

MELANCHOLIA AND REMAINS OF LOSS IN AUGUST WILSON'S *THE PIANO LESSON*AUGUST WILSON'IN *THE PIANO LESSON* ADLI ESERİNDE MELANKOLİ VE YİTİRDİKLERİMİZDEN GERİYE KALANLAR

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to investigate the way the past determines the melancholic identity of the black people involved in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* and the way the piano's presence, though traumatic, stands as remains of the loss. The remains act like a monument for black people through which they can read and re-read their history. In *The Piano Lesson* the remnants or remains of loss are depicted, serving as poignant symbols of past traumas and unresolved grief. These remnants not only evoke the weight of history but also provide insights into the characters' emotional struggles and their attempts to reconcile with their losses. In order to define the past and its influence in the present referring to some notions like trauma, melancholia, and loss is unavoidable. However, the definitions provided here deviate from the classical explanations given to these perspectives. August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* represents the accumulation of the losses and traumas experienced by the black race through whose remains the present generation of black people attaches themselves to the past, which gives them a melancholic privilege to produce new reading of traumas to stand against the white owners. Moreover, the piano in the play acts as a traumatic monument in which the history of the past has been carved, and through which the fight against slavery starts which could lead to freedom and independence for the black race against slavery.

**Keywords:** Loss, Melancholia, Remains, Piano, Trauma

**Öz:** Bu makalenin amacı, August Wilson'ın *The Piano Lesson* adlı eserinde yer alan siyahilerin melankolik kimliğini geçmişin nasıl belirlediğini ve travmatik olsa da piyanonun varlığının yitirilenlerin kalıntıları olarak nasıl temsil ettiğini araştırmaktır. Kalıntılar, siyahiler için tarihlerini yorumlamalarına yardımcı olan bir anıt işlevi görür. *The Piano Lesson* adlı eserde yitirdiklerimizin kalıntıları ya da yitirdiklerimizi anımsatanlar, geçmiş travmaların ve çözülmemiş acıların dokunaklı sembolleri olarak tasvir edilir. Bu kalıntılar sadece tarihin ağırlığını çağrıştırmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda karakterlerin duygusal mücadelelerine ve kayıplarıyla uzlaşma çabaları hakkında okuyucuyu bilgilendirir. Geçmiş ve onun şimdiki zaman üzerindeki etkisini tanımlamak için travma, melankoli ve kayıp gibi bazı kavramlara atıfta bulunmak kaçınılmazdır. Ancak burada sunulan tanımlar, bu perspektiflere verilen klasik açıklamalardan farklıdır. August Wilson'ın *The Piano Lesson* adlı eseri, siyah ırkın yaşadığı kayıp ve travmaların birikimini temsil eder ve bu kayıp ve travmaların kalıntıları üzerinden şimdiki nesil siyahiler kendilerini geçmişe bağlar ve bu da onlara beyaz sahiplere karşı durmak için yeni travma yorumlamaları üretme konusunda melankolik bir ayrıcalık sağlar. Dahası, oyundaki piyano, üzerinde tarihi bilgiler bulunan ve siyah ırkın köleliğe karşı özgürlük ve bağımsızlık mücadelesini başlatacağı bir anıt olarak işlev görmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yitik, Melankoli, Kalıntılar, Piyano, Travma

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## Introduction

This paper is an attempt to investigate the way an object of the past determines the melancholic identity of the present in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. It also underlines the way the object's presence stands as a remain of loss acting like a monument for black characters through which they may define their haunted identity. Sigmund Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) distinguishes between mourning and melancholia by examining the successful and failed resolution to loss. Freud begins by stating that mourning is a normal response to the loss of a loved one or an abstract concept that has taken its place. However, some individuals experience melancholia instead of mourning, leading Freud to suspect a pathological disposition in such cases. Freud (1917) maintains that "mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people, the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition"<sup>1</sup>. Simply put, mourning is a psychological process where the individual gradually withdraws their emotional investment from the lost object. This withdrawal occurs gradually, allowing the mourner to finally accept the object's death and redirect their emotional energy towards new objects. In contrast, melancholia is deemed pathological because it lacks this resolution. Melancholia is characterized by endless grief due to the melancholic's inability to resolve conflicts and ambivalence (conflicting or contrasting feelings) caused by the loss of a loved object. The melancholic struggles to "get over" the loss and move forward by investing in new objects and ideals.

Freud describes the detrimental effects of melancholia on the individual. When grief remains unresolved, the melancholic preserves the lost object or ideal by incorporating it into their ego, establishing a complex and ambivalent identification with it. This ambivalence arises from the unresolved and conflicted nature of the loss. From another perspective, ambivalence in melancholia can be seen as the outcome of transforming an external conflict into an internal loss. The melancholic exerts great efforts to retain the presence of the absent object or ideal within their ego. However, maintaining this ongoing relationship with the lost object comes at a significant psychological cost. Freud suggests that the melancholic's persistent attachment to the lost object leads to psychic damage. The inability to fully let go and move on from the loss perpetuates internal conflicts and disrupts the individual's overall well-being. Freud notes that the "distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment"<sup>2</sup>.

In melancholia, the melancholic is able to preserve the lost object or ideal through identification, but it becomes a haunting and *ghostly* identification. The melancholic assumes the emptiness of the lost object, identifying with this emptiness, and consequently engages in self-denigration and self-esteem deterioration. Freud captures the distinction between mourning and melancholia by stating that "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself"<sup>3</sup>. This means that even if the melancholic is aware of the loss that triggered their melancholia, they may not consciously grasp what exactly has been lost. "In yet other cases, one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this [melancholic] kind occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the melancholic cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him"<sup>4</sup>. Freud uses this statement to highlight the complexity and unconscious nature of melancholia, where the

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al (London: Hogarth, 1957), 243.

<sup>2</sup> Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 244

<sup>3</sup> Freud, 246.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, 245.

significance of the loss remains opaque to the individual. The melancholic is aware of the external absence but struggles to fully comprehend the internal void and its impact on their own sense of self.

Freud's perspective suggests that the process of mourning entails detachment and moving on from the lost object, allowing the mourner to invest in new experiences and relationships. However, David Kazanjian challenges this notion by emphasizing the importance of sustained engagement with the remains of loss (through engaging with melancholia). They propose that actively grappling with the remnants and implications of loss can lead to a more productive and creative orientation toward the future. David Eng and David Kazanjian propose a model of loss that views it as an active, creative, and productive force, challenging the notion of a helpless attachment to an irretrievable absence. Their objective is to develop a "politics of mourning," which they define as that "creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history"<sup>5</sup>. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Eng, and Kazanjian elucidate that engaging with loss "generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future"<sup>6</sup>. Freed from its association with pathology, melancholia becomes a mechanism of maintaining a productive engagement with the past that weds the personal with the culture. "As both a formal relation and a structure of feeling, a mechanism of disavowal and a constellation of Affect, melancholia offers a capaciousness of meaning in relation to losses encompassing the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the psychic and the social, the aesthetic and the political"<sup>7</sup>. Dana Luciano and Vilashini Cooppan define the aesthetic of loss as "melancholic deferral of closure"<sup>8</sup>, in which absence is viewed as a generative presence, thereby a productive agent as a means of survival.

David Eng in his article, "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century" defines melancholia as "the privileged psychic mechanism by which abandoned and forsaken objects are simultaneously preserved by and as the ego"<sup>9</sup>. He characterizes melancholia as the status in which "loss denied is incorporated into the ego and the ego thus becomes a reminder of unresolved grief"<sup>10</sup>. Melancholia involves a denial or avoidance of the loss, resulting in its incorporation into the individual's identity and ongoing struggle with the absence of the object or person. One cannot grieve or do the mourning for the object of loss, thereby they internalize the loss and it establishes the ego. The loss produces remains through which new narratives can be brought up as an approach to interpreting or reinterpreting one's past. These remains or leftovers stay with the victim of the loss encouraging the subjects to proliferate play of significations similar to what Dana Luciano and Vilashini Cooppan mentioned earlier.

As David Eng and David Kazanjian in the introduction to the book *Loss* argue: "We might say that as soon as the question "What is lost?" is posed, it invariably slips into the question "What remains?" That is, the loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained"<sup>11</sup>. The concept of loss is not isolated or independent. It is intricately connected to what remains and how those remnants are perceived and sustained. The remnants serve as a crucial aspect of comprehending and grappling with the nature and impact of the loss. By examining what remains, we can gain insight into the significance and implications of the loss itself. When the subject cannot get over the loss, the loss generates new narratives, which are accessible by referring back to the object of loss. Such melancholic status becomes a monumental statue upon recalling which new meanings are feasible. Therefore, melancholia, as a structure of feeling-producing affects, offers a "capaciousness of meaning in relation to losses encompassing the

<sup>5</sup> David Eng, and David Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains" in *Loss the Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains," 4.

<sup>7</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Dana Luciano, "Passing Shadows: Melancholic Nationality and Black Critical Publicity in Pauline E. Hopkins's of One Blood" in *Loss the Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 153.

<sup>9</sup> David Eng, "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century," *Chicago Journals* 25.4, (2000): 1277. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3175527>

<sup>10</sup> Eng, "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century," 1276.

<sup>11</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains" in *Loss The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the psychic and the social, the aesthetic and the political"<sup>12</sup>. In the same way, the loss encompasses both the physical and metaphysical world in *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson. For each generation of characters in the play, the loss and its remains establish various layers of interpretations and narratives that have yet to be balanced and stabilized, leading to complications regarding how to put into use the object of loss carried from generation to generation. The piano is a remnant of their past, holding the memories, stories, trauma, and pain associated with their collective heritage. Its presence serves as a constant reminder of the losses endured and the unresolved grief carried by the characters. The remains of loss are also manifested through haunting memories and ghostly presences in the play. The characters feel the weight of their ancestors' struggles and the lasting impact of slavery. The ghostly presence of Sutter, a white plantation owner, represents the trauma and oppression inflicted upon the Charles family. These lingering remnants of loss contribute to the melancholic atmosphere of the play.

The piano, in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, represents the accumulation of the losses experienced both by the white and black communities, even though white people are often marginalized as in most of Wilson's plays. While different generations of the black are entangled in this story concerning the legacy of the past, the white community is only represented by one generation. Through remains, different generations attach themselves to a past, thereby regarding the piano as a structural monument *on/in* which the history of the past (slavery time) has been carved, demonstrating a sense of melancholia for the living generations. Following the arguments made, the present article may generate these questions. How to use the past as the legacy of/for the present? How does the piano render itself as an object of loss? What are the various manifestations of melancholia upon facing one's family's past? How the black and the white communities are in conflict over a monument of the past and in what ways this monument signifies liberation?

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* has obtained attention from writers and scholars over the years, essay collections like *May All Your Fences Have Gates* (1994), Mary Bogumil's *Understanding August Wilson* (1999) and *August Wilson: A Casebook* (1994). There are also copious articles and books published on August Wilson's words appeared mostly in theatre, American literature, and African-American journals. In his play, *The Piano Lesson*, most critics focus upon the themes like migration, history, and African oral tradition, while a few have shown interest in issues how melancholia, loss, and its remains carried out through generations. The Piano as a signifier finds its significance as a thing of the past haunting the play, acting like melancholia overshadowing the play. The most common observation in reviews for Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* concerns his ability to bring the characters to life through language. Alvin Klein, in his 1991 New York Times review states that "Mr. Wilson is a wonderful storyteller, with a smooth way of swinging into tales of all sizes and a special knack for the spiritual and the spooky"<sup>13</sup>. Frank Rich addresses the same issue in his review of *The Piano Lesson*: "*The Piano Lesson* seems tossing even when it is talking"<sup>14</sup>.

Wilson is usually concerned with the idea of the past and the identity construction of African people. He has dedicated himself to writing a cycle of plays dramatizing the black experience during "crucial historical periods in order to play out his individual sense of commitment to the cause of black America-which is to allow black men and women to tell American history, a history that, so far, whites have mostly told"<sup>15</sup>. Wilson's complex notion of the past demonstrated in *Piano Lesson*, is at once the "contemporary South, the slave era, and Africa"<sup>16</sup>. Wilson argues that it is only by assuming "Africanness that the black American attains a sense of plenitude and eventually

<sup>12</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains," 4.

<sup>13</sup> Alvin Klein, "Fences: A Haunting Depiction of Family Turmoil," *New York Times* 11, (1991): 11. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2903337>

<sup>14</sup> Frank Rich, "Panoramic History of Blacks in America in Wilson's Piano Lesson". Review of *Piano Lesson* by August Wilson, *New York Times* (April 1990): 13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/bayljtheperf.3.1.0057>

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Goldman, "Of History as One Long Blues Tune: August Wilson," *Dramatics* (April 1990): 14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042097>

<sup>16</sup> Samuel G Freedman, "Fine Tuning: The Piano Lesson," Review of *Piano Lesson* by August Wilson, *New York Times Magazine* (September 1989): 36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3042097>

comes to understand who he or she is"<sup>17</sup>. While dedicating most of his works to the lives and Africans, he writes his stories from the standpoint of the blacks. Bissiri, Usekes, and Elizabeth J. Heard explain the marginalization of the white community in Wilson's plays, especially in his *The Piano Lesson*, which Wilson has intentionally done to suggest that his tendency is "seemingly to marginalize whiteness by restricting it, for the most part, to an off-stage presence serves an important purpose: white restricting white people considered as a whole, Wilson's twentieth-century cycle of plays underscores the economic, social, and judicial dominance of white Americans"<sup>18</sup>.

The writers, considering Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, have mostly dealt with the issues mentioned above but the melancholic aspect of the work, which illustrates the piano as the monument of the past through which the characters can revive their traumatic past, has yet to be depicted. Sometimes one's past should be buried and stay buried to overcome its consequences and trauma, even though its losses may encourage us to move forward. In Heather Love's words: "The losses of the past motivate us and give meaning to our current experience, we are bound to memorialize them (We will never forget). But we are equally bound to overcome the past, to escape its legacy (We will never go back)"<sup>19</sup>. However, this is not the case for the characters in *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson draws attention to a history of a family whose present trauma is rooted in a painful past when their grandparents had been slaves working for the whites.

### Stolen Legacy, Pain of the Past and its Uncertain Destiny

Set in Pittsburgh in the 1930s, *The Piano Lesson* is one of the most popular plays by August Wilson, whose main conflict revolves around a piano handed down from one generation to the next signifying the history of black people; it "seem[s] like that piano's causing all the trouble"<sup>20</sup>. Berniece and her brother, Willie Boy, have inherited that piano from their parents. However, the way each looks at the history of the piano and the way it should be regarded is radically singular. In addition, the appearance of the ghost of the former owner of the piano adds to the complexity of the melancholic atmosphere of the play. The interesting part is that each character including the ghost of the white owner interprets the past and the existence of the piano as the remains of a loss differently. Freud explains that melancholia is an individual loss and suffering not a collective one but here in *The Piano Lesson*, the emphasis is not only on personal loss but also on the collective loss experienced by African Americans throughout history. The piano represents the history of slavery and the Charles family's struggle for freedom. The characters' melancholia reflects their collective grief and the inherited pain passed down through generations. We can see the broader societal impact of loss and melancholia, emphasizing the weight of history on individuals and communities.

*The Piano Lesson* portrays the piano as a metaphorical embodiment of intergenerational melancholia, carrying the weight of the past and serving as a tangible connection to the struggles and losses of previous generations. It explores the complexities of attachment, conflicting legacies, and the potential for catharsis and healing. Through the piano, one can reflect on the intergenerational legacies of melancholia and the potentially transformative power of confronting and reconciling with the unresolved grief and trauma that echoes through time. The piano has become a signifier fraught with the miseries of the past for both the white and the black. As a signifier, its significance and impact are defined differently by each concerning character. Every character's contact with the piano brings out different impacts and interpretations. To overcome their pains, sufferings, and traumas these characters need to own this haunted valuable piece of inheritance.

<sup>17</sup>Amandou Bissiri, "Aspects of Africanness in August Wilson's Drama: Reading *The Piano Lesson* Through Wole Soyinka's Drama," *African American Review* 30.1, (1996): 100.

<sup>18</sup>Cigdem Usekes, "We's the Leftovers": Whiteness as Economic Power and Exploitation in August Wilson's Twentieth-Century Cycle of Plays," Review of *Piano Lesson* by August Wilson. *African America Review*, 3 May 2003, 115. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1512364>

<sup>19</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (London: Cambridge University, 2007), 2.

<sup>20</sup> August Wilson, *The piano lesson* (New York: Dutton, 1990), 104.



"*The Piano Lesson*" centers around the struggle between siblings Berniece and Willie Boy over a piano inherited from their father, who stole it from Sutter's house, a white slave owner. Carved portraits of their ancestors adorn the piano, symbolically containing the terror of slavery within its structure. As Londre argues: "while carved family's portraits decorate the piano's exterior, the horrors of slavery are symbolically contained within"<sup>21</sup>. The piano's history traces back to when Sutter traded Berniece and Doaker's father, their grandmother and great-grandfather, for it. Sutter's wife found solace in the piano, leading Sutter to have the entire family's history carved on it. When she passed away, the piano remained in Sutter's house until Berniece and Willie's father stole it, recognizing it as a testament to their family's history and the legacy of their ancestors. The piano represents a sacrifice made by their father, who gave his life to reclaim their family's legacy and freedom from the legacy of slavery. Harry J. Elam argues: "By stealing the piano these men beat the system and assert a counterclaim on what constitutes ownership and the rights of property"<sup>22</sup>. And this stolen legacy is now an accumulation of the past traumas and pains, bringing people touching it melancholia of loss. When their father got killed, his wife, Berniece, and Willie's mother became melancholic as she could not grieve her loss, she always cleaned the piano as a means of attachment to her dead husband and Berniece played the piano for her as a way of remembering her husband and their sufferings.

Look at this piano. Look at it. 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. Every day, I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece.<sup>23</sup>

Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, underlines that "pain is not only a bodily trauma, it also resists or even shatters language and communication"<sup>24</sup>. Their mother could not mourn for her late husband because she could not find any language to describe her excruciating feelings which had made her melancholic. She believed the piano had held the spirit of her husband, "I was only playing it for her. When my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano"<sup>25</sup>. Scarry continues "Being in pain causes us to be the least human because we are least able to express ourselves and share ourselves with others"<sup>26</sup>. However, the pain in question for her is not a mourning which can be grieved and moved on but according to Freud it is an identification with the lost object or person in question which she does not let go. Berniece's mother polished the piano with her blood. She internalized the loss and suffering and became obsessed with it. After her husband's death, the piano became a legacy, her only connection with him and the past. The piano represents a monument, a history, which keeps digging into the past as a memorial for the loss, which let the mother feel the presence of both her parents and her departed husband. As Bogumil claims, "Berniece recognizes their mother's attachment to the piano, a sign of reverence to their father and, in turn, their forefathers"<sup>27</sup>.

### The Sound of the Piano as the Re-incarnation of the Dead

Freud suggests that melancholia involves the process of identification, where the individual internalizes the lost object. In the play, the characters' identification with the piano reflects their deep emotional connection to their heritage and the losses they have experienced. Berniece's identification is particularly strong, as she sees the piano as a living entity embodying her ancestors' spirits. This identification intensifies her melancholic attachment to the

<sup>21</sup> Felicia Hardson Londre, "A Piano and its History: Family and Transcending family" in *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*, ed. Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), 115.

<sup>22</sup> Harry Elam, *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 147.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 152.

<sup>24</sup> Elaine Scarry, *Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 15.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> Elaine Scarry, "The Body in Pain: An Interview with Elaine Scarry," by Elizabeth Irene Smith, *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 32.2, (September 2006): 236. <http://www.concentric-literature.url.tw/issues/Who%20Speaks%20for%20the%20Human%20Today/10.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Mary L Bogumil, *Understanding August Wilson* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 1999), 84.

instrument. The piano carries with it the spirits of the past, the spirits which can be reincarnated. Her attachment reflects the intergenerational melancholia she carries, as the piano symbolizes the unresolved grief and pain of her ancestors. It becomes a physical embodiment of their losses and a means of holding on to their memory. Berniece's resistance to parting with the piano reflects her struggle to confront and process her intergenerational grief. Berniece asserts: "I used to think their pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometimes 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"<sup>28</sup>. Berniece believes that dwelling in the past can disrupt the apparent peace of the present. Her mother, who was deeply attached to the piano, used to have Berniece play it, awakening memories of her late husband through the music. This melancholic experience is inherited by Berniece, who, after losing her own husband Crawley, is unable to mourn his death. She refuses to remarry, as she has become intertwined with the lingering sense of loss, preventing her from moving forward and finding a new connection. While she has not fully overcome her husband's death, reliving the memories and carrying his presence within her has become a way of living with the absence. Berniece carries the ghost of her late husband, perpetuating her melancholic state and preserving his memory. Avery (a priest) tells her:

How long you gonna carry Crawley with you, Berniece? It's been over three years. At some point you got to let go and go on. Life's got all kinds of twists and turns. That don't mean you stop living. That don't mean you cut yourself off from life. You can't go through life carrying Crawley's ghost with you. Crawley's been dead three years. Three years, Berniece.<sup>29</sup>

By grieving, the loss may disappear but Berniece refuses to grieve or probably she cannot do that. As Wang explains: "Losing her husband makes Berniece even more suspicious of people, defensive of herself, and aloof to life. ... Berniece's emotional burden is also as heavy as what the piano represents"<sup>30</sup>. Similar to the piano, Berniece is also holding the memories and traumas of the past with her. As Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) suggests: the sensation of pain is deeply affected by memories: one can feel pain when reminded of the past trauma by an encounter with another"<sup>31</sup>. Referring to David Eng theory of loss and melancholia, Berniece, by not getting over Crawley is creating a new of him in her mind, as if producing her departed husband every day. He is a loss but at the same time a leftover of the loss. For her, her husband has also become a memorial, a loss of self in which she has unconsciously internalized his loss. She "knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him." In contrast to what "he initially describes as healthy mourning, Freud characterizes melancholia as a type of pathological mourning without end, in which the significance of the lost object remains unconscious and opaque"<sup>32</sup>. Crawley's presence is felt and visited but as a melancholic status. As much as Berniece would like to "forget the painful memories of the past, she carries several emotional burdens which, paradoxically, reveal her close attachment to the past"<sup>33</sup>. Avery, a preacher, tries to get her into marrying him by talking to her in religious terms but her pain is not relievable even through the comfort of religion. Avery argues the Bible says, "The Lord is my refuge . . . and my strength!" With the strength of God you can put the past behind you, Berniece. With the strength of God you can do anything! God got a bright tomorrow"<sup>34</sup>. As defined by Freud in contrast to mourning, melancholia is a state in which you can not let go of the past and move on to a new object. The ghost of the loss has formed an empty signifier within her, always in loss and sadness.

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<sup>28</sup> Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson, 67.

<sup>30</sup> Qun Wang, *An In-depth Study of the Major Plays of African American Playwright August Wilson* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 100.

<sup>31</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 25.

<sup>32</sup> David Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation* (London: Duke University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Wang, *An In-depth Study of the Major Plays of African American Playwright August Wilson*, 100.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 67.

### The Piano as the Characterization of the Past and its Trauma

In *The Piano Lesson*, the piano serves as an heirloom passed down through generations, forging a connection between the present characters and their enslaved ancestors. It becomes a physical link to their family's history and the struggles endured by their predecessors. The weight of the past is carried by the piano, eliciting feelings of longing, loss, and melancholy as the characters navigate their relationship with their heritage. The piano stands as a monument to a traumatic past that affects the entire family, contributing to their collective melancholic state. Furthermore, the piano symbolizes conflicting legacies within the Charles family, representing the divergent perspectives and tensions surrounding its significance. Berniece sees it as a symbol of her family's heritage, while her brother, Boy Willie, views it as a means to acquire financial independence. This conflict highlights the intergenerational tension between preserving the past and seeking progress, as both siblings grapple with their personal desires and the weight of their ancestors' experiences. Berniece does not allow Willie Boy to sell the piano since "selling the piano would desecrate her parent's memories". The piano characterizes the remains of their slave life along with its sufferings, the remains of all the lives lost to preserve and hand the piano down as a historical reminder of their family's past to the generations to come. Berniece is not eager to play the piano because she believes it would awaken the spirits of the past inside the piano; it would awaken all traumas and losses hidden behind the piano's keys. As Londre believes, "Although Berniece refuses to play the piano because she does not want to wake the spirits of her tormented ancestors, she senses that it would be a betrayal to sell off a possession for which so much family blood was shed"<sup>35</sup>. Berniece intends to keep the past memories dormant but she cannot fight them as they are engraved within her. That is why Berniece will not let her daughter know about the history of their past generation. She wishes her a future life bereft of melancholy and trauma. Ironically, she lets her daughter play the piano as it is a reattachment to the past as if it is a spontaneously internalized action that is deeply ingrained in their genes.

The characters experience ambivalence and internal conflicts, mirroring the essence of melancholia. Berniece and Boy Willie grapple with conflicting emotions and desires. Berniece is torn between her duty to honor her family's history and her personal pursuit of happiness. Similarly, Boy Willie faces internal conflict as he balances his ambitions with the weight of his family's past. The loss of ancestral land serves as a significant remain in the play. Boy Willie's determination to sell the piano and use it to reclaim the family's land reflects his desire to restore their lost heritage and rectify past injustices. The land holds deep meaning as a tangible representation of their ancestral connection, generating a sense of longing and unresolved grief. Boy Willie is passionate about persuading his sister to part with the piano, as he believes the money could secure a piece of land in the South, symbolizing freedom and empowerment comparable to that of the white community.

As explained before, mourning, according to Freud, is the process by which individuals consciously confront and work through their grief following a loss. It involves accepting the reality of the loss, experiencing and expressing emotions related to it, and gradually adapting to life without the lost object. Both Berniece and Boy Willie engage in mourning processes, though in different ways. Berniece resists mourning and clings to the piano as a way to hold onto her grief. Berniece's attachment to the piano can be understood as a manifestation of her unresolved grief and her melancholic state. She sees the piano as a tangible connection to her ancestors, and selling it would mean severing ties with their history. This attachment reflects a resistance to fully confront her grief and move through the mourning process, contributing to her melancholic disposition. On the other hand, Boy Willie seeks to confront his losses head-on by wanting to sell the piano and move forward to let go of the past which has haunted them through its remain, piano. Boy Willie wants to claim the past and their identities: "For the first time, a character suggests the South as a place for them to pursue their identities as free men and women"<sup>36</sup>. The South is where slavery was deemed a religious action, where the blacks suffered the most, but his brother wants to sell

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<sup>35</sup> Felicia Hardson Londre, "A Piano and its History: Family and Transcending family" in *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*, ed. Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), 115.

<sup>36</sup> Bogumil, *Understanding August Wilson*, 79.



the piano to buy land there to resurrect the legacy of their ancestors, and at the same take revenge for their traumas imposed upon them. "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 any better. When he comes along he ain't had nothing he could build on".<sup>37</sup>

Owning a piece of land in the South represents more than just anger and trauma for the characters. It symbolizes their reclaiming of power and free will, taking back what was confiscated by the slave owners, as exemplified by their ownership of the piano. As Willie says, "Now, the kind of man my daddy was he would have understood that. I'm sorry you can't see it that way. But that's why I'm gonna take that piano out of here and sell it"<sup>38</sup>. Willie believes that owning property is an act of asserting their freedom and regaining the autonomy that was taken from them. According to Frank Rich, "the disposition of the piano becomes synonymous with the use to which the characters put their ancestral legacy, ... somber shrine to a tragic past or stake to freedom"<sup>39</sup>. Willie believes that a piece of land can take back their respect, freedom, and identity, "the only way for African Americans to gain freedom, dignity, and respect is to stand on what belongs to them"<sup>40</sup>. In his view, owning land allows them to participate in conversations about various subjects on equal footing; "If you got a piece of land you'll find everything else falls right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton . . . the weather, and anything else you want to talk about"<sup>41</sup>. Willie's aspiration is to write their own history through the act of purchasing land in the enemy's territory, while also striving to be like them. Ownership of property in the South grants them the power to make choices and express themselves freely.

### **The Stolen Piano and its Legacy of the Haunted House**

How the past should be utilized is the main conflict between different races and generations that disturbs the balance of the present. Should it be preserved or taken advantage of? The piano represents the labor of the Charles family's enslaved ancestors, who were forced to build it. This labor was extracted from them under oppressive circumstances, adding to the melancholic associations tied to the instrument. The piano stands as a reminder of the historical injustices and the profound losses suffered by their ancestors, contributing to the intergenerational melancholia that permeates the play. According to Londre, "both siblings recognize that family history is part and parcel of that piano. Where they differ so acrimoniously is over how the historical past should be allowed or used to impact on the present"<sup>42</sup>. Willie interprets his father's stealing of the piano as something, which could bring prosperity and benefit to the family. For Berniece the piano as a memorial should be preserved and respected as a part of their identity. After Sutter's wife's death, the piano was stolen, and Sutter looked for the piano until he died. Now, his ghost does not let go of the family, therefore haunting their house in which the piano has been kept since the piano is his only reattachment to the soul of his departed wife. Thus, as one may notice here, "the past is also alive in the form of Sutter's ghost who stalks through Berniece's house".<sup>43</sup> When he was alive, he kept it as a monument to remember his wife, but even after his death, as a form of an apparition, he is searching for the lost object, which is the remain of his loss.

One should not forget that as a former slave owner, Sutter wielded authority and dominion over the lives of African Americans. His ghostly presence at the end of the play represents the lasting influence of systemic oppression and the ways in which the effects of power imbalances can continue to be felt long after the physical presence of the oppressor is gone. The piano is both a site of exerting power and a remain of loss for both parties,

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 46.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Rich, "Panoramic History of Blacks in America in Wilson's Piano Lesson," 15.

<sup>40</sup> Wang, *An In-depth Study of the Major Plays of African American Playwright August Wilson*, 101.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 92.

<sup>42</sup> Londre, "A Piano and its History: Family and Transcending family," 116.

<sup>43</sup> Bogumil, *Understanding August Wilson*, 75.

a clash of races and losses. At the same time, it is the site of memories and existence for finding peace and connection to their losses. "Sutter here cause of that piano. I heard him playing on it one time. I thought it was Berniece but then she don't play that kind of music. I come out here and ain't seen nobody, but the piano keys were moving a mile a minute"<sup>44</sup>. The piano becomes an object that serves as a constant reminder of his wife, symbolizing her presence and preserving her memory. This act of preserving her within the piano characterizes a state of melancholia, as it continually refreshes his memory of her. He cannot properly mourn his wife's death unless he regains ownership of the piano, as it represents a means of reconnecting with her. The piano becomes a significant link between Sutter and his deceased wife, keeping their connection alive and enabling him to find solace in their shared memories, and that is why "he still lays claim to the piano"<sup>45</sup>.

### Ghost and its Exorcism Through the Haunted Piano

The presence of Sutter's ghost serves as a significant element that adds depth and complexity to the play. The ghost of Sutter, a white plantation owner, symbolizes the enduring legacy of slavery and the lasting impact of oppression on the Charles family. Sutter's ghost represents the historical trauma inflicted upon the Charles family and African Americans as a whole. As a former slave owner, Sutter embodies the oppressive forces and brutal history of slavery. His ghostly presence serves as a haunting reminder of the dehumanization and suffering endured by the Charles family's ancestors underlining the deep-rooted pain and trauma that continue to affect subsequent generations. The appearance of Sutter's ghost triggers unresolved grief and guilt within the characters. His presence evokes a range of emotions, including fear, anger, and guilt. Berniece, in particular, feels a deep sense of responsibility for her ancestors' pain, and Sutter's ghost intensifies her feelings of guilt. The ghost becomes a catalyst for the characters to confront their own history and grapple with the weight of their ancestors' experiences.

Thereby, the ghost of the past needs to be exorcised for the house and families to find stability. Sutter is the real owner of the piano, and his presence has overshadowed the whole play. As Wang mentions: "The epic scope of *The Piano Lesson* is also circumscribed by the presence of the ghosts who are as much engaged in fighting for the possession of the piano as African Americans who are struggling to identify their relationship with history"<sup>46</sup>. It seems that Sutter is the real incarnation of melancholy for all the characters occupying the space of the play since he is always there not letting them alone. The ghost of Sutter is bringing chaos to the play along with the tension heightened between Berniece and Willie over selling or keeping the piano. Avery, the preacher, is reciting some verses from the Bible so as to exorcise the ghost. However, it seems that he cannot do it. This confusion is made to the point that the ghost is wrestling with Willie causing him to be nearly choked: "BOY WILLIE begins to wrestle with SUTTER's GHOST. It is a life-and-death struggle fraught with perils and faultless terror. BOY WILLIE is thrown down the stairs. AVERY is stunned into silence. BOY WILLIE picks himself up and dashes back upstairs"<sup>47</sup>. Berniece's playing becomes a powerful form of resistance and liberation, a means to reclaim their space from the haunting influence of the past. Through her connection to the piano and the ancestral spirits, she confronts the oppressive hold that Sutter's ghost has over the family and challenges its dominance. It becomes a profound moment of spiritual and emotional release, as Berniece engages in a fierce confrontation between the forces of history and the power of her own agency.

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

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 47.

<sup>45</sup> Sandra Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (Washington: Harvard University Press, 1995), 147.

<sup>46</sup> Wang, *An In-depth Study of the Major Plays of African American Playwright August Wilson*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 104.

repetition, it gains in strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents.<sup>48</sup>

In essence, Berniece's courageous act of playing the piano becomes an invocation for ancestral support, a symbolic battle against the ghostly presence of Sutter, and a defiant assertion of her family's autonomy and liberation. Berniece by summoning her ancestors whose souls have been hidden in the keys of the piano, exorcises the ghost. "BERNIECE: (Singing.) I want you to help me. ... Mama Berniece I want you to help me Mama Esther I want you to help me Papa Boy Charles I want you to help me Mama Ola I want you to help me"<sup>49</sup>. By exorcising, she not only attaches the ghost wandering in the house with his dead wife but also makes a balance between her past and her present because she has forgotten the past by showing resentment in playing the piano. "The piano enables her to communicate with her ancestors and history; it enables her to find her own voice; it enables her to create her own song by weaving the whole family history together. ... The future instead of being separate from the past is firmly anchored in the past"<sup>50</sup>. It is actually the past that is the source of power and strength for her, the past woven in the spirits of her ancestors.

Sutter's ghost prompts the characters to confront their past and reckon with the consequences of slavery. The ghostly presence serves as a catalyst for dialogue and self-reflection, forcing the characters to confront their own relationship to history and their responsibilities within it. Through this confrontation, the play explores the complexities of acknowledging and reconciling with a painful past. The past works as the assurance of stability for all of them. As Qun Wang elucidates: "The main focus of the piano lesson is not so much on how to let go of the past, as on how to build a person's future by (re)identifying her/his ontological and cultural relationship with the past"<sup>51</sup>. In this profound act, Berniece confronts the painful legacy of her father and grandfathers during the era of slavery. The piano, serving as a symbol of the past and a memorial to her personal losses, becomes a tool for Berniece to reconcile the complexities of history with the present. Through her emotional and cathartic connection to the instrument, she finds a path toward healing and a means of bridging the gap between the past and the present.

Berniece's reluctance in the beginning to play the piano stems from her fear of revisiting the painful memories tied to it. However, as the narrative progresses, she confronts her past and uses the piano as a cathartic tool to process her emotions and begin a healing journey. This confrontation with the past generates a new narrative of personal growth and transformation. Berniece who has tried to forget their grandfathers' past comes face to face with their horror, the ghost of the past. The ghost helps them to meet the past, the trauma they have been trying to ignore and avoid addressing. This exorcism has been the exorcism of her whole family's traumas. She has been relieved of the haunted past by playing the piano; she has got rid of the Sutter's ghost, bringing him peace, by freeing him of his melancholic status and joining him with his wife. Moreover, she manages to get over her own painful traumas and her melancholic condition because of losing her family members, which has made her ambivalent toward her life dangling between the present and past.

The past ensures the reconciliation of the losses with their remains. Berniece invokes the past to help them. She learns that "she can neither ignore the past nor let it lie dormant nor sell it nor give it away. She must take it up and play it, make it a part of her"<sup>52</sup>. Thus, Berniece "sits at the piano and begins a powerful song, playing and singing her incarnation to Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boys Charles, and Mama Ola\_ the old ones who have kept the past from being forgotten\_ asking them repeatedly to help her"<sup>53</sup>. The past represented by the piano acts as a messianic power becoming of assistance to her. For Wilson, "past is not homogeneous and empty and the concept of historical must unite with a vision of the messianic"<sup>54</sup>. Willie Boy, who at the end reconciles with the

<sup>48</sup> Wilson, 104.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, 105.

<sup>50</sup> Wang, *An In-depth Study of the Major Plays of African American Playwright August Wilson*, 111.

<sup>51</sup> Wang, 98.

<sup>52</sup> Patricia Gantt, "Ghosts from Down there" in *August Wilson: A Case Book*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 2000), 81.

<sup>53</sup> Gantt, "Ghosts from Down there," 81.

<sup>54</sup> Elam, *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, 4.

haunted past allows Berniece to keep the piano as their family heritage since he finds out the power and freedom he was after is implanted within the strings and body of the piano. Because to them that is the ground where they can win the battle. As Joan Harrington believes, "It is only when the characters tap into the wellspring of their history and their culture that they are empowered"<sup>55</sup>. This empowerment to respect the past is the reconciliation that they have all been looking for. Willie Boy's acceptance is the living remembrance of their family's past. As Felicia Hardison Londre adds to this:

in fact, there is plenty of history in *The Piano Lesson*; it is simply not the kind of history we learn in school. Each major character in the play is a repository of family and community history and these histories augment one another, sometimes conflicting in the details, but collectively preserving through storytelling an awareness of elements of the past that contributed to the lives they are presently living.<sup>56</sup>

It is the responsibility that the characters have toward the past that defines their present fate and identity. As Monaco underlines, it is through this struggle with one another, the characters "discover that being responsible for one's destiny means being accountable for one's past"<sup>57</sup>. The ghost of Sutter disappears and becomes one with the piano where the memory of his wife is buried and Charles's family also gets over their conflict and decides to keep the piano as something worth preserving, as a memorial of the whole people involved in the destiny of the piano. Ultimately, the piano becomes a catalyst for catharsis and healing. Through the powerful act of playing the piano, Berniece channels her intergenerational melancholia, releasing the repressed grief and pain that has been intertwined with the instrument. This cathartic moment allows her to confront the past, reconcile with her heritage, and begin the journey toward healing and liberation.

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<sup>55</sup> Joan Harrington, "I Ain't Sorry for Nothin' I Done" in *August Wilson Process of Play Writing* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 39.

<sup>56</sup> Londre, "A Piano and its History: Family and Transcending family," 114.

<sup>57</sup> Pamela Jean Monaco, "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" in *August Wilson: A Case Book*, ed. Marilyn Elkins (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 2000), 98.

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