

# Perversion in Elfriede Jelinek's work

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Body Text;Body Text 2;Perversion means, literally, the alteration of something from its original course, meaning, or state to a distortion or corruption of what was first intended. It also means a sexual behavior or desire that is considered abnormal or unacceptable (Longman, 1995).

In Elfriede Jelinek's works this second meaning might seem more evident, where all relationships between men and women are marked by power, violence and humiliation and substitute for love. But it is in the first meaning where, we believe, Elfriede reveals herself as a writer, as a master of a perverse writing.

This paper offers a reflection over perversion in Elfriede Jelinek's Work. From Freudian conception of the work of art as an expression of fantasies and conflicts of the artist, we intend to analyse the perverse mastery of this author, through *what* she writes and *how* she writes.

We use three of her novels – *Die Liebhaberinnen* (1975), *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983) and *Lust* (1989) – and we invite you to a journey until the genesis of perversion as a deviance, an attempt to cure and path for restoring an identity precociously destroyed.

## THE WRITER. THE WOMAN

Novelist, playwright and essayist, Elfriede is well known for her controversial and bold attitudes and seen as one of the most important voices of the german-speaking cultural scene and of the resistant literature of the post-war.

Born in 1946 in Austria. At the age of 37 she wrote *The Piano Teacher*. This is her most famous work and admittedly the most autobiographic one.

The author talks about a cultural split since a very early age: her father was Jew with a modest background, son of one of the founders of the Austrian Social-Democracy, agnostic, “he hated the Church”. He impersonated a fundamental part of the Left Vienna. Her mother belonged to a family of the high bourgeoisie, deeply catholic.

By the mother's will, Elfriede attended a nun's school since she was six years old and started to learn the piano.

Elfriede's mother got a strong education at a school where she met highly cultivated and gifted girls that used to play several instruments, sing and play. She aimed the same for her daughter.

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Elfriede finished her degree in organ and violin at Vienna's Conservatory. She also studied Art and Drama.

Elfriede's father died when she was 21 years old, in a sanatory. Elfriede lived with her mother until 2000, when she died.

About her parents she said:

"They used to be terrible for each other. My father wanted to help me but he couldn't. I wanted to rescue him from my mother, but I was too young and I couldn't save him. After my mother's death I thought I'd free myself as I took care of her 'till the end. (...) I thought everything would solve for itself but strangely it didn't happen that way".

We will focus on *The Piano Teacher*, as this is the novel that reflects an internal reality that leads to a perverse solution.

## THE PIANO TEACHER

The novel is about the story of Erika Kohut, a piano teacher of the Vienna Conservatory.

At 36 Erika shares the house and the bed with her mother. Trapped in the maternal object, as if she had never been born.

The only reference to the father in the book is when the two Kohut ladies leave him at the sanatory.

"Her father promptly left, passing the torch to his daughter. Erika entered, her father exited" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 3).

The mother is always on control.

"Erika visits a café once a month, but her mother knows which café, and she can ring her up there too" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 6).

"Erika, the meadow flower. That's how she got her name: erica. Her pregnant mother had visions of something timid and tender. Then, upon seeing the lump of clay that shot out of her body, she promptly began to mold it relentlessly in order to keep it pure and fine. (...) She was destined, congenitally, for the subtleties of classical dance, song, music. A world-famous pianist – that is Mother's ideal" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 23-24).

The mother's insatisfaction and disillusion are projected on the child. This woman deprives her daughter from mother care, frustrates, hurts, humiliates her and takes full control of her daughter, aiming to shape her to her own image. Erika's goal is her mother's goal: to be a world-known pianist.

The mother becomes an agent of a primary castration. She keeps her child chained to her and can't bear her psychic birth.

Erika becomes her mother's instrument, an object, almost as a fetish, as Racamier suggests. And both of them encapsulate themselves in this powerful narcissistic couple. Narcissistic seduction might be the most violent and brutal aspect of the relationship between the pervert and his child.

The only possible relationship is with the mother, to whom she owes her own life.

One sex for two, a body for two, or even a life for two.

According to the Kleinian theory, the baby who lacks love will feel frustrated and then hate and rage feelings will arise. And this baby inflicts oral and anal-sadistic attacks to the bad object: the maternal breast. One of the baby's fantasies is that he travels to the mother's interior so he can steal and destroy those qualities he never felt. Following Klein, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel brings this conception to perversion. According to her, to empty the mother's womb corresponds to a desire of finding an universe free of obstacles, with no attrition, where the child can easily enter whenever he wants. Then, psychic energy would flow in absolute freedom, similar to the pleasure principle mode.

In its turn, this aggressiveness brings a very archaic form of guilt, the Talion's fear, the maternal retaliation.

"She knows that her mother's embrace will completely devour and digest her, yet she is magically drawn to it" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 118).

When mother and daughter are mixed together and hate prevails over love, mistrust and insecurities assume disturbing dimensions. Persecutory anxiety, typical in psychotic cases, translates to a threat of being attacked, devoured, poisoned and aniquilated by the object that was severely hit.

Sadism is usually a good mean to set one's limits, to determine a separation as a single subject. In Erika it transforms into auto-sadism: she cuts and needles, inflicting herself the pain she wanted to inflict to her mother.

The mother obliterates her daughter's identity and spoliates her desire. It is forbidden to Erika to exist as a separate subject, as a woman.

"But that vanity of hers, that wretched vanity. (...) Let go, Mother snaps, hand it over! You've got to be punished for caring so much about trivial things. Life has punished you by ignoring you, and now your mother will punish you in the same way, ignoring you, even though you dress up and paint your face like a clown. Hand it over!" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 7).

"We'll just keep to ourselves, won't we, Erika? We don't need anyone else" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 14).

On the other hand, the mother seduces her daughter, complimenting her and, that way, keeping her the closest she can. The mother convinces the daughter about the paternal nullity, denigrates the father's role, saying that only her daughter completes her and exulting the power that, together, they can reach.

"The daughter is the mother's idol, and mother demands only a tiny tribute: Erika's life" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 26).

Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel says that "seduction is a determinant etiologic factor in perversions" (1984, p. 110).

"Mother says: Erika is the best. That is the lasso she uses to rope her daughter" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 220).

The mother becomes the very image of perversion.

It is in this relationship where the feelings of megalomania and omnipotence grow. Erika's perverse behavior results from the fusion threat with the mother. She cuts herself to feel separated, to know her limits and fix them – she feels no pain, rather she feels alive.

"This blade is destined for HER flesh. (...) As usual, there is no pain. SHE, however, cuts the wrong place, separating what the Good Lord and Mother Nature have brought together in unusual unity. (...) For an instant, the two flesh halves, sliced apart, stare at each other, taken aback at this sudden gap, which wasn't there before. They've shared joy and sorrow for many years, and now they're being separated" (Jelinek, 1999, pp. 86-87).

When she goes to the peep-shows she's looking for the man, she looks for the one who dissolves the unity with her mother; and she introduces the third element, reenacting the primal scene, when she spies the couples' intimacy.

Therefore, perversion acts like a barrier to psychotic anxiety.

Joyce McDougall (1972) sees the perverse sexuality as a child's game. And that scene between Erika and Klemmer, her pupil, is a good example:

"In Erika's briefcase, a letter to the student rustles among the music scores. She will hand him the letter after scornfully telling him the score. (...)" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 187).

“Her most haunting wish – the adored Herr Klemmer reads – is for you to punish me. She would like Klemmer as a punishment. And in such a way that he ties her up with the ropes I’ve collected, and also the leather straps and even the chains! Hogtie her, bind her up as thoroughly as he can – solidly, intensely, artfully, cruelly, tormentingly, cunningly” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 215).

It is Erika, determining the rules of the game, who inflicts the humiliation and the castration she once felt. We believe that her true wish would be to abandon herself to the man, to become his object, with no freedom, being under the man’s thumb and not her mother’s, that’s Jessica Benjamin’s (1988) idea. It would be through this man’s strength and power that Erika could feel the pleasure of being punished by her father, by the one that could separate her from the mother.

“She reveals to the man she has been longing to be hit for many years now. She assumes she has finally found the master she has been longing for” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 229).

## WOMEN AS LOVERS

In *Women as Lovers* we see two women that look for their men and future husbands. They are single and they have one only objective: to get married.

All relationships are inscribed in the realm of the pure utilitarianism, of the ‘relationships trade’, where the woman is seen by the author as mere merchandise.

“brigitte has a body to offer.

apart from brigitte’s body many other bodies are flooding the market at the same time. the only thing that positively stands by brigitte on this path, is the cosmetics industry. and the textile industry. brigitte has breasts, thighs, legs, hips and a snatch” (Jelinek, 1994, p. 10).

“paula no longer has a grade, such as even eating apples must have. paula has no market value any more” (Jelinek, 1994, p. 145).

There isn’t any sort of investment.

Thus, there is a perversion of relationships and a perversion of femininity, where a deep despise for the Other takes place. And there is also the violence issue, of men’s power over women and the transmission of these values from parents to their children.

“the women remain sales assistant or part-time sales assistant until their marriage, once they’re married, that’s the end of selling, the substitution is made without a hitch.

(...) but marriage always comes alone, without life.

(...) for the woman end of life and start of having children. (...) the women begin to hate their daughters and want to have them die as quickly as possible just as they once died, so: so they must get a man.

sometimes a daughter does not want to die as quickly as she should (...)” (Jelinek, 1994, pp. 12-15).

Marriage as death.

“and the daughter can hardly wait, to be allowed to die at last also, and the parents are already going shopping for the daughter’s death: sheets and towels and dish cloths and a used refrigerator. then at least she’ll stay dead but fresh” (Jelinek, 1994, p. 16).

It is a first approach or a first portrait, no longer of disenchantment, but of disaggregation, of dismemberment of what is called family.

In *Women as Lovers* Elfriede sketches a vision, highly ironical, of her country, in particular, and, in general, of the family structure and man’s and woman’s roles in western society. We also feel the

hate to the woman's constraints and the hatred in the relationships between men and women and between parents and children.

The recurrence to the deadly mother.

"love unites, but hate divides. paula's momma hates paula because of the child in her stomach. (...) paula's momma has often enough hated her husband because of the children in her stomach (...). now momma has finally cracked, so that she not only hates her child outside her stomach in her daughter's stomach, but the daughter as well" (Jelinek, 1994, p. 114).

#### THE PIANO TEACHER

The *Piano Teacher's* plot and Elfriede's life seem to merge. The oceanic, tentacular mother; the absent father; the music. And it is in this fusional relationship with her mother, lived by Elfriede as well, that the perverse aspects of the character start to show, in an extreme effort to separate. Always failed. But it was this novel, we believe, that allowed her to meet, in the most brutal and demolishing fashion, her own destructiveness.

It is in this sequence of works that *The Piano Teacher* becomes an element of transformation of the creative process. We think that by digging her own life story, namely with her mother, Elfriede becomes more caustic and her style more perverse. If in *Women as Lovers* the author builds an attack mostly to the life style and the clichés of western society, in *Lust* everything is massively destroyed and perverted.

#### LUST

What before she would critically describe with irony, here is debauched, ostensibly and obscenely lowered, putrified. There is no hope.

"At times the woman is dissatisfied with these defects that burden her life: husband and son" (Jelinek, 1992, p. 9).

The man humiliates, tortures and destroys.

"This woman is now his luxury, he pours into her till she overfloweth" (Jelinek, 1992, p. 140).

"The woman has to crook and angle her legs like a frog so that her husband, the examining magistrate, can look into the matter closely. (...) She is flooded and shat full him (...) the Man, that irreconcilable enemy of her sex (...). He sticks his right forefinger up her arsehole and, tits dangling, she kneels above him and scrubs. Hair in her eyes and mouth. Perspiration in her brow. Another person's saliva at the base of her throat. The pale killer whale there before her till the friendly light dies, night comes, and the animal can begin to lash her with his tail again" (Jelinek, 1992, p. 65).

The son, the future man.

"The child knows a good deal about all this. The boy peeps grinning through the keyholes, spying out the joys of the home. (...) The child can't tell when he snuggles into the nest that Father built. (...) the child has a hungry mouthful of dirty talk to be stopped, talk concerning his mother and the blood that frequently stains her panties. The child knows everything. (...) And he will cling to the woman, graze upon her, bite her nipples to punish her for allowing Father to explore her tunnels and piping" (Jelinek, 1992, p. 25).

In this family only the violence, the power and humiliation take place. One cannot tell who's the father, the mother or the son. Everyone is corrupted. The family as a system is completely perverted.

"The family, this vulture, keeps itself as a pet" (Jelinek, 1992, p. 26).

In a defensive effort the devilish image of the mother is denied by the author and stuck to the man. The man *becomes* the one who abuses, persecutes, the one who takes hold of the women's work and life. At the bottom, the mother *is* the one who abuses, persecutes, the one that takes hold of the daughter's work and life. The evil mother expands to all characters. The mother is the man, the son and the woman, she is the author's destructive tendency.

In *Lust* everyone is mixed up and the relationships between them are nothing but the author's destructiveness and aggressiveness towards her mother.

In *Lust* we see death as a struggle for life. The male man's son is killed by the mother. To kill the son (a future man) means to kill the mother. That is the ultimate meaning.

"Comfortless he lies there under the eye of his mother, who comes to his bed and smooths the covers. (...) He is no doubt looking forward to growing up, like his father's member. Tenderly Mother kisses her little boat sailing around the world. Then she takes a plastic bag, slips it over the boy's head, and draws it tight at the bottom so that the child's breath will perish in peace. (...) But no, the child still wants to live. Then the son drifts out into the open waters where he is immediately quite in his element (Mummy!) (...).

The mother carries the child, and then, when she grows tired, drags him along behind her. (...) Now the woman is at the stream, and the next moment her son sinks in, contented. (...)

The water has taken hold of the child, and bears him on and away, a good deal will remain of him for a long time in this cold. (...)

But now rest a while!" (Jelinek, 1992, pp. 206-207).

#### A PERVERSE STYLE

As we said, it was also our aim to put in evidence the perverse aspects of Elfriede's writing – *how* she writes.

In *Women as Lovers* Elfriede adopts a very original style, repudiating conventional phrasal structures and rules, the text with no format, always using minuscules, which reflects how trivial and mediocre the characters and their relationships are. The very rare sentences entirely in capital letters work as a chock-stimuli. Repetition and puns are also relevant aspects of this work.

The narrative in *The Piano Teacher* is more conventional. However, some references to the main character are in capital letters (SHE, HER), revealing the greatness and omnipotence in Erika and of the author herself projected in the character. So the mother made her believe, confirming her value over everyone, even over her father. In this novel, the author transforms the reader into the third element so desired by the perverse, building a mechanism that allows the introduction of the other that sees and spies the intimacy.

*Lust* is where Elfriede achieves the mastery of her literary skills.

She says:

"It is the book I've always wanted to write. (...) It's natural that for some people it is nothing but a bunch of puns and play on words. But in literature I've always wanted to reach this extreme linguistic concentration, which is based on the linguistic mechanisms of lord/slave relationship. (...) And I've expressed it in pure language. (...) It's an amalgam of linguistic formations where male porn language – and porn language is exclusively male – is analysed and denounced".

Elfriede was looking for a feminine pornographic language, and it is here where stands her perverse mode concerning creation, taking over images and patterns of male porn writing. Because “a feminine language of sexuality cannot exist”, she says. According to a portuguese literary critic, João Barrento, “inversion is her technic, her writing is the total perversion”.

In *Lust* we question ourselves about the barrier’s resistance that perversion performs over psychosis. On one hand, we see the book’s tragic end as the emergence of psychosis: the mother who kills her son, so that she can avoid death. Then we ask if perversion as a defense really fails. On the other hand, in this work, Elfriede’s writing is highly perverse.

“The pervert (...) will have an imperative need to impose his creative work. He will amaze the spectator, the listener or the reader with his intelectual or verbal acrobatics, with his technical virtuosity, with his ingenuity and his cleverness in formal expression, bringing him the sanctimonious admiration that his mother had once lavished on him, thus confirming his role of the adequate sexual partner and the correlative devaluation of the father. Thus our magician seeks, in deluding the public, to preserve his own illusion” (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1974, p. 356).

It is the character’s anal triumph that convinces her that she is the best.

Hence the repetition of the themes in the various works, where relationships become deadlier and hate is exponentially multiplied.

Thus, the author places her destructiveness and agressiveness into the stories, locking them up in the books and attaching them to those characters. There is a sort of release, a discharge of internal tension, without which the existence would be unbearable. That is what Freud message was all about: the work of art allows, somehow, the accomplishment of some fantasies and desires of the artist. And it is her own writing the way that Elfriede found to protect herself. The writing acts for her not only as shield, but as a weapon as well, as a way to value herself.

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