

The piano as a symbol of conflict and healing



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August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* provides the narrative of the Charles family as they encounter both the challenges of the present and struggle to come to terms with the grief and suffering of their family's past. Throughout the play, the family's piano is a central symbol that comes to embody the family legacy with its deep-rooted meaning and connections to the past. It is also a source of conflict between the siblings, Berniece and Boy Willie, as they argue about how best to use the piano. In this ongoing struggle between the two, Wilson develops Berniece's character as one that is inextricable from the notion of legacy, thereby invoking her as the symbolic link to the family's past and present. As the piano evolves from a symbol of conflict and divisiveness within the family to one of unifier and healer, Berniece is the one to convey and carry on its lessons. The piano initially represents the conflict and suffering that define much of the Charles family's history of enslavement. Purchased by Robert Sutter in exchange for two of his slaves, the piano immediately becomes linked with the trauma of slavery. More importantly, the nature of the transaction reinforced the objectification of slaves – equating their value to that of an inanimate object. Another example of the piano's association with suffering is a memory Berniece relates during an argument with Boy Willie: 'Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled ... she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it ... seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood?' (52). Rather than focusing on the piano's monetary value, as Boy Willie does, Berniece sees it as a source of grief and hardship for her mother. The imagery of a teary eyed, battered Mama Ola accentuates the depth of grief that Berniece associates with the piano.

Berniece's lamentation also underscores her role as a link to the family's past; Boy Willie, on the other hand, seeks to distance himself from the past. As Berniece learns of Boy Willie's intention to sell the piano, the central question of ownership surfaces and initially portrays the piano as a source of conflict. Whereas Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to achieve his goal of buying Sutter's land, Berniece refuses to part with the family heirloom - she sees it as a critical way to maintain a connection with the past. Boy Willie sees the piano as a disruption to the family that could serve to further his goal of landownership; he loses sight of the ancestral memories the piano carries. In a characteristic argument, Berniece tells Boy Willie that "' Money can't buy what that piano cost. You can't sell your soul for money,'" suggesting that the piano contains the Charles family's soul (50). The piano moves from being symbol of divisiveness to one of unity in the final scene, in which Berniece and Boy Willie reconcile their differences. During the exorcism of Sutter's ghost, Boy Willie struggles against Sutter until Berniece begins to play the piano and calls upon the Charles ancestors for assistance. Through this incident Berniece again assumes her role as the link between present and past; she also recognizes, now, that the piano's value to her lies in its symbolism - not its material existence. Boy Willie acknowledges the importance of sustaining the piano as a symbol when he says, in a show of familial solidarity, " 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" (108). Initially the piano divides siblings, but it ultimately helps Berniece and Boy Willie find common ground. As Berniece embraces her role as preserver of family, she imparts on Boy Willie a sense of appreciation for the piano's symbolic importance. Boy Willie becomes prepared to pursue his own

ambitions more strongly rooted in an understanding of his origins. While the piano emerged out of the trauma of slavery, it comes to symbolize unity and family legacy.