

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Jessica Campbell, Ph.D.

# The Plumber (1979)

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. After making the TV movie *The Plumber* (1979), Weir received international accolades for *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), the latter of which won an Oscar. Weir then made 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 21<sup>st</sup> century but has maintained an international reputation.

**Film** *The Plumber* tells a simple story that lacks the mystical elements of Weir's two previous films. The film stages a conflict between Jill, a woman working on her master's thesis, and Max, the plumber who appears at her apartment unexpectedly and says he has been sent to do a routine check on the pipes. The plumbing work stretches into days, and Max increasingly disrupts Jill's work and her feeling of safety in her own home. Jill's husband, a professor, dismisses Jill's concerns until she finally gets rid of Max by making it look like he stole her expensive watch.

**Background** Weir's idea for the story of *The Plumber* came from friends of his who had a similar experience. The film was made for television on a small budget provided by the South Australian Film Corporation. After airing on Australian television, it was screened at various film festivals around the world. The film was well received internationally even though its producers did not adopt the strategy of placing an international star at its center (which had been done with Weir's previous film, *The Last Wave*).

## CHARACTERS

*Jill* – housewife and graduate student in anthropology  
*Brian* – professor, husband of Jill  
*Max* – plumber in Brian and Jill's apartment building  
*Meg* – Jill's friend, living in the same apartment building

## SYNOPSIS

*The Plumber* begins by establishing the relationship between two of its three main characters: Brian, a professor of what seems to be medical anthropology, and Jill, his wife, who works at home on her master's thesis in cultural anthropology. They live in a large, university-owned apartment building in modern-day Australia. One morning after Brian has left for work, a man comes to the door and identifies himself as a plumber tasked with checking all the units' pipes. Jill is surprised and hesitant but ultimately lets him in. The plumber, named Max, soon announces that he has discovered significant problems with pipes and will have to tear up the bathroom in order to fix them.

As he works on the bathroom over the next week, Max frequently steps away to try to interact with Jill. He is particularly keen to comment on the poshness of Jill and Brian's possessions and to establish himself as a man of the people, not only a plumber but also a folk singer. Jill, meanwhile, is trying to work on her thesis and is constantly interrupted by Max's conversation and his habit of turning on the radio while he works. He makes himself more at home in the apartment than Jill is comfortable with; for example, he takes a shower; he gets Jill to make him coffee and lunch; he writes song lyrics on the bathroom wall. Max also sneaks up on Jill multiple times and tells her he was once in prison for rape—then insists that he was only joking. Several times, Jill expresses her distress to Brian and asks him to

help by arranging for a different plumber. Brian, preoccupied with the possibility of a job offer from the World Health Organization, does not do this. Eventually, a strung-out Jill plants an expensive watch in Max's truck and remarks to Brian that it is missing; Brian is now outraged, and Max is arrested.

## SCENES

**Academic couple** – A man takes a shower. He dries himself and puts some hair rejuvenation tonic in his hair. We see that he is in an industrial-looking high-rise apartment building. The same man, dressed and holding a notebook with writing in it, walks into a bedroom where a woman is sitting on the bed. He tells her that he is about halfway through reading and that it is good. He flips to a picture of a black man in tribal clothing and asks the woman what happened with him. She replies that while she had been studying his tribe, the man had come into her tent and performed a kind of ritual, leading to a trance. Ultimately, she says, she threw a bowl of milk at him, causing him to cry. The man says that she should put this story in the manuscript to make it a best-seller.



**Brian at work** – Brian, standing in front of a chalkboard with “MED III Nutrition” written on it, delivers a lecture in which he describes a program to get more nutritious food to indigenous inhabitants of the New Guinea highlands. A man comes in and interrupts him with a piece of paper; Brian reads what it says and looks excited. He leaves the classroom and calls the woman, Jill, saying that representatives from the World Health Organization are planning to visit the next day to learn about his research. He tries to return the conversation to the WHO, saying that he might get a job with them and thus be able to move with Jill to Geneva. Later on, Brian and a few other people watch a video of an aboriginal man with ataxia. Brian expresses his opinion that the cause is a familiar one, but the other man insists that ritual cannibalism is no longer practiced.



**Visit from Geneva** – A plane lands. Cars drive along a road. They come to a stop and arrive at the university; Brian and three men get out. He introduces them all to two men on the sidewalk as the WHO representatives. All the men go inside. Brian and the WHO representatives look at and discuss a series of pictures of indigenous people with diseases.



One representative insists that cannibalism is no longer practiced. But Brian replies that he heard of a new fertility rite involving eating the testes of dead warriors; though this is not exactly cannibalism, he says, it might account for the disease they are seeing in the population.



**The plumber** – A man appears, only his legs and hands visible. He goes up the elevator. The woman flips through notebook pages on the bed; she hears a knock at the door and sees at the door when she opens it, identifying himself as a plumber. She insists, “We didn’t call a plumber,” but he says he is doing routine checks on all the units in the university housing and insists on coming in. She agrees.



**Taking it all in** – The plumber looks at the tribal masks on the wall and comments that it is like a museum. He goes into the bathroom and looks at the hair tonic, a pair of women’s underwear hanging on the shower, and a drawing from the Kama Sutra. He checks the water pressure. The woman goes to another room and gets fully dressed. The plumber hammers into the tile, explaining that he must do this in order to access the pipes.



**Pipe problems** – The plumber emerges, hair wet and wearing a different shirt, saying that the pipes are “buggered.” He says that the fix will take several hours and must be done the next day. “But we’ve had no problems,” Jill says. He says that the things you cannot see are more important in plumbing. He looks over at her papers and books on Jill’s desk and asks about them. She replies that she is doing a master’s in anthropology. He leaves.



**Plumber is back** – Jill returns to the bathroom and looks at the wet soap and towel. The plumber suddenly reappears right behind her. Jill is very startled and reproaches him for coming back in without warning; he retorts that the door was unlocked and that he had come across a box containing Jill and Brian’s grocery delivery. She protests that her husband could have brought it in. The plumber begins to ask questions about Jill and Brian’s lives and announces that he is from Melbourne himself. He identifies the school Jill says she went to as “pretty posh.” He then gives his name as Max and leaves. Jill locks the door.

**Round two** – The plumber drives into the parking lot of the apartment building. Brian, dressed, approaches Jill, still in bed. “Wish me luck,” he says. She reassures him that the WHO representatives will like him. He gives her a wrapped box, which she opens to reveal a fancy watch.



**Observation** – The plumber knocks on the door and Jill lets him in; he is carrying many pipes as well as other equipment. Jill is now dressed and Brian is not present. She is holding the watch; the plumber takes it from her and remarks, “Worth a fair bit of coin.” She takes it back. Now alone in the bathroom, Max looks at what is in the medicine cabinet; he breaks one of the mirrored doors while trying to open it but does not tell Jill.



**Mi casa es su casa** – Jill sits at her desk listening to a tape recording and staring at a blank piece of notebook paper. Max, meanwhile, has turned on the radio in the bathroom and is hammering into the tiles of the shower. Jill sighs. Max appears; “mind if I make myself a cup of tea?” he says. Jill insists on making it for him. He notices her coffee and remarks that he loves fresh coffee. She asks if he would prefer that, and he says yes. Jill brings him the coffee and he remarks on the monetary value of the indigenous artifacts around the apartment. She tells Max that they got them while her husband was researching the health of people in the New Guinea highlands.

**Coffee break** – Max sits down on a chair next to Jill’s desk with his cup of coffee. He remarks on the class snobbery of many of the people he works for. Max continues to sit and whistles. “I’d better get back to my work,” Jill finally says. He leaves, saying “I’ll let you off this time” and laughing.



**Trouble focusing** – Jill restarts her tape recording and picks up a pen. The hammering and radio songs from the bathroom start again. Jill turns back and forth restlessly. She finally throws down her pen and goes into the bathroom; in so doing; she hits Max’s head with the edge of the door. His forehead bleeds a little; she gets him a bandage.



**Lunch hour** – Jill makes a sandwich. Max comes out of the bathroom and looks at her. She asks if he brought lunch; he says no and comments that a sandwich would be nice. He remarks that her husband seems to be losing his hair and that the “intellectual type” often do, while he himself has a full head of hair. Max does indeed have thick curly hair.



**Confidences from Max** – Max says that he is not really a plumber but actually is a folksinger. He and Jill eat sandwiches. He says that he has had offers to go commercial but refuses to compromise. Max begins to walk in circles around the living room, saying that he wants to be like Bob Dylan and to tell the stories of the people. He uses prison as an example of society’s wrongdoing, prompting Jill to ask whether he

has ever been in prison. He says yes and that it was for rape. Then he laughs and says he is only joking – it wasn't for rape but for burglaries that he conducted by pretending to be a plumber. Jill looks at him uncertainly.

**Meeting Meg** – Someone knocks on the door; Max answers it before Jill can beat him to it. A woman is there; Jill introduces her to Max as Meg, her friend. Meg is picking Jill up to go out; Jill hesitates to leave while Max is present, but he insists that she should, and that he can lock the door on his way out. Jill acquiesces. While she gets her purse, Meg announces that her Mercedes has finally arrived. Jill puts the watch in her purse and exits the apartment with Meg, leaving Max sitting at the table reading a newspaper. “What is going on?” Meg asks when the two women leave the apartment. “You wouldn't believe it,” Jill says.



**Too much imagination** – Max sits at the counter and says, “You're a bit on the neurotic side – too much imagination.” He says that he never got much education but has a photographic memory and is great at crosswords. Jill does not respond to this. Max says that as an educated person herself, she must have noticed that his speaking is not very refined and grammatically correct. “That's not important,” Jill says, but he says that it is to him. “Didn't they offer you an English course in prison?” Jill asks; Max looks hurt and says, “I've never been in prison.” He leaves the room, saying, “Too much imagination.”

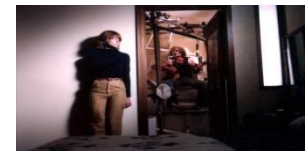
**Bathroom insight** – Meg comes to the door and Jill lets her in. Meg and Max banter. Max sits down at the counter with Meg while Jill gives her a glass of wine. Meg tells Max about a woman she knows who had an elaborate bathroom remodeling job done. He says that you can tell a lot about people from their bathrooms; in reply to Meg's question about what he can tell about Jill and Brian from theirs, he says, “Jill's pretty sexy, and her old man's losing his hair.”



**Grammar lessons** – Max continues, “The most amazing house I done was at Government House.” Jill says, “‘Did’, not ‘done.’” Meg looks horrified and Max says, “What?” as his face falls. He goes back to the bathroom. Jill's face falls, too. In the bathroom, Max leans against the door and repeats “did a bathroom.” Max mutters for a while in the bathroom, landing on the phrase, “I'm me, babe,” which he then writes on the bathroom wall with a black felt tip pen. He then adds “I'm free, babe” and sings the lines.



**Private performance** – Meg and Jill finish their lunch, and Meg leaves. Jill looks at the picture of the indigenous man she had discussed with Brian at the beginning of the film. She then walks toward the bathroom, where she sees Max sitting on the sink with a guitar and harmonica. He begins to play and sing a song culminating in “I'm me, babe / I'm free, babe.” More writing is visible on the bathroom wall.



**Class** – The women attend some sort of yoga or other eastern spirituality class involving chanting and arm movements. A man watches them from a door that is ajar at the back of the room. The teacher concludes the class. Jill and Meg talk as they leave the class; Jill comments on how strange it is that she let a complete stranger into her house just because he said he was a plumber. Meg agrees that it can be scary, but that it can also be a turn-on to have workmen on the property. Meg tells a story of someone she knew who opened the door to an old woman claiming to need to use the bathroom, only to turn out to be a man in drag.



**Home alone?** – Jill returns to the apartment. She locks the door behind her, goes into the bedroom, and takes off her clothes. She walks toward the bathroom but then hears Max talking, apparently still there even though she had expected him to be gone by this time. Jill is startled and moves away from the bathroom.



**Worries** – Brian returns to the apartment after darkness has fallen. Jill is in bed. He asks if she is all right and she points toward the bathroom, which is completely torn up and covered with extra pipes running across the room. “He’s got to go,” Jill says. She tries to explain why, but Brian expresses skepticism. Conversation turns to the WHO visit, which Brian is concerned about. He says that the representatives will be coming over for dinner the next night because one of them wants to sample Jill’s curry. Jill protests but to no avail. She tries to turn on the kitchen faucet, but no water comes out. Max, in the corridor, clandestinely watches Jill and Brian through the window.



**An attempt to help** – Brian walks into the university building. He tells his assistant to call the administration and find the person in charge of plumbers. The assistant says that no one is answering the phone, so he tells her to forget about it and focus on another task instead.



**Breaking in** – Jill sits at her desk, listening to a tape playing at high volume and writing. She has her back to the window. Max appears and tries unsuccessfully to get her attention. He leaves; she gets up and looks out the door, sees that he is no longer there, and smiles. She goes back inside and turns off the tape. Then she hears sounds coming from the ceiling. She follows them through the apartment to the bathroom, where Max’s feet and legs appear coming through the ceiling. She runs back to her desk.



**Another meal together** – This time, Max has a guitar as well as his plumbing equipment. Jill picks up the phone and tries to reach Brian. She then calls Meg and makes a plan for them to have lunch together. Max comes into the kitchen holding a thermos and a paper bag. He takes two cups out of the cupboard and pours liquid from the thermos into them. “You were real decent to me yesterday, so I’m just doing likewise,” he says, handing her a cup and a cake from the bag. She says she is not hungry but he insists. “It’s basically hashish” he says after she has taken a bite – then he laughs and says she’ll believe anything.

**Appeal to authority** – Jill walks away and leaves the apartment. She goes to the ground floor and knocks on a door labeled “Caretaker Temp. Office.” A woman appears; Jill tells her she wants to find out about the plumber because she is not sure he really is a plumber. Max appears behind Jill. The other woman says, “Maxie! This lady here is checking up on you – quite right too, don’t you believe a word he says – oversexed and overpaid he is.” Max and the woman both smile and laugh. Jill goes back to the elevator; she tries to close it so that Max cannot come in with her, but he forces his way in. “I’m going to get you out of my flat,” Jill says. They both go back to her apartment.



**Dinner party** – Night has fallen. Brian walks with the three WHO men. Jill prepares food at the apartment; Brian and the men come in and all are introduced. “You’d better take a look at the bathroom,” Jill whispers to Brian. He does, and he sees that it is in even greater disarray than before; the pipes look like a jungle gym.



**Sink collapse** – Everyone eats, but the curry that Jill has made is too hot. One of the WHO representatives asks to use the bathroom; Brian warns him that it is rather a maze of pipes because of a plumbing problem. In the bathroom, the WHO man weaves through pipes. He messes with the sink, causing it to collapse and trap him, though he is not seriously injured. The other men try to open the locked door; they struggle but eventually succeed. Later, the men smoke, drink, and discuss Brian’s research while Jill sleeps on the couch.



**Trying to get a witness** – The next morning, Jill and Brian stand in the kitchen; Brian looks at his watch. “He’s watching us,” Jill says; “he’ll appear as soon as you’ve gone.” “He’s not some sort of a monster,” Brian says, laughing. He says that he cannot wait any longer and leaves. Brian runs to his car; on the way, he sees Max, who is sitting in his car listening to music, and stops.

**Deterioration** – Jill sits in the apartment with the door open. Max enters wordlessly with his radio on. “My husband is going to speak to the administration about you.” Max shouts at her and grabs her shoulders. Jill begins to cry and scream at him. He says he’ll do a rough job and be out in three hours.



**Good news** – Brian comes home after dark. Jill is in the shower; the bathroom is somewhat reconstituted. Brian comes in and disrobes, saying excitedly that he has been offered the job in Geneva. He joins her in the shower and says he’s taking her out to dinner.

**Out to dinner** – Brian and Jill sit in a restaurant where a man is singing in Italian. They smile and applaud when the song ends. They discuss what a difficult week it has been. Brian remarks that he had a chat in the car park with Max, whom he deems “a bit of a freak but quite likable. Quite harmless, an eccentric – he was very nice about you, kept saying how much he admired you.” Jill scoffs and becomes tearful.



**Water pressure** – The next day, Jill and Meg peruse brochures about Switzerland together. Meg uses the bathroom. After she finishes, a sound of rushing water persists; Jill looks worried and then goes to the bathroom, where water bursts through at various places in the walls and floor. Meg rushes in, too, and says that they will have to bring back the plumber; Jill, soaked, screams, “No! Not the plumber! No!” Meg rushes out as Jill attempts to stop up the drain with a towel, to no avail.



**The plumber returns** – Jill walks out of the bathroom slowly, with a resigned expression. Max appears at the door. “Problems?” he says, as he walks toward the bathroom. Meg hugs Jill and says, “Let’s go out for the day!” They agree to gather their things and meet in the car park in five minutes. Max stops the water flow in the bathroom. Max comes out to the living room, where Jill is. “How long this time?” she asks. He replies that no one knows with a tricky job like this and that they’ll just have to learn to get along with each other. Max gets back to work.

**Car park** – Jill gathers her things. She picks up the watch and puts it in her purse. Jill leaves the apartment. In the car park, she notices Max’s car, with the back open, full of plumbing equipment. She stops and looks in.



**Housewife** – Brian comes to the apartment after nightfall. Jill is sitting at the table, wearing makeup and a different hairdo. Candles are lit and the table is set. Jill cuts an avocado in half and puts it on their plates. They sit at the table and toast Switzerland.



**Missing watch** – Brian touches Jill’s bare wrist and asks where her watch is. Jill says she isn’t sure. Brian becomes increasingly agitated. “Have you any idea how much that thing cost?” he says, getting up and going to look for the watch in the bedroom while Jill eats her avocado half. She assures him that she and Meg have already looked all over the house. “What about the plumber? Did you ask him?” Brian says. “He was gone,” Jill replies. She adds that fifty dollars are missing from her purse.

**Jill victorious** – In the morning, Max drives into the car park. Four men in suits converge on him; we do not hear what they are saying at first. Max shouts as one of the men begins to look through the objects in his car. The man pulls out Jill’s watch. Max stares at it and then looks up at Jill, who is looking down from the balcony. “You bloody bitch!” he says twice. Jill looks down at him wordlessly.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Jill** Jill is a woman in modern-day Australia who spends her days largely alone in her apartment, being a housewife and finishing her master's thesis. She does not find it easy to have strangers in her home, or to flirt casually with men.

*Intellectual* – The first thing we learn about Jill is that she is writing her master's thesis in cultural anthropology. She speaks animatedly about her research. Even though Jill is in some ways choosing a traditional life by staying at home instead of getting a job, the person she has married is a fellow intellectual.

*Ill at ease* – Jill cannot relax and focus on her work while Max is in the apartment. She is clearly a little afraid of Max but tries to overcome it; she chats with him but is visibly uncomfortable doing so. Jill also seems ill at ease when compelled to host a dinner for Brian's prospective WHO colleagues.

*Determined* – Ultimately, having failed to get anyone else to listen to her concerns about Max, Jill takes matters into her own hands. She plants her expensive watch in his truck, knowing that he will immediately be suspected of stealing it when she reveals to Brian that it is missing. Jill is willing to do something extreme in order to protect herself.

**Brian** Jill's husband, Brian, is professor and researcher of nutrition in indigenous populations. He aspires to a wealthier and more prestigious lifestyle as an employee of the World Health Organization in Geneva. He comments approvingly on Jill's thesis, but he also wants her to fulfill the role of a traditional housewife.

*Ambitious* – Currently a professor at a university in Adelaide, Brian is delighted when he learns that the WHO is interested in his research and he immediately starts talking to Jill about the higher-status life they could have in Geneva if he gets the job. Brian expresses both material and professional ambitions.

*Hard-working* – Most of the times he appears in the film, Brian is working. He teaches courses at the university and has undertaken field research in the New Guinea highlands that he is striving to share with the wider scientific community. He passionately discusses this research with the WHO representatives.

*Independent* – Although Brian and Jill seem to have a basically functional relationship, they do not seem emotionally close; her distress about Max seems to make little impression on Brian. He is also an independent thinker; we learn that his theory about a disease he has observed in his research does not fit with what most other scientists think.

**Max** Working as a plumber for the university housing department, Max is also a folk singer and writes songs about the injustices perpetrated against the lower classes by the upper classes. He is very outgoing; when someone does not want to engage with him, he tries harder rather than step back.

*Extroverted* – Max cannot seem to stand being alone or silent for very long. He chats with anyone who happens to be nearby. He listens to the radio while working, but this does not seem to be enough; he frequently stops working in order to find Jill and talk to her.

*Casual* – Repeatedly over the course of the film, Jill and Max have different interpretations of the seriousness of something that is said or done; much of what Jill takes seriously is treated casually by Max. His clothing, too, is casual; he dresses in jeans with holes in them.

*Persistent* – Jill's determination is almost matched by Max's persistence. He keeps trying to have more interactions with Jill despite her hesitance and, at times, her direct attempts to end the interaction. When she tells him she is trying to get him replaced, he angrily insists that he will not be forced out of his job.

## THEMES

**Gender relations** Gender is one of the two most fruitful ways of interpreting the conflict between Jill and Max in *The Plumber*. In other words, their different genders are a strong contributor to their difficulty in understanding each other. Max has a social and physical advantage over Jill because of his status as a man; this power imbalance makes it difficult for Jill to trust him. Most of the time, Max acts surprised and frustrated that Jill will not be more open with him; this suggests that he is unaware of the reasons for her hesitation. Occasionally, though, he seems to prey on her gender-based fear, such as when he tells her (as a joke) that he once served prison time for rape. Meanwhile, gender tension exists between Jill and Brian as well. At one point, Jill says that Brian thinks she is overreacting to Max; he does not deny it, and he does not alleviate her distress. He only acts when he thinks Max has stolen their property. The one exception to the gender tension in the film is the fact that the two other women who appear in the film—Jill's friend, Meg, and one other woman whom we see very briefly—casually chat and flirt with Max.

**Social class** The other important lens through which to view the conflict between Max and Jill is that of social class. Jill has an advantage over Max because of her higher social and educational status. Although most of the film's scenes dramatize the distress Max causes Jill through his masculinity, it is ultimately Jill's social power that determines the winner of the battle of wills between them. As soon as Jill tells Brian that her expensive watch is missing, he becomes agitated and starts to search the apartment for it. Max is an obvious target of suspicion. When Max arrives at the apartment building the very next morning, we see four men in suits converge on Max and search his truck for the watch. It is clear throughout the film that class struggle preoccupies Max; he writes and sings songs about working-class people and frequently comments on the monetary value of objects in Jill and Max's apartment. Although Jill and Max do not live an ostentatiously wealthy lifestyle, Jill's friend, Meg, certainly does: she buys a new Mercedes sedan and shows off an outfit that "cost a fortune." Max remarks to Jill that he wishes he could speak in a more polished way but appears distressed when she responds by correcting one of his sentences.

**Intellectualism** Jill and Brian are both intellectuals, and they both work hard. They both study aspects of indigenous people's lives—in Brian's case, nutrition and disease, and in Jill's case, ritual and culture. Their apartment is decorated with objects (masks, spears, and so forth) that they have acquired during their field research in the New Guinea highlands. Jill turns on a record of African music at one point in the film. Obviously, their intellectual pursuits are central to their lives. Because Brian's research could help decrease instances of disease in the indigenous population, his work is fundamentally compassionate, although we never learn how the indigenous people themselves feel about it. But other than interior decorating, there is no indication that the couple's intellectual pursuits have broadened their worldview in a more fundamental sense. Max remarks to Jill that for all the discussion in their society of discrimination against "the blacks," there is no discussion of discrimination still faced by working-class whites. Jill replies that surely it cannot be true that people are still so snobbish; Max insists that it is. Ultimately, despite their work with indigenous people, Jill and Brian are unable to figure out how to interact with Max in anything but a contentious way.

**Marriage** At first, Brian and Jill seem to have a strong modern marriage. The very first scene shows Brian reading and praising Jill's master's thesis draft; he then goes off to work while she remains home, dividing her time between writing and fulfilling traditional housewife duties. They call each other during the day when there is something important to say, and they seem happy to see each other in the evening. However, it soon becomes clear that tension exists. One conversation reveals that Jill is currently staying home in part because when she had a job outside the home in the past, Brian complained about not having a real housewife who put dinner on the table and otherwise devoted attention to the home. Meanwhile, the film dramatizes several instances in which Jill expresses distress to Brian and asks for his help, which he does not give. Brian, for his part, expresses frustration that Jill is focused on what he sees as the minor issue of the plumber instead of focusing on his opportunity to work for the World Health Organization. Ultimately, Jill figures out what to do to make them a united front again: once she announces that her watch is missing, Brian comes over to her side against Max, and he is still there at the end of the film.



**Sexual violence** Rape is explicitly mentioned twice in the film. The first time, Max himself claims to Jill to have gone to prison for rape (and then retracts the claim). The second time, it comes up in a conversation between Jill and Meg when Jill comments that, when you think about it, it is bizarre that people habitually open the door to a stranger just because he claims to be a plumber. Meg, having clarified that Jill is referring to the threat of rape, agrees that such a situation can be frightening, but she also suggests that it can also be a turn-on to have workmen on the property. Her example, though, is of a time when men came to work on her outdoor pool, not on something inside her house. Meg also tells a story of someone she knew who opened the door to an old woman claiming to need to use the bathroom, only to turn out to be a man in drag. During the film, no physical sexual violence occurs; it is the threat of it that looms over the characters' interactions.

**Fear** Except for a couple of very brief scenes of Max alone, the film focuses on Jill's experience of their interactions. The viewer often sees Jill's facial expressions and body language in response to things that Max says and does. Frequently, these physical expressions are fearful. Jill doubts Max from the very beginning because he claims to be a plumber but she has neither called a plumber herself nor been informed by the building authorities that a plumber will be coming. Max also does not seem to be very good at plumbing; Brian and Jill are not aware of any plumbing problems at the start of the film, but multiple things have gone wrong with their pipes by the end. Max even says to Jill that he used to be a thief who would pretend to be a plumber in order to gain access to people's homes; Jill never learns whether this is true. Jill appears most fearful when, one morning, she does not open the door to Max, only to realize that he has entered the apartment above and is entering her apartment through the bathroom ceiling. For most of the film, she does not feel safe in her own home because she is not able to keep him out.

**Transgression** Physical boundaries and social norms are transgressed by both Max and Jill throughout the film. Max enters Jill's home more or less against her will. Once there, he does various things that a professional plumber is not really supposed to do: he takes a shower in their bathroom; he hovers over Jill's lunch so that she has little choice but to offer him a sandwich; he announces that he is going to make himself a cup of tea (then comments on the coffee beans in the kitchen so that Jill has little choice but to offer him coffee); he sits down to chat with Jill and Meg or to read the newspaper. Max's entry of Jill's apartment through the bathroom ceiling is the most significant physical transgression, as evidenced by Jill's visible fear and rush to the phone when she realizes what has happened. Meanwhile, the threat of the greater transgression of rape lingers throughout the film. Jill herself, however, ultimately commits what may be the greatest transgression: she frames Max for theft. Although Max's threatening behavior toward her is real and the theft is not, Jill realizes that theft is the transgression that will matter to the other men (her husband and the authorities) whom she needs on her side in order to get rid of Max.

**Cultures** The norms of various cultures are on display in *The Plumber*, as is the clash between cultures. Culture is also an object of study for Brian and Jill as anthropologists. The viewer learns a little bit about the culture of the indigenous people of the New Guinea highlands through dialogue about Jill's research and through audio recordings and objects (chiefly masks and spears) on display in the couple's home. Indigenous culture is not opposed to a monolithic Caucasian culture as in Weir's earlier film, *The Last Wave*. Instead, white characters themselves belong to different subcultures. Jill's friend, Meg, comfortably occupies the upper-middle-class culture of fancy cars, midday classes vaguely related to Eastern spirituality, and expensive clothing. Brian clearly aspires to Meg's culture, but he and Jill live on its fringes; they firmly belong, though, to the academic culture of hard work, conservative clothing, and orienting life choices around professional opportunities. Finally, Max, wearing jeans and listening to popular music, proudly identifies himself as a working man—specifically, a principled one who will not compromise his values by adapting his folk songs to suit the trends of the music industry. Max attributes his ethical stance to his upbringing in Melbourne, a city he holds up as a model against the capitalistic Adelaide.

**Power** *The Plumber* illustrates many nuances and shifts in the power dynamics among its characters. Max possesses physical and social power over Jill as a man. Brian and the men who arrest Max also have masculine power that Jill does not: the power to actually remove Max. Brian also clearly has more power in the marriage with Jill due to his gender: he is a professor while her thesis languishes under the

pressure to be a housewife, and it is for his jobs that they have moved to Adelaide and will soon move to Geneva. Meanwhile, Jill and Brian exercise power over Max that derives from their higher social status. Brian has power over the indigenous people he studies: due to his race and his professional status as a scientist, he can promote research projects that he hopes will lead to changes in their healthcare and diets. The film's conclusion demonstrates that a feeling of powerlessness can drive a person to an extreme and unethical exertion of whatever power they do have.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Whose "side" did you feel yourself to be on as you watched the push-and-pull between Jill and Max? Did you ever change your mind over the course of the film? Did you find yourself siding with the character with whom you share a gender or social class?
2. Have you ever had people working in your home for a long time (like Jill) or had a job where you had to work in someone else's home (like Max)? If so, did events in the film remind you of your experience (or those of other people you know)?
3. Do you think that Max is trying to terrorize Jill, or that he is simply trying to be friends and not doing a very good job of it? Or both? What specific scenes or lines of dialogue lead you to your answer?
4. The only real character outside the trio of Jill, Brian, and Max is Meg. What do you think her function in the film is? In other words, how does Meg affect your understanding of the film's main events?
5. Jill has legitimate grievances about her treatment from men; Max has legitimate grievances about his treatment from the wealthy. Would you agree or disagree with the statement that both of them direct their anger/vengeance at the wrong person? Why?