Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of American Culture and Literature

ACTING OUT BLACK *"MASK*-ULINITY": MALE STRUGGLES FOR IDENTITY IN THREE PLAYS BY AUGUST WILSON

Vahit Yaşayan

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2014

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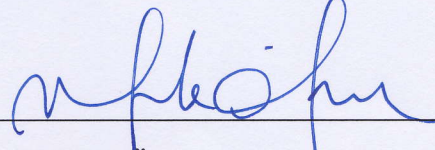
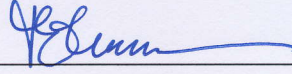Department of American Culture and Literature
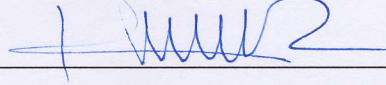
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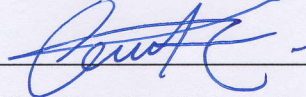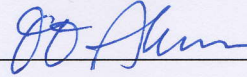
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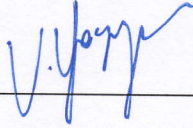
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11 Haziran 2014

Vahit Yaşayan

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ÖZET

Yaşayan, Vahit. Siyah Erkekliği Oynamak: August Wilson'ın Üç Oyununda Eril Kimlik Sorunsalı, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2014.

Bu tez, ABD'li siyahi oyun yazarı August Wilson'ın erkeklik tasvirini ele alıp, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985) ve *Fences* (1987) adlı oyunlarındaki geleneksel erkeklik kavramının karşılığını nasıl ve hangi durumlarda yitirdiğini inceler. Toplumsal bağlamda, özellikle kadına kıyasla, avantajlı gibi görülen erkeklik konumunun, yukarıda adı geçen oyunlardaki erkek karakterler derinlemesine incelendiğinde, gittikçe anlamını yitirdiği görülmektedir. Wilson'un karakterlerinden bazıları sergilemekte oldukları cinsiyet "performansının" farkında olmadan, kendilerini "erkeksi" ve imtiyazlı görürken, bazıları da eril tahakkümü hak ettiğini düşünürken iktidarsız kalıp, kendini sınırlı, kafası karışmış, kurban edilmiş gibi görmeye meyillidir. Bu yüzden, Wilson'un çoğu erkek karakteri, deyim yerindeyse iki arada bir derede kalmıştır. Kendilerini "emperyalist, beyazı üstün gören, kapitalist ataerkil" terim ve kavramına göre değerlendirip, Amerikan kapitalist teşebbüsüne dahil olamadıkları için başarısız olmaya mahkum etmişlerdir. Sadece "gerçek" erkekliğin sınırlı bir tasvirini kabullendikleri için güç sunan, özdeşleştirdikleri sistemi eleştirmek yerine, normatif erkeklikle olan kimlik mücadelesini başkalarına, diğer bir deyişle, çevrelerindeki kadınlara çocuklara ve arkadaşlarına yıkarlar. Erkeklik, her zaman tahakkümcü beyaz-merkezli toplumsal anlayış tarafından senaryolaştırılmış ve yönetilmiş bir performans, kurgu ve roldür. Bu yüzden, bu oyunlarda "rol yapmanın ağırlığı," "erkeklik ikilemi" ve daha doğrusu bir "erkeklik krizi" görülmektedir. Siyah erkekliğin performansı ile ilgili kavramlar ve teoriler çerçevesinde, bu tez Wilson'ın siyah erkekleri arasında görülen performans krizini çözümlemektedir. Roller ve performanslar derlemesi olarak bell hooks'un "plantasyon ataerki," Richard Majors and Janet Billson'un "'cool' duruşu" ve Robert Staples'in "erkeklik gizemi" kavramları Wilson'ın *Joe Turner Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* ve *Fences* oyunlarında süregelen siyah erkeklik krizini açıklamaya yönelik kuramsal bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Bu krize bir çözüm olarak, August Wilson beyaz erkek-merkezli toplumsal anlayış tarafından oluşturulan ve dayatılan siyah erkeklik temsillerine karşı çıkmayı ve bu temsillere karşı Afrikalı

Amerikalı toplum ile manevi ve kültürel bağlar kurmayı ve Afrika kökeninin bilincine varmayı savunur.

Anahtar Sözcükler

August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, Erkeklik Çalışmaları, Siyah Erkeklik, Performans Krizi, Plantasyon Ataerki, "Cool" Duruşu, Erkekliğin Gizemi.

ABSTRACT

Yaşayan, Vahit. Acting Out Black "*Mask*-ulinity": Male Struggles For Identity in Three Plays by August Wilson, Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2014.

This thesis explores August Wilson's portraits of masculinity and examines if and where traditional concepts of masculinity fail its participants in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985), and *Fences* (1987). The seemingly advantageous position of masculinity becomes increasingly hard to pin down, as a close examination of the male characters in these plays indicates. While some of Wilson's characters are unaware of their gender performances, they sense they are "being" masculine instead of "performing" masculinity and assume privilege; a few of them are inclined to see themselves as limited, confused and victimized by gender expectations, as deserving authority, but remaining powerless. Thus, many of Wilson's male characters are caught in a double bind. Measuring themselves by the term and concept of "imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy," yet unable to participate in the American capitalist enterprise, "they are doomed to fail." Rather than criticizing their male systems of identification that propose power only in return for accepting a limited version of "real" masculinity, they prefer to transfer their own identity struggle with "normative" masculinity onto others, i.e. women, children or friends. Masculinity is always already a performance, a construct, a role that has been scripted and directed by hegemonic white society. Hence, in these plays, there is "a role strain," "a male dilemma," "a crisis of masculinity." In the framework of the relevant theories or concepts related to the performativity of black masculinity, this thesis analyzes the performance crisis observed among black males in Wilson's canon. As a collection of roles and performances, bell hooks' "plantation patriarchy," Richard Majors' and Janet Billson's "cool pose" and Robert Staples' "masculine mystique" concepts provide a theoretical framework to understand the ongoing crisis in black masculinity in Wilson's *Joe Turner Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Fences*. As a solution to this crisis, August Wilson, through his black male characters, highlights resistance to European American representations of African American manhood,

promoting instead, a spiritual and cultural connection with the African American community and a recognition and appraisal of their ancestry.

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INTRODUCTION

What does a man want? What does the black man want?

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that men are in serious trouble.

Anthony Clare, *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis*

For many blacks, life is a relentless performance for the mainstream audience and often for each other. Even when he is offstage, a black male may feel that he is onstage.

Major and Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*

It is difficult to disassociate my concerns with theatre from the concerns of my life as a black man.

August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand"

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s not only shed light on the inequalities that exist between men and women but also increased public awareness of issues such as the construction and definitions of sexuality, sex and gender. As a direct result of this process, scholars such as Michael Kimmel, Michael A. Messner, Pierre Bourdieu and R. W. Connell began an intensive investigation of what these terms mean and how social construction works in practice in the development of these terms. Along with women, men have become the focal point of the scholars whose extensive analysis of feminist theories serve as the basis for a deeper understanding of masculinity.

Even though the construction of masculinity has been studied in different historical periods, a generally agreed upon history of masculinity has not emerged until very recently. One of the best attempts to provide a "sketch of a vastly complex history" (Connell 186) is the short chapter entitled "The History of Masculinity" in R.W. Connell's influential work *Masculinities* (2005). Connell's history locates the

construction of masculinity in "the formation of the modern gender order as a whole . . . in the period from about 1459 to 1650, [when] the modern capitalist economy emerged around the North Atlantic, and the modern gender order also began to take shape in that region" (186). It then describes the rise of what scholars call masculinity in connection with four key social and historical developments:

> The cultural change that produced a new understanding of sexuality and personhood in metropolitan Europe, . . . the creation of overseas empires by the Atlantic seaboard states, . . . the growth of the cities that were the centers of commercial capitalism, . . . and the onset of large-scale European Civil War . . . which disturbed the legitimacy of the gender order. (Connell 186-7)

Connell coins the term "gentry masculinity" to explain the model which was created and stabilized through these processes, and argues that "the history of American masculinity over the last two hundred years can broadly be understood as the splitting of gentry masculinity [under pressure from] challenges to the gender order by women, the logic of the gendered accumulation process in industrial capitalism, and the power relations of empire" (191).

0.1. Hegemonic Masculinity

This history, according to Connell, exposes the patterns of what is more precisely termed as "hegemonic masculinity" (77). It is possible to state that hegemonic masculinity is a kind of masculinity that a culture favors above others, one which "subliminally" defines what is normal for males in that culture, and imposes that definition of normality upon other kinds of masculinity (76). Its fundamental function is to authorize not only the dominant position of men, but also the dominance of particular social groups of men, along with their power, values, wealth and beliefs over other groups. Broadly speaking, each historical era produces its own version of hegemonic masculinity, which operates both on an external level, in terms of social roles and relations, and on an internal level, in terms of definitions of self (77). Hegemonic masculinity is, by its nature, contradictory since it appears to stand still but indeed is always changing. Its normalizing function means that it often lays claim to universals and seems to allude to static and enduring values. However, in reality, it is in a perennial process of changing (77).

Although hegemonic masculinity, in "Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies," as Bryce Traister conveys "has for so long stood as the guarantor of cultural authority, transcendental anchor and truth" (281) for American men, it can be assumed that it has been quite controversial and has been questioned at every level of American life. Since hegemonic masculinity means different things at different times to different people, it would be beneficial to examine some of these views.

In the nineteenth century, philosopher and author Henry David Thoreau shared with Ralph Waldo Emerson and other transcendentalists an ideal of manhood grounded in scholarly activity, self-awareness, and self-reliance. More radical in his advocacy of dissent, Thoreau espoused an environmentally conscious definition of manhood rather than a capitalist driven one, touching upon a crisis of his era. As he points out in *Walden,*

> [t]he mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city, you go to the desperate country. . . . A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things. (1875)

In his analysis of Thoreau's famous excerpt, Michael Kimmel whose *Manhood in America: Cultural History* (1996) analyzes the study of manhood with an anti masculinist approach, explains that, from the very beginning, American men reconstructed America in their own minds as "restless, insecure, striving, competitive, and extraordinarily prosperous" (32), which led them to experience a masculine identity crisis. Accordingly, "thrown into the anarchy of the marketplace, a place Thoreau had described as a 'site of humiliation,' American men's economic, political, and social identity was no longer fixed" (32). If the social order gives a man the chance to rise as high as he wishes, "his sense of himself as a man is in constant need of demonstration" (32). Everything becomes tests: his relationship to work, to women, to nature, to civilization and other men. In other words, in order to prove their masculinity, American men began to demonstrate, through a capitalist-based competition, their ability to provide for a family in every possible way.

It seems clear that Thoreau penned his noteworthy line "mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," when he departed for Walden Pond. As Michael Kimmel states it in *Manhood in America,* "as such a relentless test, civilization can be unbearable" (32). In her analysis of the connection between American manhood and civilization in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States* (1995), Gail Bederman indicates how seemingly contradictory notions such as manhood and civilization came together in the larger discourse. She argues that in order to advocate their power, American men utilized discourses of civilization in order to support the ideology of hegemony (42). However, they also lost their toughness and strength, in other words, their masculinity, necessary to keep civilization evolving upward (43). By tracing the current masculinity crisis in hegemonic society to the historical connections between manliness and civilization, Bederman shares the same concerns with Michael Kimmel that civilization became "unbearable" for the nineteenth century men. Thus, "one must be completely self-controlled, since in the new democracy there was no one else to look for such control. Society was chock-full of equals" (Kimmel, 32). In other words, everything was based on competition and competitors. Hence, for American men two choices seemed possible: stay and compete with civilization, or try to escape from it (32).

What, according to Kimmel, American men selected was both. On the one hand, "they struggled to build themselves into powerful impervious machines, capable of victory in any competition. And they ran away to the frontier, to the West, to start over, to make their fortunes and thus to remake themselves, to escape the civilizing constraints of domestic life represented by the Victorian woman" (33). On the other hand, Kimmel continues, "American men also tried to stack the decks in their favor. By rejecting multicultural aspects of America, by keeping the public worlds of work, education, or politics as the homosocial preservers of members of hegemonic masculinity, they could more reliably prove their manhood" (33). Exclusion also provided a sort of domestic version of escape. Whenever American men went off to work, they escaped from women to confirm their manhood homosocially with other men. These features of American hegemonic masculinity, as Thoreau, Bederman and Kimmel contend, constitute the basis of "quiet desperation," i.e. the American masculinity crisis (Kimmel 33).

Another and more recent significant criticism of hegemonic masculinity in the twentieth century was made by the poet and leader of the Men's Movement, Robert Bly. According to him, as men grow up, "they seek without clear direction to do what society expects. They work dutifully, but even as they succeed, they find feelings freezing up and vitality drifting away" (Egger, no pag). The main reason for this crisis, as Robert Bly mentions in *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990)*,* is the modern myths of masculinity. For Bly, American society prescribes and reinforces a male image that centers on being tough, emotionally unexpressive, detached and self-reliant. Accordingly, this image of "The Marlboro Man" slips off the billboard into the male psyche (Major 34). Apparently, images of hegemonic masculinity such as "being brave, courageous and bold . . . the provider, the bedrock of the family" around American men destroy their lives (Bly 4). A large percentage of men in today's America, according to Bly, contradicts this mainstream view of masculinity. The very paradigm of modern masculinity — that it is all about being the master of your universe — detains men from thinking their way out of their crisis and from taking active radical steps to resolve it (Bly 25).

When America entered the twenty-first century, a traditional and universal concept of masculinity for American males no longer existed. As Michael Kimmel suggests, "American men [have become] increasingly anxious; men feel their ability to prove [their] manhood threatened by industrialization and deindustrialization, immigration and a perceived invasion" (216). A further and similar commentary of the twenty-first century hegemonic masculinity has come from Susan Faludi, who accounts for the troubled and troubling response of men with their social disenfranchisement. Her work *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999) focuses on the American men who are entrapped by the crisis of hegemonic masculinity. As she expresses,

> [s]ocial psychologists and researchers issued reports on a troubling rise in male distress signals stretching over the last several decades – anxiety and depressive disorders, suicides and attempted suicides, psychical illnesses, certain criminal behaviors – and a "mortality gap" that was putting the average men in his grave seven years before the average women. "Men are out of control," "over-controlling," "dangerous," "violent" and even, it has been written, "obsolete." Their troubles are said to be internal, the result of testosterone poisoning, Y-chromosomes, attention deficit disorder, a warlike nature. (6)

However, Susan Faludi comes up with a revolutionary diagnosis; men's problems are not caused by "the product of biology," or such "trumped-up enemies as feminism" and affirmative action, but by the modern social tragedy that American culture has created over the centuries. Indeed, the problem that has no name is "troubled manhood" (7). Apparently, men have been inclined to mask their troubled manhood behind other topics such as war, family, personal freedom, success and business. As Barbara Ehrenreich suggests in *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and The Flight From Commitment* (1983) where the title of this thesis comes from, it has been pointed out that even the word "masculinity" has betrayed its own inauthenticity: "*mask-ulinity*" (123). In other words, in order to gain self-determination, men "perform" masculinity under a mask of manhood to maintain their authority. Additionally, it can be concluded that, this enactment of a socially acceptable self occurs at great cost to men who are pressured to participate in the performance of masculinity.

Substantial attention has already been paid to the issue of gender performance by various scholars, especially by Candace West and Don Zimmerman. In their "Doing Gender," West and Zimmerman suggest that as a powerful ideological tool, gender is used in everyday interaction to construct and reinforce distinctions between the sexes (126). They argue that gender performance is designated to construct gendered behavior as naturally occurring. This façade furthers a system through which individuals are judged in terms of their failure or success to meet gendered societal expectations, called the accountability structure. (136) Even though their argument was widely acclaimed in gender studies, there was still not a sufficiently large body of academic writing on sexuality and gender dealing with troubled manhood. It was the appearance of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) that helped reconstruct scholars' perception of masculinity within the framework of the cultural, psychic, and social production of gender. Although Butler's work was developed particularly in relation to gender, it has been expanded in many directions since its original publication almost twenty years ago. Its publication in the 1990s, along with *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), underscored that questions surrounding acceptable gender and sexuality were coming to the forefront. As Fintan Walsh argues in *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (2010), despite the fact that the majority of feminist, lesbian,

and gay scholars eagerly endorsed Butler's writing for conceptualizing a new wave of intellectual focus, its reception and reflections in the field of Masculinity Studies was actually more noteworthy (3). Previously, masculinity was torn between the stress of emasculation and a real desire to reconceptualize notions of manhood that existed outside heterosexual distinctions. (Walsh 3). Thus, by the help of Butler's theories on gender, more specifically masculinity, Masculinity Studies was provided with grounds to deconstruct masculinity within its own academic field.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asserts that sex and gender cannot be considered in isolation because they jointly constitute one another. Only through conceptualizing sex as "prediscursive or as ontologically given," (11) does Butler suggest that it becomes possible to differentiate gender and sex from each other. To explain how sex and gender mutually constitute one another, Butler theorizes gender as performative, where "gender is always a doing . . . performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33).

Furthermore, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler explains her theory of performance in a more detailed way. She describes "performance" as "that discursive practice which enacts or produces that which it names" (13). Like Lacan's theory of interpellation, but with an added emphasis on acts as well as identifications, Butler's theory asserts that the production of gendered identity occurs through "the citation and reiteration of social norms, conventions, or laws" (23). As Fintan Walsh points out, "their assumption is not a single act or event, but the effect of an iterable practice, and identity is only secured stable through seamless repetition" (24). A man begins to fulfill the expectations of society by acting out these performances, codes, norms and styles repetitively. In other words, reiteration systematically makes the illusory identity stable and natural. Butler calls this repetitive performance of socially constructed gender identity "performativity" (13).

In order to illustrate this, Butler explains how the act of naming sex, for instance, the expression "it's a boy," sets in motion the gender construction process of "boying."

> This is a [boy], however, who is compelled to "cite" the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. [Masculinity] is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed,

there is no "one" who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a "one," to become viable as a "one," where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms. (*Bodies* 232)

Thus, masculinity is formed by various repeated acts that "congeal" over time to produce the illusion of sex as the cause of gender (Emig 7). That is why, "the very idea of [masculinity] taking on meaning occurs under the cultural compulsion to take on meaning, constituted by processes and practices directed by cultural and social norms" (Butler, *Bodies* 234). In other words, through repetition, gendered practices reiterate ritualized sets of norms to the point where they conceal the norms being performed (234). Masculinity is not then a matter of choice, because through reiteration, actions "precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'" (234). Thus, reiteration becomes the "mechanisms for the production and articulation of gender norms governed by already accepted norms, simultaneously regulating and constraining" the performativity of masculinity (234).

0.2. Hegemonic Masculinity in American Drama

Through Masculinity Studies, the performance of masculinity in American drama has been revised and intensively scrutinized recently. American drama, according to Carla McDonough, is mainly concerned with the actions and experiences of male characters. Yet, she claims that many playwrights and protagonists have been critically considered as if they were non-gendered (1). Male characters in plays such as Sam Shepard's *True West* (1980) or Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) are mostly depicted as "universal referents;" their stories are treated by critics as "encompassing dynamics relevant to humanity" rather than particularly to men (1). That is why, the relationship between masculinity and performance has become a pressing concern for drama scholars, such as Michael Mangan, Robert Vorlicky and Carla McDonough, who have problematized the traditional understanding of "maleness" in canonical texts of American theatre and have called for greater attention to the staging of masculinities in American drama. For example, in *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (2003), Michael Mangan deals with the complex and paradoxical history of masculinities by exploring the ways in which changing concepts of what it means "to be man" have been represented, celebrated, examined and critiqued on the mainstream western stage. He

offers new and gendered readings of several familiar plays and traces an intricate relationship between theatrical performance and gender performance. Likewise, Robert Vorlicky's study of all male-cast plays, *Act Like a Man: Challenging Masculinities in American Drama* (1995), explores what interactions among men in these homosocial male-only worlds demonstrate about the problems of male communication. As Vorlicky argues, "most variations of American male-cast drama resist the diversity of American male experience and its challenge to traditional masculinities; rather, they aggressively limit themselves to perpetuating a rigid, antihistorical account of male identity" (1). Accordingly, the masculinity of minority groups, to a large extent, has been underexamined. White authors, in general, continue to ignore race issues when writing male-cast plays (251). For this reason, the relatively few published plays written by nonwhite playwrights for men of color become, unfairly, representative works of their particular racial community.

Similarly, in *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (1997), Carla McDonough concentrates on the relationship between male "performance" and theatrical performance. As she elucidates,

> [t]he commitment to act out one's masculinity in front of an audience connects quite clearly to the postmodern feminist idea of gender as masquerade and as performance rather than essence. Gender as performance is understood as the end result of most dramatic texts. Theatrical representation is generally recognized as being metaphorically relevant to the human experience of self-presentation. (14)

McDonough, by pointing out gender dynamics for men that are not usually openly acknowledged by playwrights or critics, exposes how deeply issues of performance and masculinity are embedded in American theater.

Interestingly enough, masculinity itself in many plays that above-mentioned drama critics analyze, seems to have become the current "problem that has no name" of American men. In her analysis of the plays by Sam Shepard, David Mamet and Amiri Baraka, McDonough comes to the conclusion that these playwrights' works reflect the deep-seated dissatisfaction shared by many men despite their advantageous position in gender roles. Male characters in the plays by these playwrights find themselves confused and dissatisfied in a culture that privileges hegemonic masculinity. In response to much of this confusion, Masculinity Studies offers explanations of

masculinity that intersect in useful ways with the concept of "masculinity as a troubled performance" (McDonough 9).

0.3. African American Masculinity

Under the light of the above-mentioned ideas, black masculinity and its treatment in American drama can similarly be analyzed through Butler's performance guideline. In *Scripting The Black Masculine Body* (2006), Ronald Jackson states that almost every single writing of masculinity stresses hegemonic masculinity and its performance contributing to the First and Second Wave of Masculinity Studies (1980s-1990s). However, it should not be forgotten that not all American men are alike. In fact, what it means to be a man in America depends mainly on one's ethnicity, class, race, sexuality, age and even the region of the country from which he comes from (128). Creating the Third Wave of Masculinity, scholars such as Ronald Jackson, bell hooks, and Robert Staples highlight ethnic and racial masculinities in the United States. As bell hooks states in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), literature on hegemonic masculinity

> does not interrogate the conventional construction of patriarchal masculinity or question the extent to which black men have internalized this norm. It never assumes the existence of black men whose creative agency has enabled them to subvert norms and develop ways of thinking about that challenge; patriarchy. (hooks, *Black* 89)

Essentially, the masculinity literature presumes complicity with hegemony, and never questions whether or not black men's exclusion from mainstream society has impacted the ways in which they have constructed their masculinities (Jackson 128).

In "The Black Male: Searching Beyond Stereotypes," Manning Marable also suggests that being black and male is the leading tragedy of America because African American males are defined by the term and terminology of mainstream capitalist-driven society with stereotypes — violent/criminal, sexual and incompetent/uneducated individuals — and by "various institutional means perpetuating and permeating within [their] entire culture" (17). Black men have responded with their own brand of masculinity that challenges stereotypes. For instance, Clyde W. Franklin has suggested that black men may embrace a conformist masculinity and try to imitate the hegemonic model's behavior and attitudes in order to belong (369). They may also adopt a ritualistic

model by trying to mimic African masculinity. However, they are different in that they do not believe in hegemonic rules and institutions, yet still play the game (369). It is this prevailing set of a stigmatized condition of blacks, as Ronald Jackson argues, that makes it extremely hard to theorize black masculinities in the same ways as white or other marginalized masculinities (128).

What does the black man want? (Fanon 8) — one of the major questions in Black Masculinity Studies — has been at the center of recent attempts to theorize the complexity of the black experience. Over the last twenty years, studies in black masculinity have radically and thoroughly altered critical understandings of black men. As David Marriott illustrates in "Reading Black Masculinities,"

> [e]arlier sociology of race relations theories of black masculinity, in which black kinship structures were shown to be based on socially dysfunctional gender relations, tended to view black male sexual cultures as the pathological reflections of white hegemonic masculinities. Many of these studies analyzed black male identification with racist stereotypes of sexual superiority as an hyperbolic inversion of white masculinity and saw a form of mourning for white paternity as the lost object of desire which requires a compensatory cultural narrative. (185)

Today, the crisis in black masculinity is more commonly considered and questioned in detail, a fact whose basis, lies in the emasculation and social death of black men under colonialism, slavery and hegemonic masculinity. While Marriot maps this crisis on to black matrilineal family structures in which the absent name and law of the father has been replaced by matriarchal kinship patterns and fratrilineal bonding between black men" (186), June Jordan in her "Don't You Talk About My Mama," refutes the arguments of the scholars, such as Marriot, who blame the black mother for the "crisis" in black masculinity (262). As she elucidates, according to some experts, "the source of the problem is 'female-headedness' [of African American family]. It must be more white — more patriarchal, less 'female-headed,' more employed more steadily at better-paying jobs" (262). On the contrary, she states that the problem does not originate with black women but the media distortions and the systematic oppression of American hegemonic masculinity (264).

Indeed, as the above-mentioned scholars point out, the social construction of the masculinities of non white men is more troublesome and confining than that of white

men in general. Writers in this area, such as Ellis Cose and Robert Staples, contend that black men have faced, and continue to face, a unique set of difficulties whose origins can be found in societal and historical roots (Staples 8). Accordingly, race has an undeniable presence in the construction of African American masculinity. Black men intimately incorporate and internalize some aspects of the dominant definitions of masculinity in order to contest the conditions of dependency and powerlessness, which racism and racial oppression enforce.

Ellis Cose, a leading black male journalist, deals with black masculinity in his recent book *The Envy of the World: On Being a Black Man in America* (2002), which has attracted more attention than any other recent work focusing on black males. Identifying African American males as "a group apart" in his introduction, Cose contends,

> [m]any of us are lost in this America of the twenty-first century. We are less sure of our place in the world than our predecessors, in part because our options, our potential choices, are so much grander than theirs. So we are trapped in a paradox. We know, whether we admit it openly or not, that in many respects things are better than they have ever been for us. This is a time, after all, when an African American [male] can be secretary of state and, possibly, even president. The old barriers that blocked us at every pass have finally fallen away—or they have opened up enough to allow a few of us to get through. But although it is fully within our power, collectively and individually, to achieve a level of success that would have been all but unimaginable for most of our forefathers, many of us are doomed to fail. (11)

As Cose argues, although progress has been made in the lives of African American men, they still experience failure. Despite all the advances in civil rights, the feminist movement and sexual liberation, Cose points out that when the spotlight is on black males, the message is usually that "they have managed to stay stuck, that as a group; they have not evolved with the times" (7). While Cose eloquently identifies many of the issues, he offers no vision of how black males might create new and different self-concepts. The reason for this failure, according to bell hooks, is the fact that "negative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to overdetermine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves" (hooks, *We Real* x). Black males should realize that "the imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy is an interrelated system of domination that will never fully empower black

men" (hooks, *We Real* xi). They should break "the life threatening choke-hold patriarchal masculinity imposes on black men and create life sustaining visions of a reconstructed black masculinity that can provide black men with ways to save their lies and the lives of their brothers and sisters in struggle" (hooks, *We Real* xii).

0.4. Masculinity in African American Drama

Perhaps the first African American play to touch upon the black masculinity crisis is Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). It was the first play on Broadway by a black woman and the longest-running play by a black author, supplanting Langston Hughes' *Mulatto* (1927). Caught up in the American capitalist dream, the play's protagonist, Walter Lee associates the acquisition of wealth and property with manhood and masculinity. He attempts to define manhood in terms of white standards of affluence and believes that owning a liquor store will make him a big man with access to power and possibility. He complains to his mother about his own exclusion from the mainstream finance world: "White boys are sitting back and talking 'bout thing . . . sitting there turning deals worth million dollars . . . . Sometimes I see guys don't look much older than me" (74).Walter senses the racism of economic disparity and desires a place at the table. When confronted by his mother and wife about his drive toward material possessions at all costs, he responds,

> [w]hat's the matter with you all! I didn't make this world! It was given to me this way! Hell, yes, I want me some yachts someday! Yes I want to hang some pearls 'round my wife's neck. Ain't she supposed to wear no pearls? Somebody tell me – tell me, who decides which women is suppose to wear pearls in this world. I tell you I am a *man* – and I think my wife should wear some pearls in this world. (Hansberry 141)

Walter seems to interrogate the American Dream and its racial limits, questioning whether there is in fact an inalienable right to economic prosperity. Through the story of Walter Lee, according to John M. Hannah, Hansberry questions existing frameworks of manhood and masculinity and redefines them ("Signifying" 158). In the end, Hansberry argues that manhood is determined not by external acquisition but by internal pride, self-definition as well as self-determination with a strong connection to the black community.

Like Hansberry, August Wilson also invoked the question of being a black male and an American, exploring the presence of an imposing, unresolved past and the unfulfilled promises of the American Dream. As a leading African American dramatist, with two Pulitzer Prizes (1987, 1990), two Tony Awards (1987, 2010), and numerous accolades, August Wilson stands out as one of the most significant playwrights of late-twentieth century American theater. Beginning his writing career as a poet, Wilson switched to drama in the 1960s, co-founding the Black Horizon Theatre (1968), a company that featured activist drama. Wilson envisioned theater as a means to raise the collective community's consciousness about black life in twentieth-century America. On October 17, 2005, nine days after his funeral, the Virginia Theater was renamed the August Wilson Theater, making Wilson the first African American to have a Broadway theater named in his honor (Graham 690).

A brief survey of Wilson's plays reveals that his self-imposed dramatic project involves reviewing twentieth century African American history by writing a play for each decade. With each work, he recreates and reevaluates the choices that African Americans, who left the South to become urban dwellers in the North, made in the past by refracting them through the lens of the present. Wilson focuses on the experiences and daily lives of ordinary black people within particular historical circumstances. The recurring theme in Wilson's historical cycle is the concept that "the events of the past can and do have a powerful impact on the present" (Bigsby 4). Repeatedly in his plays, Wilson creates black characters that are forced out and disconnected from themselves or, as Wilson conveys in a majority of his plays, from their "song" and their history. Desiring cultural reassociation and spiritual resurgence, his characters must go backwards in order to move forward. Thus for Wilson, the nature for the odyssey of self-knowledge involves rediscovering and reaffirming the Africanness of the African American experience.

Wilson's *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, according to Elam, "illustrates his own process of moving backwards in order to move forward" (691). Even the way in which Wilson wrote *The Pittsburgh Cycle* does not follow a straight chronological order from 1904, the date in which Wilson sets his first play of the cycle *Gem of the Ocean*, to 1997, the date in which Wilson sets his last play of the cycle *Radio Golf*, but is rather an odyssey of stops and starts. His cycle of plays start in the 1920s with *Ma Rainey's Black*

Bottom (1985), then leaps to the 1950s with the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fences* (1987). He then steps back to 1911, completing *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), followed by *The Piano Lesson* (1990), set in 1936, and *Two Trains Running* (1993), his play about the 1960s. From the 1960s, he pushes back to the 1940s with *Seven Guitars* (1995). His play dealing with the 1980s *King Hedley II* (1999), follows *Seven Guitars*, but precedes *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), set in 1904. The inclusion of Wilson's play of the 1970s, *Jitney*'s (2000), into the cycle is a bit more complicated. Wilson first drafted the play in the 1980s, but would return to it in the 1990s with a renewed sense of dramaturgical project. Finally, there is *Radio Golf* (2005), which covers the 1990s, completed just before he died the same year. All of Wilson's plays, except for *Ma Rainey*, are set in his childhood home, the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was not until he was well into the cycle that Wilson himself recognized his historical mission. As he states in an interview with Kim Powers,

> as it turns out, I've written plays that take place in 1911, 1927, 1941, 1957, and 1971. Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that I was writing one play for each decade. Once I become conscious of that, I realized I was trying to focus on what I felt were the important issues confronting Black Americans for that decade, so ultimately they could stand as a record of Black experience over the past hundred years presented in the form of dramatic literature. (52)

Wilson not only guides African Americans towards rediscovering and reaffirming the Africanness in the African American experience, but also sheds light on the current African American male crisis. As he contends in one of his interviews, his purpose in writing a cycle of plays was to give African American men an image of themselves that may help direct them towards a greater self-awareness (Devries 29). He asserts that his presentations "demonstrate that [the black tradition] is able to sustain a man once he's left his father's house" (29). Hence, going back to his African heritage, and rediscovering the African male's characteristics are two of Wilson's major aims. Wilson's desire to formulate a history of African Americans definitely postulates a male audience as the chief beneficiary of that history. As Hilary Devries argues, by writing *The Pittsburg Cycle,*

> Wilson wishes his plays to allow black Americans in essence to recognize themselves, but the chief responsibility that concerns him is that of black men because [they] have been told by the mainstream society so many

times how irresponsible [they] are as black males that Wilson tries and presents positive images of responsibility. (25)

In each of his plays in *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, Wilson reveals the story of at least one man endeavoring to rediscover his "song," struggling to define his masculinity as an African American and as a soul who has inherited a history of separation, but also of enormous strength. Each protagonist in Wilson's *The Pittsburgh Cycle* has abandoned his African American culture and heritage, which results in a masculinity crisis. He is "spiritually and culturally bankrupt" (Elam 158), and since he is incapable of being a source of help because of his issues with hegemonic masculinity, he is an obstacle in the lives of those around him. Many of Wilson's characters refuse all ties with their African ancestry and attempt to imitate and impersonate white, European values, and its definition of hegemonic masculinity. Wilson clearly differentiates African and American or rather white culture when defining African sensibilities. As he claims,

> [t]he whole philosophical system is different. For instance, Europeans look at man as apart from the world. In African sensibility, man is a part of the world. That's a very basic philosophical difference, which influences how you think, how you live, how you respond to the world around you. You see, blacks in American society have had to respond to the way Europeans respond to the world in order to survive in society. And they have not been allowed their cultural differences. I think that if we move toward claiming the strongest parts of ourselves, which is the African parts, so that we can participate in society as Africans, we would be all the stronger for it. (Livingston 57)

Wilson's dramatization of black males, nonetheless, has bothered a number of black critics precisely because he confronts the gender and racial hierarchies of American capitalism, including the emasculation of black men through their inability to earn a family wage and protect black women from sexual exploitation (Clark 100). Another criticism of Wilson's dramaturgical project would be his choice of heterosexual characters. While there is merit in this argument, an analysis of Wilson's canon reveals that there does not exist alternative interpretations of masculinities. While it may be true that some of Wilson's characters do seek homosocial environment, it would be unfair to call such homosocial relations with homoerotic connotations. In other words,

the term masculinity, as used while analyzing Wilson's plays within the scope of this thesis, will refer to heterosexual masculinity.

Wilson's dramatization of women, along with men, has also become the focus of criticism. In an interview with Sandra Shannon, Wilson answers these accusations and tries to justify himself:

> I doubt seriously if I would make a woman the focus of my work simply because of the fact that I am a man, and I guess because of the ground on which I stand and the viewpoint from which I perceive the world. I can't do that although I try to be honest in the instances in which I do have women. I try to portray them from their own viewpoint as opposed to my viewpoint. ("August" 139)

Feminist critics are not satisfied with this explanation and problematize the stereotypical black women characters and commodification of black women's sexuality in Wilson's cycle. Accordingly, in *the Pittsburgh Cycle,* there are fifty-four men and just nineteen adult women with representative roles. As a result, one major source of critique for Wilson has been his lack of female characters. In *The Past as Present in August Wilson's Drama,* Harry J. Elam, accused Wilson "of constructing women who, in his male-dominated dramatic vision, not only exist in subordinate positions but also operate solely in reaction to men and are defined and confined by these relationships" (89). He sees Wilson's depiction of women as reflecting the dominant culture's anxieties concerning female characters. On the other hand, his male characters, having internalized the phallocentric ethos of the dominant culture, feel that they must overthrow women to become men (89). Likewise, Kim Marra argues that Wilson's commercial success "may partly rest upon this reinforcement of dominant gender ideology because it shifts blame for racial ills from the white capitalist patriarchy onto black women, a subtext that is acceptable to the white male dominated critical establishment and middle class theater audiences" (xvi). bell hooks also criticizes Wilson's portrayal of black women. For her,

> Wilson's plays poignantly portray complex and negative contradictions within black masculinity in a white supremacist context. However, hegemonic patriarchy is not critiqued, and even though tragic expressions

of conventional masculinity are evoked, sexist values are re-inscribed via the black woman's redemption message as the plays end. (*Yearning* 18)

According to Keith Clark, on the other hand, even though Wilson covers at least one man's story in each of his plays, his *The Pittsburgh Cycle* is "either misogynistic nor phallocentric, but [instead] they are male-centered" (100). One of the few critics who have investigated the sociocultural implications of Wilson's choice to write male dominated plays, Clark scrutinizes August Wilson's rearrangement of "the black male dramatic subject hinting at the sociocultural implications of that reconfiguration" (Nadel 30). Clark contends that at the root of the African American male crisis is African Americans' failure to know their own history — to know who they are and where they have been (Clark 100). Wilson's mission is to unite and present that history in a way that makes it accessible "not as processed or anonymous in the sort of apolitical distant voice of authority evident in much that is considered to constitute history, but as a history that both delights and instructs" (100).

As Cynthia L. Caywood argues, Wilson's assessment of what is wrong with African American males can best be figured out by establishing what history, and by extension, the history play means to him. As she suggests "Wilson is not interested in the history play as it is more familiar to us, either in terms of the 'state of the nation' play or in dramatizing great figures or moments from the past" (78). Rather, his grand project of writing a play for each decade of the twentieth century provides a re-envisioning of American history as it has affected African American men. Acknowledging the manner in which most history disregards the marginalized and powerless, August Wilson refuses to think of history as something one-dimensional, or as something that dictates order on the past. On the contrary, Wilson claims that "[t]he importance of history is simply to find out who you are and where you've been. It becomes doubly important if someone else has been writing your history" (Powers 5). In addition, Wilson points out that African American history has been shaped by the response of African Americans to one central question:

The question we've been wrestling with since the Emancipation Proclamation is, "What are we going to do?" Do we assimilate into American society and thereby lose our culture, or do we maintain our

culture separate from the dominant cultural values and participate in the American society as Africans rather than as blacks who have adopted European values? (Shannon, "August" 130)

How have African American men defined their masculinity? Assimilation to or separation from hegemonic masculinity is the major question that appears to particularly attract August Wilson's attention. Whereas his plays present a variety of sociological, cultural and historical factors conducive to this definition of masculinity, many of Wilson's male characters adhere, at great cost, to hegemonic masculinity. What all of Wilson's male characters more or less are aware of is the fact that there exists a settled perception of masculinity in mainstream society. The existence of this perception is indicated through the white characters in the plays. In the whole cycle, there are only three white male characters who appear onstage. However, according to Henry Louis Gates, "one of Wilson's accomplishments is to register the ambitious presence of white folks in a segregated black world — the way you see them nowhere and feel them everywhere" (55). Although Wilson's focus is clearly on the black male residents of the Hill District, there is simultaneously the constant presence of hegemonic society. Even in the white men's absence, they are very much present since "they clearly circumscribe and govern the lives and potentialities of the black" males (Üsekes 115).

It is hegemonic masculinity's influence, as well as black males' unawareness of their masculine performance, that brings about the black male crisis. As Keith Clark points out, "what resurfaces throughout the canon is a concern with black men's valiant though often misguided efforts to situate themselves into a fiction of archetypal masculinity — attempts that are often derailed by a virulently hostile hegemonic culture" (100). This "fiction of archetypal masculinity" is indicated by such consequences as the glorification of violence, the struggle for dominance, the oppression of women, and the embodiment of a capitalist agenda that measures success through material goods and accumulation of money.

In his works, August Wilson emphasizes a measure of masculinity that highlights African sensibilities rather than dominant concepts of American masculinity. Apparently, he suggests that attempting to uphold the dominant society's definition of

manhood, which emphasizes wealth and power, will only bring about failure. Moreover, he contends that for black men, a different measure of masculinity has existed for centuries; African American males merely need to repossess it. Wilson values a masculinity that demands from his characters a deep sense of recognition and an appreciation of their rich heritage. This involves accepting that they are indeed responsible for their neighbors and that they play a vital role in their community. What August Wilson's *The Pittsburgh Cycle* indicates is that man's liberation from hegemonic masculinity comes through spiritual and cultural connection with his community and through the recognition of his ancestry. While his characters attempt to embody and perform hegemonic masculinity, through *The Pittsburgh Cycle,* Wilson reveals that they are bound to remain enslaved. If they do not reconstruct black masculinity in a way that empowers the connection among black community and recognizes black history, they will not be able to save their brothers and sisters in struggle.

This thesis will explore August Wilson's portraits of masculinity and examine if and where traditional concepts of masculinity fail its participants in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985) and *Fences* (1987). The seemingly advantageous position of masculinity becomes increasingly hard to pin down as a close examination of the male characters in these plays indicates. While some of Wilson's characters are unaware of their gender performances, they sense they are "being" masculine instead of "performing" masculinity and assume privilege; a few of them are inclined to see themselves as limited, confused and victimized by gender expectations, as deserving authority, but remaining powerless. Thus, many of Wilson's male characters are caught in a double bind. Measuring themselves by the term and concept of "imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy," yet unable to participate in the American capitalist enterprise, "they are doomed to fail" (Cose 11). Rather than criticizing their male systems of identification that propose power only in return for accepting a limited version of "real" masculinity, they prefer to transfer their own identity struggle with "normative" masculinity onto others, i.e. women, children or friends. Masculinity is clearly always already a performance, a construct, a role that has been scripted and directed by hegemonic white society. Thus, in these plays, there is "a role strain," "a male dilemma," "a crisis of

masculinity." As a solution to this crisis, August Wilson, through his black male characters, highlights resistance to European American representations of African American manhood, promoting instead, a spiritual and cultural connection with the African American community and an appraisal of their ancestry.

Since Wilson's plays share almost the same concerns for black manhood but in different decades, this thesis will only analyze three of his plays in order to avoid repetition. Yet, his other seven plays will be briefly examined in the conclusion since they are essential to the whole cycle. In order to follow the logical line of historical events, the three plays will be examined in the chronological order they were written. It is the intention of this thesis to establish theoretical paradigms derived from leading exponents of black masculinity thought on performativity, and will apply them to a critical analysis of the male characters in August Wilson's *The Pittsburgh Cycle.*

In the first chapter of this thesis, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* will be analyzed from the standpoint of bell hooks' "plantation patriarchy" (*We Real* 1). In her analysis of the autobiographical writings of free and enslaved black men, bell hooks argues that African Americans have been taught, in the New World, the hegemonic patriarchal masculinity, which makes it possible to use violence or oppression to establish patriarchal power over women or others. Patriarchal masculinity became an accepted ideal for most black men, an ideal that would be reinforced by twentieth-century norms. This chapter is based on the argument that Herald Loomis, the protagonist of the play, embraces this patriarchal ideal and transfers his own problems with "normative" masculinity onto his wife and daughter. The problem of masculine identity, which according to August Wilson, demands a spiritual and cultural connection with one's family and a recognition of his ancestry, is not resolved in this play. By adopting a model of hegemonic masculinity — traditionally splitting of the white American hero from his family or any kind of female presence — Loomis mimics and embodies the standard model set by white masters, thereby experiencing a failed masculinity.

In the second chapter of this thesis, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* will be analyzed using the framework of Richard Major and Janet Mancini Billson's "cool pose" theory. They

argue that black masculinity sometimes resists the clichés of normative definitions of masculinity by performing "cool." When the mainstream society represents African American masculinity as conceivably violent, or as invisible in other circumstances, African American males can take on a "cool pose," acting in a performative way to subvert these constructs. While the "cool pose" has its advantages on behalf of black masculinity, it can also be destructive to African American manhood when taken to the extreme. Thus, in this chapter, the costs of the "cool pose" will be discussed with regard to Levee's actions and thoughts concerning his masculinity crisis.

Levee, as the male protagonist in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, desires to succeed in the white world by abandoning his heritage. His masculinity crisis revolves around the conflict between assimilation or separation. He desires to separate himself from his past in order to embrace a flashier, financially more rewarding future. Outraged at Sturdyvant, not being able to fulfill his dreams within hegemonic society, Levee transfers his anger to Toledo, his black fellow man, whom he murders at the end of the play for accidentally scuffing Levee's Florsheims, high quality shoes. It is safe to assume that Levee's actions reflect Major and Billson's description of the cost of the "cool pose." As they argue, "when cool behaviors are placed ahead of acknowledging and dealing with true fears or needs, pent-up emotions and frustrations result, which are then released in aggressive behavior toward those who are closest to the black male — other black people" (19-20). Even though Levee has previously been taught how to handle his rage or wrongs that have been done by the hegemonic society by performing "cool," his stabbing Toledo at the end for a trivial reason reveals how he is incapable of keeping his "cool." Thus, the "cool" acting is presented by Wilson to be the method by which African Americans try to cope with the reality imposed on them yet not being able to create an alternative state.

In the third chapter of this thesis, Troy's, the protagonist of *Fences*, "masculine mystique" will be analyzed in the light of Robert Staples' "sex role theory." In *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (1982)*,* Staples argues that African American males, in the post war era, were isolated and alone. Loneliness and emptiness became the dominant terms in the era's cultural analysis of black masculinity. In order to define the crisis in African American masculinity — the

masculine mystique — Staples adopts the concept of "the feminine mystique" from Betty Friedan. Accordingly, Robert Staples draws attention to the massive unhappiness of African American men trying to fit into a media-idealized "strong breadwinner" image while experiencing a masculinity crisis and suffering from "the masculine mystique." He examines how normative definitions of masculinity deprived so many black men of the ability to fulfill the expectations attached to being male in hegemonic America. Fulfilling the American Dream and the hegemonic masculine ideal was not an easy task for black males. They conditioned themselves to internalize this norm, yet were victimized by it.

Troy emerges from a battered past and as someone who once dreamed of swinging for the fences — playing professional baseball — but is consigned to being a garbage man. Troy's perception of his existence and worth is inadequate, mostly because he cannot realize the American Dream economically and socially as he is an "emasculated" man. By embodying and performing standards of hegemonic masculinity, Troy sentences himself to a lifetime of disappointment. Due to the dominance perpetuated by hegemonic masculinity and his inability to "head" his family, Troy experiences failure with his masculinity and, in turn, oppresses his wife and sons. In other words, the metaphorical emasculation is presented by Wilson as a motif, which delineates the status of African American males in the United States.

This thesis analyzes how Wilson's *The Pittsburgh Cycle* reflects different aspects of African American masculinity crisis and purports that masculinity is an ever-changing term and ideology, which is reflected as performance not only on stage but also in daily lives of African Americans. It is the argument of this study that, as Wilson's drama demonstrates, masculine gender identity is never fixed; its terms are always being re-negotiated, redefined and the masculine performance is constantly being re-staged. Some themes and images certainly reappear with regularity, but each era that Wilson handles conveys itself in different ways.

Wilson's characters expose the grief and pain that they carry as a direct result of their blackness and the unawareness of their masculine performances. A great many of them have been imprisoned by hegemonic masculinity. Since their identity crisis is observed in the form of masculinity crisis, there appears to be no possible way out for them to

solve the problem. Although Wilson does not define it clearly either in his plays or in his interviews, he reinforces his solutions to the masculinity crisis through characters that resist European American representations of African American manhood and emphasize the importance of spiritual and cultural connection with the African American community and a recognition of African ancestry. Wilson's solution to the problem may not be unique for the African American experience. Yet his approach and handling of the problems of African American males is exemplary and sheds light on the relatively untapped field of the Masculinity Studies.

CHAPTER I

EMBODIMENT OF THE "PLANTATION PATRIARCHY" IN AUGUST WILSON'S

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

When asked whether he considered *Fences* (1987), his most economically successful and recognized endeavor, as his "signature play," August Wilson asserted that his signature play was *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988): "most of the ideas of the plays in the cycle are contained in that one play. . . . *Fences* is the only one that's not an ensemble play" (Shannon "August Wilson" 36). Unlike *Fences*, a play developed around Troy Maxson, a single character, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* reflects the workings of a community and the play's theme develops out of the complex interplay of multiple characters. In a broader context, hence, the characters' thoughts, actions and experiences "echo the dramatic rhythms emerging out of the repetition, juxtaposition and opposition that move the play forward" (Hannah "A World" 127). In that sense, the play has much to say about African American life, especially with regard to the common aspect of the performance of hegemonic masculinity among African American males.

Wilson privileges *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* over the plays in his cycle because as stated above, it possesses the core elements of the whole cycle. In terms of black masculinity, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* represents how the crisis of black masculinity performance appeared in the lives of African American males, especially after they were introduced to the "plantation patriarchy" during their bondage and emancipation (hooks 1). Using bell hooks' *We Real Cool: Black Man and Masculinity* (2004) as a theoretical framework, this chapter will demonstrate how Loomis, the protagonist of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* is socialized by mainstream patriarchal society to believe that he should become a patriarch by protecting his wife; in other words, by becoming "benevolent patriarch" (hooks 1). Adopting the "plantation patriarchy," Loomis takes as his standard the dominator model set by white masters. By making white patriarchal masculinity a crucial part of his identity, he not only

distances himself from his African heritage but also oppresses himself, his family as well as other people in his community. At the end of the play, his escape from a female presence and his rejection of his African heritage implies that he will face a masculinity crisis or using bell hooks' term a "failed masculinity" (hooks 1).

1.1. Exploring the "Plantation Patriarchy" in Light of bell hooks' *We Real Cool: Black Man and Masculinity*

In Tony Morrison's *Sula* (1973)*,* Sula criticizes Jude who has just commented after a long day of work about the burden carried by black men. She says,

> I mean, I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world love you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. . . . And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. . . . Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children, white and black, boys and girls — spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in the world loves a black man more than another black man. . . . It looks to me like you the envy of the world. (103)

According to bell hooks, there are reasons for Jude's feelings and thoughts about not being loved as a black man. She points out that due to the stereotypes that Sula explains above, black males like Jude, in the culture of "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" are feared but not loved (hooks *We Real* ix). They are not loved by white men, white women, black women, or even children. What is more striking for hooks is that black men do not love themselves (ix). Accordingly, many black males feel that they are living on "borrowed time, just waiting to be locked down (imprisoned) or taken out (murdered)" (hooks *We Real* 57). What they are experiencing as black males, according to hooks, is summarized by Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Wright's protagonist Bigger describes the black male's confrontation with white patriarchy: "They [mainstream society] choke you off the face of the earth. They don't even let you feel what you want to feel. They after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die" (327). As Bigger explains, the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy will not completely empower African American men. In other words, the seemingly advantageous position of hegemonic masculinity leads many African American males

toward a failure in their lives since they are unaware of their gender performances. It is one of bell hooks' aims to remind black males of the disastrous results of their performance of hegemonic masculinity.

The first major attempt by a black woman to speak from a feminist standpoint about the black male crisis and its consequences on black men and women is Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978). Her book examines how the Civil Rights Movement and especially the Black Power Movement absorbed certain patriarchal assumptions concerning men and women and ended up blaming black women for keeping black men from getting ahead. Her book begins with the premise that African American men felt deprived of manhood by white supremacy, so that it was a revolutionary claim for human dignity, "not a tautology, when striking male garbage workers mobilized by Martin Luther King, Jr. wore signs saying 'I am a man'" (1). According to Wallace, African American men in the decade of the Black Power Movement (1966-1977) came to believe that "manhood was essential to revolution" and that authority over women was a primary agenda for liberation (17). Upon her analysis of Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman,* bell hooks finds that the reasons for the crisis in African American masculinity do not date back to the Black Power Movement but rely on the institution of slavery, which undermines the ability of black males to construct self and identity with their well-being mind, creating a life-threatening masculinist sensibility (hooks, "Reconstructing" 308). Unfortunately, she says, most black men remain in a state of denial, refusing to acknowledge the pain in their lives that is caused by patriarchal and phallocentric violence that not only is expressed by male domination over women, but also by internecine conflict among black men (308).

After her encounter with the cases of black masculinity crisis, and her analysis of the literature on Black Masculinity Studies, hooks deduces that the mainstream writing about black masculinity continues to push the notion that all black men need to do to survive is to become "better patriarchs" (*We Real* xii). That is why, it is necessary she says, to identify black masculinity crisis issues and offer solutions for how black males might create new and different self-concepts (viii). *We Real Cool: Black Man and Masculinity* (2004) challenges the misguided notion that "ours is a culture that loves black men" (127). Hooks clarifies that there exists a crisis in the black male spirit and

that crisis is not because black men are an "endangered species;" rather, it is a crisis perpetuated by widespread dehumanization, and by the ongoing placement of black males outside the category of human, one that identifies them as animal, beast, and "the other" (127).

Looking back to her ancestors' lives, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), hooks portrays a harmonious African community, where "there was no monolithic standard of black masculinity and many men, despite their difficulties in attaining breadwinner economic status, were caring and giving" (88). She maintains that recent media distortions have disoriented men and women, white people and people of color, with their "stereotypical, fantastical representations of black masculinity, and some African American male celebrities augment these distortions with swaggering, self-centered dick thing masculinity" (105). Apparently, she believes that African American manhood should once again highlight providing and protecting, instead of its current emphasis on black males' "capacity to coerce, control, dominate" that has devastated the relationship between the sexes in the black community (66). Unlike, hegemonic masculinity, hooks models a kind of masculinity built on cooperation between men and women and within the African American community.

In *We Real Cool: Black Man and Masculinity*, hooks argues that African American males repress themselves in mainstream imperialist capitalist white society. She conveys the ways in which the sexist and racist attitudes formulated in American culture have dehumanized and criminalized African American males and how these myths have deteriorated the conditions of black community. For hooks, black males today live in a world that pays them the most attention when they are violently acting out. Considered "animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers" (*We Real* x), African Americans have been victimized by the stereotypes that were previously articulated and still dominate the minds and imaginations of Americans presently. For hooks, these negative stereotypes about black masculinity continue to determine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves (xi). As opposed to these stereotypes, according to hooks, what African American men have to recognize is that the

> imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is an interrelated system of domination that will never fully empower black men. Right now that system is symbolically lynching masses of black men, choking off their very life, by making it all but impossible for them to learn basic reading and writing skills in childhood; by the promotion of addiction as the free enterprise system that works to provide unprecedented wealth to a few and short-term solace from collective pain for the many; by widespread unemployment; and the continued psychological lure of life threatening patriarchal masculine behaviors. (xi)

She elucidates that the major genocidal hazard, the force that places black male life into jeopardy is the performance of patriarchal masculinity. In American culture, all males are taught to perform "a role that restricts and confines" (hooks x). In the African American context, when race and class are introduced along with patriarchy, black males "endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity" (hooks x). Undoubtedly, white males across all classes are damaged by patriarchal socialization as well; nonetheless, that damage is intensified in the experience of black males precisely because they face a situation of double jeopardy.

It is necessary at this point to deal with the case of black women so as to understand how the performance of the "plantation patriarchy" destructively ruins their lives along with the black males. According to hooks' identification, there exists a strained relationship between black men and women. Due to the performance of the "plantation patriarchy," not only black males, but also black women have endured a high level of oppression. Ironically, many black women do not think that their oppression is caused by the "plantation patriarchy." Accordingly, she observes, "like black men, many black women believed black liberation could only be achieved by the formation of a strong black patriarchy" (hooks, *Ain't I* 181). Indeed, she contends that since black males continue to perform hegemonic masculinity, they are responsible for high levels of violence against women, as well as other men. Even though it seems like black masculinity torments black women, hooks' *We Real Cool* is quite hopeful about the advancement of the black community and "she looks to self reflective, politically conscious black men working with black women as a means of advancing an emancipatory project" (Morrell and Swart 97). As she explains,

> we need to hear from black men who are interrogating sexism, who are striving to create different and oppositional views of masculinity. Their

experiences are the concrete practice that may influence others. Progressive black liberation struggle must take seriously feminist movements to end sexism and sexist oppression if we are to restore to ourselves, to future generations of black people, the sweet solidarity in struggle that has historically been a redemptive subversive challenge to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. (hooks, *Yearning* 77)

Indeed, in order to comprehend bell hooks' "plantation patriarchy," a brief analysis of the condition of masculinity in the antebellum and emancipation period is necessary because African Americans today embody the gender roles that already exist in America. According to Michael Kimmel, there is an intricate relationship between the issues of separation of spheres and hegemonic masculinity. In the antebellum period, Kimmel argues, the doctrine of separate spheres, "a male creation," was introduced and promoted by male writers of advice books because it "serve[d] men's needs" (*Manhood* 39). Only later was it picked up, embraced and elaborated on by women writers celebrating domesticity. At first, separate spheres allowed insecure middle class men to feel like men, both at work and when they returned home (39). According to Linda Kerber, "aggressiveness, self-reliance and competitiveness" were planted in most males in antebellum America by separation of spheres, because these attributes were demanded both at work and at home. White males, whether members of the low country planter class or the backcountry working class, identified masculinity and patriarchy with the concept of personal honor "in defense of which duels were fought and fists flew" (9). As Kerber explains, in the cities of the North, many young working-class males shared their Southern counterparts' obsession with physical bravery and aggressiveness: "So synonymous were masculinity and toughness for those New Yorkers known as 'Bowery boys' [who were the most visible embodiment of popular masculinity in the mid-nineteenth century] that when the Bowery boy was represented on stage, he was immediately recognizable by his 'swaggering gait' and 'aggressive persona'" (9). As Kerber suggests, a pattern of masculinity that emphasized aggressiveness and toughness, was formulated for males. Thus, the separation of spheres facilitated this performance of hegemonic masculinity among white males. Hence, the separate spheres doctrine helped men of the era to distinguish themselves from the female sphere and create a male-only dominion where aggressiveness as the mode of communication and interaction became the manifestation of hegemonic masculinity.

Nonetheless, the separation of spheres between women and men, and the performance of hegemonic masculinity as Kimmel mentions, had enormous consequences for the relations between men and their families. Women had become prisoners in the home, while men were increasingly exiled from the home, unable to return without fear of feminization (*Manhood* 43). As Joseph Pleck argues in *My Male Sex Role — And Ours* (1974), hegemonic masculinity has been a dual system of oppression, a system by which men have oppressed women and in which some men have oppressed other men so that "to be a man with other man means to always fear being attacked, victimized, exploited and in an ultimate sense, murdered by other men" (qtd. in Kimmel *Manhood* 206). Thus, many men chafed at

> what they felt was a loss — of freedom, of casual homosocial intimacies, of authority. They longed to make themselves all over again, they yearned for a place where they could reestablish their manhood and replace market competition with male camaraderie. In both fiction and fact, they ran away. (43)

As Kerber and Kimmel outline, the intricate relationship between the separation of spheres and the performance of the hegemonic masculinity with its consequences, resulted in the formulation of gender roles that become became models for black males. Although, previously, many slaves would not have been comfortable with the exaggerated aggressiveness and virility promoted by white males as a badge of working class masculinity, the identification of force and power with manhood was becoming a concept that many black males well understood and embodied later (Kerber 9).

In the chapter in which she particularly deals with "plantation patriarchy," bell hooks overviews the history of slavery and masculinity. As a matter of fact, as hooks argues, African men journeyed to America before Columbus. The fact that they did not seek to dominate and/or destroy the indigenous native people who were living there indicates that their understanding of masculinity was not defined by the will to dominate and colonize people who were not like them (hooks 1). Initially black males did not see themselves as sharing the same standpoint as white men about the nature of masculinity (2). Yet, African American men were forced into adopting the stereotypical gender roles that had existed in America. In her "The Liberation of Black Women," theorist Pauli Murray points out that because of their role of earning a living

to support their families during slavery and its aftermath, many African American women "have been stereotyped as 'female dominance' attributed to the 'matriarchal' character of the American family while African American males have remained as 'patriarch'" attributed to the "patriarchal" character of the American family (233). The process of the embodiment of gender roles by African Americans is also indicated by bell hooks. As hooks states,

> [t]ransplanted African men, even those coming from communities where sex roles shaped the division of labor, where the status of men was different and most times higher than that of women, had to be taught to equate their higher status as men with the right to dominate women, they had to be taught patriarchal masculinity. They had to be taught that it was acceptable to use violence to establish patriarchal power. The gender politics of slavery and white supremacist domination of free black men was to school where black men from different African tribes, with different languages and value systems, learned in the "new world," patriarchal masculinity. (hooks 2)

She furthers her argument by referring to a previous essay that she has penned. In "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," hooks discusses the double standard that has been used to define African American manhood. Even though the gendered politics of slavery denied African American men the freedom to act as "men" within the definition set by white norms, this notion of manhood became a standard used to measure black male involvement in the plantation patriarchy. In her analysis of the autobiographical writings of Henry Box Brown, Josiah Henson, William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, she points out that these narratives reveal that Brown, Henson and Douglass saw "freedom" as the change in status that would enable them to fulfill "the role of chivalric benevolent patriarch" (hooks, "Reconstructing" 300). According to these abolitionists, only on condition of freedom would black males be men and able to provide for and take care of their families. In other words, many African American men thought freedom would allow them to become "benevolent patriarchs." Many abolitionists saw the struggle against slavery as a question of manhood, not just color (Kimmel, *Manhood* 53). hooks deploys Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom* to exemplify the argument of how African Americans performed and were involved in patriarchal masculinity. Although Frederick Douglass spoke regularly on behalf of gender equality and actively supported female suffrage, even he

was exposed to the indoctrination of the patriarchal masculinity. For instance, in his talk, "I Am a Radical Woman Suffrage Man," he made his position clear:

> The fundamental position of the women suffrage movement is scarcely less simple than that of the anti-slavery movement. It assumes that woman is herself. That she belongs to herself, just as fully as man belongs to himself – that she is a person and has all the attributes of personality that can be claimed by man, and that her rights of person are equal in all respects to those of man. She has the same number of senses that distinguish man, and is like man a subject of human government, capable of understanding, obeying and being affected by law. That she is capable of forming an intellectual judgment as to the character of public men and public measures, and she may exercise her right of choice in respect both to the law and the lawmakers . . . nothing could be more simple or more reasonable. (Douglass, "I Am" n pag.)

It seems that Douglass linked his struggle to claim his manhood as a free black man to the struggles of women for full equality. For him, to be a man meant autonomy and meant being independent. However, according to bell hooks, Frederick Douglass did not consider his manhood to be linked to intellectual progress. It was affirmed when he fought man to man with the slave overseer Covey (hooks, "Reconstructing" 300). As Douglass explains, this battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in his life as a slave. "It rekindled in my breast the smoldering embers of liberty; it brought up my Baltimore dreams, and revived a sense of my own manhood. I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before; I was a *man* now" (Douglass, *My Bondage,* emphasis added, n.pag.). As the incidence indicates, for Douglass, it was more important to be a man than to be free and his manhood was defined by power struggle. Later in his *Narrative of the Life*, he looks back at the fight almost nostalgically, recognizing that it "revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (Douglass, *Narrative* 2104). In another speech entitled "Self-Made Men," he places himself in a long line of men who

> owe little or nothing to birth, relationship, friendly surroundings; to wealth inherited or to early approved means of education; who are what they are, without the aid of any of the favoring conditions by which other men usually rise in the world and achieve great results. (n.pag)

According to bell hooks, the image of black masculinity that emerges from slave narratives such as this one is one of hardworking men who "longed to assume full patriarchal responsibility for families" ("Reconstructing" 300).

hooks' study indicates that African Americans in bondage were socialized by mainstream patriarchal society to believe that they should endeavor to become patriarchs by questing to attain the freedom to provide and protect black women, or in other words, to become benevolent patriarchs. As hooks explains,

> [b]enevolent patriarchs exercise their power . . . [on women]. And it was this notion of patriarchy that educated black men coming from slavery into freedom sought to mimic. However, a large majority of black men took as their standard the dominator model set by white masters. When slavery ended, these black men often used violence to dominate black women, which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slave master used. Some newly freed black men would take their wives to the barn to beat them as the white owner had done. Clearly, by the time slavery ended patriarchal masculinity had become an accepted ideal for most black men, an ideal that would be reinforced by twentieth-century norms. (*We Real* 4)

Even though there were rare black males who rejected the norms set by the mainstream society, there was an overwhelming adoption of patriarchal masculinity among African Americans (hooks 4). In fact, hooks states that there were rare individual black males who strategized resistance to slavery, plotted paths to freedom, and who invented new lives for themselves and their people against the white supremacist patriarchal norm (5). For instance, as Rudolph Byrd argues in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (2001), during slavery, there were rare African American men who adopted the role of the mythopoetic folk hero John as an example of an alternative masculine figure. As Byrd explains,

> [c]ommitted to the overthrow of slavery and the ideology of white supremacy, John is the supreme antagonist of "Old Massa" and the various hegemonic structures he and his descendants have created and, most disheartening, many of them predictably still cherish. In John's various acts of resistance are reflected his most exemplary values and attributes: motherwit, the power of laughter and song, self-assertion, self examination, self knowledge, a belief that life is process grounded in the fertile field of improvisation, hope, and most importantly love. And his aspirations? Nothing less than the full and complete emancipation of Black people from every species of slavery. These are the constitutive elements and aspiration that together comprise the tradition of John. In these days of so many hours, it is a mode of Black masculinity grounded in enduring principles that possesses . . . a broad and vital instrumentality. (7)

Thus, African Americans who opted for ways of liberation without resorting to a form of patriarchy or hegemony were indeed rare.

bell hooks conveys, even though most black men recognized the powerful and necessary role black women had played as freedom fighters in the effort to abolish slavery, they still wanted black women to be subordinate so that they could pursue an advantageous position. In that sense, they followed the same path that white males did in the white women's struggle to gain their rights (hooks, *We Real* 6). As she maintains,

> they wanted black women to conform to the gender norms set by white society. They wanted to be recognized as "men," as patriarchs, by other men, including white men. Yet they could not assume this position if black women were not willing to conform to prevailing sexist gender norms. Many black women who had endured white supremacist patriarchal domination during slavery did not want to be dominated by black men after manumission. Like black men, they had contradictory positions on gender. On the one hand, they did not want to be dominated, but on the other hand they wanted black men to be protectors and providers. After slavery ended, enormous tension and conflict emerged between black women and men as folks struggle to be self-determining. As they worked to create standards for community and family life, gender roles continued to be problematic. ("Reconstructing" 302)

In conclusion, these contradictions, as bell hooks explains above, became the norm in African American life. Many black males saw patriarchal masculinity as a crucial element of their masculine identity and performed it. Even though there exist different alternatives, as Rudolph Byrd exemplifies, for black males a restored and vigorous self esteem meant the embrace of patriarchal masculinity and for "most black men measuring against the norm would also be less than a man, failures, unable to realize the ideal" (hooks, *We Real* 14). Such thinking, as bell hooks suggests, brings about psychological unrest and disease, which turns into a masculinity crisis (14). Tragically, black men collectively began to blame black women for their fate caused by the performance of plantation patriarchy. Indeed, this blaming, as hooks puts it, "ignited the flames of a gender war so intense that it has practically consumed the historical memory of black males and females working together equally for liberation, creating love in family and community" (14). It has practically demolished, "beyond recognition the representation of an alternative black man seeking freedom for self and loved ones, a rebel black man eager to create and make his own destiny. This is the image of the black male that must be recovered, restored, so that it can stand as the

example of revolutionary manhood" (hooks, 14). Likewise, August Wilson shares the same concerns for black manhood. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, he exemplifies how his character Herald Loomis internalized "plantation patriarchy" as a crucial element of his masculine identity, and consequently, is doomed to experience a masculinity crisis.

1.2. Herald Loomis' Performance Crisis

When he was fourteen, August Wilson read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and the novel had a great impact on him when he began writing his plays years later. (Tyndall 27). In the novel, Invisible Man is a portrayal of a black man who is unaware of his identity and considers himself to be socially invisible. Along with *Invisible Man,* as Charles Tyndall points out, the protagonist in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940)*,* Bigger Thomas, was a sort of inspiration for August Wilson as well (27). Bigger Thomas is the focus of the novel and the embodiment of its main theme: — the consequences of racism on the psychological state of black males. Influenced by the presence of two significant masterpieces in African American literature, Wilson created his protagonist Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1911, in order to settle the connection between "oppression, self-image, and black masculinity" (Tyndall 27). According to African American theater scholar Paul Carter Harrison, through Loomis, Wilson "is placing a face on the Invisible Man while refiguring the turbulent angst of Bigger Thomas into gestures of liberation" (299). Similar to Invisible Man and Bigger Thomas, Loomis also experiences a masculine identity crisis because of his recent imprisonment and his insistence on performing the hegemonic masculinity.

The story of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is actually quite straightforward. Herald Loomis, with his daughter Zonia, enters Seth and Bertha Holly's boarding house in Pittsburgh in search of his wife, Martha, whom he has not seen for the past ten years because of her move from Memphis to Pittsburgh while he was serving a seven-year peonage. He wants to find her because he believes that seeing her face is the only thing that would help him to restart his life. Loomis, on conjure-man Bynum Walker's advice, hires Selig Rutherford, a peddler and "people finder," to locate his wife. Selig

returns with Martha after seven days, Loomis delivers his daughter, Zonia to his wife and leaves the boarding house.

Historically, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* deals with the migratory nature of the African American community in the 1910s, reminding audiences that slavery is not a forgotten memory. Wilson remarks that because *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is set much closer to the days of slavery, and he takes "advantage of some of the African retentions of the characters . . . they're Black Americans, they speak English, but their world view is African" (Powers 53). A reckless quest for a masculine identity illustrates Herald Loomis' wandering. Even though the play is set only seven years after *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), historical precedent suggests that the migratory nature of the black community had enormously intensified within that time period. Because of its migratory nature, the play exemplifies bell hooks' argument of how black males embodied the "plantation patriarchy" as a model of masculinity and were taught to perform hegemonic masculinity.

Historians argue that the Great Migration, during which millions of African Americans moved from the South to the North, occurred between 1877 (the end of Reconstruction) and 1929 (the beginning of the Great Depression) (Bell 44). However, Kim Pereira notes that the black population in the South decreased less than three percent between the years 1877 and 1910, while between the years 1910 and 1930, "the black population doubled and trebled in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and New York" (56). A vast majority of African Americans experienced the dual paradox: on the one hand, they were detained by plantation owners who maintained their authority after the Civil War by authorizing Jim Crow laws. On the other hand, African Americans who departed from the South to the North were not able to find a welcoming place.

In order to contrast and magnify the sense of displacement each of the ex-slaves experienced in the North, Wilson personified many elements of the setting. In a note entitled "The Play" that precedes the text, Wilson offers the following contextualization:

> It is August in Pittsburgh 1911. The sun falls out of heaven like a stone. From the deep and near South, the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their hearts 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 the 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.
>
> Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and whelp of joy. (Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* 6)

In a fitting manner, the play takes place in Seth Holly's boardinghouse, which he runs with his wife Bertha, a way station for wayward individuals whose stay is usually brief, seeking to find a sense of self or in other words, their "song" (6). In Loomis' case, he attempts to rediscover, repossess and redefine his masculinity as a free black man. Throughout the play, the audience witnesses how Herald Loomis experiences a masculinity dilemma that involves assimilation into the hegemonic masculinity or returning to the African sensibilities that hooks and Wilson highlight.

In *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, the most grievous victim, the man who endures the brutality of slavery is Herald Loomis. He has been seized and forced to serve seven years in Joe Turner's chain gang. Consequently, he suffers the most excessive alienation, which he desires to terminate by meeting his wife Martha, for whom he has spent four years searching. Loomis' role as husband and father is stolen from him the moment he is captured by Joe Turner, a character who is based on the actual brother of Tennessee Governor Pete Turner.[1] His world is completely shattered after returning home and to find that the people who once depended on him are no longer there. As he explains in Act II Scene II:

> My wife Martha gone from me after Joe Turner catched me. Got out from under Joe Turner on his birthday. Me and forty other men put in our seven years and he let us go on his birthday. I made it back to Henry Thompson's place where me and Martha was sharecropping and Martha's gone. She taken my little girl and left her with her mama and took off North. We

been looking for her ever since. That's the only thing I know to do. I just wanna see her face so I can get me a starting place in the world. The world got to start somewhere. That's what I been looking for. I been wandering a long time in somebody else's world. When I find my wife that be the making of my own. (69)

Since Wilson favors returning to African heritage and rediscovering African characteristics of masculinity as opposed to hegemonic masculinity, with Herald Loomis, he exemplifies the dilemma that many black males have faced. In order to come to terms with his masculine identity, Herald Loomis is supposed to undergo a spiritual quest, which will be guided by Bynum, the conjure man. Bynum will direct him to a greater self-awareness, to rediscover his "song." Yet it is not an easy task for both of them because Loomis has been estranged from his African ancestry and has been taught to be a "benevolent patriarch" in his bondage. As bell hooks formerly elaborated on African American males' involvement in plantation patriarchy, Loomis associates his freedom, or, in other words, finding his "song," or masculine identity with finding Martha. That is why, he oppresses not only himself, but also those around him. What he must do is come to terms with his African ancestry and discover "his father's house" he has left in the past (Devries 29). The theme of returning to his father's house in the odyssey of self-empowerment is part of Loomis's recognition of his African heritage and a symbol of the rejection of the plantation patriarchy.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone is a play in which the protagonist's spiritual confrontation with his identity is ritualized and dramatized concretely on stage. In that sense, there are ritualistic elements throughout the play, which help the audience understand the intertwined relationship between Loomis and Bynum. These ritualistic elements play an enormous role in Loomis' realization of his African ancestry. In that sense, in the rest of this chapter, Bynum, rituals, as well as Marta's role in Herald Loomis's realization of his "song," will be discussed and the discussion will be concluded with an analysis of Loomis' rejection of African sensibilities and his performance of "plantation patriarchy," which will condemn his future.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone begins on a Saturday morning in August 1911 in Pittsburgh and ends two weeks later. As the lights come up in Act I, boardinghouse

owner Seth Holly and his wife, Bertha are in the kitchen. Bertha, who manages the boardinghouse, prepares breakfast, while Bynum and Selig join them and eventually they start to discuss the outcomes of emancipation. Later on, Bynum asks Selig, the people finder, if he has found his "shiny man." [2] Bynum is a rootworker, a conjurer, with a special connection to nature and community. His strength comes from a tradition that stretches directly back through slavery to his African roots. Wilson describes Bynum in the stage directions in Act I Scene I, as giving "the impression of always being in control of everything. Nothing ever bothers him. He seems to be lost in a world of his own making and to swallow any adversity or interference with his grand design" (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 10). At the beginning of the play, Bynum describes a vision he saw in which he was shown the way to his "song," his identity, by the shiny man and the spirit of his father. In his vision, Bynum is told that if he sees another shiny man in a later phase of his life, he would know that his "song" has been accepted and realized to its fullest potential; this will allow Bynum to die a happy man.

Having found his "song," Bynum's mission now is to help others find their songs. He chooses "the Binding Song" "because that's what [he sees] most when [he] is travelling . . . people walking away and leaving one another" (Wilson 10). He looks around at a fractured race of wandering people and knows he has to spend his life healing the wounds caused by shattered relationships, bringing together these people dispersed by chance and circumstance. Bynum will help various characters throughout the play, especially Herald Loomis. The relationship between Loomis and Bynum is quite significant because they are interdependent on each other. In other words, Bynum, as a conjure man, is looking for his "shiny man" while Loomis has to find his "song" with Bynum's help, which highlights hooks' and Wilson's aim to illustrate that an African American man's liberation from hegemonic masculinity can come through a spiritual and cultural connection with his community and through recognition of his ancestry.

When the audience encounters Herald Loomis, whose disruption is driven by his reaction to the other members' participation in the juba in the boarding house, "we are initiated into a world where the natural and supernatural coexist and impinge upon one another" (Bogumil 466). As Wilson states in the stage directions in Act I Scene IV, the

juba is a dance that usually begins after Sunday suppers in the boarding house (*Joe Turner's* 50):

> *The Juba is reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves. It is a call and response dance. BYNUM sits at the table and drums. He calls the dance as others clap their hands, shuffle and stomp around the table. It should be as African as possible, with performers working themselves up unto a near frenzy. The words can be improvised, but should include some mention of the Holy Ghost*. (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 50)

The dance, according to Mary Bogumil, "signifies the recurrence (in memories, in deeds, and in visions) of remote ancestral ties — a paternal cultural legacy from the characters' African forefathers" [3](465). The juba — as a song, as a dance, with all its competing cultural resonances — has an important role in the play. Specifically, in the final scene of Act 1, all the residents of the boarding house converse after Sunday dinner, except for Herald Loomis. As they perform the juba, the atmosphere becomes more and more jubilant. Then Loomis enters and cries out for them to stop. He blasphemes the Holy Ghost, the greatness of God's grandeur, and then unzips his pants. He states,

> You all sitting up here singing about the Holy Ghost? You singing and singing. You think the Holy Ghost is coming? You sing for the Holy Ghost to come? What he gonna do, huh? He going come with tongues of fire to burn up your woolly heads? You gonna tie onto the Holy Ghost and get burned up? What you got then? Why God got to be so Big? Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there? How much big do you want? *(starts to unzip his pants)*. (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 50)

 All are devastated as Loomis suddenly loses all rational control, criticizes God strongly but in the meanwhile "begins to speak in tongues." As he starts to leave, he "is thrown back and collapses, terror-stricken by his vision" (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 51). What bothers Herald Loomis about the juba, which is performed by the residents of the boarding house, is the sense of community and the legacy of Africa, which Loomis has forgotten during his bondage in Joe Turner's gang. Since he does not know his "song," he certainly cannot be part of a group celebrating duality, and his masculine identity splits into two. His reaction to the juba indicates how he is taught to

perform "plantation patriarchy" while estranged from his African sensibilities. As Bogumil argues,

> [p]erhaps what disturbs Herald Loomis about the characters' participation in the dance is that sense of community, of solidarity, of an atavistic legacy of Africa, but sadly also of the bondage still in the consciousness of the post - Civil War generation all of which are in sharp contrast to his desire for autonomy. Why do they laud it over him? Why do they wish to be reminded of their cultural past? Is not the juba a connection to that unwanted past or tradition? Herald Loomis, a member of the post-Civil War generation, attempts to sever that native African connection to the earth and to break free from that past American connection to Joe Turner enslavement in order to become Americanized in post-Emancipation Proclamation America. Surrounded by what he perceives as a conspiratorial group [the other boarders], Loomis even degrades his own ancestry with his vociferous attack against the religiomagical elements of his African American ethnicity, including physical and sexual stereotypes, to further his insult upon others present. (Bogumil 469)

Loomis' actions and thoughts about the juba convey, in his bondage, he was estranged from his African ancestry, and was inculcated with the "plantation patriarchy." Thus, he denigrates the Holy Ghost and the boarders' "Africanness," while identifying himself with racist stereotypes of sexual prowess by displaying his penis. As bell hooks previously articulates when African Americans came to the New World, they were not obsessed with sexuality. On the contrary, they were coming from worlds "where collective survival was more important than the acting out of sexual desire, and they were coming into a world where survival was more important than sexual desire" (hooks, *We Real* 66). African men in the New World "automatically entered a setting where the sexual script was encoded with sadomasochistic rituals of domination of power and play" (hooks, *We Real* 66). In Loomis' case, he was taught to equate his manhood with sexuality and to see manhood as synonymous with endless sexual conquest.

However, after experiencing the power of juba, Loomis tells the crowd that he has seen things that he cannot explain, just as Bynum saw things he could not explain at the beginning of the play when he encountered the spirit of his father and the shiny man. Guided by Bynum, Loomis describes his vision: "bones that rise out of the water and transformed into black people" (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 51). In an interview with Kim Powers, Wilson explains Loomis' vision and how it connects to his identity:

> [Loomis] is witness to bones rising up out of the ocean, taking on flesh and walking up on the land. This is his connection with the ancestors, the Africans who were lost during Middle Passage and were thrown overboard. He is privileged to witness this because he needs most to know who he is. It [the vision] is telling him, "This is who you are. You are these bones. You are the sons and daughters of these people. They are walking around here now and they look like you because you are these very same people. This is who you are." (54)

As Wilson asserts, Loomis' vision represents oppressed and deeply troubled black males. Loomis' vision also has a profoundly representative aspect, exemplifying the collective trauma of the transmission of Africans across the Atlantic and their bondage in an alien land. In his vision, Loomis desperately desires to stand up like the bones, yet he realizes that his legs cannot carry him. The first act ends with Loomis collapsing on the floor as the lights go down. It becomes clear that in order to find his masculine identity, to forget the influence of the "plantation patriarchy," Loomis must become acquainted with his ancestors. He has to begin an odyssey of "self-assertion, self examination, and self knowledge" or as Rudolph Byrd pointed out, to become the black Iron John (7).

In Act II Scene I, which takes place the following day, Seth tells Loomis that he has to leave the boarding house after his breakdown. Loomis reminds Seth that he is paid up through the week, so he is not going anywhere. While Seth and Bynum play dominoes, Bynum sings a song about Joe Turner. Loomis demands that Bynum stop singing about Joe Turner (Wilson 66). Bynum looks at Loomis and makes a proclamation about him: Loomis has forgotten his "song" and how to sing it (66). Bynum also tells Loomis that he figured out that Joe Turner enslaved Loomis, which in turn lets Loomis suppress his "song." Without it, Loomis is doomed to wander through life aimlessly, unaware of who he is or what his purpose may be.

The experience of intense oppression can have disastrous psychological and spiritual effects on black manhood. Loomis at first desperately denies it when Bynum identifies him as "one of Joe Turner's niggers."As Loomis exclaims, "You lie! How you see that? I got a mark on me? Joe Turner done marked me to where you can see it?" (68) However, Bynum as the mouthpiece of spiritual wisdom, the conjure man of the play,

deduces that Loomis has forgotten "how to sing [his] song." This song is the music of each man's essential nature; his masculine identity. As Kim Pereira suggests, the song with its special rhythms "dictates the course of each one's destiny. Each song is unique, with its unique power that derives from the unique mix of each person's characteristics" (66). The song, Bynum tells Loomis, was a burden, and initially he tried to give it back to his father. As Brian Crow states, Bynum's song, which he sings to Loomis, has been formulated from the deepest recesses of his self. "It is also associated with his powers as a 'rootworker' and the ancestral wisdom and knowledge" (59) from which this "old mumbo jumbo nonsense" or "that heebie-jebie stuff," as Seth calls it, originates (8). As Bynum tells Loomis,

> I can tell from looking at you. My daddy taught me how to do that. Say when you look a fellow, if you taught yourself to look for it, you can see his song written on him. Tell you what kind of man he is in the world. Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. Forget how he's supposed to mark down life. Now, I used to travel all up and down, this road and that … looking here and there. Searching. Just like you, Mr. Loomis. I didn't know what I was searching for. The only thing I knew was something was keeping me dissatisfied. Something wasn't making my heart smooth and easy. Then one day my daddy gave me a song. That song was hard to carry. I fought against it. Didn't want to accept that song I tried to find out it wasn't his song. It was my song. It had come from way deep inside me. I looked long back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. . . . See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it . . . till he find out he's got it with him all the time. That's why I can tell you one of Joe Turner's niggers. 'Cause you forgot how to sing your song. (68)

By telling stories, Bynum is able to illustrate his past self and to show that it was oppressive until he connected with Africa ("looked long back in memory") and accepted his Africanness. In a sense, by telling stories he implies that the "songs" of black males are lost or overshadowed due to the performance of the "plantation patriarchy" but they are recoverable through community storytelling and memory. Once he is able to do this, Bynum begins to carry the enslavement of his ancestors within himself, and this strengthens him because he comes to terms with his "song." After Bynum's encouraging statements regarding remembering his "song," in Act II Scene II, Loomis recounts to Seth and Bynum how Joe Turner imprisoned him for seven years, and ruining his life.

LOOMIS: I ain't never seen Joe Turner. Seen him to where I could touch him. I asked one of them fellows one time why he catch niggers. Asked him what I got he want? Why he got to catch me going down the road by my lonesome? He told me I was worthless. Worthless is something you throw away. Something you don't bother with I ain't seen him throw me away. Wouldn't even let me stay away when I was by my lonesome. I ain't tried to catch him when he going down the road. So I must got something he want. What I got?

SETH: He just want you to do his work for him. That's all.

LOOMIS: I can look at him and see where he big and strong enough to do his own work. So it can't be that. He must want something he ain't got.

BYNUM: That ain't hard to figure out. What he wanted was your song. He wanted to have the song to be his. He thought by catching you he could learn that song. Every nigger he catch he's looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he's got you bound up to where you can't sing your own song. Couldn't sing it them seven years cause you was afraid he would snatch it from under you. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it.

LOOMIS (*To Bynum*): I know who you are. You are one of them bones people. (70)

As the excerpt indicates, Wilson uses Joe Turner as a symbolic representation of the mainstream American oppression of African Americans. In terms of masculinity, the excerpt also highlights bell hooks' concept of the "plantation patriarchy." Slaves, similar to Loomis were taught patriarchal masculinity and they forgot about their African sensibilities with respect to their manhood. That is why, after their emancipation, when they freely reunited with their community, they experienced a masculinity dilemma. As opposed to individuality, which was perpetuated by hegemonic masculinity, Wilson emphasizes the importance of masculinity in relation to the African community. By claiming his African ancestry and remembering the slaves from the Middle Passage, Loomis is expected to discover his "song," to have a kinship with those Africans and become one of them.

Along with his estrangement from African manhood, Loomis's crisis in his masculinity is doubled when Martha becomes the most crucial part of his identity, which highlights bell hooks' idea about black males' internalization of the "benevolent

patriarch." It is crucial for Loomis to find his wife because he needs her to need him so that he can restore his purpose in life. He believes that finding her will allow him to, once again, fulfill his conception of masculinity. Through the experiences of Loomis, Wilson suggests that not all is restored immediately post-emancipation. He explains that black males who have survived slavery, which was an attempt to destroy a native culture, carry with them deep wounds that restrain their ability to recognize themselves as whole men. Wilson explains that

> [t]he seven years in which his world is torn asunder and his life is turned upside down, can in fact represent the four hundred years of slavery, of being taken out of Africa and brought to America. At some point someone says, "Okay, you're free. What do you do?" Who are you, first of all, and what do you do now that you're free?" which is Loomis's question. He searches for a woman to say goodbye to and to find a world that contains his image, because there's nothing about the world he finds himself in that speaks to the thing that's beating inside his chest. (Powers 54)

Herald Loomis is plagued by his missing wife. Without his wife, he finds no continuity in his life. The tragedy here is that Loomis does not know how to stand on his own feet. Through another character and a journey to the City of Bones — the underwater graveyard for the masses of the blacks who died crossing the Atlantic on their bloody journey into slavery —, he learns that it is his "song," his identity, that has been stolen by Joe Turner and must be restored before he can fully stand on his own feet (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 68). Since he was taught to be the "benevolent patriarch" in Joe Turner's gang, losing his wife was a tremendous defeat for him. He thinks his male identity rests in his wife and it will be restored by her return. (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 68). Yet, as Wilson indicates in the play, Loomis' identity will only be recuperated through a process of self-recognition and an acceptance of his ancestry. By motivating Selig to find Martha, Bynum facilitates Loomis's discovery that his identity is not linked to Martha, but rather to his African ancestry. In other words, Bynum stresses the difference between masculine identity and human identity. Bynum asserts that even if a man forgets his "song," and goes off in search of it, the song is usually with the man all the time (68). Loomis has his song with him all the time — the song of self-sufficiency or the song of non-dependence on white men or women —, even when he suppressed it so that Joe Turner cannot take it from him (68).

Nonetheless, in Act II Scene V, Loomis accuses Bynum of binding him to the road, declaring that he is not going to be bound up anymore, and pulls out a knife. He slashes himself across the chest and exclaims, "I am standing now" as he walks away (86). This symbolic break from Martha is connected to bell hooks' argument on the plantation patriarchy. Martha, in the eyes of Loomis, is a feminine force that does not enable Loomis to perform his hegemonic masculinity. Thus, Loomis frees himself from the struggles caused by Joe Turner's imprisonment only by freeing himself from his wife and daughter. Like the typical American man, Loomis departs triumphantly — alone. As Carla McDonough contends,

> [w]hile this ending positively affirms Loomis' identity after the crushing blows that have been dealt him by Joe Turner's chain gang, it leaves yet another shattered family in the long tradition of these for African Americans. This conflict between a man and his family also reflects the traditional split of the American hero. This tradition sets up the female as the presence that the male must exorcise from his life in order to assert his own identity. Just as Huck Finn ran away from Aunt Sally, as Mamet's Edmond and Rabe's Phil left their wives, and as Shepard's western heroes fled the feminine in their lives, Loomis too flees his ties with the feminine and with the entire community of the boarding house. (151)

Even though Loomis finally accepts "responsibility for his own presence in the world" (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 86) and stands on his own feet as an African American man at the end of the play, the problem of masculine identity, which according to Wilson demands a spiritual and cultural connection with one's family and through recognition of his ancestry, is not resolved in the play.

As Sandra Shannon points out, "August Wilson has apparently chosen to focus on an African American man's oppression in this country to symbolize the collective struggles of all African American males" ("The Good" 127). In that sense, Wilson values masculinity that demands from his male characters a deep sense of recognition and appreciation of their rich heritage and the acceptance that they are indeed responsible for their family and play a vital role in their community. As he suggests, in order to understand who African American males are, they "have to understand their immediate ancestors. They got to make this connection with their recent past in order to understand the present and then to plot the future" (Boyd 237). According to Brian

Crow, the power of African sensibilities, which is also a way of being and "which can be mysteriously elicited from the ancestral past at crucial moments by certain specially empowered characters is enough to bring connection and the restoration of the integrated self even where there has been a long history of oppression and alienation" (58). In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* it is Bynum who possesses this power, through his acquisition of the "biding song" from his visionary experience on the road with the "shinny man" and his father. Through Bynum, as J. Herrington asserts, Wilson hoped to show "the continuing role of African mysticism in the lives of his characters and the potential of what Wilson terms 'African retentions,' which, in his view, can serve as both a source of strength and a kind of psychic balm for the 20th century African American men" (81). Bynum seems to be suggesting that black males will never find their true identity, their "song," unless they visit their fathers' house once they have left, since the destinies of African Americans are inextricably linked to their ancestors.

However, Loomis fails to understand what Bynum has done: he believes that Bynum, like Joe Turner and others, has used his song to bind him in the sense of coercing or imprisoning him. As he says in Act II Scene V,

> "[e]verywhere I go people wanna bind me up. Joe Turner wanna bind me up! Reverend Tolliver wanna bind me up. You wanna bind me up. Well Joe Turner's come and gone and Herald Loomis ain't for no binding. I ain't let nobody bind me up!" (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 83-84)

and he angrily reacts to this perception by drawing a knife. Bynum explains what is happening: "you binding yourself. You bound onto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it Herald Loomis. It is right there kicking at your throat. All you got to do is sing it. Then you be free" (84). Nonetheless, it is only after the catharsis of injuring himself across the chest that Loomis realizes he has attained his freedom, or as Wilson conveys in stage directions, has "accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world" and leaves (86).

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* Herald Loomis realizes that the only solution to his personal fragmentation is to aggressively claim his own body, identity, and self and in doing so retrieve his inner "song." However, since he has been taught to be a

"patriarch," and learned to perform hegemonic masculinity in his bondage, he chooses the way of the white man and runs away leaving his family and evading all responsibilities for his family and community. At the end of the play, he chooses to be a father isolated from his family and his community. The only reunion is between Martha and their daughter Zonia, whom Loomis delivers to his estranged wife with the admonition:

> Martha … here go your daughter. I tried to take care of her. See that she had something to eat. See that she was out of the elements. Whatever I know I tried to teach her. Now she need to learn from her mother whatever you got to teach her. That way she won't be no one-sided person. *(Loomis stoops to Zonia)*
>
> Zonia, you go live with your mama. She a good woman. You go on with her and listen to her good. You my daughter and I love you like a daughter. I hope to see you again in the world somewhere. I'll never forget you. (Wilson, *Joe Turner's* 83)

At the end of the play, the emphasis is on Herald Loomis as an individual, on his success as a "newly whole man" (Wilson 85). As his name suggests, Loomis heralds a new era for black masculinity. He begins to live a new century with a new sense of manhood, but what sort of man he will become remains a mystery.

In conclusion*,* as David Grazian points out, masculinity represents a range of "dramaturgical performances" that males exhibit through different concepts and in varying periods (222). *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* the second play set in the first half of the twentieth century in *The Pittsburg Cycle,* illustrates the performance crisis that black males confronted after their emancipation. In the case of Herald Loomis, Wilson demonstrates that at the root of the African American male crisis is his failure to know his history and to know who he is and where he has been. As the end of the play shows, Herald Loomis' reconstruction of black masculinity does not empower the connection among the black community that Wilson valued and emphasized so much. Whereas an unconventional perspective on masculinity gave Loomis alternative grounds on which to build a healthy self-esteem through the sense of community, the embrace of "patriarchal masculinity" meant that Loomis was not able to realize the ideal that Bynum has presented. As bell hook says, by the time slavery ended,

"patriarchal masculinity had become an accepted ideal for most black men, an ideal that would be reinforced by twentieth - century norms" (4). Many black men thought that masculine identity was rooted in the hegemonic patriarchal ideal. They believed that patriarchal masculinity was a crucial part of their identity. Loomis' presence in *The Pittsburgh Cycle* reinforced the fact that African American men who adopted hegemonic masculinity, particularly the "plantation patriarchy" as a model for themselves, were, as Ellis Cose asserted, eventually "doomed to fail," by experiencing a masculinity crisis (12). As the second and the third chapters of this thesis will demonstrate, Wilson's male characters who adopt and perform hegemonic masculinity as a model for themselves, will never be able to fulfill the necessities of normative definitions of masculinity. Instead of finding a solution to their masculinity issues, they will rather transfer their own masculine identity struggle onto others.

Notes

[1] According to Samuel Hay, while writing *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* August Wilson was inspired by Romare Bearden's collage *Mill Hands Lunch Bucket* (1978), which features a hunched-over man sitting sideways in a chair in front of a table with a man, who was dejected as well as W.C. Handy's song *Joe Turner's Blues* (1915) (92). As Samuel Hay tells the story,

> The Tennessee governor Pete Turner wrote Handy, charged his brother Joe to take black prisoners from Memphis to the Nashville penitentiary. A Kangaroo court had convicted them for playing craps. But Joe Turner took them, instead, to farms along the Mississippi River where they were needed because of the loss of more than 37 000 area blacks to Pittsburgh alone during the 1910-20 period of the Great Migration. Turner's prisoners worked off their "debt to society" for seven years. Handy said that as local women missed their man, they asked a neighbor what had become of him, and they likely received the pat reply, "They Tell me Joe Turner's Come and Gone." Handy's blues, interestingly, turned Joe Turner into a "masculine victim of unrequited love, who sang sadly but jauntily." Wilson replaced the Handy blues storyline with the traditional story, but kept the masculine victim as the subject of unanswered love. (92)

[2] Douglas Anderson defines the shiny man as:

> an ordinary man who, possessing his song [identity] as a "voice inside him telling him which way to go," is able to guide others toward repossession of their songs, toward becoming shiny men in their own right [...] And since "that shine could pass on to anybody," the shiny man is also the individual who has not yet found his song, one who searches for himself. That search takes place in the world. (449)

Despite seemingly contradictory (a shiny man "possessing his song" and "has not yet found his song"), the first part of the excerpt alludes to a known shiny man, while the last part of the excerpt alludes to a shiny man who has not yet realized his calling. Through the course of the play, the audience learns that the pre-shiny man who cannot recognize who he is, and thus not fully a "shiny man," is Loomis.

[3] As Mary Bogumil points out in her article. "'Tomorrow Never Comes': Songs of Cultural Identity in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*," as a dance, the juba was performed in the antebellum plantations in the South, "a dance whose choreography consisted of the clapping of hands, the patting of knees and thighs, the striking of feet on the floor, and the singing of a refrain where the word 'juba' was

repeated, a refrain that acted as an incantation to the Holy Ghost or an invocation to manifest a transcendent being" (466). As she suggests the juba was a source of communication among African Americans and it sustained a sense of community in black society.

CHAPTER II

"COOLNESS" AS A MASK IN AUGUST WILSON'S

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

The Pool Players
Seven at the Garden Shovel

We real cool. We	*I play it cool*
Left school. We	*And dig all jive,*
	That's the reason
Lurk late. We	*I stay alive.*
Strike straight. We	*My motto as I live and learn*
	is: Dig and be dug in return.
Sing sin. We	
Thin gin. We	Langston Hughes*, "Motto"*
Jazz June. We	
Die soon.	

Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool"

Traditionally, men define their sense of masculinity through their roles in the community as the protector, the provider as well as the breadwinner. However, many African American men who are left without the means to fulfill these normative roles become angry and alienated (Majors and Billson 5). In order to formulate some strategy to cope with in these unstable times, they have developed and performed a "cool pose" or "tough-guy" image to conceal their anger and disappointment. As Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes suggest in their poems, the "cool pose" has become an inextricable part of black male identity. Since the "cool" purports different meanings for both poets, it would be beneficial to analyze the "cool" in order to understand its influence on black males' lives. Indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter, bell hooks elaborately describes the black masculinity crisis in each chapter in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity.* Even though she does not refer to Gwendolyn Brooks for the title of her book, in her "The Coolness of Being Real," she discusses cool pose briefly and states that "cool" was

> defined by ways in which black men confronted the hardships of life
> without allowing their spirits to be ravaged. They took the pain of it and

used it alchemically to turn the pain into gold. That burning process required high heat. Black male cool was defined by the ability to withstand the heat and remain centered. It was defined by black male willingness to confront reality, to face the truth, and bear it not by adopting a false pose of cool while feeding on fantasy; not by black male denial or by assuming a 'poor me' victim identity. It was defined by individual black males daring to self-define rather than be defined by others. (138)

A more elaborated discussion of the "cool" is articulated by black masculinity scholars Richard Majors' and Janet Mancini whose *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1992) brings an explanation as to how cool is experienced among black males and traces the history of black posturing back to Africa and the slave era. Accordingly, dominant in today's black males' lives, the "cool pose" helps some black males; yet in many circumstances, it may exact an enormous price in black males' lives. Apparently, because of the performance of the "cool," many African American males become distanced from their relationships and their own feelings, which results in black-on-black crime (Majors and Billson 41).

In the light of Major and Billson's "cool pose" theory, the second chapter of this thesis is going to analyze how the performance of "coolness" works destructively in Levee's actions and thoughts in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985). *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, as Paul Carter Harrison suggests, depicts "itinerant blues musicians in a rehearsal room engaged in the male ritual aggression of 'lyin' and 'signifyin' while exchanging survival tales about coming and going in a hostile world, taunting each other with a contrapuntal — call 'n' response — choral configuration which presses them to the edge of physical confrontation" (306–7). One of the musicians in this band and the protagonist of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* Levee wants to succeed in a white-dominated world by abandoning his own black heritage. He desires to separate himself from his past in order to embrace a flashier and financially more rewarding future. Because of his inculcation in patriarchal masculinity, he is preoccupied with hegemonic and market-based values. In order to come to terms with these values, he masks his masculinity crisis by performing "cool," yet he is deformed to varying degrees for his "coolness," which transforms into black-on-black crime. Thus the play becomes a study of demonstration of how the cool pose, which on the

surface seems to exalt and glorify being black actually causes the demise of the black soul and identity.

2.1. Performing The "Cool Pose": The Dilemmas of Black Masculinity

In American society, discrimination and racism have historically exacted a great deal of suffering and injustice on black males. As Richard Majors and Janet Billson argue, being black and male has meant "being psychologically castrated — rendered impotent in the economic, political and social arenas that whites have historically dominated" (16). As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, black males thoroughly internalized the traditional norms of hegemonic masculinity long ago. In their involvement in hegemonic masculinity, they have defined manhood in terms familiar to white men as: "breadwinner," "provider," "procreator," "protector." As opposed to white men, however, a preponderant majority of black males do not have consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success. It was only quite recently that they came to terms with the normative notions of masculinity — "thrift, perseverance and hard work" (Majors and Billson 1) — which have not brought them the same palpable benefits enjoyed by white males. As black masculinity scholars Majors and Billson suggest, many African American males have become "frustrated, angry, embittered, alienated and impatient" (1). That is why a great deal of black males have become incredulous towards the actions and words of hegemonic culture.

The Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America is about how African American males have adopted and performed "cool" masculinity — or as Majors and Billson prefer to call it, the "cool pose" — as a way of surviving hegemonic masculinity. As they point out, *The Cool Pose* is about "how black males have created a tool for hammering masculinity out of the bronze of their daily lives. What is more, it is about how the cool pose propels black males on a collision course with each other" and with mainstream hegemonic society (2).

In Majors and Billson's identification, there exists an intricately interwoven relationship between black masculinity and the "cool pose." They maintain that "the ironclad façade of the cool pose is a signature of true masculinity, but it is one dimensional. If it fails, masculinity fails" (28). Furthermore, since performing "cool"

constitutes the basis of the masculine identity of black males, it requires a great deal of physical and psychological performance and energy. As Majors and Billson suggest, for black males whose masculinity is determined so completely by the "cool pose," "unmasking is equivalent to being stripped off their masculine identity and being defenseless" in the hegemonic society (29). In other words, for African Americans, the cool pose is a way of saying "you might break my back but not my spirit." It is the African American men's "last-ditch effort for masculine self-control" (29). However, when they are disunited from the "cool pose," there emerges two significant outcomes: rigidity and aggression. In other words, "a potpourri of violence, toughness, and symbolic control over others constitutes a prime means" (33) through which black men can perform masculinity. As Majors and Billson point out, "violence has become a readily available and seemingly realistic tool for achieving these critical social rewards; it is in this sense that violence can even become a form of achievement when everything else has failed" (33).

In their thorough analysis of what it means to be "cool," black and male in America, Majors and Billson argue that the performance of "coolness" in African American masculinity, with few exceptions, has been basically ignored. Accordingly, due to the fact that social scientists are inclined to perceive "cool" as a colloquial term — and because they do not consider cool as a coping mechanism — studies tend to be more descriptive than analytical (3). That is why, Majors and Billson dwell upon the social, historical and cultural importance of "coolness" in the lives of black males. They explore how African American males, specifically those who live in lower economic circumstances, perform "cool behavior" as an expressive acting out that helps them counter stress caused by hegemonic masculinity (3).

They illustrate that, historically, the performance of "cool," which has played a significant role in the social and cultural development of African Americans, goes back to West Africa. Apparently,

> [c]oolness was central to the culture of many ancient African civilizations. Cultural anthropologist John Janzer dates the phenomenon of cool in Africa back to at least 2000-3000 B.C. He believes that coolness was expressed in oral culture, character building, artwork, linguistics, dance, initiation rituals, warrior cults, mating rituals, and the concept of health. As an ancient and indigenous part of black culture, the idea of cool bears a

> spiritual meaning: sense of control, symmetry, correct presentation of self, and sophistication. Coolness is a part of character — *ashe*. . . . A noble confidence and mystic coolness of character, ashe reveals an inner spirituality and peace that marks the strongest of men. True ashe is a reflection of true inner turmoil and anxiety. That mask became a matter of survival, as well as of spirituality during the grim transfer of Africans to the Americas via enslavement. (58)

In their bondage, black males learn that a male stands for being responsible and a good provider for himself and his family. For them, though, this is not a straightforward achievement in reality. Outlets for achieving masculine pride and identity, particularly in political, economic and educational systems, are more fully available to white males than to black males. Thus, denied access to mainstream avenues of success, black males have created their own voice (Majors 2). The most prized possession of black males is their identity or "ashe." That is why creativity and imagination are the only limits in establishing a personal status based on "posturing, prevarication and coolness" (59). As Majors and Billson state, in the hegemonic society, black males have mastered the art of concealment and have constructed masks. (2) Thus, in order to cope with the hegemonic masculinity, some black males have built a symbolic world. Having been denied a natural development of his sense of manliness, black male must constantly prove to himself that "he is a man, he is worthy as well as powerful" (2). Accordingly,

> [u]nique patterns of speech, walk and demeanor express the cool pose. This strategic style allows the black male to tip society's imbalanced scales in his favor. Coolness means poise under pressure and the ability to maintain detachment, even during tense encounters. Being cool invigorates a life that would otherwise be degrading and empty. It helps the black male make sense out of his life and get what he wants from others. The cool pose brings a dynamic vitality into the black male's everyday encounters, transforming the mundane into the sublime and making the routine spectacular. (Majors 2)

As they explain, African American males, as a reaction to hegemonic masculinity, and in order to reestablish their male identity, perform "coolness." In that sense, the "cool" pose can be defined as a "ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control" (4). African Americans who act out "coolness" are often

chameleon-like in their uncanny ability to change their performance to meet the expectations of a particular situation or audience. They attain the impression they communicate to others through the use of an imposing array of masks, acts, and façades. (4)

As a performance, while the "cool pose" is constructed to render African Americans visible and to empower them, it lessens the worry and pain caused by the hegemonic masculinity. Acting out coolness is an "ego booster" for African American males "comparable to the kind white males more easily find through attending good schools, landing prestigious jobs, and bringing home decent wages" (5). As Majors and Billson elucidate, the

> [c]ool pose is constructed from attitudes and actions that become firmly entrenched in the black male's psyche as he adopts a façade to ward off the anxiety of second-class status. It provides a mask that suggests competence, high self-esteem, control, and inner strength. It also hides self-doubt, insecurity, and inner turmoil.
>
> By acting calm, emotionless, fearless, aloof, and tough, the African American male strives to offset an externally imposed 'zero' image. Being cool shows both the dominant culture and the black male himself that he is strong and proud. He is somebody. He is a survivor, in spite of the systematic harm done by the legacy of slavery and the realities of racial oppression, in spite of the centuries of hardship and mistrust. (5)

As their excerpt indicates, performing "cool" enhances the black man's pride and character and helps him cope with conflict and anxiety that is aroused by the performance of hegemonic masculinity. While Majors and Billson analyze how the "cool pose" helps bring balance, stability, confidence, as well as a sense of masculinity to those African American males who adopt it, they also examine how the "cool pose" works destructively in African American lives. On the one hand, the "cool pose" embodies "the kaleidoscopic brilliance of the black male self. People are drawn to the power of the cool black male because he epitomizes control, strength, and pride. He presents a mysterious challenge. He is charismatic, suave, debonair, entertaining" (Majors and Billson 2). On the other hand, Majors and Billson state that being "cool" could be more significant than life itself. That is, performing coolness can exact a price that appears disastrously high (2). Performing "coolness" can help explain why black males die earlier from suicide, homicide, accidents and stress-related illnesses and why "black males are more deeply involved in criminal and delinquent activities; that they drop out of school and are suspended more often than white men; and that

they have more volatile relationships with their community" (2). They explain that the excessive performance of the "cool pose" can deteriorate black males' most intimate relationships, get black males in trouble with their communities and reinforce "an aloofness that stems from living too far from his deeper emotions" (37).

As a matter of fact, if black males place their "coolness" ahead of "acknowledging, and dealing with fears or needs, pent-up emotions and frustrations result" (20). They may act out violently towards those who are closest to them i.e. other African Americans. For Majors and Billson, that is why, performing "cool" may bring about more complex problems in the black community today; black-on-black crime (20). As they contend,

> the masking central to cool pose also trains the black male in the art of self-deception. He may lose the ability to know his own feelings, to feel them keenly, or to express them to others when it is safe to do so. As Dworkin writes, "the most tragic aspect of cool is that it has become a self sustaining pattern independent of its original functional significance." (40)

Consequently, many black males are afraid of expressing feelings and participating in mainstream activities in their community because such behavior may be defined as "uncool." In other words, the fear of emasculation directs black males to an excessive preoccupation with the performance of "coolness." That is why, for Majors and Billson, some African American men have difficulty exposing their deepest feelings even to those with whom they are expected to be closest: Good friends, wives, mothers, fathers, girlfriends, and children. In other words, keeping their guard up with hegemonic masculinity, "makes it next to impossible to let their guard down for people they care about and who care about them" (41).

Continuing the discussion of the negative sides of the performance of the "cool," Major and Billson assert that black men who are unable to show or discuss their feelings and fears, are at the risk for black on black crime, especially assault and homicide (Majors 41). For Majors and Billson, "the pent up emotions born of frustration and disappointment may explode in aggressive acts against those who are closest to his daily life — other black people. The pervasive nature of coolness in many black males can have tragic consequences for their relationships with males and females, black and white" (41).

Constantly challenged by hegemonic society, many black males have become so conditioned to keep their guard up that they tend to act "cool" on many occasions regardless of the circumstances. In that sense, the "cool pose" becomes a "conditioned strength" (Majors and Billson 41). According to Majors and Billson, this rigid and inflexible strength results in cool behaviors that seem automatic (41). The performance of the "cool pose" becomes such a major part of black males' psyche that even when white males are not present and hegemonic masculinity is not a threat, African American men still operate in a "high cool gear" (42). In other words, for some black men being cool is never switched off as a defense mechanism. As Major and Billson argue, the African American male is

> unable — because of his anger, bitterness and distrust toward whites — to mainstream or evolve other forms of consciousness. The cool front leads the black male to reject mainstream norms, aesthetics, mannerism, values, etiquette, or information networks that could help him overcome the problems caused by [hegemonic masculinity]. His cool defense makes it extremely difficult for him to selectively let his guard down. He is impeded from showing affection for people he may really care about or people who may really care about him. (42)

Just as hegemonic masculinity is shaped by privilege and anti-black racism, black masculinity is shaped by poverty and oppression. The white patriarchal gender norms that are imposed on black men in a hegemonic society create double binds: black men are taught that men should be providers and should create their own opportunities, but poverty and racism block them every step of the way. While the message to black men from patriarchy is to "be a man," the message from capitalism is "no chance" (Catterbaugh 142).

In conclusion, as Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes suggest in their poems, the "cool pose" has become an inseparable part of black male identity. Compensating for feelings of insecurity and inadequacy has directed African American men to redefine what it means to be a man and many black males respond to the demands of hegemonic masculinity by striking a "cool pose." This includes "machismo," aggressive social skills, risk taking, and "sexual promiscuity" (Majors and Billson 70). By performing "cool," African American males are indoctrinated to view every white man as a potential enemy, every symbol of the dominant system as a potential threat. Because of this, they are unwilling to expose their innermost feelings. Thus, playing it

cool becomes the mask of choice. Nonetheless, this choice demands a stiff price in suppressed energy and repressed feelings that generally emerge as black on black crime. August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* examines the negative outcomes of the performance of "cool," specifically through Levee's actions and thoughts about his masculinity.

2.2. Levee's Performance Crisis

> *"As long as the colored man looks to white folks to put the crown on what he say . . . as long as he looks to white folks for approval. Then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about."*

> Toledo, August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

In the 1920s, as Kim Pereira suggests, African American music was in a perennial state of change, fracturing into new modes of expression (13). As he conveys,

> [t]here were the addictive rhythms of ragtime; the twelve bar call and response of the blues; jazz, swing, and the big band; be-bop and dazzling virtuosity; and fusion and the marriage of acoustic and electronic instruments. (13)

August Wilson sets his *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985) in this world, in a studio in Chicago in 1927. The importance of this date is vigorously repeated during the play, because much of the action flows from a conflict between proponents of the old and new forms of black music, between the blues and swing. The "Blues people," Ralph Ellison once mentioned, are "those who accepted and lived close to their folk experience" (Lahr 42). In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson creates blues characters in Chicago who are allegorical representations. All musicians suffocate under an oppressive American social structure that inherently denies their existence. Even though they are gifted musicians, their talent does not allow them to move up the American hierarchy. Thus, as he does in other plays, Wilson suggests the inevitable African American prerequisite of embracing one's ancestral and personal past and the people who reside in this circle so as to alleviate present persecution.

In terms of black masculinity, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is different from the other plays in *The Pittsburgh Cycle* because it is the cycle's most violent and unmotived expression of the "cool" exemplifying how the "cool pose" works destructively in

African Americans' lives. Through the protagonist Levee, Wilson illustrates to his contemporary African American audience how performance of "the cool" leads to self-destruction and displaced violence. In other words, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* demonstrates how when repressed and then triggered, "the cool" brings about destruction. Moreover, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is the only play in the cycle, in which the entire African American community that Wilson valued so much is metaphorically influenced, particularly with the slaying of the character named Toledo who, because of his intellectualism, represents the future of the community.

In contrast to its title, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is not really about Ma Rainey. Even though the play revolves around the life of the one-time blues legend Ma Rainey, it is the trumpeter, Levee, who ultimately conveys Wilson's powerful message about the crisis in black masculinity. The play opens in a South Side Chicago recording studio where Ma Rainey's band — Toledo, Slow Drag, Cutler and Levee — wait to record a new album. They tease each other, tell stories and argue about the black man's role in American society, as they wait for Ma to arrive. As the play unfolds, however, it becomes evident that there is tension between Levee, the young, hot-headed trumpeter who dreams of having his own band, and Cutler and Toledo, the veteran players who think Levee has a great deal to learn about music and handling his "coolness." By the time Ma Rainey finally arrives, the group has fallen behind schedule, and Ma's insistence that her stuttering nephew Sylvester perform the intro to "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" throws white producers Sturdyvant and Irvin into confusing turmoil. While the band waits for various technical problems to be resolved, the conflict between Levee and Cutler reaches its peak and violence becomes inevitable. Ma then fires Levee for his insubordination, at which point Sturdyvant informs him that he will no longer be allowed to record his songs at the studio. Levee, overcome by the "cool pose," responds by fatally stabbing Toledo, thus destroying his future.

Like in the rest of the plays in *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, Wilson also creates a dichotomy between individuality and the black community. Throughout *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, there is a battle going on between Levee's excessive performance of "the cool," which highlights his individuality and his quest for a masculine identity, and the other characters' insistency on the black tradition. Wilson clearly illustrates this division early in the play through the stage directions which accompany the entrances

of the characters. In Act I, he attracts the audience's attention by drawing a sharp distinction between the three older men, Toledo, Cutler and Slow Drag, and the younger Levee. On the one hand, Toledo, the pianist "recognizes that [his instrument's] limitations are an extension of himself" and his "insights are thought-provoking" (Wilson 12); Cutler, the trombonist and guitar player, is the "most sensible," with a playing style that is "solid and almost totally unembellished" (12), and Slow Drag, the bassist, is "deceptively intelligent, though as his name implies, he appears to be slow" (12). On the other hand, Levee is more flamboyant and "somewhat of a buffoon," with a "rakish and bright" temper and strident voice (14). Their personalities also reveal their attitudes toward music; while Toledo, Cutler and Slow Drag favor the blues, Levee is interested in the flashier swing.

In order to understand Levee's excessive preoccupation with "the cool," it is necessary to overview his choice of the swing as opposed to the blues, which constitutes the plays' major argument about black masculinity. Levee believes that manhood can be achieved through individual achievement, and dedicates himself to mastering this process. In the 1920s, as Kate Dossett suggests, "black-owned businesses in the retail, wholesale, and service sectors of Chicago grew by nearly eighty percent" (566). Similarly, another manifestation of this individual achievement was the way in which African American males presented themselves in the society. Thus, this growing economy became the source for a new vision of masculine identity based on consumption. According to Martin Summers,

> middle class Americans increasingly unlinked manhood from the market, at least from the orientation of the producer, and began to define it in terms of consumption. One's manhood became more and more defined by the consumer goods one owned, the leisure practices one engaged in, and one's physical and sexual virility. (8)

In spite of his indigence at the beginning of the play, Levee's purchase of Florsheims for $11 exposes his eagerness to buy into the materialism of the American Dream and to look "cool" in his struggle to be like a white man. Levee desires to carve out a space for himself by establishing his own band instead of playing in Ma's, believing that this will allow him to be in control of his own livelihood, proving his manhood. Motivating himself in this fashion, in order to assert his independence from Ma Rainey, Levee has written his version of the song, which attracts attention of the white

producers Sturdyvant and Irvin, who represent the white exploitation of black music. Obsessed with making money, they prefer to deal with black performers "at arm's length" (Wilson 9). According to them, swing is what people want. "They want something they can dance to. Times are changing. Levee's arrangement gives the people what they want" (49). Thrilled by the encouragement of the white producers, Levee acts out "cool" believing that he will be able to cope with the conflict and anxiety caused by hegemonic masculinity.

Indeed, from the very beginning of the play, Levee's excessive pride and "coolness" contribute to his indifferent attitude toward Ma and her music. In their discussion about art in Act I, particularly the future of the blues, Levee, previously unable to date with a girl, furiously states that the blues is just "old jug-band music" (17). In a reprimanding manner, he underestimates the other members of band, saying

> I ain't like you, . . . I got talent! Me and this horn . . . we's tight. If my daddy knowed I was gonna turn out like this, he would've named me Gabriel. I'm gonna get me a band and make me some records. I done give Mr. Sturdyvant some of my songs I wrote and he say he's gonna let me record them when I get my band together. (17)

When the entire band begins to rehearse, Levee plays something different. Although it is not his business to decide which version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" — a song about a black clog dance popular in the 1920s — is going to be played, he snobbishly interferes in Cutler's plans, implying that he will be a complete man, when his music is consumed by mainstream society. As Toledo puts it in Act I, Levee assumes himself to be "the king of the barnyard. He thinks he's the only rooster know how to crow" (46).

 As Majors and Billson previously suggested, "the masking central to the cool pose trains the black male in the art of self deception" (40), which comes out as isolation from the African American community. Because of his disloyalty to tradition, and his lack of cultural identity as opposed to excessive "coolness," Levee is motivated by his vigorous sense of individualism and detachment from his community. By neglecting the blues, Levee turns his back on the most important aspect of African American musical heritage. Kim Pereira conveys that Levee's denial of the blues is also a refusal of a fundamental part of his masculine identity as a black man: "a part woven into the

fabric of all the traditions that inform his sensibilities" (18). In other words, in seeking to discover his own identity through new music, Levee rejects the blues as defining his identity. What is ironic is that in his despair to acquire his own recording contract, Levee accepts the control and artistic direction of the white record producer Sturdyvant. Cooperating with Sturdyvant, Levee "becomes virtually an apostate to his fellow musicians, aligning himself with the white man and bestowing on him the authority to make decisions about the one thing that is truly their own — their music" (Pereira 18). This quest for white approval, which all the while involves ignoring his past and acting "cool," leads to his downfall. Since he has placed his search for "ashe" (Majors and Billson 58) in the performance of hegemonic masculinity, he will never obtain the identity he is striving for. Because of his excessive "coolness," he never understands what Toledo tells him at the beginning of the play:

> As long as the colored man look to white folk to put the crown on what he say . . . as long as he looks to white folks for approval . . . then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing. (Wilson, *Ma Rainey* 27)

As a matter of fact, Levee's passion for jazz, and in general for innovation, would, under normal circumstances, be a precisely legitimate choice. However, Levee selects to adopt swing music, individuality and improvisation so that he can run away from his heritage, which further disconnects him from his band members. Thus, when Levee makes music, unlike the other members of the band, he does not connect with his community in the emphatic and communal way that August Wilson values. His gravitation towards swing, and use of the blues in a detrimental way, is indicative of how he deals with hegemonic masculinity. In contrast to the other members of the band who express their oppression through their music, Levee thinks that through swing, he will run away from the grief and pain caused by hegemonic masculinity: the two components that make up his excessive preoccupation with the "cool." As Philip Smith describes,

> Levee's strategy for survival, to smile and say 'yessir,' but to advance only himself to write and sell music to white men, to be inspired by Doctor Jazz and the white man's advice to forget his troubles, to buy new Florsheim shoes and clothes and scorn those who wear country clod-hoppers, to reject his rural heritage and the solidarity and wisdom of the older band members, in short, to sell his soul to the devil and leave behind his roots

and the crimes against his family, all make him into a black man alienated from the blues people, into a foolish Faustian individualist searching for money, fashion, fame, sexual pleasure, dancing, and all the urban 'good times' he feels he is owed to make up for the scars he bears on his body and his soul. (Smith 182)

As Philip E. Smith asserts in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Playing the Blues as Equipment for Living," Levee fails to understand the fact that in order to come to terms with his own "ashe" (Majors and Billson 58), he must get in touch with his past. His fascination with "coolness" obscures his own past and its power.

At the end of Act I, the audience learns that there are reasons behind Levee's excessive performance of the "cool." Wilson illustrates why Levee avoids his ancestors, what his outrage is, and how Levee's past generates his ongoing resentment. Toward the end of Act One, after Sturdyvant leaves the band members in the band room, they tease Levee about "shucking and jiving" in front of the white producer (Wilson 53). Levee ignominiously responds that he knows how to handle the white man by experience. He then proceeds to tell the following story:

> I was eight years old when I watched a gang of white mens come into my Daddy's house and have to do with my mama any way they wanted. It was coming on planting time and my daddy went into Natchez [Mississippi] to get him some seed and fertilizer. Called me, say, "Levee, you the man of the house now. Take care of your mama while I'm gone." I wasn't but a little boy, eight years old. (*Pause.*)
>
> My mama was frying up some chicken when them mens come in that house. Must have been eight or nine of them. She standing there frying that chicken and them mens come and took hold of her just like you take hold of a mule and make him do what you want. (*Pause.*)
>
> There was my mama with a gang of white mens. She tried to fight them off, but I could see where it wasn't gonna do her any good, I didn't know what they were doing to her . . . but I figured whatever it was they may as well do to me too. My daddy had a knife that he kept around there for hunting and working and whatnot. I knew where he kept it and I went and got it. . . . I tried my damnedest to cut one of them's throat! . . . He [one of the white men] reached back and grabbed hold of that knife and whacked me across the chest with it.
>
> (*LEVEE raises his shirt to show a long, ugly scar.*)

>That's what made them stop. They was scared I was gonna bleed to death. . . . My daddy came back. . . . He found out who they was and then we announced we was moving. . . . He got us settled in and then took off one day. I ain't never seen him since. He sneaked back, hiding up in the woods, laying to get them eight or nine men. (*Pause.*)
>
>He got four of them before they got him. . . . Caught up with him and hung him and set him afire. (Wilson 55-56)

The experience reveals why Levee has to resort to adopting a cool pose. Clearly, Levee's "cool pose" masks a troubled and painful childhood, filled with violence, rape and the lynching and bump of his father. As Majors and Billson previously argued, the detrimental and vicious side of "the cool pose" stands for a person's isolation from the African American community. "The masking of true feelings interferes with establishing strong bonds with families and friends. Unfortunately, for the black male who constantly puts himself under pressure to prove his manhood and who is simultaneously unable to show and discuss his feelings and fears" the risk exacts a very high consequence. (Majors and Billson 41) In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* this risk drives Levee. In his choice of music, in addition to making more money, Levee's strategy is to ignore the grief and pain. As Philip E. Smith states "Levee's solution for the problems of black people is to forget them, as Irvin and Sturdyvant have urged; he sings and dances a few lines of 'Doctor Jazz': 'When the world goes wrong and I have got the blues / He's the man who makes me put on my dancing shoes'" (181). Levee gravitates towards swing because it is about putting on your dancing shoes, ignoring your blues and acting out "cool." However, as Charles Patrick Tyndall suggests,

>Levee, fleeing from his past should raise a red flag for Wilson aficionados; any Wilson character that avoids or does not respect his/her past is going to be used to teach a lesson. According to August Wilson, ignoring one's history (including the negative events) always leads to tragedy. (55)

As the other plays in the cycle illustrate, Wilson's characters have unfinished business, unresolved issues with the past, with their history. As Alan Nadel points out, the blues formulates an alternative history encoding the African American experience overlooked by official historical documentation (104). Ma Rainey conforms this in Act II, "white folks don't understand the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life" (Wilson, *Ma Rainey*

66). Because she regards the blues as history, she suggests that African American life would be empty without the blues. Thus, she "takes the emptiness and [tries] to fill it up with something" (Wilson 66).

Ma also emphasizes the importance of the blues and its contribution to the entire black community. For example, as Kim Pereira points out, it is noteworthy that a nonmusician plays an important role in recording (20). In other words, such characters signify a synergistic force between musicians and the rest of the community. The inarticulate Sylvester, Ma's nephew, represents those black people with little or no voice in the African American community. By letting him perform the introduction of the song, Ma Rainey suggests that the isolated characters in the African community can participate in the blues as well — all black people have a voice through their music — and, in a larger sense, that they can contribute to the successful advancement of black culture. Unlike the other members of the band, Levee's vociferous opposition to Sylvester's role highlights how he is imprisoned by his "cool pose." He never understands what Toledo points out about the black community: all black males "got to his part. I ain't talking about what I'm gonna do . . . or what you or Cutler or Slow Drag or anybody else. I'm talking about all of us together. What all of us is gonna do" (Wilson 32).

Along with Ma Rainey, Toledo persistently stresses the significance of the black community which contrasts with Levee's "cool" behavior. He attempts to create historical contexts so that Levee figures out the consequences of the performance of hegemonic masculinity. When the bass player Slow Drag, and the guitarist Cutler, bond through naming, Toledo explains that they are performing an African ancestral retention ritual, a bond of kinship. Calling attention to the performance of hegemonic masculinity, he insists in Act II,

> we done sold Africa for the price of tomatoes. We done sold ourselves to the white man in order to be like him. Look at the way you dressed. . . . that ain't African. That's the white man. We trying to be just like him. We done sold who we are in order to become someone else. We's imitation white men. (Wilson 76-77)

Toledo's role in the band, in more musical terms, is to supply the notes, not just the melody; he retrieves the historical circumstances that have brought Levee to this time and this place. Levee, on the other hand, insists on his "coolness," suggesting,

> I ain't no imitation white man. And I don't want to be no white man. As soon as I get my band together and make them records like Mr. Sturdyvant done told me I can make, I'm gonna be like Ma and tell the white man just what he can do. Ma tell Mr. Irvin she gonna leave . . . and Mr. Irvin get down on his knees and beg her to stay! That's the way I'm gonna be! Make the white man respect me! (Wilson 77)

Reminiscent of Majors' and Billson's warning of the negative consequences of the performance of "cool," Toledo anticipates the fact that Levee's performance of "cool" may bring about failure in his life. As he conveys in Act II,

> Some mens got it worse than others . . . this foolishness I am talking about. Some mens is excited to be fool. That excitement is something else. I know about it. I done experienced it. It makes you feel good to be [cool.] But it don't last long. It's over in a minute. Then you got to tend with the consequences. You got to tend with what comes after. That's when you wish you had learned something about it. (Wilson 73)

In his warnings against the consequences of the performance of excessive "coolness," Toledo also dwells upon the black masculinity crisis that occurs with the estrangement of black males from their African bonds. As he points out in Act I,

> we are the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers. Now who knows that? You find me a nigger that knows that and I'll turn any whichway you want me to do. I'll bend over for you. You ain't gonna find that. And that's what the problem is. The problem ain't with the white man. The white man knows you just a leftover. 'Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don't know that we been took and made history out of. Done went and filled the white man's belly and know he's full and tired and wants you to get out the way and let him be by himself (44-45)

The concept of being a "leftover" leaves African Americans outside the trajectory of hegemonic America. Since Toledo knows that black men have to navigate a world in which the rules have been made by white men, he portrays the mainstream history as a process of waste and discontinuity. In a sense, he desires to reformulate a version of history that will center on black manhood. Thus, he asks, "now what's the colored man to do with himself?" (44) This question is critical not only in this play but to *The*

Pittsburgh Cycle. In that sense, self-determination as opposed to the black masculinity crisis becomes a critical objective identified and supported by August Wilson. Self-determination connects with the notion of defining alternative images of black masculinity.

Indeed, Levee finds an alternative image of black masculinity with the performance of "the cool pose." As Majors and Billson previously suggested, the performance of "the cool" is indeed beneficial to black males since it empowers their understanding of self or "ashe" (Majors and Billson 58). By performing "cool," Levee believes that he can preserve his pride, dignity and respect when his masculinity is under threat by hegemonic masculinity. When he is accused by Toledo of acting out excessively, Levee indicates that he could control his performance in Act II.

> TOLEDO: That's the trouble of it. You wouldn't know if he was fixed on you wrong or not. You so spooked up by him [the white men] you ain't had the time to study him.
>
> LEVEE: I studies the white man. I got him studied good. The first time one fixed me wrong, I'm gonna let him know just how much I studied. Come telling me I'm spooked up with the white man. You let one of them mess with me, I'll show you how spooked up I am" (Wilson, *Ma Rainey* 67).

Nonetheless, as the mouthpiece of August Wilson, Toledo warns that when "the cool pose" is taken to extreme, as Levee does throughout the play, it brings about failure and destruction (Majors 20). During the play, Levee plays "cool," plays the accommodating black to Sturdyvant and Irvin and, what is more threatening, to other black males excessively. When Sturdyvant offered less money than he has expected for his songs, Levee's dreams about being in control of his manhood are shattered. Angered by Sturdyvant, Levee transfers his rage to Toledo, whom he murders at the end of the play for accidentally scuffing Levee's Florsheims. In Marilyn Elkins' *August Wilson: A Casebook*, Kim Marra focuses on why Toledo's stabbing happens after Sturdyvant rejects Levee;

> [n]ot surprisingly, the pain and frustration of this public emasculation [at the hands of Sturdyvant] push Levee into a volatile rage. The seemingly small provocation of Toledo scuffing one of his fancy new Florsheim shoes, signifiers of his thwarted economic aspirations, moves him to plunge a knife into his fellow band member. Because he kills the insightful Toledo, the only one capable of understanding the oppressive dynamics

causing his suffering, the act is tantamount to Levee's self-destruction and,
in a larger sense, to race suicide. (141)

Levee's stabbing Toledo at the end of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* for a trivial reason reveals that he is incapable of controlling his "coolness" and that coolness is an incomplete mechanism to control the oppression imposed by American society. It is a mask that is bound to be exposed, for it is a repressive mechanism that temporally conceals anger and violence under a serene façade. Although formerly his father had advised him that he needed to be highly competent to perform "cool,"

> My daddy wasn't spooked up by the white man. No sir! And that taught
> me how to handle them. I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker's
> face . . . smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he's planning
> how he's gonna get him an what he's gonna do to him. That taught me
> how to handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about
> the white man. I can smile and say "yessir" to whoever I please. I got time
> coming to me. You all just leave Levee alone about the white man.
> (Wilson 56)

the stabbing of Toledo "is a physical acting out of the betrayal [of the excessive performance of 'cool'] that Levee had been flirting with throughout the play" (McDonough 147).

Whereas an unconventional perspective on masculinity has given Levee alternative grounds on which to establish a healthy self esteem or "ashe" (Majors and Billson 58), Levee is unable to realize the ideal that Toledo and in a larger sense August Wilson has presented. Similar to Herald Loomis, who acts out the "plantation patriarchy," and is thus doomed to fail in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Levee "foreshadows the next generation" of black males as "a modern urban, alienated man, refusing to recognize that his individualism cripples him" in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Smith 184). Instead of coming to terms with his excessive performance of "cool," and finding a solution to his masculinity crisis, like Herald Loomis, Levee transfers his own identity struggle onto others.

In conclusion, the cool pose, thus, for Wilson is how a black man responds to the society which leaves no room for his individual existence. The "cool pose" not only helps the black male to construct and maintain a certain kind of charisma and impression, it also covers the ages-old emotions repressed due to not being able to

speak up. The "cool," thus, become the tormenter rather than the outlet of repression and it devalues and destroys the status and hopes of the African American society, rather than glorifying it and providing it with opportunities for a social and individual change. The dichotomy of the black masculinity under the "cool pose" practice is, as Wilson observes, self-destructive and a development of a pseudo-self: Turning the whole practice into a psychological crisis, an identity problem, a sort of cultural schizophrenia.

CHAPTER III

EXPLORING THE MASCULINE MYSTIQUE IN AUGUST WILSON'S *FENCES*

> *It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family . . . You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you . . . Let's get this straight right there . . . I ain't got to like you.*
>
> *Just give me some space. That's all. Just give me some room to breathe.*
>
> Troy Maxson, *Fences*

After the Civil War, the majority of the black population of America lived in the South. It was not until the Jim Crow laws were enacted after Reconstruction that African Americans truly began to migrate. Between 1910 and 1930, the black population doubled and tripled in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Philadelphia as well as New York. Wilson depicts the consequences of this migration on black men's understanding of manhood. With *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, he exemplifies how black males have been taught to perform the "plantation patriarchy" and with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, he depicts how black males have experienced a dilemma in controlling their performance of "cool," which was originally designed to cope with the devastating consequences of hegemonic masculinity. In *Fences* (1986), August Wilson illustrates the outcome of the performance of "plantation patriarchy" and the consequences of black males' migration almost fifty years after the fact, that is, the confrontation with economic survival and disintegration of families and homes.

In the third chapter of this thesis, Troy's, the protagonist of *Fences* (1986), "masculine mystique" will be considered in the light of Robert Staples' sex role theory. In his *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society,* Staples argues that African American males, in the post war era were isolated and alone. In other words, loneliness and emptiness became dominant in the era's cultural analysis of black masculinity. In order to define the crisis in African American masculinity or the masculine mystique, Staples adapts the concept of "the feminine mystique" from Betty Friedan. After looking at the 1950s, Friedan formulated "the problem that has no

name," the confusion, self-blame and anguish experienced by women who had been told "to seek fulfillment as wifes and mothers" (57). Friedan noticed that women spoke with a tone of "quiet desperation" about their problems (62), the same quiet desperation that Thoreau had observed among American men a century earlier. Like Friedan, Staples draws attention to the massive unhappiness of African American men trying to fit into a media-idealized "strong breadwinner" image while experiencing a masculinity crisis and suffering from "the masculine mystique." He examines how normative definitions of masculinity deprive so many black men of the ability to fulfill the expectations associated with being male in hegemonic America. Fulfilling the American Dream and trying to live up to the hegemonic masculine ideal were not easy tasks for black males. Ultimately, they could only attempt to perform this norm, while being victimized by it under the masquerade of the masculine mystique.

Using Staples' concept of "the masculine mystique," this chapter will explore Troy Maxson's identity problems in Wilson's *Fences*. Emerging from a battered past and as someone who once dreamed of swinging for the fences — playing professional baseball —, Troy is consigned to being a garbage man. His perception of his existence and worth is inadequate, mostly because he cannot realize the American Dream economically and socially as an "emasculated" man. By embodying and performing standards of hegemonic masculinity, Troy sentences himself to a lifetime of disappointment. Due to the dominance perpetuated by hegemonic masculinity and his inability to "head" his family, Troy experiences failure with respect to his masculinity, which, in turn, oppresses his wife and sons.

3.3. The Masculine Mystique

The masculine mystique is the notion that a specific set of codes, performances, behaviors and powers represent manhood. Andrew Kimbrell, the author of *The Masculine Mystique* (1995) argues that unlike the feminine mystique, the masculine mystique was not built on ideas concerning natural biology (65). Instead, it is a mask, performance and a construct that has been scripted and directed by mainstream society. For Kimbrell, the unique purpose of the masculine mystique is to maintain the power of normative hegemonic masculinity at the expense of other masculinities (xiv). In return for adopting the masculine mystique, mainstream society provides men with

prestigious and powerful positions, which entitles them to the indiscriminate abuse of the other masculinities, women and children. The mystique, as Kimbrell asserts, seemingly perpetuates the image that "men are entranced by simulated masculinity, experiencing danger, independence, success, sexual fulfillment, idealism and adventure as 'power' voyeurs" (128). In reality though, the vast majority of men "lead mostly powerless lives in a servile state, frightened of losing their jobs, mortgaged to the gills and still feeling responsible for supporting their families" (128). They become increasingly frustrated, as they remain powerless and unable to "get ahead."

In *The Masculine Mystique*, Kimbrell devotes attention to the plight of American males who have faced a "crisis of masculinity." In his analysis, he uncovers the reasons why some men have not conformed to current standards of male "responsibility" — husband, father, and breadwinner — and how as a result they have been condemned by the nation's mass media. "Over the years," says Kimbrell, "I have learned that there is something terribly wrong in the lives of most men. Whatever age, political persuasion, race, or creed, these men share a common condition. They feel bewildered, out of control, numbed, angered, and under attack" (xiii). Accordingly, various social forces, along with the constantly difficult burden of breadwinning and the financial and personal devastation of divorce, have destroyed men's lives to the breaking point. "Everywhere I turn," Kimbrell conveys, he encounters "the tragic, intimate toll that these realities are taking on men – the undermining of men's health, the suicide of so many young men, lives spent in meaningless work or joblessness, broken marriages, the inability to properly father their children, the lack of any real relationship to the natural world" (xiii).

It is obvious that men are confronting their performance crisis in the midst of a fundamental confusion about their gender identity. In 1963, Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* heralded a distinct wave of feminism and echoed across America. She put forward the claim that "American women no longer know who they are" (15). Friedan, after observing what was going on in America in the 1950s, came to the conclusion that "the problem that has no name was shared by countless women in America" (200). Writing as a "housewife and mother," she described the dissatisfaction of educated middle-class women like herself, despite their "nice" homes and families.

She anticipated the fact that men are actually in serious trouble as well. As she maintains,

> how could we ever really know or love each other as long as we kept playing those roles that kept us from knowing or being ourselves? Weren't men as well as women still locked in lonely isolation, alienation, no matter how many sexual acrobatics they put their bodies through? Weren't men dying too young, suppressing fears and tears and their own tenderness? It seemed to me that men weren't really the enemy — they were fellow victims, suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill. (386)

Like women, men were experiencing turmoil and their personal and social crisis became the male "the problem that has no name." According to Kimbrell, this turmoil is caused by the masculine sex role; the performance of "rigid stereotypes," "financial responsibilities," as well as "economic dislocations and rising demands for a change in gender roles" (xiii). Subsequently, men have been left bewildered, without a consistent, reasonable or healthy concept of their own masculinity. Whatever their frustration, fear, or confusion, one thing is evident: According to Kimbrell,

> whether at work or at home, whether in the doctor's office or on the battlefield, most men will "keep it to themselves." They are locked into a code of denial and silence. When men talk person to person or in small groups, there is usually a tenacious reluctance to speak about their problems or to show emotion about their condition. Unfortunately, when men do break through and open up to discuss their concerns, or complain of constricted and reduced lives, they are often labeled by men and women alike as "whiners." (xii)

By disclosing the concealed masculinity crisis, Kimbrell presents a different profile of the American man using a Masculinity Studies approach. *The Masculine Mystique* also reveals how older, generative concepts of masculinity have been devastated over the last several generations and "how in their place a little-known defective mythology about masculinity has been indelibly encoded into American men's social structures and psyches" (xiv). According to Kimbrell, men experience this myth on a daily basis. "It is the basis for many of their dysfunctional daydreams and most of their nightmares. It has now led society into a dangerous 'misandry,' a belief that masculinity itself is responsible for most of the world's woes" (xv). By making noticeable the invisible structure of the masculine mystique in the American

consciousness, Kimbrell calls for American men to reevaluate their role in society so that they can change the way they understand the past, how they see their present and how they plan their future without the devastating influences of the masculine mystique.

While Kimbrell elaborately depicts how economic industrialization, politics and technology interacted to create the modern white male psyche and the masculine mystique, he does not explore the masculine mystique with relation to other ethnic groups in detail. As a matter of fact, the masculine mystique's demands — that a man is characterized by his economic capability, his competitiveness, his ability to accumulate material goods as well as his power over other men — is no less a mandate for minority men it is for white men. Particularly, African American men buy into the mystique, even though they lack the jobs and resources to conform to it (Staples 142). Since they cannot fulfill the requirements of the masculine mystique, they become its egregious victims. (Staples143)

Similar to Andrew Kimbrell, Robert Staples traces the turbulent history that has brought men to the masculine mystique through an African American point of view. One of the pioneering figures in Black Masculinity Studies, Robert Staples who published *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (1982) before Andrew Kimbrell, begins his book with the following claim — "it is difficult to think of a more controversial role in American society than that of the black male. He is a visible figure on the American scene, yet the least understood and studied of all sex-race groups in the United States" (1). He published *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* at a time when there was no book or a single author that had examined the performance of African American manhood in the United States.

Although he does not call his sex role theory "performative," he anticipates many of the concerns of current black masculinity scholars. From today's perspective, it could be suggested that Staples' sex role theory is founded upon a theatrical or dramaturgical metaphor in which black males' behavior is as a sort of performance. He draws attention to the fact that males mostly behave in ways that are socially prescribed by hegemonic society. Very seldom, he suggests, are they genuinely "doing their own

thing" (47). Rather, he asserts, they are like actors on a stage, playing out parts that have been assigned to them. From his outlook, masculinity is considered as an act rather than essence. It exists as a set of lines and stage directions that all males have to learn so that they can perform masculinity. For him, similar to white men, African American males are "trapped" into performing a set of stereotypical roles perpetuated by the masculine mystique (19). Nonetheless, black males are in conflict with the normative definitions of masculinity since they are perpetually chasing after economic survival. He describes the dual dilemma of the black man as follows:

> [Masculine] identity is crucial to a person's values, life style and personality. Black men have always had to confront the contradiction between the normative expectations attached to being male in this society and the proscriptions on their behavior and achievement of goals. Surely, this has psychological ramifications, which have yet to be explored or understood. Instead, he is subjected to societal opprobrium for failing to live up to the standards of manhood on the one hand and for being super macho on the other. It is a classical case of "be damned if you do and damned if you don't." (2)

Indeed, in his analysis, Staples points out that historically the masculine mystique was not actually an integral part of black masculinity. Prior to the fifties and sixties, especially in the South, Staples suggests black men's status was based on being a stable husband and father despite the fact that many men endured devastating consequences of racism (143). They performed the traditional attributes of "the plantation patriarchy" and manhood was determined by having a wife and a well-protected family (145). Apparently, the irony is that they had to protect their wives and families from white men, even as they were imitating white standards and definitions of masculinity (145). However, Great Depression and the Second World War, in Staples' opinion, altered notions of American masculinity. The decade's confusing and conflicting views of American men and their social expectations epitomize this cultural anxiety (145). Men who had been taught to perform the role of idealized men by the mystique experienced failure and questioned their identity, their roles and their performances in American society. As Michael Kimmel asserts,

> [t]he experience of powerlessness (having no control over their actions on the job), meaninglessness (performing specialized tasks that they cannot relate to the whole), isolation (inability to identify with a firm or its goals), and self estrangement (the lack of integration between their work and other

aspects of life) led men to search for affirmation and identity outside the workplace, in the realm of consumption. (191)

Undoubtedly, white men, across all classes, were damaged by patriarchal socialization, which perpetuated the masculine mystique as the idealized male role. Nonetheless, that damage is intensified in the experience of black males precisely due to the fact that they encountered a situation of double jeopardy. On the one hand, they were asked to fit into normative definitions of masculinity, which were already being questioned, and on the other hand, they realized that the American Dream would be unachievable for black males because of the racism that prevailed in society.

In the 1950s, the masculine mystique — "that impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero — was finally exposed as a fraud" (Kimmel 190). However, mass media continued to perpetuate confusing images that highlighted the presence of the idealized man in the American scene. Staples states that the media accelerated black males' suffering from the masculine mystique because the development of black males from a traditional community-based approach to one that is externally defined by mass media (146). Apparently, while the media depicted the white American men as "benevolent," black men were characterized as "the carefree, hustling superstud caricature" (145). As bell hooks summarizes the male images on television in the fifties,

> [t]he white fathers we saw on shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best,* and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* were kind of protectors and providers who gave their children unconditional love. They did not yell, beat, shame, ignore, or wound their children. They were the fantasy white family. The real white family, the ones where fathers were controlling, abusive, incestuous, violent alcoholics, workaholics, or rageoholics, did not appear on our television screens. (*We Real* 95)

While this was the representation of white males, African Americans were frequently defined in opposition to the "other" since the hegemonic society often considered the lifestyle and culture of African American males as "threatening, aggressive and intimidating" (Majors 2). While black men bought into the image presented by the media as readily as white men, they were not as likely to have the resources to bring the image into "reality," which was socially constructed and unachievable anyway.

Black males have consistently received contradictory messages from hegemonic society about what it means to be responsible. The masculine mystique dictates that a man is responsible if he gets a job, brings his wage home, and provides for his family's material well-being. Nonetheless, poverty and lack of job opportunities have prevented many black males from being "responsible" in the mystique's sense of the word. Many African American passively accept this definition of "responsible manhood," and waste their lives feeling like a failure, feeling as if their self-esteem has been violated and attacked on all sides due to the fact that they cannot fulfill the masculine mystique (Staples 142). In other words, the masculine mystique denies black men's ability to have free will and to resist forces that are inimical to black masculinity.

Thus, a vast majority of black males who are bewildered by this "manhood hustle" are channeled into the army because they have no viable options left in society, seeking a sense of "order" which eludes them in everyday life. (139). Furthermore, wanting desperately to prove their manhood leads many black males to join dangerous elite military units. As Staples argues, in the Vietnam War, for instance, twenty-six percent of all casualties were black (139). Accordingly,

> [t]he aftershocks of that war were even more devastating for the blacks who served in it. Even with the high rate of drug addiction, unemployment, crime and psychological problems of black male civilians, the Vietnam War veterans have an even higher rate. It is a terribly high price to pay for one's manhood. (140)

Continuing his analysis of black masculinity in the aftermath of Second World War, he points out that a new era was ushered in for black males. Apparently, both the sixties and the seventies

> witnessed the bourgeoning of black nationalism with its attendant elevation of the black male to his "rightful" and historical role as head of black family and community. Instead, the sixties and seventies proved to be a decade where women, mostly white, a few black gained ascendency. As it was, the decades' flowering of black manhood turned into a withering away of what little supremacy they had and consigned many black men into a prison of their gender. While the changes that occurred in [sixties] had an impact on all black people, since it is an indivisible group, there are forces that differently affect the male segment. The dominant force is the masculine mystique that infects black men and its interface with institutional racism. (Staples 135)

In response, as Staples explains, black males roved aimlessly along the streets of ghettoes, narcotized by drugs and alcohol resorting to acts of self-destruction, in extraordinary numbers including suicide, homicide and street crime (142). Even when they are successful at fulfilling some of the necessities of the normative masculinity, something continues to plague their masculinity: the masculine mystique. As Staples conveys,

> [i]n a society where work and money is the measure of the man, joblessness can destroy the male's motivation to live. Because of the masculine mystique, losing a job can cause damage to the fragile male ego, result in psychological breakdown and family violence. It is no wonder that many black families are torn asunder by the male's unemployment. Instead of allowing his wife to pick up the slack and pitching in with domestic chores, he often resorts to abusive behavior toward his wife and children or engage in extramarital affairs, all to bolster his deflated ego or reassert his masculinity. (143)

Thus, African American males, who are the victims of the masculine mystique, frequently pay a high price themselves and oppress people around them. The symbols of manhood, "sexual conquest [and] dominance of women," become significant to black men since they lack the real symbols — economic and political power. As he suggests, in America,

> it should be noted that sex occupies a unique place in black culture. Black males, for instance, have had a strong sexual orientation because the sexual conquest of women was considered a masculine trait [reminding bell hooks' "plantation patriarchy"]. Since other symbols of masculinity have been denied them in society, sexual prowess became a partial substitute for achievement in other areas. Thus, the black male who has a variety of premarital sexual experiences occupies a prestigious position in [African American community]. (81)

Black male sexuality also attracts Michael Kimmel's attention. In his analysis of the Black Panther Party, a militant civil rights organization, which made black manhood a crucial part of its agenda, Kimmel asserts that there was, in fact, a radical preoccupation with resistance to the masculine mystique in the late 1960s and 1970s. As he claims,

> "We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it," wrote Eldridge Cleaver [one of the leaders of the Black Panther party] in S*oul and Ice* (1968), his incendiary manifesto of black liberation [as opposed to the masculine mystique]. The sight of

hundreds of angry black men in military formations, carrying machine guns, preparing to fight for their rights, was a stirring sight to all who observed the Black Panthers — no doubt a terrifying sight to some but, also no doubt, inspiring sight to many young black men facing the crippling realities of the masculine mystique. (196)

They were so radical about black manhood that they even proposed to rape white women "since such a violation was the ultimate violation of white male power" (197). By raping "his" women, they aimed to strike the ultimate blow against the white masculine mystique. As a result, black males became "compulsively masculine" as violence would ensure their manhood. As Majors suggests "in compulsive masculinity, typical masculine values become a rigid prescription for toughness, sexual promiscuity, manipulation . . . and a willingness to use violence to resolve interpersonal conflicts" all which derives from the masculine mystique (34). Thus, the inability to perform the requirements of the masculine mystique, led dysfunctional behavior among African Americans. As Staples concludes, these values resulted in smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, sexual conquest, dominance and crime, all the reasons of the black masculinity crisis (143).

In conclusion, as Staples suggests that the black performance crisis derived from the gap existing between the desire to perform the "ideal male gender role" for the American society and the inability of black males to realize it. As a collection of dos and don'ts, the masculine mystique was a recipe for disaster; given what it actually took to be a "real man." Few, if any, men could fulfill the mystique; consequently, a vast majority of black males felt like failures. What is striking, the physical and psychological costs of trying to live up to the mystique would brought men lives of despair and isolation, of suppressed emotions and deferred dreams. In *Fences*, Wilson conveys Troy Maxson's story of manhood as measured against the masculine mystique while chronicling the black performance crisis with specific references to the norms of manhood in the 1950s.

3.2. Troy Maxson's Performance Crisis

> *Some people build fences to keep people out . . .*
> *And other people build fences to keep people in.*
>
> Jim Bono*, Fences*

Fences opened at the Yale Repertory Company in 1985. When the play was performed on March 26, 1987 in New York, its reception surpassed August Wilson's earlier plays of *The Pittsburg Cycle*. As Frank Rich commented in the *New York Times, "Fences* leaves no doubt that Mr. Wilson is a major writer, combining a poet's ear for vernacular with a robust sense of humor, a sure sense of cracking dramatic incident, and a passionate commitment to a great subject" (1987). As Rich suggests, the play attracted a lot of attention and won the Drama Desk Award, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award (1987), the Tony for best dramatic work (1987), and eventually the Pulitzer Prize (1987).

Set in the front yard of Troy Maxson's "ancient two-story brick house" (Wilson 4), *Fences* foregrounds the space that Troy has picked up for the Maxson family. Throughout the play, the action occurs in this singular space, which is defined by its partially constructed fence, the only element of the stage that alters over the course of the play. This positions the fence as something deliberately built one by one, as Jim Bono mentions in the play, "to keep people out . . . and . . . to keep people in" (59). That is why, the fence around the yard can be considered as a constant reminder of the masculine mystique in Troy Maxson's life. The boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are deliberately constructed by the mystique and do not exist naturally.

By setting his play in the 1950s, Wilson is able to describe vividly the consequences of the Great Migration on black males, which left African Americans isolated in northern cities where they confronted the challenges of everyday living. Wilson illustrates the difference between European immigrants and African Americans in a note preceding the play:

> Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. They swelled its belly until it burst into a thousand furnaces and sewing machines, a thousand but butcher shops and bakers' ovens, a thousand churches and hospitals and funeral parlors and moneylenders. The city

grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tar paper. They collected rags and wood. They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream. That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. (5)

Wilson's description of the descendants of African slaves certainly fits Troy Maxson's life. Interestingly, Wilson also attributes to Troy a majority of the terms he employed to describe Europeans, for he is a large man whose "honesty," "capacity for hard work" as well as "strength" galvanize his friends and family. Nonetheless, his considerable mistake assuming the performance of hegemonic masculinity as his ultimate ideal, shatters his American Dream and destroys his life.

To summarize, Troy Maxson wants desperately to conform to the 1950's masculine mystique, which for him mainly crystallized around the notion of home ownership. As a hardworking man, he wishes to buy a home and, as the patriarch of his household, to control the lives of his wife and sons. The masculine ideals of the 1950s makes Troy believe that the major sign of manhood is money earned through hard work and its management. Thus, throughout the play, he urges his sons to get "real" jobs instead of Lyon's dream of being a musician and Cory's hope to go to college on a football scholarship. Nonetheless, Troy's attempts at performing the masculine mystique are undermined by his inability to participate in the profitable post-war economic boom due to racial oppression. Having being denied entrance into baseball because of racism, Troy gets involved in robbery to be able to feed his family. Only by using his brother Gabriel's money, is he able to buy a house. Imprisoned in the shadows by his rejection, Troy eventually becomes as garbage collector, collecting the detritus of American society for black men, "dreams deferred and hopes deflected" (Roudane 136). His inability to perform the masculine mystique leads to his betrayal, the

suppression of his wife, his scorning for Cory and Lyon's dreams and talents and ultimately to his banishment from the Maxson family.

Struggling beneath the measures of the masculine mystique, Troy tries to participate in the 1950s consumer society when he takes his brother's three thousand dollars and uses it to buy a house. Gabriel has suffered a traumatic head injury during the Second World War, and with a metal plate in his head, functions at a diminished mental capacity. As compensation for getting "half his head blown off" (Wilson 31), the army gives him a "lousy three thousand dollars" (31). Troy cannot perform the expected patriarch role of the Maxson's family, and the house with its fences becomes a constant reminder of this inability. As Troy explains in Act I Scene II, it is the only way he can get a roof over his "head . . . 'cause of that metal plate" (31). In other words, his brother's misfortune becomes his fortune:

> ROSE: Ain't no sense of blaming yourself for nothing. Gabe wasn't in no condition to manage that money. You done what was right by him. Can't nobody say you ain't done what was right by him. Look how long you took care of him . . . till he wanted to have his own place and moved over there with Miss Pearl.
>
> TROY: That ain't what I'm saying, woman! I'm just stating the facts. If my brother didn't have that metal plate in his head . . . I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I'm fifty three years old. Now see if you can understand that! (31)

Because he identifies his masculinity with the accumulation of money and goods, his inability to buy a house has a devastating impact on his life. He continues to live under the masculine mystique's looming shadow, denigrating the lives of the members of his family.

Like Wilson's other male protagonists in *The Pittsburgh Cycle,* Troy is not aware of his gender performance. On the one hand, he assumes he is privileged as a "masculine" man. On the other hand, he sees himself as limited, confused and victimized by gender expectations; as deserving power, yet remaining powerless. Troy understands his fate as an African American man living in the shadows of the masculine mystique; yet, his progress to confront his masculinity crisis is shattered by

his inability and unwillingness to alter it. Excluded from the masculine mystique, he must come to terms with what it means to be a black male through his own history, a pattern that Wilson uses for his black male characters in order to underscore their performance crisis.

Troy's reconciliation with his past occurs when he recounts his dreadful experience with his father. Towards the end of Act I, sitting with his son Lyons and best friend Bono, Troy shares his personal history with them. "Sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy" (48), says Troy, and continues with how he determined that the time had come for him to leave his father's house. Having witnessed the brutal beating of a girl, Troy realizes he is no longer scared of his father: "Now I thought he was mad cause I ain't done my work. But I see where he was chasing me off so he could have the gal for himself. When I see what the matter of it was, I lost all fear of my daddy. Right there is where I become a man . . . at fourteen years of age" (50). As he points out in Act II Scene IV, after leaving his father's house, "the world suddenly got big. And it was a long time before I could cut it down to where I could handle it" (50). For Troy, cutting down the world to where he could handle it involved negotiating his past and realizing his unconditional tie with it. While leaving his father house empowers Troy's self-esteem, coming to terms with the reality of being unable to find a job and a place to live degrades Troy's life. In order to feed himself, he steals, which put him into jail. There he learns how to play baseball, which, as Kim Pereira argues

> gives him a new direction, renewed meaning, and the opportunity to redefine himself and prove that he can do something well. It saves his life in prison and then becomes his raison d'être. Soon there was no distinction between Troy Maxson, human being, and Troy Maxson, baseball player. (41)

Thus, his ultimate desire to seek self-empowerment through baseball finally imprisons him in the shadows of the masculine mystique. After fifteen years, Troy is released from prison yet is imprisoned by the masculine mystique. Unable to confront entirely with his past leads Troy to remain passive and incapable of navigating his way out from the masculine mystique. He digs up his childhood experiences to a certain extent, however, when it comes to his rejection of the Major League, Troy escapes from reconciliation.

As Staples previously stated, in the 1950s, the American mass media perpetuated confusing images that highlighted the presence of the idealized man (146). Rose even suggests in Act I Scene III that Troy is not supposed to fit into the role model of the 1950s "times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. The world's changing around you and you can't even see it," (40) Troy desperately responds to her by indicating the routine of his manhood: Yet,

> I do the best I can do. I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain't got no tears. I done spent them. We go upstairs in that room at night . . . and I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever. I get up Monday morning . . . find my lunch on the table. I go out. Make my way. Find my strength to carry me through to the next Friday. *(Pause)* That's all I got, Rose. That's all I got to give. I can't give nothing else. (40)

While many men suffered from "the manhood cycle" that Troy explains above, the American media continued to perpetuate images of the idealized man, which included participation in sports such as baseball. Baseball became the epitome of this masculine success. As Avi Santo suggests in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, American baseball with its spectators and performers perpetuates the common aspects of American hegemonic masculinity (48). As he elucidates in Act I Scene IV, baseball provides "the rite of passage between fathers and sons" and "a nostalgic commemoration of a manliness away from urban complications and corruptions" (48). That is why, it carves out a space in American males' psyche as an indispensible element of masculinity. It promotes "American courage, confidence, combativeness, energy, spirit and American vim, vigor and virility" (48). As Troy conveys to his sons, his wife and the audience, African American players are not allowed to access to the Major Baseball League. Thus, as an indicator of the American masculine ideal, baseball automatically defines American masculinity as white. As Santo adds, "even after racial barriers fell, baseball remained a contested site in which minority players continued to have to prove their worth and their manhood by complying with white standards" (48). Troy's definition of manhood, thus, centers on his ability to play baseball in the Major League and his ability to support his family economically. As

Susan Koprince argues in "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*," Troy is "driven to see himself" and measure his success "through the lens of white America" (353). Consequently, the masculine mystique plagues the rest of his life. Because of discrimination in the Major League, Troy cannot break through racial and gender barriers. In other words, he cannot manage to cross the fence. It was not until Jackie Robinson who the first African American to break the color barrier in 1947, that blacks could play in the Major League. By then, Troy is too old to play baseball professionally. As Rose explains, "they got a lot of colored baseball players now. Jackie Robinson was the first. Folks had to wait for Jackie Robinson," (16) Troy responds to her in anger:

> I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play . . . then they ought to have let you play. (16)

His desire to act according to the masculine mystique and his inability to participate in the mystique imprisons him. As Staples formerly asserted, since the masculine mystique is a performance that featured by measures such as the oppression of women, struggle dominance, the glorification of violence and the embodiment of the capitalist agenda that measures success through the accumulation of money and material goods (143), Troy considers himself worthless according to these standards, thereby sentencing himself into despair.

Incapable of measuring masculinity by any means other than through white standards, Troy turns to seeking power in his personal relationships. Every Friday, he hands his paycheck over to his wife, which is something degrading for Troy's masculinity. Thus, in order to regain his power, he exercises a misogynist attitude towards Rose who, throughout the play, acts according to the 1950s expectations. She is always at home, cleaning or cooking, and most important for a housewife of the time, she stands by her man. Even though Troy reprimands her on every occasion, Rose sticks by him for most of the play. As Wilson describes in his stage directions,

> [h]er devotion to him stems from her recognition of the possibilities of her life without him: a succession of abusive men and their babies, a life of partying and running the streets, the church, or aloneness with its attendant pain and frustration. She recognizes Troy's spirit as a fine and illuminating one and she either ignores or forgives his faults, only some of which she recognizes. (12)

Rose at first may seem to support the opinion of certain critics such as bell hooks and Harry J Elam who allege that August Wilson does not have exemplary female characters in his plays. Nonetheless, Rose, like Ma Rainey, emerges as a key character in *The Pittsburgh Cycle,* a woman who has sacrificed everything to make Troy happy, and a woman who foreshadows the outspoken Tonya in *King Hedley II* (1999) and Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean* (2003). Her most significant speech comes in Act II Scene I when she opposes Troy:

> Don't you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me? . . . You not the only one who's got wants and needs. But I held on to you, Troy. I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams . . . and I buried them inside you . . . You always talking about what you give . . . and what you don't have to give. But you take too. You take . . . and don't even know nobody's giving! (67)

Since Troy is driven by the masculine mystique, he attributes the reason of his performance crisis to his wife inflicting a great deal of suffering on her. Retreating into his own crisis and grief, he says in quiet desperation in Act I Scene II: "just give me same space. That's all. Just give me some room to breathe" (72). Troy betrays her and turns to another woman to escape his own failure as a man, and, in so doing, betrays the one person who believes in him even when he no longer believes in himself. Thus, for Wilson the mutual mistreatment is an outcome of the masculine mystique. All chances for reconciliation are shattered when Troy cannot take the hand that Rose tries to extend him and continues in his desperate and futile quest for manhood in the mystique's way.

Overwhelmed by constant defeat in his struggles to participate into the masculine mystique, Troy seeks freedom from his failures. As Staples previously pointed out those who suffer from the masculine mystique are overwhelmed by sexual conquest, dominance of women, since they lack real symbols (81). In an effort to "steal second"

after eighteen years, Troy has an extramarital affair with his mistress Alberta. He explains his relief over his performance crisis in Act II Scene II:

> It's just . . . She gives me a different idea . . . a different understanding about myself. I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems . . . be a different man. I ain't got to wonder how I'm gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed. I can just be a part of myself that I ain't never been. (65)

Troy's sexual prowess becomes a partial substitute for masculine achievement. He thinks that his masculinity has been reasserted by his relationship with Alberta; yet, in reality, his life is revitalized precisely by avoiding the responsibilities perpetuated by the masculine mystique. Troy, grasps at straws when "heading" the Maxson family and homeownership become unbearable. The outcome of his affair with Alberta is a baby girl, which only narrows the walls or fences of Troy's imprisonment. Because Alberta dies when delivering her daughter, Troy feels obliged to take responsibility for Raynell. Hence, the pressures and problems in Troy's life are intensified, not lessened.

Notwithstanding his sense of "heading" his family, Troy manages to alienate not only Rose but also his son, Cory. Troy believes that the fences of the masculine mystique that shape his understanding of masculinity will construct barriers around Cory's dreams of playing football. Frustrated by the denial and discrimination that shattered his baseball dreams, Troy erects barriers in Cory's dream of being a football player. Rose asks, "Why don't you let the boy go ahead and play football, Troy? Ain't no harm in that. He's just trying to be like you with the sports."(40), Troy responds in Act I Scene III,

> I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only decent thing ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don't wish him a thing else from my life. I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports. (40)

By detaining his son's dreams, Troy limits Cory's motivation. Since he considers himself as patriarch of his family, he finds in himself the power to control Cory's future. As Carla McDonough argues,

because sons are often considered a reflection of a man's masculinity, Troy, by alienating Cory, can be interpreted as diminishing his own identity as well. By refusing to let Cory compete for a football scholarship to college, perhaps out of jealously rather than out of fatherly concern for Cory's future, Troy pushes his son out of his life. (149)

Although Troy seems to protect Cory, he is unable to show him any affection. Troy neglects to do for Cory what he does for Bono, his best friend. Bono reveals how Troy plays a significant role in his life in Act II Scene I:

I done learned whole heap of things about life watching you [Troy]. I done learned how to tell where the shit lies. How to tell it from the alfalfa. You done learned me a lot of things. You showed me how to not make the same mistakes . . . to take life as it comes along and keep putting one foot in front of the other. (60)

While Troy is able to be a role model for his friend, he is unable to do so for his son. In an attempt to assert patriarchal protection, Troy becomes the barrier in Cory's life. As Missy Dehn Kubitschek maintains in "August Wilson's Gender Lesson," unable to recognize changes in social conditions, Troy

[s]ees Cory's talents as a temptation to irresponsibility. He insists on conditions that make it impossible for Cory to satisfy his work requirement and also to attend necessary athletic practices. Although he claims to be protecting Cory from inevitable disappointment, he is deforming another generation with Procrustean gender definitions. (186)

Troy's sense of responsibility for the Maxson family comes from his father; yet, it is responsibility from which Troy escapes by the end of the play. In an epigraph at the beginning of play, Wilson stresses the significance of overcoming and acknowledging the sins of the black father, which will help black men escape hegemonic masculinity. As Wilson puts it,

When the sins of our fathers visit us
We do not have to play host.
We can banish them with forgiveness
As God, in His Largeness and Laws. (7)

Thus, the nature of the odyssey of self-knowledge, for Wilson, involves rediscovering and reaffirming the Africanness in the African American experience. With this regard, the process of self-assertion, self examination and self knowledge involves black men's stepping away from the sins of their fathers, discovering their own place, and planting their own roots, which necessitates a reconciliation with their past. Troy is capable of noticing his father's mistakes, nonetheless, is not able to banish his father's sins. Troy's father, who worked his farm ceaselessly but who was always in debt to a remorseless master and who transmitted his frustration to his children, becomes an opportunity to teach "duty." Troy notes in Act I Scene IV that his father was not generous, yet he tells Lyons that he approves of his father's "responsible manhood" (49). As Troy recounts his experiences with his father, "he felt a responsibility toward us. Maybe he ain't treated us the way I felt he should have . . . but without that responsibility he could have walked off and left us . . . made his own way" (49). Like his father, who "wasn't good for nobody" (49), Troy becomes a threatening shadow over the dreams of others due to his masculinity crisis. Trapped beneath the normative definitions of the masculine mystique, Troy finds freedom in death.

Throughout *Fences*, Troy struggles with death, which he characterizes as white. In one of his extensive stories about "confronting the devil" in Act I Scene I, Troy defines the Devil as a "white fellow . . . got on good clothes and everything. . . . He say 'I'll give you all the credit you want but you want but you got to pay the interest on it.' . . . Say if I miss a payment the devil was coming back and it'll be hell to pay" (20). Similarly, in another story that he tells, he attributes whiteness to Death when he describes it as wearing "a white robe with a hood on it" (18). Yet, he fails to realize that the white cloak he wears over his masculinity is the shadow that is suppressing him. As Rose recounts the story of how Troy dies in Act I Scene V:

> Ain't too much changed. He still got that piece of rag tied to that tree. He was out here swinging that bat. I was just ready to go back in the house. He swung that bat and bat and then he just fell over. Seem like he swung it and stood there with this grin on his face . . . and then he just fell over. They carried him on down to the hospital, but I knew there wasn't no need. (87)

Even though Troy dies at the end of the play, the audience does not know if he escapes from the masculine mystique. Since confronting "the sins of black fathers" is a significant concept for August Wilson, he transmits the problem of masculine identity from Troy to Cory. What kind of a man Cory will become remains a mystery for the audience. In order to establish his own life outside the fences that his father has erected, Cory escapes his father's house to join the military and tries, as the play implies, to make a productive life for himself. Although Troy's death brings Cory to his father's house, his freedom from hegemonic masculinity requires reconciliation with his father's sins as well as his past. After Cory returns home, he experiences the same dilemma Troy experienced, which is when he realizes that he is tied to his father. As Cory explains in Act II Scene V,

> [t]he whole time I was growing up . . . living in his house . . . Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere. It weighted on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn't tell which one was you anymore. That shadow digging in your flesh. Trying to live crawl in. Trying to live through you. Everywhere I looked, Troy Maxson was staring back at me . . . hiding under bed . . . in the closet. I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow. (87-88)

Like his father, Cory believes that denying his father is the way to get rid of that shadow. However, in order to formulate his life as a black man, and not to experience a masculinity crisis that ruined his father's life, Troy's looming shadow must be acknowledged and overcome. Rose suggests that there exist two options for Cory; he must either try to perform hegemonic masculinity or negotiate his own masculine identity against the shadows of the masculine mystique. As Rose suggests in the final scene of Act II,

> You can't be nobody but who you are, Cory. That shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself. You either got to grow into it or cut it down to fit you. But that's all you got to make life with. That's all you got to measure yourself against that world out there. (88)

Although Troy partially reconciles with his past, the idea of a complete reunion of all the members of the Maxson family comes from Gabriel. At the end of the play, the redemptive and ritualistic action that stresses August Wilson's emphasis on African sensibilities on black masculinity occurs through the final transcendent act of Gabriel

Maxson. Gabriel thinks he is the Archangel Gabriel and thus represents the earthly embodiment of power. At the end of *Fences*, Gabriel summons his special faith to literally and symbolically open heaven's gates for his brother Troy on the day of his funeral. His actions imply a new day for Troy and the Maxson family. Moreover, Gabriel's ritualistic and spiritual performance like the juba in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, (his atavistic dancing and howling) demonstrates "a syncretic cosmology, the presence of African tradition within New World religious practice." (Elam 698). Gabriel announces to Rose that he will tell St. Peter to open the gates of heaven. For the first time, Troy does not have to muscle his way past a barrier to get by; the passageway is free and clear with African sensibilities. Gabriel reminds the audience how the exploration of individual characteristics, mythic signification, one's African roots and the struggle to integrate with society is important in the identity search of black males. In other words, Wilson's blend of African rituals with Christian elements highlights the influence of the past on the present as the Maxson family's African sensibilities provide a benediction for their African American presence and hope for a better future.

In conclusion, *Fences* is ultimately the story of manhood as measured against that illusory American Dream of material gain. Only this time in *The Pittsburgh Cycle,* the struggles of the male protagonist are further heightened by the masculine mystique. In his trace of the black performance crisis in different decades of the twentieth century, through *Fences*, Wilson illustrates to his audience that the masculine mystique actually is not unbreakable. His emphasis on the African rituals at the end of the play, implies that there exist some possible ways for the salvation of black masculinity from hegemonic masculinity. Since the masculinity crisis continues to exist, Wilson's indirect handling of performance of the masculine mystique indicates that African American males' double consciousness as black men living in a white world requires a fuller perspective of their lives than the one they are performing. In order to have any chance for freedom both for themselves and for their community, they must take off the lens of the hegemonic masculinity that obscures their view of themselves and the world.

CONCLUSION

> *A dog knows it's a dog. A cat knows it's a cat. But a Negro don't know he's a Negro. He thinks he's a white man. It's Negroes like you who hold us back.*
>
> Sterling, *Radio Golf*
>
> *If you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up.*
>
> Aunt Ester, *Two Trains Running*

August Wilson, as a prolific playwright with more than ten major plays, numerous theatrical commentaries and other creative works embodies twentieth-century African American theater. His plays are classically "well made," with strongly individualized characters and realist settings and action. In formulating a completely African American world of kitchens, taxi stands, recording studios and backyards, Wilson's drama has attracted universal attention. While depicting the black male experience over the twentieth century, Wilson's *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, in which each play is set in a different decade, reflects cultural issues that are vital to black manhood in the United States.

In response to the criticism concerning his focus on male characters, August Wilson contends that he writes about black men because he is a black man, and it is the position from which he perceives the world. (Shannon, *Dramatic* 222). Throughout *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, Wilson reveals the inauthenticity of hegemonic masculinity that precludes conformity to idealized archetypes and denies black men a place in American society. Holloway, one of the characters in Wilson's *Two Trains Running* (1993), makes a direct and clear connotation with this hegemony. As he argues in Act I Scene II, the source of hegemonic masculinity has been the exploitation of African American men (*Two Trains* 34). Unemployment that plagues young African Americans such as Sterling in the play is not due to "laziness" as Memphis and Troy before him in *Fences* argue. It is due to the fact that male success in hegemonic society tends to be measured by material standards; how much money a man makes, what kind of car he drives, or even the woman on his arm. As Holloway points out in Act II Scene III, "that is what's wrong with half these niggers now. They don't know

what causes their trouble" (*Two Trains* 82). For him, the only way to salvation from the performance crisis is for black men to look within, to recognize themselves as the source of their well-being.

Wilson believes that the reason why many black males suffer from a masculinity crisis is due to the fact that the vast majority of black males internalize the masculinity of propertied, heterosexual white men as natural, normal, and exemplary. In this fashion, elite white men control the normative definitions of masculinity, and they use these standards to evaluate their own masculine identities and those around them. Forced into performing these standards, black males find themselves sinking into blind hopelessness. As Wilson reveals in an interview with Bonnie Lyons, America proposes black males

> a contract that says, "if you leave all that African stuff over there and adopt the values of the dominant culture, you can participate." For the most part, black males have rejected that sort of con job. Many blacks in the ghettos say, "if I got to give up who I am, if I can't be like me, then I don't want it." The ones who accept go on become part of the growing black middle class and in some areas even acquire some power and participation in society, but when they finally arrive where they arrive, they are no longer the same people. They are clothed in different manners and ways of life, different thoughts and ideas. They've acculturated and adopted white values. (qtd in Lyons 3-4)

Similarly, according to bell hooks, who considers masculinity as a carefully orchestrated performance, or in other words a masquerade, one of the tragic ironies of black masculinity is that black males "succeed in acquiring material privilege often by sacrificing their positive connection to black culture and black experience" (*Killing* 160). That is why, she argues, black males must thoroughly reconsider their views on gender and sex "as it seeks to dismantle racially oppressive systems, given the ways in which these modes of oppression are interrelated" (*Killing* 69). Because of the performance of hegemonic masculinity, black males have divorced themselves from black community, making their wealth on their own without recognizing or acknowledging their ties to the larger African American community.

August Wilson's *The Pittsburgh Cycle* should be considered as a manifestation of his odyssey for the creation of self-sustained and actualized black masculinity. Wilson's

celebration and call for a traditional African model of masculinity is the message that he conveys though his other plays.

Since Wilson's *The Pittsburgh Cycle* addresses black performance crisis in different decades of the twentieth-century, in this thesis only three of his plays were thoroughly analyzed so as to avoid repetition. Nonetheless, since they are essential to the whole cycle in terms of understanding August Wilson's dramaturgical project for black manhood, his other seven plays are required to be dealt with.

Set in 1904, Pittsburg, *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) is the play that begins August Wilson's ten-play cycle dramatizing the black male experience during the twentieth century. The character, Caesar is arguably the vilest in the entire cycle because he fully assumes his role and composes his masculinity on his ability to control and oppress those in his community. What does Caesar fail to see is in the eyes of the hegemonic society that chained millions of black, he is just as inferior as other African Americans. Moreover, his casual usage of the word "nigger" implies his embracement of a language used by the "imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" to discriminate and oppress his fellow blacks. His repeated use of this word to separate himself from other black males displays the extent to which he has internalized the white man's definition of aggressive masculinity. Thus, Caesar is a good example of how internalization of the plantation patriarchy can cause a character to become vile.

Wilson's second Pulitzer Prize winning play is *The Piano Lesson* (1990), set in 1936. The legacy of a dead father/grandfather is the testing ground for the main male character Boy Willie and his identity as a man and his role within the family. The piano carved by Bernice and Boy Willie's great grandfather and stolen by their father is the legacy that must be evaluated either for its monetary value or for its symbolic value. Boy Willie wants to control his inheritance as a means of claiming his manhood yet by doing so, he must accept a female version of that inheritance. He must transform himself from adolescence into an acceptance and acknowledgement of an African manhood that includes his entire family and its history. Boy Charles' (Bernice and Boy Willie's father) struggle to prove his own manhood results in the disintegration of the family. Boy Willie, by selling the piano, his father's legacy,

intends to become financially independent like the white man whose property he envies. Not being able to cope with the ghost of Sutter (the landowner), Boy Willie needs of his sister, Bernice's help. The ghost of the white man is finally exorcised by Bernice's action. When the play is considered according to Wilson's dramaturgical project for black manhood, it exemplifies that the ills caused by the performance of hegemonic masculinity can be cured with the assistance of female partnership and black legacy.

In *Seven Guitars* (1995), Wilson focuses on the Hill district of Pittsburgh in the spring of 1948. Just released from jail, the protagonist Blues singer Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton is asked to make a deal after a song he recorded previously, which turns out a hit. After a year of trials and tribulations, Floyd is ready to change the past year's wrongs and return to Chicago with a new consideration of what is significant in his life. However, his struggle to change the wrongs in his life inherently failed since his dream of the future is the performance of hegemonic masculinity, which stresses materialism and empty status symbols. The play's persisting theme is the African American male's fight for his own humanity, self-understanding and self-acceptance as opposed to performance of hegemonic masculinity. The rooster is used as a recurring symbol of the black man in the play, and provides a violent and shocking foreshadowing influence when Hedley delivers a vehement monologue and ritualistically slays one in front of the other characters. This ritual highlights Wilson's connection between the urban black community in Pittsburgh with its rural African roots.

In *Two Trains Running* (1993), Wilson focuses on a group of men who hang out at Memphis Lee's restaurant in Pittsburgh in 1969. Even though they are living in the politically unsteady years of the 1960s, the men of the play are more concerned with their private pursuits. The conversation between Memphis Lee and Sterling's dwells upon four key issues peculiar to African American male identity: guns, employment, unemployment and women. What they come up with out of these issues is that they must navigate a world in which the rules have been made by white men. Memphis and Sterling, as opposed to Uncle Tomism, are open to rage and turn to guns so as to protect themselves from threats in their own community caused by the hegemonic society. However, potentially volatile situations are prevented due to the presence of

women. With this play, Wilson suggests that the performance of hegemonic masculinity and its consequences on black masculinity and, to a larger sense on black community, can be avoided with the assistance of women. Hope seems to arise from the women in this play, who support and maintain the definitions and limitations of manhood for black men.

Jitney (2000) a play about African American taxicab (jitney) drivers in Pittsburgh in 1977, displays African American men struggling to find respect and fulfillment in a world of degrading values. Till the end of the play, the major conflict revolves around the cab company's building is going to be pulled down by the Urban Reneval to make room for new construction. The protagonist, Becker, must decide whether to take a stand and fight City Hall, search for a new place or close up the venture. A subplot is provided by the impending arrival of Becker's son, Booster, who is returning home after twenty years in prison. His unwelcome presence will trigger a confrontation with his father. The existence of this play in *The Pittsburgh Cycle* contributes Wilson's dramaturgical project with its sense of community. The taxi stand becomes a microcosmic meeting place for the taxi drivers who have either a great deal in common or significant things to teach one another about the conditions of black masculinity.

Wilson's *King Hedley II* (1999) set in 1985, Pittsburgh, is a quasi-sequel to *Seven Guitars*. As *Seven Guitars* ends, Hedley is led to believe that he has fathered a child. In *King Hedley II,* Hedley is long gone but his son is in the here and now, fighting both his past and present. Named King Hedley II, he spends great deal of energy to understand what it means to be a black man in the 1980s as an ex-convict. Some of the problems the play addresses include black on black crime, joblessness and the family. In addition to this, King Hedley II has to deal with a second wife who is pregnant and desires to terminate her pregnancy due to the fact of the ongoing hardships of being black in America. Similar to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the play illustrates how the excessive preoccupation with the cool pose destroys Hedley II's manhood.

The last play of the cycle is *Radio Golf* (2005) which focuses on the dilemma of the black middle class men in the 1997, who are caught between the desire for

educational, social, and financial advancement in a predominantly white power structure and suffer from the consequent potential erosion of African American manhood. Roosevelt yields to the hegemonic masculinity and worship property regardless of personal costs. Roosevelt is able to have an opportunity to host his own golf talk radio show with the help of well off-white investors. Nonetheless, he allows himself to be bought, metaphorically permitting the white investors to own him. Even though he gets financial benefits from this, it comes at the cost of tokenizing himself, and by doing so, indicating that this is the only way to "get in the door." As opposed to the other plays in the *Pittsburgh Cycle*, the characters in *Radio Golf* are middle class African Americans. Even though they gain material wealth that the other characters envy in the rest of the cycle, they still adhere to the performance of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, Wilson exemplifies that black males will continue suffering from hegemonic masculinity. However, at the same time, the ending of the play (Harmond strives for protecting Aunt Ester's house) implies that, for Wilson, there is still hope for black manhood.

In the framework of the relevant theories or concepts related to the performativity and masquerade of black masculinity, this thesis exemplified the performance crisis observed among black males in Wilson's canon. As a collection of roles and performances, the "plantation patriarchy," the "cool pose" and the "masculine mystique" provide a theoretical framework to understand the ongoing crisis in black masculinity. The thesis also contributes to the Third Wave of Masculinity in which ethnic and racial masculinities come to forefront in the United States.

In the first chapter of this thesis, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* was analyzed through the angle of bell hooks' "plantation patriarchy." In her analysis of free and enslaved black men, bell hooks brings to light the fact that African Americans, upon their arrival to the New World, were taught hegemonic patriarchal masculinity. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* as the second play set in the first half of the twentieth century in *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, illustrates the performance crisis that black males confronted upon their embodiment of the plantation patriarchy at the beginning of the century. In the case of Herald Loomis, Wilson indicates that at the root of the black male crisis, is the failure to know his history and know who he is and where he has been. As he ending of the play indicates, Herald Loomis's reconstruction of

black masculinity does not empower the black community that Wilson and hooks valued and emphasized so much. Instead, Loomis' presence in *The Pittsburgh Cycle* reinforces the fact that many black men who adopt hegemonic masculinity, particularly the "plantation patriarchy" as a model for themselves are doomed to experience a masculinity crisis.

The second chapter of this thesis analyzed *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* using the framework of Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson's "cool pose" theory. In order to resist the normative definitions of masculinity, black males may adopt a "cool pose" to establish their male identity. By taking on a "cool pose," black males act in a performative way to subvert the norms formulated by the hegemonic masculinity. Yet, the performance of "cool" can be risky if it is taken to extreme. Exemplifying the outcome of an excessive preoccupation with "the cool," the play illustrates the black male crisis in the music industry in Chicago in 1927. The protagonist, Levee plays "cool" in order to advocate his presence for other black men in his band. His coolness becomes his unique source of dignity, pride and worth. Because Levee is too "cool," he becomes alienated from his community and past, which accentuates Majors' and Billson's argument on the destructive result of "the cool pose." Whereas an unconventional perspective on masculinity has provided Levee with alternative grounds on which to establish a healthy self-esteem or "ashe," Levee cannot realize the ideal that Toledo and, in a larger sense, Wilson has presented. Instead of coming to terms with his excessive performance of "cool," and finding a solution to his masculinity crisis, Levee transfers his own masculinity and identity struggle onto others.

In the third chapter of this thesis, the protagonist of *Fences* was examined in light of Robert Staples' sex role theory. In his *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society*, Staples acknowledges that black males in the post war era were deserted and alone. Loneliness and emptiness became the dominant terms in the era's cultural analysis of black masculinity. In his analysis, Staples draws attention to the massive grief of African American men aspiring to fit a media-idealized "strong breadwinner" image while experiencing a masculinity crisis and suffering from "the masculine mystique." He examines how normative definitions of masculinity deprive so many black men of being able to fulfill the expectations attached to being male in

hegemonic America. Trying to live up to the hegemonic masculine ideal was not an easy task for black males. By considering his masculinity within the standards of the masculine mystique, Troy creates pressures that can only be abated by removing the inadequate benchmarks defining him. Living in a "imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" where he must earn money to survive, however, makes this struggle arduous. If he wishes to break free of the masculine mystique, Troy's double consciousness as a black man living in a white world requires fuller consideration. In order to have any chance for freedom both for himself and the Maxson family, Troy must take off the lens of the masculine mystique that obscures his view of himself and the world because he cannot regard himself to be inadequate and his burdens to be failures. As a result, Troy fails to see the successes of his family and his life.

To conclude, in *The Pittsburgh Cycle,* August Wilson presents the problematic and problematized nature of black masculinity in acts of responsibility to one's self and the surrounding community. In each of his plays, his black characters either experience a masculinity crisis or come to a new understanding of themselves in relationship to structures of power and systems of privilege. While actual confrontation with hegemonic masculinity works to produce a revisionist definition of black masculinity for some of his black male characters, the ones who reject confrontation with this reality are doomed to fail. In the end, his plays suggest that black manhood cannot be determined by external acquisition, but through internal pride, self-definition as well as self-determination. August Wilson demonstrates this dynamic of black male empowerment through various images of black men, of different ages and of different historical circumstances. As Keith Clark argues, by depicting black men within a community of black men, "Wilson's plays foreground multiple conceptions of gender that are often contradictory and conflicting" (102). Therefore, August Wilson's portrait of black masculinity is not static. In his plays, devalued by society and marked by their performance crisis, black males negotiate with each other and with the hegemonic masculinity as they attempt to reclaim their masculinity. The complete liberation from the performance crisis will occur, as Wilson suggests in an interview with David Savran, when black males "begin to make a contribution to the society as Africans" (296).

Even a casual look at the black experience in today's American culture and society reveals that the problem of African Americans continues to exist in various shapes. Even the plantation patriarchy, the cool pose and the masculine mystique can still be observed in today's black male's performance of masculinity. They still do perform that is, live up according to the expectations of social and ideological norms, which makes Wilson's observations and interpretations all the more relevant and interesting because of the fact that African American men still have to "perform" i.e. act out in order to survive in a hostile social environment. In other words, the crisis exists and continues to determine the fate of African American males and it seems as if August Wilson's wisdom i.e. going back to the African roots, rediscovering "African-ness" is adapted and will continue to exist.

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