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***The Discourse of Power in Five Plays by August
Wilson: A New Historicist Approach***

A Ph. D Thesis

in

English Literature

Submitted by

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2010

Abstract

Al-Sa'ddany, Rasha Abbas. The Discourse of Power in Five Plays by August Wilson: A New Historicist Approach. A Ph. D Thesis (drama). The Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University.

This thesis attempts an application of the theories of Michel Foucault (1945-1984), the most significant influence on the new historicist theory and practice, to five plays by the contemporary African-American dramatist August Wilson (1945-2005): Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1984), Fences (1986), Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988), The Piano Lesson (1990), and Two Trains Running (1992).

The thesis provides a demonstration of New Historicism, as the literary critical approach adopted, as well as a detailed account of Michel Foucault's theory of power. It also explores power conflicts on the grounds of both race and gender and investigates the dynamics of power in the black community.

The study concludes that the dominant group maintains and reinforces its power via a number of discursive practices such as money, violence, ownership, and the manipulation of the religions discourse, the judicial discourse, and the psychiatric discourse. It also exploits the institutions of marriage and the family and various power strategies as '*self-policing*'.

Acknowledgement

My deepest thanks, respect, and gratitude go to Prof. Dr. Nadia Soliman who has been supportive beyond imagination. Her response to my work and feedback have always been timely and detailed and her insightful and challenging questions helped me clarify my thinking and led to significant revisions. Demanding, encouraging, and thoughtful, she has taught me what it means to be a real scholar and has opened up new topics I have never explored before. I would also like to express my sincere and overwhelming appreciation to Prof. Dr. Sara Rashwan whose able guidance, earnest support, and kindness have always been invaluable.

I owe a special debt to Dr. Ahmed Thabet who has always believed in me and has never let me down. Thanks are due to my dearest friend Dr. Hanem Al-Farahaty whose true friendship and help have given me great comfort and confidence. All words fall short to express my indebtedness to my caring family members who have showered me with endless love, precious wisdom, good wishes, and fervent prayers and whose patience and encouragement have never waned. They have always been there to give me inspirational push to renew my strength. I hope they are now proud of me.

For my beloved father, who is not alive to enjoy this moment but who regarded it his life dream. For the man, who has been the whole world to me and whose endless love, extraordinary tenderness, and ceaseless encouragement I still feel and nourish on.

Your voice at times a fist
Tight in your throat
Jabs ceaselessly at phantoms
In the room,
Your hands a carved and
Skimming boat
Goes down the Nile
To point at Pharaoh's tomb

You're Africa to me
At brightest dawn
The Congo's green and
Copper's brackish hue,
A continent to build
With black Man's brawn.
I sit at home and see it all
Through you

Maya Angelou

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Introduction

This thesis attempts an application of the theories of Michel Foucault, the most significant influence on the new historicist theory and practice, to five plays by the contemporary African- American dramatist August Wilson (1945 – 2005): Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1984), Fences (1986), Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988), The Piano Lesson (1990), and Two Trains Running (1992).

While previous studies, which have adopted a new historicist approach, focused more or less on the exploration of power- relations on grounds of either race or gender, this study attempts an examination of both while-at the same time-investigates the dynamics of power-structure inside the community of the subordinate/oppressed featured in the five plays studied.

The thesis aims at answering the following questions:

- a. In what way is the claim of '*the textuality of history*' and '*the historicity of texts*' focal to the new historicist literary critique?
- b. How does the Foucauldian model theorize power?
- c. In what way have different discursive practices been manipulated, deployed, and maintained by the dominant group for silencing and subjugating the subordinates on racial as well as gendered terms?
- d. What are the various means through which the subordinates seek to empower themselves against domination?
- e. How does power work among the subordinates and how do they disturb the power structure in their own community, showing an instinctive will to power in the Nietzschean sense followed by Michel Foucault?

The basic argumentation of the thesis is that all the subordinates are subjects, in one way or another, to many '*discursive practices*' used as mechanisms of domination ranging from the most specific to the more general

ones according to an ascending ladder of power perceived by Michel Foucault. While those discursive practices are reinforced by the dominant regime, they are often challenged and resisted by the subordinates via their various attempts at empowerment. The intended contribution of this study is to apply Foucault's theory of power to the analysis of August Wilson's plays with special emphasis on how power works inside the community of the oppressed itself. Despite the feminists' claim that Foucault's theory of power does not address the issues they are concerned with, the thesis seeks to bring a reconciliation between the feminist theory and Foucault's through applying his model of power to the analysis of the female status in the plays

In addition to the introduction, the body of the thesis comprises four chapters. Chapter ONE gives a historical survey of New Historicism as the literary critical approach of analysis. It also provides a detailed account of Michel Foucault's theory of power and focuses mainly on its meaning, characteristics, modalities and some relevant concepts such as '*the subject*', '*episteme*', and '*discourse*'. While Chapter TWO displays power-relations in terms of race showing how the blacks are marginalized and abused, Chapter THREE deals with the gender-based conflicts in the black patriarchal community and the different ways through which the black female struggles for self-definition. Chapter FOUR uncovers the dynamics of power structure in the black society itself. The thesis ends with a Conclusion that summarizes the findings.

The five plays under study are chosen because they evidence multiple power struggles and work as representations of the racial as well as the gendered power conflicts which are often implicated in the power/resistance mechanisms manipulated particularly in ethnic and patriarchal societies. Their uniqueness stems from their portrayal of the power conflicts among the blacks themselves,

rendering possible an application of Foucault's claim concerning the innateness of power.

August Wilson is considered as one of the most important African-American dramatists. Breaking away from his white often absent autocrat father, he has developed a sense of identity and has learned to value the African-American experience in its entirety from his black devoted mother Daisey. By the age of twenty, he decided to become a playwright and he toured the Hill District in search for purely black authentic language and stories. He articulates his interest in drama as he says,

One of the things that makes theatre so exciting for me, what makes it such a wonderful form is that the audience participates and influences what happens on stage. The communication between what happens between two actors and audience is different with each and every audience. If you do the play 700 times, you are going to have 700 different groups of people sitting out there, and so each audience has its own nature, its own thing, and they respond differently and that is what makes it thrilling. (qtd. in Heard)

Wilson's often-cited 1996 address at the Theatre Communication Group National Conference, The Ground on Which I Stand, offers insightful remarks concerning how he views the African-American theatre and community. He begins his address by asserting that the black theatre does exist from the first moment the slaves arrived at the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. As soon as the first black slaves trod America, they began "seeking ways to alter their relationship to the society in which they lived-and, perhaps more importantly, searching for ways to alter the shared expectations of themselves as a community of people" (qtd. in Noggle 24- 25). This has been achieved through the theatre which has enabled them to know who they are and how they can face their tragic status quo in a society discriminated against them. The black theatre, therefore, is the only means for the African-Americans to retain the voice that has long been silenced via the oppressive discursive practices of racist America.

But due to the lack of funding, which is supported by the white discriminatory practices, the black theatre has been silenced for many decades:

If you do not know I will tell you that Black theatre in America is alive ... it is vibrant ... it just isn't funded. Black theatre does not share in the economics that would allow it to support its artists and supply them with meaningful avenues to develop their talent and broadcast and disseminate ideas crucial to its growth. The economics are reserved as privilege to the overwhelming abundance of institutions that preserve, promote, and perpetrate white culture. (qtd. in McCord)

In the same address, Wilson differentiates between two kinds of black artistic expression: one targets pure entertainment of the dominant white power structure and one that dives deep into the black life and finds out ways for survival and resistance. He explains that "There are and have always been two distinct and parallel traditions in black art: that is, art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society, and art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity" (qtd. in King "Cycle of Life"). Wilson shows complete adherence to the second kind. Thus, he launches a sharp attack on the black theater of the 1920s and the 1930s because the plays it has staged have been written, acted, and directed from a white, not black, perspective. He often makes his separatist view public, asserting that the black theatre must emphasize and celebrate the singularity and uniqueness of the blacks' life, traditions, and values in contrast to the white culture. He clarifies his view point, saying, "we can not share a single value system if that value system consists of the values of white Americans based on their European ancestors. We reject that as '*cultural imperialism*'. We need a value system that includes our contributions as Africans in America." (qt. in Myles)

Influenced by the notions and revolutionary ideas of such black nationalists and political activists as Elijah Mohammed, Martin Luther King, W.E.B Du Bois, and Malcolm X, and the political movements of the Black Power and the Black Arts, Wilson views playwriting a means for political expression, social

change, and cultural preservation. The art he supports is intellectually, culturally, socially, and politically didactic. He says, "We saw theatre as a tool for politicizing the community or as we used to say in those days, raising the consciousness of people" (qtd. in Whitaker "Is August"). He embraces Du Bois' point of view published in The Crisis (1926) regarding the necessity for creating a theatre that keeps the African roots and identity alive. He says, "A theatre by us and about us is a theatre I embrace. I think it should be about, made up out of black people and all the aspects of our culture: we should use that as the fabric, the material with which we make art." (qtd. in Fitzgard)

For Wilson, the blacks are the only ones who can feel the experience they present because it is theirs despite all the white attempts at distorting, devaluing, and even dismissing it all together. Through the black theatre, the blacks not only tell people something about their life and values, but they also feel a sense of empowerment which enhances the development of the black community at large. About this Wilson writes in the publication which reports the Summit events of 1998, "Art is made up out of the spiritual resources of the people who create it. Out of their experiences, the sacred and the profane, is made a record of their traverse and the many points of epiphany and redemption. It empowers and provokes sense of self that speeds development and progress in all areas of life and endeavor" (qtd. in Pinkney 242). Ambush states in his "Culture War" that the black theatre, as Wilson conceives its task to be,

helps correct historical distortion of black people and reclaims their collective psyche; repairs the ravages of oppression; builds collective self-esteem, communes with black audiences in terms they understand; develops black talents, investigates black aesthetics; tells stories and presents images which celebrate and nurture the innate dignity, beauty and worth of black people; re-conceives, defines and reveals a sense of peoplehood which resisted the corrupting influences of the dominant white culture; and creates an independent space with the values held precious by black folk so that African-Americans may live, so that African-Americans may feel in harmony with themselves and create something that is theirs and which can serve as a source of pride.

For the accomplishment of his task of reviving the African spirit latent in the hearts of the African-Americans, Wilson called also for the establishment of professional black theatres. In "The Ground on Which I Stand", he states that

We need more black theatres ... We need back theatres in black communities as black institution. So that theatre becomes a natural part of life in the community, which is very often for those who go to the theatres, they do not have to leave their communities and go somewhere else ... The whole idea of drama is that it educates us about ourselves. That is why people go to the theatre to see Shakespeare and Lorraine Hansburry or whoever. I think this is virtually important for our children. They need to learn something about their history. (qtd. in "August Wilson: A Maverick")

In a speech he delivered on June 26, 1996 to the 11th Biennial Theatre Communications Group Conference at Princeton University, August Wilson also announced the following call:

The time has come for black playwrights, Black theatre intellectuals, and Black theatre artists to confer with one another ... to address questions of aesthetics [and] ways to defend ourselves ... We need to develop guidelines for the protection of our cultural property, our contributions, and the influence they accrue ... Artists, playwrights, actors, [intellectuals,] we can be the spearhead of a new movement to reignite and reunite our people's positive energy for a political and social change that is reflective of our spiritual truth. (qtd in Harrison "August Wilson's Call")

Wilson also calls for the expansion in the establishment of more black theatres in the black communities themselves and the necessity for facing the problem of under-funding: "we need more black theatres ... We need black theatres in black communities as a black institution. So that theatre becomes a natural part of life in the community, which is very often for those who go to the theatre, they have to leave their community and go somewhere else" (qtd. in "August Wilson: A Maverick"). Consequently, he co-founded many Afro-centric arts organizations with playwright Rob Penney. He also established a black activist theatre company on which he staged his early one-act plays.

It is true that August Wilson writes mainly for his black community, but he at the same time-addresses the whites to give them a true understanding and

appreciation of the worth and richness of the black experience. About this point, he tells Bonnie Lyons that he wants to "offer [white Americans] a different and new way of looking at black Americans and to show black Americans the content of their lives being elevated into art" (qtd. in Noggle 24-25). Wilson further clarifies this point as follows:

What I am trying to do is put Black culture on stage and demonstrate to the world, not to white folks, not to black folks, but to the world, that it exists and that it is capable of sustaining you. I want to show the world that there is no idea or concept in the human experience that cannot be examined through black life and culture. (qtd. in Whitaker "Is August")

In a remarkable poetic voice unmasking the effects of the horrors and the repercussions of the Middle Passage, slavery, segregation, and marginalization in successive generations of black Americans, Wilson has written a cycle of ten plays chronicling the black experience in the 20th century, a drama for each decade. This is "a unique achievement in American drama. Not even Eugene O'Neill accomplished such a monumental effort" (Kuchwara). Regarding the African-American experience in America his own life story, he gives himself the right to tell it all from his own view point. He declares this in 1994 when he says, "I'm definitely part of the [African-American] story. I claim all 400 years of it. And I claim the right to tell it in any way I choose because it is in essence, my autobiography-only it's the story of myself and my ancestors." (qtd. in Downing Restoring 191)

Pinpointing the close relation between his art and the cultural, political, and historical context in which each of the plays is originated, Wilson tells Fitzgard, "I simply look at a particular decade and see what, to my mind, was the largest idea that confronted blacks during that decade and try to write a story, a play about that to illustrate those flash points of American history and cultural history". The black life Wilson aims at documenting is presented, as he concedes, "on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, and with all its richness

and fullness, in language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to every life enable it, affirmed its value and exalted its presence." (qtd. in Harrison "August Wilson's Call")

All Wilson's dramas revolve around often recurring themes such as:

Black people's need to establish and maintain ties with their immediate families as well as with their cultural ancestors; their mistaken devaluation of their own culture, prompted by a massive exodus from South to North after their Emancipation; their heroic struggles and degrading compromises made to achieve economic stability; and the deterioration of their moral, spiritual, and familial values resulting from those compromises and that self-devaluation. (Shannon The Dramatic 78)

Like the other plays in the cycle, the dramas under discussion are not written in a chronological order. However, the thesis intends to analyze them in a chronological order beginning from the earliest to the latest one so that the overall picture of the African-American experience after the Emancipation in successive decades of the 20th century is fully drawn. In addition, keeping the chronological order renders possible a placement of every text in its social, cultural, and political context as the new historicists always do in their critical practices. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1984) takes place in a Chicago recording studio in 1927 and illustrates the legacy of racism and the white exploitation of a group of blues musicians. Fences (1986) is set in Pittsburgh in 1957 and exhibits a heart rending conflict between a father, who can not forgive the scars of racism and hideous family predicaments, and a son, who aspires high. Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988) occurs in a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911 and deals with the blacks' attempts to get rid of the clutches of slavery and the tragic journey from the agriculture South to the disappointing industrial North. The Piano Lesson (1990), with its Pittsburgh setting in 1936, tackles the conflict between a brother and a sister over the fate of an heirloom piano, which symbolizes the black history and identity, and the conflict between them on one hand and the whites on the other for its possession. Two Trains Running (1992)

also takes place in Pittsburgh in 1969, the decade which has witnessed the boisterous events of the Civil Rights Movement and its accompanying chaos. The action is set in a restaurant, where a group of black men recall memories of oppression and racial discrimination.

Chapter One

Michel Foucault: The Greatest Influence on the New Historicist Theory and Practice

This chapter gives a historical survey of New Historicism as the critical approach adopted in the thesis. It examines Michel Foucault's theory of history with all the implications it entails. It also proposes a detailed and holistic account of his theory of power as presented in different works, particularly the late ones in his philosophical project. The definition of power as well as its characteristics, as dispersed in Foucault's works, are traced and identified. The chapter also speaks in detail about the fashioning of subjects from the Foucauldian perspective with special reference to Foucault's theory of power/knowledge and the concepts of '*episteme*' and '*discourse*'. The notion of resistance, as a highly essential element in the renewal, maintenance, and reinforcement of the dominant power structure, is discussed. The chapter ends with an exploration of Foucault's analytics of power and a demonstration of the various power modalities that humanity has witnessed through ages.

New Historicism has emerged in the 1980s and has widely spread in the 1990s as an approach to literary criticism and literary theory. Stephen Greenblatt, a renaissance scholar and a founding editor of the journal Representations, may be credited with the coining of the term 'New Historicism' when he called his approach of criticism in his book Renaissance Self- Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (1980) a kind of 'new historicism', or "a new kind of activity ... a sustained attempt to read literary texts of the English Renaissance in relationship to other aspects of the social formations in the 16th and the early 17th centuries." (Howard 19)

New Historicism is defined as "a mode of literary study that has its proponents oppose to the formalism they attribute both to New Criticism and the