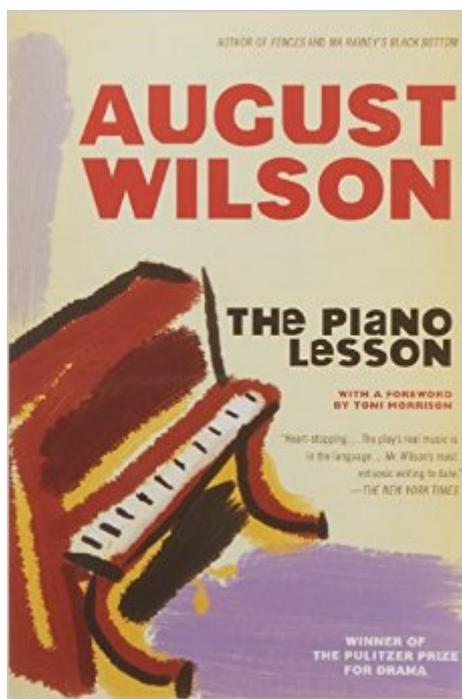


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# The Piano Lesson



## Synopsis

August Wilson has already given the American theater such spell-binding plays about the black experience in 20th-century America as *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning, *Fences*. In his second Pulitzer Prize-winner, *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson has fashioned his most haunting and dramatic work yet. At the heart of the play stands the ornately carved upright piano which, as the Charles family's prized, hard-won possession, has been gathering dust in the parlor of Berniece Charles's Pittsburgh home. When Boy Willie, Berniece's exuberant brother, bursts into her life with his dream of buying the same Mississippi land that his family had worked as slaves, he plans to sell their antique piano for the hard cash he needs to stake his future. But Berniece refuses to sell, clinging to the piano as a reminder of the history that is their family legacy. This dilemma is the real "piano lesson," reminding us that blacks are often deprived both of the symbols of their past and of opportunity in the present.

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, August Wilson's sensitive story of a family's struggle to reconcile the past with the present centers around the carved piano which dominates the living room of Doaker Charles and his niece Berniece. The legs of the piano are carved with faces of their slave ancestors, carvings made by a distant relation who was owned by the Sutter family and working on their farm in Mississippi before Emancipation. Berniece's brother Boy Willie, recently released from a prison farm and penitentiary, has come to Pittsburgh with his friend Lymon, determined to sell this

ancient piano in which he claims half-ownership. His arguments with Berniece conjure up the ghost of Sutter, who calls out Boy Willie's name. The struggle of Boy Willie and Berniece over possession of the piano gradually broadens as they reveal the past, incorporating vivid pictures of the family's tenuous survival from slavery to the present. A dozen or more of the white men who have been most abusive over the generations have met their deaths by "falling" into wells, crimes of revenge attributed to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. These ghosts are supposedly the ghosts of five black men burned to death in a boxcar by Sutter after his carved piano, the one in Berniece's living room, was stolen. The most recent Mr. Sutter "fell" into a well and died three weeks ago, and Berniece believes that Boy Willie may have had a hand in his death. The play's success rests on the well-developed family relationships and their interactions on stage, as they reflect the legacy of slavery and its aftermath. Berniece wants the piano because the blood of her family has been worked into its wood--it represents her heritage.

August Wilson is the greatest American playwright. Not the greatest living American playwright, but the greatest, period. His best plays stand comparison with the best work of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. No American playwright has produced such a consistent body of work, and no American playwright has attempted a cycle with the scope and ambition of his series of plays. Wilson's subject is the Great Migration, the story of the African-Americans who emigrated from the southern states to the cities of the industrial North and their slow construction of satisfactory lives in the difficult and changing world of 20th century America. Wilson has written 10 plays on this subject, one for each decade of the 20th century, amounting to a fictional history of African-Americans in the urban North. This is, however, history from below. Wilson's heroes are garbagemen, short-order cooks, day laborers, self-taught musicians, and street vendors. One of his great gifts is his ability to use common speech in a way that is consistently interesting, frequently eloquent, and often powerful. He gives poetic voice to people usually regarded as inarticulate and invests ordinary struggles with real but not exaggerated significance. The African-Americans of Wilson's plays are a doubly uprooted people. Uprooted initially by the grievous trauma of slavery that sundered their connection with their native traditions, the emigrants fleeing the Jim Crow south and its brutal racism are uprooted also from their homes, families, and the traditions developed in the aftermath of slavery. Wilson's overall story is the reconstruction of African-American identity and family life in the cities of the North over the course of the 20th century.

"The Piano Lesson" (1990) by the late August Wilson is part of his ten-play series, the Pittsburgh

Cycle or the Century Cycle. It focuses on a frequent literary device--a family feud over money, land, or personal property. In this case it's a piano that has carved into its surface a history of the family. Berniece and her brother Boy Willie are battling over possession of the piano. Boy Willie with his buddy, ne'er-do-well Lymon, has brought a truckload of watermelons up from the South to Pittsburgh to peddle, hoping to sell them and also sell the family piano so he can buy a spread of land down South. This story takes place in the 1930's when the blacks are still living in a South where white people oppressed blacks and where no law existed to intervene for blacks. Boy Willie wants a white man's land, Sutter's spread. Sutter fell down a well, and he may or may not have been assisted in that fall by Boy Willie. Berniece and her daughter live with her uncle Doaker, a cook for the railroad. He is the voice of reason. She is seeing Avery who wants to set up a church and is the voice of religion and prophecy. Various characters such as Wining Boy play the piano briefly and there are occasional songs. The ghost of Sutter is present at times in the play, and later his spirit plays a pivotal role. As the action of the play continues, all sorts of family memories and history are revealed. August Wilson was a risk-taker who asked audiences to come along with him as he dealt with questions of ownership, possession, and family disputes while at the same time presenting a very accessible story with flashes of humor, large doses of humanity, and a dramatic structure with a beginning, middle and end. It's about as far from Absurdist theater as you can get.

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