The Challenges of Contemporary Criticism in Recent Studies of

August Wilson

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Abstract

August Wilson was one of the most skilful African-American playwrights of this century and was one of only seven to win the Pulitzer Prize. He devoted his career to acknowledge the 20th century struggles of African-Americans, decade by decade, in a sequence of ten plays. He completed the phase soon before he died of liver cancer on October 2, 2005. The themes of racism and inequity are the core elements in his plays which are depicted in *Ma Rainey's*
Black Bottom and Joe Turner's Come and Gone. The selected novels are of African Americans' struggle for survival in racial separated society of America in which male characters struggling with financial problems due to their helplessness to find adequate work is a re-occurring theme in his plays, which weakens their power position in the family. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom articulate the weakness of black occupied males to make effectively in their social accepted roles and the various approaches the weak marginalized black men adopted to be considered men in America. This paper is aimed to study of the inability and subjectivity of the marginalized African Americans.

Key words

1. Racism and inequity
2. Struggling with financial problems and helplessness

Post-Colonialism is an intellectual conversation that consists of reactions to, and analysis of, the cultural inheritance of colonialism which comprises a set of theories found among anthropology, architecture, philosophy, film, political science, human geography, sociology, feminism, religious and theological studies, and literature. Moreover, the ultimate goal of post-colonialism is accounting for and fighting the remaining effects of colonialism on cultures. It is not simply concerned with salvaging past worlds, but learning how the world can move beyond this period together, towards a place of communal respect. Post-Colonialism writers identify that many of the assumptions which bring about the logic of colonialism are still active forces today. A key goal of post-colonial theorists is clearing space for multiple voices. This is especially true of those voices that have been in the past silenced by leading ideologies subalterns.

American race relations have been an important topic of study from 1619, when the first African was brought to Jamestown, as witnessed by an excess of books, articles, plays,
and dissertation on racism. Wilson, major playwrights, whose works continue to be produced from Broadway to California, illuminates the African-American experience in his phase of history plays. In producing this African-American family, Wilson uses different types of black rage to show his African-American audience how to find the way their way through American society. Black rage is a useful tool for analyzing Wilson's plays since he uses his characters' personal personification of black rage to define his characters. Their respective rages often lead to their own self-discovery, which delivers a dominant message to his audience about the importance and necessity of black rage.

In an interview with Wilson, he elaborated:

"[black rage is] certainly within the plays. Certainly what I would call political elements that deal with outrage: moral outrage, social outrage. Yes, that is a part of it, that's a part of the plays, yes, that's a part of black American life" (Wilson, 13 Nov, 1998).

In Wilson's plays, black rage exposes the various facets of African-American life and history. Black rage can help us discover what it means to be Africans in America. Since 1981, Wilson has been writing a ten-play cycle of history plays dealing with African-American life, each play in the cycle chronicling a specific decade of the twentieth century. Wilson has written the following plays: Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988), set in 1911; Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1981), set in 1927 The Piano Lesson (1990), set in 1936; Seven Guitars (1996), set in 1948: Fences (1986), set in 1957: Two Trains Timings (1992), set in 1969: Jitney (1979), set in 1977, and King Hedley I1 (not published), set in 1985. With each decade, Wilson tracks a slice of African-American life, never losing sight of the ancestors who came before. Although Wilson does not write about his own specific lineage, he shines as massive spotlight on an African-American family tree, illuminating those niggers.
Negroes, Coloreds and Blacks who made American history simply by active and active, surface the way for modern African Americans.

In 1982, Wilson submitted Ma Rainey's Black Bottom to the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference. After having revised it for the previous seven years; the play was accepted for a workshop, where Wilson met his future friend and collaborator, Lloyd Richards, the artistic director of the National Playwrights Conference. This collaboration marked the beginning of Wilson's career as one of America's premier contemporary playwright.

Wilson writes his characters to expose the grief and pain that they carry as a direct result of their blackness. Wilson's characters rage because a large percentage of them have been unjustly imprisoned by white men, because they cannot see a way out of their lives, and because they are always fighting for a foothold in a societal system that only pays attention to the man on top. Wilson knows the social history of African Americans: his characters speak about the sting of persecution inherent in their situations. Wilson allows his characters to grieve, because he knows that their real-life counterparts could not find their own unique voices in American society. This is Wilson's job to give voice to these unknown African Americans. Consequently, Wilson trumpets the unbalanced playing field between European Americans and African Americans by making his characters feel anguish and express rage, in order to guide modern-day African Americans through these obstacles.

In Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Seven Guitars, two plays where the expression of rage leads to murder, Wilson at least alludes to punishment for the murderers, either through the legal system or through a total break with sanity. Black rage is an essential part of Wilson's cycle, in that at least one character in each play experiences black rage as a catalyst for self-discovery while it might be easy to assume that the black rage in Wilson's cycle lessens as the cycle progresses, this is not the case; each decade's rage is a different not a
lesser for the previous decade's. Also, there is no discernible conclusion about black rage when one looks at the order in which Wilson wrote his cycle.

For Africans in America, one major legacy of slavery and emancipation was the loss of identity. During slavery, slaves did not possess any individuality; they were simply the master's property. After emancipation, the slaves were free, but they did not know who or what they were. What did it mean to be free? Wilson answers this question using Loomis's story. How is Loomis's identity impacted once his confinement is over? Wilson is able to use Loomis and the largest metaphors in the play the search journey for self to personify the delicate *Invisible Man*.

Wilson also uses Loomis to show that rape does not have to lead to tragic events, as with Bigger Thomas, but instead can be triumphant. Black rage is literally used to propel and lead a character to uncover his suppressed self. In Wilson's plays, black rage is often linked to supremacy, suppression, and subjugation. Though phonetically similar, oppression, suppression and tested mean different things. To represent is to hold back, and control. To suppress means to keep something from being revealed, to hide it. To oppress someone is to burden them harshly, unjustly or tyrannically. Loomis's identification is self-suppressed, but the character is oppressed American society. Loomis's story shows how he has been and will be impacted by persecution, fury and not knowing who he truly is."I will indicate how oppression created Loomis's black rage, which literally fuels is trek up North, where he discover his trueimage as an African in America" (Douglas Walt 25). Although Wilson demonstrates how the suppression of one's song can result from rage, he also uses Loomis to show how black rage can be used as a motivating force, leading to self-awareness. Thus, Loomis's rage is positive because if it were not triggered by his coerced drudgery, he would have never realized his connection to Africa. Loomis will use his rage to advance toward
accepting his slave ancestors and, within his own shining light, discover himself to be a leader for his people.

In discussing why he wrote Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Wilson states:

"Josh Turner" was born from a painting [...] in a magazine. [...] It was a boardinghourescene, and I began to wonder who one of the figures was, a man [...] in this posture that I call abject defeat. He eventually became the character [and protagonist] Herald Loomis. [...] the song called "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" [...] and the painting [...] fueled what I wanted to say about the separation and dispersal of blacks (Robert Farris 145). m. [...] what makes [Joe Turner's Come and Gone] so unique is the fact that Wilson also incorporates [Jan African modality--the interplay of the spiritual with the material world (Burton 6).

As Seth and Bertha continue their conversation Bynum enters and joins the conversation which eventually leads to the three discussing the outcome of emancipation. As if on cue, the only white character in the play, Selig, enters. Selig, a thin man with greasy hair, is approximately the same age as Seth. Though the two men appear to be friends, their relationship is mostly business Selig buys Seth's metalwork and sells it throughout the community. Besides being a salesman, Selig is a self-proclaimed People Finder for one dollar, Selig helps black people find their long-lost relatives, scattered throughout the North in a post-slavery landscape. Selig comes from a long line of black people finders his father was a slave hunter, while his great-grandfather brought slaves to America.

After Seth and Selig conduct business, Bynum asks Selig if he has found his "Shinyman." In his article, "Saying Goodbye to the Past Self-Empowerment and History in Joe Turner's Come and Gone." Douglas Anderson defines:

the shiny man as: an ordinary man who, possessing his song [read: identity] as "avoice inside him telling him which way to go," is able to guide others to word

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repossession of their songs toward becoming shiny men in their own right [...] And since that shine could pass on to anybody," the shiny man is also the individual who has not yet found his song, one who searches for himself. That search takes place in the world (449).

Jeremy is not the only person to suffer false imprisonment in this play: the next character to enter protagonist Herald Loomis also suffered the same fate ten years earlier. Loomis, who is thirty-two, tall, and solidly built, enters with his eleven-year-old daughter, Zonia. Loomis is literally and figuratively a dark presence, with wild hair and bulging eyes. Loomis is looking for a room, which Seth begrudgingly offers him in the larger picture, looking for his wife, Martha. Though there are conflicts in the play. The major conflict in the play is an internal one that resides within Loomis. Bynum tells Loomis about Selig and his people-finding abilities. Once Loomis and Bynum meet, Bynum is all about prompting Selig to find Martha. When Selig returns, Loomis pays him to find Martha.

According to Burton, what Loomis is really looking for is his identity, Joe Turner's Come and Gone" is a ritual drama where the protagonist's spiritual confrontation with his identity is ritualized and theatricalized concretely on stage. [...] operating on a metaphysical" level (7). The first round of this on-going "spiritual confrontation" is realized by the end of Act One, as Loomis appears to be possessed and has a vision.

Act Two opens the next day. Seth tells Loomis he has to leave the boardinghouse, after his outburst. Loomis reminds Seth that he is paid up through the week, so he is not going anywhere. While Seth and Bynum play dominoes, Bynum sings a song about Joe Turner, a fictional white man who imprisoned black men. Wilson uses Joe Turner as a symbolic representation of white American oppression. Though there was no real Joe Turner, there was all Joe Turney, who was the brother of Tennessee governor Peter Turney. Joe
Turney's political connection will color Wilson's depiction of the Joe Turner Loomis relationship. Loomis demands that Bynum stop singing about Joe Turner. Bynum looks at Loomis and makes a proclamation about him: Loomis has forgotten his song and how to sing it. Bynum also tells Loomis that he now knows Joe Turner enslaved Loomis, which led to Loomis suppressing his song. Loomis then recounts to Seth and Bynum how Joe Turner imprisoned him for seven years, effectively ruining his life.

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson creates black characters in Chicago in March 1927 bois allegorical representation. These characters all musicians suffocate under an oppressive American social structure that continuously tells them they are nothing even when a character has great talent as two characters (protagonist Levee and Ma) do, this talent only allows them to move up the American hierarchy to a minimal degree. Wilson adapted the real Ma Rainey's story to aid him in this allegorical play, as he created a fictional Ma Rainey by using a real blues figure.

Black rage is not a static entity, it changes and shape-shifts as the society alters, as laws are recreated, and as time marches on. The researcher feels that black rage will be present in Wilson's more current plays, as it is present in plays that took place almost a century ago. Black rage did not disappear from Wilson's play as the cycle progressed, it just changed. In most of Wilson's works, rape heals his characters; however, in two of the plays, black rape leads to murder. In all of the works, however, the significance of the rage, especially when it is used to inspire action in Wilton's characters, is paramount.

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, black rage motivates Loomis to realize his link to his African ancestors, and the strength they can provide him. Wilson depicts how rage, when it is repressed can lead to displaced Violence in Mo Romney's Black Bottom. This play is set in 1927, and still today black-on-black crime is killing members of the African-American community, just a Levee murdered Toledo, the hope for his African-American community. In
his text, Martin Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare, James H. Cone explains the plight of Levee and his kin, as well as the consequences.

In each of Wilson's plays, at least one character goes back to past, to obtain strength, or runs from the past, to avoid the pain that is housed there, or both. What Wilson is doing with his cycle of history plays is presenting his non-African American audience with the richness that is so present in African American life. For Wilson's African-American audience, if they already acknowledge the fertile experience. Wilson uses his plays to encourage a communion with their ancestors, to acknowledge the power in both the triumphs and tribulations of racism, and to help current African Americans avoid the mistakes of the past.

August Wilson's dramaturgical project is to review African American history in the twentieth century by writing a play for each decade. He re-creates and re-evaluates the choices that blacks have made in the past by refracting them through the lens of the present. Wilson focuses on the experiences and daily lives of ordinary black people within particular socio-historical circumstances. Carefully situating each play at critical junctures in African-American history. Wilson explores the pain and perseverance the determination and dignity in these black lives. He has now written plays for the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Viewed together, these plays represent a decidedly proactive dramaturgy that not only reflects on the past but intends to empower the African American present and future. Implicitly and explicitly within his dramaturgy Wilson desires to recuperate the African in African American experiences. Wilson's plays talk to each other, repeating, revising, and building upon narrative tropes. Images and concepts that are developed in one play are extended and re-imagined in subsequent plays.

In Wilson's plays, music and song act as metaphors for African American identity, spirit, and soul. Through the invisible presence and symbolic activities of offstage white
characters, Wilson suggests that the dominant culture has continually sought to subjugate African American humanity and suppress the power and ability of African Americans to sing their song. This musical metaphor has considerable contemporary significance. It reflects on the ways black cultural expression has been commercialized and exploited in today's mediatized culture. The raw, hard edge and social critique of black urban rap music, for example, has been commoditized and softened to sell everything from soft drinks to hamburgers. In addition, Ma Rainey's obstinacy in the face of white hegemony parallels Wilson's own struggle against cooperation as a black artist and his desire to maintain his creative integrity and autonomy. Wilson's fiercer resolve not to allow the film version of Fences to go forward without a black director evidences his determination to protect his agency as a black artist. One theme that Wilson continually improvises on in his work is the struggle for African Americans to find connections, to reorient and re-establish themselves after the disorienting and dislocating experiences of the Middle Passage, slavery and the northern migrations.

The present paper has read the two plays Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom of August Wilson in a Post-Colonial angle by discussing the subjectivity of the Africans and suggests to read the same and other plays of August Wilson by projecting the other feature of Post Colonialism.
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