When the Levee Bursts

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Imagine a calm stream gently winding its way through the woods. The water twists and it turns, gaining velocity as it makes its way down a slope. As you make your way further and further down stream, the water starts to get uneasy, flowing faster and faster. The water begins to crash into jagged rocks protruding above the surface, battering the banks. Curiously, you walk further and further down the winding rapids, with every step you take the intensity of the water grows, when suddenly, it begins to overfill. Pressure is building as you begin to panic. There is no other choice but to dash for safety. Before you can react, the unrelenting flow of water bursts out from over the levee, blasting into the once calm woods. The levee has failed.

The experience I described above is a representation of Levee, a main character in August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Levee is the youngster of Ma Rainey’s musical group, in his early thirties. Levee plays the trumpet and has dreams of gaining fame and forming his own band one day. Levee is described as having a flamboyant, ambitious and reckless personality. His new age musical style and lively attitude often clash with the more traditional personalities of his fellow musicians. Throughout the play, tension builds because of these clashes until it reaches a grisly culmination; Levee snaps and stabs Toledo in the back. Levee is a man of brash confidence. He wants to make a statement, as he dresses in a bold manner. He has ambitions, as he wants to rise to the top of the music industry with unimaginable fame. He also possesses a deep and dangerous temper, because of his tragic past. I will analyze scenes in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* that showcase Levee’s character traits, and as an actor in the play, speak on how I will portray Levee on stage.

The most important element to Levee’s character is the rising tension he experiences with the other characters because of his flamboyant and abrasive nature. There are many moments in the play where he clashes with his fellow musicians. In fact, as soon as he arrives at the studio, readers catch a glimpse of his brash demeanor. Levee trots on in with a shiny new pair of shoes, and immediately wants to show them off. He asks Cutler to come take a look at them, but Cutler harshly rejects the offer: “Nigger, I ain’t studying you” (*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Wordpress.com). This may be a short piece of dialogue, but it shows how Cutler feels about Levee. Cutler obviously doesn’t like the fancy clothes, or shiny new shoes that Levee wears. Immediately, readers can tell that these characters are at odds, and it sets the tone for the rest of the play. A few moments later, Levee and Toledo get into a spat. After Levee puts his new shoes on, he looks around the studio. He notices that things may have changed or been moved around since the last time he was in studio. Toledo tells him: “Everything changes all the time. Even the air you breathing change. You got, monoxide, hydrogen . . . changing all the time. Skin changing . . . different molecules and everything.” Levee responds in a harsh manner: “Nigger, what is you talking about? I’m talking about the room. I ain’t talking about something I can see!” Levee explains that the door in the studio wasn’t there before, and Slow Drag responds by insisting they get set up to record. Levee then blames the argument about the door on Toledo. When they finally simmer down, Levee scoffs at the type of music they are told to produce: “You ain’t gotta rehearse that . . . ain’t nothing but old jug-band music. They need one of them jug bands for this.” He then goes on to insult Slow Drag: “He sound like one of them Alabama niggers.” Levee then continues to boast about how talented he is, while Cutler tells him to shut up and play what he is told to.

These early episodes of arguing and bickering show just how abrasive Levee can be. He
responds to the other characters in an obnoxious, condescending tone, and speaks as if he is always right. Later, Levee bets Toledo that he can spell “music.” Levee proceeds to spell it incorrectly, but refuses to believe the others when they correct him. I feel that Levee acts in this abrasive, obnoxious manner because he feels that he has something to prove to the world. He believes that he is a fantastic musician, and he isn’t afraid to let the others know about it. He consistently insists that the band play his version of the music, which creates more tension amongst the group. In fact, when the band starts to play music for the first time, Levee is playing something completely different from the others. He then interrupts the whole band, demanding they play the music his way. This further reinforces his abrasive nature.

Later on, Slow Drag accidentally steps on Levee’s new shoes. This leads to more argumentative behavior. Levee makes a big deal out of it, which prompts Cutler to show his distaste towards Levee’s shoes: “Any man who takes a whole week’s pay and puts it on some shoes — you understand what I mean, what you walk around on the ground with — is a fool! And I don’t mind telling you.” Levee becomes irritated by that comment, and takes out that irritation on Toledo, calling his shoes “clodhoppers” and calling Toledo a “sharecropper.” Levee’s loudmouth personality is not perceived well by the rest of the group. In another moment, Levee and Cutler have an argument over God: “Oh shit! God don’t mean nothing to me. Let him strike me! Here I am, standing right here. What you talking about he’s gonna strike me? Here I am! Let him strike me! I ain’t scared of him. Talking that stuff to me.” Cutler responds by telling Levee he’s going to be sorry. Throughout the first act, Levee is in constant disagreement with the band, and it devolves into arguments among them. Rather than graciously disagree with the others, Levee chooses to act out in obnoxious ways. He pokes fun at Cutler’s faith, yelling out to God to strike him down, and insults Toledo and his shoes. These abrasive acts cause Toledo and Cutler to ask themselves why on Earth they put up with Levee.

I believe that Levee acts the way he does because of his dark past. After constant back and forth with the rest of the group, Levee snaps after Toledo accuses him of kissing up to Sturdyvant: “It ain’t none of my business that you spooked up by the white man,” Toledo teases. Levee then tells the tragic story of his parents. Four white men raped his mother. Levee tried to fight them off with a knife, but was cut deeply in the chest. Fearing that Levee would bleed to death, the attackers left the scene. His father then sold their land to one of the rapists, only to return to exact revenge. His father killed four white men before he was captured and lynched on the spot. I think that Levee carries this pain with him every day of his life. In my opinion, he dresses in fancy clothes and acts in an obnoxious manner as a means of coping with the anger and guilt he carries with him. I think he wants to make something of himself in honor of his parents, but he is doing so in an immature and superficial way. Often times, he resorts to name calling, or making childish remarks towards other members. Also, rather than staying humble and waiting for his time, he actively tries to incorporate what he thinks is good music into the band’s entire recording session, despite the other members expressing disgruntlement. Sure, Levee is ambitious and has talent, but he isn’t in a position where he can boss everyone around. There are times where he acts like the leader of the group, when he clearly is not. He even goes as far as arguing with Ma Rainey, when Ma insists that her nephew, Sylvester, read the title to the first track. Sylvester has a stutter, and holds up the rest of the band while he tries to get it right. This further irritates Levee, who has no say over Rainey. All the while, there is a deep, slumbering anger simmering within him, waiting to be released.

At this point in the play, we learn that Levee has written some songs and showed Sturdyvant. Levee explains to Dussie May that Sturdyvant is going to let him record them, and that he will have his own band. This is important to keep in mind as the end of the play nears. Readers clearly see that Levee has worked hard at his craft, and he feels that he is close to accomplishing his dream of becoming famous. Dussie May and Levee share a romantic altercation, where it seems that May is only interested in Levee because of the prospect of him getting his own band. Nonetheless, this is the
kind of fame Levee has dreamed about.

The disagreements, arguments, and clash of personalities culminates in a physical altercation, where Cutler strikes Levee in the mouth. Levee has a certain lack of faith because of what he experienced earlier in his life. Cutler and Toledo, on the other hand, have a strong belief in God. Cutler tells the story of Reverend Gates, who was jumped by white men after getting off a train. The attackers ripped off Gates’ cross, and tore up his Bible. Levee, who earlier mocked Cutler’s faith, starts up again: “What I wants to know is . . . if he’s a man of God, then where the hell was God when all of this was going on? Why wasn’t God looking out for him? Why didn’t God strike down them crackers with some of this lightning you talk about to me?” Levee feels betrayed by God. He feels as if God did not help his mother when called upon. Instead of coping with what happened in a mature way, he lashes out against the others. This event left Levee feeling unstable. At this point, Cutler couldn’t handle it anymore. He punches Levee in the face. Considering Levee’s tragic past, I believe he has good reason to question God, but he acts brash and without thinking clearly. He does not respect the feelings of his band mates. After Cutler gets off him, Levee stands up and pulls out a knife, the pain and anger of his dark past spills over the edge: “Cutler’s God! Come on and save this nigger! Come on and save him like you did my mama! Save him like you did my mama! I heard her when she called you! I heard her when she said, ‘Lord have mercy! Jesus, help me! Please, God, have mercy on me! Lord Jesus, help me!’ And did you turn your back? Did you turn your back, motherfucker? Did you turn your back? Your God ain’t shit Cutler.” The tension has risen. What started as petty arguments, transforms into full-blown violence. Levee’s abrasive and forceful behavior has brought him on edge, but he stops, feeling victorious after his tirade.

Levee’s obnoxious attitude eventually results in Rainey firing him. He feels that this is okay, as he is going to his own brand. He believes that Sturdyvant will help him record the songs he wrote. Sturdyvant hits Levee with the harsh news that no one will listen to those songs, and that Levee is out of luck. Sturdyvant tells Levee that his songs won’t quite sell like Ma’s records, a stinging blow directly at Levee’s belief that his quick-paced musical style would fair better. Then, the story comes around full-circle. Toledo, just like Slow Drag had done earlier, steps on Levee’s shoes. This drives Levee to an all-out rage. Levee’s rage has slowly been building throughout the entire play. Like a violent rush of water finally bursting over an actual levee, Levee’s emotions begin to spill over. The other band members try to ignore him, but Levee loses it. He takes out his knife and stabs Toledo to death at the end of the play. The flood gates have opened.

Levee is characterized by bold ambitions, but immature and brash interactions with his peers. The tension between Levee and the other characters slowly builds until it culminates in the death of Toledo. Levee is so different from the other characters, and he does not know how to handle it. He dresses differently, plays different music, and has different religious beliefs, and cannot get along with the others because of that. As an actor, I would have to portray his abrasive personality. On stage, I would carry myself with confidence. I must have the mindset that I am the next big thing when it comes to music. I would speak my lines loudly and clearly, louder than any other character on stage, to portray a brash, condescending attitude. During heated arguments, especially toward the end of the play, I would make use of many aggressive hand gestures and shaking of my head to portray my feelings of disagreement. During the scenes where there is physical altercation, I must portray Levee as a ticking time bomb. When threatening Cutler with a knife, I would swing it wildly, and stab the air in Cutler’s direction. When the time comes to fatally stab Toledo, I would act as if I was in a terrified panic. Pacing back and forth, unsure of what to do, before fixing a deathly gaze upon Toledo, and violently approaching him. Overall, I think Levee is the driving force of the tension in the play. From the first scene he is in, to the final, fatal scene, he finds himself at odds with the other members of the group. He was different in many ways, and he handled those differences in brash, immature ways. The disagreements he shared with his group, combined with the final, stinging realization that Sturdyvant didn’t want to sell his new wave of music, drove him to commit murder.
In conclusion, Levee is like a stream. The tension and anger within him, and throughout the play, slowly grows. The arguments Levee finds himself in become more and more intense, as the stream starts to gain momentum. Finally, it all culminates when Levee is punched in the face, fired, told his music won’t sell, and has his shoe stepped on. It’s as if he’s flowing down a raging river, being thrown against jagged rock after jagged rock. Then, he finally breaks down, as if his fiery emotions were spilling over an actual levee.

Works Cited