The Piano Lesson Study Guide

The Piano Lesson by August Wilson

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The Piano Lesson is the fourth of August Wilson's cycle of plays about the African American experience in the twentieth century. It opened at the Yale Repertory Theater in 1987, and, later, on Broadway, to great success.

The play was inspired by Romare Bearden's painting *Piano Lesson.* It is set in Pittsburgh in 1936 and focuses upon the relationship between the Charles siblings, Berniece and Boy Willie, who clash over whether or not their family's piano should be sold. In the mid-nineteenth century, when the Charles family were slaves, two members of the family were sold by their owners, the Sutters, for a piano. Subsequently, a master-carpenter in the Charles family was ordered by the Sutters to carve the faces of the sold slaves into the piano. He did that and more: he carved the family's entire history into the piano. The instrument was later stolen by Berniece and Boy Willie's father, who was then killed by the Sutters in retribution.

The play explores African Americans' relationship to family history, particularly to the history of their slave ancestors. While Wilson's cycle of plays is set during the twentieth century, all of his plays explore the legacy of slavery and the roots of American racism□this play is as concerned with the Ante-bellum period as it is with America during the Great Depression.

Wilson presents the Charles' different attitudes towards their family history in a naturalistic style: the dialogue accurately reflects everyday dialect, and the action is interwoven with scenes of people preparing meals, hot-combing hair, and bathing. The play's central metaphor, the piano, dominates this structure, while Wilson's inclusion of ghosts and spirits demonstrates his diverse cultural and literary influences. Although a few critics were critical of his mixing of styles and traditions, the majority applauded his imaginative fusion of African, American, and African-American traditions.

The Piano Lesson won Wilson his second Pulitzer Prize and confirmed his status as one of America's most important and innovative living playwrights.

Author Biography

Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in 1945 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He grew up in a racially diverse working class neighborhood, the Hill, where he lived with his mother and five siblings. His mother, a single parent, worked as a domestic to support her six children. Her own mother, Wilson's grandmother, had walked from North Carolina to Pittsburgh in search of better opportunities. Wilson's mother remarried when he was still young, and the family moved to a white suburb. Wilson met persistent racism in the schools he attended there, and at fifteen he was frustrated enough by this prejudice to leave school and educate himself at the local library. There, he read "anything" he wanted to, and educated himself about the Afro-American literary tradition by reading works by Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Arna Bontemps, amongst others. Their example inspired him to write poetry and short fiction.

Wilson was active in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, particularly the Black Power movement, and one of his contributions to the movement and to his community was to co-found Black Horizon on the Hill, a community theater set up in 1968. Like many community theaters founded during this period, Black Horizon on the Hill aimed to increase political awareness and activism in the local community while also encouraging the development of local talent. Here Wilson premiered his first one-act plays.

In the late-1970s, Wilson moved from Pittsburgh to St. Paul, Minnesota, where his plays finally attracted widespread critical attention. Wilson's serious theatrical debut was *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills,* a drama written in 1977 and performed in 1981. His first big hit was *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), which was workshopped at the National Playwright's Conference before playing at the Yale Repertory Theater and later opening on Broadway. This play was followed by two acclaimed dramas, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fences* (1985) and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986).

These three plays form part of Wilson's ambitious series of dramas about African-American experience during the twentieth century (his aim is set a play in each decade of the century). The fourth play in this cycle, *The Piano Lesson* (1987), is set in the 1930s and explores the different attitudes of a brother and sister to their family inheritance, a piano for which their ancestors were sold and which is engraved with their ancestors' images. *The Piano Lesson's* combination of comedy and tragedy garnered Wilson another Pulitzer Prize and confirmed his reputation as one of America's most important and innovative playwrights.

Wilson's earliest writing was poetry, and his training in this field is still evident in his writing, which showcases the lyricism of African-American speech patterns and language and blends naturalist structure with devices that originate in black spiritualism. His social criticism also makes his writing especially rich, while his naturalism makes him heir to a tradition that includes such American greats as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams□a tradition that he has adapted to include powerful representations of African-American experience.

Plot Summary

Act I

The action takes place in the kitchen and parlor of the house where Doaker Charles, his niece, Berniece, and her eleven-year old daughter, Maretha, live. Boy Willie, Berniece's brother, has just arrived from down South with his friend Lymon. The two men have stolen a truck and have hauled a load of watermelons in it. They plan to sell the melons and split the profits evenly. Lymon is in trouble with the sheriff back home and announces that he plans to stay in Pittsburgh, but Boy Willie insists that he will return South.

Boy Willie greets his uncle Doaker exuberantly, and although it is only five o'clock in the morning, he soon raises the whole household from sleep. Soon the audience learns that Boy Willie's motives for driving to Pittsburgh are by no means innocent. He plans to take the family heirloom, an antique piano, from Berniece and sell it□whether she agrees or not. Boy Willie believes that the profits from this sale, together with those from the melons, will enable him to buy land from the Sutter family and set himself up as an independent farmer. He complains that Berniece never uses the piano and uses this observation to justify the sale. His complaint is crucial to later developments in the play, particularly the final scene.

During Act One, scene one, the audience meets Berniece and her daughter Maretha. Berniece is hostile to Boy Willie, who she believes is responsible for the death of her husband, Crawley, three years ago. She has just had a great shock: she claims she saw Sutter's ghost standing at the top of the steps. The audience has just learned that Old Man Sutter fell down a well three weeks ago. Boy Willie says she is dreaming. (However, later in the play the audience learns that Doaker saw Old Man Sutter's ghost before they arrived, just three days after he died, and in the third act Sutter's ghost appears again.)

Berniece is being courted by an old acquaintance of Boy Willie's, Avery, who, like him, used to work and plant the land but has now moved North. Avery has become a preacher and is trying to raise funds to build a church. Avery recounts a dream he had to Billy Willie and Lymon. Boy Willie is more interested in finding out from Avery the name of the antiques dealer who wants to buy the piano. As the scene ends, Boy Willie asks Berniece directly about the dealer, thus revealing to her his plan to sell the piano. She immediately announces that she "ain't selling that piano. If that's why you come up here you can just forget it." The scene is set for their confrontation over their heritage.

In Act One, scene two, much of the mystery surrounding the piano is explained. The greater part of this scene is played out between Doaker and his older brother, Wining Boy, and their nephew Boy Willie. Wining Boy and Doaker reminisce about their old loves. They are interrupted by the arrival of Boy Willie and Lymon, who have been trying to sell their truck-load of watermelons. Inevitably, talk turns to Boy Willie's schemes to

buy the Sutter land (which Doaker claims "ain't worth nothing no more") and to sell the piano. Doaker decides to give Boy Willie a lesson: "See, now ... to understand why we say that ... to understand about that piano ... you got to go back to slavery time. See, our family was owned by a fellow named Robert Sutter," the grandfather of the recently diseased Old Man Sutter.

Robert Sutter decided to buy his wife, Miss Ophelia, a piano for their wedding anniversary. Since Sutter had no cash, he traded "one and a half niggers" for the piano, selling Doaker's grandmother (also called Berniece) and his father (then a young boy). However, Miss Ophelia began to miss her slaves, "so she asked to see if maybe she could trade back that piano and get her niggers back." The offer was refused. Doaker's grandfather, also called Boy Willie, was a master carpenter; Sutter ordered Boy Willie to carve pictures of his wife and son into the piano legs, so that Miss Ophelia could have "her piano and her niggers too." Boy Willie did just that: but he also carved other images from the family history into the piano□"the story of our whole family," as Doaker relates.

After the Civil War, the Charleses were freed and became share-croppers for the Sutters. Berniece and Boy Willie's father, Papa Boy Charles, decided to steal back the piano, believing that "as long as Sutter had it ... he had us... we was still in slavery." The family managed to obtain the piano, but Papa Boy Charles was killed in retribution, burnt to death by a lynch mob in the train (the "Yellow Dog") on which he was attempting to escape. The murder set off a series of mysterious deaths (the latest of which is Old Man Sutter's) that are supposedly caused by the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog."

Act One, scene two, ends with Berniece and Boy Willie fighting about the piano and about Boy Willie's role in Crawley's death. Berniece emphasizes the pain the piano caused her widowed mother. Suddenly, Maretha screams□she too has seen Old Man Sutter's ghost.

Act II

In Act Two, scene one, Wining Boy cons Lymon and Boy Willie, who have sold their melons and are flush with cash, into buying some secondhand clothes.

In scene two, Avery repeats his proposal of marriage to Berniece, who refuses to consider it seriously before Avery has established his church. She points out that she, as a woman, is subject to unfair standards: "You trying to tell me a woman can't be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me□ without a woman□and still be a man.... Everybody telling me I can't be a woman unless I got a man." The scene ends with Berniece asking Avery to return the next day to exercise Sutter's ghost and bless the house. Avery promises to do so.

Scene three is split into two halves. In the first half, Boy Willie comes home with a woman he has picked up, Grace, but the two of them are thrown out by Berniece, who complains that their behavior is not appropriate since Maretha lives in the house. In the

second half, Lymon arrives and talks to Berniece. He compliments her on her nightgown and gives her a bottle of perfume. They kiss, before Berniece departs. This scene and the previous one with Avery suggest that Berniece is beginning to put Crawley in the past and move forward. It is also a humorous contrast to Berniece's restrictive behavior in the previous scene.

In the last scene in the play, Lymon and Boy Willie try to remove the piano from the house, but Berniece threatens them with Crawley's gun. At this climatic moment, Avery appears. He begins his ceremony to exorcize Sutter's ghost and bless the house. Sutter's ghost is heard, and Boy Willie starts wrestling with it. Avery despairs of healing the family, saying, "Berniece, I can't do it." Suddenly, "Berniece realizes what she must do." She begins to play the piano, calling on her ancestors to help her. The song works: the ghost is exorcized, Boy Willie returns to the room. He leaves peacefully, saying as he does, "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."

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1 Summary

Very early in the morning before sunrise, Boy Willie and his friend Lymon arrive at the home of Boy Willie's uncle Doaker and sister Berniece. Boy Willie shouts for Doaker and Berniece to come and meet them. Doaker comes out of his bedroom, asking what's going on. Boy Willie tells him that he and Lymon have come north with a truckload of watermelons to sell. Berniece comes downstairs and tells Boy Willie to stop shouting. Boy Willie tells her about the truck and the watermelons, and then asks Doaker to break out his liquor, since they've all got something to celebrate. He says a man called Sutter fell down his well, pushed by the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog."

While Doaker is out getting his liquor, Berniece asks Boy Willie and Lymon where the truck came from. They tell her that they were cutting some wood on Sutter's land and using it to haul the wood away. They also reveal that Lymon is sleeping in the truck, since the sheriff is after him. As Doaker comes back, Berniece tells them that she thinks Lymon has done something wrong. She wants them out of her house so she doesn't get into trouble with the law. She goes back upstairs, telling them again to be quiet so they won't wake up her daughter, Maretha. Boy Willie says he wants to see Maretha and shouts up to her, but Berniece tells him to be quiet, saying that Maretha has got to go to school in the morning.

When Berniece is gone Boy Willie asks about Wining Boy, Doaker's brother. Doaker says he stopped by for a visit a short while ago, and isn't likely to be back soon. Lymon comments on the piano in the living room, and Boy Willie tells him how it's been in the family for years, how his mother polished it every day, and how he wants Berniece to sell it. He tells Doaker about his plan to take the money from the sale of the watermelons and the piano and buy Sutter's land, saying that he's already made a down payment. Doaker tells him that Berniece is never going to sell the piano. Boy Willie answers that he'll be able to talk her into it and tells Doaker in some detail about how Sutter's brother has decided he's the right person to get the land. Doaker tells him about an old friend of theirs named Avery who is now a preacher, and how he tried without success to get Berniece to sell the piano to a musical instrument dealer. Boy Willie says that he's got as much right to sell it as she does since it's actually half his.

Berniece shouts for Doaker from upstairs. Boy Willie, Doaker and Lymon run up to see what she's upset about, and she tells them that she's just seen Sutter's ghost. Boy Willie says she's imagining things and should just go back to bed, but Doaker gets her to tell them what she saw. She says she saw Sutter in a blue suit, standing there holding the top of his head as though it was going to fall off, and calling Boy Willie's name. She says that means that Boy Willie pushed him down the well. Boy Willie says that's ridiculous, and Lymon says again that Sutter was killed by the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Berniece says that she wants Boy Willie to leave, adding that whenever he comes to visit he brings trouble. She refers to the death of her husband Crawley, but Boy Willie says that

Crawley was a grown man and that he had nothing to do with his death. He adds that if Sutter was there he was looking for the piano and that Berniece should sell it so she can be rid of him. Berniece tells him to hurry up and sell his watermelons so he can leave, then goes upstairs with Doaker to wake up Maretha and get her ready for school. When Berniece and Doaker have gone upstairs, Lymon and Boy Willie talk again about how Lymon is planning to stay up north and Boy Willie is planning to go back south and farm Sutter's land.

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 1 Analysis

This first section of the play sets up several important elements. One of these is the play's central conflict, between Berniece and Boy Willie over the sale of the piano. Another is the play's two main symbols, the piano and the ghost of Sutter. Other less thematically important elements include the reference to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, Berniece's suggestion that Boy Willie killed Sutter, and the mention of Wining Boy. As the action of the play unfolds, what these five elements represent and their layers of thematic and dramatic meaning all become more clearly defined. At this point, however, their principal function is to foreshadow what is to come.

This section also sets up several stylistic elements, or ways in which the story is told. The characters speak in plain language, suggesting a relative lack of education. This, combined with the fact that they state their intentions and desires frequently and plainly, creates the impression of uncomplicated people with simple, basic human drives. This is particularly true of Boy Willie, who is clearly driven by the desire for both material success, as represented by his obsession with buying Sutter's land, and for revenge, illustrated by his constant negative comments about Sutter. Berniece is also insistent about what she wants, which seems to be the simple goal of maintaining a safe, quiet home for Maretha. The image presented is of two strong-willed people, each fighting to realize basic desires, which happen to be in direct opposition to each other. The emotional context of this struggle, the history that fuels it, and its larger social resonances are all elements that are defined later.

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2 Summary

Doaker goes back downstairs, and when Boy Willie starts speaking about how Berniece is imagining things, Doaker tells him Berniece is too levelheaded to imagine such a thing. Boy Willie teases Doaker about all the women back home who are after him, and how they all put on their best dresses and wait for the train to come in, since Doaker's a cook on the railroad. The women know that when the train comes in they'll be able to see him. Doaker tells a long story about the railroad, how the track has a certain set of directions it travels in and will always arrive there once it gets started. He also talks about how people are sometimes surprised when they discover they've gotten on the wrong train. Most people, he says, are riding the train because they're not satisfied with where they are. He believes that if people just stayed home and let themselves be satisfied, life would be much easier. He's about to talk even more, but Maretha comes downstairs.

Boy Willie embraces her, introduces her to Lymon, teases her about how big she's getting, and then asks her to play the piano. She plays a very simple song, and then Boy Willie plays some boogie-woogie and tells her that he'll teach her how to play the right way. He then asks her whether Berniece has told her the story of the figures carved into the legs of the piano. When she says no, Boy Willie tells her to ask; if Berniece won't tell her, he will. Berniece calls down for Maretha to come upstairs and get ready for school. Maretha goes up to her mother.

Just then Avery arrives. Boy Willie tells him his plans for the watermelons, says he can take as many as he wants. He then asks why Avery decided to become a preacher. Avery tells him that it was because of a dream, in which he was visited by three hobos riding a train, who were dressed in robes. The hobos caused a halo of fire to burn around his head, showed him a room full of sheep that needed to be protected from a valley full of wolves, and told him to go out and preach the word of God. He says it took him a long time to accept that that's what God wanted him to do, but he finally did and now he's starting a church. Boy Willie asks him the name of the man who wanted to buy the piano, but Avery tells him that there's no way Berniece is going to sell it.

Berniece and Maretha come downstairs. As Doaker gives Berniece a shopping list and she makes plans with him for the rest of the day, Boy Willie asks her the name of the man who wanted to buy the piano. She says there's no way she's selling, and tells Doaker to keep an eye on Boy Willie while she's out. When she's gone, Boy Willie says he's going to cut the piano in half and sell his share no matter what she says.

Act 1, Scene 1, Part 2 Analysis

The significance of the piano is foreshadowed again in the conversation between Boy Willie and Maretha, in which two aspects of the piano story are heard for the first time. The first is that there is a history to the carvings on the piano that Maretha needs to learn. This foreshadows the telling of that story later in the play. The second characteristic of the story is the hint that Berniece might be uncomfortable telling whatever that story might be. This suggests that it might not be pleasant and is at least partly the source of the conflict between her and Boy Willie. The importance of the piano is reinforced at the end of the scene, in which Berniece reacts strongly to the idea that Boy Willie will sell it. It is not clear yet why the piano is so important to Berniece, but at this relatively early stage of the story it is enough to know that it is important. This repeated foreshadowing is an effective technique in increasing our interest and building suspense.

Another important symbol is the railroad, which appears twice in this scene. In Doaker's story it represents the human journey, the path of life that each of us is on. However, the story also contains the warning that sometimes people take the wrong journeys for the wrong reasons. This suggests the possibility that Boy Willie's literaral journeyis up north to sell the watermelons so he can buy Sutter's farm. The metaphorical journey is getting revenge on Sutter (the reasons for which become clear later). Each might be the wrong kind of journey, which could lead him into trouble. The idea that Boy Willie is on the wrong kind of journey is reinforced by other aspects of the story, such as the fact that the truck keeps breaking down.The second time the railroad symbol appears is in Avery's story, which is full of references to the Bible. The three hobos represent the Three Wise Men of the Christmas story. The halo of fire represents the flame of the Holy Spirit, which visited the twelve disciples. The sheep represent how Christ was referred to as the Good Shepherd, while the valley refers to "the valley of the shadow of death" in the 23rd Psalm. At this point in the play it's not clear whether Avery's journey is the wrong kind of journey, like Boy Willie's, or a truly genuine path. What is clear is that Avery strongly believes himself to be on the right kind of passage, a belief challenged later by his failure to bless the house and free it from Sutter's ghost.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 1

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 1 Summary

Wining Boy, Doaker's brother, has arrived. He sits at the table as Doaker does the dishes, talking about how Boy Willie's been trying to sell watermelons for three days, trying to get into the rich white neighborhoods, and how the truck keeps breaking down.

Boy Willie and Lymon come in after yet another unsuccessful attempt at selling the watermelons. Boy Willie asks Wining Boy to lend him some money, saying that Doaker told him Wining Boy had bags full of cash. Wining Boy says that the money is long gone, and that he was just about to ask Boy Willie for a loan. Boy Willie changes the subject, and asks whether Wining Boy had heard about Sutter being killed by the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. They talk about how many men have been killed by the Ghosts and how Wining Boy actually felt the presence of the Ghosts in the wind the last time he was home. When they start talking about how Berniece doesn't believe in the Ghosts, Wining Boy says he doesn't want to talk about her anymore. Boy Willie reveals that he's found out the name of the man that wanted to buy the piano, tells Wining Boy he's going to buy Sutter's land, and asks Doaker to bring him some whiskey.

As they drink, Wining Boy says he heard that Boy Willie and Lymon had spent some time in prison. Boy Willie explains that they'd gotten into an argument with some white men, Crawley (Berniece's husband) was killed, and they were put in jail for a few months. Lymon talks about how he's going to stay up north and Wining Boy says he'll stay with him, both of them saying they'd get better treatment in the north. Boy Willie says it doesn't matter if the white people treat him badly; he'll treat them badly in return, adding that the law means nothing to him since he makes his own law. They talk again about prison, and all join in singing an old prison song.

This leads Boy Willie to ask Wining Boy to play the piano, but Wining Boy says he's given the piano up. He tells a long story about how he started to feel like he was carrying his talent around with him like a heavy weight, almost as though he was carrying the piano itself. He talks about how he felt it was the only thing defining him, and how he realized he had to be something other than just "the piano player." Boy Willie tells him to talk Berniece into selling their piano, but Wining Boy says there's no way that Bernice is ever going to sell it. Then Doaker, with a long story, explains why.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 1 Analysis

A key stylistic component of this play is the way that information about the past is revealed piece by piece. In the play's first scene several important elements are mentioned almost in passing, then as the action continues more parts of the truth are revealed until we almost have a complete picture. An example of this technique is the story about what happened to Crawley, which is barely mentioned in the play's earlier

scenes, described in detail in this scene, and brought up again in the final scene in this act in which we see the full emotional impact of his death on Berniece. This method keeps us intrigued by continually foreshadowing truths and emotional revelations.

The symbol of the piano takes on another dimension in Wining Boy's story about how difficult it is to be known as "the piano player." The image that he uses of carrying the piano around with him not only to refers to the burden of expectation he feels he's carrying, but also the weights carried by Boy Willie and Berniece. These are both represented by the actual piano. The weight Boy Willie carries with him, as this scene and the final scene of this act reveal, is his intense desire to take revenge upon Sutter by buying up his land. The weight Berniece carries with her, which will be revealed in the final part of this act, is the weight of family history, both the pain the Sutters caused and her family's defiant courage in stealing the piano.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 2

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 2 Summary

Doaker says that the history of the piano goes back to the days of slavery, when the Sutter family owned their family. Robert Sutter, who was the grandfather of the Sutter that just died, gave a family named Nolander two slaves for the piano, which his wife Ophelia desperately wanted. The traded slaves, Doaker's grandmother and father, were Ophelia's favorites and after a while she wanted them back, but Nolander wouldn't return them. Sutter then told Doaker's grandfather, an expert woodcarver who had remained with the Sutter family, to carve their likenesses into the legs of the piano so that Ophelia would still have them around. Doaker's grandfather carved not only those two slaves, but also several generations of his family. Robert became angry, but Ophelia was delighted.

Doaker goes on, saying that several years passed, slavery ended, and Boy Charles (Boy Willie and Berniece's father) wanted to get the piano into the family where it belonged. He said that as long as Sutter owned that piano, he owned them. So, when Sutter was out at a Fourth of July picnic, Boy Charles, Doaker, and Wining Boy broke into the Sutter house, stole the piano, and brought it home. Sutter was furious, went looking for Boy Charles, found him on the Yellow Dog train with four hobos, trapped them, and burned the train to ashes, killing all the men. Doaker says no one knows for sure who set the fire, but adds that shortly afterwards one of the suspects fell down his well and drowned. This was the beginning of the stories of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Doaker ends his story by saying that that's the reason that Berniece will never sell the piano, because her father, Boy Charles, died rescuing it from the Sutters.

Boy Willie protests that he's doing what his father never got the chance to do, farm his own land, adding that if his father had lived he'd have sold the piano, bought land, and lived his own life, just like Boy Willie. He shouts angrily that no one can take away his right to live the way he wants to live. In an effort to calm him down Wining Boy goes to the piano and starts to play.

Just as he's finishing, Berniece and Maretha come in. Berniece says how surprised and glad she is to see Wining Boy, and then goes upstairs with Maretha to change. Boy Willie gets Wining Boy and Doaker to help him lift the piano, but it turns out to be too heavy. As they're trying to move it, the "Ghost of Sutter" moans. Berniece comes downstairs and tells Boy Willie again that she's not going to sell the piano. Boy Willie responds again that he's going to sell the piano so he can buy some land and make a future for himself, saying the land will give back to him but that the piano will give back nothing.

Berniece tells Boy Willie that the only reason he wants the piano at all is so that he can get revenge on Sutter. She goes on to say that the men in her family are all alike, fighting and stealing, killing, and looking for revenge. When Boy Willie protests that he

never killed anyone and only stole a little, Berniece reminds him of how they were stealing wood the night that Crawley was killed. They argue over what happened the night Crawley died, and Berniece insists he wouldn't have been killed if Boy Willie hadn't asked for his help. She finally loses complete control, shouting, crying, and hitting Boy Willie repeatedly. He does nothing to stop her, but asks Doaker to take her away. Suddenly from upstairs, Maretha screams. It seems she's seen the ghost.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 2 Analysis

In this scene there is another example of a slowly revealed truth as the origins of the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog" are revealed, which reinforces the idea that one of the motivating forces in the story, specifically in terms of Boy Willie, is revenge. It is interesting to note that Boy Charles was killed on the railroad, suggesting that he was on the wrong kind of life journey as described in Doaker's earlier speech. It is clear, however, that he did the wrong thing for the right reasons, an idea reinforced by the passionate defense his actions receive from both Boy Willie and Berniece.

The carvings on the piano are a symbol within a symbol. Given that the piano represents freedom, the carvings on the piano represent the struggle of Berniece and Boy Willie's ancestors to achieve that freedom. The struggle isn't yet completely over, given Boy Willie's determination to take revenge and Berniece's refusal to actually play the piano (which means that she is still haunted by the pain that it represents). Nevertheless, the fact that the piano is essentially unmovable suggests that Berniece is right and Boy Willie is wrong. As Berniece fights to keep the piano in the family in spite of her fear, she's keeping her ancestors' courage alive and is therefore on the right kind of railroad journey. Boy Willie, who is desperate to get the piano out of the family and use the proceeds from its sale to gain revenge on the people who wronged him, is on the wrong kind of journey. This is related to the play's thematic statement that the spirit of endurance under hardship (as represented by Berniece) is more powerful and more effective in closing doors upon a painful past than the spirit of revenge (as represented by Boy Willie).

The moaning of Sutter's ghost, however, suggests that it doesn't really matter what kind of journey either of them is on, since despite their desperation, neither of them has been able to exorcise his presence from their lives completely. Berniece takes a step closer to being able to accomplish that exorcism when her anger, frustration, loneliness, and resentment are all released as she shouts and beats Boy Willie's chest. This is the emotional context of all their conflicts to this point, which is Berniece's blame and Boy Willie's denial. Berniece's emotional release in this scene, however, frees her to become closer to the triumphant spirit of her ancestors and draw upon their strength to complete the family's journey to freedom. She accomplishes this in the final scene of the play, when her playing cleanses the house of Sutter's ghost. Boy Willie, however, has a way to go, since at the end of this scene he is in denial about what happened to Crawley.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

As he irons his uniform, Doaker sings a song about a railroad journey. Wining Boy comes in, complaining about how he couldn't pawn his one-hundred-percent silk suit. When he asks where Berniece is, Doaker tells him that Berniece went to work early and then reveals that he saw Sutter's ghost before she did. Doaker also says that Berniece should get rid of the piano as soon as she can. Wining Boy says he agrees with Berniece and that Boy Charles didn't steal the piano just to have someone else give it back. He then asks Doaker to loan him five dollars.

Boy Willie and Lymon come in, excited about having sold most of the watermelons and all the money they've made. Wining Boy sees how much money Lymon has and talks him into buying the silk suit, shoes and all. Lymon tells Willie they should go out that night and find themselves some women, then goes off to try on the suit. Boy Willie comments that all Lymon thinks about is women, and Wining Boy says that Lymon's father was exactly the same way. He tells the story of how he hooked up with Lymon's mother, who needed some money from him to get Lymon's father out of jail. He says that Lymon's father knew that something had gone on between the two of them, and ended up getting killed because someone mistook him for someone else. Lymon comes back in having changed into the suit. Boy Willie tells him he looks like a million bucks. Doaker goes out to work, and Boy Willie, Lymon, and Wining Boy go out to party and find some women.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

This scene is filled with references to money and the ways that money, material possessions (represented by the suit), and pleasure (represented by Lymon's insistence upon finding some women), become distracting. Boy Willie, for example, forgets for a moment about his drive to acquire Sutter's land. Another example is Wining Boy, whom has already squandered a large sum of money and whom we now see reduced to both begging for money and selling his clothes. It is interesting to note that no one in the scene suggests to Lymon that he save his money in order to start a new life. Everyone, with the possible exception of Doaker, encourages his indulgence in new clothes and a good time. This situation, juxtaposed with Doaker's singing of the railroad song, which reminds us of the railroad metaphor, evokes another way in which Lymon and Boy Willie seem to be on the wrong kind of journey.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Berniece has brought her bathtub into the kitchen and is just about to fill it when Avery arrives. He tells her that a landlord named Cohen has agreed to lease him land for a church, and then asks Berniece to marry him. She says that this isn't a good time to talk about things like that, but he insists, saying that a preacher is more likely to attract a congregation if he has a wife. He also says she needs someone to love her, and that she can't carry her memories of Crawley around with her forever. She says she'll talk about marriage when Avery actually has his church and when she's got other parts of her life sorted out. She then tells him that Maretha saw Sutter's ghost, and asks Avery to bless the house so that the ghost will go away. Avery says it takes a special kind of preacher to do something like that and that he's not that kind of preacher. He then talks about how a preacher he used to go to would talk about how the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog were actually doing God's will, implying that Sutter deserved to die. Berniece insists that the Ghosts had nothing to do with people like Sutter falling into their wells, and tells him she's sure that Boy Willie killed Sutter so he could get Sutter's land. When Avery tells her that Boy Willie is just not like that, she says that Boy Willie is exactly like his father, and won't stop until he gets what he wants.

Avery suggests that Berniece start a choir at his church and have rehearsals in her home. That way Boy Willie can't say she's not using the piano and use that as an excuse to sell it. Berniece tells him she stopped playing the piano when her mother, who only liked listening to it because her father loved it so much, died. Avery tells her that she's got to let all her family history go, she's got to put down the load she's carrying and live her own life. Berniece tells him to go home and let her take her bath. Avery goes, but not before he promises to come back the next day and bless the house.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Berniece's bath symbolizes how she's ready to cleanse herself of the pain of her past and move on. This is the next step in a journey begun at the end of the first act when she released all her anger and frustration. Her refusal of Avery because he doesn't have a church is merely an excuse; somewhere inside she knows that she is unable to be a good wife to him until her emotional wounds have healed. This means that when Avery says she has got to put down the load she is carrying (a reference to an old spiritual, which speaks of "a weary load" that has to be "toted"), he is more right than he realizes. He understands fully, however, that part of the load that Berniece needs to let go is represented by the presence of Sutter's ghost, and even though he doesn't believe he is that kind of preacher, he will make the effort to perform the exorcism.

The question of whether Boy Willie killed Sutter is raised again in this scene, and is never fully answered by the play. Berniece's recognition of Boy Willie's stubbornness

and willfulness, of which we'll see more of in the play's final scene, suggests that it is possible and even likely that her suspicions are correct.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

Late that night, Boy Willie comes in with a young woman named Grace. He tries to get her to make love with him on the couch, but she wants to be on a bed. Finally she gives in, and they start kissing and taking off each other's clothes. They accidentally knock over a lamp, and Berniece comes downstairs to see what's going on. Boy Willie tells her to go back up to bed, but she sees what's happening with Grace and tells them they have to leave. Boy Willie tries to talk his way into staying but Berniece insists and Grace agrees with her, saying they can go back to her place. Boy Willie and Grace go out, and Berniece puts on the kettle for tea.

Lymon comes in and asks where Boy Willie is. Berniece tells him what just happened, and Lymon says that he saw Grace first but Boy Willie beat him to her. He talks about the woman he was starting to spend time with, but left because all she wanted to do was drink. He then talks about his feelings for women in general, how he wants to be with a woman who wants more than just quick and easy sex, and to "feel nice" with a woman. Berniece tells him that he'll find that kind of woman someday. Lymon talks about how he plans to get a good job and make a success of himself. Berniece speaks about how difficult it is for Boy Willie to get and keep jobs, since he always ends up getting in trouble. Lymon talks about how Berniece would be a wonderful wife for Avery, since she's such a good woman. He tells her how pretty she looks in her nightgown and offers her a bottle of perfume he was going to give to Dolly but decided not to. He dabs some behind Berniece's ears, then kisses her. She kisses him back, embraces him, and then goes upstairs. Lymon folds up his suit and lies down.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

One element to note about this scene is how Berniece's loneliness and readiness for love are awakened by Lymon's physical passion, as opposed to Avery's spiritual passion. This suggests that she's becoming more open to her feelings, reinforcing the idea that she's ready to move on from her spiritual captivity. This is represented by Sutter's ghost, which represents -the literal captivity of slavery from which she and her family have been freed.

Another notable element in this scene is the different ways that Lymon and Boy Willie treat women. We see that Boy Willie approaches women aggressively and without subtlety, while Lymon employs grace, finesse and patience. These approaches represent the different ways in which these two men view the future and their lives in general. Boy Willie charges into romance like he charges into life, head on, convinced that his way is right, without any doubt that he'll get what he wants. Lymon, on the other hand, displays sensitivity to other aspects of the situation than his own desire. The fact that Lymon gets further in this scene than Boy Willie does suggests that his way is more

rewarding. Boy Willie's efforts, however, put him into more conflict, as we find out in the next scene, suggesting that his "bull in a china shop" ways lead to trouble.

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

Lymon is asleep on the couch when Boy Willie hurries in and wakes him up, saying that he found the man who wanted to buy Berniece's piano. Lymon asks what happened with Grace and Boy Willie tells him that Grace's old boyfriend came by, but couldn't get into the apartment, because the door was blocked by a chair. He then tells Lymon to hurry up and help him move the piano.

Sutter's ghost moans, but Boy Willie and Lymon don't seem to notice as they try to move the piano but can't get it to budge. Doaker comes out of his room and tells them to leave the piano alone until Berniece comes back. Boy Willie tries harder and harder to move the piano but just gets more and more frustrated. Finally he says he's going to get some planks and rope to haul that piano out of there, sell it, and give Berniece her half of the money. He and Lymon go out to get the equipment.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

As previously mentioned, Boy Willie's story about what happened at Grace's apartment reinforces the idea that his approach to life just gets him into trouble. Meanwhile, the fact that no one hears the moans of Sutter's ghost suggests that Boy Willie's method not only blinds him to circumstances, but that his enthusiasm and obsession also blinds others, like Lymon. Finally, the fact that the piano doesn't move suggests again that Boy Willie's desire for revenge is the wrong kind of journey.

Act 2, Scene 5, Part 1

Act 2, Scene 5, Part 1 Summary

Doaker sits at the table playing solitaire and listening to Boy Willie finish telling Maretha the story about how the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog push people into their wells. As he screws casters onto a plank of wood, Boy Willie explains that the real name of the Yellow Dog railway was the Yazoo Delta Railway. It got its nickname because of the yellow boxcars the rail line used, and also because the wind along the rail line sounded like the howl of a dog. Berniece comes in and tells Maretha to go upstairs and get ready to have her hair done, reminding Boy Willie that she told him to get out of her house. When he sees that Maretha is frightened of going upstairs Boy Willie goes up with her.

Berniece asks Doaker why Boy Willie is still in the house, and Doaker tells her of Boy Willie's plans to haul the piano out on the dolly he's making and sell it no matter what. Berniece says she's not going to let that happen, and that she's got Crawley's gun upstairs to make sure that it doesn't. Boy Willie and Maretha come back in. Boy Willie goes back to work on his plank and casters while Maretha tells Berniece that there's no more grease left for her hair. Berniece sends Maretha out to get more.

When she's gone Berniece tells Boy Willie again to leave. Boy Willie says he's going to take the piano out of the house just like his father took it out of Sutter's. Berniece tells him she's got something to convince him to go, which Boy Willie takes as a threat. He tells a long story about how he prayed to Jesus to save his dead dog. The dog stayed dead, and he went out and killed a cat so he could understand the power of death. Since then he's not been afraid of death. He finishes by saying that a black man unafraid of death is the thing that white people fear the most. As Maretha returns, Doaker talks about how Avery will be coming by with his Bible to bless the house. As Berniece sits Maretha down and starts to comb her hair, Boy Willie talks about how the Bible calls for revenge, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." He continues saying that- getting his revenge is exactly what he's going to do. He talks about how Avery and Berniece accept only half of the Bible, which is -the parts about salvation, and how they can't just believe in parts of the Bible because it's got to be all or nothing.

Act 2, Scene 5, Part 1 Analysis

The confrontations in this scene begin the build-up to the play's climax. Boy Willie's determination to sell the piano, get the land, and thereby get his revenge on Sutter starts high, and builds steadily to the ultimate confrontation with Sutter at the end of the play. The story Boy Willie tells about the dead dog and how he's unafraid of death illustrates how determined he is and how he got that way. Most importantly, however, this speech reveals how Boy Willie believes taking his revenge on Sutter is actually an act of revenge against all white people. This suggests that Boy Willie and Berniece are representatives of two sides of the African American perspective on the past: an angry,

revenge-seeking side and a wounded, but needing to heal side. This is the emotional and spiritual core of the image of the piano, which was liberated from a home where it didn't belong in the same way that Boy Willie and Berniece, and by extension all black people, need to be liberated from societal oppression, past and present. The ghost of Sutter is a symbol of that oppression, which means that when Boy Willie and Berniece get rid of it, their liberation represents the possibility of the liberation of African Americans in general.

Act 2, Scene 5, Part 2

Act 2, Scene 5, Part 2 Summary

Maretha cries out in pain as Berniece combs her way through the tangles in her hair. Berniece says that if Maretha was a boy she wouldn't be having this trouble, and Boy Willie tells her that's an awful thing to say to a child. He angrily tells Berniece how she ought to be raising Maretha, telling her the history of the piano as though it was something to be proud of. Berniece tells him to mind his own business, and that when he's got children of his own he can raise them his way.

Boy Willie tells Berniece he wouldn't want to bring a child into the world with nothing to give them. He says that's why he wants to buy Sutter's land, so he can do for his family what his father could never do, and give them a future so they can stand as equals with white people. He says that Berniece is teaching Maretha to believe that she lives at the bottom of life. He tells her that their parents didn't do what they did and fought in the way they fought because they believed they were at the bottom and were going to stay there.

As she continues with Maretha's hair, Berniece tells her to hold her head up, and tells Boy Willie that he's all talk, that all he's ever been is talk, and has never been able to take any real action on what he's always talking about. Boy Willie says that for a long time he was going along doing what he was told to do, but no longer. He says he's heard the sound of his heart, knows that it beats just as hard and strong as anybody else's, and that even though some people are afraid of a black man's beating heart he's going to live the way his heart tells him to.

Avery arrives with his Bible. As Boy Willie asks him about the "eye for an eye" part of the Bible, Doaker changes the subject, and asks Avery what the bank told him about getting money for his church. Avery says that the bank was really positive, and that he's getting excited about having his own church and Berniece as his deaconess. Berniece says she hasn't agreed to marry him, only that she's thinking about it. Doaker asks Avery whether he's come to bless the house, but Boy Willie says the ghost is just in Berniece's imagination, and that Avery hasn't got the power to do anything. Just as Avery is talking about how the power is actually God's, Lymon comes in with the rope to move the piano. When Boy Willie asks what took so long Lymon says he ran into Grace and went for a drink. As Boy Willie gets the dolly ready to move the piano Berniece goes upstairs and comes back down with Crawley's gun. For a moment Lymon sides with Berniece, but then Boy Willie convinces him to help move the piano. As they load it up Berniece tells Doaker to take Maretha out of the way, and he takes Maretha into his room.

Wining Boy comes in, drunk and looking for more liquor. Berniece and Doaker try to get him to lie down, but he goes to the piano and plays a song he wrote about the woman he left behind. Boy Willie tries to move him away from the piano but he spreads his

arms out over it protectively and says if the piano is going he's going too. Grace then comes in, looking for Lymon to take her to the movies as promised. As Lymon and Grace argue over whether they're going, as Boy Willie tries to get Lymon to help him move the piano, as Wining Boy says that Boy Willie isn't taking the piano anywhere, and as Berniece tries to get everyone to leave ... they all suddenly sense Sutter's ghost. Grace abruptly leaves, and Lymon goes out to take her home. As Boy Willie shouts for him to come back, everybody feels Sutter's presence again, and Berniece and Doaker tell Avery to start the blessing. He lights a candle, scatters some holy water, and starts to pray. Boy Willie angrily grabs a pot of water from the stove, starts scattering it about, and as Avery continues he starts shouting for Sutter to come out and face him. He runs upstairs, but is pushed back down by an unseen force. Avery continues to pray as Boy Willie runs upstairs, shouting for Sutter. Sounds of a fight are heard as Avery prays, then suddenly stops, saying he can't continue.

Berniece moves to the piano and starts to play, singing an old song that calls upon her ancestors to help her. As her playing and singing get stronger the noise from upstairs disappears. Boy Willie calls for Sutter to come back so they can continue the fight. Berniece's song changes, and she starts to sing, "thank you." Boy Willie comes back downstairs, asks Wining Boy whether he's ready to go back down south, and asks Doaker what time the next train leaves. Doaker tells him he's got time to make it, and Maretha comes back in and embraces him. Boy Willie tells Berniece that unless she and Maretha keep playing that piano, it's likely he and Sutter would both be back. He goes out, and Berniece says thank you one last time.

Act 2, Scene 5, Part 2 Analysis

The image of Berniece combing Maretha's hair is one of caring and nurturing, in spite of Berniece's comment that it wouldn't be as difficult if she was a boy. Berniece's argument with Boy Willie as a result of this comment, and like most of their arguments, it arises because of Boy Willie's insistence upon seeing things his way and his denial that there's any other possible interpretation. This is another manifestation of his self-righteous, "bull in a china shop" attitude. On the other hand, Berniece's command to Maretha to hold her head high suggests that in her own way, Berniece loves Maretha in a healthy and supportive way. Her command foreshadows the strength and pride that Berniece finds in herself to play the piano, chase away Sutter's ghost, and free herself and her family for good. The conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie in this scene is a manifestation on their two very different perspectives on how to move on from the past.

These perspectives are illustrated through the contrast between the nurturing image of Berniece combing Maretha's hair and Boy Willie's increasing rage, fueled by frustrated pride. The image of the "black man's beating heart" is extraordinarily powerful, and reinforces the idea that the play we're watching is in fact an extended metaphor for the historical experience of all African Americans. Boy Willie's determination and anger gives a voice to the frustrations of all his ancestors, both genetic and spiritual. That anger and determination, not to mention fearlessness, build through the almost farcical comings and goings of Doaker, Wining Boy, Grace and Lymon, and through Avery's well

intentioned but pointless prayers (because in the thematic context of the play Boy Willie and Berniece must exorcise Sutter's ghost, not God), as well as through the semi-comic song sung by Wining Boy, to the play's explosive climax.

When Boy Willie physically confronts the ghost. Berniece confronts it spiritually, invoking the power and courage of their ancestors. It represents not only years of struggle for them personally, but also centuries of African American struggle against white oppression. Boy Willie's final warning, that he and Sutter might both be back if Berniece doesn't keep playing the piano, suggests that the spirit of oppression has to be guarded against constantly and consistently. In this final warning, then, the symbol of the piano takes on its final meaning. Not only is it a symbol of the past and of strength, it is now a symbol of hope for the future, as long as the past is never forgotten.

Bibliography

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Characters

Avery

Avery was one of Boy Willy's acquaintances down South but like so many other southern African-Americans he migrated to the North. He now works in Pittsburgh as an elevator operator. Avery has also become a preacher and is trying to raise funds to build a church. His dream of becoming a preacher and ministering to a congregation represents one of the traditional ways in which African Americans rose to prominence within their communities and reminds the audience of the importance of religion within African-American culture.

Avery's dream includes Berniece: he courts her and hopes that she will agree to marry him and play piano for the church congregation. But when Avery repeats his proposal of marriage to Berniece in Act Two, scene two, she refuses to talk about it seriously. Instead, she asks him to return the next day to exercise Sutter's ghost and bless the house. Avery promises to do so. Avery's exorcism ceremony is unsuccessful, however. It is up to Berniece to call upon another spiritual source□the power of her ancestors□to rid the family of Sutter's presence.

Berniece Charles

Berniece, Boy Willie's sister, long since left the South for Pittsburgh. There she married Crawley and had a daughter, Maretha. Widowed for three years, she works as a domestic to support her small family. Recently, an old acquaintance from down South, Avery, has begun to court her; however, Berniece is very ambivalent about his interest. She feels angry that her family and friends are pressuring her to marry again: "Everybody telling me I can't be a woman unless I got a man."

Berniece's attitude toward the piano is also profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, she is fiercely protective of it and refuses to allow Boy Willie to sell it. She also encourages Maretha to play the piano. On the other hand, she refuses to play the piano herself, claiming that she only played it while her widowed mother was alive out of respect. After her mother's death, she ceased to play it because she was bitter about the pain it had brought the family.

In the last scene in the play, Lymon and Boy Willie attempt to remove the piano, but Berniece threatens them with Crawley's gun. The potentially tragic confrontation between sister and brother diffuses when Sutter's ghost appears. While Boy Willie tries to wrest it physically from the house, Berniece turns to the past□to African-American spiritualism□to exorcize its presence. The siblings' joint battle with the past thus reconciles them in the present.

Boy Willie Charles

Boy Willie is Berniece's brother and Doaker's nephew. Unlike them, he has remained in the South, farming the land that their family worked for generations. He dreams of raising enough cash to buy land from the diminished Sutter family so that he can become an independent farmer rather than a debt-ridden share-cropper. Boy Willie plans to raise the cash by selling a load of watermelons and the family piano, which he part owns with Berniece. To this end, he travels North to Pittsburgh.

Berniece refuses to sell the piano, however, and there are additional troubles in the past that divide brother and sister. During Boy Willie's last visit, he was involved in an illegal racket and fell into trouble with the local police. He lied to Berniece's husband, Crawley, about the racket; Crawley tried to protect him from the police and was killed. Boy Willie departed hastily. His grieving, hostile sister is thus doubly opposed to his plan to part with the family legacy.

Boy Willie complains that Berniece never uses the piano, and he uses this observation to justify his decision to sell it. His complaint is a good example of his pragmatic approach to life: why should not an unused piano be sold to purchase productive land? But it does no justice to Boy Willie's character to describe him as simply interested in "getting ahead." Boy Willie reverences the family past in a different way from Berniece. He seeks to revitalize the land worked by his enslaved ancestors and to make that land finally theirs by owning and working it himself. Moreover, he seeks to educate his niece, Maretha, about her background, believing that pride in the past will help her hold her head high.

Doaker Charles

Doaker is Berniece and Boy Willy's uncle. He is a dignified, wiser older man who used to earn his living building and working the railroads and now works as a railroad cook. If Boy Willie and Berniece are two out-of-kilter wheels, their uncle Doaker is the frame that holds them together. He is the play's chief story-teller: in fact, he does a better job of remembering and narrating the family history than either Berniece or Boy Willie.

It is through Doaker that the audience learns about the importance of the piano: "See, now... to understand about that piano ... you got to go back to slavery time." Doaker's description of the piano's place in their family history is powerful stuff, and although he plays a neutral role in the siblings' dispute, his narration of the story suggests that he sides with Berniece.

Maretha Charles

Maretha is Berniece's eleven-year-old daughter. She is mainly important because Berniece and Boy Willy clash about how she should be raised. Should she be told her family's history, particularly the history of the piano that her mother is encouraging her to

play, or should she be encouraged to forget it and thus be freed from the "burden" of the past? The resolution of this question has particular importance because Maretha, as the next generation of the family, represents the future of not only her own family but of the African American people.

Wining Boy Charles

Wining Boy is Doaker's brother and thus Boy Willie and Berniece's uncle. He is a failed musician and gambler, by turns charming and affectionate, at others, selfish and irresponsible. As his name implies, he is something of a " wino"□a heavy drinker□and also something of a" whiner"□a bluesman.

In Act One, scene two, Wining Boy reminisces about old times with Doaker. He also succeeds in conning money from Lymon and Boy Willie, both of whom are flush with cash after selling their watermelons. His role in the play is not critical but in some ways his presence is a reflection upon the present fate of the piano: the failure of the music within.

Grace

Grace's appearance on-stage is brief. She and Boy Willie have a brief encounter in the living room before Berniece, outraged, orders them to stop or leave the house. They leave.

Lymon

Lymon is Boy Willy's friend from "down South." He is in trouble with the local sheriff back home and has traveled North with Boy Willy to escape prosecution and to sell their truck load of watermelons. Lymon plans to stay in Pittsburgh. It is, however, his first time in the North, and for much of the play he is more concerned with exploring the dazzling city lights than with selling the watermelons and finding a job.

His inexperience and naivete provides much humor in Act Two, scene one, when Wining Boy cons him into parting with six hard-earned dollars for a cheap suit, shirt, and pair of shoes. His naivete is also apparent in Act Two, scene three, when he tells Berniece that Boy Willy picked up the woman Lymon had been angling after.

During this scene, Lymon compliments Berniece on her nightgown and gives her a bottle of perfume. They kiss. Their brief intimacy suggests that Berniece is melting the barriers she erected after Crawley's death; this prefigures the play's positive resolution.

Themes

Past and Present

Wilson's cycle of plays concentrates on African-American experience during the twentieth century, but they are all also focused in either direct or indirect ways upon the experience of slavery.

The Charles family in Wilson's play is almost a textbook example of the southern black experience in the nineteenth and twentieth century, and it is certain that Wilson intended his characters to be representative of that history. After the emancipation of the slaves in 1863, most ex-slaves remained on the land, renting from their former masters as tenant-farmers (sharecroppers). The returns from their labor were low, the risks of natural disasters were high, and the costs of living were artificially inflated because it was mainly whites who owned the stores at which blacks bought and sold their goods. Many sharecroppers were locked into a cycle of debt to their former masters and lived in grueling poverty. This paucity and debt were compounded further by white hostility.

The promises of the Reconstruction Era were cut short, and the introduction of "Jim Crow" laws that segregated whites and blacks confirmed the enduring influence of American, and particularly southern, racism. The accelerating industrialization of the North in the last decades of the nineteenth century promised workers higher wages, improved work conditions, and a better standard of living. Many rural blacks migrated North, and when demand for labor peaked during and after World War One this steady flow North became a torrent.

In the play, the Charles family were once owned by the Sutters and worked the Sutter land as slaves. After emancipation, they remained on the same land but became sharecroppers for the Sutters, renting the land from their former masters and working it for themselves. Finally, a part of the family migrated North to Pittsburgh, leaving only Boy Willy behind.

Boy Willie refuses to abandon the land and migrate North. His dream of finally owning, rather than renting, the Sutter land, is an extraordinary anomaly, and it reflects Wilson's own curiosity about what "the fabric of American society would be like if blacks had stayed in the South and somehow found a way to develop [economically] and lock into that particular area." His father's desire to reclaim the piano is later paralleled in Boy Willie's desire to remain on the land. Both father and son believe that reclaiming the heritage of slavery and transforming it through labor and ties of affection will alter their relationship to their family and to their history.

Boy Charles believed that the piano symbolized "the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it... we was still in slavery." Boy Willie also tries to alter the family's relationship to their slave history to break the bond of master and slave, of owner and

renter, by becoming an owner himself, the master of the very land that the Charles family has worked for so many generations.

The central conflict in the play, the battle over the future of the piano, is generated by Boy Willie's desire to transform the past by altering the present. However, the battle takes place precisely because the piano's history is so important: each family member has strikingly different responses to its past. In part, then, the piano's lesson is a lesson about the past: history can sound dramatically different depending upon *who* is telling a story and why they are telling it. Understanding this lesson is crucial to understanding contemporary race relations in America and the extraordinary divide between black and white experience in the past.

Just as the play's central conflict originates in Boy Willie's desire to remake the past, so too can the conflict be resolved only by Berniece' s decision to return to the past. When her mother died, Berniece refused to perform the "ancestor worship" that her mother had demanded of her (playing the piano to invoke, and also to honor, the blood sacrificed for it). Ironically, Berniece's attitude towards the piano is now almost as pragmatic as Boy Willie's: both of them see it as "a piece of wood."

But when Avery's Christian exorcism fails, Berniece returns to her mother's ritual practices in order to save her brother and to exercise Sutter's ghost. She plays the piano and calls upon the spirits of the dead to help her. Wilson describes her actions as "a rustle of wind blowing across two continents," and her plea to her ancestors and her gratitude at their help recalls African rituals of ancestor worship. The piano's lesson, then, is also a lesson that asks African Americans to value family ties and to acknowledge their personal involvement in the legacy of slavery.

The American Dream

One of the themes that Wilson explores in all of his plays is the conflict between the American dream and African-American experience of poverty and racism. In *The Piano Lesson* each of the central characters has a different vision of their future, and the contrast between then defines Wilson's exploration of the barriers African Americans faced in achieving the American dream.

The phrase "the American dream" describes the belief in the possibility of advancement in American society: an immigrant who arrives at Staten Island with nothing in his pockets can, with hard work, eventually earn and save enough to enable him to buy and own his own house and to live in reasonable prosperity. Boy Willie's dream of owning his own land resembles the traditional American dream.

Avery also has a dream, but it differs markedly from Boy Willie's. Avery has "been filled with the Holy Ghost and called to be a servant of the Lord." He now works in his spare time as a preacher while trying to raise funds to build a church. Both Avery's dream of becoming a preacher and ministering to a congregation, and Boy Willie's dream of becoming a farmer and owning his own land, represent two key elements of African-

American experience religion and the land. Likewise, Avery's ecstatic religious language is the other side of the black southern dialect in which Boy Willie speaks.

Their dreams represent two ways blacks could "make it" in this period; however, there were other possibilities for economic advancement. The character of Wining Boy represents another of the few avenues of advancement traditionally open to blacks: music. Wilson explored this path in the first play in his cycle, *Ma Rainey 's Black Bottom* (1984), and his critique of white exploitation of black musical talent in that play is echoed in his characterization of Wining Boy, a failed "recording star," a piano player whose luck has run out. Not everyone, however, is lost to the lure of hope: while Berniece is pragmatic about her own position in society, she nonetheless nurtures the dream that her daughter will advance socially by becoming a piano teacher, while Lymon, too, hopes to make it in the big city.

Perhaps the most important dream in the play, however, is Papa Boy Charles's dream that possession of the piano will alter the family's relationship to their past. His dream of removing the piano from Sutter' s house and restoring "the story of our whole family" to his kin is accomplished at the cost of his life. The Sutters's murder of Boy Charles reiterates their past violence to the Charles family. Moreover, the "liberation" of the piano and the murder of Boy Charles on the railway (a powerful symbol of escape and liberation for blacks, because it was one of the routes North used by fugitive slaves) occurs on the Fourth of July. Wilson thus points to the original limits of the American Revolution in which white citizens won freedom from British tyranny while maintaining their own tyranny over black slaves and the limits of its rhetoric for African Americans living in the segregated 1930s.

Style

Naturalism

Naturalism is often confused with realism; however, although the two styles both represent "real life," there are important differences between them. Naturalist writers were influenced by scientific and evolutionary theories of human character and of social interaction. One of the central motifs of Naturalist writing is the individual's struggle to adapt to an often hostile environment. Indeed, most Naturalist writers emphasize their characters' environment to such an extent that it becomes an integral element in their narratives. Moreover, their protagonists usually belong to a less fortunate class than their middle-class audience or readership, and the description of their struggle to survive and succeed against all odds usually allows the writer the opportunity to make powerful social criticism.

Wilson is considered a Naturalist playwright *par excellence.* Although the play's conflict is triggered by Boy Willie's sudden appearance, the drama unfolds during the Charles family's everyday activities. Doaker describes precisely what kind of "ham hocks" he wants Berniece to buy, and he shares with her and the audience his plans to cook "cornbread and . . . turnip greens." When Avery arrives to propose to Berniece, she is busy heating up water for her evening bath. The final climatic argument between Berniece and Boy Willie occurs while Berniece is combing her daughter's hair. These kinds of details are the staple of Naturalism: they foreground the everyday experiences of the characters while deepening the veracity of the characterizations.

Like many American Naturalist dramas□Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night,* for example□the action of *The Piano Lesson* takes place over a short period of time: from Thursday morning to Friday evening. The brevity of the plot's span intensifies the drama of the events that unfold, while the kinds of detail described above allow the audience an extraordinarily intimate glimpse of the family's life. The *brevity* of the time frame is an implicit contrast to the *length* of the family's history; this contrast emphasizes the Charles' inherent problems in relating to and narrating their family history, since, when their family were illiterate slaves, they relied upon storytelling, music, and art, rather than writing, to recite and remember their joys and sorrows.

The African Tradition: Ancestor Worship and Storytelling

In the final scene, Wilson describes Berniece's decision to play the piano as a "rustling of wind blowing across two continents." The playwright himself merges two different cultural traditions within the play, the African and the American, and seems to suggest that this melding of cultures is essential to African-American identity.

Ancestor worship is integral to African religious practice, and the spirits of the ancestors are believed to be able to influence people's lives and cause good or bad events, depending upon whether the spirits are malevolent or benevolent. In fact, although ancestor worship is premised upon respecting and honoring the dead, the practice also ensures that spirits will remain benevolent and will protect the worshipers from malevolent forces. Neglect of the spirits removes their protection and may even incur their wrath.

The piano is the Charles' family totem: it visibly records the lost lives of Berniece and Boy Willie's ancestors, and it is the only tangible link remaining between past and present. Their ancestors' spirits coalesce in the piano, which is precisely why Berniece's mother, Mama Ola, polishes it, prays over it, and asks her daughter to play it. She keeps the shrine to her ancestors clean and pure and maintains her link with them by praying and playing it.

Berniece refuses to play the piano after her mother's death because she "don't want to wake them spirits." Consequently, "they never be walking around in this house." However, her refusal to honor the piano in the ways her mother has taught her means she has abandoned her African heritage and "disrespected" her family history. Berniece comes to realize that her neglect has allowed the Charles' to be persecuted by Sutter's ghost. When Berniece finally starts playing again and calls upon her ancestors' spirits, she affirms the importance of maintaining African cultural practice and of honoring the history of slavery.

The other important African cultural practice in *The Piano Lesson* is storytelling. Again, this is a cross-cultural practice, but one that is particularly important to African Americans, who were denied formal education and literacy skills even after Emancipation. Slaves created or adapted songs and relied upon community storytelling to remember their heritage and history. Two scenes in particular hinge upon African-American storytelling.

Avery's dream, which he narrates in Act One, scene one, reflects the importance of the Book of Revelations and of the scriptural promise of redemption to African-American Christianity. His narration of the story is a testimony to his conversion experience and displays the speech patterns of evangelical preachers. His dream is influenced by the New Testament story of Christ's birth as well as by Old Testament stories of prophets being called and chosen by God. But Avery has cast these traditions in an African-American context: the pilgrimage begins in a "railway yard," the three wise men become "three hobos" (who are reminiscent of the murdered hobos on the Yellow Dog), and he strongly emphasizes the ecstatic elements of the experience.

An even more important story is told in the next scene by Doaker, the de facto patriarch of the Charles family. Doaker uses the call and response structure that is common to African ritual practice and to evangelical preaching: "'I'm talking to the man ... let me talk to the man.... Now ... am I telling it right, Wining Boy? "You telling it."' He also uses rhythm to great effect by pausing throughout his story and repeats certain phrases to intensify its drama. Doaker's story is the core of the play: it reveals the importance of the

piano, and he is shown to be the one family member who still honors the ancestors' spirits by telling their stories.

Many of the other characters tell stories about themselves during the play, a practice that emphasizes Wilson's belief in the importance of the oral tradition to African-American identity. Storytelling keeps the past alive in the present, for it establishes the individual's connection to their personal and cultural history. Survival depends upon the continuation of this practice across the generations: in the final scene of the play, Boy Willie begins to teach Maretha her family stories. He insists that if she knows about and celebrated her history, it will dramatically improve her self-esteem: she "wouldn't have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head head high.... She [would] know where she at in the world."

Historical Context

Slavery and Reconstruction

The widespread importation of slaves to America began in the 1690s in Virginia. Although slaves had been imported earlier than this, it was in the 1690s that indentured servants, who sold themselves to masters for contracts of five to eleven years in exchange for the price of their passage from England or Ireland to America and the cost of their keep during their indenture, were increasingly replaced by permanently enslaved laborers. Contrary to popular misconception, the colonists actually preferred indentured servants to slaves, for the latter were a more expensive investment. But after six decades of migration, there were simply not enough English, Irish, and Scots migrants to meet the colonists' demand. The foundation was set for slavery in America: the kidnaping of human beings, their transportation from Africa to Jamaica, the West Indies, and North America, their forced labor in those colonies and later generations' inheritance of their parents' enslaved status.

It was the rhetoric of the American Revolution (1775-1783) that for the first time forced Americans to reconsider their attitudes towards slavery: the Revolution's expressions of freedom and equality for all men was contradicted by the existence of an enslaved underclass. Some southerners and northerners briefly entertained emancipating the slaves (and repatriating them to Liberia or settling them in an empty part of America), but these schemes were soon abandoned.

During the ante-bellum period (the era before the American Civil War) strong opposition to slavery developed in the North. Partly in response to abolitionist attacks and partly as a result of the growing racism within southern society, southern slave-owners and apologists for slavery began to offer the public "scientific" and "philosophical" defenses of slavery.

As the decades rolled by, the gulf between the defenders and the opponents of slavery widened, although there was considerable overlap in misconceptions about blacks between the more conservative of the abolitionists and their opponents. The growing tension within society about slavery came to a head in the American Civil War (1861-1865). Should slavery be extended to the newly settled states of Kansas and Missouri? Should slavery be abolished in the southern states? What kind of labor system would replace it and would the agrarian South still be able to function economically, particularly in competition with the more industrialized North? What would happen to the emancipated slaves?

Although slavery was the key issue dividing the North and South, Abraham Lincoln prioritized maintaining the American union of states above all else. The Emancipation Proclamation issued on January 1st, 1863, emancipated slaves in the southern states; congress passed the thirteenth amendment in 1865, thus emancipating all remaining slaves.

The North's triumph over the South in the Civil War and its determination to help the emancipated African Americans adjust to their new position in society soon subsided under a growing wave of conciliatory action and nostalgic sentiment for the South. The promises of the Reconstruction Era (1865-1876)□the dream of better treatment of and opportunity for blacks, and the possibility of integration and reconciliation between the races□were quickly cut short. Republican presidents adopted a conciliatory approach to the southern leadership. All hope of establishing a truly egalitarian society in the South was destroyed in the 1880s and 1890s when southern legislatures successively introduced the "Jim Crow" segregation laws that disenfranchised blacks and made true civil rights impossible.

During and after the Reconstruction, southern blacks struggled to define their new place in society. Although there had always been a small but significant free black population in America who enjoyed better educational and occupational possibilities than their enslaved brethren, most ex-slaves were trained for nothing but rural labor. The choices facing them were limited: they could either leave the land and work in urban factories or they could remain on the land as sharecroppers. Many chose to remain, but in the boom years of the 1910s and 1920s, and during and after World War I (1914-1919) in particular, there was a mass exodus of southern blacks to the northern cities.

America in the 1930s

The 1930s were characterized by severe economic depression in America and abroad. The Great Depression had its roots in Britain and America's punitive reparations policy after their victory in First World War, in technological advances that increased output and profits but made many workers redundant, and in depressed agricultural, mining, and textile markets. Stock-market speculation only concealed the weaknesses eating away at America's economic heart. The stock market crash of 1929 did not trigger the Depression but rather was a response to and a confirmation of existing problems within the market and the international banks.

From 1929 to 1932, unemployment in America rose from about 1.5 million to about 15 million. On the land, in the early-1930s, good weather produced an over-supply in agricultural produce, but people in the cities went hungry. By the mid-1930s, drought and bank foreclosures had driven farm prices down by more than 50% and many tenant-farmers were forced off their land. Agricultural laborers, many of whom were black southerners, were as badly hit as factory workers in the city, who, like them, joined millions of others in the bread lines (welfare handouts for those who could not afford to buy food).

Nonetheless, President Herbert Hoover's administration maintained an attitude of stoic indifference, believing that "market forces" would solve the escalating crisis□a proclamation that proved false. In March, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected to the presidency. He immediately began implementing his "New Deal" reform plan: relief for the unemployed, fiscal reform, and stimulus measures to boost economic recovery. Roosevelt owed his election success in part to African Americans' desertion of the

Republicans□the party of Abraham Lincoln, which they had traditionally supported□for Roosevelt's party, the Democrats. Both Roosevelt's New Deal and African Americans' switch in political allegiance transformed twentieth-century American politics. In subsequent decades, the struggle for African-American civil rights would be closely related to the politics of the Democratic Party.

Critical Overview

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* won a Pulitzer Prize before opening on Broadway, an honor that is indicative of the almost unanimous praise critics showered upon the play. Yet the drama still attracted its fair share of negative criticism, some of which came from privileged onlookers who had witnessed its transformation over three years of extensive workshopping. Wth the exception of these few hostile voices, however, most critics greeted the play with strong applause.

William A. Henry III, writing for *Time,* stated that the play was Wilson's "richest yet," a sentiment echoed by many other critics, including the *New York Post's* Clive Barnes, who called it "the fourth, best, and most immediate in the series of plays exploring the Afro-American experience during this century." However, one or two critics failed to join this chorus of approval. Robert Brustein, a prominent director and reviewer for the *New Republic,* issued a damning attack of the play, arguing in detail that it was "the most poorly composed of Wilson's four produced works." John Simon, writing in *New York,* joined Brustein when he complained that the play was an unwieldy mixture of farce, drama, and Broadway musical. Simon's attack was deemed by many as unwarranted, since laughter and tragedy walk hand in hand in many of the great tragedies (such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet, King Lear,* and *Macbeth)*.

Henry, in his largely positive review of the play, did acknowledge that Wilson had blurred genre boundaries by mixing tales of the supernatural with "kitchen-sink realism." This, in fact, was an element of the play to which many critics had a mixed response. Was it necessary, they asked, to hear the sound of a toilet flushing off-stage, or to watch Berniece washing with "real" water in a sink? Wilson's decision to mix genres irritated Brustein and Simon in particular: Brustein called the supernaturalism "ludicrous" and "forced," while Simon asked, "why, in this day and age, bring in ghosts at all?"

Looking at the larger critical picture, however, these critics seemed to have missed the point: Wilson's mixing of genres is natural for a playwright who seeks to represent dual cultural traditions in one form and on one stage, and his inclusion of a supernatural sub-plot reflects African-American culture in the 1930s, not white American culture in the 1980s. Indeed, Michael Morales, in *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson,* argued that the supernatural element of the play is crucial to Wilson's representation of African-American history.

Many critics were fascinated, and rightly so, by the play's central symbol, the piano. Barnes called the musical instrument "a living symbol of the family's past□its slavery and its escape, its blood and its tears. . . . The piano is ... an heirloom of tragic memory and meaning." Frank Rich, writing in the *New York Times,* discussed the piano's symbolism in detail. He emphasized the instrument's bountiful but painful heritage: "Sculptured into its rich wood are totemic human figures whose knifedrawn features suggest both the pride of African culture and the grotesque scars of slavery." "The siblings at center stage" inherit both "the pride and scars," and the piano is their key to their reconciliation with their family history and their identity as African-Americans.

Time's Henry concluded his evaluation of the play by stating, simply and powerfully, "the musical instrument of the title is the most potent symbol in American drama since Laura Wingfield's glass menagerie"□a reference to Tennessee Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie.*

The most negative criticism came from critics who suggested that Wilson's success depended on his ability "to stimulate the guilt glands of liberal white audiences." The *New Republic's* Brustein dismissed Wilson's previous plays and added that he found little "power or poetry" in *The Piano Lesson.* Brustein felt that any comparisons between Wilson and Shakespeare or O'Neill were ridiculous. Wilson had "limited himself" to exploring "the black experience" whereas O'Neill "wrote about the human experience."

Not satisfied with producing this nonsensical and rather insulting distinction between general human experience and black experience, Brustein continued in a similar vein: "Still, enough radical vapor floats over the bourgeois bolster and upholstered couches [of the play] to stimulate the guilt glands of liberal white audiences. Unable to reform the past, we sometimes pay for the sins of history and our society through artistic reparations in a cultural equivalent of affirmative action." Brustein's statements suggest, falsely, that white audiences lack the ability to appreciate artistic representations of experience other than their own and also ignore the black audience attending Wilson's plays; moreover, his statements suggest that he has misinterpreted the reconciliatory message of the play's ending.

Simon displayed a similar hostility to Wilson's success in his review of the play. He attacked it for having too many sub-plots, for mixing genres, and for being repetitive: "it is sincere but overcrowded, overzealous, and, without quite knowing where it is headed, repeats everything three or four times." But he saved his most damning criticism for his last lines. Simon argued that the play was essentially a product of "two years of testing and rewriting at five leading university and commercial theaters": in short, that it owed as much to the skills of professional theatre craftspeople as it did to Wilson himself. "Less favored, nonminority practitioners," he claimed, would not have enjoyed such help.

Simon and Brustein's attacks on Wilson's talent and on the merits of *The Piano Lesson* are not typical of the overall criticism of the play, but they do represent the kinds of criticism, illogical though they may seem, that Wilson, as an African-American playwright writing about African-American experience, has had to face. Most critics, however, are not encumbered by such blinkers. They can appreciate that Wilson, far from wanting to stick to strict definitions of what constitutes a "proper" realist play or "real" human experience, is an artist interested in inventing new forms and voices as much as he is in connecting to voices and traditions from the past.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Ifeka is a Ph.D specializing in American and British literature. In this essay she argues that Wilson's plays are an eloquent form of social protest and public education.

August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize-winning play (his second) *The Piano Lesson* demonstrates that commercially successful theater can be an eloquent vehicle for social protest and public education. Wilson's early involvement in the Black Power movement and in black community theater, and his ambitious plan to write a cycle of plays about African-American life in the twentieth century, are proof of his desire to "alter the relationship between blacks and society through the arts." His representation of black suffering, coupled with his celebration of black resistance and endurance, offers his audience a new representation of African-American history.

In the late-1960s, artists involved in counterculture movements resurrected the theater as a forum for political protest and a vehicle for social change. Many artists saw community theater as a means to reach out to their community and educate and politicize them. Wilson participated in the Black Power movement in the early-1960s and, like many artists during this period, he saw writing as a means to bring about social change. In 1968 Wilson co-founded the Black Horizons Theater in his home-suburb of the Hill in Pittsburgh.

Wilson found community theater at Black Horizons and, later at the Science Museum of Minnesota, a challenging experience. Throughout the 1970s he directed and wrote short plays for both these organizations, in the process perfecting his craft. Wilson was not content to remain involved in community organizations, however. He wanted the professional advice and support of the National Playwrights Center, and, after they rejected his plays several times, he finally won them over. The Center accepted a draft of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* a play that became Wilson's first commercial hit.

Wilson's shift from community theater to the comparative profitability of Broadway was either hailed as progress for black audiences and artists or seen as him selling-out to white expectations and commercial incentives. But close examination of Wilson's oeuvre reveals that he maintained his original ideal: to educate his audience and to contribute positively to the African-American identity.

Wilson's aesthetics are founded on a belief in the African-ness of black Americans and upon an emphasis upon reclaiming black history. He stated in an interview conducted shortly after the completion of *The Piano Lesson* (reprinted in *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights)* that he hopes a viewer will "walk away from my play, whether you're black or white, with the idea that these [characters] are Africans, as opposed to black folks in America." Such an aim is in keeping with the black nationalist movement, which emphasizes the African roots of African Americans and the importance of African culture in sustaining generations of slaves. Wilson's inclusion of African cultural and religious practices in his plays□Gabriel's ritual dance in *Fences,* Berniece's appeal to her ancestors' spirits in *The Piano Lesson*□is just one way in

which he emphasizes the ethnic roots of African Americans and rewrites their history from a black perspective.

Emphasizing such an African perspective necessarily involves recovering and re-examining black history in America. But Wilson's desire to reclaim African-American history is complicated by the fact that many African Americans were long denied the literacy and education enjoyed by most white Americans. Not only did this mean that early black writers such as the poet Phyllis Wheatley and the abolitionist Frederick Douglass struggled against great odds to write, it also meant that until recently African-American history was mainly located in oral forms, such as spirituals, jazz songs and the blues, trickster stories, visions, conversion experiences, and folk tales. Wilson's decision to include some of these forms in his plays evidences his commitment to valuing the diverse sources of black history and his desire to celebrate black cultural achievement.

Equally significant is Wilson's project of writing a play about African-American experience for each decade of the twentieth century. Wilson skillfully integrates sociological research into the fabric of each play, while exploring an issue that he sees as characteristic of the decade as a whole. In *The Piano Lesson,* the decade in question is the 1930s, and the issues that Wilson fixes upon are the relationship of urban blacks to their past as slaves and the Great Migration of southern blacks to the cities of the North. In effect, each play is a new installment in a new history of the African-American people.

The Piano Lesson is set in a period with which many audience members are at least superficially familiar, for the Great Depression's impact upon generations of Americans was so wrenching that to this day mention of it conjures up vivid images of gaunt faces and soup kitchens. But Wilson offers audiences a story that has not been told as often as it might have been: the story of black American experience during the Depression.

While poor blacks and whites alike experienced tremendous hardship during the 1930s, black poverty differed from white poverty in significant ways. The relatively recent resettlement of millions of blacks to urban northern centers during and after the First World War had produced enormous upheaval in kin networks, tension that was exasperated by the fact that almost all migrants moved into urban slums in the inner city. Nonetheless, the promise of steady income and improved living conditions in big cities like New York, Chicago Detroit, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh continued to draw black migrants North.

The Piano Lesson dramatizes the moment of migration and represents the city's temptations: Lymon is attracted to Pittsburgh because of the possibility of finding good work, meeting attractive women, and living the "good life." Avery's decision to abandon the South and his subsequent success in Pittsburgh exemplifies a successful migration.

The play is subtly didactic: it encourages the audience to re-think American history by asking them what might have happened if more blacks had stayed on the southern land, and it encourages black Americans to value their own history of suffering and resistance

under slavery. Wilson believes, as he stated in *In Their Own Words,* that "blacks do not teach their kids ... that at one time we were slaves." This history must be told: "It is the crucial and central thing to our presence here in America." To this end, in the play the Charles family come to accept the burden of the past that the piano represents. The faces of their ancestors carved into the piano represent the family's loss and suffering, but the artistry of the carvings also testifies to their ancestor's achievements. Similarly, the terrible loss that Boy Charles's death brings to the family is balanced by the beauty of the music that the stolen piano gives the family.

While Wilson never sounds a strident call to arms, his representation of the history of black protest encourages the audience to value it and supports contemporary black protest. The examples given above, for instance, are testimony of the family's endurance of hardship and of their maintenance of their identity, but they are also testimony to the family's *resistance* to their bonds: Doaker's grandfather, Boy Willie, breaks his master's orders and creates an artwork that is testimony to *his* bonds of affection, rather than his mistress's, and Boy Charles's decision to steal the piano strikes another blow against the Sutters's□and white□oppression. Indeed, the play includes several important examples of blacks carving (literally and figuratively) out their own space in a hostile white world, such as Avery's attempt to found his own black church and Boy Willie's attempt to reclaim the land on which his ancestors slaved.

Wilson's essentially positive project of valuing black history, even its most terrible and painful elements, is also apparent in his representation of the richness of African-American culture. *The Piano Lesson* is typical of his plays in that he touches upon all of the central elements of African-American culture. Avery's character speaks to the importance of religion in African-American life, "our saving grace," while Berniece's call to her ancestors speaks to the continuing influence of African belief in "ancestor worship .. . ghosts, magic, and superstition." Wining Boy represents the black tradition of the blues, while Berniece's management of her household acknowledges women's role in the black family's resilience in the face of great adversity. Last but not least, the dialect in which the characters speak is not only realistic but also a showcase to the unique contribution African Americans have made and continue to make to American English.

Wilson's journey from community theater in the Hill to commercial success on Broadway has been a long one, but *The Piano Lesson* shows that his original belief in the playwright's potential to "alter the relationship between blacks and society" remains unshaken. He still seeks to reach out to and educate his audience, to encourage them to re-think their present and their past and to offer black audiences voices with which they can identify.

Not only does Wilson continue to use the theater as a form of public education, he also continues to use it as a form of social protest. *The Piano Lesson* mourns black suffering under slavery and its impact three generations later on the descendants of those slaves. But, like all social protest, the play harnesses the energy of anger and grief in order to change the present: the play's conclusion asks black Americans to honor their ancestors' history and their own painful inheritance.

Source: Helena Ifeka, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In this excerpt, Hornby review Wilson's play. While finding that the work does not hold the same appeal as the playwright's previous efforts, the critic lauds Wilson for his "vividness of characterization."

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* is set in the 1930s, continuing his chronicle of black life in America during each decade of the past hundred years. A family in Pittsburgh owns an antique piano, which originally belonged to the master of their ancestors in the days of slavery. The widowed young matron of the family, Berniece Charles, wants to keep the piano; her brother, Boy Willie, wants to sell it to help buy a piece of land in the South that was originally part of the plantation on which the family were slaves. The piano is covered with carvings made by their great-grandfather, depicting the family history.

The Piano Lesson is thus not only a historical play, but also a play about a family trying to come to grips with its own history. The controversy over selling the piano is not just a simple conflict between sentimentality and practicality. The piano is a symbol for Berniece, but an empty one. She will not even play it; her daughter, Maretha, picks at it in desultory fashion. On the other hand, for Boy Willie, selling the piano is not just a means of getting some cash. Buying a hundred acres of the old plantation is a way of getting control over the family's terrible past. The land for him functions as the carvings on the piano did for his great-grandfather. Taking something that belonged to the master and making it into his own is a means to power, a way to go on record and be somebody, an ultimate triumph over white oppression.

The first act of *Piano Lesson* is talky and slow, with lengthy exposition about half-a-dozen unseen characters that is more suited to a novel than to a play, but in the second act the pace quickens. As the conflict between brother and sister approaches tragedy, the tone of the play becomes crazily comic, as when Berniece comes down the stairs with a gun in her pocket, while carefully wiping her hands on a dish towel. Boy Willie's repeated attempts to steal the piano from the living room are thwarted by the sheer bulk of the thing, a piece of business that manages to be both highly symbolic and hilarious. The mystical overtones that occur in all of Wilson's work are more explicit than usual, with apparent visitations by a ghost from the family past, which is finally exorcised.

Ultimately, *The Piano Lesson* is not as tightly written as Wilson's *Fences* or *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* but he remains unmatched today for vividness of characterization, richness of background, sensitivity to American history, and use of poetic imagery. Motifs of ghosts (showing the influence of Ibsen and O'Neill), music, land, wood, and travel are gracefully woven into the naturalistic façade, in a way no other American playwright has done since Tennessee Williams.

Lloyd Richards directed superbly, as he has with all of Wilson's other plays. The players, from that small group of serious black American actors who are an unacknowledged national treasure, were all wonderful. Charles S. Dutton failed to get a Tony Award for

his Boy Willie, but he deserved one for his inventive, varied, graceful, energetic, driven performance. (There was no timid underplaying here!) Dutton, a graduate of the penitentiary and the Yale Drama School, has a past of his own that he has exorcised.

Source: Richard Hornby, "The Blind Leading the Blind" in the *Hudson Review,* Vol. XLIII, no. 3, Autumn, 1990, pp. 471-72.

Critical Essay #3

While finding much to recommend in The Piano Lesson, *Kramer also found the playwright's conclusion to be somewhat obscure.*

The interior of the newly restored and rechristened Walter Kerr Theatre (it was formerly the Ritz), where August Wilson's *' 'The Piano Lesson"* opened last week, is truly exquisite. I have an idea that parts of Wilson's play must be exquisite, too. Unfortunately, I found it difficult to see past the head of the extremely tall man sitting in front of me. Offhand, I can think of no playwright whose work is harder to appreciate in such a situation. Wilson is unusual among contemporary playwrights in that he writes for the proscenium stage. His plays tend to present two juxtaposed areas□the adjoining rooms of a recording studio, or the world within someone's back yard and the world outside it, or a boarding house where people stay briefly and the city of roads and bridges that carry them away□and you have to be able to view the whole stage to get the full effect of what is happening there.

In the case of *"The Piano Lesson,* " which takes place in the house of a black family in Pittsburgh in 1936, the stage is divided into two rooms (evoked by E. David Cosier, Jr.): a living room, where the piano in question sits, and where the person who wants to sell it does most of his talking; and a kitchen, where people mostly talk about why it couldn't or shouldn't or won't be sold. There are some spell-binding scenes in *"The Piano Lesson"*□ like the one in which a man sits in the living room talking about his hands while in the kitchen a woman goes through the elaborate process of taming her little girl's hair with a hot comb and grease. What the man is talking about□working to produce something that white men will own□goes back to slavery. What the woman is doing□using her hands to make her daughter conform to white fashion□ looks toward the future. Because of where the actors were placed in this sequence, something of its meaning came across to me. But most of the important scenes in Act I□like the one in which a room comes alive with the movement of men singing a work song, and the one in which we hear the history of the piano□take place on the right side of the stage, the side that this very tall man and I were sitting on. I would have gone back the next night, but I quailed at the prospect of sitting through Charles S. Dutton's performance again.

Dutton is the central character, Boy Willie, whose arrival and departure frame the play, and Dutton's performance, which could all too easily win him a Tony Award (it seems calculated to), and which has already won the actor praise, is, I think, terribly damaging to the delicate structure of Wilson's play. Like the performances that Lloyd Richards□ who directed *"The Piano Lesson"*□elicited from James Earl Jones, Mary Alice, Courtney Vance, and Frankie Faison in Wilson's *"Fences,"it is essentially a bid for attention. It's not so much stagy as self-conscious; indeed, self-consciousness is virtually its only quality. Stagy acting is what Maggie Smith does so well in "Lettice & Lovage" projecting the mannerisms of someone who doesn't behave the way real people behave. What Dutton is doing is stagy only in the sense that you know (because something in the actor's bearing or timing or intonation tells you) when a big line is coming up; for the rest, it's projected realism: the simulation of a feeling anxiety, say, or*

indignation at such a pitch that the audience is constantly aware of watching the performance of an actor in a play.

What impresses people about this sort of acting may be its effortfulness. In Mr. Dutton's case, effort means speed. Dutton bursts onto the stage at the beginning of the play acting at such a level of hysteria that his performance has nowhere to go; his character talks incessantly, compulsively, and Dutton delivers practically every speech with the unvarying, frenzied purposefulness of a crazed auctioneer. He induces a sort of delirium, so that by the end of the evening it's impossible to focus on anything Boy Willie is saying.

To be fair, it's hard to know how else an actor could approach the role. *"The Piano Lesson"* is a play that desperately wants cutting, and Boy Willie has most of the long speeches. Yet Dutton's performance isn't about subtlety, and all the rest of the performances are, as is the play. With the exception of *"Fences,"* all Wilson's plays are subtle: they explore complex ideas by constructing around some aspect of the experience of black Americans an intricate system of theme and imagery. If' *'Fences"* was Wilson at his least interesting, that's because it was linear: its eponymous image meant basically the same thing to all the characters. The central object in this play□the piano, a beautifully carved upright, decorated with faces and scenes□means something different to everyone. To Boy Willie, who wants to use money from the sale of the piano to buy the land his family worked as slaves and sharecroppers, the piano means the future and his spiritual emancipation. To his widowed sister Berniece (S. Epatha Merkerson), whose father died stealing it from the man who owned it, the piano means a heritage of grief, bitterness, and women without men. To Berniece's would-be suitor, Avery (Tommy Hollis), the piano represents the baggage of sorrow he wants her to relinquish. For Berniece and Boy Willie's uncle, Wining Boy (Lou Myers), a former recording artist, the piano was once a living and is now a burden, and to Boy Willie's friend Lymon (Rocky Carroll), an interloper, it's just a good story. To Doaker (Carl Gordon), the head of the household, whose grandfather carved pictures of his wife and son on the piano for the slave owner who sold the wife and son in order to buy it, the piano embodies the family's history□symbolically and in concrete terms.

If a man carves pictures of his wife and son on a piano, to whom do the pictures belong: the artist or the man who owns the piano and once owned the wife and son? Which is more important, the future or the past? How do you measure the abstract value that one person puts on an object against the practical use to which another person can put it? And what is the best way of making your way in a world in which whatever you make with your hands belongs to someone else? Wilson never answers any of these questions. Instead, he tacks on an ending that takes refuge in mysticism and melodramatic event□a tendency of his. Like the stages for which he writes them, all Wilson's plays are divided in two□between earth, represented by women and home, and mysticism, embodied in the men who travel around in a world no part of which, they feel, can ever really be theirs. And mysticism always wins out. Usually, though, some marriage between the two forces has been effected in the audience's mind by means of music. "O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal well, go 'head marry don't you wait on me," sing the men in the kitchen. "I am a rambling gambling man," sings Wining Boy, pounding the

piano. "I've travelled all around this world." And later he sings, "It takes a hesitating woman wanna sing the blues," while Doaker makes up a song out of the names of the towns on the Katy line. All the music in *"The Piano Lesson"* is about travelling man and hesitating woman□except for the prayer that Berniece improvises to resolve the conflict and bring the play to a close.

I suspect that at one time Wilson had it in mind to include in the play an actual piano lesson. Wilson said in a recent *Times* interview that the play was inspired by a painting of "a young girl at the piano, with a woman standing behind her who seems to be admonishing her to learn her scales." I think this image got translated into that wonderful hair-fixing scene, in which Berniece stands behind her daughter, Maretha (Apryl R. Foster), who is seated. At one point, the child tries to play the Papa Haydn piece out of the Thompson piano primer; in disgust, Wining Boy pushes her away and launches into some boogie-woogie. But there isn't a piano lesson in the literal, down-to-earth sense. It's clear that by the time Boy Willie departs Wilson wants us to feel that the piano has taught him something□or that he's learned something about it□but the precise message of Wilson's mystical ending is obscure to me.

Source: Mimi Kramer, "Traveling Man and Hesitating Woman" in the *New Yorker,* April 30, 1990, pp. 82-83.

Critical Essay #4

Henry reviews a 1989 Chicago performance of the The Piano Lesson, *finding much to recommend in the play's content and the production.*

The piano in Doaker Charles' living room is a family heirloom, and like most heirlooms it is prized more than used, its value measured less in money than in memories. For this piano, the Charles family was torn asunder in slavery times: to acquire it, the white man who owned them traded away Doaker's grandmother and father, then a nine-year-old. On this piano, Doaker's grieving grandfather, the plantation carpenter, carved portrait sculptures in African style of the wife and son he had lost. To Doaker's hothead older brother, born under the second slavery of Jim Crow, the carvings on the piano made it the rightful property of his kin, and he lost his life in a successful conspiracy to steal it.

Now, in 1936, it sits admired but mostly untouched in Doaker's house in Pittsburgh, and it threatens to tear the family apart again. Boy Willie Charles, son of the man who stole the piano, wants to sell it and use the proceeds to buy and farm the very land where his ancestors were slaves. Boy Willie's sister Berniece denounces as sacrilege the idea of selling away a legacy her father died to obtain.

That is the premise of *The Piano Lesson,*which opened last week at the Goodman Theater in Chicago. The lesson of the title□an instruction in morality rather than scales or fingering□makes the work the richest yet of dramatist August Wilson, whose first three Broadway efforts, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* each won the New York Drama Critics Circle prize as best play of the year. The fact that producers are not shoving each other in haste to bring *Piano Lesson* to Broadway, especially in a season when the Tony Awards are likely to be given to mediocrities by default, underscores the all but defunct place of serious drama in our commercial theater.

Piano Lesson debuted more than a year ago at the Yale Repertory Theater, where Wilson has launched all his plays. In that production, the work seemed an intriguing but unpolished amalgam of kitchen-sink realism (there is literally one onstage) and window-rattling, curtain-swirling supernatural-ism. Not much of the actual text has changed. But at the Goodman the play confidently shuttles spectators between the everyday present and the ghostly remnants of the past, until ultimately the two worlds collide. The first glimpse of the spookily poetic comes before a word is spoken, when a shaft of white light illumines the piano, which by itself plays an eerily cheerful rag.

The other major change since Yale is the recasting of Boy Willie with Charles S. Dutton, who gives a performance as energized as his Tony-nominated Broadway debut in *Ma Rainey,* Puffing his cheeks, waving his arms, hopping around like Jackie Gleason in a one-leggedjig, the burly Dutton seems a rustic buffoon. But when conversation turns to conflict, his jaw tightens and the clowning stops. In Boy Willie, Dutton and Wilson achieve that rarity in literature, a truly common, ordinary man of heroic force.

The rest of the cast is equally fine, notably S. Epatha Merkerson as Berniece and Lou Myers as the dissolute uncle Wining Boy, who leads family members in musical interludes that include a haunting, African-influenced chant. Director Lloyd Richards needs to tinker with the ending, a sort of exorcism in which a sudden shift from farce to horror does not quite work. But already the musical instrument of the title is the most potent symbol in American drama since Laura Wingfield's glass menagerie.

Source: William A. Henry III, "A Ghostly Past, in Ragtime" in *Time,*Vol. 133, no. 5, January 30, 1989, p. 69

Topics for Further Study

Wilson was inspired to write *The Piano Lesson* by Romare Bearden's painting *Piano Lesson.* Examine the painting, then consider the symbolism of the piano in the play, particularly the carvings on it. Compare and contrast the painting and the play in terms of their representation of art in African-American life.

Research the Great Depression and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in 1930s America, then, using your research, consider Wilson's representations of poverty and opportunity in *The Piano Lesson.*

Research the Great Migration of southern African-Americans to the urban North. Then, using your research, discuss Wilson's speculation about what might have happened if more African-Americans had stayed on in the South and found a viable way to work the land. Do you think this might have been possible, and what kinds of social changes would have to have taken place to make this work?

Why is Sutter's ghost haunting the Charles family, and how convincing is its unseen presence on-stage?

Consider one or more of the following examples of Wilson's use of language in *The Piano Lesson* and, using examples, demonstrate how it contributes to the power and believability of the play: black dialect, metaphor, lyricism.

Using examples from the text, identify what you believe is the play's central message and consider its importance today.

Compare and Contrast

1936: President Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected for a second term by a massive majority. He wins every state but Virginia and Maine. Congress is 80% Democrat. Roosevelt's unprecedented victory depends upon a big swing in the black voting population from the Republicans to the Democrats.

1987: Ronald Reagan is serving his second term in office. He had been reelected in 1984 by the greatest Republican landslide in U.S. history, having won in forty-nine states. Nonetheless, during his seventh year in office he attracts severe criticism for his involvement in the Iran-Contra Affair and his veto of the Clean Water Act.

Today: President Bill Clinton was reelected to office in November, 1996, with 49% of the vote, the first Democrat since Roosevelt to be reelected. However, his second term in office is marred by the Whitewater investigation and the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

1936: Eight million people are unemployed and the economy is in deep recession. Roosevelt's New Deal offers support to the unemployed and attempts to boost the economy with public works programs and support for farmers.

1987: The 19th of October is "Black Monday" on Wall Street: a massive slump in share prices of over 20%. The crash is the worst in the history of the New York Stock Exchange, and the decline in stock prices is nearly double the 1929 plunge.

Today: Contrary to all predictions, the American economy continues to boom. The collapse of the Japanese and Mexican markets only affected the New York Stock Exchange briefly. The Dow Jones Index passed the 10,000 mark for the first time in January of 1999, the bull market continues to grow, and the unemployment rate is the lowest in forty years.

1936: Eugene O'Neill becomes the first American playwright to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

1987: August Wilson becomes the first African-American playwright to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, with his play *Fences*. In the same year, Rita Dove, an African-American poet, wins the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her collection *Thomas and Beulah.*

Today: African-American writers continue to accrue honors nationally and internationally. African-American novelist Toni Morrison became the first African American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1994, and August Wilson won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for a second time in 1990

What Do I Read Next?

Immanu Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) is an African-American playwright whose writing encompasses be-bop poetry and black nationalist plays. His plays *Dutchman* and *The Slave Ship* (1966) are important examples of black nationalist writing. Wilson produced all of Baraka's plays when he was working at the Black Horizons Theater.

Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman* (1949) is one of the most famous plays of the twentieth century. This Pulitzer Prize-winning drama exemplifies the "well-made" play of the realist tradition, in which escalating tensions concentrated around the central protagonist unfold neatly scene by scene before reaching a dramatic conclusion. In this case, the central protagonist is the failed sales- and family man, Willy Loman, whose sons Biff and Happy are unable to fulfill his thwarted dreams. Wilson's play *Fences* has been compared to *Death of A Salesman,* although Wilson has stated that he is not familiar with it.

Tennessee Williams's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) depicts the bitter family tensions that originate in failed marriages, repressed sexuality, and the desire to control a southern plantation. The play is an excellent example of American naturalism.

Booker T. Washington's classic autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901) defined a generation.Washington was born into slavery on a Virginia plantation; freed at fifteen, he taught himself to read, then walked almost 500 miles to attend a vocational training institute. He was later selected to head the Tuskegee Insitute in Alabama. Although Washington was criticized in his own time and later for his cautious approach to race issues, at the time he was the black community's most well-known and influential leader.

Langston Hughes was one of the major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, the flowering of African-American creativity in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Hughes's superb poetry collection, *The Weary Blues* (1926), which includes the famous poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," launched his career and introduced audiences to anew style of poetry that was based on jazz rhythms and black idiom. The first volume of his autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), provides a fascinating insight into his life in America and Europe during the 1920s.

Frederick Douglass, a nineteenth-century African-American abolitionist, published his autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* in 1845. It describes his life as a slave and his escape to freedom. Douglass agitated for the abolitionist cause, organized black garrisons during the Civil War, and served his people in public office during the Reconstruction period.

Further Study

Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made,* [New York], 1974.

Genovese's exhaustive account of slave culture can be used as a source book for focused research. It provides detailed background for the culture in which Wilson's character live in the 1930s.

Honey, Maureen. *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance,* 1989.

This valuable collection of women's poetry from the Harlem Renaissance also includes a readable introduction to the period.

Morgan, Edmund S. *American Slavery American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia,* [New York], 1975.

This ground-breaking work of scholarship outlines the economic basis to the development of slavery in colonial Virginia and its connection to white citizens' increasing equality.

Nadel, Alan, editor. *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essay on August Wilson,* University of Iowa Press, 1994.

This collection of essays on Wilson's major plays is a good source for secondary criticism on the playwright.

Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Ante-bellum South,* 1979.

Raboteau uses a rich variety of sources for his fascinating investigation into slave religion. His study also includes interesting discussion of slave religion in other colonies, such as the West Indies, and of African religious practice.

Savran, David. *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights,* Theatre Communications Group, 1988, pp. 288-306.

Savran includes an informative interview with Wilson in this collection, which he recorded in New York just after the completion of *The Piano Lesson.*

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535