
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Facets of Struggle in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*

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| ABSTRACT

This paper explores the various facets of struggle and resistance in August Wilson's dramatic play *Two Trains Running*. It highlights the manifestations of the African American struggle while examining the degree to which this struggle affects characters' identities and their psyches in the long run. Given that August Wilson is one of the leading figures in African American literature, specifically Drama and Theatre, it is paramount to consider his work in the historical context that the events revolve around, as it is quite significant and analogous to the thematic dimension of the play. Based on a textual, thematic, and character analysis, this paper analyzes the different facets and aspects of struggle and resistance represented in *Two Trains Running*, which includes, mainly, social, economic, and psychological struggles. Moreover, it elaborates on the ways this struggle has affected and shaped their identities, psyches, and perceptions towards themselves, each other, and their community. Besides, it examines the major racial conflicts that contributed to the tension between characters and that ultimately manifest in their social interactions and attitudes.

| KEYWORDS

African American Literature, struggle, drama, identity, resistance.

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1. Introduction

African American literature is one of the greatest literary traditions that subsume interesting topics, themes, and issues. This committed literature can be defined as a "body of literature written by Americans of African descent."¹ It tackles subjects related to race, tolerance, discrimination, identity, as well as the conflicts and clashes that come with topics. Such subjects are very influential, especially when considering the influence of two nations being at the heart of one big nation, interacting, exchanging, and at times clashing. In this case, it is the African American context. The latter not only includes interesting historical interactions and incidents but also engaging literature, inclusive of poetry, novels, drama, music etc. Leading figures such as Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, Louis Armstrong, and others have contributed tremendously to African American Literature regardless of their different perspectives or modes of expression. That is to say, some of them opted for fiction, some opted for poetry and theater, and others opted for music. However, they all endeavor to highlight the struggles, the resistance, and the various issues characterizing African American Literature.

August Wilson's works, in their turn, are considered as a crucial body of literature in the African American Literature, specifically in African American drama and theatre, as Natasha Young states when considering the significance of August Wilson's works and his contribution to the African American literature in general: "Wilson's ten-play cycle spans the twentieth century and intricately chronicles the lives of Black people in America. Throughout each decade, he focuses on societal challenges that distinguish the Black experience in America as a complex piece of the country's fabric." (Young, 2020, p. 1) It can be claimed that African

¹ This definition is taken from Encyclopedia Britannica:

L. Andrews, Williams. African American Literature. Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature/Prose-drama-and-poetry>. Retrieved June 3 2025.

American interactions are fundamental in such literature. Although they may seem to be perceived as two different nations, they have witnessed shared incidents, conflicts, and struggles that bring them closer. Thus, they are related and inseparable from one another, historically and humanly speaking, in one way or another, as Amiri Baraka claimed in his work, *Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle*:

Afro-American culture has absorbed all the elements it came in contact with, but it is still a specific entity itself. It is particular, yet interrelated with the whole U.S. culture. It is impossible without the overall U.S. culture, and likewise the overall U.S. culture, as it is, and has been for 300 years, is impossible without Afro-American culture. (Baraka, 1980, p. 11)

The African American influence has been presented intensively for a long time in history; it is still presented nowadays, and it will probably linger on into the future. It is a contemporary case. In fact, Africans and Americans have been communicating, influencing, and sharing many intricacies since their first interaction. Their contact has been influential in not only their literature but also their culture.

Back to the influence of literature, it could be claimed that August Wilson is, to a great extent, the real prototype of a struggling African American playwright who grants African American Drama many incredible plays and performances to be remembered for all times especially since it synchronized a context that witnessed the rise of so many movements at the time such as the 'Black Power Movement' and 'the Civil Rights Movement'².

Generally speaking, *Two Trains Running*, which was written in 1961, is very compelling and poignant. It does not deal with the superficial conflicts but rather with the profound themes that concern not only social and political problems but also psychic and racial ones, including identity. The latter are indeed remarkably addressed in the majority, if not all, of August Wilson's works. It is set in a restaurant of a black man called Memphis. The latter is a self-made person who is proud of his life no matter the difficulties and hardships. From the very beginning we get to understand that his building – the restaurant – is to be sold to the city, and it will be sold under the price that they will impose, the fact that Memphis won't approve and will insist on inflicting the price he wants; however, at the end he will sell it to West. This building – the restaurant – is very important because it is the space where incidents of the play are taking place. Different characters show up there, interact, and sometimes quarrel. Through their conversations, a lot is going to be revealed about their life and their attitudes towards themselves and all that surrounds them. Starting with Memphis who is trying to defend the price he wants for his building, Sterling who is trying to find a job and settle down, Rica who is utterly passive and shows no interest in nothing, in addition to Hambone, whose mental disability has led him to consistently repeat one sentence "I want my hum." (Wilson)

The analysis of *Two Trains Running* not only foregrounds the thematic dimension, but it also sheds light on the dramatization and characterization of its characters, as the latter are quintessential in the understanding and the evolvement of the events in the play: "Many characters in Wilson's dramas seek to define themselves in a world where definitions for black people are predetermined. In this predestined world of maladies, characters emerge as unsettled, determined, and dangerously close to personal demise." (Young, 2020, p.1). In this sense, characters have a crucial role in conveying the messages behind themes in this play. Their dialogues, their interactions, as well as their word choice are deliberate. Essentially, characters are a mere reflection of the author's own words and thoughts. They are the author's mouthpiece. Thus, this paper considers both the thematic and character analysis while attempting to unveil their meanings and intentions.

2. The African American Struggle for a better life

Set in a restaurant owned by an African American man called Memphis Lee, around 1968, *Two Trains Running* narrates the stories of some African American individuals sharing almost the same struggles, inner conflicts, dreams, and disappointments. This play is significant in terms of displaying not only these individuals' struggles and conflicts but also their aspirations and hopes. The latter are illustrated in the ways they navigate their lives within their community as well as their daily interactions. Throughout the play, the characters swing between acceptance, tolerance, and hope, at times, and helplessness, outrage, and disillusionment, at other times.

In *Two Trains Running*, facets of struggle vary depending on the way characters undergo it and on the way it is presented throughout the sequence of events of the play. There are basically four major facets of struggle that could be considered more significant: the social struggle, the political struggle, the financial struggle, and the psychic struggle. However, all these struggles contribute to their sense of survival and resistance.

²The Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement were dominant as political and social movements between the 1950s and 1960s. They synchronized an interesting period, which is also the context of the play.

The social struggle is manifested in the chaotic situation that the characters survive within their community. In other words, as far as society is concerned, the characters in *Two Trains Running* are very much undermined and lost. They are struggling to raise their voices within their community. They feel that they are very underestimated by other members of the same community because the latter conceive themselves as superior and the former as inferior when it comes to public service or duties and rights. For instance, Memphis's building – the restaurant -- is going to be sold to the city as gentrification, but he doesn't want it to be sold at the price they will impose. He knows that if it were sold to a white man, it would be much different, as far as he believes. Memphis declares while talking with Wolf, who is also a member of their community and is known as a gambler, in Act One, Scene 2: "They give white folks a good price. Most time that be who they buying it from." (Wilson, p.15) In addition, Memphis is trying to impose his price and then himself over them; he looked for another lawyer when the first one was not doing his job as Memphis expected him to do. He kept insisting on the same price and rejecting what they had suggested. This is a state of persistence that is rooted in, and sprang from, his dignity and pride, the same as the rest of the other characters. Needless to mention, these characters are living in specific neighborhoods; that is to say, they are socially separated and isolated. They are not blended with white people. But still, they are willing to end this kind of separation and segregation to feel connected to them as they should be in reality. However, some factors hinder this task that they want to accomplish and instead contribute to this isolation. Consequently, such factors create resentment and mistreatment, which adds more to the feelings of alienation and isolation from their community and society at large.

The political struggle is felt throughout the whole play as well. It is sensed and presented in almost every scene and act as it contributes to the overall struggle in the play. When Memphis rejects the city's price and fires his lawyer and brings another one, this can be considered as his way of protesting and showing that he is politically struggling to get a fair price for his building, for it is the source of his living. Moreover, he thinks that the building is worth more money than the price he offered.

Besides, the characters of Sterling, who has just been released from prison, and Holloway, who is an older man from their community, are very political in their language and in the way they express their ideas. Although it may seem full of some irony and political stir every now and then, we sense its political gravity. For instance, it is obvious that Sterling's insistence on going to the "Black Power Rally" is political and would serve black people, even though the play just mentions the Rally and does not focus on it. Sterling's and Holloway's satirical language can be interpreted as a form of indirect resistance to their situation, as they seem dissatisfied with their community and the conditions surrounding it.

In brief, the social and political struggles are very interrelated, for they do influence one another. Moreover, they are influenced by the government. The latter is represented in the play as very unfair towards these characters; it does not care or give importance to them or their needs in comparison with the white people. Yet, the characters are still sticking to their rights even though they may not express it explicitly, but they do try to impose themselves through their constant attempts to reject what seems to be unfair, the example of Memphis and his refusal to sell his building.

Characters in *Two Trains Running* are not only fighting to get social and political equality, but they are also striving hard to get a good financial situation. Almost all characters are financially modest, apart from West, the undertaker. Even if Memphis is, to a certain extent, in a good financial condition, he is not wealthy. He has only the building that will no longer be his, and that is why he is trying to get a good price. Sterling is struggling to find a job and be financially able to support himself, and may get married to Risa. Though the latter is passive and most of the time quiet, she is to some extent attracted to Sterling, and in her turn, longing for somebody or something that gets her out of her absurd situation. From the mouthpiece of Memphis, it is revealed that most African Americans are wasting their time and money on gambling and other irrational deeds that do not serve them; on the contrary, they just ruin their lives. In the Act One, Scene 1, Memphis claims:

It wasn't till I hit the numbers eight or nine years ago that I got to the point where I could change my clothes every day. See, most of these niggers around here can't do that. The only way they can do that is to hit the numbers or get lucky in a crap game. The one that working... the only way they can do anything is to wait on their income tax return. Half the time the government cheat them out of that. (Wilson p. 9)

It is not only a matter of social, political, or financial struggle, but also a psychic struggle. If we consider their psyche, all characters are struggling, if not suffering. They want to feel that they are respected and embraced within their society. Once they are accepted and well treated in all its places and in every domain, once they get their social life as normal as it can be, once they can speak out their political opinions and practice it, and once they get their financial rights the same as white Americans, they will psychically be comfortable and included. All of the characters in the play hold feelings of anger, resulting primarily from their lack of inclusion in their society. The example of Hambone, a mentally disturbed black man who didn't get his "ham" from a white man, Lutz, after Hambone painted his fence and Lutz promised to give him a ham if he did a good job, Lutz didn't see that he did a good job and instead suggested a chicken, and since then Hambone is repeating the same sentence "He gonna give me

my ham, I want my hum". Though nine and a half years have passed, Hambone is still sticking to his sentence and doesn't give in, forget about it, or even agree to take a chicken. This insistence is a sign that he is refusing to take whatever white people want to give him, just like Memphis's refusal of the city's price. In addition, it is a sign of a psychic struggle that Hambone is undergoing; it is more about their existence and their dignity. To sum up, characters' struggle includes every single part of them and their daily life. Their social, political, financial, and psychic life cannot be complete unless all their rights and needs are met. Otherwise, they can never be free and happy, and they cannot maintain their true values and identities.

3. The Aspects of Racial Conflict

Racial conflicts in *Two Trains Running* can be divided into two major conflicts. On the one hand, there is a conflict between characters who are African Americans and characters who are white Americans as individuals existing in the same community. On the other hand, there is a conflict between characters who are African Americans, towards each other, existing in the same community as well. In each conflict, many layers, confrontations, and instances reflect the tension such conflict may create, especially at the level of identity and psyche.

The African American conflict in *Two Trains Running* is apparent. It is, in fact, the range of conflicts and confrontations that Black people, mainly the play's characters, face or encounter. For example, the conflict between Memphis and West is mainly manifested in their heated debates. Memphis and West are engaging characters in the sense that they are both stubborn and resilient. Memphis is an independent, determined, and resolute man. West, in his turn, is a rich and serious man. They do not show any kind of hatred to one another, but there is some tension between them. It is due, chiefly, to Memphis's building – the restaurant – that is going to be sold to the city. West was about to buy it, but it slipped through his fingers to Memphis, the fact that he did not accept. West is passionate about enlarging his wealth and property, so he wants to include this building too. Memphis realizes that he cannot have the building anymore, so he has to ensure the most suitable price for himself, but it will not go according to his will. They will give him less than what he imagined, and it is then in West's favor. In addition, Memphis has accused West of robbing people of their money. In Act 1, Scene 1, he states: "West the only nigger I know who can cheat and rob the people and they be happy to see him. Calling him ' Mr. West.' 'How you doing, Mr. West?' ' Have a nice day, Mr West.' ' Good to see you, Mr. West.' He done cheating them out of four or five hundred dollars and they talking about, " Have a nice day, Mr. West" (Wilson, p16). Thus, Memphis and West are engaging in conflicts that demonstrate one of many other conflicts that African Americans have daily, either about money or about property.

The conflict between Memphis, Wolf, and Sterling is also another manifestation of the constant confrontations that characters as African Americans face. He is always annoyed and irritated by Wolf's usage of his phone since he is the "numbers' runner". Many times, they glare at each other, showing that they do not agree about the way one treats the other. As for Sterling, Memphis regards him as a foolish, pointless, and easygoing person. He thinks that he is not going to stay out of the "penitentiary" for too long, for his behavior and the way he is keeping up are not leading him anywhere but to prison again. The tension they have is clear in terms of the language they use and the word "nigger" that is used frequently. It goes to show how that hidden anger can come to the surface and manifest in the form of insults or hurtful statements.

Hence, African Americans' conflict in the play at its real core is boundless. Characters represented as African Americans have different conflicts with each other. That is to say, apart from the conflict with the White Americans, government, and society, they are themselves in conflict with one another. It is quite normal to have differences that create that kind of conflict, but in their case, they don't have differences in mentality or points of view; they have the same pressure imposed upon them. Regardless of sharing the same struggles and values, they still have slight differences. But, they don't use this fact in their favor. Thus, conflicts can be seen through the way they treat one another. For example, their inner conflicts are revealed through their dialogues and the fact that they keep backbiting and, sometimes, insulting one another.

On the other hand, and as mentioned earlier, there are conflicts between African Americans and White Americans in the same community as well. Characters in the play are not only having conflicts and confrontations with each other, but they are also confronting the white people. The latter are more significant and symbolic because it is, to a large extent, the reason why they are facing each other in the sense that, as previously mentioned, when these people cannot face the government and the societal pressure, they turn against each other. Thus, in *Two Trains Running*, these conflicts and confrontations are manifested more by the suppression and lack of inclusion they face. Memphis's conflict with the city to gain the price he wants from them is an example. Besides, the conflict between the police and the characters is another instance. Wolf was once caught by the police just because he was at the wrong time, in the wrong place, as he believes. He couldn't confront them, and he was not able to defend himself, as he states:

I was walking down Centre Avenue... Police was chasing somebody and wasn't looking where he was going, and I wasn't looking where I was going either... he ran into me so hard it knocked us both down. I started to

get up and there was two, three policeman with their guns pointed at my head. Told me not to move. They arrested me for obstructing justice. Kept me down there for three months before the judge had a chance to throw it out. But I learned a lot from that. (Wilson, p 50)

In addition to this instance, there is the example of the conflict between Hambone and Lutz. This one could be interpreted as a psychological and social conflict. It is more about freedom and dignity. Hambone is a mentally unstable black man, whereas Lutz is a white man who hasn't given Hambone what he deserves. After that incident, Hambone could not recover from demanding his right to get the "hum" that Lutz promised. The conflict between them is about a "ham"; it may seem trivial, but behind it lies a lot of meanings and messages. Hambone's constant demand for his "hum" reflects his demands for his rights and dignity.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, conflicts, clashes, and confrontations presented in this play are endless and reflect the various internal and external struggles these characters have undergone. The social, financial, political, and psychic struggles influence their lives, psyches, and identities. Hopelessness and pessimism were dominant throughout the play, and they were manifested in the characters' inability to tolerate their situation and, at the same time, their helplessness. Thus, this paper examines these conflicts and views how they affect the way characters perceive themselves, each other, and their situation. Besides, the paper views two major racial conflicts that illustrate the continuous confrontations and issues in the play. The first conflict is the one between characters who are African Americans in the same community, and the second conflict is the one between characters who are African Americans and White Americans. However, each conflict highlights how such confrontations can affect individuals' perception of the whole situation, not to mention how they can affect their identities and psyches. Finally, *Two Trains Running* is a dramatic play that is concerned more with the psychic state of characters and the conditions surrounding them, yet it takes into consideration some historical events and recounts some social realities. In addition, it is a play denoting, more or less, that black people and white people in the American community and society have many things in common, a fact that cannot be neglected. It is a reflection of how African American community and American community are indeed one community and society, their history, their similarities, and even their differences are all part and parcel of their identity and heritage.

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