

Ma Rainey's Spiritual Blues: Exploring the Intersection of Religion and Music in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

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Abstract

August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is a theatrical masterpiece that not only captures the essence of the jazz era but also delves into the complexities of the African American experience, including the role of religion. Religion serves as a nuanced backdrop that adds depth to the characters and their experiences. This paper delves into how religion is portrayed in the play, particularly in the context of spirituality and music, and how it influences the characters and their worldviews. By analysing the spiritual power of music, the contrasting perspectives of Levee and Jeremy on religion, and the subtle religious symbolism, this paper sheds light on the intersection of spirituality and artistry in the lives of Black musicians in 1920s Chicago.

Keywords: Music, Religion, African, Blues, Resistance, Society

August Wilson's 1982 play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* depicts the African-American experiences in the twentieth century. The play, set in Chicago in 1927, uncovers the mistreatment of blues musicians by white recording industry tycoons. It addresses topics of racism, art, religion, and white marketers' ongoing exploitation of Black music artists. The drama makes logical and aesthetic use of history, memory, religion, and period. This play is part of August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle, whereby each play is a narrative of African

Americans' lives in each decade of the twentieth century. Wilson has depicted black people's sufferings, sorrow, and anguish in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Religion is primarily a social structure that regulates individuals' ideas and practices by directing how they connect to themselves as people, within or outside their community, surroundings, or deities. When it comes to African religion, African civilisation is openly religious. Religion is a strength of African civilisation, making it a fundamental component of humans' lives and the lives of communities and families as a whole. Ancient African religion can be described as a form of ritual, customs, and activities to maintain and protect people's and families' brotherhood. Religion was not a distinct notion in African society because it was not isolated from their lives. Spirituality and religion are significant in African society because they unite people into clans and give them a feeling of fulfilment and connection. Religion connects the people to the gods, the land, and the humans, incorporating everybody into society. Religion is strongly related to communities. African religion is quite broad; it does not narrow the extent of the religious ideology in the same way that Christianity does by emphasizing recognising a single god, Jesus Christ. Wilson depicts black people in the play as conflicted between traditional African religion and the faith of the white majority, Christianity. Christianity is a Religion of the bible with a long history of theological discourses. African Traditional Religion, on the other hand, is largely expressed orally. African religion is more abstract and conceptual than the Christian religion.

After enslaved Africans were brought to America, their religious beliefs merged with those of the various ethnicities they encountered. Christianity had an impact on the African American people. Wilson's drama illustrates a schism between Christianity and African traditional religion. In traditional African religion, all humans are seen as religious guardians, whereas Christianity sustains an order of holy masters. Wilson's goal throughout the play is

to awaken the African American audience about their forefathers' religious roots through music, storytelling, and several other moments.

Every character in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* has a unique perspective about religion, and the value of finding one's culture and religious renewal through Blues Music is emphasized. Ma Rainey realizes that blues music can be an assertion of African Americans' historical, ethnic, psychological, and religious heritage. Wilson's play continues on this understanding of blues philosophy through religion. The blues was a symbol of identity. Toledo's pronouncements about the importance of African Americans recognising their ancestry in Africa are a significant part of Wilson's blues theology. Wilson argues that African Americans need to reclaim their Africanness in order for African Americans to sing their own music and feel completely released in the American setting. Toledo chastises the band members and himself for not being African and for being impersonators of white males. Cutler is a religious individual and has a strong belief in African American culture. He always advises Levee that he must follow in Ma Rainey's footsteps to maintain African American pride through music. Toledo has a strong feeling about his own cultural past, religion, and grief over his annihilation by whites. Furthermore, they have adopted the fictitious ideas of white men, resulting in a significant loss of ethnic traditions.

Wilson acknowledges the immense requirements for religious foundation and its influence on blacks' struggle for liberation. Levee, who is permanently traumatised and furious over Christ's white God's failure to step in to protect his mother from being gang-raped by a gang of white men, has concluded that the Christian God seems to have no interest in black people. Levee no longer believes in God as the "holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned." He is also unconvinced by African American Blues' musical and cultural legacy. He is a non-believer due to his early exploitation and unpleasant encounters at the hands of whites in his childhood. "God don't pay niggers no mind. In fact . . . God hate

niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart” (81). He hears as Cutler narrates the tale of Reverend Gates, a black pastor who is attacked at a train station by a bunch of white men and made to dance. Such white men force Reverend Gates to dance, dehumanize him, and restrict him to prejudices: always singing, dancing black man. From Levee's viewpoint considering his mother's sexual assault and his father's killing at the hands of whites, and the public shaming of Reverend Gates, who is an epitome of religious sovereignty. Therefore, he allegations against God and his visual neglect of black concerns. “if he's a man a God, then where the hell was God when all this was going on” (80)?

Wilson illustrates black people in transitional zones, isolated and disconnected from their culture, tradition, and religion, and in pursuit of a social reconnection. Wilson infuses music imagery throughout their quest: his estranged and alienated black people must find their "song." Wilson's acknowledgement of this song is vital to reuniting African Americans with their African heritage, both religious and cultural roots. So, according to Wilson, the blues take into account the historical, religious, sociological, philosophical, and mystical elements. The Blues evolved from African and African American hardship and grief ballads. They began to represent the expressive depth of black people's lives as they understood reality, primarily their attempt to reconcile with and emerge above their gloomy condition. The blues, according to Wilson's Ma Rainey, “help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. You get up knowing whatever your troubles is you can get a grip on them 'cause the blues done give you an understanding of life” (3). The blues may not have the ultimate culmination of folk tunes, but they did strike an intimate bond, inspiring optimism even in the darkness of life. In the white society, blacks did not have the liberty to publicly voice their opinions, beliefs, religions, and inclinations. As a result, they created music to reflect their ethnic awareness. Ahmet BEŞE

writes in the paper, “The Significance of the Blues as a Cultural Expression in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*”

The blues that is developed out of African-American sorrow songs constitutes the essential part of August Wilson’s play, and provides a ground where cultural experiences of the community might be resolved. Wilson’s dramaturgy contextualizes African-American cultural experiences through his interest in both factual and fictional history and the blues in order for the community to redefine itself (227)

Music is a form of communication that allows African Americans to engage with their illustrious history and legacy. They are not directionless, but they have been devastated by the whites. Their faith, tradition, and lifestyle linger through the creation of black music. Ma feels that singing the blues is more than just therapy; it is an interaction with a rich and empowering energy. “You don't sing to feel better. . . . You sing 'cause it's a way of understanding life” (67). Ma Rainey abandons the philosophical views in contrast to Toledo, who advises in the first act that the gods be reconceptualised and considered according to African customs. Ma Rainey explains to Cutler and Toledo, in the vernacular of the blues heritage, how her music serves to fill the void of the presence of a stagnant religious identity. The play's storytelling catalyses emotional relationships and reveals the chasm that frequently separates black males who share shared physical spaces but not psychological spaces. The transmission of history from generation to generation is an important part of African religion. Recounting stories, also known as an oral tradition, is an essential aspect of African religion. The use of narrative telling is crucial throughout Wilson's play, with characters delivering stories about their past or current circumstances on many occasions.

Ma Rainey, the iconic "Mother of the Blues," embodies this colonial legacy. Her insistence on performing the blues in her own way reflects a quest for artistic autonomy and cultural self-determination. It is not merely about her asserting authority over her music but

also a statement against the historical oppression of Black artists whose creativity was often exploited by white producers and managers. In Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom*, the recording studio becomes a microcosm of power dynamics within a society, particularly the ways in which dominant groups assert control over marginalized communities. Sturdyvant, the white record producer, attempts to exert control over Ma Rainey's performance, using religious rhetoric and manipulation to impose his will. This mirrors historical patterns of exploitation and control where white individuals exercised authority over Black artists and their cultural expressions. Ma Rainey's resistance to this power dynamic reflects a broader postcolonial theme of challenging and renegotiating authority. While religion is used as a tool of control in the play, it also serves as a site of resistance. Postcolonialism acknowledges that marginalized communities often employ elements of their oppressors' culture to subvert dominant power structures. Jeremy's conversion to Christianity in the play reflects this dynamic. His newfound faith provides him with a sense of purpose and strength, allowing him to navigate the challenges of being a Black musician in a racially oppressive society. This illustrates how religion can be a source of empowerment and resistance within the African American experience.

Cutler, Toledo, Ma Rainey and Slow Drag are people of old faith, whereas Levee is a new man of faith. He wishes to alter the tone and content of Blues to accommodate white producers and listeners. On the other hand, old blues performers think that blues is their cultural heritage. As a result, they should not alter their form or structure to obtain money or popularity. Levee represents a transition from a traditional community culture to an individual-centred one. Blues Music may represent traditional religious beliefs and a feeling of spirituality that allows individuals to identify with a community and work together for great, mutual interests. Levee reflects modern forces at odds with traditional African religion; Levee speaks of individual possession and personal excellence. He wishes to perform "his"

songs, create "his" lyrics, and establish "his" bands. He seems unable to hear Toledo's advice to embrace coexistence and collective thinking. Levee does not conceive in terms of "we," rather isolating and alienating himself from the other band members and African American community.

August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is a rich canvas upon which a New Historicist reading can unveil layers of meaning, context, and cultural dynamics. New Historicism, as a literary theory, emphasizes the interconnectedness of literature and historical context, exploring how a work of literature reflects and engages with the socio-political and cultural milieu of its time. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, religion is portrayed as a mirror of the cultural dynamics of the 1920s. The characters' engagement with religion, particularly Ma Rainey's insistence on her own spiritual connection to her music, can be seen as a reflection of the African American community's quest for self-expression and cultural autonomy during this period. Mahdi Sepehrmanesh's essay, "A New Historicist Reading of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*" talks about "Music, especially Jazz and blues, is the embodiment of African culture through which one can come to get familiar with their culture...Music here acts as a social energy, which is spread among all the members of the society, both the dominant and the marginalized parts of the society. Power is disseminated among both the whites and the blacks." (214-215) Sepehrmanesh's essay might discuss how the play embodies the historical context of the Great Migration, a period when millions of African Americans moved from the rural South to urban centres like Chicago in search of better opportunities. Within this context, religion can be seen as both a source of continuity and a means of resistance. The characters' diverse relationships with religion—Jeremy's conversion, Levee's scepticism, and Ma Rainey's spiritual connection to her music—mirror the varied responses of individuals and communities to this transformative period.

Wilson intends a faith that really portrays African Americans in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and a religion that, unlike Western portrayals of God, is approachable and accessible to everyone. African Americans demonstrate their religious traditions and history using music, storytelling, and other happenings. Thus, in the play, Wilson's religion seeks to bridge the spiritual and physical gap between the Almighty and the ordinary citizen and between the individual and the united community. Through the play, August Wilson chronicles the lives of African Americans in the twentieth century. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, he represented African American communities' dreams, anxieties, ambitions, and religion via symbolism, music, and storytelling.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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