

# The Jezebel on Stage: August Wilson's Portrayal of Women in *The Century Cycle*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the work of August Wilson's *Century Cycle*, focusing particularly on *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II*, and *Two Trains Running*. Using a framework based on foundational Black feminist texts, this analysis interrogates the archetypes that emerge in Wilson's portrayal of Black women to reveal their sexist assumptions. Drawing on Wilson's comments and insights from other scholars, this study explores the debate over the depictions of gender dynamics and societal roles in his plays. It argues that Wilson and other artists have a moral obligation to resist sexist archetypes and acknowledge the historical context from which they emerge. By situating Wilson's plays in the history of racialized gender violence stemming from slavery in the United States, this analysis emphasizes how theatrical and artistic representations can perpetuate systems of oppression. Ultimately, this paper argues that the portrayal of Black women in American theater must be analyzed within the context of historical oppression and violence, helping move towards a framework that provides agency, humanity, and historical awareness.

**Key Terms:** August Wilson, *Century Cycle*, Black Feminist Theory, American Theater, Racialized Gender Violence

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## 1. Introduction

A play is a mosaic: a tapestry of history forged together that mirrors reality. Theater, like other performance arts, has always been inextricably linked with social movements and politics. It has been an avenue of expression for groups historically silenced, especially within LGBTQ communities. Nevertheless, racism and sexism have deeply rooted themselves in the foundation of this art form. Because theater reflects social hierarchies, representation on stage is critical to enforce or challenge those hierarchies. Racist stereotypes were widespread in live performance during the years of slavery. Archetypes like the Mammy, a stereotype of a nurturing Black woman

serving white families, or the happy slave, exemplified by characters like Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima (Cheers), were performed repeatedly by white actors in blackface paint. This practice was known as "black face," a form of theatrical makeup used to create caricatures of Black characters ("Blackface: The Birth of an American Stereotype"). These minstrel shows left a deep scar on how Black men and women were portrayed in American Theater.

As the Civil Rights movement progressed, the theater was slow to reflect societal change. During this period, the archetypes of black characters, typically written by white authors, continued to ostracize the Black community. The theater space for Black artists was nonexistent,

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though not for lack of effort from Black creators. In more recent times, Black performers have permeated the theater, though not in roles crafted for them. White plays were cast with Black actors; there was little space for exclusively Black theater. This practice, known as colorblind casting (Eyring), was proposed as a remedy to discrimination in the arts. Despite the movement's allegedly pure intentions, this approach ultimately sparked more conflict within the theater community. Many Black creators and performers found this solution to be inadequate. Rather than providing equal space for diverse performances, this merely obscured discrimination and enabled White theater members to dismiss ongoing complaints of inequality. Within this debate, we meet August Wilson.

## 2. Who was August Wilson?

August Wilson was born in 1945 and raised in the Pittsburgh Hill District by mixed-race parents. Although Wilson's father was not active in his life, Wilson grew up with five other siblings and often had to fend for himself. Intense racism from his peers led Wilson to drop out of school at 15. He then spent countless hours in the local library, reading whatever he could get his hands on. He fell in love with poetry and was publishing his own by 1969. Following his published poems, Wilson turned to playwriting. His first show, *Jitney*, was showcased in 1982. This showcase marked the beginning of the *Century Cycle*. This series of ten plays, each set in a different decade of the Hill District, explores the experience of Black Americans and the legacy of slavery on the family structure. Wilson was quickly recognized for his remarkable abilities. Wilson's work was endlessly praised, being compared to the genius of Tennessee Williams (Brantley), and for some, being "considered to be one of the five greatest

playwrights in American history" (Washington). His characters were beautifully tragic, riddled with flaws and pain that felt raw.

Despite Wilson's prowess, he faced many critiques of the portrayals of Black women in his plays. To further understand this tension, this essay will examine the stereotypes of Black women present in the *Century Cycle*, their historical foundations, and their broader implications for American theater. In particular, this analysis will explore Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II*, and *Two Trains Running*.

## 3. Author Perspective

Before diving in, I find it crucial to disclose my identity and explain why I chose to discuss this topic. I am a young white woman who self-identifies as a feminist. I had the opportunity to take a college course on the work of August Wilson, and I felt there was a need to discuss the women within the plays. However, as a white woman, I know that my perspective is privileged. To account for this, the theory in this essay is grounded in the incredible work of Black female scholars who have defined the foundational theory of Black Feminist literature. My perspectives will undoubtedly be painted by my life experience, and my goal is not to speak for Black women. Instead, the purpose is to fight against misogyny for all women.

What drew me to Wilson's work was both the poetic nature of the language and the dialogue that felt human. Through my college course, I saw *Jitney* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and spoke with the artistic director and one of the actors. Hearing artists discuss the influence of Wilson's shows long after his death pushed my decision to investigate the hidden (or often, very blatant) misogyny woven through his plays. This is not to say that Wilson was intentionally endorsing

misogyny, or that he is any kind of ‘woman hater.’ Instead, my criticism stems from an intense admiration for Wilson’s work. Given the influence of his works, they have naturally attracted subject criticism. *The Century Cycle* is foundational in American theater and thus must be closely examined to ensure that artists and audiences alike do not end up reinforcing existing racist and sexist stereotypes unconsciously.

#### 4. Ruby in *Seven Guitars*

Starting with the fifth show in the cycle, we meet Ruby in *Seven Guitars*. This play takes place in 1948, following the days leading up to the murder of Floyd Barton. Floyd had previously been in a relationship with Vera; however, they ultimately split up as Floyd pursued a career in blues music, leaving her behind. While the script follows the reconciliation between Vera and Floyd, it also features a subplot with Louise’s 25-year-old niece, Ruby. Ruby is described as an “uncommon woman” (Wilson, Act 1, Scene 5), dripping in sensuality. She is pregnant and does not know the father’s identity. The two potential fathers ended up fighting over Ruby, leaving one of the men dead. This violence led Ruby to seek shelter with her aunt, Louise. Wilson portrayed Ruby’s pregnancy as a misdeed on her part, leading to assumptions we see other characters make later in the play. Ruby is considered promiscuous for having been with two partners and is lusted over by every man she comes across. This is seen through stage directions such as, “Ruby gets up, brushes off her backside, and walks around the yard. Hedley watches her with undisguised lust” (Wilson, Act 2, Scene 1).

The phrasing of Wilson’s stage directions immediately paints Ruby as a temptress. Wilson clarifies that Ruby merely brushed herself off, consequently drawing the attention of a man twice

her age. As Wilson regarded this note as important enough to be included in the stage directions, he considers this moment to be necessary for the plot and to explain men’s lusting after Ruby. This moment acts as a preface for the sexual violence Hedley commits later in the play. However, this phrasing also characterizes Ruby for the audience. Louise, her aunt, is vocal about her displeasure with Ruby’s actions. Louise says, when asked about Ruby staying with her, “Knowing her and her fast little behind, she won’t be here long” (Wilson). By characterizing Ruby in this way, Wilson creates ammunition to blame her for the later sexual violence she experiences. The phrasing describing Ruby implied that the lust men expressed for her was in response to her deliberate actions, such as brushing her backside. It is implied that she is asking for such attention. The idea that women invite sexual exploitation is a common trend in the media’s portrayal of Black women and their bodies. Their presence is seen as sexual in nature. By drawing any attention to her backside, Ruby loses her humanity in the eyes of the male characters. She becomes merely an object for sexual desire, making the later violence seem like a natural reaction to her prior behaviors.

The sexualization of black women’s features, such as the buttocks, has been a long-documented remnant of slavery. Black enslaved women were repeatedly subjected to sexual torture by their White masters. To justify this, these rapists would then blame women’s very existence as the cause. There was curiosity about the differences between a black and white woman; this justified the sexual abuse of enslaved women for their supposed inherently sexual features (Collins). The natural shapes of black women’s bodies then became markers of sexual deviance, with a disturbing history.

In 1816, Sarah Bartmann, an enslaved woman, was locked in a cage and showcased to

white audiences as a freak of nature. One account states that: "When ordered to do so, she leaves her cage and parades before the audience who seems fascinated with what they see as her most intriguing feature—her buttocks" (Collins 26). After Bartmann's death, she was dissected by the "fathers of modern biology" as they were so fascinated with her genetic differences from white women, particularly regarding her curvier figure. Stories such as this one are precisely why we most closely examine why certain body parts are so sexualized. This fascination with black, female bodies has shaped the Western view of black women as sexual in nature.

This Western view impacts modern beauty standards to this day. The desire for large buttocks that mirror Black women is now common amongst young women across the globe, for the desire to become more sexually attractive now includes having bigger breasts and buttocks. Cosmetic surgeries such as buttock augmentations or Brazilian Butt Lifts (BBL's) have continued to rise in popularity. And those receiving this surgery are usually young, white women, with 72% of BBL patients being Caucasian (Afolabi). The West remains fascinated with the black female body and attempts to emulate it to gain sexual desirability. Despite the seeming simplicity of the stage direction of Hedley lusting after Ruby brushing her backside, it is built upon a legacy of rape and accusations made to justify sexual violence.

In the play, Hedley is 59, a man who often goes on rambling to no one in particular. Despite being twice Ruby's age, he repeatedly reveals his desire for her. No one in the play bats an eye at Hedley's desire. Hedley's lust is seen as usual and appropriate. In a specific scene, after Hedley became intensely upset, he began wildly swinging a machete in Ruby's direction. Considering Hedley's obvious lust, Ruby sensed she was in danger. This leads to Wilson's stage direction: "She

lifts her dress and gives herself to him in recognition of his great need" (Wilson, Act 2, Scene 5). While sexualization of women permeates Wilson's plays, this phrasing is particularly uncomfortable. The sexualization does not hide behind a character's voice. These are Wilson's words. Playwrights speak through the stage directions, defining what they feel cannot be changed by other directors. The choice to use this kind of language implies that Ruby is complicit and, thus, is not a victim.

Wilson created a situation in which Ruby is charged with a machete by a man twice her age who has publicly lusted over her at every opportunity. However, rather than explaining this situation of coercion as rape, Wilson states that Ruby was merely "helping" Hedley. Hedley was so distraught that he needed to force a 25-year-old pregnant woman to have sex with him. In a situation where Ruby is in danger, she still "gives herself to him," painting the blame entirely on her. While arguments can be made that the dialogue is the character speaking and does not represent Wilson's own perspective, this line is different. This line is a stage direction, so it is seen by the directors as a guiding hand on how Wilson wants his play to be portrayed. This phrasing mirrors the all-too-common victim-blaming that survivors of rape experience every day.

For black women in this country, sexual violence is a lived reality. Forty to sixty percent of black women report being subjected to coercive sexual contact by age 18, and 35% of Black women experienced some form of contact sexual violence during their lifetime ("Black Women and Sexual Assault"). According to the U.S. DOJ Bureau of Justice Statistics, black women and girls over the age of 12 experience higher rates of rape and sexual assault than any other group. With 63% of rape usually going unreported (US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics), the way we

speak about victims is critical for the safety of young black women.

Wilson creates for Ruby a fate that is too familiar for many. She was in a dangerous relationship and accidentally got pregnant. Despite being the victim of violent partners, Wilson portrays her as a whore. Louise, the woman Ruby sought out for safety, repeatedly calls Ruby too promiscuous. Wilson portrays Louise as the sensible one, always ensuring that the people around her are protected and that she has a way of defending herself as well. Wilson could have used Louise's opposing lifestyle to show women coming together and supporting one another. Instead, Wilson chooses to have Louise be annoyed with Ruby and how irresponsible she seems, leaving Ruby to fend for herself from the sexualization she experiences constantly. She had already experienced violence surrounding her romantic relationships. She is then victimized by a much older man threatening her with a machete. This choice by Wilson could have led to a powerful story about a woman recovering from being victimized and oversexualized by the men she thought she could trust. Instead, Wilson chooses to have Ruby engage in a relationship with Hedley after the attack. She then decides to claim Hedley fathered her baby during this incident, even naming her child after him. Ruby was set up by Wilson to be a Jezebel.

A Jezebel, biblically speaking, was a temptress who lured men to sin. As White masters raping their slaves were caught by their wives, the abuse was justified as the fault of the enslaved women. The women were tempting their masters; responsibility could not be placed on the men. These crimes led to the emergence of a new belief that "black women were naturally seen as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust. They were labeled Jezebels and sexual temptresses and accused of leading white men away from spiritual

purity into sin" (hooks 33). As Patricia Hill Collins put it, this meant "in brief, Jezebels can't be raped" (Collins 66). Wilson's portrayal of Ruby destined her to be blamed for her own suffering.

Wilson may have portrayed Ruby in this way to reflect the time period in which her story takes place. Ruby is a young, pregnant woman in a time when being such was dangerous. Wilson may have thought that Ruby had to go with Hedley to protect herself. Wilson offered her a form of security in a society that did not offer protection for young, single mothers. When I interviewed Folami Williams, an actress who played Rena in *Jitney* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, I asked her about Wilson's intentions. I asked whether she felt Ruby had lost her depth beyond being an object of sexual desire, due to repeated victimization. The play only explores Ruby's toxic relationships rather than any other element of her existence. Williams responded that "there is a power in these women, what choice did they have? They had to make it happen for themselves" (F. Williams, Personal Interview, 15 June 2025). Williams felt Ruby's power came from her survival. Ruby made her way in the world despite the repeated trauma she faced. She wanted to give her child a chance. With Hedley, she had protection from other men and a sense of stability. She would be able to raise her son in one place, rather than having to take refuge elsewhere. Being with Hedley meant her child could have the security of those who supported Hedley. Ruby chose to take the violence and pain for the sake of her child's future.

I agree with the perspective that Ruby's story has power when viewed as a mother making sacrifices and a woman surviving in a world designed to hurt her. However, this specific portrayal is simultaneously harmful. Imagery portraying "the sexually available 'slave girl'" who is "alive and kicking, smouldering away on some

exotic TV set or on the covers of paperbacks” (Hall 7) continuously appeared post-slavery after decades of sexual abuse. These stereotypes lasted long past the era of slavery, and this is precisely why the image of a “loose or promiscuous black woman is dangerous. Women like Ruby are viewed as tragically sexual (hooks 74), unable to escape their sexual nature supposedly inherent to their race and gender. There was “the sexual myth that black women are not innocent and never can be” (hooks 160) that needed to be challenged. By portraying Ruby as this stereotype, she is blamed for her suffering, suggesting that her actions have led to her unfortunate fate. While she overcomes elements of her trauma, she is still considered at fault for her suffering. This blame strips away the power of Ruby’s survival story, as she is represented as the villain in her own story.

## 5. Ruby’s Return in *King Hedley II*

Ruby’s misfortune did not end after *Seven Guitars*. In the ninth play of the *Century Cycle*, *King Hedley II*, Ruby returns as another stereotype. The play is set in 1985, following Ruby’s son King’s release from prison. Predictably, this show is about Ruby’s son, whom she claimed was Hedley’s, and follows King’s struggle to balance the weight of generational violence. Hedley murdered Floyd Barton at the end of *Seven Guitars*, but Ruby chose to protect her son by providing an image of a loving and kind father. This ultimately harms King as he discovers the weight of his namesake. This play explores intense dynamics of generational trauma and includes a character I consider the most dynamic of Wilson’s women. Tonya, King’s wife, is grappling with another pregnancy and the danger of bringing a child into the world. King’s journey with fatherhood reflects the conflict with his own paternity, as he learns Hedley was not his true father. Ruby tries to help King find his way,

but ultimately chooses her happiness by focusing her attention on a romantic relationship.

Ruby then morphs from the Jezebel into the bad mother. She is suggested as the cause of King’s suffering. Her dishonesty dooms him to violence, or so it seems within the script. Ruby focuses on her own relationship, appearing to leave King to suffer with the violence within his father’s legacy. Ruby returns to Elmore, the man who murdered her past boyfriend, despite the suffering he caused her. She once again is defined by her relationships with violent men. The portrayal of the bad Black mother is another archetype that appears far too often. Such archetypes appear in the forms of the historic Mammy, who was depicted as a perfect maternal figure to white children with a total indifference to her own (Imani), or in a modern retelling seen as the Welfare Queen, black single mothers who only care about the government checks they receive rather than the well-being of their children (Freeman). Wilson portrays Ruby as exactly what Black women were pressured to be: sexually submissive and defined exclusively by her relationships to men, even dismissing her own child’s struggles in pursuit of relationships.

Ruby is a prime example of Wilson reinforcing negative representations of Black women. Given Wilson’s influence in the world of theater, these portrayals carry significant weight. The archetypes of the bad mother and the Jezebel run rampant through Wilson’s work. Characters such as Dussie Mae, Mattie Campbell, and Molly Cunningham are just a few examples of other Jezebels that appear across Wilson’s dramatic canon. These women are repeatedly described as sexually promiscuous, portrayed as bringing on lust in the men around them. The stage directions include them flaunting their sensuality, taking on the blame for the male characters’ sexual degradation. These women are victims of the

legacy of their abused ancestors, with men perpetuating such beliefs knowingly or unknowingly.

## 6. Risa in *Two Trains Running*

This brings us to the next show, *Two Trains Running*, which is set in Pittsburgh in 1969. Working at a local restaurant, Risa—a defiant young woman—makes her distaste for relationships clear. Risa is hardly the focus of this play, as it delves into the effects of the Hill District's collapse on Black businesses. However, it was Risa's introduction that solidified her place within this discussion. In the stage directions, Risa's initial description is as follows: "In an attempt to define herself other than her genitalia, she has scarred her legs with a razor" (Wilson, Act 1, Scene 1).

The topic of self-harm could be an essay in its own right and deserves more discussion than can be given within the framework of this essay. This essay will focus on the overt sexual nature of this remark. As previously mentioned, stage directions provide the playwright a chance to define important elements of the show outside of dialogue. The phrasing of this introduction immediately paints Risa as, once again, a character that exists only in the periphery of her romantic relationships. The act of cutting her legs became part of her relationship with men, rather than an element of her personal struggle. Equating the act of cutting oneself with her refusal of men, it reduces Risa's existence exclusively to her suitability as a sexual or romantic partner. This dependence on male attention is a far too common narrative for young, Black women within the media. Black women are portrayed exclusively in this manner far too often, leaving the impression that "the black female body must exist in a narrative of voyeuristic pleasure where the only

relevant opposition is male/female and the only location for the female is as a victim" (hooks 116). Black women's suffering must be related to their relationship to men, and their resistance is always a response to being repeatedly victimized. Risa's choice to scar her legs may be an act of defiance, an attempt to reclaim her body for herself. However, this later becomes a point of sexualization by other men. This ultimately paints her body, and bodies of Black women like her, "as text on which to write male desire on the black female body" (hooks 114).

Risa's relationship to men in the play can be seen in how the men within the show describe Risa. Despite Risa being vocal about not wanting to submit to men, this does not stop any man from pursuing her. Regarding her scars, one of the men says, "And every man that seen her since she was twelve years old think she got to go layup with them somewhere. She don't want that. She figure if she make her legs ugly that would force everybody to look at her and see what kind of personality she it" (Wilson, Act 1, Scene 2).

The implications of referring to self-harm scars as so ugly that they would repel sexual interest present Risa's existence as built around how she was sexualized. This presents the opportunity for a conversation about how young Black women are impacted by being overly sexualized throughout their childhood. The topic could have been explored and dissected, giving Risa a place within the story beyond just a woman to chase after. However, "women so empowered are dangerous" (Lorde 55), so this could not be the reality without acknowledging the individuality and humanity within her. Instead, her defiance is overlooked. The men in the play dismiss her feelings on relationships, claiming them as merely a flaw within her womanhood, "I know all she need is a good man. Someone to make her feel like a woman" (Wilson, Act 1, Scene 2).

The men view Risa as an angry woman who just needs a man to fix her. This calls back to the idea that Black women are naturally sexual creatures who require guidance from a man to truly live. Risa is one of the few women within Wilson's shows who adamantly push away relationships. She is pursued regardless.

"So you wanted to have ugly legs...You got them. Now what? I done looked at your legs, your hips, your titties, and everything else" (Wilson, Act 2, Scene 4). This is the line that fully defiles Risa. The actions she took to protect herself from sexualization, according to Wilson's stage directions, then become weaponized as a tool to sexualize the rest of her. Her legs may be ugly, but the rest of her body is still sexualizable: "Quite naturally when men see you with that big ass and them pretty legs they gonna try to talk you in to bed somewhere. That's common sense. They be less a man if they didn't" (Wilson, Act 2, Scene 4). Risa took a blade to her body to attempt to keep it her own and to protect her body from being claimed by the men around her. Even with such extreme measures, her body remains her primary attribute. Her rebellion seems foolish in light of the men disregarding her. By choosing to portray the men in this fashion, Wilson aligns himself with their words. This depiction of Risa makes her an object, nothing more, her scars becoming just another attribute to fetishize rather than a representation of her personal battles. Wilson's choice to include self-harm only in relation to Risa's suitability as a sexual partner strips her of dignity and agency.

Wilson's choice to have Risa destroy her own body, then to be defiled by the men around her anyway, reveals a deep-rooted belief that a woman cannot fully exist without a man. Risa, who adamantly wanted to be independent, ended up with a man who repeatedly did what she feared most; he viewed her as a sexual object. Other

characters encourage the pursuit of Risa, repeatedly remarking how the right man will change her mind. Yet, her ending was portrayed as a happy one. This consequently implies that, to be a real man, one must go after women whether they want to be pursued or not. This is seen in the light in which every woman is viewed, as they evaluate any woman's value based on her attractiveness. This ties directly into the rape and sexual violence Black women face every day. Men must pursue them, regardless of whatever measures they took to avoid male attention. Therefore, it must be something within the nature of women to submit to a man. Can women really be victimized then? As Audre Lorde put it, "women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked" (Lorde 54). No matter how hard women like Risa try, they are doomed to be reduced to their sexual features.

Risa, after all the sexual comments from the men around her, still ultimately ends up with a man. A man who repeatedly reduced her to her sexual features. However, Wilson paints this dynamic as a sort of love, a sort of power that, despite Risa's resistance, she found love anyway. I argue, however, that what she saw was not love. It was a way of submission to protect herself from further pain. This is not to say that Sterling, the man whom Risa ends up with, was intended to portray the subjection of women as it does. Instead, it speaks to Wilson's own perspective of what love and relationships look like. Wilson's choice to portray this as a happy ending for Risa communicates a deeper view that his view of genuine love is intertwined with the sexualization of women. This twisted idea of what relationships should be is socialized within men like Wilson before they can even understand. So much so that "violence and love become so intertwined that many men cannot see alternative paths to

manhood that do not invoke violence against women” (Collins 230).

## 7. Other Experts

Many black feminist scholars, such as Michele Wallace and Barbara Smith, have argued that Black men tend to assert power over women in their romantic and sexual behaviors as a response to the legacy of domination their ancestors faced. This is then passed down from father to son, and the strength in reclaiming their power fades into misogyny for its own sake. To describe this, Patricia Hill Collins describes that black men’s desire to reclaim the title of master (Collins 158) and do so by dominating the women within their lives. Collins refers to this as the matrix of domination (Collins 23), and it stems from the years of suffering during times of slavery. While White men refused to let Black men have power over them, these men found the power they sought through their gender.

Some scholars, such as Daniel Moynihan, argued that the initial family structure post-slavery was matriarchal and “imposed a crushing burden” on Black men, and consequently, women too. To resolve this, Moynihan argued that male authority would restore Black men to a comfortable place within society. This was supposedly necessary as during slavery, “Men could not have power over women; they were oppressed in the same way” (Davis 8). Thus, black women were submissive as a form of repayment to black men (Davis 7) after years of being dominated themselves. This subjects black women to an eternal victimhood for the sake of their male counterparts.

However, this perspective is warped by the misogyny of the scholars who examined such family dynamics.

To suggest that black men were dehumanized solely as a result of not being able to be patriarchs implies that the subjection of black women was essential to the black male’s development of a positive self-concept, an idea that only served to support a sexist social order (hooks 21).

To dismiss Black women’s suffering to protect Black men is precisely what leads men to view women’s pain as a necessary evil, which hurts Black men as well. Angela Davis describes how this perspective warped young Black men’s mindset, saying, “I became acquainted very early with the widespread presence of an unfortunate syndrome among some black male activists—namely, to confuse their political activity with an assertion of their maleness” (Davis). Young Black men were socialized to feel like masculinity exists solely by overpowering women, a theme that Wilson’s work demonstrates through Wilson’s worldview when writing the characters of his plays.

Michele Wallace explains how these outdated beliefs were passed on to her, influencing her worldview as a young black woman. She describes how the older women in her life warned her, “The black man has learned to hate himself and to hate you even more. Be careful. He will hurt you” (Wallace 9). This history is precisely what made Wilson’s portrayals of characters such as Ruby and Risa so uncomfortable. Whether Wilson understands it or not, his sexualization of his female characters represents decades of suffering and abuse of Black women from the men in their lives.

## 8. Wilson’s Response

Wilson was not new to criticism regarding the women within his plays. When asked in an

interview why he does not focus any of his works primarily on women, he responded,

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 I try to portray them from their own viewpoint as opposed to my viewpoint. I try to the extent that I am able, step around on the other side of the table, if you will, and try to look at things from their viewpoint and have been satisfied that I have been able to do that to some extent (A. Wilson. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 1991).

He explained that he is not concerned about how he writes about women, as he has a male worldview. The lack of women, he explains, is a consequence of his gender rather than a deliberate attempt to give male characters more content.

I argue that Wilson's response is an evasion of acknowledgement. By choosing to view women as unreachable because of his worldview, he admits that his writings only concern women in their relation to men. Given the influence of Wilson's plays, it is part of his responsibility to give his female characters the same attention and care as he gives his male characters. Black women are far too often treated as "the mule of the world" (Walker 237), and the influential playwrights who set the foundations for what Black American theater looks like should do everything in their power to provide a safe space for Black women. The internalized racism (hooks 1) that causes Black women to be further ostracized from their own communities requires careful study and examination to prevent further spread of racist archetypes in the media and art surrounding the lives of Black Americans.

## 9. Why It Matters

In my college course, I discussed my discomfort with the portrayal of Wilson's female characters as we analyzed each play. During these discussions, a peer asked me a question. She said, "Obviously, August Wilson was a misogynist. We know he hates women, why are we still talking about it?" (K. Gulliot, personal communication, May 2025). This struck me. In every discussion, I brought up the portrayal of women within that particular show. This peer was right; it was becoming repetitive. So why did I feel it was necessary to bring it up continuously? After all, most older plays are rampant with misogyny. This is hardly a new discovery in the history of theater. When I decided to examine Wilson's writing from a historical perspective, that question continuously rang throughout my research. Why should we talk about this? Why does it matter?

To begin answering this question, I focused on the impact of such portrayals. Theater is a medium for change; it has been associated with politics and social movements since its inception. Media and art alike are powerful, and ignoring their influence abandons those hurt by the legacy of discrimination and suffering. Representation beyond sexist archetypes is necessary as "the media's main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies" (Hall 3). The absorption and adoption of beliefs based on portrayals in art and the media is almost entirely unconscious. However pure the intentions may initially be, the reality is that "we formulate our intentions within ideologies" (Hall 4). Despite a newfound awareness of this due to the diligent work of feminist scholars, there has been little change regarding representation for Black women in particular (hooks 1).

Wilson's legacy will live on; his shows continue to be produced twenty years after his death. This also means that the Wilson's portrayals of women will continue to carry weight in the American theater. Without examination of such stereotypes, the scars left by racist and sexist portrayals within theater will continue to deepen as shows such as Wilson's are reproduced. Beyond mere examination, I argue that it is the responsibility of artists to bear the weight of historical injustice in every element of their craft. We must unite in our choice to fight against the historical stereotypes that have tormented minority communities, ignoring the societal implications of such representations endorses them. By taking on the responsibility of examining, challenging, and changing the art forms that surround us, we chose to help bear the "legacy of struggle" (Collins 27) that Black women have carried since the moment of their birth. "In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower" (Lorde 112) to create the representations that future generations deserve. "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" (Lorde 112)

Beyond the broader societal impact, we must consider the individual experiences of Black women. Patricia Hill Collins described how she knew early on in her life that "black and female is pretty high on the list of things not to be" (Collins 27). From the moment they were born, these young girls felt the burden of a history of sexual violence that had passed from their mothers and their mothers before them. These Black girls were destined to become "creatures so absurd and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy of even hope" (Walker 232) by a society that allowed

their suffering to become commoditized through stages and screens alike.

## 10. Conclusion

August Wilson was a master of his craft and revolutionized American Theater by carving out a space for Black men in the art form that had historically ostracized them. While his work certainly created space for the stories and performances of Black artists, this privilege did not fully extend to the women he wrote about as it did to men. By portraying so many of the women within his works as Jezebels, bad mothers, and overtly sexual, it only furthered the harmful representation of Black women that has become far too common in any sort of media. As artists and theatergoers, we must address such suffering to give Black women the space and stories they deserve. The responsibility of change should fall on everyone, not just on the backs of Black women who spent their lives fighting for the chance to create.

In the words of bell hooks, "there is power in looking" (hooks 107). It may be repetitive to examine plays that carry deep misogyny, but we must do so regardless. By calling out the historical suffering reflected in our art, we demand change. We refuse to stand by idly as little Black girls watch their likeness be dehumanized. We tell them that they are worth more than just a body that men can control. As the ugliness of our nation's history emerges within the art we hold dear, we do not turn our faces away. We must choose to look.

"I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears." (Lorde 113).

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