The Sound of Silence: Women Voices in the American Century Cycle by August Wilson

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Abstract: *Male characters make up the largest part of the cast of the ten plays comprised in* The American Century Cycle *by August Wilson. The present paper will focus on the female characters of the plays, on the courage they find in themselves to speak up to their male partners, and on the ways in which they are represented throughout the Cycle. Feminist theorists such as bell hooks and Frances Beal provide the general framework for this paper to show that the female characters of the plays are as important as their male counterparts. Theories of trauma and memory enable the paper to focus on how women are influenced throughout their lives by traumatic experiences and how memory helps in dealing with these traumas.*

Keywords: *August Wilson*, The American Century Cycle, *female characters*, *traumatic experiences*, *memory*

A descendant of slaves, August Wilson created a thrilling cycle of plays depicting the lives of the African Americans starting with the turn of the twentieth century until the later decades. The fact that Wilson's father was white did not prevent him from becoming one of the most representative African American playwrights, as Christopher Bigsby notes. Bigsby also claims that the white side of his identity did not interest Wilson (2). Instead, Wilson focused on the stories of his grandmother and mother, the history of his African American predecessors and created *The American Century Cycle*. Bigsby comments that "through all this suffering something new was born […,] strategies of resistance that were simultaneously strategies of self-invention, and by degrees, they, too began to transform" (2) the society which they were not yet a part of. Bigsby draws a parallel between Wilson and Arthur Miller (a Jew), dwelling on the fact that it was easier for the Jewish population to become assimilated by American society than it was for the African Americans. Wilson did not want assimilation, which transpires from his plays, as being assimilated into the white society meant giving up ones Africanness (qtd. in Bigsby 2). Through the plays he has tried to convince the African American community that only by accepting their heritage they will be able to move forward.

In the 1960s August Wilson, along with his friend Rob Penny, created The Black Horizon Theatre, a prominently black theatre focused on African American plays and producing many of them. Wilson centered his works in the Hill district in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where he was born and lived most of his life. Nine out of the ten plays of *The American Century Cycle* are based in the Hill district, Wilson focusing on the changes that took place as the years passed. Wilson wrote about the struggles of the African Americans after the Great Migration to the north, a self-

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assumed relocation which he "went so far as to regret" (Bigsby 3). He depicted the reality of what the African Americans expected once they reached North: the promised riches and better living conditions were close to non-existing for the African Americans who, as opposed to the Polish Jews, Irish, or Italian workers, were not welcomed with arms wide open. Instead, the African Americans found that they stirred the same feeling of repulsion into the hearts and minds of the white community who, caught off guard, did not know entirely know how to react to the wave of millions of newly freed slaves. Wilson writes about these exact moments in history, when the African Americans accepted menial jobs which were refused by whites and submitted into a new form of slavery symbolized by various forms of exploitation. While working at the Black Horizon, Wilson met LeRoi James who would later become Amiri Baraka, one of the leading figures of the black theatre movement. It was due to Baraka's words that August Wilson was inspired to use drama to portray society. This could be seen as the effort to keep the heritage and history of the African Americans alive, which the characters of *The American Century Cycle* do through keeping traditions alive. The most important role in the plays is played by memory: it is through memory that traditions are kept alive, traumas of the past are dwelt with, and characters strengthen themselves in order to deal with their present and future.

The largest part of the characters of the plays comprised in *The American Century Cycle* are male ones. The plots focus mainly on them and the ways in which the hardships of life affect them. Female characters, though present, are mostly silent. August Wilson does not seem to create a main character in his plays: each of the characters of a play takes center stage in turn and can be seen as the main character. The male characters are always the focus, while women take the back seat when it comes to leading. Nevertheless, when it comes to them speaking their minds, the women of *The American Century Cycle* find the courage to do so. The focus is mainly on the traumatic events through which the male characters pass, seemingly forgetting that women can as well experience traumas. While the male figures of the plays seem to come out of traumatic experiences lacking the courage to move on, the women of the plays come out stronger and with a will, it seems, to conquer the world. The present paper will focus on such female characters, on the courage they find in themselves to speak up to their male partners, and on the ways in which they are represented throughout *The Cycle*. Feminist theorists such as bell hooks and Frances Beal provide the general framework for this paper to show how six female characters transcend the limits imposed by society on them, how they grow and develop as strong, independent female characters. Theories of trauma and memory enable the paper to focus on how women are influenced throughout their lives by traumatic experiences and how memory helps in dealing with these traumas. The analysis will focus on Aunt Ester and Black Mary of *Gem of the Ocean*, Martha Loomis Pentecost of *Joe*

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Turner's Come and Gone, Risa of *Two Trains Running*, Rose Maxson of *Fences*, and Rena of *Jitney*.

About August Wilson's women characters Harry J. Elam writes that "he presents independent women who assert feminist positions" (165); however, these women "either through their own volition or as the result of external social pressures, ultimately conform to traditional gender roles" (165). Wilson himself told Nathan Grant that he creates "some black women characters and tr[ies] to be honest in their creation, but it's very hard to put [himself] in their space" (qtd. in Williams-Forson 129). To Sandra Shannon he admits that making a woman the focus of his work is doubtful "because of the fact that I am a man" (qtd. in Williams-Forson 129). These quotes indicate that Wilson finds it somewhat hard to write women characters because of the viewpoint he has on society, which is in total opposition from that of a woman. He tells Sandra Shannon that when he writes a female character he tries to change the point of view from his perspective to that of a woman (qtd. in Shannon 150-151). Even if Wilson finds it hard to write women characters, those he creates are examples of strong, independent women. About these same women Shannon writes that "in each play a singular African American woman manages to wrestle free from prevailing social restraints or domestic concerns to, in some way, affirm a separate identity" (Shannon 151). These women evolve throughout the *American Century Cycle*, they grow as characters and seem to be at times stronger in character than the men of the plays.

The Century Cycle spans the twentieth century, having a play placed in each decade of the century. The first play in chronological order is *Gem of the Ocean*, set in the Pittsburgh of 1904. The main character of the play is Citizen Barlow, a troubled man who comes to the house at 1839 Wylie Avenue where Aunt Ester lives. He is looking for help from Aunt Ester, the spiritual leader of the community. Although Citizen is the main character, Aunt Ester's importance to the whole *Cycle* as the keeper of the memories and of the traditions of the community is made clear in *Gem of the Ocean*. She is introduced as the central figure in many of the plays belonging to *The Century Cycle*, "a two-hundred-and-eighty-five-year-old conjure woman at the beginning of the cycle" (*Gem of the Ocean* xi) who is the embodiment of African American wisdom, tradition, and folklore. Aunt Ester is as old as the slavery period, Wilson claims, which places her among the very first Africans brought to the United States as slaves. She herself tells Citizen Barlow: "I been across the water. I seen both sides of it" (*Gem of the Ocean* 2.1.54). In the same monologue, she tells Citizen that she does not like adventures and would rather stay home, which indicates that the only journey Aunt Ester ever took was the Middle Passage. For Wilson, she becomes the "repository of the blood's memory" as she "contains the valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personality and for exposing all the places where society is lacking in virtue" (*Gem of the Ocean* xi), thus confirming yet again that Aunt Ester is the keeper of memory

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for the African American community of the Hill District, the spiritual leader of the community seen as an almost sacred figure.

Aunt Ester's importance comes through her lending a helping hand to Citizen Barlow and also through the way in which she confronts Caesar when he comes to her house to make an arrest. Aunt Ester asks Selig to take Solly Two Kings over the river so that he can hide from Caesar after he set fire to the mill. The outcome of the episode is the arrest Caesar performs, but not on either Selig or Solly, but on Aunt Ester. Throughout their exchange Aunt Ester keeps her calm and remain self-composed. When Caesar tells her that he has a warrant she counters by saying: "I see you got a piece of paper. I got a piece of paper too" (*Gem of the Ocean* 2.4.81). The piece of paper she produces is her Bill of Sale. She asks Caesar how much he thinks the piece of paper is worth; he retorts: "I wouldn't give you ten cents for it" (*Gem of the Ocean* 2.4). Both pieces of paper are worthless in her eyes. She does not fear the warrant that Caesar carries, and she does not fear Caesar.

In her essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Audre Lorde writes about her fear of speaking up: "Of what had I *ever* been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death" (41, original emphasis). Aunt Ester is not afraid to speak her mind. She tells Caesar exactly how she feels about him, how she sees him: "You think you a strong man, Mr. Caesar. But you got that gun" (*Gem of the Ocean* 2.4.83). The gun, in her opinion, does not give Caesar power: he can kill a man, but the place of the man he kills will be taken up by another, and another, and another. Lorde claims that "we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and the pain will either change, or end. Death on the other hand is the final silence" (189). Death – an individual's death – may silence one person, but it cannot silence everyone at once. All of the characters of *Gem of the Ocean* have been hurt, they all have the power to speak their minds by overcoming their fears. The most important aspect is the fact that women overcome their fears and speak their minds.

Another female character of *Gem of the Ocean* is Black Mary. Introduced as the helper of Aunt Ester, the woman who cooks and does the cleaning and washing, Black Mary is Aunt Ester's protégée, the woman whom Aunt Ester is preparing to take over when Ester Tyler's time comes up. Black Mary is a silent character, a character in the shadow of Aunt Ester, who occasionally finds her voice. Solly and Aunt Ester see her as stubborn. She does not want to learn things, as Aunt Ester says. She refuses her brother Caesar's help and is not afraid to tell her brother the truth about him killing a young man. Even if Caesar explains to her that the young man "was a thief! He was stealing" (*Gem of the Ocean* 1.3.37), trying to reason with her that what Caesar did was to apply the rule of law on a thief, Black Mary does not want to see things from her brother's perspective. She tells him that it was a loaf of bread the boy stole; in her turn she tries to make

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Caesar understand her point of view: that he could have looked the whole affair over.

Both Black Mary and Aunt Ester represent strong female characters. Of the two, Black Mary seems to have been silenced by those around her: by her brother Caesar, who wants to be her guardian, and by Aunt Ester. Aunt Ester silences Black Mary by imposing her ways of doing things on the latter. Until Black Mary bursts out:

> Black Mary: It's been three years now I can't do nothing to satisfy you. I may as well lay down somewhere and forget about it. You got something to say about everything. Turn the fire down. Wash the greens in the other pot. Shake the flour off that chicken. Tuck in the corners of the sheets. That too much starch. That ain't enough salt. I'm tired of it! Your way ain't always the best way. I got my own way and that's the way I'm doing it. If I stay around here I'm doing it my own way. (*Gem of the Ocean* 2.3.77)

Aunt Ester asks her what took her so long, as if this outburst of rage from Black Mary had been expected the past three years during which Aunt Ester had tormented her, so that Black Mary might show her strength and value to take on Aunt Ester's role.

There is another outburst of anger from Black Mary at the very end of the play. This time the focus is her brother Caesar:

> Black Mary: Caesar, I gave you everything. Even when I didn't have to give you. I made every way for you. I turned my eyes away. I figured if I didn't see it I couldn't hold fault. If I held fault I couldn't hold on to my love for you. But now you standing in the light and I can't turn away no more. I remember you when you was on the other side of the law. That's my brother. The one selling hoecakes off the back of a wagon. The one that helped Mrs. Robinson and the kids when nobody else would. That's my brother. The one who used to get out of bed to take me to school. The one who believed everybody had the same right to life … the same right to whatever there was in life they could find useful. That's my brother. I don't know who you are. But you not my brother. You hear me, Caesar? You not my brother. (*Gem of the Ocean* 2.5.88)

Audre Lorde writes, in "The Transformation of Silence" (40-42), about how learning to put her fear into perspective gave her great strength to speak, which can be applied to what Black Mary tells her brother Caesar. She overcomes the obstacle of her brother's authority – as he represents the law in the Hill District – and is now able to cut all the ties with her brother.

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Such types of women, although not in a large number, are present throughout Wilson's *The Century Cycle*. But Aunt Ester and Black Mary are vocal characters in their play, who have time to demonstrate the strength of their characters. Other female characters do not have this time opportunity, for they appear episodically or at the end of the plays. Even Ma Rainey, a character absent for most of the action of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, has time to show her strength in the scenes when she makes an appearance. On the other hand, Martha Loomis Pentecost – of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (the second play in chronological order) – is one of the characters introduced only at the end of the play. The absent character of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, set in 1911, comes searching for her daughter, Zonia, unaware that her husband, Herald Loomis, had been searching for his wife too.

Throughout *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* the main purpose of the protagonist, Herald Loomis, is to find himself again, to regain his identity. This identity was lost the moment Joe Turner took him into captivity as a slave. Riley Keene Temple rightly asks: "How does a person, newly released from a Joe Turner's post-emancipation slavery, know who or what he is?" (14). The answer comes from Wilson through the words spoken by Bynum: "Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it" (*Joe Turner* 2.2.67). For Bynum, a man who has forgotten his song is a man who has forgotten who he is, and the play shows Loomis's desire to regain his identity. Bynum, who provides a link between African mysticism, customs and beliefs, and Christianity, is not the one meant to help Loomis on his quest.

The one who helps Loomis is his wife Martha, the woman supposed to wait for him while his years in bondage wore up. Loomis believes that only reuniting with his family will help him find his lost identity. Martha, on the other hand, has moved on. She has arrived to the house of Bertha and Seth, where Loomis and Zonia are boarding, to find her daughter. Bynum claims to Martha that he has bound her and her daughter, but not also Martha to Loomis. In some ways this revelation seems to give Martha the courage to say: "(…) I woke up one morning and decided that you was dead. Even if you weren't, you was dead to me" (*Joe Turner* 2.5.82). She tells Loomis that she had understood that she was still a young woman who could make something of her life, but that dragging her captured husband after her as a dead weight would be devastating for her. Accordingly, Martha says, "I buried you. I mourned you" (*Joe Turner* 2.5.82); afterwards she left to make a life for herself.

Nevertheless, Martha plays the part she is expected to in the quest of Loomis to find himself. When he wants to attack Bynum with a knife, she starts reciting psalms (the 23rd Psalm). Her action makes Loomis understand she is bound to something, either to her daughter or to her religious beliefs, and that he is not bound to anything anymore. "He has to move on. He knows that now" (Temple 21) and Bynum now has to deliver Loomis, to help him move on. When Martha tells

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Herald that he has to be washed in the blood of the lamb, Loomis cuts himself across the chest twice with the knife he's holding and thus finds redemption and the power to move on.

The analysis of Martha Loomis seems to not be possible without analyzing her husband as well. Trying to see her as a separate character seems to be impossible as she is a mildly important pawn in the redemption process of her husband. Nevertheless, Martha finds courage in herself to distance from her husband. She finds her voice and is not afraid of telling him that she has found the resources to move on with her life.

Out of the seven characters that appear in *Two Trains Running*, a play set in 1969, only one is female. Risa is introduced as "a young woman who, in an attempt to define herself in terms other than her genitalia, has scarred her legs with a razor" (*Two Trains* 1.1.9). Thus the most attractive feature of her become her legs. Temple writes that Risa is still attractive to men despite her scarred legs, but claims that "at least those men who have the capacity to see the scars and to comprehend their why" (78) are still attracted to Risa. In some ways she manages to redefine herself through her scars: she is no longer attractive due to her beauty, but due to the reason why they are there. Harry J. Elam sees this action of hers as a frustration by "men who deny her humanity by observing her body as a sex object" (165). The explanation for the scars on her legs comes from Holloway, who tells the others that she did it to make her legs look ugly so that men would be forced to look at her and see her personality instead of her good looks. Risa herself acknowledges the truth of Holloway's explanation to Sterling: "That's why I did it. To make them ugly" (*Two Trains Running* 2.4.90). Thus she managed to achieve what she set out to: defining herself on something other than the basis of sex. Elam claims that she deconstructs herself as a woman, that she "defies traditional expectations and exists outside cultural codes of femininity" (166). Out of all the women of the *Century Cycle*, Risa seems to be the one who moves from the traditional sphere of female embodiment towards an unexpected stage of femininity by choosing to define herself in ways that are in total opposition to society's views on women.

Psyche Williams-Forson writes that when "Wilson writes women into his plays he has them performing roles typical of gender norms" (129), in that women of the *Century Cycle* perform the roles that society has assigned them traditionally. They are mothers, caretakers and caregivers, they cook and clean and take care of the children and their husbands without much or any protest at all. Risa in some ways goes beyond the conventional role assigned to her. She is a waitress, but through the scarring of her legs she can be seen as something more. In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks writes about African American women slaves: "black female slaves had shown that they were capable of performing so-called manly labor, that they were able to endure hardship, pain, and privation" and that they could also "perform those so called womanly tasks of housekeeping, cooking, and child rearing" (71). Risa is no longer a slave, but the way in which bell hooks looks at

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African American women slaves can be applied to understanding Risa. She is not only a waitress but she is a cook as well; she does the shopping and makes up the menu for the day. Therefore, doing the shopping can be seen as a manly labor – as regards supplying a diner – while cooking and serving can be seen womanly chores. Williams-Forson writes that "Risa uses food not only to self-express but also to unsettle the male domain of Memphis' Diner" (131). Thus Risa becomes an example of a strong woman. She is capable of maintaining her own space in a male dominated diner. From a feminist point of view the fact that the space she keeps for herself is the kitchen shows the enduring patriarchal order established by male society. But for Risa, as an African American woman, this sacred space in which she rules supreme can be seen as achieving a victory over the patriarchal system.

In her essay "The Ground on Which I Stand: August Wilson's Perspective on African American Women," Sandra G. Shannon writes about Rose Maxson that she "is a woman who chooses to direct her energy toward being a wife, a mother, and a homemaker" (154). Thus Rose becomes the personification of bell hook's words regarding the "black female slaves" who performed the womanly tasks set for them (*Ain't I am Woman* 71): Rose is the mother and homemaker; her life revolves around motherhood and housekeeping. Rose's single job is to take care of the house, her husband Troy, her son Cory and step-son. Sandra Shannon claims that Rose takes on the role of peace negotiator for the family, managing to keep conflicts between her husband and those around him at bay. Nevertheless, being a peace negotiator at times backfires. She does not manage to appease the conflict between Troy and their son which results in Cory's running away and joining the Marines; she does not manage to keep Gabriel, Troy's brother, in the same house as them and does not manage to make Troy understand that his brother did not want to be a burden to the family anymore. At times she does manage to keep the family united, and the building of the fence around the house can be seen as both a metaphor for the father-son relationship and one for keeping the family together.

In opposition to Risa, who tries her best to keep herself from being defined by the men around her, Rose – the female character of *Fences* – seems to willingly choose to define herself by her husband. She willingly accepts the mantle of mother and homemaker all the while enjoying and actually finding comfort in her situation. Shannon writes that Rose embodies the very idea Wilson portrays with his African American women, namely the ambivalence between nurturer and a need to maintain self-respect and a sense of self (154). This ambivalence which Shannon has noted comes to an end when, after eighteen years of faithful marriage, Troy tells Rose that he is going to be a father with another woman. This represents the breaking point for Rose and the moment when the line between nurturer and having a sense of self is crossed. Rose finds her voice and the power to cut herself off from Troy. The beginning of their separation starts at this moment when Rose becomes somewhat independent. The outcome of her finding her voice and courage comes after the death of Alberta in childbirth. Troy brings home his baby daughter

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and asks Rose to be a mother to be innocent child. In what is initially seen as a return to the mother-homemaker side of Rose, she accepts to take care of the baby. The certainty that Rose has grown as a character, that she has managed to cut ties entirely with her past, and that her life with Troy has become meaningless comes from "From right now … this child got a mother. But you a womanless man" (*Fences* 2.3.74). After eighteen years of being defined simply by patriarchal values attributed to women, Rose goes through a revolution, a personal one, but with her coming out of it victorious. Shannon sees Rose as "she evolves from a long-suffering heroine to a fiercely independent woman" (155). She becomes one of the strongest characters of the *American Century Cycle*, her trajectory being one of slow rise to achieve her independence and self-respect.

Rena, the only female character of *Jitney*, set in 1977, seems to be in total opposition to the women previously analyzed. She is the epitome of the follower of the social roles: she has a job, she cooks and cleans the house which she shares with Youngblood, and takes care of their child. She is the perfect exemplification of Frances Beale's "Black women make up a substantial percentage of the Black working force" (111). Beale rightly notes that it is "idle dreaming to think of Black women simply caring for their homes and children (…). Most Black women have to work to help house, feed, and clothe their families" (111). Rena is an example of such a woman. The small piece of courage she finds when she tells Youngblood not to bother to come home because she might not be there, is lost the next day when she comes to the jitney cab station to ask him where he had been the previous night. If other women of the *Cycle* seem to not need a man in their lives to make them feel secure, Rena seems to be in total opposition as she tries all her best to keep Youngblood next to her. She seems subdued, and even her outburst of anger at the fact that he took the eighty dollars she was saving does not pull through; she still comes back to the man who took the money she worked for and who might also be having an affair with her sister. Nevertheless, she is an example of a strong woman as she manages to find her voice and stand up to her boyfriend.

August Wilson writes women the way a man would, and he does not shy away from admitting that they are written from a male perspective. Nevertheless, he manages to create strong women, women capable of taking care of themselves, but most importantly women who are capable to find their voice and stand up against authority. The women of *The American Century Cycle* become as strong as the male characters, at times even stronger. They are women capable of making a life for themselves and of coping with the hardships of the present and future. Even though at times female characters seem stuck in the ways assigned to them by a patriarchal society, the same women break the barriers of the hold the men around have on them. Therefore, female characters of *The American Century Cycle* should be seen as visible, vocal, and powerful characters of the ten plays.

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