REVOLUTION, REVELATION, CELEBRATION: ETHNIC IDENTITY IN THE PLAYS OF BARAKA, BULLINS, AND WILSON

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that this thesis submitted by Mr. Manoj Kumar Tula for the degree of Ph.D. in English is a bona fide record of the research work done by him under my supervision during his period of study at the University for the degree, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, or other similar title, and that it is his original work done independently. Such materials as have been obtained from other sources have been duly acknowledged in the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic identity has been historically an urgent issue of the African American people from the very beginning of their existence in America. Denied and misrepresented of their true identity as a respectable ethnic group with a distinctive culture and history, they have struggled to affirm their identity passively or aggressively. This historical struggle for identity reached its climax in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the rise of the Black Power Movement when they asserted aggressively, culturally as well as politically, their separate ethnic identity going as far as demanding a separate state for the African American people.

This thesis proposes to show how three playwrights have articulated this demand for the separate ethnic identity in three different ways representing the truth of this historical struggle. Amiri Baraka represented the militant voice of the Black Power Movement in his, what he called, "Revolutionary Theatre", in which he called for the destruction of the oppressor to set right the historical wrongs inflicted upon the black people. He sought to incite a revolution on the streets through his consciousness-raising agitprop drama as Malcolm X sought to do through his political orations. Ed Bullins represented the critical and introspective voice of the period in his, what he called, "Theatre of Reality", in which he committed himself to telling the truth of the black life like it was.

Turning away from the revolutionary politics and propaganda of the Black Power Movement, he chose to reveal the internal reality of the black life, particularly, the life of the people of the streets and slums, in the hope of awakening fresh insights into it. August Wilson, a self-proclaimed inheritor of the black cultural nationalism of the 1960s when the Black Power Movement itself had died, represents a cool and self-confident voice in his, what I describe as, "blues" drama, in which he celebrates the history and culture of the African American people. Avoiding the opposite extremes of the revolutionary propaganda of Baraka and the apolitical art of Bullins, he recreates and reaffirms the history and culture of the people in a twentieth century cycle of plays.

The thesis contains five chapters. The first chapter, which is an introductory chapter, titled, "Beyond the Pale: Ethnic Identity and the African American People", charts briefly the history of the struggle of the African American people for identity from the early days of slavery to the 1960s when the struggle reaches its highest point and states how the three playwrights reflect that historical struggle in their respective plays. The second chapter, titled, "Set it Right: The 'Revolutionary Theatre' of Amiri Baraka", analyzes eight of Baraka's revolutionary plays which he had written during the black nationalist phase of his life, to show his militant assertion of the ethnic identity. The third chapter, titled, "Tell it Like It is: The 'Theatre of Reality' of Ed Bullins", analyzes eight of Bullins's realistic plays, which he had written from 1965 to 1971, to show his introspective reflection of the ethnic identity. The fourth chapter, titled,

"Celebrate it: The 'Blues' Drama of August Wilson", analyzes five of Wilson's plays, which he had produced from 1984 to 1990, to show his glorification of the ethnic identity. The fifth chapter, which is the concluding chapter, titled, "Fenced in: Flaws in the Ethnocentric Plays of Baraka, Bullins, and Wilson", briefly points out the flaws committed as a result of the authors' subscriptions to specific agendas centred on ethnicity.

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CONTENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

BEYOND THE PALE: ETHNIC IDENTITY AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PEOPLE

From the hull of a ship to self-determining, self-respecting people. That is the journey we are making (August Wilson " The Ground on Which I Stand" 501).

W.E.B. DuBois says that the attitude of an oppressed people towards oppression takes three main forms, viz., a feeling of revolt and revenge, an attempt to adjust all thought and action to the will of the oppressor, and a determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite oppression. He then says that the African American people have displayed all these attitudes at different times in the long history of their oppression (636). Analogous to these attitudes to oppression, the identity of the oppressed people, in the face of its denial or distortion, is also asserted in similar ways reflecting that historical struggle against oppression. The first way is that of revolution, i.e., to inspire and motivate the oppressed to revolt and retaliate against the oppressor, the second way is that of introspection, i.e., to make the oppressed reflect upon the dreadful reality of their life, and

the third way is that of celebration, i.e., to invite the oppressed to celebrate the beauty and nobility of their life lived despite oppression. These three ways of asserting the identity of the African American people are represented by three African American playwrights, viz., Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and August Wilson, who have dealt with the issue of identity in the wake of the 1960s' Black Power Movement.

The issue of the identity of the African American people has always been urgent because it is integrally connected with the history of their oppression (enslavement and segregation). The African American people have been cast beyond the pale of human civilization and culture as they are exploited and oppressed by the white supremacist majority. Hence, before analyzing the ways of its assertion, it is necessary to understand the historical urgency of the issue of identity itself.

Ever since the day of their arrival in America, the African American people have had to struggle for freedom, civil rights, and, above all, their identity. Brought as slaves and treated as merchandize rather than as fellow human beings, they had to fight for freedom and dignity from day one. In the days of slavery for over two hundred years, they waged many revolts for freedom, only a few of which have been recorded in history. There must have been many revolts on the slave ships like the famous mutiny on the Amistad in 1839. Similarly, there must have been many revolts on the plantations like that led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vessey in

1822, and Nat Turner in 1831. The slave revolts, while they were basically for freedom, were also an expression of the African American people's racial and national solidarity.

Slavery had brought the African people of different tribes together obliterating their tribal differences and unifying them as a people of one race and nation living under the same circumstances of oppression. White racism still strengthened their racial and national solidarity and identity. One of the leaders in the failed slave revolt led by Gabriel Prosser is quoted to have "told the court that he had done for his people what George Washington had done for white America: 'I have ventured my life . . . to obtain the liberty of my countrymen' " (Dennis 79).

Besides violent revolts, free African Americans as well as slaves waged a peaceful struggle for freedom by legal means from early days on. From the 1830s to the 1850s, they had intensified their struggle by holding national conventions to protest against slavery. While these national conventions were basically for the abolition of slavery, they were also an expression of the national solidarity and identity. Sterling Stuckey, tracing the ideological origins of black nationalism, states that the "desire for autonomy" which was "surely as old as the 1600's, may well have crystallized into ideology some years before the violent -- but edifying — clash of arms [i.e., the Civil War of 1861-65]" (2).

Frustrated and despaired of ever finding real freedom and dignity in racist America, some African Americans desired to emigrate back to Africa from early days on. Many societies like the African Union Society of Rhode Island in 1787 were formed to promote repatriation to Africa. Besides emigration, some African Americans desired to establish a separate colony for themselves in the U.S. like the one in Nashoba, Tennessee, established in 1826. Thus, either through emigration or establishment of separate colonies, they expressed their desire to live separately and maintain their separate ethnic identity from early days on.

Slavery was abolished (Emancipation Proclamation, 1863) throughout America, including the South, where the majority of the African Americans were kept in slavery, but it did not bring real freedom and dignity to the African American people because of continuing racism and discrimination. The few civil rights promised in the Reconstruction Era were never seriously implemented. Hence, the African American people continued to struggle for their rights. Booker T. Washington, the first important leader to emerge after the Emancipation, called upon the African American people to uplift themselves economically through learning different trades. He founded the Tuskegee Institute (1881), which provided training in different trades. But, Washington advocated a policy of racial accommodation and called upon the African American people to give up their demands for political rights. His accommodationist policy was not acceptable to many African Americans,

one of whom was W.E.B. DuBois, who emerged as the most important leader in the 1900s and provided intellectual, cultural, and political leadership through the 1950s. DuBois emphasized upon political rights and fought for racial equality throughout his life. He founded the National Association for the Advancement of the Coloured People (1909), which led the struggle for equal rights. He organized the Pan-African Congresses to promote the idea of the racial unity of the African peoples throughout the world, continental as well as diasporic. He founded the newspaper, 'Crisis', which played a key role in the cultural awakening of the 1920s' Harlem Renaissance. He preached the idea of protest and propaganda in literature, which was so ardently followed in the 1960s' Black Arts Movement. Marcus Garvey, who was the first to organize a mass movement of the African American people, was also the first great champion of racial pride and unity. He founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (1916) with the objective of the general uplift of the black people of the world. His idea of "Back to Africa" provided the theme for the literatures of the Harlem Renaissance and, later, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. He also advocated the idea of "Africa for the Africans" and encouraged emigration back to Africa.

The 1920s saw the emergence of, what Alain Locke termed as, the "New Negro", and the cultural awakening and the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. The Northern migration of the African American

people from the South, in the wake of the failure of the Reconstruction and the growth of racial segregation (Jim Crow), contributed to the growth of this popular ethnic consciousness and the cultural awakening. The African American people expressed their pride in their racial identity as Africans. There was a growth of interest in the folklore, folk music, folk dance, folk language of the African American people. The literature of the 1920s and 1930s celebrated this new ethnic consciousness and sought thematic and stylistic inspiration from the African American folk tradition. One of the major writers of the Renaissance, Langston Hughes, besides portraying the African American life and culture, voiced protest against racism in his works. Richard Wright, who wrote in the 1940s through the early 1960s, carried on the protest tradition, which had been started right away by the Slave Narrative, to a great height. Both Hughes and Wright inspired the nationalist writers of the 1960s' Black Arts Movement.

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the growth of the Civil Rights Movement led by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who called for the end of racism through a non-violent means. He preached the ideas of racial equality and integration. But there was a growing dissatisfaction among many African American people with the non-violent struggle because of the violent opposition by racist whites. Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam gave voice to that growing dissatisfaction. He called for an armed resistance to racism. Rejecting the idea of racial integration as preached by King, he

called for a black self-pride and a separate identity. He preached the idea of "a nation within a nation" as propounded by the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad. Through his call for an armed resistance, self-pride, and separate national identity, Malcolm X gave birth to the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s.The Black Power Movement was a revolutionary nationalist movement with the objectives of self-respect, self-determination, and nationhood.

The Black Power Movement was not only a social and political movement, it was also a cultural movement. In fact, as a cultural nationalist movement, the Black Power Movement, even after its demise in the mid-1970s, has continued to live on in the minds of the African American people. Maulana Karenga, through his cultural organization, "US", propounded the idea of the black cultural nationalism. Emphasizing the African root of the black people, he popularized the philosophy and principles based on the African tradition and values like the Kawaida (theory of social change), the Nguzo Saba (seven principles for black life), and the Kwanzaa (African American holiday).

The writers of the 1960s joined in the nationalist struggle led by the Black Power Movement and gave birth to a similar movement in literature known as the Black Arts Movement. One of the theorists of the Black Aesthetic, Larry Neal, describing the Black Arts Movement as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept", stated, "The Black Arts and

the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood" (29). Maulana Karenga defined the characteristics of the Black Arts as collective, functional, and committed (33). In other words, the Black Arts works are for the black masses, they have a social function of inculcating values in the masses, and they are committed to the cause of the black revolution.

Three trends can be noticed in this nationalist movement. One is a passionate, chauvinistic, and unquestioned commitment to the movement, which sees the destruction of the oppressor as the one and only means of achieving nationhood. The second is a self-critical withdrawal from the movement, which believes that only the knowledge of one's own society (or, nation) can bring about a true nationhood. The third trend avoids these two opposite extremes and expresses its faith in and celebrates its own nation even as it believes in struggle against the enemy and self-knowledge and self-search as the means of achieving nationhood. These three trends are represented by the three playwrights considered in this thesis, two of whom, Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins, wrote their nationalistic plays during the Black Arts Movement while the third, August Wilson, has come into prominence with the production of his plays since the mid-1980s.

Amiri Baraka, then LeRoi Jones, is acclaimed as the founder of the Black Arts Movement. It was his drama and his Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem, New York, which started off the movement

(Bigsby 207). Baraka, who was a middle class integrated Beat poet who lived with a white wife in Greenwich Village, New York, became a fanatic black nationalist after an eye-opening visit to the Communist Cuba and the shocking assassination of Malcolm X. Baraka, who had believed in an apolitical art and the sanctity of word, distrusted both and committed himself head over heels to politics and action. Parallel to the Black Power Movement, he started the Black Arts Movement writing his "revolutionary" drama dedicated to the cause of the black revolution. He sought to incite a revolution on the streets through his consciousness-raising agitprop drama as Malcolm X sought to do through his political orations. He indeed became, as one critic put it, the Malcolm X of literature. This thesis analyzes eight of his major revolutionary plays which he wrote during his black nationalistic career in the 1960s and early 1970s when he believed, at least metaphorically, that the black man would achieve his nationhood only through the destruction of the white enemy.

A contemporary and an admirer of Baraka, Ed Bullins professed commitment to and even shortly worked for the black revolution. But, at heart, he was an artist who distrusted politics, particularly, of the fanatical sort to which Baraka was so blindly committed. So, he not only turned away from the black revolutionary politics and propaganda, he satirized it in some of his plays. On the other hand, he turned his focus on the internal reality of black life, the life of the people of the streets and slums, and told their story

like it was in the hope of awakening fresh insights into that dreadful reality. This thesis analyzes eight of his major realistic plays written between 1965 and 1971 in which he elevates the social outcasts to the status of literary subjects, which was unprecedented and a major achievement in itself.

The Black Power Movement came to an end in the mid-1970s and its foremost exponent, Baraka, gave up the ideology of black nationalism and has turned to Marxism since 1974. In such circumstances, August Wilson, producing his major plays since the mid-1980s, proclaims himself an admirer of Baraka and inheritor of the black cultural nationalism of the 1960s. But he is not political like Baraka who wrote revolutionary plays advocating the death of the whitey. He is also not apolitical like Bullins who avoided entirely the question of nationalism in his realistic plays. On the other hand, he affirms and celebrates the history and culture of the African American people and thus asserts their separate cultural identity. Like the blues, which has awakened him to his history and culture, he tells the story of the African American people portraying their culture with all its values, customs, and traditions emerging from the roots of Africa and the plantations of the South. He seeks to recreate the entire history of the African American people in a cycle of plays each set in each decade of the twentieth century. This thesis analyzes five of his plays, which he produced between 1984 and 1990.

While analyzing the selected plays of the playwrights in order to show their respective ways of asserting the separate identity of the African American people in the three main chapters, this thesis also seeks to point out the limitations of their presentations in a brief concluding chapter. Baraka, in his blind commitment to the black revolution, eschews analysis of the race relations and creates one-dimensional characters, or, stereotypes of the black man as a victim and a revolutionary. While Bullins seeks to mirror the reality of the black life on the streets and slums, he touches only the surface and lacks analysis and presents only one-dimensional characters and, thus, unconsciously reinforces the stereotype of the black man as a carefree, un-self-conscious, and self- annihilating person. Pursuing the project of writing the history of the African American people in a twentieth century cycle of plays, Wilson's otherwise admirable art suffers sometimes from repetition and didacticism in his later plays.

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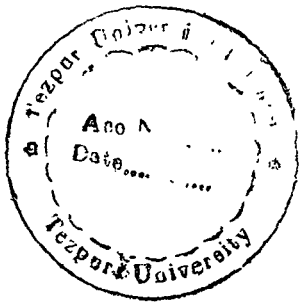

CHAPTER TWO

SET IT RIGHT: THE "REVOLUTIONARY THEATRE" OF AMIRI BARAKA

The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality (Baraka "The Revolutionary Theatre" 211).

Baraka asserted the ethnic identity of the African American people by giving a call for a separate black nation as advocated by the leaders of the Black Power Movement. He represented the militancy and revolutionary fervour of the Black Power Movement in drama. He wrote, what he called, "revolutionary" drama propagating the message of the black revolution. He believed that only the destruction of the white enemy would set things right for the establishment of a separate black nation. Hence, he called for the destruction of the whites in his drama. "The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF [WHITE] AMERICA", he declared in his essay, 'The Revolutionary Theatre' (215).

Baraka's militancy and revolutionary fervour for black nationalism can be understood if we look at his early life as an integrated middle class intellectual and poet. His "revolutionary" drama, which he wrote between

1964 and 1973, can be read as an act of exorcism of a personal guilt, which he felt for that early life.

In his autobiography, 'The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka' (1984), Baraka describes the African American people in terms of colour — black, brown, and yellow — that reflect their social attitudes. "The black was fundamental black life, the life of blues people, the real and the solid and the strong and the beautiful" (42). "The brown was my family and me, half real and half lodged in dream and shadow" (43). "The yellow, the artificial, the well-to-do, the middle class really" (43). His transformation into a black nationalist was a transformation from being a brown to becoming a black person.

Amiri Baraka was born as Everett LeRoy Jones, later shortened to LeRoi Jones, into a "brown", i.e., lower middle class, family in 1934 in Newark, New Jersey. His ambitious parents sent him to predominantly white schools and college in Newark to receive a good education and become a successful middle class man in life. In his autobiography, Baraka describes the internal tension he felt in these schools and college and the homeliness on the streets where black people lived.

After school and college in Newark, he went to Howard University, Washington, D.C., a historically black university. Despite being a black university, he describes his experience there as "a continuation of the old black brown yellow white phenomenon" (The Autobiography of LeRoi

Jones/Amiri Baraka 66). He describes Howard University as a school where "We were not taught to think but were merely prepared for superdomestic service [i.e., middle class jobs]" (The Autobiography of . . . 93). He flunked at Howard and went back home. He then joined the Air Force, which he describes as the "Error Farce" (The Autobiography of . . . 94). He was discharged from the Air Force because of his alleged Communist alliances. But at the Air Force, he discovered the "absolute joy of learning" which he had not found in the artificial surrounding of Howard University (The Autobiography of . . . 104). He read voraciously but his "reading was, in the main, white people. Europeans, Anglo-Americans" (The Autobiography of . . . 120). "I was being drafted into the world of Quattrocento, vers libre, avant garde, surrealism and dada, New Criticism, cubism, art nouve, objectivism, 'Prufrock', ambiguity, art music, rococo, shoe and non-shoe, Highbrow vs. lowbrow, . . ." (The Autobiography of . . . 125).

It was that wide reading and his fascination with intellectualism that led him to Greenwich Village in New York to live and work among the artists and intellectuals. "The idea that the Village was where Art was being created, where there was a high level of intellectual seriousness, was what I thought" (The Autobiography of . . . 127). He befriended the Bohemians, the Beats, and the Black Mountain School of poets, who were almost all whites. He wrote poems seeking the spiritual fulfillment of self. He edited avant garde poetry magazines. He married a white woman and had two daughters

by her. Thus, he lived a totally integrated intellectual artistic life in which race was just not relevant. He wrote in a poem:

> " . . . Africa
> is a foreign place. You are
> as any other sad man here
> american" ("Notes for a Speech" 15).

His intellectual artistic stance received a severe jolt on a visit to the revolutionary Cuba in 1960 where he met revolutionary artists and intellectuals who were activists. His high aesthetic disapproval of politics was ridiculed by them. One young Mexican poet, calling him a "cowardly bourgeois individualist", said to him, "You want to cultivate your soul? In that ugliness you live in, you want to cultivate your soul? Well, we've got millions of starving people to feed, and that moves me enough to make poems out of" ("Cuba Libre" 42-43). At the end of the visit, he realized the futility of his Bohemian life and art. "The [Bohemian] rebels among us have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics" ("Cuba Libre" 61).

The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement of the 1960s drew him into the middle of the politics of race. From being a raceless apolitical individualist poet he swiftly changed himself into a race-conscious

activist writer. He joined various groups involved in the black liberation struggle. He frequently visited Harlem, the black quarters of New York. His genre changed from poetry to drama as he became a nationalist. He produced his two famous plays, 'Dutchman' and 'The Slave', in 1964, which marked his transformation into a black nationalist. He founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem in 1964, which started off the Black Arts Movement. Finally, the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 made him a complete black nationalist, complete in the sense that he left Greenwich Village and his white wife and two daughters for ever and came uptown to Harlem. He describes his journey to Harlem as a return of the native to his home:

> The middle class native intellectual, having outintegrated the most integrated, now plunges headlong back into what he perceives as blackest, nativest. Having dug, finally, how white he has become, now, classically, comes back to his countrymen charged up with the desire to be black, uphold black &c. . . a fanatical patriot ! (The Autobiography of . . . 202).

The internal fighting and Baraka's lack of administrative skill made Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School close down after a short time and Baraka returned to his hometown of Newark, New Jersey. He describes his

journey back to his hometown, Newark, as the return of a prodigal son to his home:

> And so the journey that I made, which can be characterized as the 'prodigal's trip', only to be summoned. . . Summoned where? Why, home, emotionally, intellectually, and in some cases physically and geographically. And whom do you meet? Your brothers and sisters, the other parts of yourself. The people who be home! (The Autobiography of . . . 242).

He met his second wife, Amina Baraka (formerly, Sylvia Jones), and with her set up the Spirit House, which was intended to continue the work of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School at a higher level of consciousness. "I had named the building the Spirit House, trying to raise up to another level the idea of what soul was to black people. The Spirit House was a place to raise the soul, to raise the consciousness. It was to be another edition of the Black Arts" (The Autobiography of . . . 241).

He came under the influence of the black cultural nationalist, Maulana Karenga. He subscribed to his Afrocentric doctrine of Kawaida (theory of social change) and Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles/A Black value System). With his persuasion, he converted to Islam and changed his name to the Africanized Islamic name, Imamu Ameer Baraka, later shortened to Amiri

Baraka. As an activist, he participated in the Black Power conferences and the Black Convention movements. Believing in actual power, he formed the organization, Committee for Unified Newark, to mobilize the black people of Newark to attain political power and helped elect the first black mayor in the city.

But, after becoming a fanatical black nationalist, he realized the narrowness of his nationalist vision. He analyzed the economics of the social situation that determined the structure of the society. He understood that the real problem was the economic system, Capitalism, not racism. He then changed his view to Communism and declared himself a Communist (Marx-Lenin-Mao Tse Tung) in 1974.

This thesis deals with Baraka's black nationalist phase and hence proposes to analyze the major plays he produced between 1964 and 1970 in order to show his way of asserting the ethnic identity of the African American people. Committed to the cause of the black revolution, Baraka saw drama as an appropriate genre to spread the message of revolution. He says, "I can now see that the dramatic form began to interest me because I wanted some kind of action literature, where one has to put characters upon a stage and make them living metaphors. Drama proliferates during periods of social upsurge, because it makes real live people the fuel of ideas" (The Autobiography of . . . 187). He created, what he called, the "revolutionary" drama, i.e., drama committed to the cause of the black revolution. He said,

"The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 211). That is to say, the revolutionary drama must present the dream of a black nation as a reality on stage so that the audience was moved to act in real life to build the black nation.

Baraka's revolutionary drama was agitprop and its aim was to agitate/incite the audience to act in real life to make the black nation a reality. He said, " . . . what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-Revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 213). He said, his revolutionary drama would "Accuse and Attack" and show the destruction of the oppressor on stage. "The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 215).

Baraka's revolutionary drama was not only a drama of revenge but also a drama of righteousness. That is to say, he not only showed the destruction of the white enemy but also the righteous punishment of the evil black brothers and sisters, like the junkies and whores, who were detrimental to the black nation. There are two exceptions though, 'Madheart' and 'Great goodness of Life', in which he showed a willingness to help his own people to get over their weaknesses.

Baraka's revolutionary drama was a drama for the black mass audience whose consciousness he sought to raise in order to build the black nation. Hence, he wrote short and simple plays to make the message easy for the audience to understand. He presented the racial situation as a clear conflict between the blacks and the whites in which the blacks were the victims and the whites the oppressors. He also expanded the racial conflict into a greater conflict of values and cultures: a conflict between good and evil, between body and soul, between materialism and spiritualism, in which the black man was good and represented the soul and spiritual values whereas the white man was evil and represented the physical/sensual and material values. Hence, he portrayed the black and white characters as large symbols and their conflict as an allegorical plot.

Aiming to raise the consciousness of the mass audience, Baraka not only made the plays simpler but more emotional. That is, he reduced the intellectual word-play, or, dialogue, to a minimum and used more non-verbal means of communication like sight, sound, and smell to create a stronger emotional impact upon the audience to move and persuade it to act in actual situations in the world.

Dutchman (1964) is the first revolutionary play of Baraka in which he seeks to raise the consciousness of the black people by showing the black man as a victim in spite of the fact that he has the revolutionary potential,

because he refuses to act on it and diffuses it instead in words. The message of the play is that the black people must act or they will be destroyed by their enemy, the white America.

Baraka gives this message by presenting an encounter between a middle class black man and a racist maniac. The black man has tried to integrate with white America suppressing his black self, but racist America will not accept him as its equal citizen. Hence, the implied message is that the black man must not try to integrate with white America, which is not possible, not even desirable, but assert his true self, his separate black identity, by taking up arms against racist America.

The title and the setting of the play signify the problematical situation of the black man. Dutchman recalls the legendary slave ship, the Flying Dutchman. The subway, "the flying underbelly of the city" (3), suggests the hold of the slave ship in which the African slaves were transported to America. Thus, they signify that the black man is virtually a slave in America even today because of racism. Hence, the need for a revolution to end racism is more urgent.

Clay is a college educated young man. He has poetic ambitions. In college, he had thought himself to be a Baudelaire (19). He speaks an artificial language typical of the college educated middle class black people. He wears a "three-button suit and striped tie" (18) even though it is "Steaming hot" (3). He has a magazine in his hand and is on his way to his

friend's party. Thus, in education, manners, and habits, Clay has imitated the white man and tried to become like him. In the process, he has suppressed his black self, which is, significantly, full of hatred and rage against the white racists. But, his dream of integration is shattered when he meets, in a chance encounter, a racist maniac.

Lula represents white America. White America treats the black man either as a clown (Uncle Tom) or a criminal, a murderer, and thus ridicules him or kills him. It does not see him as a fellow human being who has honest feelings of anger and outrage against racial injustice.

Lula is a racist maniac who is on a mission to kill young black men. She prowls the subway and seduces and preys upon them. As soon as she sees Clay, she takes him for "a well-known type" and chooses him for her victim (12). She approaches him with the prejudice that he will be sexually attracted towards her. So, she engages with him in a dirty sex-talk. But, her real intention is not to indulge in sex with him, but to humiliate and kill him. So, from the beginning, even as she engages in sex-talk, she taunts him with racist remarks. She makes smart guesses about him being from New Jersey, about his family, about his college and poetic ambitions, and his present journey to his friend's party. She then ridicules him for imitating the white man: "What've you got the jacket and tie on in all this heat for? . . . Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by" (18). When Clay innocently says that, in college, he had

thought himself to be a Baudelaire, she throws this remark at him, "I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger" (19). She mocks at his middle-class aspiring parents who vote "for the man rather than the party" (20).

Finally, she asks Clay to forget his middle class respectability and dance with her the nasty belly-rub. When Clay refuses to join her, she throws these blunt racist remarks at him accusing him and the black man in general of imitation and cowardice, "Come on Clay . . . let's do the thing. Uhh! Uhh! Clay! Clay! You middle class black bastard. Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds and let's knock stomachs. Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man" (31). Describing Clay as an Uncle Tom, she says about the black man in general: "There is Uncle Tom . . . I mean, Uncle Thomas Woolly-Head. With old white matted mane. He hobbles on his wooden cane. Old Tom. Old Tom. Let the white man hump his ol' mama, he jes' shuffle off in the woods and hide his gentle gray head. Ol' Thomas Woolly-Head" (32). Finally, she advises him to stop being submissive and act like a man: "Clay Clay, you got to break out. Don't sit there dying the way they want you to die. Get up" (31).

Clay is a thoroughly well-bred middle class black man. So, initially, he does not take Lula's casual racist remarks seriously. He takes her conversation as "pure sex-talk", meant for a momentary pleasure to last till the journey's end (8). But, when Lula mounts a sustained racist attack upon

him and the black man in general and even presumes to give him advice as to what he should do, he is finally stung to the core. He drops his mask of a contented black man (Uncle Tom) and speaks out his heart. He stops Lula violently from talking and makes her listen to him. He tells her that she does not know the black man because she cannot see what's lying beneath the surface, and the surface is only "An act. Lies. Device" (34). Beneath the surface lies "the pure heart, the pumping black heart" which is full of murderous thoughts against the white man (34). The black poet or singer conceals his "black heart" and writes or sings in metaphor and the white man does not understand its significance. He believes that the black poet or singer should stop writing or singing and do the act, i.e., murder the white man: "If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors. No grunts" (35).

But being a thoroughbred middle class intellectual, he still believes in words, not act. So, he says, "But who needs it [i.e., sanity through act or murder]? I'd rather be a fool. Insane. Safe with words, and no deaths, and clean hard thoughts, urging me to new conquests" (35).

Clay refuses to act, but Lula understands the dangerous potential of this would-be revolutionary. She has always considered him to be a murderer, a criminal, though not a revolutionary. So, she has every reason to kill him before he kills her. Anyway, Clay has refused to act. But, Lula, i.e., white

America, has always been the aggressor, the enemy, hence, she kills him. Through the murder of Clay, Baraka warns his black audience that a similar fate awaits them if they refuse to act against the enemy.

Baraka wrote, "The Revolutionary Theatre, which is now peopled with victims, will soon begin to be peopled with new kinds of heroes -- not the weak Hamlets debating whether or not they are ready to die for what's on their minds, but men and women (and minds) digging out from under a thousand years of 'high art' and weak-faced dalliance" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 214-215). After showing the black man as a victim in 'Dutchman', who believed in word/art and refused to act, Baraka would go on and show him in his next play as a hero, who abandons the word/art and plunges himself headlong into action. But, the problem in this play is that, even as he shows the black man as a hero, he shows the action itself as of dubious value.

The Slave (1964) is the second revolutionary play that Baraka produced in the same year as 'Dutchman'. Although Baraka subtitles the play as a fable, the message of the play is not simple and straightforward but self-contradictory and confusing. The protagonist of the play, Walker, has become a revolutionary but, for him, revolution is nothing but retaliation and ultimately self-destructive. Hence, as a revolutionary play, intended to raise the consciousness of the mass audience, the play can be seen as a failure.

The self-contradictory message is given right in the portrait of Walker, the revolutionary leader. Walker is presented as a field slave who speaks the Prologue before the beginning of the play and becomes a field slave again in the end of the play. Again, the Prologue the field slave speaks is self-contradictory. The Prologue is too intellectual and abstract for a field slave. Besides, the Prologue is only seemingly profound, but actually lacks meaning and substance. Baraka perhaps intends to say through the Prologue that words are meaningless and ineffective in the real world of action. But, having said that, he also shows in the body of the play that actions are also equally meaningless ultimately as they are destructive, both to self and to others.

'The Slave' is both complementary and contrasting to 'Dutchman'. It is complementary in the sense that the black man, who was an intellectual, assimilationist, and a victim in 'Dutchman', becomes an activist (revolutionary), a separatist, and a hero in 'The Slave'. It is contrasting in the sense that the black man who was a victim in 'Dutchman' becomes a victimizer in 'The Slave'.

Walker, like Clay in 'Dutchman', was a middle class intellectual poet and an assimilationist. Then he realized the futility of words. But, unlike Clay, who too knew the futility of words but still sought safety or refuge in them, Walker leaves the word for the act and becomes a revolutionary. But, having become a revolutionary and started a race war, he realizes the futility of the

act also. But, even after realizing this, he justifies the revolution just for the sake of retaliation.

Walker tells his former teacher, Prof. Easley, about the futility of words, or, liberalism, in which he had believed, "You never did anything concrete to avoid what's going on now. Your sick liberal lip service to whatever was the least filth. Your high aesthetic disapproval of the political . . . " (74). So, he could not continue to be a liberal and be a mere social critic. He wanted to act because action alone had meaning in the world: "And I couldn't be merely a journalist . . . a social critic. No social protest . . . right is in the act. And the act itself has some place in the world . . . it makes some place for itself . . . " (75).

But, having chosen to act, he realizes that action also does not really change the social situation, it merely reverses the respective positions of the victim and the oppressor: "I know that this is at best a war that will only change, ha, the complexion of tyranny" (66). But even after realizing this, he justifies revolution for the sake of retaliation itself: "What does it matter if there's more love or beauty? Who the fuck cares? Is that what the western ofay thought while he was ruling . . . that his rule somehow brought more love and beauty into the world? . . . The point is that you had your chance, darling, now these other folks have theirs" (73). He justifies revolution even though it has made him a murderer, a human being without soul or heart: "I have killed for all times any creative impulse I will ever have by the

depravity of my murderous philosophies . . . despite the fact that I am being killed in my head each day and by now have no soul or heart or warmth . . . " (66).

That he now has no soul or heart, Walker shows by visiting the house of his former white wife, in the middle of the war he is leading, and killing or helping to kill the whole family, i.e., his own daughters by his former wife, her white husband, and his former wife who is killed when a shell lands on the house. One would think, if he, too, had been killed in the explosion, his revolution would have been completely justified. But Walker survives the explosion and walks out of the house as a field slave again. The fact that he becomes a field slave again suggests that he remains a slave to his murderous philosophy, which he calls revolution.

The pictures of the revolution and the revolutionary hero that Baraka presents in this play are negative and discouraging to his audience whose consciousness he wanted to raise. Hence, he needed to present positive and inspiring pictures of them in order to motivate the audience towards the revolution.

In 'Dutchman', Baraka presented the black man as a victim because he refused to act. In 'The Slave', he presented the black man as a revolutionary but he did not believe in the revolution even as he led it. But, henceforward, he would not allow any withdrawal from or doubts about the revolution and

present the black man as a revolutionary, who believed in the revolution and worked for it with a single-minded devotion and purpose.

In the introduction to the 'Four Black Revolutionary Plays', Baraka writes for the black readers that he has nothing to say that they do not already know. What he means by this is that there is only one thing for them to know that the white people are their oppressors and they ought to kill them. That's why he warns them, "Unless you killing white people, killing the shit they've built, don't read this shit, you won't like it, and it sure won't like you" (vii). He then writes about the plays,

> this is an introduction to a book of plays
> i am prophesying the death of white people in this land
> i am prophesying the triumph of black life in this land,
> and over all the world
> we are building publishing houses, and newspapers, and
> armies, and factories
> we will change the world before your eyes, (vii-viii).

In the following plays, Baraka shows impatience and intolerance for the black people who are a threat to the revolution in any way as well as extreme hatred for the white people. These plays are plays of revenge and righteous action. For the purpose of clear and easy instruction, he makes the plays

even shorter and simpler: "NOT MORE DIFFICULT . . . BROTHER JONES!!!, but simpler, faster, stronger, harder, more humbling, more uplifting" ("Black [Art] Drama is the Same as Black Life" 82). And he presents characters, which are bold caricatures, and situations, which are fantastic.

Experimental Death Unit #1 (1965), as the title suggests, demonstrates the righteous act of cleansing the black community of the white enemy and its black collaborator by a death unit of the black revolutionary army. Baraka hated the liberal intellectuals, hence, he presented them as disgusting creatures and showed their executions in this play. The two white men are theatre-of-the-absurd type characters or caricatures who mouth clichés about time, art, beauty, knowledge, etc., without communicating any meaning. They are Bohemian type artists or intellectuals high on drugs and have perverted sexual desires. As soon as they see a black whore, they are excited and fight each other to get her. The black whore also mouths clichés about soul, spirit, God, etc.. One of the white men beats the other unconscious and engages in sex with the whore. Just then a death unit of the black revolutionary army marches in. The commander of the unit orders his soldiers to shoot the white men and the black whore. Then the soldiers chop off the heads of the white men and fix them on the pikes and march off. As

they march off, one of the soldiers tries to play the dozens with another. But, he sternly warns him against that.

Thus, through the righteous punishment of the white enemy and its black collaborator and the stern warning against the dozens, Baraka demonstrates to the audience the serious business of the revolution and the building of the black nation.

In **A Black Mass** (1966) Baraka uses the Nation of Islam myth of the creation of the white man and shows the opposite values of the black and white races and the need to destroy the white race in order to protect and preserve the black race. Through this myth, he reverses the racist prejudices of the white man about the black race and intends to arouse intense contempt against the white race and its values. He presents the white man as a beast, a dirty and disgusting creature, a creature without soul or heart, without any human feeling of love or compassion. He describes the white civilization as cold and inhuman.

Baraka sets the play at the early stage of the earth's creation when the only inhabitants were the black people. They were good, wise, and happy. But, one of the magicians or scientists, Jacoub, is engaged in anti-human experiments, which will destroy the beautiful and happy world. Jacoub is the caricature of a western scientist who is ever curious and pursues knowledge for its own sake. He seeks "knowledge that is beyond the human mind" (26)

and believes that "creation is its own end" (24). Hence, he creates things that are anti-human. He has already created time in the world where there is no need for it. Another magician, Nasafi, is now preparing a black mass to destroy time. He has prepared a potion, "All those who taste it will dance mad rhythms of the eternal universe until time is a weak thing" and "Until time, that white madness, disappears" (22).

After creating time, Jacoùb now intends to create a "being in love with time" (27). The fellow magicians warn him that "time is an animal thing" and "It turns us into running animals" (23). They tell him that what he is indulging in is "a magic against humanity" (27). But Jacoùb goes ahead with his curious experiment and creates a creature, which is the complete opposite of humanity. It is "absolutely cold white" and a beast with a lizard head and a lizard spine cape (30). It is disgustingly dirty, makes "horrible farting sound with his mouth" and vomits and licks it up (30). It cannot speak except the words, "I white. White. White. White" (30). It makes obscene gestures and attacks women. It has no soul or heart. "IT HAS NO REGARD FOR HUMAN LIFE!" (31).

The white beast reproduces itself asexually by merely touching the others. When it attacks one of the women, she is transformed into a white creature like itself. She also behaves in the same manner uttering only the words "White! White! White!" (33). The fellow magicians cast a spell on the white beasts and make them immobile. They ask Jacoub to cast them into the

cold regions of the world. But Jacoub wants to teach the beasts. They warn him that the white beast cannot be taught. It is absolutely anti-human, void of reason, compassion, thought, and feeling. But, Jacoub insists and releases them from the magic spell. As soon as they are released, they attack the magicians and the women killing them instantly. Then they leap into the audience "kissing and licking people" and screaming "White! . . . White! Me . . . Me . . . Me . . . White!" (39).

Baraka instructs the audience through the voice of the narrator about the urgent need to kill the white beast: "And so Brothers and Sisters, these beasts are still loose in the world. Still they spit their hideous cries. There are beasts in our world. Let us find them and slay them. Let us lock them in their caves. Let us declare the Holy War. The Jihad. Or we cannot deserve to live" (39).

Baraka wrote, "The teaching of Black History would put our people absolutely in touch with themselves as a nation" (Raise Race Rays Raze 47). In the same essay, he also wrote, "It is easier to get people into a consciousness of black power, what it is, by emotional example than through a dialectical lecture" (46). Baraka tried to do exactly this in his next revolutionary play, **Slave Ship** (1967), produced in the same year as he wrote that essay. He wrote, what he called, "A Historical Pageant" (the subtitle of the play), in which he recreated the entire history of the black

people, from their African root to the 1960s, when the Black Power Movement had been launched, using sound, smell, and light and darkness, but little or no dialogue. The play is a theatrical tour de force intended to move and involve the audience emotionally.

In the play, Baraka makes a strong statement against non-violence and integration as preached by the Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. and pleads strongly for an armed rebellion, a black revolution, as advocated by the Black Power leaders. He argues the case for revolution by showing the people's resistance to oppression as a continuous process beginning on the slave ship itself.

Baraka sets the play on a slave ship implying that the black people are still slaves in America. He presents the entire action on the slave ship, viz., the experience of the Middle Passage, which is conveyed throughout from the beginning till the end, the shuffling dance of the plantation slave (Uncle Tom), the slave revolt and its break-up, the preaching of the non-violent preacher (Rev. King), and the armed rising of the black people (the Black Power revolt).

Baraka creates the entire history mentioned above keeping the stage mostly in darkness, using light only occasionally, through voices, sound, music, and smells. He conveys the sense of the slave ship through the sound of the slave ship "groaning, squeaking, rocking", "Sea smells", bells, and the voices of the captain and the sailor (132). He conveys the experience of the

Middle Passage through the "slash and tear of the lash", chains, cries and screams of women and children, and stifling smells of "Pee. Shit. Death" (132). He emphasizes the point of resistance as he conveys the experience of the Middle Passage. Men and women pray to their gods for deliverance from captivity. Men pray to gods asking for strength to fight the white captors. Some men get angry and curse their gods for forsaking them. A woman kills her child and herself to end their captivity. The African drum is played throughout in the background to signify the continuous voice of resistance. Baraka also shows the degrading behaviour of some men in the trying circumstances. A man tries to rape a woman in the darkness.

Baraka shows the Uncle Tom slave who betrayed his own community. He shows a shuffling slave dancing happily for his master. He shows the planning of the slave revolt by preacher Nat Turner. The Uncle Tom slave leaks this secret to his boss for "an extra chop" (139). He shows the break-up of the slave revolt through the sound of the gun-shots. He then conveys the constant fear of the plantation slaves of separation from family members through slave sales.

Baraka then shows the Uncle Tom preacher (Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.) preaching non-violence and integration. As he preaches, a black man brings the dead body of a child killed in a church bombing (cf. Birmingham church bombing). But the preacher ignores him and pushes the boy's dead body away and pleads with the white master for integration. He then shows

the rising of the black men and women up in arms against the non-violent preacher and his white master. The men and women sing the song of revolution and liberation:

> Rise, Rise, Rise
> Cut these ties, Black Men Rise
> We gon' be thing we are . . . (143)

The saxophone and the African drums are played in the background to signify the spirit of resistance continued from the past. They march towards the preacher and the white man singing and dancing. They kill the preacher and the white man. Baraka makes the audience participate in the singing and dancing. When the singing and dancing turns into an "actual party", the head of the Preacher is thrown into the center signifying the contempt and total rejection of the philosophy of non-violence and integration.

In **Madheart** (1967), which he subtitles as a morality play, Baraka presents a ritual scene of the killing of the white devil, the exorcism of the black sinners, and the reunion of the black man and woman. The symbolic significance of this ritual is that the white enemy and his culture need to be destroyed, the black imitators of that culture need to be exorcised of their sinful imitation, and the black man and woman need to be reunited in the

struggle against the white enemy. Baraka reinforces his message through the use of music, African as well as black American, background voices, and direct authorial comments in the play. He presents caricature images of the white race and the black imitators.

That the white culture needs to be destroyed suggests the fact that the black people, men as well as women, have a strong attraction for it. Baraka suggests the strong attraction of the white culture for the black man by representing the white culture as a white woman implying the fact that the black man has a strong attraction for the white woman. For the same reason, he also portrays the white woman as a devil (the Devil Lady) to arouse hatred and contempt so that the black man turns away from her.

The fact that the Black Man struggles to kill the Devil Lady suggests the difficulty of the black man to turn away from the white woman. The white woman knows it, that's why she says, "You need pain . . . You need pain, ol' nigger devil, pure pain, to clarify your desire" (69). The Black Man also admits this, "You will die only when I kill you" (70). The strong attraction of the black man for the white woman is also suggested through the emphasis on her sexuality. The Devil Lady says, "My pussy rules the world through the newspapers. My pussy radiates the great heat" (70). "My pussy throbs above the oceans, forcing weather into the world" (72). This is the reason why the Black Man sticks his spear or arrows not only on her heart but also on her "hole" (71).

The Black Man can turn away completely from the white woman only when he finds his black woman. The Black Woman knows it and, therefore, comes to him and presents her beautiful black self to him: "I am black black and am the most beautiful thing on the planet. Touch me if you dare. I am your soul" (74). "Is there a heart bigger than mine? Is there any flesh sweeter, any lips fatter and redder, any thighs more full of orgasms?" (75). She appeals to him to get her back and warns him that he must not surrender his manhood to the white woman: "Now you must discover a way to get me back, Black Man. You and you alone, must get me. Or you'll never . . . lord . . . be a man. My man. Never know your own life needs. You'll walk around white ladies breathing their stink, and lose your seed, your future to them" (81).

The black man, killing off completely all vestiges of his desire for the white woman, turns towards the black woman and discovers his true woman. But, before he accepts her, he, as a black nationalist, must subdue the black woman. In the black nation, the nationalists believed, the woman's position is subordinate to the man. So, he asks the black woman to submit to him, "I want you, woman, as a woman. Go down. (He slaps again) Go down, submit, submit . . . to love . . . and to man, now, now forever" (81). He vows to protect her now unlike in the past when he could not do it because of the white man's cruelties upon both of them:

BLACK WOMAN: I've seen you humbled, black man, seen you crawl for dogs and devils.

BLACK MAN: And I've seen you raped by savages and beasts, and bear bleach shit children of apes.

BLACK WOMAN: You permitted it . . . you . . . could . . . do nothing.

BLACK MAN: But now I can. (He slaps her, drags her to him, kissing her deeply on the lips) That shit is ended, woman, you with me, and the world is mine (82).

The Black man's Mother and Sister are too deeply attracted to the white culture. They want to become white. That's why they want to stop the Black Man from killing the Devil Lady. They argue and fight with him to stop him: "She [the Devil Lady] is old and knows. Her wisdom inherits the earth", the Sister says (71). She is the "light and promise", the Mother says (72). The Black Man is bewildered by their behaviour. He becomes desperate and says, "This is the nightmare in all of our hearts. Our mothers and sisters groveling to white women, wanting to be white women, dead and hardly breathing on the floor. Look at our women dirtying themselves" (76).

But, unlike the commander of the death unit of the black revolutionary army in 'Experimental Death Unit #1', he wants to help his Mother and Sister get over their weaknesses. He says he would try every means to make them get over their baseness. He would try to instruct them: "I should turn

them over to the Black Arts and get their heads relined" (77). He even tries to wake them up from their deep stupidity by turning the firehose upon them. When he still fails to get them back, he seeks the help of the black people: "They're my flesh. I'll do what I can. (Looks at her) We'll both try. All of us, black people" (87).

In **Great Goodness of Life** (1967), Baraka employs the form of satire not only to ridicule but severely condemn the black middle class to which his family belonged. Significantly, he dedicates the play to his father "with love and respect" (41). But, in the portrayal of the central character, Court Royal, who is presumably the caricature of his father, he shows no love or respect. He accuses the black middle class of self-gratification, self-debasement, and betrayal to the black community. He says that through the pursuit of self-gratification, which it believes to be the great goodness of life, the black middle class submits itself to the white power structure and betrays its own community. Thus, it remains always a slave (a "coon") and never becomes a man.

As in his other revolutionary plays, Baraka uses bold characterization, crude symbolism, theatrical devices of light and sound and visuals to get across his message to the mass audience. He sets the play outside an old log cabin, which signifies the real status of Court Royal, i.e., a field slave, in spite of being a postal worker (which Baraka's father actually was). The

story of the play is that Court Royal is being tried for harbouring a murderer. But there is no proper court or a proper trial for him. He is tried in front of his log cabin, in darkness, alone, by an invisible voice, and none of his pleas is heard. He is simply required to submit to the judgment whatever it is. The symbolic significance of this is that the black middle class has no right or dignity, in fact, no manhood, in the eyes of the white power structure, which wields its tremendous power invisibly like a spirit.

When charged by the Voice, Court Royal defends himself repeatedly as a good middle class man: "I have done no such thing. I work in the Post Office. I'm Court Royal. I've done nothing wrong. I work in the Post Office and have done nothing wrong" (46). But his pleas won't be heard. A mock-trial is conducted. He is assigned an attorney. His request to call his own attorney is not heeded. Significantly, his own attorney, his friend, John Breck, is appointed by the court. Like Court Royal, Attorney Breck is also black middle class, so Baraka portrays him as a house slave. His lack of manliness is suggested through his presentation as an automaton programmed by the white operator. He has a wire attached to his back and a huge key in the side of his head and the sound of the motor animating his body is heard. As a faithful house slave, he advises Court Royal to plead guilty because that alone can save his life: "Plead guilty. Get off easy. Otherwise thrrrrit (Makes throat-cutting gesture, then chuckles)" (49).

In the mean time, the voice of the Young Victim, the alleged murderer whom he is charged with harbouring, is heard from the background. The Young Victim actually is not a murderer but a black revolutionary and is his own son. The Young Victim scolds his father, calling him a slave and a traitor: "You're here with me, with us, with all of us, and you cannot understand" (50). "You bastard. And you Court Royal you let them take me. You liar. You weakling. You woman in the face of degenerates. You let me be taken. How can you walk the eartttttt . . ." (51). Court Royal seems to recognize momentarily his son's voice: "That voice sounded very familiar. (Caught in thought momentarily) I almost thought it was . . ." (51).

As Court Royal does not plead guilty, the Voice decides to remove the attorney. Court Royal is frightened and he runs after the attorney. But a siren is heard and shots are fired around him warning him not to escape. Then he is made to hear and see brief historical moments of the black people. The sound of the pulling of chains and low moaning by the slaves, signifying the enslavement of Africans, is played in the background. Hearing this, he moans (which means he recognizes his ancestors), but then confused, he asks where he is. The Voice ironically says he is in heaven. Then he breaks into a "funny joke-dance" signifying, perhaps, the happy plantation slave, Uncle Tom (54).

Two white hooded men, symbolizing the Ku Klux Klan, drag in a drunken black woman, who symbolizes the degraded condition of the urban

black woman. Seeing her, Court Royal immediately dissociates himself from her remarking with self-righteousness: "She drinks and stinks and brings our whole race down" (54). Then the two hooded men, now dressed in business suits, bring a dead black man on a stretcher. They announce that the dead man is Prince, i.e., Malcolm X, who was killed for them by a black assassin. A series of fast moving images of black heroes and youth like Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba, Rev. King, Garvey, and young black men are shown on the screen and he is asked whether he recognizes the man on the screen. He refuses because, not one face, but a series rapidly shifting faces are shown, so he cannot identify. He fails to understand the significance of the question, which is, whether he recognizes the existence of manliness in him. But then the middle class Court Royal has always suppressed his manliness while pursuing self-gratification: "No, no, no . . . I don't know them. I can't be forced into something I never did" (57). But, then again, momentarily, as he had earlier recognized the Young Victim's voice as that of his son's, he recognizes the faces on the screen and calls them all his sons: "Oh, son . . . son . . . dear God, my flesh, forgive me . . . (Begins to weep and shake) My sons" (58). As soon as, although momentarily and under duress, he recognizes and identifies the revolutionaries and prepares to die, the Voice, ironically, spares his life in spite of being guilty.

There is a significant parallel between Court Royal and Clay of 'Dutchman', who was also a middle class man. In 'Dutchman', when Lula

forces Clay to admit of his manliness (murderous self) through her nasty tricks, he not only admits of it but threatens to destroy Lula and her white society with it. But then he chooses to stop with the words and refuses to act. Lula, who always knew the manliness concealed behind the assimilationist middle class face, then decides to destroy Clay, a potential murderer, i.e., a revolutionary. On the other hand, in 'Great Goodness of Life', the Voice knows that Court Royal, the middle aged middle class man, has almost completely suppressed his manliness, so he decides to spare his life. But, he wants him to destroy his manliness completely, so, he makes him perform a symbolic rite of cleansing. He says, "Court Royal, this is your destiny. This act [of killing your manliness] was done by you a million years ago. This is only the memory of it. This is only a rite" (61). After the rite, the Voice says, Court Royal can live a peaceful, i.e., emasculated, life: "This is your destiny, and your already lived-out life. Instruct, Court Royal, as the centuries pass, and bring you back to your natural reality. Without guilt. Without shame. Pure and blameless, your soul washed (Pause) white as snow" (62).

Court Royal feels relieved and is only too willing to perform the final rite of killing his manly self: "Oh, yes . . . I hear you. And I have waited for this promise to be fulfilled" (62). The two KKK men bring in the Young Victim and give Court Royal a pistol to shoot him down. He fires into the boy's face and the boy calls him "Papa" before he falls dead. By killing his son, he demonstrates his readiness to do the act of purging the black revolutionaries

at the white man's bidding. After the rite, Court Royal feels relieved and happy. He flings away his gun and says, "My soul is as white as snow . . . I'm free. I'm free. My life is a beautiful thing" (63).

Junkies Are Full of (SHHH . . .) (1970) is like 'Experimental Death Unit #1' in which Baraka teaches the black audience by example about the need to cleanse the black community of its evil elements. In 'Experimental Death Unit #1', the evil element was the whore and in 'Junkies Are Full of (SHHH . . .), it is the drug vendor.

Baraka says that the US government secretly spreads drugs in the black community through the drug dealers and their drug vendors to destroy the community and its nationalist leaders. So, he shows the members of the Committee for Unified Newark (Baraka's own organization) plan to get the drug dealers through a black drug vendor. They persuade the vendor, Big Time, to take them to the drug dealers telling him that they, too, want to sell the drugs for them. So, Big Time tells his boss about it. The boss is excited and tells his fellow dealers, who have been trying hard to get the nationalist leaders in the grip of the drugs: "Hey, yeh. This cd be the openin' we need. The feds'll back us, kid. We can get the whole black power crowd outta their heads blind. The country's at peace again. Remember how we did it to the gangs in the fifties? Huh?" (20).

Big Time takes the Committee members to his boss's house where all the dealers have gathered waiting excitedly for them. As soon as the members are ushered into the room, they open fire at the dealers and kill them. Then, they turn to Big Time who is completely taken aback at their action. They tell him that they are going to make him an example for the black community to show what happens to a junky: "Nigger, you an example. We gonna put you in the middle of Hawthorne and Bergen with a big sign say, JUNKIES ARE FULL OF SHIT, and let them all pushers and junkies look at you. You see, BT, you gonna be a martyr, and a true help to the race" (23).They inject an overdose of the drug into his veins which kills him. Then they take his body and the body of his boss and hang them in the street. They put the signs "Master" and "Slave" on them. The black people watch them and read the warning as they pass by them.

Thus, from 'Dutchman' to 'Junkies Are Full of (SHHH . . .)', Baraka called upon the black people to assert their separate ethnic identity by portraying the black man, first, as a victim ('Dutchman'), then as a ruthless revolutionary ('The Slave'), then from 'Experimental Death Unit #1' on, as a nation-builder who took on the task of building the black nation by cleansing the community not only of the white racist oppressors but their black imitators and collaborators. He called upon them to destroy the white beastly enemies and set right the historical wrongs suffered by the black

people and restore their pristine chaste and beautiful life ('A Black Mass'). He condemned and rejected submission, self-denial, and assimilation ('Madheart' and 'Great Goodness of Life') and sanctified and preached retaliation, self-assertion, and separation ('The Slave' and 'Slave Ship'). In a word, he propagated the message of the black revolution, as advocated in the Black Power Movement. He gave a strong dramatic voice to the nationalistic concepts of self-defense, self-determination, and nationhood.

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CHAPTER THREE

TELL IT LIKE IT IS: THE "THEATRE OF REALITY" OF ED BULLINS

If a Negro playwright is to write effectively and honestly he must draw upon his experience (Bullins "Theatre of Reality" 62).

Bullins asserted the identity of the African American people by depicting their life as it was, not as it should be, like Baraka. He chose to depict the life of that section of the African American community, which had rarely been the main subject of literature before him. He chose the lowest of the low, the people of the street, whom he called the "street niggers", of whom he considered himself as one. He chose to depict their life realistically, employing realism in its crude form as their life itself was. Considering the revolutionary times of the mid-1960s and early 1970s during which he wrote his works, his choice of the subject and the method was really bold. He was right when he bragged about his works like one of his characters would do in a different context: "To make an open secret more public: in the area of playwrighting, Ed Bullins, at this moment in time, is almost without peer in America — black, white or imported. I admit this, not

merely from vanity, but there is practically no one in America but myself who would dare" ("Introduction" The Theme is Blackness 12).

Bullins's preachings regarding the didactic purposes of the black theatre, in contrast to what he practised, are misleading. Unable to escape the influence of the Black Arts Movement, he, too, like his self-acknowledged model, Baraka, preached off and on that:

> It is the black artist's creative duty to plant, nurture and spread the seeds of change [i.e., "sweeping social and cultural change"] . . . In an evil, white world of ever shifting values and reality, for the Black man there must be a sanctuary for the re-creation of the Black spirit and African identity . . . Black Art is to express what is best in us and for us Black people ("Introduction" The Theme is Blackness 11-15).

Indeed, he, too, wrote a few Black revolutionary plays like the 'Black Revolutionary Commercial', which he wrote while working with Baraka and Marvin X for the Black Communications Project, and 'The Gentleman Caller', etc.. But, significantly, he also wrote plays satirizing the black revolution and cultural nationalism, like 'Dialect Determinism', 'We Righteous Bombers', 'Death List', 'Pig Pen', 'The Taking of Miss Janie', etc.. Indeed, Bullins seemed confused about the purpose of his own works considering the fact that he made the above statements about the didactic

purpose of the black theatre in an "Introduction" (to his anthology, "The Theme is Blackness"), which was largely critical of the revolutionaries and cultural nationalists. Besides, he published the revolutionary plays and the plays satirizing the revolution together with his realistic plays dealing with the street people in the same anthology. However, the didactic and satiric plays do not constitute the main work of Bullins. Bullins's important works are the realistic plays in which he revealed the life of the street people, which were "revolutionary" in a different sense, as he often claimed, besides being bold (Marvin X vii).

Bullins believed that there were two types of black theatre: one that dealt with the "*dialectic of change*" and the other that dealt with the "*dialectic of experience*" ("Introduction" The New Lafayette Theatre Presents 4). The propagandistic revolutionary plays belonged to the dialectic of change which, he said, had its historical antecedent in the Slave Narrative and the realistic plays, like his, belonged to the dialectic of experience which had its historical antecedent traced back to the oral tradition of Africa ("Introduction" The New Lafayette Theatre Presents 4). He called the theatre that dealt with the dialectic of experience the theatre of reality, which he practised.

Bullins was not a theorist, or, a great dramaturgist in the technical sense. So, his views on drama are rather vague. He explained that it was not the "style and technique" but the "theme and character" that defined the theatre

of reality because any "theatrical style or method" could be used "separately or in combination to reach the truth of the play" ("Theatre of Reality" 65). He should have known that it is the technique that makes a play realistic or otherwise. But, as I said, Bullins was not a great dramaturgist and he did take liberties with the technique, employing such dramatic and theatrical devices as monologues, flashbacks and flashforwards, special light and music to convey different moods, in his realistic drama.

Bullins wrote, "If a Negro playwright is to write effectively and honestly he must draw upon his experience" ("Theatre of Reality" 62). This is exactly what he did in his realistic plays. He described himself as a "street nigger", who had lived the life of the street in his early life, which he depicted so truthfully in his plays. In fact, his plays have autobiographical reverberations. He was born in a ghetto in Philadelphia. He was a member of a gang called the "Jet Cobras" (referred to in 'Clara's Ole Man') and had lost his front teeth in a street fight. He "drank wine, made it with the girls, sold bootleg whisky — everything" (Anderson 44-46). He says, if he had stayed in Philadelphia, " . . . I would have been six foot under. There was nothing I could do in Philly. Today, most of my friends are either winos, junkies, or dead" (Anderson 48).

Although Bullins gave up the life of the street and joined the revolutionaries and cultural nationalists like Marvin X, Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and others, he wrote about the street

people whom he knew best and identified himself with. He was not certainly proud of the street people nor did he glorify or romanticize them, as some critics would say, yet, at the same time, he was not apologetic about them. He simply told their stories like they were, hoping that "the stories will touch the audience in an individual way, with some fresh impressions and some fresh insights into their own lives — help them to consider the weight of their experience" (Anderson 73). I am not sure whether the stories open fresh insights into the lives of the street people because Bullins simply told the stories, without any analysis of or probe into their lives. He simply presented a thin slice of their life, focusing entirely upon their sensual indulgences. He did not tell about their struggles and ambitions. He did not even delineate the characters fully developing the other dimensions of their personalities. Nonetheless, the stories reveal a world, however small, inhabited by the street people, which has its own laws and customs, language and music, pleasures and tensions.

The street people are looked down upon by the mainstream society. They are seen as outsiders, lawbreakers, dirty, and dangerous to the society. But, how do the street people look at themselves? Certainly not the same way as the mainstream society looks at them. They do not look at themselves as outsiders or lawbreakers. They look at themselves as just different from the mainstream society and have the same contempt for it as the people of the mainstream have for them. They live their life with pride and gusto being

almost completely indifferent to the mainstream opinion. Bullins, having been one of them in his early life, depicted this world seen in its own eyes and valued in its own terms.

The characters of Bullins are winos, junkies, hustlers, gangsters, pimps, and prostitutes. Most of them do not do any regular work, except hustling of some sort. If they work at all, they do low-income jobs. In fact, they have contempt for work and prefer hustling. They want fast money and lots of money, which only hustling can provide. Party, not work, is the central activity of their life. They enjoy wine, drug, sex, music and dance. They spend day in and day out partying. In fact, life is a party for them. Violence is always just under the surface, ready to erupt any moment. The dozens (a verbal duel centring on one's mother's sexuality) is a fond game, which sometimes leads to violence. Profanity is inseparable from their language.

They live almost their whole life on the streets. They have no proper family or home. Marriage is not much thought of or respected. Men are mostly irresponsible. Manliness is the greatest virtue and making it with women is the most important mark of manliness. Dominating women is another mark of their manliness. In fact, they use and abuse women. Most of them are pimps. Loyalty is not a great virtue and it hardly exists for them. Men frequently betray their friends as well as their women. Violence is a means to prove manliness. Hence, violence occurs frequently even between friends.

Fidelity is not a great virtue among the women also. They, too, indulge in casual sex with many men. But, most of them are responsible. They yearn for family and home. But they are completely submissive to men. Hence, they become a party to their own abuses. Most of them do regular jobs. But, they willingly support their lazy men, who indulge in drinking and sex with other women. In fact, they, too, indulge in drinking, drug, and sex along with their men. To sum up, the world of the street is a jungle where pleasure, pure animal pleasure, is the only and the greatest good.

As I have said, Bullins simply tells their stories without analyzing or examining them. His characters do not reflect upon their lives, they simply live and enjoy. They do not think themselves to be the victims of any system, social or economic. They do not think themselves to be the victims of racism either. Racial conflicts, i.e., the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the race riots of the 1960s and 1970s, the time in which the plays are set, do not simply exist for them. Whites are hardly a part of their lives and when they are, they are indistinguishable from them. They are just like them, "street niggers".

Clara's Ole Man (1965) is Bullins's first play that deals with the life of the street people. Bullins gives the play a subtitle, 'A Play of Lost Innocence'. This subtitle is significant not only in relation to this play but to

all his plays in this type. His characters have lost their innocence as soon as they are born into the brutal world of the streets.

Bullins's first play also sets a familiar pattern for the rest of his plays that show the life of the street people, except 'A Son, Come Home'. His characters and their stories become all too familiar as we move from one play to the other. In 'Clara's Ole Man', there is the suggestively named, Big Girl, who is the head of her house. She works in a state mental hospital. She has a mentally retarded sister, who is also suggestively named, Baby Girl. There is their invalid aunt, Toohey, who spends her days drinking with a "drunken neighbour", Miss Famie (251). Big Girl is a responsible but a heavy-handed woman. She supports her sister and aunt and gives shelter to Clara. But she rules them heavy-handedly. She is also a lesbian who uses Clara as her sexual partner.

Clara, a young girl of eighteen, is a victim. She was austerely raised by her pious parents. She was seduced by a man who made her pregnant and then abandoned her when she refused to become a prostitute for him. She was then driven out of the house by her pious parents. It was then Big Girl gave her shelter, but since then she has been using her as her homosexual partner. She is unhappy and seeks a male company, but is prevented by Big Girl, who has made her as well as Baby Girl and Aunt Toohey, completely submissive to her.

There is C.C., "a young wino" (251). He comes to Big Girl's house to take care of Baby Girl when Big Girl and Clara go out. Stoogie, Bama, and Hoss are street people who live by robbery. They are the friends of Big Girl and they respect her.

Jack is a character who has some resemblances with Bullins's early life. He was also a street man who belonged to one of the gangs, the Jet Cobras, the gang to which Bullins belonged in his early days. He quit the streets to join the navy. After returning from the navy, he now attends school and prepares for college. This was also the story of Bullins's early days. He works in the Post Office. Thus, Jack is moving away from the streets towards the mainstream to live a decent middle class life. He is invited by Clara to visit her when her "ole man would be at work" (280). Jack does not know who Clara's husband is. Clara had thought that Big Girl, as usual, would be at work. But Big Girl has not gone to work that day, hence, Jack spends the afternoon not with Clara alone, but with Big Girl. Big Girl is a loud and dirty-mouthed woman. She ridicules Jack throughout her conversation with him. She ridicules him about his school education and navy days. When the street boys come, fleeing the police after a robbery, they also join her in ridiculing him. Finally, before leaving, when Jack naively asks when Clara's ole man will come back from work, Big Girl is surprised and hurt. She angrily asks Clara whether she has not told the truth to him that her husband is no one but she herself, her lesbian partner. She

then asks the street boys, before going out with Clara, to beat up Jack and drive him out of the house. Thus ends the brief episode of the one-act play.

Bullions shows the life of the slum and street people like it is without either analyzing or moralizing about it, as I have said. However, here, he throws gibes at the mainstream society through Big Girl and the street boys. Jack is seen as an intruder from the mainstream society and made a butt of ridicule and then thrashed. Big Girl mocks at Christianity as fake and anti-human. After spending twelve years of her early life with Christian foster parents, she says, she discovered that the Christians always preached about heaven but created a bigger hell on the earth (259). The Christian parents of Clara turned her out of their home when they found her pre-maritally pregnant (260). Big Girl accuses the foster parents of Baby Girl to have exposed her to the disease because of which she has become mentally retarded (259). Thus, she accuses the mainstream society as a whole for her and her sister's conditions. She has a remedy for their conditions, which will scandalize the mainstream society. She says, by learning to curse to let off steam, she has been able to maintain her health (259). That's why she has taught her mentally retarded sister to curse "which gives her spirit and everything" (257). She also explains that the psychiatric patients of the state mental hospital where she works curse because they get relief through cursing.

A Son, Come Home (1968) is different from Bullins's other plays, which deal with the people of the street. The mother and the son, who also lived on the same Derby Street of Philadelphia as Cliff and Lou of 'In the Wine Time', never indulged in drinking or promiscuous sex or violence or profanity. They are like the decent people of the street like Minny Garrison or Beatrice of that play.

The mother, Berniece, had her fair share of trouble with men but it never made her resort to the kind of behaviour Bullins's other characters indulged in. She and her sister, Sophia, used to live on Derby Street when they were young. She had met a man, Andrew, whom she loved. Andrew was like Bullins's other characters who drank and indulged in promiscuous sex and was irresponsible. He made Berniece pregnant and abandoned her. Berniece raised her son alone. She loved another man, Will, who was good to her. But, her son, Michael, was jealous of him, so, he left. When Michael grew up, he joined the navy. Returning from the navy, he went to Los Angeles and went to college. Then, he went to Harlem, New York, where he now lives. He plays music and is in a band.

Michael visits his mother after nine years. But, there is no home for him that he can visit. His mother has now withdrawn from earthly life and lives in a convent. Berniece will only pray for Michael but will not share with him his worldly joys. Michael, in fact, has never had a proper home. He never had a father. He never had any relative also, except his mother. His aunt,

Sophia, who did not like Berniece getting pregnant with Andrew's child in the first place, never liked Michael. She is selfish and cold. Thus, the title, 'A Son, Come Home', is rather ironical because Michael, who had only half a home, has lost even that as his mother has left the mundane world and joined the church dedicating her life to the service of God.

From **Goin' a Buffalo** (1968) onwards, Bullins would show his characters rolling in the vicious cycle of wine/drug, sex, and crime. In this play, he depicts the fantasy of a couple of prostitute and her pimp-husband to move to Buffalo which, they think, is " a good little hustling town" (31). But, their plan is frustrated when the trusted friend of the pimp betrays them. This is the reason why Bullins gives the play the subtitle, "A Tragifantasy".

The characters of the play are a couple of prostitutes and their pimps and their friends. Besides, there are musicians at the Strip Club, the Strip Club owner, and the bar-tender. Curt is a hustler who forges payroll checks, or robs, or sells drugs, or anything like that besides being the pimp of his wife, Pandora. Pandora is a striptease dancer and a whore. Shaky is a drug-peddler and a pimp of his partner, Mamma Too Tight. Mamma Too Tight is a white prostitute. Rich is an old friend of Curt who together have lived on the street by robbery etc.. Art is a recent friend of Curt whom he had met in the jail. Art also belongs to the street, but his occupation is not specified although he,

too, had planned once to sell drugs that he had bought cheaply in Africa while he was working in a ship.

Curt and Pandora plan to move to Buffalo because they think it is a good hustling town where they can do their hustling better. They want to take their friends there so that they can "set up a kinda organization" (32). Hence, they want to save enough money for that. Curt needs money to get a probation for the forgery he had committed. But, their plan is doomed to failure because Curt's trusted friend, Art, is secretly planning to cheat him of his woman. Art is a smooth operator. He has a weakness for women and he knows how to get them (14). He gets the opportunity to do so when Curt, along with Rich, goes out to sell Shaky's drug to get money to get him out on bail. He informs the police and gets them arrested. He then makes off with their women, Pandora and Mamma Too Tight, to Buffalo. Art gets this opportunity when things go wrong for Curt and Pandora at the Strip Club. Deeny, the Strip Club owner, suddenly closes down the club because of some problem with the union and refuses to pay the salaries to the performers, including Pandora. Then a fight breaks out between Deeny and the performers, during which Curt beats Deeny unconscious and Shaky gets arrested. Hence, Curt now has to move out of Los Angeles as soon as possible because Deeny may press charges against him when he regains consciousness from his coma. Shaky also must be freed on bail to take him

along. So, Curt plans to sell Shaky's drug and this is when Art takes the opportunity of informing the police about it and gets them arrested.

The world of the street is a brutal world. There is no place for trust and gratitude. Curt, a good hustler himself, makes a mistake when he puts too much trust on Art. He has too much trust in him because he feels grateful to him for saving his life in a fight in the jail (10). He has so much trust that he asks him to take care of his wife in case he is imprisoned in the forgery case (72). He has so much trust that he is not even prepared to listen to the warning his old friend, Rich, gives him about him and Pandora (85).

The world of the streets is also a brutal world of domination of women by men. The two women, Pandora and Mamma Too Tight, are totally dominated by their men. Curt loves and has married Pandora but only after completely subduing her (66-67). He now of course uses her as a whore as Shaky uses his woman, Mamma Too Tight. Art in his turn forces Pandora to go along with him to Buffalo and would use her and Mamma Too Tight as whores as they had been used by their former men.

Bullins, as in 'Clara's Ole Man', shows this brutal world of the streets like it is without analyzing or moralizing about it. There is, however, very briefly and superficially, a complaint about their profession made by Pandora. When Art asks Pandora, which is surprising in itself, why Mamma Too Tight uses drugs, Pandora replies angrily, " . . . she has to use that stuff to put off the reality of it [i.e., daily whoring] happen'n" (59). But, her

complaint is not only superficial, it is also inconsistent with her life. In the same conversation, she tells him that she does not actually see their profession as bad: " . . . but I'm really an entertainer. I'll show you my act one day . . . and Curt's got a good mind. He's a good hustler . . . " (60). Her husband, Curt, even glorifies their profession. He tells Art, praising his intelligence, "You're like me in a lot of ways. Man, we're a new breed, ya know. Renegades. Rebels. There's no rules for us . . . we make them as we break them" (69).

In **The Corner** (1968), Bullins, as the title suggests, shows the people spending their evening on a street corner drinking wine, exchanging jokes and insults, quarreling, and engaging in sex. A few of the characters ought to be remembered as they reappear in later plays: Cliff, his girl, Lou (off-stage), his brother, Steve (off-stage), and his friend, Silly Willy Clark.

Cliff is the boss at home and on the streets among his friends. He was in the navy. After returning from the navy, he now spends his days on the streets with his girls and friends. He lives with Lou who supports him. Lou works at a laundry and she not only supports him but also gives him money daily to spend it on his girls. One of the girls is Stella, with whom he has sex daily in the evening in his friend, Silly Willy Clark's car.

This evening, Cliff is late coming to the corner to meet his friends and Stella. As they, Bummie, Slick, Stella, Blue, and Silly Willy Clark, wait for

him, they engage in drinking, exchanging jokes and insults, and quarreling. The scene is explosive, threatening to burst into violence at any moment. Cliff comes and asks Stella, as usual, to go to the car to have sex with him. But, Stella refuses to go to the car and requests him to take her to some motel. Cliff refuses to do so because he does not want to waste money on that "foolishness" (118). Then they have an argument. Stella says that she is not a whore and she wants to be his woman and requests him to treat her right. But, Cliff says, she is already a whore and she has only to "make it pay" (119). Then he forces her to go to the car. But, Stella is too drunk. So, he leaves her asleep at the car and returns to his friends in the corner. He asks his friends to go and enjoy Stella. His friends are only too happy to do that.

One of the friends, Bummie, before he joins his friends in raping Stella in the car, asks Cliff why he does not want to go up the avenue with them (to drink more wine) as he did daily. Cliff gets angry and says he is not happy living like that: "What's like me, huh? To be a bum? To drink wine and fuck bitches in junky cars? To stand half the night on some street corner that any fucken cop can come up and claim? . . . Is that like me?" (125). Bummie is surprised and asks what else he is going to do. He explains that he is a "family man now" because he is going to be a "father" (125-126).

Cliff's anger about the street life and his desire to change to become a family man are not consistent with his behaviour towards Stella. He had

come to have sex, as usual, with Stella. As he could not have sex with her because she was too drunk and had fallen asleep, he asked her friends to rape her. He had also told Stella that she was a whore. He had also told her that he would live with Lou because she worked in the laundry "bringin' home that paycheck every week" (119). Besides, when Bummie asks whether he is going to marry Lou, he is surprised and says he "never thought about that" (126). All this suggests that Cliff's anger and feelings of change are only a passing feeling, as he admits to Bummie in the beginning of his conversation, " . . . it's just one of those goddamn days, I guess" (125).

In **In the Wine Time** (1968), Bullins continues the story of Cliff and here also, as the title suggests, he shows the people, including Cliff, spending their evening drinking wine, quarreling, engaging in sexual activities, and, at last, committing violence.

Cliff of 'The Corner' has not exactly quit the street here, as he had said. He has married his girl, Lou, though. He is now going to school on the G.I. bill. He was in the navy where he had spent most of the time in the guardhouse or the brig (127). He would have got a "bad discharge" from the navy had not Lou married him (126). Cliff says he has an ambition to do something big. He does not want to do a small job like his wife or the neighbours. That's why he is studying business in the school so that he can find a good job or start his own business (137-138). But, he does not know

how he is going to do that, nor does his wife seem to believe him about that (138). On the other hand, he himself does not seem to be serious or honest about it. He spends his days, after returning from school, with girls and drinking wine like this evening. He even says that if he does not find a big job, he may join the navy again (138). (It is not certain though how he can do it because he had been almost badly discharged from the navy.) In fact, he loves the life on a ship very much because it means good wine, beautiful foreign women, and the nights at sea. That's why he advises Ray to join the navy. That's his idea of making it in the world.

Lou married Cliff because she thought he was a "man" (139). On the contrary, she also says, "In fact, I'm the one who made a man out of you even though your mother and the whole entire United States Navy failed" (126-127). However, she is completely submissive to Cliff as almost all Bullins's women are to their men. She often quarrels with him, engaging often in physical violence. Cliff, as mentioned earlier, has his girls and Lou cannot do anything about it. She is helpless. She also says she loves him. Her feelings towards him are contradictory and confusing. Similarly, Cliff's feelings towards her are contradictory. He says he loves her and admires her. He says to Ray, "And your aunt's got principle and conviction and you have to be awfully special for that" (152). He then adds, "I don't deserve her, I know" (152). But, at the same time, he goes after girls and beats up Lou, mocks at her, and threatens to leave her and join the navy again.

Ray is also a character with contradictions. Right from childhood, he has been "drinkin' 'n smokin' and foolin' around with girls" (130). With Lou and Cliff, he spends the summer evenings drinking at the stoop. In the 'Prologue', he says he hustles his liquor money (103). He is violent and can hit a girl (Bunny) (178) and can kill a man in a fight (Red) (179). Yet, he is soft and delicate with the girl who passes every evening smiling at him. They are in love. The girl advises him to give up wine and leave that place and come to her. Ray promises to do that but does not even start to do that. He indulges in his street life. He even wants to join the navy being encouraged by Cliff who tells him of the prospects of wine and women in a ship. Besides, as mentioned earlier, he not only persists in his street life of wine, women, and violence, he commits a murder. So, it is not probable that he can ever free himself from the street even though he is saved from imprisonment or death sentence by the sacrifice of Cliff.

In the street, there are other people who present a contrast to them. The Krumps are white and the others are black. Mr. Krump is a drunkard and Mrs. Krump has difficulty in handling him. So, almost daily, Ray helps him into his house when he returns home drunk. The other black people are polite and live quietly. They are horrified at the behaviour of Cliff and his friends. Miss Minny Garrison and Beatrice, in particular, show scorn for them. In return, Cliff mocks at them as "Derby Street Donkeys" (140).

Bullins shows this world as fake and unnatural as he shows the world of the streets as dirty and dangerous.

In **The Duplex** (1970), Bullins shows the people enjoying themselves playing cards, drinking wine and smoking marijuana, playing the dozens (i.e., exchanging jokes and insults), and having sex. The play also shows the love story of Velma and Steve, but it is almost indistinguishable from the party, which is the main story of the play as it is of all other plays.

Steve goes to school on the G.I. bill (i.e., government check) and works part time. He lives in the duplex which belongs to Velma and her husband, O.D.. He says, he loves to read books and has the ambition to become a "reader", i.e., read books all his life, but his behaviour does not match his words. He is just like his friends who spend their days partying. Marco also goes to school, probably on the G.I. bill, like Steve. He also lives in the duplex. There is another young man, Tootsie. But, it is not mentioned what he does for a living. Marco says he and Tootsie used to work at the Post Office. He also says that he has a wife, whom he still loves, but they are separated. There is Marco's father, Montgomery, who is one of this group. Marco and Montgomery are only recently united having been separated right in Marco's childhood. They do not behave like father and son, but, as Montgomery says, "like brothers", or, perhaps, more like friends (86). There are neighbours, Mamma, the "neighbourhood drunk", and her "current

man", Pops, and Sukie (1). Mamma and Pops are old people who are also regular members of the group. It is not said what they do for their living. Sukie is a young woman who lives alone. She is another member of the group. There are Marco's girl, Wanda, and her aunt, Marie. Wanda brings her aunt, who is a wild reveler, to the party. Velma is a young woman who yearned for a home of her own and at last got one by persuading her husband to buy a house. But, then, her family is broken. O.D. has another woman and he almost lives with her. Their children live with her parents.

In the upstairs of the duplex, where Steve and Marco live, there is the party, held regularly, in which all, except O.D. and his "buddy", Crook, participate. In the party, there are wine, music, dance, and jokes and insults (the dozens). The party is followed by sex. There is no loyalty or fidelity, and violence is always under the surface about to erupt at any moment.

The "love fable" of Velma and Steve is typical of the street world. Velma hates her husband who now lives with another woman. He comes to the house, as Velma says, only to "change his clothes and eat and then try and get me in bed" (28). He also robs her of the rent money and beats her up and rapes her if she resists to make love. Velma is completely submissive to him. But, she turns to Steve because of his mistreatment. The first Movement, "You gotta be mah man, man", conveys her appeal to Steve to become her man. But, Steve is reluctant and he even advises her to stick with her husband because "he's got a good job, gives you money, sends money to

take care of your kids in Tennessee and takes care of you pretty good" (28). He wants them to be only "friends" (29). They make love freely.

O.D. comes in the afternoon and robs the rent money, as usual. Velma calls Steve for help but he cannot do anything. Then, there is the party in which Velma also joins. O.D. comes again, drunk, and disrupts the party. He then rapes Velma. Velma calls Steve for help and, this time, Steve responds by turning to Marie, who is sleeping drunk in his room, and makes love to her. The second Movement, "Party Killer", speaks of this party-killing by O.D..

Three or four days pass. Velma goes to Steve and listens to a story (Bullins's own, 'In the Wine Time'), read by Steve. Then she informs that she is pregnant with his child. Steve does not want to talk about it. Later, that evening, Velma goes out to shop and returns with O.D. buying grocery. She requests O.D. to spend that night with her, but O.D. refuses. When she insists and blocks his way, he slashes her arm with a knife and leaves. Velma still appeals to him: "O.D.! . . . O.D.! . . . Please . . . please, baby, please . . . O.D.!" (126). The Third Movement, 'Save me, Save me, Save me, Baby', speaks of this appeal.

In the mean time, Steve has made up his mind about Velma: "I love her . . . and I'm going to get her" (118). He even makes a long speech, rambling and inconsistent with his behaviour though, about his love as a black man for Velma, a black woman (121-122). When Velma screams, he rushes to her

and comforts her, "It's alright now, baby . . . It's okay now . . . everything's okay, Velma . . . Baby . . . I love you . . . I love you . . . and ain't gonna let nothin' more happen to you" (126).

Even though he says he loves her and wants to protect her from O.D., he does not think of asking her to get a divorce and marry him. Two days later, he and Velma go and buy a gun. They want to kill O.D.. That evening, when O.D. comes, Steve does not use his gun, but fights with him hand to hand. O.D., being stronger, almost strangles him to death. He then slaps Velma, and drags her, perhaps, to the bed to rape her. When Steve revives and asks Tootsie to take care of Velma, Tootsie reprimands him, "Man . . . that woman's wit her ole man . . . Can't you understand that?" (165). The Fourth Movement, 'Cool Blowing', speaks of this lack of understanding:

> When you know
> right
> but do
> wrong . . . (145).

The "love fable" of Steve and Velma is never expected to go anywhere. The play ends, quite befittingly with Montgomery announcing, "Hey, ev'vabody! Grab yo cards, whiskey 'n women! It's party time!" (166). Steve and Velma can be seen later enjoying themselves in that.

In **In New England Winter** (1971), Bullins shows the same people and their same life of wine, sex, and crime. He says that this play is the second in the proposed Twentieth Century Cycle of Plays, the first being 'In the Wine Time'. There are two more plays, produced earlier, which also have connections with these two plays. Cliff first appears in 'The Corner', then in 'In the Wine Time', then is referred to in 'The Duplex' (Pops, father of Cliff, is reportedly seeking to meet his son he had by Brenda). Steve is first referred to in 'The Corner', in which Bummie was also a character, then appears in 'The Duplex'.

In 'The Corner', Cliff had returned from the navy and was living with Lou with her money, which he spent for his wine and women. In 'In The Wine Time', he was married to Lou and going to school on the G.I. bill and had an ambition to do something big but ended up in jail trying to save his nephew Ray, who had murdered Red in a drunken fight. In 'In New England Winter', he is on the streets again planning a robbery with his half-brother, Steve, whom he loves although he knows, being told by Lou herself, that he has fathered a child with Lou while he was in the jail. Steve's portrait is consistent with that in 'The Corner' but not so much with that in 'The Duplex'. Steve, who had a grudge against Bummie in 'The Corner' takes revenge against him in 'In New England Winter' as he wanted to blackmail him about his affair with Cliff's wife, Lou. In 'The Duplex', Steve was going to school and doing part-time work and loved a married woman,

Velma, but, in 'In New England Winter', he is planning a robbery and loves a woman named, Liz, whom he wants to see in New England.

The play presents alternately two situations taking place in two different places at two different times. Steve is the connecting link between these two situations. The first scene takes place in New England in 1955. Steve had deserted the navy and was living with Liz drinking wine and sleeping with her. Liz loves Steve and wants to have a baby by him desperately. There is a traitor in their group of friends, Crook, who reports to the police about Steve and takes Liz for himself. Thus, Steve ends up in jail for desertion. The other scene takes place in an unnamed place, which is hot in January, in 1960. Steve has apparently returned from jail and is planning a robbery with Cliff and two other friends, Chuckie and Bummie. It must be noted here that Cliff also was in jail during the same time as Steve (cf. 'In the Wine Time') and this fact makes the story of Steve living with Lou and fathering a child by her during Cliff's absence inconsistent. Be that as it may, the robbery fails because the relationship among the future robbers is fragile and explosive. Thus, after meticulous rehearsals, planned by Steve, the planned robbery ends up in the murder of Bummie by Steve as the former wanted to blackmail the latter about his affair with Cliff's wife, Lou. The murder seems even more senseless as Cliff tells Steve that he knew from herself that he was the father of Lou's second child.

In **The Fabulous Miss Marie** (1971), Bullins once again shows the street people indulging in drinking wine, smoking reefer, and having promiscuous sex. In this familiar scene of wild revelry, he brings in a dog, suggestively named, Whitie, which barks off-stage occasionally and a character, Gafney, a black nationalist, who reprimands the revelers, particularly, Art Garrison, for dissipating their lives. The purpose of the inclusion of the barking dog off-stage in the scene is not clear. If it is only to humiliate the white man, it is done in poor taste. The inclusion of the odd character, Gafney, reprimanding the revelers who ignore him almost completely, is also not clear.

The play, which, Bullins says, is the fourth in the proposed Twentieth Century Cycle of Plays, includes five characters from other plays, namely, 'The Duplex' and 'Goin' a Buffalo'. Marie, Wanda, Marco Polo Henderson, and Steve are from 'The Duplex'. Steve is common to 'In New England Winter' and 'In the Wine Time' as well. Art Garrison is from 'Goin' a Buffalo'. All these characters have the same natures and their lifestyles have not changed. Marie, after whom the play is titled, is shown with her husband in her house. She here is the host of the party, which is held everyday in her house. Her husband, Bill, works in a car-parking lot. She also used to work, but now, with her husband's steady income, she hosts party in her house everyday and enjoys herself: "We make almost as much as some colored doctors make . . . 'n we spend it too. 'Cause it's party time everyday at Miss

Marie's house" (17). She not only drinks and smokes, but has sex with other men, preferably, younger men like Art Garrison and Steve. Besides, she also has sex with girls like Ruth, her "cut-buddy", and Toni, her "home girl" (7). Bill runs after white women and makes it also with his wife's niece, Wanda. Art, who in 'Goin' a Buffalo' had cheated Curt of his wife, Pandora, and another woman, Mamma Too Tight, is here seen living with Marie and enjoying the party which includes sex with her. He also eyes other women, particularly, Wanda, whom he wants to use as he had done Pandora and Mamma Too Tight. Steve, who, in 'The Duplex', loved Velma, has now abandoned her because Velma's husband now realizes that Velma loves him. He enjoys the party and sex with Marie. Marco Polo Henderson, who was a student in 'The Duplex', is here also a student on the G.I. bill and wants to finish school. He now does not want Wanda whom he sees as a distraction from his studies. But, he is a regular participant of the party. Wanda gives herself in to everybody, Marco Polo, Bill, and Art, to be used by them anyway they want. Tony, her husband, Bud, and her friend, Ruth, are regular participants of the party. Bud enjoys sex with Ruth. The wild scene includes also a pornographic film to give the revelers a kick to do the real act.

In this wild scene, Bullins shows on the screen scenes of Civil Rights march and includes voice off-stage indirectly reporting the race riots (i.e., the black revolution). By doing this, Bullins seems to satirize, as his characters do, the black liberation movement. But, he satirizes in a crude and

simplistic way. He seems to say to the revolutionaries like Art says to Gafney: "Nigger . . . we've been led and misled for four hundred years . . . why don't you leave us alone and let us find our own way for a while?" (47). But, the problem is, he does not show any alternative way.

Thus, from 'Clara's Ole Man' to 'The Fabulous Miss Marie', Bullins showed over and over again the life of the people of the streets spent in pursuit of sheer sensual pleasure. The characters are winos, junkies, hustlers, gangsters, pimps, and prostitutes. The chief occupation of their life is partying. They indulge in wine, drug, sex, music, and dance day in day out. They have no ambition in life, no complaints about it either. They are happy and carefree. They do not consider themselves to be victims, either of racism or Capitalism. They do not have any grudge against anybody, racists or Capitalists. The outside world, the so-called mainstream, just does not exist for them. Black Nationalism or Communism just does not interest them. They live in their own world, self-satisfied and self-sufficient.

Bullins showed this self-indulgent and hedonistic life of his characters realistically without glorifying it, or, criticizing it, or, even analyzing it. He just told the story of their life like it was with the hope of awakening in the audience some fresh insights into it. Choosing the street people and telling the story of their "low" life at a time when revolutionary heroes and revolution were in vogue, Bullins showed a rare courage and artistic

independence. And through the bold and honest presentation of their life, he affirmed the separate ethnic identity of the African American people that was as sure of itself as the characters were of themselves and their way of life.

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CHAPTER FOUR

CELEBRATE IT: THE BLUES DRAMA OF AUGUST WILSON

I'm just trying to place the world of that [African American] culture on stage and to demonstrate its existence and maybe also indicate some directions towards which we as a people might possibly move (Wilson "How to Write a Play Like August Wilson" 5).

August Wilson asserts the identity of the African American people by celebrating their culture and history. He challenges the white American assumption that "black Americans do not have a culture . . . and that black Americans make up a subgroup of American culture that is derived from the European origins of its majority population" ("The Ground on Which I Stand" 494). He affirms that "blacks have a [distinct] culture, and that we have our own mythology, our own history, our own social organizations, our own creative motif, our own way of doing things" (Moyers 175-176). He opposes the idea of cultural assimilation, which requires that the African Americans shed their distinctive cultural characteristics as Africans and be submerged in the American mainstream (Moyers 173). He describes this idea as cultural imperialism, which assumes that only the white American

values are valid and be universally adopted ("The Ground on Which I Stand" 496). He wants that the distinctive cultural characteristics of the African Americans be recognized and respected.

Wilson affirms that the African American people have a long history rooted in Africa and the plantations of the South. He wants to affirm this fact for two reasons. First, the historical discourse of the dominant white society has either ignored or distorted the history of the African American community. The white society ignored because it did not think that the African American, whom it considered as subhuman and uncivilized, had a history worth writing. When it did write, it distorted the history by presenting the African Americans in negative stereotypes, i.e., either as childlike and submissive or as a savage and a criminal. Wilson wants to fill this void and correct this distortion by writing and righting at the same time the history of the African American people. Secondly, he wants to write the history because, he states, "The importance of history to me is simply to find out who you are and where you've been" (Powers 52). That's to say, history defines the identity of a people. The African American people must know that they are an African people who have been living in America. He also wants that the African American people must learn from their history, particularly, their recent past. Wilson believes that the migration from the South to the North was a mistake because, by leaving the South, which was their "ancestral homeland" (Pettengill 216) in America, the African

American people abandoned the "culture that was growing and developing in the Southern part of the United States for 200 and some years" ("How to Write a Play Like August Wilson" 5). That's why he suggests that the African American people should go back to the South and consolidate their emerging culture and strengthen their community economically, socially, and politically (Pettengill 218). He also suggests that they should embrace their history that includes the South and its slavery and Africa, their original homeland. He regrets the African American people's forgetfulness of their history because of the slave legacy. He says:

> I find it criminal that after hundreds of years in bondage, we do not celebrate our Emancipation Proclamation, that we do not have a thing like the Passover, where we sit down and remind ourselves that we are African people, that we were slaves. We try to run away, to hide that part of our past. If we did something like that, then we would know who we are, and we wouldn't have the problem that we have. Part of the problem is that we don't know who we are and we're not willing to recognize the value of claiming that, even if there's a stigma attached to it (Moyers 176).

Wilson states that his "larger artistic agenda . . . is answering James Baldwin when he called for 'a profound articulation of the black tradition'

which he defined as 'that field of manners and ritual of intercourse that will sustain a man once he's left his father's house'" ("How to Write a Play Like August Wilson" 5). Wilson is awakened to the consciousness of the black tradition by the profound impact of the blues. He describes his apocalyptic experience he had when he listened to a Bessie Smith number, when he was a young man of twenty, as a "birth, a baptism, a resurrection, and a redemption all rolled up in one. It was the beginning of my consciousness that I was a representative of a culture and the carrier of some valuable antecedents" ("Preface" Three Plays ix). He says the blues revealed to him the rich life of the black people "lived in all its timbre and horrifics, with zest and purpose and the affirmation of the self as worthy of the highest possibilities and the highest celebration" ("Preface" Three Plays x).

Being made to see this life and himself as a part of it, he is inspired to celebrate it in his drama as the blues did in music. He sees the blues as the cultural expression of the black people, whose history and culture are rooted in the oral tradition of Africa, in which they narrated their history and expressed their values and attitudes. He says, "The blues are primarily important because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation they found themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. You get the ideas and attitudes of the people as part of the oral tradition" (Moyers 168). He, too, wants to continue the same tradition and narrate the history of the black people and express their

values, attitudes, and manners in his drama as the blues did in music. He describes himself as "a bluesman" ("Preface" Three Plays xi) and, I think, he can also be described as a griot, a person in the traditional African society who kept the oral history of the village or the tribe and entertained his people with stories, song, dance etc..

Although not consciously initially, Wilson is now engaged in writing a cycle of plays each set in each decade of the twentieth century which together will tell the twentieth century history of the black people. Wilson believes that the plays will not only tell the twentieth century history but represent the entire almost four centuries old history of the black people since their arrival in America. Although his plays tell the history of the black people, they do not dramatize the major historical events. They tell the stories of the common black people, their simple lives, their joys and sorrows, their manners, their values, and their music.

The basic theme of Wilson's plays is the African American's search for his identity. Violently uprooted from native Africa and transplanted on the alien American soil, the African slaves suffered a spiritual dislocation and a cultural fragmentation that caused a great injury to their sense of identity. After the Emancipation, by voluntarily migrating from the South, where they had lived for more than two hundred years and evolved a composite culture of their own, to the North, the ex-slaves suffered a repeat of the same spiritual dislocation and cultural fragmentation which caused once again a

great injury to their sense of identity. Wilson deals with this story of the separation from the roots and the consequent search for them, which will give the African American his true identity. He focuses upon the twentieth century migration from the South to the North as he tells the stories of the Southern migrants who have allowed themselves to sever the connections to their roots and consequently suffer a crisis of identity. He suggests that the African Americans must reestablish their connection to their roots, which lie in the South and, beyond that, in Africa from where they originally came. By reestablishing their connections with their roots, they will regain their true identity as Africans who live in America and then will be able to live and prosper in the future without any problem.

Although Wilson deals with the African American's crisis of identity caused primarily by the white man's racism, he does not focus upon racism as the central story of his plays. He keeps it in the background lest one should forget the undeniable fact that it is the principal cause of the black man's problems. On the other hand, he focuses upon the lives of the black people telling their stories and portraying their culture in all its richness of language, manners, customs, and, above all, their music.

Almost all of Wilson's principal characters are Southern migrants who have migrated to the North in search of a better life. Hence, they exhibit their Southern characteristics in their language, manners, beliefs, food and dress, and their music. Their language is replete with Southern farming idioms and

metaphors. They exhibit good narrative skills. Some of them are good story-tellers like Troy in 'Fences', who is called "Uncle Remus" by his friend. Almost all of them exhibit good rhetorical skills. They are good rappers engaging often in lusty jokes and tall-talk or boasting among friends and romantic rap or sweet talk with women. They are fond of chicken, collard greens, peas, rice, watermelon, etc.. Some of them still wear farming boots like clodhoppers, long overcoats, and big hats, typical of Southern farmers. They are superstitious and believe in ghosts. Some of them communicate with their ancestors retaining unconsciously the African belief in the worship of the ancestors. Most important of all, they carry their music, song, and dance with them. They sing the blues, play on the piano or the guitar, play the boogie-woogie and dance the juba.

The narrative strategy that Wilson follows in his plays is typical of the black oral tradition, i.e., story-telling. His dramatic structure differs from the Aristotelian model of a well-made play — conflict and resolution with a beginning, middle, and an end. His plays are a collection of stories told by different characters which together form a unified whole. They do not focus upon a single protagonist or upon the development of a single plot leading to a final solution. On the other hand, they present many characters and their individual stories which together form the story of the community. Wilson says that he has learnt this method of narration from the collage art of Romare Bearden, a contemporary black painter, whose paintings have

inspired some of his plays like 'Fences' and 'The Piano Lesson': "Bearden had accomplished in painting an expression as full and varied as the blues" ("Preface" The Play x). Like a collage painting, he brings his characters together in one setting where they converse and exchange their stories and, in this way, he presents the picture of the community with its rich history and culture.

In **Ma Rainey's Black Bottom** (1984), which is set in 1927, Wilson tells the story of the blues musicians and through their story presents a glimpse of the history and culture of the black people in the 1920s. He sets the play in a studio in Chicago where the famous blues singer of the time, Ma Rainey, is to record her songs. But the play is not about her but her band members who, as they wait for her to arrive for the recording, indulge in talking, exchanging jokes, insults, and stories. Their casual talking in course of their music rehearsal together with Ma Rainey's songs present a picture of the manners, traditions, and history of the black people in that decade.

Ma Rainey and her band members are from the South. They have migrated to the North in search of better opportunities as many black people had done during the previous decade. The band members were farmers in the South working for the white man. One of them, Toledo, still wears the clodhoppers (31). He even feels nostalgic about farming: "I liked farming. Out there in the Sun . . . smell that dirt. Be out there by yourself . . . nice and

peaceful. Yeah, farming was alright by me. Sometimes I think I'd like to get me a little old place . . . but I done got too old to be following behind one of them balky mules now" (77). Their language is full of Southern farming idiom. For example, Toledo says about Levee, "Levee think he the king of the barnyard. He think he's the only rooster know how to crow" (48). Levee, the youngest member of the band, says to Dussie Mae as he courts her, "Look here, sugar . . . what I wanna know is . . . can I introduce my red rooster to your brown hen?" (67).

The band members are good rappers and they display good rhetorical and narrative skills. Their conversation is embellished with metaphors and is interspersed with such modes as lying, sweet-talk etc.. For example, Slow Drag tells a little lie when he recalls how they have been together and all in order to persuade Cutler to give him a reefer:

> Cutler, how long done I known you? How long we been together? Twenty-two years. We been doing this together for twenty-two years. All up and down the back roads, the side roads, the front roads . . . We done played the juke joints, the whorehouses, the barn dances, and city sit-downs . . . I done lied for you and lied with you . . . We done laughed together, fought together, slept in the same bed together, done sucked on the same titty . . . and you don't gonna give me a reefer (24).

Levee sweet-talks to Dussie Mae with an impressive rhetorical skill as he courts her (65-67).

Most of Wilson's characters have good narrative skills which they display as they tell their personal or other stories. As I have said, Wilson uses story-telling as his narrative strategy to present the stories of his plays. He brings his characters together in one setting and makes them exchange their stories, which together constitute the stories of his plays in the end.

Levee has a personal tragic tale to narrate, which he does with great emotion when he is provoked. His tale is about his childhood experience of racism in which he had witnessed the gang rape of his mother by a gang of white men in the South when he was an eight-year-old boy (56-58). Cutler has a similar tale of racism, which had happened to one Reverend Gates when he was stranded in a Southern railway station (78-81). Tales of racism are so common to black people that Toledo says to Cutler, "You don't even have to tell me no more. I know the facts of it. I done heard the same story a hundred times. It happened to me too. Same thing" (80). Stories are also told to illustrate points. For example, Toledo explains the unwanted situation of the black people in America through a metaphorical story. Using the metaphor of food, he describes the black people as "the leftover from history" because the white man had used them up and does not want them any more (46-47).

The play being about a recording session, it includes, of course, many blues songs. As the band members rehearse, Slow Drag sings "Rambling man makes no change in me . . . " (27). Ma Rainey sings the same song (83) and the "Black Bottom" song (70) for the recording. But the blues is not just music for rehearsal or recording, it is a part of their life. As Ma Rainey says, the blues is a "way of understanding life" and "This be an empty world without the blues" (67). Hence, she sings to herself when she waits for the recording, "Oh, Lord, these dogs of mine . . . " (49). Slow Drag sings, "If I had my way . . . ", which expresses a mood appropriate to the tragic tale of his childhood experience that Levee narrates (58).

In the play, Wilson shows the life of the blues musicians in the 1920s. The blues musicians are exploited by the white recording industry. Although their music fetches the white man enormous profits, they get only a pittance. Ma Rainey gets $200 and her band members get $25 only each for a recording. Sturdyvant, the white record producer, does not even provide enough heat in the recording studio. In fact, the blues or the musicians are not treated with respect by the white man. For Sturdyvant, the blues is not even a "respectable business" like the textiles (13). Ma Rainey feels that she is used like a whore by the white record producer and her white manager. She says, "As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then" (64). She can't even get a cab because the

white cabbie refuses to take colored folks (41). The band members can't even cash their checks because, Cutler says, "See a nigger with a check, the first thing they [the white folks] think is he done stole it some place" (88).

In the 1920s, music was the only career available for the black man to achieve success in life. But the record industry was owned by the white man. So, the black man had to go to him to pursue his career as a musician. When even that career is denied to a black man, he becomes frustrated and commits self-destructive acts out of frustration, as it can be seen in Levee. Of the four band members, Levee is ambitious who wants to become a famous blues musician and record his own songs and have his own band. He is a talented musician and also can compose music unlike the others. He is aware of the people's change of taste for Ma Rainey's "old jug-band music" in the North (18). So, he composes a different music for the Northern fans with a lot of rhythm and dance. Sturdyvant promises him to record his songs. But, he later turns his back on his promise. Levee is extremely hurt by this sudden refusal. Unable to do anything to the white man, he takes out his frustration on a fellow black man, Toledo.

Levee's frustration with the white man and the resultant fratricide is not because of that single incident with Sturdyvant. His frustration has its roots in his childhood experience of racism, which has made him bitter towards the white man. Unable to do anything to the gang of white men who gang raped his mother, he has carried that bitterness in him. But the bitterness

must find its release either in retaliation or forgiveness, otherwise it leads to self-destruction. Levee has not been able to retaliate against or forgive the white man; as a result, he becomes self-destructive. That moment of self-destruction comes when, once again, the white man hurts him.

It is tragic to see how white racism turns a black man against a fellow black man. But, Levee's fratricide being tragic as it is, it is also ironical because he kills a black man who is the only enlightened member of the band. Toledo is not only the only member of the band who can read and write, he is the only black man who is conscious and proud of his identity as an African and who tries to educate his friends, however imperfectly, about their identity and heritage. He is like a griot who has a knowledge of the black man's history from its African roots. He also serves as Wilson's mouthpiece as he instructs his friends on their identity, heritage, and problems. For example, he airs Wilson's views on the need for education (23), the need to know their identity as Africans and stop imitating the white man (78), the need to know their history (46-47) and culture (24), and the need to work collectively for the welfare of the community (33-34). So, his needless death, as an indirect consequence of white racism, is a great loss to the black community.

Fences (1985) is different from Wilson's other plays in the sense that in it Wilson tells the story of one individual rather than the community as he does in his other plays. In fact, the play can be called, as he says, "*The Life of Troy Maxson* or just *Troy Maxson*" (Pettengill 222). But, through the story of one individual, Wilson tells the story of the black man in the 1950s.

As usual, as Wilson tells his story, he depicts the culture of his people through his characters' language, rhetorical and narrative skills, manners, food, and, above all, their music. Like the characters in his other plays, Troy, his wife, Rose, and his friend, Bono, are from the South. So, their language is filled with Southern farming idiom. For example, Bono and Troy compare the body of a woman (Alberta) to the river, Mississippi, or a horse.

> BONO: . . . Got them great big legs and hips as wide as the Mississippi River.
>
> TROY: Legs don't mean nothing. You don't do nothing but push them out of the way. But them hips cushion the ride! (105).

Troy, the phallocentric trickster, like Levee in 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', describes his courtship with Rose, using the metaphor of a rooster:

> TROY: Come back, told her . . . "Okay, baby . . . but I'm gonna buy me a banty rooster and put him out there in the backyard . . . and when

> he see a stranger come, he'll flap his wings and crow . . . " Look here, Bono, I could watch the front door by myself . . . it was that back door that I was worried about (109-110).

He describes his son, Cory's, defiant behaviour as that of a bull: "That boy walking around smelling his piss . . . thinking he's grown. Thinking he's gonna do what he want, irrespective of what I say" (146).

Troy and Bono, close friends, "engage in a ritual of talk and drink" every Friday night in the front yard of Troy's house (105). As they sit and drink enjoying themselves on this payday every week, Troy tells his stories and Rose prepares the food inside. Rose prepares the typical food of the black people, "chicken and collard greens", whereas Bono's wife prepares "a pot of pigfeet" in their house (109).

Troy has great narrative and rhetorical skills. He is called Uncle Remus by Bono who enjoys his stories every Friday: "I know you got some Uncle Remus in your blood. You got more stories than the devil got sinners" (115). Troy tells the long story of his life from his childhood in the South to his life in the North (147-155). But his narrative and rhetorical skills are manifested in his stories about Death and the white moneylender. Troy was a skilled baseball player. Hence, he often uses the baseball metaphor to describe things. He describes his near-fatal sickness as an encounter with Death. He describes Death as a "fastball on the outside corner" and being a skilled

striker, he knows what to do to that: "You get one of those fastballs, about waist high, over the outside corner of the plate where you can get the meat of the bat on it . . . and good God! You can kiss it good-bye" (112-113). He also describes Death as a wrestler with whom he wrestled hand to hand (114). He describes the white moneylender who lent him the money for his furniture as a devil and narrates his experience with him as his meeting with the devil (116-117).

The blues becomes a symbol of paternal heritage in 'Fences'. Troy's father had made up a song about their dog named, Blue, "Hear it ring! Hear it ring!" (141). Troy has learnt that song and often sings it. He sings it when he is happy (141) and also when he is sad and lonely (176-178). By singing his father's song, Troy has forgiven his father who was a tyrant to his family. Cory, too, sings his father's song when he comes around to forgive him on the day of his funeral (190-191). Rose sings a sacred blues praying to Jesus for protection and safety as she does her chores: "Jesus, be a fence all around me everyday . . . " (122).

In 'Fences', Wilson tells the story of Troy, his life and his relationship with his son and his wife. In 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', he showed the disastrous consequence of racism upon a black man when he was denied of his ambition in music. In 'Fences', he shows the disastrous consequence of racism upon a black man when he is denied of his ambition in sports.

Wilson traces three generations of Troy as he tells his tragic story: his father's and his son's besides his own. Troy, like Wilson's characters in other plays, is from the South. His father was a sharecropper. Through the story of his father, Wilson gives us a glimpse of the miserable life of the sharecroppers in the post-Reconstruction era. The sharecroppers were virtually slaves who worked on the white man's land in an economic arrangement, which bound them in eternal debt to the white man. Only a few of them, like Levee's father in 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', could extricate themselves from this economic slavery. Troy's father worked hard on the land growing cotton. But he found himself always in debt to the white man no matter how much cotton he grew and gave him. This frustrated him and he was bitter. He knew he was "trapped", but he could do nothing about it because he knew nothing except farming (147). The result is, he took out his frustration on his family. He was absolutely selfish and tyrannical towards his family. His women never stayed with him long as a result of this. He had eleven children and he made all of them work on the land as soon as they were able to walk. But, he had one positive quality in him. That is, he did not have the "walking blues" (148), i.e., walk off to the North, like most black men of his time, leaving behind his family. He carried out his responsibility to his family, although in his own tyrannical way.

His father was so tyrannical that he once behaved like a brute towards him. He had sent him to do some ploughing. But, being a young boy of

fourteen, Troy was fooling around with a girl. His father came upon him and whipped him. Troy tried to run away but he saw that his father had driven him away only to have the girl for himself. Then he lost all fear of his father and began to whip him. But his father turned upon him again and whipped him unconscious. When he regained his consciousness, he decided to leave his father's house. He walked off to the North like many black people did at the time.

Coming to the North, Troy faced the same situation as every Southern migrant faced. There was no job, nor a place to live. He lived in a shack and stole food. Then he stole money to buy food. In the mean time, he met a woman and had a child, Lyons, by her. Now, he had to steal more to feed three mouths. While committing a robbery, he killed a man and was imprisoned for fifteen years.

The prison changed Troy's life. It removed the idea of robbing from his nature. In prison, he learnt to play baseball. In prison, he met his close friend, Bono. Coming out of prison, he played baseball in Negro leagues. He achieved a great success hitting more home runs than many players. In the mean time, sports was desegregated and black players were gradually recruited into the major leagues. But Troy was left out because he was too old already. Troy did not understand that. He felt that it was only because of racism, he was left out. He felt frustrated and carries the bitterness in his heart for ever. He has hung a ball made of rags from a tree in his yard and a

baseball bat leaning against it. They are a reminder of his life's frustration. He practices with that bat and ball whenever he is sad for any reason. He loved and dreamed of baseball so much that baseball had entered his idiolect.

Being denied of his baseball ambition, Troy is forced to take up a menial's job in the city's municipality, collecting the city's garbage. Nonetheless, he enjoys his life, does his work regularly, loves his wife and son, enjoys his Friday night with Bono, etc.. But, the frustration of his baseball ambition and the daily struggle to make both ends meet with a menial's job take their toll on him.

Troy is too protective of his son, Cory. He does not want him to meet with the same frustration in life as he did because of sports. So, when Cory wants to play football for his school, he stubbornly refuses to allow him. He refuses to believe that black people are now allowed in major leagues and he was only too old to be recruited. He says to Rose, "What do you mean too old? Don't come telling me I was too old. I just wasn't the right color. Hell, I'm fifty-three years old and can do better than Selkirk's .269 right now!" (137-138). That's why he wants that Cory should give up his ambition in sports and learn some trade to make a living. He says to Cory:

> The white man ain't gonna let you go nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book learning so you can work

> yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage (134).

It is perhaps true that times have changed since Troy played baseball and black players are now being recruited into major leagues, perhaps true that he was too old to be recruited as Rose says, and it is also perhaps true that he is jealous of his son getting the chance in sports which he did not get, as his son says (153). But it is also true that it was because of racism in the first place that Troy's father treated his son as he did and Troy was made a criminal and all and did not get a chance to play baseball till he was too old. Hence, the basic truth is that white racism breeds frustration in the black men and that frustration leads to his self-destruction.

The daily struggle to make both ends meet with a menial's job forces Troy to seek freedom and satisfaction with another woman. He tries to make his wife understand this:

> It's just . . . She gives me a different idea . . . a different understanding about myself. I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems . . . be a different man. I ain't got to wonder how I'm gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed. I can just be

a part of myself that I ain't never been (163).

Troy alienates his son by refusing to allow him to play football. He alienates his wife by having a secret affair with another woman and a daughter by her. Like his father, Troy is a responsible man. So, he brings his daughter by that woman, who dies in childbirth, to his house and requests Rose to look after her. He continues to look after his family, but becomes lonely being alienated by it. Ironically, he has also become lonely in his job by becoming a driver, "the first colored driver" in Pittsburgh (143), instead of being only a collector like his friend, Bono, and others. He has also alienated Bono by his extramarital affair. He dies a lonely and sad man. And, significantly, he dies, while practicing a shot with the bat and ball he has in his yard, a frustrated man.

Being denied of a football scholarship to college, Cory joins the army, a career open to black men. After six years, he's already thinking of retiring because he is not very happy there. Being very angry with his father, he refuses to attend his funeral. But, Rose persuades him to understand and forgive his father, who always meant to do good for him. He does so and, when he sings his father's song, as I have said earlier, it is symbolically understood that he forgives his father.

Rose is a strong and wonderful black woman. She was completely devoted to Troy because she recognized the possibilities of the life of a black

woman without a man — "a succession of abusive men and their babies, a life of partying and running the streets, the church, or aloneness with its attendant pain and frustration" (108). She wanted to have a whole family, which she had not seen in her own: "My whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and mothers . . . " (162). But, Troy, who pursued his own self-satisfaction, makes her family exactly that by bringing in a daughter by a different woman. But Rose accepts his daughter as her own as if "she was all them babies I had wanted and never had" (190).

The fate of Troy's brother, Gabriel, is a sad comment on how America treats its black soldiers. Gabriel was wounded in the head in World War II and as a result has lost his mind. He believes himself to be the Archangel Gabriel and blows a trumpet to open the gates of heaven. He moves around the streets trying to sell the discarded fruits and vegetables he picks up from somewhere. Because of his mental sickness, he is often kept in a mental hospital. He was given $3000 as compensation for his injury and Troy had to take that money to buy his house for which he always felt guilty.

The life of Troy's first son, Lyons, is no better. He loves music which, he says, echoing the words of Ma Rainey in 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', "help[s] me get out of bed in the morning" (119). He tries to become a musician without success. Hence, he is forced to hustle — "cashing other people's checks" (186) — and ends up in the workhouse. Thus, the sad story

of Troy, his wife, his brother, and his two sons, sum up the story of the black people in the 1950s.

In **Joe Turner's Come and Gone** (1986), which is set in 1911, Wilson deals directly with the problem of identity. He shows how slavery — in this case, post-Emancipation slavery — causes a crisis of identity in the black man, as a result of which he wanders in search of it until he finds in his own roots. Besides this story of the fundamental spiritual crisis, he also tells the story of the social crisis caused by the black people's migration to the North, which started in a big way (i.e., the Great Migration, 1910-30) in the second decade of the twentieth century in which the play is set.

Wilson returns to his narrative strategy of sketching the community rather than a single individual in this play as he did in 'Fences'. He brings his characters together in one setting where they tell their individual stories which together sum up the story of the community. As usual, as he tells the story, he depicts their culture through their language, their rhetorical and narrative modes, their beliefs, their food, and, above all, their music and dance.

All the characters, except the owner of the boardinghouse, Seth Holly, are from the South. Hence, their language is filled with the Southern farming idiom. For example, Bynum uses the metaphor of a mule as he refers to Jeremy who will be hungry after a night's stay in the jail, "He's gonna be

back here hungrier than a mule directly" (209). Martha uses the metaphor of a sack of cotton when she says that she wanted to leave her past behind, "I couldn't drag you [her husband] behind me like a sack of cotton" (285). Jeremy, the phallocentric trickster, like Levee ('Ma Rainey's Black Bottom') or Troy ('Fences'), sweet-talks to Mattie as he courts her. Boasting about his sexual prowess, he says, "I got a ten-pound hammer and I knows how to drive it down. Good god . . . you ought to hear my hammer ring!" (227).

Bynum uses the narrative mode of call-n-response to make Loomis relate his vision of the bones people (250-253). He himself narrates the story of his mystical experience of finding the "Binding Song" (211-213). Loomis tells the story of his capture by Joe Turner (268-269). Selig, a friendly white man, tells the story of his own life and about the family business of finding the black people (239-240). Bynum explains the importance of woman to Jeremy through the illustration of a story comparing a woman to a new land (245).

The beliefs of the black people are manifested in Bynum's conjuring and Bertha's superstitions. Bynum is a conjurer who uses the Southern traditional art of healing, whose roots can be traced back to Africa. His father was also a conjurer who had taught the art to him. Bertha believes in such beliefs as sprinkling salt in the house and lining up pennies across the threshold to bless the house (206).

The music and dance of the black people are shown in the blues songs and the juba dance. The play's title itself is extracted from a blues song, which goes like "They tell me Joe Turner's Come and Gone . . . ". Bynum sings this song as he plays a game of dominoes with Seth (264-266). Zonia sings a blues song, "I went downtown . . . ", as she plays in the yard (227-228). All the characters in the play, except Loomis, dance a juba, which is a "call-n-response dance" and "reminiscent of the ring shouts of the African slaves" (249).

Slavery and migration to the North have both caused spiritual disintegration to the black man. Slavery caused them by forcibly uprooting the black man from his native continent, Africa, and transplanting him on the alien land, America. The migration to the North was a voluntary act of the black man by which he willingly uprooted himself from the South, which had become his "ancestral homeland" in America (Pettengill 216) and transplanted himself on the North, an alien land, causing similar disintegrations to himself. By combining the stories of the spiritual disintegration caused by slavery (here, post-Emancipation servitude) and the social disintegration caused by the migration to the North in 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone', Wilson emphasizes the above point. He, in fact, equates the situation of the Southern migrant in the North in the 20th century to that of the African slaves in America in the 17th or 18th century:

> Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy ("The Play" 203).

All the characters in the play, except the Hollys, the owners of the boardinghouse, and Bynum and Selig, are wanderers and seekers. All of them are looking for something. Jeremy is looking for work, Mattie is looking for a mate, Martha is looking for her daughter, and, above all, Loomis is looking for his identity. All the characters come to the boardinghouse at some point of their searches. The boardinghouse not only provides them a temporary lodging but also helps in their searches through its permanent boarder, Bynum, and its weekly visitor, Selig. Bynum provides the spiritual help with his conjuring whereas Selig provides the physical help with his people-finding business.

The story of Loomis is essentially the story of every black man whose existence in America is rooted in slavery. Loomis's brief enslavement by Joe Turner in the post-Emancipation South and the consequent spiritual crisis is suggestive of the slavery and its spiritual effect upon the black man. Loomis was a tenant farmer in the South. He was also a deacon and a zealous follower of Christ. One day, when he was preaching to a group of gamblers

to see if he "could turn some of them from their sinning", he was suddenly arrested, along with the gamblers, by Joe Turner and taken to his farm to work in bondage for seven years (269). Joe Turner, a real person in history, was the brother of the governor of Tennessee, who tricked black people into servitude by arresting them as law-breakers and forcing them to work on his farm in lieu of their prison terms. His trick was a reenactment of the history of the slave trade when Africans were kidnapped and sold into slavery. Being enslaved, Loomis suffers from a crisis of identity. He loses the sense of his self. He loses it because he has not been his own since the day of his captivity. Bynum explains to him, using the metaphor of a song, when he asks him what Joe Turner wanted from him:

> What he wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his. He thought by catching you he could learn that song. Every nigger he catch he's looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he's got you bound up to where you can't sing your own song. Couldn't sing it them seven years cause you was afraid he could snatch it from under you. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it (270).

Loomis had a sure sense of his self and his world before he was enslaved by Joe Turner. He believed in Christ and saw himself in His image. But, the treacherous act of Joe Turner destroyed that belief in himself as well as in

Christ. He no longer believes in Christ. He now sees Him as the white man's God, looking and behaving as the white man himself. He, in fact, equates Him to a planter, the slave's tyrant: "Great big old white man . . . your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton" (287-288). Having lost faith in that world, he is now searching for "a world that speaks something about himself" (216).

Freed after seven years on Joe Turner's birthday, he wanted to see his wife's face and say good-bye to her. He wanted to see her face just to "Make sure everything still in its place so I could reconnect myself together" (284). But, at the same time, he wanted to say good-bye to her because he knew he did not belong to that world any more. He wanted to "recreate the world into one that contains his image" (216). That's to say, he wanted to discover his true identity. But he must know that, as Bynum says, his true identity lay within himself, in his roots. He must find a way to reconnect himself to himself, to his roots, his ancestors. But unless he frees himself spiritually from the clutches of the white oppressor, he cannot reconnect himself to himself, his roots.

Enslavement by Joe Turner has made Loomis spiritually bound to him for ever even after he is freed by him. He has become bitter towards the white man but his bitterness now binds him spiritually to him. That's why, although he sees the vision of his ancestors, i.e., the vision of the slaves who

had died and were thrown into the ocean in the Middle Passage, he cannot completely connect himself to them (250-253). He receives the power of the ancestors, "the breath", into his body, still he cannot stand up and walk like them because he is still bound to the white man (252). Hence, he must cut off that tie to the white man and make himself free to discover his self and his roots.

Loomis is finally driven to cut off his spiritual bondage to the white man in a moment of great bitterness and anger when he performs a self-cleansing act by bleeding himself. After four years of frenzied search, Loomis is finally able to meet his wife, Martha. Martha, who is a devout follower of Christ like he was earlier, tries to persuade him to pray to Christ for salvation who has bled for mankind. But, Loomis, who has already lost faith in Christ, says that he wants nobody to bleed for him because he can bleed for himself. Saying that he slashes across his chest and rubs his face with the blood. As soon as he does that, he suddenly realizes that he feels free from all bondages and feels strong enough to stand on his own. Symbolically, this means that he frees himself from the spiritual bondage to the white man and as soon as he does that he discovers his true identity and can stand strong and proud on his own. Hence, Wilson writes,

> *Having found his song, the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the*

workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh, having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world, he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions (288-289).

As I have said, slavery and migration to the North have both caused disintegration of the black family. The woman is separated from her man, the children are separated from their parents, and so on. Loomis's enslavement by Joe Turner causes his family to disintegrate. Shortly after Loomis was incarcerated by Joe Turner, his wife, Martha, was kicked off the white man's land where he was a tenant farmer. She went to her mother's place and waited for him. But, after waiting for five years, she did not know whether Loomis would come back. So, she decided to devote her life to the church and live without him. She migrated to the North along with her church. She left her daughter in her mother's place intending to take her after she was able to settle in the North. But, in the mean time, Loomis is freed and takes their daughter with him to the North as he goes looking for her. When she discovers this, she starts looking for her daughter in the North. She seeks Bynum's help in finding her daughter. Ultimately, Selig, the "People Finder", whose help Loomis seeks in finding his wife, unites Martha with her daughter as he finds Martha for Loomis.

The migration to the North obviously causes more suffering to the black woman. This is because, more often than not, the migration to the North, which is supposed to be, as Bono says in 'Fences', "Searching out the New Land", simply means "moving from place to place . . . woman to woman" (146). As a result of this, the black woman is constantly in search of a man with whom she can set up a stable family. The story of Mattie shows this typical situation of the black woman. All her life she has been looking for somebody to stop and stay with her. She had a man (Jack Carper), but he left after three years because he thought she had a curse prayer on her because their babies kept dying. Since then she has been looking for somebody to stop and stay with her. When Jeremy tries to be her man till Jack Carper comes back, she says to him, "I just can't go through life piecing myself out to different mens" (226). Hopefully, she gets her right man in Loomis, who also thinks her to be his right woman.

Because of the wandering nature of the man, Molly chooses not to depend on him for a stable and long relationship. She chooses to live independent and, perhaps, single. She does not want a family. She finds her proper mate in Jeremy, who is a wanderer. Jeremy does not like hard work. He is a rambling musician who wants to enjoy his life playing his guitar in restaurants and bars in different places and earning his living in this manner.

Separation and dispersement is so pervasive in the black community that even the children are painfully aware of it. Reuben has no kids in the

neighbourhood to play with. He had only one best friend but he died. He says to Zonia, "Ain't no kids hardly live around here. I had me a friend but he died. He was the best friend I ever had" (229). He eagerly wants to make friendship with Zonia. When Zonia says that she will go next Sunday, Reuben is upset: "Dag! You just only been here for a little while. Don't seem like nothing ever stay the same" (278). He plays the grown-ups' game of separation and pursuit with her. He kisses her on the lips and tells her, "You my girl, okay?" "When I get grown, I come looking for you" (280).

Bertha is a woman of love and friendship. She is like a loving mother to her guests. She is also meant to symbolize Africa and her magic of love and laughter. She says to Mattie, who is too worried, "That's all you need in the world is love and laughter. That's all anybody needs. To have love in one hand and laughter in the other" (282-283). Wilson writes about her movements as she does her chores in the kitchen, following the above words: "It is a dance and demonstration of her own magic, her own remedy that is centuries old and to which she is connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood's memory" (283).

Besides the Hollys, Bynum and Selig have now stability in their lives. Bynum was also a wanderer like Loomis in search of his "song" or self. But his father gave him his song. He had initially thought it was his father's song, but he found out that it was his own song, made up out of himself (267-268). His father, who was a healer who healed people with a song, the

"Healing Song", also gave him a song, the "Binding Song", to bind people to each other (258). He says that he chose that song because he had seen, when he was a wanderer himself, "people walking away and leaving one another", and needed to be bound to each other (213). Now, he is known as the Binder who binds people to one another. He is also the Binder who binds people to themselves. He helps Mattie to find her mate in Loomis and helps Martha find her daughter. He helps Loomis find his song. Bynum is also a symbolic character who represents Africa by virtue of being a conjurer or rootworker. The roots of conjuring are found in the traditional art of the medicine man in Africa.

Selig is an interesting character in the play. He is a white man whose forefathers were involved in the slave trade and who worked for the plantation bosses. His "great-granddaddy used to bring Nigras across the ocean on ships" (239). His daddy "used to find runaway slaves for the plantation bosses" (240). After the Emancipation, when the black people began to migrate to the Northern cities and started looking for one another, he continues the family's "People Finding Business" and finds the black people for themselves (240). The significant thing is, before the Emancipation, his forefathers must have been feared and hated by the black people, but now, he is a friend of the black people who helps them find one another like Bynum.

In **The Piano Lesson** (1987), August Wilson teaches the lesson of history directly. In his earlier plays, he touches upon the attitude of the black man towards his past. In 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', Levee is bitter towards his past and has not come to terms with it. As a result, one more of incident of frustration caused by the white man (Sturdyvant) proves to be the proverbial last straw upon his already heavy burden of bitterness under which he collapses. He commits fratricide by turning his frustration on his fellow black man (Toledo). Through Toledo, who attempts, although unsuccessfully, to enlighten his colleagues about their history, Wilson teaches the right attitude towards the roots, Africa. In 'Fences', Cory learns to forgive the "sins" of his father and respect him. Cory is so bitter towards his caring but domineering father, who adamantly refuses to allow him to play football in school, that he refuses to attend his funeral. His mother, who herself is unhappy with her husband lately, teaches him, "Disrespecting your daddy ain't gonna make you a man, Cory. You got to find a way to come to that on your own. Not going to your daddy's funeral ain't gonna make you a man" (188). When Cory sings his father's song, which his father had inherited from his father, he learns to respect his ancestor, and, by extension, his history. In 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone', Loomis is so devastated by his incarceration by Joe Turner that he forgets his "song", i.e., his identity. He is led to reclaim his "song" by Bynum who makes him recognize and accept his ancestors (the slaves who had died and were thrown into the

ocean in the Middle Passage). Now, in 'The Piano Lesson', Wilson focuses on the question how the black man should view his history of slavery. Should he view it as a burden and try to forget it and go on to make his life without it? Or, should he view it as the basis of his identity, an asset to build his future on? Wilson dramatizes this debate through the story of a piano, a family heirloom, which is at the center of a bitter conflict between a sister and a brother who look at the piano, a symbol of history, from different perspectives.

As usual, as Wilson tells the story of the piano, he depicts the culture of the black people. He depicts the culture through their language, rhetorical and narrative modes, manners, and, above all, their music. All the characters of the play are from the South. Hence, their language is interspersed with the Southern idiom. Story-telling is as usual the narrative strategy Wilson employs to relate through his characters their individual stories as well as the story about the piano. Doaker narrates the long story of the piano as he explains to Lymon why Berniece does not want to sell the piano (42-46). Wining Boy, the rambling pianist, tells the story of his rambling life with the piano as he recollects his unhappy past (41). He tells the story of his brief married life as he remembers his wife whom he loved but left because he "loved to ramble" (31-32). He tells the story of his communication with the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog whom he had called upon for help (34-35). Avery relates the story of his dream in which he was called upon to become a

"shepherd for his flock", i.e., a priest (24-25). His story is an example of testifying in which the testifier relates the vision/dream of his sacred experience.

The blues music and songs are as usual included in the play. Boy Willie plays the boogie-woogie on the piano as he gives a demonstration of the music, which is a type of the blues, to Maretha (21). Boy Willie, Lymon, Wining Boy, and Doaker sing a blues song, "O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal, oh-ah . . . " as they sit together and talk (39-40). Doaker, the railroad cook, sings a blues song about his train journeys, "Gonna leave Jackson Mississippi . . . ", as he prepares to leave for work (55-56). Wining Boy, the rambling pianist, sings a blues song playing on the piano, "I am a rambling gambling man . . . " (47-48). He also sings a song which he had written for his late wife, playing on the piano as Boy Willie finally prepares to take it out to sell, "Hey little woman what's the matter with you now . . . " (101).

The piano is both a symbol of history and has a history of its own. The Charles family, of which the brother, Boy Willie, and the sister, Berniece, are present descendants, belonged to a white man, named Sutter, in slavery time. The piano belonged to another white man, named Nolander. On their wedding anniversary, Sutter wanted to give a gift to his wife, but he had no money. So, he wanted to trade off some of his slaves for the piano. He gave away the great-grandmother, named Mama Berniece, and grandfather, named Willie Boy (of Boy Willie and Berniece). Sutter's wife loved the

piano very much. But she began to miss Mama Berniece, who used to do everything for her, and Willie Boy, who used to fetch things for her. So, she wanted to have them back from Nolander and return the piano. But, Nolander refused. As a result, she became sick. So, Sutter asked the great-granddaddy, named Papa Boy Charles, to carve the images of Mama Berniece and Willie Boy on the piano for his wife. Boy Charles was a good woodworker and he carved from his memory not only the images of his wife and son, but the whole tree of his family. He carved the pictures of his father and mother. He carved the scene of his marriage with Mama Berniece, the picture of his son when he was born, the picture of his mother's funeral, and the picture of his wife and son as they were taken by Nolander. When Sutter saw all those pictures, he was furious, but he could do nothing. His wife was excited seeing those pictures because she now had her piano and her slaves as well.

Time passed and slavery was abolished. Boy Charles, father of Boy Willie and Berniece, wanted to get the piano from Sutter, the grandson of the Sutter whose slaves his ancestors were. He argued, "Say it [the piano] was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it . . . he had us. Say we was still in slavery" (45). So, on the fourth of July, when the Sutters were away at the picnic, he and his two brothers, Doaker and Wining Boy, stole the piano from Sutter's house. They took it to his wife, Mama Ola's place. When Sutter returned and saw that the piano was stolen, he suspected Boy

Charles and looked for him. Finding him in the boxcar of a train, he set the boxcar in fire killing Boy Charles and the four hobos with him. Two months later, the white people, who were responsible for the fire, began to fall mysteriously in their wells, the last being Sutter himself.

For Berniece, the piano is a reminder of this tragic past. It was because of the piano her father was killed. As a result of which, her mother became lonely and pined the rest of her life at the piano. She wants to forget this tragic past, so she does not touch the piano. But, she respects the piano as a monument to the tragic history. That's why she fiercely resists to part with it when Boy Willie wants to sell it. Boy Willie wants money to buy land in the South where he lives. So, he wants to sell the piano, of which he is a part inheritor like his sister. As a result, a fierce struggle, which threatens to end in yet another tragedy over the piano, ensues between the brother and the sister.

Berniece claims the piano to be the "soul" of his family. She angrily tells Boy Willie, "Money can't buy what that piano cost. You can't sell your soul for money. It won't go with the buyer. It'll shrivel and shrink to know that you ain't taken on to it" (50). But, the point is, how does she actually take the piano? What kind of relationship does she have with the piano? She sees the piano as a symbol of the tragic past, which she wants to forget. That's why she does not touch the piano. Thus, she distances herself from the piano. She'll have nothing to do with the "soul". She used to play on the

piano for her mother though. She tells Avery, " . . . when I played it she [her mother] could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them" (70). But she does not want to "wake them spirits" (70). She does not want to communicate with the ancestors as her mother used to. She wants to forget them because they remind her of the tragic past. She sees them as a "burden" which she does not want to pass on to her daughter. That's why although she makes her daughter play on the piano, she does not want her to know about the history of the family carved on it. "I ain't gonna burden her with that piano", she says (70).

Berniece is not only bitter about the past, she is confused about it. She does not see her father's stealing of the piano from their former slave master's house as an honorable act to reclaim the family's history and dignity as free people, as her father had seen it. She sees it as mere "thieving" and equates his killing by Sutter and other white men with the latter's mysterious deaths by falling down their wells (52). Similarly, she sees Boy Willie, Lymon, and Crawley's "keeping us a little bit of wood" for themselves to make both ends meet as mere stealing (53). Hence, she is bitter about the sorrow and pain caused to her mother and herself by the men's acts. That's the reason why she is still in mourning for her husband's death after three years. She is unable to come to terms with it because she sees those acts wrongly. She sees her father as well as her husband as fools

(52), not as people with the "warrior spirit" who fought for their families by whichever means they could.

Boy Willie is the protagonist who is endowed with all the qualities Wilson wishes to see in a black man. He is proud of his heritage. He wants to live in his homeland, the South, when all others are migrating to the North. He wants to own and farm land when all others are seeking other occupations. He has the African "warrior spirit" to fight for his goals by whichever means he can.

Boy Willie, like most other black men, has nothing to make his life with. His father was a sharecropper before he was killed for the piano. He tries all means to make both ends meet. He and his friend, Lymon, while hauling wood for a white man, tried to sell some wood for themselves. They were caught and put in the penitentiary, and Crawley, who was helping them, got killed. The penitentiary, the Parchman Farm, is a place where most black men find themselves in one time or the other in their life. Wining Boy calls it "my old stomping grounds" (37). Both Wining Boy and Doaker had done their times there. Wilson says about the black man, who has the African warrior spirit, and the prison: " . . . the most valuable blacks were those in prison, those who had the warrior spirit in the African sense – men who went out and got for their women and children what they needed when all other avenues were closed to them" (Moyers 179).

Sutter dies falling down his well like the other white men responsible for killing Boy Charles and the four hobos. His brother, who now lives in the North, wants to sell off their land. Boy Willie wants to buy that land but he does not have enough money. So, he wants to sell the piano to make up for the shortage he has after having two-third of the amount with his savings and the proceeds from selling the watermelons with Lymon.

Boy Willie wants to own and farm land in the South when all others like his uncles, his sister, Avery, and now Lymon, have migrated to the North. Boy Willie wants to do what Wilson wants the black man to do. Through his argument, Wilson presents his own viewpoint to the audience: "What we should do is to return to our ancestral homeland in the Southern United States . . . If we continue to stay up here in the cities and go along the path that we are going along now, I'm not sure we're going to be here fifty years from now" (Pettengill 216-218). Boy Willie tells the same to Lymon who tries to persuade him to stay in the North, "Why I got to come up here and learn to do something I don't know how to do when I already know how to farm?" (46). He argues that it is the land, which gives a man a solid and firm economic grounding in the world and, as a result, a stronger sense of self. His ancestors had no land of their own. His father was only a sharecropper on a white man's land. So, they could not do anything for themselves. They could not make anything in life except for the white man. As a result, they did not have a stronger sense of self they would have if they had land. He

tells his sister, "See now . . . if he [their father] had his own land he wouldn't have felt that way. If he had something under his feet that belonged to him he could stand up taller" (92). That's why he wants to possess land, now that he has a chance, which his father did not have. Because "If you got a piece of land you'll find everything else fall right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton . . . the weather, and anything else you want to talk about" (92).

Boy Willie wants to trade off the piano for land not because he does not know or have respect for the sentimental value of the piano. He tells his sister, "See, you just looking at the sentimental value. See, that's good. That's alright. I take my hat off whenever somebody say my daddy's name" (51). "But", he argues, "I ain't gonna be no fool about no sentimental value" (51). His daddy had nothing else except the piano to leave for them, so, they are supposed to build on that. But, Berniece does not use the piano. If she used it, he says to her, he would let her do that and find some other means to raise his money for the land (51).

As I have said, Berniece actually sees the piano as a reminder of her bitter past which she wants to forget. That's why she does not tell the story of the piano to her daughter. When Boy Willie comes to know this, he reprimands her. He accuses her of being ashamed of her history: "You ain't even told her about the piano. Like that's something to be ashamed of. Like she supposed to go off and hide somewhere about that piano" (90-91). On the

other hand, he tells her, if she had been proud of her history, she would not have had any problem in life:

> You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle round it . . . and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. If you did that she wouldn't have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head held high (90).

This is Wilson's own view about the importance of remembering one's history. Regretting the African American people's forgetfulness of their history because of the slave legacy, he says:

> I find it criminal that after hundreds of years in bondage, we do not celebrate our Emancipation Proclamation, that we do not have a thing like the Passover, where we sit down and remind ourselves that we are African people, that we were slaves. We try to run away, to hide that part of our past. If we did something like that, then we would know who we are, and we wouldn't have the problem that we have (Moyers 176).

Boy Willie accuses Berniece that by not telling the history of the piano, she is teaching her daughter that she is "living at the bottom of life" (92). But, Berniece believes that she is teaching her the truth because, according to her, every black man lives at the bottom of life. In fact, that's the reason why she cannot appreciate her father's, Boy Willie's, or Crawley's, action as essentially a heroic struggle (a manifestation of the African warrior spirit) to express themselves in their own respective ways. Boy Willie gets angry hearing this and asks "how you come to believe that stuff" (92). He then warns her, "If you believe that's where you at then you gonna act that way. If you act that way then that's where you gonna be" (92).

Berniece does not play on the piano because she does not "want to wake them spirits" (70). That's to say, she does not want to communicate with her ancestors as her mother used to. She refuses to communicate with her ancestors means that she cuts herself off from her history. In other words, she relinquishes her claim on the piano, which symbolizes her history. As she relinquishes her claim on the piano, significantly, Sutter's ghost lays its claim on it. (Sutter's ghost is seen frequently in the house playing on the piano.) Afraid of the ghost, she asks Avery, the preacher, to bless the house to get rid of it. But, when Avery blesses the house, the ghost does not seem to be affected by it at all. Boy Willie, who does not believe in the "old preaching stuff", challenges the ghost and wrestles with it, engaging with it in a "life-and-death struggle" (106). Unable to drive away the ghost with his

Christian ritual, Avery finally gives up. It is at this terrifying moment, Berniece mysteriously realizes that she must seek the help of her ancestors in order to get rid of the terrible ghost. She crosses to the piano and begins to play. She calls upon her ancestors, Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola, for their help in her song. Wilson describes her song as the embodiment of the spirit of Africa, which is invoked for help: *"It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents"* (106).

As Berniece sings, the approach of the spirits of her ancestors is signified by the sound of an approaching train (107). That is, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, whom Wining Boy had called upon to help him (34-35), come to the rescue of Berniece also. At their approach, the ghost of Sutter disappears. When Boy Willie sees Berniece playing on the piano, he gives up his insistence on selling the piano and returns to the South. But, before he returns, he warns her, "Hey Berniece . . . if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano . . . ain't no telling . . . me and Sutter both liable to be back" (108). Berniece, of course, has now understood the significance of playing on the piano. She should no longer be reluctant to communicate with the spirits of her ancestors. She should now know the importance of remembering her ancestors, i.e., her history. Being no longer ashamed of her history, she should now be proud of her self and should no longer feel to be

at the bottom of life. Through Boy Willie's warning to Berniece, Wilson, of course, teaches his audience this lesson of history.

Two Trains Running (1990) being set in 1969, one would expect it to be about the turbulent sixties, particularly, the Black Power Movement, the "kiln" in which, Wilson says, his youth was "fired" ("Preface" Three Plays ix). But, as Wilson explains, he did not want to write a "sixties play", because " . . . those events ["so-called red-lettered events of the sixties"], while they may have in some way affected the character of society as a whole, didn't reach the average person who was concerned with just simply living" (Pettengill 207). The play is also not about the "ideas of cultural assimilation and cultural separatism", the "two ideas that have confronted black America since the Emancipation", symbolized by the two trains, as Wilson claims (Pettengill 208). The play is actually about the economic survival of black America in the politically turbulent sixties, or rather, in spite of it. Wilson here shows the economic situation of the black people to be as bleak as ever. The majority of black people are without jobs and survive only through unlawful activities like robbing or gambling. The man who tries to do a decent business is hardly able to do well. The only people who do well are, interestingly, preachers and funeral home owners.

As usual, Wilson tells the story of the black community by putting together the stories of many individuals. He brings his characters together in

one setting where they exchange their stories which together sum up the story of the community. And, as usual, as he tells story, he depicts the culture of the community through their language, narrative modes, and manners. The music, particularly, the blues, which is an important part of the earlier plays, does not figure in this play. In fact, the juke box, the only source of music in this play, remains broken through most of the play. Although most of the characters are from the South, they have lived long enough in the North, hence, their language is that of the urban Northerner, particularly, that of the street which includes the vocabulary from gambling. Sterling, who sweet-talks to Risa, does not use the farming metaphors like Levee, or Troy, or Boy Willie. All the characters have, of course, the narrative skill to narrate the stories of their lives. Memphis has the stories of his early life as a farmer in the South and of the early life as a robber in the North before he hit the number and bought the restaurant. Sterling has the story of his early life as an orphan and then a robber. West has the story of his early life as a hustler before he became a funeral home owner. Holloway is, like Toledo in 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', the local historian who has stories about almost all the people and everything in the neighbourhood. He not only has stories about individuals, but, like Toledo, knows the history of the black people in general.

A majority of the black people in the sixties have no jobs. Holloway has no steady job. He sometimes paints houses. But, now, he is virtually

dependent on Social Security. Out of the penitentiary for two weeks, Sterling is seeking a job but is unable to find one. Without a job, how does a black man fend for himself? Robbing, gambling, hustling, or running numbers. After being "tired of waking up every day with no money", Sterling had "robbed a bank" (45). That's how he had found himself in the penitentiary. Now, getting tired of seeking a job without success, he is again resorting to stealing. Before West became a rich undertaker, he was a hustler — gambling, selling bootleg liquor and running numbers (93). Before Memphis "hit the numbers" and got into the restaurant business, he was also a robber or a hustler carrying "a pistol and everything" (8). Wolf has become "the community's numbers runner" (2) working under the white exploiter, Albert. Playing the numbers is another choice a black man has to survive. Wolf correctly says, "The numbers give you an opportunity. If it wasn't for the numbers all these niggers would be poor" (3). Not only does Memphis owe his restaurant business to the numbers game, he now looks to it to see him through his daily expenses now that his business is down (11). Sterling plays it and gets lucky also, but his winning amount is cut in half by the white boss.

Of legitimate jobs, preaching seems to be very lucrative in the black community. Samuel, before he became Prophet Samuel, was a reverend, preaching "the word of the gospel and sell[ing] barbecue on the side" (25). He earned so much that he had got arrested "for income tax invasion" (26).

He sought the help of Aunt Ester who fixed with the law for him. Then he became Prophet Samuel, one of the richest black men in the city. People went to him for "financial blessing" (87). Undertaking is another lucrative business in the black community. West, who used to live a "fast life", discovered that "fast life" killed too many black people too early (93). Thus, he became an undertaker and one of the richest black men like Prophet Samuel.

Restaurant is a good decent business, but Memphis is already losing it. The city administration is demolishing the restaurant along with the whole block. So, even though, surprisingly, after fighting stubbornly for his price, Memphis gets more than that, he is not happy because he has lost his business. It leaves him high and dry and he does not know what he will do next. Memphis is a hard-working man, but he suffers too many reverses in life. He was born in the South. He had bought a farm from a white man. But, he was cheated out of it by a dirty deed which said that if he found water in the land, the sale would be null and void. Not only by legal trick, but by violence, was he run out of his farm by the white men who killed his mule and burnt his crop. Memphis leaves his farm quietly and comes to the North. But, he does not want to give up his farm. He calls it a "draw" and wants to play the game by the white man's rules (73). That's to say, he wants to go back and reclaim his land by force. Unable to find a job in the North, he resorts to hustling. Luckily, he wins the numbers game once and buys the

restaurant thinking he has "found a [decent] way to live the rest of my life" (9). Now he loses that because of the city-administration's demolition plans.

Except preaching and undertaking, there seems to be no job for the black man. Holloway, the self-made historian, like Toledo in 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', explains the unwanted situation of the black man in the sixties. Using the metaphor of food, Toledo describes the present black population as the "leftover from history". Using the metaphor of commodity, Holloway explains that the white man brought niggers from Africa, stacking one on top of the other (i.e., "stacking niggers"), in the ship, when he wanted work from them. He got all his works done by them for free. So, now, he does not need them any more.

In these circumstances of exploitation and discrimination, there is no alternative for the black man except to fight. This is what the historical Malcolm X preached in the sixties and the mythical and mystical Aunt Ester in the play advises. Malcolm X called upon the black people to fight, physically, against racial discrimination and for economic, political, and cultural rights. Aunt Ester also, in her mystical and metaphorical way, advises her clients the same: don't give up, fight. "If you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up. Ain't no need in keeping running, cause if you get to the end zone it ain't gonna be a touchdown", she says to Memphis (109). She also uses, significantly, the metaphors of fire and water. "If you can't fight the fire, don't mess with it", she tells Memphis (108). "I cannot

swim does not walk by the lakeside", she tells Sterling (98). Aunt Ester, with her mythical age of 322 years, i.e., the number of years blacks have lived in America, symbolizes the African continuum, the African wisdom, and, above all, the African warrior spirit.

The black men have always fought, with or without the advice of either Malcolm X or Aunt Ester. Very few are like Holloway's grandfather, who was a stereotypical Uncle Tom. Memphis has always fought. When the white man runs him out of his farm, he calls it a "draw" and wants to play the game by the white man's own rules. He says to himself, " 'okay, I know the rules now . . . You [the white man] go on and get your laugh now. Cause if I get out of this alive I know how to play as good as anyone' " (73). He comes to the North and, like most Southern migrants, he does not find any work. So, he does, what he has to do to live. He robs. Then, he gets lucky with the number. With the money, he buys a restaurant, happy to find at last "a way to live the rest of my life" (9). He was doing well with the restaurant. But, now, the restaurant is going to be demolished along with the whole block by the city administration. He fights stubbornly for his own price. He, too, goes to see Aunt Ester and gets the advice he wanted. He fights in the court and gets, surprisingly, more than what he demanded. But, he has lost his business. But, he does not want to give up. Now, he decides to go and reclaim, by force, his land in the South.

Sterling, born "an orphan" and raised in "an orphanage" (45), learns to fight early in his life. When he comes to be on his own, he seeks a job for his livelihood. He does not find one. He becomes desperate. He waits till his warden at the orphanage, whom he does not want to hurt, dies. Then he decides to rob. When he robs, he feels "strong" (48), like a man should feel. He is arrested. Coming out of the penitentiary, he looks for a job for over two weeks. He does not find one. He again resorts to stealing: stealing a flower from Prophet Samuel's coffin for Risa whom he loves, and stealing gas. He too goes to see Aunt Ester and gets the advice he always knew. In the end, he demonstrates his resolve to fight for what he wants by breaking into Lutz's Meat Market and stealing a large piece of ham for Hambone's casket.

Hambone symbolizes Martin Luther King, Jr.'s non-violent struggle for justice, a version of the African warrior spirit. He fights for justice till his end, peacefully. Nine and a half years ago, he paints a fence for Lutz, the white Meat Market owner. Lutz says to him, if he paints well, he will give a ham, otherwise, he will give him a chicken. After the painting, Lutz gives him a chicken. But, Hambone thinks he has painted well, so, he asks for a ham. But, Lutz thinks otherwise and refuses to give him a ham. Hambone refuses the chicken and demands only a ham. Since then, every morning, Hambone waits for Lutz at his shop and asks for his ham. People think he is mad. But, as Holloway explains, he has more sense than anyone else "Cause

he ain't willing to accept whatever the white man throw at him" (30). But, Hambone dies without getting his ham. He was a man about whom nobody knew much. But, when he dies, his death affects everybody. West lays him nicely in a casket for the funeral. Sterling, as I have mentioned, steals a large piece of ham from Lutz's shop and puts it in the coffin suggesting he would give him his due even though he has died. Memphis, who had always been annoyed at Hambone's refrain on his ham, buys expensive flowers to lay at his coffin. His death, I think, symbolizes the abandonment of the non-violent struggle as was preached by Martin Luther King, Jr., and, considering the reactions of Sterling and Memphis, the adoption of the violent struggle as advocated by Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement.

Thus, in play after play, Wilson narrates the stories of the sad but noble lives of the black people and portrays their culture in all its beauty and richness. He sets the plays in each decade of the twentieth century wishing to chronicle the twentieth century history of the black people in a cycle of ten plays. He does not write historical plays in the traditional sense dramatizing major historical events of the decades, but narrates the simple tales of the lives of the common people, which throw light on the life of the community peculiar to the concerned decades. Thus, in 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', set in the 1920s, he tells the story of the blues musicians working in the racist recording industry. In 'Fences', set in the 1950s, he tells the story of a black

man frustrated in sports. In 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone', set in the 1910s, he tells the story of an ex-slave, i.e., a former bondsman of Joe Turner, who looks for his identity. In 'The Piano Lesson', set in the 1930s, he deals with the issue as to how to look at the history of slavery. In 'Two Trains Running', set in the 1960s, he tells the story of the black people who struggle to survive in the hostile circumstances.

As Wilson narrates the stories of the black people, he portrays their culture — the typical language, manners, morals, customs and beliefs, and, above all, the music. He emphasizes the Southern plantation and African roots of the black people. All his characters are migrants from the South; hence, their language is filled with the farming idiom, country manners, folk customs and beliefs, and folk music. He emphasizes that the blacks have an honourable history, which is not just a history of victimization, but a history of triumph, and a distinctive culture, not just a sub-culture derived from the European culture of the majority white population, but a culture inherited from the African roots and transmuted on the Southern plantation on the anvil of the travails of slavery. As he narrates the stories and portrays the culture of the black people, he simultaneously affirms and celebrates their history and culture, and thus asserts their distinctive ethnic identity.

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CHAPTER FIVE

FENCED IN: FLAWS IN THE ETHNOCENTRIC WORKS OF BARAKA, BULLINS, AND WILSON

Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and August Wilson, three major African American playwrights to have written their works in response to or being inspired by the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, lent their dramatic voice to the chief concern of the movement — the affirmation of the distinctive ethnic identity of the African American people. They affirmed the identity in three different ways in their respective works reflecting the three trends in this historic nationalist movement. Baraka's "revolutionary" drama, propagating the message of the black revolution, represented the militancy of the Black Power Movement. Bullins's "realistic" drama, revealing the dreadful reality of the black people's life in America, represented the critical and introspective voice, which believed that only the knowledge of one's own society or nation could bring about a true nationhood. Wilson's "blues" drama, affirming and celebrating the history and culture of the African American people, represented the cool and self-confident voice, which expressed its strong faith in the culture even as it recognized the need for struggle and self-assessment to strengthen it.

The common social agenda of affirming the ethnic identity of the African American people helped the three playwrights produce strong ethnocentric works. But, even as it did so, it made the works themselves narrow, biased, and repetitive. The social agenda, as it were, erected a fence around the works, which restricted the writers' scope and vision and kept out the limitless horizon of the artistic truth and freedom. Let me now briefly point out in this concluding chapter the flaws committed by these three playwrights as a result of their subscriptions to the agenda centred on ethnicity.

A writer's commitment to a specific agenda, beyond the objective of the artistic truth, causes flaws in his art even as it adds strength and purpose to it. The agenda brings a certain focus to the work, which helps the writer make a strong statement in favour of his agenda. But, at the same time, the agenda makes a certain demand upon the writer, which makes him sacrifice, either willingly or unconsciously, the artistic truth, in order to fulfil the needs of the agenda.

Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and August Wilson have a common agenda of affirming the ethnic identity of the African American people in their plays. While this agenda has made their plays focused and purposeful, it has made them lose complexity, depth, and variety. Baraka's total commitment to the black revolution and his belief that art and politics were one enabled him to write plays with a strong message, but, at the same time, it made him

sacrifice the complexities of the issue and write plays with strong biases. While Bullins, with his professed commitment to the truth of life and art, boldly revealed the dreadful reality of the black life, he merely touched the surface and created works, which were only superficially impressive in terms of the truth of both life and art. While Wilson's "larger artistic agenda" of a "profound articulation of the black tradition" has enabled him to write plays as beautiful and moving as the blues, his project of writing the history of the black people in a twentieth century cycle of plays has made him repetitive and didactic, particularly, in his later plays (Wilson 5).

From being a reclusive intellectual, Baraka became, what I would describe as, a street revolutionary. As an intellectual, he had believed in art and ideas. But, as a street revolutionary, he distrusted both and believed in politics and action. Things that he had found to be complex and indeterminate as an intellectual, he found them to be too simple and definite. Being too sure of things, he set out on a revolutionary path in the truly street style. Like his character, Walker Vessels of 'The Slave', he believed in retaliation. The enemy was evil and must be destroyed. On the other hand, the black people, the truly black people, not the imitators and collaborators of the white, were good. As a result, he created, as Eric Bentley put it, not characters, but "monsters", and stories, which were shallow (141). He did not analyze the racial situation, but presented it as a simple conflict between the victim and the victimizer, the good and the evil.

The white characters, from Lula of 'Dutchman' to the nameless white drug-lords of 'Junkies Are Full of (SHHH . . .)', are presented as gross stereotypes. Lula is a racist maniac who has a mission to kill young black men. Prof. Easley and Grace of 'The Slave' are impotent liberals who are useless to the society, hence, deserve to be eliminated. Duff and Loco of 'Experimental Death Unit #1' are two immoral tramps who need to be cleansed off the black nation. The black woman of the play is a whore, hence, she, too, needs to be cleansed off along with them. The white man in 'A Black Mass' is a dirty beast that corrupts the virtuous and beautiful black people, hence, needs to be destroyed or banished. The slave traders and planters in 'Slave Ship' are tyrants who need to be executed. The white woman in 'Madheart' is a "Devil Lady" who corrupts the vulnerable black women with her materialistic culture, hence, needs to be destroyed. The white men in 'A Great Goodness of Life' are tyrants and the middle class black men are servile to them and treacherous to their own community. The white men in 'Junkies Are Full of (SHHH . . .)' are drug-lords and venal politicians who collaborate with each other to destroy the black community with drugs. The black drug vendor in the play is their collaborator, hence, needs to be executed along with his boss, to serve as an example to the other drug vendors and junkies.

Having created the characters as stereotypes, Baraka presented the stories as simple as that of the Morality Plays showing the destruction, or, the need

for the destruction, of the evil and the triumph of the good over the evil. As a result, while the plays served as a good revolutionary propaganda, they lacked analyses of the complexities of the issue and the people embroiled in it.

Eschewing the revolutionary politics and propaganda of the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, Bullins committed himself to the truth of life and art and revealed the unedifying life of the black people of the streets and slums. As he did it, he showed a rare artistic independence, liberating himself from the "prevailing philosophies and stereotypes of their day . . . the black revolutionary of the sixties" (Andrews 179), and an honesty in depicting the "ugly and confused aspect of black life" which helped "us reach our destined grandeur" (Jeffers 33). But, he merely touched the surface and told the truth that was only superficial and partial. He showed the manifest action that was apparent to the common uncritical eye. He did not make an attempt to probe the internal dynamics of that action, the causative factors of that behaviour, to get at the deeper truth. Apart from that, he showed only one part of the life, which made his story incomplete and biased. Thus, he created characters that were one-dimensional and told their stories that were only partially true. As a result, either deliberately or inadvertently, he reinforced the existing stereotypes of the black man as a carefree and self-annihilating person and the existing prejudices about their life as dirty and degrading.

In all his realistic plays, Bullins dealt with only one type of characters and told only one type of story ('A Son, Come Home' is the only exception to this pattern, where the mother and her son, although they live on the same Derby Street where the characters of 'In The Wine Time' live, do not live the street life.) and treated both the characters and their story superficially. From 'Clara's Ole Man' to 'The Fabulous Miss Marie', he presented the same black people of the slum or the street and told the same story of self-gratification, violence, and crime. He showed only one dimension of the characters' personalities and told only one part of their story of life without making an attempt to show the other two dimensions of their personalities, viz., multiplicity and depth, and tell about the other interests and activities of their life.

In 'Clara's Ole Man', Bullins shows Big Girl and her family and friends, who belong to the slum and the street, indulging in revelry, violence, and crime. Although Big Girl has a decent job, unlike most of Bullins's characters, she has no social aspirations and she is no different from the other slum and street people. Through her, Bullins voices only contempt for the mainstream society but offers no analysis of the characters' behaviour or their situation. In 'Goin' a Buffalo', Bullins shows the fantasy of a couple of prostitute and her pimp-husband to move to Buffalo along with their hustling friends because it is a "good little hustlin' town" (31). He merely shows the fantasy and its tragic end because of the betrayal by one of the friends, but

offers no insight into their behaviour or their life. In 'The Corner', Bullins shows the slum or street people spending their evening on a street corner reveling (drinking wine and making love). One of them, Cliff, announces that he wants to leave the street and be a family man, but he does not seem to mean it nor is his behaviour consistent with his words. Once again, Bullins offers no clue or insight into his characters' behaviour or life. In 'In The Wine Time', he continues the story of Cliff who is now seen among his wife, nephew, and friends, all indulging in the same activity of drinking and quarreling. Thus, this play is a repeat of the earlier play as all the other plays are repeats of one another. In 'The Duplex', 'In New England Winter', and 'The Fabulous Miss Marie', Bullins shows the same type of people living the same type of life. Although Bullins shows the same people and tells the same story in play after play, he makes no analysis of and offers no insight into his characters' behaviour and their situation, as one would expect from his repeated treatment of the same people and their life.

In choosing to express the black tradition through telling the story of the black people, Wilson has been able to create plays that are more richly revealing and instructive than Bullins's constrictedly realistic plays and Baraka's bitter propagandistic plays. But, his project of writing the history of the black people in a twentieth century cycle of plays, with the focus not only on the reconstruction of the black history but on the instruction of the

importance of history and culture, Wilson has become repetitive and didactic, particularly, in his later plays.

Having chosen not only to affirm and celebrate the black history and culture, but to instruct the virtue of reclaiming them for defining the distinctive identity of the black people, Wilson has made the latter the theme of his later plays in succession, 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone', 'The Piano Lesson', and 'Two Trains Running'. In 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone', he teaches the importance of reclaiming one's self through reconnecting to one's history and by liberating one's self from the oppressor. Herald Loomis, who had lost his self-identity by being enslaved by Joe Turner, rediscovers it through the discovery of his connection to his ancestors ("the bones people"), i.e., history, and by finally spiritually cutting himself free from the external [i.e., oppressor's] bondage. In 'The Piano Lesson', he teaches the importance of reclaiming one's history to liberate oneself from the oppressor's bondage and define oneself. Berniece, who used to be distressed by the tragic history of her family, learns to respect her ancestors, i.e., her history, in course of the near-fatal conflict with her brother, Boy Willie, over the piano, which symbolizes the family history. In 'Two Trains Running', he teaches the same lesson with regard to the economic struggle of the black people in the 1960s. Through the story of Memphis, Hambone, and Sterling, he teaches the need to reclaim, by force, if necessary, one's due, in the hostile and oppressive circumstances. The spiritual significance

of this economic lesson is conveyed through Aunt Ester, who symbolizes Mother Africa and who, as Holloway says, makes one right with oneself.

Although, in order to teach his lesson, Wilson does not write didactic plays like Baraka, he has tended to be didactic in his later plays by directly conveying his message in mystical and metaphorical terms rather than embodying it in terms of the common earthly experience and by making the ends of his plays somewhat abrupt and contrived rather than eventual and natural. In 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone', in order to convey Loomis's discovery of his connection to his ancestors/history, he includes a mystical vision of the "bones people" and in order to convey his realization of his spiritual freedom, he shows him, in the end of the play, slashing across his chest and rubbing his face with the blood. Similarly, in 'The Piano Lesson', in order to convey the sense of a persisting spiritual oppression, he includes the ghost of the oppressor, which appears invisibly and lays claim to the piano, which symbolizes the black history, and enters into a fierce struggle with Boy Willie over it. Then, in the end, in order to show Berniece's realization of the need to seek help from her ancestors, i.e., connect herself to her history, he shows her suddenly turning to the piano and playing on it calling upon her ancestors one by one to help her get rid of the ghost. In 'Two Trains Running', in order to convey the idea of the need to turn to one's tradition to seek wisdom, he includes a symbolic character, Aunt Ester, who is 322 years old and who gives spiritual blessings. Then, in the end, in

order to convey the characters' realization of the need to reclaim their dues, he shows Memphis suddenly becoming sympathetic towards Hambone and offering money to place flowers at his coffin and shows Sterling stealing a piece of ham (which Hambone used to demand from Lutz daily as his due) from Lutz's Meat Market to place it in Hambone's coffin.

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