

August Wilson's Absurd Female Characters' Spirituality in American African Society

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Abstract

One of America's most powerful and original dramatists, August Wilson offered an alternative history of the twentieth century, as seen from the perspective of black Americans. He celebrated the lives of those seemingly pushed to the margins of national life, but who were simultaneously protagonists of their own drama and evidence of a vital and compelling community. Decade by decade, he told the story of a people with a distinctive history who forged their own future, aware of their roots in another time and place, but doing something more than just survive. Wilson deliberately addressed black America, but in doing so he discovered an international audience.

Keywords: August Wilson, Absurd Female Characters, Spirituality, Siren American African

INTRODUCTION

Theatre of the Absurd

As a reaction in view of life reflected in form and content to conventional dramas, came "The Theatre of the Absurd". The dictionary definition of the word absurd is something which is out of harmony without reason or logic. In the general sense, it means ridiculous however this is not the sense it is used for to define the absurdist plays. The term "absurd" is narrowed down ... to connote man trapped in a hostile universe that was totally subjective, and made to describe the nightmare that could follow when purposelessness, solitude and silence were taken to the ultimate degree.

1 In his essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined the term absurd as something which is ... devoid of purpose. ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions became senseless, absurd, and useless.

The term "The Theatre of the Absurd" is coined by the critic, Esslin deriving from Camus' Myth of Sisyphus. Camus, in his essay reflected the man's absurd existence based on the Myth of Sisyphus who was given the task to roll a rock up to the peak of a mountain yet the rock would definitely roll down and Sisyphus had to do it every day, obviously

reaching nowhere. Camus conceived postwar man not much different from Sisyphus. He too, wakes up, washes his face, shaves, has his breakfast and goes to work only to do the same tasks day after day. Camus gives a picture of postwar world in his essay as;

Thus the postwar man feels locked up in a world of irrationality for there is no way to give a meaning to his life that composes of but his daily routines. Esslin deriving from that essay, traced the elements or the ways in which the plays expressed the absurdity of human life and grouped those plays under the term "absurd." Plays meriting the term "Theatre of the Absurd", abandoned conventional dramatic structures and staged a reflection of the absurdity of life.

The self that was alienated fragmented and unable to communicate had to face such a world of irrationality. Introduction of the unknown unconscious in the field of psychoanalysis was another factor that added much to the sense of not being able to understand fully the self and the world. It is no coincidence that absurd plays in the modern sense started to be produced at those times. It is in nature of the artist to reflect the vision of the world in way that he/ she can do best. Absurdist playwrights theorized and produced plays that thoroughly expressed the absurd human condition in universe. Absurd plays are also responses to the dominant philosophy of the postwar times; the philosophy of the absurd, in broader sense is the existentialism, in the way of expressing human condition. Existentialist thought basically rejects validity and reality of general concepts. In idealistic philosophy, the concepts as the good or the evil are conceived as real and contain the reflection of the particular of the good or the evil in themselves. Thus the particular mirrors the essence and essence comes before the existence. Existentialism reacts against the idealistic philosophy and argues that existence comes before essence. In this way human beings become the particular, individual and unique. Everyone has his or her own ways of being. This concludes in that human being is responsible for his or her own actions and that there is free will. However, one cannot find the answers to the questions; why human exists, why we are here and what life is after all. In contrast to such ambiguities, what is clear is that human existence is absurd for the efforts of humanity to find a meaning in universe will definitely fail as life carries no such meaning at least at the level of humanity. In this sense the theatre of the absurd reflected the negative side of Sartre's existentialism and staged futility of human condition and purposelessness of life.

Anti-drama

Drama usually has its own characteristics from its origins. Traditional dramas are easy to understand from its contents and themes, but the Theater of the Absurd is difficult to understand from many aspects. The Theatre of the Absurd appeared in 1950s, while traditional drama appeared several hundreds of years earlier. Traditional dramas and the Theater of the Absurd become popular in different times and the latter's emergence has its own special social background. They have their own representative playwrights respectively. Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw are the representative playwrights of traditional drama in Britain. While another group of playwrights, such as Beckett, Pinter and Albee belong to the Theater of the Absurd. The two different groups had formed different characteristics, but all of them obey the rules and forms of the ordinary drama.

We cannot say that they are absolutely opposite. The two groups have intersections from language to artistic techniques. The Theater of the Absurd has some characteristics of the traditional dramas. Meanwhile, it has some unique characteristics, and all these characteristics hide beneath the surface of the absurd dramas. In traditional dramas, plot is clear and the contents are easy to grasp for common people. The main characters often are endowed with particular and typical behavior and personalities. So when you read or appreciate the drama, you will soon pick him or her up among the crowd. Another point is that the language in traditional drama is usually simple and suitable for common sense. For instance, though Shakespeare's plays were written many years ago, people can grasp their contents and enjoy them easily when they read them. That is why most people in our daily lives choose to read and appreciate traditional dramas.

Themes of the Theater Of The Absurd

Theater originally is used to show the reality on the stages. But everybody knows that reality is serious and full of dangers and adventures and it usually gives us tragic effects. Using comic form to end a play is a relative comfortable and moderate way. It can be accepted by common people more easily after comparing with other forms. When you begin to read the play, you may laugh at the characters and their words and behaviors. But after you finish reading the play, you may change your mind and consider its theme once again. You will consider that it is worthwhile to regard the play as a tragicomedy. Degradation and oppression should have been part of the tragic theme, but many playwrights in the Theater of the Absurd describe them in a happy and comic form. When you read this kind of play, you may feel ridiculous about them.

Cruelty of Human Beings

In the Theater of the Absurd, playwrights try to explore the crisis and cruelty of human beings. The Theater of the Absurd appeared in 1950s. At that time, economy developed very fast in western world. All kinds of new technologies were used in every field. People who wanted to survive must catch up with the step and variation of the society as soon as possible. If they could not keep pace with the speed of the society, they would be abandoned and lose themselves in it. Some of them were destined to be left and they could not find their status and identification. So it doomed that their minds were full of crisis and cruelty and usually their thoughts were strange and curious. Some pioneers wrote their minds and thoughts in the Theater of the Absurd to reveal their inner feelings. In contrast, traditional playwrights involve in more extensive themes, such as politics, economics and culture. Playwrights in the Theater of the Absurd regard the crisis and cruelty of human beings as one of its themes (Wang, 1995).

Dissimilation of the Society

Dissimilation means that people regard the metamorphic things as normal things. Dissimilation of the society means that many abnormal things have appeared, what's more, these phenomena have been regarded as normal things. Disease, death and hunger are often regarded as the themes to discuss. Evil, crime and violence are often thought to be natural things in the society. When people come across these occasions, they would feel sad and sympathetic for the dead or the patients. But in the Theater of the Absurd,

people consider it in an indifferent attitude. The world makes people feel unconcerned and even unmerciful. People no longer believe in any gods who can save them from the heaven. Material life is thought at the first place. Meanwhile, money is considered the most important thing in the world. Money is the first condition before people do everything. People live in a world where love and mutual assistance are meaningless. There is no love and trust among them.

Meaninglessness of the Existence of Human Beings

To the two characters in *Waiting for Godot*, the meaning of their lives is just endless waiting. They could not find what they are waiting for. Their life is meaningless. They even could not find the essence of human existence. Though they live in the real world, their lives are ridiculous. In the Theater of the Absurd, playwrights express their true feelings to this world by means of the protagonist whom they have depicted in their plays. A play, in fact, is a mirror which reflects the real phenomena in the society. In the Theater of the Absurd the playwrights strive to express the senselessness of the human race and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theater of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumption and the form in which these are expressed. They live in a real world, but they don't feel their existence. In fact, they are afraid of their existence, so they would rather put themselves in a confused or unconscious condition. Only when they don't realize their existence can they feel that they are alive. Most poor people exist and live in endless poverty, and life is terrible to them. If they consider their lives earnestly, their lives are miserable and painful. Only when they forget the reality can they abandon the suffering and feel their existence. But suffering is endless as long as they live, so they have to endure them from cradle to grave (Diao, 2008).

Isolation among People

In the society described by the Theater of the Absurd, the relationship among people is measured through material and money. When they face some dangers and problems, few people come to help them. People who live in this society for a long time will feel lonely and indifferent. Human beings communicate with each other in a cold and detached attitude. Because of this, people gradually have less communication and would rather locked themselves in cages. And once more the chain reactions lead to a serious isolation among people. Therefore, the isolation is just like a snowball which is growing in people's heart. People seldom communicate with each other and hardly believe in each other. Because selfishness and fright fill their hearts, they are afraid that people who have higher social status than them will laugh at or look down upon them. So they try their best to cover and hide themselves under the surface of the material. And their desires and pursuits are put in their hearts silently even if they have rights to express them. In *Waiting for Godot*, the boys seem to be good friends, but the relationship between them is isolated and unconcerned. They cannot bring any warmth and comfort to each other. They communicate in just a few of words without much feeling and concern (Wang, 2001). The condition of little care or concern would make people feel lonely and helpless.

Only in the Theater of the Absurd can this phenomenon express the original and true features of the society.

August Wilson

Wilson's(1945 –2005) extensive use of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh resulted in its later "awarding" him an honorary high school diploma. Wilson, who said he had learned to read at the age of 4, began reading black writers at the library when he was 12 and spent the remainder of his teen years educating himself through the books of Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and others.

Although Wilson was a very different type of writer than Baraka, Jorge Luis Borges, a short story writer from Argentina, created a writing formula that intrigued Wilson. He didn't save the ending of the story for a big climactic finish; instead, he let the characters tell their own future, sometimes at the beginning of the narrative. Wilson was never a writer that revealed a big secret; instead he calmly allows the story to flow. In *Gem*, this is exemplified in the first act where there is hardly any action, while the major action of the play rests somewhere about two-thirds of the way into the story. He allows the resolution of *Gem* to easily flow into Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, the next play in the Cycle.

Through artist Romare Bearden's collages of African American life, Wilson was finally able to see the stories he had imagined on the page. To Wilson, Bearden had managed to capture the spirit of African American-ness on canvases. Three of his collage works were the direct inspiration for two plays: Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson* in the Cycle. Wilson even began to use Bearden's technique of assembling pieces to create his own works. He began to realize that putting together his works was easier if he found bits and pieces of dialogue, character, setting, etc. and patched the work together as a whole later. In our production of *Gem*, the back drop was designed in a collage format. Our scenic team sewed together a random collection of fabrics that were dyed in different ways to create collage-like walls that enveloped the set, creating an exclusive world for the production. From these four inspirations Wilson took what was most relevant to his own work. Later in his career he added two writers, Ed Bullins and James Baldwin, his fifth and sixth B's. Both of these writers wrote about everyday life, and Wilson liked their representations of what life was like on an everyday basis. All of the elements that these B's possess inspired Wilson to create the works he did and shaped him as an artist. A piece of each of these inspirations is in all of Wilson's works.

American African Society

African-American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. It begins with the works of such late 18th-century writers as Phillis Wheatley. Before the high point of slave narratives, African-American literature was dominated by autobiographical spiritual narratives. The genre known as slave narratives in the 19th century were accounts by people who had generally escaped from slavery, about their journeys to freedom and ways they claimed their lives. The Harlem *Renaissance* of the 1920s was a great period of flowering in literature and the arts, influenced both by writers who came North in the Great Migration and those who were

immigrants from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands. African-American writers have been recognized by the highest awards, including the Nobel Prize to Toni Morrison. Among the themes and issues explored in this literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, and social equality. African-American writing has tended to incorporate oral forms, such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues, or rap. In broad terms, African-American literature can be defined as writings by people of African descent living in the United States. It is highly varied. African-American literature has generally focused on the role of African Americans within the larger American society and what it means to be an American.

Black characters in black drama are opposite to the white and superior characters that we have in American literature especially in black playwright's characters. This study tries to show some features such as spirituality beauty social position that black women have been presented by the American writers. This study will show the effect of presence of this female black characters on the society and the family because the situation that they live sometimes are absurd and their attempt has no success for them.

Absurdity

An absurdity is a thing that is extremely unreasonable, so as to be foolish or not taken seriously, or the state of being so. "Absurd" is an adjective used to describe an absurdity, e.g., "Tyler and the boys laughed at the absurdity of the situation." "This encyclopedia article is absurd". It derives from the Latin *absurdum* meaning "out of tune", hence irrational. The Latin *surdus* means "deaf", implying stupidity. Absurdity is contrasted with seriousness in reasoning. In general usage, absurdity may be synonymous with ridiculousness and nonsense. In specialized usage, absurdity is related to extremes in bad reasoning or pointlessness in reasoning; ridiculousness is related to extremes of incongruous juxtaposition, laughter, and ridicule; and nonsense is related to a lack of meaningfulness.

The meaning of spirituality has developed and expanded over time, and various connotations can be found alongside each other. The term "spirituality" originally developed within early Christianity, referring to a life oriented toward the Holy Spirit. During late medieval times the meaning broadened to include mental aspects of life, while in modern times the term both spread to other religious traditions and broadened to refer to a wider range of experience, including a range of esoteric traditions.

Female Characters

Womanhood

Berniece's womanhood is centered on her devotion as mother to Maretha. She does not have time to entertain the affections of a man. Avery, an admirer, falls in love but she does not love him. Avery does not understand Berniece's unwillingness to marry him. Berniece may not want to get remarried because she wants to have the freedom to do things without a man telling her what to do. Since her husband's death, she has been making all of the decisions. She thinks that if she marries Avery she will be confining herself to the

role of wife, catering to her husband's every need, in addition to the role of mother. Ultimately, Berniece stands firm with her decision not to marry Avery even though she is pressured to marry him. There are two main scenes where Berniece's womanhood can be seen; the first is the scene where Avery questions Berniece's womanhood:

EVERY. You too young a woman to close up, Berniece.

BERNIECE. I am not said nothing about closing up. I got a lot of woman left in me.

EVERY. Where's it at? When's the last time you looked at it? (Wilson, Piano 66)

The second scene is between Lymon and Berniece. After having a nice conversation together Lymon caresses her as he puts some perfume on her neck and

Then kisses her. Berniece returns the kiss only to recoil in fear. Afraid of her vulnerability she runs away before an innocent kiss can blossom into something more. Berniece flees from Avery's sexual advances the same as she does Limon's. I believe this is the reason Avery questions Berniece's womanhood. Her inability to be vulnerable with a man prevents her from engaging in a romantic relationship with Avery or Lymon.

Berniece's womanhood can also be expressed by the Blues. Barbara Christian the narrator of the movie *A Conversation with August Wilson* quotes Wilson as saying, "the Blues is an oral tradition that help sustains southern black culture.

Spirituality

Rhetoric about spirituality and the human search for spiritual answers has been part of history for many years, and spiritual care has been part of American literature history since ancient times (Narayanasamy 1999c). Humans have a profound need to understand their spirits (Freeman 1998), which is the core of human existence and the most elusive and mysterious constituent of our human nature (Macquarrie 1972, p. 43), because being spiritual is part of being human (Wright 1998, Cairns 1999). In the last few decades, there has been a resurgence of spiritual discourse, as scientific-based approaches are not fully able to address many fundamental human problems such as persistent pain (Sundblom et al. 1994).

Furthermore, people are searching for peace, meaningful lives, and connections (Walsh 1999), and are seeking answers to increased societal and cultural problems such as violence (Thoresen 1999). Additionally, people are increasingly frustrated by the impersonal managed health care system in the United States of America (USA) and are looking elsewhere for answers to their health concerns (Gundersen 2000). Despite a renewed interest in spirituality, there is no consensus on a definition of this concept (Dyson et al. 1997, Martsolf & Mickley 1998, McSherry & Draper 1998, George et al. 2000) due to its subjective and personal nature (Cawley 1997, Miller & Thoresen 1999). The purpose of this analysis is to attempt to clarify the meaning of spirituality in relation to American literature, in order to enhance communication and influence how nurses might incorporate this concept into practice, education, and research. The conceptual analysis strategy offered by Walker and Avant (1995) is used as the conceptual framework.

CONCLUSION

According to Chinn and Kramer (1999), a concept is a complex mental formulation of experience as perceived in the world (p. 54, 1999). Walker and Avant (1995) state that concept analysis is used to describe and examine a word and its usage in language and American literature; that is, to determine what the concept is, and what it is not. It is also useful to clarify ambiguity of a concept in literature, scholarly discussions, and in practice when multiple definitions are present. Furthermore, concept analysis may yield precise operational definitions, defining attributes and antecedents, and provide new tools for theory and research development, or may be used for evaluating established tools. Clinically, concept analysis is useful in the process of formulating and evaluating American literature diagnoses (Walker & Avant 1995).

Walker and Avant's (1995) iterative steps of concept analysis include: the selection of a concept; the aims of the analysis; all the various uses of the concept; the defining attributes of the concept; the model case that epitomizes the concept; the other cases that are related or different from the model case; the antecedents and consequences of the concept; and the empirical referents of the concept. The first two processes have already been described. Walker and Avant (1995) assert that the defining attributes of a concept may allow one to develop case examples of what the concept is or what it is not. Cawley (1997) argues that using this framework and the attributes of spirituality to develop a contrary case that exemplifies none of the components of spirituality is problematic, because spirituality is a phenomenon common to all humans. Since a contrary case of spirituality seems problematic, this author uses a man-made robot in a contrary case in lieu of a human being. This framework has also been criticized for having a positivist paradigm (Rodgers 1989). In spite of these criticisms, this framework is useful to this author because of its step-by-step and iterative approach of analyzing a concept, thereby facilitating an in-depth analysis. Furthermore, this framework has been used by others who have analyzed this concept (Meraviglia 1999).

While Hedley processes his chick-ends for sandwiches, the other men strut around the backyard in their Pittsburgh neighborhood like roosters scratching for territory. They crow in unison, each with his own voice, and they peck at each other as they "strut their stuff." For example, Floyd and Cane well criticize Red's cigars and compare them to more expend-save brands. In another scene, they extol the merits of their weapon of choice, be it gun or knife. Next to the backyard, is Miss Tiller's barnyard and her rooster, which announces itself in the second scene and becomes the object of comic abuse as well as a symbol of the dilemma of this shifting black population Floyd says the rooster makes too much noise and would never be allowed in Chicago. To Cane well, the rooster is a reminder of the painful past. "The rooster didn't crow during slavery," he says. "If you think I'm lying, go and find you somebody from back in slavery time and ask them if they ever heard a rooster crow. Hedley, after hearing all the grousing about the rooster, bolts from the backyard and returns with the bird. He tells the group that God is not going to make any more roosters, and maybe He won't make any more black men either. Hedley continues: "You hear the rooster, you know you're alive." 3 Then Hedley wrings its neck and slits its throat.

This chilling moment is both a curse and a prophecy. As Wilson says: "Hedley's whole warning is 'If the rooster has become useless, then what about you? Maybe you'll become useless, too.' If you don't connect to the past, then you don't know who you are in the present. You may prove to be unworn- thy of the past." The recipes of the black South bring sustenance and comfort to these characters. The play opens with sweet potato pie being served at Floyd's funeral; later, Louise threatens Hedley with no more plates of collard greens and black- eyed peas if he doesn't bring her cigarettes. Finally, there is Conwell's comparison of a woman to a watermen- on, and his recipe for fixing turnip greens; in his eyes, it is a recipe for happiness. He carefully tells her how to plant the roots.

In truth, it is Canewell who wants to put down roots. He is sick of the road music business and is looking for a good women with whom to settle down. Finally, the violent and mysterious ending. As chickens, roosters, food, and gardens are equated with a simple, rustic, rural life, so are two other themes related to urbanity and "city blues." Almost everybody has a weapon; Floyd has his .38; Louise has her 32 caliber; Carter has a gun; Canewell has his knife and Hedley, his machete. Because Wilson's characters are trying to change their situations, to make luck hap- pen, they arm themselves. Wilson says this stance is "about black power and self-determination....Black power means we can alter relationships to society to gain power. We can alter how we see ourselves. Finally, there is justice and jail. Floyd is stopped with empty pockets by the police, arrested for vagrancy, and serves 30 days in the workhouse. Canewell was arrested in Chicago for playing his harmonica, thus disturbing the peace. Red says you need a license to do anything—including walking down the street. These men are punished for doing nothing; ironically, when Floyd commits a crime, he is not apprehended. "Through Floyd, Wilson comments on the discrepancy between black lives and American Justice: 'Now here's what I don't understand. If I go out there and punch a white man in the mouth, they give me five years even if there isn't no witnesses. Joe Louis beat up a white man in front of 100,000 people and they give him a million dollars. Now you explain that to me.

The play is the urban challenge versus the South's roots. It is guns and knives versus Miss Tiller's rooster and, in the end, neither the bullet nor the bird win. (Gass, 1996). Sally R. Gass in his article seven guitar stated that Pittsburgh, 1948: In Louise's backyard, a group of friends gather after the funeral of Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton, whose sudden death has cut short a blues guitar career that had just been on the verge of taking off. The friends talk about the mysteries of Floyd's death and the black-hatted angels who seemed to appear at the grave site to bear him away. To the sounds of his first hit recording, "That's All Right," the play jumps back in time to piece together the final days of Floyd's life. The play recounts Floyd coming home from his mother's funeral with empty pockets and being stopped by the police and arrested for vagrancy. In the workhouse, Floyd discovers he has a hit record, but no hit record money. When released, he gets a letter from his white producer inviting him back to Chicago to cut another record. Floyd sees the summons as a promise that he will become a star—all he has to do is find a way to get enough money together for him and his band to return to Chicago. In the backyard, we

meet Floyd's band members and his friends. Red Carter is the drummer who would happily return to Chicago if Floyd could get his drums out of hock.

Canewell is the harmonica player who is reluctant to go back, though he hungers for fame. He is tired of the road and would like to put down roots. Then there is the tubercular Hedley, who earns his living processing chickens in his makeshift backyard slaughterhouse and dreams that the legendary New Orleans trumpeter Buddy Bolden will come down and give him money for a plantation. The women of the play, a bit worn around the edges, epitomize love gone wrong. Vera, Floyd's girl-friend, takes him back after he left her for another, but she's ambivalent about going to Chicago. Louise, the landlady, has sworn off men and doesn't want anyone knocking on her door anymore. And finally we meet Ruby, Louise's promiscuous niece, who has just fled Alabama where one man killed another over her. All of the characters, in one way or another, are involved with Floyd and his strategy to obtain the money to go to Chicago. But Floyd's plans appear to be ruined when he discovers that the agent who was to finance the trip has been arrested. His only recourse is to use the money he's been saving for a marker for his mother's grave. But that's not nearly enough, so Floyd takes a chance—a gamble that changes everything for Floyd and leads us to the secret behind his death. (Gass, 1948)

Fences: August Wilson did not name his play, *Fences*, simply because the dramatic action depends strongly on the building of a fence in the Maxson's backyard. Rather, the characters' lives change around the fence-building project, which serves as both a literal and a figurative device, representing the relationships that bond and break in the arena of the backyard. The fact that Rose wants the fence built adds meaning to her character because she sees the fence as something positive and necessary. Bono observes that Rose wants the fence built to hold in her loved ones. To Rose, a fence is a symbol of her love and her desire for a fence indicates that Rose represents love and nurturing. Troy and Cory on the other hand think the fence is a drag and reluctantly work on finishing Rose's project. Bono also observes that to some people, fences keep people out and push people away. Bono indicates that Troy pushes Rose away from him by cheating on her. Troy's lack of commitment to finishing the fence parallels his lack of commitment in his marriage. The fence appears finished only in the final scene of the play, when Troy dies and the family reunites. The wholeness of the fence comes to mean the strength of the Maxson family and ironically, the strength of the man who tore them apart, who also brings them together one more time, in death.

The Devil: Troy casts the Devil as the main character of his exaggerated stories that entertain, bewilder, and frustrate his family and friends. Eventually, Troy's association of the Devil as a harbinger of death comes to represent his struggle to survive the trials of his life. Many scenes in the play end with Troy speaking a soliloquy to Death and the Devil. In Act 1, Scene 1, Troy spins a long yarn or tale about his fight for several days with the Devil. The story of the Devil endears Troy to audiences early on by revealing his capability to imagine and believe in the absurd. In another story, Troy turns a white salesman into a Devil. Troy calls a man the Devil who tried to sell Troy furniture in exchange for monthly payments by mail. Again, providing the pragmatic version of the story, Rose explains why Troy invents stories about the Devil. "Anything you don't understand, you call the Devil."

Troy observes door-to-door salesmen and the process of layaway for the first time and in his ignorance, turns a modern occurrence into a mythical story.

Troy also describes the Devil's appearance as a man in a white hood. Wilson conjures the image of KKK members in KKK regalia with this description. Troy imagines the Devil, not just as an comprehension. His use of the word, "Chinese" to describe jazz music is a derogatory remark that backfires on Troy because it says more about his own failure to appreciate an ingenious invention by people of his own culture (and his lack of appreciation for Chinese culture) than it insults Lyons. Similarly, Lyons and Bono expose other weaknesses of Troy when they tease him for being illiterate and unable to drive. Wilson makes an argument here that Troy's lack of education and lack of worldliness or cultural literacy contribute to his black and white decisions about others' lifestyles and therefore, act as additional components to the roots of Troy's conflict with other characters in the play. Troy and Bono's memories provide Lyons with an unwritten history of his culture. Slavery displaced many African American families. Slave owners often forced African Americans to live far apart from parents, spouses, siblings, and young children by selling some family members to distant plantations. Troy and Bono's fathers were likely born into slavery or slave like conditions. Their fathers' parents were almost definitely born into slavery and may not have had a nuclear family to model as an adult. The family units in Bono and Troy's lives were fractured by wandering parents who sought solace in escape from parental responsibilities, a lack of commitment, a zealous work ethic, and/ or violence.

Wilson's first Broadway play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), had been an instant hit, and this success continued through to *Piano Lesson* (1987), which first played at the Yale Repertory Theatre, then opened on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theatre in 1990. Wilson's subsequent plays, however, met with more muted success. Though a lesser theatrical commercial success than *Fences*, *Piano Lesson* encapsulates all of Wilson's art and politics, going beyond the simpler realism of *Fences* and offering within its single form a complete survey of black experience in America since slavery. Wilson has won the most New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards of any playwright, and a prior Pulitzer for *Fences*, but with its Pulitzer, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, and subsequent Hallmark Hall of Fame television production in 1995, which was able to reach an even vaster audience than its 328 theater performances, *Piano Lesson* marks the pinnacle of Wilson's achievement. Reviews of both play and film (for which Wilson wrote the screenplay) were predominantly positive, and Charles S. Dutton, who had previously played

Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, was highly praised for his performance as Boy Willie in each. Critic Clive Barnes described the Broadway production as the "best and most immediate" (325) of Wilson's plays, with an "iron-firm and fascinating dramatic framework," and compared Wilson's skill to that of Shakespeare (326). While William Henry III declared Wilson "has transcended the categorization of 'black' playwright to demonstrate that his stories, although consistently about black families and communities, speak to the entire U.S. culture" (329). A few, however, felt the play had too many digressions, offered contradictory opinions, and did not convincingly convey its use of the

supernatural. Robert Brustein was the most vociferous in attack, announcing the play "an overwritten exercise in a conventional style," which was misguidedly "locked in a perception of victimization" (28). He also criticized the use of the supernatural as a "contrived intrusion," inappropriate in a realist drama, and concluded that "Wilson is reaching a dead end in his examination of American racism" (29). This began a bitter feud between Wilson and Brustein over each one's perception of the future of the American theater. Meanwhile, academic critics found the play far less flawed, especially in its use of the supernatural, which is seen as a valid aspect of Wilson's desire to reconnect contemporary blacks to their past, and an element endemic to black art, with its roots in African spirituality. Likewise, the digressions and contradictions are all part of black concepts of oral history and signifyin'. The term "signifyin'" is one used in black culture to denote a style of speech uniquely African American that is often used to create a more attractive reality. These factors confirm Wilson's importance as an artist equally able to speak to blacks and whites, within a predominantly white establishment. As critic Frank Rich surmises, Wilson is a playwright able to introduce "white audiences to black America without patronizing either whites or blacks"

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