

## The Past Informing the Present: The Plays of August Wilson

By Nick Roman

The works of August Wilson present a landscape beset by social injustice. Opportunities for upward mobility are deferred by racial oppression. The gap between generations is highlighted by misplaced anger, which then crescendos to black-on-black violence. Meanwhile, black identity itself is threatened by white assimilation. It is clear that Wilson's plays are underscored by their inherent historicity. Accounts of slavery, displacement, poverty and personal trauma unite these individuals under a shared history, even as it separates them through the specificity of their individual hardships. As Mary L. Bogumil writes in her book, Understanding August Wilson, "Through the retrospective structure Wilson dramatizes the forces and factors that influence or determines a character's actions in the present" (Bogumil 11). To this end, Wilson succeeds in creating a narrative structure which dramatizes the histories that drive each character, illustrating the powerful influence of the past upon the present.

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson focuses the effect of the past on the present through the character of Levee. An ambitious, hotheaded young musician, Levee stakes his future on his musical capabilities, believing himself to be an avant-garde blues trumpeter. Levee's version of the title song is a radical reinvention of the traditional version, and it is in this way that Levee seeks to distance himself from not only his band mates, but also the historical past which, as black men, they all share. Levee asserts his identity through his music, which he believes will facilitate his advancement in a world where blacks are subjugated to white dominance. Levee understands that the future he wishes to obtain for himself requires the backing of the white record producer, Sturdyvant. However, Levee is quick to insist that his compliance in no way reflects a fear of the white man. He urges, "Just 'cause I say 'yessir' don't mean I'm spooked up with him" (68). Nevertheless, Toledo's insistence that Levee really is "spooked up" forces him to reveal his own personal history in order to reinforce his earlier declaration.

Levee recounts how his mother was raped by a number of white men and how he himself was scarred across the chest with a knife in the attempt to defend her. Levee's father sells their land and moves the family away. However, when he eventually returns to exact revenge on his wife's attackers, he is lynched for his troubles. His father's lynching motivates Levee's fearlessness:

My daddy wasn't spooked up by the white man. No sir! And that taught me how to handle them. I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker's face...smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he's planning how he's gonna get him and what he's gonna do to him. That taught me how to handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man. I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please. I got time coming to me. (70)

Where his father failed in exacting retribution, Levee intends to succeed. His music will be the vehicle for his revenge against white dominion, a power structure that left its scar indelibly etched into his skin. Much like his father, Levee openly submits himself to white superiority in order to further his goals. His pliability with the white producer and his irritability

with his black comrades is clarified by the fact that he needs the former to accomplish his goals, not the latter. This makes Levee's eventual killing of Toledo all the more heartrending, as he exacts revenge not on the white man who wronged him, but instead upon his own racial kin. Exacerbating the tragedy is the realization that whatever future Levee had once hoped for himself is now closed to him.

Wilson varies his approach in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The protagonist, Herald Loomis, is a man in search of his past because it contains the identity that was stolen from him. Arriving with his daughter Zonia at Seth Holly's boarding house, Loomis is a mysterious figure who literally looms over the action of the play. He is both a man displaced by slavery and one who perpetuates his displacement by persisting in the desperate search for his wife, Martha. Wilson reveals Loomis's past only gradually. Once a deacon who lost his church and his family when he was taken by Joe Turner, Loomis has lost a sense of individuality over the seven years he spent in indentured servitude. As Bynum, a mystical figure in the narrative, states, "Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is" (71). As a former deacon, Loomis experiences a number of spiritual outbursts, and the implication would appear to be that African-American identity is embedded within spirituality. However, it appears more likely that Wilson utilizes spirituality in order to tease out confrontations with an historical past.

In her article, "Wilson and Fugard: Politics and Art," Joanne Gordon writes, "Wilson sees himself as a kind of chronicler, taking the oral tradition of Africa and setting it down in a uniquely African American form. He insists that African Americans must rediscover their own history if they are to come to terms with their present" (Elkins 17). This carries into the midway point of the play, when Loomis walks in on a *juba*, an African song/dance that invokes the Holy Ghost. Enraged, he not only condemns the residents of the boarding house but openly mocks the *juba* by unzipping his pants and speaking in tongues. This initiates a spiritual vision in which bones walk across the ocean before dropping into the water and resurfacing as powerless Negroes, unable to stand up. Loomis soon realizes that he, too, is unable to move his legs. He says, "I got to stand up. Get up on the road" (56). Loomis exposes how he uses travel, through his seemingly endless search for Martha, to avoid confronting the affect slavery has had on his identity. His vision, in which the bones, presumably of his ancestors, come ashore as powerless beings, is representative of his own helplessness. The inability to stand serves as foreshadowing, as we now know that Loomis will not be able to leave until he rediscovers his song. Through this spiritual mechanism, Wilson brings Loomis face-to-face with his own history.

The climax of the play, in which Herald and Martha are reunited, sees Wilson further utilizing spirituality to put Loomis in confrontation with his past. Martha tells a tormented Loomis to embrace Jesus, but he denies Christ:

Great big old white man...your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And he counting. He tallying up the cotton. 'Well, Jeremiah...what's the matter, you ain't picked but two hundred pounds of cotton today? Got to put you on half rations.' And Jeremiah go back and lay up there on his half rations and talk about what a nice man Mr. Jesus

Christ is 'cause he give him salvation after he die. Something wrong here. Something don't fit right! (92-93)

In denying Christ, Loomis draws upon the historical treatment of African-Americans to inform his tirade. He presents spirituality as something to be denounced because it allows social injustice to endure. However, when Martha tells him, "You got to be clean, Herald. You got to wash yourself with the blood of the lamb" (93), Loomis takes it literally and slashes himself across the chest. Bathed in his own blood, Loomis has an epiphany. He has "found his song, the song of self-sufficiency," having finally confronted his past and "having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world" (93-94). The loss of Herald Loomis's identity was a consequence of injustices in his past. The rediscovery of his identity, however, was a consequence of his confrontation and reconciliation with that past. Wilson's narrative techniques again illustrate how the past impacts the present.

Wilson's *Fences* is a play whose setting is nearly fifty years removed from *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, though both plays present a protagonist defined by their past, as the character of Troy Maxson possesses a distinct inability to let go of his past. In his job as a garbage man, Troy observes that only white men can be drivers. Despite not knowing how to drive, Troy protests this exclusionary practice. As Wilson elaborates on Troy's history, it is clear why he protests so vehemently against exclusion. While serving a fifteen year sentence in prison for robbery and murder, Troy grew to be a gifted baseball player. But following his release, Troy was too old to play in the major leagues. Troy's bitterness, then, is influenced by the deferral of his opportunities. Whereas Herald Loomis resisted his past, Troy Maxson resists his present. He refuses to acknowledge the gradual progression of race relations as the 1950s dissolve into the 60s. The major leagues are now integrated, and Troy shows his bitterness and inability to adjust by verbally deriding the abilities of the Negro players. The animosity engendered by his past spills over into his relationship with his son, Cory. It is this relationship that involves the most significant interaction between past and present in the play.

In Act One, Wilson reveals that Troy has been on his own since the age of fourteen, having escaped from the rule of his brutish father. Troy's tumultuous relationship with his father informs his relationship with his own son. When Cory is recruited for a college football team, Troy refuses to allow him to play. Cory protests, and the ensuing tirade displays how Troy's upbringing has limited his definition of what constitutes fatherhood. "A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house...sleep you behind on my bedclothes...fill you belly up with my food...cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you" (38). Because Troy's own father was domineering and rough, he is incapable of parenting any other way. In The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson, author Harry Justin Elam writes:

In vivid detail, Troy recalls his journey into the present, his battles with his father, leaving his father's house, his early life of crime that led to manslaughter and imprisonment, his redemption through baseball and marriage to Rose. Troy's stories reach beyond the conventional temporal and spatial limits. Reexamining history, re-creating and positioning himself within the fabric of the historic narrative, Troy constructs his past in the present. (Elam 12)

Though his forbidding Cory from playing football is motivated by a desire to shield him from a social order that would simply exclude him because of his race, Troy perpetuates the errors of his father by maintaining a cold and distant workman-like demeanor. Cory's departure in Act Two, following Troy's split with Rose, underscores how Troy's behavior has driven his loved ones away from him.

The final scene of the play, set on the morning of Troy's funeral, is also important in elucidating the effect of the past on the present in the relationship between Cory and Troy. Cory returns for the first time in several years and reveals that he does not intend to go to Troy's funeral. Cory rationalizes his decision to his mother, saying, "I can't drag Papa with me everywhere I go. I've got to say no to him. One time in my life I've got to say no" (96). He resists his past in the same way Troy resisted his present. In speaking of finding "a way to get rid of that shadow" (97), Cory struggles to form an independent identity in the present, free from the towering specter of the past, as represented in Troy Maxson. However, while Rose supports her son's right to an identity separate from his father, she rejects the idea, represented in Cory's assertion that he will not attend Troy's funeral, that Cory is not beholden to his past. She declares, "You standing there all healthy and grown talking about you ain't going to your daddy's funeral?" (96). Rose's subsequent speech, coupled with meeting his young stepsister Raynell, gives Cory perspective on his late father. In singing a song taught to them by Troy, Cory and Raynell participate in a shared history, allowing Cory to reconcile his past so that the weight of his father's shadow does not bear on his present.

Finally, in *Two Trains Running*, Wilson presents a work that is motivated by change. The protagonist of the play is Memphis, a restaurant owner in Pittsburgh's Hill District. Memphis faces personal turmoil through the ruin of his marriage and the impending demolition of his restaurant, exacerbated by the city offering him less for his restaurant than what he paid. In his book, *A Companion to Twentieth Century American-Drama*, David Krasner writes, "At issue in the play is the relationship between capitalism and spirituality. Set during the time when the rhetoric of Black Nationalism and 1960s paradigms of black liberation emerged, Wilson bemoans the lack of black investment in the black community" (Krasner 329). The lack of investment by the black community in Memphis's restaurant forces him to turn to spirituality, represented in the character of Aunt Ester, to ensure that he receives the compensation to which he feels entitled.

Wilson informs Memphis's present sense of entitlement by clarifying his past. Driven from his land in Jackson, Mississippi by whites who set fire to his crops, Memphis holds onto his past and allows its memory to motivate his refusal of generous offers from both the city and from local entrepreneur Mr. West. Memphis operates under the desire to return to Jackson and reclaim his farm. By insisting that he is entitled to compensation, Memphis resists marginalization. His ultimate goal, reclaiming his land, would further combat the hegemonic white power structure that oppresses not only him, but the denizens of the Hill District, such as the eccentric Hambone.

Wilson presents the character of Hambone as both a mirror and a foil to Memphis, as both men are driven by the sting of past wrongs by the white man. Hambone is persistent in his quest of getting the ham he was promised by Lutz, the white butcher across the street, for painting his fence nine years earlier. Lutz had promised a ham but produced a chicken, and so

Hambone stands vigil outside of Lutz's meat market, adamant in his demand for the ham he is owed. Hambone's symbolic value is two-fold. When compared with Memphis, Hambone's significance is in his inactiveness. Kim Pereira writes, "Blacks are fighting back any way they can. Refusing to accept the settlement the city offers him, Memphis goes to court and is astonished to receive a greater amount than he had expected. Unless they fight and take what is theirs, they are doomed to become like Hambone, who goes insane waiting for justice" (Pereira 7). Hambone's less active role in his pursuit of justice contrasts with Memphis's aggressive campaign to seek out compensation. Memphis uses his past as fuel for his present quest, while Hambone simply waits for the white power structure to acknowledge him and grant him justice.

Hambone's second symbolic function is in death. Dying without ever receiving his ham, Hambone is a tragedy of oppression. West, the undertaker, discovers scars on Hambone's body, and it is through these physical markers that Wilson evokes the past. Hambone is the legacy of slavery in *Two Trains Running*, and his death signifies the disconnect from an historical past. The gap left by this disconnect is filled by spirituality. It is possible that the \$35,000 Memphis receives for his restaurant may have been due to his visit with Aunt Ester, who instructed him to throw twenty dollars into the river. If this is the case, Wilson reinforces the motif of African spirituality as a necessary component of an historical past. This component is shown to have immediate power in the present time of the characters in his plays. Wilson is showing the desire, perhaps even the need, for African-Americans of the period to reconnect with their roots in order to fight oppression. Of the characters in *Two Trains Running*, author C.W.E. Bigsby writes:

They live at a time of change. Some are rich, some poor, though mostly the latter, but while money remains a central theme, this is not the essence of their lives. Their struggle is to become something more than victims, to relate to their lives in some other way than that determined by a white world that we never see but which exists as some seemingly implacable reality that determines the parameters of their experience. (Bigsby 305)

Memphis embraces Aunt Ester's practices and follows her instructions to throw his money in the river, because what he stands to gain is more valuable than the money with which he'd part. He would gain not only vindication, but liberation from identifying himself as a victim. Hambone, whether due to his limited mental capacity or because he felt his approach would best deliver him justice, never sees such vindication. This may well inform the significance of the play's title, as the eponymous locomotives could be Memphis and Hambone, two men who have been undersold by the white man in the past but who take different paths in retaliating against him in the present.

August Wilson has created a narrative structure that illustrates the prevailing influence of the past upon the present. Not only are the individual histories of Wilson's characters important, but the history of the African-American experience is vital in illuminating the motivations behind their actions in the present. His narrative structure unlocks meaning through linear progression. As in the cases of Troy Maxson, Herald Loomis, Levee, and Memphis, Wilson scatters back-story throughout the narrative. In doing so, he creates a layered narrative in which each successive revelation about a character informs some aspect of what is happening and what is yet to come.

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