

A song of
remembrance: the
importance of
Bernie's choices



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August Wilson uses his play *The Piano Lesson* to explore the turmoil inside the homes and hearts of many African Americans in the 1930s. Many African Americans are torn between being proud of their heritage, which is blackened with the enslavement of their ancestors, and putting the past completely behind them and ignoring their horrifying past. Wilson uses Berniece, an unconventional African American woman, to exemplify both sides of the struggle between remembrance of one's past and the disregarding of it to focus on the future. Berniece's ultimate acceptance and appreciation of her heritage is the only force powerful enough to stop the chaos that unfolds in her life.

The Piano Lesson is a play dominated by men, with the exception of Berniece, who cannot decide if she should dismiss her African American heritage completely or celebrate her ancestors. Many other African Americans in the 1930s are in the same predicament as Berniece. They are physically free from slavery but are still discriminated against and do not know whether they should be proud of their past or ashamed of it. As one of the only females in the play, Berniece is very representative of women in the 1930s and of women in the African American community. She is forced to raise a daughter alone after her husband is killed during a skirmish with the police; an incident she blames solely on Boy Willie. Berniece and Boy Willie do not get along and she fervently denies his attempts at selling the family piano. On the surface it appears that she has a strong connection to the piano due to its significance to her heritage. When Boy Willie tries to convince Berniece to get rid of the piano she replies, "Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years"

(Wilson, 52). She does not appreciate the piano for its musical value but wants to keep the piano out of respect for her ancestors.

Although Berniece wants to keep the piano, she does not want to celebrate her heritage and acts as though it is something to be ashamed of. Boy Willie tells her that she “ ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house... and every year when it come up throw a party” (Wilson, 91). Boy Willie adds that her daughter, Maretha, would be able to hold her head high in life if they celebrated their past but Berniece dismisses the idea. In the beginning of the play Berniece tells Maretha, “ Don’t be going down there showing your color” (Wilson, 27). This statement clearly implies that being colored is something to be ashamed of and should be hidden. Berniece also refuses to touch or play the piano and does not like discussing its past. However, she still fervently insists on keeping the piano and cannot bear to see it sold to another family.

Berniece is very unconventional for a woman in the 1930’s. She is very independent and intends to stay that way. When her boyfriend, Avery insists on marrying her she rebukes him by saying “ You trying to tell me a woman can’t be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me -without a woman- and still be a man” (Wilson, 67).

Although she still misses her husband, she is content to raise and support a child without the help of a man. This idea is more common today, but in the 1930s this would have been a very unusually thing. The way that the other men of the play interact with Berniece suggests that her opinion is respected and she is a very hard headed woman. Were she not, Boy Willie would have marched right into Doaker’s home and took the piano without a second

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thought to Berniece's opinion. Instead he tries to convince Berniece to let him take it. He does not use his superior male status to overpower her stance.

Ultimately, only Berniece's acceptance of her heritage is able to stop the turmoil and chaos in her family. Sutter, a member of the family that used to own Berniece's family, appears to the characters as a ghost and haunts their home. To get rid of him, Avery tries to bless the house and Boy Willie screams at him to leave. Berniece sees that these tactics are not working and sits down at the piano she refused to touch for years and begins to play. She calls to each of her ancestors " I want you to help me" (Wilson, 107). The passing train and Boy Willie's yells quiet down as she sings and the family feels Sutter's ghost leave. She then shows her gratitude by singing repeatedly to her deceased family, " Thank You" (Wilson, 107). Berniece's embracing of her heritage is the only way that peace is restored to the household. She finally sees how important it is to be proud of her ancestors, especially since hers overcame so many struggles at the hands of their slave owners. Boy Willie sees this acceptance and stops fighting her for the piano.