

Piano



POEM TEXT

- 1 Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
- 2 Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
- 3 A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
- 4 And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

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

- 9 So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
- 10 With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
- 11 Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
- 12 Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.



THEMES



MEMORY, NOSTALGIA, AND CHILDHOOD

"Piano" explores the powerful hold that childhood memories can exert throughout one's life. Listening to a piano player transports the poem's speaker back to his childhood, when his mother would play the piano and sing hymns on Sunday nights. The speaker weeps with longing to once again experience "the old Sunday evenings at home," yet understands that, as a grown man, he no longer can. His memories thus provoke deep sadness, reminding him of his youthful sense of wonder while casting childhood as a kind of lost homeland to which he can never return.

At first, the speaker's reminiscing seems pleasant. Listening to a woman singing at "dusk," he travels "back down the vista of years" to his childhood. He recalls "sitting under the piano" and playfully "pressing" his mother's feet while she smiled and sang. The weather outside was cold and harsh, but the speaker's home was "cosy." Back then, the speaker felt protected not just by his mother but also by the solid piano around him. The music itself was like a "guide," the speaker says, evoking his childhood sense of trust and faith. It's no wonder the speaker would feel nostalgic for this happy, simple time.

Yet even as the speaker longs to return to "the glamour of childish days"—to the beauty of his childhood—he knows he can't *really* relive those Sunday nights with his mother. Nostalgia, here, is tricky: it doesn't just bring up warm, fuzzy memories, but also causes a painful sense of loss. And because the speaker's memories remind him that he can no longer "belong" to the past, he tries to resist their pull. In fact, he claims these memories rise up "In spite of myself," through "the insidious mastery of song." In other words, he can't control the way his mind suddenly leaps back to his youth.

Such is the power of nostalgia that even the passionate singer he's now listening to can't distract him from the "flood of remembrance" washing over him. The speaker's "manhood" (maturity) is lost in this "flood" of memory; all but forgetting that he's an adult, he "weep[s] like a child for the past." Notice, however, that he's still not a child—only *like* one. Though he feels his "heart" belongs, at this moment, to his past, he's stuck firmly in the present.

The poem thus shows how powerful and heart-wrenching memories can be, while admitting that they offer only an illusion of the past. It depicts nostalgia as a dangerous, yet irresistible, double-edged sword.



SUMMARY

The speaker listens to a woman singing softly in the early evening. The woman's song transports the speaker through the beautiful landscape of the past until he sees a young boy nestled underneath a piano, surrounded by the vibrations of its quivering strings. The boy is pushing his mother's small, elegant feet (perhaps onto the piano pedals) while she smiles and sings.

Against the speaker's wishes, the treacherous music pulls him back to this moment in time, until his heart is sick with longing to once again be that boy on those cozy Sunday nights inside his childhood home, away from the winter cold. He longs to again listen to hymns in their snug, warm living room, where the sparkling notes of the piano would lead them in song.

It would be pointless now for the singer to erupt into a powerful song alongside the passionate playing of the black grand piano. The alluring beauty of the speaker's childhood has him in its grasp, and his adult life is lost in the flood of his memories. He cries like a little boy for those days gone by.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

**MUSIC, MEMORY, AND EMOTION**

Listening to a woman singing transports the speaker of "Piano" back to his childhood, when his mother would play hymns on the piano. The speaker blames this effect on the "insidious mastery of song," conveying music's power to stir up vivid emotions and memories—even against the listener's wishes.

For the speaker, song triggers deeply held—perhaps deeply *buried*—thoughts and feelings. As he listens to the present-day singer, her music exerts a powerful pull, [metaphorically](#) "taking" him "back down the vista of years." It's as though the vibrations in the air loosen his mind and imagination. Though he tries to resist, the music quickly affects him "in spite of" himself and has an "insidious" (subtly harmful) quality. His heart "weeps" under its spell. For all his adult restraint, he's no match for music's transportive power—which he seems to resent on some level.

Music not only has the power to trigger memories, the poem implies, it also helps those memories linger in the first place. That is, the speaker seems to remember his past so vividly because it's stuck in his mind like a melody. The present-day singing makes him think of the Sunday evenings he would spend around the piano with his mother; he recalls the "boom of the tingling [piano] strings" and describes those sounds as a kind of trustworthy "guide." His memory links the comfort and security he felt in these moments with the music his mother played.

In the end, not even impassioned singing in the present can pull the speaker out of his reverie, so deep is his longing for the past. Thus, the poem illustrates music's power to move and unsettle its listeners, while suggesting that the nostalgia it stirs up can be even more powerful.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-3**

*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,*

When "Piano" begins, the speaker is listening to a woman "singing to" him at "dusk," or early evening. Notice how line 1 uses [sibilance](#) to conjure a hushed, almost magical atmosphere:

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;

These whispery consonants suggest quiet and reverence as the speaker listens to this "singing."

It's not clear where this is literally happening: the speaker might be at a bar, party, or lounge of some sort, or perhaps he's listening to this woman singing in one of their homes.

[Symbolically](#), the fact that this is taking place at "dusk" (the transition between day and night) signals that the speaker is about to straddle two worlds: adulthood and childhood, present and past.

The song transports the speaker "back down the vista of years"; it's as though he's moving down a stack of memories in his mind. Soon enough, the speaker can see his childhood self "sitting under the piano." The [enjambment](#) between lines 2 and 3 evokes the swiftness with which the speaker's childhood self suddenly appears:

Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, [...]

The child's position *under* the piano also suggests how young and small he is, and how the large instrument surrounds him like a shelter.

Note, too, that this memory is narrated in the present tense: the speaker says that the child is "sitting" rather than that he "sat." As a result, the poem's actual present and imagined past seem to overlap. And yet, there's also a clear *separation* between the speaker's past and present selves: the speaker says that he sees "A child" rather than that he sees *himself*. In this way, the poem subtly anticipates the fact that the speaker can never truly return to the childhood he remembers.

LINES 3-4

*in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as
she sings.*

The child the speaker describes (who is really the speaker himself as a young boy) isn't just "sitting *under* the piano"; he's "in the boom of the tingling strings." In other words, he's surrounded by the booming vibrations of the piano's strings. This description makes it seem as though the child is inside the instrument itself.

The speaker then describes how the boy is "pressing" his mother's feet as she plays this piano, perhaps attempting to help her by pushing her feet into the instrument's peddles. That her feet are "small" and "poised" implies that she is delicately and deftly playing. The sweet image conveys the loving relationship between the boy and his mother, who "smiles as she sings."

Again, the poem's language is itself intensely musical. Note how

the playful [assonance](#) and [consonance](#) of "tingling strings" make the line itself seem to "tingle" with sound, and how the plosive [alliteration](#) of "pressing" and "poised" perhaps evokes the tapping of the mother's feet on the pedals.

Note, too, how line 4 is packed with [sibilance](#):

And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

The language is soft, gentle, and hushed, reflecting the tenderness of this memory.

By now, readers also have a sense of the poem's form: each stanza is a [quatrain](#) made up of lyrical [rhyming couplets](#) ("me"/"see" and "strings"/"sings").

LINES 5-6

*In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back,*

The memory that the speaker describes in the first stanza, of "Sunday evenings" gathered around the piano with his family, sounds pretty warm and fuzzy. As such, the first line of stanza 2 might come as a surprise to readers: the speaker says that this trip down memory lane happens "In spite of myself"—that is, against his will.

The speaker seems at once in awe of and resentful of music's power to conjure childhood memories, which he refers to as "the insidious mastery of song." In other words, music is sneaky, crafty; its power sneaks up on you bit by bit until it's too late.

Listen to the intense [sibilance](#) of line 5:

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song

The hissing sounds are like the slithery tongue of a serpent, beckoning the speaker back in time against his better judgment.

Note, too, how the music doesn't just *take* him back (as it did in line 2), but it "**Betrays** [him] back." That is, the song effectively double-crosses the speaker; he thought he was simply listening to some singing, but now he has to grapple with his childhood memories. The [alliteration](#) of "betrays" and "back" is forceful and loud, suggesting the potent strength of this musical spell.

LINES 6-8

*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.*

Now, readers start to understand why the speaker is so hesitant to return to this childhood memory: for all its beauty and warmth, this memory also upsets him. That's because when he thinks of the past, he can't help but actively wish he could go back there and be a child again—something that he knows is impossible.

The speaker explains that it's not just him that "weeps" for the past, but the "heart of me." He feels his longing in his emotional core. Notice how the /ee/ [assonance](#) in "me weeps" sounds almost desperate, evoking the speaker's intense longing to again "belong" to the past.

The poem's form here evokes that longing as well. This whole stanza is one long sentence, [enjambéd](#) over multiple lines. The poem thus pulls the reader down the page just as the speaker is pulled deeper into his own memories.

The poem also chooses its specific line breaks carefully. For example, the enjambment after "belong" creates a moment of anticipation, calling readers' attention to the importance of this word: the speaker doesn't just want to *remember* the past, but to "belong" to it—to be a *part* of a moment that no longer exists. The enjambment here also *separates* the speaker's "heart" in line 2 from the actual *memory* the heart longs for, which appears in line 3. That is, enjambment creates *distance* on the page between the speaker in the present and the image of those "old Sunday evenings at home."

Despite the speaker's growing sadness, the memory itself is again tender, affectionate, and wholesome. The word "evenings" implies that these were regular gatherings, the literal and emotional warmth of which contrasts with the stark "winter outside." Safe and toasty in their "cosy parlour," the speaker and his mother would sing "hymns." The speaker clearly felt protected and comforted.

These nights even had a magical quality to them, the "tinkling piano" acting as the family's [metaphorical](#) "guide." On the one hand, this relates the piano's role as a *musical* guide; it's the accompaniment to the family's singing. But it also echoes the speaker's earlier description of going "back down the vista of years," treating his memories as a kind of ladder to climb down. The music is like a "guide" between the present and the past.

The poem again uses intense [assonance](#), [alliteration](#), and [consonance](#) to conduct its own spellbinding music:

And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

The lines are rich with "tinkling" sound, bringing the speaker's memories to life on the page.

LINES 9-12

*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.*

So wrapped up is the speaker in his memories that the singer in the present performs "in vain," or to no end. Her song is now just a "clamour"—a loud, confusing sound.

She's accompanied by "the great black piano appassionato," a musical term meaning that the piano is being played passionately. Listen to the bold consonants of this line, which evoke the intensity of this music:

With the great **black piano appassionato**.

Yet this linguistic flashiness only emphasizes the music's futility: so strong is the pull of the past that the speaker no longer really hears the striking sounds of the present. The [caesura](#) after "appassionato" creates a distinct pause in the line that highlights this break between the present and the past: there's a full stop, after which the speaker then returns to discussing his memories.

The "glamour"—or alluring beauty—of "childish days is upon" the speaker, a phrase that implies he has been overpowered by his memories. His very "manhood" (by which he means his adult self) has been "cast / Down"—tossed away—"in the flood of remembrance." His memories are so overwhelming that form a [metaphorical](#) flood, rushing over him and drowning his adulthood.

The poem ends with its one and only [simile](#). The speaker states "I weep **like a child for the past**." His memories have chipped away at his adult composure, but he still can't truly reclaim his past; he can cry **like a child**, but he can never truly **be a child** again.



SYMBOLS



DUSK

The poem begins with the speaker listening to a woman singing "in the dusk," a transitional time of day when the final light of the afternoon begins to fade into the darkness of night. This in-between space represents the in-between space that the speaker is in by the poem's end: no longer an adult, his "manhood" drowned "in the flood of remembrance, but also not the child he once was.

As the speaker listens to this music, he is transported "back down the vista of years" until he sees his childhood self "sitting under the piano" as his mother sings. He describes this memory in the present tense (his child self is "sitting" rather than "sat"), as though that child is right there with the speaker in the present. In the poem's final moments, he "weep[s] like a child" for what he's lost. The speaker is in a liminal, transitional space that mirrors the time of day in which the poem takes place: no longer a man, but still not a child (only "like" one).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the dusk"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and [consonance](#) work together to fill the poem with music.

Much of this alliteration is [sibilant](#), as with "Softly," "singing," and "see" in the poem's first two lines (there's additional non-alliterative sibilance in "dusk" and "vista"); "smiles" and "sings" in line 4; and "spite" and "song" in line 5. All these whispery /s/ sounds create a quiet, reverent atmosphere that conveys the speaker's wistful longing for the past. These delicate sounds make the speaker's memories seem fragile, intangible, and even ghostly, as though they might be swept away at any moment.

Not all of the poem's alliteration is so gentle, however. The plosive /p/ sounds in line 4, for example, add some pops of playfulness as the speaker describes "pressing" his mother's "poised feet" as she plays the piano. And in line 6, the booming /b/ sounds convey the power with which the music pulls the speaker's mind back in time:

Betrays me **back**, till the heart of me weeps to **belong**

These /b/ sounds are almost like pangs of the speaker's heart as it swells with longing to "belong" to the past.

There's more /p/ alliteration in the next few lines as well: when the speaker mentions the "parlour," the "tinkling piano," and the "piano" playing "appassionato" (this word can be considered alliterative because the shared /p/ sound occurs at the start of a stressed syllable). These pops of alliteration again fill the poem with bursts of music.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Softly," "singing"
- **Line 2:** "see"
- **Line 3:** "sitting"
- **Line 4:** "pressing," "poised," "smiles," "sings"
- **Line 5:** "spite," "song"
- **Line 6:** "Betrays," "back," "belong"
- **Line 7:** "with winter"
- **Line 8:** "parlour," "piano"
- **Line 10:** "piano appassionato"
- **Line 11:** "me, my manhood"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#), like alliteration, fills the poem with music and lyricism. Much of this assonance revolves around the delicate short /ih/ sound, as in "tingling strings" in line 3. Assonance combines with clear consonance here to bring those "tingling" piano "strings" to life; the line itself seems to "tingle" with sound.

Likewise, assonance adds intensity and rhythm to the speaker's recollection in lines 7-8:

To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter
outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our
guide.

This memory feels all the more vivid and lovely thanks to all those shared sounds.

The assonance in the next two lines, by contrast, evokes the "clamour" of the music in the present:

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

This abundant assonance mimics the "clamour"—that is, loud confusing noise—of the singer and her piano accompaniment. It's as though the music in the present is trying too hard in a futile attempt to keep the speaker's attention.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "is singing"
- **Line 3:** "tingling strings"
- **Line 4:** "pressing"
- **Line 5:** "spite," "myself"
- **Line 6:** "me weeps"
- **Line 7:** "old," "home," "with winter"
- **Line 8:** "hymns in," "cosy," "tinkling," "piano"
- **Line 9:** "burst," "clamour"
- **Line 10:** "black piano appassionato," "glamour"
- **Line 12:** "like," "child"

CAESURA

"Piano" features long, lyrical sentences which very rarely end—in a grammatical sense—when the line does. As a result, the poem pulls readers down the page in a way that mimics the pull that the music it describes exerts on the speaker. Frequent [caesurae](#) slow things down and break the poem up into more readable chunks.

Listen to the pauses in line 1, for example, which creates a rocking, almost cradle-like motion that pre-empts the speaker's return to childhood through memory:

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;

The sounds of the poem here are gentle and tender.

The second stanza is again a single, long sentence with only caesurae for pauses. These pauses are subtle and don't obstruct the poem's flow, instead simply slowing things down

to reflect the speaker's thoughtful, meditative tone:

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.

With each comma, the speaker descends deeper into his memory, drawing out ever more vivid and poignant details from his mind.

In the final stanza, the poem uses its one and only full-stop caesura:

With the great black piano appassionato. The
glamour

Right as the singer and the piano seem to strike up even louder—"appassionato"—this full stop provides an [ironic](#) silence. None of that passionate playing and singing can reach the speaker, so wrapped up is he in his childhood memories.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Softly, in," "dusk, a"
- **Line 2:** "years, till"
- **Line 3:** "piano, in"
- **Line 5:** "myself, the"
- **Line 6:** "back, till"
- **Line 7:** "home, with"
- **Line 8:** "parlour, the"
- **Line 10:** "appassionato. The"
- **Line 11:** "me, my"
- **Line 12:** "remembrance, I"

ENJAMBMENT

Almost every line in "Piano" is [enjambéd](#)! The poem consists of long, winding sentences that unfurl down the page, pulling readers along just as the music transports the powerless speaker back to his childhood.

Enjambment also creates anticipation. In the first stanza, for example, the enjambment after line 2 creates a moment of suspense as readers wonder what, exactly, the speaker "see[s]":

Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano [...]

The line break creates the sensation that something is suddenly appearing out of nowhere. Readers thus get a sense of how powerfully and suddenly the music draws out the speaker's memories.

In the next stanza, the first three lines are all enjambed. This creates a sense of momentum as the speaker dives deeper and deeper into the past. Note, too, how the poet breaks lines on specific words to mirror what's being described. The break after "belong" in line 6 separates the speaker's weeping heart from the scene that it longs for:

Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter
outside

The enjambment in the next line then separates the cold "outside" from "the cosy parlour":

To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter
outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our
guide.

The final stanza is again enjambed until its final line, conveying the overwhelming power of the speaker's memories. Just as his "manhood is cast / Down in the flood of remembrance," so too does the poem flow relentlessly "Down" the page.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "see / A"
- **Lines 3-4:** "strings / And"
- **Lines 5-6:** "song / Betrays"
- **Lines 6-7:** "belong / To"
- **Lines 7-8:** "outside / And"
- **Lines 9-10:** "clamour / With"
- **Lines 10-11:** "glamour / Of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "cast / Down"

METAPHOR

"Piano" uses a variety of [metaphors](#), all of which relate to the speaker's memory.

The poem opens with the sound of a woman singing, which the speaker says transports him "back down the vista of years." A vista can refer to a pleasant view and/or to a mental picture of one's memories. The speaker presents this vista as a kind of physical space that he can move backwards through until he reaches his childhood self.

The next few metaphors are also examples of [personification](#). The speaker says "the insidious mastery of song / Betrays me back," granting music the power to essentially double-cross him: it conjured up beautiful memories of the past, but in doing so forced the speaker to confront the loss of his childhood self. As such, his "heart [...] weeps"—a metaphor that conveys the depth of the speaker's grief: he feels it in his very emotional core. This is another example of personification, and it subtly

reflects the speaker's lack of control over his emotions: his own heart seems like a separate part of himself, which "weeps" of its own accord.

The "tinkling piano," the speaker continues, used to "guide" the speaker and his mother in song. While it's literally true that the singers follow their accompaniment, this phrase also implies that the speaker felt protected and cared for in the past.

Finally, the speaker describes "the glamour / Of childish days" being "upon him": the bright, sparkling glow of memory has him in its grasp. His adult self—his "manhood"—is metaphorically "cast / Down in the flood of remembrance." Memory here is a surging flood that drowns his adult self.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Taking me back down the vista of years"
- **Lines 5-6:** "the insidious mastery of song / Betrays me back"
- **Lines 6-7:** "till the heart of me weeps to belong / To the old Sunday evenings at home"
- **Line 8:** "the tinkling piano our guide"
- **Lines 10-12:** "The glamour / Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast / Down in the flood of remembrance,"

SIBILANCE

[Sibilance](#) is an important part of "Piano," filling the poem with soft, gentle sounds from start to finish that evoke the delicate, tender, and at times even haunting nature of the speaker's memories.

This sibilance appears right away, in the first line of the poem:

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;

This line immediately sets up a hushed, almost reverent atmosphere: it's quiet, the light is fading, and the air seems charged with some strange, musical magic. The sibilance contributes to this feeling that the speaker is about to go on a kind of journey down memory lane.

Intense sibilance continues as the speaker describes seeing his childhood self for the first time (as both /s/ and /z/ sounds):

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.

While the memory is undoubtedly vibrant, the sibilance creates this whispery, wispy undertone that subtly suggests the fragility of what's being described. That is, for all its emotional power, this is an act of the *imagination* and not reality (which is part of why the speaker gets so upset by the poem's end).

Indeed, the most sibilant line of the poem describes this powerful connection between song and memory:

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song

Here, the speaker basically accuses music of being manipulative and cruel. The line is filled with hissing /s/ sounds that might call to mind the hissing of a snake—the ultimate symbol of temptation and betrayal.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Softly,” “dusk,” “singing”
- **Line 2:** “vista,” “see”
- **Line 3:** “sitting,” “strings”
- **Line 4:** “pressing,” “small,” “poised,” “smiles,” “she sings”
- **Line 5:** “spite,” “myself,” “insidious mastery,” “song”
- **Line 9:** “So,” “singer,” “burst”
- **Line 10:** “appassionato”
- **Line 11:** “childish”
- **Line 12:** “remembrance,” “past”

SIMILE

"Piano" uses just one [simile](#), but it's an important moment. This simile appears in the poem's final line, after the music has worked its powerful magic on the speaker and conjured up poignant memories of his childhood:

Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

The poem has used plenty of [metaphorical](#) language by this point, but this is the first time that the speaker tempers a comparison with the word "like." While he might cry "like" a child, he is emphatically **not** a child. That's the whole point: these memories have made him long for a past to which he can never return.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** “I weep like a child for the past.”



VOCABULARY

Vista (Line 2) - A pleasant/impressive view. Also a general survey of events in the past or future.

Tingling (Line 3) - Vibrating or buzzing.

Poised (Line 4) - Graceful and elegant.

In Spite of Myself (Line 5) - Against my own best efforts.

Insidious (Line 5) - Gradually harmful; tricky or treacherous.

Betrays me back (Line 6) - Sends me back against my will.

Hymns (Line 8) - Church songs.

Cosy (Line 8) - Pleasant and comfortable.

Parlour (Line 8) - The sitting or living room.

Tinkling (Line 8) - Making bright, clear sounds.

Vain (Line 9) - Pointless or useless.

Clamour (Line 9) - Loud, confusing sound.

Appassionato (Lines 10-10) - Played with strong emotion.

Manhood (Line 11) - Adulthood.

Cast Down (Lines 11-12) - Depressed/lost.

Remembrance (Line 12) - Memories.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Piano" has a simple form consisting of three quatrains (four-line stanzas). Each quatrain consists of two rhyming [couplets](#).

This shape lends the poem some steady music. And thanks to the poem's varied line lengths and frequent [enjambments](#), that music never feels rigid stiff.

METER

"Piano" doesn't have a regular [meter](#). Instead, its lines feature varying lengths and rhythms, and this adds to the poem's contemplative, thoughtful tone. The speaker's memories swell up of their own accord, and the poem doesn't try to make them stick to any particular pattern.

That said, the second halves of the lines tend to fall into [anapaests](#) (da-da-DUM). Take a look at the latter halves of lines 2-8, which feature three anapaests (sometimes with an [iamb](#), da-DUM, substituted):

[...] the vis- | ta of years, | till I see
 [...] in the boom | of the ting- | ling strings
 [...] of a mo- | ther who smiles | as she sings.
 [...] the insid- | ious mast- | ery of song
 [...] till the heart | of me weeps | to belong
 [...] even-] ings at home, | with win- | ter outside
 [...] the tink- | ling pian- | o our guide.

The first halves of these lines have more irregular rhythms, but there's still definitely a waltz-like sound going on that helps cast a musical spell over the poem—just as the song does over the speaker.

RHYME SCHEME

"Piano" uses rhyming [couplets](#) throughout its three [quatrains](#):

AABB CCDD EEFF

All the rhymes are clear and full ("me"/"see," "strings"/"sings,"

and so forth). This simple rhyme scheme fills the poem with steady, predictable music that evokes the comforting allure of the speaker's childhood memories.



SPEAKER

The second draft of the poem was written not long after Lawrence's own mother died, and many readers view the poem as autobiographical. Whether or not readers take the first-person speaker here to be Lawrence himself, it's clear that this person had a close, loving relationship with his mother when he was a child. He remembers sitting under the piano, sheltered by its shape and enthralled by his mother's happy singing. She brought joy and comfort to his life (and perhaps this memory is painful for the speaker because she is no longer around).

The fact that the speaker would prefer not to remember these happy moments perhaps suggests that his adult life lacks the warmth and love of his childhood.



SETTING

In the poem's present, the speaker is listening to a woman singing. It's "dusk"—a transitional time of day when the light of the afternoon is starting to give way to the darkness of night. This in-between setting reflects the fact that the speaker is transported to a kind of in-between space in the poem: he straddles the world of his present self and that of his childhood memories.

The woman's singing transports the speaker "back down the vista of years," until he sees his childhood self sitting beneath a piano as his mother happily sings. He recalls the warmth of comfort of these "old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside." He describes his memories in the present tense, as though they're actually right there alongside him in the present. They feel intensely vivid and immediate, to the point that they eventually drown out the speaker's present reality. Even the "clamour" of the present singer and "the great black piano appassionato" can't pull the speaker from his reverie.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

English writer David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) is best known for his controversial novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), which was subject to an obscenity trial for its explicit language and depictions of sex. The trial, ironically, helped to skyrocket the book's popularity, and it went on to sell millions of copies. Lawrence also penned hundreds of poems, with "Piano" appearing relatively early in his career.

Lawrence was included in the first *Georgian Poetry* anthology,

published in 1912 and named for the reign of King George V. But critics more often group Lawrence in with modernism, a movement of the late 19th and earlier 20th centuries that championed new, experimental artistic forms. Modernist poets rejected the strict structures of the past, turning instead to [free verse](#) in their writing. While "Piano" uses a steady [rhyme scheme](#), it features only a loose, irregular [meter](#) that bends to the speaker's thoughts; there's no rigid pattern of syllables here.

Modernists also introduced the [stream of consciousness](#) writing style, with poets trying to capture not just their speaker's thoughts, but the actual experience of *thinking* them. "Piano" reflects this style as well, as readers feel like they're following the speaker's memories as they emerge in real-time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lawrence wrote the first draft of "Piano" in 1906 and revised it in 1911, not long after the death of his mother, Lydia. Lawrence and his mother were close, and her death devastated him; his own grief undoubtedly informed the melancholy tone of "Piano." Lawrence's 1913 novel [Sons and Lovers](#) was inspired by Lydia's death as well.

Lawrence also had a deep interest in the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis and in particular in the disconnect between people's outer appearances and their inner realities. Such interests are reflected in this poem's focus on the power of memory and the contrast between the speaker's adult demeanor and childlike weeping "for the past."

More broadly, the early 20th century was a time of rapid and widespread change. The Victorian era (which coincided with the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901) had been an age of strict morality and social inequality. Modernism arose at the tail end of this era, with writers responding to a world that felt increasingly fast-paced and unpredictable through inventive forms that broke away from the rigid conventions of the past.

Finally, it's worth noting that the piano was a common feature in middle and upper-class households during both the Victorian and Edwardian eras (which Lawrence's life overlaps). The piano formed a kind of musical center around which members of a family could gather, singing both hymns (as in "Piano") and the popular songs of the day.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Lawrence and Modernism](#) — Learn more about the poet's life via the Yale Modernism Lab. (<https://campuspress.yale.edu/modernismlab/d-h-lawrence/>)

- [The Great and Troubled Life of D.H. Lawrence](#) – Listen to a radio documentary about Lawrence, put together by poet John Hegley. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00wldvg>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) – Listen to a reading of "Piano." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAqLnwfz9js>)
- [The Rehabilitation of D.H. Lawrence](#) – Read an article exploring the changing reputation of D.H. Lawrence after his lifetime. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/30/the-female-gaze-on-dh-lawrence>)
- [Georgian Poetry](#) – Explore the 1911-1912 poetry anthology in which D.H. Lawrence appeared. (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9484>)



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