

Unlikely optimism in jane campion's film 'the piano'



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The Piano, Jane Campion's evocative narrative of envy and intrigue, is visually stunning, set against the untamed beauty of the New Zealand forests and shoreline. The critically acclaimed film follows Ada McGrath, a 19th century mute Scotswoman sent by her father to marry a man she has never met, in colonial New Zealand. Ada is accompanied by her wilful young daughter Flora and her treasured piano, the voice through which she expresses vivid emotion. While director Jane Campion has claimed that she is "averse to teaching messages," The Piano highlights the powerlessness of women in patriarchal 19th century society, and condemns the brutality of their male oppressors and the British colonialism of the Maori homeland. The film further explores the differing perceptions of morality that existed at the time. Despite its dark themes, Campion's creation ultimately contains a message of hope.

Through the principal character, Ada McGrath, Campion most clearly emphasises the destructive impact of patriarchal society upon women. Abandoned by the father of her child and shipped off to another country by her father, Campion conveys that Ada's "dark talent" for silence is the product of her unconscious decision to exercise the little control she has. The audience is given a first insight into Ada's new husband, Alistair Stewart, when he states that "God loves dumb animals, so why shouldn't [he]?" This apparent statement of his intention to love, instead reveals that he regards his new wife as little more than an animal, and is in no way dissatisfied with her muteness, which only makes her less able to oppose his will. Stewart's first act of cruelty to his wife is to deprive her of her piano, insisting it must be left on the beach. The suffering this causes Ada is emphasised by

Campion's cinematic shot of the lonely piano on the shore and Ada's distraught expression. Campion conveys that this decision is fundamentally driven by Stewart's sense of masculine superiority to Ada and preoccupation with the acquisition of property. Upon her arrival, Stewart circles his new wife as if inspecting an expensive purchase, eventually voicing his disappointment in her being "small" and "stunted". Campion also highlights the oppression of women through Stewart's selfish decision to trade away Ada's piano to Baines for a parcel of land. Not only does Stewart deprive Ada of her piano for personal gain, he forces her to give lessons to Baines, who she initially fears and perceives as an illiterate "savage." Stewart's expectation that Ada be a submissive and compliant wife, is clearly conveyed by Campion through his rage at her refusal to give lessons and hypocritical assertion that "we all have to make sacrifices!"

Campion's film also explores the complex relationship between the Maori people and the colonists, such as Stewart. While viewed as "savages" by the white settlers, the Maori people are inherently the more civilised group, with a far stronger sense of morality. This is exemplified by the Maoris' interruption of the settlers' production of "Bluebeard," when they fear that several of the female actors are about to be harmed. Rather than presenting the Maori as ignorant, Campion utilises this scene to suggest that they have a sense of basic decency that many of the settlers lack. The compassion of the Maori for Flora after Stewart's brutal actions reinforces this concept. The surroundings of Stewart's elaborate European style cabin - the remains of the charred trunks of the forest he has aggressively burned and chopped into 'civilised' order, highlights the destruction caused by supposedly 'civil'

actions. Having the most 'civilised' character commit the act of the greatest brutality reinforces this dichotomy.

Particularly through the quixotic character of Flora, Campion sheds light upon differing perceptions of moral behaviour. While Flora does begin calling Stewart "Papa" late in the film, it is not the desire for a family which motivates her loyalty to him, but rather the influence of Stewart's rigid moral code. Encompassing the misogynistic, seen through his treatment of Ada, as well as the ridiculous, such as believing that Flora could "shame the trees" by kissing them, Stewart's sense of morality is shown by Campion to be the twisted product of his 'civilised' upbringing and to be totally inapplicable to life in New Zealand. The influence of this perception of morality upon impressionable Flora is seen through her admonishing Ada for visiting Baines, even as Stewart locks them both in his cabin. Flora's angel wings are used by Campion to symbolically represent her belief in the morality of her actions. Flora wears the wings as she runs to deliver the message to Baines. However, tellingly, she steps into the mud as she changes path, instead deciding to give the message to Stewart. Furthermore, Campion ultimately remains sympathetic to Flora's naïve character, as shown by the symbolic 'washing' of the tainted wings in a stream before she and Ada leave with Baines.

Forming a sub-plot of oppression between the settlers and Maori that mirrors the suppression of Ada at the hands of Stewart, the inclusion of the Maori is an essential facet of Campion's film. Campion condemns the incursions of the settlers, represented by Stewart in the film, through a Maori chief's refusal to pass through sacred burial grounds on the journey from the beach

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to Stewart's home. Stewart's ignorance is highlighted by his spoken belief that this is simply a ploy of the Maori to gain more money, wholly dismissing their unwillingness to disturb the graves of their ancestors. Stewart's later comments to Baines that the Maori "don't cultivate the land" or "use" it and can therefore have no real ownership of it, emphasise his arrogant view that only 'civilised' appropriation of the land constitutes legitimate ownership.

On the surface it may appear reasonable to view *The Piano* as an incredibly depressing, miserable and bleak film. The film's message is a dark one, highlighting the commodification and powerlessness of women in the 19th century, while also condemning the brutal incursions of colonialism in New Zealand. The film encompasses confronting scenes of violence, such as Stewart's ruthless dismemberment of Ada's finger after he discovers her "heart belongs to" his compatriot George Baines. Stewart's cruelty towards his wife is an enormously disheartening element of the film, exemplified first through his refusal to have her most precious possession and 'voice', the piano, carried from the beach to his home, despite her wordless pleadings. However further analysis of the film reveals a message of hope. Despite all that she suffers at the hands of her husband and her lack of control over her fate, Ada is able to escape his ownership of her and begin a new life in Nelson with Baines and Flora. This sense of hope is underscored by Campion through Ada's declaration that "my will has chosen life!" as she kicks to the surface instead of choosing to drown with her piano.