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Layers of perception: Racial dynamics in Ma Rainey's black bottom

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Abstract

August Wilson's play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* delves into the lives of individuals amidst pivotal historical shifts, offering a profound exploration of race, power dynamics, and cultural identity. This paper aims to analyse Wilson's portrayal of Black male characters and their interactions with their White counterparts within the context of the play. Through a close examination of character dynamics and thematic elements, the paper will uncover how Wilson skillfully navigates the complexities of race relations, highlighting the nuances of power and agency within a racially stratified society. By scrutinizing the actions, dialogue, and motivations of the characters, the paper will attempt to elucidate how Wilson underscores the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, shedding light on the enduring legacy of systemic oppression and the resilience of the human spirit. Through this analysis, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of Wilson's masterful storytelling and its enduring relevance in contemporary discourse on race and representation.

Keywords: Black characters, representation, racism, white discourse

Introduction

"Everything changing all the time. Even the air you breathing change. You got, monoxide, hydrogen. Changing all the time. Skin changing. Different molecules and everything" ^[1]. One can find the above lines in August Wilson's well-acclaimed work *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Published in 1982, this play has become a seminal part of the African literary canon. This play is a part of the *Pittsburgh Cycle* in which he portrays individual lives in relation to moments of subtle yet decisive historical change. Hence, it becomes particularly vital to notice how his characters in this play underscore this. This paper will attempt to explore how Wilson has portrayed Black male characters and their White counterparts in the play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

The play is placed in the backdrop of America of the 1920s. It is vital to remember that it was a decade that saw changes all around. Booker T Washington's policy hurled the blacks together and gave them a direction. It was a time when they saw themselves in a positive light and believed that they were capable of doing something, that they were the 'New Negroes' - skilled, ambitious, and dreaming of climbing the social ladder. Hence, it was a time when the Blacks held an internal hope of having a good future and time ahead. However, it was also a time when racism was rampant in America. They had no say in the dominating white discourses and were often still treated as specks of dirt on the road. Despite this fact, Wilson chose to show the alternate discourse, a discourse established by the Blacks. As Usekes says, "Wilson's play proposes to rewrite the white version of American history in the twentieth century" ^[2]. Wilson, through his characters, put forth these changing discourses. At the start of the play itself, Wilson points toward how his Black characters are dynamic and well-developed. In one of the starting songs, Slow Drag sings:

Rambling man makes no change in me
I'm gonna ramble back to my used-to-be
Ah, you hear me talking to you
I don't bite my tongue
You wants to be my man
You got to fetch it with you come ^[1].

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In the above song, in spite of the fact that they are the ostracised parts of the society, or leftovers, as Toledo often likes to call the blacks, they point out that they will resist and cry. The Blacks are not afraid anymore. They listened to Booker T. Washington and acquired skills. These skills will now help them make others- both blacks and whites- listen to them. All of the Black male members in the play want to have their voices heard in the dominant ideology of the time, including Sylvester, who stutters a lot.

Blacks were already regarded as inferior, so there was definitely no respect for a young black man that could not speak. Also, it was hurtful to him when other blacks ridiculed him, so he really needed acceptance from society as a whole ^[3].

Despite failing continually in the beginning, he is able to record in the end. It signifies how Blacks are unwilling to accept failures and will persist till they succeed.

One of the central Black male characters in the play is Toledo. He is the most cultured man in the band, and he is the only person in the group who is able to read. He has read numerous books and is sufficiently cognisant of the condition of the African people living in America.

It ain't just me, fool! It's everybody! What you think I'm gonna solve the colored man's problems by myself? I said, we. You understand that? We. That's every living colored man in the world got to do his share. I'm talking about all of us together. What all of us gonna do ^[1].

By creating such a character, Wilson nods to all the Blacks who were going to schools and acquiring knowledge. These people were those who would pass down and spread the newly acquired insights and become the harbour for change. He is the voice to encourage the other black men to rise up: Each voice is clear and distinctive but, taken together, they tell a story of the struggles, defeats and victories which have defined the experiences of those invited to live on the margins of American life but who have done so much more than merely survive ^[4].

As J. R. Bryer says, "Toledo is an intellectual and the voice of Black Nationalism who maintains that if every living colored man works together, their lives will improve, and that it is a mistake to look for the white man's approval" ^[5]. However, at the same time, we see how Toledo is too much of a dreamer and an idealist. He comes up as a man of words and no action. He himself fails to do anything in his own life and is doing what he does just because situations led him here. Sandra G. Shannon claims "In Toledo, August Wilson creates a character who possesses exceptional potential to effect positive change among his people, yet he is never really able to rise to the occasion" ^[6].

Another central Black male character in the play is Levee. Levee mirrors those who underwent traumatic oppression at some point in their lives at the hands of Whites. At the tender age of eight, he saw white men assaulting his mother. He eyed as his father dealt his land to one of these guys and then steered after them to avenge that assault on his mother. It was perhaps the first instance of him feeling powerless, and as he lived, such instances multiplied. He is domineered by his boss. His prospective career in music is determined by white men and even his confrere black men try to thrust him down. Despite feeling helpless in his life, he does not entirely give up. When he is presented to the reader, he is sporting a pair of new shoes. Shoes, here, become a powerful symbol. These shoes indicate empowerment for Levee, for they are something that is his own. Shoes also

symbolise upward social mobility. Owning a white pair of shoes exactly like that of white men indicates his desire and hope to enter their world. He reprimands Toledo and asks him to buy decent shoes. "Nigger, why don't you get some decent shoes? Got nerve to put on a suit and tie with them farming boots" ^[1]. Where Toledo loses hope and sees gloominess around, Levee ignites it with life. Levee says: That's what the problem is with Toledo... reading all them books and things. He done got to the point where he forgot how to laugh and have a good time. Just like the white man ^[1].

However, towards the end, the suppressed anger, oppression, and frustration get the better of him. He gets tired of waiting and searching for the perfect time to strike back. What Martin Luther King Jr once said applies aptly to this situation:

For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the car of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquillizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration ^[7].

Through the character of Levee, Wilson highlights the situation and experiences that the majority of the Black population had to go through. The other Black male characters, Cutler and Slow Drag, too are depicted as people with skills and talent. They are described as sensible people who are dressed as successful. Wilson describing their attire as "successful" is significant for it indicates how they treat and command for respect and dignity.

In this play, where Wilson's Black male characters are dynamic and well-developed, his White male characters are one-dimensional. Wilson uses these one-dimensional white characters as foils. By doing so, he contrasts the depth and personality that Blacks hold in them, which is often whitewashed by the Whites. Irvin, Ma Rainey's manager, Sturdyvant and the Policeman are the only white characters in the play. From the onset of the play itself, we see that Sturdyvant and Irvin, do not care about the blacks and are just after capital they can gain from the band through their music. Wilson describes them as:

Irvin is a tall fleshy man who prides himself on his knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them. Sturdyvant "preoccupied with money" is "insensitive to black performer and prefers to deal with them at arm's length" ^[1].

They do not offer compassion and humanism because what is vital is money. "If you colored and can make them some money, then you alright with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley" ^[1]. Even though Ma Rainey is such a popular singer, she is ill-treated by the Policeman. Instead of believing her story, the Policeman accuses her of things she did not even do just because she is Black. They do not consider them human beings. For the whites, the black men are just a bunch of thieves. It is evident when Cutler expresses that he despises to be given a check since he cannot go to the bank to cash it. "Man give me a check last night. You remember. We went all over Chicago trying to get it cashed. See a nigger with a check, the first thing they think is he done stole it someplace" ^[1].

In conclusion, August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* provides a compelling depiction of the lived realities of Black individuals in the 1920s, shedding light on experiences often obscured or whitewashed by dominant narratives. Through the nuanced portrayal of both Black and

white male characters, Wilson exposes the complexities of race, power, and identity during this pivotal period in American history. Wilson's Black male characters emerge as dynamic and multifaceted figures, navigating the challenges of systemic oppression with resilience and agency. Their struggles, aspirations, and relationships reflect the diverse array of experiences within the Black community, offering a rich tapestry of humanity that defies stereotypes and caricatures. In contrast, Wilson's white characters often serve as foils to the Black protagonists, embodying entrenched power structures and perpetuating racial hierarchies. While they may lack the depth and complexity of their Black counterparts, they nevertheless play a crucial role in highlighting the disparities and tensions inherent in a racially stratified society.

Through his masterful storytelling and richly drawn characters, Wilson invites readers to engage critically with the historical and social forces shaping the lives of Black Americans. "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" stands as a testament to Wilson's enduring legacy as a playwright and his commitment to amplifying marginalized voices in the theatrical canon.

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