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Adopted Religion

by Jeremy Glavanovits

(English 1130)

In August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, he provides us with an in-depth look at how blacks were treated in the 1920's. Although emancipated, they were not considered equals. Laws against blacks were still strictly enforced throughout the country. Some looked to God for guidance and solace, while others longed to make their own way and work their way to the top, hopefully earning respect and equality along the way. Wilson captures varying viewpoints from Ma Rainey's band members on the subject of God, Satan and religion in the text. Childhood experiences fuel anger for some while understanding and the idea of knowing one's place for others. August Wilson provides the reader with his viewpoint on African American Christianity in his play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, claiming that it is adopted along with the rest of their lifestyle.

The lives of the members of the band were anything but easy. Wilson provides us with a glimpse into the troubles each band member has encountered throughout their lives, seeming to focus on Levee, who struggles with the concept of God. Levee witnessed the assault and rape of his mother when he was only eight years old. His father went into town to fetch seed and fertilizer for his land, prior to this horrible crime, leaving Levee in charge as "the man of the house" (Wilson 69). Levee attempted to kill the men with his father's knife, knowing that he had to do something in order to protect his mother. He failed, and his efforts led to a deep wound etched across his chest from the very knife he intended to use. Upon seeking revenge, Levee's father was lynched before he could kill the last few members of the group. It seems as though Levee blames himself and God for these grim events in his past. His regret fuels his anger, which triggers his emotions, leading to terrible and destructive decisions throughout the play.

Levee's anger overflows and affects the other members of the band, particularly Cutler. When Levee said he would join the man who sold his soul to the devil, and help him recruit others to follow the devil, Cutler aggressively objected, saying, "...God's gonna strike you down with that blasphemy you talking" (46). Levee does not believe Cutler's warning, daring God to intervene and strike him down. This foreshadows a scene later in the play where Levee attempts to attack God with his knife while in a fit of rage. However, before this occurs, Cutler calls out Levee once more for blaspheming, which Levee ignores and begins another one of his lectures. Levee believes that no black man should be satisfied with stagnation. He feels that they should keep moving, searching to find a better life. He urges that they have to continue to watch for the devil "...who's looking to buy up your soul. And hope you get lucky and find him!" (94). At this moment, Cutler warns him to stop blaspheming, hinting that a physical confrontation may occur, but Toledo and Slow Drag calm the two men down, for the time being, by acting as peacemakers.

Hoping to calm Levee down, Cutler tells the group a story about Reverend Gates. The pastor was traveling by train. He had to use the restroom, but there was no designated restroom for blacks. He had to use the outhouse just outside of town. A group of white men approached him and ridiculed him. They ripped off his cross, tore apart his Bible and forced him to dance. The white men forced a man of God to make a fool of himself, inciting that the white man could not care less about a black man, even if they share a common belief. Cutler mentions this story to let Levee know that he is not alone in his struggles. He acknowledges that the times they are living in are unfair, but knows that black men and women must take whatever they can get and be happy with it. However, despite Cutler's attempt, Levee does not calm down. Instead, he becomes enraged once more, claiming that

God is not on the black man's side (98). This agitates Cutler who lunges at Levee and punches him in the mouth, knocking him to the floor with the forceful blow. At this point, Cutler is taking Levee's remarks as personal attacks against his god. When Levee returns to his feet, he pulls out his knife and dares God to save Cutler. "Save him like you did my mama! I heard when she called you! ...And did you turn your back?" (99). Levee mocks God by bringing up a situation in his past where he felt God was absent, which further manifests his anger. He curses God, blames Him for not showing his mother mercy and wildly stabs the sky, trying to reach God. The scene ends with this visual.

Levee obviously struggles with believing that God is on his side. From his childhood experience with his mother's rape and father's murder, he is clearly troubled by his past. Being angry with God is common in situations such as these. Levee wonders why God wasn't there to help him in those situations. He felt helpless. At a time when he needed God most, Levee believed He was not there. The agitation and near instigation of the band members pushes Levee over the breaking point. When Toledo steps on his shoes, it was a sign of the feather that broke his back. Something as insignificant as scuffing up his shoes was the final straw. He snapped and killed Toledo, without even realizing what he did until it was too late.

Wilson successfully portrays that African American lives in the 1920's were in fact adopted, shaped by the American way of life. They were stripped of their identity when sold into slavery. Their religion and lifestyle changed. The slaves began to worship the god of their oppressors. This is somewhat of a bizarre concept at first, but it is understandable. The slaves identified with many figures in the Bible, specifically Moses and Christ Himself. The story of Moses was especially important, because he led his people out of slavery and to the Promised Land. This is what the slaves wanted. This is what they longed for. Christ was mocked, spat on and beaten although He was innocent of any wrongdoing. His story of overcoming evil is the central story and lesson of the Bible. This was something the slaves could relate to. The hope that is displayed throughout the Bible attracted them. They began to believe in a higher power with the ability to deliver them as the Hebrews were in the Old Testament. August Wilson shows us how difficult the lives of the slaves were, even after they were emancipated. Even though they were now in a country with more opportunity, they were not always given the chance to seize the moment and make a great life for their families. The point Wilson is trying to make is that the whole life of blacks in this period is adopted. Their religion, clothing, language and ultimately their way of life were forced upon them, leaving them with no choice but to accept it and assimilate.

The idea that African American Christianity is adopted was successfully displayed in August Wilson's play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. By carefully revealing to the reader the lives of the band members, Levee in particular, we leave with a better understanding of how blacks view their faith. Some are loyal to God and continue to hold out hope that all will be fixed one day. Others are resentful and angry with Him for not being there when they need His help the most. In America, some feel that African American lives are not considered to be as valuable as the white man's life, even though they have been emancipated for many years. This is something that certainly needed to be changed at the moment, which would eventually be achieved in the Civil Rights Movement, for the most part. However, confrontations continue to occur in today's day and age despite efforts to achieve peace.

Works Cited

Wilson, August. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. New York, New York: Penguin Group, 1985. Print.