

THE SONGS OF A CENTURY:
THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS
FOUND IN SELECTED PLAYS BY AUGUST WILSON

THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

August Wilson's projected ten-play cycle encompassing the African-American experience in each decade of the twentieth century has secured him a place in theatre history. To date, six of these plays have been published and produced. (*Jitney*, an early play by Wilson, has recently been re-written and performed, but has not yet been published) All of these scripts have received substantial critical acclaim, earning Mr. Wilson much recognition. His awards are numerous, including two Pulitzer Prizes, two Tony Awards, and six Drama Critic's Circle Awards. He has been characterized as "the foremost dramatist of the American black experience" (Shafer 5). Indeed, his contributions to African-American theatre are great. Yet, possibly Mr. Wilson's most remarkable accomplishment lies in the fact that his plays appeal to extremely culturally diverse audiences. He openly states that all of his plays focus on the African-American male. However, his productions continually draw multi-racial audiences of both genders into theatres across the country. Wilson's universal appeal seems to lie in the fact that his characters are striving to re-establish their cultural identity (Pereira x). These realistic story lines always incorporate relevant political activity, music, and a healthy amount of the supernatural. His continual use of ritual, folklore, and mystical elements has earned him criticism, as some critics believe Wilson relies too heavily on the supernatural. Yet,

as Kim Pereira notes in his book, *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*, “...the common threads of similarity between human beings lie buried among the lore and legends of the cultures of the world” (x). The supernatural elements of Wilson’s plays seem to be strongest in the scripts focusing on the first half of the twentieth century. As the decades progress in Wilson’s cycle, his characters seem to be moving farther and farther from the connection with cultural history that Wilson sees as being of primary importance for the African American. Therefore, in his plays set in the early parts of the century, one finds the strongest ancestral influence of the supernatural. This work will analyze the supernatural and ritualistic elements used in Wilson’s productions, with the focus placed on *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Seven Guitars*.

The son of a black mother and a white father, Wilson has a unique insight on the relations of African Americans with the predominately white society of the United States. His father, Fredrick Kittel, did not have a major role in Wilson’s life. As a result, Wilson grew up with a strong connection to the African-American lineage of his mother, Daisy Wilson Kittel.

Wilson experienced racism at an early age. Living in an all-white neighborhood, Wilson found public school difficult, as prejudice was abundant. After years of fighting with his racist peers and teachers, Wilson dropped out of school at the age of fifteen. When his fellow African-American teacher accused him of not writing the exceptional paper he had submitted on Napoleon, Wilson made the decision to educate himself. This education focused on influential African-American authors, musicians, and artists, and would later have substantial influence on his works (Shafer 7).

August Wilson has consistently cited the blues, the artistic works of Romare Bearden, and the diversity of black American culture as strong contributors to his writings. Additionally, part of his independent education consisted of spending hours in local grocery stores, bars and pool halls, listening to the unique rhythms of African-American speech. These experiences gave Wilson his gift for honest dialogue. He strives to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the African-American culture in his plays in every way.

Perhaps his strong belief in this principle is the cause of the recent controversy surrounding the playwright. Wilson has always maintained that he will only allow black directors to work on his plays, as their connection to the African-American experience is imperative for the authenticity of the production. This statement has caused critics to argue that if a precedent such as this is set, it could be detrimental for the diversity of the theatre, as it would limit directors to only playwrights' works within their own race. This belief, in combination with his keynote speech to the Theatre Communications Group in 1996, has categorized Wilson as one of the most controversial artists of the contemporary theatre. In his address, "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson chastised professional theatrical establishments in America for the absence of theatres devoted to works by African Americans. He further condemned white artists and critics, claiming that black theatre professionals have been forced to compromise their art by translating their works for the white population. He finally accused the American theatre of rationalizing the lack of plays produced about the experiences of African Americans by stressing multi-cultural casting in traditionally white plays (Rizzo 1).

As a result of his speech, Wilson began a written and public argument with *New Republic Drama* critic and Artistic Director of the American Repertory Theatre, Robert Brustein. After months, the two artists finally met in a public debate. Mr. Brustein supported "...an integrated American culture that prized multi-culturalism but does not tolerate racial hatred or separatism or a waiving of artistic standards" (Rich, "Two Mouths Running" 19). In opposition, Wilson argued in favor of "a self-segregated black theater in which black actors would play only black roles and only black writers would write about black characters" (Rich, "Two Mouths Running" 19).

Wilson's effort to provide scripts for the American theatre that are strictly ingrained in the African-American culture is the primary reason for the abundance of supernatural elements found within his plays. As Alan Nadel explains in his book, *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, "An African American's understanding of his or her location in spiritual time...is confounded by the competing cosmologies of largely obscured African ritual and highly visible, but dysfunctional Christian dogma" (3).

The unique combination of the African and Christian influences strongly developed during the time of American slavery in the South. As stories and myths were handed down from generation to generation, an oral record of African-American's history began to develop. These stories were naturally influenced by the changing politics and belief systems of the times. The result of years of historical accounts by word of mouth produced a wide variety of conflicting beliefs and superstitions within the African-American culture of the early twentieth century.

Logically, storytelling plays an important role in Wilson's plays (Shafer 8). In fact, Wilson has been criticized for his emphasis on dialogue, as opposed to action in some of his scripts. However, as Wilson's goal is to accurately portray the African-American experience, he refuses to compromise on this issue. Wilson's plays tend to be lengthy with a concentration on the density of the language. In an interview with Heather Henderson, James Earl Jones comments on Wilson's use of language in *Fences* by observing:

Few writers can capture dialect as dialogue in a manner as interesting and accurate as August's...August's language has a certain root – I've heard other people speak with the same kind of inarticulateness. You find it in other cultures – the uneducated Irish too sometimes speak with great floweriness, they use language very richly – and I think August is catching this sort of speech. My dad, who was a Mississippian before I was, said don't ever lose touch with that sound; don't let your children lose touch with it. People do get educated out of it. (2)

Thus, August Wilson rejects the trend in contemporary theatre of shorter plays with enhanced visual elements (Shafer 16). Rather, he prefers to concentrate on strong themes, honest character development, and truthful relationships created through dialogue. As a result, Wilson's plays are seen as realistic in portrayal. Many have questioned this label in regard to his continual focus on the supernatural. However, Pereira justifies Wilson's mystical elements by explaining that, "It is common to people throughout the Eastern hemisphere to integrate the spiritual, religious, and material aspects [into their lives]" (4). So, as the reader studies Wilson's plays in order of the chronology of settings, it is possible to observe the varying impact the supernatural plays in the lives of African Americans as the twentieth century progresses.

CHAPTER II

THE SEARCH FOR A SONG: *JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE*

Set in a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* explores the timeless question, "How do we heal ourselves and begin again?" For the African-American ex-slave in the 1800s, the healing process was confusing and difficult. The search for lost family members was often the first step taken by these individuals. Therefore, black men, women, and children took to the roads. Traveling by foot across the country, they sought their loved ones who had been sold, freed, or imprisoned. This practice continued amongst their descendants for generations. As these African-American southerners realized that the South could not offer them true freedom, they began a migration to the northern states. Here they faced a country that had given them their freedom, but that was not willing to accept their culture. As a result, many felt they were searching for their identity and independence in a foreign land. As one sees in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson suggests that these African Americans' healing and empowerment could only be achieved through a reunion with their true selves, or their "African selves." Africa held their identity, or what Wilson calls "...their song which was both a wail and a whelp of joy" (xvi). As Herald Loomis searches for his "song" in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, one is introduced to the importance of ritualistic and religious behavior in August Wilson's characters.

Searching for self-affirmation, the individuals in Wilson's play introduce the reader to two major sources of influence. African traditions had joined with Western Christianity to form a belief system unique to the African Americans. These beliefs had been the basis of a strong cultural unity in the South. Wilson contends that the African Americans should not have migrated to the North. Rather, if they had remained in the distinctly African American culture already formed in the South, they could have prospered through the strength of their identity. Thus, blacks could have avoided the displacement they experienced when forced to assimilate with the dominant white culture of the northern United States (Plum 58).

The repercussions of this assimilation are the focus of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The confusion felt by blacks trying to adapt to urban life provides an interesting array of African-American characters in Wilson's play. The relationships that are formed by these individuals relay representative hopes and dreams felt by many blacks in the early 1900s. Nevertheless, their aspirations were often unrealized, as they existed in a society that wished to take away the song of their true identity. Therefore, many turned to their spiritual beliefs for comfort and guidance.

The tensions that arise amongst the characters in this script are largely due to their individual spiritual choices. Varying degrees of African spiritualism and Christianity exist and are a strong source of conflict in the relationships formed in the boardinghouse in which the characters reside. This establishment houses a variety of personalities with differing backgrounds, while serving as a common gathering place where these individuals reveal their deepest secrets and desires. In providing the intimate setting of a

home, Wilson allows the reader to become exposed to the otherwise private eccentricities of his characters.

In the play's opening, the conversation between the owners of the boarding house, Seth and Bertha Holly, provides exposition on many of the characters. Seth makes observations about the boarder Bynum Walker which reveal that he is a conjure man. Later that morning Rutherford Selig, a traveling salesman, arrives to arrange business with Seth. Selig and Bynum engage in a discussion that reveals that the former is known as a people finder. Through this conversation, one also learns that Bynum, who encourages others to find their own song, "binds people together," while searching for a magical man who shines from within, whom he has met years before. One is then introduced to Jeremy, a new tenant from the South, who complains about being arrested by the police for nothing.

Next, Herald Loomis enters and rents a room for himself and his 11-year-old daughter, Zonia. He discloses that he is looking for his estranged wife, Martha. At this point, Seth realizes that the woman whom Loomis is searching for is nearby, and her name is now Martha Pentecost. Seth does not trust Loomis and chooses not to tell him of this knowledge.

The action continues as a romance occurs between Jeremy and Mattie Campbell, who has been abandoned by her lover. In addition, a friendship develops between Zonia and the neighboring child, Rueben Mercer. Soon, Seth becomes frustrated with Loomis' bizarre behavior. However, Loomis is determined to continue his search for Martha and asks Selig to find her.

Jeremy announces that he has asked Mattie to move into the boarding house with him. Yet, his attention is easily diverted when Molly Cunningham enters. A dinner of fried chicken follows, and many of the residents participate in a “Juba” dance, which includes a combination of frenzied African slave cries and Christian references to the Holy Ghost. Herald Loomis becomes enraged at the Christian references being used. He denounces the Holy Ghost and describes visions that he has had involving skeleton bones washing ashore. Loomis seems possessed as he describes these visions and temporarily loses the use of his legs.

As Act II begins, one learns that Seth is disturbed by the behavior of Loomis and wants him to leave the boarding house. However, Loomis he has no intention of leaving until Saturday when Selig returns. He says that he has paid in advance for the room and will continue his stay. Next, Jeremy enters stating that he has been fired from his job. This prompts him to convince Molly to travel with him as he tries to make his living playing his guitar and gambling.

The title of the play is explained as Bynum sings a song about Joe Turner, a man who caught blacks and forced them to work for him. The song ignites anger in Loomis, and he discloses that Joe Turner was the cause of his family’s estrangement. Loomis explains that while preaching a roadside sermon he was detained and forced to work in Joe Turner’s chain gang. Loomis further discloses that since being given his freedom, he has been wandering in a world that has not been his own. As a result, Bynum advises Loomis to remember how to sing his own song. Further action develops as Mattie, who has been left by Jeremy, and Loomis privately admit an attraction to one another.

Loomis discovers that although he has an overwhelming need for intimacy, he has forgotten how to touch a woman.

Loomis becomes convinced that Selig is not returning and prepares to continue his travels in search of Martha. However, Martha Pentecost soon arrives, having been found by Selig. A heated confrontation occurs, as Loomis accuses Martha of abandoning him. In return, Martha informs him that she was forced to leave their farm and has been searching for Loomis and Zonia. Nevertheless, Martha confesses that she no longer loves him and Loomis returns Zonia to her to raise.

In the final moments of the play, Loomis flies into a rage and exposes a knife. In his anger, he accuses Bynum, like Joe Turner, of binding him. In response, Bynum admits that he has bound Zonia to her mother, but denies binding Loomis, because an individual cannot be bound if he refuses to cling. As he slashes his own chest, Loomis declares that he does not need Jesus to bleed for him. He covers his face with his own blood as an act of cleansing himself. With this act, he leaves the past behind him and is now able to begin again.

Wilson frequently cites the blues as an inspiration for his plays and so it is not surprising that he uses the idea of a song as a metaphor for one's soul. Wilson views the blues as distinctly African American, and he sees them as a source of documentation for the true identity and spirituality of the culture. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson describes the blues as "music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being, separate and distinct from any other" (xvi).

Wilson's use of a musical motif is also important historically; knowledge of the real-life Joe Turner's chain gang has been largely preserved musically. Joe Turner was

the brother of the governor of Tennessee. As a Mississippi plantation owner, he chose to ignore the laws formed to ensure freedom, and he enslaved African Americans. Every seven years Joe Turner would capture innocent black men and force them to work for him (Pereira 59). This enslavement affected many African-American men, as well as their families. The wives of these men documented the pain and suffering inflicted by Joe Turner through song (Plum 57). Believing that music has had a strong influence on the African-American experience, Wilson often incorporates it into his plays. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Bynum sings:

They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone
 Ohhh Lordy
 They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone
 Ohhh Lordy
 Got my man and gone

Come with forty links of chain
 Ohhh Lordy
 Come with forty links of chain
 Ohhh Lordy
 Got my man and gone. (67)

These events surrounding Joe Turner have been largely ignored by historians. Often no mention of the experience is noted at all in American history (Plum 57). This fact supports Wilson's argument that music chronicles the African-American journey like no other medium.

However, the catalyst for the composition of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is found not in song, but in art. Wilson has also consistently cited the artwork of Romare Bearden (1912-1988) as another source of inspiration. Wilson began writing *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* viewing a painting of Bearden's entitled "Mill Hand's Lunch

Bucket.” So moved was Wilson after seeing this painting that he used this title as the original name for the script (Shafer 12).

The painting depicts several inhabitants of a boardinghouse. The character who most inspired Wilson was simply a man sitting, holding his coat and hat. To Wilson, this man looked as if he had been defeated by his own existence (Shafer 12). As the man in Bearden’s painting entered Wilson’s imagination, a character was formed. From this character came the story line of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Wilson says that he allows the characters to speak to him and does not censor their dialogue. Wilson notes: “When Loomis cut his chest, I didn’t question it. I just wrote, ‘Loomis slashes his chest.’ I didn’t just say, ‘Well, I know what I’m going to do. I’ll have him cut his chest’” (Shannon 13). Wilson believes that his characters speak to him of their joys and sufferings. As they relay to him the details of their mortal and spiritual journeys, unique stories are formed into Wilson’s plays.

From the moment *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* opens, one becomes aware of the importance of African spirituality in the play. As Seth and Bertha, discuss Bynum Walker, Seth watches Bynum out the window, and the reader becomes aware that the conjure man is engaging in ritualistic activity involving the killing of pigeons. This ritual is apparently performed daily, and it irritates Seth. Living his entire life in the North, Seth has been removed from much of the African ritual that has been maintained in the southern states. Seth’s annoyance with Bynum’s practice is humorously displayed in the script, yet presents a pertinent comparison. The importance of a man who “binds people together” seems to be lost on Seth. However, the presence of Bynum is particularly

significant to Herald Loomis, who has been separated from his family by enslavement in Joe Turner's chain gang.

As one becomes aware that Herald Loomis is searching for his estranged wife, Martha, the importance of Bynum's character becomes clear. His presence is strong evidence of Wilson's use of African ritual. Wilson draws his themes from African tribal rites of passage. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep notes that African ceremonies pass through three distinct stages: "separation, transition, and reincorporation" (Plum 59). Bynum represents the hope for this reincorporation. However, Wilson is very clear about his beliefs pertaining to the reincorporation of the ex-slaves. He argues that this reincorporation should not have been an assimilation into a dominant white culture. Rather, it should have been a return to African roots, ultimately creating a reunion within themselves (Plum 58). Therefore, this element of reincorporation for Herald Loomis can be more accurately seen as a reunion. In *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*, Kim Pereira offers further documentation of Wilson's objective. Pereira argues: "August Wilson deals with the effects of separation, migration, and reunion on the descendants of slaves who migrated from the rural South to the urban North" (2).

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the quest to complete this final phase of reunion is a strong theme. The boardinghouse gives shelter to characters who are searching for someone or something. Pereira notes that having traveled long distances, Herald Loomis appears with his daughter Zonia in search of Martha. Furthermore, Mattie comes to the boardinghouse to ask Bynum to help her find her lover, while Bynum conducts his own search for the "shiny man" (Pereira 59-60).

Although he is also conducting his own search, the character of Bynum offers the hope of reunion for many of the characters. In addition to his special gift of “binding people together”, Bynum’s belief in the supernatural also drives him to encourage others to find their own song. Bynum’s compassionate nature inspires him to use his craft as a conjurer to help those who are lost. Furthermore, his position derives directly from the medicine man of African tribes (Pereira 64). Through Bynum’s explanation of his supernatural gift and his reason for searching for the “shiny man”, one hears the voice of August Wilson encouraging African Americans to look within themselves for answers:

[The shiny man’s] just a man I seen out on the road...He say he had a voice inside him telling him which way to go and if I come and go along with him he was gonna show me the Secret of Life...he told me to hold out my hands. Then he rubbed them together with his and I looked down and see they got blood on them. Told me to take and rub it all over me...say that was a way of cleaning myself. Then we went around the bend in that road...and it seem like all of a sudden we ain’t in the same place...everything look like it was twice as big as it was. I turned around to look at this fellow and he had this light coming out of him...He shined until all the light seemed like it seeped out of him and then he was gone...I looked over and seen my daddy standing there...Said he had been thinking about me and it grieved him to see me in the world carrying other people’s songs and not having one of my own...and my daddy showed me ...how to find my song. I asked him about the shiny man and he told me he was the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way. Said there was lots of shiny men and if I ever saw one again before I died then I would know that my song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world and I could lay down and die a... man who done left his mark on life. On the way people cling to each other out of the truth they find in themselves...I had my own song. I had the Binding Song. I choose that song because that’s what I seen most when I was traveling...people walking away and leaving one another...Been binding people ever since... (8-10)

As August Wilson expresses his beliefs about the African American’s need for individualism through Bynum’s speech, he also presents to the reader the information that this play is not only about one man’s search, but that of all African Americans.

Bynum's search for the shiny man is an effort to attain self-worth. As he recognizes Herald Loomis as the man for whom he has been searching, the reader is shown that Bynum realizes that every man has this magical power to shine. Herald Loomis' cleansing is used by Wilson as a representation of the power that all African Americans have within themselves.

While Bynum's character practices African ritual, the speech also contains Christian symbolism. His travels are compared to missionaries relaying the messages of Jesus Christ. Further connection to Christianity is proposed by Kim Pereira. In his book, Pereira argues:

[Bynum's] reference to the shiny man as The One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way could also be an allusion to John the Baptist, who went before Christ and showed the way...Bynum even calls his shiny man John, ' 'cause it was up around Johnstown where I seen him'...and the cleansing ritual conducted by the shiny man is a baptism of blood...A more subtle Christian allusion buried in this moment refers to St. Paul's conversion,...which, like Bynum's revelation, opened his eyes to the 'Secret of Life.' Both took place on a road, both were accompanied by a shining light,...and both resulted in life long missions of healing. Significantly, Christ gave Peter, and, through him, all his disciples – including Paul – the binding power. (71-72)

One sees additional evidence of the coexistence of African spirituality and Christianity through the character of Bertha. Seth's relationship with his wife Bertha presents an interesting religious dichotomy in the play. As he speaks of Bynum's "mumbo jumbo business", the reader realizes that Bertha somewhat supports Bynum in his efforts. Seth ridicules Bertha for straying from the doctrine of Christianity:

You around here sprinkling salt all over the place...got pennies lined up across the threshold...all that heebie-jeebie stuff. I just put up with that 'cause of you. I don't pay that kind of stuff no mind. And you going down there to the church and wanna come home and sprinkle salt all over the place. (2)

However, Bertha seems to accept the combination of the two belief systems. She defends herself by saying, “It don’t hurt none. I can’t say if it help...but it don’t hurt none” (2).

Seth’s apparent abhorrence of Bynum’s African ritualistic behavior leads the reader to believe that Seth has rejected his African roots. However, at the end of Act I, the reader is shown that his life also combines Christianity and African ritual. During the African-based Juba dance, which he initiated, Seth repeatedly invokes the Holy Ghost. This reference provokes Loomis to condemn the participants for including Christianity in their ritual. Thus, Seth experiences the same ridicule which he has inflicted upon Bertha.

As Loomis becomes a part of this ritual, “He ultimately receives strength and vision from the Juba dance...Empowered by his African ancestry, he begins to shine” (Plum 60). Seth has strayed away from many of his African roots and finds Loomis’ behavior and visions bizarre and disturbing. Seth seriously doubts that Loomis could have ever been a deacon in a Christian church, as he claims. Furthermore, he seeks to protect the religiously-named Martha Pentecost from Loomis.

Upon arrival, Martha Pentecost (formerly Martha Loomis) provides the ultimate symbolism of Western Christianity in the play. As Martha urges Loomis, “You got to be clean, Herald. You got to be washed with the blood of the lamb” (93), one is presented with perhaps the most evident tension deriving from the presence of African ritual and Christianity. Loomis rejects Christianity as a result of his membership in Joe Turner’s chain gang. He denounces Jesus Christ as a savior for only white men. He additionally views the practices of his enslavers as the practices of Christ. Prior to his enslavement, Christianity had guided Loomis’ actions, but now he rejects it as he embraces African spirituality. He proclaims:

All I seen was a bunch of niggers dazed out of their woolly heads. And Mr. Jesus Christ standing there in the middle of them, grinning...and niggers wallowing at his feet...Great big old white man...your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip...and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And 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...and talk about what a nice man Mr. Jesus Christ is 'cause he give him salvation after he die. Something wrong here...I'm choking on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation? (92-93)

The final scene of the play is ultimately a battle found within Loomis. As Martha quotes scripture and Loomis responds with scathing attacks against Christianity, the tension ultimately builds to a catharsis for Loomis. All of his inner confusion and rage is finally set free as he screams, "I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself" (93). As he spreads blood over his body, he finds a cleansing power within himself. Performing his own "baptism", he has healed himself of the wounds of his past.

Using Herald Loomis as an example, in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson urges African Americans to find their own song, to create a reunion with the spiritualism of their African heritage. Wilson has said that this is his favorite play that he has written (Shafer 12). Set in 1911, it is the closest relationship to the effects of slavery that Wilson has thus far explored. His use of a wide variety of African American characters develops an intriguing plot, while providing an insightful glance at the lives of the descendants of African-American slaves. The sharing of this historical insight is very important to Wilson. He says, "I'm definitely part of the story. I claim all 400 years of it...it's, in essence, my autobiography" (Wilson, "Blues, History, and Dramaturgy 2).

CHAPTER III

SELLING THAT SONG: *MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM*

As August Wilson continues to chronicle the lives of African Americans in the twentieth century, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes a poignant look at the exploitation of black musicians in 1927. Wilson uses the setting of a recording studio in Chicago to present the detrimental effects of white America's manipulation of these black artists. Through the introduction of Wilson's characters, one quickly becomes aware of a division that has been formed among the individuals in the play. The "song" which the African Americans fought so hard to find within themselves in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* has become the subject of debate in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The question of what to do with that song once it has been found is intensely explored in Wilson's play. In this third decade of the twentieth century, Wilson's characters have begun to fight amongst themselves to a greater degree, rather than simply against their society. This marks the beginning of a disconnection in the African-American culture that Wilson continues to explore and document in his plays set in later time periods. As this division comes to a climax in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, one realizes that not only the integrity of one's personal "song" is in question, but also that of the characters' loyalties in relation to a Christian God and to their African heritage.

The debate over the recording of the record *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* presents a symbolic debate over the importance of one's personal "song." As a younger generation of African Americans joined the work force, they were less appreciative of the struggles their elders faced in reclaiming their true identities. Therefore, their eagerness to succeed at all costs ignited a willingness to part with this "song" for a price. The dangers of this action to individuals, as well as to the African-American culture as a whole, is dramatically presented in Wilson's play.

During the opening scene of the play, the reader is introduced to the white characters. Irvin, Ma Rainey's manager, and Sturdyvant, the record producer, are preparing the recording studio for Ma Rainey's arrival. One becomes aware that Sturdyvant is agitated at Ma Rainey's behavior. Irvin tries to pacify Sturdyvant by assuring him that the black performers will not cause any problems. Soon, three of the band members arrive. Cutler, Slow Drag, and Toledo are shown to their rehearsal room. However, Ma Rainey is still not present at her own recording session, and the young trumpet player, Levee, is also tardy.

Upon the arrival of Levee, the reader finds out that he has spent a week's salary on a new pair of shoes in order to impress Ma Rainey's girlfriend. He also declares that he doesn't want to spend his time rehearsing the old-fashioned jug music the band will be playing. Furthermore, he proclaims that he will be forming his own band that will focus on a more popular style of music, and he will be selling his songs to Mr. Sturdyvant. While waiting for Ma Rainey to arrive, the members of the band argue amongst themselves and tell stories of their lives. As the band finally begins to rehearse, Irvin

enters to confirm that the recording session will be of Levee's new version, rather than the traditional version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

Soon, Ma Rainey makes her entrance. Ma is accompanied by her girlfriend Dussie Mae, her nephew Sylvester, and a policeman. The policeman's presence is explained as the story of Sylvester wrecking Ma's car is divulged. As a result of the collision, the trio tried to take a cab to the studio. Upon the taxi driver's declaration that he would not allow blacks into his car, a fight began and the policeman took the African Americans into custody. As a result, Irvin bribes the policeman for Ma Rainey and tries to get the recording session on track by ordering food for the band.

As the band members eat their sandwiches, they continue to argue and express their opinions about various issues. Eventually, they begin to rehearse again, and one hears Ma's promise of many gifts for Dussie Mae. Ma further responds to Irvin's decision about using the new version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" by stating that she will only perform the traditional version. Furthermore, she informs Irvin that her nephew will be speaking the introduction for the record.

The band members are informed of the decision, which causes an argument between Ma Rainey and Levee. Ma Rainey ultimately informs Levee that she makes the decisions in the band and that he will abide by them. However, all of the band members begin to doubt Ma's decision to let her nephew perform the introduction as they recognize that he has a stuttering problem. Nevertheless, Ma Rainey is determined to have him perform the introduction, and she refuses to change her mind. Levee continues to try to impress Sturdyvant by singing him a new song, but the reader soon finds out that Levee holds a great deal of contempt for the white man. He discloses to the band that his

mother was raped by white men, which led to his father murdering the rapists. His father was then lynched for this act.

With the opening of the Second Act, one views Levee flirting with Dussie Mae. In addition, Irvin continues to try to convince Ma to begin recording, but Ma refuses to sing until she has a coke. She then has a private conversation with Cutler, telling him that Levee is to be fired. She continues by complaining about the white man's exploitation of her music for financial gain.

Levee continues his pursuit of Dussie Mae by kissing her, but soon Ma's coke arrives and the focus turns back to the recording. Many attempts at recording the song are made as a result of Sylvester's stuttering problem. After the song is finally performed successfully, it is discovered that the song did not get recorded because a plug had been disconnected.

Ma threatens to leave, but Irvin is able to convince her to stay for fifteen more minutes in order to fix the recording. The band retreats to the band room, and Levee is told to stop pursuing Dussie Mae. This leads to arguments about beliefs amongst the band members. These arguments build to a climax as Levee mocks God, stating that God hates blacks. This prompts Cutler to attack Levee, and Levee pulls a knife.

However, the recording is once again resumed and successfully accomplished. Ma Rainey criticizes Levee for his improvisation and fires him from the band. After payment is received for Sylvester's performance, Ma leaves the studio with her nephew and Dussie Mae. Sturdyvant enters to pay the band and discloses to Levee that he will only pay five dollars a piece for the new songs. As a result, Levee understands that

Sturdyvant has lied to him. Realizing that he will not be able to achieve his dreams, Levee's anger overcomes him.

When the band begins to leave, Toledo accidentally steps on Levee's new shoe. Levee becomes enraged and in a blind fury fatally stabs Toledo. All of the members of the band are shocked, and Cutler calls for Irvin to come take control of the situation. As the lights fade, one hears the sound of Levee's trumpet, muted and struggling to reach notes beyond its grasp.

The question of whether any of these individuals have actually found their true "song" is raised when examining the text. Furthermore, if the songs have been found, one wonders if they have been lost in this world of the white businessman. Ma Rainey, the star of the band is dedicated to her music, but as *New York Times* critic Frank Rich states, "[she] has become a sad, ludicrous 'imitation' of white stardom" (2). Moreover, her ambitious trumpeter, Levee, has confused personal worth and success with fame. His willingness to sell his soul to the devil can also be seen as his willingness to sell the "song of his true identity" to the white man. Toledo, the pianist in Ma Rainey's band, expresses concern for his culture's identity as a whole. He claims that black Americans have sold themselves out to white people. He furthers his argument by claiming:

As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say...as long as he looks to white folks for approval...then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. (37)

As this fight for identity takes place for the musicians in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson continues his exploration of the division in America between the North and the South. The older and more established performer, Ma Rainey, remains sternly

loyal to the original blues styles that have been popular in the South for years. In contrast, as we meet the trumpet player of the band, we are introduced to a new generation of black Americans in the 1920s. Determined to succeed without regard to his ancestry, the character of Levee does not recognize the dangers of assimilation into northern white society. As a young musician, he rejects the cultural importance of the blues, and believes that music can only be successful if the new sound of swing is performed, as it will appeal to northern audiences.

There is no doubt that Wilson is arguing that this division in the African-American culture is a direct result of the discrimination and mistreatment these individuals faced. Their southern tradition included music, and was a strong link to their ancestry. However, white businessmen saw this as a novelty that could provide them with substantial financial gain. As a result, they used the black performers without regard for them as people or for the integrity of their music. Wilson expands on this concept by proclaiming:

Blues is the best literature we have. If you look at the singers...They are carriers of culture, carriers of ideas...Except in American society they were not valued, except among the black folks who understood...white America would very often abuse them...They were never seen as valuable members of society by whites. (Shannon 1-2)

Furthermore, as Wilson's plot develops, it is increasingly clear that the performers have all developed different ways of dealing with the mistreatment which the whites inflict. Yet, they continue to perform, without surprise or shock. This ill treatment inflicted upon them is simply an extension of the horrors that their African-American ancestors faced. Furthermore, the older characters have learned from their experiences

that the white man doesn't treat them fairly. This exploitation of African Americans is confirmed by Ma Rainey as she states:

They [white men] don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurts them...As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on ...Irvin right there with the rest of them. He don't care nothing about me either...the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends...If you colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise you just a dog in the alley. (1176)

Yet, Levee, the younger and more naive musician, seems to think he can succeed in life by playing the white man's "game." Rather than clinging to his uniqueness as an African American, he seeks to join white America. He seems to accept the idea that America is a cultural melting pot, and wrongly believes that he will be treated fairly by the white businessmen.

Wilson has continually argued against the "melting pot" theory. He maintains that this belief has been a major contributor to the oppression of black culture. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, he uses the voice of Toledo, the African nationalist of the group, to explain his views:

Everybody come from different places in Africa, right? Come from different tribes and things. Soonawhile they began to make a big stew. You had the carrots, the peas, and potatoes and whatnot over here. And over there you had the meat, the nuts, the okra, corn...and then you mix it up and let it cook right through to get the flavors flowing together...then...You got a stew. Now you take and eat the stew. You take and make your history with that stew...Now...Your history's over and you done ate the stew. But you look around and you see some carrots over here, some potatoes over there...You got some leftovers. That's what it is...and you can't do nothing with it. You already making you another history...cooking you another meal, and you don't need them leftovers no more...See... The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers...and that's what the

problem is. The problem ain't with the white man. The white man know you just a leftover. 'Cause he the one who done the eating...Done went and filled the white man's belly and now he's full and tired and wants you to get out the way and let him be by himself. (57)

Elaboration is provided by Jay Plum in his essay, "Blues, History and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson." Plum explains, "Wilson's dramaturgy specifically resists the egalitarian myth of America as a land of endless opportunity for everyone, focusing instead on the social and economic displacement of African Americans" (57).

However, this is a story about a group of black Americans who have to some degree achieved success in white America. Wilson adds to the play the intriguing element of using a factual central subject. Ma Rainey's character is based on Gertrude Pridgett, a famous blues figure. Her fame and support mostly came from the black population in the South. Her music appealed to these individuals because of its ruggedness and honesty. In the play, Ma Rainey comments on her music by saying:

The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something. (1177)

Although most of the characters and activities have been fictionalized by Wilson, Ma Rainey was actually one of the first African Americans to obtain a recording contract from a white company. Yet, the barriers faced by Ma Rainey, and all other African-American performers of the 1920s are not to be underestimated. The performers were only signed as part of the company's "race division" (Rich, "Theater: Wilson's 'Ma Rainey's' Opens" 1).

Facing opposition such as this caused many African Americans to subscribe to the theory of "survival of the fittest", rather than that of "strength in unity", or "the meek

shall inherit the earth.” This change in attitude is again a rejection of earlier ancestral beliefs. Kim Pereira offers insight support as he discusses African-American folklore in *August Wilson and the African American Odyssey*:

In African American folklore...[the] energy [of the spirit] found expression in the animal trickster tales of the slaves. The trickster occupied a central position in their consciousness, for his pranks represented the victory of the weak over the strong...Mere survival was not all the trickster wanted. He had his eyes set on most of the goals that human beings seek – wealth, power, glory, sexual gratification. (16)

Moreover, Wilson continues to explore the presence of God in his characters' lives. Just as Herald Loomis questions the validity of God for a black man, Levee accuses the Christian God of being a white man's God. August Wilson uses this controversy throughout his cycle of plays. His plots continually question and ponder the existence of a higher being. He successfully presents characters that make substantial arguments for each side of this debate. This is in part due to the vast array of African-American characters Wilson chooses as his subjects. This diversity is extremely apparent in the characters and the plot of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

In Act I, the reader is first presented with the major argument over the existence of God. As Levee refers to himself as the devil, the religious tension begins to build between him and Cutler. Levee questions Cutler's Christian beliefs as he claims: "If there's a god up there, he done went to sleep...God don't mean nothing to me. Let him strike me!" (1166). This blasphemy is actually a challenge to a God that Levee feels has betrayed him. Levee continually speaks about selling his soul to the devil, while Cutler keeps warning him of the danger in his words. As Levee feels that he has been left alone in the world, on some level this challenge to God is Levee's own way of searching for a

higher power. Yearning for any type of justification for his pain, he summons both God and the devil, willing to accept whatever will make its presence known.

As the plot advances, the stress of the argument increases. Cutler attacks Levee for his mockery of the deity. Levee responds by pulling a knife and daring God to intervene. He argues:

That's your God, huh...All right. I'm gonna give your God a chance...to save your black ass...I'm calling Cutler's God! Come on and save this nigger! Strike me down before I cut his throat...Come on and save him like you did my mama...I heard her when she called you... "Lord, have mercy! Jesus help me!" ...And did you turn your back...Come on and turn your back on me...I'll cut your heart out! What's the matter? Where is you...what are you scared of...Coward. (1182 – 1183)

The character of Levee can easily be viewed as the villain in the play. However, one can also see him as a victim of the white man. In her essay, "The Long Wait: August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*", Sandra Shannon offers a defense for Levee's actions:

Despite Levee's genuine ambition to excel in the music industry, he is sucked under by the swirling vortex of oppression. If isolated and studied strictly in terms of his sociological relevance, Levee might easily serve as the basis for a viable case study on the root causes of black on black crime in the United States. His character mirrors the all-too-familiar results of the black male's battle to survive in a white-dominated society...Thus, Levee, like many one-time ambitious, creative young black hopefuls, becomes disillusioned, self-defeating and ultimately violent. (10)

Ultimately, Levee may be viewed as a man whose "warrior spirit" is being oppressed. As in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the lack of faithfulness to African heritage is shown to be the source of many problems for the characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Levee's attempt to assimilate into the white man's world is the ultimate cause of his anger and pain. He continually states that he knows how to handle the white man. Nevertheless, his fighting spirit is stifled as he tries to please his white oppressors.

Among his fellow African Americans, he appears confident and non-compromising. He actually chides his fellow band members for their lack of assertiveness. He sees their complacency in their positions as a sign of weakness. Yet, the older members of the group all recognize their place in society with distaste. They have simply realized that to try to force themselves into a white man's world is not the way to change their lives.

In contrast to Levee's harsh abrasiveness in a setting void of the white man, when dealing with Sturdyvant, he becomes submissive. This passive behavior is not natural for Levee. Over a period of time, a level of anger and resentment has formed within him that eventually leads to the explosion of his fatal act. Pereira notes:

[African Americans] can hold onto nothing that will define them or reassure them...except their African roots. Denied full participation in the fellowship of America, cheated of their humanity by a dissembling social and legal system, their only hope of dispelling the angst that threatens to erode their lives resides in a renewal of spiritual ties with a distant past.
(31)

The importance of African ancestry is repeatedly voiced by Toledo, the piano player in Ma Rainey's band. His continual efforts to try to educate his peers on the necessity of the recognition of their African roots is often under appreciated. He is blessed with a talent for recognizing the realities of situations. As he is self-educated, he often misunderstands and misuses large words. Yet, he is the only member of the band who reads, so he is seen as their link to a larger world.

Wilson has often stated that he believes that reading is the black man's route to success. However, Wilson contends that without this "warrior spirit" the black man's ability to read is wasted (Shannon 7). Although Toledo is ultimately the most qualified in Wilson's viewpoint for success, the pianist doesn't recognize that his complacency restricts him from achieving higher goals. Unlike Levee, who intentionally represses his

natural instincts, Toledo seems to have lost his. Living many years in an unfair world where aspirations seem like a waste of time, Toledo has become the educated cynic. Tired and unwilling to struggle against the white man's force, Toledo's ability to read has become a hindrance rather than an asset. More keenly aware of the injustice that continues on a daily basis, he chooses retreat from the oppression.

As Toledo strives to open the minds of his peers to the significance of Africa in their existence, one expects to find this "warrior spirit" in his character. However, Wilson uses Toledo as a sad example of a black male who has become lost in the rhetoric concerning his African instincts, while ignoring the true meaning of his knowledge. In fact, Toledo's comments only lead to confrontational arguments with the band members. He doesn't practice the ultimate message that he is trying to convey of being true to one's African roots. Therefore, as his peers see him as an educator, like a teacher or parent who professes, "do as I say, not as I do", he is ultimately ignored and resented.

Interestingly, the only character in the play who uses her "warrior spirit" effectively is Ma Rainey. As a female, this character seems to be most acutely aware of the white man's cruelty. Yet she remains unbending in her approach to him. Wilson has never denied the fact that his plays are primarily about the African American male's plight. In an interview with Shannon, he claims:

I doubt seriously if I would make a woman the focus of my work simply because of the fact that I am a man, because of the ground on which I stand and the viewpoint from which I perceive the world. I can't do that, although I try to be honest in the instance in which I do have women...I try not to portray any of my characters as victims. (Wilson, *Blues, History and Dramaturgy*" 11)

Therefore, Wilson's use of a female figure successfully exhibiting these traits is surprising. However, in her life Ma Rainey exhibits many characteristics that could be

seen as more commonly male. She has taken a lesbian lover in Dussie Mae and treats her as a “kept woman.” Furthermore, her fierce aggressiveness and desire for control is often seen as more characteristic of the male gender.

Yet, Wilson is not trying to present Ma Rainey as a male character. She is a woman with whom to be reckoned. She is a fighter who realizes not only the opposition she faces as a black American, but also as a woman. Moreover, it is not difficult to see the mothering instinct Ma Rainey exhibits when relating to Dussie Mae. One can assume that like many African-American women, Ma Rainey has simply realized the necessity of specific male traits when dealing with the white man. She has found herself in a position to acquire the things that she needs and desires, and invoking the male “warrior spirit” allows her to maintain her status.

Although Ma Rainey is the namesake of the play, she is not the focus. Her late entrance allows her band members to become equally established through their insightful conversations. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* has been criticized for this delay of action, as the band members spend the majority of the play in conversation. Rather, their exchange of words can be seen as a connection to the African-American culture. Pereira argues: “[Their] past has survived not only in their racial subconscious but, more tangibly, in their music, their stories, their almost ritualistic daily exchange of banter configured along a call ‘n’ response pattern” (31).

Further, on observance, one finds the insightful use of Wilson’s characters as a collective blues melody. Using Slow Drag as the bassist, with his calm and steady manner, Wilson creates an ensemble out of the men’s personalities and conversations. Cutler’s abilities as the guitarist and trombonist complement the bassist with stability and

depth. Additionally, the pianist of the group provides creativity. Toledo's knowledge and insightfulness aid him in contributing this element to the band (Pereira 27-28).

Levee, as the trumpet player, strives to achieve the notes of his success through a higher pitched and brassier sound, while often improvising instead of planning his actions.

Thus, as the quartet must share the stage, emerging for solos and then returning to the group, the musicians also share importance in the play.

In summary, through the collective "song" of the play, one learns about the characters' beliefs in relation to personal success, African-American culture and Christianity. As they argue and struggle amongst themselves, the reader witnesses the desperation felt by these musicians struggling against a racist society. The alarming effects of oppression and prejudice are strongly conveyed by Wilson through the actions of his characters. The choices made by these individuals often lead them farther away from their true identities. Amidst confusion and pain, their personal "songs" appear to be forgotten, lost, or sold to the white man.

CHAPTER IV

NEVER STOP SINGING YOUR SONG: *THE PIANO LESSON*

In the latter 1930s, America's economy was beginning to recover from the years of depression. After facing a scarcity of jobs and continuing prejudice, many African Americans began to question their migration to the northern United States. Their dream of a more prosperous life was often unrealized. Furthermore, a strong cultural connection to the South kept alive the painful, yet influential history of their ancestry. Therefore, in *The Piano Lesson*, the reader is introduced to northern African Americans who desperately cling to their heritage, while their southern relatives, still immersed in their established culture have, become less careful about remembering their history. Set in 1936, the script centers around a piano that has not only become a family heirloom, but also a symbolic altar for the Charles family. Wilson uses the piano to represent the communions of the past and future, spirituality and historical fact, and the North and South for African Americans. The altar causes the characters to confront literal and spiritual ghosts who challenge them to overcome their separation in order to unite against a society that still rejects them.

In *The Piano Lesson*, reconciliation with the past inspires a concentration on the future. The painful memories that haunt the Charles family can only be banished by the confrontation of their fears. It is ultimately these fears that have driven the family apart.

Fear of the unknown, fear of the past, and fear of their own strength have caused many of the characters to hide from their futures. As they bury themselves in the past, they watch opportunities pass by them, unrealized. The fact that their fears manifest themselves as ghosts provides the characters with an external war to end their emotional and spiritual battles. However, to win this war, the characters must fight on the same side and realize a spiritual reunion with their past and within themselves.

It is therefore only fitting that Wilson provide an altar around which the play is centered. The piano that serves as the catalyst for controversy, also serves as a representative of the past that must be acknowledged. The question of how to pay homage to their ancestors intensifies the division in the Charles family. The fate of the sacred piano lies in the hands of a sister and brother. On either side of the argument stand Berniece and Boy Willie. The musical instrument holds not only the family's history, but is also symbolic of their sacrifices. Carved into the wood are the faces of the past that have been literally polished with the blood of Berniece and Boy Willie's mother, Mama Ola.

The play opens as Boy Willie arrives at Uncle Doaker's house in Pittsburgh. Boy Willie and his friend Lymon explain that they have driven from the South with a truck full of watermelons to sell. They continue by saying that they are celebrating the death of a man named Sutter. They claim that Sutter has been drowned in his well by "The Ghost of the Yellow Dog." Boy Willie tells his sister, Berniece, who also resides at Doaker's house, that he plans to sell the piano that was left by his father in order to buy Sutter's land. Though Berniece has not played the piano for years, she makes it clear that she will

not allow Boy Willie to sell it. After she exits upstairs, she screams and claims that she has seen Sutter's ghost.

The reader continues to learn the history of the piano as Boy Willie, Lymon, Doaker, and Whining Boy, the uncle of Boy Willie and Berniece, talk of family affairs. Boy Willie's great-grandfather, a slave, carved the pictures of his family into the piano. The piano was ultimately the cause of Boy Willie's father's death, as he had stolen it from a descendant of the slave owner, Sutter, and was burned alive in a railway car on the Yellow Dog railroad line. Since then, the white men who committed this murder have all died mysteriously.

Boy Willie and Lymon try to move the piano, and the ghost is again heard. Berniece and Boy Willie begin fighting. As Berniece attacks Boy Willie, she claims that her husband's death was Boy Willie's fault. Boy Willie defends himself. Yet, Berniece concludes the argument by reiterating that the piano is important because the family's history lies in it. However, Boy Willie is undeterred in his plan to sell the piano and promises that he will find a way.

During the Second Act of the play, Berniece convinces her boyfriend Avery, a preacher, to bless the house. She believes that Sutter's ghost will then leave the family alone. Boy Willie continues to try to sell the piano, and finds a white man who will buy it for a good price. Doaker threatens Boy Willie and will not allow the piano to be taken until Berniece returns and agrees to the arrangement.

The story comes to a climax as Avery blesses the house. This takes place as Boy Willie tries to move the piano. At this point, Sutter's ghost is felt by the characters. As Boy Willie runs upstairs to confront Sutter, Berniece begins to play the piano calling on

her ancestors for help. As a result, peace finally comes over the house, and Boy Willie leaves, reminding Berniece to continue playing the piano, or the ghost may return.

Berniece's fierce protection of the piano, as she refuses to sell it, could be seen as a kind of reverence. She explains her position to Boy Willie as she argues:

You ain't taking that piano out of my house. Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished that piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in...mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. 'Play something for me Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece.' Every day, 'I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece.' (52)

However, Berniece's refusal to play the instrument is a sacrilege. Her fears prevent her from achieving a spiritual connection with her past. She displays this as she explains:

When my mama died I shut the top on that piano and I ain't never opened it since. I was only playing it for her. When my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano. She used to have me playing on it...had Miss Eula come in and teach me...say when I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometimes late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house. (70)

It is Berniece's neglect of the piano that ultimately allows the ghost of Sutter, a descendant of her family's former enslavers, to enter the house. Her lack of sacrifice to the altar causes unrest in the spirits of the piano. In his essay, "Ghosts on the Piano: August Wilson and the Representation of Black American History," Michael Morales notes:

If we draw the parallel between the piano and African ritual practice, the physical and spiritual consequences of forgetting her past and not using the piano are very serious. In the parallel context of most African ancestral worship, neglect of the ancestor and the ancestral altars results in loss of their protection and threaten the destruction of the living members

of the lineage, but it also threatens the very existence of the ancestors who require the food of sacrifice to maintain their existence in the realm of the dead. (109)

In opposition of Berniece lies Boy Willie. His plan to sell the piano and use the money to build a future for himself is a logical solution in his mind. Furthermore, the fact that he plans to purchase Sutter's land seems like justice to him. He explains his position to Berniece:

The only thing that make that piano worth something is them carvings Papa Willie Boy put on there. That's what make it worth something. That was my great-granddaddy. Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. Now, I'm supposed to build on what they left me. You can't do nothing with that piano sitting up here in the house...Alright now, if you say to me, Boy Willie, I'm using that piano. I give lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. Then that be something else. I'd have to go on and say, well, Berniece using that piano. She building on it. Let her go on and use it. I got to find another way to get Sutter's land. But Doaker say you ain't touched the piano the whole time it been up here. So, why you wanna stand in my way? See, you just looking at the sentimental value. See that's good. That's alright. I take my hat off whenever somebody say my daddy's name. But I ain't gonna be no fool about no sentimental value. You can sit up here and look at the piano for the next hundred years and it's just gonna be a piano. You can't make more than that. Now I want to get Sutter's land with that piano. I get Sutter's land and I can go down and cash in the crop and get my seed. As long as I got the land and the seed then I'm alright. I can always get me a little something else. Cause that land give back to you. I can make me another crop and cash that in. I still got the land and the seed. But that piano don't put out nothing else. You ain't got nothing working for you. Now, the kind of man my daddy was he would have understood that. I'm sorry you can't see it that way. But that's why I'm gonna take that piano out of here and sell it. (51)

While Boy Willie's argument is logical, his desire to sell the piano is as equally destructive as Berniece's lack of sacrifice. He does not realize that building on his ancestors' sacrifices can only be beneficial if he acknowledges their importance in his life. Additionally, the buyer of the piano is a white man. Similar to Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Boy Willie seeks to rise above oppression, only to discover that he is

actually selling not only the song of his soul, but also his heritage to the white man.

Pereira reinforces this point as he suggests:

In 1936, a white man is still trying to capture their [black Americans'] song; this time, by buying the instruments that produce it – there are several references in the play to a mysterious white man who is 'going around to all the colored people's houses looking to buy up musical instruments.' The process of trying to rob the black man of the source of his identity – and his power – continues. The music that gave meaning to his freedom could force him into a different kind of slavery, for even as it soothes it creates a new dilemma. (89)

As in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson is again showing his audience the dangers of losing one's personal song. However, in *The Piano Lesson*, he intensifies the impact of this metaphor, by using an actual musical instrument as his focus. Berniece literally finds the song of her ancestors, and ultimately her own song, at the end of the play. As she finally plays the piano and calls out to her ancestors for help, she banishes Sutter's ghost, realizing the power of the connection to her heritage. Jay Plum comments on this in "Blues, History, and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson":

The piano proves too much of a load for just a few individuals to handle...it will require the entire Charles family to come to terms with the familial legacy represented by the piano. Berniece eventually finds the courage to play the piano once again, asking Papa Boy Charles and Mama Esther to help the family drive Sutter's ghost from her home. By calling upon her ancestors, Berniece protects her family and propels it into the future. African-American heritage in this light is not a burden but a positive force that can empower the African-American family at large. (60)

Berniece's call for help is not only a summons of ancestral ghosts, but also a revival of her own spirit. Widowed by her late husband Crawley, Berniece has closed off a part of herself, in fear of being hurt again. She resists the idea that she needs anyone, which only makes her plea at the end of the play more powerful. Berniece calls upon her

heritage for aid as she repeatedly sings, “I want you to help me” (107). Within the song she calls upon her ancestors Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola.

Interestingly, the majority of her song focuses on the single line, “I want you to help me.” As this line is repeated eighteen times compared to the minimal references to her ancestors, one recognizes the importance of the act ultimately lies in her recognition that she cannot fight her fears alone. Her reunion is not only with her past, but also with herself. Again, Wilson is exhibiting the power of one’s “warrior spirit” as it connects to African history. He is reiterating his claim that the African American’s “warrior spirit” has been stifled by a white society, and that a return to African roots allows the African American to realize his or her strength.

In the original production, Wilson used Christian references in Berniece’s song. She begged, “Oh, Lord I want you to help me” (Morales 110), and repeated this numerous times. Wilson eventually changed the song from a call to God for help to a call to the African ancestors for help. In changing her words, Wilson increased not only the importance of Berniece’s reconciliation with her African roots, but the recognition of the power found within her.

This brings to light the interesting combination of Christianity and African ritual often found in Wilson’s plays. In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, one sees the struggle in Loomis between African spirituality and Christianity. In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson expands on the confusion that has arisen out of the fusion of the two belief systems.

The most obvious symbol of Christianity in the play is found within the character of Avery, Berniece's boyfriend. He is a self-proclaimed minister of God and is trying to begin his own church. Avery explains that he was called in a dream to minister:

I was sitting out in this railroad yard watching the trains go by. The train stopped and these three hobos got off. They told me they had come from Nazareth and was on their way to Jerusalem...Next thing I know I was standing in front of this house...This old woman opened the door and said they had been waiting on me. Then she led me into this room. It was a big room and it was full of all kinds of different people. They looked like anybody else except they all had sheep heads and was making noise like sheep make. I heard somebody call my name. I looked around and there was these same three hobos...they showed me these three doors and told me to pick one. I went through one of them doors...and saw a valley full of wolves...[a voice] told...[me] that these sheep people that I had seen in the other room had to go over to the other side of this valley and somebody had to take them...Next thing I knew I said, 'Here I am. Send me.' That's when I met Jesus. He say, 'If you go, I'll go with you.'...I knew right then that I had been filled with the Holy Ghost and called to be a servant of the Lord...So I became a preacher. (24-25)

Avery's desire to be a preacher can be seen as a historical connection to Africa. The power associated with this position is extremely desirable to Avery. Sterling Stuckey notes in his book, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*:

The old Negro preacher and other religious leaders in the slave community were the ones who spoke for their people whatever their ethnic origins. The authority of major religious leaders on the plantations owed much to the divine-kingship systems of West Africa and for that reason was the least likely to be questioned. (qtd. in Pereira 92)

Avery tries to persuade Berniece to play the piano and put her fears behind her. He claims that the Lord will help her release the pains plaguing her soul. However, Berniece cannot find the strength to use the piano. She attempts to cling to Christianity for strength as she begs Avery to bless the house in order to banish Sutter's ghost. Avery reluctantly agrees. As he finally tries to exorcise the ghost during the final scene of the

play, he upholds his faith in the Lord as he says, “I ain’t worried about him chasing away a little old ghost” (97). To Avery’s amazement, the Christian ritual he performs only seems to feed the strength of Sutter’s ghost. Ultimately Avery realizes that the ghost’s strength is too strong for his Christian god and finally admits in the final moments of the play, “Berniece, I can’t do it” (106). This scene in the play reinforces Herald Loomis’ claim in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* that the Christian god is a white man’s god, and that true redemption for blacks lies in a connection with their African “warrior spirit.”

Additionally, during this final scene of the play, one witnesses Boy Willie’s lack of connection to his African roots. Throughout the play, the fact that this character is fiercely aware of his “warrior spirit” is apparent to the reader. For example, during Act I, Boy Willie explains how he feels about the white man’s law by saying, “I don’t go by what the law say. The law’s liable to say anything. I go by if it’s right or not. It don’t matter to me what the law say. I take and look at it for myself” (39).

Moreover, as Sutter’s ghost becomes stronger at the end of the play, Boy Willie attempts to physically fight the spirit. Additionally, he mocks Avery’s Christian ritual, which only enhances Sutter’s power. His lack of connection to anything but himself limits his power to do battle with the ghost. He does not recognize that this “warrior spirit” originates from his ancestors. Therefore, as he attempts to battle the ghost alone, he is suffering from the same delusions as Berniece. The power of one man or woman alone is not enough to overcome the oppressing force of the white man, symbolized by Sutter’s ghost. As the ghost is too powerful for him, it is only when Berniece summons the connection to their ancestry that the ghost is finally banished. Finally realizing the power of this reunion, Boy Willie leaves the house warning, “Hey Berniece...if you and

Maretha don't keep playing on that piano...ain't no telling...me and Sutter both liable to be back" (108).

Boy Willie's return to the South indicates his attitude toward the geographical division of African Americans in the United States. His companion, Lymon, chooses to remain in the North, searching for a more prosperous future. On the contrary, Boy Willie believes that his greatest chance of success lies in the South. He does not fall under the misconception that the African American is treated better in the North. He prefers to remain in a familiar environment and build his future in farming. Although Boy Willie does not leave with the piano, the reader is left with hope for Boy Willie's success, as he has finally realized the power of connecting with his ancestry.

Furthermore, Boy Willie's uncle, Whining Boy chooses to return to the South. After years of sharing his song with the white men of the North, Whining Boy decides to return to his roots. Again, Wilson attributes the loss of the African Americans' true song to white oppressors. As Whining Boy's song is exploited, he begins to hate the burden of his musical talent. He explains:

I give that piano up. That was the best thing that ever happened to me, getting rid of that piano. That piano got so big and I'm carrying it around on my back. I don't wish that on nobody. See, you think it's all fun being a recording star. Got to carrying that piano around and man did I get slow. Got just like molasses. The world just slipping by me and I'm walking around with that piano. Alright. Now, there ain't but so many places you can go. Only so many road wide enough for you and that piano. And that piano get heavier and heavier. Go to a place they find out you play piano, the first thing they want to do is give you a drink, find you a piano, and sit you right down. And that's where you gonna be for the next eight hours. They ain't gonna let you get up! Now, the first three or four years of that is fun. You can't get enough whiskey and you can't get enough women and you don't never get tired of playing that piano. But that only last so long. You look up one day and you hate the whiskey, and you hate the women, and you hate the piano. But that's all you got. You can't do nothing else. All you know how to do is play that piano. Now, who am I?

Am I me? Or am I the piano player? Sometime it seem like the only thing to do is shoot the piano player cause he the cause of all the trouble I'm having. (41)

Whining Boy discloses that he is leaving for the South by train. The trains are symbolic of the African Americans' outward search to create a reunion that can only be found within themselves. As Doaker has worked for the railroad for many years, he provides a unique insight. His speech offers a parallel between the railway, and the unrest of the African American. Doaker claims:

Now, I'll tell you something about the railroad...See you got North. You got West. You look over here you got South. Over there you got East. Now, you can start from anywhere. Don't care where you at. You got to go one of them four ways. And whichever way you decide to go they got a railroad that will take you there. Now, that's something simple. You think anybody would be able to understand that. But you'd be surprised how many people trying to go North get on a train going West. They think the train's supposed to go where they going rather than where it's going...They got so many trains out there they have a hard time keeping them from running into each other. Got trains going every whichaway. Got people on all of them. Somebody going where somebody just left. If everybody stay in one place I believe this would be a better world. (18-19)

Overall, the outward search the characters conduct never fulfills the spiritual and historical reunions that will allow them to banish the ghosts of their past. Only through the act of joining together are they finally able to conquer their fears. As they confront the demons that haunt their existences, they remember to continue "singing the songs of their true souls." When the African "warrior spirit" is acknowledged, the characters are able to move forward, focusing on a productive future. This future must include the collective "song" of the African-American culture. The lesson of the piano is clear. One's individual "song" is useless without faithfulness to the race as a whole. Foremost,

in *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson reminds the African American that a return to spiritual and ancestral roots is where ultimate peace is found.

CHAPTER V

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHORUS: *SEVEN GUITARS*

In the year 1948 the future looked bright for many Americans. The country's increased job opportunities provided hope for prosperity. Moreover, the country's attitudes seemed to be changing. Black Americans took pride in the fact that they had successfully served in every branch of the military during World War II. This active participation inspired many African Americans to continue their fight for Civil Rights at home. When President Truman signed executive order #9981 in response to a civil disobedience campaign in 1948, he ended racial segregation in the U.S. Armed Forces, and marked an important milestone in the African Americans' fight for recognition and equality. Moreover, migration continued among the African Americans from the South to the northern, urban areas, as they sought to solidify their position in a changing job market (Appiah 2028). Yet, new struggles combined with the familiar forces of prejudice that intensified African Americans' need for equality. It is amidst this cultural background that Wilson sets *Seven Guitars* as he continues to explore the effects of spirituality, oppression, and displacement on the African American.

As was seen in the earlier part of the twentieth century, job opportunities were increasing in the United States, but white America flooded the northern job market, and blacks were left with limited prospects. Once again, the white population's benefits far

outweighed that of the African Americans. In fact, in 1948, as the white citizens of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania strived to better their city, they created urban renewal programs that focused on clearing out old neighborhoods in order to construct newer homes. These programs ultimately resulted in the unfair eviction of many African Americans. This act intensified the extremely crowded situations in the ghettos. Additionally, overpopulated neighborhoods resulted in increased tension and unemployment among Pittsburgh's black citizens (Appiah 1528).

It is in this setting that Wilson places the action of *Seven Guitars*. In the backyard of a large house that serves as individual apartments for several of the characters, the reader is introduced to a historically-accurate portrayal of African Americans residing in Pittsburgh in 1948. The play opens immediately after the funeral of Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton. Vera, Louise, Canewell, Red Carter, and Hedley discuss their friend's death. Through their conversation, the reader becomes aware that Floyd was a blues musician.

While the play begins with Floyd's funeral, most of the remainder of the play focuses on the days leading up to Floyd's death. First, the reader is introduced to Floyd and Vera, his former lover. The couple discusses Floyd's plans to return to Chicago in order to pursue his recording career. As Floyd has just returned from a jail-related workhouse, he is anxious to renew his connection with Vera and continue his music. However, Vera is reluctant to re-establish this relationship.

As the play continues the landlady of the house urges one of her residents, Hedley, to see the doctor, as he is suffering from tuberculosis. Floyd leaves and unsuccessfully attempts to obtain money to pay for his ticket to Chicago. Floyd, Vera, Louise and Hedley listen to Joe Louis' fight on the radio. Two of Floyd's former band

members, Canewell and Red Carter, join the group in a victory celebration of singing and dancing.

As the characters begin to play cards, Louis' niece, Ruby, enters. She is visiting from Alabama and has a sensuality about her that gains the attention of the men. A rooster crowing begins to dominate the conversation. Floyd throws a rock at the bird and Hedley becomes enraged. In a stunning moment, Hedley ritualistically sacrifices the rooster, as he compares it to the black man.

In Act II, Floyd continues to become enraged about his lack of success in obtaining money. His frustration builds, as he is unable to retrieve his guitar from the pawnshop. Moreover, Hedley's delusions and paranoia begin to grow as he warns Floyd that the white man has a master plan against the black man.

Next, Ruby admits to the other women that she is pregnant. This moment is interrupted as the band members enter excitedly, explaining that they will be playing at a club for Mother's Day. Additionally, a recording date has been solidified in Chicago for the men. However, Floyd's white agent fails to meet him with his advance payment for the club date. It is soon discovered that his agent has been arrested, which results in the loss of the payment. As he leaves in a fit of anger, Floyd proclaims the injustice of the white man and vows to go to Chicago anyway, regardless of what he must do.

Meanwhile, Hedley has become convinced that the machete he has been given is his protection against the white man. As Hedley loses his grasp of reality, Ruby realizes his desperation and offers herself to him sexually. As she comforts him, she realizes that Hedley is the only man who ever wanted to give her anything.

Floyd returns after two days with a brand new guitar and gifts for Vera. After the band performs at the club, Canewell mistakenly unearths money that Floyd has buried. He realizes that Floyd has robbed a bank in order to obtain this money. Canewell leaves in disbelief, and in a moment of confusion, Hedley views Floyd counting his money. Hedley becomes convinced that this is the money that his deceased father has sent him and kills Floyd with his machete.

The final scene of the play continues after Floyd's funeral. Everyone is confused as to who has killed Floyd. Then, Canewell realizes that Hedley is responsible for Floyd's death. However, Hedley is in such a delusionary state that he is unaware of the murder he has committed.

The symbolic meaning of the title, *Seven Guitars*, directly relates to the opportunities missed by Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton. His "warrior spirit" has been stifled time and again by white oppressors. He has been thrown in jail, robbed, left by a lover, and exploited for his musical talent. After a lifetime of pain and compliance, Floyd has reached his patience limit with society. In a moment of recognition, he admits:

I had seven ways to go. They cut that down to six. I say let me try one of them six. They cut it down to five. Everytime I push...they pull. They cut it down to four. I say what's the matter? Everything can't go wrong all the time. They cut it down to three. I say three is better than two I really don't need but one. They cut it down to two. See...I'm going to Chicago. If I have to buy me a graveyard and kill everybody I see. I am going to Chicago. I don't want to live my life without. Everybody I know live without. I don't want to do that. I want to live with. I don't know what you all think of yourself but I think I'm supposed to have. Whatever it is. Have something. Have anything. My mama lived and died she ain't had nothing. If it ain't nothing but peace of mind then let me have that. My mama ain't had two dimes to rub together. And ain't had but one stick. She got to do without the fire. Some kind of warmth in her life. I don't want to live in a cold house. It's a cold world let me have a little shelter from it. That's all I want. Floyd Barton is gonna make his record. Floyd Barton is going to Chicago. (87)

In *Seven Guitars*, Wilson again addresses the plight of the black man to realize his “warrior spirit.” Floyd’s desperate actions in the play are the consequence of denial. As Floyd denies his “Africanness,” or “warrior spirit,” he has lost the song of his soul. Furthermore, he finds himself fighting furiously for anything. His spirit is no longer channeled into the positive and assertive. His passion has been stifled for such a long period of time that it explodes, without regard to who or what is in his path. His need overwhelms him. Using Floyd as an example, Wilson is certainly answering white society’s condemnation of the crime rate among African-American males. As blacks have been residing in a society that denies them economic opportunities and that does not allow them to express their true “warrior spirit,” Wilson would argue that many African-American young men have been persecuted to the extent that it is no wonder the effects of this oppression yield increasing hostility.

The African American’s intense need to feel alive and ignite his own warrior spirit is also the cause of Joe Louis’ fame. The characters’ exuberant reaction to Joe Louis’ boxing victory over his white opponent accurately represents the views of many African Americans during this period. Joe Louis easily became a symbol of hope for many African-American men. Like a great number of African Americans, Louis migrated to the North from the South, as his stepfather searched for work. Further, he struggled against the prejudices of white Americans. When Louis began boxing, white Americans had pre-conceived notions of black boxers. Whites had detested the first African-American heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, who reigned from 1908-1915. His public relationships with white women and apparent gloating over victories against

white opponents only fueled the hatred many white Americans bore for African Americans (Appiah 1202).

Therefore, Joe Louis was extremely careful about his public image and remained humble in the public eye. As a result, his victories were accepted and even praised by white Americans. They nicknamed him “The Brown Bomber” and viewed his success as proof of racial harmony. However, African Americans viewed Louis’ victories as the long awaited triumphs of the black man over his white oppressor. Summoning his powerful “warrior spirit” catapulted Louis to stardom. Moreover, he became a role model for African Americans across the United States. They were fiercely supportive of Louis, and his matches became extremely important events within their communities.

Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience notes:

“After a victory by Louis, entire black neighborhoods were known to burst into spontaneous celebration” (Appiah 1202-1203). Wilson uses this historic fact in *Seven Guitars*. The characters chanting and dancing in elation is a typical reaction to Louis’ victory over his white opponent.

Joe Louis’ success was so important in African-American communities, that many saw him as a much-needed savior. As many of the characters in *Seven Guitars* turn to Joe Louis as a savior, Hedley continually seeks a Christian savior. Hedley claims, “The bible say it all will come to straighten out in the end. Every abomination shall be brought low. Everything will fall to a new place” (30). This need for justice from a savior drives many of the characters’ actions and shapes their personalities.

Spiritual significance can also be found in the title of *Seven Guitars*. The number seven in Christianity is used to represent completeness, fulfillment and perfection. One

obvious example being that God created the world in seven days. However, the number six represents a lack of perfection and emptiness. Therefore, Vera's continual claims of seeing six angels dressed in black at Floyd's funeral is symbolically important. In his life Floyd missed his perfection, spiritually and otherwise, and this ultimately causes his untimely demise.

Hedley's need for divine spiritual intervention is also apparent throughout the script. His increasing dementia as a result of tuberculosis, combined with his incredible need for justice served against the white man, causes him to transfer his spiritual needs to the realities of his environment. He remains convinced that the black man will overcome his oppression, as God will come and save him. He quotes the Bible for support as he claims, "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her wings and every abomination shall be brought low" (25). Furthermore, the sad fact that this undying hope incorporates itself into his confusion is a powerful tool used by Wilson. Hedley's rage and frustration become stronger as his insanity increases. He is a harsh reminder of the effects white oppression has had on the African American.

Hedley's further confusion derives from his father's death. He still continues to yearn for forgiveness from his father for childhood disobedience. He believes that when a musician named Buddy Bolden brings him riches, it will symbolize his father's forgiveness. This money will allow him to achieve his potential to become a "big man." This belief is the driving force behind his ultimate murder of Floyd. In his insanity, he mistakes Floyd, who stands in a shaft of light counting his stolen money, for Buddy Bolden. Just before he kills Floyd, in desperation he cries:

Buddy...you come. You come Buddy. Oh, how I wait for you. So long I wait for you. I think to myself many times 'Maybe I die before Buddy

Bolden bring me my father's money.' Maybe I'm not going to be a big man after all. Maybe my father don't forgive me, but I see you have the money. Give it to me... You say, "Come here... here go the money." Give it to me. It's my father's money. Give it to me... This time Buddy... you give me the money. (109)

Hedley's given name is "King." This enhances his connection to the musician "King" Buddy Bolden. In a poignant and insightful moment by Hedley, Wilson comments on the tragic fact that the black man has contributed to his situation of oppression by refusing to see the glory of his brother. Hedley explains to Ruby:

My father named me after... King Buddy Bolden... My father play the trumpet and for him Buddy Bolden was a God. He was in New Orleans with the boats when he make them run back and forth from Haiti to New Orleans. The trumpet was his first love. He never forgot that night he heard Buddy Bolden play. Sometime he talked about it. He drink his rum, play his trumpet, and if you were lucky that night he would talk about Buddy Bolden. I say lucky cause you never see him like that with his face light up and something be driving him from inside and it was a thing he love more than my mother. That is how he names me, King... after King Buddy Bolden. It is not a good thing he named me that. I killed a man once. A black man... He would not call me King. He laughed to think a black man could be King. I did not want to lose my name so I told him to call me the name my father give me and he laugh. He would not call me King and I beat him hard with a stick. That is what cost me my time with a woman. After that I don't tell nobody my name is King. It is a bad thing. Everybody say Hedley crazy cause he black. Cause he know the place of the black man is not at the foot of the white man's boot. Maybe it is not alright in my head sometimes. Cause I don't like the world. (73-74)

As in his prior plays, Wilson continues to use the blues as a powerful historical tool in *Seven Guitars*. Buddy Bolden was a definitive force in the musical world at the turn of the century. As he began to lead his own band, he earned the nickname "King." He is said to have been the first to "rag the blues." As a result, this new sound ultimately became jazz music. It is further interesting to note that just as King Hedley is suffering

from insanity, “King” Buddy Bolden was also committed to a mental institution in 1906 (Appiah 279).

Wilson again uses music as a symbolic representation of Hedley’s sincere hopes, but ultimate feelings of inadequacy. As Hedley plays a one-stringed instrument that he has built from a plank of wood, a nail, and some chicken wire, he explains that his grandfather claimed that the musical instrument had a mystical quality that allowed him to connect to the dead. Hedley literally believes the statement and is frustrated that the instrument does not yield the same effects for him. He relays the story to the other musicians as he says:

Now. When I was a little boy I asked my Grandfather where his mother was. He say she was long gone far away. Say when he play this he could hear her pray. I asked him, ‘How?’ He say, ‘Listen.’ (*He plucks the string.*) I didn’t hear her. But I learned it and I used to sit and play and try to hear her. Once. Maybe. Almost. (54-55)

Hedley’s desire for some sort of accomplishment and recognition is so intense that he equates his sufferings to that of Christ. He truly believes that the only justification for his suffering comes from a higher divine purpose. Vincent Canby notes in his review of *Seven Guitars* that Hedley acts as the play’s “ferocious conscience” (2). Indeed, Hedley continually strives to enlighten the characters and remind them of the importance of the past. Yet, he feels unsuccessful, as the characters continually dismiss his thoughts. Furthermore, his intense desire to father a child is his last desperate hope of fulfilling a desired destiny of importance. He explains:

I always want to be a big man. Like Jesus Christ was a big man. He was the son of the Father. I too. I am the son of my father. Maybe Hedley never going to be big like that. But for himself inside. That place where you live your own special life. I would be happy to be big there. And maybe my child, if it be a boy, he would be big like Moses. I think about that. Somebody have to be the father of the man to lead the black man out

of bondage. Marcus Garvey have a father. Maybe if I could not be like Marcus Garvey then I could be the father of someone who would not bow down to the white man. Maybe I could be the father of the messiah. (73-74)

As Hedley begins to have doubts about his purpose, he immediately clings to the hope that he has possibly mistaken his mission. He decides that instead of being a big man, he is to be the father of a child of importance. He references Marcus Garvey, who founded and led the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Garvey was known as “Black Moses”, as he led the UNIA to become the largest organization to champion racial pride and black equality. At its peak, the UNIA had hundreds of chapters around the world. Garvey was known as a leader who could show his people the way to freedom and happiness (Appiah 818).

Sadly, as Hedley is fifty-nine years old, and suffering from tuberculosis, it is highly unlikely that he will ever father a child. It is this fact that drives Ruby to tell him falsely that he is the father of her child. Thus, her hope is that he will feel he has fulfilled his purpose in life.

This search for purpose and self-affirmation is also seen in the character of Floyd. As a guitarist who has suddenly had a hit song, he strives to continue recording in order to make a name for himself. However, unlike Hedley, Floyd sees his struggle as an individual effort, rather than the collective plight of the black man. He also denies that God has had any contribution to his success. He tells Hedley:

God is in his heaven and he staying there. He must be up there cause a lot of things down here He don't know. He must not know about it. If He did it seem like He would do something about it. Being that He God and everything ain't right in his kingdom. Wouldn't you want everything to be right if you was God? So I figure He don't know about it. That's why I don't want to hear nothing about no bible. (45-46)

Hedley views Floyd's positions as disrespectful and naive. The conflict of ideas between the two men is symbolized in the play by a rooster. As Floyd sees the rooster in the neighboring yard as an annoyance, Hedley views the rooster as a symbol of his race. Hedley claims, "The rooster is the king of the barnyard. He like the black man. He king" (66-67).

Therefore, as a result of Floyd throwing a rock at the crowing rooster, Hedley becomes enraged. In a delusional fit, Hedley kills the rooster in front of the rest of the group. He ritualistically spreads the blood of the bird in a circle and threatens Floyd. He screams:

You want or you don't want, it don't matter. God ain't making no more roosters. It is a thing past. Soon you mark my words when God ain't making no more niggers. They too be a done thing. This here rooster born in the barnyard. He learn to cock his doodle do. He see the sun, he cry out so the sun don't catch you with your hand up you ass or your dick stuck in your woman. You hear this rooster you know you alive. You be glad to see the sun cause there come a time sure enough when you see your last day and this rooster you don't hear no more. (*He takes out a knife and cuts the rooster's throat.*) That be for the living. Your black ass be dead like the rooster now. You mark what Hedley say. This rooster too good live for your black asses. Now he good and right for you. (69)

When asked as to why he sacrificed the rooster, Hedley replies, " 'cause nobody want him" (71). Here, Wilson seems to be symbolically using the rooster to represent the displacement of the African American into the northern United States. As in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson uses *Seven Guitars* to again express his belief that the black American found himself out of his element in the industrially-based northern cities.

The rooster is a powerful representative of the past for the characters. The bird is obviously out of place in the city. The characters continually complain about its

presence. As it crows, it is a screeching reminder of a history that many of them would rather forget. Yet, Wilson reminds his characters of the importance of the African American's connection to his history. Canewell says:

The rooster didn't crow during slavery. He say, 'Naw. I ain't gonna be part of nothing like that. I ain't gonna wake nobody up.' He didn't start crowing again till after the Emancipation Proclamation. The people got up whooping and hollering so. He say, 'Nah. You all ain't gonna leave me out.' That's why the crow so loud. If you think I'm lying go and find you somebody from back in slavery time and ask them if they ever heard the rooster crow. (66)

Additionally, Hedley's desire to build a plantation in Pittsburgh is also evidence of the confusion of the African American. Louise explains to Hedley that there are no plantations in the city. However, he believes that owning a plantation in Pittsburgh will establish his importance as a contributor to his community, while forcing the white man to respect him. He claims:

When I get my plantation I'm gonna walk around it. I am going to walk all the way round to see how big it is. I'm gonna be a big man on that day. That is the day I dress up and go walking through the town. That is the day my father forgive me. I tell you this as God is my witness on that great day when all the people are singing as I go by...and my plantation is full and ripe...and my father is a strong memory...on that day...the white man not going to tell me what to do no more. (30)

Overall, this character's desperate need for acceptance is the result of many years of spiritual and cultural oppression by the white man. Although in the latter 1940s white America was beginning to accept black men and women into some organizations and communities, the lack of respect and dignity was still harshly felt by many African Americans. An urgent need for equality continued to rise after World War II. The events that occurred during this period of time helped shape the Civil Rights Movement that would later follow. This movement ultimately championed the African-American

“warrior spirit” and the power of the united race. These are aspects which the characters in *Seven Guitars* have almost forgotten.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The impact of the supernatural on August Wilson's characters in the twentieth century varies greatly. With passing time, these African Americans seem to be moving farther away from their ancestral influences. As the African American becomes more accepted as an independent contributor in the United States, his confusion seems to grow. Although they faced unbearable conditions during slavery, the African Americans developed a strong solid cultural identity during this period of time. This unity is progressively affected by white America, resulting in less prevalent connections to Africa with each passing decade. Therefore, the supernatural beliefs of Wilson's characters find their strongest African roots during the first half of the century. Through the study of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Seven Guitars*, one finds significant evidence of both ritualistic practices and religion that significantly affect the plots and characters in Wilson's plays.

Wilson's belief that African Americans must return to the instinctive "warrior spirit" found amongst their African ancestors is a re-occurring focus in his plays. It is obvious that Wilson feels black Americans have been forced to compromise themselves in order to adapt to a white society. As a consequence, Wilson would argue, the authenticity of the African-American culture is in danger of extinction.

An important element in the definition of this culture is the belief system that has developed as a result of the combination of African ritual and Christianity. The fusion of these influences began during the days of slavery in the United States. On the plantation, although oppressed, blacks found themselves immersed in distinctly African American communities, where Africa remained an important force in their lives. Sterling Stuckey notes:

The final gift of African 'tribalism' in the nineteenth century was its life as a lingering memory in the minds of American slaves. The memory enabled them to go back to a sense of community in the traditional African setting and to include all Africans in their common experience of oppression in North America. (Pereira 2)

As generations passed, Christian dogma found its way into the quarters of slaves across the South. Rather than replacing the ritualistic activity and the presence of the African "warrior spirit," these African-American slaves combined the teachings of Christ with their ancestral history. Thus, a distinctive belief system developed among African Americans, which Kim Pereira describes as "Afro-Christian" (103).

Scores of black slaves held to the belief that Jesus would redeem their race, punishing the wrongs of the white man and rewarding the sacrifices of Africa. Yet, upon realization that freedom in the United States meant continued oppression and hardship, many African Americans began to question their religious positions. For some, the Christian God in which they had placed their faith had revealed himself as the white man's God. These individuals often found peace only through a re-connection with their African roots. Wilson would argue that the complete submersion of African Americans into the established Christian beliefs of the white man is a significant cause of the displacement blacks have felt during the twentieth century.

Yet, Wilson does not condemn the Christian doctrine in his plays. Rather, he emphasizes the importance of the African influence into black Christians' belief systems. Repeatedly, he presents the reader with characters who are both loyal to their African traditions as well as to Christianity. However, the degrees to which these characters have incorporated each of these belief systems into their lives varies, which often produces conflict amongst these individuals. On analysis, one understands these differing view points among African Americans often places them on opposing sides of emotional, social, and political issues. This fact is often a defining element in the relationships found within Mr. Wilson's plays.

As *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* focuses on the healing that must take place for the African American in the early 1900s, the reader views both African and Christian influences on the characters. Redemption for Harold Loomis is ultimately found only in a return to his Africanness. After years of imprisonment in Joe Turner's chain gang, he has rejected his former position as a deacon in the Christian church. In his eyes, faithfulness to the Christian doctrine has not been rewarded. Rather, white men claiming their own Christianity continually punished him and his peers. While in this work camp, Loomis repeatedly saw formerly proud black men reduced to a state of desperation by these white enslavers. As a result, he rejects Christ, concluding the Son of God is only the white man's savior.

So, Loomis finds himself lost, searching for peace in a land filled with confusion and continued oppression for the African American. He believes that when his wife is found, he will finally feel complete. In searching for his spouse, Martha Pentecost, Loomis has traveled across the country. Moreover, in his journey, he has begun to pass

through the distinctive phases of separation, transition, and reincorporation used in African ceremonies.

Wilson continually uses the themes of separation, migration, and reunion in his plays. Loomis' confinement to the chain gang separates him from his family and a life that is strongly based in Christianity. Additionally, in searching to fill this void, he has traveled many miles, eventually migrating to the Northern United States. This movement displaces Loomis into a foreign environment. Wilson contends that the African-American culture would have been saved much disconnection if blacks had remained in the South after slavery. Wilson elaborates on this point by stating:

Blacks in American need to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people. I'm not certain the right choices have always been made. That's part of my interest in history – to say "Let's look at this again and see where we've come from and how we've gotten where we are now." I think if you know that, it helps determine how to proceed in the future. (Plum 56).

The playwright in each of his works conducts this examination of the African American's choices. However, the effects of the Northern migration of blacks are strongest in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Living in 1911, these individuals experience the first hand benefits and repercussions of the choices made by ex-slaves.

As a result of Loomis' physical migration, in addition to his emotional search, the need for the final phase of reunion becomes intensified. The hope of this re-connection for Loomis is only provided through the character of Bynum, who is extremely connected to his African roots. Bynum continually urges people to find their own "song" and to never let the white man take it away. Yet, Loomis does not recognize that the reunion he must achieve is found through a communion with Africa. Only this realization will allow him to find his own song. Instead, he focuses on reuniting with his wife. Only at the end

of the play, does Loomis realize that he must find within himself his true African “warrior spirit” in order to complete his personal cycle.

When faced with his wife’s dedication to Christianity, Loomis begins the battle within himself that must take place in order to complete the final phase of reunion. Martha Loomis’ intense loyalty to Christianity fuels Loomis’ anger, rather than comforting him. At this point, it becomes apparent that the battle and relationship in question is not between Loomis and his wife. The fight is ultimately inside Loomis. Martha Pentecost is simply a representative of Loomis’ former life.

When Loomis finally “baptizes” himself with his own blood, he is symbolically taking his life back from a white man’s God. Further, this marks the moment that Loomis is able to live again, as he has released his resentment for his wife, his enslavers, and his Christian savior. He makes the conscious decision to move forward in his life, finally recognizing the power of his African ancestry.

Ultimately, the major focus of the play is the fact that Loomis searches for and eventually finds his African self. As he finds his “warrior spirit”, he locates his personal “song.” This is a common theme for August Wilson. Kim Pereira notes that Wilson’s characters are “seeking spiritual unification with the mythological aspects of their greater cultural identity as African” (3).

Indeed, this search for re-unification with one’s African ancestry is again seen in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. However, in this, Wilson’s darkest play, the consequences of stifling the African spirit are harshly presented to the reader. Levee, the trumpet player in Ma Rainey’s band, is searching for self-affirmation and a justification for his pain, just as we see with Loomis in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Yet, Levee never reaches his

fulfillment in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Instead, as a result of his “warrior spirit” having been stifled for the majority of his life, he becomes immersed in his resentment.

After seeing his mother raped at a young age and experiencing his father's murder, Levee has held a strong resentment for the white man for many years. He has abandoned Christian beliefs, as he feels God has betrayed him. Moreover, he is desperately searching for some justification for his pain. During the play, he repeatedly calls on both God and the devil, challenging either one to prove their existence.

The character of Cutler provides the strongest element of Christianity in the play. One witnesses the growing frustration of Levee as Cutler lectures him on the Christian doctrine. As the tensions of differing religious beliefs build between the two men, Wilson then introduces the importance of faithfulness to African ancestry.

The character of Toledo continually informs the band members of the importance of their African heritage. However, he is not a role model for the African “warrior spirit.” Rather, Wilson presents Toledo as a sad example of wasted intelligence. Without his “warrior spirit”, Toledo's knowledge is easily dismissed. In consequence, Levee resists acceptance of the importance of his heritage. His denial of both Christ and his African heritage influences him to believe in only himself.

In making this choice, he abandons the power of a united African-American culture. He falsely believes that compromising to meet the white man's wishes will allow him to succeed in white society. However, each time he must alter his behavior when dealing with his white boss, it only agitates his wounded soul. The “song” of his soul is being sold to the white man for the price of success. Perhaps the most tragic fact is that Levee's naivety prohibits him from recognizing that this success will never come.

Even as the elder members in the band persist in warning him against trusting the white man, Levee ignores them. It is the ultimate realization that the white producer has lied to him that is the catalyst for Levee's murderous act. Full of rage and pain, his injured African "warrior spirit" explodes, as he fatally stabs Toledo.

Levee can no longer wait for justice to be served to the white man. With the stabbing of Toledo his frustrations are finding a release. In 1963 Martin Luther King provided an explanation for the African American's frustrations:

For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This 'wait' has almost always meant 'never'. It has been tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill formed infant of frustration. (Shannon 1)

After waiting and hiding his "warrior spirit" for such a long period of time, the fact that Toledo's crime was simply stepping on Levee's shoe is insignificant for Levee. Ultimately, he is stabbing the white men who have oppressed and harmed him throughout his lifetime. The sad fact that Toledo happens to be the recipient of Levee's fury is the cruel irony of the play. Ultimately, Levee's failure to achieve a communion with his African self proves to be his fatal flaw.

This communion with heritage is again strongly addressed in *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson intensifies the ritualistic elements of this theme by providing an altar for the Charles family. A communion with the past is only achieved as Berniece finally worships the altar of the piano. The piano that is the ultimate source of conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece, is actually a representative of their history.

Both brother and sister have become disconnected from their African ancestry. As Boy Willie wishes to sell the piano to a white man, he is choosing to deny the past in

order to build his future. His “warrior spirit” is not effective until he finally realizes that he must pay homage to its origin, which is his African heritage.

Additionally, Berniece’s unwillingness to play the piano is also a refusal of her heritage. She has stopped singing the “song” of her past, and has begun hiding her own “warrior spirit” out of fear. Although she intensely refuses to sell the piano, she sees the instrument as a dark reminder of the past that she is trying to escape. She feels that the piano has been the source of the majority of her family’s pain. She fails to realize the power that the sacrifices of her ancestry provide. She lives in fear of the past, present, and future. Thus, her own “warrior spirit” has been lost until the end of the play.

The fear that has caused the separation in the family must be confronted in order for the characters to obtain peace within themselves. Acknowledgement and reverence must be paid toward their ancestry in order for the characters to reunite. So, as the argument engages, the reader realizes that the focus of this play is not on one person, but on a family with a history deeply immersed in African-American slavery. In his review of *The Piano Lesson* Frank Rich makes this observation:

The Piano Lesson seems to sing, even when it is talking. But it isn’t all of America that is singing. The central fact of black American life – the long shadow of slavery – transposes the voices of Mr. Wilson’s characters...to a key that rattles history and shakes the audience on both sides of the racial divide. (13)

The danger of losing the personal “song” of ancestry to fear of the unknown is intensely explored in *The Piano Lesson*. The ghosts in the play arrive as a result of Berniece’s fears. Wilson claims that the idea of ghosts and the supernatural have always been a part of the African-American culture (Wilson, “Blues, History and Dramaturgy” 3). Moreover, the fact that the ghosts of the past are the teachers of the “lesson” of the

piano, intensifies the importance of the connection to one's ancestry for the African American.

Berniece's lack of sacrifice to the altar has caused unrest among the spirits. Again and again, she denies her ancestry by attempting to bury the pain of her family's past. Yet, their struggles are an important part of her existence that she must recognize in order to build a future.

At the same time, Boy Willie's eagerness to claim success in the future causes him to forget his past. In this instance, one sees the similarity between him and Levee of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Boy Willie refuses to acknowledge that the connection of the "warrior spirit" to his ancestry is more powerful than his individual strength. By this denial, he rejects the power of his united African-American culture.

In the climactic moments of the play, Boy Willie tries to physically battle the ghost of Sutter, and Avery attempts to call on Christianity for help. Yet, it is only when Berniece finally plays the piano, calling on her family's ghosts for help that the house is at peace again. Thus, authentic connection to the empowering "warrior spirit" of Africa is finally made, and the characters realize the importance of continuing to sing the "song" of their ancestry.

This same need for empowerment is found in *Seven Guitars*. The overwhelming need for self-affirmation drives Floyd Barton to make his destructive choices. Again, the actualization in which he is searching can only be achieved through the recognition of his own "warrior spirit." Sadly, like Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and Berniece in *The Piano Lesson*, Floyd has denied this part of himself for such a long period of time that it seems lost to him. When he finally calls on

his African self, he is so desperate that he is unable to use the power positively. Instead, like Levee, he becomes obsessed with the idea of material success in the white man's world, separating himself from his fellow African Americans.

The character of Hedley serves as Floyd's conscience. Hedley continually reminds Floyd of the importance of Afro-Christianity and the importance of the role of the black man in the United States. As his delusions intensify throughout the play, Hedley's own desperate needs for forgiveness and justification drive him to his fatal actions. Feeling he wronged his father during childhood, he has lived his entire life waiting to be redeemed for this sin. He believes his father wanted him to be a "big man", and he becomes obsessed with proving that the black man is "king."

This fact explains his continuous references to Christian doctrine. As Jesus was King of Jerusalem, Hedley wishes to become a king who will lead the black man out of bondage. Like many of the characters, Hedley is searching for a savior to right the wrongs in his life. Therefore, his search for a higher power is an extremely large part of his existence. His insanity is ultimately the result of oppression by the white man. Because he believes the white man has a plan to destroy him, he has not gone to the doctor to be treated for tuberculosis. Having lived his life in an oppressive society, he does not trust white doctors,

As the number seven represents perfection, one can see the symbolic significance of the title, *Seven Guitars*. Both Floyd and Hedley struggle to achieve the goal of self-affirmation. However, each falls short in his quest. Therefore, perfection and completeness is never achieved. Thus, the meaning of the six angels at Floyd's funeral is made clear. Floyd's "song" had been tainted by desperation and was never truly realized.

Moreover, a parallel of Hedley's murderous actions can be made with Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Both men commit these fatal acts out of a desperate need for justification. Both Levee and Hedley can no longer continue waiting for the crimes committed against them to be punished.

Hedley's delusion causes him to mistake Floyd for a messenger from his father. As his own "warrior spirit" has been a prisoner to the chains of insanity, the African force reveals itself in a state of confusion. Hedley believes that he must carry out the wishes of his father, and that in this he will finally pay homage to his ancestry. Yet, even as he attempts to maintain a connection to his African self, by murdering Floyd he loses his connection with his African brother. In a need to remain true to his own personal "song", Hedley forgets to sing the true "song" of the united African-American culture.

In his works, August Wilson attempts to portray the importance of this unity of culture by highlighting distinctly African-American traditions and beliefs. The incorporation of the supernatural allows Wilson to intensify his belief in the importance of a connection to African ancestry. Further, it allows him to speak to the problems that the black community faces in the United States. He seeks to aid his fellow African Americans in understanding the positive and negative aspects of their historical choices as a race. Additionally, he urges them to remain true to their natural African "warrior spirit" by finding their own "song to sing." In an interview with Sandra Shannon, Wilson sums this up by stating:

The question we've [African Americans] been wrestling with since the Emancipation Proclamation is, 'Do we assimilate into American society and thereby lose our culture, or do we maintain our culture separate from the dominant cultural values and participate in the American society as Africans rather than as blacks who have adopted European values?' On the surface, it seems as though we have adopted the idea that we should assimilate, because one

has received more publicity than the other. But if you look at it, you'll find that the majority of black Americans have denied the idea of giving up who they are – in essence becoming someone else – in order to advance in American society. (7)

As Wilson's goal is to champion the African-American's individuality, one might expect his plays to attract only black audiences. However, his works play to a wide variety of multi-cultural audiences across the United States. His ultimate appeal seems to lie in his realistic and honest characters who live in unpredictable worlds filled with magic and mystery.

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