

**Twentieth Century American Drama**  
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**Lecture - 54**  
**August Wilson's The Piano Lesson Part 6**

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Call-and-Response: Parallel "Slave Narrative" in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

Author(s): Devon Boan

Source: *African American Review*, Summer, 1998, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 263-271

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Hello and welcome to today's session. So, as we continue with this discussion let us take another look at Devon Boan's essay which looks at August Wilson's *Piano Lesson* as a Slave Narrative. So, this appeared in the *African American Review* in 1998.

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And it offers an analysis which encourages to read the piano lesson as a slave narrative; as a narrative which also opens up roots to explore an alternate literal history as well as sociopolitical history of American drama and American life.

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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

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So, we saw how August Wilson has redefined the burden of the past. He is redefined past by locating African American characters at the center of this play and also letting them explore the past, letting them have different kinds of claims with the past as the as this plot progresses. So, at the center of the plays this question about how one would utilize

ones past like August Wilson himself once told in one of the interviews, the real issue is the piano and the piano is the legacy and how is one going to use it.

So, the legacy become something which could be put to use it could be an emotional use, it could be a material use, it could be a means to reclaim ones tradition, ones past it could be that object which could act as a tangible bridge between an unspeakable past and a present that they have come to occupy. So, in this play we find that this metaphorical presence of the piano, this symbolic presence of the piano dominates most of the questions that one would ask about the narrative that unfolds.

So, we do have a sense of how the plot unfolds and how the piano becomes a center of contestation, it is a bone of contention with the siblings unable to arrive at a consensus as to how to use this legacy to advance their lives.

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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

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



So, we did take a look at how both of them Berniece as well as Boy Willie how they look at the piano in two different ways and how one wants this to be used as a one wants a piano to be used as a means to acquire material wealth, the kind of wealth which would also help him crossover this hierarchy which presumably will also help him talk to another white man on a one to one basis.

But for Berniece, she wants to retain she wants to keep the piano as a possession, but she does not want to hand over the story the history behind the piano while she is while she

continues to teach her daughter how to play the piano, she does not want to hand over the history the legacy which is part of that.

So, for Boy Willie this dynamic of enslavement it is not just a product of oral tradition, of course, that story is important for him the context is important for him, but he sees the piano as something which is much more than a symbolic presence of an oral tradition a symbolic presence of what the their family's life was before they arrived where they have now.

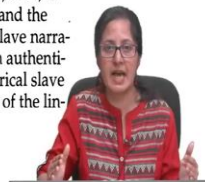
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had worked as slaves, and which would offer him, for the first time in his life, a substantial degree of achievement and self-realization. Arnold Rampersad identifies such a pursuit of self-realization as an inherent feature of the slave narrative (105), so that the play itself comes to constitute a broader, metaphorical slave narrative, one 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 nar-

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 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 lin-



For him that piano is that object which could perhaps offer for him for the first time in his life a substantial degree of achievement and self-realization. It is something which could open up the path towards a different kind of claim a different kind of heritage by acquiring the land which ones belonged to the family that owned them Sutter's family.

So, this could be realized as this pursuit; this pursuit towards self realization could be identified as an inherent feature of the slave narrative and this pursuit towards self realization in different ways could be seen even in the earlier play that we looked at a raisin in the sun.

So, there is in metaphorical as well as in real sense, this quest towards self realization is also a search towards economic freedom and in Boy Willies persona we find this getting exemplified in so, many different ways when right at the beginning when we meet him

he is he arrives there with a truckload of watermelons and he wants to sell them and make money and his pursue towards any form of self worth any form of self realization any form of acquiring or cementing his identity is also through economic freedom.

So, the structure of the play we would see it's like a narrative within a narrative it's a boxed kind of structure as we would see and one narrative does not overlap with the other one narrative does not overlap with the other one narrative does not destroy the importance of the other that something that we see in the in these in this narration which is almost like a box within a box structure.

But the interaction in some sense if you look at it's in the form of a call and response structure. There are certain situations there are certain conversations dialogues which are initiated and the plot unfolds as a response to that. So, the there are two linear narratives that we could see.

So, in the manner of this traditional call and response pattern we find that, the movement is not towards resolution, the movement is not towards resolving the crisis or figuring out how everything will come to an end, but the progression is determined in the way in which each character is responding to this call.

So, if you notice the way in which the plot is unfolded before us whether it is about a minor detail about how the details of the occupation that Doaker pursues or how Avery had the dream. And how he responds to that and decides to form a congregation or if it's about something more profound and more deep which has an impact on the play like the history of the piano, we find that these details are being given in response to in the in the in this pattern of a call and response a situation.

So, there is as a result what happens is, in the course of the play itself when the each characters are responding to these different situations and as a new form of narrative is unfolding before us, we also find an perennial recreation of the myths that they are living we find their own belief systems.

We find their own notions about their own lives as well as the society that they see around them it keeps changing because in the every time the version of their stories are getting narrated, we find a different kind of a truth emerges as well a different kind of an ending emerges as well.

So, each character in that sense has an ownership of the kind of narrative that he or she is narrating and that has an overall bearing on the kind of narrative which the play produces the kind of alternate histories and the alternate possibilities that this the this play encourages us to access. So, Boy Willie we find that he is unable to take charge of his own narrative.

So, every move that he makes to escape this legacy by selling the piano, by getting rid of the piano, by not engaging with the history the context within which it is let me find that it also in response to the mythical presence in response to the symbolic metaphorical mythical presence that the piano has in their lives.

So, even his final attempt to defy the myth and steal the piano is quite frustrated and he is forced into acquiring his freedom and self realization in the emotional realm and not the economic one by confronting Sutter's ghost and not buy buying him.

So, we find a complete shift in his attitude, we find a complete shift in his value system the way he wants to go ahead with this process of claiming his identity with this process of claiming his legacy by shifting from this economic realm towards a more emotional realm.

So, we find a rewriting of the myths though in the response that Boy Willie gives, we find a reconfiguration of this entire story based on how Boy Willie chooses to respond to in to this question of what to do with this piano, how one uses this legacy.

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...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

...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, here in order for these characters to find peace or come to terms with the reality, it's also important that some of the myths have to be completely destroyed. They have to destroy the existing myths in order to create new ones, the piano has to become something which belongs to them in an organic and inherent way and not something which would constantly remind them of a legacy that of a past that they want to perhaps distance themselves from or get rid of that is the transformation maybe the most visible transformation that we see in this play is also that of Boy Willie, where he changes his stance from wanting to acquire Sutter's land towards encountering Sutter's ghost.

This also acquires a radical change of his position, his attitude where he has to acknowledge the presence of the ghost vis a vis the his initial response where he chooses to think that perhaps Berniece is just seeing things Berniece is just making up these things just to get rid of the prospect of selling the piano.

So, it's possible as this essay would encourage us to think, it's possible to look at this play the piano lesson on three tiers. So, first Wilson creates a play within a play by describing a mythological slave narrative carved into this focal object which is the piano and it is repeated several times by the plays characters.

So, we there are we find these triggers to talk about the pianos history about the history of the the narrative which is carved on the piano from the outset when Boy Willie listens



to Maretha playing something on the piano and he asks her whether she is aware of the history where she knows what these carvings mean.

So, we find that this history, this narrative, this mythological slave narrative is repeated by these characters several times and in this repetition also we find that newer versions and newer possibilities are emerging.

So, that is a first level the second level we find that the August Wilson is using the piano and its attendant narrative as a haunting presence and this is also formulated in the form of this call and response manner of black folk tradition and the call to which Boy Willie in his quest for self realization must also respond to if he were to achieve his goal.

So, we find Boy Willie becoming the center of this second level, where it is in his response and it is in response to these different calls that we find the play unfolding itself.

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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.

The 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 Boy Willies undertaking he juxtaposes Boy Willies undertaking with that of his slave ancestors and the quest becomes quite similar over here. Boy Willies quest and the quest of his ancestors they are made to blend together they are made to come together and forges at a similar point.

So, we find that at the end of the play instead of these characters pursuing their own personal self words there is a certain coherence that the play achieves at the end of it not



perhaps a resolution not perhaps a decision about how things would unfold in future, but there is a coherence which we can notice through which the play overall becomes a metaphorical slave narrative.

So, they towards the end of the play we realize that it is no longer about what Berniece thinks or about what Doaker feels or the versions that a Boy Willie has, it is about claiming an alternate narrative a metaphorical slave narrative that all of them can equally participate that all of them can equally subscribe to without having to distance themselves from it in any way.

It is an unspeakable past, it is a past which has had many tragic complication and implications, but at the same time it becomes it also becomes a past that they that all of them can claim to.

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taught behaviors and attitudes to its victims which were subsequently making them successful in postbellum America (Andrews). In every case for such a narrative, the bondage is shown to have served ultimately the interests of the one who had been subjected to it and subsequently escaped it.

No one seems to need such a psychological reconstruction any worse than Boy Willie. He is essentially a rogue—a “survivor” who has learned, in the process of surviving, to steal, cheat, and lie, and who now sees his chance to emerge from the cycle that has killed more of the men in his family than he wishes to remember. His passionate denial of any responsibility for Crawley’s death in the face of Berniece’s accusations make that clear (57). But the accusations themselves

(18-19). Boy Willie and Wining Boy’s simultaneous arrival in Pittsburgh reinforces a certain truth in the metaphor; to this point, Boy Willie’s life has reflected this “restless wandering” of the freed slave experience (Pereira 1). For Boy Willie, however, the escape from white domination is more ambitious, and he seeks a change from which the train will never return (90-92). The irony is that he must use the piano to accomplish such a change, to authenticate his identity, just as every male in his family has done since its construction. The difference is that, rather than discovering his identity in the piano’s layering of myth, he must do so by demythologizing it.

His actions seem to fall logically within an evolutionary series of phases through which the slave narrative



So, how is Boy Willie presented in this play? He is presented as a survivor a very rough survivor who has perhaps seen it all. So, he is essentially a survivor who has learned, in the process of surviving, to steal, to cheat, and lie, and who now sees his chance to emerge from the cycle that has killed more of the men in his family than he wishes to remember.

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and subsequently escaped it.

No one seems to need such a psychological reconstruction any worse than Boy Willie. He is essentially a rogue—a “survivor” who has learned, in the process of surviving, to steal, cheat, and lie, and who now sees his chance to emerge from the cycle that has killed more of the men in his family than he wishes to remember. His passionate denial of any responsibility for Crawley’s death in the face of Berniece’s accusations make that clear (52). But the accusations themselves remind Boy Willie of just how far he has come in the family legacy, and how close he is to escaping it through the piano. The fact that he now needs the piano, the hard evidence of the legacy, with the likeness of his ancestors

from white domination is more ambitious, and he seeks a change from which the train will never return (90-92). The irony is that he must use the piano to accomplish such a change, to authenticate his identity, just as every male in his family has done since its construction. The difference is that, rather than discovering his identity in the piano’s layering of myth, he must do so by demythologizing it.

His actions seem to fall logically within an evolutionary series of phases through which the slave narrative, as a literary form, has passed. Robert Stepto writes that slave narratives develop in three phases, each building upon the social and psychological dynamic of the previous stage. The first phase he calls the “eclectic phase,” in which the



So, his passionate denial of any responsibility of Crawley’s death Crawley is a Bernieces husband and they were together like stealing wood and he is the one who gets shot and the other two are imprisoned. So, his denial of any responsibility for Crawley’s death it’s also to make this very clear.

He does not want to remember certain aspects of that past even while he is encouraging all the other characters to be aware the way he tells Maretha at the outset that she should know what these carvings mean, we find that he also wants to escape this escape the many things that he also has done escape the many things that the family had to undergo.

So, these accusations that he had a responsibility he had a part to play in Crawley’s death. They also remind Boy Willie of how far he has come in the family legacy and how close he is to escaping it by getting rid of the piano by selling the piano and acquiring something which will help him remember the past perhaps in a very different way.

That is what he envisions when he describes the scene of meeting another white man and then talking to him about random things about the weather or talking to him one to one basis without this hierarchy coming into picture that is what he ideally envisions that is what he thinks he would get once he sells the piano and acquires the land.

And he needs the piano, that the piano which is the hard evidence of this legacy it's not abstract anymore there are those carvings which makes the piano very distinct from any other piano owned by a white family. So, this is a hard evidence of the legacy and he also finds the history of the family carved into it in ways that it cannot be erased at all. So, for Boy Willie stories of the family's courage in saving this icon are no longer sufficient for maintaining his self work maintaining his self identity his self concept.

So, he wants to establish his own slave narrative or even a metaphorical one to do for himself or Doaker's narrative has done for the rest of the family and his quest in some sense this play could be seen as a quest undertaken by Boy Willie to have a narrative of himself a narrative which would help him identify his concept, his identity.

Because the play also starts with this journey he has traveled in this truck with a truck load of watermelons and he arrives at the crack of dawn and he is the one who creates a ruckus. And he is the one who enters the scene of the play enters Charles household and disturbs everything.

So, it is his quest in some sense if we could choose to see it that way. So, the piano also remains as his focal point in a very literal sense no matter where they are, no matter what kind of a things that they have done with their life with their lives like a Doaker's story tells us about how he had this occupation, how he was working in these railroads and Boy Willie had forever been roaming.

He was in prison and the family has faced death the family has suffered all kinds of things that the um all kinds of things that African American family could possibly think of, but regardless of how far they have roamed and regardless of what all has happened in their lives there is this piano acts as a central focal point which can again bring them together.

So, it is the piano though Boy Willie is there to sell the piano to get rid of the piano, it is the piano which brings him back to the Charles household and this is what gets metaphorically foregrounded in that narrative in that description about the trains when Doaker goes into this endless ramble about the about his work. And how he used to witness trains coming and going many people assume they can arrive at their destinations by going in any direction, but in the end the train always returned.

There is a cyclical nature of their journeys of their history which Doaker's story here very metaphorically eludes too. So, Robert Steptos critic has identified these different stages of through which slave narratives develop in this quest for achieving their identity in this quest for identifying their self-work.

The first phase if we could use this play to understand how the unfolding of a slave narrative works, we could again identify these different stages, it could be mapped into this the piano lesson as well. So, as per Robert Steptos analysis the first phase is the eclectic phase.


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evidence for authenticating the narrative is appended to the tale, and comes from outside the tale itself. The earliest slave narratives bore affidavits signed by white editors, writers, or slaveholders, stating that the witnesses knew personally that the slave was capable of writing, and had in fact written, the narrative to which the affidavit was attached. In the second phase, the "integrated phase," the authenticating evidence became integrated into the tale and became one or more voices within the tale. This appears to be the phase in which Doaker's narrative of the family legacy of the piano exists. It is replete with mythological elements. specific names

generic one—it can be anyone's story. The myth for Boy Willie no longer demands that *anyone* have a piano; all that is demanded is a willingness to follow in the tradition of the myth, and to do whatever it takes to succeed, just as those who carved the piano, maintained it, and subsequently stole it for the family demonstrated. He becomes, in Pamela Jean Monaco's words, a "living reminder" of his family's past (95).

**The structure of the play is a literal slave narrative integrated into a metaphorical one.**

One of Wilson's important distinctions in the play is the difference between Boy Willie and Berniece. Each has an





So, this is where evidence for authenticating the narrative is appended to the tale and comes from outside the tale itself. So, the earliest slave narratives for instance bore affidavits signed by white editors, writers or slaveholders stating that the witnesses knew personally that the slave was capable of writing whatever the family's of the slaves wrote it had to be validated .

So, there was an affidavit which had to be attached to these tales in order to authenticate these tales. So, in the second phase which is the integrated phase, the authenticating evidence became integrated into the tale and it became one or more voices within the tale and this is what happens in Doaker's narrative of the family legacy the piano, this is what happens when Doaker is narrating this story and it is replete with mythological elements

specific names with of places events and they all serve to bear witness through the connection with established fact to the tales authenticity.

So, they may not be authentic in the truer sense of the term, but it need not be validated with an external presence, there is no white presence which is required to authenticate these tales anymore. So, it becomes a core of Patricia Gantt another critic it talks about the shared southernness over here where the stories come from within where these tales come from within in the second stage where the details are all supplied in an internal sense authenticating validating the slave narratives.

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and places and events, all of which serve to bear witness, through their connection with established fact, to the tale's authenticity (though it is important to notice that this tale, as with all such myths, may *not* be "authentic," in the sense of having occurred in the literal manner the narrative details). As such, it becomes the core of what Patricia Gantt calls their "shared southernness" (79). Boy Willie seems to have moved to the third phase, the "generic phase" of the slave narrative, during which it becomes no longer necessary to add details merely to authenticate the narrative; the narrative itself takes total precedence, subsuming all other authenticating documents or strategies (Step 4-6). At this point, the narrative stands on its own merit.

This appears to be the point at

understanding of the world that demonstrates a certain nobility of vision, but their understanding of each other's visions is so limited that they seem, at times, not to have shared the same heritage (Kubitschek 193). Indeed, for whatever reason, they have arrived at different spiritual destinations. Slave narratives are essentially Bildungsroman, and like the typical Bildungsroman, slave narratives often fail to distinguish adequately between male and female development (Smith 33). *The Piano Lesson* could conceivably have told Berniece's story—the attempt of a strong woman to salvage the family history from a brother who would sell it. This would have required a greater investment on Wilson's part into "eclectic phase" narratives, along with the accompanying



So, Boy Willie seems to have moved to the third generic phase, from the first eclectic phase Doaker's story in general the Charles household in general seems to have moved on the second phase which is the integrated phase. But Boy Willie as a character as perhaps if we may identify one lead character in this play he seems to have move to the third phase which is the generic phase.

During this time it becomes no longer necessary to add any details to authenticate. The narrative the narrative takes precedence subsuming all other authenticating documents or strategies and at this point the narrative has the ability to stand entirely on its own merit.

So, that is what Boy Willie wants for his life as well not just for his legacy, not just for the history that for that metaphorically the piano stands for, he wants the same to be replicated in his life as well.

So, this is where this is the point during this generic phase where there is no longer a need to authenticate or validate it's at this stage that Boy Willie also wants to escape from his family legacy, because he does not want to be no longer authenticated by the piano or its mythological connection to the past there is a constant denial of everything right from the beginning when Berniece says she saw Sutter's ghost upstairs.

So, he is only a rationale for keeping the piano is in putting it to some practical everyday use in giving piano lessons and if that is not being done in the absence of that practical everyday use he is willing to put it to use by selling it in exchange of money which he can use to buy the land.

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necessary to add details merely to authenticate the narrative; the narrative itself takes total precedence, subsuming all other authenticating documents or strategies (Step 4-6). At this point, the narrative stands on its own merit.

This appears to be the point at which Boy Willie is attempting his escape from the family legacy. His own life is no longer authenticated by the piano and its mythological connection to the past. His only rationale for keeping the piano lies in Berniece's putting it to some practical use—giving lessons. In the absence of that, he himself is willing to put it to use.<sup>2</sup> But his identity is no longer based in the mythology it represents. This is the significant point in Step 6's typology; at this point, the narrative becomes a

could conceivably have told Berniece's story—the attempt of a strong woman to salvage the family history from a brother who would sell it. This would have required a greater investment on Wilson's part into “eclectic phase” narratives, along with the accompanying authenticating strategies—in this case, the rich detail of the story, the ghosts who seem to confirm it, the fascinating, almost mythic qualities to the narrative. This might have had the effect of tying the play even closer to Afro-American tradition, for in black literature, history often assumes a mythic quality in order to respond to questions of identity raised by a history largely told by and focusing on whites (Campbell 155). The result is a black American history structured as a con-



But his identity is no longer based in the mythology it represents and he wants to make a tangible move make a very visible move away from the piano and the legacy and the validating compulsions that it brings with it.

This is also a point where the story could be anyone story, it is that generic status that a person like a Boy Willie longs to inhabit longs to be part of which is why he chooses to believe that the he can take care of himself and the law is not particularly in favor of the

white population he also unlike the others chooses to believe that he will be treated just the way he would treat the others and he can decide he can be the master of his life and he can be the master of the turn of events that happen in his own life.

So, the myth for Boy Willie no longer demands that anyone should have a piano; there is no need for a specific symbol to inhabit ones identity and all that is demanded is a willingness to follow in the tradition of the myth and to do whatever it takes to succeed and just as those who carved the piano maintained it and subsequently stole it for the family demonstrated.

So, he just wants just the way all the other members his ancestors had been using the piano to meet their own ends and this is how he chooses to see it he wants to use the piano in a way that it would help him find himself help him find a position for himself in the current situation.

So, he becomes he himself he becomes a living reminder of his family's past and that is also something that he is trying to get away from. So, in spite of the shared heritage that Berniece and Boy Willie seems to have, they do not perhaps understand the nobility of the common vision, but their understanding of each other's vision the or understanding of each other's attitude to life is so, limited that its almost becomes impossible for us to believe whether they actually have this shared heritage and they also seems to have arrived at different destinations, they seem to have carved out different roots and different goals for themselves.

So, slave narratives in this sense could be seen as a bildungsroman, where we see this journey of becoming and here we have seen that there is a difference between how the men and women look at the slave narratives, how they want to either appropriate it or how they want to distance themselves from it. This is a play which also encourages to look at the gender discrimination over here by looking at the responses of Berniece as well as Boy Willie.

So, *The Piano Lesson* could have been told is Berniece story entirely and if you if we choose to look at it in that sense. The attendance of a strong woman to salvage family history from a brother who would sell it and this. In fact, this if the story were to be taken forward in that sense it would have required a greater amount of investment into the eclectic phase with, it would have required a lot of authenticating strategies to confirm



the mythical qualities to accentuate the mythical qualities to add tangible sort of evidence to the story that she is believing that she is subscribing to and she is wanting the others to subscribe to as well.

So, this might have had the effect of taking the plane closer to the afro American tradition because this would also have become kind of a story which is told by way of authentication after having validated it by the white population which also had caused these tragic effects.

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tinuing relationship between the living and the dead (Morales 106).

Consider, for example, the accidental deaths of white men being attributed to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. With near certainty, the explanations we hear in the play for the deaths are not the explanations that would be offered by the families of the victims, or by the mass media. They are mythical explanations, yet they serve to authenticate the lives of the men who died and became the Ghosts (just as Boy Willie seeks authentication through ownership of Sutter's land), and they serve to authenticate the sacredness of the piano itself—it was important enough for black men to die for, and it was important enough for white men to kill for. Berniece believes

who wanted to convey a specific political message (Smith 9-10). In *The Piano Lesson*, the truth of the narrative is subsumed by its communal and familial empowerment—consider the empowering effect achieved by Wining Boy's retelling of the Yellow Dog myth:

I done been to where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog and called out their names. They talk back to you, too. . . . I can't say how they talked to nobody else. But to me it just filled me up in a strange sort of way to be standing there on that spot. I didn't want to leave. It felt like the longer I stood there the bigger I got. (34-35)

Doaker's retelling of the piano myth offers the same sense of power (40-46). What is not so obvious is that Doaker's narrative bears internal evidence to



So, that is the danger of making this story entirely Bernieces and that is something very strategically that August Wilson stays away from as well.

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important enough for black men to die for, and it was important enough for white men to kill for. Berniece believes in the mythical power of the piano and acknowledges it as a point of contact with her ancestral heritage (Morales 108); this explains her absolute reluctance to sell it—it was important enough to die for (but only within the parameters of the myth). The result is an acknowledgment of the symbiotic relationship between her generation and those who came before—for mutual gain or mutual destruction—just as in the African ancestral rituals that were the source of the original myth (Morales 109). It is to these ancestors she turns during the family's confrontation with Sutter's ghost near the end of the play.

One of the strengths of such a

offers the same sense of power (40-46). What is not so obvious is that Doaker's narrative bears internal evidence to some degree of inauthenticity. In documenting the family heritage, Doaker relates that Old Berniece and her son (Doaker's and Charles's father) were sold as payment for the piano to a slaveholder "down in Georgia" (42). In his grief over their departure (and in response to the white mistress's grief over losing her favorite slave), the first Boy Willie (Doaker's grandfather) carved their portraits, as well as much of the family history, into the piano. What seems problematic about this genealogy is that Doaker's and Charles's father would have been in Georgia, some distance away, when these statues were being carved, and was unlikely to have known anything



So, towards the end of the play when the family is confronting Sutter's ghost, Berniece turns to her ancestors and in her mind and also as the way the play chooses to show it, it is the presence of the piano that helps them to invoke the ancestors and the ancestors play a very big role when she is when the family is confronting the Sutter's confronting the Sutter's ghost.

And this also towards the end of the play we find that the piano is not just a metaphorical presence over here it becomes like a symbol of a very symbiotic relationship between her generation and those who came before. And whether this is for mutual gain or for mutual destruction we find that there is a symbiotic relationship with the past, there is a symbiotic relationship with what the ancestors did and how they arrived how they help to the present generation arrived where they have that is something which cannot be pulled apart.

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and those who came before—for mutual gain or mutual destruction—just as in the African ancestral rituals that were the source of the original myth (Morales 109). It is to these ancestors she turns during the family's confrontation with Sutter's ghost near the end of the play.

One of the strengths of such a mythology is its ability to empower the believer—particularly in its power to define the past and to define reality (Byerman 4). It was precisely for this reason that slave narratives and slave songs became such an important literary form for black America. Such narratives take control of the environment by shaping it sympathetically and, in doing so, giving individuals control over themselves and their destiny (Dixon 70). As a result then, it is common

Boy Willie (Doaker's grandfather) carved their portraits, as well as much of the family history, into the piano. What seems problematic about this genealogy is that Doaker's and Charles's father would have been in Georgia, some distance away, when these statues were being carved, and was unlikely to have known anything about them, or that they even existed. Nevertheless, Doaker relates that Charles (his father) becomes obsessed enough with the piano to raid the Sutter farm and steal it, an act that would lead directly to his death. Now, even Sutter's grandson has become complicit in the myth, appearing like what Anne Fleche calls "the vampire from some expressionistic film" to take his revenge on those, like Boy Willie, who will not believe the myth and



So, in a very drawing a drawing on a very mythical tradition, the story at the end we find that it's not about the tangible evidence it is not about the rational way of looking at history, but what gets foregrounded is the ability to empower the believer and it is in terms of how they are all convinced that the about the presence of Sutter's ghost about the need to encounter Sutter's ghost.

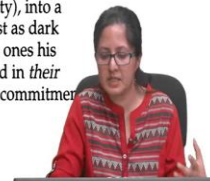
Why invoking the presence of the ancestors who are also who could be invoked by needs of the through the piano, we find that there is a mythology which comes to life over here it's deliberately plant in such ways that it becomes important for this belief system to be foregrounded towards the end of the play.

And it is that believe which has the power to define the past as well as the present reality and here we find the play deliberately moving away from many of the things that Boy Willie subscribes to at the beginning of the play. It's not a rational response, it's not a material sort of response, but it's more like a response which is based on a belief system.

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though she treats the myth throughout the play with a selective reverence. She refuses to play the piano, and has done so ever since her mother's death, as a way of forgetting the past—of keeping the spirits from “walking around . . . the house”—even as she honors its sacredness (70). Likewise, she denies the existence of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog (15, 34), though she is ultimately forced to acknowledge both—the past and the spirits—in reclaiming her faith in the myth, when she plays the piano and furiously calls on her ancestors to help Boy Willie defeat the ghost of Sutter in a final showdown, for both Boy Willie and Berniece, between embracing the past and planning a future. For the family, it is a landmark moment, and a reconciling one, for by embracing the shared

ness, it is more than mere pragmatism that sets Boy Willie's story apart as a classic “slave narrative.” He was, after all, extremely pragmatic when he was still playing the part of the rogue; skimming wood for himself from the load he was hauling for a white man, as pragmatic as the decision may have seemed, was the catalytic event in Crawley's death. What sets Boy Willie apart, then, is that, like the archetypal hero of the Bildungsroman, he is moving from the somewhat idyllic world of an almost childlike ignorance, symbolized by his having recently come out of the rural South (a traditional metaphor for innocence and simplicity), into a metaphoric wilderness, just as dark and full of surprises as the ones his ancestors would have faced in their escape attempts. Once the commitment



So, it is because of this that we need to see Boy Willie as it archetypal hero of bildungsroman and he we find that he is moving from a somewhat idyllic world of an almost childlike ignorance and it is symbolized also with his recent coming out of the rural south and he is moving into a metaphoric wilderness.

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so ever since her mother's death, as a way of forgetting the past—of keeping the spirits from “walking around . . . the house”—even as she honors its sacredness (70). Likewise, she denies the existence of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog (15, 34), though she is ultimately forced to acknowledge both—the past and the spirits—in reclaiming her faith in the myth, when she plays the piano and furiously calls on her ancestors to help Boy Willie defeat the ghost of Sutter in a final showdown, for both Boy Willie and Berniece, between embracing the past and planning a future. For the family, it is a landmark moment, and a reconciling one, for by embracing the shared mythology, both Berniece and Boy Willie find what they seek (Werner 46). Berniece rediscovers the usefulness for

ing, extremely pragmatic when he was still playing the part of the rogue; skimming wood for himself from the load he was hauling for a white man, as pragmatic as the decision may have seemed, was the catalytic event in Crawley's death. What sets Boy Willie apart, then, is that, like the archetypal hero of the Bildungsroman, he is moving from the somewhat idyllic world of an almost childlike ignorance, symbolized by his having recently come out of the rural South (a traditional metaphor for innocence and simplicity), into a metaphoric wilderness, just as dark and full of surprises as the ones his ancestors would have faced in their escape attempts. Once the commitment is made, turning back becomes impossible (Smith 33).

Furthermore, while he is not a lit-



And this his movement his growth is in this movement, the bildungsroman as it works out in Boy Willies life with the piano at the center, we find that he moves from a very childlike idyllic ignorance that it is that he could do whatever he wants with his legacy

and that the past is going to be very different once he claims it in a different way, he is moving he is being forced out of that belief into something which is rooted in myths something which is rooted in a very ideal belief system.

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Boy Willie embarks on an archetypal quest for self-realization by attempting to purchase the very land that his family had been forced to work as slaves, and working it himself for his own profit. The cost of such self-realization is high—he must surrender the concept of community, the folklore of family, and the respect of his ancestors to acquire the means to his sense of selfhood. In the call-and-response of the parallel narratives within the play, Boy Willie is refusing to engage the call, seeking instead his own “song.” To him, the decision seems to be a pragmatic one—the piano has gone untouched by Berniece since Mama Ola died seven years before (10). His argument places him squarely in the

quest for not only economic and social freedom but to reclaim the heritage built by his ancestors and stolen from him. He even seems to be pursued by a sort of spiritual slave catcher. His chief dissimilarity with the runaway slave would appear to be his inability to persuade anyone of the merits of his method. What he surrenders in nobility, however, he reacquires with single-mindedness: He is determined to take the piano regardless of Berniece’s opinion or threats. This quality of being “driven” is a quality inherent in yet another literary motif—the running man, the man who is fleeing the culture in which he is the outsider: the immigrant from Europe at the birth of America, the pioneer in the westward expansion, the runaway slave (Klotman 17). What distinguished the



So, what this play tries to subvert towards the end is, this the quest for self-realization that Boy Willie embarks on and this archetypal quest is defined by his attempt by his desire to purchase the very land that his family had been forced to work as slaves and he wants to work it himself for his own profit thereby appropriating and claiming a part of the past which she could never have a share of.

But the cost of this self realization is very high that is what the play is showing us showing the characters at the end of the play that he must surrender the concept of his community, he must surrender the mythical the folklore elements of his family. He should also surrender the respect of his ancestors that he has to acquire the means to acquire the means to his sense of selfhood it’s a practical element of Boy Willie’s life decision that the play also has to counter that the play also has to try and engage with.



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sesses in the piano, a value that stands in contrast to the inherent transcendent and symbolic value it possesses for Berniece (51). To liquidate the piano would be to demythologize it, to profane it, to take away the essence of identity which Berniece has bestowed upon it, the same identity that she placed so completely in Crawley, who seemingly foreshadowed this loss by being taken from her, in her mind, by Boy Willie. In this sense, Boy Willie, by selling the piano, would be asserting the preeminence of his own narrative over that of the piano and its carvings—present over past, utility over tradition, freedom over community. It is an inversion of the call-and-response, an attempt to make the “song” that is his life truly his own. At that point he would be retaking con-

like the piano (69).

In the end, however, the piano will not authenticate Boy Willie’s search for freedom. When he goes to move it, to take possession of it, to claim power over it, the piano will not move (83). As a result, he is ultimately forced into battle with the one thing that may still hold power over his narrative—Sutter’s Ghost. Whether he killed Sutter, as Berniece believes (15), or whether Sutter has taken a position as representative of the whole white world directly in Boy Willie’s path, the result is that Boy Willie must ascend the stairs—“go to the mountaintop”—and defeat this final obstacle to freedom. He had imagined all along that the piano was his final hurdle; now he finds this engagement with Sutter, which he has desired economically



So, while it’s difficult to argue with the pragmatic aspects that the character Boy Willies foregrounding, it’s also shown in a very real tangible sense in the play that the piano is something which would refuse to move. It is not something over which even say Berniece or Boy Willie has a complete say, they cannot make a decision based on what they feel like or based on what they think piano will eventually yield itself too.

But it also turns out that they realize that the sense of agency that they have over the piano and by extension to change their past in ways that it would not be in alignment with what their ancestors wanted that seems like quite an impossibility towards the end of the play.

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selling the piano, would be asserting the preeminence of his own narrative over that of the piano and its carvings—present over past, utility over tradition, freedom over community. It is an inversion of the call-and-response, an attempt to make the “song” that is his life truly his own. At that point, he would be retaking control over the text of his own narrative, a text that most slave narratives, even the one represented by the piano, surrendered to the demands of authentication and audience (Step 16-17). Certainly control over the text of bondage is no guarantee of freedom (McDowell 160). But it would be evidence of that freedom.

For the first time, then, Boy Willie would have acquired a sense of place. Ralph Ellison writes, “If we don’t

representative of the whole white world directly in Boy Willie’s path, the result is that Boy Willie must ascend the stairs—“go to the mountaintop”—and defeat this final obstacle to freedom. He had imagined all along that the piano was his final hurdle; now he finds this engagement with Sutter, which he has desired economically throughout the play, to be his “baptism by fire”—“baptism” suggested by his reference to water, “fire” by his reference to Hell (105).

This was the point at which the play originally ended; once Boy Willie engaged the ghosts of the past, he had cleared the very hurdle for which he sought to sell the piano (Shannon 149-50). For Wilson, struggle with such ghosts of the past is a real phenomenon for black America, and the ambiguity



So, this final hurdle that he has by encountering Sutter’s ghost that is described as baptism by fire and as baptism by fire is also reference to a reference to hell over here and whether he killed Sutter as Berniece believes or whether Sutter has taken a position as representative of the whole white world directly in Boy Willies path the result is that Boy Willie must ascend this stairs go to the mountaintop and defeat his final obstacle to freedom.

There is no easy way out of it and this personal encounter in order to achieve his personal worth that becomes the highlight of this play. There is no easy way out by selling the piano and acquiring the land, but there is a personal encounter over here which makes his quest more valid which adds gives a spiritual element which adds a spiritual flavor to his quest.



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He leaves Pittsburgh no richer (with the exception of the proceeds from watermelons he has brought with him), but wiser—no longer completely disdainful of that which his ancestors loved, no longer completely trusting in his own pursuits.

At this point, the parallel narratives come together in a single call to the future; the response awaits. The family's slave narrative yields to the piano's pragmatic use, where its focus becomes the present and future, not the past. On the other hand, Boy Willie,

having concurred with the importance of sanctifying the family's past, refocuses on an unchanged, but refined and more powerful, vision of his own future. In his struggle with the ghosts of the past, he has reached a new level of self-actualization and has taken the family's understanding of its shared slave narrative to its final, generic phase; now both he and Berniece may continue the narrative. Neither of them seeks, or needs, any further authentication of its validity.



So, it is not that Boy Willie has to give up what he aspires about his future. He has a more refined sense of future now he has a more refined vision of his future now as this essay would also highlight a Boy Willie having concurred with the importance of sanctifying the family's past, refocuses on unchanged, but redefined, but refined and more powerful vision of his future.

In his struggle with the ghost of the past he has reached a new level of self actualization and he has taken the family's understanding of its shared slave narrative towards final generic phase now both he and Berniece may continue the narrative neither of them seeks or needs any further authentication of his validity.

So, there is a coherent piece towards the end of the play as we would see we will also look at some particular sections which highlights those aspects. We find that towards the end of the play there is no need for either Berniece or for Boy Willie to validate their story anymore the piano could be there as an organic presence, the past could be there as an extension of their own life of their ancestors life and the future can still look very promising even while they are holding onto all of these things.

The material the piano continues to remain there as a legacy as a material procession and it also helps them to refine their goals in a better way because both of them in some sense when the play begins both of them are disconnected with their past while

Bernieces holding onto the piano she does not want to actively remember or hand over the legacy of a remembered past.

On the other hand, while Boy Willie is entirely conscious of what the piano stands for, while Boy Willie continually acknowledges what the piano stands for he also wants it to disappear as a symbol which would remind him of an ugly past on the contrary, he wants to use it as a material thing which would help him access a different future.

But here at the end of the play we realize that by keeping the piano by claiming what the ancestors had left for them they both can have a more refined sense of future, a more refined sense of more meaningful goals which would also help them not to move away from the legacy, which would also help them to stay connected with the past while lane claim on a future which would take them towards more self actualizing possibilities. So, with this we bring this session to an end.

I thank you for your time and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.