

A Study of Hermeneutics in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey Black Bottom*

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Abstract

*The connection between the dramatic question whether the band will complete the recording session despite the conflict among the band members and Levee's death in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey Black Bottom* and the comparison between interpretations of Martin Luther's theology has gone largely unnoticed by the interpreters. The present paper addresses this gap by examining Levee's temperament and Cutler's frustrations in the play by comparing it with the features of Luther's *Sola Scripture, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia* and the *Ten Commandments* that has been preached over three centuries before. Secondly the paper explores the interesting and fascinating world of Luther's thought about music and its place in the life by comparing to *Ma Rainey's* retains strength and heartfelt connection to the origins of her music that gives her power and authenticity. As music is true gift from the hand of God, it possesses solemnity and truthfulness. According to Cutler and Toledo God liberates, provides, and upholds the dignity of human beings. For Levee, God has done none of these things. This relates Luther's conversion stories where God comes to them, lift them up, makes them new creatures and frees them from the enslavement of sin in their own hearts. By showing how Wilson's play engages scripture, this paper implies the African American biblical hermeneutics which confirms the use of the bible in art and literature is a guide for producing biblical interpretations that are in need for African Americans.*

Key Words: *faith and grace, frustrations, music, biblical interpretations and sin*

The word Hermeneutics comes from a Greek word which means 'to say' or 'interpretation'. Especially the interpretation involves biblical texts, wisdom literature and philosophical texts. Hermeneutics is initially applied to the interpretation of the Scripture as it is derived from the Hermes who is a messenger as well as an interpreter of the God. It has emerged as a theory of human understanding in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey. Modern hermeneutics includes both verbal and nonverbal communication as well as semiotics and presuppositions. The term is introduced into the philosophy mainly through the title of Aristotle's work 'On Interpretation'. This paper deals with the Biblical hermeneutics as it has

its wake up by Martin Luther's Sola Scriptura, who is considered as the dawn of a modern hermeneutics and the Ten Commandments that mutually outline the record of the Christian customs and honest procedure for a God- fearing and morally good life, are continually in siege and fall sufferer to an individual egoism, that depresses the human harmony. The Five Solae of Martin Luther is formed from five Latin phrases or slogans that are emerged during the Reformation to summarise the Reformers' basic theological principles about the essentials of Christianity. Among the five Sola

- *Sola Fide*, by faith alone.
- *Sola Scriptura*, by Scripture alone.
- *Sola Gratia*, by grace alone.

are revealed all the way through in Wilson's character Toledo, Ma Rainey and Cutler in the play is an evident for its insinuation in Biblical hermeneutics, on the other hand Levee always denies God, battles with Him and curses Him grounds to be a liable for his failure.

The scriptures are well thought-out as an ultimate and trustworthy authority of faith and tradition. Luther doesn't mean that Bible is the only source where truth is found but it means that everything that are learned about God and all other authorities should be interpreted in the light of Scripture. As this is reflected in Cutler's words as the Bible alone is the highest authority "That's my God! That's my God! That's my God" (98) Jesus loves every one. All the creatures in the world are saved through the faith in the God, Cutler is of person who believes that he is not saved by his own merits or declared righteous by his good works. God grants salvation not because of the good things that everyone does, despite their sin. Often in the play Toledo formulates that an individual is inherited from his ancestor, whose basic nature is enslaved to sin, because of that nature he is basically treated as enemies of God and lovers of evil. God graciously preserves the humanity in the world even if they are faithless towards him, He is still faithful. This is persistent in Luther's words about grace "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (287). Cutler believes that God is not anything else than to trust and believe Him from the heart. As "I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol" (43).

The city Chicago is portrayed as an absolute consign for the blues to harmonize and for others it is emulated as a place of ambiguous and conflicting nature. In most of Wilson plays it is the home for musicians alone, like Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey Black Bottom* and Floyd Barton in *Seven Guitars* a place they try to reach for their affluence and positive reception. Wilson portrays it as a facile, sophisticated and juxtapose North side with the South side and the Blacks with the whites. Ma Rainey is a role model and an inspiration to the other musicians and whites in Chicago, she as a blues is a book of literature and

influences everything. The blacks' cultural response to the world is sheltered in blues like Ma Rainey; Chicago in 1927 exposes the exploitation of African Americans in the white domination commercial music industry. Alternatively it parallels as a place for successful challenging blues singer who conflicts with her producers and her band including the talent and ambitious trumpeter Levee.

Wilson's introduction to the play gives the first hint on the people's spirituality, ethical integrity and interpretation. The moon light "has fallen through a window and broken into thirty pieces of silver" (xv) jog the memory of Judas who has obtained the very same amount of money for revealing his Lord and sacred leader Jesus. This picture of introduction intimates that the city looms a fog of betrayal and bribery and on the other dispense the characters discussion and their reference to Scripture portrays that there is still grace and faith in the mankind. An endowment musician Levee challenges God and offences Him throughout the play proves his ignorance and instability towards God. Toledo, Cutler and Slow Drag counsel him all over but ultimately it ends in awful, which signifies the call for trust in Martin Luther's Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia and work of Christ as "Sacramental Union" (37). Cutler deems Luther's works "Unless I am convinced by the proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. God help me" (505). The condition on the South side of Chicago is completely different, the sleepy-eyed negroes move slowly towards their small flats and rented rooms to expect the assault of night. Instead of spiritual solace through church service the blacks draw comfort out of the blues "vision and prayer" (xvi) which instructs to reconnect and reassemble them.

Levee has a profound aversion to black peoples' unquestioning acceptance and devotion to the doctrine of Christianity. Waving a knife at Cutler and at the heavens, Levee criticizes Christ for having lack of action in protecting his mother from being gang raped by a group of white men. He scolds the traditionally Christian Cutler, "God don't pay niggers no mind. In fact . . . God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart. Jesus don't love you nigger! Jesus hate your black ass!"(95). He finds Christianity severely insufficient in meeting the spiritual and practical needs of black people. In other way the picture of Levee in the play with consideration of Christianity that has not provided blacks with tangible support in the struggle for liberation.

The appearance and language of the characters utter and the means in which they proceed and respond to their surroundings afford additional insight into the relationship of God and their attitudes towards grace, faith and scripture. But the white folks, like Sturdyvant avoids to have close contact with the musicians is informed as a racist or segregation attitude, he simply wants to record the songs on the agenda as quickly as possible and get rid of the performers immediately after the recording session is over " Just like clockwise" (18). Sturdyvant is symbolised as the mark off segregation. But the blues musicians who have

surrendered to supreme sufferings trust that grace and faith in scripture is the only way to discover the completion of bliss. Cutler is in belief that salvation can be attained only by refinement and faith in God. Faith is the beginning of human revival, it is the foundation and root of all justification, without faith it is impossible to please God. “What is hidden about us in the heart of God will be revealed or us and his Spirit testify and persuade our spirit that we are the children of God. But he convinces us of this by calling and justifying us by grace through faith” (143). God has not saved the ancestors because of the deeds done by them in righteousness but in virtue of His mercy by washing of Baptism and renewal in the Holy Spirit. Throughout the recording session Cutler advises for faith and good deeds that are necessary for salvation as God judges one’s life based on this. As Luther has insisted the personal faith in Christ is essential for justification “because nobody will be justified in his sight by works of the law” (50) so that “conscious of our deficiency, we shall cry to heaven and God will have mercy on us” (50).

Ten Commandments List Lutheran

Thou shalt have no other God:

Many things around Cutler goes wrong as Chicago is not depicted as a peaceful place for living, never cares about the environs and he is truthful to his soul. None can argue or moralise negative thoughts concerning God “...my God! You worthless...talking about my God!” (98). For Irvin and Sturdyvant wealth is god, they not only become one of the most attractive goods but it has made them an end in itself.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain:

Toledo and Cutler love God and never curse, swear, use witchcraft, lie or deceive by his name, but call upon Him in every trouble, pray, praise and thanks giving. As its clear in the words of Irvin “Christ, you made a bundle” (11), Toledo “I done take up the church learning and I’s learning all kinds of things about the bible” (29) when he shares the story of Lord’s Prayer and the good times of the ancestors “God got ways to count” (40). Levee “Cause if there’s a god up there, he done went to sleep” (43) swearwords to an extreme by abusing and hurtful God and challenges Him to a fight shows Wilson’s narration of business and religion on a par with one another.

Thou shalt sanctify the holy-day:

The fear and love towards god is not despised preaching but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn them. The day of the recording session is considered as holy day for Cutler and others expect Levee, as they have planned the recording session ends on well finally after the numerous arguments and interruptions. Levee is fired from the band and at the same time

Sturdyvant who encourages him from the beginning of the play “that horn player...the one who gave me those songs...is he gonna be here today? Good. I want to hear more of his sound” (19) pays him five dollars at last for his denial to acknowledge his band. For Levee alone the day is a weird as it turns off his careers.

Thou shalt honour thy father and thy mother

The characters are too respectful to their parents and forefathers, but their influence on the American commercial society makes Levee like persons to forget their god and culture. Cutler utters that he “got blues in the church” (83) and Levee desires to forget about his past and the roots of his forbears. All that comes to his mind in connection with the word African “is running around in no jungle with no bone between my nose” (32). Slow Drag’s music echoes African rhythms and calls up the admirable earlier period he spent with Cutler in the manner of an African religious ceremony “the gods is sympathetic with his cause for which he is calling them with the right names. Then his success comes with the right proportion of his naming”(33). He especially uses the same “what you call an African conceptualization. That’s when you name the gods or call on the ancestors” (32) in the similar means like his forefathers have done to achieve the desires.

Thou shalt not kill:

Cutler repeatedly insists Levee not to hurt or harm his band members either physically or mentally but to befriend and help them in every need and danger of life. In spite of his dreadful action Cutler never curses nor attacks him also reflects Luther’s sola grace by which “we have been saved” (9) it comes into the human beings through the heart of God and by the act of justice and mercy “ We are give Grace” (9). Levee is crafted as a man who demands self-respect and higher position in life, he frustrates when Cutler asks “Where Mr.Irvin go?” (23) and responds that he does not know as he “ain’t none of his keeper” (23). This text refers to the Bible’s story of Cain and Abel “After Cain had killed his brother Abel, God asked him where his brother was, and Cain answered him, I know not; am I my brother’s Keeper?” (57).

Thou shalt not commit adultery:

The band members in the play try to lead a trustworthy and decent life and each love and honour their spouse. The arguments arise mainly as they intend to complete the recording session within a day. Toledo is too lovable to his wife “I can’t say nothing bad about her” (91). He waits for her till he puts in the grave and never blames for “A good Christian women going to church and wanna do right by her god.... the church was more important than I was” (91). Levee is too respectful to his parents; he frustrates in too many events in the play only because of the cruelty that he has faced in his young age. He never thinks to commit adultery till the end when everybody has turned their hands against him.

Thou shalt not steal:

Levee who is answerable for his own failure, tries to get a reputed name and a band of his own name. Throughout the play he suffers for this but he never thinks to steal his neighbour's money or property, nor get them by false ware or dealing, he struggles to improve and protect his property and music.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour:

This instruction forbids telling untrue things about somebody else but it too stresses not to perform any act of untruthfulness neither by deed nor spoken word. Fairly a number of characters do and do not speak the truth. Sturdyvant has assured Levee to record his songs but breaks his promise. Sylvester blames someone to have caused the accident with Ma's car although he himself has run a red light. Irvin's bribe helps to cover up the true facts of the accident. Levee denies that he has ruined the recording of the first song by unintentionally unplugging Sylvester's microphone.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house and Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his cattle, nor anything that is his:

Cutler warns Levee to be careful with Dussie Mae as she is "Ma's gal" (89). Levee has bought his shoes to inspire Dussie Mae and assures her that he will make up his own band and has asked her to wait until Mr. Sturdyvant conforms for the recording. He doesn't covet about the neighbour's house and Dussie Mae, he wishes to marry her. Dussie Mae on the other hand does not have any concrete things that she wants but her whole survival is mechanised at living through the expenditure of others, mainly Levee. He does not have much longing in material things that belongs to his band members but he has his mind enviously fixed on acquiring Ma's fame, Ma's status and Ma's power. He looks forward of having his own band just like she has, he dreams to be a boss around white music producers.

In order to make understand Levee how ridiculous he sounds the music Toledo illuminates him through a story "just answer the question. Do you know the Lord's Prayer or Don't you" (28). The Lord's Prayer is the opening of one's heart and soul in an conversation with God and it is an expression of faith in a relationship with God. Humility is a foundation of prayer and God presents himself as a model. As Luther believes that 'The Lord's Prayer' taught about the prayer to our Father and this is given to the world by Lord Jesus. Each and every contrary idea that Levee put forth in the play can be interpreted by Luther's faith and grace ideals towards God. Levee is blamed by Toledo "you forget the name of the Gods" (32) as he changes his outlook. His interest in the Florsheims shoes from clodhoppers intimates his eagerness to have a change in the music style that is from blues to jazz. He has

forgotten the own nativity of African American and goes at the back of whites for his empowerment.

Blues is an expression of social conditions. Both the blues and gospel have offered the performers, composers and entrepreneurs an alternative way to the harsh manual labour conditions of plantation and factory. Gospel music leads the way for women's empowerment. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* establishes a foundation for Wilson's blues theology that he has articulated in his later plays. The play is significant of finding one's cultural and spiritual regeneration through the blues song by Ma Rainey and the young trumpet player Levee, who has failed to understand his relationship to the music and never realizes his blues song. The great Mississippi Delta bluesman Muddy Waters has pointed that "The blues was born behind a mule"(43). Blues and gospel music has originated in the oppressive experiences of African Americans in the Post-Emancipation South. When the United States Congress ends Reconstruction in 1877, the political gains and civic protections African Americans has gained after the Civil War have suppressed and millions of blacks are economically and politically disenfranchised. Blues and gospel has proved empowering for the artists who make the music, similarly women found a prominence and influence in gospel as singers, choir leaders and composers that has given them an equal priority to the male preachers who have dominated black churches. Gospel gives black women a public prominence in church that they seldom enjoyed elsewhere in black America. Music has offered the promise of freedom to the people those who have pursued it.

Ma Rainey, eponymous realizes her blues song and understands her relationship to the music. Ma Rainey recognizes the power of the music as "you don't sing to feel better. . . You sing 'cause it's a way of understanding life" (62). According to Ma Rainey the blues is not simply therapy but an engagement with a complex and it enables to understand, transform and transcend life. Repeatedly and insistently Ma shouts to her manager Irvin, as she enters the studio accompanied by the arresting officer, "Tell him who I am"! (48) establishes her importance. Ma Rainey informs to Levee and her other band members in recording session that "They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand it's life's way of talking... 'cause that's a way of understanding life.... This be an empty world without the blues" (82).

Wilson has included numerous cites of biblical interpretation and the importance of music in the play proves that the utilization of the bible is an escort for producing biblical interpretations that are in need for African Americans. It clearly points out Levee's plight, his own particular form of the problem of evil that is compared to the Old Testament story; Job has once enjoyed fabulous wealth, prosperity in his crops, a flourishing family, and vigorous good health. And he knows that all of his pleasure comes from God. Later when God takes all from Job and Job's wife cried out, "look how God is treating you—it is better to curse him and die!" (302) Job still has the memory of God's goodness to him that is reflected in Cutler,

Toledo and others expect Levee. Though Cutler is confused why God has apparently turn on him and his people yet he still believes and hopes for an excellent future and this kept him true to God. Levee didn't have the memory; he need not want to hear the narrative of his community that says "God was *for* the black man, not against him" (107).

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