

5-2001

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Seven Guitars: August Wilson's Portrait of Three African-American Women

by

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Dr. Bogumil

UHON 499

7 May 2001

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DS only

August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* begins with "five friends gathered together in the backyard of a house in Pittsburgh to reminisce about the life of their absent friend, a local blues guitarist named Floyd Barton, whose sudden death elicits in them the impetus to reexamine their lives in relation to his"(Bogumil 119). As seen in Mary Bogumil's book, *Understanding August Wilson*, it is 1948 and the group is dressed in their best, having just returned from the cemetery, where Floyd has been buried(119). As the friends share stories about Floyd, they begin to reveal aspects of their personal lives(119). The seven friends, before the absence of Floyd, could be seen as separate instruments that when brought together, represent a unity or cohesion, thus the title *Seven Guitars*. As the play indicates, this group of friends could not manage without each other.

In August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, specific scenes are set up in order to focus on the relationships between the three women in the play: Louise, Vera, and Ruby. The relationships between the women and the men in the play are extremely problematic, as well as the relationships between the women as a collective group. The roles and conversations of the other characters in the play are pivotal in defining the character of these women. In the play, the female characters can be seen as a composite of one woman at different stages in her life. Like Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*, August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* can be compared in regard to portraying the lives of three black women instead of three white ones. Wilson admits that creating female characters is difficult when he says:

I doubt seriously if I could make a woman the focus of my work simply because of the fact that I am a man, and I guess because of the ground on which I stand and the viewpoint from which I perceive the world. I can't do that although I try to be honest in the instances in which I do have women. I try to portray them from their own viewpoint as opposed to my viewpoint. I try to--to the extent I am able--to step around on the other side of the table, if you will and try to look at things from their viewpoint and have been satisfied that I have been able to do so to some extent.(Bogumil 125)

Sandra G. Shannon, author of *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, has her own argument about the role of female characters in Wilson's plays. She feels that "the female characters assume the traditional role of nurturer in his plays, a role that is based in part because of their ability to sustain others and in part because of men have thrust that role on them"(125). Shannon believes this role has been "sustained," historically inscribed in their psyches "from slavery through the Great Migration to the North"(125). "Thus, the real difficulty for Wilson becomes how to go beyond what one might perceive as this "conventional" type of black women on stage in his plays(125). The character that best fits into this assumed role of nurturer in *Seven Guitars* would have to be Louise, for she establishes relationships on her own terms throughout the play.

In *Seven Guitars*, Louise can be seen as the older, wiser, motherly figure. Louise also plays surrogate mother to Hedley. Hedley, an extremely troubled character, has a problem with all institutions in that he thinks they are all run by white people who are out to get him. Hedley's distorted world view is based in part on his father and the untimely circumstances that led to his death. Hedley's father died before he was able to apologize

for something that he said to him as a small boy. Hedley reminisces about a time when he was younger towards the end of Act II Scene IV and this calls up the memory of his father. When Hedley was a boy in school, his teacher was teaching a lesson on Toussaint L'Ouverture and basically told Hedley and his classmates that they would never be like him, since then, Hedley wanted to be like him. When he returned home from school, he asked his father why he did nothing instead of being like Toussaint L'Ouverture and that landed him a kick in the mouth. From that point on, Hedley gave up hope on becoming anything and remained silent in the presence of his father. On his father's death bed however, Hedley came to apologize for this incident and when he said his long speech, he realized it was too late and his father was already dead. This made him sorrowful and as he states on page 92 of the play, until "Marcus Garvey come and say that it was not true and that she (Hedley's teacher) lied he give me back my voice to speak"(Wilson 92). Hedley has tuberculosis and refuses to see a local doctor named Goldblum. Instead, he relies on the principle of holistic medicine. Hedley sees a woman by the name of Miss Sarah Degree, who is supposed to have a cure all for any disease. She gives Hedley Golden Seal plants to make tea out of, as well as powders, and roots. Hedley believes that these agents are all that he needs to get well and that a doctor is a waste of time. In Act I Scene III, the telling conversation between Louise and Hedley starts out as a confrontation over cigarettes and rent payments and ends up a conversation about his health. This dialogue begins when Louise asks, "Did you go down there and see the doctor? You need to go back and see the doctor. You sick. I called them and told them you need to go down and get tested"(Wilson 24). Hedley then mentions the root tea that he received from Miss Sarah Degree and confesses that he feels "just fine". After

Hedley's explanation, Louise goes into detail about his need to see a doctor even further, by mentioning someone they knew that died, George Butler. Louise says:

You need to go see the doctor. You be spitting up blood. That don't sound like no job for Miss Sarah. You go to see Miss Sarah when you have a cold. You need to go back to that doctor and do what they tell you. They got medicine they can give you. That's what happened to George Butler. He didn't go back to the doctor. You need to get another chest x-ray. Miss Sarah can't do that. (Wilson 24-25)

By this statement, it can be seen that Louise does not completely discredit Miss Sarah's method for curing sickness, she just believes that for something as serious as tuberculosis a doctor is needed. While Hedley is still living in the past with his belief in folk medicine, Louise very much believes in modern medicine. For many African-Americans, there is a belief that the ancestors knew what was best to cure and that modern medicine is not productive; however, many changed those beliefs when people they knew began to die and immediate results were seen from the practice of modern medicine.

Another example of how the notion of outside sources intrudes upon the present, appears later in Act I Scene III when Canewell enters and there is dialogue between Louise, Hedley and himself, in which Canewell agrees with Hedley's idea of the Golden Seal plant being able to cure. From this scene, it can be seen that in the African-American community, the women know when to rely on folk medicine and when not. For many African-American communities, it is the women that hold the family together, and this is evident in the dialogue between Canewell and Louise. After Canewell enters carrying a Golden Seal plant for Vera, the dialogue proceeds as follows:

Louise: What you got there?

Canewell: This is for Vera. This a Golden Seal plant. Ask Hedley about them.

Hey Hedley tell her about the Golden Seal.(Wilson 26)

Immediately following, in Act I Scene III, Vera enters and Canewell offers the plant to her saying:

Hey Vera, I bought you this Golden Seal plant. You plant that over there and that be all the doctor you need. That'll take care of everything you can think of and some you can't. You just take a pinch off of them leaves and make you a tea.

Ain't that right. Hedley? Or else get you a little piece of the root.(Wilson 33)

As Hedley and Canewell proceed to prepare a place to plant the Golden Seal, Canewell again solicits information from Hedley about the plant when he says, "Tell her Hedley. That be all the doctor she need"(Wilson 33). Hedley goes on to say, "My grandmother used to make tea with the Golden Seal. She make a tea or she chew the leaves and rub it on her chest"(Wilson 33). This institutes a traditional view on Hedley's part of this Golden Seal. To Hedley, it is a remedy that has been passed down from generation to generation. No matter what the men say, Louise still insists that Hedley see a doctor when she says:

We ain't living back when your grandmother was living. You can go right across the street and see the doctor. Doctor Goldblum don't charge but two dollars. You can get some real medicine.(Wilson 33)

Then Canewell chimes in with, "This is real. Where you think Dr. Goldblum get his medicine from"(Wilson 33). Just the fact that Louise would go to the trouble of insisting that Hedley see a doctor is proof that she cares about him. Louise is an example of the

motherly figure, nurturer, one who keeps everything in order no matter how out of hand it may become.

Hedley understands the world in Jim Crow terms, and this is in part why he sees all institutions as harmful. Jim Crow Laws had a tremendous impact on the lives of African-Americans and their relationship to white people. Jim Crow Laws were instituted in states of the South in order to restrict the activities of African-Americans and for some in order to keep them in a subordinate position as opposed to whites. For many people who have no clue what the Jim Crow Laws brought about, there was segregation and signs that said white only and black only, and the infamous back of the bus incident with Ms. Rosa Parks. Through Hedley's character, the reader can see that he has his own qualms with society and that he refuses to settle for the "white man's" version of his behavior. He, like many other African-Americans at this time in history, felt that "the place of the black man is not at the foot of the white man's boot"(Wilson 73). In Act II Scene I, Hedley admits that he does not like the world or what he sees from the people. Hedley feels that Black people should be more concerned about their well being or station in life than they are at present. In Hedley's eyes, the people seem to be too small minded and have no thoughts of being great. The assertion can be made that Louise lives in the present while Hedley thrives in the past.

Not only is Louise playing the role of surrogate mother to Hedley, she also assumes the maternal role for Canewell. In Act I Scene III, Canewell mentions that he is "looking to eat my breakfast in a brand new place." Louise quickly jumps in and says, "I thought you was staying up there with Lulu Johnson"(Wilson 34). Canewell says that he has become a "drifter" now, until he can find something better for himself. This

conversation leads into Vera's feelings about men and relationships. Louise has her own perspective on relationships that she expresses to her friends in Act I Scene III. For example, Louise and Hedley have a conversation about Miss Sarah Degree in which Hedley says, "A woman need a man. That's what Hedley say. I knock on your door last night"(Wilson 25). Louise responds by saying, "You can knock all you want. You go knock on the doctor's door before you come knocking on mine"(Wilson 25). This allusion to knocking could possibly lead the reader to create associations. For instance, the knocking that Hedley is doing could be a knock for survival. He needs Louise and her behavior towards him in order to make it through his day and the constant trials that he, a Black man, faces in America. For Louise, this knocking could be a knock of coping. Louise has been deserted by a previous lover, and this hurt molds her interpretation of relationships. Louise has her own views on relationships, and later on in the conversation, she explains the reason why she feels that she does not need a man. She mentions that, "I got me a thirty-two caliber pistol up there. That be all the man I need. You need to go see the doctor"(Wilson 25). Although Hedley's conversation with Louise about a woman's need for a man is playful, she cannot help dismissing it and acting as a caregiver to him. The relationship between Vera and Floyd is possibly the most problematic in the play in regard to the other characters and their relationships.

Vera's character can be seen as the middle-aged woman with an unrequited need for love that she longs to have fulfilled. Vera can also be seen as the holder of truth, which in fact is what the etymology of her name means. Vera too, can be seen as jealous when it comes to the critical relationship between Ruby and her. Vera has been with Floyd for quite some time, and during this time, he has gone to Chicago in order to pursue

a career in music and left her in Pittsburgh. Vera knows that reuniting with Floyd or "falling back into his trap" means getting hurt, but she is compelled to do so. In Act I Scene II, Vera and Floyd have a conversation about their relationship and what it will mean for Vera to go to Chicago with him. Floyd is making a confession to her that all that has gone on in the past is over and that he is ready to be serious. Vera is vulnerable and the "dialogue between the two characters exposes her vulnerability"(Bogumil 124). In other words, "her sense of self-worth is contingent upon her ability to satisfy Floyd"(124). When Floyd went to Chicago the first time, he invited Pearl Brown to join him and they ended up having an affair which "proves to Vera that what she had to offer was not enough"(124). The conversation in Act I Scene II between Vera and Floyd proves that she is hurt by what he has done to her. Vera questions Floyd's fidelity after he says the following:

Floyd: Pearl Brown don't mean nothing to me.

Vera: She sure meant something to you before. She meant enough for you to pack up your clothes and drag her to Chicago with you. She meant something to you then. Talking about you gonna send for me when you get up there. Left out of here telling me them lies and had her waiting around the corner."(Wilson 14)

At this point, Floyd has tried to convince Vera to back to Chicago with him and she does not see the advantage in it as far as she is concerned. For Vera, even thinking about going to Chicago with Floyd allows her to examine the thought of being left all over again for the next woman who comes along. Vera is not pleased with Floyd in this scene and thinking about him and Chicago only reminds her of the pain that she felt when he left her

the first time. In Act I Scene II, Vera expresses her feelings of rejection to Floyd when she says:

I don't know what she did or didn't do but I looked up and you was back here after I had given you up. After I had walked through an empty house for a year and a half looking for you. After I would lay myself out on that bed and search my body for your fingerprints.(Wilson 19-20)

What best describes Vera's relationship with Floyd is the phrase that Louise uses, "man trouble"(Bogumil 124). In Act I Scene III, Vera expresses her frustration with members of the opposite sex when she says, "That what the problem is now. Everybody keep their trunk packed up. Time you put two and two together and try to come up with four...they out the door"(Wilson 34). Vera says this in response to Canewell's remark about being a drifter and living with a woman with whom he has an "understanding", which is the reason he "keeps his trunk packed up". This understanding between Canewell and the older woman is a sexual exchange on his part for the luxury of having a place to lay his head at night. Canewell could be seen as having a "sugarmama" which was common for women to have instead of men. For women, it is what is known as a "sugardaddy". In a relationship where there is one or the other, there is an understanding that goes on between both parties that allows for them to know that there is no commitment; the one is just taking care of a particular need at the time. Vera's relationship with Floyd seems to be a major disappointment for her. As before mentioned, she feels unable to satisfy Floyd the way that she should. This, in part, is the reason that she refuses to go to Chicago with him, along with the fact that he has no money. Vera explains to Floyd in Act I Scene II that when they got together he really did

not want her, he just wanted "what he could get at the time". This can be explored further in the dialogue between the two when they go back and forth as follows:

Vera: I had just left my mama's house.

Floyd: I knew you was just getting started. But what you don't know, I was just getting started too. I was ready. You was just what I was looking for.

Vera: You was looking for anything you could find.

Floyd: I said, "That's the kind of woman a man kill somebody over." Then I see you turn and walk toward the door. I said, "They just gonna have to kill me."

That's when I went after you. I said you was just right for me and if I could get that I never would want nothing else. That's why you ought to try me one more time. If you try me one more time, you never carry no regrets.

Vera: I don't carry no regrets now. I'm gonna leave it like that.(Wilson 18)

In this dialogue between the two, as well as the dialogue that follows, Vera is hurt and she feels like Floyd does not understand the reason behind it. To her, he was doing what men do, pass up the women who really care about them in order to satisfy their whims. What Vera fails to understand is that for Floyd, she was a conquest. As the previous dialogue insinuates, Vera was someone that Floyd felt he had to have, because he did not want to see anyone else with her. Floyd went to Chicago to pursue his dreams of becoming a famous musician like Muddy Waters. Muddy Waters was a famous jazz musician who Floyd heard once in a club in Chicago. In Act I Scene II, Floyd reveals to Vera an instance where he was passing by a night club and heard Muddy Waters playing and was amazed at the way the music sounded and the way that people were crowding in the club to hear it. This was the instance that allowed Floyd to realize that "the sky's the limit"

and that he could or would play like that one day(Wilson 16). All Vera wanted was to be with Floyd and support him like she knew she could, but he never gave her that opportunity. As a result of Floyd's leaving to be with another woman, Vera felt somehow stripped of her womanhood. This is possibly the most fatal mistake that Floyd could have done to Vera, because she continues to feel the sting from it as long as she deals with him.

It seems that for Floyd, Vera was the woman who he needed, he just had to go out and "find himself" first. Vera was good enough for him to come back to, but not good enough for him to take with him. The need to fulfill Floyd's sexual desires as well as be his mental and emotional support is what has Vera at odds about their relationship. Through their dialogue, Vera's longing to please Floyd is explored. The whole issue of being able to please a man is addressed through the character Ruby.

In the play, Ruby, Louise's niece comes to Pittsburgh from Alabama. This young, vivacious, femme-fatale is the "male pleaser". She even had two men ready to kill for her. Leroy and Elmore are discussed in a conversation that Ruby has with Hedley, in which she reveals her past to him. In Act II Scene I, Ruby is "motivated by her compassion for the old man"(Bogumil 138). Ruby wants Hedley to make her a mattress from the feathers he discarded from the chickens that he slaughtered. Ruby compares the innocence of the slaughtered rooster to her ex-lover Leroy who was murdered by Elmore in a barbershop. Ruby, a free-spirit, felt smothered by Elmore so she decided to leave him for Leroy. Ruby really did not love either of them, and the discussion of death leads into a conversation about names, specifically Hedley's name and the Buddy Bolden analogy. Buddy Bolden, a jazz trumpet player, is who Hedley is named after. Hedley is

very sensitive when it comes to his name and is not modest when telling the story of how he once killed a man for making fun of it. His real name is King Hedley, but he dropped the King in order to escape ridicule.

Just as she has Leroy and Elmore ready to kill over her, Ruby has Canewell and Red Carter ready to fight. In Act I Scene V as Ruby arrives to Pittsburgh from Alabama, both gentlemen offer to carry her suitcase. When Canewell feels as if Red Carter is intruding on his future woman, he becomes upset. This anger is shown in the dialogue between the two as they both grab hold of the suitcase:

Canewell: Watch yourself!

Red Carter: You watch yourself!

Canewell: I was here first!(Wilson 63)

The actions of the two gentlemen that follows this dialogue is shown to the reader through stage directions(The two men start at each other. Red Carter gradually lets go of the suitcase. Ruby takes the suitcase from Canewell and goes up the stairs.)(63) The hold that this sensuous Ruby has on men is amazing and evident upon her arrival to Pittsburgh. This magnetism does not stop at single men. Ruby attracts Floyd and has him taking her out to "see the town" and have a beer. In Act II Scene I, Floyd enters and offers to go sight-seeing when he says:

Floyd: Hey, Ruby. How you doing? Ruby, I thought you'd be gone. Be out looking around the city. See where you at.

Ruby: I know where I'm at. I know I'm in Pittsburgh. I done seen lot of cities before. They may not have been up North but a city is a city. It don't make no difference.

Floyd: Sure it do. This is Pittsburgh. This ain't Alabama. Some things you get away with up here you can't get away with down there. I'll show you around. It ain't as good as Chicago but you be surprised at what you find. Comeon don't worry about nothing...I'll tell everybody you my cousin.

Ruby: You gonna buy me a beer?

Floyd: I'll buy you a beer and anything else you want. Comeon.(Wilson 74)

Within this dialogue between the two, there is an obvious attraction to Ruby on Floyd's behalf, as well as allusions with the use of the words cousin and Chicago. This whole business of a man taking a woman out and referring to her as his cousin alludes to a common occurrence in the African-American community. In such a community, a man who is seeing another woman (a mistress) along with his "main woman," will easily take both women out on the town, often times to the same establishment and assume that no one knows the wiser. What ends up happening is, someone who knows the man and the mistress are not "kissing cousins" will sell them out and word will get back to the "main woman". This action can result in turmoil on the part of the man and even the end of his relationship with both women. The other allusion to Chicago brings up the fact that for Floyd, Chicago was a place of adventure and excitement. Aside from this adventure of the city, Floyd was also able to explore the women. With Ruby now in the picture this becomes all too clear.

Ruby is trying to find a father for the child she is carrying. This is part of the reason why she comes to Pittsburgh in the first place. Ruby does not know who the father of her child is and she sleeps with Hedley, and since she knows he wants an heir, she puts it off on him. In the first conversation that Ruby engages in with Hedley, he reveals many

private aspects of himself and his life to her. Hedley talks of his father, his name, and his longing to have a son. Hedley says:

I always want to be a big man. Like Jesus Christ was a big man. He was the son of the father. I too. I am the son of my father. Maybe Hedley never going to be big like that. But for himself inside. That place where you live your own special life. I would be happy to be big there. And maybe my child, if it be a boy, he would be big like Moses. I think about that. Somebody have to be the father of the man to lead the black man out of bondage. Marcus Garvey have a father. Maybe if I could not be like Marcus Garvey then I could be the father of someone who would not bow down to the white man. Maybe I could be the father of the messiah. I am fifty nine years old and my times is running out. Hedley is looking for a woman to lie down with and make his first baby. Maybe...maybe you be that woman for me. Maybe we both be blessed.(Wilson 73-74)

Hedley believes that if he has a child that the child will be great. This stems from the idea that he did not have the opportunity to do the things that he would like to see done. His child would be able to be his heir and attribute all of his fame and glory to his father. Act II Scene V is the scene in which Ruby allows herself to succumb to Hedley's will. Hedley has gone off on one of his usual rants about what the black man is and what he is not and Ruby tries to calm him down and let him know that everything is alright. Hedley feels that he needs a woman and has previously revealed this to Ruby, so she gives in to his need at this time. This decision for Ruby allows her to give a sick, old man a chance at a legacy and allows her to be able to give her unborn child a father.

The women in the play are key in keeping the plot moving and allowing the reader to see the troubled relationships and lifestyles of the characters. In Act II Scene II, the women have a conversation amongst themselves that allows the reader to obtain a closer look at the problems that arise between these particular women and the men that they have encountered. Louise again plays the motherly, wise role when she offers advice, but claims that she would not tell anyone what to do. Vera mentions that she may go to Chicago with Floyd and see what the city is like. She seems to be in denial and goes on to explain that she can always come back if he does not act right. Louise has her own theory of Floyd and his behavior that she expresses to Vera in this scene when she says:

You can do what you want to do and I wouldn't be one to try and tell you not to do something. I just know even though it seem like Floyd know how to do the right thing...he really don't. Floyd is the kind of man can do the right thing for a little while. But then that little while run out.(Wilson 78)

Louise does not want Vera to get hurt another time by Floyd and she will not hesitate to voice her opinion about the situation. When Ruby enters the scene, she mentions that her mother sent her a letter that Elmore had written. Ruby goes on about Elmore and his jealousy and how he killed Leroy in the barbershop. For Ruby, Elmore was too demanding and wanted her all for himself. Elmore could not stand to see Ruby with another man, he regarded her as his property, and when Leroy had her, he felt that he had to kill in order to stop it. Through this conversation with the women, the reader is shown how different men behave and how all men are not the same.

August Wilson's own life and troubling experience when it comes to relationships may be one of the reasons that he can write so well about the problematic relationships of

others. Having been married three times, Wilson has some experience when it comes to loving and leaving and unresolved feelings. Although the characters in Wilson's plays are fictional, their lives and the events that take place appear real. Seen, his plays create such a vivid picture that the untrained eye could mistake it for reality. In this play, *Seven Guitars*, each of the characters represent one piece of the whole. Louise, Vera, and Ruby allow the reader to view the time capsule of the life of one African-American female in three different stages of life, love and resolution.

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Niketa,

It was a genuine
pleasure to read
your paper. Much
luck in your academic,
career and personal
endeavors.

Dr. B.

P.S.
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