

Rising 12th Grade Summer Reading

Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*

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During or after reading *Player Piano*, please answer three of the following questions. Your answers should be typed and double-spaced with an MLA-style heading in the upper left corner. Answers should be 200-400 words each, thoughtfully presented in your best short-essay style, using complete sentences, proper spelling and grammar, and correct paragraph indentation.

These questions are open-ended, and you are encouraged to be creative in your answers. The ideal answer will show thoughtful and humble engagement with the text.

- 1) We often take technological innovation to be unquestionably beneficial, perhaps even a source of human liberation. Of course, we do this with good reason. Many of the goods we take for granted today—high-speed travel, indoor plumbing, modern medicine—would be almost unfathomable to even the richest pre-industrial society, and we enjoy these goods because of some previous technological innovation. *Player Piano* seems to be a critique of technology. What has gone wrong in the society depicted in *Player Piano*? Is it fundamentally a problem with technology, or something else?
- 2) Throughout the book, Paul seems to be nostalgic for an older kind of technology. He drives an old car and buys an old house. Yet, this old technology is still *technology*. His car has an engine; the house comes with a clock and appliances. What is the difference between the technology that Paul appreciates and the technology that he bemoans? As you ponder this question, consider comparing today's "smart" technology with the older (but still very much advanced) "dumb" technology of the last century.
- 3) The society depicted in *Player Piano* is a rigid meritocracy, with every position, from mechanic to manager, awarded strictly on the basis of merit, narrowly defined (exam scores and IQ numbers). How does Vonnegut portray this meritocratic system? What's wrong with it? Does this critique apply to America today, or is there something different about our own system of "meritocracy"?

- 4) Choose one of the characters in *Player Piano*, and describe their reaction to the rigid social system portrayed in the book. Is this reaction reasonable? Does it make sense given the character's specific background and circumstances? (Any character will do, but here are a few that I'd pay attention to: Paul, Anita, Finnerty, The Shah of Bratpuhr, Baer, Shepherd.)
- 5) As a dystopian novel, *Player Piano* can be read as a warning, a cautionary tale about a future we would hope to avoid. What is the danger that Vonnegut hopes we will avoid? Have any of Vonnegut's "predictions" come true? Is *Player Piano* a book for our time?
- 6) How does *Player Piano* compare to other dystopian novels like *Brave New World* or *1984*?