

**Twentieth Century American Drama**  
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**Lecture - 50**  
**August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* Part 2**

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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.

*(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.

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 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



We are looking at August Wilson's Play *The Piano Lesson* which is a 1987 play and it looks at a very different kind of history in modern America. It looks at a very detailed look at the slave trade the history of 3 generations which from the perspective of a family was majorly affected by the slave trade. So, this play is set in the 1930s in Pittsburgh and August Wilson takes us through the journey of a certain legacy which becomes the bone of contention which becomes the point of departure in this play which is a piano.

The question which is central in *The Piano Lesson* is about legacy. What does one do with legacy, how does one respond as a family as a community as a part of as some a person who is part of a historical process, how does one respond to a legacy, how does one respond to an object which symbolizes legacy and how does one go about negotiating with the various socio political as well as historical and even emotional aspects of such aspects of legacy.

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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 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 inci-



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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 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 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



So, in this work August Wilson is helping us to trace the history of one family and one incident which had left a permanent impact in the family's history and this incident is part of the slave narrative of the slave legacy.

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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, which is at the center of his other plays, into a question of how best to utilize the past. He told an interviewer, "The real issue is the piano, the legacy. How are you going to use it?" (DeVries 25).

This question is brought into focus at the point where Doaker—Boy Willie and Berniece's uncle—tells Boy Willie's friend Lyman the reason that Berniece refuses to sell the piano (40-46). He relates the story of his grandfather's carvings on the

African American Review, Volume 32, Number 2  
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26



So, what we begin to see right from the outset is that there are 2 siblings one is Boy Willie and the other is Berniece and we find that Boy Willie is coming to visit Berniece after a gap of 3 years. He has traveled all the way from Mississippi he has a partner with him and they are also bringing a truckload of watermelons to be sold and in the hope of making a fortune.

Berniece is very suspicious we saw it at the outside of the play itself is very suspicious of the things that Boy Willie is claiming and including how they got the truck and what they proposed to do with the watermelons. This piece of information is that this presumably happy update that Boy Willie is sharing with Berniece is that Sutter is dead.

So, he seems to be she seems to be suspicious of the very presence of Boy Willie. In this context, what we are also as an audience, but we are also being made privy to is the way in which the members in the same family are having very different very diverse attitudes about the past.

So as it is pointed out in this essay right at the outset there is a sense of escape there is a kind of a dream that Boy Willie seems to be wanting to pursue. But his dream of escape is blunted by Berniece's unwillingness to sell this piano. The piano in that sense becomes a very central piece it also occupies a very central piece physically in that living room as we can see. So, when Boy Willie wants to sell the piano and in order to buy the land that

the dead Sutter is about to sell, Berniece chooses to see this piano as a sacred icon of the family's legacy, the family's sacrificial history which is very precious to her.

So, throughout the play we find that the piano thus becomes a touchstone by which these antithetical attitudes about the past may get evaluated. So, it is perhaps too early to comment on which side is more judicious or more idealist. But the process that they undergo the trauma and the struggle and the different memories that they relive in this process, they become very important in this process of storytelling.

So, what Wilson has done over here is to redefine the frustration of carrying the burden of the past and this is also the kind of a past which we do not find being narrated in the other plays, it is an ugly past. It is a past that modern America may not want to lay claim to and this is a past which is tainted by slave trade slave narratives and a lot of ugly instances which are not part of the American dream that twentieth century America seems to have embraced.

So and in this play this Wilson August Wilson redefines the frustration of carrying the burden of the past and this in fact this burden of the past which is there at the center in most of his plays as well as in most of the other twentieth century American plays. It also brings into this added question of whether the past is burdensome or not how does one make use of it in the present how would one utilize ones past to ones advantage in the present.

So, as he himself mentioned in one of his interviews the real issue is piano the legacy how are you going to use it. So, the piano or the legacy or what has been handed over here becomes an object an emotion an experience, which can be utilized and in which way it could be utilized and then for in which way the family can get mileage out of it that is something which we will soon see as well.

So if we take this aspect of the past and the various ways in which the past could be utilized you find that occupying a central position in a number of place. The previous play that we looked at *A Raisin in the Sun* we find that there is an inheritance that comes to the family from the through an insurance and it is like an inheritance from the father after his death and the crisis is about how to use this money.

But here it is a very different sort of a legacy it is not something which is handed over by a family by an individual, but it's a historical experience which becomes the ancestor over here. It is a historical experience which becomes the determining factor in terms of evaluating this object which is being handed over.

So there is an antithetical element over here which with Boy Willie wanting to sell the piano in order to claim the land of a family who owned them as slaves. And on the other hand we have Berniece position well she does not want to let go of this piano, because for her it is about holding on to a past which is also about resilience.

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piano in a tale so imbued with rich images of bondage, acceptance, and retribution that it seems to have been handed down, father-to-son, detail-by-detail, since the time of its origin. It is, in other words, the family's slave narrative. For Boy Willie, however, the dynamic of enslavement is not just a product of oral tradition; the events of his own life constitute, in his mind, a second, metaphorical, enslavement—economic, not physical—from which he attempts a desperate flight to freedom through the acquisition of James Sutter's land, upon which his family had worked as slaves, and which would offer him, for the first time in his life, a substantial degree of achievement and self-realization. Arnold Rampersad identifies such a pursuit of self-realization as an inherent feature of the slave narrative (105), so that the play itself comes to constitute a broader, metaphorical slave narrative, one

integrated, so that one narrative does not get destroyed by the preeminence of the other. But the interaction in *The Piano Lesson* is instead structured like the classic call-and-response; the two narratives are linear—evolutionary rather than integrated—and so, in the manner of the traditional call-and-response pattern, the direction of the interaction is not toward resolution or even progress, but toward an appropriate response to the call. The result is an ever-changing series of recreations of the myth, in which the narrative gets repeated in a different version every time, each with its own veracity (Byerman 7).

In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie is never able to take charge of his own narrative; every move he makes in his attempt to escape the legacy with which he has been left is made in response to the mythology of the piano. Even his final desperate attempt



So, this is a piano which bears the carvings of their grandfather Bernice's and Boy Willies grandfathers piano, it has those African totem like carvings which also makes it a very culturally significant item. So, in this tale and as well as in this piano we find rich images of bondage acceptance and retribution and this is something which has been handed down handed down from father to son over generations without missing out any detail from the time of it is inception.

This detailing which is evident in the physical presence of the piano too it is very important over here, it is in the details that this experience has depth and there is now the narrative about slave trade and how in a very grand eloquent way the modern America also brought those practices to an end.

But this story which unfolds in front of us this experience of the slave narrative which unfolds in front of us, it has a very telling experiential element to it with all the details which makes it more like an individual's story rather than a narrative which the nation or a community lays claim to.

So, here this in this piano we can find that it is a very tangible expression of the family's engagement with the slave narrative. The families experience as slaves in even before 3 generations and for Boy Willie and this dynamic of enslavement as pointed out in this essay is not just a product of oral tradition.

The events of his own life constitute in his mind metaphorical enslavement and from which he is also trying to desperately flee and for him this experience by this experience could be made better by buying this land which was previously owned by the ones who were by the family for whom his own family Charles family used to work as a slaves.

He thinks would offer him substantial degree of achievement and self realization and this is an individual journey, this is a journey towards a certain kind of a dream which would could be realized only if he foregoes this prized possession. And of course, in his mind it is not a prized possession it is more like a reminder of an ugly past which again which has a very different significance for Berniece.

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er, metaphorical slave narrative, one being lived out by Boy Willie as he searches for economic freedom.

The structure of the play, then, is a narrative within a narrative, a literal slave narrative integrated into a metaphorical one, with the latter (Boy Willie's narrative) reflecting both a continuation of and an attempt to bring to fruition the former one (the family's). The success of Boy Willie's narrative is dependent upon a shared understanding of the traditional family narrative, the one related by Doaker, so that the interchange between the two narratives becomes a form of the black folk tradition of call-and-response, through which a performer interacts with an audience in a rhythmic counterpoint of improvisation and emotive language that becomes both song and dialogue, as in the black religious tradition (Byerman 3). In this story, the call consists of the slave narrative that has been carved into the body of the piano; Boy Willie's response is his improvised effort to translate that myth into the reality of his own economic and social

piano. Even his final desperate attempt to defy the myth and steal the piano is frustrated, and he is forced, finally, into acquiring his freedom and self-realization in the emotional realm, not the economic one, by confronting Sutter's ghost instead of buying his land. What Wilson demands, then, is that the theatregoer understand the ultimate importance of the slave narrative depicted on the piano in authenticating Boy Willie's metaphorical slave narrative, and how, because of the linear nature of the relationship, the family myth must be destroyed, or his own narrative altered, to create a new one.

Wilson posits, then, a complex, universal way of looking at black history, and does so by structuring *The Piano Lesson* on three tiers. First, he creates a play within a play by describing a mythological slave narrative carved into the play's focal object, an old piano, and repeated several times by the play's characters. Second, he uses the piano and its attendant narrative as a haunting presence in the call-and-response manner of black folk tra-



So, if we look at the structure of this play it is in the form of a narrative within a narrative, it is a literal slave narrative which is integrated into a metaphorical one. So, we have the literal slave narrative on the one hand and the metaphorical slave narrative on the other hand and this is how the historiographical elements are getting foregrounded here within this on a framework of fiction over here framework of this a fictional retelling of this the slave narrative.

The success of Boy Willie's narrative is dependent upon a shared understanding of a traditional family narrative and this is the same one which is related by Doaker, so that the interchange between the two narratives become a form of the black folk tradition of call and response. So, that is also the title of this essay call and response through which a performer interacts with an audience in a rhythmic counterpoint of improvisation and emotive language that becomes both song and dialogue as in the black religious tradition.

So, this play in some sense is replicating this oral tradition the with the call and response folk tradition, where there are certain kinds of instances also which become dialogic in nature in this in the format of this play in the conception of this play. But however, what happens over here is that in piano lesson Boy Willie is never able to take charge of his own narrative , because in every move that he makes in his attempt to escape the legacy which is left by the piano.

It is in response to this grand narrative that this piano as an object itself is creating. So, on his own in fact he is not making any move he is only responding to this narrative which is already supplied by the piano.



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BOY WILLIE: AW REIL, 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.

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

calling him a truck. Now he ain't got no truck 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 hollering 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.



If we could take a look at this play in detail we find that there is a certain kind of masculinity which a character like Boy Willie is articulating. There is a certain kind of masculinity which is aggressive and say naive at the same time he wants to become a landowner. And this could be achieved this dream could be achieved only by getting rid by a selling an heirloom which is part of his ancestral history and this is an ancestral history which the mainstream American life perhaps does not reflect that very well.

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*(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. Maretha 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.

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.

LYMON: *(Working on 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.

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.





And here in lies the complication and here in like the complexity of a play like this as well. When we are trying to go deeper into the historiographical elements of this play when we are trying to get into the ancestral history of this play, we find that it is also cutting into certain ideas it is also cutting right into certain grand narratives that America as a nation is upholding.

Of course, there is a political departure, there is a sociological departure and a cultural departure that as a nation America has made. But nevertheless when one is looking at a play like this we find that it is also threatening to unveil, it is also threatening to unpack a certain coherence which seems to be built into the notion of American dream.

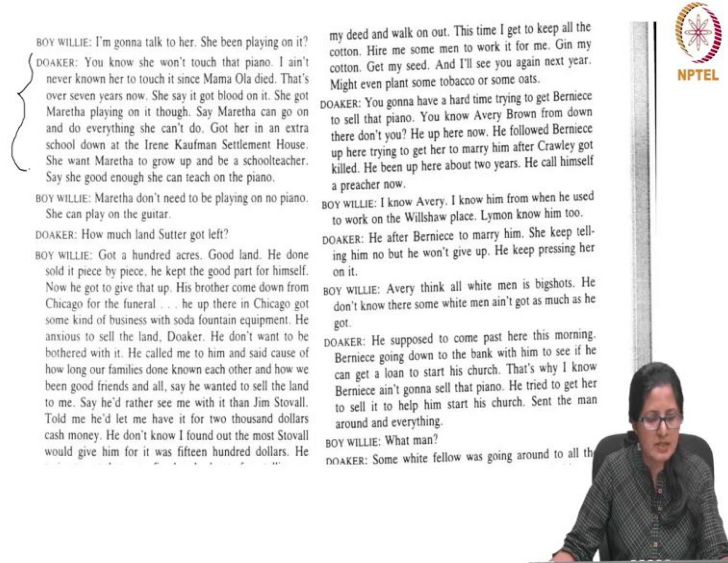
So for a character like Boy Willie when he is trying to buy the land which Sutter's brother is selling and trying to get a certain sense of self-realization and self-worth. It is it becomes intertwined in the ancestral history because of which he cannot even make up make a decision, because his decision is never and his in an individual decision his decision is something which is also heavily influenced by and also heavily determined by the choices that his sibling Berniece would also make.

So, the preservation of this piano and the preservation of this ancestral history in that sense seems like a burden which is falling squarely on Berniece and Berniece interestingly is not even using the piano much, though she does not she would not sell she would not agree to sell the piano but she is not using it either. And that is another kind of complex metaphor that one would want to deal with while looking at this play.

And Berniece will not sell the piano, but she does not use it to create a music either and this is perhaps something which is presented to us right at the outset as an event as an incident as something that needs to be resolved as well. So here the distinction the dichotomy is between the son who wants to use his legacy as capital, but who cannot use it and the daughter who has access to it, but who would not want to use it at all.

So, I hope this is becoming clearer to you in terms of what August Wilson has in mind when he talks about using this legacy as capital, using this legacy as something out of which the family or the individual could get mileage .

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The image shows a video lecture interface. On the right, a woman with glasses is speaking. On the left, a transcript of a play scene is displayed. The transcript includes dialogue between Boy Willie, Doaker, and Berniece. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the video frame.

BOY WILLIE: I'm gonna talk to her. She been playing on it?  
DOAKER: You know she won't touch that piano. I ain't never known her to touch it since Mama Ola died. That's over seven years now. She say it got blood on it. She got Maretha playing on it though. Say Maretha can go on and do everything she can't do. Got her in an extra school down at the Irene Kaufman Settlement House. She want Maretha to grow up and be a schoolteacher. Say she good enough she can teach on the piano.  
BOY WILLIE: Maretha don't need to be playing on no piano. She can play on the guitar.  
DOAKER: How much land Sutter got left?  
BOY WILLIE: Got a hundred acres. Good land. He done sold it piece by piece, he kept the good part for himself. Now he got to give that up. His brother come down from Chicago for the funeral . . . he up there in Chicago got some kind of business with soda fountain equipment. He anxious to sell the land, Doaker. He don't want to be bothered with it. He called me to him and said cause of how long our families done known each other and how we been good friends and all, say he wanted to sell the land to me. Say he'd rather see me with it than Jim Stovall. Told me he'd let me have it for two thousand dollars cash money. He don't know I found out the most Stovall would give him for it was fifteen hundred dollars. He  
my deed and walk on out. This time I get to keep all the cotton. Hire me some men to work it for me. Gin my cotton. Get my seed. And I'll see you again next year. Might even plant some tobacco or some oats.  
DOAKER: You gonna have a hard time trying to get Berniece to sell that piano. You know Avery Brown from down there don't you? He up here now. He followed Berniece up here trying to get her to marry him after Crawley got killed. He been up here about two years. He call himself a preacher now.  
BOY WILLIE: I know Avery. I know him from when he used to work on the Willshaw place. Lymon know him too.  
DOAKER: He after Berniece to marry him. She keep telling him no but he won't give up. He keep pressing her on it.  
BOY WILLIE: Avery think all white men is bigshots. He don't know there some white men ain't got as much as he got.  
DOAKER: He supposed to come past here this morning. Berniece going down to the bank with him to see if he can get a loan to start his church. That's why I know Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano. He tried to get her to sell it to help him start his church. Sent the man around and everything.  
BOY WILLIE: What man?  
DOAKER: Some white fellow was going around to all th

So, this is how when Doaker is revealing this to Boy Willie, Boy Willie is asking I am going to talk to her has she been playing on it she would not touch that piano I is not never known her to touch it since mama Ola died. So it could be the trauma as well she is also a woman who is in mourning her husband died just 3 years back, she is a woman in mourning her mother has died and there is a lot of trauma individual trauma emotional trauma and a historical trauma which has been passed on.

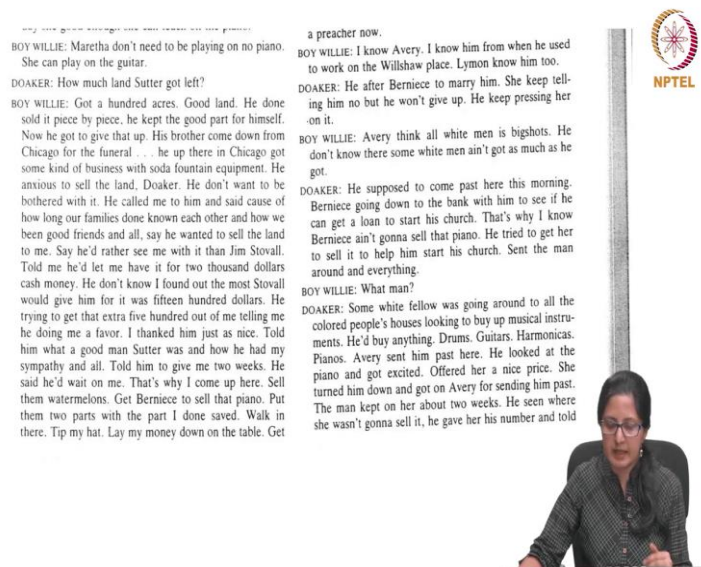
So, it could be because of those reasons it is over 7 years now she said it got blood on it she got Maretha playing on it though say Maretha can go on and do everything do everything she cannot do, got her in an extra school down at the Irene Kaufman settlement house she want Maretha to go up and be a school teacher say she is good enough she can teach on the piano.

So, this is very interesting on her own left to herself Berniece does not want to even touch the piano or use it, blame it on the trauma blame it on the distance that the emotional distance that she feels it with because of the traumatic involvement that she has. But she wants her to do her daughter to continue playing it to grow up playing it to grow up using the piano.

So the use of the piano over here is very different the way Boy Willie and Berniece experiences it. So, Boy Willie says she does not need to play the piano she can always

play the guitar. Now Doaker comes straight to the point to find out the details about the land that Sutter has left and how much his brother is selling.

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BOY WILLIE: Maretha don't need to be playing on no piano. She can play on the guitar.

DOAKER: How much land Sutter got left?

BOY WILLIE: Got a hundred acres. Good land. He done sold it piece by piece, he kept the good part for himself. Now he got to give that up. His brother come down from Chicago for the funeral . . . he up there in Chicago got some kind of business with soda fountain equipment. He anxious to sell the land, Doaker. He don't want to be bothered with it. He called me to him and said cause of how long our families done known each other and how we been good friends and all, say he wanted to sell the land to me. Say he'd rather see me with it than Jim Stovall. Told me he'd let me have it for two thousand dollars cash money. He don't know I found out the most Stovall would give him for it was fifteen hundred dollars. He trying to get that extra five hundred out of me telling me he doing me a favor. I thanked him just as nice. Told him what a good man Sutter was and how he had my sympathy and all. Told him to give me two weeks. He said he'd wait on me. That's why I come up here. Sell them watermelons. Get Berniece to sell that piano. Put them two parts with the part I done saved. Walk in there. Tip my hat. Lay my money down on the table. Get

a preacher now.

BOY WILLIE: I know Avery. I know him from when he used to work on the Willshaw place. Lymon know him too.

DOAKER: He after Berniece to marry him. She keep telling him no but he won't give up. He keep pressing her on it.

BOY WILLIE: Avery think all white men is bigshots. He don't know there some white men ain't got as much as he got.

DOAKER: He supposed to come past here this morning. Berniece going down to the bank with him to see if he can get a loan to start his church. That's why I know Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano. He tried to get her to sell it to help him start his church. Sent the man around and everything.

BOY WILLIE: What man?

DOAKER: Some white fellow was going around to all the colored people's houses looking to buy up musical instruments. He'd buy anything. Drums. Guitars. Harmonicas. Pianos. Avery sent him past here. He looked at the piano and got excited. Offered her a nice price. She turned him down and got on Avery for sending him past. The man kept on her about two weeks. He seen where she wasn't gonna sell it, he gave her his number and told

So, if we could just go through this passage he got a 100 acres good land he done sold it piece by piece kept the good part for himself. Now he got to give that up his brother came down from Chicago for the funeral he up there in Chicago got some kind of business with soda fountain equipment he anxious to sell the land Doaker he do not want to be bothered with it.

So this is a role reversal over here and this is a role reversal that a person like Boy Willie wants to capitalize on as well. Now he finds himself with this possibility of being on the other side of history and he wants to be able to be the landowner and be the owner of the land where his ancestors worked. And this becomes again ironically possible only if he is willing to sell the heirloom which reminds him of this ancestral experience of this the history of this slave life.

“If you come to the second half of this passage told her what a good man Sutter was and how he had my sympathy and all told him to give me two weeks. He said he would wait on me that is why I come up here sell them watermelons get Berniece to sell that piano put them 2 parts with the part one I saved walk in there tip my hat lay my money down on the table get my deed and walk out this time I get to keep all the cotton hire me some men to work it for me gin my cotton get my seed and I will see you again next year.”

So this is very important and this is also couple of lines which is there in the epigraph of this play as well, because this play itself begins with this quotation from Skip James he was a Mississippi blues musician and he wrote in the 1930 gin my cotton sell my seed buy my baby everything she need.

So, this epigraph and the way it gets used in this the way Boy Willie is talking about the land that Sutter's brother is about to sell it exemplifies and condenses the thematic the central thematic conflict which identifies which defines this play it is again what to do with ones legacy.

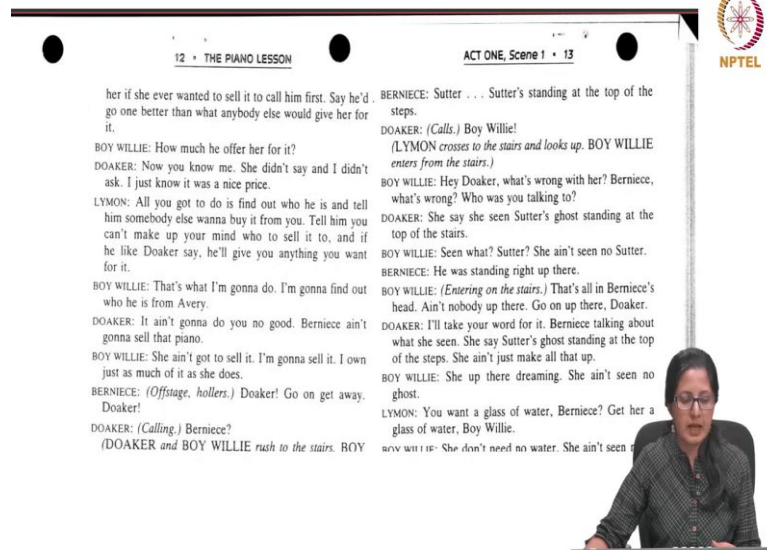
So this conflict over legacy appears as this choice between climbing the forging ahead and climbing the economic ladder or just attending to the memory of past injustices. So, what kind of choice would one make the kind that Boy Willie would make or the kind that Berniece would make? So, which is why he then here there is scene also Boy Willie is made to repeat this refrain gin my cotton get my seed.

So, with this scheme it is what the play is also implying is that Willie would achieve the economic self sufficiency which is only possible in the changed America, where slave trade is no longer possible. Where the slave lives are no longer lived the way it used to be how where a different order has come into being where a black American person can buy land.

So this is a changed America there is a change to there are changed possibilities which a person like Boy Willie wants to capitalize on as well. So, right after this we know that there is a history of slavery that we get to know which is very uncomfortable which is also about recovery and reunion. But it is also something which leaves us this with central question of how would one make the most judicious and moral lesson when one is encountered with such questions in terms of what to do with ones legacy.

So, Doaker is saying again that Berniece would be completely unwilling to sell this piano and he is narrating some white fellow was going around to all the colored people's houses looking to buy musical instruments, he buy anything drums guitars harmonicas pianos a very sent him past here looked at the piano and got excited offered her a nice price she turned him down and got on a very for sending him past the man kept on her about 2 weeks he seen where she was not going to sell it.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:34)



12 • THE PIANO LESSON

ACT ONE, Scene 1 • 13

her if she ever wanted to sell it to call him first. Say he'd go one better than what anybody else would give her for it.

BOY WILLIE: How much he offer her for it?

DOAKER: Now you know me. She didn't say and I didn't ask. I just know it was a nice price.

LYMON: All you got to do is find out who he is and tell him somebody else wanna buy it from you. Tell him you can't make up your mind who to sell it to, and if he like Doaker say, he'll give you anything you want for it.

BOY WILLIE: That's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna find out who he is from Avery.

DOAKER: It ain't gonna do you no good. Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano.

BOY WILLIE: She ain't got to sell it. I'm gonna sell it. I own just as much of it as she does.

BERNIECE: *(Offstage, hollers.)* Doaker! Go on get away, Doaker!

DOAKER: *(Calling.)* Berniece?

*(DOAKER and BOY WILLIE rush to the stairs. BOY WILLIE - She don't need no water. She ain't seen*

BERNIECE: Sutter . . . Sutter's standing at the top of the steps.

DOAKER: *(Calls.)* Boy Willie!

*(LYMON crosses to the stairs and looks up. BOY WILLIE enters from the stairs.)*

BOY WILLIE: Hey Doaker, what's wrong with her? Berniece, what's wrong? Who was you talking to?

DOAKER: She say she seen Sutter's ghost standing at the top of the steps.

BOY WILLIE: Seen what? Sutter? She ain't seen no Sutter.

BERNIECE: He was standing right up there.



BOY WILLIE: *(Entering on the stairs.)* That's all in Berniece's head. Ain't nobody up there. Go on up there, Doaker.

DOAKER: I'll take your word for it. Berniece talking about what she seen. She say Sutter's ghost standing at the top of the steps. She ain't just make all that up.

BOY WILLIE: She up there dreaming. She ain't seen no ghost.

LYMON: You want a glass of water, Berniece? Get her a glass of water, Boy Willie.

BOY WILLIE: She don't need no water. She ain't seen



He gave her his number and asked her if she would ever want to sell it to call him first say he would get go one better than what anybody else would give her for it. “How much did he offer for it now me she did not say and I did not ask I know it was a nice price?” So, Doaker makes it again and again very clear that she is not going to sell it.

“Boy Willie is sticks to his point and says she is not going to sell it, but I am going to tell it I would not I own just as much of it as she does.” So, who has the right who has the ownership over legacy who has the right to make use of it these are against a few questions that this play foregrounds.

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DOAKER: Now you know me. She didn't say and I didn't ask. I just know it was a nice price.

LYMON: All you got to do is find out who he is and tell him somebody else wanna buy it from you. Tell him you can't make up your mind who to sell it to, and if he like Doaker say, he'll give you anything you want for it.

BOY WILLIE: That's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna find out who he is from Avery.

DOAKER: It ain't gonna do you no good. Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano.

BOY WILLIE: She ain't got to sell it. I'm gonna sell it. I own just as much of it as she does.

BERNIECE: *(Offstage, hollers.)* Doaker! Go on get away. Doaker!

DOAKER: *(Calling.)* Berniece?

*(DOAKER and BOY WILLIE rush to the stairs, BOY WILLIE runs up the stairs, passing BERNIECE as she enters, running.)*

DOAKER: Berniece, what's the matter? You alright? What's the matter?

*(BERNIECE tries to catch her breath. She is unable to speak.)*

DOAKER: That's alright. Take your time. You alright. What's the matter?

*(enters from the stairs.)*

BOY WILLIE: Hey Doaker, what's wrong with her? Berniece, what's wrong? Who was you talking to?

DOAKER: She say she seen Sutter's ghost standing at the top of the stairs.

BOY WILLIE: Seen what? Sutter? She ain't seen no Sutter.

BERNIECE: He was standing right up there.

BOY WILLIE: *(Entering on the stairs.)* That's all in Berniece's head. Ain't nobody up there. Go on up there, Doaker.

DOAKER: I'll take your word for it. Berniece talking about what she seen. She say Sutter's ghost standing at the top of the steps. She ain't just make all that up.

BOY WILLIE: She up there dreaming. She ain't seen no ghost.

LYMON: You want a glass of water, Berniece? Get her a glass of water, Boy Willie.

BOY WILLIE: She don't need no water. She ain't seen nothing. Go on up there and look. Ain't nobody up there but Maretha.

DOAKER: Let Berniece tell it.

BOY WILLIE: I ain't stopping her from telling it.

DOAKER: What happened, Berniece?

BERNIECE: I come out my room to come back down here and Sutter was standing there in the hall.



So, the play takes a very dramatic turn from now on when Berniece she thinks that she saw Sutter's ghost at on top of the steps. So, she is yelling out for help and seeing Sutor Sutter standing at the top of the steps. Hey Doaker what is wrong with her Berniece what is wrong who was you talking to she says she has seen Sutter's ghost standing at the top of the stairs, seen what Sutter she is not seen no Sutter he was standing right up there that is all in Berniece's head is not nobody up there go upon there Doaker.

I will take a word for it Berniece talking about what she has seen she say Sutter's ghost standing at the top of the steps she is not just making all that up she is up there dreaming she is she has not seen any ghost. So, we find here that these siblings both Boy Willie as well as Boy Willie as well as Berniece they just refuse to believe the things that they tell each other.

When Boy Willie is telling her about the truck and why he came up over there, there is an absolute refusal to engage with him and believe him. And now when she is telling him about a very traumatic experience of seeing a ghost he refuses to believe that too and we find that both of them have their own reasons to stick to their beliefs and stick to what they choose to believe in this context.



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continuation of and an attempt to bring to fruition the former one (the family's). The success of Boy Willie's narrative is dependent upon a shared understanding of the traditional family narrative, the one related by Doaker, so that the interchange between the two narratives becomes a form of the black folk tradition of call-and-response, through which a performer interacts with an audience in a rhythmic counterpoint of improvisation and emotive language that becomes both song and dialogue, as in the black religious tradition (Byerman 3). In this story, the call consists of the slave narrative that has been carved into the body of the piano; Boy Willie's response is his improvised effort to translate that myth into the reality of his own economic and social emancipation.

The transition would be easier for Boy Willie if the narratives were better

that the theatregoer understand the ultimate importance of the slave narrative depicted on the piano in authenticating Boy Willie's metaphorical slave narrative, and how, because of the linear nature of the relationship, the family myth must be destroyed, or his own narrative altered, to create a new one.

Wilson posits, then, a complex, universal way of looking at black history, and does so by structuring *The Piano Lesson* on three tiers. First, he creates a play within a play by describing a mythological slave narrative carved into the play's focal object, an old piano, and repeated several times by the play's characters. Second, he uses the piano and its attendant narrative as a haunting presence in the call-and-response manner of black folk tradition, as the call to which Boy Willie, in his quest for self-realization, must respond if he is to achieve this goal.



So, as this play enters different phase now with Berniece seeing the ghost and we find a layered structure emerging already we will take a look at how this essay is also choosing to read this layered structure. Wilson posits then a complex universal way of looking at black history and does. So, by structuring *The Piano Lesson* on three tiers, first he creates a play within a play by describing mythological slave narrative carved into the plays focus object an old piano, repeated several times by the plays characters.

And the second one is when he uses the piano and it is antenna narrative as a haunting presence in the call and response manner of black folk tradition, as a call to which Boy Willie in his quest for self realization must respond if he is to achieve this goal. So, there are different layers in this storytelling process.

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Finally, he juxtaposes Boy Willie's undertaking with that of his slave ancestors, and makes his quest an extension of theirs, so that Boy Willie's story, and the play itself, becomes a metaphorical slave narrative in its own right.

**T**he purpose for the antebellum slave narrative was to help the slave remember the life he had fled (Step 1). Deep within each such narrative, then, is the psychological empowerment for self-identity, a vehicle through which the former slave might construct an apologetic for his or her own personality in terms of the response to that "peculiar institution."

carved into the wood itself, to complete his journey is the ironic evidence that his identity will forever be, for better or worse, intertwined with the past. For Boy Willie, however, stories of the family's courage in saving this icon are no longer sufficient for the maintenance of his own self-concept. He is left, then, with seeking to establish his own slave narrative, even a metaphorical one, to do for himself what Doaker's narrative has done for the rest of the family—communicate a mythology of black potential to succeed within the confines of, and by the rules of, a white world (Campbell 2). The narrative has worked for previous generations because of the piano, which has served as the touchstone by which members of the family could reinforce their posi-



And finally, August Wilson is juxtaposing Willies undertaking with that of his slave ancestors and making his quest an extension of theirs. So, Boy Willies play Boy Willies story Boy Willies life Boy Willies experiences and this play itself it becomes they all become a metaphorical slave narrative in it is own right metaphorical slave narrative when we look at it in a composite sense.

So we will bring this discussion to an end with this and it is strongly encouraged to go through the play in order to appreciate the depth of what August Wilson is trying to convey. And there is only one central theme which he is reiterating over here about the presence of this piano as a legacy a tangible legacy, an object which could either be preserved or made use of in order to claim other kinds of fortunes.

So, what kind of decisions would individuals take when they are faced with such possibilities, when they are faced with such difficult choices that is the question that continues to remain at the heart of this play.