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## She's A Brick House: August Wilson and the Stereotypes of Black Womanhood

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# She's A Brick House: August Wilson and the Stereotypes of Black Womanhood

## **Abstract**

In his Century Cycle of plays, August Wilson tells ten distinct stories of families in or linked to the Hill District, an African American community in Pittsburgh; one play taking place in each decade of the twentieth century. Through these plays, Wilson's audience sees the Hill District and America evolve, while prejudice, oppression, and poverty remain constant. Many scholars argue that sexism provides a fourth common factor, asserting that Wilson portrays the female characters in the male-fantasized, stereotypical roles of the Mammy or the Jezebel figure, rather as realistic, empowered, and complex women. However, close examination of the women with in each of Wilson's plays reveals that Wilson does not embrace these stereotypes, but subverts them, allowing sexuality and maternity to serve a source of empowerment, not subordination and subservience. This paper will examine Wilson's subversion of the Mammy stereotype, which is particularly evident in the centrality of the maternal characters to the play's action and character development, and is underscored by metonymic relations to the ever present set. *The Piano Lesson*, *Gem of the Ocean*, and *Fences* best illustrate Wilson's empowering mechanisms and will be principally discussed, although the effects can be seen in each of Wilson's ten plays.

## **Keywords**

August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, *Fences*, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Aunt Ester, *Gem of the Ocean*, *Radio Golf*, metonymic sets, stereotypes of black womanhood, plays, mamie, jezebel

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

English Honors Thesis

*She's a*  
**BRICK  
HOUSE**

*August Wilson and the  
Maternal Stereotype of  
Black Womanhood*

**Amelia  
Grabowski**

**2013 Senior Honors Thesis**  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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**Gettysburg**  
COLLEGE

Sadie Mae by William Tolliver

She's A Brick House:  
August Wilson and the Maternal Stereotypes of Black Womanhood

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Class of 2013  
Advisor: Assistant Provost Jack Ryan

Anyone who knows me knows that I love to thank people. I do it often. For small things. For anything really. Therefore, asking me to limit my thanks to just this statement is cruel, so forgive as I try to thank everyone I have ever met, consciously.

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Most of all, I thank my mother, my sisters, my grandmothers, my aunts, Jillian and Allie, who taught me life's most important lessons. They taught me that women could and should be powerful, strong, and complex. They also taught me the lyrics to "Brick House."

"She's a brick . . . house. Well put together, everybody knows, this is how the story goes."<sup>1</sup> In 1977, as this Commodores hit filled the radio waves, the young playwright August Wilson was just beginning to tell stories of his own. Like the Commodores, Wilson's stories featured brick houses and women, both of which were "mighty mighty," but that is where the comparison ends. In his *Century Cycle*, Wilson pens ten distinct narratives of families who live in or are linked to the Hill District, an African American community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In each play, Wilson appears to present female characters crafted along stereotypical "male-fantasized roles," much like the subject of the Commodore's *Brick House*.<sup>2</sup> However, closer examination reveals that unlike the Commodores, Wilson subverts stereotypes of black womanhood, particularly those related to maternity—figures of the Mammy or the black matriarch to present extremely empowered characters. The centrality of women to the core of the plots in the *Century Cycle*, in addition to their metonymic relationships with their surroundings—literal brick houses, allows Wilson skillfully and subtly to create empowered female figures.

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<sup>1</sup> The Commodores, *Brick House*, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> This is a summary of Sandra G. Shannon's claim, quoted later on, that Wilson's "feminine portrayls tent to slip into the comfort zones of . . . male-fantasized roles," found in Sandra G. Shannon, "The Ground on Which I Stand: August Wilson's Perspective on African American Women" in *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, ed. Alan Nadel (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 151.

*For my mother*<sup>3</sup>

I happen to think that the content of my mother's life—her myths her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful response and pregnant laughter—are all worthy of art.<sup>4</sup>

Although this author's note preceded *Seven Guitars*, the fifth play in August Wilson's Century Cycle, the sentiment could easily introduce any of the Century plays.<sup>5</sup> The playwright's mother, Daisy Wilson's, superstitions haunt *The Piano Lesson's* audience and characters alike. Both groups feel and fear the chill of the ghost creeping just off stage, the ghost of Sutter, the recently and suspiciously deceased manager of the plantation the play's protagonist family worked first as slaves now as share croppers. Daisy's favorite tunes, the songs that permeated Wilson's childhood, reappear in each play, whether the recording session in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the music crackling through a phonograph in *Seven Guitars*, and later blasting through the boom box in *Radio Golf*, or all the informal, impromptu singing that breaks during each play. As Wilson's memories of his mother provide inspiration for his plays and grounds them with realistic details of day-to-day life, so do his early experiences in the hyper-masculine enclaves of Pittsburgh. All of these experiences informed Wilson's imaginative world and the characters within it, particularly his women.

In an interview, Wilson began discussing his characterization of women by stating, "My mother's a very strong, principled woman. My female characters . . . come in a large part from my mother."<sup>6</sup> Daisy Wilson indeed influenced her son substantially. Any discussion of the

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<sup>3</sup> "For my mother" refers to Wilson's dedication of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, see August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> August Wilson, *Seven Guitars* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Here, the fifth play in Wilson's century cycle refers to the fifth play chronologically in the complete cycle, set in 1948. *Seven Guitars* was the seventh play Wilson wrote, premiering in 1995. To see the order of the plays, please refer to the attached addendum.

<sup>6</sup> Shannon, "The Ground on Which I Stand," 151.

gender roles in Wilson's work would be incomplete without a discussion of the gender influences of his early life, and Daisy was principle among these. August Wilson was born "Frederick August Kittel" in 1945 to his father and namesake, Frederick Kittel, a white German immigrant, and Daisy Wilson, a black American woman. Frederick Kittel abandoned his family when August was five years old, leaving August Wilson and his five siblings to be raised by Daisy.<sup>7</sup> Wilson concretely demonstrated his affinity with his mother by assuming her last name when he became a writer. Today, Wilson's tribute to his mother glitters over Broadway on the marquee of the August Wilson Theater. Another tribute stands, subtly, in black and beige, on the dedication page of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*: "For my mother."<sup>8</sup>

Daisy Wilson was not the only substantial influence on young August's conception of gender roles. After dropping out of school, Wilson spent his days in hyper-masculine environments in Pittsburgh. Chief among these was Pat's Place, a cigar shop where aged black-American men congregated. Pat's Place became Wilson's imaginative crucible. "I was twenty-one at the time and had no idea I was going to write about it. I wasn't keeping notes. But I loved listening to them," he later said.<sup>9</sup> Wilson would continue to make his home in public places like Pat's Place, seeping in the masculine air of the retiree's tall tales and tobacco smoke, writing long

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<sup>7</sup> Daisy Wilson would eventually remarry. Scholars speculate that Wilson's stepfather provided the basis for the character of Troy in *Fences*. Isherwood, Charles, "August Wilson, Theater's Poet of Black America, Is Dead at 60," *New York Times*, October 3, 2005, [http://theater.nytimes.com/2005/10/03/theater/newsandfeatures/03wilson.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://theater.nytimes.com/2005/10/03/theater/newsandfeatures/03wilson.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&) (accessed March 20, 2013); Mary L. Bogumil, *Understanding August Wilson* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, *Ma*.

<sup>9</sup> August Wilson, interview by Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton, "August Wilson, The Art of Theater No. 14," *The Paris Review*, Winter 1999, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/839/the-art-of-theater-no-14-august-wilson> (accessed March 20, 2013).



hand on legal pads and cocktail napkins.<sup>10</sup> These settings, the characters found there, their conversations, and the accompanying gendered spirit remerge in each of Wilson's plays.

His smoke-filled days at Pat's Place were certainly not August Wilson's only immersion into Pittsburgh's highly masculine culture. During the same period, Wilson became involved in the Black Power and Black Arts movements, founding the *Black Horizons* theater company with Rob Penny. According to historian Joseph Peniel, the "misogyny and bravado by black power advocates" are infamous.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not Wilson subscribed to these ideals, he could not have escaped exposure to them during his work in the movement.

Outside these specific experiences, Wilson was immersed in America's generally sexist culture. Born in 1945, Wilson matured in an America where women were encouraged to stay in the home, be subservient to their husbands, and contribute children and maternal guidance to achieve the nuclear family suburban dream. For instance, a June 20, 1960 copy of *TIME* Magazine, pronounced:

The key figure in all Suburbia, the thread that weaves between family and community—the keeper of the suburban dream—is the suburban housewife. In the absence of her commuting, city-working husband, she is first of all the manager of home and brood, and beyond that a sort of aproned activist with a penchant for keeping the neighborhood and community kettle whistling. With children on her mind and under her foot, she is breakfast getter, laundress, housecleaner, dishwasher, shopper, gardener, encyclopedia, arbitrator of children's disputes, policeman. If she is not pregnant, she wonders if she is. She takes her peanut-butter sandwich lunch while standing, thinks she looks a fright, watches her weight (periodically), jabbars over the short-distance telephone with the next-door neighbor.<sup>12</sup>

While the suburban ideal described here was not Wilson's personal experience coming of age in Pittsburgh's Hill District raised by the parenting duo of his biological mother and her second

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<sup>10</sup> Isherwood, "August Wilson;" *August Wilson: American dream, in black and white* (New York: Films Media Group, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* Vol. 96, No. 3 (December 2009): 751, <http://www.peniellejoseph.com/StateoftheField.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> "Americana: The Roots of Home," *TIME*, June 20, 1960, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,826423,00.html> (accessed March 20, 2013).

husband, it was nevertheless the ideal that permeated contemporary American society. The omnipresence of such attitudes about women, relegated to the home and subservient to men, could not help but influence Wilson and are addressed in his work.

### **The Century Cycle**

These experiences and influences, the places Wilson frequented and the people he met there, became the body of his work: the Century Cycle. The Century Cycle, also called the Pittsburgh Cycle, refers to August Wilson's ten published plays set in Pittsburgh's Hill District.<sup>13</sup> In the Cycle, one play occurs in each decade of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> *Gem of the Ocean*, set in 1904, draws the curtain on the Cycle, depicting freed slaves and their mentees grapple with chains of guilt, duty, heritage and power. The play features the three residents of 1839 Wylie Avenue, Black Mary, Eli, and the Hill District's spiritual advisor, Aunt Ester. The residents council Citizen Barlow through his grief and guilt over his indirect contribution to another man's death. Set in 1911, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* portrays Harold Loomis as he searches for his estranged wife, while the other residents of the Holly family's boarding house search for answers, partners, and commitment of their own.

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, set in 1927 Chicago and therefore an anomaly in the Century Cycle, features a recording session for famed blues singer Ma Rainey and her band, in which competitions for power in the microcosm of the recording studio underscore nationwide issues of power and powerlessness. *The Piano Lesson*, set in 1936, again focuses on competition: this time the competition between siblings Bernice and Boy Willie for an engraved piano, the family heirloom. As the competition continues, the siblings bring to light buried family history and

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<sup>13</sup> *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is an exception to this, set in Chicago. However, the characters come from Pittsburgh.

<sup>14</sup> A more complete addendum outlining the ten plays in greater detail can be found attached.

questions about the value of heritage, economic gain, and sacrifice. The entire cast attempt to exorcise or embrace the emotional and actual ghosts that arise.

In *Seven Guitars*, Wilson returns to the Hill District, albeit a very different community by 1948. The play presents an elegiac blending of the stories of five friends, affected by the death of the sixth member of their group, memorializing not only their fallen friend but an aging and changing of America. In the Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Fences*, the Maxson family wrestles, in 1957, with fences, both figurative and literal—those that used to define ourselves and those that hedge us in. In the play, Troy Maxson struggles in his role as an established middle age man, grappling with how to be a good husband, father, employee, and friend. More often than not, Troy falls short in his struggles. *Two Trains Running*, set in 1969, features patrons and employees of Memphis' diner, individuals on the periphery of society who grapple with personal issues that underscore major justice questions. In Wilson's first penned play of the cycle, *Jitney*, set in 1977, a group of all male gypsy cab drivers explore issues of masculinity and responsibility between routes.<sup>15</sup>

In *King Hedley II*, set in 1985, Wilson returns to a domestic setting, in fact returning to the very home, friends, and family that first appeared in *Seven Guitars*. The pregnancy announced in *Seven Guitars* has grown into the title character, *King Hedley II*. All of Wilson's plays include some overlap of characters and setting, much as the works of Thomas Hardy or

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<sup>15</sup> Wilson wrote a few other plays before commencing the Century Cycle, which he would work on until his death in 2005. The Century Cycle plays are the only plays in publication. Wilson's earliest plays are short skits about Native American heritage written in conjunction with a museum education program. The works that followed were unsuccessful. Wilson attributed their shortcomings to the fact that he "didn't recognize the poetry in the everyday language of black America." The playwright elaborated, "I thought I had to change to create art. I had a scene in a very early play, *The Coldest Day of the Year*, between an old man and an old woman sitting on a park bench. The old man walks up and says, 'Our lives are frozen in the deepest heat and spiritual turbulence.' She looks at him. He goes on, 'Terror hangs over the night like a hawk.' Then he says, 'The wind bites at your tits.' He gives her his coat. 'Allow me, Madam, my coat. It is made of the wool of a sacrificial lamb.' 'What's that you say?' she says, 'It sounded bitter.' He says, 'But not as bitter as you are lovely . . . as a jay bird on a spring day,'" <sup>15</sup> August Wilson, interview by Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton, *The Paris Review*.

William Faulkner do, similarly set in a distinct community over time. However, *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II* is the only example of a direct sequel in which many of the principle characters remain, and simply age.

In the final play of the Century Cycle, *Radio Golf*, Wilson's characters again grapple with the issues raised in every preceding plays including heritage, responsibility and power. *Radio Golf's* protagonist, Harmond Wilks, must balance all these to decide between preserving the past or shaping the future. Together, the Century Cycle carries Wilson's dedicated audience through the twentieth century. The curtain rises in *Gem of the Ocean* in 1904, and descends in 1997 on *Radio Golf*.

The Century Cycle takes place in the same community: The Hill District. Wilson's boyhood neighborhood and setting for nine of the ten Century Cycle plays, the Hill District was a concentrated African-American community in Pittsburgh. According to one scholar, "In its hey-day, [the Hill District] was as glamorous as Harlem."<sup>16</sup> Through his decade-by-decade depiction of the Hill District, Wilson's audience witnesses the depreciation of "the Hill" from a hub of African American culture, to a ghetto, to the site the latest and greatest gentrification project containing a Whole Foods, a Barnes and Noble book seller, and a Starbucks.

Each play takes place in a genre moment wedged between landmarks in history. For instance, in *Two Trains Running*, set in 1969, characters mention the Civil Rights Movement and Malcom X tangentially, but the principle action begins as a normal day in Memphis' restaurant. By crafting plays in genre movements, Wilson allows his audience to experience not just the famed moments of American history but instead, welcomes audiences into the more common, and arguably more important, experience of the everyman, or what could be called that of the *everyblackman*.

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<sup>16</sup> *August Wilson: American dream, in black and white.*

### **The Mammy, The Matriarch, and The Mother**

Within the Century Cycle, Wilson's portrayal of women leans dangerously close to classic stereotypical tropes of African American women, most notably the maternal tropes of the "Mammy" figure and the black matriarch. Patricia Hill Collins defines the Mammy figure as "the faithful, obedient domestic servant . . . loving, nurturing and caring for her white children . . . [she] knows her 'place' as an obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination."<sup>17</sup> In the Century Cycle, Wilson threatens to portray but ultimately subverts the image of the Mammy. With the exception of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the Century Cycle plays do not take place in "white space" where Mammy figures have the opportunity to cater to here "white children," as Collins describes. Instead, we see this potential Mammys at home or in decidedly "black spaces." However, the threat of playing the role of the subservient, periphery maternal figure remains.

The second stereotypical image of black maternity Wilson flirts with throughout the Century Cycle is that of the black matriarch, who Collins describes as "the failed mammy," the "overly aggressive" black mother who ultimately has not time for her family, leading to her children's failure and her manlessness.<sup>18</sup> The image of the black matriarch did not arise with the slave narratives, as did that of the Mammy. Instead, it was considered a product of oppression establishing itself in 1960s literature, a mere two decades before the premier of Wilson's first Century Cycle play, *Jitney*.

Although Wilson may not have recognized these tropes by name, he experienced shades of these stereotypes during his youth: perpetuated by the maternal side of his mother, and tall tales of mythical women told by the men at Pat's Place. He would endeavor to reject both these engrained stereotypes in his own work, instead producing extremely powerful female figures,

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<sup>17</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2000), 71.

<sup>18</sup> Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," 74.

often subverting or manipulating the maternal stereotype and setting to assert their control while ultimately maintaining overall concern for their family.<sup>19</sup>

From wherever Wilson derived his characterization of women, many scholars denounce it as misogyny. “Individually his feminine portrayals tend to slip into comfort zones of what seem to be male-fantasized roles” (such as those described above), wrote premier Wilson scholar Sandra G. Shannon, accurately summarizing her colleagues critiques of the playwright.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Wilson’s plays are full of mothers who threaten to become Mammys or black matriarchs. In all but two of the plays, Wilson’s female figures are mothers or mother figures, seemingly embracing the stereotypical maternal figures elucidated above. While this is not the case, one must first understand the omnipresence of maternal figures to comprehend how Wilson subverts these stereotypes, instead creating extremely empowered female figures.<sup>21</sup>

*The Piano Lesson* best illustrates how Wilson’s implicates stereotypical perspectives of black female maternity in his characterization of women. Berniece, one member of the play’s principle duo, is mother to an adolescent girl, Maretha. Wilson characterizes Berniece primarily through her maternity. After her age, he lists Berniece’s motherhood as her primary characteristic, noting in the stage directions “BERNIECE enters on the stairs. Thirty-five years old, with an eleven-year-old daughter, she is still in mourning for her husband after three years.”<sup>22</sup> One of Berniece’s earliest lines establishes her as a caring maternal figure, commenting, “I don’t want all that loud carrying on around here. I’m surprised you ain’t woke

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<sup>19</sup> Family here does not strictly denote those who share blood with the maternal figure, both those who the maternal figures accept as family. For instance, in *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester has outlived her blood relatives but she looks after the family of individuals who reside with her in addition to her larger Hill District family.

<sup>20</sup> Shannon, “The Ground on Which I Stand”, 151.

<sup>21</sup> The author recognizes that these are far from the only stereotypes of black womanhood, and arguably even of black maternity. Stereotypes of black womanhood are also almost inextricably tied to concerns of sexuality. However, for the scope of this paper, only these two stereotypes will be addressed and only their relation to maternity. To read more into the sexuality of Wilson’s women, please consult any of the anthologies listed in the bibliography.

<sup>22</sup> August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (New York: Penguin Group, 1990), 3.

Maretha up.”<sup>23</sup> Throughout the play, Berniece invokes her responsibility to Maretha to enhance or elucidate her own position in arguments, for instance, justifying keeping the piano for Maretha’s education and betterment. None of the characters can escape the fact and associated responsibility of Berniece’s motherhood. Furthermore, during key and emotionally fraught moments within the play, Wilson chooses to place Berniece in extremely mothering poses. The play's concluding scene exemplifies this maternal positioning. During the apex of the argument between Berniece and Boy Willie, Berniece stands in the kitchen, fixing Maretha’s hair, apron on. An image of the scene, sans dialogue, presents the perfect picture of maternity.

In addition to threatening to embody modern stereotypical maternity herself, Berniece is a vessel to invoke the memory and power of an entire line of possibly stereotypical black mothers. Arguing with Boy Willie as to why she should keep the piano, Berniece describes the sacrifice of her mother, Mama Ola, exasperatedly exclaiming:

Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled . . . You always talking about your daddy but you ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed.<sup>24</sup>

Like the image of Berniece herself, Berniece’s depiction of Mama Ola’s sacrifice hints at the stereotypical image of the subservient, faithful wife and mother.

Wilson concludes *The Piano Lesson* with a final image of mothers, again delivered by Berniece. Sutter’s ghost is only exorcised and the play resolved when all the ancestral and living maternal figures conspire to exorcise of Sutter's ghost. Berniece calls upon the family’s maternal line, of which she is the latest in the chain, singing "I want you to help me/ Mama Berniece/ I

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<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 52.

want you to help/ Mama Esther/ I want you to help me . . . Mama Ola."<sup>25</sup> Six lines later, the play ends with the names of the Charles family's mothers echoing in the audience's ears.

The other nine plays in the Century Cycle contain a similar prominence of traditional maternal figures. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester, in addition to being a biological mother, serves the spiritual mother to the Hill District community—a role that persists throughout the Cycle despite her absence from stage and eventual death. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* features the search and discovery of a missing mother (Martha), while Mattie and Molly consider their desire to be or not to be mothers, and Bertha mothers everyone in the boardinghouse.

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, despite the absence of a biological mother, is rife with stereotypical maternal imagery. One needs look no further than play's title for an example of this. The cast, playwright, and title consistently refer to the central character as "Ma Rainey," or simply "Ma," despite her protestations of "Madame Rainey! Get it strait!"<sup>26</sup> Ma Rainey is crowned "the Mother of the Blues," a title of maternity she accepts, stating, "if they wanna call me the Mother of the Blues, that's all right with me. It don't hurt none."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Ma Rainey takes a pseudo-maternal role caring for her nephew, Sylvester, and her much younger lover, Dussie Mae. For instance, Ma fusses over both Sylvester and Dussie Mae's apparel, offering to provide for them. In one scene, Ma responds to Dussie Mae's request for new shoes asserting, "You get you some shoes that fit your feet. Don't you be messing around with no shoes that pinch your feet. Ma know something about bad feet. Hand me my slippers out my bag over yonder," in a manner more commonly attributed to a mother than a lover.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 107.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson, *Ma*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, *Ma*, 83.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, *Ma*, 60.



Maternity plays a less substantial role in *Seven Guitars*; however, it still constitutes a strong undercurrent in the play. The pregnant Ruby obviously signifies maternity. The prominence of maternity in the play is underscored when Wilson allows Ruby to present her pregnancy as a possible solution to King Hedley's mental and physical depreciation. "I'm gonna tell him [my unborn child] it's his. . . . He wants to be the father of my child and that's what this child needs," Ruby declares.<sup>29</sup> This statement suggests that through her maternity, Ruby can save Hedley, influencing him to care for himself in his final days and giving him a sense of self-worth he lacks. Despite the failure of this newfound paternity to save King Hedley's mind, this interaction seems to position Ruby, who busies herself caring for her selected family of the unborn infant and Hedley, in a stereotypical Mammy. The failure of Ruby's plan, in this stereotypical interpretation, only serves to reinforce, women's ultimate inferiority to men.

The extremely maternal figure of Rose, who Wilson acknowledged came "in a large part from my mother," and the introduction of an illegitimate child in the play *Fences* ensures maternity again constitutes the principle theme.<sup>30</sup> Again, Wilson presents his audience with the image of a strong, if stereotypical, maternal figure in Rose. Rose not only mothers Cory, her biological son, but also plays the role of mother to a variety of her husband, Troy's, family. Rose's conglomeration of surrogate children includes Lyons, Troy's son from a previous marriage, Gabriel, Troy's developmentally disabled brother, and ultimately, Raynell, Troy's daughter from his extramarital affair. Like a good Mammy ought, Rose finds fulfillment through her role as mother, telling Cory, "One of them empty spaces [in me] was being somebody's mother," then continues to suggest he and Raynell, her adopted daughter, filled that hole,

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<sup>29</sup> Wilson, *Seven*, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Shannon, "The Ground on Which I Stand: August Wilson's Perspective on African American Women," 151.

commenting, "I took on to Raynell like she was all them babies I had wanted and never had . . . Like I'd been blessed to relive a part of my life."<sup>31</sup>

The most unusual display of maternity in *Seven Guitars* is Rose's maternal relationship with Troy. She monitors his money and scolds him like a mother. Her maternal role supersedes her marital role, pushing Troy into the arms of Alberta and an adulterous affair and threatening to cast Rose in the role of the black matriarch. In *Rose, Wilson* threatens to reproduce the both the Mammy and black matriarch stereotypes—a difficult feat.

In Wilson's more modern plays, the possible reproduction of maternal tropes are less obvious, yet still accessible. The sole example of maternity in *Two Trains Running*, Risa's care for some of the patrons of Memphis' diner, notably Hambone borders on the Mammy like care of a subservient female figure, redoubled by her servant-esque role as waitress. *King Hedley II* reinforces the stereotypical image of mothers by introducing two maternal figures who reject traditional motherhood. Wilson portrays these women as negative influences on the other characters, notably their children, thereby seeming to condemn motherhood that strays from stereotypically prescribed roles. The first anti-mother figure is Ruby. The young expectant mother from *Seven Guitars* is now old, with a fully-grown son: King Hedley II. Ruby was absent for most of Hedley's youth, leading her own son to reject her legitimacy as a mother, claiming Louise to be his true mother. Ruby is such a negative maternal figure that the play concludes with her killing her own son, albeit accidentally. The second figure is Tonya, who seriously considers aborting her pregnancy.

*Radio Golf*, the final and most modern play both in terms of setting, taking place in 1997, and date written, being Wilson's final play—penned in 2005, is the only play devoid of living mothers. In the other modern plays, the rarity of maternal figures sometimes strengthen the

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<sup>31</sup> August Wilson, *Fences* (New York: Penguin Group, 1986), 97-98.

stereotypical implications of their brief stay on stage. Such is the case in *Jitney*. During the entire play, only one woman appears on stage, and then ever so briefly. Wilson characterizes this woman, Rena, principally by her relationship with Youngblood and role as mother to their son, Jesse. Rena summarizes her outlook on the world by stating "All I know is we got somebody, a little two year-old boy, counting on us."<sup>32</sup> Her maternal role dominates her few lines. For instance, she supports herself in her argument with Youngblood by stating "I have responsibilities. I want to know if it has a hookup for a washer and dryer cause I got to wash Jesse's clothes. I want to know if it has a yard and do it have a fence and how far Jesse has to go to school."<sup>33</sup> The dominance of motherhood in the presentation of Rena, and therefore the presentation of all black women in the world of *Jitney*, suggests motherhood and accompanying nurturing is a principle component in the lives of all black women, thereby reinforcing the Mammy stereotype.

When considering Wilson's seemingly stereotypically maternal characterization of women, one must compare it with the level of paternal characterization evident amongst Wilson's men. *Jitney's* Rena adeptly summarizes the power of paternity throughout the Century Cycle in her critique of Youngblood (aka Darnell): "you bought a den for Darnell . . . that's what you did. So you can sit down there and watch your football games. But what about the kitchen? . . . Is there some place for Jesse to play?"<sup>34</sup> Rena argues that while Youngblood loves his son and is cognizant of his paternal duties, paternity does not dominate his mind and character as maternity does for Rena. The same argument can be made for the paternal figures throughout each of the other nine plays.

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<sup>32</sup> August Wilson, *Jitney* (New York: Samuel French Inc., 2002), 59.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson, *Jitney*, 58.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, *Jitney*, 58.

Paternal duty and adoration do factor strongly into the plots of some of the plays. Becker worries about his son's freedom and character in *Jitney*. Herald Loomis searches for Zonia's mother out of paternal anxiety in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Boy Willie is eager to honor his father by owning his own land, using his father's stolen piano to do so, in *The Piano Lesson*. In *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*, both Hedleys are anxious about who their fathers were, and whether they would be fathers themselves. Troy Maxson, in *Fences*, runs the gamut of paternal figures in the relationships with his three children and disabled brother: everything from doting to destructive to distant. Old Joe's eagerness to provide housing for his daughter propels the action of the final play in the Cycle, *Radio Golf*. However, these paternity plots do not define the character of Wilson's men to the extent maternity does his female characters. Neither does paternity characterize all of the male characters in Wilson's canon; while almost all of Wilson's adult female characters are defined by their maternal roles, or lack thereof.

Indeed, the matrilineal line functions as a principle identifying feature and a frame by which audiences view events. For instance, in *Seven Guitars*, four of the characters, those unaware of the extent of the crime they discuss, broach the subject of a recent robbery through the mother, describing the accused not by name but as "Miss Tillery's boy."<sup>35</sup> Then, rather than comment on the morality of the robbery, the tragedy of police brutality, or the oppressive poverty taking hold of the Hill District, Vera, Louise, Ruby, and Canwell comment on Miss Tillery's grief at her son's death at length, reporting "They come and told her Poochie and she commenced to moaning . . . She was out there for about eight hours crying. 'My Poochie boy. My Poochie boy.'<sup>36</sup> Abstaining from concluding with direct political critique and instead inserting an image of maternal grief, Wilson comments more substantially as to the deplorable

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<sup>35</sup> Wilson, *Seven*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, *Seven*, 96-97.

nature of the entire situation through all powerful, all relatable parental grief. Similarly, in *Radio Golf*, when inquiries into Harmond's father's actions prove fruitless, Old Joe's statement as to the maternal heritage of his family, remarking "That's my daughter. I named her after my mother . . . But that wasn't her birth name. . . . Her birth name was Black Mary," changes everything, leading Wilson describes as "one of the important moments of their lives in which everything may change for them" as the men discover their shared heritage.<sup>37</sup>

The omnipresence of mothers throughout the Century Cycle seems to reinforce arguments as to Wilson's stereotypical characterization. The rarity of female characters enhances this effect. Generally, Wilson's plays only include one to two female characters.<sup>38</sup> Wilsonian scholars have responded negatively to the abundance of allegedly stereotypical portrayals of women within Wilson's plays, maternal and otherwise, sometimes going so far as to declare Wilson's work as sexist. "Like all of Wilson's plays to date, *Fences* is very much a black man's story. Black women do have appreciable roles in his dramas; however, they seldom are as developed as the men, who freely commune with other black men," decreed Sandra G. Shannon.<sup>39</sup> "He presents independent women who assert feminist positions, but who, either through their own volition or as the result of external social pressures, ultimately conform to traditional gender roles and historical expectations" similarly denounced Harry J. Elam Jr.<sup>40</sup> While these critiques address strong motifs that pervade Wilson's work, it does not encompass a complete analysis of Wilson's women's roles.

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<sup>37</sup> August Wilson, *Radio Golf* (New York: Theater Communications Group, Inc., 2007), 65-66.

<sup>38</sup> *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is anomalous with five major female characters: Bertha, Zonia, Mattie, Molly, and Martha.

<sup>39</sup> Sandra G. Shannon, "Developing Character-*Fences*," in *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1995), 105.

<sup>40</sup> Harry J. Elam Jr., "August Wilson's Women" in *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, ed. Alan Nadel (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 165.

### Subverting the Stereotype

Although much of Wilson's characterization of women aligns with the stereotypical roles Elam and Shannon mention, Wilson's overall characterization of women is not misogynistic, nor stereotypical—it expands beyond these categorizations through depictions of agency and authority. In doing so, Wilson subverts the stereotypes of the Mammy and the black matriarch, making maternity a source of power. Wilson transforms these traditional stereotypes to no longer dismiss and pigeonhole women, but endow them with greater power and authority within the scope of each play. Wilson's women seem to embody feminist Dale Spender's recommendation, "We women find ourselves in the position of being the nurturing sex in an exploitative society; our nurturance is taken and used by men. We must confront the problem of how to make ourselves nurturantly unavailable for exploitation—an oppression—without repudiating nurturing itself."<sup>41</sup> *Gem of the Ocean* and *The Piano Lesson* best illustrate this simultaneous embrace and reversal of stereotypes in Wilson work, and therefore will principally be discussed below. However, they are by no means the only plays in which Wilson toys with gender stereotypes.

"Black women in Wilson's dramaturgy," Harry Elam argues, "function largely in secondary roles and often in reaction to men."<sup>42</sup> The reality is quite the opposite. Although the scarcity of female characters as compared to male characters statistically dwarfs the females in the scope of the play, the women possess absolute power that dominates the works. The female characters hold central roles within the social dynamics of each cast. Their situations and actions spur on the plot. The men in the plays define themselves in relation to the women, thereby demonstrating the women's extreme power, even if while referring to them as "their women."

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<sup>41</sup> Shannon, "The Ground on Which I Stand", 155.

<sup>42</sup> Harry J. Elam Jr., "August Wilson's Women," 165.

### Aunt Ester

Crowned by Wilson as “the most significant persona of the cycle,” Aunt Ester best exemplifies the centrality and power of women throughout Wilson's work.<sup>43</sup> Aunt Ester is a mother, however, her maternity does not dominate her. Wilson subtly inserts the detail of her biological maternity into the work. During her second conversation with Citizen Barlow, Aunt Ester mentions, “You remind me of my Junebug he was the only one of my boys that caused me trouble.”<sup>44</sup> However, this detail is soon forgotten in the shadow of Aunt Ester’s larger roles. As inconsequential as this detail of her motherhood may seem, Wilson included it. By doing so, Wilson crafts an extremely powerful woman whose power is not limited by nor derives from her role as a biological mother.

Not only does this characterization upset stereotypes of black womanhood, it’s extremely incongruent with the gender power dynamic of the time period. In an interview given seven years previous to the publication of *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson discussed the limitations historical parameters place on his characterization, stating “You also have to be historically correct in the sense that women in 1936—I’m sorry—were not liberated. They were not the same as women in 1993 are. Originally I had Berniece in *Piano Lesson* utter some very feminist ideas. These were not the ideas that were even in the world, that she would have even been aware of in 1936. I had to take that away from her.”<sup>45</sup> In *Gem of the Ocean*, written only a few years later, Wilson willfully flouts the limitations of the 1904 setting to create this extraordinary powerful woman. The recognition and subsequent rejection of historical limitations in his characterization of Aunt

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<sup>43</sup> Ben Brantley, "Wilson's Gems, Memory's Ocean," *New York Times*, May 20, 2007, [http://theater.nytimes.com/2007/05/20/theater/20bran.html?\\_r=0&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1363761704-6Z8G9ih8oxb41+uhVtb1GQ](http://theater.nytimes.com/2007/05/20/theater/20bran.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1363761704-6Z8G9ih8oxb41+uhVtb1GQ) (accessed March 20, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2006), 20.

<sup>45</sup> Nathan L. Grant, "Men, Women, and Culture: A Conversation with August Wilson," in *Conversations with August Wilson*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, 172-187 (*American Drama*, Spring 1996 repr., Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2006), 182.

Ester reflects Wilson purposefully reversing the pervading Mammy stereotype, creating a character that is anything but subservient.

The most obvious example of Aunt Ester's power is her role as “a very old, yet vital spiritual advisor for the community.”<sup>46</sup> Citizen’s comment, “The people sent me to see Aunt Ester. One man say he came to see Aunt Ester and all his problems went away. Say she can help anybody,” epitomizes the reverence with which the Hill District community treats Aunt Ester.<sup>47</sup> Her centrality as spiritual leader expands beyond the confines of the Hill District, as August Wilson explained, “She represents the entire 349 years that blacks have been in America. She represents our tradition, our philosophy, our folk wisdom, our hobbies, our culture, whatever you care to call it.”<sup>48</sup> Elam suggests that Wilson develops Aunt Ester's historical centrality even through the spelling of her name. Rather than spell Ester traditionally, “Esther,” he instead spell it without the “h,” as in “anc-estr-y.”<sup>49</sup> Although Aunt Ester's role as spiritual advisor is a somewhat a maternal role for the Hill District at large, her authority expands far beyond this, representing over three centuries of black American history, wielding much more power than that which accompanies the maternal stereotypes of the Mammy and the black matriarch.

In addition to Aunt Ester's centrality to the community, she is likewise essential to the action of the play. Wilson defines the characters through their relation to her. According to Wilson, Eli is first and foremost “Aunt Ester’s gatekeeper.”<sup>50</sup> When describing Solly Two Kings, Wilson opens his description with “suitor to Aunt Ester,” elevating it in importance above

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<sup>46</sup>This line comes from Wilson's character description of Aunt Ester at the beginning of *Gem of the Ocean*; Wilson, *Gem*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 40.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Pettengill, “The Historical Perspective: An Interview with August Wilson,” in *Conversations with August Wilson*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, 155-171 (1993, *August Wilson: A Casebook*, ed. Marilyn Elkins, New York: Garland, 2000 repr., Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2006), 160.

<sup>49</sup>Andrea Johnson credits Harry Elam with this point in her Master's thesis; Andrea D. Johnson, “Discovering Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean* by August Wilson” (master's thesis, University of Florida, 2010), <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00001593/00001> (accessed March 20, 2013), 9.

<sup>50</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 5.



all other traits listed, including “former Underground Railroad conductor.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Wilson describes Black Mary as “Aunt Ester’s protégé and housekeeper,” then concludes as those it is an afterthought with “Late twenties.”<sup>52</sup> These introductions foster the sense that without Aunt Ester these individuals would not gather, thus compounding her power.

Aunt Ester’s essentiality to perpetuate the action similarly demonstrates her centrality and power. The play’s prologue scene evidences this extreme power. Eli opens the door to Citizen who forces his way into the house, eager to see Aunt Ester. Eli tries to stop him. Citizen and Eli argue, tussle, and ultimately exert no power over each other. However, Aunt Ester, wielding extreme power, easily and immediately resolves both the scene and the issue through her understated entrance and twelve words. Wilson simply but exquisitely creates a sense of Aunt Ester’s power when “*Aunt Ester enters from her room. Her presence has an immediate calming effect on Citizen,*” a calming effect which culminates with Aunt Ester’s line “Didn’t he say Tuesday, baby? Go on I’ll see you on Tuesday,” at which “*Citizen takes his hat and goes out the door. Aunt Ester turns around and goes back into her room.*”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Aunt Ester allows the play to conclude, leading the spiritual rituals that frees Citizen from his guilt and Solly from the mortal realm.

As these examples demonstrate, Aunt Ester incurs an extreme amount of power in *Gem of the Ocean*, power that far exceeds that awarded to stereotypical figures of the Mammy and the black matriarch. The Mammy figure has influence but no real power, while the black matriarch only has power in her domestic situation—and there she holds a limited amount. Aunt Ester holds real power, power that far exceeds her domestic situation and affects the entirety of the Hill District. Furthermore, her power does not yield from of nor result in a rejection of concern

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<sup>51</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 8.

for her family, but instead grows from genuine care. Wilson does not simply reject the traditional stereotypes by endowing Aunt Ester with this extreme amount of power. Instead, Aunt Ester's power grows out of her maternity, particularly as a maternal figure for the Hill District community. Creating the power dynamic as such, Wilson subverts the traditional stereotypes pertaining to black maternity, creating instead an extremely positive and powerful depiction of black mothers.

This subversion and Aunt Ester's power is not only evident in *Gem of the Ocean*, but throughout the Century Cycle. The resonance of Aunt Ester throughout the Cycle further exemplifies her centrality and power. For instance, in *King Hedley II*, when the 366 year old finally dies, it cataclysmically interrupts the play, upsetting the audience and characters alike as “*Stool Pigeon* enters in a rush,” screaming “Lock your doors! Close your windows! Turn your lamp down low! We in trouble now. Aunt Ester died! She died! She died! She died!”<sup>54</sup> In the next scene, the audience learns that this disturbance was not limited to the microcosm on stage but, according to *Stool Pigeon*, the lights “went out all over the city when Aunt Ester died. She died and all the lights went out God got a plan.”<sup>55</sup>

In the following and concluding play, *Radio Golf*, Aunt Ester's absence is still felt. Sterling remembers that Aunt Ester “Had this peacefulness about her,” then continues, saying “I was sorry to hear that she died.”<sup>56</sup> The best example of Aunt Ester's continuing centrality along with lingering reverence and respect, is the great concern and warm nostalgia given to Aunt Ester's house, the woman and the house almost forming a metonymic relationship. This will be discussed at greater length later.

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<sup>54</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> August Wilson, *King Hedley II* (New York: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2005), 21.

<sup>56</sup> Wilson, *Radio*, 54.

Conversely, at the time of Aunt Ester's death in *King Hedley II*, none of the characters are concerned with the longevity of Eli, who first appeared as a fully grown character in *Gem of the Ocean* set eighty-one years previously. Stool Pigeon casually mentions him, and only in conjunction with Aunt Ester, when he states, "They wanna do an autopsy but Mr. Eli fighting them on that."<sup>57</sup> In the case of Aunt Ester, as in all of Wilson's plays, it is the woman who holds the ultimate power, receives the upmost respect, and is not limited to peripheral roles nor reduced to a mere stereotype. Men, such as Eli, cannot hope to compete.

Critics who condemn Wilson of sexism often argue that Aunt Ester does not represent a female figure as she has been unsexed through her age, Christ-like role, and spiritual position within the Hill District community. However, this is not the case. Wilson carefully reinforces Aunt Ester as female throughout the Cycle. The reinforcement of Aunt Ester's femininity begins with her name. Aunt. Ester. The term "Aunt" precedes the character's every action and every mention of her, thereby reinforcing not only her age and state of authority, but also her femininity. Only females can be aunts. Furthermore, the nurturing, near maternal nature of a self-identified aunt implies that not only is Aunt Ester most definitely female, she is a woman, characterized by actions beyond the biological and matrilineal basic qualifications of an "aunt," in addition to those necessary to be recognized universally as such.

"Ester," the second portion of Aunt Ester's name, instantly calls the biblical figure of Esther to mind. Esther delivered her people from the danger of genocide, much as Aunt Ester delivers her people of the Hill District. This connection not only reinforces Aunt Ester as a spiritual savior, but underscores Aunt Ester's femininity. Esther's ability to save her people in the

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<sup>57</sup> Wilson, *King*, 80.

Bible derived from a key component of her femininity—her sexuality, which secured her the role of wife of the king and therefore influence over him.<sup>58</sup>

Wilson's reinforcement of Aunt Ester's womanhood expands beyond her name. Upon her arrival on the stage in the first act, Wilson immediately affiliates Aunt Ester with traditional feminine symbols. First and foremost among these symbols is that of tea. After entering, Aunt Ester immediately asks, "What you doing making all that noise out here? I smell pigfeet. Black Mary, put me on a pot of tea."<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, soon after her arrival, Aunt Ester jokingly proposes marriage to Solly Two Kings. This scene's humorous tone asserts Aunt Ester's independent power, not requiring a man. However, Aunt Ester's desirability to Solly and the evidence of her previous marriages reinforce the audience's understanding of her femininity. Through all these presentations, Wilson alerts his audience that Aunt Ester is most certainly not unsexed, but feminine and therefore capable of subverting feminine stereotypes.

There is no question throughout the Cycle that Wilson portrays Aunt Ester as very much a woman and an empowered one at that. Her power in the domestic, theatrical, and community spheres pervade the plays. Through this empowered characterization of Aunt Ester, Wilson challenges and refutes stereotypical images of black motherhood.

### **Berniece**

Berniece, in *The Piano Lesson*, similarly illustrates Wilson subverting sexist stereotypes, thereby empowering Berniece, principally by rendering her the central figure essential to the plot. Wilson recognized the complexity and centrality of Berniece in *The Piano Lesson*,

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<sup>58</sup>Aunt Esther with an "H" was an established character in *Sanford and Son*, which would have aired before the production of *Jitney*, Wilson's first play. She's a strong female figure that goes head to head with Redd Fox, and is similarly associated with femininity. The mass popularity of *Sanford and Son* virtually assures that Wilson would have seen at least an episode or two; however, there is no way of knowing if he saw an Aunt Esther episode or not. Although there is a direct connection between the names, this may not have been intentional (*Revolution Televised*).

<sup>59</sup>Wilson, *Gem*, 16.

remarking, "You see, the play's about Berniece, it's not about Boy Willie. Berniece is the only character in the play who goes through any changes. She is forced to confront her unwillingness to embrace her past, her unwillingness to tell her daughter—she feels the piano's a burden to her daughter."<sup>60</sup>

"I didn't know whom I was rooting for," remembers Constanza Romero, Wilson's costume designer and later wife, "Amongst the designers we were saying, 'No, Berniece should have the piano!' 'No, Boy Willie should have the piano!'"<sup>61</sup> As Mrs. Romero indicated, the weight of arguments for both Boy Willie and Berniece are approximately equitable. After running the play for months without a concluding resolution, Wilson deliberately chose to end the play with Berniece keeping the piano. This choice affirms the verity of Berniece's power. She overpowers Boy Willie. She exorcises Sutter's ghost. She wins. As the following examples will illustrate, Berniece's power comes from a redefinition of the maternal trope.

Like Aunt Ester, Berniece subverts the traditional stereotypes of black motherhood by incurring power without abandoning concern with her family. The first example of this is the most obvious, without Berniece's presence and strong opposition to Boy Willie's selling the piano motivated by her familial loyalty, the play would be reduced to a one act in which the eccentric, overly enthusiastic Boy Willie visits his Uncle Doaker in the North, regales Doaker and the audience with the story of Yellow Dog, sells a few watermelon, sings a song or two then soon departs, piano in tow. It is Berniece's presence and her strong defense for the value of heritage that makes the play.

Berniece's importance to the plot is not limited to the central conflict. She participates in each of the play's key moments. For instance, it is Berniece that announces the arrival of Sutter's

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<sup>60</sup> Nathan L. Grant, "Men, Women, and Culture: A Conversation with August Wilson, 175.

<sup>61</sup> Constanza Romero, "Living & Learning with August Wilson," *Signature Stories 4*, Autumn 2012, 17-18.

ghost, suddenly calling offstage "Doaker! Go on get away. Doaker!"<sup>62</sup> Berniece's announcement of Sutter's arrival serves as the impetus that sets the plot and the characters in both figurative and literal motion. It causes "DOAKER *and* BOY WILLIE [to] *rush to the stairs*, BOY WILLIE *runs up the stairs, passing* BERNIECE *as she enters, running*."<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Berniece resolves the plot by exorcising Sutter, saving Boy Willie's life, and the familial memory. Berniece changes, confronts her demons, and finally plays the piano and sings, calling upon the ancestral spirits for help. In Wilson's words, Berniece's music interrupts "*a life-and-death struggle fraught with perils and faultless terror*" with "A rustle of wind blowing across two continents."<sup>64</sup> Berniece's emotionally fraught sung pleas of "I want you to help me" fill the theater, juxtaposing the slamming and gushing sounds as Boy Willie battles against Sutter's invisible ghost, augmenting the emotional heft of Berniece's plea and with it Berniece's power.<sup>65</sup>

As delineated in the discussion of omnipresent maternity in Wilson's works, Berniece repetitively invokes maternal responsibility to defend her arguments. While this seems to denote a traditional Mammy figure, over-concerned with the welfare of others, it also represents a principle source of power, one that Berniece exploits to her benefit. For instance, Berniece repetitively justifies her arguments with protestations for the welfare of her daughter, Maretha. Principally, Berniece argues that Boy Willie's presence in the house threatens Maretha's well being. According to Berniece, Maretha should not be exposed to the noise, the wildness, the extra-legal activities, and the extra-marital affairs that are inseparable from Boy Willie. When Berniece descends the stairs interrupting Boy Willie's midnight rendezvous, proclaiming "I got an eleven-year-old girl upstairs. I can't allow that around here," the audience understands that

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<sup>62</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 106-107.

<sup>65</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 106.

this is a common complaint of the exasperated mother.<sup>66</sup> Maretha, conversely, seems undisturbed by Boy Willie's raucous presence, and borders on enjoying it. For instance, in the following scene, Maretha waits with rapt attention, demanding to know more each time Boy Willie pauses in his retelling of the background of the Ghosts of Yellow Dog. "Why they call them that?" she asks, "Anybody ever see the Ghosts?"<sup>67</sup> No doubt Berniece does act out of motherly concern for her daughter, however, she recognizes and embraces the power of maternity and relishes in her maternal role as the sole adult woman in the house, and exploits it to her advantage.

Within *The Piano Lesson*, maternal power as embodied by Berniece is overwhelmingly evident. While the men within the play continue the multi-generational cycle of violence, that which Berniece describes by exclaiming "You, Papa Boy Charles, Wining Boy, Doaker, Crawley . . . you're all alike. All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And what it ever lead to? More thieving and killing."<sup>68</sup> The women within the play hold the uniquely powerful role of stopping this cycle of violence. After Berniece resolves the fight with Boy Willie and exorcises Sutter's ghost within her house, all that is left is the positive peace illustrated by the positive final words of the work, those uttered by Berniece: "Thank you."<sup>69</sup> Berniece's extreme power may seem to nominate Berniece to claim the label of a black matriarch. However, the conditions of Berniece's power differentiates her from that of the black matriarch. Berniece's power does not result in extreme neglect or domineering of her family, but yields from and results in extreme concern for their welfare.

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<sup>66</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 85-86.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 52.

<sup>69</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 108.

### Power of Pregnancy

Of course, the women of *The Piano Lesson* and *Gem of the Ocean* are not the only females within Wilson's works to empower themselves from within the stereotypical tropes of femininity, notably maternity. Pregnancy constitutes a unique form of empowerment within the Cycle. Pregnancy factors principally in the plots of *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II*, and *Fences*; each to dramatically different yet similarly powerful effects. Including pregnancy in his plays, Wilson poses an image of maternity drenched in agency, in which the female body is empowered not only to create life but also to affect positive change. This reflects grander trends in the limited canon of black American theater. For instance, in James Baldwin's 1964 play, *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, the character of Juanita elucidates the power of pregnancy, asserting that while "Mama is afraid I'm pregnant. . . . I'm not afraid, oh no, no. I hope I am pregnant. I hope I am! One more illegitimate black baby—that's right, you jive mothers! And I am going to raise my baby to be a man. A *man*, you dig? Oh, let me be pregnant, let me be pregnant."<sup>70</sup> This motif of power of pregnancy and the associated influence of motherhood repeats throughout Wilson's plays.

In *Seven Guitars*, Ruby attempts to use her pregnancy as a healing measure—endeavoring to mend Hedley's deteriorating mind. Ruby's hope for healing through her gestational gestures, and the other characters willingness to help her whether through real support and acquiescence or mere humoring, illustrates the widely, if tacitly and subconsciously, recognized power of pregnancy; a subset of the power of motherhood.

The sequel to *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II* again deals with the theme of the power of pregnancy as characters face another unplanned pregnancy. The approach to pregnancy within

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<sup>70</sup> This comes from Act III of *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, as performed in: *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, DVD, Director of photography Don Lenzer, Editor Steven Olswang (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2004).



this play, although still powerful, diverges entirely from that espoused in *Seven Guitars*.

Pregnancy no longer represents an optimistic end, but a weighty responsibility. Whereas Ruby casually and confidently mentions, "I just hope he live long enough to see this baby born," as her entire intended statement on the matter of her pregnancy in *Seven Guitars*, in *King Hedley II* Tonya definitely declares, "I ain't having this baby. That's all there is to it."<sup>71</sup>

Tonya's consideration of abortion and trepidations on becoming a mother again reflects the great responsibility of motherhood, thus illuminating the accompanying extreme power of bringing another human being into one's world. When Tonya replies to King's "What's the difference?" between Tonya's first pregnancy and her current one, Tonya alludes to the awesome power of motherhood, the weight of the choice to bring a child into a given environment, through her response that:

About seventeen years. That's a whole lot of difference. I'm thirty-five years old. I done seen the whole thing turn around. When I had Natasha I was as happy as I could be. I had something nobody could take away from me. Had somebody to love. Had somebody to love me. I thought life was gonna be something. Look up and the whole world seem like it went crazy. Her daddy in jail. Her step-daddy going to jail. She seventeen and got a baby, she don't even know who the father is. She moving so fast she can't stop and look in the mirror. She can't see herself. . . . I don't want to go through it.<sup>72</sup>

Through Tonya's acknowledgment of the hardship and pain of motherhood and the difficulty of raising a child in modern Hill District environment, Wilson painfully evidences this weighty responsibility and accompanying power of maternity.

Tonya's consideration of abortion also emphasizes the power of women, particular mothers, who control their own bodies with powerful and meaningful effects—whether introducing new life to the world or choosing to shield a child from that by terminating a pregnancy. Again, the consideration of pregnancy comprises a major theme in the canon of black

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<sup>71</sup> Wilson, *Seven*, 95; Wilson, *King*, 37.

<sup>72</sup> Wilson, *King*, 37-38.

American theater. While *Blues for Mr. Charlie* celebrated the power of completing a pregnancy and raising a child, Lorraine Hansbury's *Raisin in the Sun* reflects the similar agency in choosing not to complete a pregnancy, thereby sparing a child from the unpleasant realities of a harsh world.<sup>73</sup> Both depictions of pregnancy highlight the agency and power that accompany having a baby, complicating Wilson's depictions of black mothers beyond the tired tropes.

*Fences* presents the third perspective on pregnancy in the Century Cycle. While the two previous plays commented on the power of both completing and terminating pregnancy, *Fences* more generally reflects pregnancy as a symbol overwhelming female power. In *Fences*, Alberta's condition, a pregnancy which arose from Troy's extramarital affair, is the straw that breaks the camel's back in the Maxson's marriage, irrevocably separating Rose and Troy while simultaneously providing each with opportunities for redemption. The incredible power of the pregnancy—destroying the Maxson's marriage, killing off Alberta, and allowing Rose one last chance at motherhood—epitomizes the power of motherhood that far exceeds the stereotypical image of submissive, domesticated Mammies or the cool, dominating black matriarchs. While the power of maternity is not always used to a positive effect in Wilson's plays, such as here where motherhood destroys marriage and kills a woman, the power remains both present and strong. These depictions of pregnancy complicate black motherhood, drawing Wilson's rendering of women further away from the staid stereotypes previously discussed.

### **Setting the Stage**

In addition to the power structures within the Century Cycle that are anything but "male-fantasized," the physical structures challenge stereotypical understandings of female roles and subtly underscore the power of women throughout the play. While the sets and settings of Wilson's plays may seem secondary, as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* told his audience "Life's but a

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<sup>73</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (Cambridge: ProQuest LLC, 2002).

walking shadow, a poor player,/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/ And then is heard no more."<sup>74</sup> When the strutting is over, the stage remains. Less abstractly, in the theater the set is the first and last thing the audience sees. It remains constant throughout the work, while characters, time and situations change. The allusions to power and characterization established in a set are rarely consciously recognized, yet they still constitute a source of powerful allusions that permeate the work and the audience's understanding therein.

The power of setting was not lost on Wilson. Each play begins with a lengthy description of the setting, generally expanding beyond that purely on stage to encapsulate the community in which the audience suddenly finds itself: defining the relationships that compose the community, the attitudes that govern actions, and the emotions that surge through the air. For instance, at the beginning of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson wrote:

Chicago in 1927 is a rough city, a bruising city, a city of millionaires and derelicts, gangsters and roughhouse dandies, whores and Irish grandmothers who move through its streets fingering long black rosaries. Somewhere a man is wrestling with the taste of a woman in his cheek. Somewhere a dog is barking. Somewhere the moon has fallen through a window and broken into thirty pieces of silver.

It is one o'clock in the afternoon. Secretaries are returning from their lunch, the noon Mass at St. Anthony's is over, and the priest is mumbling over his vestments while the altar boys practice their Latin. The procession of cattle cars through stockyards continues unabated. The busboys in Mac's Place are cleaning away the last of the corned beef and cabbage . . .<sup>75</sup>

In this brief sketch, Wilson situates his audience and actors in his Chicago, which is distinctly different from the Hill District home of the other plays.<sup>76</sup> The place and role of Chicagoan women is a key component to this orientation. Wilson's description of "Whores and Irish grandmothers who move through its streets fingering long black rosaries" allows his audience to

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<sup>74</sup> *Mabeth*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009), 5.5.19-28.

<sup>75</sup> Wilson, *Ma*, xv.

<sup>76</sup> The Chicago described here is particularly the gypsy cab station of *Jimney*, the only other produced play at the time of debut of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

imagine these women, absentmindedly wandering routes they have mastered, dominating the streets with equal belonging as the male “millionaires and derelicts, gangsters and roughhouse dandies” that share the sidewalk and the sentence.<sup>77</sup> In the following line, Wilson presents his audience with telltale one o’clock images. By listing secretaries—undoubtedly all females in 1927—as chief among these images, Wilson subtly but definitely creates a Chicago where women are not only a part of events, but integral and active to the day. They are as necessary and as omnipresent as one o’clock. Women in the built, imaginative, environment of Wilson’s Chicago, as is the case throughout all of Wilson’s plays, are not swept aside and secluded into stereotypical spheres, but dominate their world from their locales albeit often in seemingly limited gendered spaces: the homes of the Irish grandmothers, the bedrooms of the whores, or the small ring side desks of dedicated secretaries.

The physical environments in August Wilson’s plays reinforce the power and centrality of women, as demonstrated by the preceding description of Chicago. However, while setting descriptions such as that discussed above are fleeting, mentioned at the beginning of the play or included as a playbill note then soon forgotten, the actual setting of the play remains and reminds viewers of power structures and social hierarchies throughout the performance. The physical settings and subsequent character interactions with their environment in *Gem of the Ocean* and *The Piano Lesson* amongst others exemplify Wilson simultaneously setting the physical and metaphorical stage.

### **House Mother**

Introducing the setting of *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson writes:

The action of the play takes place in the kitchen and parlor of the house where DOAKER CHARLES lives with his niece, BERNIECE, and her eleven-year-old daughter, MARETHA. The house is sparsely furnished, and although there is evidence of a

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<sup>77</sup> Wilson, *Ma*, xv.

woman's touch, there is a lack of warmth and vigor. BERNIECE and MARETHA occupy the upstairs rooms. DOAKER's room is prominent and opens onto the kitchen. Dominating the parlor is an old upright piano. On the legs of the piano, carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art. At left is a staircase leading to the upstairs.<sup>78</sup>

Immediately, Wilson's readers and audience can infer the gendered dynamics of the home's residents. Every few words reveals something new. "The action of the play takes place in the kitchen and parlor of the house." The kitchen and parlor are two regions of the home almost immediately categorized in the feminine sphere. This categorization carries with it two contradictory, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, agency affiliations. The first is as hubs of power. The parlor and the kitchen are where women are in control: preparing food and thereby providing for the family or moderating polite interaction while entertaining. Wilson chose from among the myriad of monikers for a seating area with a sofa to call the aforementioned room not a den, not a family room, not a sitting room, not a living room, all of which carry neutral or masculine gender associations. The porch, as seen in *Fences*, or dens are the venues of male moderated entertaining. However, the parlor belongs to a more formal strand of entertaining and the feminine sphere. Wilson definitely and repetitively refers to the room as the parlor, and in doing so purposefully invokes the feminine affiliations.

The kitchen and parlor are also interpreted as inescapable spheres of domesticity, veritable prisons of prettiness from which women must slave away for their family, and outside of which women lack all power. Wilson swiftly addresses and subverts this interpretation of the rooms. In the opening scene, Doaker assumes the domestic hosting role affiliated with women under the sphere of domesticity interpretation, thus subverting audience expectations and leaving the parlor, where the scene occurs, purely a place of power. This behavior is not an anomaly

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<sup>78</sup> Wilson, *Piano*.

excused by the earliness of Boy Willie's arrival at five o'clock in the morning. It is the expected behavior of Doaker. Boy Willie opens the play by calling for Doaker to fulfill his duty, screeching "Hey, Doaker . . . Doaker! (*He knocks again and calls.*) Hey, Doaker!"<sup>79</sup> It is only



Figure 1: A still from the Signature Theater Company's 2012 production of *The Piano Lesson*, in which the audience can clearly see Doaker, standing, in hosting role serving alcohol and dinner to the seated Wining Boy, Lyman, and Boy Willie (from left to right). Furthermore, Doaker stands comfortably surrounded by the trappings of domesticity: refrigerator, rug beater, etc.

after calling three times, becoming frustrated and even more impatient than his modus operandi establishes that Boy Willie concedes to call the Charles house's other adult resident, with "Hey, Berniece! Berniece!"<sup>80</sup> As the scene continues, Doaker continually strives to moderate etiquette and reasonable behavior, a difficult feat in the face of the whirlwind that is

Boy Willie, repetitively reminding Boy Willie in vain that "Berniece don't like all that hollering now."<sup>81</sup> Through Doaker's behavior as a host, Wilson places Doaker squarely and continually in the traditional feminine role, therefore freeing Berniece from it.<sup>82</sup>

As the scene continues, Doaker subverts the sphere of domesticity expectation associated with the kitchen in addition to that affiliated with the parlor. Wilson writes in this subversion with the simple stage direction: "DOAKER *starts to cook his breakfast.*"<sup>83</sup> Not only does

<sup>79</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 2.

<sup>82</sup> Joan Marcus, 2012, Signature Theater Company,

<http://www.signaturetheatre.org/tickets/production.aspx?pid=2371> (accessed March 20, 2013).

<sup>83</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 17.

Doaker cook, the skill alone being traditionally feminine, but Wilson emboldens this subversion by having Doaker, not Berniece, prepare food for the family and provide for the family through cooking, a similarly traditionally feminine duty. The opening scene also bears witness to this subversion as upon Boy Willie asking “What you cooking over there, Doaker? Me and Lymon’s hungry . . . That look good what you got. Give me a little piece of that grilled bread,” to which Doaker responds by saying “Here . . . go on take the whole piece” then gives both Boy Willie and Lymon toast.<sup>84</sup> While Doaker as chef already constitutes a clear inversion of the social morés of the 1936 world in which the play is set, and most likely social norms if not morés for Wilsons original 1987 audience, Wilson further challenges feminine associations with the physicality and activity of spheres of domesticity by writing that Doaker not only feeds his family, but survives by feeding, working as a cook on the railroad.

These subversions are introduced immediately, precluding the audience from viewing the choice of setting as limiting agent for Berniece and female power, but quite the opposite. The rooms are the epicenter of her power. Wilson reinforces this by continuing the aforementioned subversions of traditional gender roles as associated to the rooms throughout the play. At the advent of the next scene, “The lights come up [as] . . . DOAKER busies himself washing pots,” another task in the play that escapes the cult of domesticity into the everyday activities of the men.<sup>85</sup> The half empty bottle on the table in front of the newly arrived Wining Boy suggests that Doaker has also been entertaining. Likewise, the second act commences with Doaker enacting the triple threat of domesticity: he “is ironing the pants to his uniform. He has a pot cooking on the stove at the same time,” and upon Wining Boy’s immediate entry he commences once again

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<sup>84</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 19.

<sup>85</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 28.

entertaining.<sup>86</sup> This role reversal was entirely intentional, Wilson established in a 1993 interview, explaining that “I very pointedly have [Berniece's] uncle Doaker taking care of himself. It’s not an accident that her irons his clothes and cooks for himself. Someone else with a woman in the house would have her do all the ‘woman things.’ But it was very important to me that Berniece not do these things and the Doaker be self-sufficient.”<sup>87</sup> Wilson repetitively develops the sets as nexuses of feminine power throughout the Century Cycle.

Having discussed most of the of the ramifications of the set design established in the first thirty words, one can now examine the rest of the sentence: “the house where DOAKER CHARLES lives with his niece, BERNIECE, and her eleven-year-old daughter, MARETHA.”<sup>88</sup> In this phrase, Wilson establishes the co-residency of Doaker, Berniece and Maretha. However, establishing this by stating “DOAKER CHARLES lives with his niece, BERNIECE,” Wilson suggests to the audience that the house belongs to Berniece who allows Doaker to live there. However, in 1936, a woman owning a home, and as such supporting an entire family, would be incredibly unusual. The confusion as to who owns the home pervades the work. Berniece consistently refers to the house as “my house,” particularly in regards to Boy Willie, often when expressing her frustration by demanding “Boy Willie, just go on out there and sell them watermelons and you and Lymon leave my house.”<sup>89</sup> Even Boy Willie refers to the house as Berniece’s, telling Grace, a potential lover, that “This is my sister’s house.”<sup>90</sup>

Throughout the first two thirds of the play, Doaker does not refer to the home as belonging to either himself or Berniece. However, the history of Berniece and Maretha’s relocation from the South and Doaker’s long time work for the railroad ads weight to audience

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<sup>86</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 55.

<sup>87</sup> Nathan L. Grant, "Men, Women, and Culture: A Conversation with August Wilson," 179.

<sup>88</sup> Wilson, *Piano*.

<sup>89</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 6, 16.

<sup>90</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 72.



suspicion that Berniece does not own the house. By the play's conclusion, Doaker asserts his ownership, exploding at Boy Willie, "This is my house, nigger! I ain't gonna let you or nobody else carry nothing out of it. You ain't gonna carry nothing out of here without my permission!"<sup>91</sup> After this explosion, Boy Willie also recognizes Doaker's ownership, responding, "This is my piano. I don't need your permission to carry my belongings out of your house."<sup>92</sup> This heated acknowledgement of ownership at the play's conclusion strongly implies that the house belongs to Doaker after all.

The issue of who actually owns the house is less significant than Berniece's tacitly recognized control in it. Berniece rules the roost. With the exception of Boy Willie and Lymon, she determines who stays and who goes. Within the first scene of the play, Doaker tells Boy Willie, Lymon and the audience that Berniece drove her other uncle, Wining Boy, from the house, recounting "He come by here about a year ago. Had a whole sack of money. He stayed here about two weeks. Ain't offered nothing. Berniece asked him for three dollars to buy some food and he got mad and left."<sup>93</sup> The audience witnesses for themselves Berniece power as mistress of the house in the second act. Berniece, upon arriving downstairs to find Boy Willie in the throes of a *tet à tet*, states "I'm sorry, Miss. But he know I don't allow that in here," and without any protestation from Grace, and relatively little from Boy Willie, the amorous couple acquiesces and leaves.<sup>94</sup> In this vein, at the plays conclusion, it is Berniece who ultimately expels Sutter's ghost from the house. Berniece's dominance of the house not only reveals itself through her control of who is in the house, but of what goes on in it. When Berniece is in the room, she commands the action, everyone responds to her.

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<sup>91</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 84.

<sup>92</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 84.

<sup>93</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 74-75.

Wilson further underscores Berniece's authority in the house as the setting description continues, "The house is sparsely furnished, and although there is evidence of a woman's touch, there is a lack of warmth and vigor."<sup>95</sup> The phrase "a woman's touch" immediately signals association with Berniece, the principle woman in the play. Wilson's choice to signal this reflects his desire to have Berniece's residence in the home be dominant, visually reminding the audience of her power even when Bernice is absent from stage. No matter who is there or what is going on, the set stands and therefore "a woman's touch," and the affiliated power, is always present.

However, the actuality of the woman's touch as the sign of Berniece's presence, overlooking all the action, is problematic. In the same sentence, Wilson describes the house as marked by "a lack of warmth and vigor."<sup>96</sup> What does Wilson mean to imply by the sparse and cold decor? While these directions can be interpreted in a variety of ways, the rest of the play suggests Wilson means to underscore the metonymic relationship between Berniece and the house. Throughout the play, almost all the characters comment upon Berniece's reserve. Avery, her suitor, tells Berniece "You too young a woman to close up, Berniece."<sup>97</sup> When Berniece replies, "I ain't said nothing about closing up. I got a lot of woman in me left," Avery bitterly asks "Where's it at? When's the last time you looked at it? . . . Anytime I get anywhere near you . . . you push me away . . . Who you got to love?"<sup>98</sup> However, critiques of Berniece's care and womanhood do not only come from spurned suitors, but seem to gain legitimacy as neutral figures and even Berniece herself comment and act in relation to her coolness. Doaker, the play's most paternal and neutral figure who principally acts as a peace keeper, remarks on Berniece's

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<sup>95</sup> Wilson, *Piano*.

<sup>96</sup> Wilson, *Piano*.

<sup>97</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 66.

<sup>98</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 66-67.

reserve as a normal subject in casual conversation, telling his brother “She need to go out here and let one of these fellows grab a whole handful of whatever she got. She act like it done got precious.”<sup>99</sup>

Lymon, the play’s Shakespearean sage fool, comments during a twilight conversation in the kitchen, “Avery’s nice. You ought to go ahead and get married.”<sup>100</sup> Later in the same scene, Lymon attempts to correct Berniece’s coolness, if not in actuality, at least in the eyes of the audience. He comments on her nightgown, remarking “You got on that nightgown. I likes women when they wear them fancy nightclothes and all. It makes their skin look real pretty.”<sup>101</sup> Similarly, he gives her an uber-feminine prop, perfume, then states for the audience “There . . . you smell real good now.”<sup>102</sup> These accoutrements begin to color Berniece with warmth and femininity. However, much like the house, Berniece can only stand a light touch and remains without warmth. Berniece ultimately cannot develop a romantic relationship with Lymon, her coldness and barriers remain. For instance, when Lymon applies the perfume to Berniece’s neck, Wilson interjects that “BERNIECE stiffens at his touch.”<sup>103</sup> Although Berniece and Lymon embrace, it is Lymon who instigates the embrace, and Berniece who breaks it, ending the interaction. By the play’s conclusion the possible relationship between Berniece and Lymon has fizzled, the audience is aware Lymon is now seeing Grace, and Berniece continues rebuffing Avery’s advances.

Even Berniece acknowledges that like the house lacks warmth, she lacks warmth for romantic relationships, exclaiming “You trying to tell me a woman can’t be nothing without a man . . . But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece. ‘How Berniece gonna take care of

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<sup>99</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 29.

<sup>100</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 79.

<sup>101</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 79.

<sup>102</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 80.

<sup>103</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 80.

herself? How she gonna raise that child without a man? Wonder what she do with herself. How she gonna live like that? . . . Everybody telling me I can't be a woman without a man."<sup>104</sup>

Berniece's acknowledgement of this coldness confirms it, further associating her to the house. However, while acknowledging her coldness, Berniece rejects the system that denounces it as a problem, asking Avery "You can just walk out of here without me—without a woman—and still be a man. That's alright. Ain't nobody gonna ask you, 'Avery, who you got to love you?' That's alright for you. But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece."<sup>105</sup> By including this challenge to the system, Wilson alleviates part of the negative connotation of Berniece's association with the house, allowing the metonymic relationships to overpower considerations of Berniece's flawed comportment, and remains a representation of power.

The strong affiliation between Berniece's coolness and the lack of warmth and vigor in the house facilitates this easy metonymic connection between the two. Just like the home houses all the characters, Berniece is central to interaction between all the play's characters and key to the plays' plot. This centrality endows her with power, rejects the domicile domestic stereotype of black women of the house encapsulated by Mammy and Aunt Jemima figures. The set in *The Piano Lesson* becomes a nexus of feminine power within the play, enhancing the play's powerful portrayal of women, while simultaneously distancing Wilson's portrayal of women from such popularly understood stereotypes.

The metonymic underscoring of Berniece's dominance may seem to characterize Berniece as the black matriarch, but Wilson's description subtly yet purposefully falls short of the stereotype. Berniece, in her authority over the house, does not abandon care for her family nor over-power their concerns. Boy Willie's vocally and consistently demonstrated arguments

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<sup>104</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 67.

<sup>105</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 67.

evidence. Nor does Berniece drive her family from the home. At the beginning of the play, Berniece seems in danger of fulfilling this component of the stereotype, Wining Boy's absence having been attributed to her. However, Berniece welcoming him back into the home and keeping him there counters this early implication. At the play's conclusion, some may argue that Berniece now drives Boy Willie from the house. However, this is not the case. Boy Willie's visit was always going to be a short one, due not only to his established purpose of selling the watermelons and returning home, but also because of his transitory nature. Berniece does not force him out, but frees him, allowing him to return to the South and in doing so demonstrating her considerable power. Wilson reinforces that black mothers are not black maternal stereotypes, but empowered yet nurturing women in his rendering of the other mothers mentioned in the play.

While Berniece is the only adult woman to walk the halls of the Hill District home. She is not the only mother that resides there. However, the presence of the entire matrilineal Charles line is present in the form of the piano, which Wilson describes as "Dominating the parlor . . . On the legs of the piano, carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art."<sup>106</sup> The piano embodies the power of the preceding Charles mothers, Mama Bernice and Mama Ola. Through this association, the symbol of female power and sacrifice dominates the stage.

Mama Berniece, Berniece's grandmother, chronologically is the most removed ancestor mentioned in the play. However, her presence on the piano intimately involves her in the play. Mama Berniece's image and her life story, literally carved into the piano, constitute a strong visual reminder of the power and importance of maternal figures. Mama Berniece's life story provides a strong example of maternal power. Miss Ophelia, Mama Berniece's mistress and the

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<sup>106</sup> Wilson, *Piano*.

woman for whom Sutter exchanged Mama Berniece for a piano, missed Mama Berniece's maternal attentions, "the way she would cook and clean the house and talk to her and what not."<sup>107</sup> It was Miss Ophelia's nostalgia for Mama Berniece's maternal nature that prompted Sutter to request the elder Boy Willie, modern Berniece and Boy Willie's grandfather, to carve Mama Berniece's image in the piano, thus cementing the piano as a family heirloom of the Charles family. Not only is the piano and Mama Berniece's image upon it a manifestation of the power of maternity within the play, but so too is the history of the piano and the conflict that surrounds it. The modern Berniece will not sacrifice the maternal memory of her grandmother for land. Figures like Mama Berniece and modern Berniece exemplify that the trope of mother is not a pigeonhole but a source of power.

References to Mama Ola, Berniece and Boy Willie's mother, similarly represent maternal power throughout the play. Mama Ola's power evidences itself through her strength and



Figure 2. In this still from the Signature Theater Company's 2012 production of *The Piano Lesson*, one immediately observes how the piano dominates the stage right, in addition to the gaze and the minds of the characters.

endurance in the face of hardship. As Berniece exclaims, "Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in . . . mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it."<sup>108</sup> Mama Ola's strength allowed her to raise two children as a single mother, to live seventeen years alone. After Mama

<sup>107</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 43.

<sup>108</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 52.

Ola's death, her maternal power continued, barring Berniece from playing the piano, as it symbolized not only Mama Berniece but Mama Ola and their maternal sacrifices.<sup>109</sup>

In only 127 words of set description, demanding a relatively simple set, Wilson endows every room, every object with significance referring to the power of women, particularly mothers. Through the structures in *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson underscores his empowered reinterpretation of maternal stereotypes of black womanhood.

### 1839 Wylie Avenue

“The play is set in 1904, the Hill District, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the parlor of Eli, Aunt Ester and Black Mary’s home at 1839 Wylie Avenue:” in these twenty six words Wilson briefly introduces the most important setting in the Century Cycle.<sup>110</sup> While the description of the setting in *The Piano Lesson* aptly encapsulates the characters relations to the set throughout the play, *Gem of the Ocean* commences with a bare bones description. Nevertheless, the built environment of 1839 Wylie Avenue, seen in *Gem of the Ocean* and described elsewhere in the Century Cycle, metonymically reinforces Aunt Ester's power and influence.

Given the brevity of Wilson's description of the set, the detail of the building’s address becomes conspicuous. In fact, 1839 Wylie Avenue is the only setting within Wilson's literary canon given the honor of an address. In *Radio Golf*, Wilson places the office somewhere on Centre Avenue and in *Two Trains Running* Wilson place’s Memphis’ dinner near West’s Funeral Home and Lutz’s Meat Market, however these are only relative placements. *Gem of the Ocean* is the only set with geographic specificity.

The novelty of the Wylie Street address demands an audience member’s attention. Reexamining the address, its significance slowly reveals itself. 1839 is not just a number, but a

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<sup>109</sup> Joan Marcus.

<sup>110</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 5.

year. Wilson cautiously ensures the address is pronounced as a year would be rather than four separate digits at the time of its first appearance in *Two Trains Running* when Holloway refers to Aunt Ester's address as "Eighteen thirty-nine Wylie."<sup>111</sup> Writing the address out draws the readers' eye to it, augmenting its importance. However, *Two Trains Running*, like all of Wilson's published works, was intended for primarily aural consumption as plays. By writing 1839 out as "eighteen thirty-nine," Wilson ensures every performer pronounces it as such, rather than "One eight three nine," an equally appropriate pronunciation when referring to addresses. Insisting on the eighteen pronunciation, Wilson forces his actors to pronounce the address as they would the year.

So what did happen in 1839? The short answer is the Amistad revolt. The Amistad revolt refers to an extraordinary story that juxtaposes the typical narratives of slavery.<sup>112</sup> In early 1839, fifty-three Africans were captured and brought to Cuba where they were purchased as slaves and loaded aboard the *Amistad* to be transported to and sold in a separate part of Cuba. However, they never arrived at their location. Three days after leaving port, one of the Africans aboard, Sengbe Pieh, broke free from his shackles and subsequently freed his fellow fifty-two countrymen. Together, they turned mutinous, killing much of the crew and forcing their captors to change the boats direction and return them to Africa. During the day, the *Amistad* sailed due East for Africa. At night, when the absence of the sun made checking navigation near impossible, the remaining whites turned the ship what they believed to be westward, hoping to return to Cuba. This continued for sixty-three days until the ship eventually landed in New York. Unfortunately, landing in the United States meant the Africans aboard the *Amistad* immediately became property and were sold into slavery then put on trial for the murder of the whites aboard

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<sup>111</sup> August Wilson, *Two Trains Running* (New York: Penguin Group, 1992), 23.

<sup>112</sup> Cornell Law School, "The *Amistad* revolt," Cornell Law School, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/background/amistad/revolt.html> (accessed March 20, 2013).



the ship. However, this did not happen without a fight and marked one of the many race related controversies preceding the Civil War, as both freed blacks and white Abolitionists fought for the captured Africans. Abolitionists went so far as to hire a translator which marked the extraordinary recognition for the period that like white Americans, these captured Africans were people to both capable of and demanding to speak on their own behalf, a privilege generally denied people of color.

This connection relies upon Wilson's prior knowledge of the *Amistad* revolt when selecting Aunt Ester's address. The revolt constituted a major event in African American history. Wilson possessed a keen interest in the breath of black American history, recalling in an interview:

My older daughter called me from college, all excited, and said, 'Daddy, I've joined the Black Action Society and we're studying Timbuktu.' I said, 'Good, but why don't you study your grandmother and work back to Timbuktu? You can't make this leap over there to those African kingdoms without understanding who you are. You don't have to go to Africa to be an African. Africa is right here in the southern part of the United States. Its our ancestral homeland. You don't need to make that leap across the ocean.'"<sup>113</sup>

Given this interest, it is highly unlikely the *Amistad* revolt would have escaped Wilson's notice.<sup>114</sup>

The association between Aunt Ester and the *Amistad* is unmistakable. What's more, Aunt Ester's methodology for enacting this search for freedom involves extremely heavy-handed boat imagery, reinforcing the already strong link. Like Sengbe Pieh who led his fellow captives to fight for freedom aboard the *Amistad*, Aunt Ester leads her fellow Hill Districtites in their quest

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<sup>113</sup> August Wilson, interview by Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton, *The Paris Review*.

<sup>114</sup> A second reference of the number 1839 could refer to is the first United States law permitting women to own land despite a living husband, which was codified that year. If this reference was intentional it is yet another clear signal of Aunt Ester's extreme power, not needing a man but not beholden to them either. However, without accessible papers, it is impossible to determine if Wilson was aware of this law and incorporated it into the significance of 1839. For more information, see: Sandra Moncrief, "The Mississippi Married Women's Property Act of 1839," Hancock County Historical Society, <http://www.hancockcountyhistoricalsociety.com/vignettes/the-mississippi-married-womens-property-act-of-1839/> (accessed March 20, 2013).

for freedom. Wilson purposely chooses to associate Aunt Ester with the *Amistad* in lieu of traditional symbols of freedom such as Moses and or deliverers from slavery. Wilson's choice not to use escape from slavery as the traditional symbol may spring from the setting of the play. Taking place in 1904, slavery was not a symbol, but a reality for the characters. Both Aunt Ester and Solly had endured and escaped slavery. However, this still leaves the question of the oft used symbol of Moses as an image of deliverance. By instead choosing the *Amistad* as a symbol, not only does Wilson subvert the expectations for a Moses like figure, but he gains the greater symbolic connotations for Aunt Ester. The allusion associates her with the tangible power, freedom, and bravery of the fifty-two individuals who fought aboard the *Amistad*, a far more poignant symbol, as opposed to the power of a mythological figure.

Furthermore, by affiliating Aunt Ester with the *Amistad*, Wilson suggests a sense of catharsis towards the larger civil rights struggle that brews and boils just under the play's main plot and themes. The passengers of the *Amistad* were doomed to eventual slavery, so too are those Aunt Ester frees doomed to greater entrapment in the oppressive racist structures of early twentieth century America depicted in Wilson's nine other plays. This oppression subtly pervades the play. For instance, racial oppression in Pittsburgh is an integral part of Citizen's guilt. Citizen stole a bucket of nails from the mill because employers did not fairly reimburse black Americans for their work. Another man is accused of Citizen's crime and ultimately drowns trying to prove his ignorance, as the testimony of black individuals is doubted in the racially prejudiced society. The inescapability of this oppression becomes pronounced in the novel's final scene when Caesar shoots Solly Two Kings who is endeavoring to help Citizen break free of his own oppression in Pittsburgh and deliver his sister from Alabama. By tying Aunt Ester's struggles to the *Amistad* passengers' struggle for abolition, and eventual success,

even if checked, Wilson not only suggests a tie between the two, but that Aunt Ester's following—the characters of the Century Cycle—will find freedom just as those aboard the *Amistad* or their descendants found abolition. Endowing Aunt Ester with this extreme power, not only a moderator of immediate freedom but also a vessel of eventual delivery, Wilson reinforces his characterization of an individual that is anything but a subservient, periphery Mammy figure.

The "Wylie" portion of the address carries fewer connotations with it than "1839," but none the less bares examination. Wylie Avenue, like all the locations in the Century Cycle, is an actual street in the Hill District. 1839 Wylie Avenue, today an empty lot, stands next door to the library where August Wilson received his first library card and was most likely the where he studied independently after dropping out of school. Much as 1839 Wylie Avenue constituted a spiritual center for the Hill District community, the library next door constituted a center of maturation and spirituality for Wilson himself.<sup>115</sup> The connection between augments the spiritual power of the location, simultaneously augmenting Aunt Ester's power through her metonymic connection to her brick house.

Returning to the introduction, Wilson describes the setting of 1839 Wylie Avenue at the beginning of *Gem of the Ocean* as "the parlor of Eli, Aunt Ester, and Black Mary's home."<sup>116</sup> This description repeats many of the gendering and empowerment techniques employed in conjunction with the setting of *The Piano Lesson*. Although the setting is described as the parlor of the home, the scenes require both a parlor and a kitchen. The presence of both rooms arises in the first line of the play's stage directions, still in the prologue, when Wilson describes "The lights come up on Eli in the kitchen" and continue through the play's conclusion when Solly dies

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<sup>115</sup>"August Wilson's Hill District," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 29, 2012, <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/ae/uncategorized/pg-map-august-wilsons-hill-district-285441/> (accessed March 20, 2013).

<sup>116</sup>Wilson, *Gem*, 5.

on Aunt Ester's kitchen table.<sup>117</sup> The feminine associations and interpretations of kitchens and parlors have been previously established in the preceding discussion of *The Piano Lesson*. Parlors and kitchens are both intensely associated with the realm of the feminine, either as a domain of power or one of subjugation. As in *The Piano Lesson*, in the *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson immediately uses the actions of male characters to dismiss the subjugation connotation, situating the set clearly as a realm of female power. When the curtain rises on the prologue, "*The lights come up on Eli in the kitchen. It is late night. He is preparing to retire. He draws the shade and is preparing to put out the light when there is a knock at the door.*"<sup>118</sup> Eli performs the traditionally feminine chore of tidying the kitchen, thus refusing to play into audience expectations of gendered roles, thereby dismissing cult of domesticity framing from dictating audience interpretation of the play, just as Doaker's cooking, hosting, and ironing did in *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson does not isolate this effect to the play's beginning, which would diminish it in importance to an isolated oddity. He immediately reinforces the subverted gender paradigm in the power of the hierarchy of the play in the prologue, when following Eli's tidying, Aunt Ester must resolve the brawl, asserting her power when the male characters are incapable. Wilson continues to reinforce the subverted power structure throughout the play via scenes often involving the men—particularly Eli—working in the kitchen, often waiting on the women.

As in *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson invokes home ownership as a gendering technique in *Gem of the Ocean*. Again, the play's opening description is ambiguous in terms of to whom the home belongs. Wilson describes the home as "Eli, Aunt Ester and Black Mary's home."<sup>119</sup> This phrasing could imply the home was owned by Eli, Aunt Ester, Black Mary, or any combination thereof. Again Wilson allows character perpetuated recognition of ownership, rather than actual

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<sup>117</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 7, 81.

<sup>118</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 7.

<sup>119</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 5.

financial ownership, to dictate to whom the house belongs. *Gem of the Ocean* was Wilson's penultimate play. The dialogue of previous plays unequivocally established 1839 Wylie as Aunt Ester's house. In *Two Trains Running*, the first play in which Aunt Ester is mentioned, 1839 Wylie Avenue is alluded to as soon as the character of Aunt Ester is introduced. Holloway comments:

HOLLOWAY: All he got to do is go see Aunt Ester. Aunt Ester could straighten him out. Don't care whatever your problem. She can straighten it out.

STERLING: You think she can help me find a job? I wanna open me up a nightclub.

HOLLOWAY: Whatever your problem is. I don't make no difference to Aunt Ester. She can help you with anything.

STERLING: Where she live at? What's that address again?

HOLLOWAY: Eighteen thirty-nine Wylie. In the back. Knock on the red door. You can't miss it.<sup>120</sup>

Fifty-eight words is all that separates the introduction of Aunt Ester from the introduction of her home, and it is her home. Throughout the remainder of the Cycle, Wilson's characters frequently refer to 1839 Wylie Avenue as "Aunt Ester's house." *Radio Golf* provides the best example of this. Sterling, immediately upon hearing the house mentioned, asks, "The house with the red door? You talking about Aunt Ester's house?"<sup>121</sup> This intimate association between Aunt Ester and her home is not just a relationship of ownership but of possession, of encapsulation, of personification: in short, of metonymy.

The metonymic relationship reinforces Wilson's characterization of Aunt Ester as extremely powerful and central, like her house, which powerfully stands the tests of time, storms, and gentrification and remains a community hub. In *Radio Golf*, initially Harmond Wilks and company plan to bulldoze Aunt Ester's home along with several other properties along Wylie Avenue in order to build a paradise of gentrification complete with apartments, a Whole Foods, a Starbuck and a Barnes and Noble. However, the continued power and influence of Aunt Ester,

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<sup>120</sup> Wilson, *Two*, 23.

<sup>121</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 44.

asserted by her memory and her home lead Harmond to attempt to alter his plans at great personal loss. Even after her death, Aunt Ester's power, now expressed through the metonymic relationship with her house, alters the lives of Hill Districtites and the Hill District itself.

Returning to *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson intensifies this metonymic relationship through physical connection as Eli comments, "I ain't know her to leave the house in the past twenty years."<sup>122</sup> Aunt Ester, in the viewer's mind, becomes part of the house and the house part of Aunt Ester. When Aunt Ester dies in the 1985 set *King Hedley II*, she dies in her home and is mourned in her home, a fact reported repeatedly throughout the play when King and Stool Pigeon comment "KING: Them people still up there standing around her house. STOOL PIGEON: They been up there ever since the word got out about her dying," and when Mister affirms "Them people still up there on the corner in front of Aunt Ester's house."<sup>123</sup> The physical connection reinforces the metonymic.

The house stands as a pillar in the community, sheltering the Hill Districtites. Eli's consistent greeting when opening the door, "This is a peaceful house," illustrates this power, in stark juxtaposition with the harsh Pittsburgh community where individuals drown themselves to prove their innocence.<sup>124</sup> The solace of the house, adds to its notoriety and power, and as such Aunt Ester also gains notoriety and power. It also reinforces that this power grows out of Aunt Ester's nurturing, maternal role, countering Mammy and black matriarch stereotypes and instead reinforcing maternity as a source of positive empowerment. This stereotype subversion continues through Aunt Ester's memory after her physical death.

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<sup>122</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 10.

<sup>123</sup> Wilson, *King*, 20-22.

<sup>124</sup> Wilson, *Gem*, 7.

The metonymic relationship between Aunt Ester and her home not only augment the power of the two by sharing it, but allow for Wilson to exemplify Aunt Ester's continued power after her death, most notably *Radio Golf*. The house, like Aunt Ester, continues to unite the community, for instance bringing Harmond and Old Joe together in *Gem of the Ocean*, uncovering their common ancestry. Furthermore, the house continues to reflect Aunt Ester's calming, nurturing effect. Harmond experiences this, commenting after his first visit to 1839 Wylie Avenue:

It's a Federalist brick house with a good double-base foundation. I couldn't believe it. It has beveled glass on every floor. There's a huge stained glass window leading up to the landing. And the staircase is made of Brazilian wood with a hand-carved balustrade. You don't see that too often. . . . You should feel the woodwork. If you run your hand slow over some of the wood you can make out these carvings. There's faces. Lines making letters. An old language. And there's this smell in the air. . . . The air in the house smells sweet like a new day."<sup>125</sup>

The extraordinary nature of the home, in addition to its calming effect, continues to characterize Aunt Ester posthumously as atypical, caring, and powerful, anything but the stereotypical figures of black maternity previously discussed. Through this metonymic association, Wilson reinforces that both Ester and her home are pillars of the community. Aunt Ester is no more belittled by her gender and maternity than her house is by its decorative balustrade door's red color. In both cases, it simply adds to their distinction.

The character interactions with the sets of *Gem of the Ocean* and *The Piano Lesson* best exemplify how the characters interactions with the sets empower the women in the play. However, they are hardly the only examples. For instance, the cast's interactions with the built environment in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* again illustrate the nurturing power of maternal figures, countering the stereotypes. Bertha Holly dominates and moderates the activity within the boarding house she shares with her husband. Bertha's domain is the kitchen, an epicenter of

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<sup>125</sup> Wilson, *Radio*, 61-62.

feminine power, where most of the play takes place. In addition to Bertha, the other female characters of the play dominate the set and the plot. The male characters react principally in relation to them. Where the secondary female characters of Molly Cunningham and Mattie Campbell sit and sleep speaks volumes and helps the other characters better understand their desires.

Similarly, in both *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*, the women dominate the apartment building and yard. Women own the home. Women live there. Women moderate who enters and exits, forcing some characters out of the house and into the yard. Women do not struggle with the environment and cross the threshold with ease. Conversely, the men battle against the environment, often failing in their struggle. In *Seven Guitars*, King Hedley cannot make his plants grow, cannot make himself heard, cannot make himself sane.

In *King Hedley II*, the second King Hedley battles against the women in the play, both his mother and Ruby, for some modicum of control, and fails miserably. Even the absent Aunt Ester denies him control, diverting character and audience attention alike with her death. King undergoes all these struggles in his home's yard, ultimately dying there. Whereas the house shelters the play's female characters, for instance hiding Tonya from King when she requires space and privacy to consider an abortion; when King attempts to enter it spits King back out into the cold, hard yard. Throughout the entire play, the audience only sees King successfully enter the house



Figure 3. August Wilson stands outside his childhood home, the setting for both *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*. Like the men in those plays, Wilson is also banished to the yard.



once. Then his stay inside is brief, only fifteen lines separate the last time he speaks from his return. The audience hardly notices he's gone. Furthermore, when "*King enters from the house*" he returns with "*a Glock 9-mm pistol. He shoves the clip in the gun.*"<sup>126</sup> King's only successful entry in the house seems only to be permitted as it was not his desired destination, but a pit stop on the road to destruction. The home as a sacred solace for women in these plays again provides a physical indication of their power.<sup>127</sup> This creates the closest association between female characters and the stereotype of the black matriarch that is to be found in the canon. However, the nurturing that pervades—Ruby and Tonya's concern for King Hedley II—denies the connection.

### **From Hostility to Home**

The relationship between female characters and the setting within Wilson's work is not always symbiotic; however, it is always a relationship that asserts feminine power. The interaction between Rose and the set in *Fences* and Ma Rainey and the recording studio in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* exemplify this. In *Fences*, Rose seizes control over a hostile environment. At the beginning of the play, Rose is relegated to the porch, limited in movement as she is limited in power. The play opens with Troy and Bono sitting on the porch, drinking, laughing, and commanding the yard. Soon "*ROSE enters from the house.*"<sup>128</sup> Wilson then explains, "*Though she doesn't drink, her presence is an integral part of the Friday night rituals. She alternates between the porch and the kitchen, where supper preparations are under way.*"<sup>129</sup> Although Rose is "integral," she is integral in a subservient sense: the designated drink freshener and strait man for Troy's jokes. Furthermore, although Rose, unlike the men, freely crosses

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<sup>126</sup> Wilson, *King*, 19.

<sup>127</sup> <http://murderiseverywhere.blogspot.com/2010/11/why-i-didnt-become-writer-back-then.html> (accessed March 20, 2013).

<sup>128</sup> Wilson, *Fences*, 5.

<sup>129</sup> Wilson, *Fences*, 5.

between the porch and the house, the house does not represent a feminine sanctuary as it does in *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*. Instead, it is a symbol of her subservience. Both, the house and Rose in it exist to provide for Troy's comfort. In the play's final scene, taking place eight years after the action of the play on the day of Troy's funeral, Rose explains this opening relationship between herself, Troy, and the house, to their son, Cory:

I married your daddy and settled down to cooking his supper and keeping clean his sheets on the bed. When your daddy walked through the house he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me. For my part in the matter. But at that time I wanted that. I wanted a house that I could sing in. And that's what your daddy gave me. I didn't know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. I did that.<sup>130</sup>

However, these power dynamics do not remain unchanged throughout the play.

As Rose's "at that time" suggests, this relationship of subservience does not continue.<sup>131</sup> Instead, Rose reclaims the house as a feminine space. When Troy, having done Rose wrong and had a child with another woman, brings the illegitimate infant home, Rose seizes control. "*She takes the baby from him,*" thereby asserting her control over the situation and accepting the responsibility of being a mother again rather than having it foisted upon her.<sup>132</sup> So too, she assumes great power, controlling the fate of both Troy and his daughter, Raynell, and the memory of Alberta, Raynell's mother. Concurrently, she appropriates the house as her own, no longer a symbol of subservience but now a realm of power, asserting, "From right now . . . this child got a mother. But you a womanless man," then "*Rose turns and exits into the house with the baby. Lights go down to black,*" leaving Troy in the dark, evicting him from the house without so much as a word.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Wilson, *Fences*, 98.

<sup>131</sup> Wilson, *Fences*, 98.

<sup>132</sup> Wilson, *Fences*, 79.

<sup>133</sup> Wilson, *Fences*, 79.

By the play's conclusion, Rose has claimed control of the entire property, not merely by default of Troy's death, but through his own action. As Bono shares, "Rose told Lucille [Troy] had finally built your fence."<sup>134</sup> Troy building Rose the fence she had long requested illustrates not only Rose's dominance over the yard, but her ultimate control of Troy. Far from the first images of porch-bound subservience, Rose is now all powerful as illustrated by her relationship with her domestic domain. It is now Troy who she relegates to the yard like a scorned dog.

In *Jitney* and *Radio Golf*, the play's maternal female figures possess a weaker presence than seen in the plays previously discussed. However, even with a lesser presence, their relationship with the environment is empowering. In *Jitney*, although Rena only appears onstage for a fraction of the scenes, the jitney station, a gypsy cab service, is dedicated to getting individuals—mostly females—where they want to go. Therefore the action and the characters' exits and entrances are dictated by the beck and telephone call of Hill District women, most of them mothers or grandmothers. In *Radio Golf*, Wilson explores what happens when his characters abandon a sense of community and history, what he identifies as a source of strength and power in the black American community. In this absence, living mothers similarly do not appear in the play. Instead, the action and discussion of the play is predicated around the character's relationships with a built environment off stage: Aunt Ester's home, a representation of the maternal power that was.

### **Thank You<sup>135</sup>**

The power of female characters within August Wilson's work arises in a myriad of ways, whether via women's centrality to the plot or the subtler effect of their metonymic connections to the setting. Due to Wilson's artistry and varied characterization, the women within his works

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<sup>134</sup> Wilson, *Fences*, 84.

<sup>135</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 107.

wield great power, both stemming from and subverting traditional stereotypes of black maternity, such as the Mammy and the black matriarch. However, Wilson's presentation of women is not blameless. In creating central, powerful mothers, he tiptoes the border between rejecting the submissive Mammy figure and embracing the overbearing, all-powerful black matriarch. However, when considering Wilson's misogyny in regards to stereotypes of black maternity, it is crucial to remember that Wilson was also concerned with his shortcomings of characterization, commenting:

I doubt seriously if I would make a woman the focus of my work simply because of the fact that I am a man, and I guess because of the ground on which I stand and the viewpoint from which I perceive the world. I can't do that although I try to be honest in the instances in which I do have women. I try to portray them from their own viewpoint as opposed to my viewpoint."<sup>136</sup>

Ultimately, the audience witnesses the best reconciliation of Wilson's childhood haunts, imagined environments, and outsider understanding of womanhood as he could achieve, further distorted by the vision of the audience and cast and crew of each play. In such a complex, collaborative scenario, the audience must draw on the enduring clues Wilson leaves for the audience, principle among these sets and closing words. Whereas the Commodore's "Brick House" devolves into a objectifying reflection on the female sexuality, Wilson's plays consistently end with demonstrations of feminine power, none more so than *The Piano Lesson*. After exorcising Sutter's ghost, Berniece's power resonate in her steady chant "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you," maintaining conversation with the maternal ancestors she has just called upon.<sup>137</sup> In the end, "thank you" is much more powerful than "shake it down."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Sandra G. Shannon, "Developing Character-*Fences*."

<sup>137</sup> Wilson, *Piano*, 107.

<sup>138</sup> "Brick House."

## Addendum

Plays of the Century Cycle in Chronological  
Order by Setting

*Gem of the Ocean*  
1904  
*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*  
1911  
*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
1927  
*The Piano Lesson*  
1936  
*Seven Guitars*  
1948  
*Fences*  
1957  
*Two Trains Running*  
1969  
*Jitney*  
1977  
*King Hedley II*  
1985  
*Radio Golf*  
1997

Plays of the Century Cycle in Order of Date  
Premiered

*Jitney*  
1982  
*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
1984  
*Fences*  
1985  
*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*  
1986  
*The Piano Lesson*  
1987  
*Two Trains Running*  
1990  
*Seven Guitars*  
1995  
*King Hedley II*  
1999  
*Gem of the Ocean*  
2001  
*Radio Golf*  
2005

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