

Consider the concept of legacy within the play. Discuss how the play examines notions of racial legacy.

The identity of American-born descendant's of slaves is dynamic, amorphous and vast. They continue to shape and reshape who they are and how to best present themselves to the world in hopes of progress. Every iteration of Black identity harkens back to the legacy of those before, thus the choices of forefathers and foremothers influence the advancement and strength of the coming rendition of the Black identity. It is important to note that with every generation, the identity of the past is not lost but in fact built upon. August Wilson chronicles the journey to forge the Black American identity in his ten-play cycle called the *Century Cycle*, most notable in his play set in the 1930's called *The Piano Lesson*. In this play, legacy and progress contend against one another: both the legacy of slavery's past and a family legacy unique to the characters in the play. Throughout it, Wilson examines the idea of family legacy with a *sankofa* lens – *sankofa* meaning, “go back and get it,” a concept that represents the role of the past in moving people forward. Herein, the analysis will revolve around how the siblings Berniece and Boy Willie differ in their approaches to preserving family legacy and by extension their Black identity. There are many different interpretations of legacy. In the case of racial and familial legacy as it manifests in *The Piano Lesson*, there are two main perspectives that come into play. Berniece upholds the notion that establishing and kindling a legacy only recycles and reinvigorates the pain of the past. Whereas, her brother Boy Willy believes that a legacy must be repurposed for the present for future progress. All of their disputes center on the piano that's been in their family since the era of slavery.

The case of Berniece, who symbolizes those who hesitantly engage with their familial legacies because it is inextricably linked to a racial legacy, demonstrates that the reluctance to participate in a racial family legacy stems not from a place of irreverence but from a need to appease pain. She scolds her brother saying, “you always talking about your daddy but you ain’t never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama, (52)” who was left alone without a husband for 17 years. Her mother, Mama Ola, clung to the piano for strength and even companionship and Berniece remembers that. She remembers what she had to do to breathe life into her mother to continue the living legacy of her mother, which consisted of continuously playing the piano for her after she polished it, bled into it, wept over it and prayed from it. Berniece was the true vessel through which the loss of the family flowed. She was the vehicle for the pain of the sacrifice that made this piano a legacy. Bernieces’ resentment is underlined by her language. She calls the reclamation of the piano from Sutter’s house (slave owner), “foolishness” and describes it as “cost” to her mama and not a benefit. In essence, she frames the legacy in terms of loss. To Berniece, stoking the legacy of this piano would resurface the struggle that made it possible.

However, she holds on steadfastly tight to the piano. She consistently refuses to let Boy Willy sell it, especially considering he wants to use the proceeds to help him buy the land that their family was enslaved upon. “If he come up here thinking he gonna sell that piano then he done come up here for nothing,”(27): a common sentiment repeated throughout the play. Despite the bitterness for the piano, Berniece also has reverence for its history. She does realize that the piano is a family artifact that incarnates their story and because she deems it precious she knows she must keep it in the family. However in

order to pay true homage to the piano she would need to share it with her progeny. Most notably, she still does not impart the story of the family or this history onto her daughter. That is where she falls short of preserving the legacy. Even though she helped maintain it while her mother was still alive, she has not continued the tradition of playing the piano in order to establish the same legacy for Maretha, her daughter. Part of that could be from not wanting to burden Maretha with the same responsibility of sustaining the memory of the piano by playing it or perhaps she herself does not want to confront the past. Nevertheless, she still vehemently opposes the sale of the piano stressing to Boy Willy, “money can’t buy what the piano costs...you can’t sell your soul for money,” (50) proving that she divorces her reluctance to play the piano from her duty to preserve it. Even though she does not play the piano anymore to maintain or rejuvenate the “souls” within, she does know that these “souls” belong to her family. When she talks about the “cost” of the piano in this context it directly juxtaposes the way she used “cost” in the first example. Whereas the first time she uses “cost” in relation to what her mother lost, in this circumstance she references the value of the piano given the sacrifices of the family. She frames the losses as a value now instead of as a void. Hence, the instinct to claim the legacy arises, while the urgency to continue and sustain the legacy is not as intuitive or simple for Berniece. When she implements Sankofa for the piano, or rather when she looks into the past, she sees loss and resentment and so clings tight to the memory for reverence’s sake but does not advance.

Conversely, Boy Willy sees only the opportunity to repurpose the family legacy albeit at the expense of the piano. He is eager to move forward and to start amassing irrevocable wealth and dignity by buying and sewing the land of the men that owned his

family. During one of Berniece and Boy Willy's many spats over piano he urges: "now I'm supposed to build on what they left me. You can't do nothing with that piano sitting up here in the house, (51)". From this, it is evident that he wants to reinvent or upgrade the family legacy to something more permanent like land. He says that he is "supposed to build on what they left me," demonstrating his view of the piano as a foundation from which to advance and not necessarily the culminating legacy itself, as Berniece treats it. Furthermore, he treats the repurposing of the piano as his duty claiming he is "supposed" to add to the legacy his father left. His reasoning is valid in that Berniece does not use the piano any more but he fails to recognize the true value of the piano. He sees it as currency and not as culture, he views the piano as a step up and not a relic when he remarks, "if my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own. It wouldn't be sitting up here now," (46). Consequently, for Boy Willy the piano serves as a tool to guarantee future legacy.

Still, exchanging the piano holds more than monetary gain for Boy Willy. He also wants to reclaim the dignity of his family. He reminisces often about the story behind the piano but in particular how his father spurred the efforts to take it back from the Sutter Family. His father believed the piano, "was the story of [their] whole family and as long as Sutter had it...he had [them]. Say we was still in slavery,"(45). The liberation of the piano was what truly marked the end of bondage for their family. Now, he wants to continue the legacy of liberation by purchasing the very land that his family tilled as slaves using the profits from the piano. He repeats throughout the play that he plans to, "get Sutter's land with that piano," (51) but he fails to realize the void he will create by going through with the sale. Boy Willy cannot see that the life of his family lives on

through the piano and must be maintained and revived by the living members. To him the piano represents a chance from the past that should be used to pave a future. For Boy Willy, when looks to the past and tries to institute the concept of Sankofa, he sees stepping-stones. Consequently, a dichotomy presents itself from differing perspectives of the two siblings, in that selling the piano would create a void for the family but keeping it is a reminder of the losses that made the piano a legacy.

Overall, the conflict of racial legacy lies in nexus of pain and progress, familial legacy. Both Boy Willy and Berniece are trying to figure out how to transform pain and loss into progress, and understand how to continue a legacy without tarnishing it. Berniece's method of conservation slowly asphyxiates the spirit of the family while Boy Willy's strategy robs the family of its spirit. However, Boy Willy is making progress for the family and Berniece does preserve the essence of the family by protecting the physical artifact. Presenting both of these methods where they each lack something that the other contains proves that Wilson is encouraging the audience to combine both Boy Willy and Berniece's perspectives to effectively preserve and establish a legacy. Especially in the case of racial legacy, it is important to tend to the family legacy in order to avoid erasure. For Black Americans at the time, being seen and enfranchised was the biggest struggle. In the midst of that struggle, there must be a more personal identity for Blacks to lean on fueled by the family legacy. Once the family legacy is secure then the power of it can be used to move the family forward and contribute to the collective black legacy and progress- the power of Sankofa realized.