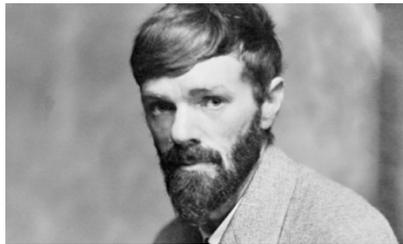


Roberta Nava

PIANO BY DAVID HERBERT LAWRENCE
A SHORT COMMENTARY ON THE POEM



*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.*

This poem was written in 1918 by the English author David Herbert Lawrence, who is perhaps better known as a novelist – for his masterpiece *Sons and Lovers* and for the more controversial novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* –.

He was born on the 11th September 1885 in Eastwood, a coal-mining village in Nottinghamshire England. His father was a struggling coal miner and her mother a former schoolteacher, greatly superior in education to her husband. Lawrence's childhood was dominated by poverty and friction between his parents. Despite his hard background, he became one of the greatest figures in 20th-century English literature, as a novelist, storywriter, critic, poet and painter. He died from Tuberculosis on the 2nd March, 1930.

He wrote several poems about his close relationship with his mother. 'Piano' is one of such poems.

A short commentary on the poem

In the first stanza of this delicious poem the poet is sitting in the dusk, listening to a woman singing accompanied by the sound of a piano.

The softness and the suavity of the melody she is intoning as well as the

precious sound produced by the vibrations of the piano strings take him back to his childhood. Suddenly the image of himself as a child, crouched under a piano, appears to his mind in all its clearness and concreteness: he is caressing his mother's feet while she is singing and playing the piano. He visualizes her tender smile and the grace of her feet gently moving above the piano pedals.

In the second stanza, the poet blames the intensity and the virtuosity of the song he is listening to: in spite of all his exertions, he fails to endure its "mastery" which becomes even "insidious" and deceitful (it "betrays" him) in that it takes him back to the nostalgia of his past. He has a lump in his throat thinking of "the old Sunday evenings" he used to spend in the warmth of his house, while the chilly winter was freezing everything outside. The nostalgic tune of the hymns coming from the cosy living-room echoes in his mind, accompanied by the perpetual sound of the piano in the background.

The third and last stanza emphasizes the uselessness and the failure of the pianist and singer's efforts, in her crescendo of notes and melodic rhythm, aiming at bringing back the poet to the present. In fact, the latter is now absolutely unable to come back to his manhood. At this point, he is completely overwhelmed by the fascination of his childhood. His memories of happy days are so vivid and so copious that they sweep him away like a river in flood. He

cannot help bursting into tears for nostalgia: his childish days have faded away for good!

This poem is essentially autobiographical: the poet identifies himself with the little child sitting under the piano; furthermore, the woman singing and playing the instrument isn't anybody but his own mother. The remembrance of his past is so pregnant and his nostalgia so intense that he is definitely overwhelmed by the bitter awareness of the ineluctability and irreversibility of time that goes by.

The poem is structurally divided into three stanzas; each of them is composed of four verses in rhyming couplets. These repeated phonic endings after each line lend a special effect to the general rhythm of the poem: they constitute a pleasant musical background which reproduces, in a sort of poised and modulated parallelism, the omnipresent notes of the piano accompanying the poet's remembrance.

The nostalgic atmosphere is skilfully conveyed by a precise choice of words and metaphorical images: the melody and the sound of the piano "*take [him] back down to the vista of years*", as though the poet were at the same time both the spectator of a beautiful panorama and the leading actor in a show. An

onomatopoeic word – “*the boom of the tingling strings*” – is then used to define the typical sound produced by the vibrations of the piano strings. This linguistic choice gives another impressive effect of sonority to the whole poem.

In the second stanza, the virtuosity of the chant is depicted as “*the insidious mastery of song*”, using a shocking expression in order to underline the paradoxical affirmation which will be explained in the course of the poem.

Finally, in the last stanza, the poet emphasizes the overall dimensions and the gloomy colour of “*the great black piano appassionato*”; yet he points out how impotent they might be against the impetuosity of “*the flood of remembrance*” in which his maturity is “*cast down*”.

The poet does not just take a stroll down memory lane – he drags the reader into his past remembrances so that he/she is there with him, feeling the vibrations in his/her arms and legs to the sound of the piano.

The poem ends with the poet bursting into tears: a resigned relief against the childish years ineluctably rolling by... as well as the ultimate transformation of a full-grown man into a helpless and fragile child.