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## **Resilience and Reclamation: African American Identity through Non-White Techniques and Black Aesthetics**

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### **Abstract**

To shed light on the intricate exploitation of African Americans as an ethnic minority, the author employed the theoretical framework of non-white techniques and black aesthetics. Wilson adheres to these theoretical frameworks to develop a distinct and autonomous identity for African Americans within the United States. Despite being brought to America as slaves, they carried with them their rituals, myths, and songs. Therefore, they place a strong belief in their native cultural history and authentic identity. Nevertheless, this particular identity was shown to be in a state of turmoil due to the prevalence of racist practices within the United States. To reclaim their sense of identity, several black aestheticians spearheaded the Black Aesthetics Movement. To disseminate the philosophy of Black Aesthetics, proponents engage in the collection and utilization of diverse mythologies, rituals, folklore, musical forms, and religious beliefs throughout the realms of art, literature, drama, and sculpture. Wilsonian dramaturgy is defined by the presence of several myths, rituals, and beliefs that are specific to the African-American community. Consequently, it is possible to analyze Wilson's dramaturgy through the lens of the principles of Black Aesthetics.

This study examines the theories and criteria for African-American art and theatre, as articulated by prominent scholars Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois, and Amiri Baraka. These theories were developed during the Black Theatre and Black Aesthetics Movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

**Keywords:** August Wilson, Afro-American art, dramaturgy, myths, diverse mythology, black aesthetics, etc.



August Wilson emerged as a famous playwright during the 1980s. During the initial years of the 1980s, he garnered recognition as a prominent figure in African-American theatre due to his distinctive approach to dramaturgy. Nevertheless, he fell prey to discriminatory practices and the prevailing white hegemony in the United States. Furthermore, in 1959 at Pittsburgh's Central Catholic High School, he held the distinction of being the sole African-American student, subjecting him to intimidation and harassment from his white peers. Additionally, he faced allegations from a teacher regarding the act of plagiarizing a substantial academic work consisting of 20 pages, specifically focused on the topic of Napoleon. Consequently, as a result of these accusations, he decided to withdraw from his enrollment at Gladstone High School in the year 1960. Despite being expelled from a racially discriminatory educational institution, he took it upon himself to pursue self-education through the resources available at the Carnegie Library. Consequently, he developed a voracious appetite for literature about the experiences and history of African Americans. The treatment he received from individuals of Caucasian descent was profoundly inhumane and characterized by acts of extreme brutality. In addition to his disadvantaged upbringing, Wilson has attained remarkable accomplishments in the field of dramaturgy.

In the early 1980s, Wilson was well-recognized as a prominent figure in African-American theatre due to his distinctive approach to dramaturgy. Nevertheless, he experienced discriminatory behaviours and the prevailing white hegemony inside the United States of America. Furthermore, in 1959 at Pittsburgh's Central Catholic High School, he held the distinction of being the sole African-American student, subjecting him to threats from his white peers. He faced allegations of plagiarism from a teacher, specifically over a 20-page report on Napoleon. Consequently, this incident led to their decision to withdraw from Gladstone High School in 1960. Despite being expelled from a racially discriminatory educational institution, he took it upon himself to pursue self-education through the resources available at the Carnegie Library, where he developed a voracious appetite for literature on the subject of African-American experiences. The treatment he received from individuals of European descent was profoundly inhumane and characterized by acts of brutality. As an individual of African American descent residing in the United States, he asserts that black Americans possess the most profound narrative in the annals of humanity. Wilson views the harassment of African Americans through an artistic lens, rather than perceiving it solely as a form of protest.

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The author has composed a collection of ten plays commonly referred to as the ten-play cycle or century cycle. This nomenclature stems from the fact that each piece meticulously documents the evolution of African-American theatre during each decade of the twentieth century. In the early stages of his professional journey, Wilson held the belief that theatre could serve as a vehicle to heighten the collective awareness of the black community's experiences in 20th-century America. He dedicated himself to the creation of a series of ten plays, to reimagine the historical narrative of each decade within this century. The objective was to ensure that black life would be recognized and integrated as an integral component of America's theatrical heritage.

The significance of Wilson's dramatic attempts in African-American Theatre lies in their polemical nature.

Wilsonian dramaturgy serves as a means of circumventing the complex socio-economic and cultural challenges experienced by individuals of African-American descent. Wilson is a pivotal character in the establishment of multidimensional and multi-thematic perspectives within the African-American theatrical heritage. The African American Theatre has been engaging in novel explorations of history, memory, rituals, time, and location, demonstrating an intellectual and creative approach. Therefore, he is capable of circumventing the socio-economic and cultural upheaval experienced by those of African descent. Consequently, by the early 1980s, numerous contemporary African-American dramatists were actively observing and emulating his dramaturgical style. According to Marion Mac Clinton, it is evident that the influence of August Wilson has played a significant role in providing opportunities for black writers in the American theatrical industry. As a result, African Americans are now regarded as valuable contributors to the field.

Wilson is recognized for his role in establishing a distinct identity for African-American theatre. However, it is important to note that his artistic development did not occur in a controlled or ideal environment. The trajectory of his life exhibits both rising and downward trends due to his experience as a victim of cultural problems. This adverse backdrop is evident in the thematic content of his plays. The artist depicted the stark realities and challenging circumstances of African-American existence. About this matter, John Lahar asserts that the plays in question do not function as instructional materials; rather, they depict the broader scope of life through the subtle portrayal of small incidents.

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W.E.B. DuBois, Amiri Baraka, and Alain Locke are widely recognized as significant contributors to the Black Aesthetics Movement. The notion of Black Aesthetics had a significant impact on the dramaturgy of August Wilson.

Identifying a writer who produces work devoid of ideology poses a considerable challenge. The assertion that one writes without ideology can be understood as a manifestation of ideology in itself. Hence, African-American drama exhibits a multitude of philosophies. Throughout history, African Americans have held varying opinions regarding the concepts of liberty and equality, spanning from their earliest experiences to the present day. African American leaders, such as Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Dubois, Martin Luther King Jr., Eliza Muhammad, and Malcolm X, held differing ideologies regarding the liberation of African Americans from a racially oppressive white culture. Therefore, the historical narrative surrounding African-American leadership has multiple ideological perspectives. Certain leaders hold the belief that the United States should establish a separate nation exclusively for African Americans. Conversely, other leaders adhere to the principles of Islam and Christianity. The Civil Rights Movement of African Americans thus encompasses multiple facets, although its primary objective is the liberation and empowerment of African Americans within the United States.

The Wilsonian ideology of dramaturgy is distinguished by its association with many movements, namely the Black Power Movement, Black Theatre Movement, Black Art Movement, and Black Aesthetics Movement. The creation of this movement is the confluence of various philosophies embraced by African Americans, to foster enlightenment and empowerment within their community. Consequently, he employs strategies utilized by non-white individuals to bring attention to the systemic racism and oppression experienced by African Americans. As articulated by Harry I. Elam Jr. (2004),

Despite the—cultural appeal of his dramaturgy, Wilson sees his roots within the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and identifies Himself with the black cultural nationalism of that time and the processes of black revolutionary theatre. (6)

The historical narrative surrounding the abolition of slavery and the socio-economic and cultural empowerment of African Americans holds significant prominence. Upon their arrival in America, African Americans brought with them their rich African heritage. The



African tradition under consideration predominantly manifested itself through oral means. Over time, it transformed and took on a written format. During the era of slavery, spirituals and ceremonies held significant importance within the context of oral tradition. The African-American Theatre holds a profound historical significance as a guardian and promoter of the rich oral traditions embedded within their culture and religion. In the aftermath of President Abraham Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation, which granted freedom to enslaved individuals, a new era unfolded, presenting fresh opportunities for education and employment. Within this transformative period, scholars emerged as pivotal figures, leveraging their newfound freedoms to spearhead anti-racism campaigns and advocate for the rights of African Americans.

One of the noteworthy contributions of these scholars was their commitment to enlightenment through the creation of a substantial body of written literature. This literature aimed to educate and empower African Americans, shedding light on their history, struggles, and aspirations. Through written works, these scholars sought to dismantle stereotypes, challenge discriminatory practices, and foster a sense of identity and pride within the African-American community.

This shift from oral discourse to a written tradition marked a pivotal evolution in the cultural landscape. While oral traditions had long been a cornerstone of African-American communication, the advent of written literature allowed for a more enduring and widely accessible form of expression. It became a means of preserving stories, experiences, and cultural nuances for future generations, contributing to the construction of a collective narrative that reflected the resilience and strength of the African-American community.

The African-American Theatre, therefore, played a crucial role in this transformative period by serving as a platform for the dissemination of these written works. The stage became a powerful medium through which the narratives of African Americans were brought to life, providing a visual and emotional dimension to the stories that had previously been shared predominantly through oral means. This convergence of written literature and theatrical expression not only enriched the cultural tapestry of the African-American community but also played a pivotal role in shaping the broader discourse on race and identity in the United States. Thus, the African-American Theatre emerged as a dynamic force, bridging the gap between oral traditions and the written word, and contributing

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significantly to the cultural and intellectual empowerment of a community that had long been marginalized. Through this process, the theatre became a beacon of resilience, fostering a legacy that continues to influence and inspire generations to come.

Wilsonian dramaturgy (1991) incorporates elements from both the oral and written traditions of African-American culture and religion. He has the belief that the past holds the utmost significance in the process of establishing the identity of African Americans. Consequently, the author asserts that the act of documenting our historical narrative has proven to be an immensely advantageous instrument. This is primarily because to effectively navigate and progress towards the future, we must possess a comprehensive understanding of our collective past.(7).

Wilson emphasizes the past of African Americans to enlighten them towards their future. Each of his plays delves into the thematic exploration of the past as it intersects with the present.

August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* stands as a cornerstone in the playwright's remarkable body of work, earning accolades such as the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Tony Award. The play unfolds against the backdrop of Pittsburgh in the year 1911, a crucial juncture in American history that witnessed the beginnings of a transformative migration – the Great Migration – wherein African Americans embarked on a significant exodus from the Southern regions to the Northern parts of the United States.

The choice of Pittsburgh as the setting is emblematic of Wilson's deliberate selection of locations with historical and cultural significance in many of his plays. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the city serves not merely as a backdrop but as an integral part of the narrative, capturing the essence of the urban experience during this pivotal era. Pittsburgh, a burgeoning industrial hub, becomes a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities that awaited African Americans as they sought a new life in the North.

The year 1911 marks a crucial moment in the Great Migration, reflecting a period when many African Americans were drawn to the North by the promise of better economic prospects, improved living conditions, and, importantly, the hope of escaping the systemic racism and oppression prevalent in the Southern states. Against this historical backdrop,



Wilson weaves a narrative that explores the complexities of identity, belonging, and the search for freedom in a society undergoing profound transformation. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* introduces audiences to characters whose personal stories mirror the broader themes of the Great Migration. The characters grapple with the challenges of adapting to an unfamiliar urban environment, the search for employment, and the quest for a sense of self and community in the face of a shifting cultural landscape. Through Wilson's nuanced storytelling, the play captures the nuances of the African American experience during this era, shedding light on both the resilience and the struggles inherent in the pursuit of a better life.

The recognition garnered by the play through prestigious awards like the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Tony Award attests to its artistic merit and its ability to resonate with audiences. By delving into the historical context of the Great Migration, Wilson not only crafts a compelling narrative but also invites reflection on the broader socio-cultural forces that shaped the lives of African Americans during this transformative period. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* thus stands as a testament to August Wilson's skill in capturing the essence of history and humanity within the confines of the stage, inviting audiences to engage with the complexities of the past while drawing connections to the present.

The setting of the play is a boarding house in Pittsburgh owned by Mr. Seth and Mrs. Bartha. The majority of the characters in the play are individuals who have been displaced and are seeking economic prospects in the industrialized North. However, their pursuit is not solely driven by the desire for economic success, but rather by a quest to discover and understand their spiritual identity. The drama explores the connection between the Black characters and their culture and ancestry. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* explores the multifaceted encounters of African Americans about issues of race, gender, and class strife amidst the migration from the Southern to the Northern regions.

Wilson (1991) aims to demonstrate the migration of not only geographical locations, but also the migration of cultural elements, historical events, traditions, and beliefs among the Black community. However, it is worth noting that several of Wilson's characters exhibit a lack of awareness regarding their original cultural history. In the current theatrical production, Seth, the spouse of Bartha, lacks awareness of his ancestral background. He asserts, "[A]ll of that antiquated and nonsensical mumbo jumbo." (18).

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It appears that certain African Americans have been subjected to a cultural assault by White individuals, beginning with the era of slavery and persisting to the present day.

Rutherford Selig is a Caucasian merchant who engages in the sale of kitchenware to individuals of African descent, often imposing additional fees. Additionally, he offers assistance to individuals of African descent in locating their missing family members, although in exchange for monetary compensation. Wilson seeks to propose the uncivilized behaviour exhibited by those of Caucasian descent towards the anguish experienced by individuals of African-American heritage. According to Douglas Anderson (1997), Selig embodies economic forces that not only exploit those of African-American descent but also disregard their inherent value as human beings.(29).

Wilson's portrayal of the relationship between white and black individuals reveals a profound and savage psychological disposition of the white population towards the black community. Wilson further explores the issue surrounding African American cultural history by utilizing the character of Bynum, who serves as the conjure man and possesses extensive knowledge of numerous cultural elements within the Black community. He possesses a profound connection to the historical practices and rituals of the Black community, symbolizing their spiritual realm.

Hence, Bynum becomes a distinctive and pivotal role inside Wilson's work, serving as a means to delve into the complexities and nuances of the African-American cultural legacy.

The central character of the current theatrical production is Herald Loomis, who serves as a representative of the victims of the institution of slavery, having been subjected to enslavement under the authority of a white landowner. Therefore, it may be argued that the presence of slavery and racism has had a significant role in contributing to the challenges and difficulties faced by the individual in question. Wilson seeks to investigate the impact of slavery on the psychological well-being of individuals of African descent.

Mattie Campbell is a youthful female character featured in the theatrical production. The individual in question is a 26-year-old woman who is currently seeking a romantic partnership and true connection with a male counterpart. This desire stems from the unfortunate circumstance of her husband's absence due to migration. In his work, Wilson





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delves into the issue of estrangement and the anguish experienced by black women in their relationships with their husbands.

Jeremy, a guitarist of African descent, is approximately twenty-five years old and exhibits a strong sense of self-assurance when facing various obstacles in life. She expresses a reluctance to participate in guitar competitions due to a poor past encounter with the prize allocation practices of the dominant group. According to Anderson Douglas, Wilson's character makes an effort to showcase his musical abilities in a competition against two black opponents. However, he eventually becomes aware that the white man cannot perceive and differentiate the quality of each musician's performance due to being tone-deaf.(10). There is another female Molly, a figure who serves as a representative of women resisting the patriarchal societal structure. She holds a perspective that challenges the adherence to traditional family and social conventions as a means to pursue a life of personal freedom. Additionally, Wilson delves into the challenges faced by black women within a culture characterized by racism. Wilson's current theatrical production, titled "Joe Turner" The play "Come and Gone" thus delves into the concept of black aesthetics, the philosophy of non-white strategies, and the oral and written discourse surrounding African American heritage.

Another play by August Wilson (1991) *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* serves as the inaugural installment inside a comprehensive cycle of ten plays.

The setting of the play takes place within a recording studio situated in Chicago during the year 1927. The theatrical production, consisting of two acts, narrates the account of a recording session including the renowned blues icon, Ma Rainey, and her ensemble of musicians. The recording of Ma Rainey has contributed to the wealth accumulation of white producers and agents. However, there is a reluctance to accord Ma Rainey the attention she deserves due to her status as a black performer. Wilson examines the exploitation of black musicians and their music within the context of white producers' prioritization of financial gain. Sturtevant, the Caucasian producer, expresses his indifference towards Ma Rainey's self-identification.

I am not tolerating it. I only desire to bring her into this location, proceed with the recording of the songs specified on the aforementioned list, and subsequently escort



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her out. The regularity of the occurrence is reminiscent of the precision of a clock mechanism, is it not?(56).

The portrayal of Sturdyvant's attitude reflects the profound aversion and animosity harboured by the white population towards Black artists.

In the current theatrical production, Wilson (1991) adeptly explores the concept of Black Aesthetics. The focus of the play revolves around the blues tunes and their structures. The blues serve as essential elements for the examination and exploration of African-American culture. The Caucasian producers aim to introduce alterations to the Blues genre, potentially diluting its inherent authenticity for the intended audience through a modified rendition. Nevertheless, Ma Rainey is determined to preserve the authenticity of the Blues genre to uphold and perpetuate the cultural heritage of African Americans. The author contends that those who possess the ability to generate profits through their actions are deemed acceptable by others. Otherwise, you are merely a canine residing in the urban thoroughfare."(65) In the play "*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*," the character Ma Rainey is depicted as facing challenges and difficulties as an artist, while also resisting the established norms of exploitation of black music by white individuals. August Wilson's plays, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* delve into the complex dynamics of race interactions between white and Black individuals. Simultaneously, Wilson engages with the theoretical framework of Black Aesthetics, the ideology of non-white methods, and the debate surrounding African-American culture within the context of his plays.

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