

## The Emergence of a New Female Archetype in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Drama

(Including August Wilson's *Fences*)

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“I believe that it's better to be looked over than it is to be overlooked.” -- Mae West

In the above quote, Mae West encompasses the 20<sup>th</sup> century female and her struggle to be accepted as an emotional, physical, and sexual equal to men. The good news is that numerous female roles have been written throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century across racial barriers to portray a new archetype in drama – the strong female character who refuses to simply be labeled the “Madonna” or the “whore.”

In examining the emergence of the “sexual and intelligent female in the 20<sup>th</sup> century drama” and the social injustice she incurs as a result of her promiscuity and learnedness, the reader can see a definite swing in the depiction of femininity. She will not tame her sexuality to fade into the background of a male dominated society or stage. She craves learning and equality in all social aspects.

This new female role is not written as a foil to her male counterparts; she has her own story to tell. Traditionally female characters fall into eight heroine archetypes: the mother, the boss, the temptress, the damsel in distress, the free spirit, the crusader, the spunky kid and the wise old sage (Cowden). Many argue that women fall into these categories throughout their lifetimes not because they innately do so, but out of limitations society has placed upon them. In essence, women are content to stand behind their man, give up their own identity to rear children; they are not sexually motivated after middle age; because society tells them that is what a “good” woman does. Men have written history, and women have played their part; that stereotype is history, and in the future lays a new ideal. August Wilson, Angelina Grimke, Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress parade a barrage of strong atypical women across stage as examples of the “new” female.

Can a man write about a woman and do so honestly without objectifying her and taking away her identity? August Wilson never tried. “I try to portray them from their own viewpoint as opposed to my viewpoint. I try to – to the extent that I am able – to step around on the other side of the table, if you will, and try to look at things from their viewpoint” (Nadel 151). Wilson attempts to write women how they view themselves.

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson places the female character at the height of importance by titling the work after her; making the audience wait to meet her; and finally symbolizing the oppression of race through her. At first the reader patiently waits for Ma Rainey's appearance. This patience quickly turns to eagerness and finally intolerance as Ma does not appear until the end of Act I. Her late arrival only heightens her importance. Not only does the audience wait on her, the band, and studio executives do also.

“How you boys doing Cutler? Come on in. Where's Ma? Is she with you?” (Wilson 12). Mr. Irvin greets the band and does not skip a beat immediately asking after Ma. He does this numerous times before she arrives. The band provides the music, but Ma's voice and lyrics

sell the records. Wilson purposely makes the white studio executives wait on Ma. Once they lay her voice down onto the tracks, they no longer need her; she becomes disposable. “As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it’s just like if I’d be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on”(63). Ma does everything she can to prolong the inevitable. She arrives late; her nephew stutters through the entire intro to the song; she stops because she needs a Coke. Everything about Ma, her larger than life stature; overbearing personality; and commanding voice all allude to her control over the situation.

In addition Wilson uses Ma as an “Everywoman” poster child for the injustice of racial relations. She has made it as far in this “white person’s world” as African Americans can. She is wealthy enough to own a car, but that does not stop the police from asking from whom she stole the car. She has good clothes and is in charge of even the white studio executives; but that will all end once she surrenders her power (voice) to them. “If you colored and can make some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise you just a dog in the alley” (63). Ma also has a secondary conflict with Levee. He chases the “American Dream” by selling his lyrics to Sturdyvant and Mr. Irvin. When the executives choose Levee’s lyrics over the lyrics Ma originally wrote, she refuses to sing. In the end Levee also takes a secondary role to Ma. The executives choose Ma’s lyrics out of fear that they won’t be able to record her. She defeats Levee in a battle over lyrics, only to lose her voice in a war with the “white man.”

Ma is not a mother, nor does she accept any man getting ahead of her. She imparts wisdom, but not in any self-sacrificing way. “Ma Rainey is the antithesis of the traditional homemaker” (Nadel 152). She is self-preserving not self-sacrificing and although she is not the protagonist, her importance is vital to rhythm and structure of the play.

In Rachel, Angelina Grimke not only strips the protagonist of those things we associate as innate female wants and needs, marriage and children; Grimke also takes away her trust in love and in God. The central conflict of the play is an internal conflict with which Rachel struggles; not the black v. white or man v. man to which audiences are accustomed. Rachel cannot fathom marrying and bringing a child into a world where lynching and cursing “Nigger!” are common practice. She wages war within herself and with her faith in Christianity. “Rachel is thematically preoccupied with issues of theodicy, and it is in this context that its main character approaches an authentically tragic identity, as manifested in her direct and impassioned arguments with God” (Storm 3).

Grimke juxtaposes this unforgiving society with the safe-haven of Rachel’s apartment, and Mrs. Loving, her mother, with Rachel. Mrs. Loving is even-tempered emotionally distant from things that happen “outside” the apartment. However, when she relates the story of her husband and son’s lynching, she is written as somber but not overly emotional. When Jimmy comes home and tells of kids yelling “Nigger!” at him, Rachel is inconsolable and suicidal. This shift in female nature is purposeful.

“Aside from Mrs. Loving, the other model of motherhood that Rachel refers to is the Blessed Virgin, pictured on the wall of the living room in a reproduction of Raphael's Sistine Madonna” (4). In Act I Rachel imparts that she has dreamt that she is to be a mother. This foreshadows the many visits of young children to her door throughout the play. The audience is

made aware that none of the children are biologically hers. The relationship of Jimmy and Rachel is the most prevalent in the play; it fulfills the dream she had in Act I.

Rachel elongates her own childhood as much as she can. When her own innocence is lost, her intense inner conflict is the result. Ironically she does not lose her own innocence and faith until Jimmy is made to grow up and lose his. This is the climax for her. She resigns herself to the idea that "--it would be more merciful—to strangle the little things at birth-- this white Christian nation--has deliberately set its curse upon the most holy thing in life--motherhood" (Grimke 28).

Grimke tackles racial relations at the turn of the century through a teenage girl. Her themes of innocence lost, Christianity as a white religion and female identity further the idea that women constantly battle the categories or stereotypes designated to them at every age.

Lorraine Hansberry explores three generations of women living under one roof in A Raisin in the Sun. Mama the self-declared matriarch of the family craves a place for her family to live where sunlight can help them grow. Hansberry bestows the symbolism of this need to grow onto a plant that is withering away in the apartment just like Mama's family. "Mama is commendable in her determination to use the insurance check to buy a house" (Brown 243). She wants to move her family out of the poverty that shrouds them. The idea that sun shines out in the white suburb, but never shines in the apartment is again and again disclosed through the little plant that is withering away on the windowsill.

The plant also symbolizes Ruth dying piece by piece. She dreams of escaping the four walls that stifle her and fuel her claustrophobia. The play opens and closes with the same description of the furniture. Throughout the description of the rug and furniture Hansberry utilizes diction such as "worn," "depressing," and "uniformity" to convey the negative tone of the situation. "All pretenses but living itself have long since vanished from the atmosphere of this room" (Hansberry 1734). The description of the furniture is introduced just as Ruth is introduced and is extended to describe Ruth too.

Through his death and the insurance check that accompanies it, Walter Sr. has given life to everyone else's dreams. At one point Mama states "I seen him night after night come in and look at that rug and then look at me...I seen him grow thin and old before he was forty" (Hansberry 1784). In the end it is the materialistic American Dream that dies along with Walter, Sr.; that dream is replaced with a dream of hope for a better existence.

Beneatha strives throughout the play to be a foil to Ruth and Mama. She views them as ignorant and wants no part of the sacrifices they make. She has an unforgiving take on Mama and Ruth's lifestyle. When asked if she will marry George, she guffaws at the insinuation that she would place her own dreams on hold to play shadow to a man. She continually bounces from one hobby to another with reckless abandon to "find herself." Ironically it is through Asagi that she discovers herself. Asagi represents a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country with values that have been forgotten and replaced by the "American Dream" of materialism. Asagi helps Beneatha to evolve and realize that she can be her own person with traits familiar to those of the two women

who raised her. Each generation of Hanberry's women evolves to break down one more barrier set up by society.

Alice Childress crosses race lines in the most intimate of ways in *Wedding Band: A Love Hate Story Told in Black and White*. The setting is South Carolina and the principal theme its anti-female laws. Black and White are not allowed to date, cohabit, or even sleep together. However, only females are persecuted according to South Carolina's laws. According to Rosemary Curb "Black and white women both suffered under such laws, and each suffered alone, since a woman's testimony about the paternity of her child was not considered valid" (58).

Interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict reign the Julia's life. Her world revolves around the illicit relationship she has with Herman. She has moved numerous times over the last ten years, because people always discover their secret relationship. She fights against society's laws, people of her own race, white people and her conscience to defend a relationship that in no way can ever exist before the eyes of the ruling class. This never stops Julia though. Instead she relocates her entire life so people won't judge or expose the forbidden relationship.

Through dialogue the audience is made aware exactly how much Herman's mother disapproves of his relationship with Julia:

Herman's Mother. "There's something wrong about mismatched things, be they shoes, socks or people."

Herman. "I feel...I don't know what I feel..."

Herman's Mother. "Don't need to feel. Live by the law. Follow the law – law, law of the land. Obey the law" (48).

Frieda's disgust with her son, his profession, his relationship and standing in the community is worn on her sleeve for all to see. She manipulates Herman when he falls ill and is delirious. This female versus female conflict of Frieda and Julia displays the tense race relations. Herman is a poor baker and lower middle class. Frieda never allows him to forget that he has done nothing to "raise" his family's social status. Now his relationship threatens to disgrace her family name even more. Frieda's desperate attempt to rise and assimilate to American society is referred to often throughout the play. At one point Herman privately discloses that someone had painted on their house, "Krauts...Germans live here!" (24). When he is at wit's end with everyone and falls ill to influenza; Frieda takes full advantage.

The climactic moment arrives when Frieda brings about the recitation of John C. Calhoun's speech. "Men are not born...equal, or any other kinda way..." (47). Julia can stomach no more and realizes that she has wasted ten years of her life waiting for society, her own race, the white race and Frieda to change their minds. The audience watches as Julia slowly loses touch with the reality that is thrown in her face time and again. She is black, and he is white. In the resolution of the play and their relationship she gives up the dream of going north to New York, and clings to Herman's fever-ravaged, lifeless body. She has made her choice to let them discover him in her arms. Curb states "Julia's firm stand - taking Herman in and locking his

mother and sister out - dramatically demonstrates her assertion of her rights, even though such a gesture lacks any public effect or crusading zeal” (64).

Karl Marx stated “Social progress can be monitored by the social position of the female sex.” The aforementioned women are a measure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century female. Ma Rainey refuses to be a whore for white listeners. Rachel forgoes those things women are told to prize, marriage and motherhood. Beneatha, Mama and Ruth defer their dreams until they can stand it no more. Julia strikes at the laws with which society imprisons her. In the end all of these women do not adhere to any stereotype laid before them.

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