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# Breaking the Cycle: The Forgiving Blues in August Wilson's *King Hedley II*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay argues that in *King Hedley II*, his sequel to *Seven Guitars*, August Wilson presents a bleak picture of life for African Americans living in the inner cities in the 1980s. King, the titular protagonist and now-grown son of characters from Wilson's previous play, struggles to build a future in a world that constantly reminds him that he doesn't count. Wilson uses King, a character thoroughly enmeshed in the inner-city hoodlum culture of "blood for blood" violence, to dramatize a way to break that cycle and navigate American reality. Although King is ultimately sacrificed at the end of the play, he learns his own and his community's history and adopts a "bluesman" mentality, which allows him to learn forgiveness and, thus, transcend cycles of violence.

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**Introduction**

"The past is never dead. It's not even past."

—William Faulkner

The ten plays of August Wilson's Twentieth-Century Cycle (or Pittsburgh Cycle) display the various crises assailing the African-American community, ranging from external threats by exploitative and conniving white capitalists—the plots of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982) and *Radio Golf* (2005), for instance, both hinge on this particular danger—to the internal strife caused by the over-ready trigger fingers of young black men—note especially the title character of *King Hedley II* (1999), described by Sandra Shannon as bearing "mental and physical scars that turn him into a walking time bomb" (127). As the only true sequel within the Twentieth-Century Cycle, *King Hedley II* effectively demonstrates the ways that the past can catch up with us as well as the importance of communities maintaining meaningful connections. Following up on the characters first presented in *Seven Guitars* (set in 1948), *King Hedley II* (set in 1985) dramatizes the state of black America in the era of Ronald Reagan's presidency—after the battle for Civil Rights allegedly had been won, demonstrating that, at least for some segments of the African-American community, those gains have proven illusory.



Told in flashbacks, *Seven Guitars* (1995) begins at the funeral of its main character, Floyd Barton, an aspiring blues musician. In one of these flashbacks, we witness Floyd's murder at the hands of the drunk and delusional King Hedley. Also in this play, we meet Ruby, who has just become pregnant by a man who is in jail back in Alabama. She soon begins a relationship with Hedley and then tells him that she is pregnant with his child.

In *King Hedley II*, set roughly thirty five years later, we meet Ruby's child as the titular grown man. As the play opens, King[1] has just returned home from prison to try to build a new life. Tonya, his wife, is pregnant, and he and his friend Mister are raising money to open their own video store. Unfortunately, these dreams are stymied when he falls into conflict with Elmore, his mother's fiancé. Elmore tells King both the truth about his patrimony and that he (Elmore) killed King's biological father back in the 1940s as they were fighting over Ruby. King vows revenge, but in the play's finale, he and Elmore decide to leave thier conflict in the past. Tragically, however, in the midst of their reconcilliation, Ruby accidentally shoots King in the throat, killing him.

According to Harry Elam's assessment of the play, Wilson uses King to represent "a generation of black children unable to thrive in their kingdoms in the self-destructive

[1] To avoid confusion, I use "King" throughout this essay when discussing the title character of *King Hedley II*, and I use "Hedley" to refer to the character from *Seven Guitars*.

1980s" (82). Believing himself the son of the character from *Seven Guitars*, King "feels compelled to repeat his father's violent actions as the sole means of inheriting his legacy. Instead of a beneficent patrimony, King Hedley II inherits this trauma as the deep truth of his own existence" (Pease 1). Riffing on Langston Hughes's "Harlem," Elam declares that "[t]hrough King, Wilson reveals what happens to dreams deferred, to hopes unfulfilled, to the power of the past unrealized in the present," adding that King "is a toxic combination of heredity and environment; the sins of the father are, in fact, visited on the son" (82). Further, he notes that "Wilson creates an ironic portrait of royalty and a kingdom steeped in the depressed circumstances of the 1980s urban milieu, where black poverty, despair, and cultural devastation are the norm" (ibid). Yet, Wilson's vision of black America is by no means without hope; however, to find that hope, it is necessary to experience multiple Wilson plays since they do often tend toward the tragic. Seemingly every time the final curtain descends on one of his plays, Levoy is knifing Toledo (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*), or Hedley is severing Floyd's windpipe with his machete (*Seven Guitars*).

With one play for each decade of the twentieth century, it becomes quite easy to connect William Faulkner's often-quoted line—from his only real attempt at writing a drama, *Requiem for a Nun*—with Wilson's plays since each one is suffused with a sense of history and since each of the plays is at least loosely connected to the rest in the cycle. Faulkner's statement refers to the tendency of the past to catch up with us, which is wont to happen in the Twentieth-Century Cycle, since all but one are set within the Hill District where Wilson grew up. Furthermore, Wilson wrote his plays to help ensure a meaningful connection to that past so that his characters (and his audiences, of course) can learn from past mistakes and move forward with an enabling sense of community.



Many critics have pointed to the exceedingly dark picture painted in *King Hedley II*—especially as follow-up to *Seven Guitars*. For instance, in his introduction to August Wilson: Completing the Twentieth Century Cycle, Alan Nadel describes it as "Wilson's most tragic play" (5). As Charles Isherwood notes, in this sequel, "almost 40 years on, King is still fighting the same battles that Floyd fought, against limited opportunity and the demons of self-destruction. If anything, the odds seem to have become tougher for a man from the black underclass" (Isherwood). Furthermore, as he notes, "The past impinges with particular weight upon the characters of 'King Hedley II,' which reverberates darkly with echoes from events depicted in 'Seven Guitars'" (ibid). Thus, when the two plays are viewed in succession, audiences can then "see with unusual clarity how powerfully Mr. Wilson illuminated the destructive legacies of history — personal and cultural — in the lives of African-Americans over the course of the 20th century" (ibid). Indeed, the end of the play features Ruby, King's mother,

accidentally shooting her own son in the throat as she tries to protect him. However, as we will see, this very act dramatizes a break in the cycle of disappointed hopes familiar to black America.

Other critics have also noted the redemptive arc when connecting the two plays together. For instance, in her essay "If We Must Die: Violence as History Lesson in *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*" (2010) Soyica Diggs Colbert discusses "King's choice at the end of the play to enact his own law in order to end the cycle of violence creates a historical detour that ruptures the chronological relationship between *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*" (97). Diggs's article, which is drawing on Elam's commentary of the play in *The Fire This Time*, adds that the latter play "promises, nevertheless, conditional redemption from the incessant violence that plagued urban black communities in America in the late 1980s and early 1990s" (101). While Colbert's article is informed by psychoanalytic theory, this study will focus much more heavily on reading the two plays, especially *King Hedley II*, within their historical moments. Furthermore, my arguments here assume, but do not require, that that the reader is fairly familiar with *Seven Guitars* since that play sets up the events which unfold in its sequel; however, my argument places more emphasis on the later play since it is there that the cycle of disappointed hopes is symbolically broken. Paying close attention to Wilson's narrative, we find a few important criteria for breaking this cycle and achieving that illusory "hope." The first of these is a connection to the past and to community. The second is the ability to use a blues mentality to overcome an "economics of slavery." The final criteria in breaking the cycle and salvaging hope is learning to forgive.



### *The Living Past*

As a commentary on the African-American experience of the twentieth century, history is obviously an important component in Wilson's Twentieth-Century Cycle, both in terms of his plays' settings and in terms of a criteria for achieving hope. First, let's take a look at the historical moment captured in each play and then examine history as a theme—that is, a connection to history, and therefore community, is essential for survival. While *Seven Guitars* is set in the pre-civil rights era, Wilson places *King Hedley II* in 1985, when (white) America had decided that the battle for civil rights had been won and we could move forward in a new post-racial era. Wilson sets *Seven Guitars* in a significant moment in American and African-American history. While more notable landmark events like the *Brown vs. The Board of Education* decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott were still on the horizon, the nation began taking some essential baby

steps toward ensuring the full rights of citizenship to African Americans. In July of 1948, following on the heels of World War II, President Truman issued two executive orders. The first of these "instituted fair employment practices in the civilian agencies of the federal government" ("Desegregation"). In the second, Truman ordered the desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces. While these orders didn't eliminate redlining or a grossly uneven distribution of the benefits of the G.I. Bill, they were still significant steps forward. Outside of the realm of government, the nation had just witnessed the beginning of desegregation in Major League Baseball as Jackie Robinson broke the "color barrier" in the year preceding Wilson's play. Within the play itself, in Scenes 4 and 5 of Act I, the characters listen to the radio as Joe Lewis, the Brown Bomber, defeats yet another white man, Billy Conn. While Lewis's victory here is a slight anachronism since the two men had last fought several years earlier, it nevertheless emphasizes the burgeoning presence of African Americans in American society and the high notes yet to be hit. The play's sequel, however, dramatizes a state of the nation in which the hopes of African Americans have been severely dashed.

*King Hedley II* is set in the midst of the Reagan years, remembered as an era of tremendous prosperity for "yuppies" (young urban professionals), stock brokers, and corporations. On the other hand, among the nation's urban lower classes, particularly in the African-American community (including the residents of Pittsburgh's Hill District), the same cannot be said. Shannon provides a useful snapshot of urban America in the Reagan era, describing it as "a time characterized in urban areas by guns, crime, family dysfunction, and neglect" (126). Paraphrasing Wilson's commentary on the play, Pease describes this turbulent era within the Black community as the outcome of a "transgenerational structure of violence" that "originated from African Americans' unconscious transference of the collective aggression aroused by an oppressive white supremacist social structure onto black surrogates" (4). Through the character of Tonya, Wilson provides an elaboration on this snapshot within the play: As she protests to King that she doesn't want to have another baby because of the world she'd be bringing it into, she points to the child she does have—Natasha—and the world in which her daughter exists ("exists" as opposed to "lives"):

> 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. She moving so fast she can't stop and look in the mirror. She can't see herself. All anybody got to do is look at her good and she run off and lay down with them. She don't think no further than that. Ain't got no future 'cause she don't know how to make one. Don't nobody care nothing about that. All they care about

> is getting a bigger TV. All she care about is the next time somebody gonna look at her and want to lay down with her (37-8).

If we were to try to root out causes of this lamentable situation, we might describe them as legislative, economic, and narcotic: On the legislative side, the Reagan government vigorously set about crippling New Deal and Great Society programs, "cutting federal support for virtually every program important to African Americans" (Shannon 127). Due to both national and global shifts on the economic front, many of the industries had begun to shut down—most notably in terms of August Wilson's Pittsburgh, the American steel industry had begun to falter and shut down foundries. The 1970s and 80s "brought the collapse of the steel industry and civic unrest which combined to speed the decline of the Hill District's business artery and housing stock. The neighborhood experienced rampant deterioration of buildings, increased crime and random demolition leaving vacant lots" ("Developers"). Making both of these problems worse for the urban poor, the price of cocaine dropped by fifty percent, bringing about a "new and corrosive industry that proved devastating to the inner cities" (ibid). Thus, "by 1985, many neighborhoods that had once been run-down but still thriving" had become "savage war zones" wherein "[g]ang culture, street justice, and lyrics of gangsta rap advocated new, antisocial codes of behavior" (ibid).



While these causal factors are easily assessed, at the beginning of *King Hedley II*, Wilson stresses an equally important factor that has generated this state of affairs: the African-American community had lost its sense of history. As Canewell/Stool Pigeon prophetically phrases the situation, "The people wandering all over the place. They got lost. They don't even know the story of how they got from tit to tat" (8). He laments that the path to Aunt Ester's house "is all grown over with weeds, you can't hardly find the door no more" (8). August Wilson uses Aunt Ester as a quasi-supernatural manifestation of the African-American experience, she having been born the same year the first slaves landed in America and enduring through all the perils of that 366-year experience up to Ronald Reagan's second term as president. The People of the Hill District, however, have forgotten her. They no longer seek her counsel; thus, the path to her house is overgrown, and thus, Natasha has no future because she doesn't know how to make one.

Critics have commented upon the apocalyptic nature of *King Hedley II*'s setting with its rundown houses, barren lawns, and barbed-wire around the only specimen of plant life—Harry Elam and Robert Alexander situate the play as "a meditation on apocalyptic history" (Colbert 99). To make this stark apocalyptic situation even more dire, the seemingly immortal Aunt Ester dies at the beginning of the play, leaving little hope for the future, a situation contrary to the blues-inflected ebullience and hopefulness of the post-war situation of *Seven Guitars*. Onto the apocalyptic stage steps the Glock-toting King Hedley II and his compatriot Mister, both

thoroughly enmeshed in street culture and street justice with its "blood for blood" rule, as Mister chants at the end of the play (100-101). It becomes obvious as the action of the play commences that King and Mister are little more than two-bit hustlers; they have been going around the neighborhood selling $200 refrigerators, which, no doubt, have been stolen. We will note a connection to the play's internal history in that T. L. Hall, Floyd Barton's manager, found himself arrested for selling fake insurance all throughout the neighborhood. King remains tight-lipped, so all the other characters or the audience know about the owner of the refrigerators is that he is a contact King made while he was in prison for killing Pernel. When this scheme proves insufficient to raise the money King and Mister need to achieve their very-1980s entrepreneurial dream of starting their own video store, they, like Floyd before them, resort to robbery. History, we can be certain after reading *Seven Guitars*, is constantly repeating itself. Regardless, audiences will note that the primary problem facing the characters is a lack of historical knowledge, or a lack of connection to history—and through history, a connection to community.

King Hedley II, the man, lacks a historical frame of reference. As the play commences, all of the well-connected community members of *Seven Guitars* are either dead (Hedley, Louise, and, importantly, Aunt Ester, whose death commences the play), absent (Vera and Red Carter may well be dead), or marginalized: Canewell is considered crazy by everyone and has now been rebranded by Ruby as Stool Pigeon because he testified that King Hedley I murdered Floyd, and King Hedley II, mistrustful of his mother, keeps her at arm's length. King seeks solace in Tonya, who is pregnant with the child who he hopes will carry his name.



The seeds that he plants at the beginning of the play take on obvious symbolic value as it progresses—he is trying to set down roots even though he has been told that he doesn't have good dirt. The soil may be inferior, but King declares, "This is the only dirt I got" (37). He anxiously nurses his seeds, hoping to breed flowers out of the dead land, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. Though part of King's motivation in this act seems to be proving everyone else wrong, the seeds hold deeper significance for him—they are a reflection of himself. To step on his plants is to step on him. As symbolic entities, these seeds function on multiple levels. On the one hand, the seeds are stand-ins for King himself; he is the one in need of roots, of good dirt to grow in, and almost solely through his stubborn will, the plant survives just as King does in allegedly bad dirt (we are reminded of Tupac Shakur's rose that grew through concrete). Beyond this, the seeds are his legacy, just as the child growing in Tonya is his legacy; just as he doesn't want to see his plants stamped out, he doesn't want Tonya to get the abortion she has decided to get after deciding that she has failed her previous child as a mother.

At the end of Act II when King has learned the truth of his own patrimony, he ruthlessly rips the plants from the ground so that he may use that spot to vie with Elmore in a literally

cutthroat dice game. Despite protecting his seeds for so long, he rips out the plants just as he has been ripped out. He has been set adrift, and he vindictively takes the plants with him. The only real connections that King has had to the past are Louise, who is now dead, and the urban legend of his faux father, King Hedley I. All he really seems to have of this father, who we saw as a fleshed-out character in *Seven Guitars,* is a one-line embodiment of street justice: "I want everybody to know, just like my daddy, that you can't fuck with me" (58). Not until Elmore gives him a rude awakening by telling him about his real father does he even know that that part of his history is illusory. King is a character utterly without a frame of reference but desperately seeking one.

King's lack of connection is largely due to another one of the play's aforementioned repetitions, for his mother is similarly adrift. When she first arrives on the scene, it is with few connections to time, place, or people (exacerbated by the fact that one of her lovers was on his way to prison for murdering the other). Louise, when Ruby arrives unexpectedly, says "I got [your] letter last week. It ain't had no day, no time, no nothing. Just 'Aunt Louise, I'm coming.' I know you can do better than that" (54). Ruby responds "I didn't know the time when I sent the letter" (ibid). This is a simple enough transgression to overlook, but we soon note another broken connection: She claims, "I ain't country. Don't care where I come from. It's all in how you act, and I know I don't act country" (55). Ruby offers the opposite extreme as Louise's neighbor Mrs. Tillery who cannot seem to part with her roosters in spite of her irritated neighbors' exhortations to just go to Woolworth's and buy an alarm clock. While the discussion of roosters, especially by Canewell, demonstrates the characters' understanding of their history, Ruby would bolt from that history. She wants to deny her roots, and as we know from reading *King Hedley II*, she didn't stay long in Pittsburgh before heading to Chicago, leaving her baby boy behind for her aunt Louise to raise.



We also know from Wilson's later play that she would abandon this lifestyle, too. She attempts a reconciliation with her King, who greets her with an icy reception, claiming that Louise is all the mother he needs, for he doesn't really know her in the capacity of mother—they have no history together (though as *King Hedley II* opens, we see that she is living with her less than congenial son). The day she stops singing, she begins dying, symbolized by her hair turning white. Moreover, this symbolic change is hugely significant, for it shows that she is living outside of the blues (or, as Houston A. Baker might phrase it, outside of the blues matrix). This exclusion from the blues is accompanied by a disconnection from history, and the connection to history, as has already been noted, is essential for any possible of chance of breaking the cycle of despair extant in Wilson's later play. But, so too is a connection to the blues.

***A Blues Harmony***

How, then, does the blues fit into the cycle of these two plays? Within *Seven Guitars*, the answer, on the surface, seems obvious. For instance, Steven Tracy has written extensively on the number of blues songs within the text, focusing especially on Wilson's use of "Anybody Here Want to Try My Cabbage," "That's All Right," and "Buddy Bolden's Blues." The play, in fact, starts with the first of these songs, a bawdy blues number sung by Louise as a "much-needed affirmation of life" (7). Floyd "School Boy" Barton, the central figure of the play, is a blues singer with a "hit" record with the second song. The third song, aside from being sung throughout the play, is instrumental in the play's ending. Hedley, either from drunkenness, delusions, or both, murders Floyd, mistaking him for blues legend King Buddy Bolden (his namesake). Hedley, we learn, has had a recurring dream of Bolden bringing him money from his father so that he might start a plantation.

But, what about *King Hedley II*? Ruby no longer sings the blues. Canewell/Stool Pigeon never plays his harmonica in this sequel. King's pistol-packing lifestyle screams gangsta rap, not old-timey blues rhythms. Where're the blues? To answer this, we'll need to look at Baker's conception of the bluesman. Reading through the lens of Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1987), I will demonstrate that the blues are not merely present in *King Hedley II*, but they are the most important unifying factor between it and *Seven Guitars*.



Baker claims that in his text, he is attempting "to provide suggestive accounts of moments in Afro-American discourse when personae, protagonists, autobiographical narrators, or literary critics successfully negotiate an obdurate 'economics of slavery' and achieve a resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity" (13). Phrased differently, Baker aims to point out examples of bluesmen/blueswomen. By "economics of slavery," he refers to "the social system of the Old South that determined what, how, and for whom goods where produced to satisfy human wants…. an exploitative mode of production embodied in the plantation system," marked by a mythology of patriarchy and economic paternalism on the part of whites (26-27). Importantly, while slavery was abolished in America, the economics of slavery persisted beyond the antebellum days of chattel slavery and into the post-bellum experience of African Americans as social and economic second-class citizens. We see this economic relationship throughout the Twentieth-Century Cycle of plays. Wilson dramatizes the people Baker refers to as America's "vernacular" voices, presenting his audience with "the living and laboring conditions of people designated as 'the desperate class' by James Weldon Johnson's narrator in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" (Baker 3). The lives of these people, as Baker would assert, have been conditioned and shaped by an "'economics of slavery' as they worked the agricultural rows,

searing furnaces, rolling levees, bustling roundhouses, and piney-woods logging camps of America" (ibid). Even when Wilson gets to *Radio Golf*, set in 1995, we see the white capitalist paternalistically set up Roosevelt in the radio business—explicitly because he needs a black face to front his enterprise.

Returning to Baker's bluesmen, to negotiate the economics of slavery, then, means to recognize one's place in the economic system and use this to one's own best advantage, and this can only be done, due to the very nature of that economics, in an improvisational fashion because it is the aim of the system to maintain non-whites in a subjugated position. Whether an instrument is in hand or not (be that instrument a harmonica or a straight razor), this lived blues experience becomes expressive through the sharing of it in story and song, and thus, the expression of overcoming the economics of slavery—perhaps like the signifying monkey overcoming the lion—leads not necessarily to pride or profit but to dignity and a solidified understanding of self worth.

By this definition of the blues and of a bluesman, Floyd Barton falls short. He may have a hit record, but he doesn't have a dime to show for it. If he wants another chance at getting rich off his music, he must first secure the funds to get himself and his band-mates back to Chicago. Unlike Ma Rainey, un uber-blueswoman in the Baker sense, who calls the shots—she controls her recording sessions by including who she wants to include and starting when she wants to start—Floyd has not achieved that level of mastery. He can master the music, and his wooing and winning back of Vera ultimately by performing masterfully at The Blue Goose demonstrate that he can parlay that music into sexuality, but he has not learned how to negotiate the economics of slavery. Mr. T. L. Hall, his "manager," and the industry of white record producers who have learned to harness black musical talent and turn it into gold have victimized Floyd's ignorance of the business: They convinced him to sign away the enduring royalties from his record "That's All Right" in exchange for giving him a small payoff up front. He knows there's more money to be had from his music, but he has to find a way back to Chicago. To do this, he resorts to felonious methods, and in the process, "Poochie" Tillery, his accomplice and neighbor, is killed. Moreover, the money he gains from this criminal enterprise leads directly to his demise as Hedley slays him with his machete, severing "his windpipe with one blow" (98). The symbolic positioning of the wound should not be overlooked: his ability to sing is cut off along with his life. In thirty years, King Hedley II will be shot in the throat, recreating this wound.

Floyd is a blues singer in the literal sense, but let's not forget that, for Baker, the term transcends the literal. The bluesman in Baker's writing is much akin to the trickster. He is able to manipulate situations to his advantage to, as noted before, "achieve a resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity" (Baker 13). Canewell/Stool Pigeon and Elmore prove themselves quite able

to improvise and talk their way through, and it also helps that luck seems to stay on their side. Thus, they survive. Note, for instance, that when the police pick up Canewell and Floyd (in the events preceding the action of *Seven Guitars*), Canewell has five dollars on him, so is able to go on his way but Floyd gets put in the workhouse after being charged for "worthlessness" (*Seven* 14). Of course, that luck is on Canewell's side is no accident on Wilson's part: The bluesman is connected to the community and to his history. We may note, for instance, Canewell's discussion of roosters from different Southern states as a connection to both personal and cultural past. Canewell's knack for survival is telling, since even at the end of *King Hedley II*, Floyd is gone, Hedley is gone, Red Carter is gone, Louise is gone, and Ruby is a shell of her former self, but Canewell lives on. When looking into the sequel to *Seven Guitars*, we meet Elmore, a character even more able to improvise and survive.

Though not as obsessively connected to the past as Canewell with his hoarded collection of newspapers, Elmore has been lucky enough to survive the process of learning life's lessons. He tries to pass on what he has learned to King, who seems to have learned precious little from the school of hard knocks. Referencing Baker's idea of the economics of slavery, Elmore tells King, "Boy, you wouldn't have lasted three days in Alabama in 1948. I done got my ass whipped so many times I done lost count" (53); however, he has learned to pick his battles more carefully rather than fly off the handle at any provocation. Elmore is responding to a sulking King who has had an unfortunate run-in trying to retrieve the pictures Tonya has had developed. In a scene that mirrors and exacerbates Floyd's inability to retrieve his pay from the workhouse because he doesn't have the proper documents, King, receipt in hand, has been told that his receipt "don't count." King takes this as an affront directed solely at him because he doesn't understand the universalizing experiences of the economics of slavery and doesn't have a proper sense of connection to the community. "You see what I'm saying. That's like telling me I don't count" (ibid). In a sense, he *is* correct; he doesn't count because he is one among a multitude being marginalized by capital. King is spoiling for a fight, but Elmore counsels him to let it go. He says, "You got to pick and choose when to fight. If you pick and choose the right place you'll always be victorious" (ibid). One cannot fight the economics of slavery all the time on every front; Elmore tells King to learn to recognize the battles that are winnable, and otherwise let the rest go. Earlier in the play, we find that Elmore, too, was once like King, but he was able to learn to negotiate the march of events. Ruby tells King that there was a time when Elmore wasn't ever satisfied with his life and always wanted more, and Elmore responds, "I wanted to have [life] to where I could get a handle on it. Only that was a large sucker to try and wrestle to the ground. It took me a long time to figure out I didn't have to do that. I could just learn to live with life" (44).

His blues-inflected instincts and his ability to connect with history allowed him to learn to adapt and survive.

The blues, then, are a survival technique, whether we look at the pre-Civil Rights era *Seven Guitars* or the post-Civil Rights era *King Hedley II*. They are also, therefore, one of the important criteria for hope. Again, the central theme Wilson is expressing by joining these two plays together is the possibility of breaking the cycles of violence, of defeat, of despair. The blues offer a means by which to accomplish this end and ensure a hopefulness for future possibilities despite the disastrous endings of the two plays. This seems to be what King needs to learn more so than anything else. If he is unable to adapt, he will thus be unfit to survive in a naturalistic, social Darwinistic world. As the play reaches its conclusion, we find that—and this is one of the most pivotal scenes in Wilson's cycle of plays—King *can* adapt. He doesn't kill Elmore, which leads us to another important criteria for hope: forgiveness.

***Power in Forgiveness***



It would be easy to assert that the problem with a number of the characters within the Twentieth Century Cycle is that they have learned to forget but not to forgive. The final and most pivotal element required to break the cycle and manifest hope from the forlorn endings of *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II* is the capacity for forgiveness, which involves, at its core, a certain kind of letting go. One of the pivotal scenes of the former play is Hedley's description of his dream about his father. Even though it did not happen in the "real" world, Hedley and his father have been reconciled (which, lamentably does lead to Hedley's drunken murder of Floyd). Hedley describes that in this dream, his father says,

> "Are you my son?" I say, "Yes, Father. I am your son." He say, "I kick you in the mouth?" I say, "Yes, Father. I ask you why you do nothing and you kick me." He say, "Do you forgive me?" I say, "Yes, Father, I forgive you." He say, "I am sorry I died without forgiving you your tongue" (68).

While this was not a real life situation, Hedley is able to put his father's transgressions behind him, especially because his father is supposed to be sending dead Buddy Bolden to give him some money to buy a plantation. Up until Floyd's money metaphorically turned to ashes in his hands, Hedley is able to maintain his hopes, including the hope that he will bear a son; Ruby makes good on this hope by telling him that she is pregnant with his (rather than Leroy's) child.

When Wilson moves forward to the squalid situation of 1985, forgiveness is a lot harder to come by. King, like Hedley and Elmore before him, spent a chunk of his life incarcerated for

murder. And while Hedley was by no means inculpable, King and Elmore were guilty of intentionally taking another life, and in the cases of both men, they let rationality and community take a back seat to raw emotion—rather than choosing their battles, as Elmore advocates later in life, they let the battles choose them. As it turns out, King killed Pernell because he refused to call him King (we learn in *Seven Guitars* that Hedley committed precisely this same act but learns over time to be ashamed of the act since, in spite of his aspirations of being the next Garvey or Toussaint, he killed one of his fellow blacks). Instead of calling him "King," Pernell calls him "champ" (72). While we understand that this is somewhat of an insane reason to kill a man, King feels that Pernell is robbing him of his identity (as with the clerk at the photo lab at Sears who said that his receipt didn't count). Wrapped up in street justice and a warped sense of self-importance, King mercilessly slaughters Pernell.

Furthermore, when King tells his story to Elmore, he says, "If he hadn't called me 'champ,' my whole life would have been different" (ibid). He doesn't seem to want to take full responsibility for his own actions; he is, again, unable to pick his own battles. Elmore can sympathize because he made the same mistakes in his youth; nevertheless, he counsels patience and asks King to learn from his mistakes. King says, "People try to say Pernell calling me 'champ' was a little thing. But I don't see it that way," to which Elmore responds, "It didn't seem like it at the time. But it was a little thing in the grand scheme of things" (73). King could not let go of Pernell's insult, so the state lets him go to jail; thus, for now, the cycle of violence is kept intact, but it will soon be up to King to take his name seriously and lead by example.



The very end of *King Hedley II* is heart-wrenchingly depressing, and particularly so if we are unwilling to accept the messianic explanation of King spilling his blood as a sacrifice to resurrect Aunt Ester's cat, and thus Ester herself, “the matriarchal wisdom figure who had accompanied the African community throughout its 366 years in America” (Pease 2). This resurrection allows the African-American community to reconnect with their history and with one another. Ruby, who has lost her own singing voice (her ability to sing the blues), shoots her own son—the next generation—in the throat, ending all of his future possibilities by destroying his ability to sing the blues (and, yes, too, of course, by killing him). However, we must consider that Wilson's plays are about more than just the endings. For instance, Lavoy kills Toledo and damns himself, but we cannot forget the example of Ma Rainey, both black and a woman, but still able to assert her will over white men.

In the case of *King Hedley II*, we must consider what happens just before King's tragic death. King wields his "father's" machete—with Floyd's blood still upon it—which Stool Pigeon has provided for him, telling him that it is "the machete of the Conquering Lion of Judea" (61) and "the Key to the mountain" (62), though he doesn't explain what this means. However, what

he does explain is the real story behind Hedley killing Floyd—King always believed it was because Floyd had stolen Hedley's money, but Stool Pigeon relates to him the events of *Seven Guitars*—that is, he provides King with a connection to his past and the past of the community.

Wilson depicts the penultimate moment of the play with a double-dose of restraint and a triple-dose of forgiveness, played out primarily in the stage directions. "Unable to harm Elmore, King turns and sticks the machete into the ground" (101). Elmore may have killed his father, but he has formed a bond with the man who will soon become his step-father. He attacks Elmore, but he restrains his vicious nature; he lets go of Mister's idea of "blood for blood" street justice. King has used the machete, "The Key to the Mountain" (ibid) to save a life rather than to take a life. Elmore, still angry over the confrontation, then pulls out his pistol and demands of King "Turn around, let me see your eyes!" (102). When King complies, Elmore follows King's lead. "Elmore, unable to shoot King, lowers the gun and fires shots into the ground" (ibid). While the viewing audience doesn't get to read the stage directions, the meaning of the character's actions are nonetheless clear. King's final action, however, is one that is easy to overlook. He cries out "Mama!" just after Ruby accidentally shoots him. His heart has been moved by forgiveness again, opening his heart to Ruby, even though in the first scene of the play, he declared "My mama dead. Louise my mama. That's the only mama I know" (12). Even as she destroys him, they are reconciled. As Elam notes, when Ruby spills King's blood, the characters are able to "bring about social, spiritual, and cultural resurrection" (213). The ritual at the end of the play, then, signifies the possibility of constructive change.



***Conclusion***

Like *Seven Guitars* before it, *King Hedley II* ends with tragedy. Nevertheless, Wilson tries to sow the seeds of hope in King's bad dirt. King is dead and Tonya's child, if it is born, will grow up without a father. Worse, Ruby has to live with not only the death of her child but also the reality that he died by her own hand. However, unlike what we witness in the earlier play, the sequel features a "King" who can lead by example. King is able to connect with his community's past and abandon "blood for blood" vengeance. Moreover, he learns to pick his battles, and, most importantly, he learns how to forgive. Because he has matured as a person, his blood nurtures the soil, reviving Aunt Ester's spirit to heal her fractured community. If we'd like, we can view *King Hedley II* as a blueprint for success—if you learn from the past, learn to pick your battles wisely, and learn to forgive your brothers, the cycle of violence can be undone.

Though tensions arose between Red Carter and Floyd or between the other characters in *Seven Guitars* and violence was often threatened, the other members of the community were always around to mitigate the conflict, and because they were friends, and because they had history together, they were able to forgive each other. This is the lesson that King learns just before his death; he now has the Key to the Mountain and the others bear witness to King's actions (as do we the audience). Pease asserts that King's personal drama "allegorizes events that the characters in [Wilson's] earlier plays were unable to work through, and indicates that the community must work through them before its members can secure a viable future" (3). We are led to an understanding that the cycle of violence, the cycle of murders, and the cycle of hopelessness can be broken if the members of the community can learn forgiveness.

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## BIO

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