

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 51
August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* Part 3

We begin looking at August Wilson's 1987 play *The Piano Lesson*, which was an iconic event in modern American dramatic history. So, *The Piano Lesson* changed the way in which African, American plays were being looked at and it also carved out a new way to look at the African American history, the African American heritage through the performances, through the stage presences. August Wilson's play went on to achieve numerous laurels as well. So, in some sense, it is both canonical as well as part of this popular culture.

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August Wilson

- Theatre's poet of Black America
- The Pittsburg Cycle – 10 plays
 - 9 set in Pittsburg, 1 in Chicago
- Experiences and heritage of the African-American community
- "My plays offer a different way to look at black Americans"
- Father – a Sudeten German immigrant
- Mother – an African-American



So, moving on to this kind of influence that August Wilson had in Twentieth Century American Drama; it is important to recall that he is known as the theatre's poet of black America. And he is best known for the series of 10 plays that he wrote and performed. They are together known as the Pittsburgh Cycle.

So, 9 of them were set in Pittsburgh where he was born where he lived and 1 is set in Chicago. So, these plays are collectively known as the Pittsburgh Cycle; it was the first of its kind event in the history of American drama.

So this series showcased the African American lives in ways that it was never done before in the theatres history. And this also made it possible for both the white community as well as the African American community to look at their culture, their heritage, their history in a slightly different way.

There was a different trajectory which was getting foregrounded; the one which is not otherwise found in the in American drama, the otherwise found in most articulations which were part of popular culture then.

So while trying to capture the experiences and heritage of the African American community; we find that August Wilson also renders it a personal touch and experiential touch, which makes it and all the more impactful as well. So, in one of the interviews he remarked that his plays offered a different way to look at black Americans.

This was very important and from the 1970s onwards and this is 1987 play; this was very important during those decades, given the many political and popular movements which had been gaining momentum. It was also important to present an alternate view, which would be absorbed which would be imbibed as part of popular culture.

So, August Wilson's background was also slightly different which also made it made this experience very unique that, his telling his narration very unique. His father was a Sudeten and German immigrant and his mother was an African American. So, he came from such humble origins and the way he made inroads into American drama also became an inspiration for; in some sense it showcased the spirit and it showcased the power of American dream.

So if we compare August Wilson's plays with the rest of the American drama; we will also realize that it is a very different kind of a history that he is trying to foreground. And this alternate history is not seen as something which is jarring; this alternate history is not seen as something which is not part of the American culture, but there is a very concrete as well as concert effort that we can find in his place to merge these histories together.

His intention is not to isolate the black American experiences as very different from the mainstream experiences of what has been portrayed so far in American theatre. But his intention is to make sure that there is an assimilation without the uniqueness getting lost.

We find August Wilson's plays in a sense fitting in as a perfect continuum to the earlier play; such as *A Raisin in the Sun*, where the African-American experiences were beginning to be documented.

So, here we find that it is more melodramatic in some sense without touching the, without really losing the realist touch and it also has a way of getting into the nitty gritty of the African American lives, without again compromising what is essentially American in this genre.

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Awards



- Pulitzer Prize winner of American Playwright
 - Drama Desk Outstanding New Play Award
 - New York Drama Critics Circle Best Play Award
 - Antoinette Perry Award for Best Play
 - American Theatre Critics Outstanding Play Award
 - Pulitzer Prize for drama
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- all in 1990, all for *The Piano Lesson*



So, this play was an iconic success as mentioned at the outset. So, in 1990, *The Piano Lesson* went on to win a series of awards including the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Being a Pulitzer Prize winner, his other plays also began to get the kind of recognition that it had never got before.

So, in 1990, he won other than the Pulitzer prize; Drama Desk Outstanding New Play Award, New York Drama Critics Circle Best Play Award, Antoinette Perry Award for best play, American Theatre Critics Outstanding Play Award and so, this made this play almost like a watershed event in the year 1990.

So in that decade right after the performance, right after the publication of *The Piano Lesson*; we also find an increasing interest, an academic interest, a popular interest, a cultural interest in engaging with the African American plays from diverse perspectives.

So, this may be seen, then this is also incidentally the final play that we will be reading as part of this course.

It also opens up newer avenues for us to explore American theatre, for us to explore different ways of reading American theatre. If we continue to compare this with the rest of the plays and also more primarily if we compare this with the very first play that we did as part of this course, *The Emperor Jones*.

We find that the treatment of race has radically changed in a few decades; the treatment of race, the treatment of individuals whose marker of identity is primarily race that has changed and this play also highlights the need to foreground different kinds of approaches.

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- Exploration of a double world and a double consciousness
- Characters – life-defining decisions
- The difficult choices of African Americans – past heritage and past exigencies



So, in August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson*, we find that there is an exploration of a double world; there are both worlds which are simultaneously being explored, the African American world also white world inhabited by the white Americans. So, this double world makes this approach very balanced as well. And along with this exploration of the double world; we find that there is a double consciousness which is not necessarily, the compartmentalization is not always necessarily neat over here.

There is a double consciousness, which sometimes overlaps between and across these two worlds as well. So, what becomes very important in this play is, how these

characters are faced with certain life defining decisions and particularly focuses on the difficult choices that the African Americans have to make; given that their choices are also determined and sometimes their choices also have a heavy bearing on their past heritage and past exigencies.

We find that the crisis or the issue is more accentuated in a play like piano lesson compared to say a raisin in the sun. In a raisin in the sun too we find that the African American family is made to they have to make certain way difficult choices and even within the family there seems to be very little consensus about the kind of decisions to be made.

There is also a lot of money which they have to decide on what ways to spend it. We also have certain characters in a raisin in the sun, where they find themselves in alignment with the American dream; it certain characters who feel that they who feel that they have to get assimilated into the American culture. And also certain characters like Asagai, who feels a need to completely move away from America and trace their roots in a in an African country as well.

So here we find that these live design these life defining decisions that are part of these families, that are part of these African American individuals; it renders them a kind of humanity, renders them a kind of uniqueness which also helps them to fit in with the rest of the American drama, rest of the American theatre.

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The Piano

- The past and the present
- The reminder of the white culture that built the piano & of Papa Boy Charles the slave great-grandfather who carved African images onto it
- Bears ancestral blood
- The images narrate the plight of Boy Willie's and Berniece's slave ancestors – sold into bondage in exchange for the piano
- Boy Willie and Berniece's father died 'stealing' it from Sutter, the white boss
- A source of contention



So, the piano becomes almost like, the piano emerges almost like a character in this play; that the piano becomes that object which signifies metaphorically stands for the past as well as the present. So, in fact, if we think about the keys in the piano; the black and white keys, the intertwining of the black and white keys and how they have to function together in order to produce music that itself is a very live metaphor of what this piano stands for.

So in here we find that metaphorically as an object, this piano stands as a reminder of the white culture that built the piano and of Papa Boy Charles who was a slave who is the slave character, the great grandfather of the Berniece and Boy Willie. Here we find that this piano is a reminder of two cultures at the same time; it functions as a reminder of twin cultures in a simultaneous sense.

The white culture that produce the piano, the white culture that built the piano, and the black culture whose vestiges are we continue to see in the in the family of Papa Boy Charles. So, Papa Boy Charles was a slave great grandfather and he was one who had carved these African images, these images of these totems and all into the piano.

So this piano in that sense becomes this character who can imbibe both the cultures, both the worlds and it is also an object which was owned at different points by both the communities. And there is a historical, it stands as a muted character; but it is also some an object a character which had witnessed this shift in history, which had witnessed these changing patterns and changing trajectories in hierarchy and sense of ownership and sense of belonging.

So, the piano is seen as something which bears the ancestral blood of both the white characters, of both the white culture as well as the African American culture. So, it was owned by a certain family for whom the Charles family was working as slaves. So it bears the ancestral blood from both sides.

And the images which are carved into this piano are something which makes this piano very unique; though it is part of the white culture, though it is a production, though it is something which was originally made by the white culture, we find that the images are something which helped the African American family, this Charles family appropriate that piano as theirs.

So, these images narrate the plight of Boy Willie's and Bernice's slave ancestors and they were in fact sold into bondage in exchange for the piano. And this is something which is there at the heart of this play as a foundation, as a historical foundation as an emotional link with the piano. Papa Boy Charles he also died while he was stealing it from Sutter; Sutter was the white boss who we also realize at the outset of this play that he also has met with his death.

So the piano also becomes a source of contention between the family members. So, Bernice and Boy Willie they seems to be having a very different view on what to do with the piano. The piano is a legacy, the piano is something which has been handed down to them as a reminder of what they were before and what they have become now.

And this becomes a source of contention; because they both have Boy Willie as well as Bernice they both have very different notions of what to do with this legacy, how to use this legacy. So, that is something that we will also centrally look at as the play progresses.

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The piano – for Berniece



- A haunting presence
- Associated with her father's death, mother's suffering
- The symbol of a tragic past + a familial heritage that must be honoured
- Historical link to slave ancestors, sacrifice and beauty
- A reminder of loss – but meant to be preserved
- Fixed on the past – difficult to conceptualise the future

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So, for Bernice the piano is a haunting presence and it also literally becomes a haunting presence when she begins to see Sutter's ghost upstairs. So, this which is why since it is a haunting presence for her; she also she does not want to get rid of it, but she also refrains from using it, utilizing it fully.

So, she associates the piano with her father's death and subsequently she thinks that her mother's suffering was also born out of that. So, the piano becomes a very live object over here; an object which can continue to produce trauma as well as affect them with suffering even after the event has passed.

So it is a constant reminder, a haunting presence and mind you she does not want to get rid of it either; she wants that presence to be there and that suffering also becomes cathartic in some sense perhaps for her. So, it is a symbol, simultaneously it is a symbol of the tragic past and a family will heritage that must be honored.

So, it becomes a very complex as well as complicated combination; this tragedy becomes something that the family needs to own, that the family needs to be constantly reminded of, because the heart of their identity, the foundations of their identity also come from that tragic past.

So it becomes a heritage which can serve as a constant reminder of the journey that this family has undertaken over the last three generations. And this journey incidentally is not just a personal journey, it is not just a familial journey; it becomes a journey of the community as well. So, which is why the piano assumes a lot of significance in this play as a historical link; it serves as a historical link to the slave ancestors.

So, it is at the same time a signifier of sacrifice as well as beauty; but for Bernice the only flip side is that, she chooses to see more of its sacrifice and she misses the beauty of it on because of it. Which is why perhaps she fails to assimilate these two together, which is why she also does not educate her daughter on the history of this piano; she does not tell her about what these different images signify.

So there is a there is a reluctance to pass on this story in its entirety, their history in its entirety. So, I hope you are able to see this irony and the complexity over here, when a character like Bernice wants to continue to be in possession of this piano, which is a signifier of this of their tragic past. But she is also not very confident about passing on this legacy in its entirety when she is encouraging her daughter to take the piano lessons.

So, it becomes just another object which will produce music without making it a unique object, which also symbolizes their past, their tragic past and what they were before. So it is a reminder of loss for Bernice it is a reminder of loss which was, whichever way she

chooses to look at it; but it is something which has to be preserved as well. And this in fact, is also the dilemma and the crisis which most members of the African American community also face.

And here the trauma is much more than perhaps the trauma that the African American family in a *Raisin in the Sun* faced; because there is a history of slave trade which is part of this. And this is the kind of suffering that the Charles family had undergone; it seems to be quite immense in degree compared to perhaps the kind of difficulties that the family in the *Raid*, the Younger family in *Raisin in the Sun* had encountered.

So here the struggle over here is that, since Bernice continues to be fixed on the past, always fixated on what had happened and the tragedy and the sacrifice which were part of that the piano and what had happened this; the events which happened around the piano and right after procuring it, she finds it very difficult to conceptualize the future.

For her the future is something which is not as positive as say Boy Willie chooses to see it; she refuses to see this as an object, which could perhaps make their future better than what it is now.

And this is where we find that Bernice as well as Boy Willie, they have to meet midway; because it is only in the assimilation of both these perspectives, we find that an appropriate kind of future could be envisaged for this family as well as for the community.

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The piano – for Boy Willie



- A practical perspective
- Recognises its everyday use and future value
- Piano = means to secure land = securing freedom = reconnecting with his familial past
- “you can stand right next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton ...the weather and anything else you want to talk about”

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So, on the other hand for Boy Willie, the piano is an object which has to be utilized in a practical sense. And here we find Boy Willie almost subscribing to the capitalist ideals of the American society and he sees this object as something to be capitalized on; it is capital for him, it is something which should be put to good use. So, it is a practical perspective we find as being very dominant in Boy Willie’s character and in his approach to the piano.

And he recognizes its everyday use particularly in that scene, where he encourages Bernice’s daughter to take these lessons more seriously and also tries to educate her on what is there in the, the kind of images which are there in the piano. We finds that he is someone who wants to put this to daily use and it is not; if you think about the title of the play at this moment, we find that there we do not encounter a real piano lesson over here.

But the piano becomes an object through which many life lessons, many historical lessons, many lessons on identity are being learnt over here. And for him learning to use the piano, putting the piano to an everyday use; it is does not come through learning music or practicing with the music sheets, it has to be an extension.

The way he approaches the playing of the piano is as an extension of the kind of music that the African American community, individuals have embarked. It is more natural, it is not trained, it is not more original, it is more rhythmic; it is something which would help them to say dance to the kind of music which gets produced. And that is they are

very evident in the brief scene, where he tries to engage with Bernice's daughter about the everyday use and how differently the piano could be used.

And he also on the other hand, apart from its everyday use; he is also quite conscious about the future value of this, which is why he also has this very commercial plan in mind to sell the piano and get some part of that money and use it to buy the land that Sutter's brother is about to sell.

And that for him, in that sense a piano for him becomes a means to secure land; secure the land, where his ancestors worked earlier and now they here they are about to become the owners from that previous position of having been slaves in the same land. So for him the piano operates, the piano is there as a means to secure land and for him securing land also means securing freedom.

And this is his ticket, this is his passport to travel towards the American dream that the others seem to be having quite naturally, quite automatically. And this has another purpose as well; he will be able to secure his freedom by securing this land, but it also becomes a way for him to reconnect with his familial past.

So, in a certain way here we begin to see that both Bernice as well as Boy Willie they are very similar in nature. They both want to stay connected with their familial past, with their ancestral history, but in two different ways.

One takes a perhaps a more mercenary or attempts to take at least more mercenary kind of a route, which is looked down upon by Bernice. But Bernice takes a very emotional and a very mystic kind of approach towards her connection, with her ancestors and that is being seen with a lot of suspicion, and with a lot of amusement by Boy Willie. And, but we find that both these approaches have something fundamentally very common, because they both want to reconnect with their past.

So which is why in Boy Willie remarks, you can stand right next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton, the weather and anything else you want to talk about. And this is the status that he hopes to achieve, once he gets hold of the land, which will come to him only by selling the piano.

And this is perhaps a kind of life that he wants to appropriate; that he wants to claim, where equality, where freedom could be achieved by owning land by owning property and that gives him that position, through which he can stand right next to the white man and talk to him about it.

So in interestingly even in *A Raisin in the Sun*, it was the heart of that play is about owning property; owning property in a predominantly white neighborhood and the kind of struggles and questions and concerns that it raises. So, this the struggle of an African American person owning a property, which predominantly, which primarily belongs to the white community to be mainstream white life, that is seen as a possibility as well as a threat over here.

But here even within the family we find that, just the way we found in *A Raisin in the Sun*; we find that there are certain concerns within the family as well for varying reasons, while such decisions are being made. This becomes the decision to buy a property, the decision to sell a property; it becomes not just a mercenary, not just a commercial decision. But it becomes a life changing decision, which has the potential to change the identity and future of the person, the family and the community for good.

In the next session, we will start taking a look at the play in a greater detail, in order to understand what the piano exactly stands for and what are the lessons which a play like this is rendering when it is placed in the context of the African American life.