

# Ecodrama and Social Injustice in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*<sup>(\*)</sup>

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## **Abstract**

August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* (1992) is the 7<sup>th</sup> play in a series of ten plays, called Pittsburgh Cycle. The play deals with city authorities' urban renewal plans and its influence on the lives of the customers of a diner in the Hill District which is inhabited by black and white people. The aim of this paper is to analyze representations of ecodrama in Wilson's *Two Trains Running*. By doing this, the analysis is not restricted to tracing injustice enforced upon the environment, but it extends to include prejudice exercised against African Americans. Although man controls the nature, he is influenced by the injustice imposed upon the outer environment. It means that he is involved in a direct relationship with it, and he suffers from the same type of prejudice enforced on his surroundings. Accordingly, the transformations that are enforced upon characters' lives are a result of oppressive practices against nature. Consequently, ecodrama concentrates on ecological issues as well as other issues related to gender, poverty, inequality, social status and racism. In ecodrama, the playwright moves from universal concerns to personal experiences. Therefore, ecological concerns could be merged with the characters' past oppressive experiences, memories, failures, successes, emotional crises and future plans. The paper has reached the following findings. 1) As long as justice is implemented via defective laws, justified oppression is the ultimate byproduct. This leads to the hypothesis that justice is proportional. This suggestion could lead to complete denial of the existence of such value, or simply question its existence in interracial relationships and among individuals of the same race. 2) Oppression is exercised on people as well as the environment. Accordingly, justice is not only essential in human beings relationship with each other, it is also important in their relationship with the environment.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, social contract, injustice, rights, poverty, Civil Rights Movements,

## ملخص:

تحتل مسرحية "قطاران يتسابقان" للكاتب الأمريكي أوجست ويلسون- المركز السابع في سلسلة من عشرة مسرحيات تسمى "مجموعة بيتسبرج". تتناول مسرحية قطاران يتسابقان" خطة سلطات المدينة للتطوير الحضاري وأثر ذلك على حياة عملاء أحد المطاعم في منطقة "ديستركت هيل" وسكانها من ذوى البشرة البيضاء والسوداء. الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تحليل تمثيلات الدراما البيئية في مسرحية "قطاران يتسابقان" لويلسون، لا يقتصر التحليل على تعقب الظلم البيئي، ولكنه يمتد ليشمل التحيز الذي يمارس ضد الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي. على الرغم من أن الإنسان يتحكم في الطبيعة، إلا أنه يتأثر بالظلم المفروض على البيئة الخارجية. هذا يعني أنه في علاقة مباشرة معها، ويعاني من نفس النوع من التحيز المفروض على محيطه. وعليه فإن التغييرات التي يتم فرضها على حياة الشخصيات هي نتيجة ممارسات قمعية ضد الطبيعة. وبالتالي، تركز الدراما البيئية على القضايا البيئية بالإضافة إلى القضايا الأخرى المتعلقة بنوع الجنس والفقر وعدم المساواة والوضع الاجتماعي والعنصرية. في الدراما البيئية، ينتقل الكاتب المسرحي من الاهتمامات العالمية إلى التجارب الشخصية؛ لذلك يمكن دمج الاهتمامات البيئية مع التجارب القمعية والذكريات والفشل والنجاحات والأزمات العاطفية والخطط المستقبلية للشخصيات. توصلت الدراسة إلى النتائج التالية. (1) طالما يتم تطبيق العدالة من خلال قوانين معيبة، فإن الاضطهاد المبرر هو النتيجة الحتمية. هذا يؤدي إلى فرضية أن مفهوم العدالة مفهوم نسبي قد يؤدي إلى إنكار كامل لوجود هذه القيمة، أو التشكيك في وجودها في العلاقات بين الأعراق وبين الأفراد من نفس العرق. (2) يُمارس القهر على الناس كما يمارسه على البيئة. وبناء على ذلك، فإن العدالة ليست ضرورية فقط في علاقة البشر ببعضهم البعض ، بل هي أيضاً مهمة في علاقتهم بالبيئة.

**Introduction:**

August Wilson was born in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1945. He writes about the history and the experience of black people, as he lives in a place predominated by black people. *Two Trains Running* is the 7<sup>th</sup> play in "Pittsburgh Cycle" series which consists of ten plays. The play premiered on Broadway in 1993. It was

a Pulitzer Prize finalist. The play is set in the Hill District Pittsburgh, an African American neighborhood in 1969. The Hill District was one of the most prosperous, black neighborhoods in the United States in the 1960s. Later, the neighborhood suffered a sharp economic decline. Rod Bush argues:

By the mid-to-late 1960s, the notion of a "culture of poverty," or of the predominant demoralization of the lower strata, became increasingly untenable as this sector of the population rose in revolt around the world and thus began to speak for themselves. They received support from left-wing and organic intellectuals, as well as political leaders. (n. pag.)

African Americans faced poverty, racism and prejudice because of city authorities urban renewal of Pittsburgh. In the series, Wilson "focused with unfading devotion on its African-American community and evaluated its changing fortunes across the 20th century" (Cavendish, n. Pag). He records the struggle of African Americans against white structures of power after the great immigration to the north in the sixties., looking for better jobs and wealth.

Wilson uses the 1960s, a time featured by turbulence, because of its considerable historical significance. It witnessed the increasing power of American civil rights movement. The beginning was in 1961 when Black people managed to enroll in Ole Miss University for the first time in history. In 1963, Washington D.C. Witnessed a large public protest where Martin Luther King Jr. "delivered his inspiring 'I Have a Dream' speech" (Head, n. pag.). In 1964, black citizens were registered to vote by a group of activists. Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Act was passed by president Lyndon B. Johnson to prevent discrimination against black people in job employment. In 1965, The Voting Rights Act was put into action to eliminate prejudice exercised by Southern legislators to prevent black Americans from voting through the imposition of "literacy tests." This period also witnessed violent incidents such as the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. Head believes, "King's ideology of nonviolent protest, in which sit-ins, marches, and disruption of unfair laws by polite, well-dressed persons, was a key to overturning the South's repressive laws" (n. pag.). An extension of 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed in 1968. It

outlaws racial, religious, and gender discrimination which is related to renting and housing (n. pag.).

The play puts into focus African Americans deficient awareness and discord over the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement which were supposed to consolidate their voices in order to stand against prejudice. He questions the ability of nonviolence ideology to stop racial segregation. Michael Davies believes that *Two Trains Running* “covers the emerging civil rights movement and awareness in the late 1960s and is forensic in its slice-of-life approach” (n. pag.). The play highlights social dissent over the influence of Civil Rights Movements in the 1960s on the status-quo of African Americans at that time.

As an eminent dramatist, Wilson’s works has received noticeable critical attention. Among these studies, there are four doctoral dissertations that deal with *Two Trains Running*. The first dissertation, “She’s A Brick House: August Wilson and the Stereotypes of Black Womanhood” (2013) by Amelia Tatum Grabowski, explores Wilson’s subversion of stereotypical maternal roles in his plays *The Piano Lesson*, *Gem of the Ocean*, and *Fences*. The second doctoral dissertation, “This Is Me Right Here”: August Wilson and Pittsburgh’s Hill District” (2011) by Betina Jones, examines the connection between Wilson’s plays and Hill District where he sets all his Pittsburgh Cycle. The third dissertation, “Audience and the African American playwright: an analysis of the importance of audience selection and audience response on the dramaturgies of August Wilson and Ed Bullins” (2002) by Ladrica C. Menson-Furr, deals with audience response to the drama of African American playwrights August Wilson and Ed Bullins. The fourth dissertation “*Two trains running*: The train as symbol in twentieth-century African American literature”( 2001) by Darcy Ann Zabel, deals with the symbolic literary meaning of the train in twentieth-century African American literature.

The aim of this paper is to interpret *Two Trains Running* from an ecocritical standpoint. Wilson’s ecodrama shows the interconnectedness of ecological aspects and personal experiences, as it underlines the effect of urban renewal on African Americans’ lives. This paper acknowledges that oppression is exercised on human beings and the environment alike. Firstly, it discusses ecotheater as a

movement that deals with issues related to urban ecology and its influence on human beings' life. It intends to answer the following questions: What is ecodrama? What are the consequences of ecological injustice on people's lives? The focus of my analysis is to discuss the manifestations of injustice exercised against black people exhibited by key characters' long speeches. Then, it explores racial discrimination as a result of the imposition of defective laws. It studies Wilson's play which represents issues related to urban development plans, gender, race and social injustice. Finally, it analyzes Wislon's play which portrays the struggle of a group of people against city authorities' urban renewal plans.

Ecoteater deals with environmental issues that affect people's life. It depicts human beings' relationship with nature. Even if it does not concentrate on environmental issues, it sheds light on continuous conflicts between human beings and the environment. The main conflict is people's struggle to live regardless of terrible circumstances that threaten their lives. During this struggle, nature suffers from injustice and negligence. Theresa J. May illustrates, "Ecocriticism, like feminism, post-colonial or multi-cultural theory, addresses injustices felt in the body—the body of experience, of community, of land" (86). As the theater is always a place where ecology or the natural world is represented, ecodrama is a new way to examine ecological issues. May adds:

once thinking both about theatre and about ecology shifts such that artifice is not proof of independence from, but evidence of interconnection with, the natural world... and with it the realization that theatre has always served as a forum where people negotiate and generate relationships to their environments (wild, cultivated, industrial, virtual). Ecology considered materially (rather than metaphorically) gives rise to new ways of looking and reading (ecocriticism) as well as creating (ecodrama/ performance). (86)

Ecocritical theater tells the stories of human beings' interaction with nature. It highlights the effects and results of this relationship. In fact, theater is used to illuminate the duty of community towards the environment. It is also used to resist injustice inflicted upon nature. May believes:

Theatre functions as a field of exchange where stories take flight, moving between the permeable spheres of self and community, then out into the terrain of lived experience. Stories are written in the land and in human and other bodies.... At a time when master narratives engage the armies of destruction and empire in a so-called “clash of civilizations,” the critical role of the arts and theatre in particular as a site of counter-discourse, resistance, and re-imagining can hardly be more apparent. The task of dismantling the stories that take us to war must be commensurate with the task of generating the possibilities of justice and sustainability. (86)

Not only does ecocriticism deal with environmental injustice, it also expands to include other forms of oppression based upon religion, gender, race and class (Rigby 12). Thus, theater enlightens the audience and resists injustice toward human beings and environment in order to inspire change.

*Two Trains Running* deals with ecological culture of the 1960s and urban development plans which pay no attention to its disastrous effects on people and land. Furthermore, it ridicules a flawed social contract that displaces inhabitants. Accordingly, May maintains, “When the ecocritical view can expand its scope to include the issues of race, class, gender, geographic situated-ness, and white power and privilege, then theatre—which has always been a force for activism as well as the dissemination of hegemonic myths—appears ripe for analysis” (87). As ecodrama discusses environmental issues, it also traces racial and gender oppressive relationships. It extends its scope to raise questions related to people’s identity and their relationship to the environment. May suggests:

Green dramaturgy asks us to reconstitute the world, to re-conceive our notions of community in such a way that the very boundaries between nature and culture, self and other, begin to dissolve. As theater participates in our human ecological situatedness, it reclaims its ancient roots as a site of ritual celebration of the reciprocity between people and the natural world. Thus, theater emerges not only as a means by which to investigate the long-standing humanist question “who are we?” but also the urgent ecological question “where are we?” (100)

*Two Trains Running* features important questions about the concept of justice. Throughout the play, the characters contemplate/ grapple with the present social, economic circumstances that shape their future. The play also underlines African Americans deficient awareness and discord over important issues. It suggests that as long as they do not stand up for their rights or enforce their laws, they will get the same consequence.

Economic issues and unfairness are the most discussed issues throughout the play, as most of the key events in the play takes place offstage. The characters tell stories about immigration, hopes for better future, wealth, happiness, freedom, justice, solidarity and poverty. The main focus of these stories circumscribe around the relationship between environmental injustice and poverty. They reveal the deteriorating status of the poor as a result of city authorities oppressive measures and urban renewal plans. They suffer from oppressive practices that are exercised by city authorities and policemen against black people. The play denounces a dominant image of black Americans as criminals, terrorists and inferiors. It puts into focus life experiences and struggles against inequality. For example, Memphis, the central character and the owner of the dinner, is forced out of his farm. He dreams of getting it back after selling the restaurant to the authorities for a reasonable price. However, the characters end up gaining what they crave for, regardless of all the hardships they encounter at the beginning of the play. This gives hope that persistence is essential to achieve what you want.

Wilson adopts an ecocritical approach that does not solely concentrate on ecological aspects, but it extends to fuse environmental and personal oppression. It deals with a new branch of ecology which is called “urban ecology” (Zapf 46). His play puts into focus city authorities’ urban rejuvenation plans that turn the inhabitants’ life upside down. However, it does not deal with deep ecological concerns. It portrays the effect of ecological issues on the social and economic aspects of black people. It highlights prevalent oppressive attitudes against African Americans. It can be said that it deals with ecocriticism from a social, economic and political perspective. Here, the concept of injustice is discussed in relation to the environment and human beings. This version of ecocriticism raises knowledge and awareness of the audience of the interconnectedness of ecological

aspects and personal experiences. Although the play insinuates that African Americans are subject to constant oppression, the characters end up gaining what they crave for, regardless of all the hardships they encounter at the beginning of the play.

Given the fact that human beings relationship with each other is influenced by their relationship to the natural world, “Eco theater plays put the natural world in conversation with human socio-economic concerns in the context of interpersonal relationships” (Slagle, n. pag.). The aim of ecodrama is to direct Americans attention to different forms of oppression exercised against black people and the environment at the same time. Therefore, ecodrama in the 1980s focused on the “discussion of ecological issues as more inclusive of other forms of oppression; racism, repression of the lower class, immigration policies, imperialism, and state aggression” (n. pag.). Wilson was inspired to adopt a direct approach that addresses urban ecology while raising public awareness of the effect of urban renewal plans as well as racial discrimination on black people’s lives. The play does not propose solutions. It raises an important question: how to overcome the current situation? Some characters find solace in Christianity, while others find comfort in African spiritual figures like Aunt Ester or following Malcolm X and black power movement.

According to Wilson, the title of the play refers to life and death. He states, **“There are always and only two trains running. There is life and there is death. Each of us rides them both. To live life with dignity, to celebrate and accept responsibility for your presence in the world is all that can be asked of anyone”** (qtd. in Austin, n. pag.). Throughout the play, Wilson uses Holloway to deliver wise concepts about love, life and death. At the end of the play, he maintains that life is about love. He argues, “That’s all you got. You got love and you got death. Death will find you ... it’s up to you to find love. That’s where most people fall down at” (102). This insight about life and death instigates other characters to talk about the deaths of important people in their life. For example, they speak about Hambone’s life and death. Meanwhile, Sterling talks about the death of Mrs. Johnson who raised him in an orphanage. Even Memphis speaks about the death of his mule after he was expelled of his farm.

The two trains could be “representations of the conflicted nature of America’s image of itself” (Zabel 2). It symbolizes the



difference between reality and the ideal image of America as the land of rights and freedom. It symbolizes black people's persistence and continuous struggle against injustice. The trains are also the means through which the characters can go home or to a starting point. It is "a point where one stops running and in a sense, goes home, back to the South, back to God, back to a previous way of experiencing life that was cast off, perhaps, prematurely, an internal and external journey Houston Baker calls 'the journey back'" (12). The trains could also refer to both African and American people whose wellbeing requires that both trains never go off-track, otherwise they will wreck each other.

There are different stories that reveal the oppression that is exercised against African Americans. The most prominent example is the story of Memphis, who used to work in his farm in Jackson, Mississippi in 1932. His land was usurped from him because of a law that revokes the contract of the farm ownership if there is water in the land. Because of this defective law, he is unable to restore the farm. He decides to move to the north, expecting a better life. Throughout the play, Memphis dreams of going back to the South. There is always "the option to leave this changing Northern industrial city and hop back on one of the two trains running daily back to the South. But what would that mean? Can we go home again?" (Austin, n. pag).

Injustice is a central theme throughout the play. Due to constant violation of characters' rights, they resort to daydreaming as a way to adapt to injustice. Some of them dream of living a wealthy life like Holloway, Wolf and Sterling. However, Hambone, a mentally ill person, looks forward to taking his payment from Lutz, a butcher. He symbolizes a stark example of white people's exploitation and prejudice. Memphis dreams of reclaiming his farm back after winning his case against city authorities. He loses his farm because of an unjust law and is about to lose his restaurant because of another one. He believes that he can force city authorities to give him a fair price for his property. He suggests that they "give white folks a good price.... Well, they gonna give me just like they give them. I bought it eight years ago for fifty-five hundred dollars and I ain't taking a penny less than twenty-five thousand" (10). The play ridicules unfair legislations that deny the right of black people to be equal to white people.

The play is based on verbal communication and storytelling as most of the action takes place offstage. The characters often discuss oppressive practices related to black and white relationship. Frank Rich says, “The glorious storytelling serves not merely as picturesque, sometimes touching and often funny theater but as a penetrating revelation of a world hidden from view to those outside it” (13). The characters deliver long speeches that reveal African American problems that have different social, economic and political ramifications. They discuss the challenges that force African Americans to move to the city. Storytelling technique is used to emphasize persistent oppressive experiences against black people, as the characters relentlessly compare between their past and present situation. As the characters recount old times prosperity, the play questions the mistaken decision to immigrate to the North after authorities’ catastrophic plans to displace inhabitants for the sake of urban development plans. It focuses on residents’ struggle to get a fair price for their property while the city authorities, which are supposed to guard civil rights, use a clause to deprive them of their right to demand a reasonable price which could be used to begin a new business after economic depression.

Wilson uses his characters to represent the problematic situation of black people. The characters symbolize social, racial and economic problems. Memphis is used to refer to usurpation of land and identity. He loses his farm because the contract includes a clause that nullifies the sale if water is discovered in the land. He insists that he can force city authorities to pay the price of his property. He identifies himself with the restaurant. Jim Lowe believes, “His reasons have more to do with the price of selling his identity than financial gain” (n. pag.). Memphis defends his right to be treated equally like white citizens. Rich suggests that Memphis “is confident he can beat the white man at his own game as long as he knows the rules” (13). He shows deep knowledge of laws of contracts that is necessary to stand against city authorities oppressive measures. He even blames Hambone for letting Lutz estimate the fee of the painting work, which leads to Lutz’s unjustified denial of Hambone’s payment.

Hambone is a mentally ill person. He is in his late forties. He is a stark example of unfairness. Michael Billington describes him as a character “who might have stepped out of a Ben Jonson play”(n. pag).

His existence triggers deep discussions related to social and economic injustice. Likewise, his death motivates the characters to discuss social rights. He claims his payment from a white owner of a meat market called Lutz who denies him his payment. He is supposed to take a ham in return of painting Lutz's fence. He waits for nearly 10 years to get his fee; his mental status deteriorates after the incident. Unfortunately, he does not have the chance to achieve justice in his life. He cannot speak except two phrases that he incessantly repeats, "He gonna give me my ham." Or "I want my ham." Like Memphis, Hambone have unyielding insistence on reclaiming their rights. Hambone's insistence to claim his payment proves sufficient to indict the oppressor. Upon Hambone's funeral, It is stated that his body is full of scars. It seems that the pain he endures in life is also inflicted upon his body. Every character tells a part of his story. Memphis sheds light on the main points of disagreement between Hambone and Lutz. Lesson learned is that if you do not impose your terms, the other side will do it and he will do it oppressively. Here, the play questions the limitations of human justice. It suggests that justice is proportional, and the only hope for weak people is divine justice. It urges black people to step up and take action to eliminate discrimination against race.

Risa is a waitress who works for Memphis. She protests against social objectification of female body by deforming her legs. She is in love with Sterling. She suffers from deliberate oppression exercised by Memphis who is never satisfied with her work although she does her best at her job. Risa and Hambone are presented as two subjugated characters who suffer from social cruelty. Clare Brennan believes that their oppression is "inscribed in the scars on their flesh" (n. pag.). However, Risa's scars are intentionally done by herself to protect herself from unwanted or failing relationships with men. Risa is an important character who does not make much appearance on the stage. Rich believes that both Risa and Sterling's characters are underwritten. He argues, "Mr. Wilson's reticence about his two youngest and most crucial characters turns up most glaringly in the pivotal but underwritten" (Rich 13).

Risa has serious relationship issues with the opposite sex. Like Wolf, she has trust issues with the opposite gender. She chooses to resist oppression in her own way. Since she refuses to be seen as an object to please others, she resorts to physical deformation to resist

subjugating gender roles. She deforms her legs to divert people's attention to her personality. Holloway illustrates, "She figure if she made her legs ugly that would force everybody to look at her and see what kind of personality she is" (32). She deforms her body to stand against social objectification of female body. Later, Sterling lectures Risa about life. He tells her to simply refuse toxic relationships and carry on with life. He says, "All you got to do is say no and keep on stepping" (100).

Aunt Ester is an old woman. She is a fortune teller who is 322 years old. Brennan believes that the age of Aunt Ester, which is 322, refers to "the age of black experience in America" (n. pag.). Although Aunt Ester does not appear on the stage, she is a central character for African Americans who still hold onto their cultural beliefs during these hard times. All the characters meet her looking for advice or searching for relief from worldly pains. Some of them does not really believe in her powers like West and Memphis, as they reject the fact that she can change luck. However, they recite their experiences after meeting her. For example, Memphis doubts that Aunt Ester has real spiritual powers. However, he paid her a visit at the end of the play before selling the restaurant and repeats her words with complete trust.

Wilson's portrayal of female characters subverts stereotypical roles. Grabowski argues, "Wilson's overall characterization of women is not misogynistic, nor stereotypical—it expands beyond these categorizations through depictions of agency and authority" (18). Wilson gives female characters the authority to repudiate exploitation. His female characters are not submissive or subservient; on the contrary, they stand against conventional roles. For example, Aunt Ester is a central character in the play although she does not appear on the stage. She is a source of empowerment to all the characters who seek her advice or pay her a visit to get rid of the burdens of life. She signifies wisdom, tradition and salvation. She symbolizes the African American experience in America. She is used as a symbol that unites African Americans during hard times.

Wilson's characters raise some social and economic problems that affect black people like unemployment and poverty. Sterling is thirty years old, who represents He is unable to be employed after being recently released from the prison, because he was convicted of a

bank robbery. Later, Sterling declares his reasons for robbing a bank. He argues, “Everybody else seem like they got it. Seem like I’m the only one ain’t got no money.... That was after Mr. Lewis at the orphanage died. I never would want him to know I would do something like that” (45- 46). He wishes to marry Risa. He is always dreaming of wealth and leading an extravagant life without exerting any effort. Memphis predicts that he will go back to prison because of his odd points of view. To Sterling, money means power. Therefore, he feels strong after robbing the bank. He says, “Like when I robbed the bank. That made me feel strong too. Like I had everything under control” (48). Wilson criticizes black people deficient social awareness and motivation to take action to achieve change.

Of course, money is important to fulfill daily needs. However, all the characters equals money to power. Wealth is seen as a source/ means of sudden economic and political change for black minority. They are continuously speaking about luck strokes and possibilities of gaining money through gambling. They are curious about future betting possibilities to gain money. Ben Brantley argues, “The possibilities of sudden wealth and sudden death dance endlessly through the conversations conducted by Wolf, West and three other locals: Sterling... Risa... the comely, man-wary waitress; and Holloway... the diner’s resident cracker-barrel philosopher” (n. Pag.).

The play suggests that higher levels of unemployment, poverty and deficient social awareness of African Americans can be catastrophic. For example, when Sterling fails to be employed, he maintains that he will use a gun if he fails to be rich by illegitimate ways. He adopts awkward rules and principles in life, as he is obsessed by superficial matters. He declares that he has the basic skills to do any job, including being a judge. Like any judge, he can run a trial. He supposes that the judge’s main role is to silence the lawyer and identify lunch time. Sterling declares, “I told the judge I could do his job.... I got sense enough to know when it’s lunch time and how to say “recess.” I can do anything he white man can do” (52). Wilson uses Sterling and Hambone to shed light on existing slogans that may look confusing to some people. The same slogans are questioned later by Memphis who wonders why these movements go saying “Black is beautiful” unless they believe otherwise. Later on, Sterling teaches Hambone new words that he learned in the penitentiary like “Black is

beautiful,” “United we stand,” “Divided we fall,” and “Malcolm lives” (63-6<sup>o</sup>), Ironically, Sterling seems unaware of the meaning behind these slogans. To Hambone, they are just empty words that are not as important as the words he uses to claim his payment.

Wolf, numbers runner, is the manifestation of characters’ dreams of wealth. All the characters seek to achieve change through gambling. Rich argues, “They invest their hopes in playing the numbers, not in distant leaders sowing lofty dreams of change” (13). Wolf fails to build deep relationships with women, because his mistress knows five other men. Like Risa, he has trouble establishing emotional relationships with the opposite sex. As he suspects women’s infidelity, he wonders how Prophet Samuel managed to handle seven women. He argues, “Hell, it’s hard to get one, let alone seven. It’s hard to get one you can trust that far” (106).

West, a funeral director, has a materialistic point of view of life and death. He is a greedy black American who manages to achieve wealth by robbing dead people. Since his wife’s death, he devotes his life to making money. He looks down upon the spiritual abilities of Aunt Ester. However, he meets Aunt Ester to ask her about his wife in the other life. He believes that he can gain money from burying people instead of being sad. He says, “I looked up one day and so many people was dying from that fast life I figured I could make some money burying them and live a long life too” (93). West talks about his strategy as a successful undertaker and a social observer. He says, “I’ll bury anything with anybody” (37). Rich declares, “Even nastier gallows humor is provided by West... an undertaker whose practical view of death has made him perhaps the community’s keenest social observer and certainly its wealthiest entrepreneur” (13). Although he is an African American himself, he does not have high opinion of black people. West states, “Them niggers come to bury Patchneck Red act like it was a party” (107). He tries to buy Memphis’s restaurant for a low price. When Memphis refused, he retorts, “I don’t know how niggers think sometimes” (38).

Holloway is one of the customers of the restaurant. He presents philosophical insights of everything. He gives long speeches about social injustice that faces African Americans. However, he believes in the supernatural powers of Aunt Ester. This belief helps him survive the hardships of life. He depends on his dreams as a

precursor of good luck. He is described as “a man who all his life has voiced his outrage at injustice with little effect” (5). His belief in supernatural powers gives him the ability to face despair and oppression. As his endeavors to gain money ends in failure, he emphasizes the influence of spiritual powers and superstition on his life. He argues, “Aunt Ester give you more than money. She make right with yourself” (22). Holloway believes that Aunt Ester can cure worldly pains. He suggests, “I go up to see her every once in a while. Get my soul washed” (24). Later, Holloway recites how Aunt Ester helps him forget the idea of killing his grandfather who was too submissive. He also convinces Sterling to meet her who will help him find a job and get a fulfilling life.

As the characters are unable to change the current oppressive situation, they resort to believe in superstitious powers that can free or cure them. They hold on to something that can give them hope that everything is possible. They wish that these spiritual powers can turn their dreams into reality. Sometimes, they know that they give them temporary feelings of relief that help them continue their path/ life. For example, Holloway has a deep belief in spiritual figures which trespasses the rules of life and death. According to Holloway, Aunt Ester is immortal. He says, “But she ain’t gonna die, I guarantee you that!” (40). Moreover, he suggests that she can cure Hambone from mental illness. He says, “Aunt Ester Could straighten him out” (23). Aunt Ester proves to be the clue for the problems that face black people. Whether these problems are social, economic, spiritual, or even physical, she possess limitless powers.

Wilson uses Holloway’s character to interpret the real motives behind the actions of other characters. He delivers wise speeches that are based on sound logic and practical experience. He admires Hambone’s persistence and motivation that others lack. He asserts that he is wiser than them, as he boldly stands against Lutz. He has unyielding determination to claim his rights for ten years. Holloway clarifies:

We might take a chicken. Then we gonna go home and cook that chicken. But how it gonna taste? It can’t taste good to us.... How we gonna feel about ourselves? Every time we even look at a chicken we gonna have a good taste in our mouth. That chicken’s gonna call up that taste. It’s gonna

make you feel ashamed.... This fellow here ... he say he don't want to carry it around with him. But he ain't willing to forget about it. He trying to put the shame on the other foot.... He trying to shame Lutz into giving him his ham. And if Lutz ever break down and give it to him... he gonna have a big thing. (30)

Actually, Hambone's struggle against injustice triggers the characters to tell stories of oppression and injustice they experienced in life. It also motivates Sterling to stand against Lutz and bring Hambone's payment at the end of the play. Like Hambone, Memphis has unyielding determination to reclaim his farm from usurpers. He asserts, "One of these days I'm going back and get my land. I still got the deed" (31).

Throughout the play, Wilson uses his characters to deliver long speeches about issues related to inequality and racism. He also uses black people who badmouth other black people to open up the conversation about history of racial discrimination. This also urges the audience to think about the history of racism that normalizes oppression which motivates even black people to repeat the same oppressive language to describe their race. For example, Holloway gets annoyed when Memphis describes black people as lazy. He delves into giving a long speech about slavery. Holloway retorts:

People kill me talking about niggers is lazy. Niggers is the most hard-working people in the world. Worked three hundred years for free. And didn't take no lunch hour. Now all of a sudden niggers is lazy.... If it wasn't for you the white man would be poor. Every little bit he got be got standing on top of you. That's why he could reach so high. He give you three dollars a day for six months and he got him a railroad for the next hundred years. (34)

The characters narrate white man's maltreatment stories. They discuss low social and economic circumstances that force Bubba boy to steal a dress for the burial ceremony of his wife. Sadly, he gets arrested and fails to attend her funeral. Additionally, Wolf recounts how he is jailed for stumbling on a thief in the street. He argues:

I been to jail. Stayed down there three months.... I was walking down Centre Avenue... police was chasing somebody



and wasn't looking where he was going either. He ran into me do hard it knocked us both down. I started to get up and there was two, three policemen with their guns pointed at my head. Told me not to move. They arrested me for obstructing justice. (54)

The existence of two movements that defend African Americans' rights appear ineffective and at least competitive, as they adopt incompatible ideologies. In Act Two, Sterling distributes flyers for a rally about racial injustice which carries the name of Malcolm X. Sterling does not mention anything about the purpose of the rally; however, he plans to attend the black power rally to have fun. Neither Memphis nor Holloway follow Malcolm X as a leader who defends the rights of oppressed people. Rich suggests, "The liveliest talkers in 'Two Trains Running' are members of an older generation skeptical of all externally applied panaceas, secular and religious" (13). They criticize Civil Rights Movements, as they doubt the efficacy of these movements. This suggest that these movements do not help black people in their struggle; nonetheless, they propagates confusing slogans. Meanwhile, Memphis does not understand the logic behind celebrating a dead person's birthday. He argues that Malcolm was killed by black people who celebrate his birthday now. He delivers a long speech about freedom, equality and black power movement in the 1960s. He believes that black people cannot gain their rights without a gun. This implies that force is the only means to achieve justice. Meanwhile, equality is proportional and human beings cannot achieve equality because of individualistic differences. Memphis states:

These niggers talking about freedom, justice, and equality and don't know what it mean.... These niggers talking about freedom, but what you gonna do with it? Freedom is heavy.... There ain't no justice. Jesus Christ didn't get justice. What makes you think you gonna get it?.... These niggers talking about they want freedom, justice, and equality. Equal to what? Hell, I might be a better man than you....Talking about black power with their hands and their pockets empty. You can't do nothing without a gun. (41-43)

The play puts into focus Civil Rights Movements in the 1960s, which attempt to defend black people rights. The playwright uses black

people to repeat the same words that were used against African Americans. This may suggest that the oppressed could use the same oppressing, strategies, or even language to oppress others. This is quite clear as the characters use insensitive language while talking about their race.

The play ends by Sterling carrying a large ham that he steals from Lutz's shop. He "enters, carrying a large ham. He is bleeding from his face and hands. He grins and lays the ham on the counter." Then he says, "Mr. West... that's for Hambone's casket" (110). The play suggests that justice needs power to be accomplished. Hambone waits for nearly ten years to get his ham; however, he does not have the power to compel Lutz to pay him. Apparently, Sterling follows Holloway's advice to exert some effort to get what he wants. Perhaps, Hambone is the spark that forces Sterling to act. At the end of the play, all the characters get what they want. Sterling avenges from Lutz and gets Hambone's ham. Risa finds a faithful lover who considers her the ultimate satisfaction in life. Memphis gets a fair price for his restaurant. The play explores characters' struggle to claim their rights. It criticizes a defective social contract that deprives mentally disturbed Hambone of taking his painting fee before he dies. It also suggests that people cannot solely rely on patience and persistence to retrieve their rights. Power should be applied to retain rights. Patience and perseverance are needed during this journey to achieve justice, but they should not be the sole factors in this struggle. Justice needs strength to put it into action. Otherwise, people will wait for ages to achieve nothing.

Some characters try to resist the oppressive status quo by taking action and claiming their rights like Memphis and Hambone. Both characters have the determination to call for their rights for years. Memphis follows judicial procedures to obtain his right while Hambone uses peaceful means to claim his rightful payment, as he does not possess the needed power to achieve justice. Perhaps, Hambone's character insinuates that peaceful slogans and words are not sufficient means to get your right.

Theater is a site for resistance against social, economic and ecological injustice. It indicts a flawed social contract that brings prejudice rather than justice. It tackles different stories about people

and their environment which interfere in formulating and affecting their experiences. May maintains that

Theatre's multivocal, embodied, shape shifting qualities make it an apt site for exploring questions of identity and community.... Moreover, the complications of theatre's performativity, its urban- and body-centeredness, its inherent multiplicity unveil new understandings of, and stories about, community, illuminating theatre's capacity to intervene publicly on behalf of social justice and ecological sustainability. (100)

At the end of the play, Sterling manages to get Hambone's payment by breaking into Lutz's shop, which suggests that injustice could lead to violence. He also wins some money through gambling. The play puts into focus the positive and negative sides of the characters' lives. Wilson presents economically empowered characters like Memphis who manages to get a fair price for his restaurant. He has the needed knowledge to defend his right and resist unfair laws that deprived him of his rights. Ben Brantley states, "'Two Trains' is all about money and the ways it defines, inspires and suffocates the inhabitants of the Hill" (n. Pag.).

*Two Trains Running* is about African Americans life and death stories. It puts into focus civil rights movements in the 1960s, and its influence on the life of African Americans. It underlines racial issues that resonates in the present time. Rich declares, "Rough in finish and unresolved at the final curtain, 'Two Trains Running' captures a racially divided country as it came apart. That Mr. Wilson's history bleeds so seamlessly into the present is testimony to the fact that the bringing together of that America is a drama yet to unfold" (13). Throughout the play, the characters compare between their past and present lives. Their stories implies alienation from the place and circumstances they face. Brennan states, "This is not so much a play of action but of energetic interactions, as characters riff around themes simultaneously personal and political" (n. pag.). Some of the characters seek spiritual comfort by visiting Aunt Ester who symbolizes the power of holding on to cultural heritage in times of crisis. Their beliefs motivate them to compete and challenge difficult situations.

*Two Trains Running* deals with diverse issues that still resonate in the present time. Nancy Medina believes that it is a political play. She explains:

What I find to be most profound is that everything the characters speak about in 1969 is still relevant to us in 2019 – issues with police brutality, a rigged economic system, housing inequalities, crime, poverty, trauma, mental illness, race hostilities. This play is very political in very subtle ways and I found that to be very powerful. (n. Pag)

The play highlights African Americans' struggle against prejudice. It discusses negative attitudes toward black people, putting into focus the obstacles black people face after their immigration to the North. It underpins economic problems, low living standards and oppressive circumstances. It also discusses the efficacy of Civil Rights Movement and Black Power movement on the current situation of African Americans. It questions the efficiency of peaceful movements to achieve justice and equality.

**Conclusion:**

*Two Trains Running* criticizes social injustice as a result of urban development plans in the 1960s. It suggests the injustice enforced on the environment can also affect human beings as a part of it. Ecocritical theatre is a means to reveal hegemonic practices against people and the environment. Not only does Ecodrama concentrate on stories about the environment, it also sheds light on stories about race, gender, class and poverty. Ecotheater is a site to resist injustice inflicted upon people and environment alike. It is used to illuminate the duty of community towards the environment/ nature and people. It calls for change and raises questions related to environment and people's identity.

*Two Trains Running* puts into focus different issues that are related to African Americans' life today as they were decades ago. It depicts the lives of black people who struggle against inequality, injustice and low social status. Furthermore, it underlines characters' past oppressive experiences, memories, failures, successes, emotional crises and future plans. It traces the transformations inflicted upon the characters' lives and the environment after city authority plans of environmental development. The play deals with negative attitudes

toward black people in the sixties. It discusses the hardships African Americans face after their immigration to the North. Additionally, it examines the influence of Civil Rights Movement on racial injustice exercised against African Americans. It questions the effectiveness of black movements calls on the elimination of racial segregation. Regardless of characters' long speeches and the fact that the play primarily depend on dialogue rather action, the play puts into focus important issues such as racism, housing, poverty and social injustice. It raises public awareness against racism and discrimination.

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