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THE WOMEN OF AUGUST WILSON AND A PERFORMANCE STUDY AND ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF GRACE IN WILSON’S THE PIANO LESSON

by
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B.A. University of Virginia, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Theatre in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 2007, I was cast in the University of Central Florida’s production of *The Piano Lesson*. My thesis will examine my performance in the role of Grace, as well as understudying the role of Berniece under the direction of Professor Belinda Boyd. In addition to the performance components, my thesis materials will include historical and cultural character research and a reflective journal documenting my rehearsal and production process. My character research and journal will address questions about the characters “choices” and the relationship of their environment to views of personal responsibility and obligations in the play. I will examine the characters’ relationships and situations in the play, investigating some of the decisions that these characters make in response to their cultural and social landscapes.

The second part of my thesis will include research on three additional female characters from August Wilson’s dramatic canon: Aunt Ester Tyler from *Gem of the Ocean*, Ma Rainey from *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, and Rose from *Fences*, which will inform my character explorations of Grace and Berniece, and the choices that I make during the rehearsal process in developing their journeys. By reading other plays by Wilson, I endeavor to deepen my understanding of the struggles of African-American women in the twentieth century, and explore how the social and economic status of black women was affected by America’s changing political and social climate over several decades. In addition, I will document how my visceral experience of performing the roles of Grace and Berniece relates to my intellectual process of exploring the journeys of Aunt Ester Tyler, Ma Rainey, and Rose.
For my mother, who at an early age fostered my love for theatre.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION: EVOLUTION OF THESIS PROJECT

Initially, I set out to discuss the female characters in August Wilson’s plays (Gem of the Ocean, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson, Seven Guitars, Fences, Two Trains Running, Jitney, King Hedley II, and Radio Golf) thus examining how August Wilson saw the status of black women was affected by the United States’ changing political and social climate over a period of several decades. After reading the ten plays in Wilson’s Pittsburgh century cycle, I realized that the women in Wilson’s plays were not really progressing throughout the twentieth century; specifically, they were not setting and achieving goals for themselves. Instead, I saw Wilson presenting a recurring pattern of women constantly squandering away their life’s potential in order to obtain the affection of a man. These women were more concerned with finding a man to take care of them or being loyal to their current partner. As a result they did not develop into the best women they could become by achieving educational and professional success. However, not all of the women fall into this trap. Aunt Ester (Gem of the Ocean), Ma Rainey (Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom), and Mame Wilks (Radio Golf) seem to rise above the ensnaring traps of men.

The pattern of women pining for the affection of a man made me realize that most of Wilson’s plays have an archetypal “Grace-like” character. A “Grace-like” character is a promiscuous woman who seeks to find a man that will spend money on her. “Grace” gets a false sense of confidence by always having a man around. In order

1 See Chapter Six for a biography on August Wilson.
to dissect this “Grace-like” character, I first need to explain the inner workings of Grace from *The Piano Lesson*. Then I will uncover the “Grace-like” characters that can be found in Wilson’s other plays mentioned above, thus helping me to understand and fully develop the character of Grace. Although I use the qualities of the “Grace-like” characters to help me develop Grace, I will create more character specific choices in my character analysis for Grace. Wilson does not fully develop some of his women characters including Grace and the “Grace-like” characters. As an actor it will be challenging for me to fill in the holes Wilson left in Grace’s character.

My thesis is comprised of seven chapters: Black Life in the 1930’s; Analysis of *The Piano Lesson*; Berniece’s Journey; Grace the Sultry Seductress; “Grace-like” Characters in Wilson’s Plays; Women Pioneers and Enduring Wives; August Wilson’s Biography; and Wilson’s Playwriting Inspirations, Technique, and Style. The essay on Berniece’s journey through *The Piano Lesson* examines five symbols (the piano, the death of her husband, Crawley, her daughter, Maretha, her womanhood, and her ancestors) that I believe shape her identity. Grace’s identity and character development along with my thoughts throughout the rehearsal process and performances of *The Piano Lesson* are included in my journal. The research on August Wilson’s life along with the research done on his playwriting inspirations, techniques, and style will help me discover Wilson’s inspiration for writing *The Piano Lesson*, and the inspiration for creating his characters. By researching Wilson’s history I will be able to see how his life experiences shaped his viewpoint as an African American playwright.

My thesis begins with research on the history of Jim Crow, and the disenfranchisement of black men and women through the use of discriminatory laws,
which the characters in *The Piano Lesson* and their ancestors endured. Many African Americans like Grace, Berniece, Doaker, Wining Boy, and Lymon migrated to the North in order to escape the harsh Jim Crow practices that were commonplace in the South. In search of a life free of discrimination and more work opportunities, they believed the North was a place where they could claim their stake in the American Dream. My research on Jim Crow reveals that once blacks reached the North, they were still discriminated against and the only work offered them were low paying menial labor jobs. Life for working black women is also touched upon, which will give me insight into positions that were available to black women like Grace and Berniece. I will also discover the added responsibilities placed on Berniece, a working single mother. Black women’s beauty standards are explored which will inform me of the unrealistic white beauty ideal placed on Grace and Berniece.

*Note*

I have chosen to use the word “black” instead of African American, in the section about Jim Crow, because the term “African American” was not commonly used until the 1960s. During the eras of racial segregation, people were identified by their skin color and thus were categorized as either white or colored. To show that black people were disenfranchised from their inalienable rights as citizens of the United States, I will therefore refrain from using the term African American. The authors that I will quote use various terms for black people including Negro, Colored, and African American. Blacks during the Jim Crow era referred to themselves as Negroes.
CHAPTER ONE: BLACK LIFE IN THE 1930s

Living Under Jim Crow

The Origins of Jim Crow

August Wilson wrote his plays to encourage blacks to reexamine their past, so I felt that it was important that I researched the discriminatory practices that were used against blacks and where they derived. In order to understand Wilson’s plays, it is necessary to establish that the white and black experience in America since its founding in 1776 has been vastly different. I believe Wilson wrote his plays to reveal the true black experience in America, which is one that reflects the disenfranchisement of blacks, “who have been promised a place and a stake in the American Dream only to find that access to the rights and freedoms promised to all Americans is in fact guarded and exclusive” (Bogumil 5-6). This chapter uncovers some of the obstacles that the characters in The Piano Lesson faced as they fought to achieve their piece of the American Dream. This research is intended to inform me of the political and social environment which these characters were living. I will discuss the facts I found and then apply them to The Piano Lesson.

The discriminatory Jim Crow laws that oppressed blacks into the 1960s date back to the times of slavery. The origin of the term “Jim Crow,” comes from a popular minstrel ditty, “which went something like this:

I look about and jump about,
And do just so,
But every time I turn about,
I jump jump Jim Crow! (Kennedy 34)

The term “Jim Crow” is believed to have derived from James Crow an unknown
soldier. Some writers say he was a slave from Cincinnati, Ohio, and others say he was
from Charleston, South Carolina. Many other writers believe the term “Crow” came
from old man Crow, the slave owner, while some say it came from the simile, black as a
crow (Bennett 255).

The lyrics and term of “Jim Crow” were based on society’s belief that blacks were
inferior and, therefore, not first class citizens in the United States of America. Stetson
Kennedy, author of Jim Crow Guide: The Way it Was states that “Generally speaking,
first class citizenship is limited to native-born white Protestant Gentiles” (7). Other races
albeit Black, Jew, Latino, or Native American’s were considered second-class citizens,
which had to face the wrath of prejudice whites. Kennedy says, “Ever since Europeans
first arrived on the North American continent five centuries ago it has been public policy
that [it] was to be a white man’s country” (7). The U.S evolved into a country that was
for white men only through the extermination of Native Americans and the enslavement
of Black Africans (Kennedy 7). The ideals of white supremacy had been indoctrinated
into American society since the founding of the country. Another example of the attitude
of white superiority can be seen in the steps taken in the establishment of America.
Native American Indians were slaughtered, raped, had their land stolen from them, and
were forced to live as outcast on reservations. The white European settlers thought
they had a right to take over the land because they believed as whites they were
superior and had the right to dominate other races.
Groups like the Ku Klux Klan continued with this belief of white supremacy by terrorizing nonwhites, especially blacks. The Ku Klux Klan, also known as the KKK, formed in the South in 1867, used propaganda to encourage white supremacy. White supremacists like Hiram W. Evans, an Imperial Wizard in the KKK in 1937, believed:

The negro, so far in the future as human vision can pierce, must always remain in a group unable to be a part of the American people. No amount of education can ever make a white man out of a man of any other color. It is a law on this earth that races never can exist together in complete peace and friendship and certainly never in a state of equality. (Kennedy 31)

White supremacists feared blacks becoming their equal and having the same privileges and rights as them. Former Senator James O. Eastland, who held a senate seat from 1941-1979, said on the senate floor: “I believe in white supremacy, because I can see that if the amalgamation of whites and Negroes in this country is permitted, there will be a mongrel race, and there will come to pass the identical condition under which Egypt, India, and other civilizations decayed” (Kennedy 31). White supremacy beliefs were held by a vast majority of the white southerners, and “many millions more outside the South” (Kennedy 31).

The Kloran, handbook of the Ku Klux Klan, was originally written by William J. Simmons who was also the founder of the second KKK in 1915. Many blacks had to suffer not only under the wrath of discriminatory laws, but also under the Kloran, which “for many years superseded the Constitution of the U.S.A as the governing instruments for the Southern states in matters concerning race relations and the status of Negroes
as citizens and persons” (Kennedy 31-2). The power of the Ku Klux Klan in the South is one of the many reasons why blacks fled the South and migrated to Northern states. Gerald Early, Professor of English and Afro-American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis Missouri writes this in his essay about Black Migration posted on PBS's website, “The North offered fewer racial restrictions because Jim Crow was less blatant, and legalized segregation not nearly so widely enforced. Moreover, in the North there were far fewer lynchings…”(1). Blacks believed that life in the North would provide more opportunities and less discrimination, but discrimination still created obstacles for blacks in the North.

**Discrimination**

After slaves were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865, many blacks sought a fresh start in the North. The North seemed to offer better jobs, higher wages, educational opportunities, and less discrimination. However, another set of discriminatory laws were enforced upon blacks. The laws were commonly referred to as “Jim Crow laws.”

Jim Crow laws were extreme laws that prevented blacks and whites from using the same public facilities: bathrooms, schools, water fountains, restaurants, and entertainment venues. Blacks were supposedly given “separate but equal” public facilities to use; however, the facilities for blacks were not equal to the white ones. The black facilities were in the poorest condition and poorly maintained. Blacks were even prohibited from voting after they were given the right to vote in 1871 by the Fifteenth Amendment. States enacted poll taxes, literacy tests, and required voters to be land owners in order to excluded blacks from voting. Even when these requirements were
met, blacks often had to face angry white mobs that would try to intimidate them from voting.

Although Jim Crow laws were first legislated in the South, these separate but equal laws were also practiced in northern states. Equality for blacks had been established in northern states after the American Revolution in 1783, but due to the small size of the black population, they posed no threat to white society and no laws were needed to segregate them from whites. After 1860, the black population increased from a few to more than 200,000, and white fear increased as the black population exploded. This fear brought about the practice of restricting blacks in public areas. Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America* (1831), discusses the inequality between the races in the United States:

> In the theatres gold cannot procure a seat for the servile race beside their former masters; in the hospitals they lie apart; and although they are allowed to invoke the same God as the whites, it must be at a different altar and in their own churches, with their own clergy. The gates of heaven are not closed against them, but their inferiority is continued to the confines of the other world. When the Negro dies, his bones are caste aside, and the distinction of condition prevails even in the equality of death. (Takaki 107)

De Tocqueville is commenting on the inequality he perceived between blacks and whites. He observed that blacks were viewed as inferior to their white counterparts and therefore segregated from whites. Blacks were not only separated from whites in life, but also in death because they were buried in separate cemeteries. In the early 1800s, separation of blacks in transportation and housing was rigidly enforced. Blacks in
northern states were purposely concentrated in urban ghettos in cities like New York, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. There was the unjust fear that social commingling of the races would contribute to miscegenation, in other words, cohabitation or marriage. With this extreme fear of race mixing came the idea to segregate schools. It was thought that black men would pursue the “lovely white” as Benjamin Franklin described white women, and this was one of the ways to prevent it from occurring (Takaki 109). So, to ensure the protection of “lovely white” and purity of the white race, other discriminatory laws were legislated and enforced. Prior to finding this research I was under the impression that discrimination was something that blacks in the North rarely experienced, however my research revealed that this was not the case.

Grace, Berniece, Doaker, Maretha, Wining Boy Avery and Lymon, the characters of *The Piano Lesson*, moved to North for better opportunities and to escape the confines of discrimination. Lymon attest to life being better in the North, “They treat you better up here” (Wilson, *Piano* 38). Although they moved to the North to escape the discrimination they faced in South it was still prevalent in the North. They still had to adhere to the unjust Jim Crow laws.

**Black Migration: Opportunity In the North**

In the 1890s blacks started moving from the rural South to eastern costal cities in the North. The First World War sparked an increase of approximately 500,000 blacks migrating from the South to the North. Cheap European labor was no longer readily available, so northern industrial recruiters looked to white women and black southerners to fill the void. The increase in wages was more than enough to lure blacks to the
North. Gerald Early compares the salary of rural southern workers to that of northern industrial workers:

Work in northern industry paid more than agricultural work. Men could earn up to $2.50 a day in a Chicago meat packinghouse, or as much as $5.00 a day on an assembly line in the auto factories of Detroit. These rates of pay far exceeded anything African-Americans could make in the South. Even black women could make $2.00 a day as domestics in a Northern city — as much as twice or more as doing the same work in the South. Despite the fact that the cost of living in Northern cities was higher than in the South, blacks felt that the higher salaries more than compensated for the difference (1).

Blacks were crossing the Mason-Dixon Line heading to northern cities seeking industrial jobs. They envisioned new lives which could be supported by good industrial jobs. Many blacks used the train as a mode of transportation to the North. After a while, using railroads to travel to the North presented problems for both blacks and whites. Blacks felt free to sit anywhere on the trains while whites felt they should not.

The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, as well as, the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 had guaranteed freedom and rights to all American citizens:

The Fourteenth Amendment:

No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of the citizens of the United States, nor shall any State deprive any person of life liberty or property without due process of the laws. (Bennett 260)

The Fifteenth Amendment:
The rights of the citizens of the United States shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. (Bennett 260)

The Civil Rights Bill of 1875:

All persons within the jurisdiction of the United States shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, or other places of public amusement; subject only to the conditions and limitations established by the law and applicable alike all citizens of every race and color, regardless of any previous condition of servitude. (Bennett 260)

By law, blacks were granted the same entitlements as whites but discriminatory “Jim Crow” laws revoked these rights. Many black men became frustrated with being relegated to the rear of trains and decided to test its validity in the courts. Several filed law suits based on refusal to hotels, trains and other public places, but did not prevail, and in 1883, the United States Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 unconstitutional, saying “the law applied to states and not individuals” (Bennett 260).

A specific example of this injustice can be seen in the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson. Homer Plessy, filed suit after he was thrown off a train by the train conductor for violating the Louisiana law of separation of blacks and white on trains. Plessy was mixed- black and white European. Because of his extremely white complexion, he was used by an activist group to test the law. Plessy was arrested and eventually tried in the United States Courts. His defense was that his Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment rights had been violated. The case was to be heard by State
Court, Judge Ferguson, but Plessy filed suit in the United States Supreme Court. In 1896, Judge Henry Bollings Brown declared that it was legal for states to enforce Jim Crow laws requiring blacks to have “separate but equal” accommodations:

The object of the Fourteenth Amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either. (Bennet 267)

This decision upheld the long practiced separation of races and the Jim Crow laws. Regardless of these laws, blacks were not dissuaded from their belief that life would be better in the North. Despite the discrimination blacks faced traveling on the train to reach the North, they came seeking factory and domestic jobs leaving the South and their demeaning sharecropping jobs behind.

In *The Piano Lesson* the train can be seen as a symbol of the characters inability to escape the confines of discrimination which lies under the guise of progress. The black passengers on the train carried with them the baggage of racism of the South to the North, which is an obstacle that prevents them from obtaining the freedom to live as equals amongst whites. Free blacks in the 1930s were not afforded the privileges and rights given to them by law. Wining Boy from *The Piano Lesson* states, “the difference between the colored man and the white man [is] the colored man can’t fix nothing with the law” (Wilson, *Piano* 38). Whites structured the legal systems to work in their favor, and they were able to manipulate it so blacks were unable to benefit from laws written to protect the rights of U.S. citizens. The Plessy v. Ferguson trial was held due to the fact
that blacks were forced to ride in the back of the train in a separate compartment from whites. I find it interesting that Doaker, a railroad cook, as a passenger would be relegated to sitting in the back of the train in a separate compartment from whites, and he would not be allowed to eat in the dining compartment, as blacks were not offered the services that whites were.

Blacks transitioning from life in the South to North often had a shift in mindset once they settled in the North. Alain Locke, Philosophy Professor at Howard University, in the 1920s, wrote an essay titled “The New Negro.” This essay discusses the difference between the southern old rural Negro and the new sophisticated urban Negro. These two types of Negroes can clearly be seen in The Piano Lesson. Boy Willie and Lymon’s characters depict the “Old Negro” way of life with their southern mentality. Bow Willie displays this more than Lymon because Boy Willie wants to go back to the South and farm land while Lymon aspires to begin a new life in the industrial North. Grace, Berniece, Doaker, Wining Boy, Maretha, and Avery have adapted to the northern urban way of life. Early explains the difference between Alain Locks' “New Negro” and “Old Negro”:

The Old Negro was southern, rural, agricultural, tied to the past and to a feudal order of white political control and racist stereotype. The "New Negro," totally a result of a migration that had been occurring for the last 10 or so years before Locke wrote his essay, was northern, urban, industrial, freed from his past, more militant and assertive. (1)

One thing that strikes me in his statement about the New Negro is that he is “freed from his past.” On the contrary, Berniece is not freed from the past that she left behind in the
South. The death of Crawley, her husband, her mother’s obsession with the piano, and Sutter’s ghost are baggage that followed her up North. Berniece is cemented to her past, unable to move on with her new life, until she finally deals with these ghosts from her past. And like so many other blacks, Berniece moves to the North for a better life and a new beginning. Gerald Early writes about this mythic significance of the Black Migration, “So important had this migration become that it changed the way black people saw themselves and their future as Americans” (1). Blacks started to have a renewed sense of hope that they were capable of achieving the American Dream, and all of the inalienable rights that come with American citizenship. The term American Dream first appeared in James Truslow Adams book *The Epic of America* written in 1931. Truslow defines the American dream as:

…that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Unknown 1).

The seemingly never ending migration of blacks to the North from the South continued until the 1970s. From 1916 through the 1960s over six million blacks migrated North (Katzman).
Grace came to the North seeking to claim her stake in the American Dream. I chose to believe that Grace migrated from South Carolina to Pittsburgh, because I felt she need to be apart of the Great Migration, and that she had experienced life in the South like the other characters in *The Piano Lesson*. Just three years prior to 1936 the year *The Piano Lesson* takes place Berniece migrated to the North after the death of her husband to live with her uncle who moved to the Hill District several years prior. Many blacks like Berniece settled in places where they had family members, and where black communities had already been established, as there was in the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

**Family Life: Working Black Women**

There are various jobs that the characters in *The Piano Lesson* hold. Doaker has worked on the railroad for 27 years. He worked his way up from laying railroad tracks to the position of a cook. Avery is a preacher, but earns his main income from working as an elevator operator in a downtown office building. Wining Boy, a retired piano player, lives day to day as a gambler. Lymon and Boy Willie work as day laborers on a plantation down South, and Berniece is a maid for a wealthy white family in the posh community of Squirrel Hill. Unfortunately Graces’ line of work is not stated. This research helped me discover what type of job Grace might have held that would be available to blacks during the 1930s. I will also examine how Berniece functions as a single woman raising her daughter, Maretha.

Many black families left the South to escape dreadful lives that promised little or no job advancement. The South only offered low paying rudimentary jobs of either day laborers or sharecroppers, who were trapped in a never-ending cycle of indebtedness to
land owners. But in the North, many blacks found jobs working in industrial factories and as domestic servants. Michael Keith Honey, author of *Black Workers Remember* accounts that blacks “only rarely found middle-class jobs as schoolteachers, preachers, or entrepreneurs, and these jobs were within the framework of a segregated black community” (47). Without the skills necessary to obtain these middle-class jobs most blacks worked as laborers.

Many blacks were unskilled, and had little or no formal education, so jobs requiring strength, endurance, and domestic skills were plentiful. In the North, “black labor became critical to the automobile, steel, meatpacking, mining, longshore industries, and other basic industries, as well as to the service and household economies” (Honey xvii). However, obtaining skilled labor positions was not an easy task for black workers due to discrimination, which prevented them from working in certain fields. They were locked out of plumbing, electrical work, carpentry, other craft positions, and of course white collar jobs. Black women had an even harder time securing industrial jobs.

Unlike the traditional white family, most black women had to work outside the home to supplement their husband’s earnings. *Women and Work: A Handbook* says:

Maintaining economic independence was often more crucial for African American women than for white women because they were more likely to be the main breadwinners of their family. They were more likely to be single mothers and, less likely to be able to rely on a spouse’s income for economic survival because of the relatively higher rates of unemployment among African American men. (Dubeck 35).
In 1930 one-third of black women were working, and ninety percent of them were domestic servants (Dubeck). Most African American women were unable to be stay-at-home moms, because blacks received less pay than their white counterparts, and they needed to work to supplement their husband’s income. The Pittsburgh Courier says, “A U.S. Bureau of the Census table […] indicated that in 1939, African American men’s income on average totaled $460 per year compared to $1,112 for white males” (Henthorn 282). The average salary for a black male living in The Hill District was lower than the Pittsburgh average. The Carnegie Library of History says the average weekly wage of a black male, “Based on a National Urban League on The Hill was $28.20” (1). The average white female wage was twice as much compared to the lower black female wage. Black women had to balance working full-time and taking care for their family.

As a minor character that only appears in two scenes, I had to create a significant amount of back-story to fill out the character of Grace. As an understudy for Berniece I found that most of the critical information that I needed for Berniece was included in the text of the play. When I began to create back-story for Grace, I chose to believe she had moved from the South to the Hill District to work as a seamstress in Dolly’s Aunt’s dress shop. Grace is always dressed in the latest fashion, so I concluded that her profession allows her to dress above average. I was hesitant at first because Berniece works as maid for a family, and I thought Grace should have a similar line of work, because there were few jobs available to black women other than work as a domestic servant. However, my research confirms that there were a few black entrepreneurs in black communities. So, it is not unrealistic for Grace to work in a black-owned family shop.
I believe Grace carries herself with a false sense of pride because she wears fine clothes and works in a black woman owned business instead of working as a maid like most black women of her time. When Grace first meets Berniece she humbles herself because she has just been fooling around with Boy Willie on Berniece’s couch. However, the second Berniece commands respect from Grace, she quickly transforms into her normal sassy self. Grace knows that she dresses very fashionably, is attractive, and that at the snap of her finger she can have a man pining for her affection. These trivial things propel Grace’s ego to enormous heights, and when she has her first confrontation with Berniece, she tries to intimidate her with her demeaning tone of voice, and by the cutting looks that she gives Berniece. Grace believes she is of a higher status than Berniece not only because of her ability to attract men, but also because she is adorned in fancy clothing and does not work as domestic servant.

Black women like Berniece that were working as domestic servants were denied fair and equal wages, thus forcing them to work longer hours to make up for the deficiency. Grace, on the other hand, probably earned a better wage of about $4.50 a day, because I have decided that she works in a black own shop dress shop. And the text seems to imply that she has her own room, so I chose to assume that she earns enough money to rent a room in a boarding house or a room may be provided to her as part of her wages. While Berniece on the other hand probably only earns about $2.50 a day, which is not enough money for her to provide her with housing; instead she lives with her Uncle Doaker.

It appears that Doaker and Berniece contribute equally to household expenses, and, as a single parent, Berniece is unable to rely on any other support do to the loss of
her husband. Being a stay-at-home mom was not an option for Berniece. She works a full-time job and maintains her household. In spite of this, throughout the play she tries to find time to tend and care for Maretha, but this does not eliminate the stress that comes with being the sole breadwinner and parent. When she becomes overwhelmed, she sometimes takes her frustration out on her daughter, Maretha. Although Berniece loves Maretha, she often appears to be a burden. This can be seen by the snappy tone of voice that Berniece uses when she speaks to Maretha. An example of this is when Berniece is getting Maretha ready for school before she leaves the house: “Maretha, run back upstairs and get my pocketbook. And wipe that hair grease off your forehead. Go ahead, hurry up” (Wilson, *Piano* 26). My view of the relationship between Berniece and Maretha may be slightly influenced by the way Sidonie Smith portrayed Berniece in our production of *The Piano Lesson*, but I feel that she only brought out emotions that are in the subtext of the line. As an understudy I closely observed the way Sidonie portrayed Berniece, because if I had to perform in her place I would have to stay true to her portrayal of Berniece.

Through this research I have learned that racial oppression did not end once slavery was banned; it festered and grew preventing blacks from obtaining true freedom. Laws were mandated to prevent blacks from having the rights that they were guaranteed as citizens of the United States. The characters of *The Piano Lesson* were still suffering from discriminatory practices in the North, the so called land of opportunities for blacks. They were living and working in the North and still suffered from the strains of segregation. The white racist mentality made it hard for them to advance beyond unskilled labor positions, and it was even harder for women like Grace
and Berniece to obtain skilled labor jobs. Even if blacks obtained semi-skilled or skilled labor positions, there was a disparity in wages compared to their white counterparts.

**Black Beauty: Mimicry of White Standards of Beauty**

In addition to working hard, black women were burdened with the chore of molding themselves into the white standard of beauty. Black women were bombarded with images that encouraged them to achieve the white standard of beauty or white beauty ideal. African American beauty product advertisements promoted an image of “fun, youth, womanhood, and a beauty ideal of light skin and straight hair,” which mimics the white beauty ideal (Walker 136). Some black women have naturally tightly curled hair, and some have fine straight hair. Some black women are light skinned while some are darker hues of brown skin. The beauty standards depicted in advertisements left black women in conscious and subconscious competition with white women and fair or light skinned black women. Many dark skinned women resorted to using skin lightening products to achieve a lighter complexion. Some dark-complexioned black women felt inferior to their lighter counterparts, because the lighter your skin was the more status you were given, and they began using bleaching creams and other products to lighten their skin color. This white standard of beauty was a constant reminder they were not as valuable as white women. Some black women who were extremely light would try to pass for white to avoid discrimination in hopes for a better life.

Although none of the characters in *The Piano Lesson* were fair enough to pass, I chose to believe that Grace would have definitely tried to adhere to these white beauty ideals by straightening her hair instead of wearing it in its natural form. I do not think
that she would have tried to lighten her skin because men are attracted to her chocolate skin and sexy curves. Lymon describes her as, “brown-skinned woman,” suggesting that her skin has not been lightened. Berniece also subscribes to these white standards of beauty by straightening her hair. She also straightens Maretha’s hair. In our production of *The Piano Lesson* Wining Boy had chemically straightened hair. Some black men like Wining Boy straightened their hair, so they could have silky straight hair like their white counterparts. Having naturally silky straight hair is often referred to as having “good hair” among blacks, as opposed to kinky tightly curled hair that is referred to as nappy. The comparison of good and bad hair comes from comparing white and black hair types; therefore, if you have hair like white people your hair is good and if you have hair like black people your hair is bad. The same type of mentality went on with skin color. The lighter your skin was the better; because it was a closer hue to a white persons skin color. I believe these white beauty standards still plague the black community today.
CHAPTER TWO: THE PIANO LESSON

The Piano Lesson is a play about a brother and sister’s battle over a piano, the family heirloom. The setting of the play is in the Hill District of Pittsburgh in 1937, and is rooted in the African oral tradition of story telling. The lyric and rhythmic dialogue, which is reminiscent of poetry, is the driving force of the play. Several themes such as ghost of ones past, Christianity, disenfranchisement of blacks, identity, and ancestors are present in this play. Throughout the play we are introduced to the characters, Boy Willie, Lymon, Berniece, Doaker, Maretha, Wining Boy, Avery, and Grace.

Boy Willie, Berniece’s brother, is seeking to find a way to make his mark on the world, and he hopes to do this by farming the land his ancestors once worked as slaves. His loud and boisterous behavior disrupts the peace of the Charles family home.

Lymon, Boy Willie’s sidekick, has traveled to Pittsburgh to help him sell some watermelons and procure the piano. Lymon like Boy Willie has worked on the Parchment Farms, a prison work farm. Lymon seeks to escape the discrimination he faced in the South by moving to the North for better work opportunities. He is also searching for a nice woman to date, and he believes Wining Boy’s “magic” suit will give him luck.

Berniece is a stubborn and hardworking woman, who is a widow of three years yet she still mourns the loss of her husband. She is now concerned with raising her daughter, Maretha, trying to ensure she has a successful future. Berniece’s brother, Boy Willie, is a constant irritant to her, and her frustration with him escalates throughout the play.
Maretha is Berniece’s eleven year old daughter, who is constantly reminded by her mother that as a child she is to be seen and not heard.

Doaker, Berniece and Boy Willie’s uncle, has been working for the railroad for twenty seven years and has worked his way up to the position of a cook. Doaker loves to tell stories and he is the one who reveals the history of the Charles’ family piano.

Wining Boy is a washed-up piano player who makes his way through life gambling as he travels from city to city. In his youth he had the promise of becoming a successful piano player; Wining Boy loves to tell nostalgic stories from his glory days. It is clear from the sorrow that the stories bring, that he is unhappy with some of the decisions he has made in his life. He uses drinking as a coping mechanism.

Avery has found his calling in the church, and is trying to build a church of his own. He has followed Berniece to Pittsburgh hoping that she will one day marry him.

Grace is a sexy lady that happens to catch the eye of Boy Willie and Lymon while they are celebrating one night on the town. She is a promiscuous woman who finds validation from the attention she gets from men, and she moves from man to man the second they stop showing interest in her. After recently being dumped by her boyfriend Leroy she finds Boy Willie, and then she quickly leaves him for Lymon.

The action of the play takes place in Doaker Charles’ home. The aging house evokes a slow languid energy which stands in stark contrast to the bustling city of Pittsburgh which surrounds it. The peace and tranquility of the house is disrupted by the jarring presences of Boy Willie who pounds on the door at five o’clock in the morning waking its inhabitants. Boy Willie and his friend Lymon have traveled all the way from Mississippi in a broken down truck to sell some watermelons, and the family
piano, which Boy Willie hopes will secure him with enough money to purchase a portion of the land that his ancestors worked as slaves. Owning the land is important to Boy Willie because it will validate his purpose on earth, and give him pride in having something that he can call his own. Unlike sharecropping, Boy Willie would not only own the land, but he would be able to reap the full profit of the crops he grows, which would enable him to work for himself no longer under the confines of the white man. Boy Willie is insistent on selling the family heirloom to ensure this freedom.

Berniece has no intention of selling the piano, and a battle of wills soon ensues between Berniece and Boy Willie. Doaker is forced to play the role of mediator for the feuding siblings. Hoping to remind Boy Willie of the significance of the priceless heirloom he unfolds the piano's history. Doaker explains that his grandmother, Mama Berniece, who Berniece is named after, and father, whose name is never mentioned, were separated from their family when they were traded for the piano. Doaker’s grandfather, Willie Boy, who Boy Willie is named after, carved pictures of his son, and Mama Berniece, his wife, into the piano; along with many other family events such as him jumping the broom with Mama Berniece, the birth of his son, and his mother’s funeral. Berniece and Boy Willie’s father, Boy Charles decided to take the piano, which he believed rightly belonged in their family. After securing the piano’s safety he caught a train that was set on fire by some men seeking revenge. Doaker says, “Berniece ain’t gonna sell that piano. Cause her daddy died over it” (Wilson, Piano 46). The piano is priceless, because it was purchased in the blood of their family members, but Boy Willie is unrelenting in his quest to sell the piano.
In the midst of the family feud Berniece and Doaker have several guests, which include Wining Boy, Grace, Avery, and Sutter’s ghost, the recently deceased landowner whose land Boy Willie hopes to buy. Each of these visitors has a symbolic importance relating to the themes of the play. Wining Boy visits the family and reminisces with stories from his past. Wining Boy’s character symbolizes what can happen to a person who fails to have their dream realized, and seems to foreshadow the life that Boy Willie could soon lead if he is unable to fulfill his life goal of becoming a land owning farmer. Wining Boy is a drifter; he travels from town to town, gambling, unable to lay any roots down to a place long enough to call it home. Although Wining Boy puts on a happy persona it is clear from the wistful nostalgic tone of his stories that he is full of sadness. This sorrow can be seen when he speaks of Cleotha, his late wife who he was unfaithful to numerous times. Wining Boy’s cheating drove Cleotha to kick him out of the house, which resulted in a permanent separation between the two.

Boy Willie and Lymon meet Grace while out one night at a saloon celebrating the profits they made selling the watermelons. Grace comes home with Boy Willie for a late night tryst, which is interrupted by Berniece who kicks them out of the house. Her unstable relationship with men is seen when she is courting Lymon the next day. Grace’s character stands in stark contrast to Berniece. Berniece is a respectable Christian woman who abstains from sexual relationships with men, which sets a good example for her daughter Maretha. Grace on the other hand lacks the responsibility of a mother, and is sexually promiscuous and has low moral values. Without the cares and concerns placed on Berniece as a mother, Grace seems to view life as a party.
Their different lifestyles shape their identity. Berniece’s identity is shaped by her motherhood, and Grace by her sexuality.

Avery is a frequent visitor of the Charles family house, as he seeks to gain the romantic affections of Berniece and marry her. His character represents the patriarchal Christian tradition. As a preacher he aspires to start his own congregation, and he believes that it is only proper for him to have a wife by his side. Avery also projects a lot of Christian imagery in the dream where he explains why he decided to become a preacher. There are three hobos who represent the trinity or three wise-men which lead him on a journey to a valley, the valley of death, where he is asked to lead a flock of sheep people through a pack of ravenous wolves. The sheep people are allusions to the Biblical reference to Christians as the sheep of God whom he leads as the shepherd of his flock. The wolves represent the evil and temptation in the world. Avery believes this dream has summoned him to start a church and minister Christian values to his congregation.

The ghost of James Sutter, the recently deceased land owner whose land Boy Willie wants to buy, has been haunting the family. Sutter’s ghost has come to claim the piano that once belonged to his family. His presences exemplifies how ghost of ones past can come back to haunt you if not dealt with. Berniece is forced to relinquish her fear of the piano and wake her ancestors to rid Sutter’s ghost from the house. Sutter’s ghost also represents the dominance of white men over black society. And the black man’s struggle to claim his freedom from oppression is demonstrated when Boy Willie wrestles with Sutter’s ghost. Boy Willie loses this battle, and it leads me to believe that August Wilson, the playwright is commenting on the continual disenfranchisement of
blacks, despite attempts to escape it by moving North for better opportunities. Sutter’s
ghost, the Ghost of the Yellow Dog (the ghost of the hobos killed in the train fire), and
the spirits of the Charles family ancestors symbolize the supernatural spirit world that is
imbedded in African folklore, which is interlaced with the Christian undertones of the
play.

The climax of the play occurs when the supernatural world of ghost collides with
Christianity. The supernatural world and Christianity battle it out when Avery tries to
perform a Christian exorcism on Sutter’s ghost with prayer and holy water. Avery is
unsuccessful and so is Boy Willie who tries to wrestle with the ghost. Sutter’s ghost is
only expelled from the house when the spirits of the Charles family ancestors drive the
ghost from the house as Berniece plays the piano and gives homage to them by
chanting their names and pleading for their help in the form of an African ritualistic
prayer.

Christianity has no power over the ghost in this play. The spirits of the ancestors
are the only ones that can defeat Sutter’s ghost, which signifies the power that can be
channeled in ones self by acknowledging those that came before you and accepting
ones past.

After the ancestors restore order back to the Charles household, Boy Willie and
Berniece make amends, and he leaves respecting his ancestors and acknowledging
that the piano he was once willing to pawn away should remain in the Charles family for
generations to come. Although it is not stated Berniece will undoubtedly share the
history of the piano with her daughter Maretha allowing the legacy to be passed down to
future generations.
Plot Structure of The Piano Lesson

The exposition, “introduction of main characters and setting”, of the play occurs in the first scene where we are introduced to Boy Willie, Lymon, Doaker, and Berniece. Boy Willie reveals that he has traveled to Pittsburgh to sell the family piano. He wakes up Berniece with all of his shouting, and tries to get Berniece to wake up his niece Maretha. He asks Doaker if he has seen his uncle Wining Boy, and he explains to his friend, Lymon, that his uncle plays the piano and has made a few records. We learn that Robert Sutter has fallen down his well and died, possibly as revenge from the Ghost of the Yellow Dog. Doaker tells Boy Willie that Avery tried to get Berniece to sell the piano to help fund his church, but she refused.

The inciting incident, “event that begins conflict”, occurs at the end of act one when Berniece accuses Boy Willie of causing Crawley’s death. She begins to attack Boy Willie in a fit of rage. This seems to be the first time she has confronted Boy Willie about Crawley’s death. Berniece stops when she hears Maretha’s blood curdling screams. Maretha has just seen Sutter’s ghost. Berniece believes that Boy Willie pushed Sutter down his well, and that Sutter has followed him from Mississippi to haunt him and his family. Sutter’s ghost and Boy Willie have created a lot of tension in the Charles family household. The presence of Sutter’s ghost gives Berniece even more reason to get Boy Willie out of the house, because she believes when he leaves Sutter’s ghost will also leave the house.

The climax, “point of highest emotions or turning point”, of the play occurs when Boy Willie confronts Berniece as he tries to take the piano out of the house. Berniece
threatens to shoot Boy Willie if he attempts to remove the piano. In the midst of all of this Sutter's ghost appears, and Avery attempts an exorcism.

The denouement, “resolution of play”, occurs when Berniece rids Sutter’s ghost from the house with the help of her ancestors. Berniece gets over her fear of playing the piano, and Boy Willie comes to respect the significance of the priceless family heirloom.

Berniece’s Journey in The Piano Lesson

Prior to being cast in The Piano Lesson I had already done some research on the character of Berniece, which I used to develop her character. In my analysis of Berniece I discovered that there are five significant symbols in The Piano Lesson, which shape Berniece’s Journey: the piano, the death of her husband, Crawley, her daughter, Maretha, her womanhood, and her ancestors. Throughout this chapter I will answer the question, what symbols shape Berniece’s journey and how do they develop her character throughout the play.

The Piano

The piano symbolizes her reluctance to embrace her ancestral history. Berniece says, “When my mama died [Mama Ola] I shut the top on that piano and I ain't never opened it since. I was only playing it for her” (Wilson, Piano 70). After the death of Mama Ola Berniece decides she can no longer endure the pain of playing the piano that brought so much anguish and emotional pain into her family. Her great-grandfather and his parents were separated when he and his mother were traded for the piano, and her father Boy Charles was burned alive in a train box car by some unknown white men retaliating for the stolen piano.
The blood stained piano not only represents the pain the family went through, but it also is a constant reminder of the family history. Willie Boy carved scenes of his family events and sculptures into the legs of the piano, in attempts to cheer up Miss Ophelia who missed her slaves and became very ill. She claimed to miss having Mama Berniece and her son doing chores for her and having them around. Doaker describes the carving:

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...He carved all this. He got a picture of his mama...Mama Esther...and his daddy, Boy Charles. Then he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That's when him and Mama Berniece got married. They called it jumping the broom. That's how you got married in them days. Then he got here when my daddy was born...and here he got Mama Esther's funeral...and down here he got Mr. Nolander taking Mama Berniece and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia[...]. When Miss Ophelia seen it...she got excited. Now she had her piano and her niggers too. (Wilson, Piano 44)

Berniece does not want to part with the piano, because of its rich family history which binds her to it. The separation of her great-grandparents and the death of her father are a testament to the sacrifices that her family made for the piano. By keeping the piano Berniece believes it will foster Maretha’s future, but she does not realize that the piano will actually help her get past her fears and allow her to embrace her own future. Berniece hopes Maretha will one day become a piano teacher and school teacher.
Even though Berniece has Maretha playing the piano Berniece will not touch it. Instead of playing the piano, Berniece lets the piano sit as a reminder of what can go wrong in life. She is unable to see that the piano represents something positive about her ancestry and she fails to realize that her ancestors’ strength lies in it. During the play, Berniece uses the strength of her ancestors to exorcise the ghost of Sutter, the ever-present white slave master that haunts the Charles family. Mary Ellen Snodgrass, the author of *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*, elaborates this point; she writes that “The family heirloom in *The Piano Lesson* (1990), the old upright piano is a psychologically charged bas[e] relief illustrating the Charles clan’s progression from servitude to the Robert Sutter family to a hardy, enduring extended family surviving [slavery and] the Great Depression” (153). The piano also symbolizes the family’s’ strength and descent from slavery, and sits as a reminder of the past that Berniece tries to hide from.

Berniece’s refusal to play the piano can also be seen as her rejection of her ancestors’ African cultural, values, and rituals, in order to assimilate. Wilson says, “Whites say if you want to participate in society you have to deny your African culture” (*A World of Ideas*). Wilson believes people assimilate to get along in the dominating society. It becomes clear that Berniece subscribes to assimilation when she warns Maretha not to show her color. Berniece equates loudness and Boy Willie’s obnoxious behavior with showing color. Boy Willie chides Berniece by saying that she is prissy and bourgeois. Boy Willie says, “I see Berniece still try to be stuck up” (Wilson, *Piano 8*). She looks down at the way Boy Willie tries not to conform to behavior that is deemed acceptable by white society. He is a prime example of the black resistance
that Wilson espouses and often refers to in his interviews. Wilson also states, “We should not be ashamed that we were once slaves in the United States” (*A Conversation with August Wilson*). Wilson also says Berniece must call upon her ancestors whose spirits live within the piano. Critic Paul Hodgins says, “It [the piano] sits in the corner of Berniece’s living room like a silent elder” (qtd. in Snodgrass 153). Even though Berniece tries to deny her ancestral slave roots, her ancestors’ sprits live within her. Berniece finally finds her identity when she calls upon her ancestors for help, thus discovering and accepting her true self.

**Burden of Crawley’s Death**

Berniece’s life was drastically changed when her husband, Crawley was killed. With his death, she not only loses the love of her life, but she is now a single mother left to raise Maretha. Berniece like so many widows is now the sole provider of her family. When Crawley was alive, Berniece probably still had to work outside of her home to contribute to Crawley’s income; however she was not the sole provider. Molly Ladd-Taylor the author of *Mother-Work* says, “Few men actually earned enough money to be the sole support of their wives and children—and many married women, particularly African Americans worked outside the home” (9). Berniece must now work longer hours and twice as hard to support herself and Maretha.

After Crawley’s death, Berniece moved to Pittsburgh to earn a better wage and have the familial support of her Uncle Doaker. Berniece mostly likely worked as a maid or field hand prior to moving to Pittsburgh. Like most African Americans, Berniece probably moved to Pittsburgh hoping that she will be able to find employment in a factory instead of as a domestic worker. Carol C. Marks, author of the essay “Black Migration and Urbanization, 1900-1940,” says, “According to the census of 1900, an
astonishing 96 percent of African-American women working for wages were employed as field workers, house servants, waitresses, or laundry workers” (531). Berniece inevitably faces reality when she realizes she is unable to obtain any work other than as a domestic servant. As a domestic servant, Berniece works long hours and does not earn a wage equivalent to the amount of work she performs. Berniece works for a well-off white family in the steel business. As a maid she would be responsible for taking care of the household cleaning, sometimes cooking, and any other chores she was given in addition to her regular duties.

For additional income Berniece might wash clothes for other white families. As Janyes writes, “Throughout the nation the discrimination against blacks in general kept African Americans in such poverty that even low middle class whites could afford to hire black women as cooks and house cleaners. These positions involved long hours under close supervision and offered the lowest wages” (Janyes 131). Berniece probably worked between eight to ten hours a day and probably earned between $1.25 and $2.50 a day. Elizabeth Haynes author of “Negroes in Domestic Service in the United States” says, “The minimum wage rate in this State [Utah] for experienced women is $1.25 per day…In New York City, according to employment agents, the practice of an eight to nine hour day for domestic workers generally obtains…” (Haynes 547 and 549). Berniece worked very long hours at her job, but when she comes home she still has to take care of Maretha, performing task such as doing her hair, preparing her food, making sure her school work is complete, and putting her to bed. Working almost every hour that she is awake Berniece has little to no free time.
In addition to being a single parent, the Great Depression makes it even harder for Berniece to provide for her and Maretha. Louis Rita Helmbold author of *Beyond the Family Economy: Black and White Working-Class Women During the Great Depression* says:

Black women’s deprivation was far more severe than that of white women, particularly with regard to jobs. There was the racial and sexual stratification of the labor force already in place, which relegated black women to a few of the worst jobs at the bottom of the occupational ladder. The Depression added endemic unemployment, employers’ preferences for white women, and white women’s willingness to accept jobs they previously had disdained” (Helmbold 586).

Black women were frequently searching for jobs, because they were often fired from their jobs and replaced by white women. Berniece may fear that she will loose her job on a daily basis.

The endless hours of labor Berniece faces gives her no time to grieve for Crawley. Over the past three years since Crawley’s death, I think that her attack on Boy Willie was probably her first violent outburst. I think that Berniece is such a strong person she probably never let others see her mourn for Crawley. I imagine that she cried when she was told of his death, but after that I think she put on the mask of a strong woman who would not let the death of her husband affect her. She had to be strong in order to get by in life, because she could not give into her emotions. I think this is exactly what Berniece has been doing since the death of her husband: getting by in life. She hasn’t allowed herself to have a life outside of work and taking care of
Maretha. Berniece’s role as a mother enables her to bury herself in work, thus aiding in her inability to find closure with her past. I will delve into this topic in more detail in the section about Berniece’s womanhood.

Marriage was very important to Berniece because when slavery was practiced slaves could not legally marry. They just “jumped the broom,” which was a symbolic gesture of marriage. Berniece and Crawley however were legally married. Like her great-grandparents slave families were often split apart when they were sold to new masters. Slaves by law were classified as chattel; they were treated cruelly and as if they were less than human. Berniece wants a cohesive family; especially since her other family members were unable to secure this stability. This was a top priority for Berniece. Children growing up fatherless is a reoccurring theme in this family. Doaker’s daddy was separated from his father when he was nine; Berniece’s father dies when she is three years old, and Maretha’s father dies when she was eight years old. Berniece is trying to break this curse that seems to have taken hold of her family, but Berniece is unable to control fate making it impossible for her to ensure that Maretha will grow up with her father.

*Maretha*

Maretha is Berniece’s eleven year old daughter whom Berniece raises with a strong hand. She wants Maretha to be everything that she could not be. Berniece feels sorry for Maretha because she knows the heartache and hardship of growing up fatherless, but she shows this with tough love. Berniece wants to ensure that Maretha will be able to provide for herself without the support of man, and that a quality education will guarantee success. Berniece has Maretha enrolled in extra classes in addition to public schooling. In public schools blacks were relegated to classes with
younger students. Marks explains, “One of the most troubling areas was in the public schools. Blacks were forced to attended classes with much younger students, adding to the assessment that they were of lower intelligence than whites” (142). Berniece wants to make certain that Maretha gets an extensive education, and that is why she has her enrolled in classes at the Irene Kaughman Settlement House. Through the classes that Maretha is taking at the Irene Kaughman Settlement House she is learning to play the piano, developing social skills and manners, and practicing assimilation. Berniece wants Maretha to be a school teacher and possibly a piano teacher. Berniece believes that she will prosper in the teaching profession. By the 1930s, the number of black school teacher more than doubled (Marks 140). These statistics prove that Berniece is correct in her belief that Maretha has a good chance of having a career as a school teacher.

**Womanhood**

Berniece’s womanhood is centered around her devotion as mother to Maretha. She does not have time to entertain the affections of a man. Avery, an admirer, falls in love with her, but she does not love him. Avery does not understand Berniece’s unwillingness to marry him. Berniece may not want to get remarried because she wants to have the freedom to do things without a man telling her what to do. Since her husband’s death, she has been making all of the decisions. She thinks that if she marries Avery she will be confining herself to the role of wife, catering to her husband’s every need, in addition to the role of mother. Ultimately, Berniece stands firm with her decision not to marry Avery even though she is pressured to marry him. Avery is very persistent and follows her from Mississippi to Pittsburgh after Crawley’s death. As Doaker says, “He followed Berniece up here trying to get her to marry him after Crawley
got killed. He been up here about two years” (Wilson, Piano 11). Avery wants to marry Berniece not only for companionship; he also wants the social power associated with being married. Avery says, “Berniece . . . 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. […] I need somebody on my bond side. I need a woman that fits in my hand” (Wilson, Piano 66). Avery thinks it is only proper that a preacher should marry and have a wife by his side, and he hopes it will increase the size of his church congregation. Doaker wants Berniece to marry Avery because it is the proper thing for a lady to do, and he also thinks Berniece should marry Avery for protection and stability. Lymon, too, tries to encourage Berniece to marry Avery. He tells her, “Avery's nice. You ought to go ahead and get married. You be a preacher's wife you won't have to work” (Wilson, Piano 79).

There are two main scenes where Berniece’s womanhood can be seen; the first is the scene where Avery questions Berniece’s womanhood:

AVERY. You too young a woman to close up, Berniece.

BERNICE. I ain't said nothing about closing up. I got a lot of woman left in me.

AVERY. Where's it at? When's the last time you looked at it? (Wilson, Piano 66)

Berniece then confronts Avery and tells him that she does not have time for a man because she is busy raising Maretha. Berniece also questions why society says Avery can be a man without a woman, but she cannot be a woman without a man. She refuses to conform to society’s and Avery’s restricting mold of a woman.

The second scene is between Lymon and Berniece. After having a nice conversation together Lymon caresses her as he puts some perfume on her neck and
then kisses her. Berniece returns the kiss only to recoil in fear. Afraid of her vulnerability she runs away before an innocent kiss can blossom into something more. Berniece flees from Avery’s sexual advances the same as she does Lymon’s. I believe this is the reason Avery questions Berniece’s womanhood. Her inability to be vulnerable with a man prevents her from engaging in a romantic relationship with Avery or Lymon.

Berniece’s womanhood can also be expressed by the Blues. A lot of Wilson’s influence comes from the blues and, in part, from the female blues singer Bessie Smith. Wilson describes Bessie Smith’s music as different than any other music he has heard. After listening to his first Smith record, he said “This is yours. I knew this was [my] music” (A World of Ideas). Barbara Christian the narrator of the movie A Conversation with August Wilson quotes Wilson as saying, “the Blues is an oral tradition that helps sustains southern black culture.” Wilson interweaves the blues throughout The Piano Lesson. Some examples of how Wilson incorporates the Blues in this play are through Berniece’s character which is symbolic of a blues woman, Wining Boy singing them at the piano, and the work song that the men sing. Berniece also sings a form of the Blues and plays the piano when she casts the ghost out of the house. She is singing out all the hurt and pain inside of her and she reclaims herself as a woman:

What has been called the ‘Classic Blues,’ the women’s blues of the twenties and early thirties, is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations; a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women’s bodies as the sexual and sensuous objects of women’s song (Carby 250).
I think the song titled “In House Blues” by Bessie Smith clearly depicts how Berniece must feel over the loss of Crawley. This song represents Berniece’s unwillingness to let go of Crawley and her pent up frustration. She expresses this in the form of physical violence when she beats up Boy Willie, and when she threatens to shoot him. Berniece’s frustration builds up to the point where she can’t take it anymore, and she drives her blues (sadness) and the ghost of Sutter out of her house. I think it is very significant that Berniece calls on her ancestors to help her drive out the ghost and her blues out of her life. I think this song also sets Berniece’s mood at the start of the play

Sitting in the house with everything on my mind.  
Sitting in the house with everything on my mind.  
Looking at the clock and can’t even tell the time.  

Walking to my window and looking outa my door.  
Walking to my window and looking outa my door.  
Wishin that my man would come home once more.  

Can’t eat, can’t sleep, so weak I can’t walk my floor.  
Can’t eat, can’t sleep, so weak I can’t walk my floor.  
Feel like calling ‘murder’ let the police squad get me once more.  

They woke me up before day with trouble on my mind.  
They woke me up before day with trouble on my mind.  
Wringing my hands and screaming, walking the floor hollerin an crying.  

…..(?), don’t let them blues in here.  
…..(?), don’t let them blues in here.  
They shake me in my bed and sits down in my chair.  

Oh, the blues has got me on the go.  
They’ve got me on the go.  

They roll around my house, in and out of my front door. (qtd. in Carby 255)  

The lyrics of this song depict a woman who has the blues because she always has trouble on her mind, and she is waiting for her man to come home. The lady in the song does not want to have the blues in her house, but she cannot seem to get them to
leave. One thing that sticks out to me is that she says “feel like calling murder”; this reminds me of the animosity that Berniece carries in her heart for Boy Willie, because she believes he is responsible for Crawley’s death. It is also reminiscent of the end of the play when Berniece points a gun at Boy Willie and threatens to kill him (255). With the assistance of her ancestors Berniece pushes her blues out of her house.

The music in this song contrasts Bessie’s voice which parodies the “supposed weakness of women” (Carby 254). Carby says, “A vibrating cornet contrasts with the words that ultimately cannot be contained and roll out of the front door” (254). Berniece thinks she is weak, but in reality she is a strong independent woman. And she proves this by driving the ghost out without the help of Avery; to do so she calls on her women ancestors to help her. Some women tend to think that they need a man to save them, but in reality they can save themselves. Avery lets Berniece know that it is up to her to let go of the past. As he tries to perform the exorcism, he realizes that he cannot do it acknowledging that she must do it on her own. Avery says, “Berniece, I can't do it” (Wilson, Piano 106). Early in the play Avery tries to convince Berniece that she is the only one who can free the house of the ghost. He says, “Come on, Berniece . . . set it down and walk away from it. Come on, play "Old Ship of Zion." Walk over here and claim it as an instrument of the Lord. You can walk over here right now and make it into a celebration” (Wilson, Piano 71). At the end of the play Berniece finally stops resisting and she plays the piano, exorcises the ghost, and breaks the chains of her pernicious past.

Ancestors

Berniece does not want to acknowledge her ancestors because their past is filled with painful memories of lost of loved ones which remind her of the death of her father
and Crawley. She does not know the power that her ancestors hold and she is afraid to
wake their spirits by playing the piano. Ultimately, her ancestors teach her to look within
herself and channel the power that she has within. I find it interesting that Avery is
unable to exorcise the ghost when he calls upon the Lord, but Berniece is able to when
she calls upon her ancestors. It wasn’t Avery’s fight; Berniece had to do it herself. I
think Berniece needs to exorcise the ghost without the help of Avery, because she must
get over her fear and summon her ancestors to help her vanquish Sutter’s ghost.
Wilson frequently talks about how whites attempted to strip Africans of their gods when
they were brought to America to be slaves. Wilson states his belief about the slave
masters’ Christian God vs. an Africa god. He would have told Berniece she was
worshiping the wrong god. In the film A World of Ideas Wilson, states “It was the wrong
god...It was the white man’s god.” Therefore, Berniece must praise and worship her
ancestors in order to have the cathartic experience that she has, which is a renewal of
self.

At the end of the play Berniece releases her blues and gets the courage to move
on with her life. That is what enables her to drive Sutter’s ghost away. Snodgrass
believes that Berniece’s “hostility suggests that the ghost that haunts the flat actually
dwells in her spirit” (56). I believe that the ghost haunts her spirit by lingering around as
a reminder of her of hardships. Snodgrass says:

By playing the piano and confronting the ghost that emerges from it, she
summons her ancestors to help the current generation lay to rest the family’s
hurtful past under slavery. Her improvised performance summons ‘a rustle of
wind blowing across two continents,’ an indication that she has bound the two
traditions, African and American, into one song. Wilson describes the
performance as a dynamic force that ends sibling enmity and rids the house of its
specter (57).

Berniece is the heroine of the play, despite all of the hardships that she has faced she is
able to rise above them. Berniece finds herself through her ancestors, and confronts all
of her fears and stares them in the face. That is the only way she is able to start living
life instead of just getting by.
CHAPTER THREE: GRACE: THE SULTRY SEDUCTRESS

The initial information I obtained about Grace came straight from Wilson’s text. Grace is described as an attractive sexy brown skinned woman with nice hips on her. It is clear that she uses her good looks to lure men to her. Although she seems composed on the outside as she is adorned in beautiful clothing and has nice silky curled hair which adheres to the beauty standards of the time, her outward appearance is merely a façade hiding all of her insecurities. Lymon best describes this type of woman when he is talking to Berniece, “Mostly they be lonely and looking for somebody to spend the night with them. Sometimes it matters who it is and sometimes it don’t” (Wilson, Piano 78). It is clear that Grace moves from man to man: as soon as her boyfriend Leroy dumps her, she is out on the prowl for a new man--this time it is Boy Willie. And when she thinks Boy Willie has left her, she runs straight into Lymon’s arms. She manipulates men to get what she wants, and Lymon who is enamored by her beauty is an easy target. Grace may walk with her head held high, but she is really trying to mask the pain and loneliness she feels inside. If she was really as confident as she appears she would not feel the need to always have a man by her side; instead she would find confidence in herself.

Berniece knows exactly what kind of woman Grace is, and that is why she tells Boy Willie she does not allow that kind of company in her house. Berniece looks at Grace and sees a promiscuous gold-digger who is up to no good. Grace is more concerned with having a good time than with being a proper lady, and she also fails to
see the potential within herself to become something great. Instead of channeling her energy into improving herself, she focuses on attracting as many men as possible.

Wilson does not give a lot of background information on Grace so I had to create some character background in order to understand why she acts the way she does. In the research I did in Chapter One I decided that in addition to her good looks Grace gets a lot of self-confidence from her work in a dress shop owned by a black woman: this is an amazing job opportunity for Grace because the majority of jobs available to blacks were labor positions. Working in that shop enables her to stay dressed in the latest fashions. Despite the discrimination she faces being black she holds her head up high, because she always has men fawning over her. However, most of my character background was developed during the rehearsal process; this process was also aided by the discoveries that I made in a theme sheet provided by director Be Boyd, before we began the rehearsal process. The words from the theme sheet spell out the acronym “piano lesson”. I realize now that I was commenting on Grace’s character rather than talking about Grace from her point of view. This prevented me from being able to act some of the qualities I chose to give Grace, but I feel that as an actor I still need to be aware of things that she may not even be aware of, which shape her personality.

Pride

I, Grace, have a lot of pride; so much pride that I fail to realize that the life I am living is only going to leave me hurt and broken. I am seeking fulfillment in the wrong things, mostly men. I have very little self-esteem, honor, dignity, and self-worth; even though, I appear to posses these qualities, it is really all a façade.
Identity

White society places little or no value on blacks except for the manual labor they do, but I seek to affirm my identity by being the apple of every black man’s eye, and the envy of every black woman. My identity is lost because I cannot have one, not without a man. I want to be taken care of and loved more than anything, but my poor choices in men make this only a dream.

Ancestors

It is hard for me to think about the hardships of slavery because the thoughts of them are too painful, so I distance myself from them. I know that I wouldn’t be where I am today without their sacrifices, but I am living for today, not yesterday or tomorrow. I do what I want, when I want. All I know is that I am living better than I did in the South.

Name

I will be remembered for doing anything necessary to survive. My goal is to find a man to take care of me, even if it means sleeping with a thousand. *Grace is really no better than a prostitute, but she does not think her relationships with men make her a whore. She justifies her need to have a man in her life as a survival tactic.

Ocean

Several of my ancestors were unable to have their dreams realized due to the confines of slavery. Many lost their lives crossing over the ocean on their journey through the middle passage. Unlike so many of my ancestors my dream came true when I fled the South and made my way to the North. I knew that once I made it up North, I would have a better chance of finding a job that didn’t limit me to just field work.
I currently work with my friend Dolly in her aunt Anita’s dress shop. This is the reason why I am always adorned with the latest fashion. I feel a sense of pride in holding a position in this dress shop because most black women are maids. It is really a privilege to have a job in a store, instead of working as a maid for white people. I hope that one day I will own a dress shop of my own.

**Legacy**

I am going to make my mark on the world by being known as the prettiest, sassiest black woman in the Hill District.

**Emancipation Proclamation**

I was fortunate enough to be born post- Emancipation Proclamation; however, other laws were enforced to prevent blacks from being treated as equals. Jim Crow is the reason I left the South and came to the North. I did not want to have to farm land like my mother and father. My father died when I was young on a prison work farm. My mother tried to replace his memory with every man she met. I learned at an early age—when I was raped by my mother’s boyfriend, Ronny—that men only wanted sex. One evening Ronny came over when my mother was away at a friend’s house helping her cook. And when Ronny realized she was not there, he decided to take advantage of me. I never told my mom what happened because I was too embarrassed and ashamed. I thought that if I told her, she would blame me for what happened. Dolly my best friend is the only person that knows this. Subconsciously, I think that this experience affects the relationships I have with men now. I use sex and sex appeal to get what I want.
Soul

My soul is damaged and I seek to fix it by sleeping with men. I am so busy focusing my energy on men that I don't listen to my inner voice. I love going to saloons to waste away and melt into the Blues. I spend my nights drinking away my pain and sorrow.

Spirits

When I felt the spirit of Sutter's ghost in the Charles family house, I knew I had to leave. It was an evil spirit out to harm everyone in its path. I dream about my mother sometimes, and I hear her calling out to me. She is crying Jesus' name. I go to Church sometime, but most of the women there won't talk to me, so I don't feel welcome. I think they are just jealous of my beauty. And maybe they are also upset because I might have stolen a man or two from a couple of them. I believe in Jesus, but I am just not one of those Bible toting –do- good Christians. I can't stand that type of a person. They are always in your face trying to point out your flaws when they have a ton themselves.

Overcome

I think I have overcome a lot. I am living in the North, and I am alive.

Never Again

Never again will I let a man harm me. I will use men for their money, but I am in control of my life.
Grace Character Analysis

Physical Qualities

Who am I?

My name is Grace Jones.

Who am I named after? Do I like my name?

I was named by my grandma. She named me Grace because I was born during a church service on Easter Sunday. I like my name because it means having, “elegance, beauty, and good will,” and I believe I possess all of these qualities.

What is my sex? What do I think of my sex?

I am female. And I love being a woman because I can wear pretty dresses, and make any man who sees me stop and stare.

How old am I? What do I think of my age?

I am twenty seven years old, and I am not looking forward to turning thirty.

How does my posture express my age, heath, inner feelings?

I walk with my head held high, my chest sticking out, and I switch my hips when I walk accentuating my nice curves. I believe my posture makes me look young healthy and youthful. My posture also lets people know that I have a lot of confidence.

How is my complexion? What do I think of it?

I am a dark brown skinned woman, and I am living in a world where light skinned women are praised for their beauty, but I wouldn’t change the color of my skin for anything because my grandmother use to rub my arm and tell me I had beautiful skin.

What is my height? What do I think of it?

I am 5’5”, and I wish I was at least 5’7”, so I wear high heels to make me look taller.
What is my weight? What do I think of it?

I weigh 140 lbs, and I think that is a nice healthy weight. I don’t want to be a skinny rail that is just skin and bones.

What is the pitch, volume, tempo, resonance or quality of my voice? What do I think of it?

I have a high pitched loud voice that has some sinus resonance. I speak slowly when I am trying to be sexy, and when I am angry I speak quickly and lower my pitch, because I become very impatient and I am trying to assert my authority. I use my angry voice when I get upset with Boy Willie, speak to Berniece, and when I enter the house looking for Lymon. I think my voice is charming and I am normally able to get what I want when I play up this charm.

Is my articulation careless or precise? Is my articulation standard or colloquial?

Do I have a dialect or an accent?

My articulation is careless and I use colloquialism as I use the word gal to refer to another woman and the word ain’t. I also drop –ing (IPA sound η) endings and replace them with an uh or ^ IPA sound. I speak with a southern accent that reveals that I am from the South even though I am living in the North.

What is my hair color and style? Do I like it?

My hair is black, and it is styled in a short curly bob cut. I get my hair straighten with Madame C. J. Walkers hair straightener and sometimes with a straightening comb. I love my short sassy cut. All I have to do is set it in rollers at night, and then shake it out in the morning.

Do I have any deformities? What do I think of them?
I don’t have any physical deformities.

Do I have any mannerisms? What do I think of them?

I normally stand with one hand on my hip, and I switch my hips when I walk. I think these mannerisms help me to be sexy.

Do I have any handicaps? What do I think of them?

I don’t have any physical handicaps.

How energetic or vital am I? Do I like it?

I have a lot of energy that I display mostly in the bedroom. I like to think of myself as the life of the party. My energy and vitality help me keep up with the young girls that are my competition.

Do I suffer from any diseases past or present?

I don’t have any diseases that I know of.

Are my gestures complete or incomplete, vigorous or weak, compulsive or controlled?

My gestures are complete, vigorous, and controlled. My gestures become compulsive when I am angry.

Do I like my walk?

I like my sexy strut. I normally walk switching my hips from side to side, but I do it even more when I am upset or trying to catch the eye of a man because I am commanding attention.

How do I usually stand?

I normally stand with one hand on my hip, and the other by my side with my right foot in front of the other turned out.
Do I have any objects with me, hand props or accessories? Why? How do I handle them?

I have a pair of black satin gloves that Leroy, my ex-boyfriend, bought me. I hold them daintily in my hands and use them to gesture at things with a flip of my wrist. I have the gloves because I started rehearsing with them because I thought the action of taking them off and putting them on would giving me some action of dressing and undressing on stage. I also wear a necklace and earrings, and I wear a rose in my hair. I wear jewelry everyday to jazz up my outfits. I wear the rose in my hair because I thought this was something unique I could wear. Everyone knows Grace always has a flower in her hair. In addition to these accessories I have a clutch purse.

Are my basic rhythms smooth or jerky, even-tempered or volatile, impulsive or deliberate, ponderous or light, broken or continuous?

My movements have a lot of weight to them and they are smooth and even-tempered when I am trying to be sexy. And they become jerky and impulsive when I am angry like in the scene when I am furiously knocking on the door looking for Lymon.

What do I like to wear? What do I have to wear? How do I wear my clothes? How do I handle them?

I like to wear dresses. I have a lot of dresses to wear because I work in a dress shop. I wear my clothes with style and dignity. I handle them with care, because I spend way too much money on them for them to become torn and tattered.

Social Qualities

What do I do when I wake up each morning?

The first thing I do when I wake up in the morning is wash my face with cool water. Then I pick out what I am going to wear, which can take me a while. I pick out
matching accessories. Then I put on my make-up with a precise and steady hand. I put on powder so my face will not look like a greasy laborer. I also place some rouge on my cheeks to brighten up my face, along with lipstick to accentuate my plump lips. Put on my clothes, and before I head out I assess myself in my full length mirror. I always need to look put together.

**What is my relationship to my environment? Do I like it?**

I love living in the Hill District, because I feel safe in the black community. I didn’t feel safe living in the South, because black people were constantly being harassed and lynched left and right. I have more freedom living in the Hill District. After I get off of work I can go to the saloon hang out and drink, which I do several times a week. Sometimes I even go to the movies.

**What is my educational background? How much discipline was I subjected to?**

**How intelligent am I?**

I have a middle school education. I was pulled out of school to work as a field hand and maid with my mother. She felt that I would benefit from learning household work instead of going to school. I am not book smart, but I have street smarts that allow me to know when someone is trying to pull the wool over my eyes. My mother was very strict, but I knew that she was doing it out of love.

**What was my childhood like? What are my strongest memories?**

I was raised in South Carolina. My childhood was a happy one until my daddy died when I was nine. After my daddy died my mom took to drinking and she would have a different man around every week. My strongest childhood memory is when my mom’s boyfriend Ronny raped me when I was thirteen years old. He came by to see
my mama, but when he found out she wasn't there he didn't leave. He slowly walked over to me and caressed my face and told me not to be afraid of him. I just stood still and closed my eyes until he was finished. I never told my mama what happened because I was ashamed that I didn't try to stop him. Another childhood memory is picking cotton with my mama. I hated it. We would pick cotton from sun up to sun down until our hands were raw and bleeding. I promised to myself that I would do whatever I could to leave the South.

**How much money do I have? How much do I want?**

Even though I get paid a decent amount of money about $4.50 a day, I don't have a lot because I spend it on clothes. I wish I had more, and to compensate for the money I spend in clothes I find men to spend it on me.

**What is my nationality? What do I think of it?**

I am colored woman. Although I love being colored and I am proud of who I am, I wish I was afforded all of the freedoms that whites have.

**What is my occupation? Do I like it? What other jobs have I had? When and why did I choose this one?**

I work as a seamstress in Pretty Polly, a dress shop located in the Hill District where I live. I like my job, but I wish I owned the shop instead of working in it. I hope to one day have a shop of my own. I have worked as a field servant and maid, and I will never do that back breaking work again. My friend Dolly got me this job, and I couldn’t pass it up because it is a job of a lifetime.

**What are my political attitudes?**

I am not involved in politics.
Am I religious?

I was raised in the church, but I stopped going once I moved to Pittsburgh because I didn’t feel comfortable because all of the women would stare at me like I didn’t belong there.

Whom would I chose to be if I could be anyone else?

I wish I could be Josephine Baker, because she is a fabulous sexy woman that men fawn over. She gets paid to travel the world, wear fancy clothing, and perform for a living.

Did I have childhood heroes? What did I like about them?

My mama was my hero until she seemed to fall apart when my father died. I use to admire the positive outlook she had on life regardless of our situation.

Do I like members of the opposite sex? What do I like about them?

I like having men around, because I need a man to hold me and tell me I am beautiful. I find comfort knowing that I have a man to take care of me. I tend not to fully trust them, so I never fully open up my heart.

Who were my parents? What do I like and/or dislike about them? What can I still hear them saying to me?

My mama, Lorna Jones was a hardworking woman who seemed to lose her way once my daddy died. My father Curtis Jones loved his family, and he would have given me the shirt off of his back. I just wish my mother hadn’t taken up drinking, because she seemed to live the rest of her life in a daze hardly aware that I was there. I can hear my mother tell me to go to church. I forgive her for not being a good role model after my daddy’s death. My father says, “I love you, Grace.”
Do I like my family? What do I like? What do I dislike?

I had an older brother that died in childbirth. My parents are both deceased.

How has my mother influenced me? How has my father influenced me?

My mama taught me that I should always hold my head up high with confidence regardless of what people were saying about me. I learned that a man is a very important part of a woman’s life because they complete us, and my mama always had a man by her side. My daddy taught me the importance of standing up for what you believe in. He was sentenced to a year on a prison work farm when he stood up to his boss for short changing him on his pay. He told me that if you let someone walk over you they will.

Do I have brothers and sisters? What do I think about them?

I would have had an older brother, but he died in childbirth. It would have been nice to have someone look out for me when I was growing up.

What was my favorite fairy tale? Why?

My favorite fairy tale is Cinderella, because she goes from rags to riches when she marries the prince. It gives me hope that one day I will find my prince, who will take care of me.

Who are my friends? Who are my enemies? How can I tell if someone is a friend or an enemy?

Dolly is my best friend she traveled with me from South Carolina to Pittsburgh, and she got me a job at her Aunt’s dress shop. My enemies are people that get on my bad side by talking about me behind my back or any woman who tries to take my man away from me. In order for someone to prove themselves worthy of my friendship they
have to prove that they are loyal. I don’t call just anyone a friend. Anyone who turns out to be disloyal is not someone I want to have around me.

**What ideas do I like? What ideas do I dislike?**

I like individuality and non-conformity. I don’t like it when religious people try to condemn me for enjoying life.

**What hobbies or interest do I have?**

I like making dresses in my spare time. Sometimes there is leftover fabric at the dress shop that I am allowed to take.

**Do I have children?**

I don’t have any children, and I am glad because I don’t want that kind of responsibility in my life right now.

**Am I married? Why did I marry the person I did?**

I am not married, and I don’t ever think I will be. The men I have been with never seem to want to settle down. Leroy went off with another woman when I mentioned marriage.

**How does the locale of the play make me feel?**

I feel very safe and comfortable living in the Hill District, but I feel uneasy in Berniece’s house. I feel like she is always judging me, and it was clear that I am not welcomed because she kicks me out of her house the first time I visit. The second time I came to the house I felt the tension in the air, and I knew something was wrong. I got a chill up and down my spine, and I knew I was sensing the presence of a ghost. I will never return to that haunted place again.

**How does the time of play make me feel?**
Living in a world where white men rule, I know that I must humble myself when I am in their presences. If I cross a white person in the street I can’t look them in the eye, and I must address them as sir or ma’am if they speak to me. I am glad I left the South because I felt the discrimination there was much worse. In the South you could be lynched just for looking at someone the wrong way.

**Where have I been prior to each of my stage entrances?**

In act two scene three I have just come from the saloon with Boy Willie. We have had a great time flirting with each other and drinking. He has talked me into coming to his place for a late night rendezvous. I am drunk, so I am talking loudly and laughing. I am stumbling a bit because of this and I also can’t see because the lights are out. When I enter I just want to see a big soft bed that I can plop down on.

In act two scene five Lymon ran into me while I was on my way to the store. He told me Boy Willie had left to go back to Mississippi, and he begged me to go to a movie with him. He seems like a sweet guy, so I decided to go with him. He said he had to make a quick stop at Berniece’s house so I decided to wait in the truck so I wouldn’t have to see her again. I have been waiting in a hot sweaty truck in the dead of summer for twenty minutes. I am irritated and angry, and I come in yelling. My movements are weighted and compulsive. All I want to do is see Lymon so I can wring his neck.

*Psychological Qualities*

**What choices do I make?**

I choose to go home with Boy Willie, a man that I have just met and have sex with him. I also choose to go out on a date with Lymon, who is Boy Willie friend and who Dolly, my best friend is interested in.

**What makes me angry? What relaxes me?**
I get angry when people lie to me, and try to tell me what to do. Drinking relaxes me.

**What are my driving ambitions, my goals?**

I hope to one day own a dress shop, but I spend all of my money on clothes and alcohol.

**Do I have instincts?**

I know when people are trying to use me.

**Do I do things impulsively?**

I tend to go with the flow and do things on a whim. Whenever I have been drinking I make rash decisions.

**What do I worry about?**

I am afraid of being alone. I crave companionship, and I don't like to go to long without having a man in my life.

**What do I like about myself? Dislike about myself?**

I like that men say I am beautiful. I don't like how my temper can get the best of me. I wish that I had gotten more education. I also wish that I was better at saving money.

**What do I need?**

I need lots of attention, and that is why I need to have a man around, so he can keep me company. I also need money so I can purchase the latest fashions.

**Do other people like me? Why?**

Most men like me because I am fun to be around and not uptight. Most women feel threatened by me, because I am so beautiful.

*Moral Qualities*
Are the choices I will make based upon expediency or upon some ethical standard?

I make most of my choices at the spur of the moment. I do whatever I think is going to benefit me.

Will the pursuit of my needs lead to a moral choice?

I always decide to put my needs above my morals. I choose to steal a man from my friend and go out with Lymon the day after I had sex with his friend. My need for companionship trumps morals.

What is my attitude toward the choice I make?

I don’t think there is any thing wrong with what I have chosen to do.

How do I express this attitude vocally and physically?

I try to make Boy Willie jealous by flaunting myself in front of him (by sticking out my chest and standing with my hand on my hip as if I am posing), so he is aware of what he has missed out on, and I speak to him using my charming “I am a lady voice.” I speak sweetly in my high register and lengthen my words by playing up the vowel sounds.

Play Qualities

Why am I included in the play? How do I contribute to the overall idea the playwright wishes to express?

I think I am in the play as comic relief, but I am also in the play to be compared to Berniece. We are complete opposites. Berniece is a moral Christian woman and I am an immoral harlot. I believe that August Wilson placed Grace in the play to show how these two women have chosen to lead two vastly different lifestyles.

My journal contains more character analysis on Grace.
**Grace and Berniece’s choices**

Why does Grace choose to live her life the way that she does? She has many other options regarding how she can live her life: for example, she could obtain an education or try to start her own business (like Dolly’s Aunt has). Instead, she focuses her energy on finding a man to boost her self-esteem as opposed to raising it through her own success and personal pursuits. I want to explore the reasons why Grace and Berniece have chosen to lead vastly different lives despite the fact that they are both women living in the community of the Hill District. Berniece lives a regimented life that consists of home, work, church, and raising Maretha, which is quite different from the fast paced life that Grace lives working by day and partying by night. The social environment that Berniece and Grace choose to live their lives shapes the choices they make in their life.

After the death of her husband Crawley, Berniece could have decided to take to night life by going to saloons, drinking, and picking up men like Grace. But instead she has committed herself to her motherly duty of raising Maretha. One of the reasons Berniece abstains from picking up men is the fact that she wants to set a good example for Maretha. Berniece makes it clear that she is not interested in getting married when she wards off Avery’s advances, “I got enough on my hands with Maretha. I got enough people to love and take care of” (Wilson, *Piano* 67). When Crawley dies she consumes herself with raising Maretha, because she does not want to have another man abandon her the way Crawley did when he died. She purposefully closes herself off toward Avery, because if she lets herself fall in love with him he may also end up leaving her.
Despite the fact that Berniece has learned to take care of herself without a male companion after Crawley’s death, I think the reason that Berniece chooses to stay at home and live a quiet simple life is centered around the solace that she found in the church. And a life of partying like Grace is condemned as sinful by the church because it usually only leads to trouble. I believe Berniece’s faith in God is what keeps her grounded and her priorities in life in check. Grace, on the other hand, seems like a drifter who lives life day to day without much care about her future; as a matter of fact, she is living only for the moment. Grace’s spiritual life is not a priority for her at this time, but it is the very thing that is holding Berniece together.

I think the fact that Grace has no one else to care for but herself gives her the freedom to live a reckless life jumping from man to man. Grace’s looseness with men is an acquired behavior that she may have observed when her mother or another female figure in her life repeatedly engaged in sexual relationships with multiple men.

Berniece’s mother, Mama Ola, on the other hand, set a different example for her. Mama Ola was very devoted to her husband, and she mourned his death till the day she died. Berniece’s life thus mirrors that of her mother’s. At the beginning of the play Berniece is still mourning the loss of her husband that has died three years earlier. It is not until the end of the play that she finds peace with his death. When she acknowledges the power of her ancestors and calls on them for help, she finds the peace she has been seeking. Wilson says, “the propagation and rehearsal of the value of one’s ancestors is the surest way to a full and productive life” (Wilson, King Hedley II viii). Unlike Grace, Berniece finds peace at the end of the play. Grace has not even realized that she is seeking peace through men instead of within herself; she is,
therefore, unable to transform at the end of the play. At the beginning of the play, Berniece is aware that she is troubled, but she is afraid to face her fears. The peace she has been seeking through the spiritual teaching of her church is only found when she acknowledges that she needs help and her ancestors are the only ones that can give her the peace she has desperately been seeking. Grace, on the contrary, is blindly searching for peace in saloons hoping to find a man that will solve her problems. Grace will not find the peace she is seeking until she realizes that it can be found within herself and not in a man.
CHAPTER FOUR: “GRACE-LIKE” CHARACTERS IN WILSON’S PLAYS

Now that we know more about Grace, I will discuss the traits that create the “Grace-like” characters that are found in some of Wilson’s plays. These “Grace-like” characters added to my analysis of Grace giving me a deeper look into Grace’s mindset, thus allowing me to add more depth to her personality. These “Grace-like” characters are all minor characters in Wilson’s plays, and I believe that they recur throughout the decades to represent the unchanging mentality of some women (black and white alike). Wilson wrote characters that he saw around him: in this particular case, these characters are promiscuous women that rely on men to boost their self-esteem and take care of them. The “Grace-like” characters that I discovered in Wilson’s twentieth century cycle of plays are Molly Cunningham, Dussie Mae, Dolly, Alberta, and Ruby. By studying these women I was able to develop Grace’s character. Throughout my discussion of these characters, I compare them to Grace and explore their similarities.

**Molly Cunningham from Joe Turner’s Come and Gone**

The first “Grace-like” character that appears in Wilson’s century cycle is Molly Cunningham from *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, which is set in 1911. Molly is described in the stage directions as follows, “She is about twenty-six, the kind of woman that ‘could break in on a dollar anywhere she goes.’ She carries a small cardboard suitcase, and wears a colorful dress of the fashion of the day. Jeremy’s heart jumps out of his chest when he sees her” (Wilson, *Joe 47*). As the first “Grace-like” character we encounter in Wilson’s century cycle I believe Wilson is setting a precedent for the
“Grace-like” character when he introduces us to Molly. Bertha, the co-owner of the boarding house Molly is staying at, says this about her, “She that kind of woman run off with the first man got a dollar to spend on her[…] That gal don’t mean him no good. She’s just using him to keep from being by herself” (Wilson, Joe 75). She manipulates men by using her charm to get to their money, but contrary to her actions she says, “Molly ain’t up for sale” (Wilson, Joe 66). She is also the kind of woman that always has a man because she is afraid to be by herself, and feels she is worthless without one.

Like Grace, Molly is a gorgeous girl that can manipulate a man to do whatever she wants, but Molly has learned from her failed relationships that most men are reluctant to commit to her, as many have left her for another woman. So, instead of letting men use her, she plays her own game. By pretending to be uninterested in the man, she makes the man chase after her, allowing her to have the upper hand because she does not appear to be desperate. Molly tells men that she is an independent woman that can survive without a man by her side, but this is only a ploy to ensnare men in her trap. Once the man has begged her to be their lady and promises her the world, she uses them for their money and leaves them when it runs out.

Her goal is to find a man to support her because “common folks” work is beneath her, and as she claims she is too proud to iron other people’s clothes. Molly and Grace both have a feeling of superiority due to the fact that they do not work as domestic servants as most black women did during those days. Molly and Grace both migrated to the North seeking to avoid a life of field labor and domestic servitude. Molly like many blacks believed life in the North afforded blacks more opportunities and a better lifestyle, and she claims she won’t every go back to the South.
Dussie Mae from *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*

Dussie Mae from *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is the second “Grace-like” character to appear in Wilson’s plays. Although Dussie Mae is bisexual, she still possesses some “Grace-like” qualities. She is Ma Rainey’s girlfriend, but she is also messing around with Levee, one of the male members of the band. In addition, to being a gold-digger, a woman who seeks to find a rich man to pamper them; Dussie Mae’s motivations are the same as all the other “Grace-like” characters. She has to have a companion, and she swindles him or her out of their money. Dussie Mae declares, “A woman like me wants somebody to bring it and put it in my hand. I don’t need nobody wanna get something for nothing and leave me standing in my door” (Wilson, *Ma Rainey* 81). She clearly wants someone who can give her money or, perhaps, provide her with a comfortable life-style. Dussie Mae is very direct with her expectations when she says to Levee that he has to own his own band before she will be with him, as she is not impressed that he is only a member of the band. She feels she is worthy of more. It doesn’t matter that he talks a good game since most men do; she believes she deserves someone who is rich. “Grace-like” characters choose their men based on how much money they have and not by the quality of their character.

Dolly from *The Piano Lesson* and Alberta from *Fences*

The next two women are only mentioned briefly: Dolly, from *The Piano Lesson*, and Alberta, from *Fences*. Both Dolly and Alberta’s personalities are typical of a “Grace-like” character. Their motive is to meet a man, spend his money and, if lucky, marry him. We hear of Dolly’s manipulative tactics when she does a litmus test on Lymon’s spending power. She has him buying her drinks at a bar, but eventually,
Lymon wises up and leaves her sitting alone in an attempt to keep the rest of his money. From this incident, we can see that “Grace-like” characters are calculating as well as manipulative. Alberta is another one of Wilson’s female characters with the same modus operandi. She is a young woman who is running around with Troy, an older married man. Unfortunately, Alberta doesn’t get money or the guy. She becomes a model of poetic justice dying while giving birth to Troy’s child. Based on her character traits, I chose to believe she probably became pregnant on purpose in an attempt to trap Troy and potentially break up his marriage.

*Ruby from Seven Guitars*

Ruby from *Seven Guitars* is the last Grace-like character I found in Wilson’s cannon. The stage description describes her as, “An uncommon woman, she exudes, a sensuality that is electric. Everyone stops to look at her” (Wilson, *Seven* 55). Ruby comes to Pittsburgh attempting to leave her troubled past with men behind her. She was previously involved with two men at the same time, and one of the men killed the other to win Ruby’s heart. Instead of leaving her turbulent past with men behind her, the first thing she does when she arrives in Pittsburgh is to sink her teeth into another unsuspecting man. Vera, a woman Ruby confines in, says, “Ruby seem like she got a way about her that the men take to” (Wilson, *Seven* 94). Wherever Ruby goes she seems to have a flock of men following her around.

I think that these characters constitute an archetypal woman that recurs in most of Wilson’s plays. They may all have different names and tell different stories, but they are basically the same woman. They are reincarnated throughout each decade because Wilson sees that the mindset of this type of woman has not changed with time.
He sees their ambitions, desires, motivations, and needs unchanging. These women reflect the core belief of a “Grace-like” woman, which is she is only valuable if she has a man with money in her life. Sadly, these “Grace-like” women still exist today. I believe that all of the “Grace-like” characters mentioned above provide an in depth look at Grace, giving me insight into the various qualities of her personality.
CHAPTER FIVE: WOMEN PIONEERS AND ENDURING WIVES

Women Pioneers

Aunt Ester, Ma Rainey, and Mame Wilks are three extraordinary women that stand out to me in Wilson’s canon as pioneers for women of future generation. Specifically these independent women have chosen a life that leads them down a path of success unlike the "Grace-like" characters that rely on men to mark their success in life. When I start my research I thought that I would discover more women like them throughout Wilson’s century cycle, however these three women were the only ones that stood out to me as being successful. In this chapter I discuss what makes them extraordinary women.

Aunt Ester from Gem of the Ocean

Aunt Ester is the woman pioneer we are introduced to in Gem of the Ocean, the first play in Wilson’s twentieth century decade cycle which takes place in 1904. Aunt Ester is what Wilson calls a gatekeeper because she tells people what they need to do to inherit their blessings in life. I like to think of Aunt Ester as the backbone of the Hill District community. Aunt Ester, a former slave, is referred to in many of Wilson’s plays, and revered as a woman of wisdom by all in the community. Aunt Ester guides people on a journey as they seek to find their identity. She says:

The people will come and tell you anything. They got all kinds of problems. They tell you this and they tell you that. You’ll come to find out most of the time they looking for love. Love will go a long way toward making you right with yourself.
They looking for love and don’t know what it is. If you tell them they still don’t know. You got to show them how to find it for themselves. (Wilson, Gem 46).

Aunt Ester has clearly unlocked the secret to life with her wisdom. She knows that people must first love themselves before they can take charge of their life and become successful at loving and living. It seems that most people are looking for love in all of the wrong places like Grace and the other “Grace-like” characters. Aunt Ester, a giving spirit, uses her wisdom and offers it to benefit everyone who comes to her seeking answers to their problems. She is the wise old sage and role model not only to Black Mary, her protégée, but to everyone in the Hill District.

Ma Rainey from Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom

Ma Rainey is not only a famous jazz singer, she is also a fierce business woman when it comes to her career. Ma Rainey’s character is based off a real jazz singer that lived during the 1920s. She does not take no for an answer, and if anyone tries to stand in her way she is quick to let them know who they are dealing with.

Living in a time when most blacks worked as laborers, it is remarkable that Ma Rainey has a contract with a record label in the male dominated music industry. I have to wonder if her secret to success lies in the fact that she has decided to leave men alone and seeks companionship with females. As previously mentioned, there seems to be a pattern of women focusing their attention on men instead of working to pursue their dreams; however Ma Rainey’s number one priority is her success and well-being. Ma Rainey’s boldness is her ability to defend herself and demand respect from white men, which is a characteristic of a courageous black woman. During the Jim Crow era, prior to the Civil Rights Movement, black people were expected to bow their head with their eyes looking at the floor in the presence of white people. When a police officer
accuses Ma Rainey of stealing and crashing a car, she is quick to let him know that she is Ma Rainey and that it is her car, “That’s my car! What you mean you don’t know whose car it is? I bought and paid for that car” (Wilson, *Ma Rainey* 49). And when the record producers try to tell her what songs she has to record, she tells them they either do it her way or they can forget about it. She also acknowledges the fact that they are only using her as a pawn to make money, “They don’t care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them” (Wilson, *Ma Rainey* 79). Although she is able to demand respect while in the recording studio, she realizes that she does not have these rights in the outside world. Ma Rainey is a fearless black woman and can be seen as a pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement, because she does not turn a blind eye to injustice. She speaks her mind and stands up to the people persecuting her. She is attuned to her inner voice which guides her through life, “Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her. That’s what counts with Ma” (Wilson, *Ma Rainey* 63).

**Mame Wilks from Radio Golf**

Mame Wilks from *Radio Golf* is a successful public relations representative, who is on her way to work for the governor. Her husband is a prominent real-estate developer, who is seeking mayoral candidacy. When he ruins his reputation by uncovering that the city government has been abusing its power selling property seized for real-estate taxes without holding a sheriff’s auction, she lets him know that she will no longer support him if she has to sacrifice her career in order to support his. Mame in so many words tells Harmond that she wants a divorce, “I don’t know if I can carry this any further. I’m still standing here, Harmond. I still love you. But this is all you now. Your campaign, that old house, the Hill…You’re on your own with all that. I can’t live my
life for you. And you can’t live yours for me. But I’m still standing here” (Wilson, Radio 72-3). She will not allow her husband’s mistakes and bad reputation to ruin her professional ambitions, and she is willing to leave him so she can achieve them. Mame unlike so many of the female martyrs in Wilson’s plays will not let a man deter her from her life goal.

What do all of these women have in common? They are strong, confident, and courageous and in control of their lives. They do not allow men to deter them from their aspirations and goals, which all of the “Grace-like” characters and so many other women have in Wilson’s plays. The recurring theme in Wilson’s plays seems to be that a woman gets caught up with a man, and then she fail to develop or pursue her goals because she lets her relationship with that man define her. Aunt Ester and Ma Rainey are examples of black women who did achieve their dreams because of their prevailing spirits, and I believe Mame Wilks will also see her dreams come to fruition. These women are pioneers who were role models for black women during their time. They helped clear the path for many black women to come as forerunners and models of exemplum for black women in their community.

**Enduring Wives**

There are other women in Wilson’s plays that don’t fit into the category of women pioneers or “Grace-like” characters. These women are the women that support their husbands. Wilson describes, “The men need support and nourishment, and in the black community, there are always women who can supply that for them” (Moyers 72). Women like Rose from *Fences*, Bertha from *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and Berniece from *The Piano Lesson* come to mind. Their stories are ones of personal
preservation, and tremendous strength as they are often left to rise above their unfortunate circumstances. They often devote so much of themselves to their husbands they have nothing left for themselves; as Rose from Fences acknowledges, “I didn’t know to keep up his strength I had to give up pieces of mine” (Wilson, *Fences* 98).

*Rose from Fences*

Rose is a devoted housewife and mother who always has a meal prepared for her husband, Troy, when he comes home from work. She lets him rule the household, and have the final word when it comes to matters with their son. It is not until the end of the play that we hear her take a stand as she reveals to Troy all of the sacrifice that she has made to be a faithful loving wife. Rose finds her voice and her identity that she has let Troy overshadow. Refusing to be a silent martyr, Rose reveals all the thoughts that she has locked up inside of her:

> I been standing with you! I been right here with you, Troy. I got a life too. I gave eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot with you. Don’t you think I ever wanted other things? Don’t you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me [...] I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams…and I buried them inside you. I planted a seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted my self inside you and waited to bloom. And it didn’t take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and wasn’t never gonna bloom. But I held on to you, Troy. I held you tighter. You was my husband….You always talking about what you give…and what you don’t give. But you take too. You take …and don’t even know nobody’s giving! (Wilson, *Piano* 70-1).
Rose is a gracious woman, because she agrees to raise the child that Troy fathered with another woman when the mother dies in childbirth. Offering her support, she tells Troy, “I am your wife Troy. Don’t push me away” (Wilson, *Fences* 77). Rose’s strength lies in her ability to stand up to Troy and say all of the things that she has always wanted to say to him but did not because she buried them deep inside to protect Troy’s ego. Trying to hide the fact that marrying Troy might have been a mistake, Rose is willing to overlook his faults and make sacrifices for his sake and for their marriage. Rose refuses to be just a wife that cooks and cleans and functions as a sexual gratifier for Troy. For eighteen years, she was Troy’s obedient wife, silently enduring her unhappiness; now, however, she refuses to have her feelings overlooked, “From right now… this child got a mother. But you a womanless man” (Wilson, *Fences* 79). She is Troy’s rock even though he fails to realize that she is the one who provides stability and comfort in his life. The Maxson family is introduced as a patriarchal household, but after Rose finds her voice and identity as a matriarch it transforms into a female-run household.

*Berniece from The Piano Lesson*

Berniece is a strong independent woman who is focused on providing her daughter Maretha with the skills to secure her bright future. Since the death of her husband, Crawley, who was shot and killed by a white man while supposedly hauling some stolen wood with Boy Willie and Lymon, she has become spiritually crippled closing herself off to the joy in life. Berniece refuses to believe that Crawley willingly participated in Boy Willies scheme to steal the wood. She says, “Crawley ain’t knew you stole that wood” (Wilson, *Piano* 53). Crawley probably only showed his sweet, loving side to Berniece, and that is why it is so hard for her to imagine her husband...
committing a crime. But in order to provide for his family he probably felt that he had to do whatever was necessary to support them. Berneice’s inability to get over the death of Crawley is paralyzing her, making her unable to break the monotonous routine of her life or allowing her to move on with her life, until she calls upon her ancestors to help her break the chains of her past.

**Coreen and Cleotha from The Piano Lesson**

I believe the wives of Wining Boy and Doaker are pushed like Rose from *Fences* to leave their husbands, because they realized that they are better off by themselves than with their men. The women are not characters that actually appear in the play; they are only casually mentioned by the men. Wining Boy’s wife, Cleotha, and Doaker’s wife, Coreen, both left their men because they did not seem ready to settle down and commit. Wining Boy tells Doaker, “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” (Wilson, *Piano* 31).

Coreen and Doaker also seemed to have had a rocky marriage. When Wining Boy asks Doaker about Coreen, Doaker does not want to talk about her. Doaker replies, “She up in New York. I let her go from my mind” (Wilson, *Piano* 32). It can be inferred from the text that Coreen left Doaker, because he seems to be bitter when he talks about her. Boy Willie, like his uncles, also seems to have problems with women. He is only with Grace for one night and then he is ready to move on to another woman. He tells Lymon, “I ain’t thinking about no Grace nothing,” when Lymon brags about getting Grace to go to a picture show with him (Wilson, *Piano* 98). The Charles men,
Doaker, Wining Boy, and Boy Willie, all drive their women away, and it is probably due to lack of commitment and inability to be monogamous.

**Bertha from Joe Turner’s Come and Gone**

Bertha Holly is a unique woman who is the only woman (that I have found) in Wilson’s century cycle that has a stable family life and has been happily married to her husband, Seth, for over twenty five years. They work well together running a boarding house. Bertha explains, “I get along with everybody. You'll find I ain’t no trouble to get along with” (Wilson, *Joe* 50). In the stage directions we discover that Bertha “has learned how to negotiate around Seth’s apparent orneriness” (Wilson, *Joe* 1). Bertha has found her soul-mate in Seth, a man “who’s got some understanding and who willing to work with that understanding to come to the best he can” (Wilson, *Joe* 75). The success in their marriage lies in the fact that they are able to respect each other and find a way to work out their differences through compromise.

**Vera from Seven Guitars**

Vera was fresh out of her mother’s house when she met Floyd Barton, a sweet talking blues singer who can get any woman he wants. Vera fell head over heels for Floyd, and he left her heartbroken when he left for Chicago with another woman. Floyd says the reason he went off with the other woman is because Vera didn’t believe in him. In the following dialogue, Vera tells Floyd he should have had confidence in himself, and she reveals how Floyd' leaving made her feel:

VERA. You supposed to believe in yourself.

FLOYD. A man that believe in himself still need a woman that believe in him.

You can’t make life happen without a woman.
VERA. I wanted to be that for you. Floyd. I wanted to know where you was bruised at. So I could be a woman for you. So I could touch you there. So I could touch you there. So I could spread myself all over you and know that I was a woman. That I could give a man only those things a woman has to give. And he could be satisfied. How much woman you think it make you feel to know you can’t satisfy a man? (Wilson, Seven 13-4)

Just as Floyd believes he can’t be a whole man without a woman, Vera does not believe she is complete without a man. Floyd finally convinces Vera to marry him and go to Chicago with him, but he is killed the night before they are supposed to leave. When Vera finally places her trust in Floyd, he is taken from her.

_Tonya from King Hedley II_

Tonya Hedley is the wife of King Hedley and the mother of a promiscuous seventeen year old daughter, who has a child of her own. Tonya is pregnant and she does not want to have the child because she fears that it will become a victim of the violent streets of the Hill District. Tonya says, “Why I wanna bring another life into this world that don’t respect life? I don’t want to raise no more babies when you got to fight to keep them alive” (Wilson, _King_ 39). She believes it is irresponsible to raise a child into a crime ridden environment, especially with a father involved in criminal activities himself. Sensing that King will be thrown in jail sometime soon, Tonya warns him that she will not be apart of it. Tired of constantly worrying if King comes home alive, she complains, “Every time he go out somewhere I hold my breath. I’m tired of it. I’m suffocating myself. I done told him if he go back to jail I’m through with it. I’m gonna pack up my little stuff and leave” (Wilson, _King_ 77). Instead of ending up in jail King is killed, leaving Tonya to raise a child by herself. Tonya, therefore, is another one of
Wilson’s women that is left to support her family, and patch up the hole that her husband has created.

In Wilson’s male dominated plays, the presence of these women is very important. They are the rock that their husbands lean on for support and, are often taken for granted. Most of these women seem to have married men that only create problems for them. With so many doors closed to them as women and from discrimination, these women devoted their lives to their families. Rose, who exemplifies love, commitment, sacrifice, and strength, is the archetypal wife in Wilson's plays. She is devoted to raising her son, Cory, and to her husband, Troy. Her world is turned upside down when Troy’s troubles become her own, but she finds the courage and strength to prevail. Like Rose, most of these women are often overshadowed by their husbands, but they make a stance when pushed to their limit.

There is also a theme of husbands falling victim to violence leaving the women that love them to forge through life alone. Maybe this is symbolizing that they do not need men to define who they are or that they are better off facing life by themselves; inadvertently, their husbands death forces them to be independent. Maybe by themselves they will finally be able to find their voice as Rose does when she stands up to Troy. Bertha's marriage seems to be the only healthy relationship in Wilson's century cycle, because she and Seth have discovered how to communicate with each other. I believe lack of communication is one of the many causes of marital problems between these couples, who seem to merely exist with one another, instead of communicating their wants and needs to their partner. Like children the men make foolish decision without considering how the consequences will affects their wives and families.
These women married their husbands hoping they would provide for their families. Most of these devoted wives silently endure through the pain that their husbands put them through; some characters, however, like Coreen and Cleotha, escape the fate of a troubled marriage by leaving their husbands. These marriages mirror the relationship Wilson’s mother, Daisy, had with men. Wilson’s father abandoned the family, and his stepfather spent several years in prison. That is why we see a recurring theme of men dying which can be equated to abandoning their families or men participating in criminal activities. Some of these plays end in the midst of the tragedies mentioned above and we never get to see these women overcome their circumstances. They have two choices they can: either wallow in pain, as Berniece initially does, or persevere and come out stronger and wiser, as Rose does. The choice is theirs; hopefully they choose the latter and realize that they are the only ones who are in control of their destiny—not the men that they married and entrusted their future to by placing their lives in their hands.
CHAPTER SIX: AUGUST WILSON’S BIOGRAPHY

August Wilson was born April 27, 1945, as Frederick August Kittle in “The Hill” district of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Originally named after his white German father, Wilson changed his name to August Wilson taking on his mother’s, Daisy Wilson, maiden name. The Wilson’s had direct ties to the South even though they lived in the north. Daisy’s mother was one of many blacks to take part in the Great Migration. She traveled on foot from North Carolina all the way to Pittsburgh. Wilson had an estranged relationship with his father partly due to the fact that his father never lived with the family and eventually abandoned them. He and his five siblings were raised by his mother and later, in his teens, also by his step father, David Bedford, who spent most of his life in prison and consequently was not much of a father figure either. Wilson’s mother and stepfather both had low paying blue collar labor jobs. His mother worked as a domestic servant, and his stepfather worked for the sewer department after his release from prison. The family lived in a two room house which had no water or toilet and was situated above a mom-and-pop grocery store.

Despite their menial living conditions, Daisy wanted to make sure her children were well educated. With only a sixth grade level of education, she taught Wilson to read at the age of three. Daisy always stressed the importance of reading. Wilson remembers, “She stressed the idea that if you can read, you can do anything…you could be anything you wanted to be if you knew how to unlock the information “(Moyers 65). Wilson grew up to become an avid reader and an A student.
While in the tenth grade, Wilson was accused by a black teacher of plagiarizing a twenty page paper on Napoleon Bonaparte for which he had included a bibliography and footnotes. Refusing to prove that he was the true author of the paper, Wilson dropped out of school. He spent several days shooting hoops under the principal’s office window, hoping that he would be encouraged to come back to school. And when he was not, Wilson permanently gave up on a formal education. Moreover, Wilson was kicked out of his house by his mother when she found out that he had quit school. He moved into the basement and supported himself through various labor jobs: washing dishes, mowing lawns, stocking shelves, and other odd jobs he could find.

Wilson educated himself. He went to a library and began studying black history, sociology, anthropology, and literature. He favored the writings of John Berryman, Dylan Thomas, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, Arna Bontemps, and Booker T. Washington. For four years, Wilson educated himself from the numerous books he found at the Pittsburgh Carnegie Library.

Seeking a better job, Wilson joined the Army at the age seventeen, and left after one year of service due to his failure to adjust to the authoritarian environment. After his stint in the military, he continued working various labor jobs to support himself while focusing on pursuing his writing aspirations. Wilson joined the Black Power Movement in 1965 and co-founded the Pittsburgh’s Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop. Later in 1968, he co-founded Pittsburgh’s Black Horizon Theatre Company, where Amiri Baraka’s\(^2\), plays were staged.

\(^2\) activist, writer and a prominent force in the Black Arts and Black Power Movement
After marrying his first wife a devote Muslim, Wilson joined the Nation of Islam. When he failed to adhere to some of the Black Muslim dictates, they divorced. After a second unsuccessful attempt at marriage, Wilson met Constance Romero, the costume designer of *The Piano Lesson*, to whom he was happily married to until his death.

In the late seventies, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, and began working for the Science Museum of Minnesota. While there, he wrote children’s plays for a theatre troupe in the museum’s anthropology wing and focused on improving his playwriting skills. Later, he took a job as a cook for local service organization, The Little Brothers of the Poor, earning a meager wage of $88 per week, which gave him more time to write his own plays. When he joined the Playwrights Center of Minneapolis, he had already written four plays, although they were not commercially successful: *Recycle* (1973), *The Coldest Day of the Year* (1976), *The Homecoming* (1976), and *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1977).

In 1976 Wilson began writing *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, his first successful play. This play proved to be a labor of love. After numerous edits on pacing and dialogue, it was finally published in 1985. Wilson was offered and $25,000 from a producer for the rights to turn *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* into a Broadway musical. Wilson refused and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* became the second play in his century cycle of plays, following *Jitney*.

Wilson began to become well known in the theatre scene when he began to enter his works into the National Playwriting Conference in the early 1980’s. Around the same time, Wilson met Lloyd Richards, former dean and artistic director of Yale Repertory Theater at the O’Neil Theatre during a workshop of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. 
Richards then became a mentor to Wilson and helped him to sharpen his writing skills. With the absence of a stable father-son relationship in his life, Wilson viewed Richards, who was twenty-five years his senior, as a father figure. Richards taught Wilson about life in addition to theatre. In 1984, Richards directed *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* at Yale Rep and went on to direct five other plays in Wilson’s ten play cycle. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* appeared on Broadway and won the New York Drama Critics Circle award for best play in addition to a Rockefeller fellowship. Wilson was able to obtain additional financial support for his plays through fellowships such as Jerome (1980), Bush (1982), Rockefeller (1984), McKnight (1985), and Guggenheim (1986).

For many years Wilson continued to complete his century cycle of plays, *Fences* (written in 1983 set in 1957), *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (written in 1988 set in 1911), *Two Trains Running* (written in 1991 set in 1969), *Seven Guitars* (written in 1995 set in 1948), *King Hedley II* (written in 1999 set in 1985), *Gem of the Ocean* (written in 2003 set in 1904), which culminated with *Radio Golf* (written in 2005 set in 1997). In addition to his century cycle of plays, he gave a speech at the Theatre Communications Group titled *The Ground on Which I Stand*, which he states his stance and viewpoint as a playwright arguing that there is a need for a black theatre where playwrights and actors can develop their craft.

Wilson has received numerous awards for his plays which include two Pulitzer Prizes (for *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*), seven New York Drama Critics’ Circle Awards for best play, a Tony Award for best play (*Fences*), three American Critics Awards, an Outer Circle Award, two Drama Desk Awards, the John Gassner Award,
the Helen Hayer Award, a National Humanities Medal. Wilson received twenty-five honorary degrees including one from Yale University and the University of Pittsburgh, and a high school diploma from the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, where he studied as a child. He was also inducted into the Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent, and, after his death, the Virginia Theatre was renamed the August Wilson Theatre in his honor.

On October 2, 2005 Wilson died in Seattle, Washington of inoperable liver cancer, but his legacy lives on through his plays. Audiences will continue to experience his twentieth century historical dramatization of African American life throughout the decades. Wilson’s use of the African oral tradition of storytelling in his plays has greatly added to the American dramatic canon.
CHAPTER SEVEN: WILSON’S PLAYWRITING INSPIRATIONS, TECHNIQUES, AND WRITING STYLE

Throughout this chapter I will explore Wilson’s playwriting inspirations, techniques, and writing style. Wilson’s characters and writing style stem from African American culture; his characters and stories, in particular, derived from the people and the environment that surrounded him growing up in the Hill District. He was reared in the Hill District filled with impoverished African Americans and Jewish, Syrian, Irish, Italian, and other eastern European immigrants. In most diverse communities, there were all kinds of colorful people that one might take for granted. And like most young people who taunted and teased anyone who was different, August was no exception. In fact, one particular incident was a defining moment in his life.

Inspirations

One day Wilson was taunting a drunken man, Johnson Tidrow, who handed him a copy of Ralph Ellison’s novel *The Invisible Man*, and said “Read this and learn something, fool” (qtd. in Sondengrass 7). Later Wilson was informed that Tidrow was a former professor denied tenure by a white administrator. Wilson’s mother, Daisy, reminded him that he could learn from all people, even drunkards. This encounter probably made him realize that his inspiration for writing could come from the people around him.

Living within this diverse community helped Wilson develop a keen ear for speech patterns and vernaculars. This particular exposure helped him create themes, stories, and some of the fascinating characters which abound in his plays. In fact, the
character Troy Maxson from *Fences* is based on his stepfather, David Bedford. Bedford had been a star football player and had hopes of attending medical school. Unfortunately, he was unable to fulfill this dream; instead, he was incarcerated for twenty three years for robbing a store and killing a man. After his release from prison, the only work he was able to find was with the public sewer department. Trying to re-live his dreams, David pushed Wilson to become an athlete; but Wilson’s dream was to become a poet.

Although Wilson’s initial aspiration was to become a poet, he later became interested in playwriting. Many years later, he would express that “the Blues” and visual art had inspired him the most. Through the Blues he was able to merge poetry and drama together:

> The craft I knew was the craft of poetry and fiction. To my mind, they had to connect and intercept with the craft of playwriting at some point, and all I had to do was find that point. Fiction was a story told through character and dialogue, and a poem was a distillation of language and images designed to reveal an emotive response to phenomena that brought it into harmony with one’s knowledge and experience. Why couldn’t a play be both? I thought in order to accomplish that I had to look at black life with an anthropological eye, use language, character, and image to reveal its cultural flashpoints and in the process tell the story that further illuminated them. That is what the blues did.

*(Bogumil 3)*

The Blues, a reoccurring motif, enabled Wilson to voice the experiences of many African Americans in his plays. The Blues are, as he puts it, “the wellspring of my art”
(Sheppard 110). He was especially influenced by jazz singer, Bessie Smith. Wilson recounts, “The universe stuttered and everything fell to a new place” (qtd. in Sondengrass 11) when he heard Smith’s record “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Jelly Roll Like Mine.” After hearing Bessie Smith, Wilson reminisces that he started to look at the black people around him, “a little differently than I had before. I began to see a value in their lives that I simply hadn’t seen before. I discovered a beauty and nobility in their struggle to survive” (Moyers 64).

Along with the Blues, Wilson had four people that were major influences on his work; Romare Bearden, an African American visual artist, Amiri Baraka, a revolutionary playwright/writer, Jorge Luis Borhes, an Argentinean writer, and James Baldwin, African American writer—all greatly inspired and influenced Wilson’s ideas and writings. Bearden, Baraka, Borhes, and Baldwin combined with the Blues comprise the five B’s that influenced him. By studying the life of African Americans around him through music, paintings, and their conversations, Wilson found inspirations to write his plays.

One of Wilson’s favorite quotes of Bearden’s is, “I try to explore, in terms of the life I know best, those things which are common to all culture” (Savran 26). Romare Bearden used collage as a means to express the African American experience in his paintings. Describing his first encounter with Bearden’s work, Wilson says, “The first time I encountered anyone who dealt with black life in a large way. He shows through his work a black life that has its own sense of self, its own fullness, and he does this in terms of myth and ritual” (Feingold 17). Romare Bearden’s painting titled “The Piano Lesson” inspired Wilson to write the play, and a painting titled “Mill Hand’s Lunch”.

3 See Appendix C
"Bucket" gave him the inspiration to write *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. The picture titled *The Piano Lesson* is a picture of a piano teacher instructing a student. Wilson describes the painting and how it inspired him to write the play:

> The woman is standing over her, and I heard the woman in my mind admonishing the little girl: Now you, Maretha, get your piano lesson. That’s how it started. I wanted to explore the question; Can you acquire a sense of self-worth by denying your past? I don’t think you can, and I wanted it to be very visible onstage. I wanted the piano in the course of the play to get bigger and bigger. I figured the more you understand the piano, the more you understand about these people. (Watlington 89).

The little girl in the painting became Maretha, and the lady scolding her Berniece, her mother, who believes her future lies in her ability to play the piano.

The following is Wilson’s description of the “*Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket*” painting:

> It showed a man coming down the stairs of the boardinghouse reaching for his lunch bucket, a woman with her purse apparently going out, and a child sitting at a table drinking a glass of milk. And in the center of the painting was this man with a hat and coat who was sitting in this posture of abject defeat (Livingston 53-4).

Wilson became intrigued with the man in the painting, so much that he began to write a short story about him. Not surprisingly, the story eventually became a play. And it wasn’t until he heard a song by W.C. Handy called “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,” a

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4 See Appendix D
blues song about a white plantation owner who entrapped black men into bondage, that
the song became a play about Herald Loomis.

As a member of the Black Power Movement, Wilson was moved by Amiri
Baraka’s plays, which used, “incendiary works as addressing the experiences and
anger of many black American’s” (Bogumil 4). Wilson’s plays often express the
frustration that most black men experience living in a country that places so many
barriers in their path. Boy Willie from The Piano Lesson speaks about making his mark
on the world and the value of his mere existence by attacking people that believe blacks
have nothing to contribute to the world, he cries out, “But my mama ain’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’” (Wilson, Piano 94).

Quite often, the men in Wilson’s plays express their frustration with living in a
world where they are not offered the same opportunities as their white counterparts. It
may seem that Wilson writes from a place full of anger and bitterness because of his
portrayal of the injustices that black men have faced. He says, however,” I don’t write
from a wellspring of bitterness. I write from a very positive viewpoint of black life and
black experience” (Livingston 55). Some characters in Wilson’s plays may be bitter, but
he wrote these plays to give voice to the African American experience as a “testament
to the resiliency of the human spirit”, and due to the many injustices that they have
faced it may seem that he does not write from a positive point of view (Sheppard 105).
Wilson’s plays are depicting some of the experiences that black people have
experienced living in the U.S. Although these stories are fiction, they are written from
Wilson’s historical perspective of truth.
Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentinean writer, uses suspense to tell his stories by revealing what is going to happen in the beginning, without telling the reader how the story will unfold or the events that will occur. Wilson adopts this technique for his play *Seven Guitars*. In the first scene in *Seven Guitars*, we learn that Floyd Barton has died, and the play begins with mourners coming back from his funeral. We don't know how he has died but as the play progresses we become aware of the events that preceded his death.

Wilson was inspired to explore African American culture by James Baldwin’s call for, “A profound articulation of the things that can offer a man sustenance once he leaves his father’s house” (Sheppard 105), and I believe this is exactly what he does through his century cycle of plays. And pride in one’s heritage is one of the things that Wilson is trying to promote.

**Techniques**

As a self taught playwright, Wilson reveals, “I never took any classes in playwriting. I never read any books on it. I never read any books on writing, period. I always thought, ‘You do it. You learn by doing!’” (Livingston51). Striving to find his own process for writing plays, Wilson purposely did not read classic plays. He abstained from using other plays as templates for his own. The foundation of Wilson's playwriting style is poetry, he explains, “not so much in terms of language, but in the concept. So, each play is specific, each is different, each has its own form. But the mental process is poetic: you use metaphor and condense. I try to find a metaphor to carry the work” (Savran 23).
Instead of writing in the solitude of his home, Wilson prefers to write in bars and restaurants. The atmosphere within these establishments created the inspiration for him to write, “Sometimes I’ll be at Sweeny’s, and they’ll put on a good tape, and the music is inspirational. It’s music I like, and I’m off on a roll, writing something” (Livingston 41). When he hears the music he tries to think of the year the music originated, and what he was doing when he first heard the song and what the song means to him. Once he finds a decade to write about, he listens to some music from that period. He explains, “Inside the music are clues to what is happening with the people…The music provides you an emotional reference” (Moyers 62-3). Wilson is able to extract ideas and attitudes from the artist’s lyrics, specifically; the Blues, which is a form of music in the African oral tradition that black folk’s used to communicate their emotions and struggles.

A line of dialogue is all Wilson needs to begin his writing process. Wilson explains, “Someone says something and they’re talking to someone else. I don’t all the time know who’s talking or who they’re talking to, but you take the line of dialogue and it starts from there…the more the characters talk the more you know about them” (Shannon and Williams 224). He relies on the personalities of his characters to guide him in creating events and scenarios that build and end each play. He explains, “Very often I don’t know what the ending is or what the events of the play are going to be, but I trust that these characters will tell me or that the story will develop naturally out of the dialogue of the characters” (Shannon and Williams 224). Instead of trying to mold his plays to serve a specific purpose, Wilson’s lets the characters speak for themselves. Wilson views himself as a vessel through which the characters come to life: “I don’t
have a strong sense of myself being in there at all. It’s like, I’m there, I’m writing this
down but the characters are really in control. I have the choice to censor them, to say,
no, I don’t want you to do that. But basically I just watch them and they do or say
whatever they want” (Feingold 18). His ability to discover characters through paintings
like Romare Bearden’s and his ability to listen to what the characters want to say is a
unique skill that distinguishes him from other playwrights.

Wilson refined the technique of revising his plays while at the Eugene O’Neill
National Playwriting Conference. Wilson developed a new revising process when he
began to rewrite his plays during the rehearsal process of Seven Guitars. Wilson found
it was better to wait to rewrite the play during the rehearsal process, because he would
see things on stage that needed tweaking to accommodate the evolution of the play
from text to performance and he would hear changes that needed to be made to the
dialogue. The feedback he got from actors, directors, and designers helped him to
make daily script changes, which he would bring in the next day. Prior to this new
rewriting process he would make a majority of revision prior to the start of rehearsals.
However he grew to prefer rewriting during the rehearsal process, because he could
see an immediate response to the revision with the actors on stage. Wilson rewrote the
ending to The Piano Lesson originally, Berniece expelled the ghost by calling out to the
Christian God, but he revised the script so that she was calling out to her ancestors.
This rewrite profoundly changed the statement the play is making. Wilson makes it
clear that the white Christian God is unable to help Berniece. Her ancestors are the
only ones that can free her soul and expel the ghost from her house.
Initially, Wilson had no intention of writing a play for each decade of the twentieth century. The idea came to him once he realized he had written a few plays, which were each set in a different decade. Wilson acknowledges:

Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that I was writing one play for each decade. Once I became conscious of that, I realized I was trying to focus on what I felt were the most important issues confronting black Americans for that decade, so ultimately they could stand as a record of black experience over the past hundred years presented in the form of dramatic literature. What you end up with is a kind of review, or re-examination, of history. Collectively they can read, certainly not as a total history, but as some historical moments. (Powers 5)

The journey that Wilson’s plays take us on throughout the twentieth century is filled with characters that share their personal journeys and struggles as they try to capture their piece of the American Dream.

Throughout the history of the United States, blacks have been marginalized and viewed as inferior. Wilson confronts these views with the long dialogues and speeches from his characters. He describes the speeches as, “An unconscious rebellion against the notion that blacks do not have anything important to say” (Sheppard 104). With these speeches, he is demanding that the African American voice be heard.

His goal is “to present positive images, strong black male characters who take a political stand” that can take responsibility for their presence in the world (Savran 30). It is important for Wilson to show black men as being prudent, responsible and capable of making decisions, however after reading his plays I believe many of the men make
irresponsible choices. Too often, white Americans view black males as non-thinkers and irresponsible. This is one of the many reasons why Wilson’s works are so important to the American dramatic canon. In essence, he is rewriting the history of African Americans that was written predominately by white men. Wilson says, “I try to make them heroic… and I’m just trying to uncover it, pulling layer after layer from the stereotype” (Savran 30). My thesis reveals that women, although often living in the shadows of men, also play an important role in Wilson’s plays.

Wilson seems to be calling for social change by creating plays that confront social issues of the black community, such as assimilation, black on black crime, the disproportionate imprisonment of black males, the lack of stable nuclear black families, and redevelopment of black communities (without corporations taking over). Wilson tries to abstain from approaching his plays from a didactic standpoint, Wilson admits, “All of my plays are political but I try not to make them didactic or polemical. Theater doesn’t have to be agitprop” (Savran 37). His message is expressed in the characters’ views; for example, Boy Willie scolds Berniece for raising Maretha as if black people are living at the bottom of life. He preaches:

If you want to tell her something tell her about that piano. You ain’t even told her about that piano. Like that’s something to be ashamed of. Like she supposed to go off and hide somewhere about that piano. You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. ..and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. If you did that she wouldn’t have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head held high. (Wilson, Piano 90-1)
The point Wilson is making is that African Americans should be brought up to be proud of their heritage and encouraged to rise above their circumstances. He is able to get this message across without berating the audience with his stance.

The conflict between assimilation and pride in one’s heritage is a theme that Wilson confronts in many of his plays. Wilson says, “I think the fundamental question that has confronted blacks since the Emancipation Proclamation is the following: are we going to adopt the values of the dominant culture, or are we going to maintain our cultural separateness and continue to develop the culture that has been developing in the southern United States for some two to three hundred years?” (Sheppard 105-6). This theme is one that *The Piano Lesson* confronts head-on. This is evident when Berniece and her daughter, Maretha move to the North. The piano in the Charles household not only represents their ancestors painful past of slavery, but also a future of possibilities which it holds for Maretha, Berniece’s daughter whom she hopes will become a piano teacher. As stated before, Berniece is only able to expel Sutter's ghost and move on with her life until she plays the piano, she vowed never to touch again, and embraces her family’s past as she calls on her ancestors for help. Wilson says *The Piano Lesson* is a play about, “A woman who is trying to acquire a sense of self-worth by denying her past. Which is something you cannot do” (Feingold 18). One truth that can be gleaned from *The Piano Lesson* is never be ashamed of where you came from, because your ancestral past helps shape your identity. A person needs to know who they are and where they have been in order to progress in life. Wilson proclaims:

I think blacks in America need to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people. I’m not certain the right choices have
always been made. That’s part of my interest in history-to say ‘Let’s look at this again and see where we’ve come from and how we’ve gotten where we are now.’ I think if you know that, it helps determine how to proceed with the future.

(Powers 5)

Berniece needs to accept her past life so that she can be released from the chains of her past. African Americans can learn from Berniece’s cathartic awakening that she experiences when she calls on her ancestors. We can learn from Berniece and her ability to face her past. I along with other African Americans need to acknowledge where we came from so we can claim our place in this world, and proclaim this is who I am, and I am proud of where I came from.

Throughout the decades in the twentieth century, Wilson wrote his plays about African Americans’ long journey, one which at times seemed to make little progress or change (Bogumil 9). Wilson believes that we as African Americans should embrace our history: “Blacks in America want to forget about slavery—that stigma, the shame. That’s the wrong move. If you can’t be who you are, who can you be? How can you know what to do? We have our history. We have our book, which is the blues. And we forget it all” (qtd.in Bogumil 9). In many of Wilson’s plays such as *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson* the characters have a spiritual awakening and find their identity when they acknowledge their ties to Africa. They are bound to Africa through their ancestors that were brought to America on slave ships.

Although the themes and the people Wilson writes about are black, he says: I write for an audience of one. For myself. I think I have to satisfy myself as an artist first before I write for any particular other audience. So I look at my work as
a piece of art, and I have to be satisfied with it. I don’t write for black people or white people. I write about the black experience in America. And contained within that experience, because it is a human experience, are all the universalities (Sheppard 109).

I believe that Wilson is saying that he does not write solely for one audience, but I must say that there is a healing catharsis that African Americans can experience from his plays. His plays seek to help blacks to identify as Africans in America. Wilson’s plays also reveal to other races that there are universal themes within the black experience in America, which include family conflicts, oppression, and discovering one’s identity. In addition to the universalities found within Wilson’s plays, he also demonstrates the unique cultural qualities that distinguish African Americans. Wilson believes that African Americans have an innate way of doing things differently than whites, and that African Americans should embrace their cultural uniqueness.

Wilson’s plays are rooted in his identity as an African American. He states his artistic and social viewpoint:

Before I am anything, a man or a playwright, I am an African American. The tributary streams of culture, history and experience have provided me with the materials out of which I make my art. As an African American playwright, I have many forebears who have pioneered and hacked out of the underbrush an aesthetic that embraced and elevated the cultural values of black Americans to a level equal to those of their European counter-parts. (Wilson, King Hedley II viii)

Wilson gives tribute to his African ancestors, who created the African aesthetic and cultural values from which he writes. The artistic influences of the five B’s and the daily
experiences of African Americans throughout the twentieth century inspired Wilson to create his century cycle of plays. By writing these plays Wilson is stating that the African experience is just as important as its European counterpart, and he demands that the African voice be heard. Through his plays, people from all walks of life are enlightened with the African American experience.
8/25/07

Today the cast got together to have an informal meet and greet. We introduced ourselves and gave our first impression of our characters. Be discussed how performing this play is a tribute to our ancestors. She also said the ancestors in the play would always be watching us, and that would be apparent by the faces of our ancestors illuminating on the wall, and the ones carved into the piano. The chorus will also be a reminder of the ever present spirits. Be gave us a character analysis breakdown to complete for each of the characters we are playing. We also are expected to be off book for the first act by the first rehearsal. That means I need to start memorizing Berniece’s lines because I am the understudy.

9/28/07

Today we had our first rehearsal. We read through the play. I have a lot of work ahead of me. I need to get totally off book with my Grace lines, and also work on Berniece’s lines. David, who is playing Boy Willie, and I are getting together tomorrow to do some contact improve to get ready for our very physical sexy scene. I also might get together with Mike to go over our scene. I need to finish my action verb markings for my Grace scenes, and think of subtext. I also will do the same for Berniece. I think I will record my cue lines and practice them by listening to the cue line and then pausing the recorder to say my lines. It always takes me awhile to get off book, and feel completely comfortable with the text. I also have to apply the theme sheet (piano lesson acronym list) to my characterization of Grace and Berniece.
I feel like this play or rather performing in this play will be a cathartic experience for me. I have often struggled with defining who I am as an African American girl in America, and now I am an African American woman (some would still call me a young adult and I would agree because my parents are still supporting me financially). Well anyway, I have never felt close ties to Africa. I read Roots during the summer of 2006, and that really helped me relate to the hardships many Africans experienced on their journey through the middle passage. I suddenly realized that my family had a similar journey. Slavery became more than something that happened to other people, but something that happened to my family. I wanted to know my family’s personal story.

This summer I learned that some of my ancestors were freed slaves prior to the Emancipation Proclamation in the 1700s, and that they could read and write. The best thing about this is that there is authentic legal documentation to prove that they were really free. I would like to trace my family roots back to Africa.

When AC was reading Doaker’s lines and explaining how the Charles family came into ownership of the piano, I started to get tears in my eyes. I was thinking that my ancestors went through the same horrific things, only I don’t know the specific stories. The atrocities of slavery are not just stories; they happened to my ancestors and thus to me. Everyone (white and black) in the room became quiet, because we were all very attentive to what he was saying. We African Americans were taking in Doaker’s memory of what happened to his family and imagining what happened to our ancestors during the times of slavery. I wonder what the white people were thinking. What was going on through their heads?

9/29/07
Today David and I read over our scene, and we did some contact improv: we improvised a scene that we created about how we probably first met in the saloon. After that, we improvised our scene. In this scene we arrive at the Charles family home. He tries to get me in the mood by kissing on me, but I get annoyed because I ask where I am going to sleep, and he tells me we have to sleep on the couch. Eventually I give in, and we start to have a little foreplay, before we start having sex, but his sister Berniece interrupts us and kick us out of the house. Then we proceeded to block the scene. I dressed up like Grace would have dressed today if she was going out to a club. I wore this jean dress and cute yellow high healed shoes, and I put on make-up.

It was good to break the ice. One of the best exercises we did was one where we had to stand ten feet apart from each other, and then look at that person and take them in. Then we would slowly take one step in until our toes, chest, and nose were touching each other. At first I thought this is not going to be a big deal, but when I started taking David in, I started to see him differently. In fact, I noticed the big tired lines under his eyes, and he looked like a totally different person to me. I also started to get a nervous tingly empty vulnerable feeling in my stomach.

During our improv, we kissed several times, just pecks on the lips. And he kissed the back of my neck. While this was happening, I was able to turn off the nattering in my brain and live in the moment. I thought I was going to have a hard time with this since my boyfriend, Alex, and I are in a serious relationship. He told me, he thought my kissing another guy in a scene is cheating, but it didn't feel like cheating because I was Grace. I wasn't Ingrid Alexandria Marable anymore. I hope the first time we rehearse this scene, it will be just me, David, and Be. It would be hard for me to do
this scene for the first time in front of the whole cast. I will talk to Be about this. I am
excited about this scene. It’s going to be great! Today, I learned that Grace wants a
man to be attentive and affectionate with, because she gives in to Boy Willie when he
charms her with kisses and flattery. Grace’s mood changes from upset to into the mood
as she melts into Boy Willies “game”, which is known as the ability to flatter women. The
fun for Grace is all in the chase.

9/30/07

Today part of act 1 was blocked. During this time, I worked on the moment
before character scene sheet that Be gave us, where we had to write where we came
from before we entered a scene and what our state a mind before we entered a scene. I
also discussed some of the play with the other actors, the assistant director, Rachael;
and the assistant stage manager, Calla. I read through the Avery and Berniece scene
with Kenneth, and we had an interesting discussion about Berniece. I just saw her as
an independent woman, but he said that she might be so bitter and closed-up because
she was so dependent on Crawley, and now she can’t lean on him. It is as if he left her
in a rut.

10/1/07

Today I worked on my Grace lines with Felicia, my understudy. It was nice to
have someone read my cue lines. Sidonie, Felicia, Brianna, and Rachael got into a
discussion about spirits, and that was helpful, because there are good and evil spirits
throughout this play. We talked about some emotional memories we have had that will
help us drop that into our characters. We also discussed Berniece’s spirituality.
Berniece acknowledges that there is a God, but we feel her relationship with God has
been strained since the death of Crawley. At the end, Avery fails to exorcize Sutter’s ghost in the “name of the Lord”. Berniece is able to exorcise the ghost by calling on her ancestors to give her the strength to overcome her fears, and expel Sutter’s ghost. Berniece was unable to find peace by calling on a white Christian God for help. She had to call on her ancestors for help. Wilson often talks about how your God should look like you, inferring that a lot of black people are worshiping a white Christian God. Wilson explains:

Amiri Baraka has said that when you look in the mirror, you should see your God. If you don’t you have somebody else’s God. So, in fact, what you do is worship an image of God which is white, which is the image of the very same people who have oppressed you, who have put you on the slave ships, who have beaten you, and who have forced you to work. The image was a white man. And the image that you were given to worship as a God is the image of a white man.

(Moyers 77)

I think this is interesting because in the first version of The Piano Lesson Wilson had Berniece calling on Jesus to rid the house of the ghost, but changed it so that she was calling on her ancestors. Praising an ancestral god also occurs in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Loomis finds his song when he sees the bones of his ancestors rising from the water, which is a symbolic representation of baptism.

10/3/07

Today we discussed Grace, and I discovered that she is very manipulative. I believe she picked up Boy Willie to get back at Leroy, but now I think she was planning to have Leroy walk in on her and Boy Willie to make him jealous. Somehow Boy Willie
talked her into going to his home, but now she is trying to get him to come back to her place. My objective is to lure Boy Willie to my house, but somewhere down the line I give into the heat of the moment and I surrender. I also played around with feeling vulnerable and being intimidated by Berniece. Mandy John, another assistant director suggested this strategy.

We blocked the scene with Grace and Boy Willie tonight, in front of everyone. I took a big leap tonight. Before we were about to start, David asked me if we were going to drop in the stuff we rehearsed and I told him, “Yes.” He said he would be self-conscious, and I told him that I was nervous too, but we needed to do it now because it would help our blocking. It was messy, but we got through it. If we hadn’t done the contact work before, I can honestly say I don’t know how I would have gotten through it. I would have been so in my head, but because we did do the contact work I was able to just drop it in. I just hope I remember all of the blocking.

Notes-work on playing with the “I am a lady” voice (which is my high pitch voice charming voice that I use when I am trying to be a refined), and my serious demanding voice (that is in the Ybuzz lower part of my vocal range), which I use when I am frustrated or upset. My lady voice should be soft and soothing, and my serious demanding voice is harsh and has an edge to it. I talk with a southern accent so in my “I’m a lady” voice I elongate my vowel sounds and run one word into the next, and in my

5 Most of the vocal changes I made to create my southern accent were in the words that had –er endings. I changed them from R-flavoring into a schwa or as Edith Skinner, author of Speak with Distinction, calls it a neutral vowel sound.
demanding voice I raise my voice and add a sense of urgency to it. I use my “I’m a lady” voice when I am trying to be charming, and I use my demanding voice when I am not getting my way or I am pissed off.

10/05/07

We are running the rest of act one, starting on page 34. Then we will move onto act two, which I am going to try to do off book. I have brought some gloves, and I am going to try to use them, too. I think wearing a skirt, the high heels, low cut shirt, and gloves will help me find my character.

Why did Leroy go off with another gal? The following is some back-story that I created for my turbulent relationship with Leroy. We are hot one minute and cold the next. I mention Leroy when I am trying to convince Boy Willie to come back to my place. And from the text it appears that we have separated because I say, “If Leroy don’t come back there…He used to be my man” (Wilson, Piano 73).

Leroy is quite a catch. He is a handsome, light skinned, and he has a good job working as a doorman/porter at an office building downtown, which means he is paid a pretty good wage. I told Leroy that it was time for us to get married. We have been seeing each other for about eleven years on and off. (Specifically, we have been dating ever since I moved to Pittsburgh when I was 16.) I told him I was tired of him seeing other women. I always end up getting him back when he sees me with another guy. I am tired of playing games. If I can’t get Leroy to commit to me then, I need to find another man that will. When I mention to Leroy that I wanted to get married, he couldn’t get out of my place fast enough. He said he just remembered he had to meet his buddy Ed. I didn’t believe him but I thought he would come back. The next thing I know he is
at the saloon with some girl name Rita, a blues singer. My friend Dolly told me that she saw him there last night. I knew I would see him there today, so Dolly and I went down there to find me a guy…any guy, and flirt with him, and then leave with him to make Leroy jealous. I might even take the man to my place, and I hope that Leroy would come walking in on us. Well, I ended up meeting Boy Willie, a handsome manly man. I just know that Leroy will be jealous of him because he is built better than Leroy. Leroy is a tall skinny stick of a man. Anyway Boy Willie had his eye on me from the moment he walked through the door. I knew he was the one. He bought me a drink and Dolly ended up with his friend Lymon. The look on Leroy’s face was priceless. He was steaming mad. I know Leroy will be knocking on my door tonight.

Boy Willie

Boy Willie has big hands, but they’re soft despite their size. I would expect a country man like him to have rough hands. He has big juicy lips. He turns me on because I love strong aggressive men.

10/12/07

Today we got to run act two. We started off with a warm-up, which I really needed because I felt so rushed when I arrived. The warm-up helped me get out of my head. I really loved that we did vocal challenge today. When doing vocal challenge, you have a vocal battle that is similar to a call and response warm-up but it often turns out that the two people are making sound at the same time. This warm-up also incorporates the physical body with vocals. We added a spin on this today because we started to do it as our character. This was really helpful because it really brings out the status and relationship between the characters, for example when I was doing vocal
challenge with Berniece we both started circling each other and testing each other by looking each other up and down as we mocked each other with umm noises. We eventually started yelling at each other and I back off, because she started to intimidate me, because I started thinking about how she in so many words calls me a whore when she says, “I don’t allow that in my house” (Wilson, Piano 74). I know she is referring to the fact that we are fooling around. But later she says, “Your company gonna have to leave,” and she has this disdainful tone in her voice when she says “company” (Wilson, Piano 74). Her subtext was your hoe is gonna have to leave. I eventually end up leaving her house in the scene, so I was trying to play around with being vulnerable and humbling myself. This exercise also helped me drop in my relationship with Boy Willie, and Lymon.

I felt rushed when we started my scene with Boy Willie, because I had been running my lines, but maybe that is a good thing because I didn’t have time to over think what I was doing. I threw my water bottle slammed down my script, and I was trying to put on my gloves. I went up on some lines, but I thought David and I were really in the moment. I wasn’t thinking about my lines when he was saying his. That is good because I am normally in my head when I am thinking about my lines. I forgot to switch my hips at Berniece and bend over to get my purse. The subtext is “look at what I got and what it gets me. Aren’t you jealous?”

We need to score our physical contact because David bit me and he hit his tooth on my clavicle. I think we have a great physical connection and relationship, but the kinks just need to be worked out. I really could tell I was responding to David instead of making up things: for example, tonight when he comes up from behind and starts
humping me. He was rougher than normal, and it really surprised me. That is great. Also when the lights came on, I was really shocked and I felt startled and nervous. Who caught us?

Today after we ran the last scene act two scene five, and I realized that Lymon really does end up staying up North with me. Do we end up getting married, do I run him off, or do I get back with Leroy when he comes crawling back? I think I end up staying with Lymon, because he is sweet, and for the most part he does what I tell him to do, and if he doesn’t I can always manipulate him into doing what I want with my charm. I am tired of being with slick crude men. I realize I have caught a good a man.

10/20/07

I watched my scenes in the movie version of *The Piano Lesson*, and I realized I can be much louder and laugh more when I first enter. I need to accentuate the fact that I am tipsy. I should stumble in, and that makes my first line, “Put some light on” more understandable.

10/27/07

This weekend I watched *Eves Bayou*, because Felecia, understudy for Grace, said that there was a character in the movie that reminded her of Grace. Mrs. Mattie Mereaux, who is an adulterous woman that has sex with a married man during a party he is hosting with his wife. All of the women hate her and envy the fact that she tantalizes all of the men attracting them to her like magnets. She dances a raunchy hoochee couchee as all of the women at the party stare at her. Far from a refined lady, she uses her sensual curves and good looks to seduce men. In one scene of the movie, she is wearing a pink rose in her hair; incidentally, Dan the costume designer
has given Grace a rose to wear in her hair. Eve, the main character, in the movie points out, "Mattie doesn’t seem like the lonely type," hinting at the fact that she always in the company of a man. This made me think about how women can use their sensuality to manipulate men. Women have had power over men since the time of Adam and Eve and the original sin. They can choose either to use their power of manipulation or not, and Grace definitely chooses to use it.

I was flipping through the channels and came across a film called *Lakawanna Blues*. This is a story about a woman named Nanny, who owns a dinner and rooming house, and raises a foster child as her own in 1956 Lakawanna, New York. Every Friday night she has a fish fry and the black people in the community get together to dance, drink, and have a good time. The characters that hang out at the dinner are quite interesting, especially Jimmy Lean and Pauline, who have a love-hate relationship, and can’t seem to live with out each other. Jimmy Lean and Pauline’s relationship reminds me of Grace and Leroy’s relationship. They are hot one minute and cold the next, in love one minute and the next at each other throats about to kill each other. No matter how many fights they get in, they always end up back in each other’s arms.

10/29/07

We ran the show after Doaker worked on his monologue. I helped Brianna with some voice work, specifically with call. Tonight my scene with David felt a little off. It was kind of cool, because I had to work with it and react differently. We need to definitely do 1-5 min physical connection prep before we do our scene. I think the physical excitement of the fact that we let the saloon and came to his house to have sex
was missing. We also need to ask Be about the “Go on Boy Willie” and my “Come on” line: did she like that I repeated this line?

11/1/07

We ran the show again tonight. David and I had some great moments tonight; we really had some great chemistry. We played off of each other, and I was extra feisty tonight and comfortable in my body. I think I finally fully became Grace. The cross to the couch worked well tonight, because I am giving Berniece control. I surrender to her, especially because she has a gun. It helps to stutter a little when I say, “ssssomthing ain’t right here” and feel the cold on my body, and really look for the ghost.

11/4/07

Today we finally got to work on the Boy Willie Grace scene (act two scene three). I found some great new tactics and ad libs. For example, after Boy Willie shoves me off of him and is trying to coax me to come back to him, I can give him the hand and turn away from him. When he pushes me down when he sees Berniece, I can shove his hand off and say “move your hand.” And when he goes back to get his hat, I say, “Come on Nigga, now take me home.” I think having to go back and repeat certain sections was great, because I found the new tactics and felt new impulses that I mention above.

11/8/07

Opening night went great. We had an awesome crowd, and we got more laughs than I expected. We picked up the pace in act two scene three. David came at me after my, “you sure is country” line and said “let me show you what this country boy can do” and added it’s “Boy Willie time.” This was great. I think we have found some great
moments. The last scene in the play went well too. It was filled with energy. I still want to connect more to sensing the spirit.

I have realized that performing when things are going on in your own life is hard. The warm-up before and during the show helps, but it is still hard to quiet the voices in my head.

11/15/07

I forgot my “I don’t want to be with you on no couch. Ain’t you got a bed” line. And during the scene I thought David had gone up on his line so there was a pause and I repeated, “You ain’t said nothing bout no couch,” and we just moved on to his line, “what you need a bed for…” It didn’t get much of a laugh. The crowd was dead that night. Maybe it was because we weren’t on. We got through it though. You can’t rely on a crowd to motivate your performance.

11/17/07

Tonight was also great. I always feel like responding to Berniece calling me nasty, but I didn’t. I told David my idea about saying “At least I’m getting some” and he suggests that I say it tomorrow.

11/18/07

Tonight was closing night. I was a little sad to say goodbye, but hopefully we will be going to ACTF, and we can relive the magic, and I can once again be Grace. I learned how to embody a character that is not like me by letting my inhibitions go, and living life through their eyes and not my own. It was really helpful to create back-story for Grace, because it enabled me to see how events shaped her life and allowed me to see why she acts the way she does, for example because I believe that she was raped
at a young age she realized that sex was something that men craved, and she found that she could manipulate men with sex. I also did say my adlib, “at least I’m getting some,” after Berniece called me nasty, and I was told the audience couldn’t hear me say, “come on nigga now take me home.” I won’t say that adlib again, because it was a little inappropriate.

1/5/08

_The Piano Lesson_ was chosen to go to ACTF, which means I get to relive the magic of Grace. I wonder what new things I will discover. Over Christmas break I read _Gem of the Ocean_ and _Joe Turner's Come and Gone_. I have decided to read all of Wilson’s plays in his ten play cycle in historical order (early 1900s to late 1900s). While reading _Joe Turner's Come and Gone_, I realized that Molly Cunningham, who also has a minor supporting role, is very similar to Grace. She reveals that she doesn’t believe in love because, in the past, she was hurt by a man and she realizes that she can’t trust men any longer. She tries to assert her independence saying that she doesn’t need a man. The truth is she only gets with men that have money because they have to be able to support her. In that respect, she and Grace are one in the same. They both exude a false sense of confidence that covers their secret insecurities. Both women need men’s attention to validate their self worth.

1/15/08

We have started rehearsing _The Piano Lesson_ again for the remount, which we will perform at KACTF. Tonight we had a speed through of the show. It went rather slow because we laughed a little too much, and had trouble remembering our lines. I knew my lines, but I was still hesitant sometimes because a few times I was unsure if I
was saying the right line. I can’t wait till we get back to doing the physical actions and normal blocking. It feels weird to be Grace without the physical action or contact with David. I am glad we went through rough blocking, but my internal memory of the play resonates within me physically.

1/21/08

Today, Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, we did two run-throughs. The scene between David and I was slow. I keep forgetting to take my gloves with me over to the coffee table, so I can’t put them back on while I am trying to rush out of the house. I need to keep myself facing out to the audience more. I need to work on making bigger physical choices that can be seen in a 1,000 proscenium seat balcony theater. This is something that we didn’t have to do when we were in the intimate black box theatre. I also need to make sure my consonants are crisp, so all of my words will be heard in the large theater.

2/8/08

I feel that our KACTF performance went well. The crowd was amazing. During our talk back I asked one of the moderators what she thought about Grace and all she had to say was, “She was really sassy,” and that is exactly what I was going for. I hope that she was a character that stood out in the play even though she appears for two scenes. I want the audience to leave saying, “That girl was something else!”

I have never felt closer to a production than I have with *The Piano Lesson*. I think that it is largely due to the fact that I felt like the characters could have been my family members. It reminded me of visiting at my grandparent’s house full of family
members and just listening to the stories being told. I am so glad that I got to be a part of this wonderful production, which gave tribute to my ancestors.
CONCLUSION

After being cast in the role of Grace I decided to research the journey of women characters throughout Wilson’s century cycle of plays. While reading Wilson’s plays, I thought that I would see their educational and professional advancement throughout the decades; however, I discovered that many of Wilson’s plays had women that were like Grace. These “Grace-like” characters were all focused on finding male companions to take care of them, instead of developing themselves by furthering their education or professional lives. I discovered that their personal choices rather than immediate environment shaped the path that these women decided to take in life. Some of Wilson’s women place their personal well-being and pursuits over men. I call these women pioneers, because they are breaking the pattern of the “Grace-like” characters by being independent women and achieving their personal goals. These women pioneers get their self-esteem from within not from having a man by their side. They serve as role-models for the women in their community. Wives are another group of prominent women in Wilson’s plays. These wives keep their families together in the midst of turmoil through their self-sacrificing nature. Many of these women, like Rose, have placed all of their hopes and dreams in their family. They are often left to care for their families by themselves when their husbands are sent to jail or killed. As an African American woman raised by my mother, a successful business woman, I judged the wives for devoting themselves to their family instead of pursuing a career. I realized that it might benefit me to look at how society viewed these women during the period in which they lived. I had to stop judging them solely from my 2000 point of view which
glorifies independent career oriented woman to see them clearly. Women were expected to play role of mother and family supporter during the time when many of these women were living, and women were not encouraged to have careers. Having a career was frowned upon as their place was relegated to the home. I came to realize that these women are stronger than I initially gave them credit for, because they are forced to emerge from their tragedy and face life head on, no longer placing their future in the hands of their husbands.

In addition to studying the women in Wilson’s plays I researched the history of discrimination in the United States that the characters of The Piano Lesson endured while in the South, and I was surprised to find that discriminatory laws originated in the North. The characters of The Piano Lesson migrated to North to escape discrimination and find more job opportunities; however, they still faced discrimination in the North that relegated them to labor positions.

By researching August Wilson’s biography and analyzing his playwriting inspirations, techniques, and style, I learned that he was greatly influenced by the environment around him. Inspiration for his plays came from listening to blues music, works of art, observing the people around him, and other cultural customs of African Americans. Some of the themes in his plays are often reminiscent of his own upbringing: for example, the strained father-son relationship in Fences is based off of his relationship with his stepfather.

I hope that I am able to perform the role of Berniece one day: as her understudy I never had to stand in for her during a performance although I was able to rehearse the Avery and Berniece scene a few times. When the show was cast I was devastated that
I was not playing the role of Berniece, but I realize now that I was not ready to perform that role. The role of Grace was exactly the right part for me, because I had to learn how to let my physical boundaries down. In my first acting class with Be, I really struggled with the softening and rolling exercise where we would all roll on top of each other breaking physical boundaries. When I got the role of Grace, I finally understood why we did this exercise; sometime the characters I play will be freer with their spatial boundaries than I am. I learned how to enjoy playing Grace, because I found freedom in playing a character that was comfortable with her sexuality. This allowed me to grow as an actress, because I now know that I can play a character that has a different stance on life that I do, and that is what acting is all about.

Before a show it was critical that I did a physical and vocal warm-up. The physical warm-up (wall work and termoring) helped me to relax the tension I had in my body, clear my mind allowing me to focus on my performance. As a cast we always joined as a group and prayed together, which helped strengthen our connection to one another. I used a lot of vocal techniques (like Ybuzz, vocal ladder, and call) that I learned in my voice classes, which helped me project and also helped my words to be clear even though I was using an accent. There is not much that I would change about the rehearsal to performance process except I wish that I had more opportunity to rehearse my scene with David, who played Boy Willie, but I think the scene benefited from not being over-rehearsed, because David and I reacting to each other instead of going through the motions of a scene that we knew like the back of our hand. We were still discovering new things about our scene throughout the run of the show. I don’t ever think I got to the point where I was acting on auto pilot. So, I learned that although I
love to rehearse things until I feel I have every reaction planned, that may not be a good thing after all because acting is reacting.

I have never felt closer to a play or a cast of actors in my life, and I truly believe this is because I felt I was giving homage to my ancestors performing in this play. And I hope that I get the chance to perform in more of Wilson's plays throughout my acting career.
APPENDIX A: COUSTUME DESIGNER LETTER OF PERMISSION
To: Ingrid Marable  
MFA Acting Candidate

From: Daniel M. Jones  
Costume Designer, *The Piano Lesson*  
University of Central Florida Conservatory Theatre

Re: Use of Costume Rendering

Dear Ingrid,

I am glad to grant you permission to use my Costume Design Rendering of the character Grace from the UCF production of August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* in your thesis.

Best of luck on the completion of your graduate studies at UCF.

Sincerely –

Daniel M. Jones, MFA  
Costume Shop Manager  
UCF Conservatory Theatre  
danjones@mail.ucf.edu
The Piano Lesson

By August Wilson

Grace
Ingrid Marable
APPENDIX C: ROMARE BEARDEN’S PAINTING *THE PIANO LESSON*
APPENDIX D: ROMARE BEARDEN’S PAINTING *MILL HAND’S LUNCH BUCKET*
APPENDIX E: PICTURES OF UCF’S PRODUCTION OF THE PIANO LESSON
The Piano Lesson Set

The Piano
Boy Willie lifts Grace’s “hood”.

Boy Willie gets fresh with Grace.
Berniece catches Boy Willie and Grace.
Grace is not ashamed.
Intimate Moment-Berniece and Lymon
Boy Willie and Lymon try to remove the piano from the house.

Berniece tells Boy Willie to leave the piano alone.
Sutter's Ghost is Gone-From left to right: Wining Boy, Boy Willie, Doaker, Berniece, and Maretha

The Charles Family-from left to right: Doaker, Boy Willie, Berniece, Maretha, and Wining Boy
LIST OF REFERENCES


