

D. H. Lawrence's 'Piano': A Critical Analysis

Ravi Kumar Sinha
Department of English
R. N. College, Hajipur

Lawrence's 'Piano', like his other fictional and poetic work, explores the 'binaries' of 'sentiment' vs. 'rational thinking'; warmth of instinctive bond vs. annoyance of formal relationship, 'memory' vs. 'desire'; idyllic world of childhood days vs. harsh conditions of an adult's life; etc. Lawrence was acutely conscious of dehumanizing effects of modernity which he considers to be the root cause of tragedy in life.

Piano, a lyrical poem, is composed in three quatrains with lines following a constant rhythm and a regular rhyme scheme of AABBCCDDEEFF. In fact, the poem seeks to recreate the very beat and rhythm of a song being played on a Piano. The poem dramatizes a conflict between present experiences and past memories related to manhood and childhood respectively. The tone of the speaker becomes melancholic and sentimental as his memories redefine and put to perspective his present predicament.

The poem begins by recreating two contrasting scenes: the first scene relates to the woman who sings while the sun goes down in the distance; the first two lines depict the 'present' time and then the next two lines portray his memory of the past. As the speaker listens to a woman singing in a "lyrical voice", nostalgic feelings start overpowering him. Finally the rational control of the mind yields to magical influence of the music which stirs deep recesses of the subconscious and evokes the memories of the childhood days. It is significant that the image of a piano has been used as a symbol that connects the speaker's present to the past while the music initiates the journey to the past. In fact, the music releases him from the tyranny of conscious thought. He succumbs "in spite of himself" to his glorious childhood days. As he says, the song of the woman takes him back to the "vista of years". The expression "Softly, in the dusk" romanticizes the scene, appropriate for evoking the memories and inducing the journey to the past. The speaker fondly recalls the days when he as a child would enjoy the company of his mother in intimate, homely and musical conditions. He visualizes himself as a child under a piano, surrounded by music: "I see/A child sitting under the piano/ in the boom of the tingling strings" and is "pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings". The "poised feet" and "smiles" suggest the confidence and affection of the mother. The warmth and sense of security associated with his childhood form an evaluative contrast with the 'winter' outside suggesting his harsh and rugged adult life. He becomes sentimental to realize the eternal loss of the idyllic world of innocence and delight.

In the second stanza, the speaker is aware of the power of the song- "the insidious mastery of song" seems to be stronger; the expression, "In spite of myself", suggests the resistance on the part of the conscious rational self to yield to the temptation of 'emotion'. He knows that he is being nostalgic and melancholic even though he is not given easily to emotion. Once again, the lyrical voice "Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong". Once again, the agonizing contrast between the present situation and the memory of the past becomes pronounced: "To the old evening at home with winter

outside” contrasting with music in the comfortable and secure home, “And hymns in the cosy parlour”. The image of a piano central place in stirring the memories; the speaker calls it as “our guide”.

In the third stanza, the speaker’s impression of the woman’s song undergoes a change. At that precise moment, “So now”, the song seems to have lost its meaning and significance: “It is vain for the singer to burst into clamour/ With the great piano appassionato”. The relationship existing between his mother and the piano was defined by the mother’s affection and his own emotional involvement; but that emotional affinity is no longer there. The woman playing on the piano does not seem to replicate the vibrant relationship existing between his mother and the instrument. Hence, it is “appassionato”. The entire context seems to have changed. He can no longer experience and enjoy the innocence and delight of the childhood. Naturally, the pang over the ‘lost’ paradise becomes quite evident: “The glamour/Of childish days is upon me”. It is important that expressions such as “in spite of himself” and “betrays me back” suggest inner struggle in the speaker with his own warring impulses. On the one hand, there is the egoistic desire to remain firmly footed in adulthood while, on the other, there is a natural and instinctive urge to give that up for the innocence and delight of childhood. This conflict is agonizing for him. However, the very fact that he has relived his memories makes him realize the vacuum in his present life. This brings about a significant change in his attitude. His self-consciousness, the egoistic “manhood” is lost, as he gives in to emotion: “I weep like a child for the past”. The simile, “like a child”, suggests his psychological transformation after his journey to the past. This scene casts a melancholy shadow over the poem. The speaker fondly remembers the simple moments of his childhood, which implies that his present adult life is riddled with difficulties and worries.

Piano remains one of Lawrence’s masterpieces, where he portrays the complex workings of the human heart in such a suggestive yet simple way.