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Music and the Mind

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Abstract

How does music affect a work of literature? What does it reveal about the psychological state of the characters?

Keywords

Music, German Jews, Psychology, German, Jewish

Disciplines

German Literature | Jewish Studies | Music

Comments

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Music and the Mind

Music is found in cultures throughout the world. It has become an important cultural form of a people's self-expression. It has this incredible ability to speak to the mind while moving the heart. Because music is such a powerful art form, it should not be surprising to find that music commonly appears in literature. However, there is a challenge with music that is mentioned in literature, as the reader cannot hear the music the character is hearing. It is left up to the imagination of the reader to hear the music and to share that experience with the character. Two works of literature that use music as a literary device are Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Arthur Schnitzler's *Fräulein Else*. In these works, music reflects the psychological state of the character and their relationship with others. For Gregor, music shows how lonely he is, and for Else, music shows her stream of consciousness as she is trying to resolve her inner dilemma.

In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Grete plays the violin as a form of entertainment for the three tenants staying with the Samsas. The music Grete makes with her violin represents Gregor's current state of loneliness and alienation (Stegmann 143). The loneliness that Gregor experienced is seen through the challenges that music proposes in this scene. The reader cannot hear the music that Grete is playing and that Gregor is hearing. This adds another aspect of Gregor's loneliness. Gregor is so lonely that he cannot even share this musical experience with the reader. He is left alone with his music

for even the tenants disregard the music after a while. This is symbolic of another reality in Gregor's life. He is also alone because of his inability to communicate with his family. Communication is two-directional, however for Gregor, it has become just one-sided. Gregor can understand his family, but his family is unable to understand him. They hear a voice that is not human, and therefore can't be understood (Sepp 99). When Gregor's sister plays the violin, the three tenants think they are going to like it. Kafka writes, "When the violin sounded, they pricked up their ears, got up and tiptoed to the door of the hallway where they stayed pressed together" (Kafka 134). Ultimately the tenants reject the music. This is similar of what happened when Gregor first turned into an insect. His family tried to love and care for him, but ultimately they rejected him.

Furthermore, the music is symbolic of Gregor's desire. Kafka writes, "'But I do have an appetite,' Gregor said to himself earnestly, 'only not for those things. The way those tenants fill their boots, while I'm left to starve'" (Kafka 134). Gregor doesn't desire the food the tenants are eating. He desires their ability to sit in the common living space and interact with his family. Gregor's desire is for relationship. Gregor continues to think, "Could he be an animal, to be so moved by music? It was as though he sensed a way to the unknown sustenance he longed for" (Kafka 136). Music reveals what his desire is. Gregor sees how the tenants devote their attention to Grete's violin playing and in a similar way, he longs for attention, despite his condition. Music also appears to give Gregor bravery to emerge out of his hiding, "And, in spite of his condition, he felt no shame at moving out on to the pristine floor of the living room" (Kafka 135). Although for a brief moment of bravery, music ultimately points to Gregor's state of loneliness. As the Grete continues to play the violin, Gregor fantasizes about a life where Grete is able

to attend a conservatory through Gregor's financial support. In this fantasized life, Gregor is loved and appreciated by his family (Kafka 136). However when the music stops, Gregor is thrown back into reality; a reality where he is visibly seen by the tenants and where he is not loved by his family (Turner 269). Music allows Gregor to live for a moment in a fantasy that fulfills his desire for relationship, however, music doesn't let him escape the present reality. Instead of providing freedom, music actually imprisons Gregor in his current state of loneliness (Turner 267). Shortly after this moment of music, Gregor passes away after living a life of loneliness.

Music also plays a very prominent part in Arthur Schnitzler's *Fräulein Else* through the visual representations of Schumann's Carnival. At a first glance, it appears as if the music of Schumann's *Carnival* occurs in three separate fragments (Schnitzler 91, 92, 93). However, music is seen throughout the novella. It starts with Else playing the piano, and ends with Else flying to death as she hears a chorus and an organ. In this novella, music provides another way for the reader to understand Else's stream of consciousness (Raymond 172). There is a specific piece that is played in the novella, Schumann's Carnival. Although the reader sees the score on three different occasions in the novella, it is important to note that the music does not stop when the reader cannot see the score. The music of Schumann's Carnival is continuous (Raymond 171). Else notices the music on different occasions. She remarks, "Who's that playing so nicely? Chopin? No, Schumann" (Schnitzler 85), "Schumann? Yes, Carnival. He or she plays very well" (Schnitzler 87), and "Schumann? Yes, Carnival...I studied that myself once" (Schnitzler 90). Each excerpt is placed into the text by Schnitzler to highlight what is happening psychologically in Else's mind.

The first excerpt of music is seen when Else walks into the music room and sees Herr Dorsday. This excerpt is filled with tension within the music. There is a tri-tone (an augmented fourth or a diminished fifth) on the downbeat of the fifth measure between the A and the Eb. This interval has a strong tendency to be resolved. The tri-tone is again present in the last two measures in the left hand. The left hand of the pianist is playing a *vii*^{o7} in the key of Bb major. The tri-tone is between the C and the F#. However, this chord doesn't resolve in the excerpt that Schnitzler includes in the text. The tension in the music reflects Else's dilemma. She is distressed between choosing to save her father's honor or to save her own honor.

The second excerpt is inserted into the text when Else gets thrills throughout her body and she embraces her sexuality and nakedness. There are two contrasting motions in this excerpt that occur in the right hand of the pianist. There is a lyrical descending line that is played against a faster, chromatic ascending line. The descending line represents her wanting to keep her honor and the ascending line represents her embracing her sexuality. Else remarks, "Delicious thrills run over my skin. How wonderful it is to be naked. The lady goes on playing, she doesn't know what's happening" (Schnitzler 92). Dissonance is once again present in the excerpt Schnitzler has chosen. On the third beat of the first and third measure, an Ab in the right hand is played against a G in the left hand, as the two lines meet. This is representative of how when both of Else's desires meet, they are not in agreement with each other. This excerpt too does not resolve at the end. Else cannot meet both of her desires, and her make decision of showing her naked body to Herr Dorsday is rapidly approaching.

The third and final excerpt is different from the other two. The first main difference is in the rhythm. The rhythm of this excerpt is faster than the other two excerpts. The driving rhythm of this excerpt shows how rapidly her decision must be made and how immediate the reaction to her action is. The second main difference is that it is in Ab major, whereas the other two excerpts are in Bb major. The change in key signifies how Else is no longer in a state of going back and forth between what she will do, but has instead made her decision. The third main difference is that the excerpt resolves. After all the tension in the piece, the final chord resolves to an Eb major chord. The resolution provides a sense of arrival. This gives finality to Else's decision and to her action.

After Else disrobes, the music stops and everyone's attention is drawn to her. Else thinks to herself, "What have I done? What have I done? What have I done? I'm falling. It's all over. Why has the music stopped?" (Schnitzler 94). By asking this question, Else also answers it. The answer to why the music has stopped is because it is all over. Schnitzler employs music as a literary device to draw attention to Else's inner turmoil. Music is a culturally acceptable way to represent thoughts and emotions (Raymond 179). While, the people in the music room are not aware of their access to Else's thoughts and consciousness, the music of Schumann's *Carnival* provides a window for the people in the music room to peer into Else's thoughts and consciousness. (Raymond 174). Once Else made her decision and disrobes, the music stops because people are aware of Else's thoughts and inner dilemma that resulted in her disrobing (Raymond 179). The music that was hiding her inner dilemma becomes unnecessary (Raymond 172).

Music also informs the reader on how well cultured Else is. Throughout the book, Else says that “the air is like champagne” (Schnitzler 12, 23, 28, 35, 51, 57). This is a reference to *Die Fledermaus*, an opera by Johann Strauss (Barker 7). This shows that Else was familiar with this opera to the point that she would reference it in an everyday conversation. Another indication of Else’s refined culture is her ability to play the piano. Paul says to Else, “Won’t you really play any more, Else?” (Schnitzler 7) and Else comments on how she had played Schumann’s *Carnival*, “Schumann? Yes, *Carnival*...I studied that myself once” (Schnitzler 90). Else’s ability to play piano signifies the extent to which their culture valued music and how it was a standard skill for cultured people to be able to play an instrument.

Music is used in Schnitzler’s *Fräulein Else* and Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as literary devices that reveal the psychological state of the characters. It provides the reader with another way to understand the character’s emotions, thought process, and inner conflict. The power of music is that it provides a relatable way for the reader to further connect with the characters. Music is not limited to expressing the inner thoughts of characters in literature, but is also able to express the same things in real people. Music is often turned to in order to express one’s feelings of love or sorrow. It moves people to rally to a cause or to share in despondency. The ability to move the heart makes music such a powerful device in art and life.

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