

# Arden

T H E A T R E C O .

SUPPLEMENTARY STUDY GUIDE  
for

## The Piano Lesson

By AUGUST WILSON  
Directed by WALTER DALLAS  
On the F. Otto Haas Stage  
**March 6 – April 6, 2008**

*Additional copies of this study guide are available online at [www.ardentheatre.org](http://www.ardentheatre.org).*

**The Piano Lesson**  
By August Wilson  
Directed by Walter Dallas

**Cast:**

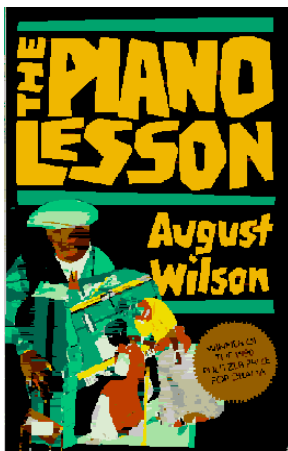
DOAKER.....JULIAN ROZZELL, JR.  
BOY WILLIE.....KES KHEMNU  
LYMON.....YAEGEL T. WELCH  
BERNIECE.....KALA MOSES-BAXTER  
MARETHA .....CHIOMA DUNKLEY  
AVERY..... BRIAN ANTHONY WILSON  
WINING BOY..... HARUM ULMER, JR.  
GRACE ..... KATRINA YVETTE COOPER

**Direction:**

DIRECTOR.....WALTER DALLAS  
STAGE MANAGER.....KATHARINE M. HANLEY  
ASST. DIRECTOR.....MEGAN O'BRIEN  
ASST to the STAGE MANAGER.....ALEXIS SIMPSON

**Designers:**

SCENIC DESIGNER.....DONALD EASTMAN  
COSTUME DESIGNER.....ALISON ROBERTS  
LIGHTING DESIGNER.....CUTIS V. HODGE  
SOUND DESIGNER.....JORGE COUSINEAU



**The Piano Lesson Summary**

It is the year 1936. Berniece and her eleven-year-old daughter, Maretha, live in a house in Pittsburgh with Berniece's uncle, Doaker Charles. One night, Berniece's brother, Boy Willie stops by unannounced from Mississippi with his friend Lymon Jackson. The two of them had driven for two days up to Pittsburgh in an old beat up truck full of watermelons that they plan on selling.

Woken up at five o'clock in the morning by Boy Willie and Lymon's noisy arrival, Berniece is not amused. She is suspicious of their intentions and questions them about where they got the truck and the watermelons and why the Sheriff in Mississippi was looking for Lymon. Boy Willie and Lymon tell her that they paid for all of it but Berniece wants them to leave as soon as possible.

As it turns out, Boy Willie and Lymon did not only go up to Pittsburgh to visit and to sell watermelons. Boy Willie hopes to earn enough money to buy land in Mississippi that was owned by a white man named Sutter who recently died after being pushed into a well. Part of the money would come from the watermelons, but the rest would have to come from selling a piano that is a treasured family heirloom. Boy Willie just needs to convince Berniece to let him sell it. He tells Doaker of his plan and Doaker tries to tell him that Berniece is not going to allow him to sell the piano, but Boy Willie insists he will sell it no matter what.

Doaker says that he knows Berniece isn't going to sell the piano because she wouldn't even sell it when Avery Brown, a good friend of hers, asked her to sell it so that he could start a church. Doaker also mentions that Avery has been asking Berniece to marry him ever since her husband, Crawley, was killed two years earlier. And when a white man came to Berniece's house to make her an offer for the piano, she refused to sell it again. But Boy Willie thinks that because it is a family heirloom, he owns half of the piano and can sell it if he wants to.

Suddenly, the men hear Berniece scream from upstairs. Boy Willie goes upstairs to see what is there but he sees nothing except Maretha, sleeping. Berniece tells Doaker that she saw Sutter's ghost. Boy Willie does not believe her but Doaker knows she wouldn't fabricate that kind of story. Berniece explains that Sutter was holding his head and calling for Boy Willie. As a result she believes Boy Willie is the person who killed Sutter by pushing him into the well. Berniece also accuses Boy Willie of being responsible for her husband Crawley's death. Boy Willie denies that he had anything to do with it and that Sutter's ghost is only around because he wants the piano – if she wants to get rid of the ghost, he reasons, she should sell the piano.

After Doaker tells Boy Willie and Lymon about his work on the railroads, Maretha comes downstairs and greets them. Boy Willie asks her to play something on the piano and says that he is going to buy her a guitar instead. Avery is surprised to see Boy Willie and Lymon when he comes to the house looking for Berniece. The men catch up – Avery tells them that he is going to the bank for a loan to start his church and tells them about his job working as an elevator operator in a skyscraper. Boy Willie tries to find out from Avery, and then from Berniece the name of the white man who came to the house to buy

the piano. This angers Berniece, whose suspicions are correct – Boy Willie came to visit so that he could sell the piano. She repeats what she said before – she is not going to sell that piano. The scene ends with Boy Willie saying that he will cut the piano in half if she won't agree to sell it.

In the second scene, Doaker is sitting in the kitchen with his older brother, Wining Boy, from Kansas City. They talk about the dispute over the piano and about the women in their lives. Doaker tells Wining Boy that Berniece is still hung up on her late husband, Crawley. Wining Boy's ex-wife Cleotha died and he and Doaker reminisce about the great person that she was. Boy Willie and Lymon come back into the house after their truck broke down on their way to sell watermelons. Boy Willie tells Wining Boy that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog killed Sutter and that Berniece saw Sutter's ghost upstairs. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog were said to have killed a number of men recently, although Berniece doesn't believe the Ghosts are responsible for the deaths. Wining Boy says that he has heard the Ghosts himself and that a few years earlier, they spoke to him. Meanwhile, Boy Willie had gotten the name of the man buying instruments and plans on selling the piano to him as soon as the watermelons are gone. Wining Boy warns Boy Willie that he shouldn't be so sure that Sutter's brother is actually going to sell him the land in Mississippi. Boy Willie won't hear anything of it and assures Wining Boy that he will buy the land.

Wining Boy had heard that Boy Willie and Lymon were in jail at Parcham Farm - the prison he was once taken to - and asks them about it. Boy Willie explains that Crawley was killed the night they went to jail for stealing wood. Crawley had been with them and got caught, but Boy Willie and Lymon got away – they were fined, but Lymon said he would rather go to jail. This is why the Sheriff was looking for Lymon and why he left Mississippi to go to Pittsburgh. Lymon plans on staying there even after Boy Willie sells the piano and buys Mr. Sutter's land in Mississippi.

Doaker tells Boy Willie, Lymon and Wining Boy the story of the piano and its carvings. He tells them how his father and grandmother were sold by Mr. Sutter's grandfather to another man in exchange for the piano as a gift for Sutter's wife, Miss Ophelia. Miss Ophelia loved to play the piano but she missed Doaker's father and grandmother and Mr. Sutter asked Doaker's grandfather - a talented woodworker - to carve their pictures into the piano. Although Mr. Sutter had only asked for two pictures, Doaker's grandfather carved everything he could remember about their ancestors and many important family events into the piano. Doaker explains that his brother, Boy Charles, had always thought it was wrong that the piano was still in the Sutter home and not with their family. So, in 1911, while Sutter was at the 4<sup>th</sup> of July party, Doaker and Wining Boy went into his house and took the piano. After Sutter and his family realized the piano was gone, they set Boy Charles' house on fire. Boy Charles jumped onto a Yellow Dog train but Sutter's men found him and set the train car on fire. Everyone in it was killed, including Boy Charles. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog are the ghosts of those men who were killed, and it was said that a few months later they pushed one of Sutter's men down his well. Boy Charles was Berniece and Boy Willie's father, and Doaker explains that Berniece is not going to sell the piano because her father died trying to get it back for the family.

Boy Willie is convinced that his father would sell the piano himself if it meant being able to own land. Boy Willie argues that it would be one thing if Berniece used the piano, but she doesn't even play it anymore and Boy Willie thinks she should not just keep it around for "sentimental value." Scene 2 ends with Berniece accusing Boy Willie of killing her husband Crawley and suddenly Maretha screams after seeing Sutter's ghost upstairs in the house.

In Act Two, Doaker tells Wining Boy that he once saw Sutter's ghost sitting at the piano but Doaker chose not to tell Berniece because he did not want to frighten her. Wining Boy asks Doaker for money to gamble with after he learns that Berniece doesn't have any. Doaker grudgingly lends Wining Boy five dollars and Boy Willie and Lymon return from selling watermelons. Wining Boy shows Lymon the silk suit that he was unable to sell at the pawn shop and convinces Lymon to buy it from him.

In scene two, Avery comes to the house to see Berniece and tell her that he will be able to rent a space to start his church and to ask her again if she will marry him. Berniece replies that she is not ready to get married and the two of them get into an argument about Crawley - Avery tells Berniece that it is time she gets over his death and moves on. Berniece tells Avery that she has too much on her mind right now, especially with Sutter's ghost around. She asks Avery to bless the house to get rid of the ghost and he agrees to come back the following day.

Boy Willie gets home very late that night with a woman named Grace and when Berniece finds them, she kicks them out of the house. Lymon gets back soon after and confides in Berniece about his troubles with women and he gives her a gift. There is a romantic moment between the two and they share a brief kiss. Berniece quickly excuses herself to go to bed. The next morning, Boy Willie comes back to get the piano. As Boy Willie and Lymon struggle to move the piano, Doaker comes in and tells them they will need to wait until Berniece gets home to make any decision about it. Boy Willie tells Maretha about the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog and then Berniece returns home. They argue about the piano and after Avery gets back to bless the house, Berniece threatens to shoot Boy Willie and Lymon before they will be able to take the piano. When they feel the presence of Sutter's ghost again, Avery blesses the house and the piano as Boy Willie protests, and Sutter's ghost begins to wrestle with Boy Willie. Berniece begins to sing and calm comes over the house. Boy Willie decides to leave without the piano and the play ends with a hug from Maretha and a "Thank you" from Berniece.

### *About the Playwright*

World-renowned playwright August Wilson was born Frederick August



Kittel in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was the fourth of six children. He was named after his father, a German immigrant baker. His mother was an African American cleaning woman named Daisy Wilson, from North Carolina. His parents tried to stay together to provide for their family, but his father left home when he was about five. His mother continued to raise their children in a two-room apartment above a grocery store at 1727 Bedford Avenue (which in 2007 was dedicated as an official state historic landmark). This economically-depressed neighborhood was inhabited predominantly by black Americans, and Jewish and Italian immigrants, and would undoubtedly influence his ground-breaking work to come.

Later in his teenage years, Wilson's mother remarried a man named David Bedford. The new family moved to a neighborhood called Hazelwood, which at the time was a predominantly white working-class neighborhood. There, the family encountered much racial hostility and prejudice, at one point even suffering violence with a brick being thrown through their window. Driven away from multiple schools because of racial intolerance and abuse, Wilson grew more and more impassioned with reading and writing. He spent hours in the Carnegie library, using their materials both for personal and professional learning. At age 12 he began reading more material by African-American writers like Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps. He knew he wanted to be a writer and as he got older, this caused contention with his mother who had hopes he would become a lawyer. When he was of age and still had not abandoned his dreams, his mother ordered him to leave the house. He enlisted in the U.S. army, but left after one year and pursued random jobs like porter and short-order cook to try and make a living.

In his professional life, he co-founded the Black Horizon Theatre in 1968. In a move to improve the African-American artistic community, he started the Kuntu Writers Workshop along with his friends Rob Penny and Maisha Baton to help bring together African-American writers to produce their work. In 1980, he received a fellowship from the Minneapolis Playwrights Center and in 1990 developed a relationship with the Seattle Repertory Theatre which would eventually be the only theatre in the world to produce his entire cycle of plays.

Wilson's greatest legacy comes in the form of the cycle of plays, detailing the African-American experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Called either the "Pittsburgh Cycle" or the "Century Cycle," it includes 10 plays, 9 of which are set in his origin town of Pittsburgh and the other in Chicago. He is the recipient of a number of literary awards including two Pulitzers, several New York Critics Circle Awards, many Tony nominations and several Drama Desk awards. He died of liver cancer on October 2, 2005 in Seattle. He was buried in Greenburg Cemetery on October 8, 2005 and is survived by his wife, Constanza Romero and two daughters. Fourteen days after his death, the Virginia Theatre on Broadway in New York City was renamed the August Wilson Theatre. It was the first theatre to be named after an African-American.

### ***Inspiration for Wilson's Work***

August Wilson is said to have gained much of his inspiration for his work from many artistic sources such as art and music. Romare Bearden in particular greatly influenced his work with his own collages painting the African-American life. In 1977, a friend introduced Wilson to Bearden's book *The Prevalence of Ritual*. A year later, Wilson saw a photograph of Bearden's "Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket" and was struck to the very core. From thence forward, he continued to use Bearden's vibrant but melancholy work as prompts for his plays, including "Joe Turner's Come and Gone", "The Piano Lesson", and "Fences" among others.

"What I saw was black life, presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence... It defined not only the character of black American life, but also its conscience." –August Wilson

"When I [August Wilson] saw his work, it was the first time that I had seen black life presented in all its richness, and I said, 'I want to do that -- I want my plays to be the equal of his canvases.'" –August Wilson



**The "Pittsburgh**

**Cycle"**

1900s - *Gem of the Ocean* (Premiered in NYC 2004) Aunt Ester's house at 1839 Wylie Avenue is a sanctuary for veterans of the old underground railway and a command post for opposition to new forms of oppression.

1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (Premiered in NYC 1988) Seth and Bertha Holly's boarding house is a haven for people on the move northward to find a new life or in search of family members lost under the oppression of sharecropping and chain gangs.

1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Premiered in NYC 1984) – The only play set in Chicago involves a white agent and studio boss waiting for blues star Ma Rainey to show up for her recording date. Meanwhile, the four black musicians in her band rehearse, bicker, tell stories and dream.

1930s - *The Piano Lesson* (Premiered in NYC 1990)

1940s - *Seven Guitars* (Premiered in NYC 1996) Floyd Barton is a natural musician who dreams of the big time. But as the play begins, his wife and friends mourn his death. In the only play constructed in flashback, it takes us back to explore what happened.

1950s - *Fences* (Premiered in NYC 1987) Has been hailed as the most popular play of the cycle. It involves Troy Maxson, a Negro League baseball star who spent many years in jail. He's now he's a trash collector fighting for blacks to be allowed to drive as well as haul.

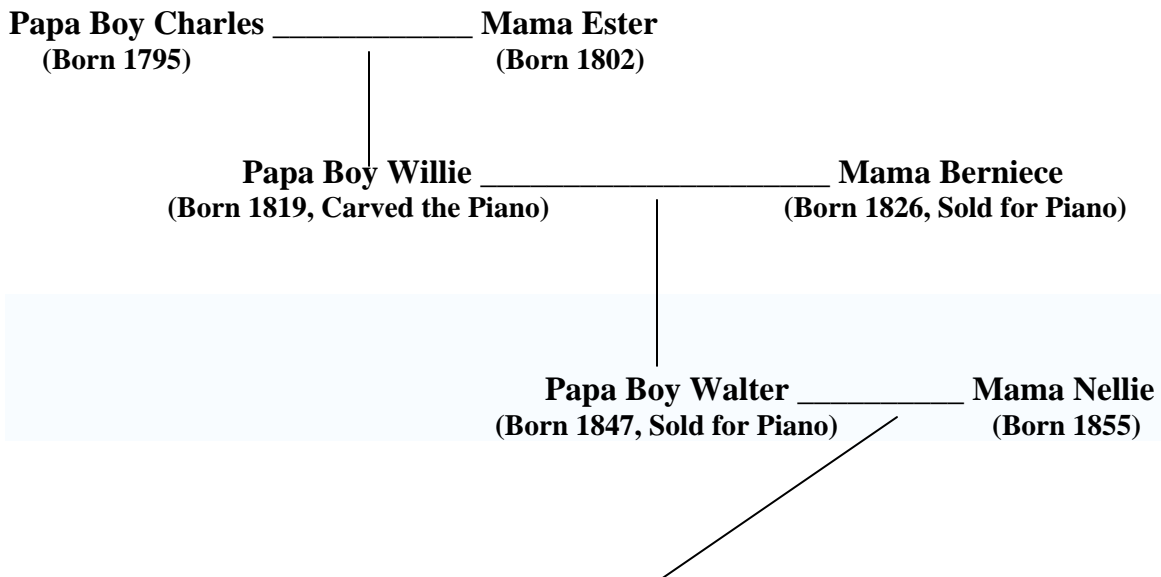
1960s - *Two Trains Running* (Premiered in NYC 1992) In the aftermath of the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, a boastful young man named Stirling arrives at Memphis' diner to learn his way around the Hill.

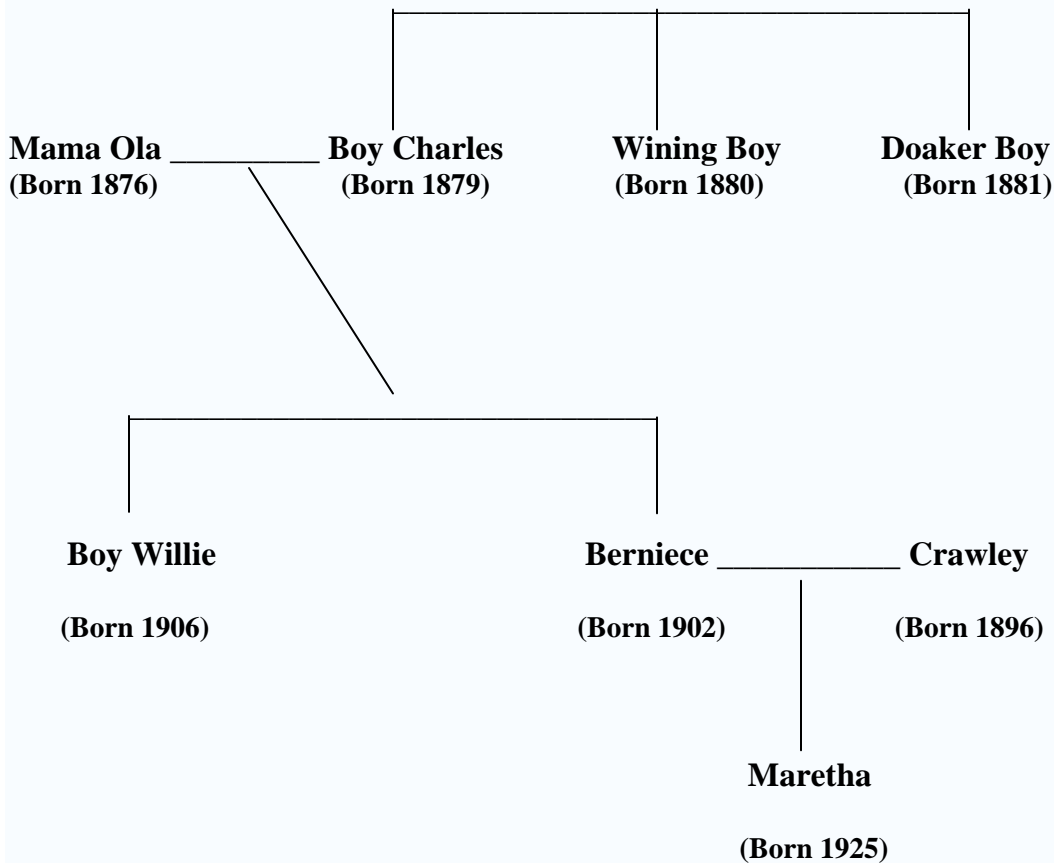
1970s - *Jitney* (Premiered in NYC 1982; Rewritten 2000) Out of a jitney station in the Hill, Becker and four other men hustle to make a living. In between calls, they gossip and bicker with each other.

1980s - *King Hedley II* (Premiered in NYC 2001) Hedley, who was named King by his father, the strange West Indian in "Seven Guitars," is a tragic figure of great stature. In Wilson's darkest cycle play, Hedley struggles to earn respect.

1990s - *Radio Golf* (Premiered in NYC 2005) It is Wilson's first play set among the black bourgeoisie. Harmond Wilks is running for mayor and planning a bold redevelopment deal for the Hill District. At particular issue is 1839 Wylie, the old house that was once Aunt Ester's.

### *Piano Lesson Family Tree*





### *A Brief History of Reconstruction*

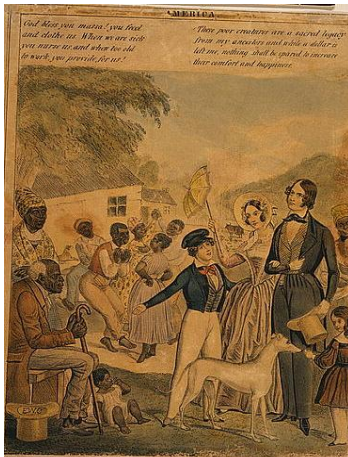


After the American Civil War, the daunting task of attempting to put a broken country back together fell upon the leaders of the country. There were many aspects and arguments to consider about how to proceed with such a delicate act; however, the primary goal was to quickly and successfully have the North and the South no longer need separate labels, but once again exist under the banner of the United States of America. The three main points of Reconstruction that were under debate and needed to be resolved were: if and how Confederate states would be allowed back into the Union; the civil status of all Confederate leaders; and the constitutional and legal status of the freedmen.

The first steps that eventually were made to try and reunite a nation were The Reconstruction Acts of 1867, outlining the process to be readmitted into the Union; the Fourteenth Amendment which granted freedmen national citizenship; and the Fifteenth Amendment which gave freedmen the right to vote. These all occurred following the Civil War, but at scattered intervals and each one came with its own set of opposition and problems due to political separation.

In order to be readmitted into the Union, each Southern state had to follow certain steps: their alliance with the confederacy had to be surrendered and a vow taken to never follow the Confederacy again, a new government system within the state had to be instilled and then assuming this new government was successful, the state could reapply for status within the Union. Pre-dating this was the discussion of what to do with Confederate leaders. President Johnson originally declared no mercy on these rebels and that they would all pay for their crimes committed; however, in practice he actually forgave many of these rebels and even went so far as to return their land. (The Freedman's Bureau had actually taken the criminals land to redistribute to the newly freed slaves, but President Johnson argued it was unconstitutional and had all land returned to the white owners). Only one war criminal hung for his crimes and the rest were allowed to return to their daily lives. In due course, many of the original war leaders even returned to power in the South, outraging congress. This led to the creation of "Black Codes" or Jim Crow laws in the South which was the birth of segregation. Segregation called for "separate but equal" policies which had schools, public transportation and other public places house two forms: one for blacks and one for whites (a policy that existed in the South until the 1960s). Most of these states found themselves successfully reinstated with the help of President Johnson. Johnson however was not

gaining any favor within his Cabinet and Congress.



In 1865, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment abolished slavery. Next was the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment which granted citizenship to all

persons born or naturalized in the United States. The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment provided that a national vote could not be denied because of race, color or previous servitude. Johnson rallied against the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, using his influence to block full ratification of the amendment (since three-fourths of the states are needed to ratify an amendment). The amendment was later successfully ratified, but his

opposition led to more battling within governmental officials, pinning Democrats against Republicans. Eventually, this would lead the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson where he was acquitted by one vote. However, the impact of the trial led to a huge loss of support for Johnson, and the successful establishment of the amendments that promoted the freedom of people of color post-slavery.

## 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment

*Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.*

*Section 2. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.*

Historians today agree that the Reconstruction movement, though begun as a measure of good faith to try and restore the country, ended as a failure. The purpose was to have both sides of the country agree on the equality of all men, but the aftermath of trying to impose a “quick recovery” meant in the end having all states “United” only by name. The support of Southern “Black Codes” and the lack of punishment for Confederate leaders perpetuated the inequality of ex-slaves in the Southern states, not to mention the undeniable violence that ensued against African-Americans from those who could not accept their liberty. Many of these crimes would go unnoticed and unpunished for years after. Unfortunately, segregation would still keep our country apart in a very real way for almost another 100 years.

### *Post-Show Discussion Questions*

What was the significance of music in the play?

Do you agree with Boy Willie or with Bernice about what should be done about the piano?

Why might have August Wilson chosen a piano as a family heirloom as opposed to another object?

What is the difference between religion and spirituality in the play?

What does ancestry mean to the characters in the play?

What do you think Maretha will take away from this whole experience?

What are some elements that transformed the scene whenever “Sutter” appeared?

## Sources

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[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com) – August Wilson Bio

<http://www.africanamericans.com/AugustWilson.htm> --August Wilson Bio

[http://www.tylermuseum.org/Walter\\_Evans.htm](http://www.tylermuseum.org/Walter_Evans.htm)-- Picture of “The Piano Lesson” By Romare Bearden

<http://www.africanaculture.org> – Summaries of August Wilson Plays

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<http://wigwags.files.wordpress.com/2007/12/america.jpg> --“America” picture in Reconstruction section

### For More Information:

Detailed timeline of August Wilson’s life:

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05276/581765.stm>

Links to interviews, responses to his obituary, reviews:

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/03001/497623.stm>

Education Sources on August Wilson:

<http://www.augustwilson.net>

Romare Bearden’s work:

<http://www.nga.gov/education/classroom/bearden/>