

# PERFORMING MASCULINITY AND THE CRISIS OF TRANSCONTEXT MAN IN AUGUST WILSON'S DRAMA

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## ABSTRACT

Feminist critics have identified the social constructedness of masculinity and have explored how male characters often find themselves caught up in a ceaseless quest to propagate and live up to an acceptable image of manliness. These critics have also explored how the effort to live up to the dictates of this social construct has often come at great cost to male protagonists. In this paper, we argue that August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* present the reader with a coterie of male characters who face the dual crisis of living up to a performed masculinity and the pitfalls that come with it, and what Mazrui has referred to as the phenomenon of "transclass man." Mazrui uses the term transclass man to refer to characters whose socio-economic and socio-cultural experience displays a fluid degree of transitionality. We argue that the phenomenon of transclass man works together with the challenges of performed masculinity to create characters who, in an effort to adjust to and fit in with a new and patriarchal urban social milieu in America's newly industrialised north, end up destroying themselves or failing to realise other possibilities that may be available to them. Using these two plays as illustrative examples, we further argue that staged masculinity and the crisis of transclass man in August Wilson's plays create male protagonists who break ranks with the social values of a collectively shared destiny to pursue an individualistic personal trajectory, which only exacerbates their loss of social identity and a true sense of who they are.

**Keywords:** identity; masculinity; performance; transclass man; transitional

## INTRODUCTION

Much of modern world literature, whether in the form of prose, poetry, drama or the short story, abounds with examples of narratives in which the male gender not only constitutes the central characters but also the central narrative.

In a world where an overwhelming majority of world literature has been produced by male writers since the advent of the written word (Nfah-Abbenyi 1997), leading to the fictional subordination of the female gender, it comes as no surprise that in this male-dominated literature, the female character has often been portrayed as passive, weak, helpless and completely dependent on her men folk (Ajayi 1997). As McDonough (1997) and others rightly point out, male protagonists have been portrayed as if they were non-gendered, with their stories and experiences often viewed by both author and critic as pertaining to all humans rather than specifically to men. Flax (1990, 45) corroborates this point by stating poignantly that: "Only recently have scholars begun to consider the possibility that there may be at least three histories in every culture – his, hers and ours. His and ours are generally assumed to be equivalents."

Following McDonough (1997), Flax (1990) and De Beauvoir (2009), we conducted a critical gendered reading of two plays by the celebrated African-American playwright, August Wilson. Using these two plays, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985) and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), we discuss some of the ways in which plays by male writers reveal some interesting issues that have to do with how men are involved in a ceaseless quest to enact and to propagate an acceptable masculinity. We go further: we adopt a literal and a metaphoric view of these acts of performed masculinity as often posing perilous dangers to the actors, wherein, as in the case of a staging cue gone terribly wrong, the calamitous fallout can easily harm the performer and his or her crew of fellow actors. We view the portrayal of certain male characters in these plays as nothing more than the performance of a socially accepted masculinity, which, as McDonough (1997) rightly observes, comes at great cost to the men who are forced to participate in these performances. At worst, this often leads to their destruction, and, at best, limits their ability to exhibit value or to see other possibilities for themselves.

In this paper we offer a combination of performed masculinity with its accompanying pitfalls, and what Mazrui (1972) has referred to as the phenomenon of "transclass man." Mazrui uses the term transclass man to refer to a character whose socio-economic and socio-cultural experience displays a fluid degree of transitionality in some rather interesting and ambivalent ways. We argue that, when combined with the phenomenon of transclass man, performed masculinity creates characters who, in their efforts to adjust and to fit in with a new and patriarchal urban social milieu in America's newly industrialised north, end up being destroyed or failing to realise other possibilities that may be available to them. We view August Wilson's male protagonists as transclass men who are caught up in the act of performing an acceptable masculinity in order to live up to that very process of transitionality. To illustrate our point, we focus on *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, chronologically the second and third

plays in August Wilson's celebrated ten-play cycle (also known as the Pittsburgh cycle or the Pittsburgh plays), each play focusing on African-American history during a decade of the 20th century.

## WILSON'S CENTRAL MEN AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (set in the 1910s and focusing on a group of African-American immigrants newly arrived from the south) and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (set in the 1920s and focusing on African-American blues musicians in the prohibition era in Chicago) are respectively the second and third plays in August Wilson's ten-play Pittsburgh cycle. Together with *Gem of the Ocean*, which is the first in the cycle (set in the 1900s and focusing on the search for spiritual sustenance by newly freed slaves), the two plays we analyse in this paper are well-primed to treat the theme of transitionality and the crisis of transclass man. This is because they deal with the basic theme of a society in transition and the African-American search for identity. The combination of these two themes renders the principal characters and indeed all the other characters in both plays as transclass men and women who grapple with a changing social milieu, changing social identities and a search for self-fulfilment in ways that (in the case of the male characters) only sharpen their propensity to perform a socially constructed masculinity.

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is set in the 1910s, a few decades after the emancipated slaves migrated from the south to America's rapidly industrialising north-eastern seaboard. It is a play about the African-American quest to find one's feet in terms of true freedom and personal identity in a supposedly freer north (and south) immediately after emancipation. To that extent it is basically a play about man and society in transition. Similarly, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which is set in the 1920s, deals with the first steps in finding one's feet in terms of self-sustained and sustainable freedom as a free economic agent in an ostensibly non-racial and free north after African-Americans migrated to and gradually settled in the northern industrial cities. To that extent it too is a play about man and society in transition where success and the ability to succeed are measured by one's ability to enact a successful masculine identity. In both plays we encounter central male characters who, as McDonough (1997) rightly observes, serve as universal referents to denote the destiny of the African-American race; so much so that, in these plays, the destiny at stake is not so much that of humanity as a whole but rather that of these male protagonists.

The female characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* only serve as minor vectors and variables that provide a tapestry against which the stories of men can be illustrated. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Ma Rainey is the eponymous character in the play, yet the story that is told is less about her than about the four male musicians in her band and their racial fight for identity, economic freedom

and survival. Significantly too, Ma Rainey is only introduced to the dramatic action almost half-way into the play. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Herald Loomis's search for his long separated wife, Martha Pentecost, forms the central plank to the narrative, yet Martha is only significant to the extent that by successfully locating her, Herald Loomis can bring a sense of closure to his personal story as a male African-American. Similar to Ma Rainey, Martha Pentecost is only introduced towards the end of the play.

## SOCIETIES IN TRANSITION AND THE METAPHOR OF PLAYING A PART

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the interwoven themes of transition, transclass man and "playing a part" through performance are accentuated by the black man's constant search for a sense of belonging and identity, having come out of the disruptive experience of slavery. It is as if the black man's ceaseless search has come to constitute some kind of entrapment. While the attainment of freedom from slavery may have been deemed to be an end in itself, the act of emancipation has only served to set the black man on another long and winding road of dispersal in search of personal identity and a sense of self-worth. Nowhere does Wilson capture the essence of this enduring spirit of dispersal and a new search than in his preamble to *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* when he writes:

From the deep and near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves *wander* into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their hearts kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive ... seeking to [shape] the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth. [emphasis added]

In our paper we argue that in both plays, entanglement in this seemingly endless search only increases the black man's propensity to perform or "play a part." In this historicised and spatialised search for identity and self-worth, the male protagonists are constantly challenged and forced to enact a compulsory masculinity in terms of their mental state, their personal strength and appearance, their sexuality, dress, gesture, comportment, and their personal independence as a coping mechanism.

De Beauvoir (2009) has observed that gender, as opposed to sex, is a social construct that is produced by both men and women. She goes on to say that one is not born a man or a woman but rather becomes one through the process of socialisation. In that process, men and women perform gender in different ways, so much so that, in the final analysis, the performance of masculinity in contemporary patriarchal contexts seems to yield greater rewards than the performance of femininity. In the two plays that we analyse, we focus on gender as a form of performed masculinity that can be read together with Mazrui's (1972) notion of transclass man.

Mazrui (1972) uses the phenomenon of transclass man in describing characters whose socio-economic and socio-cultural experience displays a fluid degree of transitionality in some rather ambivalent ways. According to Mazrui, when we analyse societies in a state of transition, we must pay attention to the phenomenon or the emergence of transclass man. In situations of social transition (such as we find in Wilson's two plays) it is simply not possible for man to transit seamlessly from one form of social consciousness to another. In the two plays under analysis, the social transition from slavery to freedom and the subsequent search for identity that comes with that freedom create a transclass ambivalence that clouds the vision of some of these male protagonists in some quite significant ways. This transclass ambivalence is a result of the residual consciousness or hold of a sedentary communal ethos cultured by the slave system and Africa's own cultural traditions against the loneliness and individualism that come with freedom and emancipation. The transclass ambivalence in these characters is exacerbated by dispersal and rural-urban migration as well as integration into a highly mobile and individualised money economy in the industrial cities of the north. The male African-American protagonists in these plays therefore manifest the crisis of transclass man by exhibiting a fluid degree of transitionality, which renders them quick to reject their racial roots, their African identities and their traditions as they simultaneously enact a new-found urban identity, which often clouds their judgement, sometimes leading to their personal demise or that of the people around them.

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Levee's social location as the youngest and most youthful of Ma Rainey's blues outfit, places a particularly pernicious amount of pressure on him to perform a self-destructive masculinity. This is a performed masculinity, which he believes will help him to manage and to secure his success as an enterprising African-American musician in urban Chicago. Because performances of masculinity often place an onerous burden on urbanised men to obsess about their dress, their personal appearance, their independence and their sexuality, it is no wonder then that a seemingly innocuous incident regarding Levee's new pair of shoes turns out to be the instigator of the tragedy in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The drama in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is essentially predicated on Levee's new pair of shoes (measured against his rustic band mates' so-called "farming boots" or "clodhoppers"). Levee's new pair of shoes becomes invested with urban success and the symbolism of singularly marking him out as "the man about the town." Levee's new shoes also become a significant dramatisation of a certain kind of masculinity that is based on looks, setting him apart from his otherwise rustic band mates. This is not least because with his new pair of shoes, Levee is better able to impress Dussie Mae, the young woman who is in the company of Ma Rainey. Although these things appear to be unrelated, Levee's sustained attempts at seducing Dussie Mae, his acquisition of an expensive pair of shoes in order to live up to the image of the "man about the town" and finally his newly penned version of Ma Rainey's songs that he intends to sell to Sturdyvant, all come together as part of the grand narrative of performed masculinity by a young African-American male or transclass man in a time

of social transition. It is also significant that for Levee, the ambivalence that comes with the crisis of transclass man makes him only too eager to distance himself from anything that remotely identifies him with his African heritage. Throughout the play, Levee is always very quick and eager to disavow anything that may link him with his African roots, claiming at one time during one of the band's numerous arguments that: "I know he ain't talking about me. You don't see me running around in no jungle with no bone between my nose" (32). At all times during these encounters, if Levee is not making a spirited effort to disavow his African roots and his identity, then he is likely to be labelling the other band members as "old country boys" or "backward Alabama niggers."

It is also significant to note that the act of performing masculinity in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* assumes a gendered dimension. McDonough (1997) has observed how Levee's staged masculinity can be also read as a contest between the male and the female gender or as man versus woman insofar as Levee perceives the current form of Ma Rainey's blues songs as not good enough to appeal to a society in transition. Examined from this gendered perspective, in Levee's construct it is as if the songs cannot be good enough as long as they are written and produced by a woman (i.e. Ma Rainey). The songs will need the intervention of a transclass man such as himself to breathe life into them in order to "jazz them up." Levee has therefore re-worked and re-written Ma's songs (which he continuously and derisively denigrates as "nothing but old jug-band music" or "old jug-band shit") into what he considers to be a more modern version that contemporary people will find appealing. In Levee's view, as the quintessential transclass man he is best placed to bring Ma Rainey's songs up to an acceptable standard and to see to it that they move with the times. In this, Levee is in full agreement with Sturdyvant's view that the old music (as represented and propagated by Ma) has run its full course and that there is need therefore for "something wild ... with a lot of rhythm." In his effort to live up to that performed masculinity as the modernised and erudite "man about the town" Levee sees himself as fitting the bill both literally and metaphorically through his personal appearance and through the re-worked songs, courtesy of the support and encouragement received from Sturdyvant. Sturdyvant thus becomes implicated in encouraging Levee to perform his masculinity as a modern musician. In Levee's perception, success in his bid to re-interpret Ma's blues music will constitute the consummation of his personal triumph in staging an independent, successful and enterprising masculinity as transclass man, particularly because his initiative has the approval and encouragement of Sturdyvant, the white studio owner. The irony that is lost on Levee is that in altering Ma's blues music as part of his efforts to perform an acceptable masculinity, Levee is emptying the music of its essence and meaning as a carrier of African-American history and identity.

August Wilson, however, cleverly subverts Levee's efforts relating to this performed masculinity on two levels. First, whereas Levee's approach to Ma's blues music is superficial in its predilection towards cheap voyeurism and commercialism (or



lack thereof), for Ma herself, the blues is not just about making people “forget about their troubles” but rather more about listening “to the voice inside her” and “keeping things balanced.” It is also about economically empowering her (hopelessly stuttering) young nephew, Sylvester, who must benefit from the royalties by doing a voice intro to one of Ma’s signature songs (much to the chagrin of Levee who cannot wait to get the recordings done). For Ma, blues music is principally a form of identity and stability. Secondly, for all his affected urbane ways and his pretences of being worldly-wise in comparison with his supposedly rustic band mates, Levee is essentially a disorganised and largely unaccomplished musician. He often arrives late for rehearsals, “plays wrong notes frequently” and for all his affected erudition he is unable to spell the word “music” correctly. Thirdly, Levee’s performed masculinity is juxtaposed with and reveals a stark contrast to that of the other band members such as Cutler whose status as the band leader, the oldest, and the most mature member of the group is complemented by his “innate African rhythms.” These qualities of Cutler give him the kind of solidity and stability of character that the other band members can only live up to in varied but limited degrees, with Levee being the least stable and thoroughly inauthentic among them all. As the most mature and most stable member of Ma’s blues band, Cutler rises above the play-acting that is so often staged in varying degrees by the other band members, always making a conscious effort to stay above the band’s petty squabbling throughout the play.

In his ceaseless efforts to perform a modern and acceptable masculinity and to sever his connections with his rustic slave past located in the south, Levee has acquired a dangerous obsession with his personal looks and appearance. This is represented by his obsession with the new pair of shoes—first accidentally stepped on by Slow Drag (much to Levee’s chagrin) and later on by Toledo (with tragic consequences) just before the play ends.

After the ignominiously capricious and thoroughly unexpected rejection of his songs by Sturdyvant, upon which songs Levee has pinned all his hopes of succeeding as a transclass man, Levee fails to deal with his pent-up rage. And when Toledo inadvertently steps on Levee’s new shoes as the band is packing up to leave the studio, this otherwise innocent mishap becomes hemmed in by Levee’s wounded self-esteem, which is partly the result of an unsuccessfully performed masculinity but is significantly represented by his shoes in which he has so substantially invested. The unexpected rejection by Sturdyvant and the mishap involving Toledo and the new pair of shoes which follows immediately afterwards, eventually cloud Levee’s vision, driving him to commit a senseless murder. When Sturdyvant first rejects Levee’s new songs, and then offers him only a paltry amount for them, Levee is angered by the sudden floundering of his hitherto well-choreographed dream through performed masculinity. He then vents his pent-up rage not on Sturdyvant but on an unsuspecting Toledo. Toledo is viciously stabbed to death in cold blood for the innocuous transgression of having stepped on Levee’s new pair of shoes. As McDonough (1997) rightly observes, throughout the play Levee’s pose has been no more than a case of creating a false impression through acting.

His earlier boasts about his personal skill and knowledge in dealing with the white man in order to achieve what he wants (the so-called “cool pose”) (Majors and Billson 1992) only serve to accentuate an essentially performed masculinity and to expose how much, in the final analysis, he is clearly not in control of his destiny. Levee has essentially sacrificed other alternatives available to him to succeed by pandering to a normative economic empowerment model that says full masculinity is realisable even if it means voluntarily submitting one’s self to being “spooked” by the white man.

In Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* we are confronted with another set of transclass men who are equally engaged in negotiating social transition from the Deep South to a new urban social milieu in the industrial north. However, unlike the characters in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, the characters in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* have had a more direct and immediate experience of the slave south, being “the sons and daughters” of newly freed African slaves. There is no doubt then that unlike the characters in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, the characters in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* experience this social transition in far keener ways.

The play is set in a boarding house that is owned by Seth Holly and his wife, Bertha. The boarding house is populated by a motley crowd of African-American drifters from the south who are soon joined by Herald Loomis (accompanied by his young daughter, Zonia). Like the other characters who inhabit Seth’s boarding house, Herald Loomis has just arrived from the south. He is in search of his long-lost wife, Martha Pentecost, from whom he has been separated for seven years after he (Herald) was forced to work on a chain gang by racist southern whites (represented by Joe Turner).

There are significant parallels that can be drawn between some of the characters in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and those in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. For instance, Seth Holly and Levee behave in similar ways in terms of how they both make an effort to perform an acceptable masculinity that will mark them out as enterprising transclass men in the new urban social milieu of the highly individualised industrial north.

Like Levee, Seth never misses an opportunity to equally disavow any social practices or identities that link him with or remind him of his heredity and rural African ancestry. It is significant then that the play opens with Seth deriding Bynum’s rituals in the garden of the boarding house. Seth is contemptuous of Bynum’s spirituality to which he derisively refers as nothing more than “all that mumbo jumbo” and “heebie-jeebie stuff.” His perceived success as a modern entrepreneur in the industrial north forces him to dramatise a contemptuous attitude to Bynum’s (and his own) African roots and spirituality. In his estimation this is no longer compatible with an urban social ethos. Just like Levee in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Seth Holly is on a path to sever any ideational ties that may still bind him with his ancestral home and his original identity as a black man. To that extent he will barely tolerate Bynum’s rituals in the yard; neither does he condone any kind of “heebie-jeebie stuff” within the boarding house, insisting on running a “respectable premises.” It is equally significant that Seth does not approve of Bynum, continuously accosting Rutherford Selig (Seth’s white



friend) to enquire whether or not Selig has finally managed to locate Bynum's "shiny man" on his numerous travels. Seth's disavowal of Bynum's Africanist belief systems is therefore reminiscent of Levee's general disavowal of African identities. And in both cases the disavowal is part of a deliberately performed manly identity that is meant to be consistent with a new-found urbanity. In the process, both of them lose sight of who they really are as African-Americans seeking to establish an enduring identity in a time of social transition.

The characters in Seth Holly's boarding house (whether male or female) are all seekers of individual destiny, each in their own right. Yet Jeremy, the young guitarist and womaniser, and probably the most unstable and down-and-out character among them all, arrogates to himself the role of guardian protector of all the women who come to reside in the boarding house. In all this, Jeremy performs masculinity in a way that seems to equate manhood with rapacious sexuality, so much so that he loses sight of a more purposeful future ahead for himself. Jeremy's construction of an evidently over-dramatised sense of the essence of what it means to be a man is eloquently captured in his efforts to seduce Mattie Campbell, one of the residents of the boarding house, when he says to her: "I got a ten-pound hammer and I knows how to drive it down. Good god ... you ought to hear my hammer ring!" (447). In this staged masculinity, Jeremy's crude sexual advances at Mattie Campbell (which are also highly comparable to Levee's crude sexual advances at Dussie Mae in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*) are reminiscent of how men have generally approached women as a transcendental symbol of sexual provision, motherhood and boundless fecundity, in extreme cases converting the woman into the prostitute metaphor (Ajayi 1997). By performing masculinity in ways that foreground their manliness as sexual predators, Levee and Jeremy rob women of their agency as subjects, rendering Dussie Mae and Mattie Campbell as objects in an essentially male-defined discourse. Rather than place a premium on a vision of their personal destiny as transclass African-American men, Levee and Jeremy indulge in performing a masculinity that does not seem to go beyond constructing women as voyeuristic objects of beauty and eroticism.

However, as in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, August Wilson sets up a foil against which the futility of performed masculinity can be understood. This is in the character of Bynum, the root worker whose intense connection with African Traditional Religion, African ancestry and spirituality affords him a kind of stability of character and personality that is in stark contrast with the aimless wanderings of the other tenants in Seth Holly's boarding house. With this, Bynum has a clear sense of his true identity in ways that Levee and Jeremy cannot have.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we attempted to demonstrate the social constructedness of gender and how the notion of an acceptable masculinity often came across as no more than a

dramatisation on the part of male characters who made an effort to live up to a part that was socially defined for them. In order to illustrate our point, we focused on two plays by the celebrated American playwright, August Wilson.

We conducted a gendered reading of Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as illustrative examples. Our principal argument was that the historical location of Wilson's African-American characters in a time of social and economic transition rendered them as transclass men in ways that could only sharpen their propensity to perform a certain kind of masculinity in an effort to adjust and to succeed after they had relocated to the north. In our analysis, we used a combination of Mazrui's notion of transclass man and the concept of performed masculinity to indicate how these twin phenomena created characters who, in trying to adjust to and fit in with a new and patriarchal urban social milieu in America's newly industrialised north, ended up destroying themselves or failing to realise other possibilities that might be available to them.

We tried to analyse how Wilson's African-American male protagonists broke ranks with the social values of a collectively shared destiny to pursue a largely performed and individualistic personal trajectory, which only exacerbated their loss of social identity and a true sense of who they were.

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