

**TWO GOTHIC FEMINIST TEXTS: EMILY BRONTË'S  
*WUTHERING HEIGHTS* AND  
THE FILM, *THE PIANO*, BY JANE CAMPION.**

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Emily Brontë's novel and Campion's film not only are distant in time, but they also belong to different aesthetic disciplines. However, their two plots share many aspects and there is direct influence of the novel on the film. In this article we have explored the Gothic and "romantic" elements that they have in common. Campion's feminist re/vision of Victorianism reveals a celebratory nostalgia of the Gothic feminist style but, by using a contemporary perspective, it becomes a new and appealing approach to the period.

The feminist film critic and theorist Patricia Mellencamp defines the film *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) as "a Gothic fairy tale, complete with a journey, a forest, a cottage in the woods, a magical object, a prince, a kiss and a happy ever after, all made strange by obsession, the compelling force of thought" (Mellencamp 1995: 177). This critic places Jane Campion's film among the representatives of what she considers to be the third age of film feminism, "Experimental feminism". According to Mellencamp this third age is characterised by female directors' search for positive solutions for women within women's experience itself. Jane Campion's narrative, an acclaimed screenplay as well as a successful and popular film, takes the search back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and combines it with relevant postcolonial claims related to her own experience and political views as a born New Zealander.

Mellencamp bases her assertion of the Gothic qualities of this text on the profoundly disturbing psychological elements that are present in it, which she identifies with "terrifying occurrences that happen amid the strangeness of everyday life", described by Freud in "The Uncanny" (1955). The story of the film unravels the internal conflict of three similarly obscure characters, all of them incapable of or

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unwilling to control their passions. What appears to be the common Victorian plot of matrimonial disagreement develops, as the film progresses, into the exploration of sexual frustration in both the main male and female characters, together with the woman's struggle to obtain acknowledgement and respect for her desires and finally to be able to control her own life.

The style that has been defined by critics as "Female Gothic" and/or "Gothic Feminism" started to be produced during the last part of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Authors like Ann Radcliffe or Charlotte Smith were the predecessors of the best-known novels by Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters, which are still very popular today (the fact that *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* have been repeatedly adapted to the cinema is clear evidence of this popularity). The contribution of the Brontë sisters to this literary tradition is especially remarkable for the way their work reveals the psychological processes having to do with the sentimental education, the intellectual development and the prospects of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gilbert and Gubar provided enough evidence in *The Madwoman in the Attic* of the ways in which the Gothic aspects of their novels gave the authors an occasion to express women's anxieties.

The gothic atmosphere created by the Brontës in their fiction presents itself also as the key to the dramatic events in *The Piano*. Diane L. Hoeveler describes the feminist strategies of the Brontës' gothic novels in the following terms: "the rejection of motherhood, control of the patriarchal estate, struggle with tyrannous religious forces, overthrow of the suffocating and claustrophobic nuclear family and the celebration of education for women" (1998: 186). However, as L. Hoeveler does not fail to point out, those novels still reflect the limitations that their authors found to make of their aspirations clear feminist goals for their characters and for themselves: "each novel concludes on a compromised note. Women sometimes survive in the Brontë universe, sometimes they do not" (Hoeveler 1998: 186). The fact that Jane Campion was writing and filming this story in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century allowed her to make much more overt references to the psychological strain leading to the characters' acknowledgement of their own sexual desire than was ever possible in Victorian fiction. The feminist message that underlies Campion's fiction implies a celebration of the female gothic tradition: it recovers the flavour of the Victorian tales with a very temperate dose of nostalgia, as it is clearly apt to move the modern sensibility and address itself to contemporary audiences.

The influence of the Brontës' gothic style is corroborated by Jane Campion's acknowledgement of having used Emily Brontë's novel, *Wuthering Heights*, as a model and reference for her film. The main female characters of these two texts are representative of the type that is most typically identified for gothic heroines, namely, motherless women who are wilful and passionate and independent. In both cases the inner psychological struggle and the fight for power and control among the characters takes place in the same sort of familial context and reaches a similarly

tragic outcome. In each of the plots, and for reasons that we will explore later, the final scenes, that take the two stories to a more positive resolution, are not totally satisfactory. Campion refers to Brontë's text as "a gothic exploration of romantic impulse" (quoted in Mellencamp 1995: 177). The element of gothic implies that the passions are taken to extremes in a violent way: paternal control is challenged by the character's inclination to transgression and this situation is resolved with cruelty, nature is wild and overwhelming, and love is either a transcendental force or it is so constrained by social circumstances that it becomes empty and meaningless. The romantic characteristics refer as much to the romance story developed in both narratives as to the exploration of the power of the natural world, which seems at times to render the characters at the heed of the natural forces. The moors are a haunting presence in *Wuthering Heights* just as the lush landscape and the extreme climatic conditions influence and qualify the moods of the characters in *The Piano*.

The film narrates the story of Ada, who, we are told at the beginning, has been married off to a New Zealand settler by her father. It is immediately obvious that the man is taking this opportunity to get rid of a daughter who would be very difficult to marry among their neighbours: she has been mute since childhood and is the mother of an illegitimate child. Her muteness is one of the most strange and powerful features of this character. At the beginning of the film, Ada's inner voice informs the audience that she chose to stop speaking at the age of six, out of no organic cause, and for reasons that no one remembers. Elaine Showalter recognised aphasia as one of the common symptoms present in many of the cases of hysteria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Showalter 1987). However, Ada's case does not take the form of a hysterical symptom. Her aphasia is described repeatedly as an outstanding evidence of the strength of Ada's will and the power of her mind. Through the letter that Stewart has received from her father, we are informed that she has played the piano competently since she was five. Her refusal to use the paternal language at the age of six does not leave her without expression, because she has her piano as a vehicle for an intimate language of her own. Being able to hear Ada's "inner voice" in her piano-playing requires a sensibility that both her father and husband lack.

One of the most relevant preliminary similarities between these two gothic plots is that they take place within a familial unit that functions as a surrogate and at the same time a deviation from the nuclear patriarchal family, which had established itself as the base of the Victorian social structure. The group of people that Lockwood meets in his first visit to *Wuthering Heights* only have the *appearance* of a family. He misunderstands the relations that exist among them, first assuming Catherine II to be Heathcliff's wife and then Hareton's, whom he also mistakes for Heathcliff's son. The strange absence of familial links between the three characters is complementary to the roughness with which they treat one another. As the novel progresses Nelly Dean's tale unfolds the remarkable circumstances that have led to this state of affairs. The reader will then realise that the situation has been inherited from the original destabilisation of the Earnshaw family provoked by

the arrival of Heathcliff, the adopted gypsy. For all the members of the house, except for Catherine I, Heathcliff is an intruder, who, by becoming the father's favourite, will alter the family's balance of power and authority. Gilbert and Gubar pertinently read Heathcliff's irruption into the family as the fulfilment of Cathy's wish for a whip, an expression of of the younger child's ambition to become empowered:

Catherine gets her whip. She gets it figuratively—in the form of a 'gypsy brat'—rather than literally, but nevertheless 'it' (both whip and brat) functions just as she must unconsciously have hoped it would, smashing her rival-brother's fiddle and making a desirable third among the children in the family so as to insulate her from the pressure of her brother's domination. (Gilbert and Gubar 1984 [1979]: 264)

Heathcliff's arrival and his deep attachment to Cathy works to give her autonomy and power to do as she wishes, that is, to reject paternal authority; and the two children grow in an atmosphere of wild freedom. Their affection and mutual dependency is later reinforced by their complicity to overcome the tyranny of the eldest brother, after the death of the father. In a similar way, Ada's rejection of the paternal language and her adoption of the language of the piano provides her with the opportunity to oppose the father: he can only powerlessly complain at the strength of Ada's purpose by declaring that "the day she takes into her head to stop breathing will be her last". This way, the attachment to Heathcliff and to the instrument in each case is part of a fantasy of power for a small child; it is a magic object through which both of them give voice to their desire.

As Catherine I and Ada reach the age of sexual development their "magic objet" acquires another aspect as the vehicle of sensuous desire, therefore a fetish of their passion. The awakening of the adolescent Catherine I and Heathcliff to love and sexuality signals the development of the playfully transgressive comradeship they had since childhood into a sort of union of souls. Thus, Cathy claims about Heathcliff that "He is more myself than I am" (Brontë 1992 [1847]: 97); on her part, Ada, linking the birth of her daughter to the instrument and to her music instructor, plays the piano in a way that no one else does. In different but equivalent ways, Ada and Catherine I exert active resistance to patriarchal control by giving course to their passion and by their actual transgression.

Ada's psychological strength is dramatised through her arrival in New Zealand at the beginning of the film: after a tiresome journey to the island, Ada and her daughter Flora are cast on the beach and remain there all night, as they wait to be picked up by her husband. On the morning of the next day Stewart crosses the jungle towards the beach in the company of a group of Maori men and another British settler, Baines, as an interpreter. As he approaches, he nervously fumbles inside his pocket and takes out a very small portrait of Ada in a frame. He gazes

attentively into it; then, he produces a comb and begins to brush his hair while he uses Ada's portrait as a mirror. This brief scene is an indication of the kind of relationship Stewart is to establish with his wife: when he, as the husband, looks at the woman what he really expects to see is himself. Stewart is convinced that having a wife must contribute to his respectability and his marriage overseas can therefore be interpreted as consequence of his ambition to obtain the conventionally prescribed forms of power within the patriarchal state. His prejudice against women is also made evident by the comment he makes about Ada's "weakness" when he first meets her on the beach. He thinks she is weak even though she has travelled alone all the way from England, and even though she has spent the whole night out by the sea in a foreign land and has not shown any sign of fear or vulnerability. Stewart has not *looked at* Ada, he *has seen through* her in the light of his own previous assumptions. Stewart represents Victorian society's repression and conventionality in a particular setting, at the early moments of the British colonization of New Zealand, where much of his attachment to British customs seems strangely foreign.

Stewart proves incapable of identifying the passionate relation that Ada has established with the piano, and decides to leave it behind on the beach, depriving his wife of her most precious possession. Ada feels humiliated and furious at this utter lack of respect and understanding and exerts her peculiar manner of silent opposition. Stella Bruzzi describes Ada's husband as "a character who is socially defined, obsessively aware (but not in control) of his territory, his whiteness and his role as head of the household" (1997: 58). The fact that his wife refuses to meet his sexual demands is also evidence of his lack of control. But their neighbour, Baines, has heard Ada play and is immediately seduced by the rich sensuality she displays in her music. He arranges to buy the piano from Stewart, thus procuring himself access to Ada, who is to teach him how to play. In a powerfully disturbing scene, he begins to touch her clothes and her body and settles an agreement with her so that she can win her instrument back through a commerce of garments of her clothes and caresses in exchange for piano keys. Progressively, what had begun as an instance of sexual abuse and exploitation develops into an intimate and reciprocal sexual relationship between Ada and Baines. This leaves Stewart only the dubious satisfaction of becoming a *voyeur*. He broods over his sexual frustration until his need for control and his resentment are so unbearable that his response to the situation becomes increasingly violent: he repeatedly attempts to rape his wife, shuts her inside his own cabin and finally takes revenge by severing her finger.

Heathcliff's reaction at his rejection by Catherine I is similarly violent, though it is not directed against Catherine I herself but against both the Lintons and the Earnshaws and against women in general as representatives of gender difference and of the sexual impulse that has caused his disgrace. Isabella Linton Heathcliff, as his wife and "property", becomes the most direct target of this hatred, in various forms of physical and psychological aggression. The blows and attacks that he addresses to

Catherine II are progressively atoned by her own resistance as well as by her resemblance to her mother in both looks and spirit.

When Ada, Flora and the piano arrive in New Zealand, there is a very close relationship between mother and daughter. Their affection is also related to the instrument, for Ada is the centre of a triangular emotional unit that presents itself as an emotionally satisfying, however unconventional, nuclear family (the piano standing for the passion that gave origin to the child rather than for the absent father himself). But they have travelled all the way to form another family, or rather, a “non family” with a stranger. The closeness of mother and daughter is beautifully represented in the film by means of the resemblance of their looks and clothes, through their encompassed movements and by the sign language that they use to communicate with one another, which no one else can understand. Their intimacy, which is to be shattered by the actions of the two male protagonists, is also intensified by the contrast between them and the rest of the inhabitants of the island, both with the Maori dwellers and with the hypocritical prejudice and light-hearted superiority of the rest of the British settlers. This contrast is two-fold, because Ada and her piano represent a profoundly rooted cultural development and an artistic sensitivity—in Mellencamp’s words, “it is a sign of European women’s training and accomplishment” (1995: 179)— whereas the cultural display of the rest of the community, a dramatised version of the tale of Bluebeard, strikes us as ridiculous due to the scandalised reaction that its explicit violence against women will cause in the assumed “savage natives”. On the other hand Ada’s education represents a gap with Baines’ illiteracy of the same sort as the gap that exists in *Wuthering Heights* between Catherine I and Heathcliff, and later on between Hareton and Catherine II. In *The Piano* the most direct consequence of this gap is that the two of them cannot communicate except by using Flora as an interpreter or through a progressively more elaborate form of body language.

In *Wuthering Heights* the withdrawal of the opportunity to become educated is presented as one of the most cruel forms of oppression for both Heathcliff and Hareton. While it points to Emily Brontë’s views on the subject of the education of women, teaching Hareton to read and write is liberating, not only for him but for the conflicting positions among the characters living in The Heights. Hareton and Catherine II perpetuate the union of their predecessors, Heathcliff and Catherine I. Her teaching does away with the barriers that had made the latter’s union impossible, so that through their marriage they can be redeemed of the sins committed in the past.

Ada and Baines’ illicit interchange of piano keys for caresses will give her the opportunity not only to recover her piano, but also to achieve the recognition and realisation of her own sexuality. Her deal with Baines, settled as a consequence of his position of control and her need, does not debase Ada; rather, it opens the path for her to discover and express her own sexual desire as a liberating force: “The strength of the affair in *The Piano*”, says Stella Bruzzi, “lies in Ada’s

responsiveness; she is no longer the passive Victorian woman, acted upon rather than acting" (1993: 241). Eventually, they communicate through the music of the piano and the intimacy of their caresses, in what Jami Bernard has called "Eros as communication" (1995: 78).

In both narratives the irruption of a third party breaks the solid union between the female protagonist and her fetish. This fact affects them deeply, bringing Catherine I to a state of moral devastation and taking Ada into herself, her strong will concentrated on recovering her instrument. In order to do so she must comply with the obscure wishes of Baines, and this forces her to keep her daughter Flora at a distance; just as Cathy felt forced to renounce Heathcliff in order to achieve the prescribed union with a male of her class and education in marriage. In both texts the characters break their natural attachment: Catherine I's marriage makes Heathcliff demand: "Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy?" (Brontë 1992 [1847]: 199) and Ada's cold disposition causes Flora's impotent resentment towards her mother.

From a modern point of view Catherine I's rejection of Heathcliff is complicated by its social implications, but in both cases the situation reveals different aspects of a psychological conflict related with adolescent sexuality. While Flora's glance on the "primal scene" triggers her discovery of sexual impulse and her oedipal distancing from her mother, Catherine I must decide between fulfilling her transgressive desire for Heathcliff or conforming to a more moderate and socially acceptable choice of marriage. The situation creates a deep internal conflict in the character, who cannot reconcile the two different aims of her desire, to be a respectable woman and to consecrate her intimate union with Heathcliff. Cathy's identity conflict is best expressed by her pondering over the names she has and may have on the windowsill: "*Catherine Earnshaw*, here and there varied to *Catherine Heathcliff*, and then again to *Catherine Linton*" (Brontë 1992 [1847]: 21). She finally opts for the decision of "exchanging the fire of Heathcliff for the frost of Linton, a choice that all Brontë heroines are forced to confront". (Hoeveler 1998: 194).

The distance between a contemporary text such as *The Piano* and the Victorian one is most relevantly expressed in the events to come. After she has betrayed her heart, Catherine I can only resort to self-effacement both as her wilful punishment for the men who love her and as a way out of her own despair, while Ada will seek the realisation of her desire. In Catherine I's climatic mad scene, the dissociation of her soul will become complete when she does not recognise her own face in the mirror. A similar conflict of identity takes place when Ada is confined in Stewart's cottage and faces his punishment and Flora's resentment. However, this time the encounter with the Self is resolved positively, for Ada confronts her mirror with reassuring pleasure. While the confinement to which Cathy is reduced leads her to self-torture and self-effacement, Ada's imprisonment by her husband is relieved by a

journey inside her own self. Ada caresses her own image in the mirror and thus achieves self-reaffirmation.

The most common hysterical symptoms reported in the 19<sup>th</sup> century often included different forms of self-renunciation and/or evasion such as fatigue, catatonia or anorexia. This is reflected, as Gilbert and Gubar indicate, in the female characters of female-authored texts of the period: “Defining themselves as prisoners of their own gender, for instance, women frequently create characters who attempt to escape, if only into nothingness, through the suicidal self-starvation of anorexia” (1984: 85-86). This seems to be the case with the protagonist of *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine I, who starves herself on the days preceding the birth of her daughter, Catherine II. From a psychological point of view, this voluntary privation masks an internal conflict, which is somatized this way. Catherine I’s anorexia gives expression to her frustration at the same time as it implies the rejection of her forthcoming motherhood. Catherine I’s aggression onto her own body aims not only at undoing the consequences of the development of her sexuality—which was ultimately the cause of her preceding breach with Heathcliff— but also implies her rejection of mothering a child that stands for her betrayal of her deepest feelings for him.

Jane Campion created a sensuous atmosphere in the film that finds its most peculiar visual expression in the costumes and the process of undressing. The main female character is masqueraded as a conventional Victorian woman. Her ample skirts and lamp-shade bonnet are foreign in the natural environment almost to the point of ridiculousness. Her clothes make it difficult for her to advance in the muddy soil, and carry with them the remembrance of “civilised society” weighted by its oppressive moral laws, cultural elitism and rigid gender classification. In a similar way, Catherine I’s brief stay in the neighbouring mansion of The Grange implies her first contact with the refinement of society, and especially, with a romanticised view of her own femininity, by the influence of the female members of the Linton family, as surrogate mother and sister. The feminine clothes that she begins to use then represent again a “visual” contrast with all that she was before, which is deeply disturbing for Heathcliff. These new clothes express an awareness of sexual roles that had never been present in the relationship between the two of them before.

In *The Piano*, by taking off the oppressive Victorian clothes, these also acquire the characteristics of an erotic fetish, in a ritual of sensuous erotic initiation for Baines and Ada. Moreover, this becomes the symbol of one of the film’s most relevant ideological messages. The erotization of both Ada’s and Baines’ bodies in a context of mutual exchange subverts the traditional structure of the look described by Laura Mulvey, in which women’s bodies become the object of the fetishistic look of the male protagonist and of the spectator (1989: 14-26). The scene in which Baines, naked, dusts the piano, fills the instrument itself and his own body with erotic meaning so that it is the male body that is placed in a position in which it can be fetishised and eroticised by the “implicitly” female look. This way, when he



later presses to see and touch Ada's naked body, his desire does not turn her into a sexual object, but is an invitation to a mutually satisfactory sexual relation.

The atmosphere that is characteristic of these two narratives is the isolation in which all the events take place. The connection of both *Wuthering Heights* in the novel and of Baines' cottages in the film with the rest of "civilised society" is strikingly feeble. The Grange and Stewart's cottage, on their part play the role of representatives of that society, that through them, holds a confrontation with a freer stage of development. Entering the world of these characters is in a way a journey within their most dramatic passions and internal psychological conflict. The situation of extreme violence that is present in these plots is resolved similarly by the elimination of the violent male character and through the establishment of a more positive relationship between the remaining characters. In the Victorian text the romantic passion of the two lovers, Cathy and Heathcliff, is impossible except in a transcendental union after death. However, in the modern one the differences between the two lovers are settled, and encouraged by Stewart's self-withdrawal, they can face the prospect of a future together.

The apparently unreachable distance that in the first moment exists between Baines and Ada, as well as between Hareton and Catherine II, is negotiated by means of their education. Their knowledge gives the female characters a positive form of authority; and, since they refuse to use this authority as power, the outcome is one of preliminary equality. However, these endings are qualified by the poetic force of Heathcliff and Catherine I's transcendental union in the grave, and by the visual impact of Ada's fall into the ocean, tied to the piano, which pulls her down to her death. By getting married, Catherine II and Hareton make up for the dramatic consequences of the former passion between Catherine I and Heathcliff; Ada's rejection of death and her liberation from the sinking piano gives her the opportunity to go on living without renouncing to her right to fulfil her desire.

Some critics (including Hoeverler 1998: 185-241; and Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 299) have claimed that the pacifying resolution of *Wuthering Heights* recuperates the female character, through her double Catherine II, for a conventionally positive vision of femininity that would be more acceptable for the Victorian reading public. In a similar way, the ending of *The Piano* leaves feminist critics with a feeling of vague dissatisfaction related to the gothic attractiveness of Ada's strength of mind and her heroic resistance as well as to the lyricism implicit in the closing image of her, floating under the sea, and her voice-off commentary: "At night I think of my piano in its ocean grave and sometimes myself floating above it. It lulls me to sleep. It is my lullaby. There is a silence where no sound may be, in the cold grave under the deep, deep sea":

The ending of the film has provoked intense debate. Some say this sea burial of Ada with her piano was the true end.... It is a logical end for

obsession —death. Or is the logical end recovery, a second chance? Or victory for a female character who is not killed for expressing and living *her* desire? Or happiness through self control? (Mellencamp 1995: 181)

The answer to these questions is not straightforward and it is a prerogative of each spectator to find her own position. The elements of romance in Campion's "Victorian-but-contemporary" film mix strangely and disturbingly with its gothic characteristics. The dramatic events that affect the life of the female protagonist contrast with the beauty of the photography, the strength of Ada's unyielding personality and memorable instances of humorous relief. Spectators are free to choose between the beauty and optimism of the style and the gothic innuendoes of the story itself. Mellencamp's own view is that Ada's recovery and future prospects are a negotiation between the gothic and the melodramatic, where the happy-ever-after closure —Ada can retain "her daughter, her man, a piano and the fetish"— is "made possible" by the outcome of late 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism. Nevertheless, Ada has been mutilated and that cannot be undone; if the ending of the film must be considered a victory of the female character it still is, as the triumphs of Victorian heroines always are, a partial, if not Pyrrhic, victory.

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