

## The Writer's Racial Paradox: August Wilson, Choosing the Black Route

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### **Abstract:**

Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, 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. For Wilson, the African-American community had, has and will always have a different view of life, because that view was built from a very different past from the white community, and that past affects to the present the way the black acts, his decision-making, his interaction with others, something that in his opinion was never accepted by the white community.

**Keywords:** African-American community, discrimination, identity, race theatre, Wilson August

### **Introduction: The Playwright's Portrait**

There is a wealth of information regarding the biography of Angus Wilson and his bi-racial family background. Frederick August Kittle was born in 1945. His father, Frederick August Kittle Sr., was a German immigrant who worked as a baker, while his mother, Daisy Wilson, was a black American cleaning woman. This mixed origin and the multi-racial neighborhood he grew up in – mostly Italian immigrants, Jews, and African Americans – definitely shaped his personality.

Wilson started writing poems, but he eventually settled to drama and in 1968 we find him in Pittsburgh as one of the founders of the Black Horizons Theatre. His first plays, *Recycling* (1973), *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1977), *Fullerton Street* (1980), and *Jitney* (1982) were performed in minor theatres and community centers. Only in the late 1970s when he moved to St. Paul where he wrote several plays which he

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submitted to the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center. In 1984 *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was accepted and produced on the Broadway, and it has been a great success ever since.

August Wilson intends to give a voice to the oppressed groups. He aims to enrich 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, compromising 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 was in fact part of his experience both as a young man and later, starting in the white suburb where he lived and he faces radical racism and ends up in school. These harsh conditions made her 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 Four B's**

As it is complex to determine precisely the influences or inspirations of an author, Wilson himself identifies the Blues, Romare Bearden, Amiri Baraka and Jorge Luís Borges as his main influences, something that is referred to in the criticism of his work as "The four B's":

My influences have been what I call my four *Bs* – the primary one being the blues, then Borges, Baraka, and Bearden. From Borges, those wonderful gaucho stories from which I learned that you can be specific as to a time and place and culture and still have the work resonate with the universal themes of love, honor, duty, betrayal, etcetera. From Amiri Baraka I learned that all art is political, though I don't write political plays. That's not what I'm about. From Romare Bearden I learned that the fullness and richness of everyday ritual life can be rendered without compromise or sentimentality (Plimpton and Lyons: 74).

In addition to these, the more or less conscious influence of all the African-American authors that he read in his youth, when he instructed himself by spending his days in the library, or even during his times of political activism, stands out: Langston Hughes, James Baldwin or Ed Bullins, or the work developed by W.E.B. Du Bois and Alan Locke.

Anthony Borges (1899-1986) is an Argentinian poet whose way of resonating universal feelings such as love, duty, betrayal or even honor in his short stories specific to a unique time and place inspired his approach creator of Wilson. Amiri Baraka (born 1934) is an African-American playwright whose plays had political aims for the social recognition of the African-American community. Bearden (1911-1988), an African-American painter, is equally concerned with the unity within the black community, and with painting, seeks to reconstruct his fragmented identity of African and inevitably American heritages. According to Harry J. Elam Jr, “[Wilson’s] creation of his twentieth century cycle [...] happens within a confluence of artistic creation that includes visual, literary, and dramatic texts” (Elam Jr., 9). Thus, Wilson places at the top of what feeds his work these three characters, these three B’s and more than anything, a music: the blues.

In his personal education and training as an artist, Wilson recognizes the influence of other artists on his work and especially the impact of the quintessential black musical genre – the blues. Due to the uniqueness of his education, Wilson had access to written material, not present in a conventional education for an individual of his time and ethnicity, as mentioned above. Later, African American writers of the 1960s representing black national culturalism, would influence the formation of Wilson’s political beliefs as well as the definition of his “voice” as a playwright.

Although in his work he does not identify with Amiri Baraka’s revolutionary theater, Wilson recognizes his influence at a time in his life as a poet, as well as his social and political importance at the time. Defending one’s culture is of utmost importance to the author and his work. Apart from Baraka, Wilson recognizes in James Baldwin another of his greatest influences. Wilson defends the integrity of African American culture, demanding recognition of its specificity and value as a support of a community, a commonality with Baldwin. Finally, Jorge Luís Borges, the Argentine writer, is also indicated by Wilson as one of the two most relevant influences, in the conceptualization of the characters and in the mode of disposition of the action.

Romare Bearden, whom the author identifies, along with the blues, as another of his most influential influences, plastically portrays the African American culture that Wilson advocates so much. Wilson says that the first time he saw such a work, he recognized in it the work he would like to develop with his writing – a reliable portrayal of African American culture. Some of Bearden’s works directly influenced the author’s plays, either as a source of inspiration or as a source of images / pictures inserted in the plays themselves.

In the same extensive interview, Wilson adds two more influences: the playwright Ed Bullins for his “uncompromising honesty and creating rich and memorable characters” and the novelist and essayist James Baldwin for his call for a “profound articulation of the black tradition”, which he defined as “that field of manners and rituals of intercourse that can sustain a man once he’s left his father’s house” (*Ibidem*).

### **The Writing Process**

From the moment he decided that he was going to write a cycle of plays, one about each decade of the twentieth century, Wilson had before him a wealth of ideas and themes that he could deal with, a fact that helped him a lot, not facing any blockade, as it happens to many writers.

Wilson starts his work, usually based on an idea that comes to him, as he himself reveals in a New York Times article “How to Write a Play Like August Wilson”: “I start – generally I have an idea of something I want to say – but I start with a line of dialogue. I have no idea half the time who’s speaking or what they are saying. I’ll start with the line, and the more dialogue I write, the better I get to know the characters” (Wilson, 1991: 1). Wilson develops the pieces through the dialogue of his characters, from pieces of conversation, talking to the characters himself: “Whenever you get stuck you ask them [the characters] a question” (*Ibidem*) – letting ideas flow to the rhythm of the dialogue between them. Wilson transposes his experiences to the text, having confessed to enjoying writing in bars and cafes, a habit he acquired at the beginning of his writing career. The author writes on pieces of paper, napkins, in his pad, picking up pieces of conversation, recording ideas that came up at the moment for later use in the writing of his texts. In addition, Wilson draws ideas and inspiration from the blues and their experiences. Wilson uses Bearden’s method – collages – only applied to a different type of art. When Wilson sits down to write, the main process is to “glue” the fragments of conversations, ideas, stories or short episodes, historical events, and symbols that he wants to be present in that text. For Wilson, this is one of the most important steps in writing a play – establishing connections between everything that came together. During this “collage” process, Wilson experimented with connections, making changes whenever necessary, changing characters, adding characters, moving excerpts of dialogue, rearranging the material. As a unifying element, Wilson is always aware of the culture of his community and its rituals, ways of living, acting. Wilson claims to always have in mind something that James Baldwin defined as: “that field of manners and ritual intercourse that will sustain a man once he’s left his father’s house” (in Wilson, 1991: 1). After writing a first draft of the work, Wilson revises it several times, rewriting, cutting, inserting

excerpts of dialogue, repositioning episodes. Wilson pays attention to details, subjecting the text to rigorous scrutiny. The author focuses on the details, rewriting in order to clarify the character of a character, or reinforcing its importance in the play. He improves on a theme that he wants to see better portrayed in the text. During the development of his pieces, they undergo a more or less profound revision process, until the author is satisfied with the text. Not being a clear and linear process, for the author it is the one that most effectively works. Not having a classical background, dedicated to the study of dramaturgy, he works by natural instinct, free from traditional canons, following his own logic. Joan Herrington explains:

[such a trial-and-error approach to composition] is the natural and inevitable expression of an instinctual artist whose initial conception is not linear: certain stories and events must be included, but not in any specific order. Actions need not necessarily precede or follow one another. He builds his dramas piece by piece, experimenting with effect (Herrington, 1998: 7).

In addition to this revision work, Wilson, during the period of rehearsing the production of his pieces, still revises the text, solving small problems / aspects that he considers necessary.

The process of reviewing and rewriting the texts is something that Wilson learned in his stints at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. Wilson sent manuscripts to the National Playwrights Conference several times before being selected to participate. The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference is organized annually with the aim of working with emerging playwrights in support of the development of American theater. Playwrights send their works to the O'Neill Theater Center, which are then subjected to a selection process. The selected ones are worked on during the Conference, but a month earlier a Pre-Conference takes place, where the selected playwrights read their plays to an audience made up of the playwrights and directors who will participate in the Conference. After this reading, the plays are discussed and each selected playwright is assigned a director and a playwright (recognized in the theatrical milieu). Selected artists have the opportunity to see their texts read, worked on and at a later stage, represented. During that period, the selected ones work with professionals from different areas related to the theater. In addition to a director and a playwright, each young playwright is assigned a team made up of actors and technicians from the areas involved in the production of a play. The team works on the text to later present two representations, two days apart, to an audience made up of the artists present at the Conference and its staff, visitors connected to the theater and the public. After the second performance, Conference participants get together to carry out a critical analysis of the pieces. The team that

worked on each piece, presents their work, the problems they encountered and the solutions adopted. Wilson saw his first play accepted in 1982 – *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. At Conference Wilson, he worked with playwright Michael Feingold and director Lloyd Richards who helped him mature as a playwright. His relationship with Lloyd Richards crossed professional boundaries. Richards became a father figure for Wilson:

Wilson: [...] Everything is going to be all right. Pop knows what he’s doing.

Shannon: I know you said “Pop” jokingly, but do you have a paternal relationship with him?

Wilson: Oh, without question, without question. I think so. Yeah. I have certainly grown up without a father, and he [Lloyd Richards] is about twenty-five years older than me. So, yeah, I defer to him in that regard (Shannon, 2003: 216, 217).

Their partnership allowed them to do long-term work and Richards staged six of the pieces in the Wilson cycle. With the work developed at the Conference, Wilson became aware of all the dimensions that the production of a piece has. Wilson, as a writer, composed the text, without having the notion of certain more practical aspects, such as the passage from one scene to another, or for example the problems of lighting technology. Another aspect improved during this period was the technique of rewriting. Wilson was already rewriting the texts, but in a less methodical way, dealing only with small details. At the Conference, Wilson learned the importance of the text review process:

The important thing I learned was to rewrite. Not just patchworking here and fixing there, but exactly what the word means – re-writing. When you write you know where you want to go – you know what a scene, a particular speech is supposed to accomplish. Then I discovered that it’s possible to go back and rewrite this speech, to find another way to say it (in Savran: 293).

Right at the Pre-Conference, Wilson considers the audience’s reaction to the text important, carefully studying that reaction, and then proceeding to revise the text. During the work at the Conference and later in the production of his pieces Wilson listens to suggestions from those involved, accepting them or not, according to his assessment of the situation.

Later, Wilson follows the rehearsals of the productions of his pieces, later rewriting what he deems necessary. Wilson feels the need to “listen”, analyzing instinctively what he hears, looking for the participation of the artists with whom he works. Some critics suggest that Wilson makes too many changes, in order to meet a model of greater commercial success, a fact that is worth his success on Broadway. However, Wilson states that during rehearsal periods: “[...] changes are

minor [...]. Rehearsals were more cutting and adding to shape it, as opposed to major rewriting” (297), considering that it does “a major rewriting before the O’Neill Conference and then after the two-day staged readings” (297). Wilson admits that there are small details that only seeing the scenes on stage, he realizes that they do not work, something that sitting at home writing could not find out. Thus, for the author, the text revision process goes through several phases, having the last place during the rehearsals, when viewing his work on stage. In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Wilson followed the rehearsals of the productions of the pieces until it reached Broadway, when the final text of the piece was defined, this being the normal process in the development of his works. The author deals with the text within a collaborative process. His text is the starting point for the production of a piece, the work developed afterwards being a mere refinement of the text, the product of his observation of the essays and representations and the feedback he gathers from the team. However, it is a fact that until reaching Broadway, Wilson submits his texts to extensive revisions, such as *The Piano Lesson*, whose ending was changed after a year and a half of representations.

**“You never transcend who you are”**

In a conversation with Bill Moyers in 1988, August Wilson – who had won the Pulitzer Prize for *Fences* one year before – explained his racial status:

BILL MOYERS: A paradox for August Wilson, at least for me – if I can be personal for a minute – is you had a white father.

AUGUST WILSON: I did, yes.

BILL MOYERS: And yet you chose the black route, the black culture.

AUGUST WILSON: Because the cultural environment of my life was black. As I grew up, I learned black culture at my mother’s knee, so to speak.

BILL MOYERS: You didn’t make a conscious choice? I’m going to choose black.

AUGUST WILSON: No. That’s who I always have been. The cultural environment of my life has always been – the forces that have shaped me, the nurturing, the learning, have all be black ideas about the world (Moyers, 2017: np).

During the interview, Wilson refers to the universality of the play, which is about what he calls “the commonalities of culture”: even if it is about the black experience, the reader will find such universal topics as “father-son conflict, husband-wife, you have whatever” (*Ibidem*). When Moyers asked him if he doesn’t ever grow weary of “thinking black, writing black, being asked questions about blackness”, the writer answered without any hesitation: “You never transcend who you are” (*Ibidem*).

August Wilson wrote his cycle of plays on the life of the American black community in the nineteenth century under the conditions

summarized above. According to Wilson, the history of the United States has been written throughout this time, but the role of African Americans in it has been concealed, calling itself the responsibility of writing and rewriting the history of the African American people in the United States, giving it due importance. In an interview with Kim Powers, Wilson reveals that after discovering his goal – writing a play cycle, one about each decade of the twentieth century, his work took a new direction:

... to focus upon what I felt were the most important issues confronting black Americans for that decade, so ultimately they could stand as a record of black experience over the past hundred years presented in the form of dramatic literature. What you end up with is a kind of review, or re-examining, of history (Bryer and Harting, 2006: 5).

History, Wilson considered, had long been written from a unilaterally and racially biased standpoint, with European roots, highlighting the viewpoint of a white sectarianism that scrutinized and categorized black communities. However impartial a historian may believe, he cannot in fact transcend his subjectivity and cultural circumstances. Considering the past of the United States, and its history being grounded on an exclusively white perspective, the role of the large black community was represented in this necessary bias, subject to its prejudices and discriminatory beliefs. As a slave, the black community had a role to play in conventional society – free labor. The physical strength of the thousands of slaves living on American soil contributed to the country's development, enriching the owners while neglecting the suffering and human condition of the slaves, understood as inferior, animalistic beings. The black community had suffered superhumanly to find its place in the enlarged society, as the overwhelming racial prejudice of the politically powerful community had long denied them that place. The question of the impartiality of historians has always been questioned throughout the ages: Plum recognizes in Wilson's work a challenge to the written and accepted version of US history:

Wilson's dramaturgy challenges the secondary position of African Americans in American history by contextualizing black cultural experiences and, in turn, creating an opportunity for the black community to examine and define itself. Rather than writing history in the traditional sense, Wilson "rights" American history, altering our perception of reality to give status to what American history has denied the status of "real" (Plum, 1993: 562).

For Wilson, the black community has had, has, and will always have a different view of life, as this view was built on a very different past



from that of the white community, and this past affects to the present the way blacks act, your decision making, your interacting with others, something that in your opinion has never been accepted by the white community. For Wilson, the black community has its own identity, the result of a story, a different path:

We are Africans who have been in America since the seventeenth century. We are Americans. But first of all, we are Africans (...) we have a culture that's separate and distinct from the mainstream white American culture. We have different philosophical ideas, different ways of responding to the world, different ideas, different ideas and attitudes, different values, different ideas about style and linguistics, different aesthetics – even the way we bury our dead is different (Bryer and Hartig: 68-69).

The white community's rejection of African American cultural manifestations has galvanized discriminatory attitudes, something the author himself has experienced throughout his life. For the author, the cultural differences between the black and white communities were crucial, as was the need for these differences to be respected.

This identity construction cannot be suppressed indefinitely. Individuals are influenced by their surroundings, the family representing the first circle of identity formation. This is widening ever more outward circles of community, defining identity: the neighborhood, the community, the city, the nation, following the growth of a person, contributing to the formation of that person's identity.

Wilson refers to the memory of blood (O'Meally, 1998: 566), not in its biological essence, but as a metaphor for the transmission of cultural values within the family and community: from generation to generation, indissoluble by the present, the product of a whole. of common experiences, generating conditioning feelings of life and the way to live it. Your characters will struggle with this past and how to best deal with it. In Wilson's view, when the past is forgotten, identity is lost. For the author, knowledge of history is a way of knowing the present and making conscious decisions in the future. Elam stresses Wilson's notion of blood memory: "(...) a metaphor for his central idea of reimagining history and for appreciating how the African and African American past is implicated in the present" (Elam, 2004: xviii). However, in his plays, Wilson does not adopt a comprehensive strategy of all social groups within the black community.

His plays refer to groups of blacks struggling to survive in the adverse world of white majority society, where their rights are denied, but it does not mention, for example, the black middle class, living unobtrusively, except in their last play *Radio Golf*. For Wilson, the black middle class succeeded in forgetting its past and its origins, that is,

denying its African heritage, adapting and acting as individuals in the white community. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson explains: “[They] are black in skin color. All of the values in that household are strictly what I would call white American values” (Bryer and Hartig, 2006: 74). From their point of view, to achieve this kind of success in American society, black individuals are forced to abdicate who they are and act in accordance with the conventions of the majority community, the white population. Wilson is clearly against the assimilation of white community culture and feels that society can only achieve success if they go through the same process: “The social contract that white America has given blacks is that if you want to participate in society, you have to deny who you are, you cannot participate in this society as Africans” (*Ibidem*: 76).

Wilson does not deny the fact that every human being would like to enjoy the advantages that money provides in the materialistic society in which we live, but he does not accept the fact that one has to deny one’s identity in order to achieve that material comfort. Through his characters, Wilson expresses a clear critique of African Americans who have forgotten their past, their roots in the name of economic success and personal recognition. That’s what Levee (in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*) or Hicks (in *Radio Golf*) represent: they both strive for success, acting like the white man, forgetting their roots.

All of Wilson’s work evokes the South, the return to the South, to Earth, but none of his plays have a Southern location as their background. The only idea is that life there would be better, closer to the past and to African American roots, something Wilson defends and expresses in his plays. Despite the defense of this idea, after emancipation and for many years life in the South was anything but idyllic, as mentioned earlier. Sandra Shannon points out that Wilson considers the capital exodus after emancipation to be the capital sin in African American history, when large numbers of blacks moved from the South to the northern cities, becoming uprooted, losing their connection to their past and the land, missing the opportunity to build a solid stake in society – “Whether directly or indirectly, each of the plays that make up Wilson’s cycle demonstrates the aftermath of the cardinal sin committed by the descendants of slaves: they abandoned the South rather than become landowners and gradually build a strong economic base” (Shannon, 2003: 12).

In his work, Wilson addresses the return to the South in terms of reconciliation with the historical past. In *Two Trains Running*, Memphis talks about returning south to reclaim his land; in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, it is in the South where Ma has her fans and where she feels good; Toledo longingly remembers the time when he worked the land; In

*The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie wants to sell the piano so he can buy a piece of land to work on. For Wilson, the migration of African Americans to the North caused them to lose the opportunity to succeed by working the land, which they were skilled at and could have given them a significant role in history. When they reached freedom, many former slaves set off for various reasons, from seeking lost relatives, to wanting to experience a better life in the cities, fleeing the oppressive environment of the South, or simply because they were free to travel.

In this movement away from the South, the region where the idea of African American community had originally formed, according to Wilson, something was lost, conditioning the lives of blacks in America:

We were land-based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent 200 years developing our culture as black American. And then we left the south. (...) I think if we had stayed in the south, we would have been a stronger people. And because the connection between the south of the 20's, 30's and 40's has been broken, it's very difficult to understand who we are (Rothstein, 2010: 2).

At the time of emancipation, the widespread flight of blacks to the South would be expected, where the environment of physical and mental oppression remained virtually intact and was more deeply entrenched. The desire to travel freely was strong after centuries of prohibition and captivity. Also noteworthy is the fact that blacks have no financial capacity to acquire a piece of land and the fact that no one in the South finances blacks for this purpose, because only whites had the capital and land and none of them wanted to see blacks with the kind of power that came from owning the land.

Wilson's work is of the utmost importance, though his art is limited to a portion of the history of the African American experience on American soil. Wilson writes, bringing with him the responsibility of waking blacks, reminding them of their past and how that past can give them the strength to overcome and overcome the problems they face. The reaction it receives from audiences is significant, reaching not only its community, but also succeeding among the white community, a fact proven by its success on Broadway. Wilson questions the fact that many blacks have forgotten their African roots, assimilating a culture that is not theirs.

For Wilson, cultural assimilation is not the solution: "I simply believe that blacks have a culture, and that we have our own mythology, our own history, our own social organization, our own creative motif, our own way of doing things. Simply that" (Bryer and Hartig, 2006: 74). In his view, the contribution of the black community to building a better society also includes commemorating its African past, enriching American culture with traces of African culture from its ancestors. This

transmission was made by oral tradition, African determinant tradition of storytelling, passing stories, myths, rituals from generation to generation: “Blacks do not have a history of writing – things in Africa were passed on orally. In that tradition you orally pass on your entire philosophy, your ideas and attitudes about life” (Savran, 1988: 295). Wilson does not understand why other minority groups, such as Asians, can maintain their culture, and blacks are required to assimilate. In his plays Wilson exalts the value of the African American people, their ability to survive, their indomitable spirit, their artistic sensibility, present, for example, in their music, the keeping of habits, rituals, way of life, despite from outside pressures. He refuses to see his community reduced to American, and emphasizes throughout his work that his community is African American.

In this sense, Wilson’s plays assume a certain didactic aspect, and Wilson’s role in reminding the black community of its historical past and the importance it must maintain in the present and in the construction of the future. In his plays his characters struggle with daily life situations, with the need to make choices, make decisions that will affect their life and their future, living and being affected by their surroundings. It is in this environment that it is of significance to resort to the past, to African things, to understand the present. Their characters are African American in their ways, their worldview, their expression, their rituals; Wilson’s aim is, therefore, to obtain this recognition from the audience and to be disappointed when this is not apparent, as he does not understand the resistance of his community to accept his African-ness (*Ibidem*: 296).

Wilson’s aim (not to incite the masses, to call for revolution, as that of other black writers, for example Amiri Baraka) is nonetheless political, underlying the desire to effect a change in the status quo. Wilson sees the recognition of African roots by the black community as the starting point for change, using his characters to convey his message. As Joanne Gordon comments: “Wilson’s characters are primarily African Americans rather than Americans who happen to be black” (Gordon, in Elkins, 1994: 18).

Basically, in this view of Wilson one cannot disassociate the fact that they are black Americans from their African roots, that is, there are “black Americans”, there are African Americans, with a whole inheritance underlying this condition. Wilson hopes the audience will draw his political conclusions from his plays, by observing the conflicts and the very history of his characters. Elkins goes even further: “Wilson effects, instead, a powerful theatrical experience and trusts his audience to reach political conclusions which develop a logical extension of his plays' narrative situations” (Elkins, 1994: xii). When the viewer hears a character tell a story of his past about a situation of racism, Wilson hopes

that description will make him think and withdraw his relations. Wilson states:

All art is political. It serves a purpose. All of my plays are political but I try not to make them didactic or polemical. Theater doesn't have to be agitprop. I hope that my art serves the masses of blacks in America who are in desperate need of a solid sure identity. I hope that my plays make people understand that these are African people, that is why they do what they do. If blacks recognize the value in that, then we will be on our way to claiming our identity and participating in society as Africans (Savran, 1988: 304).

However, in another interview Wilson claims not to write political plays: "From Amiri Baraka I learned that all art is political, though I don't write political plays. That's not what I'm about" (Lyons and Plimpton, 1999: 3). He claims, therefore, that he does not write for an audience, nor to influence a particular audience, writes for himself, as any artist does, in order to do his best: "I don't write particularly to effect social change. I believe writing can do that, but that's not why I write. I work as an artist" (*Ibidem*: 5). Wilson dates his plays, locating each of them in a decade of the twentieth century, in relevant years. *Fences*, for example, temporally located in 1957, takes place in the year of the decision to allow black students to attend the Little Rock School and the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which aimed to ensure that all blacks could exercise their right to vote. *Ma Rainey* is located in 1927, the year of the rise of popularity of a more danceable type of music in the north, the swing. However, Wilson does not focus his plays on the historical events of the time. Wilson focuses his plays on their characters, the answers they seek, their visions of life, the circumstances that force them to act the way they do, and their decision-making that will shape their future. Kim Pereira notes: "[...] history is the context in which his [Wilson's] characters live their lives, but it is those lives that he places center stage, not the public events which are defined those decades" (Bigsby, 2007: 65). For his part, Wilson claims not to conduct a historical survey of the time he places the plays, which he considers reductive – "I believe you do research, you're limited by it ... it's like putting on a straitjacket" (Bryer and Hartig, 2006: 238) – the only research he does is listening to the music of the time. According to his words, in the music and in his lyrics the experience of his people is present, and it is based on it that he develops his plays.

In addition to music, your own past turns out to be a source of information, using episodes of your own life, or elements related to it. For example, the use of the characteristic vernacular of his community, street poetry (*Ibidem*: 87), full of images and echoing the situations of the characters' own experiences, with which Wilson maintained contact

throughout his life. The use of this rich and living vernacular is one of the most admired features, the transposition to the stage of the easily recognizable language of a community, giving realism to its plays. Michael Feingold comments, by the way: “[Wilson’s plays] are treasure houses of street talk, blunt saucy and extravagant” (*Ibidem*: 13). Another personal experience that helped Wilson was his time spent at “Pats Place,” (*Ibidem*: 101), listening to the conversations and stories told by senior locals and identified by the author as “walking history books” (*Ibidem*), sources from the history of your first-person community. Many other personal data are transposed into your work; For example, Bynum’s character is named after Wilson’s maternal grandfather. Thus, his plays, despite their expressed desire to rewrite history, are not presumed to be accurate historical accounts, but rather reflect his perception of realities, based on the blues and his personal experience, with all the underlying limitations. The author’s personal life and his memories, ultimately decisively influence his work on a historical, social and political level, as Sandra Shannon states:

Reestablishing links with the past – stretching across the black experience in America to Africa – involves tapping the resources of his memory, both conscious and subliminal [...] These memories begin as a result of a past that combines his growing up poor and fatherless in a Pittsburgh ghetto, his quest to discover his own genealogical ties with Africa, and his sustained belief that African Americans of the present generation urgently need to ground themselves in Africa’s cultural past (Shannon, 2003: 6).

Wilson uses his personal knowledge of African American life, transferring it to his plays, all the stories he has heard from his family and members of his community and everything he has experienced has a place in his work.

### **Conclusions**

After three hundred years of exploitation and subjugation of an entire social mass, followed by decades of outrageous emancipation that would almost always replicate the previous regime of racial oppression (resulting in the alleged freedom of blacks and the persistence of grave social and economic inequity), Wilson’s literature deals with healing the painful wounds that have plagued the African American community for centuries. In his view, this healing process involves reestablishing the connections to its roots. The concept of roots transcends the experience of your community on American soil. The origins date back to the ancestral land – Africa. Throughout his work and career, the author mentions several reasons for the loss of links with the culture of his ancestors, resulting in a loss of identity, from migration north after

emancipation, to assimilation in a vain attempt to avoid further unpleasantness. Thus, the author's work focuses on the search for the identity of the African American community, diluted throughout the twentieth century in an experience within a society castrating difference.

In this search, the author presents possible paths through his characters and symbols. Wilson's characters are always faced with dilemmatic options – North or South? Assimilation or segregation? Accepting one's roots and reconciling with the past or ignoring ancestry, losing one's identity? React and act or adopt a passive attitude? Embrace materialism or protect individual spirituality? On the one hand, Wilson does not seem to want to give an unambiguous answer to the questions he raises: he elaborates complex characters whose paths are confused. While not taking the healthier options, the reasons behind their choices are somehow valid. On the other hand, when it claims to itself a certain pedagogical intervention, alerting to some equivocal and self-destructive manifestations of the African-American community in which it grew up, so as not to be perpetuated, its sociopolitical convictions are reverberated in the dialogues between characters.

As an unshakable advocate of African American culture, Wilson worries about blacks who, for minor reasons, dismiss their culture in favor of assimilation. According to the author, to achieve social, political or economic equality, it is not necessary to abdicate the defining characteristics:

Blacks have been all too willing and anxious to say that we are the same as whites, meaning that we should be treated the same, that we should enjoy the same opportunities in society as whites. That part is fine... but blacks are different, and they should be aware of their differences (Rothstein, 2010: 3).

For Wilson, differences are definitely a source of pride, as opposed to being a sign of inferiority. In their plays, the distinctive features of African American culture arise in the specific form of a mystical representation, for example a ghost, or a vision, or in the details of everyday life, such as cooking humming a blues (Doaker in *The Piano Lesson*).

Along the way, the author himself faced a process of searching for his own identity. At the personal level, the product of an interracial relationship (white father of German descent and African-American mother), Wilson had to make choices about his inheritance. The author refers to the choice process as apparently simple, due to the almost total absence of the father figure. However, in interviews given by the author, whenever the subject is broached, Wilson responds succinctly, leading some interviewers to draw elations from his disagreement in approaching this subject, such as Dinah Livingston: "Ask Wilson what the white part

of his heritage means to him, and he says: ‘The cultural environment of my life has been black, and I’ve always considered myself black.’ His eyes say: ‘Next question, please’” (in Bryer and Hartig, 2006: 39).

Growing up without one of the parenting figures affects an individual’s personality development. Wilson later notes that when he left his maternal home, he sought in the community, in the voice of the older men in his community, a model of the male figure of the father he did not have. Nevertheless, he had a stepfather, David Bedford, who is practically absent in his words because of disagreements over Wilson having dropped out of the football team while at school, which negatively affected his relationship. Wilson attended the Pat’s Place, cigar store and pool hall (*Ibidem*: xviii), where he listened to the stories of the elderly, regular customers of the place, where he was lovingly treated by Young Blood (Wilson, in “The Kennedy Center Interview”). Living with this group of elderly members of his community proved fruitful for the author, not only for the male image absent from his development, but also for the knowledge he acquired. From them, Wilson learned about the spirit of resistance, the history of his community, the stories / episodes of his life that he told became material to elaborate on later, and learned to listen to a quality he treasures as a playwright.

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