



August Wilson
new voices

NATIONAL COMPENDIUM
2024-2025

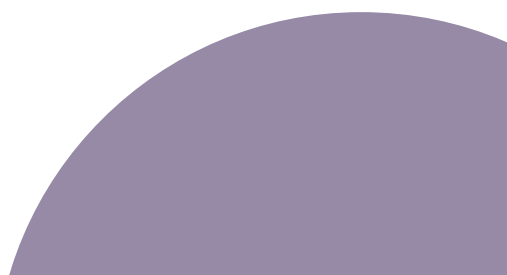
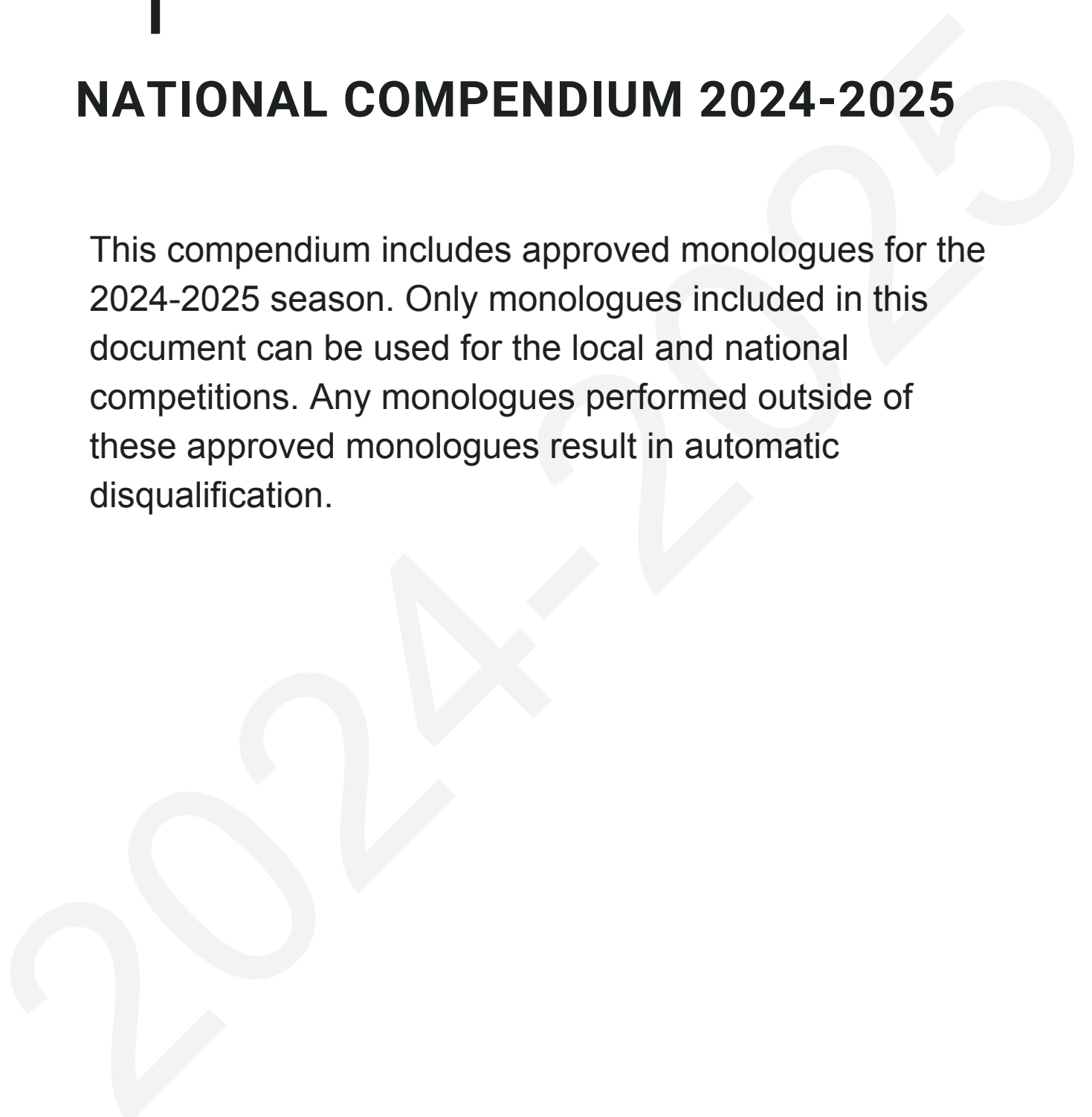
THE PIANO LESSON





NATIONAL COMPENDIUM 2024-2025

This compendium includes approved monologues for the 2024-2025 season. Only monologues included in this document can be used for the local and national competitions. Any monologues performed outside of these approved monologues result in automatic disqualification.



THE PIANO LESSON

Synopsis

The Piano Lesson is set in Pittsburgh in 1936. Boy Willie has come to his uncle's house to retrieve a piano that holds significant historical and sentimental value to the family. A battle ensues over the possession of the piano, which carries the legacy and opportunities of the characters and determines the choices they must make.

Characters

AVERY: Thirty-eight years old, Avery is a preacher who is trying to build up his congregation. He is honest and ambitious, finding himself opportunities in the city that were unavailable to him in rural areas of the South. While fervently religious, he manages to find the time to court Berniece after her husband's death.

BOY WILLIE: Brother to Berniece, Boy Willie is a thirty year old brash, impulsive, and fast-talking man. He has an infectious grin and a boyishness that is apt for his name. His story provides the central conflict for the play in that he plans to sell the family piano in order to buy land that his family worked on as slaves. He feels it's important he does this in order to avenge his father, who grew up property-less— but not everyone in the family agrees.

LYMON: Boy Willie's long time friend is a twenty-nine year old who speaks little, but when he does with a disarming straight-forwardness. As he flees the law, he makes a plan to begin anew in the North. Eliciting stories from the families past, Lymon proves a vehicle by which we learn about the family. He is also a big fan of women, and plays a part in helping Berniece move on from her husband's death.

BERNIECE: Berniece, Boy Willie's older sister, is a thirty-five year old widow who blames the death of her husband three years prior, on her brother. She resents her brother's bravado and chides him for his rebellious ways. She doesn't want to sell the piano, but also has no intention of playing it. She has an eleven-year-old daughter, Maretha.

DOAKER: Doaker is the tall, thin, forty-seven year old uncle to Berniece and Boy Willie. He has worked for the railroad his whole life—first laying rail and then as a cook. He functions as the family patriarch and the play's oral historian, recounting stories, many about the piano's history. The play takes place in the house that Doaker owns, and while he won't take a side on whether to sell the piano, he does step in when things begin to get out of hand.

WINING BOY: Doaker's wily, carefree brother who shows up in town and stays with the family whenever he is a bit down on his luck. He used to play the piano and made his livelihood making music, but quit that life when he decided he no longer wanted to be an entertainer. Despite this, he is protective of the piano.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-01

Time: 2:10

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Inspirational

Type 3: Metaphorical

Act 1; Scene 1

AVERY

Well, it come to me in a dream. See . . . I was sitting out in this railroad yard watching the trains go by. The train stopped and these three hoboos got off. They told me they had come from Nazareth and was on their way to Jerusalem. They had three candles. They gave me one and told me to light it . . . but to be careful that it didn't go out. Next thing I knew I was standing in front of this house. Something told me to go knock on the door. This old woman opened the door and said they had been waiting on me. Then she led me into this room. It was a big room and it was full of all kinds of different people. They looked like anybody else except they all had sheep heads and was making noise like sheep make. I heard somebody call my name. I looked around and there was these same three hoboos. They told me to take off my clothes and they give me a blue robe with gold thread. They washed my feet and combed my hair. Then they showed me these three doors and told me to pick one.

I went through one of them doors and that flame leapt off that candle and it seemed like my whole head caught fire. I looked around and there was four or five other men standing there with these same blue robes on. Then we heard a voice tell us to look out across the valley. We looked out and saw the valley was full of wolves. The voice told us that these sheep people that I had seen in the other room had to go over to the other side of this valley and somebody had to take them. Then I heard another voice say, "Who shall I send?" Next thing I knew I said, "Here I am. Send me." That's when I met Jesus. He say, "If you go, I'll go with you." Something told me to say, "Come on. Let's go." That's when I woke up. My head still felt like it was on fire . . . but I had a peace about myself that was hard to explain. I knew right then that I had been filled with the Holy Ghost and called to be a servant of the Lord. It took me a while before I could accept that. But then a lot of little ways God showed me that it was true. So I became a preacher.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-02

Time: 2:00

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Inspirational

Type 3: Exorcism

Act 2; Scene 5

AVERY

Seem like that piano's causing all the trouble. I can bless that. Berniece, put me some water in that bottle.

Hold this candle. Whatever you do make sure it don't go out.

O Holy Father we gather here this evening in the Holy Name to cast out the spirit of one James Sutter. May this vial of water be empowered with thy spirit. May each drop of it be a weapon and a shield against the presence of all evil and may it be a cleansing and blessing of this humble abode.

Just as Our Father taught us how to pray so He say, "I will prepare a table for you in the midst of mine enemies," and in His hands we place ourselves to come unto his presence. Where there is good so shall it cause Evil to scatter to the Four Winds.

(He throws water at the piano with each commandment.)

Get thee behind me, Satan! Get thee behind the face of Righteousness as we Glorify His Holy Name! Get thee behind the Hammer of Truth that breaketh down the Wall of Falsehood! Father. Father. Praise. Praise. We ask in Jesus' name and call forth the power of the Holy Spirit as it is written . . .

(He opens the Bible and reads from it)

I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean: from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take out your flesh the heart of stone, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-03

Time: 1:40

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Money

Type 3: Commerce

Act 1; Scene 1

BOY WILLIE

Got a hundred acres. Good land. He done sold it piece by piece, he kept the good part for himself. Now he got to give that up. His brother come down from Chicago for the funeral . . . he up there in Chicago got some kind of business with soda fountain equipment. He anxious to sell the land, Doaker. He don't want to be bothered with it. He called me to him and said cause of how long our families done known each other and how we been good friends and all, say he wanted to sell the land to me. Say he'd rather see me with it than Jim Stovall. Told me he'd let me have it for two thousand dollars cash money. He don't know I found out the most Stovall would give him for it was fifteen hundred dollars. He trying to get that extra five hundred out of me telling me he doing me a favor. I thanked him just as nice. Told him what a good man Sutter was and how he had my sympathy and all. Told him to give me two weeks. He said he'd wait on me. That's why I come up here. Sell them watermelons. Get Berniece to sell that piano. Put them two parts with the part I done saved. Walk in there. Tip my hat. Lay my money down on the table. Get my deed and walk on out. This time I get to keep all the cotton. Hire me some men to work it for me. Gin my cotton. Get my seed. And I'll see you again next year. Might even plant some tobacco or some oats.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-04

Time: 2:05

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Family

Type 3: Socio-Economic
Advancement

Act 1; Scene 2

BOY WILLIE

Now, I'm gonna tell you the way I see it. The only thing that make that piano worth something is them carvings Papa Willie Boy put on there. That's what make it worth something. That was my great-granddaddy. Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. Now, I'm supposed to build on what they left me. You can't do nothing with that piano sitting up here in the house. That's just like if I let them watermelons sit out there and rot. I'd be a fool. All right now, if you say to me, Boy Willie, I'm using that piano. I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. Then that be something else. I'd have to go on and say, well, Berniece using that piano. She building on it. Let her go on and use it. I got to find another way to get Sutter's land. But Doaker say you ain't touched that piano the whole time it's been up here. So why you wanna stand in my way? See, you just looking at the sentimental value. See, that's good. That's all right. I take my hat off whenever somebody say my daddy's name. But I ain't gonna be no fool about no sentimental value. You can sit up here and look at the piano for the next hundred years and it's just gonna be a piano. You can't make more than that. Now I want to get Sutter's land with that piano. I get Sutter's land and I can go down and cash in the crop and get my seed. As long as I got the land and the seed then I'm all right. I can always get me a little something else. Cause that land give back to you. I can make me another crop and cash that in. I still got the land and the seed. But that piano don't put out nothing else. You ain't got nothing working for you. Now, the kind of man my daddy was he would have understood that. I'm sorry you can't see it that way. But that's why I'm gonna take that piano out of here and sell it.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-05

Time: 1:30

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Death

Type 3: Value of Life

Act 2; Scene 5

BOY WILLIE

She trying to scare me. Hell, I ain't scared of dying. I look around and see people dying every day. You got to die to make room for somebody else. I had a dog that died. Wasn't nothing but a puppy. I picked it up and put it in a bag and carried it up there to Reverend C. L. Thompson's church. I carried it up there and prayed and asked Jesus to make it live like he did the man in the Bible. I prayed real hard. Knelt down and everything. Say ask in Jesus' name. Well, I must have called Jesus' name two hundred times. I called his name till my mouth got sore. I got up and looked in the bag and the dog still dead. It ain't moved a muscle! I say, "Well, ain't nothing precious." And then I went out and killed me a cat. That's when I discovered the power of death. See, a nigger that ain't afraid to die is the worse kind of nigger for the white man. He can't hold that power over you. That's what I learned when I killed that cat. I got the power of death too. I can command him. I can call him up. The white man don't like to see that. He don't like for you to stand up and look him square in the eye and say, "I got it too." Then he got to deal with you square up.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-06

Time: 1:10

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Women's Status/Identity

Type 3: Men's Status/Identity

Act 2; Scene 5

BOY WILLIE

Don't you tell that girl that. Why you wanna tell her that?

Telling her you wished she was a boy. How's that gonna make her feel?

You ain't got to worry about me. I'm gonna be here just as long as it takes Lymon to get back here with that truck. You ought to be talking to Berniece. Sitting up there telling Maretha she wished she was a boy. What kind of thing is that to tell a child? If you want to tell her something tell her about that piano. You ain't even told her about that piano. Like that's something to be ashamed of. Like she supposed to go off and hide somewhere about that piano. You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle around it . . . and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. If you did that she wouldn't have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head held high. I'm talking about a big party!

Invite everybody! Mark that day down with a special meaning. That way she know where she at in the world. You got her going out here thinking she wrong in the world. Like there ain't no part of it belong to her.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-07

Time: 1:50

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Societal Order

Type 3: Socio-Economic
Advancement

Act 2; Scene 5

BOY WILLIE

What I want to bring a child into this world for? Why I wanna bring somebody else into all this for? I'll tell you this . . . If I was Rockefeller I'd have forty or fifty. I'd make one everyday. Cause they gonna start out in life with all the advantages. I ain't got no advantages to offer nobody. Many is the time I looked at my daddy and seen him staring off at his hands. I got a little older I know what he was thinking. He sitting there saying, "I got these big old hands but what I'm gonna do with them? Best I can do is make a fifty-acre crop for Mr. Stovall. Got these big old hands capable of doing anything. I can take and build something with these hands. But where's the tools? All I got is these hands. Unless I go out here and kill me somebody and take what they got . . . it's a long row to hoe for me to get something of my own. So what I'm gonna do with these big old hands? What would you do?"

See now . . . if he had his own land he wouldn't have felt that way. If he had something under his feet that belonged to him he could stand up taller. That's what I'm talking about. Hell, the land is there for everybody. All you got to do is figure out how to get you a piece. Ain't no mystery to life. You just got to go out and meet it square on. If you got a piece of land you'll find everything else fall right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton . . . the weather, and anything else you want to talk about. If you teach that girl that she living at the bottom of life, she's gonna grow up and hate you.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-08

Time: 1:50

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Value of Life

Type 3: Socio-Economic
Advancement

Act 2; Scene 5

BOY WILLIE

See now . . . I'll tell you something about me. I done strung along and strung along. Going this way and that. Whatever way would lead me to a moment of peace. That's all I want. To be as easy with everything. But I wasn't born to that. I was born to a time of fire.

The world ain't wanted no part of me. I could see that since I was about seven. The world say it's better off without me. See, Berniece accept that. She trying to come up to where she can prove something to the world. Hell, the world a better place cause of me. I don't see it like Berniece. I got a heart that beats here and it beats just as loud as the next fellow's. Don't care if he black or white. Sometime it beats louder. When it beats louder, then everybody can hear it. Some people get scared of that. Like Berniece. Some people get scared to hear a nigger's heart beating. They think you ought to lay low with that heart. Make it beat quiet and go along with everything the way it is. But my mama ain't birthed me for nothing. So what I got to do? I got to mark my passing on the road. Just like you write on a tree, "Boy Willie was here."

That's all I'm trying to do with that piano. Trying to put my mark on the road. Like my daddy done. My heart say for me to sell that piano and get me some land so I can make a life for myself to live in my own way. Other than that I ain't thinking about nothing Berniece got to say.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-09

Time: 1:30

Type 1: Serio-Comedic

Type 2: Gift Giving

Act 2; Scene 3

LYMON

....Boy Willie been back here?

I went out to see a picture show and never got there. We always end up doing something else. I was with this woman she just wanted to drink up all my money. So I left her there and came back looking for Boy Willie.

They got some nice-looking women in this city. I'm gonna like it up here real good. I like seeing them with their dresses on. Got them high heels. I like that. Make them look like they real precious. Boy Willie met a real nice one today. I wish I had met her before he did.

. . . Grace. She real nice. Laugh a lot. Lot of fun to be with. She don't be trying to put on. Some of these women act like they the Queen of Sheba. I don't like them kind. Grace ain't like that. She real nice with herself.

She real nice. I seen her before he did. I was trying not to act like I seen her. I wanted to look at her a while before I said something. She seen me when I come into the saloon. I tried to act like I didn't see her. Time I looked around Boy Willie was talking to her. She was talking to him kept looking at me. That's when her friend Dolly came. I asked her if she wanted to go to the picture show. She told me to buy her a drink while she thought about it. Next thing I knew she done had three drinks talking about she too tired to go. I bought her another drink, then I left. Boy Willie was gone and I thought he might have come back here.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-10

Time: 2:00

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Relationships

Type 3: Women's Status/ Identity

Act 2; Scene 3

LYMON

Mostly they be lonely and looking for somebody to spend the night with them. Sometimes it matters who it is and sometimes it don't. I used to be the same way. Now it got to matter. That's why I'm here now. Dolly liable not to even recognize me if she sees me again. I don't like women like that. I like my women to be with me in a nice easy way. That way we can both enjoy ourselves. The way I see it we the only two people like us in the world. We got to see how we fit together. A woman that don't want to take the time to do that I don't bother with. Used to. Used to bother with all of them. Then I woke up one time with this woman and I didn't know who she was. She was the prettiest woman I had ever seen in my life. I spent the whole night with her and didn't even know it. I had never taken the time to look at her. I guess she kinda knew I ain't never really looked at her. She must have known that cause she ain't wanted to see me no more. If she had wanted to see me I believe we might have got married. How come you ain't married? It seem like to me you would be married. I remember Avery from down home. I used to call him plain old Avery. Now he Reverend Avery. That's kinda funny about him becoming a preacher. I like when he told about how that come to him in a dream about them sheep people and them hoboes. Nothing ever come to me in a dream like that. I just dream about women. Can't never seem to find the right one.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-11

Time: 1:20

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Family

Type 3: Men's Status/Identity

Act 1; Scene 2

BERNIECE

You ain't taking that piano out of my house. (She crosses to the piano) Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in ... mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. "Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece." Every day. "I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece." You always talking about your daddy but you ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece a wood? To get even with somebody? I look at you and you're all the same. You, Papa Boy Charles, Wining Boy, Doaker, Crawley . . . you're all alike. All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And what it ever lead to? More killing and more thieving. I ain't never seen it come to nothing. People getting burned up. People getting shot. People falling down their wells. It don't never stop.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-12

Time: 1:10

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Women's Status/Identity

Type 3: Music

Act 2; Scene 2

BERNIECE

I done told you I don't play on that piano. Ain't no need in you to keep talking this choir stuff. When my Mama died I shut the top on that piano and I ain't never opened it since. I was only playing it for her. When my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano. She used to have me playing it . . . had Miss Eula come in and teach me . . . say when I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house.

I got Maretha playing on it. She don't know nothing about it. Let her go on and be a school teacher or something. She don't have to carry all of that with her. She got a chance I didn't have. I ain't gonna burden her with that piano.

THE PIANO LESSON

Code: 30-13

Time: 1:05

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Women's Status/Identity

Act 2; Scene 2

BERNIECE

I got enough on my hands with Maretha. I got enough people to love and take care of.

You trying to tell me a woman can't be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me—without a woman—and still be a man. That's alright. Ain't nobody gonna ask you, "Avery, who you got to love you?" That's alright for you. But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece. "How Berniece gonna take care of herself? How she gonna raise that child without a man? Wonder what she do with herself. How she gonna live like that?" Everybody got all kinds of questions for Berniece. Everybody telling me I can't be a woman unless I got a man. Well, you tell me, Avery—you know—how much woman am I?