Chapter IV

Looking Back and Forward: *The Piano Lesson*

The Great Depression did much to dampen the enthusiasm of blacks. The blacks who, even during the days of prosperity, found the going very difficult, now met almost insurmountable barriers in the job market. By the middle of the 1930s, however, the national economic scene began to stabilize. Blacks realized, better than before, that they should develop institutions of their own in order to preserve their identity and dignity. Some even felt the necessity of returning to the South to give shape to their institutions and promote their integration, to a degree, into the pattern of life that had a legacy.

It is in the thirties, in 1936 to be specific, that Wilson sets *The Piano Lesson* (1987). In the two earlier plays--*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*--migration to the North is a major theme, with characters undertaking a long journey in search of jobs, relationships, and self-affirmation. In *The Piano Lesson,* however, we are introduced to characters eager to return to the South. This is significant, for it marks a potential turning point in the lives of blacks. Earlier they had considered the North as their true destination. For the first time now a black suggests that the South is their

place to pursue their destinies as free men and women. It is a moment of individual transmogrification that Wilson examines again. In his interview with Pettengill, he says:

> Boy Willie empowers himself. He has a very good clear plan, the best plan of anyone I know that was presented in 1936 about his future. He understood that if you had a piece of land, everything else [would] fall right up into place. . . . Land is the basis of independence. (225)

The search for self-authentication continues in the play, which adds a new meaning to the same theme of displacement. The displacement, however, occurs on a psychological level: blacks are seen grappling with their memories, their debts to the past, and coming to terms with their emerging role as free people. By 1936,

thousands of blacks had settled in northern industrial cities, searching for their own version of freedom, struggling to realize the American dream but living an American nightmare of poverty and discrimination. The lives of many of the characters in the play exemplify this despair.

Set once again in a boardinghouse in Pittsburgh, the play shows the blacks who live there as persons displaced from their roots and acquaintances in Mississippi. "This rootlessness,"

according to Leslie Catherine Sanders, "suggests a black attitude, arising from historical experience, that in spite of long tenancy, the land is never really theirs" (184). Certainly, much of the play reflects the same quality of expectations and self-delusion so oppressively present in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The characters are trapped in some sophistries, and there is little reason to believe that they will escape their fate. They experience the familiar pattern: the suffering of trial and betrayal, the discovery of inhumanity in those to whom they have given their allegiance, and the ultimate feeling of frustration and defeat. But, while *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* externalizes the conflict between the blacks and white culture through the recording industry, *The Piano Lesson* dramatizes more emphatically the conflict between the blacks themselves in relation to their heritage through an heirloom. Commenting on the play, William B. Branch in his introduction to the *Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama* (1992) writes:

> Posing conflicts between the consequences of holding on to often painful memories of the slave heritage and cashing them in for more tangible assets, *The Piano Lesson* reveal[s] still more complexities of Wilson's

> pondering on the promises versus the realities of the Black experience in America. (XXXI)

In *The Piano Lesson* Wilson's historical project, as Michael Morales says, "moves into a world of ancestral visitations, visions, and ghosts. . . . The mystical elements intertwine closely with Wilson's historical project in what might be characterized as an experiment in African American historiography." Like in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* Wilson, in this play, predicates the relationship of the past to the present on an active lineage, a kinship bond between the living and their ancestors. In this sense, Morales further says, "the transmission of history becomes a binding ritual through which his characters obtain an empowering self-knowledge, a tangible sense of their own self-worth and identity, that gives them the strength to manage the future on their own terms" (106). Like Herald Loomis, they are able to find their own "songs."

The piano in Charles's family living room lies at the center of the drama. It provides key links to the past. It has dual functions. First, it functions as a mnemonic device for the transmission of history. The images carved on it preserve a narrative generating visual memory that connects the family to their own ancestors who brought its rhythms and style from Africa and transformed them in the context of slave life. The

carvings tell that a white slave-owner (James Sutter's grandfather) sold two of a slave family, a wife and a nine-year-old son, in order to possess the piano. The bereaved father in memory of his loss did the carvings on it. His grandson, Boy Charles (the father of Boy Willie and Berniece) stole it back to avenge the torments perpetrated on his ancestors and reclaim the visual symbol of his family's past--a crime for which he was burnt alive in the boxcar. His lynching, a grave testimony to white cruelty on blacks before emancipation, however, brought about, after emancipation, a series of encounters between blacks and whites. Whites first killed blacks; whites were then killed mysteriously. Wilson's treatment of this theme in *The Piano Lesson* brings him close to Baraka, who depicts blacks as enslaved by white culture and an imposed white consciousness, and focuses on the act of liberation through counterbalance. Like Baraka, Wilson chooses "the particular task of freeing the oppressed from the stereotypes that live in their imagination and replacing them with a viable and liberating mythology" (Sanders 157). Second, the piano serves as a site of direct mystical connections with the ancestors, reminding us of sacred ancestral shrines in many traditional African cultures. In terms of Yoruba cosmography, it is "an *orita meta*, a crossroad between the world of the living and that of the dead. For the

Yoruba, ancestral shrines are key links between the two worlds, where descendants may contact their ancestors for protection, support, and guidance" (Morales 108).

The piano has always stood as a symbol of conflict. In the past, it involved blacks and whites in bloodletting. Now, in 1936, it involves a sister and a brother. The former wants to keep the family heirloom as a reminder of her family's suffering and hardships in slavery times, while the latter wants to sell it in order to buy a farm their ancestors had once worked on. There are two choices: to cling to the past or to meet the challenge of the present/future. For the sister, the piano has a potent significance: it has played a pivotal role in the fight for freedom, and its very presence in her household is an eloquent testament to the success of that effort. Its history is a direct reflection of the struggle that engendered the blues. Recording the history of her family for several generations--weddings, funerals, and other events, including slave sales--the piano is imbued with a totemic aura. No one can confiscate it from her because it is alive, inescapable, and immeasurable. For the brother, the piano, if sold, can buy the freedom his father wanted to have. It is a means to independence and equality in a white man's world.

The brother and sister are not the only claimants to the piano. For, the house is being haunted by Sutter's ghost, who, it seems, has his own feeling for the instrument. Sutter is dead but still "alive" to claim the piano once again in a way his grandfather had laid claim to Charles's family. The ghost of Sutter is a grotesque version of the white figure as confiscator of what Bynum in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* calls "the song" of black people. In the 1910s, Joe Turner had kidnapped blacks into slavery in order to "possess their song." In the 1930s, a white man is still trying to capture their song; this time, by buying the instruments that produce it--there are several references in the play to one white man who is "going around to all the colored people's houses looking to buy up musical instruments" (*Piano* 26). Music for black people is the source of their survival, their identity and power. Though it keeps alive the painful experiences of their past, in one magnificent leap it elevates them from the status of slaves to the level of artists. Something so spiritually supportive became a commercial prospect in the capitalist market of the twentieth century urban America and, therefore, a source of great power to performers like Ma Rainey and Bassie Smith. Small wonder then that even as this music provided blacks with a passport to a world beyond the plantation, it also became a

threat to the white people who controlled that world; and they moved quickly to bridle its galloping pace. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the music-makers at Seefus's bar were "liable to end up in a raid and go to jail sure enough" (*Joe Turner's* 220). Ma Rainey complained that white people take her "voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials . . ." (*Ma Rainey's* 64); and Levee's songs were belittled and bought for five dollars a piece. For blacks, at this time of their history, music is their only bargaining chip at the table of negotiation. But they also run the risk of losing possession of it, and with it their hard-earned identity. The intrigues of white people to rob the blacks of their source of survival, their identity, and power continue. And as long as this process continues, blacks will remain inevitably doomed to slavery of some kind or other.

The piano also has the potential to reflect the personality of those who come into contact with it. Every living member of the Charles family reacts differently to it, according to his or her past actions, hopes, fears, and desires. It thus becomes a touchstone to evaluate their attitudes and dispositions. To Boy Willie, it is a source of accomplishing his cherished dream: a dream that confuses, for the time being, his sense of kinship and understanding of the power of the piano as an heirloom.

Ready to fight with everyone, he sees himself very much as a man of his time--unwilling to suffer any more indignities, he will seize control of his own fate. Yet, he cannot be blamed for his behavior, because America has left no room for him to define himself with any other dreams. His status bears out the pattern of defeated self. Like Levee, he too is a victim. His victimization is also characterized, in part, by the dichotomy, or rupture, between present and past, turning him into a cynic. However, like Levee, he does not channel his rage against own kinsfolk when his dream is shattered. Nor does he remain mulish. There is evidence, in fact, that he, when not forced to forage for survival, has magnanimity alongside shrewdness in him. When Berniece plays the piano to summon the spirits of her ancestors to overcome the ghost of Sutter, Boy Willie at once acknowledges the spiritual power of ancestral music, and changes from a kind of detached gamesman to a recognizer of the inner necessity of living in a state of relationship and harmony. There is a selfish side to his former role, but a great human depth informs the latter: "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" (*Piano* 108).

Boy Willie's warning emphasizes that he feels it necessary to keep the ancestors alive. Like Levee, and, of course, like

almost all the young protagonists of Wilson, Boy Willie too is a trickster. Gates Jr. says that individuality and indeterminacy, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty may characterize a trickster (*Signifying* 6). Behind all this, however, lies the trickster's motive for survival. Therefore, Boy Willie also cannot be blamed for collaborating with the whites, or for apparently failing to align himself with his own kin. Having suffered a lot for being black and confronted with his rootlessness, he seeks to exploit whatever means are at hand to sustain himself. Later he tries to recreate his all-but-devastated spirit. Leaving the North, where many of his fellow beings still live, is not easy for him either, emotionally: "You gonna come down South and see me? Uncle Boy Willie gonna get him a farm. Gonna get a great big old farm. Come down there and I'll teach you how to ride a mule. Teach you how to kill a chicken, too" (*Piano* 20).

Boy Willie's quest has a pragmatic aspect; it speaks of a desire to be the master of a farm where his ancestors had been slaves. Instead of "settling" in the North to live as an exile, he prefers to stay home and do the work that generations of blacks had done before him--but this time as an owner, not as a slave. Addressing Boy Willie's issue, Richard Hornby, in his *Hudson Review* article (1990), writes:

> for Boy Willie, selling the piano is not just a means of getting some cash. Buying a hundred acres of the old plantation is a way of getting control over the family's terrible past. The land for him functions as the carvings on the piano did for his great-grandfather. Taking something that belonged to the master and making it into his own is a means to power, a way to go on record and be somebody. (qtd. in Saunders 402)

His resolve to move South stands for a search for cultural roots, for the will to discover who and what he is. His sentiment can be acknowledged, unequivocally, as a projection of the "expatriate consciousness, the creations of the black man's nostalgia for a milieu from which he has been temporarily, or permanently, separated" (Brown 138). Boy Willie's desire to stay in the South encapsulates Wilson's overall intent, which he reveals in his interview with Moyers:

> I think we should have stayed in the South. We attempted to transplant what in essence was an emerging culture, a culture that had grown out of our experiences of two hundred years as slaves in the South. The cities of the urban North have not been

> hospitable. If we had stayed in the South, we would have strengthened the culture. (167)

Boy Willie's final act has in it some solace rather than solution, but this solace has the resources to deepen true kinship and intimacy. Though he "loses" money to buy the farm, he succeeds in, as Pereira says, "establishing the identity of [himself and] his family as truly free black men and women--free from the psychological and emotional shackles of the past, free from the incubus of their white owners, and free from the dissension that threatened to serve them" (98).

Like her brother Boy Willie, Berniece too has a mission: "let her [Maretha] go on and be a schoolteacher or something. She got a chance I didn't have. I ain't gonna burden her with that piano" (*Piano* 70). This extrapersonal mission signals the beginning of release from the ancestral suffering of having fallen into the hands of whites. Though like Boy Willie, she has no means of executing her mission, she has the determination that springs from a deep conviction that blacks are not inferior to whites--her daughter will not stay at the bottom of the social ladder despite the forces conspiring to keep her there. Unlike her brother, she refuses to escape the weight of circumstances. Nor does she need to go South to find her destiny. She is the descendant of a proud heritage, the bearer

of a standard handed down by several generations of a family that refused to surrender, a family that struggled through slavery and survived to see freedom to an extent. For too longer her predecessors have been at the bottom of a static wheel of fortune. Now she struggles to spin the wheel and reverse the situation for her successors. Racial prejudice lies everywhere, but she is well prepared for the battle. She has the Charles spirit. She wants to preserve the piano to activate and renew that spirit, and at the same time, to validate the suffering of her ancestors, to ensure that their sacrifices were not in vain. When her brother wrestles with Sutter's ghost, she joins him by playing the piano and summoning a benediction from the depths of black life. The battle against Sutter transforms the family conflict into a collective resistance to a mutual enemy. This final event of the play reveals the mutual interest of the kinship group by demarcating what is truly "Other." It is a moment of self-definition, putting the kinship of blacks against the kinship of white outsiders. The ghost of Sutter, a symbol of historical torture, is expelled from the community with the reestablishment of the kinship bond. In this respect, the expulsion of Sutter is a metaphor for historical self-definition for blacks in America.

Thus, Wilson's intention to create a self-definition by expelling the dominant culture and his appeal for a separate black history, necessitated by cultural difference, are apparent. Finally, Boy Willie and Berniece learn, as black people in America must, that they should struggle together if they and their loved ones are to be free and move on with their lives, balanced and whole. The music that Berniece plays on the piano reaffirms the stories of the past, transforming the ugly and awful, along with the beautiful and tender, into a joyous melody of hope. Commenting on this moment Pereira says:

> At this moment of spiritual invocation, time and space are suspended; past and present come together, and the ancestral spirits surge forth from the piano to bless this house that they [the Charles] built. At last, brother and sister find themselves on the same side, united against a common enemy, bonded in a common destiny. This is the lesson that the piano teaches them: only as a united family can they transpose the discordant rhythms of bondage into the harmony of full freedom. (103)

Taken together, Berniece and Boy Willie try to pursue the dual strategy of embracing both black cultural heritage and economic opportunity for survival and prosperity. To create a

new meaning of life, both individuals look back at the past and thereby understand the present. Boy Willie is intent on literally capitalizing on the family's history to carve out a new beginning. Berniece wants to keep it up, to preserve family unity and cultural continuity. Their approaches are different, yet the piano synthesizes the discordant notes by becoming a symbol for the legacy of struggle as well as for the necessity of pragmatic future plans.

Avery, the preacher, experiences the familiar pattern of conflict as every black does. He prepares to enter the white world, but cannot decide how much of him he should "sell out" to white men. Despite his confusion, he does not go wrong. The awareness of tradition in him has kept his dignity alive and helped him to survive as best as he can in a white world. His donning of the preacher's mantle is a part of a continuing African tradition. As Sterling Stuckey says:

> The old Negro preacher and other religious leaders in the slave community were the ones who spoke for their people whatever their ethnic origins. The authority of major religious leaders on the plantations owed much to the divine-kingship systems of West Africa and for that reason was the least likely to be questioned. (38)

In this role, Avery is responding to his cultural past. But while his purpose carries intimations of what may be called metaphysical value, its basic concern is with coping with life in what Pereira calls the "urban jungle." Like Boy Willie, Avery too is a pragmatist-with-a purpose, but he is more intelligent than Boy Willie in carrying out his plans. He also collaborates with the whites, but to take only small favors--half a day off to go to the bank, a turkey for Thanksgiving--because he has set his eyes on greater things: to be a leader among his own people. His delicate balancing act between these two societies is evident when he sends a white man to buy the piano from Berniece and then, realizing how much it means to her, supports her decision to keep it. Indeed, he even forgets the name of the would-be buyer. He wants Berniece to use the piano in the service of the Lord and to release her spirit from the captivity of grief. Although he has not completely emerged out of his dilemma, he has learnt how to walk a fine line between both races. And this knowledge is also a powerful strategy, which will one day certainly help him achieve his purpose.

A growing realization that blacks can call the South their home is also in Wining Boy, the uncle of Berniece and Boy Willie. In 1936, for the first time, blacks seem to have

discovered that the North is not a place as heavenly as they had considered before. The lives of blacks in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *The Piano Lesson* have borne witness to racism in the North. Now they are beginning to look back at what they had left behind. Some twenty-five years ago, Winning Boy had left the South for Pittsburgh with a dream of becoming somebody. But now he has become an itinerant gambler who has lost whatever he had brought with him to fulfill his cherished dream--the music. Spending twenty-five years of nomadic life in the North, which claimed the life of his wife and his music, he thinks that his real home is the South, for his emotional roots are still there: "I'll go back [to the South] with you. I'm on my way down there. You gonna take the train? I'm gonna take the train" (*Piano* 37).

Blacks in the play are destined to perpetual suffering, yet they hope that one day they would liberate themselves. Boy Willie seeks to buy some land and settle in the South because he hopes he can survive best if he works on a farm of his own. Berniece attempts to preserve her tradition-steeped piano so that it can usher in a new future. Avery wants to be the leader of his community in order to live a worthy and respectful life. But Doaker, Winning Boy's brother, and Lymon, Boy Willie's friend, have no such mission. They have no destination.

Twenty-seven years of stay in urban, industrial America has made Doaker aware that his plight is socially caused and not simply a human condition. He knows but cannot transform the situation because he has been literally imprisoned in and by the world of Pittsburgh. His years of attachment to a mere job of a railroad cook is its testimony. Devoid of hope, he has turned into a passive onlooker. Whereas the spiritually bereft Winning Boy seeks renewal in a reunion with his roots in the South, Doaker does not have any yearning for the South. He has learnt what it means to be colored in America and there is no place in this country he can call home.

Lymon, by contrast, has yet no conception of life and thinks that the North holds the answer to all his problems. In the South he lived in the shadow of a law that found creative ways to keep him enslaved to the whites: "Fined me a hundred dollars. Mr. Stovall come and paid my hundred dollars and the judge say I got to work for him to pay him back his hundred dollars. I told them I'd rather take my thirty days but they wouldn't let me do that" (*Piano* 37). He has now entered the glamorous Pittsburgh, unconscious of its challenges. Of course, he has escaped his fate in the South, and by so doing he has freed himself. But his freedom is ever transient, for the forces that jeopardize the lives of the blacks still living

there will certainly not spare him. For sure, he would be one of the blacks to suggest that life in Pittsburgh is painful for a black. Poverty is like an infectious disease and he is a carrier, and will carry this epidemic with him wherever he goes as long as he is poor.

Blues once again reflects what Wilson calls "the resiliency of . . . [black] spirit" ("Interview with Bill Moyers" 169). Though the avenues for participation in urban society are almost closed to these people and their ambitions have been thwarted, they are still able to discover in the blues a beauty and nobility that accompany their struggle to survive. It is a means to heighten their energy, convert their pain into joy, and lessen the tension that arises out of the chaos of life. Blues helps them express their "perspective on the incongruity of life and the attempt to achieve meaning in a situation fraught with contradictions" (Cone 116). Though their attitudes are different and though they encounter different difficulties in their struggle for existence, they sing together to affirm an essential worth of black humanity:

> BOY WILLIE. They had Lymon down there singing:
>
> [*Sings*]
>
> O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal oh-ah
>
> O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal well

[LYMON *and* WINNING BOY *join in*]

BOY WILLIE. Come on, Doaker. Doaker know this one. [*As* DOAKER *joins in the men stamp and clap to Keep time. They sing in harmony with great fervor and style*]. (*Piano* 39)

At the end of the play, Boy Willie tells Berniece that unless she lets Maretha play the piano, both he and Sutter's ghost will be back. The blues enables the young girl to bear the responsibility of preserving the newfound ties between sister and brother. "In her innocent hands," says Pereira, "the piano will fill their house with its song of freedom, and its music will be a touchstone for the daily process of reappraisals and renegotiations by these people struggling for survival" (103).

"*The Piano Lesson*," says Barnes, "is first a confrontation of the heritage of the past and [then] the promise of the future" ("Piano Lesson" 455). Yet the ambiguity in the play is due to the ambiguous fate of blacks. The opening suggests that blacks turning to the South might bring a new order to their lives, but the end leaves the effort unresolved. The fate of the blacks may be ambiguous because it lies beyond the knowledge of Wilson himself.