Two Trains Running Study Guide

Two Trains Running by August Wilson

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Introduction

One of the leading playwrights of the late twentieth century, August Wilson brought African American culture and history to the stage with eloquence. His many awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes, together with his formidable critical reputation and the popularity of his plays, marked his status as perhaps the greatest black dramatist of his generation. Wilson is widely known for his ear for idiomatic African American dialogue, his gift for portraying political dilemmas and social turbulence in an immediate and compelling manner, and his deep knowledge of daily life among impoverished blacks living in U.S. cities.

Two Trains Running, one of Wilson's most overtly and pointedly political works, takes place during the heyday of the black power movement, at a moment of great upheaval in U.S. race relations. It is one of a series of plays dealing with African American culture and history in the twentieth century, and perhaps its central theme is the manner in which the poor urban black community reacted to legal victories of the civil rights movement. Wilson stresses that a sense of hopelessness went hand-in-hand with optimism and progress in places such as 1969 urban Pittsburgh, where equal rights applied to African Americans only in theory and many blacks struggled daily with meager wages and dismal prospects. As of 2007, the play was available in a 1993 paperback edition published by Plume Drama. It originally opened in 1990 and came to Broadway in 1992 with a cast that included Samuel L. Jackson and Laurence Fishburne.

Author Biography

Ethnicity 1: African American

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1945

Deathdate: 2005

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1945, August Wilson was the fourth of six children in a poor mixed-race family. He was named after his father Frederick August Kittel, a white German, but Kittel never lived with the family, and Wilson's mother Daisy Wilson, a cleaning woman, later married David Bedford, an ex-convict who had spent twenty-three years in prison after killing a man during a robbery. The character Troy Maxson of *Fences* is based on Bedford, and this play serves as an indication of the tense relationship between Wilson and his stepfather.

Wilson attended Catholic school but encountered severe racial abuse and changed schools twice. He quit public school after a history teacher accused him of plagiarizing a term paper. He began to read literature by various writers, including Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and Dylan Thomas. Wilson briefly joined the U.S. Army and then, at age eighteen, returned to his Pittsburgh neighborhood where he took on a variety of jobs and began writing poetry.

When his biological father died in 1965, Wilson officially took his mother's maiden name and moved into his own apartment. He became interested in the blues singer Bessie Smith, the poet Amiri Baraka, and African American oral culture in general, and he became involved in the black power movement. In 1968, Wilson helped to open the Black Horizon Theater Company, which intended to promote black self-awareness. The next year he married a Muslim woman named Brenda Burton, and they had a daughter in 1970, but the marriage ended in 1972. In 1973, Wilson wrote a play about a troubled marriage entitled *Recycle*, and from then on Wilson's choice of subject matter as a dramatist was often influenced by his personal life, even though he consistently claimed in interviews that he did not write autobiographical plays.

In 1978, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, to work as an educational scriptwriter for the Science Museum of Minnesota. His breakthrough as a playwright came in 1982, with the production of *Jitney*, a play about a Pittsburgh cab company, and the acceptance of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* for workshops at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut. The latter was produced on Broadway in 1984 to critical acclaim, and Wilson won a variety of prestigious fellowships and awards based on it. His next play, *Fences*, was produced on Broadway in 1987 and won the Pulitzer Prize. He also won a Pulitzer Prize in 1990 for *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson's plays continued to be produced through the 1990s, usually to considerable success, and he came to the conviction that each of his plays should portray a different period of

twentieth-century African American history. Each play in his cycle takes on a different decade, including *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986), which details an ex-convict's journey to find his wife in the 1910s, and *Two Trains Running* (1990), which is set in the 1960s and which won the American Theatre Critics' Award in 1992.

Wilson, who remarried twice and was survived by his third wife, Constanza Romero, continued to write plays until he died of liver cancer on October 2, 2005, in Seattle, Washington.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

In a restaurant across the street from West's Funeral Home and Lutz's Meat Market, Wolf talks on the phone about his job running numbers (taking bets for an illegal lottery). Memphis tells him to get off the phone, and Risa criticizes the numbers game. Memphis explains why his wife left him, and Holloway enters telling them about the people lining up at the funeral home to see Prophet Samuel. He says people were charging to see him until West stopped them, and the men declare that West must be very wealthy, in part (they say) because he robs corpses of their valuables before burying them. Memphis says that West has always wanted his land and that the city wants to tear down his restaurant. He says he will refuse to take less than twenty-five thousand dollars, and the men continue to talk about how West takes too much money from people.

Hambone enters, repeating “He gonna give me my ham” as usual, and Risa expresses sympathy for him. Sterling enters and chides them for having very little available to eat. He recognizes Risa as the sister of his old friend, flirts with her, and reveals that he has been in prison. The men give him some recommendations about finding a job, but Sterling has already tried most of them and found that it is very difficult to find work. They talk about how the people hope to become lucky by rubbing Prophet Samuel's head, and Holloway says it is better to go to see Aunt Ester. They explain to Sterling that Lutz promised Hambone a ham if he painted the fence well but gave him a chicken instead, and every morning for almost ten years Hambone has demanded the ham. Holloway discusses how Aunt Ester and Prophet Samuel earned the affections and trust of the community, and Sterling leaves in search of Aunt Ester.

Act 1, Scene 2

The men watch as Hambone confronts Lutz once again, and Holloway argues that Hambone might have more sense than any of them, since he refuses to accept “whatever the white man throw at him.” Memphis tells about how white residents drove him out of Jackson, Mississippi, and expresses confusion about the fact that Risa cut her legs in order to distract attention from her beauty. Then Memphis says he found out that Sterling had robbed a bank, and Holloway argues that the problem is not that Sterling or black people in general are lazy, but that the money that black people make inevitably goes to white men. He says that white people have always “stacked” or exploited black people since the times of slavery.

West enters and defends his lucrative undertaking business. He offers to buy the restaurant for fifteen thousand dollars in cash and tells Memphis that the city will not give him more than ten thousand for it. Sterling enters saying that Aunt Ester was not available and inviting everyone to a rally celebrating the birthday of Malcolm X. They

discuss Malcolm X and the black power movement, and Memphis expresses frustration with such political movements. Hambone enters, and Memphis angrily kicks him out of the restaurant.

Act 1, Scene 3

Unable to find a job, Sterling talks with Risa about his past, invites her to a rally for Malcolm X, and claims that they will get married if the number she suggests wins the lottery. He tells Holloway that Hambone painted the fence very well and deserves his ham, and West enters with gifts for Risa and Memphis. Sterling asks to borrow money so he can bet on a number, and he and Wolf agree that the world is crazy and hopeless. Holloway tells him that he is headed for jail, and Sterling says that he will end up there anyway.

Wolf starts a collection to get Bubba Boy out of jail so he can attend his wife's funeral, and Sterling teaches Hambone the phrase “Black is beautiful.” Memphis enters complaining that the city offered him fifteen thousand dollars for the restaurant, so he fired his black lawyer and hired a white one. He says he decided not to settle for anymore “draws” after he missed his mother's death because he could not borrow the money to travel down to Jackson, and he resolves to make the city meet his price.

Act 2, Scene 1

Sterling steals Risa flowers from Prophet Samuel's visitation room and seems to have stolen a can of gasoline as well. He tries to teach Hambone other black power slogans and starts hollering with him, then sells the gas to Memphis. Memphis starts to get irritated with his customers, and Wolf sells Sterling a gun on credit. Memphis hangs up on a caller trying to reach Wolf and says that Wolf cannot receive calls at the restaurant anymore.

West enters complaining that someone has broken the window to his funeral home, and someone tried to break in the basement. He offers Memphis twenty thousand dollars for the restaurant, with the catch that he withhold five thousand until after he sells it to the city. Memphis refuses and explains how the white community in Jackson confiscated his land, killed his mule, and set fire to his crop, all because he had found a way to irrigate his field. Sterling asks West for a job as a driver, but West refuses and tells about the time that he asked Aunt Ester whether his wife was in heaven. Holloway says that he went to see Aunt Ester because he wanted to kill his grandfather, who loved white men and helped them control other slaves. Sterling asks Memphis if he wants to form a partnership selling chicken to steel mill workers, but Memphis refuses.

Act 2, Scene 2

Holloway says that Hambone did not go to see Lutz that morning and describes Prophet Samuel's funeral. Wolf tells them that he has two women in Atlanta, but one of them

thinks he is a rich man so he cannot go there unless he has money. Then Wolf says that Sterling won the numbers game yesterday, but the family who runs it cut the amount of the winnings. Holloway refuses to explain this to Sterling, and Memphis tears down a black power poster that Sterling has put on the wall. Sterling enters and describes Prophet Samuel's funeral, and Memphis says that Prophet Samuel used to cheat people out of their money. Sterling says he believes the world is coming to an end. Memphis pays Risa and asks Holloway where Aunt Ester lives.

Act 2, Scene 3

Holloway says that Hambone is dead, and Risa sweeps at Wolf with her broom. West enters describing how he retrieved Hambone's body, and Risa tells him that he should bury Hambone in a decent coffin. West says that this would be too expensive for him. Sterling enters and invites West to come gambling with him in Las Vegas, but West says he is no longer interested in this kind of life. West tells Sterling that his expectations for life are too high, but Sterling refuses to listen. Wolf enters and explains to Wolf that they cut the numbers in half, and Sterling says he is going to demand his money from the Alberts despite Wolf's and Risa's warnings.

Act 2, Scene 4

Sterling tells Risa how he confronted Old Man Albert but did not actually ask for his full winnings. He then went to see Aunt Ester and threw twenty dollars into the river on her advice. Sterling asks Risa why she cut up her legs and says that it is only natural that he wants to be with her. She tells him he would be an unreliable husband who will end up in jail, and he says they can kiss without marrying. Risa puts on the jukebox and they dance, then kiss.

Act 2, Scene 5

Holloway philosophizes that there is nothing in the world but love and death, and the men discuss the rally the previous night. A drug store was burned down, but Holloway thinks it was just a scam so that the owner could collect the insurance. Wolf tries to explain why he does not have a girlfriend, and West agrees that he made Hambone's visitation look good. Wolf says that it is all right that Sterling is together with Risa, and Memphis enters slightly drunk. Memphis explains that he went to see Aunt Ester, threw twenty dollars into the river, and went to the courthouse where they awarded him thirty-five thousand dollars for his restaurant. His wife moved back in, but he moved out and says he plans to go down to Jackson and claim back his land. He gives Risa fifty dollars to buy flowers for Hambone, and Sterling enters with blood on his face and a ham he has stolen from Lutz, for Hambone's casket.

Characters

Bubba Boy

Bubba Boy is deeply in love with his wife. When she dies of a drug overdose, he steals a dress for her and is arrested.

Aunt Ester

Aunt Ester is an old black woman who tells fortunes and helps people find relief. Holloway claims that she is three hundred and twenty-two years old, which means that she is about as old as African slavery in North America, and this correspondence suggests that she may symbolize the black experience in the United States. She gives advice about how to cope with life rather than change circumstances, and she frequently advises black people to throw money into the river.

Hambone

Hambone is a mentally disturbed, or possibly mentally handicapped, man who repeats the same two phrases continually. He is in his late forties, and his character description terms him, □*self-contained and in a world of his own*.□ A major source for his deterioration seems to be Lutz, the white owner of the meat market across the street from the restaurant, who promised to reward Hambone with a ham if he painted his fence well, but then agreed only to give him a chicken.

Hambone is of great symbolic importance to the play, and the main characters all come to feel an affinity with him and sadness at his death. West reveals that he had scars all over his body, and this image recalls flogging marks of blacks from the South, helping to depict Hambone as a symbol of the oppressed black man. Hambone's dogged insistence that the white man must give him his due seems pathetic and even ridiculous at first, but later it seems that he is not necessarily so different from the other characters. In some ways, Hambone is a foil, or a character whose purpose is to reveal something about another character, for Memphis, since they both make demands of white people with similar persistence, but seem to go about it in different ways.

Holloway

Holloway, a wise and philosophical man who has strong religious beliefs, voices □*his outrage at injustice with little effect*.□ His character description indicates that he has come to □*accept his inability to effect change and continue to pursue life with zest and vigor*,□ but he has not lost his fury with the oppression that African Americans continue to face at the end of the 1960s. Somewhat cynical about people's motives to make

money and take advantage of others, Holloway's opinions are nevertheless justified by his experience.

Holloway was deeply affected by his grandfather's loyal and subservient relationship to white people and was ready to kill him until he came under the influence of the spiritual advisor Aunt Ester. After that, he was able to endure his troubles by believing that he can do little or nothing to make matters better for black people. Holloway serves as a valuable and articulate source of context and history for the audience; he is always probing for reasons for current problems and scolding blacks for failing to see the broader causes behind their desperation.

Lutz

Lutz is the white owner of the meat market across the street from the restaurant. The black characters despise him, particularly after Hambone's death, for refusing ever to give Hambone the ham that he promises him. They differ, however, in their opinion as to whether he will ever succumb to Hambone's persistence. Lutz himself never appears in the play, and there is no indication that he regrets refusing to satisfy Hambone for nine and a half years.

Mellon

Mellon is a rich white banker and speculator who may be exploitative of or racist toward blacks. Holloway indicates that Mellon had a shady alliance with Prophet Samuel.

Memphis

The central character of the play is the restaurateur Memphis, whose life comes to the brink of tragedy when his marriage breaks up, and the city moves forward with its plans to demolish his restaurant. His character description states that he is a "*self-made man whose values of hard work, diligence, persistence, and honesty have been consistently challenged by the circumstances of his life*," and identifies "*impeccable logic* " as his best quality. Memphis is by no means a simple character, however, and his sense of rationality or logic is not always straightforward. For example, he strongly believes that individuals are born free and able to determine their own destiny, but he is limited in his ability to understand the ways in which black people are not exactly free in the United States due to continued racial oppression. He is also inept at maintaining and cultivating personal relationships, and he is unable to see why his wife is not satisfied simply because he supports her financially.

Memphis has a strong sense of justice and self-worth, and he is willing to fight violently and resourcefully for his own well-being. He continually makes demands of white people (such as twenty-five thousand dollars for his restaurant and the ownership of his farm in Jackson) based on his sense of entitlement. He fails, however, to address the broader, institutional forces working against him and other black people.

Old Man Albert

Old Man Albert is the head of the white family which runs the numbers game and is probably tied to organized crime.

Prophet Samuel

Prophet Samuel is a very popular preacher whose funeral attracts large numbers of supporters. Holloway and Memphis accuse him of cheating people and having corrupt ties to powerful businessmen, but Risa and Sterling support him. His political and religious position is never perfectly clear, but Risa explains that he was interested in justice for black people and talked about the end of the world approaching.

Risa

Risa is a resilient woman with deeply held convictions, the only female character in the male-dominated world of the play. Her character description indicates only that she cut herself with a razor in order to focus attention away from her good looks and towards her personality. Her personality remains something of a mystery, however, since she refuses to go into detail about her personal life, possibly because she remains disgusted by the fact that men think of her only as a sex object.

Risa is nevertheless outspoken about her convictions, and she makes no secret of her dedication to Prophet Samuel and her admiration for Hambone. She criticizes the men for wasting their money gambling and persists in asking West to provide a decent coffin for Hambone. She is attracted to Sterling in part because of their shared interest in the black power movement, but she refuses to see him as a potential marriage partner because she does not think he is reliable.

Sterling

A personable young man who appears to be somewhat "*unbalanced*," Sterling has recently been released from jail. He does not show any remorse for his crime, which was robbing a bank because he was tired of having no money, and he seems poised to go back to prison. This is not so much because Sterling is lazy, as Memphis claims, even though he seems unwilling to do hard manual labor. Instead, the play suggests that work is very difficult to find for poor black people, and Sterling continually looks in vain for a job.

Sterling's character description reads that he is wearing a prison-issue suit and an old-fashioned straw hat and that he uses "*unorthodox logic* " and has a "*straightforward manner*." Sterling is certainly straightforward about what he wants, which is money and a girlfriend, and he flirts persistently with Risa until she begins to fall for him. He is susceptible to influence and becomes interested in the black power movement, Malcolm

X, Prophet Samuel, and Aunt Ester, though it is unclear exactly where his political or spiritual convictions lie. Ultimately, Sterling expresses his sense of right and wrong with a belated and probably doomed gesture of affection for Hambone, when he steals a ham from Lutz. His attitude is generally that life is hopeless, but he also insists on enjoying each moment to the fullest, which makes him a likeable if somewhat confounding personality.

West

An undertaker who lives above his funeral home, West arouses the jealousy of his neighbors because he is comparatively wealthy. He is a widower in his early sixties and seems to continue to be saddened by the death of his wife, whom he loved deeply. He used to work in the gambling business, but he realized that he could make a lot of money by dealing instead with those who died from this kind of life, and he became an undertaker.

West's character description indicates that he □*has allowed his love of money to overshadow the other possibilities of life*,□ and a symbol of this is the fact that he always asks for sugar with his coffee but never actually uses it. He is not entirely unsympathetic, however, since he is generally kind to everyone and even gives Risa and Memphis gifts (although he may intend these to encourage Memphis to sell the restaurant). He dresses immaculately in black and has a sense of pride and propriety; even though someone breaks the window of his funeral home, for example, he refuses to put a board in its place because that would not be classy enough for him.

Wolf

Wolf is a numbers runner who longs for female companionship but is unable to maintain or even begin a relationship. He earns a living recording bets and distributing winnings for an illegal lottery run by a white family organization probably tied to organized crime. He and Memphis have a strained relationship because Wolf continually receives phone calls related to his work at the restaurant, and Memphis is worried that he will get into trouble for allowing this. Wolf's confrontation with Sterling reveals that he has some mild discomfort with the nature of his work, not because it is illegal or even because it contributes to the impoverishment of the people who participate in it, but because those who run it do not always fairly distribute the winnings.

Wolf has feelings for Risa, which is why he is concerned about her relationship with Sterling and why he continually pays regard to her. He is completely ineffective in courting her, however, and deludes himself and others with stories of multiple lovers (possibly prostitutes) in Atlanta. Ultimately, he does not object to Risa's relationship with Sterling or even confront them about it, perhaps because he is insecure and unable to express his feelings.

Themes

White Exploitation and Black Power

Two Trains Running is an explicitly political play that makes extended reference to the black power movement and its impact on poor urban communities like the Hill District of Pittsburgh. The issue of continued white oppression of African Americans and the response of the black community during the 1960s is at the foreground of the characters' experience. The community surrounding the restaurant is undergoing a major redevelopment, probably one which has been precipitated by the social initiatives that came in the wake of the civil rights movement. However, the legal rights and privileges that the African American community won during the 1950s and 1960s do not seem necessarily to extend to impoverished city-dwellers. An underlying sense of tragedy and hopelessness pervades even short-term victories such as the city awarding Memphis thirty-five thousand dollars, since Memphis remains estranged from his wife and has the foreboding and dangerous plan of returning to Mississippi to claim back his land. Sterling seems doomed to return to prison, his relationship with Risa seems unlikely to have a future, and Wolf and Holloway have as few prospects for the future as they did at the outset of the play.

Various religious and political organizations, which are tied loosely or explicitly to institutions such as the Nation of Islam or figures such as Malcolm X, provide a way of rallying and organizing as a community. Sterling repeats black power slogans, and other characters believe or participate in African American community initiatives to some degree. Even Memphis comes by the end of the play to feel affectionate towards Hambone, a symbol of unwavering resistance to white exploitation. All of the characters are skeptical about the effectiveness of individual organizations and movements, however, and none seems to find any direct benefits from them.

Gambling and Spiritualism in the Black Community

The characters in Wilson's play express their frustration and address their problems in a variety of ways, sometimes through political action. Frequently, however, they resort either to gambling in the numbers game or subscribing to supernatural beliefs or both, in order to find hope and comfort. Wilson characterizes these two pursuits in somewhat similar terms, stressing the ways in which they make poor blacks poorer. Memphis and Wolf believe that the numbers game helps its players rise from poverty once in a long while to enjoy a brief period of prosperity, but Risa points out that it is simply a way of throwing away money. Wilson also consistently associates religious and supernatural comforts with poor blacks' throwing away money, since Aunt Ester always advises her clients to throw money into the river and Prophet Samuel may have cheated people for donations. Spiritualism and gambling do help poor blacks to survive day to day, however, and Wilson's main goal in highlighting them may be to point out that the desperation among the black urban poor has no productive or effective outlet. They may

be signs, rather than causes, of the desperate circumstances of African Americans living in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

Individual and Social Justice

Each of Wilson's characters feels some mix of resentment, anger, despair, and responsibility for his/her relationship to institutions of power, and Wilson is interested in comparing and evaluating these various attitudes. Memphis insists that he holds complete personal responsibility for his own freedom, for example, while Holloway is resigned to the idea that white people have always oppressed African Americans and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Other characters have a mix of personal and institutional allegiances, most of which have to do with race relations; while Wolf seems loosely comfortable with working for a white-run gambling association, Sterling feels that his situation is hopeless and turns to organizations such as the black power movement for support. Risa and Holloway find consolation and support mainly in religious beliefs that seem to distract attention from issues of justice altogether. Inescapably at issue in the play, however, is the question of how personal freedom relates to social forces, and Wilson is interested in expressing the limited possibilities available to individual black people within a system of continued inequality and turbulence.

Style

Unity of Place

Although *Two Trains Running* focuses on the changing circumstances of an entire community and describes large-scale events, such as rallies and funerals, the entire play takes place inside a small restaurant. Wilson thus follows a dramatic convention called the unity of place, a term invented to describe the tendency in ancient Greek drama for all of the action to occur in a single location.

One function of this formal choice is to achieve a sense of realism, since the audience does not have to imagine being transported for a change of scene. Wilson provides a full and sharp view of Memphis's restaurant, allowing the audience to experience a large range of emotion within a place that they begin to know well. The playwright establishes a kind of window on the world that he wishes to describe, one that can be both private and social. The restaurant provides a space in which the communal or external as well as the personal and intimate aspects of the characters' lives come into view.

Specific Character Descriptions

Wilson is known for his minutely detailed descriptions which state outright a character's fundamental motivations. Before the play begins, for example, the stage directions indicate that Memphis's *greatest asset is his impeccable logic*, a judgment that is not necessarily or entirely evident from the lines themselves, since Memphis's logic sometimes seems fuzzy or variable. Playwrights are often less aggressive in defining a character's role and purpose, since doing so leaves the work open to interpretation for individual productions or readers, although some may choose to view Wilson's character descriptions as suggestive but not definitive. Wilson's practice may be a method of assisting production companies and actors in fulfilling his intentions. Also, they may have the effect of bringing the characters to life for those reading the play.

Historical Context

African American Literary Culture before 1990

Mainstream drama in the United States changed significantly in the later part of the twentieth century, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, to include more work by and about minorities. This was by no means a straightforward development, since there was continued opposition to theater, literature, and other arts that were seen as insufficiently American. Figures such as Wilson, however, widely increased the visibility and availability of theater that focused on the experience and traditions of cultural and racial groups that had long been sidelined or ignored.

When Wilson began writing drama in the 1970s, artists and intellectuals had been working for many years to focus less on a traditional canon of white drama and more on the unique history and culture of African Americans. Cultural figures, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, were part of black literary scene that flowered from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s and continued through the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Writers, including Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Amiri Baraka, continued during the 1970s and 1980s to highlight African American cultural history and explore its relationship to white culture and structures of power. Angelou and Morrison have been important figures in relating African American cultural history as a whole to the experience of women, and they have helped to impress upon U.S. culture the ways in which minority categories overlapped and combined in patterns of oppression. Baraka, who was one of Wilson's greatest influences, was widely influential and controversial in emphasizing the relationship between art and politics. Wilson himself was a pioneering figure, along with his mentor Lloyd Richards, in carving out a place for African American culture and history in the contemporary theater.

Late 1960s Political and Social Upheaval

Two Trains Running is set at a highly symbolic and significant point in African American political and social history, at the end of the U.S. civil rights movement and at the height of the influence of the black power movement. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) and other figures led a prominent and successful campaign to guarantee equal rights for all citizens under the law during the 1950s and 1960s. Nonviolent resistance tactics were perhaps chiefly responsible for achieving victories in the courts and in legislation that led to the dismantling of laws that discriminated against blacks and segregated U.S. society into racial groups. In 1968, shortly before the events of Wilson's play, President Lyndon Johnson signed the second Civil Rights Act, which outlawed discriminatory practices in housing.

By 1969, many African Americans continued to feel frustration and disappointment with their status in U.S. society. The civil rights era had marked major legal advances, but its

victories did not translate into immediate or widespread improvements in economic circumstances, and great numbers of blacks remained extremely poor with very limited prospects. Many African Americans also continued to feel the loss of leaders, including Malcolm X (1925-1965) and Martin Luther King Jr.; major riots broke out in U.S. cities following the assassinations of King and Robert F. Kennedy (1925-1968). As a result of these and other factors, increasing numbers of blacks began to support institutions that did not confine themselves to peaceful resistance tactics, such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party.

So-called black power organizations did not necessarily share the same beliefs or goals; the Black Panther Party was explicitly revolutionary and violent in its philosophy, while Nation of Islam was a religious institution that preached black superiority over other races. However, such groups did tend to share a dedication to African American solidarity and self-assurance, which is why they have been identified as part of the black power movement. The phrase black power itself is a political slogan that was associated with black nationalism and self-determination. The black power movement had a wide following in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but its effects were limited at best, since it did not directly inspire clear economic or social gains for blacks. In part because of its violent associations and its tendency to identify blacks as superior to whites, it was widely viewed as dangerous and threatening to white U.S. society.

Critical Overview

By the time *Two Trains Running* opened at the Yale Repertory Theater in 1990, Wilson had already achieved the status of a prestigious and eminent dramatist. The play itself was generally well-received, was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play, and was the recipient of an American Theatre Critics' Association Award. Beginning with its 1992 Broadway opening, however, a critical debate raged about how *Two Trains Running* compared to Wilson's earlier work. As they had his previous play, *The Piano Lesson*, some critics in the mass media claimed that Wilson was becoming less poetic in his rendition of African American life. Mimi Kramer of the *New Yorker* suggested that *Two Trains Running* did not function as eloquently and subtly as Wilson's earlier efforts, and Clive Barnes of the *New York Post* criticized the play's lack of dramatic elegance.

Other periodicals praised Wilson's efforts; William A. Henry III writes in *Time* that "*Two Trains Running* is Wilson's most delicate and mature work, if not necessarily his most explosive or dramatic." In *Massachusetts Review*, Robert L. King notes that the "civil rights movement rolls on past" Wilson's characters and highlights the political implications of the play: "Larger-than-life figures won't correct the injustices of their grocer and bookie, and saints don't connect to the Afro-American values that Wilson celebrates." Academic criticism also tends to discuss the work's upfront political agenda. In her influential book of criticism *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, for example, Sandra Shannon notes Wilson's expression of loss over the "debris of an explosive era in black awareness" and his appeal to black youth "to look to the African continuum as inspiration for their cultural preservation and continued advancement."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a doctoral student of English literature at Rutgers University. In the following essay, he discusses Wilson's nuanced critique of African American spiritual organizations and traditions, which in Two Trains Running *do not tend to act in the genuine interests of poor blacks.*

Two Trains Running is perhaps principally intended as an expression of the frustration and sense of tragedy on the part of lower-class, urban-dwelling African Americans who find themselves bypassed and sidelined by the civil rights victories of the 1950s and 1960s. Wilson creates a sense of doom surrounding even Memphis, who seems to have won a great victory in the amount of money that the city gives him for his restaurant. Taking instruction from Aunt Ester, the mysterious spiritualist who helps African Americans feel better about their problems, Memphis vows to go back and □pick up the ball,□ or regain his lost sense of pride and self-righteousness by winning his land from the white family that took it in Jackson, Mississippi. His glaring and ominous phrase, □if I get back from seeing Stoval,□ however, leaves a sense of gaping doubt and insecurity about the wisdom of this enterprise.

Even if Memphis were able to return and open a big new restaurant, it seems likely that he would leave his friends and neighbors behind. Holloway, Wolf, and Risa probably have even more difficult times ahead, since their neighborhood is about to be demolished, and Sterling is almost certainly bound for prison. Wilson thus alludes to the decline and desperation that would plague African Americans in inner city neighborhoods such as Pittsburgh's Hill District in the 1970s and 1980s. A complex variety of social and political forces and organizations are to blame for this grim reality, and Wilson highlights some of them individually or by implication in the course of the play. Continued white oppression is the greatest and most powerful threat, as Holloway stresses in his eloquent speech about the ways in which whites have always □stacked□ African Americans. Wilson is sensitive to other problems as well, however, and in fact one of his most interesting critiques is of black spiritualism. The subtle, yet incisive, manner in which Wilson criticizes belief in the □*supernatural*,□ as he refers to religious or spiritual belief, is one of the most intriguing aspects of his politically charged drama.

Wilson is sympathetic to the idea that poor blacks must find some way of easing their minds and enjoying life despite their continued difficulties. When he brings up amusements and releases such as those offered by spiritualism and gambling, he carefully outlines the desperation that gives rise to them. Before she meets Sterling, Risa finds little comfort in life outside the counsel of Prophet Samuel, who seems to give her the empowerment and faith in herself that she needs to get through the day. Holloway, meanwhile, justifies the practice of throwing twenty dollars into the river at Aunt Ester's bidding based on the idea that it changes one's attitude and allows one to become comfortable with the inequities of the world. Aunt Ester is the only recourse he has in dealing with his infuriating grandfather, and Memphis comes to rely on her as well for advice on how to deal with his old demons. Similarly, Memphis explains that the numbers game may take money away from blacks, but it is also the only way that they

are able to come by a large sum at once, with which they can buy something that they really want. He blames the "cheat[ing]" government for the fact that poor blacks are unable to save any money, while Wolf blames the rich white banker Mellon.

Understanding as he is of the conditions that lead poor African Americans to invest their time and money in gambling and supernatural belief, however, Wilson is sharply critical of the organizations that profit from them. Risa provides a blunt critique of the men for wasting their money in the numbers game, and the play seems to prove her point when the white Albert family cuts the winnings on Sterling. Sterling's encounter with Old Man Albert, in which he attempts a futile and somewhat pathetic gesture of pride by proclaiming that he has "something that belong to [Old Man Albert] for a change," leaves little doubt that poor blacks are accustomed to being cheated by the Alberts. Sterling's insignificant attempt at self-assertion, in which he gains a measly two dollars while the other half of his rightful winnings remain in Old Man Albert's pocket, reinforces the idea that gambling is little more than an extremely effective method by which white organizations are able to exploit the black poor.

Though perhaps more subtle in their process of cheating poor African Americans than groups tied to organized crime, spiritual organizations are little better at the end of the day in terms of the financial burden they impose on their followers. Evidence indicates, for example, that Prophet Samuel was adept and well-practiced at garnering large donations from the poor. Wilson is careful to emphasize that Risa's membership card to the First African Congregational Kingdom includes the phrase "having duly paid all tithing" and that Prophet Samuel's followers charged for admission to the visitation before West stopped them. There is no suggestion that Prophet Samuel managed to secure any real gains for the black community, however. On the contrary, Holloway indicates that the former income tax-evader has substantial and suspect connections to Mellon, the same white banker and speculator whom Wolf has blamed for keeping poor blacks poor.

Aunt Ester seems on the surface to be a more benign figure, and indeed she is effective at helping African Americans feel better about themselves. She makes it possible for Holloway to lead a peaceful life, contents Sterling for a brief period, and prompts some of Memphis's self-assurance at the end of the play. Beneath the surface, however, runs an indication that Aunt Ester is in fact a great threat to black prosperity. Her continual insistence that blacks throw significant amounts of cash into the river, her advice that Holloway ignore the dangerous and regressive behavior of his master-loving grandfather, and her ominous advice that Memphis "go back and pick up the ball," if indeed this means that he should return to Mississippi, seem counterproductive, if not dangerous. Supernatural beliefs may bring comfort to those who subscribe to them, but these pose a significant threat to their financial wellbeing and social advancement.

Wilson's implication against practicing supernatural belief is loaded with political significance, not least because the leadership of the African American community that was prominent before, during, and after the civil rights movement was so closely associated with religion and spirituality. Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister, Malcolm X was a leading figure in the Nation of Islam before he broke away from the

organization, and black civil rights leaders continued to organize and develop community initiatives through religious bonds during the late-1960s and beyond. In highlighting the misleading and dangerous aspects of spiritual leadership, Wilson is calling into question many heroes and traditions of twentieth-century African American history.

Aunt Ester is a particularly rich symbolic figure in this regard, since she claims to have been alive for almost exactly the time period that Africans had lived in North America after they were abducted by European slave traders. As a figure of African American history and tradition, she represents many of the cultural ideas that Wilson is known to revere and identify as important. Furthermore, though his specific organizational association is left ambiguous, Prophet Samuel is strikingly reminiscent of leadership figures in the Nation of Islam. An institution known for preaching of signs from heaven, African superiority, and justice for black people, the Nation of Islam affirms many of Prophet Samuel's beliefs, as is clear from Risa's comments, such as □God sent him to help the colored people get justice□ and, referring to the idea of the world coming to an end, □He said God was gonna send a sign.□ The Nation of Islam was known to be plagued by corruption and poor leadership decisions, and it might be an intended target of Holloway's criticism of Prophet Samuel's hypocrisy in his claim to be working towards the best interests of the black community.

Again, insofar as Wilson is critiquing or attacking the black spiritualist traditions, his is a mixed message. Prophet Samuel may not help Sterling and Risa to great fortunes, but they may be doomed in any case, unable to make any real advances until they feel comfortable and positive about themselves. Similarly, it is doubtful that ignoring Aunt Ester and refusing to play the numbers game in order to focus on moneymaking is a tenable solution to African American desperation. As Holloway points out, African American attempts to work within the white-dominated capitalist system is like toting a bucket of sand with a hole in it. West is a good example of this phenomenon, since he turns away from gambling in order to concentrate on money-making and refuses to follow Aunt Ester's advice but is deeply discontent and does not have a positive relationship with his neighbors. He may have lost all that was positive and meaningful in his life by capitalizing on the misfortunes of fast-living and fast-dying black people.

Nevertheless, Wilson's cynicism about black spiritualism during the late-1960s serves as a powerful reminder that it is dangerous to blindly idealize the spiritual heroes of the civil rights movement. *Two Trains Running* suggests that these leaders had a long way to go before finding effective solutions to African American segregation and exploitation. In fact, institutions and traditions posing as forthright contributors to black advancement may well have been corrupt, ineffective, misleading, and even dangerous to their followers. Aunt Ester and Prophet Samuel may have made Wilson's characters feel better about themselves in the short term, and they may have provided nuggets of wisdom about black pride and self-assurance with the potential to be very valuable. It may be that Memphis does, for example, have to confront the ghosts of his past before he can move on. The play provides a warning signal, however, that supernatural traditions and organizations are not necessarily to be trusted or emulated, since

instructions of figures like Aunt Ester are as likely to worsen the situation of poor blacks as they are to provide any relief.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *Two Trains Running*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Two Trains Running was produced contemporaneously with a resurgence of interest in black power, marked perhaps most notably by Spike Lee's 1992 film *Malcolm X*. Watch Lee's film and research other treatments of the black power movement during the 1990s, and then deliver a class presentation analyzing why and how the movement was portrayed during the decade. How and why did such treatments tend to differ from historical reality? Why might they have been popular? What might they reflect about African American culture in the 1990s? How does Wilson's play compare to them?

Wilson is known for his sensitivity to African American oral culture, including music. Listen to influential African American music of the 1960s, including bebop jazz musicians such as John Coltrane and black popular singers such as Aretha Franklin, and research the context and political associations of the music you have heard. Then, write a descriptive essay in which you speculate about how such music influenced the dialogue and rhythms of *Two Trains Running*. Which musical influences were most important to Wilson and why? Why might he have chosen Franklin's "Take a Look" as a backdrop to the love scene between Risa and Sterling? How might live or recorded music be used to various effects in productions of the play?

Two Trains Running seems divided in its articulation of theories of personal freedom and social determination. Memphis declares that he is and always has been free, and no one can take this freedom away from him, but Holloway meditates on the complex ways in which white oppression determines an individual African American's destiny. Write an essay in which you analyze Wilson's treatment of these themes. Describe the play's implied viewpoint on these matters, and determine the manner in which it impresses them upon the audience. Support your analysis with examples from the text.

Write a short play in which Memphis travels to Jackson, Mississippi, in order to demand back his land. Carefully study Memphis's character as it develops through *Two Trains Running* in order to pursue his emotional development during this difficult quest. Study also his manner of speaking, and imagine how people might speak differently in the South. Consider what is at stake for Memphis in this journey, how it relates to the political atmosphere of its era, and what social themes and positions you will articulate in your drama.

Compare and Contrast

1969: The African American community has secured major legal victories as part of the civil rights movement, but blacks remain economically depressed in comparison to whites.

1990: African Americans have made economic advances due in part to affirmative action and other social initiatives, and black-owned businesses are on the rise.

Today: Despite major advances, African Americans continue to encounter discrimination and remain significantly more likely than whites to be poor.

1969: President Richard Nixon leads the United States in the bloody and extended Vietnam War, which later ends in complete U.S. withdrawal.

1990: President George H. W. Bush prepares to send U.S. forces into the Persian Gulf after Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait.

Today: Years after President George W. Bush deploys U.S. forces to invade and conquer Iraq, the United States military remains engaged in the violent and unstable country.

What Do I Read Next?

Wilson's *Fences* (1985) focuses on an ex-convict and baseball player who is locked in a desperate struggle with his son. Its sensitive depiction of themes which are widely supposed to be autobiographical has won it a place as one of the finest achievements in late-twentieth-century drama.

Dutchman (1964), by Amiri Baraka, is a stark and shocking depiction of a white woman's efforts to take sexual advantage of a black man.

In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison's widely successful and influential novel about African American history and the supernatural, a black woman murders her own child to avoid her being returned to slavery.

James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) is not one of the prolific author's most well-known novels, but it provides a powerful meditation on social and political change and the impact of celebrity and art on a black man's development. Written at the very moment at which *Two Trains Running* is set, it is very much of its era.

New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (1993), by William L. Van Deburg, is a classic work of scholarship which analyzes what was at stake during the turbulent period in African American history that serves as the setting for Wilson's play.

Further Study

Bogumil, Mary L., *Understanding August Wilson*, University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

Bogumil's useful and accessible overview of Wilson's career and dramatic output is directed towards students as well as nonacademic readers. It provides a biographical outline of Wilson and his place in African American drama and a discussion of each major play through *Seven Guitars*.

Elkins, Marilyn, *August Wilson: A Casebook*, Garland Publishing, 2000.

This collection of essays by leading scholars of twentieth-century African American theater includes a broad overview of Wilson's politics and their relation to his plays. It also contains two interviews, one with Wilson's longtime collaborator and mentor, Lloyd Richards, and one with Wilson himself.

Menson-Furr, Ladrica, “Booker T. Washington, August Wilson, and the Shadows in the Garden,” in *Mosaic*, Vol. 38, No. 4, December 2005, pp. 175-91.

Menson-Furr's sophisticated article places Wilson against a broad historical backdrop, analyzing his place in twentieth-century African American history alongside major leaders who worked towards the advancement of black people.

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

The critical essays collected in this volume represent an important achievement, since they include the viewpoints of all of the prominent early scholars of Wilson's work. Each major play through *Two Trains Running* is considered in detail.

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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.

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“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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