

# Trauma in August Wilson's The Piano Lesson

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## ABSTRACT

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1987) is a play which deals with the social life of a broken African American family in Pittsburg – a city in Pennsylvania – who migrated from the South. The family's grandparents, who were slaves on a Southern plantation, were separated and exchanged with a piano. This shocking incident causes cross-generational trauma and other traumatic incidents for the family as they retrieved the piano. This study examines the play through the lens of Literary Trauma Theory. This theory appeared in the middle of 1990's, henceforth it has been developed by so many scholars, and the latest revision is made by Joshua Pederson, an Associate Professor of Humanities at Boston University, in 2014. The first wave of the theorists claim that trauma causes amnesia for the victims; they can neither remember nor describe what they have experienced, but Pederson in his revised edition of the theory proves the opposite. By applying the latest version of trauma theory this study shows how slavery, its aftermath or its legacy affected and haunted African Americans, and created trauma or historical trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for the African Americans.

**KEY WORDS:** African Americans, Chattel Slavery, Southern Plantation, Transgenerational Trauma, Trauma Theory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

August Wilson wrote a cycle of ten plays; each of them was designed to deal with a decade of African Americans' life in the twentieth century. *The Piano Lesson* is Wilson's fourth play, written between his other two works *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, which won the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Drama (Hurwitt, 2017).

The play is set in Pittsburgh in 1936, i.e., it is concerned with the fourth decade of the life of African Americans. In 1987 the play was staged at the Yale Repertory Theatre and later on Broadway. Originally, as August Wilson explained in an interview with the *New*

*York Times*, the idea of the play was inspired by a painting titled 'Piano Lesson' by Romare Bearden, who is considered as one of the most important American artists of the twentieth century (Biography, 2018). Wilson explained that the piano initially provided him with "a link to the past, to Africa, to who these people are. And then the question became, what do you do with your legacy? How do you best put it to use?" (Morales, 1994, p. 105). The playwright's employment of ghosts in the play is "an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history" (Brogan, 1995, p. 150). Therefore, the play's major concern is the unwritten history of African Americans. Within the play, there is a great sibling rivalry between a brother, Willie Boy, and a sister, Berniece, over the family's heirloom, a piano that carries the history of their ancestors during the Antebellum chattel slavery.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literary trauma theory originally emerged in the field of literary criticism by the publication of Cathy Caruth's book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* in 1996. Caruth claims that survivors can neither recall

Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (KUJHSS).

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2020.

Received 12 February 2018; Accepted 08 May 2019,

Regular research paper: Published 26 June 2020

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nor depict traumatic events; the latter only belatedly reemerges as repeated nightmares and compulsive thoughts. In other words, survivors of trauma suffer from memory loss, they may forget the event. Victims of trauma can neither remember, nor represent traumatic events, which can only belatedly reemerge as repeated nightmares and compulsive thoughts (Caruth 1991). Caruth, in an introductory essay to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), provides a clear description of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She suggests that a traumatic event cannot be “experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, 1995, p. 5). Countless scholarly works have been conducted in the light of literary trauma theory.

American Psychiatric Association (2016), in *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder*, fifth edition known as (DSM-5), presents a list of conditions which cause mental and/or emotional traumas that justify the diagnosis of PTSD:

- A serious threat or harm to one’s life or physical integrity.
- A threat or harm to one’s children, spouse or close relative.
- Sudden destruction of one’s home or community.
- Seeing another person injured or killed as result of accident or physical violence.
- Learning about a serious threat to a relative or a close friend being kidnapped, tortured or killed.
- Stressor is experienced with intense fear, terror and helplessness.
- Stressor and disorder is considered to be more serious and will last longer when the stressor is of human design. (p. 120)

DeGruy (2005) wonders that any one of the above stressors or events is enough to cause PTSD. So what about African slaves? Many of them experienced not only one, but all the aforementioned stressors. The majority of the slaves were repeatedly subjugated to these traumatic experiences. On the other hand, the slaves were “exposed to a ‘lifetime’ of traumas”, since they were brought to the United States of America from Africa, and the majority were “traumatized by traumatic events” (DeGruy, 2005, p. 118).

DeGruy develops her theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome and publishes it in 2005 under the title *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*. She describes a set of behaviors that are related to African Americans’ transgenerational trauma. DeGruy suggests that the slaves’ untreated PTSD is passed to their descendants.

Shoshana Felman (2002), in her book *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, offers an account of the surprising interaction between

trauma and justice and explores the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. Felman argues that “the encounter of law with trauma impacts the structures of the law and transforms that legal procedure, thereby giving to the trial a new jurisprudential dimension” (Starman, 2006, p. 1).

Initially, trauma theory was generated in the field of psychology, then employed in the domains of sociology and literature; that is to say, they share the same theoretical premise. Therefore, the following lines make a brief review of some works in the field of psychology and sociology.

Michelle M. Sotero, a scholar at the University of Nevada, in an article in 2006 entitled “A Conceptual Model of Historical Trauma: Implications for Public Health Practice and Research,” hypothesizes that “historical trauma theory” is a relatively new concept. The premise of this theory is that “populations historically subjected to long-term, mass trauma – colonialism, slavery, war, genocide – exhibit a higher prevalence of disease even several generations after the original trauma occurred” (p. 93). According to Sotero the descendants of nations who are affected by historical trauma exhibit various symptoms of PTSD.

Mohatt et al. (2014) in their study “Historical Trauma as Public Narrative: A Conceptual Review of How History Impacts Present-day Health” explain how historical trauma “influences the health of individuals and communities. [They] argue that historical trauma functions as a public narrative for particular groups or communities” (p. 128). Mohatt et al. point out that scholars to describe the generational aspect of historical trauma use different terminology as transgenerational, intergenerational, multi-generational, or cross-generational, and have introduced concepts, such as soul wound or Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome.

Danzer et al. (2016) in their research “White Psychologists and African Americans’ Historical Trauma: Implications for Practice” suggest that white racism is another source of trauma for the African Americans, in addition to the effects of slavery’s historical trauma.

Returning to Caruth’s literary trauma theory in the field of criticism, Anne Whitehead’s (2004) *Trauma Fiction* applies it to miscellaneous literary works. In the introduction, Whitehead (2004) raises a question about the contradictory nature of literary trauma theory via commenting on the title of her book, “The term ‘trauma fiction’ represents a paradox or contradiction: if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction” (Whitehead, 2004, p.3)? Lise De Mey’s (2012) MA thesis “The Representation of Trauma in Shira Nayman’s *Awake in the Dark* and *The Listener*” deals with the survivors of the

firsthand and intergenerational trauma of Jewish Holocaust. A PhD dissertation entitled "The Application of Trauma Theory to the Post-World War I Writing of Ernest Hemingway, Laurence Stallings and Harry Crosby" by Wael Juma Hafeez Salam (2016) at the University of Texas deals with the victims of the First World War trauma.

Michelle Balaev (2008), in an article "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory", suggests that identity is shaped by trauma's transgenerational transmission. After two decades from the outset of literary trauma theory, Michelle Balaev edited and collected a group of contemporary academic articles and published them under the title *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014). In chapter five interestingly, Irene Visser's "Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies" shows the limitation of trauma theory for postcolonial studies, and she adapts the theory of 'grid-group' diagram in order to interpret trauma in postcolonial criticism.

In a PhD study at the University of Manchester by Electra Georgiades (2014) under the title "Trauma, Company and Witnessing in Samuel Beckett's Post-War Drama, 1952-61" relies on the first wave theorists of trauma as Cathy Caruth, Kai Erikson, Dori Laub, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart. These theorists claim that the victims of trauma suffer from traumatic amnesia and are able neither to recollect nor to describe their past traumatic events. However, Georgiades (2014) after an extensive study proves otherwise:

*Though it has been argued that Beckett's protagonists suffer from a 'profound form of amnesia,' 'total amnesia,' or that they are 'bereft of [...] their memories,' a number of references they make to their past suggest otherwise. We may approach such episodes, episodes which depict the deliberate recollection of past events, as instances of voluntary memory. (p. 111)*

However, Joshua Pederson, who is a scholar at Boston University, depending on a myriad of academic researches of Richard McNally's research team at Harvard University's Department of Psychology, proposed an alternative model of literary trauma theory in 2014 in his seminal study "Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory". Pederson, unlike Caruth, suggests that survivors can both recollect and describe their traumatic experience (Pederson 2014, p. 338). Pederson's theoretical framework is comprised of three elements: first, scholars in order to analyze a text should change their attention to the text rather than searching for gaps or traumatic amnesia because trauma is memorable and speakable, and victims can construct reliable narrative about their experience, which has a great role in alleviating or healing their traumatic wounds. Second, traumatic exposure does not hinder or banish survivors' memory,

adversely; it enhances the memory of the victims. They precisely remember what has happened to them in detail. Usually victims record the traumatic event by using the five senses; they use visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile and gustatory cues to register their exposure. Third, although trauma strengthens the memory of the survivors, their memory partially might be altered; for instance, time slows down, the world seems unreal, spaces may loom, and victims may feel they slip outside their bodies. Scholars call all these symptoms 'peritraumatic dissociation'.

Pederson himself applied his theory to three works of art. First, Alain Resnais's drama film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Pederson offers "a critique of Caruth's interpretation of Resnais's ... *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and suggest[s] the film's depiction of personal and historical loss supports McNally's theory of trauma, not her own" (Pederson, 2014, p. 340). The second work is entitled "Dulce et Decorum Est" by one of the FWW's noticeable veteran poets, Wilfred Owen. His poem is concerned with the memory of trauma. The third one is a novel by Jonathan Safran Foer's (2005) *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Additionally, this paper has benefited from another study by Pederson in the field of trauma entitled "Trauma and Narrative" published as a chapter in a *Trauma and Literature* (2018) edited by J. Roger Kurtz.

This study, by adopting Pederson's theoretical framework, attempts to analyze the abovementioned plays to demonstrate how the playwrights reflect upon traumatized African American characters and how they deal with trauma in their works; then how the three elements of Pederson's new literary trauma theory play out in the close reading of the text of the plays.

### 3. THE ORIGINAL TRAUMA OF CHARLES'S FAMILY

Recent studies suggest "[t]he children and grandchildren of historically traumatized populations continue to manifest such symptoms and risk factors even when they have not been, in a traditional sense, directly traumatized" (Danzer et al., 2014, p. 351), and Mohatt et al (2016) propose that African Americans are victims of historical trauma as they possess "a history of oppression, victimization, or massive group trauma exposure" (p.128). Accordingly, all the black characters in this play are traumatized twice or thrice. First, the characters are vicariously traumatized since their ancestors are exposed to various traumatic events during the Middle Passage slave trade and as slaves on the plantations, therefore "the blemish of these inhumane conditions persists as a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome on the collective mind of Africans in America" (Akbar, 2006, p. i). Second, the characters have experienced traumatic events first-hand.

During the Antebellum slavery, the Charles's family was owned by the Sutters. Robert Sutter, on the anniversary of his wedding, wanted to buy a piano for his wife, but he did not have enough money. Therefore, he paid two of his slaves, a mother and her son from the Charles's family in exchange for the piano.

The split of the family causes trauma for the family members and the coming generations. The Sutters keep Papa Willie boy and sell Mama Berniece and her son. Papa Willie Boy remains alone, traumatized (in accordance with DSM-5) by the sudden destruction of his family; similarly, Mama Berniece and her son are traumatized by the same event. When the Sutters ask Papa Willie Boy to draw the images of his wife as well as his son on the body of the piano, instead of narrating his emotional wounds in words, he portrays the pictures of not only his lost family on the body of the piano but also the entire history of his family. Here he gives "adequate expression" to the shocking event of the sudden destruction of his family in deeds (Pderson, 2018, p. 97) that functions as "talking cure". Therefore, the piano becomes the heirloom that carries an invaluable record of the entire history of Charles's family.

Later, after passing one generation, Doaker, Wining Boy and their elder brother, Boy Charles (father of Boy Willie and Berniece) stole the piano. The Sutters rounded up a lynching mob who set Boy Charles's house on fire. Boy Charles fled from the posse and caught the Yellow Dog train, but the mob stopped the train which he had caught and set his wagon on fire, burning him and the rest of the innocent African Americans who shared his compartment. Henceforth, the Ghosts of Yellow Dog became renowned among the African Americans. The Charles's family (Doaker, Wining Boy, Boy Willie and Berniece) haunted vicariously by the traumatic events of their grandparents' family split during the slavery's time and traumatized firsthand by the extreme atrocity of the lynching of Charles Boy.

In addition to ancestral and familial trauma (her father's and then her mother's death), Berniece is traumatized by the sudden loss of her husband. In accordance with the DSM-5's list of the factors that cause emotional and/or mental trauma, Berniece suffers from PTSD since she has witnessed the calamitous death of her father and murder of her husband which caused the sudden destruction of her family. Berniece is thirty-five years old and "she is still in mourning for her husband after three years" (Wilson, 1990, p.3). She accuses her brother, Boy Willie and Lymon of the murder of her husband, Crawley:

*BERNIECE. You killed Crawley just as sure as if you pulled the trigger.*

*BOY WILLIE. See, that's ignorant. That's downright foolish for you to say something like that. You ain't doing*

*nothing but showing your ignorance. If the nigger was here I'd whup his ass for getting me and Lymon shot at.*

*BERNIECE. Crawley ain't knew about the wood.*

*BOY WILLIE. We told the man about the wood. Ask Lymon. He knew all about the wood. He seen we was sneaking it. Why else we gonna be out there at night? Don't come telling me Crawley ain't knew about the wood. Them fellows come up on us and Crawley tried to bully them. Me and Lymon seen the sheriff with them and give in. Wasn't no sense in getting killed over fifty dollars' worth of wood. (Wilson, 1990, pp. 52-53)*

It can be noted from the above and the next extract, as survivors of the traumatic event of Crawley being murdered, Boy Willie and Lymon remember well what has happened to them and give the details of their adventure. Their accurate narration is good evidence that their memory is not affected by the traumatic experience. They have recorded their traumatic experience through visual sense. What makes their account of the event reliable is that several times in the play they repeat the same event with the same accuracy, without changing even the words:

*BOY WILLIE. Me and Lymon was down there hauling wood for Jim Miller and keeping us a little bit to sell. Some white fellows tried to run us off of it. That's when Crawley got killed. They put me and Lymon in the penitentiary.*

*LYMON. They ambushed us right there where that road dip down and around that bend in the creek. Crawley tried to fight them. Me and Boy Willie got away but the sheriff got us. Say we was stealing wood. They shot me in my stomach. (Wilson, 1990, p. 37)*

In accordance with the DSM-5's list of the factors that contributes to PTSD, it can be concluded from the above extract that both Boy Willie and Lymon were traumatized when they witnessed the murder of Crawley at the hand of a white sheriff, and now both suffer from PTSD. Additionally, Lymon was traumatized further when he was under the threat of death as he was shot and wounded physically in his stomach at the scene of the crime where Crawley was killed.

Worthy of attention, from a conversation between Wining Boy and Doaker the audience know that Lymon was also traumatized during his early childhood when his father was killed mistakenly in a club. No doubt Lymon's own being shot in the stomach, bad in itself, would also have been compounded by his immediate recollection of his father's unfortunate demise and this memory of trauma triggered by this immediate wound. He would have at the time surely have anticipated dying in the same manner as his father.

Perhaps this occurrence alludes to the phenomenon in which traumatic history has an uncanny knack of

repeating itself, as the 'descending snowball' gathers momentum, in so many generational major or minor variations on one theme

WINING BOY. . . . L. D. Jackson. *That was one bad-luck nigger. Got killed at some dance. Fellow walked in and shot him thinking he was somebody else. (DOAKER enters from his room.)*

Hey, Doaker, you remember L. D. Jackson?

DOAKER. *That's Lymon's daddy. That was one bad-luck nigger. (Wilson, 1990, p. 64)*

Thus, all the central characters are victims of historical trauma as their ancestors suffered from trauma during slavery. At the same time, they suffer from direct traumatic experiences. Thus the reverberations from the initial trauma continue.

#### 4. DOAKER'S AND WINING BOY'S PRETERNATURAL MEMORY

Doaker and Wining Boy, as direct and vicarious victims of trauma, recollect and construct narratives of what had happened to them in detail and precisely. Doaker is the chief narrator in the play, who recites the story of the piano and, through his narration the audience learn the importance of the piano to the Charles's family.

Recent studies propose that "psychological trauma relies on two levels of narrative: 1) an internal logic describing a cause-effect relationship between a past event and present symptoms [Doaker's narration], and 2) memory [the piano] as a constructed representation of a traumatic event" (Mohatt et al., 2014, p. 129). Doaker's narrative representation can at the least be considered as a historical trauma since it links the history of the family's past traumatic events to the present conflict between Berniece and Willie Boy on whether to preserve or dispose of the piano.

Doaker, supported by Wining Boy who affirms the credibility of his narration, recounts distinctly the traumatic events of the past, even he remembers the exact dates and times; for instance, he recollects all the shocking events of his ancestral family split accurately; the names of the white slaveholders who carried out the transaction of exchanging the slaves for the piano, the way that the bargain is performed and the consequences of the contract:

DOAKER. *I'm talking to the man . . . let me talk to the man. See, now . . . to understand why we say that . . . to understand about that piano . . . you got to go back to slavery time. See, our family was owned by a fellow named Robert Sutter. That was Sutter's grandfather. Alright. The piano was owned by a fellow named Joel Nolander. He was one of the Nolander brothers from down in Georgia. It was coming up on Sutter's wedding anniversary and he was looking to buy his wife . . . Miss*

*Ophelia was her name . . . he was looking to buy her an anniversary present. Only thing with him . . . he ain't had no money. But he had some niggers. So he asked Mr. Nolander to see if maybe he could trade off some of his niggers for that piano [. . .] They made the trade off and Miss Ophelia was so happy with that piano that it got to be just about all she would do was play on that piano [. . .] Time go along. Miss Ophelia got to missing my grandmother [. . .] So she asked to see if maybe she could trade back that piano and get her niggers back. Mr. Nolander said no. Said a deal was a deal. Him and Sutter had a big falling out about it and Miss Ophelia took sick to the bed. Wouldn't get out of the bed in the morning. She just lay there. The doctor said she was wasting away. [. . .] our granddaddy [. . .] Willie Boy. Now, he was a worker of wood [. . .] Sutter [. . .] told him to carve my grandmother and my daddy's picture on the for Miss Ophelia. And he took and carved this . . . (DOAKER crosses over to the piano.) See that right there? That's my grandmother, Berniece. She looked just like that. And he put a picture of my daddy when he wasn't nothing but a little boy the way he remembered him. He made them up out of his memory. (Wilson, 1990, pp. 42-44)*

The original ellipses, in the excerpt above, do not necessarily indicate to gaps in the text to be evidence that trauma is unspeakable and Doaker suffers from amnesia. The playwright used these dots instead of stage direction to mean pauses in Doaker's narration. Thus Doaker's account proves that trauma is memorable and describable, and that trauma enhances memory rather than effacing it. It is very clear in Doaker's recollection of the past traumatic events of the Yellow Dog. For example, Doaker remembers their elder brother's (Boy Charles's) urge that led to stealing of the piano from the Sutters' house. Boy Charles was preoccupied with the idea of taking the piano from the Sutter's house. As Doaker says: "Boy Charles used to talk about that piano all the time. He could never get it off his mind. Two or three months go by and he be talking about it again. He be talking about taking it out of Sutter's house" (p. 45). Therefore, to Boy Charles the piano symbolizes the family's generational unity and continuity, and he used to tell his younger brothers: "as long as Sutter had it [. . .] he had us. Say we was still in slavery" (p. 45). Thus, by that 'theft', over which he had constantly obsessed, he thought that he could emancipate his line from the traumatic ownership of slavery. In Boy Charles therefore, by his unremitting sense of injustice over injury to his line, the symptoms of historical trauma are exhibited.

Doaker recalls precisely what the reaction of the Sutters was, and what happened to the piano as well as to Boy Charles's house. Additionally, he remembers the exact train time table "3:57" that Boy Charles took, the precise place, date of the death of his elder brother "fourth of July, 1911" as he was burnt by the lynching

mob and retells the names of the felons who had a hand in the crime. Doaker's narration, as mentioned in chapter one, proves that "[t]raumatic memories [. . .] are not elusive or absent; they are potentially more detailed and more powerful than normal ones" (Pederson, 2014, p. 339). The point is, a narrative, however variant, is constructed from memory thus there is no out and out amnesia, as claimed by the earlier theorists, as such.

Doaker and Wining Boy's PTSD is less severe, either that or else they tend to heal as they employ language and art, giving expression to the traumatic events from which they suffered because they do not repress their memory and speak about their trauma. Narrating memories to others as McNally suggests "enables survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma" (as cited in Pederson, 2014, p. 339).

Doaker through narration abreacts the repressed events of the past, whereas Wining Boy creates artistic works out of his past psychic anguish. Wining Boy has two records, instead of recounting his traumatic past through words, he narrates it by singing and playing the piano. His following statement is a clear reference that he no longer, having given it full expression, suffers from the burden of the past memory: "I give that piano up. That was the best thing that ever happened to me, getting rid of that piano. That piano got so big and I'm carrying it around on my back. I don't wish that on nobody" (p. 41).

Both Doaker and Wining Boy's methods, the employment of language and art to communicate the overwhelming events, function as catharsis to purge the psychic wounds of the past. Pederson (2018) points out: "it is a widely accepted therapeutic truth that the stories we tell about the catastrophes that beset us - both individual and collective - can be crucial tools for recovery" (p. 97). Accordingly, Doaker and Wining Boy together prove the first and the second elements of Pederson's theory.

## 5. TRAUMA AND SIBLING RIVALRY OVER THE PIANO

Both Boy Willie and Berniece are named after their great-grandparents, Papa Willie Boy and Mama Berniece, and both characters have an unconscious tendency to imitate their ancestors' lives. Thus the text advances the concept of an uncanny generational pattern, in which traumatic history, even more than 'normal' history, appears to repeat itself, issuing forth with the unfolding of time.

Boy Willie struggles to remain upon the same land (the Sutters' plantation) where his great-grandfather spent his solitude after being secluded from his wife and his son. To achieve his ambitions though under an unconscious obligation to his great-grandfather in a bid to repair or else evolve the continuity and progress of

the bloodline, Boy Willie strives to purchase the Sutters' land; his great-grandfather could not do this but in some form of PTSD compulsion he must advance in the way his forebear could not. So stunted was the bloodline that the descendant feels an obligation to make amends for the past debilitation.

Likewise, Berniece has an inclination to reproduce Mama Berniece's life who spent her life with her son away from her husband, there being no hint that she remarried following her compulsory seclusion. Similarly, Berniece endeavors to spend the rest of her life with Maretha in solitude. The siblings are seemingly compelled into an unconscious rivalry toward one another to reenact to the letter their great-grandparents way of life.

The piano is the most significant object in the play. It is not an ordinary piano, but a complete chronicle of the family. It symbolizes the traumatic memory of the Charles's family. The family members have not been able to efface the memory of their ancestors' separation and of their father's death, who was burnt alive.

The two main characters of the play, the siblings who share the role of protagonist, Boy Willie and his sister Berniece struggle to purge themselves from the past traumatic wounds. But their points of view are different, Boy Willie craves to show his masculinity to get rid of the haunting memory of the past (the piano) physically, whereas Berniece's prudence, especially in the final scene, surpasses her brother's physical power. She is determined to make a psychological recovery from their past and not to merely attempt to cast it aside, namely to confront it head on and work through it; to Berniece it cannot merely be jettisoned outwardly but must be eradicated inwardly.

Boy Willie thinks that owning the Sutters' land, by selling the piano, is one way to overturn the painful memories of slavery that haunts their family's present. He believes that having a piece of land will empower him with enough status and confidence to rival the white landlords; to all intents and purposes therefore he would merely imitate his capitalist oppressors approach:

*BOY WILLIE. . . . 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. (p. 51)*

To achieve his ambition accompanied by his close friend Lymon, Boy Willie pays a visit to Doaker's house. Along the trip from the South to the North, Boy Willie speaks to Lymon about the piano. The status quo signifies Boy Willie's determination to sell the piano and his decision is irreversible, his innate mentality is fixed,

unknown to him the enslavement of his ancestors has indirectly affected this within him:

*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. (pp. 41-42)*

However, Doaker informs Boy Willie that Berniece will never sell the piano despite that she has not been playing it since the death of her mother, Mama Ola, seven years ago.

During her lifetime, Mama Ola cleaned and polished the piano every day and used to ask Berniece: "Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece" (p. 51). Berniece says that she played the piano only for her mother because when her father died it "seem[ed] like all her [mother's] life went into that piano" (p. 70). When she played it, her mother relived the past traumatic events and her mother could hear her husband, Boy Charles talking to her. Berniece says that "[s]ometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to [the ghost of my father]" (p. 70). Mama Ola severely suffered from PTSD of the loss of her husband Boy Charles. Berniece's musical performance for her was a means of narrating the wounds of the past, reliving the past traumatic events, linking then and now, i.e., blurring the boundary between past and present. Thus, she alleviated her traumatic wound by music (LaCapra, 2014; Pederson, 2018):

*BERNIECE. You ain't taking that piano out of my house. (She crosses to the piano.) 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." You always talking about your daddy but you ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood? (p. 52)*

Berniece is traumatized by the death of her mother; she has never played the piano since her death. From the quotation above, Berniece apparently sympathizes with her mother's miserable life and loneliness for seventeen years after the death of her father Boy Charles. She criticizes her father bitterly and believes that a piano is not worth sacrificing your own as well as your family's life for it. Nevertheless, at the present, the piano for her is the soul of the family or a living entity through which the blood of her father and her mother is running.

It is ironic that one who thus fixates upon the piano cannot see that her attitude towards that same "piece of wood" merely duplicates that of her father, whose attitude toward it she posthumously esteems "foolish". The reality is that this is her wisdom she craves ownership of the piano for which the unity of their entire line was callously traded at the whim of their oppressors.

On the other hand, what makes Boy Willie insist on selling the piano is that Berniece neither plays it nor gets benefit from it. Thus, in Boy Willie's opinion, the piano becomes a "piece of wood" or it rots "just like if I let them watermelons sit out there." In a dialogue between Wining Boy and Doaker, the latter reveals his opinion that concurs with Boy Willie, apparently the family have nothing to do with the piano and that "Berniece need to go on and get rid of it. It ain't done nothing but cause trouble" (p. 57).

Boy Willie's practical stance on the piano to some extent is correct. Since Berniece has not only overlooked the piano but also kept her daughter in the dark as well about the carvings – the history of the family – on the body of the piano. In other words, Berniece neither uses music nor language to narrate her traumatic past. She seems intent solely to own their ownership of her line, by merely hoarding the piano, considering that alone to be adequate reclamation.

At the end of Act I, while Berniece is tussling Boy Willie, "Maretha is heard screaming upstairs. It is a scream of stark terror" (p. 54). Maretha sees the Sutter's ghost and she calls her mother. The status quo demonstrates that transgenerational nature of trauma or the psychological wound of the family in the past is passed to her and she is haunted as are the rest of the family members by the traumatic events of the past. In other words, she now also suffers from symptoms of historical trauma.

The schism between the siblings over the piano hinders their endeavor to abreact their repressed emotional tension (especially Berniece). Futility is the outcome of their conflict until they unify their efforts.

## 6. THE DOMINANCE OF THE GHOSTS:

African Americans by dint of their past religious rituals and folk tales have a predisposition towards ghosts and ancestral spirits. Kathleen Brogan (1995) suggests in this regard that "[t]he figure of the ghost itself emerges from the cultural history of that group: one of the key elements of African religious thought to survive in syncretic forms of New World religious practice and in slave folklore is the belief in ancestor spirits" (p. 150).

Tian and Li (2018) offer another aspect of the ghost narratives; they suggest that the "white American writers in favor of black slavery used to fabricate ghost stories to evoke crippling terror in would-be runaway

slaves, whereas black writers invented ghost stories to arouse black people's collective consciousness of their lost history" (p. 1).

For Toni Morrison (2008), the ancestors "are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (p. 62). In this sense, when Boy Willie speaks to Maretha about their ancestral ghosts, he says: "They like the wind you can't see them. But sometimes you be in trouble they might be around to help you" (Wilson, 1990, p. 86). Thus they are intangible and sensed solely by intuition, indeed by so much they may not even exist externally to the psyche of the 'beholder'; it is possible they may be internally caused by trauma itself.

The playwright indirectly, through a description of the setting time at the outset of the play, makes a reference to a racial conflict between blacks and whites in the first stage direction. The word 'dawn' signifies conflict because it is neither black nor white, "but there is something in the air that belongs to the night." Thus, as the 'night' stands for the 'Blacks', it means the blacks resolve the conflict over the piano by the aid of their ancestral ghosts at the end. However, a 'stillness' is a bad omen of a 'storm' that will sweep the house in the future. In other words, it foreshadows the upcoming events of the play that is a serious conflict between siblings over the family's piano, and then the main conflict of the play between the siblings and the ghost of Sutter.

Berniece is the only character who does not believe in the power of ghosts; nevertheless, by the end of the play in order to exorcise the ghost of Sutter in her house, she asks help from her parental specters while playing the piano and singing:

BERNIECE. (*Singing.*)  
 I want you to help me  
 I want you to help me  
 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 (p. 107)

The trauma which the piano represents has given her a sense of unification with her ancestors and seemingly to own the piano alone, proves inadequate; therefore, through art she calls upon the ghosts which her perception considers absent.

### 6.1 Ghosts and Peritraumatic Dissociation:

The effect of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder on almost all the main characters can be noticed as they blur the distinction between absence and loss that:

*Create a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion and may induce a gripping response whose power and force of attraction can be compelling. The very conflation attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (such as that between absence and loss). (LaCapra, 2014, p. 46)*

This is well illustrated in the case of Wining Boy who suffers from PTSD. He has "a tendency [as referred to in the previous chapters] to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if [he] were still fully in the past, with no distance from it. Victims of trauma tend to relive occurrences, or at least find that those occurrences intrude on their present existence" (LaCapra, 2014, pp. 142-143). For instance, when Wining Boy visits "Southern cross the Yellow Dog," he relives the past and cannot differentiate between past and present "wherein [he] is able to remember what happened to [his brother Charles Boy] in the past but realizes [that he] is living in the here and now with future possibilities" (LaCapra, 2014, pp. 46-47). Wining Boy calls out the ghost names and he believes that they talk to him:

LYMON. *What they sound like? The wind or something?*

BOY WILLIE. *You done been there for real, Wining Boy?*

WINING BOY. *Nineteen thirty. July of nineteen thirty I stood right there on that spot. It didn't look like nothing was going right in my life. I said everything can't go wrong all the time . . . let me go down there and call on the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, see if they can help me. I went down there and right there where them two railroads cross each other . . . I stood right there on that spot and called out their names. They talk back to you, too.*

LYMON. *People say you can ask them questions. They talk to you like that?*

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. It felt like the longer I stood there the bigger I got. I seen the train coming and it seem like I was bigger than the train. I started not to move. But something told me to go ahead and get on out the way. The train passed and I started to go back up there and stand some more. But something told me not to do it. I walked away from there feeling like a king. (pp. 34-35)*

In the above extract it seems Wining Boy's traumatic memory is vibrant. He remembers what has happened and his memory is not obliterated by the traumatic events of Yellow Dog. In July 1930, Wining Boy pays a



visit to the crime scene after two decades from its occurrence in order to relive the past. When he speaks with the ghosts and feels that he becomes a giant man even bigger than the train, it is a clear indication to the alteration of his traumatic memory or a distinct instance of peritraumatic dissociation, "I seen the train coming and it seem like I was bigger than the train." Here Wining Boy not only "relives" or "re-experiences" his trauma, he "retells" it, too (Pederson, 2018, 104), in order to soothe his pains.

Thus it appears that the ghosts are not really there now but to him they are for example "I can't say how they talked to nobody else," so arrested was he at the moment of that great trauma that he palpably revisits it with ease, only thus is he haunted. The trauma was so overwhelming that it trapped him thereafter in the moment.

## 6.2 GHOSTS OF YELLOW DOG VERSUS 'GHOST'<sup>1</sup> OF SUTTER

Two types of ghosts dominate the text of the play. Benevolent black and malevolent white ghosts. Both are the embodiments of past traumatic events. Black ghosts, like the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, signify the oppressed African.

Americans who suffered at the hand of white oppressors of whom the ghost of Sutter is the representative. The black ghosts in the play are vengeful and protective. They avenge themselves on their white murderers and protect their descendants. It should be noted that in the text of the play, the name of black ghosts is always capitalized as "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog". This may be a way in which the playwright pays his deep homage to thousands of African Americans who lost their life by the white lynching mobs.

Seemingly the justice system has failed to protect African Americans from the atrocities of white folks due to its explicit complicity in oppression or its constant prejudice in favor of the whites. In addition, the inability of African Americans neither to bring justice nor to exact revenge on white culprits has impelled their imagination to seek refuge from supernatural forces, i.e., revenging ghosts, since their poetic justice soothes the traumatic wounds from which they suffer. For example, in the play, when Boy Willie tells his uncle Wining Boy that the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog got Sutter", Wining Boy confirms his unshaken belief in the ghosts of African Americans, and shows his contentment with hearing the fate of Sutter:

WINING BOY. *So the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog got Sutter. That just go to show you I believe I always lived right. They say every dog gonna have his day and time it go around it sure come back to you. I done seen that a thousand times. I know the truth of that. But I'll tell*

*you outright . . . if I see Sutter's ghost I'll be on the first thing I find that got wheels on it. (p. 28)*

Apparently, the Charles family and African Americans, in general, are disappointed in the justice system. Doaker, when recounting the story of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, quite explicitly accuses the police (Sheriff Carter) of conniving with the lynching mob in burning his elder brother and the hobos to death. Thus, the family or the rest of the blacks can find solace in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Even a black preacher like Avery strongly believes in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog:

EVERY. *He caused it to happen. God is the Great Causer. He can do anything. He parted the Red Sea. He say I will smite my enemies. Reverend Thompson used to preach on the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog as the hand of God. (p. 69)*

The first encounter with ghosts in the play can be noticed when Boy Willie mentions to his uncle the death of Sutter. He tells his uncle that "everybody say" the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog took revenge on Sutter. The word "everybody" is a reference to all the surrounding African Americans who unquestionably believe in the avenging power of the ghosts:

BOY WILLIE. . . . *We fixing to have a party. Doaker, where your bottle? Me and Lymon celebrating. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog got Sutter.*

BERNIECE. *Say what?*

BOY WILLIE. *Ask Lymon, they found him the next morning. Say he drowned in his well.*

DOAKER. *When this happen, Boy Willie?*

BOY WILLIE. *About three weeks ago. Me and Lymon was over in Stoner County when we heard about it. We laughed. We thought it was funny. A great big old three-hundred-and-forty-pound man gonna fall down his well.*

LYMON. *It remind me of Humpty Dumpty.*

BOY WILLIE. *Everybody say the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed him.*

BERNIECE. *I don't want to hear that nonsense. Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells. (pp. 4-5)*

In the quotation above, Boy Willie and Lymon, as they hear the fate of Sutter, feel happy because African Americans cannot punish their previous slaveholders and plantation owners. However, Berniece shows her objection and cannot believe in their accounts; she suggests that "Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells." From her speech "them people" appears that the case of Sutter is not a unique one, there are many others who (caused them trauma) fell into their wells. Berniece accuses Boy Willie of murdering Sutter; she says: "I believe you pushed him in the well," but Boy Willie supported by Lymon deny her allegations and affirm that the "Ghost of the Yellow Dog got Sutter" or pushed him:

BOY WILLIE. *He bending over looking down his well, woman . . . how he know who pushed him? It could have been anybody. Where was you when Sutter fell in his well? Where was Doaker? Me and Lymon was over in Stoner County. Tell her, Lymon. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog got Sutter. That's what happened to him.*

BERNIECE. *You can talk all that Ghosts of the Yellow Dog stuff if you want. I know better.*

LYMON. *The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed him. That's what the people say. They found him in his well and all the people say it must be the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Just like all them other men. (pp. 14-15)*

Although Boy Willie gives a logical explanation for being innocent, Berniece suspects his credibility. When she says "I know better" about the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, it indicates that, though she suffers from PTSD, her memory works properly and she recollects the traumatic event of the Yellow Dog and what had happened to the culprits in the aftermath, but she "may choose [like some victims of trauma] not to speak about her trauma" (Pederson, 2014, p. 334). However, Doaker while speaking with Wining Boy, opposite to Berniece's suspicion, thinks that Boy Willie is innocent in this case. He says: "I don't believe Boy Willie pushed him in the well" (p. 57). Similarly, when Berniece charges her brother with murdering Sutter, Avery refutes her accusations and attributes the accident to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Wining Boy, Boy Willie and Doaker assertively enumerate the white perpetrators who had hands in the lynching of Boy Charles and had subsequently been murdered by the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog:

WINING BOY. *How many that make the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog done got?*

BOY WILLIE. *Must be about nine or ten, eleven or twelve. I don't know.*

DOAKER. *You got Ed Saunders. Howard Peterson. Charlie Webb.*

WINING BOY. *Robert Smith. That fellow that shot Becky's boy . . . say he was stealing peaches . . .*

DOAKER. *You talking about Bob Mallory. (p. 34)*

As Berniece wonders about a logical reason behind the fate of these people in their wells, the audience might raise the same question. All the characters, except Berniece, think that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed the criminals into their wells. Nonetheless, as Boy Willie states, it would be challenging for the blacks to penetrate the whites' plantations due to barriers (such as dogs and fences in addition to guns), even if the blacks are capable of overcoming all the obstacles, they should lie in ambush at the appropriate setting time and place, and the quarry should be alone and lean himself over the fence surrounding the well, then the blacks can push them into their wells, which is next to impossible.

Then here one might wonder, so who pushed the perpetrators into the wells? A reasonable answer is that these culprits might have been traumatized by the overwhelming event of the Yellow Dog. Later they suffered from PTSD and felt deep remorse for the victims that caused repeated nightmares and psychic anguish for the offenders that evoked the notion of suicide. In LaCapra's (2014) words, they are "haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes – scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop" (p. 21). The black characters, when they claim that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog exacted revenge on them, might be understood to suggest that the ghosts or the traumatic wounds of the past events haunted the white culprits and tortured them psychologically, in a way to prefer death over life.

Alternatively, although less likely, supposing the living progeny of their dead ancestors did manage to negotiate all said obstacles to vengefully dispose of the guilty down their wells, arguably so vivid was the symptoms of historical trauma that the ancestors as it were embodied their living children motivating them to so act. Thus the living children acted on behalf of their ancestors as though the dead in haunting carried out the deeds.

### 6.3 The 'Ghost' Of Sutter and The Piano:

Berniece thinks that Boy Willie is a killer and asks him to leave her house, but Boy Willie, who is right, affirms that Sutter's ghost is in the house looking for the piano. He thinks that if his sister gets rid of the piano, Sutter's ghost will disappear as well.

The piano as an heirloom object continuously reminds the family members, on a daily basis, of their past burden or traumatic memories during slavery as well as the Jim Crow era that overshadows the Charles family, especially Doaker and Berniece, who live in the same house where the piano is located. Doaker confirms Boy Willie's opinion that Sutter is in the house for the piano. Doaker's speech, in the following extract, is an indicator that he still suffers from trauma or PTSD and has not recovered completely:

DOAKER. *About three weeks ago. I had just come back from down there. Sutter couldn't have been dead more than three days. He was sitting over there at the piano. (p. 57)*

The Ghost of Sutter that haunts Doaker's house is a reminder and an embodiment of the shocking legacy of slavery in addition to the traumatic events of the Yellow Dog. The family is haunted by the ghost of Sutter or their traumatic past from which they attempt to escape.

Their failure to progress or to rebuild their life is due to their preoccupation with the memory of their slave

ancestors, without taking appropriate action to heal their past wounds. It is also due to an on-going never concluded fear of the ultimate oppressor, the slave owner, emancipation from whom neither their ancestors nor consequently they ever gained; in their perception his ownership of them all persists for as long as that unethical exchange stands unredressed. This is evident in the character of Berniece who seeks to escape from the past traumatic events, as the ghost of Sutter causes repeated nightmare. Berniece suffers from a severe PTSD, she is as victimized as the rest of the family members by the family's history during slavery, as well as by her father Boy Charles's death, in addition to her mother, and her husband's death (within seven years she lost her mother and her husband). Berniece as a PTSD victim does not only recollect her traumatic events, she "re-experience[s] it as vivid sensory recollections [flashbacks], nightmares, and intrusive thoughts" (McNally, 2012, p. 872). Indeed, perhaps PTSD can be likened to a haunting, especially when the trauma is intergenerational.

Therefore, she more than anyone else in Charles's family is in need of working through her memory or the family's memory (the piano) to heal her traumatic wounds and the compulsive thoughts or repeated nightmares (Sutter's ghost). Victims of trauma should give adequate expression to their repressed traumatic memory through language or deeds because "[s]peaking trauma pulls it from the realm of painful obscurity and hastens the process of rehabilitation (Pederson, 2014, p. 338). However, she does not express herself through artistic works as a substitute for language by playing the piano and singing to narrate or retell her story to abreact her repressed memory that leads to soothe or cure her wounds. She prefers to merely own the piano, not realizing that the trauma surrounding it must be articulated as precisely as possible in order for it, the trauma, to be truly owned or mastered: the piano alone is insufficient, it must be played if the ghost is to be exorcised.

Berniece, instead of taking proper action by herself, attempts to get benefit from religion and asks Avery to bless the house and discharge the ghost of Sutter. Avery spares no effort to exorcise the ghost of Sutter, he reads verses from the Bible, sprinkles water and prays a lot. Eventually he declares his inability: "Berniece, I can't do it." Here, the playwright shows the ineffectiveness of religion in curing PTSD symptoms; a priest figure, as an agent, cannot do it vicariously, the trauma victim must engage with their trauma directly.

Alternately, whilst Boy Willie attempts to move the piano by using his physical strength, the sound of the Sutter's ghost is heard upstairs, then Boy Willie wrestles the ghost. It is significant that the ghost of Sutter is upstairs while the piano remains downstairs, this

depicts the master over slave imposition: Sutter stands over this unjust transaction, he is the orchestrator of the family's trauma but the family history is not his to own, it is theirs as they are their own human beings and not anyone else's mere chattel.

Metaphorically, as pointed out before, the piano serves as the memory of the family, and the ghost of Sutter stands for the compulsive nightmares. The immobility of the piano demonstrates the impossibility of effacing painful memories of the past by physical strength. Boy Willie endeavors to transfer the piano. His act stands for getting rid of the past memory physically.

BOY WILLIE. *Let's see if we can lift it up, Lymon. Get a good grip on it and pick it up on your end. Ready? Lift! (As they start to move the piano, the sound of SUTTER's GHOST is heard. DOAKER is the only one to hear it. With difficulty they move the piano a little bit so it is out of place.)*

BOY WILLIE. *What you think?*

LYMON. *It's heavy . . . but you can move it. Only it ain't gonna be easy.*

BOY WILLIE. *It wasn't that heavy to me. Okay, let's put it back. (The sound of SUTTER's GHOST is heard again. They all hear it as BERNIECE enters on the stairs.) (pp. 49-50)*

Following his failure to obliterate the traumatic memory of the family, Boy Willie rushes to fight Sutter's ghost that represents his effort to thwart the recurring compulsive nightmares that haunt survivors in the post-traumatic cases. "As BOY WILLIE approaches the steps he is suddenly thrown back by the unseen force, which is choking him. As he struggles he frees himself, then dashes up the stairs" (p. 106). Although Boy Willie fails twice in his wrestling with Sutter's ghost, he resumes his attack another time. As Avery surrendered to heal or attempting to remove, through religion, the compulsive nightmare which haunts the family, failure is also the fate of Boy Willie's physical efforts.

Then Berniece "realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece" (p. 106). Here Berniece by means of art requests support from her ancestors' specters to exorcise Sutter's ghost. Thenceforth, "[t]he sound of a train approaching is heard. The noise upstairs subsides" is a sign of exorcising Sutter's ghost. The sound of the train signifies that Berniece chants or narrates her repressed past traumatic memory of the Yellow Dog. She has finally articulated Sutter's crime, the subjugating, traumatizing memory that had been locked within the psyche of her family, that of its abject oppression.

Thus, Berniece "give[s] adequate expression" to the catastrophes that beset her by "deed" and "word" (playing music and singing), hence she effectively abreacts her haunting nightmare (Pederson, 2018, 97). However, Berniece as a survivor is in need of singing

and playing the piano (working through her memory) continuously, if not, nightmares (Sutter's ghost) might come back again as Boy Willie indicates in his last speech in the play:

*BOY WILLIE. Hey Berniece . . . if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano . . . ain't no telling . . . me and Sutter both liable to be back. (He exits.)*

*BERNIECE. Thank you. (p. 108)*

The 'exorcism', due to the trauma being so entrenched, needs to be repeated and rehearsed over and over if the trauma's echo in PTSD is to be silenced, thus recovery from the condition is depicted as an ongoing process.

## 7. BOY WILLIE'S PLAN AND BERNIECE'S RECOVERY FROM TRAUMA

From the profit of the watermelon load, Boy Willie, after selling it, has an obvious plan to buy part of the Sutters' land. Besides, he intends to persuade his sister, Berniece, to sell the family piano and buy another part from his share:

*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. (p. 9)*

The abovementioned is only the outward appearance of Boy Willie's design. His plan is contrived very carefully that neither Berniece nor the rest of the characters uncover the secret objectives behind his visit. Nevertheless, an accurate reading of the play unveils Boy Willie's real intention which is saving Berniece from her trauma and teaching Maretha the history of the family.

It can be noticed that Boy Willie in a speech uses the expression "sentimental value" twice. This expression shows that, contrary to appearance, Boy Willie is not an ordinary or superficial character because this is the language of someone who is cultured and well educated.

Boy Willie works in three different directions; firstly, he attempts to awaken Maretha to take her responsibility, as a new generation, towards the family's legacy. Secondly, he tries to encourage Berniece to remarry because he knows that his sister is traumatized: three years after the death of her husband she still mourns his death and is not ready to marry Avery the preacher. In a dialogue between Wining Boy and Doaker they assert that she is in need of a man to sustain and evoke her intimately:

*WINING BOY. Other than seeing Sutter's ghost how's Berniece doing?*

*DOAKER. She doing alright. She still got Crawley on her mind. He been dead three years but she still holding on to him. She need to go out here and let one of these fellows grab a whole handful of whatever she got. She act like it done got precious.*

*WINING BOY. They always told me any fish will bite if you got good bait. (p. 29)*

Perhaps, however, they have failed to realize that Berniece is too paralyzed by her overwhelming trauma. Moreover, given that her trauma is separation trauma, she needs time to reconnect with herself. Thirdly, Boy Willie attempts to persuade Berniece to resume playing the piano, since he knows that she stopped playing it since the death of their mother, and she is in need of playing to free herself from the PTSD symptoms.

Boy Willie's first mission is obvious from the outset of (Act I: Scene 1). When he enters the house of Doaker, the conversation between Boy Willie and his sister metaphorically shows their different points of view; whether to wake up Maretha from her sleep or to leave her asleep as her mother demands. The argument reveals that one of the objectives of Boy Willie from his visit is waking up Maretha from her sleep; in other words, he has the intention of enlightening her about the family's past. Thus Boy Willie credits the indissoluble connection of the family line recognizing Maretha as no less involved in all of this than her ancestors: to him the entire family, dead and living, is all of one. In the following extract despite Berniece's reluctance, Boy Willie is determined to wake up Maretha:

*BERNIECE. . . . I don't want all that loud carrying on around here. I'm surprised you ain't woke Maretha up.*

*BOY WILLIE. I was fixing to get her now. (Calls.) Hey, Maretha!*

*DOAKER. Berniece don't like all that hollering now.*

*BERNIECE. Don't you wake that child up!*

*BOY WILLIE. You going up there . . . wake her up and tell her her uncle's here. I ain't seen her in three years. Wake her up and send her down here. She can go back to bed.*

*BERNIECE. I ain't waking that child up . . . and don't you be making all that noise. You and Lymon need to sell them watermelons and go on back. (BERNIECE exits up the stairs.)*

*BOY WILLIE. I see Berniece still try to be stuck up.*

*DOAKER. Berniece alright. She don't want you making all that noise. Maretha up there sleep. Let her sleep until she get up. She can see you then. (pp. 7-8)*

Boy Willie's concern about the piano and the family's history exceeds that of Berniece. He follows the African philosophy of Sankofa<sup>2</sup>, emphasizing the necessity of teaching the new generation lessons and wisdom of the ancestral past. The mythic Sankofa bird flies forward [future] while its head turned backward [towards past wisdom and history] and keeps an egg [new generation]

inside its beak. Likewise, Boy Willie insists to take care of the family's background and teach the new generation [Maretha] the history of the family.

He refuses to "let [Maretha] sleep until she get up" seeing it as his direct responsibility to actively "wake her up" he will not leave her in ignorance of her heritage no matter how bad it is, it is hers about which to possess knowledge and that knowledge must be actively conveyed to her by her forebears, not withheld from her by them as Berniece would have it. Thus Boy Willie prioritizes full disclosure of family history to family by family if intergenerational trauma is to be thwarted, the secrecy advocated by Berniece he sees as the antithesis of the help Maretha needs. Boy Willie's interest is evident when he asks Maretha eagerly, "[has] your mama told you about that piano? You know how them pictures got on there?" After he receives a negative answer from her, Boy Willie's amazement appears from his question:

BOY WILLIE. *You hear that, Doaker? And you sitting up here in the house with Berniece.*

DOAKER. *I ain't got nothing to do with that. I don't get in the way of Berniece's raising her.*

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. (p. 22)*

This situation demonstrates Boy Willie's commitment towards the family's history and the piano as well. From Doaker's answer it can be noticed that Berniece, in an attempt to keep Maretha safe from transgenerational trauma, has not divulged the secrets behind the carved pictures on the piano. In other words, she desperately endeavors to cease the motion of the history, in an effort to put an end to the legacy of slavery or the transmission of traumatic events of the past that overshadows Charles's family to be engraved on Maretha's memory from the early age of childhood. Berniece's response to the problem appears to be to repress it by concealment, in this she fails to credit that it is her daughter's heritage and as such, if she is to manage the condition inevitably passed on to her, it must be fully divulged to her. Again, articulation is seen as the antidote.

In (Act II: Scene v), Boy Willie teaches Maretha a lesson of the family's history. He recounts the traumatic events of the Yellow Dog and instills into her mind the power of their ancestors' ghosts over the whites. The following conversation shows that despite Boy Willie's suffering from historical as well as firsthand traumatic exposure, his memory is vivid, i.e., the traumatic events have, due to the immensity of their significance, enhanced his memory. He remembers and narrates to his niece what has happened to her grandfather in detail. It shows the memorability and speakability of trauma:

BOY WILLIE. *(To MARETHA.) Then after that them white folks down around there started falling down their wells. You ever seen a well? A well got a wall around it. It's hard to fall down a well. You got to be leaning way over. Couldn't nobody figure out too much what was making these fellows fall down their well . . . so everybody says the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog must have pushed them. That's what everybody called them four men what got burned up in the boxcar.*

MARETHA. *Why they call them that?*

BOY WILLIE. *Cause the Yazoo Delta railroad got yellow boxcars. Sometime the way the whistle blow sound like an old dog howling so the people call it the Yellow Dog.*

MARETHA. *Anybody ever see the Ghosts?*

BOY WILLIE. *I told you they like the wind. Can you see the wind?*

MARETHA. *No.*

BOY WILLIE. *They like the wind you can't see them. But sometimes you be in trouble they might be around to help you. They say if you go where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog . . . you go to where them two railroads cross each other . . . and call out their names . . . they say they talk back to you. I don't know, I ain't never done that. But Uncle Wining Boy he say he been down there and talked to them. You have to ask him about that part. (pp. 85-86)*

Whether or not the ghosts are real is held up in the air by the text, one explanation for them could be that the descendants in their processing of trauma were so full of vengeance that they actually avenged their ancestors. Thus they themselves in their act brought their forebears back to life being all one with them. Here is seen the connection between trauma and injustice and its therefore being linked with the concepts of justice and revenge.

To apply the second part of his plan, Boy Willie dates a lady named Grace in Doaker's house. Knowing that Berniece is alone upstairs at home, he deliberately and openly speaks about his intercourse with Grace to evoke Berniece sensually. When Berniece comes down to ask them to leave the house, Boy Willie intentionally kisses Grace in front of her.

Beforehand, Boy Willie has spoken with Lymon about his sister's situation, that is evident when he speaks to Berniece "I told him [Lymon] come on let's go up and see my sister" (p. 6). Boy Willie realizes that Berniece is affected by his act with Grace. To complete his plan, he has already prepared Lymon to stay near the house. The following stage direction shows after Boy Willie and Grace leave the house, immediately Lymon enters:

(BOY WILLIE and GRACE exit. BERNIECE puts the light on in the kitchen and puts on the teakettle. Presently there is a knock at the door. BERNIECE goes to answer it. BERNIECE opens the door. LYMON enters.)

LYMON. *How you doing, Berniece? I thought you'd be asleep. Boy Willie been back here?*

BERNIECE. *He just left out of here a minute ago. (p. 74)*

Lymon's question about Boy Willie, clearly indicates that Lymon has information about Boy Willie's return to Doaker's house. Lymon after a long discussion about women and marriage with Berniece, he praises Avery in front of her and tries (up to Boy Willie's plan) to urge her to marry:

LYMON. *I get me a job and a little place and get set up to where I can make a woman comfortable I might get married. Avery's nice. You ought to go ahead and get married. You be a preacher's wife you won't have to work. I hate living by myself. I didn't want to be no strain on my mama so I left home when I was about sixteen. Everything I tried seem like it just didn't work out. Now I'm trying this. (p. 79)*

By the end of the third scene in Act II, Lymon and Berniece embrace each other, he kisses her and she returns the kisses as a sign of her recovery from the trauma of losing her husband. Lymon succeeds in his mission of arousing Berniece sensually. That is the first practical step to break the chains of her mourning over the death of Crawley and to direct her to remarry.

Boy Willie in the third part of his well-designed plan urges Berniece to play the piano. Boy Willie appears to be a very superficial, senseless and indifferent character when he stubbornly threatens Berniece that he will sell the piano, it being the family's heirloom as well as the only record of the family's history, to purchase a piece of the Sutters' land. However, underlying this callous appearance her brother is intentionally provoking her to play the instrument, it is a means to an end: it must prove instrumental. The piano for Boy Willie, without being in use, is merely a piece of lifeless or useless wood.

Of course, Boy Willie realizes that Berniece will never allow him to sell the piano. Indeed, even were she to let him do so, Boy Willie is not ready to trade it for the entire Sutter's land. He only pretends to be unconcerned for the piano, but in reality he is enthusiastic to protect it.

There are many situations in the play which show that Boy Willie honors the piano, the family's past and is proud of his father's sacrifice for it. He says whenever somebody mentions my father's name "I take my hat off". He understands that his father's motive was only ever to free his family from being inhumanly objectified. Boy Willie's justification for selling the piano is that Berniece does not play it. However, he contradicts himself by his bid to actually get rid of the piano. Thus, there is no logic in such a decision to sell the only thing that his father has left to his son and that over which he lost his life, it is merely strategy:

BOY WILLIE. . . . *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. If Berniece can't see that, then I'm gonna go ahead and sell my half. (p. 46)*

Boy Willie realizes that Berniece is, to a great extent, sentimentally attached to the piano. His pretense that "he gonna cut it in half and go on and sell his half" is only part of his plan to arouse Berniece's attention to the importance of the piano which carries the quintessential lesson from the history of the family; that it is of much substantial rather than merely sentimental value. It is not simply a keepsake but it is to be practically used, i.e., played. Boy Willie apprehends that Berniece no longer plays the piano in order to avoid the traumatic memories of the past and escape from her psychic wounds; as a result, the ghost of Sutter still haunts her mind. The only way to return the right value to the piano is playing and singing along to it:

BOY WILLIE. *Now, I'm gonna tell you the way I see it. The only thing that make that piano worth something is them carvings Papa Willie Boy put on there. That's what make it worth something. That was my great-granddaddy. Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. Now, I'm supposed to build on what they left me . . . Alright now, if you say to me, Boy Willie, I'm using that piano. I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. Then that be something else. I'd have to go on and say, well, Berniece using that piano. She building on it. Let her go on and use it. I got to find another way to get Sutter's land. But Doaker say you ain't touched that piano the whole time it's been up here. (p. 51)*

After a prolonged conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece over the selling of the piano, Boy Willie achieves his goal by dismantling Berniece's mental barriers which were caused by the death of Mama Ola. In the final scene Berniece returns to play the piano, this signals the success of Boy Willie's plan, the music and the song of Berniece enable Boy Willie to successfully fight the ghost of Sutter. Berniece obtains catharsis through playing music and singing old songs: she successfully communicates her family's past traumatic experience which is difficult to be achieved merely through historical documents (Pederson, 2018).

Here, the playwright, through Boy Willie's character, delivers a message to African Americans on the importance of working on the history through art and not to let the history be merely documented and kept on the library shelves. Art can bestow life on the inanimate pages of the history. To recover from the historical trauma that haunts them throughout centuries, African Americans should give adequate expression to their past wounds through language or deeds to construct

narratives or artistic works in order to heal their wounds. Thus he advocates the concept of art being therapy.

## 8. CONCLUSION:

The root of the family's trauma can be traced back to the time of slavery; in other words, the characters in the play suffer from the legacy of slavery, namely of having been dehumanized by fellow humans; they have suffered injustice. The atrocities of family separation during the Antebellum era is the original trauma of the Charles family, the outcome of the tragic event of separating a father from his son and wife is a piano that has provided a pleasant entertainment for the white slaveholder, but painful memories for African Americans. The playwright conveys a message that the white folks enjoy pleasant moments from playing the piano on pain of catastrophic events in the lives of African Americans. This highlights a staggering discrepancy in the balance of power within the human race: this invariably leads to historical trauma in the marginalized victims.

The playwright makes reference to the Great Migration of African Americans from the southern states to the northern ones, running from the atrocities of the plantations and white local authorities because they have witnessed countless traumatic events perpetrated by the lynching mobs and the local authorities: The Yellow Dog event in the play is one such atrocity. If the black migration is likened to the exodus, the drowning of white plantation owners in their own wells in the play is comparable to Pharaoh's demise.

The characters suffer from historical or transgenerational trauma as well as firsthand traumatic experiences. Indeed, the impression given is that the trauma sustained in previous generations is in some uncanny fashion the precursor of the later firsthand trauma as though the former were the very cause of the latter. Their responses to the traumatic events are different. The most vulnerable characters are women who suffer from severe trauma. Mama Berniece lost her husband by family separation, Mama Ola lost her husband in the traumatic event of the Yellow Dog, and Berniece lost her husband as well as her father. The characters must give sufficient expression to their repressed traumatic memories in order to ameliorate their wounds.

The ghosts in the play stand for the intrusive thoughts and repeated nightmares that haunt the victims of trauma, and the piano serves as a constructed memory of the past history of African Americans. The conveying of this memory to the upcoming generation is important if they are to understand their ancestral past and to be a testimonial for the condemnation and committed atrocities against the blacks.

The application of the main elements of Pederson's theory shows that traumatic events are indeed memorable and describable, as the characters are able to recollect their past traumatic experiences with accurate details, even after the passing of twenty-six years. It verifies that traumatic events are remembered more precisely, rather than being completely forgotten. The characters are able to purge their minds from emotional wounds through peritraumatic dissociation scenes, and through remembering and narrating as well as through engaging in artistic expression.

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and its head turned backward at the same time carries an egg in its beak (Temple, 2010, p. 127; Barden, 2013, p. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> The author deliberately capitalizes the initial letters for the African American ghosts, whereas he uses a lower case letter for the white ghost.

<sup>2</sup> Sankofa is an Akan word- (language from West Africa) which stands for an ancient symbolic bird. In the Akan language Sankofa is expressed as "se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki" which means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot" (Willis, 1998; Allvin, 2014, p. 40). The myth of Sankofa portrayed as a bird that flies forward