

Defamiliarizing the Piano in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

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Abstract

The paper aims at applying the concept of defamiliarization to the piano. It is an attempt to point out how the piano acquires a value that surpasses its material being as a wooden musical instrument, and a stage prop. It turns into a focal point, around which almost all the action of the play revolves. It is transformed from a static inanimate piece of wood into a dynamic object acquiring different meanings and values for almost all the characters of the play, dead or alive, white or black, seen or unseen, each of whom has his/her special perception of it. . In short, it turns into an animate being with the importance of a protagonist.

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson is able to defamiliarize the piano, its music, its songs and its lesson. It is used as a device for character revelation, and a decisive factor in character transformation. Wilson's piano is highly dynamic. It keeps on taking different meanings, allowing for diverse forms of evaluation and new perceptions. Through this instrument one can perceive character, legacy, suffering, self-realization, melancholia, oppression, violence, action, inaction, love, hatred, self-assertion, dehumanization, enslavement, freedom, myth, tradition, power, courage, identity, loss of identity and struggle.

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تغريب البيانو فى مسرحية أوجست ويلسون
درس البيانو
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ملخص

يهدف البحث إلى تطبيق مفهوم التغريب على البيانو. وهو محاولة لتوضيح كيف أن البيانو أصبح له قيمة تفوق طبيعته المادية كأداة موسيقية خشبية وإحدى أدوات المسرح. فقد تحول إلى نقطة محورية تدور حولها كل أحداث المسرحية تقريباً. فقد تحول من كونه قطعة جماد خشبية صامتة إلى كائن ديناميكى يكتسب معانى وقيم مختلفة لمعظم شخصيات المسرحية سواء الأحياء أو الأموات، البيض أو السود، الذين نراهم والذين لا نراهم. وكل واحد من هؤلاء له مفهوم خاص للبيانو. باختصار، يتحول البيانو إلى كائن حي له أهمية بطل المسرحية.

وقد استطاع أوجست ويلسون من خلال مسرحية درس البيانو أن يغرب البيانو، وموسيقاه، وأغانيه، ودرسه. وقد استخدمه كأداة للكشف عن الشخصيات، وعاملاً مؤثراً فى تحول الشخصيات. فبيانو ويلسون على الديناميكية، يقوم بتفريق أفراد العائلة الواحدة ويوحد أفراداً آخرين، ويوضح عبودية السود وتحررهم، ويبدئ الصراع بين أخ وأخته وينهيه، ويكون سكناً للأرواح وباعثاً وطارداً لأرواح أخرى. فهو يستمر فى أخذ معانى مختلفة سامحاً بذلك لأشكال تقييم متعددة، ومفاهيم جديدة لهم. فمن تلك الآله يمكننا أن ندرك الشخصية، والتراث، والمعاناة، وتحقيق الذات، وحالة الحزن الشديد، والقهر، والعنف، والعمل، والتوقف عن العمل، والحب، والكرهية، وتأكيد الذات، ومحو الإنسانية، والعبودية، والحرية، والأسطورة، والتقليد، والقوة، والشجاعة، والهوية، وفقدان الهوية، والصراع.

The Piano Lesson (1987) is one of August Wilson's significant plays. It won him his second Pulitzer Prize in 1990 and confirmed his status as one of America's most important and innovative playwrights. The present paper aims at applying the concept of defamiliarization to the piano. It is an attempt to point out how the piano acquires a value that surpasses its material being as a wooden musical instrument, and a stage prop. It turns into a focal point, around which almost all the action of the play revolves. It is transformed from a static inanimate piece of wood into a dynamic object acquiring different meanings and values for almost all the characters of the play, dead or alive, white or black, seen or unseen, each of whom has his/her special perception of it. In short, it turns into an animate being with the importance of a protagonist.

Russian Formalism is mainly concerned with the "literariness" of a work of art, "that which makes a given work a 'literary' work [focusing on] . . . the functioning of literary devices rather than on content" (Rice and Waugh 17). It is concerned with the meaningfulness of artistic devices. In other words, "the core of the text is not the theme but its devices" ("Literary Theory").

Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984), a prominent Russian Formalist critic, is well known by the concept of defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is derived from the word *ostranenie* meaning "making strange". It "draws attention to the artifice of the text and dehabituates automatized perception" (Rice and Waugh 17). In his essay "Art as Technique," Shklovsky claims that according to the general laws of human perception, as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Such habituation explains the reason why in ordinary speech, one tends to "leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed" (13). He believes that the purpose of art is to change our mood of perception from the automatic to the artistic, to give us back the awareness of things which have lost their significance in our mundane existence. He adds:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. . . . And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel

things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects '*unfamiliar*,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and the length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (15)

Lemon and Reis see that the advantage of Shklovsky's critical approach is that the work of art "not only bears meaning, it forces an awareness of its meaning upon the reader" (5). They add that Shklovsky's defamiliarization can be obtained by any number of devices, such as a novel point of view which makes the reader perceive by making the familiar seem strange, and by making man look with an exceptionally high level of awareness.

In his essay "Defamiliarization: A Personal History," William Drenttel writes:

It's an easy concept to grasp: artists make things noticeable by making them look strange — i.e., different from our normal ways of seeing things. I like the simplicity of this notion because it only requires understanding two things. First: what are the means by which one makes things look strange? And second: what is the expected context that one is challenging in order to make something noticeable? In other words, evaluating the success of the defamiliarization requires understanding the means by which the expression is fresh and the degree to which the context has been subverted.

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson applies Shklovsky's critical approach and offers a practical answer to the questions posted by Drenttel. He gracefully produces a masterpiece with the "piano" made defamiliarized not only to the readers/audience but also to the play's characters by highlighting how each character perceives and is affected by the piano. He claims that through the instrument of the

piano he presents a play that "feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity" (*Ground* 18). The piano acquires the value of metaphor in the manner he describes when he states:

The idea of metaphor . . . is an idea that I find missing in most contemporary plays. . . . Metaphor is important because it's a device, a storytelling device, and it's a way of asking people to see things in a fresh way. If I can get you to look at a cup of coffee in a way that you've never looked at it before, then I'm a successful poet. Metaphors are a way of seeing common, ordinary things in a new way. (DiGaetani 281)

In his preface to *Three Plays*, Wilson expresses his belief that both the craft of poetry and the craft of fiction do connect and intercept with the craft of playwrighting at some point. He illustrates, "Fiction was a story told through character and dialogue, and a poem was a distillation of language and images designed to reveal an emotive response to phenomena that brought it into harmony with one's knowledge and experience. Why couldn't a play be both?" (xi). In *The Piano Lesson*, he makes each character either narrate his/her story/experience with the piano, or report that of the other characters. With each story/experience a new perception is revealed finally turning the piano into "an objective correlative of a family history marked by blood and tears" (Londré 115). Referring to its origin, Wilson admits that he is inspired by Romare Bearden's painting "The Piano Lesson." He explains, "It's of a little girl at the piano with her piano teacher standing over her. And in my mind I saw Maretha and Berniece" ("Fine-Tuning" A18).

Wilson is often described as a dramatic historian because of his attempt to document the experiences of African Americans in the twentieth century. He has a special version of history, one which has its roots in mythology. "It is there that he looked for the symbols, metaphors and tales that embodied and expressed the hopes, fears, aspirations, and religious and civic yearnings of communities. . . . In an African context history is deeply implicated in storytelling, song

and myth" (Pereira 65). His aim from the play is to "explore the African roots, the atavistic connections African Americans have to their ancestors . . . to explore the distinct difference between white American and African American experiences" (Bogumil 6). In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson delineates his special sense of history and achieves his aim through the device of the piano. He explores the object's life history and its relationships to individuals and cultures. It turns out to be the element of the play that holds it together, and the main issue of contention within the family. Londré observes, "As a repository of history, the piano is the family and it also transcends family" (121).

The play turns around the conflict between a brother and a sister as to whether or not to sell the piano which carries the carvings of their ancestors. After establishing the central conflict, the action in the whole play revolves in a circular manner around the same topic. However, each time the discussion adds a certain detail or new information, revealing the multi-layered perceptions of the piano. With each discussion, a layer is peeled out, a new piece of information is added, and a new perception of its value is achieved. By the end of the play it is realized that the piano is a token of love, a family legacy, a dehumanizing tool, a means of economic independence, self-realization and freedom, an identity marker, an identity obliterator, a killer, a ghost producer, a spirit-haunted, a spirit expeller, a permanent image of loss and suffering, an empowering object, a myth preserver/producer, a weapon, and an object of disruption and unification. It is transformed from an inanimate tool to an almost walking-talking creature directing and influencing the action of the play, and engraving a special history for the Charles family that stands the test of time and eternalizes that family as long as the piano is kept within the possession of its grandchildren, and as long as its history is circulated among family members, generation after generation.

The word "piano" is central in the play's title, preparing the reader/audience for its special connotation and focal value. In fact, from the very beginning of the play, Wilson draws attention to the unique nature of the piano, mainly because of its "African" carvings.

In his description of the play's setting, he writes:

Dominating the parlor is an old upright piano. On the legs of the piano, carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art.
(The Setting)

Wilson's description of the piano as "old", "upright" and "dominating the parlor" also draws attention to its uniqueness, and paves the way for its upcoming forms of defamiliarization. This is supported by the time of the day, with its accompanying weather condition, to mark the start of the play: "*The dawn is beginning to announce itself, but there is something in the air that belongs to the night. A stillness that is a portent, a gathering, a gathering, a coming together of something akin to storm*" (1). The loud knock at the door that introduces Boy Willie into the play's action is a means to keep the audience alert for what he is about to do.

Wilson's concentration on the piano's carvings, rather than on its shape or structure, suggests that its value mainly stems from such carvings; an idea Boy Willie expresses when he says, "The only thing that makes that piano worth something is them carvings Papa Willie Boy put on there. That's what make it worth something" (51). They turn the piano into "a photo album . . . [with] snapshots that have captured memories" (Bryant 35).

With the arrival of Boy Willie, it is revealed that the main reason for his coming to Pittsburgh is to sell the piano and buy a piece of land owned by the Sutters, and previously worked by the Charles' ancestors. His intention of selling is strongly rejected and opposed by his sister, Berniece. For the piano is not an ordinary musical instrument. It has value and history that no money can buy, and which no one is allowed to play with or violate. This introduces Doaker's story, which, as he explains, "go[es] back to slavery time"(42). This story uncovers the piano's special value.

The old piano is an object that incarnates the history of the Charles family. It is prized more than used. Its value is measured less

in money than in memories. It takes on a number of meanings throughout the course of its life. Its significance originated when it was purchased and given, as an anniversary gift, to Miss Ophelia, a white slave-owner's wife. What was unique about the purchase was that no money was paid for it. Instead, it was exchanged for Doaker's grandmother and his father. Doaker narrates that Sutter, who had no money then, asked Mr. Nolander, the original owner of the piano, "to see if maybe he could trade off some of his niggers for that piano. Told him he would give him one and a half niggers for it" (42).

Treating slaves as objects—rather than humans—to be parted with and exchanged for another object, reflects their very low value. They are considered as property that can be, owned, sold and traded exactly like the piano. The way the exchange took place further stresses this low value which equates the slaves with "litter." Doaker explains:

Mr. Nolander agreed only he say he had to pick them [i.e. the slaves]. He didn't want Sutter to give him just any old nigger. He say he wanted to have the pick of the litter. So Sutter lined up his niggers and Mr. Nolander looked them over and out of the whole bunch he picked my grandmother . . . and my daddy when he wasn't nothing but a little boy nine years old. (42-43)

The piano in this situation is defamiliarized on two opposing levels. On one hand, it has been viewed as a means of love expression from a husband, Sutter, to his wife, Miss Ophelia, in the special occasion of their wedding anniversary and a source of happiness to the wife. On the other hand, it was perceived as a dehumanizing tool, a means of tearing apart the Charles family eventually leading to their emotional oppression. In fact, the black enslaved family has paid dearly for the piano, "kinship relationships", as Elam explains:

Property relationships in slavery undermined kinship relationships and eroded African and African American definitions of family. The economics of slavery constantly disrupted and uprooted the black family, the preexistent

and 'normal' relationships of nurturing, fatherhood and motherhood. (368)

As Doaker resumes the story, other perceptions of the piano surface.

At first, Miss Ophelia loved the piano, delighted that "it got to be just about all she would do was play on" it (43). Eventually the piano turned into a burden and a source of misery. For she missed her slaves so much that she became sick and bed-ridden, and stopped playing the piano. Failing to go back on his purchase to get back the two slaves, Sutter asked Doaker's grandfather, Willie Boy, a handy carpenter, to carve the faces of his wife and child into the piano. Willie Boy did carve the two slaves as requested, but also included other images of the family history. In this respect Doaker informs Lymon:

He carved all this. He got a picture of his mama . . . Mama Esther . . . and his daddy, Boy Charles. . . . Then he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That's him and Mama Berniece got married. They called it jumping the broom. . . . Then he got here when my daddy was born . . . and here he got Mama Esther's funeral . . . and down here he got Mr. Nolander taking mama Berniece and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia. He got all kinds of things what happened with our family. (44)

These carvings have transformed the piano into an artifact, giving it life-like characteristics, carrying the spirits of both the living and the dead members of the Charles family. This turns the piano into a permanent document of the family's social history of removal, marriage, birth and death.

Miss Ophelia perceived the carvings as living entities. They made her regain her happiness and play the piano again till her death. "Now she had her piano and her niggers too," Doaker explains (44). Her happiness and satisfaction with the carvings further stressed the non-human value of the enslaved family, establishing equality between the piano and the Charles family as the Sutters' mere property, or commodity. In this respect Elam writes, "The wooden image replaced the real slave body. Accordingly, for Miss Ophelia the

carving equaled the real slave because neither was perceived as human" (369).

Hartman observes that black slaves were "envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment. Their abject and degraded condition and the fascination with others' enjoyment went hand in hand" (23). This applies to the carvings on the piano. They were a direct response to an order with an aim to please a white woman. They were also a lively evidence of the suffering of the enslaved Charles family at the hands of the Sutters. One can easily imagine the torture of Willie Boy as he was carving the likeness of his wife and son of whom he was deprived. His feeling never crossed Ophelia's mind. In fact, "oblivious to the pain, struggle, and suffering of the Charles family . . . Miss Ophelia sees only pleasure in these [carved] figures. . . . She exalts in her ability to play on her piano with her niggers" (Elam 370). However, the carvings had a positive value for the black family:

There are and have always been two distinct and parallel traditions in black art: that is, art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society, and the art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America. . . . The second tradition occurred when the African in the confines of the slave quarters sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving his art, in his [sculpture,] song and dance, a world in which he was the spiritual center. (Gates 44)

Thus the piano has turned into a representation of black suffering, coupled with a celebration of black resistance and endurance. With Willie Boy's carvings, the piano turned into history standing on four legs. Such carvings transformed the piano from a European object to an African artifact, and even an African entity as Elam points out, "Willie Boy's act of carving the piano operates as an enabling gesture of cultural intervention that empowers him and implicitly declares the Charles family's agency. Through this act, the piano and its 'songs' become the property of the Charles family" (370).

The special perception of the piano as a register of the history of the Charles family redefines "the family's relationship to the piano and the semantics of ownership and property" (Elam 370). This urged Boy Charles, Berniece's and Boy Willie's father, to steal it from the Sutters. For him the piano belonged to his family rather than the Sutters. He believed that as long as the Sutters possessed it, they in effect still owned the family. As Doaker recalls, "it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it . . . he had us. Say we still in slavery" (45).

On the fourth of July, 1911, with the help of Doaker and Wining Boy, Boy Charles successfully stole the piano, and kept it safe with Mama Ola's relatives. It was a coincidence that the piano was set free on Independence Day. Bryant observes that both the carvings on the piano and Boy Charles's act of reclamation position "the piano as an object of conquest and 're(patri)ation'" (32-33), explaining that Boy Charles repatriated "the bodies and memories of family members imprisoned by slavery" (42). The act of stealing was an act of resistance that asserted self in defiance of the master and the system that constituted the slave as property. This added the perception of freedom to the piano in addition to its value as an object of defiance and self-assertion. However, the black family paid dearly for that freedom.

Sutter decided to get the piano back. In Chasing Boy Charles, and when he found neither him nor the piano, Sutter set his house on fire. Then he went with his followers to the railway station to stop the 3:57 Yellow Dog train in the boxcar of which was Charles, together with four hobos. When the piano was not found, the boxcar was also set on fire, burning Charles and the four hobos alive. This incident started the myth of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. In this way the piano is perceived as a ghost emitter and myth producer and/or preserver. In fact, the "idea of ghosts and the idea of supernatural phenomena in black American life is a very real phenomenon" (Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 206).

People believe in the ferocious deadly power of the Yellow Dog Ghosts on whom, as Avery informs Berniece, "Reverend Thompson

used to preach . . . as the hand of God” (69). Whenever there is mention of death among white people, it is automatically attributed to the work of the Yellow Dog Ghosts. For example, people claim that those ghosts killed Ed Saunders, one of those who chased Boy Charles, by pushing him in his well. Sutter died in the same way. "Everybody say the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed him," says Boy Willie (5). He adds that the number of people killed by the Ghosts so far is "about nine or ten, eleven or twelve" (34). Such stories "serve to authenticate the lives of men who died and became the Ghosts . . . and they serve to authenticate the sacredness of the piano itself—it was important enough for black men to die for, and it was important enough for white men to kill for" (Boan 267).

Belief in mythology has an "ability to empower the believer—particularly in its power to define the past and to define reality" (Byerman 4). Due to his strong belief in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, Wining Boy finds comfort, and feels empowered, to go to the place where he believes the ghosts are, and talk to them. He tells Boy Willie and Lymon that one day in nineteen thirty, when nothing was right in his life, he went to the Ghosts' location, where the two railroads cross each other, and talked to them seeking their help. He explains:

I stood right there on that spot and called out their names. They talk back to you, too. . . . to me it just filled me up in a strange sort of way to be standing there on the spot. I didn't want to leave. It felt like the longer I stood there the bigger I got. . . . I walked away from there feeling like a king. Went on and had a stroke of luck that run on for three years. (34-35)

Berniece also feels empowered when she resorts to the spirits of the people carved on the piano to help in exorcising Sutter's Ghost. (There will be a later reference to this incident)

Apart from its connection to the myth of the Yellow Dog Ghosts, the piano has become ghost haunted and a spirit abode. For after Boy Charles' death, the piano became a means by which Mama Ola conversed with her dead husband. Berniece narrates to Avery:

When my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano. She used to have me playing on it . . . say when I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. (70)

Explaining to Avery why she has stopped playing the piano ever since her mother's death, she says, "I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits" (70).

Boy Charles' act of liberation of the piano, and Mama Ola's behavior towards it after her husband's death add a new episode to the narrative of the piano and bring about new perceptions of it. It is perceived that Charles' black body is "equated . . . with the inanimate, nonhuman piano. Metaphorically the wooden 'body' of the piano now becomes the casket of his body . . ." (Elam 373-74).

Ola perceived the piano as a permanent image of loss and suffering. She poured her soul and blood into it, turning it into an altar or a shrine which she tended till the end of her days. She adopted a daily ritual which lasted for seventeen years. Berniece reports:

Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in . . . mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. (52)

Ola's daily ritual towards the piano endows upon it a religious perception. With Ola the piano became a propagation of the African religious practices of

Yoruban *orita meta*, a crossroad between the world of the living and that of the dead. For the Yoruba ancestral shrines are key lines between two worlds, where the descendants may contact their ancestors, for protection, support and guidance. . . . Sacrifices and offerings are

made to the ancestors at the *orita meta* in order to maintain their spiritual existence. (Morales 108)

Ola's daily ritual of rubbing, polishing, and blood mixing and Berniece's daily playing the piano might be seen as an offering that aims to maintain the spiritual existence of Boy Charles and all the deceased members of the Charles family. At the end of the play, Berniece's playing the piano might be considered as a call for support and protection in the Yorubian manner (See the later reference to Berniece's action at the end of the play).

Being part of Ola's daily ritual, and as a result of her close observation of her mother, Berniece acknowledges the piano as a point of contact with her ancestral heritage. She perceives it as an embodiment of a sad family history which she cannot overcome. It "commemorates the lost lives and familial bonds that cannot be redeemed" (Singleton 51). It becomes a grave in which the sufferings of the deceased are buried. Therefore, she turns it into an idol, an untouchable sacred entity. That is why she has stopped playing it since her mother's death, and why she thinks highly of it. She tells Boy Willie, "Money cannot buy what that piano cost. You can't sell your soul for money" (50).

The piano can also be perceived as a bond, not only between Ola and her deceased husband, but also between Ola and Berniece. This bond was severed by the mother's death. Hence, playing the piano "serves only to remind Berniece of a lost mother-daughter bond the piano conditioned and signifies" (Singleton 51). She admits never playing it ever since her mother's death. "When my mama died I shut the top on that piano and I ain't never opened it since," she informs Avery (70). "Her ritual of enshrinement allows the secrets of her mother's phantom to speak through the mouthpiece of her lived reality" (Singleton 51).

Affected by her mother's suffering, Berniece also adopts a rather negative perception of the piano as an object that has deprived her mother of her father and turned the father into a thief. She explains to her brother, "You always talking about your daddy but you ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen

years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood? . . . you're all alike. All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing" (52). Therefore, she perceives the piano as a burden from which she wants to keep her daughter Maretha away. In this respect, Berniece says to Avery, "I got Maretha playing on it. She don't know nothing about it. Let her go on and be a schoolteacher or something. She don't have to carry all of that with her. She got a chance I didn't have. I ain't gonna burden her with that piano" (70). This attributes for telling Maretha nothing about its historical background. For Maretha it is perceived only as a musical instrument.

Berniece's attitude towards her daughter reflects Wilson's general observation of the parents' avoidance to involve their children in the past of their black American ancestors. In this respect he says in an interview with Hilary DeVeries, "As a whole, our generation knows very little about our past. My generation of parents tried to shield their children from the indignities they'd suffered" ("New Voice" 29).

Avery sees in Berniece's passive perception of the piano a stone hindering her progress towards the future, and a main reason preventing her from remarriage. He wants her get rid of the burden of suffering and torture she attributes to it. Instead, he wants her to adopt a positive perception and to put the piano into practical fruitful use. He wants her to share his optimistic perception that the piano is "an instrument of the Lord". He urges her:

Everybody get stones in their passway. You got to step over them or walk around them. You picking them up and carrying them with you. All you got to do is set them down by the side of the road. You ain't got to carry them with you. You can walk over there right now and play that piano. You can walk over there right now and God will walk over there with you. . . . Walk over here and claim it as an instrument of the Lord. (70-71)

Doaker develops a sense of guilt towards the piano, which led to the death to his brother. He perceives it as a surviving evidence of his weak support of his brother at the time of stealing it. In this respect

Berniece says, "He blames himself for not staying behind with Papa Boy Charles. He washed his hands of the piano a long time ago. He didn't want me to bring it up here – but I wasn't gonna leave it down there" (69). However, he contributes to giving life and history to the piano transforming it into a central character, giving life to its decorating carvings and binding the other characters to it. "In some senses he played the role performed by the griot in West Africa whose function it was and is to recount the history of his tribe and thereby to preserve and celebrate it" (Pereira 65). He informs such people as Lymon and the audience about the piano's historical background, upgrading and implanting its value and deepening its significance in their minds so as make them perceive it differently. He allows them to realize that while "carved family portraits decorate the piano's exterior, the horrors of slavery are symbolically contained within" (Londré 115). In other words, he defamiliarizes the piano for those who are ignorant of its valuable history.

Wining Boy first perceived the piano as a source of living. He used to carry it on his back and move from one place to another, playing on it, singing songs, having drinks and enjoying women. Then he perceived it as a dehumanizing tool that obliterated his identity as a person with a certain name and a specific individuality, especially as he grew older and the piano turned heavier for his age. He "let the piano shape his life instead of him using it to shape his existence" (Bissiri 43). The piano gave him no chance for development or change. It turned him into the "piano player". Away from the piano he was unnoticed and unknown. The more he played, the more he was recognized as the "player." No longer able to tolerate being improperly recognized, he stopped playing and took the piano to Doaker's house, and left it there for good. He says to Boy Willie explaining why he gave up playing and singing:

The world just slipping by me and I'm walking around
with that piano And the piano get heavier and heavier
. . . . You look up one day and you hate the whiskey, and
you hate the women, and you hate the piano. But that's all
you got. You can't do nothing else. All you know how to
do is play that piano. Now, who am I? Am I me? Or am I

the piano player? Sometime it seem like the only thing to do is shoot the piano player cause he the cause of all the trouble I'm having. (41)

In his essay on the play, Bissiri claims that the piano is innocent of passively affecting Wining Boy's life which does not get any better after giving up the piano. This means that "the problem was not the piano but he himself" (44). Bissiri, who perceives the piano as a representative of the African American native culture, sees in Wining Boy's passive experience with the piano a deficiency in properly manipulating one's culture. For "the efficacy of culture depends much on how it is used" (43).

On the other hand, the connection between the piano and Wining Boy throughout the play further defamiliarizes the piano. It turns into a means of communication through which he expresses his feelings towards Cleotha, his wife, after her passing away. He wrote and sang a special song in her memory. He did so at the end of the play, as Boy Willie was trying to move the piano away. It was a practical attempt to prevent Boy Willie and at the same time to relieve the tension between Boy Willie and Berniece when their conflict over the piano reached its climax. Earlier in the play, he played it when Boy Willie was harshly arguing with Doaker wrongly believing that Doaker was supporting Berniece in her refusal to sell the piano. Thus he used it to disrupt conflict and tension.

In fact, Wining Boy is very much related to the piano. Whenever he goes to Doaker's house, he keeps playing it. Doaker tells him, "You was playing on it the last time you was through here. We couldn't get you off of it" (47). The last scene of the play also reveals how much Wining Boy is related to the piano. He does his best to prevent its being taken away. He sticks to it and says to Boy Willie, "You ain't taking this piano out the house. You got to take me with it!" (102). This indicates that although officially he gives the piano up, he still enjoys playing it. It is his private means of entertainment, happiness and self-expression. This reveals another perception of the piano as a mere musical instrument and lays

emphasis on the very special relationship between a player and his beloved musical instrument.

Black Americans, in the context of what they largely believe to be a hostile, exploitative white culture, seek to assert their distinctive identity and their right to belong as equals in American society. It is a struggle that has necessarily assumed a variety of dimensions – political, economic and cultural – and which has gone through several historical phases. (Crow and Banfield 42)

In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie represents the struggle of black Americans for equality with white Americans. This struggle makes him adopt a special perception of the piano as an object of a utilitarian value. It is his means to stand shoulder to shoulder with the white men, especially those for whom his great grand ancestors worked as slaves. He "seeks to complete his forefathers' unfinished business by seizing economic mobility they were denied" (Singleton 50). He wants to sell the piano to buy the same land where those ancestors worked. He wants to get rid of his deep-rooted enslavement. He says to Berniece, "If you got a piece of land, you'll find everything else fall right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton . . . the weather, and anything else you want to talk about" (92). For Boy Willie, not selling, or using, the piano keeps his and his ancestors' enslavement alive in his mind, and makes the piano haunted by American slavery.

Boy Willie fully realizes that the piano is all that his father could offer. It is the family's real treasure and legacy which should be properly used and invested. He relates what his father has done, by dying over the piano, to what he is going to achieve by selling it when he tells Doaker:

If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn't be sitting up here now. . . . When he come along he ain't had nothing he could build on. . . . The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano. And he died over giving me that. I ain't gonna let it sit up there and rot without trying to do

something with it. (46)

He feels it his responsibility to build on what his grandfather and father did with and for the piano. He wants to create his own legacy and make his own mark. "I got to mark my passing on the road. Just like you write on a tree, 'Boy Willie was here,'" he informs Berniece (94). He looks forward to the future rather than keeps himself buried in the past without making his own contribution to it. He sees in the piano a means to achieve his manhood, especially "in a society that devalues black masculinity. . . . For him manhood still depends on ownership" (Elam 365). Selling the piano and buying Sutter's land is an assertion of masculinity that his father, as he informs Berniece, "the kind of man my daddy was he would have understood . . ." (51).

Boy Willie also perceives the piano as a means of ethical upgrading. Selling the piano will help him escape the bad cycle of his life, a cycle characterized by stealing, cheating and imprisonment. He has been serving a sentence on the Parchman Prison Farm for the last three years for stealing wood with the help of Lymon and Crawley. Crawley was killed while the other two went to prison.

In fact, Boy Willie feels it is his duty to see that the piano is put to practical use. He is against its being perceived as a stagnant static instrument, and/or a lifeless piece of wood. He is also against Berniece's useless, passive protection of the piano. In this respect he says to Berniece:

Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. Now, I'm supposed to build on what they left me. You can't do nothing with that piano sitting up here in the house. . . . Alright now, if you say to me, Boy Willie, I'm using that piano. I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. Then that be something else. I'd have to go on and say, well, Berniece using that piano. She building on it. Let her go on and use it. I got to find another way to get Sutter's land. (51)

He complains to Wining Boy, "She ain't doing nothing but letting it sit up there and rot" (42).

Boy Willie shares Avery's desire to change Berniece's pessimistic view of the piano. He is also against Maretha's ignorance of its historical background as if it were something to be shunned or ashamed of. He is shocked when Maretha informs him that her mother tells her nothing about the piano and the pictures on it. The only thing the mother says to the daughter is that the piano "just always been like that since she got it" (22). He advises Maretha, "You tell your mama to tell you about that piano. You ask her how them pictures got on there. If she don't tell you I'll tell you" (22). He acknowledges the history of the piano "as a collective family record that must be passed on to subsequent generations. . . . and relates the history of the piano to . . . Maretha. Through this action he insures the continuance of the family's history" (Elam 372). He also blames Doaker for passively responding to Maretha's ignorance in this respect. Trying to persuade her to proudly involve Maretha in the history of her ancestors, and to broaden her perception of the piano, Boy Willie advises Berniece:

You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle around it . . . and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. If you did that she wouldn't have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head held high. I'm talking about a big party! (90-91)

In this way, Boy Willie's practical perception of the piano and his keenness to keep its history alive, help him to act as a continuation for what his great grandfather initiated. "Like his grandfather as an artist who wrote history into the piano, Boy Willie revives, or better re-creates, history through it by helping Berniece and Maretha rediscover and rekindle their historical knowledge" (Bissiri 48).

Boy Willie's desire to proudly involve Maretha in the history of the family reflects Wilson's view of how black Americans should consider their past history of slavery. He states, "Slavery is nothing to

be ashamed of. Why is it, after spending hundreds of years in bondage, that blacks in America do not once a year get together and celebrate the Emancipation and remind ourselves of our history?" (Savran 295-96). Elam also establishes an analogy between the significance of the piano's history and the position of prominence Wilson believes slavery must achieve in African American social life and cultural discourse. Elam reaches the conclusion, "Wilson wants to reexamine and reposition slavery, its impact and aftermath, in order to understand the contemporary social, cultural, and political circumstances of black peoples" (375). Plum also states that for Wilson "historical knowledge is the first step in transcending marginal existence" (566).

Thus, even the stance of the play's characters towards the piano reveals another perception of the piano as a mark of past slavery the African Americans should feel proud of rather than ashamed. This is what black Americans should teach their children. They should make their children well aware of their past so as to move successfully towards their future. In *The Piano Lesson* only when Berniece comes to grip with the past, and Boy Willie understands its real value, can Maretha move on to understand that past and become the future with a new perception of the piano, a perception that goes beyond its objective appearance, and superficial perception as a musical instrument, into a deeper, wider one involving the Afro-American legacy of her ancestors. This makes her step towards the future with strong, confident steps.

The conflict of Willie and Berniece over the piano's fate, the idea of using or not using it and, in case it is used, how to use it properly reflect what Wilson wants to achieve through the piano in this play, which becomes evident enough by the end. He wants his audience to perceive it as a mirror of the black American legacy. It is a legacy that endorses the question of identity that one cannot do without, or neglect. In this respect he states:

The real issue is the piano, the legacy. What do you do with your legacy, and how do you best put it to use? . . . I think it is largely a question of identity. Without knowing

your past, you don't know your present—and you certainly can't plot your future. You go out and discover it for yourself. It's being responsible for your own presence in the world and for your own salvation. (DeVeries, "Song" 25)

Through the different characters' stories about, and experience with the piano, one realizes that beneath the external beauty of the piano there is always a sense of violence and suffering with tears, horrors and bloodshed. There is violence in burning Boy Charles; in the strong belief in the ferocious deadly power of the Yellow Dog Ghosts; in the oral and physical conflict between Berniece and her brother, which leads to her beating him and bringing a gun ready to kill him; and in the physical struggle between Boy Willie and Sutter's ghost, which could have put an end to Boy Willie's life. There is suffering in the enforced separation of the black family; in Ola's loss of her husband; in Berniece's carrying the burden of and preserving the legacy of her family; in Doaker's inability to support his brother strong enough; in Wining Boy's personal loss of identity, and in Maretha's fright of Sutter's ghost. All this further defamiliarizes the piano not only in the eyes of the Charles family but also the spectators' and/or readers'.

Not only did the piano give birth to the Yellow Dog Ghosts and abode to the spirits of the deceased members of the Charles family, but it also became ghost haunted. Sutter's ghost is either seen or strongly felt during the course of the play. His presence in the house is connected with the piano. For example, on Boy Willie's announcing his intension to find the white man who wants to buy the piano, Berniece comes downstairs in horror, informing of seeing Sutter's ghost "standing at the top of the steps" (13). In the ensuing discussion between Boy Willie and Berniece, and with Berniece's claim that the ghost is calling Boy Willie's name, Boy Willie reacts, "Sutter was looking for that piano. That's what he was looking for. He had to die to find out where that piano was at . . . If I was you I'd get rid of it. That's the way to get rid of Sutter's ghost" (15). With Boy Willie's first attempt to lift up the piano with Lymon's help, "*the sound of Sutter's Ghost is heard. Doaker is the only one to hear it*"

(50). With their second attempt to move the piano, the sound of the ghost is heard again. But they "don't hear it" (82). At the beginning of act two, Doaker informs Wining Boy that he saw the ghost sitting at the piano, only three days after Sutter's death, but he kept the matter secret so as not to upset Berniece. He adds, "Sutter here cause of that piano. I heard him playing on it one time. I thought it was Berniece but then she don't play that kind of music. I come out here and ain't seen nobody, but them piano keys was moving a mile a minute" (57).

Towards the end of the play, on Lymon's and Boy Willie's attempt to move the piano away from the house, the ghost's sound is heard, only to the audience. Again by the end of the play, on Berniece's attempt to stop her brother and Lymon from moving the piano, all of them suddenly sense the presence of the ghost (103), which gets Boy Willie into a frenzy, causing him to run around the room, calling Sutter's name, and finally engaging in a ferocious quarrel with it, a quarrel that could have cost him his own life:

The sound of Sutter's Ghost is heard. As Boy Willie approaches the steps he is suddenly thrown back by the unseen force, which is choking him. As he struggles he frees himself, then dashes up the stairs There are loud sounds heard from upstairs as Boy Willie begins to wrestle with Sutter's Ghost. It is a life-and-death struggle fraught with perils and faultless terror. Boy Willie is thrown down the stairs. Avery is stunned into silence. Boy Willie picks himself up and dashes back upstairs There are more sounds heard from upstairs. Doaker and Wining Boy stare at one another in stunned disbelief. (106)

Relating the ghost to the piano, acts as a continuation of the past struggle between the Sutters and the Charleses over the piano, which is a symbolic continuation of the white-black, owner-slave, oppressor-oppressed struggle. This, in turn, relates the past to the present and keeps the past alive, the "vestiges of the slave past that still haunt the African American present" (Elam 274). The ghost of the white man,

the grandson of the slave-owner, and original owner of the piano, makes its own combat with the grandson of the black Charles family. This connects the family emotionally to their social history of bondage and exploitation. This makes Boy Charles' liberation of the piano worthwhile and more effective, as it stirred Sutter's ghost, soon after Sutter's death, and long after Boy Charles' death, to "hover around and play on the piano," as Wining Boy observes (58).

In this way, the ghost adds another perception of the piano as a tool of revealing the ongoing black-white tension and a representation of "not only the memory of Doaker's immediate relatives but also the spirit of each extended family member from Africa to America" (Shannon, "Good Christian's" 140).

The piano is further defamiliarized when Wilson uses it to reflect not only the black-white tension, but also the white's rejection of the social and economic autonomy of the black. This is achieved through the failed attempt to move the piano, which, as Lymon observes, is "stuck. Something holding it" (83). It is fastened in its place by Sutter's ghost which is trying to hinder Boy Willie's attempt, as an African American, to realize a whole, integrated self-concept through material means. In fact, "Sutter's ghost wants both the piano and its music and, by extension, to prevent his family's former slaves owning his land" (Crow and Banfield 55).

In fact, Sutter's ghost greatly contributes to Berniece's reunion and positive involvement with the past so as to build for the future with a new perception of the piano. It also contributes to Boy Willie's retreat from selling the piano, freedom of his innate feeling of enslavement, and achievement of his real manhood. The ghost is viewed as a symbol of the Africans' incomplete realization of their "African-ness." In this respect Elam writes, "While no longer physically bound to the slave master, Wilson believes that African Americans remain spiritually and psychologically imprisoned by the dominant culture unable express or discover their inherent 'African-ness'" (371). This calls for the final battle with the ghost in which both Boy Willie and Berniece participate, each in his/her own way. Boy Willie engages in a physical combat with the ghost supported by

Berniece's call upon all the members of her family, whose images are carved on the piano, to join in this final battle against the "white" master.

Boy Willie's battle with Sutter's ghost acts as a compensation for his equality struggle with the white master. It leads to his victory over the symbol of bondage and exploitation. It enables him to achieve his real manhood and masculinity long denied by the white. It puts into practice his internal pride, self-definition, and self-determination. He is boldly and solely facing the ghost, which is Wilson's main concern as he states in an interview with the theater critic Mel Gussow, "What was important to me was Boy Willie's willingness to do battle. He's not running out the door, he's not relying on Jesus, he's not relying on anything outside of himself" ("Fine-Tuning" A18).

The battle also achieves Boy Willie's aim behind selling the piano. Once "Boy Willie engaged the ghosts of the past, he had cleared the very hurdle for which he sought to sell the piano" (Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 149-50). He is finally freeing the piano/the family legacy from its haunting white ghost. Thus the piano appears as an indirect factor that helps Boy Willie finally growing into manhood and properly practicing his responsibility towards preserving and protecting the family legacy. In this case, it can be perceived as an incentive of strength and courage.

With Berniece, the piano is used in the final battle as a conjuring instrument, an exorcising weapon expelling the ghost of the oppressive white. Her playing the piano and singing are an invocation of the spirits of ancestors and all the deceased members of her family—namely Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles and Mama Ola, who are engraved on and embedded into the piano. In this final scene of the play, the piano takes on its most powerful, effective meaning. It stirs into and takes action. It empowers and frees Berniece. "She draws out of herself, at this moment of crisis, a power that she herself had feared and for so long renounced" (Crow and Banfield 60). This power helps her make a new start in life, a start that is built on the legacy of the past without living its torture but with

availing from what her ancestors have achieved. She frees herself from her enslavement and self-imprisonment in the female suffering attributed to piano.

The final battle is both physical and psychological. It reveals that the struggle is not merely between a brother and his sister, but between a whole black family and a white master. The piano in this final scene reflects the collective efforts of the Charles family to positively crown the long-lived struggle against, and culminate the inferiority of the black to the white in the dominant white system. By the end, Berniece "is able to express herself . . . and reclaim her identity and her brother's soul" (Bryant 40).

Berniece's call for support is sung as she plays the piano. At this special moment, the music of the piano and the accompanying song—with "I want you to help me," repeated eighteen times, and, after Willie's success in the struggle, "Thank you," repeated five times (107-08)—are defamiliarized. They come from deep down the self and out of history. They are performed rather as a ritual, a prayer, a call on the spirits of the ancestors, a summoning of their power, an invocation of the history and legacy of the Charles family, than an ordinary song or music. In his stage directions Wilson describes Berniece's song, "*The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains in strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents*" (106).

What suggests that the song and the music at the end of the play are practised as a ritual is the fact that they replace Avery's blessing, when he "*is stunned into silence*" (106). This gives the piano a religious connotation. Morales also supports the idea that the special call upon the spirits of the ancestors is considered a protective ritual when he writes, "In the parallel context of most African ancestral worship, neglect of the ancestors and ancestral altars results in loss of their protection and threatens the destruction of the entire community" (109). Hence, Berniece's action is an acknowledgement of the power and importance of the spirits of her ancestors and a rescue not only of

her brother but also of the entire family with their legacy.

Crow and Banfield also pay special attention to the music and song at the end of the play and perceive them as a power that embraces the mythic and ritualistic and returns the play's characters to black American roots in Africa and the Southern plantations. Crow and Banfield reach the conclusion, "In doing so, Wilson challenges black Americans to discover, or . . . rediscover, a dimension of being that their subordinated history in a white-dominated society has obscured" (60). They also perceive the music historically when they stress that it is not only Berniece's but also her forbearers'. "It is an expression of age-old forces that . . . black American must rediscover to achieve their full emancipation from racial subordination" (60).

Londré also observes the last exorcising scene artistically on stating, "Finally, there is the power of art to exorcise demons. As a musical instrument on which an artist has carved portraits, the piano necessarily becomes a symbol of art, and it is situated within a work of art: Wilson's play from which slavery's racist ghost takes a lesson" (118).

The final music and song are further defamiliarized as they replace seeing the actual struggle between Willie and the ghost. The "grappling with the white ghost of the slave-owning past is symbolized as *voice* in Wilson's play—as song, instrument, music, rhythm, style" (Fleche 10).

The final action puts the play to its satisfactory end not only to Berniece and Boy Willie, but also to the audience, especially the black ones, who are expected to know how much their legacy is important in their lives. To Boy Willie's satisfaction, Berniece finally puts the piano to practical use. She rediscovers the usefulness of the piano. She is finally able to "recover her 'song', and in the process defeat . . . her brother" (Crow and Banfield 55). To Berniece's happiness, Boy Willie will not sell the piano. Instead, he is to leave the house causing no more troubles to her. He also helps her finally get rid of Sutter's ghost. Boy is leaving with the condition that both Berniece and Maretha keep playing the piano, or else "me and Sutter both liable to be back," he says (108).

The final scene of the play adds a new perception to the piano. Berniece's playing it becomes a condition that keeps away Sutter's ghost and Boy Willie's unfavorable annoying interference in her life. This turns the piano into a safety, empowering tool and a protection weapon. This also keeps the past alive in both the present and the future.

In this way, the piano turns both as a way to drive the family apart, and to bring them back together. It helps both Bernice and Boy Willie to embrace the past and plan for the future. The end of the play is a landmark and a reconciling moment for the family. For "by embracing the shared mythology, both Berniece and Boy Willie find what they seek" (Werner 46).

As is especially evident from the last scene of the play, there is an act of defamiliarization, not only of the piano, but also of its music and accompanying song. Frank Rich makes a special reference to the music when he writes, "Whatever happens to the piano . . . the playwright makes it clear that the music in *The Piano Lesson* is not up for sale. That haunting music belonged to the people who have lived it" (C13). He also describes it as "history" when he asserts that the play "rattles history and shakes the audience on both sides of the racial divide" (C13).

It is observed how music was Berniece's daily ritual, and a method for connecting her mother Ola to her deceased husband. Boy Willie's and Wining Boy's music and songs are defamiliarized. They are the black-American's identifying blues. They are different from the music played by the white, which Doaker listened to as Sutter's ghost played the piano.

In fact, Wilson has a special perception of the blues, a perception he gracefully reflects in the play and reveals in occasional writings and interviews. For example, he writes in his preface to *Three Plays*:

I saw the blues as a cultural response of a nonliterate people whose history and culture were rooted in the oral tradition. The response was to a world that was not of their making, in which the idea of themselves as a people of

imminent worth that belied their recent history was continually assaulted. It was a world that did not recognize their gods, their manners, their mores. It despised their ethos and refused even to recognize humanity. In such an environment the blues was a flag bearer of self-definition, and within the scope of the larger world which lay beyond its doorstep, it carved out a life, set down rules, and urged a manner of being that corresponded to the temperament and sensibilities of its creators. It was a spiritual conduit that gave spontaneous expression to the spirit that was locked in combat and devising new strategies for engaging life and enlarging itself. It was a true and articulate literature that was in the forefront of the development of both character and consciousness. (ix-x)

He also states in an interview, "Inside the music are clues to what is happening with the people. . . . The blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation they find themselves in" (Moyers 168).

The music and songs performed on the stage throughout the entire play reveal Wilson's perception of the blues. For example, at the beginning of the play, Boy Willie spontaneously plays for Maretha a "simple boogie-woogie", which she cannot copy because she has "to read it on the paper" (21). Later, Winning Boy plays and sings a song which echoes the story of black Americans' unsettled hard life with its "ups and downs" and "bitter times", a story which is very similar to his personal life experience. The hero of the song is a "rambling gambling man" who "traveled from land to land . . . all around this world" (47-48). Similarly, Wining Boy "don't never stay in one place" (8). In his stage directions Wilson describes him as a "gambler" (28). What makes the song suggestive of Wining Boy's personal life experience is the use of the first person pronoun "I" in the song. In addition, the song reflects the suffering of the employee at the hands of the deceptive employer, "the rascal" whose name is "Joe Herrin" (47). This again reflects the suffering of the black Americans in the white-dominated society, which Wilson perceived as a young child, and the blues acted as not only an outlet to but also a

proof of strength. In this respect Wilson states about black Americans:

I began to understand the fact that the avenues for participation in society were closed to these people and that their ambitions had been thwarted, whatever they may have been. The mere fact that they were still able to make this music was a testament to the resiliency of their spirit. (Moyers 169)

In addition, the song Wining Boy wrote and played at the end of the play is a very personal song dedicated to his deceased wife Cleotha and reflecting his personal sorrow for losing her. Bissiri sees in Wining Boy's character a special importance as, "albeit not a star, he remains a blues singer, a carrier of culture that Wilson exploits in his play" (45). This goes with Wilson's conviction that blues singers are "carriers of culture, carriers of ideas. . . . [They are] sacred because of the sacred tasks they took upon themselves—to disseminate this information and carry these cultural values of the people" (Shannon, "Blues" 540).

Even the lesson conveyed through the play is defamiliarized. It is not a music lesson which teaches how to read the note or play the keys. It is not a lesson in which the piano is the tool of instruction, but one in which the piano takes the role of instructor. It is a history lesson the piano teaches black Americans, generation after generation to help them "get insights into their history and identity, and achieve self-determination" (Bissiri 50). The lesson in simple terms is: "there must be a balance between abandoning the past, as Boy Willie wants to do, and living too much in it, as Berniece does" (McDonough 152).

Metaphorically, the play's lesson transforms the piano into a bottomless deep well absorbing, the feelings and emotions of both the living and the dead, and accommodating the spirits of the dead. It stands as an evidence, witness and contributor to the ongoing struggle between the black and the white. It celebrates and supports the black in their struggle for self-expression, self-realization and survival against all odds in the white dominating society. In short, it is a very special lesson, the scope of which is enlarged and enriched by Wilson's inclusion of the white audience as possible learners, or

observers. This is achieved by establishing a conflict between the ghost and Boy Willie in which the piano acts as an integral catalyst. In fact, the “literal presence of a white slave owner’s ghost is a heavy reminder that Wilson’s history lesson isn’t all black” (Fleche 9).

The piano is further defamiliarized when it is used as a device for character revelation, which is especially evident with Boy Willie and Berniece. It is Wilson's means of delving into “the landscape of the self, unattended, unadorned, exploring what D. H. Lawrence called ‘the dark forest of the soul’” (*Three Plays* vii). The piano reveals how Berniece is an introvert, somehow stagnant and pessimistic. She is

not only the custodian of the piano, but also a container of a unique strain of the Charles Family’s unresolved grief. . . . After Mama Ola’s death, the piano’s new status as an untouchable object marks its transition from a symbol of Mama Ola’s melancholy to an emblem of Berniece’s melancholy. (Singleton 51)

She has, as Wilson states, “a self-imposed taboo about playing the piano” (“Fine-Tuning” A18). She is satisfied with her routine-like, lifeless, marginal life. She transforms herself into a guardian of the family history without any attempt to build on that history. She also refrains from passing the family legacy to the following generation represented by her daughter. She prevents her from playing any blues, and tells her nothing about the history of the piano. She is not ready to play the piano after her mother’s death. She is somehow heading at burying herself into that piano. Till that moment comes, she keeps herself at the bottom of the society, neither causing nor tolerating any troubles. She is against anyone that would intrude to change her lifestyle, even if that person is a brother or a lover. She dares not take any new steps in her life. She is not ready to open her heart to another person after her husband’s death.

Keeping Maretha away from the piano’s history, caring nothing about her ignorance of the black music, is viewed as an attempt on Berniece's part to turn Maretha into ‘an imitation white’. In this respect Crow and Banfield write:

In the process to give her daughter a good start in life Berniece is arguably making her into an 'imitation white': to make the point, Wilson has Berniece straighten her daughter's hair with a hot comb during the argument with Boy Willie about their inheritance and what sort of values should be encouraged in Maretha. For Boy Willie . . . it is essential that she . . . is proud of her people and colour. (54-55)

Contrary to Berniece is her brother Willie, whom Wilson intended in the first place to intrude into his sister's life like a "tornado". "I wanted him to come to the house like a tornado and force her to confront the thing she was trying to deny," Wilson states ("Fine-Tuning" A18). He is dynamic. He is both willing to embrace the history of the piano, and build on it. He admits the greatness of the past. But he is not ready to be buried in it. He is not ready to stand still either. He wants to provide himself with a future, with a better life. He never gives up arguing with his sister and attempting to move the piano away from the house.

The piano is also used to reflect the way Doaker is presented in the play. He appears as a simple-natured unbiased easygoing person. He interferes in no one's business unless things go to extremes. He does not interfere in Berniece's manner of bringing up Maretha, as he declares to Boy Willie, "I don't get in the way of Berniece's raising her" (22). He does not respond to Berniece's demand to expel her brother from the house because Boy Willie does nothing bad for him. In short, he is peacefully living and letting others live. He says: "I'm just living the best way I know how. I ain't thinking about no top or no bottom" (93).

Doaker's personality is practically reflected through his attitude towards the piano, and the conflict around it. Compared to the piano, he comes second in value. One might even claim that he is there in the play only for the sake of that piano. The way Wilson depicts him gives the impression that, due to acting as the piano's historian, Doaker belongs to the past rather than the present. He is the one who uncovers the piano's remote past. From his narrative the

piano's long trip starting from Nolander's house to his own house along almost 137 years is revealed. One gets the impression that he stands more as a tool than a real character. His main role is to impose the piano's past history on the present interfering in and affecting its action.

Doaker stands more as an observer and a narrator than an active participant in present-time action. He is not decisive in the ongoing conflict over the piano. For example, he responds to Boy Willie's claim that he is right to consider selling the piano to get the land, "Ain't nobody said nothing about who's right and who's wrong" (46). When asked on how to put an end to the conflict over the piano, he gives the general unbiased opinion, "one of them ought to respect the other one's wishes" (99). He is "forced into the role of mediator" (Londré 114), whose main role is "to stay around here and keep you all from killing one another," he informs the siblings (90). He also tells Boy Willie while attempting to move the piano in Berniece's absence, "I can't tell you what to do with your piano. But I can't let you take her half out of here Leave that piano set over there till Berniece come back. I don't care what you do with it then" (84-85). He is only concerned that nothing bad should happen to the piano, irrespective of whoever should take or keep it.

Freud distinguishes between mourning and melancholia, explaining that mourning is a healthy response to loss because "we rest assured that after a lapse of time it will be overcome" (240). But melancholia leads to unconscionable loss-of-self: "The melancholic suffers a loss-of-self that claims yet cannot be claimed" (Freud 241). From Berniece's story about her mother, it is realized that Ola has been in this state of melancholia ever since her husband's death. The audience/readers discover Ola's nature through her conduct and relationship towards the piano. She also reveals herself as a sincere wife.

The piano is also defamiliarized when it marks the transformation of Berniece and Boy Willie. By the end of the play, Berniece gets rid of her introversion when she plays the piano and puts it into its most vital use ever since it was in her sole possession.

It is also noticed that Boy Willie becomes friendly with his sister after his emotional victory over the white ghost who has for long haunted the piano. Boy Willie becomes reconciled with his sister, himself and the family legacy. He puts into practice the idea that although there is nothing wrong in pursuing the American Dream, it should not be at the expense of one's heritage of culture. Observing the character transformation of both Boy Willie and Berniece, Elam writes:

As they actively and literally wrestle with the ghosts from the past, Boy Willie and his sister Berniece both gain in terms of their own self-awareness, their collective identity and their ability to define and determine their own destiny as African Americans. (262-63)

Examined collectively, contrary to the male characters, the female characters adopt a rather passive attitude towards the piano. The male seem the doers of action, while the female are the recipients, or the victims of that action. In this respect McDonough states that the history of the piano is "the legacy of violence done to black manhood and the scars this violence leaves for black womanhood" (152). For example, the grandmother was part of the price paid for the piano. She had nothing to do to prevent that bargain. This made her suffer from separation from the rest of her family. Mama Ola suffered the loss of her husband, shedding her blood and tears for seventeen years over the piano which she turned into a shrine. With her mother's death, Berniece's life became stagnant. She stopped playing the piano. She did not put it into any practical use. She avoided informing Maretha about its history, the burden of which she chose to carry silently and solely. Maretha knows neither the black heritage nor the black music.

On the other hand, Sutter bought the piano as a present for his wife. The grandfather of the Charles family carved pictures of his wife and son on the piano. He also registered on it the history of his family, which turned it into both an artifact and a family document. Boy Charles stole the piano and got himself burned at the hands of Sutter in the latter's failed attempt to get the piano back. Wining Boy used it for a while as a source of living. His blues songs and music

kept the African American identity alive. Doaker works as the piano's historian. Boy Willie wants to sell it to get land. He wants to put it to practical use. Avery wants Berniece to play it and "claim it as an instrument of the Lord" (71). Sutter's ghost haunts the piano causing trouble to Berniece and fright to Maretha. However, Berniece's final action of playing the piano and singing rebuts the general passive attitude of women towards the piano. She is the one who "finally exorcises Sutter's ghost. . . . for the man by the actions of a woman" (McDonough 152-53).

From the historical point of view, the way the Charles family male members handle the piano can be perceived as a black struggle for identity in the white oppressive dominating community. The piano stands as a concrete evidence of the ability to "communicate a mythology of black potential to succeed within the confines of, and by the rules of, a white world" (Campbell 2). The family keeps resisting all the time, and never giving up. The piano with its carvings strengthens and highlights the black voice and defies the louder voice of the ruling white master, whose ghost still hovers around the piano. Doaker reports that when Sutter first saw the carvings on the piano "he got mad. He didn't ask for all that. But . . . there wasn't nothing he could do about it" (44). Sutter became mad again when the piano was stolen and he burned Boy Charles as a punishment. However, this did not prevent the Charles family from keeping the piano and preserving their legacy. Even Sutter's ghost failed in keeping close to the piano. Boy Willie expelled it after a ferocious struggle. The fact that the piano is finally claimed by a white ghost, not a real living person, might suggest that the black identity is progressively and more powerfully asserting itself. Boy Willie's overcoming the ghost further stresses that suggestion. Thus the piano "has served as a touchstone by which members of the family could reinforce their position in the legacy, regardless of how far they roamed" (Boan 265).

From the way the Sutters and Charleses are depicted in the play, it is realized that the piano acts as a touchstone which all the characters, living or dead, revolve around in one way or another. The readers/audience understand, appreciate and/or delve deep into such characters according to how much they are related to the piano. This

defamiliarizes the piano as it turns from a stage prop, a mere musical instrument that should occupy the background of the action, into a central element directing and causing action and revealing and/or transforming characters.

It is also noticed that each character in the play has a special function towards the piano, such as playing, carving, creating a history for, stealing, liberating, dying over, mythologizing, shedding tears over, polishing, enshrining, haunting, preserving and quarrelling over. This gives more prominence to the piano putting it into the foreground while the characters, relatively speaking, are situated into the background. This is a further defamiliarization of the piano.

According to Bryant, Wilson's use of successive narratives, mainly revolving around the past, with the piano as a central object, makes the piano function as "a site of memory" in the manner illustrated in Pierre Nora's article "Between Memory and History: *Le Lieu de Mémoire*". The characters reveal their memories about the piano. Together they form a collective memory that can shape identities and bind the members of a social group, such as a family or a nation. Bryant explains:

By having each character share memories of their relationship to the piano, Wilson demonstrates how the instrument becomes a surrogate for the historical event and connects individuals to perceived shared experiences. . . . Thus, when individual memories of the piano come together through social discourse, these memories negotiate a consensus that serves as a history or agreed upon memory for the artifact and the people the object represents. (35-36)

Thus the mere telling of the narratives further defamiliarizes the piano as it stresses its value as a binding object of the members of the Charles family, living or dead, relating the past to the present, and making the effect of the past on the present influential and significant. This creates a special continuous history of the family that empowers them and makes them head for the future as Plum assumes when he states that Wilson seeks to offer his plays as "a potential source of

empowerment that helps African Americans shape their future by becoming informed cultural historians" (566).

The piano is also defamiliarized when Wilson uses it to make the play fluctuate randomly along time. Through the successive narratives, mainly centered on the piano, past is inserted into present. This is particularly evident with Doaker whose "recollections of the Charles's family history serve as the primary conduits through which the past disrupts the real-time of the text" (Singleton 44). This lucid movement of the play along time also enables Doaker to connect "each family member from the past and present to the piano's history" (Bryant 40). He also links the Sutters to the piano beginning with Robert Sutter, the original slave owner, and his wife Ophelia till Sutter's ghost who haunts the piano.

Establishing a connection between the Charleses and the Sutters stresses the theme of the ongoing black-white tension with the piano as a point of contention. This tension started with slavery time and is still going on at present. The choice of a white man who is interested in buying the piano, further stresses that tension.

Wilson's concept of himself as a writer, the resources of his literary creation, the special handling of the piano in *The Piano Lesson*, the dynamic relationship between the characters, especially between Boy Willie, on the one hand and the piano on the other, and the effectiveness of that piano in their lives allow for establishing an analogy between the play and T. S. Eliot's critical essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," especially his concept of the dynamic nature of "tradition" – which keeps on changing and being redefined with each new literary work added to it – and the notion of the pastness of the past and its presence.

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot explains that tradition is not inherited, but obtained by great labor. This for him means that the writer should write with a feeling that all the European literature from Homer till present time forms a whole, a simultaneous order. Every new work has meaning only in the context of what has come before, and it should be capable of changing the past. Tradition thus involves the historical sense with "a perception, not only of the

pastness of the past, but of its presence” (14). This historical sense “is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together. . . . And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity” (14).

Within the scope of the play, and having Eliot’s views in mind, the piano can be perceived as tradition. It is transformed into the tradition of the Charles family by virtue of their contributions to its accumulative value along time, the ongoing struggle over it as well as the hard labor and suffering attributed to building and creating its tradition.

Within the play itself, each character narrates his/her story expressing a peculiar perception of the piano. By virtue of continuation, addition, stress, or difference, these stories build on the stories of the deceased characters of the Charles and the Sutter families. Collectively they bring about a redefinition and/or a reshaping of the readers’/audience’s perception of the piano as a representation of tradition. It also acquaints them with the distinctive nature of the Afro-American culture to which Wilson makes a reference when he states:

We have a culture that’s separate and distinct from the mainstream white American culture. We have different philosophical ideas, different ways of responding to the world, different ideas and attitudes, different values, different ideas about style and linguistics, different aesthetics—even the way we bury our dead is different.
(Moyers 172)

In addition, the process of successive narratives with the past as an integral part keeps that past alive and gives it a present value. In other words, it makes the past both past and present. Wilson stresses the importance of the past and its effect on the present when he declares that the play poses the question: “Can one acquire a sense of self-worth by denying one’s past?” (Savran 294).

The past in Wilson’s play not only acquires a present value, but also new meanings. With the narrative of each character a special

meaning of the past is uncovered. In this respect Bryant writes, "History . . . is always changing, shifting and evolving from one moment to the next; from one person to the next. . . . As the piano stands as a trope for the past, the playwright reinscribes its meaning with each character's memory" (36).

In his essay on Wilson's play, Elam suggests:

Looking back in African American history enables Wilson to reevaluate the choices made by African Americans in the past as well as to suggest their contemporary meanings. The philosophical trajectory of his dramaturgy posits that one can only go forward by first going backwards and confronting the past. (361-62)

The piano stands as an edifice linked with both the past and the present. Its past history affects the choices of both Berniece and Boy Willie at present. By the end of the play, Berniece adopts a positive attitude towards the past freeing herself from her previous stagnant, rather passive attitude. She "must reconnect with the past so that she and her family might be freed from the negative psychological and sociological forces that haunt and inhibit their present" (Elam 367). The piano enables her to rediscover herself and what she can do to the legacy of the family. She must transcend playing the role of the passive preserver to the role of the dynamic contributor. She puts into practice Eliot's description of the effect of the introduction of a new work of art on tradition, which is "so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new" (15).

Berniece practically exemplifies how "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (Eliot 15). Her action when she finally plays the piano and sings crowns the previous contributions of her family to legacy, which started by her great grandfather when he commemorated the family through his carvings. This action keeps the tradition alive in the manner described by Wilson when he states, "The culture is very much alive. . . . The way that blacks participate in the world is fueled by their African sensibilities, so that is alive and vibrant and growing.

. . . We are constantly debating the character of our culture. So it's alive—it didn't disappear, it didn't die" (Moyers 174).

As for Boy Willie, it is noticed how he finally achieves his freedom from his emotional and psychological enslavement to the white. He finally chooses not to discard with the piano. His "identity will forever be, for better or worse, intertwined with the past" (Boan 265). His relationship to the piano with its spirits resembles that of the poet to tradition which Eliot clarifies when he states, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (15). This also agrees with the opinion of Tilley and Shanks when they write, "Although the past is completed and gone, it is nevertheless physically present with us in its material traces. . . . The past is often where we look for roots and a sense of self and identity" (9). Bryant also states, "Wilson uses his characters' individual recollections of the past to demonstrate how present perceptions and relationships are affected by history" (36).

By the end of the play, both Berniece and Boy Willie achieve an awareness of the piano in the manner described by Eliot when he states, "But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (16). This again stresses the accumulative value of the piano, a value which is properly and fully realized by the fourth generation of the Charles Family. The final result is "a black American history structured as a continuing relationship between the living and the dead" (Morales 106). Eliot's statement that the poet "is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living" (22), also applies to Boy Willie and his attitude towards both the piano and his sister.

Devon Boan also sees in the lively relationship between the past and the present, through the successive narratives in the play, not only a family tradition that relates Boy Willie to his great grandfather,

but also a black folk, religious tradition. Boan describes the slave narrative carved into the body of the piano as “the call”, “the myth” and Boy Willie’s improvised effort to achieve his own economic and social emancipation as “the response” in which he tries to translate the myth into reality (264). Byerman also sees in this traditional call-and-response pattern “an ever-changing series of recreations of the myth, in which the narrative gets repeated in a different version every time, each with its own veracity” (7). Boan adds that Wilson uses the piano and its attendant narrative as a haunting presence in the call-and-response form of black folk tradition.

The piano also propagates the tradition of the African myth with its belief in ghosts and spirits and their protective and/or destructive power. It is seen how Wilson makes the piano produce, accommodate, as well as haunted by, spirits. This, in Campbell’s view, not only relates the play closer to Afro-American tradition but also to the white-black struggle. Campbell assumes that “in black literature, history often assumes a mythic quality in order to respond to questions of identity raised by a history largely told by and focusing on whites” (155).

Referring to Romare Bearden’s and the blues’ influence upon him, Wilson states in his preface to *Three Plays*:

The blues provided me with an aesthetic with which to frame my growing ideas of myself as part of something larger, it was not until I discovered the art of Romare Bearden that I was able to turn it into a narrative that would encompass all of the elements of culture and tradition . . . that sustains black American life. . . . [I] sought to answer Baldwin’s call for a profound articulation of the black tradition that could sustain a man once he left his father’s house. (x-xi)

In these statements, Wilson sees himself as part of the surrounding universe, open to incorporating its creative influential artistic currents, which are part of the literary and artistic tradition, into his own literary work in a manner that propagates and validates the concept of tradition. He stresses, “I place myself in the long line of the tradition

of African-American letters that has nurtured us all” (*Three Plays* xii). The blues, Bearden’s art and Baldwin’s call are the framework, the vehicle, the starting point for Wilson’s creation and innovation of, hence modifying and readjusting, the tradition. Wilson admits about Bearden, “I try to put in my work all the things I saw in his, the spirit and texture and substance and grace and elegance” (*Three Plays* xi). Wilson describes the world he is introduced to as a result of the blues, “I had been given a world that contained my image, a world at once rich and varied, marked and marking, brutal and beautiful, and at crucial odds with the larger world that contained it and preyed and pressed it from every conceivable angle” (*Three Plays* ix). This world is reflected in the world created in *The Piano Lesson*. Plum also thinks of the blues as “a connective force that links the past with the present, and the present with the future” (561).

Wilson's description of his creative process also goes with Eliot’s concept of the dynamic nature of tradition, which is all the time readjusted and modified. In his preface to *Three Plays*, he states:

To write is to fix language. . . . It is in many ways a remaking of the self in which all of the parts have been realigned, redistributed and reassembled into a new being of sense and harmony. . . . To write is to forever circle the maps . . . giving new meaning to something very old and very sacred—life itself. (viii)

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson resorts to the life and legacy of Afro-Americans with the piano as a focal entity to create this masterpiece. The piano in the play is the ‘tradition’. It is presented as “very old”, “very sacred” and a reflection of the “life” of the Charles family. What Wilson says about the act of writing as a “remaking of the self” resembles what has taken place to Berniece and Boy Willie through their relation to and perceptions of “the piano”. Wilson writes about the black American culture, “The ideas of self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense which it espoused are still very much a part of my life as I sit down to write” (*Three Plays* ix). These ideas also apply to the character of Boy Willie and what he wants to achieve through selling the piano.

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson's focus on the Afro American tradition makes not only the members of the Charles family but also all the readers/audience, black or white, Americans or non-Americans realize and appreciate that tradition.

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson is able to defamiliarize the piano, its music, its songs and its lesson. It is used as a device for character revelation, and a decisive factor in character transformation.

Wilson's piano is highly dynamic. It keeps on taking different meanings, allowing for diverse forms of evaluation and new perceptions. Through this instrument one can perceive character, legacy, suffering, self-realization, melancholia, oppression, violence, action, inaction, love, hatred, self-assertion, dehumanization, enslavement, freedom, myth, tradition, power, courage, identity, loss of identity and struggle.

There is an ongoing interaction between the piano and all the characters of the play, alive or dead, spirits or ghosts, seen or felt. It is humanized and mystified. It affects the characters and is affected by them. It observes and urges to action. It gives life to the dead and causes the death of the alive. It reveals characters and turns into a central dynamic, effective character.

The piano tears members of family apart and unites others. It marks the enslavement of the black and their freedom. It starts conflict between a brother and a sister and culminates it. It gives abode to spirits, emits and exorcises others.

The piano is dealt with both as an entity, a piece of wood the carvings of which turn it into an artifact, and a musical instrument used to play the Afro-American identifying blues. It is dealt with both as tool of instruction and an instructor. It becomes an open document upon which different characters inscribe their sagas, each in his/her way. It is myth preserver and myth producer.

The piano is the real protagonist that takes part in, and sometimes causes, almost all the events and incidents of the play, past and present. It takes part in, and wins the battle against the ghost of Sutter, exorcising it from the house. It observes and concludes the

brother-sister conflict which would have turned bloody and deadly. This puts the play to a satisfactory end to all the characters and to the audience who would leave the theatre with the sound of the piano and the lesson it teaches echoing vigorously in their minds, hearts and ears. It also stands strong ready for the future.

The audience/readers may come out of the play with the sense that the piano is an embedded description of the African Americans' struggle to survive and succeed against all odds. It shows that all the time no matter how hard they suffer at the hands of the white, the black fight back and persist in making their mark and proving their unique identity in the white-dominating oppressive universe. They are slowly but surely creating, carving, building and developing their own legacy. They pass this legacy successfully from one generation to another. Despite all adverse circumstances, the piano remains intact, defying time, passing from one generation to another, and heading successfully towards the future.

The piano vigorously and practically reflects the pastness of the past and its presence. The play stresses the idea that history must be shared and accepted, then valued for the lessons that it teaches before the future can be achieved. Through the piano Wilson is able to propagate his personal conviction that African Americans cannot go on towards their future without being strongly armed with and supported by their past. It helps Wilson to rewrite and keep the black American history, with its hard-won legacy, alive, effective and strong.

The play proves to be a masterpiece. Its "piano" helps Wilson carve his place in American literature, and makes him worthy of the Pulitzer Prize he has won for it.

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