



VIGIL



New Zealand Film Study Guide

The following activities are based on the achievement objectives in the New Zealand English curriculum. They may provide a starting point for teachers wishing to design a unit based on the film.

Focus

“Vigil” was described in the Los Angeles Times as ‘a unique work by a major talent’, and it has been variously described as ‘stunning’, ‘distinctive’, ‘magical’, ‘astonishing’ – ‘a milestone marking [Ward] as a figure of importance’ (The Boston Globe). Teachers may therefore find it relevant to focus on what makes “Vigil” distinctive or important in the context of its contribution to the development of New Zealand film. Aspects to consider /discuss/research further might include the following:

“Vigil” marks New Zealand film’s “coming of age”

- influenced by European cinema and signaling a distinct departure from the American “action” movie tradition, it is rich cinema.
- influencing many subsequent New Zealand films, for example, “The Piano”, “Rain”, and “Whale Rider”, with the emotive power of its striking and poetic visual imagery and strong spiritual dimension.
- an example of film as cultural expression, strengthening the strong thread of New Zealand films about children, broadening and questioning the maturing vision of ourselves as New Zealanders.
- as the first New Zealand film selected to screen in competition at Cannes
- and with its subsequent release to international acclaim, mining new
- territory and preparing the way for other successful New Zealand films.

Writing Poetic

- 1 Write diary entries as various family members after Justin’s death.
- 2 After identifying important points in the plot, write a series of diary entries as Toss.
- 3 Write the school report you think Toss would receive. Make aspects of her personality clear.
- 4 Write a description of Toss – her character and attitudes – ten years later.
- 5 Imagine that two of the characters from the film meet after ten years – write the conversation you think they might have.
- 6 Rewrite your favourite scene from the film as a piece of prose.
- 7 Interior Monologue: Choose one scene from the film. Write an interior monologue showing what a character might have been thinking at that time.
- 8 **Point-of-view**
The story is told subjectively, through the eyes of Toss. Choose a scene and retell it from the perspective of another character.
- 9 Imagine that this film was a book. Write the blurb for it.
- 10 Before watching the film, listen as your teacher plays you part of the soundtrack. Write a piece based on what you felt as you listened.
- 11 Write the summary of a story of an adolescent dealing with death, religion, relationships and growing up which is completely different to “Vigil”. Explain the setting, characters involved, plot, theme and tone. Alternatively, in pairs, write a plot summary of this film, then rewrite that summary as a possible “Hollywood-type” rewrite of the film.



Writing Expressive

- 1 Describe the mood of the opening series of shots. How did you feel? Describe how you would have filmed in the same setting to create an opposite mood.
- 2 What is a rite of passage? Give some examples.
- 3 What is a vigil? Guess. Look in the dictionary. Explain the film in terms of its title. Give the film an alternative title and explain your choice.
- 4 Which main character/s do you learn least/most about? How do you learn about them?
- 5 What do you think of Toss? Why? In what ways does Toss mature during the film? Explain Toss's relationship (and the changes that take place within that relationship) with her mother over the course of the film. How does their relationship reflect Toss's growing maturity? On the road to maturity, Toss has to cope with, and is confused about, many things. What are those things?
- 6 In what ways does the film's presentation of parental/child/adolescent relationships "match up" with your own experience/knowledge?
- 7 What is Toss and Justin's relationship like? How do you know that?
- 8 Attempt to explain the censor's rating given to this film.
- 9 What is Toss's view of God?
- 10 When Toss discovers Liz and Ethan together, how does she react? How does the director show that Toss sees Ethan as being in competition with her father?
- 11 Do you think that being isolated (physically or psychologically; as an individual or a community or a nation) makes a person stronger or weaker? Why?

Transactional Writing

- 1 Individually, in pairs or in groups, write (or design a diagram) a character study of Toss. Start by brainstorming a list of words to describe her. Use a dictionary or thesaurus to enlarge your list. Choose what you see as the best words. Find examples from the film to back up your chosen words.
- 2 Write down some important questions that you would like to ask the director of the film. Explain why each of your questions is important.
- 3 Write the newspaper article that might have appeared in the local newspaper after Justin's death.
- 4 Write a letter to the director giving your opinions about the location/s used in the film. Suggest alternatives if you do not think they were good choices.

Essay Topics

- Vincent Ward's "Vigil" has been described as one 'of the finest and most influential films of the 1980s' (Matthews). Discuss the qualities that you think make this a fine film.
- "Vigil" was the first New Zealand film in competition at the Cannes film festival and proved to be a major influence on New Zealand film. Discuss how you think the 'land-mysticism, the heightened, almost supernatural vision, the sadness . . . a feeling of being bound to a place and needing to protect it from change or invasion' (ibid.) apparent in "Vigil" has been reflected in other New Zealand films (such as "The Piano", "Whale Rider" and "Rain").
- "Vigil" was a catalyst that changed the landscape of New Zealand film. Discuss that landscape in terms of "before" and "after" "Vigil".
- "Vigil's" simple narrative is the vehicle for a complex rite of passage story told largely from the point of view of an anxious, impressionable and highly imaginative child' (ibid.). Discuss how Toss tries to make sense of her father's death and her mother's relationship 'through a mix of the imagery and rituals of Catholicism and her own animalistic ideas' (ibid.).
- With close reference to the techniques used, discuss how a particular scene or scenes helped to make this film successful.
- Describe the main idea or purpose of this film.

Research

Research one of the following topics (all related to the film). Try using the KWL format.

Topics

Vincent Ward; Catholic Rituals; hawks; fog; clouds; geese; docking; Lucifer; deer; New Zealand film; European and American film traditions.

What I Know	What I Want To Know	What I Learned

Personal Reading

Read and comment on New Zealand fiction or film that deal with adolescent rites of passage. Research, read and comment on reviews of the film. References made in this study guide, and other texts which may be useful, are listed below.

References

- Cairns, B & Martin, H: *Shadows on the Wall – A Study of Seven New Zealand Feature Films*, Longman Paul, Auckland 1994.
- Dennis, J. & Bieringa, J. (Eds): *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Victoria University Press, Wellington 1996.
- Horrocks, R: *On Film*, Heinemann, Auckland 1980.
- IPL Books: *Celluloid Dreams – A Century of Film in New Zealand*, IPL Books, Wellington 1997.
- McDonnell, B: *Fresh Approaches to Film*, Addison Wesley Longman New Zealand Ltd, Auckland 1998.
- Martin, H. & Edwards, S: *New Zealand Film 1912 – 1996*, Oxford University Press, Auckland 1997.
- Matthews, Philip: “The Waiting Room”, in “New Zealand Listener”, Oct 18-24 2003 (Vol 190 No 3310).
- Partridge, D. & Hughes, P: *Flicks – Studying Film as Text*, Oxford University Press, Australia 1992.

Speaking/listening/ Interpersonal/using Text

1 Listen

to parts of the film again. The score helps to build atmosphere. How?

2 Continuum

As your teacher calls out the following statements, physically place yourself on a continuum, from strongly disagree, through neutral, to strongly agree. For each statement, pair up with someone who disagrees with your stand. Discuss your viewpoint with that person.

- This film is visually beautiful.
- This film has messages for us.
- This film is dark.
- The thing that stays with me most about this film is . . .
- The reasons this film is admired are . . .

3 Circle Talk

Students form two circles with equal numbers. One stands inside the other, facing outward. The outer circle face the middle. Students talk to each other on various topics for a preset time, before one circle moves clockwise, so that all students experience a series of partners with whom to share their thoughts. Topics might include:

- My favourite part of the film was . . .
- My least favourite part of the film . . .
- I thought the character . . . was . . .
- I thought . . . was the best actor because . . .
- The things I learned were . . .
- I would change the ending of this film by . . .
- The most colourful character was . . . because . . .

4 Have students write down questions they would like to ask a main character. Allocate roles and hold a press conference.

5 Character: In groups, on a large sheet of paper draw around a group member to create an outline of a major character. Inside the body, brainstorm and write down all the words you can think of to describe that character’s personality. Inside and around the head area, brainstorm and write down all the words you can think of the describe that character’s feelings. Outside the body, brainstorm and write down all the external influences on that character. Pin your sheet to the wall for others to read and comment on.

6 In pairs, script an interview with a main character exploring their motivation, and present it.



Presenting

- 1 Design a poster advertising the film.
 - 2 Design a poster showing Toss's changing view of Ethan during the film
 - 3 Design a diagram or collage representing Toss's shrine to her father.
 - 4 Design a shrine to someone you admire or love.
 - 5 Make a plot summary in graph or diagram form.
 - 6 Design a tourist brochure for the area in which the film is set.
 - 7 Storyboard a promotional preview of the film.
 - 8 Design a symbol for some of the main characters. Be prepared to explain them.
- 6 Watch the final sequences again. What do you think is the significance, if any, of:
 - the tractor starting?
 - Birdie's words, 'Aren't we all' in reply to Toss's, 'I think I'm dying'?
 - Toss taking off her hat?
 - the birdsong as Toss emerges?
 - leaving the farm?
 - 7 Jigsaw Groups: In groups, take one of the following topics then re-view the film, taking notes and discussing your findings. Re-group so that each new group member has different expertise. Teach your new group about your topic.

Viewing and Close Reading

- 1 This film has been described as 'visually stunning, with the primary colours filtered out to give a luminous intensity to the grey/green images' (Martin & Edwards : 106). Choose a scene in which you think this is clearly demonstrated. Describe the effect.
- 2 Explain and give examples of the "different ways of seeing" in this film - through smoke, mist, rain, distorting glass (ibid.). How does this reinforce the underlying theme (voiced by Birdie) - 'what you see depends on who you are'.
- 3 **Setting Chart**
Fill in a setting chart, like the one below:

Scene	What it shows about character	Evidence (quote, shot, image etc)
Toss and Justine go to "the tops".	Steep, bleak, dark, foggy, inhospitable, deserted.	Long shorts, silhouettes, LA/HA shots, music, dark colours.

- 4 Stop the film at various points and predict what might happen (and explain why you think that); stop the film just before the end and predict what might happen; stop the film soon after the start and predict the entire storyline.
- 5 'What you see depends on who you are' (Birdie). Give different characters' views of:
 - the farm/the future of the farm.
 - relationships.
 - Ethan.
 - the role of a girl.

TOPICS

Symbolism [eg the weather (reflecting events, characters); colour; visual motifs (eg tractor, clothing, hawks, gun, Toss's stick)

- Sound (eg music as metaphor; mood music); dialogue.
- Film Techniques (eg types of shot and their purpose).
- Themes (eg that what you see depends on who you are; that adolescence is a difficult time; that the death of a loved one can effect people differently and deeply; that death is a natural part of life; that the forces of nature cannot be controlled).

8 Setting

Reading Film - View the sequence near the beginning of the film, from the shot of Justin struggling with the sheep, to the long shot at the end of the burial (approximately four and a half minutes), and answer the following questions:

- How does the film maker use sound to create emotion?
- List the dialogue in this sequence. Why is it so minimal?
- What is the effect of the use of tracking shots as Toss runs for help?
- What use is made of close ups/reaction shots in this sequence?
- How does the setting contribute to the mood of this sequence?
- What is your initial impression of Ethan? List the reasons why you got that impression.

9 In groups: complete the following 3 Level Guide.

Level 1 : Reading on the lines

Tick the statements which focus on what the film maker shows in this film. When you've made your decisions, discuss your reasons with your group.

- Toss and Justin had a good relationship.
- Toss doesn't like Ethan.
- Liz wants to leave the farm.
- Toss is bored living on the farm.
- Toss builds a shrine to her father.

Level 2 : Reading between the lines

Tick statements which you think mean what the film maker meant in this film. Discuss your choices with your group and be prepared to justify them.

- The noise created by Ethan in the scene when he drives to the farm shows that Toss's world is being invaded.
- Liz's relationship with Ethan is built on loneliness.
- Toss is confused about religion.
- Toss is facing many changes in her life.
- Relationships can change.

Level 3 : Reading beyond the lines

Tick the statements which you think the film maker would support. Be ready to give your reasons when you discuss your choices.

- Individuals deal with trauma in their own way.
- Each individual sees the world differently.
- Despair and hope are part of the human condition.
- Death is a natural part of life.
- Adolescence can be a difficult time.

From the level 3 section, have students put the chosen statements in a chart, like the one below. Fill in the right hand side with evidence from the film.

Statement	Evidence (Quote or Explanation)
Individuals deal with trauma in their own way.	After her father dies, Toss...

Further information

Vigil was produced in 1984 and is available at all good DVD stores. It can be purchased online through Aro Street Video. www.arovideo.co.nz

This guide was written for New Zealand Film by Cynthia Thomas, who has 23 years teaching experience. © New Zealand Film 2005.

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NEW ZEALAND FILM

TE TUMU WHAKAATA TAONGA