SOFTWARE & TECH

A Play In The Fields Of The Lord

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Introduction: A Literary and Cinematic Journey into the Heart of the Amazon

A Play In The Fields Of The Lord is a work of profound depth and haunting beauty. Whether you are exploring the original 1965 novel by Peter Matthiessen or the ambitious 1991 film adaptation directed by Héctor Babenco, this story offers an unflinching look at the collision of cultures, the arrogance of colonialism, and the fragile sanctity of the natural world. Set deep in the Amazon rainforest, the narrative follows a group of Christian missionaries, a handful of cynical American adventurers, and the indigenous tribes they seek to convert or exploit. The result is a tragic, sprawling epic that questions the very nature of faith, civilization, and humanity's place in the wild.

In this article, we will explore the plot, themes, characters, and lasting legacy of **A Play In The Fields Of The Lord**. We will examine why this story remains relevant in discussions about cultural imperialism, environmental destruction, and spiritual hubris. Whether you are a student of literature, a fan of cinematic history, or simply curious about one of the most provocative stories set in the Amazon, this comprehensive guide will provide valuable insights.

Background of the Novel

Peter Matthiessen: The Author Behind the Masterpiece

Peter Matthiessen was an American novelist, naturalist, and explorer whose work often bridged the gap between fiction and deep ecological observation. A co-founder of *The Paris Review*, Matthiessen was a Zen Buddhist whose spiritual journey profoundly influenced his writing. **A Play In The Fields Of The Lord** is arguably his magnum opus, a novel that took years to research and write. Matthiessen traveled extensively in South America, immersing himself in the cultures and landscapes he would later depict with such precision and empathy.

His background as a naturalist lends the novel an extraordinary sense of place. The Amazon is not merely a setting in this book; it is a living, breathing character—one that is both beautiful and indifferent to the struggles of the humans who dare to impose their will upon it.

The Novel's Publication and Initial Reception

Published in 1965, **A Play In The Fields Of The Lord** was immediately recognized as a work of considerable literary ambition. Critics praised Matthiessen's prose, his ability to inhabit multiple perspectives, and his unflinching portrayal of the moral complexities surrounding missionary work. The novel was a finalist for the National Book Award, cementing Matthiessen's reputation as one of America's most important postwar writers.

However, the novel also stirred controversy. Some religious groups felt the portrayal of missionaries was too harsh, while others praised the book's nuanced critique of cultural arrogance. Over time, the novel has come to

be seen as a classic of 20th-century American literature, often studied in courses on postcolonialism, environmental literature, and Latin American studies.

Plot Summary

The Setting: A Town on the Edge of the World

The story is set in the fictional town of Madre de Dios, a remote outpost in the Amazon basin near the borders of Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia. This is a place where the jungle presses in on every side, where law is fragile, and where the indigenous people are seen by most outsiders as either obstacles or souls to be saved.

Into this volatile setting come several groups of outsiders, each with their own agenda. The central conflict revolves around the attempt to convert a local tribe called the Niaruna, a group that has so far resisted all contact with the modern world.

Key Characters and Their Arcs

Leslie Hubenis a Protestant missionary filled with evangelical zeal. He is devout, but his faith is rigid and uncompromising. His desire to save the Niaruna is sincere, but his methods are disastrous. He sees the tribe through the lens of his own beliefs, unable to recognize the value of their existing culture and spirituality.

Martin Quarrieris another missionary, but he is more thoughtful and introspective. He questions the very purpose of his mission, especially as he watches his wife, Hazel, struggle with the harsh realities of jungle life. Martin's crisis of faith is one of the novel's most compelling threads.

Lewis Moonis a half-Brazilian, half-American mercenary pilot who is hired by the town's corrupt authorities to bomb the Niaruna as a form of intimidation. However, Moon undergoes a dramatic transformation. He abandons his mission and becomes an unlikely protector of the tribe, even going so far as to paint his body and live among them.

Father Xantesis a Catholic priest who represents the older, more established form of missionary work. He is cynical, weary, and deeply suspicious of the Protestant newcomers. His quiet resistance to the evangelical mission is a reminder that not all forms of religious outreach are the same.

The story unfolds through multiple points of view, allowing the reader to see the same events through vastly different moral and emotional lenses. This polyphonic structure is one of the novel's great strengths, forcing the reader to grapple with competing truths.

The Major Themes of A Play In The Fields Of The Lord

Cultural Imperialism and the Failure of Good Intentions

At its core, **A Play In The Fields Of The Lord** is a searing critique of cultural imperialism. The missionaries arrive in the Amazon believing they are bringing salvation. But Matthiessen shows how their efforts, however well-intentioned, are ultimately destructive. The missionaries cannot see that the Niaruna already have a rich spiritual life, one that is deeply connected to the land they inhabit.

This theme is particularly relevant today, as debates about cultural preservation, indigenous rights, and the legacy of colonialism continue to shape global discourse. The novel asks a difficult question: what right do outsiders have to impose their beliefs on others, even if they believe they are acting out of love?

Religious Fanaticism vs. Spiritual Humility

The novel draws a sharp distinction between faith and fanaticism. Characters like Leslie Huben represent a faith that is certain, loud, and aggressive. In contrast, Martin Quarrier and Lewis Moon represent a more tentative, searching spirituality. Moon, in particular, finds a kind of grace in the jungle—not through conversion, but

through surrender. He learns to listen rather than preach.

Matthiessen, a practicing Zen Buddhist, infuses the novel with a sense that true spirituality is found not in dogma but in direct experience of the world. The Niaruna, with their rituals and their intimate knowledge of the forest, embody this kind of spiritual wisdom.

Environmental Destruction and Human Arrogance

The Amazon rainforest is not merely a backdrop; it is a character in its own right, and its destruction is one of the novel's central tragedies. The outsiders see the jungle as something to be tamed, exploited, or ignored. The missionaries clear land for their mission station, the adventurers seek rubber and gold, and the authorities want to remove the Niaruna to make way for so-called progress.

Matthiessen's environmental message is prescient. Written decades before climate change became a mainstream concern, the novel anticipates the devastating impact of deforestation and the loss of indigenous knowledge. The fields of the Lord, in this context, are not just a metaphor for the mission field—they are the actual, living earth that is being destroyed.

The Tragedy of the Outsider

Every character in the novel is, in some way, an outsider. The missionaries are outsiders to the jungle, the mercenaries are outsiders to any sense of moral purpose, and even the Niaruna are outsiders to the modern world that is encroaching upon them. This creates a pervasive sense of loneliness and dislocation. The novel suggests that true connection—whether to other people, to nature, or to God—is extraordinarily difficult, and that our attempts to bridge the gap often end in disaster.

The 1991 Film Adaptation

Héctor Babenco's Vision

Nearly three decades after the novel's publication, Brazilian director Héctor Babenco brought **A Play In The Fields Of The Lord** to the screen. Babenco was an interesting choice for the project. He had previously directed *Pixote* (1980) and *Ironweed*(1987), films that dealt with social marginalization and human frailty. He was drawn to the novel's moral complexity and its lush, dangerous setting.

The film was shot on location in the Amazon, and the production was notoriously difficult. Actors endured extreme heat, disease, and the logistical nightmare of filming in one of the most remote places on Earth. But the result is visually stunning, with cinematography that captures both the beauty and the menace of the rainforest.

Cast and Performances

The film boasts an impressive cast. Tom Berenger plays Lewis Moon, and he brings a haunted, volatile energy to the role. John Lithgow plays Leslie Huben with a fervor that is both compelling and repellent. Daryl Hannah plays Andy Huben, Leslie's wife, and her performance captures the quiet desperation of a woman trapped in a hostile land.

Aidan Quinn plays Martin Quarrier, and his portrayal of a man losing his faith is subtle and heartbreaking. Kathy Bates plays Hazel Quarrier, Martin's wife, and she brings a weary strength to the role. The supporting cast includes Indigenous actors from the Amazon region, adding an element of authenticity that is rare in Hollywood films.

Critical Reception and Legacy

The film received mixed reviews upon its release in 1991. Some critics praised its ambition and visual splendor, while others felt it was too long and too bleak. The film was not a commercial success, and it has since become

something of a hidden gem—a movie that is more admired than beloved, but one that continues to find new audiences through streaming and home video.

Over time, the film has gained a reputation as a noble failure—a film that aimed for greatness and fell short, but that is still worth watching for its performances, its themes, and its stunning cinematography. For fans of the novel, the film offers a faithful yet distinct interpretation of Matthiessen's complex story.

Differences Between the Book and the Film

As with any adaptation, the film makes changes to the source material. The novel is denser and more philosophical, with extensive interior monologues that reveal the characters' thoughts and doubts. The film, by necessity, externalizes these conflicts through action and dialogue.

The novel also includes a wider range of perspectives, including those of the Niaruna themselves. The film focuses more heavily on the outsider characters, which some critics argue diminishes the novel's polyphonic quality. However, the film compensates with its visual storytelling, using the jungle itself to convey the awe and terror that the characters experience.

One notable change is the ending. Without revealing spoilers, it can be said that the film's conclusion is somewhat more hopeful than the novel's, though both versions are undeniably tragic. The novel's ending is more ambiguous, leaving the reader with a sense of unresolved tension.

Why the Story Still Matters Today

Indigenous Rights and Cultural Preservation

In the decades since the novel was published, the rights of indigenous peoples have become a central issue in global human rights discourse. The Niaruna are a fictional tribe, but they represent countless real communities that have faced displacement, violence, and cultural erasure. **A Play In The Fields Of The Lord** serves as a powerful reminder of the damage that can be done when outsiders impose their will on vulnerable cultures.

The Climate Crisis and the Amazon

The Amazon rainforest is currently under threat from deforestation, mining, and agricultural expansion. The novel's environmental themes have never been more urgent. The "fields of the Lord" are burning, and the novel's warning about the consequences of human arrogance is more relevant than ever.

The Limits of Good Intentions

One of the novel's most enduring lessons is that good intentions are not enough. The missionaries in the story genuinely believe they are doing God's work, but their actions lead to suffering and death. This is a cautionary tale for anyone who believes they have the answers to complex human problems. Humility, listening, and respect for difference are essential qualities that the characters in the novel—and perhaps we ourselves—so often lack.

Key Quotations from the Novel

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