

Piano

D. H. Lawrence

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
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.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. 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.

VOCABULARY

Appassionato > 'passionately', a piano

Poignant > beautiful, sad, touching

Insidious > harmful in a slow or hidden way

Hymn > a religious song

Melancholy > a light, almost enjoyable sadness

Remembrance > the state of remembering something

STORY/SUMMARY

Stanza 1: A woman is singing to the speaker, he is watching her and a piano onstage - the setting is 'dusk', a dark space between day and night. The music and singing take him back in memory to a point where he sees a child sitting under the piano, pressing the feet of his mother who is singing and smiling. We assume he is the child and that this is a childhood memory.

Stanza 2: The music makes him feel strongly nostalgic, he wants to go back to the time when he spent Sunday evenings in winter with his family, listening to them singing hymns in the parlour room with the piano's music guiding them.

Stanza 3: He seems irritated by the current singer and piano because they are a reminder of his past without being as good as his memories, it is as if he feels that both the piano and singer are singing vainly to amuse or impress themselves, rather than for a communal or spiritual reason, as in his memories. He feels stripped of the pressure and expectations of being an adult, and instead feels young and vulnerable like a child as he strongly misses his past.

SPEAKER/VOICE

The speaker is unnamed and we can perhaps assume that it's the poet himself, the tone of the poem is very **personal** and **connected to memory**, so the speaker delves into his own psyche/mind to retrieve experiences and emotions from the past - using music to trigger his thought processes.

STRUCTURE/FORM

- **Non linear chronology** > Jumps around between childhood and present via memory, creates an authentic sense of nostalgia.
- **Line length** > Lines get longer as the stanza goes on-shows that the speaker is going deeper into his memories, creates slow pace because lines are building up, helps the reader to catch the feeling of memory.
- **Semicolon (caesura)** > In first line indicates time shift-being taken back to his childhood by the woman singing-like a jolt, disrupting the smooth rhythm of the poem.
- Many **commas** which disrupt the flow/rhythm of lines, forcing the reader to take short breaths often- indicates breathlessness and waves of memory, each individual image is coming to him, suggests fragmentation of memory-visual description, energistic.

- Each line is **end stopped**-each stanza is distinct and separate as they are each their own sentence.
- Uses **quatrains (four-line stanzas)**> The **regular structure** evokes the shape of a hymn and has a musical verse quality to it, evoking the feeling of lullabies and childhood songs.
- **Rhyme scheme** > AABB (**rhyming couplets**) - Creates a regular sound pattern, perhaps a soothing and comforting repetition of sound, again evoking a lullaby. Couplets are generally associated with love poetry, so it creates a feeling of love or harmony.
- **Internal rhyme** > Evokes musical quality and places emphasis on those words: 'singer... clamour' 'piano...appassionato' (appassionato= passionately).

LANGUAGE

Emotive language > E.g 'the heart weeps to belong', 'Down the flood of remembrance'.

Continuous verbs > 'woman is singing' 'child is sitting' 'pressing' - constant movement, the memory and present moment seem to fluidly blend with one another, we have a sense of the action unfolding in front of us, we observe the actions in a filmic sense, as if a play is occurring

Semantic field of nostalgia > 'Old Sunday evenings...winter outside...cosy parlour...tinkling piano'- words that seem to be part of a memory help build up an **image** of comfort and longing/regret in the reader's head. E.g 'Old', 'cosy' and 'tinkling' are **adjectives** which help create an atmosphere of sadness and a **bittersweet tone**

Sibilance > 'a mother who smiles as she sings' - The repetition of the 's' sound is soothing, and also helps to create an emphasis on the image of the mother, who is contrasted directly with the 'woman' who is singing at present in the bar - one a comforting and protective figure, the other cold and self centred or 'vain'.

Trochaic rhythm > The first syllable of each foot is stressed - '**Softly/ in the/ dusk, a/ woman**', creating a lilting feeling that adds to the sense of a lullaby, it also creates a falling rhythm as the speaker slips back into the past.

Auditory imagery > 'the boom of tingling strings' (**onomatopoeia**) / 'burst into clamour' 'tinkling piano' - creates an overall feeling of sound, the atmosphere of the sound is sometimes loud and sometimes soft, sometimes pleasant and at other times offensive.

Personification > 'the tinkling piano our guide' - the piano is leading the way with the scene, as if it has taken on a life of its own.

CONTEXT

- First published in **1918**
- **Modernism** > Artists in the early 1900s, obsessed with being modern, not old fashioned, etc.
- **End of Victorian era** > Modernists saw Victorians as boring and old fashioned, not embracing the new age - psychology, film, photography.
- DH Lawrence was part of '**The Bloomsbury Group**', a talented group of modernist writers whose common themes were psychology, emotion, memory and time.
- Lawrence was **33 years old** when he wrote the poem

THEMES

- Psychology
- Memory
- Nostalgia
- Pain and Longing
- Time
- Innocence
- Childhood/Adulthood