

3. Using two plays read in the second half of the course, consider and contrast the ways that women operate in relationship to the men around them. Do the women have power and agency? How does the women's interaction with the men and/or with other women shape their identity, their sense of self?

The plays of August Wilson typically feature the conflicts of the African American quotidian through the lens of a male. Virtually all of the plays' principle characters are male and it is their individual conflicts and experiences that drive majority of the plot. In the play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, it is mainly Herald Loomis' inner turmoil that drives the events of the play, similarly in *Fences*, Troy's struggles are highlighted and serve as the impetus for the key action. However, the focus on men does not diminish the role of women throughout the play cycle. In fact, the actions of men are often bolstered or validated by the women in the play. Yet, women often must maneuver in relationship to the men to exude their unique personalities and identities. The different ways in which women operate around men gives the audience insight into these women's psyches. Subsequently, this paper will focus on the actions and personalities of two women from two plays: Vera from *Seven Guitars* and Rena from *Jitney*. Rena counters careless and selfish decisions of her partner by asserting their self-worth and agency, while Vera laments her partner's mistakes, portraying herself as dependent and uncertain.

Rena and Vera address the actions of their men in two very distinct ways: though, they are both emotionally wounded by the men's short comings, their method to cope with their particular situations vary. It is first important to note that the nature of the two women's relationship differs. Rena and her boyfriend Youngblood have a child together, whereas Vera and Floyd do not. Moreover, Rena's situation centers around rumors suggesting that Youngblood consistently cheats on her with sister. Hence, in relationship to her boyfriend Youngblood, Rena acts as an autonomous and dissatisfied partner. Before any of this is confirmed, Rena confronts Youngblood about another pressing matter related to money. She enters the play looking for

Youngblood (also known as Darnell) to ask what he has done with \$80 she has set aside for food. She demands, “What you need it for? You tell me. What’s more important than me and Jesse eating?” (Jitney, 1.2.49), not giving Youngblood any opportunity for an excuse. He cannot give any plausible reason why the health of his family was more important than a debt he had to pay. Additionally, Rena firmly asserts herself as a responsible and rightfully demanding woman in this scene. Given that Youngblood has circumvented the trust of the relationship and put the livelihood of Rena and their son at risk, her reaction is appropriate. In the same vein, Rena stresses her autonomy by enumerating her familial duties: “Whatever happens we got to eat. If I need clothes...I do without. My little personal stuff...I do without. If I ain’t got no electricity...I do without...but I don’t never touch the grocery money. Cause I’m not gonna be that irresponsible to my child,” (Jitney, 1.2.49) thereby proving her committed efforts. The repeated use of the first person in this quote including “I” and “my” accentuates Rena’s actions as independent of Youngblood’s, exemplifying her autonomy from him. In this circumstance, her sacrifices are crucial to the stability of the family unit, thus further contextualizing Youngblood’s decision as egocentric and detrimental.

Moreover, Rena’s incredulity at Youngblood’s actions transforms into action when she lets him know, “Ain’t no need in you bothering to come home ‘cause I just might not be there when you get there.” (Jitney, 1.2.51) further emphasizing her low tolerance for what he has done. She owns the authority of the house and Youngblood’s right in it. She threatens to divide their joint efforts, or the “home”, as consequence for what he has done. Through all of these declarations, Rena’s character continues to resonate as an independent and responsible partner who does not tolerate neglect. Even, when Youngblood’s actions are explained, and Rena realizes that they were not malicious she does not get lost in his niceties. Despite his virtuous intentions to surprise

her and buy a house, she stresses, “I love you Darnell, but love can only go so far,” (2.1.92);

even when things are right she does not settle. Rena remains realistic and does not let

Youngblood’s positive actions cloud her judgment of their feasibility and appropriateness. In effect, Rena remains poised and autonomous in relation to her boyfriends’ actions.

Conversely, in *Seven Guitars* the character Vera struggles to define herself in light of her ex-partner’s actions. Her partner, Floyd has just returned from Chicago after recording a new hit single. Upon his return, he seeks Vera out to get back in her good graces and to rekindle their relationship. However, she reminds him that the reason he left was because, “he [was] there in Chicago with another woman...and all [she had was] a little bit of nothing, a little bit of touching, a little bit of [herself] left,” (*Seven Guitars*, 1.2.16). Evidently, she continues to lament his abandonment and struggles with the tangible emptiness he left her with. He had taken everything from her psychologically and now she has only “a little bit.” This “little bit” conjures an image of holes left all over her body: the emptiness of her heart incarnate. Vera’s tone almost indicates a yearn for Floyd to fill the void he left, but it also exudes anger and frustration for the void he has created. Thus, Vera struggles to define herself without Floyd as her partner while maintaining respect for her womanhood. She does not react in the same manner as Rena by giving the man an ultimatum and forcing him to recognize his lack of power without her. Instead, Vera makes concessions for Floyd and his behavior. She tells Louise, “I believe Floyd means well. He just don’t know how to do. Everything keep slipping out of his hands. Seem like he stumble over everything. (*Seven Guitars*, 1.2.31) to justify why Floyd does not act maliciously despite his impact. When Vera describes Floyd’s actions as “stumbling” or “slipping” out of his control, it makes it seem as though he does not do harm deliberately. She cedes the responsibility of his actions to his hardships and not to his intrinsic character.

Vera's constant excuses (though she is still hesitant to trust Floyd fully), manifest themselves into action and in Floyd's favor. "I want to say yeah, but what am I saying yeah to," (2.7.92) demonstrates Vera's decision to consider Floyd's proposition to accompany him to Chicago. Her desire to accept Floyd's offer and ultimately forgive him comes from the possibilities that await in Chicago apart from Floyd but also from the possibility that he fill the void he has created within her. Here again, we see Vera's struggle to define herself given the prospect of rekindling a relationship with a man. Her struggle represents that of many women of the 1940's where having a sense of self was promising but futile without a full life and resources with which to apply it, therefore she would not be personally (in all facets) fulfilled without Floyd. Ultimately, Vera relents and accepts Floyd's proposition notifying him, "I got to thinking and I went down to the Greyhound bus station too...It say, 'One way...Chicago to Pittsburgh.'...I hope I never have to use it." (2.7.93). Her decision signals a hope for a virtuous and faithful relationship, self-fulfillment and prosperity (given the success of Floyd's first single). All of these hopes could lead to a stronger version of Vera, because she will have no emotional voids and consistent validation and support from her partner. Given that, since the start of their relationship, Vera invests a large portion of herself in Floyd, and when he leaves she lost those parts of herself, but this trip could potentially be a source of redemption. She can renew herself, be more steadfast and find her agency in her relationship with Floyd as compared to her life when she was single and anguishing over his absence.

Accordingly, different time periods afforded women different opportunities. In the 1970's women had autonomy in society and so had less reason to be completely dependent on a man for a livelihood. Whereas, the male-female unit is a bit more sacred in the 1940's due to the lack of agency black women had; men were a means to enfranchisement and by extension self-

validation. Rena has more flexibility and resources (both emotionally and financial) without Youngblood in the seventies and so had more freedom to be independent and demanding. Vera, on the other hand, may be stable financially (given that she has her own house), ameliorating her emotional health and the prospect of expanding her resources were made more possible with Floyd's presence. For this reason, her personality comes across as more unsettled and dependent but what she really accomplishes by assuming this persona is the alignment of herself with a person (man) who acts as a means to access the life and love she deserves. Norms of the time, markedly influenced each women's unique reaction, response and subsequent sense of self in relation to their male partners. Even if both women were aware of the mistakes and manipulation of the men around them, the expression of their power and personality reflected their specific needs and their potential for self-sufficiency without men.