

The Piano Lesson: General comments on the presentations as a whole.

There are a few major issues that have to be dealt with carefully, and, I think, critically. (I want you, incidentally, to assess how well you think the play accomplishes whatever you think it sets out to do and how well it works as a play and as a unified narrative.) The play sets up a number of oppositions and they all have to be explored and the interactions between those oppositions clarified.

One is between whites and blacks and their history together, specifically the Sutters and the family of Berniece and Boy Willie. Clearly at the heart of this opposition is slavery, emancipation and subsequent history. In the long narratives of the first and second act, what do all the characters reveal about how the African-Americans have dealt over the generations with their "freedom"? And "over the generations" is important. How far has each generation moved? Where are Boy Willie and the others now? Where "ought" they to be? How have they progressed? What is the importance of the event that sets off the action of the play, Sutter's dying and Boy Willie's wanting to buy his land? When Boy Willie wrestles with the ghost of Sutter in the last scene, why is it Sutter's *ghost* he wrestles with?

And what about the "opposition" of generations in the play? How do Boy Willie and the men in his generation compare to men of the previous generation, represented by Wining Boy and Doaker? Especially in terms of managing their lives and assimilation and progress? And how about Berniece and Mama Ola and Maretha as representatives of three generations? So much is made of the history of the family in *The Piano Lesson*. Why?

And there is the "opposition" of men and women. How differently have they handled their common problems? At the center of this opposition are Boy Willie and Berniece. What does each want? What does the piano represent to each of them and why do they feel about it as they do? What does Wilson mean by ending the play with Boy Willie wrestling the ghost of Sutter and Berniece playing the piano simultaneously? And which is the more significant act? If most of the play is taken up with the men talking about themselves to each other, where does Berniece fit in and why is she at the center of the story and why is her playing the piano so important?

Each of the men is different from the others. How do they represent a sort of cross-section of African American men? And what is the response of each of them to the situation that African Americans find themselves in? For example, how do Avery, Boy Willie and Lymon each deal with essentially the same problem?

What does Boy Willie want to achieve by buying Sutter's land?

What's Berniece's story? Why the "paralysis" after Crawley's death? (And why does Lymon, not Avery, almost get her out of it?) Why won't she play the piano and when she does, what does it mean?

What is the story of the play in the simplest terms? What happens? The climax? How well does the play prepare for that particular climax? How much of the play is extraneous to it?

The play is called *The Piano Lesson*. A lesson means that someone is learning something. Who learns what? And then, finally, the question is how focused the play is on this simple story? What about the ghostly (non-realistic) intrusion into a realistic play? How successful is the play?