

RESEARCH ARTICLE



**THE DIOTIMA-SHAPED HOLE IN THE PIANO TEACHER'S HEAD: CONSTRUCTING A
NEGATIVE DIOTIMEAN HERMENEUTIC TO RE-READ ELFRIEDE JELINEK'S
THE PIANO TEACHER**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I read Elfriede Jelinek's celebrated novel, *The Piano Teacher*, through the lens of the wise woman figure of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. I argue that Jelinek's text is marked by an absence of Diotima, the black-hole of love that removes all possibilities of wedding love to wisdom. In this way, I argue, the novel, when read through an absent Diotima's eyes, may enthuse us to build up a new methodology of reading, a sort of negative hermeneutic, where the absence of a topos or a figure can help us explain a text at least as productively as the presence of certain metaphors and images.

Keywords: *Diotima, negative Diotimean hermeneutic, Eros, love, wisdom, absence, hole*

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In *The Piano Teacher*, Elfriede Jelinek, the Nobel Prize winning author, presents a complex and multidimensional erotic relationship between Erika Kohut, the piano teacher, and her student, Walter Klemmer. I would like to read this complex relationship in terms of the Diotima motif in Plato's *Symposium*. That is to say, I would like to use the topos of Diotima's erotic instruction to Socrates in interpreting the Erika-Walter relationship in a new light. However, this can only be an interpretation with negatives, a kind of absence-oriented hermeneutic. Diotima's Eros is what is absent from the narrative scenario of *The Piano Teacher*. Diotima is a "hole", an orifice in the landscape of love in -

Jelinek's novel. And it is the conspicuously non-Diotimean nature of the "love" Jelinek portrays that makes me dwell on Diotima all the more seriously. We can, again, relate this possible negative hermeneutic to what Brenda Bethman identifies as the "negative aesthetics" of Jelinek (Bethman viii).

Diotima teaches an ascent of love in the *Symposium*. The Diotimean Eros moves from physicality to spiritual planes, from narrow amatory experiences to a possible socialization of Eros. Exactly the opposite happens in *The Piano Teacher*. And yet, Diotima is not just an *absence* in this text, she is a spectre that haunts what we might call the textual subconscious of *The Piano Teacher*. Jelinek's

novel, despite its ostensibly exclusively satirical tone, does seriously deal with the motif of erotic teaching. Any hermeneutic approach that focuses too much on the stylistic aspects of this postmodern novel at the cost of its profound philosophical concerns will fail to do justice to this novel. Jelinek invokes the spectre of Diotima, probably engages in a satirically oriented dialectic with her, and yet finally carves a space for Diotima's ghost in her novel, just as Athena, at the end of the *Eumenides*, provided a space for the Erinyes in the polis under her rule (Aeschylus, *Eumenides*).

Erika is, precisely, mistaught by her mother. Jelinek satirizes Erika's mother's obsession with the Christian phobia of sex. The mother tries to control her daughter by desexualizing her. The outside world is full of males, the males who are going to pounce upon her daughter. So, the daughter must be protected (Jelinek 6-7, 18). And yet, the daughter is uneasy with this protection. She loathes her mother's attempts to control her body and soul, but returns, every time, to the "home", the mother's closet, finding it to be her inescapable existential centre (39-41). She wants to decentre (to improvise on the deconstructivist concept) her amatory life, exploring all the possibilities of sexual innovation. She creates a universe of her own: a world of sado-masochistic imaginings (28-30, 118-120). She is not virgin, she loves losing innocence again and again - though without any feeling. And her male partners are not capable of deep feeling, either (41). She frequents the stalls where sexual games are played and voyeuristically witnesses them (26-29). She wastes money on these cheap sex shows; she keeps fantasizing about a male cousin in erotic terms; she mutilates herself to give release to her suppressed erotic passion (21-28). The mother's obsessive attempts to control her daughter culminate in the daughter's obsession with losing all control over herself, an obsession with masochistic "surrenders". And yet, she is a "teacher", a piano teacher who can never forget that she has some "cultural" responsibilities. This culture-obsession is what becomes the chief target of narratorial mockery in *The Piano Teacher*. The culture Erika's mother valorizes and has trained her daughter to celebrate is a hypocritical middle class culture that has lost all social relevance and yet spectrally haunts the

hegemonistic imagination of the economically stunted middle class that clings to the ghost of culture to assume an illusory supremacy (12-15, 25). Erika's life in the city space emblemizes all that are her mother's ultimate fears. She is a sexually compulsive woman, anxious about her passing youth, and in search of a "master" who will nevertheless programme her "slavery" according to her wishes (119-120). She wants to be the slave of a master whom she can control totally (110). And it is this which is the ultimate outcome of the flawed teaching she receives from her mother.

Erika is a complete antithesis of Diotima. She teaches music to students and thinks highly of the musical art - a habit she shares with her mother and which intensifies the snobbery of both mother and daughter (Jelinek 62-63; Powell and Bethman 72-78). However, Jelinek makes it clear that music can never carry Erika to the ethereal places where the flesh becomes spirit. Rather, in Erika's psychic universe, the flesh and the spirit are sharply distinguished. Her flesh rebels against her mother's obsession with the primacy of the spirit. Behind her pompous show-offs as a music teacher, there is hidden the Erika with animal instincts whose sexual urges verge on perversion, and who is also a victim of the postmodern principle of absolute reification that turns the flesh into a "hyperreal" (a la Baudrillard) sex object, at once material and virtual, consumable by a postmodern voyeur like Erika. The conversations on art between Erika and Klemmer are basically bogus, and they symptomize the radical incapability of art to represent - let alone offer any solution to - the problems Erika faces inwardly (Jelinek 62-63). Klemmer thinks that Erika shies away from love, and hence tries to teach Erika that love is more important than art and that she is still lovable, even in the twilight of her youth (85-87). But the problem is that Erika, thanks to her mother's flawed Christian training, has become a sex-addict, as a result of her secret rebellion against her mother. And now, she can no more "love" somebody. She only wants perverse forms of sex acts to please her in a dark way. On the other hand, Klemmer does not genuinely "love" her, either. He wants to see her as a sex object that will offer him concrete fleshly knowledge, useful for his erotic adventures. Erika would be the first hunt who would

offer him adequate erotic experience so that he can be successful in his consequent amatory adventures. He is playing a predator cloaked under a "lover's" guise (89, 106-109). Like Erika, he too is doing exactly what Diotima finds fault with in the *Symposium*. Erika is his music teacher, but she is incapable of offering him any erotic instruction, as she herself never received a proper erotic training of the sort Socrates is concerned with in Plato's work. There is no Diotima in Jelinek's narrative universe, and there seems to be no Diotima in the postmodern universe, either. The repressive order Erika's mother introduces culminates in her obsessive search for erotic release in sex shows. She is fascinated with male beauty, but that beauty only takes her towards the entrails of ugliness. And gradually, she becomes entrapped in the mesmerizing lure of the ugliest aspects of sex.

Diotima's teaching is based on an idea of spiritual pregnancy. According to her, beauty does not precede pregnancy, but operates as a midwife in the birth-in-beauty (Plato 37-38). We need to question: is it actually a radical barrenness of the heart and the soul in the post-Second-World-War Austria that Jelinek seeks to foreground in this novel? Is she suggesting that beauty, love and wisdom mean nothing for the young people entrapped in this spatio-temporal frame because they have ceased to be pregnant within, and have become totally bereft of the quintessentially creative dimension of human existence? Love cannot exist without an inner creativity in the individual, and it is this lack of creativity that leads to the aggressive obsession with sado-masochistic and self-destructive sexual perversions. Both Erika and Klemmer are entrapped in the master-slave dialectic, and this dialectic excludes love. As Luce Irigaray has noticed, in Diotima's dialectical teaching, love operates as an *intermediary* that never gets abolished at the conclusion of the dialectic (Irigaray 20). Erika and Klemmer try to control and "teach" each other. For them, the attempt to teach becomes an attempt to control the Other (Jelinek 93-94, 106; Murray 568-572). And, curiously, in this laughable trial to teach each other love, they expose themselves as pathetically incapable of love. Both of them desire sex, or rather, a perverse form of it. Erika's perversion is more

conspicuous than Klemmer's, but the latter is no less perverted than the former. There is no space for Diotima in this society, no space for an erotic teaching that encompasses the entire social life. Sex is seen as a private affair, and hence it is a matter of social silence or of secret speech. Sex is delinked from public speech, and yet it is public in a different way: in the sex shows, a collective privacy or a private collectivity is maintained, at the expense of both the private intensity of conjugal sex and the possibility of bringing sex into public discourse, thereby demystifying it. As Andrea Nye observes, "The pursuit of pleasurable sensation could not be the motive for Diotima's desire; a privatized sensation of pleasure could never account for the universality and urgency of love as she sees it. For Diotima, love is not a recreation but permeates the whole of human activity" (Nye 86). This is something that becomes, for the postmodern society, a *burden* of love. The people like Erika and Klemmer want to cast off this burden, in order to embrace what Zygmunt Bauman calls "liquid love" (Bauman, Foreword). And this liquid love is figured in terms of synthetic sex.

But it is not only the impossibility and irrelevance of Diotima in the postmodern world that is depicted by Jelinek's narrator. The ironic tone of the narrator implies that the condition she portrays is never an ideal one. And the novel's ideological strain remains equivocal. Is Jelinek just portraying a decadent society? Or is she also criticizing it by placing it against a template of *ideal* erotic behaviour? It would be inappropriate to think that Jelinek endorses any single "ideal" paradigm of erotic life. However, I would argue that she shows us a hole in Erika, a lack which never comes into the domain of her conscious self-critique. Erika is never totally satisfied with what she does; her masochism always ends in an inner dissatisfaction. She is never "happy". And it is here that we again need to think of Diotima. Diotima shows us the nexus between beauty, love, happiness and the "good". Eros is, she argues, not only a desire for beauty, but also that for happiness and goodness (Plato 35). And this Diotimean teaching does not foreground the *burden* of "ideal" love, but rather a warning against the troubles of "liquid love". Diotima's teaching opposes phallocratic violence, and the masculinist obsession

with possessing the beautiful beloved as a desired *object*. Erika thinks that she would love to be possessed as an object, but this self-objectification she wishes to be effected on her own terms and conditions. So, she asks Klemmer to use her as a sex object, to possess her as a master, but she gives minute instructions regarding the ways in which he is supposed to control her body (Jelinek 113). She struggles to retain her subjectivity and agency as a “teacher”. For her, a teacher has the *responsibility* to retain some hierarchical power against the student, though that teacher-student relationship might have already turned into an erotic one, something that is not “standard”. She wants to use Klemmer’s body in the way she wishes, and she enjoys the physical pain Klemmer goes through. She is a sadist as well as a masochist (Jelinek 95-97). When Klemmer gets her letter directing him how to make her a sex slave, he begins to feel that his dreams about Erika were all illusory and baseless (120-123). However, here Jelinek sets in motion a different layer of narratorial irony. Klemmer, she has already made clear, never actually “loved” Erika. His pursuit of Erika has always been an erotic chase, and it is nothing akin to “love”. Both of the teacher and the student are incapable of loving anybody erotically, and they inhabit a universe where the love of the older sort has been replaced with “liquid love”, a love which must not be satiated, which must always be accompanied by a desire that is in excess of its object.

However, there is a Diotima-shaped hole in Erika’s head, which becomes evident in the latter part of the novel. When Walter Klemmer feels that he has not been able to stage the act of love, the drama of courtship, in the way he wished, he gets angry with his teacher. His male ego is hurt, and he thinks that Erika usurped his “passions” by controlling the scene of sexual intimacy. She asserted her wish too much, he thinks. And he does not wish to be a “student” in the drama of love. Jelinek summarizes his attitude thus: “Frau Kohut made fun of his feelings. His love rained down upon her for months on end – but she didn’t deserve it! His passion poured out on her from the cornucopia of his heart, and she stuffed that sweet rain right back into his horn. Now she’ll get her just deserts in a gruesome act of annihilation” (135). Klemmer feels

that he has not been able to possess the object of his desire on his own terms, and hence the object, or at least its desirability, must now be *annihilated*. Here we see the flip side of the obsessive desire for someone that Diotima criticizes. The acquisitive ethos of love is always accompanied by a suppressed annihilative impulse. Diotima’s teaching, by foregrounding the creativity of and *in* love, seeks to delegitimize both the obsession with possession and the hidden urge of annihilation. This annihilation is featured in the novel in the form of a rape. Klemmer finally enters the house of Erika and violently rapes her, while locking her mother up in another room. Klemmer enjoys his masculine violence against two women, and it gives him a bizarre sort of pleasure to see the two helpless women being crushed under the unbearable pressure of the swelling tide of his masculinity. Erika is raped and brutally tortured. Thus the “annihilation” takes place (Jelinek 141-147). And yet, before this moment of annihilation, Erika tells Walter that she wants the “normal version of love”, based on the “ideal” of “shared feelings” (142). But it is too late, and Walter thinks that he cannot return to the normal version of love any more. Erika’s *abnormal* requests to sadistically torture her have definitively changed Klemmer’s feelings. However, one cannot think that Klemmer is really turned into a rapist by Erika’s “abnormality” alone. The nature of this “love”, from the very beginning, was annihilative.

The Erika who wants to return to the normal version of love is the frail “teacher” who has become ready to jettison her *teacherly* agency. However, she is still not aware of the Diotima-shaped hole in her head. And yet, the hole is there, the absence through which we can look at the novel afresh. Diotima, as an absence, helps us in building a negative hermeneutic to study this novel *de novo*.

When we think of Diotima in the context of this novel, we also need to reconsider the relationship between the female teacher and the male student that features in this novel. Diotima, we must remember, was a teacher, an erotic *instructor* to Socrates. And yet, nowhere does Socrates say that Diotima was herself involved in any amatory relationship with him. Rather, Diotima teaches the ways of a “correct pederasty”. She valorizes

homoerotic relationships at the expense of heterosexual ones (Plato 39-41). Nevertheless, as Nye suggests, one can see her teaching in a different light, if one takes into account the *larger* domain which Diotima seeks to map out for Eros in her teaching. Nye writes, "Diotimean love is the same for all, women and men, and makes no distinction between feminine and masculine desire.Both men and women enter into other kinds of loving relationship to produce virtues, ideas, new ways of management. These relationships can be between any sex, heterosexual or homosexual. In every case, the impulse of desire is the same – cooperative generation of good things both for the couple and for others, both for the household and the community" (Nye 87). If this is the case, then Diotima's teaching on love cannot be identified as one exclusively homoerotically oriented. She has something to say about *all* forms of erotic relationships, and these relationships are never merely "sexual". Diotima's teaching does not negate the body, but, by linking it to larger existential categories, she prevents the flesh from dwindling into a sexually enjoyable *object*. She gives flesh its due value, whereas in liquid love or liquid sex, flesh is equated with filth, and sexual urge with an impulse to enjoy the dark pleasures of ugliness. And yet, like Erika, the practitioners of liquid love, especially if they are women, can never be completely satisfied with the alluring forms of sexual perversion. There must be the Diotima-shaped hole in them, something that we may call an erotic conscience, which will open them up towards the dazzling sea of beauty Diotima had had a vision of (Plato 41). And this is exactly what turns the novel into a *Diotimean tragedy*, a tragedy not explicable in terms of *hamartia* or *hubris*, but in terms of a flawed erotic teaching which produces the (non-)loving subjects like Erika and Klemmer. Both of them could have loved each other and reached the Diotimean ideal delineated in the *Symposium*. Through music as a common ground and a common bond between them, they could have reached the heights Diotima had envisioned. It is not that they are *intrinsically* incapable of love or of appreciation of art; it's only that they are the misguided children of a culture that sees the Diotimean model of love as an unnecessary burden. Jelinek exposes the Diotima-

shaped holes in Klemmer and Erika at certain moments in the novel, and if we read the novel from the perspective of these apparently rare moments, we will be able to understand that the novel deliberately depicts a relationship troubled by the postmodern reifications of bodily desires, as juxtaposed against the shadowy and apparently "absent" possibilities of a *different* kind of love capable of making Eros compatible with a fuller and larger version of human life (both individual and collective). Marjorie Perloff says that one can understand "Jelinek's communism to be no more than a Utopianism necessary to survive in an otherwise unbearable world". Interestingly, this kind of utopianist stance of Jelinek's may make us seriously reconsider the possibility of there being a Diotimean subtext in *The Piano Teacher*. Diotima's teaching may be seen as erotic utopianism, though one needs to understand that what Diotima teaches is not essentially utopian but practically possible if the phallogocentric episteme of love-as-possession is radically challenged and dismantled. However, I would argue that Jelinek poises her narrative in the void above the Diotima-shaped hole in Erika's head. And it is from this hole that we need to look at the plot. Jelinek is not only concerned with what finally happens to Erika and Klemmer but rather with what *might have* happened to them but could not happen. And so, the novel's themes must be read with reference to the Diotima-shaped holes that inform the textual unconscious of the novel. Jelinek never simplistically endorses artistic idealism. Heidi Schlipphacke reminds us that Jelinekian intertextuality reveals "the brutality underlying the idealism of high art" (Schlipphacke 78). But Diotima's teaching, we must remember, is not just artistic or philosophical idealism: it is something that upholds an ideal which can be produced only through praxis – in other words, it presents the concept of a processual construction of the ideal through a wise mode of loving.

I have already referred to the pregnancy motif in Diotima's speech. Now, let us renegotiate it in the context of the Jelinek novel. As Schlipphacke points out, "Sex embodies, for Jelinek, precisely the banality of repetition, the lie of newness told to us by pop culture" (80). That is to say, sex in the postmodern world is barren - incapable of

generative creativity. It is only repetition, and hence can never aim at the magic of the newness of the offspring. Diotima's prescription of wise eroticism indicates a way out of the narcissistic self-closetedness of barren, obsessive, acquisitive erotic impulses. The Diotimean erotics is oriented towards the Other, outside the closet of that self-occupied Eros which only looks for self-reflections in the faces of desired objects. Thus, Diotima's vision is present in this narrative, not as a Derridean "trace", but as a *hole*, through which one can peep into the annihilative void at the centre of what the *dramatis personae* of the novel call "love". Powell and Bethman notice that Jelinek's literary musicality can be seen as a Utopian revolt against the limits of art itself (Powell and Bethman 178). This utopianism is informed by the possibility of other spaces, other visions, and other paradigms of experience that slouch on the horizons of the narrative universe of *The Piano Teacher*. And Diotima stands for all of these: the *other* possibilities of love that seem utopian to us.

Walter Klemmer refuses to be instructed by Erika in erotics. He is no Socrates. On the other hand, Erika is no Diotima. She herself does not know what "love" actually means. Following Schlipphacke's observations, we may say that she becomes a repetition of sex acts, voyeuristic, sadistic and masochistic. She does not have any agency, in the sense Diotima was a teacher aware of her feminine agency as a priestess, prophetess and wise woman full of erotic wisdom (Nye 78). From the Diotima-shaped hole in the head of Jelinek's piano teacher, we peer into the erotic abyss celebrated by postmodernity. It is dystopia as reality – that of "liquid love". We are being trained by the postmodern "culture industry" (à la Adorno and Horkheimer) [that manufactures not only consent but also desire]¹ to celebrate this abyss as a crowded space graced by "the unbearable lightness of being"². And yet, Diotima's ghost still hovers over us, the old grandmother spirit who tries to make us perceive the Diotima-shaped holes in our heads, the holes which grope for the "significant soil"³ of goodness under the momentary waves of liquid love.

Notes:

1. For the elucidation of the concept of "manufacturing consent", see Herman and Chomsky xi.
2. I here refer to the title of Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.
3. See Eliot, "The Dry Salvages".

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