

“And Is My Underwear Like Theirs?”: Men’s Clothing and the Dynamics of Masculinities in
Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano*

Esteban Rojas Castro

The objective of this paper is to draw focus to the male characters’ clothes in *Player Piano* not only as markers of their position in a noticeably male-dominated world, but, most importantly, as manifestations of the dynamics between different masculinities. While descriptions of clothing do not appear heavily in the texts, Vonnegut’s tailored and sporadic use of them highlight the social conventions of gender as well as the characters’ own relationship with those dynamics. The analyzed characters – Paul Proteus, Kroner, Edward Finnerty, Luke Lubbock, and Ewing J. Halyard – represent different aspects of the technological dystopia of the novel, and they all possess a degree of power and authority in their different worlds to varying degrees. As such, descriptions of their clothing and their attitudes towards clothes grant further insight into the characters’ positions in a system where even gender behaves mechanically. For example, Kroner is the highest-ranking manager of the Eastern factories; his style of dress thus exudes patriarchal authority in both social and private settings. In contrast, Finnerty is a brilliant engineer working in Washington D.C.; however, he actively criticizes the moralistic attitude of the elite by mocking their superficial values regarding family, marriage and dress. As many other dystopian novels, Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* functions as a satire of American society in the 1950s, particularly the consumerism, conformity and social anxieties of the time. Therefore, in addition to gender and literary theory, this study also employs cultural studies of men’s fashion and the development of men’s lifestyle magazines in the 1950s. By encompassing studies, such as Tom Pendergast’s *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture 1900-1950* and Marshall McLuhan’s *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, this

paper aims to showcase the societal dynamics of gender in the novel and link them to the cultural aspects being satirized.

Works Cited

- Arnold, Thurman W. *The Folklore of Capitalism*. Yale UP, 1937.
- Baker, Brian. *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres 1945-2000*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006.
- Buck, Lynn. "Vonnegut's World of Comic Futility." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1975, pp. 181-198. *Project Muse*. <https://muse.edu/article.441272>.
- Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., U of California P, 2005.
- Freese, Peter. "Kurt's Vonnegut's 'Player Piano': or, 'Would You Ask EPICAC What People Are For?'" *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, vol. 27, no. 2, Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2002, pp.123-159. *JSTOR*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43025671>.
- Hicks, Heather J. *The Culture of Soft Work: Labor, Gender, and Race in Postmodern American Narrative*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Hoffman, Thomas P. "The Theme of Mechanization in Player Piano." *Clockwork Worlds: Mechanized Environments in SF*, edited by Richard D. Erlich and Thomas P. Dunn, Greenwood Press, 1983, pp. 125-135. *Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, vol. 7.
- Hume, Kathryn. "Vonnegut's Melancholy." *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 2, U of Iowa Press, 1998, pp. 221-238.
- Klinkowitz, Jerome. *The Vonnegut Effect*. U of South Carolina P, 2004.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1951.
- Merrick, Helen. "Gender in Science Fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 241-252.

- Morse, Donald E. "Sensational Implications: Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952)." *The Anachronist*, vol 1, Lorand UP, 2000, pp. 303-314.
- Pendergast, Tom. *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture 1900-1950*. U of Missouri Press, 2000.
- Schatt, Stanley. *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* Twayne Publishers, 1976.
- Segal, Howard P. "Vonnegut's *Player Piano*: An Ambiguous Technological Dystopia." *No Place Else: Explorations in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*, edited by Eric S. Rabkin, et al., Southern Illinois UP, 1983, pp. 162-181.
- Slater, Philip. *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*. Beacon Press, 1970.
- Tally, Robert T. *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography*. Continuum, 2011.
- Tomedi, John. *Great Writers, Kurt Vonnegut*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2004.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Player Piano*. The Dial Press, 1952.

Biography

Esteban Rojas Castro is a UCR master's student in English literature. He graduated with honors with a B.A. in English at the same institution. For the past years, he has presented at several literature conferences at UCR. In late 2016, he was a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley. There he conducted research for his dissertation on mechanization and masculinities in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*. His areas of interest are contemporary fantasy and science fiction, cultural and gender studies, and literary analysis of new media.