

Symbols for men and women in scenes 112-118 of 'the piano'



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In Jane Campion's 'The Piano', scenes 112 to 118 depict Flora's betrayal of her mother, Ada, as she takes the piano key intended for her clandestine lover Baines, instead to Ada's husband, Stewart. This betrayal subsequently results in Stewart reacting in a violent manner and decapitating Ada's index finger with an axe. In terms of context, this scene follows briefly after Ada's return to Baines' hut after accepting her desire for his affection, resulting in Stewart keeping her captive within his cottage. Ada then shows affection towards Stewart but he rejects her advances, with this scene following swiftly afterwards. Following this scene, Stewart decides to let Baines and Ada elope together after he believes he hears Ada's voice within his head pleading him to let her be free. This scene is a momentous one within the film as it is the climax of a significant build-up of tension and angst within the relationship of Ada and Stewart, most notably from Stewart, who struggles to come to terms with Ada's stubborn and unaffectionate nature, a combination of qualities seen to be socially deviant for a married woman in the era in which 'The Piano' is set. In this way, the scene is notable in that it allows Campion to convey her views and values associated with gender roles, and more specifically the treatment of women in a subordinate and constrictive manner by men of the time. This scene acts as the emotional pinnacle of the numerous examples Campion provides to the viewer of the level of control and degradation exhibited over women such as Ada, with the viewer forced to endure an abhorrent level of violence towards Ada, which is evidently intended by Stewart to inflict pain on her both physically and mentally, in restricting her principal form of self-expression by preventing her from playing the piano. Ultimately, these scenes, which comes towards the conclusion of the film, in conjunction with other interrelated scenes <https://assignbuster.com/symbols-for-men-and-women-in-scenes-112-118-of-the-piano/>

throughout the film, allow Campion to make a final, and intentionally shocking statement to reinforce the views and values associated with the flawed aspects of a male-dominated society, and the state of feminism within 'The Piano'.

Throughout the film, the relationship between Stewart and Ada is portrayed as an unbalanced one, lacking both chemistry and prospective future happiness; this is established from the outset of the film when Stewart remarks in Ada's smallness, and also talks loudly to Ada, despite her hearing being perfectly adequate. This indicates that Stewart views Ada in a derogatory manner as a result of her muteness, and that her purpose to him only occupies the physical sphere of being; in her potential ability to bear children as well as her capacity to work and add to his wealth. This initial meeting is representative of Stewart's patriarchal nature, which contrasts strongly with Ada's abnormal stubbornness and willful demeanor, exemplified by her unwillingness to be 'affectionate' with Stewart, and implies that the relationship between the two is irreparably flawed and somewhat doomed. In scenes 112 to 118, the magnitude of Stewart's frustration and unease in regards to the unorthodox nature of his imported wife is brought to the fore and unveiled for the audience, with a intentionally confronting and disturbing scene. Element of the screenplay that convey this intended level of distress include the descriptions of Ada's head as 'held twisted between the wood chop and Stewart's leg' and Ada being grasped by the necks of her dregs and hair. This emotional eruption of Stewart is also aided by the script and its descriptions in that the scene begins with a sense of honesty, purity and hope. Prior to these scenes, Ada promises not to visit

Baines, and Stewart begins to look optimistically toward their future together, hoping that 'one day, [Ada] might come to like [him]'. As dictated by the script, the piano key is swaddled in white cotton, again reinforcing a sense of purity initially in the scene. As the scene progresses however, this sense of hope and immaculacy is diminished, as the setting progresses to one of a dark sky and heavy rain, before Stewart bursts into the cottage and unleashes his fury upon Ada, shattering the calm atmosphere set up initially in the sequence. This scenic progression helps add drama to and enhance the scale of Stewart's outburst, helping to emphasize his true level of discomfort in regards to Ada which remained shadowed and dulled for the majority of the film, rearing its head only in a smattering of awkward and ambiguous objections to the behaviors and manners of Ada, such as when Stewart questions Ada's sanity when he discovers her modeling the playing of her piano using a table inside the cottage.

The significance of this contrast in emotional intensity is that the audience finally learns about the reality of Stewart's character, in that he is zealously discontent with Ada's abnormalities, indicating the discontentment he experiences at the hands of Ada's unusual behaviors. Campion uses this scene to accentuate her evident view around the state of feminism in the post-colonialist era. With Stewart embodying the typical European agriculturalist of the era, he acts as an everyman in the film, and allows the viewer to gather that his uneasiness would have been a common thread amongst males of a similar social standing at the time. Fundamentally, upon marrying Ada, Stewart expected a straightforward child-bearer, worker and lover, and was not prepared to get tangled up in the complexities of Ada's

character, as emphasized by the way in which he treats her throughout the film, most notably in the early scenes on the beach. In providing Stewart with an axe with which to sever Ada's finger in scenes 112-118, Campion further emphasizes these evident values of Stewart, in that the axe is frequently shown in the film as a tool that is used to control the wildness of the land, and in chopping off Ada's finger in attempt to tame her, he equates her to the land as something to be controlled and managed, rather than an equal being. This notion of inequality in Stewart's mind is reinforced moreover within these scenes as he makes lopsided exclamations to Ada, such as 'I could love you.', which focus heavily on Stewart's perceived level of output into the relationship, disregarding what he receives in return, indicating that he does not see the value in a reciprocal relationship, spawning further indication to the viewer that Stewart views women as inferior beings. Stewart emphatically emphasizes his uneasiness in regards to Ada's persona by cleaving the piano, directly attacking her state of elective muteness by restricting her principal form of self-expression, indicating he resents this aspect of her, again implying to the viewer that Ada's deformities infuriate and displace him. According to the screenplay notes, upon Stewart striking the piano, it lets out a 'deep resonant moan'. The use of the word 'moan' indicates that Campion intends here for the abuse of the piano to be perceived by the audience as a painful and torturous experience, indicating that Campion views the sort of maltreatment and control exhibited over Ada by Stewart is abhorrent and condemnable, and wishes the audience to share this view.

Another important element of the screenplay in scenes 112-118 used to convey views and values around gender roles is the mud that dapples itself as a motif constantly throughout the film. After having her finger severed, Ada is seen to 'sink into the mud', as quoted from the script. This sinking is symbolic of the restriction and oppression that Ada experiences continually throughout the film at the hands of Stewart; from the extended period in which is separated from her piano to the way in which he barter with it for personal gain. Before scenes 112-118, Ada tramples and squelches in the mud a numerous amount of times, however the sinking in this scene is the first time the mud fully envelops Ada's being, symbolizing the extent to which Stewart has defiled her on this occasion. This 'sinking' juxtaposes with later scenes in the film, once Ada has been freed from Stewart, most notably the scene in which Ada is being pulled down by the piano in the ocean (yet another oppressive motif linkable to Stewart), but then she pulls free and rises to the surface, the antithesis of the sinking portrayed earlier in the film. Given that this uplifting experience occurs when she is rid of Stewart and with a more unconventional character in the form of Baines, this contrast between the sinking exhibited in scenes 112-118 and the rising serves to convey to the audience Campion's evident view that the systematically subordinate treatment of women by post-colonialist and patriarchal men such as Stewart is oppressive and shameful.

A significant symbol and role within scenes 112-118 is that of Flora and her angel wings. In the scene Flora acts as the messenger intended by Ada to bridge the gap between her and Baines, however she betrays Ada for Stewart, most likely as a result of the way in which Baines monopolizes the

majority of Ada's attention and devotion in the latter stages of the film. Through Flora, Campion is evidently making commentary around the consequences of an untraditional childhood, or being stuck in a highly transitional state between childhood and adulthood as Flora is. Throughout the film, Flora is required to immerse herself in adult concerns and as a result, she is highly perceptive and savvy to exchanges between adults. Despite this, Flora remains a child, and one of the main roles of the angel wings in the film is to serve as a reminder of this. Flora has a fragmented understanding of the goings-on between Ada and Baines, but cannot holistically understand the emotions and complications of the situation due to her true age. This, in combination with the gradual separation Flora experiences from Ada across the film, leads her to betray her mother for Stewart in scene 116. As specified by the script, the angel wings donned by Flora gradually muddy across these scenes, before she is ultimately splattered in her mother's blood as a result of her actions. This muddying acts as a symbol of the destruction of Flora's remaining innocence, and serves to remind the viewer of the ramifications of the splintered nature of a child who is forced to integrate into a world in which she evidently does not belong. This unsuitable life of Flora later contrasts with the happier, more content girl pictured at the conclusion of the film when she is finally free of this fragmented world, as her mother is both learning to speak, and has been reunited with her piano, allowing her to express herself rather than depending on Flora to do so. Flora is pictured here doing cartwheels and wearing white, symbolizing the childhood and carelessness which she has regained as a result of her new life with Baines, which further serves to enhance the viewer's positive impression of Baines, and allows Campion to

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further convey the views and values associated with this natural and emotionally charged man, who contrasts starkly with the character of Stewart.

Scenes 112-118 are evidently plentiful in their aforementioned imagery, symbolism and characterization, all of which are promoted by the various elements of the script, from the screenplay directions to the direct dialogue. These elements, working with prior and post occurrences in the film, particularly in a contrasting manner, help to evoke some of the key thematic messages of the film around the role of women in the era, the nature in which men were accustomed to treating women, and how this contrasts with women's desires to be beings of free will and individuality, as well as the innate, innocent nature of children, and the level of unbalance this can cause if this pure innocence is infringed upon too early by adult concerns. These scenes are pivotal in Campion conveying her views and values also, in that the dictated screen directions in the screenplay, such as the macabre details around the twisting of Ada's head, allow her to either condemn or condone these actions, and ultimately present these views and values to the viewer in such an emotionally fraught way that it is likely to remain a part of their consciousness for a long time.