TRAGEDY IN THE HILL DISTRICT: A STUDY OF AUGUST WILSON’S *KING HEDLEY II*

AS RECEPTION OF

SOPHOCLES’ *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*

A Thesis Presented

By

John “Jack” Flor

to

The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree

In the field of English

Northeastern University
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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ABSTRACT

In his famous 1996 address at the Theater Communication Group’s biennial conference at Princeton University titled “The Ground on Which I Stand” August Wilson attacked colorblind casting, stating that it is nothing more than a tool of Western imperialism. Three years later in 1999, Wilson published *King Hedley II*, a tragedy which traces the arc of the eponymous King as he struggles to a make a place for himself and his family within the urban wreck of deindustrialized Pittsburgh. Interestingly, this tragedy bears several poignant similarities to one of the seminal tragedies of the Western tradition: Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*. I contend that *King Hedley II* is a reception of *Oedipus Tyrannus*—that August Wilson has pulled Sophocles’ work through the millennia into the specific context of Pittsburgh’s Hill district in 1985. The aims of this paper are twofold. First, I will unpack the ways in which August Wilson transforms Sophocles’ tragedy and redefines the dramatic components of *Oedipus Rex* in a way that is aligned with his artistic vision. Second, I will be examining how this act of transformation is able to challenge the monolithic tradition of Western dramaturgy that Wilson both worked inside of and strove to escape. How, through an act of reception, Wilson destabilizes the privileged tradition of Western dramaturgy and claims equal ground for black theater in America. Wilson states that, “The term black or African American not only denotes race, it denotes condition, and carries with it the vestige of slavery and the social segregation and abuse of opportunity so vivid in our memory.” If the term black or African American denotes condition, why is Sophocles’ tragedy a site visited by Wilson to explore that condition? There is a tragedy occurring in the Hill district in 1985 equal of the tragedy in Thebes, complete with a plague, scarred heroes, wise prophets, brilliant and frustrated queens, and harrowing ritual sacrifice. Only, the tragedy in the Hill district is not put into motion by oracular prophecy, but by the smothering force of racism.
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**DISCLAIMER:**

The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.
INTRODUCTION

As the 1970’s marched into the 1980’s, Pittsburgh’s Hill district and the working-class black community living there were in a state of crisis. The steel mills, which were so essential to previous wartime manufacturing efforts, saw a steep drop in demand for their metal as deindustrialization took hold. Pittsburgh’s once-commanding national share of steel production dropped from 25 to 14 percent.¹ Close to 100,000 manufacturing jobs were lost—but this drop was not felt equally along racial lines. The black unemployment rate at the time rose to 35 percent, 3.5 times that of whites, and the average income for a black worker was nearly half that of the average white worker. Veronica Morgan Lee, former director of Carlow College’s Hill District Campus, recalled that, “I had never in my life seen the number of people, mostly males, just in throngs…What a waste of creative energy. I could not believe that all those folks did not have the potential to be productive citizens. It blew my mind that we could write off that many people because that’s what has literally happened. They’ve been written off.”² Yet it was not just the men in the Hill district who were “written off.”

Working-class black women, desperate for work, were largely unable to find jobs in the new service industries which paid enough to support a family. This economic stagnation, coupled with the fact that the rate of black single mothers living in poverty increased by 20 percent over the 70’s and 80’s, placed an incredible burden on working-class black women during this period. These factors, the poverty, the unemployment, the disintegration of the

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working-class black family—all bound together by racist attitudes and legislation—fostered a culture of violence among the youth in Pittsburgh’s black neighborhoods. Where there were not jobs and familial stability, there were gangs and guns and drugs. In the years between 1974 and 1996 the homicide rate for black males in Pittsburgh nearly doubled, and the number of black men and women incarcerated for drug offenses increased by 67 percent. These figures, unpoetic as they are, serve to quantify the state of community decay in the Hill district of the 1980’s—an urban wasteland which August Wilson animates in his 1999 tragedy King Hedley II.

King Hedley II, described by Chris Jones as a “dramatic howl of anguish at the horrors wrought in the 1980’s by guns and crime, family dysfunction and urban neglect,”³ embodies the bleak desperation of the Hill district in the Regan era. It is a play that has been received with conflicting critical attention, being called both “one of Wilson’s best,”⁴ and “a disappointing entry in this [the Pittsburgh cycle] ongoing literary landmark.”⁵ These contradictory assessments are understandable, given the sense that King Hedley II does not exactly follow the artistic thrust of Wilson’s Pittsburgh cycle as a whole. The Pittsburgh cycle is a collection of ten plays, with each play taking place in the Hill district in a different decade of the twentieth century. Each one of these plays, beginning with Gem of the Ocean (1900’s) and ending with Radio Golf (1990’s), is preoccupied with representing black experience in Pittsburgh at the specific historical moment in which it takes place. The cycle is an effort to rewrite the “history” of America in a way which privileges black culture and experience. As Jay Plum writes, “Wilson’s dramaturgy challenges the secondary position of African Americans within American history by contextualizing black cultural experiences and, in turn, creating opportunity for the black community to examine and

³ Jones, Chris. "King Hedley II." Variety (20 Dec. 1999), 68.
⁴ Ibid
⁵ Isherwood, Charles. "King Hedley II." Variety (7 May 2001), 76.
define itself.” 6 King Hedley II, though, is an outlier when held against the other members of the cycle, as it contextualizes the black cultural experience in the 1980’s by looking far into the past and deep into the heart of the Western dramatic tradition—a tradition that claims the historical privilege which Wilson is challenging.

The modern tragedy, which unfolds in a dusty vacant lot behind a row of decrepit houses in the Hill in 1985, takes its inspiration from the Grecian proving ground of the Athenian theater. Wilson states that his impetus to write King Hedley II was to, “try and write a Greek tragedy,”7 which would explain the dissonant critical receptions of the work. Wilson’s whole dramatic oeuvre has been pointed at specifically representing and historicizing the black cultural experience in America in a way that challenges Western privilege and normativity, and this reappropriation of Greek tragedy—the very bedrock of the Western dramatic tradition—would seem to buck that trend. What, specifically, is Wilson engaging with though? The playwright’s harrowing dramatic work, both in theme and plot, bears remarkable similarities to Sophocles’ seminal Oedipus Tyrannus. In both King Hedley II and Oedipus Tyrannus, there are heroes struggling against forces that control their fate, devastating blight, scarred kings, prophetic visions, mistaken parentages, unimaginable violence, and ritual sacrifice. The two dramas, set millennia apart, make for an especially interesting pairing given Wilson’s political aims at the time.

In 1996, three years prior to the publishing of King Hedley II, Wilson delivered his famous speech “The Ground on Which I Stand,” where he railed against colorblind casting, the

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practice of inserting black actors into roles created by dramatists of the mainstream, Western tradition. Colorblind casting, Wilson believed, was a concerted act of racism which subverted any effort to establish and grow black theaters in the United States. That colorblind casting, rather than create an institution where all colors where celebrated, served only to whitewash the theatrical landscape. This assertion, for Wilson, was evidenced by the fact that only one of the sixty-six League of Resident Theatres (LORT) recognized theatres in the United States at the time of the address “could be considered black.”

As Brandi Wilkins Catanese writes:

That a significant organization of American theaters would have such a culturally skewed membership was, to Wilson, no accident: this statistical reality emerged from the social reality that most of those with the power to allocate resources (from institutional funding to individual production opportunities) failed to see or concern themselves with the merits of institutional longevity for black theater as a site where the cultural and political histories and meanings of blackness should be produced, and negotiated.

While Wilson has reached the pinnacle of success in the mainstream American theater without compromising his vision as a black artist, his achievement is betrayed by that same mainstream American theater’s reluctance to foster black artists who share in that vision. This situation has changed since 1996 though—the one black theater which Wilson championed has since lost its recognition by the LORT. For Wilson, the disparate allocation of resources between the culturally dominant, mainstream theater and black theater is nothing short of cultural imperialism and pushes aspiring black artists to assimilate into the culturally dominant dramatic tradition.

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10 Ibid, 69.
“To cast us in the role of mimics,” Wilson states, “is to deny us our competence.”

Why, then, at a time when Wilson was so preoccupied with mimicry and tradition, interpolate Oedipus’ plagued Royal House of Thebes with the embattled backyards of King’s Hill District?

I contend that *King Hedley II* is a masterful work of reception, in which Sophocles’ original masterpiece is redefined in a way which articulates the tragic circumstances specific to the black experience in 1980’s and challenges the privileged authority of the Western tradition in drama. Following this argument, my aims in this paper are twofold. First, I will interrogate the ways in which Wilson reshapes Sophocles’ bedrock of Western dramaturgy and elides Ancient Greece into the specific context of Pittsburgh’s Hill district in 1985. I will compare the similarities between the two tragedies, as well as the points of departure. These points of departure, the distortions, are vitally important as they best articulate the specificities of black experience and culture in America which are not contained in the tradition of Western dramaturgy. Second, I will be looking at how, through *King Hedley II* as a reception of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Wilson argues that black theater—the retelling of the black cultural experience on the American stage—is just as adept at depicting human experience as the hallowed works of the Western tradition, even though it is not recognized as such by the institutions that support theaters across the United States. That black theater proudly stands on the same ground as the drama of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Miller, and deserves to be given the respect that it is due. Eugene O’Neill wrote that, “There is no present or future—only the past happening over and over again—now.”

Wilson, in *King Hedley II*, would seem to echo this sentiment. How, then, does the mythic tragedy of an ancient peoples “happen” in the very real site of the Hill District?

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district in 1985? I think it is imperative to look at why it is important that a dialogic relationship exists between the two texts and establish a theoretical basis which will undergird the present study.

Receiving the Past

The academy has been hard at work purging the ghost of the monolithic, monochromatic, and mono-gendered “Great Books” programs which were so commanding at one point in the not-so-distant past. The words of Harold Bloom, who proclaimed, “Without the Canon, we cease to think. You may idealize endlessly about replacing aesthetic standards with ethnocentric and gender considerations, your social aims may indeed be admirable. Yet strength can only join itself with strength,”\(^{13}\) are now part of the nightmarish history which educators strive to awaken from. What was once assessed as the Western canonical tradition, formed in an Eliotan rhythm where each new work of genius alters the substance of the canon but ultimately upholds its integrity, has become dissolute. I do not mean to say that cultural literary traditions do not exist or are not important, but that the assessment of the Western canon as the standard for all literature has become archaic. What value, then, can the classics still have today? If looked at through the theoretical lens of reception, rather than tradition, they may still hold great insight into modern literary studies. As Michael Broder writes:

> In the classical tradition model, Greco-Roman antiquity provides the foundation for, and influences the development of, modern Europe and Western civilization. According to the classical reception model, individuals and societies continually reappropriate and

redefine classical antiquity in an effort to assert (or at times, to challenge) continuity with a privileged past.\textsuperscript{14} A model based on tradition is intent on assuring that the eternal fire of Greco-Roman literature is well tended, that the torch is passed in a way which glorifies the mythos of the “West.” A model based on reception enables the tricksters—the Greek Prometheus or the Shoshone Coyote or the Eko boy—to take the fire and do with it what they will. And that just might be watching the “eternal flame” sputter and die, or to demonstrate how it has been weaponized as a destructive and colonizing blaze.

To view any Classical text as a stable entity—as a singularity—is a folly. As James I. Porter writes, “The problem with this formulation is that it suggests the wrong kind of picture, as though you could look through a viewfinder into a tube at an image, and that only the final image mattered—that of a pure, uncontaminated antiquity—when in fact antiquity includes the viewfinder and the medium through which the looking is done. The past is mediated already in the past.”\textsuperscript{15} I may be using \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus} as a “source text” in this study, but it is important to remember that Sophocles’ drama is itself an act of reception. Sophocles took a myth that was ancient even to him and made it relevant to his Athenian audience. The past is being constantly mediated through the present—often in surprising ways. For example, as Dan-el Padilla Peralta so wonderfully points out, the classics have recently seen a rebirth in hip-hop.\textsuperscript{16} Artists like Kanye West and Wyclef Jean of the Fugees have used the mythic sword of Damocles as a

thematic motif in their raps, Jay-Z’s rhymes include references to Plato’s *Euthyphro*, and the Wu-Tang Clan’s Inspectah Deck proclaims that Sophocles’ prophecies fail to define his lyrical braggadocio. As people living in a modern world, we are constantly in conversation with the classical past. In some circumstances, these conversations can be incredibly difficult to have.

There is a long-standing tradition of black adaptation of Greek tragedy, and the dialogical relationship that exists between the two is turbulent. Recent works like Kevin Wetmore’s *Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre* and Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson’s *Crossroads in the Black Aegean* have done great work in unpacking the complicated conversation that occurs at this intersection. In the introduction to their book, Goff and Simpson state the following:

The present study contends instead that to read these dramas closely is to understand how critically, self-critically, and creatively they engage with the European canon, even as they cultivate more indigenous traditions. Conscious of their literary aspect, they use it variously to parody the pretension of the canon, to assert their claims on the same ground and to demonstrate the limits of that status within the theatre.  

It is in this spirit that I am reading *King Hedley II*. Wilson uses *Oedipus Tyrannus* as the site in which he can stand eye to eye with the great dramatists of the Western tradition and assert his authority in a space where black dramatists have traditionally been denied entry. It is also important to note that this study will focus mainly on the “literary aspect” of the works. In this sense, I echo Wetmore, who writes that, “This study has fallen into the trap of much postcolonial theatre research in the West. It is textocentric. Dramatic literature is privileged, primarily 

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because the topic is the transformation of Greek tragedy into African American tragedy, mostly through writing.”¹¹⁸ Factors such as performance studies and audience reception are outside of the scope of this study, and my work will be centered upon the textual interplay between the two dramas.

Through King Hedley II, Wilson intervenes in the Western canon through hybridity. He fuses his own cultural materials—for example the blues, or Christianity, or African mythology—with Sophocles’ cultural material from Ancient Greece. This intervention allows for Wilson’s modern audience to commune with the past in a way that would otherwise be impossible. By pairing the familiar with the unfamiliar, Wilson generates new meaning in the space between the two texts. In this sense, Wilson is Sophocles, who received the myth of Oedipus and created a hybrid work which made new meaning for his Athenian audience. It is important to emphasize that Wilson is the one who is doing the work. Goff and Simpson write that, “The older version of ‘tradition’ would claim that texts of the ancient world push their way through history, independently powered by their own vigorous excellence, the more recent model recognizes the motive force of a critical mass of reappropriations, pulling the ancient texts forward into new situations.”¹¹⁹ Sophocles does not push his way into Wilson’s work. Rather, Wilson pulls Oedipus Tyrannus into the unfamiliar situation of the Hill district, and it is on his terms that the transformation takes place. The question now, is how?

¹¹⁹ Goff and Simpson, Crossroads in the Black Aegean, 53.
“We in trouble now:” Plague in Pittsburgh

*Oedipus Tyrannus* begins with a procession of priests entreating Oedipus, the king of Thebes. The priests come to the hero because a plague has befallen the city, the kingdom is wasting away. Oedipus, seemingly unaware of the horrible blight that has fallen on his land, asks the holy men what they want. “I am ready to help,” he proclaims, “I’ll do anything” (13-14). One of the priests informs Oedipus of the dire circumstances:

Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops
and the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die,
and the women die in labor, children stillborn,
and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls down
on the city, his lightning slashing through us—
raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating
the house of Cadmus! And black Death luxuriates
in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes. (30-38)

Here the plague that has fallen on Thebes takes on some very specific characteristics. Cast down by Ares as a result of Oedipus’ unknowing patricide and incest, it has blighted the crops, killed the livestock, struck down mothers and newborns, and is threatening the very existence of the house of Cadmus—the cultural continuity of Thebes. Accordingly, in *King Hedley II* a plague with very similar features—yet manifested in different ways—has set itself upon the people of the Hill district.

Throughout Wilson’s play, King is preoccupied with a small patch of dirt in which he has planted some seeds. He wishes to grow some flowers which he can give to his wife, Tonya. When his mother, Ruby, finds him planting the seeds in the first act of the play, she ridicules
him, saying, “You need some good dirt. Them seeds ain’t gonna grow in that dirt” (10). King is stubborn, however, and continues to try to coax life out of the ground amidst the urban ruins. “Ruby tell me my dirt ain’t worth nothing,” King tells his best friend, Mister. “It’s mine. It’s worth it to have. I ain’t gonna let anyone take it. Talking about I need some good dirt. Like my dirt ain’t worth nothing. A seed is a seed. A seed will grow in dirt. Look at that!” (22). What King is proudly pointing to is described as a “small, barely discernible spot of green”—hardly anything to brag about. This, however, is as large as King’s garden ever gets. King’s seeds are trampled on repeatedly. He tries to erect a barbed wire barrier around them, but ends up defiling his own treasured piece of earth in order to shoot dice with his mother’s lover, Elmore, in the harrowing final scene of the play. Regardless of how adamantly King exclaims that, “This is good dirt! A seed supposed to grow in dirt! Look at this…That’s good dirt!” the seeds will never bare the fruit that he intends (58). Just as in Oedipus, the land will not yield a crop. But why? King is not the subject of a terrible oracular fate and Pittsburgh is not besieged by the gods. Instead, King’s inability to grow his flowers is indicative of Wilson’s belief that black Americans will not be able to culturally flourish in the industrial North.

August Wilson, born and raised in the same Hill district in which he situated his plays, was outspoken about his belief that black American culture could not grow deep roots in the industrial North and expressed a desire to move back to the South. In an interview with Richard Pettengill, Wilson stated that:

I think we should all go back. We should all move tomorrow, while we still can before the government says we can’t…I think if we did that, fifty years later, we’d be in a much stronger position in society than we are today. If we continue to stay up here in the cities
and go along the path that we’re going along now, I’m not sure we’re going to be here fifty years from now.  

For Wilson, who traces his philosophical lineage back to Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey, and Elijah Muhammad, the South is the ancestral homeland for black Americans. In the prolific playwright’s eyes, black flight from the South to Northern industrial cities like Pittsburgh—where Wilson was born, raised, and lived for most of his life—fractured the black community and brought their cultural roots to infertile soil. Peter Wolfe writes that, “Wilson believes that the black exodus from the agrarian South was a mistake…First, this exodus fragmented many black families. Next, the cities of the industrial North spurned the new black migrants, herding them into slums and offering, at best, backbreaking work with low pay.” The situation in 1985 was even more dire, as the factory jobs which provided “backbreaking work with low pay,” were disappearing. King’s effort to grow a garden, to establish roots, in the rocky Northern soil is an error. The earth of the Hill district is blighted because it does not have the nutrients to culture the growth of a black community. The city—its infrastructure, commerce, industry, and its land—are all controlled and owned by the white majority. King proclaims that “This is good dirt!” And it might be—just not for King and the other members of the black working-class in the Hill district.

Along with the blight on crops, the plague sent down by Apollo at the beginning of *Oedipus Tyrannus* wastes away the cattle in the pastures around Thebes. For the beleaguered inhabitants of Thebes in the mythic past of Greece, this would have been especially troublesome. Boeotia, the region of Ancient Greece which cradled Thebes, was known for its rich pastures and abundant cattle. In fact, the root word for the name Boeotia is the ancient Greek word for cow,

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The plague occurs on the periphery of Sophocles’ drama, but it is not hard to imagine that, if cattle were wantonly dying in the pastures of Thebes, this would have spelled disaster for the hardworking herdsmen. Livelihoods would have stood in the balance and the families that depended on the cattle would have prayed that the hero might right the wrongs and restore what prosperity they might have had. In King’s Pittsburgh, where there is hardly enough dirt to grow a flower, perishing cattle were not on anyone’s minds. What was, however, were the stunted livelihoods and economic inequality writ by racist policymakers and corporate structures. This may not seem as outwardly ruinous as the Theban herdsmen who see their bovine stock die before them, yet it is more subtle and ultimately more smothering.

During the second Act of the play King becomes angry over an instance where the photo department at Sears would not honor his receipt, his ticket to pick up developed photos. The workers state it must be linked to a phone number, and King’s phone has been turned off. The following dialogue occurs when King returns home and explains the situation to the wily hustler Elmore and his confidant Mister:

MISTER. It count for everybody else. Why all of a sudden it don’t count when it’s you?

KING. You see what I’m saying. That’s like telling me I don’t count.

MISTER. They got different rules for different people. (53)

Mister’s statement, “They got different rules for different people,” is at the heart of the economic plague which wreaks havoc upon the already-meager livings that black work-class families were able to make prior to the 80’s. When these jobs go away, however, there are few options left. As King further vents:

They got everything stacked up against you as it is. Every time I try to do something they get in the way. It’s been that way my whole life. Every time I try to do something they
get in the way. Especially if you try and get some money. They don’t want you to have none of that. They keep that away from you. They got fifty eleven way to get money and don’t want you to have none. They block you at every turn… I ain’t gonna be poor my whole life. I ain’t gonna die a poor man. (53-54)

Just like cattle killed by the wrathful god of war, the fatted calf of the “American dream” for black Americans is likewise slaughtered by racist economic structures. The path to financial ascendancy is blocked, and the jobs which afforded basic survival are now gone. Yet, King remains hopeful. “I ain’t gonna die a poor man,” he says. Unfortunately, this hopefulness leads King to search for economic success outside of conventional economic structures—namely through criminal activity. King’s aspiration is to open a Kung-Fu video store with Mister, but he attempts to finance this dream by selling stolen refrigerators and robbing a jewelry store. It seems that King is on a path back to prison, a place he recently left. Thus, this economic draught smothers the black working-class, pushes them towards crime, and keeps them trapped in a cycle of violence and imprisonment. This cycle was very real, as indicated by the spikes in black murder and incarceration rates in Pittsburgh throughout the 80’s—and was felt most deeply by black mothers who raised children—often alone—only to see their lives squandered.

Why bring a life into the world if it is destined to be wasted? This is the crux of the argument between King and his wife Tonya, who is pregnant. Tonya, prior to marrying King, had a daughter with another man, who is in prison. Her daughter, Natasha, is now seventeen and has a child of her own and does not know who the father is. King desperately wants a child, but Tonya is adamant about getting an abortion. In perhaps the most despairing speech in the entire play, Tonya bares her soul:
I don’t want to have a baby that younger than my grandchild. Who turned the world around like that? What sense that make? I’m thirty-five years old. Don’t seem like there’s nothing left. I’m through with babies. I ain’t raising no more. Ain’t raising no grandkids. I’m looking out for Tonya. I ain’t raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends shoot him. 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. (40)

As in Thebes, mothers and their children are suffering and dying in the streets of inner-city Pittsburgh. Souls are not reaped by a spectral angel of death during childbirth, but instead are wasted over the span of years or suddenly taken away in an act of meaningless violence. And, if bodies do not physically perish, hope certainly does. “When I had Natasha I was as happy as could be,” Tonya tells King. “I had something nobody could take away from me. Had somebody to love. Had somebody to love me. Look up and the whole world seem like it went crazy. Her daddy in jail. Her step-daddy going to jail. She seventeen and got a baby, she don’t even know who the father is” (37). Ground down by the seemingly inescapable desperation which is cultivated in the crumbling industrial wasteland that is the Hill district, Tonya sees no hope for the future. Enthralled by a deep world-weariness and desperation, she is certain that she cannot bring another life into the world.

The culmination of this blight, brought down by racism and diaspora, is the death of Aunt Esther, the “366-year-old conjure woman” who has appeared continuously throughout the Pittsburgh cycle. For Wilson, Aunt Ester, “Has emerged for me as the most significant persona of the cycle. The characters, after all, are her children. The wisdom and tradition she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personality and for dealing with a society in

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22 Wilson, *King Hedley II*, x.
which the contradictions, over the decades, have grown more fierce, and for exposing all of the places it is lacking in virtue.” Aunt Esther is the moral, cultural, and spiritual fiber which binds the black American community together and the needle of the compass which gives it direction. Her death does not bode well for the future. “Mr. Eli says she dies from grief,” King remarks to Stool Pigeon, the neighborhood soothsayer and fool. Imagine how terrible the circumstances on the Hill in 1985 would have had to been in order to push Aunt Esther over the edge, after living through 366 years as a black woman in America. As Stool Pigeon puts it so eloquently in the scene following her demise, “We in trouble now” (20).

In Pittsburgh there are no wilting fields of grain, but there is a single plot of dirt in which King is desperately trying to foster life. There are no dead livestock, but there are withered and dying livelihoods. Mothers and children are not being struck down by a vengeful god, but by fractured homes, neglect, and cycles of violence and crime. Rather than the house of Cadmus falling, Aunt Ester, the 366 year old sage who is the embodiment of black culture in Wilson’s plays, grows sick and dies. The parallels are apparent, but there are two key differences which I think require due attention. First, if the symptoms of the plagues between the two tragedies can be read as similar, their pathologies are not. The disease of Thebes was induced by the actions of Oedipus himself: albeit unknowingly. There is a direct correlation between what Oedipus did and the actions that are accordingly taken by the gods. There is no such correlation in King’s case. The systematic disparity was not caused by the black community. Instead. It was instituted by the oppressive force. In this sense, Wilson is placing racist societal structures in the position of the retributive gods, as well as naming them as the cause of the destruction. This complicates the situation greatly. No remedy can be given, as it would cause the downfall of the governing body.
If this were the truth in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Ares would be the one shamefully plucking out his eyes, not Oedipus. Therefore, the cycle does not break—it changes and evolves over time.

The evolutionary aspect of the American plague is important. Like the plague in Thebes, the plague in America affects the generational abilities of the black community. That is, it inhibits the ability for black communities to grow in the United States—it is a stagnating force. This plague has had many names: slavery, segregation, Plessy v. Ferguson, Jim Crow, red lining, gentrification, and war on drugs—to name a few. The plague can summarily be called racism, and it is a persistent and resourceful germ. It was disabling black communities in 1985, the year that *King Hedley II* takes place, and it does so today as well. Blacks are currently incarcerated at a rate that is six times higher than whites, have an unemployment rate that is double that of whites, and schools and neighborhoods are still sites for segregation. Plagues in classical literature end when the causal offense is remedied. When Pharaoh let the Israelites go, God ceased calling down his blights. When Agamemnon returned Chryseis to her priestly father, Apollo put his arrows back in his quiver. The causal offense of the plague in America, however, is the racist legislation that was wrought out of slavery and finds a way to persist through the decades. Great strides have been made in the fight against racism in America, but that does not mean that it has disappeared. On the contrary, it has evolved into an elevator tune that some assume to be part of the ride.

The second major difference between Sophocles’ plague and Wilson’s plague is that the plague which ravaged Thebes was something distant from Oedipus. As Thalia Phillies Feldman writes, “It is noteworthy that the plague does not directly touch Oedipus and his family. Indeed,

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23 For the report behind these statistics, see Menendian, Stephen and Rothstein, Richard. “The Road Not Taken: Housing and Criminal Justice 50 Years after the Kerner Commission Report.” (Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, U.C. Berkeley, 2019), 8-11.
had Oedipus not made every effort to find the truth, he might never had suffered physical harm or exposure.”24 The characters of King Hedley II do not need a procession of priests to inform them that the world is crumbling around them. They exist inside the plagued lands and feel its poisonous touch every day. They strive and struggle against it, looking for some way up or out. We, as readers, are not reminded at the beginning of King Hedley II that there is something terribly wrong in in Pittsburgh. The desperation is so immersive that one might forget that this is not how things are meant to be—and in this way the plague of Pittsburgh is more insidious in its desolation. The Thebans, of course, are saved by the tragic fate of Oedipus. What about weary members of the Hill district? How does Wilson reimagine King as the “tragic hero,” the healer of the wasteland who races towards their own disintegration?

**Scars and Names: Re-Envisioning the Tragic Hero**

Before we meet our ancient hero in the wreck of Thebes, he is a stranger to the city with a limp, an odd name, and a cunning intellect with which he bests the sphinx and ascends to the throne. His actions propel him forward as the Tyrannus of the city, yet his scarred, swollen feet and the name that is derived from them tether him to his past and a fate that he cannot escape. Just when Oedipus hears of the death of Polybus, his assumed father, and believes that he has skirted his oracular doom, a herdsman who helped save him from Mt. Cithaeron comes to remind him of his past:

MESSENGER. Your ankles…they tell the story. Look at them.

OEDIPUS. Why remind me of that old affliction?

MESSENGER. Your ankles were pinned together. I set you free.

OEDIPUS. That dreadful mark—I’ve had it from the cradle.

MESSENGER. And you got your name from that misfortune too, the name’s still with you. (1131-1135)

The exchange encapsulates the paradox of Oedipus’ life. By freeing Oedipus, by giving the hero the gift of life, the shepherd shackled the king to a fate worse than death—dooming him to be an incestuous patricide. Ripped from Mt. Cithaeron our tragic hero was able to walk through life haunted by a limp—the mark of a death he should have died with a name that should have never been spoken. Oedipus’ trauma, the scar of his unfortunate and fateful not-death, is inextricably linked with his identity, his name. King, too, has a scar and a name that are linked—albeit in a different fashion.

King’s wound, described as “a vicious gash running down the left side of his face,” was carved into his visage by Pernell, the man whom King killed and whose murder he was sent to prison for. Pernell cut King in an altercation that revolved around Pernell refusing to call King by his name. “Pernell,” King recalls, “made me kill him. Pernell called me by ‘champ.’ I told him my name’s King. He say, ‘Yeah champ.’ I go on. I don’t say nothing. I told myself, ‘He don’t know.’ He don’t know my daddy killed a man for calling him out of his name. He don’t know he fucking with King Hedley II” (73). Here we see King echoing Oedipus, who was similarly enraged when a young drunkard at a banquet foolishly insinuated that the tragic hero’s

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25 Hedley’s full character description given by Wilson: King (King Hedley II), has a vicious scar running down the left side of his face. Spent seven years in prison. Strives to live by his own moral code. Thirties.
parents might not be who he thought they were (858-860). King’s “daddy,” as he will come to realize by the end of the play, is actually a man named Leroy Slater. Regardless of blood relation, though, King Hedley I is King Hedley II’s father figure, the man whom he wishes to emulate—for better or worse.

The first King Hedley, the man who King is told is his father, was a Haitian immigrant in Seven Guitars who was charismatic, deluded, and often resolved his problems through violence. As Ama Wattley writes regarding the younger King, “His flaws stem from his attempt to follow in the footsteps of the man that he believes is his father, King repeats the cycle of violence and the desire for size and value that his surrogate father craved.” By killing Pernell, King corrects him for “calling him out of his name” and assumes the identity of his father. This action thrusts King into the vicious cycle of violence that was endemic in the Hill district in the 1980’s. King, after Pernell slashes him with the razor, remembers thinking, “I figure that scar got to mean something. I can’t take it off. It’s part of me now. I figure it’s got to mean something” (Wilson 74). King gives it meaning by shooting Pernell. By shedding Pernell’s blood, King binds his identity to the violence that the scar represents. Just as Oedipus’ feet, scarred by his own father, marked his tragic fate, King’s scar is a bloody inheritance passed down to him in an act of violence which his father embodied and marks him as doomed to kill or be killed by his brothers. This violence was not prophesied at Delphi. It was inscribed into the fabric of American society through the act of slavery and years of racial oppression whereby the violence done to black bodies by white bodies was projected and internalized by black communities.

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26 “Some man at a banquet who had drunk too much / shouted out—he was far gone mind you—that I am not my father’s son. Fighting words!”
Although both Oedipus and King bear scars that are linked to their identities, the markings are received in different ways by the society around them. Oedipus’ swollen feet, a limitation of physical agency that is connected to his limited agency as it pertains to his fate, does not affect the way in which others perceive him. Although marked, he is still regarded as the “first of men,” among his Theban subjects (41). The ruler’s merit is acknowledged regardless of his physical appearance. King’s scar, however, has a different effect on the people around him. As King tells Tonya, “Most people see me coming and they go the other way. People look at their hands funny after they shake my hand. They try to pretend they don’t see my scar when that’s all they looking at” (83-84). Whereas others cannot easily discern Oedipus’ true identity from his marked feet, King’s face tells a story that others are too quick to read. As Harry Elam Jr. writes, “If black men are symbolically and physically marked by a white society that demonizes their color and visibility, then King is hypervisible, hyproblematic through the powerful signifier that is his scar. As such the act of killing Pernell brings meaning to the sad and ironic commentary on his inherently marked, inherently deviant, ontologically criminal status.”

No one, aside from the shepherd who rescued Oedipus, would look at the doomed king and infer his tragic fate—that his very being is cursed. Those who gaze upon King’s scar, however, cannot see anything else aside from the problematic otherness which they perceive as his ontological substance as a black man.

I would be remiss, when discussing these two tragedies, to mentions scars and markings and not discuss the concept of hamartia—what is sometimes referred to as “tragic flaw.”

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28 Elam, Harry J. *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*. (University of Michigan Press, 2006), 139-140.

29 From the glossary of the Norton Critical edition of *Poetics: mistake* (hamartia) The term *hamartia* is sometimes translated as “error.” Like catharsis, this term is central to Aristotle’s
Referenced by Aristotle in *Poetics 13*, hamartia is not clearly explained and is often interpreted as a singular moral fault in a character which ultimately results in their downfall. What moral weak point leads Oedipus to his downfall? What erroneous personality trait is engendered in King which leaves him lying in a pool of blood at the end of the play? To try and find such a flaw may be over-simplifying, misleading, and ultimately fruitless. As E.R. Dodds observes:

As we all know, the word hamartia is ambiguous: in ordinary usage it is sometimes applied to false moral judgements, sometimes to purely intellectual error… many scholars have thought in the past (and many undergraduates still think) that the hamartia of Oedipus must in Aristotle’s view be a moral fault. They have accordingly gone over the play with a microscope looking for moral faults in Oedipus, and have duly found them – for neither here nor anywhere else did Sophocles portray that insipid and unlikely character, the man of perfect virtue.

When first exposed to the Theban cycle, I was taught to look for hamartia in a similar fashion—as a chink in the armor of an otherwise faultless individual. When reading the text, however, one does not find that “man of perfect virtue.” What one does find is a person grounded in their humanity. For all of his great deeds, Oedipus can be quick to anger, lashes out at those close to him, and is incessantly stubborn in his monocular search for truth. Regardless, Oedipus was regarded as a good man by those with whom he interacted. Oedipus freed the city of Thebes

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30 Aristotle’s description of hamartia in *Poetics 13*, where hamartia is translated as “mistake:” “Such is the man who on the one hand is not preeminent in virtue and justice, and yet on the other hand does not fall into misfortune through vice or depravity, but because of some mistake.”

from the captivity of the sphinx, is a merciful ruler, and a dutiful husband. One might say that Oedipus’ flaw was his desire to know more than he should, to gain a glimpse into the inner working of the gods, yet this argument is inherently flawed as well. Oedipus sought out the Oracle to try and find the truth of his parentage and underwent his own harrowing search in order to save the city which he loved.

Similarly, King is a terribly human figure who has his faults and virtues. Yes, King killed Pernell, but he did so after he was slashed in the face with a razor, and he served time for the action. Yes, King is headstrong and involved in some dubious business ventures, yet he does so in order to try and secure a future for himself and his family. King is doing the best he can in the face of his urban blight—and having a hell of a time at it. Instead of looking at hamartia as a trait or miscalculation, it should be looked at as an integral part of the human condition. To be human is to live in a state of hamartia, to constantly err, to wander through the tortuous woods of life and hope that the paths that we choose might lead us to some brighter place. To live is to “miss the mark,” to fall short even when we push ourselves to the limits of our ability. This concept is at the heart of both Oedipus’ and King’s journeys—and is what ultimately makes their stories tragic.

Robert Cohen writes that Oedipus’ most endearing trait is his “absurd courage,”32 his propensity to plunge forward despite the fact that his world is crumbling around him. Does this seems so absurd, though, given the fact that Oedipus is a man of continual success? Is King—who has seen nothing but defeat—not more absurd in his courage? Regarding the characters in his dramas, Wilson writes that, “Despite the fact that their relationship to the larger society is one

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of servitude and neglect... In all the plays, the characters remain pointed to the future, their own pockets lined with fresh hope and an abiding faith in their own abilities and heroics.” The absurdity of hope is what marks King’s journey. Oedipus, through his guile, has climbed a societal ladder which King is unable to scale. King places his hope in an American Dream which he can only realize in the fantasies of his sleep. Nevertheless, he persists. The hero of the Hill district does not allow himself to submit to victimhood. Rather, he struggles against the racism which has held him and the black community down for 366 years. Yet, he does not do so alone.

**Prophets and Queens: Wisdom in the Wreck**

On their journeys, Oedipus and King are accompanied and guided by speakers of truth and queens. It is in the dialogue with these other characters where the true action of the play takes place. Oedipus’ and King’s identities are dragged through their plays to the point of realization by the host of voices which they commune with. It is only through others that they are able to truly see themselves. Likewise, the fates of our heroes and the supporting cast around them are inextricably entwined. Together they succeed, fail, struggle, are horrified, see truth, and are redeemed or doomed. In this section I will be looking at how Wilson transforms the seer Tiresias into the neighborhood prophet Stool Pigeon, and the queen Jocasta into the brilliant and fiery Tonya. As I have shown throughout this study, Wilson redefines these roles and pushes against them in a way which is aligned with his artistic vision and speaks to the black experience in America.

Prophetic voices assert authority in both tragedies. In *Oedipus Tyrannus* there is the famous blind prophet Tiresias—a seer whose power as a teller of truths lives long past his

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33 Wilson, *King Hedley II*, x.
death—and in *King Hedley II* there is the quirky and intrusive Stool Pigeon. Writing about the prophetic figure in Greek tragedy, Jon D. Mikalson states that:

> They know the truth, the divine, and the ‘things’ of the gods. Seers in tragedies speak ‘god-spoken words’ and give ‘signs,’ usually of future success or failure, to those who consult them…Through their mantic arts and sometimes through their personal wisdom—for Tiresias in particular is a ‘wise man’ figure—they offer detailed descriptions of present situations, of future events, and the plans and the purposes of the gods.”

Like Tiresias, Stool Pigeon too knows the truth—the ‘things’ of the gods—, speaks “god-spoken words,” gives signs of future success or failure, and employs mantic arts. Whereas Tiresias’ clairvoyance is gifted to him by the gods, Stool Pigeon is born with a predisposed ability to see into the “metaphysical presence of a spirit world,” which Wilson finds to be most important in his dramatic works. With the death of Aunt Ester, the embodiment of this presence, Stool Pigeon is the only one left in the Hill District who is able to see clearly through the haze of modernity which dissociates Wilson’s characters from their spiritual ancestry. Unlike Tiresias, who looks bright-eyed into the direct burn of future events, Stool Pigeon’s ability to interpret the future is based in how he looks in to the past. Stool Pigeon’s sermons are wrought partially from the Bible

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34 In the Book XI of Homer’s *Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles, Odysseus visits Tiresias in the land of the dead. In their exchange, the spectral seer gives Oedipus one rule for communicating with the dead: “Any one of the ghosts you let approach the blood / will speak truth to you. Any you refuse / will turn and fade away” (XI. 167-169). In this address, Tiresais gives Odysseus the key which enables him to commune with the past and gain the knowledge that will finally lead him out of hell and back to Ithaca. Thus, like in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *King Hedley II*, the seer’s key to salvation lies in engaging with the past.


36 Wilson, *King Hedley II*, x.
(almost exclusively the Book of Revelation), and from the massive collection of newspaper clippings which he hoards.

Stool Pigeon’s focalization on the last book of the Bible is indicative of his belief that the world as he knows it is truly about to end. In one of his rants, Stool Pigeon proclaims that, “He [God] say, ‘I will smite my enemies. I will make battlefields out of the pastures and send a rain of fire on the Earth so that all may know I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.37 Numberless are my wonders and my vengeance is twice-fold.’ Twice-fold! God is a motherfucker!” (35). It is clear, at least to Stool Pigeon, that a point-of-no-return has been reached. Wilson’s plays often hold the salvific powers of Christianity in doubt, but he does not underestimate the power that the church holds in black communities. Wilson states that, “The church is the only stable organization in the black community, and the community is organized around the church. If you want to disseminate information in the black community, the way to do it is through the church.”38 Stool Pigeon is a prophet of this church, just as Tiresias was a prophet for Apollo. The message that he is disseminating in the dilapidated backyards of the Hill District is clear. Between the alpha and the omega, there is all of history and experience. In the Hill District—and for black communities across the United States—that history and experience had a name and lived and breathed for the better part of 366 years: Aunt Ester. With Aunt Ester’s death, history has ended, and all that is left is the omega—the end of times. Or, the complete severing for modern black communities with the ancestral, spiritual, and communal ties which once held them together.

37 See Revelation 22:13  
Despite this foreseen rapture, Stool Pigeon does not cease in his mission to guide those in his assembly towards some semblance of a future. He does not use oracles or augery to see into the future. Instead, Stool Pigeon utilizes scraps of newspaper. In one scene, Stool Pigeon shows some of these to King, saying:

See I know what went on. I ain’t saying what goes on…what went on. You got to know that. How you gonna get to the other side of the valley if you don’t know that? You can’t guess on it…You got to know…Some people don’t mind guessing…but I got to know. If you want to know you can ask me and I’ll look it up. The valley’s got a lot of twists and turns. You can get lost in the daytime! (27)

The newspaper clippings which he offers to King report on acts of violence and tax levies which have been ruinous to the black community in the Hill district. Through these he makes the connection between racist economic and political structures and the violence that it has engendered in the black community. He can see the effects of the plague and link them with their causality. It is a short history of the mess that has led up to the state of the Hill district in 1985. Stool Pigeon is coaxing King, telling him to look at the past so that he can affect his future—break the cycle. With no spiritual direction left from Aunt Ester, these are the fragments which he attempts to shore against the community’s ruin. However, his wisdom falls on deaf ears.

In the last act of the play, a gang of young men breaks into Stool Pigeon’s shack, steals his money, and burns his newspapers. This scene stands in stark contrast to the reverence which is shown to Tiresias in the Theban community. Even Oedipus, a king, begs Tiresias on his knees to impart his wisdom (371-373). The younger generation in the Hill District antagonize Stool Pigeon when they should be looking to him for guidance, and they lose their way. “What them kids gonna do now?” Stool Pigeon asks King. “They burned up their history. They ain’t gonna
know what happened. They ain’t gonna know how they got from tit to tat” (69). The anxiety that Stool Pigeon has regarding generational ignorance is shared by August Wilson. Sandra Shannon writes that:

By transforming select moments in black history into dramatic reenactments, he [August Wilson] attempts to forge new attitudes among black Americans about their past and the role they played in its making. The resulting plays display a variety of tactics to forge a link between generations separated by pronounced cultural breakdown. According to Wilson, in an age when far too many African Americans have been corrupted by materialism and have become disinterested in their past, their salvation lies in lessons resurrected from bountiful examples provided by the past.”

In this sense, what Stool Pigeon is doing with his newspaper clippings is the same thing that August Wilson is doing in his dramaturgy. Stool Pigeon transforms select moments of history—his newspaper clippings—into lessons which can bridge the generational gap and connect them with their past. When Stool Pigeon’s newspapers go up in flames, so does any hope of salvation for the new generation of black men and women.

The salvific key which Tiresias holds, the knowledge that Oedipus’ is the same incestuous king-killer whom he seeks, saves Thebes but ultimately dooms Oedipus. On the other hand, Stool Pigeon gives King a key which will not only save the Hill district from destruction, but will save King as well. Stool Pigeon hands King the machete that his assumed father, King Hedley, used to kill a jazz singer named Floyd Barton in a dispute over owed money. Stool Pigeon tells King, “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 can find a way to wash the blood off you can go sit on
top of the mountain. You can be on top of the world…I give that to you and we can close the
book on that chapter. I forgive. That’s the key to the mountain” (62). Stool Pigeon’s key is an
escape from the cycle of violence through forgiveness. Tiresias tells Oedipus that he is someone
that he thinks he is not, and Stool Pigeon tells King that he can be someone that he thinks he is
not—that he does not have to be like his namesake. Donald Pease writes that, “When Stool
Pigeon handed King Hedley II the sword with which his father had slain a sacred blues singer, he
challenged him to discover the resources within himself that would end the cycle of retributive
violence responsible for his father’s commission of the inequities.”

Stool Pigeon is telling King that, as Tiresias also tells Oedipus, there is another side of himself buried internally who would
do things that go against his very nature. Yet, the man buried within King holds the key to a
brighter future not only for the community at large, but also for himself.

Jocasta, the queen of Thebes, and Tonya, the queen of the Hill district also try to council
their spouses away from impending doom. Sophocles’ Jocasta comes through as one of the
strongest characters in the play—a powerful speaker who stands toe-to-toe with the king who
shines through in her dialogue. As Cedric Whitman writes, “Throughout we are confronted with
Jocasta’s intellectual gifts, her skill in argument, her views on life, religion, and the world at
large. She is accustomed to dealing with men, and she deals with Oedipus as well.”

The same can be said for Wilson’s Tonya, whose wisdom in the midst of the plagued streets of Pittsburgh
often elevates her over King in the rapport that they have. Both Oedipus and King are positioned

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41 Whitman, Cedric H. “Jocasta.” Oedipus Tyrannus: A New Translation, Passages from Ancient
Authors, Religion and Psychology: Some Studies, Criticism, edited by Luci Berkowitz and
as the leaders in a patriarchal power structure, but the women in the tragedies—like the prophets—are the ones who see that their spouses are on a path to destruction when they themselves cannot. Jocasta’s solution, however, would ultimately lead to ruin, and Tonya’s offers King a way out from the mess that he is in.

In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Jocasta can see the writing on the wall before Oedipus can. As more information is given regarding Oedipus’ origins, she realizes that something terrible is about to happen. “Stop!” the queen implores, “in the name of god, / if you love your own life, / call off this search! / my suffering is enough” (1161-1163). Jocasta calls for the king to cease his plunge into the darkness of his—and her—past. This would ultimately save both of them from the knowledge that they are equally mother and son, husband and wife. To continue to live in ignorance bliss, however, would be to continue the abdominal relationship that they have unknowingly entered into and would ultimately damn Thebes. Therefore, Jocasta’s advice—no matter how well-intentioned—could only lead to further ruin.

Tonya, too, issues King a call to forego his own doomed mission and to revel in the things that he already has. Tonya tells her husband:

King, you don’t understand. I don’t want everything. That’s not why I’m living…to want things. I done lived thirty five years without things. I got enough for me. I just want to wake up in the bed beside you in the morning. I don’t need things. I saw what they cost. I can live without them and be happy. I ain’t asking you to stop living. The things I want you can’t buy with money. And it seem like they be the hardest to get. Why? When they be simplest. Do your job and understand what it is. It ain’t for you to go out of here and steal money and get me things. Your job is to be around so this baby can know you its
daddy. Do that. For once, somebody do that. Be that. That’s how you be a man, anything else I don’t want. (84-85)

Here, Tonya asks King to call off his own search for material success. Instead, she wishes that he would simply be there for her—to be a good husband to her and a good father to her son. She wants King to recognize that his duty as a father and a husband is paramount to his idealization of economic success in a society that will not grant it to him. She can see that the pursuit of material goals can only lead down one path, a path that has led to the fracturing of family bonds in the black community.

In redefining the roles of the prophet and the queen in *King Hedley II*, Wilson is issuing a call to the black community that he is writing for: Listen! Where Tiresias and Jocasta hold wisdom which might be salvific to either the community or the individual, Stool Pigeon and Tonya hold keys which could do both. The younger black generation, Wilson is claiming, needs to be attentive to the words of the speakers of truth in their own communities. It is only in knowing the past that a brighter future can be established. Similarly, Wilson is urging black men to listen to the women around them. In a patriarchal society, prideful masculinity can occlude the things that truly matter: living a full life with those that you love. Additionally, by taking the lofty prophet and turning him into a rambling shack-dweller and transforming the powerful queen into an embattled mother and wife, Wilson is making it clear that wisdom comes through in places that we might not expect it. One does not need god-gifted powers or a title to speak truth. I have expressed here, and in the previous sections, how specifically Wilson’s ability to riff on Sophocles’ work creates new meaning, but what if we look at the play as a whole? What sort of new meaning is made through Wilson’s reception of the classical text as it pertains to the dramatic and cultural traditions which Wilson is fusing together in *King Hedley II*?
Bearden, Dramatic Collage, and Classical Collaboration: Claiming Ground

The transformative work that Wilson does in King Hedley II occurs on page, but it strongly resembles the artistic technique of one of the playwright’s great influences: Romare Bearden. Romare Bearden was a prolific painter and collagist who grew up in the Harlem Renaissance, and whose work was a great inspiration to August Wilson throughout his career. As Wilson states, “In Bearden I found my artistic mentor and sought, and still aspire, to make my plays the equal of his canvas.” This statement is especially important when considering the work that Bearden did in receiving and transforming classical literature. In 1977 Bearden created his “Odysseus Series,” which took scenes from Homer’s Odyssey and transformed them through medium of collage—the practice of layering different scraps of paper, cloth, and textiles on top of each other to create a unified whole. In the “Odysseus Series,” Bearden creates a depiction of Homer’s work which fuses classical mythology and black culture—the same thing that Wilson is doing in King Hedley II. As Robert O’Meally states, “Part of what we’re looking at is an attempt to tell the African American epic, using Homer as a foil, or a springboard for it…He’s trying to make the universal story black but he’s also trying to show that the black story is universal.” Bearden achieves this effect by creating an Odyssey which replaces the white heroes which one might expect to see with black figures and culturally black themes.

42 Wilson, qtd in Shannon, The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson, 12.
43 Bearden’s Odysseus Series originally went on display in New York, for only two months in 1977. The series was recently put back on display at Columbia University, from November 15, 2014 to March 14, 2015, and was curated by English and Jazz scholar Robert G. O’Meally, the Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia. For more background on both the original display and O’Meally’s exhibition see: http://www.columbia.edu/cu/wallach/exhibitions/Romare-Bearden.html
For example, through the aesthetic of collage, Bearden changes Poseidon into an African king with a look of unbridled rage hung on his visage. The god of the sea stands with spear and shield in hand, ready to attack. Bearden wants the viewer to remember that Poseidon was chasing Odysseus around the seas because the wandering hero had ventured onto his son Polyphemus’ island unannounced, stole his prized sheep, and plucked out his eye. His status as the god of the sea becomes secondary to his status as a father seeking revenge for wrongs done to his child. Furthermore, it invokes a feeling of colonial violence, where tricksters like Odysseus sailed to lands inhabited by black men and women, stole their treasures, and committed atrocities worse than blinding. In this collage, Bearden has received Homer’s work and given it new meaning. Just as Bearden uses scraps and fragments of paper to refigure the classical work, Wilson too creates a dramatic collage which layers fragments of different cultures on top of each other to redefine Oedipus Tyrannus.

The clearest example of Wilson’s dramatic layering in King Hedley II comes at the climactic ending of the play. In a moment that hearkens back to Oedipus Tyrannus, Elmore, the hustler who has been courting King’s mother Ruby, finally reveals to King that his father, is not in fact King Hedley—it is a man named Leroy Slater. Furthermore, Elmore intimates that he killed Slater years ago over a gambling debt. King, distraught and angered, picks up the machete that Stool Pigeon handed him and vows revenge. In this sense, King appears doomed to repeat the cycle of violence which he is stuck in. “But see…my name ain’t Leroy Slater, Jr.” King tells Elmore. “My name is King Hedley II and we got some unfinished business.” (99). King, rather than heed the words of Stool Pigeon and Tonya, picks up the inheritance gifted to him by the ghost of the first King Hedley and promises bloodshed.
However, when King has the machete to Elmore’s throat, he stops and plunges the sword into the ground. “The Key to the mountain!” Stool Pigeon proclaims, indicating the King has freed himself from the cycle (101). Elmore gets up and draws a gun, but cannot bring himself to shoot King—he fires a shot into the ground. Ruby, thinking that Elmore has shot her son, fires a gun of her own and the bullet hits King in the throat. King’s lifeblood spills out of his body onto the site where Stool Pigeon has buried Aunt Ester’s cat. Stool Pigeon has been trying to resurrect the cat, because he believes that, “If she ain’t used up her nine lives Aunt ester coming back” (61). The prophet, who “recognizes that the sacrifice has been made,” falls into a joyous religious frenzy. Prior to the stage fading to black, a cat’s meow is heard.

This scene begins with the classic moment of reversal that *Oedipus Tyrannus* is so famous for. King, like Oedipus, comes to the realization that his family tree is much more complicated than he thought it to be. Here, Wilson layers Sophocles’ dramatic narrative on top of the setting of the Hill District and the characters which he has put there. Yet, the play does not end as Sophocles’ does. Rather than ripping out his eyes, King reaches “the mountain” that Stool Pigeon has prophesied—he wipes the blood off the machete. King is then laid low senselessly by his own mother. As Henry J. Elam writes,

> Wilson’s Ruby—like Soyinka’s Agave, who unknowingly decapitates her own son Pentheus—accidentally kills her son King, symbolically signaling the end to a cycle of violence and destruction. The end is also a beginning as his blood blesses the shrine that Stool Pigeon has constructed for Aunt Ester. King’s blood is the blood of a King, the purifying, sanctified blood of Shango’s ram, the blood of human sacrifice that can bring about social, spiritual, and cultural resurrection.\(^{45}\)

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Here, Elam elucidates the dramatic brushstrokes which Wilson places on top of the canvas that already contains Pittsburgh and Thebes. Wilson infuses African drama by calling back to Nigerian playwright Wale Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides*, and African mythology by mimicking Yoruba ritual sacrifice.

Wilson does not stop here, however. On top of this already culturally clustered dramatic landscape, Wilson continues to add fragments. When Ruby sees that she has accidentally killed her own son, she sits on the ground and sings in lament:

Red sails in the sunset
Way out on the sea
Oh carry my loved one
Bring him home safely to me. (102)

Here, Wilson interpolates the song “Red Sails on the Sunset,” popularized by Nat King Cole in 1957, and introduces the blues tradition the Wilson believes to be “the best literature” that black Americans have. Finally, Wilson inserts Stool Pigeon’s fanatical ranting at the end, which begins with, “Thy will! Not man’s Will! Thy Will! You wrote the Beginning and the End!” and

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46 Wole Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides*, first published and produced in 1973, is an adaptation of Euripides’ *The Bacchae* in which Soyinka receives Euripedes’ text, as Wilson does with Sophocles’ text in *King Hedley II*, and refigures it in a way that speaks to his Yoruba heritage.

47 Shango, or Sango, is a Yoruba god, or orisa. Each one of the orisa demands sacrifice from the practitioners of the Yoruba religion, and Shango desires the ram. Ritual sacrifice is incredibly important in Yoruba religion. Regarding Yoruba ritual sacrifice, J. Pemberton III writes that, “Sacrifice is essentially the conversion of a situation of death, or potential death in any of its manifestations, into a situation of life. Hence, the underlying desire in every sacrificial rite is the desire for life, whether expressed as health, children, wealth, wives, or social status…every sacrifice is also the conversion or reversal of the situation of death into life” (24-25). In this sense, Yoruba ritual sacrifice is enacted through the death of King, whose death and blood reverses Aunt Ester’s death and breathes new life into this embodied spiritual force.

ends with We give you our Glory. We give you our Glory!” (103-104). In this tirade Wilson includes black American religion in the dramatic collage which he has created. This layering creates a dramatic work which, although pieced together in fragments, creates a whole which includes the cultural stamp of each tradition that Wilson calls upon. In this regard, *King Hedley II* stands on the ground of Ancient Greece, Pittsburgh, and Africa equally.

In this layering, this cultural fusion, Wilson destabilizes the singular authority which has been traditionally granted to the Western masters on the American stage. By intervening in *Oedipus Tyrannus* through hybridization—by layering the artifacts of his cultural traditions on top of the evaluative tradition of drama which *Oedipus Tyrannus* upholds—August Wilson becomes a collaborator with Sophocles in the creation of meaning. Like in *Oedipus Rex*, there are plagues, heroes, prophets, and queens—but, as we have seen, they take on new meaning when thrust into the cultural context that Wilson brings them in to. Through this act of reception, Wilson is asserting that his religion, his music, his ancestry, is just as important to the American theater as the story of Oedipus. In *King Hedley II*, black theater and the theater of the Western tradition stand on the same ground, Sophocles and Wilson become partners in their endeavor to represent the human condition on stage. Wilson states that, “We [black playwrights] are capable of work of the highest order…we can answer to the high standards of world-class art. Anyone who doubts our capabilities at this last stage is being intellectually dishonest. We can meet on the common ground of theater as a field of work and endeavor. But we cannot meet on the common ground of experience.”

The theater is a common space in which uncommon or unfamiliar or uncomfortable experiences can be explored and interrogated at a distance. If the only

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49 Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” 497.
representation of experience on the stage in America does not include black experience, it cannot fully represent the human condition and the theater becomes a dead institution.

August Wilson’s vision of a world where specifically black theaters represent an equitable portion of LORT recognized theatres has not come to fruition. As I indicated previously, the single theater which Wilson said “could be considered black” has since lost its LORT recognition. Does this mean that the American theater is a defunct institution, unable to recognize the essentiality of black theater to the American dramatic tradition? Has colorblind casting effectively whitewashed black theater? Or, do dramatic traditions need to be segregated in order to fully express nonwhite cultural experiences on the stage? Brandi Wilkins Catanese writes that, “By refusing traditions of segregated stages without refusing racial difference, what we have come to call color-blind casting has the potential to render whiteness particular rather than universal in its relationship to other racial categories.”

This concept of refusing traditions of segregated stages without refusing racial difference is sound in theory, and points to a more complicated view of shared stages than the cultural imperialism which Wilson was so anxious about. But, how might it work in practice?

This past Fall, the LORT recognized Court Theatre in Chicago launched a production of King Hedley II, starring Kelvin Roston Jr. as King. Following that production, the theatre launched a run of Oedipus Rex, also starring Kelvin Roston Jr Oedipus. So, this past Fall, Wilson’s work has literally stood on the same ground as Sophocles’ drama. Is this the colorblind casting that Wilson was so adamant against? I argue that this nontraditional casting choice is in

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line with Catanese’s conceptualization of a shared theater where racial difference is interrogated instead of erased. Like Bearden’s transformation of Poseidon into an African king through the layering aesthetic of collage, the character of Oedipus, who has traditionally been cast as white, is layered over by the character of King Hedley II and becomes black. Whereas Poseidon becomes a vengeful black father, Oedipus is transformed into a working-class black man who cannot catch a break. In this layering racial differences are cast into the forefront of the stage rather than obscured behind the veil of colorblindness. The stage, like Bearden’s canvas and Wilson’s text, becomes a place where the privilege accorded to the Western tradition is destabilized and calls the audience to question what they thought they knew about tragedy and tradition. The dual casting of Roston Jr. as both King and Oedipus calls the audience to think about each character: how are they similar, how are they different? What about King’s situation is different than Oedipus”? How has the distant mythology of Ancient Greece replayed itself in the black community of the Hill district in the 1980’s? And, hopefully, how is Wilson’s drama replaying itself today? Such a staging might call the audience to evaluate the plagues, prophets, kings, and queens which are in their own lives and in the society around them—all the while keeping race at the forefront of the discussion.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this study we have seen that Wilson, a master playwright, is able to take the dramatic elements of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* and transform them into something new and challenging. I, like Wilson, am a believer that a strong understanding of the past is the key to a better future. The classics have held a special place in my heart for quite some time. They are situated in a world vastly different than our own, where gods come down from the sky, wars are
fought with swords and shields, adventures are plentiful, and monsters lurk around corners. These stories articulate something deep, primordial, about the human experience in a beautiful way. This is why they have been pulled through history by artists like Wilson. Through *King Hedley II*, Wilson uses the extreme tragedy of *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a vehicle with which he can better express the tragic circumstances of the black experience in America. Most students who have taken a survey course in literature know about the plague in Thebes, Wilson can be heard to say, but let me tell them about a real plague that occurred right here in America. A plague that is still occurring today. Classical scholars engage in fierce debate regarding Oedipus’ heroic qualities, well let me tell them what courage looks like, Wilson whispers through *King Hedley II*. Anyone who has seen the work of Sophocles on the stage knows all about prophets, well let me tell you them speaks the truth. All of these people have read or watched *Oedipus Tyrannus*, they hail it as one of the greatest dramatic achievements of all time, but they fail to recognize it playing out every day right before your eyes.

In an age when the country is divided and any sort of civil argument seems to be an impossibility, works like *King Hedley II* are reminders of how vital literature and the arts are. They provide space to have these tough conversation—an arena where meanings and traditions can be explored and fought over. Like the productions of *King Hedley II* and *Oedipus Rex* put on by the Court Theatre this past Fall, they allow people from different cultural backgrounds to take part in a discussion that must always be had together. The America that we are living in today is an experiment, and our societal culture, like a biological culture, must be fed nutrients which are empowering to people of all races, creeds, and ethnicities. If not, the experiment will surely fail. The classics provide a dimension of distance, of universality, which can help to facilitate these discussions. This is the importance of the work that I have done in analyzing Wilson’s drama and
its relationship with Sophocles’ tragedy. This study has been about redefining things which might be unfamiliar to some—like the black experience in America—in familiar terms—like plague, hero, prophet, king, and queen. The past is happening over and over again now, and the more we understand of it the better equipped we can be to handle whatever is thrown at us, or to right wrongs done in the past which are still affecting society today.
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