Abstract

Jelinek was often commended for her frequent critiques of consumerism and the subjugation of women in the patriarchal society. In her avowedly autobiographical novel *The Piano Teacher*, she again uses the life of a pathological piano teacher to reflect the cruelties and the subjugating powers inherent in the capitalistic and patriarchal society. By adopting a psychological approach, this thesis will show that Jelinek’s fiction is an account of a larger analysis of female masochism than it initially seems to be. The protagonist’s regular practice of self-mutilation is more than an individual pathology, but an allegory of the result of the violence and deprivation inflicted on the individual by the capitalist society.

The thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter I is an introduction, including the overview of the novel and its critical backgrounds. In Chapter II, textual analyses as well as psychoanalysis will be made to explore the psychological depths of the protagonist’s compulsive behaviors and voyeurism. Erika’s relationships with men, especially with one of her musical students, Walter Klemmer, failed tragically and resulted in her final self-destruction. This chapter will study Erika’s neurotic personality and will investigate the factors which contribute to the protagonist’s neuroses and her consequent sufferings.

In Chapter III, I will focus on studying Erika’s sadomasochistic fantasies and voyeurism; not only is she made to hurt herself in her tormenting relationship with her mother, she also repeats the sadomasochistic pattern in her relationship with Kelmmer. By researching into the causes and psychodynamics of sadomasochism, I will discuss why her non-erotic impulses would be transformed into perverse erotic desires and behaviors. My topics for discussion include: What caused her to develop her “perverse mechanism”? What forces propel her to live out her perversions? The
answers lie in the childhood traumas inflicted by her mother and the cultural conditions which lend weight and color to the individual experiences and determine their particular forms. In order to excel and become an elite of Austrian’s high culture, Erika was made to deny her drive needs until later she can only experience a libidinal deadness. Forceful repression of her natural desires lead to her pathologies. The chapter also shows the danger of conforming too completely to the capitalistic ideology and exposes the ideology’s oppressing and alienating effects.

Finally, the last chapter concludes that by presenting a cruelty revolting in its extremity, Jelinek is denouncing the Austria’s idolization of high music culture, and mourning the sacrifice of a pianist’s id under its system. Erika can be seen as the victim of society’s fetishization of petty-bourgeois values and her upbringing according to its norms. By exposing the superstructure that immobilizes her characters, Jelinek’s biting irony is directed at the capitalist superstructure and its restraining and deadening effect on the individual.