
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Willing Suspension of Disbelief in August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson"

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| ABSTRACT

Using supernatural elements in literature is a common phenomenon. The most discussed Black playwright, August Wilson (1945-2005), introduces supernatural elements in his works to deepen the exploration of African-American experiences and cultural heritage. Incorporating supernatural elements adds a rich layer of meaning and symbolism to Wilson's work. They symbolize the characters' internal and external conflicts, enhancing their emotional and psychological complexity. They often reveal the characters' desires, fears, and past traumas that drive their actions and decisions. Wilson's play "The Piano Lesson" (1987) subtly and symbolically uses supernatural elements. The present study sheds light on: Why and how did Wilson use the technique of "Willing suspension of disbelief" in his play "The Piano Lesson"? Because of the "Willing suspension of disbelief" technique, readers and audience do not question the credibility of the incidents and events in "The Piano Lesson." The use of ghosts and supernatural elements contributes significantly to this play's dramatic power and intrigue. As much as they successfully keep the audience and the readers engaged, they create such an atmosphere on stage that the audience is made to believe what they see on stage.

| KEYWORDS

African-American, culture, drama, playwright, supernatural elements

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1. Introduction

In his text, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), the English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge introduced the principle of "suspension of disbelief." "Suspension of disbelief" is the idea that sometimes readers must turn off their critical thinking and logic to be invested in a literary work. In other words, putting aside one's skepticism to fully engage with a work of fiction such as a book, film, or play. Coleridge opines that readers must temporarily suspend their skepticism and disbelief to fully engage with a narrative or artistic work. This act allows them to accept the fantastical elements of a work as if they were real, enabling a deeper emotional and imaginative experience. This suspension is a natural response to the aesthetic pleasure derived from art, which allows audiences to appreciate the beauty and emotional truths conveyed through imaginative literature. Also, readers connect with the work more profoundly, immersing themselves in its emotional and thematic richness.

The concept of "Willing suspension of disbelief" is closely related to the introduction of the supernatural elements, which was practiced by playwrights such as Thomas Kyd, William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe and poets such as Coleridge and Walter de la Mare, and novelists such as Emile Bronte and Toni Morrison. In literature, supernatural elements such as ghosts, witches, and spirits have been used throughout the history of literature from its origin in oral folktales. Writers use supernatural elements to develop themes that reflect the nature of humanity and also to show that both good and evil exist in this world. Ghosts, spirits, and witches have been used to show evil power and to bring out the human conscience and sense of guilt. These elements also outline and comment on conflicts and power struggles. In a study by Kadhim (2019), it is stated that a supernatural element is the factor that causes events over which man has no control because it is beyond his ability to do so. According to

Quinn (1910), "the supernatural in American literature belongs mainly to the nineteenth century, and is to be found in its most artistic form in the lyric, the romance, and the short story, though it has also been introduced into the epic and the drama."

The use of supernatural elements in August Wilson's play (the most discussed Black playwright), "The Piano Lesson" (1987), will be highlighted in this paper. It is worth going through the plays of Wilson-the American playwright of African descent who dealt with racial inequality, injustice, imprisonment, slavery, religion, rebirth, supernatural elements, love and loss, betrayal, father-son dynamic, husband-wife relationship, legacy, music, escapism, death, and other themes in various ways. The supernatural elements show how past injustices can shape a character's personality and impact his psychology. Although many readers and audiences do not believe in mysterious elements, such as ghosts or spirits of the dead, they get involved in "The Piano Lesson" and feel as if the events are actual and happening now.

Before exploring the depths of "The Piano Lesson," a glimpse will be given of the periods in English Literature when writers included supernatural elements in their works.

2. Background

Using supernatural elements in literature is a common phenomenon. Starting from drama, poetry, and novels, some writers have used supernatural elements deftly in their works. In his most famous play, "The Spanish Tragedy," the Elizabethan playwright Thomas Kyd has used supernatural elements to enhance the interest in the incidents. The supernatural elements serve several purposes such as developing the plot and theme, creating a grim atmosphere and providing an objective view of Bel-imperia's revenge. According to Mercure (2009), the Ghost of Andrea and Revenge play significant roles as they can be considered as the chorus in the Greek tragedy.

William Shakespeare has used the supernatural elements in several of his plays. To mention a few, in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" (1601), "Macbeth" (1606), and "Julius Caesar" (1599), the ghosts of Claudius, Banquo, and Caesar are significant for understanding the plot. Shakespeare's use of supernaturalism can be interpreted on many levels, so it is wise to interpret Shakespeare's plays by looking at his time. In 16th century England, physical science was not developed enough, so people's belief in supernatural elements and superstitions had some reasons. Some literary traditions at that time can also explain why Shakespeare used ghosts, apparitions, or witches in his plays. His plays were influenced by Greek and Roman mythology and Greek dramas centuries ago. During the Elizabethan period, when people failed to understand inexplicable events or phenomena, they believed that supernatural powers were at work.

However, in Shakespeare's plays, the supernatural elements often explore complex human emotions and societal issues. They enhance the dramatic impact of the stories and provide a way to delve into themes of ambition, power, justice, and the nature of reality. Moreover, according to Kadhim (2019), "Theatre is always associated with the culture of the intended audience...". When playwrights produce plays, they give importance to the ideas and concepts which are closely related to the cultural and, traditions, customs, and habits of the author's community. Hence, the authors prioritized the highest satisfaction for their audience. In "Hamlet", the supernatural element appears as the Ghost of Hamlet's father. In Act I, Scene V, he tells Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, how his uncle Claudius murdered his brother by pouring poison into his ear while he was asleep. The Ghost wants his son Hamlet to avenge his father's death, so including the Ghost is important for the theme of revenge in the play. During Shakespeare's time, people believed in the idea of good and evil and were very superstitious, so when Hamlet sees his father's Ghost, he says, "My father's spirit in arms! All is not well; I doubt some foul play" (Act 1, Scene V).

In "Macbeth", Shakespeare creates an uncanny atmosphere by using supernatural elements such as the three Weird Sisters, the floating dagger, the apparitions, and the Ghost of his friend Banquo. The Ghost of Banquo symbolizes Macbeth's guilt and fear about the consequences of killing King Duncan and Banquo. The appearance of Banquo's Ghost reminds the audience that Macbeth still has some conscience to be tortured by his foul deeds.

In Act IV, Scene III of "Julius Caesar," Caesar's Ghost appears to manifest Brutus's guilt of killing Caesar. It foreshadows Brutus's death by suggesting he will join Caesar in the afterlife. The appearance of Caesar's Ghost is a sign of destruction that will befall Brutus and the other conspirators. Therefore, ghosts appear in Shakespeare's plays to convey a message or haunt the living. One of the oldest means of attraction is the use of the supernatural element in the play's structure. Shakespeare does it successfully to hook the audience's attention.

The inclusion of supernatural elements continued even in the Renaissance and Medieval periods. They were often used to create moral conflicts within characters and to support biblical lessons that the writers wished to convey to their audience.

Marlowe's inclusion of supernatural elements in his noteworthy play "Doctor Faustus" (1604) serves several purposes, such as exploring the themes of ambition, morality, the conflict between reason and faith, Doctor Faustus's inner struggle, entertainment, and spectacle. Moreover, the protagonist sells his soul to Mephistopheles's power to pursue his ambition. The

audience's reaction to such an act by the protagonist creates scope for negative reaction as witchcraft was seen in an extremely negative light during that time. Hence, the supernatural elements dramatize the protagonist's internal and external conflicts, underscore religious and philosophical questions, and enhance the overall impact of the play. It creates a sense of mystery and wonder. The play is filled with witchcraft, demons, and evil spirits, which shows Faustus's impending downfall and the consequences of his deal with the devil (Syeed, 2023).

If we look at the Victorian Period, we see that the Victorians were quite superstitious about the supernatural. In Victorian England, education brought scepticism, so most people were sceptical about the supernatural but not non-believers because of the ghost stories in this period. The fascination with the supernatural reflected broader societal concerns and transformations of the era. Writers often included supernaturalism in their writings to explore the unknown, highlight themes of punishment and redemption, and explore unconscious dreams and hidden fears. Moreover, the Victorian Period was greatly inspired by the revival of Gothic literature, which began in the late eighteenth century and continued in the Victorian era. The novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by the English novelist Emily Brontë includes Gothic elements in the story such as the setting, the dark and brooding tone, eerie atmosphere, complex and tormented characters, isolation, madness, entrapment, violence, and traumas all contribute to the supernatural elements in the novel. However, the most significant supernatural element is Catherine's Ghost, which is included to show the eternal love (of Catherine for her lover, Heathcliff) that goes beyond the boundary of mortality. Although *Wuthering Heights* cannot be called supernatural fiction, Brontë has used supernatural elements unconventionally.

The Ghost of Catherine Earnshaw, the protagonist in Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, elevates the story to the status of a Gothic novel. Heathcliff, the adopted son of Mr. Earnshaw, comes to know from a person called Lockwood that he has seen the Ghost of Catherine Earnshaw, who died at childbirth. Heathcliff could not bear the rejection of his lover Catherine, who refused to marry him because of his low birth. When Catherine dies, Heathcliff goes crazy and says:

Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living; you said I killed you—haunt me, then! The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe. I know that ghosts have wandered on earth. Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! (Brontë 2012)

Brontë uses Heathcliff's state of insanity to show the madness to which love can drive a person. Towards the end of the novel, when Heathcliff dies, the readers learn from the villagers that the ghosts of Catherine and Heathcliff are seen. Apart from the protagonists' ghosts, Mr. Lockwood's dreams, the novel's narrator, create a supernatural atmosphere in *Wuthering Heights*.

Another novel worth mentioning is "Beloved" (1987) by the American novelist Toni Morrison, in which the supernatural appears in various forms. Through the Ghost of Beloved, the murdered child of the protagonist Sethe, Morrison shows that her characters are forced to accept and face a forgotten past.

Moving from drama and novel, if we look at the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's mesmerizing poem "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner" (1798), using supernatural elements, the poet makes the readers suspend disbelief to grasp the significance of the supernatural elements in his poem. Before Coleridge, the supernatural elements were introduced into English literature in a crude form. Coleridge was against such ludicrous grossness. His use of the supernatural elements is refined. He gave an inward quality to his treatment of the supernatural. He brought supernaturalism into an intimate relation with individual experience and gave a new psychological interest to it. The atmosphere of mystery is created by indefiniteness and subtle suggestion in "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner." Coleridge leaves many things vague and indefinite in this poem. He keeps his supernatural to a suggestive level.

There are some impossible, incredible, and weird situations in "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner," but those have been made believable and convincing by the blend of the natural and supernatural elements. Coleridge's poem permeates with supernaturalism, starting with the power of hypnosis, the Albatross, the Polar Spirit who followed the mariner's ship from the land of mist and snow to avenge the killing of the Albatross, the ghost ship, Death and Life-in-Death engaged in a gambling contest, the mysterious resurrection of the sailors for a while, and the spirits that personify some aspects of nature. He evokes the mystery of things so that they seem real, and the readers are transported to his imaginative world. He presents a sense of a whole reality in which the supernatural exists without difficulty.

3. Purpose of the Present Study

Supernatural elements are not new in literature, as seen in the Elizabethan, Romantic, Victorian, and Modern Period periods. A few of the works of famous writers who have uniquely used supernatural elements have been mentioned. It is evident that African Americans believed not only in ghosts and ancestral spirits but also in the Middle Ages, a widespread belief was "that the ghosts of criminals, or murdered persons, walked the earth after death, that they sometimes entered compacts with the living, that they appeared at midnight and 'faded on the crowing of the cock,' and at their approach, the lights grew dim- all this is a part of the primitive ghost-lore common to most European nations" (Moorman 1906). Playwrights and writers incorporated

supernatural elements to keep the audiences and readers engaged and presented them with such expertise that the readers and audiences had no option but to accept them as if they were happening in real life.

Therefore, the present study sheds light on:

Why and how has Wilson used the "Willing suspension of disbelief" technique in his play "The Piano Lesson"?

4. Findings

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge introduced the concept of the "Willing suspension of disbelief, not thinking whether the modern readers or audience would believe in the unexplained phenomena. In the twentieth century, August Wilson confidently embraced this idea of the "Willing suspension of disbelief" in his work "The Piano Lesson." By including supernatural elements in his play, Wilson shows the beliefs of the African people who accept supernatural elements as a taken-for-granted aspect of reality. Not only that, but the belief in the supernatural is also how it helps the African-American community to face the future confidently. They do not question their presence because supernatural elements are so much imbued in their culture, customs, and traditions. Wilson probes into the psychology of his audience and includes "Ghosts" in his plays. They enhance the dramatic effect and hook the readers' attention because they symbolize real-life struggles, conflicts, and dilemmas, moving the drama's plot forward.

Therefore, readers and audience get engrossed in Christian, folk/superstitious, and African mythical traditions. It is noteworthy that the researchers have demonstrated how the twentieth-century African-American playwright August Wilson is similar to the Elizabethan playwrights such as Thomas Kyd, William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, who use supernatural elements to move their plots forward. He is different from them in the unique way he incorporates the ghosts in his play. The researchers agree with the view of Wilson when he says, "We have a different way of responding to the world. We have different ideas about religion and manners of social intercourse" (Wilson, 1995).

5. Discussion

August Wilson's play "The Piano Lesson" uses supernatural elements more subtly and symbolically than Shakespeare's overtly fantastical works. He includes supernatural elements for various reasons. First of all, the piano in the play is not only a piece of furniture. It is symbolic as it is imbued with the spirits of the Charle's family ancestors. The presence of the piano in the households the stories and spirits of past generations.

Moreover, the play has two other types of ghosts: the black ghosts and the malicious white ghosts. Both symbolize the past traumatic experiences of the central characters in the play. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog represents the oppressed Africans. They are vindictive and protective. They avenge themselves on their white murderers and try to protect their descendants. The readers first hear of the ghosts in the play when Boy Willie tells his uncle about the death of Sutter-the actual owner of the piano: "Everybody say the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed him in the well" (Act One, Scene 1).

When his sister Bernice accuses him of murdering Sutter, Willie says: "Ghost of the Yellow Dog got him. "Doaker believes Willie and says: "I don't believe Boy Willie pushed him in the well" (Act One, Scene 1). Even Avery, the preacher, refutes Bernice's accusations and attributes the accident to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Examining Caruth's essay Trauma: Explorations in Memory (1995), Maulood & Barzani (2020) opine that "when the black characters say that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog exacted revenge on the whites might be understood to suggest that the ghosts or the traumatic wounds of the past events haunted the white culprits and tortured them psychologically."

Brogan (1995) views that "the figure of the ghost itself emerges from the cultural history of that group: one of the key elements of African religious thought to survive in syncretic forms of New World religious practice and slave folklore is the belief in ancestor spirits."

Wilson establishes the credibility of the supernatural in "The Piano Lesson", the fourth play in his Pittsburgh Cycle, by showing that some characters have already encountered the unseen. In their individual ways, the characters accept the supernatural elements as a taken-for-granted aspect of reality.

"The Piano Lesson" is haunted by ghosts, but they are not clearly explained until the end of the play. Wilson's treatment of the supernatural shows that the noteworthy thing about spirituality is not even its precise content but what it means to individuals in their struggles. He explains that the value of belief in the supernatural is how it helps communities, especially the African American community, with the painful 'ghosts' of their past to face the future with confidence and hope. The reference to ghosts in the play shows a mixture of Christian, folk/superstitious, and African mythical traditions. The war between the Ghost of Sutter and the Ghost of Charles signifies the battle between the white and Black people. The ghosts are concerned with taking revenge: Sutter comes back to avenge his murder and take back the piano and the Charles family; the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog avenge their murder by murdering Sutter; these ghosts' life ended in Boy Charles's attempt to avenge the ancestors.

In Act One, Berniece sees the Ghost of Sutter standing in her house, so she thinks that Avery can bless the house and free the house from an evil spirit. Berniece's experience with Sutter's Ghost demonstrates that each person has to wrestle with the supernatural individually, and the significance of such encounters lies in how they equip an individual to move forward in life. The first time Berniece tells her family that she has seen the Ghost of Sutter "standing at the top of the steps," Boy Willie makes fun of his sister and says: "She ain't seen no Sutter. That's all in Berniece's head. She up there dreaming" (Act One, Scene 1). However, Berniece is sure that she has seen Sutter's Ghost. Her uncle Doaker believes her because he has seen Sutter's Ghost, too, and thinks the family piano is responsible for these occurrences.

This comment of Boy Willie reminds the audience of Shakespeare's play "Hamlet." In Act I, Scene (ii), when Hamlet tells his mother about the Ghost of his father in her closet, Gertrude says: "This is the very coinage of your brain!" Hamlet wonders aloud whether what appears to be the Ghost of his father might not be a demonic trick.

Berniece's encounter with Sutter's Ghost reminds us of the novel *Beloved*, in which only Sethe and her daughter Denver can see the Ghost of Beloved. *Beloved* began in 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Sethe, the protagonist, does not want her children to have a life of dehumanizing slavery like her. Hence, she tries to kill all her children. However, Sethe kills only her third child (Beloved), cutting her throat with a handsaw. Beloved comes to haunt their house 124 because of her mother's infanticide. Although Morrison presents Beloved as an allegorical figure, she represents a painful past returned to haunt the present. Swarnkar (2021) says: "The walls of the house 124 felt Beloved's presence when she lived there as a spirit." The interesting point that can be noted is that Sethe asks Paul D- a formerly enslaved person like Sethe, to exorcise their house, just as Berniece asks her friend Avery to banish the Ghost of Sutter by exorcism.

At the end of the play, when Sutter's Ghost attacks Boy Willie, Avery fails in his exorcism because the problem is not the presence of the Ghost, as Doaker says regarding the piano; the real problem is Berniece's shunning of the past. Berniece's sudden and unexplainable realization that she has to play the piano and call upon her relatives' spirits for help makes the Ghost of Sutter subside. Sutter's presence prompted Berniece to accept her past, realize her spiritual power, and move forward.

Except for Berniece, her uncle Wining Boy has a dialogue with the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog at a railroad, finding new strength and fortune in their voices. He says that each person has to experience supernatural things for themselves, and it is up to them to make sense of that experience. No one should unquestioningly accept somebody else's testimony about such things, and nobody can explain anyone else's experience. When Wining Boy tells of his experience with the Ghost, it is evident that the supernatural event impacted him, but Berniece is not sure it happened the way he describes it.

Wilson presents the supernatural as an accepted, taken-for-granted aspect of reality. He says, "We are an African people who have been in America since the early seventeenth century. We have a different way of responding to the world. We have different ideas about religion and different manners of social intercourse. We have different ideas about style and language. We have different aesthetics" (Wilson, 1995). It is stated that, in the African worldview, the realm of the visible and the invisible do not constitute two completely separate entities; these entities combine to form one dynamic entity (Konate 2010) and that there may always be things outside the realm of human understanding. They have always believed that there should be a balance between what human beings know and what they don't know. The Blacks respect the existence of these entities to the extent that they are afraid of them and create a conducive atmosphere for both the human and supernatural worlds. (Ojiakor & Ezenwamadu 2018).

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the purpose of the supernatural in literary works can be interpreted on many levels. Literature always represents the beliefs of a particular society, so the inclusion of supernatural elements in a piece of work does not imply that a specific culture is outdated or old-fashioned. In her essay, Dana Williams points out how Wilson "rejects outright the idea that anyone can interpret black culture authentically.... African culture, style, and content were so incongruent with European sensibilities and beliefs that Africans *seemed* primitive, slow, and dull-witted" (2016). She also says that the Americans looked down upon the enslaved people as "... childlike, and otherwise incapable of grasping complex ideas." Critiquing Wilson's plays, Richards (2016) says that "the reward for teaching Wilson's plays is the joy of introducing students to a gifted playwright who takes them on a bracing journey toward a reconceptualization of their world."

August Wilson used supernatural elements in "The Piano Lesson" to explore human nature and create mystery, suspense, and tension throughout the play. More than the plot itself, the spirituality and supernatural elements have invested the readers and audience in it. Because of the "Willing suspension of disbelief," we do not question the credibility of the incidents and events in "The Piano Lesson." In today's era, we accept them just as audiences accepted them in the Elizabethan, Renaissance, or Victorian periods. We tend to think that Africans are right to believe in the spirits of their dead ancestors coming to help them or haunt them. Wilson strongly believes that the most important thing about spirituality is not its precise content but what it stands for individuals in their struggles. His expert and confident inclusion in the plays leave the audience and readers in awe. The belief in the supernatural helps the African-American community face the future confidently. Moreover, the use of the supernatural

symbolizes the fact that even today, its importance constitutes a tangible component of African belief systems. Readers and audiences worldwide accept its purpose in the plays.

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