

Setting and morality in the pianist

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Setting and circumstances we find ourselves in create the person we become and choose to be. In *The Pianist* directed by Roman Polanski setting was used to develop the viewer's understanding of the characters of Szpilman and Hosenfeld. Szpilman is a Jewish citizen of Warsaw during World War Two, who faces many struggles throughout his life. Hosenfeld is a German officer during World War Two. The physical setting of the Hospital and the Warsaw ghetto developed the viewer's understanding of Szpilman's will to survive and his strong moral compass. The physical setting of the prisoner of war camp and the abandoned buildings in Warsaw developed the viewer's understanding of Hosenfeld's remorse and regret for his actions during World War Two, as can be seen through the techniques of cinematography and dialogue.

The physical setting of the hospital was used to develop understanding of the character of Szpilman and his will to survive. When Szpilman is surviving on the streets of Warsaw, he finds refuge in an abandoned hospital. Through a high angle close up shot, Szpilman is shown drinking dirty, contaminated water from a bucket with his hands. The Nazis have reduced Szpilman to an animal like state, by making him so desperate as to drink dirty water out of a bucket. Szpilman has been diminished to a state of desperation as he is sacrificing his dignity for survival. This shows the audience that Szpilman's strong sense of survival has aided his strength for life in the abandoned hospital. He has lost his family, personal belongings yet his survival is his first priority. The viewer again sees this strong will to survive in the hospital in a point of view shot. Broken glass frames the shot of Szpilman watching as Nazi's burn bodies on the street. Watching this gives Szpilman motivation as

he refuses to become a victim but instead uses the fear to become more determined to survive. These horrible actions could have easily happened to him yet he does not give up but views the horror first hand. These horrible circumstances have given him the opportunity to show the best of himself and his ability to survive the harsh conditions that have been forced upon him. It is almost paradoxical that at one of Szpilman's lowest and most desperate points physically is in a hospital, which is meant to help and heal. But Szpilman carries on and refuses to let his physical surroundings change his strong motivation to survive. The will to survive is often defined as " a type of survival instinct that prompts individuals to put forth effort to overcome situations that are life threatening and continue to enjoy the benefits of living." (wiseGEEK). But what does it really take to have the will to survive? How do you tell how much your will to survive been tested? The struggle that the audience sees Szpilman push through within the abandoned hospital shows that his will to survive overpowers his want for it all just to be over. Szpilman wants all of his suffering and pain to become something more than just that, but for him to survive the war for himself and to live for his family. His will to survive was fully tested as he managed to survive all alone as a Jew in the abandoned hospital in Warsaw.

Szpilman's time spent in the physical setting of the Warsaw Ghetto developed his character and his strong moral compass. Within the ghetto Szpilman is forced to make many tough and life change decisions and sacrifices that affected both himself and his family. When the idea is propositioned to Szpilman to join the Jewish police force in the ghetto, he responds with " thank you, I've got work" . This piece of dialogue shows the

sacrifice that Szpilman has to make to keep his moral integrity. He refuses to be the person to beat and abuse the Jewish people within the ghetto. Even with his family starving he refuses to gain money through this immoral source, and would rather keep his dignity intact than feed his family and have a better life by hurting his own population. We again see Szpilman making sacrifices for himself and his family, with a mid shot from a slightly low angle. Szpilman is playing piano in a Jewish cafe for rich members of the Jewish population. Szpilman's facial expression is blank and vacant, at this point playing the piano is almost a chore as he lacks the passion he usually experiences when playing the piano. His face has split lighting with half of face in shadow with the other half in light, this shows his internal struggle of what he wants to do and what he has to do. The Jewish population outside the cafe are starving and dying on the streets, but the people in the cafe are eating nice food and are in comfortable living conditions, but by playing he feels as if he supports the separation between the Jewish population and the Nazi control over his people. As the people he is playing for have gained their money through bribes to the Nazis, so he believes he is supporting this unethical way of obtaining money. He is playing the piano as a matter of survival as it is what is feeding his family. Szpilman's conflicted actions shows us his strong moral compass as he is only doing what he must do to survive, in the Warsaw Ghetto. The condition of the Warsaw Ghetto has forced Szpilman to make decisions that compromised his moral position and his internal struggle to do what was wrong but necessary shows his strong moral compass. These sacrifices we see Szpilman make are the same sacrifices the director Roman Polanski made as a child during the Holocaust.

Polanski too was separated from his family by a Jewish police officer. Polanski was the best person to show Szpilman's struggle as he experienced the same struggle within his own life and has a personal connection to the hardship and struggles experienced by Szpilman.

The physical setting of the Warsaw Ghetto developed Szpilman's strong moral compass. The physical setting of the prisoner of war camp and the streets of Warsaw developed the viewer's understanding of Hosenfeld's remorse and regret for his actions during World War Two. As a German officer Hosenfeld has made many decisions he has come to regret at the end of the war, when he is in a prisoner of war camp. Through a close up shot the audience sees Hosenfeld behind a barbed fence looking guilty. This shot shows Hosenfeld at his lowest point physically but at his highest point morally. This is because he understands the right and wrong within his actions and is willing to admit fault and responsibility for his actions. The distraught emotion of Hosenfeld's face suggest his regret as he is now feeling the weight of his actions. Hosenfeld is experiencing what he subjected the Jewish population too. Hosenfeld again shows his remorse and regret for his actions when he hears Szpilman play the piano, with a mid high angle shot. Hearing the piano strikes something inside Hosenfeld, as he chooses to help Szpilman survive. He feels regret for what he has done to Szpilman and the Jewish population, as he is now seeing the repercussions of his actions. He is seeing the love and passion Szpilman is putting into the piano and realising that he is taken so much away from him. Hosenfeld's regret and guilt is triggered in his mind as he is now understanding on a personal level what he has done to so many people. We all know how easy it

is to make decisions affecting people's lives without seeing the repercussions of your actions. But Hosenfeld is now being confronted with the consequences his decisions have had on Szpilman on a personal level.

All of this relates to Polanski's purpose for the film, "to show the best and worst of humanity". Hosenfeld represents both aspects as before meeting Szpilman he had vacant expressions on his face, signing away lives without a single thought to the consequences of his actions. But after he meets Szpilman, we see him helping a person who should be his 'enemy', but instead he sees Szpilman as his chance for redemption and show the "best.. Of humanity". The character of Hosenfeld shows his remorse and regret for his actions through the physical setting of the streets of Warsaw and the prisoner of war camp. The Pianist thus uses setting to develop the viewer's understanding of the characters of Szpilman and Hosenfeld. The audience sees Szpilman's will to survive and his strong moral compass through the physical setting of the hospital and the Warsaw Ghetto, settings crucial to the development of the film and the main character.