

# Techniques of Slave Narrative Used by August Wilson In His Plays

Tshering Denkar<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Muzafar Ahmed Bhat<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract**

*This paper aims to focus on importance of using the slave narrative technique by August Wilson in his plays to showcase the true emotions of the black people. We know how he uses this particular technique in all of his ten plays. This technique that Wilson uses in his plays has set him out amongst other African American writers. Wilson has used it in his plays not just to inform people but to remind the people of atrocities their ancestors have faced in the white society. His works clearly shows what he wanted to achieve as a writer not just fame but answers from the white society, and to inform his audiences about the life experiences of a black person. And how Wilson has achieved to connect with his black audiences with his stories.*

**Key word:** *slavery, survival, narration*

## **I. Introduction**

This paper focuses on the techniques of slave narrative used by August Wilson in his plays. So in order to have a clear picture, we must understand what is a slave narrative? Now this technique is used by many writers but especially a Black writer or someone related to a black person who has faced slavery first hand. And in simple terms slave narrative is one of the literary genres which includes the stories of various people who were once a slave, especially Africans who were brought in the western worlds by the colonizers. It is a literary genre that includes stories or tells accounts of the slavery by the characters.

August Wilson is still considered as one of the well know playwright that belonged to African American descend. His works are till this date being loved by readers around the world and with some of his plays turned in to Hollywood movies as well. If we watch his interviews, we will find that Wilson himself being an African American has faced the same consequences as most of the characters in his play. There are always these preconceptions in the heads of the white Americans about the blacks, since they were once slaves and were under them. And that these people do not belong in their society.

Wilson life has been full of such things where by he had to prove himself amongst the whites just to survive and be called an American. Wilson has written in total about ten plays, out of which almost all of his play talks about the black experiences in the United States. Wilson has been able to portray it well the sentiments of his fellow black brothers. He was able to show it well as he himself had gone through the hate and

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<sup>1</sup>M.A. Student, School of Humanities, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, School of Humanities, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab, India

racism as an African American man. How his amazing talent as a playwright has brought back the past to many of his readers. For that his plays have been well loved by people of all walks of life as it talks about the real struggles of black Americans.

August Wilson in all his plays has included characters who tells the tale of their struggles, their pain as a slave in a foreign land. By including people from the past and letting them tell their stories was what made him stand out as one of the finest playwrights.

August Wilsons play talks about the struggles of black Americans against subjugation not for their ethnicity but also because of their colour. The term Slavery, oppressions and feelings of inferiority was created by those people who faced at the hands of the whites. August Wilson permeates his experiences as a Black man who grew up in Pittsburgh during the Civil Rights era when blacks were starting to get some liberties as a minor citizen in the united states. His plays like I have discussed above talks about the psychology of African Americans in a white society.

## **II. The Piano Lesson**

The piano lesson one of the most acclaimed plays of August Wilson till this date is a play that talks about the family legacy. It is published in 1978 and the play is set to be taking place during 1936 in Pittsburgh. We would not be going deep into the play and mainly focusing on the techniques of slave narrative used by Wilson in this play. The play mostly emphasizes around three characters such as Boy Willie, Berniece and their paternal uncle Charles Doaker. Wilson creates a situation where by the two siblings are rival to each other and it's because of their difference in viewpoint regarding the family heirloom.

Berniece who happens to be the elder sister wants to hold on to the piano whereas her younger Boy Willie wants to sell it so that it could benefit him. And just as the tensions rise between the two siblings, Charles Doaker comes in and tells them the history behind the piano.

Such as the importance of having and holding on to the family legacy. In the play Wilson tells us a tale of family and its heirloom. Doaker says in order to know the significance of the piano they have to go back in time and that means when Doaker was a child. To the time when slavery was taking place. He narrates how the piano ended up there. He says Sutter's wife wanted the piano but he couldn't afford it so he traded his slaves for the piano. He says his grandmother and his father was picked from the rest of the slaves. Doaker says everything his grandfather made was owned by Sutter as he owned him. And how his grandfather has carved the picture of the whole family.

Doaker also tells them that their dad uses to tell Doaker that their family story was with Sutter and as long as they owned the piano they are still under slavery. It was their father who brought back the piano to where it is in their family. And Berniece and boy Willies' father was killed for that piano. After finding out about the missing piano Mr. Sutter killed his brother.

The heirloom was the piano which was made by a black man. We come to know for that piano some black slaves died for it. This kind of technique of introducing characters and letting such characters talk about

their ordeal is very important and this is what sets a good writer as he can create a strong bond between the reader and his work.

We clearly know August Wilson is trying to bring the untold stories of the past through his characters. Wilson uses his personal life experiences as an African American to develop his plays, Wilson through this was able to create voice for his people. The piano lesson is one of the plays where we get to see the characters coming to life from the past. As we know this play showcases the incidents from past to present and from present to past.

The techniques of slave narrative will help to display a strong voice for the enslaved ones, and how a character can narrate his part of the incidents of slavery. He or she through such techniques will be able to tell what really happened to them as a slave in the hands of the white people. In the play the piano lesson Boy Willie and Berniece's uncle Doaker tells his story of being a slave. Through uncle Doaker we come to know what was the main reason for holding on to that piano. Doaker says that it was their father who carved the piano. He even carved the picture of his family members on it. He says his family was slaves and were owned by a white master named Stutter who then later sold his mother and brother to another white man named Mr. Noalander in exchange of the piano. This clearly shows the brutality of the white society and how their acts are opposite to what they preach. This technique gives voice the people like Doaker to share his part of the story. After all a piano is just another instrument in the house but what makes it extra special was the long history and the legacy it holds.

Wilson through his plays is trying to form a strong bond from the past to the present. His plays are well appreciated and loved through the world because he used such techniques which somehow brings back the memories from the past. Even though slavery was abolished many decades ago the new generation of African Americans need to know the past. Wilson himself had a hard time surviving in the white society and them treating the blacks as second-class citizens. Even though he was born after slavery and in the 20th century he somehow felt bounded in his own country. Another play of Wilson where by we can see him using such techniques is in the gem of the ocean.

### **III. Gem of the ocean**

Now gem of the ocean is a play set in the 1904s and mainly talks about the spiritual journey of the characters. In this play August Wilson is showcasing the African traditions and culture of believing in the supernatural elements. He has taken references from both the culture that is the white culture and the black as well. Some of Wilson's characters were born out of slavery and some telling their families stories. Their stories were not made up of lies but of the actual events in history. Life for the Africans were not good during the times of slavery. Slavery has taken so much from them starting from being a free man.

And even after so many years of abolishment of slavery these group of minorities are still facing the consequences of white supremacy.

We can see him giving his character's name from the bible and believing in the old age African traditions. But we shall emphasize on the techniques of slave narrative. Here in this play, there are characters

who have witnessed slavery and tells his tale. The main character in the play is aunt Ester whose house is a safe haven for the lost souls. Her house is place where people come to cleanse their soul.

We come to know that Aunt Ester is nearly 300 years old who epitomizes the past. She was victim to slavery and witnessed first-hand slavery. and also, as a connector of the future. Her life shows the survival of the past. Aunt Ester loses her children as slave and she has suffered a lot. And there is a character named citizen Barlow he was also a slave. He talks about his journey towards north. He says on his way up he encountered another run away slaves and they helped each other towards the journey.

Another character named Solly two Kings. He calls himself two kings, actually his name was Alfred which was given by his white master. He later on changed it Solly Two Kings. The two kings were king Solomon and King David. For him these kings reminded of him as both of them rose up from their adversities. David in the bible was once a slave and became king of the nations. So, he was a reminder and an inspiration to the runaway slave, and eventually named himself after them. Incidents as this which makes these techniques unique and makes the story more connecting. As we gotten the opportunity to see the past through the eyes of the real slaves themselves. Wilson has beautifully connected the past with the present through these narrative techniques whereby he includes stories from the slaves themselves.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

August Wilson play has offered his readers the reality of black lives in a white society. The colonisation and uprooting the black individuals from their native lands and brought to be made slaves has effected millions of Africans around the world. Wilson as an African American himself has faced many subjugations in his life. The day-to-day life experiences of an African American person cannot and will never be the same as the white privileged people.

Wilson has invested so much of his time and energy in creating a respectable place for his fellow black Americans, producing masterpieces that will be read by the future African Americans. The techniques he has used such as the slave narratives is very much recognizable in his plays. By using narrative techniques, he was able to connect his audience and remind his audience about the history of their ancestors. How far has these slaves come so that their future generations do not have to suffer like them. The consequences of decades of persecutions and subjugations at the hands of white people has its ripples around till this date. The attitude of the white people is still the same, they still believe they are the better race than any other group of people. We can clearly make out since August Wilson has put real life characters, living ordinary lives and their experiences of being a minority in the white society. And the most important thing which made August Wilson a literary genius of America today is because of his stories in the play. And because of the real experiences of the oppressed people who were once a slave. That's why he was able to create a deeper connection amongst his readers as he was a good story teller not just of the present times, but of the past.

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