# 65. The developmental trajectory of African American masculinity in African-American Drama[1]

**Sinan GÜL[2]**

## Abstract

Notwithstanding the belated emergence and subsequent acknowledgment of African American dramaturgy, its impact has proven salient in elucidating cultural, social, and political occurrences. Thus, this study constructs a triangular framework for twentieth-century African-American drama, delineating three distinct periods through the analysis of selective works by Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), and August Wilson. The selected literary works delineate the developmental trajectory of African American men across the dimensions of individuality, manhood, and fatherhood. By juxtaposing the historical context of each playwright's oeuvre with the unfolding chapters of the Civil Rights Movement, this study endeavors to unravel the intricate interplay between artistic expression and the broader socio-political landscape. In elucidating the multifaceted dimensions of African American drama through thematic underpinnings, narrative strategies, and stylistic choices of each writer, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how these playwrights grappled with the exigencies of their times and aims to contribute to a richer comprehension of the complexities inherent in the intersection of artistic creation and social activism within the African American literary tradition. The stages of creating an identity, defiant resistance to the status quo and a mature protestation tone are three selective eras that have been associated with the works to understand the parallelism between dramatic works and civil rights movement.

**Keywords**: African-American Drama, Masculinity, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, August Wilson.

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## Afro-Amerikan Tiyatrosunda Afro-Amerikan erkekliğinin gelişimsel yörüngesi[3]

### Öz

Afro-Amerikan dramatik metinlerin geç ortaya çıkmasına ve daha sonra kabul görmesine rağmen, kültürel, sosyal ve politik olayların aydınlatılmasında etkisi belirgindir. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka (eski adıyla LeRoi Jones) ve August Wilson'ın seçili eserlerinin analizi yoluyla üç farklı dönemi tanımlayarak yirminci yüzyıl Afro-Amerikan tiyatrosu için üçgen bir çerçeve oluşturmaktadır. Seçilen edebi eserler, Afro-Amerikan erkeklerin bireysellik, erkeklik ve babalık boyutlarındaki gelişimsel yörüngesini tasvir etmektedir. Bu çalışma, her bir oyun yazarının eserlerinin tarihsel bağlamını Sivil Haklar Hareketi'nin gelişen bölümleriyle yan yana getirerek, sanatsal ifade ile daha geniş sosyo-politik manzara arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimi çözmeye çalışmaktadır. Her bir yazarın tematik dayanakları, anlatı stratejileri ve üslup seçimleri aracılığıyla Afro-Amerikan tiyatrosunun çok yönlü boyutlarını aydınlatan bu çalışma, bahsi geçen oyun yazarlarının zamanlarının zorunluluklarıyla nasıl mücadele ettiklerine dair bira analiz sunmakta ve Afro-Amerikan edebiyat geleneği içinde sanatsal yaratım ile sosyal aktivizmin kesiştiği karmaşıklıkların daha zengin bir şekilde anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Kimlik yaratma aşamaları, statükoya karşı meydan okuyan direniş ve olgun bir protesto tonu, dramatik eserler ile sivil haklar hareketi arasındaki paralelliği anlamak için eserlerle ilişkilendirilen üç önemli dönemdir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** African-American Dramı, Erillik, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, August Wilson.

### Introduction

The theatrical domain stood as a marginalized art form within the United States, as expounded upon by Susan Harris in her renowned book, *American Drama: The Bastard Art* (2006). A conspicuous disregard and hesitancy toward dramatic pursuits still pervade the comparatively brief trajectory of American literary history across various genres. Eminent scholars commonly designate Eugene O'Neill as the progenitor of "serious" American drama, thereby marking the initiation of authentic American dramatic expression in the eyes of many academicians. Despite a shifting paradigm due to the unearthing of works by Susan Glaspell, Elmer Rice, and the performative endeavors of the Provincetown Players, the entrenched canonical foundations of American dramatic heritage remain challenging to displace. African-American playwrights, akin to their white predecessors and counterparts, also experienced a delayed emergence. Despite the late acceptance, plays by African-American playwrights wield substantial influence in cultural, political, and social realms. This study constructs a triangular framework for twentieth-century African-American drama, delineating three distinct periods through

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the analysis of selective works by Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), and August Wilson. Each of these playwrights merits an in-depth analysis in its own right, given their prolific literary output; however, the present endeavor focuses on elucidating the evolution of protest and collaborative ethos across decades by delving into these playwrights' selected plays. Despite the voluminous literary oeuvre of these three authors, a judicious selection of three significant plays has been made to encapsulate their contributions within the confines of identity, manhood and societal position for this scholarly exposition.

This study undertakes a partially selected exploration of the historical trajectory of African American drama, segmenting it into three distinct epochs. Each segment scrutinizes the works of different prominent writers, aiming to elucidate the nuanced perspectives these authors bring to the fore concerning racial, cultural, and political challenges prevalent in their respective eras. The intent is to discern and articulate the similarities, differences, and overarching significance characterizing each writer's unique approach to addressing the intricate socio-political milieu of their times. Inextricably linked to the Civil Rights Movement, African American drama emerges as a compelling and dynamic mirror reflecting the zeitgeist of the periods during which it was penned. The resonances between the thematic content of these dramatic works and the concurrent social and political movements underscore the symbiotic relationship between art and activism. By juxtaposing the historical context of each playwright's oeuvre with the unfolding chapters of the Civil Rights Movement, this study endeavors to unravel the intricate interplay between artistic expression and the broader socio-political landscape. In elucidating the multifaceted dimensions of African American drama through thematic underpinnings, narrative strategies, and stylistic choices of each writer, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how these playwrights grappled with the exigencies of their times and aims to contribute to a richer comprehension of the complexities inherent in the intersection of artistic creation and social activism within the African American literary tradition. The stages of creating an identity, defiant resistance to the status quo and a mature protestation tone are three selective eras that have been associated with the works to understand the parallelism between dramatic works and civil rights movement.

For an extended duration, African-Americans grappled predominantly with the issue of freedom, a predicament uniquely manifested in the United States. The intricacies of slavery presented a distinctive quandary unparalleled by any other nation, rendering a nuanced comparative analysis challenging. Unprecedentedly protracted, the institution of slavery found its manifestation in the United States, unrivaled in duration by any other country. The American Civil War, undertaken explicitly to eradicate slavery, further underscores the exceptional nature of this struggle. The exigency for an assertive Civil Rights movement, akin only to South Africa's quest for equal rights, attests to the singularly formidable legal and social regulations entailed in addressing racial disparities. (Eyerman, 2002, pp. 38-42) While the phenomenon of slavery in the U.S. can be attributed to various overt factors, its fundamental cause lies in the entrepreneurial foundation of the American nation. The pioneering Puritans, seeking refuge from religious despotism, concurrently harbored a business-oriented mentality and morality—an ethos woven into the fabric of the capitalist ethic system, as expounded by sociologist Max Weber in his book The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905). The transatlantic slave trade, implemented primarily for the agrarian American South, yielded considerable profitability, motivating its persistence. Conversely, the industrialized North diverged from the South's staunch adherence to slavery. This divergence can be attributed in part to the intellectual ethos of New England, characterized by the accumulation of esteemed educational institutions, and the mechanization of business practices, mitigating reliance on human labor.

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The American South, characterized by vast expanses of exploitable fields, necessitated an abundant workforce for efficient crop harvesting. Slavery emerged as the optimal means for crop cultivation, offering labor without remuneration, insurance, benefits, or legal responsibilities. Despite the abolition of slavery in the aftermath of the Civil War, it took nearly a century for Black individuals to secure acknowledgment and legal recognition as rightful citizens of the United States. This protracted struggle was marked by massacres, rebellions, murders, and egregious violations of human rights (Webb & Brown, 2007, pp. 78-81). The journey toward freedom for African Americans prompted the development of distinct narratives to convey their experiences. Initially, they preserved their cultural heritage through African dances and songs, gradually evolving to embody their own stories. The circumstances were arduous, given the initial division and separation of families upon their arrival. The absence of familial connections facilitated their management. Prohibitions on native languages, restrictions on marriage, and the potential for sale to other plantations further compounded their challenges. Notably, conversion to Christianity was restricted until 1700, as apprehensions among the white population existed that baptism might confer a claim to freedom. By 1890, over 90 percent of African families, primarily engaged in farming, were concentrated in the Southern states (Hatch and Shine, 65).

**Search for an identity: Langston Hughes**

At the onset of the twentieth century, a substantial migratory influx transpired from the Southern to the Northern regions of the United States. Concomitantly, industrial advancements catalyzed urban development, compelling individuals, particularly African-Americans, to seek enhanced employment opportunities and improved living conditions. Constrained by their status as unskilled industrial laborers and possessing limited formal education, they found themselves compelled to accept low-wage occupations. Nevertheless, incremental strides were made in education, albeit not commensurate with their white counterparts. Inevitably, African Americans also paved the way for an artistic expression of their colorful but harsh lives. An important figure within the contextual emergence of the Black Arts movement, Langston Hughes assumes a pivotal role, being an indispensable figure in the African-American literary canon. His contributions span a spectrum of artistic genres, encompassing poetry, drama, essays, and short fiction. Hughes functioned as a seminal precursor, encouraging fellow Black writers to articulate their unique experiences. His impactful influence extended beyond his literary endeavors, as he navigated a contentious personal and ideological trajectory, garnering both allies and adversaries. His appearance before the McCarthy committee in 1953 marked a notable chapter in his life, leading to a subsequent disassociation from leftist movements. By the 1960s, Hughes faced accusations of opportunism due to his involvement with the Black Power movement, a critique that attests to the complexities surrounding his engagement with socio-political currents (Smethurst, 1225).

Langston Hughes achieved primary acclaim for his poetic endeavors, yet his literary repertoire encompasses a substantial body of plays, with *Mulatto* (1935) standing out as a singular instance within his extensive oeuvre. Noteworthy for its distinctive tragic nature, *Mulatto* diverges from the predominant thematic and structural elements characterizing Hughes' theatrical productions. In a departure from his customary stylistic approach, Hughes opted for a conventional European structure in crafting *Mulatto*, rendering it a rarity within his dramatic corpus. (Tracy, 2003, p. 144) The significance accorded to this play is underscored by its inclusion in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, affirming its status as a seminal work within the broader American literary canon.

Despite his profound engagement with African-American themes and experiences, Hughes, in a paradoxical stance, grappled with his identity as a non-Negro. This existential concern finds expression

in his autobiography, where Hughes candidly reflects upon the complexities surrounding his racial identity. This introspective dimension adds an additional layer of depth to Hughes' literary contributions, as he navigates the intricate interplay between personal identity and the thematic content of his creative output:

> You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word "Negro" is used to mean anyone who has any Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means all Negro, therefore black.
>
> I am brown. My father was a darker brown. My mother an olive yellow. (Hughes, 1993, p. 11)

Langston Hughes' discontent encompassed various dimensions, notably manifesting in his exploration of the theme of the "tragic mulatto." This term refers to a character of mixed racial heritage, particularly one with a lighter complexion, who experiences suffering due to not being fully embraced by either racial group. Surprisingly, this theme, ostensibly resonant with Hughes' own complex racial identity, becomes a focal point in his literary works. Two prominent poems and a play dedicated to the subject indicate his deep engagement with the struggles and nuances associated with the identity of the "tragic mulatto." Arthur P. Davis delves into Hughes' fascination with the theme of the tragic mulatto, proposing that through his literary exploration, Hughes found a cathartic outlet to articulate the profound feelings of disappointment and resentment stemming from his own experiences as a perceived "rejected" son (Davis, 1955, p. 204). This thematic emphasis becomes a means for Hughes to grapple with the complexities and emotional turmoil associated with his racial identity.

The grievous sentiment expressed by mulattos is contextualized within the broader historical context of slavery and miscegenation. The offspring of relationships between white owners and slaves, referred to as mulattos, faced a unique form of suffering and marginalization. Often separated from other slaves due to their biracial heritage, they found themselves caught in a liminal space, rejected by both racial groups. This aspect of Hughes' exploration underscores the enduring consequences of historical injustices and the intricate interplay between race, identity, and societal acceptance.

Langston Hughes' inaugural full-length play, *Mulatto*, defied expectations by enjoying a noteworthy success. Surprisingly, the production ran for a year on Broadway, subsequently embarking on an extensive eight-month tour across the United States. Its acclaim transcended national borders, finding a receptive audience in Italy, where Italian actors continued to stage the play for an additional two years. Set in the post-World War I South, the narrative centers on the pivotal conflict between Colonel Thomas Norwood and his youngest son, Robert Lewis, a mulatto. The tumultuous relationship between Colonel Norwood and Bert originates in a traumatic childhood incident when Bert, at the age of seven, was physically punished by the Colonel for addressing him as "dad." Subsequently, Bert was sent away to a boarding school, estranging him from his family. Cora, Bert's mother and the African American housekeeper, advocates for her children's education, envisioning a future where they can secure better opportunities in the North. However, Colonel Norwood, fueled by pride, refrains from acknowledging Cora's children as his own. Upon Bert's return, he boldly asserts his identity as Colonel's son, challenging the prevailing racial norms. His defiance extends to his use of the front door for entry into the mansion, an act in direct contravention of both his father's directives and societal regulations in the Southern context. These actions exacerbate the tension between Colonel Norwood and Bert, culminating in a perilous confrontation.

As concerns about changing racial attitudes in the North threaten Colonel Norwood's business interests, the conflict intensifies, leading to a climactic altercation. The situation escalates to the point where Bert,

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fearing for his life, engages in a struggle with his father. In a moment of impulsive desperation, Bert prevails in strangling Colonel Norwood before the Colonel can retaliate. Faced with the dire consequences of his actions, Bert attempts to escape but encounters a menacing mob blocking his path. In a tragic denouement, Bert, opting for self-preservation, chooses to end his life rather than endure the imminent threat of capture and lynching. The play masterfully navigates complex themes of identity, racial tension, and the enduring repercussions of systemic racism in the post-World War I Southern landscape.

Langston Hughes presents a portrayal of the Southern milieu in *Mulatto* that suggests a veneer of relative comfort for the Black population, contingent upon their adherence to societal norms. Within this context, African Americans are deemed to possess essential rights as long as they conform to established rules. However, the central character, Bert, disrupts this delicate equilibrium by aspiring to be acknowledged and respected as white. Despite the seemingly idyllic circumstances, Bert's stubborn desire to embrace his white identity clashes with the prevalent racial order. In contrast to Bert's unyielding demeanor, his mother, Cora, emerges as a character marked by experience and sagacity. She discerns the weightiness of the situation, recognizing that Bert's pursuit extends beyond mere privileges; it is a fervent quest for the acknowledgment and acceptance of his identity. While Bert shares his father's obstinacy, Cora's nuanced understanding of the broader implications adds depth to her characterization.

On the other hand, Colonel Norwood, despite being Bert's father, is a man steeped in historical legacies and entrenched traditions. The honorific title of "Colonel" links him to the bygone era of the Civil War, aligning him with the plantation owner class that historically justified slavery on pragmatic and commercial grounds. The Colonel's unapologetic stance underscores his commitment to upholding the status quo, as he refuses to renounce the deeply ingrained practices that underpin the racial hierarchy. Bert's conflict with his father encapsulates the broader societal tension between a changing world and the entrenchment of historical prejudices. The play unfolds as a nuanced exploration of identity, privilege, and the enduring impact of historical traditions within the Southern landscape:

> NORWOOD: ...Now, I'm going to let you talk to me, but I want you to talk right.
>
> ROBERT: (Still standing) What do you mean, talk right.
>
> NORWOOD: I mean talk like a nigger should to a white man.
>
> ROBERT: Oh! But I'm not a nigger, Mr. Norwood! I'm your son.
>
> NORWOOD: (Testily) You're Cora's boy. (19)

In contrast to Bert's quest for identity, his elder brother William embodies a manifestation of internalized racism within the framework of "Mulatto." Hughes skillfully delineates a thematic comparison between these two siblings, accentuating their divergent perspectives. William's ire towards Bert stems from the latter's refusal to conform to the established norms of the Norwood mansion. William, characterized by a compliance with the prevailing status quo, becomes a foil to Bert's revolutionary spirit. Bert seizes every opportunity to articulate his discontent, particularly drawing from his experiences in Atlanta, Richmond, and Washington. Through these conversations, the contrast between the brothers becomes evident, with Bert's utopic vision forged through his travels serving as a catalyst for his dissent. Unlike William, Bert radiates self-respect and confidence, having undergone a transformative journey that emancipated him from invisible societal constraints.

The relationship between Bert and Colonel Norwood reflects a distinct dynamic, resembling more an employer-employee interaction than a sincere parental bond. Bert, having shed the metaphorical chains

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that bound him, approaches his father with a confidence and self-assurance that defies the conventional filial reverence. The paternal connection is tainted by a lack of genuine affection, as Bert is incessantly subjected to admonishments and admonitions instead of the nurturing care expected in a parent-child relationship. This familial dynamic serves as a microcosm of the broader societal tensions and ruptures portrayed in Hughes' exploration of race, identity, and the struggle for self-determination.

The prevalence of lynching in the South during the depicted era highlights the gravity of the racial tensions central to *Mulatto*. Bert's opposition to the prevailing white authority, despite relying on his father's power and wealth, symbolizes a spiritual embodiment of resilience. His connection to systems of power, history, and knowledge is not just naive acceptance; rather, it stems from his experiential conviction in the righteousness of his cause. His ultimate act of suicide serves as a poignant commentary on the inherent unfairness of the legal system. He is acutely aware that, if apprehended, he would face not a judicial trial but a relentless cycle of lynching aimed at instilling fear among African Americans. Hughes strategically situates Bert at the heart of the narrative, presenting him as a beacon of hope and resistance within the confines of the prevalent Southern mindset. The pivotal moment arrives with Colonel Norwood's wife, Cora, breaking free from years of submissiveness. Despite bearing five children from the Colonel, she defies her traditional role and joins the protest against Norwood. Her raised voice becomes the powerful message that Hughes conveys. Cora emerges as the storyteller, ensuring that Bert's narrative resonates beyond his death, acquiring meaning in its aftermath.

The education of all Cora's children in the Northern mentality aligns Bert with Northern values, positioning him as the embodiment of the future for Black individuals. In the face of systemic oppression, Bert emerges as a symbol of Black Power, raising his voice militantly to reclaim what has been unjustly taken from him. Hughes, through the complex interplay of characters and their trajectories, articulates a layered narrative that transcends the immediate confines of the play, addressing broader socio-political themes and envisioning a future marked by resistance and change.

*Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South* serves as a poignant manifestation of the harsh realities endured by successive generations of Southern Black individuals, who remained unrecognized by the dominant White landowners. Within its narrative, the play also underscores the lingering challenges that persisted even after the Civil War, failing to entirely eradicate the deeply entrenched segregation within the societal fabric. Langston Hughes, drawing from his own experiences as a victim of racial stratification, channels his concerns about identity into the play. Beyond the central conflict between father and son, *Mulatto* delves into the cultural traumas and internal fractions within American society. The themes articulated by Hughes resonate as enduring echoes throughout the twentieth century, transcending the specific historical context of the play. The play stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of its themes, as the issues of racial inequality, identity struggles, and internal divisions within marginalized communities persistently resurface in varying forms across the tumultuous landscape of the twentieth century. Hughes, through the prism of his play, contributes to a nuanced exploration of the complexities within the American social fabric, fostering a narrative that transcends temporal boundaries and remains resonant in the ongoing dialogue about racial equity and societal evolution.

### The angry youth: Amiri Baraka (former LeRoi Jones)

Following the struggle for identity in the first half of the twentieth century, the latter half witnessed a deterioration of social conditions for Black Americans, despite the reformative spirit embodied by figures like Bert. The era was marked by intense struggles and atrocities against the African-American

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community. Despite Dr. King's leadership in peaceful protests, African-American communities continued to endure pervasive discrimination and police brutality. The government's inadequate response further exacerbated tensions, leading to a significant faction advocating for retribution, rejecting the non-violent tactics espoused by Dr. King. In the wake of Malcolm X's formation of the Organization for Afro-American Unity in 1964 and the subsequent establishment of the Black Panthers after his assassination in 1965, violent riots erupted regularly in major cities like New York, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Newark, Chicago, Atlanta, and Detroit. These developments underscored the deep-seated frustration and anger within the African-American community, as systemic injustices persisted despite efforts for change. (Blackmon, 2009, pp. 122-140)

The violence, however, was not unidirectional, as Black communities continued to face substantial brutality. The climax of this tumultuous period occurred with the assassination of Dr. King in 1968, revealing the pervasive intolerance that characterized the United States during the 1960s. While the tendency towards violence may appear to stem from individual choices, the shared fate of Dr. King and Malcolm X highlights the inhospitable atmosphere prevailing across the entire country during this period. Amidst this turmoil, it is crucial to acknowledge the transformative impact of the Civil Rights movement. Despite the challenges and setbacks, this movement stands as the most influential force for change in the lives of Black Americans since the Civil War. The struggle for civil rights catalyzed significant advancements and laid the groundwork for ongoing efforts to address systemic racism and promote equality in American society. (McNeese, 2007, pp. 55-70)

The societal upheavals of the era spurred many writers to adopt a markedly critical stance towards the emerging culture of impassivity within American society. Le Roi Jones, in particular, exemplifies the trajectory of the Civil Rights movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. A significant figure in the Black Arts Movement, Jones' career encapsulates the ethos of this movement, which Larry Neal characterized in 1968 as "the aesthetic and spiritual sister to the Black Power concept" (62). In contrast to contemporaries like Lorraine Hansberry, Jones consistently employed a robust language and attitude, portraying black characters on stage with a distinctive macho sensibility.

One of Jones' notable works, *Dutchman* (1964), encapsulates his confrontational approach. In this play, a middle-class black man named Clay is tragically murdered by a seductive white woman named Lula on a train. The narrative unfolds as a searing commentary on race, power dynamics, and the corrosive impact of societal norms on personal interactions. Jones employs this intense theatrical experience as a vehicle to critique and challenge prevailing racial and cultural paradigms, making a poignant contribution to the broader discourse surrounding civil rights and cultural identity during this tumultuous period. The play intricately weaves symbolic connections between black enslavement, religious narratives, and ancient texts. Within the subtext, a "Dutchman" takes on a symbolic meaning, drawing on underworld terminology where it denotes a killer responsible for disposing of corpses. Robert Cardullo contextualizes this term by referencing Dutch Schultz (1902-35), a notorious American gangster of the 1920s and '30s who was colloquially known as "Dutchman." Schultz led a gang that seized control of illegal daily lotteries from the black community, adding layers of historical resonance to the symbolism (Cardullo, 2009, p. 52).

Lula, a central character in the play, serves as a representation of the aggressive behaviors embedded in the collective psyche. Through her character, the fundamentally disturbed and guilt-ridden nature of American white society is laid bare. (Rebhorn, 2003, p. 797) When Lula enters the train car, the paper books she holds symbolize the civilized and literate world of the West, contrasting with the illiterate

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blacks who have been systematically deprived of their right to education. Lula's sunglasses function as a metaphorical disguise, concealing her true intentions. The apple she holds becomes a potent reference to the biblical story of Adam and Eve, casting her as the temptress. Although Clay's encounter with Lula imparts knowledge, it is a knowledge tainted by death. The layers of symbolism within *Dutchman* underscore the complexity of racial dynamics, historical injustices, and the manipulation of knowledge and power. Jones skillfully employs these symbols to engage with profound societal issues and invite critical reflection on the enduring legacy of oppression and discrimination.

In *Dutchman*, LeRoi Jones portrays an aggressive and dominant white woman, using her character to highlight the white myth surrounding black male sexuality as a tool for the deliberate annihilation of the African American people. The play endeavors to illustrate the impossibility of achieving a non-segregated society, attributing this to the toxic attitudes of white individuals. Jones draws parallels between the murder of Clay in the play and public lynchings in the South, emphasizing the systemic violence against Black individuals. Lula, the character representing the white woman, deliberately aims to provoke Clay, using her words to express contempt for blacks. Her actions are calculated to incite anger, providing a potential justification for her eventual act of killing him. The underlying message in *Dutchman* may intensify racial tensions, as it suggests that Blacks, who have been unjustly targeted and killed by whites, may consider self-defense through reciprocal violence. LeRoi Jones, in this context, does not advocate for pacifism in the face of violence; instead, he argues for a response of violence to violence. Despite receiving negative criticism, *Dutchman* was recognized with an Obie Award for the best Off-Broadway play. The play's controversial themes and unflinching exploration of racial dynamics contribute to its lasting impact and its acknowledgment as a significant work within the Off-Broadway theater scene.

LeRoi Jones' one-act play, *The Toilet*, presents a distinct setting while arriving at a similar thematic conclusion. The narrative unfolds within the confines of a high school restroom, where, at day's end, an anticipated confrontation is set to occur between two individuals: Ray, known as "Foots," and Jerry, referred to as "Paddy." The first half of the play involves verbal sparring among Foots' friends, with Karolis, Foots' supposed adversary, falling victim to another intimidating figure. The play delves into the intricate dynamics between black and white cultures, narrating the story of a gang leader participating in an assault on an outsider whom he secretly harbors feelings for. Despite the loss experienced, the play introduces the prospect of a utopian practice of hope. Notably, there is a homoerotic undertone in the narrative, as Karolis expresses affection for Foots by sending him a letter offering a sexual favor. However, the play concludes with Karolis being beaten by Foots and his gang, underscoring the complex and often harsh realities of the interplay between cultures and personal relationships. *The Toilet* serves as a thought-provoking exploration of race, identity, and interpersonal connections, utilizing its unique setting to illuminate the tensions and possibilities embedded within the intersection of black and white cultures. Jones' nuanced approach invites the audience to confront uncomfortable truths while contemplating the potential for transformative change, even in the face of loss and conflict. Jones ends the game with an optimist tone:

> After a minute or so Karolis moves his hand. Then his head moves and he tries to look up. He draws his legs up under him and pushes his head off the floor. Finally he manages to get to his hands and knees. He crawls over to one of the commodes, pulls himself up, then falls backward awkwardly and heavily. At this point, the door is pushed open slightly, then it opens completely and Foots comes in. He stares at Karolis' body for a second, looks quickly over his shoulder, then runs and kneels before the body, weeping and cradling the head in his arms. (58 – 59)

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LeRoi Jones' another play, *The Slave* (1964), unfolds against the backdrop of a racial civil war in a hypothetical near future. Described as *A Fable in a Prologue and Two Acts*, the play serves as an exploration of the potential for a civil war between blacks and whites in contemporary America. The central character, Walker Vessels, the leader of the black forces, pays a visit to his white ex-wife, Grace, and her husband, Easley, with the intention of taking his children with him. Throughout the narrative, the sounds of explosions and gunfire serve as a constant backdrop. In a dramatic turn of events, Vessels ends up killing Easley, a pivotal moment that underscores the intensity and gravity of the racial conflict portrayed in the play. The final scene introduces a poignant moment, where a child's cry resonates, leaving the audience uncertain about the significance of the child's fate. The play concludes with a powerful image as Vessels transforms into the figure of an old field-slave, reminiscent of the Prologue. This symbolic gesture reinforces the historical continuum of racial strife, connecting the contemporary civil war to the legacy of slavery. *The Slave* stands as a thought-provoking exploration of racial tensions, societal breakdown, and the enduring impact of historical injustices on the fabric of American society.

LeRoi Jones emerges as a fervent revolutionary in his plays, expressing a passionate desire for rapid change to disrupt the prevailing status quo. This fervor is fueled by a deep-seated anger that traces its roots from the historical injustices of slavery and extends to the discriminatory policies entrenched in society. Jones does not shy away from employing dark and brutal themes in his works, often delving into subjects such as deaths, murders, and humiliations. Despite the potential for stereotypical characterizations and the appearance of melodrama in his plays, the overarching political tone remains a dominant force in shaping the content.

Notably, *The Slave* marks a pivotal juncture in Jones' career, representing the last play directed at a primarily white audience. Subsequently, he underwent a significant transformation, distancing himself from the theatre and delving into one-sided propaganda works. This shift reflects Jones' increasing commitment to more direct and confrontational means of conveying his political message. The evolution in his approach underscores the urgency and intensity with which he sought to challenge and transform the societal structures that perpetuated racial inequality.

Lorraine Hansberry emerges as a significant writer of the 1960s, alongside Baraka, in advancing the African American cause. Her play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), stands as a canonical work within African American drama and twentieth-century American literature. This domestic drama by Hansberry not only contributes to the African American literary canon but also addresses racial and gender issues experienced by African American families, making it a noteworthy exploration of social and cultural dynamics. Hansberry's approach aligns with the pacifist and integrationist faction of the Civil Rights movement. In contrast, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) represents the harsh, violent facade of militant groups advocating resistance against white dominance. Jones' subsequent conversion to Islam, divorce from his Jewish wife, and withdrawal from his family reflect his deep commitment to social and political action. Under his new identity, Amiri Baraka, he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in Harlem in 1964, followed by the establishment of Spirit House in Newark. (Watts, 2001, p. 79) These institutions served as platforms for the promotion of black arts and culture, emphasizing the transformative power of artistic expression in the quest for social justice and equality.

## Age of maturity: August Wilson

August Wilson, a towering figure in African American drama, made an indelible impact by undertaking the ambitious task of dramatizing the entire African American experience in the twentieth century. His

contribution includes a play for each decade, offering a comprehensive and nuanced portrayal of the black experience in America. One of his notable works, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), is set in 1927 and narrates the story of Ma Rainey, a black musician. This play delves into the challenges and complexities faced by black artists in the music industry during that era. Wilson's subsequent play, *Fences* (1987), unfolds in 1957 and centers on Troy Maxton, a middle-class worker whose actions impact his son Cory's aspirations for college. The play explores the tension between generations, vividly depicting the clash between the aspirations of the younger generation, eager to participate in the Civil Rights movement, and the cautious approach of the older generation, wary of past hardships. Despite Troy's capabilities, he is constrained by a life of fear and submission, serving as a protector of the existing social order.

In *Fences*, Wilson skillfully exposes the generational gap that existed within the black community in the 1950s. While the younger generation sought progress and participation in the Civil Rights movement, their elders, who had experienced the harsh realities of the past, were often hesitant to embrace change. Wilson suggests that, despite the abolition of slavery, a profound sense of interdependence and confidence had yet to be fully cultivated within the African American community. His works provide a rich and textured exploration of the African American experience, contributing significantly to the cultural and literary landscape. Troy Maxton, a central character in *Fences*, faced the harsh reality of the color barrier in Major League Baseball, which curtailed his potential career as a great player. Despite the obstacles, he finds satisfaction in his later success as a garbage truck driver, a notable improvement from his earlier role as a barrel lifter. Troy's contentment with his life choices and accomplishments becomes a defining aspect of his character, representing a form of personal triumph amid societal limitations. Characteristic of many older characters in African American plays, Troy embodies a conservative stance, advocating for traditional values. The symbolic significance of the fences surrounding his property becomes apparent, marking ownership and leadership of his family. The completion of the fences after his death underscores their role as protectors of what belongs to the Maxton family. In this narrative, the fences signify ownership and identity, reinforcing the notion that the Maxtons are proprietors of their country, equal to anyone else.

As Wilson adeptly signals, the ability to engage in business, particularly the right to buy and sell property, represents a quintessential characteristic of American society. The emphasis on property ownership aligns with the broader theme of African American struggles for equality and recognition in a society where economic empowerment and property ownership hold significant weight. The role that Wilson assigns to the Maxtons is the responsibility of maintaining a familial spirit within the society. This feature also completes the circle of acknowledgement of African-American men.

In addition, August Wilson astutely recognizes the presence of a warrior spirit in characters like Troy Maxton in *Fences*. Troy's frustration with external injustices, coupled with his strength and ambition, aligns him with other characters in Wilson's works who share a similar constitution. Notable examples include Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* (1987), and Sterling in *Two Trains Running* (1990). These characters, like Troy, embody a fierce determination to challenge the prevailing cultural norms and societal structures.

August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) takes the audience back to the beginning of the twentieth century, a time marked by a pervasive struggle with identity crisis among individuals. Wilson's exploration of this historical period delves into the complexities of personal and cultural identity, shedding light on the challenges faced by people during this transformative era. An integral aspect of

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Wilson's dramaturgy is the incorporation of songs, which play a significant role in conveying the thematic essence of his works. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the character Bynum serves as a spiritual guide, claiming to have had a profound encounter with his father who imparts wisdom on finding one's own song. Bynum extends this guidance to others, assisting them in discovering their own songs and, by extension, their individual identities. The sacred aura surrounding Bynum creates a rich layer of meaning, echoing the thematic exploration of identity crisis prevalent in the play. The importance of finding one's song becomes a metaphor for reclaiming personal agency and understanding one's place in the world. This spiritual journey aligns with the broader narrative context of the play, emphasizing the significance of self-discovery in the midst of societal changes and challenges.

> Isolated cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles and fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth. (1)

In August Wilson's works, particularly evident in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the inclusion of songs serves as a powerful tool to reconnect African Americans with their African heritage and address the missing pieces of their identity. For Wilson, finding one's own song is a transformative experience, leading individuals to a deeper understanding of their true selves and serving as a pathway to salvation. The ritualistic nature of these songs in Wilson's dramas also plays a crucial role in bringing African Americans closer to their pagan culture and ancestral roots. The spiritual and cultural resonance embedded in the songs becomes a means of re-establishing a connection with the past, emphasizing the importance of cultural continuity and self-discovery. However, Wilson also presents a critical perspective on Christianity, particularly in the dialogue between Martha and Loomis. Loomis rejects the Christian discourse, asserting his self-sufficiency by stating, "I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself" (36). This rejection reflects a divergence from traditional religious values and a desire for a more personal, self-determined spiritual experience. While religion may not be a central focus in African American drama, some plays, such as James Baldwin's *Amen Corner* (1954), delve into the lives of individuals committed to religious values. These explorations contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between spirituality, identity, and cultural heritage within the African American experience.[4]

August Wilson, hailed as a mature voice for elucidating the challenges faced by African American society, stands as a towering figure in American literature and theater. Through his profound and emotionally charged plays, Wilson skillfully crafted narratives that delved into the intricacies of the African American experience, particularly within the context of the 20th-century United States. His work, often set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, explored the nuanced layers of race, identity, and systemic oppression.

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[4]   Religion has wielded a substantial influence on the Civil Rights movement, despite its ostensibly pacifist discourse. The integration of slaves into Christianity officially began after 1700, with the calming effect of religion often serving to foster obedience among the enslaved population. While attending services, they were segregated to the back or balcony of churches when participating with whites. Despite this segregation, the presence of black individuals in churches provided a means of spiritual upliftment. The post-slavery era witnessed the establishment of the first black-controlled institution, The Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1794 under the leadership of freed slaves, particularly Absalom Jones. By 1816, this church had severed ties with the Methodist Church, uniting with other African Methodist churches. This marked a significant moment in history as the African American church became the first institution solely controlled by black individuals. Throughout its evolution, these churches played pivotal roles in shaping responsible and educated black citizens. Moreover, African American churches emerged as vital hubs of community organization and mobilization against social and political injustice. With sensitivity to the Civil Rights movement, churches provided a platform for the organization of blacks, fostering a sense of community solidarity and resistance against systemic inequities. In this way, religion became a dynamic force in the struggle for civil rights, acting as a cornerstone for social and political activism within the African American community.

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Wilson's mature voice was marked by a keen understanding of the historical and cultural dimensions of the African American struggle, allowing him to articulate the complexities and nuances of the community's collective consciousness. His ability to capture the beauty, resilience, and pain of African American life contributed significantly to fostering empathy and understanding, making him an essential voice in the ongoing dialogue about racial inequality and social justice. Through his plays, August Wilson left an indelible legacy as a mature and compassionate chronicler of the African American experience, providing profound insights into the human condition and the challenges faced by his community. By the time that Wilson penned down the experiences of African-American characters, their acknowledged positions within the society have enabled them to focus on their families, cultural heritages and future expectations.

**Conclusion**

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1990) unfolds the poignant narrative of sibling conflict between Boy Willie and Bernice over a piano adorned with family portraits. The crux of the disagreement lies in their father's belief that the piano rightfully belongs to them, as his ancestors were sold to acquire it. Boy Willie is determined to sell the piano and purchase a farm in the South, while Bernice is adamant about preserving it for the memories it holds. The play, set in the 1930s, encapsulates the ongoing conflicts with the past, emphasizing the necessity of addressing these unresolved issues for any meaningful progress to occur. The struggle depicted in "The Piano Lesson" echoes the broader trajectory of African American drama. In the 1930s, as Langston Hughes noted, there was a concerted effort to grapple with and define their identity. The 1960s marked a period of intense and fervent activism, characterized by fierce battles for civil rights. By the 1980s, there emerged a moment to confront and conclude the narrative of the past, allowing for a collective movement towards the future.

Wilson's play encapsulates this thematic progression, suggesting that resolving historical conflicts is a prerequisite for moving forward. The symbolic act of leaving the piano with Bernice signifies a willingness to acknowledge and engage with the past, recognizing the importance of preserving cultural heritage while simultaneously preparing for the future. In this way, "The Piano Lesson" becomes a microcosm of the broader journey undertaken by African American drama through different epochs, reflecting the evolving struggles and aspirations of the community. David Savran reports Wilson's fervent ideas:

All art is political. It serves a purpose. All my plays are political but I try not to make them didactical or polemical. Theatre doesn't have to be agitprop. I hope that my art serves the masses of blacks in America who are in desperate need of a solid and sure identity. I hope my plays make people understand that these are African people, that this is why they do what they do. If blacks recognize the value in that, then we will be on our way to claiming our identity and participating in society as Africans. (37)

African American drama emerged as a potent tool for African Americans to discover and articulate their own voices, songs, and identity. Initially, it dismantled the barriers of racism on a fictional plane, paving the way for subsequent social progress. This dramatic form provided a platform for African Americans to envision a utopian future, serving as a mirror reflecting the nuances and complexities of African American society. By challenging the status quo, African American drama became an instructive force, prompting critical questioning and fostering a sense of consciousness within both the black and white communities.

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Despite its transformative impact, the desired mutual connection between black and white audiences did not always reach fruition. Nevertheless, African American drama played a pivotal role in preserving the cultural distinctiveness, historical narratives, and language of the African American community. It successfully dismantled stereotypical representations of blacks on Western stages, contributing to an elevated awareness not only among blacks but also within the white community.

The enduring legacy of African American drama is evident in the fact that a black man could rise to become the President of the United States. This achievement stands as a testament to the resilience of writers who, in the face of social and economic pressures, remained steadfast in conveying their authentic and often tragic stories. The trajectory of African American drama has thus left an indelible mark on the broader cultural landscape, challenging norms, fostering understanding, and contributing to the ongoing journey toward a more inclusive and equitable society.

The selected literary works delineate the developmental trajectory of African American men across the dimensions of individuality, manhood, and fatherhood, with Hughes directing his attention towards personal identity and its societal recognition. The primary challenge emerges as the endeavor for societal acknowledgment of one's personhood. In the latter half of the twentieth century, individuals within this demographic assert their identity, seeking recognition as gendered individuals whose fundamental needs warrant societal respect. Although the violent methods offered by Baraka can be seen as the reflection of social reality, the expectation for acknowledgment undergoes a transformation in its manifestation. August Wilson's literary oeuvre adopts a divergent approach, spotlighting African-American men as fathers tasked with integrating their families and solidifying their role within the familial structure. These three developmental stages exhibit distinctive characteristics found in the writings of Hughes, Baraka, and Wilson, concurrently mirroring the historical struggles of the African-American community in their pursuit of equitable rights.

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