Player Piano by Kurt Vonnegut

Vonnegut's first novel spins the chilling tale of engineer Paul Proteus, who must find a way to live in a world dominated by a supercomputer and run completely by machines. Paul's rebellion is wildly funny, deadly serious, and terrifyingly close to reality. Amazon.com


About the author: The appeal of Kurt Vonnegut may be attributed partly to the fact that he is one of the few writers who have successfully straddled the imaginary line between science-fiction/fantasy and "real literature." He was born in Indianapolis and attended Cornell University, but his college education was interrupted by World War II. After the war he returned to Cornell and then earned his M.A. at the University of Chicago. He worked as a police reporter and in public relations before placing several short stories in the popular magazines and beginning his career as a novelist. His first novel, Player Piano (1952), is a highly credible account of a future mechanistic society in which people count for little and machines for much. Other novels include The Sirens of Titan (1959), Mother Night (1962), Cat's Cradle (1963), God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965), Slaughterhouse-Five; or The Children's Crusade (1969), Breakfast of Champions (1973), Slapstick (1976). In addition to his fiction, Vonnegut has published nonfiction on social problems and other topics, some of which is collected in Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloons (1974). He died from head injuries sustained in a fall on April 11, 2007. (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. What does a player piano have to do with the novel Player Piano, other than being in the title?
8. In what ways is the class system in the novel better.

9. What does the match with Checker Charley have to do with the plot?

10. What is the Ghost Shirt Society?

(Questions issued by publisher)