

African American Women's Gender Role in *Two Trains Running*

Ryo SAIGAMI

Introduction

August Wilson (1945-2005) was a famous playwright who had great success on Broadway. In his play, *Two Trains Running* (1992) the background of the 1960s is reflected. *Two Trains Running* was nominated for Tony awards for Best play and Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1992. In this thesis, I will focus on *Two Trains Running*.

August Wilson writes about the history of African Americans in Pittsburgh in ten parts, which is known as the 'Pittsburgh Cycle'. Ten playwrights separate each period from the 1900's to the 1990's, each playwright telling a different story, but August Wilson wrote on African Americans life in each of the eras. Especially, the 1960s is the most important era for him.

His plays focus mostly on male characters. In *Two Trains Running*, appear many types of African American male characters, many heroics. However, Wilson thought that African American female character was as important as males.

Sandra G. Shannon explained August Wilson's overviews:

Yet this very same ground has produced the African American woman—the manifestation of a playwright whose sensibilities are admittedly and understandably masculine. Despite Wilson's grounding in a decidedly male frame of reference, his portrayals of African American women cover as wide a range as do those of his men. (Shandra G. Shannon)

Actually, Many African American male characters appear in his work and is connected with these characters. However, Wilson does not focus on only male character. In this essay, I will focus on Wilson's female characters and gender roles, especially, I use *Two Trains Running*.

Two Trains Running presents a wider view of African American life. August Wilson shows the effects of racial discrimination in *Two Trains Running* and shows conflict between African Americans of lower class and middle class. In fact, we can see more complex problems. Nathan Grant explained:

The plays in the second half of August Wilson's cycle emphasize more deeply than the first the idea of coming to terms with the realities of capital. (Nathan Grant)

Two Trains Running is set in 1969 Pittsburgh, in one restaurant, where seven characters have conversations, talk about racial discrimination, and despair about this situation. These characters have different problems in this play. *Two Trains Running* is storytelling and this play more reflects Wilson's life. The restaurant is based on Eddie's restaurant, a restaurant August Wilson often frequented and talked about theater arts with his friends.

In *Two Trains Running*, there appears a young woman whose name is Risa. She has a very strong personality, at the same time, she has a lot of scars on her legs. Risa is the most complex character in August Wilson's work. Many reviewers looked at the play with a critical eye on Wilson's female figures, because almost all his female characters suffer enormous tragedies. However, I think that August Wilson understood African American woman's role. In this thesis, I look into *Two Trains Running's* female character. To do that, I will use his interviews and essays, to examine African American women's gender roles from August Wilson's point of view.

1. Risa in *Two Trains Running*

Risa is the most important character in *Two Trains Running* and shows more directly the diversity of African American women. Stephen Bottoms examine *Two Trains Running*:

Wilson presents equally clearly an awareness that the double oppression of African American women remained, as late as the 1960s, almost invisible even to their menfolk. This was a time when even Black Power radicals saw no equivalence between the struggles against racial and sexual oppression (*Conversations with August Wilson*, p.156).

Bottoms thinks that *Two Trains Running* shows problems of the late 1960s, and also presents gender roles of that era. Risa is a beautiful young woman and works in a restaurant owned by a character named Memphis, where she cooks and serves the meals. This is one type of female role in Wilson's play. Cooking and serving the meals are an important symbol in *Two Trains Running*. It presents a crucial element of Wilson's play. In the first scene, the menu board of the meals appear in this show. August Wilson comments on his writing strategies in *Seven Guitars*.

"I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother's life—her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter—are all worthy of art." (*A Note from the Playwright*)

Wilson thought that cooking meals is one of the important roles women play in African American culture and he tries to create female characters who reflect his mother. However, Risa is different from other female characters in his plays. She is not someone's wife. Cooking for the restaurant is a money-earning job for her and supports her financially. Memphis is always managing the business and does not help Risa when he is in the restaurant. During his absence, Risa is managing the restaurant by cooking and serving the meals. In contrast, Memphis does not do any work and always talks with guests, not really understanding the operations of his own restaurant. In scene 1,

MEMPHIS: What you mean, "What?" You see the man sitting there... Wait on him. That's what you here for.

RISA: I was trying to clean the chicken.

MEMPHIS: The man want to eat now. He ain't thinking about you cleaning no chicken.

RISA: We ain't got no chicken. And we ain't got no meat loaf. we ain't got no hamburger either. We just got beans and cornbread.

MEMPHIS: You got some hamburger back there.

RISA: It's all frozen. (*Two Trains Running*, p.19)

In this scene, we can see that his restaurant is in critical shape. Risa understands this. To tell the truth, although Memphis is the owner of his restaurant, Risa manages it, showing that she has some power in the African American community.

Let us consider the fact that she also has a lot of scars on her legs. In act one, scene 1, it is explained that she has scarred on her legs with a razor (9). There is another aspect of her character, an ironic one.

She does not talk a lot about her scars in this play, however she talks about the number of her scars when Sterling is playing the numbers. Another character, Holloway explains about Risa's past and how these scratches were made by herself. She has seven scars on one leg and eight on the other (46). Sterling asked her why she hurt her legs by herself, but, she did not explain the reason for that. Her self-mutilation has two meanings. One, she refuses the stereotypical African American female role of being sexually available to men, at the same time, she shows vulnerability.

In an interview with Richard Pettengill, Wilson talks about the reason for Risa's scars,

One of the large ideas that men and women wrestle with is the question of self-definition: women define themselves in terms other than the terms men define them in. Men see Risa as someone to sleep with, in terms of sex, in terms of her body. The scars on her legs became a rejection of that

definition. (*Conversation with August Wilson*, p.158)

Therefore, we understand what Holloway says. Memphis thinks that Risa is a good girl and she does not have to have scars. The problems of sexual relationships between African American men and women have been taken up by African female writers today. Alice Walker writes about the problems of sexual relationships illustrating male abuse of wives, focusing on the relationship of Celie and Albert in *The Color Purple*. Toni Morrison writes about the problem of incest in *The Bluest Eye*, and Suzan Lori-Parks writes about African American women's sexual problems in *In the Blood*. Unlike these authors, August Wilson does not so directly. However, Risa's scars are symbols of her strong rejection of African American men's masculinity. The male characters do not look at Risa with any sort of sexual desire except for Sterling. In this play, we understand that Risa is powerful and independent, but also vulnerable. Her scars show her desperation, not her independence and power.

As indicated previously, Shirley Chisholm notes that African American women like Risa stands at the bottom of American society. In the 1960s, Some of them could taste the social progress of women. In the history of America, the Civil Rights movement spans in the 1950's and 1960's, resulting in the growth of a black middle class from the movement. *Two Trains Running* reflects the change. For example, Memphis has trouble with West who is a rich undertaker in this play. West becomes a counter point to Memphis. West tries to buy Memphis's restaurant and is influenced by the utilitarianism of White society. August Wilson thinks that this relationship shows more complex problems. Outwardly, African Americans lives are improving, however, that is just a part of the story. Wilson tries to present a more complex, realistic picture in *Two Trains Running*. West is the only rich black in this play and he squeezes Memphis. The audience can speculate that Risa is a poor person, like almost all the characters in this play. In fact, Risa shows one kind of African American woman's life in the 1960s. In her case, she commits acts of self-harm. She reflects the conflict between many women face and strong at the same time. As with Wilson's male characters, the female characters have suffered trouble and illustrate that many women face problems like Risa's that caused her self-scarring. However, Risa is the most important role in *Two Trains Running*, especially important in her relationship with Sterling and Hambone.

2. Risa's Relationship with Sterling

Sterling, a friend of Risa's brother, loves Risa and wants to get married to her. Risa doesn't love Sterling, but finally, she trusts him. Their relationship expresses true love. Act 2 has a most interesting scene. Risa says she had scars and her legs are ugly.

Sterling does not mind these things, or rather, he takes her scars in stride. Sterling is pro-Malcolm X. August Wilson thought that The Black Power movement of which Malcolm X played a crucial role, was the most important development in the 1960s. He explained in 1987,

MM: You've written a one-man show on Malcolm X. Is he one of your heroes?

AW: Oh, sure. Without question. Malcolm was a very important historical figure in black experience. (*Conversation with August Wilson*, p.57)

Malcolm X had different ideas from Martin Luther King. In *Ground on Which I stand*, Wilson explained that his way is rooted in Elijah Muhammad's philosophy. Muhammad was the leader of the Black Muslim Movement and Malcolm X's master. The Black Muslims rejected Christianity. Because they thought that Christians supported the African slave trade. They did not completely reject white society. However, they want to change American society quickly, which Wilson agreed with. In addition, August Wilson wrote poetry about Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. Many black activists were assassinated in the late 60's including Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. Sterling reflects August Wilson's philosophical roots. However, Sterling takes on the role of a minority in Memphis's restaurant, because Memphis does not like Sterling's way of life. Stephen Bottoms refers to August Wilson's opinions:

Far from being simply some retrograde his strengths, and he may well have chosen the year of 1969 as the backdrop for *Two Trains Running* partly in order to avoid attempting to dramatize the hyperkinetic energy of the 'High sixties'. Rather, 1969 was the year when the decade of dreaming came to an increasingly soul end. (*The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*, p.147)

In this thesis, Bottoms wrote that African Americans had increasingly negative opinions about The Civil Right Movement. *Two Trains Running* shows that. Memphis says 'Black is beautiful' is ugly. He is disappointed with this era and state of affairs. Therefore, Memphis represents this dissatisfaction.

Memphis does not like the fact that Sterling has no job and always plays the numbers game. Sterling hope to strike it rich by investing in the numbers game. Some people in the play understands Sterling. Holloway thinks that apparent laziness of the black people is caused by the problems of unemployment. Holloway says:

HOLLOWAY: People kill me talking about niggers is lazy. Niggers is the most hardworking 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, ain't no work for him to do. (*Two Trains Running*, p.34)

Holloway says his world view includes the history of slaves. This is a self-deprecating joke and gloomy. As a fault, almost all characters do not believe that change in American society is good in *Two Trains Running*. Therefore, Sterling stands on the fringe in this community, like Risa.

In this community, Risa stands in a unique position with regard to Sterling, and yet, at the end of the story, Risa is falling in love with Sterling. Sterling loves Risa and Risa understands that and accepts his feeling. However, this relationship has another meaning. It shows the bonds between people on the fringe. Sterling has a criminal record, he is not a regular customer and Sterling and Memphis do not get along well. Therefore, he does not have power in this restaurant community. Sterling and Risa are similar characters. *Two Trains Running* focuses on the fringe person, and Memphis's restaurant is a small microcosm of the African American community. In this play, we can find another fringe person, whose name is Hambone. Risa has a special relationship with Hambone.

3. Risa's Relationship with Hambone

Hambone always stands in front of the meat shop and says, "I want my ham." He painted this meat shop's fence. The meat shop owner had said "If you paint my fence, I will give you a chicken. If you a good job, I will give you a ham." So, the owner gave Hambone a chicken, However Hambone rejects, because he thinks he has done a good job and deserved the ham. He has waited waits every morning to get his ham for nine years. He never gives up on getting the ham from the meat shop owner. This action debated by other characters in *Two Trains Running*. Wolf and Holloway understand Hambone. They talk:

WOLF: Anybody can see he ain't in his right mind.

HOLLOWAY: I don't know. He might be more in his right mind that you are. He might have more sense than any of us.

WOLF: Would you stand over there every morning for nine-and-a half-years?

(30)

Hambone is a little disturbed mentally off. However, Hambone's behavior resembles the sit-in of the Civil Right Movements in his non-violent and silent protest in front of the white man's meat shop. On the contrary, Memphis make a forceful move against Hambone. Memphis does not like him and hopes that he does not come to his restaurant. But Risa is not like Memphis. In this play, Risa argue with Memphis about

Hambone:

HAMBONE: He gonna give me my ham. He gonna give me my ham.

MEMPHIS: I don't wanna hear that today. Go on out of here with that.

RISA: Here's your coffee, Hambone.

MEMPHIS: I told you not to give him nothing.

RISA: He ain't bothering nobody.

MEMPHIS: Let him take that somewhere else. (45)

Risa lets up on Hambone in this story. In addition, she worries about Hambone who goes missing and she wants to buy a gold casket for Hambone after he dies. Her attitude is different from that of Sterling. Shandra G. Shannon views these relationships, explaining:

Risa's unexplained nurturing of Hambone may also be a result of the respective physical and emotional scars that seem to forge a common bond between them. (Shandra G. Shannon)

Like Risa's scars on her legs and Hambone has mental scars. On this point, it has been emphasized that Hambone is in similar position in *Two Trains Running* like Risa and Sterling. Risa understands Hambone, because she has her own scars like Hambone. In other words, she empathizes with a person who is in a weaker position in the restaurant society. August Wilson talks about the main points of *Two Trains Running* with Nathan L. Grant in 1993:

As he points out in the play, it's better to take nothing than to take the chicken. It's going to constantly remind you that you should have ham. It is same position—which is the same position that Memphis [the owner of the restaurant where the action takes place] takes with respect to his property. Sterling, too. (*Conversations with August Wilson*, p.187)

Wilson says that the three persons have common problems they are connected in that sense. Among them, Risa falls in love with Sterling and takes care of Hambone. She supports people who fight White American society. It can be seen, then, that Sterling and Hambone reflect August Wilson's roots and philosophy. One of the reasons why Sterling likes Hambone is that Hambone implicitly lives out Malcolm X's ideas:

STERLING: There he is! Hey, Hambone. Black is beautiful!

(*Hambone looks at him for a moment, confused.*)

Hambone: I want my ham.

STERLING: You stick me... you gonna get your ham. Okay? Me and you. Brothers.

(*Claps his hands together*) See? Like that. Black is beautiful. Remember? ...

(*Two Trains Running*, p.59)

The relationship between these two men reflects August Wilson's world view. At the end of the play, Hambone died a tragic death. However, Hambone has an effect on a lot of characters in the play. Memphis asks Risa to get some flowers for Hambone's funeral. Memphis sells the restaurant for a lot of money and came to understand that Hambone was a rebel against White society. So, Hambone has encouraged Memphis. Sterling understands Malcolm X's philosophy and how Hambone's action follows it; Hambone keeping fighting prejudice in American society. So, Sterling stole a large ham in the meat shop to pay respect to Hambone. August Wilson uses the character of Hambone to send a message of hope. *Fences* and *Two Trains Running* resemble each other in that. Hambone's character is similar to Troy's and Gabriel in *Fences*. At the end of the play, they made an effort to convey hope on the death of other characters. August Wilson talked about Hambone in an interview with Sandra G. Shannon:

Hambone has a much more important part in *Two Trains*. He has an effect on everybody's life in this play. (*Conversations with August Wilson*, 143)

In other words, Hambone is the most important male character in *Two Trains Running*. while, Risa represents Wilson's views on African American women's role in the struggle for equality.

Firstly, Risa nurtures male characters, such as Hambone and Sterling, strong heroic persons who lead some characters and reflect August Wilson's world views. The men cannot achieve this result alone, so the female characters help them.

Risa has many problems and suffer tragedy yet does not feel pessimistic. She understands suffering and tries to cope with it, but she injures herself. It is not the best way but nonetheless a way to reject male sexuality. Risa tries to solves her problems. August Wilson focuses on the problems of racism in American society in *Two Trains Running* in *The Pittsburgh Cycle*. Risa is fighting against racism and sexual abuse, but she also helps male characters. African American women's support for African American men is significant in the culture and social development of African American society.

Works Cited

Bottoms, Stephen. "Two Trains Running: blood on the tracks." Christopher Bigsby, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge

Press, 2007.

Chisolm, Shirley. "The Black Woman in Contemporary America." Radio broadcast, University of Missouri, Kansas City. 17 June 1974.

<<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/schisholm.html>>

Freedman, G. Samuel. "A Voice from the street." *New York Times* 15 March, 1987.

<<http://www.nytimes.com>> 6 October, 2017.

Grant, L. Nathan. "Men, Women, and Culture: Conversation with August Wilson" Bryer Bryer R., Mary C. Harting, editors. *Conversation with August Wilson*, University of Mississippi Jackson, 2006.

Livingston, Dinah. "Cool August: Mr. Wilson's Red-Hot Blues" Bryer Jackson R., Mary C. Harting editors. *Conversation with August Wilson*, University of Mississippi Jackson, 2006.

Pettengill, Richard. "The Historical Perspective: An Interview with August Wilson," Bryer Jackson R., Mary C. Harting, editors. *Conversation with August Wilson*, University of Mississippi Jackson, 2006.

Shannon, G. Sandra. "The Ground on Which I Stand: August Wilson's Perspective on African American Women," Alan Nadal, Editors. *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, University of Iowa Press, 1994.

Wilson, August. "Fences". New York: Plume Book, 1986.

---, "Seven Guitars". New York: Plume Book, 1997.

---, "Two Trains Running". New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007.

---, "The Ground on Which I Stand" 26 June, 1996. Theater Communications Group

<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/callaloo/v020/20.3wilson02.html>>