Preface

August Wilson emerged in the 1980s as a compelling new voice in the American theater. Within a short span of time he received such coveted honors as the Tony Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and two Pulitzer prizes. His dramatic works are part of a planned play-cycle devoted to retelling the story of black experience in twentieth-century America. "I'm taking each decade and looking at one of the most important questions that blacks confronted in that decade and writing a play about it," says Wilson. "Put them all together and you have a history" (qtd. in Hunter 370). Wilson seeks to reclaim the strong, distinctive personality of the African-Americans because he believes that they, too, are a long line of honorable people with a cultural and political history. He writes plays to preserve and promote the elements of black culture that stands acknowledged today to have been an inseparable part of the American experience.

Wilson's theater as a whole presents the familiar with a freshness and in a manner never quite seen before. It seeks to reveal the richness underlying the life of blacks. In his interview with Kim Powers Wilson explains: "Blacks in America have so little to make life with compared to whites, yet they do so with a certain zest, a certain energy that is fascinating

because they make life out of nothing--yet it is charged and luminous and has all the qualities of anyone else's life" (373). Sometimes he works with stereotypes, but with a view to stripping away layer by layer the surface to reveal what is underneath--the "real" person, the "whole" person. Wilson's plays maintain a contemporary involvement with the past, and foreground each era with its own history of black suffering and the strategies blacks have adopted in order to survive.

Wilson's treatment of his subject has been highly praised by critics. They explore the various ways in which Wilson's brilliance as a playwright illuminates the complex themes encompassed by his characters' experiences. Hilary DeVries, in an early study titled "A Song in Search of Itself" (1987), examines briefly the recurring themes in Wilson's cycle of plays about the black experience. She identifies as the most pervasive theme "the need for black Americans to forge anew their identity, an identity that is at once African and American" (375-78). A year later Margaret E. Glover wrote "Two Notes on August Wilson: The Songs of a Marked Man" (1988), in which she examined the role of blues music in Wilson's plays. She observes that blues "gave the black man a place in the white man's world, but at the cost of losing his right to that music and the part of himself he put in it" (378-79). Sandra G.

Shannon, writing two years after Glover, examines in her essay, "The Good Christian's Come and Gone" (1990), the shifting role of Christianity in Wilson's plays. Christianity for African-Americans is traditionally a good old-fashioned religion. But Wilson's men affirm that it did not, and will not, suit their need, and therefore "they demonstrate their disavowal by challenging and withdrawing from the religion of their ancestors" (379-87). In "Essential Ambiguities in the Plays of August Wilson" (1995), James Robert Saunders overviews Wilson's life and career for a contextual exploration of ambiguous and often paradoxical characters, details, and themes in his works (1-12). In the same year, Yvonne Shafer wrote "Breaking Barriers: August Wilson," analyzing Wilson's dramaturgy and chronicling the stage productions of his plays (403-11).

The 1990s drew greater critical attention to Wilson's plays. His works were discussed in book-length studies and in Ph.D. dissertations. Corlis Angela Hayes's dissertation, "A Critical and Historical Analysis of Five Major Plays by August Wilson" (1993), examines how Wilson uses the themes of separation, migration, and reunion to depict the experiences of his characters as they travel from Southern plantations to Northern industrial cities in search of new identities. Central to the above study is Wilson's use of the blues as collective

consciousness that redefines the black identity. It was not until 1995 that the very first book devoted entirely to Wilson, Kim Pereira's *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*, was published. It attempts to show how Wilson uses the migrant experience to depict the physical and psychological journeys of ex-slaves as they traveled from the South to the North. Of the other scholarly works on Wilson, Vera Lynn Nobles's "Emi: The Concept of Spirit in Selected Plays of August Wilson" (1995), Sandra G. Shannon's *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (1996), Michael John Dawning's "Restoring the Myths: Converting Stereotype to Archetype in Five Plays of August Wilson" (1997), and Mary L. Bogumil's *Understanding August Wilson* (1999) merit special attention. In addition, James Lawrence Taylor Jr.'s dissertation, "Understanding Wilson's Blues Women: A Dramaturgical Exploration of August Wilson's Female Characters" (2000), attempts to show that despite being grounded in a decidedly male frame of reference, Wilson's female characters cover as wide a range as do his men. "Strategies of Coping with Social Oppression in Selected Plays of August Wilson" (2000) by Joans Nissen, though partly a source of inspiration behind the present work, underplays the theme of victimization to focus on the survival instinct especially of Wilson's secondary

characters and therefore offers a somewhat partial view of the "historical reality" Wilson aims at.

From the above brief survey, it is obvious that not much attention has been paid to Wilson's twin projects of rearticulating black suffering that has been understated in "official history" and of rediscovering the strategies that blacks have desperately adopted in order to sustain themselves in extreme situations of oppression, to forge anew their identity, to preserve their dignity, their pride, and to fence out their humiliation in a world unspeakably hostile to them. Though a few scholars and critics have focused around these issues, their studies remain limited to one or two of Wilson's plays, as they are mostly essays. If Lisa Wilde's "Reclaiming the Past: Narrative and Memory in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*" probes how the play gives expression to the memories of African-Americans, Bogumil's "Tomorrow Never Comes: Songs of Cultural Identity in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*" explores within a brief compass Wilson's handling of black identity, culture, ethnicity, and displacement. Another essay by Pamela Jean Monaco, "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: From the Local to the Mythical in August Wilson," looks on Wilson's presentation of the African heritage as a repository of black survival skills, but then again the essay deals with such skills

only from a spiritual, and therefore limited, perspective. Hence, a fresh, full-length study of Wilson's plays is still very much possible so far as his simultaneous representation of black suffering and reassertion of different survival strategies are concerned.

Wilson turns to drama for a meaningful representation of his perceptions and experiences because he considers drama as a large canvas that can include everyone and a medium that can most effectively reconstruct black history as substantially truer than "actual" documents, which have been largely written from the perspective of dominant culture. Striking characters earmarked by the eras in which they live people his dramatic chronicle. Collectively, these characters live in a society that refuses to recognize their worth, that enslaves them as a culture both physically and psychologically, and that prevents them from thinking of their own welfare. Despite all discrimination, these people are the thinkers, the doers, the dreamers; their struggle to survive in such a society symbolizes the collective struggle of all African-Americans. They fight fate as determined by white men, the authority that plays by rules written for the black "Other." Their stories, however, go beyond the crises they faced throughout the twentieth century or

still earlier and become sagas of their fortitude and resilience.

Based on the above problematic, my study endeavors to examine how Wilson in his plays resists "the egalitarian myths" of America as a land of equal opportunity for everyone, focusing instead on social, political, economic, and spiritual displacement of black people over the past hundred years or so. Simultaneously, it examines how these distressed and displaced people have restored to survival strategies--as diverse as traditional rituals, folklore, music, religion, materialism, violence, family--to cope with their hardships. If there are circles of sorrow, there are lines of struggle too. Since my study considers Wilson as a creative chronicler, it also examines his drama as a countertext that "'rights' American history, altering our perception of reality to give status to what American history has denied the status of 'real'" (Plum 562).

Wilson wrote more than a dozen plays. Among them, however, *The Homecoming* (1976), *The Coldest Day of the Year* (1979), *Fullerton Street* (1980), and *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1981) have garnered little notice. Wilson himself admits, "I had submitted a couple of other plays to the O'Neill, but I'm glad they weren't selected" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 372).

Besides, these plays are not part of his cycle of "history" plays. My study will examine seven major plays of the said cycle, each of which depicts a decade of the twentieth century in the lives of African-Americans. But I would like to follow not the chronology of production or publication but the chronology of events to put the plays in proper historical perspective. The play set in the 1940's, for example, was produced/published a decade after the production/publication of the play dealing with the 1950's.

When I contemplate how I have "completed" my project, I recognize more clearly the fundamental inadequacy of the traditional term "acknowledgement." Yet I am moved to affirm the obvious fact that this entire work would not have been possible without the valuable guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Ashis Sengupta. Any endeavor on my part to thank him in words would prove inadequate.

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