

# Cultural trauma narratives' use of supernatural elements



Novels that are centered on traumatic events in history have used different tools to access the past. The Piano Lesson by August Wilson is a film (based on a play) that is set during the Great Depression while Octavia Butler's Kindred is a novel that is set in the 1970s and part of the 19th century. In Kindred, protagonist Dana finds out more about her family's past and the trauma they went through during slave times. Likewise in The Piano Lesson, siblings Boy Willie and Berniece, along with Berniece's daughter Maretha, learn the importance of the history of their family's piano to find out what their ancestors went through during slave times. Both stories are focused on learning, through the use of supernatural elements, about the characters' ancestors' traumatic experiences and the importance of family and cultural history. Kindred and The Piano Lesson use elements of the fantastic (i. e. haunting (from ghosts) and time travel) to access the past, because, through these elements, the stories engage and describe things to people from modern or close to modern times in ways they wouldn't be able to without them, and therefore enhance their understandings of the lingering traumas of past enslavement in the United States.

Before Dana travels back in time and to Maryland, she doesn't know very much about her family's past, only knowing the names of a few of her ancestors and a couple other things. Her cultural heritage isn't something that means as much to her as it does later, and she doesn't actually know how bad slave times were. But then, after the second time she goes across the country to the nineteenth century and she finds out about the kind of violence that existed then, it becomes more real to her and not something that, even though she is still a part of, is more detached from. She becomes

willing to use violence on people intending to hurt her, and when asked if she will use a knife, says, “ Yes. Before last night, I might not have been sure, but now, yes.” (Butler 47). Butler uses the supernatural element of time travel here to show that although people may think they know what happened during the past (from history books/classes or other sources), they oftentimes don't and won't be able to fully understand it if they weren't there.

Dana's learning about her cultural history through time travel gives us, as readers, a way to connect to it better, because unlike cultural trauma stories in which the characters are from a very different time, in *Kindred*, Dana has much more similar knowledge and feelings than characters from a much earlier time do to those of the modern reader, so it makes the story feel a lot more real. Placing (the at first unknowledgeable about slave times) Dana in the role of a “ lone black woman” (Butler 47) in the nineteenth century gives the reader “ a journey of discovery that mirrors the protagonist's own, which enables her to imagine a “ mimetic encounter” with a trauma that she did not experience and one, moreover, to which she may not have a cultural connection” (Setka 96). This is because the reader is from the same or a similar time as Dana and therefore accepts the new information that Dana receives in a similar way to her.

Similarly to Dana finding out in *Kindred* more about her family history and cultural heritage through her travels in time, Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* realizes the importance of his family's heritage and of keeping his family's piano to remember that heritage, and Berniece realizes the importance of remembering and not ignoring the piano. However, unlike Dana, Berniece

<https://assignbuster.com/cultural-trauma-narratives-use-of-supernatural-elements/>

and Boy Willie start out already at least partly knowing the story of his family and why they thought the piano was important. In *The Piano Lesson*, instead of using an element of the fantastic to show history to a character who didn't know almost all of it, the supernatural element of ghosts was created to show Boy Willie and Berniece the importance of the piano and of remembering his family's past enslavement. In the beginning of the film, Boy Willie starts out not really feeling attachment to the piano and only wanting it to make money off of it, but by the end, he has realized the importance of the piano and of its connection to his ancestors/family history and culture, and Berniece starts out ignoring and not playing the piano, but by the end of the movie, she plays it and brings out the spirits of her ancestors, who drive out the ghost of Sutter.

The most important ghost in *The Piano Lesson* is probably Sutter's ghost because of the fact that he haunts an object that almost everyone in the story is focused on – the piano. Sutter's ghost makes the remembrance of the Charles family's past more unavoidable, because it makes the piano more alive and hard to ignore in the minds of some of the characters (Berniece's and Boy Willie's). It is also, according to Jermaine Singleton in the article *Some Losses Remain with Us: Impossible Mourning and the Prevalence of Ritual in August Wilson's The Piano Lesson* “the text's metaphor for the psycho-social remains of the Charles family's social history of loss, dispossession, and struggle.” (46). August Wilson created Sutter's ghost as the part of the family's and culture's traumatic past that both Berniece and Boy Willie are trying to ignore, but then they are both forced to confront. The siblings' overcoming of the ghost (Boy Willie's fighting it and

Berniece's playing the piano to bring out their ancestors' spirits to fight it) is similar to their embracing the importance of remembering their family's past. Sutter's ghost was not able to be ignored, just like the trauma the enslavement of African-Americans in the U. S. caused are not able to be forgotten.

Despite the fact that the use of supernatural elements made *Kindred* and *The Piano Lesson* stories that were obviously not true, it made the slave narratives in them something that made them something we could connect to, or at least understand, more easily. The use of elements of the fantastic in both *Kindred* and *The Piano Lesson* help us, the readers, to better understand the lingering cultural trauma of slaves in the past. These supernatural elements (time travel and haunting) are placed in the two stories also because they have no need for explanation, which makes adding unexplainable scenes, such as Dana's loss of her arm in *Kindred*, the Charles family's ancestors' spirits being a part of the piano, something like Sutter's ghost symbolizing the past that Berniece and Boy Charles are ignoring, or anything else that can't be represented in a way that can be easily explained in a way that makes sense scientifically.

Without these supernatural elements, the stories of enslavement in both Dana's family and the Charles family, and therefore those accounts of slavery that were shown in both the novel and the film, would not have been created, and the portrayals of slavery in both *Kindred* and *The Piano Lesson* would not have been as powerful as they are right now. Both of the stories illustrate lingering traumas of enslavement in the United States in ways that enhance our understanding of them extremely well.

<https://assignbuster.com/cultural-trauma-narratives-use-of-supernatural-elements/>

## **Works Cited**

The Piano Lesson. Dir. Lloyd Richards. 1995. Film.

Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. 1979. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. Print.

Setka, Stella. "Phantasmic Reincarnation: Igbo Cosmology in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U. S.* Oxford University Press. 2016. 93-124. Web.

Singleton, Jermaine. "Some Losses Remain With Us: Impossible Mourning and the Prevalence of Ritual in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*." *College Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 2009. 40-57. Web.