

My sequence for Jane Campion's romantic drama *The Piano* takes place at 1:12:42 and goes to 1:17:41. The sequence takes place around the film's midpoint, after Baines has returned the piano to Ada, ending their sexual contract. The sequence begins when Ada leaves Flora, her daughter, in the woods and visits Baines, beginning their emotional relationship and ends just after Ada's husband begins to watch them from outside Baines' hut. This scene is important because it marks the turning point for Ada's character and the plot. It is the first time Ada begins to explore her own sexual identity and act with agency. She begins her emotional and consensual relationship with Baines. It also signifies Ada's break away from Flora. Lastly, Ada's husband discovers the affair, beginning his isolation and fascination with Ada. These themes and elements are portrayed in this sequence using juxtaposition, strong cinematography, and an interesting use of non-diegetic sound.

*The Piano* is set in 1850s New Zealand, a time when women had no rights. They could not own property or hold their own money; everything they had went to their husbands or fathers (Pickwell). It was normal for them to be sent off to be married to whomever. Women were expected to tolerate their husbands and their desires. It was scientifically proven that women did not have their own sexual desires (Hughes).

New Zealand in the 1850s was mostly uncolonized. Mostly forested, it was populated by the Maori people and the a growing number of Western settlers looking for land ("NZ in the 19th Century"). This creates a very isolated setting for the film, which is an auteuristic feature of Jane Campion's work. She puts her characters in isolated environments to break them down and explore their psyches.

*The Piano* was released in 1993, just as the third wave of feminism was starting. While Campion did not label herself as a feminist at the time, she supported some feminist ideas (Dieckmann). This wave of feminism focused on women's identities and self ownership, on being seen as more than how men saw them. Women were striving to be known as individuals and to be known beyond their sexuality (Grady).<sup>1</sup> This is something Jane Campion has aimed to do in her films. Campion herself once said she aimed to make her female characters something more than sexual objects (Pulver). This idea is seen in this sequence through Ada's agency. She is more than an object, she is making her own choices. Both the setting and the time of release are important to the film's themes of love, sex, society, and womanhood.

The sequence opens as Flora stomps down a hill screaming curses about her mother. Her stepfather approaches and asks Flora where her mother has gone. 'To Hell!' she screams into a close up. The shot then cuts directly to the interior of Baines' hut with him curled on his side. We cannot see Ada, but we know she is there. The juxtaposition of these two shots is incredibly important. Ada is committing adultery, a sin, and Baines is the reason. He is the one leading her to 'hell.' Yet, Ada's freedom comes from her sexual liberation and relationship with Baines. Campion is criticizing the way society judges women. She is asking why Ada's relationship with Baines, one that brings her love, pleasure and empowerment, is considered a sin.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that the third wave of feminism was still not intersectional, meaning it focused predominantly on white women. *The Piano*, though about colonizers and Maori people, does not touch much on race either, as all its characters are Anglo white.

This opener is also important because it shows the divide between Flora and Ada. Up until now, they have been very close and Flora has been distant from her stepfather. Yet, Ada's affair causes Flora to distrust her mother. This split is important later in the film when Flora tells her stepfather about the affair. Flora's anger in their relationship begins with this scene.

Stuart Dryburgh's cinematography is one of the most important aspects of this sequence. In an interview, Jane Campion said she was not interested in specific shots, but that "I'm more interested in what sorts of sensations and feelings and subtleties you can get through your story and bring out through your performances," (Dieckmann). This is what makes *The Piano* different from other period romance dramas. Most of those films have very intense cinematography with wide sweeping shots and really dramatic close ups. Dryburgh's cinematography is simple powerful, as it takes advantage of the actor's abilities.

An excellent example of this is in Baines' hut. As Baines talks about wanting Ada and not having her, there's a slow push in on Ada from a medium to a close up. Ada and Baines are physically apart right now, but the move in indicates they are coming together emotionally. As we move in, we see the increasing intensity of emotions on Ada's part. Here, Holly Hunter's acting is very important. She expresses a combination of repressed love, anger, and confusion. As seen in *Figure 1*, her acting extends beyond her face to her physical tenseness. Dryburgh's simple cinematography complements her acting as he still gives her room to breathe. The movement increases the feeling of her emotions as we see them come to life.



*Figure 1*

Another great shot is when Ada falls to the ground after slapping Baines. Instead of showing her from a high angle, making her seem weak, a tilt and a crane shot fluidly follow her down. She remains at eye level to the camera. This symbolizes the beginning of Ada's agency. She may not have rights and is figuratively and literally low down, but she is in charge of herself, her desires, and her decisions. As Baines helps her up, the film cuts outside and the res is seen from her husband's perspective.

As he spies on them, the shot is vignetted to indicate his point of view. This makes him isolated and alone. While Ada and Baines have each other, he has no one, forced to watch from the outside. This furthers the distance between him and Ada, increasing his longing for her.

The cinematography in this scene intertwines with the lighting. Outside, the light is distilled and blueish (see *Figure 2*), leaving Ada's husband alone in the expansive wilderness. The lighting in the forest is important, not only in this scene, but in the film as well. *The Piano* is a period drama, but something about the light and the birdcalls gives it an 'enchanted manner of

a fairy tale,' (Canby). This overall feel of the film ties back into this sequence. The fairytale like setting makes Baines and Ada's love possible, but also slightly unreal.



*Figure 2*

While the editing is not as powerful in this scene, there are a couple editorial choices that are important. First, when Baines tells Ada to leave if she does not feel the same, a long shot is held of him, with no cuts to Ada. This establishes his isolation from her, but also his selfishness. He is oblivious to the emotion she feels for him. This emotion, though, is complicated. Their relationship has bloomed from a power play physical deal of sorts. Ada is not sure how she feels about this and neither is Baines.

The intercuts between Ada and Baines and her husband outside watching are important in furthering his isolation from them. They are seen inside together through a peephole (*Figure 3*), while he is shown starkly alone (*Figure 4*). These contrasting shots additionally play with color. Inside, the hut is warmly lit, while outside the lighting is cool. Ada's husband is alone.



*Figure 3*



*Figure 4*

Sound is important in this sequence. Throughout this scene diegetic sounds of birds can be heard. Yet, when Baines' talks about wanting Ada and tells her to leave, there are fewer birds to be heard outside. The focus is entirely on his words. When he stops talking, one bird lets out a sad cry. This physical cry mirror Baines' cry for Ada. Up until now, we have only seen him as a tough wild man, but now he shows vulnerability.

When Ada finally hugs Baines, music starts. The film's score, composed by Michael Nymand, is predominantly piano pieces as the film centers on Ada and her piano. This scene's score is different. It is all strings, with no piano. This helps to represent Ada and Baines' turning point in their relationship. Before this, their relationship centered around the deal they made with

the piano. Now, though, it has moved on from that; it is something new and powerful. The score cuts off when the scene cuts to Ada's husband approaching the house. This allows the audience to see that while they may have their love, there are still problems that will come from it, particularly Ada's husband.

This sequence is a major turning point in this film. It sets the stage for the second half of the film, which questions Ada and Baines' relationship, and begins to focus on Stuart's pent up lust and anger for Ada. It additionally encompasses many important themes of the film, which are able to come out through the setting and the time period. While it is set in New Zealand in the 1850s, its ideas and themes of sexuality and desire transcend time allowing it to be so impactful, which can be seen through its reception.

*The Piano* was very well received when it was released, first at Cannes, winning the Palme d'Or, and upon its public release. It additionally went on to win three Oscars, and almost all the awards at the Australian Film Institute awards ("The Piano"). Upon its initial release Kenneth Turan, film critic from the *LA Times*, said of the film: 'it offers a complete way of seeing, an uncompromised view of the world by a writer-director whose command of the visual and emotional aspects of filmmaking is fearless and profound' (Turan). This initial praise seems to have held up over time. In a 2008 review of the film, Nathaniel Rogers of *Film Experience* deemed it 'a masterwork of humanism' (Rogers). It was not only well received critically, but also amongst public, grossing 40 million dollars in the US alone ("The Piano").

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