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2006-03-22
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Tickling the Ivories: Power, Violence, Sex and Identity in Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*.

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A Research Report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in European Literature.

Johannesburg, 2005

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of power and its manifestation in social and inter-personal relationships, violence, sex, and sexual identity – the construction of identity as well as the perception of identity – in Elfriede Jelinek's novel *The Piano Teacher* (1988). The location of the study within a contemporary text, is intended to examine the manifestations and implications of power in contemporary society, using the relationships indicated within the text as case studies.

The study attempts to indicate that social and inter-personal relationships cannot be divorced from the dynamics of power which demonstrate themselves in acts of physical, psychological and sexual violence. In light of this, the research attempts to examine the relationship between gender and power, and the manner in which it demonstrates itself in relationships. Power is also examined in light of the concept of generational conflict, through an examination of the exchange between the principal character, Erika, and her mother, and the relationship between Erika and her students, specifically a male student by the name of Walter.

Furthermore the study attempts to establish the extent to which women are complicit in, and consequently perpetuate their role as victims. The examination of the relationships serves to indicate the consequences of the female adoption and consequent internalisation of traditional male power roles. Although the study is located specifically within an Austrian text, the issues raised within the text and the study are relevant to many contexts.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in European Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

3 January 2005

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Kathleen Thorpe for her invaluable support and guidance in this project. Thank you also, to my friends and family for their support and faith in me. Without all of this I would not have been able to complete this project.

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“Here, without warning, is the truth I spent so much energy avoiding. I hate being alone. I’d like to live, marsupialized, within the skin of another. More than air, and energy and life itself, what I want is to be safe, warm, taken care of. This, I’m startled to find, is nothing new. It has been there, a part of me, for a long time.”

(Colette Dowling – *The Cinderella Complex*)

Introduction

Elfriede Jelinek was born in Mürzzuschlag, Steiermark, in 1946 and grew up in Vienna. As a child, she studied music at the Vienna Conservatory and at university she studied art history, theatre and music. Currently living in Vienna, she is regarded as a leading figure in women's literature, placing particular emphasis on issues of female sexuality and the conflict between the sexes. Her work is often shrouded in controversy and Elfriede Jelinek as an author, or more particularly as a female author, is often regarded as something of an "anti-feminist feminist" in her refusal to let women off the hook and allow them to rest peacefully in their role as victim. Instead, her works, and her characters, highlight the complicity of women in their own oppression.

These themes are particularly prevalent in her work entitled *The Piano Teacher* (Die Klavierspielerin), which was published in 1988. Other works include *Women as Lovers*, *Wonderful, Wonderful Times*, and *Lust*[1]. In 1998, in recognition of her contribution to German literature, she was awarded both the Heinrich Böll Prize, and the Georg Büchner Prize. In 2004 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. This decision received varied responses[2], aided by the author's decision not to attend the ceremony.

The representation of women as complicit in their dual role of both victim and oppressed, is of particular importance in "The Piano Teacher" in which power relationships are destabilized by a mother who has usurped the traditional male role of power. Though this

[1] For a comprehensive list of the author's publications as well as further bibliographical information, refer to the Elfriede Jelinek Homepage at http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/elfriede/
[2] *Fachdienst Germanistik.* (ed.) Kapitza, Peter. November 2004. p. 4

is indeed a complex issue - she was obliged to do so as a single parent - her actions are distinctly disempowering in nature in terms of the effects this has on her daughter. "The Piano Teacher", Erika Kohut, lives with her mother in Vienna. Erika was raised to fulfil her mother's desires to see her daughter become a world-renowned concert pianist, but, because she failed to achieve this, she has had to resort to teaching music at the Vienna Conservatory. In the text power is allotted according to gender roles. Erika's mother exercises dictatorial power and control over Erika, subjecting her (even as an adult) to a curfew and the limitations of a dress code.[3] These measures are designed to maintain the essentially "hands off" approach to human interaction, with specific relation to intimate and personal relationships. This applies to the relationship Erika has with her mother as well, since the two characters demonstrate the rejection of traditional mother-daughter roles – Erika exists simply as the result of the failed experiment to construct or raise a child without any awareness of her sexual identity. An examination of the relationship between Erika and her mother encourages the reader to ask why Erika simply does not leave – the apartment she shares with her mother, as well as the relationship with her mother. Erika is trapped in a similar situation as women in abusive relationships, who do not leave the relationship despite being, in some cases, financially independent.[4] The nature of the relationship between Erika and her mother is distinctly antagonistic. Though Erika is not materially dependent on her mother, she is indeed psychologically damaged – as a consequence of her mother's controlling influence - to such an extent that

[3] Another literary example of a daughter as a disempowered product of a mother-daughter relationship occurs in *Auroras Anlaß*, by Erich Hackl. In this text Hildegart is represented as a product of a controlling mother who consciously sought to create, almost single-handedly – the absence of a father is intended – a daughter as the perfect construct or product who would effectively achieve and be all that she, as her mother could not, or failed to be. (Hackl, Erich. *Auroras Anlaß*. 1987. Zürich: Diogenes Verlag AG.)

[4] Though similarities could be drawn between Erika's relationship with her mother and the case of women who exist in abusive relationships, this particular examination would be located in the field of forensic psychology, which is not in the realm of my research.

she is unable to lead a life as a functional and self-sustaining individual, and is consequently dependent on her mother.

The relationship between Erika and her mother serves not merely as a demonstration of the use and abuse of power in personal relationships, but also the consequences of the female adoption and internationalization of traditional male power roles. This is also indicated in the practice of female genital mutilation. The eradication of this problem lies not only in the persuasion of men, but also of women, that the practice should cease. This serves an indication of the female perpetuation of their situation or roles as victim, and is particularly prevalent in traditional African societies[5]. Indeed a complicated issue, this practice is regarded as empowering, though on a fundamentally paradoxical level, in that the women involved in this practice, derive their power from men – thereby conspiring with men, and compromising their own kind. Power, a fundamentally male dominated phenomenon as indicated in the text, is associated with notions of influence, control, the basic capacity to perform a task or function, authority, and political, personal and social ascendancy. As a concept, power is complex, and extends beyond the mere reference to the ability to exert control over a person, group or situation. Instances of social exchange, or relations between people, can also be regarded as 'relations of dependence', providing the 'basis of power'[6] in their capacity to create and break down conditions of equality in the distribution of power. In light of this the relationship between Erika and her mother, and that of Erika and Walter, serve as sites for the examination of the dynamics of power in inter-personal relationships.

[5] For further information refer to "Fighting Genital Mutilation in Africa" at http://www.afrol.com/Categories/Women/index_fgm.htm
[6] Molm, Linda. *Coercive Power in Social Exchange.* 1997. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg. 29

The aim of this research is based on the hypothesis of the notion of power and the manner in which it demonstrates itself principally in relationships – social as well as sexual – but also in violence and identity – identity construction and perception – in the work by Elfriede Jelinek entitled “The Piano Teacher”. The relationships or exchanges demonstrated in the text explore various characteristics of power and control and despite being specifically located as an Austrian text, the issues raised within the relationships are relevant to many contexts. The research sets out to prove that interpersonal relationships in Jelinek’s novel cannot be separated from the dynamics of power, which express themselves in physical and/or psychological violence. To this aim the research intends to examine the relationship between gender and power and the manner in which it manifests itself in relationships.

It is through an exploration of these concepts that the research will examine the role of power in relationships in “The Piano Teacher”. Two distinct relationships can be identified in the text, namely that of the mother-daughter relationship, and the relationship between the daughter, Erika, who is also a piano teacher, and her students, specifically her relationship with a particular male student, Walter. Walter Klemmer is represented as a charming, musically talented and attractive young man. Decidedly more sexually developed and confident than his teacher, he regards her, and the relationship he intends having with her, as an opportunity to gain sexual experience, and demonstrate his sexual prowess and power.

Walter's sexual development, confidence and power are demonstrated principally in an act of violence which occurs at the end of the text. In this scene, a confrontation, Walter demonstrates that although Erika's mother may have power over her, she has no control over him, and that it is indeed Walter who possesses this power – he locks her in a room, and proceeds to physically and verbally abuse Erika, and rape her. This act of violence proves not only that Walter is able to reclaim the power and integrity he felt he had lost when confronted with the masochistic nature of Erika's desires for their relationship, but also that power – sexual and psychological – cannot be claimed by women and remains intrinsically a male dominated phenomenon.

The research is also intended to examine the concept of generational conflicts, through the examination of the exchange between Erika and her mother, and – using the older woman, younger man scenario – Erika and Walter. As a study of the generational conflict, the relationship between Erika and her mother is also meant to indicate the extent to which Erika was raised in order to continue the Kohut legacy – a legacy and tradition of women, who, having inverted the tradition of the male power position, have adopted and internalised this position of power. This is a legacy marked by the substitution of matriarchy for patriarchy. This matriarchy however, is not based on traditional feminine premises and behaviour such as nurturing and mothering, but rather distinctly masculine behaviour characteristics such as aggression, control and violence. Erika represents the intended end of this legacy, and demonstrates this internalisation of the male power position by undertaking activities which are traditionally associated with males, namely that of her conscious exposure to pornography, in her visits to peep shows

and to the park, where she hopes to find and observe couples having sex. By extension then, this also demonstrates itself as a legacy of female internalisation of patriarchal power, which ironically, results not in women who are fundamentally independent and self-sufficient, but rather in women who are, and will always remain victims – disempowered, desexualised and dehumanised.

This paradox is deeply entrenched in Western culture. According to Jonathan Dollimore, desire is inextricably linked with the concepts of death and loss.[7] Dollimore states that in the tradition of Western culture, with its origins in ancient Greek history, man has always desired that which he has lost, or has never owned.

> "… desire comes to be regarded as inherently incapable of satisfaction and linked to death. Thus apparently always defeating itself, desire comes to seem destructively insatiable, a permanent lack whose attempted fulfilment is at once the destiny of the self and what destroys it …"[8]

Loss, is turn, regarded as, and associated with death, establishing the relation between the concepts of desire and death. When applied to the context of the narratives within the text, Erika's desire for power proves just as futile as her mother's desire and attempts to exercise power and control over daughter. Both Erika and her mother essentially desire that which was never theirs. Read in this light, the pursuit of power by Erika and her mother as a representation of the female or feminine pursuit of power is also futile, as it remains essentially the desire for something which has not merely been lost, but which was never theirs originally.

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[7] Dollimore, Jonathan. *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture.* 1998. London: Penguin Books
[8] Ibid. Pg. Xvii (Introduction)

Chapter One: The Mother-Daughter Relationship

Kristeva, in her focus on the maternal function, establishes and identifies specific stages in the relationship between the mother and her child.[9] The early stage is characterised by the symbol and function of the mother's breast, through which, the mother is able to control everything which enters and leaves the child's body. Through weaning, the mother denies the child the breast, establishing a system of negation. Kristeva differentiates between material and symbolic negation or rejection.

Material negation is marked by the ability of the child to physically reject any excess of what the mother feeds into its mouth. It is this material rejection which enables symbolic rejection[10]. The transition between material rejection and symbolic rejection is made possible by the phase of abjection. This phase is associated specifically with the mother's sex, the passage through which the infant entered the world. During this phase the infant progresses from dependence on the maternal body to independence from it. This transition is facilitated by the fantasy of a "loving and imaginary father"[11]. The logic, which informs the transition from material negation to symbolic negation, is already at work on the level of the semiotic, prior to the child's progression to the symbolic level.

The transition from the material to the symbolic is also regarded on the level of castration. Kristeva employs a theory which is similar to that of Lacan, though with slight

[9] Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*. 1993. USA: Indiana University Press. Pg.5
[10] Kristeva identifies the process of birth, whereby one body is repelled from another, also as a state or stage of negation and separation.
[11] Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*. 1993. USA: Indiana University Press. Pg. 4

deviations.[12] According to Lacan, the child enters the Symbolic by means of the "mirror stage" where it is provided with the first recognition of the "I".[13] Prior to this the child has no conception of the self, of its self, as a unified whole, and paradoxically, it is the fragmented image of the child's physical form and its reflection, which construct this whole. Ultimately, the child realises that the mirror image is indeed not real.

For Kristeva, the mother is a symbol of gratification, and therefore, a symbol of the Phallus. Therefore, for the infant (male or female), separation from the mother is equated with castration. Castration could be regarded as a lack, and the symbolic, could therefore be seen as the result of a lack, though for Kristeva, the symbolic is not only the result of a lack. The gap – which could be regarded as the transition from the original maternal function to the function of the mother after material negation - between the mother, and what is expected of her is then equated with what Lacan establishes as the "place of the Other as the place of the Signifier."[14] Castration then, creates the lack, which is important in the "mirror stage". Through the castration all dependence to the mother is ended, and replaced with a symbolic relation to an other.

> "She is trying to escape her mother. Erika is in her late thirties. Her mother is old enough to be her grandmother. The baby was born after long and difficult years of

[12] Ibid. pg. 24
[13] During this stage the child is held up in front of the mirror by an adult, facilitating a recognition of the "I"
[14] Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*. 1993. USA: Indiana University Press. Pg. 24

> marriage. Her father promptly left, passing the torch to his daughter. Erika entered, her father exited."[15]

Erika's mother was both mother and father to her. Erika's mother's association with the symbol of the Phallus occurs therefore, not only because of her role as a symbol of gratification, but also perhaps because she assumed the role of both mother and father in their relationship. At no point in the relationship between Erika and her mother is one able to detect a moment of castration - a break - by Erika, from her mother's (controlling) influence. The symbiotic relationship between Erika and her mother is disturbed, as Erika does not wholly identify with her mother. Their relationship is akin perhaps to slavery since Erika is unable to act on her own wishes. The first glimpse of Erika and her mother is not one of a mother and daughter, or more specifically a mother and infant, but of Erika as a middle-aged woman living with her elderly mother. Erika, as an adult, is still subject to the control and influence of her mother. Though it is not possible for her mother to use her breast in order to control what goes in and comes out of her daughter's mouth, the original maternal function has been mutated in such a way, that she, as the mother, still controls every aspect of her (adult) daughter's life. It is she, who stays at home and prepares their meals, and takes care of the maintenance of the apartment while Erika is away at work[16], and it she who controls what Erika wears;

> "Mother can't always prevent Erika from buying something, but she can dictate what Erika puts on. Mother is an absolute ruler. She decides what Erika will wear outside the house. … It is a mother's duty to help a child make up her mind and to

[15] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 3

[16] Interestingly, this also indicates the extent to which Erika too, has adopted certain aspects of the traditional male power role, representing the patriarch of the home, who sets off to work while his wife remains at home preparing meals and maintaining the home.

> prevent wrong decisions. By not encouraging injuries, a mother avoids having to close wounds later on. Erika's mother prefers inflicting injuries herself, then supervising the therapy."[17]

Erika and her mother exist in a fundamentally (self) destructive relationship. Conventional mother-daughter roles have been replaced by roles resembling more of a subject-object relationship. The mother has ceased being a mother, and become a tyrant, a dictator - "an absolute ruler"[18]. Erika on the other hand has ceased being a daughter, and become an object – property - governed, controlled and owned by her mother the proprietor. As the proprietor, her mother keeps a vigilant eye on her property, striving at all costs, never to let it out of her sight. As the proprietor her mother believes that she has made an investment in her property, and the best way to ensure lasting returns on an investment, would be to ensure that her property does not stray out of her control; that is, that it remains immovable:

> "Mother worries a lot, for the first thing a proprietor learns, and painfully at that, is: Trust is fine, but control is better. Her greatest anxiety is to keep her property immovable, tie it down, so it won't run away. That's why they have the TV set, which prefabricates, packages, and home-delivers lovely images, lovely actions."[19]

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[17] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 9 – This behaviour bears distinct similarities to Münchhausen Syndrome by Proxy, a condition named after an 18th Century German baron famed for his excessively fictitious and untrustworthy tales. The condition refers to a particular form of child abuse usually involving the mother or principal caregiver, who fabricates symptoms and signs in relation to the child ultimately causing the child unnecessary examinations and treatment. In terms of the relation to power and control, the condition demonstrates itself as an ideal means by which to ensure that the child remains under the control and influence of the mother, as an "unhealthy" child is less likely to rebel against his/her mother or caregiver. For further information related to this condition and its variants, refer to http://www.whonamedit.com

[18] Ibid

[19] Ibid. pg. 5

Erika's mother has sought to keep her child, her property, as far from the influences of the outside world as possible.[20] Erika has not been properly weaned from her mother, and as a result has been denied a life of independence. Instead, Erika's life and indeed her world, revolve solely around her work – her music – and her apartment. Erika, to a large extent, does not deal with reality – with the reality, demands, expectations and threats of the outside world and of functional adulthood – but is instead fed and subjected to an alternative, un-threatening and aesthetically pleasing image of reality, a reality which is false and nothing more than a representation, packaged and delivered via the television set - the practice of watching the television is fundamentally passive in that one simply watches other people doing. Within the incarcerating safety of their home, Erika is safe and under no immediate threat, except from herself and her mother.

These threats often manifest themselves physically, addressing a violent and abusive quality in the destructive nature of their relationship. When Erika comes home one night, her mother confronts her regarding the purchase of a dress – with funds reserved for the eventual purchase of a condominium. In light of the fact that there was no cessation of the original maternal function Erika was, and still remains simply her mother's child. As a child she has, according to the mother, done something wrong and needs to be punished. However, the punishment does not in any way resemble the 'slap on the wrist' one would expect a child to receive as punishment. Here, mother-child roles are replaced by the mother, the ultimate authority, and Erika who is now not a child, but a (juvenile)

[20] This is once again demonstrated in Erich Hackl's text, in which Aurora, the figure of the mother, represents, though in a different manner, the female usurping of power. Her daughter, Hildegart, becomes a problem when she starts developing (normal) sexual interests. Biology has in this case proven itself as an obstacle, which her mother tries to "get around" or avoid, in order to see her daughter become all that she failed to be.

delinquent. The ensuing confrontation is harsh, violent and both physically and verbally abusive:

> "You bitch, you bitch! Erika furiously yells at the superior authority. She grabs her mother's dark-blond hair with its grey roots. Now, Erika yanks at the hair that she herself beautified. She pulls it furiously. Her mother weeps. When Erika stops pulling, her hands are filled with tufts of hair. Erika does not know what to do with the discoloured dark-blond tufts. She goes into the kitchen and throws them into the garbage can."[21]

Erika's mother has exercised supreme control over her life. The relationship between these two characters could also be viewed in terms of an experiment – more specifically, Erika – like Hildegart in Hackl's *Auroras Anlaß* - exists as a product of a failed experiment to construct an identity which excludes sexuality. The mother's dictates regarding Erika's wardrobe, for example, stem from the fear of "what will happen if Erika enters strange homes with strange men in them."[22]

Erika's mother fears that by dressing in the way that she considers inappropriate, Erika runs the risk of attracting unwanted – unwanted for her, the mother – male attention. For this reason, although Erika's wardrobe consists of many attractive and flattering items, Erika has never worn them, and her existing dress sense caters to her mother's dictates. Even in this seemingly superficial area of her life, Erika is denied the expression of her femininity. The risk of attracting the attention of male individuals, by extension, means the risk of possibly losing Erika to this individual:

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[21] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag.Pg 8
[22] Ibid. pg 9

> "The only item missing from her dismal wardrobe is, fortunately, a wedding gown. Mother does not wish to become a mother-in-law. She prefers remaining a normal mother; she is quite content with her status.
>
> Mother says: Erika suits me just fine the way she is. Nothing more will come of her."[23]

Erika's mother seeks to control even her basic human right to reproduction, which could be regarded in a manner similar to castration and serving as a consequence, as the ultimate abuse. Erika was designed never to have a relationship. By reproducing, Erika will assume another role – namely that of mother – and her mother actively seeks to control her roles as daughter – or object – and teacher – roles which are intrinsically sterile and devoid of any reproductive potential.

Erika's penchant for purchasing clothes which eventually remain in her wardrobe, never to be worn, demonstrates that she is indeed aware, to some extent, of certain aspects of her femininity and the desire to not only project this femininity, but also to maintain her connection with it:

> "For these clothes belong to her! Mother can take them away and sell them, but she cannot wear them herself, for Mother, alas, is too fat for these narrow sheaths. They do not fit her. These things are all Erika's."[24]

Erika has a residual feminine identity, represented in the outer manifestation of (her relationship with) her clothes and her wardrobe. This establishes a mechanism of differentiation between Erika and her mother. Erika is aware of her femininity, but

[23] Ibid. pg 11, 6
[24] Ibid. pg. 10

remains a "closet woman"[25] as her mother has effectively truncated this femininity. Though her mother cannot control biology, or Erika's biological make-up, she can, however, distort it. Erika's mother however, perceives and interprets her daughter's actions not as natural, but rather as an indication of her vanity, and as a consequent flaw in her character. Equally importantly though, is that she projects her own dissatisfaction with her old age – consequently her own estrangement from her femininity – into this perception. Old age is a hard enough burden to bear without the demands of trying to maintain a connection with your femininity and sexuality:

> "But that vanity of hers, that wretched vanity. Erika's vanity is a major problem for her mother, driving thorns into her flesh. Erika's vanity is the only thing Erika should learn to do without. Better now than later. For in old age, which is just around the corner, vanity is a heavy load to bear. And old age is enough of a burden as it is. The only thing Erika should give up is her vanity. If necessary, mother can smooth out the rough edges, so there won't be anything abrasive in Erika's character."[26]

Sexuality though, is basic and a fundamental aspect of the construction of identity. Elizabeth Grosz identifies four dynamics at work in human sexuality.[27] First she identifies sexuality as a drive or impulse, which, in Erika's case, cannot be controlled by her mother; secondly, as an act or an interaction between individuals or bodies, demonstrated in the relationship between Erika and Walter; thirdly, sexuality can be

[25] Kathleen Thorpe, discussion, 2004.
[26] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag Pg. 7
[27] Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. 1994. USA: Indiana University Press. Pg. 8

understood in terms of identity, gender and the basic male-female distinction, and fourth, sexuality is also associated with the notion of orientations (which direct the drives). Though inherent, sexuality, because of its unpredictable and dynamic nature, cannot be controlled, and remains intrinsically something which is "excessive, redundant and superfluous":

> "As a drive it infests all sorts of other areas in the structures of desire. It renders even the desire not to desire, or the desire for celibacy, as sexual; it leaks into apparently nondrive-related activities through what Freud described as sublimation, making any activity a mode of its own seeking of satisfaction."[28]

Following the confrontation between Erika and her mother regarding the dress, their conversation becomes gradually directed towards Erika's students.

> "Their conversation becomes more and more vitriolic: Mother and daughter spray acid at students who do better than Erika or threaten to do so. You shouldn't give them free rein, you don't need to. You should stop them. But you let them get away with murder! You're not smart enough, Erika. If a teacher puts her mind to it, none of her students will succeed. No young woman will emerge from her classroom and pursue a career against Erika's wishes. You didn't make it – why should others reach the top? And from *your* musical stable to boot?"[29]

The title of the text is significant since the term teacher is associated not only with education and development, but also with power. Rather than displaying a desire to see

[28] Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. 1994. USA: Indiana University Press. Pg. 8
[29] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 9

her students succeed in their musical careers and to facilitate (in her role as their teacher) this ambition, Erika seeks to prevent them (or deter them as long as possible) from achieving success. She too, was once a promising pianist with aspirations of becoming an equally promising concert pianist. Erika, however, was unable to achieve this ambition and consequently became a teacher at the Vienna Conservatory, where she (consciously perhaps) seeks to deny success to those students displaying the same aspirations as she once did.

There exists an interesting parallel between the teaching approach Erika adopts with her students and the manner in which her mother raised her. Erika actively seeks to deny her students any expression of what could very likely be a sincere and promising career calling. She denies them their growth and development as artists in the same way she was denied growth and development as (a child and) a woman. Erika demonstrates an awareness of her sexuality, demonstrated in her relationship to her clothes and her wardrobe, in the same way some of her students demonstrate genuine talent for music, but in both incidents, insufficient action is taken on this awareness in order to facilitate further development.

Erika's mother, in her position as authority figure and the holder of power in their relationship, did not nurture and empower Erika, but rather disempowered her. Similarly Erika, in her capacity as the power-holder in the teacher-pupil relationship, disempowers her students, perhaps as a projection of the failure of her career and her relationship with her mother. Erika then, consequently perpetuates the vicious circle of abuse by

establishing and maintaining a dynamic in the teacher-pupil relationship similar to the relationship she has with her mother. The (intimate and interactive) relationships between mother and daughter, and teacher and student therefore also function as power relationships. Joan Meyer suggests that relationships – loving relationships especially – be examined in terms of both power and love.[30] Meyer takes the idea of the consideration that relations between people be considered as power relations a step further, in her suggestion that loving or intimate relationships be regarded in terms of both power and love. Meyer states that because Western culture regards the notions of power and love as separate entities, that a theory of relationships should be formulated, which avoids the complications caused by the cultural dichotomy of power and love. She cites the political approach to power in the model created by Stephen Lukes, a model which allows a combination of both personal and structural dynamics of relationships:

> "Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances, by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?"[31]

This is particularly interesting and relevant when considering the narratives within the text and in particular the relationships presented in the text, as the protagonist, Erika, seems indeed alienated from her sexuality. But sexuality is inherent – part of the package,

[30] *The Gender of Power*. 1991. (eds.) Davis, Kathy., Leijenaar, Monique., Oldersma, Jantine. London: Sage Publications
[31] Ibid. pg. 35

as it were – and Erika possesses only a rudimentary, if not naïve knowledge of her sexuality and sexual identity, owing largely to the controlling influence of her mother who sought to consciously raise a daughter without a sexual identity. Though Erika does indeed possess some awareness of her sexuality and femininity – indicated in her frequent purchase of clothes, and later in her interaction with her cousin, not only is this knowledge vague, but she also appears to have internalized this vague knowledge as reality. Because of her lack of knowledge, Erika is left to her own devices, with no one to confide in. Her mother's control has limited her access to information. In this way her mother has established herself as the sole source of information and knowledge, and consequently the one who is able to control this knowledge. This then, also demonstrates an act of conditioning as well as its consequences. Notwithstanding the fact that sexuality is an integral component in the construction of identity, Erika has been conditioned by her mother to reject this aspect of her identity as superfluous and inconsequential. Because this is not entirely possible however, Erika has only internalized certain aspects of this, and has as a result, become emotionally and psychologically removed from her femininity and sexuality. Erika's mother has imposed limitations on her daughter's access to information and knowledge, and Erika has as a result, become self-limiting – becoming in effect, her own mother.

Though personal relationships also contain a dynamic of power, Erika's alienation from her sexuality could be traced directly back to the control and influence of her mother as a result of (negative) conditioning. This relationship exists as more of a relationship (and exercise) of power, than as an intimate, loving and nurturing relationship between mother

and daughter. The manner in which the nature of the mother-daughter relationship within the text manifests itself as a power relationship is established clearly in light of the argument that:

> "Power is described as both relative and characteristic of relationships. Describing relationships in terms of this power perspective means questioning which party in a relationship has the greater potential to determine the behaviour of the other party. If power is actualized, it is defined as control."[32]

[32] Ibid. pg. 34 – Although, as will be discussed further, power can only be defined in relation to the parties directly involved in the relationship. Erika's mother has power and exerts control over her, but is unable to control Walter.

Chapter Two: All About Sex

Erika, though still not weaned from her mother, still desires a relationship with an 'other'. This desire in Erika demonstrates a degree of normative conditioning and development, but Erika has had no frame of reference or knowledge other than her mother and has consequently been unable to carry out the normative response to this desire. In this manner Erika as a character evades distinct definition, as it is not possible that her desire for a relationship concretely establishes her as a "normal" and well-adjusted individual, in the same manner that her material independence fails to establish her as a fully independent individual. Erika's character and identity are marked by distinct fragmentation. Though she does indeed possess some awareness of certain basic aspects of her (human) make-up, she does not have access to the information which would facilitate the development of these attributes. More importantly, because she has not been allowed to develop this dynamic of her character, this significant other is not only a male partner, but also her sexual self. As mentioned, sexuality and an awareness of one's sexuality are inherent. By extension then, sexuality and an awareness of one's sexuality become associated with the needs, demands and pressures of this human dynamic.

Erika's awareness of her sexual, sensual and physical attributes and needs occurred (as is normally the case) during adolescence. Living then with both her mother as well as her grandmother, whose femininity had decayed or rather, had been so excessively ignored and dismissed that it had become almost obsolete and insignificant, Erika was subjected to a life of extreme isolation:

> "She is shielded from influences, and never exposed to temptations. This hands-off policy applies only to pleasure, not work. Mother and grandmother, the female brigade, stand guard, rifle in hand, to protect Erika against the male hunter lurking outside."[33]

The controlling influence of Erika's mother (and grandmother) had become almost military in nature. Mother-daughter roles have fallen away. Erika was not so much the daughter and granddaughter, but rather, the project, or experiment, which would astonish and captivate the world when ready. This experiment was two-fold, in that not only was it intended to ultimately demonstrate Erika's musical talent to the world, but it was also designed in order to breed, through Erika, a third generation of women alienated from their femininity. Erika was raised in order not only to carry on this legacy, but specifically to be the end of it, as the nature of her role as a project is fundamentally sterile, facilitated by her mother's intentions and belief that Erika will not be involved in any relationships, and will not procreate. Indeed the two women, mother and grandmother, have ceased being merely estranged from their femininity and sexuality, and have become almost completely detached from it. Qualified only by their age, they exist merely as "two venomous women, a pair of spiders" with Erika as "their victim, whom they have sucked dry."[34]

> "The vaginal lips of the two old women have turned into siliceous stone. Rattling dryly, their snatches snap like the jaws of a dying stag beetle, but catch nothing. So the two women hold on to the young flesh of their daughter and

[33]Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 33
[34] Ibid. pg. 37

granddaughter, slowly mangling it, while their shells keep watch to make sure no one else comes along and poisons the young blood."[35]

The poisoning of Erika's young blood is caused, however, unknowingly, by a (male) member of the family. Erika reflects on her youth and remembers the visit of her cousin, a then young, good-looking medical student. Erika, governed by her (mother's) strenuous timetable, was unable to interact with her cousin and the friends he had brought along until she had practiced her music. Her cousin is boisterous, charming, energetic and flirtatious. With his visit, a new energy enters the house "for a man always brings life into a house."[36] Her cousin, a young man, is clearly aware of his sexuality and masculinity and is eager to demonstrate this.

In a manner which addresses certain potentially exhibitionist tendencies, he wears revealing bathing suits and subjects unsuspecting female victims to his latest complicated wrestling maneuver. This is precisely the trigger for Erika's sexual yearnings. As soon as she is able to take a break from her practicing, Erika rushes outside to her cousin and his friends, hoping for respite not only from her practice schedule and her mother (and grandmother) but also from the alienation she experiences from herself and other people her age.

Erika is not like other children her age, but her isolation is perceived as seriousness, as a devotion to her music (and ultimately her future). Her cousin wishes to demonstrate his

[35] Ibid. pg. 33
[36] Ibid. pg. 38

new wrestling maneuver on her, in an attempt to cheer her up. Erika agrees, and she soon finds herself in the same position of submission the previous victims had found themselves in. Although experiencing slight pain and discomfort, it is the close proximity to another – and in this case, an "other", young, virile, and in this context physically powerful – body, which arouses Erika:

> "The red genital pouch sways and dangles, it swings seductively before HER eyes. It belongs to a seducer, whom no one can resist. She leans her cheek against it for only a split second. She doesn't quite know what she's doing. She wants to feel it just once, she wants to graze that glittering Christmas-tree ornament with her lips, just this once. For one split second, SHE is the addressee of this package. SHE grazes it with her lips or was it her chin? It was unintentional. The guy doesn't realize he's triggered a landslide in his cousin. She peers and peers. The package has been arranged for her, like a slide under a microscope. Just let this moment linger, it's so good."[37]

The moment, however, does not linger, and Erika is forced back into isolation. Her interaction with her cousin is located principally in instinct and biology, areas her mother cannot control. Erika however, has no idea what to do with this instinctual reaction as she has no frame of reference or information. Alone, in her room, Erika unwraps a blade, which she carries along wherever she goes. The blade – a potentially phallic symbol - is imbued with great significance for Erika, and appears to smile at her "like a bridegroom at a bride."[38] What Erika lacks – or at this stage in adolescence, searches for – in a relationship, she attempts to compensate for, or find in and through the blade and her

[37] Ibid. pg. 42-43
[38] Ibid. pg. 43

relationship with it, demonstrating a perverse sexual initiation or act of deflowering. Cutting herself is then not just an act of self-mutilation, but a sexual act, similar to masturbation, in which Erika tries to create the sexual act for herself. Erika does not hate her body; she is instead an active participant, a voyeur of herself, watching with clinical detachment. By likening it to a bridegroom, a complex relationship is established with the blade. The associations with the blade are then not only those of love, fidelity, intimacy and pleasure, but also pain, discomfort and potentially even death. The incisions made by the blade do not cause her pain, but pleasure. She cuts herself, but is not seeking to kill herself. She takes care not to cut too deep so as to injure tendons and cause fatal blood loss. This is not the first time Erika has done this. She does, however, draw blood.

> "The razor blade is always wiped clean and then wrapped up again. Bright red blood trickles and trails from the wounds, sullying everything as it flows. It oozes, warm, silent, and the sensation is not unpleasant. It's so liquid. It runs incessantly. It reddens everything. Four slits, oozing nonstop. On the floor and on the bedding, the four tiny brooks unite into a raging torrent. "Just keep following my tears and the brook will take you in.""[39]

According to Elizabeth Grosz[40], inscriptions on the surface of the body, like cuts and tattoos, function to increase sexually or sensually sensitive areas on the body. These markings indicate that some areas are potentially more sensitive than others. The added function of these markings is to heighten the sensitivity of these zones, which, by extension, heighten or increase sexual intensity or pleasure. These markings indicate:

[39] Ibid. pg. 44
[40] Grosz cites the theory of Alphonso Lingis regarding body markings and tattoos, and the role of the body as a "surface of erotogenic intensity."

> "the constitution of erotogenic orifices, rims, and libidinal zones, producing intensities unevenly over the entire surface of the body and within the body's muscular-skeletal frame, a kind of interweaving of incisions and perforations with the sensations and sexual intensities, pleasures and pains of the body. These incisions and various body markings create an erotogenic surface; they create not a map of the body but the body precisely as a map."[41]

Though Erika as an adolescent has experienced her sexual awareness or awakening at the 'normal' stage in her development, she has been forced to lead a life marked by the strong denial of these urges or aspects of her identity. Pleasure has no place in Erika's life, only work – though ironically for the pleasure of her mother. Erika's passion has been directed toward her music, and so her hands consequently become the part of her body she is most aware of, and which is more sensitive. Erika though, also demonstrates distinct masochistic tendencies – which become clear in light of her relationship with Walter Klemmer – and regards pain itself as integrally associated with the pursuit and achievement of pleasure:

> "Pain itself is merely a consequence of the desire for pleasure, the desire to destroy, to annihilate; in its supreme form, pain is a variety of pleasure."[42]

Because she has made no real connection with the sensuality of her body as it were, the sexual or sensual dynamic associated with the marking of her body becomes directed toward her hands, as the only indicator and medium of expression of her passion or sensuality and sexuality. This area is for Erika, virgin territory in every sense of the word – an empty slate on which Erica seeks to inscribe the details of her sexuality and her

[41] Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. 1994. USA: Indiana University Press. Pg. 139
[42] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 107

sexual identity through her use of the blade to mark her body, her clandestine visits to peepshows and her late-night expeditions to the park to spy on people or couples having sex there – in the manner of field work.

The recurrence of the blade, and several other implements with which to mark her body, later in the text, indicate that Erika continues to redirect her sexual urges, energy and perceived deficiencies through the marking of her body. Though Erika's mutilation of her body could be regarded as an indication of her hatred of her body, it is essentially, a sexual act, and an indication of her masochistic tendencies. The only significant sexual partner Erika has had, has been herself. A hatred of her body would imply the existence of emotional involvement for Erika, which she at no point demonstrates. Her perception of her body is clinical and detached, and her perception of the reality of relationships is mediated strongly by her masochistic tendencies. Despite being aware of these sexual urges, and of her sexuality and sensuality, Erika was still subject to the dictates of her mother, and consequently subject to the forced alienation from her sexuality. She is aware of it, but she does not know it. To her, it seems like a stranger. In this manner Erika has been estranged from her sexuality and this estrangement from her sexual identity is manifested not only in the marking of her body, but also in her clandestine visits to peepshows and her trips to the park to spy on the sexual activities of couples.

Erika makes several excursions to peep shows and to the park: Erika is not only the piano teacher, but also the voyeur. The natural explanation for voyeurism would be that the individual seeks to satisfy/gratify his/her own personal sexual desires or fantasies. Since

this activity is strongly related to sexual practices, gratification would then mean orgasm. Erika appears to demonstrate this when at the peep show, along with the emotional and psychological detachment she exhibits as a result of her conditioning – she enters the booth and while taking in surroundings she also picks up the evidence of the previous occupant of the booth's gratification; the tissue which was used to wipe up the ejaculate. She sniffs it, taking in not only the smell, but also demonstrates something of a secondary orgasm.

> "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 labour. She breathes and looks, using up a wee bit of her life."[43]

This is substantiated by the description of her behaviour – she does not appear disgusted, though she keeps her gloves on in order not to touch anything and recognizes the booth and establishment as dirty – she is intrigued, and excited. Here, Erika demonstrates behaviour similar in nature to the previously mentioned act of watching television. Watching television is essentially a passive occupation in which one simply observes other people, and here too, Erika desires simply to watch – and remain an observer.

Just as the incident with her cousin indicated her gaze, willing, excited, eager to have the moment continue, so too here in the booth, does Erika demonstrate the same desire to simply watch:

> "All Erika wants to do is watch. Here, in this booth, she becomes nothing. Nothing fits into Erika, but she, she fits exactly into this cell. Erika is a compact tool in human form. Nature seems to have left no apertures in her. Erika feels

[43] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 52

> solid wood in the place where the carpenter made a hole in any genuine female. Erika's wood is spongy, decaying, lonesome wood in the timber forest, and the rot is spreading."[44]

Erika's visits to the peep shows and her trips to the park address a lack; an absence of femininity. Furthermore Erika seeks to find some meaning – and consequently establish a connection - in relation to her femininity, sexuality and sexual identity:

> "The man must often feel (Erika thinks) that the woman must be hiding something crucial in that chaos of her organs. It is those concealments that induce Erika to look at ever newer, ever deeper, eve more prohibited things. She is always on the lookout for a new and incredible insight. Never has her body – even in her standard pose, legs apart in front of the shaving mirror – revealed its silent secrets, even to its owner! And thus the bodies on the screen conceal everything from the man who would like to peruse the selection of females on the open market, the women he doesn't know; and from Erika, the unrevealing viewer."[45]

Just as she was conscious of being different from the other young girls (and boys) her age, so too, as an adult, is she aware of her difference to other women. Erika's identity and femininity have been reduced and rendered almost entirely redundant. As an indication of the extent to which she has internalised the indoctrinating influence of her mother, Erika regards these shortcomings in the light of natural, birth or creative defects. Though sexuality is natural, Erika regards it as natural that she is not in possession of this quality. "Nature" and/or the "carpenter" have simply created her differently. Erika is

[44] Ibid. pg. 51
[45] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 108

confused, and unaware of nurture in this particular instance. Her mother has stifled not only her normal development as a woman, but also her awareness, so much so, that Erika is unable to draw proper conclusions. The fragmentation of Erika's identity has become so extreme that here in the booth, she becomes nothing. As a product of a carpenter, Erika is less of a woman, and more of a puppet or marionette – which as physical objects are usually genderless (sex-less?). Furthermore, she appears to project this image of nothingness onto the other women at the establishment, and since Erika is the only female patron, she refers then, to the women who work at the peep show, the women whom people (including Erika) pay to watch.

> "Please come in, he says, welcoming her into his parlour, where the small lamps glow tranquilly over boobs and cunts, chiselling out bushy triangles, for that's the first thing a man looks at, it's the law. A man looks at nothing, he looks at pure lack. After looking at this nothing, he looks at everything else." [46]

Erika is so estranged from her sexuality and her sexual identity that her sex and gender appear to mean nothing to her, for her even the symbols or objects representing the female sex and sexuality are without meaning and substance, representing nothing. Femininity means nothing, as does female sexuality, and when the patrons of establishments such as the peep shows – voyeurs like Erika – visit the peep show, they do so to see essentially nothing. Erika's perception indicates more than a belief in the female objectification associated with this industry, it indicates a complete dismissal of the relevance of basic human – in this case female – sexuality and sexual needs and establishes the role of women simply as objects of male gratification which she then

[46] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 52 – This is strongly suggestive of the Freudian concept of penis envy, in which the idea of female or feminine inadequacy is located principally in the absence of a penis.

projects onto her relationship with Walter, in which she indicates her willingness to place herself at his (sexual) disposal.

Just as Erika's life at home with her mother is mediated by the television, the peep show and her trips to the park continue the image of the television. The media and television are distinctly passive occupations, in which one simply watches other people engaged in various activities. Consequently this reinforces the passivity, or the second-hand thrills associated with the peep show industry. The television offers up fragmented images – bits of reality that have been snatched up and delivered to her for her viewing pleasure. Erika's life and identity are marked and characterised by fragmentation and consequently her perceptions of and interactions with reality occur in the form of fragmented images and isolated moments. The booth, with its walls and screen or window also suggests idea of a television. Erika is a character in a different reality – like a puppet, or marionette – a reality much like a television show. The only difference lies in nature of what this television presents in the line of images and suggestions of reality, and what the television at home does. The television at home presents images which are pretty, lovely and unthreatening testimonies to the reality her mother would like her to believe exists. Here in the booth the images address the very aspect of her life and identity her mother has tried prevented her from coming to terms with. This blatant display of bodies and sex and sexuality – Erika becomes so engrossed in these images, these images from the booth and the activities in the park, seeking perhaps to establish some sort of connection with her own life and reality (just as viewers of a soap opera become engrossed and

emotionally involved in the drama presented to them on screen – a life which is not their own – a reality which they could perhaps only indirectly identify with).

For the couples in the park, the screen on the television has become larger, but the reality of the couples still is delivered to Erika (and to us) as an isolated moment, a scene from a movie. Erika becomes excited, and when in this state she finds herself desperately wanting to urinate. When viewed in the context of watching the couple having sex in the park, Erika's urination could be viewed in two ways; firstly in the same manner as an orgasm, the climactic gratification which follows intense or extreme excitement, and secondly, as a manifestation of her anxiety and a sign of her nervousness, and a manifestation of her super-ego as a controlling influence:

> "Then she reaches it. … At last: the homeland of the peepers. … 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 realising it, is turned into a threesome. Suddenly, certain organs labour 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. … Erika Kohut can't stand it anymore. Her need is stronger. She gingerly lets down her panties and pisses on the ground."[47]

Erika's anxiety and excitement are instinctual, but again, she is unable to control these instinctual reactions. The stressful nature of the situation creates anxiety, which ultimately creates Erika's need to urinate. Interestingly, Erika is divorced from her role of

[47] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 141-148

spectator. All references to Erika as the voyeur are replaced by references in the first person singular – "the spectator", "she" – creating voyeurs out of the readers.

Erika's position as voyeur is highlighted by her active observation and her wish to be a participant in the activity she is observing. What is also evident though, is the extent to which the text makes us aware of our own voyeuristic tendencies. Carlotta von Maltzan suggests that in the text the reader becomes the voyeur through the dynamic of self-fictionalisation in the text.[48] This self-fictionalisation creates the effect of a double-sided mirror, in which the reader, though seeking to discover the secret sexual fantasies and tendencies of the author, ultimately sees only him/her self:

> "A reader who hopes to satisfy his/her secret sexual fantasies and desires when listening to/reading Jelinek will be disappointed. Readers who tend to confuse the text with the person of the author, … , ultimately give away their own position as voyeur: By trying to uncover Jelinek's "secret life" or her "secret fantasies and desires," they will have to face only themselves."[49]

The impossibility of the reader to establish the author's intentions in and through a reading of the text is supported by Elizabeth Grosz, who states that:

> "The author's intentions, emotions, psyche and interiority are not only inaccessible to readers, they are likely to be inaccessible to the author herself. For

[48] Maltzan, Carlotta von. "Voyeurism and Film in Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*" in (ed.) Lamb-Faffelberger, M. *Austrian Culture*. Vol. 33: *Literature, Film and the Culture Industry in Contemporary Austria*. 2002. New York: Peter Lang Publishing. Pp. 98-108

[49] Ibid. pg. 100 – von Maltzan draws a comparison between *The Piano Teacher* and Hitchcock's film, *Rear Window*, to demonstrate the manner in which, in both the text as well as the film, the voyeur is identified on screen or in the narrative, and in the reading/viewing audience. In most cases literature such as Jelinek's text, establishes or creates the narrator and the author as two separate and distinct entities. The consequent narrative is demonstrated as more of an example of reportage; an essentially impersonal and non-judgmental narrative.

> Barthes and Foucault, as for Derrida a text cannot be the expression of an individual's interior, nor simply the representation of some social exterior, for it is as *an act of writing*, the material manipulation of signs, discursive structures, textual elements, an act of inscription, with its own protocols, modes of constraint, and regulation."[50]

Erika's gaze then becomes our gaze; this effect is also due to the change in the address in the text from the first person plural to the third person singular.[51] The reader then becomes complicit and sees what Erika sees. Von Maltzan also refers to the notion of the "cinematic apparatus"[52], in which the voyeur adopts what Foucault describes as a gaze (an inspecting gaze), which makes, ultimately, the individual his/her own observer. However, the presence of an observer or observing force or influence does not necessarily facilitate self-controlled and monitored behaviour. An individual is not necessarily likely to display behaviour which is then ordered and "well behaved", since clearly just because you're being watched, it does not mean that you're not going to "step out of line" since the only person watching you, is you. This could very likely serve as another explanation for Erika's multiple trips to the peepshows and to the park where, though she often displays an acute awareness of her mother's control and influence, in the context of her clandestine visits to the peepshows and to the park, she is aware that the only person doing the watching, is her.

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[50] Grosz, Elizabeth. *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. 1995. New York: Routledge. Pg. 13

[51] Maltzan, Carlotta von. "Voyeurism and Film in Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*" in (ed.) Lamb-Faffelberger, M. *Austrian Culture*. Vol. 33: *Literature, Film and the Culture Industry in Contemporary Austria*. 2002. New York: Peter Lang Publishing. Pp.101

[52] Ibid

This however, is strongly suggestive of narcissism of which the basic principle would be the love of one's own image.[53] This, by extension, is associated with the notion of projection – the voyeur is narcissistic because he/she enjoys watching other people, because he sees him/her self in them, or perhaps desires to see him/her self in them and in that situation. Though Erika admits to her desire to participate in the sexual encounter she observes in the park, it is less likely that she sees herself in them, simply because she is (very likely) unable to do so. She is not aware of the totality of her self and her identity, which would facilitate this projection. For her these experiences, these images address that aspect of her life and identity from which she has been estranged (though, as it has been suggested, she derives some pleasure from it).

The extent to which narcissism is associated with Erika is primarily associated with the concepts of the mirror and reflection. These serve to accentuate the fragmented nature of Erika's life, sexuality and identity.[54] Erika is so removed from her body that she regards it merely as a rotting piece of wood. Her perceptions of herself are limited solely to the reflections she finds herself confronted with – from the hazy and distorted reflection in the shop window, to the fragmented reflection in the mirror she uses when she cuts her

[53] An ideal example of the demonstration of the concept of female narcissism can be found in *Problems Problems*, by Ingeborg Bachmann. In this text the protagonist, Beatrix, seeks to achieve and maintain a physical appearance which is timeless, ageless and without expression. She seeks to remain physically fragile and delicate – doll-like, and experiences a moment of almost sublime clarity, while at the salon, in which she admits to falling in love with herself: "This was how she should look! That was it! Slender, doll-like, with these two curls in front that looked fake, maybe a whole head of these corkscrew curls, framing a mask-like face, drained of all expression. … I'm in love, I'm honest to goodness in love with myself, I'm divine!" (Bachmann, Ingeborg. *Three Paths to the Lake*. 1989. New York: Holmes and Meier)

[54] The concept of the fragmented female physical image is indicated clearly in the work of Franz Kafka. Daniela Pacher ("Kafka's Women: The Feminine Link to Art") indicates that the only way for Kafka to successfully visualize women, was by focusing on the fragmented components of their bodies, as opposed to their bodies in their entirety – by viewing her in terms of the sum of her total parts, as it were. According to Pacher this rendered them more accessible to Kafka. (*Journal of the Kafka Society of America*. June/Dec 1990)

genitals. This is also evident in the final scene where Erika plunges a knife into her shoulder, and fails to notice the blood she has drawn – the blood which would be the principle indicator of her life and existence. Erika does not exist as a person, merely as a reflection. Her life and her narrative continue the idea of the television set; merely a sequence of fragments and isolated images which are in principle only (mediated and mediating) representations.

Chapter Three: Erika and Walter

Joan Meyer's adaptation of Stephen Lukes' power theory[55] has particular relevance to the relationships described in "The Piano Teacher". The mother-daughter relationship is one which is marked not only by the dictatorial exercise of power, but also the manipulation of power. Erika's mother has controlled every aspect of her life including when, even as an adult, Erika is subject to a curfew and the dictates of a dress code enforced by her mother. Erika was not socialized into any normative female role. The clothes she wears, for example, are not meant to encourage any demonstration of her (physical) female form. Erika has no (sexual) identity – she was not taught to be anything other than a pianist. The extent to which she has internalized the (de-humanizing and de-sexualizing) influence and control of her mother is demonstrated in her perception of her fragmented and incomplete identity as natural (though strikingly different and alien even to her). These are the perceptions which Walter, her student, challenges.

Walter Klemmer is one of Erika's students, "a nice-looking blond boy"[56]. As a student he is keen, ambitious and talented, with an eager desire to please his teacher, Erika. Walter is typically confident, talented and womanizing. As a young man, he is at the peak of his sexual development. His interests, likewise, in Erika are predominantly sexual:

> "He sees the play of muscles in her upper arm, he is excited by the collision of flesh and motion. The flesh obeys an inner motion that has been triggered by the music, and Klemmer beseeches his teacher to obey him some day. He masturbates

[55] *The Gender of Power*. 1991. (eds.) Davis, Kathy., Leijenaar, Monique., Oldersma, Jantine. London: Sage Publications. p. 35
[56] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 29

in his seat. One of his hands involuntarily twitches on the dreadful weapon of his genital.

He is crazy about music. He is also secretly crazy about his music teacher. He is of the highly personal opinion that Fräulein Kohut is the very woman a young man desires as an overture to life. The young man starts out on a small scale and climbs rapidly."[57]

Walter seeks sexual experience and believes that Erika as an older woman, and more importantly, an older female authority figure, would be the ideal source of experience. As an indication of (the success of) Erika's mother's dictates regarding her daughter's dress code, he regards Erika as (sexually) conservative. He believes that though she may be his teacher, he would be able to instruct her sexually and bring her to a point where she would be able to love, or at least accept her body. Ultimately he intends demonstrating his sexual prowess. According to Frank Young, Walter's intentions – though seemingly self-centered and myopic in terms of their focus on his sexual experience and gratification – also have a somewhat well intended aim – Walter's intentions and interest in Erika are geared towards freeing her from the limitations of the middle-class mentality by which she has been imprisoned:

"Die Klavierlehrerin ist das Opfer einer Individualistischen Ideologie und ihrer Fixierung auf kleinbürgerliche Werte. Die vordergründige Konkretisierung der Romanproblematik in Erika Kohuts sexuellem Verhalten darf den Blick nicht

[57] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 63-64

dafür verstellen, daß es in diesem Roman um die system-immanente, gezielte Erziehung eines Menschen zu Entfremdung, Isolation und Unmündigkeit geht."[58]

Erika therefore, could be regarded as a victim of the system in which she was raised – essentially her mother's system, which was aimed at raising a concert pianist as opposed to raising and nurturing a daughter, and ultimately a woman. In terms of her identity then, and more specifically her sexual identity, Erika is not only naïve but also weak and sexually underdeveloped. Sexually, Walter is portrayed as decidedly more powerful than Erika – whereas Erika perceives and believes that she has nothing but rotting wood as an indicator of her sex and sexuality, Walter's very sex is indicated by a weapon, a "dreadful weapon", which he uses to exercise his power over the female sex, and demonstrate his masculinity.

Erika's sexual experiences have been limited, and generally discouraging. These experiences, coupled with the desires of her mother to keep her away from intimate encounters and relationships, have consequently made Erika distrustful of men, sex and relationships.

> "Sex started those young men rolling with Erika, and then they stopped sex. Erika tried to hold them with passion and pleasure. Her nails pointedly scratched the back of each antagonist. She felt nothing. She stimulated overwhelming pleasure so that the man would finally stop. The man would finally stop, but then he came

[58] Young, Frank W. "Am Haken des Fleischhauers: Zum Politökonomischen Gehalt der Klavierspielerin" in *Gegen den Schönen Schein: Texte zu Elfriede Jelinek.* 1990. (ed.) Gürtler, Christa. Frankfurt (Main): Verlag Neue Kritik. Pg. 75

another time. Erika felt nothing, she has always felt nothing. She is as unfeeling as a piece of tar paper in the rain."[59]

Even in her limited experience, Erika has always felt and demonstrated extreme emotional and psychological detachment in intimate relationships. In sexual encounters, Erika regards herself not as a living, sensual and sexually active participant, but as something lifeless and essentially negligible. Her apparent self-objectification is indeed so extreme that she regards herself as nothing but "a piece of tar paper in the rain."

Erika does develop an interest in Walter, though from the onset the nature of this interest is one of surveillance and control – a need to monitor the movements of Walter – thereby bearing a striking resemblance to the behaviour displayed by Erika's mother. Erika follows Walter when he leaves the Conservatory one night in a manner similar to a stalker, demonstrating an added dynamic to her voyeuristic tendencies:

> "Klemmer lopes along in front of Erika. Erika eludes everyone and everything, but if a nimble person eludes her, she sets off after him, dogging his heels: her saviour, to whom she is drawn as if to a giant magnet.
>
> Erika Kohut follows Walter Klemmer, who, without looking back, enters the doorway of a middle-class town house. She knows from the school records that Klemmer lives in her neighbourhood. Perhaps one of them is made for the other, and the other will realize it after a great deal of storm and strife.
>
> She knows that Walter Klemmer has stopped nowhere, he has gone straight home. So she can give up her supervisory task for today."[60]

[59] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 75
[60] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 128-130

Owing to the manner in which she was raised by her mother – who demonstrates the same behaviour – Erika's immediate desire and inclination is to assume complete control over the relationship. Because she has had no other significant intimate or personal relationships, Erika's actions mimic the nature of the only significant relationship she has experienced, namely her relationship with her mother. Erika desires then, just like her mother, to survey and control every movement made by the object of her interest.

The first sexual encounter between Erika and Walter takes place in the children's toilet, where Erika, in a desperate attempt to relieve her strained bladder, has found herself. Walter, who regards Erika's separation from the rest of the school as the ideal moment to initiate physical contact with her, follows her to the toilet. This encounter proves as amusing, as it is awkward and clumsy. Both parties in the encounter desire to assume and exercise control over the moment and over the other party. Initially it is Walter who holds the position of power in their encounter, demonstrating it principally through his physical strength. Erika, initially, submits to this, regarding it as the moment for which she has been preparing herself for a while - she allows Walter to assume this position of power over her:

> "Erika can relax in this new security: She is being taken care of. She waits for instructions or orders. She has been studying for years – not toward her concert, but toward this day.
>
> Klemmer has the option of putting her back unused in order to punish her. It's up to him, he can utilize her or not."[61]

[61] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 176 – Erika's contentment in her belief that Walter will be taking care of her from this point onward is suggestive of the principle of the Cinderella Complex (see page 6), which highlights women's un-disclosed hesitance to pursue, or fear of, independence. The inclusion of terms such as "unused" and "utilize" can be traced back to Erika's

In her submission Erika demonstrates her inherent self-objectification. She regards herself merely as a vessel to be placed the disposal of her student – more importantly to be placed at the disposal of a man.

> "She would like this student to be absolutely free and leave whenever he likes. She makes it a point of honour to stand still where he has stood her up. He will find her there again, faithful to the very millimeter, when he feels like working her again."[62]

Erika's reaction is perverse and indicative of her self-delusion and confusion. Erika regards her submission as an indication of her power and control – the fact that she is allowing herself to be used, is testament of her power; her power over herself, over Walter, and ultimately over the situation. She still regards their interaction as being that of a teacher and a student. Erika desires domination in submission, which actively contradicts the principle of a masochistic relationship.

Erika then, actively assumes the power position during their encounter. She holds him at arm's length and physically takes hold of the symbol of his power, namely the dreadful weapon of his penis. By masturbating Walter, Erika is able to control Walter's involvement in the encounter: "Erika starts kneading the red root between her fingers. She demands a privilege, but refuses to grant it to the man"[63]. She has the power to limit the encounter to a brief, incomplete and dissatisfying moment for Walter, and demonstrates this by stopping when Walter indicates that he is nearing orgasm. Her

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perception of and visits to the peep show industry, in which she demonstrates her belief in the role of women merely as objects of male gratification.

[62] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 178

[63] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 178

power is demonstrated by denying Walter his gratification. She also assumes control of the language of the encounter, principally that of Walter, by ordering Walter to stop talking, threatening to leave – him and the situation – if he fails to comply. Finally, Erika also takes control of Walter's gaze by ordering him to look at her while she masturbates him, again threatening to leave should he not comply. This particular level of control addresses the same dynamic of the gaze at work in the peep show, where the revolving platform on which the dancer is situated during her performance also controls the nature of the gaze of the patrons.

> "He should simply stand in front of the teacher until she commands otherwise. She would like to study his physical transformation.
>
> Erika allows him to pack away his asparagus. In an instinctive movement, Klemmer turns away from Erika in order to do so. But ultimately he has to do everything in full view. While she watches him."[64]

Though not excited, Erika is intrigued, and is eager to watch, just as she peered at her cousin's genitals as an adolescent, just as she observes when at the peep show, and just as she watches while spying on couples in the park. The watching continues, the gaze continues, and Erika remains emotionally and psychologically detached from the situation. Just as she regards herself and her body as something superfluous such as "a piece of tar paper in the rain" or a piece of rotting wood, so too, has Walter, and indeed his sexuality, been reduced to something equally superfluous. Walter has been objectified and his very sex is now nothing but an asparagus.

[64] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 181-183

Erika tells Walter to wait for further instructions, which she intends delivering by telephone, orally, or written. These instructions are meant to serve as dictates for the relationship, in which Erika's demands and desires will be included. For Erika this is an indication of her position of power and authority in their relationship, though she is not aware that their encounter in the bathroom was the first and only encounter – outside the music class – in which she was able to demonstrate even a semblance of power and control.

Walter has power over Erika in terms of his sexual confidence, and later in a physical demonstration of violence. Erika believes she is in control of the nature of their relationship, a projection perhaps, of her authority as his piano teacher. She writes a letter to Walter in which she details the course she wishes the relationship to take, including the nature of their sexual encounters. Erika believes that by detailing the "wheres" and "hows" of their relationship she will maintain a position of power and control, but it is Walter who controls their relationship.

The reason for this lies in the fundamentally paradoxical nature of Erika's wishes. Erika desires a masochistic relationship with Walter. She desires submission to Walter, but at the same time desires to be in control of the relationship.

> "He should be free, and she in fetters. But Erika will choose the fetters herself. She makes up her mind to become an object, a tool; Klemmer will have to make up his mind to use this object. Erika will withdraw entirely from Klemmer if he refuses to expect violence from her. He can take on Erika only under the

> condition of violence. He is to love Erika to the point of self-surrender; she will then love him to the point of self-denial. Erika waits for Klemmer to abjure violence for the sake of love. Erika will refuse for the sake of love, and she will demand that he do to her what she has detailed in the letter, whereby she ardently hopes that she will be spared what is required in the letter."[65]

Erika desires to "entrust herself to someone else, but on *her* terms,"[66] a desire which calls into question the very nature of their relationship. Walter is unable to reconcile himself to this and leaves Erika's bedroom, which is where he was finally forced to read the letter:

> "Klemmer says he wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole. He swears he felt love before, but now it's over. He is not going to go looking for her. He's disgusted with her. She dares suggest such things! Erika buries her face in her knees, the way air passengers get into a fetal position when the plane is about to crash. He won't hit her, because as he puts it, he doesn't want to dirty his hands on her. He throws the letter at the woman, trying to get her face. But he only gets the back of her bent head. Klemmer jeers at the woman: Lovers don't need to write letters. A written pretext is necessary only if lovers have to deceive each other."[67]

Walter correctly refers to a dynamic of deception, though in the case of the relationship between Erika and Walter, the only deception at work is that of Erika's self-deception.

Walter, following the incident in the bathroom, felt the desire and need to redeem his manhood and masculinity, and thought he could do so when he finally gained access into Erika's bedroom. However, after reading Erika's letter, Walter felt even more violated

[65] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 213
[66] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 215
[67] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 230

and confused (indeed even disgusted), to such an extent that Erika has ceased being his love-interest or potential sexual conquest, and is referred to as merely "the woman." Walter thereby actively reinforces her gender, but denies it a personal identity. The result is a negation; Erika is just a woman, with no name. The construction of gender and a gendered identity, according to Judith Butler, is an intricate and complex, located principally within political and cultural ideological systems - Walter's reference to Erika as "the woman" is therefore problematic, if not offensive, because:

> "If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained."[68]

Though Erika sought to assume the position of power in their relationship, it is Walter who demonstrates this; in the same way Erika demonstrated her power in the bathroom by walking out and denying him the desired sexual gratification. Walter leaves Erika's apartment, failing to act on what Erika demanded in her letter, thereby defying her power and denying her requests.

The masochistic nature of Erika's desires for her relationship demonstrate distinct associations with the concepts of guilt and punishment. Though Erika's desires to be tied

[68] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* 1990. New York: Routledge. Pg. 3

up and gagged could immediately suggest an admission of guilt and consequent request or desire for punishment, the origin of this guilt is two-fold. On the one hand, Erika could be said to be demonstrating her feelings of guilt after having failed to become a concert pianist. Consequently Erika seeks to be punished and held accountable, and indeed this is the case in terms of her relationship with her mother. But the fact that this masochistic desire takes place in the context of an intimate and sexual relationship – with a man – suggests that the role of Erika's father could therefore also be called into question, regarding the responsibility for this guilt, as it were. According to Gilles Deleuze, the masochistic experience of guilt is relevant to and associated with, a particular story:

> " For it is no longer the guilt of the child toward the father, but that of the father himself, and of his likeness in the child."[69]

In light of this suggestion, Erika's guilt – or the guilt associated with her desire for a masochistic relationship – can be traced directly to the absence of her father. Erika then, has internalized then, not only the mindset she has been subjected to by her mother, but also the guilt of her father for having deserted his family. The actions of Erika's mother could then, by extension, be regarded as a desire to punish the father, through the child. Erika, defeated and rejected, "mounts a halfhearted love attack" on her mother that night, in a manner which is distinctly incestuous in nature:

> "Erika is carried away by her own amorous overture. She throws herself upon Mother, showering her with kisses. She kisses Mother in a way in which she has not even thought of kissing her for years. Erika kisses Mother between her shoulders, but doesn't always hit her target, for Mother keeps jerking her head toward the side that's not being kissed. In the semidarkness, Mother's face is

[69] Deleuze, Gilles. "Coldness and Cruelty" in *Masochism*. 1991. New York: Zone Books. Pg. 108

> merely a bright splotch, surrounded by dyed blond hair, which helps orientation. Erika promiscuously kisses this bright spot. She is flesh of this flesh! A crumb of this maternal cake!"[70]

This confrontation could then be interpreted in two ways: On the one hand Erika projects the failure of her father onto her mother[71], while on the other hand, she could also be said to be projecting the failure of her attempts to establish a relationship with Walter, onto her mother. Erika and Walter have both been denied gratification. Erika seeks to direct this onto her mother. By doing so, Erika also directs any emotional investment she might previously have intended directing toward her relationship with Walter, toward the only available substitute, namely her mother. However, since Erika's affection is of the kind her mother sought to deny her, Erika's kisses – promiscuous and amorous – become a form of punishment as well. Erika and her mother have swapped roles, and Erika now assumes a role of power. It is now Erika who punishes her mother, but instead of withholding the affection from her, like her mother did, Erika literally attacks her mother, overpowering her with demonstrations of the affection she was denied as a child, and throughout her life.

The next encounter between Erika and Walter proves just as fruitless and devoid of gratification for both parties. Erika arrives at the school, having purchased new clothes she hopes would make her more attractive to Walter, and demonstrate her eagerness to please him. Walter, still wounded and humiliated following their previous encounters,

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[70] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 232-233

[71] This could also be regarded in light of the earlier statement (footnote – page 15) that Erika has adopted certain aspects of the male/patriarchal position of power in terms of her relationship to her mother – specifically in relation to the act of leaving the apartment and going to work while the mother remains at home and maintains the home.

seeks to exercise his power and deny Erika gratification. Erika pulls Walter into the staff cleaning cupboard where she soon finds herself in a position of submission; on her knees before Walter, begging for his attention and affection, because "for Erika, the most profound evidence of love is failure."[72] Walter, this time, demonstrates emotional detachment - but coupled with an intense anger at his apparent inability to sustain an erection – but nonetheless:

> "He shoves the woman's mouth upon his genital like an old glove. The glove is too big; his penis is drooping again after almost standing at attention. Nothing happens, and nothing happens in Klemmer, while the teacher's essence modestly wanes in the distance."[73]

Erika submits herself before Walter's humiliation, regarding his failure as an indication of his love. Walter, however, has still not been able to reclaim his manhood, and instead finds himself even more humiliated than before. Interestingly, both Erika's submission and Walter's humiliation are fundamentally subjective reflections of their respective roles in the power struggle. Walter, who feels humiliated due to his inability to sustain an erection and thereby demonstrate his sexual abilities and power, is essentially the holder of power in his encounter as it he who has Erika in front of him, on her knees. Erika, on the other hand, is perhaps still inclined to think that she is in control of her submission. Her fragmented and distorted perception of the nature of relationships is such that she believes that Walter's humiliation is indeed an indication of his love and affection.

[72] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 243
[73] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 242

Though Walter believes he has been humiliated and his manhood been challenged, he still holds the position of power in his relationship with Erika. In this, the final confrontation, the three parties involved in the two main relationships are present. The dynamics of the power relationships are related specifically to the respective relationships – that is, the relationship between Erika and her mother in which the mother is in the position of power and control, and the relationship between Erika and Walter, in which he is in control. These two relationships establish themselves as two distinct, but similar relationships of power; distinct in that they refer to Walter and Erika's mother respectively, but similar in that both are relationships in which power is exercised over Erika. This distinction is clarified by Linda Molm, who states that relationships are not based entirely on power, and that power in a relationship or exchange is applicable only to the parties directly involved in the relationship:

> "power is an attribute of a relation, not an actor, derived from an actor's control over resources that are valued by another actor. Because the value of the resources is relation-specific, and because some actors have more alternatives for acquiring resources than others, it is meaningless to speak of 'powerful persons'. A may have power over B, but not over C."[74]

Though Erika's mother has power and exercises control over her and the relationship, she has no control or power over Walter. This is supported by Oliver Claes who states that:

> "Im Leben der Klavierlehrerin Erika Kohut sind drei Machtsysteme wirksam: Familie, Kunst und Sexualität. Die Hierarchie des Machtsystems "Familie" wird von der Mutter angeführt, die das Leben ihre Tochter bis zu einer symbiotischen

[74] Molm, Linda. *Coercive Power in Social Exchange.* 1997. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg. 30

> Abhängigkeit beider reglementiert hat. Gezwungen wird Erika under die Herrschaft des Machtfaktors "Kunst", dessen Ansprüche wiederum die Mutter vertritt, während die damit verbundenen sozialen Aufstiegsträume auf der Tocher lasten. Im Machtbereich "Sexualität" befindet sich Erika Kohut ebenfalls auf der Seite der letztlich Ohnmächtigen, sie widersetzt sich der männlichen sexuellen Gewalt ihres Schülers Klemmer, will diese selbst ausüben und unterliegt ihr am Ende in ihrer unverhüllten Form – der Vergewaltigung."[75]

Walter, in terms of the specific dynamics of his relationship with Erika, has control and power over her (Erika) and the relationship. Indeed in the final confrontation Walter demonstrates his power over Erika's mother as well, when he locks her in the room. Walter then proceeds to demonstrate this power over Erika, by abusing her both physically and verbally – addressing ironically certain requirements Erika had set out in her letter – and raping her:

> "Asking for love and understanding, he resolutely penetrates the woman. He energetically demands his right to affection, a right that anyone can have, even the worst people. Klemmer, one of the worst, bores around inside Erika. He awaits a moan of pleasure from her. Erika feels nothing. Nothing comes. Nothing happens. It's either too late or too early. The woman openly avows that she seems to be the victim of deception, because she feels nothing. The core of this love is annihilation."[76]

In her attempts to reconnect with her sexuality and femininity, Erika has been rendered entirely obsolete. Intimate relationships, have proven themselves as nothing other than

[75] Claes, Oliver. *Fremde. Vampire.: Sexualität, Tod und Kunst bei Elfriede Jelinek und Adolf Muschg.* 1994. Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag. Pg. 71-72
[76] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 272

processes of annihilation, chipping away at her already fragmented and unstable identity, until nothing remains. Erika, the woman, has been deceived and victimized, but Walter maintains that Erika is indeed responsible for this as she perpetuated the victimhood her mother imposed on her, "If you weren't a victim, you wouldn't become one."[77] This claim is supported by the suggestion by Oliver Claes that the internalization by women of the traditional patriarchal power dynamic – in this case, Erika's mother's adoption of the role of the father, and consequently Erika's internalization of the concept of patriarchal power – facilitates their ultimate victimhood, and negation of their sexuality and sexual identity:

> "Deutlich erkennbar ist die Familie der Kohuts unvollständig, hat die Mutter die Rolle des fehlenden Patriarchen übernommen und übt mit weiblichen Mitteln väterliche Macht über ihre Tochter aus. Mit dieser Konstellation erreicht Jelinek zweierlei: Sie zeigt, die Internalisierung männlicher Herrschaft durch die Frauen, die selbst das Gesetz ihre Unterdrückung ausführen und damit deren Entfremdung."[78]

Claes suggests that although Erika's mother clearly controls areas of family and art, that the power and control she exerts are intrinsically patriarchal in their nature (facilitated by the absence of Erika's father) and which facilitate, ultimately, the internalization of male superiority and domination over women. Erika's mother's control and influence over her life has lead to her alienation from her sexuality.

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[77] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 267
[78] Claes, Oliver. *Fremde. Vampire.: Sexualität, Tod und Kunst bei Elfriede Jelinek und Adolf Muschg.* 1994. Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag. Pg. 73

The result is an almost complete fragmentation of her attempt to reclaim her sexual identity. Walter exerts and maintains power through physical, verbal and emotional violence when he assaults and rapes Erika, and Erika is consequently made aware not only of the fact that she has conclusively been denied the power she sought in the relationship, but that she had not really possessed any to begin with.

Erika's first interaction with Walter in the children's toilet, and even the later one in the broom cupboard (where Walter puts his flaccid penis in her mouth) seem like "more grown up" versions of her awakening encounter with her cousin. Erika (in the first encounter) is acting on an impulse which is natural, but what is also 'natural' for Erika, is the limitation of these impulses, as a consequence of her upbringing. She only ever goes so far.

Walter, however, demonstrates complete power when he rapes Erika in the final confrontation. He felt incredibly disempowered by Erika following the scene in the bathroom as well as in Erika's bedroom. According to Carlotta von Maltzan, the text establishes a male control over the dynamics of power over identity, language and sexuality[79] - Walter, following his humiliation with Erika, felt denied of this power – and indeed his very manhood and masculinity - and consequently sought to avenge this.

A connection is established between the notion of a fragmented identity and awareness of sexuality and the extent to which one is able or willing to take the sexual experience.

[79] Maltzan, Carlotta von. "Voyeurism and Film in Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*" in (ed.) Lamb-Faffelberger, M. *Austrian Culture*. Vol. 33: *Literature, Film and the Culture Industry in Contemporary Austria*. 2002. New York: Peter Lang Publishing. Pp. 103

Walter is fully in control of his sexuality; he is confident and has grown or developed sexually, more so than Erika, who seems to have stopped somewhere in adolescence. Walter's identity and awareness of his sexuality is complete – and he demonstrates this through the completion of the sexual act, as it were. In doing so, he also demonstrates power (physical and sexual) over Erika. Erika's awareness of her sexuality is fragmented. What she knows started somewhere in adolescence and has become limited to the excursions to the peep shows and to the park. Sexually, Erika is still a child, still an adolescent. As a consequence, her awareness of this dynamic of her personality and identity is limited to the introduction she had with her cousin. Erika had always been subjected to restrictions and limitations imposed on her by her mother. As a consequence of having internalised this throughout the course of her life, Erika, as an adult, subjects herself to restrictions and limitations as though her mother were indeed able to observe everything she does. In this way Erika's mother continues to exercise power over her daughter even when she is not near her. This demonstration of omnipresent power is clarified when examined in terms of Michel Foucault's citation of John Bentham's 'panopticon'[80] as a regulatory system of power and control. The Panopticon is imagined as a tower structure with a guard who can observe hundreds of cells. The prisoners are not able to see the guard or each other and consequently behave as though they are being watched. This is the method of normalization employed by society and Foucault regards this as the most efficient form of power – you become your own guard. Erika too, behaves in a manner which suggests she is constantly aware of her mother's presence and control over her life. Erika subjects herself to restrictions and limitations as though her

[80] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Vol 1. An Introduction.* 1984. England: Penguin Books. Pg. 18

mother were indeed able to observe everything she does. Erika, consequently, becomes her own mother.

Erika had no further experiences after the encounter with her cousin except for a few negligible sexual encounters with men, during which she remained totally detached and wished for nothing but that the moment end as soon as possible. Essentially, she had nothing more to work from, and consequently her actions when with Walter demonstrate this fragmented and disjointed awareness.

Erika consistently sought to be in control in her relationship with Walter – she desired power. Paradoxically though, she desired to be in control in a masochistic relationship. Her letter to Walter, in which she indicates the course she desires the relationship take, desires that he demonstrate power over her, sexually, physically, emotionally and psychologically. She wants to establish herself in the position of power in the relationship, but the position is such that she is then able to control the extent of her submission. Power has associations with freedom and liberty, but Erika wishes to be tied up and gagged, and left at the submission of the whims (sexual) of Walter (which she would like to dictate). Consequently the dynamic of power becomes paradoxical in nature – fundamentally contradictory. This dynamic establishes itself as two conflicting principles which ultimately cancel themselves out and leave her with nothing.

In the end, Erika seeks to kill Walter – though she is indeed not certain of her intentions when she sets out from her apartment. She follows him to school and watches him from a distance:

> "Erika Kohut discovers Walter Klemmer in a group of congenial students at various stages of knowledge. They are laughing loudly together. But not at Erika, whom they do not even notice."[81]

Erika holds a knife intended for Walter, but which she ultimately uses to stab herself in her shoulder. Her intentions with the knife can be traced back to her blade and her relationship with it. Erika is unable to project her anger outward, and instead she directs her anger, dissatisfaction and lack of gratification inward, onto herself – becoming her own victim.

Erika's fragile and fragmented identity has been reduced to such an extent that she fails to even make her physical presence known. Erika is accustomed to viewing from a distance, unnoticed, as she has demonstrated in her encounter with her cousin, and more especially in her trips to the peep shows and to the park. But in these two situations – the peep show and the park – she still maintained a semblance of her physical presence. The dancer in the peep show is aware, though not of Erika specifically, but that patrons are seated behind the mirror, in the booths, and the Turkish man in the park suspected the presence of a possible Peeping Tom. Here however, Erika fails to be noticed. Erika has stopped existing. Her development has not been complete. As an individual with a fragmented reality and identity, then she could not possibly emerge as a complete and well-rounded individual at the end. In the end she is left even more estranged from

[81] Jelinek, Elfriede. *The Piano Teacher*. 1983. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag. Pg. 279

herself, from her identity and her sexuality, that she even fails to notice the blood trailing from her shoulder after she stabs herself there. Erika fails to notice other people staring at her. Erika is not aware of her blood – not aware of her life – and ultimately she does not even exist for and to herself at the end. So in the end there has not been a development, so much as there has been a counter-development. In the end Erika is left right back where she started. Carlotta von Maltzan suggests that even the closing sentence is suggestive of this, in terms of its relation to the opening sentence of the text.[82] In the closing sentence, Erika heads home, negated and obsolete, back to the apartment she burst into like a whirlwind in the opening sentence of the novel.

[82] Maltzan, Carlotta von. "Voyeurism and Film in Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*" in (ed.) Lamb-Faffelberger, M. *Austrian Culture*. Vol. 33: *Literature, Film and the Culture Industry in Contemporary Austria*. 2002. New York: Peter Lang Publishing. Pp. 101

Conclusion

The discussion in the preceding chapters was aimed toward establishing the extent to which power is manifest in violence, sex and identity – identity construction and the perception of identity – in the text *The Piano Teacher*. The site for this discussion was located in an analysis of the main relationships within the text, namely that of the relationship between Erika Kohut and her mother, and that of Erika and her students, specifically one of her male students, Walter Klemmer.

The relationship between Erika and her mother provides a representation of power with various dynamics. Erika's mother exerts power over Erika not only in her capacity as a mother, but more so as a proprietor, or one seeking to exert control over an object or possession. Traditional mother-child, or mother-daughter roles do not exist in this relationship. Facilitated by the death of her father, Erika's mother has adopted and internalized the male position of power. Erika's role as child and daughter, and ultimately as woman, has been replaced by that of experiment or project. Erika exists as the (failed) result of the attempt or experiment which sought to construct – as opposed to raise and nurture – a child without any connection to her sexuality or femininity. Erika was raised exclusively in order to fulfill the role of concert pianist, and as result, the role adopted by her mother was not one which sought to develop and nurture a well-rounded and well-adjusted individual, but one of constant surveillance and control, in order to ensure that the experiment yielded the desired results.

This internalization of the male power position, together with the desexualization of Erika, resulted in a relationship demonstrating itself as fundamentally self-destructive. The self-destructive dynamic is demonstrated through various acts of violence. Violence itself, can be regarded both as an attribute, and as a consequence of power, when viewed in relation to the relationship between Erika and her mother. Physical violence demonstrates itself in a confrontation between the two characters, following Erika's purchase of a dress with funds meant for the eventual purchase of a condominium. Both mother and daughter possess power, though of varying natures, in this confrontation. Though Erika demonstrates physical power over her mother by ripping out tufts of her hair, it is, more importantly, her mother, who demonstrates emotional and psychological power over Erika. Described as possessing a looming presence, which is already an indication of her authority, her control over Erika, and consequently her power over Erika, is represented by the fact that although Erika has defied her mother's authority by purchasing the dress, she will never wear it, just as she will never wear the countless other garments purchased within the same context.

The reason for this addresses the extent to which Erika has been subjected to – and consequently internalized – the emotional and psychological power and control of her mother. Even as an adult, Erika is subjected to the restrictions of a curfew and a dress code enforced by her mother. These restrictions are aimed at denying Erika any opportunity for the expression of her femininity and sexual identity, as well as maintaining the position of control she possesses in her relationship with her daughter.

For the mother, an attractive wardrobe could potentially attract the attention of a male, and consequently mean the relinquishing of her power over Erika.

As a result, Erika's identity is fragmented and incomplete. Erika has only a rudimentary connection with her physical and sexual self. She is alienated from her sexuality, having been sucked dry by the venomous influence of her mother (and grandmother), and regards it as something obsolete and superficial, a piece of rotting wood. In an attempt to establish some sort of connection with this aspect of her identity, Erika makes frequent clandestine trips to peep shows and the park, where she secretly observes couples having sex. Erika's position as voyeur is explicitly due to her estrangement from her sexuality. Voyeurism implies the observation of a stranger, and for Erika, this stranger is her sexuality.

Sexuality though, is inherent in the construction of identity, as is an awareness of it, even if, as in Erika's case, this awareness is naïve and limited. Erika establishes and demonstrates an awareness of her sexuality in her role as voyeur, seeking to find further meaning in the very part of her identity she has been raised to regard as irrelevant. She also demonstrates this awareness through her frequent acts of self-mutilation. First, using a blade which has been invested with the qualities of a loving groom, and then with several pins – these pins, and the markings made by them, ultimately pre-figure the wound Erika inflicts on herself with the knife in the final scene - Erika makes several cuts and incisions in various parts of her body.

As has been suggested, these acts of body marking indicate her desire to expand or highlight the sexually sensitive areas of her body. The first incident occurs when Erika is an adolescent. Erika makes several cuts in her hand, indicating the need to highlight her hand's sexual sensitivity – facilitated by the fact that she directs all her passion and energy when playing and practicing music, toward her hands. As an adult, with limited sexual experience, Erika also makes incisions in her genitals, though at this stage, her disconnectedness to her body is so advanced that she merely observes the blood she has drawn in a clinical, detached manner. As indicated in the introduction, the intention of this practice in traditional African societies is to render women sexless, with no sexual desire. Erika demonstrates her lack of knowledge by practicing genital mutilation, regarding pain as inextricably linked to, and equated with pleasure.

The only authority Erika possesses is over her students. In her relationship with her students, Erika projects the dynamics of her relationship with her mother. She intentionally seeks to prevent them from achieving success in the area in which she failed to do so. As a teacher, Erika subverts the traditional role of education, nurturing, developing and empowering, and instead actively disempowers her students. All except one, a male student, Walter Klemmer.

The relationship Erika seeks to establish with Walter, is just as self-destructive as the relationship as the relationship she has with her mother. The reason for this is located in the paradoxical nature of their relationship. Erika, as a reflection of her authority as Walter's piano teacher, seeks to maintain power and control over the relationship.

However, though this is in itself not problematic, it is because of the masochistic nature of the relationship that Erika is unable to achieve and maintain this control. Erika writes a letter to Walter, indicating the course she intends the relationship to take – demonstrating her intention to be in control – stating the manner in which she wishes to be tied up, gagged, and left to Walter's disposal. Erika desires submission, but she also desires to be in control of the nature and extent of this submission. This is in direct opposition to the fundamental principle of masochism, which is that of a relinquishing of one's power.

Walter exists as a demonstration of the male power position. He has power over Erika in terms of his sexual development and confidence, and demonstrates this power over her, in an act of violence. In the final scene, he locks Erika's mother in a room, and physically and verbally abuses Erika, and rapes her. In Walter there exists not only a demonstration of the traditional male power position – a power over language, sex and identity - but also an indication of the extent to which the text suggests and even condemns the perpetuation by females, of their own victimhood. By raping Erika, Walter demonstrates not only the extent to which Erika has internalized the victimizing, and dehumanizing influence of her mother, perceiving herself as object and victim, but also the extent to which females have internalized and propagated the existence and influence of patriarchal power. Erika, a woman, is a victim, and has indeed always been a victim, but it might have been her fault – at least partially - all along.

Erika's mother's complicity lies in her intentions and attempts to prevent her from becoming a victim outside the home, but paradoxically created the very conditions for

Erika's inability to cope with normal relationships. The narrative within the text is essentially that of reportage – intentionally and fundamentally objective and non-judgmental, encouraging the reader to remain un-sympathetic, and by extension facilitating not so much an opinion, but rather a response to the text and the characters which depicts Erika's mother as abusive, dictatorial and victimizing, and Erika as complicit.

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