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The Symbolism of the Piano and Heritage and History in August Wilson's play *'The Piano Lesson'*

Tanushi Jain
Assistant Professor (English), Government College, Amargarh, Punjab
tanushijainji@gmail.com

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Abstract

August Wilson's play 'The Piano Lesson' explores the complex relationship between African American identity, ancestral memory, and the legacy of slavery. At the centre of the play stands the family piano, an object that transcends its material value to become a powerful symbol of heritage, history, and resistance. This article examines the symbolic significance of the piano and investigates how it embodies the memories, suffering, struggles, and cultural identity of generations of the Charles family. The conflict between Berniece and Willie Boy Charles over whether to preserve or sell the piano reflects a larger tension between remembering the past and pursuing economic progress. While Willie Boy views the piano as a means of achieving material independence, Berniece regards it as a sacred connection to their ancestors and their cultural heritage. Through the piano's carved images and its history of ownership, Wilson connects personal family memory with the broader historical experience of African Americans under slavery and racial oppression. The article argues that the piano functions not merely as a symbol of the past but also as an instrument of resistance and cultural survival. Ultimately, Wilson suggests that confronting and acknowledging ancestral history is essential for developing a meaningful sense of identity and achieving genuine freedom. Thus, 'The Piano Lesson' presents heritage as both a responsibility and a source of strength for future generations.

Keywords: August Wilson, Piano, Heritage, History, Symbolism.

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Introduction

August Wilson was an African American playwright, who has been referred to as the 'Theater's poet of Black America'. Wilson devoted much of his literary career to representing the African American experience and exploring the historical, cultural, and social forces that shaped Black life in the United States. His works are particularly significant for their attention to African American history, racial identity, family relationships, cultural heritage, economic struggle, and the continuing impact of slavery and discrimination.

"August Wilson was born on April 27,1945, as Frederick August Kittel in a two room , cold water flat in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania".(*August Wilson's Twentieth Century Cycle Plays , p.5*). His experiences growing up in an African American community deeply influenced his dramatic writings.

His father, Frederick August Kittel Sr. , a German immigrant, worked as a baker and his mother, Daisy Wilson, was an African American woman from North Carolina who cleaned homes for a living. Wilson later wrote under his mother's surname Wilson and legally took his mother's surname at the age of twenty, when he began seriously writing plays wand poetry.

Wilson maintained a strong voice in the progress and development of the contemporary Black theatre. As Harry. Justin Elam says, "Wilson through his own style of realism, his three -dimensional portraits, his story telling bravado validates a history of black experience. Rather than locating blacks in positions of victimization, subordination or objectification ,Wilson places them as subjects of his drama". (*The Past as Present in The Drama of August Wilson, p.17)*. By using realism, Wilson shows life as it actually is. He created three-dimensional characters, who feel real because they have their own emotions, thoughts, strengths, weaknesses, and personal struggles. His powerful storytelling presents the experiences, culture, and history of Black people in a meaningful way. Wilson does not portray Black people only as victims of racism or as people controlled by white society. Instead, he makes them the main subjects of his dramas who have their own voices, identities, ambitions, relationships, and decisions. Through their stories, Wilson shows that African Americans have a rich history and a valuable cultural identity.

Main works of August Wilson

August Wilson's major works include Jitney (1982), Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1982), Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1984), Fences (1985), The Piano Lesson (1986), Two Trains

Running (1990), Seven Guitars (1995), King Hedley II (1996), Gem of the Ocean (2003), and Radio Golf (2005). His most significant achievement is the Pittsburgh Cycle, also known as the Century Cycle, comprising ten plays that portray African-American life and synthesized the experiences of Black America in the 20th Century, using each historical decade, from 1904 to 1997, to document the physical, emotional, mental, and political strivings of Black life in the wake of emancultural. In chronological order of the periods, the plays are Gem of the Ocean (1900s), Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1910s), Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1920s), The Piano Lesson (1930s), Seven Guitars (1940s), Fences (1950s), Two Trains Running (1960s), Jitney (1970s), King Hedley II (1980s), and Radio Golf (1990s). Through these works, Wilson explores African-American history, racial discrimination, cultural identity, family relationships, historical memory, and resistance to oppression.

In the 1960s, Wilson joined the group of writers and artists with Rob Penny and other members of the group, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theater in 1968, which produced plays from the black canon as well as new works by emerging African American writers. Wilson's first play, *'Recycling'*, was performed for audiences in small theaters, schools and public housing community centers for 5 cents a ticket . In the same year, Wilson's '*Sizwe Banzi is Dead'*, his first professional play, is performed at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre.

Wilson, Penny, and poet Maisha Baton founded the Kuntu Writers workshop to bring African American writers together and to assist them in publication and production . He wrote 'Fullerton Street', which remained unpublished. .In 1987, St. Paul's major George Latimer named May 27, as 'August Wilson Day'. *Fences* and The *Piano Lesson* are the two of his plays for which Wilson received Pulitzer Prize for Drama.. Seattle Repertory Theatre became the only theatre in the country to produce his entire 10 play cycle and his one man show 'How I Learned What I Learned'.

Once, a Hollywood, studio proposed filming Wilson's play 'Fences'. He insisted that a black director should be hired for the film by saying: "I declined a white director not on the basis of race but on the basis of culture. White directors are not qualified for the job. The job requires someone who shared the specifics of the culture of black American."(*Aspects of Africanness in August Wilson's Drama: Reading The Piano Lesson Through Wole Soyinka's Drama, , p.98).* He believed that directing African American plays

required familiarity with Black American history, racial oppression, community life, language, music, and traditions.

In 'On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion' where Wilson argued for a completely black theatre with all positions filled by blacks. Amadou Bissiri remarks, "To him, black can best write and stage their experiences and cultured identity (*Aspects of Africanness in August Wilson's Drama: Reading The Piano Lesson Through Wole Soyinka's Drama, Vol. 30 No.1, p.99).* Wilson felt that African Americans understand their community's history, traditions, struggles, emotions, and cultural values through their lived experiences. Wilson was concerned about the survival of Black cultural values in a society dominated by white culture. He feared that Black traditions, history, language, music, and identity could be weakened or overlooked by the dominant culture.

'Radio Golf' is a play by Wilson, the final installment in his ten- part series, 'The Century Cycle'. It was first performed in 2005 by the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven and had its Broadway premiere in 2007 at the Cort Theatre. It is Wilson's final work. and Sandra G. Shannon writes, "For August Wilson, writing plays was an intensely personal affair. While it offered him the means by which to celebrate the unique particulars of black life, this medium also offered him a road map for negotiating the tricky contours of his own life." (*August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle, p.57*). For August Wilson, playwriting was a deeply personal experience. It allowed him to celebrate the richness and distinctiveness of African American life while also helped him understand his own experiences and navigate the challenges of his personal journey.

Influence on August Wilson

Wilson was most influenced by 'the four Bs': blues music, the Argentine writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges, the playwright Amiri Baraka and the painter Romare Bearden. He went on to add writers Ed Bullins and James Baldwin to the list. Borges's wonderful stories about gauchos (South American cowboys) taught Wilson to describe a particular time, place, and culture in detail.

Amiri Baraka taught Wilson that all art is political because it reflects society, power, and human experiences. However, Wilson did not write direct political plays. Instead, he explored the lives, struggles, and experiences of ordinary African Americans. Romare Bearden, a visual artist, inspired Wilson to portray the richness and complexity of everyday life.

Wilson admired Ed Bullins and James Baldwin for their honest representations of everyday life. They inspired him to portray the real experiences, problems, emotions, and struggles of Black people without hiding uncomfortable truths.

Wilson presented a different way to look at black Americans. Two years before his death in August 2005, Wilson wrote and performed an unpublished one-man play entitled 'How I learned What I learned' about the power of art and the power of possibility. August Wilson believed that art could give a voice to underrepresented communities, challenge stereotypes, and inspire people to recognise their potential. Blues music had a profound influence on his dramatic style. "Wilson viewed the blues as a form through which African Americans expressed **pain, memory, resistance, identity."(***August Wilson's The Piano Lesson and the Limits of Law. pg 4)*. Its rhythms and storytelling techniques are reflected in his dialogue.

Storytelling, folklore, proverbs, spiritual beliefs, and oral histories influenced his characterization and language. His characters often communicate history through stories passed from one generation to another.

The Symbolism of the Piano

American playwright August Wilson wrote 'The Piano Lesson' in 1987. It is the fourth play in Wilson's 'The Pittsburgh Cycle'. August Wilson began writing this play by questioning the limited belief that a person can gain self-worth by rejecting or forgetting their past. Wilson suggests that people cannot truly understand themselves or develop a strong identity by denying their history, culture, and roots. Our past experiences and cultural heritage play an important role in shaping who we are. *The Piano Lesson's* content was set in 1936 Pittsburgh during the aftermath of the Great Depression, The Piano Lesson follows the lives of the Charles family in the Doaker Charles household and an heirloom, the family piano, which is decorated with designs carved by an enslaved ancestor. The play focuses on the arguments between a brother and a sister who have different ideas on what to do with the piano. The brother, Boy Willie, is a sharecropper who wants to sell the piano to buy the land (Sutter's land) where his ancestors toiled as slaves. The sister, Bernice, remains emphatic about keeping the piano, which shows the carved faces of their great-grandfather's wife and son during the days of their enslavement. The play was adapted to film with the same name in 1995.

The central symbol of the play is the 137-year-old Piano, an object that incarnates the family history. The piano was originally traded by a white slaveowning Sutters family for Berniece and Boy Willie's great-grandmother and grandfather. Their great-grandfather carved the faces of the family into the wood. Years later, their father Boy Charles stole the piano back, an act that led to his murder. It takes on a number of meanings through the course of its life. The piano was originally obtained through the exchange of enslaved people. This shows that, under slavery, Black people were treated as objects that could be bought, sold, and exchanged like ordinary goods.

As Alvarado, Pedro. E writes , " It is widely believed that African art is created for the purposes of and with the ability to do many things in the spiritual realm...It is the understanding of the piano as a work of African art and a spiritual artifact that informs the decision making process as it relates to the fate of the piano."(*Religious Symbolism in August Wilson's The Piano Lesson p. 4*). African art is not created merely for decoration , it is also believed to possess spiritual power and serve important purposes in the spiritual world.

In the play, the piano is more than a musical instrument or a valuable object. It is a work of African art that carries the memories, history, and spiritual connection of the Charles family. The carvings on the piano represent the family's ancestors and their painful experiences of slavery. Therefore, the decision about whether to sell or preserve the piano becomes a conflict between economic needs and cultural heritage. Boy Willie wants to sell it to buy land, while Berniece wants to preserve it as a symbol of their family's history and ancestral identity. Thus, the piano represents African cultural heritage, ancestral memory, spiritual identity, and the struggle to preserve the past.

Heritage and history in August Wilson's play 'The Piano Lesson'

August Wilson emphasises the artist's responsibility to preserve cultural identity and historical memory. Wilson remarked, "You have responsibilities as a global citizen. Your history dictates your duty. And by writing about black people, you are not limiting yourself. The experiences of African-Americans are as wide open as God's closet." (Alexander, Elizabeth. *The One Who Went Before: Remembering the Playwright August Wilson, 1945–2005.)*A person's historical and cultural background shapes their responsibilities toward their community, heritage, and future generations. As an African American playwright, he considered it his responsibility to represent Black experiences, preserve cultural memory, and give voice to a community whose history had often been excluded from mainstream narratives. Through the Charles family's piano, Wilson explores the legacy of slavery,

ancestral memory, cultural identity, and the responsibility of preserving the past for future generations.

In August Wilson's '*The Piano Lesson'*, **heritage and history are inseparable from African American identity**. The play is about family, memory, and how to use ancestral legacy. The piano's carved figures are especially significant. They record the history of the Charles family, transforming the instrument into a kind of **family archive**. Because written historical records often failed to represent African American experiences adequately, the piano becomes a physical repository of memories that might otherwise disappear. Wilson gives representation to people whose experiences were ignored, suppressed, or excluded from dominant historical narratives. The ancestors whose lives were shaped by slavery cannot tell their stories directly. However, their history survives through the piano's carvings and the memories of the Charles family.

The conflict between **Berniece and Willie Boy** represents two different attitudes toward heritage. "The main idea of August Wilson's play, "The Piano Lesson," is the struggle of an African-American family, characterized by Berniece and Boy Willie, to face their past and embrace the future". (The Piano Lesson of August Wilson as the Representation of the African Cultural Heritage .pg 80).Both characters seek empowerment, but they choose different paths. In August Wilson's play 'The Piano Lesson', Boy Willie and Berniece are brother and sister belonging to the Charles family, an African American family. He comes from Mississippi to Pittsburgh with the intention of selling the family piano and using the money to buy land. While Willie's elder sister Berniece lives in Pittsburgh with her daughter, Maretha. She refuses to sell the piano because it represents their ancestors and family history.

Willie Boy wants to sell the piano and use the money to purchase land. For him, economic independence is a way of securing the family's future. Berniece, however, believes that selling the piano would mean abandoning the sacrifices and suffering of their ancestors. Her attachment demonstrates that heritage is not merely an object from the past, it is part of one's identity. Wilson therefore presents history as a **living presence** rather than something finished. The ghost of Sutter reinforces this idea: the past continues to affect the present until it is confronted. At the climax, Berniece plays the piano and calls upon her ancestors, symbolically reconnecting the family with its heritage.

All the themes which August Wilson addresses in *The Piano Lesson* inform a pervasive discussion of race and racial discrimination. The Charles family legacy, like that

of many African Americans, includes enslavement and discrimination but also a rich and distinctive cultural history. Wilson portrays racist stereotypes through various symbols such as piano, watermelons and ghosts ,characters and conflicts that were built in the play .“The piano is so significant because it is considered to hold history of slavery for the Charles family”. (*Mohammad, Dlnya .Heritage of Slavery in August Wilsons the Piano Lesson p.183)*. The significance of piano in August Wilson’s 'The Piano Lesson’ is implanted in the heritage of slavery.

In *The Piano Lesson* Wilson explores the idea of legacy on several levels: as something tangible with monetary value, as something emotional related to a parent's hopes when making a bequest to a child, and as something cultural that knits together groups and generations. The play focuses on a very tangible legacy- the carved piano. It has a calculable monetary value, which is Boy Willie's focus when he arrives in Pittsburgh. He can sell it and get the money he needs to buy the land on which his ancestors worked as slaves. He knows his great-grandfather's carvings give the piano its high monetary value and his father died to make sure that the family had possession of the instrument. But, Boy Willie's sister, Berniece however, sees the piano as an emotional legacy. For her, selling it would be like selling her soul because it contains generations of Charles family blood and tears. Berniece wants to preserve the piano, as an artifact of the family’s history and suffering. The piano has a symbolic meaning separate from its practical or monetary value, and in Berniece’s eyes it should be protected.

The two questions arise in 'The Piano Lesson' are: “What do you do with your legacy, and how do you best put it to use?” The Charles legacy is incarnated by the piano, an artifact and record of the family’s history under slavery. Consequently, implicit in the question of legacy are those of vengeance, debt, and reparation across the generation. The two characters primarily confronting these questions are Berniece and Boy Willie. Whereas Boy Willie would sell the piano in the name of his future, a future that would avenge his ancestors and secure his success, Berniece clings to the heirloom in memory of the blood that stains its wood. The siblings reconciliation comes in the play’s final scene, a struggle between Boy Willie and Sutter’s ghost that allegorizes their families and races battle across time. Boy Willie fights Sutter’s ghost, which represents the continuing influence of slavery, white domination, and racial oppression. Their struggle is not merely a personal conflict; it symbolises the historical battle between Black and white families and the lasting consequences of slavery. During this crisis, Berniece and Boy Willie come to understand the importance of their shared family heritage. Although Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to

buy land and Berniece wants to preserve it, both ultimately confront the same historical legacy.

At the end of the play, Berniece plays the piano and calls upon her ancestors for help. She functions like a priestess, connecting the living members of the family with their dead ancestors through music and spiritual invocation. Her playing is not simply musical performance. It becomes a spiritual act through which she seeks the strength of her ancestors to protect the family against Sutter's ghost, the symbolic representative of the former slave-owning order. By playing the piano, Berniece finally embraces the cultural and spiritual power of her family's history. Earlier, she had avoided playing it because of the painful memories associated with her husband's death and her ancestors' suffering. In the final scene, however, she uses music to confront that history rather than remain silent about it. Thus Boy Willie comes to understand the importance of the piano- an importance beyond material concerns- and Berniece finds herself able to use her legacy.

Throughout the play, a number of characters address the dead across the grave, the speech of the dead becomes a central vehicle by which the living assume their legacy. The ghosts in The Piano Lesson symbolise the unresolved conflicts of the past "Exorcism is the religious or spiritual practice of evicting demons and jinns or other spiritual entities from a person or an area, that is believed to be possessed".(*Jacobs, Louis. A Concise Companion to the Jewish religion,p.34)* Berniece emerges as the family's priestess, a person who connects the living members of the family with their dead ancestors through music and spiritual communication. She uses music to communicate with her ancestors and seek their help. Her song calls upon Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola, asking them to protect the family during its struggle against Sutter's ghost. When Berniece invokes the names of her ancestors, she brings their memory into the present. She says:

"I want you to help me
Mama Esther
I want you to help me
Papa Boy Charles
I want you to help me
Mama Ola"
(The Piano Lesson, p.107)

The dead are not merely figures from the past; they remain spiritually connected to the living family. This connection reflects an important aspect of African American cultural traditions, in which ancestors are remembered as sources of strength, guidance, and protection. She assumes this role in childhood, playing the piano so her mother can hear her dead father speak. In the present, she returns to the piano as supplicant, forcefully imploring the ancestors to assist in the exorcism.

'The Piano Lesson' is enriched by interweaving the legacy of African American customs, folktales, music, and spirituality which draws on the culture of two continents. Examples of confrontation with one's historical legacy through African American musical traditions in The Piano Lesson are abundant, such as the Work song, the Traveling song, the blues, and the boogie- woogie. In 'The Piano Lesson', music becomes a medium for preserving Black history and collective memory. Through these musical interludes, August Wilson communicates African American history, suffering, and cultural experiences to the audience. In August Wilson's play The Piano Lesson, the epigraph is a short verse taken from the blues musician Skip James.

"Gin my cotton

Sell my seed

aBuy my baby" (James, Skip. Lllinois Blues, The Piano Lesson p.i)

The song has a double meaning. On the surface, it appears to describe selling cotton and seeds to earn money to buy a baby. However, at a deeper level, it refers to the history of slavery, in which Black people were treated as commodities and bought and sold like property. The song recalls not only economic exploitation but also the destruction of family relationships and human dignity. Music in The Piano Lesson serves as more than entertainment. It preserves the collective memories and painful experiences of African Americans. Whether the songs function as historical documents or as cryptic messages, they communicate the legacy of slavery to later generations. They help the audience understand the history that shapes the Charles family's identity and their relationship with the piano.

In the play, the piano preserves the history of the Charles family. Its carvings represent the lives and suffering of their ancestors, including the history of slavery. The piano therefore becomes a living reminder of a past that might otherwise be forgotten. **The history of the piano itself represents resistance. The piano originally belonged to the Sutter family, a white slave-owning family. The Charles family's ancestors were enslaved, and their**

lives were connected to the piano through the system of slavery. Papa Boy Charles and his brothers later stole the piano back. Their action transforms the piano from an object of white ownership into a symbol of Black resistance and reclamation. The piano represents the Charles family's painful history under slavery. Boy Willie's great-grandfather, Willie Boy, carved the family's history into the piano, transforming it into a permanent record of Black suffering and survival.

Enslaved people were often denied control over their own stories and identities. By carving the family's history into the piano, Willie Boy resists historical erasure and asserts that his family existed, suffered, and survived. The piano becomes a form of cultural resistance because it preserves the experiences that dominant white society might otherwise ignore. The piano appears to have a secret ability that keeps alive the spirit of the dead, fostering a unity between past and present. "Each person of the family respond to it in a different manner, according to his or her past actions, hopes, fears and desires."(*Religious Symbolism in August Wilson's Piano Lesson p. 8).* The piano also has the possibility to contemplate the identity of those who come into contact with it.

The piano becomes a form of resistance through memory. Resistance through cultural heritage can be seen in Berniece's refusal to sell the piano represents another form of resistance. She understands that the piano carries the suffering and sacrifices of her ancestors. For Berniece, preserving the piano means preserving Black cultural identity. Her position can be understood as to forget one's history is to risk losing one's identity. Berniece's final playing of the piano and her invocation of her ancestors demonstrate the continuing power of ancestral spirituality. Willie Boy's Economic Resistance represents a different form of resistance. He wants to sell the piano and use the money to purchase land. His objective is economic independence. He believes that owning land can give the family greater control over its future. Thus, Willie Boy's resistance is directed toward overcoming the economic consequences of racial oppression.

The play also presents a conflict between remembering the past and moving beyond it. Berniece believes the past must be acknowledged, while Willie Boy wants to transform the family's future through economic advancement. "Later in the play, he explains to his sister that land ownership brings empowerment, some sense of equality with whites even in the 1930s." (*August Wilson's The Piano Lesson and the Limits of Law. pg 4)***For him, land ownership is a way of transforming the family's painful history of**

slavery into economic power and independence. Historically, African Americans faced severe barriers to landownership, economic mobility, and financial independence. Boy Willie's ambition therefore carries significance beyond personal profit. It also connects to August Wilson's broader concern with Black heritage, self-determination, and the struggle to establish an independent identity in America.

Their disagreement reflects a larger question .Should African Americans preserve their painful history? , or Should they leave it behind to build a new future? Wilson does not provide a simple answer. Instead, he suggests that genuine freedom requires both remembering the past and creating the future. The climax provides the strongest expression of resistance. When Berniece finally plays the piano and calls upon her ancestors, she reconnects with the family's spiritual and cultural heritage.. By restoring suppressed voices, preserving cultural traditions, and representing the survival of African Americans, he transforms the past from a history of oppression into a source of identity, dignity, and empowerment. The play ultimately suggests that African American heritage is not a burden to be discarded but a source of identity, dignity, and strength., Wilson suggests that true empowerment comes not from rejecting the past but from confronting it, reclaiming it, and transforming it into a source of collective strength.

Conclusion

'The Piano Lesson' by August Wilson is not only a captivating play, but it also encompasses a deeper truth. The play explores African American conflict relating to family, society and history particularly to the history of the slaves .**The piano functions as a bridge between past and present. Wilson emphasizes that remembering African American history helps preserve cultural identity and prevents the loss of ancestral memories and experiences. August Wilson's play 'The Piano Lesson' presents the piano as far more than a musical instrument; it becomes a powerful repository of African American heritage, history, memory, and resistance. Through the carved images and painful history associated with the piano, Wilson preserves the experiences of generations who suffered under slavery and racial oppression. The conflict between Berniece and Willie Boy reflects the larger tension between preserving ancestral heritage and pursuing economic progress. While Willie Boy views the piano as a means of achieving material independence, Berniece recognizes its deeper cultural and spiritual significance.**

Ultimately, the play 'The Piano Lesson' establishes heritage as both a responsibility and a source of empowerment. The piano connects the past with the present and enables the characters to understand who they are and what they have inherited. Through this central symbol, Wilson emphasizes that remembering history, preserving cultural identity, and resisting erasure are essential forms of survival and self-definition. The play thus remains relevant as a powerful reflection on the relationship between memory, identity, heritage, and freedom.

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