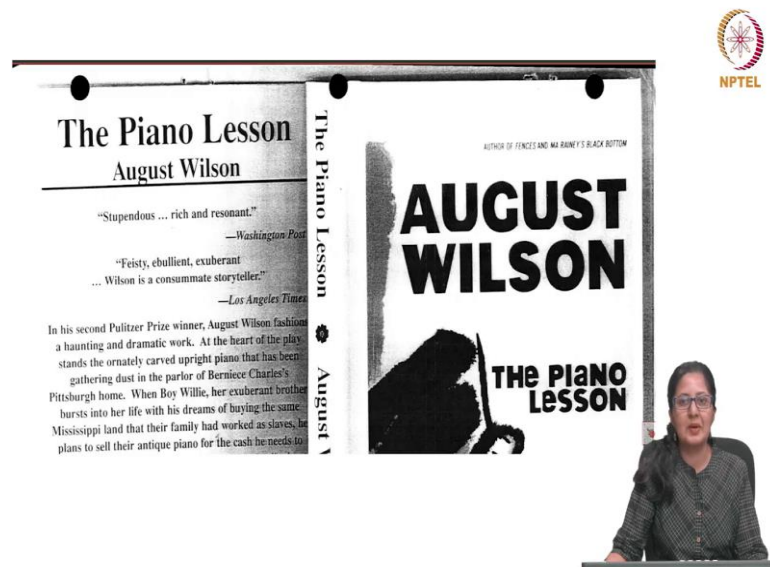


**Twentieth Century American Drama**  
**Prof. Merin Simi Raj**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Lecture - 49**  
**August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* Part 1**

(Refer Slide Time: 00:14)



We begin with August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson*. It is a 1987 play and this play might be seen as one of the representative plays of the decades as well and as we had noticed noted before and this play is also comes after a significant gap the last one that we dealt with was from the late 1950s 1959 play Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

We also took a look at the historiographical trajectory of the American twentieth century American plays and how there was a shift from Broadway, how there was a decline in theatre, how theatre continued to remain as an extension of national consciousness by expressing the dilemma and the anxiety and the struggles of the consumerist society that America was fast way coming.

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In his second Pulitzer Prize-winning work, Wilson's play is a haunting and dramatic work. At the heart of the play stands the ornately carved upright piano that has been gathering dust in the parlor of Berniece Charles's Pittsburgh home. When Boy Willie, her exuberant brother, bursts into her life with his dreams of buying the same Mississippi land that their family had worked as slaves, he plans to sell their antique piano for the cash he needs to stake his future. Berniece refuses to sell, though, clinging to the piano as a reminder of the history that is their family legacy.

August Wilson

**THE PIANO LESSON**

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"Hear stopping... The play's real music is in the language... Mr. Wilson's most virtuosic writing to date."  
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*The Piano Lesson* is a prize winning work and this is considered as a very haunting work as well and the scenes are quite thrilling in terms of the dramatic techniques used here. It is also in terms of the major themes which are being explored, it talks about race and in that sense it is also a continuation of the work that we looked at right before this Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

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**ACT ONE**

**SCENE 1**

*(The lights come up on the Charles household. It is five o'clock in the morning. The dawn is beginning to announce itself, but there is something in the air that belongs to the night. A stillness that is a portent, a gathering, a coming together of something akin to a storm. There is a loud knock at the door.)*

BOY WILLIE: *(Off stage, calling.)* Hey, Doaker... Doaker!  
*(He knocks again and calls.)*  
Hey, Doaker! Hey, Berniece! Berniece!  
*(DOAKER enters from his room. He is a tall, thin man of forty-seven, with severe features, who has for all intents and purposes retired from the world though he works full-time as a railroad cook.)*

DOAKER: Who is it?

BOY WILLIE: Open the door, nigger! It's me... Boy Willie!


DOAKER: Who?

So, we will start with act one scene 1 and then get into some of some detailed discussions about specific themes and certain major trends major ideas which are

being discussed in this play. So, we will look at the kind of characters are getting introduced what kind of setting is over there and more importantly the language which is used over here, in details.

The societal background is important which is getting depicted over here and also compare this with the other American plays that we have already looked at so far. So, scene 1 the lights come up and come up on the Charles household it is five o' clock in the morning, the dawn is beginning to announce itself, but there is something in the air that belongs to the night a stillness that is a portent a gathering a coming together of something akin to a storm.

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*coming together of something akin to a storm. There is a loud knock at the door.)*


BOY WILLIE: *(Off stage, calling.)* Hey, Doaker . . . Doaker!  
*(He knocks again and calls.)*  
Hey, Doaker! Hey, Berniece! Berniece!  
*(DOAKER enters from his room. He is a tall, thin man of forty-seven, with severe features, who has for all intents and purposes retired from the world though he works full-time as a railroad cook.)*

DOAKER: Who is it?

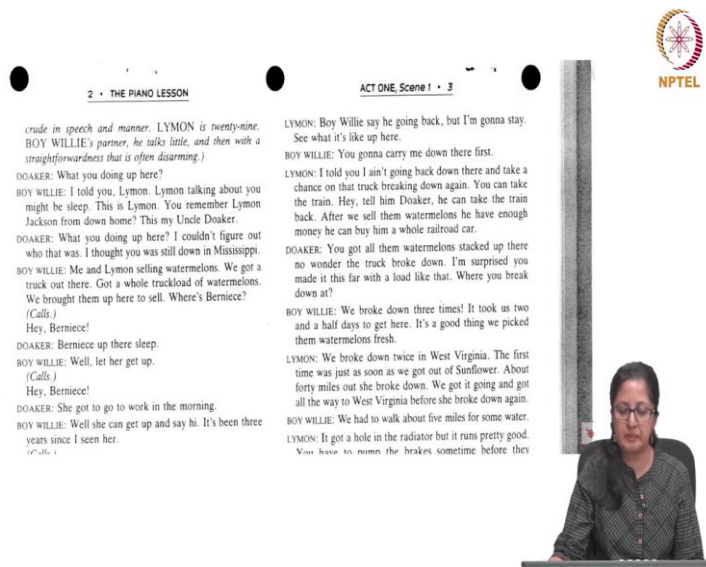
BOY WILLIE: Open the door, nigger! It's me . . . Boy Willie!

DOAKER: Who?

BOY WILLIE: Boy Willie! Open the door!  
*(DOAKER opens the door and BOY WILLIE and LYMON enter. BOY WILLIE is thirty years old. He has an infectious grin and a boyishness that is apt for his name. He is brash and impulsive, talkative and somewhat*



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2 • THE PIANO LESSON

ACT ONE, Scene 1 • 3

*crude in speech and manner. LYMON is twenty-nine. BOY WILLIE's partner, he talks little, and then with a straightforwardness that is often disarming.)*

DOAKER: What you doing up here?

BOY WILLIE: I told you, Lymon. Lymon talking about you might be sleep. This is Lymon. You remember Lymon Jackson from down home? This my Uncle Doaker.

DOAKER: What you doing up here? I couldn't figure out who that was. I thought you was still down in Mississippi.

BOY WILLIE: Me and Lymon selling watermelons. We got a truck out there. Got a whole truckload of watermelons. We brought them up here to sell. Where's Berniece?

*(Calls.)*  
Hey, Berniece!

DOAKER: Berniece up there sleep.

BOY WILLIE: Well, let her get up.

*(Calls.)*  
Hey, Berniece!

DOAKER: She got to go to work in the morning.

BOY WILLIE: Well she can get up and say hi. It's been three years since I seen her.

*(Curtain.)*

LYMON: Boy Willie say he going back, but I'm gonna stay. See what it's like up here.

BOY WILLIE: You gonna carry me down there first.

LYMON: I told you I ain't going back down there and take a chance on that truck breaking down again. You can take the train. Hey, tell him Doaker, he can take the train back. After we sell them watermelons he have enough money he can buy him a whole railroad car.

DOAKER: You got all them watermelons stacked up there no wonder the truck broke down. I'm surprised you made it this far with a load like that. Where you break down at?

BOY WILLIE: We broke down three times! It took us two and a half days to get here. It's a good thing we picked them watermelons fresh.

LYMON: We broke down twice in West Virginia. The first time was just as soon as we got out of Sunflower. About forty miles out she broke down. We got it going and got all the way to West Virginia before she broke down again.

BOY WILLIE: We had to walk about five miles for some water.

LYMON: It got a hole in the radiator but it runs pretty good. You know to pump the brakes sometime before they

NPTEL

There is a loud knock at the door. So, like most of the other plays right at the outset we are being the audience is being told of what to expect it is not going to be a another morning and something very tumultuous is about to happen.

So, boy Willie the character without any introduction is being introduced off stage. “Calling hey Doaker, Doaker he knocks again and calls hey Doaker hey Berniece Doaker enters from his room he is a tall thin man of forty seven with severe features who has for all intents and purposes retired from the world though he works full time as a railroad cook and this is Doaker is the one who runs this household the Charles household.

Who is it? Boy Willie open the door nigger it is me boy Willie. Who? Boy Willie open the door. Doaker opens the door and boy Willie and Lymon enter boy Willie is thirty years old, he has an infectious grin and a boyishness that is apt for his name he is brash and impulsive talkative and some would crude in speech and manner Lymon is twenty nine boy Willie’s partner he talks little and then with the straightforwardness that is often disarming.”

“What are you doing up here? I told you Lymon, Lymon talking about you might be sleep this is Lymon. So, look pay attention to the kind of language which is being used over here you remember Lymon Jackson from down home this is my uncle Doaker.”

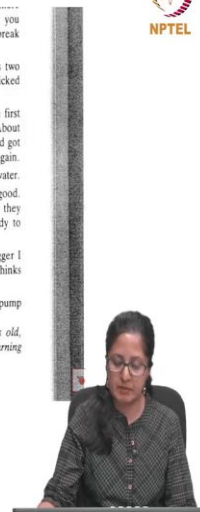
So, we kind of get a picture of how these characters are related to each other, Doaker who is in the Charles household is boy Willies uncle, Lymon is his Lymon Jackson is boy Willies partner the one with whom he is perhaps working with and doing trade with.

“Doaker what you doing up here, I could not figure out who that was. I thought he was still down in Mississippi me and Lymon selling watermelons we got a truck out there got a whole truckload of watermelons we brought them up here to sell where is Berniece? Hey Berniece up there sleep well let her get up.” So, this is five o’ clock in the morning mind and Berniece got to go to work in the morning.

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who that was. I thought you was still down in Mississippi.  
BOY WILLIE: Me and Lymon selling watermelons. We got a truck out there. Got a whole truckload of watermelons. We brought them up here to sell. Where's Berniece?  
*(Calls.)*  
Hey, Berniece!  
DOAKER: Berniece up there sleep.  
BOY WILLIE: Well, let her get up.  
*(Calls.)*  
Hey, Berniece!  
DOAKER: She got to go to work in the morning.  
BOY WILLIE: Well she can get up and say hi. It's been three years since I seen her.  
*(Calls.)*  
Hey, Berniece! It's me . . . Boy Willie.  
DOAKER: Berniece don't like all that hollering now. She got to work in the morning.  
BOY WILLIE: She can go on back to bed. Me and Lymon been riding two days in that truck . . . the least she can do is get up and say hi.  
DOAKER: *(Looking out the window.)* Where you all get that truck from?  
BOY WILLIE: It's Lymon's. I told him let's get a load of watermelons and bring them up here.

DOAKER: You got an uncle? I wonder the truck broke down. I'm surprised you made it this far with a load like that. Where you break down at?  
BOY WILLIE: We broke down three times! It took us two and a half days to get here. It's a good thing we picked them watermelons fresh.  
LYMON: We broke down twice in West Virginia. The first time was just as soon as we got out of Sunflower. About forty miles out she broke down. We got it going and got all the way to West Virginia before she broke down again.  
BOY WILLIE: We had to walk about five miles for some water.  
LYMON: I got a hole in the radiator but it runs pretty good. You have to pump the brakes sometime before they catch. Boy Willie have his door open and be ready to jump when that happens.  
BOY WILLIE: Lymon think that's funny. I told the nigger I give him ten dollars to get the brakes fixed. But he thinks that funny.  
LYMON: They don't need fixing. All you got to do is pump them till they catch.  
*(BERNIECE enters on the stairs. Thirty-five years old, with an eleven-year-old daughter, she is still in mourning for her husband after three years.)*



“Well, she can get up and say hi it is been three years since I see her.” So, this is again a slightly dysfunctional kind of family perhaps because the siblings have not seen each other in three years. “Hey Berniece it is me boy Willie Berniece do not like all that hollering now she got to work in the morning.

She can go back on to bed me and Lymon been riding two days in that truck the least she can do is get up and say hi Doaker looking out the window where you all get where you all get that truck from it is Lymon I told him let us get a load of watermelons and bring them up here.

Boy Willie say he is going back, but I am going to stay see what it is like up here.” So, these two have come together Lymon and boy Willie and now Lymon is saying he is going to stay back over there and check what kind of fortune he can make there.

“Boy Willie you going to carry me down there first I told you I ain’t going back down there and take a chance on that truck breaking down again you can take the train hey tell him Doaker he can take the train back after we sell them watermelons we have enough money he can buy; he can buy him a whole railroad car.

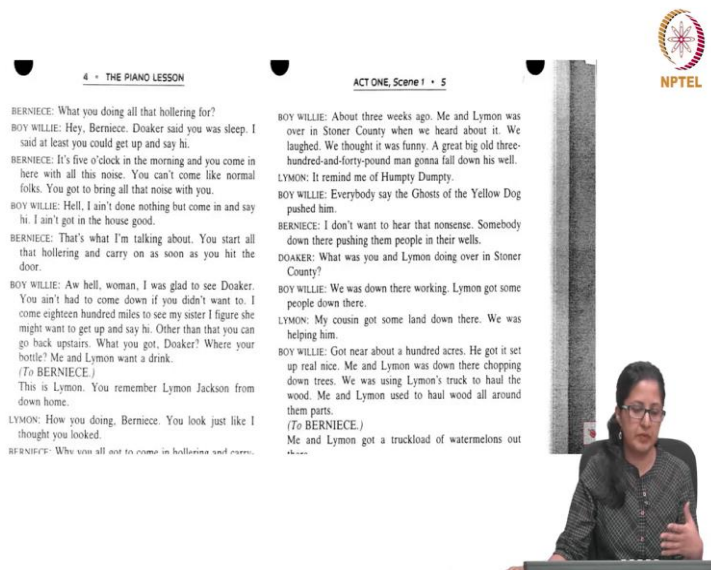
You got all them watermelon stacked up there no wonder the truck broke down I am surprised you made it this far with a load like that where you break down at? we broke down three times it took us two and a half days to get here it is a good thing we picked them watermelons fresh.”

We broke down twice in West Virginia, the first time was just as soon as we got out of sunflower about forty miles out she broke down, we got it going and got all the way to West Virginia before she broke down again. So, we also get a sense of the kind of terrain that they had been covering it is a suburbs.

We had to walk about five miles to get some water it got a hole in the radiator, but it runs pretty good, you have to pump the brakes sometimes before they catch boy Willie have his door open and be ready to jump when that happens. “Lymon think that is funny, I told the nigger I gave him ten dollars to get the brakes fixed, but he thinks that is funny they do not need fixing all you have got to do is pump them till they catch.”

So, there is a very stark difference in their attitudes towards difficulties attitudes towards crisis, it is revealed in a very minor sense at the outset of this work and we get a deeper sense of it as we move forward. So, Berniece she is awake too enters on the stairs thirty five years old with an eleven year-old daughter which is in still morning for her husband after three years.

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4 • THE PIANO LESSON

BERNIECE: What you doing all that hollering for?  
BOY WILLIE: Hey, Berniece. Doaker said you was sleep. I said at least you could get up and say hi.  
BERNIECE: It's five o'clock in the morning and you come in here with all this noise. You can't come like normal folks. You got to bring all that noise with you.  
BOY WILLIE: Hell, I ain't done nothing but come in and say hi. I ain't got in the house good.  
BERNIECE: That's what I'm talking about. You start all that hollering and carry on as soon as you hit the door.  
BOY WILLIE: Aw hell, woman, I was glad to see Doaker. You ain't had to come down if you didn't want to. I come eighteen hundred miles to see my sister I figure she might want to get up and say hi. Other than that you can go back upstairs. What you got, Doaker? Where your bottle? Me and Lymon want a drink.  
(To BERNIECE.)  
This is Lymon. You remember Lymon Jackson from down home.  
LYMON: How you doing, Berniece. You look just like I thought you looked.  
BERNIECE: Why you all out to come in hollering and carry on...

ACT ONE, Scene 1 • 5

BOY WILLIE: About three weeks ago. Me and Lymon was over in Stoner County when we heard about it. We laughed. We thought it was funny. A great big old three-hundred-and-forty-pound man gonna fall down his well.  
LYMON: It remind me of Humpty Dumpty.  
BOY WILLIE: Everybody say the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed him.  
BERNIECE: I don't want to hear that nonsense. Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells.  
DOAKER: What was you and Lymon doing over in Stoner County?  
BOY WILLIE: We was down there working. Lymon got some people down there.  
LYMON: My cousin got some land down there. We was helping him.  
BOY WILLIE: Got near about a hundred acres. He got it set up real nice. Me and Lymon was down there chopping down trees. We was using Lymon's truck to haul the wood. Me and Lymon used to haul wood all around them parts.  
(To BERNIECE.)  
Me and Lymon got a truckload of watermelons out there.

NPTEL



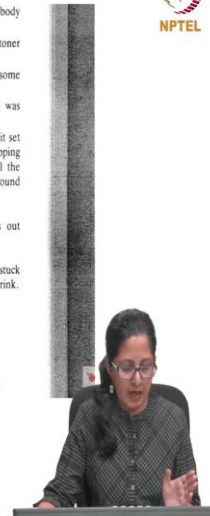
So, we are being too given a few more details in order. So, that we can understand this family better. “Hey, Berniece Doaker said you was sleep. I said at least you could get up at least you could get up and say hi it is five o’ clock in the morning and you come in here with all this noise.

You cannot come like normal folks you got to bring all that noise with you.” So, this is something very characteristic of boy Willie we understand from Berniece response this is how he always was. “Hell, I ain’t done nothing but come in and say hi I ain’t got in the house good that is what I am talking about you start all that hollering and carry on as soon as you hit the door. Aw hell woman I was glad to see Doaker you had not had to come down if you did not want to.”

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ni. I ain't got in the house good.  
BERNIECE: That's what I'm talking about. You start all that hollering and carry on as soon as you hit the door.  
BOY WILLIE: Aw hell, woman, I was glad to see Doaker. You ain't had to come down if you didn't want to. I come eighteen hundred miles to see my sister I figure she might want to get up and say hi. Other than that you can go back upstairs. What you got, Doaker? Where your bottle? Me and Lymon want a drink.  
(To BERNIECE.)  
This is Lymon. You remember Lymon Jackson from down home.  
LYMON: How you doing, Berniece. You look just like I thought you looked.  
BERNIECE: Why you all got to come in hollering and carrying on? Waking the neighbors with all that noise.  
BOY WILLIE: They can come over and join the party. We fixing to have a party. Doaker, where your bottle? Me and Lymon celebrating. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog got Sutter.  
BERNIECE: Say what?  
BOY WILLIE: Ask Lymon, they found him the next morning. Say he drowned in his well.  
DOAKER: When this happen, Boy Willie?

BERNIECE: I don't want to hear that nonsense. Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells.  
DOAKER: What was you and Lymon doing over in Stoner County?  
BOY WILLIE: We was down there working. Lymon got some people down there.  
LYMON: My cousin got some land down there. We was helping him.  
BOY WILLIE: Got near about a hundred acres. He got it set up real nice. Me and Lymon was down there chopping down trees. We was using Lymon's truck to haul the wood. Me and Lymon used to haul wood all around them parts.  
(To BERNIECE.)  
Me and Lymon got a truckload of watermelons out there.  
(BERNIECE crosses to the window to the parlor.)  
Doaker, where your bottle? I know you got a bottle stuck up in your room. Come on, me and Lymon want a drink.  
(DOAKER exits into his room.)  
BERNIECE: Where you all get that truck from?  
BOY WILLIE: I told you it's Lymon's.  
BERNIECE: Where you get the truck from, Lymon?  
LYMON: I bought it.  
BERNIECE: Where he get that truck from, Boy Willie?



“I come eighteen hundred miles to see my sister I figure she might want to get up and say hi other than that you can go back upstairs what you got Doaker? Where your bottle? I and Lymon want to drink this is Lymon you remember Lymon Jackson from down home, how you doing Berniece you look just like I thought you looked.




Why you all got to come in hollering and carrying on waking the neighbour's with all that noise they can come over and join the party, we fixing to have a party Doaker where your bottle is? I and Lymon celebrating the ghosts of the yellow dog called Sutter.”

So, there is a reason why boy Willie is over there because Sutter is dead that is what we get to know through boy Willie over here and this is the turning point of this play and this becomes interesting the visit becomes interesting in so, many different ways for Doaker as well as for Berniece the moment they get to know that Sutter is dead.

Say what? So, this is where this is the part from where the this plot begins to get interesting because they all now get to know that Sutter is dead and who is Sutter and what connection he has with the family and why is this a matter of celebration is something we will get to know very shortly.




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Call-and-Response: Parallel "Slave Narrative" in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*  
Author(s): Devon Boan  
Source: *African American Review*, Summer, 1998, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 263-271  
Published by: Indiana State University




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Call-and-Response: Parallel "Slave Narrative" in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*  
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Source: *African American Review*, Summer, 1998, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 263-271  
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Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3042123>

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So, in the mean while we will also take a look at in order to sell contextualize this work further, we will take a look at one of the recent essays a 1998 essay on this 1987 play.

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## August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*



So much has been written on August Wilson's project to chronicle the African-American experience through each decade of the twentieth century that the series, which now includes seven plays—*Jitney!* (1979), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), *Fences* (1987), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), *The Piano Lesson* (1990), *Two Trains Running* (1992), and *Seven Guitars* (1996)—sometimes seems like a monolith. This effect may be more thematic than theatrical; the plays are rich in their variety of characters and conflicts, and in the resolutions to these conflicts. But beneath the diversity within the dramatic framework of the plays lies the assertion that the present for black America has been invariably shaped by a history of race-related stolen opportunity and broken relationships, or what Michael Morales calls "a

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(Refer Slide Time: 09:26)

tunity and broken relationships, or what Michael Morales calls "a simultaneously reactive/reconstructive engagement with the representation of blacks and the representation of history by the dominant culture" (105). Traditionally in Wilson's plays, the protagonist's personal past is the lens through which the present situation is seen. In *The Piano Lesson*, however, Wilson traces the play's historical complications back three generations, to an incident in the family's slave legacy that has left them to face the present in terms of a history that, seventy-five years later, is not just personal, but communal and familial.

The action of the play is driven by conflict over how best to engage history—as iconographically centered mythology, which would celebrate the events of the past, or as foundation for the present, which would seek to fulfill its promise. The fulcrum of the conflict is the piano. Boy Willie, the great-grandson of the slave whose art graces the piano, has come north to Pittsburgh to claim his half of the piano, which is currently in the possession of his sister, Berniece. He is a ruffian, and feels that the proceeds from the sale of the piano offer him his best chance to escape the economic and social oppression that has burdened the men in his family since slavery. His dream of escape is blunted, however, by



It tries to situate August Wilson's project as a part of the African American experience. And this is being done we are looking at this essay in order to understand this play in a better way in order to situate it within the theory of African American literary criticism.

We will read through some parts of this essay and then go back to discussing the play. So, much has been written on August Wilson's project to chronicle the African

American experience through each of the each decade of the twentieth century that the series which now includes seven plays.

These are all these part of his seven play series *Jitney* 1979, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *the Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running* and *Seven Guitars* sometimes seems like a monolith.

This effect may be more thematic than theatrical the plays are rich in their variety of characters and conflicts and in the resolutions to these conflicts, but beneath the diversity within the dramatic framework of the plays lies the assertion that the present for black America has invariably been shaped by a history of race related stolen opportunity and broken relationships or what Michael Morales calls a simultaneously reactive or reconstructive engagement with the representation of blacks and the representation of history by the dominant culture.

This is something that we need to keep in mind while we are reading through *The Piano Lesson* as well. The background that the play is foregrounding the characters their lives the responses the way in which they interact with the rest of the world all of those things showcase how African American life is shaped by a history of the way in which America in general has dealt with race. So, traditionally in Wilson's place the protagonist's personal past is the lens through which the present situation is seen.

In *The Piano Lesson*; however, Wilson traces the plays historical complications back three generations. So, this is again very important it is not something it is not a one off kind of an instance that he is trying to depict over here, there is a certain continuity over here just the way the white history the history of a white family could be traced back to two or three generations here we find that though it is a traumatic unsavoury kind of history, we find that these complications are being traced back to three generations of this the Charles family.

So, the history is traced back to three generations in order to highlight the historical an incident in the family's slave legacy and this has left them to face the present in terms of a history that, seventy-five years later, it is not just a personal history anymore it is communal as well as familial .

So, this is something very hugely interesting about the background of this play, it is not just about one individual just the way we have noticed in the other plays too just like the even while the individual is the protagonist even while it is about one individuals engagement with the society with his family with his community.

It is largely about the nation, here we find that starting from a micro level this is also a play which goes out into a communal history goes out to become a large community history which could be traced back to three generations. So, the piano here is a character itself it is at the heart of this play, the piano is a legacy the question of legacy here becomes very important because it is being pursued through the lens of African American history.

In fact, this opens up a very different way in which one could deal with African American historiography as well. We see that in Lorraine Hansberry's play, they begin to look at how the protagonists the characters the way in which their relation with the society is being set up that is an encouragement to the reader to look at the African American history as something very central to the formation of the American society itself, but here we find that August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* pushes this these boundaries a bit more further.

So, the action of the play is driven by conflict over how best to engage history. So, history is something very significantly important over here African American history and that to African American history which is situated right in the mainstream of twentieth century America. So, this is the kind of history which is iconographically centered and mythology and which would celebrate the events of the past or as foundation for the present would seek to fulfil it is promise.

So, it is exploring the lives of an African American family and getting into the historiographical elements in a very deep and as well as profound way. So, the centre of conflict over here the point of depart the contention over here is a piano. So, the fulcrum of the conflict is the piano the piano becomes very important here just the way the glass menagerie as a set also has become important in that play.

So, here more than anything the piano is something which defines the family, the family's history, the family's legacy. It is the way the piano is being looked at by different members of the family it also tells us about the way they engage us with

the past for some it is something which needs to be held on to something that needs to be passed on to the next generation for the others in the family it is something that should be used that should be utilized in a materialistic sense to gain something which would make their acceptance more complete in the mainstream.

So, the point of contention over here is this piano boy Willie the great grandson of the slave whose art graces the piano has come north to Pittsburgh to claim his half of the piano which is currently in possession of his sister Berniece. So, this is also setting the context for the visit of boy Willie which we saw in the first part of the play why he is there travelling eighteen hundred miles and reaching Berniece house at dawn.

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uation is seen. In *The Piano Lesson*, however, Wilson traces the play's historical complications back three generations, to an incident in the family's slave legacy that has left them to face the present in terms of a history that, seventy-five years later, is not just personal, but communal and familial.

The action of the play is driven by conflict over how best to engage history—as iconographically centered mythology, which would celebrate the events of the past, or as foundation for the present, which would seek to fulfill its promise. The fulcrum of the conflict is the piano. Boy Willie, the great-grandson of the slave whose art graces the piano, has come north to Pittsburgh to claim his half of the piano, which is currently in the possession of his sister, Berniece. He is a ruffian, and feels that the proceeds from the sale of the piano offer him his best chance to escape the economic and social oppression that has burdened the men in his family since slavery. His dream of escape is blunted, however, by Berniece's unwillingness to sell what is, for her, a sacred icon of the family's sacrificial legacy. Throughout the play, then, the piano becomes a touchstone by which antithetical attitudes about the past may be evaluated (Pereira 90). The result is that Wilson has redefined the frustration of carrying the burden of the past



So, we do understand in what context boy Willie is presented as well he is a ruffian, he feels that the proceeds from the sale of the piano can offer him the best chance to escape the economic and social oppression that has burdened the men in his family since slavery. And his dream if that of an escape and this is very important over here because it is not the it is not something that would fit in perfectly with the American Dream it is a very different sort of a projection that we find over here.

So, coming back to this play now that we know what is going to be the bone of contention after Sutter's death, Sutter was a family who was holding the Charles household in slavery for the longest time. Berniece is now trying to understand what

happened to Sutter, ask Lymon they found him the next morning say he drowned in as well when this happened boy Willie.

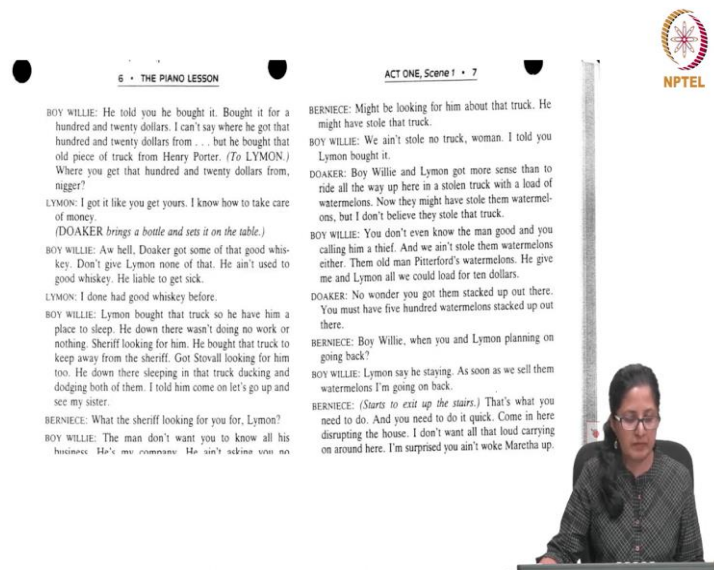
“About three weeks ago me and Lymon was over in stoner county when we heard about it we laughed we thought it was funny, a great big old three hundred and forty pound man going to fall down his well it remind me of humpty dumpty everybody say the ghost of the yellow dog pushed him I do not want to hear that nonsense somebody down there pushing them people in their wells Berniece does not believe what is being told to her. She does not believe this story that boy Willie and Lymon are trying to tell her.

What was you and Lymon doing over in Stoner County?” So, there is a lot of suspicion about the details that they are giving and now we also if you recall there is also a three-year absence in this family they have not seen each other for three years maybe there is a dark history which is waiting to be revealed as well. They were down there working Lymon got some people down there my cousin got some land down there we was helping him got near about a hundred acres he got it set up real nice.

“Me and Lymon was down there chopping down trees we was using Lymon’s truck to haul the wood, me and Lymon got a truckload of watermelons out there Doaker where is your bottle? I know you got a bottle stuck up in your room. So, they are trying to talk about different things Lymon and boy Willie and Berniece is again coming back to the point saying where do you get the truck from I told you it is Lymons.

Where do you get the truck from Lymon? Lymon is saying he bought it where he got the truck from boy Willie and again she is asking there is a lot of distrust over here.”

(Refer Slide Time: 18:32)



The screenshot displays a video lecture interface. On the left, a script for 'The Piano Lesson' is shown, with characters including Boy Willie, Lymon, Doaker, and Berniece. The script text is as follows:

6 • THE PIANO LESSON

ACT ONE, Scene 1 • 7

BOY WILLIE: He told you he bought it. Bought it for a hundred and twenty dollars. I can't say where he got that hundred and twenty dollars from . . . but he bought that old piece of truck from Henry Porter. (To LYMON.) Where you get that hundred and twenty dollars from, nigger?

LYMON: I got it like you get yours. I know how to take care of money.  
(DOAKER brings a bottle and sets it on the table.)

BOY WILLIE: Aw hell, Doaker got some of that good whiskey. Don't give Lymon none of that. He ain't used to good whiskey. He liable to get sick.

LYMON: I done had good whiskey before.

BOY WILLIE: Lymon bought that truck so he have him a place to sleep. He down there wasn't doing no work or nothing. Sheriff looking for him. He bought that truck to keep away from the sheriff. Got Stovall looking for him too. He down there sleeping in that truck ducking and dodging both of them. I told him come on let's go up and see my sister.

BERNIECE: What the sheriff looking for you for, Lymon?

BOY WILLIE: The man don't want you to know all his business. He's my comrade. He ain't asking you no

BERNIECE: Might be looking for him about that truck. He might have stole that truck.

BOY WILLIE: We ain't stole no truck, woman. I told you Lymon bought it.

DOAKER: Boy Willie and Lymon got more sense than to ride all the way up here in a stolen truck with a load of watermelons. Now they might have stole them watermelons, but I don't believe they stole that truck.

BOY WILLIE: You don't even know the man good and you calling him a thief. And we ain't stole them watermelons either. Them old man Pitterford's watermelons. He give me and Lymon all we could load for ten dollars.

DOAKER: No wonder you got them stacked up out there. You must have five hundred watermelons stacked up out there.

BERNIECE: Boy Willie, when you and Lymon planning on going back?

BOY WILLIE: Lymon say he staying. As soon as we sell them watermelons I'm going on back.

BERNIECE: (Starts to exit up the stairs.) That's what you need to do. And you need to do it quick. Come in here disrupting the house. I don't want all that loud carrying on around here. I'm surprised you ain't woke Maretha up.

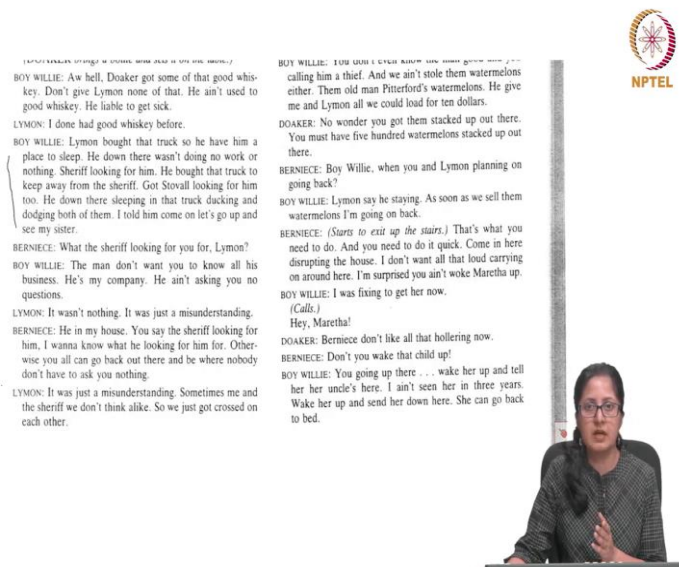
NPTEL

A woman with glasses and a dark jacket is visible in the bottom right corner of the video frame, appearing to be the instructor.

We will very soon get to know of the reason as well. Berniece does not believe that believe any of the things that boy Willie is trying to tell her. “He told you he bought it for a hundred and twenty dollars, I cannot say where he got that hundred and twenty dollars from?”

“But he bought that old piece of truck from Henry Porter where did you get that hundred and twenty dollars from nigger? I got it like yours I know how to take care of money.” Lymon is very smart in terms of the conversations that he has over there over here. We know that both of them are perhaps tricksters of some sorts ah, but Lymon also knows how to find his way around it.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:13)



The image shows a screenshot of an NPTEL video lecture. On the left side, there is a script with dialogue between characters: BOY WILLIE, LYMON, BERNIECE, and DOAKER. On the right side, a woman with glasses is speaking. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the video frame.

**BOY WILLIE:** Aw hell, Doaker got some of that good whiskey. Don't give Lymon none of that. He ain't used to good whiskey. He liable to get sick.

**LYMON:** I done had good whiskey before.

**BOY WILLIE:** Lymon bought that truck so he have him a place to sleep. He down there wasn't doing no work or nothing. Sheriff looking for him. He bought that truck to keep away from the sheriff. Got Stovall looking for him too. He down there sleeping in that truck ducking and dodging both of them. I told him come on let's go up and see my sister.

**BERNIECE:** What the sheriff looking for you for, Lymon?

**BOY WILLIE:** The man don't want you to know all his business. He's my company. He ain't asking you no questions.

**LYMON:** It wasn't nothing. It was just a misunderstanding.

**BERNIECE:** He in my house. You say the sheriff looking for him, I wanna know what he looking for him for. Otherwise you all can go back out there and be where nobody don't have to ask you nothing.

**LYMON:** It was just a misunderstanding. Sometimes me and the sheriff we don't think alike. So we just got crossed on each other.

**BOY WILLIE:** I see you a year ago you was getting into calling him a thief. And we ain't stole them watermelons either. Them old man Pitterford's watermelons. He give me and Lymon all we could load for ten dollars.

**DOAKER:** No wonder you got them stacked up out there. You must have five hundred watermelons stacked up out there.

**BERNIECE:** Boy Willie, when you and Lymon planning on going back?

**BOY WILLIE:** Lymon say he staying. As soon as we sell them watermelons I'm going on back.

**BERNIECE:** *(Starts to exit up the stairs.)* That's what you need to do. And you need to do it quick. Come in here disrupting the house. I don't want all that loud carrying on around here. I'm surprised you ain't woke Maretha up.

**BOY WILLIE:** I was fixing to get her now.

*(Calls.)*  
Hey, Maretha!

**DOAKER:** Berniece don't like all that holtering now.

**BERNIECE:** Don't you wake that child up!

**BOY WILLIE:** You going up there . . . wake her up and tell her her uncle's here. I ain't seen her in three years. Wake her up and send her down here. She can go back to bed.

So, boy Willie is now giving more details saying Lymon bought that truck. So, we have him a place to sleep he down there was not doing no work or nothing sheriff looking for him he bought the truck to keep away from the sheriff. So, Berniece catches latches on to that information and asks why the police was looking for him the man do not want to you to know all his business he is my company he is asking no questions it was nothing it was just a misunderstanding.

“He is in my house you say the sheriff looking for him I want to know what he looking for him for otherwise you can all go back out there and where nobody do not have to ask you a thing. It was just a misunderstanding sometimes me and the sheriff we do not think alike.”

So, we just got crossed on each other. Might be looking for him about that truck he might have stolen that truck. “So, maybe there is a history for boy Willie as well with a theft, I know maybe they earlier also they must have gotten into trouble with the police which is why there is a lot of distrust in Berniece’s mind too.” So, very soon we are also introduced to this eleven-year-old daughter Berniece’s son Maretha.



(Refer Slide Time: 20:17)

8 • THE PIANO LESSON

ACT ONE, Scene 1 • 9

BERNIECE: I ain't waking that child up . . . and don't you be making all that noise. You and Lymon need to sell them watermelons and go on back.  
(BERNIECE exits up the stairs.)

BOY WILLIE: I see Berniece still try to be stuck up.

DOAKER: Berniece alright. She don't want you making all that noise. Maratha up there sleep. Let her sleep until she get up. She can see you then.

BOY WILLIE: I ain't thinking about Berniece. You hear from Wining Boy? You know Cleotha died?

DOAKER: Yeah, I heard that. He come by here about a year ago. Had a whole sack of money. He stayed here about two weeks. Ain't offered nothing. Berniece asked him for three dollars to buy some food and he got mad and left.

LYMON: Who's Wining Boy?

BOY WILLIE: That's my uncle. That's Doaker's brother. You heard me talk about Wining Boy. He play piano. He done made some records and everything. He still doing that, Doaker?

DOAKER: He made one or two records a long time ago. That's the only ones I ever known him to make. If you let him tell it he a big recording star.

broke. Just as soon as that sack of money is gone you look up and he be on your doorstep.

LYMON: (Noticing the piano.) Is that the piano?

BOY WILLIE: Yeah . . . look here, Lymon. See how it got all those carvings on it. See, that's what I was talking about. See how it's carved up real nice and polished and everything? You never find you another piano like that.

LYMON: Yeah, that look real nice.



BOY WILLIE: I told you. See how it's polished? My mama used to polish it every day. See all them pictures carved on it? That's what I was talking about. You can get a nice price for that piano.

LYMON: That's all Boy Willie talked about the whole trip up here. I got tired of hearing him talk about the piano.

BOY WILLIE: All you want to talk about is women. You ought to hear this nigger, Doaker. Talking about all the women he gonna get when he get up here. He ain't had none down there but he gonna get a hundred when he get up here.

DOAKER: How your people doing down there, Lymon?

LYMON: They alright. They still there. I come up here to see what it's like up here. Boy Willie trying to get me to go back and farm with him.



Who she is afraid will also be woken up with all this shouting and yelling in the at the crack of dawn and right after this now we are introduced to the central character this object the piano. So, this is the description of the piano that is my uncle that is a Doaker's brother you heard me talk about the wining boy he about her winning boy he play piano he had made some records and everything.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:39)

BOY WILLIE: I ain't thinking about Berniece. You hear from Wining Boy? You know Cleotha died?

DOAKER: Yeah, I heard that. He come by here about a year ago. Had a whole sack of money. He stayed here about two weeks. Ain't offered nothing. Berniece asked him for three dollars to buy some food and he got mad and left.

LYMON: Who's Wining Boy?

BOY WILLIE: That's my uncle. That's Doaker's brother. You heard me talk about Wining Boy. He play piano. He done made some records and everything. He still doing that, Doaker?

DOAKER: He made one or two records a long time ago. That's the only ones I ever known him to make. If you let him tell it he a big recording star.

BOY WILLIE: He stopped down home about two years ago. That's what I hear. I don't know. Me and Lymon was up on Parchman Farm doing them three years.

DOAKER: He don't never stay in one place. Now, he been here about eight months ago. Back in the winter. Now, you subject not to see him for another two years. It's liable to be that long before he stop by.

BOY WILLIE: If he had a whole sack of money you liable never to see him. You ain't gonna see him until he get

BOY WILLIE: I told you. See how it's polished? My mama used to polish it every day. See all them pictures carved on it? That's what I was talking about. You can get a nice price for that piano.

LYMON: That's all Boy Willie talked about the whole trip up here. I got tired of hearing him talk about the piano.

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DOAKER: How your people doing down there, Lymon?



LYMON: They alright. They still there. I come up here to see what it's like up here. Boy Willie trying to get me to go back and farm with him.

BOY WILLIE: Sutter's brother selling the land. He say he gonna sell it to me. That's why I come up here. I got one part of it. Sell them watermelons and get me another part. Get Berniece to sell that piano and I'll have the third part.

DOAKER: Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano.

BOY WILLIE: I'm gonna talk to her. When she see I got a chance to get Sutter's land she'll come around.

DOAKER: You can put that thought out your mind. Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano.



“He is still doing the Doaker, he made one or two records a long time ago that is the only once I ever known him to make if you tell let him tell it he is a big recording

star.” So, now, in a very soon they are going to hear about the details of the piano is that the piano Lymon notices the piano and asks is that the piano.

“Lymon sees how it all got these carvings on it see that is what I was talking about, see how it is carved up real nice and polished and everything you will never find another piano like that. That looked real nice, I told you see how it is polished my mama used to polish it every day, see there all the pictures carved on it that is what I was talking about you can get a nice price for that piano that is all boy Willie talked about the whole trip up there.

I got tired of him talking about the piano.” So, this is very interesting because now we get to know that they came all the way till there for the piano because they had; obviously, been talking about the piano as he mentions over here and now he comes to the details about Sutter.

“No this is where the pieces are beginning to fall into plays too. So, Sutter’s brother is selling land he say he is going to sell it to me that is why I came up here I got one part of it sell the watermelons and get me another part, get Berniece to sell that piano and I will have the third part Berniece is not going to sell that piano.”

So, this is going to be the bone of contention over here, whether to sell the piano or not and what is the significance of this piano, why is this a legacy and what is the significance of Sutter’s land why does boy Willie. Why does he want to buy that land and why does he want to buy that land by selling the piano?

This piano seems to be the connection which is now bringing this family together after so, many years, playing the role in holding the family together. It also seems to be this one object which will take us back to take us back in time take us back to perhaps three generations in order to understand the kind of history that this family as well as this community had.