

## Story-Telling in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Fences (\*)

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**Abstract:** Story-telling has been used for various reasons and variety of purposes of the authors in contemporary American drama. The most distinctive contemporary American authors such as Edward Albee, David Mamet, Sam Shepard, David Rabe, and August Wilson to name only the few create story-tellers in their prominent plays. The tensions between past and present, self and other, life and death, and the subjects as confusion, self-doubt, and self-questioning in an unstable and infinitely changeable state of insights fill the narrative form of contemporary American dramatists through story-telling. Employing stories as stage narrative, the authors can have a fictional space outside stage time and stage space, and the authors can make fact a fiction or vice versa. Story-telling as dramatic narrative can specifically be seen in the dramas of August Wilson as part of the oral narrative experiences of African-Americans. This study attempts to reflect the functions of story-telling in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Fences, and analyze how the characters reveal themselves and their subjectivity in stories. Wilson's typical story-tellers are Toledo in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Troy Maxson in Fences.

**Keywords:** Story-telling, August Wilson, Contemporary American Drama, Subjectivity, African-American Culture.

### Ma Rainey's Black Bottom ve Fences'de Hikâye Anlatımı

**Öz:** Çağdaş Amerikan tiyatrosunda yazarlar çeşitli neden ve amaçlarla hikâye anlatımına yer verirler. Örneğin, Edward Albee, David Mamet, Sam Shepard, David Rabe ve August Wilson gibi çağdaş Amerikan tiyatrosunun önde gelen yazarları başyapıtlarında hikâye anlatıcıları yaratırlar. Geçmiş ve günümüz, ben ve öteki, yaşam ve ölüm arasındaki gerilimi vurgulamak ve bireyin içinde bulunduğu değişken ortamda yaşadığı şaşkınlık, şüphecilik, kendini sorgulama gibi içsel duygularını anlatabilmek amacıyla yazarlar, hikâye anlatımına sıkça başvururlar. Sahnede hikâye anlatımı uygulamakla yazar, sahnenin şimdiki zaman ve mekân sınırlarının dışında kurgusal bir alan yaratmış olur. Böylece yazar, sahnede gerçek ile kurgusal ya da tam tersini sunma olanağı bulur. August Wilson'un yapıtlarında hikâye anlatımı, Afrikalı-Amerikalı toplumun sözlü anlatım deneyimleriyle sunulur. Bu çalışma Ma Rainey's Black Bottom ve Fences adlı yapıtlarda hikâye anlatımının fonksiyonlarını ve karakterlerin hikâye yoluyla kendilerini ve öznel dünyalarını nasıl yansıttıklarını araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom'da Toledo ve Fences'de Troy Maxson Wilson'un tipik hikâye anlatıcılarına örnektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hikâye Anlatımı, August Wilson, Çağdaş Amerikan Tiyatrosu, Öznellik, Afrikalı-Amerikalı Toplum.

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### Introduction

August Wilson relates the rich oral tradition of African-American culture through story-telling in his plays. He also uses stories “as key strategies in developing his characters, themes, and the social dynamics of character interaction in particular scenes” (Blumenthal, 2000: 76). Wilson uses story-telling in all his plays, thus, the stories told in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and *Fences* are most representative ones to illustrate his overall messages. Moreover, *Ma Rainey* is Wilson’s first Broadway success, and the most representative of his earlier plays; *Fences* is the bridge between his earlier and later plays. “Without question the dual success of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and *Fences* garnered Wilson a prominent place in American theatre and, just as important, bolstered his confidence as a serious playwright” (Shannon, 1995: 116). August Wilson tries to point out in *Ma Rainey*, as in all of his plays, the problems of race, class, cultural identity and rage related to music, history, and spiritual world. And all these important points are delivered through story-telling rather than direct (dialogic) communication.

### Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom

*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* takes place in Chicago, yet the stories are still filled with the echoes of the South. The play centers on Ma Rainey, a famous blues singer, and her band which consists of four black musicians, Cutler, Toledo, Slow Drag, and Levee. Each character in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* has a “solo turn to talk about past experiences, which echoes another ancient African strategy of expression-storytelling” (Pereira, 1995: 34). The story-telling starts at the very beginning of the play when the band musicians tell each other stories related to spirituality [i.e. Toledo’s story about the meaning of Lord’s Prayer (21-2)<sup>1</sup>, and Slow Drag’s story about how Eliza Cotter of Tuscaloosa sold her soul to the devil but suffered no fatal repercussions (35-6)] while waiting for Ma Rainey to arrive in the recording studio.

*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is about the clash between Ma Rainey’s conventional music and Levee’s new music. In larger context, however, it is not difficult to make the distinctions between conventions and new steps of black people in the U.S. Levee represents the new generation with his implicit criticism towards the conventional way of thought in his community. “Wilson further complicates Levee’s position as one who wishes to change the music to keep up with the times by creating a more jazzy sound out of the old backwoods blues sung by Ma Rainey. This change is both symbolic of the dawning of the Harlem Renaissance and its musical soundtrack of jazz music, and of the emergence of a new generation of black Americans...” (Menson-Furr, 2005: 176).

Levee, the youngest of all the members in the band, is presented as ambitious musician to make a change in black music. Yet, it is not only Levee’s age that sets him apart from his fellow musicians, but also his impatience, his greed, and his severe speeches. Moreover,

1) August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, in *August Wilson Three Plays*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991. All future citations from this play refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

he expects the approval of his version of black music from a white record producer, Sturdyvant. Toledo, however, who sees it a fault for Levee to expect the approval from Sturdyvant, instead of Ma Rainey or his own fellow musicians, warns Levee earlier in the play:

Toledo: See, now ... I'll tell you something. As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say ... as long as he looks to white folks for approval ... then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing (29).

Toledo's speech to Levee carries messages that Wilson wants to share with his community. Wilson directs such speeches beginning with "See, I will tell you something" to the actual addressee as well as to his wider audience. "In Act Two the distinction between the two spaces and the two sorts of time breaks down completely, as a series of invasions and an inversion is succinctly staged" (Hanlon, 2002: 113).

The first stories delivered in the play are also mainly centered on the experiences of racism. Each member of the band in the play has in common, an experience of racism. Slow Drag's report of a black preacher and Toledo's comment on black people in the white world as "just a leftover from history" (46) are represented as Wilson's political vision put at the beginning of the play. It is, however, Toledo as the only character who questions his self-image and thus, is the main story-teller in the play. Toledo tells his long story about black man, as being 'leftover from history' while the band has lunch together. His addressee is the fellow musicians (Levee in essence) as well as the wider audience.

Toledo: Now, I'm gonna show you how this goes ... where you just a leftover from history. Everybody come from different places in Africa, right? Come from different tribes and things. Soon awhile they began to make one big stew. ... Now you take and eat the stew. You take and make your history with that stew. Alright. Now it's over. Your history's over and you done ate the stew. ... See, we's the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers. ... The problem ain't with the white man. The white man knows you just a leftover. Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don't know that we been took and made history out of. ... (46-47).

In his story about black men's *eating the stew* and being the *leftover from history*,<sup>2</sup> Toledo seems to be Wilson's mouthpiece. Through Toledo's speech to the band, specifically

2) John J. Hanlon reads Toledo's story related to leftovers of the colored man as Wilson's description of the stew of slavery and the post-emancipation period. For further details see, John J. Hanlon,

Levee as his actual audience, Wilson relates his political ideology to the wider audience. Toledo is Wilson's mouthpiece when he also stresses the idea that the colored man should make the world better for the colored people in the play (33, 46-7). Similar to Toledo in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Troy is the main story-teller in *Fences*, and similarly again the stories delivered in the play involve African-Americans in the U.S.

### Fences

*Fences* is a story of Troy Maxson and his family who struggle to cope with the changes in America in the late 50s. Story-telling in *Fences* helps reveal who Troy Maxson is, and how he is formed (subject formation), and the stories are multi-functional in *Fences*. Troy's stories, dominating centre stage, can also be read as his defense strategy against his family and his own conscience related to his wrongdoings. When Rose, his wife, warns him against drinking too much liquor, for instance, he turns into his long solitary speech on Death:

Troy: Death ain't nothing. I done seen him. ... Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner. ... I done seen him. I done wrestled with him. ... I looked up one day and Death was marching straight at me. Like soldiers on Parade! The army of Death was marching straight at me. The middle of July, 1941. ... I say ... What you want, Mr. Death? You be wanting me? You done brought your army to be getting me? I looked him dead in the eye. I wasn't fearing. I was ready to tangle. Death standing there staring at me ... carrying that sickle in his hand. Finally he say, "You want bound over for another year?" I told him, "Bound over hell! Let's settle this now!" It seem like he kinda fell back when I said that, and all the cold went out of me. I reached down and grabbed that sickle and threw it just as far as I could throw it ... and me and him commenced to wrestling. We wrestled for three days and three nights. ... I wrestled with Death for three days and three nights and I'm standing here to tell you about it (*Pause*) All right. At the end of the third night we done weakened each other to where we can't hardly move. Death stood up, thrown on his robe ... had him a white robe with a hood on it. ... Death ain't nothing to play with. And I know He's gonna get me. I know I got to join his army ... his camp followers. ...<sup>3</sup>

Although Death's gradual transforming from fastball to a manageable obstacle of the brutality of white robe, and finally to the army impossible to fight with seems to be a

"'Niggers got a Right to be Dissatisfied': Postmodernism, Race, and Class in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*," in *Modern Drama* 45/1 (Spring 2002): pp. 95-122.

3) August Wilson, *Fences*, London and New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1986. All future citations from this play refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

paradox, it stems from Troy's enactment of double duty, as the story refers both to his actual audience, and to the larger context of experiences. In such references, Troy's target, as with Wilson, is the larger audience. The story, then, becomes a fact and fiction. It is fiction in relation to his actual addressee, his wife and his colleague Bono, and fact for black people in American society: "The darker implications of his story, typified by irony, and paradox, are expressed, but only for an imagined, rather than an actual audience" (Blumenthal, 2000: 84). Troy's "Wrestling with Death" is similar to his struggling with life itself. Wilson links the image of Death with real life references; such as the company Troy works in which he is a hard worker, yet, cannot have promotion because of his color. Despite his talent Troy could not find possibility to play baseball in major leagues mainly because of his color.

Troy's second 'fictitious' story is with the Devil. We learn from Rose that the Devil is a white man who sells furniture for which Troy pays ten-dollar each month to dissolve the debt. Troy tells the story just after his older son's (from his previous marriage) asking for ten dollars. On the surface the story is clearly directed at Lyons as actual addressee whose weekly borrowing ten dollars from Troy and never paying back has a connection. When Lyons, comes to ask for ten dollars Friday night that is also Troy's payday, Troy turns to story-telling:

... I went down to see Hertzberger about some furniture. Got three rooms for two ninety-eight. That what it say on the radio. ... Go down there ... man tell me I can't get no credit. I'm working everyday and can't get no credit. What to do? ... Cory ain't got no bed. He's sleeping on a pile of rags on the floor. Working every day can't get no credit. ... Come a knock on the door. Ain't been living here but three days. Who know I'm here? Open the door ... devil standing there bigger than life. White fellow ... got on good clothes and everything. Standing there with a clipboard in his hand. First words come out of his mouth was ... "I understand you need some furniture and can't get no credit." I liked to fell over. He say "I'll give you all the credit you want, but you got to pay the interest on it." I told him, "Give me three rooms worth and charge whatever you want." Next day a truck pulled up here and two men unloaded them three rooms. Man what drove the truck give me a book and everything will be all right. Say send ten dollars, first of every month to the address in the book and everything will be all right. Say if I miss a payment the devil was coming back and it'll be hell to pay. That was fifteen years ago. To this day ... the first of the month I send my ten dollars, ... I ain't never seen that man since. Now you tell me who else that could have been but the devil? I ain't sold my soul or nothing like that, you understand. ... (19-20).

The 'fear' of Troy to pay ten dollars each month to the Devil might at least have double meaning; the first to the actual addressee and the second to the wider audience. Troy's speech is also "immersed in figurative language that opens a window to his thinking and that captures his very particular emotions" (Shannon, 2003: 141). Wilson moves Troy's language from commonplace to sublime through his use of story-telling. Troy's communication with Death, construction of his encounter with the Devil (furniture creditor) is received with total suspension by his auditors. Death becomes a wrestling partner and Devil credits him to buy furniture, it is Troy's skill as a narrator to tease and amuse his auditors with stories while informing and instructing them, and thus it is Wilson's skill in converting this oral tradition on to the stage. "This is seen in the instructive way Troy uses his longer stories and in the way he adapts them to the particular social situations in which he chooses to tell them" (Blumenthal, 2000: 76). Troy is Wilson's witty story-teller who well knows how to control his emotions and hide cynicism, how to persuade his addressee about his messages, how and when to instruct his past experiences, in short, how to give his references to both the actual audience, and the imagined or wider auditors.

After Troy's imaginative first two stories in the play, further stories related to his past life have turned out to be factual. Troy delivers two stories about his past experiences, the first of which is related to his family memories and the second is about his poverty as a black man. These stories, similar to modern soliloquies, reveal Troy's past life, and his pain and suffering. As a revealing character in the play, Troy not only reveals the situation of a black family in America before the radical 1960s, but also his own personal life. Troy's first story, a long story about his childhood experiences, covers especially his relations with his father:

Troy: Sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy. He ain't cared nothing about no kids. A kid to him wasn't nothing. All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working. ... The only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin. That's the only thing that mattered to him. Sometimes I used to wonder why he was living. Wonder why the devil hadn't come and got him. "Get them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin" and find out he owe him money ... My Mama couldn't stand him. ... She run off when I was about eight. She sneaked off one night after he had gone to sleep. Told me she was coming back for me. I ain't never seen her no more. ... He wasn't good for nobody. When my turn come to head out, I was fourteen and got to sniffing around Joe Canewell's daughter. Had us an old mule we called Greyboy. My daddy sent me out to do some plowing and I tied up Greyboy and went to fooling around with Joe Canewell's daughter. ... We didn't know Greyboy had got loose and wandered back to the house and my daddy was looking for me. We down there by the creek enjoying ourselves when my daddy come up on us. Surprised us. He had

them leather straps off the mule and commenced to whupping me like there was no tomorrow. ... Now I thought he was mad cause I ain't done my work. But I see where he was chasing me off so he could have the gal for himself. ... Right there I become a man ... at fourteen years of age. (*Pause*) ... I picked up them same reins that he had used on me. I picked up them reins and commenced to whupping on him. ... When I woke up, I was laying right there by the creek, and Blue ... this old dog we had ... was licking my face. ... The only thing I knew was the time had come for me to leave my daddy's house. ... (49-52).

While Troy's talking about his father, whose sole aim for his children was to make them work, in his memories refers to the hard working past generation and gives, at least, clues about that generation; its impact is apparent on Troy in one way or another. *Fences* covers three generations reflected in the present time of the play through the narrative of story-telling. "As such, the play captures the stories of three generations of Maxson men and points to the interconnectedness of their lives" (Shannon, 2003: 54). Troy's second story about economic deprivation and responsibility to support his family (Lyons and his mother) in Mobile covers his stealing and his being put in prison.

Troy: I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them fellows that was heading this way. Got up here and found out ... not only couldn't you get a job ... you couldn't find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shhh. Colored folks living down there on the riverbanks in whatever shelter they could find for themselves. ... Messed around there and went from bad to worse. Started stealing. First it was food. Then I figured, hell, if I steal money I can buy me some food. Buy me some shoes too! One thing let to another. Met your mama. I was young and anxious to be a man. Met your mama and had you. What I do that for? Now I got to worry about feeding you and her. ... I am ashamed of it today. But it's the truth. Went to rub this fellow ... pulled out my knife ... and he pulled out a gun. Shot me in the chest. ... When he shot me I jumped at him with my knife. They told me I killed him and they put me in the penitentiary and locked me up for fifteen years. That's where I met Bono. That's where I learned how to play baseball. ... (53).

Troy narrates his past life, his wrestle with Death, his commerce with Devil, experiences with his father, life in Mobile, and "in doing so he addresses an interested audience made up of his family and friend Bono, an audience which habitually interacts with Troy as he performs his stories" (Blumenthal, 2000: 76). He not only delivers stories and lets his auditor interpret them, but he comments on the stories himself during and in the course of the play. Troy's stories allow the playwright to show something of Troy's inner landscape,

a frightening, nightmare world in which duty and betrayals seem to transform into each other, to dramatize the inner struggle.

### Conclusion

Story-telling is the central prominence to the development of August Wilson's plays. August Wilson constructs black subjectivity through foregrounding of African-American culture and history in the stories, and the main messages in Wilson's plays are explicated through the use of stories. The stories give Wilson as a playwright, a possibility to reveal emotional side of his characters on one side and to instruct the audience about the social and cultural situation of African-American community, on the other. A character who tells stories not only reveals his subjectivity but also the historical, cultural process through which he/she is formed. As a result, story-telling in Wilson's plays is the strongest mode of oral discourse in African-American culture. Wilson creates 'historical moments' between fact and fiction by means of stories in his dramas. The 'historical moment' comes out through Wilson's imagined reality which is beyond merely to inform by recording history, toward the emotional landscape of African-American experiences.

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