

The piano lesson



act 1 scene 1the action of the play takes place in the kitchen and parlor of Doaker's sparsely furnished home in 1930s Pittsburgh. The old, upright piano, its legs decorated with mask-like totems in the manner of African sculpture, dominates the parlor. /Note

Summary

The play opens at dawn. Wilson calls for a portentous "stillness" akin to the gathering of a storm. Boy Willie knocks at the door and calls for his Uncle Doaker. Doaker lets him in, and Willie enters with his more taciturn partner, Lymon. The two have come from Mississippi in a rickety truck to sell watermelons. Lymon plans to stay in Pittsburgh.

Against Doaker's admonishments, Willie calls for his sister Berniece. He has not seen her in three years, having spent time on the Parchman Prison Farm. She enters on the stairs and chides her brother for making so much noise. Willie then asks his uncle for a drink for they all have cause to celebrate: the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog have drowned Sutter in his own well. As we learn later, the Sutter family owned the Charles during slavery.

Berniece refuses to believe such foolishness. Suspicious, she asks how the boys procured their truck. Lymon bought it, needing a place to hide from the sheriff and Jim Stovall. Berniece presses him to explain and we will learn Lymon's story later. She wants them out of her house as soon as possible. Indeed, she is surprised they have not woken her daughter, Maretha. Willie immediately calls Maretha down. Berniece returns upstairs in frustration.

Changing the subject, Willie asks about Doaker's brother and ex-recording star, Wining Boy. In his middle age, Wining Boy has become a wanderer, returning to his family when broke.

Lymon then asks about the piano. Apparently Willie intends to sell it and, with the profits from the watermelons as well, use the money to buy Sutter's land. Sutter's brother has presented himself as eager to sell to Willie owing to their families' shared history. Willie is all too aware that he is trying to cheat him but is bent on starting his own farm.

In any case, Doaker is sure Berniece will not part with the piano. While Maretha is taking piano lessons, Berniece has not touched it since Mama Ola died. For her, it has blood on it. In this sense, the piano has become a taboo object for her, or something sacred. Indeed, Avery Brown—a preacher courting Berniece who followed her to Pittsburgh when her husband Crawley died—tried to get her to sell her piano to a local white man collecting instruments and help him start his church, but Berniece refused. Willie schemes to get in touch with the prospective buyer himself.

Suddenly Berniece cries out off-stage: "Go on get away." Willie rushes up, passing her as she enters. Berniece claims she has seen Sutter's ghost, dressed in a blue suit and holding the top of his head to keep it from coming off. Staring at her, he called Boy Willie's name. Willie is incredulous, thinking that his sister is imagining things. It remains unlikely that Sutter could find his way to Pittsburgh and travel so far in the first place. Berniece is convinced that her brother pushed Sutter into the well. She orders the men out anew, blaming Willie for Crawley's death. Willie protests, saying that

Sutter is not looking for him, but for the piano, and Berniece should get rid of it. Utterly exasperated, she goes upstairs with Doaker to wake Maretha.

Analysis

The Piano Lesson begins with a quotation from Skip James, a Mississippi blues musician discovered in the 1930s: "Gin my cotton Sell my seed Buy my baby Everything she need." In some sense, this epigraph condenses what most critics identify as the central thematic conflict of the play: the question of what to do with one's legacy. This conflict over legacy appears as the choice between forging ahead and climbing the economic ladder or attending to the memory of past injustices. Thus, early in the scene, Boy Willie will repeat Skip James's refrain in describing his plans to start his own farm: "Gin my cotton. Get my seed." With his scheme, Willie would achieve the economic self-sufficiency only recently made possible for blacks in America. Implicit in this self-sufficiency, as the song makes clear ("Buy my baby/ Everything she need"), is a concept of masculinity: as his brash posturing suggests, the farm will make Willie more of a man. Indeed, in buying the land his family once worked on as slaves, Willie will later imagine himself as the son following in and surpassing his father's legacy, as the heir avenging his ancestors.

Willie's ascension to the position of landowner, however, is contingent on the sale of an heirloom that incarnates his ancestral history, which is stained with the family's blood under Berniece's vigilant protection. As we learn soon after this scene, this history begins with slavery. In this light, the Skip James lyrics become a double entendre: "Sell my seed/Buy my baby." The trauma

at the heart of this family history is precisely the traffic in human flesh echoed in the song, the sale of the totemic figures depicted on the piano's legs. This sale rent the Charles family in two, splitting it between slave owners. Thus piano's recovery at one level symbolizes for the ensuing generations the avenging of this sale, the recovery and reunion of the ones lost. Carved in a vaguely African manner, the lost figures also clearly represent a connection to a lost mother Africa. With this in mind, the sale of the piano, a sale that would reduce it to capital, becomes a turn away from the past and its traumas in the name of advancement. Thus Willie's insistence on economic advancement will often appear as a denial of the suffering and blood that stains the family history. Throughout the play, the past will weigh heavily on even the apparently easy-going dialogue.

It is not for nothing that the preservation of this past falls upon Berniece, along with the figure of the dead Mama Ola, pictured as conscientiously polishing it every day. The rather unfortunate gendered division of labor the play presents in managing the family legacy will become clear in the siblings' ultimate reconciliation. The distinction is between the son who would literally use his legacy as capital and the daughter who cannot use her legacy at all. Berniece leaves the piano untouched. As we will learn, she has not passed on its history either. As the stage notes underline, she is above all a woman in mourning, unable to work through the family's many traumas, traumas that—as the Berniece's memory of Mama Ola suggests—persist across generational lines. Berniece will constantly order the constantly forward-looking Boy Willie and all the "confusion" he brings out of her house.

With all these conflicts over legacy, this scene can only be haunted. Along with the totems staring out at the household, two other ghosts appear explicitly. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, the ghosts of Willie and Berniece's murdered father and his hobo companions, and the ghost of Sutter lurking upstairs. Sutter's ghost will literally weigh down on the household throughout the play, having come to avenge its death or perhaps even reclaim the piano and the family it once owned. A showdown between them seems imminent.

As we will see, unnamed ghosts haunt this scene as well. These ghosts include, for example, the siblings' father or their grandfather and Boy Willie's namesake, Willie Boy and sculptor of the piano. The effects of these ghosts manifest themselves in the ambiguity among the agents and actors of the play, an ambiguity produced in the way the past haunts the present. We are unsure whether the ghosts or Willie kill Sutter. As the argument between Berniece and Willie indicates, it is unclear whether he comes for his murderer or for the piano that records his crimes. a

act 1 scene 1 part 2 Summary

When Doaker returns, he admits that he believes his niece and that the suit she described is probably Sutter's burial costume. Doaker begins to cook breakfast, and Willie jokingly asks about his success with the ladies in the course of his railroad travels. Doaker has worked the railroad for almost thirty years. He reflects on what he has learned on the railroad, musing how passengers tend to get on trains going in the wrong direction, how often they find themselves forgotten at their points of destination, and how everyone should stay in one place. Thankfully Willie interrupts Doaker's ramblings.

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Maretha enters, and Willie greets her. He invites her to play the piano. She plays a short beginner's song, and Willie replies with a simple boogie-woogie. He asks if she knows the significance of the piano's carvings. To his surprise, Berniece has not explained them. He promises to reveal their secret to Maretha if her mother does not.

Avery then enters and greets his old friends. He has an appointment with Berniece at the bank to procure a loan for his church, the Good Shepherd Church of God in Christ. Currently he works as an elevator operator in town. When asked how he became a preacher, Avery recounts a dream. Sitting in a railroad yard, he comes upon three hobos traveling from Nazareth to Jerusalem. They entrust a lit candle to him. Avery then appears before a house. He enters, and an old woman leads him into a room filled with people with bleating sheep heads. The three hobos dress and anoint him, and Jesus charges him with leading the sheep-people through a valley of wolves. Willie asks Avery about the piano's prospective buyer. Berniece and Maretha then enter, and, when the former asks if they need any groceries, Doaker delivers a set of long-winded, deliberate stipulations on ham hocks. Casually, Willie asks his sister if she still has the name of that potential buyer for the piano and he confesses his plan to buy Sutter's land. Barely addressing him, Berniece refuses her brother and abruptly walks out. As he exits to sell the watermelons, Willie tells Doaker that he will happily chop and sell his half of the heirloom if his sister will not cooperate.

Analysis

Avery's account of his dream is the most prominent speech in this section of scene 1. Of particular importance in this dream are the three hobos who

attend to him. Certainly these train-hoppers double for the Magi, or wise men, in the story of Jesus' birth. At the same time, the hobos also stand in for the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, the ghosts Avery will describe them later as the "hands of God." The condensation of these two sets of figures marks a blending of Christian and folk tradition. Avery is heir to both, imagining himself as called by both the wise men of the bible and the spirits demanding vengeance on the railroad.

Also of importance in this scene is the brief exchange between Boy Willie and Maretha, the only "piano lesson" we see in the play. As noted in the Context, Wilson offers the piano lesson as a metaphor for the teaching and learning of one's legacy. In the short lesson at hand, Maretha reveals that Berniece has not told her of the piano's history, causing her uncle to promise to tell her of its past if her mother will not. Willie accompanies this promise with the demonstration of a simple boogie-woogie. For Willie, the boogie-woogie surpasses any beginner's exercise. It is something you can dance to, play without sheet music. As Willie imagines it, the boogie-woogie is somehow more intimate, "natural." Music—and specifically African American music—serves as the connection to one's historical inheritance as well as a vehicle for its preservation and transmission. The importance of music will become clearer as the play progresses.

Closely connected to the function of music in the play is the dialogue's emphasis on storytelling, reportage, and testimony. Like music, these modes of speech will serve as vehicles by which to preserve and transmit the family legacy, thus the "retrospective structure" of Wilson's plays noted by a number of critics. Most scenes in *The Piano Lesson* begin with some either

form of reportage that recapitulates and elaborates the events previous or an anecdote recounting some past experience. Much of this first scene prefigures the storytelling to come, providing details require further information. In particular, Lymon will function as an outsider eliciting the family's history.

As the trope of the piano/history lesson figures so prominently, we should finally note how Wilson's plays are tendentiously steeped in history, written to chronicle a particular moment in the history of black experience. For example, the stage notes include the description of Avery and Doaker's jobs, the references to culinary traditions, the allusions to black migration patterns from north to south, the use of colloquialisms, the meandering, digressive conversations that create the impression of "real life" speech, and onward. Though we should be weary of regarding these devices as constitutive of some "black experience," we cannot consider them as mere exercises in realism either. Through the realism of dialogue, setting, and characters, Wilson aims at the representation and documentation of a history largely absent from the American stage.

act 1 scene 2summary

Three days later, Wining Boy sits at the kitchen table drinking as Doaker washes pots. They discuss the recent events. Boy Willie and Lymon have been trying to sell their watermelons in the white neighborhoods, but their truck keeps breaking down. Berniece is still deep in mourning for Crawley, though Doaker suspects she may be seeing Avery.

Doaker jokes about Avery's dream, and Wining Boy tells him of a man who tried to impersonate Christ—right up until the time came for his crucifixion. Thinking of a woman he just left in Kansas City, Wining Boy muses on the death of his ex-wife, Cleotha. He reads a letter announcing her death and reminisces on their marriage, a marriage ruined by his need to wander. As long as Cleotha lived, Wining Boy could be certain he had a home.

Boy Willie enters with Lymon and they greet each other. The Ghosts of Yellow Dog and their many victims come up for conversation. Wining Boy relates a time where he spoke with the Ghosts at the junction of the Southern and Yellow Dog railroads. The longer he stood there, the bigger he got; he left feeling like a king and had a stroke of good luck for the next three years.

Boy Willie then announces that he has already secured the sale of the piano. Doaker and Wining Boy protest that the land he wants is worthless, that the intelligent white man has already migrated to the cities, and that Sutter is probably cheating him. Willie remains undaunted.

Changing the subject, Wining Boy mentions that he heard Willie and Lymon were on Parchman Prison Farm, where both he and his brother spent time. Willie explains that some whites had tried to chase him, Lymon, and Crawley from some lumber they were pilfering. Crawley fought back and was killed, while the other two went to prison for theft. Lymon was shot in the stomach. Eventually Mr. Stovall bailed Lymon out on the condition that he work for him. Unwilling to serve Stovall, Lymon immediately fled, planning to stay in Pittsburgh where they treat blacks better than in the South.

Willie disagrees with his partner evaluation of the South, that whites will only treat you as badly as you let them. Wining Boy concurs but underlines an important difference: the white man can make use of the law. Willie declares he only follows law when it is right. Wining Boy responds that as a result, he will end up back on Parchman. The men reminisce about Parchman and sing an old work song (" Oh Lord Berta").

Willie then asks Wining Boy to play the piano. Wining Boy moans that he is tired of carrying a piano on his back. " Am I me? Or am I the piano player?" he asks. Willie remarks that someone better play the piano quick, rehearsing his plans to sell it and claim Sutter's land. Once again Doaker insists that Berniece will not sell it and begins to explain its history to Lymon.

Analysis

Scene 2 focuses on male camaraderie, the first of two in the play, introduces the ironically named Wining Boy, a wandering, washed-up musician who is clearly past his time and looks back upon his life with an " odd mixture of zest and sorrow." A traveling man, he functions as one of the play's primary storytellers, delivering in this scene a number of thematically significant speeches. Certainly his call to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, a dialogue with the dead at the crossroads, once again underlines how the play poses these characters' ancestors as sources of strength and renewal. Wining Boy is not only occupied with the ghosts of the railway, however, lamenting the passing of his wife and the certain home she emblemized. As the omnipresence of these ghosts suggest, The Piano Lesson is a play about mourning and attending to the memory of those lost. As in Wining Boy's stories of the

crossroads and Cleotha, this mourning will specifically involve the address across the grave, a call to the dead both in speech and, importantly, in music.

Though not named explicitly, among the ghosts with whom the men are in such dialogue are those of slavery, ghosts that assert themselves in the group's memories of the Parchman Prison Farm. As Wilson largely leaves this reference unexplained in the script, Parchman requires a brief historical detour. The Parchman Prison Farm opened in 1904 by Governor James K. "White Chief" Vardaman as a highly profitable labor camp. Boasting over 20,000 acres and covering over forty-six square miles, the prison contained a sawmill, a brickyard, a slaughterhouse, a vegetable canning plant and two cotton gins. Unlike most prisons that consumed state revenue, Parchman furnished the state treasury annually with substantial profits from the sale of cotton and cottonseed.

Prisoners at Parchman endured conditions and cruelty that paralleled the former days of slavery. Inmates lived in over-crowded cells with bloodstained floors, overflowing waste buckets, and vermin-covered walls. Convicts were forced to work long hours in scorching cotton fields and were barbarously whipped by "Black Annie," a three-foot long, six-inch wide leather strap. Convicts were always stripped to the waist, and whipped in front of other men. An apprehended escapee faced an unlimited number of lashings. Prisoners were supervised by a handful of paid guards and a large number of armed prisoners called "trusty shooters" with the authority to shoot escaping convicts.

The men's shared history at Parchman—a history shared across generations—and encounters with a racist legal system, marks the specter of slavery in their lives. In particular, Lymon's anecdote of fleeing Stovall after his racist arrest and sale into bondage can only evoke the memory of the runaway slave. Also connected to these memories of Parchman is Wining Boy's allegory of the difference between the white and black man, a difference that lies in the white man's ability to use the law. Notably, Boy Willie rebels against the fact of these racist conditions, declaring that there is no difference between him and the white man, and that he can only follow laws he considers just. This rebellion against racism prefigures his final outburst in Scene 5.

act 1 scene 2 part 2Summary

Doaker tells the piano's story. During slavery, a man named Robert Sutter—the recently deceased Sutter's grandfather—owned the Charles family. He wanted to make an anniversary present out of his friend, Joel Nolander's, piano but could not afford it. Thus he traded a full and half grown slave, Doaker's grandmother Berniece and his father, for the instrument. Though initially Miss Ophelia, Sutter's wife, loved the piano, she started to miss her slaves and attempted to trade them back. When Nolander refused, she fell desperately ill.

So, Sutter called Doaker's grandfather, Willie Boy, and asked him to carve the faces of his wife and child into the piano. Willie Boy was known as a great craftsman, and thus Sutter kept him when Nolander offered to buy him to keep the family together. Willie Boy complied with Sutter's order but did

not only carve his immediately family, however. He included his mother, father, and various scenes from their family history. Though Sutter hated the carvings, they thrilled Miss Ophelia, who played the piano until her death.

Years later, Doaker's eldest brother and Berniece and Boy Willie's father, Boy Charles, developed an obsession over the piano, believing that as long as the Sutters held their family's history, they held them in bondage. So, on July four, 1911, he, Doaker, and Wining Boy stole it, storing it in the neighboring county with Mama Ola's family.

Later that day, lynchers set Boy Charles's house on fire. Charles fled to catch the Yellow Dog. The mob, however, stopped the train and, when unable to find the piano, set his boxcar on fire. Boy Charles died along with the hobos in his car. The murderer was never identified, though the suspects soon began falling in their wells. Local residents attributed their deaths to the work of their victims' spirits, dubbed the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog.

Once Doaker finishes his story, Boy Willie forcefully declares that these events are in the past and that his father would have done as he wants now. Doaker refuses to take sides in his dispute with Berniece; Wining Boy, on the other hand, clearly thinks he should leave it alone.

Wining Boy begins to sing a familiar song, " I'm a rambling, gambling man." Berniece and Maretha then enter, and the former greets her uncle, and then the two retire upstairs. Once they exit, Willie and Lymon attempt to move the piano and test its weight. As they start to move it, Sutter's ghost is heard. Only Doaker notices it. Sutter's ghost makes noise again, and all take notice.

Berniece reappears and commands Willie to stop. He cannot sell his soul for money. Willie retorts that he is not selling his soul, only a piece of wood for some land. His father would have made something out of the piano, not left it rot in the parlor. Berniece retorts with the memory of their mother polishing the piano every day for seventeen years until her hands bled—the piano is sacred.

She continues her tirade that Boy Willie is just like all the men in the family, guilty of nothing but theft and murder. Indeed, he has the death of her husband on his hands. Willie refuses responsibility for Crawley's death. Unconvinced, Berniece attacks her brother. Suddenly, Maretha is heard screaming upstairs in terror, and the lights go out on stage.

Analysis

The centerpiece of Scene 2 is the story of the piano. An intensely symbolic artifact, the piano takes on number of meanings in the course of its life. Initially purchased with slaves, the piano first exemplifies the interchangeability of person and object under the system of slavery. This traffic in human flesh serves to reaffirm a white kinship network at the expense of black ones—the piano is an anniversary present. Carved to placate Miss Ophelia, the piano's wooden figures then indicate the interchangeable nature of slave and ornament: as Doaker notes, " Now she had her piano and her *****s too." The piano makes all too clear that the slave is the master's gift and accessory.

Under Willie Boy's hands, however, the piano becomes both a symbolic attempt to reunite his broken family as well as the transcription of the

family's history through one of the few means available to him. Through his craftsmanship, Willie Boy records a history all too easily lost, the history of those without the authority to write official historical narratives. As both symbol and narrative, the figures are no longer ornamental, but totemic, the markers of a familial legacy.

Sutter's ownership of the piano for Boy Charles is not only egregious in that its figures represent slaves and show the ancestors under symbolic enslavement. Sutter's ownership of the family's historical narrative also keeps the Charles family in bondage. As Doaker recalls: "[Charles would] 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." It is also notable that the theft of the piano occurs on Independence Day. As Boy Willie will declare in the final scene, this theft marks a rewriting of history. The family should write his father's act on the calendar and celebrate it as their own holiday.

The trope of the mark for posterity will recur with respect to Willie in the final scene as well. Already this scene makes clear how Boy Willie imagines himself as heir to his father's legacy in his plans to claim Sutter's farm. Willie would make something of the piano as his father would have done. Against this vision of self-improvement, Berniece invokes the image of her mother, mournfully scrubbing and praying over the piano until her death. The siblings' confrontation over the uses of one's legacy thus also divides them along paternal and maternal lines. Note how the play draws this divide across the generations. Great-grandparents Willie Boy and Berniece are reincarnated in a sense in Boy Willie and Berniece. As his brash father might have, Boy Willie rebelliously looks toward the future, striking out against

racist society. Like her mother, Berniece serves as guardian of the family's past suffering, and like her mother, Berniece is also another woman mourning her husband. As noted earlier, these two approaches to the family's legacy will find its synthesis in the ritual that closes the play.

Act II, Scenes 1 and 2 Summary

Scene 1

The following morning, Doaker appears ironing his pants while singing a song about the railroad. Wining Boy enters with a suit he has failed to pawn. Berniece is out cleaning a house, and Boy Willie and Lymon are selling their watermelons. Doaker remarks that Maretha is now scared to sleep upstairs. Though he did not tell Berniece, he admits to his brother that he saw Sutter's ghost three weeks ago, playing the piano. He thinks his niece should get rid of the heirloom. Wining Boy disagrees and then asks his brother to lend him some money.

Boy Willie and Lymon enter, having fast-talked their watermelons off on the local whites. Shrewdly, Wining Boy sells his suit and a pair of shoes to Lymon, promising that it has a magical effect on the ladies. Lymon and Boy Willie plan to go out the local picture show and find some women.

Wining Boy remarks that Lymon is as crazy about women as his father was. He recounts how he once helped bail his father—L. D. Jackson, described as "one bad-luck *****"—out of jail after he was arrested for fighting with a white youth. In return, Lymon's mother invited Wining Boy over for a night.

Declining Wining Boy's invitation to a game of cards, the young men prepare to go out. Wining Boy coaches Lymon on pick-up lines: " If you got the harbor, I got the ship."

Scene two

Later that evening, Berniece appears preparing a tub for her bath. Avery enters and he has gotten his loan. Hesitantly, he proposes to Berniece anew, declaring that she is too young to " close up." Berniece retorts that she still has " a lot of woman" in her and is occupied with Maretha. Avery replies that she cannot continue carrying Crawley with her.

Changing the subject, Berniece asks Avery to bless the house in hopes of exorcising Sutter's ghost. She remains convinced that Boy Willie killed him. Avery, on the other hand, believes in the Ghosts of Yellow Dog, recalling a preacher who used to describe them as the hand of God. Berniece continues her lament, complaining that Doaker blames himself for Boy Charles' death and has washed his hands of the piano and that Boy Willie has been a problem since he was a little rebellious boy, just like his father.

Avery suggests that she use the piano to start a choir at his church. Berniece replies that she has not been able to touch the piano since her mother died. She played for her mother alone. When she played, her mother could hear her father speaking to her. As a child, Berniece imagined that the figures would come to life and stalk the house. She leaves the piano untouched to keep from waking those spirits. Invoking the powers of God, Avery urges Berniece to put the past behind her, but Berniece cannot.

Analysis

Breaking the tension of the scene previous, Act II opens with another scene of male camaraderie. Once again, the scene consists of little action, largely relying on reportage and storytelling. As Scene 1 is so digressive, it is difficult to offer a synthetic analysis. It begins with Doaker's railway song, song that consists almost entirely of place names. Literally chronicling the stops on a railway man's journey, this song once again locates the play within its historical milieu. The remainder of the scene largely consists of Wining Boy comically pawning his suit off on Lymon and advising the two younger men on the local women. Though sold, the suit remains a gift of sorts, Wining Boy in a sense passing on the success he once had with the ladies. It is not for nothing that Wining Boy was almost Lymon's father. As he declares, " Two strokes back and I would have been his daddy!"

The subsequent scene involves its own game of courtship, Avery renewing his proposal of marriage to the recalcitrant Berniece. Note that for Avery, Berniece's persistent widowhood calls her femininity into question. If she remains aloof much longer, she is likely to " close up." Though Berniece retorts that a woman can stand without a man, Avery points out that she herself " carries" one with her at all times—her husband Crawley.

Scene 2 also elaborates Berniece's relation to the piano as a sacred and tabooed object. Berniece played the piano for her mother alone, and when she played, her mother could hear her father speaking to her. Thus, the young Berniece, who is associated with the maternal line, appears as a sort

of priestess in the channeling of the family's ghosts. Her music animates the totemic figures, functioning as a sort of call that her mother hears.

Avery's response is telling, and it involves a series of biblical citations and the invocation of Christ. He advises Berniece to start a choir. He believes that with the strength of God, she can move the "stones" in her path and play as she once did. In other words, she should do something with her legacy. Indeed, Avery declares that she should "make it into a celebration." The trope of the celebration will recur in the final scene when Boy Willie declares that the family should consider the day of the piano's theft a holiday.

Also important is the "mixed" quality of Avery's exhortations, involving the invocation of a number of local traditions. For example, Avery identifies the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, a folk myth, with the "hand of God." As critics have noted, these exhortations prefigure the exorcism staged in the final scene, one that will blend Christianity, folk superstition, and a vaguely African mysticism.

Act III, Scenes 3 and 4 Summary

Scene 3

Several hours later, Boy Willie enters the darkened house with Grace, a local girl he picked up, in tow. Though the darkness and lack of a bed make Grace reluctant to stay, they begin to kiss on the couch. In their anxiety, they knock over a lamp. Berniece comes down the stairs and orders them out.

Unwilling to stay where she is not wanted, Grace takes Willie back to her own flat.

As Berniece is making tea, there is a knock at the door. Lymon has returned looking for Willie. He tried to go to a picture show with Grace's friend, Dolly, but ended up leaving her after she had a few drinks at his expense. Initially Grace had shown interest in him, but Willie got to her first.

They discuss Lymon's plans to stay in Pittsburgh. Berniece expresses her disapproval of the local saloons. Lymon defends their women patrons, as most of them are just lonely. As for himself, he is tired of one-night stands, dreaming of finding the right woman. He wants to find a job and set himself to provide for a wife. He wonders why Berniece is not married and encourages her to become Avery's wife.

They chat further. Lymon compliments Berniece's nightgown and prepares for bed. Musing on Wining Boy's supposed magic suit, he withdraws a bottle of perfume from his coat pocket and gives it to Berniece. He anoints her and they kiss. Berniece exits up the stairs. Lymon strokes his suit lovingly, sure of its magic.

Scene 4

Late next morning, Boy Willie rushes in, waking Lymon from the couch—apparently he has not spent the night with Berniece. He left Grace's last night when her old lover, Leroy, swung by. Willie has called the buyer about the piano, though perhaps did not convince him to pay as much as he would

have. The two attempt to move the piano. Sutter's ghost is heard, but the two do not notice it.

Suddenly Doaker enters and orders them to stop and wait for Berniece to come home. The two men continue their efforts but to no avail. Ultimately they exit to fetch some rope and a makeshift dolly, Willie pledging to sell the piano no matter what.

Analysis

Scene 3 juxtaposes two contrasting seductions: one between Boy Willie and Grace and another between Berniece and Lymon. While the play poses the first as a fumbling one-night stand, it invites us to consider the second "magical." To be more precise, we could perhaps consider "magical" in the sense of metamorphosis. The first transformation occurs in an earlier scene, when Lymon dons Wining Boy's charmed suit, a suit that ostensibly makes him irresistible to his object of seduction. This suit is a magical costume, transforming him from county bumpkin to a man of the city. Perhaps implicit in this costume change is a fantasy of maturation, Lymon becoming the gentleman who stands in stark contrast to the crude and boyish Willie.

Less explicitly, Berniece undergoes her own transformation as well. With the kiss, Berniece emerges from her grief over Crawley and it is now possible for her to take new love objects. She becomes an erotic figure, for the first time in the play, under Lymon's gaze, his compliments and gift addressing her as a sexual being. With this transformation in mind, note Lymon's enumeration of women's garments, what one could describe as the "signifiers" of femininity. For example, he compliments Berniece, telling her that fancy

nightclothes make women's skin " look real pretty." He remarks on the local woman: " Got them high heels. I like that. Make them look like they real precious." These fetish objects eroticize the female body and define the feminine. Over and against the scene previous with Avery, where Berniece appears in danger of " closing up," the enumeration of these signifiers that lead up to the climatic kiss returns Berniece to her femininity.

As this scene is certainly the most erotic in the play, a few questions remain, such as why Lymon and Berniece apparently do not consummate their game of seduction. We wonder whether the play resists consummation for fear of compromising Berniece's unyielding integrity, and whether the play insists on Lymon's virtue. We also wonder why this scene occurs, as neither character has shown interest in the other up until this point.

We can only speculate as to Berniece's motivations as this scene overwhelmingly features Lymon in the confessional mode. At the outset of the play, Wilson characterizing Lymon with a certain " disarming straightforwardness." Certainly his confessions to Berniece, which are free of Boy Willie's bravado and Wining Boy's posturing, exemplify his candid nature. Lymon wants a lover who recognizes him, who understands that they are unique in the world, and will explore how the two of them " fit together." He is tired of one-night stands, sadly relating the time he spent the night with the prettiest woman he had ever seen but failed to ever look at her. Dreaming only of finding the " right woman," Lymon yearns for the fantasy of mutual recognition and compatibility that love can offer.

Scene 4 is largely an interlude, prefiguring the play's supernatural denouement in the following scene. Attempting to move the piano, Boy Willie and Lymon wake Sutter's ghost. We wonder if a supernatural force keeps the piano in place. Doaker forcefully intervenes, unwilling to let Willie run off with the piano without Berniece's consent. The stage is set for a final confrontation.

Act II, Scene 5 Summary

Scene 5 begins later that day, with Doaker playing solitaire, Maretha sitting at the piano, and Boy Willie screwing his dolly together on the sofa. Willie is telling Maretha of the Ghosts of Yellow Dog. Berniece enters and once again orders Willie out of her house. She tells Maretha to go upstairs and bring down her comb and hair grease. Willie accompanies her to protect her from Sutter's ghost.

Doaker tells his niece of Willie's current plan to cart the piano out of the house. Berniece replies that she is ready to use her husband's gun to stop him if necessary. Willie and Maretha return, and the siblings begin to argue anew. When Berniece threatens him, Willie declares that he does not fear death. He recounts a story from childhood when a priest failed to revive his dead dog. Having learned that nothing was precious, he went out and killed a cat and discovered the "power of death." This power makes him the equal of the white man.

As Berniece begins to style Maretha's hair, Willie continues, stating that the Bible dictates the justice of "an eye for an eye," and that Berniece and Avery would ignore those teachings. Though he is not a believer, he knows

Berniece should remain true to the entire Bible. Maretha cries out in pain and Berniece silences her. Willie protests and says that if Berniece wants to tell her daughter anything, she should tell her the piano's story. The household should celebrate the day of Boy Charles's theft, Independence Day, as their own personal holiday.

Berniece replies that Willie can dispense his teachings when he has children of his own. Willie retorts that he would never have children as he has no advantages to offer them. He remembers how his father would stare off at his hands, without the tools to produce anything, left only with the power to kill. Unlike his father, land will enable him to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the white man. Willie accuses Berniece of teaching Maretha that as a black person she lives at the "bottom of life"—the only result will be that she will come to hate her.

Berniece replies that she only tells her daughter the truth. Willie protests that he is living at life's top and that none of their ancestors would have ever thought themselves at the bottom. He knows that the world wants no part of him but that it is better because of his existence. Though some fear the sound of a "*****'s heart beating," his will not beat quietly. Willie will mark his passing on the road. Avery enters, and Willie interrogates him on what a Christian should believe. He also mocks the imminent exorcism. We learn that the bank has finalized Avery loan for the church. Lymon then enters carrying a coil of rope.

Analysis

Thematically, this final confrontation between Berniece and Boy Willie involves most of Boy Willie's speeches on race relations. Notably Willie delivers these speeches while Berniece does Maretha's hair. Maretha's presence indicates how the fate of the future generation is very important.

Throughout the play, Willie asserts that there is no difference between him and the white man. At the same time, he remains painfully aware of the disparities between them. He thus plays both sides of a paradox, insisting, for example, that he lives in the world like any other man, that he lives at the top and not the bottom of life, and that he his heart beats like any other's while at the same time striving toward becoming the white man's equal.

Boy Willie's first speech relates his discovery of the "power of death." As he notes with respect to his father, this power is the only one left to a black man denied property and the tools to build something for himself. The power of death—that is, the power to kill as well as risk one's life—makes the black man the white man's rival. As Willie declares: "See, a ***** that ain't afraid to die is the worse kind of ***** for the white man." With the power of death, he can look the white man "square in the eye and say, 'I got it too.' Then [the white man] got to deal with you square up." Willie is all too aware of the fear the sound of a "*****'s heart beating" can inspire. By discovering the power of death, Willie undermines the distinction master/slave that haunts the difference between white and black, a distinction in large part founded on the master's capacity to kill his servant. The power of death makes both players masters engaged in a struggle to the death, masters who are willing to murder and die in a battle for recognition. As only the power of death ensures his recognition, Boy Willie believes in the justice of

an "eye for an eye," refusing to temper his violent rage with Christian homilies.

Willie also fantasizes about becoming the white man's equal in the purchase of land. Once again he invokes the memory of his property-less father, staring emptily at his strong, useless hands. As a landowner, Willie will become the white man's neighbor, stand next to him and talk about cotton, the weather, and whatever else they like.

Willie is all too aware that he has been born into a "time of fire," and that the world would rather do without him. For Willie, Berniece accepts this world, teaching her daughter that she sits at the bottom. He, on the other hand, will mark his passing on the road: "Just like you write on a tree, 'Boy Willie was here.'" The trope of the mark refers to Willie's paternal heritage, to the fathers before him who left their mark on time. Willie Boy leaves a literal mark on the piano that records the family's history. Boy Charles' theft leaves a mark on the calendar, creating a new Independence Day. Again, the gendered politics of this vision are not innocent, with the men appearing as the makers of history and the women as their mourners.

Act II, Scene 5—Part IISummary

The two young men begin to move the piano. Berniece exits up the stairs. She reappears with Crawley's gun. Doaker and Avery urge the siblings to talk things through. Hesitant at first, Lymon eventually decides to continue helping Willie. Berniece orders Maretha out of the room.

Suddenly a drunken Wining Boy enters, rambling about some fellow named Patchneck Red. Comically breaking the tension of the scene, he attempts to fish a drink out of Boy Willie's coat and sits down to play a song he wrote in memory of Cleotha. Willie attempts to dislodge him, and Wining Boy defensively spreads his arms over the piano.

A knock at the door follows, and Grace enters. She and Lymon have a date for the picture show. Suddenly everyone but Grace can sense Sutter's presence. Grace soon notices it as well and exits, and Lymon follows her.

Sutter's presence reasserts itself, and Avery moves to bless the piano using a candle and a bottle of water. He begins his prayers, sprinkling water and reading from the bible. Boy Willie intercedes: " All this old preaching stuff. hell, just tell him to leave." As Avery attempts to drive out the ghost, Willie flings a pot of water around the room, working himself into a frenzy: " Hey Sutter! Sutter! Get your ass out of this house!"

He charges up the stairs. The sound of Sutter's ghost is heard, and an unseen force drives Willie back and chokes him. He charges back up the stairs, and the two engage in a life-and-death struggle. Ultimately Avery is stunned into silence; Doaker and Wining Boy gape in disbelief.

Suddenly, " from somewhere old," Berniece realizes what she must do. She begins to play a song on the piano, both a " commandment and a plea," an " exorcism and a dressing for battle," a " rustle of wind blowing across two continents." " I want you to help me" she sings, naming her ancestors. The sound of a train approaching is heard, and the noise upstairs subsides. Willie taunts Sutter, and Berniece thanks her family's ghosts.

A calm comes over the house, and Maretha and Willie reappear, the latter pausing to watch his sister at the piano. He asks Wining Boy if he is ready to catch the train back south. Maretha embraces her uncle and Willie offers his goodbye to his sister: " Hey Berniece if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano ain't no telling me and Sutter both liable to be back." Berniece says, " Thank you," and the lights go down to black.

Analysis

The second half of Scene 5 begins with a " pseudo-climax," Berniece holding her brother at gunpoint when he and Lymon attempt to move the piano. Sutter's ghost reasserts itself. Almost immediately, however, a drunken Wining Boy enters, comically defusing the tension of the scene. A marked shift in tone follows, Wining Boy playing a song for his beloved Cleotha and then desperately stretching himself across the piano. This address to the dead prefigures the ceremony about to ensue.

Indeed, the final climatic confrontation of the play does not occur between the two siblings but between the living and the dead. The members of the household lock themselves in a battle against Sutter's ghost. Sutter's exorcism involves the work of three characters—Avery, Boy Willie, and Berniece—and the blending of the family's various cultural inheritances, such as Christianity, folk superstition, and African mysticism. As the preacher, Avery invokes the authority of God to cast Sutter out. Miming Avery's exorcism, his taunting cries and imitation of the holy water rendering it grotesque, Boy Willie dispenses with divine intermediaries and, as if a character from a folk tale, confronts the ghost himself. This struggle seems

allegorical if not archetypal in nature. Note that Willie's last remark to Berniece (" me and Sutter liable to be back") suggests that they stage an old battle. Certainly Sutter's ghost evokes that of his grandfather, the slave master Robert Sutter. Similarly, Boy Willie functions here as a sort of revenant, embodying his own ancestors. As we have noted throughout the play, his namesake, and constant references to his paternal legacy make him the heir and incarnation of the familial spirits. Read allegorically, Willie and Sutter engage in a battle between the Sutters and Charles, white and black that stretches across the time.

Serving as the priestess of this ceremony, Berniece ultimately ensures the household's victory by resuming the childhood role she described earlier. Though her call in song, the dead will return to assist the living and cast out the ghosts of the master's family. Her song buttresses both Avery and Willie's efforts, involving both an exorcism and a dressing for battle. Notably, Wilson underlines the necessity of this resurrection. The song is a commandment and a plea, an injunction and an entreaty for help. Moreover, all the ghosts must rise: if Berniece's playing animates the figures on the piano, the sound of the train certainly refers to a visitation from the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog.

The inexorability of Berniece's call lies in its source: the " somewhere old" inside of her, some imagined place of origin that, for Wilson, harkens back to Africa. The living draw strength from the ghosts of the past, in a sense returning to their origins, and the ghosts respond to the living because they speak from that very originary place. Mystically, Berniece speaks from the family's place of origin and addresses the family's spirits from the present to

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take strength from that original place. The logic of this fantasy is circular, referring to the uninterrupted circuit this ceremony establishes across time, space and the grave. Notably, the woman functions as the means by which to reach and speak from the imagined origin.

This ritual appears to resolve the central conflict of the play: the question of what to do with one's legacy. The specter of the white man has been cast out, and Willie can leave in peace. He does, however, leave the women of the household with a charge: if they do not continue playing the piano, he and Sutter are liable to return. In other words, they will resume the old battle between white and black. Thus again the maternal line is left with the responsibility of maintaining the connection to the family's origins, a connection that will ostensibly keep the ghost of the master at bay. Though the conclusion of the play is supposedly cathartic, those of us who have attended to the ways its characters are haunted by past traumas may wonder if the question of using one's legacy is answered so simply.

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