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## The Putdown: Intergenerational Communicative Dynamics of Male Characteristics in the Plays of August Wilson

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**The Putdown: Intergenerational Communicative Dynamics of Male  
Characteristics in the Plays of August Wilson**

THE PUTDOWN:  
INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMICS OF MALE CHARACTERS  
IN THE PLAYS OF AUGUST WILSON

by

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
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Conversations between individuals, particularly disputes, can be interpreted differently by an observer. While some people may look at a conflict as being damaging and harmful, the participants may realize its true benefits. Older generations believed being tough on children and younger generations prepared them for the hardships of the outside world. This idea was strongly believed by African-Americans, whose major conflicts have consistently been their survival, success, and acceptance in the white-majority American society.

Communication and language are very important among African-American families and society. Their vocal and verbal patterns are different from other cultures, yet very understandable and meaningful to each other. Fluid and often rhythmic, the language and mannerisms used, including dialect and speech patterns, help share information about the problems and situations in society. One element of language which has played a major role in the culture and life of Africans and African-Americans is the art of signifying. Hermese E. Roberts defines signifying as “language behavior that makes direct or indirect implications of baiting or boasting, the essence of which is making fun of another’s appearance, relatives, or situation“ (Signifying 68). Signifying can be applied in stories or conversations for helpful or harmful purposes, impacting both the communication between people and the conversation’s meaning. With a rich African heritage that survived the institution of slavery, signifying is still used among families and throughout society in conversations, stories, and poetry. Though some forms of signifying are shared through oral tradition, signifying can also be displayed in various forms of African-American literature, including drama. Some productions present signifying through real-life situations that could occur in the black communities, while other plays satirize other plays, certain stereotypes, or characteristics made about blacks and their culture.

Most African-American playwrights use realistic dialogue and monologues in their plays to share messages and stories about African-American culture, history, and society with others. One of the most popular and successful African-American playwrights today is August Wilson. His plays are a plethora of storytelling, and makes use of strong dialogue. Wilson displays elements of African-American culture

and history in each of his plays, mostly through interaction and conversations between the characters. Wilson's plays are part of a larger project known as the twentieth-century cycle, in which each play represents a decade of African-American history and culture.

Wilson includes different types of signifying within the world of the play, including strong dialogue between characters and the use of putdowns for various reasons, similar to its uses in real life. Wilson's writing techniques and use of signifying add to the uniqueness of the play as well as assist the development and understanding of the plot and characters. This study investigates the use and types of putdowns in August Wilson's plays and its impact on the intergenerational relationships between father and son and other males, as well as the plot and other elements of the play. The study will analyze both the relationships between males from different generations, and the history and use of signifying, including put-downs, within the African-American society. Also, Wilson's use of signifying and put-downs to present and affect the relationships between male characters in his plays, specifically between family members and different generations, will be discussed. Though this use is evident to some degree in all of his plays, this investigation will focus on three plays: Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1984), Fences (1985), and Jitney (2000).

#### Male Relationships and Intergenerational Influence

The relationship between male individuals can vary depending on the presence and active involvement of the older male in the life of the younger. According to Clyde W. Franklin II, males usually avoid sharing any personal feelings or emotions with other males, due to "socialized competitiveness, dominance, and males' learned fears of emotional intimacy with other males," traits males learn in their youth as they learn to become 'men' (120). This desensitization and concern about other people's perceptions prevent the development of many friendships between males, though some males can look beyond these fears to develop bonds within and outside their family.

Some bonds can develop between people of different age group and generations. In most circumstances, the roles of these people become mentor/student or father/son, where the elder tries to

teach the youth and point them in the right direction in society. These bonds exist strongly in African-American society, where, as Robert Staples states, there is a common “need for mutual aid and survival” in a majority-white society (124). Harrison Y. Smith adds that, according to a 1976 essay by Katz and Bender, people “need to live, to be valued, to experience, to give, to share with others, to transcend the boundaries of their own egos—to give in social communion. Many must fight for a place in the world, to reshape a society that cannot see their value” (25). Mentors and fathers help the younger generation adapt to society in order to succeed in life and advance the African-American society in this country.

The African-American family unites to confront racial and societal issues, and to preserve their part of a strong history and culture. Smith presents Billingsley’s definition of the African-American family:

An intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means, including blood, marriage, formal adoption, informal adoption, or by appropriation; sustained by a history of common residence in America; and deeply embedded in a network of social structures both internal to and external to itself. Numerous interlocking elements come together, forming an extraordinarily resilient institution. (24)

Smith adds Robert Hill’s five strengths of black families: adaptability of family roles, strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, strong religious orientation, and strong achievement orientation (24).

These strengths help provide the support and knowledge needed to keep the members prepared for society and the family together as a group.

Fathers can be influential to their sons in different ways, both positive and negative. Ronald L. Taylor explains, “the father’s influence as a model stems from his ability to provide what may be called crucial resources, i.e., pertinent behavior patterns, general value orientations, and the like, which the youth has found, through experience, to be particularly effective in coping with certain developmental problems” (10). When present, the father is considered a hero and teacher of power, control, and survival. The father’s involvement in different issues throughout his son’s life can have a lasting effect on the son’s development and future. Positive paternal impressions at an early age can help the son as he grows up, even if he seems to distance himself physically from his father (Taylor 10). The relationship between

father and son can go through many stages and extremes. As Perry Garfinkel explains, the relationship goes through stages “of reverence, revolt, and ultimately, one hopes, reconciliation” (6). As he grows up, the son makes a choice to “become” and take on the traits of his father. This decision could be made depending on the father’s involvement and imprint on the son’s life. A lack of involvement can turn the father into a negative, yet still influential, model, that is, according to Taylor, “an evil prototype of identity features the youth should seek to prevent” (Taylor 10).

As the youth grows up, males outside the family begin to influence his decisions and teach lessons based on their own experiences. Older generations may try to live their youth again through storytelling and their involvement in the lives of the younger generation. As mentors or as competitors in life, African-American elders will work with their younger members to survive the hardships of society, as well as to teach and expand their own culture.

### Communication and Signifying

One of the most important aspects of a relationship is communication and the use of language. Staples describes language as “the primary conveyor of cultural attitudes toward people and events” (73). Oral tradition is one example of the importance of language and communication in African-American society. Even when other societies may have considered the speech patterns careless and uneducated, African-Americans can assure themselves of their wealth of knowledge and culture, and in their abilities to control their own lives in this society through their linguistic talents (Staples 74).

Some of the forms of communication used by African-Americans today include telling stories, verbal games (e.g., playing the dozens), and generally eloquent talking, or rapping, which draws attention from the audience to the speaker (Staples 74). These activities succeed through the active and composed facility of the language and words. Variations of these forms can be classified as types of signifying. Depending on the individual, signifying has different spellings (i.e., signifying, signifyin(g), and signifyin’), many definitions, and many variations of terms, including “marking,” “loud-talking,” “calling



out someone,” “sounding,” “rapping,” and “playing the dozens” (Literature 286). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. presents Roger Abrahams’s definition of signifying:

Signifying . . . can mean any of a number of things . . . to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes . . . [which] encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. (Literature 288)

Abrahams describes signifying as a “technique of indirect argument or persuasion, a language of implication, to imply, goad, beg, boast, by indirect verbal or gestural means” (Literature 288). This technique includes stirring up a fight between others by telling stories and making fun of others by mimicking their actions.

Signifying is not just a negative or competitive linguistic practice, but rather, according to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, “a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection” (Kochman 315). Jim Haskins and Hugh F. Butts explain “[Signifying is] the clever and humorous use of words, but it can be used for many purposes—‘putting down’ another person, making another person feel better, or simply expressing one’s feelings” (Signifying 71). The presentation of signifying can also be either light, “that is, for verbal posturing,” or heavy, “that is, a way of driving home a cognitive message” (Smitherman 120).

Linguist Geneva Smitherman provides some common characteristics of signifying, which may or may not exist in every form:

Indirection, circumlocution; metaphorical-imagistic (but images rooted in the everyday, real world); humorous, ironic; rhythmic fluency and sound; teachy but not preachy; directed at person or persons usually present in the situational context; punning, play on words; introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected. (121)

Smitherman adds, “Signifyin’ can be a witty one-liner, a series of loosely related statements, or a cohesive discourse on one point. It can exhibit all or a combination of characteristics just cited” (121).

The use of signifying can be traced as far back as slavery times, when slaves would sing songs which, unbeknownst to their masters, would communicate to each other about times and places of secret meetings and other information (Signifying 69-70). Frederick Douglas adds that some people

misinterpret the slaves' singing as "evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake" (Signifying 67). Signifying can still be used for positive means, including telling stories to make people feel better about their own lives and telling fables to teach lessons about life, or "schooling."

Today the most common form of signifying is known as "playing the dozens." Often played by black adolescents as "Yo Mama" jokes, the "Dirty Dozens," according to Clarence Major, is "a very elaborate game traditionally played by black boys, in which the participants insult each other's relatives, especially their mothers. The object of the game is to test emotional strength. The person to give in to the anger is the loser" (Signifying 68). Musicians also use signifying through competitions called "cutting contests," in which individuals show their talents to prove who is the best performer.

Variations of signifying can be classified according to their intentions and presentation. Abrahams presents a chart in his book Talking Black, which breaks down signifying into two categories: serious, clever conflict talk between two people, also known as 'talking smart;' and non-serious contest talk with anyone around, or 'talking shit.' Abrahams further breaks down 'talking smart' into two terms: overtly aggressive talk, or 'putting down;' and covertly aggressive, manipulative talk, or 'putting on.' Within this group of words, Abrahams explains these forms of 'talking smart' "arises within conversational context, yet judged in performance (stylistic) terms" (46). The list of terms referring to some type of signifying can go on, but we will focus on 'putting down' in this study.

Contrasting with loud talking and the put-on, Abrahams describes the put-down as a "style that relies on sharpness of perception and verbal focus," rather than just speaking louder than the other person (54). When putting down, the signifier uses witty devices and talking techniques to establish dominance and control in the conversation. Abrahams compares the 'put-down' as a serious form of 'playing the dozens,' in that some of the same verbal devices are used in both instances (54). Though the results can be as damaging and insulting as that of the dozens, the message within the put-down can also be meaningful and instructive.

Application to August Wilson's Plays

August Wilson's plays present realistic situations and relationships to which audiences can relate. Many of his plays display communication and conflicts within families and between generations. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom takes place in a Chicago recording studio in 1927, and features black musicians working within a white-run industry. Music at this time has started to make a transition in terms of rhythm and style. The older members are content with the original "jug-band" music they have been playing; as the bass player Slow Drag puts it, "Don't make no difference. Long as we get paid" (745). Meanwhile, the younger trumpeter Levee wants to create a newer version that appeals to the current public. The older members understand the system for which they are working, and are trying to not cause any issues and risk not getting paid:

CUTLER: You wanna be one of them . . . what you call . . . virtuoso or something, you in the wrong place. You ain't no Buddy Bolden or King Oliver . . . you just an old trumpet player come a dime a dozen. Talking about art.

LEVEE: What is you? I don't see your name in lights.

CUTLER: I just play the piece. Whatever they want. I don't go talking about art and criticizing other people's music.

They try to convince Levee to just play the music in front of them:

LEVEE: But everybody can't play like I do. Everybody can't have their own band.

CUTLER: Well, until you get your own band where you can play what you want, you just play the piece and stop complaining. I told you when you came on here, this ain't none of them hot bands. This is an accompaniment band. You play Ma's music when you here. (745)

Levee tries to tell the other members that the white managers, Sturdyvant and Irvin, are the ones in charge instead of Ma Rainey or any of them, but the others, specifically Toledo, warn Levee not to trust or rely on their white managers:

I'll tell you something. As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he says . . . as long as he looks to white folks for approval . . . then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing. (748)

This message is just one lesson discussed between the members during this session. Most conflicts occur between Levee and Toledo, the latter trying to teach Levee how to survive in this society and not waste

his life away. Cutler calls Levee's use of all his week's pay to buy only a new pair of shoes foolish (749). This complaint begins a discussion about how people waste their life on just having fun instead of making life better for oneself and the race. Their warnings about their white managers come to light when Sturdyvant will only pay for Levee's songs instead of letting him record them for himself.

The older members criticize Levee for his ideas and willingness to rebel against the norm of black society. They share their experiences through stories and put down the actions and statements Levee makes about certain issues. The language used between the men become rather harsh and charging, but their criticism helps show Levee the importance of making certain decisions. Also, the ability to influence Levee, a next-generation musician, will make them feel like a part of his experiences and thus allowing them to relive their youth.

These conversations can also extend into the family, especially between father and son. Fences is set in 1957, and shows the struggles of a former Negro League baseball player-turned-garbage collector named Troy. As the opportunities for blacks have expanded in sports and life, his major issues about society include not being able to play in the major leagues when he was in his prime. He begins to direct his anger toward his son Cory, who is attempting to be recruited for college for playing football. Troy's frustration over his own missed opportunities causes him to yell at Cory about not helping around the house and choosing to play football instead of working and learning a trade: "That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use" (Fences 35). This suggestion comes from his past experiences, in which he was unsuccessful in sports and to conforming to the white society. He wants to point Cory in the 'right' direction to make things better for his son. In an interview with David Savran, Wilson points out Troy's major flaw: "[He] does not recognize that the world was changing. That's because he spent fifteen years in a penitentiary" (Savran 299).

Troy's complaints toward his son continue, wanting Cory to respect and address him properly:

"Nigger, as long as you in my house, you put that sir on the end of it when you talk to me" (Fences 37).

He also explains that part of his role as a father is not to like his son:

It's my job! It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house . . . fill you belly up with my food . . . cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let's get this straight right here . . . I ain't got to like you . . . I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you your life! Me and your mama worked that out between us. And liking your black ass wasn't part of the bargain. (Fences 38)

Troy warns Cory to not try to go through life worrying about who likes him: "You best be making sure they doing right by you" (38). This final statement shows Troy's attempt to help his son, even though his put-down statements are harsh and biting. His hardness toward his son is probably a trait he learned from his dad's "evil" behavior toward him. Troy's dad never really cared much for him other than to get work done, so Troy left his house at fourteen after a major fight (50-53). He wants to make things better for his children, but nothing will soften his edge and treat them nicer than he does.

Franklin presents Dick Vittitow's list of "ten commandments of manhood" which could be seen in Troy's situation, among other cases:

1. Thou shalt not be weak, nor have a weak God before thou.
2. Thou shalt not fail thyself, nor "fail" as thy father before thee.
3. Thou shalt not keep holy any day that denies thy work.
4. Thou shalt not love in ways that are intimate and sharing.
5. Thou shalt not cry, complain, or feel lonely.
6. Thou shalt not commit public anger.
7. Thou shalt not be uncertain or ambivalent.
8. Thou shalt not be dependent.
9. Thou shalt not acknowledge thy depth or thy limitations.
10. Thou shalt do unto other men before they do unto you. (121)

Fathers like Troy do not always know the best way to treat their children, but they attempt to prepare them better than their dads prepared them. The importance of using put-downs is that the receiver of the statements understands their intentions to help and not to completely harm or blast. Cory did not completely understand Troy's intentions, and never took the time to accept things until after Troy died. Even then, his mother Rose had to convince him to go to the funeral instead of disrespecting him in

absence: “Whatever was between you and your daddy . . . the time has come to put it aside . . . You got to find a way to come to that on your own” (Fences 96). After their talk Cory realized what his dad was trying to accomplish in life as a father and person. Cory will take his own experiences with and traits from his dad into the later stages of his life. Wilson summarizes this “healthy” family situation: “I think every generation says to the previous generation: you’re in my way, I’ve got to get by. The father-son conflict is actually a normal generational conflict that happens all the time” (Savran 300).

Wilson presents other versions of relationships between generations and fathers and sons in his play Jitney. Set in Pittsburgh in 1977, Becker owns a gypsy cab station, which is going to be boarded by the “man” for future demolition. The workers figure out ways to either keep the business going or find another option to earn money.

A dispute occurs between Youngblood and an older Turnbo over the Youngblood’s actions and ideas, including staying out with his own girlfriend Rena’s sister at late hours. Turnbo tries to tell Youngblood to be careful staying up all night and disrespecting his woman: “Everybody know how you misuse that gal, keeping her tied up in the house with that baby while you run around with her sister and don’t give her two pennies to buy the baby no milk” (Jitney Act 1 Scene 3). Turnbo was trying to keep Youngblood from falling into the social traps that many young people experience and regret, things that could get people broke, jailed, or killed. Though Turnbo’s intentions were understandable, Youngblood, in reality, had been planning with Rena’s sister to secretly buy a house for Rena and him (Act 2 Scene 1). Once the initial fireworks died down, the sides understood each other enough to move on.

A more critical issue developed when Becker’s son Booster returned to see his dad after spending twenty years in jail for murder. Though only Booster did time in prison for the crime, both members claim to have suffered more as a result of the incident. Booster knows he did wrong, but he felt he paid his debt and is able to move back into society. Becker explains the misconception of his son’s ideas:

Everything I give you... you threw away. You ain’t got nothing now. You got less than the day you were born. Then you had some dignity. Some innocence . . . You ain’t got nothing now. You took and you threw it all away. You thirty-nine years old and you ain’t got nothing. (Jitney Act 1 Scene 4)

Becker also claims to have suffered through the ordeal:

I'm the one got to walk around here with people pointing at me. Talking about me behind my back. 'There go his father. That's him.' People trying to sneak a look at me out the corner of their eye. See if they can see something wrong with me. If they can see what kind of man would raise a boy to do something like that. You done marked me and you walk in here talking about you ain't got no grudge. (*Jitney* Act 1 Scene 4)

Booster recalls an incident at an early age involving Becker being threatened for eviction by his landlord.

Booster watched his "big" dad become "smaller" while and after being threatened: "you didn't seem so big no more. You was the same size as everybody else. You was just another man in the barbershop.

That's when I told myself if I ever got big I wouldn't let nothing make me small." He thought his dad should be proud of him "for being a warrior. For dealing with the world in ways that you didn't or

couldn't or wouldn't." Becker felt otherwise, claiming he wanted his son to not "follow up behind me . . .

So you could go on and go further. So you could have a better life. I did without so you could have"

(*Jitney* Act 1 Scene 4).

The conflicting expectations between Becker and Booster make this reunion tough to accept.

Booster later thinks about his dad's words and attempts to mend things, but Becker ignores him (Act 2

Scene 1). They never get another chance before Becker dies in a factory accident. Booster, though,

understands what his dad tried to do and reminisces about his life and efforts:

I can't say nothing wrong about him. He took care of me when I was young. He ain't run the streets and fuss and fight with my mama. The only thing I ever knew him to do was work hard. It didn't matter to me too much at the time cause I couldn't see it like I see it now. He had his ways. I guess everybody do. The only thing I feel sorry about . . . is he ain't got out of life what he put in. He deserved better than what life gave him. I can't help thinking that. But you right . . . I'm proud of my old man . . . And I'm proud to be Becker's boy. (Act 2 Scene 4)

There is evidence that he may try to fill his dad's shoes; as the play concludes he answers the business phone just as his dad would.

The relationships between males can differ based on their closeness, education, and upbringing.

The experiences and lessons learned, through mentors or by themselves, often point people in a certain

direction in their lives. August Wilson presents stories in a realistic environment utilizing dialogue and

situations to which people can understand and possibly relate. He shows the importance and variables involved within families, friends, and co-workers. Using signifying in these scenarios, Wilson presents differences in African-American society and how certain issues could be confronted and resolved differently than in other cultures.

Drama can be a tool for entertainment and education. The ability to either read the script or watch a performance of the play offers the observer two ways to experience the story being told. Theatre presents the story vocally as well as visually. Plays provide an opportunity to share one or more stories in one script through dialogue between characters, even if the story is not the entire plot. In return, observers can use these stories to help understand the situation and characters in the play, as well as apply morals from the stories in their own lives when applicable. Looking at the uses of signifying and other elements of African-American theatre can show its relationship to the black society. It also challenges the current society to make things better for individuals and the black race as a whole. The effectiveness of signifying in Wilson's plays can influence the work and dramatic approach of future playwrights, thus providing a greater opportunity to increase both the uniqueness of theatre and the observer's knowledge about history and culture.



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