Heritage of Slavery in August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*

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**Abstract**

To some extent, everyone has been extremely impacted by the American history of slavery, but those who, understandably feel it the most are the Americans descended from slaves. Modern drama influenced African Americans to realize the nature of their whole history in America as being deeply affected by the heritage of slavery, particularly to guarantee that others recognize the institution for the inhumanity and terror that it was, also to motivate those with slavery in their past to demand this experience as part of their cultural identity.

August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* looks at the African Americans segregation from Mississippi who has travelled North without coming to terms with their southern past. This dispute is expressed in the brother-sister conflict between Bernice and Boy Willie over an antique, 135-year-old piano that their great-grandfather carved for a white man, which has been inherited by the siblings now. They argue over whether to respect their slave ancestors or deny the family’s past enslavement. Boy Willie wishes to sell the piano to be free of the past, but this longing is also his way of considering his ancestors and building on their heritage. For him, selling the piano is a proof of the past not a refusal. On the other hand, Bernice desires to possess the piano as a symbol of her African American heritage. The piano symbolizes the struggles and relations between the past and present that exists yet. It proposes that the profit taking of black’s artistic and manual achievement by whites is an American tradition underlying the reality of the American dream.

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The Piano Lesson explores the Charles siblings, Bernice and Boy Willie, who have opposing attitudes towards their family history which leads them to explore contradictory remedies to conquer that past and support them stand fixed in the present. Though the play might not superficially look like rebellious, but as so many of the most effective works in the African American literary tradition one of the major themes of the play involves the search for personal and group emancipation. In this case, it is the release of the Charles’s family from slavery and its permanent outcome. The play is set in Pittsburgh in 1936, during the Great Depression, a time that was a challenge for most particularly for African Americans who had found it laborious to find lawful work even during more sturdy economic times. In addition to this, it happens during this time when African American residents moved from the rural South to the big cities in the North. Reggie Young states that “weighing down the baggage of those who left were the shared pieces of their past identities, aspects of their being shaped by the various psychological and spiritual wounds that continued to infect their present-day realities with the pain and suffering of past subjugation and bondage” (Williams and Shannon 136).

In Wilson’s plays, the protagonist’s present situation is seen by means of their personal past. In The Piano Lesson, the play’s historical complication is traced back three generations, to an episode in the family’s slave legacy that has left them to confront the present regarding a history that, thirty five years later, is not just personal but communal and familial. The central conflict of the play revolves around how best to become involved in history- as iconographically centered mythology which would highly praise the incidents of the past, or as basis for the present, which would attempt to attain its promise. The conflict’s focus is the piano. Boy Willie the great-grandson of the slave whose art honors the piano has come up from the South to demand his half of the piano, which is presently in the ownership of his sister, Bernice. Contradictory to most of the African American plays, in which characters migrate to the North in search of jobs, relationships, and self-affirmation, The Piano Lesson introduces characters who are eager to return to South. This is important as it signals a possible turning point in the fortunes of black people. So far, journeys to the North, away from their farms and families, have accompanied their search for their true identities. For the first time, the South is suggested, by a character, as a place for them to pursue their destinies as free men and women (Pereira 86).

During 1936, thousands of blacks had moved and settled in the northern industrial area, but living an American agony of poverty and segregation in a capitalist society. They were filled with hopelessness, as a consequence of years of unfulfilled hopes and ambitions, which would simmer for a few more decades before bursting into fierceness during the latter part of the century. In The Piano Lesson, many of the character’s lives symbolize this depression.

The play begins when Boy Willie and his friend, Lymon, come North in a broken-down truck full of watermelons which Boy Willie hopes to sell. He thinks that the income which he gets from selling the piano offers him a good chance to buy Sutter’s land; a land on which his family was once enslaved. He believes possession of the land would put him on equal footing with the white men of the South. However, Bernice diminished his dream of escape when she shows her unwillingness to sell what is, for her, a sacred icon of the family’s sacrificial legacy. Throughout the play the piano becomes a criterion by which contradictory situations about the past may be
estimated. For Devon Boan, though, the result is that the frustration of carrying the burden of the past has been redefined, by Wilson, into a question of how best to make use of the past (263).

The Charles family needs to own the piano which symbolizes their history of slavery and freedom. Boy Charles, Boy Willie’s father, knew that owning the piano will strengthen the family and if someone else owns it this will weaken them all, that’s why he stole it in the first place: “Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it…he had us. Say we were still in slavery” (Wilson 45). Boy Willie’s great-grandfather claimed the piano first and he carved his entire family history into the wood in defiance of its white owners. Stealing the piano by Boy Willie’s father and uncles from the Sutter reaffirmed that claim. To show the family’s complete independence from the Sutter’s they stole it on Independence Day (Abbotson 91).

The role of whites in African American history is represented by Sutter whose great weight conveys the luxuriousness and desire of a man who has fed off the toil of African American for years. Sutter’s tumbng down the well, quite literally, symbolizes his fallen status. Reappearing his ghost, after his death, and expressing an objection to the situation could not hide the decline of his family’s control. The demise of the white power in the South is indicated first through Sutter’s brother who lives up North and is ready to sell his Southern heritage to the enemy, in the form of Boy Willie, and second by his sons; one of them has moved North and the other is an idiot. The contrasting growth in power of African Americans in the area is shown by the rise of the ghosts of Yellow Dog. The decline of Sutter and other whites signifies an African American ability to bring about retaliation and works as an admonition to whites to act properly in the future (Abbotson 92). For African Americans to dominate their own lives in the South, all this should make the way easier, if only they can build the impulse to do so, as Boy Willie intends. Boy Willie chooses his ancestor’s same path which was resistance to white control.

Bernice acts as the guardian of the family’s past. She firmly rejects the idea of selling the piano. She leaves it untouched and keeps it from her daughter, Maretha, because she does not want to wake the spirits of her tormented ancestors. For her, selling a possession for which so much family blood was shed would be a betrayal (Bigsby 115). Since their mother’s death the instrument has been in charge of Bernice who viewed the piano as embodying the narrative of her family’s suffering and iniquity. She considers her father’s awkward death over what she calls “a piece of wood” and her mother’s mourn over her husband’s death “seventeen years’ worth of cold nights and an empty bed” (Wilson 52) comprises in the heritage of the piano which conveys history through graphic narrative and serves as hereditary altar bridging the world of the living to that of dead (Williams and Shannon 140).

Bernice is concerned about her heritage and her own color, and she conveys this feeling to her own daughter, motivating her to adapt to white anticipations. The girl has no connection with her true African American heritage as her mother rejects to transmit to her the family history and any trait she associates with African American life. Instead of teaching her daughter those values by which her African American family has lived and died, Bernice gives lessons in white community values thus she ignores her family legacy (Abbotson 91). Boy Willie feels treating Maretha in this way deprives her of her true identity. He believes that in order Maretha be able to build a pride in herself, she needs to be given a sense of her family. This will let her to become a useful member of the African American society. Instead of considering his color as restricting, Boy Willie sees it as liberating. Unlike Bernice who sees her family history only as a source of misery, he uses that same past as a source of strength and pride. However despite his strength, he
needs the aid of his sister and the support of his family to be able to win the battle against the ghost. The piano teaches them a lesson that they must be united before they can turn their prior slavery into a full sense of liberty.

The piano appears to have a secret ability that keeps alive the spirits of the dead, fostering a unity between past and present. The piano also has the possibility to contemplate the identity of those who come into contact with it. Each person of the family respond to it in a different manner, according to his or her past actions, hopes, fears, and desires. Consequently, it becomes a criterion to estimate their attitudes and dispositions. To Bernice, who has spent her life in the muck of violence and death, it is a burden that enclosed her in a whirlpool of grievous recollections, pulling her into the depths of a past she wants to forget. First her father was burnt to death. Then her husband dies in a gunshot with the sheriff while stealing wood with Boy Willie and Lymon. The fatherless family struggled long, hard years to survive. Of all this, the piano is a powerful reminder. She is not able to play it, as she is afraid of freeing a torrent of suppressed feelings. Yet, she will not abandon this repository of her family’s pain (Pereira 90).

Even after his death, Sutter, a surviving member of the family that once owned the Charles family, defies the Charles siblings to have the piano, on which the story of the family’s slave heritage is carved, including a depiction of two of their ancestors who were sold in exchange for the instrument. The piano carries what happened with the Charles family and Sutter’s as well. All kinds of things that happened with the Charles family were carved on it. Also, it relates Sutter’s wife to those slaves whose pictures are carved on the piano. After selling her two slaves, Miss Ophelia, Sutter’s wife began to miss them for all the housework they did for her and wanted them back, but the new owner rejected to cancel the trade. So, Sutter ordered Doaker’s grandfather, Willie Boy who was an expert wood sculptor to carve the faces of the two slaves with their history on the legs of the piano. Willie Boy did not only carve his immediately family, but also included various scenes from the family history. According to Doaker,

he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That’s when him and Mama Bernice got married. They called that jumping the broom. That’s how you got married in them days. Then he got here when my daddy was born . . . and here he got Mama Esther’s funeral . . . and down here he got Mr. Nolander taking Mama Bernice and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia. He got all kind of things what happened with my family. When Mr. Sutter seen the piano with all them carvings on it he got mad. He didn’t ask for all that. But see . . . there wasn’t nothing he could do about it. When Miss Ophelia seen it . . . she got excited. Now she had her piano and her niggers too (Wilson 44).

Sutter is keen on regaining the piano as a way of symbolically winning back ownership of the Charles family even after his death. Even after their masters’ deaths, slaves most often suspected that they were not secure from their masters. So, in order to put as much distance as possible between them and their masters’ ghosts former slaves moved far away from the places where they were held in servitude (Williams and Shannon 137).

In The Piano Lesson Doaker plays the role of African American griots, oral historians, narrating family chronicles and penning their own expertise into considerable accounts. Thus, the history is individual and private and works as an assessment of the metanarratives of American past that frequently deny the lives of African Americans (Williams and Shannon 89). The narrative devices, especially ghost methodology, used by the characters throughout the play reveal the
family’s background and show that their past and present strife for independence are bind to the instrument, which exemplifies a holy shrine.

The situation becomes more confusing when Bernice blames Boy Willie for being responsible for the death of her husband and when Sutter’s ghost appears (Bigsby 114). Thus, the play becomes something of a ghost story when the house is haunted by the ghost of Sutter. A decision must be made concerning the piano in order to drive out this ghost, and what evolves is an agreement between the siblings in which the family’s history takes priority. The family finds itself in a dilemma of conquering the presence of its hunted past on their own. Boy Willie attacks Sutter’s ghost when it tries to stop his dream to sell the family heirloom to buy a piece of land. Bernice comes to aid her brother against the ghost by playing a song that explicitly calls on the ancestral spirits,

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 … (Wilson 107).

Finally, the spirits show up and help Boy Willie to defeat the ghost. The spirits also help the siblings reconcile at the end. The piano teaches them a lesson that they must be united if they want to turn their former bondage into a full sense of freedom. Though, Boy Willie leaves the piano with Bernice and goes back to the South without the money he needs, he seems content as he realizes the family ties are more important than Sutter’s land. Bernice has rediscovered how to use the piano which has helped her to overcome the grieves that have haunted her during most of her life. Also, her reconnection to her past lets her to become a stronger woman and to find value in the deaths of the members of the family that she had viewed as senseless before (Williams and Shannon 141).

Both siblings realize that the piano is part of the family history, but they argue over how the historical past should be allowed or used to impact on the present.

**Conclusion**

Though Wilson’s play contains layers of symbolism and a ghostly figure, yet it is largely realistic drawing in its audience with detailed characterizations and gentle humor. The significance of the piano in August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* is implanted in the heritage of slavery. Wilson regarded slavery as a basic historical period in the African American awareness and never to be overlooked or disregarded. The African American reply for their awareness of deprivation, colonization, and injustice show an unbelievable flexibility of spirit in the reality that they survived. Wilson believes to remind Afro-Americans of their history they should celebrate just as Jews commemorate their liberation as a race from Egypt every year at Passover. He views lots of African Americans getting away from the history of slavery, and persists that it must be directly confronted.
To Wilson, being African American has nothing to do with the color of one’s skin: “it is more a state of mind and a way of viewing the world” (Abbotson 90). He stresses that African Americans need to define their culture for themselves and not to agree to negative white judgments of that culture as he views too many of them are ready to accept. Fostering and comprehending of their own history in America is integral to that definition. Throughout his plays, but particularly in *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson investigates the “bedrock of racial memory and particularity of expression” (Williams and Shannon 129), one that surpass the Middle Passage which was designated by the critic and playwright Paul Carter Harrison. The mutual relations between concrete and abstract truth in black diasporic culture, a link that has been examined to an increasing extent by African American expressive artists in various categories over the last several decades and one in which the reconciling of the slave past is a serious part in personal redemption is detected by Wilson in his plays.
References


