

Family heirloom concept in august wilson's the piano lesson

Literature



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Hauntings of the Past, Needs of the Present

Throughout *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson siblings Bernice and Boy Willie argue over who should get ahold of a precious family heirloom. The piano. However, despite both of them inheriting it from their father obviously only one of the two can have it. It seems that Boy Willie taking the piano to sell it as it would result in more dynamic result for the family overall. As opposed to Bernice whom intentions would result in a very static outcome, of basically nothing happening besides her teaching Maretha to play the piano.

Bernice's primary reasoning for keeping the piano is because she finds it to have a high sentimental value, even telling Boy Willie that, " Money can't buy what that piano cost. You can't sell you soul for money." (Wilson 878). She also uses the piano as a way of clinging to the past, similarly to how she refuses to marry Avery repeatedly citing that she's busy and has too many other things to be worrying about (Wilson 889). It is obvious that Bernice dwells on the past not only regarding the piano when after being denied marriage again Avery says " What is you ready for Bernice? You gotta drift along from day to day. Life is more than making if from one day to another. You gonna look up one day and it's all gonna be past you. Life's gonna be gone out of your hands- there won't be enough to make nothing with. I'm standing here now Bernice-but I don't know how much longer I'm gonna be standing here waiting on you." (Wilson 889). While Bernice's reasoning behind her desire to keep the piano are sound on a sentimental level, keeping the piano around has no legitimate practical use. The piano's lack of use while heavily implied is backed up when Boy Willie says that Docker told

him Bernice “ ain’t touched that piano the whole time it’s been up here.”
(Wilson 878).

Boy Willie’s intention for the piano are to sell it in order to obtain the remaining portion of money that he needs to purchase some land down south. This is very similar to Walter from *A Raisin in the Sun*’s plan to buy a liquor store using his late father’s life insurance check. While these situations are similar and both men seem to be acting on a whim, one thing is obvious. That being that Boy Willie’s play is far more thought out and involves far more variables. For example, Boy Willie has other plans to get money if Bernice ends up not letting him have the piano. Also, he had already had discussed terms for buying the land with the current owner unlike Walter who was just kind of just figuring it out as he went. Lastly, he doesn’t have business ‘ partners’ like Walter did, so he could be assured if he got the money he would pay for the land himself with no possibility of having his money taken. This shows that while like many other African American men at the time, Boy Willie was trying to make a respectable name for himself and help his family, he also put more forethought into it than others doing the same.

While it may seem as though Boy Willie is being selfish and not considering Bernice’s reasons for wanting to keep the piano, due to his seemingly blunt nature. This perception if set aside however, when he tells Bernice that if she’d been giving lessons or simply playing it herself he wouldn’t be demanding she sell it. He then goes on to compare her keeping the piano to him letting the watermelons in the back of the truck sit there and rot as

opposed to selling them (Wilson 878). This shows that while he does care about his sister, he also cares about the family as a whole and how their lives could change if he gets this land.

Despite Bernice having deep emotional ties to the piano, it is apparent that Boy Willie should be able to selling it. This is because Boy Willie's plan to buy land with the money would help the family financially as well as reputation-wise. Especially in the time period they are in where African Americans were not yet considered as equals to their white counterparts. Also not only would it benefit the adults in this situation, but Maretha. Maretha, Bernice's daughter, would benefit the most from the family becoming wealthier and having more resources available to them. This is the case because since she is still young, 11 years old, she won't have been as affected by the poverty and racism the enveloped their lives. This is important because most of the history of the piano revolves around racism and poverty. And also most of the arguing between Boy Willie and Bernice comes from the history behind the piano, but also from Bernice's skepticism of the man selling Boy Willie the land and Boy Willie's thoughts on the piano's history within their family.

Therefore, it is clear that Boy Willie should be able to do as he wishes with the piano. While Bernice also has sound reasoning to keep the piano, they are solely based on slightly selfish sentiments. Whereas Boy Willie while incorporating some sentiment to reason with his sister is being logical, due to the fact that his intentions for the piano would eventually be prosperous to the entire family for generations to come.