August Wilson and Four B's Influences

Dr Sudarsan Sahoo

Assistant Professor of English

Parala Maharaja Engineering College

Sitalapalli,Berhmapur,Odisha,INDIA

Abstract

August Wilson emerged in 1980s as a major figure in American theatre. His plays have received Pulizer prize , Drama Desk Award, Drama Critics Circle Award. He presents the tragic situations and realities of blacks. His plays are the perennial records of history and aesthetics of black life and situations. His characters are deeply rooted to black culture and tradition.They are the representative figures of the African American traditions .

Key Words :B's, African Sensibility, Western Influence, Father like Figures

Introduction:

Few American Playwrights have been as explicit in naming influences as August Wilson.In the dozens of interviews, Wilson has granted in the eight years since *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* appeared on Broadway in 1984, Wilson has been unusually forthcoming not only citing his influences but in explaining specially how the four B's can be found in his plays.A good deal of Wilson's citation of the four B's may be ascribed to a generous and magnanimous soul who is sincerely grateful to those who have nourished his art.There is also behind Wilson's acknowledgement of indebtedness a sense of homage and respect that characterizes an African sensibility. As Wilson notes, "In Africa a man is judged not by what he has but by what is owed to him'' (Rocha29)Wilson's consistent invocation of his for B's goes beyond the expression of gratitude and respect.It is part of a conscious, deliberate, programmatic effort to turn every interview he gives.

Analysis:

August Wilson doesn't just talk about his four B's , he teaches them,not merely as discrete influences, but as constituent elements of an African American cosmology.In offering his four B's –Bearden, Baraka, Borges, and the blues-Wilson not merely inscribes a theory of African American literature but also names the creator of sign system he inhabits.To read or see a Wilson play without learning about the four B's is ,in the vernacular, not to see where he is coming from.

But before we see where Wilson is coming from, it is worth a moment to clarify where Wilson is not coming from , because Wilson has also been unusually explicit in stating who has not influenced him.Despite the fact that in 1987 he told *Los Angeles times* that he is "sitting in the same chair as Shakespeare, confronting the same problems as Aurther Miller and Eugene O'Neil'' (Arkatov 35).Wilson has insisted many times that he has never read any of the canonical western playwrights.In 1988 he commented , "I haven't read Ibsen, Shaw and Shakespeare…..I'm not familiar with *Death of* Salesman.I haven't read Tennessee Williams. I very purposefully didn't read them.''(Savran 292)

I don't raise this to reveal a discrepancy in Wilson's testimony.Rather I wish to call attention to why Wilson goes so far out of his way to disconnect himself from the western tradition of drama, even though his plays reside comfortably within that tradition.I do of course hold it as improbable that Wilson,a playwright who has collaborated for eight years with Lioyd Richards and the Yale Repertory Theatre , has never read O'Neil and Miller.It is nearly impossible to avoid one reading of Fences as a deliberate point-to-point signifying parody of *Death of* a *Salesman*.It is thus all the more significant that Wilson argues so vociferously for himself as liberated from western influence.

Wilson's obvious desire to get over on the Western tradition is first and foremost what bonds him so strongly to his brother poet-poet Baraka, who is his quest for a post-white , post-American, post-Western form is the discoverer of the African American literary landscape in which Wilson has found a place.Baraka has spent his entire career 'facing' the Western tradition , no clearer instance of which comes from his autobiographical novel, *The System of Dante's Hall (1965)*, when the Prodigal asks , ''Who is T.S.Eliot ?So what ?'' (134)Without Baraka posing this question, August Wilson would not be possible.

Baraka is Wilson's brother-poet for several reasons .First, the two are closer together in age than one might think , Baraka born in 1934 and Wilson in 1945.But more importantly , both poets experienced an almost ritual exorcism of Western poetic influence that was enacted in the year 1965-the year that Malcolm X was killed.Kimberly Benston has called 1965 Baraka's year of crossroads during which he divorced his wife and moved uptown to Harlem , whereupon he set himself to realizing the dead prophet Malcolm X's dream of a black nation.(Benston , *Baraka 43)*Wilson , in characteristically mythic fashion, designates April 1 , 1965, only a few weeks after Malcolm X's death, as the birth of his life as a poet :

That was the day I made a commitment to being a writer.I spent $20 for a typewriter ……I did not even have enough left over to take the bus home, so I carried it up the street, plopped it down on the kitchen table in my basement apartment , sat down and plunked out my name.I did not know how to type . I just wanted to see what AUGUST WILSON looked alike.I saw it there , standing up on the paper , and said , ''That's alright, man, all right.''(Kelly)

Wilson has noted that the Baraka plays that he liked most were the ones published in the volume *Four Black Revolutionary Plays (1969)*,which served as the main fare of the Black Horizons Theatre of Pittsburgh , which Wilson founded with Rob Penny in 1968 and operated until 1972.Wilson thus not only subscribed to but lived the well-known Barakan manifesto , *The Revolutionary Theatre* directing many of Barak as plays.The experience had a profound effect , for Wilson transported three quintessentially Barakan elements to his plays :the motion of history as the emergence of the African *Geist* out of the bones of the Middle Passage , the enactment of the ritual dance in which personal experience and racial history converge, and , most importantly , the quest for one's song that is ultimately realized in the blues.

Clay's epiphanic speech in *Dutchman* aptly expresses the significance of blues in Baraka and serves as a stepping-off point for considering Wilson's biggest B of all .Clay has finally been stirred to speak the truth of his experience to Lula which his appearance belies. He rages at whites who misinterpret black culture and experience :

They [the ofays] say, "I love Bessie Smith'', And Don't even understand that Bessie Smith is saying , ''Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass.'' Before love, suffering, desire, anything you can explain, she's saying , and very plainly, "Kiss my black ass''. And if you do not know that , it's you that's doing the kissing . (Jones sc. 2,34-35)

"Kiss my black ass'' would be suitable title for Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,*the first of his blues plays .The twenty-year gestation period of Ma Rainey dates back to the day in 1965 when August Wilson was transfixed and transformed by his discovery of Bessie Smith and came to an understanding of her coded message , which Baraka revealed not only through Clay but through such books as *Blues People (1963)*Wilson has often recounted how he bought a record player and pile of old 78s for a few dollars and then found Bessie Smith's "Nobody in Town can Bake a Jelly Roll Like Mine'' He played the record twenty –two times in a row:

I was stunned…… It was one of the most beautiful songs I'd ever heard…. I thought, " This person is talking to me.This is mine.''

I began to look at people in the rooming house (where I lived)differently. I had seen them as beaten, I was twenty, and these were old people.I didn't see the value to their lives. You could never have told me there was a richness and fullness to their lives. I began to see it . (Brown 122)

If Baraka is Wilson's brother, then Bessie Smith may well be figured as Wilson's mother, for she gave birth to Wilson as what Houston Baker would call a "blues detective'' who is able to decipher black forms by looking to "the limitless freedom of myth and fictive discourse'' (122)It took Wilson nearly twenty years to decipher fully in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984)what Bessie Smith first brought into Wilson's view.In this first play of the current cycle,

Ma Rainey becomes the embodiment of an African American cultural history which she pronounces with full authority :

White folks do't understand about the blues.They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there.They don't understand that's life 's way of talking.You don't sing to feel better.You sing cause that's a way of understanding life.(67)

Wilson best elaborates the monumental importance of the blues to his plays:

I think that what's contained in the blues is the African American's response to the world.We are not a people with a long history of writing things out, it's been an oral tradition…….

The thing with blues is that there's an entire philosophical system at work.And I've found that whatever you want to know about the black experience in America is contained in the blues…….

So it (the blues)is the book.It is our sacred book.Every other people has a sacred book, so I claim it as that.Anything I want to know , I go there and find it out.(Livingston 32)

Wilson's plays are replete with knowledge from his sacred book of blues. The title of *Joe Turner* comes from a W.C Handy song, Ma Rainey is of course about the real- life "Mother of the Blues'' and *Fences, The Piano Lesson,* and *Two Trains Running* contain numerous epigrams, allusions , and lyrics drawn from specific blues songs.In Wilson's plays, the blues are what Baker identifies as "the expressive site where American experience is named'' (64)and constitute an ontology that is the very idea of America itself :that the sign "America'' signifies the broken promise of presence.All blues songs begin from the ontological awareness of the American condition as the sign of an absence, a broken promise-usually the specific premise is my lover's gone-and the blues is the form blacks invented to mediate this absence.So when August Wilson discovered the blues, he in effect discovered America.

In Wilson, the blues is the American language for telling and confronting the tragic reality of America that is always absent. Any American history is as much about our future as about our past, and Wilson's American history in the current cycle asserts that the sign of America itself can only be read into the future as a tragedy, as an experiment that must fail because it was committed to the impossible from the beginning.As James Baldwin first pointed out thirty years ago, Americans do not wish to face the reality expressed in the blues that life is tragic and the only fact we have is final absence of death. Wilson's 'blues people' may be taken together as an enactment of Baldwin's prescription that " one ought to rejoice in the fact of death-ought to decide , indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life''.(24)

One black way of confronting the conundrum of life with passion is through ritual , and it is on this ground that Wilson met Romare Bearden (1912-1988), the African American artist best known for his colleges of black life created during 1960s and 1970s.Wilson holds Bearden in reverential esteem , for Bearden has not only served as the explicit inspiration for at least two of Wilson's plays-*Joe Turner* and *Piano Lesson*-Bearden also serves Wilson as a kind of Father-figure (both grew up in Pittsburgh), a personification of the ideal for a black artist.Indeed , Wilson has adopted Bearden's credo as his own : "I try to explore , in terms of life I know best, those things which are common to all cultures''(Wilson *How to write a Play)*

Bearden offered Wilson a new visual language that created a world populated by conjure women, trains, guitar players, birds, masked figures, and the rituals of baptisms, funerals, dinneres, parades.Wilson was of course impressed by the black experience Bearden represented, but he was equally interested in his mode of representation.Wilson volunteered the creation history of this new black form:

One day (in 1963)Bearden and some of his colleagues had arranged to work together on a collaborative work-it was supposed to be a college of black life at that time-but when it came time to actually do it, Bearden was the only one who showed up.So he went ahead and just started doing it on his own.(Rocha31-32)

Bearden riffed on quintessentially twentieth –century language of college, first introduced by Picasso in his Cubist experiments, to create a form capable of expressing what Ralph Ellison has called "sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time, and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes and dreams, which characterize much of Negro American history.(qtd.in Bearden 9)Wilson describes the structure of his own plays as having this collagist form :

In Bearden you've all these pieces.There's an eye here, a head over there, a huge oversized hand on a small body.It's like that with me.I' he got all these images, and the point is how I put them together.The pieces are always there, it's how I put them together, the relationships between them that counts.(Rocha 32)

Where does Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1966) fit into Wilson's family?Possibly as a learned Latin cousin from whom Wilson has taken lessons in aesthetics.Wilson's debt to the Argentinian fabulist has been the least explored of the four B's , but he was no less emphatic about the influence of Borges :

It is the way Borges tells a story. In Borges, it's not what happens, but how. A lot of times, he'll tell you what's going to happen up front, as in (The Dead Man) in which we're told at the beginning that nobody from the slums will be shot in the head as a leader of his people.All of the interest is in how the story is going to be told.(Rocha31)

Reading Borges has also taught Wilson the ethics of listening which are so important in the black communities in his plays :

With Borges you have got all these wires carrying electrical impulses , but they don't all connect up.When you encounter one of those little breaks, I think he wants you to stop and say, "Now wait a second, how does that connect ?'' That's why so many of his stories are about writing stories, like [''Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote''}

Wilson's interest in story telling is the basis of his strongest bond with Borges. Mary Lusky Friedman has recently identified a ''Borgesean Paradigm'' that may be usefully applied to Wilson :

Reduced to its most schematic outline, the fantasy that informs each one of Borges' tales tells the following story:A mishap sets in motion a protagonist, who responds to calamity by setting out on a journey. In the course of this journey Borges' hero travels through surroundings that are progressively more impoverished and unreal until the last he arrives at a structure that walks him in. Immured there, he is privy to a marvelous but blighting experience, an experience that blasts his selfhood and annihilates him.(6)

Conclusion :

This adumbration of August Wilson's four B's is intended only to suggest the outline of these influences.It bears reiterating that the four B's are much more than discreet influences whose traces are to be shifted out of Wilson's plays, but together form the sign system from which Wilson's plays are written.Approached in this way, the four B's provide the growing numbers who read Wilson with an extraordinary opportunity to attain a truly interdisciplinary perspective.Reading Wilson requires that we learn about the blues and American music, about Bearden and modern art, about Baraka and Black Nationalism, and about Borges and the Postmodern.

Works Cited

Arkatov,Janice. "August Wilson :His Way". *Los Angeles Times 7*June 1987, Calendar:35

Baker, Hauston. *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* . Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1984

Baldwin , James. *The Fire Next Time* .New York :Dell, 1962

Baraka , Amiri .*Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka /Leroi Jones* .New York:William Morrow , 1969

----------*The System of Dante's Hall.* New York :Grove Press, 1965

Bearden, Romare.*Memory and Metaphor :The Art of Romare Bearden 1940-1987.*Oxford University Press ,1991

Benston, Kimberly.*Baraka :The Renegade and the Mask* .New Heaven :Yale University Press, 1976

Brown , Chip . "Light in August'' *Esquire* April 1989:116+

Fitzgerald, Maureen . "The Heat of August"*Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine* 15 July 1993:33+

Friedman , Mary Lusky .*The Emperor's Kites :A Morphology of Borges' Tales .* Durham :Duke University Press, 1987

Gates, Henry Louis ,Jr *The Signifying Monkey* .Oxford:Oxford University Press 1988

Jones, Leroi.*Dutchman. Two Plays by Leroi Jones* .New York:William Marrow , 1964:1-38

Kelly, Kevin ."August Wilson's True Stories"*The Boston Globe 29 April 1990:29*

Livingston, Dinah. "Cool August Wilson"*Minnesota Monthly* .October 1987 :25-32

Rocha, ark Williams. "A Conversation with August Wilson'' *Diversity :A Journal of Multicultural Issues1* (Fall 1992):24-42

Wilson, August .*Fences .Three Plays* .Pittsburgh :University of Pittsburgh Press ,1991:94-192

……. "How to Write a Play like August Wilson "The New York Times 10 Mar 1991 , sec.2:5

……..*Joe Turner's Come and Gonne .Three Plays* Pittsburgh :Pittsburgh University Press ,1991 :193-289

……*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom .Three Plays.* Pitsburgh :University of Pittsburgh Press , 1999 :1-93

…….The Piano Lesson .New York :Plume, 1990.

……*Two Trains Running* .New York :Plume, 1993