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The Repercussions of Traumatic Experiences in August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson"

ABSTRACT

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, which premiered in 1987, tells the story of an African-American family that relocates from the South to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The grandparents, who had worked as slaves on a plantation in the South, are acquired in exchange for a piano. The family went through numerous generations of shock and trauma as a result of reclaiming the piano. Within the context of this investigation, the Literary Trauma Theory acts as a kind of microscope to magnify the play. The findings of this study demonstrate how traumatic experiences may can impact a person's capacity to grasp the views of other people, sometimes known as their "theory of mind" (TOM), and how this is related to psychotic experiences.

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تداعيات التجارب الصادمة في درس البيانو " لأوكست و يلسون

الاستاذة أخلاص محمد ناتي العابدي /جامعة واسط كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية
الباحثة هدى عباس جاسم الفتلاوي /جامعة واسط كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية
الخلاصة:

يروى الكاتب المسرحي أوكست و يلسون في مسرحية درس البيانو، والتي تم عرضها لأول مرة في عام ١٩٨٧ قصة عائلة أمريكية من اصل أفريقي انتقلت من الجنوب الى بيتسبيرغ، حيث تم استخدام آلة بيانو للأجداد الذين كانوا عبيدا في مزرعة جنوبية، اثناء استرجاع هذا البيانو عانت هذه الأسرة من الصدمة. في هذا التحليل، تعمل نظرية الصدمة الأدبية كوسيلة يتم من خلالها مشاهدة المسرحية. يوضح هذا البحث كيف تؤثر الصدمة على قدرة المرء في فهم وجهات نظر الآخرين أو ما يسمى بنظرية العقل وكيف يرتبط ذلك بالتجارب الذهانية

الكلمات المفتاحية: السلوك الاجتماعي، الصدمة، نظرية العقل، العنصرية

Introduction

August Wilson, widely regarded as the best African-American author of the last several decades, authored a series of plays that investigated the history and culture of black Americans throughout the 20th century. According to Mary Bogumil, (Professor Bogumil teaches modern British and American literature,) "the purpose of this strategy is to draw attention to the long journey that so many African Americans have made with little progress and change" (Usekes, 2004,P.24). This explains Wilson's success with the minority community. His dramatic work is appreciated and profitable by both white and non-white audiences (Plum, 1993, p. 67).

Wilson's plays center on his portrayal of the African-American experience and his fascination with the lives of those who, in Wilson's words, "have not made their way history books" (Bigsby, 1992).Thamir R.S. Az- Zubaidy (2019) states that Cultural, psychological, and cognitive factors all play a role in the lifetime process of identity creation .According to Wilson's argument in his 1996 paper, "those who would deny black Americans their culture would also deny them their history and the underlying ideals that are part of human life." The use of dialect in *The Piano Lesson* was integral to the play's overall subject according to (Hamad & Alzubaidi, 2020, P.2490) the Africans were whipped for not understanding their masters' orders, so they were forced to learn the language of their masters. Because of this, they have developed a new language that incorporates their culture's rhythms. Through his dramaturgy, Wilson shows that he cares about more than just the survival of black culture in a hostile white environment. According to (Mankhi & Hamad 2022,P.296) the power of the racial majority constantly watches upon, controls, and evaluates the Black community. Wilson thinks it was a bad idea for many African-Americans to relocate to the North around the turn of the twentieth century. African_American people packed up and moved to the urban,

industrialized North to spread this way of life there. As a result, the transplant was a bust. As one author puts it, "Had we remained in the South, I believe our nation would have become more powerful" (Shannon, 1993,P.39).

According to Mohatt et al. (2014), African Americans suffer from historical trauma because of "a history of oppression, victimization, or massive group trauma exposure," and new research shows that "the children and grandchildren of historically traumatized populations continue to manifest such symptoms and risk factors even when they have not been, in the traditional sense, directly traumatized." This results in several horrific experiences for every black character in the story. Mistreatment of the black people in the United States has profound psychological roots (Nati, 2019, P.423). A first cause of the characters' "vicarious trauma" is that "the stain of these inhumane conditions persists as a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome on the collective mind of Africans in America." (Benitez, 2014,P.36) This is because their ancestors were subjected to a number of harrowing experiences during the Middle Passage "which is the stage of the Atlantic slave trade in which millions of enslaved Africans were transported to the Americas as part of the triangular slave trade"(Equiano,2001,P.18), .Second, everyone in the story, both good and bad, has been through hell. The Sutters owned the Charles family during the antebellum era of American servitude. Robert Sutter wanted to buy his wife a piano for their anniversary but he did not have the money to do so. So, he traded a mother and son from Charles' household for the instrument (Mohatt et al., 2014, p. 128).

The researchers shall refer to traumatic experiences that occurred throughout childhood and adolescence as "developmental trauma" from here on out. The term "trauma" is used more frequently in the field of psychology than in fiction. It

originally meant physical harm, but now more often refers to psychological harm (Mankhi et.al. 2020, P.89). This type of trauma has been linked to an increased risk of developing psychosis and other forms of psychopathology in adulthood (Schafer and Fisher, 2011; Aas et al., 2014; Varese et al., 2012). About a third of adult cases of psychosis can be linked to traumatic events in early life (Varese et al., 2012). It is generally established that childhood trauma can increase the intensity and duration of psychosis in adulthood. Increased symptom severity, treatment resistance, hospitalization rates, and poorer treatment results have all been linked to developmental trauma in psychotic populations, according to a growing body of research (Gibson et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2019). However, recent research suggests that cognitive impairment, a precursor to psychosis, is linked to early childhood mental trauma. However, studies examining the link between early life stress and adult neurocognition have yielded conflicting results. Recent meta-analysis (Bloomfield et al., 2021) found a link between developmental trauma and hallucinations, with dissociation and emotional dysregulation playing a role. But at the moment, no neurocognitive processes exist (Bloomfield et al., 2021). Experts lack a firm grasp on the precise neurocognitive pathways by which childhood trauma can lead to an increased risk of adult psychosis. This is worrisome because it shows that there is not enough data to support trauma-informed care (Bloomfield et al., 2020).

Theory of Mind (TOM) may be one vulnerability and intervention target for adult survivors of developmental trauma. Theory of Mind is a component of mentalization (Nijhof et al., 2016), and it is the capacity to attribute one's own and another's knowledge, emotions, thoughts, and beliefs (Premack and Woodruff, 1978; Sabbagh, 2004). This enable us to anticipate how the actions, intentions, and objectives of others may differ from our own (Baron & Cohen, 1997), allowing us

to act in a socially acceptable manner. Therefore, ToM is an essential component of social cognition (Bell et al., 2017; Wimmer and Perner, 1983).

Doaker, Wining Boy, and their older brother Boy Charles (grandfather of Boy Willie and Berniece) took the piano a decade later. The Sutter family led a vigilante mob that tore Boy Charles's house down. After evading the posse, Boy Charles joined the Yellow Dog Railway, but the mob later stopped the train and set fire to his wagon, murdering him and several other innocent African Americans. This led to widespread acclaim for *The Ghosts of Yellow Dog* among black audiences. Doaker, Wining Boy Boy Willie, and Berniece Charles were haunted by the tragic circumstances surrounding the breakup of their grandparents' family during the age of slavery, and they were greatly affected by witnessing Charles Boy's lynching.

BERNIECE. You killed Crawley just as sure as if you pulled the trigger. BOY WILLIE. See, that's ignorant. That's downright foolish for you to say something like that. You ain't doing nothing but showing your ignorance. If the nigger was here I'd whup his ass for getting me and Lymon shot at. BERNIECE. Crawley ain't knew about the wood. BOY WILLIE. We told the man about the wood. Ask Lymon. He knew all about the wood. He seen we was sneaking it. Why else we gonna be out there at night? Don't come telling me Crawley ain't knew about the wood. Them fellows come up on us and Crawley tried to bully them. Me and Lymon seen the sheriff with them and give in. Wasn't no sense in getting killed over fifty dollars' worth of wood. (Wilson, 1990, pp. 52-53)

This and the following excerpts show that Willie and Lymon have a clear memory of the events and are able to describe them in detail, despite having lived through the horrific experience of witnessing Crawley's murder. It is heartening that they can accurately recount the events despite their pain. They made a photo album to document their harrowing ordeal. Their story is more likely to be believed because they repeat it verbatim several times throughout the play.

BOY WILLIE. Me and Lymon was down there hauling wood for Jim Miller and keeping us a little bit to sell. Some white fellows tried to run us off of it. That's when Crawley got killed. They put me and Lymon in the penitentiary.

LYMON. They ambushed us right there where that road dip down and around that bend in the creek. Crawley tried to fight them. Me and Boy Willie got away but the sheriff got us. Say we was stealing wood. They shot me in my stomach. (Wilson, 1990, p. 37)

The following paragraph is interpreted in light of the DSM-5 criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to show that both Boy Willie and Lymon suffer from PTSD as a result of seeing Crawley's death at the hands of a white sheriff. Lymon was already traumatized by being present at the scene of Crawley's murder when he was shot in the stomach. In a pivotal scene, Wining Boy and Doaker reveal that Lymon's father was accidentally murdered in a nightclub when Lymon was a child, traumatizing him for life. Rapidly recalling his father's tragic end and the anguish produced by this wound certainly increased Lymon's distress from his own bullet wound to the abdomen. He probably thought he would meet the same fate as his father. Similar to the way a "descending snowball" gains

momentum with each incremental alteration, this may be a metaphor for the way traumatic events tend to be passed down through families.

WINING BOY. . . . L. D. Jackson. That was one bad-luck nigger. Got killed at some dance. Fellow walked in and shot him thinking he was somebody else. (DOAKER enters from his room.)

Hey, Doaker, you remember L. D. Jackson? DOAKER. That's Lymon's daddy. That was one bad-luck nigger. (Wilson, 1990, p. 64)

As a result, all the main characters, like their forebears, suffer from historical trauma. In addition, they themselves have endured traumatic events. This indicates that long-term consequences stemming from the initial trauma exist. Both Doaker and Wining Boy, who have experienced trauma firsthand and secondarily, have detailed memories and accounts of their ordeals. Doaker plays the role of the piano's principal narrator throughout the play. Through Charles's narration, the readers gain insight into how essential the piano is to his household. It has been suggested by recent studies that "psychological trauma relies on two levels of narrative: an internal logic describing a cause-and-effect relationship between a past event and present symptoms [Doaker's narration] and memory [the piano] as a constructed representation of the traumatic event." Doaker's narrated depiction can be seen as a historical trauma, as it links the family's past traumatic incidents to Berniece and Willie Boy's disagreement over whether or not to keep the piano. On page 129 (Mohatt et al., 2014).

Conclusion

The pain experienced by the family in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* originates from their time spent as slaves. That is to say, the harsh and animalistic treatment that the characters have endured of others is a legacy of slavery that continues to haunt them in the play. In the antebellum era, it was a terrible thing to take a father

away from his son and wife. The Charles family now has a piano that would have brought joy to white slave owners but would bring back horrible memories for African Americans. The author makes it sound like white folks enjoy themselves by playing the piano while African Americans are in pain. This shows that there is a huge power disparity inside the human race, which has always led to pain for the outsiders.

Those with a history of trauma had significantly lower accuracy rates on the director task, suggesting they had difficulties with mentalization (theory of mind). Whether or not a single stress or event is sufficient to trigger PTSD is questioned by DeGruy (2005). Then the question of African slaves arises. Many of them had multiple encounters with each of these pressures. Most slaves endured these deplorable conditions on a regular basis. Conversely, slaves "exposed to a 'lifetime' of traumas" throughout their transatlantic journey from Africa to the United States of America were "traumatized by traumatic events"

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