

# Jane Campion's *The Piano*: A sensitive touch to a fairly selfish theme

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In Jane Campion's film *The Piano*, mute Scottish widow Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter) and her child take themselves off to New Zealand in 1852 to start a new life. Ada and her stuffy, but earnest, new husband Stewart (Sam Neill) do not hit it off. She does, however, strike up a relationship with her husband's overseer, Baines (Harvey Keitel), an illiterate who paints his face in the style of the aboriginal Maoris. Through a somewhat circuitous route, he has ended up the owner of her piano. Baines proposes to sell her back the instrument one black key at a time, in exchange for music lessons. The lessons turn into erotic encounters. All this leads to jealousy and violence.

Campion was born in Waikanae, New Zealand, and attended the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. She has a television movie, *Two Friends* (1985), and two other feature films to her credit: *Sweetie* (1989), a portrait of a disturbed girl and her family, and *An Angel at My Table* (1990), based on the novels of Janet Frame.

*The Piano* has been praised on many sides for its "sensuality" and its "visionary brilliance." It is a great success.

The director, in her production notes, made the following comment: "I feel a kinship between the kind of romance Emily Brontë portrayed in *Wuthering Heights* and this film. Hers is not the notion of romance that we've come to use; it's very harsh and extreme, a Gothic exploration of the romantic impulse."

This is quite significant and deserves some consideration. If one makes the point that *The Piano* as a work of art stands in almost direct opposition to *Wuthering Heights*, it is not in order to attack Campion as an individual or deny her talent (which is genuine). The problem is a thornier and, at heart, objective one: the disorientation of the artist under the prevailing ideological conditions, and, to speak directly to the matter, the truly pernicious influence of contemporary feminism on many women (and men) artists.

Self-pity is a very poor foundation on which to construct a work of art, or much anything else for that matter.

An unstated assumption underlies *The Piano* (an assumption undoubtedly shared by much of its potential viewing audience), to wit: sensitive middle class women are special, abused, silenced (Ada is mute by choice, she has been traumatized by life somehow) and deserve better from the world. The film takes as a starting-point much of what it actually needs to establish *dramatically*, but cannot because of the essential hollowness of its outlook.

A certain tone is set in one of its first sequences. A crew of sailors unloads Ada's belongings in the surf. Mother and daughter, somewhat dazed from the journey and the rude landing, appear vulnerable and frail. The seamen, on the other hand, are crude, uncouth and careless. They clearly have no appreciation of the significance of the piano. To them, it is simply something heavy to lug around.

When asked if there is anything further she needs or wants, Ada, through her daughter, replies that she has had enough of the stinking ship and they can all go to hell. (One thinks of the Manhattan lady advertising executive or up-and-coming lawyer upbraiding a subway conductor when there has been a delay in train service.) The audience members titter in sympathy with the poor woman. They know straight away to whom this film is addressed and to whom it is not.

Campion has failed, frankly, to bring to life a plausible, mid-nineteenth-century Scottish widow. She has created a middle class professional woman from one of the large urban centers of Western Europe, North America or Australia/New Zealand, 1993 model, and transported her back in time.

The film as a whole is filled with implausibilities. How is it that Baines, the illiterate backwoodsman, turns out to be such a tame, understanding and articulate creature? After sending for her thousands of miles, why is Stewart so easily put off by Ada? And how does she dare, isolated and friendless in a new country, to enter so rapidly and willingly into a liaison with Baines?

It is not a question of demanding naturalistic detail, but, once the filmmaker herself has created a certain framework, expecting some kind of coherence. The film is not essentially an effort to grasp the truth about the world, *but to shape the world according to a particular sensibility*.

In a peculiar way, Campion both reveals her own orientation, and fundamental complacency, and underestimates the pressures that women, including many in the middle classes, do in fact confront. *The Piano* presents someone who has, presumably of her own accord, come half way around the world to marry a new husband. And yet she refuses, from the very outset, to make the slightest effort, on principle, to ingratiate herself with him. Is that likely? Isn't it far more tragic that many women accommodate themselves to intolerable situations from fear of destitution, loneliness, etc.?

Emily Brontë approached things in a different manner. The lives

of Emily and her two novelist sisters, Charlotte (1816-1855, the author of *Jane Eyre*) and Anne (1820-1849, a lesser talent), are fabled. They spent almost their entire short existences at an isolated moorland parsonage in Haworth, Yorkshire, in the north of England.

The times they lived in were bleak and desperate. This was the era of the rapid growth of London, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and the new manufacturing centers of the Midlands, whose populations lived in physical wretchedness. The threat of the hated workhouse, depicted in the novels of Charles Dickens, hung over the head of every laborer.

This was the age of Chartism, the first independent movement of the working class. As one commentator put it, during the "Hungry Forties" two fears were ever present in the minds of the prosperous classes: "terror of pestilence and terror of a rising of the 'mob'."

In art, we associate the period with the last phase of Romanticism, a movement characterized by an infatuation with emotion, imagination and individualism. As one historian puts it, "The longing that haunted it [Romanticism] was for the lost unity of man and nature. The bourgeois world [of 1830-48] was a profoundly and deliberately asocial one.... Three sources assuaged this thirst for the lost harmony of man in the world: the Middle Ages, primitive man (or, what could amount to the same thing, exoticism and the 'folk'), and the French Revolution."

Out of all this--the intense, claustrophobic family life, the harsh social climate, the stormy effusions of Romanticism--Emily Brontë created one extraordinary novel at the age of 27, *Wuthering Heights*, three years before her death. The story of the ill-fated love of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw, and of his revenge, is saturated with a passionate hatred of polite society and all forms of restraint. Catherine's mystical vision in the book was no doubt Emily Brontë's: "I see a repose which neither earth nor hell can break ... where life is boundless in its duration, and love in its sympathy, and joy in its fullness."

We referred above to one of the opening sequences of *The Piano*. In her novel, Brontë introduces Heathcliff in an altogether different fashion. Catherine's father goes off on business from their isolated rural estate and returns with a "gypsy brat" and "a tale of his seeing it starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool." Heathcliff emerges as a kind of demonic force, in keeping with the Byronic view of the dual nature--half-revolutionary, half-malevolent--of the great Romantic myth-heroes and literary creations (Satan, Napoleon, Don Juan, Faustus) in general. But, in any event, Brontë's work burns with protest against the conditions of Heathcliff's early life, against abuse, against injustice.

One commentator has noted that while Marx and Engels repudiated the idealization of the aesthetics of the Middle Ages indulged in by Romanticism, "That movement also contained Byron and Shelley, for whom [they] held great respect. There is little doubt that they made a distinction between 'Philistine' Romanticism and a plebeian and folklore-oriented Romanticism." Marx, in 1854, included Charlotte Brontë (Emily had died by then), along with Elizabeth Gaskell, William Makepeace Thackeray and Dickens in the "present splendid brotherhood of fiction writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have

issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together."

In all honesty, why does Campion think her film makes a point of contact with *Wuthering Heights*, which burst out of Brontë as a condemnation of everything corrupt and inhuman that existed? Because her character goes "beyond the bounds," so to speak? Because of the film's emphasis on the intuitive, the sensual? But these elements are quite unconvincing in the film and the characters' motivations seem petty. Romanticism as a movement wasn't simply concerned with self-expression. On the part of its most heroic representatives, it was a doomed, but inspired, attempt to regenerate and remake bourgeois society emotionally and intellectually, to make it "live up to" the great democratic ideals of the French Revolution. The outcome of the 1848 struggles demonstrated to nearly everyone, artists included, the hopelessness of such an effort.

Objectively, *The Piano* and *Wuthering Heights* have almost nothing of substance in common, but Campion is no doubt sincere in thinking that they do. What is the problem? Artists (and not only artists) have difficulty because their entire framework for looking at social problems is so warped. It is as if people were looking at objects under water. Campion no doubt considers herself a radical and a critic of society. The fault lies with the absence of any mass movement against capitalism which might provide a social compass, on the one hand, and the dominance, on the other, of petty-bourgeois protest movements and a general atmosphere which nourishes self-pity and self-absorption.

A balance sheet could be drawn up. Movements such as feminism, black nationalism and gay rights have not helped anyone to see the world and its most fundamental social relationships more clearly; they have had precisely the opposite, narrowing effect. They have objectively damaged artistic and intellectual work.

The film's great popularity stems from the fact that it applies a sensitive veneer to a fairly selfish and comforting theme: the "specialness" of the petty bourgeois individual and his or her inalienable right to find personal fulfillment and be protected against the more brutish side of existence. This is a message many still want to hear.



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