

Al-Bulanee Alwan Hassan Khalaf

Al-Bulanee Alwan Hassan Khalaf

*Playing Black America:
Thematic Concerns in the Plays of August Wilson*



**Editura UNIVERSITARIA
Craiova, 2021**

Referenți științifici:

Conf.univ.dr. Adrian Radu

Prof.univ.dr. Emil Sîrbulescu

Copyright © 2021 Editura Universitaria

Toate drepturile sunt rezervate Editurii Universitaria

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

AL-BULANEE, ALWAN HASSAN KHALAF

Playing black America : thematic concerns in the plays of August Wilson / prof.

Al-Bulanee Alwan Hassan Khalaf. - Craiova : Universitaria, 2021

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-14-1756-8

821.111.09

© 2021 by Editura Universitaria

Această carte este protejată prin copyright. Reproducerea integrală sau parțială, multiplicarea prin orice mijloace și sub orice formă, cum ar fi xeroxarea, scanarea, transpunerea în format electronic sau audio, punerea la dispoziția publică, inclusiv prin internet sau prin rețelele de calculatoare, stocarea permanentă sau temporară pe dispozitive sau sisteme cu posibilitatea recuperării informațiilor, cu scop comercial sau gratuit, precum și alte fapte similare săvârșite fără permisiunea scrisă a deținătorului copyrightului reprezintă o încălcare a legislației cu privire la protecția proprietății intelectuale și se pedepsesc penal și/sau civil în conformitate cu legile în vigoare.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	7
Statement of Purpose.....	9
List of Illustrations	11
Foreword	13
Introduction	31
The Playwright’s Quest for Identity and the concern to elude destiny	
Part One	49
August Wilson – Themes, Influences, and the Writing Process	
Chapter One.....	51
The Importance of the Past	
Chapter Two.....	67
The Four B’s: Jorge Luis Borges, Amiri Baraka, the Blues, and Romero Bearden	
Part Two	83
Choosing the Route – August Wilson Playing Back America	
Chapter Three.....	85
The Writer’s Racial Paradox	
Chapter Four.....	98
Finding One’s Way	
Chapter Five	111
Music and the Quest for One’s Voice	
Part Three	125
The Playwright, the Stage, and the Screen	
Chapter Six.....	127
<i>Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom</i> : Blues and Discrimination	
Chapter Seven	151
<i>Fences</i> : the Meaning of Blackness in White America	
Chapter Eight.....	167
<i>The Piano Lesson</i> : Another View of the African American Philosophy of Life	
Chapter Nine	188
From the Text to the Stage and to the Screen	
Conclusions	207
Illustrations.....	215
Annexes	221
Works Cited.....	237

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When the world is going through a pandemic similar to what we are going through, which wiped out the lives of many relatives, our close friends, and causes frustration, only God, Glory be to Him, has granted man capabilities to challenge such circumstances. Hope remains the lamp that illuminates the path of continuity and progress.

First, my dedicated foremost thanks are delivered to my Lord Allah for endowing me unlimited patience, guidance, and insistence on achieving what I planned to continue in the scientific path for the service of humanity. And strength to accomplish this study, without which I could not have finalized.

After Allah, my utmost appreciation, recognition, and thanks go first to my respectful supervisor and mentor, Prof. Dr. Emil Sîrbulescu, for his consecutive advice, valuable remarks, and guidance that has been showered on me since my first day in Romania.

I would never forget my dearest father (may Allah have mercy on him), who was the first to sacrifice his comfort and preferred me over himself. He was pushing me to study, and when I became a teacher in Higher Education, the first word I heard from him was “Professor,” and this word was my motivation to continue and progress. For his spirit of mercy and peace.

My profound thanks and warm-hearted gratitude to my family: my lovely dearest wife who stood up for me and bore the weight of my anxieties that accompany the writing of my Ph.D. project, my lovely son Raheem, and my lovely headstrong son Nabil, and my lovely and dutiful son Atheer. And my dearest daughters, who with all my family tolerated my long absence since my coming to Romania. Finally, I would never forget the prayers of my mother and sister Um Jafar and their wishes for success.

I also thank everyone who stood beside me and supported me, even with a good word, in finishing this project.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Reading some of August Wilson's plays, I concluded that the playwright personally lived through and exposed racial and sectarian discrimination. There is a difference between those who live the situation and those who hear or read about it. Most writers have reported or imagined cases of discrimination, persecution, sectarianism, and dictatorship since the beginning of the enslavement of human beings. August Wilson was bold and sincere in dealing with the racial discrimination, oppression, and racism that the African Americans were subject to and still suffer from. There are still areas where blacks cannot enter white markets, shops, and bars.

Moreover, my country went through sectarian conflicts due to foreign interventions. Wars that lasted for years drained many energies and resources, the most important of which was humankind. Many were martyred without guilt, women and children suffered. The latest tragedy was the proliferation of ISIS, brought about by the occupying invaders, which destroyed our land's archaeological landmarks. And this cannot be changed.

August Wilson's plays represent real suffering; they are not the products of the writer's imagination. The plots of his plays are realistic, and they remain so to the extent that most people have lived the experience of racism and sectarianism, being forced to leave their families and homelands in mass migration leading to the loss of identity.

It is my hope that this volume – a revised and updated version of my PhD dissertation successfully defended at the University of Craiova, Romania – will be a useful introduction to the African American drama and a valuable working tool for the Iraqi students and specialists alike, thus filling a gap in the general knowledge of this field not only in Iraq but also in the other Arab countries.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

NOTE: All illustrations belong to the public domain.

Fig. 1: August Wilson, Yale Repertory Theatre

<https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/theater/august-wilson--fences/>

Fig. 2: August Wilson, *The Pittsburgh Cycle*

Fig. 3: Romare Bearden, “The Piano Lesson” (Homage to Mary Lou) (1983)

<https://www.pafa.org/collection/piano-lesson-homage-mary-lou>

Fig. 4: Romare Bearden, “Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket” (1978)

<http://www.artnet.com/artists/romare-bearden/mill-hands-lunch-bucket-pittsburgh-memories-IGLRSePONRgG5YdgMkRYRg2>

Fig. 5: Romare Bearden, “Continuities” (1969)

<https://anzinga.com/2013/08/25/fences-art-without-borders-wilson-the-universalist/>

Fig. 6: Romare Bearden, “Farewell to Lulu” (1981)

<https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/-Farewell-to-Lulu-/951B50D1B989483E>

Fig. 7: Jason Dirden, Glynn Turman, Damon Gupton, Keith David, and Lillias White in August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, directed by Phylicia Rashad, at the Mark Taper Forum for Center Theatre Group.(© Craig Schwartz)

https://www.theatermania.com/los-angeles-theater/reviews/ma-raineys-black-bottom-mark-taper_78509.html

Fig. 8: The cast of Lake Superior Community Theatre’s production of August Wilson’s “Fences.” Courtesy of Alex Flinger.

<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2018/03/29/art-hounds-august-wilsons-fences-tours-the-north-shore>

Fig. 9: Berniece (Noelle Strong) faces off with her brother, Boy Willie (Earley Dean, left), as he and Lymon (Michael Mendez) attempt to remove the piano. Photo by Don Daly

https://www.yourobserver.com/article/theater-review-%27the-piano-lesson%27?__

Fig. 10: Oscar Winning Film “Fences” At Towngate Theatre.

<https://oionline.com/fences-at-towngate-theatre/>

Fig. 11: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (Netflix, 2020).

<https://rishabhvashishthareviews.wordpress.com/2020/12/19/ma-raineys-black-bottom-movie-review/>

Fig. 12: Chadwick Boseman and Viola Davis star in “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.”

<https://fullertonobserver.com/2020/12/29/film-review-ma-raineys-black-bottom-gets-two-hits/>

FOREWORD

The contemporary African American community is characterized by its robust and affirmed identity within the American national population. Most black Americans today share the ancestral legacy of slavery, much less extensively, racism and discrimination. They also share the heritage of the Civil Rights Movement. The African-American identity remains marked by diversity, like American culture and society. African-Americans are united by a shared past, the memory of which has been passed down from generation to generation, and is still maintained today by a crucial memorial work. However, between slavery and the 1960s, this identity was not always unified. The division that characterized it reflected another identity that of the nation, still clearly shared between North and South despite the institutional reconciliation after the American Civil War. Between the end of the 19th century and the 1960s, the South, where a majority of the black population lived despite massive migration to other regions, was governed by openly discriminatory segregationist laws. While racism and discrimination permeated all of American society at this time, they were only genuinely institutionalized in the South, where blacks were not recognized as full citizens. African Americans, therefore, have different experiences depending on whether they live in the North or the South. During the Civil Rights Movement, these experiences converge when activists from the North join the Southern activists. The South's militancy, profoundly religious and rural, meets that of the North, political and urban.

On the other hand, the South's movement spread geographically to the whole country after 1965. In the 1970s, the results were evident in the affirmation of a black national identity united by the experience of the fight against discrimination (even if this identity is not necessarily homogeneous). At the same time, the American national identity seems to have been unified by the "Americanization" of the South.

The population that migrated north from World War I was concentrated in the Midwest and Northeast's large urban centers. This migration gave rise to urban ghettos, favored by discrimination and residential segregation. The black population of the North suffers from discrimination. However, their rights are not violated as systematically as in the South. The Northern blacks have more

economic and social opportunities, greater political freedom, a better education level, and more contact with mainstream society members.

W.E.B. Du Bois (who spent only part of his adult life in the South, occupying the chair of sociology at Atlanta University between 1934 and 1944) will inspire the black artistic and intellectual elite of the Northeast (in particular the representatives of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s). Even if some adopt divergent positions compared to Du Bois, the black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance include their reflection on identity in line with their predecessor. Alain Locke, for example, takes Du Bois's argument and responds to racist stereotypes by asserting the existence of talented black artists and intellectuals as an integral part of American culture that rejects them. He stated in 1925:

Separate as it may be in color and substance, the culture of the Negro is of a pattern integral with the times and with its cultural setting. The achievements of the present generation have eventually made this apparent. Liberal minds to-day cannot be asked to peer with sympathetic curiosity into the darkened Ghetto of a segregated race life. (Locke 38)

Langston Hughes, in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), rejects the norms imposed by the dominant culture and extols his black identity as a force worthy of pride:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either.¹

While artists and intellectuals in the Northeast differ in their positioning vis-à-vis the assertion of a black identity in response to discrimination, the

¹ Foster, S. (2019, June 26). (1926) Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/primary-documents-african-american-history/1926-langston-hughes-the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain/>

urban culture of the North directly influences all. It developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, directly connected with the Great Migration, which began in 1915.

Another force at work in the construction of black identity in the North is black nationalism, that is to say, a way of thinking aimed at the creation of a black state independent of the white American nation, endowed with its black-controlled institutions, on American soil or not. This line of thought took on significant importance at the start of the twentieth century through Marcus Garvey, who advocated black separatism and the creation of a state in Africa. He encourages racial pride and gives his movement a religious dimension by placing the struggle for racial equality in a biblical perspective (he reinterprets the Christian religion from a black perspective). It is interesting to note here that the speech de Garvey, even if it is anchored in the urban framework of the North-East, echoes in the rural communities of the South. It was precisely in the South that the movement was best established in the mid-1920s. Garvey encouraged separate development, community mutual aid. In the face of discrimination, but also manifests a religious fervor that finds a particular resonance among the South's blacks, in whose life religion occupies a preponderant place. The separatist current was then perpetuated by creating the Nation of Islam in Detroit in the early 1930s. This organization developed a specific religious doctrine on which a new definition of black American identity was based. The Black Muslims overthrow the doctrine of white supremacy, declaring Christianity the religion of whites and Islam the religion of people of color. They are openly hostile to whites, declared enemies, and identified with the devil in their religion. The Nation of Islam mainly spread to cities in the Midwest and Northeast between the 1930s and 1950s. However, its influence remained limited to these regions until the Civil Rights Movement and the growing influence of Malcolm X from the 60s.

Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner and critically acclaimed African-American playwright, August Wilson was one of the 20th century's foremost writers who highlighted the struggles of the African-American community. A victim of racial discrimination himself, Wilson was terrified as a child as he experienced traumatic episodes of racism in school. Not only was he kicked out of school for being the only African American, but he was also threatened and abused to the point of being physically assaulted. It was these experiences that deeply marked young Wilson, so much so that he began to express his feelings through his

writings. One of the first African-American men to achieve success on Broadway, Wilson was instrumental in shaping the African-American movement and highlighting their plight in the eyes of people around the world.

Wilson gives a voice to the oppressed groups, enriching African-American history with valuable themes and aspects. Not only does he try to turn drama into a history book for black Americans to make them think deeply about their past and present lives, but he also uses this as a way to think about their future and dreams. In his early life, Wilson had to work hard to help his family, comprising six children living in the racial ghetto in Pittsburg. It was an environment characterized by slavery and racism in all forms that affected his previous writings. In portraying the various themes of abuse, exploitation, and racism in his work, he remembered his experience both as a young man and adult, starting in the white suburb where he lived and faced radical discrimination and ending up in school. These harsh conditions made him drop out of school and go to self-study in history and literature. His main concerns in this regard were his involvement in the Black Power Movement. He wanted to help people better understand black people in a multicultural society. In order to create works that describe longer periods in the lives of African Americans, he used a strategy that made each piece represent a decade, as a historical circle from the first decade of the twentieth century to the 1980s, focusing on the cultural aspects of color differences that govern his society.

The aim of this research is to expose the similarities and dissimilarity in characters and themes in the plays of August Wilson. The study is an attempt to highlight the reflections of racism and the conditions imposed by the white majority and the way they have developed their own tradition, culture, and civilization to subjugate the African Americans through the creation of slavery, racism and sexual exploitation of the black women in particular. An attempt will also be made to understand the economic exploitation of the blacks. We will also reveal how the whites have created and used the American political structure so that the blacks will always remain politically weak and powerless.

We have decided to discuss the plays thematically (not chronologically), keeping in view the duality and complexity of the American black identity as presented in the plays of the Pittsburgh Cycle. The major research directions of our research will be: (1) an overview of August Wilson's work and the way his plays address the African American community's quest for identity; (2) Wilson's

treatment of the past, the playwright's Southernness, and the cycle of history as defining features of his characters' quest for identity; (3) the major influences on Wilson's work and the way they are found in his writing process; (4) the plays viewed as a manifestation of the writer's racial paradox: assuming his blackness and forgetting his white heritage; (5) Wilson's reliance on Greek tragedy and the fundamental role played by music both in a quest for identity and as a specificity of Wilsonian drama; (6) A comparison with Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* and Wilson's treatment of similar themes in a different context; (7) the importance of the blues as a spiritual guide and as a weapon to fight against this destiny, but also as a demarcation point of classical theater.

Finally, following the literary analysis, I wish to highlight that music and theater unite, thus creating a complete theatrical and musical experience, capable of leading the spectator towards an understanding, and a recognition of the quest carried out by the Wilsonian characters.

It was not possible to consider all ten plays in the Pittsburgh Cycle and give them equal treatment. Even if we are devoting generous space to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, and *The Piano Lesson*, we make references to some of the other plays only when necessary to our demonstration. A few titles have been referred to in more detail: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Two Trains Running*, *Gem of the Ocean*, and *King Hedley II*. Our discussion considers the plays as written texts, and we have included only one chapter on the stage performances and screenings of the three plays which form the main body of our analysis.

Our approach is essentially hermeneutical. It follows some of the tenets of the field, stressing the text description and the socio-historical context in which Wilson wrote the plays. A play's text is a literary object, a linguistic fact composed of sentences, words and the formal set of discourse. Whenever necessary we have resorted to the writer's texts, intertwining the textual elements with reflection. After all, hermeneutics is a synchronous and diachronic discipline at the same time, trying to capture the essences of the phenomena, but also their evolution.

Regarding the other approaches, we mention the contextual approach which allowed for a reading of the plays in the context of the American literature in general and of African American literature in particular, and the comparative approach.

We have structured the present thesis as follows: Introduction: *The Playwright's Quest for Identity and the Concern to Elude Destiny*; PART ONE: *August Wilson – Themes, Influences and the Writing Process*, including Chapter One: *The Importance of the Past*, and Chapter Two: *The Four B's – Jorge Luis Borges, Amiri Baraka, the Blues, and Romero Bearden*; PART TWO: *Choosing the Route – August Wilson Playing Black America*, including Chapter Three: *The Writer's Racial Paradox*; Chapter Four: *Finding One's Way*; Chapter Five: *Music and the Quest for One's Voice*; PART THREE: *The Playwright, the Stage, and the Screen*, including Chapter Six: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom – Blues and Discrimination*; Chapter Seven: *Fences, or the Meaning of Blackness in White America*; Chapter Eight: *The Piano Lesson – Another View of the African American Philosophy of Life*, and Chapter Nine: *From the Text to the Stage to the Screen*, followed by Conclusions, a selection of Illustrations, and the list of Works Cited.

The Introduction, *The Playwright's Quest for Identity and the Concern to Elude Destiny*, establishes the theoretical background of the thesis. We emphasize his mother's defining influence in shaping the future playwright's character and personality and in the transmission of his African American cultural heritage. All these are later found in his plays which feature African American characters fractured by life and seeking their place in society. His work is a continuous contestation of the American history written by white historians and is intended as an affirmation of the place and importance of the African American people. Regarding the place music occupies in his plays, we point out that Wilson uses the blues as a plot that allows him to establish a thread between the different parts of the cycle. Music accompanies the characters in their search for a geographical and social identity. The playwright's activism may be explained by his way of appropriating the theatre as a literary genre and infusing it with the blues as an explicitly African American cultural brand. His theatre is political in that it portrays the African American community and its claims at affirmation in an oppressive society haunted by the ghosts of slavery. Regarding the critical reception of Wilson's place, we underline its twofold dimension, first, the positions taken by the theatre reviewers and columnists, then the articles, essays, and books written by the literary critics specialized in drama in general, and the African American drama in particular, and we provide examples from both categories.

PART ONE: *August Wilson – Themes, Influences and the Writing Process*, including Chapter One: *The Importance of the Past*, and Chapter Two: *The Four B's – Jorge Luis Borges, Amiri Baraka, the Blues, and Romero Bearden* outlines the main themes of Wilson's history cycle, the main influences on his choice of these themes, and the intricacies of the writing process. It also establishes the intellectual and cultural background which made possible August Wilson's work, with a stress on the inheritance of slavery and the writer's Southernness.

In Chapter One: *The Importance of the Past*, we underline – as a background of Wilson's work – the historical events that shaped the fate of the African slaves on the American soil: the Proclamation of Emancipation, the amendments to the Constitution, and the ensuing Civil War, all leading to segregation, persecution, unemployment, and discrimination, turning the United States into the scene of social and political inequities. We point out the importance of slavery and its heritage as a shaping force acting on the Africans' minds upon which the slave-owners imposed the white, Western culture and Christian faith. Their artistic and literary productions testify to the objectification of the slave, reinforcing it from the slavers' point of view or combating it in the slave narratives and the abolitionist writings.

We emphasize the migration to the North as a dominant feature of Southern African American literature and a pattern within which the Southern black writers contrast the South with the North and the two contradictory yet complementary sides of living black in the South. Migrating to the North, the African Americans lost the advantages of working the land. Many former slaves left for various reasons, from looking for lost family members, to the desire to experience a better life in the cities, fleeing the oppressive environment of the South, or to the simple fact that they were free to travel. Wilson approaches the return to the South in terms of reconciliation with the historical past, as we can see in *Two Trains Running*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, or *The Piano Lesson*. He finds the origins of the African American dramatic productions in their artistic manifestations on the plantations. He acknowledges that the African American community has always had a view of life different from that of the white majority. The African Americans are affected by the slavery past in their decision-making, their interaction with others, which the whites would not accept.