



The Role of Ghosts in August Wilson's the Piano Lesson

Lawend Ikram Mohammed/ Department of English, College of Humanities, Zakho University-
Zakho,Duhok,Kurdistan Region,Iraq.



CORRESPONDENCE

Lawend Ikram Mohammed
Lawend.mohammed@uoz.edu.krd

Reiceved 15/07/2024
Accepted 10/09/2024
Published 15/12/2024

Keywords:

August Wilson,
Symbolism,
the ghosts,
identity,
African American heritage,
traumatic legacy.

Abstract

This study explores the role of ghosts in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, concentrating on how these supernatural elements symbolize the traumatic legacy of slavery and reflect African American heritage. The main problem indicated is the symbolic function of ghosts in the play and their connection to the African American experience, notably in how they represent the ongoing consequence of slavery on familial and cultural identity. Utilizing the close reading approach, the analysis examines the text through the lens of Gothic fiction and African American folklore, unfolding the ghosts as symbols of historical trauma and spiritual continuity. The study finds that the ghosts manifest unresolved historical trauma and embark on the complex struggle between valuing the past and pursuing material advancement. Wilson's utilization of Gothic elements enhances the play's exploration of African American history and spirituality, with the ghosts symbolizing the lasting effects of slavery and underscoring the need for reconciliation with the past to achieve personal and familial unity.



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1. Introduction

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* is a cornerstone of his Pittsburgh Cycle, first presented as a staged reading at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in 1987 and later performed at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1990, the play delves deeply into themes of family, heritage, and the legacy of slavery through the lens of the Charles family in Pittsburgh. The central conflict revolves around a piano, a valuable family heirloom intricately carved with images that capture the Charles family's history, including their ancestors' period of enslavement (Kruize 25).

Wilson's portrayal of ghosts in *The Piano Lesson* serves a dual purpose. The ghosts symbolize the traumatic legacy of slavery, acting as manifestations of the unresolved pain and injustices that continue to haunt the family. For instance, the ghost of Sutter represents the historical violence and exploitation faced by the Charles family's ancestors, serving as a powerful reminder of this legacy. Simultaneously, the ghosts reflect African American spiritual beliefs and traditions, embodying a form of spiritual continuity that connects the living with their ancestors. This dual role emphasizes both the emotional burden of historical trauma and the importance of spiritual heritage.

This study aims to analyze how Wilson uses these ghosts to highlight themes of racial inferiority and spiritual resilience. By examining their symbolic functions, this paper will explore how these supernatural elements serve as a conduit for understanding the enduring impact of slavery and the complexities of African American spirituality. The analysis will be structured around three key areas: the historical and cultural context of the play, the role of the piano as a symbol of heritage and trauma, and the depiction of ghosts as reflections of both personal and collective trauma.

2. Literature Review

August Wilson's plays, including *The Piano Lesson*, are often celebrated for their rich portrayal of African American folklore and spirituality. Scholars have extensively explored how Wilson incorporates elements of African American cultural traditions into his narratives. For instance, Wilson's use of folklore and spirituality is seen as a means of expressing the complexities of African American identity and history. As Andrew M. Stauffer (2005) notes, Wilson's integration of folklore into his works serves as a powerful tool for exploring themes of heritage and historical trauma. Stauffer argue that Wilson's plays often reflect the mystical and spiritual dimensions of African American culture, highlighting the importance of ancestral connections and spiritual beliefs in shaping individual and collective identities (Stauffer 74).

The incorporation of Gothic elements in *The Piano Lesson* has been a focal point for many literary critics. While Wilson's play is not traditionally classified as Gothic literature, it contains significant Gothic features, particularly in its use of ghosts and supernatural elements to explore themes of trauma and legacy. Critics such as Robert K. Martin (1990) have examined how the play's ghostly apparitions function to evoke a sense of historical and psychological haunting. Martin suggests that the ghosts in *The Piano Lesson* symbolize the unresolved traumas of slavery and serve as a metaphor for the lingering impact of racial oppression (Martin 112).

The exploration of trauma and historical memory in African American literature is a well-established area of scholarship. Critics like Deborah E. McDowell (1998) have discussed how African American writers use literary forms to address and process the legacy of slavery and racial violence. McDowell's analysis of trauma theory in African American literature emphasizes how narrative can function as a means of confronting and working through historical pain. In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson's portrayal of ghosts and the family's struggle with their past can be seen as a reflection of these broader themes of trauma and historical memory (McDowell 45).

The symbolic role of the piano in Wilson's play has also received significant attention. The piano, intricately carved with the history of the Charles family, represents both a physical and symbolic link to their past. Literary scholars such as Ellen M. Williams (2002) argue that the piano serves as a powerful emblem of familial heritage and the painful legacy of slavery. Williams suggests that the piano's carvings, which depict the family's ancestors, embody the dual nature of memory as both a source of pride and a reminder of historical suffering (Williams 89).

The dynamics of family unity and division are central themes in *The Piano Lesson*, and these themes have been explored in various critical studies. Researchers like James W. Coleman (2003) have analyzed how Wilson portrays family conflict as a reflection of broader societal issues. Coleman argues that the disagreements between Boy Willie and Berniece over the fate of the piano symbolize deeper conflicts within the African American community regarding the reconciliation of past and future (Coleman 67). The play's resolution, in which the family comes together, highlights the importance of unity in overcoming historical trauma and forging a path forward.

The existing literature on *The Piano Lesson* reveals a rich tapestry of interpretations regarding African American folklore, Gothic elements, trauma, and symbolism. Scholars have recognized Wilson's ability to blend cultural traditions with dramatic narratives, using elements such as ghosts and historical artifacts to explore themes of heritage, memory, and identity. This review of the literature provides a foundation for understanding the complex ways in which *The Piano Lesson* addresses the enduring impact of slavery and the role of spiritual and cultural beliefs in shaping the African American experience.

3. Methodology

This research is driven by the question of how the ghosts in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* reflect African American folklore and the legacy of slavery. The primary data source for this analysis is the text of *The Piano Lesson* itself. The play's rich integration of historical trauma, spirituality, and cultural identity makes it an ideal subject for a close reading analysis. The methodology employed in this study is the close reading method. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the text, focusing on the nuanced language, symbolism, and narrative structure that Wilson uses to convey complex themes. Through close reading, the study delves into how the play's dialogue, stage directions, and character interactions reflect broader themes related to haunting and the enduring impact of slavery. Data was meticulously gathered by engaging in a thorough reading and re-reading of *The Piano Lesson*. Particular attention was paid to scenes that involve ghostly apparitions, references to African American folklore, and discussions of the legacy of slavery. Key scenes, such as Berniece's invocation of her ancestors and the exorcism of Sutter's ghost, were singled out for their symbolic significance and their relevance to the research question.

The analysis focused on interpreting how the text's language and symbolism articulate themes of historical trauma, cultural identity, and spirituality. The close reading method enabled a detailed examination of the play's intricate layers, revealing how Wilson's use of language and symbolism portrays the psychological and cultural effects of slavery on the Charles family. Interpretations were further enriched by incorporating relevant literary theories, such as postcolonial and trauma theories, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the play's treatment of these themes.

Throughout the study, careful attention was given to the cultural significance of African American traditions and narratives depicted in the play. The analysis aimed to offer a respectful and nuanced interpretation, acknowledging the depth of Wilson's portrayal of African American spirituality and history.

The close reading method was selected for its ability to uncover the multiple layers of meaning embedded in Wilson's text, particularly concerning the interplay of history, culture, and identity. While the play's dense symbolism presented certain interpretative challenges, these were effectively addressed by incorporating scholarly perspectives and maintaining a strong focus on the text's intricate details. This approach ensured a thorough and sensitive analysis, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the play's thematic richness.

4. *The Piano Lesson: Summary of The Play*

The story revolves around the Charles family and centers on a valuable family heirloom, a piano decorated with intricate carvings. The piano carries the history of the family, including the struggles of their ancestors who were enslaved. The main conflict arises between the siblings, Boy Willie and Berniece Charles. Boy Willie desires to trade the piano to buy land, whereas Berniece demands to preserve it as a symbol of their tradition. The piano also represents the painful legacy of slavery and the complex relationship the characters have with their past. The ghost of Sutter, the son of a white slave owner, appears from time to time in the play to scare the family. There are also the ghosts of the Yellow Dog, and the train, who are the spirits of the father of both Boy Willie and his sister, Berniece, who died trying to get the piano with some men because the piano was traded with slaves, Doaker's father and his grandmother. The play ends with the family's attempts at exorcism to get rid of the ghosts. Once Berniece starts to play the piano, everything ends.

5. *The Ghosts in The Piano Lesson Top of Form*

The ghosts in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* play a crucial role in the narrative. To understand their significance, it's important to first explore the concept of Gothic fiction, as the presence of ghosts in literature often connects a work to this genre. The term "Gothic" originally comes from the Goths, a Germanic tribe that invaded the Christian Roman Empire after the fall of Rome in the 4th century A.D. The Goths later adopted Christianity and introduced a distinct architectural style characterized by its emotional intensity—meant to evoke feelings such as awe, pity, fear, or horror. This style differed from the classical Roman style, as it was often crude, grotesque, and exaggerated (Prendergast 1).

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is often regarded as the first Gothic novel, known for its mysterious and supernatural elements set in a medieval setting. This novel became a prototype for subsequent Gothic fiction (Mohammed 21). Early Gothic fiction often featured gloomy castles as settings, which have since been replaced by old houses in modern works. Gothic fiction is marked by its antirealism, emphasizing emotional effects and imagination that go beyond rational limits. Common elements in Gothic literature include anxiety, murder, madness, hauntings, and the reappearance of the dead as ghosts. These haunted settings often reflect the characters' internal struggles and fears, forcing them to confront their past in search of solutions. The persistence of time is a key theme in Gothic works, where characters are haunted by their past (Botting 2).

August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* is not typically classified as a Gothic work, but it does contain elements that can be interpreted as having a Gothic atmosphere. The play revolves around a family heirloom, a piano, that represents the haunted past of the Charles family. The piano is carved with the images of their enslaved ancestors and becomes a source of conflict, symbolizing the ghosts of the past. The Charles family has a history marked by

tragedy and secrets. Berniece, one of the main characters, is haunted by the memory of her late husband, Boy Willie's father, who died under mysterious circumstances. The revelation of these family secrets adds a Gothic dimension to the narrative.

August Wilson's play, *The Piano Lesson*, opens with a stage direction that establishes the play's gothic atmosphere. So, from the very beginning, the antirealistic feature is presented: "The dawn is beginning to announce itself, but there is something in the air that belongs to the night. A stillness that is a portent, a gathering, a coming together of something akin to a storm" (Wilson 1). In addition, this stage direction may foreshadow the following events that unfold later in the play. The word "storm" metaphorically refers to conflict between the members of the Charles family. Hence, immediately after that Boy Willie arrives and the argument with Berniece starts over selling the piano of the family. The ghosts are first introduced in this play when Boy Willie, Berniece, and Doaker discuss about the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog when Boy Charles died trying to rob the piano that caused his family's fracture by Sutter. Retelling the story of the Ghost of the Yellow Dog and how Boy Charles died with other black men implies the ideas of resistance and haunting. The death of Boy Charles and the other men with him in the hands of white men symbolizes the racial oppression of the blacks by the whites. The play, and through the use of this gothic element, portrays the painful experience of slavery from an African American perspective. This also shows the persistence of the past of the family members. They are unable to be separated from their past. Retelling the story of the death of Boy Charles reflects the idea that the Charles family is still suffering from the trauma caused by their past. It exemplifies what has been argued about trauma; "cure for trauma is a successful [narration] of the violent event" (van Alphen in Labanyi 106). Boy Willie and Berniece handle their trauma differently. Boy Willie talks openly about the past, while Berniece avoids it and tries to distance herself from it. This contrast highlights the presence of the second ghost in the play: Sutter's ghost, the white master who once owned the Charles family. Berniece even avoids sharing her family's history with her daughter Maretha, leading to disagreements with Boy Willie.

You tell your mama to tell you about that piano. You ask her how them pictures got on there. If she don't tell you I'll tell you (Wilson 22)

Berniece's refusal to play the piano and tell her daughter about its history symbolizes her emotional entrapment. Her unresolved past and lack of resolution are manifested through the ghost of Sutter. Her past represented by Sutter's ghost terrifies her and eventually, she is psychologically paralyzed in front of this unrest caused by her past. The ghost represents the unresolved issues or traumas from the past. unfinished business that haunts characters or locations. The presence of the ghost of Sutter serves as a reminder that the past cannot be easily forgotten or escaped. The fearful haunting experience in the play is not resolved until the end of the story when Berniece faces or encounters her past in the scene when Avery, the priest carries out exorcism to get rid of Sutter's ghost. In this scene, Berniece plays the piano for the first time and with this action, This act ends the unresolved conflicts, the haunting of Sutter's ghost, and the emotional burden that has plagued her family. Both Berniece and Boy Willie are haunted by the same ghost that caused their family fracture which also indicates the traumatic experience of slavery that their ancestors suffered from.

Berniece starts to play the piano while chanting “I want you to help me” (Wilson 107) and calls upon the spirits of her family that are captured in the piano. Even though the ghosts do not become animate as Sutter’s ghost does, Berniece’s music does drive out Sutter’s ghost (Wilson 107).

The theme of being haunted and the fears of the past that the characters show in this play reflect what is known as internalized racism since the white implant the idea that emphasizes the superiority of the white on the part of the black people. This inferiority haunts the characters and makes them unable to face the ghost. This is one of the aspects that show how the black were dominated by the white (Subedi 15).

Presenting the ghosts and the way they are treated in this play can be tackled from a distinct perspective other than that of a gothic element. In *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson explores the African American culture and tradition. The character of Sutter's ghost is a manifestation of the supernatural. The family believes that Sutter's ghost is present in the household, haunting the piano. This belief reflects a common theme in African American folklore where spirits of the deceased linger in certain places or objects. Accordingly, it can be stated that the play offers key concepts about African American cosmology. Including the ghost in the story reflects folk and African mystical traditions that are related to ghosts, ghost stories, and spirits. In the play, Boy Willie believes that Sutter had been killed by the Ghost of Yellow Dog. He says, “The Ghost of Yellow Dog got Sutter” (Wilson 15). The play deals with African American culture highlighting its identity that is to be studied from an African American perspective not the by the white. It shows that African Americans have their own traditions, beliefs, and spiritual practices and that does not need to be that of the white. They also have their own literature and poetics. This eventually reflects their uniqueness (Subedi 13). Bernice supposes that the assistance of ancestors' potential inside the piano will support her in overcoming the ghosts. She starts the process of exorcism by playing the piano, hoping to invoke her ancestors to aid Willie in the fight against the ghosts.

BERNICE: I want you to help me.....

Ma Berniece.....

I want you to help me

Mama Esther. (Wilson 107)

This scene, calling the ancestors, reflects Wilson’s strong belief in the Afro-American verbal traditions as fighting the spirits in this play. After calling the ancestors Berniece becomes stronger and Boy Willie realizes that family union and history is more important than any financial profits he would gain. He becomes proud of the history of the family and their past, this is the real value for him. By the embodiment of these features in his characters, Wilson shows his strong belief in African American rituals and spirituality. He defines his culture in terms of beliefs in spirits, magic, and voodoo rituals (African rituals of spirituality) in contrast to Christianity. His play sheds light on the struggles between African American religious

views and Christianity (Pimpliskar 3). The play explores the connection between the living and the ancestors. The piano is a direct link to the family's past and serves as a connection to their roots. The characters are confused by the question of whether they should hold onto the past or let it go to secure their future.

August Wilson's work often draws on the African American experience and folklore, and "*The Piano Lesson*" is no exception. The play weaves these superstitions and beliefs into the fabric of the narrative, enriching the story with cultural depth and complexity. However, the victory over the ghost of Sutter comes from the unity of the family, by going to their roots. The unity between the brother and the sister exorcised the piano, and the ghost left. "The materialistic aspect is defeated. The fathers are honored by keeping their history, their roots, not by buying land and trying to stand feet by feet with the Whites, because they will always back to each other" (Khalil 6).

6. Conclusion

Literature serves as a medium for conveying messages across the world, often through indirect methods rather than direct communication. Readers are influenced by these techniques and the subtleties of the writer's intentions. This is evident in *The Piano Lesson*, where August Wilson primarily explores themes through various techniques, including the use of symbolism. To sum up the discussion, August Wilson's use of ghosts serves as a powerful symbol of the persistent impact of slavery and its impact on African American identity in the play. The ghosts associated with the piano illustrate the Charles family's unresolved trauma, reflecting broader themes of historical impact and cultural heritage. The analysis reveals that these spectral figures are not mere Gothic elements but crucial components in exploring the complex dynamics between honoring the past and seeking material progress. The ghosts underscore the characters' struggle with their history, demonstrating how unresolved trauma influences their present lives. The play's conclusion where Berniece's piano playing dispels the ghosts, suggests that reconciling with historical trauma is key to personal and familial resolution. Regarding the incorporation of Gothic elements, they enhance the narrative by emphasizing how African American folklore and historical trauma shape the characters' experiences. Thus, Wilson's play effectively shows that confronting and integrating historical experiences is essential for moving forward. In addition, we found that the ghosts symbolize the necessity of acknowledging and resolving past traumas for personal and collective growth. This result underscores the play's message: true progress requires embracing and reconciling with one's heritage rather than ignoring it.

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رولێ ئەجنان د شانۆگه‌ریا *The Piano Lesson* یا ئوگست ویلسون

لاوند إكرام محمد

به‌شی زمانی ئینگلیزی، کۆلیژی مروفايه‌تی،
زانکۆی زاخۆ - دهوك، هه‌رێمی کوردستان، عێراق.

lawend.mohammed@uoz.edu.krd

پوخته

ئەف فەكولینه لدور فەدیتنا رولێ جنان د شانۆگه‌ریا "*The Piano Lesson*" یا ئوگست ویلسونی یه، برێكا دیاركرنا ریبازین ده‌ستنیشانكری بچه‌وانیا سه‌ره‌ده‌ریكرن دگه‌ل ئەوان ئامرازین هه‌یزێ ئەوین گرێدای كۆلتورێ چینه‌یه‌تی و به‌ندا تیا ب ئیش، كو دنافا ئەفریقیین ل ئەمریکادا دژین هاتینه بكارئینان، فەكولین گه‌هشتیه ئەوێ چه‌ندێ كو كیشا سه‌ره‌کی دنافا ئەفێ شانۆگه‌رییدا دیاركرنا كارێ ئەوان جنان برێكا چه‌ندین سومبولان بوو، زێده‌باری گرێدانا كارێ وان ب تاقیکرنا ئەفریقا ئەمریکی فە بوو لدور چه‌وانیا دیاركرنا كارئیکرنا به‌ندا تیب لسه‌ر ره‌گه‌زنامه‌یا وان چ لسه‌ر ئاستن تاكه‌سه‌سی و خیزانی یان جفاکی بیت. دیسان ریبازا شروفه‌كرنا هوبیر دخواندنا ده‌قین ئەفێ شانۆگه‌رییدا هاتیه بكارئینان، برێكا بكارئینانا ریبازین ئەده‌بیاتا قوتی و فلکلورێ ئەفریقی- ئەمریکی؛ ژبه‌ركو ئەف شروفه‌كر نه‌ به‌ره‌ف دیاركرنا جنان دچت كو مینا سومبولین میژویی و گیانی دده‌نه نیاسین. دیسان فەكولین گه‌هشتیه ئەوێ چه‌ندێ كو جنه ده‌هاته دانان وه‌ك شوکه‌كا میژویا بچ چاره‌سه‌ری، و ئەف هه‌فۆریه دنافه‌را پيشاندانا پاشه‌روژێ و پيشكه‌فتنێن ماددیدا دما، بكارئینانا ویلسونی ژبو ره‌گه‌زین قوتی دناف هه‌وکیشه‌یا شانۆگه‌رییدا خورتكرنا دیاركرنا میژویا شانۆگه‌ریه‌ و گیانه‌ ئەفریقی - ئەمریکی بوو، كو جنه دكرنه سومبول به‌ندا یه‌تی، دیسان ته‌كه‌ز لسه‌ر لیکخوشبوونا دنافه‌را رابردوویی و بده‌سته‌ئینانا ئیکگرتنا تاكه‌سه‌سی و خیزانی دكر.

ووشه سه‌ره‌کیه‌کان: ئوگست ویلسون، سیمبول، ئەجن، ناسنامه، كه‌لتورێ ئەمریکیین ئەفریقی، میراتێ بئیش.

دور الأشباح في مسرحية (*The Piano Lesson*) لأوغست ویلسون

لاوند إكرام محمد

قسم اللغة الانكليزية ، كلية الانسانيه
جامعة زاخو . دهوك، أقليم كوردستان، العراق.

lawend.mohammed@uoz.edu.krd

الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة دور الأشباح في "*The Piano Lesson*" لأوغست ویلسون، مع التركيز على أساليب هذه العناصر الخارقة للطبيعة التي ترمز إلى الإرث المؤلم للعبودية وتعكس التراث الأمريكيين الأفارقة. المشكلة الرئيسية التي تم تحديدها هي الوظيفة الرمزية للأشباح في المسرحية. تكمن هذه الوظيفة في علاقتها بالتجربة الأفريقية الأمريكية. خاصةً في كيفية إظهارها للتأثير المستمر للعبودية على الهوية العائلية والثقافية. لا سيما في كيفية تمثيلها للتأثير المستمر للعبودية على الهوية العائلية والثقافية. تم استخدام منهجية القراءة الدقيقة لتحليل النص من خلال عدسة الأدب القومي والفولكلور الأفريقي الأمريكي، مما يكشف عن الأشباح كرموز للصدمة التاريخية والاستمرارية الروحية.

تجد الدراسة أن الأشباح تجسد الصدمة التاريخية غير المحلولة وتشرع في النضال المعقد بين تقدير الماضي والسعي لتحقيق التقدم المادي. استخدام ویلسون للعناصر القوطية يعزز استكشاف المسرحية لتاريخ الروحانية الأفريقية الأمريكية، حيث ترمز الأشباح إلى الآثار الدائمة للعبودية وتؤكد على الحاجة إلى التصالح مع الماضي لتحقيق الوحدة الشخصية والعائلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أوغست ویلسون، الرمزية، الأشباح، الهوية، التراث الأفريقي الأمريكي، الإرث المؤلم .