

The Symbolism in *The Piano*

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Abstract—*The Piano* has been a classic of feminist film. Most scholars so far only studied this film from the perspective of feminism, while few people probed its symbolism involved in this film. In fact, in this film, the forest, the piano and the sea are all highly symbolic. These symbolic meanings not only clearly demonstrate the heroine Ada's spiritual journey in the process of her self salvation, but also greatly enhance the remarkable expressiveness of the film.

Index Terms—*The Piano*, symbolism, Ada

I. INTRODUCTION

The Piano, directed by a woman director, is a film about a female's self salvation told from the perspective of a female (Zhou, 2010). Since its release in 1993, it has been a classic in feminist films. Most scholars in the previous researches only studied this film from the perspective of feminism (see Zheng, 2008; Zhou, 2011), while few people probed the symbolism involved in this film. This paper will analyze the symbolic meanings of the forest, the piano and the sea in the film, so as to make clear of the spiritual journey in the heroine Ada's self salvation process and the remarkable expressiveness of the film.

II. THE FOREST

In the film, the forest is the background of the most of the story, but it is more than this. It has many shifting aspects, and plays a very important role in the process of Ada's self salvation.

The setting of the story is mid-Victorian times. During this period, though being treated with special courtesy publicly, women were still regarded as the lower class in the social life. According to Kate Millett, after the marriage,

Women lost the rights to the property they brought into the marriage, even following divorce; a husband had complete legal control over any income earned by his wife; women were not allowed to open banking accounts; and married women were not able to conclude a contract without her husband's legal approval. (Millett, 1999, p.109)

Some plots in the film demonstrate to the audiences the extent of women being oppressed, for instance, at the beginning of the film, Ada's father arbitrarily marries her to a man she has never met before; later, Ada's new husband Stuart disposes at will the piano Ada brought from her home and so on.

Ada is a strange woman. She refuses to speak since age 6. "I have not spoken since I was six years old. No one knows why, not even me." The speculations about the causes of Ada's muteness are various. Perhaps she suffers from the "autism" (Zhu, 2003, p.66-69) when she was small, or perhaps there has been "a long-standing incestuous relationship between father and daughter" (Izod, 1996, p.117-136), we are given no evidence which would enable us to confirm or discredit speculation. However, symbolically, considering the historical context Ada lives in and the following plot development, we can translate her muteness as the silent resistance against the ridiculous and oppressive outside environment. As it is, Ada pursues freedom and equality for all her life.

Later, Ada tells us by voiceover that she is married by her father to a man she has never met before, which perhaps is a punishment by her father for having a baby girl out of the wedlock, in Victoria times, it should be a greatest outrage. And Ada submits to her father's will in this, maybe because it is a way to survive.

When coming to New Zealand by sea along with the two most important things in her life—her daughter Flora and the piano, Ada never expects that the structures of patriarchy have been imported wholesale from the homeland. In the face of her absolute refusal to abandon the piano, her new husband Stewart declares the instrument too heavy for his men to move, and leaves it on the beach. The abandoning of the piano produces an ineradicable rift in the relationship between Ada and Stewart; And Ada resists it by refusing him conjugal rights. But this is a desperate and risky stratagem because in Stewart's mid-Victorian New Zealand, men are the decision-makers in public issues, and within the confines of family, men also control the sexuality. Stewart, though deeply repressed in his sexuality, expects to be able to exercise his rights over his wife.

Ada's new husband's dwelling lies deep within the forest, which is gradually becoming a key image in the film. At first, the forest is presented through the newcomers' eyes, as a pathless maze of thickets, trees and mud. Through the boundless confusion, travelers must force their way as best as they can. Obviously, the forest here represents the formidable physical barrier that Ada encounters when first toiling through to reach her new home, which hints at the misfortunes and setbacks in her forthcoming life.

Later, Stewart's estate manager Baines falls in love with Ada. Unlike Stewart, who is handsome and wealthy, Baines, an illiterate white man, represents a distinct sub-type of the settler. Baines is a man who has "gone native" with his face tattooed with Maori markings. And he can speak Maori language and is more comfortable in their company than with his fellow expatriates.

Pitying her as she yearns for the piano, Baines buys the instrument from Stewart at the cost of an 80-acre land. (With marriage, ownership of even Ada's most treasured possession has passed to her husband.) Baines has it carried from the beach to his own house and restores to good order. He pretends to Stewart that he wants music lessons, but when Ada first comes to his house, quickly corrects Ada of any such idea. He wants to hear her play. During one lesson, Baines strikes a bargain with Ada by which she earns back one of the piano's keys for each visit and in return allows him to caress her as she plays. In order to get back the piano, Ada accepts the deal. Thus, the two people take the "piano lesson" in this unique way.

During the following days, in order to give Baines the music lessons, Ada finds her way through the forest. Seen through Ada's eyes, the forest gradually changes from being the formidable physical barrier, and it could be seen that there are pathways across the mud that lies deep around the encampment. Ada could walk around with less extreme difficulty. Her observance and exploration of the outside world gradually triggers that of her inner world. The primitive natural environment has a subtle influence on her, and it eventually becomes a mysterious expressions of her state of mind.

Although Ada remains outwardly unresponsive, with Baines' caresses becoming more intimate, something subtle gradually changes in Ada's heart. In a session, Ada suddenly finds Baines not present; she seems to feel something missing in the mind. So she pauses playing and gets up to look for Baines. Drawing apart the cloth curtain with curiosity, Ada finds Baines standing there in the nude. Ada instinctively gives out an exclamation but does not run out of the room like most girls usually would. Then Baines persuades Ada to lie beside him unclothed. Though with blank expression and stiff muscles, Ada does so as told.

After this incident, Baines abruptly brings the arrangement to an end, and decides to send the piano back to Ada, telling her, "The arrangement is making you a whore and me wretched. I want you to care for me, but you can't." By these words, Baines clearly tells Ada that what he wants is her love, not her body. And this incident finally makes Ada realize that only Baines can give her true love.

When her piano is installed in her husband's home, Ada walks uncertainly away from the house while Stewart directs Flora to play a tune. She aimlessly wanders in front of the door. The camera tracks with her until it settles on a shot of tree trunks, through which the eye could find no passage. Both the camera and Ada remain motionless. Ada is gazing into the forests which seem to submerge her. As we later understand, Ada has reached a crux in her inner life and has been lost in the middle of the soul's dark forest. As Marie-Louise von Franz notes, the forest is the place where all things grow, faced with some puzzling event, the heroines in the fairy tales usually have to withdraw temporarily into the woods and not go back into life.

From the outside it looks like complete stagnation, but in reality it is a time of initiation and incubation when a deep inner split is cured and inner problems are solved. This motif forms a contrast to the more active quest of the male hero, who has to go into the Beyond and try to slay the monster, or find the treasure, or the bride. (von Franz, 1993, p.106)

At this point, the forest is a highly symbolic image. It is a soul-curing and initiation place. It is in here, the deep inner split and inner problems in Ada get cured. Under the mysterious revelation of the forest, Ada makes the choice: she would listen to the need of her body and her soul. The next day, Ada gets rid of Flora's pestering and runs toward Baines's hut, seeking him out and leading him into love.

Yet the forest also takes on another image. There exists a contrast between the scenes outside Stewart's house and Baines's hut. Outside Stewart's house the trees are gray, withered and half dead. While around Baines' hut, the trees are green and prosperous, blending in with the surrounding forest. In any literature, wild forest is loaded with sexual symbolic meanings. The grey and half-dead trees outside Stewart's house symbolize his sexual impotency. In the film, Stewart, materialistic in nature, pays more attention to land and money than to Ada, which makes him unconscious of his sexual desires; this point is clearly demonstrated by his reaction to Flora's naïve sexual behavior.

Forced to find her own amusements by her mother's preoccupation with her own affairs, Flora begins to use the forest as a playground and a way of exploring the world. Her sense of the forest converges with her mother's in being an expression of her inner state of mind. After spying on her mother making love, Flora leads the indigenous children in a grotesque mimicry of making love to the trees, much to the amusement of the Maori elders. But in Stewart's eyes, she has defiled herself and the white community. He impresses this on her by making her whitewash all the trunks that the children have played with. It makes the trees look as though they were dying. In this guise the trees seem to be a metaphor for Stewart's emotional deadness.

Baines, however, treats his own sexual desires as naturally as the trees growing outside his hut. He believes that physical contact is the natural expression of love. In the process of pursuing Ada, his only method is caressing her affectionately in the piano music. Even when Ada is absent, Baines uses his underwear to wipe the piano to substitute the physical contact with Ada. Intrigued by the primitive vitality and natural desire, Ada, a woman nurtured by European civilization, turns over to Baines without much hesitation.

To sum up, the forest is more than the background of the most of the story. At the beginning, it symbolizes the

formidable physical barrier, foreshadowing the misfortunes in Ada's forthcoming life. However, when Ada is experiencing an inner split, the woods play the role of the soul sanctuary, helping her make the right choice. Another image of the forest is the sexual symbolic meanings that it contains, which implicitly tells us why Ada chooses Baines.

III. THE PIANO

The piano is the most important prop in the film. It is the link between the characters. Almost all the plots are involved with the piano. The piano is also highly symbolic. It means different things to Ada in her different life phases. By analyzing the symbolic meanings of the piano, we can clearly trace the spiritual journey of Ada in her self salvation.

Ada's life begins in the mid-Victorian Scotland. One unique aspect of her life is the absence of her mother and any brothers or sisters. The arbitrary father is all she has (The primal authority of her father is indicated by his autocratic decision to marry her to a man she has never seen before). Since age 6, Ada has refused to speak, and indulged in the world of the piano. The piano is the pivot of her life. Because of the existence of the musical language, Ada does not feel it much inconvenient losing the power of speech. She says, "I don't think myself silent, that is, because of my piano." Her muteness is symbolically the female's losing of the discourse power in the social life. It is a silent resistance to the oppressive patriarchy. At this phase, the piano is the spiritual haven for Ada. She uses the piano to express the romanticism in her soul. However, on the other hand, immersing in this spiritual haven also brings Ada one serious consequence, that is, she is isolated from the real life, she has no friends no access to the outside world. At the beginning of the film, there is a long close-up of Ada peering at the audience through the bars of the jail, which gradually turn out to be her fingers. This close-up demonstrates that Ada is only a passive observer of the life and she desires to enter into the real life. This can explain why the piano is referred in the film many times as a "coffin".

Mainly because of the piano, the first meeting between Ada and her new husband Stewart on the beach produces an irremovable effect to their relationship. Though Ada opposes strongly, her new husband relentlessly declares the instrument too heavy and the road too muddy, and orders his men to carry all other belongs but the piano. This patriarchal style is consistent with his later selling Ada's piano without consulting with her for a piece of land. Through his two moves —"abandoning the piano" and "selling the piano", Ada sees through his patriarchal and materialist nature, therefore, completely closes up the door of emotions to him.

In fact, Stewart's hierarchal demeanor is not only revealed in his conscious oppression of females, but also in his rapine of the Maoris. He often swindles the Maoris out of their lands at the ridiculous cost such as tobacco, blankets, shotguns even candies. In this sense, he is also the representative of the Victorian colonial policy.

Having no choice but to leave the piano on the beach, Ada reluctantly goes with her new husband to her new home, standing on the cliff, Ada turns over and yearningly gazes at the piano as though it were her soul. The conjunction of the wild shore and this potent symbol of Victorian gentility forms a bizarre and mysterious picture. It is a highly symbolic scene, which is enhanced when we discover that the instrument has magically suffered little harm from its prolonged exposure.

Also for the sake of the piano, Ada and Baines begin the contact with each other. A scene on the beach foreshadows the future development of the film. For example, among the group, only Baines notices the inner state of Ada. When Stewart asks him opinions of Ada, apparently, concerning about Ada's appearances, Baines gives an irrelevant answer, "She looks tired." And his answer probably is the one and only comfortable words that Ada hears on the beach. This detail lays the foundation for the next scene that Ada seeks his help to see the piano at the beach when Stewart is absent.

On seeing the piano, Ada with her daughter gleefully run toward it, and plays on it promptly. The usually detached and serious expression on Ada's face is replaced by a brilliant and heartfelt smile. As though affected by the music, Flora is dancing on the beach like an angel. Intrigued by the scene, Baines gazes at Ada without winking his eyes. He is wondering at the magic power of the piano. Or something in her music appears to be stirring in his soul. At the same time, he finds himself deeply fascinated by this "icy" woman, which is demonstrated by his choosing to follow in the footsteps of Ada and her daughter Flora when leaving the beach when it get dark.

Contrast to Baines's sensitiveness and inclination toward the piano music, Stewart completely lacks of it. Not that he is entirely untouched by the arts; but his dull soul seems to have been stirred only by Bluebeard's grotesque melodrama, which he later mimics crudely in attacking Ada with his axe.

After that, Baines begins to pursue Ada in his own coarse but sincere way. First, he buys the piano from Stewart at the cost of 80 acres of fertile land on excuse of wanting to play the instrument himself. Then, in one piano cession, he strikes a deal with Ada that she could earn back the piano by allowing him to caress her as she plays. However, while caressing Ada, Baines does not show any greed or aggressiveness or effrontery, instead he is always cautious, step by step, knowing when to stop, and with so much adoration as though toward a goddess. And this heartfelt caress gradually melts cold and detached Ada, something changed in Ada's heart.

And Ada's piano-playing is also significant in her slowly developing relationship with Baines. Through the piano, Ada not only expresses the romanticism of her soul, but also the unconscious impulses that drive her. It is rightly described by Stewart's aunt Morag as "a mood that passes through you... a sound that creeps into you." and we can see that in her relationship with Baines, her music is the catalyst for them both in the gradual release of their deep-seated sexual and spiritual regressions.

Owing to failure to get Ada's explicit reaction to his loving caress, Baines decides to return the instrument to Ada.

And this move eventually dawns on Ada that only Baines can give her equal and true love.

To Ada, the significance of the piano becomes different after she enters into a relationship with Baines. In the past, because first her own father and then her husband commanded so much authority in her life, they exerted a godlike power over her. To resist this patriarchal oppression, Ada committed herself to muteness, and the piano became her haven of her soul. Now, Baines, like a fairy tale hero, frees her from oppression and slavery, and will marry her in an equal relationship. Ada does not need to resort to the piano as the haven of soul. To express her love to Baines, there is nothing more proper than the piano. So the first thing after Ada gets free of the patriarchal oppression is to take down one of the piano keys and engrave these words "You have my heart" and has it sent to Baines. Later on, after receiving Stuart's brutal punishment, Ada and Baines leave New Zealand along with Flora and the piano. On the sea, Ada demands the seamen to sink the piano into the sea. Because at this phase, the piano has become a burden that Ada wants to get rid of.

To sum up, the piano means different things to Ada in her different life phases. In face of the patriarchal oppression first represented by her own father second by her husband, Ada commits herself to muteness, resorting to the piano as her haven of soul. At the same time, by indulging in the piano world, Ada's life is sadly penned up; she has no contact with the real world and other people. So, the piano is also a "coffin" to Ada. After finding the true and equal love in Baines, Ada does not need to indulge in the piano; she yearns to enter into the real life, that is why she first breaks the "coffin", and then sinks it into the sea.

IV. THE SEA

In the film, the sea is not proportionally as important as the forest and the piano; still it is an important symbol. Without it, the film will slip into the vulgar vein of other books with its "happy ending".

While Ada and Baines are leaving New Zealand, on the sea, the huge piano is balanced precariously across the boat's transom. When the wind picks up, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the seamen to control the balance of the boat. Suddenly Ada begins to panic that the instrument's weight would unbalance them, and the reassurances of Baines couldn't soothe her. Ada commands the bewildered seamen to throw the piano overboard; Baines swiftly intuits the urgency of her need and jettisons it. But as the piano is sinking, Ada's foot suddenly gets entangled in one of the binding ropes, and is dragged after it into the deeps. While it sucks her down, Ada gazes around calmly for a period, apparently reconciled to the death that she seems to have willed. Then, without premonition, she slips her shoe out of the knot that holds it and frees herself: only when facing death, as she later reports with astonishment, does her will unexpectedly choose life.

Hitherto, Ada has been searching for her innermost nature. As we have seen, when Ada first comes to the colony, in the strange forest, she becomes confused, unable to find her way, and later, when Stewart tries to force her to love him by attempting rape, she was literally tangled in the vines. But it was then and there that Ada discovered the beginning of her new life. However, the culmination of her own search into her innermost nature occurs in that half-willed dive into the ocean's deeps. It suggests that she is at risk of committing a passive suicide until the moment when she chooses life. In symbolic sense, an encounter with the desire for suicide can be a symbolic expression of bringing an end to an old way of life before embarking on a new one. In other words, the death of the old life of the psyche is the prerequisite to resurgence into the new. Therefore, the sea here symbolizes Ada completely bids farewell to her past self and past life and gets rejuvenation.

At the end of the film, Ada, Baines and Flora form a happy family. Ada makes a living by teaching the piano, and she is practicing the rediscovered art of speech, because the musical language alone cannot satisfy her need. Although she has not yet rediscovered her power to speech, a sense of loss stood by the sunken piano often haunts her dreams and draws her mind down again and again into the dark depths of the unconscious and the contemplation of her death; Ada has basically achieved her desirable life, and got a free and equal life. With courageous struggle, she eventually obtains self salvation.

V. CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, in the film the forest, the piano and the sea all involve rich symbolic meanings. These symbolic meanings not only clearly demonstrate the heroine Ada's spiritual journey in the process of her self salvation, but also enhance the film's extraordinary expressiveness.

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