

# Good essay on reevaluating retribution; response to act i of the piano lesson

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



When it comes to the topic of slavery, one's heart immediately jumps up and cries out for justice. It is a dark mark on this country's and the world's past.

What makes August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* so interesting is that the Charles family's ties to the time period are so close, they not only remember who owned them, they know the family personally. It is this fact that creates the dilemma of the first act. Boy Willie wants to sell the family's piano in order to buy the land of the Sutters, the family that once owned his.

However, Willie is a wanderer and has not cared for or taken the piano, which has a long history entrenched in both families. On one hand, Boy Willie has the chance to own the land that, in a way, once owned him. On the other, this piano is a piece of their heritage. While there is no denying that slavery was an abominable practice, bonds between people are bound to grow, and this piano represents the bond between the Charles family and Miss Ophelia, who was a light spot in a dark time. She cherished the Charles family and they her. Selling the piano would be throwing that history away. While both sides of the story are clear, it is easier to side with Berniece, who has cared for the piano for some years and recognizes its sanctity.

Boy Willie is a charming guy. He enters at the top of the play full of fire and ambition. It is easy to understand his side of the story. He has the chance to own the land of his former owners. Anyone knowing the circumstances of slavery would see how this opportunity would be so tempting. However, the Charles family has already had a form of justice from the Sutters when they took the beautifully carved piano. Owning land may be a bonus on top of that, but it does not mean anything if the land cannot be cultivated, which, it would seem, is true of the land. The piano was a symbol of their freedom.

Owning it means they are free. They have a meaningful piece of their grandfather's work to carry with them as a reminder of their own worth. The Charles family treasured each other and, despite the fact that the circumstances were less than ideal, was also treasured by the Sutters, or, at least, one of them. The land offers no similar symbolism.

It is true that the piano is likely worth a lot of money. It is possible that the family could cultivate that land and live happily on it. However, Boy Willie pops in after a long absence and, suddenly, claims an object he is not there to care for as his own. He, Berniece and Doaker all own the piano. All three must make the decision to sell it. However, Willie is claiming it as though the family were simply holding it for him. His actions are selfish. It is true he knows how to play the piano and it is true that Berniece did not tell her daughter the story. This may make it seem that the piano holds more value for Willie, except for the fact that Berniece states outright that the piano is sacred. Each person has their own bit of history to carry on. The story belongs to Willie. The sense of the importance of the piano belongs to Berniece.

On top of all this, one must consider Maretha. She is the new generation of the family. She was born free and has the chance to build her life on this foundation. She is also learning how to play the piano. Again, this fact holds symbolism. Maretha is now learning to wield her family's freedom, fortitude and special gifts. If they owned the Sutter's land, perhaps she could learn to cultivate it, but Berniece and Maretha are not invited to share the land. Willie seems to want it for himself. Besides, there is a beauty and a power that music has over people that is held in the instrument. Music exists without

color and moves everyone equally. The piano is a treasure where the land would be empty vengeance.

One can only hope that karma either has been or will soon be restored in regard to the evils of slavery. August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* is an example of the movement toward that balance. The question in the air is should the piano be sold. The answer is simple—no. The piano is a treasure. It is a symbol of the Charles family's past and their freedom. It should be honored as such. Buying the land may feel good, but it is unnecessary. The family has moved away and moved on. When one is hurt as deeply as the Charles family was, the healing process may take a long time. At some point, one must let go of the pains of the past and move forward, even if it still feels tempting to strike. This is one of those cases. Willie has no right to sell the piano underneath his sister's nose, but, more than that, by keeping and honoring their history in their new home, they are choosing to leave the pain behind and build a new future.

## **Works Cited**

Wilson, August. *The Piano Lesson*. New York, N. Y., U. S. A.: Plume, 1990. Print.