The Inheritance of Black Anger and Hope in August Wilson’s Series of Plays

Aya Takanashi

Introduction

August Wilson (1945-2005) is one of the greatest contemporary playwrights in 20th century America. Born of a German father and a black mother, his works explore the African American experience in the 20th century. His ten plays represent the black community and their lives in each decade, and they show the audience not the political, but the oral and cultural history of African Americans. He is the first and so far only black playwright in America to win all three major prizes for American theatre, which are, the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, and the Tony Award. Apart from his last play *Radio Golf*, all of his plays reached Broadway, and they are highly regarded by critics. Here is a list of August Wilson’s cycle of plays in order of the time each play is set.

1911-1920 *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1986)
1941-1950 *Seven Guitars* (1995)

*Seven Guitars* (1995), the fifth play of his cycle, is set in 1948 in the Hill District in Pittsburgh. It depicts the life and fall of Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton, a young ambitious guitarist who dreams of leading a successful life by making records in Chicago. In this play the seven characters weave the story like seven instruments playing the music of the time. In *Seven Guitars*, August Wilson shows the powerful and musical lives of the blacks, and at the same time he also shows their anger and struggles, living under the pressure of the dominant white society. Hedley, an old man who has his roots in a West Indian Island and is strongly proud of himself as a black man, plays an important role in representing this anger. He is one of the “idiot savant” characters of August Wilson’s plays, who show the truth in their apparently insane words and actions.

*King Hedley II* (1999) is set thirty-seven years after *Seven Guitars*, in 1985 at the same location. This play is closely connected to *Seven Guitars* in a number of ways. Most of the characters in *King Hedley II* have already appeared or have kinship with the characters in the earlier play, *Seven Guitars*. Most importantly, the main character of *King Hedley II* believes that he is the son of Hedley in *Seven Guitars*. Hedley feels a strong anger against white society and against blacks themselves, and it leads to the tragic ending of the play. The character *King* in *King Hedley II*, believing himself the son of Hedley, inherits his name and his strong anger. King also comes to a tragic end, but I think the way African Americans deal with their anger changes in these two plays.

In August this year at the Signature Theater in New York, a revival production of *Seven Guitars* opened. Watching this new production, I felt the strong power and feeling of African Americans from the stage, and also from its audience, which was mostly black. Just as the music played by Floyd Barton never fades, the anger represented by Hedley has not faded at all. In this production, Hedley was shown as a
rather old man with a twisted heart, rather than as a mysterious prophet. I think it lacked intensity and momentum; however, the interpretation was more audience-friendly, and his anger seemed more familiar to us. In February next year the same theater group is going to perform *King Hedley II*. I am interested in how they will show the anger of King and how they will interpret the inheritance of anger.

In this essay I would like to focus on the anger of Hedley and King and that of other black males surrounding them because I would like to show how August Wilson represents black anger in each play and how it changes. I chose these two plays to discuss the anger of African Americans from among his ten plays because I would like to aim at the inheritance of the anger over two generations. Since August Wilson tries to chronicle black history, the social, cultural, musical and emotional inheritance from fathers to sons is a very important issue. In this essay I would like to discuss especially the emotional inheritance—the inheritance of anger. *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II* actually have the strongest relationship in Wilson’s series of plays, and *King Hedley II* can almost be considered the sequel to the former play. Although Hedley is not really King’s father, this emotional inheritance from fathers (or from an older generation) to sons is vividly shown in these two plays.

**Chapter 1 Seven Guitars: Black Anger and Self-destruction**

In *Seven Guitars* (1995) Hedley represents the uncontrollable and destructive anger of African Americans, who feel dispossessed in white America. *Seven Guitars*, which is set in 1948, is a play filled with the music of the time, and it depicts the lives and community of blacks, which are lively even under the difficult circumstances -discrimination, unemployment and poverty. However, there is the strong anger of black males that lies deep beneath the surface of this musical and lively play. Of course this anger is depicted repeatedly in the other plays of August Wilson, but in *Seven Guitars* this anger results in a self-destructive way for the community, in the form of black-on-black violence.

Hedley is a character who embodies this anger and destruction. Vincent Canby writes, “Hedley expresses the playwright’s bluntest, most savage outrage at the black man’s condition in a white American society.” His anger is irrational and uncontrollable like his character itself, and it reflects how the anger of black males and the
author himself at this time. Hedley’s anger is not just against the white society, but also against himself, his friends, and the blacks in general. What is most tragic about this play is that this anger against the world results in self-destructive black-on-black violence.

It is not the first time for August Wilson to show black-on-black violence in his plays. For example, in the last scene of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984), an irritable young trumpet player Levee stabs one of his band members, who accidentally steps on his new shoes. Levee feels isolated from the other band members and betrayed by his white boss, and in the end he stabs that band member. Also in *Jitney* (1982), the friction between Young Blood and Turnbo is so tense that it nearly ends up in them shooting each other. In both cases, it does not take too much for one to kill the other, for black-on-black violence long existed in black community of August Wilson before *Seven Guitars*. In this play, the black-on-black violence once again explodes.

There is a scene that symbolically shows Hedley’s strong and self-destructive anger against blacks. In Act One, Scene 5, Hedley gets mad at Floyd, who throws a stone at a noisy rooster, and he suddenly kills the rooster in front of everyone. This scene foreshadows the black-on-black violence at the end of the play, which is Hedley’s murder of Floyd. Here the noisy rooster is the symbol of the black male, who is not needed by society, but tries to live out his life. Hedley sees the rooster as a symbol of the blacks and of himself:

The rooster is the king of the barnyard. He like the black man. He king. (61)

By killing the rooster, symbol of the blacks and yet a “King” like Hedley himself, Hedley tries to show his friends the foolishness of treating themselves badly and depreciating their value by themselves. Vincent Canby writes regarding this scene, “He’s [Hedley’s] punishing not the bird but them.” Hedley punishes the foolishness of his friends and warns them not to forget their pride as blacks.

Sustaining the pride of being a black male is so important for Hedley that he could kill a man for it. In Act Two, Scene 1, Hedley tells Ruby that he has in fact killed a man before because the man laughed at his name, “King.” Hedley says he killed the man because “he laughed to think a black man could be King” (67). It is tragic that the man who laughed at Hedley’s name was black, not white. The black
man was laughing at Hedley, but at the same time he was laughing at himself by thinking that "a black man could not be King." Hedley killed the man not only because his pride was hurt, but also because the man was not proud to be a black male. I think he felt strong anger against the man, who seems to have been reconciled to living under the control of the whites.

There is a structure, in which the anger against white society is transformed into black-on-black violence in *Seven Guitars*. The anger of the characters in this play is mostly toward white society, which does not treat them right. Almost every man feels some frustration because of the white dominant society they are living in. Canewell and Red Carter complain about the unfair treatment they got when they recorded Floyd's record last time. Floyd also tells his experience of being arrested by the police for nothing on the way home from his mother's funeral, and shows his anger against the white society in clear words:

I asked the police say, "I done nothing. What you arresting me for?" He say, "I'm arresting you in advance. You gonna do something." I just look at him and told him, "Well, boss, you right, cause if I had my druthers I'd cut you every which way but loose." He just laughed, cause he know a black man ain't never had his druthers. (41)

Floyd is a character who struggles to live and work equally with the whites with his talent of making music. He is proud of himself as a black man, and he does not want to be looked down on by whites. He carries a gun as a tool of resistance. He says that he carries his gun not to be treated wrongly by white power, but in the end he attacks blacks, not whites. When Floyd finds out that he has lost everything he was promised by the betrayal of his white manager Mr. T. L. Hall, he uses his gun as a tool of robbery and even turns it on his friend, Canewell. In this robbery he commits, Floyd's accomplice is shot by the police. This is another black man killed off stage.

What urges them on to commit violence against each other? I think Hedley is a key character to explain this vicious cycle. He is a twisted character and seems mentally disturbed. However, he is the character who speaks the truth and represents the twisted and complicated anger of African Americans.

As well as the other characters, Hedley expresses his strong anger - almost hatred -
toward the white society. In this regard, he is not very different from Floyd or other members of his community. However, what is particular about Hedley is that he also shows his anger toward black people. While Floyd and other characters just talk about their anger against white people, Hedley also expresses anger against himself and blacks. In other words, Hedley embodies the structure that leads blacks to hurt each other.

Hedley’s anger against himself is frustration for not being a “big man.” When Hedley receives a letter from the Board of Health, telling him to go into the sanitarium, he becomes angry. I think this scene shows Hedley’s frustration between the ideal and reality. He does not want to accept that he needs the help of the whites to get over TB, and he probably fears that he is going to die without doing anything great:

Hedley don’t go nowhere! ...The white man cannot help me! It is a plot against the black man! Hedley don’t go nowhere! (76)

In these words Hedley’s distrust for white society can be seen. At the same time, he is angry with himself for dying without being “big” as he should be, without being a “King” as his name suggests.

Hedley’s anger against himself is rooted in his childhood relationship with his father. The existence of the father means a lot for a black male, as it is depicted in many other plays of August Wilson. The father-son relationship is one of his favorite themes. It is the central theme of Fences (1985) (the relationship between Troy and Cory) and also of Jitney (1982) (Becker and Booster). Seth in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1986) is another one who lives on his inheritance from his father. These sons in August Wilson’s plays inherit a great deal from their fathers, regardless of whether they wish to do so or not.

Hedley in Seven Guitars is not an exception. He also inherits the anger of African Americans from his father. In Hedley’s words, his father was “big and black and tired taking care of the white man’s horses”(86). Hedley once blamed his father for doing nothing about that, unlike the Haitian revolutionary hero Toussaint L’Ouverture. Hedley regrets that he did so, but here we can see that he felt frustrated about his own father, who worked for the white men and did not resist. Since his father has already
gone, Hedley’s frustration toward his father is directed at himself. Therefore, he is angry at himself for not being able to do anything, like his father, and he wishes to entrust his anger and dream to his child. The main character of *King Hedley II* (1999) believes that he is that child.

One more thing to be mentioned is that Hedley plays the role of a prophet in *Seven Guitars*. There are some magical characters in August Wilson's plays, like Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) and Bynum in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986). Their acts and words are mysterious, and they sometimes seem insane, but they speak truth and wisdom. These prophetic characters sometimes lead people and at other times warn them. Hedley is one of these magical characters, and he often expresses his anger with religious and mysterious words. He repeatedly uses the phrase “Hedley know.” and quotes the words from the Bible. Hedley, as a prophet, represents the anger of black males in general.

The black man is the conquering Lion of Judea, you know. He like Toussaint L’Ouverture. He is the king! Most people don’t know that. Hedley know. He know himself what blood he got. They say, “Hedley, go on, you too serious with that” But Hedley know the white man walk the earth on the black man’s back. (40)

As the words above show, Hedley warns the blacks, who tend to forget their pride in being black. For the same reason, he killed the rooster in Act One, Scene 5, as mentioned previously. Hedley cannot forgive his black friends for forgetting their pride and going the wrong way, and as a prophet he “punishes” them.

Hedley strongly believes that the black man should be the king or even God. He believes in the royalty of blacks so strongly that he cannot accept reality:

Everybody say Hedley crazy because he black. Because he know the place of the black man is not at the foot of the white man’s boot. Maybe it is not all right in my head sometimes. Because I don’t like the world. I don’t like what I see from the people. The people is too small. I always want to be a big man. (67)
Being a "big man" means to Hedley not just to be proud of himself, but to be someone who deserves to be proud of himself. As a prophet he feels responsibility toward his people. He dreams of having a plantation and leading black people to the promised land. He somehow recognizes that he may not reach his goal, but then he dreams of giving a birth to the Messiah - his son. He cannot really have a son, but with Ruby’s assistance he can believe that he is going to leave something in the world. In this way Hedley’s unattained dream and destructive anger is inherited by the next generation, to the story of King Hedley II.

I see Hedley’s anger against himself and his people as a part of many reasons that lead August Wilson’s characters into black-on-black violence. By hurting and punishing each other, they ultimately hurt themselves. Black-on-black violence is nothing but self-destruction.

Seven Guitars ends up in this counterproductive self destruction - the murder of Floyd Burton by Hedley. This tragic ending of the story is foreshadowed by Hedley’s words at the end of Act two, Scene 1:

You are like a king! They look at you and they say, “This one... this one is the pick of the litter. This one we have to watch. We gonna put a mark on this one. This one we have to crush down like the elephant crush the lion!” You watch your back! The white man got a big plan against you. Don’t help him with his plan. He look to knock you down. He say, “That one!” Then they all go after you. You best be careful! (71)

This warning to Floyd is realized by Hedley himself. Here again, they hurt each other as a result. I think that this black-on-black violence represents a problem the black society holds inside. The anger and frustration of living in a white-dominated world should essentially turn outward, but it turns inward destructively in Seven Guitars.

However, the characters in the play are not aware of this self-destruction. Hedley kills Floyd without fully recognizing what he is doing. He is drunk, and he mistakenly believes that the jazz musician Buddy Bolden has brought his father’s money to him, as his father “promised” him in a dream. August Wilson talks about this scene in Seven Guitars in an interview: “He [the killer] doesn’t know he did it.” I think it
represents the unawareness of blacks of destroying themselves. August Wilson also says, "if Buddy Bolden is bringing some money from Hedley’s father, he represents his father’s forgiveness. ... In a way, the play says that anyone who is standing in the way of a black man’s independence needs to be dealt with. So it's very necessary that Hedley decides that Floyd, as Buddy Bolden, is the messenger, the courier who would like to keep the money, who will not give him his money so he can buy his plantation. It means it's a betrayal of Hedley’s father." In Hedley’s mind, he kills Buddy Bolden for standing in his way. But actually, Hedley kills Floyd - he cannot obtain his father's forgiveness but rather commits the sin of murder. By killing Floyd, Hedley destroys both his dream and his friend's dream without recognizing this self-destruction.

Only Canewell notices this self-destructive act at the end of this play. He comes to know what happened between Hedley and Floyd when Hedley shows the money to him at Floyd’s funeral. Being aware of the senselessness of black-on-black violence and the chain of anger and destruction, Canewell appears as a prophetic character called Stool Pigeon in King Hedley II to lead the next generation to cut this chain.

I think that Seven Guitars is a story that warns black people against self-destruction. Sometimes anger can seem like a sort of energy, and it can be a power to change society. However, the anger depicted in this play leads the character and the black community to self-destruction without awareness. And this anger is inherited by the next generation depicted in the ninth play of the August Wilson’s cycle, King Hedley II.

Chapter 2 King Hedley II: Cutting the Chain of Destruction

While Hedley in Seven Guitars represents the uncontrollable anger of black males that leads to destruction, King in King Hedley II represents the struggle of blacks who try to control this anger and cut the chain of destruction. King is also an angry black man, and he inherits the strong anger of Hedley in Seven Guitars. His acts and words in this play often overlap with that of Hedley, and actually King tries to do everything in the way he thinks Hedley would. However, at a certain point of this play, King learns to control his anger and gains the ability to forgive, things that Hedley could not do after all. Besides, the accidental death of King in the last scene disconnects the
anger not only from himself but from people around him and the next generation.

As announced by the "truth-sayer" Stool Pigeon in the prologue, this play is set in a time when "everything done got broke up" and "look like it's gonna be broke up some more before it get whole again" (7). I think that August Wilson tries to break everything down in this play in order to pull it together again. The play is full of anger, killing, and violence, and its ending is tragic, but it seems to me that it is still the story of regaining the power of forgiveness and the beginning of reconstruction.

Although King is not really Hedley's son, his inheritance from Hedley is not only his name, but also his pride and anger as a black man. At first, King's anger is expressed in the same way as Hedley's, which is, black-on-black violence. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Hedley once killed a man because the man laughed at his name, "King." Almost the same story is told in King Hedley II. King has been in jail for seven years for killing a man called Parnell because he called King "Champ," not "King." King once held back his anger and gave Parnell another chance, but his anger exploded when Parnell cut his face with a knife. After all, King comes to kill Parnell for the same reason that Hedley felt he had to kill the man who laughed at his name. Both Hedley and King killed in order not to lose their dignity. The anger and violence of these two proud men are their ways of self-assertion and of expressing their identity.

Their name 'King' itself also shows their identities. It represents their anger and pride, and it also foreshadows the fate of this black man, King as it appears in the title of the play. Especially in King Hedley II, the importance of the name is emphasized. While King Hedley in Seven Guitars is called 'Hedley' by his friends, the main character in King Hedley II is called 'King.' It suggests that Hedley after all could not deserve to be called 'King' but King could. Here whether he deserves to be called 'King' or not means whether he is a 'big man' or not. Both Hedley and King want to be a 'big man.' In Seven Guitars Hedley ends up playing second string to a 'big man' in the play Floyd; King at last attains his right to be called 'King' or a 'big man' by getting the ability to forgive and by his death.

In the first half of King Hedley II, King's anger and violence are depicted as his way of dealing with the world, in other words, being a warrior. August Wilson does not justify the violence, but he often depicts black men who exercise violence in order to protect their pride as "warriors." For example, Booster in Jitney claims that
he killed his girlfriend, who falsely accused him of rape, to be a “big man,” and he thought his father would be proud of him as a warrior (Jitney, 57). The story of Levee in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is another example. Levee’s father took revenge on the white men who raped his wife, and he killed four of them before he was caught by them. Levee is proud of his father being a warrior, and he says, “That taught me how to handle them” (Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, 70).

I think that August Wilson tends to depict violence or mistakes as something inevitable as long as they are done for the right purpose. This tendency is also seen in Seven Guitars and King Hedley II. In Act One of King Hedley II, King does not feel sorry at all for what he did to Parnell. He says, “I ain’t sorry for nothing I done” (56). These words show that he thinks his act was righteous violence, just as Hedley thinks so when he killed the man who refused to call him King and even when he killed Floyd. I think that the way King expresses his anger does not differ so much from that of Hedley in Seven Guitars until a certain point in this play. King walks around with his gun to look for Parnell’s cousin when he hears that the latter is looking for him. When he has problems with getting a picture of his wife that he ordered from Sears even though he has a receipt, he vents his anger roughly and directly on his friends. It does not seem he can control his anger any better than Hedley.

However, in King Hedley II, the character’s regret for this “righteous violence” is shown very clearly for the first time. King got a scar on his face when Parnell attacked him, and it reminds him of the incident all the time. This scar is a symbol of his crime and because of that, he has to realize that he lost something when he killed Parnell, although he meant to regain something -probably his pride and dignity- by killing him. King tells his wife Tonya, after he sees Parnell’s grave in the cemetery and finds out that he was the father of a little boy:

Parnell stepped on me and I pulled his life out by the root. What does that make me? It don’t make me a big man. ... I used to think Parnell did that to me. But I did it myself. Parnell put that scar on my face, but I put the bigger mark on myself. (83-84)

There is a clear change in King’s mind as the play progresses. His words above show his regret and his realization that he cannot take back his honor by killing a
man. He tries to stop expressing his anger like Hedley did in *Seven Guitars*. It does not mean that he gives up being proud of himself. He just realizes that no one can take away his dignity, even when somebody insults or injures him.

There is a symbolic scene at the end of Act One in *King Hedley II*. Elmore steps on the seeds that King planted in the yard, and King gets angry at him. He insists that the seeds are growing and that he has got good dirt. The seeds are the symbol of African Americans, who live in difficult circumstances, and King gets angry because his friends do not believe that they can grow. He wants to believe that they should be able to grow and gain success, although the circumstances are far from perfect. This is a contrast to Act One, Scene 5 in *Seven Guitars*. In *Seven Guitars* the rooster, also a symbol of African Americans, is killed by Hedley to show his anger against his friends and blacks in general. Here we can clearly see the difference between Hedley and King in how and why they express their anger. While Hedley’s anger represents the despairing cry of African Americans and it ends up in black-on-black violence, King’s anger represents the struggle and the frustration of the blacks, who try to step forward.

There is another scene which is quite symbolic and kind of mysterious. King asks his best friend Mister if he has a halo around his head at the opening part of the play:

> I dreamt I had a halo. The police was chasing me and all of a sudden they stopped and just looked at me. I said, “It must be my halo,” only I didn’t know if it was there or not. (14)

A halo is a symbol of sacredness and here perhaps of forgiveness. These words of King remind us of that Hedley wanted to have the Messiah as his son. Actually, there was a scene in *Seven Guitars* cut by August Wilson to make the play shorter, and in that scene, Ruby also dreams of having a halo on her head. August Wilson in the interview affirms that Ruby represents the Virgin Mary. Since King is her son, it suggests that King is the Messiah. At this moment of the play the audience cannot see how King can be a Messiah in any way, but this image of the halo, as well as the image of seeds in the ground, makes the audience expect some progress in the world of black Americans in August Wilson’s plays.

It might sound contradictory because it seems like the situation for African
Americans has hardly improved in August Wilson's plays. There is a 37-year lapse of
time between these two plays. While Seven Guitars is set in 1948, King Hedley II is
set in 1985. Since the situation even seems to get worse for them as long as we read
the words of August Wilson's characters, King Hedley II is usually understood as a
play that shows the unimproved situation of blacks in America, behind the success of
white society.

Actually the circumstances depicted in King Hedley II seem harsher than in any
other play of August Wilson. In this play Aunt Ester, according to the author the most
important character of all, dies after her 366 years of life. August Wilson has said that
all of the characters in his plays are the children of Aunt Ester. Her age, 366 years
are the exact number of years that African Americans have spent in America. There is
no doubt that her death means a lot in the black history August Wilson portrays. She
dies from grief, and it means that their wisdom of life is lost and that they are in a
helpless situation.

Stool Pigeon, who inherits the prophetic part of Hedley, repeatedly says "we in
trouble now" (20) and is afraid of God bringing fire down on the earth. Stool Pigeon
is the character who represents the anger and anxiety of African Americans in a simi-
lar way to Hedley in Seven Guitars. It is interesting that it is not King but Stool
Pigeon who inherits the prophetic and religious roles of Hedley. King says to Elmore
that he is living without God since he killed somebody. King cannot be a prophet in
this play because he knows that he has already lost his right to speak for God by
killing a man. Instead, Stool Pigeon inherits Hedley's anger toward the world and
speaks about God's anger. Stool Pigeon's anger is rooted in the murder of his friend
Floyd by Hedley. He told the truth to the police and since then he is called 'Stool
Pigeon' in the community, and his real name 'Canewell' is forgotten. He was angry
with Hedley, but more than that, he is angry against fate - the fate of Hedley and
Floyd, Stool Pigeon himself and the blacks in white society. He is angry with God,
who is the only one to control the fate of his people and repeatedly calls God a 'bad
motherfucker.' Unlike Hedley's times, in Stool Pigeon's words we can read the deep
despair of the blacks and their feelings that even God is no longer a righteous exis-
tence for them.

Everybody carries guns, and the newspapers write "City Violence Escalates" (34).
Tonya does not want to give birth to a baby because she is afraid of raising him or her
up in the world full of violence. Her words are strong and painful when she tells King that she is not going to have that baby:

Why I want to bring another life into this world that don’t respect life? I don’t want to raise no more babies when you got to fight to keep them alive. (39)

The circumstances for blacks are undoubtedly at the depths of despair, and so, I think August Wilson entrusts his character King with the task of controlling uncontrollable anger and cutting the chain of violence and destruction.

In the play, this task is given to King by Stool Pigeon, who represents the intention of August Wilson from the beginning of the play. In Act Two, Scene 1, Stool Pigeon gives King the machete that Hedley used to kill Floyd in *Seven Guitars*:

I give that machete to you, and me and Hedley come full circle. That’s yours. You can do with it what you want. If you find a way to wash that blood off you can go sit on top of the mountain. ...That’s the Key to the mountain. (62)

What does “the Key to the mountain” mean? Both Stool Pigeon and King do not really know what it is, but by the time the play comes to its end, we can see that it is the ability to forgive. Christopher Rawson, in his stage review writes, “[Comparing it to the previous production in Pittsburgh,] The plot points are clearer, and Stool Pigeon is much more explicit that the ‘key to the kingdom’ King must seek is ability to forgive.”8 As Stool Pigeon says “a way to wash that blood off” above, it is clear that Stool Pigeon does not give it to King in order to kill someone else. He rather leaves King the task of cleansing himself from his sin and his father’s sin. In the end King finds a way to wash the blood off. He uses the machete not to kill Elmore, but to cut the chain of anger and destruction in the black community.

In an interview with *Theater Week* in 1996, just before starting to write *King Hedley II*, August Wilson talks about his next play and says, “The whole purpose of the play may be to stop the seventeen-year-old son from doing it (killing a man like his surrogate father).”9 His purpose of stopping “the seventeen-year-old son” King from committing another killing succeeded in this play. As the author himself admits, this play was written to stop the black-on-black violence, which was inherited
through a long history of black males.

The last scene of *King Hedley II* proves it better than any other scenes of this play. As I wrote at the beginning, the accidental death of King cuts the chain of anger and violence among the characters in the play. In this scene, his anger, that he has somehow managed to control so far, nearly explodes like that of Hedley in *Seven Guitars*. King is confused and angry because Elmore tells him that his father is not King Hedley but Leroy, whom Elmore has killed. King challenges Elmore with Hedley’s machete in his hand, but at last he chooses not to kill Elmore. King chooses not to inherit the anger of his father. Elmore, as well as King, once turns his gun at King but chooses not to kill him. But then King is shot by his mother Ruby by accident.

I think that the death of King has two meanings. First, since King is killed by his mother by accident, his death will not yield any more anger among them. Although it is an accident, their anger against each other is sublimated by his death. King’s anger against Elmore, Elmore’s anger against King, Tonya’s anger against King and Ruby’s anger against Elmore... these all disappear with his death and only sorrow remains. On the contrary, the death of Floyd in *Seven Guitars* left the anger in Stool Pigeon and made him a twisted character with anger at and fear of God. It also left anger in Hedley himself, and his anger was inherited by King in *King Hedley II*. The accidental death of King is a way to avoid further inheritance of anger.

The second meaning of his death is the author’s intention of breaking everything down before reconstruction. Set in 1985, *King Hedley II* is the ninth play of August Wilson’s cycle of 20th century black history, and it was written just before he wrote the first and last pieces of his series of plays. I think that August Wilson intended to break the whole world down in this play so that the next decade is going to be fresh with something new and appropriate to put at the end of the century. This is why I say *King Hedley II* is a story of reconstruction. The cat’s meow heard at the end of this play is symbol of regeneration. It cannot be that Aunt Ester herself that is regenerated, but it is something that represents her will, wisdom and spirit. After all the destruction in this play, there can be a reconstruction of black history.

Because the death of King is an accident, there is a criticism that it does not make any sense in this play. However, I would say that it is a meaningful conclusion. Although it is an accident and King’s death is brought about by chance, it ends the chain of destruction as a result. Christopher Rawson says, “The most random killing
comes at "Hedley's" climax, but surely that is fated, too." The "fate" is uncontrollable, but I think it is the end that is arranged carefully by the author. According to Stool Pigeon's words in Prologue, "He wrote the beginning and the end"(8). Here "he" is God, and what he means is that we cannot control our fate, but in regard to a play, "he" can also mean the author himself. It is August Wilson who controls how the story starts and ends. I do not deny that it might have turned out in another way. It is not important whether it is an accident or not, but it is important that August Wilson, who is a black man himself, chose to end the destruction long depicted in his plays.

By the death of King, his anger, which he inherits from Hedley, is finally transformed into a power which is less violent but stronger. His death itself is certainly a tragedy, but it holds a little bit of possibility toward the future and the next generation. I think it is the progress August Wilson tried to depict in this play. What his darkest tragedy tells us is not the darkest message for us.

**Conclusion**

August Wilson is a playwright who empowers the audience by showing the pain and the strength of African Americans on stage. He shows the inheritance of anger from Hedley to King in the two plays *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*. At the end of *King Hedley II*, the chain of self-destruction is symbolically cut by the death of King, but it isn't cut yet in the reality the audience lives in. However, what is important is that he shows how the chain can be cut in front of his intended black audience in the theater. August Wilson in his last interview quotes the words of Romare Bearden, an African American painter he strongly respected, "Art is born out of necessity." I think that the plays of August Wilson were born out of the necessity of all the black people in America who needed anchorage. They were also born out of the necessity of August Wilson, who searched for meaning in writing his plays.

I focused on how August Wilson expressed the anger of Hedley and King in these two plays, and how it changed. I think this comparison helps us to understand the whole idea of his ten-play cycle better. While he warns black people against self-destruction through black against violence in *Seven Guitars*, he shows a way to stop the destruction in *King Hedley II*. This can be read as a positive message of the author.
because it shows a certain amount of progress in this ten-play cycle. However, I think the author’s basic attitude to the plays does not change from *Seven Guitars* to *King Hedley II*. Vincent Canby in his review of *Seven Guitars* writes, “Mr. Wilson’s methods, concerns and influences do not vary from play to play.”[12] Both in *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II* the situation for African Americans is rather miserable, but the characters never look miserable. There are always deaths in the plays of August Wilson; however, he was definitely not trying to show the audience the death of African Americans, but their strong lives. Ben Brantley in *The New York Times* writes on the production of *King Hedley II* at the new O’Reilly Theater in 2000, “And though its characters sense their futures shrinking around them, they themselves never, ever seem small.”[13] I think these words justly describe the strength of black Americans that August Wilson shows us on the stage. I think these words of Ben Brantley also apply to Wilson’s other plays. Every play of August Wilson shows us the limitless power of blacks.

I do not deny that the last three plays, *King Hedley II*, *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf* were written deliberately to conclude the cycle. I feel like that his purpose of “empowering” the people is too obvious and the endings of those plays are a kind of wishful thinking. How King and Elmore forgive each other in *King Hedley II* may not be as realistic as how Troy Maxon dies without a mutual understanding with his son Cory in *Fences*. Yet, however hard the reality is, August Wilson tries to show a strong history and a hopeful future for African Americans. It is necessity of the people whom August Wilson was writing plays for. I believe it is the whole purpose of his ten-play cycle.

I think August Wilson tried to be Aunt Ester by writing and showing his plays. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, he says that all the characters are the children of Aunt Ester. I think he meant that all the characters somehow inherit Aunt Ester’s will and wisdom; in other words, their roots and identities as Africans. At the same time, the characters are the children of August Wilson, who created a story for each of them. Naturally the characters’ words reflect the author’s ideas. I think August Wilson did not try to put a political message in the characters’ words in his plays, but he tried to put some kind of hint for life in them. It is just like what Aunt Ester did for her people in *Gem of the Ocean*. She heals the people with her magical words and gathers people into a community. I think it is also what August Wilson tried to do with his
ten-play cycle.

August Wilson says, "my goal was to prove that it [black experience] was inexhaustible, that there was no idea that couldn't be contained by black life."14 As described in these words, Wilson's plays were written for blacks living in America, by a black playwright. But I find some universality in his plays because emotions such as anger, hate and love depicted in his plays are common for all the people, especially for those who ever felt dispossessed in any way. An Irish writer Roddy Doyle writes in his novel, "An’ Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland. The culchies have fuckin’ everything. An’ northside Dubliners are the niggers o’ Dublin."15 I think that there are numbers of "niggers" - people who feel dispossessed - in this world. August Wilson's plays are primarily written for black Americans, but I think these plays can also empower many others around the world.

Aunt Ester dies in King Hedley II, and August Wilson also passed away in 2005. However, his plays will never fade away and will always empower people just as Aunt Ester did.

Notes

7 The preface of King Hedley II, page x
8 Rawson, Christopher. "Cleaner, leaner ‘Hedley’ hits Broadway." Pittsburgh Post Gazette (May 02, 2001)

10 Rawson, Christopher. “Cleaner, leaner ‘Hedley’ hits Broadway.” *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* (May 02, 2001)


**Bibliography**


Summary

I am studying the anger of African Americans expressed in August Wilson’s two plays, Seven Guitars (1995) and King Hedley II (1999). These two plays have the strongest relationship in Wilson’s ten plays, which depict the African American experience in the 20th century, decade by decade. Most of the characters in King Hedley II have already appeared or have kinship with the characters in the earlier play, Seven Guitars. Most importantly, the main character of King Hedley II believes that he is the son of the old prophetic character in Seven Guitars, Hedley. Hedley feels strong anger against the dominant white society and also against blacks themselves, and it leads to the tragic ending of the play. King Hedley II is also a character twisted by anger, and he also comes to a tragic end, but I think that the way this anger is dealt
with changes in the two plays.

Set respectively in 1948 and 1985 at the same location in the Pittsburgh Hill District, these two plays show the inheritance of anger over two generations. In *Seven Guitars* Hedley represents the uncontrollable anger of African Americans who feel dispossessed in white America, and this anger results in a self-destructive way for the community, in the form of black-on-black violence. In *King Hedley II*, the main character King inherits this strong anger from his surrogate father Hedley, but in the end he chooses not to kill, not to hurt others any more. At a certain point in the play, he gains the ability to forgive, and it cuts the chain of destruction.

*King Hedley II* is normally seen as the darkest tragedy of Wilson’s ten plays, but I think it is an important step that leads us to the next decade and to the 21st century. Including these two plays I discussed, I think Wilson’s ten-play cycle was written to empower those who feel dispossessed in society. August Wilson met the necessity of these people by writing about the limitless power of blacks and a hopeful future for them.