Ma Rainey's Black Bottom Study Guide

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom by August Wilson

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Contents

Introduction

August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, his first play in a ten-play cycle, each chronicling a decade in the African-American experience, was first performed at the Yale Repertory Theater in 1984, though Wilson began writing the play in 1976, after listening to the blues for more than a decade. Set in a Chicago recording studio in 1927, the two-act drama tells the story of a recording session with blues legend Ma Rainey, her band members, and the white producer and agent who made themselves wealthy through Rainey's recordings. The play explores race relations between blacks and whites in 1920s America and the African-American search for identity. The title comes from the song of the same name, which is at the heart of a major conflict in the play. Of particular note is Wilson's character, Levee, who literally embodies the aspirations and disappointments of black males during this era and, arguably, today. Wilson pits Levee against Rainey, the band members, and the whites, examining various stripes of inter and interracial conflict.

Partly inspired by the plays of Amiri Baraka, who warned black writers to keep their characters faithful to the black experience, Wilson finished the first version of the play in 1981 and had it accepted by the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference in the summer of 1982. In 1985, the play opened on Broadway at the Cort Theater, and it subsequently captured a slew of awards including the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best American play. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is considered Wilson's first major play and helped to cement his reputation as an important American playwright.

Author Biography

Born in 1945 to a white father, Frederick August Kittle, and a black mother, Daisy Wilson, August Wilson grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A voracious reader who credits his mother for his love of language, Wilson dropped out of school in the ninth grade, educating himself at libraries. In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army but was discharged a year later. In 1965, he decided to become a writer, buying his first typewriter for twenty dollars. In 1968, he helped to found Pittsburgh's Black Horizons on the Hill Theater, with the goal of "politicizing the community." Wilson was heavily involved with the Civil Rights movement during this time and described himself as a "Black Nationalist." After he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978, Wilson's career began to gather steam. Following the oftgiven advice to write what you know, Wilson created characters that spoke like people he knew in black neighborhoods of Pittsburgh.

In 1980, the Playwright's Center in Minneapolis accepted his play, *Jitney*, a drama set in a Pittsburgh taxi station, and in 1982 the prestigious Eugene O'Neill Center accepted *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The success of this play helped catapult Wilson into the national limelight. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play and an Antoinette Perry ("Tony") Award nomination from the League of New York Theatres and Producers. Wilson's next effort, *Fences*, was even more successful, garnering an Outstanding Play Award from the American Theatre Critics, a Drama Desk Outstanding New Play Award, a New York Drama Critics' Circle Best Play Award, a Pulitzer Prize for drama, a Tony Award for best play, and a Best Broadway play award from the Outer Critics Circle. The latest installment in Wilson's ambitious plan to write a tenplay cycle—each dealing with a decade in Black American history—is *King Hedley II*, which opened in 2001 on Broadway. Set during 1985 in Pittsburgh's Hill District, *King Hedley II* explores the relationship between an exconvict struggling to understand his life and the impoverished community in which he lives. Wilson continues to write and to speak out, from his home in Seattle, Washington, for the creation of and the funding for black theaters.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom opens in a Chicago recording studio in early March 1927. Rainey has taken a break from touring to record some songs for Sturdyvant's studio. As the lights come up, Sturdyvant is warning Irvin that he will not put up with any of Ma Rainey's "shenanigans." Sturdyvant characterizes Rainey as a prima donna, someone who expects the world to do her bidding. Irvin's assurances that Rainey will show up on time do not sound convincing, however, and the more Sturdyvant warns Irvin that he won't put up with Rainey's attitude, the more prepared the audience becomes for an inevitable conflict when she does appear.

Cutler and the band appear shortly, and Levee shows up carrying his new shoes, which he paid for in part with money he won from Cutler the night before playing craps, a dice game. Levee's new Florsheim shoes represent a shift in musical taste from blues to jazz and swing, a change that Sturdyvant wants to exploit, at least initially, when he tells Irvin to have the band record Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

The bulk of act 1 is comprised of bantering between and among band players, with Levee arguing with almost everyone. The stories the band members tell and the subjects of their arguments both reveal their respective characters and outline a particular struggle blacks historically have had with whites.

One of these struggles is exemplified when Rainey finally makes her entrance, along with Sylvester, Dussey Mae, and a policeman, who threatens to arrest her for assaulting a cab driver after the group attempted to leave an automobile accident they were in. Wilson's scenarios are universal enough to appeal to a racially diverse audience and to create empathy for dilemmas specific to blacks. The struggle for financial control of goods made by black labor is evident, for example, in the way in which Rainey responds to Irvin and the way in which Sturdyvant pressures Irvin. Act 1 ends with Levee, the youngest band member, telling the story of his mother's rape and his father's murder at the hands of white men. The important thing to remember about the action in this act isn't what happens, but the emotional effect racial conflict has on how band members interact with one another, as well as with whites.

Act 2

In this act, Rainey asserts her prerogative in having Sylvester do the introduction to "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," even though band members and Irvin think it's a bad idea because of his stuttering. Rainey's insistence, however, symbolizes the duty she feels in giving powerless blacks a voice, both literally and figuratively. This demand—and her refusal to sing unless she has a Coca-Cola—illustrates almost stereotypical behavior of prima donna celebrities. However, Rainey's motivation for behaving this way is more

closely related to her desire to let her white producer and agent know that they cannot take advantage of black people in general and her in particular. Various characters, including Rainey, give speeches about white exploitation and mistreatment of blacks throughout the act. Levee, who Sturdyvant had promised could record some of his own songs, is humiliated by the producer, who now tells him that his music isn't what people want. Enraged at a system that has squelched his creative powers, at a people who have shamed and exploited him, and at a man who has lied to him, Levee stabs Toledo. He does so, not because Toledo stepped on his shoe, but because Toledo was unfortunate enough to be in the vicinity just after Sturdyvant's exchange with Levee. By offering no transcendence or resolution at the end of the play, Wilson figuratively "sticks it" to his audience as well, reminding them that the plight of African Americans remains the same.

Characters

Sylvester Brown

Ma introduces Sylvester as her nephew. He is young and built like an "Arkansas fullback," and he stutters. He was the driver during the car accident, but Ma absolves him of blame. Ma insists that he introduce her song, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," even though he stutters. Critics have raised the possibility that perhaps Sylvester is Ma's lover, rather than her nephew, and that Sylvester's sniping with Dussie Mae reflects competition for her affection and attention.

Cutler

Cutler is the guitar and trombone player and leader of the instrumentalists. He is in his mid-fifties and, Wilson writes, "has all the qualities of a loner except the introspection." He plays the music straight, with no embellishment. During the session, he smokes reefer (marijuana). Cutler's story about Reverend Gates being humiliated by a gang of white men illustrates his attitude that black men have to do what's necessary to survive.

Dussie Mae

Dussie Mae is Ma Rainey's beautiful girl (her lover). She is a "young, dark-skinned woman whose greatest asset is the sensual energy which seems to flow from her." Dussie Mae wears a fur jacket and a tight-fitting yellow dress. She is deferent to Ma Rainey, but when she is alone with Levee, she kisses him and tells him that she'll be his woman when (if) he gets his band together.

Irvin

Irvin is Ma Rainey's white agent who is "a tall, fleshy man who prides himself on his knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them." Most of his energy is spent placating Ma Rainey and Sturdyvant. He solves Ma's issue with the policeman by bribing him to make it go away. Although he seems comfortable communicating with the band and with Ma Rainey, he is chiefly motivated by money.

Levee

Levee is the talented, temperamental trumpet player, and, in his early thirties, the youngest player in the band. He prides himself on his appearance, especially his shoes, which he bought with money won from Cutler at craps. Levee wants to put a band together and record his own songs, and he tells other band members that Sturdyvant said he would help him do this. Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is faster,

more of a swing song than a blues number. Levee is frustrated and bitter and argues with all of the band members; he also attempts to seduce Dussie Mae. Like the other band members, Levee has a story about his past that illuminates his present relationships with both blacks and whites. When he was a child, he witnessed his mother being raped by a gang of white men. He tried to stop the men but was seriously injured after being struck with a knife by one of the men. His father subsequently sold their farm to one of the men who raped his wife, settled his family in another town, and then returned for vengeance. He killed four of the men before being killed himself. Levee's anger reaches a fevered pitch at the end of the play, when Sturdyvant won't let him record the songs he previously told him he could. Levee winds up stabbing Toledo, killing him, after Toledo steps on his shoe.

Policeman

The policeman is the third white man in the play. He enters with Ma Rainey, Sylvester, and Dussie Mae and engages in a shouting match with them to tell Irvin the story of Ma's automobile accident. Eventually, he is satisfied that Rainey is "as important as she says she is" and takes money from Irvin to forget the incident and not take Ma to jail.

Ma Rainey

Wilson's Ma Rainey is based on the historical Ma Rainey, widely considered to be the Mother of the Blues because of her influence on other female blues singers. Born Gertrude Pridgett in Columbus, Georgia, in 1886 to parents who were minstrel performers, Rainey first appeared onstage in 1900. She toured with William "Pa" Rainey, a minstrel song and dance man whom she married in 1904, and with groups such as Tolliver's Circus and Musical Extravaganza. Rainey signed a recording contract with the "race division" of Paramount Records in 1923, when she was thirty-eight years old. Her recording career ended in 1928, after she had recorded some one hundred songs, many of them classics today. Rainey is rumored to have coached a young Bessie Smith in singing the blues, and she played with jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Tommy Ladnier, Coleman Hawkins, and Buster Bailey. Rainey died in 1939.

In Wilson's play, Rainey is the bandleader and has the final say in recording decisions. Rainey has no illusions about her relationship with her agent, Irvin, or Sturdyvant, the producer, recognizing that they cater to her only because she can make them money. She tells Cutler, the bandleader: "They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them." Rainey's petty demands, however, often make her appear as a prima donna. She won't sing without her Coca-Cola, for example, and she insists on having her "nephew," Sylvester, a stutterer, do the introduction to one of her songs. Rainey recognizes the band members for what they are. She praises Slow Drag's bass playing and warns Levee numerous times to behave himself, before she finally fires him. Rainey travels with both Sylvester, whom she calls her "nephew," and her lover, Dussie Mae.

Slow Drag

In his mid-fifties, Slow Drag is the slow moving but talented bass player. Like Cutler, he is a professional who is focused on his music, always giving each take his best effort. Slow Drag's name stems from an incident in which he slow danced with a woman in an endurance contest for money. Critic Mary Bogumil writes that Slow Drag's playing "reflects the fundamental rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic nuances found in African music. His style of play could be characterized as an Americanized version of the African."

Mel Sturdyvant

Sturdyvant is the overworked white owner of the recording studio and Ma Rainey's producer, a penny-pinching tightwad concerned exclusively with money. Uncomfortable dealing with black performers, Sturdyvant communicates primarily with and through Irvin. Sturdyvant repeatedly tells Irvin throughout the play that he is responsible for Ma Rainey, saying, "She's your responsibility. I'm not putting up with any Royal Highness . . . Queen of the Blues bull——!" Representing white exploitation of black labor, Sturdyvant promises Levee throughout the play that he will be able to record his own music, but at the end of the play he changes his mind, telling him that his songs aren't what people want. Sturdyvant offers to buy Levee's songs from him for five dollars a piece, acting as if he's doing Levee a favor. The reason for his change of mind is unclear. Maybe he feels uncomfortable backing Levee against Ma, or maybe he's just more comfortable with the established rather than the new.

Toledo

Toledo is the literate piano player and the most reflective of the band members. As a musician "in control of his instrument, he understands and recognizes that its limitations are an extension of himself." Kim Pereira writes, "To Toledo, style is indistinguishable from content; it is a manifestation in the artist's fidelity to the main musical idea or theme, whatever his improvisations." Toledo discusses abstract concepts such as racial memory and the plight of the black man, but he frequently misapplies his knowledge. When he attempts to make a philosophical point through storytelling, Levee takes him literally rather than figuratively.

Toledo has lost his wife and children to divorce, telling band members that his wife left him for the church. At the end of the play, Levee kills Toledo instead of Sturdyvant, the person who had wronged him the most.

Themes

Power

The dramatic question in the play is whether the band will complete the recording session despite conflicts among various band members and the power struggles between Rainey and Sturdyvant. The battle of wills between Rainey and Sturdyvant echoes the historical battle between capitalists and workers; only in this case, Rainey holds on to the goods (i.e., her music) that she produces until she gets what she wants from the white producer. It is only after her demands are met and she and her band members are paid that Rainey signs off on the contract. The power struggle between Levee and the other band members over whose version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is recorded reflects a generational conflict defined by different attitudes towards music. Rainey and the band represent the older generation, preferring to play the song as they always have. Levee, the youngest band member, represents the new order, preferring a more improvisatory, jazz-like version of the song.

The Great Migration

In American history, 1915 to 1960 is often referred to as the Great Migration, to signify the millions of blacks who moved from the agricultural South to the industrialized North in search of work and a better way of life. The band members and Ma Rainey herself were part of this migration, and the music industry represented for them the hope for a more prosperous future. Finding work, however, especially in an environment rife with racism, was difficult, and the blues was a way through which blacks expressed their disappointment and struggle.

Black Identity

The band members engage in a process of self-definition through their storytelling and their interactions among themselves and with Sturdyvant and Irvin. Each band member's story tells readers something about him while also forming a theme of the blues. Toledo defines himself through his ability to read (he is the only literate band member) and through his failed relationships with women. Levee defines himself through his appearance, of which his shoes are a central symbol, through his womanizing, and through his musical differences with other band members. His story about the brutalization of his mother and the murder of his father at the hands of whites also provides insight into Levee's argumentative nature and rage. Cutler's story is a familiar story for most blacks, in theme if not in plot: appeasing white power to survive.

Style

Structure

Wilson's play observes the three unities, criteria devised during the Renaissance and based roughly on Aristotle's theory of drama in his *Poetics.* These criteria include the unities of time, action, and place. The action of plays embodying them takes place during a single day and in a single place, and the plot clearly details the causal relationships between characters and action. Although *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place over the course of a few hours in a Chicago recording studio, thereby adhering to the unities of time and place, and although one event follows another in a more or less causal order, there is not a whole lot that happens in the play. Most of the story consists of talk, frequently a character telling a story. In this way, the characters' speech and what it says about their relationships with one another is more important than what happens, the plot. This is fairly standard fare for modern drama, which tends to be character driven in nature and more intent on delivering a single emotional impression than in detailing events.

The play also has elements of a modern tragedy, insofar as Levee's downfall is his inability to control his pride and his rage. However, the play does not fit the conventional definition of tragedy, in that Levee is neither a courageous figure nor one who behaves in a particularly dignified manner.

Verisimilitude

Wilson's play achieves verisimilitude—the illusion of reality—through observing the unities of time and place but also through his use of vernacular dialogue. That is, his characters talk using the rhythms, speech patterns, vocabulary, and phrasing that black urban Americans of the 1920s used. This technique, which Wilson has honed to perfection over his career, helps the audience suspend their disbelief and empathize with the characters.

Historical Context

Harlem Renaissance

In 1927, when Wilson's play takes place, the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing. Black pride manifested itself across the country in art and politics. In poetry, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and James Weldon Johnson wrote in black vernacular, using the rhythms of the blues and spirituals in their verse. Johnson's 1927 poetry collection, *God's Trombone: Seven Negro Folk Sermons,* one of the more popular works of the era, used the speech patterns of an old black preacher to capture the heart of the black idiom. Novelist Claude McKay detailed the life of working class blacks in *Home to Harlem,* and Jean Toomer told the story of poor southern blacks in her novel, *Cane.* Georgia-born, Ma Rainey and blues and jazz artists such as Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters signed contracts with recording studios such as Paramount Records to cut albums to be sold in cities like Chicago, New York, and Birmingham, which had a burgeoning market of urban blacks. Frank Day, writing in his book, *August Wilson* notes, "Ironically, many of these records were cut in Chicago . . . where they sold badly, until Bessie Smith refined the gut-bucket approach evolved by Ma." Harlem speakeasies such as the Cotton Club, which served only whites, became a symbol of the erotic and the exotic appeal of the "New Negro." The influence of the blues showed up in the visual arts as well, as hot colors and improvisatory compositions dominated the work of painters such as Archibald J. Motley Jr. and Aaron Douglas, whose genre portraits of Harlem nightlife embodied the excitement and passion of the times. In his essay on the art of the Harlem Renaissance, "Modern Tones," Paul Gilroy notes the different responses to black music:

> There was a sharp divergence between those who emphasized that black music was a folk form in transition towards varieties of high cultural expression that could demonstrate the overall worth of the race and others who saw it instead as a sophisticated urban and cosmopolitan phenomenon of an inescapably modernist type.

While white intellectuals theorized black music, the black community asserted their political strength. In the South, black students at Fisk University protested policies of the school's white president, staging campus strikes. In the North, Oscar De Priest won election to Chicago's First District, becoming the first black congressman ever elected from the North. By the end of the decade, blacks held one quarter of the postal service jobs in Chicago. These events contributed both to a heightened black race consciousness and to the belief that social change was possible.

1980s

Wilson's play opened in 1984, towards the end of Ronald Reagan's first term as president of the United States. That year, Jesse Jackson, the firebrand Baptist minister and civil rights leader, finished third in the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. Though Jackson didn't win the nomination, he did help black reformer, Harold Washington, win the Chicago mayoralty. Jackson spoke out against Reagan's policies, both foreign and domestic, repeatedly during the 1980s, arguing that they were unfair to minorities and women. In 1987, seeking to consolidate his constituency, he formed the National Rainbow Coalition and announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination once again. Though Jackson failed to win the nomination, he did win five state primaries and finish second in the delegate count. Such a showing once and for all proved the might of the black voter in national politics.

Critical Overview

Reviews of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* were mixed when it debuted in 1984. Writing for *Women's Wear Daily,* Howard Kissel notes the freshness of the dialogue and says the cast is "excellent." *New York Times* reviewer, Frank Rich notes that Wilson is a find for American theater and lauds the production by the Yale Repertory Theater. Those finding fault with the play include the *New York Post*'s John Simon, who complained about the play's weak structure, saying that, as a play it is only "intermittently drama." Edwin Wilson, writing for the *Wall Street Journal,* agrees, noting that the play is long on theme and short on plot. Wilson writes, "Polemics don't make a play." Academics have also paid attention to the play. Kim Pereira, for example, in *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey,* examines the themes of separation, migration, and spiritual reunion in the play and the significance of African folklore. Joan Herrington, in *i ain't sorry for nothin' i done,* argues that although critics have found problems with the play's "bifurcated focus" on white men and black men, "audiences seem to have found the bifurcation an apt and powerful metaphor for the inequities of the segregated world Wilson was portraying."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Semansky's essays, stories, reviews, and poems appear regularly in literary magazines and journals. In this essay, Semansky considers the blues as a mode of communication in Wilson's play.

In his preface to the play, Wilson writes this about the blues: "It is hard to define this music. Suffice it to say that it is music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being separate and distinct from any other." By positioning the blues as a form of communication, Wilson underscores his desire that the audience watch the play as they would listen to the blues, for its emotional impact, rather than its plot. Although Wilson tells us how the blues work, he doesn't tell us what they are.

Historically, the word *blues* emerged from black American folk music. It denotes both a form of music and a melancholic state of mind as, for example, when someone feels depressed and says, "I've got the blues." Formally, the blues are comprised of eight-, twelve, and thirty-two-bar harmonic progressions that form the foundation for improvisation. The vocal style of the blues derives from the southern work songs of blacks, and by the turn of the twentieth century it was typically comprised of three-line stanzas. When blacks began migrating north in the 1920s, singers such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Sara Martin brought the blues with them. These singers cultivated their fan base through live performances in traveling vaudeville shows. By the 1940s-and with significant urban influences-the blues developed into rhythm-and-blues, which singers such as Muddy Waters helped to popularize. The rhythm-and-blues, in turn, had and continues to have, their own influence on rock-and-roll, as seen in the music of bands such as the Rolling Stones.

Wilson's play, however, is more closely related to the state of mind the blues embodies and the way in which it acts as a kind of glue, bonding the characters to one another. The stories of the band members themselves can be considered blues, for they encapsulate the hopes, dreams, and disappointments of their tellers, as well as of black people as a whole. Critic Mary Bogumil writes this about the blues: "If a struggle can be inherited, the blues is inherited, for the blues functions as the documentation of those who experience that struggle. It is an inherent tradition in the African American culture." Those struggles are documented in the characters' stories, which are themselves reflected in the songs. Here, for example, are the first two stanzas from "Hear Me Talking to You," which Slow Drag sings during the band's rehearsal in act I:

Rambling man makes no change in me I'm gonna ramble back to my used-to-be Ah, you hear me talking to you I don't bite my tongue You wants to be my man You got to fetch it with you when you come. Eve and Adam in the garden taking a chance Adam didn't take time to get his pants Ah, you hear me talking to you I don't bite my tongue You wants to be my man You got to fetch it with you when you come.

This song, about a woman's love for her man in spite of his wandering ways, speaks to the values of endurance and forgiveness, values cultivated by blacks who have survived

and flourished in a society that has exploited and then scorned them. Wilson's Ma Rainey speaks to the inability of whites to understand the blues and, hence, the black experience:

White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing cause there's a way of understanding life.... The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something.

Ma's pointing to white ignorance of the origin and cause of the blues underscores white people's essential indifference to the black struggle. This stance is illustrated by Sturdyvant and Irvin's behavior. The former is so uncomfortable being around Ma and the band that he has Irvin communicate most of his desires. The latter treats Ma and the band as unruly children he is obligated to appease to win their cooperation in the studio. Despite the bickering and arguing among band members, they all share the common history of white oppression. Their stories, like their music, transcend particulars and allegorize their struggle. Each recognizes himself in the story of another. For example, when Cutler is telling the story of Reverend Gates, who is humiliated by white men who force him to dance while ripping his crucifix from his neck and tearing up his Bible, Toledo stops him, saying, "You don't even have to tell me no more. I know the facts of it. I done heard the same story a hundred times."

That "same story" in which Toledo sees his own experience echoed is emotionally enacted in the performance of the blues. Interestingly, Wilson originally had only five members in his script. Joan Herrington writes that he added the band members after listening to blues recordings of male singers. Herrington quotes Wilson: "I suddenly realized there were four musicians there, waiting in the band room. In them, I found the key to the play—the divisions, the tensions, the meaning of their lives." The addition of Levee as a tragic character allows Wilson to develop the familiar story of black response to white exploitation. Levee believes he is competing with Ma in attempting to curry favor with Sturdyvant and Irvin to get his version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" recorded and have his songs produced. But in Levee's behavior, Wilson shows that blacks' strategy, historically, of appeasing white power is no longer effective, or at least no longer morally tenable. The only way to get "white respect," as Levee calls it, is to withhold something that whites want: in Ma's case, it's her music and her signature on the release forms. It is only by controlling these that she is able to record her own version of the song and have Sylvester paid separately and not from her own pocket.

Continuing to appease white power, Wilson suggests, will only result in intraracial conflict and a diminution of one's own self-worth. If, instead of internalizing his despair and rage at Sturdyvant and taking it out on Toledo, Levee had enlisted the band and Rainey in his cause, perhaps there could have been success for everyone. But Levee's fate was written in his character, as he had neither the emotional restraint nor the insight into his own desires to do battle with the forces arrayed against him. African-American men today suffer a similar fate, as many of them, lacking adequate education and

opportunity and stigmatized by society at large, do battle with one another rather than against a common adversary. For Wilson, it is the heritage of Levee's struggle that forms the basis of the blues in contemporary America.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Elam studies how Wilson uses blues music to treat themes related to the African-American experience in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.

> Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that I was writing one play for each decade.Once I became conscious of that, I realized I was trying to focus on what I felt were the important issues confronting Black Americans for that decade, so ultimately they could stand as a record of Black experience over the past hundred years presented in the form of dramatic literature. What you end up with is a kind of review, or reexamination of history . . . The importance of history to me is simply to find out who you are and where you've been. It becomes doubly important if someone else has been writing your history. I think Blacks in America need to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people. ("An Interview with August Wilson")

As indicated in the quote above, August Wilson's dramaturgical project is to review African American history in the twentieth century by writing a play for each decade. He recreates and reevaluates the choices that blacks have made in the past by refracting them through the lens of the present. Wilson focuses on the experiences and daily lives of ordinary black people within particular sociohistorical circumstances. Carefully situating each play at critical junctures in African American history, Wilson explores the pain and perseverance, the determination and dignity in these black lives. He has now written plays for the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Viewed together, these plays represent a decidedly proactive dramaturgy that not only reflects on the past but intends to empower the African American present and future.

Implicitly and explicitly, within his dramaturgy Wilson desires to recuperate the African in African American experiences. Wilson's plays talk to each other, repeating, revising, building upon narrative tropes. Images and concepts that are developed in one play are extended and reimagined in subsequent plays. A significant element in this process is Wilson's reconsideration of African American spirituality and faith. Dissatisfied with the relationship African Americans have historically shared with Christianity, Wilson works to establish a syncretic African and African American based theology. At the center of this typology is music, in particular the blues. According to Wilson, the discovery of one's blues song is critical to reintegrating African Americans with their African, spiritual and cultural roots. Repeatedly in his plays, Wilson imagines black people in a liminal space, displaced and disconnected from their history, their individual identity and in search of spiritual resurrection and sociopolitical reconnection. They search for and are in need of their blues song.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Wilson's first critically acclaimed play and the most musical of his plays to date, establishes a foundation for Wilson's blues theology that he articulates further with each of his later plays. In *Ma Rainey*, the significance of finding one's cultural and spiritual regeneration through the blues song plays out principally through the conflicting views of the title character, Ma Rainey, and the spirited young trumpet player, Levee, the pivotal character, who fails to understand his relationship to the music and never realizes his blues song. Ma Rainey, on the other hand, recognizes that the blues can become both a self accentuating song and a declaration of the collective, cultural memory of African Americans. Wilson's dramatic canon extends and expands on this exploration of this blues theology. In fact, close readings of his more recent plays provide insight into the early manifestations of Wilson's blues project revealed in *Ma Rainey*. Accordingly, in this essay, I will discuss the significance of Wilson's blues theology or "bluesology" in *Ma Rainey*, by reading this play on and through an understanding of his subsequent plays.

Historically the blues have not only been a site for black cultural production, but a space for critical inquiry and considerable theoretical speculation as well. Ralph Ellison argues that the blues have the power of "transcendence;" the blues can transcend "those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social justice" (*Shadow and Act*). The fact that blues can act as a transcendent, oppositional location has brought both critics and artists to this space. In the 1960s, Amiri Baraka theorized that the emergence of the blues in slavery times marked "the beginning of the American Negro" (*Blues People*); the point where blacks ceased to be Africans and became consciously African Americans. Houston A. Baker, expanding and revising Baraka, sees the blues as the foundation for African American vernacular culture and as a critical element in his vernacular theory for African American literary criticism. He imagines himself as a "critique-as-blues singer" analyzing African American literary texts with an" invitation to inventive play" (*Blues, Ideology*). More recently, black feminist critics such as Hortense Spillers and Hazel Carby have recuperated the early blues and black women blues singers as examples of black feminist self-assertion. In this theoretical context, Wilson's play emerges at a fertile text in which to examine the agency of the legendary black female blues singer Gertrude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey, to explore blues theories in practice and to observe what Paul Carter Harrison refers to as Wilson's "blues poetics"("August Wilson's Blues Poetics").

Wilson discovered the blues in 1965 while listening to an old recording of Bessie Smith's "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jellyroll Like Mine." This recording transformed his life and his cultural ideology. The blues not only became a guiding force in his writing but the foundation he found for African American expressive culture and for what he believes is a distinctly African American way of being".

> I saw the blues as a cultural response of a nonliterate people whose history and culture were rooted in the oral tradition. The response to a world that was not of their making, in which the idea of themselves as a people of imminent worth that believed their recent history was continually assaulted . . . In such an

> environment, the blues was a flag bearer of self-definition . . . It was a spiritual conduit that gave spontaneous expression to the spirit that was locked in combat and devising new strategies for engaging life and enlarging itself. (*Three Plays by August Wilson*)

According to Wilson, then, the cultural, social, political and spiritual all interact within the blues. Forged in and from the economics of slavery as a method of mediating the pains and dehumanization of that experience, the blues are purposefully duplicitous, containing a matrix of meanings. The blues are built upon the complexities and contradictions that comprise African American life. In *Ma Rainey*, Ma reminds her band leader and guitar player, Cutler, "The blues always been here." Houston A. Baker, Jr, similarly calls the blues "an economically determined and uniquely black 'already-said'" (*Blues, Ideology*). The blues for Wilson continue to offer a methodology for negotiating the difficult spaces of African American existence and achieving African American survival.

In *Ma Rainey*, as in Wilson's subsequent works, the dominant culture seeks to suppress, to control and to commodify the black blues song. *Ma Rainey* opens with two white characters: Ma Rainey's manager, Irvin, and Sturdyvant, the recording studio owner and a producer of "race records," on the stage. Together Irvin and Sturdyvant strategize on their plan for the recording session and for capturing Ma Rainey's blues voice. Sturdyvant reminds Irvin, "I just want to get her in here . . . record the songs on the list. . . and get her out. Just like clock work, huh?" Wilson juxtaposes Irvin and Sturdyvant's plan to commercialize Ma Rainey's blues song with Ma's own resolve to protect the integrity of herself and her music. Ma testifies to Wilson's contention that the blues are a uniquely black voice that whites desire, but cannot understand, "White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there.

Throughout his historical cycle of plays, Wilson replays this theme, as whites repeatedly attempt to seize or possess black music, the black blues song. Early in *The Piano Lesson*, when the protagonist, Boy Willie, inquires about potential buyers for the family's heirloom, a carved piano, his uncle Doaker tells him that there is a white man going around trying to buy up black people's musical instruments. Even more significantly, the ghost of the recently deceased white southern landowner, Sutter, materializes in the Pittsburgh home of Doaker and Boy Willie's sister, Berniece, in an effort to reclaim the family's piano, the symbol of their African American struggle and survival. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the brooding central figure in the play, Herald Loomis, has lost his identity and his place in the world after being incarcerated by Joe Turner. The title character, Joe Turner, is an absent presence in the play. Mythologized in an old blues song, Joe Turne(y)r, the brother of a former Governor of Tennessee, kept black men in servitude for seven years. These indentured black men functioned as a personal chain gang performing menial labor throughout the state. Through the action of the play *Joe Turner*, Wilson reveals that Joe Turner imprisoned Herald Loomis and these other black men in an effort to capture their song. In Wilson's plays, music and song act as

metaphors for African American identity, spirit and soul. Through the invisible presence and symbolic activities of off-stage white characters, Wilson suggests that the dominant culture has continually sought to subjugate African American humanity and suppress the power and ability of African Americans to sing their song.

This musical metaphor has considerable contemporary significance. It reflects on the ways black cultural expression has been commercialized and exploited in today's mediatized culture. The raw, hard edge and social critique of black urban rap music, for example, has been commodified and softened to sell everything from soft drinks to hamburgers. In addition, Ma Rainey's obstinacy in the face of white hegemony parallels Wilson's own struggle against co-optation as a black artist and his desire to maintain his creative integrity and autonomy. Wilson's fierce resolve not to allow the film version of *Fences* to go forward without a black director evidences his determination to protect his agency as a black artist.

Wilson's blues theology privileges the blues musician. He posits the blues musician as a potentially powerful site of black resistive agency. Too often, however, the musicians do not realize the power that they possess. As with any gift or power, the power of the blues musician exacts certain costs and expectations from the ones to whom it is given. Lyons in *Fences,* Jeremy in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and Wining Boy in *The Piano Lesson*, all represent blues musicians who have not recognized the spiritual force of the blues song and the cultural responsibility inherent in their ability to play the blues. As a result they are exploited for their music and fall victim to those who wish to control their spirit and song. The band members in *Ma Rainey*, similarly, do not realize the power and privilege of their music, their blues voice. Toledo, the piano player, chastises his fellow band members, "You lucky they [white people] let you be an entertainer. They ain't got to accept your way of entertaining. You lucky and don't even know it." Still it is on and through these musicians that Wilson positions himself as blues musician improvising on a theme (*Blues, Ideology*).

One theme that Wilson continually improvises on in his work is the struggle for African Americans to find connections, to reorient and re-establish themselves after the disorienting and dislocating experiences of the Middle Passage, slavery and the northern migrations. Yet, Wilson's blues improvisations not only infuse the content of his plays, but his form and structure as well. Ralph Ellison calls the blues a unique combination of the tragic and the comic, of poetry and ritual (*Shadow and Act*). The structure of *Ma Rainey* embodies this blues formula. The events that transpire—from Sylvester's stuttering rendition of the introduction to the recorded version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" to Toledo's unfortunate death—combine the comic and the tragic, the poetic and the ritualistic. *Ma Rainey* plays out as an extended series of blues riffs providing each of the members of the band the opportunity to solo. Wilson sets the band interaction in the band room downstairs and separated from the recording studio above. The band room represents what Houston A. Baker terms a "blues matrix" (*Blues, Ideology*). Baker envisions the blues matrix is a "point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting", crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit" (*Blues, Ideology*). For Baker the prototypical site of the blues matrix is a railroad crossing, "the juncture of multi directionality," a place "betwixt and between" (*Blues, Ideology*).

Situated at the blues matrix, the blues singer through blues song transcends spatial and sociohistorical limitations. Positioned at the blues matrix, the blues singer is empowered with unlimited and ending possibilities. The band room as blues matrix is equally a site of power and potential. The band room is a space of unfinished business, where the band must rehearse its songs for the recording sessions. It is a metaphorical space where the band members enact rituals and tales of survival that replicate the patterns of black experiences in America. Like Seth's boarding house in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the band room is a liminal space; a space that people pass through; a space where the band must await the arrival of Ma Rainey. The liminality of the space is subconsciously recognized by Levee, who comments upon entering into the room, "Damn! They done changed things around. Don't never leave well enough alone . . . That door! Nigger, you see that Door? That's what I'm talking about. That door wasn't here before." The liminality of the band room makes it a location of great creative and destructive force. Within the storytelling riffs of the band members and the tragic demise of Toledo, both the creative and destructive potential of liminality are realized in Ma Rainey's band room.

> Down in the band room, the band members engage in a series of vernacular games, the dozens, and signifyin'. All are extensions of the blues, variations on a blues theme. Wilson adds, through the voice of Toledo, that these forms of blues games are also examples of African retentions. When the bass player, Slow Drag, signifies on Cutler in order to extract a reefer from him, Toledo explains that what he has performed is an "African conceptualization": That's what you call an African conceptualization. That's when you name the gods or call on the ancestors to achieve whatever your desires are.

Correspondingly, in the climactic moment of *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson extends this blues riff and the concept of African conceptualizations through the actions of the character, Berniece. When Berniece sits at the piano to play, she employs an African conceptualization. Just as Toledo suggests in *Ma Rainey*, her song at the piano calls on the power of her ancestor to exorcise the ghost of the white land owner, Sutter, and to save her brother Boy Willie.

Toledo's declarations of the need for African Americans to recognize their connections to Africa represent an important element of Wilson's blues theology. Wilson believes that in order for African Americans to be able to sing their own song, to feel truly liberated in the American context, they must rediscover their "Africanness". "One of the things I'm trying to say in my writing is that we can never begin to make a contribution to the society except as Africans" (*In Their Own Words*). Toledo, accordingly, reprimands the band and himself for not being an "African" and for being "imitation white men." In later plays, such as *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson further delineates the connections he sees between African cultural roots and contemporary African American identity. In *Joe*

Turner's Come and Gone, Bynum's rituals of pigeons and blood, his story of the shiny man, as well as Herald Loomis' cleansing himself with his blood are all rooted in Yoruba religious practices and cosmology. Wilson's bluesology builds on African traditions adapting them to an African American context. In fact, Wilson's valorization of music and the blues musician parallels the position that Wole Soyinka establishes for music in Yoruba cultural expression. According to Soyinka,

> The European concept of music does not fully illuminate the relationship of music to ritual and drama among the Yoruba . . . The nature of Yoruba music is intensively the nature of its language and poetry, highly charged, symbolic, mythembryonic . . . The true tragic Yoruban music, unearths cosmic uncertainties which pervade human existence, reveals the power of creation, but above all creates a harrowing sense of omnidirectional vastness where the creative Intelligence resides and prompts the soul to futile exploration ("The Fourth Stage").

For Soyinka, music in Yoruba tragedy transcends the physical world and particularized meanings. Music expresses the cosmic, the spiritual, the metaphysical. Similarly, the blues are an integral component of Wilson's dramaturgy. They express and embody the African American soul. The blues inform both the content and form of Wilson's work enabling the spirituality and mythopoetic power of the works to emerge.

To further the blues mood in *Ma Rainey*, Wilson composes his blues musician characters to correspond with the instruments which they play. Slow Drag, the bass player, maintains the bass line in the play. He is a slow and deliberate voice who reinforces the action around him. Cutler, the band leader and guitar player, strikes a practical tone. He is not one to improvise but has the power to embellish a theme, as when he tells the involved story of Reverend Gates. Toledo, the piano player, is the only member of the group who can read. He is a philosopher who engages in monologues and story telling riffs that are analogous to virtuoso, improvised piano solos. Toledo preaches a doctrine of Afrocentric nationalism. "As long as the colored man look to white folks to put a crown on what he say. . . as long as he looks to white folks for approval . . . then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about." Toledo agitates for black nationalist consciousness. In the plays of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Toledo would have been the most prominent voice in the play. Toledo's voice in Wilson's drama, however, is muted. He is part of the ensemble, one instrument blending with the other blues sounds emanating from the blues matrix band room.

Still, in Wilson's bluesology, as in the 1960s and 1970s platforms of black cultural nationalism, the cultural and the spiritual are inextricably connected to the political. Wilson advocates and agitates for African American social consciousness and black nationalistic self-determination through his art. Accordingly, Toledo instructs the band

members as to their status as products of the economics of slavery. These are lessons that Wilson wants all African Americans to understand. In his powerful, poetic and humorous analogy of a stew, Toledo explains that African Americans are historical leftovers. "See we's the leftover. The colored man is the leftovers. Now what the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers." For Wilson, African American advancement can only come after African Americans recognize their leftover status, appreciate the legacies and lessons of slavery and realize and express their Africanness. In *Ma Rainey* unfortunately, Toledo's words do not activate an increased social awareness in the brash young trumpeter, Levee, nor in the other band members.

Levee, the youngest member of the band presents himself with a boldness that the others lack. His self-importance is both stubborn naivete and camouflage. Levee desires to fit in with the band, to be accepted, to achieve within a world that devalues African American spirit and accomplishment. Like a trumpet, Levee blares onto the stage. According to Wilson, "With the trumpet you have to force yourself out through the horn. Half-consciously I tried to make Levee's voice a trumpet. . .Levee is a brassy voice" (*In Their Own Words*). Levee with his brassy voice represents the forces of modernity in conflict with tradition. Significantly, Wilson has set the play in 1927, at a time when the country blues of Ma Rainey were fading in the taste of the black consuming public and being replaced by the more upbeat, danceable blues of Bessie Smith and the jazz sounds emerging from urban cities. Levee symbolizes this modern, urban blues landscape. Paul Carter Harrison writes that Levee's very name signifies, "possible kinship with the new music soundings of jazz being created along the Mississippi levees of New Orleans during the period" ("August Wilson's Blues Poetics"). Levee rejects and ridicules the "jugband" circus style songs of Ma Rainey. He desires to play music that makes people move and that he can "lay down in the peoples lap." Yet, Levee does not recognize nor understand that his new urban blues sound and jazz beats are deeply indebted to earlier African and African American sounds and socio-cultural traditions. One of the most significant and repeated messages in Wilson's historical project is that modernity cannot erase but must embrace tradition, that the past constantly and continually impacts on the present.

Tragically individualistic, Levee speaks of personal ownership and individual achievement. He wants to play "his" music, write "his" songs and form "his" band. He is unable to heed Toledo's warning to embrace communality and to think collectively:

It ain't just me, fool! It's everybody! What you
think. . .I'm gonna solve the colored man's problems
by myself? I said, we. You understand that? We.
That's every living colored man in the world got to do
his share.

Levee does not think in terms of "we", but rather, isolates and alienates himself from the other band members and systems of African American communal empowerment. Rejecting communality, Levee believes that he is on a mission to sing his song. Yet, he

does not understand the technologies of capitalism and white racism which constrict him and prevent such self-actualization.

> Levee does, however, have a profound aversion to black peoples' unquestioning acceptance of and devotion to the doctrine of Christianity. Waving a knife at Cutler and at the heavens, Levee decries Christ's lack of action in protecting his mother from being gang raped by a group of white men. He berates the traditionally Christian Cutler, "God don't pay niggers no mind. In fact . . . God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart. Jesus don't love you nigger! Jesus hate your black ass!"

Levee feels betrayed by the inability of a Christian god to act proactively on behalf of black people. He finds Christianity severely insufficient in meeting the spiritual and practical needs of black people. Wilson similarly comments on the impotence of Christianity in African American lives in his later plays. At the end of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Herald Loomis, wielding a knife like Levee, bemoans the ineffectiveness of Christianity in his life. Ironically, Joe Turner captured Herald Loomis when he had stopped to preach the Christian gospel to some men who were gambling on a Memphis street corner. In *Piano Lesson*, Christianity again fails. Avery, called upon to perform a Christian ritual of exorcism to rid the house of Sutter's ghosts, loses his resolve when confronted with the powerful spiritual forces present within the house. The picture Wilson paints in these plays is of a Christianity that has not provided blacks with tangible support in the struggle for liberation.

Consequently, Wilson in his bluesology formulates alternative syncretic strategies for African American spirituality. In the final moment of *Fences*, Gabriel Maxson performs an atavistic dance that unites him with his African origins, his blues spirit and serves to open the gates of heaven for his recently deceased brother Troy to enter. At the conclusion of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Harald Loomis subverts the traditional Christian ritual of blood letting in which Christ died for our sins. Loomis, instead, bleeds for himself. He cuts himself with his knife and then, in Yoruba fashion, cleanses himself with the blood. Through this symbolic process, Herald Loomis re-discovers his identity and his ability to sing his blues song. Berniece, after witnessing Avery's aborted exorcism in *The Piano Lesson*, turns to an African conceptualization and calls for the intervention of her ancestors. Her actions not only save her brother, but also bring spiritual redemption to herself and her family. Significantly, all these moments infuse the Christian with the African, and transpire on and through music.

Despite his protest against the inaction of Christ and the racism of Christianity, Levee has not yet found a recourse in the syncretic spirituality of the blues. Instead he turns to the devil. He is quite literally willing to sell his soul to the devil. Interestingly, the notions of the "devil" within *Ma Rainey* implicitly resurrect the black nationalist rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s which referred to members of the dominant culture as "white devils".

In *Ma Rainey*, the "white devil" to whom Levee is willing to sell his soul is Sturdyvant. Levee gives Sturdyvant his songs and expects that Sturdyvant will help him to form his own band. Levee naively believes that Sturdyvant will protect and serve his interests. Levee, however, is betrayed and undone by these actions, as Sturdyvant only desires to exploit him. Levee's deal with the devil signals his demise. Tragically, Levee disavows African American community and allows his music, his song to be commodified and controlled by Sturdyvant.

Levee believes that his interactions with Sturdyvant build upon lessons he learned from his father on how to "deal with the white man." At the end of the play's first act, Levee tells of his father's act of retribution against the white men who gang raped his wife, Levee's mother. Levee explains that his father, Memphis Green, "acted like he done accepted the facts of what happened," while he gathered the names of the white men involved. Memphis even smiled in the face of one of these white men and sold that white man his farm. Later, after he had sold the land and moved his family, Memphis returned and managed to kill four of his wife's attackers before he himself was killed. Memphis' actions unite the power of the trickster with that of the revolutionary. Duplicitously, Memphis had smiled in the face of a white man who had wronged him and his family deeply, all the while plotting his revenge. Present in Memphis' response to his wife's rapists is the inherent irony of the blues. In effect, his performance is analogous to that of Baker's blues musician at the crossroads. Memphis, through his actions, negotiates and transcends the excruciating pain of his African American experience. Interestingly, in *Two Trains Running*, Wilson again features a character named Memphis who has also been abused and run off his land by a group of white men. Much like the earlier Memphis, this Memphis, a restaurant owner in *Two Trains Running*, has unfinished business that he must settle. After a conversation with Aunt Esther—a woman who, at over three hundred and twenty years of age, is as old as the black presence in America—Memphis reconnects with his past and discovers his blues voice and the power to sing it. At the end of the play, he will return south to reclaim his land.

Levee in *Ma Rainey*, however, misinterprets his father's legacy. While his father plotted revenge with cunning duplicity, Levee approaches Sturdyvant with romantic naivete. Levee defers to Sturdyvant because he believes that Sturdyvant has the power to make him a band leader and a star. Levee does not recognize the authority of black people over the blues song. Cutler attempts to explain this reality to Levee citing Ma as an example: "The white man don't care nothing about Ma. The colored folks made Ma a star. White folks don't care nothing about who she is. . .what kind of music she make." Levee does not listen to Cutler's explanation. Unlike his father, Memphis, Levee allows his blues voice to be bought and controlled by the mechanisms of institutionalized racism. Memphis sells his land but maintains his power of self determination, his soul. Levee, on the other hand, internalizes his oppression and becomes both a victim and a victimizer.

Wilson establishes Levee's status as victim with his first entrance onto the stage. Levee enters the band room later than the rest of the band members because he has been delayed buying shoes. The shoes function as a symbol of his internalized oppression. Levee's sense of respect and identity are constructed around his sense of acquisition

and property rather than an internal sense of self-worth and pride in his blues voice. This notion of "respect" being tied to external, material items is repeatedly played out on contemporary urban streets, where black young men battle fiercely with each other and without any recognition of their blues voices. Young black men kill each other over tennis shoes and issues of respect. Such battles for respect evidence the ultimate lack of respect for the black self. In his autobiographic memoir, *Make Me Want to Holler* Nathan McCall writes of this battle for respect:

> For as long as I can remember, black folks have had a serious thing about respect. I guess it's because white people disrespected them so blatantly for so long that blacks viciously protected what little morsel of self respect they had left . . . It's still that way today. Young dudes nowadays call it "dissin'." They'll kill a nigger for dissin' them. Won't touch a white person, but they'll kill a brother in a heartbeat over a perceived slight. The irony was that white folks constantly disrespected us in ways unseen and seen, and we tolerated it. (*Makes Me Want to Holler*)

Levee, as victim, suffers from a similarly impoverished self-image. When Sturdyvant exploits him for his songs, he is further diminished. Levee then encounters the ultimate frustration that many blacks experience under white oppression. At that moment, Levee the victim turns victimizer. His internalization of his oppression constricts him from acting out against Sturdyvant. Instead, he strikes out with fury against Toledo for the disrespect of stepping on his shoes. As Wilson explains, Levee transfers his "aggression to the wrong target" (*In Their Own Words*). The result reinforces the tragic implications of black-on-black violence: the senseless, self-destructive loss of black lives.

In contrast to Levee, Ma Rainey, the title character, realizes her blues song and understands her relationship to the music. Ma Rainey recognizes the power of the music to move through her. "You don't sing to feel better. . . You sing 'cause it's a way of understanding life. Ma explains that singing the blues is not simply therapy but rather an engagement with a complex and enabling force that acts to understand and even to transform and to transcend life. Ma, unlike Levee, perceives her blues voice as a source of identity, collective African American empowerment and self-actualization. Her late entrance into the play is juxtaposed against Levee's tardy appearance in the band room. Levee is late because he falls victim to the seductive authority of American capitalism. Ma's tardiness is also due to her victimization. She, however, finds herself the victim of institutionalized racism when she refuses to be commodified. Ma struggles against the efforts of the policeman, who accosts her after a traffic incident, to treat her as just another "nigger". Repeatedly and insistently Ma shouts to her manager Irvin, as she enters the studio accompanied by the arresting officer, "Tell him who I am"! With her late, chaotic entrance, well into the play's first act, Wilson focuses the spectators' attention on Ma and further establishes her importance.

Ma remains a fiercely independent woman throughout the action of the play. Her interaction with all the men in the play is analogous to Baker's reading of the blues musician at the crossroads; she situates herself inventively and uses the resources she has at her disposal to control and mediate the world around her. Ma demonstrates a practical understanding of the material hierarchy of the record industry and her place within it. Recognizing that the purpose of the recording session is to record her voice and her music, Ma does not allow herself to be objectified but uses her position as a desired musical commodity to legitimize her authority. She reminds Irvin, "What band? The band work for me! I say what goes!" After the recording session, Ma exercises her blues voice in one final act of defiance. She leaves the studio without signing the release forms that legally grant Irvin and Sturdyvant control over her recorded music. Through this act, she asserts the power of blues singer to transcend and overcome material limitations. She retains her artistic autonomy and rebuts the usurpations of others who wish to claim her song. Wilson maintains,

> The music [blues] is ours [African Americans], since it contains our soul, so to speak—it contains all our ideas and responses to the world. We need it to help us claim the Africanness and we would be a stronger people for it. It's presently in the hands of someone else who sits over it as custodian, without even allowing us its source. (*In Their Own Words*)

While Ma confronts the desires of the dominant culture to control and suppress her blues voice, she also must struggle against the patriarchal hegemony that seeks to commodify and objectify her as a woman. Ma must negotiate systems of oppression not only as an African American but as a woman. Interestingly, in *Ma Rainey*, Wilson uses his black male characters, rather than the white ones, to reveal attitudes of sexism and male privilege. In their band room bonding rituals and verbal games, the band members speak of women only as sexual objects. At one point Cutler admonishes Levee, "Slow Drag don't need you to find him no p——y. He can take care of himself." Ma is well aware of the objectification of women as well as the exploitation of African American musicians. In fact, at one moment she uses the image of black woman-as-sexual property to emphasize her position as expendable commodity with the dominant culture's musical economy: "As soon as they [white folks] get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on."

In Wilson's character Ma Rainey, as well as in the real persona of the legendary blues singer Ger-trude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey, issues of race and gender interact. The legendary blues singer Ger-trude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey continually and purposefully challenged the limits placed on women. Through her music and its lyrical content, her public performances and stylistic flair, Ma Rainey developed an image that contradicted conventional representations of black female sexuality. By traditional standards of western beauty, Ma Rainey would have been perceived as an ugly woman. Yet, her body in performance signified not the limitations of stereotypes but the possibilities of

self-definition. Ma Rainey became known for her flamboyance. She adorned herself in lavish gowns and extravagant gold jewelry. Through her performance the image of the heavy-set black woman as mammy figure was subverted and transformed into a symbol of sexuality and style. Her performance revealed traditional western beauty standards to be a socially constructed means of oppressing black women. Since the horrors and inequities endured by slave women on the plantation, the American patriarchal system has denied or misrepresented black women's sexuality. Historically, mainstream American culture limited black female sexuality to two stereotypical images—the wanton black whore and the asexual black mammy. In *Sex and Racism in America*

Calvin Hernton argues that in American public discourse black woman disappear as legitimate subjects of female sexuality. Michelle Russell posits the blues and black female blues singers as important historical sources of black women's sexual empowerment. Russell writes that the blues

> are the expression of a particular social process by which poor black women have commented on all the major theoretical, practical and political questions facing us and have created a mass audience who listens to what we say in that form ("Slave Codes and Liner Notes").

Through the activity of singing the blues, Black women such as Ma Rainey positively acknowledged and represented black women's sexuality. Ma Rainey's songs displayed an earthy and forthright, crude and sassy sensuality. As she asserted control over the content and form of her songs, she equally declared control over her own sexuality. "She is in the moment of performance the primary subject of her own being. Her sexuality is precisely the physical expression of the highest self-regard and, often, the sheer pleasure she takes in her own powers" ("Interstices: A Small Drama of Words"). Present always in Ma Rainey's performance of her music was the concept of the black woman as empowered subject.

In her personal sex life as well as in her music and on stage performances, Ma Rainey refused to conform to traditional gender expectations. She was a bisexual with acknowledged lesbian relationships. According to Harrison, "Rainey's and Bessie Smith's episodes with women lovers are indicative of the independent stance they and other blues singers took on issues of personal choice" (*Black Pearls*). Her lesbianism and the public knowledge of it further testified to Ma Rainey's personal revolt against male hegemony and her ability to survive outside male domination and societal norms.

Paradoxically, while Ma Rainey's own activities in life attempted to subvert the male dominated, heterosexual status quo, the events of Wilson's play appear to uphold it. Decidedly more overt than the physical exchanges between Ma and Dussie Mae, her younger lesbian or bisexual companion, is the sexual embrace shared by Dussie Mae and the young rebellious trumpet player, Levee. Protected by the privacy of the downstairs band room, they exchange a passionate kiss. Their stolen embrace

emphasizes Levee's fateful defiance of Ma's authority. Significantly, Dussie Mae jeopardizes her financially stable—Ma has supplied her with money and clothing—but nontraditional lesbian relationship with Ma Rainey for an extremely tenuous but conventional heterosexual affair with Levee. Implicit is the message that relationships with men are more valuable.

Ma, a woman, is not the primary subject of Wilson's *Ma Rainey*. Although placing Ma Rainey's entrance late in the first act draws the audience's attention to her, it also provides Wilson with the time to establish interest and involvement in the lives of the band members who await Ma Rainey's arrival. The construction of the set further emphasizes the collective voice of the band, while silencing the presence and power of Ma Rainey. Ma Rainey remains above, on the surface, in the Recording Studio. In the band room below, the domain of the men, the drama simmers. In the stories and conflicts of these men, she is powerless. Significantly, Levee's murder of Toledo occurs after Ma has gathered her entourage and left the recording studio. Just as she does not determine the action at the outset of the play, she does not determine its conclusion. The play does not end with Ma's defiant exit from the recording studio, but escalates into tragedy in the band room below. Despite her assertions of her blues voice and her powers of self-determination, Ma remains outside of the discourse of men and the decisive action of the play. While Gertrude Pridgett's own life and blues music represent examples of black women's sexual agency and strategies of feminist empowerment, black female sexuality and the politics of gender are neither the subjects of Wilson's play nor the focus of his bluesology. As evidenced in *Ma Rainey*, Wilson's bluesology is both a racialized and gendered ideology and practice.

The ending of *Ma Rainey* is a complex and confounding blues moment. It stands in stark contrast to endings of Wilson's later dramas in which characters reach moments of spiritual fulfillment, acknowledge their relationships to the African American past, and perform actions of self-actualization, self-determination and communion. Present in the final scene is the ironic anguish of the blues wail. Levee's stabbing of Toledo, like all acts of black-on-black violence, strikes out against African American collectivity and cultural unity. The murder of Toledo represents a performance of tragic, unfulfilled promise, a loss of the black self that must be reclaimed through the triumph of the blues voice. The death of Toledo stands as a lesson that African Americans must learn from and that Wilson will build upon in his later plays. In African American life and Wilson's historical project of African American cultural expression, African Americans can and

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Adell provides background on the real Ma Rainey, and explores the theme of blues music as release from oppression in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.

I've traveled 'Til I'm tired
And I ain't satisfied
I've traveled 'til I'm tired
And I ain't satisfied
If I don't find my sweet man
I'll ramble 'til I die
Ah Lawdy Lawd Lawd Lawdy
Lawd Lawdy Lawd lawd Lawd
Ah Lawdy Lawd lawd lawdy
Lawd lawdy lawd lawd lawd
Lawd lawdy Lawd Lawd Lawd
Lawd Lawdy lawd lawd lawd
—"Slow Drivin' Moan" by
Gertrude (Ma) Rainey
Oh Ma Rainey
Sing yo' song;
Now you's back
Whah you belong,
Git way inside us,
Keep us strong.
— Sterling Brown

August Wilson's drama receives its strongest impulses from what Houston Baker has called the "blues matrix"—that metaphorical space where down-home folk like Boy Willie, Wining Boy, and Doaker in *The Piano Lesson,* Bynum in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* and Madame Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* all reside. Each of these characters serves as a kind of repository for a musical tradition that Wilson considers crucial to the development of the historical perspective he needs in order to write. In a 1989 interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson explained why the blues are so important for his work:

The blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. You get the ideas and attitudes of the people as part of the oral tradition. This is a way of passing along information. If you're going to tell someone a story, and if you want to keep information alive, you have to make it memorable so that the person hearing it will go tell someone else. This is how it stays alive. The music provides you an emotional reference for the information, and it is sanctioned by the community in the sense that if someone sings the song, other people sing the song. They keep it alive because they sanction the information that it contains.

Like the blues singer, Wilson keeps *his* story alive by improvising on a theme: the theme of displaced Southern black people struggling to survive in a hostile Northern urban environment. Wilson makes his story memorable by elaborating a philosophical system in which music becomes the metaphysical activity par excellence. Music is tied to understanding in a most primordial way, one that evades any logical explanation. This is the point Ma Rainey makes when she complains to Cutler about how badly white folks have misunderstood what it means to sing the blues:

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

It is also a way of securing for one's *self* a temporary reprieve from the forces of oppression with which each of Wilson's characters must always contend. And it is through the figure of Ma Rainey that Wilson most strongly articulates the possibility for grounding this kind of self-possession in the rituals and soulful rhythms of those low-down dirty gutbucket blues.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is the first of what August Wilson has referred to as a "cycle of history plays," which he hopes will "stand as a record of Black experience over the past hundred years." Set in a Chicago recording studio in 1927, this two-act play attempts to explore, among other things, the tensions arising out of a conflict between a traditional vaudeville-based down-home blues aesthetic and a new, more fast-paced and urbane style of the blues. It also presents a powerful and persuasive image of the woman who was called the Mother of the Blues.

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey was born on April 26, 1886, in Columbus, Georgia. According to one source, she made her theater debut in 1900 in a talent show called "The Bunch of Blackberries." Four years later she married William "Pa" Rainey with whom she spent many years traveling and performing on the Southern minstrel and vaudeville show circuit. By the 1920s when she began to record for Paramount records, she had already become the most popular female down-home blues singer in the country. For the folk down home and the down-home folk up North, Ma Rainey represented the epitome of black female wealth, power, and sensuality. She had her own group of musicians, a spectacular wardrobe, and for a while, her own touring bus. She also had a strong voice that could project her raunchy lyrics, without the aid of a megaphone, over the music and the noise of the crowds who regularly attended her blues performances.

An important feature of Ma Rainey's performances was a large cardboard replica of a Victrola, from which she emerged, extravagantly attired in a sequined gown and a necklace made of twenty-dollar gold pieces, singing her big recorded hit, "Moonshine Blues." This part of her stage performance most certainly must have symbolized for Ma Rainey's audiences her great success as a recording star, but in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* it becomes, at least implicitly, the technical instrument that detaches the down-

home blues singer from the domain of the blues tradition. The Victrola makes it possible for Ma Rainey's voice to be heard in places other than the great circus tents where she usually performs. One no longer has to *be there* to experience Ma Rainey coming out of the Victrola; all one needs is a phonograph record. The phonograph record reproduces the sound of Ma Rainey singing the blues and, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, it "enables the original to meet the beholder halfway." What it cannot reproduce is what Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," refers to as the "aura" or the presence, in space and time, that guarantees an object—be it a painting, a choral performance, or a staged performance—its uniqueness and singularity.

According to Benjamin, the "aura" of a work of art is what "withers" in the age of mechanical reproduction:

> That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.

One might also generalize by saying that the second most powerful agent is the phonograph record. Like the film, the phonograph record is designed for its own reproducibility and marketability rather than for the transmission of the "traditional value of the cultural heritage." In that sense, the phonograph record, like the film, does indeed lead to a "tremendous shattering of tradition." What Benjamin argues in his essay and what August Wilson dramatizes in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is that the age of mechanical reproduction reduces everything within the aesthetic domain to a simple matter of supply and demand. And by the time Ma Rainey is scheduled to record her "Black Bottom Blues," that demand, especially among her loyal displaced downhome fans, has already translated into enormous profits for the two white entrepreneurs, Irvin and Sturdyvant, who control the techniques of reproduction and the "recording machines." What they cannot control—and this becomes obvious during the first

moments of the play—is Ma Rainey, upon whose cooperation those enormous profits necessarily rely.

Ma Rainey does not cooperate with Irvin and Sturdyvant. Fully aware of the extent to which she is being exploited, Ma Rainey uses her exploitation to her advantage whenever she can. To cite just one example, although she does not deliberately disrupt Irvin and Sturdyvant's plan to run the recording session "just like clockwork," when she finally arrives at the studio she takes advantage of the commotion caused by the automobile accident that detained her to gain the upper hand. Ignoring Irvin's remarks about her tardiness, Ma Rainey insists that he talk to the policeman who is trying to arrest her for hitting a taxi driver and set him straight about who she is:

Ma Rainey: Tell the men [*sic*] who he's messing with!
Policeman: Do you know this lady?
Ma Rainey: Just tell the man who I am! That's all you gotta do.
Policeman: Lady, will you let me talk, huh?
Ma Rainey: Tell the man who I am!
Irvin: Wait a minute . . . wait a minute! Let me handle it. Ma, will you let me handle it?
Ma Rainey: Tell him who he's messing with!
Irvin: Okay! Okay! Give me a chance! Officer, this is one of our recording artists . . . Ma Rainey.
Ma Rainey: Madame Rainey! Get it straight! Madame Rainey! Talking about taking me to jail!

Unintimidated by the threat of arrest, Ma Rainey refuses to "await her verb," as Hortense Spillers might put it. Ma Rainey does not ask, "Who am I?" Ma Rainey demands instead that the world be informed about who she *is*—a social *and* sexual subject who, as the drama unfolds, continuously challenges the presumed authority of the white men and the black men who make up her immediate environment. She is, as blues singer, what Spillers calls "a metaphor of commanding female sexuality . . . who celebrates, chides, embraces, inquires into, *controls* her womanhood through the eloquence of form that she both makes use of and brings into being" (emphasis added). That control, however, is negotiable. For Ma Rainey, it has an exchange value, particularly insofar as her managers are concerned. She exchanges the rights to her voice for a right that is denied most other blacks, including her musicians: the right to be treated as she wants to be treated. But, as she makes clear to Cutler, her lead musician, she has no illusions about the limits of that control. Ma Rainey knows that she gets her way because she has something that Irvin and Sturdyvant want—her voice. She knows that Irvin and Sturdyvant lack any real commitment to her, her music, or the blues tradition and that they will put up with her only as long as it is profitable for them to record her songs.

They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt

them. They back there now call me all kinds of names . . . calling me everything but a child of god. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then.

This is what the trumpet player Levee fails to comprehend when he talks about leaving Ma Rainey and getting his own band together and making records for Irvin and Sturdyvant. Levee wants to be like Ma Rainey. He believes that the white men respect her and that all he has to do to make them respect him is to turn over a good profit. Yet unlike Ma Rainey, who knows that it was black people and not white people who made her a star, Levee relies on Irvin and Sturdyvant to give him his break. Ma Rainey, on the other hand, has learned, after long years of performing on the Southern circuit, how to manipulate the powers that be. She has also learned to place a higher value on the blues tradition and all that it implies than on its technical innovations and mechanical reproduction. For example, when Irvin balks about not having enough time to let her stuttering nephew Sylvester record the lead-in lines to her "Black Bottom Blues," Ma Rainey does not hesitate to remind him that this recording session is something she does not need to do. She can easily return to her Southern tour, where over the years she has cultivated large numbers of loyal fans:

If you wanna make a record, you gonna find time. I ain't playing with you, Irvin. I can walk out of here and go back to my tour. I got plenty fans. I don't need to go through all of this. Just go and get the boy a microphone.

Ma Rainey doesn't need to go through the performance-inhibiting ordeal of a recording session because she remains solidly grounded in the tradition out of which her music evolved. Her *contract* is not with Irvin and Sturdyvant; it is with the people, the down-home folk who identify most closely with her brand of the blues. Her "Black Bottom" belongs to them, and she refuses to give it up to anyone else unless she gets something in return. As the last line of her "Moonshine Blues" goes, "You got to fetch it with you when you come." And when Irvin comes out of the control booth after the recording session with Sturdyvant's crooked deal to pay Sylvester with part of the money he owes her, Ma Rainey sends Irvin right back to fetch the boy's pay, then makes him and Sturdyvant beg her to sign the release forms.

Sturdyvant: Hey, Ma . . . come on, sign the forms, huh?
Irvin: Ma; . . . come on now.
Ma Rainey: Get your coat, Sylvester. Irvin, where's my car?.
Irvin: It's right out front, Ma. Here . . . I got the keys

right here. Come on, sign the forms, huh?
Ma Rainey: Irvin, give me my car keys!
Irvin: Sure, Ma . . . just sign the forms, huh!
(He gives her the keys, expecting a trade-off.)
Ma Rainey: Send them to my address and I'll get around to them.
Irvin: Come on, Ma . . . I took care of everything, right? I straightened everything out.

Ma Rainey signs. Just before she makes her exit she signs, but by that time she has gotten everything she can out of Irvin and Sturdyvant and their recording machines, including the satisfaction of making them put everything on hold, of making them wait.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is structured around the *act* of waiting and its consequences for her four black musicians, for whom waiting seems to be a condition of their being: waiting to play a halfway decent gig; waiting to get paid, in cash, when they do play a gig; waiting to have just one mo' good time; waiting for a good woman to help ease their trouble-in-mind; waiting for Ma Rainey to sing her "Black Bottom Blues."

Sandra Shannon has commented on how the act of waiting is crucial for establishing the tensions that culminate in Levee's murderous act at the end of the play. In "The Long Wait: August Wilson's

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Shannon argues that Wilson makes us all wait for Ma Rainey in order to focus more closely on the musicians as they wait for Ma Rainey to arrive:

Capitalizing on the knowledge that both the reader and the viewer subconsciously expect the sassy blues singer to grace the stage at any moment, Wilson manages to upstage her entrance by focusing instead upon seemingly trivial conversations among her band members. Not only does Wilson make the rehearsal group wait for Ma Rainey, but he strategically places the audience on hold as well. Subconsciously they experience, in some measure, the frustration of waiting and its accompanying effects upon the cast. As a result of the delay, what they learn about the various idiosyncrasies of the troubled group serves as a context for understanding their motives when they are finally in the company of Ma Rainey.

What we learn is that each of the musicians has a story to tell, and that embedded in these stories are clues to why they interact with each other the way they do. We also learn that, with the exception of Levee, each of the musicians is strongly committed to

doing things Ma Rainey's way. As Cutler and Slow Drag remind the rebellious Levee, who insists on doing things Irvin and Sturdyvant's way, when it comes to her music or her *self,* what Irvin and Sturdyvant want doesn't matter: Ma Rainey will always have the final say.

Cutler: Levee, the sooner you understand it ain't what
you say, or what Mr. Irvin say . . . it's what Ma say
that counts.
Slow Drag: Don't nobody say when it come to Ma.
She's gonna do what she wants to do. Ma says what
happens with her.
Levee: Hell, the man's the one putting out the record!
He's gonna put out what he wanna put out!
Slow Drag: He's gonna put out what Ma want him
to put out!

Consequently, although Wilson does indeed manage to upstage her entrance, his strategy does not close off the possibility of rendering Ma Rainey powerfully present even in her absence. In fact, her *presence* causes everyone, and especially Sturdyvant, a great deal of anxiety long before she arrives on the scene.

Sturdyvant would rather not deal with blacks under any circumstances and finds it particularly irritating to have to put up with one who comports herself as if she were a queen. As he helps Irvin test the studio's sound equipment for the one o'clock recording session, Sturdyvant continually reminds Irvin that it is his responsibility to keep Ma Rainey in line.

Sturdyvant: She's your responsibility. I'm not putting
up with any Royal Highness . . . Queen of the
Blues [bull& —]!
Irvin: Mother of the Blues, Mel. Mother of the Blues.
Sturdyvant: I don't care
what she calls herself. I'm not
putting up with it. I just want to get her in here . . .
record those songs on that list . . . and get her out. Just
like clockwork, huh?
Irvin: Like clockwork, Mel. You just stay out of the
way and let me handle it.

And for the most part, Sturdyvant does stay out of the way, in the control booth, while Irvin tries to handle a situation that, from the moment the musicians arrive without Ma Rainey, becomes increasingly chaotic. There is confusion about the songs the group is supposed to record. Irvin hands Cutler, who can't even read, a list that is different from the one Ma Rainey told him they would be recording. According to Toledo, the only member of the group who can read, Irvin's list includes four songs instead of six and

one of them is Bessie Smith's version of "Moonshine Blues." It also includes Levee's *and* Ma Rainey's versions of "Black Bottom Blues." To further complicate matters, Levee refuses to rehearse the music on the list because he feels that it is outdated and requires a different kind of band, a jug band. This leads to a heated discussion about whether or not this style of music can be called art.

Levee: You ain't gotta rehearse that . . . ain't nothing but old jug-band music. They need one of them jug bands for this.
Slow Drag: Don't make me no difference. Long as we get paid.
Levee: That ain't what I'm talking about, nigger. I'm talking about art!
Slow Drag: What's drawing got to do with it?
Levee: Where you get this nigger from, Cutler? He sound like one of the Alabama niggers.
Cutler: Slow Drag's all right. It's you talking all that weird [sh—] about art. Just play the piece, nigger. You wanna be one of them . . . what you call . . . virtuoso or something, you in the wrong place. You ain't no Buddy Bolden or King Oliver . . . you just an old trumpet player come a dime a dozen. Talking about art.

But it is about art. It's about an art that is being divested of its Being, for the three-and-a-half-minute mechanically reproduced sound of the blues will always lack the presence, in time and space, of the "unique existence" that assures its authenticity. What is at stake, especially for the folk down home, is not just a musical style but a way of being, a way of understanding, defining, and improvising upon a world from which the Christian God had disappeared long before those white men *waited* 'til Levee's daddy went to Natchez to buy that seed and fertilizer and then came to Levee's daddy's house when Levee wasn't nothin' but about eight years old and had to do with his mama "any way they wanted" and Levee tried to save her *'cause God couldn't since he was already dead* and one of those white men cut him so bad that his mama had to carry him two miles to keep him from dying too and his daddy came back and acted like didn't nothin' happen and even sold his land to one of those white men and then moved out of that county and *waited* and then went back and got four of them before the other four or five got him.

Hear me talkin' now people. I'm talkin' about the BLUES!

Levee's got the blues! Levee's got the blues so bad that he thinks he learned from his father's example how to handle the white man. When Cutler and Slow Drag criticize him for the way he "yessirs" Sturdyvant, and Toledo accuses him of being "spooked up with

the white man" like everyone else, Levee tries to defend himself by insisting that his daddy's actions taught him what to do:

> I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker's face . . . smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he's planning how he's gonna get him and what he's gonna do to him. That taught me how to handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man. I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please. I got time coming to me. You all just leave Levee alone about the white man.

What Levee forgets is that his daddy did not smile and yessir the white man in order to get something from him. He did it in order to do something to him, and he carried his plan out to the bitter end. A true warrior, Memphis Green learned how to do what his son cannot. He learned how to live with his "head in the lion's mouth," as the enigmatic grandfather in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* puts it. He did what the grandfather advised Ellison's protagonist's father to do. He overcame 'em with yeses, undermined 'em with grins, and agreed 'em to death and destruction before they destroyed him. What Memphis Green didn't do was what the grandfather in *Invisible Man* insisted in his dying breath that *his* son must do: "Learn it to the younguns." Memphis Green couldn't learn it to his "youngun": his time ran out just a bit too soon. Consequently, Levee lets his personal ambition dictate how to do battle with his oppressors. In so doing, he reverses his father's smile-and-sell strategy and substitutes compliance for subversiveness. Levee believes that all he has to do to make his way to the top of an industry already dominated by the immutable figure of the Mother of the Blues is yessir and smile and sell Sturdyvant a few of his songs. His strategy fails. Sturdyvant agrees to buy Levee's compositions—for five dollars apiece—but refuses to let him record them because he doesn't "think they'd sell like Ma's records." When Levee objects, Sturdyvant shoves five dollars in his pocket for the song he's already given him. And as Sturdyvant leaves the room, he lets the door slam in Levee's face. This makes Levee *mad.* However, instead of confronting the real enemy, Levee displaces his anger and resentment—first onto Cutler, who tries to persuade him, through his story of Reverend Gates, not to expect respect from white men, and then onto Toledo, who makes the mistake of stepping on one of his brand-new shoes.

Cutler's story is a familiar one, one that Toledo insists isn't worth telling since it has already been told "a hundred times." A black preacher takes a train to visit a sick relative and ends up, through no fault of his own, in a no-(black)man's-land surrounded by a group of white men who have nothing better to do than terrorize and humiliate him. What Cutler tries to make Levee see is that it is foolish for a black person to expect to be respected by people who won't even respect a "man of God" if he happens to be black. But all Cutler succeeds in doing is making Levee even *madder* than he already is. As far as Levee is concerned, Cutler's story is proof enough that this God that Cutler is so fond of is "a white man's God" who "don't pay niggers no mind. In fact . . . God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart." As Levee's own fury intensifies, so do

his blasphemous attacks on God. This in turn provokes a bloody battle between the two men. Toledo and Slow Drag break it up just as Levee pulls a knife on Cutler and dares "Cutler's God" to come and save him:

> Cutler's God! Come on and save this nigger! Come on and save him like you did my mama! Save him like you did my mama! I heard her when she called you! I heard her when she said, "Lord, have mercy! Jesus, help me! Please, God, have mercy on me, Lord Jesus, help me!" And did you turn your back? Did you turn your back, [motherf—r]? Did you turn your back? (Levee *becomes so caught up in his dialogue with God that he forgets about* Cutler *and begins to stab upward in the air, trying to reach God.*) Come on! Come on and turn your back on me! Turn your back on me! Come on! Where is you? Come on and turn your back on me! Turn your back on me, [motherf—r]! I'll cut your heart out! Come on, turn your back on me! Come on! What's the matter? Where is you? Come on and turn your back on me! Come on, what you scared of? Turn your back on me! Come on! Coward, [motherf—r]!

Cutler's God can't come. Cutler's God is the Christian God, and that God had already been pronounced dead by another *madman,* Nietzsche's madman who, in *The Gay Science,* went running around the marketplace with his lit lantern looking for Him. When the people in the marketplace laughed at him for seeking a God they had long ago ceased to believe in, Nietzsche's madman proclaimed his death and said that *we* have killed him: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our *knives*" (emphasis added). The bloody knives of unbelief killed God once. Now Levee is trying to conjure him up in order to make him bleed all over again. The difference is that this time the potential murderer "of all murderers" is not an unbeliever. Levee believes in God as much as Cutler does. What Levee has lost faith in is the idea of God as the "holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned." In that sense, Levee stands in the shadow of Nietzsche's most "uncanny guest," nihilism, or what Martin Heidegger in "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'" calls, after Nietzsche, the ongoing historical event of the "devaluing of the highest values up to now."

Heidegger defines the highest values as the suprasensory world, which is subsumed under the name God, and the true, the good, and the beautiful. These values

> are already devaluing themselves through the emerging of the insight that the ideal world is not and is never to be realized within the real world. The obligatory character of the highest values begins to totter.

The question arises: Of what avail are these highest values if they do not simultaneously render secure the warrant and the ways and means for a realization of the goals posited in them?

For the nihilist these values are of no avail once their "obligatory character" and their authority begin to totter. That does not imply that in the face of this "tottering of the dominion of prior values," the world falls into decline and decay. The world remains, but it lacks the essential something that must occupy the authoritative realm which is preserved despite the fact that God is absent from it. As Heidegger explains,

if God in the sense of the Christian god has disappeared from his authoritative position in the suprasensory world, then this authoritative place itself is still always preserved, even though as that which has become empty. The now-empty authoritative realm of the suprasensory and the ideal world can still be adhered to. What is more, the empty place demands to be occupied anew and to have the god now vanished from it replaced by something else.

August Wilson's Ma Rainey also recognizes the importance of replacing that now-empty realm with something else. However, unlike Toledo, who in the first act suggests that the gods be reconceptualized and named according to African traditions, Ma Rainey turns away from the theological altogether. Using the idiom of the blues tradition, Ma Rainey explains to Cutler and Toledo how her music helps to fill that space:

Ma Rainey: The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something.
Toledo: You fill it up with something the people can't be without, Ma. That's why they call you the Mother of the Blues. You fill up that emptiness in a way ain't nobody ever thought of doing before. And now they can't be without it.
Ma Rainey: I ain't started the blues way of singing. The blues always been there.
Cutler: In the church sometimes you find that way of singing. They got blues in the church.
Ma Rainey: They say I started it . . . but I didn't. I just helped it out. Filled up that empty space a little bit. That's all.

The blues is what excites the will-to-power of those beings who would otherwise lack the power to will beyond the narrow and racially defined spheres of their existence. In the absence of the God of Christianity, the blues is what *em*powers them to seek their truth in a "dimension of happening" that transcends the value-laden realities of the everyday. Ma Rainey's *truth* is her song transformed into a communal act. In that sense, she has much in common with Dionysius whom Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy,* credits with having broken the "spell of individuation" that governs the artistic energies of the Apollonian, or the plastic arts, and opening the way for the symbolic expression of what he feels is at the heart of all human experience: the tragic. Nietzsche writes that while Dionysian art "wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence," it urges us to seek it "not in phenomena, but behind them" in order to recognize, without fear, that

> all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence—yet we are not to become rigid with fear: a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of the changing figures. We are really for a brief moment primordial being itself, feeling its raging desire for existence and joy in existence; the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena; now appear necessary to us, in view of the excess of countless forms of existence which force and push one another into life, in view of the exuberant fertility of the universal will. We arepierced by the maddening sting of these pains just when we have become, as it were, one with the infinite primordial joy in existence, and when we anticipate, in Dionysian ecstasy, the indestructibility and eternity of this joy. In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose creative joy we are united.

What Nietzsche had in mind when he developed his concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian was tragedy as it is manifest in the works of Richard Wagner. But he could just as easily have been talking about the blues. For the spirit of Dionysius is transfigured onto Ma Rainey, whose music celebrates and mourns—many of her songs are called "moans"—one of the most tragic cultures of the modern age. Furthermore, Ma Rainey's music is valued only insofar as it links her with her people in a communal "bond of kinship" signaled by her name. Levee breaks out of that bond and separates himself from his immediate "kin" when, in the second act, he deliberately provokes Ma Rainey until she fires him just before she leaves.

Afterwards, while the musicians wait in the bandroom for Sturdyvant to pay them their twenty-five dollars each, Slow Drag offers to show Levee a card trick just "to be nice." Levee refuses Slow Drag's friendly gesture, thus further alienating himself from the

group. Toledo plays the game instead and pulls the six of diamonds, which, in the end, proves to be his unlucky card. After having "done been through life" and "made [his] marks," Toledo ends up the target of Levee's terribly misguided "warrior spirit."

August Wilson has described the "warrior spirit" as a refusal to accept the limitations of a racist society and a "willingness to battle, even to death" the forces that threaten existence in a real and immediate way. He feels that throughout the play Levee is guided by the "warrior spirit" despite the fact that he progresses toward the wrong target. Toledo posed no threat to Levee. If anything, Toledo simply forced him to confront his own ignorance about music and about what it means to be a struggling musician in a business that is being controlled by white men. He also showed him how little he understands "the basic understanding of everything." But *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is very much in the tragic mode. And tragedy demands that someone be sacrificed. Tragedy insists that someone must die.

Source: Sandra Adell, "Speaking of Ma Rainey/Talking about the Blues," in *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson,* edited by Alan Nadel, University of Iowa Press, 1994, pp. 51-66.

Adaptations

In *August Wilson: A Conversation with August Wilson,* Wilson describes his role as passing down the practical and spiritual wisdom of the African-American community in his plays and writings. He discusses the influence of black traditions like storytelling and blues music on his plays. The video, 22 minutes long, is part of the series, *In Black and White: Six Profiles of African American Authors,* and can be purchased from California Newsreel, 149 Ninth St., San Francisco, CA 94103.

The Classic Blues label released *The Essential Ma Rainey* in 2001, a collection of Rainey's most popular songs.

In 1988-1989, *August Wilson, Playwright* was filmed by City University Television in association with the Center for Advanced Study in Theater Arts and the Harold Clurman Endowment.

Topics for Further Study

Characterize the communication among the band members, Ma Rainey and her entourage, and Irvin and Sturdyvant. If you were a counselor for this group, charged with helping its members gain insight into the ways in which they communicate, what issues would you explore and what changes in behavior would you suggest?

Ma Rainey suggests that white people do not really understand the blues, that only blacks can truly relate to the blues. Do you agree with this thinking? Why or why not? Compare Ma Rainey as a feminist figure to a feminist figure of today. Before starting, be sure to research the role of women, particularly black women in America in the 1920s.

Each of Ma Rainey's band members has a story to tell that embodies something representative of the black experience. Write a story that you believe is representative of the experience (s) of your gender, race, or ethnicity.

Research the recording industry of the 1920s in the United States, paying particular attention to how working conditions for blacks and whites differed. Present your findings to your class.

Compare white acceptance of hip-hop or rap music today with white acceptance of the blues in the 1920s. Note differences and similarities.

Write lyrics for a blues song using any of the following subjects: lost love, infidelity, parent-child conflict, work, or disappointment. If you are musically inclined, put your lyrics to a song and perform it for your class.

With at least three other classmates, listen to Ma Rainey's album, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Then write an essay detailing the emotional effect the music had on you. How do your responses compare with the responses of other members in your group?

Research the kinds of music popular in the United States during the 1920s. Report to your class any connections you see between the music and the region of popularity of various kinds of music.

Argue for or against the play being read as a tragedy.

With at least five other classmates, write a third act for the play and perform it for your class. Assign one member of your group to explain the choices you made.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Through live performances and recordings, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Louis Armstrong help to popularize blues and jazz as distinctive forms of black music.

1980s: The black group Sugarhill Gang inaugurates the history of hip-hop with their single "Rapper's Delight," a multi-platinum seller and radio hit. From the Sugarhill Gang come the works of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. In the early 1980s, this group take the lead from the Gang and developed rap, integrating the sounds of a live disc jockey scratching on wax on their albums.

Today: Hip-hop and rap music, though originating from black performers, are widely embraced by white audiences and practiced by white performers such as Eminem.

1920s: The Ford Motor Company introduces the Model T and produces their 15 millionth Model A.

1980s: Worldwide earnings at Ford reach an all-time high of $5.3 billion in 1988, the highest to-date for any automotive company.

Today: Ford opens new plants in Portugal, Poland, Brazil, India, and Russia.

1920s: Oscar De Priest, the first black congressman from the North, is elected in Chicago's First District.

1980s: Black civil rights leader Jesse Jackson runs twice in the Democratic presidential primary, finishing third in 1984 and second in 1988.

Today: Colin Powell is the first black man appointed as United States Secretary of State.

What Do I Read Next?

Holly Hill's essay, "Black Theater into the Mainstream," which appeared in Bruce King's collection of essays, *Contemporary American Theater,* examines tensions among blacks in Wilson's plays.

After opening on Broadway in 1987, Wilson's play *Fences* won a Pulitzer Prize, a Tony Award, a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, an American Theater Critics' Association Award, a Drama Desk Award, and the Outer Critics' Circle Award. *Fences* explores the relationships between husband and wife, father and son, two lovers and two friends.

Wilson's play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* tells the story of Harold Loomis who, while searching for his wife in Pittsburgh, is haunted by the memory of being illegally enslaved by bounty hunter Joe Thomas in 1917. The play opened at the Yale Repertory Theatre in late 1986 and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award.

Carla McDonough's intriguing book, *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (1997), provides a sociological reading of Wilson's plays, focusing on the subjects of crime, guns, and work among his urban black male characters.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Further Study

Baker, Houston A., Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance,* The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Baker argues that the Harlem Renaissance predates the 1920s and that its influence is still echoed in a broad spectrum of twentieth-century African-American arts.

Lieb, Sandra R., *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey,* University of Massachusetts Press, 1983.

This biography is a good resource for those who want to learn more about Ma Rainey. It is well researched and contains numerous anecdotes about the singer and her circle of friends and business associates.

Nadel, Alan, ed., *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson,* University of Iowa Press, 1994.

Nadel collects useful critical essays on the role of issues such as gender, history, art, politics, and race in Wilson's plays.

Shafer, Yvonne, *August Wilson: A Research and Production Sourcebook,* Greenwood Press, 1998.

In this indispensable book, Shafer surveys Wilson's life and work, summarizing his plays and providing critical overviews on them. Shafer also includes an exhaustive bibliography.

Shannon, Sandra, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson,* Howard University Press, 1995.

Shannon details the development of Wilson's aesthetic sensibility. Her study also includes an interview with Wilson, in which he discusses his dramatic vision.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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