The Piano Lesson

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AUGUST WILSON

August Wilson's mother, Daisy Wilson, was African American woman; his father, Frederick Kittel, was of Sudeten German origins (Germans living in what was then Bohemia). Wilson's parents divorced while he was young, and he and his five siblings remained with their mother in Pittsburgh, where they lived in predominantly poor Black and Jewish neighborhoods. Wilson always identified strongly with his mother's Black heritage and culture. He faced prejudice while attending Catholic school, being one of few African American students, and eventually dropped out to study in the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. After his father's death when Wilson was 20, he took the name August Wilson and began writing. A few years later, he cofounded the Black Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh. After some initial efforts at poetry, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota in 1978 and began writing plays instead. He finished his first, *Jitney*, in 1979. Eight years later, *Fences* garnered both a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award; the following year, *The Piano Lesson* followed suit with another Pulitzer. Ten of Wilson's best-known and most critically acclaimed plays formed the Pittsburgh Cycle, with each play focusing on one decade of the African American experience. Wilson was married three times. At the time of his death from cancer in 2005, he was married to a costume designer named Costanza Romero.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Historical details in *The Piano Lesson* highlight matters of structural injustice faced by African Americans in the Depression Era. In the second play of the Pittsburgh Cycle, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson addresses the selling of petty criminals to farmers in need of labor. Though *The Piano Lesson* is set decades later, Lymon Jackson's situation—fleeing Mississippi rather than being forced to work for Stovall to pay off his bail—seems to be a gesture toward this form of injustice. Incarceration in general is touched on several times throughout the play, as several men in the Charles family share a history of imprisonment on Parchman Farm, or the Mississippi State Penitentiary, a maximum-security prison and labor farm founded in 1901 and operating to this day in the Mississippi Delta. In the 1930s, nearly 2,000 prisoners labored there. Wilson also touches on positive aspects of the Great Migration, the northward movement of millions of African American people from the rural South in search of greater economic opportunities in cities like Pittsburgh. For characters like Avery Brown and Lymon, a new life in Pittsburgh does seem to extend freedoms that weren't available to them in Mississippi. Wilson's personal familiarity and fondness for his hometown also comes through in occasional details like the Kaufmann Settlement, a school that offered supplemental education to Black and other minority children in the city throughout the 20th century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Other plays in August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle include *Fences* (set in the 1950s and, like *The Piano Lesson*, a winner of the Pulitzer Prize) and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1910s). In terms of the Cycle's chronology, *The Piano Lesson* is preceded by *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (set in the 1920s) and followed by *Seven Guitars* (1940s). For a fictional contrast to *The Piano Lesson* that's set in the South, Zora Neale Hurston's short story "The Gilded Six-Bits" explores themes of African American self-sufficiency and domestic strife in 1930s Florida. Additionally, Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* is an award-winning nonfiction account of the Great Migration.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Piano Lesson
- **When Published:** 1987
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1936
- **Climax:** Berniece banishes Sutter's ghost.
- **Antagonist:** Sutter (Sutter's Ghost)

EXTRA CREDIT

Acclaimed Cast. *The Piano Lesson* opened on November 26, 1987 at the Yale Repertory Theater, with Samuel L. Jackson playing Boy Willie. The Broadway debut, in April 1990, included African American actresses like S. Epatha Merkerson (playing Berniece) and Lisa Gay Hamilton (playing Grace) who subsequently become well-known television and film actors.

Hometown Legacy. In Pittsburgh, the August Wilson African American Cultural Center opened in 2009 to house visual and performing arts and to honor the cultural contributions of African Americans. In 2020, its most recent event was a virtual celebration to honor what would have been Wilson's 75th birthday.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Piano Lesson takes place in the Pittsburgh home of Doaker

Charles, his niece Berniece, and her young daughter Maretha. It's 1936. The Charleses are an African American family originally from rural Mississippi; they have brought with them a beautiful upright **piano** decorated with carvings resembling African masks.

At five o'clock one morning, Berniece's brother Boy Willie and his friend Lymon show up at the house. They've driven from Mississippi with a truckload of watermelons they hope to sell. Boy Willie reports that Sutter, the current owner of the farm on which the Charles family was once enslaved, has just died. It's rumored that the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog" pushed Sutter down a well. Berniece dismisses this story as nonsense and mistrusts the young men's business in Pittsburgh. She tells them to sell their watermelons quickly and then goes back to bed.

Lymon tells Doaker that he's hoping to settle down in Pittsburgh and start a new life. Boy Willie, on the other hand, wants to sell the family piano to help him save up enough money to purchase the late Sutter's land. Doaker warns Boy Willie that Berniece won't agree to this plan. Just then, they hear Berniece shouting from upstairs. She runs into the room, claiming that she saw the ghost of Sutter upstairs, and she accuses Boy Willie of having killed Sutter. Boy Willie denies it and says that Sutter is probably haunting her because of the piano—a sign that she should get rid of it. Soon after, Berniece's boyfriend, Avery Brown, drops by and tells Boy Willie and Lymon about his plans to become a preacher and start a church.

A few days later, Doaker's brother Wining Boy (a failed musician) drops by for a visit. Boy Willie and Lymon, who still haven't sold their watermelons, reminisce with Wining Boy about serving time on Mississippi's Parchman Farm. After their release, the men were pursued by the local sheriff for having stolen some wood. Berniece's husband, Crawley, was shot and killed in the confrontation. Later, Lymon was imprisoned for not working, and after the judge required him to work for a local white man named Stovall in order to pay off his bail, Lymon began hiding out in his **truck** instead.

During the same conversation, Doaker tells Lymon the history of the family piano. Back when the Sutter family enslaved the Charles family, the Sutter ancestor traded two of the Charles family members—Boy Willie's and Berniece's great-grandmother Mama Bernice and grandfather Papa Boy Charles—for the piano, as a gift for his wife, Ophelia Sutter. But Ophelia missed her slaves, so the Charles's great-grandfather Papa Boy Willie was made to carve his wife's and son's images on the piano for Ophelia to remember them by. He also carved images of other family members and family events.

A couple of generations later, Boy Willie's and Berniece's father, Boy Charles, was obsessed with the Sutter piano and the fact that, by owning it, the Sutters still owned a piece of the Charles family. So his brothers, Wining Boy and Doaker, helped him steal the piano. Though they succeeded, Boy Charles was caught and burned to death in a boxcar as a result. This is why Berniece refuses to sell the piano to this day. Boy Willie insists that if his father knew that Boy Willie had the chance to become a landowner, he would have been happy for Boy Willie to sell the piano. He and Berniece fight over this, with Berniece blaming him for Crawley's death as well. They're interrupted by the screams of young Maretha, who thinks that she saw Sutter's ghost upstairs.

That night, Berniece is about to take a bath when Avery drops by. His plans to start a church are moving forward, and he wants Berniece to marry him. Berniece insists she isn't ready, and she resents Avery's insistence that she needs someone to take care of her. Avery tells her that she can't carry Crawley's memory—or the sorrowful memories associated with the piano—around with her forever. Though Berniece continues to refuse him, Avery agrees to come over tomorrow to attempt to bless the house and to hopefully dispel Sutter's ghost.

That same night, Boy Willie and Lymon, finally successfully in selling their watermelons, go out on the town to spend some money and meet women. A drunk Boy Willie comes back with a woman named Grace, but Berniece hears their racket and kicks them out. Shortly thereafter, Lymon comes home, and he and Berniece chat about Lymon's job prospects and his hopes to find a nice woman to share his new life with. He and Berniece end up kissing before parting ways for the night.

The next day, Boy Willie wakes up Lymon with the news that he's going to sell the piano to a white man who collects musical instruments. He and Lymon struggle to heft the heavy piano toward the truck without success, and Doaker, who's largely stayed out of Boy Willie's argument with Berniece, firmly warns them to stop what they're doing.

Later, Berniece and Boy Willie have another confrontation over Boy Willie's determination to sell the piano. Boy Willie tells Berniece that she's sending Maretha into the world at a disadvantage by not telling her about the piano's history and thereby giving her something to take pride in. He tries to persuade Berniece that by selling the piano, all he's trying to do is leave his mark on the world, like their father did.

Soon after this, Avery arrives to bless the house, just as Lymon arrives with rope to help load the piano. Berniece, holding Crawley's gun, warns Boy Willie that he isn't taking the piano anywhere. When everyone perceives the presence of Sutter's ghost, Berniece urges Avery to begin the house blessing. As Avery begins praying and reading from the Bible, however, Boy Willie—who's been mockingly calling out to Sutter's ghost—finds himself being choked and thrown about by the unseen spirit. Avery is helpless, and from an unexplainable impulse, Berniece suddenly realizes what she has to do. She sits down and begins playing the piano for the first time in many years, calling upon her parents and other ancestors to help her. As calm finally descends on the house, Berniece chants words of thanks to her ancestors. Boy Willie decides to catch a last-

minute train home to Mississippi instead of selling the piano, and in farewell, he tells Berniece that if she and Maretha don't keep playing it, both he and Sutter's ghost might be back.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Berniece – Berniece, one of the protagonists, is Doaker's niece and lives with him in Pittsburgh, having moved there from Mississippi a few years ago. She is 35 years old and has an 11-year-old daughter, Maretha. A widow, Berniece has been in mourning for her late husband, Crawley, for three years. Berniece cleans house for a steel mill bigshot in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood. Berniece is a strong-willed woman, portrayed as levelheaded, serious, and single-mindedly focused on providing for Maretha and herself. However, she can be fiery and emotional when the moment calls for it: for example, she resolutely refuses to sell the family **piano** when her brother, Boy Willie, asks. Though she refuses to play the piano herself or to teach Maretha its history because of the sorrowful memories it evokes, she senses that it occupies an important place in the family's identity and won't part with it. Berniece has been dating Avery Brown for a couple of years, though it's suggested that her independent streak and self-sufficiency will complicate matters between the two of them. At the end of the play, Berniece finally plays the piano in order to expel Sutter's ghost, allowing herself to be positively connected to the spirits of her parents and ancestors for the first time in many years.

Boy Willie – Boy Willie, Berniece's brother and another of the play's protagonists, is 30 years old. He is boyish, impulsive, talkative, and can behave a bit crudely. He comes across as optimistic and a bit naïve. In particular, Boy Willie is determined in his plan to purchase the property belonging to the Sutter family—those who enslaved past generations of the Charles family—and believes he'll succeed in convincing Berniece to sell the old family **piano** so that he can save up the rest of the money he needs. He drives all the way from Mississippi to Pittsburgh in a dilapidated **truck**, along with his good friend and work partner Lymon, in pursuit of this goal. When Boy Willie gets his mind set on something, it's impossible to turn him aside from it. Despite his sometimes comical stubbornness and his own light-hearted temperament, Boy Willie is also perceptive, especially when it comes to his sister's feelings and motivations. And though he doesn't often show it, Boy Willie also has a darker side; having encountered it squarely, he is unafraid of death and of anyone, white or Black, who wishes him harm. With Lymon, Boy Willie has served time on Parchman Farm prison for petty offenses. However, his general attitude about racism is that he simply treats others the way they treat him and disregards unjust laws. Although he repeatedly provokes Berniece about the piano and goes so far as to try to remove it from the house—even denying her belief that Sutter's ghost is real—he changes his tune when the ghost engages him in a deadly struggle. After Berniece saves Boy Willie via exorcism of Sutter's spirit, he relents about the piano.

Doaker Charles – Doaker lives in the first-floor apartment of a Pittsburgh house he shares with his niece Berniece and her daughter Maretha. Doaker is 47 years old and has worked for the railroad for 27 years. He is currently employed as a cook. He is tall and thin, with severe features, looking as if he has "for all intents and purposes retired from the world." Doaker is fairly quiet and restrained in his opinions, but when he speaks his mind, he speaks clearly and with conviction. He's also inclined to occasional reveries about his history with the railroad. With his brothers Wining Boy and Boy Charles, Doaker once helped remove the **piano** from the Sutter house, and he accurately perceives that Sutter's ghost has to do with the piano's past. Doaker was once married to a woman named Coreen, though she's out of his life now. A caring uncle, Doaker generally stays out of Berniece's efforts to raise Maretha, but he backs her up firmly when she's challenged.

Lymon Jackson – Lymon is 29 years old. He is Boy Willie's good friend and has partnered with him in various work ventures. Lymon doesn't talk very much, but when he does, he is disarmingly straightforward. Lymon served time on Parchman Farm for being involved in Boy Willie's wood theft; he got shot in the stomach during the incident. Later, Lymon was jailed for not working and then forced to work for Stovall to pay off his bail. Refusing to work for Stovall, Lymon lived in his **truck** in order to hide from the sheriff. Though Lymon is more mild-mannered and laid back than Boy Willie, he is ambitious in his own way—he is determined to make a new life in Pittsburgh work out. Lymon is very interested in women and can hardly wait to start meeting Northern ladies. He initially doesn't seem very successful, but at the end of the play, it's suggested that he and Grace have hit it off, and they slip away together. He also shares an affectionate moment of mutual understanding with Berniece, who seems to respect him and to believe that he has better prospects in life than Boy Willie.

Wining Boy – Wining Boy is Doaker's 56-year-old brother. Once a successful musician, he worked with Doaker on the railroad for a time and nowadays spends much of his time drinking and gambling. His personal style is outdated, and he "lives [life] with an odd mixture of zest and sorrow." The family jokes that he only shows up for visits when he needs money. Wining Boy deeply loved his ex-wife, Cleotha, who recently died, although he has always tended to stray romantically. A few years ago, Wining Boy had an empowering encounter with the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog in Mississippi and has always believed firmly in these spirits. Years ago, Wining Boy helped Doaker and their brother Boy Charles take the **piano** from the Sutters.

Sutter (Sutter's Ghost) – Sutter owned the land in Marlin County, Mississippi, that previous generations of Boy Willie's

family worked while enslaved by the Sutters. Sutter was a large man, about 340 pounds. Before the beginning of the play, he was killed when he fell into his well. Though it's rumored that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog are responsible for this, the facts surrounding the incident are never made perfectly clear. Sutter's Ghost haunts the members of the Charles family throughout the play, especially in connection with the **piano** his ancestors acquired by trading enslaved members of the Charles family a couple generations ago, and engages in a deadly invisible wrestling match with Boy Willie at the end. It ultimately transpires that Sutter's Ghost can only be expelled when Berniece squarely faces the pain of the family's history, which she does by playing the piano and summoning the spirits of her own ancestors.

Avery Brown – Avery Brown is a 38-year-old man who's dating Berniece. Avery is ambitious and honest and dresses well. He followed Berniece to Pittsburgh from Mississippi two years ago in hopes of persuading her to marry him after her first husband, Crawley, died. Avery has recently become a preacher and hopes to start a church, the Good Shepherd Church of God in Christ, an idea which came to him through a dream filled with biblical imagery. Avery has adapted smoothly to life in Pittsburgh, finding opportunities here that the rural South did not afford. He is currently working as a downtown elevator operator while raising money to start his church. Though Avery genuinely loves and cares for Berniece, he tends to look at her primarily in terms of his own goals and to underestimate her independence and self-sufficiency. While blessing the Charles's house, he fails to exorcise Sutter's ghost.

Cleotha Holman – Cleotha, who died recently at 46, was Wining Boy's ex-wife. At the time of Cleotha's death in Kansas City, Wining Boy was living elsewhere and hadn't known she was sick. They first met when Cleotha was 16. After they got married, Wining Boy's tendency to wander and cavort with other women persisted, and the two fought until Cleotha asked Wining Boy to move out. Even then, she told him she loved him.

Mama Ola – Mama Ola was Berniece's and Boy Willie's mother. She died over seven years ago. She constantly polished the **piano** with her tears and often begged Berniece to play for her in memory of Mama Ola's husband, Boy Charles. Mama Ola's spirit is among those called upon by Berniece for help at the end of the play.

Boy Charles – Boy Charles was Berniece's and Boy Willie's father, Wining Boy's and Doaker Charles's eldest brother, and Mama Ola's husband. Boy Charles was obsessed with the Sutter **piano** his whole life, believing that as long as the Sutters owned the piano, they effectively still enslaved the family, too. After Boy Charles's brothers helped him steal the piano from the Sutter home, Sutter had Boy Charles tracked down and killed in retaliation.

Ophelia Sutter – Ophelia was Robert Sutter's wife, for whom the **piano** was a gift. She later pined for the slaves (Mama Berniece and Papa Boy Charles) whom Robert traded in exchange for the piano, so Papa Boy Willie carved images of his wife and son onto the piano for her—and him—to remember them by.

Jim Stovall – Jim Stovall lives in Mississippi and is offered Sutter's land for a lower price than the price quoted to Boy Willie. It's not otherwise specified who Stovall is or what he does, but a judge tries to force Lymon to work for him after he posts Lymon's bail, a job that Lymon flees.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Maretha – Maretha is Berniece's 11-year-old daughter. She is a shy, obedient girl. Maretha is getting extra schooling in hopes of becoming a schoolteacher. Berniece devotes most of her energy to raising Maretha well, hoping that her daughter will have opportunities that she herself never had.

Crawley – Crawley was Berniece's first husband. He died about three years ago, shot by the sheriff while helping Boy Willie and Lymon haul some wood they'd been hoarding. Though little is said about Crawley, it's suggested that he was an impulsive but loyal man. Berniece mourns him to this day.

Grace – Grace is a young woman whom Boy Willie meets and brings back to Berniece's house for a romantic night. She and Lymon later end up together.

Mama Berniece – Mama Berniece was Berniece's and Boy Willie's great-grandmother. Along with her son, Papa Boy Charles, she was traded to Joel Nolander in exchange for Ophelia Sutter's **piano**. Mama Berniece's spirit is among those called upon by Berniece for help.

Papa Boy Willie – Papa Boy Willie was Berniece's and Boy Willie's great-grandmother, husband of Mama Berniece, and father of Papa Boy Charles. A talented woodworker, Papa Boy Willie carved his wife's and son's images onto Ophelia Sutter's **piano** after being forcibly separated from his loved ones.

Papa Boy Charles – Papa Boy Charles was Berniece's and Boy Willie's grandfather, Mama Berniece's and Papa Boy Willie's son. Along with his mother, Mama Berniece, he was traded to Joel Nolander in exchange for Ophelia Sutter's **piano**.

Robert Sutter – Robert Sutter was Sutter's grandfather. He was the ancestor who owned the Charles family as slaves and agreed to trade Mama Berniece and Papa Boy Charles for the **piano** as a gift for his wife, Ophelia.

Coreen – Coreen is Doaker's ex-wife who now lives in New York. Doaker claims that he never thinks about her anymore.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM AND SELF-DETERMINATION

In *The Piano Lesson*, a play about a Black family living in Pittsburgh in 1936, Boy Willie and his friend Lymon reflect different attitudes about self-determination, the process by which a person makes choices about and manages his or her own life. Both men have traveled from Mississippi to Pittsburgh to make some money while visiting Boy Willie's sister, Berniece. They each want to create a new life for themselves—Boy Willie plans to take his earnings back to Mississippi and buy a farm, and Lymon hopes to remain in Pittsburgh and start over there. By contrasting Boy Willie's and Lymon's ideas about self-determination, Wilson suggests that African Americans in the 1930s faced inequality wherever they went, but that they used different strategies to confront that inequality—all of which were valid.

Boy Willie is determined to make a way for himself in Mississippi, buying the Sutter land that his ancestors worked while they were enslaved. He is selling a truckload of watermelons in order to save up some of the money for the place; the remainder he hopes to get by selling the family **piano**. Boy Willie is sure that when Berniece understands his goal, she'll be willing to let him take and sell the piano. But Berniece refuses to let Boy Willie take the piano because her father, Boy Charles, died because of it (he was killed in retaliation after his brothers stole the piano from the Sutters). Boy Willie sees the piano differently than Berniece does: "All that's in the past. If [Boy Charles] had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn't be sitting up here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that." Basically, Boy Willie's idea of success involves owning the property of the family who formerly enslaved his own family, and he's certain that his father would approve of such independence—even if the piano Boy Charles died over turns out to be just a means to that end. Boy Willie argues that if Berniece were using the piano to help support herself, like by offering music lessons, that might be a different matter—but she's just letting the piano sit there. He goes on, "I ain't gonna be no fool about no sentimental value. […] [L]and give back to you. I can make me another crop and cash that in. […] But that piano don't put out nothing else. You ain't got nothing working for you." From Boy Willie's perspective, Berniece's attachment to the piano leaves her stuck in the past, whereas his plan to sell the piano and purchase the Sutter land is a way of creating a new future for the family—turning objects of oppression (the piano and the Sutter land) into means of opportunity.

Lymon, on the other hand is uninterested in returning to Mississippi and hopes to start over in the North. He accepts that things won't be perfect there but believes that he'll ultimately have more choices about where to work and how to live his life. Lymon has come to Pittsburgh because he doesn't have any options left in Mississippi. He was put in jail "for not working," and when Mr. Stovall, a white man, paid his $100 fine, a judge ordered Lymon to work for Stovall to pay him back. When Lymon wanted to serve 30 days in jail instead, he wasn't allowed. Now, rather than fight against an environment where he can't meaningfully choose his future, Lymon would rather start fresh somewhere else. Berniece agrees that Lymon should fare better in Pittsburgh than in Mississippi, because he's different than Boy Willie: "You shouldn't have too much trouble finding a job. It's all in how you present yourself. See now, Boy Willie couldn't get no job up here. Somebody hire him they got a pack of trouble on their hands. Soon as they find that out they fire him. He don't want to do nothing unless he do it his way." Berniece's implication is that, in order to succeed in the North, a Black person has to be willing to accommodate to others' norms—usually, the norms of the white majority (Berniece herself works as a cleaner for a wealthy white industrialist). But Boy Willie refuses to accommodate himself to anyone, meaning that he'd never succeed in Pittsburgh on his own terms. When Boy Willie's and Berniece's uncle, Wining Boy, argues that the difference between Black and white people in society is that "The colored man can't fix nothing with the law"—in other words, that white people have power to shape society that Black people don't have—Boy Willie doesn't care. "I don't go by what the law say. The law's liable to say anything. I go by if it's right or not," he says in reply. Lymon observes wryly, "That's why you gonna end up back down there on the Parchman Farm [prison]." Like Wining Boy, Lymon acknowledges that there are structural inequities in society. The difference between him and Boy Willie is that Lymon doesn't want to continue fighting against those inequities in the same way he always has; he'd rather take the risk of starting a life elsewhere, even if he runs into different problems in the North.

Boy Willie's and Lymon's different attitudes reflect the struggles confronting African Americans in the Jim Crow South (where state and local laws enforced racial segregation). By 1936, the Great Migration had resulted in millions of African Americans moving from the South and settling in Northern cities like Pittsburgh. At least half of the country's black population remained in the South, where segregation was more obvious, but both regions presented obstacles and dangers to black citizens. The two men's attitudes allow Wilson to explore different yet equally valid paths in the common struggle for self-determination and dignity within a racist society.

SPIRITUALITY AND THE SUPERNATURAL

The Piano Lesson is strongly characterized by spiritual and supernatural elements. For example, Avery's ambition to become a Christian preacher and start a church is presented in a sincere and favorable light. More strikingly, however, encounters with ghosts and other unexplainable forces are sprinkled throughout the play. Even when certain characters don't believe in the specific supernatural experiences that others describe (like Berniece dismissing Boy Willie's explanation that ghosts killed Sutter or Boy Willie's disbelief that Berniece has seen Sutter's ghost), all of them seem to accept the basic *reality* of such powerful forces. As the play goes on—especially as Berniece succeeds in banishing Sutter's ghost herself—it emerges that the significance of spiritual encounters lies in how they help characters deal with the concrete struggles in their lives. Particularly through Berniece's exorcism of Sutter's ghost, Wilson argues that the supernatural realm is most valuable as a site of personal and communal self-realization.

Wilson first establishes the plausibility of the supernatural within the play by showing that various characters have had encounters with the unseen, not just those (like preacher Avery) who are obviously "spiritual" in temperament. In other words, the supernatural is presented as an accepted, taken-for-granted aspect of reality, but one that's highly individual in nature. When Boy Willie and Lymon arrive at Berniece's house, one of their first pieces of news from Mississippi is that Sutter has died from falling down a well. "The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog" got him, Boy Willie explains. Because the "Ghosts" aren't fully explained until near the end of the play (they're said to be the ghosts of men who were murdered by a group of vigilante white men, and they've been systematically killing their oppressors), they hover in a vague, threatening way over the entire story—undeniably present and powerful. Uncle Wining Boy believes in the Ghosts, too. He claims that he stood at a certain railroad crossing in Mississippi and was filled with the Ghosts' power: "A lot of things you got to find out on your own. I can't say how they talked to nobody else. But to me it just filled me up in a strange sort of way to be standing there on that spot. […] I walked away from there feeling like a king. Went on and had a stroke of luck that run on for three years. […] I know cause I been there." Wining Boy's testimony suggests that each person has to experience supernatural things for themselves, and that it's up to each person to make sense of that experience. Ultimately, no one should blindly accept somebody else's testimony about such things, and likewise, nobody can explain anyone else's experience.

Berniece's experience with Sutter's ghost shows that each person has to wrestle with the supernatural individually, and that the significance of such encounters lies in how they equip an individual to move forward in life. In the play's first act, Berniece suddenly sees what she believes is the ghost of Sutter standing in her house. Boy Willie doesn't believe her, but Doaker asks her to tell the whole story. It turns out that Doaker has seen Sutter's ghost, too, and he blames the presence of the storied family piano: "Berniece need to go on and get rid of it. It ain't done nothing but cause trouble." Berniece rejects this idea and asks her boyfriend, Avery, to bless the house, believing that this will rid them of Sutter's ghost. But it doesn't seem to work: as Avery reads passages from the Bible, Boy Willie begins to be choked and thrown around by Sutter's ghost. The fact that Avery's conventional exorcism is ineffective suggests that the problem is not the presence of an evil spirit, as Doaker suggested with regard to the piano; the real problem is Berniece's avoidance of her past. Avery tells Berniece he can't stop this, and Berniece has a sudden, unexplainable realization of what she has to do: she sits down and plays the piano for the first time in many years, calling upon her relatives' spirits for help. As she repeats their names in a kind of incantation, the struggle between Boy Willie and the ghost subsides. The play closes with Berniece thanking her ancestors, as she's apparently now at peace—both from Sutter's haunting and from the grief she's long associated with the piano (thus refusing to play it for years). The key to dealing with Sutter's ghost, then, was not banishing some disembodied evil; it was Berniece's willingness to accept the past in order to move forward.

Wilson's treatment of the supernatural in *The Piano Lesson* suggests that, in his view, the most important thing about spirituality is not even its precise content, but what it means to individuals in their personal struggles. By extension, he hints that the value of belief in the supernatural is how it helps communities—especially the African-American community—cope with the painful "ghosts" of their past in order to face the future with confidence and hope. Even Sutter's sinister presence wasn't a threat in itself; ultimately, it prompted Berniece to realize her own spiritual power.

GRIEF, HOPE, AND HISTORY

The most important historical symbol in the play is the family **piano**. It's a unique piano, not only for its beautiful and well-maintained quality, but for the carvings of family members engraved on it. The piano came into the family's life back in the days of slavery (only a generation removed from most of the characters). Boy Willie's and Berniece's grandmother and their father, Boy Charles, were traded by the Sutter family in exchange for the piano; their grandfather Boy Willie, a woodworker, carved images in remembrance of his wife and son on the piano. Years later, Boy Charles and his brothers stole the piano from the Sutters, and Boy Charles was killed in retaliation. Though Berniece still owns the piano, she only associates it with the family's past pain and grief and will neither play it herself nor tell her daughter Maretha its history. Through Berniece's conflicted attitudes

toward the piano, Wilson suggests that history must not be ignored but faced directly—something that demands both active engagement with past pain and celebration of the good—for the sake of a better future.

The piano represents sorrow in the family's past and, by extension, holding onto the piano is a way of characters symbolically clinging to their past hurts. Berniece and Boy Willie's father, Boy Charles, talked about the Sutter piano all his life. Boy Charles's brother Doaker explains that Boy Charles would "Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it…he had us. Say we was still in slavery." So one day, Doaker and Wining Boy stole the piano. When the current Sutter patriarch found out, he had Boy Charles tracked down and burned to death. As Doaker concludes the story, "Now, that's how all that got started and that why we say Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano. Cause her daddy died over it." The reason Berniece's father died over the piano, though, is because the brothers believed they had to reclaim the piano as a demonstration of their freedom from the Sutters and their ownership of their family story. When Boy Willie argues that their father would have understood the value of selling the piano in order to buy and farm his own land, Berniece doubles down, appealing to family history: "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 […] Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood?" Berniece's refusal to give up the piano is tied to the way she carries on her mother's grief over her father; it doesn't occupy a positive role in her life.

Though Berniece won't let Boy Willie remove the piano because of its sorrowful associations, she also won't allow the piano to take on a positive role in the family's life. Berniece refuses to play the piano because she doesn't want to awaken the ghosts of her family: her mother used to tell her that "when I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures [on the piano] came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits." Because of this, Berniece has also refused to tell her daughter Maretha the family history: "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." Because Berniece only associates the piano with grief, she tries to protect Maretha from its past, believing this will help Maretha have a better future. Boy Willie tells Berniece that instead of hiding the piano's history from Maretha, she should mark the day it came into their family with an annual celebration: "Invite everybody! Mark that day down with a special meaning. That way she know where she at in the world. You got her going out here thinking she wrong in the world. Like there ain't no part of it belong to her." Ironically, though Boy Willie himself doesn't attach much sentimental value to the piano, he sees that Berniece doesn't fully understand the piano's historical value, either—that is, its ability to give the family a sense of positive identity and pride that will sustain them in the future.

Berniece, in other words, is caught between her stubborn attachment to the piano and her refusal to fully own the history to which the piano bears witness. In the final scene, Berniece finally plays the piano while calling upon her relatives' spirits for help. This conclusion suggests that Berniece has finally come to terms with her grief while also accepting the piano's positive role in the family's past and future.

LOVE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND INDEPENDENCE

Though no single romantic relationship dominates the play, love and romance are a persistent undercurrent in the plot. This theme often takes a humorous turn: when Boy Willie and Lymon visit Pittsburgh, for example, one of their goals is to find out what Northern women are like and ideally to impress some of them, with decidedly mixed results. At other times, reflection on romance—especially among male characters—indicates a longing for mutual companionship despite sometimes unfaithful behavior. Interestingly, however, the play's most promising match—that between Avery and Berniece—does not result in an engagement, because Berniece feels ambivalent about committing to Avery despite his faithful devotion. Through characters' reflections on romance and especially Berniece's ambivalence, Wilson suggests that romantic partnerships can only succeed when both partners are unambiguously committed—and that, in fact, a person doesn't require such a relationship in order to be a complete human being.

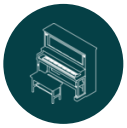
The men in the play aren't always exemplary in their attitudes and treatment of women, but they generally acknowledge that a relationship is most worth pursuing when it's a mutual partnership. Wining Boy wasn't a very faithful lover and even fought with his longtime partner, Cleotha, over his romantic wanderings, but he still measures the success of his life by the fact that she loved him: "Man that woman was something. I used to thank the Lord. Many a night I sat up and looked out over my life. Said, well, I had Cleotha. […] If ever I go anywhere in this life I done known a good woman. And that used to hold me till the next morning." Wining Boy acknowledges that even if he hasn't always been a good man to be with, the love of a good woman has invested him with a certain dignity and sense of accomplishment. Lymon, too, used to take a more libertine attitude about women, but he's beginning to change his mind. When people sleep around, he suggests, "Mostly they be lonely and looking for somebody to spend the night with them. Sometimes it matters who it is and sometimes it don't. I used to be the same way. Now it got to matter. […] I like my women to

be with me in a nice and easy way. […] We got to see how we fit together. A woman that don't want to take the time to do that I don't bother with." In other words, despite his past indiscretions, Lymon now feels that compatibility and mutuality are important to a meaningful relationship.

Especially compared to Wining Boy and Lymon, Avery is the most exemplary male character in the play, but even his love and faithfulness aren't enough for Berniece to accept his proposal of marriage. When Avery tries to persuade Berniece to marry him, he claims that she fits his life just right: "I ain't never found no way through life to a woman I care about like I care about you. I need that. I need somebody on my bond side. I need a woman that fits in my hand." Berniece replies that she has her hands full caring for her 11-year-old daughter, Maretha. When Avery asks Berniece who will love *her*, Berniece responds angrily: "You trying to tell me a woman can't be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me—without a woman—and still be a man. That's alright. Ain't nobody gonna ask you, 'Avery, who you got to love you?' […] But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece." Whether her reaction to Avery is completely fair or not, Berniece is angered by the implication that she isn't complete without a man's love, whereas a man is viewed as complete in himself. Though the evidence in the play suggests that Avery genuinely loves Berniece and desires her partnership in life—and even that he might be right about Berniece's reluctance to move on from her late husband Crawley's death three years ago—Berniece seems to be too independent to fully reciprocate that desire. And when Avery's attempted exorcism of Sutter's ghost fails, Berniece's success at summoning the good spirits of her ancestors is a powerful statement of her agency and self-sufficiency. Though he doesn't resolve things between Berniece and Avery at the end of the play, Wilson suggests that no matter what Berniece decides about their relationship, she'll do it knowing that she's fully capable of providing for herself and making herself happy.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



PIANO

The Charles family's piano, which resides in Berniece's house, symbolizes the family's history and identity—both their past sorrows and their hopes for the future. The piano belonged to the Sutter family, who once enslaved Berniece's and Boy Willie's ancestors. The Sutters traded the Charles siblings' great-grandmother Mama Berniece and grandfather Papa Boy Charles for the piano, and their great-grandfather Papa Boy Willie carved beautiful images of his wife and son on the piano in remembrance of them. A couple of generations later, Boy Willie's and Berniece's father, Boy Charles, stole the piano back from the Sutters, believing that as long as it remained in their hands, the Sutters would continue to own a piece of the Charles family. In this way, the piano is a tangible representation of the Charleses' painful legacy. This is why Berniece resists letting Boy Willie sell the piano, and also why she avoids playing it or passing down its legacy to her daughter Maretha: she fears calling up sorrowful memories and letting loose their power in her life. At the end of the play, however, Berniece finally plays the piano while calling upon her ancestors for help. This represents her newfound openness to honestly facing the past, ridding her home of haunting memories, and thereby opening the way to a better future.

TRUCK

Lymon's and Boy Willie's repeatedly broken-down pickup truck is a comical feature in the play, but it also symbolizes creative self-determination in the midst of oppressive circumstances. Lymon and Boy Willie travel from Mississippi to Pittsburgh in the truck in hopes of selling a load of watermelons and helping both men start new lives. And for Lymon, the truck has also served as a means of concealment and escape from a Mississippi sheriff who is trying to force Lymon to work for Stovall, a local white landowner, against Lymon's will. The truck thus symbolizes the men's initiative in choosing and pursuing their own paths in life, while also hinting at the obstacles and limitations they face as Black men within a racist environment.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Plume edition of *The Piano Lesson* published in 1990.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

BOY WILLIE: Lymon bought that truck so he have him a place to sleep. He down there wasn't doing no work or nothing. Sheriff looking for him. He bought that truck to keep away from the sheriff. Got Stovall looking for him too. He down there sleeping in that truck ducking and dodging both of them. I told him come on let's go up and see my sister.

Related Characters: Boy Willie (speaker), Jim Stovall, Berniece, Lymon Jackson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

When Boy Willie and Lymon arrive in Pittsburgh from Mississippi with a truck full of watermelons, Berniece is suspicious of the truck's origins. Boy Willie explains that the truck really does belong to Lymon, and with good reason: Lymon's truck allows him to avoid both the police and Stovall (a white man for whom Lymon was ordered to work by a judge). The implication is that Lymon is essentially homeless because of the way the sheriff has been harassing him. So, for Lymon, the truck is not just a means of transportation but a means of survival. It allows Lymon to make his own decisions about where to go and how to live his life, even in an environment like Jim Crow-era Mississippi, where racism and segregation laws curtailed such self-determination. In the same way, the truck even allows Lymon and his friend Boy Willie to load up watermelons and drive to a different part of the country in order to earn money on their own terms and, in Lymon's case, possibly start life over in a place where his options aren't as limited.

BOY WILLIE: Sutter's brother selling the land. He say he gonna sell it to me. That's why I come up here. I got one part of it. Sell them watermelons and get me another part. Get Berniece to sell that piano and I'll have the third part.

DOAKER: Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano.

BOY WILLIE: I'm gonna talk to her. When she see I got a chance to get Sutter's land she'll come around.

DOAKER: You can put that thought out your mind. Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano.

Related Characters: Doaker Charles, Boy Willie (speaker), Ophelia Sutter, Robert Sutter, Papa Boy Charles, Mama Berniece, Berniece, Sutter (Sutter's Ghost)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This quote introduces Boy Willie's plan to make a new life for himself as well as the significance of the piano as a pivotal symbol in the play. The background of Boy Willie's plan is that the Sutter family owned members of the Charles family as slaves couple of generations ago. During this time, Robert Sutter traded Doaker's enslaved grandmother and father in exchange for the piano for his wife, Ophelia. Eventually, Boy Charles stole the piano—and now it serves as a symbol of the Charles family's past traumas.

In the present, the latest Sutter patriarch has died, and Boy Willie wants to purchase the Sutter land for himself. He hopes to earn the money he hasn't yet saved by selling watermelons and selling the old family piano, which Berniece keeps in her home. This is an example of Boy Willie's style of self-determination. In contrast to Lymon, who hopes to start over in a different region of the country, Boy Willie wants to reclaim parts of his family's Mississippi past on his own terms—for example, by owning for himself the farm that his ancestors once worked as slaves. He's certain that Berniece will agree to his plan, but he hasn't yet reckoned with his sister's determination to keep the piano, which itself is a powerful symbol of the family's history. Thus this quote introduces the play's central conflict: the tug between the family's past sorrow and their hope for the future.

DOAKER: You know she won't touch that piano. I ain't never known her to touch it since Mama Ola died. That's over seven years now. She say it got blood on it. She got Maretha playing on it though. Say Maretha can go on and do everything she can't do. Got her in an extra school down at the Irene Kaufman Settlement House. She want Maretha to grow up and be a schoolteacher. Say she good enough she can teach on the piano.

Related Characters: Doaker Charles (speaker), Mama Ola, Maretha, Berniece, Boy Willie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Though Boy Willie and Lymon are the play's primary examples of self-determination, this quote, describing Berniece's outlook on parenting, provides another one. Berniece wants Maretha to have what she never had, and she pours her energy into making sure that happens—like by teaching Maretha to play the piano and *not* teaching her

family stories. In other words, Berniece thinks self-determination for Maretha means escaping from the past rather than remembering it.

This quote is also of historical interest because of its reference to the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House. The Irene Kaufmann Settlement was a Pittsburgh school begun in the late 1800s by an activist named Pauline Rosenberg. Rosenberg intended that the Settlement House serve community members, particularly immigrants, by promoting values like self-improvement and civic pride. For example, a prominent offering was English classes for Jewish children. A student like Maretha might have taken music classes and used other supplemental resources in the Kaufmann House that may not have been readily available in her public school.

> That's why I come up here. Sell them watermelons. Get Berniece to sell that piano. Put them two parts with the part I done saved. Walk in there. Tip my hat. Lay my money down on the table. Get my deed and walk on out. This time I get to keep all the cotton. Hire me some men to work it for me. Gin my cotton. Get my seed. And I'll see you again next year. Might even plant some tobacco or some oats.

Related Characters: Boy Willie (speaker), Doaker Charles, Sutter (Sutter's Ghost), Berniece

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Boy Willie sums up his plan to buy the Sutter land. The cheerfulness of Boy Willie's explanation shows how straightforward and optimistic his plan is—he doesn't anticipate any obstacles to realizing his dream of self-improvement. As Boy Willie notes, this time the fruits of the land will belong to him—in contrast to his family's history of working the same land as slaves. The songlike cadence emphasizes Boy Willie's lighthearted tone, and in fact some of the words—"gin my cotton / get my seed"—are probably a reference to the song "Illinois Blues" by Skip James, an early 20th-century blues singer (the song is also quoted in the play's epigraph).

The hopeful mood of the passage, soon to be contrasted with Berniece's staunch refusal to part with the piano, shows the optimism of a character who believes that upward mobility is within reach, achieved almost as simply as desiring it. Berniece's refusal, on the other hand, suggests that Boy Willie is naïve and that, by not recognizing the piano's role in the family's history, he's also being shortsighted about the legacy of slavery and racism and the continued obstacles these will present for his self-determination.

> They got so many trains out there they have a hard time keeping them from running into each other. Got trains going every whichaway. Got people on all of them. Somebody going where somebody just left. If everybody stay in one place I believe this would be a better world. Now what I done learned after twenty-seven years of railroading is this…if the train stays on the track…it's going to get where it's going. It might not be where you going. If it ain't, then all you got to do is sit and wait cause the train's coming back to get you. The train don't never stop. It'll come back every time.

Related Characters: Doaker Charles (speaker), Lymon Jackson, Boy Willie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

When Boy Willie asks Doaker about his career on the railroad, Doaker begins to talk at length about the lessons he's learned. He begins by saying that a train only travels in one of the four cardinal directions, which seems easy enough to understand; but it's surprising how often a person gets angry when they discover that they've boarded a train that's heading in a different direction from the one they want. Doaker continues by saying that in such a case, a person just needs to wait for the train that's traveling the way they're going. The nature of the railroad is that, eventually, there will always be a train that's headed where one wants to go, if only one is patient.

This quote is a reflection of Doaker's steadfast personality. Doaker has worked for the railroad for 27 years with little variation in his life. Unlike either Boy Willie or Lymon, Doaker tends to accept like as he finds it. His speech about trains suggests that, in his view, people tend to be too restless and too insistent on life conforming to their own wishes. This suggests that although he's taken his own initiative in life by working for the railroad and moving to Pittsburgh, Doaker thinks that the younger men are too optimistic in their belief that they can bend circumstances

to their liking. Characteristically, Boy Willie and Lymon ignore Doaker's speech and turn their attentions to breakfast instead.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

WINING BOY: A lot of things you got to find out on your own. I can't say how they talked to nobody else. But to me it just filled me up in a strange sort of way to be standing there on that spot. I didn't want to leave. [...] I walked away from there feeling like a king. Went on and had a stroke of luck that run on for three years. So I don't care if Berniece believe or not. Berniece ain't got to believe. I know cause I been there. Now Doaker'll tell you about the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog.

Related Characters: Wining Boy (speaker), Doaker Charles, Berniece

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog have been mentioned several times in the play, but they've never been fully explained. They aren't explained in this quote, either, which adds to the vague, lingering sense of the supernatural that hovers over the play as a whole. However, this quote contributes to Wilson's argument that each person must arrive at his or her own understanding of the supernatural, and that the spiritual realm is most significant where it helps a person deal with the tangible realities of life.

Wining Boy describes an experience he had while standing at a railroad crossing in Mississippi: he was going through a difficult time in his life and decided to call upon the Ghosts for help. According to Wining Boy, his encounter with the Ghosts filled him with strength, encouragement, and luck. But he can't apply his experience to anyone else—it's up to each person to encounter the supernatural for themselves and draw their own conclusions about its meaning for their lives. In the same way, nobody's disbelief (like Berniece's) can take away what personal experience has taught him.

BOY WILLIE: They looking for Lymon down there now. They rounded him up and put him in jail for not working.

LYMON: Fined me a hundred dollars. Mr. Stovall come and paid my hundred dollars and the judge say I got to work for him to pay him back his hundred dollars. I told them I'd rather take my thirty days but they wouldn't let me do that.

Related Characters: Lymon Jackson, Boy Willie (speaker), Jim Stovall

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is an example of the way in which a person's desire for self-determination can become a source of frustration, especially a Black person's in a racist environment like the Jim Crow South. Lymon, who's Black, is currently in Pittsburgh because the police are looking for him back in Mississippi—one of the most repressively segregated states in the South. After Lymon was jailed for "not working," Mr. Stovall, a white man whose identity in the play is otherwise vague, paid Lymon's bail.

Far from simply being an act of generosity, it appears that Stovall's gesture was meant to secure Lymon's labor for himself, whether Lymon desired to give it or not; and when Lymon prefers to serve a jail sentence instead, even that choice is taken away from him by the justice system. Lymon's truck then becomes his refuge, a way of outrunning the sheriff's harassment and eventually claiming a different life for himself. With Lymon's story, Wilson suggests that African American people of this era had to use creative measures in order to decide and embark upon their own paths in life.

WINING BOY: Alright. Now Mr. So and So, he sell the land to you. And he come to you and say, "John, you own the land. It's all yours now. But them is my berries. And come time to pick them I'm gonna send my boys over. You got the land . . . but them berries, I'm gonna keep them. They mine." And he go and fix it with the law that them is his berries. Now that's the difference between the colored man and the white man. The colored man can't fix nothing with the law.

Related Characters: Wining Boy (speaker), Boy Willie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated in the middle of a discussion between Doaker, Wining Boy, Boy Willie, and Lymon about

relationships between Black people and white people. Lymon believes he'll be treated better here in the North. Boy Willie says that he doesn't worry about mistreatment—whether white or Black, he just treats others the way they treat him.

At this point, Wining Boy interjects to say that, while Boy Willie's position might be the ideal, it doesn't reflect current reality. That's when he offers the illustration of a Black person getting in trouble for picking berries on a white man's unfenced property. Even if the property was later sold to the Black man, the former owner, being white, would have the means to change the law so as to assert ownership over the berries too—just to be spiteful. A Black person doesn't have the power to make such a change or to exert comparable influence within society. In Wining Boy's view, this is the big difference between Black and white people, meaning that Black people remain subject to nonsensical whims and power plays—like property rights over berries. In other words, there isn't true equality regardless of location.

❝ Boy Charles used to talk about that piano all the time. He never could get it off his mind. […] He be talking about taking it out of Sutter's house. Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it…he had us. Say we was still in slavery. Me and Wining Boy tried to talk him out of it but it wouldn't do any good. Soon as he quiet down about it he'd start up again. We seen where he wasn't gonna get it off his mind…so, on the Fourth of July, 1911…when Sutter was at the picnic what the county give every year…me and Wining Boy went on down there with him and took that piano out of Sutter's house.

Related Characters: Doaker Charles (speaker), Boy Willie, Berniece, Sutter (Sutter's Ghost), Wining Boy, Boy Charles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Doaker is telling the story of the Sutter piano and how it came into the Charles family. His brother, Boy Charles (Berniece's and Boy Willie's father), was obsessed with the piano and the family history preserved in its carvings. Because the Sutters initially purchased the piano by trading enslaved members of the Charles family, the piano's continued presence in the Sutter home symbolizes a kind of perpetual ownership of the Charles family, even though they're now legally free. That's why the brothers decided to reclaim the piano for themselves—it was an act of reclaiming their family story from the Sutters and showing that it no longer belongs to those who treated their ancestors like objects to be traded. It's probably also significant that the "liberation" of the piano took place on the Fourth of July. Because the piano symbolizes the family's continued enslavement in Boy Charles's mind, taking the piano from the Sutters symbolizes newfound independence.

❝ BOY WILLIE: All that's in the past. 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. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that. See, he couldn't do no better. When he come along he ain't had nothing he could build on. His daddy ain't had nothing to give him. 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.

Related Characters: Boy Willie (speaker), Boy Charles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Boy Willie discusses Berniece's refusal to give up the family piano for him to sell. Boy Willie argues that if his father had understood that the piano would give Boy Willie the opportunity to begin a new life as a landowner, he would have supported his son's plan. His father never had an opportunity like this and died as a result of his efforts to reclaim the piano for the Charles family—surely, Boy Willie reasons, Boy Charles would want his children to make the best of what he left behind.

In one way, Boy Willie is able to perceive his sister's shortsightedness regarding the piano. He sees that Berniece isn't really coming to terms with its history or preserving that history by passing it down to her daughter. She clings to the piano without owning its story. In another way, Boy Willie has his own blind spot regarding the piano: he only views the piano as a form of currency, a resource upon which to build his new life. What Berniece hangs onto, Boy Willie, in his eagerness for a measure of self-

determination, lets go of too readily.

❝ 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. "Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece." […] 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?

Related Characters: Berniece (speaker), Boy Willie, Boy Charles, Mama Ola

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Berniece's and Boy Willie's mother, Mama Ola, clung to the family piano in a different way than either of her children. After Boy Charles was killed for his involvement in taking the piano from the Sutters, the piano was all that Mama Ola had left of her husband. She tended the piano obsessively in turn, weeping over it and adding her own blood to her late husband's blood that was symbolically present on it.

It's easy to see how this legacy would become a heavy burden for Berniece. Her mother's constant requests for music seem to have been Mama Ola's way of searching for meaning in her husband's death—a search that never seems to have brought peace. Berniece doesn't want to pass down that anguish, hence her refusal to teach her own daughter, Maretha, the piano's history. Her outburst to Boy Willie reveals their different outlooks on the piano: Berniece believes that Boy Willie is too flippant about the piano's role and doesn't appreciate the legacy of pain it's brought the family. For Berniece's part, the painful memories associated with the piano make it difficult for her to acknowledge anything hopeful or worth celebrating about its presence in the family.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ That's how the whole thing come about between me and Lymon's mama. She knew me and his daddy used to run together and he got in jail and she went down there and took the sheriff a hundred dollars. […] The sheriff looked at that hundred dollars and turned his nose up. Told her, say, "That ain't gonna do him no good. You got to put another hundred on top of that." She come up there and got me where I was playing at this saloon…said she had all but fifty dollars and asked me if I could help. […] I will give anybody fifty dollars to keep them out of jail for three years.

Related Characters: Wining Boy (speaker), Cleotha Holman , Lymon Jackson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Though this quote is mostly an aside from Wining Boy—evidence of the romantic wanderings that got him into trouble with his former wife, Cleotha, earlier in life—it also illustrates a painful reality of life in a racist society. After seeing Lymon for the first time in many years away from their shared Mississippi roots, Wining Boy recalls becoming briefly entangled with Lymon's parents. It came about because Lymon's father was in jail for unknown and possibly petty reasons, and his mother struggled to pay the bail. When she succeeded, the sheriff used it as an opportunity to extort additional money out of her.

This reflects a common reality in the Jim Crow South: that Black people could not expect to be treated consistently or fairly by the justice system, which in turn had a destabilizing effect on families and communities. The jail Lymon's father would likely have been sent to for longer—which Wining Boy and Lymon, too, eventually serve time in—is called Parchman Farm, which was a real place, an infamous, segregated maximum-security prison and labor farm in Sunflower County, Mississippi.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

❝ BERNIECE: You trying to tell me a woman can't be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me—without a woman—and still be a man. That's alright. Ain't nobody gonna ask you, "Avery, who you got to love you?" That's alright for you. But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece.

Related Characters: Berniece (speaker), Maretha, Avery Brown

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Avery Brown has been courting Berniece throughout the play, and Berniece supports Avery in turn, helping him get his new church off the ground. When Avery—who's been waiting on Berniece for two years—puts forward the question of marriage, however, Berniece becomes aloof. She argues that taking care of her daughter Maretha is all-consuming, and when Avery asks who takes care of *her*, Berniece fires back. Whether it's what Avery intends to say or not, Berniece gets the message that it's okay for a man to go through life without a partner, but that a woman like her isn't enough all by herself.

This quote represents the ongoing ambiguity in Berniece and Avery's relationship. Although it's clear that Avery genuinely cares for Berniece—his other goals aside, he moved from Mississippi primarily in pursuit of her—it's never completely certain that Berniece reciprocates his affection. This accords with Wilson's argument that even a relationship of mutual affection isn't strictly necessary in order for a person to be fulfilled in life. Although this ambiguity is never resolved, Berniece's self-sufficiency at the end of the play hints that whatever she decides about their relationship, it will proceed on her terms.

❝ I was only playing it for her. 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. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house.

Related Characters: Berniece (speaker), Maretha, Boy Charles, Mama Ola, Avery Brown

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Berniece reflects on her past experience with the family piano. When she was a child, her mother, Mama Ola, polished the piano daily with her tears. Berniece's father, Boy Charles, was killed after he and his brothers took the piano from the Sutter house. So for Mama Ola, the piano remained her only connection to her husband, and forcing Berniece to play the piano became Ola's way of ensuring his memory survived. Her whole life becomes wrapped up in the piano, and the instrument thus becomes an intergenerational symbol of how the Charles family has suffered over time.

Berniece expressly refuses to let the same thing happen to her—she no longer plays the piano herself, and she doesn't teach Maretha the story behind it. By the end of the play, Berniece does choose to play the piano in order to expel Sutter's ghost from her house, and she intentionally calls upon the spirits of her ancestors in order to do that. Berniece has to reach a point where she is willing to acknowledge her history—even unleashing her ancestors' pain in her home—in order to draw hope from them as well.

❝ AVERY: You got to put all of that behind you, Berniece. That's the same thing like Crawley. Everybody got 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. […] You can walk over here right now and make it into a celebration.

Related Characters: Avery Brown (speaker), Maretha, Boy Willie, Crawley, Berniece

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

When Berniece explains her history with the family piano to Avery, he has a different perspective on the situation than she does. He argues that, like Berniece continuing to cling to her late husband, Crawley, she is unnecessarily burdening herself with the piano's sorrowful history. Avery argues that Berniece can instead make a choice to lay down this burden by squarely facing her history. She can do this by refusing to

hide from her past and taking the risk of reopening family wounds by playing the piano.

Interestingly, Boy Willie makes a similar argument later when he urges Berniece to instill a sense of history in her daughter Maretha—saying that without celebrating one's history, one cannot go through life with dignity. In the end, Berniece does come around to recognizing that these things are true. However, she has to arrive at these truths in her own time, taking responsibility to seek them in her own way. This lines up with Wilson's emphasis on self-determination and independence throughout the play.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

That's when I discovered the power of death. [...] [The white man] can't hold that power over you. That's what I learned when I killed that cat. I got the power of death too. I can command him. I can call him up. The white man don't like to see that. He don't like for you to stand up and look him square in the eye and say, "I got it too." Then he got to deal with you square up.

Related Characters: Boy Willie (speaker), Berniece

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a jarringly dark one for the typically lighthearted Boy Willie. When Berniece threatens Boy Willie with a gun for trying to remove the piano from her house, Boy Willie tells her he isn't afraid—he came to terms with death a long time ago. He describes an occasion when he prayed and prayed that his dead dog would be brought back to life. When it didn't work, Boy Willie went out and killed a cat. Doing this seemed to release Boy Willie from the fear of death; moreover, it made him realize that he was capable of inflicting it.

In 1930s Mississippi, this realization gave Boy Willie the strength to walk among white men as an equal—even though, in many concrete ways, racism made this demonstrably untrue, and plenty would have been glad to prove his supposed inferiority to him. This quote thus reveals a hidden depth and even darkness to Boy Willie's personality. Though he often seems blithe and even naïve in his attitudes about racism and life in general, this attitude is fueled by the fact that Boy Willie is not afraid of anyone, and this fearlessness forces others—especially those who wish him harm—to reckon with him as a human being.

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. [...] You got her going out here thinking she wrong in the world. Like there ain't no part of it belong to her.

Related Characters: Boy Willie (speaker), Maretha, Berniece

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Boy Willie takes Berniece to task for failing to tell Maretha the story of the Charles family's piano. By denying her this, Boy Willie argues, Berniece also denies Maretha the opportunity to know and celebrate where she comes from—which will hamper her throughout her life, diminishing her ability to take pride in herself and claim her place in the world. There's a certain irony in Boy Willie saying this; after all, Boy Willie attaches relatively little importance to the piano, ascribing to it only sentimental value, which he finds worthless. Yet even for Boy Willie, the piano represents a chance to make something more of himself by selling the piano and buying the Sutter land with the money. In that way, he would be able to carry on the family story. By trying to protect Maretha from the sorrow associated with the piano, Berniece actually inhibits her from extending the family's legacy. Even as she clings to the piano, in other words, Berniece fails to make worthwhile use of it.

AVERY: Berniece, I can't do it.

(There are more sounds heard from upstairs. DOAKER and WINING BOY stare at one another in stunned disbelief. It is in this moment, from somewhere old, that BERNIECE realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. 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[.])

Related Characters: Avery Brown (speaker), Doaker Charles, Boy Willie, Sutter (Sutter's Ghost), Wining Boy, Berniece

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the play, Boy Willie gets locked in a life-or-death wrestling match with the invisible spirit of Sutter. This climactic scene—mostly portrayed here through stage directions—especially touches on the play's themes of the supernatural and the enduring pull of history. Berniece had initially tried to delegate the exorcism of Sutter's ghost to her boyfriend, Avery, but now she discovers that Sutter can only be expelled by his oppressors. This is not so much a comment on Avery's weakness as on Berniece's strength; she finally acknowledges her spiritual power and decisively exercises self-sufficiency in this area of life.

Similarly, Berniece finds that Sutter's haunting of the piano had less to do with the circumstances of Sutter's death—as Berniece had originally tried to convince herself—and more to do with Berniece's refusal to acknowledge the piano's sorrowful history. Now that she has done so, by summoning the spirits of her ancestors instead of ignoring their presence, she reclaims the piano for the Charles family once and for all, bringing peace for her ancestors and for her own future.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE SETTING

The play takes place in the kitchen and parlor of Doaker Charles's house. Doaker lives with his niece Berniece and Berniece's 11-year-old daughter, Maretha. An old upright **piano** sits in the parlor; on the piano's legs are gracefully wrought carvings resembling African sculpture.

Right away, the piano is established as the play's primary symbol and the center of its drama. Its carvings, so far unexplained, will prove to be important to the characters as well.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

It's five o'clock in the morning. In the Charles household, there's the vague feeling of a gathering storm. Offstage, Boy Willie is calling for Doaker and Berniece as he knocks at the door. Doaker, who at 47 is tall, thin, and severe-looking, enters the room. He opens the door, and 30-year-old Boy Willie and 29-year-old Lymon walk in. Boy Willie is boyish, beaming, and talkative; Lymon is reserved and straightforward.

The younger men burst into the Charles household at an unexpected hour, suggesting that they have some kind of connection to the family and that their presence will unsettle things in this quiet home. Whether that will be good or bad for the family isn't yet clear.

Doaker is surprised that Boy Willie and Lymon have traveled all the way from Mississippi. Boy Willie explains that they're here selling watermelons—they have a whole truckload. Lymon says that he hopes to stay in Pittsburgh to see what it's like here; Boy Willie can take the train back home. The **truck** has broken down three times since they left Mississippi. Boy Willie calls for his sister Berniece, whom he hasn't seen in three years.

The Pittsburgh-based Charles family has roots in Mississippi, suggesting that they are one of millions of Black families that would have relocated from the rural South to Northern cities by the Depression era. Lymon hopes to find new opportunities here as well.

Berniece enters. She's 35 and still in mourning for her late husband, Crawley, who died three years ago. She's annoyed that the men have come into the house so noisily at five o'clock in the morning. Boy Willie ignores her scolding and tells Doaker to get him and Lymon a drink—they're celebrating. Sutter drowned in his well, he explains—everyone says "the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog" got him. Berniece rejects this as "nonsense."

Berniece's persistent mourning establishes that she is connected to her past—to such a degree that she could even be said to be stuck there. Though it's not yet clear who Sutter is, his death is good news for all of them, at least according to Boy Willie.

Berniece looks outside at the **truck** filled with watermelons. She's skeptical about how Boy Willie and Lymon came to own the truck. As the men drink Doaker's good whiskey, Boy Willie explains that Lymon bought the truck in order to dodge the sheriff—he even sleeps in the truck. Berniece doesn't like the sound of this, but Lymon says that the issue between him and the sheriff was a misunderstanding. Berniece tells the two that they need to sell their watermelons as quickly as possible and get out of her house. She goes back upstairs.

Boy Willie and Lymon are both examples of self-determination in the play, although they exemplify that impulse in different ways. Boy Willie, as will become clear, is mainly focused on his entrepreneurial instinct; Lymon, harassed by the sheriff, just wants to live in freedom. Berniece, though, is unimpressed by the men's disruptive appearance in her life.

Boy Willie and Doaker then discuss Wining Boy, Doaker's brother. Wining Boy's wife Cleotha died awhile back. Wining Boy visited Doaker and Berniece a year ago and didn't offer to help pay for food. Wining Boy used to be a musician, playing the **piano** and even making a couple of records. But now, he mostly wanders around. Boy Willie says that Wining Boy usually shows up when he's broke. Boy Willie also mentions that the last time Wining Boy was home in Mississippi, he and Lymon were doing time on Parchman Farm.

The casual mention of Parchman Farm—the name of the Mississippi State Penitentiary—shows that incarceration and troubles with law enforcement are a recurrent issue in the men's lives, so common that it's practically taken for granted. Wilson hints at the racist underpinnings of the penitentiary system throughout the play.

Lymon notices the family **piano**. Boy Willie points out how beautifully polished it is, as well as the pictures carved into it. He says that the piano would fetch a nice price. Lymon says that's all Boy Willie has been talking about, and Boy Willie retorts that all Lymon can talk about is women.

Boy Willie's is not interested in the piano as a family heirloom. Rather, he apparently views it as something to sell, hinting at the conflict that's soon to erupt between family members.

Doaker changes the subject, asking after Lymon's family, who still live in Mississippi. Lymon explains that he wants to see what life in Pittsburgh is like instead of going back to Mississippi with Boy Willie. Boy Willie explains that he plans to purchase the land Sutter's brother is selling. He has part of the money saved up already; he'll get another part by selling the truckload of watermelons. If he can get Berniece to agree to sell the piano, he'll have the remainder. Doaker warns Boy Willie that Berniece will never sell the piano.

Boy Willie explains what's brought him to Pittsburgh. Unlike Lymon, he doesn't intend to stay here; rather, he hopes to earn the money to make a better life for himself back in Mississippi. However, Doaker senses from the outset that this plan won't get off the ground, hinting at the difficulty of breaking from one's troubled past and reinventing oneself.


Doaker continues that Berniece hasn't played the **piano** since Mama Ola died seven years ago. Berniece claims the piano "got blood on it." She's teaching Maretha to play, though, and she hopes that Maretha will have better opportunities than Berniece has had—she's enrolled in an extra school.

The piano has "blood on it" in the sense that it symbolizes a long, painful history within the family that Berniece doesn't want to face. The "extra school" is a reference to the Irene Kaufman Settlement, a real place in Pittsburgh's historically Black Hill District. The Kaufman settlement's mission was to provide educational and recreational opportunities to the community at large—especially Jewish, immigrant, and Black residents of Pittsburgh.

The conversation shifts back to Sutter's land: according to Boy Willie, Sutter's brother from Chicago is eager to sell the remaining section of Sutter's land. Because of the long history between the two families, Sutter's brother has offered the property to Boy Willie for $2,000. However, Boy Willie knows that Sutter's brother has offered it to Jim Stovall for $1,500. Boy Willie didn't challenge this—he just asked for two weeks to get the money. This is why he's come to Pittsburgh with a **truck** full of watermelons and a determination to sell Berniece's piano.

It's hinted that the "long history" between the Sutter and Charles families may have something to do with the "blood" on the piano, suggesting that there has been a dynamic of violence or oppression between the Sutters and Charleses. Sutter shamelessly exploits this history through his attempt to cheat Boy Willie. Undaunted by this, Boy Willie proceeds with his plan, showing his determination to realize his goals regardless of others' racist motivations.


Doaker maintains that Berniece will be hard to convince. He tells Boy Willie that Avery Brown followed Berniece to Pittsburgh from Mississippi two years ago, wanting her to marry him after her husband, Crawley, was killed. Avery is a preacher now. Boy Willie says that Avery believes all white men are rich and successful—he doesn't realize that some white men have less than he does. Doaker says that Avery has tried to get Berniece to sell the piano, too, in order to get money for him to start a church. Avery even sent over a white man who collects musical instruments and who offered to buy the piano for a nice price. Boy Willie wants to find out who this man is.

Violence and grief loom over the Charles family—though the circumstances surrounding Crawley's death aren't yet explained, they clearly seem to have been traumatic for Berniece, and she doesn't yet seem to be interested in remarrying. Boy Willie believes that Avery thinks too highly of white people and too little of himself—there's an undercurrent of suggestion that Boy Willie doesn't greatly respect Avery's approach, though arguably, Avery is taking his own route to self-determination.

Just then, the men hear Berniece shouting from upstairs. As Berniece enters the room, breathless, Boy Willie runs upstairs to see what upset her. He calls down that nobody is there. Catching her breath, Berniece says that she saw Sutter standing at the top of the stairs. Boy Willie says that she's imagining this, but Doaker says that Berniece wouldn't make up such a thing and encourages her to tell them what she saw. Berniece says that Sutter was standing in the hallway wearing a blue suit and resting his hand atop his head, as if he were afraid that his head would fall off. He was calling Boy Willie's name. Berniece tells Boy Willie that she believes he pushed Sutter to his death in the well.

This is the first appearance of a supernatural element in the play. Even though Boy Willie doesn't believe Berniece's claim to have seen Sutter, the existence *of supernatural beings like ghosts, and the ability of humans to interact with them, seems to be largely taken for granted within the play. Already suspicious about Boy Willie's visit, Berniece takes Sutter's appearance as evidence of wrongdoing on her brother's part.*

Boy Willie argues that this is ridiculous. He and Lymon weren't anywhere near Sutter when Sutter died; he thinks the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog" got Sutter. Lymon agrees. But Berniece tells the two men to leave her house—they only bring trouble. She even blames Boy Willie for Crawley's death. Boy Willie says he's not going anywhere until he sells the watermelons. Anyway, he doesn't believe that Sutter's ghost would be looking for him—Sutter was looking for the **piano**. He tells Berniece that if she wants to get rid of Sutter's ghost, she needs to get rid of the piano.

The "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog" are not fully explained at this point in the play. Though vague, they serve as additional evidence of people's belief in the existence of the supernatural and the ability of those forces to affect the living. Boy Willie perceives that Berniece's suspicion of him is a misdirection—it's the piano's mysterious connection to Sutter that should be of greater concern to her.

After Berniece goes upstairs to wake up Maretha and Doaker exits, Lymon suggests that Boy Willie stay in Pittsburgh with him. Boy Willie refuses, though—he thinks Lymon is too optimistic about Pittsburgh. Boy Willie, on the other hand, wants to farm all of Sutter's land. Doaker reenters to make breakfast. He remarks that he believes what Berniece said—she's never seen Sutter wearing a suit before, so she must have seen Sutter's ghost in his burial suit.

Boy Willie's and Lymon's opposite views of self-determination are on display here. Where Lymon wants to start over fresh in a new place, Boy Willie is equally determined to build something new on old ground. Doaker, meanwhile, clearly believes that Sutter's ghost is real.

Boy Willie changes the subject, teasing Doaker about all the girlfriends he's rumored to have in Mississippi (he travels there every month because of his job as a railroad cook). Doaker denies this. He also reminisces about his past job lining track for the Yellow Dog railroad, where his brother, Wining Boy, used to work with him. Doaker has been with the railroad for 27 years. He reflects that trains only go in one of four directions at any given time—you'd think that people could understand that, he goes on, but surprisingly few people do. Instead, people get mad when they find out that the train isn't going the direction they want to go. If people would stay in one place, Doaker believes that it would be a better world.

Besides Doaker's occasional tendency to daydream of the past, his reflections on the railroad also reveal something about his character. Doaker is a steady man who generally accepts the condition of the world around him and does the best he can within those parameters. Rather than portraying this as a compromising attitude, Wilson portrays Doaker's steadfastness as its own form of self-determination, just as worthy of respect as his nephew's bolder method.

The younger men are distracted from Doaker's monologue by the breakfast he is cooking. Then Maretha enters, and Boy Willie coaxes the shy girl into conversation, talking about how big she's gotten. He also teaches her how to improvise a boogie-woogie on the **piano**. When Maretha admits she doesn't know anything about the pictures carved on the piano, Boy Willie is surprised. Berniece calls for Maretha before Boy Willie can press the issue.

Boogie woogie is a musical genre that developed out of the blues and was especially popular in the African American community around the 1930s; it was intended for dancing and suits Boy Willie's playfulness. Maretha's unfamiliarity with the piano's history suggests that Berniece doesn't want her to know about the family's past.

Just then Avery Brown knocks on the door, and Doaker lets him in. Avery is 38, "honest and ambitious," well-dressed, and carrying a Bible. He is surprised to see Boy Willie and Lymon, and they tease Avery about becoming a preacher. When Boy Willie asks how Avery got the idea, Avery tells him that God's call came to him in a dream. Doaker encourages Avery to tell Boy Willie and Lymon about the dream.

Avery's focus, professional dress, and overall conventional look contrast with the younger men's more carefree lifestyle. The implication is that Avery is more willing to adapt to the norms and expectations of Northern urban culture. However, he got there in an unusual way himself: via supernatural prompting.

Avery describes his dream: in it, he watched three hobos get off a train. The hobos said they were from Nazareth and were heading to Jerusalem. They handed Avery a candle and took him along. In a house, Avery saw a crowd of diverse people who all had sheep heads. Then the hobos dressed Avery in a blue and gold robe and instructed him to choose one of three doors. Avery went through a door and felt as if his candle's flame set his head on fire. In this room, other robed men overlooked a valley filled with wolves. A voice said that the sheep people must be led across the valley of wolves and asked, "Who shall I send?" Avery volunteered. Then Jesus came to Avery and told him that he would cross the valley with him. Avery woke up, feeling at peace with his new calling.

Avery's dream contains fairly common Christian imagery and symbolism for someone who's thinking of becoming a preacher. The hobos' journey follows the journey of Christ's life; the "sheep people" are a flock in need of a shepherd to defend them from dangerous wolves. In other words, there's nothing too mysterious about the content of the dream—yet it functions as inspiration toward a new path in life, much like what Boy Willie and Lymon are seeking.

Berniece comes in with Maretha and greets Avery. Before she and Avery take Maretha to the Settlement House, Boy Willie asks about the white man who'd been interested in buying the piano. Berniece tells Boy Willie she knew he was up to something, and that she'll never agree to selling the piano. She leaves with Avery and Maretha. Soon after, Boy Willie and Lymon venture out to sell watermelons.

The play's central conflict is established: Berniece is just as determined not *to part with the piano as Boy Willie is to sell it. The rest of the play will be a contest between the siblings' respective wills and their views of the piano's place in their family.*

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Three days later, Wining Boy, 56 years old, is sitting at the kitchen table, drinking, while Doaker washes dishes. Wining Boy used to be a professional musician and still tries to project that image, but he comes across as outdated and a bit pitiful. He and Doaker discuss Boy Willie's plans. Boy Willie and Lymon haven't yet sold their watermelons. They keep intending to sell to the white people who live in Squirrel Hill, but their **truck** has repeatedly broken down on the way there.

Squirrel Hill is a Pittsburgh neighborhood that was home to wealthy executives throughout its history, although by the 1930s, it was transitioning to being a more ethnically Jewish, immigrant neighborhood. Boy Willie's and Lymon's plans, perpetually frustrated by the dilapidated truck, have a comical aspect—but their repeated attempts to drive to Squirrel Hill also exemplify their relentless self-determination.

Doaker also tells Wining Boy about Berniece's lingering grief over her husband, Crawley, who died three years ago. He thinks Berniece needs to get out and date more, and that perhaps Avery will be the right man for her. Then they shift to talking about Wining Boy's ex-wife, Cleotha, who recently died. Wining Boy was living in Kansas City and received a letter from Cleotha's friend letting him know. Wining Boy reminisces about his love for Cleotha—they'd met when she was 16—and his tendency to "ramble" continued even after they married. Eventually, Cleotha asked Wining Boy to move out, though Wining Boy always knew she still loved him. Doaker, too, was once married, to a woman named Coreen. Coreen lives in New York now, and Doaker claims that he's let go of his feelings for her.

Doaker assumes that Berniece needs to get remarried in order to be happy, an opinion that Berniece doesn't seem to share. In fact, neither Doaker nor Wining Boy appear to have been particularly faithful to their marriages (Wining Boy's "rambling" likely refers to wandering around and having relationships with other women) or to require a faithful partner in order to feel complete in life. This inconsistency in expectations for men and women will be explored in the development of Berniece and Avery's relationship later in the play.

Boy Willie and Lymon come in; they've had to leave the broken-down **truck** with a mechanic and are arguing over which of them should sleep in the truck to guard the watermelons. Boy Willie starts talking with Wining Boy about Sutter and the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Boy Willie says the Ghosts have gotten around a dozen men so far, though Berniece claims that she doesn't believe in them. Wining Boy says that even white people in Mississippi believe in the Ghosts. He claims that he's contacted the Ghosts himself and knows they're real.

As before, just because characters don't necessarily believe in one another's specific encounters with the supernatural doesn't mean that they don't generally acknowledge the reality of unseen powers. Wining Boy underscores this point with his story of a personal encounter with the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog.

Wining Boy explains that in 1930, he was at a low point in his life and decided he'd call upon the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog for help. He stood at a certain railroad crossing and called the ghosts' names. He says that the ghosts made him feel strangely full and like a king. In fact, he felt so strong he almost didn't get out of the way of an oncoming train. When he did, he claims he went on to have three years of good luck. So it doesn't matter to him if Berniece believes in the Ghosts—he was there, and he knows for himself.

The precise nature of the Ghosts—their identity and powers, and even whether they're benign or not—all these questions remain unexplored at this point. The bigger point seems to be that supernatural forces are most potent when they draw to the surface powers that are already present within a human being. And each individual must make sense of such encounters for themselves.

The men drink whiskey, and Wining Boy asks Boy Willie and Lymon about their time on Parchman Farm, where he's done time himself. Boy Willie explains that this happened after he and Lymon were accused of stealing wood. On that occasion, Crawley tried to defend them and got killed; Lymon got shot in the stomach. The sheriff is still looking for Lymon, who was later fined and jailed for being unemployed. After Lymon's bail was paid by Stovall, the judge made Lymon work for Stovall to pay off the debt, overruling Lymon's preference to serve jail time instead. After that, Lymon got his **truck** so that he could dodge both the sheriff and Stovall.

Parchman Farm was a notorious maximum-security prison in Sunflower County, Mississippi. It wasn't uncommon for Black men to be sentenced to hard labor on Parchman Farm for petty crimes—a fact that's underscored by Wining Boy's, Boy Willie's, and Lymon's shared experiences of doing time there. In other ways, too, self-determination could be threatened altogether—like Lymon being ordered to work for Stovall against his will.

Lymon claims that he's going to stay in Pittsburgh because people are treated better here. Boy Willie says that no matter where you are, people treat you how you *let* them treat you. If he's mistreated, he mistreats right back; there's no difference between him and a white man. Wining Boy agrees that this might be the ideal, but it's not true in real life. He gives an illustration of a Black man getting thrown in jail for picking berries on a white man's unfenced property. Later, if the white man sold his land to the Black man and insisted that the berries nevertheless remained his, he could even "fix it with the law" that the berries were his. A Black man couldn't do that.

Lymon's and Boy Willie's attitudes further reflect their differing outlooks on racism and self-determination. Lymon wants to make a fresh start in Pittsburgh on the belief that racism isn't as virulent in the North. But Boy Willie argues that no matter where a person goes, they must insist upon others' respect rather than waiting for others to treat them properly. Wining Boy brings both opinions down to earth with his illustration, arguing that white men simply have access to power and influence from which Black men are barred by a racist society.

Boy Willie claims that he doesn't care what the law says—he goes by whether the law is right in his eyes or not. Lymon says that's why Boy Willie is going to wind up on Parchman Farm again. But pretty soon, all four men are singing a song that they remember from Parchman Farm, harmonizing as they stamp and clap in time.

Besides teasing Boy Willie for his stubbornness, Lymon's wry remark also emphasizes the structural injustices faced by Black men. It's implied that Doaker, too, spent time as an inmate on the Parchman Farm—incarceration there seems to have been a looming threat for Black men in Mississippi.

Then, Boy Willie encourages Wining Boy to play the **piano** for them, but Wining Boy declines. He says he's given up the piano and that it's the best choice he ever made; the life of a musician tied him down too much. For the first few years, all the whiskey and women were enjoyable, but one day he grew sick of it all, no longer sure how to distinguish between himself and the piano player.

Wining Boy is another example of self-determination in the play. Though Wining Boy is portrayed as a somewhat pathetic character at times, he is also portrayed as having a strong sense of self and knowing exactly what he does and doesn't want from life.

After they admire Berniece's **piano**, Doaker starts telling Lymon the story behind Berniece's refusal to give it up. It dates back to slavery, when the family was owned by Sutter's grandfather. The piano was originally owned by a man named Joel Nolander in Georgia. One year, Sutter's ancestor Robert Sutter wanted to buy the piano for his wife, Ophelia—but being cash poor, he had to trade some slaves for it. Mr. Nolander insisted on picking out the slaves for himself, and he chose Doaker's grandmother Mama Berniece and his father, Papa Boy Charles, who was a child at the time.

Near the play's midpoint, the history of the piano and its significance for the family is finally revealed. The Sutters once owned members of the Charles family as slaves, and they were permanently separated from their loved ones and sent far away just so that Ophelia Sutter could have the piano. This dehumanizing reality is calmly related by Doaker, suggesting that such trades were hardly unheard of at the time.


After some time had passed, Ophelia began to miss Mama Berniece's and Papa Boy Charles's company and labor. When it proved impossible to trade the **piano** back for the slaves, Ophelia began pining away. Then, Robert Sutter summoned Doaker's grandfather Papa Boy Willie, a talented woodworker, and made him carve his wife's and son's images onto the piano. Doaker indicates the carvings on the present-day piano. He also points out additional carvings of family members and significant family events. When Robert Sutter saw the extra carvings, he was angry, but Ophelia was so delighted with her decorated piano that he couldn't say anything against it.

Ophelia's pining for her former slaves contrasts sharply with the silenced grief of Papa Boy Willie, from whom Mama Berniece and Papa Boy Charles been wrenched away for the sake of the piano. Likewise, Ophelia's delighted satisfaction with the carved images of the slaves shows the shallowness of her affection and contrasts with the mute anguish of Papa Boy Willie as he engraved their memories onto the piano.

Doaker's and Wining Boy's brother, Boy Charles (the oldest of the three brothers and Berniece's and Boy Willie's father), talked about the Sutter **piano** all his life. He always said that the piano contained the story of their family and that as long as the Sutters owned the piano, they owned the family, too, as if they were still enslaved. So one day, while Sutter was at a Fourth of July picnic, Doaker, Wining Boy, and Boy Charles snuck in and removed the piano, the other two brothers carrying it by wagon to Mama Ola's house in the next county. Boy Charles stayed nearby, acting as though nothing had happened.

Boy Charles saw the piano as a symbol of enslavement and believed that it rightfully belonged to the Charles family. The "liberation" of the piano on Independence Day seems intentional—a way of signaling that the restoration of the piano to its rightful owners ought to free them from the grief associated with the piano as well.

Doaker doesn't know exactly what happened after Sutter got home. Soon after, Boy Charles's house was set on fire. But by that time, Boy Charles had jumped on the 3:57 Yellow Dog train. The train was stopped, and the boxcar in which Boy Charles was hiding with four hobos was set on fire, killing them all. Nobody knows for sure who did that—whether it was Sutter, the sheriff, or a white man named Ed Saunders who, a couple months later, died from falling down his well. But it was around this time that the legend of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog got started. And this, Doaker concludes, is why Berniece won't sell the piano.

The story of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog is finally explained in full. The ghosts are those who were killed in retaliation for the taking of the piano, and the ghosts, in turn, are believed to avenge themselves on those rumored to be responsible for their deaths. The legend of the ghosts has subsequently taken on a life of its own, with vague, often benign, spiritual powers attributed to the ghosts.

Boy Willie says this story is all in the past. If Boy Charles had known that he could trade in the **piano** for some land, it wouldn't have wound up sitting in Pittsburgh. Boy Willie refuses to spend his life farming somebody else's land like his father did. He's going to try to build something on the piano that Boy Charles died to give him.

Boy Willie doesn't accept Berniece's reasoning for hanging onto the piano. He treasures the piano in his own way, believing that it honors his father's memory better if he trades it for the land on which the family was once enslaved.

Wining Boy sits down at the **piano** and begins playing and singing. Berniece and Maretha enter, and Berniece greets Wining Boy briefly before going upstairs. After she's gone, Boy Willie gets Lymon to help him attempt to move the piano. While this is going on, Doaker hears Sutter's ghost. The ghost is heard again as they're sliding the piano back in place—everyone hears it this time, including Berniece as she comes downstairs. She tells Boy Willie she's done playing around with him and that "money can't buy what that piano cost."

Sutter's ghost appears to be associated with the piano in some way, though it isn't yet clear why the piano's attempted removal tends to summon Sutter's presence. Berniece's comment that "money can't buy what that piano cost" again suggests that she sees the piano as an irreplaceable loss, a tangible connection to the Charleses' family history.

Berniece turns to making Wining Boy's dinner, but Boy Willie keeps talking. He argues that the only thing that makes the **piano** valuable is his great-grandfather's carvings. If Berniece were offering piano lessons to help pay the bills, that would be a different story. Instead, the piano is just sitting there. Boy Willie refuses to be a fool about sentimental value. Unlike land that yields crops, a piano that just sits there doesn't give you anything back, and Boy Willie knows that his father would have understood that.

Boy Willie continues to fight a losing battle with Berniece, seeing the piano primarily in terms of its transactional value, not its sentimental value. In his mind, there needs to be some material justification for the piano's continued prominence in Berniece's life. Since she can't provide one, he sees the piano as worthless.

Berniece stands by the **piano** and tells Boy Willie to look at it. She says that Mama Ola polished the piano with her tears and blood for 17 years. She cleaned it every day and asked Berniece to play music for her. But Boy Willie, she argues, never stops to think about their mother and what Boy Charles's foolishness cost her—years of lonely widowhood. She says all the men in the family are alike—thieving and killing, which just leads to more thieving and killing, and it never stops.

As Berniece thinks back over the family's history, she becomes upset. This is representative of the way Berniece views her family and everything associated with it, such as the piano; all of these memories prompt grief for her, and it's difficult for her to conceptualize their past in any other way. Hence, for example, she characterizes all the Charles men as thieves and murderers.

When Boy Willie denies that he's ever killed anybody, Berniece says that he killed Crawley just as surely as if he'd pulled the trigger. Boy Willie insists that by saying this, she's just being ignorant—Crawley knew that he and Lymon were sneaking wood, and he chose to intervene. They asked Crawley to help them load up the wood, and Crawley brought his gun in case anyone else showed up. Sure enough, when they got there, the sheriff's men were lurking, and Boy Willie and Lymon were ready to give up. But Crawley started shooting, and the sheriff's men shot back. Berniece says all she knows is that if Boy Willie and Lymon hadn't gotten Crawley involved, he'd still be alive today. Berniece starts hitting her brother, repeating, "He ain't here, is he?" Boy Willie doesn't try to defend himself, and Doaker pulls her back. Suddenly they're interrupted by a terrified scream from upstairs—it's Maretha calling, "Mama!"

Berniece, who's been portrayed as unflappable and levelheaded so far, continues to exhibit her emotions, showing how deep her grief runs. The story surrounding Crawley's sudden and needless death is also revealed, showing why Berniece might harbor resentment toward her brother and why his reappearance in her life hasn't been welcome so far. In the midst of all this strife, Maretha's cry of distress—hinting that the family's grief will continue and that future generations won't be spared—is not surprising. It's implied that she, too, has seen Sutter's ghost.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

The next day, Doaker is ironing his railroad uniform and cooking something on the stove, singing a song as he works. Wining Boy comes in carrying a silk suit which he was supposed to have pawned; he says that the shop owner wouldn't offer him enough money for it. Berniece is still at work, and Boy Willie and Lymon are out selling watermelons. Maretha is refusing to sleep upstairs anymore. Doaker tells Wining Boy that although he hasn't told Berniece this, he saw Sutter's ghost before she did, sitting at the **piano** with his hand resting on his head, just like Berniece said. The ghost didn't seem threatening, so Doaker didn't worry about it.

In contrast to the previous scene of domestic strife with its closing hint of the supernatural, this act opens with a scene of contrasting peace and normalcy. Everyone is more or less going about their normal business, although there are hints—like Maretha's fear of the ghost—of unrest. The fact that Doaker, who's a levelheaded and calming presence in the play, saw the ghost reinforces its reality.

Doaker says that he thinks Berniece is wrong about Boy Willie pushing Sutter in the well. Rather, he thinks that Sutter is haunting them because of the **piano**—he saw the piano keys being invisibly played one time. He figures that Berniece needs to get rid of the piano, since it's done nothing but cause trouble. However, Wining Boy figures that they have more right to the piano than the Sutters ever did, and anyway, Sutter's ghost can't do anything about it. Meanwhile, he needs money, which Doaker reluctantly gives.

Doaker correctly perceives that the presence of Sutter's ghost isn't primarily about the circumstances of Sutter's death but has something to do with the piano and the family's past. Both he and Wining Boy, directly connected to the procurement of the piano, are keenly aware of its costs to the family.

Boy Willie and Lymon come in, excited—their pockets are full of money. People were lining up to buy watermelons, even after they raised the price by a quarter. Boy Willie pretended that they planted sugar along with the seeds to make the melons extra sweet, and people believed him. While the younger men are still counting their money, Wining Boy brings in the silk suit and tells Lymon to try it on. He tells Lymon that the suit will help him get a woman, and that he'll let him have it for $3. Lymon agrees and talks Boy Willie, who's preoccupied about fitting the **piano** into the **truck**, into going to the picture show that evening to meet some women.

Humorously, the men in the family—both Boy Willie and his uncle Wining Boy—have a gift for sales and making ordinary things, whether a watermelon or a suit, sound more special than it is. Now that they've finally sold some of the watermelons, the younger men are ready to move forward with their respective plans: Wining Boy is eyeing the piano, and Lymon is ready to hit the town and meet local women.

While Lymon is trying on his new outfit, Wining Boy tells the others he knew Lymon's father and that he, too, was always talking about women. In fact, Wining Boy says, he almost could have *been* Lymon's father—he had an affair with Lymon's mother while her husband was in jail. When Lymon's mother tried to pay the bail, the sheriff demanded an additional $100. She found Wining Boy playing the **piano** at a saloon and asked for help. Wining Boy knew that if she didn't come up with the money, her husband would end up on Parchman Farm for three years, a fate he'd help anyone avoid. After Wining Boy gave her the money, Lymon's mother invited him over, and she ended up inviting him to stay all night. Presently, Lymon enters then in his new suit. Wining Boy tells him that it's a magic suit and that while wearing it, he'll be able to get any woman he likes. The younger men head out.

Wining Boy's story about Lymon's parents mainly serves to demonstrate the pervasiveness of injustice among Mississippi's rural Black community, especially when it came to matters surrounding incarceration. Wining Boy's generosity (as well as his personal familiarity with the unjust system) is shown by his readiness to help Lymon's mother out of an exploitative situation. He now extends a fatherly kindness toward the younger man.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Berniece has set up a tub in the kitchen and is heating water for her bath when Avery knocks. Today Avery secured a building for his church, and he tells Berniece he's been thinking that it's better for a congregation if their preacher is settled and married. He tells Berniece that he's never cared about a woman like he cares about her, and that he needs someone by his side. But Berniece says that she isn't ready to get married—besides, she has to take care of Maretha.

Avery's solemn proposal contrasts with the wilder romantic hopes and reminiscences of the previous scene. Avery's conventional desire to settle down also contrasts with the sense of upheaval in Berniece's life, and Avery seems somewhat oblivious to the persistence of Berniece's pain.

Avery asks Berniece who is loving *her*, and Berniece retorts that Avery is telling her that a woman can't be anything without a man. Avery thinks Berniece's problem is that she is still carrying Crawley around with her. Life is going to pass her by, and he can't promise he'll still be waiting for her when she changes her mind.

Berniece's independence is important to her, and she wants her hard work in raising Maretha to be acknowledged. While there is truth to Avery's charge that she's still clinging to Crawley, Avery's interpretation of her response is somewhat myopic.

Berniece tells Avery they can talk about this again once he's gotten his church established. Right now, she has too much going on. She tells him about Maretha seeing Sutter's ghost and asks him if he might be able to bless the house. Avery is uncertain. Berniece figures Sutter's ghost might leave when Boy Willie does, since she thinks he pushed Sutter into his well. Avery doubts this; he thinks God is the "Great Causer" and that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog might be the hand of God.

Berniece is using Avery as a way to get out of her difficulty with the ghost—allowing her to avoid too much soul-searching about Sutter's presence. Berniece also persists in assuming that the ghost's haunting has to do with Boy Willie, not with the piano. Avery sees a bigger spiritual power behind all these events, and in his mind, there's no conflict between the "Ghosts" and God.

Avery suggests that Berniece could start a church choir. If Boy Willie saw that Berniece was using the **piano** for that, perhaps he would change his mind about selling it. Berniece says that she hasn't played the piano since Mama Ola died, and that she only ever played it for her. Mama Ola used to say that when Berniece played, she could hear Boy Charles talking to her. Berniece could hear her mother talking to her ancestors' spirits at night and vowed that would never happen to her.

Avery continues to see the solutions to Berniece's problems in terms of his own goals of starting his church. Meanwhile, Berniece reveals more of the source of her pain regarding the piano: she fears that by playing it, she will set her ancestors' spirits free, and she doesn't want to interact with them the way her mother did. She'd sooner avoid the past altogether.

Berniece says that Maretha doesn't know anything about the **piano**'s history. Berniece doesn't want to burden her with it. Berniece hopes that Maretha will have opportunities that she never had and will go on to become a schoolteacher or something like that. Avery tells Berniece that she needs to put these things behind her. If she walked over to the piano right now and played it, God would go with her. He opens the piano and encourages Berniece to play a hymn and "make it into a celebration." But Berniece refuses, just wanting to take her bath. Avery promises to return tomorrow and bless the house.

Avery's suggestions aren't off base: treating playing the piano as a celebratory or spiritual activity would likely help Berniece to move on from her family's past traumas. But doing so will only be effective if Berniece takes initiative and finds meaning in playing on her own. This aligns with Wilson's argument that each individual must encounter the supernatural on his or her own terms. It also highlights Berniece's strong independence, which Avery underestimates.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Hours later, after Berniece has gone to bed, Boy Willie sneaks into the darkened house with a woman named Grace. He tries to coax her to sleep on the couch with him, though she resists this and rebuffs his kisses at first. Pretty soon, though, they're entangled on the couch and noisily knock over a lamp, waking up Berniece, who shortly appears in her nightgown. She tells the two that with a young girl upstairs, she can't allow this kind of activity in her house. Grace and Boy Willie leave.

The scene between Berniece and Avery is bookended by scenes of others' unpredictable romantic ventures—the night on the town appears to have been successful for the young men, or at least for Boy Willie. Again, Boy Willie seems to be more concerned with casual sexual encounters than with establishing a meaningful long-term relationship.

While Berniece is making tea in the kitchen, Lymon knocks. He says he'd been with a woman, but she was only interested in his money, so he came back. He admires Pittsburgh women, though, and thinks he's going to like it here. He especially likes Grace and wishes he'd gotten to her first instead of Boy Willie. He is optimistic about his future in the North. Unlike in Mississippi, Lymon can't be forced to work for somebody like Stovall. He figures that after he and Boy Willie sell the remaining watermelons, he'll look around for a job of his choice.

Though hapless in his first romantic overtures, Lymon is feeling hopeful about the new life he's chosen. Unlike Boy Willie, he seems to desire genuine companionship and more stability. He also sees that this Northern city affords greater freedoms than he could find in the rural South.

Berniece says that Lymon shouldn't have too much trouble finding a job—it's all in how you present yourself. Boy Willie, on the other hand, only wants to do things his way, so he'd certainly get fired. She also warns Lymon not to follow Boy Willie into "that fast life"—he doesn't need to be looking for women in saloons. Lymon agrees that nowadays, he doesn't want to just spend the night with someone out of loneliness; he's only interested in finding a woman with whom he's a good fit. Berniece assures him that he'll find somebody. She also admits that although she likes Avery, she doesn't really have anyone in mind right now.

Though Berniece agrees with Lymon that Pittsburgh has advantages over Mississippi, she also acknowledges that life in the North requires certain compromises, too—namely, accommodating oneself to the norms of the Northern white majority. Of course, this also gives her a chance to get another dig at her brother; unlike Lymon, Boy Willie isn't interested in accommodating himself to anyone. Lymon's view of romance has evolved: he only desires mutual companionship nowadays.

They talk a little more, and after an awkward pause, Lymon dabs a bit of perfume behind Berniece's ear (he'd just bought the bottle off a man on the street) and kisses her. She kisses him back and then breaks away and goes upstairs. Lymon happily strokes his "magic" suit coat, believing that Wining Boy was right about it.

The interlude between Lymon and Berniece seems to be more a mutual recognition of loneliness and appreciation than genuine attraction, although it's enough to satisfy Lymon's goal to connect with a woman that night.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Late the next morning, Boy Willie walks in, finding Lymon asleep on the couch. He spent last night at Grace's but left before her ex-boyfriend, Leroy, tried to break in. He pushes Lymon on the floor and tells him to get up—he's called the musical instrument collector about the **piano**, so they have to get it loaded onto the **truck**. As they each take a side of the piano, Sutter's ghost is heard offstage. The piano won't budge.

Boy Willie's plans for the piano move forward, or so he thinks. The piano seems to resist their efforts to remove it from the house, and their initiative apparently offends Sutter's ghost.

As Lymon and Boy Willie continue to wrestle with the **piano**, Doaker comes in and orders them, with quiet authority, to leave the piano alone until Berniece comes home. Boy Willie relents and heads out with Lymon in search of a rope, plank, and wheels with which to transport the piano later.

Though he typically stays out of such things, Doaker loyally backs up his niece when it's necessary. Boy Willie is undaunted, though, and remains determined to move and sell the piano no matter what his sister says.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

Boy Willie is attaching wheels to a wooden plank. Maretha is sitting by the piano and Doaker sits at the table. Boy Willie tells Maretha the story of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. He explains that this is the name given to the men who died in the burned-up boxcar. They're named after the Yellow Dog railroad line. Nobody can see the ghosts—but sometimes, if you call upon them at a certain railroad crossing, they might show up to help you.

Boy Willie takes the initiative to tell Maretha bits and pieces about her family's past, since he believes that Berniece isn't doing this adequately. The connection between the Ghosts (which presumably include Boy Willie's and Berniece's father, Boy Charles) and the piano is also confirmed.

Berniece gets home and sends Maretha upstairs. Since Maretha's still scared of Sutter's Ghost, Boy Willie goes with her. Berniece asks Doaker what's been going on, and he explains that Boy Willie and Lymon are getting ready to move the **piano**. Berniece says that she's done playing around with Boy Willie; she warns her brother that she's got Crawley's gun in the house. Boy Willie tells her he isn't scared of dying, and he recalls a time when his pet dog died. He prayed and prayed for it to come back to life. When nothing happened, he went out and killed a cat, and this made him realize the power of death. When a Black man holds that power, Boy Willie says, he no longer has to be afraid of a white man.

Berniece's exchange with Boy Willie reveals a deeper, darker side to her brother. The point of Boy Willie's chilling story about the dead animals is that Boy Willie has reckoned with the power of death personally and does not fear it—he is neither afraid to kill nor to die. This power means that he can meet a white man, who otherwise holds power he cannot access as a Black man, on relatively even ground. This story suggests that there are deeper layers to Boy Willie's seemingly blithe, superficial attitudes about racial inequity earlier in the play.

Berniece ignores Boy Willie and starts doing Maretha's hair. When Berniece scolds Maretha for resisting the painful hairstyling, Boy Willie criticizes Berniece. He tells her that she ought to tell Maretha about the **piano** instead of acting like she's ashamed of it. She should celebrate the piano and its entrance into the family instead of acting like nothing in this world belongs to Maretha.

Maretha becomes the locus of disagreement between Berniece and Boy Willie, as she represents both Berniece's attitudes about the past and the future. Boy Willie argues that by ignoring the piano's history, Berniece fails to pass down anything meaningful to her daughter in which Maretha can take pride.

Boy Willie goes on to say that there isn't any great mystery to life—it's a matter of going out and meeting it head-on. That's why he's determined to become a landowner, so that he can stand on equal footing with the white man. If Berniece keeps teaching Maretha that she doesn't have anything, she'll grow up resenting Berniece. He believes he's living at the top of life. If someone believes they're at the bottom, that belief governs how they'll behave, too. As for himself, he's determined to make a mark in the world.

Boy Willie argues that a person's attitude about life determines their willingness to make something out of themselves. If Maretha is raised with the message that she doesn't have anything, then she won't strive for anything. This is how, in Boy Willie's view, Berniece's attitude about the family's past is dangerous—it directly impedes the family's potential in the future.

Avery arrives then with his Bible and chats with Doaker about his growing congregation. He says that he's ready to bless Berniece's house. Boy Willie mocks the idea, saying that the haunting is all in Berniece's imagination. Before Avery can start, Lymon enters with a rope for the **piano**, saying he'd run into Grace and bought her a drink. As he and Boy Willie start wrestling with the piano again, Berniece disappears upstairs and returns with Crawley's gun. She sends Maretha out of the way into Doaker's room. Wining Boy also comes in and begins drunkenly playing and singing a song he wrote for Cleotha. Grace shows up in search of Lymon.

As events build to a climax, all the characters converge on the Charles house, suggesting that a significant shift will soon take place in regards to the piano. Both Boy Willie and Berniece show that they mean to proceed with their respective plans for the piano: Berniece is still clinging to the memories (albeit painful ones) that the piano represents, while Boy Willie still believes that acquiring Sutter's land should be the Charleses' priority.

As Lymon and Boy Willie get ready to move the **piano**, everyone senses the presence of Sutter's ghost. Grace leaves, uneasy, and Lymon runs out after her. Berniece tells Avery to go ahead and bless the house, but Doaker interjects that the *piano* is what needs to be blessed. Avery hands Berniece a candle and begins sprinkling water on the piano as he commands Sutter's spirit to be cast out. As Avery continues reading from the Bible, Boy Willie mockingly throws water around the room and calls for Sutter's ghost. Suddenly, Boy Willie is thrown backward by an unseen force and begins to be choked. He runs upstairs in pursuit of the force.

With Lymon's and Grace's exits (and apparently happy ending together), the cast of characters is now reduced to just the Charles family and Avery. Up to the last minute, there's disagreement as to the nature of the haunting, or even its existence—Doaker rightly suspects that the piano has been the problem all along, while Boy Willie persists in denying anything that would keep the piano out of his hands. He gets his comeuppance here.

Everyone hears the sounds of a bitter struggle from upstairs. At one point, Boy Willie is thrown down the stairs, but he runs back up. Avery admits to Berniece that he's powerless to expel Sutter's ghost. After a few stunned moments, Berniece abruptly realizes what she has to do: she sits down at the **piano** and begins picking out an improvised song. The song grows more confident and powerful as she repeats it. Berniece begins singing and calls upon Mama Berniece, Papa Boy Charles, Mama Ola, and other ancestors to help her. Just as the sound of an approaching train is heard, the struggle upstairs subsides.

Avery's inability to exorcise the ghost doesn't so much point to Avery's powerlessness, but to the fact that the ghost is a family matter which only Berniece can deal with. She does this by calling upon the ancestors whose presence she's suppressed all her life—and her song apparently releases them from the pictures on the piano. They overpower Sutter's ghost, suggesting that Sutter haunted the family because the tie between the Sutter and Charles families needed to be decisively broken. The sound of the train whistle recalls the story of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, hinting that their victims have been dealt with for good.

Berniece begins to chant, "Thank you. Thank you." Calm descends over the house. Maretha comes back into the room, and Boy Willie comes downstairs, watching Berniece at the piano. He and Wining Boy decide to catch the train back to Mississippi at the last minute. He tells Berniece that if she and Maretha don't keep playing that piano, maybe he and Sutter's ghost will both come back. He leaves. The play ends with Berniece voicing a final, "Thank you."

Accepting the reality of Sutter's ghost, Boy Willie changes his mind about the piano. He also accepts that the piano will have a valuable role in the family's future. For her part, Berniece is now at peace with the grief of the family's past and is therefore able to look to the future with real hope.

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