

A Dabrowskian Interpretation of the movie The Piano.

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"No genuine mental conflicts, that is to say, conflicts involving self-consciousness and authenticity, can be solved by any means other than the individual's conscious effort and inner growth." (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1970, p. 119).

Plot Overview:

The opening scene is of a strange, undecipherable and distorted view of reality. We slowly see that we are looking at things through the eyes of Ada, the principal character in the film. She is holding her hands over her face and we are peering out with her, looking through the tangle of her fingers - our first look at what many would say is Ada's self-imposed prison. Ada, walking across a field on the grounds of a large, Scottish estate (set in 1847), then tells us in narration that we are hearing her mind's voice not her speaking voice and that she has not spoken since age six - no one knows why, not even her. Her communication link with the world is her piano - and her nine year old daughter, Flora. Ada narrates that her father has arranged a marriage for her with a man in New Zealand and she and her daughter are preparing to leave, taking her prized piano with her. She explains "My husband said my muteness does not bother him. He writes and hark this: God loves dumb creatures, so why not he!"

Ada and Flora are dropped off on a rugged, isolated beach where they and the piano await her husband, Stewart. The next day, Stewart and his neighbor, George Baines, arrive with a group of Maori Natives. Stewart's difficulty in understanding Ada is immediate, when she won't speak, he yells at her as if she is deaf. Stewart (and the Natives) overtly examine Ada, Stewart telling Baines that his first impression is that she is "stunted." When they set off for "home," Stewart refuses to take her piano and she is forced to leave it on the beach. Their new home is a cabin in dense, bleak and semi-remote bush with mud a foot deep, everywhere in sight.

Several days later Ada convinces Baines to take her back to the beach where she spends the afternoon playing the piano while Flora plays. Baines may not fully understand Ada's rapture but he "is

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finds that Ada has carved the outline of a piano keyboard into the kitchen table. He seeks advice from the English matriarch of the nearby village, Aunt Morag. He is mystified by Ada's lack of affection and he can't understand why she sits "playing" the keys on the table - "What would you think if someone played a kitchen table like it were a piano? It's strange, isn't it? I mean, it's not a piano, it doesn't make any sound." Stewart's conclusion: "I knew she was mute, but now I'm thinking it's more than that. I'm wondering if she's not brain-affected."

Baines retrieves the piano by volunteering to buy it from Stewart (by trading land for it - Stewart's God) under the guise that he wants to learn to play and Stewart agrees that Ada would make a fine teacher. The piano is placed in Baines's cabin where he has it cleaned and tuned (by a blind piano tuner). Baines suggests to Ada that he will sell the piano back to her a few keys at a time in exchange for intimate favors - he wants to touch her leg, to see her naked and eventually to have her lay beside him naked and she easily agrees.

After laying naked, Baines breaks off the arrangement and simply gives the piano back as he feels their pact is wrong - it is not how he wants to know Ada. The piano is placed back in her home with Stewart but Ada now refuses to play.

After leaving Flora unhappily behind, Ada returns to see Baines and he explains that he is very depressed because he is in love with her: "Ada, I am unhappy because I want you, because my mind has seized on you and thinks of nothing else. This is how I suffer. I am sick with longing. I don't eat, I don't sleep. If you do not want me, if you have come with no feeling for me, then go!" Flora meets Stewart on the path and out of anger at being left behind, informs him that Ada has gone "TO HELL." Stewart proceeds to Baines's shack where he voyeuristically watches Ada and Baines make passionate love. The audience sees an ambiguous implication that Ada is able to whisper something in Baines's ear.

The next day Ada is on the rough path on her way to Baines again when Stewart stops her. He tries to rape her but she is able to struggle free.

Stewart bars the doors and windows to keep Ada in the house while he is away working on the land. Eventually Stewart agrees to trust her and he takes down the bars. Immediately Ada carves a message on a piano key that says "Dear George you have my heart, Ada McGrath." Ada gives the message to Flora to take to Baines but instead, in a new alliance with "Papa," she takes it to show Stewart. Stewart returns to the house swinging an axe, first striking the table where Ada is sitting, then hitting the piano. He seizes Ada and drags her outside where he cuts off her index finger, saying that every time she sees Baines, he will cut off another. He gives the finger to Flora to take to give to Baines.

While Ada is recovering, asleep, Stewart calmly lectures Ada that she made him angry and says "I meant to love you. I clipped your wing that is all." Stewart tries to have intercourse with her. She awakes and looks into his eyes and the two share a silent communication. Stewart goes to see

Baines. He says that Ada has silently "spoken" to him and her words are now in his head. Stewart tells Baines: "She said: I am afraid of my will, of what it might do, it is so strange and strong. She said I have to go, let me go, let Baines take me away, let him try and save me."

We see Ada dressed and ready to leave, her face a blank and deathly mask. Baines, Ada and Flora settle into a large Maori canoe, manned by a number of Natives. The piano is lashed across the canoe with ropes. While sailing up the ocean coastline, Ada has been gazing down into the water, running her hand in the current. She suddenly decides that the piano must be thrown overboard, signing to Flora that it is "spoiled." To save tipping the boat, Baines agrees to the request and the piano is thrown into the water with some ropes still attached. With a calm and detached look, Ada sees a rope unraveling into the water and quickly, deliberately places her foot into the coil. She is dragged overboard. Initially, for what seems like minutes, we see Ada "floating" as she is pulled to the bottom. She is not struggling against the rope and her face looks calm and peaceful. Suddenly she begins to frantically struggle and is able to kick her shoe off and free herself. Just after she breaks the surface, we again hear her voice in narration saying:

"What a death!
 What a chance!
 What a surprise!
 My will has chosen life?
 Still it has had me spooked, and many others besides!"

In the closing scenes, we see Ada now living happily in a white picket fence house with Baines. The audience is given a mere glimpse of Flora doing a cartwheel in the background. Ada is seen walking on the porch sounding out words, she is wearing a black cloth over her head (embarrassed by her efforts to relearn to speak). While most of what we hear is unintelligible, we can hear her sounding out "death." In a voice over, Ada narrates that she now teaches piano using a metal finger he has made for her. In her narration she tells us: "At night I think of my piano in its ocean grave, and sometimes of myself floating above it. Down there everything is so still and silent that it lulls me to sleep. It is a weird lullaby and so it is; it is mine."

The movie ends with her reciting this quote:

"There is a silence where hath been no sound
 There is a silence where no sound may be
 In the cold grave, under the deep deep sea"
 Thomas Hood.

Note: Holly Hunter plays the solo piano parts in the film.

[Dabrowski:](#)

We all see a movie like this in our own way and the connections with a theory like Dabrowski's may

seem certain and still may contain a wide latitude for interpretation. It is ultimately up to our own sense of how we understand Dabrowski and how we see these characters on the screen.

It is easy to see the differences between Stewart with his staid, unemotional and linear view of life and Baines. Baines is more sensitive to both others and to his own internal moods, key features of multilevelness, and he is able to clearly express his emotions to Ada. His depression at the prospect of not being able to be with her is another illustration of his strong psychoneurosis.

Ada poses a somewhat more difficult interpretation to make. Initially, I focused on the final scenes in isolation and felt they were symbolic of Ada taking control of her life and of her development - a transition that I associated with the transition from Level III to Level IV - from spontaneous to directed or organized multilevel disintegration. However, after seeing the movie several times to prepare for this presentation, I think on balance her behavior throughout the movie suggests the deep ambiguity and ambivalence more associated with Level II. At times, her emotions and loyalty seem equally split between Stewart, Baines Flora and the piano.

Throughout the movie, Ada remains for the most part depressed and withdrawn - literally and symbolically mute. She seems unable to alter her course, her mood and the environment (relentless rain and mud) seem to parallel each other. In a sense she seems to be floating through events as they unfold (there are several critical "floating scenes" in the movie - one, the "axe scene" - after her finger is severed we see her slowing floating down to the ground riding on the billowing hoop of her Victorian skirt, another at the end when we see her floating above the piano in her dream). We see her conflict and ambiguity in her half-hearted attempts to form an intimacy with Stewart while at the same time she sees Baines. Her relationship with Flora is also a concern - at times Flora seems more an assistant or simple foil to Ada than her daughter, at other times, Ada seems quite detached from Flora altogether. Her behavior with Baines initially appears detached and unemotional - a disgusting economic bargain to get back the piano, but her passion is eventually aroused and becomes overwhelming (she literally pushes aside both Flora and Stewart in her final quests to see Baines).

"Disintegration is unilevel (or horizontal) if there are protracted and recurrent conflicts between drives and emotional states of a similar developmental level and of the same intensity, e.g., states of ambivalence and ambitendency, propulsion toward and repulsion from the same object, rapidly changing states of joy and sadness, excitement and depression without the tendency toward stabilization within a hierarchy. It is characteristic of unilevel disintegration that conflicts are accompanied by a lack or by a minimal degree of consciousness and self-consciousness, self-control and ability to transform stimuli " (Dabrowski Kawczak and Piechowski, p.165, 1970).

Ada first exerts herself and her sense of what she wants when she "tells" Stewart (apparently through telepathy) that she wants to go away with Baines. Stewart agrees that this course is best for everyone and we see the departure, perhaps thinking that Ada now has what she wants, a loving relationship, Flora and her piano. But we shortly see that this resolution has addressed only part of Ada's problem - there is another, more critical inner resolution that she has to face. This final resolution occurs in two

critical steps.

First, Ada's decision to throw the piano overboard can be seen as a conscious and calculated attempt to break with her past. The piano has become a symbol of Ada's past and even of her death. A Maori boatman says: "She's right. It's a coffin. Let the sea bury it." It is very much her piano - her coffin - and, as we eventually see, her grave. The piano is also the link to her muteness and now that she is on her new journey with Baines, it seems time to "bury it" and move ahead into a genuinely "new" chapter of life - a rebirth of sorts, beginning with learning to speak.

Second, Ada's conscious decision to catch her foot in the rope was her own personal showdown with herself - with her will - with her inner psychic milieu. We have the distinct impression that this will is wild ("strange and strong") and, in a significant way, a stranger to Ada. She consciously creates the opportunity -- as she emphasizes: "What a chance!" -- to discover herself, not fully confident of the final outcome. As it turns out, her will chooses life and we see that she is both surprised and relieved at this outcome: "What a surprise! My will has chosen life? Still it has had me spooked, and many others besides!" By a conscious self-confrontation - a confronting of her very death, Ada is able to achieve a deep personal breakthrough - an integration of herself, her will and her new life - George and Flora. This interpretation suggests it is only now that she begins the path of personal growth, illustrated in the film by her halting efforts to learn to speak. She has joined with her will and taken control of herself and she is no longer in conflict.

In closing, a final ambiguity is introduced in her dream sequence. She tells us in her narration that at times, when she is alone, she dreams of being rejoined with her piano in its mute ocean grave. We are left somewhat confused - who is the "real" Ada? The "new," learning to speak Ada, or the still mute (now, forever mute) Ada in her underwater grave with her piano?

Level III, spontaneous multilevel disintegration, is a level characterized by "intense emotional experiences and spontaneously developing conflicts of value" (Dabrowski, p. 305, 1972). Dabrowski described level IV, organized multilevel disintegration, as a level characterized by a high level of self awareness. The individual is able to take control of their development and eventually, external conflicts disappear and internal conflicts become less overwhelming and less intense. "Organized multilevel disintegration is a stage of recognition and classification of difficulties, taking them into one's own hands and incorporating them into a development leading toward a clearly perceived personality ideal. The higher the development of disintegration the stronger is the role of integrating forces" (Dabrowski, p. 106, 1972).

Conclusion:

I think one of the issues facing the Theory of Positive Disintegration is to better understand, describe and appreciate role models of advanced development. A number of exemplars have been advanced over the years and a number of objections raised over each one. There does not appear to be a consensus about any one role model today. Dabrowski could not find living examples of the highest

levels, so relied on biographies. This approach has a number of problems associated with it, one, the confounding aspects of notoriety - the people who are written about are "famous" for one reason or another and this may bias their story. Also, the accuracy of the source material is always a concern. Finally, we need to be careful not to fall into the trap of overgeneralizing; how well can we really know someone through secondary sources - through literature? Interpretation of fictional characters and of movie characters is also fraught with these issues. By the end of the movie, we only have a general impression of Ada's personality and character as a person.(footnote one) Clearly, we need to continue our search for better representatives of positive disintegration and of the higher levels of development. Dabrowski was confident there are many examples, it remains a question of discovering them and learning about their lives.

I anticipate (and welcome) criticism over The Piano and see it as a contribution to bringing this debate to the fore. Ada certainly illustrates the fact that it is a challenge to classify developmental levels in complex people. We also do well to remember Dabrowski's continuous reminders that people may present with a mixture of developmental levels on different dimensions. I tend to fall back to the too simplistic dichotomy of "they don't get it" (unilevel) versus "they do get it" (multilevel) and based on this notion, Ada and Baines appear to get it and Stewart does not.

Movies, and visual symbols in general, are an important element in helping people see the world and in introducing different ideas and images to feel over and to think about.

Footnote one: I think a better example of an individual in the throws of positive disintegration is a character in a German movie called Fitzcarraldo. Unfortunately, this 1982 movie by director Werner Herzog starring Klaus Kinsky, is quite obscure in North America (but has recently been released on DVD through Anchor Bay Entertainment). This is the allegedly true story of an Irish entrepreneur/mad genius named Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald who had an obsession with bringing opera (and Enrico Caruso) to the Natives deep in the Peruvian jungle (Fitzcarraldo was the nickname the Natives gave him). We are told the Jivero Indians believe that "everyday life is only an illusion behind which lies the reality of dreams." The thin line between reality and dreams is a theme of Herzog's and, as if to illustrate this, "Fitz" devises a plan to fund his opera adventure by farming raw rubber in the jungle. This scheme involved moving a 320 ton steamship over a mountain (a 40-degree incline). An equally interesting character (and some say equally crazy), Herzog filmed the actual ship being pulled over the mountain (recorded in the documentary movie Burden of Dreams). Other movies that illustrate personal development include Apocalypse Now (the character Willard), and Grand Canyon. Several levels of psychological function are obvious in Grand Canyon, from the Steve Martin, movie producer, character at level I, to the multilevelness of the Danny Glover character.

Filmography of Jane Campion (as Director):

1. Holy Smoke (1999)
2. Portrait of a Lady, The (1996)
3. Piano, The (1993)
4. Angel at My Table, An (1990)

5. Sweetie (1989)
6. Two Friends (1986) (TV)
7. After Hours (1984)
8. Girl's Own Story, A (1984)
9. Passionless Moments (1983)
10. Exercise in Discipline - Peel, An (1982)

[Note: There are several web sites on the movie.](#)

[Note: It is important to also mention that Jane Campion was initially trained as a social anthropologist, a student of the work of Levi-Strauss.]

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