Piano – Selection of Commentary

***Biography***

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.

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 4

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.

<http://hellesdon.org/rattlebag/Piano%20by%20D.%20H.%20Lawrence.pdf>

D. H. Lawrence’s Piano shows a man experiencing nostalgia as he listens to a woman singing which reminds him of his childhood.

The poem starts with the man hearing the soft singing of a woman which takes him on a mental journey down memory lane and he sees visions of his childhood flashing in front of him. The memory he focuses on is that of a small child who is sitting beneath a grand piano as his mother plays it, taking his mother’s elegant feet into his small hands and listening to the loud chords of music.
The man is reluctant to remember those days and be affected by them, but the song which the woman is singing seems to have a slow subtle impact on him and despite his hesitance he gives in to his emotions and yearns for the days of childhood: the cold Sunday evenings in winter when it used to now outside and they, mother and son used to sit in the warm comfortable indoors and sing melodious hymns with the help of the piano.
The man who was listening to the lady singing now thinks that it would be useless for her to continue on as he is already so affected by his memories that he is just physically present, his mind elsewhere. Without any thought of his adulthood, he bursts into tears remembering the blissful ignorance and innocence of his infant years. He starts weeping, thus bridging the gap between his past and his present.

Lawrence uses words in such an intricate manner throughout the poem that they end up creating vivid and delightful imagery. By using the word ‘vista’ he propels the images of the reader’s own childhood in front of his eyes so that one experiences the same thing that man experienced.  These images ‘take him back down’ into the memories of his childhood. This immediately brings to mind the image that growing up is similar to climbing some difficult mountain and in his adulthood, the man is right at the top, and from there he falls into his childhood again. Onomatopoeia used in describing the ‘boom’ of the ‘tingling’ strings of the piano indicates that the man in the poem is none other but Lawrence himself, as the tiny detail that the piano would sound loud to a small child and consequently would be described as booming when later remembered even as an adult is so simply portrayed and thus removes all doubts that Lawrence is writing from personal experience. Further, the man remembers that his mother’s feet were ‘poised’ betraying the respect and awe a little child has for its parents. Even at that tender age, the child identifies dignified elegance with his other.
The words ‘in spite of myself’ and ‘betrays me back’ show the immense struggle that the man goes through with his own warring desires. The need to remain solidly footed in his adulthood and the yearning to give that up for the innocence and joys of childhood tear him apart and he goes against his own desires by giving in to the latter. Again the words used are so simple yet effective in describing the evenings spent by the fire that they paint a vivid image in the readers mind: one of comfort, warmth and unlimited acceptance. This scene casts a melancholy shadow over the poem, as the man remembering these simple moments from his past suggest that he no longer has the comfort of a family or home to lean upon, and that his life is riddled with difficulties and worries for him to long for the dull and boring adolescent years.

This poem achieves that delicate balance between being cliché, sentimental and being full of self-pity; and expressing empathy. This is done because though the overview of the poem is simple and direct, there are some strong words which are sprinkled throughout with such apt accuracy that they intensify the powerful feelings that a man experiences when he is torn between his past and present lives.
The title of the poem, ‘Piano’ is quite suiting as music is proven to be the strongest trigger of memories. Also it implies that playing the piano, and subsequently music, played a large role in the man’s life: his mother used to play and sing hymns on the piano in his childhood, and even as an adult he finds the time to escape the responsibilities for a few hours by attending musical concerts as the woman singing and playing the piano could be seen as such. The piano was their guide in his childhood, and it still continues to show him the way through life.
Nostalgia is the central idea behind the poem but one would not be wrong to say that it also throws light on the pains of growing up. The man in the poem has traveled the road of life and has reached his adulthood, a phase of life which is associated with freedom of will and power of right. But he still contemplates giving all that up; his heart ‘weeps to belong’ and his ‘manhood is cast down a flood of remembrance’ as the ‘glamor of childish days’ overcomes him emotionally. He throws away the confines of his ‘manhood’, breaking the unspoken rule that men aren’t supposed to show emotions by crying for his childhood. When does a person experience such contrasting emotions? It is only when the responsibilities and burdens of adulthood become too much to bear that one starts wishing that one could somehow go back to one’s immature and ignorant days of being a child, free of worries and still holding the limitless possibilities of growing up in its hand, head full of unbroken dreams and untarnished ideals and principles.

Thus is ‘Piano’ another one of Lawrence’s masterpieces, as he once again portrays the complex workings and dealings of the human heart in such a refined, elegant yet simple manner that he pulls at all the right heartstrings and one finds oneself tearing up while remembering one’s own childhood days.

<http://litxpert.wordpress.com/tag/piano-poem-piano-analysis-d-h-lawrence-comments-and-summary/>

“Piano” by [David Herbert Lawrence](http://csanad.hubpages.com/hub/Classic-Books)(1885-1930) was first published in 1918. This poem is about childhood memories that were brought to the poet’s mind through music. In the first stanza, the poet paints a beautiful picture of a woman singing next to him, causing him to think about a child playing with his mother’s feet underneath a piano. As the poem progresses, however, the reader sees that this poem has a more somber tone as the poet longs to return to his own childhood. This essay will analyze the poem through its meaning, structure and the poet’s intent.

David Herbert Lawrence wrote this poem in the later years of his life; it was first published when he was thirty-three, twelve years before his death in 1930. The content of the poem depicts an internal struggle within the poet’s mind. In the end, it is clear that he longs to return to his childhood. He structures the poem with a simple [rhyming scheme](http://sunnyrobinson.hubpages.com/hub/Writing-Poetry-In-Fixed-Forms) (aabb), which is similar to the structure of some hymns. He uses this rhyming pattern to mimic the form of a song. Because the music in this poem triggers a memory, it is structured and progresses much like a song. In lines seven and eight, he makes reference to hymns: “To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside/And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.” The piano is a guide for both himself and the reader through his recollection. The song-like rhythm to this poem attempts to imitate the melody of the woman’s music which prompted this memory. As the melody evolves and his memory gets clearer, so does the poem’s structure.

The rhyming scheme is not the only structural choice which makes Lawrence’s poem like a song. He uses a trochaic structure, stressing the first syllable of each line. This causes the effect of a song, but dissimilar to the rhythm caused by[iambic](http://daniellefarrow.hubpages.com/hub/Skills-for-Shakespeare-Speaking-in-Verse) pentameter. [Trochaic](http://cybermouse.hubpages.com/hub/Poetry-Purist) meter stresses the first syllable in each line, while iambic pentameter stresses the second. Both of these forms create a song-like rhythm similar to a hymn or more specifically a nursery rhyme. Because Lawrence is recollecting his childhood, this poem’s rhythmic similarity to a nursery rhyme connects the reader to their own childhood memories.

The simplistic language of the first[stanza](http://sunnyrobinson.hubpages.com/hub/Writing-Poetry-In-Fixed-Forms) alludes to childhood also. For example, the third and forth lines of the poem are, “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.” The use of this simplistic language makes the reader feel nostalgic to return to their childhood also. Although the beginning of “Piano” illustrates a child-like rhyme, the second and third stanzas have a more saddening tone.

The second stanza depicts the poet crying, mentally returning to “the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside” (line 7). In this stanza, the poet desires to return to childhood. The rhythm of the poem changes in the second stanza. The use of a comma in each line of the second stanza causes the reader to pause, much like a musician. This structure alludes to the poet’s internal struggle—that he does not want to tease himself by recollecting his childhood: “In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song/Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong” (line 5-6). He does not want to remember the past and desire to return to it, because that is impossible. As stated above, he weeps in this stanza, causing him to submit to his nostalgic desires.

The final stanza begins with a concluding word, “So.” The use of this term causes the reader to know that he will summarize his final points. He writes, “So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour/With the great black piano appassionato” (lines 9-10). The rhythm of this stanza makes the poem faster, like the end of a song. He places a period in the middle of the second line after “appassionato,” making the reader stop on that musical term for passion.

The final couplet of “Piano” have commas in the middle of them, creating brief pauses that separate meaningful fragments: “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” (lines 10-12). In these final lines, the poet explains that although he is a man by age, his mind desires to return to his childhood. Again he weeps, much like a child, and illustrates to the reader that the music was the cause of his nostalgic memories.

In conclusion, David Herbert Lawrence’s “Piano” is a poem about [nostalgia](http://annerako.hubpages.com/hub/A-Defense-of-Nostalgia), about the desire to return to childhood. He uses the rhyming pattern of a hymn or nursery rhyme to make the poem feel like a song, while alluding to the music in the first stanza. He uses musical terms and punctuation to control the rhythm of this poem, making it much like a song. Through the use of trochaic meter and concrete imagery, he allows the reader to feel like they are with him, listening to the music and slipping into the past. Overall, this poem shows the struggle between being an adult and longing to return to the past, when life was simpler.

<http://brittanytodd.hubpages.com/hub/Analysis-of-David-Herbert-Lawrences-Piano>