

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975)

Peter Weir

OVERVIEW

Director Peter Weir (1944-) is one of the best-known Australian filmmakers. He participated in what has been called the Australian New Wave in the 1970s, directing distinctive films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and *The Last Wave* (1977) that made use of Australian settings. Weir's global status grew with *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), the latter of which won an Oscar. Weir went on to make several Hollywood movies, including the acclaimed *Witness* (1985), *Dead Poets Society* (1989), and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003). The recipient of numerous awards, Weir began making films less frequently in the 21st century but has maintained an international reputation.

Film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) is based on a novel by Joan Lindsay of the same name, published in 1967. It takes place at a girls' boarding school in Australia in 1900 (the year before the federation of Australia resulted in more independence from Great Britain). Early in the film, three students and one teacher go missing during an excursion to Hanging Rock. Although various attempts are made to find the missing persons as the film progresses—and although the film, like Lindsay's novel, misleadingly hints at a possible connection to a real-life case—in fact, the story's focus is the existential crisis faced by the school's Victorian headmistress, staff, and students when confronted with a mystery that cannot be explained.

Background One of the most remarkable features of the film is that much of it was shot on location at Hanging Rock in Victoria, Australia. Eerie images of massive rocks that sometimes resemble human faces thus loom throughout the film, creating quite a foreboding atmosphere, especially when paired with the haunting pan flute music by Gheorghe Zamfir. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was frustrating to some viewers because it presents a mystery that it does not solve. Still, it was well regarded in art-house circles and was nominated for many awards, including by the Australian Film Institute and BAFTA. It remains one of the great unsolved-mystery films, alongside *A Passage to India* (David Lean, 1984) and *L'Avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960).

CHARACTERS

Mrs. Appleyard – headmistress of Appleyard College
Miranda – senior student at Appleyard College; disappears
Sara Waybourne – younger, orphan student at Appleyard College, enamored of Miranda
Marion Quade – senior student at Appleyard College; disappears
Irma Leopold – senior student at Appleyard College; disappears
Miss Greta McCraw – mathematics teacher at Appleyard College; disappears
Mademoiselle Dianne de Poitiers – French teacher at Appleyard College
Miss Dora Lumley – teacher at Appleyard College
Edith Horton – younger student at Appleyard College
Michael Fitzhubert – young Englishman visiting his aunt and uncle near Appleyard College
Colonel and Mrs. Fitzhubert – Michael's aunt and uncle
Albert Crundall – coachman of the Fitzhuberts' and actually Sara Waybourne's long-lost brother

SYNOPSIS

Picnic at Hanging Rock opens on the morning of Valentine's Day, the year 1900, at Appleyard College, an English-style boarding school for teenage girls in Australia. The students, their teachers, and

their headmistress, Mrs. Appleyard, prepare for the day and discuss the upcoming holiday excursion to Hanging Rock—a massive geological formation that welcomes picnickers and explorers but also seems to exert a vaguely menacing influence on all who approach it.

One student, Sara, is told that she must stay behind. The other girls happily go off in a carriage with two teachers and a driver. They arrive at the base of the Rock, a looming geological formation, and have a picnic. Afterward, three senior girls (Miranda, Marion, and Irma) get permission to walk further up and into the Rock on their own. As they ascend, they take off their formal shoes and stockings and begin acting strangely and making mysterious remarks. Eventually they simply disappear into the Rock, and no trace of them can be found.

Search parties are formed, but the girls and the teacher who had gone after them remain missing. A young man, Michael, who happened to catch a glimpse of the girls just before their disappearance, has become obsessed with Miranda and decides to search on his own. This results in the discovery of Irma, alive and mostly unharmed but unable to remember what happened. As the weeks pass and no further discoveries are made, things fall apart at Appleyard College: parents withdraw their children, teachers give notice of their departure, and Mrs. Appleyard begins drinking heavily. Mrs. Appleyard, concerned about the school's finances, tells Sara, a student, that she must return to the orphanage because her fees are not paid. The next morning, Sara has died, and it is unclear how. Finally, Mrs. Appleyard goes to the Rock and commits suicide. No solution to the mysterious disappearances is given.

SCENES

Boarding School – Various teenage girls in Victorian-era clothing get out of bed and complete morning routines (washing their faces, getting dressed, helping each other tighten their corsets). Several of them read aloud from Valentine's Day cards. One girl presses flowers.



Sara's attraction to Miranda – Sara Waybourne gives a card to her roommate, Miranda. Miranda invites Sara to visit her family home one day, but she also languidly remarks that Sara must learn to love someone else besides her. Sara looks sad but seeks no further explanation.



Preparation – Sara is then told by a teacher that she will not be allowed to attend the picnic that day. Some twenty girls, all dressed in white dresses, gather around a breakfast table. Then they go outside, gloved and hatted, and stand in rigid formation at the bottom of a flight of outdoor stairs to receive a lecture from headmistress Mrs. Appleyard about the way they must behave and the dangers they must avoid on their picnic at Hanging Rock. Miranda looks up at Sara on the roof.



Travel to Hanging Rock – The girls and two women ride in a horse-drawn carriage outside the college gates. They pass through the town of Woodend, to cheers and whistles from men and children. The girls then eagerly remove their gloves and fan themselves as they ride on. The driver points out Hanging Rock. One of the women remarks that Hanging Rock was formed one million years ago – a statement that appears to intrigue a couple of the girls.



Male friendship – An older man and woman and a young man, all richly dressed, sit outside at a picnic setting. The young man, addressed as Michael, walks away to join another young man, who asks whether they have finished lunch, explaining that he will have to clear away. He offers Michael a drink from the bottle he is holding; Michael accepts. The two young men discuss the older couple's lack of activity and smile at each other.



Arrival at the Picnic site – The girls' carriage proceeds. When they reach a gate, Miranda leaps out to open it. When she does so, the horses rear up and flocks of birds fly frantically. When they arrive at the picnic destination, Miranda cuts a Valentine's Day cake.



Sara defies Mrs. Appleyard's authority – Mrs. Appleyard approaches Sara and asks whether she has memorized the assigned poem. Sara replies that she cannot do it. Mrs. Appleyard calls her an ignoramus and praises Felicia Hemans, calling her "one of the finest of our English poets." Sara offers that she knows another poem by heart, but Mrs. Appleyard is disdainful when Sara clarifies that she wrote this poem herself. Mrs. Appleyard insists again that Sara must memorize the assigned poem, or she will be sent to bed immediately. Mrs. Appleyard leaves; when alone, Sara puts her head on the desk and whispers, "Bertie, Bertie, Jesus, where are you? Oh, Miranda!"



The Picnic – The girls sit at the base of Hanging Rock. Some eat, some lie down, some read, some play with each other's hair. The carriage driver and the teacher Miss McCraw discover that their watches have stopped at twelve noon. The driver expresses concern at the fact that they now are unsure of the time but have promised to return to Appleyard College by eight o'clock.



Wandering – Miranda, Irma, and Marion ask the teacher Mademoiselle for permission to go and take some measurements at another part of Hanging Rock. She agrees, and Edith successfully petitions to go along. "We shall only be gone a little while," Miranda says, staring dreamily into the distance. The four girls walk away. Pan flute music plays. The four girls skip and walk up the Rock. They pass Michael and the older man and woman without seeing them.



Michael's attraction to Miranda – Michael and the family servant notice the girls; the servant comments on the girls' appearance, prompting disapproval from Michael. But the servant, now named as Albert, insists that Michael is thinking the same thing. Albert mentions that he and his sister were raised in an orphanage, and that women are all the same whether they come from an orphanage or a college. Michael stares intently at Miranda and then, announcing that he wants to go "stretch his legs a bit," walks off in the same direction as the girls.



More wandering – The four girls continue upward, increasingly surrounded by more rock and less vegetation. They exclaim at the Rock's splendor. Walking in a single file line, the three older girls join hands as the descent steepens, while Edith lags a little behind and breathes heavily. Edith complains that it is nasty. Miranda looks with interest into a dark crevice between two fragments of rock. There is no music, but a vague sound of wind or earthquake can be heard. Miranda remarks that they should not go much further, lest they break their promise to return soon. But they continue on. They briefly discuss Sara's devotion to Miranda and her plight as an orphan.



Sleeping – Miranda gazes around at the Rock. Irma, having removed her shoes and stockings, stands on an outcropping and sways back and forth. The pan flute music has returned. Marion and Miranda also remove their shoes and stockings; all three older girls set off deeper into the rock barefoot, without looking back at the protesting Edith, who runs after them. Marion and Miranda make cryptic statements as all four girls stare down at the other people from Appleyard College, far below. They walk further up the Rock and suddenly appear to be seized by an overwhelming lassitude, all dropping gently to the ground and lying there seemingly asleep as insects crawl on their bodies and a reptile walks along Miranda's arm. The other people from Appleyard College, too, seem to be sleeping, except for Miss McCraw, who looks up somberly at the Rock, then down at her geometry book.



Last sight of the girls – The three senior girls rise in unison and walk together, in single file led by Miranda, into yet another crevice in the Rock. Edith calls after them to no avail. They disappear one by one, and Edith screams as she runs back down the Rock.



The partial return - Mrs. Appleyard gets up from her desk and looks out the window. Two college servants, Minnie and Tom, get up naked from a bed and rush to dress as the clock chimes. We see that it reads 10:30; darkness has fallen and Mrs. Appleyard sits seriously alone. Finally, the carriage arrives. A tearful Mademoiselle announces to Mrs. Appleyard that something terrible has happened; in response to her question, she states that Miss McCraw was left behind at the Rock. The girls go inside, while Sara, in her nightgown, looks in vain for Miranda. The driver tells Mrs. Appleyard that three of the girls and Miss McCraw went missing on the Rock. He cannot give further explanation, either to her or to the police officer he then speaks to.



Searching – Several men in a variety of kinds of clothing walk around the Rock, making noise and looking for the missing persons. They find nothing. Edith lies silently in bed while Mademoiselle and the policeman press her for information. Another man, evidently a doctor, informs Mrs. Appleyard that Edith has scratches on her legs but is otherwise “intact.” The policeman briefly discusses the case at home with his wife. He then interviews Michael, who says he did see the girls on their way to the Rock but struggles to describe them; he initially indicates that there were three and then later that there were four. Edith, Mademoiselle, and the policeman go partway up the Rock. Edith eventually reveals that while she was running down the Rock, she saw a strange red cloud and Miss McCraw coming up, wearing no skirt, only her undergarments.

The search continues – Mademoiselle and the policeman take an item of clothing from Miranda's wardrobe – “for the bloodhounds” – while Sara looks on despairingly. Bloodhounds accordingly search; water is dredged and megaphones are used. The Rock looms silently. Michael tells the policeman that he did not exactly follow the girls but simply walked in a similar direction and then turned back. The viewer sees an image of Miranda, which then resolves into an image of a swan swimming on a lake, watched by Michael. Michael is then at a formal outdoor party of some sort. He wanders off toward a shack, where Albert is sitting. He again is drinking from a bottle that he shares with Michael. Michael removes his hat. Michael states that he is extremely concerned about the girls and wants to go looking for them, with Albert's help.



Michael's search begins – In the grey dawn, Michael exits his house, hatted and caped. He smiles when he sees Albert waiting with two horses. The two young men ride to the Rock. Several animals observe as they begin to climb on foot. Michael fixes a little piece of paper to a plant. As they have found nothing, Michael announces to Albert that he will spend the night on the Rock. Albert protests, but he follows Michael's wishes and lies to Michael's uncle, Colonel Fitzhubert, that Michael is spending the night at a nearby pub. Colonel Fitzhubert looks down at a story in the newspaper about the missing people.



Michael's search continues – Michael continues to wander the Rock as darkness falls and the next day dawns, leaving more pieces of paper along his trail. The viewer hears again the wind/earthquake sound that accompanied the girls' ascent. As Michael lies on the Rock, he seems to be hearing Miss McCraw, Miranda, and Marion saying things they said on the day of the picnic. We see again the image of the girls disappearing into the Rock, superimposed over Michael. He wakes as we hear Edith's scream. More strange sounds arise as Michael scrambles up, calling "Miranda!"



Albert rescues Michael – Albert appears again near the Rock and calls for Michael. Receiving no response, he proceeds, grinning when he finds Michael's pieces of paper. He sees Michael, sitting down and shaking, with scratches on his face, and goes for help. While being carried off, Michael is clutching something and hands it to Albert: a piece of white lace. While Michael appears entirely overwhelmed, Albert does not. Albert returns up the Rock. He finds Irma, lying down, dirty, and a little scratched. He calls for help and runs down.



Irma is alive – A servant tells Mademoiselle that Irma, but only she, has been found alive. Townspeople in Woodend harass a policeman, pressing him for an explanation of what has happened and where the other missing people are.

Mrs. Appleyard tries to manage – Mrs. Appleyard enters a classroom the next morning and announces officially to the students that Irma is alive and will be convalescing at the Fitzhuberts'. She announces, too, that no trace has been found of Marion, Miranda, or Miss McCraw. Most of the students act very happy, but Sara does not. Mrs. Appleyard expresses anger in a conversation in her office with Miss Lumley, exclaiming that several parents have already written to remove their daughters from the school because of the publicity about the disappearances. Mrs. Appleyard also remarks that Sara Waybourne's fees are overdue and asks Miss Lumley to tell Sara to come see her after lunch.

Irma convalesces - Michael looks at Irma lying asleep in bed. The doctor comes and remarks on how "extraordinary" it is that Irma has sustained almost no injuries after over a week in the bush. Those she has sustained are mysterious, the doctor observes; for example, her head is a bit injured as if from a heavy blow, but she does not seem to have fallen. "She's quite intact," he remarks upon his departure. A servant tells the housekeeper that there is something unusual about the clothing in which Irma returned: her corset is missing. The housekeeper dismisses the observation as of no possible interest to the case.

Speculation – Two employees of the college, Tom and the gardener, discuss the mystery. Tom mentions Jack the Ripper as a point of comparison. "There's some questions got answers and some haven't," the gardener observes. Tom insists that a solution will surely be found.

Sara's dismissal – Sara enters Mrs. Appleyard's office. Mrs. Appleyard tells her that she has written several times to Sara's guardian without receiving a letter or check in reply. She therefore will be canceling Sara's "extras," including dancing and drawing lessons. She continues, saying that if Sara's fees are not paid by Easter, she will have to leave Appleyard College for some other "institution." Sara looks shocked but says nothing and leaves when told to.



Sara's dark night of the soul – Later, after darkness has fallen, Miss Lumley finds Sara sitting alone on the stairs. She reprimands her. Sara goes to bed but refuses dinner when Minnie brings it to her. Sara confesses to Minnie that she used to live in an orphanage with her brother, Bertie, and mentions some of her experiences at the orphanage. Minnie expresses sympathy for the kids while lying in bed with Tom later.

Widespread fallout – A series of quick scenes follow, beginning with another search party at the rock. Mademoiselle visits Irma, now sitting up in bed. Both are tearful. Irma says she remembers nothing. Michael sits outside; he appears to see an image of Miranda looking at him, but then to see nothing when he looks back to the same place. He looks at a swan in the pond. The residents of Appleyard College walk home out of church, observed keenly by other churchgoers. A man clandestinely photographs Appleyard College and is shooed off by Mrs. Appleyard, who identifies him as a reporter. Sara builds a kind of shrine to Miranda. Mademoiselle enters and comforts her. “Miranda knows lots of things other people don't know. Secrets,” Sara says. “She knew she wouldn't come back.”

Irma visits Appleyard College – Several students are taking a calisthenics class with Miss Lumley. Mademoiselle brings Irma in to visit them, dressed in a striking bright red cape and hat. But the girls remain silent, staring fiercely at Irma, until they begin to yell, “Tell us, Irma, tell us!” and rush at her. The mood passes after a few moments, and almost everyone quietly and tearfully exits the room. Then Mademoiselle discovers Sara in the corner, restrained in a strange contraption that Miss Lumley insists is for her own good because she stoops.



Mrs. Appleyard deteriorates – Mrs. Appleyard crosses out names in a notebook. Her hair has begun to come out of its elaborate wig. Miss Lumley enters and gives her notice. Mrs. Appleyard pours herself a drink. She goes into the hallway and sees Minnie, who tells her she is taking supper to an ailing Sara. Mrs. Appleyard asks her to tell Sara she will be coming in later to speak to her. Mrs. Appleyard then sits on a bed and murmurs, “This is not a charitable institution.” She then enters Sara's room and announces that she will be returning Sara to the orphanage. Mrs. Appleyard next appears in her office, sitting down and beginning to cry. “God help me,” she says. Sara smiles and we hear the covers rustle.



Albert's dream – Albert tells Michael that he had a strange dream the previous night that felt like being awake. He says that he saw a bright light in the room and smelled pansies, the favorite flower of his sister, whom he had not seen since the orphanage but who appeared suddenly in the room. Then, he says, she began to fade and bid him good-bye despite his encouragement to her to stay.

Mrs. Appleyard in crisis – Mrs. Appleyard tells Mademoiselle that Sara's guardian arrived earlier in the day and took Sara away. When Mademoiselle leaves, Mrs. Appleyard sits back down and says, “Oh God.” The remaining girls depart in a carriage for Easter vacation. That evening, Mrs. Appleyard and Mademoiselle sit by themselves at dinner. Mrs. Appleyard is wearing a looser, more revealing dress than is usual for her. She speaks effusively about how much she and her late husband had loved vacationing in Bournemouth when they lived in England. She has clearly been drinking a substantial amount of alcohol. She then expresses frustration with Miss McCraw for “allowing herself” to be “lost, raped, murdered in cold blood like a silly schoolgirl.” Servants listen at the door. Mademoiselle asks whether Sara will be returning after the holiday; Mrs. Appleyard returns to the subject of Bournemouth.

Sara dies – A man walks past the college greenhouse and remarks on the presence of glass shards. He enters and sees that there is a hole in the roof. He then sees Sara's dead body amid broken flowerpots. He enters Mrs. Appleyard's office tearfully, saying, “Sara!” Mrs. Appleyard is sitting at her desk, fully dressed in a black cape, hat, veil, and gloves, with a handbag and various packing trunks all around her. Mrs. Appleyard looks wordlessly at him.

Mrs. Appleyard dies – A voiceover then announces that Mrs. Appleyard’s body was found at the base of Hanging Rock on March 27, 1900, and that “it is believed she fell while attempting to climb the Rock.”

Missing People – The voice announces that the search for the missing people continued occasionally in future years, but that “to this day, their disappearance remains a mystery.”



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mrs. Appleyard Mrs. Appleyard, an émigré from England, is the founder and headmistress of Appleyard College. Reputation and decorum are extremely important to her. In the film’s early scenes, her school gives every impression of being well-run—students obey, teachers carry out duties regularly, and the people and premises all appear clean and neat.

Inflexible – Mrs. Appleyard is physically rigid throughout most of the film, standing up straight, dressing conservatively in black, and sporting an elaborate wig. She also enforces strict rules of behavior. It is clearly against Mrs. Appleyard’s will that her rigidity slips late in the film, and she reclaims it at the very end, packing her belongings neatly and wearing a proper traveling costume when she goes to her demise.

Vulnerable – Despite her steely exterior, Mrs. Appleyard is clearly vulnerable. She insists that Sara memorize “The Wreck of the Hesperus” on the grounds that Felicia Hemans is a great poet, but in fact, not Hemans but Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote this poem. Mrs. Appleyard and the books she uses for her school are unreliable, which makes her vulnerable to questions about the quality of the school and, eventually, to the potential loss of her livelihood. She has no confidants and apparently no money to fall back on; when adversity strikes, she succumbs to secret drinking and bullying Sara. She finally commits suicide.

Traditional – Like many of the film’s characters, Mrs. Appleyard is an English person who has moved to Australia. She has a picture of Queen Victoria in her office, as well as a Union Jack. She refers to Felicia Hemans as one of “our English poets.” The subjects, rules, and clothing we see at the College are all consistent with what would have been seen at boarding schools in England at the same time.

Miranda Miranda is one of the senior students at Appleyard College. She was raised on a cattle station in Australia and loves her family. She has many friends. Miranda is the most traditionally beautiful of the girls, with regular features and long blond hair. She leads the small group of girls into Hanging Rock and sometimes seems to know that they will not be coming back.

Popular – Miranda is universally beloved—by her teachers and by all of her peers. She behaves with tranquility and kindness toward others. Miranda inspires particularly strong devotion in her younger roommate, Sara, and in Michael, who never even speaks to her but is clearly captivated by merely one glimpse of her walking toward Hanging Rock.

Otherworldly – Miranda, unlike the other named students, is given no last name. She tends to speak languidly and cryptically; her graceful movements are almost too serene. She gives a couple of indications of knowing that she will not be coming back from the picnic at Hanging Rock. Furthermore, her image haunts characters left behind, chiefly Michael, who repeatedly seems to see her when in fact he is looking at a swan or at nothing.

Sara Waybourne Sara is another student at Appleyard College, a little younger than Miranda. She is a poor Australian orphan, with fees paid by a guardian. She adores Miranda, whose disappearance devastates her. Sara chafes against school rules but evidently dreads returning to the orphanage even more.

Lonely – Sara is an orphan; moreover, she has not seen her brother in years, and her best friend, Miranda, disappears. She evidently loves no one else. The servant, Minnie, seems to sympathize with her, but she does not offer practical help. Sara’s guardian appears distressed when he discovers that she has died, but he too has been unable to help her because he arrived too late to prevent her death. Sara’s loneliness is visible throughout the film both in that she often appears alone (in her room, on the stairs) and in that she continually seeks to renew connection with Miranda by making a shrine to her.

Vulnerable – Like Mrs. Appleyard, Sara is vulnerable. Irma compares her to a little deer her family once encountered, who was “doomed to die.” She is physically small and thin, and presented as less beautiful and mature than most of the other girls. Sara cannot protest when Mrs. Appleyard decides to return her to the orphanage. The film is ambiguous on this point, but it is possible that Sara commits suicide; the other possibility is that Mrs. Appleyard kills her. Either way, Sara is vulnerable.

Determined – Nevertheless, Sara is extremely strong-willed. She wears her devotion to Miranda proudly. She refuses Mrs. Appleyard’s demand that she memorize “The Wreck of the Hesperus” on the grounds that “it doesn’t make sense.” She often speaks through gritted teeth and stands or sits very still and straight. If, in fact, she does commit suicide, this could be an indication of her determination not to return to the orphanage.

Michael Fitzhubert Michael is a young Englishman visiting family near Appleyard College, for no particular reason stated in the film. He is upper class but is seen talking to a servant, Albert, far more than to his aunt and uncle. Although obviously unused to the wilderness, he continues to search for the missing girls, which results in the discovery of Irma.

Traditional – Like Mrs. Appleyard, Michael is consummately English – all the more so since he is still living in England and merely paying a visit to his aunt and uncle in Australia. Michael clearly belongs to the upper classes, given his dress, his accent, and the opulence of the Fitzhuberts’ house. Michael comments to Albert that girls in England would not be allowed to wander off alone.

Lonely – In a different way from Sara, Michael is lonely; he has no obvious companions of his own age, gender, and class in Australia, but he is clearly eager to connect to people. He is drawn to Albert and Miranda. He becomes friends with Albert despite their class difference; he dodges a party of social importance to talk to Albert. He becomes obsessed with Miranda after seeing her at the Rock and focuses most of his attention on her thereafter, neglecting any other plans he may have had for his time in Australia.

Determination – Michael resembles Sara not only in being devoted to Miranda but also in doing what he wants with great determination. He persists in searching for Miranda after official searches have been abandoned. He actually spends a night alone on the Rock. While doing these things, he risks his life, his safety, his uncle’s respect, and his reputation.

THEMES

Confronting the unknowable *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is a mystery with no solution. The viewer never learns what happened to Miranda, Marion, Irma, and Miss McCraw, or why they seem to have an inkling about it in advance. In the absence of a solution, the viewer can only focus on other matters, including the fact that all the other characters also want an explanation and are not getting one. On a fundamental level, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* asks, “How do human beings react to something they cannot understand or explain?” *Picnic* is about human encounters with something bigger and almost inarticulate. Something outside the normal human experience. And that force swallows up some of the people who encounter it, but not all of them. For example, while Michael is clearly very affected by the Rock, acting strangely and appearing to see visions and lie down suddenly like the girls before him, Albert seems not to experience any of this. Perhaps significantly, Albert was born in Australia, while Michael was not. Meanwhile, Mrs. Appleyard literally cannot survive the confrontation with the unknowable.

Nature vs. Civilization More specifically, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* asks, “How do modern humans react to something they cannot understand or explain in the natural world?” Most of the characters in the film are depicted as highly civilized, as indicated by the hats, gloves, corsets, and other restrictive articles of clothing that they must wear, as well as the good behavior and rote memorization demanded of them. Something about Hanging Rock disrupts such demands: all three girls who disappear first shed their shoes and stockings, and Miss McCraw apparently takes off her skirt on the way up the Rock. The girls dance, lie down, and have insects and other animals crawling on them; the film contains many images of human beings dwarfed by the Rock or the woods. The viewer often sees images, too, of individual animals observing human beings marching into the Rock. In addition, whatever happened to the girls and teacher out in the wilderness has effects that reach into the school as well: students and teachers leave, Mademoiselle puts on rouge (to Mrs. Appleyard’s disapproval), and Mrs. Appleyard’s usually perfect hair becomes increasingly messy as her control over the school fails. Natural urges and processes increasingly take precedence over restrictive human practices.

Colonialism Another specific question that *Picnic* asks is, “How do British Victorians—who see themselves as exemplars of order and rationality, in control of the world—react to something they cannot understand or explain in a colonial setting?” The main characters in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* are not just any modern humans; they are white British (or British-descended) people in Australia at a time when it was part of the British Empire. They are the colonizers; they should not be there. Aborigines are never seen in the film; is this neglect on the part of the filmmakers? Or is it a comment on the colonizers’ own inability to see the people they have invaded? The pan flute music, though not actually native to Australia, certainly evokes a culture different from the Victorian British one represented by string quartets, corsets, and pictures of Queen Victoria. The characters’ fancy, restrictive clothing looks completely out of place as soon as they leave the school building and go outside. The film suggests that these white characters are unequipped to handle what they experience as the extreme foreign-ness of the Hanging Rock.

Sexuality and maturation *Picnic at Hanging Rock* can be analyzed as a fairy tale about children going alone into the wilderness, such as “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Hansel and Gretel.” In these tales, children must confront various challenges without the help of adults. Mrs. Appleyard, like Little Red Riding Hood’s mother, sends the girls off to Hanging Rock with a speech warning them, essentially, not to stray off the path. Like most fairy tale protagonists, several of the college girls go anyway, and what happens there is beyond their ken. The experience changes all of them forever – some are swallowed up, and the one who returns has changed. She is Irma, who states that she cannot remember what happened during her week in the bush. When she is permitted to visit the other girls at school, she looks suddenly much older than they, wearing an elaborate bright red velvet cape and hat styled for an adult (a costume evocative of “Little Red Riding Hood”). The girls immediately react with hostility, yelling at her for not sharing the knowledge she now has; they ostracize her. All of these visual and verbal details contribute to the evocation of sexual maturation. Of course, Irma’s red clothing contrasts with the white dresses—evocative of innocence—that all the girls wore to the picnic. Other hints of sexuality inhere in the girls’ age (on the brink of adulthood), the initial setting of Valentine’s Day and exchanging of cards among the girls, Sara’s single-minded love for Miranda, the presence of Michael at the Rock, and the hushed questions among the adults as to whether Edith and Irma have returned “intact.”

Time An extension of the nature versus civilization dynamic is a specific theme of time. Hanging Rock seems to disrupt the ordinary flow of clock time. The characters who wear watches on the picnic find that they stop at noon, rendering the picnickers unable to tell exactly what time it is. They have already discussed Hanging Rock’s role in geologic time earlier in the film. And after the excursion to the Rock is ostensibly over, it recurs in various ways. At several moments in the film, some characters (often Michael) see an image of Miranda or hear in voiceover a statement that was made on the day of the picnic. Clock time, of course, is associated with human civilization; inside Appleyard College, the viewer often sees large clocks and hears their ticking. In fact, the second-to-last scene of the film shows Mrs. Appleyard sitting in her office while a loud ticking sound can be heard; this sound stops right before the beginning of the voiceover announcing that Mrs. Appleyard subsequently killed herself. The end of human time, the end of Mrs. Appleyard, and the end of the college are all essentially one.

Authority / Power Mrs. Appleyard has power and authority at the school that bears her name. As the framed picture of Queen Victoria in her office is intended to demonstrate, she wants that authority to be viewed as an extension of the power of the Empress who is in charge of Australia along with the rest of the British Empire. Mrs. Appleyard speaks to the students in an authoritative tone; she never expresses sympathy with a student, asks how they feel, or offers clemency on anything. The first thing we see her do is give directions to the girls about how they should behave on the picnic. Sara Waybourne clashes with Mrs. Appleyard because she defies this power. She absolutely refuses to memorize the classic poem she has been instructed to learn; she even insults the poem as illogical. Sara derives authority from within: she has written a poem of her own, about love. She refuses to bend to Mrs. Appleyard's instructions, even when threatened with punishment. Mrs. Appleyard correspondingly exercises her power by telling Sara she must leave the school. Sara's subsequent death is a tragedy. Still, if the film is suggesting that Sara commits suicide, then Sara finally wins out in exercising her internal power.

Poverty Most of the students at Appleyard College are wealthy, as is Michael. But two prominent characters are poor: long-lost siblings Sara Waybourne and Albert Crundall. They were raised in an orphanage and have now been separated for years. Albert works as a servant (a job he does not carry out with alacrity), while the younger Sara has been allowed to receive an upper-class education because of the munificence of her guardian. But Sara's position is extremely tenuous. She cannot force Mrs. Appleyard to let her continue to live and study at the school. Her guardian's lapse in payment and communication with Mrs. Appleyard – another thing Sara cannot control – costs Sara her place at the school and ultimately her life. Albert plays a happier role in the story as a whole, since he is the person who ultimately rescues Irma. Michael's determination (and sense of wealthy, English entitlement, perhaps) drives him to search longer for the girls, but it is Albert who can actually tolerate enough of the climb up the Rock to get to Irma safely. There is clearly a toughness to both Albert and Sara that could perhaps be attributed to the adversity they have faced.

Obsession Several characters display obsessive behavior. Michael and Sara are both obsessed with Miranda. Michael seems to fall in love at first sight, and he never wavers, even risking his safety to undertake his own search for her on the Rock. Even though he effects the rescue of Irma and looks at her as she convalesces at his aunt and uncle's house, he does not transfer his affections to Irma. Instead, Michael continues throughout the film to see Miranda. He sees her looking at him in the garden; he sees her when nothing is there, and when a swan is there. Sara does not hallucinate images of Miranda, but she has the advantage of possessing a photograph of her. Miranda, early in the film, invites Sara to her family home but also tells her that she must learn to love someone else apart from her; this tells us that Sara seems to love no one else at this point. Sara writes love poetry about Miranda. Some days after the disappearance, Sara constructs something of a shrine to Miranda in their room, centered on Miranda's framed portrait. Although Sara's death is partly connected to her expulsion from the school, it is also clear that she sees her life as less meaningful in Miranda's absence.

Attraction Many of the characters in this book are teenagers experiencing sexual attraction. Both Albert and Michael are obviously attracted to the girls as soon as they see them, in different ways. Albert immediately comments on Miranda's and Irma's bodies. Michael has been raised not to talk about girls that way, but Albert is clearly right when he says that Michael is secretly thinking the same thing. Michael's pull toward Miranda surely is intended to be understood as at least partly sexual. None of the girls have any known attractions to boys; they do not really know any boys that we see in the film. The environment is clearly ripe for them to have attractions to each other, however, and there is no reason not to understand Sara's feelings for Miranda as at least partly sexual.

Love Many characters clearly love each other. Mademoiselle loves the students in general and Irma in particular. Sara loves Miranda, as expressed by writing a poem for her, looking at her lovingly, and mourning her loss. Conspicuously, Sara does not love anyone else. Many of the girls at the school seem quite affectionate and caring toward each other; this is true of Marion, Irma, and Miranda, who also loves Sara. Albert shows a kind of love for Michael in accompanying him on his dangerous search on the Rock. Mrs. Appleyard seems not to love anyone at all. One might even say that Miranda represents love in the film, and that her disappearance causes desperate attempts to recover that love or to live without it.

Friendship Both expected and unexpected friendships are apparent in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Unsurprisingly, many of the girls at Appleyard College appear to be close friends, as evidenced by their physical closeness, the sharing of confidences, and the general comfort they seem to take in each other's presence. But unexpected friendships occur, too, including the one between the very popular, glamorous Miranda and the plainer, younger Sara. Another friendship that crosses class boundaries is the friendship of Albert and Michael, which the viewer sees from its beginning. Unlike the girls at the college, Michael does not have companions of his own age, gender, and class in Australia. He seems happy to sacrifice social class in order to be friends with Albert—and Albert shows himself to be a true friend by his willingness to accompany Michael on the risky venture to the Rock and to lie to his employer, Michael's uncle, about Michael's whereabouts. No adult friendships are seen in the film. Rather, friendship in this film is the province of the young, and while it only seems to exist within genders, it has the ability to transcend other barriers.

Curiosity/adventure Miranda, Marion, Irma, Michael, and (to a lesser extent) Edith all show themselves eager to explore. Not coincidentally, all of these young people are living in an extremely restrictive society. Their clothing, knowledge, and behavior are dictated for them by adults with a very narrow view of what is appropriate. The Appleyard College girls are literally instructed to keep their gloves on until they have passed through the town that lies between the college and Hanging Rock. Clearly, the Hanging Rock brings out these young people's desire to escape such confines. Michael, standing in the wilderness and seeing Miranda, experiences a sexual awakening and a desire to "stretch his legs a bit" and walk into the unknown. Michael is especially restricted because he normally lives in upper-class England, which generally had a more restrictive society than Australia at this time. Then again, the girls are especially restricted, because they are girls. Their clothing focalizes this restriction: the first thing they do when they are quite alone at the Rock is remove their shoes and stockings, and we learn later that Irma and Miss McCraw both removed additional articles of clothing while on the Rock. We don't know what exactly they all do at the Rock, but the fact that they are unobserved by authority and free to choose for themselves is crucial.

Past/memories *Picnic at Hanging Rock* engages with the collective past as well as individual characters' personal pasts. Geologic time is evoked when the characters discuss the Rock's age before they arrive there. When Michael goes to the Rock, he seems to experience the memory of things that Miss McCraw, Miranda, and Marion said when they were there. This is, of course, unexplained, but characters' personal pasts surface as well. Albert, when looking at the college girls, speaks of his younger sister and remarks that this is the first time in many years that he has thought of the orphanage where they were raised. This past haunts Sara, as well, when Mrs. Appleyard essentially threatens to send her back into it when her college fees remain unpaid. Late in the film, Mrs. Appleyard herself refers to the part of her own past that she shared with her now-deceased husband. She speaks fondly of trips to Bournemouth, England. But the viewer is left to wonder how Mrs. Appleyard ended up running a school in Australia; her educational background is unclear, and the fact that she misattributes "The Wreck of the Hesperus" to Felicia Hemans suggests that she may not be truly qualified.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did you as a viewer feel at the end of the film? Were you angry or frustrated about the lack of a solution to the mystery, or did you find this intriguing? Do you feel like the film led you to expect a solution, or not?
2. What connections might you draw between *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and fairy tales?
3. What do you think the film is ultimately suggesting about the relationship of modern human beings to nature?
4. To what extent, and in what ways, do you think gender matters in the film? Do the experiences of Miranda, Marion, Irma, Edith, Michael, and Albert at the Rock seem categorizable in terms of gender, or not?

5. What do you think the film is suggesting about colonialism?