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The Dramatization of Some Aspects of Slave Narratives in August Wilson's
Pre-Civil Rights Movement Plays

A Thesis Submitted by

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Preface

Slave narratives are accounts of the lives of fugitive or former slaves, either written or orally related by the slaves themselves before the Civil War and in the post-bellum era. They comprise one of the most extensive and influential traditions in African American history, literature and culture.

As historical documents, slave narratives chronicle the evolution of white supremacy in the South from the beginning of slavery in the eighteenth-century through early twentieth-century segregation and disenfranchisement. They document slave life primarily in the American South through first-hand experience. Moreover, they reveal the struggles of people of color in the North, as fugitives from the South recorded the disparities between America's ideal of freedom and the reality of racism in the so-called "free states."

Authored by Africans and African Americans, these narratives, from a literary standpoint, give voice to generations of black people who, despite their marginalization and misrepresentation by the white system, still found a way to bequeath a literary legacy that gave vent to their aspirations, frustrations and, above all, a pervasive longing for freedom and self-respect. The most influential slave narratives of the antebellum era were designed to enlighten white readers about both the realities of slavery as an institution and the humanity of black people as individuals who have a right to a life of dignity, freedom and respect. Even after the Civil War, former slaves continued to record their experiences under slavery, partly to ensure that the newly-united nation did not forget what had threatened its existence, and partly to affirm the dedication of the ex-slave population to social and economic progress.

As a literary genre, slave narratives shaped the form and themes of some of the most celebrated and controversial writings, both in fiction and in autobiography, in the history of the United States. This ancestral genre has been a source of inspiration for so many American and African American writers such as Margaret Walker, Charles Johnson, Mark Twain, Toni

Morrison, William Styron and Harriet Beecher Stowe whose works bear the direct influence of slave narratives.

August Wilson (1945-2005), the greatest African American playwright, is no exception. With Pulitzer Prizes, Tony awards, and numerous other accolades, Wilson stands out as one of the finest playwrights in modern American theater. His dramatic agenda involves a review of African American history and culture by writing a play for each decade in the twentieth-century. With each work, he recreates and re-evaluates the choices that blacks made in the past by refracting them through the lens of the present. Wilson blends history, music, poetic dialogue, and richly complex characterizations to create images of America's past from an African American perspective. Central to most of his plays is the idea that the events of the past can and do have a powerful impact on the present. The present dreams and aspirations of Wilson's characters are inextricably linked to the history of African American struggle and survival. Carefully situating each play as a critical juncture in African American history, Wilson explores the pain, perseverance, determination, and dignity in these black lives. Concerned as he was with African American history, he draws upon the experience of slavery as a "historical moment" worthy of examination. As such, his re-processing of slave narratives into his dramatic output coincides with his ideological perspective.

The aim of this thesis is to explore Wilson's adaptation of some of the aspects inherent in the genre of slave narratives in his pre-Civil Rights Movement plays.

The first chapter entitled "The Eyewitness Testimony of Slave Narratives: A Literary and Historical Legacy of Bondage and Freedom" is a background chapter which is concerned with highlighting the history and development of slave narratives as a historical and literary expression of the African American predicament. The chapter also focuses on the most important themes and aspects dealt with in slave narratives, which are reflected in Wilson's pre-Civil Rights Movement plays.

The thesis mostly tackles the written and dictated slave narratives published before 1865. This deliberate choice of antebellum texts is assigned for specific reasons. The date of 1865 signifies a new order for blacks. Once slavery was legally abolished, the genre of slave narratives altered completely in terms of its thematic and structural characteristics. After 1865 the black slave felt less inclined to write his own story. Henry Louis Gates cites Frederick Douglass saying in 1855 that the free black “cannot see things in the same light with the slave, because he does not and cannot, look from the same point from which the slave does” (“Language” xiii), thus, with the settling of the issue of slavery, there was no urgent need to condemn slavery through the action of first-person narration.

“August Wilson: Writer and Critic of the African American Experience” is the title of chapter two which discusses Wilson’s position as a leading contemporary playwright and a major figure in African American literature. The chapter also examines his dramatic works that provide significant information about his vision and ideology. In addition, it sheds light on Wilson’s life, literary career and the major influences he was subjected to as well as his critique of and perspective on African American attitudes and culture.

Chapter three entitled: “Uprooting and Displacing the Black Race”, mainly examines one aspect of slave narratives which is the dislocation and displacement of the black race due to their uprooting from their homes in Africa to the New World. As slave narratives record the dispersion of African Americans, Wilson’s plays tackle the same theme of dislocation as they focus on the displacement caused by the influx of blacks from the agrarian fields of the south to the industrial urban cities of the North. The chapter presents an in-depth analysis of these two forms of physical displacement and their adverse impact on the black race. Themes like social disintegration, cultural fragmentation, rootlessness, spiritual breakdown, psychological and physical restlessness and alienation are given primary focus.

The second aspect of slave narratives is discussed in chapter four under the title "Self-Definition: The Historical Legacy of the Past." The chapter shows how slave narratives and August Wilson's dramaturgy are inspired by the fact that mainstream histories have consciously distorted and misrepresented African Americans' history and image. It first presents an overview of the western and American racist thoughts, myths and theories about the black race and American slavery, which dominated the racial context of black-white relationships. It then discusses how black ex-slaves and August Wilson refuted in their writings the racist discourses in a way to redress the image and history of the black race. Wilson and black ex-slaves alike recognized the importance of learning about the black experience, of being proud of African history and illuminating the past of blacks. As such, they attempt to portray this history, show the importance of heritage and give voice to those silenced and misrepresented blacks.

The chapter shows how Wilson dramatized these two aspects of slave narratives in his pre-Civil Rights Movement plays. These plays reflect the suffering and oppression of blacks since the beginning of slavery in the eighteenth-century until they achieved a limited degree of freedom and civil rights in the twentieth-century. They are, in the order in which they are set, *Gem of the Ocean* (1900s); *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1910s); *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1920s); *The Piano Lesson* (1930s); and *Seven Guitars* (1940s).

The conclusion will wrap up the preceding chapters, and explain how the playwright's use of certain slave narrative aspects in his plays is in itself a process of re-writing African American history. In fact, Wilson's dramatization of these aspects illustrates his perspective on the importance of the past and of the African heritage. In addition, it will underscore the playwright's own dedication to the issue of writing plays that constitute broader, metaphorical slave narratives; plays lived out by African Americans as they search for their self-authentication and empowerment.

Chapter One

The Eyewitness Testimony of Slave Narratives: A Literary and Historical Legacy of Bondage and Freedom

Slave narratives are eyewitness accounts of bondage and freedom written or dictated by former chattel slaves of African and African American descent in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. They are considered one of the genuine and richest sources of American history, literature, and culture. Slave narratives possess remarkable historical and literary status: they are illuminating documents that not only transcribe the individual and collective experiences of the black race under the chattel slavery system but also, more outstandingly, entitle their lives to survive forever, in their own words, in the records of America's literary and cultural history. The chapter at hand has a twofold purpose. First, it presents a survey of the literary genre of slave narratives: beginning, historical development, themes, and structural characteristics. Second, it helps explicate the world they represent, understand the milieu in which they were written and published, reveal their focal position in American history and literature, and finally indicate their major contribution to the anti-slavery movement and to the historical and literary landscape of African American history.

Slave narratives did not follow one fixed course. They were deeply determined by the economic, political, and racial situation prevailing in the New World and the needs and expectations of white readers.¹ The origin of slave narratives dates back to the first records of European and British colonies during the seventeenth-century. Published in various forms, these records contain certain documents about the blacks' early initiation into the Americas — their number, social life, and status (Foster, *Witnessing* 24). They are useful in the sense that they explain how the system of slavery evolved in different colonies and, in effect, led to the

creation of one of the largest bodies of literary and historical expressions known as slave narratives.

In 1700, Samuel Sewall (1652-1730), a Puritan judge, published *The Selling of Joseph* which is regarded as the first American anti-slavery pamphlet released in New England, that condemned African slavery and the slave trade in North America, and refuted many of the era's typical justifications for slavery. In his publication, Sewall tackled the issues of race and slavery in New England society, focusing on their religious validity (Quarles, *Negro* 41). *The Selling of Joseph* was mainly inspired by a petition circulated in Boston in 1700 "for the freeing of a Negro [Adam] and his wife, who were unjustly held in Bondage." Adam was the slave of John Saffin (1626-1710), a prominent Boston merchant and magistrate, who hired out Adam for a term of seven years and promised him freedom upon his good behavior. Unexpectedly, Saffin denied Adam his liberty, leading to several years of legal proceedings, public war of words, and bitter feud between him and Sewall over the release of Adam and, by extension, the justice of slave-owning in general. In 1701, Saffin replied to Sewall's attacks on the institution of slavery with his *A Brief and Candid Answer to a Late Printed Sheet Entitled [sic], The Selling of Joseph*, which refuted Sewall's objections to slavery and defended Saffin's actions in Adam's case. In 1703, after a long legal struggle and persistence on Adam's and Sewall's part, the Court declared Adam free for life (Foster, *Witnessing* 30).

Sewall's and Saffin's publications, along with a number of official court records, personal diaries, poems and pamphlets related to the case, furnished obvious motives for the creation of *Adam Negro's Tryall* (1703), a court document (Foster, *Witnessing* 30-31). Based on their scholarly findings, American and African American literary historians and scholars identify *Adam Negro's Tryall* as the first story of bondage and freedom of a slave in North America.² Recorded in the written transaction of the colonial Massachusetts Court, it was not written by the slave Adam himself as the case with most eighteenth-century slave texts³