**Piano by D. H. Lawrence**

Lawrence, like Hardy, was most of his life a novelist. Unlike Hardy he opted for sprung rhythm in his poetry, preferring the flexibility that sprung rhythm – which places irregular metrical stresses on important words – provides. Hardy, of course, used traditional verse forms with deliberate naivety and sometimes awkwardness. Lawrence is more obviously sophisticated. The often prose-like nature of Piano, bound as it is with alliteration, sibilance and rhyming couplets, can also be said to be mimetic – that is, its shape imitates the form of a piano piece, searching but failing to convince, just as piano and appassionato are musical instructions which (it could be argued) do not work within the context of the poem. Like Hardy’s The Self-Unseeing, Piano is about the lost felicity (happiness) of childhood, but Lawrence’s approach is very different from Hardy’s. Read these three interpretations, then formulate your own.

In the poem, “Piano,” D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930, England) becomes nostalgic—while a woman sings and plays the piano— and he starts to remember his childhood. The piano’s melodic sounds would transport him back in time to his childhood years. Then, as a young child, he used to sit under the piano—accompanied by the strong vibration of the strings—while his mother played the piano, sang, and smiled. The smile was probably caused by the fact that the child was playing with her “small, poised feet”.

His childhood memory came suddenly, invading his new life by surprise. The entrapping piano melody allowed him no choice but to remember the past: “In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song/Betrays me back. This sudden encounter with his childhood memories makes the poet long for those Sunday evenings—during wintertime—when they use to play hymns. The piano was the central element, guiding them with its tinkling sounds.

The poet is now an adult. The beautiful memories of his childhood make him sad and melancholic—but he is also mad at the person who prompted these memories that make 2 his heart weep to “belong/To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside/And hymns in the cosy parlour”. Because of the singer’s great and passionate piano interpretation, he “weep[s] like a child for the past”. But there’s no going back because he is now a man whose “manhood [was] cast”.

The only liaison between now and then remains the beautiful and dramatic piano appassionato, which is tearing apart his soul. His innocent childhood is, now, only an overwhelming memory of a grown man: “The glamour/Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast/Down in the flood of remembrance”.

This melancholic poem “speaks” to the reader who once found himself wandering down memory lane, where some things are unforgettably special.

[Betty Gilson]
Featured Poem: ‘Piano’ by D. H. Lawrence

This poem was given to me to read last week by one of our Get Into Reading group members. K, who has also been volunteering in our office found the piece of paper with the poem on it filed away with a collection of short stories, or rather sandwiched between other things in haste after one of the reading groups. It had been lying there, forgotten about, “It’s time we brought it back out into the light,” K said,”isn’t it?” Urging me to read it, telling me that it was one of the most beautiful poems that he’s ever read, I turned away from my computer screen to do just that.

What struck me most about re-reading ‘Piano’ by D H Lawrence was that it didn’t strike me as being merely an act of nostalgia but a beautifully penned illustration on the nature of memory. One can almost hear the “tingling strings” of the “tinkling piano”. These strike me as being like crystal clear water trickling and tumbling in narrow, rocky streams. So our lives move on, never stopping – like a river – and we’re left, on occasion, with our own “insidious mastery of song” which takes back to somewhere we can never really be again (and we may well not want to be) but in those moments floods our present life all the same.

Piano

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

D. H. Lawrence, 1918

[Jen Tomkins]
Poem Summary

Lines 1 – 4

From the opening line of “Piano” we are asked to see from the point of view of the speaker, who waxes nostalgic as he listens to a woman singing to him in the evening. Lyric poetry is defined by the expression of strong emotion from a first-person point of view, so we are given every indication of what to expect. The imagery of this first stanza sets the tone for a poem about memory. Because memory itself is a function of the relationship between past and present, it is significant that the poem takes place at dusk, a time somewhere between day and night. The image that sets up his memory, “the vista of years,” is also apropos because it prepares us for a visual remembrance: the speaker literally sees a younger version of himself “sitting under the piano.” The “boom of the tingling strings,” an aural image, echoes the suddenness with which the memory hits the speaker, and, as readers, we are left in the same place as the speaker.

The scene embraces sentimentality because of its clichéd representation of a mother and her child: he is sitting at her feet, adoringly, pressing her “small, poised feet.” Though we have come to expect this type of imagery in greeting cards, we usually do not expect it from poetry, especially modern poetry. It is significant that this image pits the interior world of the house against the exterior world of winter, as domesticity suggests safety and the innocence of childhood, whereas winter suggests the insecurity and experience of adulthood. The aabb rhyme scheme also adds to the clichéd nature of the image, as it underscores the conventional form of the poem.

Lines 5 – 8

The second stanza takes us deeper into the speaker’s memory, which he tells us he is fighting against. By using the word “insidious” to describe the woman’s “mastery of song,” the speaker suggests an almost adversarial relationship with her. That he is “betrayed” deeper into his memory, emphasizes the resistance he is putting up against the onslaught of the memory. The last two lines of the stanza participate again in image building. Now the speaker presents us with an idyllic picture of his childhood. Like the initial image of the speaker as a child with his mother, this representation is also stock; it conforms to all of the stereotypes of what a middle-class Sunday night with the family would be like in the late-nineteenth century. The image of the piano links the first and second stanza to highlight the relationship between music and memory. Music was the speaker’s guide when he was a child, and it remains his guide as an adult.

Lines 9 – 12

The third stanza signals the speaker’s thorough capitulation to his memory. It is “vain” for the singer “to burst into clamour” because the speaker has already done that, giving himself over to the barrage of feeling and memory. But it is not to the singer that he gives his passion, but to the past. In this stanza, the speaker also makes a link between
manhood and childhood. It is not only the adult world of the present that he is forsaking for the past, but also the adult world of manhood. By equating manhood with the ability to resist the temptation of sentimentality, Lawrence embodies yet another stereotype: that of the male whose identity rests upon his capacity not to feel. The image we are left with is the adult as child, uncontrollably weeping for his past.

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