

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

**Dr. Adel M. Abdelsamie<sup>(\*)</sup>**

August Wilson (1945 - 2005) grew up in Pittsburgh's Hill district, a slum community where he experienced the poverty-stricken conditions in which many northern urban African Americans are forced to live. Wilson writes about the people he admired the most when he was growing up on the Hill, with whom he found value, respect and nobility.

August Wilson is an effective prolific playwright who has contributed much to the twentieth century American Drama. Five of his plays were produced on Broadway between 1984 and 1992, and he won two Pulitzer Prizes. As a chronicler of the twentieth century African American history, Wilson has dedicated his career not only to interpret the American black experience but also to encourage the world to understand what it means to be a black American in recent past.

Wilson, who emphasized the important role of theatre as both the expression of and a weapon for the African-American struggle for equality and freedom, plans to write a play on African-American life set in every decade of the twentieth century. These plays honestly depict the experience of blacks in America's racist society. Wilson's aim in achieving such a project is to focus on and to record the important issues confronting African-Americans. He says: "what you end up with is a kind of review, or re-examination, of history .... The importance of history to me is simply to find out who you are and where you've been .... I'm not certain the right choices have always been made. That's part of my interest in history, to say, 'let's look at this again and see where we are now' " (Powers 53) .

---

<sup>(\*)</sup> **Aswan Faculty of Arts- South Valley University**

The central conflict in a Wilson play is the characters' search for an identity that they have lost because of social oppression in the form of racism. By forming a new self-identity and self-worth, the central characters have recreated what the oppressing society has denied them. The main form of social oppression, that is common for most of the characters, is that they or their ancestors laboured in the south and eventually migrated north for the hope of better opportunities. Most of Wilson's characters are linked to the oppression they experienced while living in the south. Patricia Grantt states that the south, for Wilson's characters, is:

a scene of slavery and sharecropping, of oppression and cruelty, of rejection, bittersweet yearning, and only restricted happiness .... The principal southern legacy they share, however, is their memory of the slave past ... Wilson is not reluctant to explore the slave past, about which he says: "Blacks in America want to forget about slavery – the stigma, the shame. That's the wrong move. If you can't be who you are, who can you be? How can you know what to do?" (Grantt 71)

Wilson concerns himself with exploring the emotional trouble of African Americans as the result of slavery. Reminding his people of their history, Wilson feels that he encourages them to be more comfortable with the idea that they are different from mainstream America.

The aim of this paper is to explore the use of train as a literary symbol in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* (1992), a symbol which adds to the play's overall theme of separatism and Black Nationalism. Wilson uses the train as a symbol of the dangerous but necessary journey towards a deeper understanding of the power which the self is capable of exerting and achieving. Wilson's response towards the symbol of train in his play is not to be a positive or negative response; rather, train symbolizes for him a necessary inward journey towards self-redefinition, and towards black-

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

nationalism. Train journey provides perhaps the stimulus for an inner journey and a continuous understanding of one's place in the world. It can be seen as a travel towards self-awareness and self-discovery.

Two Trains Running shows the train as a symbol of life-enhancing perspective, a possibility of a new enlightened and empowered return to one's point of origin, a point where one stops running and, in a sense, goes home, back perhaps to the south and back to a previous way of experiencing life that was abandoned, an internal and external journey back.

The title of the play, *Two Trains Running*, can be read as a metaphor for the concept that one may live life either mechanically, or one may go metaphorically back to the past to mend the old mistakes and wounds. Wilson's words about the title, which appear on the back cover of the 1993 Plume paperback edition, read as follows: "There are always and only two trains running. There is life and there is death. Each of us rides them both. To live life with dignity, to celebrate and accept responsibility for your presence in the world is all that can be asked of anyone" (Wilson).

Twoness has been deeply and specifically inherited in the African-American identity for in a black body one may find an American person and a Negro; one may also find two souls, two thoughts, two warring ideas, and two strivings. Wilson states that since emancipation Blacks have been confronted metaphorically with two trains: either of cultural assimilation or of cultural separatism. He suggests that there are always two trains running: there are decisions one may make leading down a certain path to destruction; but there are other decisions one may make adding to the dignity and grace of life. Man's life can be seen, thus, as continuous train rides, continuous departures and arrivals to possibilities yet unknown. To David Rosenburg the title of the play suggests a concept of parallel oppositions: "life and death, African

spirituality and American materialism, tradition and practicality, separation and integration” (Rosenburg D. 7) .

Wilson concerns himself in *Two Trains* with the concept of separatism; Blacks search for identity and self-determination. Separation is dealt with on a psychological level for the characters in the play tackle their identities as African Americans and try to hold fast to the virtues of their cultural heritage in a hostile white society.

Concerning the play’s title, Sandra Shannon in an interview with Wilson, wonders whether or not black people still have choices, and Wilson states that African Americans have to acknowledge and maintain their own distinguished identity, which is different from whites’ identity. In his own words :

The question we’ve been wrestling with since the Emancipation Proclamation is, “Do we assimilate into American society and thereby lose our culture, or do we maintain our culture separate from the dominant culture values and participate in the American society as Africans rather than as blacks who have adopted European values?” On the surface, it seems as though we have adopted the idea that we should assimilate .... But if you look at it, you’ll find that the majority of black Americans have rejected the idea of giving up who they are ... in order to advance in American society .... I see the majority of American saying, “Naw, I don’t want to do that. I’m me.” These are the people in the Ghetto; these are the people who suffer. You can also look at people who are doing well .... They still say no, even though they’re suffering for it.” Shannon 546)

## **The Use of the Train in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

August Wilson uses the symbol of the train as a means of exploring America's history of racism, and as a symbol of the forceful push for a definition of self, a formation of an identity different from the one provided by the mainstream culture. Explaining the need for symbol in literature Wolfgang Iser in *The Fictive and Imaginary* states that some symbols contain a legacy of representations which "reproduces effective attitudes, memories, knowledge, mental and perceptual dispositions," and that in literature there is always the purpose to "symbolize the absent, the unavailable, the ungraspable that they may become accessible" (Iser 254). Literary symbols through repetition became part of the cultural heritage of a nation.

In general, the repeated use of train in African American literature becomes part of a self-created inheritance, in Maggie Sale's words: "a process of creating African-American history" (Sale 359). Black American Writers are able to reinterpret history and the meanings formerly attached to aspects of American history and culture. They present the history of the "lives of everyday, often enslaved people, whose lives had not been recorded because they had not been deemed worthy by writers of history" (Sale 358). They represent, thus, what had been previously unspeakable. The literary symbol of the train is thus used to represent and interpret Africans' history.

The train has become a dominant well-known literary and cultural symbol in the American literature since the publication in 1964 of Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. This novel establishes the train as a symbol of man's ability to create power, the symbol which is added to an already existing image of America as God's new Garden of Eden. This rises a conflicted sense of American identity and purpose, because the train symbol suggests a clash of opposed states of mind: a strong urge to believe in the rural

myth, and an awareness of industrialization as a contradiction of that myth. Since then, the train has been assumed either as a symbol of man-made progress, controlling and modifying nature for the good of man, or as an indicative of the coming destruction of the American Eden.

However, some particular aspects of railroad history are specific to the African American experience. Afro-American writers use the literary symbol of the train in a way that goes beyond the boundaries of the symbolism established by Leo Marx.

When the first American-built locomotive appeared in 1830, railroad enthusiasm had begun and there were marked differences in regional responses to it. For example, the South rejected the attempt of the Northern railroad owners to own and to operate railroads in the South. Laws were passed in the South making it illegal for “any railroad corporation to control track in more than one state, since this would diminish the power of the state” (Gordon 5). Moreover, the South insisted that any attempt at federal control of the railroad was seen as an intention to interfere in local politics. Thus, what many Northerners saw as a symbol of progress, was for southern whites a symbolic of the determination to assault the south agrarian way of life.

However, African Americans were able to view new railroad as a symbol of promoting slave emancipation. An abolitionist song, “Long Steel Rail,” in 1844 depicted Emancipation as the engine that would change America’s history: “Ho! The car Emancipation Rides majestic thro’ our nation, Bearing on its Train, the Story, Liberty! A Nation’s Glory. Roll it along, Roll it along, thro’ the Nation freedom’s Car, Emancipation” (qtd. in Gordon 133).

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

Thematically, the song stressed the idea that without Emancipation, one would not talk about America as a place of freedom. Emancipation looked like a train, and trains, desired or not, were already at that time viewed as an unstoppable force, making their way into the landscape; and emancipation, likewise, would roll on through the nation whether the South liked it or not.

Before the American Civil War African Americans did not see the train as a representative of “commercial powers which threatened the peace of a budding agricultural utopia,” simply because they were denied land ownership (McPherson and Miller Williams 9). During the Civil War trains were used to carry supplies and to transport massive troops to the South. The military trains were being used in the South to crush southern opposition through confiscating southern trains. Railroad brought, thus, soldiers who could be seen by some as destroyers, but by others as saviors. The way to freedom was, perhaps, still to be found in traveling out of the south, and thus, in Gordon’s words, “slaves saw the potential for freedom” (Gordon 127).

World War II cut the supplies of European labour for northern factories; consequently, industrialists discovered that the African Americans of the south were more likely to relocate to the North. Northern efforts resulted in the exodus of tens of thousands of black men from the south, crippling thus the southern farming system (Bontemps and Jack Conroy 159). Black Americans heading north at that time, were hopeful about the time it would take to be assimilated into a culture of freedom at the “promised Land” or the “Land of Hope” (Bontemps and Jack Conroy 163).

*Two Trains Running*, set in the nineteen sixties, faithfully portrays the decade progress and its effect on black Americans who, despite black Power Activism, were still oppressed. To Peter Wolfe the play, “unfolding in a

transitional era, describes urban blacks caught in the wash of social change. It depicts the clash of old and new energies – the relative ease of an old order faced by the anarchy of a new social agenda” (Wolfe). The nineteen sixties era was marked by sweeping significant changes for Afro-Americans whether in their political participation, in their striving for economic independence or in their heightened sense of self-worth. Nonetheless, by the end of the decade there was still dissatisfaction with the quality of their lives and doubt regarding racial integration.

It is true that the turbulent events of the decade did not change the economic circumstances of blacks; yet, it contributed considerably to the increased awareness of blacks who became both self-aware and society-aware people. Blacks looked at the north as the Promised Land where they expect to participate more fully in the economic, political and social life of the country. However, because the expectations of blacks had grown far beyond those of the 1950s, and because “living conditions were largely unchanged from what they had been in the 1950s,” increasing frustration and dissatisfaction had been created particularly among the residents of the larger ghettos of the nation’s major metropolitan areas (Johnson and Rex R. Campbell 167). The 1950s improvements due to the Civil Rights activism did not satisfactorily meet the increasing expectations of blacks in the 1960s simply because they began to compare themselves with their white counterparts, instead of merely looking at the improvements in their own standard of living.

One of the economic benefits, for example, blacks opted for in the North cities, was a business enterprise. They were engaged in small businesses in retail trade for sometime in the cities. However, these small black-owned businesses were often shabby and catered to a low-income clientele simply because “the state of the ghetto business

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

community [usually] reflects the economic circumstances of its clientele” (Fusfeld and Timothy Bates 213). Moreover, most of these businesses were shaped by limited access to credit and limited training opportunities; the thing which made black capitalism an improbable means for ghetto economic development.

To confront the contradiction of the United States political system, the Civil Rights movement or rather the Black Revolution emerged. It was a fight for democratic rights guaranteed by the American constitution. Alkalimat states that Civil Rights movement focuses on “the contradictions between what the government says in theory ... and what the government actually does in practice” (Alkalimat 266). The movement fought against the government that denied black people both their political and civil rights, while guaranteed the same rights for the white citizens.

The greatest peaceful demonstration for civil rights in the United States was the March in Washington on August 20th 1963. It brought more than two hundred thousand people together, black and white, in an eloquent demand for equal rights for black people. It was the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. who near the end of the day, touched the vast audience, and became an embodiment of hope for the movement. This march together with other events resulted in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the strongest act in the nation’s history because “the law ordered an end to segregated public accommodations, such as discrimination by hotels and restaurants, but the broader implications applied to employers, institutions of higher learning, and social services” (Johnson and Rex R. Campbell 153). This act was the most far-reaching and comprehensive law in support of racial equality ever enacted by the Congress.

However the law failed to meet the rising expectations of blacks. As a result, there was a series of explosive race riots, which turned the attention of the nation to the black ghettos of the Northern and Western cities. Black people living in poverty and despair were venting their long-suppressed hostility. Their sense of frustration and alienation that exploded into violence was indicative of the illusion of equality. Consequently, Black Nationalism or self authentication became blacks' alternative. Their immediate objective was to look at the black experience with pride. African American people must purge themselves of all those years of white values and ideology. This was the well-spring that produced subsequent movements for black art, black theatre, black capitalism, and black politics.

The self-educated Muslim Minister Malcolm X was the most influential Black Nationalist in the 1960s, who saw revolution as a necessary means to free black people in America. His philosophy of revolutionary nationalism attracted wide spread support in the 1960s even from the white community. He withdrew in 1964 from the Nation of Islam to found the Afro-American Unity to carry out his plans for racial liberation.

The main aim of the black revolution or black power was “full participation in the decision making processes affecting the lives of black people, and recognition of the virtues in themselves as black people” (Carmichael and Charles Hamilton 3). Black people needed to gain control over their lives so that they would no longer submit to the institutions of the whites .

The dramatic action of *Two Trains* which is set in the turbulence of the nineteen sixties, and which takes place in Memphis Lee's cheap restaurant, concerns the attempt of the characters to cope with the changing circumstances of the nation around them. They are talking about life and death

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

and about how to control their lives. They are fighting their fate that is determined by whites. Their struggle goes even back beyond the immediate events of the decade to their far past. Through their attempt to change their luck, to get their due, to find some sort of justice, to achieve their goals, those characters are led to self-discovery, to some sort of meaning perhaps, in a futile existence. Reconciliation with the past, for example, may heal the wounds of the present and may pave the way also for a better future.

Wilson's aim in the play is to depict the search of an entire community for identity. Rather than showing the causes of oppression or race relations, Wilson focuses on black life in general: how black people live in ghettos during the nineteen sixties, how superstition influences them, how they look forward to meaningful relationships, and how they struggle to find their true identity. In other words, Wilson focuses on blacks' daily lives, rather than on the historical or political events which have been kept at the background of the dramatic event. In a review of *Two Trains*, Ansen comments: "What we witness is not a play about the '60s, but a form of oral history, in which we're invited to eavesdrop on the timeless continuum of the African-American experience" (Ansen 70). Thus, at the foreground of the play, we as an audience, witness the characters' joy, hopes, sorrows, failures, difficulties, fears, ideas and disappointment. Their lives go on for the better or the worse.

Technically, Wilson's dramatic skills used to record the African-Americans' search for identity are to be found in the most fertile sources of black culture; namely the storytelling source that is deeply rooted in the black oral tradition. Storytelling is employed in the play to help the characters discover the past in order to find new perceptions of the present and the future. Pereira regards storytelling as an essential feature of Wilson's drama: "Personal reminiscences and storytelling – with their natural propensity towards

dramatic expression, and in keeping with the black tradition of the spoken word as the vehicle to transmit common values and history – are integral features of Wilson’s plays” (Pereira 10) .

To Lawrence W. Levine storytelling is a form of black expression which is taken from an African tradition of slave tales. These tales, like slave songs and folk beliefs, were not only contrived as “tales of wish-fulfillment through which slaves could escape from the imperatives of their world ... [but they were also] painfully realistic stories which taught the art of surviving and even triumphing in the face of hostile environment”(Levine 115). Struggle to survive in the nineteen sixties marks blacks’ journey towards self-authentication.

Moreover, storytelling is essential to the form and substance of much Afro-American drama because experiences and cultural movements are all theatrically encoded. Levine adds:

The oral inventiveness of good storytellers ... was a source of delight and stimulation to their audiences. Their narratives were interlarded with chants, mimicry, rhymes, and songs .... Nothing, it seems, was too difficult for a storyteller to represent: the chanting sermon of a black preacher and the response of his entire congregation, the sound of a railway engine, the cries of barnyard animals, the eerie moans of spectral beings, all formed an integral part of black tales, (Levine 88-89)

Much of the substance of *Two Trains* is conveyed through a succession of stories which help “enlarge the time and space of reality by weaving a circuitous course of parenthetical anecdotes, asides, and utterances into a coherent pattern that encourages unanticipated tensions which amplify the coded signification inherent in the story” (Harrison 301). Story telling and talking become, thus, the only vehicle of redemption in a world where economic

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

concerns become a real challenge to black men's sense of manhood and even to their familial relationships. Sterling, for example, depends only on talks in his relationship with Risa, Memphis hides his sense of oppression and insecurity behind much talk, and Hambone's protest is summed up in two lines.

Artistically, *Two Trains* does not contain a single conflict or a major unifying struggle to be developed during the dramatic action and to be resolved by the end of the play. Rather, Wilson intends to focus on creating "a compelling story line for each individual" in the play (Free Essays Website). The different characters of the play are simply telling their tales; consequently, we, as an audience, witness an oral history of the African Americans.

To begin with, Holloway has an important role in storytelling in the play because he has the function of ensuring the historical accuracy of stories around him. For example, when Memphis states that Sterling does not want to work, Holloway gives a long talk on black man's work ethics: "Niggers is the most hard-working people in the world. Worked three hundred years for free. And didn't take no lunch hour. Now all of a sudden nigger is lazy. Don't know how to work. All of a sudden, when they got to pay niggers" (34). Holloway's stories which help him find perhaps his true self and which consist of the historical experiences of slavery and domination, will help others come to an understanding of who they are.

Holloway is the local retired philosopher/historian who comments on the behavior of all, and criticizes those who waste their time and lives. He prizes superstitions, mysticism, ancient African remedies and the advice of a 322-year-old soothsayer. Holloway recognizes and accepts the metaphorical train of separation and self-identity early in his life and specifically when his grandfather died.

Subsequently, Holloway began his journey searching for self-determination. He was able to know that his grandfather was no good: “that was the worse Negro I ever known” (77). Seeking only the approval of the whites, this grandfather turned against his black people and, in a sense, against himself; consequently, Holloway despised his grandfather who equated heaven with picking cotton for whites: “I figure if he want to go to heaven to pick cotton, I’ll help him .... It stayed on me so didn’t nobody want to be around me cause of the bad energy I was carrying” (78).

Holloway went to Aunt Ester originally to help him deal with that “bad energy” he was carrying: “I go up to see her every once in a while. Get my soul washed. She don’t do nothing but lay her hand on your head. But it’s a feeling like you ain’t never had before. Then everything in your life get real calm and peaceful” (24). Specifically, Aunt Ester helps Holloway to rid himself of an obsession he had to kill his grandfather. He says: “I went up there to see her cause I wanted to kill my grandfather. I went up there to get that feeling off me .... He died from natural causes” (77). His grandfather was a terrible man but by going to Aunt Ester, Holloway was able to resist his compulsion to kill his grandfather who died from pneumonia .

The different members of black community seem to suffer from some sort of spiritual hunger; they seem to concentrate on their daily survival and on satisfying their daily needs. They have, therefore, to create their own reverend holy images other than those of white man. In *Two Trains* spiritual entities such as Prophet Samuel and Aunt Ester help fill such psychic emptiness.

Aunt Ester is 322 years old, about the same number of years African Americans have been in America. The different characters in the play find their way to the red door on 1839 Wylie Street behind which Aunt Ester works her

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

soothing, healing powers. Discussing this power of Aunt Ester in an interview with Richard Pettengill, Lloyed Richard explains what happens when a person goes to visit her: "Anyone who comes back from Aunt Ester doesn't have a prescription, or an answer, but they all come back with faith and their ability to act. Aunt Ester's is a place of personal, spiritual revival of oneself ... She is the idea, the person, the spirit that holds the mirror up to you and says 'This is what you can be' " (Pettengill 206). Aunt Ester's mythical power lies in her ability to impart wisdom and advice. She is also at times able to dispense a sensation of peacefulness and satisfaction to people. She is a significant and important resource for many of other characters in the play .

West, the mortician, rides the metaphorical train of self-determination searching for his identity through a well-paid service to the Pittsburgh's black community, enjoying a steady income based on the certainty of death. Early in his life, West, as a young man in the prime of life, had been gambling, selling "bootleg liquor," and running numbers; then, he got to know that "the only thing you get out of this is an early grave"; consequently, he decide to change the course of his life as he states: "I look up one day so many people was dying from that fast life I figure I could make me some money burying them and live a long life too. I figured I could make a living from it. I didn't know I was gonna get rich. I found out life's hard but it ain't impossible" (93). West is able to find a new meaning in life through his new career for he emerged as a successful businessman through a profitable business.

With the death of his wife early in their marriage, the only person he cared about and with whom he had a strong relationship, West became a much hard person with no feeling for the other living. He finds meaning only in death and through making money off the dead. He says: "see,

people don't understand about death, but if you ever bear one of them coffin sounds you'd know. There ain't nothing like it. That coffin get to talking and you know that this here ... this what we call life ain't nothing. You can blow it away with a blink of an eye. But death ... you can't blow away death. It lasts forever. I didn't understand about it till my wife died" (75).

Because his clientele have very few alternative places to go to for their business West gets to exploit them with high credit fees and high prices. Moreover, pretending to be beneficent helps him manipulate the poor. Memphis comments: "West the only nigger I know who can cheat and rob the people and they be happy to see him. Calling him 'Mr. West' .... He done cheated them and they talking about 'Have a nice day, Mr. West' " (12-13). Money overshadows the other possibilities in West's life. As a real estate speculator, West has accumulated properties throughout the city. Like Memphis, he has no desire to enjoy life and has little regard for the ghetto residents. Both of them see black capitalism as a means to ensure their economic stability, to give them status among whites and to attain self-determination. As a ruthless business person, West becomes greedy. Breaking free from the painful experience of the loss of his wife is perhaps the only way to discover his true identity.

The mentally retarded Hambone, perhaps, starts off his search for identity when he is cheated out of his rightful due in white America, the due which is symbolized by a ham without which his life has no meaning. Lutz, a white merchant, had promised Hambone a ham for a painting job, but he underpaid him giving him a chicken instead. Since then Hambone stands every day in front of Lutz's store insisting on demanding what is rightfully his: "I want my ham. He gonna give me my ham" (114). Like Memphis, Hambone wants justice and he expects to find some in the

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

white system that ironically has separate standards for blacks .

Embracing his identity as an African American, Sterling breaks into the butcher's store to get a large ham for Hambone. This act opens door, perhaps, to salvation for the entire group: "carrying a large ham," Sterling tells West "that's for Hambone's casket" (110). Ironically, Hambone seems to get his due only after his death. Although Wilson states that: "black Americans [stand] patiently outside the door of American society saying, 'we want our ham,' " Sterling's act of stealing the ham suggests that Black Americans are no longer standing or waiting for their ham/rights (Rothstein H 7-8). This withheld ham can be seen as "a decade-old deal gone awry: it embodies the great disparity and deep seated racism prevalent in 1969" (Minnesota Monthly Website). Sterling's act perhaps uncovers a new spirit of resistance among black Americans by the 1969. Wilson's message is that there is a new black American, with whom the society is going to have to deal.

Wolf, the numbers runner, starts his search for his identity with the loss of his woman who deserted him for another man. Wolf says: "My woman came and told me she had another man. I told her say, 'alright, baby, but she can't hear and he can't see. He can't see like I do.' " (105-106). Despite his deep sense of pain by her betrayal, Wolf hides his true feelings. As a result, Wolf gets to trust nobody at all especially women: "It's hard to get one you trust that far" (106). Consequently, Wolf withdraws from any meaningful relationship and he became a shallow person, having instead temporary companionships with women paying luxuriously for love with them. Wolf's inability to have a meaningful relationship prevents him perhaps from finding his true self.

Manipulating Memphis, Wolf runs his numbers game from Memphis's restaurant :

Memphis: This my place, nigger! This my place. How you gonna have people call you at my place?

Wolf: I ain't told nobody to call me. People know I be here and they trying to catch me. I get messages everywhere I go. Nobody else don't say nothing about it. (69)

Thus, Memphis, who is proud of being respectable, and submitting to the law, does not want his business to be mixed with the criminal elements in the community .

During the 1960s the urban ghettos supported organized crime which drained the poor of hundreds of millions of dollars every year. Several criminal elements such as Wolf's numbers game contained the bulk of the irregular economy outside the law, as an integral part of the economic system of the black ghetto. Fusfeld and Timothy Bates state:

A high proportion of slum residents play the policy game [numbers running]. The New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Crime estimated that in 1968, the policy game was played by 75 per cent of all adult and old teenage slum residents in New York City .... In the three ghetto areas of Harlem, south Bronx, and Bedford – Stuyvesant, some \$150 million were spent on it annually, according to estimates made by city and state officials. (Fusfeld and Timothy Bates 166-167)

Most of the money collected would not remain in the ghettos though some of the runners and collectors are residents of those ghettos. The persons at the top were generally out of the ghetto and thus away from the risk. Wolf has the illusion of a certain power like the white capitalist; yet, he realizes that, being black and being out of the front line, he, not his white boss, takes the risk. This risk involves going to prison, getting hurt or even being killed by a customer. Wolf says to Sterling: “every nigger you see done been to jail one time or another. The white man don't feel right unless he got a record on these niggers .... I'll give you a dollar for every nigger you find that ain't been to jail. Ain't

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

that right, Sterling. I been to jail. Stayed down there three months” (54).

This is why most of the time Wolf carries a gun and asserts his authority in the ghetto community as a “tough guy,” who according to Faber, is “gifted with qualities that build up his prestige .... For his peers, he is an exceptional person, one who knows how to appropriate the space around him, take stock of danger, and exploit any situation. He adds wit to know-how without worrying about scruples” (Faber 149). Consequently, Wolf’s aggressiveness is to be seen by his community as a way of gaining respect. Some customers view his behaviour as taking care of his business. In all, Wolf acts according to the law of the streets to survive.

Like the other characters in the play, Risa is a lonely person who looks for self-fulfillment through love but according to her strict terms, with the ‘right person.’ Defying being classified sexually or being appraised as a possible bedmate, Risa scars her legs with a razor. Thus, Risa in her search for identity and self-determination chooses to ride the metaphorical train of “self-destruction.” Wilson, in an interview with Shannon and in an answer to a question why he has depicted such “self destruction” in an African American woman, says: “for me the scaring of her legs was an attempt to define herself in her own terms rather than being defined by men .... It was her standing up and refusing to accept those definitions and making her self-definition” (Shannon 550-551 .)

Abusive men seem to trigger Risa’s search for identity. She is a young attractive woman who is looking forward to linking her fate with one man in a permanent relationship. Having difficulties in her search for her needed companionship, she puts her faith in the Prophet Samuel who perhaps keeps her mind trouble-free. Reading a card, Sterling announces: “this certifies that Risa Thomas is a

member in good standing of the first African Congregational Kingdom, having duly paid all tithing .... Signed, Prophet Samuel” (87).

She also lives by some Christian values such as the kind of charity with which she treats Hambone, despite the protest of Memphis who says to her: “I told you not to give him nothing,” Yet, she insists on her stance, “He ain’t bothering nobody, Memphis. He just come in to get his coffee” (43). Because she is able to embrace both ancient African culture and Christianity, Risa possesses the deepest moral sense and awareness that perhaps helps her to regain faith in men.

Although Risa is attracted to Sterling, she resists her passion to him simply because he does not have a job, “You ain’t got no job” (100). Moreover, she is not willing to build her life on a doomed relationship because Sterling is likely to go back again to prison, “I don’t want to be tied with nobody I got to be worrying is they gonna rob another bank of something” (100). Thus, in Risa’s view, Sterling is unfit mate to her. However, her instincts have defeated her judgment for she dances with and kisses him by the end of Act Two in the play. Yet, in a short time Risa’s fears bursts into reality for Sterling is to be sent again to prison.

Sterling is a young man whose new release from jail perhaps triggers to his search for identity because he tries to set his life right. Early in his childhood his mother left him for another woman who was died and he was placed in an orphanage until the age of eighteen. Sterling lost stability early in life and suffered from a painful sense of loneliness. Tired of having no money he woke up one morning to rob a bank and to be sent, consequently to prison for five years. He explains: “I figure a man supposed to have money sometime. Everybody else seem like they got it. Seem like I’m the only one ain’t got no money. I figure I’d get my money where Mellon gets his from” (45-46).

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

Once out of prison, Sterling is full of ideas for making money: playing numbers, performing odd jobs for Memphis or even opening a night club. He plans also a business and wants Memphis as a partner: "I figure we could make some money selling chicken sandwiches. All you need is a little truck ... have Risa fry up the chicken and I go over there and sell them. You ever thought about that? We could go in business together" (79). Yet, Memphis does not want any partner.

Sterling identifies himself with beliefs of Black Nationalism. When a rally, for example, for the late Malcolm X is happening near the restaurant, he tries to persuade others to come and join him at the celebration. Moreover, he teaches Hambone how to say "Black-is-beautiful," and Hambone manages to pronounce each word; and Sterling tells him: "I want you to remember that now ... for the next time I see you. Then I'll teach you something else. Okay?" (57). At no moment does Sterling want to forget that he is black. He never uses his blackness to justify his failure, but rather, he includes it in his plan for survival. It seems that Sterling possesses a "bluesman" spirit and belongs to the "blues people," a term which, according to Faber, "refers to a common past and an intrinsic cultural quality of a people that has endured despite enslavement and migration" (Faber 150). Sterling's African heritage has formed his deepest perceptiveness and shaped his identity as a free man. Thus, he has the potentiality to achieve self-fulfillment in life .

Before visiting Aunt Ester, Sterling believed that the world was about to end. Yet, Aunt Ester is able to vitalize him by advising him to be the best person he can, only through using the qualities given to him. If he cultivates what he has already had he will prosper. This session with Aunt Ester helps him the most. For example, when he returns to the restaurant, Sterling is able to sing with and to kiss Risa

who dances with him to the music of the newly repaired jukebox. Moreover, Sterling may support the continuation of the world, which he thought before was about to end, because he may have fathered a child during the hours that pass from the time he “kisses [Risa] as the lights go down” at the end of Act Four, to the time of the opening of the play’s final scene next morning, when Sterling robs a local store to be sent again to jail (102). Yet, it seems that Risa is able and ready to raise a child she may have with Sterling.

Much of the dramatic action of *Two Trains* concerns Memphis’s search for an identity. In his metaphorical journey towards self-fulfillment he tries the two options suggested in the play, namely assimilation and separatism. Early in his life Memphis experienced the devastation of being swindled out of his farm in Jackson, Mississippi. It happened that he had bought a farm from a white man called Stovall, who had believed that the land was unsuitable for farming. Memphis’s aim was to be assimilated and accepted as a farmer in the society. Determined to make success and hence to be on equal footing with the white farmers, Memphis dug a well sixty feet deep. Because his grandfather had taught him how to find water on dry soil, Memphis, after six months of hard work, was able to find water and to make a good crop. Forging the original contract, Stovall wanted the land back. Stovall and his gang grabbed Memphis’s mule and “cut his belly open .... I stood there looking at them, I say, ‘Okay. I knew the rules now ... I know what you would do to me’ ” (73). At the court, Memphis was not able to prove his right and he lost his land.

Thus, according to the segregating social codes of the South, Memphis lost his hopes of assimilation; consequently, his search for an identity as a free person came to an impasse. He began to live the life of a drifter heading to Natchez which he left again to go to Pittsburgh, where still attempted searching for identity and self-determination.

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

Despite difficult life in the North with few job opportunities, he managed to have a job with a little pay, cut off from the rest of his family in the south .

When his mother died before he was able to see her in her illness, Memphis completely changed. His reminiscences: “I ain’t even got the train fare .... I cried like a baby .... I cried till the tears all run down in my ears. Got up and went out the door and everything looked different” (59). Embittered by that experience, Memphis’s attitude towards life changed; and the death of his mother compelled him to redefine himself. For eight years he saved enough to buy a small property, a restaurant in his black community.

Memphis’s search for an identity demands perhaps reconciliation with the past. His restaurant is scheduled to be torn down as a part of the city’s urban renewal program. He is determined, then, that the city pays him what his property is worth: “They forcing me to move out ... close up my business .... Well, I figure they ought to pay something for that” (38). He refuses this time to be swindled out of his business as he previously had been in Jackson. Although the city is willing to give him a fair deal, blacks are not subject to the same rules of equality in a white world. Yet, Memphis has to bridge the gap between the present and the past and to release the hold of past painful memories on him in order to rediscover and accept his true self.

Inspired by the life-time insistence of Hambone for his due, and encouraged by Aunt Ester, who says to him, “If you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up,” Memphis, who is offered 10 thousand dollars more than what he feels his due, determines to go back to Jackson for his rightful due there too: “That’s what I’m gonna do. I’m going back to Jackson and see Stovall. If he ain’t there, then I’m gonna see his son. He enjoying his daddy’s benefits he got to carry his daddy’s weight. I’m going on back up to Jackson and pick

up the ball” (109). Consequently, and in celebration Memphis goes down to “Brass Rail”, the train depots bar to plan his return to Jackson.

As an expression the “Brass Rail”, the train depot bar, refers to the railroad which is a symbol itself of dreams, and also to “brass ring”, an old expression referring to an object beyond reach but one is supposed to keep attempting to reach it. The train can be seen then as the vehicle on which one travel in pursuit of the brass rings of dreams. The train is also a symbol of choices one may have in life: to run or return, to escape or fight, and Memphis is now committed to make a return trip to go back again to the place where things started to go wrong to fix them.

The message of the play is that one gets what one settles for, but if one has accepted less in the past, one is supposed to go back and get what one actually deserves. Memphis, thus, has attained a sense of rebirth, and the rest of the characters are encouraged and expected to ask for more of life. Risa is sent to the florist to get fifty dollars worth of flowers, with a card that reads: “it’s for everybody who ever dropped the ball and went back to pick it up” (100.)

Though it can be argued that there is no actual turning back to point of origin, *Two Trains*, seems to depict life as a train ride with a return ticket available; one failure or mistake does not make up the sum of one’s whole life. Rather, one should evolve a new identity capable of endowing life with new meaning and purpose .

The philosophy of the play implies perhaps a lesson about America’s national history: reconciling with black life in America means coming to terms with the south, with the history of slavery, with the agricultural world before the great migration north, and even with the earlier records of the journey from Africa to America. Wilson believes that to

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

be whole and happy, African Americans must not be afraid to go home, to look back at their southern homes and agrarian tradition, for African American heritage is not to be seen as an element of inferiority, rather it is an evidence of pride and cultural distinction.

It is true that the Northern cities promised freedom for Blacks from Southern racism, yet it is at the cost of losing their agrarian heritage. Wilson criticizes African Americans for abandoning the agrarian South heading instead for the industrial North :

We were land-based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent two hundred years developing our culture as black Americans. And we left the south. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transport this culture to the pavement of industrialized North .... I think if we had stayed in the South, we would have been a stronger people. (qtd. In Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* 13)

In *Two Trains*, Wilson suggests that the time has come to reach for the 'Brass Rail', to reach for dreams, to use the metaphorical return ticket available, heading metaphorically home, because "there are always and only two trains running." To live life with dignity and a sense of responsibility, one must not be afraid of the return trip, even when that journey back seems to involve death or disaster. While death/destruction is a possibility so too is life/survival. The train here becomes a means for a return to the place one calls home. It seems to be a homecoming for African Americans. Wilson, thus, uses the train as a metaphor for the possibility that African Americans can, at the long last, call America home.

### Works Cited

- Alkalimat, Abdul, et al. *Introduction to Afro-American Studies: A People's College Primer*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Chicago: Twenty-First Century Book, 1986.
- Ansen, David. "Of Prophets and Profits: August Wilson's '60s." *Newsweek*, 27<sup>th</sup> April 1992, 70.
- Bontemps, Arna and Jack Conroy. *Anyplace But Here*. Columbia: University of Missouri, 1966.
- Carmichael, Stokely, and Charles Hamilton. *Black Power: The Political Liberation in America*. New York: Random House, 1967.
- Faber, Genevieve. *Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre*. Trns. Melvin Dixon. Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Fusfeld, Daniel R., and Timothy Bates. *The Political Economy of the Urban Ghetto*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984.
- Gordon, Sara H. *Passage to Union: How the Railroads Transformed American Life, 1829-1929*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998.
- Grantt, Patricia. "Ghosts from Down there." *August Wilson: A Casebook*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994.
- Harrison, Paul Carter, "August Wilson's Blues Poetics." In *August Wilson: Three Plays by Wilson*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991.
- <http://www.essays.cc/freeessays/e4/vak252.shtm/>. [accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> Oct. 2011].
- <http://www.minnesota-monthly.com/media/Minnesota-monthly/october-2011/review.two-trains-running>. [accessed on 20th October 2011].
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Johnson, Daniel M., and Rex R. Campbell. *Black Migration in America: A Social Demographic History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1981.

**The Use of the Train in August Wilson's  
*Two Trains Running* (1992)**

---

---

- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- McPherson, James Alan and Miller Williams. *Railroad: Trains and Train People in American Culture*. New York: Random House 1976.
- Pereira, Kim. *August Wilson and African American Odyssey*. USA: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- Pettengill, Richard "Alternatives ... Opposite ... Convergences: An Interview with Lloyd Richards." Ed. Marilyn Elkins. *August Wilson: A Casebook*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1004.
- Powers, Kim. "An Interview with August Wilson." *Theatre* 16. 1 (1984): 50-55.
- Rosenburg, David. "Parallel Tracks: Yale Rep Dos August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*." *Fairpress*, 12 April 1990, D 1,D 7.
- Rothstein, Mervyn. "It's Round Five for a Theatrical Heavy Weight." *New York Times* 15 April 1990: H 7-8.
- Sale, Maggie. "Historical Novel." *The Oxford Companion Guide to African American Literature*. Eds. Williams L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 358 - 359.
- Shannon, Sandra G. "Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An interview with August Wilson," *African American Review*, Vol. 27, Issue 4 (Winter, 1993), 539-559.
- , *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*. Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1995.
- Wilson, August. *Two Trains Running*. England: Plume, 1993. [All subsequent quotations from this play are taken from this edition].
- Wolf, Peter. "Two Trains Running: The Decade-Long Progress and its Effects on Black Americans." <http://www.enotes.com/two-trains/running/decade-long-progress-its-effects-black-americans>. [accessed on 1st January 2011].