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August Wilson's Two trains Running :A sense of community

A paper

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Dedication

I dedicate this piece of work to my late mother,
mercy and light descend upon her.

I also dedicate this work to my late father, mercy
and light descend upon him, I wish he witnessed
my success.

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All words of thanks, praises are due to Almighty Allah

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Abstract

This research explores the portrayal of the African American community in August Wilson's play, "Two Trains Running." The play is set in 1969, during a time of immense social and political change in the United States, which greatly impacted the black community, and examines the difficulties of creating a sense of community in that context. This research examines how Wilson portrays the relationships between the play's characters, and the various ways in which they find or create a sense of community within the constraints of their circumstances. Through this examination, this research highlights Wilson's commentary on the importance of community in the struggle for equality and empowerment. August Wilson's *Two Trains* shows that the post-Civil Rights era, particularly the Black Power movement, as an alternative to old Civil Rights ideology. The play follows Hambone, a black diner proprietor, as he struggles with persecution and agitation. Memphis, an African American protagonist, uses Black Power, Black Nationalism, and black rage ideologies to resist racism and equal justice. Money is a significant issue in the play.

Table of Content

No.	Title	Page No.
	Dedication	II
	Acknowledgement	III
	Table of Content	V
	Abstract	IV
Chapter One: Introduction		
1.1	August Wilson	1
1.2	August's Influence	3
1.3	About the Play	5
Chapter Two		
2.1	Two Trains Running	6
2.2	The Struggle in the Play	7
Chapter Three		
3.1	Black Power versus the Civil Rights Movement	12
	Conclusion	15
	References	17

Chapter One

1.1 August Wilson

Frederick August Kittel, was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1945. He purchased his first typewriter on April 1, 1964, marking the start of his poetry writing journey. In the mid to late 1960s, Wilson was actively involved in the Pittsburgh literary scene, collaborating with other black writers at various workshops and theaters. It was during this time that he co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre in 1967. As his career progressed, Wilson underwent a significant personal and professional transformation, changing his name to August Wilson in the late 1960s." He retained his middle name and embraced his mother's maiden name while discarding his father's first and last names " (Tyndall ,2002:4).

Wilson's evolution as a playwright is evident in his works like *The Coldest Day of the Year* in 1977, which showcased themes similar to his earlier play *Recycle* from 1973. This transition marked a pivotal moment in Wilson's career as he continued to explore and redefine his artistic voice and narrative style, Wilson transformed his poems into a play called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, premiered in 1981. He wrote scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota and perfected dialogue. "In 1982, he submitted *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* to the National Playwrights Conference, where he met Lloyd Richards" (ibid)

He is best known for his series of ten plays which is collectively called *Pittsburgh Cycle/Century Cycle/ Decade Cycle*. "In his works he dealt with the issues related particularly with black life like diaspora, dislocation, racism, slavery, segregation and in general with love, relationships, human predicament, spirituality, life and death" (Mitra,2021:8).

He used theatre very powerfully to present black life on stage and to raise voice of protest against subjugation of the blacks by the whites. He strongly believed that the black people as a community and their cultural heritage can thrive only if they remain connected to their origin, ancestry, history and the African spiritualism .Wilson, a poet and master storyteller, discovered the joy of play-writing after a friend encouraged him to do so. He found theater's ability to communicate ideas and virtues thrilling, comparing it to novel reading. Wilson believed that art and life are inseparable and indistinguishable, and that the purpose of an artist is to add to the artistic storehouse and celebrate common humanity. (ibid). "Wilson uses storytelling and monologue (Bynum's storytelling, Loomis's monologue, and both characters' oral tradition) to recuperate African/African Americans' song/identity" (Tyndall ,2002:46). As a playwright, August Wilson worked in the style of a collagist. "He scribbled his ideas on napkins, or whatever was handy, then pulled the various pieces together into a cohesive drama"(Wilson, 2006:).

Since 1981, Wilson has been creating a ten-play cycle of history plays focusing on the African-American experience, with each play in the cycle chronicling a specific decade of the twentieth century: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), set in 1911; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1981), set in 1927; *The Piano Lesson* (1990), set in 1936; *Seven Guitars* (1996), set in 1948; *Fences* (1986), set in 1957; *Two Trains Running* (1992), set in 1969; *Jitney* (1979), set in 1977; and *King Hedley II* (not published), set in 1985 (Tyndall ,2002:2).

Wilson's plays explore the connection between characters and their attachment to property, highlighting its impact on social status, exposure to crime, proximity to services, and sanitation. Homeownership is seen as an external marker of permanence, belonging, and place, offering

financial, social, and emotional security. Wilson's characters recognize the role of housing in their lives, serving as settings and backdrops that add visual reminders and weight to the audience. "However, the significance lies in the characters' attitudes towards their homes and property, rather than the buildings themselves "(Jones,2011:7)

August Wilson's plays emphasize the importance of embracing one's ancestors and the past in empowering African Americans. He believes that understanding one's past helps determine how to proceed in the future. Wilson's plays aim to avoid repeating one's history by examining their own individual histories-in-the-making. Through his characters, Wilson illustrates how actions in 1957 might influence choices in 1969. His ultimate goal is to show a way for present-day African Americans to navigate the inherent obstacles of being Africans in America. "He sets his plays in the past to make the present its proscription against what contemporary African Americans should not be doing. Each play depicts aspects of identity, the past and music "(Tyndall ,2002:21).

1.2 August influence

The specificity of place in the plays (and the specificity of that place being Pittsburgh's Hill District) corresponds to a growing emphasis in Wilson's work on the necessity of joining individual activism to collective identity and community support. "As this emphasis evolved, Wilson also geographically anchored the cycle more and more firmly in his hometown" (Jones,2011:1).

"August Wilson's connection to African-American culture and history is rooted in his formative influences, which include playwright Amiri Baraka, collage artist Romare Bearden, Argentinean fabulist Jorge Luis Borges, and the Blues" (Wilson, 1998).Baraka's nationalist ideas, such as

Black Power, influenced Wilson, who considers himself a Black Nationalist, advocating for African Americans' autonomy and awareness of politics' impact on social standing. Nationalist ideology in the 1920s advocated for separate black states and countries. Racial pride and revolutionary resistance to racial discrimination were essential components of Black Nationalism. In William Wilson's plays, black rage sometimes fuels character nationalism, while others are less aggressively Black Nationalists. Wilson's plays bolster African Americans' racial pride and provide a blueprint for dealing with racism, reflecting his Black Nationalist beliefs. Bearden, an African-American collage artist, was instrumental in shaping August Wilson's writing of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Wilson's plays, such as *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*, were inspired by Bearden's collages, which allowed him to focus on a larger theme of racial oppression. The plays are like collages, with the main characters riffing on a specific American injustice. Borges, a fabulist, influenced Wilson's storytelling style, emphasizing listening to his characters and storytelling. Wilson's storytelling style is evident in *Seven Guitars*, where a murder happens up front, followed by the protagonist's murder. "Wilson's listening and storytelling skills were learned from old black men he watched in bars, pool halls, and juke joints."(Tyndall ,2002:19).

Both Wilson and Borges share a similar approach to storytelling, with Wilson sending characters on a quest to locate or lose a text, while Borges often sends his characters on a road to find their identity. Wilson's plays are open-ended, with the journey being what helps the characters find fulfillment. August Wilson's plays, particularly his plays, heavily rely on the blues as a primary influence. Wilson believes that the blues is the

African American's response to the world and encompasses most, if not all, black experiences in America. In his plays, the song of the blues is the language for telling and confronting the tragic reality of an absent America. Characters either find their song at the end of the play or do not, leading to devastating results. Wilson's message is that they should not be like these characters and should not forget their song and how to sing it. "The blues is most prevalent in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, where Levee never finds his song because he rejects his musical identity" (Tyndall ,2002:21).

1.3 About the play

This play explores the changing landscape of America and the evolving perception of African American identity, as seen through the experiences of three men (Memphis, Hambone, and Sterling) finding themselves in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1969. The depiction of black rage by Hambone and Sterling illustrates the various ways African American men in the 1960s confronted racial injustice. Hambone's expression of rage demanded justice, while Sterling's anger motivated him to claim what he believed was rightfully his. These contrasting approaches symbolize the transition from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement during that era. The play "Two Trains Running" delves into the tension between these two movements, with the overarching theme of the 1960s being the shift from Civil Rights to Black Power. "Written by August Wilson, this play explores the dualistic choices and conflicts faced by African Americans during this pivotal period in history"(Tyndall ,2002:166).

Chapter Two

2.1 Two trains running

Two Trains Running examines the possibilities of securing the American dream in a 1960s northern urban ghetto. Memphis Lee, his neighbors and his restaurant's patrons stand on the precipice of urban renewal. They consider the prospects for surviving this change with their history and cultural identity intact as the existence of their community is in jeopardy. "Sterling, a young, politicized ex-con, has just been released from prison and insists on righting an injustice committed years earlier; a man not rewarded with what was promised him after completing a job "(Wilson, 2007)

2.1.1 Characters

MEMPHIS: Memphis Lee is a self-made man whose values of hard work, diligence, persistence and honesty have been consistently challenged by the circumstances of his life. His greatest asset is his impeccable logic. He owns a restaurant that the city intends to demolish. He is determined to negotiate a fair price out of the demolition. He is confident in playing the White man's game as long as he knows the rules. With little patience for those who preach the "black is beautiful" mantra—he claims it sounds as if those black people are trying to convince themselves (ibid).

STERLING: A young man of thirty, he appears at times to be unbalanced, but it is a combination of his unorthodox logic and straightforward manner that makes him appear so. Only recently released from the penitentiary after serving some time for robbing a bank, Sterling is new to the scene of Two Trains Running. He is in search of work, and

when he finds Memphis Lee's restaurant and the group that hangs there it gives him the chance to seek advice from a colorful group of characters.

WOLF: He is a Numbers Runner—someone who carries the money and betting slips between the betting parlors and the headquarters or “Numbers Bank.” He enjoys the notoriety and popularity that comes with this work. While he manages to keep money in his pocket and a decent pair of shoes on his feet, his inability to find secure female companionship is the single failure that marks his life.

HOLLOWAY: A retired house-painter, who, in his retirement, has become a self-made philosopher of sorts. He is a man who all his life has voiced his outrage at injustice with little effect. His belief in the supernatural has enabled him to accept his inability to effect change and continue to pursue life with zest and vigor. He is equally enraged by white men who exploit black men, and any black men who try to fight back. If anyone happens to come to him with a problem, he will send them on over to the oldest woman in town—an Aunt Esther—to sort it out.

WEST: A widower in his early sixties, he is the owner of the wealthiest business on the block. West runs the funeral parlor across the street from the restaurant. His wife's death has allowed his love of money to overshadow the other possibilities of life. It is his practical view of death that has earned him the title of perhaps the sharpest social observer in the play

2.2 The Struggle in the Play

Being black in a white society means ‘being others’ who are always under threat and have to watch their backs and make themselves understood. They must face enduring difficulties to be accepted as they

are, including their cultural and physical differences. Not surprisingly, Wilson has regarded himself as “a struggling playwright whose struggle was to reveal the richness of black life as being both uniquely African, and at the same time authentically American” (Fishburne, 2017: ix). Relatedly, the readers witness the struggles of black community to get their deserved rights, to protect their cultural roots and to resist against the oppression in *Two Trains Running*.

The discriminative practices of the white supremacy are reflected through the black character’s both individual and collective experiences in *Two Trains Running*. More specifically, Memphis and Holloway epitomize the collective experiences of black people while Hambone is the most insistent character whose individual resistance is purely for getting his deserved right throughout the play. Through his black characters, Wilson shows his belief in the power of community which essentially constructs the African American identity.

Their struggles to survive under oppression are the central tenet of their meaning of existence. Wilson thinks that “blacks know the spiritual truth of white America and that we know them better than white America knows us” (Lahr, 2001: 53) as Memphis learns the rules in the play. Memphis told West his story about his past in the South where is the home of slavery. He was in conflict with a white man about his land in which he was the legitimate side but he lost his land and his mule because a black person could not be right under any circumstances against the white authority:

Memphis: [...] They took and cut my mule’s belly out while it standing there. [...] Okay. I know the rules now. If you do that to something that ain’t never done nothing to you... then I know what you would do to

***me. [...] Once I know the rules, whatever they are, I can play by them.
(Wilson 2007: 67)***

Memphis learns how to survive in the white society since he has witnessed his mule's killing because of its black owner and he has watched its murderers without doing anything. It is the legitimized discrimination which leaves Memphis hopeless and forces him to leave his own farm behind. His silence as a part of his personal integrity represents his ways of surviving in a hostile environment because in Wolf's eyes in the play "you always under attack" (Wilson, 2007: 51). Wolf is talking about black people's daily experiences in the white society. While they are just walking in the street, they may be arrested, beaten or killed for any reasons or without any reasons. As an epitomized incident, Wolf was arrested for obstructing justice while walking in the street and stayed in prison for three months, which showed him that black people are always under the white threat. Similarly, Holloway emphasizes the same issue in line with discrimination:

***Holloway: You say the word "gun" in the same sentence with the word "nigger" and you in trouble. The white man panic. Unless you say, "the policeman shot the nigger with his gun"... then that be all right.
(Wilson, 2007: 77)***

As seen, racism is a social construct to sustain the authority, which naturally evokes victimization of black people. Holloway obviously shows that blacks are inherently dangerous and pose a threat to the

safety and stability of the white society. The deeply-rooted reality, racism is central to the Holloway's idea. His belief perpetuates negative stereotypes which unfairly categorize an entire race as 'violent and

criminal’, while ignoring systemic discriminative factors such as poverty, unemployment or lack of access to education or healthcare. In the play, Wilson touches on these issues to portray the unfair system of the white society. In the restaurant, Holloway, Wolf, Sterling and Risa were talking about playing and hitting numbers to earn money and Sterling mentioned that he wanted to have a job as white people who could earn eight or nine thousand dollars yearly. However, Holloway reminds him the unequal

access to the social opportunities: “You ain’t got none of them white folks’ education... how you gonna get one of their jobs?” (Wilson, 2007: 49). It is clear that racism makes impossible to have equal rights to access both education and employment opportunities for black people.

Poignantly, it is Hambone who is the most remarkable character in the play. As Bottoms (2007:149), highlights, the play “concerns with structural racial injustice are embodied in the character of Hambone, who has been driven over the edge of his sanity by a deep-rooted sense of having been wronged” and he is described as “self-contained and in a world of his own” by Wilson (2007:17) in the play. As a voice of black world dominated by the white rules, he revolts against the injustice by repeating the same sentence throughout the play:

Hambone: He gonna give me my ham. He gonna give me my ham. I want my ham. He gonna give me my ham. (2007: 17)

He embodies not only a symbol of resistance but also an inspiring beacon of hope for his black community. Hambone’s story is closely related to the racist practices of the American society. Hambone and Lutz made a deal about ten years ago and Lutz would give him a ham in exchange for Hambone’s painting his fences. After Hambone finished painting the fences, Lutz did not keep his promise and told him to take a chicken or

nothing instead of ham. Since then, Hambone has wanted his ham by waiting in front of the Lutz's fences.

Lutz is a white man and is the symbol of discrimination in the play. His determination not to remunerate Hambone along with Hambone's determination not to accept the whites' injustice is the portrayal of how racism works in the social order. Actually, Hambone's ideological stance is similar to a true story of Wilson's mother. Answering a question correctly in a radio program, his mother, Daisy won a new washing machine.

Yet her blackness posed an obstacle for the prompters who offered a second-hand machine instead of a new one. Most notably, she did not accept although she extremely needed it: "Something is not always better than nothing" (Lahr, 2001: 55) poignantly said Daisy. That incident turned into Wilson's life philosophy for his struggle in the white society. Through his plays, he draws attention to the crucial need for black people to seek their rights and not to accept what is determined as deserved or undeserved for black people by their white masters. Relatedly, Hambone's rejection of chicken is a kind of resistance to the white supremacy even if Hambone cannot manage to take it. "As Hambone waits at Mr. Lutz's fence, so do black people wait, collectively, for the freedom, justice and equality owed them" according to Fisburne (2017: vii).

Chapter Three

3.1 Black Power versus the Civil Rights Movement

In *Two Trains Running*, conditions like violence, worsening ghettos, and European Americans' attempts to dominate African-American organizations led to a resurgence of Black Nationalism in the 1960s, fueling the Black Power Movement and the shift from Civil Rights. August Wilson chronicles the post-Civil Rights era, particularly the Black Power movement, as an alternative to old Civil Rights ideology. Hambone's demand for freedom, power, money, or autonomy represents the Civil Rights Movement, as he believes he can work within the system. The play's message is that change could occur with the help of the government, unlike revolutionary change, which is often difficult and unfriendly (Tyndall, 2002:171).

In August Wilson's "Down the Line Cycle," Hambone, a black proprietor of a diner, struggles with his persecution and agitation. His mutterings, which are his expressions of black rage, are ineffective as they are outdated and do not bring justice. Hambone's actions are representative of the ineffectiveness of asking for civil rights. Despite his ineffectiveness, he does impact members of the African-American community. The play revolves around Hambone's quest to get his due, causing a conflict between those who want Hambone to shut up and those who support him. His death has a significant impact on the characters of Stelling, Risa, and Memphis.

Hambone inspires Memphis to join the Black Power Movement, but his lack of self-discovery and lack of personal history is evident. The Black Power Movement, which thrived in the 1960s, calls for African Americans to unite, recognize their heritage, build community, engage in

self-determination, be autonomous, reject racism, and operate from a position of strength. August Wilson, a Black Nationalist and cultural nationalist, shares a controversial view of crime and violence as a means of equalizing justice for blacks. Wilson believes that actions, not words, are paramount in both movements.

In *Two Trains Running*, African American protagonist Sterling uses Black Power, Black Nationalism, and black rage ideologies to resist racism and equalize justice in American society. He uses his warrior spirit to improve his financial standing in a capitalist society. Sterling's number comes up in a lottery, but the European-American family, the Alberts, attempts to bilk him out of half of his winnings. Despite not getting his full winnings, Sterling confronts the oppressive conditions and walks away from the battle. Wilson considers Sterling's articulation of black rage and warrior spirit highly effective. The story explores issues of economic and spiritual empowerment and the impact of collective action.

Money is a significant issue in the play *Two Trains Running*, as it is linked to black rage and the past. Sterling's black rage triggers a communal experience for African-American community members when he steals Hambone's ham. Sterling resists European American economic control and pursues illegal or suspicious income outside traditional occupations. The progression between Memphis, Hambone, and Sterling speaks to the identity of African-American men in the 1960s. Both Malcolm X and Wilson advocate for the use of black rage to take what one is due, and the character of Sterling represents their willingness to shed blood for their cause (Tyndall, 2002:176).

Wilson uses Memphis, Hambone, and Sterling as examples of racial development, with their individual ideologies overlapping and affecting each other's actions. They are allegories of the development of the

African-American man, especially in his relationship with the European-American man: he has moved from being powerless under the European-American main's thumb, to being able to confront him, but still not receiving what he is due, to taking what he is owed. A pre-Civil Rights Memphis, who could not safely exhibit his rage, was not able to challenge the European-American man effectively. Memphis is a usual figure in Wilson's plays an African-American man trying to be somebody in the face of American discrimination. In 1931, Memphis was basically run out of Jackson, Mississippi, yet another victim of racial oppression in American society. This Memphis, who could not use his rage to fight back, was representative of the pre-Civil Rights era. Although Memphis does not express black rage, his role emphasizes both Hambone and Sterling's expressions of rage, thus it is necessary to understand Memphis, in order to comprehend the characters that do rage (Tyndall ,2002:177).

Conclusion

Frederick August Kittel, born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was a poet and playwright who began his poetry writing journey in 1964. He co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre in 1967 and underwent a significant personal and professional transformation, changing his name to August Wilson in the late 1960s. Wilson's works, such as *The Coldest Day of the Year* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, dealt with issues related to black life, such as diaspora, dislocation, racism, slavery, segregation, love, relationships, human predicament, spirituality, life, and death. Wilson's plays, collectively known as the Pittsburgh Cycle/Century Cycle/Decade Cycle, deal with issues related to black life, such as diaspora, dislocation, racism, slavery, segregation, love, relationships, human predicament, spirituality, life, and death. He used theatre powerfully to present black life on stage and raise a voice of protest against subjugation of the blacks by whites. Wilson's plays explore the connection between characters and their attachment to property, highlighting its impact on social status, exposure to crime, proximity to services, and sanitation.

He emphasizes the importance of embracing one's ancestors and the past in empowering African Americans and avoiding repeating one's history by examining their own individual histories-in-the-making. Wilson's connection to African-American culture and history is rooted in his formative influences, including playwright Amiri Baraka, collage artist Romare Bearden, Argentinean fabulist Jorge Luis Borges, and the Blues. Baraka's nationalist ideas, such as Black Power, influenced Wilson, who considered himself a Black Nationalist advocating for African Americans' autonomy and awareness of politics' impact on social standing. Both Wilson and Borges share a similar approach to storytelling, with Wilson sending characters on a quest to locate or lose a text, while

Borges often sends his characters on a road to find their identity. Wilson's plays heavily rely on the blues as a primary influence, emphasizing the importance of not forgetting one's song and how to sing it.

"Two Trains Running" delves into themes of race, community, and change in 1960s America. The characters grapple with issues of equality, gentrification, and the impact of progress on their lives. It's a thought-provoking piece that sheds light on the struggles of the time and the resilience of the human spirit.

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