

Powerlessness of the Marginalized: A Reading of August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson"

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Abstract: Regarding African Americans' struggle for survival in racial segregated society of America, male characters struggling with economic problems due to their inability to find adequate work is a re-occurring theme in Wilson's plays, which weakens their authority position in the family. *The Piano Lesson*, like Wilson's other plays, articulates the debility of black subjugated males to perform effectively in their social expected roles. Most of the male characters in the play are marginal members of a racial society that has squeezed them out of its workforce. Consequently, they resort to cheap moneymaking tactics such as selling watermelons, hauling and stealing wood, or participating in other schemes for quick profit. Boy Willie, Lymon, Wining Boy, and Avery represent the various approaches the powerless marginalized black men adopted to be considered men in America. This paper is aimed to study the powerlessness of these marginalized male characters to perform their social expected gender roles.

Keywords: Marginalization, Powerlessness, African American, August Wilson, The Piano Lesson

I. Introduction:

Each of Wilson's plays, set in a different decade, articulates the inability of black men to perform effectively in social expected roles for men. A re-occurring theme in Wilson's plays is male characters struggling with economic problems due to their inability to find adequate work, which weakens their authority position in the family. This weakened position forces the male characters to question their manhood and sometimes erupt in verbal, mental or physical violence against family members and friends in their lives led to injuring and damaging familial relationships and friendships. A major problem for Wilson's male characters is that they have not questioned the normative hypothesis about socially accepted male roles. Their acceptance of this cultural norm causes powerlessness within the subjugated characters. Wilson's plays provide the conceptual and theoretical framework for examining powerlessness the subjugated in black males who accept society's notion of what it takes to be a man, but are denied the resources to earn their masculinity through traditional channels.

The Piano Lesson, like many of Wilson's plays, articulates the inability of African-American males to perform effectively in social expected roles for men —students, workers, and family providers. As in other Wilson plays, we observe the chemistry that exists among a traditionally oppressed group as they try to survive in America without sacrificing either their dignity or their manhood.

Most of the African-American males in *The Piano Lesson* are marginalized members of a

society that has squeezed them out of its workforce. Consequently they resort to moneymaking tactics such as selling watermelons, hauling and stealing wood, or participating in other schemes for quick profit. Boy Willie, Lymon, Wining Boy, and Avery represent the various approaches African-American males adopted to be considered men in America. Regrettably only Boy Willie and Avery aspire to do anything useful with their legacies.

II. Discussion

Boy-Willie:

The character in *The Piano Lesson* who is most affected by powerlessness is Boy Willie, the central figure in the play. The exuberant Boy Willie bursts into his cautious, widowed sister Bemiece's life with a truckload of watermelons to sell and the dream of buying the same Mississippi land that his family had worked as slaves. From the moment he storms into the house, through his arguments with Bemiece, his bantering with Lymon, his aggressive advances on Grace, and his final fight with Sutter's ghost, is determine to fight for his right to be a man no matter the cost. He seems poised to do battle with everyone. In Act II, Scene 5, Boy Willie tells Bemiece:

I was born to a time of fire. The world ain't wanted no part of me . . . But my mama isn't birthed me for nothing. So what I got to do? I got to mark my passing on the road. Just like you write on a tree, "Boy Willie was here." That's all I'm trying to do with that piano. Trying to put my mark on the road. Like my daddy

done. My heart say for me to sell that piano and get me some land so I can make a life for myself to live in my own way. (*The Piano Lesson*, p.93-94)

Boy Willie's "time-of-fire" speech is the pinnacle of debility in performing the expected gender role in his life. The speech is a desperate cry for manhood. When he says, "I was born to a time of fire," he speaks of a time of sharecropping for young black males who were two generations away from slavery — a time that deprived him of the traditional American way of proving his manhood, namely, marrying, having children, and supporting his family.

According to Erickson's (1980) adult life cycle classification, Boy Willie, who is 30, has lived through two of the four stages in the adult life cycle — preadulthood and early adulthood — and is now approaching middle adulthood. As an African-American male nearing middle-age, Boy Willie should have already been properly educated, economically stable, and pursuing a young woman, who he would soon marry, have children with, and provide for — the criteria for manhood in American society. However, the truth of the matter is Boy Willie, who was born around 1906, fifty-nine years after the abolition of slavery, is an unweaned sharecropper with no education. Like most of the African-American males in *The Piano Lesson*, he is a marginal member of a society that has squeezed him out of its workforce.

When Boy Willie states, "The world ain't warned no part of me," he knows that in this world he must make his own way and fight hard to establish his right to live his own way. He also knows he is equipped for this battle: he has the Charles fighting spirit, handed down to him by his father and mother and is ready to take control of his own life. But what is more important, Boy Willie's only chance of controlling his life and obtaining manhood in America is by purchasing the land where his entire family had been enslaved. To obtain the money, he resorts to tactics such as selling watermelons, hauling and stealing wood, and, if he must, peddling the family's prized piano for a quick profit.

Although he lacks a steady income that could finance his undertaking and enable him to avoid confronting his sister over the piano, he holds onto his dream of acquiring and working the land he understands: "Hire me some men to work it for me. Gin my cotton. Get my seed. . . Might even plant some tobacco or oats (11). Boy Willie sees in this business venture an opportunity to obtain a piece of the American Dream, thereby earning respect as a man in American society.

When Boy Willie asserts, "But my mama isn't birthed me for nothing. So what I got to do? I

got to mark nay passing on the road. Just like you write on a tree, 'Boy Willie was here.' That's all I'm trying to do with that piano. Trying to put my mark on the road. Like my daddy done," he speaks with a sense of purpose. Pereira points out that Boy Willie is on the verge of accomplishing what few blacks in the 1930s even dared dream about. He goes on to say, "No other Wilson character has come close to owning the very farm on which his family was enslaved. It is this sense of being truly free — perhaps even turning the tables on the white man — that endows him with such an extravagant sense of humor (Pereira, 1991, p.181)." Boy Willie is preparing for the act that will empower his family to come of age — the slaves will become the owners of the farm that enslaved them.

So when Boy Willie says, "My heart say for me to sell that piano and get me some land so I can make a life for myself to live in my own way," he sees the piano as symbolic freedom from economic serfdom and oppression of the past. However, unlike Levee in Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom*, Boy Willie does not reject his cultural heritage. In wanting to sell the piano he is merely attempting to use his heritage to free himself of economic serfdom, and he believes his father would have done the same:

If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn't be sitting up here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that. See, he couldn't do no better. When he come along he ain't had nothing he could build on. His daddy ain't had nothing to give him. The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano. And he died over giving me that. (*The Piano Lesson*, p.46)

Therefore, Boy Willie's reason for selling the piano, far from being a rejection of all the piano symbolizes, is his way of earning a piece of the American pie — and ultimately being deemed a man. By purchasing this land, he can obtain manhood through traditional channels by work that he instinctively knows how to do:

Hell, the land is there for everybody. All you got to do is figure out how to get you a piece. Ain't no mystery to life. You just got to go out and meet it square on. If you got a piece of land you'll find everything else fall right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton. . . the weather, and anything else

you want to talk a about. (*The Piano Lesson*, p.92)

This persistence to make his own way derives from an intense desire to be a man in the white man's world, and he refuses to stay at the bottom of the social ladder despite the forces that conspire to keep him there. Unlike his sister Berniece, he will not succumb to the weight of circumstances. He tells her:

This might be your bottom but it ain't mine. I'm living at the top of life. I ain't gonna take my life and throw it away at the bottom. I'm in the world like everybody else. The way I see it everybody else got to come up a little taste to be where I am. (*The Piano Lesson*, p.92)

For too long Boy Willie's family has been at the bottom of the social ladder. And, he believes that buying the Sutter farm will consolidate his family's identity as free people, ultimately giving him the promise of manhood in American society.

Lymon:

Lymon is Boy Willie's close friend. In Wilson's stage notes, Lymon is said to be 29 years old, which would make him a part of young adulthood in Erickson's (1980) adult life cycle. As stated in Chapter I, young adulthood is signaled by the end of educational preparation for the world of work. Erickson (1980) maintains that during this stage the predominant role expectations shift from doing well in school to getting a job. He goes on to say that this salient role shift is not only imposed by society, community, and family but is also personally reinforced as these social expectations are internalized into one's if own value system. Therefore, Erickson (1980) believes the work role becomes the major life arena for role strain processes during early adulthood. Wilson's Lymon would make a perfect case study for Erickson's (1980) young adulthood stage.

When we meet Lymon, he is running away from the law in Mississippi in hopes of finding gainful employment in the North. However, he so happens to be black, poor, and uneducated — three strikes that lock him out of jobs paying mainstream wages in the 1930s. In the South, Lymon could not get a legitimate job, but other tactics that he employed to provide for himself was said to be against the law. After stealing wood, he was jailed and later released just to work off his debt on a white man's farm:

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 . . . 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 . . . Me and Boy Willie got away but the sheriff got us. Say we was stealing wood. They shot me in my stomach.

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

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

BOY WILLIE: As soon as Stovall turned his back, Lymon was gone. He down there living in that truck dodging the sheriff and Stovall. He got both of them looking for him. So, I brought him up here. (*The Piano Lesson*, p.37)

In the North, Lymon is just one of many fugitives, who has no marketable skills suited for anything other than menial jobs such as janitorial, laundry or, at worse, shoe shining. In the South, he was denied an adequate education, and as a result, prepared to be no more than a farmhand. Consequently, his self-esteem is based on a kind of behavior that supports a stereotyped picture of the Negro male who migrated from the South: forever in trouble with the law, opposed to hard work, fond of flashy clothes, lacking personal ambition, driven by sexual lust, and limited in vision. However, the play suggests that this stereotypical picture does not completely hold true for Lymon and that even as he runs from Mississippi to avoid the law, he is also motivated by his belief that blacks are treated better in the North. He also seems to have an aversion to hard work, but he picks and loads watermelons along with Boy Willie and helps him in selling them, and even though he purchases a flashy green suit, matching shirt, and shoes from Wining Boy, he does so with money he earns honestly by working with Boy Willie. So, he engages in much womanizing while in Pittsburgh, but he still has respect for women and hints to

Berniece that he might seriously seek her affections. It is a testament to his character that growing up in the racist South has limited his dreams, but he is still full of enthusiasm about his prospects in Pittsburgh, believing that he will get a job and a woman. Yet, the lack of gainful

employment opportunities deprives Lymon of the traditional American way of proving his manhood — marrying, having children, and supporting the family. *The Piano Lesson* reveals the appalling degree of economic hardship, insecurity, and deprivation that Lymon must confront day in and day out.

Consequently, he must define his manhood in nontraditional ways, such as dating many women and participating in the underworld economy.

Wining Boy:

Wining Boy is the uncle of Boy Willie and Berniece. The North did not fulfill the dreams of this one-time, piano player, who now turns to liquor to buffer the pain of his unsuccessful life. Wilson describes him in the following way:

Wining Boy is fifty-six years old. Doaker's older brother, he tries to present the image of a successful musician and gambler, but his music, his clothes, and even his manner of presentation are old. He is a man who looking back over his life continues to live it with an odd mixture of zest and sorrow." (*The Piano Lesson*, p.28)

At age fifty-six, Wining Boy has lived through three of the stages in Erickson's (1980) adult life cycle — preadulthood, early adulthood, middle adulthood — and is now caught in the throes of old age. During these stages of his life, Wining Boy was expected to attend school, find a job after graduation, then marry, have children and perform effectively in the family provider role to be considered a man. However, like so many of Wilson's male characters, Wining Boy coped with discouraging role barriers, repeated failure, and frustration. This is not to say that he did not attempt to do what is expected of him in social roles. However, due to unique historical circumstances, it was not always easy and sometimes even impossible. Born around 1880, fifteen years after the abolition of slavery, one can assume that Wining Boy is the product of an inadequate education. In fact, more than likely, he is a self-taught piano player. Consequently, after leaving the sharecropping South, his only job in the North was as a disheartened piano player, who could not find happiness in forever entertaining in bars and gambling joints.

At some point in his life, he married Cleotha, who later threw him out because of his wandering, rambling, restless nature — which forced him into alcoholism. A musician, gambler and alcoholic, he has been on the move constantly:

Couldn't nothing keep me still. Much as I loved Cleotha I loved to ramble. Couldn't nothing keep me still. We got married and we used to fight about it all the time. Then one day she asked me to leave. Told me she loved me before I left. Told me, Wining Boy, you got a home as long as I got mine. And I believed in my heart I always felt that and that kept me safe. (*The Piano Lesson*, p.31-32).

Up North, he now lives the blues that he so frequently played throughout the South. Such extreme discouragement in student, work, family and elderly roles resulted in identity confusion, isolation, stagnation, and despair as Wining Boy proceeded from adolescence to old age.

At fifty-six, life has been little that Wining Boy has expected, and he is driven almost to desperation by the attempts to suck the music from him:

Go to a place and they find out you play piano, the first thing they want to do is give you a drink, find you a piano and sit you right down. . . They ain't gonna let you get up! . . . You look up one day. . . and you hate the piano. But that's all you got. You can't do nothing else. All you know to do is play that piano. Now, who am I? Am I me . . . or am I the piano player? Sometimes it seem like the only thing to do is shoot the piano player cause he's the cause of all the trouble I'm having. (*The Piano Lesson*, p.41)

The above monologue is at the root of the gender role strain in Wining Boy's life. The music that once defined him and became inextricably merged with his identity has now placed him in jeopardy. It has given him a renewed sense of himself and a new vulnerability. Thus, the music that gave meaning to his freedom forced him into a different kind of slavery, for even as it soothes his bruises it creates a new dilemma. In her essay "*The Songs of a Marked Man*," Margaret E. Glover writes: "His music gave the black man a place in the white man's world, but at the cost of losing his right to that music and the part of himself he put in it (Glover, 1988, p.69)."

Now, years later, Wining Boy is tired of the music and is ready to go home. His decision to return to the South is a step toward freedom — an assertion that he will no longer run from the South but return to claim it as his home. When he left the

South, Wining Boy took with him little more than the blues. The song he sings captures the essence of his career: "I'm a rambling gambling man. . . I've traveled all around this world (*The Piano Lesson*, p.47-48)." But slowly the music became a burden. Pereira states, "Wherever he went people forced him to play, tying him to a piano for hours at a stretch. That is I when he began to reject the music, to 'hate the piano' and to distance himself emotionally from the very thing that defined him (Pereira, 1991, p.169)." Pereira goes on to say, "Now, his wife has died and he has lost touch with the blues. Spiritually bereft, he is in great need of a renewal. So he seeks a reunion with his roots in the South (Pereira, 1991, p.168)."²⁴ After years of searching, he realizes that his home is exactly where it had always been — the place he left years ago. Now in the face of successive role strains and failures, Wining Boy must cope with feelings of regret as he looks back over his life during his waning years. According to Erickson, this "despair expresses the feeling that the time is now short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try out alternate roads to integrity (Erickson, 1963, p. 269)."

Avery:

Avery, Bemiece's persistent suitor, has accepted society's notion of what it takes to be a man. He believes he must get married, have children and provide well for his family. At age 38, Avery is going through the middle adulthood stage in Erickson's (1980) adult life cycle. Erickson (1980) notes that as African-American males move into middle adulthood, conventional gender and family roles make their performances as fathers and husbands especially critical issues. Traditionally family expectations for fathers/husbands have emphasized the breadwinner role. Avery, like many unmarried, middle-aged, male characters in Wilson's plays, believes the provider role remains at the core of his masculine identity. Success as a breadwinner is a major source of personal pride for Avery, and the fact that he is not married is an especially sensitive issue for him. Being single and childless has left him with a more extreme sense of discouragement, hopelessness and stagnation. Therefore, he constantly pressures Bemiece to marry him so he can have the opportunity to provide for her and her 10-year-old daughter, Maretha:

EVERY: Bemiece... I be at home and I get to thinking you up here an' I'm down there. I get to thinking how that look to have a preacher that ain't married. It makes for a better congregation if the preacher was settled down and married.

BERNIECE: Avery... not now. I was fixing to take my bath.

EVERY: You know how I feel about you, Bemiece. Now...I done got the place from Mr. Cohen. I get the money from the bank and I can fix it up real nice. They give me a ten cents a hour raise down there on the job...Now Bemiece, I ain't got much in the way of comforts. I got a hole in my pockets near about as far as money is concerned. I ain't never found no way through life to a woman I care about like I care about you. I need feat. I need somebody on my bond side. I need a woman that fits in my hand.

BERNIECE: Avery, I ain't ready to get married now...

EVERY: Anytime I get anywhere near you... you push me away.

BERNIECE: I got enough on my hands with Maretha. I got enough people to love and take care of.

EVERY: Who you got to love you? Can't nobody get close enough to you. Doaker can't half say nothing to you. You jump all over Boy Willie. Who you got to love you, Bemiece?

BERNIECE: You trying to tell me a woman can't be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me — without a woman — and still be a man. That's alright. Ain't nobody gonna ask you, "Avery, who you got to love you?" That's alright for you. But everybody gonna be worried about Bemiece. "How Bemiece gonna take care of herself? How she gonna raise that child without a man? Wonder what she do with herself. How she gonna live like that?" Everybody got all kinds of questions for Bemiece. Everybody telling me I can't be a woman unless I got a man. Well, you tell me Avery — you know — how much woman am I? (*The Piano Lesson*, p.66-67)

Yes, Avery is persistent in marrying Bemiece; however, being married alone is not enough to be deemed a man in America, one must also provide well for his family. *The Piano Lesson* suggests that Avery is socialized to highly value the worker role, and his self-evaluation depends

heavily on success or failure in playing this cherished role. Nevertheless, despite the high stakes Avery places on the work ethic, he has always faced some degree of difficulty or strain as worker due to unique historical circumstances. Born in Mississippi in 1898, thirty-three years after the abolition of slavery, Avery lacks the training and skills necessary for anything other than menial labor. In the South, he was a farmhand, who was locked out the mainstream of the American occupational system. Unable to provide for himself let alone a family, he decided to migrate North in hopes of a better life. Once in Pittsburgh, Avery found employment as an elevator operator in a downtown skyscraper. Although his job offers him an annual pension plan, annual Thanksgiving turkey, and annual ten-cent-per-hour raise, he feels incomplete. Therefore, he becomes a preacher. He believes that by building a church and serving as minister he will be set for life. Since he is bent on obtaining manhood through traditional channels, one could assume that he sees the black church as an opportunity to gain the financial security needed to be deemed a man. However, Wilson suggests that Avery honestly believes God called him into the ministry to lead blacks to a better, safer life. Nevertheless, Wilson also suggests that many African-Americans have problems with black preachers — believing them to be mere con men for money. The following dialogue occurs in Act I, Scene 1:

BOY WILLIE: Doaker say you a preacher now. What. . . we supposed to call you Reverend? You used to be plain old Avery. When you get to be a preacher, nigger?

LYMON: Avery say he gonna be a preacher so he don't have to work.

BOY WILLIE: I remember when you was down there on the Willshaw place planting cotton. You wasn't thinking about no Reverend then. Doaker Berniece say you all going down to the bank.

EVERY: Yeah, they give me a half day off work. I got an appointment to talk to the bank about getting a loan to start my church.

BOY WILLIE: Lymon say preachers don't have to work. Where you working at, nigger?

DOAKER: Avery got him one of them good jobs. He working at one of them skyscrapers downtown.

EVERY: I'm working down there at the Gulf Building running an elevator. Got a pension and everything. They even give you a turkey on Thanksgiving.

BOY WILLIE: How you get to be a preacher, Avery? I might want to be a preacher one day. Have everybody call me Reverend Boy Willie. (*The Piano Lesson*, p.22-24)

Boy Willie and Lymon believe Avery to be a street-smart con man who would play any role that gives him an economic edge. Therefore, they refuse to believe that Avery was "called" to the ministry, choosing instead to believe that, like them, Avery found a lucrative scheme to support himself. Wining Boy sees it this way "Ain't nothing wrong with being a preacher. You got the preacher on one band and the gambler on the other. Sometimes there ain't too much difference in them (*The Piano Lesson*, p.30)."

In his play *Blues for Mister Charlie*, James Baldwin (1979) suggests that black men originally became preachers, not for financial gain, but to be men in the eyes of God since they were not considered men in the eyes of white America. Wilson writes this about Avery in his stage notes: "Thirty-eight years old, honest and ambitious, he has taken to the city like a fish to water, finding in it opportunities for growth and advancement that did not exist for him in the rural South. He is dressed in a suit and tie with a gold cross around his neck. He carries a small Bible (*The Piano Lesson*, p.22)."

Doaker:

It seems in most of Wilson's plays, there is at least one character who does not fully experience the impact of gender role strain. In *The Piano Lesson*, that character is Doaker Charles. Of him, Wilson writes: "He is a tall, thin man of forty-seven, with severe features, who has for all intents and purposes retired from the world though he works full-time as a railroad cook (*The Piano Lesson*, p.1)." At 47, Doaker would be considered middle-aged in Erickson's (1980) adult life cycle. However, because of his life accomplishments and positive mental health, Erickson's (1980) old-age stage best describes Doaker. Of the entire group of men in the play, Doaker has what was for black men in the 1930s the most reliable and best-paying job available. He has been a full-time railroad cook for twenty-seven years, and he is content. Of Doaker, Shannon says, "Unlike his restless brother Wining Boy, he seems satisfied with how he has lived his life. He shows no signs of anxiety about a lack of money or about his single life (Shannon, 1995, p.156)."

However, black railroad employees were originally tapped from slave labor, and there was a tendency among the white passengers that these black men encountered to act like masters (Santino, 1989, P.7). Therefore, as a railroad cook for white passengers during the Depression, Doaker adopted a measure of Avery's conformity and a great deal of Boy Willie's cunning. Yet given the choice between standing in breadlines to feed himself and acting the part of an obsequious servant, Doaker chose the latter while adopting various means of deflecting the racism that seemed an inevitable part of the job. By necessity, he could transform into the ultimate trickster, pampering and smiling at white passengers to nearly doubling his salary in tips while laughing with other black employees about his wiles.

Nevertheless, quite happy with his current lifestyle as a railroad cook, Doaker does not want to return South. His experiences have taught him that there is no one place black people can call home, believing that home is wherever he wants it to be.

There is a sense of balance and rhythm in him that none of the other characters have, and he is at peace with himself in a way the others are not. His character is not without emotion, but he has developed a strong sense of whom he is and what his role might be.

Though Doaker is younger than Wining Boy, this is his house and he presides over it like an elder statesman. He is a survivor. To him that means living in the present, not in the past like Boy Charles did, or like his nephew and niece do. It means viewing the world as rationally as he can, without letting sentimentality cloud his vision of goals that are already too hard to achieve. In spite of a lifetime of role failures as student, husband and father, Doaker has maintained a level of integrity that helped him to cope with despair. As a result, he readily views his past life as meaningful and he can continue productive activities.

III. Conclusion:

The Piano Lesson, set during the early Depression years, depicts black males who journeyed North during the height of the Great Migration in search of the American Dream that would ultimately deem them men. Most of the male characters in the play are subjugated and marginal members of a society that has squeezed them out of its workforce. Consequently they resort to cheap moneymaking tactics such as selling watermelons, hauling and stealing wood, or participating in other schemes for quick profit. Boy Willie, Lymon, Wining Boy, and Avery represent the various approaches the powerless marginalized black men adopted to be considered men in America.

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