Chapter I

Introduction

A critic for *Time Magazine* (1990) writes, "Wilson has established himself as the richest theatrical voice to emerge in the U.S. since the post-World War II flowering of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller" (qtd. in Shafer 408). Praised for their vivid characterization, Wilson's plays center upon the black life, as it was and is lived, in America. His characters are multidimensional; they display the subtle and complex experiences of black life, rather than speaking about the so-called red-letter events of history. Wilson's exploration of black history prompted Samuel G. Freedman to describe him as "one part Dylan Thomas and one part Malcolm X, a lyric poet fired in the kiln of black nationalism" (448).

In Wilson's opinion, the present should redefine the past so that the future can be determined: "'Let's look at this again and see where we've come from and how we've gotten where we are now'. I think if you know that, it helps determine how to proceed with the future" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 373). Such a consciousness about past motivates Wilson to re-examine African-American issues of each decade of the twentieth-century so ultimately his plays could stand as a theatrical record of black experience over the past hundred years. For Wilson, the

history of black people is a most intimate part of American history. A re-examination of it can encourage the blacks, as Ralph Ellison says, "to trust [their] own experience, [their] own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow [their] masters to define these crucial matters for [them]" ("Interview with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard" 87).

In his attempt to dig out the black experience of the last hundred years, Wilson begins from the transitional phase in African-American history: the Great Migration. Over a period of thirty years, from 1900 to 1930, as Douglas Anderson says, some one and a half million African-Americans left rural and urban areas of the South for industrial cities of the North--New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and the locale for most of Wilson's plays, Pittsburgh. In leaving for the industrialized cities of the North the migrants hoped to find higher wages, economic and political equality, educational opportunities, and social justice. But what they found in the North was something less: voting rights that did not translate into political power, discriminatory hiring and promotion practices that kept them at the bottom of the employment ladder, segregated and substandard housing and education (434-35). Some gains were made in terms of economic well-being, political rights, and opportunities in education. But, as James R. Grossman suggests, "the dreams

embodied in the Great Migration eventually collapsed under the weight of continued racial oppression and the failure of industrial capitalism to distribute its prosperity as broadly as the migrants expected" (265). Ethnic conflicts frequently marked the relations between the white "Old Settlers" and the new black arrivals. Conflicts generated by differences of class were often manifested as the fear that the newcomer's rural manners or religious expression would injure the white's community image.

Wilson dramatizes this subject of displacement in its entire psychological vicissitudes. However, the migration, for him, is not merely a demographic or geographical shift; rather it is a historical transition to a new identity. He sees the migrants and the established black community in the North as sharing a sense of ethnic identity, which synthesizes much of the experience of both groups and redefines the African-American cultural identity across the country. In his plays, the image of movement, of traveling the roads, serves as an apt metaphor for the search for self--both personal and collective. His characters seek an individual "song"--a metaphor for self-definition and life's purpose--that will guide them along the road into the future, and they are enabled to recover this song

only through the recovery of a collective as well as a personal past.

Blacks venting their anger and frustration on each other are no less visible in Wilson's plays, but he considers these internal issues as a direct result of external forces--racial discrimination, exploitation, and violence. Oppression does not necessarily produce group cohesion; but Wilson suggests that it sometimes does. An absence of complete unity among human beings is hardly surprising. Even then, Wilson's characters differ less over black hope and determination, and hence, failure would never be the final word.

In his new racial consciousness, Wilson, however, does not confine himself only to a hundred years of black history; he excavates the remote past and searches, as an African, for a proud tradition. What he writes is not political propaganda. Yet he has, indeed, an agenda, a specific aim--to open a vista of the "origin" no blacks should lose sight of. A return to Africa is not possible today, but all blacks can reclaim or retain their cultural legacy as they move forward. "As African-Americans, we should demand to participate in society as Africans," Wilson insists. "That's the way out of the vicious cycle of poverty" (qtd. in Savron 299). He shuns the melting pot metaphor of liberal white America and rejects the

assimilationist rhetoric, both of which emphasize homogenization as a way to secure democracy. In his interview with Bill Moyers, he says:

> Blacks don't melt in a pot. People hold up the examples of the Irish, of the Germans--these are all Europeans who share the same sensibilities as the mainstream, so it's very easy for them to melt. But we cannot change our names and hide behind the label of being an American, because we're very visible minority. . . . We have a culture. (173)

Wilson thinks that the process of organizing American coherence through assimilation will breed a new cultural hegemony; consequently, black culture will recede into the margin until finally it faces erasure. He looks at the process of assimilation from the outside. Like the outsider he steps back and says, "it was a big mistake" (qtd. in Savron 304). But unlike the outsider, he refuses to reduce himself to an "Other." He knows that he is not an outsider who came to America during the early twentieth century and became very much American, because he has the history of four hundred years in the country. He is this Other/Same who moves about with at least two gestures: that of affirming, "I am like you" while persisting in his difference; and that of reminding, "I am different" because

"I am an African, and I can participate in this society as an African" ("Interview with Bill Moyers" 173). In his writing he, therefore, embraces and explores "this African presence in America" ("Interview with Gwen Ifill" 3). In fact, Wilson's stress on unmeltable ethnics is directly influenced by the black civil rights movement and strengthened by its radicalization in the 1960s. Politically this was the moment when the term "black" was used as, what Stuart Hall says, "a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization" in America and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance against the whites with, in fact, a very different history, tradition, and ethnic identity. In this moment, Hall further says, "'The Black experience', as a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference between the different communities, became 'hegemonic' over other ethnic/racial identities--though the latter did not, of course, disappear" ("Ethnicities" 223).

Like Hall, Wilson thinks of black identity in two different ways: in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self," which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common; and in terms of "difference" which constitutes--since history has intervened--"what blacks have become" (Hall,

"Cultural Identity" 111-12). His former concept of black identity reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which bind black people as "one people," with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of their actual history. This "oneness," underlying all the other differences, is the "truth" of African presence, which he excavates, discovers, and brings to light in his dramatic representation. His latter concept acknowledges the ruptures and discontinuities, which constitute, precisely, the African-American uniqueness. Black identity, in this second sense, is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the past, present, and future simultaneously. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. "I think it's largely a question of identity. Without knowing your past, you don't know your present --and you certainly can't plot your future," Wilson says. "You go out and discover it for yourself. It's being responsible for your own presence in the world and for your own salvation" (qtd. in DeVries 378). Black identity for Wilson comes from somewhere and it has history. But, like everything, which is historical, it undergoes constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, it is subject to the

continuous "play" of history, culture, and power. "The original 'Africa'," as Hall says, "is no longer there. It too has been transformed" ("cultural Identity" 117). In this sense, the origins of black identity have also been changed by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, and transformation, and to which blacks can never in any final or literal sense return. In his interview with Moyers, Wilson, therefore, says, "It's not a question of going back to Africa. It's to understand that Africa is in you, that is who you are, that you can participate, and that there isn't anything wrong with being an African . . ." (173). He seeks to reckon Africa, but does not endeavor to recover it. It belongs irrevocably, for him and for the blacks in America, to what Edward Said once called an "imaginative geography and history," which helps, "the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatising the difference between what is close to it and what is far away" (*Orientalism* 55).

It is more from Wilson's second perspective that we can properly understand the traumatic nature of black experience in his plays. The ways in which black people were positioned in and subjected by the dominant regime were the effect of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said's "Orientalist" sense, were the blacks constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of

America, the white also had the power to make them see themselves as "Other." Every regime of representation, Foucault says, is a regime of power formed by the fatal couplet "Power/Knowledge." But this kind of knowledge, says Hall, "is internal, not external. It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm" ("Cultural Identity" 112). This is the lesson of Wilson's insight into the black experience in his drama. He insists on reclaiming the rich legacy of a separate identity, while exploring simultaneously the possibilities of participation in a multicultural America.

The desire to uncover the historical reality of African-American past fuels Wilson's dramatic project: the unearthing of the context in which his dramas originated, evolved, and took on cultural significance. Wilson's act of resurrecting the "authentic" history is incompatible with the poststructuralist idea which claims that culture has lost a sense of historical consciousness of cause and effect. Postmodernists do not believe in teleological metanarratives. Fredric Jameson, in particular, sees literary postmodernism as a by-product of the

new world view according to which, as Kimberley C. Davis says, "our concept of history has become spatial or flattened out, and we inhabit a perpetual present in which images of the past are merely recycled with no understanding of their original context" (242). Similarly, Jean Baudrillard argues that mass media has neutralized reality for us and it has done so in stages: first reflecting, then masking reality, and then masking the absence of reality, and finally, bearing no relation to reality at all. Such stances of Jameson and Baudrillard have provoked numerous antagonists to speak out. Linda Hutcheon is one of them. In her two studies of "historiographic metafiction" Hutcheon argues that much of the postmodern fiction is still strongly invested in history, but more importantly in revising our sense of what history means and accomplishes. "The function of the conjunction of the historiographic and the metafictive in much contemporary fiction" she says, "is to make the reader aware of the distinction between the *events* of the past real and the *facts* by which we give meaning to that past, by which we assume to know it." To Baudrillard she replies, "postmodern art works to contest the 'simulacrization' process of mass culture--not by denying it or lamenting it--but by problematizing the entire notion of the representation of reality." In her opinion, it is not that truth and reference have ceased to exist, as

Baudrillard claims; it is that they have ceased to be unproblematic issues. "We are not," she views, "witnessing a degeneration into the hyperreal without origin or reality, but a questioning of what 'real' can mean and how we can *know* it" (*A Poetics* 223).

Wilson's treatment of history bears some similarity to Hutcheon's postmodern "historiographic metafiction," but his relationship to this discourse is affected by his aim to write what Morrison would call "black-topic" texts. In his desire to fill up a gap, neglected by historians, to record the everyday lives of racially discriminated people, Wilson breaks the hierarchy of master historical narratives and raises by its side a "real" African-American history. He sees himself as a creative chronicler who reconstructs, while deconstructing "official history," by tapping the well of African-American "presence." Thus Wilson's dramas show a "both-and" dialectical, indeterminate character, a doubleness that draws the best from two otherwise opposed theoretical and political camps. While his project is informed by postmodernism's denaturalizing critique in demystifying master historical narratives, it is no less characterized by an African-American political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory and agency, of keeping an "essentialized" past alive through story telling and

representation in order to envision a better future. As an artist, Wilson has a great deal of faith in the power of new representation to redefine the perception of reality.

By doing so, Wilson foregrounds black suffering along with their struggle to survive, and seeks to rewrite black history as life lived, suggesting that a dramatic account of the interior life of black people might be substantially truer than "actual" documents which are mostly 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. "History," according to Jay Plum, "theoretically is an open-ended discourse that does not constitute reality but provides a meaning, or an interpretation, of past events by an objective observer" (562). In practice, however, historians have often chosen and arranged events according to their own cultural bias and orientation, and made the so-called objectivity of history a fallacy. In writing American history, for example, historians (the majority of whom have been whites) have brought the experiences of white people to the center and marginalized the blacks'. Much of American history tends to be the story of white men whereas the story of black men and women recedes to the background. Wilson challenges this paradigm by contextualizing black experience

and, in turn, creating an opportunity for the black community to examine and define itself: "I think Blacks in America need to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people." Rather than writing history in the traditional sense, Wilson narrates black American experience with a view to presenting "the familiar with a freshness and in a manner never quite seen before" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 373). His narrative deals with the cultural and esthetic imperative to construct a historical path into the cultural geographies of African-Americans. His plays, says Plum, are more than dramas "containing history"; they are active attempts to reconstruct the very methods and modes of the estheticized history. His history, stripped of its numbing informational qualities, demographic insistence, and subservience to pastness, thrives in the "fluid immediacy" of a story being told. He creates a counterdiscourse, a critical fiction more "authentic" than recorded history. His stories represent more than the possibility for experience; they are human history (561-62).

In his play, storytelling becomes the means by which Wilson creates drama out of history, not drama of history. Remote historical substrata establish his present-tense notion of history. He seeks to ground his narrative in the historical reality while simultaneously blending it with fiction. Or the

whole narrative may be a fiction, yet it provides a fresh perspective on the historical reality of black life in America. What he presents in his drama is certainly not a total history, but rather some historical moments, which he finds crucial to his project.

The complex model Wilson proposes for the black theater develops from his understanding of African myths and rituals as an alternative substantive category that can dislodge the fixed referent of the West. He makes his stories an integral part of the folk continuum authenticated by African symbology to reaffirm the ethnic kinship which invites spiritual renewal. The revival of a collective African memory helps him achieve an uncompromised expression of ethnic ethos in his creative process. His stories teach black people the art of surviving and even triumphing in the face of a hostile environment. An artistic distillation of cultural memory, his stories afford blacks an opportunity to witness and comprehend their present affliction, to see themselves as those who endured and resisted oppressive powers, and to authenticate themselves not as sufferers but as survivors. In his work, Wilson lets the cultural perspective manifest itself as ghosts, divine revelations, and spirits that interact with the real world of common experience. Like Morrison, he is a mythmaker. He

creates his own mythic figure, who is an extranatural guide/seer leading other human characters to a discovery of the "song" that defines their being, their purpose in life, and their relationship with each other. "Wilson," says Trudier Harris, "adapts that pattern of human encountering otherworldly being from historical folklore" (50). In Yoruba mythology, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr., Esu-Elegbara is one such otherworldly being. He "is the sole messenger of the gods, . . . interprets the will of the gods to man, . . . [and] carries the desires of man to the gods. Esu is the guardian of the crossroads . . ." (*Signifying* 6).

Walking along the road, Wilson's characters meet a stranger who offers to show them "the Secret of Life" and teach them how to find their "song." The stranger is able to serve as a guide on the unfamiliar road. Cleansing their hands with blood, he leads them to a "place where everything [is] bigger than life" (*Joe Turner's* 212) and leaves them there, disappearing in a light streaming from his body. Possession of this song confers on blacks both a new identity and a unique task in the world. Wilson also suggests that the shiny man [the guide] could be anybody because each individual possesses the potential for self-realization. By attributing a single characteristic to all black people, Wilson seeks to show that African-Americans are

indistinguishable from one another, that they are, in fact, not individual subjects but bodies that are ultimately the same body. In a fragmented community with the self-alienation of its members, such a stance might cohere its members and help them find their own identities through a past that is collective. A search for the self in the past is crucial for Wilson because he thinks that the past is one which can ground a self, that it was made by other selves whose agency can function as the precedent for and promise of one's own. "In imaginatively expanding traditional forms of the lore," says Harris, "Wilson shares kinship with Morrison, who also takes traditional forms, gives them new shapes, and bends them to her imaginative will throughout her novels" (50).

The folklore Wilson (re)creates helps him rewrite the history of the blacks tied to racism and repression and simultaneously to a strength that transcends those limitations. He encourages "a willing suspension of disbelief" about the nature of the lore he presents. He does not seek to "prove" the existence of certain phenomena; he simply presents them as if they were givens. In his drama, as Harris says, "A world exists; Wilson invites viewers into it. Instead of going to meet the audience by trying to *prove* belief in supernatural phenomena, Wilson unapologetically invites the audience to come

into his world, to rise to his level of belief" (50-51). Wilson thus successfully combines the naturalistic Western drama with the mystical, non-Western theater of ritual and metaphor. This dramaturgy of Wilson evokes Clive Barnes to say, "it is his gift for the seat-edgingly theatrical and thrillingly, mysteriously dramatic that has made him the most acclaimed playwright of his time" ("Piano Lesson" 455).

Wilson first came to prominence in the mid-1980s, with his fourth play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), which director Lloyd Richards was able to move from Yale Repertory Theater to the Cort Theater on Broadway. Wilson's dramatic and verbal imagination galvanized critics, and heralded a major new presence on the American stage. Gates Jr. acclaimed him as "probably the most celebrated American playwright . . . and is certainly the most accomplished black playwright in this nation's history" ("The Chitlin" 132). Wilson's political and artistic consciousness directly relates to the dynamics of the 1960s--an era which brought Black Arts Movement and Black Power concept together. With contempt for the discriminatory legislative process, the Black Power concept informed the civil rights movement and, as Krishnamoorthy says, "urged black people to acquire political and economic strength, and resort to violence and riots, if necessary, to realize their long deferred

dreams. While Black Power propagated political nationalism, the Black Arts Movement . . . celebrated cultural nationalism" (35-36). The poetics accompanying the new ideological orientation underwent a "generational shift" during this period of political and cultural turbulence. Houston A. Baker Jr. defines this generational shift as "an ideologically motivated movement overseen by young or newly-emergent intellectuals who are dedicated to refuting the work of their intellectual predecessors and to establishing a new framework of intellectual inquiry" ("Shifts" 3). These intellectuals abandoned traditional integrationist poetics which aimed at bringing black literature and criticism in line with the American mainstream, and set up Black Aesthetic Theory, a poetics wholly indigenous to black culture, and politically committed to a separate identity for the blacks. As such the Black Arts Movement envisioned an art that spoke directly to the needs and aspirations of black America. In order to perform this task, it proposed a radical reordering of the Western cultural esthetic. It recommended a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology and addressed the African-American desire for self-determination and nationhood. It postulated that there are, in fact, and, in spirit, two Americans--one black, one white.

As a black artist, Wilson takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of black people. He reviews the black experience in the racist America and seeks to develop in his drama a "black esthetic" out of an African-American cultural tradition. He does this task by becoming more inward-looking, critical, and painstakingly analytic so that he can raise consciousness in blacks. Wilson's commitment to black esthetic is often accused of cultural chauvinism, and of retreat from universal human problems. But he responds to such accusation by arguing that racism in America still persists. In his interview with Gwen Ifill he says, "Black folks did not go through . . . [a] time of prosperity for . . . [long] in America." With reference to *King Hedley II* (1999), he further says: "America's not playing by the rules. The rules say that if you have the lowest bid on the contract, you're supposed to get the contract if you bid the lowest bid. So you're black and you bid the lowest bid, but you don't get the contract . . . so it's things like that." Therefore, Wilson thinks, "when you have a work of art that deals with a culture that's so seminal through black American culture, . . . you just simply have black sensibility behind the artistic development of that project" ("Interview with Gwen Ifill" 3-5).

Wilson became artistically and politically conscious amid the civil rights and Black Nationalist Movements of the 1960s. Among the black artists and intellectuals who influenced Wilson during the 1960s were Amiri Baraka and Malcolm X. "My own youth is fired in the kiln of black cultural nationalism as exemplified by Amiri Baraka in the sixties," says Wilson (Preface IX). Baraka's radical analysis of the issues with which the Black Arts Movement was concerned is the source of his impact on Wilson. Like Baraka, Wilson sees the power of the theater as giving reality to dreams, as serving as food for the hungry and, as Baraka says, as "propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind." Its function is religious--a summoning of the world spirit. Its purpose is to move people to an understanding "of what the world is; and what it ought to be" ("Revolutionary" 211). Baraka's plays that Wilson liked most were the ones published in the volume *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1969). It served, says Mark William Rocha, "as the main fare of the Black Horizons Theater of Pittsburgh, which Wilson founded with Rob Penny in 1968 and operated until 1972." "Wilson," Rocha further says, "not only subscribed to but also lived the well-known Barakan manifesto, 'The Revolutionary Theater'," directing many of Baraka's plays. The experience had a profound impact, for Wilson adapted three fundamental Barakan elements to his own

plays: "the motion of history as the emergence of the African 'Geist' out of the bones of the Middle Passage, the enactment of the ritual dance in which personal experience and racial history converge, and, most importantly, the quest for one's song that is ultimately realized in the blues" ("Four B's" 7-8).

Wilson, like Baraka, thinks that the true validation of black art must come from its reception by the black community and not from the reactions of white critics and audiences. He, therefore, pregnates his dramatic world with black issues and seeks to shatter the illusion of the American body politic--blacks have become an integral part of American culture and civilization, and their fate is inextricably connected with it--in order to awaken black people to the reality of their lives. He sees culture as the most important element in the struggle for self-determination. Similarly, it is Malcolm X's influence upon him that leads him to empathize with black nationalism. Like Malcolm X, he too urges African-Americans to break away from their psychological, cultural, and political dependence on white values. They should turn their efforts toward building their own world in terms of their own interest. In his interview with Kim Powers, he says that Malcolm X was the person who articulated for the first time "what the masses of Black people were saying on the street corners. It was all a part of

the people's lives; they had been given a platform, and there was an explosion of Black art and literature comparable to the Harlem Renaissance" (373). These influences locate Wilson in a tradition of African-American activists who have advanced the cause of their race through the reclamation of African cultural roots. By self-consciously authoring a history of his people, Wilson has followed a trajectory charted by his influential predecessors.

While adhering to the tradition, Wilson "positively discourages" it, to borrow Eliot's phrases, and makes his own place in the annals of black drama by realizing his "individual talent." His work, he says, is an attempt to confront "the glancing manner in which white America looks at blacks and the way blacks look at themselves." By questioning the social malignity with sufficient metaphor but without conspicuous didacticism, Wilson has set himself apart from Baraka and Ed Bullins. "I can only do what I do because the '60s existed," Wilson reasons. "I am building off that original conflict" (qtd. in DeVries 376). Besides, in comparison with the polemic of Baraka, Bullins, and Malcolm X, Wilson's indictments are relatively mild. His characters never appear like menacing street people screaming obscenities. He takes the homeliest of locales and makes it a way station for the destiny of blacks.

As Freedman says, "Wilson gives words to trumpeters and trash men, cabbies and conjurers, boarders and landladies, all joined by a heritage of slavery. Their patois is his poetry, their dreams are his dramas" (447).

Wilson writes of the particulars of black life, elevating his anger to a more poetic plane. His characters confront blackness not as a function of color but as a condition of being and becoming, as a complex cultural reality of African-American heritage. The white man in his plays can be ignored, it is quality of life against which his characters rail. Unlike his more politicized predecessors, Wilson has created, as Freedman says, fallible humans, not simplistic paragons. His fictive families form bulwark against a hostile world, almost the same world as he himself encountered:

> bricks through the window when the family tried moving into mostly white Hazelwood; "Nigger, go home" notes on his desk at an overwhelmingly white parochial high school; accusations of cheating when a term paper on Napoleon seemed a bit too good to have been done by a black boy. Hounded out of one school, frustrated by another, Wilson dropped out in the ninth grade. At the age of 15, his formal education had come to an end. (449)

Wilson carefully articulates the structures that inform his personal history and the forms that truthfully express, first, his own experience and second, collectively, the experience of his people. He then blends both the experiences with mystery and creates high drama in his plays. In order to get closer to "African retentiveness" he infuses his plays with African mysticism and folklore--ghosts, myths, chants, and spells. Wilson's "Africanism" serves as a vehicle for blacks in regulating love and the imagination as defenses against suffering. By it, as Morrison says, "the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (52). It helps blacks to define their goals, to know blackness in relation as much to themselves as to others, and to display this knowledge to ease and to order external and internal chaos.

In Wilson's plays, the blues is what Baker Jr. identifies as "the process of discovering AMERICA in its relationship to Afro-American culture" (*Blues* 66). Wilson's discovery of Bessie Smith, the classical blues singer, and his understanding of her song's coded message made him what Baker Jr. calls a "blues detective," who is able to decipher black forms by looking to

"the limitless freedom of myth and fictive discourse . . ." (*Blues* 122). The sign "AMERICA" signifies the broken promise of presence. All blues songs grew out of the awareness of the black American condition as the sign of an absence, a broken promise, and the blues is the form blacks invented to negotiate this absence. So when Wilson discovered the blues, he, in effect, discovered America in relation to all blacks. "In Wilson," says Rocha, "the blues is *the* American language for telling and confronting the tragic reality of an America that is always already absent" ("Four B's" 10). The blues in Wilson's drama is about black life and at the same time about the gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of oppression. It is at the core of the daily life of his characters. It helps them to define the world in which they live and to work out their ideas about and attitude toward that world. Thus it is their means of healing emotional wounds on the one hand and a universal means of communicating on the other. Wilson in his interview with Moyers explains this crucial cultural element: "The blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work" (168).

In his Preface to *Three Plays*, Wilson says that the blues provided him with an esthetic to deal his growing idea of himself as part of something larger. And it was not until he discovered the art of Romare Bearden that he was able to turn the blues into a narrative that would encompass all of the elements of culture and tradition. Bearden had accomplished in painting an expression as full and varied as the blues. Wilson's discovery of Bearden's work was somewhat akin to his discovery of Bessie Smith. "I try to explore, in terms of the life I know best, those things which are common to all cultures . . . ," Bearden had said (qtd. in Wilson, Preface X). Wilson takes it as his credo and seeks to induct into his art the elements that define traditional African forms. In the selection of his theme and the portrayal of his characters, Wilson, like Bearden, incorporates the familiar into ritualistic drama recognizable and influential to his audience. He presents, as Bearden does, "a rainbow of the life cycle incorporating the past and the present, the dead and the yet-to-be-born, offering images and inspirations intended to heal the community" (Fishman 133). Like Bearden, he too offers conflict and struggle within the African context, "whose tragic understanding transcends the causes of individual disjunction and recognizes them as reflections of a far greater disharmony

in the communal psyche" (Soyinka 50). Blues finds its way into the work of both artists not only as subjects but also as technique. For both artists, the process of creation has an improvisatory quality, with experimental variations on a theme. Listening to Wilson's dialogue, one hears the soulfulness of the blues in the long speeches of the characters. Wilson sees, says Hedy Weiss, "Bearden's use of the collage . . . [as] the visual equivalent of blues--music that you sort of have to piece together as it jumps from one thing to the next" (7).

Slavery is the historical background out of which the spirituals and the blues were created. The spirituals deal with the theme of God and heaven, and are a communicative device for blacks about the possibilities of earthly freedom. In it, the image of heaven serves functionally to liberate the black mind from the existing values of white society, enabling blacks to think their own thoughts and do their own things. The blues, on the other hand, is closely related to "slave secular." Following the Emancipation and Reconstruction, it has invited black people to embrace the reality and truth of black experience. It expresses, as Sterling Brown says, "laments of folk Negroes over hard luck, 'careless' or unrequited love, broken family life, or general dissatisfaction with a cold and trouble-filled world" (qtd. in Cone 110). And implied in the

blues is a refusal to go beyond the existential problem. It is not that the blues rejects God; rather it "ignores" Him by embracing the joys and sorrows of life. Wilson has apparently chosen to focus on the oppression of African-Americans to symbolize the collective struggle of the community as such. Placing little faith in Christianity, he has adapted a rather secular ideology that the blues embodies. While Christianity has, for centuries, provided inspiration, strength, and moral principles for blacks, Wilson doubts if it will suit their needs. His work expresses his disavowal by challenging a white religion imposed on his ancestors. He says in his interview with Moyers, "in fact, what you do is worship an image of God which is white, which is the image of the very same people who have oppressed you, who have put you on the slave ships, who have beaten you, and who have forced you to work" (178).

Wilson's views on Christianity are close to that of his influential predecessor Baraka who, in his plays like *The Baptism* (1966), attacks Christianity and possibly the black church in particular for its impotent mixture of messianic dreams and political conservatism. Wilson's male protagonists, therefore, shift from devout Christian reverence to outright blasphemy--something that Joseph Washington labels as "folk religion" (qtd. in Shannon, "The Good Christian's" 380). This

religion was black people's communal response to economic, social, and racial oppression. Realizing that their white oppressors often quoted the scriptures to them to justify the so-called "ordained" subjugation, many blacks gave up the Bible, which did not serve their interests. "According to folk religion," says Shannon, "ethics and morals were determined by adhering to group consensus and by adapting as righteous certain accepted practices within the African American community; the Bible was not the focal point of 'folk religion'" ("The Good Christian's" 380). It is not difficult, therefore, to see that Wilson's men find greatest solace in the blues, not Christianity. It is more than a pastime for them. It is their collective means of communicating on the one hand and a means of healing emotional wounds on the other.

Although Wilson's stance on Christianity is sometimes critiqued, it is also a fact that he does not altogether deny the important role Christianity has played in bringing order and stability to the lives of blacks. In some of his plays, the raising of the next generation is left to those who espouse Christian ideology: for instance, to Rose in *Fences* and to Berniece in *The Piano Lesson*. Both characters are women and both are devoted Christians. While Wilson's men demonstrate their disavowal by challenging and withdrawing from

Christianity, his women are more involved with the church, participate in its events, and sing hymns. Explaining this polarity, Wilson, in his interview with Richard Pettengill, says that what "men and women wrestle with is the question of self-definition: women define themselves in terms other than the terms men define them in" (211). Obviously, Christianity is that "other" in terms of which Wilson's women seek to define themselves and continue their struggle for survival and liberation from the world where they have been doubly marginalized. His women have their spiritual beliefs remain rooted in the Christian religious tradition. On the same morning they go to church like good Christians and then come home to sprinkle salt all over the house as a protection against evil spirits, or line up pennies across the threshold to keep witches at bay. What Wilson does reject is the prioritizing of Christian religion over African religions, particularly if Christianity blinds blacks to the stark realities of this world.

"The ground on which August Wilson stands," says Shannon, "has yielded a number of male characters. . . . Yet this very same ground has produced his African-American women." It is often alleged that he is "a playwright whose sensibilities are admittedly and understandably masculine." Despite his grounding in a decidedly male frame of reference, Wilson's portrayals of

women cover as wide a range as do those of his men. Although individually his female figures "tend to slip into comfort zones of what seem to be male-fantasized roles, collectively they show Wilson coming to grips with the depth and diversity of African American womanhood" ("The Ground" 151). It is important to note that, Daisy Wilson, the playwright's mother, is the model on which Wilson bases the majority of his women characters: "My mother's a very strong, principled woman," says Wilson. "My female characters like Rose come in large part from my mother" ("Interview with Bill Moyers" 175). Thus they repeatedly reflect some degree of his mother's indomitable spirit, her maternal warmth, and her complete independence.

For most of Wilson's characters, Christianity somehow does not seem to blend fully with what many struggling African-Americans see as necessary survival tactics. Clearly, then, their opportunism is an extension of their personal code of survival. Their religion is either folk religion or a practical religion with the haunting overtones of Social Darwinism--survival for the fittest and self-preservation. These perspectives on life are for them the only means of sustenance in the face of dehumanizing poverty and failed careers. So when they fall into the pits of suffering, they create their own convenient laws--survival strategies. Their survival strategies

differ; depending upon the times they live in. These strategies are not only means of protecting themselves from racial vicissitudes but also explorations of the ways of participation in the land they were born and raised in.

In the 1910s, Wilson's characters are free men and women in the Northern cities, but their freedom unfortunately often turns into a "self-imposed" displacement and isolation, perhaps a vestige of their marginalization as a culture in the antebellum South. To overcome this sense of disintegration, they envision themselves among their ancestors and commune ontologically with the past--an act of spiritual transformation that foreshadows their mission of personal and collective release. "While the condition of slavery and forced labor in the New World," says Paul Carter Harrison, "caused psychic and physical rupture, it resisted the cosmic vitiation of the true song, and spiritual resilience encouraged reclamation for the sake of liberation and freedom." If the renewal of spirit is to be made possible, the body must become transfigured. Thus the discernment of the ancestral experience offers these oppressed blacks, as what Harrison further says, "an opportunity to disregard flesh and spirit as opposing forces and to view their suffering in the context of a spiritual continuum that reassures physical liberation" (314).

The 1920s in Wilson's drama witnesses a brief spate of enthusiasm for black music. In the recording industry, opportunistic white promoters line their pockets from the sale of music albums of black artistes. In return what the musicians get is only a paltry wage. Though such exploitation has caused his black characters unspeakable psychic and physical trauma, it has nevertheless vitalized the true song to earn their liberation and freedom. As a survival strategy, blues empowers them with the strength to endure, to transcend the sense of disfranchisement that daily erodes the spirit. The blues is a part of the black legacy and an important element that sustains black life.

It is in the 1930s, for the first time, that Wilson introduces characters who are eager to return to the South. "This is significant," says Pereira, "for it marks a potential turning point in the fortunes of black people" (86). Earlier they had considered the North as their true destination. For the first time now blacks suggest that the South is their place to pursue their destinies as free men and women. It is a moment of black transmogrification that Wilson examines in his play, *The Piano Lesson*, set in this decade. The characters' heritage, a heritage of a dubious past, also becomes a self-serving voice and a promise of the future for them.

While exploitation of early blues musicians is a central subject of Wilson's dramas set in the 1920s, in the plays dealing with the 1940s it is made to ignite protest. His characters battle with society and themselves for self-worth. They become conscious of the discrepancy between promise and reality that fills them with pain and rage. Therefore, they try to resist discrimination and change their situation. To even the odds, they even arm themselves. Wilson sees their stance as political and revolutionary. They are about black power, self-determination.

In the plays centering on the 1950s, Wilson's characters are responsible and like the idea of the family. The sense of responsibility--for their own destiny as well as for their family--is pivotal for them, not only in its metaphysical ramifications but in its more pragmatic applications as well. "We have been told so many times how irresponsible we are as black males that I try and present positive images of responsibility," says Wilson (qtd. in Devries 377). Besides the institution of family, sports serves as another survival strategy for blacks in the 1950s. A Wilson character, Troy Maxon, finds in baseball a metaphor for survival. For him, life is a baseball game riddled with fastballs, curve balls, and sometimes uncontrolled balls. It gives him a new direction, a

renewed meaning, and an opportunity to redefine himself and prove that a black man can also do something meaningful and worthy. His quest for self-authentication and his will to protect his family help him negotiate social realities with an unusual gusto. It is indicative of a confident movement toward a positive individual and collective destiny, of a greater instinct for survival that would usher in changes in the decades to follow.

Wilson's characters of the 1960s are distrustful of the sound and fury surrounding the civil rights movement. Migration to the North has almost ended, and now blacks are as much northerners as any whites. Although some of them talk about their lost land in the South, most of the time they are busy struggling to make a living in the city. Their attention is focused on the present and future, the past being merely a distant memory. However, these blacks do not completely give up their past, since past is always crucial for them as it, says Wilson, "helps determine how to proceed with future" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 373). Reclamation of the cultural past, for them, is a means of achieving a proper place in the white world. To underscore this concept, Wilson incorporates characters like Aunt Ester, a seer who claims to be 322 years old. She is the repository of all the struggles and victories of African-

Americans and epitomizes the value of racial memory and the power of the occult, which offset black despair and alienation. The 1960s was obviously an anxious time in the lives and fortunes of blacks in America, but this was also the time to think how they should best proceed in their struggle for basic human dignity.

Wilson's characters of the 1970s still live below the poverty line and for them America has no jobs. But unlike their predecessors, they are more assertive and self-scrutinizing. They look inward rather than looking out and pointing to others. They struggle to create jobs for themselves by using their limited sources. They follow and are bound by the rules and regulations, which they themselves have made. They are responsible for what they think and do. With their collective effort and sense of morality, they earn their living. Their stories reveal their solidarity and they resolve that they must walk their day with grace and nobility.

At a conference of the Theater Communication Group, held at Princeton University in June 1998, Wilson, reports Gates jr., declared that the American theater was "an instrument of white cultural hegemony," and the campaign to integrate it had only made things worse. The physical, spiritual, and moral "survival of black Americans demanded that they be given a stage of their

own. They needed their very own theaters the way they needed sunlight and oxygen." Wilson told his audience:

> There are and have always been two distinct and parallel traditions in black art: that is, art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society, and art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America. The second tradition occurred when the African in the confines of the slave quarters sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving in his art, in his song and dance, a world in which he was the spiritual center. (qtd. in Gates Jr., "The Chitlin" 132)

Wilson differentiates between black artists who write for white audiences and those who write for black audiences, placing himself among the latter. As an African-American playwright, Wilson thinks that racism is still out there in America, under different guises. Therefore, he insists that the blacks tend their own souls and tell their truths for themselves. They must define and reveal themselves as individuals who are part of their own community.

Wilson's ideology is in contrast to the Egalitarian myth of America, which affirmed, particularly after World War II, that there would be no differences between the races, which were

likely to affect their social, cultural, and intellectual performance. Egalitarians argued openly for the possibility and desirability of the assimilation or integration of blacks into American life. These doctrines, of course, had great impact in that they provided a theoretical basis, in different ways though, for the integration and civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s respectively. By arguing that prejudice could be eliminated through education and legislation, the egalitarians raised hopes that America could become, in the relatively near future, a "color-blind" society. America "attempted to guarantee its social equilibrium and embarked on efforts to influence the non-Western world in behalf of its interests and ideology, overt and virulent intellectual racism came to be recognized as a dangerous liability" (Fredrickson 331). But events of the late 1960s served to raise doubts about the adequacy of such formulations. Wilson's ideology is the upshot of this inadequacy. He thinks that the black community is still in a dilemma. He metaphorically reveals this dilemma in his interview with Pettengill: "Two trains running, neither one going my way. One runs by night, one runs by day." He further says:

> two ideas . . . have confronted black America since the Emancipation, the ideas of cultural assimilation

> and cultural separatism. . . . [For a black,] neither of these trains [is] working. He [has] to build a new railroad in order to get where he's going, because the trains are not going his way. (208)

Wilson seeks to build this "railroad" on the basis of an ethnic diversity which will at once respect difference and ensure participation in a distinct way. He thinks that black people's difficulty is that they have accepted the American Dream of success at its face value, that they are trapped, like Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and Floyd Barton in *The Seven Guitars*, by the false dream. The result is a confused identity. Like Edgar Murphy, Wilson believes "if the blacks were given the opportunity for a self-sufficient social and cultural life on their own side of the color line, . . . they would develop their latent racial genius, evolve a worthy and distinct culture of their own, and, as a result, lose all desire to amalgamate with the whites" (qtd. in Fredrickson 294).

Controversial though his thought may be, Wilson energizes his audience by reminding them of the power of the theater to inform, to heal, and to reconstruct truth. He sincerely feels that black theater can "reignite and reunite our people's positive energy for a political and social change that is reflective of our spiritual truths rather than our economic

fallacies" ("The Ground" 73). But it remains to be seen whether this can happen in an integrated theater or whether only black theater can achieve this goal. More importantly, Wilson's self-image as a black playwright and his views on the distinctive character of black theater are not necessarily in conflict with his desire to be remembered as "August Wilson, playwright". Asked by Ifill in 2001 whether he prefers to be known as "the great African American playwright or the great American playwright," Wilson replies: "I . . . view my plays as belonging . . . to theatrical literature . . . ." He clarifies his remarks in the next few lines:

> Yes, of course, and I mean, I am. I mean, I am. I'm a black American playwright. You know, I couldn't deny it. I couldn't be anything else. I make my art out of black American culture, all cut out of the same cloth, if you will, you know. That's who I am, that's who I write about. You know, in the same manner that Chekhov wrote about the Russians, I write about blacks. So there's no reason why you can't say "August Wilson, playwright"--even though all of my work, every single play, is about black Americans, about black American culture, about the black experience in America, you know? "August Wilson,

> playwright." I write about the black experience of men, or I write about black folks. That's who I am. I couldn't do anything else. I wouldn't do anything else. (5)

Wilson, whose plays center on conflicts not only between blacks and whites but between blacks who embrace their African past and those who deny it, certainly does not deny his own roots. What he wanted to mean is that "the universals [do not exist only] outside of Black life" ("Interview with Gwen Ifill" 9). He writes about the black experience in America, and contained within that experience, because it is a human experience, are all the universalities. This may imply a shift from his earlier view of black theater with the sole objective to raise black consciousness, but equally significant is his sense of pride in having brought the black theater (his own in particular) on a par with mainstream American theater artistically, and proved black experience and culture as an inseparable part of American experience and culture. Like Suzan-Lori Parks, Wilson also thinks that though blacks still need to talk about themselves in contrast to whites, they now equally need to talk about themselves in relation to themselves to give their life and literature a new stamp of authenticity that would compel wider attention (*Span* 42-44). This element of self-introspection

informs many of Wilson's plays which, while rooted in black experience, never fail to have a universal appeal.