

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 53
August Wilson's The Piano Lesson Part 5

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Introduction



- The play is written in 1987 by American playwright August Wilson.
- It is the fourth play in Wilson's The Pittsburgh Cycle.
- Wilson is best known for his collection of ten plays, collectively called The Pittsburgh Cycle, which chronicle the experiences and heritage of the African- American community in the 20th Century.
- It was adapted to a film with the same name in 1995.



We continue to discuss August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson*.

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- Accolades:
Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play (1990)
New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play (1990)
Pulitzer Prize for Drama (1990)
- *The Dramatic Visions of August Wilson*, written by Sandra G. Shannon, states that Wilson formulated two thematic questions to address in the play:
"What do you do with your legacy, and how do you best put it to use?"



This is a 1987 play which had won a number of accolades in 1990 including the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

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The Piano Lesson by Romare Bearden. The painting which inspired Wilson to write a play featuring a strong female character.



This is a painting by Roamer Bearden, the painting which inspired August Wilson to write a play featuring a very strong female character. So, this is a 1987 play which had won a number of accolades in 1990 including the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

So, this is a painting by Romare Bearden, the painting which inspired August Wilson to write a play featuring a very strong female character. We can see how the black characters here are practicing the Piano, taking Piano lessons in this very famous painting which acted as an inspiration for the play *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson.

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Major Characters



- **Doaker Charles** – Owner of the Charles household. He is the 47 year old uncle of Boy Willie and Berniece. Throughout the play he recounts his past and his job on the railroads. He offers a connection to the family's past through his stories. He gives detailed and long accounts of the Piano's history.
- **Boy Willie** – 30 year old, impulsive brother of Berniece. A sharecropper and recently released from the prison in Mississippi. He wants to sell the piano to buy the land in which his ancestors worked as slaves.
- **Berniece** – 35 year old sister of Boy Willie. She is the only one in the family who is adamant about keeping the piano. She has a 11 year old daughter named Maretha. It is implied that Berniece can speak to the dead.



When these are a quick recap of the characters these are the major characters of the play Doaker Charles who is the owner of the Charles household and it is through him that we get an account of the history of the Piano and how that is very closely connected with the Black American history, very closely connected with the Charles household and he also gives us extensive details about his previous occupation, the description of how he used to work on the railroads.

It gives us a connection, it gives us a sense of his connection with the past and how that informs the various decisions that the family takes. Boy Willie is a 30 year old man, he is the impulsive brother of Berniece and also someone who wants to claim his share of the modern amenities and the modern fortunes which are being made available to him.

He was recently released from prison we realized and he also wants to sell the Piano, which is an ancestral property, which is a reminder of the past in order to acquire the land of mister Sutter for whom his families his ancestors worked as slaves. Berniece is of course, Boy Willie's sister and she is the only one in the family who wants to stay attached to the Piano and keep it as a possession as an object she has a 11 year old daughter who is taking lessons in playing piano, but she is not aware of the family's past or how the Piano is intricately connected to with their ancestors history of slavery.

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- **Lymon** – 29 year old friend of Boy Willie. A sympathizer who listens to everybody's problems in Charles household. He is obsessed with women and his attempts to seduce Berniece eventually help to bring her out of her mourning for her dead husband.
- **Avery Brown** – A 38 year old preacher. He is an honest and ambitious man who is trying to build a congregation. He tries to court Berniece. He often gives advices to Berniece in an attempt to help her let go of the fears of her past.
- **Wining Boy** -56 year old elder brother of Doaker. He was a successful recording artist in his youth but now a failed person who still lives in his past glory. He often narrates stories from his past travels. Like Berniece he too can speak to the dead.



Lymon who accompanies Boy Willie is a sympathizer he is a good listener he is obsessed with the women we find that he even attempts to seduce Berniece talks also actually works to their favour at least temporarily to bring her out of the state of perennial mourning that she seems to be in.

Avery Brown is a preacher, presented in a very unconventional form. He is very honest, but also very ambitious and his commitment towards what he is doing including his attempt to build a church it is a very evident and he tries to quote Berniece and he is often seen as giving a very important life changing advice to Berniece.

Wining Boy who is the older brother of Doaker was a successful recording artist during his youth, but now he is largely seen as a failed person who is continuing to live in his past glory. And, he and Berniece it is implied in the story that they can speak to the dead and that is also being incorporated into the play.

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Major Themes

- Memory and Historical Legacy
- Racism and Self-determination
- Spirituality
- Grief and Hope
- Love and Relationships



So, we did discuss we did broadly talk about the broad historical framework within which this a play like this is supported. Today, we look at the major themes which are framing the discussion.

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Memory and Historical legacy

- Wilson formulated two questions to address in the play – “What do you do with your legacy, and how do you best put it to use?”
- In the play, the Piano embodies the legacy of Charles family and the central conflict of the play is what do they do with the Piano and how do they best put it to use.



So, memory and historical legacy. So, in this play it is possible to argue that August Wilson is primarily asking this question what do one do with one’s legacy and how do one best put it to use. So, legacy the Piano is at the heart of this play and what one does

with the Piano and how it could be put to the best use in order to make the most of the present is the pressing question throughout this play.

And, in the Piano we find that in the play we find that the object Piano which is very carefully preserved in Berniece's household and embodies a legacy of Charles family and the essential conflict is also about what to do with it? Because this legacy is being received by each character in different ways.

It is indeed a constant reminder of the unsavoury past that the family had to experience. But, this past is also a definite marker of their identity a detachment from this past would also mean that they are trying to detach themselves from the only kind of history that they have access to and in the presence of the Piano by articulating the history behind the journey of the piano.

In fact, how the Piano reached there that itself the account of the journey itself is an account of the personal and the political history of the African-American community. Here the family becomes trigger to take us into this past, which is fairly undocumented in the other mainstream dominant narratives.

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- For Boy Willie, their legacy is not an artefact, but of vengeance, debt and reparation across generations. He wants to sell the Piano to buy the land in which his ancestors toiled during slavery, an act he thinks would avenge his ancestors' struggles and secure his future. He wants to turn the objects of oppression (the Piano and Sutters land) into opportunities.



But, for Boy Willie he looks at this artefact in a very different way. It is not it is not just an artefact, but it is a vengeance, it is of debt, it is of reparation across a generation. This

is a reminder of a tragic past, a haunting past and he wants to put this to very good use not just to get rid of it.

So, that it will be out of it his sight, but he wants to sell the Piano and this is a there is a transaction that he is looking forward to fulfilling through the use of this Piano he wants to sell the Piano and with that money he wants to buy land where his ancestors toiled during a slavery and this is an act which in his mind would avenge the ancestors struggles. And, this will also simultaneously make sure that his future is secure there is financial security and also dignity and self pride and that he would perhaps restore at the end of this act.

So, this object which is seen as an object of oppression which indeed is an object of oppression given their family history he wants to turn this object into opportunities and both these opportunities the Piano as well as the Sutter's land one could choose to see those as constant reminders of what they were before, but they could also become opportunities very tangible opportunities to facilitate them becoming something else.

Like Boy Willie also states in this play the once he secures the land he will also be able to face another white man and in one to one a manner and talk to him about very general random things and then that will also help him come out of this hierarchical relation which seems to be deeply embedded. And, here in that sense the material advancement is seen as something that could surpass the hierarchy of the past something that could entirely rewrite over the past, which is deeply etched in their minds too.

So, in the Piano also this story is very deeply engraved we are in the pictures which are there in the which are carved into this Piano we find that there is a visible way in which the history gets narrated and represented and handed down over there. But, that visible history itself has the potential to become an object which is facilitating a transformation too.

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- But for Berniece, their legacy is the story of their ancestors carved in the Piano. She thinks the Piano contains the spirits of her ancestors. She doesn't play the Piano or narrate its story to her daughter in the fear of waking the spirits.



But for Berniece, she is unable to buy into this argument that Boy Willie is trying to sell. For her their legacy is the story of their ancestors carved in that Piano and because of that the Piano has to be she thinks about that Piano is an object where the spirits of her ancestors live she does not play the piano, she does not put it to even the most mundane everyday use that it could be put into.

And, while she is training her daughter to play the Piano she refuses to narrate its story to her to her daughter and this also partly out of the fear of waking the spirits the dead spirits of her ancestors and partly there is a difficulty in her mind to relive that trauma.

And, we find that she seems to be in this perennial state of mourning too after her husband's death and she blames it all on there are these there is a way in which she is unable to get out of this loop of grief and of mourning and her inability to let go of the Piano could also be seen as an extension of this her personality.

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- This shows that unlike Boy Willie who thinks about the future, Berniece wants hold on to the past. But she doesn't want it to affect her future generations. That is why she tries not to 'wake' the spirits or narrate its memory to her daughter.
- She is concerned about the future, but opposed to the idea of securing it at the cost of their legacy, which their father died to protect.



So, unlike a Boy Willie in that sense she wants to hold on to her past, but she does not want that to affect the future generations. Here in it is here that we see this cardinal difference between these two siblings Boy Willie and Berniece and which is why the memory of that while the memory of this past is very important to her she is also extremely careful that that memory is not being handed over to the next generation.

And, while she is very optimistic about the future well she wants the future to be very secure that is something that we see in the way she is taking care of her house, taking care of her daughter and she does not want them to have a present or a future like that a Boy Willie or Lymon and she wants more certainty. She wants a routine too as we realize right at the outset of the play; a routine is something that she is trying to stick to in that household unlike the visitors Boy Willie and Lymon.

And, her concern about the future, but does not mean that she would secure it at the cost of her legacy. And, her father and there is a personal touch to which we get to know in detail when we read through the play their father died trying to protect this legacy, trying to protect, trying to get back and preserve this piano.

And, she believes that subsequently her mother died of that grief and she also later blames Boy Willie for the death of her husband they were together in this they were trying to in steal some woods and they get caught as we noticed in the then the first act itself.

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- Other two characters who lives in their past memories are Doaker and Wining Boy. Doaker narrates the stories from the family's past, while Wining Boy keeps recounting the stories from his travels and glory days as a musician.



So, the other two characters are also continuing to live in the past, Doaker and Wining Boy. Doaker keeps narrating stories from the family's past and it is only through him that we get a detailed description of what transpired in the context of the Piano and Wining Boy he keeps talking about the stories from the from his past glory which also gives us a sense of these different trajectories that where possible for the child's family and by extension for the African-American community.

When they are also experimenting with various things, maybe the kind of security, the kind of financial comfort, the material comfort that came their way was of a very different nature. But, nevertheless it points out it foreground the variety that they had in their life itself in that sense it is possible to argue that this play gives us an entry point to talk about the African American community, the African American experiences not in a monolith.

But as a in a very heterogeneous fashion by looking at these linkages and loops that these this family has. This single family that we encounter has it is quite the variety is quite impressive in terms of the trajectory of their historical, personal and even spiritual experiences as we would see.

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Racism and Self-Determination



- The play is about choices people make in the face of racism and how they manage their own lives.
- Each characters have their own attitude towards self-determination and they respond to racism in their own ways.



This play in where very obviously, talks about racism and about the about self worth about self determination. It is ultimately about choices, just the way we noticed in a racism the sun too, it is about the choices that they are forced to make the choices that they would ideally want to make in now while they are also encountering these dark realities of dark realities of racist behaviour all around them.

This is about also learning to manage their life on their own given that they are now no longer under the mercy of the white families who owned them. Now, that they are no longer under the service of whoever was overseeing them. So, there is a sense of agency which they have begun to acquire and the play and like most a plays of this kind it is also about trying to articulate and trying to put this agency to good use.

So, every character here we find that their attitudes to racism their attitude their attitude towards their self worth and self determination and the way they respond to racist behaviour it is very different. That is again something we notice in the first act itself where some characters feel that like a Doaker, Lymon they feel that the treatment of from towards the coloured people are very different even the law treats them differently.

But Boy Willie seems to have a very naive kind of optimism which leads him to think that it is up to him and you are treated the way you allow people to treat you. And, this is again something that is that something he had he is able to lay claim to because of these promising enterprising ideas that he has in mind as well and it becomes all the more

important for a character like Boy Willie to claim that land even at the cost of the family legacy because he wants to be able to appropriate what appropriate the sense of ownership on a land which never belonged to them on a land where they worked as slaves.

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- Willie doesn't want to enjoy the freedom they get in north, instead wants to go back and buy the property of the family who formerly enslaved his own family. For him success is avenging their ancestors and establishing equal status among whites by owning their property.



So, Willie also does not want to join the Willie also does not Boy Willie does not want to enjoy the freedom in the north, instead he wants to buy the property of that family and settle down in the south itself because financial comfort and material wealth that kind of an advancement that is it is very important for him.

It is very important for him to be able to secure to be able to find the kind of person that he actually is. So, he defines success in terms of how best he can avenge their ancestors and he also wants equal status among the whites and he wants owned he wants to own the property which originally was owned by them.

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- Lymon on the other hand is determined to live in the north and face the economic consequences. Because for him north offers him freedom that he won't get in south. He believes Blacks are treated better in north and wants to live in that comfort instead of fighting back and establishing power.

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So, the way Lymon responds to this is very different he is willing to give up the financial gains that he could have made if he were living in the south and he sees the life in the north and he wants to continue to live there because there is more freedom and there is more they are able to lead their own lives in very independent ways.

So, north offers this space, this liberty, this atmosphere which has agency which is freedom and that something the south does not have at all. So, he also thinks that the Blacks are treated in a comparatively in a better way in the north than in the south and he wants he is the kind of person unlike a Boy Willie who wants to live in the comfort that north offers.

There is also a political background which is sustaining and supporting this ecosystem, but the point here is that he wants to get into that kind of a lifestyle and live it unlike Boy Willie who wants to go back and fight against the hierarchy which used to be more prevalent he wants to be able to secure land and show to people that he is as good as or as equal to another white man in terms of power, in terms of wealth in terms of status.

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- A similar stance is taken by Avery Brown, the preacher. Initially he travelled to north in hopes of marrying Berniece when he knew about her husband's death. But soon he realised north offers him opportunities that he cant afford in south. Therefore he decides to stay there and is determined to build a congregation.

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So, Avery Brown, also takes a stance which is quite similar to that of Lymon he first travelled to the north with the hopes of quoting Berniece and getting married to her after her husband's death, but very soon he too realizes that the north offers opportunities which are entirely nonexistent in the south. So, he too decides to stay there because that is where he realizes his dream could come true.

He can build his own congregation, he can build his own church and he in though in a very relative sense he is able to pursue his dreams in a more systematic manner all the characters realize that too they are able to pursue their dreams and they are able to do what their mind wants when they are in the living in the north. But, of course, south has more prosperity and that is something, which is extremely appealing to Boy Willie.

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- Avery's determination is also visible in his pursuit of Berniece. He doesn't give up even when his affections are not reciprocated. He continues to love and treat her with respect in hopes of winning her hand.



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- Boy Charles, Willie and Berniece's father and Doaker's elder brother, is another determined character in the play. Doaker, while narrating the history of the Piano, says that Boy Charles developed an obsession over the Piano and was determined to retrieve it out of Sutter's house one day. Because he believed that as long as Sutters held their family's history which is carved in the Piano, they held them in bondage. He was determined to free their legacy from the whites who enslaved them and he successfully retrieves it risking his life and dying in the process.



So, when one talks about self determination, self worth it is again it becomes important to trace the history of this family. A Boy Charles who was the father of Boy Willie and Berniece and Doaker's elder brother, he comes across this embodiment of self determination and whatever this family has access to now, whatever this family has a possibility of accessing later it all has been handed over.

In fact, that perhaps is also the most permanent legacy that has been handed over to the family that this notion of self-determination, this idea of self worth. So, Doaker when he

is narrating the history of the Piano he recounts that Boy Charles had developed an obsession about the Piano because the family was first exchanged for that Piano and slave trade and he is determined to retrieve it out of the Sutter's house someday or the other and he believes that as long as Sutter held their families history which is carved in their Piano they held them in bondage.

So, it is a symbolic kind of retrieval when he is attempting to get that Piano from Sutter's family and that is something that he can never get through legitimate means. So, he is determined to free their legacy; the legacy which is there in the Piano, which is engraved in the piano. So, it is very symbolic and very metaphorical at so many levels.

So, he wants to restore and retrieve this legacy from the whites who had not slipped them and the Sutter family becomes again very symbolic in their presence over there and he of course, successfully retrieves it by risking his own life and he lives he gives his life also for that he dies in that process. So, it is a sack there is a sacrificial component to over here he is restoring the family's owner. He is retrieving the family's legacy and in that process he also gives up his own life.

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- For him, reclamation of the Piano was a demonstration of their freedom from the Sutters and their ownership of their family story.
- This way the play shows how people make choices in the face of racism and how they are determined to live the life they believe is meaningful.



So, which so, we do find the emotional connect that Berniece finds difficult to let go of given that now that we know the background as well and for Charles for Boy Charles if the reclamation of the Piano was the first demonstration of their freedom even before they actually became free.

And, it is also about the ownership who owns the family history. After the reclamation of the Piano after retrieving the object from the Sutter's household, they also have begin to feel this realization that now they have ownership about their history. Now, they can control their history, they can control the story of their past, it is this control that Boy Willie wants to use in a purely materialistic sense.

It is this control which in some sense Berniece wants to retain, but she retains that by also withholding important historical information important past memories she is withholding that from her for her from her own daughter as well. So, this what is what is most important over here is how this play is allowing each character to make their own choices and when faced with racism which could which could be very traumatic the after effects could be permanent continuing to generations.

The what this play is highlighting is that despite all of this the play is a lesson about on how people make choices difficult choices when faced with such harsh realities and for each one of them this choice is entirely meaningful. It is not a random rapid abrupt choice that they are making it is a very well thought out choice which is getting reflected in the way they lead their lives on a daily basis.

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Spirituality and Supernatural



- The play has strong spiritual and supernatural elements.
- Many characters encounter supernatural throughout the play. Not just Avery, who is obviously spiritual in temperament, but the rest of the characters too come in contact with supernatural in one way or the other.

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So, there is a supernatural and spiritual element built into this play which there for instance there are characters such as Avery who is very obviously, and very visibly spiritual in their temperament he wants to set up his congregation, build his own church,

he has this dream about how god himself called into him into this vocation, but the other characters too we find that they are irrespective of their understanding of spirituality or their willingness to engage with spirituality.

We find that they always come into contact with the supernatural forces the mention of the ghost from the beginning the ghost which Berniece claims she keeps seeing and the and the spirits of these ancestors who she believes are living inside the in the Piano in the object of the in the object of this legacy.

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- Willie believes that the ghost of the yellow dog and Boy Charles killed Sutter. Berniece and Maretha encounter Sutter's ghost several times in the household, A finally the whole family encounter the incident in which the ancestors helped to get rid off Sutter's ghost from the house.

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So, we find a lot of such supernatural references throughout the play. Willie actually believes that it was the ghost of the yellow dog and Boy Charles who killed Sutter, and Berniece and Maretha they keep encountering Sutter's ghost upstairs several times. And, and in fact, Doaker is more inclined to believe that because in his mind Berniece is not the kind of woman who would just make up such things, but Willie refuses to believe it they refuse to buy that story at the beginning.

And, in this household it is it could be seen that the whole family encounters this an incident where where they also decide to we see that this whole family encounters this very mysterious supernatural incident where the goals of their ancestors, are helping them get rid of Sutter's ghost, the Sutter being the enemy over here, .

So, this is an introduction of the supernatural dramatic technique that becomes important. So, the ancestors can also become characters in this play they can also participate in what is happening in the contemporary and not stay aloof and they are not forced to say or stay away from what is happening in the past.

Because they also it is in some way of the narrative in some way through which the narrative is able to show that the ancestors though they are not present today, they to have a right to interfere, they to have a right to know, they to have a right to participate in everything revolutionary that is happening over during this time.

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- The image of the ghost is used as a subversive symbol in the play. Villagers and Willie believe that the ghosts of Black men killed by whites have been systematically haunting and killing their oppressors. This image of supernatural is present as a vague and threatening force throughout the play as well as the village. This belief threatens the whites who dare to oppress the blacks and acts as a coping mechanism for blacks who believe that injustices they face are avenged by their ancestor's spirits.



So, the image of the ghost is thus used as a subversive symbol and the villagers as well as Willie believe that the ghosts of the black men killed by whites have been systematically haunting and killing their oppressors and this is also a belief that would give them a lot of comfort a lot of their pride.

It is also like avenging their ancestors in a in the most perhaps in the most appropriate way and, this presence of the supernatural could be read as a very subversive political symbol, it is very vague, it is shown as a threatening presence, but nevertheless it is also an articulation of justice in though in some very fundamental and very perverse way as well.

So, this could be seen as a coping mechanism for the blacks and a way in which in their minds there is a kind of levelling which is happening kind of an evolvement of what had happened in the past where certain sections of the community were subjugated only because of the color of their skin.

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- The implied presence of Sutter's ghost in the house and the family's belief that he haunts the Piano is symbolic too. Willie and Doaker asks Berniece to get rid of the Piano as they believe Sutter's ghost will trouble them until they do so. But Berniece believe that the spirits of her ancestors rest in that Piano and getting rid of it would mean getting rid of their memories. In the end, however, Berniece successfully 'awake' the spirits of their ancestors by playing the Piano and they 'help' to get the house rid of Sutter's ghost. This incident also convinces Willie to not sell the Piano. This symbolically shows that the Black ancestors' spirits are finally able to safeguard the Piano (their history and legacy) from being held bondage by white men (Sutter's ghost and the prospective buyer of the Piano).



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- This way Wilson justifies and explains the importance of spirituality and belief in Supernatural that is inherent in Black traditions. He presents belief in supernatural as a personal, communal and political phenomena.



And, more importantly what August Wilson is doing through this play is just the way he is introducing music into it the presence of spirituality and the this belief in the supernatural is also an incorporation of the black traditions and it is a very creative, it is a

very experimental way of doing this as well and he presents this belief in the supernatural as a space where the personal communal and the political are coming together.

The supernatural is not something which is entirely out of the world, the supernatural is also something which is helping these characters connect with their past, connect with their present and it is something which would help them to subversively cut across the other personal, communal and political fences, barriers which were always historically built around them.

So, when this belief in the supernatural is also countering the almost entirely irrational hierarchies which existed for the longest time until the Charles family and many other families could eventually come out of this the clutches of slavery, the clutches of this kind of discrimination. So, with this we bring this discussion to our close. And we will revisit the important themes in the play and do a close reading of just a few more excerpts in the following sessions.