

# Analysing Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*: The Layers of Erika's Masochism

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## *Abstract*

Elfriede Jelinek's highly controversial novel *The Piano Teacher* introduces its protagonist Erika Kohut, a thirty-eight-year-old piano teacher who works at the prestigious Vienna Conservatory. As the book follows the story of Erika, Jelinek reveals her protagonist's underlying sadistic, masochistic, voyeuristic, phallic and even fetishistic layers.

This paper aims to examine these layers of Erika's personality, associated with her most significant feature, masochism. A better understanding of these layers will help us deduct enlightening conclusions on Erika's masochism, and other psychological aspects related to the masochism, which are woven stitch by stitch throughout the book.

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## 1. Introduction

Elfriede Jelinek's 1983 novel *The Piano Teacher*, has been a highly controversial book. Taking place in the 1980s Vienna, the book follows the story of Erika Kohut, a thirty-eight-year-old piano teacher who works at the prestigious Vienna Conservatory. Living with her possessive and domineering mother, Erika has a limited, stressful and colorless life, which she tries to fill with secret visits to peep shows, voyeurism, porn, and self-harm. In the meantime, a narcissistic, handsome, popular, and aspiring piano student Walter Klemmer, who is in his early twenties, gets captivated by Erika's piano playing, iron-hard personality, indifference, and mysteriousness, making her his Everest to climb. As Erika and Klemmer know each other better, Klemmer discovers that Erika has many other layers underneath the surface. Layers showing her sadistic, masochistic, voyeuristic, phallic and even fetishistic sides.

This paper aims to examine these layers of Erika's personality, associated with her most significant feature, masochism. We will initially look at the terms of sadism and masochism. A better understanding of these terms will help us deduct enlightening conclusions on Erika's masochism, and other psychological aspects related to the masochism, which are woven stitch by stitch throughout the book.

Receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2004 for her "musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that, with extraordinary linguistic zeal, reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power", Jelinek presents us a novel about a female character with an artistic soul, while criticizing the oppression of women with social structures, norms and boundaries, which are accepted as 'normal' in Austria in the 1980s.

*i. Sadism*

The Oxford English Dictionary's primary definition of sadism is: "the tendency to derive pleasure, especially sexual gratification, from inflicting pain, suffering, or humiliation on others." The terms sadism and sadist are derived from Marquis de Sade (b. 1740 - d. 1814), who was a French nobleman, writer, and philosopher. Sade was famous for his libertine sexuality, he hired young prostitutes and performed sadistic activities on them, such as tying them by four limbs, dropping hot wax on them, flagellation, giving them an aphrodisiac called Spanish fly (which made one prostitute seriously sick) besides many others. These mistreatments caused several prostitutes and a beggar-widower to complain to the French authorities. Besides these complaints, the accusations of his sodomy with his manservant came into the picture, so Sade fled to Italy together with his

manservant, to escape his death sentence. His cat-and-mouse game with the authorities did not always go well, and at the end, he was imprisoned for thirty-two years of his life in many prisons and an asylum. He wrote most of his works in prison and published them anonymously since they were erotic works, depicting perverse, strongly violent sexual practices, including sexual sadism, sexual masochism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, pedophilia, zoophilia, and necrophilia.

ii. *Masochism*

If we continue with the definitions of the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of masochism is: “the tendency to derive sexual gratification from one’s own pain or humiliation.” Famous Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing was the first one who used the term masochism in his 1886 compilation of case studies *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Krafft-Ebing named masochism after the Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch since Sacher-Masoch’s writings had masochistic themes.

Sacher-Masoch also practiced masochism. As illustrated in his book *Venus in Furs* (1869), he was attracted to dominant women who wore furs. Sacher-Masoch forced his wife Aurora von Rümelin to experience the practices in his book. Rümelin agreed, but she always had her doubts. After a while, getting bored with his marriage, Sacher-Masoch got mistresses with whom he could engage his sexual fantasies. One of those mistresses was Baroness Fanny Pistor, whom he signed a contract with, that made him her slave for six months. During this six-month period, Sacher-Masoch insisted the Baroness to wear furs whenever she could, especially when she was in a vicious mood.

It was Freud who invented the term *sadomasochism*, concluding that in every sadist there is a masochist and in every masochist, there is a sadist. Alongside with Freud, Krafft-Ebing also presumed that masochism was deeply essential to female sexuality and distinguishing it as a separate inclination would be difficult. However, in his essay *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty (Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, 1967)*, Gilles Deleuze claimed sadism and masochism as distinct from each other and rejected the term sadomasochism. In the sadomasochistic dynamic, both sadist and masochist wield control. The sadist seizes control and the masochist prefers it that way.

## **2. The Layers of Erika's Masochism**

### *i. Lack of the father figure*

In his *Ein Kind wird geschlagen (A Child is Being Beaten)*, Freud claims the beating fantasies ultimately reveal that the figure of father is the desired punisher (Schlipphacke, 102). In *The Piano Teacher*, Erika's father is simultaneously absent and present as a shadow. Nevertheless, Erika demonstrates several masochistic actions which comprise the father as a symbol. For instance, Erika's most brutal self-mutilation case is cutting her vagina with her father's razor blade:

(...) she takes out her little talisman, the paternal all-purpose razor. (...) she is very skilled in the use of blades; after all, she has to shave her father (...) (Jelinek, 86).

With little information about anatomy and with even less luck, she applies the cold steel to and into her body,

where she believes there ought to be a hole. The aperture gapes, terrified by the change, and blood pours out (86).

In the book, the scene of Erika's mutilation of her vagina is followed by the trip to Steinhof asylum to admit her father. Therefore, we can assume that there is a link between the two scenes. Also, right after Klemmer finishes reading Erika's letter, we read about Erika's longing:

(...) I hope he doesn't hit me unexpectedly, the woman thinks. She reveals to the man that she has been longing to be hit for many years now. She assumes she has finally found the master she has been longing for (229).

Here, Erika assumes that she came together with the master she has been longing for years, so we can also assume that growing up without a father, she felt the absence of a man in her household. She was longing for a male authority in her life, who would love her and punish her when she needed. Having no father figures or "the master" in her life, she gives Klemmer the role of male authority figure in her life and tries to fill the emptiness caused by the absence of this authority figure with her younger lover. She wants to elude her heavy responsibilities, which she has carried all those years as the symbolic male figure in her own house.

ii. *Electra Complex and the high level of stress caused by the "Mother"*

Erika's mother treats her like she is the man of the house; Erika is the one who works to bring money and food to their home. Because of her father's absence, Erika is unable to use the father as an anchor to allow her to detach, separate from her engulfing

mother, thus she attempts to differentiate from the mother by assuming the father's role and becoming the father. She constructs a symbolic phallic realm that becomes an exaggerated version of her father. Which brings us to Electra Complex, the female version of Oedipus complex. The psychodynamic structure of the daughter-mother relationship in the Electra complex derives from penis envy.

Penis envy is theorized by Sigmund Freud. It is a stage concerning female psychosexual development, in which young girls experience anxiety by realizing that they do not have a penis. This realization, as Freud considered, is a determining stage in changes toward a mature female sexuality and gender identity. According to Freud's theory, the penis envy stage starts when the attachment to the mother turns into a competition with the mother to gain the love, attention, and recognition of the father. In his fifth chapter titled "Psychoanalysis" of his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton describes this stage thus:

The little girl, perceiving that she is inferior because 'castrated', turns in disillusionment from her similarly 'castrated' mother to the project of seducing her father; but since this project is doomed, she must finally turn back reluctantly to the mother, effect an identification with her, assume her feminine gender role, and unconsciously substitute for the penis, which she envies but can never possess, a baby, which she desires to receive from the father (Eagleton, 135).

In other words, the mother who caused the girl's castration also causes the penis envy. So, the girl has to re-adjust her sexual attraction to her father now –to heterosexuality– and because she fears to lose her mother's love, she represses the hostile female competition too.

In her book, *The Myth of Women's Masochism*, Paula J. Caplan talks about penis envy and its relation to the feelings of inferiority:

But Freud ignored any negative feelings girls might have about penises and wrote that not only were little girls disappointed to discover that they themselves had no penis, but they also felt disappointed and even contemptuous toward their mothers when they discovered that they, too, lacked this glorious organ. The little girl, he thought, blamed herself and her mother for her own lack of a penis and wondered whether her father's lack of love for her might be related to this 'inferiority' (Caplan 75).

Erika suffers from the feelings of inferiority. We can assume that in her subconscious, she associates her lack of a penis with her father's lack of love towards his daughter. Mutilating her vagina with a razor blade can be an important proof for this argument. She wants a penis, and instead, she has a vagina, so she externalizes her disappointment by cutting her vagina.

During the first pages of the book, Erika attacks her mother and pulls her hair off. This can also be considered as an attack towards the mother, which is made subconsciously because, like Erika, she does not have a penis, and thus she may be

blamed as the culprit behind Erika's lack of a penis. So, Erika instinctively pulls off her hair, the most significant symbol of a woman's beauty, as a revenge for her feelings of inferiority.

We can also consider her harsh and condescending attitudes toward her students, especially Klemmer, as a way to avoid her inferior feelings to feel superior.

Caplan also explains the daughters' relationship with masochism, how they encounter with it and how they act on it while mentioning Rosemary Daniell's opinion on the subject too:

A growing daughter has unlimited occasion to observe her mother in the predicament described in the previous chapter. It is hard for a child to take note of her mother's no-win situation with respect to a "masochistic" role and then make a rational decision to avoid falling into the same trap. She is still subject to most of the same pressures that have weighed on her mother—fear of being thought unfeminine and unnatural if she doesn't embrace a mothering role herself and learn to be self-denying without uttering a word of complaint. The words of Rosemary Daniell, cited at the beginning of this chapter, illustrate the young girl's dilemma of choosing between loss of love and loss of self; in such a situation, most children choose to keep the love. The traditional demand on growing girls to make this choice has meant that they, like their mothers, have been given two

undesirable options and then, in choosing the less self-serving of the two, have been called natural masochists (Caplan, 70).

Caplan's and Daniell's words enable us to reach a better understanding about Erika's love and hate relationship with her mother and why she accepts her mother's restricting, domineering treatment even though she rebels from time to time. By reading the book, we know that from an early age, Erika always follows her mother's instructions and puts up with her restrictions. Therefore, facing the dilemma Daniell mentions, of choosing between loss of love and loss of self, Erika chooses to lose herself to keep the love of her mother.

After the phallic stage, the girl's primary erogenous zone from the infantile clitoris transfers to the adult vagina, during her psychosexual development. Thus, Freud considered the feminine Oedipus attitude (Electra complex) as more emotionally intense than the masculine Oedipal struggle of a boy; possibly resulting in a less confident, submissive personality in a woman. Erika's personality also shows traces of lack of confidence and submission.

In one of her interviews on *The Piano Teacher* with The Austrian Film Commission, Jelinek explains Erika's masculine role in the book:

What interests me in a story is its resonance - in this case the unravelling of one of the women who carry on their backs the high culture that Austria so idolizes. An unlived sexuality expressed in voyeurism: A woman who cannot partake in life or in desire. Even the right to watch is a masculine right, the woman is always the one who is watched,

never the one who watches. In that respect, to express it psychoanalytically, we are dealing here with a phallic woman who appropriates the male right to watch, and who therefore pays for it with her life (Jelinek).

Erika cultivates a parodistic masculinity over the years. She is confused with the aspects of female genitalia and gender. So, she embodies the imitations of sadism, violence, perversion, voyeurism, oppression, cruelty, and penetration.

We can see an implication of this masculinity and confusion in the text where Erika kisses her mother forcefully:

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 keeps pressing her wet mouth into Mother's face, holding her in steely arms so Mother can't resist. Erika lies halfway, then three-quarters upon Mother, because Mother is starting to flail her arms seriously, trying to thrash Erika. (...) It's like a lovers' struggle, and the goal isn't orgasm, but Mother per se, the person known as Mother. (...) Erika sucks and gnaws on this big body as if she wanted to crawl back in and hide inside it. Erika confesses her love to her mother and Mother gasps out the opposite, (...). Erika's teeth graze down her mother's flesh. She kisses and kisses Mother wildly. Mother calls her daughter's actions disgusting. Erika's lost all control (Jelinek, 232-233).

(...) the daughter reaches toward Mother's body, but Mother shovels Erika's hands away. For a brief moment, Erika managed to see her mother's sparse pubic hair, which closes off the fat belly. (...) During the struggle, the daughter deliberately shoved around in her mother's nightgown, so she could finally see this pubic hair which she has always known was there" (234).

Embodying the father, Erika attempts to gain access to the mother's body as a male substitute.

iii. *Self-harm*

Erika has no sense of personal privacy since she is controlled by her mother all the time. She doesn't know how to be a woman in a sense because her mother does not allow her to learn. She cannot wear even the dresses she buys because of her mother. She has lived under oppression all her life. She definitely does not have a normal life, and always isolated from other people. She has Electra Complex and penis envy. Erika cannot fall in love in the real, normal sense, she cannot feel any joy or pain, or any emotion during her scarce sexual encounters. She is confused about her sexuality, and it is obvious from the text she cannot decide what she wants. One moment, she wants Klemmer to tie her up, punch her in the stomach, sit on her face until she turns black, and another moment, she changes her mind:

Erika wants him to kiss her ardently, not hit her. She says that the act of love can straighten out a lot of things that

seem hopeless. Say something loving to me and forget about the letter, she asks inaudibly (228).

Yet, no matter what, she cannot have a normal relationship with Klemmer. Because she is unable to feel joy, orgasm, and love like normal people – or we can even say like Klemmer – do. As a consequence, she self-harms.

Bereavement, abuse during childhood, and troubled partner or parental relationships are accepted as the principal social factors in the cases of self-harm. There are various motivations for self-harm. It can be used as a coping mechanism so one can feel a brief relief of the emotions such as self-loathing, depression, the sense of failure, anxiety, stress, and emotional numbness. It may become a way of managing and controlling pain, for a person who experienced pain earlier in their life which they had no control over, for instance, being abused. Self-harm can also be a means of feeling something, even though the sensation is painful and unbearable. Sometimes, people who self-harm complain about feelings of emptiness or numbness, so they harm themselves to relieve these feelings since physical pain may provide such a remedy.

It can be understood from the text that all these motivations apply to Erika. She cannot feel joy or pain, so she mutilates herself to feel something. For example, her first close encounter with the opposite sex is with her male cousin, whose penis she sees from up-close. She even brushes her lips on her cousin's penis. She wants to feel something about it, maybe expects to feel some kind of sexual arousal, but she cannot. So, she goes inside the house right after and cuts her arm with the razor blade, just to feel something. Other motivations which cause Erika to mutilate herself are her troubled relationship with her mother, anxiety, depression, and stress. In the last page of the book, for instance,

Erika sees that Klemmer is happy and acting as if he did not beat and rape her, as if nothing happened. Erika's existence was easily erased from his life. That leads Erika to get so furious that she stabs herself with a fruit knife in a public area. She uses self-harm to be in control too because that way, even though she does not have control over the events that happen, she has control over her own pain.

*iii. Giving the control to be in control*

Masochism is a way for Erika to be in control. She has nearly no control over her own life because of her mother. She wears whatever her mother chooses for her, she is not permitted to buy anything for herself, she goes and comes under the permission of her mother, eats whatever her mother cooks, sleeps with her mother in her parents' marriage bed, and thus, she cannot even touch herself, or masturbate to explore her sexuality. The only thing that Erika is in control of is her own body and the pain she inflicts on herself. Therefore, when Klemmer declares that he wants to be with her, she feels the need of writing a letter about what she wants him to do to her. Since Erika is a good observer, a voyeur, she surely knows how young men act: they get bored and leave once they get what they want from women. Because of her age, it is possible for Erika to conclude that she needs to be in control in this relationship so that Klemmer will not leave her. She can only control her pain; therefore, it is logical for her to give the control of inflicting pain on herself to Klemmer. This way, she gives the control without really giving it.

We can see the implications about Erika being in control by giving the control over to Klemmer from the text:

She wavers: Let him decide, she would like to be made utterly immobile. She would like to cede all responsibility to external aids. She wants to entrust herself to someone else, but on her terms. She challenges him! (215)

Klemmer finds it all so funny that he slaps his thighs: She wants to give him orders! And he's supposed to obey her on the spot. She goes on to say that you should describe what you're going to do to me. And threaten me loudly in case I refuse" (217).

Erika also does not speak openly to Klemmer about what she wants, instead, she writes a letter. This letter functions as a masochistic contract; a contract in which the masochist gives consent to her/his partner or the sadist to inflict pain on her/him for the sexual arousal. As Deleuze puts it in his essay *Coldness and Cruelty*, the masochist derives pleasure from the "Contract" because, in this process, he/she can turn another individual into someone heartless, indifferent and cold, and this way, they can control another individual. In the book, we can explicitly see that this is what Erika turns Klemmer into, a sadist.

iv. *Urinating / Urophilia*

Salirophilia is a sexual fetish involving deriving erotic pleasure from the act of disheveling or soiling one's desired object, for instance, an attractive person. Being a form of salirophilia, urophilia is a term for the sexual excitement which emerges at the thought or sight of urination or urine. Urination on oneself, on others or on other objects can be used for an arousal, and this is often tied to the idea of subjugation.

In his quite limited research on urophilia, Dr. Mark Griffiths notes that a 1982 article by a Dr. Denson has one of the most extensive understandings on the subject. According to Dr. Denson, for urophiliacs, urine has a lot of purposes; it can, for example, be used to humiliate somebody or "capture the spirit" of a sexual partner because it is considered as sexy. Urine also is accepted as a sexual object by urophiliacs too. Therefore, it can be associated with the ideas of arousal, power, and humiliation, which can be considered as standard sadomasochistic ideas.

In Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*, there are two urinating scenes described. In the first one, Erika is urinating while secretly watching a Turkish man having sex with an Austrian woman at the park:

Erika Kohut can't stand it anymore. Her need is stronger. She gingerly lets down her panties and pisses on the ground. A warm stream patters down between her thighs to the meadow ground. It ripples upon the soft mattress of twigs, foliage, refuse, filth, and humus. She still doesn't know whether she wants to be discovered or not. Rigidly furrowing her brow, she simply lets the stream run out. She grows emptier and emptier on the inside, and the ground soaks up the fluid. She ponders nothing—no cause and no consequence. She relaxes her muscles, and the initial patter turns into a gentle, steady running. She has stretched the image of the upright, motionless foreigner in the micrometer spindles of her pupils, fixing it there while urinating

vigorously upon the earth. She is ready for either solution, they're both fine with her (148).

In this scene, Erika urinates after watching the couple having sex for a while. This urinating act almost seems like reaching the climax after a sexual arousal. The smell and the dampness after urinating in this first scene are also described:

Nothing is left of the vast Prater meadows aside from a wee bit of dampness on her shoes and between her legs. A slightly sour odor rises from under her skirt, but the cabby probably doesn't notice, (...) (150).

The second time Erika urinates, she has just mutilated the hand of the flutist girl who flirted with Klemmer:

Erika hurriedly settles on the grimy bowl after pushing up the concomitant seat. Others before her have had the same flash of wisdom, so the bowl is probably covered with bacilli. Something is floating in the bowl, but Erika hasn't looked, she's in too much of a hurry. In her state, she'd even squat over a snakepit (174).

In this scene, Erika gets her revenge on the flutist girl who flirted with Klemmer. In a way, Erika calms her jealousy and satisfies her feelings of revenge by mutilating the girl's hand in a sadistic way, and not getting caught. So, the urinating act that follows this satisfaction also seems like a way of reaching the climax.

Right after she starts urinating, Klemmer dashes into the bathroom and hears Erika urinate:

That is why Klemmer now asks: “Erika, are you there?” There is no answer, only a diminishing splash resounds from a stall, an increasingly decreasing noise (175).

After reading these parts of the book, we cannot dismiss the factor of urinating. Thus, we can suggest the novel refers to a form of urophilia, which is exhibited with the orgasm-like emotions Erika has in some moments. It also matches Erika’s masochistic ideas of humiliation, arousal, and power.

### **3. Conclusion**

In her interview with The Austrian Film Commission, Jelinek explains what she sought by writing a character like Erika:

She is certainly not insane, not at all. Neurotic, but not insane. As I just tried to explain, this is all the bloody (in the truest sense of the word) consequence of the fact that a woman is not allowed to live if she claims a right that is not hers and that she obtains only in the rarest of cases: artistic fame. The right to choose a man and also to dictate how he tortures her - that is, domination in submission -- this she is not permitted. Indeed, for a woman almost everything beyond the bearing and raising of children is a presumption. You are not particularly easy on women. That isn't my role. I seek to

cast an incorruptible gaze on women, especially where they are the accomplices of men (Jelinek).

In the same interview, Jelinek also stated that her writing is based on criticism and that it reflects the horrors of the reality, written in sarcastic and analytical ways. When we do a close reading of the book, we see a society that oppresses its women with criteria it approves as “normal”; thus, a woman cannot break the chains imposed by social norms, by her family, even by herself; she cannot dictate to her lover in what ways he can hurt her or love her; she cannot be free in all the ways a man can be free.

In her highly controversial book, *The Piano Teacher*, Jelinek weaves an image of a woman, Erika, with layers of female masochism, sadism, penis envy, Electra Complex, self-mutilation, and fetishism, to criticize her society’s social norms, gender inequality, and parental pressures in the most striking ways. All these layers mentioned above, fit each other perfectly like pieces of a puzzle, making Erika both a Freudian nightmare and one of the most psychologically complex characters literature has ever seen.

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