

Hui Ying Wen

*The Piano Lesson*

The story of *The Piano Lesson* starts well before the time of the play. Robert Sutter, a slave-owner, exchanged some of his slaves for a piano as an anniversary present for his wife. When his wife started missing the exchanged slaves, he asked Willie Boy, the husband and father of the two exchanged slaves, to carve the images of the slaves into the piano for Mrs. Sutter's sake. However, Willie Boy went beyond his orders and covered the piano with African-style carvings of every member of his family. Years later, Willie Boy's grandsons, Boy Charles, Doaker, and Wining Boy, stole the piano from Sutter's house. The incident ended in Boy Charles being burned to death in a boxcar while trying to escape, and he and those who died with him were dubbed the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog." From then on, the accidental deaths of slave-owners were attributed to these "Ghosts." Doaker brought the piano with him when he moved North with his niece, Berniece, and her daughter, Maretha. He works as a railroad cook, while his brother, Wining Boy, wanders the country without a permanent job or home. Berniece's husband, Crawley, died in a conflict when he stole some wood with Boy Willie and Lymon (Berniece's brother and his friend) from a landowner. The play begins with Boy Willie arriving at Doaker's and Berniece's household, announcing the death of Sutter and his plans to sell the piano in order to buy Sutter's land. Two things stand in his way: Berniece's refusal, and Sutter's ghost, which haunts the piano and is provoked by Boy Willie's attempt to move it out of the house. Another important character in the plot is Avery, a man who wishes to marry Berniece.

There are several strong symbols that run throughout the arc of the story. The piano and the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog" play key roles from the very beginning of the story (before the time of the play) to the very last scene of the play. They both are symbols of the family's culture,

history, and ancestry. The piano has, quite literally, figures of their family members carved into it, in an African style that had been passed down to Willie Boy, even in slavery. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog take the role of ancestors of the African American slaves – they hold special significance for the family in the play, as Boy Charles is the prominent figure among the Ghosts. They are perceived as protectors, to whom the deaths of overseers and persecutors (as well as the demise of Sutter's ghosts at the end) are attributed. Sutter's ghost, which plagues the household and is attached to the piano, symbolizes the history of slavery. It is an element that haunts the family's past, which the piano represents. Slavery is also a part of the past that hinders the family from moving forward; for instance, when Boy Charles, planning to sell the piano to gain land to farm, tries to move it out of the house, the ghost acts up. The railroad is another recurring symbol; Boy Charles tried to flee via the railroad, but met his death there along with the other Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, and Doaker, the railroad cook, bases his world-weary view of life on his observations on the railroad. Hence, the railroad represents a conduit for movement through life, be it used for rash, prudent, or simply aimless movement.

The ensemble of characters is the real engine of the play. Primarily, they can be divided into two groups: the old generation, whose youths were consumed by slavery, and the young generation, who still has the time and energy to establish a new life after slavery. The brothers Doaker and Wining Boy are the old generation. Wining Boy leads a drifting life, with no secure home or source of financial stability. Doaker, on the other hand, has witnessed the drifting world from his job on the railroad, and is weary of what he sees. He seeks to live out the rest of his days in peace and harbors no higher ambitions.

Berniece, Boy Willie, and Avery are the main trio of the young generation. Newly freed from slavery relatively early in life, each represents a different way of creating a life in the

outside world. Berniece is paralyzed by and avoids the pain of her family's history – she refuses to touch the piano, which was the cause of her father's death, and keeps it sitting like a “gravestone” in her home. Expending no efforts on furthering her own life (she refuses to come out of widowhood), she focuses instead on the success of the next generation, represented by Maretha. Avery's method is to take to the white system as much as possible; he runs an elevator in a downtown skyscraper and wants to start his own church (August Wilson's view of religion as a lasting tool of enslavement created by white men was explored in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*). In contrast, Boy Willie's approach is fueled by an almost reckless need for revenge. He wants to own and profit from the very land that his family was enslaved on, and had probably killed Sutter to do so. His mantra of the “three-part payment” for the land is descriptive of his self-destructive mentality: he is willing to give of himself (his own savings), demean himself (sell watermelons), and give up part of his family's culture and treasures (the piano) to achieve his goal. In a way similar to how Berniece works with Maretha, Boy Willie also has a partner. However, his partner is not a son or daughter, but Lymon – a companion who shares his energy and youthful daring.

Another pattern among the characters consists of the men in the family. All have committed some act of revenge against their enslavers or persecutors: Willie Boy had carved the entire family into the piano, Doaker, Wining Boy, and Boy Charles stole the piano, and Crawley brought a gun with him in anticipation of a conflict with some white men when he, Boy Willie, and Lymon were stealing wood from a landowner. In fact, Boy Willie is currently committing an act of revenge by buying Sutter's land. All of these actions were not completely prudent, and some men paid with their lives. It is Berniece, a woman, who breaks this ineffective male pattern by accomplishing a true success at the end of the play.

Wilson's structure of the play is fairly straightforward, leading us through the story while incorporating character exploration. Act 1, Scene 1 sets up the situation with Boy Willie's entrance and announcement of Sutter's death and his plans to sell the piano. As if we too, like Boy Willie, had just arrived at the household, we are introduced to the cast of characters. The conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie is instigated. In the next scene between Doaker and Wining Boy, the old generation, we learn the history of the family, the piano, and the Ghosts of Yellow Dog. In preparation for the second half of the play and as a summation of the play's central conflict, Act 1 ends with a short articulation of the argument between Berniece and Boy Willie and an appearance of Sutter's ghost.

The first three scenes of Act 2 work together to explore the theme of romantic relationships between men and women. The first two scenes demonstrate ineffective and even immature attitudes towards romantic relationships. In Scene 1, Wining Boy tries to sell a suit to Lymon as a tool for going out into town and "getting women" (the character of Grace appears as a result of Boy Willie's and Lymon's night out). In the next scene, Berniece and Avery hold an unsuccessful conversation about marriage; she holds an unhealthy reluctance towards moving on after Crawley's death, and he puts forth very disparaging and selfish arguments for their marriage. In a heartwarming conclusion to this sub-theme, however, Scene 3 brings Berniece and Lymon together, each from one of the two previous scenes. They hold a frank and open discussion about their places in life, romantic and otherwise, and what Lymon truly desires in a relationship. This develops into an attraction between the two, probably the first romance Berniece has had during her self-imposed widowhood. The conflict over the piano comes to a head and is resolved in the last two scenes – which brings us to the meaning of the play.

Plotwise, the central conflict of the play is between Berniece and Boy Willie over what to

do with the piano. Thematically, since the piano symbolizes their family history and culture and both Berniece and Boy Willie are of the “young generation,” the conflict is over how to deal with their familial and cultural past in their current endeavors to establish a life after slavery.

Berniece views the past as a painful history to be suppressed in order for the next generation to rise up, yet it is a past that must not be forgotten, for it contains losses near and dear to her. This explains why she does not tell Maretha about the piano's history, yet is adamant about keeping it in her home although she refuses to touch it. Boy Willie, on the other hand, holds much less reverence towards the piano and wants to sell it to buy Sutter's land; he holds no sentiments towards objects of familial and cultural significance, and is willing to exploit or use them as stepping-stones to gain treasures that are more pertinent to his present life, such as land to farm. The disagreement between these two points of view create a constant thread-line of discontent running throughout the play.

Wilson crafts the climax as a wonderful physical manifestation of the different ways that the young generation – Berniece, Boy Willie, and Avery – tries to subdue the lingering ghost of slavery in order to move on. Sutter's ghost is roused by Boy Willie's final attempt to move the piano out of the house. First, Avery tries to exorcise the piano using religion, which comes from his belief in success by adapting to the “white man's” system. He fails, however. Next, Boy Willie, outraged, engages the ghost in a physical wrestling match. This is very indicative of his reckless, vengeful nature and no-holds-barred approach to success, which characterizes his eagerness to sell a family heirloom for a purchase that not only advances him financially, but also serves the side purpose of revenge for the past. He too fails. Finally, Berniece plays the piano, for the first time in years, and sings a song calling upon Boy Charles and her female ancestors for help. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog arrive, indicated by the sound of a train, and

drive Sutter's ghost out. What Berniece has done is to undo her suppression of the past and call upon her ancestors and family culture, symbolized by the Ghosts of the Yellow and the piano respectively, for help in the struggle against the ghost of slavery. Needless to say, the earlier conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie over the use of the piano is resolved. Although Berniece's original insistence on suppressing the past has not won out, she wins by discovering in the end the most potent way that the piano, or the power of the family's history and culture, should be utilized.

It is interesting to note that the play's climax does not result directly from the conflict. In other words, why is the climax not a fight between Berniece and Boy Willie over the piano, since that is the conflict? Instead, Wilson structures the climax as a conflict between the ghost and the three members of the young generation. This calls emphasis to the fact that the play's conflict is not a personal one between Berniece and Boy Willie, but that the conflict is between what the two siblings *represent* – their different attitudes towards dealing with the past and how to best continue with the future. Structurally, this does not present any ambiguities, as the conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie is incontestably resolved by the climax.

Ultimately, *The Piano Lesson* is about the different ways Blacks try to shake off the shadow of slavery and establish a new life afterwards, and Wilson clearly indicates which method he believes works. That would be Berniece's newfound method, discovered during the pressure of the play's climax, which is to use one's family culture and history as a foundation, a source of strength, for exorcising the “ghost” of slavery and building a new life. Neither Avery's method of trying to fit into the “white man's” system, Willie Boy's impulse to exploit the family's accumulated heritage for revenge and immediate needs, nor Berniece's original suppression of the past are successful. Wilson also shows the fate of Blacks who are unable to even attempt

what the young generation of the play is trying to do. His example characters are Doaker and Wining Boy, who end up either waiting out their days devoid of higher ambitions, or wander the world, rootless, because their lives were so taken up by slavery that there is no time or energy left to carve out a new life.

A secondary theme, to which a major portion of the play is devoted nonetheless, is the general subject of men and women. Before Berniece's climactic action, there was a general pattern, running through the family, of men committing acts of revenge against enslavers and oftentimes perishing for it, leaving the women to mourn. Berniece's feat was not an act of revenge, hence she suffered no consequences for it. However, the success of her act is a strong statement on the potency of maternal wisdom passed down a family line, and this feminine aspect is emphasized by the fact that Berniece mainly calls upon her female ancestors in her song. There is also significance to the fact that Berniece has a daughter, not a son, to carry out the task of creating a life after slavery. This theme of the differences between men and women even appears to extend to Grace. Despite playing the role of a random woman picked up by Boy Willie, she exhibits a degree of dignity and maturity. When Berniece tells her and Boy Willie to get out of the house, Grace quickly complies and states her reluctance to intrude in a household in which she isn't welcome. This suggests a lack of pretension as to how she is perceived by Berniece and by society.

A related issue the play deals with is that of male/female romantic relationships. In fact, the first three scenes of Act 2 is a self-contained discussion on this subject, depicting the immature male view towards women, a widow's unhealthy reluctance to move on, a man's old-fashioned and sexist views of marriage, and finally a genuine romantic encounter founded on honest dialogue and mature assessments of love. The importance of having a relationship is also

stressed, as Berniece's paralysis in life, triggered by the painful past of slavery, is linked to her paralysis in her love life. Likewise, Wining Boy's unstable relationships and fleeting romantic affairs is symptomatic of his drifting lifestyle. It is unsurprising that marriage and relationships are granted such a key focus in this play, given the importance Wilson places on the continuation of family, and hence the creation of new generations.

As for the merits of this play, there seems to be an imbalance between how the play is set up, and how it ends. All along, the play runs mainly on the interactions between men – Doaker, and Wining Boy, and Boy Willie and Lymon. Also, the active players in the family's history comprise almost exclusively of men. Throughout the course of the play, Berniece is called upon only as needed in her role as Boy Willie's adversary. Therefore, her central role in the play's climax and resolution is surprising, and seems to lack a setup. She is the character who undergoes the most major change over the course of the play, yet her development is not documented and seems to occur in the blink of an eye during the climax. On the other hand, as mentioned before, the contrast between the actions of the men in Berniece's ancestry and her final salvation of the family is certainly effective, as far as the theme about the differences between men and women is used in the play.

A production of this play must be aware that the characters are probably the most important element of this play. They are the physical embodiments of the themes, and the vehicles by which those themes are played against each other. Hence, it would help if the characters are visually distinct, whether in looks or costume. First, there should be a distinction between the old and young generations. Doaker and Wining Boy should look distinct from Berniece, Boy Willie, and Avery, possibly by looking more faded, less vibrant. There are differences within each generation as well. Wining Boy shows signs of his traveling lifestyle



and lack of financial stability, while Doaker looks more “kept” and settled.

The differences should be more pronounced within the young generation, as the themes of this generation are given the prominent play in this play. Berniece deliberately imposes upon herself the look of a widow, and her reluctance to attract men or forge a way in the outside world shows itself in her carefully controlled, subdued dress. In contrast, Boy Willie, though technically an adult, still bears the vestiges of a reckless youth, and there may even be some aggression in his look that supports the implication that he murdered Sutter in order to carry out his revengeful purchase. Finally, every detail of Avery's dress, look, and even manner testifies to his desire to move up in the “white man's” world. Maretha and Lymon have their connections to this generation as well. Maretha is a vision of what Berniece believes will help a woman take a place in the world (there are textual clues, such as Berniece enrolling Maretha in piano lessons, straightening her hair, and admonishing her to be a properly behaved young woman). In the same manner, Lymon shares some of Boy Willie's youth and daring, yet instances in the script point to a greater degree of maturity in Lymon, such as his plan to stay up North to make his fortune, and his romantic scene with Berniece. Therefore, while Lymon should share Boy Willie's look, he retains a bit more maturity.

Finally, in order for the central meaning of the play to come across, the climax should be staged, as clearly as possible, as a battle in which Berniece, Boy Willie, and Avery are the chief “contestants,” each with equal yet strongly distinct roles. Doaker, Wining Boy, and whoever else may be onstage at the time should fade into the background. This is to emphasize, as much as possible, that this battle is a test of the methods by which the young generation attempt to overpower the ghost of slavery, with Berniece's newfound method finally emerging as the clear victor. The last scene of the play requires special care in staging, not only because it contains the

climax and resolution, but because it delivers the ultimate message of the play.