

Significance of Songs and Music in August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson"

Tanzina Halim^{1*}, Shanjida Halim², Rizwana Wahid³

^{1,2} Faculty of Languages & Translation, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia

³ Assistant Professor of English, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia

E-mails: ¹ thlem@kku.edu.sa, ² shalem@kku.edu.sa, ³ rwaheed@kku.edu.sa

* Corresponding Author: Tanzina Halim (thlem@kku.edu.sa)

Short Communication

<https://doi.org/10.31559/BAES2024.9.2.2>

Received: 10 Sept 2024

Revised: 2 Oct 2024

Accepted: 29 Oct 2024

How to cite this article: Halim, T., Halim, S., & Wahid, R. (2024). Significance of Songs and Music in August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson". *Bulletin of Advanced English Studies*, 9(2), 51-55.

<https://doi.org/10.31559/BAES2024.9.2.2>

Abstract:

From time immemorial, literature and music have been inseparable. Therefore, songs and music have been vital in literature for centuries. The use of songs in African American Literature dates back to the era of slavery when the blacks used to sing while working on the farms. It was a medium of communicating within the slave community. It was also a way to honor deities, hence the emergence of slave spirituals. They are not just songs, but they are filled with sentiments and tales of their sufferings and hardships. The African-American playwright August Wilson (1945-2005) uses songs as a medium, which the characters in his plays sing to tell stories from the past. This short communication demonstrates why and how Wilson incorporates songs and music in his play "The Piano Lesson" (1987).

Keywords: African -American; drama; music; song; stories.



This file is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

1 Introduction

Songs and music have played a vital role in Literature for centuries. From time immemorial, literature and music have been inseparable. Literature and music have been seen to go side by side, because a person with the senses to appreciate literature will consciously or unconsciously associate it with music. When a drama is staged, "music and sound effects create the mood and atmosphere, help set the scene, build tension, strengthen an emotion or empathize the action on stage." (BBC). Music has been integral to the Western world, dating back to ancient Greek tragedies and comedies. According to Aristotle, plot, character, thought, diction, spectacle, and song (the rhythm of speech) are the six essential elements of a drama (Barnes, 1984).

In ancient Greek dramas, there used to be a chorus who would comment on the events and dance and sing when needed. As Aristotle implies, there used to be a single character who played all the parts in a speech or song. The single actor engaged in dialogue with the *choros*. The *choros* narrates most of the story through song and dance. In Ancient Greece, the playwright was expected to write the script and compose the music and dance moves. It was believed that music gives expression to a character's inner feelings, driving the narrative forward. In other words, the rhythm of speech reveals an urgency, mood, or culture.

Songs and music played an important role in Shakespearean and Jacobean dramas. In Jacobean plays, music "serves as a counterpoint to the violence enacted on stage by way of its pervasive imagery on the one hand, and on the other hand through the insertion of poignant songs that briefly suspend the unfurling chain of murders and revenge" (Schutz, 2021). In Shakespeare's plays, songs and music played a significant role. In addition to performing vocal music, Shakespeare referentially used various music and musical instruments. The folk song and ballad tune he quoted so frequently were equally well known to the groundlings as to the more distinguished patrons. Scraps of these tunes were used to create in-jokes and evoke other sentiments. His plays, such as "Othello" (1604), "King Lear" (1606), and "Hamlet" (1623), abound in songs. Shakespeare assigned most songs to servants, children, adults, clowns, fools, rogues, and minor characters. Major figures never sing except when in disguise or in distracted mental states. Most songs are addressed to the protagonists themselves. Moreover, the incantatory, magical, and ritual uses of the song are

also central to such plays as "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (1605), "The Tempest" (1611), and "Macbeth" (1606-1607). However, a special musical-comic genre, the jig, was the particular domain of the great Shakespearean comedians.

However, when it serves as an element of the story, it can become a metaphor or symbol that can be applied to the overall message of the drama. Songs and music can communicate something that is not even being shown. In African-American literature, a new trend had begun, and a new breadth of literary movement was evolving, aiming at reinventing an African-American image and introducing it to the world as the "personality of the colored people" (Borici, 2018). The plays of the African American playwright August Wilson (1945-2005) are no exception. Songs hold profound significance in African-American Literature as they shed light on the historical experiences, values, and cultural practices that are central to African-American identity. The writers also included songs to provide historical context and authenticity. The theme of songs in the play "The Piano Lesson" (1987) is pivotal in triggering emotions and memories of the past, such as happiness, sadness, and brutality. The African-American writers shared the belief that they needed to contribute something to American culture and literature, and they did it following a unique style that would set them apart from the white writers (Borici, 2018).

2 Background

The use of songs in African American Literature dates back to the era of slavery when the blacks used to sing while working on the farms. It was a medium of communicating within the slave community. It was also a way to honor deities, hence the emergence of slave spirituals. They are not just songs but filled with sentiments and tales of their sufferings and hardships. In a study by Bigsby (2007), Wilson was a "storyteller recounting the history of his people." In doing so, he used songs as a medium, which the characters in his plays use to tell stories from the past. Through songs, the characters can connect to their past and reconcile. The title of the play, "The Piano Lesson," and the presence of the piano itself prepare the readers for the presence of songs throughout the play.

3 Purpose of Including Songs and Music in the Play

Songs and music play a multifaceted purpose in the play because there are several scenes where one or the other character is found singing. In Act One, Scene One, when Boy Willie meets his niece Maretha after several years, he asks her if her mother has taught her to play the piano. He asks, "Come on, play something for me. Show me what you can do" (21). It is very much expected that his niece should know how to play the piano. When Martha says she has to read the paper to play it, Boy Willie says, "You don't need no paper. Go on. Do just like that there" (21). Music and piano are an integral part of their lives that they should be almost inborn skills, and no formal training is required.

However, the play's songs document particular moments in Black history. There is the men's song about the Parchment Prison Farm and Doaker's railroad song. All four male characters, Doaker, Boy Willie, Lymon, and Winning Boy, have served at the Parchment Farm. They sing songs to escape their troubles, forget their hardships, and cope with their traumas. It enhances the theme of misery and escapism when all the four men sing,

Oh Lord Berta Berta

O Lord gal oh-ah

Oh Lord Berta Berta

O Lord gal oh well" (40), which shows that they are fully immersed in the song and the lyrics. In Act One, Scene Two, Winning Boy tries to play the piano and sing. "He plays badly and without hesitation and sings in a forceful voice."

I am a rambling gambling man

I gambled in many towns

I rambled this wide world over

I rambled this world around

I had my ups and downs in life

And bitter times I saw

But I never knew what misery was

Till I lit on old Arkansas (47).

The songs have no formal rhyme or lyrics. They seem to be meant solely to tell and share one's personal experiences and woes—a tradition that strictly dates back to the history of slavery. In Act Two, Scene One, Doaker (Berniece's uncle) is seen singing as he works in the kitchen, and the song's rhythm provides him with the rhythm of his work.

In the play, songs can be interpreted as something that changes Berniece's attitude. The house, which ghosts had long haunted, could not be gotten rid of easily. It is done only when

Berniece starts to sing for help. She could acknowledge her family history through singing and playing the piano and accept what has been done. She was able to confront the past only through music. Hence, in Act Two, Scene Five, Berniece plays the piano and sings,

I want you to help me Mama Esther

I want you to help me Papa Boy Charles

I want you to help me

Mama Ola

I want you to help me (107).

She mentions the names of all her ancestors, who she can ask for help through the song and make the house a ghost-free house. She had not touched the piano for years, but when saving her house and her family, she begged her ancestors' spirits to help her.

4 Finding and Discussion

Wilson's use of songs has always been purposeful all along. He has incorporated songs and music in several plays. In "Fences" (1986), songs help the readers better understand the characters and their relationship to one another. Rose's song at the beginning of Act One, Scene Two,

"Jesus be a fence all around me every day

Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel all around my way" (23) is a prayer to Jesus to protect her family and herself. Her song shows her as a typical mother and wife trying to protect her family. Troy sings the most meaningful song when he brings Raynell (his mistress's daughter) to his house for the first time. He sits outside and sings,

Please, Mr Engineer, let a man ride the line

Please, Mr Engineer, let a man ride the line

I ain't got no ticket

Please let me ride the blinds (81).

His pleading is, in fact, a plea to his wife to let him in the house and accept his illegitimate daughter. Since he is homeless at the moment, he begs Rose to take care of the child. At the end of the play, Raynell and Cory sing a blues song about an old dog named Blue, a song originally taught to Cory by Troy. Gabriel—the injured brother of Troy in the Second World War, wanders around the Maxson family's neighborhood carrying a basket and sings. He often thinks he is not a person but the angel Gabriel, who opens the gates of heaven with his trumpet for Saint Peter on Judgment Day.

Hence, the songs in the play bring out the Maxons' mentality in response to the changing times and to the conflicts they perceive between themselves and their family members.

In another play, such as "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (1984), Wilson uses the music and the performer to convey several thematic elements. The title is taken from a popular blues refrain of that time, 'Joe Turner' (Big Bill Broonzy)- an early blues song. Blues talked about slavery and poverty, and the use of the blues helps to give the audience ideas about what it was like to live during that time. In the play, vocal singing and instrumental music also guides the audience to understand the characters' emotional states.

When we discuss using songs in plays, we must recognize the inclusion of songs in Shakespeare's dramas. In his plays, though, clowns and fools sing most of the songs. "Songs and music seem as a lifeline to every Shakespearean play and especially for comedies. They are important in moving the plot forward and enhancing the dramatic scenes" (Kumari, 2014). For example, in the play "Hamlet", Ophelia's song in a state of distress expresses her loss and mourning for Hamlet. She sings,

"How should I your true love know/ From another one/ By his cockle hat and staff/ And his sandal shoon" (Act IV, Scene -V, 27-30). While missing her father, she also questions whether Hamlet ever loved her or not.

On the other hand, in the play "Macbeth," the witches' cryptic song sets the mood for the play when they sing out.

Double, double toil and trouble/ Fire burn and cauldron bubble (Act Four, Scene One, 43).

The enigmatic lyrics of the songs make the readers curious, tense, and fearful about Macbeth's fate in the rest of the play. Hence, if Ophelia's song in "Hamlet" makes the readers sympathize with Ophelia's condition, the witches' song in "Macbeth" fills the readers with suspense.

Music is such an integral part of our lives that its presence in literature can help readers relate to fictional situations and characters. When a writer chooses to incorporate music or songs into their work, it connects the readers in a sensory way to the story. The numerous musical interludes in the play serve to document particular moments in Black history. The piano itself is a symbol of the family's history and legacy. Hence the songs and music associated with it connects the characters to their past bringing back emotional as well as traumatic memories.

Therefore, playwrights have incorporated songs with a purpose in both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and contemporary dramas. Whether they are significant in telling stories,

moving the plot forward, or are included just for entertainment, they hold the reader's attention and give them something to ponder.

5 Conclusion

Music has an exceptional ability to express complex emotions and experiences. It also impacts the rhythm and structure of African-American Literature. Music constitutes an important aspect of African-American culture and literature because the history of African-American people in the United States of America is closely linked to slavery, sufferings, traumatic experiences, and denial of any human rights. Songs and music have always been essential elements in Wilson's plays, and he has successfully incorporated them into his plays. The character's passion to "sing one's own song" is omnipresent in the plays of Wilson (Ogoanah, 2014). In "The Piano Lesson," as the title suggests, readers expect the inclusion of songs and music. Each character sings in the play with a purpose, and they do a great job of telling stories related to their personal experience or the history of suffering and distress. They served as a social commentary highlighting issues such as racism, inequality, and social injustice. Hence, the use of songs and music hooks the readers' interest as it takes them to explore the unknown and comprehend the background and history of the characters in the play.

5.1 Acknowledgement

The authors extend their appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University for funding this work through General Research Project under grant number GRP:146/45

5.2 Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Barnes, J. (Ed.). (1984). *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation* (Vol. 2). Princeton University Press.
- Bigsby, C. (2007). Music and mythology in August Wilson's plays. In J. T. G. T. Hart (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to August Wilson* (pp. 65-74). Cambridge University Press. [CrossRef]
- Borici, R. (2018). Reading through the lens of music: African-American literature and music. *European Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 1(2), 17-22. [CrossRef]
- BBC. (n.d.). *Music and sound, drama medium: BiteSize*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zyr7fg8/revision/5>

- Kumari, N. (2014). Role of Songs and Music in Shakespearean Comedy. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, II (V), 15-25.
- Ogoanah, F. N. (2014). The emergent properties of 'songs' as a metaphor in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. *Alicante Journal of English Studies*, 27, 143-162.
- Schutz, C. (2021). Music and the 'Jacobean thriller.' *Revue TIES*, 6, 68-83.
- Shakespeare, W. (1993). *Macbeth*. In H. Staunton (Ed.)
- Shakespeare, W. (n.d.). *The tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (B. A. Mowat & P. Werstine, Eds.). <https://socrates.acadiau.ca/courses/engl/rcunningham/resources/Shpe/Hamlet.pdf> (Original work published 1623)
- The power of music in August Wilson's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone."* (2023). *Course Sidekick*, 1-5. <https://www.coursesidekick.com/arts-humanities/2740551>
- Wilson, A. (1986). *Fences*. https://archive.org/stream/WilsonFences/Wilson%20Fences_djvu.txt (Original work published 1986)
- Wilson, A. (1987). *The Piano Lesson*. e-copy, <https://www.hackensackschools.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=607&dataid=5293&FileName=the%20piano%20lesson%20-%20august%20wilson.pdf>