movement and to advocate for change in society. The ideas in this section are, in a way, the backbone of the entire novel, since they outline all the reasons that a machine-based culture is unfit for human society. Perhaps the most important idea here is that humans are naturally "imperfect" and that, instead of seeing this as a problem, people ought to recognize that there is a certain kind of "virtue"—a certain kind of beauty—in human flaws. There's also the idea that "inefficiency" doesn't have to be seen as a problem; rather, the letter implies that society ought to accept that everything isn't always going to be streamlined and optimized for maximal efficiency. Making peace with this would possibly slow down production, but it would also create a better, happier world—one in which people can be "imperfect," "frail," "inefficient," and even "stupid."

Chapter 32 Quotes

"What distinguishes man from the rest of the animals is his ability to do artificial things," said Paul. "To his greater glory, I say. And a step backward, after making a wrong turn, is a step in the right direction."

Related Characters: Doctor Paul Proteus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

Paul says this when he's on trial for treason. The prosecutor has just accused him of wanting society to take a step backward, essentially trying to depict his anti-automation views as outdated and regressive—as if Paul wants to hold society back from progress and positive change. Taking this step backward would, according to the prosecutor, force an "artificial condition" on the country, implying that anything but forward momentum is unnatural and wrong.

Paul, however, knows that humans are imperfect, so doing "artificial things" that might seem unnatural isn't something to shy away from. After all, bringing about technological change is a perfect example of forcing an "artificial condition" on society, so it should be no problem to go back to the way things were before machines played such a dominant role. In fact, taking a step backward when it's necessary—like after "making a wrong turn"—isn't regressive at all. Rather, this is what *real* progress looks like, since any truly advanced society should be able to levelheadedly assess the direction it's headed and, when needed, make adjustments.

Chapter 34 Quotes

"You know," said Paul at last, "things wouldn't have been so bad if they'd stayed the way they were when we first got here. Those were passable days, weren't they?" […]

"Things don't stay the way they are," said Finnerty. "It's too entertaining to try to change them."

Related Characters: Doctor Ed Finnerty, Doctor Paul Proteus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 332

Explanation and Analysis

This back and forth between Paul and Finnerty takes place as they walk through the rubble of Ilium in the aftermath of the failed revolution. As they survey the damage, they admit that they used to genuinely enjoy their jobs as engineers, back when everything in society wasn't yet automated. Paul's suggestion that "things wouldn't have been so bad" if they had remained the way they were when he and Finnerty were young implies that a perfect amount of mechanization might actually exist. If there's too *much* mechanization, people become unhappy because machines take away their sense of self-worth. But if there aren't *enough* machines in society, life is hard and tiring, as Paul knows from the single day he spent working on the farm he bought—an experience that revealed his idea of a machine-free life for what it was: an overly romanticized fantasy.

And yet, Finnerty points out that nothing ever stays the same. It's probably true that there was a perfect amount of automation when Paul and Finnerty were young engineers, but it's impossible to freeze societal progress. This is because people are always going to work toward change. No matter what, it's just "too entertaining" to tinker with things in an attempt to make them better. Regardless of whether or not it benefits society, then, technological progress is inevitable.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

There are three sections of Ilium, New York: the area where managers and engineers live, the area where all the machines are kept, and—finally—a place called Homestead, where everyone else lives. The Iroquois River separates Homestead from the other parts of Ilium, and people rarely cross the bridge from one part of town to the next.

The opening description of Ilium, New York, establishes the intense class division at play in the community. The managers and engineers are separated from the rest of society, suggesting that these jobs come with a certain amount of prestige. The fact that people on either side of the Iroquois River rarely interact further illustrates this sense of separation in Ilium. Furthermore, the town's third section, which is made up entirely of machines, indicates that this society is quite advanced. And yet, there's still some obvious class division, implying that technologically *advanced societies aren't necessarily very* socially *advanced.*

Ten years have passed since a devastating war. During this war, managers and engineers were able to keep the economy afloat by inventing and building machines to replace the many laborers who went off to the battlefield. This mechanization was a great success, allowing businesses to operate almost entirely without actual workers—a business model that has persisted even after the war. These days, managers and engineers proudly like to say that "know-how won the war."

This section reveals that Player Piano *exists in a near future—one in which a war (perhaps World War III) has profoundly altered the way the United States functions. This helps explain how managers and engineers have become a prestigious class, since their knowledge about machines (their "know-how") is what helped win the war. However, the strides these managers and engineers made during the war have long-lasting effects, considering that the mechanization they helped build has changed the entire workforce. This means that anyone who worked as a manual laborer before the war has been replaced—a sure-fire way to create tension between the working class and the upper class.*

Doctor Paul Proteus, a 35-year-old engineer-turned-manager, sits in his office at the Ilium Works petting a cat. Everyone in Ilium thinks Paul is destined to be as successful as his father, Doctor George Proteus, who was the country's first "National, Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resources Director"—a position just as important as the president of the United States. Despite everyone's high expectations, though, Paul doesn't feel particularly intelligent or remarkable, and he hasn't felt this way for quite a while.

The title that Paul's father used to hold is comically long. It's so over the top, in fact, that it calls attention to its own absurdity, suggesting that people like Paul's father are overly celebrated in the corporate context of this society. Paul's father was even as powerful as the president of the United States, emphasizing just how seriously the country values corporate success. Paul, on the other hand, doesn't seem particularly suited to this corporate life, considering that he doesn't feel worthy of—or perhaps even interested in—a position like his father's.

Paul strokes the cat in his lap, which he found by the golf course near Ilium Works. He snatched her because mice have been eating important wires at the plant. Paul uses the intercom system to ask his secretary, Doctor Katharine Finch, when she'll be finished typing his speech, which he's supposed to deliver at the Country Club that night. The mere fact that Paul still has a secretary is outdated, since during the war most managers and engineers made do with machines as their helpers—an arrangement that was ultimately more efficient and cheaper than using human secretaries.

Paul's preference for a human secretary over a machine suggests that he has a different way of looking at the world than the people around him. Whereas other high-ranking workers simply use the most efficient tools available, Paul has apparently chosen to do things the old-fashioned way by having Katharine as his secretary—a sign that he sees value in human labor, even if that means compromising on efficiency.

Instead of focusing on Paul's speech, Katharine is flirting with a manager named Bud Calhoun. Slightly annoyed by this (and thinking that a machine would be much more efficient), Paul looks out the large window in his office, staring at a stretch of land where years ago Native Americans defended themselves against violent settlers and colonizers. On these grounds now lie the huge buildings full of machinery that make up the Ilium Works. The factories are busy at work creating industrial parts like refrigerator mechanisms and motorcycles and televisions. And beyond Ilium, Paul can see Homestead, where the descendants of important early Americans still live.

Although Paul chooses to have a human secretary, he's still concerned about efficiency. This implies that, while he might not completely *share the values of his productivity-driven society, he does still have the mindset of a corporate manager whose job it is to make things run smoothly. As he looks out the window, the land that he sees—whether he recognizes this or not—is a physical reminder of all the change that has taken place over the years. More specifically, the land is a reminder of the toll on human lives that the country's so-called "progress" has taken. After all, early Americans massacred Native American tribes in order to steal this land, meaning that the success of the United States is founded upon injustice—a good indicator that the current system is probably also unjust.*

Katharine tells Paul through the intercom that a machine is malfunctioning in Building 58. Normally, Doctor Shepherd would fix this, but since he's out sick, Paul has to handle it himself. He passes Bud Calhoun on his way through Katharine's office, telling Bud to draw up a design for a mechanism that will send out a signal to help his new cat find mice. He only gives Bud this assignment because it's annoying that Bud is always hanging around, but the idea immediately animates Bud, who Paul realizes probably *will* have a good design by the time he's back from Building 58.

Paul's annoyance with Bud suggests that he doesn't think people should spend their work hours interacting with one another. This is a very efficiency-oriented mindset, as Paul seems to think Katharine and Bud should focus exclusively on their work, not on flirting with each other. But this isn't to say that Paul is obsessed with productivity—it's just that he's in the habit of thinking like a manager. Still, he recognizes that Bud will probably come up with an ingenious invention by the time he's back, implying that Paul knows it's possible to do a good job while also engaging in some genuine human connection.

On his way to Building 58, Paul passes a group of enthusiastic young engineers and resents their cockiness. He tells himself he wasn't like that when he first came to work at Ilium 13 years ago with his friend Ed Finnerty and their colleague Lawson Shepherd. Paul doesn't like the way these young engineers act so important, even if people in Ilium tend to view engineers, managers, and scientists as an elite class. This mentality began during the war, when people with "know-how" were highly valued for their ability to create the machines that helped win the conflict and keep the economy in place. Back then, managers and engineers didn't really *see* themselves as elite, though that's how society treated them. But now everyone who goes to college comes out feeling entitled and important.

Paul's reaction to the young engineers solidifies the idea that automation has led to stark class division. An inflated sense of self-importance has led managers and engineers to see themselves as a superior class. Of course, the novel acknowledges that automation played a crucial role in helping the United States thrive during wartime, but it also implies that things have gone a little too far. Even Paul—a manager and former engineer himself—can recognize this, which is why he resents the young engineers, seeing them as embarrassing examples of how his own social circle has become too self-satisfied.

Arriving at Building 58, Paul feels at peace among the humming machines. The building itself is the same building where Thomas Edison used to work—it's a little run down and outdated, but Paul fought for it to be preserved because he likes its historical importance. He often wonders what Edison would think if he could see how far technology has come, finding this idea reassuring. After all, life is better than it ever has been, thanks to society's great technological strides.

Again, Paul is torn between two mindsets. In some regards, he recognizes the value of technology and productivity, enjoying the idea that a great inventor like Thomas Edison would be astounded by all the advancements society has made. In other ways, though, Paul appreciates the old-fashioned way of doing things; not only does he have a human secretary instead of a machine to help him, but he also advocated for Building 58 to be preserved even though it's outdated. Overall, though, he seems to want to convince himself that society's technological progress is a good thing, assuring himself that life is better than it was before—a possible attempt to believe that he's doing something of value by working at an industrial plant.

Sometimes, though, Paul wishes he had fought in the war. He thinks about all the action on the battlefield and wonders if experiencing carnage would have made him appreciate his life all the more. Maybe, he thinks, this would help him feel like his job was useful and worthy of respect. As it stands, though, he has recently been feeling deflated about the corporate world and its petty problems.

Paul's lack of enthusiasm about his job confirms that he's not all that committed to the corporate lifestyle. What he lacks, it seems, is a sense of purpose in his career—or, more broadly, in his life. This is why he wishes he'd gone to war, assuming that fighting for a cause would help him feel like he's done something meaningful. Paul's thoughts confirm that he isn't fully invested in the supposed value of technological advancement. Otherwise, he would feel fulfilled by his job.

Paul takes a moment to enjoy the inner workings of Building 58, thinking about the many laborers who used to toil toward greatness in this very building. The machines in here are set to stop in three days, at which point Paul will receive new instructions from his superiors and then order Shepherd (his second in command) to reset the machines according to how many new refrigerator parts are needed—a number determined by a large "computing machine" called EPICAC.

Everything in this future version of the United States is streamlined and efficient, requiring very little oversight. The only thing Paul needs to do is relay orders to Shepherd, who will then program the machines to follow those orders. With such little effort required to keep the country's entire production line moving, it's no wonder that Paul feels unfulfilled by his job—there's hardly any actual work involved, so it's unlikely that he would feel like he's doing something valuable!

Stroking the cat as he walks through Building 58, Paul wonders if Shepherd is *really* out sick. He's probably having meetings with important people so that he can get transferred away from Paul. The two men have known each other since they first started working at Ilium Works with Finnerty, who was promoted to an important job in Washington. Meanwhile, Paul was given the most important job in Ilium, humiliating Shepherd and stoking his undying sense of competition. Whether or not Shepherd gets transferred is out of Paul's control, but he hopes, for Shepherd's sake, that it happens.

Paul's thoughts about Shepherd reveal his own easy-going nature—at least when it comes to job-related competition. He's perfectly aware that Shepherd has it out for him, but he doesn't mind. In fact, he actively wants the best for Shepherd, suggesting that he prioritizes his relationships with people over things like status and power in the corporate world.

Paul opens the malfunctioning machine—called "lathe group three"—and inspects its inside. It has a loop of tape, where the precise motions of a master machinist have been documented so that the machine can imitate the man's movements. This is old technology. Paul himself helped create it when he first arrived at Ilium Works 13 years earlier; he, Finnerty, and Shepherd went out to one of the "machine shop[s]" and identified the machinist with the most skill. The man's name was Rudy Hertz, and he was honored to be chosen.

This is the first time in the novel that it becomes clear how, exactly, the country's technological advancements have impacted actual people. By building technology that can recreate the movements of a master machinist (someone who makes or fixes machines), managers and engineers have essentially rendered physical laborers like Rudy obsolete. Furthermore, the fact that this process is no longer considered cutting edge spotlights just how quickly technology has advanced. (As a side note, contemporary readers might find this technology amusingly outdated, since digitization has largely replaced the use of tape—a reminder that Player Piano *was written in 1952, even though it's set in the future.)*

After Paul, Finnerty, and Shepherd recorded Rudy's movements, they took him out for a beer. Although Rudy didn't understand the technology, he was extremely excited to be recognized for his skill. Paul doesn't know what became of Rudy—all he knows is that the machine based on the man's craftsmanship can create as many industrial parts as Paul tells it to.

It's unclear whether or not Rudy fully understood that the machine he helped Paul and his coworkers create would eventually put him out of a job. For the time being, he simply enjoyed being celebrated for his work—a sign that feeling useful and appreciated often means a lot to people.

Paul closes the machine. Nothing is wrong with it; it just needs to be upgraded. It will produce some faulty parts, but the company will just have to live with that until it gets replaced. Paul thinks about how a machine like this should be in a museum, not a factory. There was once a time when the tapes in these machines were so valuable that they had to be locked up. Now, though, the country enforces "antisabotage laws" so intensely that it's unlikely anyone would be able to get to the machines in the first place.

The "antisabotage laws" referred to in this section hint that the country is very concerned with protecting its technology—technology that keeps the entire economy afloat. The government values these machines so much that only people like Paul—a powerful manager—are even allowed access to them. This further emphasizes the separation between the different social classes, since keeping non-engineers away from the machines implies that they aren't important enough and can't be trusted.

As Paul walks back through Building 58, an automatic cleaning machine comes down the aisle. The cat in Paul's arms jumps to the floor and tries to stare down the machine, but it doesn't change course. Instead, it runs over the cat, swallowing it whole. It then shoves the cat down a chute leading to a little cart outside. By the time Paul gets outside, the cat has escaped the cart and is climbing the large fence surrounding the building. Paul calls out to it, but it's no use—the cat touches the armed wire at the top of the fence, sets off an alarm, gets electrocuted, and is sent hurdling through the air. The dead animal lands in a smoking heap on the ground.

The cat's disastrous death is a good illustration of the drawbacks of complete automation. Because the cleaner is a machine, it doesn't recognize the cat as a living being. As a result, it plows right over it! Although machines might be more efficient than human laborers, this scene demonstrates the drawbacks of this kind of efficiency, suggesting that mechanization has sacrificed important things—like, for instance, the human ability to use judgment and reason.

Back at the office, Katharine gives Paul his typed speech and praises him for his wise words. She especially likes his comment that the First Industrial Revolution "devalued muscle work," whereas the Second Industrial Revolution "devalued routine mental work." Paul shrugs this off, saying that he didn't come up with that idea; a famous mathematician said it in the 1940s. Still, Katharine is impressed, saying how astonishing it was that people used to spend their days doing the same repetitive motion until it was time to go home. Paul agrees, saying that manual labor was very expensive and extremely unreliable.

When Katharine talks about manual labor, she emphasizes the drudgery of mindless repetition. This perspective completely discounts the idea of craftsmanship, ignoring that it's possible for people to take pride in physical labor and, thus, feel rewarded by their work. In this highly streamlined, automatized society, any task that could be completed by a machine has been "devalued"—even "routine mental work" no longer has a place in the workforce, since machines can supposedly fill the roles of people whose jobs don't require complex thinking. It's a little ironic that Katharine is so convinced by this point, since her job as a secretary falls into this category of "routine mental work," at least according to the other managers at Ilium Works, all of whom have replaced their secretaries with machines. Nonetheless, Katharine somehow manages to convince herself that it's a good thing that the two Industrial Revolutions made routine work obsolete and pointless, apparently believing that efficiency is more important—more valuable—*than anything else.*

Still talking about the inefficiency of manual labor, Paul points out that personal problems always made their way into the production line. If employees had a hangover, trouble at home, a grudge against the boss, or any other stressor, these issues tended to appear in the products they made. Plus, maintaining workers' happiness was a huge drain on company resources. And each year, employees would become increasingly distracted as the holiday season approached. The "reject rate" of the products always skyrocketed around this time, and there was nothing the company could do about it.

What Paul describes is the regular toll that work takes on people. His society has addressed these issues not by trying to solve them, but by completely replacing human laborers with machines. Prioritizing efficiency above all else, companies have given up on squeezing productivity out of people. Humans are inconsistent and emotional, so it makes sense that a society obsessed with productivity would prefer machines over actual people in the workforce.

Katharine asks if Paul thinks there will be a Third Industrial Revolution. He doesn't know, but guesses that if there *were* a third, it would probably include machines that entirely devalue human thought of any kind in the workplace. Paul, for one, hopes he won't live to see this happen.

As Paul has previously stated, the Second Industrial Revolution introduced machines that made it unnecessary for human workers to engage in "routine mental work." Now, Paul imagines a future in which machines come along and make it unnecessary for humans to engage in any kind of thought while at work. This, of course, would put everyone out of a job, even managers and engineers like Paul. This is possibly why Paul doesn't want to live long enough to see this change. On a broader level, his hesitancy to embrace this idea of the future also reveals his misgivings about progress in general, as he clearly worries about where all this advancement is headed.

Before he goes into his office, Katharine hands Paul a design Bud made before leaving. He looks it over and realizes that, just as he expected, Bud has thought up a perfect machine for detecting mice. Impressed, he goes into his office and secretly drinks a shot of whiskey.

Bud's invention is proof that human thinking is still valuable in the workplace. At least at this point, a machine couldn't come up with this design for a mouse-detection unit. This intelligent design therefore illustrates the value of human reasoning. And yet, the irony is that this kind of human creativity is exactly what will probably lead to full mechanization one day, since smart, inventive engineers like Bud will surely create the very machines that end up replacing them.

Paul's wife, Anita, calls and reminds him that Kroner and Baer will be at the Country Club dinner that night. Kroner is the manager and Baer is the chief engineer of the Eastern Division, of which Ilium Works is just one part. It's up to them to choose a person to fill an important position as the manager of the Pittsburgh Works—because of this, Paul doesn't welcome the news that they'll be at dinner. He *is* happy, however, when Anita tells him that his old friend Ed Finnerty has made a surprise visit from Washington and will be staying with them.

Although he's somehow climbed his way to a powerful position, it's apparent that Paul isn't all that invested in his career. He doesn't get excited that Kroner and Baer will hear his speech, even though this is an opportunity to impress them and, thus, secure a promotion. This implies that he's not particularly interested in advancing through the company. Anita, on the other hand, is invested in Paul's career, considering that she calls him to talk about the dinner and remind him that his bosses will be present. Her enthusiasm, however, isn't enough to change the fact that Paul is preoccupied with seeing his old friend—a sign that he values human connection and relationships over corporate success.

Anita—who can't stand Finnerty—subtly tries to draw Paul's focus back to impressing Kroner and Baer, and Paul assures her that he'll be nice to them in an attempt to get the Pittsburgh job. This satisfies Anita, though she's still worried because she heard through the grapevine that someone told Kroner that Paul doesn't even *want* the job. Paul refutes this, insisting that he has been very clear with Kroner about wanting the promotion—still, though, Anita seems worried.

The fact that people are talking about Paul not wanting a promotion suggests that his lack of enthusiasm is very obvious. With this in mind, Anita's worries seem justified, especially since Paul is more interested in seeing Finnerty than impressing his bosses. With his slight skepticism about the corporate world, it's very likely that he hasn't *been acting like someone who wants a promotion. This sheds light on a lurking tension in his relationship with Anita. Whereas Paul seems unmotivated to climb the corporate ladder, Anita is eager for him to advance.*

Anita tells Paul to come home early for a drink to relax his nerves before the dinner. He agrees, and on his way out of the office, he tells Katharine not to mind the warning light indicating that lathe group three is malfunctioning. It is, he tells her, "beyond help."

The malfunctioning machine in Building 58—lathe group three—hints at the idea that even technology can't keep up with itself. Although lathe group three once replaced the need for human laborers like Rudy Hertz, now it's almost obsolete itself. If even a machine can't keep up with society's technological progress, it's hard to imagine how human workers could possibly stay competitive and relevant in the workforce.

CHAPTER 2

The Shah of Bratpuhr—who is the "spiritual leader" of the "Kolhouri sect"—sits in a limousine with his translator, Khashdrahr Miasma. The two men are on a tour of the United States led by Doctor Ewing J. Halyard. The Shah has come to see what he might learn from the United States, and as the limousine slides through Ilium, New York, he asks where they are. Halyard explains that they're about to go by the Ilium Works. While crossing the bridge over the Iroquois River, though, they slow to a stop as a group of workers fill a hole in the road. The Shah studies the workers and then asks (through Khashdrahr) who "owns these slaves." Halyard explains that they're not slaves, but citizens who controlled the machines at the Ilium Works before the war.

The Shah is an interesting character in Player Piano *because both he and Khashdrahr provide readers with an alternate lens through which to examine this futuristic version of the United States. Neither the region of Bratpuhr nor the "Kolhouri sect" exist in real life, but the mere fact that the Shah is unfamiliar with this highly streamlined, mechanized American society makes it possible for the book to provide an outside perspective on the things that all the other characters in the book more or less take for granted. This, for example, is what happens when Khashdrahr assumes that the men working on the road are enslaved people. The implication is that this kind of difficult physical labor isn't something anyone would ever choose to do. And, to a certain extent, this is actually true—the people working on the road used to have presumably easier jobs at the Ilium Works. Now that machines have taken over those positions, though, these workers have been forced into a harsher kind of physical labor. Their options for supporting themselves have become quite limited, suggesting that they don't have as much freedom as Doctor Halyard might like to think.*


These workers are no longer needed at the Ilium Works because the machines can control themselves. This creates "less waste" and "much better products." Any laborer who can't earn a living by doing a better job than a machine is hired by the government and placed into either the army or a public works organization called the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps. Their wages come from taxes on personal income and taxes on the machines. "Then the Army and the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps people put their money back into the system for more products for better living," Halyard says.

What's unique about the country's economic structure is that the system has taken jobs away from people but also furnished them with new ones. This might seem like a good system, but it ultimately means that the workers aren't actually invested *in their jobs. Rudy Hertz, for example, took pride in his work as a machinist, so it's unlikely he would feel fulfilled in a position that required him to do roadwork. Although this government-run system of employment might* seem *supportive, then, it still robs people of their sense of purpose in life.*


Disgusted, the Shah calls this economic structure "Communism," but Halyard fervently refutes this. He believes the country has greatly improved the lives of the "average man" by getting rid of human error and unnecessary competition. Khashdrahr asks Halyard what he means by "average man," since there's no translation for it. Halyard offers an explanation, but the Shah thinks he's talking about "*Takaru*," which in his language is the word for an enslaved person. Halyard insists that he's referring to citizens, not enslaved people, but the Shah takes this to mean that the word "citizen" is English for "*Takaru*." Intervening, Khashdrahr explains that, where they're from, there are only two classes: the "Elite and the *Takaru*."

Halyard believes that the United States has a very egalitarian power structure. The system of government, he thinks, makes it possible for everyone to lead a good life. What he ignores, though, is that the people serving in the army or working in the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps have been stripped of their passions, since machines have replaced them and forced them into undesirable jobs. Since these people don't actually have many options available to them, they aren't necessarily as free as Halyard would like to think—a fact that the Shah helps reveal when he refers to the workers as enslaved people, inadvertently highlighting the flawed social and economic structure in the United States.

The limousine encounters another Reclamation and Reconstruction crew doing roadwork. Their wheelbarrows are in the only open lane, so Halyard yells at them to clean up. When they finally listen to him, he chides them for taking too long, so one of them spits in his face as the limousine passes. As Halyard cleans himself off, assuring the Shah that this is an "isolated incident," the Shah commiserates with him, saying that it's "the same with *Takaru* everywhere."

When the frustrated worker spits in Halyard's face, the class division in this society becomes glaringly clear: Halyard is a member of the elite, and the man who spits in his face hates him because of this. Although Halyard has just tried to convince the Shah that the United States operates with an egalitarian social structure, this incident has revealed the deep-seated tensions between the disempowered physical laborers and the upper class. And this, in turn, suggests that the Shah isn't so far off when he assumes that the entirety of the United States is separated into just two classes: those who are fortunate and those who are not.

CHAPTER 3

Although Paul has the highest salary in Ilium, he likes to drive a beat-up old Plymouth. He keeps a rusty old pistol in its glove compartment—not because he needs it, but because he hasn't returned it like he was supposed to. It first came to him during the riots that occurred right after the war, when the government issued weapons to law-abiding citizens like him. It's illegal to have the gun lying around like this, but he hasn't gotten around to giving it back or putting it somewhere safe. Now, with the pistol in the glove compartment, he drives the old Plymouth over the bridge so he can buy a bottle of Irish whiskey in Homestead. The whiskey is for Finnerty, who is one of the only people with whom Paul has ever felt kinship.

Driving a beat-up old car is yet another sign that Paul isn't fully invested in the lifestyle that comes along with corporate success. As the highest-paid person in Ilium, he could surely afford a fancy car, but he chooses not to buy one. This suggests that acting like a powerful authority figure doesn't appeal to him. Instead, he's more down to earth, unimpressed by flashy displays of money and status. In other words, he doesn't care all that much about the elite class, which is perhaps why he doesn't bother to register his gun—he's not concerned with doing what he's supposed to. This implies that Paul has a subversive side to him.

Whenever he goes to Homestead, Paul tries to blend in by wearing a leather jacket. As he enters a bar and asks for a bottle of whiskey, though, he feels like everyone is watching him. He feels awkward because the bartender is one of those few people in Homestead who—because he was never replaced by a machine—thinks he's superior to everyone else and is therefore eager to treat Paul better than the other patrons. Although people like the bartender feel superior because they weren't ousted by machines, nobody on Paul's side of the river thinks of it this way. It's not that these people were too smart to be replaced, it's just that there's no economic incentive to build machines for their jobs.

The division in Ilium is so pervasive that it creates tension between people who are technically in the same class. Nobody on Paul's side of the river actually respects people like the bartender, but because the bartender is one of the few people who hasn't been replaced by machines, he still acts like he's better than the people around him. This shows just how eager people are in this society to feel important—status, it seems, matters more than anything else. Meanwhile, Paul wants to play down his elevated status, trying to distance himself from his own corporate success in order to fit in with the people of Homestead. Yet again, this suggests that Paul is unfulfilled by his station in life and uninterested in the power he has as a successful manager.

When the bartender disappears to get the whiskey, Paul feels everyone staring at him. To occupy himself, he pets a blind dog sitting with one of the customers, but it barks at him and looks at its owner, who assures him that the dog is harmless. The dog's owner then realizes that he recognizes Paul; "Don't you recognize my face, Doctor?" he asks. Embarrassed, Paul fails to remember, until the old man offers that Paul once said he had the most skilled hands in Ilium: the old man, Paul realizes, is Rudy Hertz.

By running into Rudy Hertz, Paul comes face to face with someone who has been replaced by machines. The interesting thing about Rudy, though, is that he has been replaced by machines designed to emulate his own work! This puts him in a unique position, since he has been robbed of a job but not necessarily of his dignity—after all, his work helped revolutionize the industry to which he devoted his life, so he can at least feel good about that.

It quickly becomes clear that having his craftsmanship recorded by Paul, Finnerty, and Shepherd was the highlight of Rudy's life. Knowing that someone as intelligent as Paul would call him a "damn fine machinist" is, Rudy says, pretty much all he has in life, especially since everyone knows Paul is the smartest man in town. This makes Paul uncomfortable. He knows Rudy thinks he's honoring him in front of everyone else, but it's very clear that nobody—except Rudy—has any respect for him in this bar.

It's almost as if Rudy respects Paul because Paul respects him*: by honoring his work as a machinist, Paul helped Rudy feel useful and relevant, even though he also put Rudy out of a job. This suggests that a lot of the tension between the working class and the elite has to do with self-worth and dignity (or the lack of these things). Rudy has every reason to dislike Paul, since Paul played such a big role in taking away his job. And yet, he goes out of his way to* celebrate *Paul. This indicates that people are less likely to resent the elite if they feel valued and appreciated. In this moment, though, only Rudy feels valued by Paul, which is why everyone else in the bar clearly dislikes Paul.*

Paul falls into conversation with a man in thick glasses sitting next to Rudy. This man's 18-year-old son recently failed the National General Classification Tests, meaning that he can't go to college. And because he can't afford to go to private school, the boy either has to join the army or go into the "Reeks and Wrecks" (a nickname for the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps).

Hearing about the troubles of this stranger's son, Paul must face the tragic lack of options available to people who don't go to college. Normally, people can go into many different fields without a college degree—in this futuristic version of the United States, though, there are very few paths for someone like this young man. This highlights the division between the working class and the elite, especially since Paul has had so much success but doesn't even seem all that invested in his career. As long as people have the right qualifications, it seems, they don't even have to try that hard in order to succeed. If they don't *have the right qualifications, though, they have very few opportunities for advancement.*

Paul tries to praise the benefits of joining the army or the Reeks and Wrecks, but he's unable to say anything that sounds genuine. He then awkwardly says that he doesn't have the power to help this man's son, though he adds that he could speak to the person in charge of "testing and placement." The man then asks if there's anything his son could do at the Ilium Works, since he's very good with machines, but Paul insists that the boy would need a graduate degree. With this in mind, Paul suggests that the man's son open a repair shop instead. The man scoffs at this. Everyone on this side of the river has thought about doing that, and it never works.

In order to work at Ilium Works, this stranger's son wouldn't just need a college degree (which he doesn't have), but also a graduate degree. This emphasizes just how impossible it is for people who don't qualify for college to gain any sort of upward mobility. Working somewhere like Ilium Works is completely out of reach for this young man, despite the fact that he's naturally talented at working on machines. He would most likely be a good worker, but he'll never get the chance to prove himself—an illustration of how limited people are by this rigid system.

Thankfully, Rudy puts some money in the **player piano** near the bar, which cuts off all conversation. Since the bartender has finally returned with Paul's whiskey, he turns to go, but Rudy stops him—he paid for this song in Paul's honor. Paul waits uncomfortably for it to finish, watching the keys on the player piano move up and down. Rudy comments on how weird it is to see a piano playing itself, almost as if a ghost is playing the tune. When the song ends, Paul bolts out of the bar.

Since the player piano recreates a human's movement, it is the perfect representation of how Rudy got replaced by a machine. After all, Paul recorded Rudy's physical movements so that a machine could emulate his work. Similarly, the player piano has been built to play a song in the same exact way that a musician originally played it. This means that, although the machine can play all by itself, it preserves the memory of whoever played the song, just like the machines that replaced Rudy preserve the memory (or "ghost") of his craftsmanship. This is a good reminder that machines aren't intelligent beings; rather, they function because *of human work and creativity, even if they've also rendered humans largely unnecessary in the workforce.*

CHAPTER 4

Anita greets Paul with a cocktail when he gets home. She's dressed lavishly for the dinner at the Country Club, and Paul momentarily resents her for caring so much about his (and, by extension, *her*) stature in Ilium. When he asks where Finnerty went, Anita says she sent Finnerty down to the Country Club to entertain Kroner and Baer before the dinner. She tries her best to act as if she likes Finnerty, but she can't help herself from talking about how dirty and unkempt he always looks. And it's true: Finnerty rarely washes himself and is always wearing the same raggedy suit. When he lived in Ilium, he was respected by all, but he still scandalized the strait-laced community by never marrying, openly seeing multiple women, and driving a beat-up car.

The fact that Paul resents Anita for obsessing over their stature in Ilium further illustrates that he doesn't care all that much about corporate success. He's the highest paid person at Ilium Works, but this doesn't mean he's fully committed to the lifestyle of a successful manager. This mentality is possibly why he likes Finnerty so much, considering that Finnerty actively rejects the expectations that the surrounding society forces on him. This lack of conformity distresses Anita, but it aligns with Paul's disinterest in all things corporate.

Like Paul, Finnerty used to drive a beat-up old car when he lived in Ilium. Although he claimed this was only because he spent his money on other things, Paul knows that Finnerty drove an ugly car to irk the other people in Ilium. This pleases Paul—while he himself isn't "aggressive," he delights in Finnerty's behavior. Paul often thinks about what it would take to make himself happy, but these thoughts don't go far. Though he assures himself that he "vaguely" knows, the truth is that he has no idea.

Although Finnerty is a bit more overt about rejecting societal expectations, Paul also gets a thrill out of refusing to live the way a successful manager normally lives. This is made evident by the simple fact that—just like Finnerty—he drives a beat-up car, even though he's the highest paid person in Ilium. Still, this subtle nonconformity isn't enough to make him happy. In fact, he doesn't even know *what would make him happy, suggesting that the life he's leading has completely cut him off from his own feelings. This makes sense, considering that he lives in a society that focuses solely on productivity and corporate success, not emotions.*

Lately, Paul has considered seeing a psychiatrist. He hopes this would make him "docile" and happy with his station in life. But now that Finnerty's here, he finds himself wanting to do the exact opposite. Finnerty has always acted as if Paul has a secret "rebellious streak" inside of him, and though Paul usually ignores this, he now wonders if Finnerty is right.

Finnerty's presence inspires Paul to be a bit more honest with himself about his own happiness. Without Finnerty in Ilium, Paul drifts along in a state of mild discontent, trying to find ways to become more passively accepting of his unfulfilling lifestyle—he wants, in other words, to be "docile," or resigned and agreeable. Now that Finnerty's here, though, he actually thinks about his dissatisfaction with life and the corporate world to which he belongs.

Paul tells Anita about the uncomfortable experience he had at the bar on the other side of the river. She listens patiently but doesn't understand what the problem is—it sounds like everyone in the bar admired and celebrated him! When this fails to make Paul feel better, Anita suggests that he's tired and says she's going to ask Kroner to give him a month off. He bitterly says he'll ask Kroner himself for time off if he wants it.

Anita and Paul do not see eye to eye when it comes to class division. Whereas Paul feels uncomfortable about his elevated status in society, Anita takes it for granted that everyone should respect powerful managers or engineers. This highlights her focus on stature, as she clearly delights in Paul's position in society—so much, in fact, that it irks Paul, who doesn't want her to play such an active role in his career.

Paul's annoyance with Anita quickly lifts when he goes to change for dinner and finds Finnerty stretched out on a bed upstairs. He's supposed to be at the Country Club with Kroner and Baer, but he snuck back into the house after Anita pushed him out. When Paul asks about his job in Washington, Finnerty says that he quit because he was "sick of it." Everything was going fine until he received his yearly invitation to the Meadows—a summer tradition to build company morale. Looking at his invitation, something just "snapped" inside Finnerty, and he decided he couldn't take this life anymore.

Finnerty's discontent with corporate life is intense. Whereas Paul feels a constant low-level unhappiness, Finnerty has finally reached the edge. The word "snapped" calls attention to this sudden change, suggesting that Finnerty finally reached a breaking point after years of discontent. This, it seems, is the direction in which Paul is headed.

Paul's hands shake as he puts a cigarette in his mouth, and Finnerty is excited by the idea that Paul seems unwell. When Paul explains that he's just nervous for his speech, though, Finnerty is disappointed. He admits that he thought Paul might be feeling the same way he felt—in fact, that's why Finnerty came. Relenting, Paul admits that he might see a psychiatrist, and Finnerty, delighted, suggests that they skip the Country Club dinner so they can go talk.

In this moment, Finnerty tries to connect with Paul on a personal level, hoping they can bond over their shared dissatisfaction with corporate life. Paul, however, isn't quite ready to do this. Instead of commiserating with his friend, he says that the only thing bothering him is the fact that he has to give a speech. But this isn't entirely true, which is why he adds that he might see a psychiatrist. The fact that this makes Finnerty so happy further illustrates just how hungry Finnerty is for human connection, suggesting that the elite class of managers and engineers doesn't have much in the way of camaraderie.

Anita enters and is surprised to find Finnerty in her bedroom. It's clear she's annoyed that he's not with Kroner and Baer. And Finnerty, in turn, is annoyed that she burst in, so he tells her that he has half a mind to invent a machine that does everything she does, effectively replacing her as Paul's wife—a comment that enrages her, sending her downstairs in a fit of anger. Paul chastises his friend for unnecessarily picking a fight, to which Finnerty says he's not sorry. He then tells Paul to go to the dinner without him.

Finnerty and Anita represent opposing viewpoints. Whereas Finnerty is tired of the corporate world, Anita obsesses over the prospect of upward mobility, wanting Paul to do whatever it takes to advance his career. This means that Finnerty and Anita pull Paul in different directions—Finnerty tries to get him to renounce the boring, strait-laced lifestyle of an important manager, and Anita tries to get him to embrace *this lifestyle. He is therefore caught in the middle—a perfect representation of his overall passive nature and his ambivalence toward both the corporate world and the idea of leaving that world behind.*

CHAPTER 5

At the Country Club, eager young engineers enthusiastically greet Paul and Anita. Kroner greets Paul in a way that makes him feel like a child, but Paul always feels this way around Kroner—possibly because Kroner was best friends with Paul's father. Baer, on the other hand, babbles on and on. He's an extremely excitable man who is, despite his casual demeanor, the most skilled engineer in the entire Eastern Division. Kroner and Baer are inseparable: Baer contains a wealth of knowledge about technology, and Kroner provides unfailing faith in the company and its objectives.

This dinner at the Country Club sheds light on the power dynamics that exist in Paul's corporate life. The young engineers, for example, are anxious to greet Paul because they know he's important, so they're just trying to look good. Kroner, on the other hand, occupies an even more powerful position—one that makes Paul feel insignificant and childish. Baer, for his part, talks so extensively that it's hard to believe he's actually trying to connect with anyone. In fact, it doesn't seem like there's any true camaraderie in this environment all, suggesting that the corporate world in which Paul lives is full of superficial relationships.

Baer lets slip that he and Kroner heard Paul was having trouble with his "nerves." Paul denies this, and when Anita asks who made this claim, Bear blurts out that it was Doctor Shepherd, though Kroner quickly insists that Baer must be mistaken: according to Kroner, Shepherd said no such thing. Shepherd is standing nearby, and the back of his neck goes bright red when he hears this conversation. He discreetly slips out of the Country Club and onto the golf course.

This awkward moment confirms a suspicion Paul had earlier in the day: namely, that Shepherd had called out sick in order to meet with people like Kroner in an attempt to get transferred out from under Paul. Paul and Shepherd started working at Ilium Works at the same time, collaborating on projects like the one they completed with Rudy Hertz. Now, though, it's clear that Shepherd's competitive spirit has overtaken any kind of friendship they may have had—a sign that Paul's work environment breeds competition and rivalry instead of friendship and kindness.

A group of young engineers stands in front of Paul. Their leader, Paul Berringer, isn't very intelligent, but he comes from a wealthy family and is the son of a well-respected engineer. Berringer challenges Paul to a game of checkers after dinner, which is a yearly tradition. Paul is the reigning checker champion of Ilium, and each year a different young engineer thinks he can beat him and take away the title. Kroner and Baer love this competitive spirit, so Paul indulges it. This year, though, he can tell things will be a little different, since Berringer says that he won't really be playing alone against Paul. Still, Paul remains confident and accepts the challenge.

The mere fact that there's a checker championship among the employees of the Ilium Works reveals the company's competitive spirit. This is a place, it seems, that incentivizes rivalry, creating an environment in which people are encouraged to work against each other. Once again, then, the corporate world lacks the kind of camaraderie and fellow-feeling that people like Finnerty yearn for (as evidenced by his attempt to commiserate with Paul about how unhappy he is at his job).

Seated at the dinner table, there are 27 managers and engineers. There are also two empty places belonging to Finnerty and Shepherd. Paul is disappointed in his reunion with Finnerty and hopes he doesn't see him for a while. He's not sure what he thought he'd get out of seeing his old friend, but he thought maybe Finnerty would help him get rid of the "nameless, aching need" that has been distracting him at work—just as Shepherd apparently reported to Kroner.

It's not exactly clear what the "nameless, aching need" inside Paul actually is, other than a general desire to lead a more fulfilling life. What that life would actually look like, though, is unknown. He hoped Finnerty would help him forget about this feeling, but Finnerty did the exact opposite: he validated Paul's unhappiness. Instead of helping his friend forget about his woes, Finnerty tried to get Paul to see that his unhappiness in the corporate world is completely understandable. However, Paul isn't ready to accept this, which is why he now hopes he won't see Finnerty for a while. In other words, Finnerty struck a nerve in Paul, but Paul isn't ready to admit that he doesn't like his current life. As a result, he wants to distance himself from Finnerty.

Paul isn't mad at Shepherd. In fact, he even gets up from the dinner table to go find him, hoping to lure him back to the party. Following him onto the golf course, Anita begs Paul to turn around, since she thinks he should let Shepherd suffer. After all, Shepherd clearly told Kroner and Baer about Paul's nerves in an attempt to undermine him and secure the Pittsburgh job for himself. Thus, Anita thinks Paul should let Shepherd worry for a while, wanting him to think Paul might fire him for what he's done. Instead, Paul politely tries to coax him back to the Club.

Again, Anita is more invested in Paul's career than Paul himself. Rather than punishing Shepherd for going behind his back, Paul wants to treat him with kindness, suggesting that he cares more about treating people well than he cares about his own job. Shepherd and Anita, on the other hand, are more interested in status and power than human relationships.

Shepherd seems to *want* Paul to be mad, but Paul refuses to get wrapped up in a big ordeal—this would only play into Shepherd's love of competition. Finally, he convinces Shepherd to head back to the party, though Shepherd refuses to shake Paul's hand. When Anita angrily tells him not to gossip about Paul's health, Shepherd says that everyone knows perfectly well that he's right: Paul can't be trusted with even the simplest machines, let alone the important Pittsburgh job.

Shepherd confirms in this moment that he wants the Pittsburgh job for himself. He wants it so badly, in fact, that he's willing to go behind Paul's back—even though Paul himself treats him with nothing but kindness. Although Paul takes this entire ordeal in stride, it's a clear reminder that he exists in a cutthroat atmosphere, and this is one possible reason he's so dissatisfied with his life as a manager.

Back in the Country Club, Shepherd claims to feel a little sick. To ease the tension, Kroner plays into this obvious lie, asking the waiters to bring him some toast to make him feel better. At the end of the meal, Paul gives his speech, in which he talks about the Second Industrial Revolution and generally states the importance of what the industry is doing. Machines, he argues, are working much better than actual workers ever could. The products are better, cheaper, and more widely available—an observation everyone makes whenever they have to give a speech about Ilium Works.

At this point in the novel, Paul still seems to believe in the value of automation. However, the fact that the speech he gives is basically the same speech everyone *gives when they talk about Ilium Works suggests that he's not all that invested in these ideas. Although he might genuinely believe machines make better products than human laborers, he isn't interested in this idea quite enough to come up with something original to say about it—in fact, he even admitted to Katharine that his point about the Industrial Revolution was borrowed from something a famous intellectual said many years ago. Simply put, he's just going through the motions of corporate life, waxing poetic about the benefits of automation without really caring about his job as much as people like Kroner or Shepherd.*

Kroner raises his hand and points out that one horsepower does the work of roughly 22 laborers. This, he says, means that some of the company's large machines can accomplish more than the whole population of enslaved people accomplished before the American Civil War. Plus, these machines work at this fast pace around the clock.

Kroner is so focused on the idea of productivity that he ends up tacitly endorsing the practice of slavery. He doesn't acknowledge that slavery was a terrible thing that deprived Black people of basic human rights. Instead, he fixates on how much enslaved people accomplished as workers, inadvertently implying that he understands—on some level—why powerful white businessmen would have wanted to enslave people in the first place. Of course, his main point is that people can put machines to work without having to feel bad about treating them poorly, but he never explicitly says this—so his comment comes off as callous, as if all he cares about is productivity.

Paul takes this into consideration but points out that Kroner's comparison mainly relates to the advancements made in the First Industrial Revolution, when machines simply replaced physical labor. Now, after the Second Industrial Revolution, it's harder to measure progress because machines have also eased the "annoyance" and "boredom" people used to feel while working as manual laborers.

The First Industrial Revolution took place between 1760 and 1840. It was responsible for changing the manufacturing process, as new inventions made it easier (and faster) for workers to produce materials without expending large amounts of physical effort. The Second Industrial Revolution spanned from roughly 1870 to 1914 and largely built upon the progress of the First Industrial Revolution, using electrical power to make work even easier and faster. Paul's general point is that, though it's easy to measure how much physical *work machines have spared human laborers, it's harder to quantify the emotional burdens that automation has eased. The mere fact that he's thinking about "annoyance" and "boredom" suggests that he's attuned to the overall impact of mechanization on society, not just on the business-related effects of these machines. Kroner, on the other hand, only seems to care about productivity.*

Baer says that the benefits of the Second Industrial Revolution are measurable by simply counting the number of faulty products. Though this is true, Paul tries to approach the matter from the perspective of the workers. How, for instance, has the Second Industrial Revolution helped the people across the river? Everyone makes light of this, and Kroner jokes that those people never worked anyway. When Anita says they're "reproducing like rabbits," Finnerty drunkenly bursts into the room and says, "Somebody telling dirty jokes about rabbits reproducing?"

Baer's point is that the "annoyance" and "boredom" people used to feel at work used to cause faults in the products. Paul himself made a similar point while talking to Katharine earlier in the day, saying that any minor problem—like a hangover or an argument with the boss—could easily affect a person's work. Now, though, Paul is more interested in exploring how mechanization has impacted the people living in Homestead. The answer, of course, is that it has deprived them of jobs and generally made their lives worse, but nobody at the dinner wants to consider this—instead, they want to tell themselves that mechanization has led to a better world. It seems obvious that this isn't true, since the people on the other side of the river don't enjoy the same perks as managers and engineers. However, Kroner and everyone else at the dinner don't recognize this because they don't actually care about the people of Homestead—yet another sign of the stark class division that exists in Ilium.

Drunk and unmannerly, Finnerty sits by Kroner, who wants to talk about the Second Industrial Revolution. Kroner remarks on the proliferation of vacuum tubes (a source of power), but Finnerty points out that the rise in vacuum tubes has coincided with increased addiction and suicide. While Kroner blames the war for this, Finnerty thinks that if there's even a small connection between technological advancement and human misery, it ought to be explored. Anita finally puts an end to the conversation, suggesting that they turn their attention to the checkers championship in the next room.

Whereas Paul still passively believes in the value of automation, Finnerty has completely given up on trying to convince himself that the proliferation of machines in the workplace has led to a better world. In fact, he thinks there's evidence that it has done the opposite, arguing that there are observable ways in which mechanization has harmed *society. This, it seems, is the answer to Paul's question about how technological advancement has impacted people on the other side of the river: it has led to things like addiction and suicide. Because everyone at the dinner except Finnerty still believes in the value of mechanization, though, nobody's willing to objectively consider the negative effects of all this progress.*

Paul sits at the checker board, confident that he'll win once again. However, he loses his confidence when Berringer and his friends wheel out a large, human-sized box called Checker Charley: a checker-playing machine designed by Berringer's father. Paul tries to call the game off, insisting that he'll never win against a machine, but Anita and the others convince him to go through with it just to be a good sport. Even Finnerty stumbles into the game room and, after inspecting Checker Charley with Baer at his side, tells Paul to play. In fact, he decides to bet money on the game, wagering that Paul will win against the machine. Berringer and Shepherd take him up on this bet.

This checker game is a perfect representation of what has happened in this society: humans have been pitted against machines. Humans hardly stand a chance in the workforce, since machines are able to work more efficiently and with higher accuracy than most physical laborers. The difference here, though, is that checkers is a mental game, meaning that Paul faces the exact thing he told Katharine he fears: a future in which machines are better than humans at thinking.

After several moves, Paul is surprised that he's able to take one of Checker Charley's pieces. He assumes this is because the machine is using an advanced strategy, but Checker Charley begins to make a strange, over-worked noise. Soon enough, Paul is winning handsomely, and Finnerty puts even more money on the bet. Paul is finally having fun, feeling quite satisfied that he's beating the machine, which—to everyone's surprise—starts smoking. "Fire!" yells Baer, and a waiter rushes in to douse the machine with a fire extinguisher. With a loud, terrible hum, Checker Charley dies, and everyone except Paul and Finnerty looks distraught, feeling terrible for Berringer and his father's precious machine.

Machines are perfectly capable of replacing physical laborers, but they're clearly not yet advanced enough to render human thought obsolete. This is comforting to Paul and Finnerty, both of whom are skeptical about the impact machines have had on society as a whole. Everyone else, though, is deeply committed to the idea of technological progress, so Checker Charley's fiery demise upsets them—after all, this outcome suggests that machines haven't come quite as far as people like Kroner would like to think.

Beside himself, Berringer accuses Finnerty of tampering with Checker Charley before the game, when he inspected the machine's backside. After all, how could Finnerty have been so confident that Paul would win? Because, Finnerty replies, he will always side with human beings over machines—plus, he saw that Checker Charley had a "loose connection." Berringer shrieks that Finnerty should have said something, but Finnerty argues that Checker Charley, if he's so incredible, should be able to fix himself.

Checker Charley's loose connection illustrates that even machines are bound to make mistakes. Ironically, Checker Charley would have been fine if only someone had fixed the connection. This shows that human error can still make its way into the world of machinery, but it also emphasizes the importance of human oversight—after all, machines like Checker Charley can't fix themselves!

On his way out the door, Finnerty congratulates Paul on his win, but Anita begs him to give Berringer and Shepherd their money back. She complains that it isn't fair for Finnerty to keep their money. And then, much to everyone's surprise, Paul loses control and starts laughing. This delights Finnerty, who announces that he's headed back to Paul and Anita's house for the night.

In this moment, Paul recognizes the absurdity of the corporate world, in which everyone is obsessed with productivity and the value of technological progress. The idea that Berringer and everyone else could be so upset about a malfunctioning machine emphasizes how obsessed they are with the promise of automation. Finnerty, on the other hand, recognizes that machines aren't always something to celebrate (a viewpoint that Paul has apparently come to appreciate). On an even more basic level, Paul's laughter suggests that he enjoys seeing his fellow managers and engineers get so flustered about something as ridiculous as a machine designed to play checkers. This, after all, is a good representation of how seriously Paul's coworkers take the idea that machines have made the world a better place.

CHAPTER 6

In bed that night, Anita presses Paul for details about what Kroner said before they left the Country Club. He tells her Kroner simply told him to visit him the following week and—much to Anita's disappointment—said nothing about the Pittsburgh job. As she asks him questions, Paul shows his annoyance, which in turn annoys *her*, as she argues that she has a right to "be interested" in his professional development.

One of the defining aspects of Paul and Anita's relationship is that they don't feel the same way about the importance of status and career advancement. Anita wants Paul to do whatever it takes to get the Pittsburgh promotion, but Paul resents her for constantly thinking about his career. There's no room in their relationship for Paul's misgivings about his job, and this seems to weigh on him, causing him to get annoyed with Anita for trying to push him up the corporate ladder.

Anita says that Finnerty ruined the entire evening, but Paul is thrilled by what Finnerty did. He felt a certain camaraderie with Finnerty at the Country Club tonight, reveling in the feeling of joining forces to undermine Checker Charley. But even more exciting is the fact that Finnerty quit his job—an idea Paul can barely wrap his head around.

Finnerty's behavior shows Paul that he doesn't have to just keep working at a job he doesn't enjoy. He also doesn't have to keep hiding his misgivings about the effects of automation on society. Instead, he can—like Finnerty—do whatever he wants. To Paul, this feels like a revolutionary idea, though it's not yet clear if it'll actually inspire him to do anything different with his life.

As Paul thinks about Finnerty's bravery, Anita reminds him about his father's expectation that he become the manager of Pittsburgh. This annoys Paul, since Anita never actually *met* his father. Still, she constantly brings him up, suggesting things he might think or say. Paul thinks she's turned his father into a kind of myth, setting the bar for Paul's own life. Kroner contributes to this too, taking it for granted that Paul will do exactly what his father did. This makes Paul feel strange. Whenever he thinks about his success, he realizes he doesn't have the same "corporate personality" as his father, Kroner, or Shepherd. What he lacks, he senses, is the ability to actually care about his job.

Part of the problem weighing Paul down is that everyone in his life (except Finnerty) not only expects him to rise through the company, but also celebrate and obsess over his own success. It's this second expectation that proves the hardest, since Paul can't find it in himself to care about his job. He has already risen to a fairly prominent position and now has the chance to gain another promotion, but he finds it difficult to invest himself in this advancement. This, of course, is because he isn't convinced that what he's doing actually benefits anyone but the elite class of managers and engineers. Whereas people like his father and Kroner clearly believe that automation has made the world a better place, Paul isn't so sure, and this makes it hard for him to devote himself to the corporate world—a world that otherwise depresses him.

CHAPTER 7

The Shah of Bratpuhr goes with Halyard and Khashdrahr to visit the US Army. The Army company marches before him, saluting him as the Division Commander barks out commands. While this is happening, one of the soldiers, Private First Class Elmo C. Hacketts, Jr., thinks about the day—many years away—when he'll finally be released from the Army, at which point he'll cuss out his superiors and they won't be able to do anything about it. Meanwhile, the Shah remarks (through Khashdrahr) that the soldiers are a "fine bunch of slaves," and Halyard once again tries to correct him.

The novel uses the Shah and Khashdrahr's unfamiliarity with the United States as a way of viewing the country's various power structures from an outside perspective. In this case, the Shah once again sees American citizens as enslaved people, and though this isn't technically true, it is the case that people like Private First Class Elmo C. Hacketts, Jr., are serving in the military not because they want to, but because they have very few alternatives. In a way, then, the soldiers the Shah visits in this scene actually do have something in common with enslaved people: the inability to live their lives the way they actually want.

CHAPTER 8

On his way to work the next morning, Paul notices that the gun is missing from his glove compartment, but he doesn't have time to dwell on this because his car breaks down. This happens right in front of a crew of Reconstruction and Reclamation workers, so an older man takes a look under the hood and fixes the car using some material from his own hat. Grateful, Paul offers him $10, but the man only takes $5, noting that this is the first money he's earned in quite a few years. When he asks why Paul looks familiar, Paul lies and says he has a small grocery store in town.

This stranger's ability to fix Paul's car shows that there are incredibly intelligent, capable people who have been completely devalued in this society. This man is such a skilled mechanic that he can fix a car with nothing more than the fabric of his own hat, but instead of working on machines in a place like the Ilium Works, he's stuck working for the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps on the side of the road. Meanwhile, Paul—who is smart but can't even fix his own car—is the manager of an industrial plant full of machines. This makes the stark class division in Ilium feel completely arbitrary, since this man seems knowledgeable enough to hold Paul's job. Instead, he has been relegated to the lowest echelons of society.

Paul arrives at Ilium Works to find Katharine distraught at her desk. Bud's there, too, and he's dejectedly looking at the floor; he has just lost his job. Paul can't believe this, since Bud is one of the best engineers at the company—he invented an important machine, whose value the company should be able to see. But this is exactly the problem: the machine Bud invented works so well that it has completely replaced him. More specifically, it has replaced him *and* 72 other unlucky engineers.

Bud's predicament calls attention to the lose-lose nature of working in an industry that is obsessed with progress and efficiency. In order to do his job well, Bud has to come up with good ideas. This, however, has led him to invent a machine capable of doing his own job, effectively putting him out of work. The only way he could have avoided this fate would have been by underperforming at his job, but this would surely have put his career in jeopardy. No matter what he does, then, his job isn't safe, indicating that automation has the power to replace not just physical laborers, but also the engineers who design the machines in the first place.

Katharine and Paul try to brainstorm new jobs for Bud, but they know it's not up to them. A machine-based system makes all of these decisions, matching a person's qualifications with open positions they're qualified to fill. And since there are no positions currently open for which Bud is officially qualified, he's out of luck. Of course, Paul is confident Bud could do nearly *anything* at Ilium, since he's so clever and competent, but because his test scores are only high in one area, he can't transition to a new concentration.

Everything about this futuristic version of the United States is streamlined and efficient. But it's also very narrow-minded and rigid, since machines make important decisions about who's allowed to do what. This might lead to increased productivity, but it doesn't leave any room for compassion. Bud is a fantastic employee who is intelligent and creative, but the machines don't care about this. They have suddenly decided that the company no longer needs Bud for the specific role he was originally hired to fill. Of course, Paul knows Bud would excel in any number of jobs, but the machines don't take this into consideration. Although this system might lead to economic *progress, then, it doesn't create an environment that fosters happiness or fulfillment—both of which any truly advanced society would prioritize.*

Katharine receives a call and tells Paul that Finnerty is at the gate. He hasn't come to see Paul, though—he's here to walk around the plant. All visitors are prohibited from roaming the grounds without an escort, since "saboteurs" might find their way in and destroy the machines. Despite this, Paul decides to let Finnerty do whatever he wants. Katharine disagrees, and as they argue, Bud listens intently, finally pointing out—at the end of the argument—that they wasted six minutes on a conversation about whether or not to let someone in. If the company is so concerned about streamlining everything, he says, they could easily make a machine that does Katharine's job. Paul slips into his office just as Bud and Katharine start to fight about Bud's insensitive comment.

Bud's bitter comment calls attention to the cutthroat mentality that he himself faces at work. Having just lost his own job as a result of automation, Bud can't help but wonder why Katharine gets to keep her job—after all, most high-level managers use machines instead of human secretaries. This isn't a very kind thing to point out, especially considering that Bud and Katharine are in a romantic relationship. The mere fact that he says this, then, suggests that this unforgiving corporate environment encourages people to compete with each other in ways that are harmful to their personal relationships.

In his office, Paul receives a call from Shepherd, who complains about an "unauthorized" person in the plant. Paul says he's the one who let Finnerty in, and this delights Shepherd, who clarifies multiple times that Paul is "order[ing]" him to let Finnerty continue his romp through the grounds without a guard. He even says that Berringer is listening in, just so he can confirm—if anyone asks—that Paul authorized this. Finnerty, Shepherd adds, is making drawings of the machines. For a moment, Paul doubts himself, but once again he tells Shepherd to let it go.

Paul's behavior in this scene is a little self-destructive. Considering that the country has strict "antisabotage" laws, it's unwise to let anyone into the Ilium Works, even if that person is a trusted friend—after all, people like Kroner wouldn't approve of this, regardless of how close Paul and Finnerty are. This is why Shepherd gleefully confirms that Paul is authorizing him to let Finnerty keep walking through the grounds: he knows this is a grave mistake, and he's excited to get Paul in trouble for it. Paul, however, doesn't care, perhaps wanting—on some subconscious level—to make a mistake big enough to get himself fired.

CHAPTER 9

Finnerty comes to Paul's office later in the day and asks if he wants to go for a drink. When Paul calls Anita to tell her they'll be late for dinner, she asks if he's thought about what he'll say if Kroner asks him about Pittsburgh, but he dodges the question. Once in the car, Finnerty directs Paul to a bar on the other side of the river, not wanting anyone to hear their conversation. On the way, Paul says he has to stop at the police station to report his missing pistol, but Finnerty tells him to keep driving because *he's* the one who took the pistol. When Paul asks why, Finnerty casually says he was considering killing himself earlier that day. Instead, he decided to throw the gun into the river.

Again, Anita is more concerned with Paul's career advancement than Paul himself is. Instead of focusing on what he'll say if Kroner talks to him about the Pittsburgh job, Paul just wants to go to a bar with his good friend, showing that he cares much more about his relationships than his job. To that end, his friendship with Finnerty seems likely to thoroughly interfere with his work life, especially since Finnerty is on what appears to be a destructive streak, as evidenced by his drunken display at the Country Club, his decision to quit his job, his appearance at Ilium Works, and his suicidal behavior. All of this contrasts with the uptight, strait-laced environment of Ilium, so it makes sense that Paul is enticed by Finnerty.

Paul is used to hearing Finnerty say morbid things, but he still suggests that his friend see a psychiatrist. Finnerty refuses, saying that a psychiatrist would try to bring him back to "the center," when what he really wants is to live life on "the edge." From this vantage point, he insists, it's possible to see life anew.

After years of unhappiness in a boring job, Finnerty welcomes the idea of a chaotic life. Instead of conforming to society's expectations by acting mild-mannered and polite, he wants to live life on his own terms—an idea that surely impresses Paul, who also feels unsatisfied by the corporate lifestyle, though he hasn't yet reached the breaking point that Finnerty clearly has.

Paul and Finnerty go to the same bar that Paul visited the day before. Over a drink, Finnerty admits that he's been a little disappointed by his reunion with Paul. He had thought that seeing Paul would make him feel better and solve his problems, but it hasn't. Paul says he, too, was hoping for a feeling of "rebirth" upon seeing his old friend.

It's a little strange that Paul claims seeing Finnerty hasn't given him the feeling of "rebirth" he hoped for, since there have already been several moments in which he has felt invigorated by his friend's presence. In particular, he felt excited and alive after the Country Club dinner, when Finnerty helped him embarrass Checker Charley. All the same, it's possible that he had even higher expectations for his reunion with Finnerty, maybe hoping that seeing him would completely change the way he feels about his life. In fact, this is *what Finnerty's presence has done, but perhaps not in the way Paul hoped; instead of helping Paul feel better about leading an unfulfilling life at Ilium Works, Finnerty has pushed him in the other direction, urging him to acknowledge his discontent.*

Paul and Finnerty start drinking, and Finnerty explains that he felt deeply lonely at his job in Washington. He used to be lonely in Ilium, too, but he thought getting a better job would solve that. But it was worse because everyone in Washington was even more obsessed with their self-image and the importance of their jobs.

Finnerty reveals one of the reasons that life in this highly efficient, productivity-oriented society is so unfulfilling: it's lonely. One of the reasons for this is that companies like the one Paul works for create highly competitive atmospheres. Consider, for instance, the way that Bud started bickering with Katharine after he lost his job, saying that, by the same principles, she, too, should lose her job. This illustrates the cutthroat mentality that perpetuates itself at this company, where even the closest people might turn on each other, creating a lonely atmosphere full of suspicion and animosity.

A ruckus in the street interrupts Paul and Finnerty, as people march to the sound of loud music. Finnerty asks the man with thick glasses who these people are, but he cryptically says that the group doesn't want anyone to know who they are. The people are dressed in lavish, vaguely Arabian clothing. The man with glasses cheers them on, though he doesn't know what they represent. He explains that he's mainly cheering Luke Lubbock, the apparent leader of the procession. Luke is carrying a large tusk, and the three men—Paul, Finnerty, and the man with glasses—watch him pass. Then, down the street, another group makes its way toward them, and the man with thick glasses explains that this is all part of a parade competition.

It's not exactly clear what's going on in this moment. Why these people are dressed like this remains unknown, as does the general purpose of the parade competition. The only reasonable thing to assume is that this is simply an event meant to entertain the people of Homestead. On a deeper level, though, it's possible to see this event as Homestead's version of the corporate competition that Paul experiences at Ilium Works. The societal hierarchies in Homestead have essentially been flattened, since everyone has been put out of work and thus has to serve in the army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps—meaning that everyone is more or less equal. Without a corporate power structure, then, the community members have instituted their own ways of competing with one another.

Paul and Finnerty decide to have a drink with the man with glasses. Paul asks him about his son, and the man seems surprised for a moment before matter-of-factly saying that his son doesn't have any problems anymore because he took his own life that morning. This sends Paul into hysterics, as he fervently apologizes to the man. Seeing this reaction, the man apologizes to Paul, admitting that he's lying—he never even had a son, he just made that up because he wanted to see what Paul would do.

When he first came here the day before, Paul promised this man that he would try to help his son get a job by talking to the person in charge of "testing and placement." Needless to say, this was an empty promise: he didn't even try to reach out to anyone about the stranger's son. This is why Paul responds so emotionally when the man says that his son killed himself; he feels guilty, as if he has contributed to the circumstances that led to the young man's death. Of course, the man was lying about having a son, but this entire interaction still sheds light on Paul's overall personality, demonstrating that he feels guilty about any failure of compassion on his part (and about his elite stature in society).

The man with the glasses asks Paul his IQ, and Paul bitterly responds by telling him to look it up, since it's public knowledge. This is true: everyone's IQ is available to look up at the police station. Finnerty tells the man with glasses that Paul isn't the best person from Ilium Works to "experiment" with, since he's different than most of the managers and engineers. He also adds that he, too, was an engineer before he quit. This surprises the man, who's startled to hear that there are "malcontents" on the other side of the river. He also admits that he'd almost rather not know that some managers and engineers have consciences; it makes it easier to dislike everyone on the other side of the river if he doesn't have to make any exceptions.

By making everyone's IQ public knowledge, the country has ensured the existence of class division and hierarchy. After all, this society as a whole is obsessed with the idea that "know how" is the most important thing a person can possess, so it makes sense that people respect anyone who has a high IQ. But the man with thick glasses doesn't *seem to respect people with high IQs, as evidenced by his apparent desire to dislike anyone from the other side of the river. This highlights the resentment that people in Homestead have for the managers and engineers of Ilium.*

The man in the glasses introduces himself as the Reverend James J. Lasher, giving his employment identification number (everyone has one). This number indicates not only that Lasher is a minister, but also that he's an anthropologist with a master's degree. When Paul asks him why he sees people on the other side of the river so negatively, Lasher explains that he used to tell his congregation (when he had one before the war) that the most important thing in their lives was their relationship to God. But now, the people on the other side of the river have forced everyone to realize that, without their jobs and sense of purpose in the economy, they're left with pretty much nothing.

It turns out that Lasher is highly educated. And yet, he still lives in Homestead. This suggests that education in and of itself isn't necessarily enough to give someone a life of luxury and privilege in this futuristic version of the United States. Rather, people have to study in specific fields, learning things that will help them become engineers or managers—not anthropologists or ministers. In this streamlined, highly efficient society, only people who are useful to the economy find true success. Lasher hints at this when he talks about how automation has made the people of Homestead feel like there's nothing worthwhile left in their lives, now that they've lost their jobs. Even religion seems meaningless to them.

Lasher argues that most people haven't felt like they play a meaningful part in the world for a long time. During the war, the country sang the praises of engineers and managers so much that now anyone working in those positions has an inflated sense of importance, while everyone else is left without anything to latch onto. Given the state of things, Lasher believes it's only a matter of time before a "phony Messiah" comes along.

One of the most important implications of what Lasher says here is that people are unhappy when they don't feel like they matter. Automation has taken more than just jobs from people: it has also taken away their sense of self-worth. Meanwhile, managers and engineers have become a celebrated, elite class, creating a stark division in society. And it's because of this division, it seems, that Lasher thinks someone might come along and act like a "Messiah" who will organize and empower the many people who feel like they've been forgotten.

Paul and Finnerty ask Lasher what he means when he says that a Messiah will someday entice all of the jaded people toward rebellion. He explains that somebody is bound to capture the general public's interest by promising to give them back a sense of importance and participation in the world at large. What people want, Lasher implies, is to feel "needed on earth." They want, in other words, "*dignity*."

Lasher's main point is that automation has stripped people of their "dignity," making it harder for them to maintain a sense of self-respect. This hints at the novel's interest in the downsides of a society that has replaced physical laborers with machines. However, this point also strangely endorses the idea that people are defined by their jobs—after all, the implication is that people can only be happy if they feel "needed" and useful. Although Player Piano *offers such a harsh critique of the corporate world's obsession with productivity, then, it also underhandedly supports the notion that a feeling of productivity lends meaning and value to life. In another sense, though, Lasher's point about people liking to feel "needed on earth" brings to mind not just the idea of productivity, but also the importance of a more general sense of* purpose *in life—something that isn't necessarily tied to the economy or the corporate world.*

Lasher points out that things are perfectly poised for a class war, especially since everyone's IQ has been publicly recorded. He can imagine a reality in which revolutionaries decide to kill anyone with an IQ of over 110. Finnerty agrees that the system of assigning worth to people based on their IQs is a terrible practice, since it's virtually impossible for people to improve their IQ.

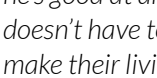
Lasher's argument is that society's obsession with productivity and efficiency (and, for that matter, intelligence) has created a tense atmosphere—one in which people are ready to revolt against the elite class of engineers. The focus placed on intelligence has only exacerbated this; the fact that people can't change their IQs means that the only thing they can *do is try to change the power structures that have made their lives harder. This is why Lasher thinks society is ripe for a revolution.*

When Lasher turns to go, Finnerty eagerly asks where he can find him. Lasher writes down an address and then tells Finnerty that he'd make a good Messiah if only he washed his face—a comment that startles Finnerty. When Lasher is gone, Finnerty says, "Magnificent, wasn't he?" Paul realizes that his friend has finally found somebody who really excites him.

Finnerty has fully left behind the corporate world (to which Paul still technically belongs), so it makes sense that he's enticed by Lasher's anti-establishment ideas. Lasher's cynical thoughts about the entire societal structure appeal to him because he himself thinks automation and productivity have hurt the country at least as much as they've helped it.

A man sitting at the bar named Alfy asks Finnerty if he wants to bet what song they're playing on the television, which is currently muted. When Finnerty makes his guess, Alfy makes his own, then tells the bartender to turn it up. Alfy wins. They play this game several times, and Finnerty loses $20. This, Alfy explains, is how he makes his living. After watching this, Paul drunkenly stumbles to the phone to call Anita, having forgotten that they were supposed to be home for dinner. But Anita tells him not to worry. Shepherd came by the house to apologize for the previous night, and he mentioned seeing Paul and Finnerty at the bar. Anita then tells Paul to enjoy himself, thinking it might do him some good to get drunk.

In the context of this futuristic version of the United States, the fact that Alfy makes his living by guessing the song on a muted television is remarkable. After all, almost everyone else has to join the army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps in order to support themselves. Alfy, on the other hand, has simply found something he's good at and has figured out how to monetize it. Best of all, he doesn't have to worry about competition, since nobody else tries to make their living this way. Paul, on the other hand, has to deal with people like Shepherd constantly trying to undermine him—which is exactly what Shepherd seems to do when he visits Anita while Paul is at the bar.



Returning from the phone, Paul finds Finnerty with two young women. Paul tries to flirt with one of them, but she's clearly uninterested in him. Before long, he drunkenly falls asleep, and when he wakes up, the young women have left. Inspired by Lasher's ideas about the arrival of a Messiah, Paul stands on a table and calls for everyone's attention. He shouts that the two sides of Ilium should come together in the middle of the bridge, and then the table breaks.

Unlike Finnerty, Paul is still wrapped up in his job, even if he has misgivings about the value of automation and society's entire power structure. And yet, it's evident that Lasher's thoughts about a possible revolution have gotten to Paul. By saying that everyone in Homestead should unite with the managers and engineers on the other side of the river, Paul tries to help society avoid a war between the classes. But nobody in the bar has any interest in making amends with the managers and engineers, so Paul's rallying cry does nothing.

Paul wakes up hours later to a mostly empty bar. Finnerty is working his way through a song on the **player piano** while Lasher sits in a shadow nearby. When Paul tries to get Finnerty to go, Finnerty tells him he's going to stay with Lasher, so Paul stumbles onto the street and drives home by himself.

The image of Finnerty playing the player piano is symbolic of his desire to challenge the current societal structure. This is because the player piano itself represents the way automation has replaced human laborers in the workplace. The fact that Finnerty is physically playing the piano—instead of letting the instrument play itself—thus foreshadows a shift away from society's reliance on machines.

CHAPTER 10

The next day, Paul doesn't arrive at work until the afternoon. Shepherd is at Paul's desk doing paperwork; it seems he's been there for a while and is looking over the security report showing that Paul let Finnerty in unsupervised. Shepherd also took a call from Kroner, who wants to see Paul tonight. And the police found Paul's pistol by the river. When Paul asks if Shepherd told Kroner he was hungover, Shepherd assures him that he covered for him by saying that he was out because of his nerves.

Shepherd once again tries to undermine Paul. This time, he even tries to slide into Paul's job while Paul is absent—a sure sign that he'll take any opportunity to steal Paul's power. The fact that he's looking at the security report about Finnerty also confirms that Paul's oversight in letting his friend into the plant will surely come back to bite him—and so, it seems, will his lost gun. All of these things threaten to derail Paul's career, but Paul doesn't react very strongly to this (perhaps because he's not very invested in his career to begin with).

Kroner calls back and invites Paul and Anita to dinner, claiming he just wants to catch up. After the call, Paul ushers Shepherd out of the office, at which point he receives a call from the police, though he avoids the situation by simply leaving the office himself. When he gets home, Anita tells him his clothes for dinner are laid out on the bed, noting that Shepherd called to tell her about the plans with Kroner. She then asks Paul if he spent time with any young women last night. He admits that he did but that he doesn't remember anything. She's not that disturbed by this information, instead bringing out a piece of paper, upon which she has written a detailed outline of all the things Paul should remember for dinner with Kroner tonight.

Once more, Shepherd won't stop meddling in Paul's life. In particular, he has no problem reaching out to Anita and informing her of all the things Paul himself doesn't tell her. In this sense, Anita and Shepherd are actually very similar, since they both care about career advancement and status more than anything else. To that end, Anita hardly even seems to care that Paul was with other women at the bar last night, instead focusing solely on her biggest concern: that he earn the Pittsburgh promotion.

Returning to the subject of the young women he saw the night before, Paul assures Anita that he didn't touch either of them. Anita says that what she was *really* wondering was if anyone saw him with them—this, she says, would be a terrible thing to get back to Kroner. When Paul matter-of-factly says that he slept with one of the women, all Anita says is, "I thought you did. That's your affair." She doesn't seem very interested in the conversation anymore—until, that is, Paul says that Shepherd saw him and the other woman after they slept together. This horrifies Anita, so Paul quickly tells her he's kidding.

The only thing Anita cares about is whether or not someone saw Paul cheating on her. The idea that he cheated on her in the first place (which, of course, he didn't) doesn't even bother her. However, because she's concerned about their family's public image, she would find it dreadful if anyone found out about any kind of affair. This just further illustrates where her priorities are: she wants upward mobility and a good reputation above all else, and she only pays attention to the aspects of her marriage that will help her in this regard.

CHAPTER 11

Doctor Halyard, the Shah of Bratpuhr, and Khashdrahr are at the Carlsbad Caverns, which is home to the country's largest computer. The computer is called EPICAC: it is, Halyard explains, "an electronic computing machine," which is to say that it's basically an electronic brain. It has been built into the caverns themselves and can answer almost any question by taking multiple factors into account. Mostly, though, EPICAC computes how many items like refrigerators, lamps, or hub caps consumers will use. It also decides how many engineers and managers to employ, what their IQs should be, and how many people should go into the army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps.

The Carlsbad Caverns is a national park in New Mexico that consists of a number of caves and beautiful rock formations. The mere fact that an enormous computer has taken over this geological marvel tells readers a lot about this futuristic version of the United States, making it clear that the country has prioritized technology over all else—including natural beauty. Instead of celebrating one of the nation's most magnificent geological features, the country has decided to use it to house a computer that calculates—among other things—how many products to manufacture. This is a clear sign that the United States cares about efficiency, productivity, and money more than anything else.

The President of the United States, Jonathan Lynn, arrives to give a speech, and Halyard sits with the Shah and Khashdrahr in the audience in one of the caverns. The Shah doesn't quite see the purpose or value of EPICAC until the President remarks that the computer is like the wisest person to ever live—in fact, the wisest man to ever grace the earth is to EPICAC what a worm would be to that wise man.

The President of the United States emphasizes the power and importance of EPICAC—so much, in fact, that even the Shah, who is otherwise so skeptical of all the supposed progress Halyard has shown him, can't help but be impressed. This is because he sees the value in wisdom. He's not impressed by EPICAC's ability to calculate how many products to manufacture in a given year, but he is impressed by the idea that EPICAC possess great knowledge.

After the speech, the Shah asks the President if he can pose a question. He then walks over to EPICAC, gets on his knees, and sings something to it. He's disappointed not to receive a reply. Khashdrahr explains that the Shah asked EPICAC an "ancient riddle," but the President says this is ridiculous, claiming that people can't just speak directly to the computer. On the Shah's way out, he refers to EPICAC as a "false god."

Although the Shah was initially impressed by the suggestion that EPICAC can answer basically any question, he's disappointed to find that this isn't the case. Of course, the President points out that there's a specific way to pose a question to this large computer, but the Shah pays this no mind, seeing EPICAC as a "false god" that promises wisdom but can't actually deliver any useful knowledge. And though the Shah didn't go about asking his question in the correct way, it seems likely that EPICAC wouldn't have been able to give him a satisfactory answer anyway—after all, computers aren't well-versed in riddles. The passage shows that although everyone in the United States celebrates EPICAC's wisdom, the computer is really more of a glorified calculator intended to streamline production than it is an actual repository of wisdom.

CHAPTER 12

Dinner at Kroner's goes the way it always does. Kroner ushers Paul and Anita inside while his wife, whom everyone calls "Mom," encourages them to tell her everything about their lives. Then, after a respectable amount of time, Kroner invites Paul back to his office to look at his guns. Everyone at Ilium Works knows that this is where Kroner offers raises, promotions, or disciplinary talks. Meanwhile, Anita and Mom stay in the living room.

There's a predictable formality to the dinners that Kroner hosts. In this way, even Kroner's social life is business-like, as if every aspect of his existence is wrapped up in the corporate world. This is possibly one of the reasons Paul is so unhappy with his life in Ilium: everyone in his social circles thinks almost exclusively about business. Considering that Paul doesn't feel inspired by his job, it makes sense that he'd be bored and miserable in a community in which everyone obsesses over their careers.

After talking about his guns for a few minutes, Kroner asks Paul if he's seen Finnerty recently. Apparently the police are looking for him because, now that he no longer has a job, he's supposed to register with them. He adds that Finnerty can't be trusted anymore. Paul agrees, which makes Kroner happy, though he then asks why Paul let Finnerty wander Ilium Works by himself. He also can't figure out why Paul would let Finnerty have his gun. Paul can't think of anything to say, but Kroner diffuses the tension by assuring Paul that he believes there's a good explanation. He also says that he feels responsible for Paul now that Paul's dad is gone.

In this moment, Paul learns that Kroner knows about all his recent missteps. What's interesting, though, is that Kroner doesn't seem to want to punish Paul for these mistakes. In fact, he doesn't even wait to hear Paul's excuses, instead insisting that he's sure there are good reasons for Paul's behavior. This just adds to the irony that defines Paul's entire career: the more apathy he shows toward his job, the more respect he seems to gain from people like Kroner. It's as if his success is inevitable, despite the fact that he has so many misgivings about automation and the entire corporate world. This, perhaps, is what keeps him from simply quitting, since it's hard to turn away from success.

Kroner waxes poetic about technological advancement, saying there's "no higher calling" than working as an engineer or a manager. This depresses Paul, though he doesn't say anything. Kroner notes that the Pittsburgh job is still open, and that the decision has come down to just two people: Paul and Fred Garth, the manager of the Buffalo Works.

Again, it's evident that Paul can do no wrong in Kroner's eyes. The more mistakes he makes, the higher he seems to rise in the company. This suggests that it doesn't actually take very much to succeed as a manager in this society, as long as a person has the right credentials and belongs to the elite upper class.

Paul tries to remember what Anita told him to say if Kroner brought up Pittsburgh. It doesn't really matter what he says, though, because it's obvious that Kroner wants to give him the job. Still, Kroner talks about how tough the decision will be. But soon he admits that he'd like to see Paul wind up in the position—though he isn't sure about Paul's loyalty. When Paul asks what he means, Kroner puts both his hands on Paul's knees and tells him to confess what has been bothering him. Unable to turn away, Paul suddenly starts talking about what Lasher said the night before, going on about the "spiritual disaster across the river" and speaking gravely about a potential revolution.

It's as if Paul can't stop himself from finally voicing his misgivings about the power structures at play in society. Until now, he has mostly kept these ideas to himself, but now he shares them with Kroner. Of course, Kroner would probably be the last person to ever understand these ideas, since Kroner has devoted his entire life to business, firmly believing in the value of automation and the importance of efficiency. Nonetheless, Paul can't keep himself from talking about the class division that this focus on productivity has created, demonstrating that it's difficult to simply ignore these kinds of concerns once they take form.

Kroner tells Paul to stay on his own side of the river. He also dismisses all of Lasher's points, saying that it's easier to pose questions than answer them. Paul is surprised to hear that Kroner knows Lasher, but Kroner says that he's known of him for a while—he also knows that Paul and Finnerty were with him the night before. None of this, though, has changed his mind about the Pittsburgh job: he still wants Paul to take it. He's just going to pretend last night didn't happen and that Paul didn't just say all those things about Lasher and the revolution. Paul is dumbfounded, feeling like he somehow got the job even though he had arrived at Kroner's that night with the "vague intention of disqualifying himself."

Again, Paul continues to advance through the company despite his failures. In fact, it becomes clear in this scene that he has, on a certain level, been actively trying to "disqualify[]" himself from the Pittsburgh promotion. This makes sense, considering that he's unhappy in his current job. If he fully withdrew his name from consideration, though, he would upset Anita, who is obsessed with upward mobility. As a result, he has tried to make himself look bad. He has, however, failed to do so, since Kroner still wants to promote him—suggesting that it's not as easy as one might think to escape corporate life.

The problem, Kroner says, is that the police are on Paul's trail. The incident with Finnerty in the plant is quite serious, as is the fact that Paul's pistol was found near the river. He could even go to prison. But Kroner says he doesn't believe Paul was thinking straight, so he's willing to cover for him: he wants to tell the police that Paul was working for him by going undercover to gather information about Lasher and Finnerty, who Kroner says are dangerous. For this reason, Kroner wants Paul to testify that they tried to convince him to join a sabotage plot against the Ilium Works.

Kroner puts Paul to the test, forcing him to choose between his job and Finnerty, his only genuine friend. Until this point, Kroner has overlooked all of Paul's failures, but now he wants to manipulate him into going against Lasher and Finnerty—two men who share the same overall beliefs as Paul. Of course, Paul isn't quite as convinced of the harmfulness of automation as the other two men are, but he certainly has misgivings about the entire social structure at play. Turning against Lasher and Finnerty would thus not only mean betraying a close friend, but also betraying his own beliefs.

Before Paul can say anything about testifying against Finnerty and Lasher, Baer thunders into the room, heartily congratulating him for getting the Pittsburgh job. Kroner tells him that they haven't settled that matter yet, but Paul senses Baer's interruption was planned.

If Baer interrupted Kroner and Paul's conversation on purpose, this would suggest that Kroner and Baer are actively trying to manipulate him by controlling the flow of conversation. Stopping him before he can agree or disagree to Kroner's terms is a perfect tactic, since Paul is a fairly passive person. Indeed, he rarely makes firm decisions, as evidenced by the fact that he's unhappy in his job but has been doing it for 13 years. By ensuring that Paul can't decline his offer, then, Kroner makes it all the more likely that Paul will go along with the plan. In this regard, Kroner treats Paul like a pawn.

Kroner tells Baer that Paul voiced some misgivings about whether the company's progress might be bad for society, and Baer genuinely considers this, seeming legitimately troubled by the question—much to Kroner's surprise. But he decides that people just have to act like progress is good. Otherwise, everyone would have to quit. Maybe, Baer muses, that's exactly what he himself should do—though he doesn't actually quit. Startled, Kroner suggests that they all retire to the living room, where Anita is pleased to learn that Paul landed the promotion.

Baer's thoughts are surprising, since they suggest that he actually considers Paul's points about the impact of technological progress on society. And yet, Baer is just thinking out loud, with no intention of actually quitting (or so it seems). This suggests that high-powered people have to just set these kinds of concerns aside in order to be successful—something Finnerty was unable to do. Whether or not Paul will be able to do this, though, remains unclear.

CHAPTER 13

Lying in bed, Paul finally feels content—not because he's in the running for the Pittsburgh job, but because he finally has good reason to be upset. His boss, after all, has asked him to betray his own best friend, Ed Finnerty. Nobody could argue that this isn't a terrible situation, so now Paul feels like he can justifiably get angry and quit. Feeling satisfied, he decides not to tell Anita about his plan to leave his job; she's too excited. Plus, he wants time to covertly "re-educate" her so that she takes on different values—then she won't be so upset that he's leaving behind his corporate success.

It becomes clear in this chapter that Paul has made a decision to quit. This is because he can't simply overlook his many misgivings about the effect of technological progress on society. On a more personal level, his decision to quit also has a lot to do with Kroner trying to force him to betray Finnerty. This goes against Paul's values, since he—unlike many people in his life—cares more about his relationships with other people than he cares about his job. Anita, on the other hand, is so fixated on the idea of upward mobility that it's highly unlikely she'll take the news of Paul leaving his job in stride. For this reason, he wants to "re-educate" her, apparently believing (in a rather condescending way) that he'll be able to completely change her entire system of values.

CHAPTER 14

Over the next few days, Paul feels exhilarated by his secret plan to quit. He's in no rush to do anything, thinking it better to let things develop while he works on getting Anita to value something other than financial success. As he waits, he takes up reading, enjoying novels about adventurous men living in the wilderness and imagining himself leading a similarly rugged existence.

Paul's attraction to adventure novels in which men live outside hints at his desire to feel self-sufficient. Right now, he lives in a highly mechanized world in which the vast majority of his needs are taken care of, leaving him to focus on his boring job. This is why the idea of taking care of himself in the wilderness seems so appealing, since this would at least be challenging and gratifying.

Meanwhile, the yearly corporate retreat at the Meadows is fast approaching. Paul receives a box of t-shirts and learns that he's been made captain of the Blue Team. Each year, a select group from the company are invited to the Meadows, an island upon which they split into different teams and compete against each other. In the evenings, they watch professional actors put on skits about the importance of managers and engineers, and then they all go out drinking. Everyone loves getting invited to the Meadows, but Paul dreads it this year.

The Meadows is a perfect example of how the company for which Paul works actively encourages competition. The company seems to think competition will encourage employees to work harder, spurring them along by breaking them up into arbitrary teams and creating petty rivalries. And though the company might also see this as a chance for employees to build up some camaraderie, it's evident that Paul doesn't gain much from this superficial kind of team spirit—otherwise, he would actually be excited for the festivities.

Paul learns that Shepherd has been made captain of the Green Team—a surprising development, since only important people are made captain. Nonetheless, the Blue Team is usually the best team, though Paul doesn't really care about this hierarchy anymore. This apathy, however, doesn't spare him from everyone else's excitement.

It doesn't matter to Paul, but the fact that Shepherd is a team captain solidifies the competition that already exists between the two men. Of course, Paul doesn't feel competitive toward Shepherd, but at the Meadows he will be forced *to compete with him. This is a perfect example of how the company infuses competition into the workforce, pushing people like Paul to indulge in petty rivalries instead of genuinely connecting with people.*

Finnerty visits Paul's office freshly shaven and clean. He asks if he can use Paul's car to move his things to Lasher's house, where he's staying. He has finally found a place where he belongs: with the people on the other side of the river. Paul gives him the keys, feeling as though his friend sees him as uptight and trapped inside a boring, useless life.

Paul's self-consciousness in this moment suggests that he's quite aware of his own unhappiness. Whereas Finnerty has taken the plunge by quitting his job, Paul is still holding onto his corporate existence. He plans to leave the company, but he hasn't done so yet, meaning that he still has to put up with things he hates—like the corporate retreat at the Meadows. Seeing Finnerty makes him jealous because it emphasizes his own discontent.

Kroner calls Paul and yells enthusiastically into the phone about the unmatched superiority of the Blue Team—which, incidentally, Kroner is also on. Each team has its own rallying song, and everyone drives Paul crazy by singing theirs whenever they get a chance. As he listens to Kroner boasting about the Blue Team (and Baer in the background singing the glory of the White Team), Paul looks at the burly man on the cover of his novel and envies him.

Once again, the competitive spirit at Paul's company exhausts him. Although people like Kroner and Baer might think this kind of competition motivates their employees and brings them together, it has no effect on Paul—except, of course, that it annoys him. It also isolates him from everyone else at the company, since it feels as if he's the only person who doesn't buy into the corporate camaraderie.

Paul thinks back to his college days and tries to remember if he learned any "manual skill" during that period, but he comes up with nothing. He begins to feel uncomfortable about the idea of leaving his job, wondering what he'll do. But then he thinks about the possibility of **farming**, and the simple, machine-free life seems like a magical idea.

Even though Paul is unhappy at his job and has been for quite some time, it's not easy for him to just get up and leave. This is largely because he lives in a society that places a huge amount of importance on whether or not people are skilled and useful. Beyond the duties of his corporate position, Paul isn't sure he actually has any way of supporting himself and Anita—until, that is, he thinks about farming, clearly seeing it as an opportunity to live with the same kind of self-sufficiency he admires in the adventure novels he's been reading.

There aren't any true farmers anymore, since they've all been replaced by "agricultural engineers." There is, however, an old **farm** on the outskirts of town. While everyone sees it as a useful piece of property, its owner, Gottwald, stipulated in his will that the property had to be preserved exactly as it is. A real estate agent named Doctor Pond says as much when Paul calls to inquire about the place. And though Pond frames this as a frustrating thing, Paul loves the idea of buying the farm precisely *because* it's a relic of the past. With this in mind, he makes plans to go see the property, which Pond discreetly suggests he can probably buy for as little as $8,000.

Paul's interest in farming continues in this section, as he considers buying the only farm in his area that still exists. The farm itself is a perfect representation of his desire to go back to a time before machines ruled the country. This, he thinks, will finally make him happy, apparently believing that automation is at the root of his discontent. And yet, it's worth noting that machines haven't done anything to interfere with his life. Unlike the people living in Homestead, he hasn't been rendered obsolete by automation, so it doesn't quite make sense that simply living a life free of machines will make him happy. Nonetheless, he continues to romanticize the idea of a simple, old-fashioned life.

CHAPTER 15

Paul meets Doctor Pond at the **farm** and immediately falls in love with the property. The entire place is rustic and feels like it's from a completely different time period. As they walk around, Pond tries to dissuade Paul from buying the place, constantly suggesting fancy houses he could show him—houses that would be a better fit for someone of Paul's status.

Doctor Pond thinks it's inappropriate for someone of Paul's status to live in a run-down, old-fashioned farmhouse. But this is exactly why Paul wants the place, hoping to escape his corporate life. Still, Pond's belief that Paul shouldn't live somewhere so simple or inexpensive demonstrates society's expectation that people in powerful positions should live in accordance with their status. In other words, it doesn't even occur to Pond that someone would want to leave behind corporate success—showing that it's unheard of for someone to do what Paul's doing.

Paul ignores Pond's attempts to dissuade him from buying the **farm**. He isn't even discouraged when he meets Mr. Haycox, the surly Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps member whose job it is to look after the property. Haycox firmly believes in the project of preserving the farm's old-fashioned charm, but he doesn't like the idea of somebody like Paul buying it. Either way, though, he reminds Paul and Pond that he is the place's caretaker no matter who owns it—according to Haycox, this, too, was in Gottwald's will.

It is exactly because the farm will always stay the same that Paul is interested in it. If this means Mr. Haycox has to stay on as its caretaker, it's unlikely Paul will bat an eye. The mere fact that Mr. Haycox takes care of this land by himself perfectly aligns with Paul's vision, since he sees the property as a place that rewards grit and hard work, two things that are sorely lacking from his current life.

CHAPTER 16

Paul keeps his excitement about the **farm** to himself, and Anita assumes he's in a good mood because he's looking forward to the Meadows. Over dinner one day, he tries to remind her that the anniversary of their wedding engagement is coming up, but she keeps interrupting to talk about the Meadows. Does he have nice tennis shoes to wear? And what about his socks? Apparently, Shepherd is taking 12 pairs of green socks because he is the captain of the Green Team—did Paul know that? Paul says that he does, indeed, know that Shepherd is captain of the Green Team, and he sidesteps Anita's questions about what it might mean that someone like Shepherd, who isn't that high up in the company, was named a captain.

Once more, Anita shows her obsession with Paul's career. With her somewhat comical fixation on socks (and Shepherd), she shows that she's more concerned with him succeeding in the arbitrary competitions at the Meadows than with their upcoming anniversary. This clearly demonstrates that she cares more about their social status as a couple than about their actual relationship.

Distracted by all these questions, Paul finally thinks to ask how, exactly, Anita knows all this about Shepherd, and she says that he came over to get her help as he plans for his trip to the Meadows, since he doesn't have a wife. Paul asks if Shepherd had anything "interesting" to say, and Anita reveals that he told her about the police finding Paul's pistol and that the authorities know he was with "underworld people" several nights ago at the bar in Homestead.

Anita and Shepherd's relationship is strange, but it makes sense that they would enjoy each other's company. They both, after all, care about status and corporate success more than anything else. Plus, Shepherd wants to sabotage Paul, so it's unsurprising that he goes out of his way to tell Anita about all of Paul's mistakes, which just makes Paul's home life that much harder.

Paul tries to steer the conversation back to the engagement anniversary, saying that he has a surprise planned for Wednesday night. Anita, however, is uninterested because Wednesday is the day before they're supposed to leave for the Meadows. When Paul tries to get her to forget about the Meadows, Anita is appalled by his lack of enthusiasm and team spirit. Still, she agrees to go along with his engagement surprise—as long as he knows what he's doing. He is, after all, the captain of the Blue Team.

Paul just wants to make an emotional connection with his wife, but all Anita can think about is the Meadows. This conversation is a good illustration of how lonely it must be for Paul in Ilium, where nearly everyone—including his own wife—only cares about business-related matters.

CHAPTER 17

Doctor Halyard brings the Shah and Khashdrahr to Chicago so they can visit the family home of a typical Reclamation and Reconstruction Corps worker. The family consists of Edgar R. B. Hagstrohm, his wife Wanda, and his two kids. According to the machines that decided who best would represent the average American laborer, Edgar is perfectly average: his IQ is middling, his height is average, his achievements are neither unimpressive nor extraordinary.

This chapter shows that the country prides itself on the quality of life for ordinary, everyday people. This is why the central machines choose Edgar Hagstrohm—one of the most average people around—to exemplify the typical American lifestyle. And yet, the information that the machines collect about Edgar doesn't really *indicate who he is or what kind of lifestyle he leads, since intelligence, height, and professional achievements don't necessarily make up a person's entire identity. Nonetheless, this is supposedly the most efficient way of choosing who the Shah should visit, once again illustrating this society's commitment to machine-led productivity.*

The house Edgar and Wanda live in is called an M-17 house, and it's the exact kind of house that the vast majority of working Americans live in. Each house is the same, even down to the furniture, which was designed according to the results of a national survey about what styles people like. EPICAC analyzed the results and determined exactly how the M-17 houses should be set up. One thing EPICAC couldn't have known, though, is that Edgar—this exceedingly average man—is having an affair and, as a result, is unhappy. Edgar also resents that he has to open his house to the Shah. Nonetheless, he lets in the Shah, who goes through the house and learns about the various high-tech appliances.

This scene demonstrates that, even though the entire country is run by machines and computers, there are certain things that these tools just can't do—like, for instance, gauge a person's overall happiness. If Halyard (on behalf of the State Department) really wanted to impress the Shah, it would be better to show him not the most statistically average *American household, but a household full of happy, thriving people. Just because everything in Edgar's home (and everything about his life) meets certain criteria doesn't mean he will positively represent the system. In another sense, though, Edgar's overall discontent probably* is *a good indicator of how most people in this society feel.*

The Shah asks why everything has to be so streamlined—what, exactly, does Wanda want to do with all her free time? "Live!" says Doctor Dodge, the local employee leading this tour. "Get a little fun out of life," he adds. This perplexes both the Shah and Khashdrahr, who follows up this question by asking what Wanda actually *does* for fun. Wanda thinks hard and mutters that she and Edgar watch a lot of television.

The Shah and Khashdrahr aren't convinced that doing things more efficiently is worthwhile. Everyone in the United States, however, takes it for granted that streamlining everything is intrinsically good. And yet, nobody really stops to think about why *everything has to be streamlined, as evidenced by Wanda's inability to actually give Khashdrahr a good answer when he asks what she does with all her free time. She lives in a society that celebrates efficiency over all else, so she just assumes it's a good thing that machines help her do the housework at astonishing speeds. But she doesn't make much use of her free time, suggesting that it's easy to get wrapped up in the allure of productivity for productivity's sake and to forget that there are other valuable pursuits in life.*

When the Shah leaves, Edgar feels so guilty about his affair that he comes clean to Wanda. But this doesn't lead to a huge argument; Wanda has known about the affair for a long time. Instead of arguing about it, she says she understands, and then she says that dinner will be ready soon (a machine has been making it). As Edgar and Wanda sit awkwardly around the table, the Shah taps on the window, peering into the house and saying "*Brahouna!*" as he waves at them. Khashdrahr stands next to him and translates, saying, "'Live!'"

The timing of the Shah's comment is darkly funny, since it's clear that Edgar and Wanda are pretty miserable in this moment. It's not as if they're squeezing the most enjoyment possible out of their lives. Their streamlined household and efficient machines have done nothing to make them happier, and they're not leading a more fulfilling life due to a lack of chores. Rather, their problems are just as heavy and upsetting as they would be if the family didn't own fancy machines. This indicates that, as much as this society believes in the power of machines to improve people's lives, true happiness has nothing to do with technological progress.

CHAPTER 18

On Wednesday, Paul has Mr. Haycox prepare the **farm** for a romantic evening with Anita. However, Anita is extremely uninterested in the surprise Paul has in store for her, constantly trying to turn the conversation back to the Meadows and how Paul should probably be resting up and focusing on his duties as captain of the Blue Team (she even tries to get him not to have any alcohol so that he'll be more competitive on the playing field). Ignoring her, he convinces her to get in the car, and then he drives her across the river, hoping to instill in her the same admiration he has for the people of Homestead. Unsurprisingly, she's appalled to be on the other side of the river.

Yet again, Anita cares more about Paul's career than she cares about their relationship. Paul just wants to connect with her, hoping she'll get excited about the idea of living a simpler life on the farm. This, however, is a wildly unrealistic hope, considering that Anita thinks almost exclusively about status and how to attain upward mobility in the corporate world—the exact things Paul hopes to leave behind. In other words, while he romanticizes the idea of farm life, she *romanticizes the idea of Paul asserting his power at the Meadows and proving himself worthy of the Pittsburgh job.*

Paul knows that Anita has a particular dislike of the people in Homestead because she herself never went to college. This means that, if she hadn't married Paul, she would most likely be living here right now. As he tries to convince her to simply sit in the car and watch people go about their lives, she feels as if he's trying to humiliate her. What he really wants, though, is to show her that they should reassess the way they think about the world. Society's obsession with automation has robbed people on this side of the river of their sense of being "needed and useful," which is, Paul argues, "the foundation of self-respect."

This moment sheds light on why, exactly, Anita is so fixated on status and success: she wants to make up for the fact that she herself comes from a humble background. Her scorn for the people of Homestead is thus a form of insecurity, as she knows that she wouldn't be part of the elite class of engineers and managers if it weren't for her marriage to Paul. With this in mind, she's uninterested in empathizing with the people on the other side of the river, since she has gone to great lengths to disassociate with them. Paul, on the other hand, has nothing to prove, which is why he recognizes the downsides of taking away the general population's sense of feeling "needed and useful"—an idea that underlines how important it is for people to feel like they have a purpose in life.

Anita still doesn't understand why Paul has brought her to Homestead, but she begins to see that he genuinely feels guilty for living such a privileged life. This, in some ways, comes as a relief, since she thought he had brought her here to *punish* her—she thought he was suspicious that she has been having an affair with Shepherd. This catches Paul off-guard. "I'll be jealous of Shepherd when you're jealous of Katharine Finch," he laughs, but she takes immediate offense, taking issue with the idea that someone like Katharine could ever be a source of competition for her. She also vehemently says that Shepherd is much more attractive than Katharine.

The mere fact that Anita brings up the possibility of having an affair with Shepherd is a little suspicious, since she seems to spend so much time with him. Not only that, but she and Shepherd are actually very well-matched, considering that they both think about upward mobility and corporate success more than anything else. Strangely enough, it's almost as if Anita wants *Paul to be jealous, since bringing this topic up in the first place is like luring Paul into competition with Shepherd. No matter what Paul does, it seems, he can't avoid a rivalry with Shepherd, despite the fact that he's completely uninterested in this kind of competition.*

Paul feels like Anita doesn't have any empathy for the people on this side of the river. Just to insult her, he says the only reason she doesn't live here is that she married him—and the only reason they got married in the first place is Oligomenorrhea: a "delayed menstrual period." This comment derails the argument, as Anita threatens through tears to get out of the car and walk if Paul doesn't drive her home. Fuming, Paul puts the car into gear, but as they cross the bridge in silence, he begins to feel sorry for what he said. Finally, he apologizes and asks if he can make it up to her by showing her the surprise he has in store. She's hesitant at first, but when he tells her it cost $8,000, he can tell she's interested.

Perhaps because he's unhappy that she essentially forced him into a romantic rivalry with Shepherd, Paul purposefully tries to hurt Anita's feelings. He does this by naming her biggest insecurity, which is the idea that she doesn't actually belong in the elite upper class. (He also implies that they only got married because they mistakenly thought Anita might be pregnant.) Needless to say, this is a cruel thing for Paul to point out, especially since his argument basically suggests that she'd be nothing without him. And considering that Anita cares about status above all else, this is probably the worst insult he could possibly give her. This is also why her anger lifts when she hears that Paul bought her something expensive, since this suggests that she's worthy of an $8,000 gift. Indeed, she doesn't forgive Paul because he makes a genuine apology, but because he ends up validating her obsession with power, wealth, and status.

Paul drives to the **farm**. Haycox has cleaned it thoroughly and outfitted it to look quaint and charming. In fact, it's *so* charming that Anita is beside herself—she loves it. After walking around and admiring all the antiques, she expresses just how excited she is, telling Paul that she loves him. Before long, though, he realizes that she has no intention of living here. What she wants is to take all of the antiques home. She thinks that Paul bought the farm to tear it apart and take away anything of value. When she learns that he wants to live here full-time, she can't believe it.

In this scene, Paul wins back Anita's affection, but not for the reasons he hoped. Paul, for his part, wants Anita to appreciate the farmhouse for its machine-free simplicity, but Anita takes a liking to it because it contains valuable objects. In other words, she likes the farm for all the wrong reasons, demonstrating once again that she only cares about superficial things like wealth and status. Paul wants to preserve the farm's rustic qualities, but Anita wants to do the opposite: she wants to plunder it for anything of value. In that sense, Anita's reaction to the farm mirrors her attitude about Paul: instead of loving him for who he is, she wants the superficial trappings she can gain through his status.

Frustrated, Paul says that he doesn't care what Anita thinks. He's going to quit his job and live on the **farm** no matter what she says. Anita then reveals that Shepherd told her Paul would surely quit, though she didn't believe him at the time. When Paul tries to convince her that things in society are unethical, she disagrees, arguing that working-class people can still succeed if they're smart—this is the "American way." This statement depresses Paul, but Anita pulls him toward her and seduces him, and though he doesn't want to, he relents. Cooing in his ear, she tells him that he's not going to quit. As if hypnotized, Paul just says "Mmmm."

In this moment, the novel spotlights the true power dynamic at play in Paul and Anita's relationship. Indeed, Anita is unwilling to even entertain the idea of Paul quitting his highly respected job, and though Paul might like to think the decision isn't up to her, he still melts in her arms when she seduces him, suggesting that he's not quite as strong-willed as he'd like to think. And yet, this doesn't change the fact that he and Anita have opposing ways of looking at the world. What's ironic, though, is that Anita isn't necessarily wrong when she says that anyone can succeed if they're smart—this, in fact, is the exact problem with this societal structure, which divides people up based on their intelligence. The problem isn't that intelligent people have trouble succeeding, it's that anyone with a low IQ has been cut off from attaining upward mobility. Therefore, Anita's comment further reveals that she only cares about people who are already in the elite upper class.

CHAPTER 19

The next day, Paul and Anita go to the Meadows. When their plane lands, they part ways, since the men stay on a separate island from their wives and families. As the men make their way onto a boat that will take them to their island, they shout out their team names and then listen to the national anthem play over a speaker while fireworks explode in the air.

There's an exaggerated sense of team spirit and camaraderie that comes along with this corporate retreat. The employees are expected to not only celebrate their teams, but also the country as a whole. This suggests that there's a certain overlap between company pride and patriotism, as if it's deeply patriotic for people to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their jobs—an attitude that aligns with this society's overall obsession with work and productivity.

Once on the island, the employees make their way to their tents, where they've been assigned a bunkmate. Paul is surprised to discover that his tent-buddy is Fred Garth—the other man up for the Pittsburgh job. Paul wonders why he would be placed with Garth. But instead of dwelling on this, he focuses on exchanging greetings with the man, who tells him that his oldest son just took the General Classification Test and failed. Luckily, Garth was able to appeal this result, so the boy will be taking the test again tomorrow.

Although Paul doesn't bother to think too deeply about this turn of events, it's clear that the company has placed him with Garth as a way of sparking competition between the two men. Of course, Kroner has already implied that he wants Paul to get the Pittsburgh job, but he apparently still wants to keep Paul on his toes—yet another illustration of how competition is a huge part of the corporate world to which Paul belongs. However, even Garth doesn't seem particularly interested in competing with Paul, instead worrying about his son's future. This is interesting because it reveals that even people from successful, powerful families have to prove their intelligence. At the same time, though, the fact that Garth's son gets to take the General Classification Test twice implies that he enjoys certain privileges that people from less powerful families don't have.

At dinner that night, everyone is required to sit next to someone they don't know. On his way to his seat, Paul walks by Kroner, who tells him that the following night, they'll sneak away together for a secret meeting with Doctor Gelhorne. Gelhorne is the "National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resource Director," which is the highest position at the entire company. Paul knows that this meeting will be about him betraying Finnerty and Lasher. Kroner suggest that this will be huge for Paul's career.

Paul has managed to put off quitting ever since he last spoke to Kroner. Although he has told himself that he's going to leave the company, he has yet to actually do so. This illustrates his passive way of moving through life. Instead of simply refusing to betray his best friend, Paul waits and does nothing. This highlights how easy it is to simply go with the flow of corporate life. In the same way that Paul spent years ignoring his unhappiness by just going about his daily duties, he now puts off actually telling Kroner that he won't betray Finnerty.

Paul sits down next to a young engineer named Doctor Ed Harrison, who recognizes Paul's last name and asks him about his father. As Paul and Harrison talk, everyone quiets down because Kroner walks over to a large oak tree and delivers a speech. Each year, he stands under this tree—which he says is a symbol of "courage, integrity, perseverance, beauty"—and speaks emotionally about the great employees of the past. This year, he eulogizes the former manager of the Pittsburgh Works, and as he does so, Paul is astounded to see how solemn and mournful everyone becomes at Kroner's words, which are mainly about this man's devotion to the company.

The company encourages employees to get to know each other but then doesn't even give them enough time to legitimately connect. This is evident when Paul starts talking to Harrison but is quickly cut off by Kroner's speech, underlining that the company doesn't actually *care whether or not people connect with each other. This suggests that the company merely wants to* seem *like the kind of place that fosters meaningful relationships. In other words, everything is extremely impersonal in this corporate environment, as made obvious by the fact that Kroner's eulogy focuses exclusively on the former Pittsburgh manager's value to the company, not on what kind of person he was.*

CHAPTER 20

Doctor Halyard sits in a barbershop in Miami while the Shah gets an American haircut. The barber goes on at length about how difficult it has been for the country to replace barbers with machines. There is, however, a machine for cutting hair, and it was actually invented by a barber who kept fretting year after year that somebody would invent a machine to replace him. As he worried, he kept unintentionally dreaming up designs that might put him out of business, until he had inadvertently thought out a flawless machine. The barber cutting the Shah's hair just hopes that these machines don't make their way to Miami for another two years, at which point he'll be retired.

The story about the barber who inadvertently designed a hair-cutting machine suggests that humans are naturally inclined toward invention. The barber in this story specifically hoped nobody would come up with a machine to replace him—and yet, he himself created one, indicating that sometimes curiosity and creativity get the best of people (as well as, perhaps, the anxiety of someday becoming obsolete). Although certain individuals might renounce machines, then, they can't change the fact that curiosity inevitably leads to inventive forms of progress—for better or worse.

As the barber talks, Halyard looks at a letter he received from the State Department. According to the letter, the department discovered that Halyard never completed the Physical Education requirement at Cornell University, where he earned his bachelor's degree. This means that his subsequent master's degree and doctorate are invalid. To keep his position, he will have to complete Cornell's fitness test, which he can do while giving the Shah a tour of the university.

A firmly established employee of the State Department, Halyard suddenly discovers that his job is at risk. This underscores just how much this society cares about arbitrary credentials. Halyard's ability to complete a fitness test has nothing to do with his ability to successfully carry out his job, but this doesn't matter because the entire structure of this society is built on the idea that only people who have completed certain degrees are qualified to hold well-paid, prestigious jobs. According to this system, then, Halyard is unqualified for his own job, since his college degree is technically invalid. And though this is nothing but a petty bureaucratic detail, it has the potential to ruin his entire career.

CHAPTER 22

Paul sits next to Kroner at an outdoor amphitheater on the second night of the Meadows. After a day spent playing sports against the other teams, Paul feels pretty good; he performed very well, which he suspects is because he didn't care whether or not his team won. This, in turn, has put him in a very good mood, as he casually considers the possibility of giving his notice that very night. This decision doesn't stress him out, but rather makes him feel empowered—he will decide later what he wants to do.

Again, Paul drifts through his corporate life without fully asserting himself. Usually, though, he does this in a state of unhappiness, but now he feels good, comforted by the possibility of finally quitting. In fact, it's almost as if the mere idea *of quitting is enough for him, since it makes him feel like he has control over his own life. But in reality, he's just going through the motions, getting swept up in the competitive games at the Meadows and, in doing so, investing himself in the company's competitive spirit. He is, in other words, behaving exactly how Kroner would want him to behave, ultimately demonstrating how easy it is to get wrapped up in the corporate lifestyle.*

After a skit suggesting that "John Averageman" is better off because of automation and the current societal structure, the crowd makes its way to a bonfire. Kroner talks the whole way about how fantastic the skit was—even though it was basically the same as it is every year. Then, at the bonfire, the employees watch yet *another* skit. In this one, a Native American man speaks about loyalty to his tribe in a way that's clearly meant to inspire the employees in the audience to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the company.

This corporate retreat is basically one long campaign to convince employees that what they're doing is worthwhile. The first skit, for instance, makes the argument that the company's work of building and maintaining machines has made the world a tangibly better place. This, of course, isn't really true, especially since it's hard to argue that the "average" American citizen has benefited from automation and the social structures at play in this version of the United States—after all, most people who aren't engineers have been forced out of their jobs as a result of mechanization. But the skits don't take this into account because their main purpose is to increase morale at the company. This is also why the skit narrated by an actor dressed as a Native American is about loyalty.

After the skit, everyone makes their way to the bar—everyone, that is, except Kroner and Paul, who sneak off to meet with Doctor Gelhorne. Gelhorne says he called this meeting because there are people out there who want to ruin the company by destroying the production plants. These people even plan to overtake the entire country. They call themselves the Ghost Shirt Society, and Gelhorne believes they're based in Ilium. Gelhorne knows Finnerty is a member, so it's clear that the Society likes disillusioned ex-managers. For this reason, it's likely that the Society would happily recruit Paul, so Gelhorne wants him to go undercover.

The existence of the Ghost Shirt Society proves the point that Lasher made the first time Paul met him: namely, that the country is headed toward a revolution. In order to break down this society's intense class division, it's necessary to destroy places like the Ilium Works, since these production plants have enabled machines to replace human laborers in the workforce. This, it seems, is exactly what the Ghost Shirt Society has in mind, taking aim at the country's overreliance on machines as a way of upending society's unequal power dynamics.

Gelhorne reveals that he has already circulated rumors that Paul is getting fired—Gelhorne's colleagues purposely said something to this effect in front of Shepherd at dinner that night. This will surely make the Ghost Shirt Society pay attention to him. Of course, Paul isn't *actually* getting fired; Kroner makes sure Paul will still have the Pittsburgh job when he's finished infiltrating the Ghost Shirts. In the meantime, Paul has to leave the Meadows that very night, and he can't even tell Anita what's going on. All of this will help him "clear up [his] record," Gelhorne points out, referring to the fact that Paul not only let Finnerty into the plant unescorted, but also lost track of his pistol.

Kroner has already implied that this assignment to infiltrate the Ghost Shirt Society is an opportunity for Paul to advance his career. However, the way Gelhorne brings up Paul's "record" suggests that the company will force him into doing this regardless of what he wants. Although his career might benefit from this, he's basically getting blackmailed. To that end, Gelhorne has already put the plan in motion by spreading the news that Paul is about to get fired, essentially making it impossible for him to refuse the assignment without losing his job.

Kroner assures Paul that his father would be proud of him, and suddenly Paul feels a wash of anger. Before Kroner and Gelhorne leave, he stops them to say one last thing: "I quit." They chuckle. "That's the spirit," says Gelhorne. "I mean it! I'm sick of the whole childish, stupid, blind operation," Paul insists. Kroner smiles. "Attaboy," he says.

Having put off his decision to quit, it appears that Paul has waited too long: he has already gotten swept up in the momentum of this plan to infiltrate the Ghost Shirt Society, and nothing he can say will convince Kroner or Gelhorne that he's serious about leaving the company. This is partly because neither Kroner nor Gelhorne could possibly fathom why anyone would want to leave the company in the first place—a testament to how unheard of it is for a powerful, respected person like Paul to turn away from corporate success.

CHAPTER 23

Although he's supposed to leave the island, Paul goes to the bar. Everyone looks at him when he enters, making it immediately clear that they all know (or *think*) he's been fired. The bartender won't even serve him, since the alcohol is intended for employees. Paul insults him before turning to leave, but—much to his surprise—the bartender doesn't shrug off his comment like people normally do. Instead, he calls Paul a "saboteur," which everyone knows is the worst thing someone can call another person. Paul punches him in the face, sending him to the ground, but then the bartender chases after him and knocks him out.

Even if he doesn't agree with the idea that managers and engineers belong to an elite class, Paul is used to acting like everyone respects him. He doesn't like the class division that exists in the country, but this doesn't necessarily mean he's ready to give up his privileged position in society. This is why he's surprised when the bartender doesn't ignore his insult; he's used to people treating him with awe and respect. Now, though, everyone at the Meadows sees him as a "saboteur," as if he has betrayed the entire way of life that the company represents. In this moment, then, everyone's commitment to the company overshadows the simple idea of treating others with compassion, as Paul's coworkers (who previously celebrated him) suddenly turn on him.

Paul wakes up on a dock. Ed Harrison is there with a glass of whiskey for him, figuring he'd probably want something to take the edge off. Kroner apparently told him to bring Paul the whiskey and the message: "it's always darkest before the dawn, and every cloud has a silver lining." To make Paul feel better, Harrison adds that the bartender has a terrible nosebleed and that he can't stop sneezing.

Paul doesn't have very many allies at the company, so it's meaningful that Harrison reaches out to him. Paul is quickly learning that the corporate world is cutthroat, especially for people who aren't in positions of power. Now that he has fallen from the good graces of the company, very few people—except, apparently, Harrison—are willing to show him any kindness at all.

Although Kroner sent him, Harrison seems genuinely concerned for Paul's well-being, asking what, exactly, he did to find himself in this position. Touched by the young man's "integrity," Paul tells Harrison not to "put one foot in your job and the other in your dreams." He tells him to either quit right now or give himself over to this corporate life. It's simply too difficult, he says, to lead this existence if you're not fully committed to it.

Paul knows how hard it is for people to think for themselves instead of just immediately accepting whatever the company tells them to think. This is why he thinks Harrison has "integrity." Whereas seemingly everyone else at the company has already written Paul off as a "saboteur," Harrison is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt by asking what he did to deserve this treatment. This suggests that Harrison is a free thinker, and it's possibly because of this that Paul warns him about trying to make it in the corporate world—people who think for themselves won't be happy there.

Paul gets on the boat to take him away from the island. As it pulls away, he gets emotional about leaving, suddenly feeling as if he's bidding a final farewell to his "home." On the island, a group of drunk young engineers stumble out of the bar singing a song about the oak tree that symbolizes the company's vitality—and then, from the boat, Paul hears Berringer's voice yelling out that the tree has been vandalized. Somebody, Berringer shouts, has ripped off the tree's bark. He yells that it must have been Paul, the "stinking saboteur." A PA system comes on and a voice sounds out in the darkness: "Beware the Ghost Shirt!"

Paul's unexpectedly emotional departure serves as a good reminder that he has spent a long time at the company. Although he hasn't always been happy at his job, the corporate lifestyle is really the only thing he's ever known. It therefore makes sense that he would see the company as his "home," despite the fact that he doesn't even like his job. On another note, it's unclear if the announcement over the PA system is an actual warning from the company—telling the employees to watch out for Ghost Shirt Society members—or if somebody from the Ghost Shirts has taken over the microphone. Either way, what's clear is that somebody other than Paul has it out for the company. The revolution that Lasher predicted, it seems, has arrived.

CHAPTER 24

The Shah catches a cold on the way to Cornell University. Self-medicating by drinking a special liquor, he rides a limousine to a doctor's office, drunkenly calling out to attractive women on the street. At a stoplight, he gets out and approaches a beautiful woman, saying, "*Fit-fit, sibi Takaru?*" Halyard tries to apologize, but the woman takes the Shah's arm and gets into the limousine. As Halyard assures her that she doesn't have to do anything she doesn't want to do, they pull up to the doctor's office—but the Shah suddenly feels better, so they keep driving.

Some of the novel's characterizations of the Shah are a little uncomfortable because they portray people from non-western cultures as crass and ignorant. The book's main intention, though, is to use the Shah's unfamiliarity with American society as a way of looking at American customs from a new angle. It's telling, then, that the Shah sees the United States as a culture divided into two classes: the elite and the enslaved. Of course, he's right that there's a lot of division in the United States, even if it's not the case that working-class people have been enslaved. All the same, he thinks that members of the elite can do whatever they want—like have sex—with less powerful people. And though this is obviously not the case, the fact that he could make this mistake suggests that the United States must not be as advanced as Americans would like to think.

The woman starts crying, explaining that she's not used to getting in the car with strangers. Halyard tells her they'll drop her off somewhere, but she insists on "going through with it." She explains that her husband is a writer and that his recently completed book was rejected by the National Council of Arts and Letters, who read submissions and decide which of the 12 existing book clubs would fit the book in question.

Nothing about the societal structure of the United States makes it easy for people who aren't managers or engineers to succeed. This is made quite clear by this woman's apparent willingness to have sex with the Shah in order to financially support her husband (she isn't, it's worth noting, a professional sex worker). When it's this hard to earn a living, the book suggests, people have to get creative. And this is presumably why groups like the Ghost Shirt Society want to dismantle the current system.

Because the woman's husband wrote a book that was 27 pages longer than the maximum length, and because it had an "antimachine theme," the Council rejected it, telling him instead to go into Public Relations. However, the man refused, so he and his wife lost everything: their house, their insurance, their possessions. This is why she was on the street looking for ways to earn money.

Everything about society has become streamlined and strictly controlled—so controlled, in fact, that the woman's husband isn't even allowed to publish a book that is a mere 27 pages over the maximum length. Furthermore, the book's "antimachine theme" also disqualifies it from publication, suggesting that this society is extremely closed-minded, especially where automation is concerned. Any truly advanced society would surely allow writers to freely express their unpopular opinions. This is especially the case in a place like the United States, which was founded upon the importance of free speech. In this futuristic version of the country, though, people like the woman's husband are stripped of their livelihood simply for speaking out against society's over-reliance on machines. This implies that the country isn't actually all that advanced, despite all its technological progress.

Halyard is appalled that the woman's husband would put her in such a precarious situation just so he could avoid working in Public Relations. But she says that her husband is one of the only people left with self-respect. Hearing this, the Shah removes a ruby from his finger and gives it to her, speaking comfortingly as he opens the limousine to let her out. Khashdrahr translates, telling the woman that the Shah wishes her good luck and that "some of the greatest prophets were crazy as bedbugs." As soon as she leaves, the Shah starts sneezing again and reaches for his flask of liquor.

The Shah empathizes with this woman and her husband, indicating that he recognizes the absurdity of American society. Whereas Halyard can't understand why the woman's husband wouldn't simply give up and work in Public Relations, the Shah seems to understand that people ought to do what they're passionate about. Life, after all, is about more than simply filling a role in the workforce, though very few people in this futuristic version of the United States seem to grasp this idea, instead focusing narrow-mindedly on things like efficiency and productivity.

CHAPTER 25

Paul reaches the mainland dock, where he's supposed to meet Anita so they can go home. As he waits, he sees a young couple run out of the woods and embrace each other, kissing passionately. Paul watches them, fondly identifying with the man and thinking about how much he must be enjoying this moment—until, that is, he realizes the man is Shepherd and the woman is Anita.

It finally becomes clear that Anita really is having an affair with Shepherd. This isn't all that surprising, since she has been spending so much time with him lately. They're also a pretty good match, since they're both obsessed with status and career advancement. In many ways, Shepherd is everything Anita wants Paul to be: motivated, competitive, and generally gung-ho about corporate life.

The lovers soon part ways, and then Anita sees Paul. But she doesn't show much remorse. In fact, she thinks Paul owes *her* an explanation, since she heard he has been fired. She then admits she's in love with Shepherd, and all Paul can do is laugh. This infuriates her, and she accuses Paul of never caring about her at all—Finnerty was right, she says. A machine really could replace her as Paul's wife. Having said this, Anita declares her intention to marry Shepherd. Paul is stunned, but he still shares a final kiss with Anita, after which they go their separate ways.

Anita references the remark Finnerty made when she came upstairs to find him in her and Paul's bedroom. In that exchange, Finnerty was annoyed at Anita for interrupting their conversation and forcing Paul to go to the dinner at the Country Club, so he harshly suggested that a machine could take her place as Paul's wife. A rather sexist thing to say, the implication of Finnerty's comment was that Paul is only interested in Anita insofar as she satisfies his domestic needs and sexual desires. Now that she sees how unbothered Paul is about her affair with Shepherd, Anita actually thinks Finnerty was right: Paul doesn't care about her as a person, he only cares about having a wife. Whether or not this is really the case remains unclear, though it's perhaps unfair of Anita to suggest that Paul is the one in the wrong—she's the one, after all, who cheated on him. What's more, she has been withdrawn from the relationship, caring more about Paul's career than about their actual bond.

CHAPTER 26

Paul takes a lonely train ride home. A fellow passenger rants about how he used to be a train conductor before machines started doing the job. When the train reaches Ilium, Paul steps off in a daze and walks through Homestead. On his way through the streets, he hears a voice calling to him from above. Looking up, he sees a woman in a window. "Lonesome?" she says, inviting him up for some company. He goes upstairs and sleeps with her, dreaming at one point that his father is standing at the foot of the bed and glaring at him.

Now that he's no longer part of the company (for the time being, at least), Paul is utterly alone. Nobody from his work life wants to associate with him because he's seen as a "saboteur," and even Anita has left him. The only person who will spend time with him, it seems, is this stranger in the window, who is possibly a sex worker and thus only sleeps with him to earn money. He has, in other words, been completely ostracized from everyone and everything he knew in life, all because people think he betrayed the central values of the corporate world.

CHAPTER 27

Paul spends the next week alone in his house while everyone else is still at the Meadows—including, presumably, Anita. He pays just one visit to his new **farm**, hoping to find some comfort in doing work for Mr. Haycox. But what he discovers is that the work is hard and unrewarding, so he leaves and doesn't go back. He also visits Ilium Works to collect his things. When he gets there, armed guards escort him to his desk.

Paul's disinterest in the farm reveals that his grand ideas about leading a simplistic, machine-free life were unrealistic. He romanticized life outside the corporate world, failing to recognize that toiling away on a farm is quite difficult. After years of working a seemingly easy, high paying job, he's not used to getting his hands dirty. Plus, it's not as if he's passionate about farming—it just seemed *appealing compared to his desk job. Maybe if he were fully invested in the life of a farmer, he would find the work rewarding. As it stands, though, he still lives in a fancy house and hasn't fully committed himself to farming, so it makes sense that his heart isn't really in it.*

Paul goes down to the police station to register, since anyone who doesn't have a job is required to do this. He fills out a card, an officer puts it in a slot, and a machine sorts it into a large pile of "potential saboteurs." Paul argues about this classification, but the officer says the machines are the ones to make this decision—they classify anyone with a college degree and no job as a "saboteur." And, the police officer adds, the machines are usually right. On his way out, Paul sees a police car pull up with a prisoner; he's shocked to discover that the prisoner is Fred Garth, but when he goes into the station to see what happened, nobody will tell him anything.

Once again, it's clear that machines make the most important decisions in this society. In this case, they classify anyone like Paul as a potential danger to society. This suggests that people who are highly educated but unemployed have probably undergone the same realization as Paul: namely, that society's celebration of automation is misguided, since machines have actually made life harder *for anyone who doesn't belong to the elite upper class of managers and engineers. Even Fred Garth, it seems, has come to this realization.*

Paul goes to the bar and runs into Alfy, who tells him that the bartender he punched at the Meadows is still sneezing because of his nose injury. Alfy worked as part of the staff serving the employees at the Meadows—until, that is, the entire service staff was fired after management discovered somebody had vandalized the oak tree. This means that everyone who isn't a manager is doing all the work, including "cleaning their own latrines."

Paul learns in this conversation that everything at the Meadows has plunged into chaos. The vandalization of the oak tree was clearly taken as a direct attack on the company, which is why the entire service staff was fired. This has ultimately emphasized the unequal power dynamics within the company, since less powerful employees are suddenly expected to do things like clean up after their bosses. Although the corporate world seems so powerful, then, these events have revealed that it's not as unshakeable as it seems.

Alfy also surprises Paul by telling him that Fred Garth was the one who destroyed the oak tree. After this conversation, Paul asks the bartender if he's seen Finnerty, but the bartender seems suspicious and says that nobody ever sees Finnerty—or, for that matter, Lasher—these days. He then gives Paul a drink laced with a drug that knocks him out.

The fact that Fred Garth is the one who vandalized the oak tree means that both of the candidates for the Pittsburgh job have turned against the company. This implies that the prospect of promotion and career advancement isn't necessarily enough to get people to ignore whatever misgivings they have about the company.

CHAPTER 28

Doctor Harold Roseberry—the football coach and head of physical education at Cornell University—goes to the bar to meet a promising doctoral student, Buck Young. Roseberry has seen Buck play football and, because he's so good, hopes to convince him to join the Cornell team. The football team has an astounding record, mostly because the university pays big money for its players—none of whom are actually students, since they're not allowed to study and play sports at the same time. Roseberry has to keep up the team's perfect record, but the university hasn't bought him any good players in several years, which is why he wants to convince Buck to stop studying and start playing football.

That athletes aren't allowed to study—and vice versa—shows the extent to which society breaks people up according to their skillsets. Anyone who is a gifted student is expected to focus exclusively on school. Conversely, talented athletes have to completely devote themselves to their sport. This leaves no room for someone like Buck Young, who is both smart and athletic. This is a good representation of the overall lack of flexibility in this society, which forces people into boxes based on their intelligence, ignoring the fact that humans are complex, unpredictable beings.

At the bar, Roseberry tries to entice Buck with the prospect of a large salary. Buck asks if he could continue his studies if he played football, and Roseberry reminds him that there are "strict rules" against this. As Roseberry tries to convince Buck, a drunk young engineer stumbles over and says he has heard the entire conversation. His name is Ed Harrison, and he wants Buck to know the perils of working as an engineer: an injury on the football field will hurt less than becoming an engineer or manager. He adds that the corporate world is no place for anyone who can "recognize the ridiculous." Roseberry sits back, realizing that Buck is only helping his case.

Harrison's drunken ramblings warn Buck about the draining aspect of corporate life. This suggests that Paul got through to Harrison when he told him not to continue on the path of an engineer if he had any reservations about the corporate world. Now, Harrison passes similar advice along to Buck, trying to show him that a powerful job as an engineer won't necessarily be more rewarding than playing a sport he loves and is good at—despite the fact that society holds engineers in such high esteem.

Harrison tells Buck that what managers and engineers are doing isn't good for the rest of the world. The prestigious people who get invited to the Meadows are nothing but "ten-year-olds at heart." Everyone except Paul Proteus, who was fired. For this reason, Harrison has decided to move to the Everglades and find a place to hole up without any machines. When Buck asks why Harrison dislikes machines, the young engineer replies that machines are "slaves" who force people to compete with them. And "anybody that competes with slaves becomes a slave."

Harrison suggests that automation has had a terrible impact on society. To make this point, he highlights the dehumanizing nature of mechanization, which has forced people to "compete" with unbeatable opponents. This recalls Kroner's point about how machines are able to do more work than the entire population of enslaved people at the time of the Civil War. Whereas Kroner saw this as a good thing, Harrison recognizes that this sets unrealistic standards for how productive people should be. It is, after all, impossible to compete with something designed to work around the clock—to do this, Harrison notes, would be to become a slave to productivity.

After Harrison leaves, Roseberry and Buck make their way out of the bar to speak privately. On their way out, though, Doctor Halyard stops them to introduce himself. He is at Cornell to take the physical education test. Acting very friendly, Roseberry assures Halyard the test won't take long. But then he takes a letter from his pocket and suggests that Halyard read it before the test. The letter is five years old, and Halyard realizes that he wrote it himself—it's addressed to Cornell's president, and it's about Roseberry. Halyard explains in the letter that he saw Roseberry one evening and that his behavior was so off-putting that he should resign as head coach because he's a disgrace to all students and alumni.

Unfortunately for Halyard, it now seems very unlikely that he'll pass the fitness test, since Roseberry clearly has it out for him. This means that he will lose his job over the absurd fact that he's not in shape enough to pass a Physical Education class—something that has nothing to do with his actual career. This just shows the ridiculously bureaucratic, irrational nature of this society, which only cares about people based on their credentials, even when those credentials are basically meaningless.

After Halyard skims the letter and awkwardly leaves, Roseberry turns to Buck and asks whether or not he'll join the football team. When Buck hesitates, Roseberry throws out an even higher salary number, and Buck immediately accepts.

Harrison's comments about the soul-killing nature of the corporate world seemed to have had an effect on Buck. At the same time, though, what really *convinces him to leave behind his studies is a bit less complicated than Harrison's long-winded ideas about the problems of the corporate world: Buck wants money. This shows that, at the end of the day, people have trouble resisting the allure of wealth and the impulse to make more money—the very same impulse that led to society's obsession with productivity in the first place.*

CHAPTER 29

Still under the influence of the powerful drug that was slipped into his drink, Paul moves through a dream-like state of consciousness. Everything feels easy and pleasant as he listens to an unidentified voice drill him with questions. The voice asks if he really got fired, and he says that his dismissal was a ruse so that he could infiltrate the Ghost Shirt Society. Except, he says, what the people who fired him don't know is that he legitimately quit his job. The voice asks why he quit, wondering if it's because his job was evil and "morally bad." But Paul simply says he was tired of working and that his job felt "pointless."

Paul's answer about why he quit his job sheds light on his dissatisfaction with the corporate life he used to lead. He reveals that he didn't necessarily quit because he thought he was participating in a morally corrupt organization, but because he didn't feel like there was any point to his job. This relates to Lasher's earlier observation that people have to feel "useful" or "needed" in order to be happy. Although Paul might have had certain misgivings about the company's negative impact on society, the real reason he was unhappy in his job was because he didn't actually feel passionate about it. In this way, he experienced the same lack of purpose as the people who were replaced by machines.

Paul suddenly finds himself talking to Finnerty, who tells him that he's on the Ghost Shirt Society's side now. The Society believes that "the world should be restored to the people." Paul likes this idea, nodding pleasantly as Finnerty tells him that he—Paul—is the one who will help the Ghost Shirts make this a reality. Paul agrees, and then he hears Lasher's approving voice saying that he will be a good addition to the Society.

As Paul slowly wakes up after being drugged, he discovers that he's basically already part of the Ghost Shirt Society. Once again, then, he ends up in a situation without making a decision of his own. In the same way that he got swept up in Kroner's plan to infiltrate the Ghost Shirt Society, he now gets swept up in the Society itself. The difference, though, is that the Ghost Shirts actually stand for something that aligns with his own values. And yet, it's still the case that he doesn't really decide for himself to join them—he's just suddenly part of the organization.

Paul asks about the Ghost Shirt's Society's name, and Lasher explains that it was borrowed from a Native American religious movement from the late 1800s. At this point in history, white settlers had taken so much from Native Americans that there was hardly anything left of their culture and way of life. This means that entire Native American communities were deprived of the very things that gave meaning to their lives. To fight against this loss of culture, a new religion formed: the Ghost Dance Religion. This brought on new rituals and new "Messiahs" who planned to lead a revolution. The idea was that this group would charge into the white settlers' oncoming gunfire wearing "ghost shirts" that would protect them from the bullets.

The Ghost Dance was an actual Native American religious movement in the early 1890s. The dance was intended to call forth the spirits of the dead, who would fight alongside Native American tribes against white settlers. This was an attempt to put an end to the westward expansion of the settlers and bring good fortune to Native American tribes. In the context of Player Piano, *this movement is relevant because characters like Lasher and Finnerty believe automation has harmed society in ways that are similar to the destructive impact of the white settlers on Native American communities.*

Lasher says that machines in the present are the same as the oppressive white settlers of the 19th century. They've completely changed the world, wiping away an entire system of values that helped people give meaning to their own lives. This is why Lasher and Finnerty have decided to fight back against the mechanized world. And Paul will be the Messiah who rallies everyone to action. He doesn't have to do anything, they assure him—he's just the face of the operation, since everyone knows who he is. Paul starts to say something, but Lasher and Finnerty leave before he can object.

Lasher makes a comparison between the violence against Native Americans and the detrimental effects of automation, but some readers might argue that this analogy is a little overstated. Since technological progress hasn't led to widespread violence, it's difficult to compare it to the genocidal events that Native American communities faced in the 18th and 19th centuries. At the same time, it is the case that all these technological changes have disempowered people and changed the nature of their lives, taking away the working class's ability to feel useful and—as Lasher has previously said—"needed on earth." In this way, automation has led to a cultural overhaul that vaguely resembles the massive changes that took place as white settlers founded the United States and set new societal norms.

CHAPTER 30

Most of the people at Paul's first Ghost Shirt Society meeting are from Homestead, but he recognizes a few people like Bud Calhoun and Katharine Finch. There is also Professor von Neumann, who used to teach political science at Union College until the social sciences building was replaced by a laboratory. The Society is based in Ilium but has factions all over the United States.

Paul has yet again found himself in a high position without really trying. He used to be the most powerful employee at the Ilium Works, despite the fact that he didn't care about the job and had a rather effortless rise to power. Similarly, he now finds himself in a position of leadership in the Ghost Shirt Society, and even though this role is largely meaningless (the Society just wants people to recognize his name), it still illustrates his passive way of moving through life. In other words, he has yet to make a real decision about what he stands for: he became an informer for Kroner simply because he never objected, and now he has become the leader of the Ghost Shirt Society without doing anything to obtain the position.

Lasher runs the meeting, asking other members about the progress they've made on their respective tasks—all of which are intended to prepare the Society for an imminent revolution against the entire system of business and government that runs the country. Someday soon, all of the Ghost Shirt members in each state will march into the streets and destroy the factories. This will include destroying EPICAC—a task given to Bud Calhoun, who has been busy designing a way to blow up the important machine.

This scene reveals that the Ghost Shirt Society is planning a true revolution. All of Lasher's talk about class war is finally going to come to fruition, as people like Bud Calhoun devote themselves to destroying society's overreliance on machines. Given that EPICAC is responsible for calculating how many people the workforce needs, it's especially fitting that Bud is tasked with blowing it up—after all, he lost his job because EPICAC no longer considered him useful or necessary.

At one point in the meeting, von Neumann reads a "warning letter" that has been sent out to a number of managers and engineers. The letter outlines the Society's belief that machines have negatively impacted society, despite their efficiency. It also strongly upholds that people should return to their jobs "as controllers of machines," and that any new forms of technological advancement should be considered in terms of how they will affect actual people. After all, the letter states, there is something to be admired about "imperfection," since all humans are inevitably flawed. The letter is signed with Paul's name.

The Ghost Shirt Society uses this letter as a way of announcing their main goal, which is to spotlight—and solve—the many societal problems that have arisen with automation. Perhaps the most important part of the letter comes when the society suggests that people are inherently prone to "imperfection." Rather than trying to create a flawlessly streamlined country in which human error never interferes with productivity, the Ghost Shirts argue, the nation ought to embrace the fact that "imperfection" is simply part of life. This clearly goes against the nation's obsession with efficiency, but allowing people to be flawed, the Ghost Shirts hope, would at least create a more humane, forgiving cultural environment.

The meeting comes to an abrupt end when somebody screams "*Cops!*" Suddenly, the sound of gunfire fills the air, and everyone frantically runs, grabbing important documents as they go. But Paul isn't fast enough, and the police pin him to the floor. Thinking he must be an insignificant member of the Ghost Shirt Society, the officers tell him he's crazy for sacrificing himself in an effort to protect someone like Paul Proteus, who is crazy. "Hell," one of the officers says, "he's got it in his head *he's* gonna be king."

The police officer's comment about Paul shows that the Ghost Shirts' letter has already made its way throughout society. Everyone now thinks Paul is the leader of this revolutionary movement. This is exactly what the Ghost Shirts wanted, but it's also—ironically enough—what Kroner and Gelhorne wanted. Indeed, the whole point of fake-firing Paul was to enable him to infiltrate the Ghost Shirt Society and rise to the top, collecting secretive information as he went. And though it's unlikely that Paul would actually inform on the Society, it's still the case that he didn't truly decide *to join the Ghost Shirts—it just happened. This is yet another illustration of how infrequently he asserts himself when it comes to making decisions about his life.*

CHAPTER 31

Paul sits in jail and makes conversation with the other man in his cell. This man has been jailed for beating a traffic safety education box to smithereens. The box tells pedestrians when to cross the street and dispenses safety tips—all of which deeply annoy this man because his window is right next to one of these machines. As a result, he lost his temper one day and smashed the box to pieces. As his cellmate complains about his predicament, Paul thinks about his own situation and considers the fact that he's still along for the ride, not knowing what, exactly, will happen to him. All this time, he realizes, he hasn't made any actual decisions—he's simply gone along with whatever happened.

The story of how Paul's cellmate wound up in jail illustrates the extent to which machines often drive people crazy instead of helping them. The fact that this man beats a traffic box to smithereens is a good indicator of just how fed-up people are with their highly mechanized society. Meanwhile, Paul has the time in jail to reflect on his involvement with the Ghost Shirt Society, finally recognizing that he hasn't actually made any decisions for himself. Instead, he has just bounced from his corporate life to the life of a rogue revolutionary, thus demonstrating his overall lack of personal agency and direction in life.

Paul hears a tapping sound against the wall and recognizes it as Morse code. Tapping back, he asks who's there and is shocked to learn that Fred Garth is sitting in the next cell. In Morse code, Garth tells him that he vandalized the oak tree because his eldest son failed the General Classification Test again. Fed up with the entire system, Garth took out his anger and dismay on the tree, and though this isn't actually a crime, the company called the police and easily convinced them to arrest him.

Fred Garth turned against the company because he finally experienced the injustices of this societal structure. Because his son has failed the General Classification Test twice now, it's obvious that his options in life will be severely limited. After all, nobody without a college degree can have much of a career. Fred himself has probably never had to worry about this until now, since he occupies a powerful position as the manager of the Buffalo Works. Now, though, he can't just ignore the unfair nature of this system. This hints at one of the reasons it's hard to change the power structures of this society: the people in power have never experienced the hardships that everyone else has to deal with. Fred's story suggests that if they had, *it might be easier to change their minds.*

A guard calls Paul out of the cell, where he meets two visitors: Anita and Kroner. Kroner asks how he's doing, and Anita congratulates him for his work. She knows that he was working as an infiltrator. And now that she knows this, she's excited to reunite with him, strongly insinuating that they will have sex as soon as they get home. Paul considers this and is relieved to find that he doesn't care if he never has sex with Anita again. Before he can decline, though, Kroner compliments him on the letter bearing his name, saying it was a perfect way to make everyone believe he really belonged to the Ghost Shirt Society—though the letter itself made no sense to Kroner at all.

The last time Paul saw Anita, she told him she was going to marry Shepherd. Now, though, all she wants is to go home and make love to Paul. This shows how much she cares about status, since her feelings toward Paul are directly linked to whether or not she thinks he's in a position of power at the company. When she thought he'd been fired, she wanted nothing to do with him, but now that he's back in the good graces of the company, she's eager to erase any tension between them. This change of heart makes it obvious that she doesn't really care about Paul as a person—so obvious, in fact, that Paul finally seems to realize that their relationship isn't all that fulfilling, which is why he doesn't care if they never have sex again.

Anita excitedly tells Paul that the letter bearing his name has done something magnificent: he's now lined up for a much bigger job than manager of the Pittsburgh plant. Baer apparently read the letter sent out with Paul's name and found it so convincing that he packed up his things and quit. Because of this, Paul will become the Manager of Engineering for the entire Eastern Division.

It's worth remembering the conversation that Baer, Kroner, and Paul had in Kroner's study, when Baer genuinely stopped to think about Paul's worry that technological progress is detrimental to society. This suggests that Baer has always been open-minded enough to entertain opposing viewpoints. In fact, he even implied in that conversation that the only way he was able to keep doing his job was by not thinking too much about the repercussions of automation. The Ghost Shirt letter, it seems, has made it impossible for him to go on ignoring these repercussions. More than anything, this suggests that society truly is ripe for a revolution, since even powerful people like Baer aren't as steadfast in their opinions as it might initially seem.

The only thing Paul needs to do to become Manager of Engineering is go on the record with the information he discovered when he was with the Ghost Shirt Society. But when Kroner turns on the tape machine, Paul freezes. He has seen this day coming for a while, knowing he'd eventually have to make some kind of choice of his own. And this choice, he realizes, has nothing to do with machines—it's an "internal" choice, and he knows in his heart what to do. When Kroner asks him who the official leader of the Ghost Shirt Society is, then, he doesn't hesitate: "I am," he says, feeling a sense of belonging and purpose for the first time in his life.

Paul finally makes a decision, pledging his allegiance not to the company, but to the Ghost Shirt Society. What's interesting, though, is that he feels as if this decision has nothing to do with machines. Even though the Ghost Shirt Society's main objective is to fight back against automation, Paul's decision to officially join them is more of a personal matter. Throughout his career, he has struggled to feel a sense of passion for his job, and this has led to a constant, low-level unhappiness. But now, for the first time, he actually feels he has a purpose because he knows his involvement with the Ghost Shirts is tangibly benefitting the Society. In this way, he finally gets to feel the sense of usefulness that Lasher argues everyone must feel in order to be happy.

CHAPTER 32

It has been three weeks since Paul was first arrested. He has already been found guilty of "sabotage," and now he's being tried for treason. As the prosecutor asks him questions, everyone but Paul himself can see whether or not he's telling the truth, since there's a lie detector behind him. The prosecutor asks why he, as the alleged leader of the Ghost Shirt Society, wants society to take a "step backward," but Paul cleverly suggests that true progress means reassessing bad decisions. He's pleased with this answer—everything, actually, is going quite well, mostly because he has already rehearsed most of his answers so that he doesn't have to lie.

In this moment, Paul argues that progress isn't inherently good. For example, there are many kinds of technological advancements that would certainly count as progress in the field of engineering but wouldn't necessarily help society move forward as a whole. This is why Paul suggests that it's sometimes beneficial to take a "step backward," arguing that true progress has to reach beyond the narrow confines of the technological world. In other words, advanced societies should be able to think critically about their own policies and structures of power. If this means turning back certain kinds of technological progress, so be it.

In the three weeks since Paul's arrest, Anita hasn't visited him in jail. Instead, she has made it abundantly clear to the press that she disapproves of his actions. She also announced that she'll be marrying Shepherd as soon as she and Paul get divorced. But Paul doesn't care about any of this. All he cares about is representing the Ghost Shirt Society. And this is why he's suddenly disconcerted when the prosecutor in court takes an unexpected approach and suggests that Paul's disdain for machines has to do with certain matters in his personal life, not with his belief in the harmfulness of automation.

Once more, Anita proves that she cares more about corporate success and status than anything else. She proves this by going back to Shepherd as soon as she realizes Paul won't become the Manager of Engineering for the company's Eastern Division. This perfectly exemplifies the way she prioritizes wealth and success over matters of the heart. Rather than choosing a husband based on love, she chooses based on the likelihood that her partner will become rich and respected. This lack of regard for genuine human connection is, it seems, the exact attitude that this productivity-oriented society has incentivized.

According to the prosecutor, Paul's "hate and resentment" for machines come from his feelings about his own father, who was "one of the greatest true patriots in American history." When Paul refutes this, the lie detector indicates that he isn't telling the truth. Still, he manages to wriggle out of this by suggesting that *most* people are motivated by unseemly things—this, however, doesn't necessarily invalidate their beliefs.

The prosecutor tries to make Paul look bad by comparing him to his widely respected father. His insistence that George Proteus was a great "patriot" implies that contributing to the American workforce is a sign of true loyalty to the country. This might have been true during the war, when managers and engineers specifically worked to keep the nation afloat while most of its workers were overseas. Now, though, it's a little unclear how, exactly, devoting oneself to a company is a patriotic act. The prosecutor also tries to make Paul look bad by suggesting that he has projected his feelings about his father onto machines, and though Paul stumbles over this accusation, he makes a clever recovery: he acknowledges that the prosecutor might be right, but also reminds the court that humans are imperfect—a good way of reasserting the Ghost Shirts' belief that there should be room in society for people to make mistakes.

Paul makes an argument for imperfection, saying that, though people are often motivated by "sordid" things, this is simply what it means to be human. He even remarks that the prettiest flowers he has ever seen were growing out of cat poop. Before anyone can react to this, the sound of loud bagpipes and drums cuts through the air, and a brick crashes through the courtroom window. Outside, the Ghost Shirt Society marches through the streets.

Again, Paul emphasizes the idea that there's value in imperfection. The current societal expectations don't make room for this kind of thinking, since everyone is obsessed with flawless productivity. In reality, though, most things in life are full of imperfection. Rather than seeing this as a bad thing, Paul thinks people should recognize that there's a certain beauty in life's messiness—as suggested by the comment about beautiful flowers growing out of cat poop.

CHAPTER 33

Halyard rides through Ilium with the Shah and Khashdrahr, who can sense that his social status has diminished ever since he came back from the Cornell gym. He miserably failed the fitness test and has been stripped of his title. As the limousine passes through Ilium, Khashdrahr remembers when a Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps member spit in Halyard's face, but Halyard quickly assures him this was an isolated incident. The Shah and Khashdrahr could travel the entire country for 100 years and never see an "outburst" like that again. Shortly after he says this, the limousine is forced to a halt by an angry crowd of armed protestors.

Halyard has lost his high position in society simply because he couldn't pass a fitness test that ultimately has no bearing on his job at the State Department. This underlines the silly emphasis that people in this country put on arbitrary credentials. Although this system has been designed to maximize efficiency, it has—in this case—done the exact opposite: the country has deprived itself of a perfectly capable worker. Now that Halyard no longer holds his position, EPICAC will have to spend time finding someone new to fill the role. Given that this is an unnecessary waste of resources, it seems that the system isn't actually as efficient as it seems.

The driver of the Shah's limousine tries to make a run for it, but Khashdrahr puts a knife to his neck and forces him to keep driving the limousine through the angry mob. Halyard tells him to go to the courthouse, but when they arrive, they find the building in complete chaos. The Ghost Shirts bash in the building's door and, several moments later, run out carrying Paul on their shoulders. Then the protestors—many of whom are dressed as Native Americans—yell out that they're headed for the Ilium Works.

The violence and disarray that the Shah, Khashdrahr, and Halyard encounter demonstrate that Ilium has finally plunged into total chaos. This starkly contrasts with the society's efficient, orderly way of being. The implication, then, is that mistreating people in order to establish a productive, well-ordered society will only lead to the exact opposite results: revolution, disorder, and mayhem.

Before the Ghost Shirts leave, two of them yank open the limousine door and knock Halyard unconscious. When he regains consciousness, the limousine is parked in front of the local bar, and the streets are barricaded with sandbags. As he tries to reconstruct what happened, he hears two Ghost Shirts mistaking the Shah and Khashdrahr for members of their own society, sending them to help block a nearby road.

At this point, it seems as if the Ghost Shirts have successfully taken over Ilium, at least judging by the fact that they've barricaded the streets with sandbags and are still running free. In fact, they're not only able to muscle their way into the Shah's limousine, but also have the power to sweep up him and Khashdrahr and send them to work on a nearby blockade—something they clearly couldn't do if they were still fending off the police. Surprisingly enough, then, they have taken over the town pretty easily, indicating that, for all its advanced technology, Ilium isn't totally stable or unshakeable.

As the Shah and Khashdrahr are escorted into a truck full of grenades and taken away, Lasher and Finnerty use walkie-talkies to direct the revolution, reporting that Salt Lake City, Oakland, and Ilium have all been successfully overthrown by the Ghost Shirt Society. Meanwhile, Paul tries to dissuade Ghost Shirts from destroying everything in sight, but they don't listen—any machine, they figure, should be ruined.

This revolution against the machine-obsessed United States is surprisingly effective, as evidenced by the fact that the Ghost Shirts have already overthrown Ilium, Salt Lake City, and Oakland. However, Paul begins to see in this moment that it's hard to direct a revolution, especially when people are so eager to take down the society that once oppressed them. Instead of recognizing that some machines might actually be worth keeping around, the Ghost Shirts run wild with their destruction, suggesting that people are at a breaking point with technology.

CHAPTER 34

It's four in the morning, and Paul sits in his old office with Lasher, Finnerty, and von Neumann. The Society has successfully overtaken Ilium, but they failed to do much more than that. Pittsburgh held its own against the revolutionaries, as did most of the other major cities in the country. Worse, the Ghost Shirts failed to blow up EPICAC. Far-off explosions are audible through the walls of the Ilium Works, as rogue Ghost Shirts go crazy destroying whatever they want, taking out virtually every single machine they come across.

As a whole, the Ghost Shirt revolution has failed, but this doesn't stop its members from taking any opportunity to decimate the machines in Ilium. No matter how many machines they break, though, it's clear that automation is here to stay, since EPICAC—the central computing machine that determines virtually everything about how the country functions—is still intact. At this point, then, the revolution has become little more than an outlet for people to vent their anger at the injustice that automation has brought upon society.

A helicopter flies overhead, announcing through a loudspeaker that the Ghost Shirts have six hours to turn in the leaders of the movement. After this, the police will cut Ilium off from the rest of the country for six months. This announcement plays until Luke Lubbock shoots down the helicopter, at which point Paul and Finnerty take a walk around Ilium Works, surveying the damage and talking about how they were the ones who helped build so many of the machines they ended up renouncing. This, Finnerty points out, is simply human nature—it's enticing and exciting to work toward change. Stasis is boring, so people are always going to work toward improvement.

Although Player Piano *sheds light on the many downsides of automation, the novel also suggests—in this moment, at least—that it's natural for people to invent things. The problem, after all, isn't with the creative impulse to make new machines. Rather, problems arise when society loses sight of the fact that machines are supposed to benefit people, not make their lives harder. In the world of the novel, machines have only benefitted people in positions of power. Meanwhile, they've made it extremely difficult for everyone else to lead happy lives. Still, Finnerty and Paul recognize that trying to come up with new ideas to improve life is simply part of what it means to be human. Unfortunately, though, sometimes technological advancement ends up doing more harm than good.*

When Paul and Finnerty return to Paul's old office, they wake up Lasher and ask what ever happened to the Native Americas who inspired the Ghost Shirt Society. He answers that many were killed, and the others surrendered; this is why he always knew the Ghost Shirt revolution would fail. What matters is that he and the others *tried* to upend an unjust, corrupt system. This baffles Paul, who can't believe Lasher would so willingly undertake something he thought was doomed, but Lasher reminds him that he is, above all, a reverend, so simply *trying* to fight immorality is enough for him—even when the entire effort is sure to fail.

For Lasher, staging a revolution against the United States is a moral undertaking, not something he actually expects to be successful. He never thought it would be possible to dismantle the country's overreliance on machines, but this didn't stop him from trying. This suggests that he sees technological progress as essentially unstoppable. And yet, the Ghost Shirt Society did *prove that large numbers of people are unhappy with the way society functions. This, it seems, is how people like Lasher can bring about change—not by completely destroying the existing structures of power, but by clearly demonstrating that those structures aren't actually working for many American citizens (despite what people like Kroner might believe about automation improving the quality of life for the typical American).*

CHAPTER 35

The sun rises over Ilium, which is littered with broken machinery. Halyard wakes up on the floor of the limousine to find Finnerty driving the four leaders of the Ghost Shirt Society around town to survey the destruction. Paul and the others have decided that they will use the next six months of isolation from the rest of the United States to prove that it truly *is* possible to live without machines. With this in mind, they've come to appreciate that their revolutionaries smashed every machine in sight.

Even though the Ghost Shirt revolution has failed, it has provided Paul and the others with the opportunity to demonstrate to the rest of the nation that living without machines isn't such a crazy idea. Because there's such an overreliance on machines, it makes sense that people wouldn't immediately accept the idea of shifting away from automation. But if people knew that leaving behind technology wouldn't completely ruin the country, then they might actually go along with the idea. This is what Paul, Finnerty, Lasher, and von Neumann want to prove.

Paul and the others soon come across a huge crowd standing around a broken soda machine. At the center of the crowd stands Bud Calhoun. He's busy at work finding innovative ways to fix the machine, and though everyone hates this brand of soda, they eagerly line up for a drink when Bud finally gets the machine working again.

In this scene, Bud perfectly exemplifies Finnerty's point about how humans can't help but find ways to improve things. Bud was instrumental not just in the plot to destroy EPICAC—the largest computing machine in the country—but also in the effort to ruin smaller machines in the town of Ilium. And yet, here he is rebuilding a soda machine. What's more, the very same people who excitedly smashed every machine in sight are now taking great joy in watching Bud fix the soda machine. This just shows that tinkering with technology (even something as basic as a soda dispenser) is simply too enticing to give up. Humans, it seems, are naturally inclined to build and fix things, regardless of whether or not those things are beneficial to society.

After fixing the soda machine, Bud moves to yet another broken machine and brainstorms ways to fix it. Enthralled, the crowd watches and runs to fetch him spare parts. As the very same people who destroyed the machines work to rebuild them, Lasher tells Paul, Finnerty, and Professor von Neumann to get back into the limousine, informing them that he's going to turn himself over to the government. When he asks if any of the others want to save themselves, they all decide to turn themselves in, too.

Watching Bud and the crowd around him take so much pleasure in rebuilding the broken machines causes Lasher to change his mind. Although he wanted to prove to the rest of the country that it's possible to live a machine-free life, he now sees that this is a futile endeavor. After all, Bud and his onlookers have proved that people really do *want machines in their lives, even if they know that certain kinds of technological progress can be harmful to society.*

On their way to the roadblock—where the authorities are waiting for them—Paul and the others pass Khashdrahr and the Shah sleeping peacefully in a trench. Paying them no mind, Lasher takes out a bottle and proposes a toast—but this toast isn't in honor of the success of their revolution. Rather, it honors the mere fact that they *did* something. They challenged an immoral system, and everyone—Paul, Finnerty, von Neumann, and Lasher himself—is perfectly content with that. Gulping down the liquor, Paul smashes the bottle on a rock and joins his fellow revolutionaries as they walk toward the police.

Player Piano *doesn't end on a triumphant, optimistic note. Nothing major about this futuristic, fairly dystopian society has changed. Machines still run the country, and the class division created by automation is still firmly in place. What's more, even most of the Ghost Shirt revolutionaries have negated the purpose of their own cause by proving that humans can't help themselves from seeking out technological progress. The only thing that has changed, then, is that Paul and the other Ghost Shirt leaders challenged the status quo. And though this clearly isn't enough to bring about comprehensive change, it at least shows the elite class of managers and engineers that they shouldn't take their power for granted. On a broader level, the novel's somewhat pessimistic ending implies that progress—and especially* technological *progress—is simply a fact of modern life, regardless of whether or not it benefits society.*

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Player Piano.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 26 Jun 2021. Web. 26 Jun 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Player Piano.*" LitCharts LLC, June 26, 2021. Retrieved June 26, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/player-piano.

To cite any of the quotes from *Player Piano* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Vonnegut, Kurt. Player Piano. The Dial Press. 1999.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Vonnegut, Kurt. Player Piano. New York: The Dial Press. 1999.