

THE PIANO [1993]

by

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The Piano. Directed and written by Jane Campion. Music by Michael Nyman. Distributed by Miramax Films, 1993.

Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter), who has been voluntarily mute since age six, arrives with her illegitimate daughter in nineteenth century New Zealand to fulfill a marriage arrangement. Her husband, Stewart (Sam Neill), is unable to transport a piano, which has become an object of her obsession, from the beach to their new home deep in the bush. She strikes a bargain of prostitution with an illiterate tattooed neighbor, Baines (Harvey Keitel), in exchange for her piano. She rejects the sexual advances of her husband while falling in love with Baines, who simply gives her the piano. Ada is betrayed by her daughter, Flora (Anna Paquin), Stewart discovers the affair and, in a jealous rage, cuts off one of her fingers. She leaves the settlement with Baines and moves to the city where she becomes a piano teacher.

I confess. I *did* see *The Piano* when it first opened last year, but I was reluctant to write on it because it is so much a “woman’s film.” I have since received many letters and phone calls about *The Piano* – some people love it while others hate it. In light of the continuing stream of requests and the worldwide recognition it has received, I will contribute my meager two-cent’s worth. However, I am going to comment on this film strictly from a male point of view, and little to analyze it in terms of its meaning to women.

Over the past two decades, many people interested in film have used “men’s films” to examine society’s view of women. Men’s films – such as, *Rambo* [1985], *Road Warrior* [1981], *Dirty Harry* [1971], or *Lethal Weapon* [1987], where men are the central characters, tell us a lot about what society considers the correct role for women – as many feminist film critics have adequately demonstrated. Can we not do the same thing with women’s films, that is, see how men are represented in them? Can we not use *The Piano* to find out what women think of men? There have been many articles written on *The Piano*, but most have addressed only one theme – Ada and her problems. I would like to take (as usual) the minority view and investigate the theme that has so far been ignored: men.

The Piano continues a long Hollywood tradition of women’s films, films that look at the world from a woman’s perspective (most often interpreted through male eyes) and treat a woman and her problems as the central theme. Good examples are *The Women* [1939] or *Mildred Pierce* [1945] all the way to *The File on Thelma Jordan* [1950] or

Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte [1964]. The latest generation of woman's films adds a new twist to the old formula: women are now making the films rather than men, like *Thelma and Louise* [1991] or *Orlando* [1993]. However, they still treat the same themes, primarily women suffering under male domination. In *The Piano*, two major themes – men's roles and women's roles – are stated, restated and interwoven, often with the complexity of a Baroque double fugue.

As one would expect of a contemporary woman's film, in *The Piano* men are immediately set up as villains. Specifically, they restrict women's ability to communicate and express themselves. Ada's arrival on the desolate beaches of New Zealand is greeted by male brutality. In beautifully photographed symbolism, her first encounter with Stewart establishes his position as villain. Ada and her daughter have spent the night in a cozy tent made of her female underclothing. It glows with the light they put inside. They have turned the bird-cage-like hoop underskirt from a prison into a seaside temple of tranquility, a paean to the transformative power of the feminine. (In the press material that accompanied the film both Ada's clothes and the morality of the day – again for feminist political implications – have been called Victorian. However, in 1820 George IV ascended to the throne – followed by Edward IV and then Victoria in 1837.) Into this idyll storms Stewart with his refusal – on simple practical reasons – to take the piano home. Since the piano is a metaphor for Ada's need to communicate, it is her husband that prevents her from expressing herself.

Since the central issue is women's inability – because of the repressive patriarchy – to communicate and express, let's look carefully at how Ada *does* communicate. She has three ways: her daughter, who is adept at interpreting her sign language, her notebook, which she wears around her neck, and her beloved piano.

Ada's relationship with her daughter borders on debilitating codependency – as we can see when her daughter betrays her at the prospect of losing her to Baines. The daughter's betrayal of her mother's illicit love affair is a wonderfully perceptive piece of writing. As a friend of mine explained to me: Flora sees two men in her mother's life, each about to steal from her some of her mother's very limited love. She betrays the greater thief in order to retain a larger portion of her mother's affection. This is indeed a masterfully complex piece of screen writing. It rings with the shock of truth. Yet it also smacks of Ada's blatant victimization of her daughter and her voice as a substitute for her own, and perhaps even her daughter's life for hers.

While Ada's signing manipulates only her daughter, Ada uses her notebook in infantile attempts to manipulate all those around her. She forces other people to stop what they are doing, pay attention to her, and read what she writes. The exception is Baines. Since he is illiterate, this form of control and manipulation doesn't work on him. I wonder if part of Ada's attraction to Baines is that she can't manipulate him – though he certainly does manipulate her into prostitution. Since she wears her notebook around her neck like a crucifix or a reliquary, I assume we are to make some vague religious association to it (as we are with the piano), perhaps something like a woman's need to express is sacred. Since Ada is willing to communicate by writing and by sign language,

what's so special about her not speaking? Both the use of the daughter and the notebook have something in common. (In contemporary psychology, both her *voluntary*, psychosomatic muteness and her specific way of writing could easily be seen as a passive/aggressive device to manipulate and control others.) But, back to the piano as a means of expression – let's consider the music it makes.

Music is an important clue to understanding this film. It is unusual to have music performed on screen that is almost identical to the soundtrack. Most often, the two are clearly separated: the on-screen music is performed within the context of the story (as in *Amadeus* [1984] or *Casablanca* [1942]) – we hear what the characters are hearing. The soundtrack, on the other hand, is in our space and is not heard by the characters. It can be any sort of music, from classical to rock-and-roll, whether relevant to the historical period represented on screen or not. *The Piano* uses an odd variation of this device: contemporary music is performed on-screen in a historical setting. I believe that this confluence of contemporary and historical is the key that unlocks much of this film.

The specific musical genre chosen for the film is late twentieth century Minimalism, best represented by Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley. Michael Nyman's minimalist score for *The Piano* is hard to tell from the music he produced for Peter Greenaway's films like *Drowning by Numbers* [1988] or *Prospero's Books* [1991]. Yet there is an important difference in the way the music is used. Hearing contemporary music coming from historical hands has tremendous political implications. In *The Piano*, we hear just what the other characters hear – music that will not have been written for 170 years. Ada, through her music, communicates with no one in her own world – but she does, very fashionably, communicate with us, the audience. Thus, what to us is an understandable minimalist musical language must be to the characters within the film chaos. It further clearly establishes Ada as *our* contemporary, a modern woman somehow stuck in a primitive and savage wasteland. Once we realize this, we see that the central device of this film is to use a historical setting to criticize contemporary social issues.

With this in mind, I want to turn to the men in the film – primarily Stewart, the husband. Extending the metaphor of the music to the characters themselves, we can see that the major conflict of this film is a twentieth century woman up against nineteenth century men. Not much of a contest here, especially if you live in the 20th century – it's pretty obvious that the woman will win a moral, if not a physical, victory. While the women who like this film may identify with Ada's moral victory, we men are left identifying with various losers. And, to make things worse for us, it's not a fair fight. Let's first take survey of Stewart.

Judged by contemporary standards, Stewart is ignorant of any sensitivity toward women and their needs, he just “doesn't get it.” But in terms of the 19th century, he's a saint. He accepts a mail-order bride who is not a virgin, has an illegitimate child, and is handicapped. I cannot imagine very many men anywhere in the world of the 1820s willing to do this – unless they have very big hearts. But from a contemporary perspective, he is terminally insensitive and brutish. To my mind, the film actually portrays him far too sympathetic and soft for his day – for instance, he doesn't insist on

his marital “rights,” he allows Ada to sleep alone, even though she mercilessly teases him. I can’t imagine any man putting up with this, especially in the harsh, pioneer environment of New Zealand. He must be the most tolerant man alive – yet the film portrays him as little more than a Neanderthal.

Ada’s response to her new domesticity is also interesting. While the marriage *is* arranged, she is there to be Stewart’s wife. The country we see on screen is primitive, difficult, daunting. Life is very hard for everyone, especially the women. The only respite we see from the drudgery of pioneer life is an occasional meal and church on Sunday. Ada, however, doesn’t participate in this life. While we see her eat, we never see her cook; she dresses, but never sews; she lives in her husband’s house, yet she never cleans. We must ask what is her idea of an arranged marriage? Living in the lap of luxury? And for some reason, Stewart puts up with all this without beating her. Amazing. A truly tolerant man.

Now let’s turn to the ultimate act of Stewart’s brutality – in a fit of rage at her infidelity with Baines (after promising faithfulness and betraying the resulting trust), he mutilates her. While I don’t condone this violence (nor do I condone Ada’s psychic violence against the men in the film), there is some illuminating symbolism here. Stewart is threatened not by Ada’s infidelity, but by her power to make an independent decision – something that violates all codes of conduct and all presumptions about women’s roles of that day. When Stewart cuts off her finger, he destroys her connection to the piano, the means by which she manipulates the world – and the men – around her. But there is another aspect to this incident. By her presumption to make her own decisions, she usurps male power. Like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, she has stolen male, phallic power. When Stewart realizes Ada is indeed an independent and powerful woman who can’t be tamed, by cutting off her finger, he “de-phallusizes” her power – he symbolically castrates her.

While Stewart’s power over Ada wanes during the course of the film, Baines’ power waxes. Baines is portrayed as the more positive of the two male characters in the film. His illiteracy, crudeness, sexual domination, and boorishness are all forgiven because he gives Ada back her piano (and all that it symbolizes) without collecting the prearranged sexual payment. He also verbalizes his feelings. Is the film saying that there is more hope for the natural (or primitive) man – tattooed and illiterate – than for the civilized man? Is a woman to fall in love with a man because he has the power to give (and presumably take) her “piano?” Is, finally, a woman’s choice only between two levels of male brutality? Pretty depressing.

This scenario is replayed toward the end of the film. Ada has fallen into the water, dragged down by her piano. By letting go of it, she opts for life rather than giving up and drowning. Presumably, she has given up a life of manipulation of others as symbolized by her piano. She also claims, in her internal voice, that she will begin to speak soon. All very positive signs. However, at the same time we learn that she intends to earn an independent living as a piano teacher. A pipe dream at best. Remember, this is 1820: Mozart died only thirty years before, Hayden ten, Schubert is at the peak of his powers,

Beethoven is working on the ultimate in symphonies and string quartets. Michael Nyman is not even a twinkle in his great-great-great-great-grandfather's eye. I can't imagine much of a market for her talents.

Furthermore, in order to teach piano, she needs a prosthesis. Notice that it is Baines who fashions for Ada a steel finger so that she can once again play the piano – and, possibly, earn a living. It is still men who empower the women – Baines has *given* Ada back the access to her piano that Stewart had denied her. His “re-phallus-ization” of her is reminiscent of *Little Mermaid* where it is ultimately father Triton who controls Ariel's sexuality.

From a strictly – as insensitive as that may be – male point of view, this film is just another aspect of the currently politically correct male bashing fever that is sweeping the country. It extends from the highest to the lowest. We see it on daytime television, from Oprah to Geraldo, where women audiences delight in the endless stories of women victims and male victimizers – rapists, abusers, bigamists, closet homosexuals, disease bearers, and so on. It extends to the halls of politics and, if we can believe Warren Farrell, science. He reports that men have about the same chance of dying of prostate cancer as women do of breast cancer, but the funding for breast cancer research is *six* times greater than for prostate cancer research. *The Piano* fits neatly into this atmosphere.

The unwritten assumption of *The Piano* is that men victimize women. However, rather than offering suggestions as to how this situation can be remedied, the film shows women victimizing men with the same zest and wallows in the resulting bathos. In the press material on the film, Campion is quoted as follows, “I think many women have had the experience of feeling like a sexual object and that's exactly what happens to Stewart. The cliché of that situation is generally the other way around where men say things like ‘Oh sex for its own sake [sic].’” Gender politics is a pendulum. It swings first one way, then the other. The pendulum, at least in some aspects of our society, has left the area of woman as victim and entered the area of man as victim. Neither is a cause for celebration or complacency. I want no victims and no persecutors; I am looking for resolution and growth. Perhaps it is this desire that leads to my dislike of *The Piano*.

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