



วารสารวิชาการศรีปทุม ชลบุรี

ปีที่ 22 ฉบับที่ 1 เดือนมกราคม ถึง มีนาคม 2569

AUTOMATION'S DOUBLE VICTIMS: CLASS, IDENTITY, AND DEHUMANIZATION IN VONNEGUT'S PLAYER PIANO

Aphiradi Supahp^{*}

English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Thaksin University

^{*}Corresponding Author e-Mail: aphiradi@tsu.ac.th

(Received: 2026, January 2; Revised: 2026, March 23; Accepted: 2026, March 28)

ABSTRACT

This academic paper examines how automation has a great impact on humans, both the working class and the technocratic elite, using Marx's theory of alienated labor, Weber's concept of the iron cage, and Seeman and Fromm's psychological perspectives on alienation. The investigation reveals that automation replaces the working class's labor and ability in doing tasks, which leads them to feel worthless because their lives lack purpose and meaning. Meanwhile, some of the technocratic elites feel alienated and empty from the comfort they enjoy from the machine-driven society.

Keywords: *Player Piano*; automation; dehumanization

INTRODUCTION

After World War II, machines proved to be among the most crucial instruments contributing to both military and industrial success. In response, the United States increasingly invested in the development of machinery and advanced technologies, leading to the widespread adoption of automation across various sectors. As automation became a key driver of economic growth, production systems were reorganized to prioritize efficiency and productivity. This transformation ultimately strengthened the nation's position in the global market through large-scale mechanization (Pursell, 2007, pp. 1-2; Noble, 1984, pp. 3-5; The National WWII Museum, Online, n.d.).

While these developments brought significant economic benefits, they also produced profound social consequences. The expansion of automation gradually reduced the need for human labor, particularly affecting the working class, whose roles were either diminished or rendered obsolete. As a result, questions began to emerge regarding not only



employment but also the broader issues of human purpose, identity, and dignity within an increasingly mechanized society.

Previous studies on automation in literature and dystopian fiction have highlighted how literary works reflect these concerns. Scholars argue that dystopian narratives frequently engage with anxieties surrounding industrialization, mechanization, and the erosion of human agency (Booker, 1994, pp. 15-20; Claeys, 2010, pp. 3-5). Within Vonnegut studies, *Player Piano* has been widely interpreted as a critique of postwar technological optimism, particularly in its depiction of a society structured around automation. Critics have emphasized the novel's portrayal of working-class displacement alongside the psychological consequences experienced by individuals living in a highly mechanized environment (Reed, 1997, p. 102; Simmons, 2009, pp. 45-50).

At the same time, interdisciplinary research on labor and technology suggests that automation does not merely transform economic systems but also reshapes human experience. Studies indicate that the reorganization of labor processes often reduces worker autonomy and contributes to various forms of alienation (Blauner, 1964, pp. 23-30; Braverman, 1974, pp. 112-120; Noble, 1984, pp. 3-5). From a broader sociological perspective, efficiency-driven systems further intensify these conditions by constraining creativity and individuality, reflecting the logic of rationalization described in modern industrial societies (Ritzer, 1993, pp. 1-10).

However, most existing studies tend to focus primarily on the working class as the principal victims of automation. Less attention has been given to the experiences of technocratic elites who operate within, and benefit from, the same systems. Despite their privileged positions, these individuals may also encounter forms of psychological and existential alienation, shaped by the very structures they help sustain.

This study argues that automation in *Player Piano* produces not a single group of victims, but a dual structure of dehumanization that affects both the working class and technocratic elites. By examining these two groups together, the paper demonstrates how automation functions as a broader mechanism that reshapes identity, undermines human agency, and generates alienation across different social strata in a mechanized society.



OBJECTIVE

The objective of this article is to investigate how the working class and the technocrats struggle through the machine-driven society emphasizing on dehumanization and alienation they both experience throughout Vonnegut's *Player Piano*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To clearly comprehend the alienation and dehumanization that appear on the double victims in the technological progress, the theoretical framework of Marx's theory of labor alienation, Weber's concept of the Iron Cage, sociological and psychological perspectives on alienation from Maurice Seeman's and Erich Fromm's theories will be presented respectively.

Marx's Theory of Labor Alienation Marx (1844/1964, pp. 108-114) proposes that alienation occurs to the workers when their labor is no longer necessary for the productivity since it is replaced by the work of the machines. The laborer, thus, feels worthless and aimless which leads to the identity loss and social marginalization. In *Player Piano*, the outstanding case lies on the Reeks and Wrecks which displaced from significant labor and restricted to trivial and low-skill tasks. As a result, they encounter socioeconomic and emotional deficit. Marx's framework reinforces how Vonnegut portrays the personal and societal outcomes of automation for the blue-collar workers.

Weber's Concept of the Iron Cage Weber (1905/1946, pp. 181-182) introduces the concept of the "iron cage of rationalization" as the means to confine people to the modern bureaucratic and technological systems which mainly focus on efficiency and predictability. Weber employs the "iron cage" as a metaphor illustrating how people are trapped in the efficiency-driven ordering of life and work. Workers become a part of efficiency system which deprives them of the individualism. Rationalization here is not only about organizing work system but it also manages the individual's life. It strips them of their freedom, sense of purpose and capacity for ethical choice. They, therefore, suffer inner discontent although they have the comfortable lives.

Sociological and Psychological Perspectives on Alienation Apart from economic and structural factors, Seeman (1959, pp. 783-784) identifies alienation in term of powerlessness, normlessness and social isolation. For powerlessness, people cannot control what happens



in their life and work or even decision-making and it leads them to frustration for not being able to control over their own lives and make them feel worthless. Moreover, normlessness means people feel that social values do not make sense or important to them anymore. Besides, they feel that social norms cannot bring them success. As a result, it is pointless to follow the social rules. And when people hardly share the same values or goals with others, it brings them to social isolation. Losing faith in social norms makes them lose the sense of belonging in the community and become the outsiders.

Fromm (1941/1991, pp. 120-125) explores alienation regarding psychological effect on human mind. He states that it is an intense feeling that separate people from themselves and others in society. When people concentrate only on money, achievement and technology, they gradually lose connection with their genuine emotions, imagination and social connection.

By applying Marx's economic points of view, Weber's sociological perception, and psychological theories of alienation from Seeman and Fromm to the analysis, these theories offer insights into the double victims of automation demonstrated in *Player Piano*. It allows the exploration of the impact of mechanization on humans both psychologically and sociologically.

THE HUMAN AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF AUTOMATION: THE DUAL BURDEN IN VONNEGUT'S PLAYER PIANO

In the wake of World War II, technological innovation reshaped American society, promising efficiency, prosperity, and progress. The rapid spread of automation and computing stirred excitement but also raised questions about the human cost of mechanization (Pursell, 2007, pp. 1-2; Noble, 1984, p. 21; The National WWII Museum, Online, n.d.). Vonnegut's *Player Piano* captures these tensions in a dystopian vision, portraying a society split between technocratic elites and a marginalized working class. Through this lens, the novel exposes how relentless pursuit of efficiency erodes human purpose, social bonds, and ethical judgment (Reed, 1997, p. 102).

Vonnegut's narrative warns that automation produces dual victims: displaced workers, deprived of meaningful labor, and privileged technocrats, trapped in bureaucratic



structures that prioritize output over humanity. The psychological and social consequences extend across all strata, threatening identity, community, and emotional well-being.

To explore these themes, this study examines *Player Piano* through four interconnected dimensions: the Reeks and Wrecks and the human costs of automation; the technocrats and their existential struggles; automation as a universal mechanism of dehumanization; and the psychological and social ramifications of living in a fully mechanized world. Together, these dimensions reveal how Vonnegut anticipates the human dilemmas of our contemporary age of automation and artificial intelligence.

The Reeks and Wrecks: Human Costs of Automation Kurt Vonnegut presents the Reeks and Wrecks as the working-class victims of progress in automation and technology. They used to be the foundation of industrial society: the ones who control the machines in Ilium, New York. Unfortunately, now they are replaced by the machines and transferred to another area in New York called Homestead. In Homestead, they are assigned the menial tasks such as repairing roads merely to occupy their time. Their roles are changed from the important to the insignificant ones. Since they cannot express their skill and creativity through work, they undergo purposelessness, alienation and a profound loss of identity. (Vonnegut, 1952, pp. 45–50).

The Reeks and Wrecks' daily lives in Homestead show how much their brains have altered since they had to abandon their homes. They feel that they have no purpose because their occupations don't make them think, take initiative, or be creative. They just do the same monotonous tasks repeatedly with little variation. This sameness makes people experience a sense of disconnection from their work, their coworkers, or the social recognition that used to give their lives significance (Vonnegut, 1952, pp. 46–50). Over time, this feeling of being alone can make you lose a lot of your sense of self. People are no longer known for their abilities, achievements, or independence; instead, they are known for how much they depend on a machine. This shows up in the mind as low self-esteem, feeling invisible, being alone, and emotional pain. Vonnegut emphasizes that this form of systematic dehumanization is detrimental not only to the economy but also to mental health and social cohesion (Reed, 1997, pp. 103–105).

Vonnegut reveals the negative effects of mechanization that it does not only make the nation in high development but it also strips humans of their dignity when machines can



do all the tasks themselves. Here, The Reeks and Wrecks are restricted to a monotonous life. Their ability is useless. They, therefore lose meaning in life

Despite the state's attempts to provide comfort and efficiency, the Reeks and Wrecks remain psychologically and socially unfulfilled. In one scene, a worker who fixes the protagonist's car proudly claims he can repair anything—if only he were given more work—demonstrating that his skills and potential are underutilized (Vonnegut, 1952, pp. 52-53). Similarly, a couple visited by the Shah lives in a fully automated home, yet the conveniences fail to bring them happiness: the wife prefers to perform tasks by hand, while the husband confesses feelings of worthlessness (Vonnegut, 1952, pp. 56-58). These examples reinforce that material comfort and efficiency cannot substitute for meaningful labor, social recognition, or human dignity. Vonnegut depicts that, even when physical ease and the illusion of contentment are provided, the Reeks and Wrecks continue to experience neglect, alienation, and a profound lack of purpose.

Taken together, the experiences of the Reeks and Wrecks reveal that automation, while designed to increase efficiency and provide convenience, imposes profound psychological and social costs on those displaced from meaningful labor. Their purposelessness, alienation, and loss of identity underscore the human consequences of a mechanized society. Yet Vonnegut's critique does not end with the working class: the novel also demonstrates that the technocrats, who manage and control these systems, face their own form of alienation and existential dissatisfaction.

The Technocrats: Privilege and Existential Alienation While the Reeks and Wrecks suffer from material displacement and psychological neglect, Vonnegut also exposes the existential alienation experienced by the technocrats—the elite managers who control and oversee the automated systems. This dual burden is particularly evident in two characters: Paul Proteus, the protagonist and chief engineer, and his friend Edward Finnerty, who both navigate positions of privilege yet confront moral dilemmas, personal dissatisfaction, and the limitations imposed by bureaucratic and rationalized systems. Despite material comfort and societal status, these technocrats experience stress, moral conflict, and a loss of personal autonomy, trapped in what Weber (1905/1946, pp. 123-130) describes as the “iron cage” of rationalization.



Paul Proteus exemplifies this condition. Though he holds a prestigious role and intellectual authority, he struggles with feelings of emptiness and moral unease. He recognizes the societal harm caused by the automated systems he helps maintain and feels conflicted between duty, ambition, and conscience (Vonnegut, 1952, pp. 120-140). Similarly, Finnerty, though enjoying status and privileges, is constrained by bureaucratic routines and the pressure to conform, which restrict his autonomy and creativity. Through these characters, Vonnegut illustrates that even those in positions of power can be psychologically and existentially trapped by the rationalized structures they serve.

Small but revealing moments deepen this portrayal. Paul's tenderness toward a stray cat—one of the few living beings in the sterile, machine-dominated environment—reflects his deep longing for vitality and authentic human connection (Vonnegut, 1952, pp. 110-112). Katherine, Paul's secretary, embodies another dimension of alienation: despite her education, she performs trivial clerical tasks, and her emotional breakdown upon realizing her redundancy underscores the fragility of identity in a system that values machines over people (Vonnegut, 1952, pp. 113-115). Both instances show that alienation permeates every level of the technocratic hierarchy, eroding dignity and emotional stability.

Proteus and Finnerty respond to their alienation in different ways. Proteus's rebellion is internal, expressed through contemplation and his yearning to abandon his position to live a simpler, more authentic life. Finnerty's rebellion is external—through defiant acts that challenge the bureaucratic order. Despite their differences, both men seek refuge in communal spaces like the Homestead pub, where they encounter the Reeks and Wrecks and briefly rediscover shared humanity. Vonnegut uses these interactions to suggest that rebellion, empathy, and solidarity emerge from the same human need for meaningful engagement.

Through the experiences of these characters, Vonnegut demonstrates that privilege and authority do not insulate individuals from the psychological and social costs of a mechanized society. Automation's "double victims" are the dispossessed and the privileged alike—each deprived of purpose, autonomy, and connection.

Automation as a Universal Mechanism of Dehumanization Vonnegut's *Player Piano* presents automation not only as a technological process but as a comprehensive ideology that redefines human worth in mechanical terms. The novel portrays a society



governed by the logic of efficiency, where both social and moral values are measured by productivity. This shift transforms technology from a neutral instrument into a mechanism of control—what Mumford (1934/1967, pp. 3-5) called the “megamachine,” a system that integrates human beings into its operations as interchangeable parts. The bureaucratic hierarchy of *Ilium* mirrors this logic: decisions are automated, moral judgment is replaced by algorithmic precision, and individuality becomes a threat to system stability.

By depicting automation as a totalizing structure, Vonnegut exposes how dehumanization becomes systemic rather than incidental. Machines are not the true agents of oppression; rather, the human institutions that emulate machine logic perpetuate alienation across all social strata. Even cultural and intellectual life reflects this mechanization. The novel’s university, once a space for inquiry and creativity, functions instead as a training ground for maintaining technological orthodoxy—mirroring the technocratic belief that rational efficiency supersedes ethical reflection. The Reeks and Wrecks are thus not merely victims of economic exclusion but of ideological exclusion: their skills and emotions are rendered obsolete by a society that prizes mechanical precision over human adaptability.

Furthermore, the novel’s portrayal of communication underscores the universality of this dehumanization. Dialogue is often mechanical, filled with technical jargon or hollow slogans that mask the absence of genuine empathy. This linguistic sterility parallels what Weber (1905/1946, pp. 155-156) termed the “disenchantment of the world,” where rationalization strips human experience of mystery and meaning. Even the technocrats’ personal relationships become transactional, mediated by efficiency and status rather than emotion or moral conviction.

Through this depiction, Vonnegut demonstrates that automation’s true danger lies not only in job loss or psychological distress but in the cultural normalization of mechanistic values. The novel’s world no longer distinguishes between technological and human rationality—machines and men operate according to the same cold logic of output. In this sense, *Player Piano* transcends a critique of industry to become a meditation on civilization itself: it shows how, once society internalizes the machine’s ethos, dehumanization becomes both invisible and inescapable.

Psychological and Social Consequences The psychological and social consequences of automation in *Player Piano* extend beyond alienation and reach into the erosion of



empathy, solidarity, and moral identity. Vonnegut's mechanized world illustrates what Fromm (1941/1991, pp. 783-784,) calls the "marketing orientation" of modern individuals—people come to value themselves and others based on utility and exchange rather than inherent humanity. This orientation manifests in both the Reeks and Wrecks and the technocrats: the former internalize feelings of inferiority, while the latter view human relations through the same utilitarian lens that governs their machines.

Psychologically, this devaluation of the human self generates chronic emotional dissonance. Individuals learn to suppress genuine feeling in favor of functionality. The result is not only depression or purposelessness but a subtle desensitization—a loss of capacity for compassion. Even acts of rebellion, such as Paul Proteus's eventual defection, are tinged with futility, reflecting what Seeman (1959, pp. 784-785) describes as "normlessness," the perception that moral effort cannot meaningfully alter systemic structures. Vonnegut suggests that this internal paralysis is automation's deepest wound: people cease to imagine alternative ways of being human.

Socially, the effects are equally corrosive. The strict division between technocrats and laborers dissolves traditional community bonds, replacing them with institutional hierarchies. Homestead and Ilium exist as parallel societies—one idle, one overworked—each incapable of genuine dialogue with the other. The disappearance of shared purpose leads to collective fragmentation: families, friendships, and civic ties weaken under the weight of efficiency. Vonnegut's inclusion of scenes where social gatherings revolve around automated entertainment or mechanical convenience reflects a society that substitutes spectacle for intimacy.

The broader implication is that automation reshapes not only work but also emotion and ethics. As machines assume greater responsibility for production and decision-making, humans abdicate moral agency, allowing technology to dictate values. Vonnegut's vision anticipates contemporary concerns about artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, and the erosion of empathy in digital societies. His warning is not simply that machines will replace people, but that people, in adapting to machines, may lose the very capacities—creativity, empathy, and moral reflection—that make them human.

Through this psychological and social lens, *Player Piano* reveals automation as a slow form of moral attrition. It dismantles the emotional and communal foundations of



human life, suggesting that the ultimate cost of technological progress is not economic displacement, but the quiet extinction of human feeling itself.

CONCLUSION

Player Piano illustrates automation's dual burden: working-class individuals face material displacement and purposeless labor, while technocrats experience existential and moral alienation. Both suffer psychological strain, social fragmentation, and diminished human dignity. Vonnegut's critique demonstrates that efficiency, when divorced from humanistic and ethical values, undermines identity, empathy, and social cohesion. Sustainable technological progress requires human-centered design, ethical reflection, and structures that preserve meaning, autonomy, and interpersonal connection.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Human-Centered Design – Automation should enhance human labor rather than replace it, allowing workers to exercise creativity and decision-making alongside machines.
2. Hybrid Work Models – Assign repetitive tasks to machines while keeping humans engaged in problem-solving and meaningful work to reduce alienation.
3. Spaces for Social Connection – Create environments, like communal areas or collaborative spaces, where people can interact meaningfully beyond transactional tasks.
4. Purposeful Education and Training – Equip individuals with adaptive skills and opportunities for hands-on, fulfilling work to maintain identity and self-worth.
5. Ethical Implementation – Prioritize human values and well-being in deploying automation, ensuring efficiency does not override dignity, purpose, or social cohesion.

REFERENCES

- Blauner, R. (1964). *Alienation and freedom: The factory worker and his industry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Booker, M. K. (1994). *Dystopian literature: A theory and research guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Braverman, H. (1974). *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.



- Claeys, G. (2010). *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fromm, E. (1941/1991). *Escape from freedom*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Marx, K. (1844/1964). *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (M. Milligan, Trans., pp. 71-73). New York: International Publishers.
- Mumford, L. (1934/1967). *Technics and civilization*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Noble, D.F. (1984). *Forces of production: A social history of industrial automation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Pursell, C.W. (2007). *Technology in postwar America: A history*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Reed, P. (1997). *The Kurt Vonnegut encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Ritzer, G. (1993). *The McDonaldization of society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Seeman, M. (1959). On the meaning of alienation. *American Sociological Review*, 24(6), pp. 783-791.
- Simmons, D. (2009). *Kurt Vonnegut: A critical companion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- The National WWII Museum. (n.d.). *Innovating for victory* (Online). Available: <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/innovating-victory> [2025, October 1].
- Vonnegut, K. (1952). *Player piano*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Weber, M. (1905/1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology* (H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, Eds., (pp.123-130). New York: Oxford University Press.