Chapter I
Introduction

*Talents differ: all is well and wisely put;*

*If I cannot carry forests on my back,*

*Neither can you crack a nut* (222).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “A Fable”, *Poems and Poets*

*The Piano Teacher* by Elfriede Jelinek is an account of what has gone terribly wrong in the raising of the daughter. Not realizing that “Talents differ: all is well and wisely put,” the protagonist’s mother willfully forced her daughter into the yoke of classical music. “Be a world-famous concert pianist”—that was her mother’s ideal for her. Whether Erika likes it or not, her life’s path had been laid out for her since she was born. Since then, Erika’s life has been governed by the pursuit of her mother’s aspiration, as her mother relentlessly trains what she sees as her ticket out of the lower economic class. Unfortunately, however, Erika fails to play her way into people’s hearts and endear herself via music. She fails in her musical career as in life and in her interpersonal relationships—she fails because she is disconnected with common human feelings, because her emotional expression has been destroyed and perverted. In Jelinek’s autobiographically based\(^1\) novel *The Piano Teacher*, we follow the

\(^1\) Like Erika in the novel, Jelinek was the only child of her parents, who were relatively old when she was born, her father being 46 and her mother being 42. Jelinek grew up in Vienna, where she attended the famous Music Conservatory. Jelinek herself lived with her mother until the latter’s death in 2000 at the age of ninety-six. Even after Jelinek married in 1974, she did not leave home, commuting back and forth between her husband’s home in Munich, and her mother’s in Vienna. Like Erika’s, Jelinek comes from a family with a very authoritarian mother, who excelled in sexually repressive pedagogical measures. Jelinek's father—a Jew who survived the Holocaust by working for the Nazis as a chemist—was also committed to an insane asylum while she was still a girl.
protagonist Erika Kohut, a failed concert pianist turned music professor at the conservatory, to a variety of dingy sexual scenes while she engages in some voyeuristic activities, including the sex shops, porno shows, and sex-trade neighborhoods of Vienna. We learn about her perverse modes of sexuality and later a secretive relationship with one of her piano pupils, Walter Klemmer. In this novel we have a glimpse into the sadomasochistic world of a piano teacher.

Behind the description of the pathological case, there is a denunciation of Austria’s musical culture in the novel. Jelinek affirmed this in an interview: “High culture is the master, the female piano teachers are the serving maids. They have no right to any creative energy, not even to a life of their own. I carried this to its extreme in the text” (“Elfriede: Interview”). Erika was depicted as a pianist whose life has been manipulated by her mother, who harbored aspirations for artistic fame and gain for her daughter. Throughout her life, Erika has been led by the nose, not even having a say in choosing her own interest and career. Having internalized the ideology of the high culture that Austria so idolizes, Erika’s mother forced her daughter into its yoke. Mother chose an artistic profession for her and started her austere training, “so she could squeeze money out of the arduously achieved perfection” (Jelinek 24). Erika was made to fathom the unfathomable opus of classical music until she could feel “no more drive within her”; she then practiced voyeurism and developed a need for sadomasochistic fantasies (Jelinek 105). Supervised by her mother, Erika went to the extreme to achieve perfection defined by the “master,” even at the expense of her libidinal needs. Here we see how Jelinek took what Austria most prides itself on—its music and musical geniuses—and presented their negative side: the renunciation by a female piano teacher of her libido. This novel can be seen as an indictment against the culture which demands the sacrifice of a person’s id. Erika’s inordinate sacrifices and
self-denial eventually lead her to a psychic death\textsuperscript{2} and neurosis\textsuperscript{3}. As a reader, I consider this an indication of an underestimation of what is of true value in life. All the demands made by her mother make one feel inclined to say that the intention for Erika to be “happy” is not included in the plan of her creation. By using violence as a means of disciplining and subordinating, the mother requires the daughter to keep climbing up the ladder of success, even if it means Erika has to repress her feelings and forsake her autonomy. Erika stabs herself in the end, proving herself a victim in the pathological mother-daughter relation. Although the mother is identified as the worst villain of the plot, the superstructure which determines her behavior is not to be spared criticism. After all, it is within the system that the mother has made the pianist renounce her desires. Therefore, in the thesis, I intend to study Erika’s neurotic personality, her sadomasochistic perversion and twisted personality as the consequence of her pathological upbringing and her internalization of the patriarchal/capitalistic ideology. Her pursuit of musical achievement doesn’t bring her the happiness and autonomy she had expected, rather, the system’s rules and restrictions have strangled her life and created in her psychological problems.

Before winning literature’s top honor—the Nobel Prize for Literature—in 2004,

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\item \textsuperscript{2} In \textit{Civilization and Its Discontents}, the psyche begins to look like a sadomasochistic dungeon, with the cruel superego tormenting the hapless ego. What we often feel day to day are the results of the endless lashings that the superego administers to the dependent self. Those results include fatigue, depression, lack of interest in sex, in new experiences, in life. At its worst, the superego can become so ferocious in its unfounded enmity against the ego—so full of frustrated aggression—that it drives the individual to suicide. The superego, says Freud in a sorrowful line, can create a pure culture of death in the psyche (Freud 83-4).
\item \textsuperscript{3} Freud sees a culture not as the result of a complex social process but primarily as the product of biological drives which are repressed or sublimated, with the result that reaction formations are built up against them. The more complete the suppression of these drives, the higher the cultural development. Since the capacity for sublimation is limited and since the intensive suppression of primitive drives without sublimation may lead to neurosis, the growth of civilization must inevitably imply a growth of neurosis. Neuroses are the price humanity has to pay for cultural development (Freud, \textit{Civilization}\textsuperscript{33-45}).
\end{itemize}
Jelinek had been called Austria’s best-hated author for her poignant social criticism and sexually controversial works. Although being crowned a Nobel laureate in literature, Jelinek’s winning and her writing still drew much criticism and controversy. It is fair to say that Jelinek’s writings are sexually bold and explicit. Written in a detached tone, her novel *The Piano Teacher* also contains graphically-delineated descriptions of sadomasochistic sexuality, rapes, self-mutilations, voyeurism, and deviations. Her style of writing really shows the power of the ruthless descriptions of bloody realities. The Nobel Prize Committee also commented that “the musical flow of voices and counter-voices” in her work “reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power” (Jelinek 1). In an interview Jelinek characterized herself in this way: “I would say that I am certainly not an author of either discretion or suggestion, but the opposite. I am an author of the axe” (Bethman 65). While being questioned about the negativity and lack of hope in her writing, Jelinek responded that her writings are “limited to depicting analytically, but also polemically (sarcastically) the horrors of reality. […] My writing, my method, is based on criticism, not utopianism” (“Elfriede”). Reading Jelinek’s works in this light, it is not surprising to find that the depiction of the ugly, unseemly, and even grotesque “society’s clichés and their subjugating power” is present in each of her works.

The background of this novel is set in the great capital of classical music, Vienna, the city of Mozart, where the appreciation of music is integral to Austrian life. The protagonist, Erika, is a 36-year-old teacher who has spent her entire life with her mother—a housewife who has always harbored great dreams and high aspirations for her daughter’s career, but none of which have come true. Erika eventually only manages to secure a teaching post at the Vienna Conservatory, and has to listen to her students’ mistakes for endless times. The story is divided into
two parts. The first part deals essentially with the relationship of the eponymous “piano-player” Erika Kohut to her mother, with whom she lives in the deathly union in a run-down apartment in Vienna. The second part focuses more on Erika’s deformed sexuality, characterized above all by voyeurism and sadomasochism, and culminates in her brutal and degrading relationship with a piano student ten years her junior, Walter Kelmmer. In the former section, we read about Erika’s present life with her mother, who very much controls Erika’s life—from the clothes she wears, the money she makes, the classes she teaches, and even the bed she sleeps on—she still shares the same bed with her mother. Then we learn about Erika’s past through flashbacks: throughout childhood and youth she had been imprisoned in the torture chamber of music, spending endless hours at the keyboard, sacrificing everything and struggling to get “a tiny place within eyeshot of the great musical creators” (Jelinek 14). Her mother constantly admonished her—“you should never let others be better than you”—and smacked her if she refused to practice (Jelinek 24). In order to make sure the child would someday get to the top of the world, she did everything she could to keep the child from being distracted, especially from men. “Mother warns Erika about the envious horde that always tries to destroy other people’s achievements—a horde made up almost entirely of men” (24). More than anything, she wants to prevent Erika from being reshaped by a man. She intends to utilize Erika’s life for her own satisfaction, to use her to fulfill her dreams for glories, and to keep this “property” all to herself. She doesn’t wish to become a mother-in-law; she is quite content with her status as a mother, as the daughter’s “proprietor” (Jelinek 5). She is against Erika’s entering in

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4 Jelinek’s novel Die Klavierspielerin (1983) was written in German language (meaning “The Piano Player” in English) and its English version The Piano Teacher was published in 1988. It was adapted for film and directed by Michael Haneke in 2001, starring Isabelle Huppert, and won three major prizes in Cannes Film Festival.
marriage later on, because Erika is “unyielding”— “If neither spouse can yield, then a marriage is doomed” (Jelinek 13). Erika likewise thinks she could never submit to a man after submitting to her mother for so many years.

Justifying her over-possessiveness, the mother makes a cutting remark: “If SHE were left to her own devices, SHE would show more enthusiasm for some young man than for her piano-playing” (Jelinek 35). She warns Erika of the horrors of the “primrose path” of male seduction, which leads downward to degeneration. “Better the peak of art than the slough of sex,” she makes Erika believe that only art can promise her endless sweetness (Jelinek 197). Erika is convinced that in order to climb up the ladder of success, she must forget about sex; she should ignore or even despise her own sexuality. Mother wants a large condominium and all the material comforts someday, and “Mother will get her choice and Erika will have to pay” (Jelinek 5). So Erika has to fight to the top, tooth and nail. Mother decides that there should be no holidays for Erika; art should pursue Erika everywhere. So during her adolescence, while other teenagers were having fun, Erika had to keep producing the notes to be heard, however reluctant she was:

“for the sounds indicate that the child has ascended the scale, to reach loftier spheres, while leaving her body down below as a dead frame. The daughter’s physical remains, sloughed off in her ascent, are combed for any traces of male use and then thoroughly shaken. After completing the music, she can slip back into her mortal coils, which have been nicely dried and starched crisp and stiff.” (35)

Erika could never rest at any level she reached; she had to keep climbing, to the next level. The mother wanted the child to enjoy “international fame and fortune” someday, that is why she held back the child, “keeping her away from the world, so that someday she won’t belong to Mama anymore, she’ll belong to the whole world” and be
worshiped by the whole world (Jelinek 37). For Erika, the act of playing the piano has little to do with enjoyment of music. For both the daughter and mother, the piano is a means to attain social status, to become part of Austria’s cultural elite.

We behold Erika’s “good” public image as a professor contrasting with her secretive, deviant private life full of voyeurism and experiments in masochism. Her brief and rather perverse sexual interlude with Walter Klemmer serves to illustrate her crippled personality, her infantile dependence on her mother, and her utterly distorted notions of human affection. Their relationship ends with Klemmer abandoning Erika after raping her and with Erika stabbing herself after witnessing Klemmer flirting with other young women. Jelinek holds, as usual, a bleak view on man-and-woman relationships, and conveys such pessimism in her writing. Her description of the sexes as “alien and enemy continents constantly crashing into one another” (Jelinek 143) can be interpreted as the central tenet informing her translation of reality onto the written page. Throughout the book none of the interactions between men and women are shown to be satisfactory; quite to the contrary, they are all based on violence and misunderstanding. One could not help but wonder why Jelinek holds such a negative opinion on man-and-woman relationships, and why the pianist in Jelinek’s depiction is so morbid and unhappy.

In Chapter II I intend to explore the psychological background of Erika’s deviant behaviors—being a professor at the prestigious Vienna conservatory, an expert in Schubert, Erika spends her free time visiting pornography dens and mutilating her genitals. I propose to study Erika’s erratic behaviors and compulsions on the premise that she suffers from the symptoms of a neurotic personality, and that such a personality is the result of her mother’s oppressive upbringing, her aspiration to make Erika a world-famous pianist, and the fierce competitiveness which has permeated the Vienna musical high culture. Brought up under sexually repressive pedagogical
measures, Erika now has anxieties over experiencing her own sexuality. She has always had to guarantee her independence from sexual passion—from the dangers of male seduction and enslavement—and to protect her virtue and remain attached to her mother. The mother holds a profoundly negative view of men—of any relationships with men—and she is convinced of the inevitability of the abuse, suffering, and dependency that women have to endure from men. It is not surprising, then, that in words and actions she inculcates suspicion of the innate depravity of men—their evil designs—and the humiliating experience of sexuality. As a result, for Erika, any sign of femininity and sexual attractiveness is extinguished, since sexuality has been judged to be the worst of all evils. “The mother expressly wants her child to stay tied to the maternal apron strings rather than to stew in the juice of sensual love and passion” (Jelinek 191). In fact, all this represents the mother’s desire to keep her daughter on the emotional level of the pre-oedipal stage, thus preventing the loss of the daughter’s loyalty.

In addition to her mother’s inculcation, Erika’s aversion to sex is also based on her past experiences with men. When Erika was a young woman, she had secretly had several experiments with men, but none of them left her with pleasant memories. After each of these experiences, Erika just wanted to get back to her mother as fast as possible. “Mother didn’t suspect a thing. In this way, Erika grazed through two or three bachelor pads with kitchenettes and sitz baths. Sour pastures for the gourmet of art” (Jelinek 74). All of the men walked away from her after having sex with her. After being maltreated by men as an object for sexual satisfaction, she made up her mind that she would never get herself into this kind of “subordinate” position in man-and-woman relationship: “SHE would never get into a situation in which she might appear weak, much less inferior. That is why she stays where she is. She only goes through the familiar stages of learning and obeying, she never looks for new areas” (Jelinek 86).
“Erika has closed everything about her that could be opened” (Jelinek 45). This is why later she feels nothing but disgust, or at best indifference, at the idea of Klemmer’s attentions, but seeks protection from and in her mother: “Their domesticity goes awry because Klemmer won’t skedaddle. He doesn’t intend to force his way into their home, does he? Erika would much prefer to creep into her mother and rock gently in the warm fluid of her womb” (Jelinek 74).

Ketch wrote that “we’re confronted with Erika’s neuroses—the shocking results of maternal over-protectiveness and domination” (361). Erika cannot free herself from her mother’s strong bonds. Instead, she has become an extension of her mother’s neurotic personality. One witnesses a world of grey for Erika, her strong and invincible exterior masking her inability to meet her mother’s standard of perfection and her manifest desire to break through her imprisonment. In her deepest wishes, Erika craves emotional freedom, wildly desires to break the shackles but knows in her heart that she in unable to accomplish such—she knows subconsciously that she no longer knows what this “freedom” even is.

Chapter III is mainly a psychoanalytical discussion of the causes and psychodynamics of Erika’s masochistic fantasies and her self-destructive behaviors. I will propose in this chapter that the factors of her erotic choices lie in the details of the traumas which her family has inflicted on her. Sigrid Berka’s in her article

5 The term masochism originally referred to sexual perversions and fantasies in which sexual satisfaction is obtained through suffering, through being beaten, tortured, raped, enslaved, and humiliated (Horney 260). According to Mark Edmundson, in the economy of sadomasochistic sex, pleasure and guilt enter into a satisfying reciprocal relationship. For the masochist, pleasure is paid for immediately and fully with pain. The masochist can enjoy piquant, long-wished-for joys that conscience has forbidden, for now conscience can also have what it deeply desires: the pleasure of punishing the transgressions. Morality and appetite are alternately satisfied. It’s as though a composer had scored a perfectly balanced duet for two implacable divas. The masochist often leaves the encounter in a state of harmony, moral and sexual passions both expended, the inner balance at soothing zero (Edmundson 134).
“D(e)addyfication” wrote that Erika plays the role of a daughter as well as a husband, thus she is “simultaneously magnified and emasculated through a disavowal of her lack”— her femininity is posited as lacking in nothing. So she cannot identify herself with either a femininity role or a masculinity role. To quote Berka’s words, “The crossing of genders and generations inscribed onto Erika’s body at the moment of her birth will emerge in the body of Jelinek’s texts as the scars and marks of masochism and vampirism” (Berka 229). Also, as Jessica Benjamin outlines the roots of woman’s masochism, she states that to develop her own desire, the girl needs to separate from the mother and identify with father, who is the representative of excitement, outside, otherness (125). “Masochism results from the girl’s inability to identify with this gender difference or to make what is not hers represent her desire” (Benjamin 124), which leads to her idealization of and envy not for the father’s male organ but actually for the independence, self-esteem, and agency it provides and signifies (Benjamin 126). In his late essays on female sexuality, Freud also came to acknowledge the decisive impact of the pre-oedipal phase on a woman’s future. He acknowledged the little girl’s primary attachment to the mother as a natural predilection. To develop a “normal” female attitude in the Oedipal phase, it is necessary for the girl to have a libidinal transfer to the father as an object of love, and progress from clitoral to vaginal sexuality. This is explained by her recognition that she cannot possess her mother due to her lack of penis (Ketch 362).

In The Piano Teacher, the mother is the sole adult responsible for the upbringing of the only daughter. The father figure is locked up in a psychiatric ward and is totally excluded from the possibility of parenting. The absence of the father does not allow Erika any opportunity to transfer her libidinal attachment from the mother to a male object, thus strengthening the pre-oedipal bond, increasing its duration, and causing long-term effects on Erika’s adult sexuality. In Benjamin’s typical view, the etiology of female masochism is directly linked to a failure of the girl’s environment, as is the case in Jelinek’s novel: an unavailable or missing father makes the girl’s depression and
helplessness increase (Benjamin 125), especially when the mother does not support her
daughter’s separation or recognize her independent accomplishments (Benjamin 133).
Indeed, Erika is unable to make a transition to the Oedipal realm, to have mature
relationships with men, because she is trapped in her mother-fixation. What results is
her “retreat from active sexuality” and an “enjoyment of submission, the annihilation
or loss of will under what appears to be conditions of control and safety” (Benjamin
135, 118). In Erika’s case, her mother provides exactly this paradoxical safety-zone,
which offers control of the self at the price of a tempting loss of self. Erika knows of
the dangers of the domestic delight of dinner, symbolizing the lure of a cannibalistic
act that links annihilation with enjoyment: “She knows that her mother’s embrace will
completely devour and digest her, yet she is magically drawn to it” (Jelinek 118). Erika
rebels against this strangling embrace by demanding a life of her own but nonetheless
fantasizes about it as a life which “will culminate in a zenith of total obedience”
(Jelinek 104). She is kept in an infantile stage of utter dependence and thus fails to
progress from clitoral to vaginal sexuality and to experience love and sensual pleasure
in a patriarchal society. Erika’s pathology is the result of her mother’s suppression of
her development and her training in classical music to be “divine” and perfect
(Jelinek 197). Her mother sets up a standard of perfection for her, but Erika can’t meet
her mother’s standard. The expectation of perfection has tormented her, and that leaves
her no choice but to keep punishing herself, physically and mentally. This creates

6 In the essay “D(e)addyfication”, Sigrid Berka mentioned that Erika’s last name, “Kohut,” a common
Austrian name, seems to carry an additional psychological explanation for her unlived life as her
mother’s “property” that belongs “to mother and no one else” (Jelinek 5, 199). Heinz Kohut is the
psychologist of narcissism and ego-development whose theories comment on the destructive effects of a
symbiotic mother/daughter relationship, in which the merger with an idealized object prevents a
successful separation from the primary other, the mother. Jelinek, in turn, evokes this background when
she analyzes the situation of Erika as that of a child: “The daughter is her mother’s idol, and Mother
demands only a tiny tribute: Erika’s life”; and the child as an extension of her mother: “Mother and
daughter put their heads together. They are inseparable, virtually one person” (Jelinek 26, 127).
Obviously, Erika has not succeeded in separating herself from her mother and in developing her
individuation (Berka 231).
self-hate, depression, and aggressiveness which find their outlet in masochistic fantasies.

In a letter to Klemmer, Erika tells Klemmer how she would like to be gagged and bound to the point where she can no longer move or stand up. She wishes to resemble “a mere object” (217), “a plank” (215), “a package” (221), and tells him ways of assuring that she is tied up so tightly that “you yourself could barely unravel them” (222); “Do you know you can intensify the effect by first soaking the ropes in water for a very long time? […] surprise me with ropes that have been thoroughly soaked; they shrink as they dry” (223). In all of Erika’s requests she stresses that pain and punishment are the satisfactions she is seeking, but she never once hints that these acts of bondage and sado-masochism are to be understood as preliminaries before progressing to orgasm. Erika may have collected all the necessary paraphernalia for her masochism to be enacted in the sexual arena, but the narrator’s commentary works against this indication, to impress upon the reader that what the protagonist truly wishes is for her letter to be completely discounted. “Say something loving to me and forget about the letter, she asks inaudibly” (228). Erika’s letter is firmly relegated to the realm of fantasy by the subtext of her thoughts. On paper she may have demanded all manner of torments and tortures, but in her mind she longs for the love and attention which accompany “normal” sexuality: “She now hopes that love will prevent anything from occurring. She will insist on it, but an amorous reply will make up for his refusal. Love excuses and forgives, that’s what Erika thinks” (226). So in Chapter III, much of the discussion will be focused on the meaning of her neurotic suffering, figuring out what psychological needs propel her to develop her perversions, and what pleasure Erika derives from inflicting pain on herself. Then I will discuss the unconscious core of perversion, which explains Erika’s deviance as the result of a miscarried repair of her mental injury through dehumanization.

In Robert J. Stoller’s book *Pain & Passion: A Psychoanalyst Explores the World of S & M*, he uses the term *sadomasochism* to refer to demonstrable fantasies and the
behaviors that put those fantasies into the real world. He mentioned that there is such a perversion, according to the more old-fashioned psychiatric and psychoanalytic wisdom, in which someone gets genitally excited by having pain inflicted or by inflicting pain, and that it is a radical distortion from normal (Stoller, Pain 8). But after actual meeting with sadomasochists and collecting clinical data, Stoller stated that sadomasochism as a perversion includes not only the inflicting of physical pain but also certain scenarios in which flagrant humiliation is evident. The inflicted pain can be either physical or psychic. For some people, the scenario does not include any of the physical techniques of whipping, mouth gagging, bondage, stomping or kicking…etc, but simply taking a role, such as master and his servant. For others, the physical pain-inflicting activities are necessary. For many, the playacting is crucial but must also include the physical (Stoller, Pain 16). The common features in S & M practices are suffering and the gross, dramatized expression of powerlessness for the participant playing the bottom role and of power for the designated top7. As to the erotic versus the nonerotic issue, Stoller wrote that by no means are all sadomasochistic scenarios aimed at creating erotic pleasures. In many situations, the techniques are used for relaxation and dramatization. As to moral issues, the difference between consensual and nonconsensual8 is the greatest in importance, “participants who choose unwilling partners or who go beyond the agreed-on rules between partners introduce high risk into what is otherwise theater” (Stoller, Pain 17). The observation that “[T]he art of sadomasochism is its theater” should explain its simulation of harm and of high risk. The imitation of humiliation is carefully constructed never to produce true humiliation,

7 A top is the person who, in a particular episode, chooses to be the manifestly dominant person, while the bottom is the person dominated. Subheadings of top and bottom are master-mistress / slave, the dominant/ the submissive…etc. (Stoller 15).
8 Before the enactment of their scenarios, the participants always negotiate the “contract” between them so that within the illusion of danger is the already arranged promise that absolute limits will not be exceeded. By far the most important element to be established is trust: These sadomasochists all appreciate sophisticated partners who know exactly how to play within the rules of the game while seeming to be exceeding the limits (Stoller 19).
and the imitation of trauma, such as when being humiliated is enacted, is also not traumatic. According to Stoller, what we can observe from consensual S & M theater is the constant and high attention to one’s partner’s experiences and feelings (Stoller 21). So looking at Erika’s case, we can say that in trying to undo the effects of harm inflicted on her young psyche, Erika now needs to “play at harm.” The story however, ends sadly because Erika proved to be a “failed” masochist—she failed to “educate” her partner, Klemmer, into a willing participant in her fantasies. When reading the letter, the sadomasochistic contract, Klemmer could hardly believe that Erika is being serious in her demands—“he merely asks for the twentieth time whether she’s serious, or is this just a bad joke?” (Jelinek 227) As a result, Erika’s hope of “salvation through love” is crashed. Instead of love, Klemmer in turn treated her with derision and disgust. After being rejected by Klemmer, she is alone once again.

In *The Piano Teacher* we witness Jelinek’s criticism lashes out mainly at two aspects: first, the grotesque symbiosis of Erika and her elderly mother, who still treats Erika like a small child and takes violent revenge whenever she disobeys; second, Erika’s perverse modes of sexuality and cruelty as the consequence of life-long repression and permanent supervision. It is no coincidence that Jelinek herself also comes from a family with a very authoritarian mother, who treated Jelinek with sexually repressive pedagogical measures. Jelinek made it clear that the thrust of her autobiographically-inspired fiction is aimed at the influences of family upbringing on individual’s sexuality and character. She places her focus on the treatment of the physical and psychological violence which maternal love is capable of and the scars left on the victimized daughter. Moreover, since Erika was brought up according to the norms of Austria’s bourgeois values and was victimized under such values and ideology, Jelinek’s critique of Austria’s fetishizing of bourgeois values is evident. It is against the backdrop of the patriarchal/capitalistic society that the conflict-laden complexities of mother-daughter bonding were treated in depth. Erika’s individual freedom is severely limited by material forces, especially by her mother’s insatiable
yearnings for a new condominium and for money. Erika’s mother values money above all things, even above Erika’s dignity and her individuality. Under the sadistic stranglehold of the mother and capitalistic ideology, Erika inevitably loses the ability to establish any relationship that would not be based on the principles of exploitation: domination/submission, exploitation/servility, and abuse/obedience.

This novel reflects a concern for women and how some of them are distorted by the musical culture of the Austrian society. Jelinek’s arrangement of the story attempts to expose the gender oppression, violence, and individual’s submission to patriarchal capitalism and how those result in a woman’s psychological problems. The violence to which Jelinek is referring is not limited to overt violence; she is also exposing the latent violence in the society’s most propagated ideology which effectively stereotypes women and paralyzes people against change, limiting the ability of women to gain a voice and a self-determined identity. Ketch claims that the mother who has “experienced devaluation as a human being and the absence of true self-realization in a patriarchal culture” in turn exerts her tyrannical power in the domestic sphere of influence (362). By convincing the daughter that “Better the peak of art than the slough of sex”, she negates the daughter’s sexuality and her independent existence, which is identical to her psychic death (Jelinek 197). Ketch wrote that by repeating the relationship pattern of sadistic domination and masochistic dependence between men and women, the mother transmits patterns of women’s inferiority and submission.9

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9 According to Ketch, the social, economic, and psychological position of inferiority that the Western middle-class housewife commonly holds is considered a major reason for a daughter’s failure to develop “mature dependence” and self-respect. The mother is likely to invest a lot of anxious energy and guilt in her concern for her children and to look to them for her own self-affirmation, or that her self-esteem, dependent on the lives of others than herself, is shaky. Her life situation leads her to an over-involvement in her children’s lives. A mother in this situation keeps her daughter from differentiation and from lessening her infantile dependence. It is difficult, then, for daughters in a Western middle-class family to develop self-esteem. Most psychoanalytic and social theorists claim that the mother inevitably represents to her daughter (and son) regression, passivity, dependence, and lack of orientation to reality, whereas the father represents progression, activity, independence, and reality orientation (Ketch 360).
makes Erika her marionette on strings. She dramatically confirms what feminist psychoanalysis has suggested—“the inescapability of the mother’s permanent influence on the daughter’s life”—her values, her standards, and her doctrines permeate the daughter’s vision of the world and society. Her advice and her admonitions continue to determine the daughter’s decisions (360). The mother’s self is then mirrored in the daughter. The mother is internalized and remains part of the daughter’s self in spite of all attempts at external separation and autonomy. So even though Erika has never experienced the “rule of the father” at first hand\(^{10}\), she has submitted to it in a purely symbolic sense. In the end, Erika doesn’t succeed in asserting herself and in taking her life into her own control. As readers, we must realize that any attempt to escape such oppression is dependent upon a fundamental questioning and revaluation of the ideology sustaining the status quo. Jelinek’s characters are incapable of this questioning because they are blind to its falsity, but an admittedly very tentative potential for change lies with the reader. Even if Erika ultimately fails to assert herself, to take control of her own sexuality, or to break out of her oppression, Jelinek’s texts do at least have a consciousness-raising effect. By drawing attention to the nature of women’s economic and sexual oppression, Jelinek reveals the evils of capitalism and the fact that women are oftentimes battered and bruised by such a capitalistic/patriarchal hierarchy. By situating her female protagonists within an ideology both capitalistic and patriarchal, Jelinek is arguing that a change in the ideology and society’s infrastructure is necessary (Fiddler “Sexuality” 12).

\(^{10}\) Erika’s father had suffered from mental illness and had died in a mental asylum when Erika was still quite young. Thus, strictly speaking, Erika has never experienced the “rule of the father” at first hand; the responsibility of rearing of the daughter falls entirely on the mother.