

Role of history and past in august wilson's the piano lesson



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Afro-American writers made the political choice of speaking up for themselves by articulating their thoughts, when they veritably vowed to own their legacy and their values. The average African-American who had not only been divested from his history and heritage, but also had been dis severed from the mainstream social life, was addressed by Wilson in the subsequent words, “ the preservation and promotion, the propagation and rehearsal of the value of one’s ancestors is the surest way to a full and productive life” (qtd. in Pease 3). August Wilson’s play *The Piano Lesson* is a piece of literary articulation that outlines the psychological impact that the white supremacist social order had on the black surrogates for many generations. It explores how the dismantling of the black subjection, which according to Orlando Patterson resulted in the “ social death” of the blacks, pushed them to experience “ natal alienation and the sense of kinlessness” (qtd. in Pease 5). Amidst all of this, history and family legacy were elements that played a munificent role in helping the African-Americans to connect themselves with their roots and celebrate the true spirit of freedom.

Wilson, in his play, focuses on the abject turmoil that an individual has to face as well as an inner battle that has to be fought by him when he stands at the crossroads where on one side, having a past and how to best put it to use is the question he has to deal with, and on the other side, he is afflicted with the haunting trauma associated with the same past.

Initially, in the play, it seems like there is a notable struggle between change and tradition, and that past or history is only restricted to the character of Berniece, who ardently vows to cling to it by not wanting to sell the piano, whereas Boy Willie, it seems, is more inclined towards acquiring change for

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himself and getting rid of his family's past by being hell-bent on selling it. But gradually towards the end of the play, Wilson makes it clear that both, Berniece and Boy Willie, are warmly affiliated with their past and their family's legacy— the only variance lies in the way that both display the impact that their past has on their mental sensibilities.

The argument over selling the piano that takes place between Berniece and Boy Willie, conceptualizes the inner battles they fight within. It hints at the idea of the piano itself symbolizing the past of the Charles family— a past which consumes Berniece, deeply entrenching her in the memory of her ancestors under slavery; and providing Boy Willie with a motivation to use his family's past as a tool to build a future for himself, for avenging his ancestors (by buying Sutter's land on which his ancestors toiled to death). In both cases, their past is still closely tied to them even after generations, and determines the nature of their futuristic plans and prospects with regards to their lives.

Wilson maintained how he felt the Africans had “ acculturated and adopted white values” (qtd. in Rudolph 565). This acculturation was Wilson's main concern; as a result of which he focuses on the idea of infusing within the Afro-Americans a sense of claiming their roots, their identity, and their past. The centripetal element of the family's past—the piano— engenders the motivation for the Afro-American audiences, to not be apologetic towards their history and their legacy, no matter how ugly it is.

The idea that Berniece and Boy Willie had never physically met their great grand ancestors, yet consciously connected with their ghosts, shows how

strongly Wilson reinforced the idea of having some vestige of roots to hold on to— thereby portraying the idea of surrogate family ties with ghosts from the immemorial past (Pease 7).

The past, as represented in the play, lies in a seamless relationship with morality that governs social and political orders that the Afro-Americans were a part of. The way the ancestors obliged the living to relive their deaths in the play, is wholesome as an idea to determine how Wilson formed affinities between the Afro-Americans and their past. Reinforcing this idea, Wilson states, “ The message of America is ‘ Leave your Africanness outside the door’. My message is, ‘ Claim what is yours’” (qtd. in Bissiri 99).

The scene in which Boy Willie would argue that he stands in his grandfather’s shoes, establishes his ideology of not wanting to ignore his legacy, rather he embraces it with open arms. Similarly, at the end, when Berniece finally plays the piano and symbolically celebrates her ancestors, she experiences a shift from the prognostic attachment to her past to a positive and a warmer attachment to her past. This also emphasizes on the true spirit of freedom being achieved by Berniece who until now was snagged between whether or not to celebrate it. Wilson portrays how at the end, it is the past and the memory of the ancestors that lives on through the ones living—which highlights that one’s bonds with his past and his roots can never be completely curtailed or snapped.

In a nutshell, through the strong representation of the idea of past and legacy in *The Piano Lesson*, an individual is not only made cognizant of how one’s roots are essential to his being, but also how his affinity with his past is

what helps him discover his ontological and epistemological self in a world where he might face rigid “ disidentificatory” postures by those around him.

Works Cited

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