Chapter IV

Conclusion

At the basis of life is Eros—passion, life-force energy. This energy is present when we allow the natural process of spontaneous creation to occur. To do that, we need to be courageously open. Sometimes, though, we get hit with genuine tragedies. To continue the metaphor of birth, the events that change us most can feel more like rape than love. While the pain and suffering involved is not invited or deserved—it simply may be the price we all pay for living in a world still at a very primitive stage of development—catastrophes can be used by the psyche for growth and eventually to bring us treasures, if we permit that growth to take place. (167)

Carol S. Pearson, *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By*

In *The Piano Teacher*, the protagonist has devoted her life to pursuing musical excellence and is kept in an ivory tower. In order to become a world-famous pianist—to fulfill her mother dream—she was made to work incessantly and shielded from all temptations of pleasures. Having indulged in pursuing perfection and excellence defined by the capitalistic/masculine rules, she gradually grows out of touch of life, or to be more exact, she has never entered it. She knows nothing about life except music; all she is asked to do is to master it and to achieve success: “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” (Jelinek 190). Being taught to value art and to despise everything pertaining to bodies, Erika has thus tried to eradicate anything that is animalistic in her. She demanded perfection that even transcends proper human limits from herself: “Erika keeps exerting self-control until she feels no more drive within her” (Jelinek 105). Consequently, the only thing left in her awareness is the feeling of libidinal deadness. She invariably suffers from the malady
of psychic death and paralysis in psychological development. She finds herself hardly alive and is incapable of enjoying what life has to offer her. Such is the price she pays for moving toward “perfection”, for ignoring the needs of her psyche and the yearning of her body. This is also the price she pays for living with an over-solicitous mother who is obsessed with controlling her life. Erika was inoculated with the germ of striving for success and competing for superiority since the very beginning of her life. The goal of her mother’s education, however, is not to make the child strong, independent, courageous, and capable of dealing with all sorts of situations. On the contrary, she wants to make the child obedient, to keep her ignorant of life as it is; in other words, she wants to infantilize her so she can possess and manipulate her to satisfy her own needs. By terror and tenderness, with possessiveness and jealousy, the mother forces the child into exclusive attachment. She tries to keep her daughter within the social and psychological confines of the child status, and by preventing any external change in her child’s way of life she hopes to forestall any developments in her inner psychological needs. As a result, Erika fails to develop normally.

1 Erika’s relationship to her mother can legitimately be seen as residing within a classically psychotic relationship: “In psychosis the mother and child remain a dyad, only the triadic structure of the Oedipus complex can break up this symbiotic predicament” (Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism 291). Juliet Mitchell points out here that in psychosis the daughter has never entered into her Oedipal relationship with her father. Not having a developed father-love, she is thus unable to transfer this to husband-love. Feminist theorists have put the emphasis of their examination on the pre-Oedipal situation between mother and child, which is thought to be of more relevance to the female psyche and sexuality. In her analysis of The Piano Teacher, Maria-Regina Kecht argues that a “blurred sense of ego boundaries” is created between mother and daughter owing to the mother’s treatment of her daughter as an extension of herself. Characterizing the basic mechanisms of mother-daughter relations in the story, she adds that “the symbiotic dyad of mother and daughter is never completely superseded. The oedipal conflict is resolved not by rejecting the mother but by adding the father, so that all of Erika’s later relationships with men are actually in a triangular instead of a binary pattern (Kecht 359).
mental status stays “at a very primitive stage of development” (Pearson 167). Erika’s young psyche had been intimidated and traumatized, but Erika only managed to pine away under a state of psychic death and remained like “an insect encased in amber, timeless, ageless” (Jelinek 14). She didn’t come out stronger from her childhood miseries; her psyche didn’t grow older and wiser.

Childhood traumas have resulted in Erika’s pathological behaviors—the abused child has developed a miscarried repair of her injuries in the form of self-mutilations and masochistic fantasies. The developmental line of Erika’s mental growth had thus been blocked and replaced by sadomasochistic fantasies. Instead of severing the old filial ties and carrying out mother-daughter separation, Erika stubbornly hangs on to the trauma of “terrifying passivity in relation to the pre-oedipal mother perceived as dangerously malignant, malicious, and all-powerful, arousing sensations of awe and the uncanny” (Cooper 23). To undo the intolerable sense of helpless passivity and to master the harm inflicted on her early in life, Erika then needs to “play at harm.” She is drawn to the escapism of masochistic fantasies, hoping to get rid of her fears, conflicting feelings, limitations, isolations, and above all, her whole tormenting self in that make-believe sadomasochistic world. However, those deviant ways fail to rescue her out of her mental imprisonment; she is still trapped in the original impasse. Erika’s story is that of an unlived life and unlived sexuality expressed in pathologies; it’s a tragedy of a woman who cannot partake in life or in desire, who tries to eradicate her own nature but in vain and thus pays the price with her own life.

In her discussion of The Piano Teacher, Sigrid Berka pointed out that Jelinek’s fiction is an account of a larger analysis of female masochism than it initially seems to be. Erika’s regular practice of self-mutilation is more than an individual pathology and therefore goes beyond the individual interpretation of her masochistic behaviors. Rather, she suggested, the violence and self-mutilation is an allegory of the only
pleasure to be had in the age of the culture industry (248). Jelinek’s story of the piano teacher who must renounce her sexual wish and desire for love under the surveillance of a dictator (her mother) and in the service of “cultural progress” is that of civilization and its discontents. No matter how civilized she is, she cannot erase her nature so completely without incurring psychological problems. She strives to become like the god that people worship, but her agony doesn’t allow her to become a perfect robot. “However hard we try to eradicate nature it eventually exerts its own value system and its own painful price” (Woodman 16). However hard Erika tries to remove her sexual wish from conscious awareness, no wish, even if its fulfillment is renounced, can escape or hide from the absolute surveillance of our superego.

“Schuld (guilt), the currency of thought control then, remains, a non-protective pathology, and therefore the most important agent of our discontent with cultural progress” (Freud, Civilization 74, 71). In Freud’s version the desire for punishment is an expression of an ego drive which becomes masochistic under the influence of the super-ego. The resulting feeling of guilt reflects the ego’s inner awareness and fear of the power of its surveyor. Hence, such guilt is the most important device for the development of culture, which must be based on the renunciation or desexualization

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2 Freud sees man’s place in the world in terms of the never-ending conflict of the claim of the individual for freedom and the demands of society. In his work Civilization and Its Discontent, he asserts that “civilization is only made possible by individual renouncement. The instinctive life of man is one of aggression and egoistic self-satisfaction. The whole structure of culture has been designed to put prohibitions and curbs on him. […] The sense of guilt has become the maker of civilized humanity” (Freud, Civilization 72).

3 Erika’s mother always pressures her to climb up the ladder of success and warns her of the primrose path which leads downward: “Better the peak of art than the slough of sex. Contrary to the popular notion of his wantonness, the artist, Mother believes, must forget about sex. If he can’t, then he’s a mere mortal; but he shouldn’t be a mere mortal. He should be divine!” (Jelinek 197).

4 With the fear of the super-ego, instinctual renunciation is not enough, for the wish persists and cannot be concealed from the super-ego (Freud, Civilization 74).
of the drives in a process of sublimation (Freud, *Civilization* 84). The more complete the suppression of these drives, the higher the cultural development. Therefore, the development of civilization implies thwarted instinctual satisfaction, or sexual repression. However, the sense of guilt and inhibition, Freud pointed out, is also the most important problem in the development of civilization: “the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt” (Freud, *Civilization* 81). 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 lead to a growth of neurosis. Neuroses are the price humanity has to pay for cultural development. In the paper “Sexuality in the Aetiolo**-**gy of the Neuroses”, Freud wrote that “we may justly hold our civilization responsible for the spread of neurasthenia” (Freud, *Civilization* 6). Realizing the sexual nature of the psyche, Freud pointed out the damaging effect of our sexual relinquishment and theorized the sexual origins of mental illnesses. He wrote that anxiety in general results from a fear of our repressed impulses, and that the neurotic symptoms of modern men are, in their essence, “substitutive satisfactions for unfulfilled (repressed) sexual wishes” (*Civilization* 86).

In Freud’s research into, and therapy of, a neurosis, he was led to make two reproaches against the superego of the individual. In the severity of its commands and prohibitions, the superego troubles itself too little about the happiness of the ego, in that it takes insufficient account of the resistances against obeying them—of the instinctual strength of the id, and of the difficulties presented by the real external environment (Freud, *Civilization* 90). The same objections can also be made against the demands of the cultural superego. It, too, does not trouble itself enough about the facts of the mental constitution of human beings. It issues a command and does not ask whether it is possible for people to obey it. On the contrary, it assumes that a
man’s ego is psychologically capable of anything that is required of it, that his ego has ultimate mastery over his id. This is a mistake; and even in what are known as normal people the id cannot be controlled beyond certain limits. If more is demanded of a man, a revolt will be produced in him or a neurosis, or he will be made unhappy. Such is the case of Erika’s pathology and neurosis. The commandment of her mother is impossible for anyone to follow; forceful eradication of sexual desire only leads to a perversion, not to a higher level of sublimation or transcendence. However, her mother is ignorant of this and doesn’t leave room for her life to be lived as she desires. She tricks Erika into believing that the harder it is to obey the precept the more meritorious it is to do so. “Better the peak of art than the slough of sex”, her mother instills in her that an artist must forget about sex, and that an artist should be “divine” (Jelinek 93). Jelinek presents the mother as an accomplice of the sexual oppression patriarchal ideology has inflicted on women. Jelinek does see sexually as symptomatic of the control which patriarchal society wields over women generally. Female sexuality is not only undefined and uncertain, but also restricted and prohibited (Fiddler “Sexuality”). By disciplining Erika with the pedagogic moralities, the mother controls and strangled Erika’s sexuality. Erika consequently becomes the victim who follows such a precept to the extreme and puts herself at a disadvantage of being ignorant in the cruel reality. Erika becomes driven by an anxiety to fathom restlessly the unfathomable opus of classical music, and keeps exerting controls over her primal instincts until she could feel “no more drive within her” (Jelinek 105). Freud once wrote, “We cannot escape from the fact that people whose behavior is in other respects normal can, under the domination of the most unruly of all the instincts [desires], put themselves in the category of sick person in the single sphere of sexual life” (Three Essays 161). Erika’s repressed sexuality later takes revenge and rears its hideous heads. Erika can never totally conquer her primitive self. Her sexual instinct
is severely impaired but cannot be tamed. It turns out that her individual expressions, even as intimate as passion, have been deformed. Under the domination of sexual desires, she then puts herself in the category of sick person and becomes enslaved to a complex, practices voyeurism, and develops a psychic dependence on sadomasochistic fantasies.

Modern society is economically based on the principle of individual competition. Under the capitalistic system of power relations and exchange relations, the isolated individual has to fight with other individuals of the same group for superiority, has to surpass them and, frequently thrust them aside. Competitiveness, and the potential hostility that accompanies it, pervades all human relationship. According to Horney, the rivalry between people is not a general human phenomenon but is “the response to culturally conditioned stimuli” (284). The psychic result of this situation is a diffuse hostile tension between individuals. The potential hostile tension between individuals then results in a constant generation of fear—fear of the hostility of others, and fear of the prospect of failure. The fear of failure is a realistic one because failures in a competitive society entail a realistic frustration of needs. They mean not only economic insecurity, but also loss of prestige and all kinds of emotional frustrations. Under the pressure of such kind of ideology, Erika is constrained to feel that she amounts to something if she is successful and she is worthless if she is defeated. Needless to say, this presents a shaky basis of her self-esteem. All these factors together—competitiveness and its potential hostilities, fears, diminished self-esteem—result psychologically in the individual feeling that she is isolated. Emotional isolation is hard for anyone to ensure; it is more of a calamity for Erika because she is not allowed to seek affection as a remedy. She is in the dilemma of needing a great deal of affection but finding difficulty in obtaining it. The situation thus represents a fertile ground for the development of neuroses.
Incapable of fulfilling her excessive need for affection, the neurotic then feels even more isolated, and the world seems to her more dangerous and frightening. She is trapped in the contradictory tendencies which she cannot reconcile. It’s a neurotic conflict between her enhanced competitiveness (which entails unbearable anxiety) and a strong need to fall back on someone to quench her thirst for love. The psychic consequence is that she is trapped in the feeling of being lonely and helpless in a cold hostile world. Therefore, the neurotic is invariably a suffering person.

In her novel, Jelinek stresses political, economical, and social conditioning more than psychological intentions. Her figures, motivated by socio-economic rather than psychological forces, become the representatives of oppressors and the oppressed. Hoping to get out of her own lower-middle-class background, the mother sets her heart on making money out of Erika’s arduously-acquired artistic craft. She drives Erika to achieve artistic perfection so Erika can make her enough money to buy a condominium and to allow her to live a life of ease. Erika is, in a way, the victim of society’s fetishization of petty-bourgeois values and her upbringing according to its norms. Conspired with the high culture that Austria so idolizes, Erika’s mother forces her daughter into its yoke. Erika was promised self-reliance and economic autonomy through the realm of classical music and the mastery of the piano. She was told that nothing is as important as mastering this craft, which would grant her uniqueness, superiority, success, happiness, and independence. So ever since she first began to think, she “mustn’t think of anything but those five black lines” (Jelinek 190). Everything else could be sacrificed as long as she could climb up the social ladder and fulfill her mother’s materialistic needs constantly stimulated by the culture industry. Music as a mechanism of control is thus demonstrated through the mother’s rearing of her daughter, a mother who would like to parade her talented offspring at world-class concerts. Jelinek depicts the disappearance of Erika’s subject and
authentic experiences behind her predetermined roles, definitions, and pictures. The “piano teacher” is reduced to a one-dimensional figure determined entirely by her social context and her ability to bring home the money. Here we see that the strict limitation of personal freedom and choice results in characters who are determined and deformed by their surroundings. 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 strangled a pianist. Since Jelinek set the story in the social setting dominated by the laws of Fathers, her portrayal of the victimized and anguished woman then should be read as a critique of the patriarchal social structure. Erika’s mother serves exactly as the consenting villain of the existing social ideology. In *The Piano Teacher* we see how Jelinek takes what Austria most prides itself on—its music and musical geniuses — and presents their negative side: the renunciation of a person’s libido.

Society control is such an overpowering coercion that most individuals have no choice but to conform to its rules, and are incapable of breaking free of its confinement. Erika cannot step outside the borders of her home, her mother’s control, the boundaries of the family (a daughter’s filial obligation), her professional role, her subjugated female role, and all the limitations represented by societal control. The concept of an autonomous subject was questioned here by Jelinek. Erika was extremely unhappy and imprisoned in the system “like a rosy ham on a butcher’s hook” (Jelinek 190). Individual freedom, for women as well as for men, is severely limited by material forces. These material forces generate a superstructure of ideas, or ideology, which in turn serve to perpetuate the economic substructure. In *The Piano Teacher*, the ending holds no hope for change because the protagonists lack the awareness that they are being manipulated by the mechanism. The author’s Marxist
feminism was then emphasized by the fact that her female protagonists have 
internalized the capitalist ideology to the point that they become blind to its falsity. 
Erika and her mother have internalized the capitalistic ideology, in which everything 
is reduced to commodity value, and in which all transactions are exploitative. In both 
sense, capitalism alienates its constituents, not only from themselves and others, but 
also from the product of their labor and from nature. That is to say under capitalistic 
system people are turned into alienated subjects. Individuals not only lose contact 
with their own genuine feelings, but also become very alienated from other people, 
and treat each other as objects. Under the sadistic stranglehold of the capitalistic 
ideology, Erika also loses the ability to establish any relationship that would not be 
based on the principles of domination/submission, exploitation/servility, and 
abuse/obedience.

Jelinek’s biting irony and sarcasm is not directed at her figures but at the 
capitalist superstructure in an attempt to reveal its falsity. She exaggerates the ugliness 
of societal conditions and juxtaposes her visions to the fairy-tale pictures of the media. 
The clash of her pictures with the idealized media pictures exposes the artificiality of 
the “superstructure” that immobilizes her characters. Through her negativity, through 
a cruelty revolting in its extremity, Jelinek attempts to awaken the realization that 
things must be changed. Although her figures remain imprisoned within the capitalist 
hierarchy, hope lies in a reader whose eyes have witnessed the discrepancy between 
reality and ideology. Only if the necessity and possibility for change are recognized 
can capitalism be replaced by a more humane economic system and can the 
reeducation of men and women alike begin.