

Dwelling above the Veil—“Double Consciousness” of African Americans in the Piano Lesson

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Abstract: August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* reveals the dilemma of African Americans in dealing with their ethnic and cultural heritage, which stirs a discussion about what attitude should African Americans take toward their history and culture and how to build their identity. “Double Consciousness”, developed by W. E. B. Du Bois, describes the fractured and conflicted mental state of African Americans in the process of self-exploration and identity construction. The play shows these two unreconciled strivings by discussing whether the piano should be sold. They attempt to maintain a sense of pride in their Africanness, while simultaneously being assimilated into a dominant white culture. Through analyzing the two main characters Berneice and Willie's confusion and self-assertion based on the concept of double consciousness, it could be seen that the way to escape their identity dilemma is not achieved by the attitude of adjustment and submission, but by the acknowledgment of African Americans' link to Africa and the fight for unalienable rights as American citizens.

Keywords: *The Piano Lesson, August Wilson, Double Consciousness, Du Bois, Identity*

1. Introduction

August Wilson (1945–2005) is acknowledged as the most important American playwrights after Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. His play *The Piano Lesson* was completed in 1987 and won the Drama Desk, the American Theatre Critics Outstanding Play awards, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1990.

1.1. August Wilson and his Play: *The Piano Lesson*

Born in Pittsburgh, a racially mixed area, August Wilson encountered increased racism as he grows up. After being falsely accused of plagiarizing a paper he had written about Napoleon, Wilson dropped out of high school. Then, he decided to become a writer and envision theater as a means to raise the collective community's consciousness about African Americans' life in twentieth-century America. Wilson committed himself to write “a cycle of ten plays that would rewrite the history of each decade of this century so that black life becomes a more fully acknowledged part of America's theatrical history”^[1]. With startling observation and imagination, Wilson infuses the everyday language of African Americans with the line of the play and thus is often considered a theatrical spokesperson for the African American experience.

As Wilson's fourth play to be produced on Broadway and his second to win a Pulitzer, *The Piano Lesson* focuses on the question of who has the right to own a family's heirloom piano and how to deal with it. Willie advocates selling the piano so he can buy some land from their old white master Sutter and become equal with the white, while his sister Berneice is unwilling to sell it because she believes that the piano is both their family's and African Americans' history and inheritance. Written in 1986, set in the 1930s, the play captures the conflict that arises between African American and mainstream cultural values. In addition, African Americans' anxiety over identity is exposed.

1.2. Introduction to Double Consciousness

Double consciousness is created by an American writer, sociologist, and political activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, who is an important figure in campaigning for equality for African Americans and co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. Du Bois first mentioned this conception in Atlantic magazine essay named “Strivings of the Negro

People” in 1897, later republished with revisions in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois thinks that African Americans were born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world—“a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world”^{[2]5}. For African Americans, one ever feels his twoness: “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”^{[2]5}. Generally speaking, “double consciousness” for Du Bois is taken as a conflicted psychological disposition or state of mind of African Americans as a whole to their aims, pursuits, and fulfillment of them in light of “the Veil,” yielding a broad-based African American cultural dilemma^[3].

2. Embodiment of Berneice and Willie’s Double Consciousness

The term “double consciousness” describes the fractured mental state of African Americans. This kind of mental state is caused by African Americans’ “[attempting] to assimilate into a dominant white culture, while simultaneously trying to maintain a sense of pride in their own black heritage and identity”^{[4]104}. The main conflict in *The Piano Lesson* focuses on Berneice and Willie’s different attitudes toward the piano which carries African cultural value. As the story unfolds, these two characters’ double consciousness is reflected in the play.

2.1. Berneice: Reservation and Submission

Berneice has the firm determination to preserve the ethnic and cultural heritage to reserve her Africanness while she takes the attitude of submission in face of white suppression. As the guardian of the family, she is aware that the inherited piano is both a memorial for Charles’s family and a carrier of African history. On one hand, she wouldn’t give up the piano for her father died over it and her mother “polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years”^{[5]52}. On the other hand, the carvings on the piano not only carry the history of her family but also symbolize the history of African Americans since they were forced to come to the land. Though the white person would pay a nice price for the piano, Berneice is unwilling to sell it. She says that “money can’t buy what that piano cost. You can’t sell your soul for money”^{[5]51}. She rejects the white’s utilitarianism and keeps the “simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness”^{[2]11}, which is regarded as the merits of African Americans.

However, Berneice has no confidence in African culture because she has been trying to avoid African Americans’ history and to integrate into white society by submission. To begin with, Berneice takes the piano as a burden and is unwilling to pass African history to her daughter Maretha. In Berneice’s view, the piano is the source of family suffering and causes indelible trauma to her so she hasn’t touched the piano for seven years since her mother died. As long as she plays the piano, it seems like the ancestral spirits are talking to her. She refuses to connect her life with those spirits so she decides to keep it concealed. She doesn’t tell her daughter Maretha the history of the piano, so she “can play on it with a clean hand so she don’t be calling them back to life”^{[5]57}. However, if them African Americans choose to forget their history, who would remember it?

In addition, she hardly dares to blame the white and asks for help from the white religion instead of her own culture when she is in trouble. Berneice believes that Lymon steals the truck, Willie pushes Sutter into the well, and Willie should be fully responsible for her husband Crawley’s death. Not only does Berneice have no trust in her people, but also have no blame on the white who shoot Crawley to death. She works hard for the white—“cleaning house for some bigshot”^{[5]54}—with low payment and still struggles for survival day after day. Under the long-term oppression of the white mainstream social groups, Berneice has become numb to her unfair treatment and unwilling to take an effort to make changes for a better life and a higher social status. She asks her boyfriend Avery, a preacher of Christianity, for help to kill Sutter’s ghost with God’s power, which implies “her willing to integrate into white society and to identify with white people’s religion”^[6]. She keeps paralyzing herself by avoiding history and living a satisfying life under the white’s charge.

Double consciousness could explain her fractured psychological state that has “both an African heritage and an American “upbringing” under slavery”^{[4]89}. According to Du Bois, after a long time of repression and degradation to African Americans, their character has changed: “courtesy became humility, moral strength degenerated into submission, and the exquisite native appreciation of the beautiful became an infinite capacity for dumb suffering”^{[2]149}. As an African American, Berneice defends her ethnic and cultural heritage firmly while she lives her life with humility, submission, and suffering.

2.2. Willie: Confidence and Assimilation

Willie has confidence in African culture while he is inevitably assimilated by the white rules. For one thing, he is proud of being an African American, doesn't afraid of revolting against the white, and has the ambition to live a better life. Willie feels angry when he knows Berneice hasn't told the piano's history to Maretha for he thinks this history should be proud of, not ashamed of. He even supports celebrating the day that Boy Charles brought that piano into the house every year when it comes. Willie never believes he is lower than the white, and he cannot bear the attitude of flattery toward the white. He criticizes Avery for being too servile and deferential: "Avery ain't nothing. I remember he was down there and everything was Mr. Stovall this and Mr. Stovall that"^{[5]45}. When Berneice and Doaker see Sutter's ghost and feel scared, Willie is not afraid and even wants to see Sutter's ghost so he could put a whipping on him. When everybody struggles for living, he has plans to get Sutter's land and live a better life. He dares to challenge life and say "the world a better place cause of me"^{[5]64}.

For another, he is assimilated by the white money-oriented thoughts. Willie associates everything with money. He thinks that Wining Boy wouldn't come back unless he has no money: "If he had a whole sack of money, you liable never to see him. You ain't gonna see him until he get broke"^{[5]39}. He believes the best value of the piano is to be sold, otherwise "that piano ain't doing nobody no good"^{[5]49}. He argues that Crawley was killed because Crawley tried to bully the white and has no business with him. He tries to prove himself and say to Berneice that it "wasn't no sense getting killed over two hundred dollars worth of wood"^{[5]52}. Besides, he trust white people naively that he could get the land and make money. Sutter's brother sells the land to Willie for 2000\$, and other people just need to pay 1500\$ for the land. Doaker warns Willie that the land is not worth anymore, because if it was worth anything the white man wouldn't sell it. Willie knows Sutter is a liar he still decides to buy the land. Because if he gets a piece of land, he can "stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton ... the weather, and anything else you want to talk about"^{[5]64}. Willie's obsession with material success is to gain the acknowledgment of the white. He measures himself with the criteria of the white.

Double consciousness emphasizes that African Americans have to deal with "problems of self-definition resulting from living within a society pervaded by stereotypes, negative images that all African Americans had to confront"^[7]. It seems that Willie feels so confident about his African identity and is immune from the white-dominated society. Nevertheless, from this struggling life African Americans "must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence"^{[2]152}. Therefore, although Willie is proud of being African American, there is self-doubt and self-degradation deep in his heart because he owns no money which is a sign of failure by the rules of white society. He tries every means to make money so he can sit with white people equally, which embodies his double consciousness of seeing himself through others' eyes.

3. Reasons of Berneice and Willie's Double Consciousness

The exclusion of African Americans from mainstream American institutions creates a way of life that is both "American" and "not-American"^[7]. This exclusion means a condition of alienation and marginality, which leads to African Americans' tensions and divisions in their identity.

3.1. Marginalized Life

In *The Piano Lesson*, the marginality of African Americans could be represented as poverty and legal injustice. Poverty makes African Americans struggle, and legal injustice makes them disappointed. It could be easily discovered that African Americans live in poverty, and "ain't got no money" could usually be heard in their daily life. They have either no job or a heavy job with low payment: Lymon can't find a job, Wining Boy has to sell his clothes to get several dollars, and Doaker and Berneice save every penny for life. Doaker says that "if you want to sell them watermelons you need to go out there where them white folks live. Folks around here have a hard enough time buying bread"^{[5]45}. Obviously, the African and the white live a different life. To be sure, they suffered the Depression, but Wilson "doesn't deal with the Depression, because [he is] not interested"^[8]. What Wilson wants to represent is not the historical details but their general condition. They live in America with freedom while they have "not a cent of money, not an inch of land, not a mouthful of victuals,—not even ownership of the rags on his back."^{[2]110}.

Besides, legal injustice for African Americans makes them feel no respect and dignity in America. The white people shot Willie and Lymon and killed Crawley just for wood stealing; they sentence

Lymon irrespective of his willingness: “Mr. Stovall come and paid my hundred dollars and the judge says I got to work for him to pay back his hundred dollars. I told him I’d rather take my thirty days but they wouldn’t do that”^{[5]47}. Wining Boy criticizes desperately that the difference between the colored man and the white man is that “the colored man can’t fix nothing with the law”^{[5]48}. Gradually, African Americans take the law not as protecting safeguards, but as a source of humiliation and oppression. Those unfair treatments for African Americans result in their fractured and conflicted mental state.

3.2. *The Forgotten History*

Apart from their marginalized life, another reason for African Americans’ double consciousness is their forgotten history. For one thing, they have no strength to face the heavy history and choose to seal their history, just like Berneice, because a distant African past had been erased by those who enslaved them and slavery is not an experience to be claimed. For another, war, hell, and slavery are just childhood tales, and their “young appetites had been whetted to an edge by school and story and half-awakened thought”^{[2]53}, which means that they have no chance to understand what their true history is, just like Maretha, because history is what white historians declared it to be. With no knowledge of their history, African Americans can’t go forward because it is their “Africanness” makes them African American.

4. The Way to Escape Identity Dilemma

To deal with the internal conflicts in the individual between what was distinctly “African”, and what was “American”, Du Bois advocates “to merge their double self into a better and truer self”^{[2]5}. Neither Africanize America, nor “bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism”, but “to be both a Negro and an American”^{[2]5}.

4.1. *Awareness of Resistance*

On the fourth of July 1911, Boy Charles thought about that piano and then decided to take that piano out of Sutter’s house because he realized that if Sutter keeps owning the piano Sutter still owns his family and even his race. Her father Boy Charles chose to seize the piano back on the fourth of July, the independence day of America, implying his father’s awakening to fight against the white. However, Berneice can’t figure this out and lives in indignation, and she criticizes her people’s revolt: “All this thieving and killing. And what it lead to? More killing and more thieving. I ain’t never seen it come to nothing. And it don’t never stop. People getting shot. People falling in their wells. It don’t never stop”^{[5]52}. She can’t understand what this fight is for and doesn’t realize that if they don’t fight the white will still control and oppress the fate of black people. At last, she gets an epiphany that only by gaining strength from her ancestors can Sutter’s ghost be killed, and only by returning to the tradition and rooting in the national culture can the pressure of white society be resisted. Therefore, the action of playing piano is not only a symbol of embracing history but also a sign of awakening to fight.

Two main strains of twentieth-century black American cultural thought represented by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois is either to accommodate or to struggle. As Wilson asserts, “you have to make a decision about where you’re going to go, whether you are going to assimilate or separate”^[9]. The play’s set offers us an answer that the year 1936 is the time when the National Negro Congress, U.S. established, which to some extent is a symbol of the awakening of African Americans. Therefore, Berneice could be recognized as a symbol of awakening to fight for their civil rights in *The Piano Lesson*.

4.2. *Recognition of African Cultural Heritage*

Boy Charles’ choice to seize the piano back also implies his father’s determination to own their own history. Like Wining Boy says that “he took it cause he figure he had more right to it than Sutter did”^{[5]53}. The carvings of their family’s figure on the piano belong to African Americans’ ethnic heritage, symbolizing their history of tears and blood. If Willie sells the piano to the white, the white will still own them African Americans because their history is within the piano. Everything her granddaddy made “Mr. Sutter owned cause he owned him”^{[5]50}. Even after Sutter died, his ghost still haunts the piano, attempting to take the piano away from them and own them again in another sense. At first, Willie can’t recognize the value of African Americans’ ethnic and cultural heritage. After fighting with Sutter’s ghost, he finally sees the power of the piano and African culture. He gives up selling the piano,

on the contrary, he asks Berneice to look after the piano and play it, which means Willie learns to own what belongs to his nation. For Willie, the need is to gain communal strength from an acknowledgment of a shared past and hence build a sense of shared identity in the present.

5. Conclusion

Wilson explores the problem of identity recognition of African Americans by depicting different attitudes toward the “piano” with ethnic cultural values in *The Piano Lesson*. Through analyzing the characters Berneice and Wille, African Americans’ conflicted double consciousness is reflected. Obviously, African Americans’ condition of alienation and marginality result in their way of life that was both American and not-American. In order to dwell above the veil and have true self-consciousness, African Americans should merge their double self into a better and truer self and be both an African and an American, which means African Americans have to cherish their culture and history. In the last scene, Berneice and Willie fight against Sutter’s ghost together shows a sign of giving up the old attitude of adjustment and submission. The way for African Americans to gain respect is not by continually belittling and ridiculing themselves; on the contrary, African Americans must insist continually beating against all barriers. As human and American citizens, African Americans have every right to enjoy civil equality. The melting-pot style America is made up of all races and the African belongs to one of them. African American is American.

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