**Analytical essay excerpt for *The Piano Lesson*:**

The normalization of racism in society does not allow everyone an equal opportunity in garnering economic stability- at least not without sacrifice. The main conflict in The Piano Lesson centers around the privilege of acknowledging sentimentality. If the characters in the play were well off, they wouldn’t have to bear the burden of ridding themselves of the piano (an item filled with such cultural value) in exchange for wealth. Initially, the piano was kept to defy the oppression that their ancestors previously faced. “Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it...he had us. Say we was still in slavery” (Wilson 45) This brings up an inquiry of morality- is it immoral to sell the piano after all that was lost to obtain it? Our characters are confronted with this question, and Boy Willie is trying to make sense of Berniece who claims he would be debauched to sell it. However, if Boy Willie was affluent, the issue of whether or not to market the piano likely wouldn’t cross his mind. This notion is an allusion- a comparison of classes. The way poverty limits an individual’s ability to recognize the importance of a relic seems to point out a simple inverse- perhaps a lack of wealth and the privilege of shared history cannot coexist. Furthermore, it is woefully clear that the most prosperous citizens were white Americans. The African Americans that lead this story depend on the price that the piano could award them in order to maintain a steady life. Whereas a white person in this era would have had the freedom to respect the significant value of such an item, and they would not have to relinquish it to be secure. Black people must sacrifice culture and family history to flourish in a country that is designed for them to collapse.

**Creative writing excerpt:**

I am first to step onto the platform. The morning sun casts an orange glow over the field, its blinding light bouncing off The Vessel’s surface. We are in the same area where last night's feast was held, with the wooden dais replacing the long tables. To my left stand the villagers, all dressed in thin, form fitting underclothes, awaiting their turns. To my right is The Vessel and ahead of me is the elevated platform that The Cleansing will occur on.

“Mia Baker.” Bone Handler David’s voice rings out through the field, his acknowledgement jolting my attention to the dais. Next to him sits John Rivers, now with a more finely crafted chair with two thick black bands that dig into the doughy flesh of his torso, effectively keeping him upright. Sunset orange flowers sit in a crown around his head. His chest moves weakly with every breath. I take the three steps up onto the platform, toward the men. The humid air is so thick that each inhale I take feels like voluntary asphyxiation. The dew drops from the grass cling to my bare feet and leave wet prints on the rough wood as I step to the center of the platform. I look out at the crowd to see the members of my village. My mom beams from the front row.

Growing up I assumed that the ceremony would be savored. A pledge to recite, a proper introduction for each person that stands in front of the dais. Maybe an acknowledgment of what the sacrifices mean to us, to our community.

Instead, Bone Handler David steps toward me, sharp blade in hand, with a clipped, “Part?”

“Um,” I say, caught off guard. I look at him, nervous and questioning.

“Which part?” he raises the shiny blade and his left eyebrow, utterly unenthused.

“Oh, right. Ear. This one.” I tug at the lobe, feeling the cool metal of my crescent earring.

David brings the blade to my ear.

This is all happening too fast.

I see flashes of Chris and the way she looked at me in class yesterday. Of Mrs. Watson with her missing fingers struggling to write on the chalkboard. Of my mom, two thick dark stitches tugging at the skin of her nonexistent ears. I look over and see John Rivers, our elder, a sack of wheezing meat with every limb removed, his body merely a cage to preserve his brain. The pool of saliva from his drooping tongue collects on his chest. I see the skin of his nostrils flare and contract as he breathes a whistling inhale, a wheezing exhale. The blade is cold against my ear. Something is wrong. I see the woman in the drawing tacked up in the classroom. Unblemished, all limbs intact, none sacrificed to combat her inherent evil. I’m no better than her, I think. I am just as corrupt, as distrustful as her. I am refusing to combat my sins, to reject my selfish instincts. I am corrupt.

The rattling breaths of Elder John Rivers echo the rapid beat of my heart.

*Whistle, wheeze.*

My heart thunders, my ears roar with rushing blood, fear shoots tremors through my body, sweat slicks in my palms, pools under my arms.

*Whistle, wheeze.*

John Rivers begins to move. Ever so slightly, his head turns to the left. Then the right. I hold my breath, waiting. He repeats the motion. Again, and again, and again. His intent rings clear.

*Don't,* he’s saying.

*Don't, don't, don't*.

Don't go through with it.

I lock eyes with bone Handler David, my nose burning with unshed tears. I wince in pain with the increase of pressure he places on the blade. He leans forward; his face close, *too* close to me. “Don’t” I croak, my throat tight. I will get these words out. “Stop.”

“Doubt and hesitation are the earliest signs of corruption.”

And with a vicious sawing of steel, my bloodied ear falls to the floor.

The shock of pain startles me so greatly that I fall to my knees. My vision is moving in and out of focus, and I watch in slow motion as Bone Handler David scrambles for my ear, now staining the wooden dais, and wraps it in a cloth to give to another Handler who starts toward The Vessel with it. I begin to crawl, searching for a way off the platform, away from everything.

*Whistle, wheeze.*

I roll off the platform, falling face first onto the grass, a scream crawling up my throat at the reverberating pain from my sacrifice. I feel blood descending the side of my head, see it dripping onto the green grass as I struggle to push myself up. I crawl backward. I stand; Then- I'm moving. Unsteady and weak- but moving. One careful step backward, two, three and then-

I bolt.

Past my mother, past The Vessel, Past the village, out toward the wide, open field that engulfs it all. The grass grows taller as I sprint farther. My world opens into a vast expanse of nothing but sky and green and dirt. My heart pounds. My breaths come quicker, the echo of whistle and a wheeze. I keep going. Through the sting of the wind against my wound, through the tickle of the weeds against my arms. I open my palms letting the grass brush across my fingers, all ten of them. I don't know where I'm going, I don't know of a world that exists outside the village.

I don't care.

I keep running.