
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Analysis of the Protagonists' Psychology in *The Piano Lesson* from the Perspective of Triple Personality Structure Theory

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| ABSTRACT

The Piano Lesson is one of the masterpieces of the famous American playwright August Wilson. This play presents an argument between a sister and brother over whether to sell the family heirloom: a piano, revealing the different attitudes of African Americans toward their history and culture. Focusing on domestic and foreign research perspectives, the author finds that most experts and scholars explore this play in terms of African American identity and ghost images, while few analyze the conflict and reconciliation between the siblings from the perspective of psychoanalysis. This paper focuses on the protagonists' psychology and explores the inner journey of the siblings from Freud's triple personality structure theory. The findings show that there is a relationship between their psychological changes and the rationality of the final ownership of the piano in the play, and then reveal that Wilson conveys his attitude toward the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities through the psychological changes of these two main characters, thus provoking thoughts on the heritage of minority cultures. This paper contributes to shedding more light on the nature of the argument between two main characters, Berniece and Boy Willie, and enhancing our understanding of the deep meaning of this play.

| KEYWORDS

August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, Freud, triple personality structure

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

As a successful black playwright, August Wilson (1945–2005) created the Pittsburgh Circle Plays, each of which is set in a different decade in the twentieth century, including *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Running*, *Jitney*, *King Hedley II*, and *The Radio Golf*. And he won the Pulitzer Prize, Tony Award, and New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for this great series of works. In the American theatrical circle, August Wilson is regarded as the fourth most important playwright after Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller.

The Piano Lesson was completed in 1987, and it won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1990. It is a story that mainly focuses on the dispute between a sister and brother who have different ideas on how to handle the family piano. Boy Willie, the brother, wants to sell this piano to buy the land of Sutter, where his ancestors toiled as slaves. He firmly believed that he could improve his social status and gain equal rights with white men by owning the farmland. In his mind, this family piano is useless but to sell for money because nobody plays it. However, the elder sister, Berniece, is adamantly opposed to selling the piano for the money. From her point of view, this piano is a symbol of the black family's history because it is engraved with the portraits of their ancestors. After a long argument and a long struggle with the Sutter's ghost, Berniece and Boy Willie finally realize the importance of the family piano and decide to preserve it.

The two siblings have gone through a process of cognitive transformation from their different opinions on the handling of the piano at the beginning to their agreement to pass it on in the end. So, what are their inner journeys in this process? And how did they come to face their hearts step by step in conflict and thus decide to preserve their family heritage and family history? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions.

The psychoanalysis of Freud is indispensable for exploring the inner journeys of the characters. And the theory of triple personality structure is a branch of Freud's psychoanalytic system and is regarded as the core of his psychoanalytic theory. In 1923, Freud published *The Ego and the Id* and proposed that the structure of personality was divided into three components, namely id, ego, and superego.

This paper uses Freud's theory of personality structure to analyze the personality structure and psychological changes of the two main characters, Berniece and Boy Willie, in *The Piano Lesson*. This study helps to explain the ultimate ownership of the piano, which symbolizes the history of the black family and thus raises questions about the cultural inheritance of African Americans.

2. Literature Review

The Piano Lesson has been studied from the aspects of the language, theme, and narrative techniques both at home and abroad. When the writer searched by "The Piano Lesson" on three foreign academic websites, there were 154,216 research monographs and papers: 142,000 in Google Scholar, 7,506 in Taylor & Francis Online, and 4,710 in JSTOR. Studies abroad mainly focus on African American identity and ghost images in this play. In *The Sense of Blackness in August Wilson's The Piano Lesson*, Lina Triestino pointed out that August Wilson's theatre is "a sort of 'soul-searching theatre'" and "it defines itself in the process of doing, in the attempt of awakening, the minds and the hearts of Black Americans"(Triestino 79). And in "The Ghosts of Slavery: How an aesthetics of haunting is used to commemorate slavery in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales, Cane, The Piano Lesson and Beloved*," Marjon Kruize uses Jo Labanyi's explanation of the aesthetics of haunting to analyze the four books and argue how all of them use an aesthetics of haunting. The author concluded that "the purpose of the haunting trope is not to enable the works' characters to work through their trauma, but for readers of the works to understand the fact that the present continues to be disturbed by the past"(Kruize 45). However, few scholars have analyzed this play from the perspective of psychoanalysis.

As for the studies in China, there are 17 journal articles and 5 master dissertations in CNKI. Based on the statistical data of domestic papers, the studies on *The Piano Lesson* are even fewer at home and also mainly focus on African American identity and ghost images. In addition, in "A Study of Ghost Image and Spiritual Ecology in *The Piano Lesson*", Tian Junwu and Li Na combined ghost images with spiritual ecology, probing into the deep implications of Sutter's ghost, the ghost of the Yellow Dog Train, and the black ancestral ghosts and further concluded that *The Piano Lesson* is an attempt to warn contemporary African Americans that only by preserving and inheriting the ancestral black culture can they achieve a sound spiritual ecology and resist the spiritual invasion of the white culture.

To sum up, few domestic and foreign critics have explored the deep meaning of this work in terms of psychoanalysis, which provides room for the author to conduct further exploration.

3. Id in Personality Structure Theory

3.1 Berniece: An Escape from Family Traumatic History

Id, according to Freud, is "a chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement [with] no organization and no unified will, only an impulsion to obtain satisfaction for the instinctual needs, in accordance with the pleasure principle" (Guerin 156). This shows that the id is not influenced by external conditions and only follows the pleasure principle. That is to say, the id is not bound by morality and reason and is not subject to the laws of logic. Under the onslaught of white culture, Berniece also inevitably yearns for the life of white people, affirms white culture, and treats black culture negatively. Berniece, like other black people who longed for life in the North, chose to leave the southern home and settle in Pittsburgh, following the standard of living of white people. She allows her daughter to live her life according to the stereotype of black people, teaching her the skill of playing the piano just so that she can become a schoolteacher, and says nothing about their family history engraved on the piano.

For their family, this piano is a record of their family's blood and tears, the painful experience of their ancestors as slaves, and the blood of Berniece and Boy Willie's father, as well as the tears of their mother. This led to the piano becoming a symbol of the suffering of their family. However, the id "contains our secret desires, our darkest wishes, and our most intense fears; the id wishes only to fulfill the urges of the pleasure principle" (Charles 127). In other words, the id will automatically absorb what the individual perceives as darkness and pain, only to enable the individual to obtain satisfaction with his or her instinctual desires. As a result, the id of Berniece takes precedence over the ego and superego out of a desire to escape the pain and pursue the life of the white

people, so she deliberately chooses not to tell her daughter about their ancestors' history of slavery, oppression, and resistance to keep her daughter living by the rules of the white people. "Say Maretha can go on and do everything she can't do... She wants Maretha to grow up and be a schoolteacher. Say she good enough she can teach on the piano." (Wilson 10) In addition to this, Berniece's act of stopping playing the piano after Mama Ola's death is also a manifestation of the id's absorption of the family's history of suffering in pursuit of a comfortable life.

3.2 Boy Willie: The Pursuit of Happy Life

As Freud said, the individual under the control of the id only wants to satisfy his or her desires and acts following the pleasure principle, not caring about the methods used to satisfy them. In other words, the individual under the influence of the id is centered on satisfying his or her desires and does take into account whether or not the conditions are right and whether or not he or she is using the right ways to satisfy them. Boy Willie drives a truck full of watermelons all the way from the South to Pittsburgh, where his sister's family lives, to raise the money to buy the Sutter's land. To raise money, he determined to sell the piano that holds the family's history, despite the opposition of all his family.

The id does not distinguish between good and evil, so the individual under its dominance will behave greedily and selfishly. Thus, when Doaker explains to Boy Willie the special significance of the piano to the family and why his sister Berniece will not agree to sell it, Boy Willie not only fails to realize the importance of the piano but also strengthens his thoughts of selling it for the land. "All that's in the past. If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn't be sitting up here now... If Berniece can't see that, then I'm gonna go ahead and sell my half." (Wilson 46) Boy Willie at this time, was dominated by the id, bent on satisfying his desire for the land and equal status with the white people, and subjectively chose to ignore the significance of the piano to the whole family. To him, the sentimental value of the piano mentioned by his sister is absurd and ridiculous, and he can only see the real benefits it brings to him.

It is driven by their ids that the siblings coincidentally choose to follow their instincts, either by subjectively forgetting their black family's painful history or by subjectively ignoring it in an attempt to integrate into the world of white people or to advance their social status.

4. Ego in Personality Structure Theory

4.1 Berniece: The Acceptance of Family Traumatic History

In Freud's theory of personality structure, the "ego" represents reason and prudence, and it is the bridge between the "id" and "superego". As Freud said, "we might say that the ego stands for reason and good sense while the id stands for the untamed passions" (Freud, 1988:76). Unlike the id follows the pleasure principle, the ego follows the reality principle. Many contents of the ego are influenced by the outside world, as well as the ego is rational, and it is from the actual situation. Berniece chooses to escape the family's history to satisfy her desire to integrate herself and her family into American society, attempting to sever their present life from the family's history. So, when Boy Willie tells her that the Ghost of the Yellow Dog pushed Sutter into the well, she shows strong resistance and flatly asserts that Boy Willie was responsible for Sutter's death. Furthermore, when she senses the ghost of Sutter in her house, she would rather ask Avery, a black preacher who believes in half of the Bible, for help than seek solutions from the family history associated with Sutter. These behaviors indicate that Berniece's personality structure has been in a state of imbalance and that the energy of the ego in her personality structure is much less than the energy of the id.

However, when the preacher informs her that he is powerless to fight against Sutter's ghost, she truly realizes the reality that religion and the power of others are not able to help their families exorcise the ghost, thus awakening the remaining part of her ego in her personality. As her ego forms, she eventually realizes where the spirit of black culture lies. Black culture encompasses not only the positive culture created by African Americans to integrate into American society but also the wounded culture developed by black people in the context of racism. At the same time, she understands that the positive culture of black culture represents the survival wisdom of African Americans, while the wounded culture is the black people's spirit of survival. Having formed her ego, Berniece chose to seek the help of their ancestors by playing the piano and eventually exorcized the ghost of Sutter.

4.2 Boy Willie: The Return of Sanity

Freud once used a vivid metaphor to illustrate the relationship between the ego and the id. "To that between a charioteer and his horses, the horses provide the energy and drive, while the charioteer provides direction." (Freud, 2010: 277) That is to say if

comparing id and ego to horses and charioteers. Charioteers control horses as ego controls and oppress the id so that the id does not do what it wants.

Similar to Berniece, the energy of the id has always prevailed in Boy Willie's personality structure, and his innermost desire is to buy the Sutter's land at the expense of his relationship with his sister. Driven by the id, he saw only the financial benefits of the piano and ignored the significance of the piano to his family. From the moment he entered Pittsburgh, he was all but determined to sell the piano to satisfy his selfish desires, despite the rest of the family stopping him from doing so. It seemed to him that the ghost Berniece spoke of was a figment of her imagination, a lie she had made up to stop him from selling the piano. "That's all in her head. There ain't no ghost up here." (Wilson 16) However, when he does encounter the ghost of Sutter but is powerless to fight against it, and it is Berniece who rescues him with the help of the ancestors carried by the piano, his sanity returns, prompting him to think soberly rather than just deny his sister's opinion.

The ego is a pivot that regulates the id and superego. The ego satisfies the demands of the id to a certain extent but does not violate the morality principle represented by the superego and makes people follow the principle of reality. At this point, the ego in Boy Willie's personality has come into play at the unconscious level, causing him to reflect on his actions and making him truly aware of the significance of the piano to the family and the fact that the piano can only achieve its greatest sentimental value in the hands of his sister. Under the control of his "ego", Boy Willie eventually comes to his senses and realizes that the history of this family and the indomitable spirit of their black ancestors on the piano cannot be measured in monetary terms and that these are priceless treasures of their family. It is when the ego overpowered the id in his personality that he finally makes the most logical choice: leaving the piano at Berniece's house.

At the same time, Boy Willie's choice to return to the South, where their ancestors had first settled, meant that he would take the spirit of the black culture with him and continue to live where their ancestors had fought, and he would never again sell his soul for a small favor from the white people. Already rich at heart, he would not have to prove his social status and worth by buying the white people's land, which they had acquired by exploiting the black people.

Based on the theory of personality structure, the ego that is differentiated from the id is connected to and directly influenced by the external environment. "It is easy to see that the ego is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world through the medium of the *Pcpt.-Cs.*" (Freud, 1991: 18-19) As a result, the ego will judge whether the desires of the id can be satisfied based on external conditions. When the individual's desires can be satisfied under certain external conditions, the ego temporarily inhibits the energy of the id and delays the satisfaction of the individual's desires. But when external conditions do not allow the individual to satisfy the desires of the id, the ego will suppress the desires completely. The ego will conform the individual's behavior to the norm and guide the individual to choose the right behavior in relation to their conditions and the external environment.

Once the egos of the two siblings have been formed, they can judge whether their inner desires are achievable in the light of realistic conditions. The family history engraved on the piano reminds them that black spirituality has always existed among the family members. This reality tells them that the desire to integrate into the world of white people by forgetting their family history is foolish and ridiculous and will only bring them endless trouble. On the contrary, only by truly embracing the full history of black people can the white spirit be defeated, and thus the black people can be socially accepted, and their racial values in the US can be realized.

5. Superego in Personality Structure Theory

5.1 Berniece: The Choice of Inheritor

As Freud said, the superego or 'ego ideal' is "the existence of a grade in the ego, a differentiation within the ego and still hold good" (Freud, 1991: 22). Contrary to the id, the superego operates according to the moral principle which includes conscience and the ego ideal. The formation of the superego doesn't only reflect the pattern of oneself but also reflects the moral standard of society.

Driven by the id, Berniece chooses to refuse to inform her daughter of their family's history of fighting against the oppression of white people and to indoctrinate her into the idea of the inferiority of colored people so that she can survive in the world of white people. "Boy Willie: If you teach that girl that she is living at the bottom of life, she's gonna grow up and hate you. Berniece: I'm

gonna teach her the truth. That's just where she is living." (Wilson 92) Yet this subjective denial of the other's right to know the truth for the sake of a secure life in the present is unethical, and the presence of the superego in Berniece's personality structure makes her aware of this. So when Boy Willie questioned Berniece about why she had not informed Maretha of their family history, she didn't offer any explanation, just told him to stay out of her upbringing of her daughter.

"Boy Willie: You ain't even told her about that piano. Like that's something to be ashamed of... You got her going out here thinking she was wrong in the world. Like there ain't no part of it belong to her.

Berniece: Let me take care of my child. When you get one of your own, then you can teach it what you want to teach it." (90-91)

At this time, the power of the id in Berniece's personality still prevails, and the energy of the superego is minimal; therefore, she believes that she has been raising her daughter in the right way. But in fact, this small part of the superego in her personality has already had some influence on her ego.

When the external conditions for satisfying the desires of the id change, the energy of the id in the individual's personality gradually decreases while the energy of the ego and superego increases. When Berniece chooses to play the piano and use the power of their ancestors to exorcise Sutter's ghost, the energy of her id in her personality structure decreases, and the energy of her superego increases relatively, eventually bringing her personality structure into balance. According to Freud, the human psyche is in a state of balance, and the personality is normal when the id, the ego, and the superego are in harmony. With a balanced personality structure, the desires of the id are suppressed, and the superego makes the individual behave in a socially moral way. So, playing the piano again also means that Berniece will come to grips with her family's cultural history and the spirit of black culture.

In addition, the person who is affected by the superego will not be confined to the present; on the contrary, he will have lofty ideals. The increase in superego energy foreshadows that Berniece will follow moral standards, respect her daughter's right to know the truth, and pass on the spiritual civilization of the black family to her daughter. Her final words, "thank you" (Wilson 107), were not only a thank you to her brother for leaving the piano to herself and her daughter but also a thank you to him for helping her to understand the significance of black cultural heritage.

5.2 Boy Willie: The Choice of Inheritor

According to Freud, the superego is formed by the individual through the internalization of moral norms and social rules during the process of growth. For Boy Willie, his trip to Pittsburgh taught him about the family history carried on the piano, the struggle of his ancestors for the rights of black people, and helped him to see the hypocrisy and insidiousness of the white people represented by the Sutter family. At first, Boy Willie, who is dominated by the id, is so intent on satisfying his desires that he deliberately chooses to ignore the family history, but the family history has awakened in him the spirit of struggle against the oppression of the white people. The resistance of Berniece and his family also made him realize that selling the piano with the family history on it to buy the land of the white people was a betrayal of the family and a breach of morality. It also marks the gradual formation of the superego in his personality.

Freud said that frustration and misfortune greatly strengthen the power of conscience in the superego. Conscience is the higher dimension of the superego, which has higher demands on the individual to behave in a holy way. So, at the end of the play, when Boy Willie experiences his sister defeating Sutter's ghost that even a preacher cannot banish by playing the piano with the power of their ancestors, the power of conscience in his superego is unprecedentedly strengthening. It leads him to realize the power of the black cultural spirit, give up selling the piano and leave it to its true owners, Berniece and her daughter. "Hey Berniece... if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano... ain't no telling... me and Sutter both liable to be back." (Wilson 108)

Under the domination of the superego, Boy Willie accepts Maretha's embrace, and that represents his choice of the inheritor. At that time, Boy Willie, who was influenced by the superego, finally realized that only Berniece and Maretha, who were committed to black ethnic culture and saw it as a spiritual treasure rather than a material one, could keep the spirit of black culture alive. What's more, the spiritual civilization of black people is the most powerful weapon that will enable them to maintain their racial identity in a white-dominated society, escape from the spiritual control of the white people and earn the true respect of American society. And this is the real value of the piano. The individual under the domination of the superego will demand that the ego

satisfies the id in a socially acceptable way, so it is believed that Boy Willie will also obtain the land and social status through his efforts when he returns to the South.

The two siblings' awakened superego means the ultimate realization of their "ego ideal", and in this process, their attitudes towards the heritage of African American culture change from passive to active.

6. Conclusion

On the issue of black cultural heritage, the two siblings Berniece and Boy Willie show the process of personality sublimation from avoidance to epiphany and, finally, firm choice to pass on black culture through the transformation of id, ego, and superego.

Driven by their ids, Berniece and Boy Willie actively choose to forget or ignore their family history to satisfy their desire to integrate into mainstream American society and achieve equal status with white people. At this time, the energy of the id in their personality prevails, and the unbalanced personality structure causes them to act irrationally and against their conscience and morality. This is the reason for the constant arguing between them in the play. As the conditions of real change, they are both prevented from satisfying the desires of their ids, thus facilitating the formation of their egos. Berniece and Boy Willie begin to come to their senses as their egos are formed, becoming aware of the importance of their family history and the spirit of black culture. The awakening of the superego in their personalities signifies that the id, the ego, and the superego possess balanced psychic energy and that they both have a balanced personality structure. At this point, the individual's behavior takes into account the external environment and the actual situation, as well as adhering to the moral values of the superego. As a result, Boy Willie, in the grip of the superego, realizes the spirituality of the black cultural heritage and begins to follow his inner moral standards, deciding to leave the piano, which carries the family history to Berniece and her daughter. And at the same time, Berniece, who was controlled by the superego, chooses to play the piano again and to pass on to her daughter the black spiritual civilization that the piano embodies. The final reconciliation between Berniece and Boy Willie is both a flow of kinship and spiritual resonance, and it is to be expected that their families, guided by the spirit of black people's struggle, will bravely pursue their values and social status in mainstream society.

The above analysis shows that August Wilson does not simply focus on the argument between the two siblings over the heritage of the family piano but uses it as a "clue" to show the process of their personality sublimation during the argument. In the process of their psychological changes, Wilson gradually conveys his attitude toward African American and black cultural heritage, which is what he said in the interview, "... I would tell blacks they are free to participate in American society as Africans, that they don't have to give up their heritage" (Lyons 6). It also conveys the author's attitude toward the cultural heritage of different races, that is, both positive and wounded cultures are the roots of racial survival, and the cultural heritage is the spiritual commonality of holding on to the cultural identity and getting rid of the material dimension during cultural conflicts.

All in all, Wilson's masterly narrative technique portrays the process of personality sublimation of the two main characters and touches on the racial trauma buried deep in the memory of African Americans. Through the process of personality change of the two characters, Wilson conveys his attitude toward the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities and provokes readers to think about the question of "how minority groups should treat their own cultures". This paper only examines the inner journey of the two main characters from the perspective of Freud's triple personality structure theory and is less concerned with the influence of the social environment and personal environment on the psychology of the characters. Future research can be combined with social psychology to make a detailed analysis of the influence of social and cultural factors on the psychology of the characters in the play.

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