



A Narrative Symphony: Integration Of Art And Life In Lisa Genova's *Every Note Played*

Gibilin. D ¹ and Dr. R. Aseda Fatima ²

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, ² Associate Professor and Head,

Department of English,

^{1,2} Nirmala College For Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract:

Art is an essential and inevitable part of human life. The art exists due to the presence of life forms that appreciate and enjoy it. Art expresses various emotions giving the producers of various art forms a natural catharsis, a vent to express themselves. The consumers also get a sense of comfort associating themselves to the various arts and the underlying emotions they carry with. Similarly, Richard the pianist, and his ex-wife Karina in the novel, *Every Note Played* focuses on the lives of two individuals with greater affinity toward music and its role in their lives. This paper attempts to explore the integration of their lives in the world of music and how it shapes their identity leading to establish various connections and alienation.

Keywords: art, life, music, career, ALS, identity, alienation, expression, communication

Introduction:

Art is a form of expressions and communication used by humans that reflects the creative and imaginative skills. There are different kinds of art forms like, visual arts, performing arts, literary arts and other forms of arts. Music comes under performing arts that acts as a medium of expression, communication, showcase of perspectives and involves rigorous practice and discipline to achieve mastery of technical skills and emotive finesse. The novel *Every Note Played* by Lisa Genova skillfully weaved art into the life of a person who later struggles with a deteriorating disease with no cure, questioning his life choices. Lisa Genova is a neuroscientist and writer who has done numerous research in the field of neuroscience. She began her career as a writer to expose the world of neurological disorders and its catastrophic effects on the lives of people to the readers. The main objective behind her novels is to promote empathy and drive the cause of finding a cure for the diseases mentioned in her novels.

Integration of Art and Life:

The novel focuses on the central characters Richard, who is a famous concert pianist and Karina, his ex-wife. Richard had a huge fan base for his concerts and was always on tour performing in various countries whereas the equally talented Karina stayed back home to take care of their daughter Grace. The prologue of the novel describes Richard's preference of being the center of attraction on the stage during his performance without the presence of a conductor or an orchestra which he believed would rob him off the undivided attention of the people. According to Richard, being alone on the stage was equivalent to a physically exerting adventure as the narrator describes, "He loves possessing their undivided attention, the adrenaline rush of being the star. Playing solo is his version of skydiving" (1). Richard was very ambitious of music from a very young age and everything else in his life came only after music. During his college days he worked so hard to master the notes of famous pianists treading on the path to be as famous as them and there was nothing to stop him.

The common thing with Richard and Karina was music which brought them both together like the destined lovers. Karina hails from a town named Zabrze in Poland where being a ballerina was the major career option for girls but strikingly enough Karina fell in love with the keys. Unbeknownst to her that singular choice of music over ballerina earned her ticket out of Poland to freedom when she gets accepted into Curtis for a degree in music. She meets Richard there and it was music that brought them closer. Richard had a bumpy relationship with his father as Richard preferred piano lessons over football and athletics unlike his brothers who were scared of their dad unable to stand up to their dad and defy his beliefs. Richard's mother protected him from his dad whenever he practiced his piano and the music set his rage out of control. She gave him the confidence to pursue his passion and was excited about his scholarship to Curtis. Her sudden death when he was just nineteen leaves him with no emotional support to lean on. Richard's love for music alienated him from his own father but he found comfort in his mother's support and after her death he is estranged from his own family as he went on to pursue his career in music.

Richard was very careful about not passing on the trauma of his childhood onto his daughter Grace and never forced her to do anything she was not interested in. Oddly enough Grace was more into sports rather than music in spite of having two parents who were equally gifted in music. "But he swore he wouldn't pick up the thread in the pattern his father had woven, that he wouldn't in turn reject his daughter" (91). Richard always believed that he was nothing like his father Walt Evans in terms of parenting but Grace's career choice did not have leave any common ground between them. His ambitious music concerts and his divorce from her mother Karina drove him completely out of her life. Richard's intentions were good in not forcing Grace into anything out of her interest but he never made any effort to understand her world of sports. Slowly both of them drifted away in their own ambitions and Richard prioritized music over his relationship with his daughter. "What if he wasn't a good father? What if he was like his father?" (190). Even after his devastating diagnosis, he couldn't find the strength to tell his daughter about it and she finds it as a surprise and she expresses her disappointment in him. "My whole childhood, I felt like you picked

piano over me” (190). So here it is evident that his love for music ruined his relationship with his only daughter.

Richard and Karina grew up learning classical piano and their skills were refined in Curtis. Karina initially started as a classical pianist but was soon mesmerized by a new genre called jazz music. “They generated a momentum, a magical chemistry, a river that flowed through everyone there. Her heart was captivated, dizzy, spellbound” (240). Karina chooses to let go of the classical piano to pursue jazz so that she wouldn’t take away the spotlight which Richard craved for as a sacrifice to save their relationship.

The opening chapter of the novel shows Richard playing Schumann’s *Fantasie* in C Major, op. 17 in a concert, reflecting his disconnectedness and unsure of the audience’s ability to comprehend the brilliance of the musical piece. As he played the final part, it gives a sense of the ending of his career. “He plays the final note, and the sound lingers on the stage before dissipating, floating away” (2). Richard mourns the loss of his right hand with *Brahms I*, a musical piece playing only the left hand notes while playing the right hand notes in his mind. He had memorized the entire eighty seven pages of this piece for a concert in Boston a year ago and is connected to this piece in an ecstatic and energetic way. “Using language to convey the magic of Brahms would be like a wooden classroom ruler to measure the speed of light” (35).

The romantic phase of college life is marked by Schumann’s *Fantasie* in C Major, op. 17, a significant musical piece that made Karina fall in love with Richard. “His playing was powerful yet gentle, assured, masterful. And the composition is so utterly romantic, still one of her favorites” (42). In his final hospital stay, Richard requests Karina to play music as he is weaned off the ventilator with a risk of dying immediately. Karina plays his favorite piece, Schumann’s *Fantasie* in C Major, op. 17 and apologizes to her through his eyes as the music progressed. “Richard locks his eyes with Karina’s as they listen, knowing she knows the meaning behind the composition, and his heart aches for her to know how grateful he is to her and how sorry he is” (288). The first time Karina made Professor Cohen cry in the hallway, she played Schumann’s *Fantasiestucke*, op. 12, no. 1. Karina had technical mastery and was emotionally connected and mature when she plays a piece. Richard’s final moments at home after being weaned off the BiPAP machine was accompanied by Karina playing Chopin’s *Nocturne* in E-flat Major, op.9, no.2. The music brings back her favorite memories as Richard drifted away peacefully. “The melody evokes sense memories of her mother’s pierogi, a gentle rain outside her dorm window at Curtis, dancing a waltz with Richard in New York” (294).

Richard moves back in Karina’s house where he happens to listen to her playing the piano as she teaches music to students. He appreciates her playing and thinks of how technically talented she was right from their college days. She was appreciated by all their teachers but it made Richard jealous.

He congratulated her whenever this happened, but his words were rigid and cold, spoken through his teeth, and would leave her feeling insulted instead of championed. Whenever she

privately or publically surpassed his playing, he'd grow distant and critical of her in other ways (239).

Karina had moved on to improvisational jazz as she found it more fascinating than the classical piano. Richard did not appreciate the decision and his personal dislike for the genre never gave him the opportunity to understand why Karina liked it. During their days in New York after college Karina joined a group that played saxophone and drums experimenting the new genre. But as she was at the beginning of her career, Richard made a selfish decision to move to Boston for a teaching position at New England Conservatory to improve his career and left the job in two years to go on tours. Karina gives up on her career chooses to stay in Boston though she could have gone back to New York to follow her passion.

The birth of their daughter Grace made her a full time mom and sole caretaker as Richard was always away on tours. "She was consumed and devastatingly lonely in the demands of young motherhood" (243). She secretly hated him for being so free to pursue his dreams without any hindrance. Karina hid behind the motherhood, secretly scared of going back and failing in her attempt to rekindle her passion for jazz. Richard had never turned back to give his time to his wife or his daughter once he set his path on becoming a famous pianist. As a result, he had achieved his dream of being a famous pianist but lost the bond with his family and slowly estranged from them. Karina on the other hand slowly let her anger takeover and despised him. Even after the divorce she is unable pick up her career and chooses to hide behind the label of a simple music teacher.

The novel brings out music as a source of escape from reality and freedom from the past life for both Richard and Karina. The passion for music gets both of them musically and romantically entwined. The art has proved to be a spark of connection in both their lives as it united them and also became the source of their alienation. Richard was too focused on his career that he ends up trading his family for his passion. Art plays an important role in life of humans, it is a place of comfort based on each individual's preferences. Art is supposed to balance out the ups and downs of life. Here in the case of Richard, art and life has essentially become one and he build his entire life around it; so he couldn't establish his identity otherwise. He and Karina chose two different paths but life has shown that they are interconnected to the art though they chose to embrace it and hide respectively. Without being a part of his family Richard may have gained fame for himself but he regrets his choice of not getting to know his daughter until it was too late for him. Karina realizes her mistake of hiding behind the title of motherhood and self-victimizing herself for Richard's infidelity for giving up her career in music. She finally remembers that she is a jazz pianist when she attends a concert in New Orleans which gives her a hope and motivation for building a career in it. Life was meaningless for Richard and Karina as they missed out on life and art respectively. So it is necessary to find a balance between the two for a fulfilled and meaningful life.

Conclusion:

Art has essentially become the inevitable part of life of each and every individual. Art initially was a form of expression but now the flipped scenario portrays life is entirely for art. Both these arguments may end in an inconclusive answer, because either of it cannot exist alone. Life is essential to appreciate and enjoy art and art is essential for appreciating life. The balance lies in identifying the fine line between art and life ensuring the sense of contentment during the brief period of stay on this earth.

References:

Genova, Lisa. *Every Note Played*. Allen & Unwin, 2018.

