

## Chapter IX

### Conclusion

The plays of August Wilson, discussed in the present thesis, cover a period of sixty years--from the 1911 of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* to the 1971 of *Jitney*. They span more than six decades of struggle of African-Americans to survive, to define themselves as individuals and as a community, and to secure their place in America. However, what those people had achieved in those sixty years of hard struggle was not enough for self-authentication. What account for this gap between the struggle and its outcome are continued economic exploitation and the changing narratives of racial discrimination. Blacks always expect to have--like other Americans--the rights of freedom and equality. Instead, they often find themselves crammed into a small part of American society, buried by the weight of everyday reality and, therefore, incapable of living a full and free life. Poor economic condition, unemployment, discrimination in public life, and the basic assumption of an inherent difference between whites and blacks continue to account for their marginality. Because these blacks live in a world that has an inferiority and instability reserved for them, they often undergo the shattering sense of frustration and alienation.

With each succeeding decade, black suffering in Wilson's plays takes on a different form. In the 1910s, blacks suffer the lingering trauma of slavery, of displacement, and of spiritual dislocation. They are forced to feel "the racial etiquette of difference and subordination" (Takaki 344). The discrimination creates a continuum--an institutionalized repetition of practices that, despite some differences, compose a coherent pattern of historical exploitation. A most poignant feature of the time is newly freed blacks searching for husbands, wives, or children who years ago had been separated by sale or other transactions. They are distressed because they lack the necessaries of life. They struggle for a better living condition, but their survival in a complex urban society becomes another nightmare for them.

In numerous ways Wilson dramatizes these experiences of blacks in his play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, set in 1911 Pittsburgh. The trauma of slavery, of displacement, and of spiritual dislocation is clearest in the character of Herald Loomis. Loomis was separated from his wife ten years earlier when he was imprisoned and forced to work on a chain gang for seven years by a white man named Joe Turner. When he is finally released, he has little left of his former life. He sets out in search of his wife. Joe Turner separates him not only from his

family and the life in which he knew himself but, in a more fundamental way, from his sense of self-worth and identity. This worthlessness, which he is forced to accept, has marked him as "one of Joe Turner's niggers." It has, in other words, reduced him from a subject into an object, a condition in which he remains bound to Joe Turner even after nearly half a century of Emancipation.

Seth Holly's labor is being exploited. Even a property owner like him has been quickly surpassed economically by white immigrants. The fruits of his labor become the profit of the white community. To be deprived of the products of one's labor is to be denied individual worth and identity; it means alienation from self and the world it inhabits. Almost every black character in the play faces similar difficulties. They remain "slaves" in a post slave society.

In the 1920s the majority of the African-American population started crowding northern cities. Social and economic problems increased in proportions as the urban population grew to unprecedented heights. Not only did the migrant blacks buckle to the poverty and racism that awaited them in the cities, but those who were already there also experienced increasing injustice. Despite the bleak present, their hopes for the future soared high as they discovered

themselves through their music, and it was this spirit that characterized the jazz age. Black musicians were gaining wide popularity, but their music could not protect them from the social and economic oppression they were experiencing on a daily basis. While black performers were often denied access to public facilities, their white fans were welcome in the exclusively white entertainment halls where blacks played their jazz before them. Frequently, in the recording industry especially, opportunistic white promoters lined their pockets from ticket and album sales from the music of African-American artistes. This often proved to be a precarious business arrangement, for such artistes had no protection against being discarded at the slightest signs of waning popularity or disfavor with the promoter.

Set in 1927 Chicago, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* makes up a sustained synthesis of black history and sensibilities of the 1920s. It explores the dreams, quests, hopes, and fears of the blacks, their efforts to survive the social and economic injustices. Much of the conflict in the play centers around black music. In the recording industry, opportunistic white promoter Sturdyvant enriches his coffers from album sales from the music of black artist Ma Rainey. A representative of the white society, Sturdyvant is responsible, in the eyes of other

black characters, for their unhappy lives. Ma Rainey understands his motives and also the limits of her commercial success. She seeks out no better sound studio for her recordings because she knows that music industry is exploitative: "They don't care nothing about me" (*Ma Rainey's* 64), she tells Cutler, another member of her band.

The theme of racist exploitation of blacks in the 1920s is reinforced by the story of Levee. Relying on Sturdyvant's words that he can record his songs and create a different music taste for the new generation, Levee dreams to achieve both economic independence and identity in the white world. But his dream is badly shattered when Sturdyvant buys his songs for a paltry five dollars each. Levee suffers not just the collapse of his dream but also the loss of what is truly his own--music. The fate of every other member of Ma Rainey's band is tragic by the same token. Whether it is in the studio or outside of it, blacks are destined to fall victim to white manipulation and prejudice. Cutler cannot cash a hard-earned check in a bank because when white people "see a nigar with a check, the first thing they think is he done stole it someplace" (*Ma Rainey's* 88). They are repeatedly forced to feel as history's "leftovers."

In the 1930s, blacks lived an American nightmare of poverty and discrimination in the wake of the Great Depression. As

business closed, banks failed, and mines shut down, a larger number of black workers became unemployed. Because of the blacks' little or no reserve of capital, there were soon dire want and untold suffering. However, as more and more blacks suffered, they began to feel that they should develop institutions of their own in order to preserve their identity and dignity. Some even felt the necessity of returning to the South to achieve their goal, while others kept on fighting for rights in the North. Thus, it was suffering and struggle, which drove blacks along different directions in thought as well as in action.

Wilson examines black suffering of the 1930s and the black consciousness awakened by that suffering in *The Piano Lesson*, set in 1936 Pittsburgh. In this play, we are, for the first time, introduced to characters willing to return to the South. In Wilson's view this is a sign of their being conscious about their actual destination, that is, the South. It is the place to pursue their destinies as free men and women. He says, "I often wonder what the fabric of American society would be like if blacks had stayed in the South and somehow found a way to [economically] develop and lock into that particular area" (qtd. in DeVries 378). The play's central symbol is a piano, which stands as a silent testament to racism in America. It is the

Charles family's legacy. It carries the history of enslavement and racial oppression that the family had endured and which still keeps its members from realizing their version of the American Dream. The conflict occurs between a brother and sister, who argue over the "proper" use of their shared legacy, the family piano. "The real issue is the piano, the legacy. How are you going to use it?" says Wilson (qtd. in DeVries 378). There are two choices, one taken up by Berniece, who wants to preserve the blood-stained piano as a record of the family's violence-wrecked past. Her brother, Boy Willie, however, is intent on capitalizing on the family's history to create a new future; he wants to sell the piano and buy the land, which their forefathers farmed as slaves. Finally, the conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie as well as between the past and present is resolved, symbolically. The white claimant of the piano --shutter's ghost--is exorcised with Boy Willie battling with it, backed by the spirits of their ancestors whom Berniece reawakens by playing the piano.

With the outbreak of World War II, blacks had better access to jobs, especially those deserted by whites. Gradually, a considerable number of blacks were also drafted into the armed services to win the war. But when the war ended, the majority of blacks became jobless again. Their sacrifice for the

preservation of, at least, the ideal of the Four Freedoms could hardly bring them a sense of relief from the discrimination, segregation, and oppression that America's "arsenal of democracy" had imposed upon them. Seldom did whites yield to blacks, who remained "masters" even while advocating assimilation.

Set in 1948 Pittsburgh, *Seven Guitars* depicts black life in post-World War II America. Blacks are battling against society and themselves for self-worth. Through Floyd and his band members, Wilson comments on the discrepancy between the reality of black lives and the American dream--a discrepancy that fills them with pain and rage. These blacks have no control over the operation of the music business and are again victims of big-city record producers. This echoes the conditions of the musicians in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Hedley kills Floyd for money because he thinks money will transform his existence as a marginalized black. Floyd's life is cut short just as he is on the verge of "making it" in the cutthroat world of the urban music industry. The female characters--Louise, Vera, Red, and Ruby--are awaiting their destiny.

By the 1950s blacks were more African-Americans than a race of ex-slaves. They were moving closer to the "mainstream" of American society. There were signs of social change when some

firms began to provide them with jobs. Upgrading of black workers made it possible for some blacks to move into positions of responsibility that had hitherto been closed to them. As the blacks began to get jobs, it was hoped that the second half of the twentieth century would witness the elimination of much of the racial discrimination in American society. Nevertheless, the improvement of the status of blacks was neither uniform nor without vigorous opposition in some quarters. White workers frequently threatening to quit if blacks were employed or upgraded served to retard the advancement of blacks. Blacks who sought to improve their lot were often singled out for attack. However, blacks also did not remain silent. They protested against white abuse and directed themselves toward more drastic action to secure their rights. Having discovered that their problems persisted, even increased, they began to seek improvement through political actions. Such actions provided a considerable stimulus to their movement for racial equality. Thus the decade represented a time of some protest, much hope, and great skepticism--all of which are present in *Fences* set in 1957.

The play has the fence as its central metaphor: fence between the races, fence to keep out, fence to keep people in. It examines the psychological battles of a frustrated African-

American garbage collector, Troy Maxon, who is living in America of the 1950s, a time when the Civil Rights Movement was just germinating, a time when opportunities for blacks were slowly increasing. Troy learned to play baseball in prison, but despite his proficiency in the game he was barred from playing in the major league. Collecting the garbage is the only job available to him. He, therefore, rages against white racism. He even denies his son, Cory, an opportunity to play in the college football league as bitter memories of his own youth continue to haunt him. Troy's failed career comes to stand for the denial of professional and personal opportunities to African-Americans of the time. When some progress was later made on the racial front, Troy could not personally benefit from it. His potential had been lost; he lived on in the memories of his friends as one who might have been a good player. In fact, Troy can only move up from a hauler to a driver. So at a time of heady social and racial advances, he merely moves from the back to the front of the garbage truck. And therein lie the irrecoverable loss, pain, and alienation of a black man.

The 1960s witnessed the beginning of the most profound of revolutionary changes in the status of blacks in America that had occurred since the Emancipation. The road to revolution had been paved by significant shifts in the black population from

rural areas to cities; by the changes in black attitude toward themselves and their place in America; by the changing white attitude toward blacks; by Supreme Court decisions on Voting Rights for blacks and on Civil Rights in general. Blacks were so preoccupied with civil rights that they were scarcely influenced by other considerations. They were determined to press for equality and they demanded fair employment opportunities and desegregation of public facilities. There were several demonstrations. Nothing, however, filled blacks with such despair as the murders of President Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. during this decade. More people openly supported racial equality than ever before in the history of America. But at the same time the opposition was as openly hostile as ever.

*Two Trains Running* set in 1969 explores the 1960s. Although the political events of the period do not appear in the play rather directly, they are constantly in the air. The play is set in a Pittsburgh restaurant, which is scheduled for demolition. The plight of the blacks in inner cities is reflected in the conversation about their closed businesses and the absence of opportunities for them. Holloway says he has survived for sixty-five years because he stayed out of white man's business. Sterling is looking for some chance in life.

Memphis, owner of the restaurant, had been run off his farm in the South by a white man and he is now determined to act tough to protect his interest. He has hired a white lawyer who knows the white man's rules, and demands a fair compensation from the authority before they pull down his building. Hambone dies without accepting chicken for ham. Risa has deliberately scarred her legs so that men will not consider her as a sex object, but will look deeper into her character. These blacks are trying to work against what American society wants them to be. They struggle to reclaim what has been taken from them, and their struggle, in actual or symbolic terms, becomes the truest form of revolution and affirmation. According to Wilson, there are two ideas that have confronted black America since the Emancipation, the warring ideas of cultural assimilation and cultural separatism. Two trains are the symbols of these two ideas. For the blacks neither of these trains is working. They have to build a new railroad in order to get to where they want to go, because the trains are not going their way.

In the 1970s dissatisfaction with the living conditions was so deep in the black community that some developments, however significant, seemed insufficient. There was considerable apprehension among blacks as they faced the future. Blacks insisted that they were entitled to more than America was giving

them. Even though the government undertook welfare programs for poor blacks, significant discrepancies remained between black and white employments. The trauma of Vietnam and then of Watergate distracted liberal consciences from the unfinished business of achieving racial equality. The recession and financial crises of northern cities threatened the urban black population. There were even greater signs of a black return to the South.

Set in 1971 Pittsburgh, *Jitney* depicts the lives of those blacks who are still unemployed. But these blacks are not hopeless. They struggle to ameliorate their economic condition by using their own limited sources. They drive jitneys not just to make money but also to do what is better for their community. They are, as Becker says in the play, "providing a service." They make themselves feel better about themselves and their place in America. It gives them a purpose and direction in life: to serve their community. Youngblood and Rena, two young adults attempting with determination to do the heavy lifting that true love calls for, are trying to carve a descent and better life for their son. Turnbo, Doub, Fielding, Shealy, and Philmore--the drivers and customers of the Jitney Station--meet each day head on with the dignity and integrity that they began

with. Their stories reveal solidarity and the resolve that they must walk their day with grace and nobility.

Despite all the traumas, these blacks adopt different survival strategies and seek to transcend the afflictions that daily erode them, physically and spiritually. With the turn of each decade, they reinvent themselves to survive fresh onslaughts and find new ways to affirm their self-worth. This self-reinvention, which has cultural and mythological dimensions, helps them reject the stereotypes and renew their identity as Africans in America. Thwarted by a hostile society in their roles as African-American males, Wilson's heroes attain self-affirmation in the African phallogocentric trickster tradition. The trickster in African mythology is a source of power to survive the predicaments.

Loomis, Levee, Troy each owe their pedigree to the trickster. Despite the trauma of slavery, Loomis reclaims his "song." He is a redeemer trickster, who seeks salvation without submitting to the powers larger than his own. He challenges the authority of the Holy Ghost by letting his blood in a cleansing ritual. His redemptive act empowers him to walk erect in the world once more "shining like new money." Levee, with an imperturbable spirit of the trickster, discovers the will to survive. He dons a mask so that he can play his "song." He

challenges the metaphysical potency of God, a human construct, and disregards Him as a match for his newly discovered will. Troy opposes the limitations imposed on him by a dominating world and refuses to play a consenting victim. Instead, in the spirit of the Yoruba trickster, Eshu, he seeks to erect a fence to set the boundaries of his universe. Even Death is no match for him. He, when stricken with pneumonia, challenges Death with his metaphoric statement.

Wilson's heroes shift from the Christian frame of reverence to outright blasphemy and ride roughshod over any obstacles toward their respective goals. They choose to give up Christianity as practiced by fellow African-Americans in favor of their own survival tactics. By contrast, Christianity plays a vital role in the search of Wilson's women for comfort and direction. It serves as a positive force in their lives. In communion with the church, they seek to transcend prevailing social restraints and affirm a separate identity. Deprived of her husband, family, and a place to live in, Martha latches herself onto the church for shelter and support. The church prompts both a religious and a personal conversion in her; she, eventually, acquires the strength to deal with her fate and make necessary choices to ensure her own mental and physical stability. Berniece goes to the church to lessen her suffering

at the murder of her husband and father. Confined to the private sphere, Rose willingly puts away all ambition and lives vicariously with and for her husband, Troy. But, when Troy stuns her with admissions of his infidelity and impending fatherhood, she steps out of the "fence" that she had erected herself. Despite her feelings of anger, hurt, and betrayal, Rose's surrender to Christianity serves to purge her of self-imposed repression and stagnation.

Wilson's characters seek self-affirmation within the cultural community. Their music is a constant attempt to reconnect with their cultural roots. Blues, more than anything else, gives them a sense of cultural identity and self-worth, for it is a continuous reminder that they are not just a group of ex-slaves but African-Americans with a cultural history and worth of their own. Blues, for Wilson, is important primarily because it contains the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation they find themselves in. It functions as the link between the experiences of those who struggled during the time of their servitude and that of the present generation. Blues, in Wilson's drama, serves as a survival strategy for blacks. It not only articulates black suffering but also stresses the opportunities, limited as they may have been, for advancement. Ma Rainey and her band members survive in the

"bruising city" of Chicago with the help of blues. Bynum sings blues to get over his sense of displacement and difficulties in the white world. Zonia's songs describe her father's sorrowful experiences--his departure from his wife, from his labor, and his phantasmagoric self-imposed exile. Floyd resolutely prepares to pursue his dream, to make a name for himself as a musician, much in the way Levee does.

Wilson's characters seek to establish relationship with their communal ancestors. The physical and spiritual worlds are often connected through the ritual aspects of their performance. Often there is a reenactment within a performance of a recognizable activity, which becomes ritualistic in its repetition. The combination of these elements with the everyday ritualistic actions captures a strong sense of continuity, a mysterious connection between the past and the present. To emphasize the linkage between generations, Wilson's black figures bring traditional African elements into their contemporary culture. Their performance of the African juba--a dance of traditional immutability from their ancestral land--provides an example. They participate in this dance as a form of celebration, for they acknowledge it as a sign of their autonomy as individuals and as members of a race, as an "act of tribal solidarity and recognition of communal history" (Takaki

344). Thus, Wilson commingles the sacred and the secular to reclaim the folklore tradition and restore it to its original spiritual meaning within African-American culture. By creating such a ritual in his drama, he confirms the possibilities of a deeper understanding of the present through cultural memory and narratives. He presents the African heritage as a repository of spiritual values and survival skills, and offers blacks in America access to their mythical past, a source of internal strength.

Wilson rewrites black history keeping in view that a dramatic account of the life of blacks might be substantially truer than "actual" documents, which have mostly been written from the perspective of dominant culture. He turns to "history" to make the African-American community understand the reality of their cultural heritage and their place in America. He thinks blacks in America need to re-examine their time spent there to see the choices that they made as people. He is not certain that right choices have always been made. Therefore, if blacks know their past, it will help determine how to proceed with their future. Wilson believes that "in a world dominated by white culture, the black must be strong enough not only to survive but to reestablish his own identity and heritage which flows unbroken from an African Fountainhead" (qtd. in Nelson 5).

He urges African-Americans not to be swept by the predominant white culture and to discover their own uniqueness in a land away from "home." His plays move toward empowering African-Americans to acknowledge and celebrate their difference in another country, which now is as much theirs as the whites'. His characters therefore do not want to integrate into a monolithic white society. They struggle to define themselves as unique individuals and at the same time to understand their own place in America. They seek to find their own salvation, their sense of identity by their own effort. They embody love laughter, strength and pathos; they are "a way of life kicking up under your hand" (*Joe Turner's* 244). They are African-Americans in search of their own "songs," a sense of spiritual and emotional stability in their lives. Their interaction with their own circumstances elicits a change to some extent within each of them, resulting in a "song" of self that one discovers for oneself.

Wilson's thought has much in common with the tenets of Black Nationalism. He became artistically and politically conscious during the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements of the 1960s. He was considerably influenced by Amiri Baraka who wrote, "We wanted art that would actually reflect black life and its history and its legacy of resistance and struggle. We

wanted art as black as music" (qtd. in Herrington 30). Baraka's outrage and energy inspired Wilson to expose the exploitation of African-Americans. However, in the process Wilson's plays follow a pattern different from that of Baraka's. Wilson rejects an external solution to exploitation and instead focuses on the change the protagonists must make within themselves in order to survive. Levee, Loomis, Troy, Floyd, and Boy Willie-- in fact, none of them kills a white; rather they struggle to define themselves as individuals and to understand their place in America. The battles they wage are not so much against individuals as against human institutions and historical attitudes, which sometimes take on the appearance of metaphysical forces. They include Mr. Death in *Fences*, Sutter's ghost in *The Piano Lesson*, and Jesus Christ in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Another eminent black artist who inspired Wilson was Romare Bearden. Wilson was particularly interested in Bearden's incorporation of traditional African elements into contemporary black art (Herrington 23). Inspired by Bearden, Wilson's drama promotes an understanding of how the African culture of the past can continue to speak to African-Americans. For example, the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* perform a juba, a call-and-response dance, "reminiscent of the ring shouts of the

African slaves" (*Joe Turner's* 249). And "'juba' itself is a West African word for 'ancestors'" (Herrington 24). Like Bearden, Wilson builds his plays from small pieces drawn from a wide variety of sources, including history.

Wilson's dramaturgy deconstructs the position of African-Americans within "official" American history by contextualizing black cultural experiences and, in turn, creating an opportunity for the black community to examine and define itself. His deconstruction of "official" history does not, however, seal off the domains of black and white from each other. Wilson deconstructs with a view to reconstructing a black subject position away from white control. To this end, the blues provides his black figures with a historical knowledge to transcend the marginal existence and with a mediational site to resolve the contradictions between the past and the present. Similarly, myths evoke in them an understanding that helps them interpret the unresolved conflicts of the present on the ground of the past. Loomis's vision of "bones people" in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is a case in point. Wilson employs this myth to suggest that a black man can reshape his own destiny; for him to do so, he must also reshape the dehumanizing myth of the Middle Passage and move toward mental freedom. A vernacular voice resounds through Wilson's dramatic world, recreating the rhythms

of the blues. In combining the literary possibilities of a realist theater with folk narratives and blues poetics, he brings into play a constant exchange between the physical and the spiritual, the oral and the written, the temporal and the timeless--a welcome model for future African-American dramaturgy that can adequately address the black experience in the United States.

Wilson's work shows a combination of traditional black and innovative white drama. On the one hand, his characters as in traditional African-American drama, reject the socially fixed position of African-Americans as a cultural "Other" and reclaim their legacy to reaffirm their sense of who they are. They move through a timeless and statusless liminality in which they receive instruction often in the form of ancestral wisdom. Finally, they achieve a sense of self-sufficiency and see themselves reincorporated into society. Rather than imitating white cultural values, they experience a separate way of being that should be recognized by the society they inhabit. Herald Loomis, for example, transcends his liminal existence through ancestral wisdom and, as Dinah Livingston suggests, recovers his "African sensibility"; that is, he benefits from adopting an African humanist worldview in which human beings are considered "as a part of the world," rather than "apart from the world"

(qtd. in Plum 565). On the other hand, Wilson's people resemble a number of memorable characters in the mainstream drama. Levee and Floyd are much like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Like Loman, they accept the American myth of success at its face value and get trapped into it.

Like Miller, Wilson is concerned over the debilitating influence of a materialistic and mechanistic society in which forces external play a key role in the internal conflict-- a conflict between the blacks themselves. In Wilson's drama the internal conflict does not, however, deny the earlier history or the continuation of black suffering due to racist exploitation or racial inequality--but focuses on a world of self-conflicting values and introspective attitudes to bring out the dynamics of black living on its own term. "I," says Wilson, "try to figure out the intent of these [blacks] lives around me" (qtd. in Freedman 450). His plays mostly dramatize the conflict between those who embrace their African past and those who adopt the values of the dominant society and seek to give up their cultural legacy. Ma Rainey and Toledo confront Levee to stop him from selling off his composition to the white record company executive. Berniece clashes with Boy Willie to preserve the piano with legs carved into family totems by their great-grandfather. Cory opposes his father Troy Maxon to step into

the world of opportunity available to him. Thus, Wilson's work combines traits from both types of drama: a powerful but destructive central character, the family as a microcosm of society, a concern about success linked with personal identity, racial inequality as a characteristic of American society, the atavistic connection of characters to their past, and a resolve to carve out a distinctive collective identity. While Wilson follows both the traditions, he also discovers a unique way of exploring the lives of blacks in America. The internal conflict, it may be noted here, is not always precipitated by external forces, but often caused by divergent black attitudes toward a common past as well as a common present.

Similar concerns characterize the last three plays that I have not included in my thesis for time and space constraints. Set in 1904 Pittsburgh, *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) is chronologically the first in Wilson's cycle of plays depicting the African-American experience throughout the twentieth century. The play addresses a time when slavery was a living memory. The year 1904, characterized by general economic downturns, was particularly hard on the black community that had been swelling in northern cities due to the flood of southern sharecroppers escaping the increasing oppression of Jim Crow laws. Exploited and cheated like other new arrivals whose labor

feeds the expanding industrial machine, the characters --Pittsburgh's black tin-mill workers--in the play are already in a restive state when an act of Citizen Barlow--a recent arrival from Alabama--followed by an unjust accusation from Caesar--a self-made entrepreneur--leads to a black man's death, a work stoppage, and an act of arson precipitating a riot for which several hundreds are arrested. At the center of the play is Aunt Ester, the presiding figure on an allegorical canvas, an enduring spirit from a brutal past, who guides the blacks who are lost. Using her paper boat, Ester inducts Barlow into the City of Bones, which lies at the bottom of the sea and is composed of bones of slaves who perished on the hideous Middle Passage--an image of cultural reclamation as Wilson used in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Wilson sets *King Hedley II* (2000) in 1985 Pittsburgh, a time when the Bill Cosby Show portrayed a vision of African-American life that mainstream America had never seen. White fans were accepting African-American sports figures and celebrities as never before. The media were telling people that race troubles were over. But the reality was that differences between the haves and the have-nots were becoming sharper. And gang violence was increasing at unprecedented rates. In the play Wilson tells of the hurts and frustration of blacks with

insufficient income. He tells of their deep anguish that flows from societal rejection and isolation, and from not having a chance to get a first leg up. As drama unfolds we get to know each character through their exposition on the motives behind their actions. They are trying to find that one missing link between the life they want and the life they deal with. The tragedy is that in each case, the link is elusive. Each looks to the others for support, but ultimately they do not hear each other. The differences in their thinking only bring them to greater suffering.

The set, backyards in Pittsburgh's Hill District, is the same as in *Seven Guitars*, but now more ravaged by the blight of Ronald Reagan's "morning in America" which cut federal support to many programs needed by African-Americans. Hedley, the protagonist, and his friends and family are the victims of two-century cycle of racism and hatred. Hedley's self-image is as fragile as glass. He is an ex-convict who now desires to establish himself legitimately in the world, but has no material resources to realize his dream. He finds no way beyond crime.

Set in 1997 Pittsburgh, *Radio Golf* (2005) is the last of Wilson's ten-play cycle about the African-American experience in the twentieth century. Most of the characters belong to the black middle class, and it appears that the doors to a bright

white world of economic and political success have finally opened to those willing to play by white rules. Harmond Wilks, the protagonist, is torn between the forces of the past that shaped him and a perilously seductive future. That future is embodied in Harmond's wife, Mame, and his golf-loving business partner, Roosevelt Hicks, who, in addition to helping Harmond oversee the redevelopment of the Hill District, has plans for them to purchase a radio station. But as always with Wilson, the cultural past is never lost sight of in spite of the materialistic progress of a class of blacks.

Wilson's commendable effort to rework the tradition of American drama in order to explore the complexity of African-American experience creates a distinct place for him in the American theater. His trenchant analysis of the myth of American egalitarianism and his insight into black suffering and survival tactics make him a playwright with a new voice, acceptable to both black and white audiences. His plays are all black-topic texts, but they treat the issues on such a scale as to incorporate the universal themes of self, family, society, politics and love, and find their way into the heart of the reader/audience. A success on Broadway and beyond, he has won accolades from literary and theater critics. With the publication of *Radio Golf* (2005), Wilson has completed the

project he had begun in the 1980s--one play for each decade of the last century. Wilson kept his word before he left the world in 2005, and that is no less dramatic. The cycle of plays bequeathed to us signals a whole new beginning --a new perception of America:

In many ways . . . it's [American society] immensely successful, it has some wonderful values, it's able to create some great work of art. And we're moving toward this art being American art--that means being influenced by all of the different ethnic groups that make up America--and further and further away from the old, old Western conventions of Europe. We're . . . not building on Western convention anymore, but on this amalgam of ideas and thoughts and necessity and struggle of all the various ethnic groups in America. Eventually, we are going to become an American culture, an American society unlike any other.

("Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks" 4)

His plays (re)tell the stories not only of African-Americans but of all Americans to an extent, of a society "unlike any other."