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Home > Elfriede Jelinek > The Piano Teacher By Elfriede Jelinek. Translated from the German by Joachim Neugroschel (from the 1983 German edition, Das Klaverspielerin). 280 pages London: Serpent's Tale, 1989. ISBN: 1-85242-157-6 Comments of Bob Corbett May 2001 Thirty-eight year old Erika Kohut, piano teacher in a Vienna conservatory, is not her own person. She been shaped, even brutalized into a "safe" form for her domineering mother. "Mother wants to utilize the child's life herself." Mother wishes and imagines her daughter as a famous concert pianist, but it is quite clear that she's not headed in that direction. What is much less clear is whether this is because Erika doesn't have the talent, or whether she has purposely sabotaged her own career in order to spite Mother. However, she is not much of a rebel. Mother bullies and cajoles, screams, slaps, cries and professes love, and always gets her way. "Tonight, when they're watching TV, she'll give Erika the silent treatment. And if Mother does break the silence, she'll tell Erika that everything Mother does is motivated by Love. Mother will declare her love for Erika, which should excuse any possible mistakes that Mother might make." However, we see small signs of trouble brewing in Mother's tightly knit world. First there is the ambiguity as to whether or not Erika did in fact throw away her chances to be a concert pianist just to hurt Mother. We do early on learn of slight moves of rebellion on Erika's part, such small things as spending money on clothes she'll never wear which Mother wants saved for a new apartment. Soon Jelinek begins to reveal deeper and more threatening movements toward rebellion. Erika has dark sexual urges and in an especially grimy scene she goes to a Turkish peep show beneath a bridge in a sleazy part of Vienna to watch live sex shows where she is the only non-performing woman around. Later we follow her to hidden parts of town where she goes to watch brutalizing sadomasochistic movies and then into a dangerous world of spying on lovers in the late night and dark regions of the Prater where she almost gets caught. For the first half of the novel Erika is successfully brow-beaten by Mother and only rebels by herself. However, from the beginnings of the story a 17 year old student, Walter Klemmer, has been falling in love/lust with Erika. He is a handsome, talented, popular and athletic boy. We are led to believe that some sort of affair may develop between student and teacher. However, we have been well-prepared that Erika's sexual desires might well lead this student flirtation into murkier waters. Nonetheless most readers will be rather startled at just how brutal Erika's dark physical sexual expression can get and how confused, angry and revengeful Klemmer can be. Ultimately Mother loses her power and place, Erika sort of carries on in her darkness and Klemmer seems to go his own way, plunging back into the world of conquests among his student set. The story is an important vehicle for Elfriede Jelinek's bitter pessimism. She seems to be an equal opportunity hater, despising Mothers who oppress, daughters who cave into such bullying control and little boys who internalize the male ideal of objectified love. Along the way virtually any other social custom or institution which intrudes is given a sharp slap in the face as well, especially the educational system. This is the fourth novel of Elfriede Jelinek I have read in the past three years. It is reputed to be her best novel by most critics. I personally preferred Wonderful, Wonderful Times, which I found to be a more persuasive telling of her dreadful vision of the world. What I did find strangely odd was that it seemed that Wonderful, Wonderful Times should have been a later development of what Jelinek was doing in The Piano Teacher. Yet, given than Wonderful, Wonderful World was copywritten in 1980 and The Piano Teacher in 1983, it would seem that Piano Teacher was written AFTER Wonderful, Wonderful World. I found that curious on two grounds: first what seemed to be a definite development leading from the seemingly earlier to the seemingly later. The Piano Teacher pushes us to the edge of degradation and yet can't end it in total tragedy. Yet Wonderful, Wonderful World, seeming written earlier, is able to embrace the full catastrophe of Rainer's murders and suicide. Perhaps the answer is that Jelinek thinks living on in the world as Erika Kohut is a harsher ending than being murdered or committing suicide. The second puzzle in this regard are the comparative characters of Rainer Maria Witkoswski of Wonderful, and Walter Klemmer of Piano Teacher. Both are self-centered and self-absorbed. Both are ruthless, cruel, carry illusions of great dreams and are driven by an image in a book (Rainer, Camus' The Stranger and Klemmer is enamored of Normal Mailer). Both are fascinated by violence. But certainly Klemmer is not quite the pathetic character that the ultimate loser, Rainer is. Klemmer is talented, handsome, popular and athletic, all things which Rainer is not. Again, I would have thought Rainer is the developed pessimistic character and Klemmer just the warm up. But, it seems not so. I find my own fascination with the dark and nihilistic works of both Elfriede Jelinek and Thomas Bernhard to be hard to understand. I just view the world so differently. Thus on this read I kept a careful eye out for just how it was that Jelinek so captivated me. The shock value of her story is a part. The dramatic challenge to my own view of the world is another. But what kept calling attention to itself is the utterly brilliant style which allows Jelinek to carry off her relentless negativity in a way that keeps me eagerly turning the pages. Some of the particular devices she uses are: gross exaggerations: the horrible people in the strassenbahn scene convinced me, despite the fact that I spend hundreds of hours on the strassenbahns without any such experience. Similarly the scene of the Turkish peep show and her general sense of human relations are achieved in these exaggerations. phenomenally powerful negative images and speech. She has the ability to conjure up some of the most disgusting images I have ever read! Yet in the context of story and message they simply astound and delight this reader. unpredictable moves on the part of characters, yet she makes one come to believe in them. use on anonymous titles in place of names -- Mama says, husband does.. This has the impact of universalizing the characters in clever ways. While all these things do suggest she makes her pessimistic case by exaggeration, nonetheless the individual characters live and are believable. The exaggeration is not such that no one could be the way she describes, just that as a universal picture of human kind the picture is exaggerated. The tactic may well be necessary to get us to consider the point she is making. She draws us to her pessimism and cynicism. Despite my general attraction to Jelinek's writing, I wasn't as impressed with The Piano Teacher as I was with Wonderful, Wonderful World and I think this was because Wondeful$\hat{\mathbf{e}}$ is carried forward by a story which flows more easily and because it is more relentlessly consistent with the tragedy being built in the plot. The Piano Teacher seems to have separate special scenes strung together in ways that gave the novel a rather disjointed form and ultimately, it didn't have the nerve to carry the coming tragedies to their fullest conclusion. On the other hand, one might well argue it is more tragic to have Erika and Mother live on than to die at Klemmer's hand as other's did at Rainer's. Whatever the comparative value of the two novels might be, Elfriede Jelinek has the ability to make human love seem more hopeless and more disgusting than any other author I have ever read. I may be mesmerized by her writing and her characters, but I certainly work always to live in a much more hopeful and caring world than that which she pictures as rather typical of human kind. Bob Corbett corbetre@webster.edu Becoming Reading Thinking Journals HOME Bob Corbett corbetre@webster.edu Novel by Elfriede Jelinek The Piano Teacher First editionAuthorElfriede JelinekOriginal titleDie KlavierspielerinCountryAustriaLanguageGermanSubjectRepression, sadomasochismGenreNovelSet inVienna, 1980sPublisherRowohltPublication date1983Media typePrint (Hardcover & Paperback)ISBN3639135970Dewey Decimal833.91 The Piano Teacher (German: Die Klavierspielerin) is a novel by Austrian Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek, first published in 1983 by Rowohlt Verlag. Translated by Joachim Neugroschel, it was the first of Jelinek's novels to be translated into English.[1] The novel follows protagonist Erika Kohut ['eːʁika 'koːhʊt], a sexually and emotionally repressed piano teacher, as she enters into a sadomasochistic relationship with her student, Walter Klemmer ['valtɐ 'klɛmɐ], the results of which are disastrous. Like much of Jelinek's work, the chronology of the events in the book is interwoven with images of the past and the internal thoughts of characters.[2] While the English work was titled The Piano Teacher, the title in German means the piano player; it is also clear that the player is female because of the noun's feminine ending. In 2001, the novel was adapted into the film The Piano Teacher, directed by Michael Haneke. Plot synopsis The novel follows Erika Kohut, a piano teacher in her late thirties who teaches at the Vienna Conservatory and still lives in an apartment with her very controlling elderly mother, with whom Erika shares her parents' marriage bed, despite having a room of her own. The very strained relationship between Erika and her mother is made clear in the opening scene, in which Erika rips out some of her mother's hair when her mother attempts to take away a new dress that Erika has purchased for herself. Erika's mother wishes the money to be used toward a new, future apartment with her, and resents Erika's spending of her money on possessions distinctly for herself; her mother cannot wear Erika's clothing. Erika herself does not wear it, but merely strokes it admiringly at night. Erika expresses this latent violence as well and need for control in many other scenes throughout the book. Erika takes large instruments on trains so that she can hit people with them and call it an accident, or kicks or steps on the feet of other passengers so that she can watch them blame someone else. She is a voyeur who frequents peep shows, and on one occasion catches a couple having sex in a park, being so affected that she urinates. Childhood memories are retold throughout the novel and their effects on the present suggested—for instance, the memory of a childhood visit from her cousin, an attractive and athletic young man, whom Erika's mother praised while she makes her daughter practice piano, results in Erika's self-mutilation. Walter Klemmer, an engineering student, is introduced very early on. He comes early to class and watches Erika perform. He eventually becomes Erika's student and develops a desire for his instructor. Erika sees love as a means of rebellion or escape from her mother and thus seeks complete control in the relationship, always telling Klemmer carefully what he must do to her, although she is a sexual masochist. The tensions build within the relationship as Klemmer finds himself more and more uncomfortable by the control, and eventually Klemmer beats and rapes Erika in her own apartment, her mother in the next room. When Erika visits Klemmer after the rape and finds him laughing and happy, she stabs herself in the shoulder and returns home. Criticism Much of the criticism has been directed at the mother-daughter relationship; less attention has been paid to the aspect of music in the novel. According to Larson Powell and Brenda Bethman, musicality is a very important aspect of the book: they argue that Jelinek (herself a former student of the Vienna Conservatory) uses musicality to underscore the perversity of the main character, who participates in a musical tradition that trains women to play the piano in order to attract a husband. Erika's failure as a pianist is a sign of her perversion: both the pervert and the artist attain pleasure, but where the artist reaches pleasure as a sublimity, thus becoming a desiring subject, the pervert fails to achieve subjectivity and remains bound to object status. Thus, Erika remains the object of her mother's desire, unable to attain subjectivity which the principles of her musical education had denied her in the first place.[3] Other criticism has been directed toward the lack of a father figure within the novel. Just as much as Erika's mother is suffocatingly present, so is her father noticeably absent. This provides her mother with sole psychological discretion as to Erika's upbringing. Worth noting is that: "the mother's power and influence increase with the absence of the father, who is admitted to an asylum and spatially exiled. Aside from the fact that the exclusive bond between mother and daughter remains uninterrupted and maternal domination obstructed, his displacement suggests the cause for Erika's failed separation from the mother and her excessive masochistic drive."[4] Critic Beatrice Hanssen refers to the novel as "an anti-Bildungsroman and anti-Künstlerroman" and writes further that The Piano Teacher is a "satirical critique...of the literature, popular during the 1970s and 1980s, that idealized the pre-oedipal mother-daughter bond."[5] References ^ Olson, Steven E. (1990). "Rev. of Jelinek, The Piano Teacher". The Antioch Review. 48 (2): 258. JSTOR 4612211. ^ Boiter, Vera (1998). Elfriede Jelinek. Women Writers in German-Speaking Countries. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. pp. 199–207. ^ Powell, Larson; Brenda Bethman (2008). "'One Must Have Tradition in Oneself, to Hate It Properly': Elfriede Jelinek's Musicality". Journal of Modern Literature. 32 (1): 163–83. doi:10.2979/jml.2009.32.1.163. 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