

August Wilson: The Search for Black Identity and Social Standing in 20th Century America

By Meredith Kiffer

“Before one can become an artist one must first be. It is being in all facets, its many definitions that endows the artist with an immutable sense of himself that is necessary for the accomplishments of his tasks. Simply put, art is beholden to the kiln in which the artist was fired. Before I am anything, a man or a playwright, I am an African-American. The tributary streams of culture, history and experience have provided me with the materials out of which I make my art.”

~August Wilson, *New York Times*

August Wilson’s characters, before they are anything: male or female, rich or poor, streetwise or educated, are black. The theme hidden within each of his plays is the need to study one’s cultural identity in order to fully understand one’s personal identity. In Wilson’s case, that is black identity. He wrote extensively on the need to establish one’s identity, perhaps out of a desire to establish his own. Wilson’s biography is well documented: he was born Frederick August Kittle in 1945, the child of a white father and black mother. His father was largely absent from his life, and he “grew up in (his) mother’s household in a cultural environment which was black.” (post-gazette) He was raised in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, which he has described as a “mixed neighborhood...people who had not made their way into American society yet. They were outcasts themselves, and so they lived in the community with the black folks” (Fitzgerald, 3).

After dropping out of school, he self-educated in the public library and spent time listening to the language of the people around him in the Hill District communities. Wilson’s mother was a huge influence: “As (August) memorably put it, ‘I grew up without a father. When I was 20, I went down onto Central Avenue to learn from the community how to be a man.’” (Rawson). He also proclaimed his cultural identity by taking his mother’s last name upon his father’s death. He spent time in the Army, worked as a cook, a stock boy and a mailroom clerk, among many other jobs. He believed in black identity movements and fought for social justice, and “considered himself ‘a black nationalist and a cultural nationalist’” (Rawson).

Wilson also experimented with religions, and nearly became a Muslim. Wilson began his writing career as a poet, co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre in Pittsburgh, moved to St. Paul in the late 1970s and began his theatre work in earnest. He wrote and submitted several plays to the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center before *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* was accepted. The Broadway production of *Ma Rainey* set his career in motion; Wilson enjoyed success and recognition as one of America’s premier playwrights, held in the same regard as Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. At an early point in his playwriting career, Wilson realized he had written three plays set in three different decades in the 20th century, and decided to continue that theme, so that he never had to worry what his next play would be about. And so was born August Wilson’s famous Pittsburgh Cycle, 10 plays chronicling the black experience in 20th century America: “a construct of frustration, nostalgia, anger and dream” (Rawson).

All of Wilson's plays revolve around characters in search of themselves, in search of their identity, of their "song", of their sense of belonging in the world. The opening play in the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* concentrates on the journey towards self-discovery; set in the shadow of Reconstruction, the characters are in the midst of reconstructing their identities. The play contains both journeyers and conductors, spiritual and physical journeys, and Christian and African spiritualities. Aunt Ester Tyler is a "conjure woman", the allegorical representation of slavery, a bond to the history of bondage, and the culmination of the history of blacks in America. "She is the embodiment of African-American wisdom, tradition and folklore" (Introduction). She guides Citizen Barlow on a spiritual journey of self-discovery to the City of Bones, where he must relive his past in order to see his future. "Aunt Ester is the repository of 'the blood's memory' as Wilson often called it; she contains, he said, the 'valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personality...'" (Introduction). Citizen returns from his journey with a sense of purpose, he is "all filled up inside" (*Gem of the Ocean*, 76), he continues the work of conducting the new citizens, the newly freed blacks into the relative freedom of the North.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone, the next in the cycle, also focuses on the search for one's "song", or soul. Herald Loomis is a man recently set free from Joe Turner's chain gang in search of his wife, Martha. All of the characters in *Joe Turner* are connected to the road, either physically or metaphorically on a journey to find their new identity in light of the newfound Negro freedom. At this point in American history, the black man is on a search for his roots and his ancestry in an attempt to identify and define himself. Loomis has to choose between his African ancestry and the white culture he has grown up with. *Joe Turner* is Wilson's first attempt at contrasting Christianity and African spirituality. The characters perform the Juba- a frenzied spiritual African dance in which Loomis relives the Middle Passage, rejects God, and is paralyzed by his lack of identity. By the end of the play, Loomis severs "the bonds that have been binding him" (*Conversations with August Wilson*, 113), turns his back on Martha, on Christianity, and has found his "song" in his acceptance of and responsibility for his presence in the world.

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the question of identity shifts to social standings, both against the white man and the fellow black man. The most obvious race issue in the play is equality and subservience; the characters perform a tenuous dance with the power continually shifting between the white producers Sturdyvant and Irvin and black vocalist Ma Rainey. The black musicians who accompany Ma Rainey have nothing to offer the white producers, and therefore have no position of equality and are treated accordingly. Wilson's characters in "Ma Rainey" represent two ways of dealing with the white world: "Toledo's is rational and acceptive, but Levee's, [which] is impulsive and veers to extremes..." (*Conversations with August Wilson*, 16) Levee hopes "to win the white man's favor and thus to be associated with his power..." (Usekes, 3) Both characters feel they have an elevated status among the rest of the musicians, which they use to manipulate the others: Toledo is educated and well read, whereas Levee has "street smarts" and the ability to write music. He clashes with the other black men, especially Toledo, because of his willingness to endorse the white men's choices. The play's climactic end is a result of the power struggle: when Levee's method of complying with the white producers doesn't have his desired effect, he takes out his anger on Toledo, "stabbing to death his fellow

musician who, ironically had earlier warned him about what to expect from white folks like Sturdyvant” (Usekes, 4).

Jumping ahead in the cycle, *Fences* is a continuation of the study of the social standings of the black man. Those social standings can mean his place in society, such as the place where a man is not fit to play professional sports if his skin is too dark; or it can mean his place in relationships with his family and friends, such as an over-protective father or philandering husband. Troy Maxson is a man living in the frustrating era that promised freedoms for African Americans only on paper. The American Dream was held up before them, but would remain intangible until the next decade and beyond. Again, the characters struggle against white society and their fellow blacks: while Troy successfully petitions his white employer to allow him to drive the garbage truck, a position held only by the white workers, he refuses to allow his son Cory to pursue his dream of playing college football. Troy believes he is saving his son from disappointment, and perhaps he is, because as he comes to realize, driving the garbage truck isn't the dream job he thought it would be. *Fences* also presents family battles and the need to identify oneself in relation to one's family, portraying the power struggle between Troy and Cory; the marital issues between Rose and Troy; the responsibility for and eventual abandonment of brother Gabriel.

Wilson focused on the need to study one's cultural identity in order to fully understand one's personal identity. His characters are searching for themselves within the spectrum of 20th century America. They, like Wilson, “take the entire black experience in America, from the first black in 1619 until now, and claim that as [their] material. (Conversations with August Wilson, 210) The characters in *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* especially, as well as those in the rest of Wilson's plays, vacillate between Christian and African ideals. Wilson has stated, “...when you look in the mirror, you should see your god. If you don't, then you have someone else's god” (*Conversations with August Wilson*, 110). The characters in Wilson's plays have both their own gods and someone else's. Wilson resembles both the African and Christian gods, and included both in all of his plays.

Many of Wilson's plays depict characters on a physical journey, such as *Herald Loomis* and *Citizen Barlow*: they represent all the blacks that suddenly found themselves without a purpose after the Emancipation Proclamation. Wilson drifted for years before embarking on a career as a playwright. He has often stated that his purpose is to portray the black struggle, to set the record straight, “to take custodianship of the Negro experience” (Fitzgerald, 7), perhaps out of a desire to take custodianship of his own personal identity. Social standing is another theme Wilson explores in his plays: the decision to integrate into white culture or to maintain a separate black culture often results in opposition and violence between both races. *Levee* and *Toledo* fight not because they are attempting to reach the same point, but because they have two different means to their end. Wilson has decided to maintain a separate black culture, but his chosen profession requires an integration into white culture, and is partially for the benefit of white culture.

Despite being the product of a biracial union, August Wilson has said: “As I grew up, I learned black culture at my mother's knee, so to speak...There was no question that I was black” (*Conversations with August Wilson*, 72) He has stated that he did not make a conscious choice to

be black, it is who he has always been. And yet, every one of his plays revolves around the theme of discovering one's identity. His characters are uncertain of themselves and their position in society. They feel it necessary to experiment, and to turn to others for guidance, much like Wilson experimented in his early careers, and turned to the men in the Hill District community for guidance. Wilson explores the dichotomy of two religious identities, questions a sense of purpose in the world, and offers the choice between integrating into white culture or maintaining separate cultural values. Wilson said this directly in his television interview with Bill Moyers:

We are African people, and we have a culture that's separate and distinct from the mainstream white American culture. We have different philosophical ideas, different ways of responding to the world, different ideas and attitudes, different values, different ideas about style and linguistics, different aesthetics- even the way we bury our dead is different. The way we participate in life is very much different than white America. (Conversations with August Wilson, 68-69)

For all of Wilson's stridency in identifying himself as an African American, he is in the unique position of straddling black and white culture. His plays offer a universal presentation of the everyday themes of life: love, honor, duty, betrayal, death. He is equally embraced by both black and white society because he is "safe", he neither disparages nor panders to either culture. He fits comfortably in each race, and is capable of producing a voice for each. Perhaps for this reason, Wilson seems to express an urgency to define himself within one culture. His plays, writings, and interviews were an outlet for Wilson to choose his mother's heritage over his father's, and declare allegiance to the black culture. Through their explorations in religion, society, and purpose, Wilson's characters relive his cultural trajectory within the microcosm of their plays.

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