

## THE ROOTS IN *THE PIANO LESSON* BY AUGUST WILSON

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By the coming of Obama as the president of the United States of America, many questions have come into the minds of American people, concerning racial discrimination. Obama is black moreover he is from Muslim origins. Taking this into consideration, and the history of black slavery, the researcher is to tackle *The Piano Lesson* thematically. Despite the fact that of the end of slavery of the Blacks by the declaration of Martin Luther King in 1862 and the announcement of their freedom, they are still treated badly. It is said that the Blacks are treated better in the North; subsequently that is why most of them emigrate to the North. Though they are freed they are not treated on equal foot. There is always distinction between the whites and the blacks; the Whites have the superiority while the Blacks have the errand jobs.

The main theme of *The Piano Lesson* is the combat/ fight over the history of slavery. It is the fight between, the two protagonists Berniece and her brother Boy Willie. Boy Willie has the readiness to fight till the end of his life to be equal with the Whites. With those who were slaved his ancestors. On the other hand we find that his sister Berniece on the contrary, she wants to keep her heritage/ her roots, symbolized in the engraved pictures on the old piano instrument. In other words, Berniece and her brother Boy Willie, the two black siblings, fight over the "Piano" instrument that represents the history of their black family from slavery to freedom. Berniece does not want to sell "the piano" because the story of her roots are engraved on its legs, while her brother Boy Willie wants to sell it in order to improve his economical status; by selling it he could purchase the land that his master owned.

From the very beginning we are introduced to Boy Willie and his friend Lymon; they have a truck of watermelons and want to sell it. Lymon wants to begin a new life in the North because, it is well-known that the life of the blacks in the North is better than that of the South. Meanwhile, Boy Willie wants to sell the truck of watermelons and "the piano" his "heirloom" that settled in his sister's (Berniece) home parlor by which he will have sufficient money to finalize a deal he made with a prospective seller from the Sutters (their masters) to buy the land that is owned by them. From the very beginning of the play it is obvious that Berniece is sticking to the past, to her roots to slavery, she does not want to sell the piano by any means or revenue. Their uncle Doaker says to Boy Willie "Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano." (1)

Both Berniece and Boy Willie fight savagely bearing the question of legacy. Both of them have their heirloom "the piano" and each of them wants to exploit it in his way. Boy Willie comes from the South with a dream to sell it (the piano) to have the chance to buy the land he wants that is owned by Sutter who died three weeks earlier and his ghost appears in the house of Berniece. Sutter's brother told Boy Willie that he will sell it to him if he brought the money

within two weeks. It is worth to mention that Sutter's brother will give the piano to him with a rise in its price 2000 dollars over the price of the White purchaser. To Boy Willie the piano is a mere peace of wood since Berniece does not gain from it. Moreover Berniece can play on any other musical instrument such as the "Guitar". Boy Willie does not care for his history that is carved on the piano. To him the carved history only gives the piano value, but land lasts. It is "something under your feet. Land the only thing God ain't making any more of. You can always get you another piano. I'm talking about a land. What you get something of the ground." (50)

His repeated evocations of the land gather force through out the action;" if you got a piece of land you'll find everything else fall right into place. You can right up the White man and about the price of cotton."(92)

In this concern one can remember more than one film in different cultures. For instance, in the American culture there is the famous film "Gone with the Wind". We cannot forget the lines of O'Hara, "Why Land is the only thing in the world that worth workin' for, worth fightin' for, worth dyin' for because it is the only thing that last". "The Land" one of the greatest films in the history of the Egyptian cinema, as well one can not forget the scene of the protagonist Mahmud el Meligui while he was dragged for the sake of the land. In other words, the only thing that worthes honor is the land. Thus, Boy Willie knows the importance and value of land in contrast of his sister Berniece or his friend who wants to stay in the North where the urban life, loving women, going to picture movies, wearing fancy suit and shoes.

I take my hat off whenever somebody say (sic) my Daddy's name. But I ain't gonna be no fool about 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 and I can go down and cash in the crop and get my seed. As long as I got the land an the seed then crop and got 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. (52)

The claim on the piano is not only at the side of Berniece and Boy Willie, but also on the side of the ghost of Sutter who wants it. The presence of the ghost of Sutter is felt from the very beginning of the play till the end. The strong and main claim is between the ghost of Sutter and Boy Willie over the land and the musical instrument. The audience learns that the ghost of Sutter is seen sat on the piano three days after his death. The majority of the scenes in which the ghost appears are related to the piano either with reference or in their speech. Their uncle Doaker says "Sutter here cause of that piano. I heard him playing one time."(52) In the Stage Direction (*The sound of SUTTER'S GHOST is heard. They do not hear it.*) Boy Willie states: "I'll carry three hundred pounds of it ..... (82-83)". Near the end of the play the presence of Sutter is felt. Despite the challenge of Boy Willie to the ghost of Sutter citing that he is waiting for him, he will sell the piano and buy the land. But Boy Willie is defeated at the end, and he is seen to fall more than once in his fight with the ghost; he left the piano, the land that is owned by the Whites and will

still be theirs. In other words, the Blacks are emancipated at the surface, but they are suppressed at the hands of the Whites.

The theme of linking the past, present and future is one of the main themes of the plays of August; it is obvious in the relationship of Berniece and the piano. To her the piano is her past, her roots; meanwhile it represents her present. She does not like to sell the musical instrument, her history. She does not like to awake the spirits of her tormented ancestors; she believes that Boy Willie killed her husband. Despite his denial, it is one of the main reasons that she does not want to sell the piano as a revenge of him.

Berniece: You killed Crawly just sure as if pulled the trigger.

Boy Willie: See that is ignorant. That is downright foolish for you to say something like that ...

Berniece: All I know is Crawly would be alive if you hadn't come up and got him...

Boy Willie: I told you woman ... I ain't had nothing to do with. (52-4)

The loyalty of Berniece is to her past, to her ancestors, to her late husband. Her past influences her present, she refuses marriage. Avery proposed to her but she postpones her consent. Her psychological state of fear and depression let her stop at a certain point of time and can not move further at present or begin a new life with another one after her late husband. She believes that her brother killed her husband, and she wished that he was assassinated instead of her husband. Time repeats itself, her father was killed and her mother who polished the piano by her blood and tears asks her to play the piano in his commemoration. In the same way Berniece raises her daughter all alone and teaches her to play piano to become a teacher. At the end of the play Berniece sticks to her past and sings the emblem asking the help of her ancestors to exorcise the piano from the ghost; because the departure of the ghost means the departure of her brother Boy Willie. It worth to say in this context, that once she sat to sing the emblem of her ancestors, she reclaimed charge for her life and restored herself.

The roots of the Charles family go back to the slavery time "...to understand that about the piano of the family ... you got to go back to slavery time..." (42) ,where the Blacks were treated like property not like human beings. The Charles' are owned by the Sutter'. Once the grandfather Sutter wants to give a present to his wife on the anniversary of their wedding, it was the piano that is exchanged by two of his slaves. This operation is achieved in a very humiliating way. They are treated as if they are objects. The old Sutter lined up his slaves in front of his purchaser Mr. Nolander to select what he wants from his slaves. Unfortunately, Mr. Nolander "look from over and out of the whole bunch ... picked up my grandmother... her name was Berniece... daddy when he was nothing but a little boy nine years old."(43) His wife Miss Ophelia was pleased by his present but soon she missed her dear slaves and fell ill. Then Old Sutter thought of engraving her dear slaves and the history of their slaved Black family on her piano. Subsequently, Miss Ophelia the wife of the old Sutter was pleased to have both the piano and her slaves. Once and for all, Miss Ophelia plays the piano till her death, as a compensation and apology to her former slaves. The heirloom (the piano) fills the gaps left over from the physical absence of relatives who have been sold, and who have been died or who have been in some manner absented in general. This makes the system of geological substitution attempts to compensate the notorious system for destroying black families. Ophelia's sudden recovery

getting her “niggers” back can be read as an evidence that the piano does provide a certain level of continuity where there would be a nagging and indeed illness-inducing of disruption and loss. Dylan Penningroth states that the continuity was as true for the slaves who were directly affected by these losses, as it was for the Whites who were better able to adjust to such substitutions for not being kin. He added by “bequeathing property, slaves over and over again defined not only belonging to them but who” (2).<sup>9</sup> Thus heirlooms were important to slaves’ efforts to create, recreate, preserve and strengthen family ties. Michael Morales agrees adding how the dead are necessarily included in this process of family formation by dint of the piano’s function as a “sacred ancestral altar, bridging the world of the living to that of the dead”.<sup>(3)</sup> For being integral to establish familial bonds, these heirlooms essentially became “a part of the family”, as it were.

The majority of the black men in *The Piano Lesson* are marginal members in the society that has squeezed them out of its workforce. Most of the Blacks are looking for a better status to stand on an equal foot with the Whites. Consequently, they resort to the various plans of money making to achieve their purpose. They sell watermelons, hauling and stealing wood or attempting to have projects of quick profit. While Boy Willie does not depend on the shady means to raise his income. He is ready to die for his dream that is to buy a land in the honor of his father, particularly if it is the one that he was slave in. By purchasing the land his father would be on equal foot with his master Old Sutter. To realize his end Boy Willie plans to exploit his heirloom the valuable, ancient “piano”. He claims that he still has the spirit of a fighter. Though he has no capital, Boy Willie has the intention to fight his sister who does not want to sell it till he has a good reason to leave.

The lessons of *The Piano lesson* continue in the character of the friend of Boy Willie “Lymon” who is a wanted man in the Mississippi, comes escaping from the Sheriff. He chooses to sever all the ties with his roots. On the surface he reinforces several stereotypes of black men who migrated from the South forever are in trouble with the law, averse to hard work, fond of flashy clothes, has no ambitions, loves women and sexual desire, has no loyalty to the past, present or even the future. Lymon comes to the North as an end in itself, where he would sell his watermelons truck as all the Blacks do and would not be detected by the Police or be under their call. Moreover, it is a chance to get out of the Mississippi where his family roots lie, “they treat you better here...” he said naively. (38).

The treatment of the Blacks in the North, as it stated before, is better than in the South, but again from the surface only. Winning Boy the cousin of Boy Willie is one of the marginal black characters. He articulates how much he understands the ideological hold and materialistic grasp of propriety whiteness, which Doaker the uncle of Boy Willie only misguidedly evokes his biased account of Ophelia to the piano. Wining Boy is a skilled storyteller, comes up with the following hypothetical scenario to explain to Boy Willie the difference between Blacks and Whites.

Now you take and eat some berries. They taste good to you. So you say I’m gonna go out and get me a whole pot of these berries and them up to make a pie or whatever. But you ain’t looked to see berries is sitting in the white fellow’s yard. Ain’t got no fence around them. You

figure anybody want something they'd fence it in. Alright. Now the white man come along and say that's my land. Therefore everything that grow on it belong to me. He tell the sheriff, I want you to put this nigger in jail as a warning to all the other niggers. Otherwise first thing you know these niggers have everything that belong to us. (38)

In the South there is the hard work and ill-treatment of the niggers, but in the North something else, the easy life, quick money, lots of inhibited women. In the North the nigger lives a comfortable life wearing the fine suite and "carousing in the Pittsburgh night spots, looking for women".( ) Lymon like all the black men whom Wilson portrays is productive meanwhile Boy Willie or even aspirations ?to achieve his ends. He is a flee person who has all the contradictions that the loss of the days and ill-treatment of the Blacks led him to the ability to help Boy Willie in selling the watermelons meanwhile he is in love with wearing the flashy suit, and the matching socks to attract women he is looking for. Meanwhile he has the wish to attract the affection of Berniece, her respect. He also plans "like hundreds of southern black men coming into the cities before and after him -the deceptive lure of the North draws him- ... he is certain to be consumed and discarded by this same society to which he feels such misguided attraction. ( )

The North also did not fulfill the aspirations of Wining Boy the cousin of Boy Willie who turned to wine to forget his unsuccessful life. As he failed in practicing the piano, like Herald Loomis, he is cut from his cultural roots and willingly lives a tormented life. According to Wilson the most poignant drama rises when the Blacks cannot find such depressed and had success in sports or music. But as Wining Boy failed in playing the piano, he becomes depressed and had losses in his self to the extent that he can not admit that he plays the music as a profession. Instead he blames for the sorry course he has in his life: "All you know how to do is play that piano. Now, who am I? Am I me? Or am I the piano player? Sometime it seem like the only thing to do is shoot the piano player cause he the cause all the trouble I'm having."(41) ?Ironically, the same instrument that eventually reunites the Charles family is Wining Boy's nemesis, symbolizing that which disintegrates his family, keeps him constantly relocating, and indirectly drives him to drink. In other words, Wining Boy is one of surrendering and weak characters, who at the age of fifty six realizes that he can not find success or happiness and consequently resorted to alcohol. Like Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner*, travels a road with his sack of money in his song.

Of the entire group of black men in *The Piano Lesson* is Doaker Charles their uncle. He is a full-time railroad cook who because of the transient nature of his job, resides with his niece in Pittsburgh when he is not at work. By nature he is the one who comforts Berniece because he does not upset her and does everything to himself. Unlike the others he is satisfied by his economic status, he does not care for improving himself, or let Berniece cares about him.

Men: The Pullman porter who serviced various railroads during the depression. According to a study based on interviews with black former railroad men, "Black men, from their point of view, saw the Pullman Company as a way up out of poverty. Many men say it was 'the only game in town', and it was relatively prestigious game. As one porter remembers it, 'It was a good job for a black man'( ) . Doaker and his rowdy friends have strong bondage that turn their raucous of 1competitive storytelling, singing or light hearted games of the dozen.



*The Piano Lesson* like many of Wilson's plays about the black experience emphasizes male bonding. As early as *Jitney!* His exploration of black men employed as Jitney drivers in a Pittsburgh station; he focuses on their relationships. He investigates from a black point of view, the chemistry that exists among a traditionally oppressed group as they try to survive in America without sacrificing either their dignity or their masculinity. They are by no means oblivious to women, yet sometimes they develop unexplained camaraderie in each other's company that is crucial in their lives.

It takes with Sutter's ghost, the ghost of the white man – that lingering idea of him as the master of slaves – who is still in black Americans' lives and to be exorcised. "I wasn't so much concerned with who ended up with the piano, as with Boy Willie's willingness to do battle. How to write..." 17.?

The history of Robert Sutter's ghost becomes the stuff of a legend in the hands of seasoned storytellers like Winning Boy and Doaker. As Gladys Fry observes, "Rumor was the method used not only to circulate the falsified story as legitimate news, but to expand and exaggerate the account as it was verbally transmitted from one excited person to another" (3). To surviving brothers of the murdered boy Charles, that perpetuating the saga of the Ghost of the Yellow Dog as an art form. A Boxcar on the yellow dog railroad was the final resting place for Berniece.

To sum up loyalty for the family, for the roots, overcome. Berniece is the victory partner. The spiritual ritual and the plea for the assistance of the dead are responded. The unity between the brother and the sister exorcised the piano, and the ghost left. The question which was viable between Doaker and Boy Willie and the dialogue between both Berniece and Boy Willie: Land ... piano ... land ... piano ...land ...piano... piano (50-51); The piano overcomes. The materialistic aspect is defeated. The fathers are honored by keeping their history, their roots, not by buying land and trying to stand feet by feet with the Whites, because they will always back to each other. Sutter's brother will sell the land to Willie by 500 \$ more than the sum that the first will pay. Boy Willie surrenders goes to the South and tries to find another way to realize his goal to buy the land. He wants to gather both the land and the roots. To achieve his target to be in the same stander as the whites (his owner) on the contrary of Berniece who wants to keep the piano the symbol of racism, of torment of her family on the hands of their owner Sutter.

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