



# A Critical Discourse Analysis of Feminine and Masculine Identity in August Wilson's *Pittsburg Cycle*

Fatemeh Torki Baghbaderani

PhD in English Language and Literature, Isfahan, Iran

## Abstract

In his collection of ten plays, *The Pittsburg Cycle*, August Wilson (1945-2005) presents the social dynamism of African Americans across the twentieth century America. In his plays, many newly freed African slaves move to the North, hoping to shape their identity as respectable citizens of great worth. They are, however, reckoned as foreigners in a new habitus. Since they have lost contact with their past heritage and have no access to their social codes as a source of power, they search for means through which they can concretize the song they carry within themselves as a sign of their true African heritage. Through the theory of critical discourse analysis, this article focuses on Michel Foucault's theory of discourse to study, analyze, and compare the discourse of both male and female characters of the plays. According to the age-old western tradition, male discourse represents power, assurance, and certainty in contrast to female discourse imbued with characteristics opposite to the mentioned ones. This article aims to explore how Wilson subverts the male and female discourse to create a non-gendered African soul, who embodies characteristics of both sexes.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Identity, Gender, Culture

## 1. Introduction

This article proposes a theoretical framework, based on Mitchel Foucault's theory of discourse, according to which feminine and masculine identity in August Wilson's *Pittsburg's cycle* is discussed. Mitchel Foucault (1926-1984), a French author, historian, and philosopher, wrote several books on diverse social and philosophical topics. In one of his books titled *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1972), he introduces a new approach of analyzing texts, called 'a critical discourse analysis'. Before developing his approach, he talks about diverse entities, such as the new definition of discourse, the unities of discourse, the discursive formations, the formation of objects, the formation of enunciative modalities, the formation of concepts, the formation of strategies, the archaeology of knowledge, and the history of ideas.

Foucault sees discourse more than merely a text composed of signs. In his opinion, discourses use signs to designate things. That it is 'more' makes it "irreducible to the language (langue) and to speech" (1972, p. 49), which must be deciphered and explored. Foucault continues his argument, showing that "discourse is not a slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a language (langue), the intrication of a lexicon and an experience" (p. 49). In other words, discourse actively shapes and constitutes the world we understand. Discourse, in fact, is closely related to the power structures, such as knowledge systems, that underlie language. He provides clear examples to show that in "analysing discourses themselves, one sees the loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice" (pp. 48-9). The relationship between language and practice / reality is not straightforward, and words do not simply correspond to realities in practice. Foucault maintains that, like a system which has a wide range of disorders behind its 'visible façade', a discourse, behind its thin surface, has a whole mass of a largely silent development "(devenir): a 'presystematic' that is not of the order of the system; a 'prediscursive' that belongs to an essential silence." In fact, several factors come together to create a discourse, which is more complex than its apparent simplicity since it is developed through a complex process with hidden elements.

Additionally, in the world we live in, we usually confront spaces that are unfolded with diverse possible discourses. In this regard, Foucault argues that discourses are "a system of real or primary relations, a system of reflexive or secondary relations, and a system of relations that might properly be called discursive" (p. 45). He proposes a tripartite model of relations, – namely, Real or Primary, Reflexive or Secondary, Discursive –, which are interconnected and mutually influence our understanding of the world. These discursive relations are not internal to discourse, meaning "they do not connect concepts or words with one another; they do not establish a deductive or rhetorical structure between propositions or sentences" (p. 46). Still, they are not also exterior to discourse, but they may be constrained by external factors – imposed from social and cultural norms, power relations, and institutions – that establish the meaning(s) of a discourse.

Foucault accepts that defining a definite methodology for his approach for the analysis of texts is impossible. Still, he describes the proposed methodology in his own way by mentioning that he has no difficulty "in accepting that man's languages (langues), his unconscious, and his imagination are governed by laws of structure" (1972, p. 201). Our thoughts and languages are not entirely free but shaped by underlying structures of power, which can even govern the way people think and speak. So, he cannot accept that one can study, understand and "analyse scientific discourses in their succession without referring them to something like a constituent activity, without recognizing even in their hesitations the opening of an original project or a fundamental teleology, without discovering the profound continuity that links them, and leads them to the point at which we can grasp them" (p. 201). In this method, a text is understood not as a separate entity, but as a part of a larger construct of language.

The aim of the discourse analysis – as a tool to understand the above-mentioned constraints is to provide a framework for understanding the system of power relations that shape knowledge and reality. The discourse analysis method serves several purposes, including deciphering the construction of meaning, detecting power dynamics, and investigating social and cultural practices.

## 2. Body of Paper

In this section, August Wilson's *Pittsburg's Cycle* is seen through the theory of discourse analysis. The African-American playwright, August Wilson (1945-2005), produced a series of

ten plays, *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, for which he received two Pulitzer Prizes. This monumental work dramatizes the history of African Americans through the ten decades of the past century, and therefore can be regarded as the twentieth-century literary encyclopedia of African American history. One of the basic issues which Wilson brings up in the plays, each of which is written for each decade of the twentieth century, is the struggle of African Americans to construct their culture and, consequently, their identity in America. African-American theatre has always attempted to give power to African Americans by shedding light on their oppressed lives from a panoramic view. Accordingly, it has established its identity in modern theatre across the world in general and American theatre in particular. Wilson's plays include *Gem of the Ocean* (1900s), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1910s), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1920s), *The Piano Lesson* (1930s), *Seven Guitars* (1940s), *Fences* (1950s), *Two Trains Running* (1960s), *Jitney* (1970s), *King Hedley II* (1980s), and *Radio Golf* (1990s). He situates the realm of his plays chiefly in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, where he spent his childhood. It is a lively African-American community that disintegrated after the failed urban development projects and ensuing poverty.

Wilson chooses Pittsburgh as the setting of his plays but does not limit the exploration of diverse social and cultural concepts to this area. Throughout *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, he connects "the Hill District's transformations to the larger history of African Americans' slavery, the Great Migration, persistent institutional racism and the ways in which these realities reveal themselves on stage in micro-histories of Black lives" (Cherry, 2016, p. 211). He also explores the relationship that exists between "music, ritual, ceremony, and oral culture as critical dramaturgical elements" (p. 211). These are the ties that, in fact, bind different generations of the characters in the plays. Because of the time and place setting of his plays, his drama prepares a good ground for studying the lives of the black generation in the twentieth-century America. This shows how the plays "express Wilson's artistic vision of the African-American search for identity, as transfigured through generations of individuals and their memories" (Bloom, 2009, p. 6). Altogether, *The Pittsburgh Cycle* can be seen as the work of a playwright connecting African Americans to their unexplored past, in order that they may find their own identity and form their autonomous culture. Once, in response to an interviewer who asked him about the reason for writing *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, Wilson answered that "if you feel a responsibility as I do to the tradition, to the black tradition and black culture, and that is what I have decided that I wanted to work out of, then you do it" (Shafer, 1989, p. 9).

The plays, overall, portray the cultural journey of African Americans across the twentieth century. Their migration from the plantations of the South to Pittsburgh, a more advanced and industrial city, created lots of challenges for them. They, in fact, migrated to forget all about the bitter history of servitude and slavery while seeking better social and economic opportunities. In this historical setting, Wilson presents different aspects of life in each decade through characters within a real setting. The plays from 1900 to 1930 depict the initial bewilderment and illiteracy of black people about their past heritage. The plays from 1930 to 1960 embody the climax of cultural conflicts in that era. And the plays from 1960 to 2000 demonstrate the way they confronted and reacted to their culture and heritage.

One of the most important cultural issues in *The Pittsburgh Cycle* refers to the subversion of male and female identity. Applying the methodology of discourse analysis, it is possible to investigate the subversion of gender stereotypes throughout the plays. As Ameila Grabowski mentions, "close examination of the women in each of Wilson's plays reveals that Wilson does not embrace these stereotypes, but subverts them, allowing sexuality and maternity to serve as a source of empowerment, not subordination and subservience" (2013, p. 1). Wilson himself, as an African-American playwright, was most probably aware of African American women's societal circumstances, about which he has written his plays. The female protagonists provide

a better understanding of the history of African-American women, who were expected to overlook their own dreams as liberal individuals. Wilson is, after all, “successful in revealing his point of view on what challenges faced by those women in their struggle to reach their dreams as one form of the equal rights and acceptance in the society” (p. 13). There are several examples from the plays that manifest this subversion.

Aunt Ester is the main character, who appears in all the ten plays. Here, in contrast to other works, which introduce male characters as leaders, female characters take on leading roles. Aunt Ester herself symbolizes the culture and tradition of African Americans. She, whose name’s pronunciation resembles the word ‘ancestor’, connects African Americans’ past to present. At the same time, her name is reminiscent of both Easter, a holy Christian day, and the character Esther, Persian queen and savior of the Hebrew People. The year is 1904 and it is just one day before Ester reaches 285 years old, associated with African Americans’ history of slavery. Grabowski maintains that she “represents our tradition, our philosophy, our folk wisdom, our hobbies, our culture, whatever you care to call it” (2013, p. 20). For Wilson, Ester has been the most important character, for whom all the other characters are like her children with different personalities: “The wisdom and tradition she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personality and for dealing with a society in which the contradictions, over the decades, have grown fiercer, and for exposing all the places it is lacking in virtue” (p. 26). In his plays, Wilson uses Aunt Ester to “represent the blood memory that connects Africa to the American culture” (Johnson, 2011, p. 26). Wilson describes his fellowmen as bewildered men and women who need personalities like Aunt Ester for their guidance because they have been “cut off from memory” and they have “forgotten the names of the gods,” so they need to shape “the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth” (Joe Turner come and Gone, 1988, Prologue). They, however, are still susceptible to new identity as free people because they still hold parts of their ancestral identity that is worthwhile.

The other strong female character is Ma Rainey, who appears in the play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. She has kept the traditional and original format of blues, against all the oppositions of white people like Sturdyvant and Irvin and black guys like Levee. As Levee says: “Ma’s the boss on the road! We at a recording session. Mr. Sturdyvant and Mr. Irvin say what’s gonna be here! We’s in Chicago, we ain’t in Memphis! I don’t know why you all wanna pick me about it, shit! I’m with Slow Drag [. . .] Let’s go on and get it rehearsed” (*Ma Rainey*, 1982, p.10). She talks about blues like a lover of her beloved:

White folks don’t understand about blues. They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there. They don’t understand that’s life’s way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing cause that’s a way of understanding life. [...] Blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone. There’s something else in the world. Something’s been added by that song. This be an empty world without blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something (*Ma Rainey*, 1982, p. 31).

As seen, Ma is a female who subverts the traditional stereotype of women, only limited to their household chores and dependent on their men for their life. But, Ma is an independent woman, who is a leader of a group of male musicians.

The other strong woman is Berneice in the play *The piano Lesson*. She is an independent woman, who, after her husband’s death, takes care of her daughter and tries to bring her up to her best by encouraging her to continue her education and level up her social status. In a dialogue, she directly says that:

You trying to tell me a woman can't be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me—without a woman—and still be a man. That's alright. Ain't nobody gonna ask you, "Avery, who you got to love you?" That's alright for you. But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece. "How Berniece gonna take care of herself? How she gonna raise that child without a man? Wonder what she do with herself. How she gonna live like that?" Everybody got all kinds of questions for Berniece. Everybody telling me I can't be a woman unless I got a man. Well, you tell me, Avery—you know—how much woman am I? (*The Piano Lesson*, 1987, pp. 1240-1241).

This passage is a critique of social and cultural expectations and gender norms. Berniece is strongly questioning the age-traditional notion of women's dependence on men for their livelihood and their identity. She daringly challenges long-established gender norms, asserting that men are independent and self-sufficient, on whom women should rely for their well-being.

Both male and female stereotype is subverted through the plays. Usually associated with leadership and strength, men have problems in advancing their lives. The male characters "manifest the crisis of transclass man by exhibiting a fluid degree of transitionality, which renders them quick to reject their racial roots, their African identities and their traditions as they simultaneously enact a new-found urban identity, which often clouds their judgement, sometimes leading to their personal demise or that of the people around them" (Khan, 2017, p. 2). The weaknesses of personality can be seen in several male characters of the plays, a few examples of which are as follows. This personal demise can be seen in the character of Troy:

TROY: I do the best I can do. I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. ... I ain't got no tears. I done spent them. ... I get up Monday morning . . . find my lunch on the table. I go out. Make my way. Find my strength to carry me through to the next Friday. (Pause) That's all I got, Rose. That's all I got to give. I can't give nothing else (*Fences*, 1985, p. 40).

Here the male character expresses his frustration at and limitations for providing the necessities for his family. Troy feels restrained by the circumstances he cannot change. He feels despaired to offer more to his family.

Men, traditionally presented as independent and powerful leaders of their families, are subverted in Wilson's plays as vice versa. It seems that "there's is a silent scream among the male characters to prove their masculinity. The male characters in each of these plays are fighting to prove their worth while trying to escape from someone or something" (Hoslack, 2023, p. 1). In fact, they struggle with their current situations that strangle them while they simultaneously try to prove their credibility by evading their responsibilities and avoiding contact with others.

The last example, in this article, is the character of Harold Loomis from the play *Joe Turner Come and Gone*. Disintegrated after his being captured for slavery by Joe Turner, he wanders in search of his family. Bynum, one of the characters, tells him that "Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forget who he is. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. Forget how he's supposed to mark down life" (*Joe Turner come and Gone*, 1988, p. 71). Here, men are struggling to be the main providers and family protectors, despite the hardships in securing well-paid jobs or other opportunities but in "their attempt to show their masculinity, most of the male characters fail terribly" (Hoslack, 2023, pp. 1-2). In fact, male characters cannot help pretending to hold their masculinity, which is subverted through the plays.

### 3. Conclusion

As discussed above, studying August Wilson's plays in light of Mitchel Foucault's discourse analysis has several results. First, the history of African Americans is understood as a general one not as a total one, meaning that it cannot be defined by a clear beginning and process. Rather, it is a general one having so many variant aspects. Second, the *Pittsburg Cycle* is understood as a process not as a history, meaning that it mostly deals with diverse aspects of African American characters and their lives. Third, the female and male discourse is subverted throughout the plays. Women play the role of leaders such as Ester. They are courageous and are successful in controlling the challenges of the family and bringing together members of the family and uniting their past, present, and future. It seems as if women have become central in contrast to the previous literature, which takes the leadership, courage, power and centrality of men for granted. Fourth, is the conception of the self rather than the binary of man and woman. The male and female discourse are both striving to find dominance, yet one cannot say which one is dominant. It is possible to find a kind of neutrality when we look at the whole plays. What matters is the self, the consciousness and the responsibility that all men and women should feel and not try to dominate the other sex to prove their worth. Fifth, is the displacement of our conceptions of diverse entities which helps one remain free from the fixed meaning of things.

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