

Aspects of Racism in August Wilson's The Piano Lesson

جوانب التمييز العنصري

في مسرحية أوجست ويلسن: درس البيانو

BY

SHAYMA'A N'IMA MOHAMMAD AL-GHANIMI

SUPERVISED BY

ASST. PROF. AZHAR NOORI FAJR

المخلص

يناقش هذا البحث مسرحية درس البيانو للكاتب المسرحي الأميركي من أصل أفريقي أوجست ويلسن حيث تدور أحداث هذه المسرحية في المدينة التي ولد فيها الكاتب أذ يتناول تأريخ و حضارة الأميركيان السود كما تعرض هذه المسرحية معاناة العائلة الأميركية من أصل أفريقي و هي تحت وطأة التمييز العنصري في الولايات المتحدة الأميركية.

Abstract

This paper discusses the African American playwright August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* the incidents of which take place in the the history and culture of dramatist's birth city .The play tackles the African Americans in America.It also shows the suffering of the blacks' families under the oppression of racial discrimination in the United States.

The Piano Lesson

Plot Summary

The Piano Lesson focuses on an African-American family's struggle to face the past and to embrace the future. The play is set in Pittsburgh in 1936, toward the end of the Great Depression. Dominating the play is the ornately carved piano , which operates as both the play's central symbol and central conflict.

The play is divided into two acts . Act One opens at dawn at the house of Berniece Charles and her eleven -year- old daughter, Maretha. They live with Bernice's uncle , Doaker , a middle-aged railroad cook. Doaker serves as both the historian and the peacemaker of the family . The house is quiet until Bernice's brother, Boy Willie, shows up with his friend, Lymon. Boy Willie and Lymon have driven up from Mississippi in Lymon's broken-down truck to sell watermelons in the North. Berniece, thirty-five-year old widow , is still mourning her husband, and is not pleased by her brother's arrival . She believes that her brother is responsible for the death of her husband, Crawley, who was killed by white men in the South. Crawley accompanies Boy Willie and Lymon in an attempt to steal their white boss's wood from his farm. Both Boy Willie and Lymon run, but Crawley stays and is killed. After her husband's death , Berniece migrates to the North .

Boy Willie's visit not only disturbs the quietness of the house, but also awakens the dead . Berniece sees Sutter's ghost . Sutter is the white landowner of the Charles family, who dies when the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog push him into the well. However, Berniece accuses Boy Willie of being responsible for Sutter's death. The conflict between Berniece and her brother increases when Boy Willie intends to sell the family's piano in order to buy Sutter's land in the South . But , Berniece opposes her brother's decision , because she wants to preserve the history of the family which is carved on the piano .

In Act Two , Berniece brings Avery , the clergy man , to bless the house because her daughter has also seen Sutter's ghost. Avery wants to marry Berniece, but she is not ready yet to do this step. Boy Willie wants to honor his sharecropper father by using the family heirloom to buy a piece of the American Dream. However, Sutter's ghost tries to stop Boy Willie's dream. Boy Willie and the ghost confront each other which makes Berniece call for her ancestors' assistance. The spirits of the piano, finally, show up and help Boy Willie to defeat Sutter's ghost. The spirits also help Berniece and Boy Willie reconcile in the end .

1.1.African American Cultural Identity

In black drama , the traditional emphasis on cultural identity has been always there. At work now, there is the claim to possess an authentic black culture expressed through a recognizably black sensibility. This emphasis can be seen in August Wilson's work *The Piano Lesson* .

Wilson presents the African American culture through the everyday personal experiences of ordinary characters and the common folk , "those who were continuing to live their lives," rather than , as Wilson says , "what you could get from the history book"¹. To him , blacks can best write and stage their experiences and cultural identity . As a matter of fact , Wilson's main concern involves the struggle and survival of black cultural values in the midst of a hostile white culture: "The message of America is ' Leave your Africanness outside the door'. My message is 'Claim what is yours' "².

Wilson's sense of identity seeks the recognition of African American identity , the acceptance of the fact that the acknowledgement of African Americans should be linked "to Africa , to who we are"³. Therein lies his denial of the assumption that slavery exterminated African culture . He also believes that :

from the first African captives, through the years of slavery, and into the present century black Americans kept alive important strands of African consciousness and verbal art in their humor, songs, dance, speech, tales, folk beliefs and aphorisms .⁴

Despite the long and painful historical separation from Africa , there remains an African sensibility among African Americans . Wilson thereby consciously seeks to integrate this sensibility and all else that stems from African culture into his play , *The piano Lesson* .

The Piano Lesson dramatizes Wilson's complex notion of the past , which is at once the contemporary South of America , the slave era , and Africa . It is only by assuming Africanness that the black American can eventually attain a sense of identity and understanding who he or she is.The Past provides an original oneness as the essence of being , of life . Wilson describes:

when we left [the South] we left people back there....[the] connection is broken, that sense

of standing in your father's shoes....What I'm trying to do with my plays [is to] make the connection. Because I think it's vital . Having shared a common past we have a common past and a common future.⁵

Wilson displays the broken connection since the migration from the South to the North through Boy Willie's coming to the North because of the establishment of Negro slavery in the deep South .

A true sense of Africanness is obviously dramatized through the conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie over the piano, the past as evoking the present and the future. The question, says Wilson, is "what do you do with the past ?"⁶ . Through the pictures that are carved on the piano by their ancestors, the piano symbolizes the Charles family and their history , specifically, the history of slavery. It represents the soul of the family after Robert Sutter, the former white master, acquired the piano by selling members of the Charles family. Hence, the Charles brothers , Boy Charles , Doaker , and Wining Boy have stolen the piano from their former owner because "as long as Sutter had it...he had us We was still in slavery" *(P.L.,1,2,p.45) . The result of the process of taking possession of the piano is Boy Charles's death for the piano which is a rightful and legitimate heirloom .

The problem lies in "the problematic role of inheritance in African American history and culture"⁷ because "[Negroes are unable] to distinguish between mine and thine . How distinguish , when for two hundred years mine did not even exist for them?"⁸ With white people , blacks are just as likely as not to possess a "having way" . The fact of being a haver is inherently white while blacks are merely "the haves" .

To both Berniece and Boy Willie , the piano represents their inheritance; however , their intentions to use it are different . Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to buy Sutter's land , the land on which his ancestors toiled to death back in the South . Moreover , he is aware of its symbolic significance , specially , when his father had the desire to buy that land from his white owner , Sutter :

**Boy Willie: Sutter's brother selling the land.
He say [sic] he gonna sell it to me .
That's why I come up here . I got
one part of it .**

(P.L., 1,1,p.9)

Boy Willie turns his attention to his personal economic goals . Although he admits the cultural and historical significance of the piano , he prefers to make use of its materialistic worth :

**See how it's polished ?
My mama used to polish
it everyday. See all them
pictures carved on it ?
That's what I was talking
about . You can get a nice
price for that piano.**

(P.L., 1,1,p.9)

Unemployed , selling watermelons and unable to support and protect a family of his own , Boy Willie carries the torch of redemption for his patrilineal line . "No one seems to require psychological reconstruction , through material means more than Boy Willie"⁹. For Boy Willie , land ownership will unlock the door to social equality and dignity . As it has been noticed :

**Boy Willie embarks on an archetypal
quest for self-realization by attempting
to purchase the very land that his family
had been forced to work as slaves , and
working it himself for his own profit.¹⁰**

Boy Willie claims that what he is seeking is what constitutes his father's identity , for his project is to fulfill his father's dream :

**If my daddy had seen where he could have
traded that piano in for some land of his
own , it wouldn't be sitting here now . He
spent his whole life farming on somebody
else's land . I ain't gonna do that .**

(P.L., 1,2, p . 46)

He wishes to build his life and thereby assures his future on his father's legacy :

**The only thing my daddy had to give me
was that piano . And he died over giving
me that . I ain't gonna let it sit up there**

**and rot without trying to do something
with it .**

(P.L ., 1,2, p . 46)

Unlike her brother , Berniece is eager to preserve the piano as an echo of her ancestors' cultural identity . She is accustomed to play the piano for her mother , but since the latter's death , she has vowed never to touch it again . She has the desire to let the ancestors lie in peace . For her , the ebony and ivory keys of the piano represent blacks and whites persons. Symbolically speaking , the history of slavery should not be manipulated or played as these keys . History retells itself and should remain away from man's hands , whether white or black .

Thus , the piano should not be touched neither by Boy Willie nor by Sutter's ghost . Sutter is so keen on reclaiming the piano that , even after his death , he appears at Berniece's home where the piano is kept. The ghost threatens and haunts the Charleses into giving it up. The piano carries what happened with the Charles family and Sutter's as well. It carves "all kinds of things what happened with [the Charles] family" (P.L.,1,2.,p.44) .Additionally , it relates Sutter's wife to those slaves whose pictures are carved on the piano. After selling her two slaves , Miss Ophelia starts missing them for all of the housework they did for her. So, Sutter commissions granddaddy ,Willie Boy, to carve the faces of the two slaves with their history on the legs of the piano for which the two slaves have been sold . According to Doaker :

**When Miss Ophelia seen it...She got
excited . Now she had her piano and her
niggers too . She took back to playing it
and played on it right up till the day she
died .**

(P.L.,1,2, p. 44)

Berniece's refusal to sell the piano forms an explanation for the spiritual value of that piano as a good preserver of black history . For her: "Money can't buy what that piano cost . You can't sell your soul for money." (P.L.,1,2, p. 50) .

On the other hand , Boy Willie's way of dealing with the piano links him to his origins in the South : "I'm talking about trading that piece of wood for some land". (P.L., 1,2 , p.50) . The land and the South are interrelated with selfhood and origin . The return to the south , for Wilson , is an essential quest , a quest for black identity and Mother Africa :

One [of black Americans' incorrect choices] was the migration to the North . We were land-based agrarian people from Africa , and we spent 200 years developing our culture as black Americans . And then we left the South . We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North . And it was a transplant that did not take . I think if we had stayed in the South, we would have been a stronger people . And because the connection between the South of the 20's, 30's , and 40's has been broken , it's very difficult to understand who we are.¹¹

Accordingly , Boy Willie realizes that his origin lies in the South and so he should not have come to the North :

Why I got to come up here [the North] and learn something I don't know how to do when I already know how to farm ?

(P.L ., 1,2, p. 46)

Lymon's desire is completely different from his friend's. Instead of embracing his past , Lymon chooses to sever all ties to his roots in Mississippi . His journey up North with Boy Willie is an opportunity to get out of the South where he is a wanted man ; he claims naively : "They treat you better up here" . (P.L., 1,2 , p.38) .

A place of easy life , quick money , and uninhibited women , the North for Lymon is all that the South is not . His complaint of the South reflects the hardships blacks suffer in the deep South :

They work you too hard down there .All that weeding and hoeing and chopping down trees . I didn't like all that.

(P.L.,1,2, p.30)

Similarly, Boy Willie's blues plagued uncle ,Wining Boy, has earlier left the South seeking a dream to be a professional musician , at the same time ,

looking for women and pleasure in the North . The result is a great disappointment to achieve his dream which drives him to drink :

All you know how to do is play that piano. Now , who am I ? Am I me ? Or am I the piano player ? Sometimes it seem [sic] like the only thing to do is shoot the piano player cause he the cause of all the trouble I'm having .

(P.L.,1,2 , p.41)

It seems that Wining Boy has lost his black identity in the North which is a prominent lesson for Lymon. At fifty–six, Wining Boy becomes drunkard and realizes that he cannot find happiness in the North where he is entertaining himself in various bars and gambling joints because of which thrown out by his wife , Cleotha . He seems restless by nature. As Wilson notes , "He is a man who looking back over his life continues to live it with an odd mixture of zest and sorrow". (P.L., 1,2 , p. 28) .

Although being seemingly lost in the North , Wining Boy has never forgotten whites' racial attitudes in the deep South . Therefore , he seems to be skeptical of Boy Willie's proposed oral agreement with a white man :

How you know Sutter's brother ain't sold it [the land] already ? You talking about selling the piano and the man's liable to sold the land two or three times.

(P.L ., 1,2, p . 36)

Boy Willie's desire to return to the South implies his awareness and acceptance of his identity . Yet, he wants to return as a land owner not as a slave. Therefore, he reproaches his sister for following her sentimentality :

See, you just looking at the sentimental value....I take my hat off whenever somebody say my daddy's name . But I ain't gonna be no fool about no sentimental value. You can sit up here and look at the piano for the next hundred years and it's just gonna be a piano . You can't make more than that .

(P.L ., 1,2 , p.51)

While Berniece's perspective goes with the piano as a memento for her father's death. Boy Willie looks at the piano from another perspective ; by selling the piano and buying the Sutters' land , his father's death will be memorable .

Like others , Berniece's persistent suitor , Avery , is the man who is eager to gain a degree of financial security in the North. He sees, as a clergy man , that the North offers him a tremendous opportunity in the cultural institution of the black church . Though his ambition is to construct a church , assemble a congregation , and minister to them with Berniece at his side as his wife , Avery , for others , is a thinly veiled version of themselves . They believe that Avery seeks economic support not religious achievements . Wining Boy sees that :

Ain't nothing wrong with being a preacher . You got the preacher on one hand and the gambler on the other . Sometimes there ain't too much difference in them .

(P.L., 1,2, p.30)

Sharing this disregard for Avery , Boy Willie makes fun of him and asks about how one can be a preacher :

**How you get to be a preacher , Avery?
I might want to be a preacher one day.
Have everybody call me Reverend Boy Willie .**

(P.L., 1,1, p. 24)

Evidently , Avery similarly looks for his financial interest . He has previously found an employment, in Pittsburgh , as an elevator operator. But , he is not satisfied with his simple job . So , he has to flatter white officials at the local bank where he hopes to secure a loan . He tells Doaker :

Oh , they [whites] talked to me real nice . I told Berniece...they say may be they let me borrow the money . They done talked to my boss down at work and everything .

(P.L., 2,5, p. 96)

Boy Willie , Lymon , Wining Boy , and Avery are representatives of the various approaches black men adopted to negotiate life in the North. Boy Willie aspires to do anything useful with the family legacy in the North ; buying a land in the South . Unlike Boy Willie , Avery prepares to establish a home in the North at the expense of religion . Lymon comes to escape the hard labor that is the staple of life for blacks in the South and to take a part of the so-called good life of the North . As for the unfortunate and eternally restless Wining Boy , he has already escaped the hardships of the South coming to the North in order to become a famous piano player . Instead , he has turned to be a gambler and alcoholic who is only wandering about .

Of the entire group of black men in *The Piano Lesson* , the forty-seven-year-old uncle , Doaker Charles has a crucial role to grasp the cultural message that the piano has taken care of .

Doaker has what was the best for black men in the 1930s , the most reliable and best-paying job available . Being a full-time railroad cook , Doaker is a member of a very honorable group of black men , the Pullman porters who serviced various railroads during that era. According to African Americans :

Black men , from their point of view , saw the Pullman Company as a way up and a way out of poverty . Many men say it was ' the only game in town ' and it was a relatively prestigious game . As one porter remembers it , It was good job for a black man.¹²

Because of the transient nature of his job , Doaker resides with his niece , Berniece . He is the level-headed referee between Berniece and Boy Willie . In contrast to his brother , Doaker is contented with how he has lived his life .

Doaker's significant presence stems from his attempts to make Boy Willie aware of how even land sales become racialized . Living in a society that devalues black masculinity , Boy Willie endeavours to define his own manhood in terms of white standards of privilege , but according to Doaker :

That land [Sutter's land] ain't worth nothing no more . The smart white man's up here in these cities . He cut the land loose and step back and

**watch you and the dumb white man
argue over it .**

(P.L., 1,2, p . 36)

Boy Willie , on the other hand , presents a justification that selling the piano and buying Sutter's land is an assertion of masculinity that his father would understand : "Now , the kind of man my daddy was he would have understood that."(P.L., 1,2, p.51) .

Doaker finds himself in the center of the conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece which is caused not only by the struggle over the piano , but also by Berniece's accusation to her brother whom she thinks responsible for her husband's death . Both Doaker and Boy Willie know that Crawley , Berniece's dead husband , was gunned by the sheriff in Mississippi when he was attempting to help Boy Willie steal lumber . However , Berniece refuses to recognize Crawley's own guilt . Her painful loss reminds her of her mother's , Mama Ola , when she lost her husband , Papa Boy Charles , over the piano . Unable to tolerate more losses , Berniece decides to migrate to the North . Hazel Carby identifies that African American women live the lamentation of leaving and being left which becomes a common part that is associated with the experience of black migration :

Migration for women often meant being left behind : "Bye Bye Baby" and "Sorry I can't take you" were common refrains of male blues . In women's blues the response is complex : regret and pain expressed as "My sweet man done gone and left me dead," or "My daddy left me standing in the door," or "The sound of the train fills my heart with misery".¹³

Unlike black women and blues singers Carby identifies , Berniece will not express her blues voice and refuses to play the family's piano after her mother's death . Moreover , she admonishes her brother and her other male relatives :

**I look at you and you all the same . You .
Papa Charles. Wining Boy . Doaker,
Crawley...you're all alike, And what it
lead to? More killing and more thieving .I
ain't never seen it come to nothing .**

(P.L., 1,2 , p .52)

In addition to her loss , Berniece bemoans the fact that her mother also endured the loss of her husband and seventeen years of loneliness all for "A piece of wood" , (P.L., 1,2 , p. 52) .

It is essential to recognize that racial differentiation is a product of social and cultural formation and political contestation . Hence , the history of the piano is inextricably linked to that of the Charles family as Doaker Charles reveals . Doaker depends on his role as the narrator of the family's racialized history. His monologue reveals how Robert Sutter , the original slave owner of Willie Boy , the grandfather of Doaker and the great-grandfather of Boy Willie and Berniece , wanted to purchase the piano from Mr. Nolander :

**Only thing with him [Robert Sutter]
... he ain't had no money . But he
had some niggers . So he asked Mr.
Nolander to see if maybe he could
trade off some of his niggers for the
piano . Told him he would give him
one and one half niggers for it .**

(P.L., 1,2, p. 42)

The one and one-half niggers are Berniece Charles and her son , the great – grandmother and grandfather of Boy Willie and Berniece. So as narrated by Doaker , the exchange of the piano has disjoined the Charles family by removing the wife and her son from the father , Willie Boy who remained in Sutter's property. The economics of slavery demolishes the black family and the preexistent normal relationships of nurturing , fatherhood and motherhood .

In order to solidify the black kinship , Wilson reinforces a positive expression of brotherhood for black men through Doaker's repetition of the word "niggers". In her essay , Wahneema Lubiano examines how "nigger" has been reclaimed within a specific African American literary text , *Elbow Room* by Reginald McKnight , as a "sign of affirmation" or even "defiance".¹⁴

When the word "nigger" is used in the arrangement between Sutter and Nolander, the word becomes more powerful carrying dehumanizing connotations. The language of Sutter's trading "one and one half niggers" for a piano , contains what Hortense Spillers refers to as "simultaneity of disparate items in a grammatical series".¹⁵ The language of slavery places humans and inanimate objects in the same "grammatical series" . As Doaker retells , "Now she [Miss Ophelia] had her piano and her niggers too", (P.L.,1,2,p.45).

Replacing the real slave body by the wooden images , Miss Ophelia is satisfied with the carving which equals the real slaves because neither is perceived as human . Thus , both the piano and the "niggers" remain her property .

The pleasure that Miss Ophelia receives from the carved pictures on the piano reflects what Saidiya Hartman terms "scenes of subjection" in which terror and pleasure are equally used during slavery . Hartman says that blacks are :

envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment....forced to dance on the decks of slave ships crossing the Middle Passage , [to] step it up lively on the auction block and [to] amuse the master and his friends were seen [by whites] as the purveyors of pleasure.¹⁶

Oblivious to the pain , struggle , and suffering of the Charles family , represented by their personal histories that are fused in the piano , Miss Ophelia sees only pleasure in these figures .

Purposefully , Wilson describes that the legs of the piano are "carved in the manner of African sculpture" with the "mask-like figures resembling totems" (P.L., "The setting"). The referent for the carved piano can be the Makonde tribesmen of Tanzania who carve their family heritage into sculptures called "trees of life" . Through their artistic craftsmanship , they connect each branch of the family in one solid piece of ebony .Similarly , Willie Boy's carvings transform the piano into a family album . Through his artistic process , he redefines his family's relationship to the piano , and at the same time , he condemns the ownership and property of slavery .

Willie Boy's act of carving the piano constitutes an enabling gesture of cultural intervention that empowers him and implicitly declares the Charles family's power as well . Now and through this act , the piano and its songs become the property of the Charles family . According to Hartman , the act of carvings is called "stealing away" :

Stealing away involved unlicensed movement , collective assembly and an abrogation of the terms of subjection in acts as simple as sneaking off to laugh and talk with friends or making nocturnal visits to loved ones.¹⁷

No matter how seemingly small , the act of stealing away is an act of resistance that asserts defiance of the master and the whole system that establishes the slave as property :

Through stealing away , counterclaims about justice and freedom were advanced that denied the sanctity or legitimacy of property rights in a double gesture that played on the meaning of theft.¹⁸

Thus, by carving the piano , Willie Boy has stolen away and asserted his subjectivity . This "theft" has prepared the way for the later determination by the Charles family to actually steal the piano .

In his historical narrative , Doaker reveals that years later , after slavery, Papa Boy Charles , Berniece's and Boy Willie's father , has remained obsessed with the thought of reclaiming the piano from Sutter's ownership :

He talking about taking it [the piano] out of Sutter's house . Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it...he had us. Say we was still in slavery .

(P.L., 1,2, p. 45)

As Doaker's narrative explains , Sutter's possession of the piano shapes a form of enslavement . It keeps the family within the system of "social death".¹⁹

Implicit in Doaker's narrative on the history of the piano is the manifestation of African American oral traditions . Wilson perceives the oral tradition of telling oral history as an African retention which has been transmuted across the Middle Passage and still observable and present in African American folk traditions today. Wilson has determined to capture the process of oral history in his plays. According to the scholars of African history and historiography , the process of oral transmission not only passes on the tribe's or community's history , but forms actual historical records . The African oral tradition has engaged history in the process of invented history²⁰ .

Thus , the history in *The piano Lesson* is not simply made in its historicity ; its historical setting and period details . Doaker invents history through his

revelation of the family's struggle over the ownership of the piano . His revelation is an authentic historical record with multiple and multilayered meanings ; being enslaved by whites . Doaker is associated with the "men of memory" of the Luba tribe of Benin and the piano with the Luba memory boards ,*Lukasa*, that facilitates their oral histories:

The communal oral historians of the Luba , known as the men of memory, sculpture concave boards (Lukasa) implanted with a design of cowries and beads to help them accurately retain the lineage history and to recall major historical events.²¹

Doaker delivers his oral history in the presence of his black community, represented by his family including Boy Willie and Wining Boy :

Sutter called him [Willie Boy] up to the house and told him to carve my grandmother and my daddy's picture on the piano for Miss Ophelia . And he took and carved this...See that right there ? That's my grandmother , Berniece . She looked just like that . And he put a picture of my daddy when he wasn't nothing but a little boy the way he remembered him . He made them up out of his memory . Only thing ... he didn't stop there . He carved all this . He got a picture of his mama ... Mama Esther ... and his daddy , Boy Charles .

(P.L., 1,2, p.44)

The Charles family acknowledges the narrative as a collective family record that must be passed on to subsequent generations . Hence, later in the play , Boy Willie assumes the function of the "men of memory" and relates the history of the piano to his sister's daughter , Maretha :

You ain't even told her [Maretha] about that piano . Like that's something to be

ashamed of . Like she supposed to go off and hide somewhere about that piano . You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house . You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle around it...and every year when it come up throw a party . Have a celebration. If you did that she wouldn't have no problem in life . She could walk around here with her head held high.

(P.L., 2,5, pp.9-91)

Boy Willie , though interested in the piano as a means to secure a land like whites , insures the continuation of his family's history of slavery . Recounting his social history , Wilson :

divulged that his parents concealed the wrongs and indignities they suffered in their early years . He characterized their deliberate cover – up as a means of shielding their six unsuspecting children .²²

Wilson finds this position disturbing , noting :

the fact of slavery is something that blacks do not teach their kids—they do not tell their kids that at one time we were slaves. That is the most crucial and central thing to our presence here in America . It's nothing to be ashamed of . Why is it , after spending hundreds of years in bondage , that blacks in America do not once a year get together and celebrate the Emancipation and remind ourselves of our history ?²³

Equally significant , Doaker presents his narrative not only to the collected family members , but also to another gathered body as well , the audience . The presentation of the narrative before the audience implies the significance of his narrative as a historical and symbolic record of the African American struggle . Doaker's account of Papa Boy Charles's defiance in the face of the sharecropper boss and his removal of the piano from Sutter's home , recalls memories of Frederick Douglass's slave narrative in which Douglass stood up and physically opposed his slave master . Furthermore , the narrative of Papa Boy Charles's violent death aboard the "Yellow Dog" summons images of lynching and tales of Emmitt Till , the Scottsboro Boys , and other lesser known but equally innocent African Americans who died anonymous deaths at the hands of unruly white mobs and an unequal system of justice . As Doaker narrates :

Now , I don't know what happened when Sutter came home and found that piano gone . But somebody went up to Boy Charles's house and set it on fire. But he wasn't in there. He must have seen them coming cause he went down and caught the 3 : 57 Yellow Dog . He didn't know they was [sic] gonna come down and stop the train. Stopped the train and found Boy Charles in the boxcar with four of them hobos . Must have got mad when they couldn't find the piano cause they set the boxcar afire and killed everybody .

(P . L., 1,2 , p. 45)

The implicit African American experiences and histories in Doaker's oral text suggest a collective racial memory , a racial memory that understands the Charles family struggle with the piano as a representative of African American efforts to reclaim their song of their piano . The personal is ultimately political . Rather than submit to Sutter and the painful legacy of slavery , Papa Boy Charles liberates the piano and is willing to face death as the price for his actions . Through his defiant , revolutionary , and redemptive death , Papa Boy Charles transforms the wooden body of the piano into the casket for his body as

he dies for the trouble of stealing it . Furthermore , the black spirits of those niggers on the piano have been freed , reclaimed , and remembered by the Charles family through the liberator action of Papa Boy Charles . Now, the body of the piano has been remained as a powerful affirmation of a family's history of struggle and survival .

1.2.Capturing African American Cultural Awareness through Myth

It is important , for Wilson , to show the aspects of the African American myth as a basic ingredient in the African American cultural traditions . In a 1991 interview , Wilson reveals a conscious plan to communicate , in each of his plays , certain types of African American cultural awareness : "I try to actually keep all of the element [s] of the culture alive in the work" .

As cultural critic and cultural architect , Wilson assures that :

myth is certainly a part of it . Mythology, history , social organizations– all of these kinds of things –economics– are all part of the culture....I purposefully go through and make sure each element of that is in some way represented – some more so than other in the plays , which I think gives them a fullness and a completeness – that is an entire world.²⁴

The piano in *The Piano Lesson* can be interpreted to be associated with ancestral altars or shrines in African tribal cultures and religious practices . The piano is associated with the Yoruban "orita meta , a crossroad between the world of the living and that of the dead . For the Yoruba , ancestral shrines are key lines between the two worlds , where descendants may contact their ancestors for protection , support and guidance"²⁵. Sacrifices and offerings are made to the ancestors at the orita meta in order to maintain their spiritual existence .

Similarly , "The crossroads is a prime spot to place sacrifices so that they will be taken to the otherworld , a practice that has been retained by both Cuban and American practioners of Yoruba religion"²⁶. Within *The Piano Lesson* , the maintenance of the piano , altar shrine , is a particularly matrilineal duty . Berniece reveals that her mother , Mama Ola :

polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years . She rubbed on it till her hands bled . Then she rubbed the blood in ... mixed up with the rest of

**the blood on it . Every day that God
breathed life into her body she
rubbed and cleaned and polished
and prayed over it .**

(P.L., 1,2, p. 52)

Mama Ola enlists Berniece into nurturing and the honoring of the piano shrine by requesting that she "Play something for me , Berniece . Play something for me , Bernices." (P.L ., 1,2, p. 52) .

Yet Berniece desires to distance herself from the memories of the past and now refuses to play the piano . This neglect has potentially serious and harmful consequences :

**In the parallel context of most
African ancestral worship ... neglect
of the ancestors and ancestral altars
results in loss of their protection and
threatens the destruction of the
entire community.²⁷**

Accordingly , Berniece's neglect of the piano , her unwillingness to confront the ghosts of her past , threatens the current stability of the Charles family and allows the ghost of Sutter to return and contest them for the ownership of the piano and the possession of their songs . Thus , it is only when Berniece returns to the piano that the ghost of Sutter can be exorcised . Berniece , drawn to the piano by the confrontation between Boy Willie and Sutter's ghost , plays a song that explicitly calls on the ancestral spirits for assistance :

**I want you help me...
Mama Berniece
I want you to help me ...
Mama Esther
I want you to help me ...
Papa Boy Charles
I want you to help me ...
Mama Ola
I want you to help me ...**

(P.L ., 2,5, p. 107)

Wilson describes Berniece's offering to the ancestral spirits :

as an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains strength . It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents .

(P.L., 2,5, p. 106)

Inherent ,then, in Berniece's calling on her ancestors is the African tradition of ancestral worship . Her act symbolically unites her with her ancestors .

Wilson's project of African recuperation also includes the mysteries and mythologies surrounding the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog , and the ghosts of Papa Boy Charles and four hobos who are burned to death aboard a boxcar on the train known as the Yellow Dog . Papa Boy Charles and the others are killed after Sutter discovers the piano missing from his home . Since their deaths , the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog have engaged in a policy of racial redemption and revenge . They have not only avenged their deaths but the deaths of other black men who are wrongly killed by white vigilantes . As reported by Boy Willie , "nine or ten , eleven or twelve" , (P.L., 1,2., p. 34) white men , all residents of Sunflower County , Mississippi , are guilty of violence against black men . These white men have all fallen down their own wells to their deaths . The latest in this line is Sutter . After the first and then with the succession of these strange coincidental deaths , the African American residents of Sunflower County begin to attribute these accidents to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog :

It was two months after that [the burning of Papa Boy Charles and the hobos in the boxcar] that Ed Saunders fell down his well . Just upped and fell down his well for no reason . People say it was the ghost of them men who burned up in the boxcar that pushed him in his well . They started calling them the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog .

(P.L., 1,2, pp.45-46)

Within western cultural traditions , such faith in otherworldly spirits and ghosts appears irrational and unreasonable , and can be dismissed as mere folk superstitions . Wilson , however , places this faith in the Ghosts of the Yellow

Dog as an African retention in African American social and cultural processes . It is believed that traditional African religions , as well as contemporary Africans , share the belief in "an ontology of invisible beings"²⁸. This belief , in invisible spirits , constitutes what is referred to as "explanatory theories"²⁹. They function in a manner that is similar to western scientific theory or western religious doctrine to explain , predict , and control both the known and the unknown forces that are operative in the practitioner's world .

Accordingly , their belief in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog offers an explanatory theory for the inconceivable coincidence of nine or even twelve men falling down their wells . African traditional religions reject the notion that unfortunate events can just happen . Precolonial African cultures believe that everything has a reason , that no event is meaningless or contingent . This belief goes along with the Christian attitude that the cosmos works a plan . Within the narrative of *The Piano Lesson* , the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog represent a cosmic plan of correction . The actions of the spirits , unbalancing white men at the well's edge , serve to balance the unequal system of the southern justice. While it is suggested that Boy Willie may have assisted the ghosts in their mission , Wilson presents the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog as a real and tangible force , a cosmic racial retribution , Wining Boy asserts the faith in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog :

**You go ask them white folks in
Sunflower County if they believe
[in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog] .
You go asks [sic] Sutter if he
believe [sic] .**

(P.L ., 1,2, p. 34)

The white residents of Sunflower County , though do not subscribe to the principles of ancestral worship that is related to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog , they do accept and acknowledge the serious threat by the unexplained deaths of nine or more white men . The black residents , on the other hand , believe in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog as a form of ancestral worship that bestows protection and spiritual well-being on the believers . Wining Boy reports :

**It didn't look like nothing was going right in
my life. I said everything can't go wrong all
the time ... let me go down there and call on
the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog , see if they can**

help me. I went down there and right there where them two railroads cross each other....I stood right there on that spot and called out their names. They talk back to you , too....I walked away from there feeling like a king. Went on and had a stroke of luck that run on for three years .

(P.L., 1,2 , p. 35)

The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog lead Berniece to her final redemption . Early in the play , Berniece voices her disagreement with the faith in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog :

**I don't care who preached what .
Somebody down there pushing
people in their wells .**

(P.L ., 2,2, p.69)

At the same time , Berniece believes in the Holy Ghost and actually sees Sutter's ghost. She even asks Avery to remove Sutter's ghost through a ritual of Christian exorcism . By rejecting the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog , Berniece is denying her heritage , her connection to history. Her rejection of the ghosts of the past is similar to her refusal to play the piano. As earlier noted , Berniece's neglect of the piano implies her rejection to connect herself to her ancestral spirits . She is unwilling to accept the import of the past on the present . Yet , she recognizes the presence of the ancestors within the world of the living . She confesses to Avery :

**I used to think them pictures [on
the piano] came alive and walked
through the house .**

(P.L ., 2,2, p.70)

Berniece's decision not to play the piano is a deliberate attempt to avoid waking these spirits . Consequently , during the final climactic scene when Berniece returns to the piano and plays , she reconnects herself with the past . She calls on her ancestors and thus acknowledges the importance of the ancestral spirits and the power of these ghosts. Bernieces's invocation of the ancestors in conjunction with Boy Willie calls for a battle with the ghost of the past , represented by Sutter's ghost , which threatens the present . The spirits finally reunite the sister with her brother , and protect the heritage of the Charles family . Boy Willie now insists on keeping the songs of the family alive :

**Hey Berniece...if you and
Maretha don't keep playing
on that piano...ain't no
telling... me and Sutter both
liable to be back.**

(P.L., 2,5, p. 108)

Sutter's ghost represents a symbol for slavery and social discrimination , agony and suffering . It represents the past with all its awful memories . Now , it is gone within the change of time and attitude of the whites in the society . But still the blacks are afraid and obsessed with the ghosts of the past.

Notes

1.
C.W.E . Bigsby , *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama* , vol.2 (Cambridge : Cambridge Up , 1985) , p. 297 .
2.
Samuel G. Freedman , "Fine Tuning : *The Piano Lesson*" *New York Times Magazine*, (10 Sept ., 1989) , pp. 39-40 .
3.
Ibid., p.40 .
4.
Lawrence. W. Levine , *Black Culture and Black Consciousness : Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford : Oxford Up , 1977) , p. 444 .
5.
Bigsby , 1985 , p. 298 .
6.
Mervyn Rothstein , "Round Five for a Theatrical Heavyweight" *New York Times* , (15 April, 1990) , p.2.
*
- Hereafter , *The Piano Lesson* will be abbreviated as "P.L." in all parenthetical documentation . All quotations are from August Wilson , *The Piano Lesson* (New York : Plume , 1990) .
7.
Jeff Allred, "From Eye to We : Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* , *Documentary* , and *Pedagogy*" , *American Literature*, vol.78, no.3 , (2006) , p.557.
8.
William Faulkner , *Go Down Moses* (New York: Vintage , 1991),p.375 .
9.
Devon Boan , "Call and Response : Parallel 'Slave Narrative' in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*", *African American Review*, vol.32,no.2 , (Summer) , p. 265 .
10.
Ibid., p. 268 .
11.
Rothstein , 1990 , p. 2 .
12.
See Sandra G . Shannon , *The Dramatic vision of August Wilson* (Washington , D.C. Howard University Press , 1995) , pp.156–157 .
13.
Hazel Carby, "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime : The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues", *Unequal Sisters : A Multicultural Reader in United States Women's History* , eds., Elene Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York : Routledg , 1990) , pp . 242-243 .
14.
Wahneema Lubiano , "Shuckin Off the African American Native Other: What's ' Po-Mo ' Got to Do with It ? ," *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1991) , pp.175–176 .
- 15.

Hortense J. Spillers , "Mama's Baby , Papa's Maybe : An American Grammar Book" , *Diacritics*, (Summer 1987) , p. 78.

16.

Saidiya Hartman , *Scenes of Subjection* (New York : Oxford University Press , 1997) , pp. 23-24 .

17.

Ibid., p. 67 .

18.

Ibid., p. 69 .

19.

Orlando Patterson , *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press , 1982) , p. 38 .

20.

See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger , *The Invention of Tradition* (New York : Cambridge University Press , 1983) .

21.

Michael Morales , "Ghosts on the Piano : August Wilson and the Representation of Black American History", *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson* , ed., Alan Nadel (Iowa City : University of Iowa Press , 1994) , p. 107 .

22.

Mary Ellen Snodgrass , *August Wilson : A Literary Companion* (Jefferson : McFarland and Company Inc . , 2004) , p.215 .

23.

David Savran , *In Their Own Words* (New York : Theatre Communications Group , 1998) , pp. 295-296 .

24.

Shannon , 1995 , pp. 202 – 203 .

25.

Morales "Ghosts on the Piano : August Wilson and the Representation of Black American History" , p. 108 .

26.

Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual* (Indianapolis : Indiana University Press , 1992) , p. 26 .

27.

Morales , "Ghosts on the Piano : August Wilson and the Representation of Black American History" , p. 109 .

28.

Kwame Anthony Appiah , "Old Gods , New Worlds," *In My Father's House : Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York : Oxford University Press , 1992) , p .

29.

Appiah , *In My Father's House* , p. 115 .

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allred , Jeff . "From Eye to We : Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* , *Documentary* , and *Pedagogy*." *American Literature*. Vol. 78.No.3. 2006 : 557 .
- Appiah , Kwame Anthony . "Old Gods , New Worlds ." *In My Father's House : Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* . New York : Oxford University Press , 1992 : 134 .
- Bigsby, C.W.E . *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama* . Vol . 2 . Cambridge : Cambridge Up , 1985 : 297 .
- Boan , Devon . "Call and Response. Parallel 'Slave Narrative' in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* ." *African American Review* . Vol . 32 . No .2. Summer : 265 .
- Carby , Hazel . "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime : The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." *Unequal Sisters : A Multicultural Reader in United States Women's History* . Eds. Elene Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz . New York : Routledg , 1990 .
- Drewal , Margaret Thompson . *Yoruba Ritual* . Indianapolis : Indiana University Press , 1992 .
- Faulkner , William . *Go Down Moses* . New York : Vintage , 1991 .
- Freedman , Samuel. "Fine Tuning : *The Piano Lesson*." *New York Times Magazine* . 10 Sept . 1989 : 39-40 .
- Hartman , Saidiya . *Scenes of Subjection* . New York : Oxford University Press , 1997 .
- Hobsbawm , Eric. and Terence Ranger . *The Invention of Tradition* . New York : Cambridge University Press , 1983 .
- Levine , Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness : Afro – American Folk Thought form Slavery to Freedom* . Oxford : Oxford Up , 1977 .
- Lubiano , Wahneema . "Shuckin Off the African American Native Other : What's 'Po – Mo' Got to Do with It ?" *Cultural Critique* . Spring 1991 : 175-176 .

Morales , Michael . "Ghosts on the Piano : August Wilson and the Representation of Black American History." *May All Your Fences Have Gates : Essays on the Drama of August Wilson* . Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press , 1994.

Patterson , Orlando . *Slavery and Social Death* . Cambridge : Harvard University Press , 1982 .

Rothstein , Mervyn . "Round Five for a Theatrical Heavyweight". *New York Times* . 15 April 1990 : 2 .

Savran , David . *In Their Own Words* . New York : Theatre Communications Group , 1998 .

Shannon , Sandra G. *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*. Washington, D.C. : Howard University Press , 1995 .

Snodgrass , Mary Ellen . *August Wilson : A Literary Companion* . Jefferson : McFarland and Company Inc., 2004 .

Spillers , Hortrense J. "Mama's Baby , Papa's Maybe : An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* . Summer 1987 : 78 .

Wilson , August . *The Piano Lesson* . New York : Plume , 1990.