



African American Identity in the City in August Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

By Patrick Ludwig

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Seminar paper from the year 1998 in the subject American Studies - Literature, grade: 2, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (FB05 Englisch Seminar), course: The City in American Literature and Culture, language: English, abstract: This paper will be concerned with the possible ways of construction of identity or the loss of identity - particularly the African American identity - in the modern metropolis as it is described in August Wilson's play Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. Which ways to construct a proper identity present themselves to the characters in the play and what will happen when they fail to acknowledge and accept these ways? In this regard, I will examine the relevance of music, society, and Christian religion. Chapter Two will show that it is essential for the understanding of the alienation of the individual, in this case specifically the alienation of the African American musician, to take into consideration the differences between rural South and urban North and the different kinds of music connected to them. From the contrast of South and North, i.e. rural and urban springs the conflict between the old, down-home blues and the new, urban blues, which will later become swing or jazz respectively. The chapter will further address the question which impact this conflict will have on the life scripts of the individual characters. Moreover, the connection between the musician, his instrument, and the music will be examined and explained. Chapter Three will explore the various facets of alienation and their respective sources in more detail. Moreover, it will identify and further illuminate possible ways of forming identity and which processes endanger and impede the formation of identity. Therefore, it is first necessary to diagnose how Wilson and his characters' actions describe the urban environment. Do these actions benefit or harm the formation of identity or do they promote alienation? Can music, religion, or ancestral awareness help the city-dweller?

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