

6. "Piano" by D. H. Lawrence

POET

David Herbert Richards Lawrence (1885-1930)

D.H. Lawrence is a famous English novelist, who also wrote essays and poetry. He was born into a mining family in Nottinghamshire. His working-class background influenced his belief in the dehumanising effects of industrialisation. He won a scholarship to attend Nottingham High School and then trained as a teacher. He fell in love with the wife of his university lecturer, and they ran away together to Europe. Lawrence spent much of his life travelling and working around the globe. However, Lawrence was eventually diagnosed with tuberculosis and this meant he had to settle in the warm climate of northern Italy and travel less. It was here he wrote his most famous novel, "Lady Chatterley's Lover" (1928) which was notorious for its explicit sex scenes.

BACKGROUND

Lawrence's mother, Lydia, was a remarkable woman. Before marrying, she had worked as a pupil teacher; she valued the importance of education to liberate the working classes from the drudgery of factory life. However, her husband's financial problems meant she had to take manual work in a lace factory in order to support their family. She made sacrifices for her children, and harboured great ambitions for her clever son. She encouraged Lawrence in his academic and artistic endeavours and was a formative influence on his opinions, and ultimate success.

SUMMARY

The poem describes an involuntarily triggered memory of the poet's mother. As he listens to a woman singing, he is reminded of his mother singing to him as he sat underneath her piano. The poet tries to remain in the present, but the memory is too strong, and he is ultimately pulled back into the past. He is left crying for his lost childhood and dead mother.

ANALYSIS

The title of the poem "Piano" describes the instrument Lawrence's mother used to play to him. It is the focus of the memory he is about to describe. A piano is also a musical instrument which expresses emotion. This is like the poet, whose memory of his mother produces an emotional response in him which is expressed in the form of poetry rather than music. Finally, "piano" is also a direction in music; it is an Italian word. It means a piece of music should be played softly. This suggests the poem describes a soft and heartfelt moment.

Indeed the first word of the poem is "Softly", echoing the musical meaning of the title. The word presumably also describes what the music sounds like that Lawrence is listening to. "in the dusk" or the early evening of the day, the poet hears a woman "singing to me". The fact the poem takes place at "dusk" provides an atmosphere of sadness. This is the time of day when the light is fading and the night time is approaching. Metaphorically, it seems the poet is about to face a dark moment in his life. Moreover, "dusk" is also the hinge of the day, connecting day and night. In the poem, the poet occupies a pivotal position between the past and present of his life. Therefore the time the singing takes place is very important.

The woman who sings in the present is not described in detail. However, her singing is “to me”. So it is personal and directed at the poet. This moment of a woman expressing her feelings to the poet through music is juxtaposed with the memory he is about to have of his mother expressing her love for him through her own singing. Here sound becomes a trigger for memory. The poet can do nothing to prevent the memory of his mother flooding back. In line two the trigger occurs – “Taking me back down the vista of years”. His memory is described in visual terms; a vista is a pleasing view. Thus Lawrence is carried to a picture in the far distance of his life “till I see”. The verb to see here is a powerful one. It shows how vivid the memory is. The poet is not imagining the past, he has actually returned to it and is watching it in front of him.

Line three begins with “A child sitting under the piano”. It is fascinating that the child is described using the indefinite article or “a”. The poet does not make clear this is a specific child. At this point, the memory is obviously personal, but the language is keeping it universal for us all to imagine ourselves in. This also underlines the fact, the poet is standing back and watching his own memory. The child is “sitting under the piano”. This description places the child in an intimate position with the instrument and the woman. It is as though he is nestled somewhere safe. The memory seems to focus here on his mother as a place of shelter. In another way, the position of the boy also shows the dominance of his mother. She is high above him creating the music, while he is a fledgling artist, listening and learning.

The description goes on to depict the boy “in the boom of the tingling strings”. Because the child is under the piano, he is in the heart of the vibrating instrument. The onomatopoeia of “boom” communicates vividly to the reader the sound of the piano. Clearly, from his position beneath the instrument, the boy hears the music very loudly. This is a contrast to the singing of the woman at the start of the poem. It suggests that the past is somehow more real, more loud than the present. The strings of the piano are described as “tingling”. This is a personification. If something tingles, then it moves, creating a feeling of excitement. The piano is portraying the pitch of excitement the boy beneath it feels.

The final line of the stanza focuses even more deeply on why this moment is so exciting. The boy is “pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings”. Therefore the boy is touching his mother’s feet while she sings. Notice again, that the mother is described with the indefinite article “a”, like the child in line three. This makes the personal nature of the act more universal. It also suggests that the poet is standing back and watching his younger self and his mother from a distance. This distance is produced by time passing, but it is also a way for him to observe himself and possibly restrain his emotional response to the memory.

The mother’s feet are “poised” because pianos require their players to press pedals with their feet to either sustain, dampen or shorten the notes. Her feet are controlling the length of the notes; this might relate to how sustained and prolonged the memory is. Moreover, the boy is “pressing” the feet. That means, he is involved in her playing in a very intimate way. Not only is the boy touching his mother affectionately, showing a loving connection, he is also learning from her feet by mimicking and following them with his hands. The mother “smiles as she sings”. This description shows that she enjoys the intimacy this act affords them. It is a moment of shared pleasure and learning for both boy and mother.

Stanza two brings the reader back to the specific emotions of the poet – “In spite of myself”. This means the poet wants to resist the memory. However, he describes “the insidious mastery of song”. The word “insidious” means something cunning and underhand. This means the woman singing has gained “mastery” or power over him in a sneaky and sinister way. The poet goes on to say, the music “Betrays me back”. This is an odd phrase which would not be used in conversation. When someone is betrayed, information about them is disclosed to an enemy. Here the singing of the woman in the present has treacherously exposed the poet to his own past. This underlines the fact he does not want to return to the past, even though it appears to be a happy place.

The poet explains that the memory pulls him “back” until “the heart of me weeps”. This is a powerful metaphor. It is not just that he cries; it is his heart – the location of love – which cries. His heart is weeping because it wants to “belong To the old Sunday evenings at home”. Thus the core of himself, his heart, wants to return home, while his head is resisting because it knows the past can never truly be visited. He goes on to describe those evenings “with winter outside, And hymns in the cozy parlor”. The fact it is winter, gives the interior scene a sense of comfort and shelter from the cold. The poet’s mother was clearly playing hymns on the piano because it was Sunday, a day of religious worship. The stanza ends with “the tinkling piano our guide.” Here the piano is described as “tinkling”. This onomatopoeia is very different from the “boom” employed earlier. This is a pleasing, soft, sound. It is the poet’s “guide”. That means, the piano music leads or guides him back to his past.

Stanza three begins with the word “So”. This is synonymous with therefore. The poet has been fighting his emotions for two stanzas, but now we are to be told the consequence of this. The next word “now” returns the reader to the present emotion of the poet. We have left the cosy parlour. In this moment in the present, the poet explains “it is vain for the singer to burst into clamor With the great black piano appassionato”. The word “vain” means pointless. The poet is saying there is no point in the singer of the present erupting into “clamor” or a loud noise with the piano playing “appassionato”. This is another Italian term used to instruct how to play an instrument. In this case it means to perform with a great amount of emotion.

The reason there is no point in the singer bursting into a loud, emotional crescendo is because the poet has already been transported to an intense moment of feeling through the memory. He explains “The glamour Of childish days is upon me”. The word “glamour” means something appealing or magical. Therefore the poet’s memories of childhood have enchanted him. He continues, “my manhood is cast Down in the flood of remembrance.” This describes the way the memory has taken away his manliness or stoicism. “cast down” means thrown aside. Thus the poet has discarded any pretence of appearing brave. This is due to the “flood of remembrance”. This metaphor compares the way the memory has overcome him, with a tidal wave of water. It shows how powerful and overwhelming this has been.

The poem ends with the sentence, “I weep like a child for the past”. This is a simile. The poet is crying in the way a child would cry. That suggests, he is uncontrollable in his tears. Importantly, his weeping is “for the past”. So, the poet is crying because he longs for the past to be alive again. Thus the poem charts the poet’s initial resistance to a memory which deeply saddens him. Eventually, he is defeated by its power, and cries for his lost past.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Half-past Two” – provides useful comparisons as both poems are about an adult remembering a childhood event which was formative.

“Do not go gentle into that good night” – provides powerful connections as both poems are about the love the poet holds for a parent who is dead or dying.

“Remember” – provides interesting points of comparison with this poem as they are both about memories after the death of a loved one.