

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


Lecture - 55
August Wilson's The Piano Lesson Part 7

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The slide displays a script for Act One, Scene 2 of August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson*. The script is split across two pages, 42 and 43. On page 42, characters like Berniece, Wining Boy, Boy Willie, Lymon, and Doaker are shown in dialogue. On page 43, the dialogue continues with Doaker and Wining Boy. A video inset in the bottom right corner shows a woman, Prof. Merin Simi Raj, speaking. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the slide.

We come back to take a closer look at this play, *The Piano Lesson*. And we had stopped with this instance, where Doaker begins to tell the story; Doaker begins to narrate the slave history which is associated with the object, the central object of this play, The Piano.

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DOAKER: I'm gonna tell you something. Lymon don't know this . . . but I'm gonna tell you why me and Winning Boy say Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano.

BOY WILLIE: She ain't got to sell it! I'm gonna sell it! Berniece ain't got no more rights to that piano than I do.

DOAKER: I'm talking to the man . . . let me talk to the man. See, now . . . to understand why we say that . . . to understand about that piano . . . you got to go back to slavery time. See, our family was owned by a fellow named Robert Sutter. That was Sutter's grandfather. All right. The piano was owned by a fellow named Joel Noland. He was one of the Noland brothers from down in Georgia. It was coming up on Sutter's wedding anniversary and he was looking to buy his wife . . . Miss Ophelia was her name . . . he was looking to buy her an anniversary present. Only thing with him . . . he ain't had no money. But he had some niggers. So he asked Mr. Noland to see if maybe he could trade off some of his niggers for that piano. Told him he would give him one and a half niggers for it. That's the way he told him. Say he could have one full grown and one half grown. Mr. Noland agreed only he say he had to pick them. He didn't want Sutter to give him just any old nigger. He


DOAKER: Alright. Time go along. Time go along. Miss Ophelia got to missing my grandmother . . . the way she would cook and clean the house and talk to her and what not. And she missed having my daddy around the house to fetch things for her. So she asked to see if maybe she could trade back that piano and get her niggers back. Mr. Noland said no. Said a deal was a deal. Him and Sutter had a big falling out about it and Miss Ophelia took sick to the bed. Wouldn't get out of the bed in the morning. She just lay there. The doctor said she was wasting away.

WINING BOY: That's when Sutter called our granddaddy up to the house.

DOAKER: Now, our granddaddy's name was Boy Willie. That's who Boy Willie's named after . . . only they called him Willie Boy. Now, he was a worker of wood. He could make you anything you wanted out of wood. He'd make you a desk. A table. A lamp. Anything you wanted. Them white fellows around there used to come up to Mr. Sutter and get him to make all kinds of things for them. Then they'd pay Mr. Sutter a nice price. See, everything my granddaddy made Mr. Sutter owned cause he owned him. That's why when Mr. Noland offered to buy him

the history of the piano - the piano lesson

Interchangeability of person and object under the system of slavery
white kinship network - at the expense of black lives
the black slave = the master's gift and accessory



Doaker is narrating this to Boy Willie, and it is not as if they are listening to this for the first time. We do know that there is a certain sense of re-narration, there is a re-enactment, which happens over here, and the memories which are which come flourishing back to Doaker, they do have an impact on not just on the audience, but also on the characters who are part of this play, because they are re-narrating this.

Every time this is being re-narrated it takes a very different import altogether, as we have already seen in the earlier discussion. So, in the previous essay that we discussed, we also saw how these memory narrations, they have an impact, they have a great impact in the way in which the history gets re-mythologized. In this, every time the story is re-narrated, we find that it is a different identity, it is a different claim that they have on the past.

So, to understand about that piano, we got to go back to slavery time. And here we would have also notice that Doaker is this storyteller here. And it is evident in the way the play makes Doaker as well as Avery talk about certain aspects from the past, which are seemingly very personal part of why how they were working and what kind of occupations they had, and how they got, and how they worked in the railroad or, in the details that Avery gives he works as a an elevator man, but he also had this dream which drew him towards the to building a church.

So, in these details, we find that what August Wilson is also doing is to give us access to a kind of history that is otherwise not documented. In these details, we also find those finer aspects, those markers, which are very peculiar to African American identity, but which will not be found in the usual, other usual descriptions about twentieth century America.

So, you got to go back to slavery time. See our family was owned by a fellow named Robert Sutter; that was Sutter's grandfather, alright. The piano was owned by a fellow named Joel Nolander. He was one of the Nolander brothers from down in Georgia.

It was coming up on Sutter's wedding anniversary, and he was looking to buy his wife Miss Ophelia was her name. All details are given to the reader, so that we can re- create the past along with very real characters. It is no longer an abstract notion about slavery. It is no longer a past from which America as a society or the Africa-Americans as individuals want to distance themselves from.

It is a real past which has people and objects with names. So, it was coming up on Sutter's wedding anniversary. He was looking to buy his wife, Miss Ophelia was her name, and he was looking to buy her an anniversary present. Only thing with him, he is not had no money, but he had some niggers.

So, he asked Mrs. Nolander, to see if maybe he could trade off some of his niggers for that piano. Told him he would give him one and half niggers for it. That is the way he hold him. Say he could have one full grown and one half grown. Mr. Nolander agreed only he say he had to pick them. He did not want Sutter to give him just any old nigger.

So, here what we are also being made privy into is a kind of history where the interchangeability of person and object is possible. This interchangeability seems to be quite normative in this under the system of slavery, and when they are narrating this story, when Doaker is narrating this story it is also a realization that now they have come to a point where they can narrate this as a person without getting without getting either objectified or getting into a position whether where they would be interchanged with another object.

So, this distancing that they seem to have achieved as individuals, as families, as communities. That is also very important when this retelling is being enacted over here. So, told him he would.

He did not want Sutter to give him just any old nigger. He say he wanted to have the pick of the litter. Look at the vocabulary which is being used over here where there is a dehumanization at work. The object becomes in some sense more valuable than the living human beings themselves.

So, Sutter lined up his niggers and Mr. Nolander looked them over and out of the whole bunch, he picked my grandmother. Her name was Berniece, same like Berniece. And he picked my daddy, when he was not nothing but a little boy nine years old.

So, this is a history, this is where we also looked at the aspect of Bildungsroman, how this is about the coming of age of not just a person, where it takes generations for this Bildungsroman to complete. It is a story which begins with a piano and where with the where Doaker's daddy is only nine years old. They made the trade off and Miss Ophelia was so happy with that piano that it got to be just about all she would do was play on that piano.

So, look at the kind of emotions which are being subtly discussed over here. There is a family which is sold into slavery. Even before, their life starts with that moment of being sold into slavery being exchanged for an object. And what the owner family, what the white family gets in return is the emotions to which perhaps the Berniece and the nine year old boy never had access to and will never have access to either.

What is getting exchanged over here, instead of a human being, it is a set of experiences, and it is a set of emotions. It is as it is like a very unfair sort of a trade-off to say the least, and it is also something which impacts them for generations.

So, we also see how this the white kinship network works over here. And this is, this happens at the expense of black lives. So, whether it is Mr. Nolander or Robert Sutter which is Sutter's grandfather or Miss Ophelia for whom the piano is being bought, we find that the this kinship is quite strong, and their agenda is pretty much clear even when it is not spelt out at all.

So, all of these, the access to these emotions, access to these finer experiences come at the expense of the black lives. So, the black slave in some sense becomes the master's gift as well as the accessory as we will very soon see in the play, alright. Time go along. Time go along, Miss Ophelia got to miss my grandmother, the way she would cook and clean the house and talk to her and what not. And she missed having my daddy around the house to fetch things for her.

So, the people over here, they are being seen as a points, as human beings who would do things, who are useful. Their description, their need in the house is based on how useful they are. It is a same kind of usefulness, it is the same kind of mercenary utilitarian attitude that Boy Willie also wants to have, wants to have access to when he wants to sell the piano and get control of the land.

So, she asked to see if maybe she could trade back that piano and get her niggers back. "Mr. Nolan do said no. Such a deal was a deal. He and Sutter had a big falling out about it and Miss Ophelia took sick to the bed. Would not get out of the bed in the morning. She just lay there. The doctor said she was wasting away. That is when Sutter called her granddaddy up to the house."

So, here we find a very collaborative mode of storytelling over here. It is not as if Doaker is telling the story for the first time, but there is it is an experience for them. It is something we also find the sense of male bonding over here about how the white men and the black men have a shared history. But, they are in antithetical positions.

And now, the time has come where they are able to have access to a common ground. And this is the access that Boy Willie wants to claim, and then in some partial sense, Doaker also wants to; wants that to happen though the play does not spell it out in any form.

So, now a granddaddy's name was Boy Willie. That is who Boy Willie is named after. Only they called him Willie Boy. Now, he was a worker of wood. He could make you anything you wanted out of wood. He would make you a desk, a table, a lamp, anything you wanted. The white fellows used around there used to come up to Mr. Sutter and get him to make all kinds of things for them.

So, the black lives are being used to decorate the white lives over here, they become gifts. They become those points where their fine ornamented accessories are being built. But, on their own there is no identity that they can claim, and even after two generations they struggle to claim the identity which is entirely their own.

So, they pay Misses Sutter a nice price. See, everything my granddaddy made Mr. Sutter owned because he owned him. And this sense of ownership, this network works in a very different way.

It is actually Boy Willie, a Willie Boy, their granddaddy who is making these things for Mr. Sutter, and this is helping him to Mr. Sutter to make some money. As it is also told to us that he did not have much of much money.

This exchange, and this the way in which Willie Boy is becoming useful for Mr. Sutter is entirely overlooked because of how this system works, under the system of slavery there are only owners and slaves. The relationship is entirely based on this hierarchical position which is; which would not allow any sort of identity, any sort of claim for the slaves.

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to keep the family together Mr. Sutter wouldn't sell him. Told Mr. Noland he didn't have enough money to buy him. Now . . . am I telling it right, Wining Boy?

WINING BOY: You telling it.

DOAKER: Sutter called him up to the house and told him to carve my grandmother and my daddy's picture on the piano for Miss Ophelia. And he took and carved this . . . (DOAKER crosses over to the piano.)



See that right there? That's my grandmother, Berniece. She looked just like that. And he put a picture of my daddy when he wasn't nothing but a little boy the way he remembered him. He made them up out of his memory. Only thing . . . he didn't stop there. He carved all this. He got a picture of his mama . . . Mama Esther . . . and his daddy, Boy Charles.

WINING BOY: That was the first Boy Charles.

DOAKER: Then he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That's when him and Mama Berniece got married. They called it jumping the broom. That's how you got married in them days. Then he got here when my daddy was born . . . and here he got Mama Esther's funeral . . . and down here he got Mr. Noland taking Mama Berniece and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia. He got all kinds of things . . .

been fifty-seven if he had lived. He died in 1911 when he was thirty-one years old. Boy Charles used to talk about that piano all the time. He never could get it off his mind. Two or three months go by and he be talking about it again. He be talking about taking it out of Sutter's house. Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it . . . he had us. Say we was still in slavery. Me and Wining Boy tried to talk him out of it but it wouldn't do any good. Soon as he quiet down about it he'd start up again. We seen where he wasn't gonna get it off his mind . . . so, on the Fourth of July, 1911 . . . when Sutter was at the picnic what the county give every year . . . me and Wining Boy went on down there with him and took that piano out of Sutter's house. We put it on a wagon and me and Wining Boy carried it over into the next county with Mama Ola's people. Boy Charles decided to stay around there and wait until Sutter got home to make it look like business as usual.

Now, I don't know what happened when Sutter came home and found that piano gone. But somebody went up to Boy Charles's house and set it on fire. But he wasn't in there. He must have seen them coming cause he went down and caught the 3:57 Yellow Dog. He didn't know they was gonna come down and stop the train. Stopped



That is why when Mr. Noland offered to buy him to keep the family together, Mr. Sutter would not sell him. Told Mr. Noland, he did not have enough money to buy him. Now, am I telling it right Wining Boy here?

So, they are also checking with each other about the validity, about the veracity of the story. So, like we saw in the essay that we took a look at in the previous session, there is an eclectic phase at the beginning. They seem to have passed that phase.

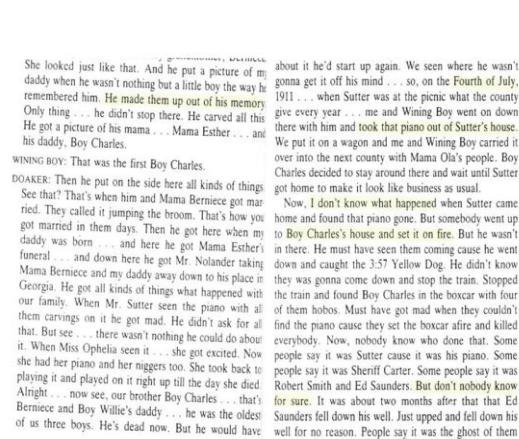
There is no longer a need for the stories to be validated from anyone outside. There is no external presence over here. They within the family, within the community as black individuals, they are narrating as well as validating their own stories in that process, creating their own histories.

Sutter called him up to the house and told him to carve my grandmother and my daddy's picture on the piano for Miss Ophelia. And he took and carved this. See that right there? That is my grandmother, Berniece. She looked just like that. And he put a picture of my daddy when he was not nothing, but a little boy the way he remembered him.

He made them up out of his memory. One thing, he did not stop there. He carved all his all this. He got a picture of his Mama, Mama Esther and his daddy, Boy Charles. That was the first Boy Charles.

So, at the slightest opportunity being given to a Willie Boy, we find that he is using that to create a canvas, a historical canvas, which will become a priceless legacy for the Charles household even two generations later. A legacy over which Berniece and Willie Boy are now even fighting so to speak.

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So, here when they cannot buy when this in the within this white network, when there is a fallout, when Sutter is unable to get back the kind of a services that he wants, he makes an artistic way to get through this, in order to please Ophelia. And this also becomes that one historical chance that the Charles family makes use of.

Then, he put on the side here all kinds of thing. See that, that is when he and Mama Berniece got married. They called it jumping the broom. That is how you got married in them days.

So, there is a cultural history emerging in these totems, in these images. Then, he got here when my daddy was born. Here he got Mama Esther's funeral. The entire cultural history, the entire historical trajectory, could be found in this piano, in this object which becomes a canvas for them.

And here he got Mr. Nolander taking Mama Berniece and my daddy away down his place in Georgia. He got all kinds of things what happened with our family. It becomes a place where family history gets told, a family history gets documented, an unusual kind of documentation, but something which they also know that will stay.

And they, like we mentioned at the slightest opportunity that they got to carve their history, they make it very graphic, they put it down without missing any detail. And

there is absolutely no need for anyone from the outside to validate this. And now it is carved forever etched forever in a very permanent way. In such ways that it could be handed down as a tangible thing as a legacy as well.

When Mr. Sutter seen the piano with all them carvings on it, he got mad. He did not ask for all that. But, see there was not nothing he could do about it. When Miss Ophelia seen it she got excited. So, it is about also about what they ask for and what they get. It comes to a point when the writing of history cannot be negotiated, cannot be bargained with, and cannot be messed up with.

This is also very metaphorical in the sense that, the moment the black artist, the black history writer, here in this sense Boy Charles is being given and Willie Boy is given a chance to document this history. He is doing it in such graphic in such permanent ways that it becomes uncomfortable for Sutter, but there is no way in which the absolutely no way in which he can get rid of it either.

Now, she had her piano and her niggers too. She took back to playing it and played on it right up till the day she died, alright. Now, see our brother Boy Charles that is Berniece and Boy Willie's daddy he was the oldest of us three boys. He is dead now. But, he would have been 57, if he had lived. He died in 1911, when he was 31 years old.

And here what is most remarkable with Doaker's storytelling is that, unlike the way he rambles in when he was telling about the railroad story, he is very solid with facts, with details, with years, with numbers, with names, . You find the kind of solidity that Doaker never shows otherwise when he is telling the story.

Because this is a story which is very important for them. They are validating it by repeatedly narrating it. They are making it permanent by a through this exercise, this ritualistic storytelling which also takes another form towards the end as we would see.

He, Paul Charles used to talk about the piano all the time. He never could get it off his mind. Two or three months go by and he be talking about it again. He be talking about a taking out of Sutter's house. Say it was a story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it, he had us. Say we were still in slavery.

So, see the connections over here between this narratorial canvas which is the piano over here and the relationship that they once shared as slave and master. And now one would not know what the emotions were in Boy Charles's mind, when he began to feel that this sense of possession about owning the piano. That it was an object which had their history because there were not too many objects like that where their histories, and their images, and their stories were permanently etched.

So, he began to feel that in a metaphorical and in a symbolic way, when the family was continuing to own that piano which had the, which had this historical reference, which had this historical the carvings that Boy Charles had made about their family. He also felt that, they continued to own them.

So, it is also interesting to see how these clutches of slavery are seen as something which would operate in very invisible ways as well. "I and Wining Boy tried to talk him out of it, but it would not do any good." So, this is a moment where it is not rationality which wins at the end of the day, it is emotion. It is a sentimental attachment towards what is there on the piano. It is a very irrational desire to claim back what is part of their legacy that is what wins at the end of the day.

And we will see again towards the end of the play that it is not a rational thing which happens. It is a; it is purely based on ritual, it is purely based on belief, it is purely based on something very sentimental as well as mystic. It is difficult to see any sort of practical rationality in many of the things which bring this play to a resolution.

"I and Wining Boy tried to talk him out of it, but it would not do him any good. Soon as he quiet down about it he would start up again. It becomes an obsession, and it is the same kind of obsession that we find that Boy Willie too has. He wants a piano. Boy Willie also wants the piano in a similar obsessive fashion when he wants to get it from Berniece and sell it just so he could acquire the land which was owned by Sutter."

So, soon as he quiet down, he would start up again. We see where he was not going to get off his mind. So, on 4th of July which is also incidentally, and quite ironically the American Independence Day on 4th of July 1911, when Sutter was at the picnic, what the country gave every year me and it is also a holiday, me and Wining Boy went on down there with him and took that piano out of Sutter's house.

The choice of this date is out of convenience, and it, but also has a very symbolic and political relevance. We put it on a wagon, and Wining Boy carried it over to the next county with Mama Ola's people. Boy Charles decided to stay around there and wait until Sutter got home to make it look like business as usual. We do not know what happened when Sutter came back and found that piano gone. But, somebody went up to Boy Charles's house and set it on fire.

Look at the violence which happens right after they steal the piano. The act of stealing is of course, something which cannot be condoned over here. But, you do see the relevance, the historical significance of it. And the disproportionate way in which the Sutter family responds to it.

They, they have set up, they have set Boy Charles's house on fire. But he was not in there. He must have seen them coming cause he went down and called the 3:57 Yellow Dog. He did not know how they was going to come down and stop the train. Stopped the train and found Boy Charles in the boxcar with four of them hobos. Must have got mad when they could not find the piano because they said the boxcar fire and killed everybody. And now nobody know who done that.

So, it is a sudden turn of events. So, it is a sudden turn of events which takes a very tragic and violent end. And this now we understand why this piano is a very special object for Berniece. And similarly, why Boy Willie also wants to get rid of this so badly to acquire Sutter's land. There is a justification that we can find in both those desires and we do find those desires reaching a reconciliation towards the end of the play.

So, some people say it was Sutter because it was his piano. Some people say it was Sheriff Carter. Some people say it was Robert Smith and Ed Saunders. But, nobody do not know for sure.

And this is clearly the times where black lives and their deaths did not matter at all. So, it does not become a big issue as we can see. It was just about two months after that Ed Saunders fell down his well. Just upped and fell down his well for no reason. People say it was a ghost of their men who burned up in the boxcar that pushed him in the well. They started calling them the ghost of the Yellow Dog.

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men who burned up in the boxcar that pushed him in his well. They started calling them the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Now, that's how all that got started and that why we say Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano. Cause he daddy died over it.

BOY WILLIE: All that's in the past. If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn't be sitting up here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that. See, he couldn't do no better. When he come along he ain't had nothing he could build on. His daddy ain't had nothing to give him. The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano. And he died over giving me that. I ain't gonna let it sit up there and rot without trying to do something with it. If Berniece can't see that, then I'm gonna go ahead and sell my half. And you and Wining Boy know I'm right.

DOAKER: Ain't nobody said nothing about who's right and who's wrong. I was just telling the man about the piano. I was telling him why we say Berniece ain't gonna sell it.

LYMON: Yeah, I can see why you say that now. I told Boy Willie he ought to stay up here with me.

BOY WILLIE: You stay! I'm going back! That's what I'm gonna do with my life! Why I got to come up here



DOAKER: You can stop telling that. You was playing on it the last time you was through here. We couldn't get you off of it. Go on and play something.

(WINING BOY sits down at the piano and plays and sings. The song is one which has put many dimes and quarters in his pocket, long ago, in dimly remembered towns and way stations. He plays badly, without hesitation, and sings in a forceful voice.)

WINING BOY: (Singing.)

I am a rambling gambling man
I gambled in many towns
I rambled this wide world over
I rambled this world around
I had my ups and downs in life
And bitter times I saw
But I never knew what misery was
Till I lit on old Arkansas.

I started out one morning
to meet that early train
He said, "You better work for me
I have some land to drain.
I'll give you fifty cents a day,
Your washing, board and all
And you shall be a different man
In the state of Arkansas."



Now, we know what the Yellow Dog is. Yellow Dog is the train, Yellow Dog is the boxcar inside which all these men were burned. The black men were burned because they were, because they had presumably stolen the piano where their history was written.

So, it would be an entirely a futile exercise to start a discussion about whether that act was required in the first place, whether it was foolish on Charles's part, on Boy Charles's part to go and steal that piano from the white Sutter's house in the first place.

But, what we see is that the disproportionate violence, makes it makes us see this entire incident, the entire history in a different light altogether. And that is how it all started. And that is why we say Berniece is not going to sell that piano because her daddy died over it.

And now, we also see the significance of Sutter's ghosts and the Yellow Dogs ghost and why they feel that it was a Yellow Dog who killed Sutter. Because they do believe that the ghosts of their ancestors who died including their father, with their great grandfather, who died in that boxcar, they keep coming back to hunt down this white family and their and the all the living members.

All that is in the past. If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, he would not be sitting up here now.

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where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn't be sitting up here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that. See, he couldn't do no better. When he come along he ain't had nothing he could build on. His daddy ain't had nothing to give him. The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano. And he died over giving me that. I ain't gonna let it sit up there and rot without trying to do something with it. If Berniece can't see that, then I'm gonna go ahead and sell my half. And you and Wining Boy know I'm right.

DOAKER: Ain't nobody said nothing about who's right and who's wrong. I was just telling the man about the piano. I was telling him why we say Berniece ain't gonna sell it.

LYMON: Yeah, I can see why you say that now. I told Boy Willie he ought to stay up here with me.

BOY WILLIE: You stay! I'm going back! That's what I'm gonna do with my life! Why I got to come up here and learn to do something I don't know how to do when I already know how to farm? You stay up here and make your own way if that's what you want to do. I'm going back and live my life the way I want to live it.

(WINING BOY gets up and crosses to the piano.)

WINING BOY: Let's see what we got here. I ain't played on this thing for a while.

towns and way stations. He plays daddy, without reservation, and sings in a forceful voice.)

WINING BOY: (Singing.)

I am a rambling gambling man
I gambled in many towns
I rambled this wide world over
I rambled this world around
I had my ups and downs in life
And bitter times I saw
But I never knew what misery was
Till I lit on old Arkansas.

I started out one morning
to meet that early train
He said, "You better work for me
I have some land to drain.
I'll give you fifty cents a day,
Your washing, board and all
And you shall be a different man
In the state of Arkansas."

I worked six months for the rascal
Joe Herrin was his name
He fed me old corn dodgers
They was hard as any rock
My tooth is all got loosened
And my knees begin to knock
That was the kind of hash I got
In the state of Arkansas.



So, here is Boy Willie who time and again interrupts with a very rational pragmatic intervention. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I am not going to do that. See, he could not do no better. When he came along, he had not had nothing he could build on. His daddy has not had nothing to give him. The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano and he died over giving me that.

So, it is a very different angle. It is a very different entry point that boy really has towards the piano. It is not sentimental. He sees something of something valuable and that something very tangible that could come out of the piano like buying land.

So, he is also reiterating. Berniece can see that when then I am going to go ahead and sell my half and you and Wining Boy know I am right. Is not nobody said nothing about who is right and who is wrong. I was just telling the man about the piano. I was telling him why we say Berniece is not going to sell it.

So, it is no, it is not like we like it was mentioned before. It is not like Doaker is narrating the story for the first time. It is like a ritualistic exercise where they are retelling this in order to establish yet another, establish the thing which is known from the beginning that Berniece is not going to sell the piano.

Now, we do know that Lymon has been listening to this story as well and Boy Willie also, sorry Wining Boy also thinks about playing something in this piano which he has not used in a while. And it the music in this play has an added significance which we will perhaps get to discuss a bit later.

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Traveling man
I've traveled all around this world
Traveling man
I've traveled from land to land
Traveling man
I've traveled all around this world
Well it ain't no use
writing no news
I'm a traveling man.

(The door opens and BERNIECE enters with MARETHA.)
BERNIECE: Is that . . . Lord, I know that ain't Wining Boy sitting there.
WINING BOY: Hey, Berniece.
BERNIECE: You all had this planned. You and Boy Willie had this planned.
WINING BOY: I didn't know he was gonna be here. I'm on my way down home. I stopped by to see you and Doaker first.
DOAKER: I told the nigger he left out of here with that sack of money, we thought we might never see him again. Boy Willie say he wasn't gonna see him till he got broke. I looked up and seen him sitting on the doorstep asking for two dollars. Look at him laughing. He know it's the truth.

ACT ONE, Scene 2 • 49

WINING BOY: A little while ago. I took the train from Kansas City.
BERNIECE: Let me go upstairs and change and then I'll cook you something to eat.
BOY WILLIE: You ain't cooked me nothing when I come.
BERNIECE: Boy Willie, go on and leave me alone. Come on, Maretha, get up here and change your clothes before you get them dirty.
(BERNIECE exits up the stairs, followed by MARETHA.)
WINING BOY: Maretha sure getting big, ain't she, Doaker. And just as pretty as she want to be. I didn't know Crawley had it in him.
(BOY WILLIE crosses to the piano.)
BOY WILLIE: Hey, Lymon . . . get up on the other side of this piano and let me see something.
WINING BOY: Boy Willie, what is you doing?
BOY WILLIE: I'm seeing how heavy this piano is. Get up over there, Lymon.
WINING BOY: Go on and leave that piano alone. You ain't taking that piano out of here and selling it.
BOY WILLIE: Just as soon as I get them watermelons out that truck.
WINING BOY: Well, I got something to say about that.
BOY WILLIE: This my daddy's piano.





So, Berniece walks in to find this these men together and having a good time, and she began to suspect that it was all planned, premeditated, you Wining Boy, Boy Willie that they all planned it together and just showed up at the crack of dawn to convince her to, persuade her to sell the piano.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:01)

(The door opens and BERNIECE enters with MARETHA.)
BERNIECE: Is that . . . Lord, I know that ain't Wining Boy sitting there.
WINING BOY: Hey, Berniece.
BERNIECE: You all had this planned. You and Boy Willie had this planned.
WINING BOY: I didn't know he was gonna be here. I'm on my way down home. I stopped by to see you and Doaker first.
DOAKER: I told the nigger he left out of here with that sack of money, we thought we might never see him again. Boy Willie say he wasn't gonna see him till he got broke. I looked up and seen him sitting on the doorstep asking for two dollars. Look at him laughing. He know it's the truth.
BERNIECE: Boy Willie, I didn't see that truck out there. I thought you was out selling watermelons.
BOY WILLIE: We done sold them all. Sold the truck too.
BERNIECE: I don't want to go through none of your stuff. I done told you to go back where you belong.
BOY WILLIE: I was just teasing you, woman. You can't take no teasing?
BERNIECE: Wining Boy, when you get here?

(BERNIECE CASHES UP THE CHECK, FOLLOWED BY MARETHA.)
WINING BOY: Maretha sure getting big, ain't she, Doaker. And just as pretty as she want to be. I didn't know Crawley had it in him.
(BOY WILLIE crosses to the piano.)
BOY WILLIE: Hey, Lymon . . . get up on the other side of this piano and let me see something.
WINING BOY: Boy Willie, what is you doing?
BOY WILLIE: I'm seeing how heavy this piano is. Get up over there, Lymon.
WINING BOY: Go on and leave that piano alone. You ain't taking that piano out of here and selling it.
BOY WILLIE: Just as soon as I get them watermelons out that truck.
WINING BOY: Well, I got something to say about that.
BOY WILLIE: This my daddy's piano.
WINING BOY: He ain't took it by himself. Me and Doaker helped him.
BOY WILLIE: He died by himself. Where was you and Doaker at then? Don't come telling me nothing about this piano. This is me and Berniece's piano. Am I right, Doaker?
DOAKER: Yeah, you right.
BOY WILLIE: Let's see if we can lift it up, Lymon. Get a good grip on it and pick it up on your end. Ready? Lift!



So, and they again get into the same old fight. Berniece asking Boy Willie to leave and go back to where he came from. And then, they again they begin talking about the piano.

So, just the way Boy Charles was obsessed about the piano and in getting it back, and getting it back he also had to sacrifice his life, he is burned to death. The same way even Boy Willie is also obsessed with this piano. He keeps talking about it, and he keeps talking about how he has he is also the rightful heir to the piano, and he can also decide just as Berniece can, he can also decide what he would want to do with this piano.

He died by himself. Where was you and Doaker at then? Do not come telling me nothing about this piano. This is me and Berniece's piano. Am I right Doaker? , you are right.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:52)

50 • THE PIANO LESSON

ACT ONE, Scene 2 • 51

(As they start to move the piano, the sound of SUTTER'S GHOST is heard. DOAKER is the only one to hear it. With difficulty they move the piano a little bit so it is out of place.)

BOY WILLIE: What you think?

LYMON: It's heavy . . . but you can move it. Only it ain't gonna be easy.

BOY WILLIE: It wasn't that heavy to me. Okay, let's put it back.


(The sound of SUTTER'S GHOST is heard again. They all hear it as BERNIECE enters on the stairs.)

BERNIECE: Boy Willie . . . you gonna play around with me one too many times. And then God's gonna bless you and West is gonna dress you. Now set that piano back over there. I done told you a hundred times I ain't selling that piano.

BOY WILLIE: I'm trying to get me some land, woman. I need that piano to get me some money so I can buy Sutter's land.

BERNIECE: Money can't buy what that piano cost. You can't sell your soul for money. It won't go with the buyer. It'll shrivel and shrink to know that you ain't

BOY WILLIE: Now, I'm gonna tell you the way I see it. The only thing that make that piano worth something is them carvings Papa Willie Boy put on there. That's what make it worth something. That was my great-granddaddy, Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. Now, I'm supposed to build on what they left me. You can't do nothing with that piano sitting up here in the house. That's just like if I let them watermelons sit out there and rot. I'd be a fool. Alright now, if you say to me, Boy Willie, I'm using that piano. I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. Then that be something else. I'd have to go on and say, well, Berniece using that piano. She building on it. Let her go on and use it. I got to find another way to get Sutter's land. But Doaker say you ain't touched that piano the whole time it's been up here. So why you wanna stand in my way? See, you just looking at the sentimental value. See, that's good. That's alright. I take my hat off whenever somebody say my daddy's name. But I ain't gonna be no fool about no sentimental value. You can sit up here and look at the piano for the next hundred years and it's just gonna be a piano. You can't make



So, they are not allowing; this is we do know that the relationship within these this family is very complex. It is very complicated. It is not that they all hate each other. But there are these circumstances which forces them to take different stances depending on how they are looking at their history. That is something we will very quickly see over here.

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BOY WILLIE: It wasn't that heavy to me. Okay, let's put it back.

(The sound of SUTTER'S GHOST is heard again. They all hear it as BERNIECE enters on the stairs.)

BERNIECE: Boy Willie . . . you gonna play around with me one too many times. And then God's gonna bless you and West is gonna dress you. Now set that piano back over there. I done told you a hundred times I ain't selling that piano.


BOY WILLIE: I'm trying to get me some land, woman. I need that piano to get me some money so I can buy Sutter's land.

BERNIECE: Money can't buy what that piano cost. You can't sell your soul for money. It won't go with the buyer. It'll shrivel and shrink to know that you ain't taken on to it. But it won't go with the buyer.

BOY WILLIE: I ain't talking about all that, woman. I ain't talking about selling my soul. I'm talking about trading that piece of wood for some land. Get something under your feet. Land the only thing God ain't making no more of. You can always get you another piano. I'm talking about some land. What you get something out the ground from. That's what I'm talking about. You can't do nothing with that piano but sit up there and look at it.

BERNIECE: That's just what I'm gonna do. Wining Boy, you want me to fry you some pork chops?

That's just like if I let them watermelons sit out there and rot. I'd be a fool. Alright now, if you say to me, Boy Willie, I'm using that piano. I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. Then that be something else. I'd have to go on and say, well, Berniece using that piano. She building on it. Let her go on and use it. I got to find another way to get Sutter's land. But Doaker say you ain't touched that piano the whole time it's been up here. So why you wanna stand in my way? See, you just looking at the sentimental value. See, that's good. That's alright. I take my hat off whenever somebody say my daddy's name. But I ain't gonna be no fool about no sentimental value. You can sit up here and look at the piano for the next hundred years and it's just gonna be a piano. You can't make more than that. Now I want to get Sutter's land with that piano. I get Sutter's land and I can go down and cash in the crop and get my seed. As long as I got the land and the seed then I'm alright. I can always get me a little something else. Cause that land give back to you. I can make me another crop and cash that in. I still got the land and the seed. But that piano don't put out nothing else. You ain't got nothing working for you. Now, the kind of man my daddy was he would have understood that. I'm sorry you can't see it that way. But that's why I'm gonna take that piano out of here and sell it.



We will begin to see how their sentimental values work in very different ways where they are also trying to divide this legacy in a maternal as well as paternal sense.

So, during this instance we find there are multiple instances where Sutter's ghost is heard again. But, it is only Berniece who seems to be affected by it. So, Berniece is also trying to convince Boy Willie, saying money cannot buy what piano cost. You cannot sell your soul for money. It will not go with the buyer. It will shrivel and shrink to know that you are not taken on to it, but it will not go with the buyer.

I am not talking about all that woman. I am not talking about selling my soul. I talking about trading that piece of wood for some land. For him the way, he wants to look at the piano is as some piece of wood, which in exchange will get him some land too.

Get something under your feet. Land the only thing God is not making no more of. And you can always get you another piano. I am talking about some land. What you get something out of the ground from that is what I am talking about.

For him the land seems to be more real than the piano. The land is something which will continue to yield him something. The land is also something which cannot be replaced with another thing because land is land. It is not movable. It is not like piano of which you can get another kind, another item could be bought.

And here he is clearly and very deliberately distancing himself from the sentimental and cultural value that is attributed to this object, to this piano. And he is also seeing land as something that will help him acquire social standing. Land is something which will also help him gain an equal kind of footing along with another white man.

And we do find him trying to ride the waves of prosperity that the new America is presumably bringing to all its citizens. The only thing that can make the piano worth something is them carvings Papa Willie Boy put on there. That is what make it worth something. That was my great granddaddy.

Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. Now, I am supposed to build on what they left me. You cannot do nothing with that piano sitting up in the house. That is just like if I let them watermelon sit out there and rot. He is comparing the piano and the watermelons, as objects which could be sold, objects which could be traded.

Here we find the changing way in which objects are being looked at, objects which will not have value anymore if they cannot be sold. Objects will be seen as things that will sit and rot, if not used in a wise sense. The legacy over here is also being seen in the same way, just like watermelons which will sit and rot if not used in a wise sense

So, we find that the practical aspect that Boy Willie talks about and that sort of an attitude that Boy Willie inhabits is not entirely something that we cannot relate to it is not him being indifferent. He is always someone who is trying to in fact, become part of a new history which is getting generated.

And we he is also trying to get something out of this sacrifice from his point of view. That is what he is trying to do. He is not trying to see any sentimental or cultural value over here. But, he is trying to see how history can change for him, how the life could change for him, how the perception about him and people like him could change once he acquires land.

So, there is of course, very deep seated political aspect over here in terms of land ownership, in terms of property, how certain kinds of possessions guarantee you social advancement and upward mobility, vis-a-vis certain other things. And here land is seen as something which is very prosperous.

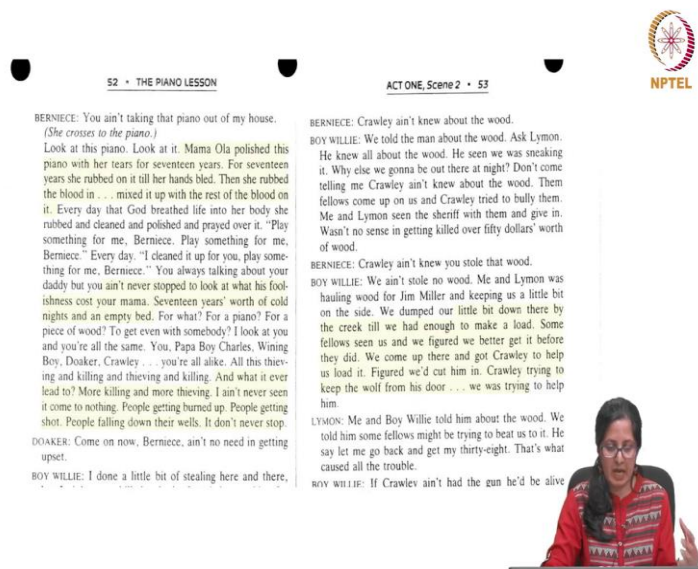
So, we do find the same sentiments getting reflected in a number of other plays that we have looked at to where you do come across these characters being talked about in a very fond sense where they went out and worked on the land and made a fortune. Unlike, that we do we did see that in Arthur Miller's plays as well.

So, here when Boy Willie is trying to set up a future for him like this to construct a future, reconstruct a history and future for him through the material gains that would come to him in exchange for a piano, . We do find that he is trying to fit in, he is trying to assimilate into the mainstream.

So, he also makes it spells it out very clearly. I am not going to be fool, and about no sentimental value, we can sit up here and look at the piano for the next 100 years. And it is just going to be a piano. That is why I am going to take that piano out of here and sell it.

So, in order to change this attitude, the play at the end has to have that very dramatic ritualistic event happening. It requires something that dramatic that out of the world to literally take Boy Willie out of this stubborn attitude that he is holding on to.

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52 • THE PIANO LESSON

BERNIECE: You ain't taking that piano out of my house.
(She crosses to the piano.)
Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in . . . mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. "Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece." Every day. "I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece." You always talking about your daddy but you ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood? To get even with somebody? I look at you and you're all the same. You, Papa Boy Charles, Wining Boy, Doaker, Crawley . . . you're all alike. All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And what it ever lead to? More killing and more thieving. I ain't never seen it come to nothing. People getting burned up. People getting shot. People falling down their wells. It don't never stop.

DOAKER: Come on now, Berniece, ain't no need in getting upset.

BOY WILLIE: I done a little bit of stealing here and there.

53

ACT ONE, Scene 2 • 53

BERNIECE: Crawley ain't knew about the wood.


BOY WILLIE: We told the man about the wood. Ask Lymon. He knew all about the wood. He seen we was sneaking it. Why else we gonna be out there at night? Don't come telling me Crawley ain't knew about the wood. Them fellows come up on us and Crawley tried to bully them. Me and Lymon seen the sheriff with them and give in. Wasn't no sense in getting killed over fifty dollars' worth of wood.

BERNIECE: Crawley ain't knew you stole that wood.

BOY WILLIE: We ain't stole no wood. Me and Lymon was hauling wood for Jim Miller and keeping us a little bit on the side. We dumped our little bit down there by the creek till we had enough to make a load. Some fellows seen us and we figured we better get it before they did. We come up there and got Crawley to help us load it. Figured we'd cut him in. Crawley trying to keep the wolf from his door . . . we was trying to help him.

LYMON: Me and Boy Willie told him about the wood. We told him some fellows might be trying to beat us to it. He say let me go back and get my thirty-eight. That's what caused all the trouble.

BOY WILLIE: If Crawley ain't had the gun he'd be alive



Now, we find Berniece's take on the piano, how is she looking at the piano. For her look at this piano; look at it and it is the first time that she is actually having a proper conversation about the piano. The very first time in the play that she is willing to engage with this history.

Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years, for seventeen years and she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then, she rubbed the blood in. She mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. And every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it.

Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece, every day. "I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece." She is reliving a very different kind of a past, about what happened after the piano reached their house,

Doaker's story ends with that moment where the piano is taken from Sutter's home, when the white they are the whites have hunted down Boy Charles and the other men who were in the boxcar and they are being burnt down, burned to death, . Doaker's story stops with that.


But, Berniece's memory, of the piano is more domestic in nature. The piano when in Doaker's memory, the way these men relive this history, they re-narrate the story and experience it together, the piano is still outside of them. The piano is still on the way to making their way towards their home space. But, the way a Berniece is remembering it, the piano is there in the house. It is something which is part of the household, which has been part of the household for seventeen years.

“You always talking about your daddy, but you are not, never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your Mama. Seventeen years worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood? To get even with somebody?”

I look at you and you are all the same. You, Papa Boy Charles, Wining Boy, Doaker, Crawley you are all alike. All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And that what it ever led to more killing and more thieving, I have not never seen it come to nothing. People getting burnt up. People getting shot. People falling down their wells. It do not never stop.”

Now, we see how she is approaching the piano. It is not it is worth. It is what it had caused. It is the how it splintered their family, how it gave them an empty bed. The piano arrived and stayed there as a constant memory of what the men should not have done. And she is also asking this rational question, like in a very ironic sense, she is asking this rational question, as to what did the piano give them in the first place rather than this endless suffering.

(Refer Slide Time: 34:32)



nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood? To get even with somebody? I look at you and you're all the same. You, Papa Boy Charles, Wining Boy, Doaker, Crawley . . . you're all alike. All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And what it ever lead to? More killing and more thieving. I ain't never seen it come to nothing. People getting burned up. People getting shot. People falling down their wells. It don't never stop.

DOAKER: Come on now, Berniece, ain't no need in getting upset.

BOY WILLIE: I done a little bit of stealing here and there, but I ain't never killed nobody. I can't be speaking for nobody else. You all got to speak for yourself, but I ain't never killed nobody.

BERNIECE: You killed Crawley just as sure as if you pulled the trigger.

BOY WILLIE: See, that's ignorant. That's downright foolish for you to say something like that. You ain't doing nothing but showing your ignorance. If the nigger was here I'd whup his ass for getting me and Lymon shot at.

on the side. We dumped our little bit down there by the creek till we had enough to make a load. Some fellows seen us and we figured we better get it before they did. We come up there and got Crawley to help us load it. Figured we'd cut him in. Crawley trying to keep the wolf from his door . . . we was trying to help him.


LYMON: Me and Boy Willie told him about the wood. We told him some fellows might be trying to beat us to it. He say let me go back and get my thirty-eight. That's what caused all the trouble.

BOY WILLIE: If Crawley ain't had the gun he'd be alive today.

LYMON: We had it about half loaded when they come up on us. We seen the sheriff with them and we tried to get away. We ducked around near the bend in the creek . . . but they was down there too. Boy Willie say let's give in. But Crawley pulled out his gun and started shooting. That's when they started shooting back.

BERNIECE: All I know is Crawley would be alive if you hadn't come up there and got him.

paternal and maternal division of legacy
- across generations
Willie's rebelliousness. Berniece's
mournful suffering



“Come on now, Berniece, have not no need in getting upset. And the Berniece now moves on to another aspect of her life. She continues to be in the state of mourning. Boy Willie gets defensive. I done a little bit of stealing here and there, but I have not never killed anybody. You cannot be speaking for nobody else. You all got to speak for yourself, but I have not never killed anybody.

You killed Crawley just as sure as if you pull the trigger. See, that is ignorant. That is downright foolish for you to say something like that. You are not doing nothing but showing your ignorance. If the nigger was here, I whup his ass for getting me and Lymon shot at. Crawley have not knew about the wood.”

So, what Berniece is protesting over here is against these wild adventures that the men in the family seems to be after which ends up costing their own lives. We told the man about the wood, and probably he is giving the details about what exactly had happened, and how Crawley got shot because of his own folly. He had the gun, only because he had the gun, he also got shot. “All I know is Crawley would be alive if you had not come up there and got him. That is the only thing that Berniece can think about.”

Here we do know that what is dividing them over here is a certain division which they have maybe inadvertently brought in to this legacy. There is a paternal and maternal division of legacy. There is a way in which Boy Charles looked at the

piano, felt about the piano, obsessed about the piano. And he was not even there eventually when he could bring it home, and then he stole, and bring it home it became the a constant reminder of what the piano had cost them, .

So, this division of legacy in a paternal as well as in a maternal sense, it operates across generations. So, it is very evident in the way Berniece and Boy Willie are responding to the piano, depending on what aspect of history they are latching on to.

So, we find that Willie's rebelliousness is something which is handed down from his father. And Berniece is mournful suffering is also something that she seems to have inherited from her mother. And there is an intergenerational quality about the legacy over here. There is an intergenerational as well as gendered quality about the kind of emotions that they choose to subscribe to.

(Refer Slide Time: 37:01)

54 • THE PIANO LESSON

BOY WILLIE: I ain't had nothing to do with Crawley getting killed. That was his own fault.

BERNIECE: Crawley's dead and in the ground and you still walking around here eating. That's all I know. He went off to load some wood with you and ain't never come back.

BOY WILLIE: I told you, woman . . . I ain't had nothing to do with . . .

BERNIECE: He ain't here, is he? He ain't here!
(BERNIECE hits BOY WILLIE.)
I said he ain't here. Is he?
(BERNIECE continues to hit BOY WILLIE, who doesn't move to defend himself, other than back up and turning his head so that most of the blows fall on his chest and arms.)

DOAKER: (Grabbing BERNIECE.) Come on, Berniece . . . let it go, it ain't his fault.

BERNIECE: He ain't here, is he? Is he?

BOY WILLIE: I told you I ain't responsible for Crawley.

BERNIECE: He ain't here.

BOY WILLIE: Come on now, Berniece . . . don't do this now. Doaker get her. I ain't had nothing to do with Crawley . . .

BERNIECE: You come up there and got him!

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

(The lights come up on the kitchen. It is the following morning. DOAKER is ironing the pants to his uniform. He has a pot cooking on the stove at the same time. He is singing a song. The song provides him with the rhythm for his work and he moves about the kitchen with the ease born of many years as a railroad cook.)


DOAKER:

Gonna leave Jackson Mississippi
and go to Memphis
and double back to Jackson
Come on down to Hattiesburg
Change cars on the Y.D.
coming through the territory to



So, when act 1 ends. We find that there is a lot of resentment. There is a lot of miscommunication, mistrust over here, largely based on the biased nature of the approach towards legacy. There is gender which is at the heart of it. It is almost like a wedge between the siblings. And it cuts across into these different generations as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 37:26)



BOY WILLIE: I told you, woman . . . I ain't had nothing to do with . . .

BERNIECE: He ain't here, is he? He ain't here!
(BERNIECE hits BOY WILLIE.)
I said he ain't here, is he?
(BERNIECE continues to hit BOY WILLIE, who doesn't move to defend himself, other than back up and turning his head so that most of the blows fall on his chest and arms.)

DOAKER: (Grabbing BERNIECE.) Come on, Berniece . . . let it go, it ain't his fault.

BERNIECE: He ain't here, is he? Is he?

BOY WILLIE: I told you I ain't responsible for Crawley.

BERNIECE: He ain't here.

BOY WILLIE: Come on now, Berniece . . . don't do this now. Doaker get her. I ain't had nothing to do with Crawley . . .

BERNIECE: You come up there and got him!

BOY WILLIE: I done told you now. Doaker, get her. I ain't playing.

DOAKER: Come on, Berniece.
(MARETHA is heard screaming upstairs. It is a scream of stark terror.)

MARETHA: Mama! . . . Mama!
(The lights go down to black. End of Act One.)


SCENE ONE

(The lights come up on the kitchen. It is the following morning. DOAKER is ironing the pants to his uniform. He has a pot cooking on the stove at the same time. He is singing a song. The song provides him with the rhythm for his work and he moves about the kitchen with the ease born of many years as a railroad cook)

DOAKER:

Gonna leave Jackson Mississippi
and go to Memphis
and double back to Jackson
Come on down to Hattiesburg
Change cars on the Y.D.
coming through the territory to
Meridian
and Meridian to Greenville
and Greenville to Memphis
I'm on my way and I know where
Change cars on the Katy
Leaving Jackson
and going through Clarksdale
Hello Winona!

A scene about the railroad



So, as we bring this, as we bring this discussion to an end, we find that there is a need for a very dramatic and perhaps a very violent kind of an intervention in order to bring peace into this situation, in order to resolve this issue.

And the mourning and the suffering, and the loss, which began with a lot of violence, also needs to be put to an end in a very ritualistic sense, in a very dramatic sense. Just the way we would see towards the end of this play.

And we find that the play oscillates between the rational element and these mystic elements in order to incorporate two kinds of traditions, two kinds of modernities. One which is very deeply white and upper class, and the other one which is based on a tradition of slavery which has come out of a history, which does not find getting documented in most mainstream histories of those times.