Chapter II

Psychoanalytical Exploration of Erika’s Neurotic Personality

After being initially repelled by the thought of a relationship with her pupil, Erika became less and less averse to the idea as the novel progresses. Although being cold and indifferent on the outside, deep down she was desperately longing for Klemmer’s affection. However, whenever Klemmer approaches her with amorous advances, she can’t help but show an aversion and pull away from him. “Erika squirms because of her unrequited and disquieting fears and anxieties. She is now suspended from the infusion tube of Klemmer’s good graces” (Jelinek 196). When she took a step forward by giving Klemmer a letter, Erika appeared uneasy and anxious, and tried to cover her embarrassment by constantly coughing, wiping her nose, swinging back and forth, cracking her knuckles, and peering into remote corners instead of looking into Klemmer’s eyes. Such a step forward was forbidden by her mother, who has made Erika think nothing else but her artistic career. Mother has always used music as a mechanism of control; it was through such a violent and suppressive control that Erika became estranged from her own feelings and incapable of emotional expressions. Her personality was so distorted by rules and restrictions that she could only act against her real wishes:

Those five lines have been controlling her ever since she first began to think. She mustn’t think of anything but those five black lines. […] She struggles for air, experiencing something like an asthma attack—then she doesn’t know what to do with all this air. Her throat rattles, she can’t drive a peep out of it. […] The teacher coughs convulsively. She coughs herself free from something far worse than a tickle in her throat. She cannot
express her feelings vocally, only pianistically (Jelinek 190).

Clearly, Erika has lost her ability to express her feelings; she is inhibited from getting what she desires. The symptoms she reveals are characteristic of a neurosis. In the book *Psychotherapy of Neurotic Character*, David Shapiro wrote:

In neurosis the personality reacts against itself. It seems that the person has tendencies that his own character cannot tolerate and reacts against, with remarkable consequences. […] Such a reaction by the personality against itself leaves the person who experiences it estranged, cut off, from himself in certain ways. He does not know what he wants or what he wants to do. He does not know what he feels; or sometimes he knows he has strong feelings or reactions but they seem strange to him, as in the case of phobias, mysteriously at odds with his judgment, attitudes, or common sense. (3)

In these two lovers’ initial interaction, Erika always seems uneasy and resistant: “She buckles at the most impossible places; and Klemmer, surprised, feels his gorge rising slightly” (Jelinek 193). Erika’s unnatural, restrictive ways of behaving are the result of the workings of her distorted, rigid personality—a personality in conflict.

In this chapter I intend to explore the psychological background of Erika’s deviant behaviors, so what is needed is a dynamic understanding of the working of her personality as a whole. As we come to consider Erika’s “symptoms”, her compulsions first seem like irrational intrusions into her otherwise normal life. (Despite being a well-respected professor, Erika lives another darker, obscene life under her normal rational life.) I propose to study Erika’s erratic behaviors on the premise that she suffers from the symptoms of a neurotic personality, and that such a personality is the result of her pathological upbringing. Her manifested symptoms are rooted in the dispositions of her personality and mentality which are practically
distorted by her mother and the cultural conditions which lend weight and color to the individual experiences and determine their particular forms. *The Piano Teacher* is an account of what has gone terribly wrong in the raising of the daughter; we’re confronted with Erika’s neuroses—the shocking results of maternal overprotectiveness and domination. The symptoms of Erika’s unusual behaviors include, for example, she always feels the urge to urinate at the most inappropriate moments.

When she contemplates or watches sexual act, the only effect of many of these sexual stimuli is manifested in her frequent need to urinate. And during sex with men she is always “as unfeeling as a piece of tar paper in the rain”; she has always felt nothing (Jelinek 76). The compulsion to urinate happened one time when Erika was witnessing a woman pianist’s hand being sliced open—“a shriek slices the air in half, and a slashed, bloody hand is pulled out of a coat pocket. [...] The girl to whom the hand belongs screams in terror and blubbers in pain” (Jelinek 170). Erika was the criminal of this hideous crime. The impulse to hurt prompts her to secretly put tumbler splinters into the girl’s coat pockets. She hated the girl for being so young and fashionable; most of all, she was infuriated to see her flirting with Klemmer. Erika was seized by a fit of intense jealousy and needed to punish the girl. While she watched the victim’s face writhing in agony, the urge to urinate again overwhelmed her:

Erika hurries up the stairs. Everyone who sees her flee thinks she feels sick—her musical universe knows no injuries. But, she has only been seized with her old familiar urge to pass water at the untimeliest moments. She feels a downward tug between her legs; that’s why she has to run upward. [...] All she wants to do is pour herself out in a long, hot stream. This urge often overcomes her at the more awkward moment of a concert, when the pianist is playing pianissimo as well as working the soft pedal (Jelinek 172).
The compulsion to pass water happened another time while she was spying a couple making love on the meadow, also during a very untimely moment:

The effect on the spectator is devastating. Her hands itch to take an active part; but if she’s not allowed, she’ll hold back. She waits for a resolute prohibition. She needs to act within a solid framework, she needs to be stretched on it. The twosome, without realizing it, is turned into a threesome. Suddenly, certain organs labor in the spectator, and she can’t control them: they work double-time or even faster. Strong pressure on her bladder, an irksome disturbance that overcomes her whenever she gets excited. […] Her need is stronger. She gingerly lets down her panties and pisses on the ground. (Jelinek 144)

Erika is a voyeur whose urge to urinate1 is substituted for the urge to have sex. She is also a regular consumer of hard-core pornography and sex-peeping booths. When in the sex booth, she would sniff the tissues with the after-effect of men’s desires on it: “Erika lifts up a tissue from the floor; it is encrusted with sperm. She holds it to her nose. She deeply inhales the aroma, the fruits of someone else’s hard labor” (Jelinek 52). To pay for the peep shows, she would even pinch on her coffee-break money, just to be able to watch attentively at the girls on display feign sexual pleasure. Watching pornographic shows is another of her compulsions:

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1 According to Karen Horney, one way of escaping anxiety is to deny its existence. To deny anxiety means to exclude it from consciousness. All that appears are the physical concomitants of fear or anxiety, such as shivering, sweating, accelerated heart-beat, choking sensations, frequent urge to urinate, diarrhea, vomiting, and, in the mental sphere, a feeling of restlessness, of being rushed or paralyzed. These feelings can be the exclusive expression of an existing anxiety which is suppressed. In such case all that the individual knows about his condition is such outward evidence as the fact that he has to urinate frequently in certain conditions, that he becomes nauseated on trains, that at times he has night-sweats, and always without any physical cause (49).
Erika watches very closely. Not in order to learn. Nothing stirs or moves within her. But she has to watch all the same. For her own pleasure. Whenever she feels like leaving, something above her energetically presses her well-groomed head back to the pane, and she has to keep looking. The turntable on which the beautiful woman is perched keeps revolving. Erika can’t help it. She has to keep looking. She is off-limits to herself. (Jelinek 54)

Obviously, Erika doesn’t enjoy the shows. She is “forced” to watch the naked sex workers stretch and sprawl and perform sexual postures; she is dictated by a force that is even unknown to herself. According to David Shapiro, such symptoms (compulsions) shows that the individual “is under the tyranny of unknown wishes and anxieties that require costly defenses and drive him/her to behavior or reactions that are strange or even antagonistic to his/her conscious interest” (119). It is reasonable to assume that Erika has developed a dislike or fear toward sex since she has been taught that sex is the worst of all evils. She is expected to guarantee her independence from sexual passion—from the dangers of male seduction and enslavement—and allow her to protect her virtue and remain attached to her mother. She has internalized what her mother had always warned her about: “Better the peak of art than the slough of sex” (Jelinek 197). So it is justifiable to assume that she has an anxiety over becoming sexually dominated—just like one of the prostitutes who has to feign sexual pleasures. Thus the act of forcing herself through the pornographic show may be prompted
as an attempt to overcome her anxiety².

Self-estrangement is said to be the most definitive feature of a neurotic personality and also of neurotic symptoms. Shapiro wrote, “[T]he neurotic process results in the subject’s loss of a sense of the purpose of, or connection with, his own behavior, as in a feeling of not having intended or wished to do what one has done or is doing, or a sense of estrangement from his own feeling, impulse, or reaction” (4). Thus there is the feeling of not having wanted or “meant” to do something but being forced by circumstances or tempted beyond one’s power to resist; or the feeling of living one’s whole life not as one wanted but as required by obligations or as dictated by others’ expectations; or simply “the feeling of having no idea what one wants to do” (Shapiro 4). Erika clearly exhibits such estrangement—an estrangement from her own feelings, wishes, and even actions. Just as Klemmer commented on her: “This woman is so old, and yet she still doesn’t know what she wants” (Jelinek 196). So when Klemmer, the attractive, athletic, good-looking fellow, came into her life, she just pushed him away—she was estranged from her own affection for Klemmer. She “thought” Klemmer was not the sort of man that was “right” or “appropriate” for her, not at all the sort she

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² It is possible to make a conscious denial of anxiety, a conscious attempt to overcome it. (This is akin to what happens on the normal level, when it is attempted to get rid of fear by recklessly disregarding it.) The most familiar example on the normal level is the soldier who, driven by the impulse to overcome a fear, performs heroic deeds. The neurotic, too, may make a conscious decision to overcome his anxiety. A girl, for example, who was tormented by anxiety until close to puberty, particularly concerning burglars, consciously decided to disregard the anxiety, to sleep alone in the attic, to walk alone in the empty house. The process of ruthlessly marching over an anxiety plays a great role in many neuroses and is not always recognized for what it is. The aggressiveness, for instance, which many neurotics display in certain situations is often taken as a direct expression of an actual hostility, while it may be primarily such a reckless marching over an existing timidity, under the pressure of feeling attacked. While some hostility is usually present, the neurotic may greatly overdo the aggression he really feels; his anxiety provoking him to overcome his timidity (Horney 50-51).
had in mind for herself. The remarkable thing is that Erika’s reaction to her affection for the “inappropriate” man should obliterate awareness of her wish to be with him. This conflict contains a reaction against the self that distorts Erika’s awareness of her interests in Klemmer. Erika repeatedly “acts against herself”; so instead of grabbing the opportunity to confide love to Klemmer and to make the relationship work, Erika forcefully pushed him away and introduced her mother to the scene. Mother was of course the biggest enemy and critic of Klemmer, Erika’s prospective lover. Erika “seems to be deliberately racing toward her own destruction; it is her final, her friendliest destination. […] Sometimes we really do fail, and I almost believe that this inevitable failure is our ultimate goal, concludes Erika. Instead of kissing, she rings the doorbell” (Jelinek 207-08). We can notice, as Erika cannot, that her disapproval of Klemmer is not wholehearted, that she actually has affection for Klemmer. We then can recognize that Erika cannot possibly have recognized her desire to become intimate with Klemmer, precisely because to her it is something to acknowledge (so she has to react against it). The result of Erika’s reaction also prevents her from recognizing the nature of the anxiety that prompts it. Erika is estranged both from her own reasons for reacting against herself and from the disqualifying and consciousness-distorting reactions she has to herself.

(I). Neurotic’s Characterological Symptoms, Restrictive Personality, and Loss of Self-awareness (Self-estrangement)

According to Shapiro, all neurotic symptoms—not only obsessions, compulsions, and such, but all symptomatic behaviors or reactions—have this general form: “they are products of conflict from which their subject is largely cut off” (3). This kind of self-estrangement is a distortion or loss of self-awareness, an
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estrangement of articulated consciousness from the actuality of a largely unarticulated subjective world. To put it more simply, it is an estrangement between what one thinks he/she feels or believes and what he/she actually feels or believes. The distortions are produced by the internal dynamics of the neurotic personality (Shapiro 28-29). So the neurotic reactions are basically characterological, which means neurosis consists of certain restrictive and conflict-generating ways in which the personality works: it is a personality that reacts against itself. Neurotic symptoms are consistent with the attitudes, the ways of thinking, and the sorts of subjective experience that are characteristic of the neurotic’s consciousness (Shapiro 26). Thus we need to enlarge the conception of neurosis beyond the original nuclear conflict of childhood wish and defense to include distortions of the entire personality or character. Wilhelm Reich in his characterological work The Function of the Orgasm proposed that the principal neurotic defense, and therefore the principal resistance, consisted of the patient’s character itself, his “ways of being,” the “formal aspects of his general behavior” (148). His proposal called for a redirection of the therapist’s attention from the search for derivatives or manifestations of the repressed wish to the attitudes of the restrictive neurotic personality. Symptoms are recognized as more characterological in the sense of being typically fairly general features of attitude, behavior, or relationships, and thus of being subjectively somewhat less alien and mysterious than the classical neurotic symptoms have been considered to be. Thus by studying not only the symptoms but also Erika’s subjective life and her personality, the symptoms or symptomatic reactions that seem strange and incompatible with her everyday rational life then make some kind of subjective sense. So what is Erika’s personality like? We know that due to her strict musical training, Erika is made extremely scrupulous, rule-minded, authoritatively-governed, rigid, dutiful and punitive. Also, Erika considers herself very tough. She sees herself as a tough warrior who has fought
her way up to the social status of some power. She also prides herself on always exercising a strict intellectual control, that she is comprised purely of reason, and knows no emotions. “Erika boasts that she knows no feelings. If ever she has to acknowledge a feeling, she will not let it dominate her intelligence” (Jelinek 193). As a result, any subjective sensation that is irrational or emotional may make her feel anxious and trigger the inhibitory reactions of her personality. Likewise, the sensation of going “soft” would imply anxiety and thus prompts her, in a quasi-reflexive way, to become more masculine so as to reassure herself. So in her sex scenes with Klemmer, we see that she always tries to appropriate male authority and she “talks back” in an equally masculine voice. When she communicates with her lover, she assumes the stance that she is over and above him—“Erika orders him, Read the letter” (Jelinek 214). Anxiety also strikes her if she ever considers skipping a class, she then suffers from the oppressive effects of her relentless sense of duty, which in turn results in her scrupulous overvaluation of her obligations. The process is an estrangement from her own feelings, and the result is symptomatic behavior which reacts against herself and leaves the neurotic Erika feeling lost and confused afterwards.

Erika’s neurotic personality reacts against itself, with the consequence that she

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3 This “rational” temperament involves a cultural factor, inasmuch as the culture places great stress on rational thinking and behavior and regards irrationality as inferior. According to Karen Horney, certain elements contained in the affect of anxiety may be particularly unbearable for the individual. One of them is helplessness. To be rendered helpless is particularly unbearable for those persons for whom power, ascendancy, the idea of being master of any situation, is a prevailing ideal. Impressed by the apparent disproportion of their reaction they resent it, as if it demonstrated a weakness or cowardice. Another element in anxiety is its apparent irrationality. To allow any irrational factors to control them is for some persons more intolerable than for others. It is particularly hard to endure for those who secretly feel in danger of being swamped by irrational contrasting forces within themselves, and who have automatically trained themselves to exercise a strict intellectual control. Thus they will not consciously tolerate any irrational elements (Horney 46).
does not know what she wants. It is a case of an adult who does not recognize her own voice. It is a case of an adult who so deceives herself that she thinks she is, feels she must be, more manly, more rational, more honorable, or more “immortal” than she is. She is not merely out of touch with particular fantasies but is unaware of whole aspects of her subjective experience. The self-deception, the distortion of self-awareness is in a way greater. For neurotics, self-awareness of a particular kind will be abhorrent, will trigger “first a characteristic form of anxiety and then a corrective reaction”, in a specific personality, if it is actually inimical to the existing attitudes of the personality (Shapiro 41). The general process in which the personality reacts certain of its own tendencies can be described as the way in which, at some cost, the neurotic personality maintains its stability and is in that respect self-regulating. The personality reacts quasi-reflexively and correctively, prompted by anxiety or shame or some other acute discomfort, to sensations or kinds of awareness of the self that threaten its stability or are inimical to its present form, usually before they are more than faint or incipient. In this sense, the restrictive and self-awareness-distorting attitudes of the neurotic personality operate to maintain stability not only in a corrective way but also in a preventive way; not only to dispel but also to forestall anxiety (Shapiro 42). Restrictive attitudes, such as obsessively conscientious attitudes, which continuously limit and distort self-awareness, will give rise to the intensified reactions that we recognize as symptoms. Such an intensification and symptomatic exacerbation is evident each time the patient consciously, deliberately neglects his/her duty in order to follow his/her own wishes, the patient experiences an intensification of anxiety and an exacerbation of symptoms. In this sense, therefore, the symptom can be said to be the product of the neurotic personality’s reaction against itself (Shapiro 37). Such restrictive attitudes tend to exclude certain sorts of feelings and interests from awareness and to trigger inhibitory reactions to any subjective recognition of
them. The awareness of oneself feeling certain ways, intending to do certain things, even when that awareness is no more than faint or incipient, becomes acutely discomforting. This discomfort, in turn, triggers an intensification of the restrictiveness itself. The result of this reaction is an attenuation or distortion of self-awareness (Shapiro 38).

Take Erika’s obsessive conscientiousness for example. Her life is usually governed by various rules and authoritative principles, and so she often has great difficulty in making decisions that rest on personal preference. She is thrown into anxiety by even inconsequential decisions when there is no rule or authority to refer to. Precisely at the moment that she becomes aware of leaning toward a choice, she experiences anxiety. This anxiety then prompts a scrupulous review of all adverse arguments—in the case of obsessive indecision the cautionary aspect paid selectively to the arguments adverse to her inclination of the moment—whatever that inclination may be—which results in a state of confusion, in the loss of a sense of the whole. This probably explains why Erika often says, “I don’t know what I want!” It also explains the phenomenon that although on the outside Erika is used to being in control, on the inside, she pines to obey commands from someone significant:

When she teaches, she breaks one will after another. Yet deep inside, she feels an intense desire to obey. That’s why she’s got her mother at home. But the old woman keeps getting older and older. What will happen when she falls apart and becomes a dismal creature in need of care herself, when she has to obey Erika? Erika pines for difficult tasks, which she then carries out badly. She has to be punished for that. […] Anyone who could get her to obey a command (there must be a commander aside from her mother, who cuts glowing furrows into Erika’s will) could get anything and everything from Erika. Erika needs to lean against a hard wall that
won’t give. Something pulls at her, tugs at her elbow, weighs down the
hem of her skirt: a small lead ball, a tiny concentrated weight. […] She is
waiting for that one command! (Jelinek 101-02)

To a dutiful follower of rules like Erika, who lives with a tyrannical mother who
currently orders her what she “should” do, the sensation of making a decision on the
basis of no higher authority than her own personal judgment is bound to feel
audacious. The sensation of freedom is inimical to her attitudes and would just prompt
her to become more conscientious and dutiful.

(II). Anxiety and Hostility in Neurosis: Neurosis is Psychological Consequences
   Resulting from a Repression of Hostility

We assume that these restrictive and inhibitory attitudes develop originally in
order to forestall various kinds of anxiety. According to Karen Horney in her book
The Neurotic Personality of Our Time, there is one essential factor common to all
neuroses, and that is anxieties and the defenses built up against them. This anxiety is
the originator which sets the neurotic process going and keeps it in motion (23).
Anxiety is a disproportionate reaction to danger, or even a reaction to imaginary
danger (42). Let us start by describing the experience an individual undergoes during
anxiety. He has the feeling of a powerful, inescapable danger against which he
himself is entirely helpless. According to Horney, people seem to go to any length to
avoid anxiety or to avoid feeling it. Patients who have gone through an intense fit of
anxiety say that they would rather die than have a recurrence of that experience (46).
Whatever the manifestations of anxiety, the two factors of an overpowering danger
and defenselessness against it are invariably present. Anxiety does not differ much
from fear, except that in the case of fear, the danger is present in reality and the
feeling of helplessness is conditioned by reality. In the case of anxiety, however, the
danger is generated or magnified by intra-psychic factors and the helplessness is conditioned by one’s own attitude (Horney 60-61). The question concerning the subjective factor in anxiety is thus reduced to the more specific inquiry: what are the psychic conditions that create the feeling of an imminent powerful danger and an attitude of helplessness toward it? Shapiro asserts that childhood conflict has its lasting effect on the development of neurotic personality; memories derived from childhood conflict and anxiety may still be powerfully affecting. Where there is no actual present danger, anxiety then may be derived from the unconsciously preserved anticipation of some, most likely fantasized, childhood danger. One such danger is the preserved danger of punishment by the superego (behind which ultimately stands the parental threat) (Shapiro 173). We can assume further that the experience of such anxiety tends to promote, in the child’s personality, the development of restrictive attitudes—such as a rigid consciousness of rules or timid attitudes—which forestall that experience of anxiety. As such restrictive attitudes come into existence, then, the further awareness of certain feelings will be inimical to them, will arouse anxiety, and will trigger some sort of inhibitory or corrective reaction according to those attitudes (Shapiro 177).

In tackling the problem of anxiety, Freud had first made the crucial discovery that the subjective factor involved in anxiety lies in our own “instinctual drives”; in other words, both the danger anticipated by anxiety and the feeling of helplessness toward it are conjured by the explosive force of our own “impulses”. This referred exclusively to the impulse of sexuality; it was based on the belief that if sexual energy is prevented from discharge it will produce physical tension in the body which is transformed into anxiety (Freud, *Civilization* 86). According to Freud, neurotic symptoms are, in their essence, substitutive satisfactions for unfulfilled sexual wishes. Freud then formulated the following proposition: “When an instinctual trend
undergoes repression, its libidinal elements are turned into symptoms, and its aggressive components into a sense of guilt” (Freud, *Civilization* 86). He wrote, “perhaps every neurosis conceals a quota of unconscious sense of guilt, which in its turn fortifies the symptoms by making use of them as a punishment” (Freud, *Civilization* 86). According to another of Freud’s views, anxiety results from fear of those impulses of which the pursuit would incur an external danger. This second interpretation refers not only to the sexual impulse but also to that of aggression (Horney 75). However, Karen Horney disagrees with Freud on several points. Firstly, she states that anxiety in general results not so much from a fear of our own impulses as from “a fear of our repressed impulses” (74). Secondly, sexual impulses may incur anxiety, but only when there is a strict individual and social taboo resting on them and thus renders the expression of them dangerous. Therefore, the frequency of the anxiety generated by sexual impulses is largely dependent on the existing cultural or personal attitude toward sexuality. Horney doesn’t see that sexuality as such is a specific source of anxiety. However, she does believe that there is such a specific source in “hostility”, or more accurately in “repressed hostile impulses” (76). As a psychologist, she wrote: “whenever I find anxiety or indications of it, the questions that come to my mind are, what sensitive spot has been hurt and has consequently provoked hostility, and what accounts for the necessity of repression?” (77). In this paper I shall also inquire in the same directions in order to have a better understanding of Erika’s anxiety.

According to Karen Horney, hostile impulses of various kinds form the main source from which neurotic anxiety springs (63). Repressing a hostility means “pretending” that everything is all right and thus refraining from fighting when we ought to fight, or at least when we wish to fight. Hence the first consequence of such a repression is that it generates a feeling of defenselessness, or to be more exact, it reinforces an already given feeling of defenselessness. These processes brought about
by repressed hostility result in exactly the state which is characteristic of anxiety: a feeling of defenselessness toward what is felt an overpowering danger menacing from outside. Repression is a reflex-like process. It occurs if in a particular situation it is unbearable to be aware that one is hostile. The main reasons why awareness of hostility may be unbearable are that one may love or need a person at the same time that one is hostile toward him, or that it may be frightening to recognize within one’s self hostility toward anyone. In such circumstances repression is the shortest and quickest way toward an immediate reassurance. With repression the frightening hostility disappears from awareness, or the person has not the remotest idea that he/she is hostile. The hostility, or the rage is then removed from conscious awareness but is not abolished. Split off from the context of the individual’s personality, and hence beyond control, it evolves within him as an affect which is highly explosive and eruptive, and therefore tends to be discharged. The explosiveness of the repressed affect is all the greater because by its very isolation it assumes larger and often fantastic dimensions (Horney 66). Though no longer aware of the hostility, in a deeper level of consciousness one still knows about its presence. This means that fundamentally we cannot fool ourselves, that we know what’s going on within us without our being aware of it (Horney 69). Thus there is an imperative need to get rid of the dangerous affect (hostility) which from within menaces one’s interest and security, the individual then “projects” his hostile impulses to the outside world. The first “pretense,” the repression, requires a second one: he “pretends” that the destructive impulses come not from him but from someone or something outside (Horney 72). If the anxiety concerns a parent, husband, friend or one in similar close relationship, the assumption of hostility is felt to be incompatible with an existing tie of authority, love or appreciation. He may then project his repressed hostility to the things or persons other than his loved ones, and the original objects of hostility is retained. If the anger concerns one whom he otherwise admires or likes or needs, the anger will sooner or later become integrated into the totality of his feelings (Horney 67).
(III). Erika’s Repression of Her Hostility toward Her Mother and Her Projection of the Hostility toward the People in the Outside World in General

Erika’s habit of hurting people on purpose shows that she has an enormous hostility toward the “masses”. For example, when she takes the trolley, she would bang into people’s backs and fronts with musical instruments and her heavy musical scores. Sometimes when the car is crowded, she would insidiously thrust her fist into someone, viciously pinch or kick someone’s shin, or step on people’s feet. “She wants to teach people how to be afraid, how to shudder. Such feelings run rampant through the playbills of Philharmonic Concerts” (Jelinek 19). When she teaches, she breaks one will after another, “annihilating the students with her yardstick, to which only the greatest musicians can measure up (Jelinek 98). When she corrects her students, she talks sternly and eyes her pupils with a glare that could cut glass: “For a fleeting instant, she needs to grab the student’s hair and smash his head against the inside of the piano until the bloody bowels of strings and wires screech and spurt” (Jelinek 105). So a crucial question needs to be raised: just what horrible injustice has been done to her that she has to act with such vengeance toward people around her? Judging from the life she has, it’s probably reasonable to say that part of her anger results from her mother’s way of treating her—mother is the main catalyst that brought about Erika’s twisted character and her later problems.

Erika is a neurotic person made such by a neurotic mother. Erika’s mother is over-solicitous and always anxious to know Erika’s whereabouts. She is extremely over-involvement in her child’s life. Instead of feeling a helpless prey to her emotions, such a mother feels she can actively do something about the situation. Instead of recognizing her anxiety a weakness, she can feel proud of her high standards (Horney 80). However, it is said that over-solicitude or the self-sacrificing attitude of an “ideal” mother are the basic factors contributing to an atmosphere that more than anything else lays the cornerstone for future feelings of immense insecurity (Horney 80).
concerned about her child and interprets her anxiety as a justified fear. Instead of admitting that irrational elements pervade her attitude, she feels entirely rational and justified. She always tells Erika that “everything Mother does is motivated by Love” (Jelinek 210). However, the child has to pay the price for the mother’s never getting rid of her worries. Horney wrote that there are some attitudes or actions on the parents’ part which always arouse hostility. Such as an attitude toward the child’s needs which goes through all gradations from temporary inconsideration to a consistent interference with the most legitimate wishes of the child, for example, by disturbing friendships, ridiculing independent thinking, spoiling its interest in its own pursuits—altogether an attitude of the parents which if not in intention but in effect means breaking the child’s will5 (Horney 80). Negation of another’s will is exactly what Erika’s mother does to Erika; her tyrannical, possessive nature finds its expressions in manipulating Erika’s every decision and controlling Erika’s social life. Any form of socialization beyond the mother-daughter interaction is made practically impossible: contacts with peers—through kindergarten, school, or work—are screened carefully and are always judged negatively; possible boyfriends or lovers are presented as incarnations of evil long before they even appear on the scene. She wants Erika to belong to Mother, and Mother alone. Such a tyrannical way of education has without question aroused fear and hostility in Erika. Although Erika has attempted rebellion against her mother’s control (such as by purchasing expensive clothes that she wouldn’t even wear or by frequenting pornographic shows although she knows

5 According to Karen Horney, neurotic parents who create the kind of atmosphere we have discussed are usually discontented with their lives, have no satisfactory emotional or sexual relations and hence are inclined to make children the objects of their love. They loose their need for affection on the children. Neurotic parents then by terror and tenderness, with possessiveness and jealousy, force the child into these passionate attachments (83).
sex is considered the worst sin of all by her mother), eventually she needs to go back
to the motherly protection, and all she could do is repress her anger and resentment.
However, a better way to tackle her mother’s possessiveness and tyranny would be for
her to confront the problem and fight for her own liberty. Horney wrote:

   It is unfortunate if the child has to fight against the actions of neurotic
parents. But if there are good reasons for opposition, the danger for the
child’s character formation then lies not so much in feeling or expressing
a protest, but in repressing it. There are several dangers arising from the
repression of criticism, protest or accusations, and one is that the child is
likely to take all the blame on itself and feel unworthy of love.” (85)

The repressed hostility then can create anxiety and start the development of a
neurosis.

   The reasons for Erika to repress her hostility can be summarized in four points:
helplessness, fear, fear of losing love, and feelings of guilt. The following descriptions
of these four factors brought up by Karen Horney correspond to Erika’s upbringing
situation. First of all, Erika feels helplessness. In children growing up under adverse
conditions “helplessness is usually artificially reinforced by intimidation, by babying
or by bringing and keeping the child in a state of emotional dependence” (86). The
more helpless a child is made the less will it dare to feel or show opposition, and the
longer will such opposition be delayed. In this situation the underlying feeling is: I
have to repress my hostility because I need you. The second factor is fear. Erika’s fear
has been aroused directly by her mother’s threats, prohibitions and punishments.
Whenever she comes home late, she has to confront her mother’s outbursts of anger
and violent interrogation. Her mother would even torn apart her favorite clothes or hit
her as punishment. Her fear is also aroused by indirect intimidation; her mother
constantly impresses her with the great dangers of life: “Mother always warns Erika
about precipitous paths. If Mother is not beckoning with the ladder of success, which
goes upward, then she depicts the horror of the primrose path, which leads
downward” (Jelinek 193). “The more apprehensive a child is made the less will it dare
to show or even to feel hostility” (Horney 86). Here the underlying feeling is: I have
to repress my hostility because I am afraid of you. The third factor is Erika’s fear of
losing the mother’s affection. Instead of genuine affection, her mother often gives a
great verbal emphasis on how much she loves Erika and how she had sacrificed for
her up to the last drop of her blood. Erika may cling to this substitute for love and fear
to be rebellious lest she lose the reward for being docile. The fourth factor is feelings
of guilt. Brought up in a traditional culture, Erika is usually made to feel guilty for
any feelings or expressions of hostility toward her mother. She is made to feel
contemptible in her own eyes if she either expresses or feels resentment against her
mother or if she breaks rules set up by her. After all, Erika is made to think that she
owes everything to her mother. The more Erika is made to feel guilty about
trespassing on forbidden territory the less will she dare to feel spiteful or accusatory
toward her mother. In conclusion, those are situations in which Erika represses her
hostility because she is afraid that any expression of it would spoil her relations to the
mother. Such repression of her hostility eventually brought about her anxiety.

Erika’s suffering experiences in the family cause her to develop not only a
reaction of hatred toward her mother and other children but also a distrustful or
spiteful attitude toward everyone. Growing up in practical isolation and the
competitiveness of music academia, such a development is fostered. Besides, as
Horney points out, “the more a child covers up his grudge against his own family, as
for instance by conforming with his parents’ attitudes, the more he projects his anxiety
to the outside world and thus becomes convinced that the ‘world’ in general is
dangerous and frightening” (88). Therefore, Erika’s reaction of anxiety and hostility
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has developed into an attitude of hostility and anxiety toward people in general. She has become basically hostile toward others, and distrustful of them. Jelinek’s story is a haunting exemplification of Simone de Beauvoir’s words: “Deeply scarred by their early home life, the parents’ approach to their own children is through complexes and frustrations; and the chain of misery lengthens indefinitely. In particular, maternal sado-masochism creates in the daughter guilt feelings that will be expressed in sado-masochistic behavior toward her own children, and so without end” (58). Erika cannot free herself from her mother’s strong bonds. Instead, she has become doubles, extension of her mother’s neurotic personality. She is incapable of exchanging genuine affection with other people because her mother is also incapable of giving it on account of her own neurosis. The mother’s claim that she has in mind her daughter’s best interest is actually a camouflage of her essential lack of warmth and real affection. So in Erika’s case, it’s the neurotic parent’s inability to give love, or worse, her abuse of parental power, that caused the lasting traumatic effects on the child’s development and led to the consequent problems.