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A KING'S ROYAL SCARS

By

Xavier Mikal Harris
B.F.A., North Carolina A&T State University, 2017

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Colleges of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2020

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A Thesis Approved on

April 14, 2020

By the following Thesis Committee

Dr. Baron Kelly

Dr. Ariande Calvano

Dr. Joy Carew

DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to God.

Without his grace I would not have made it this far.

I also want to dedicate my Thesis to my mother,

Marissa Turner. Thank you for being my guardian angel.

Love you forever.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my department chair, Kevin Gawley for his understanding and support. I would like to thank my thesis committee: Dr. Baron Kelly, for pushing me to become a better actor and writer. Thank you for not allowing me to become complacent in my work. Dr. Ariadne Calvano, for being a source of support and positivity. Dr. Joy Carew, thank you for sharing your wealth of knowledge and wisdom with me. Thank you all for agreeing to be my guides throughout this process.

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ABSTRACT

A KING'S ROYAL SCARS

Xavier Mikal Harris

May 9, 2020

This monograph is divided into five chapters covering my exploration of black male identity in America and the scars that come with it. Through a character study of the black male protagonist I portrayed in August Wilson's *King Hedley II*, I will discuss the racial stigmas and circumstances that are tied to black male identity. Chapter one will consist of analyzing the prison system in America and how its unfair system targets black men. Chapter two will discuss the plight of poverty that largely affects black communities. Chapters three and four will discuss King Hedley's dual identities created by his adopted father, King Hedley I and his biological father, Leroy Slater. Finally, chapter five discusses how I, as the actor, physically developed King Hedley II.

"To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time." - James Baldwin

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2019, the University of Louisville produced *King Hedley II* by August Wilson as the first production of its season dedicated to Black plays. The play is a two-act dramatic tale about African American life in the United States during the twentieth century. It was directed by theatre scholar, Dr. Baron Kelly, who is the head of acting and graduate studies in our program. The cast was composed of fellow graduate students, Kala Ross, Tyler Tate, and myself who are all going for Masters of Fine Arts Degrees. The other cast members were Charles Nasby, our program's technical director, Alphaeus Green Jr. and Marquita Pryor Howerton, local actors in Louisville. *King Hedley II* served as the thesis show that translated the extent of my graduate experience with the Theatre Arts Department at the University of Louisville.

This thesis presents my analysis of the identity of the play's protagonist, King Hedley II, and how his circumstances in 1985 directly reflect the circumstances that still affect African American men today. I explore the racial stigmas tied to Black masculinity and how the character of King Hedley II is a reflection of the full dimensions of inner conflict and desperation of black life in the United States. This will be analyzed through my exploration of the relationship between African American men and the prison system, financial disadvantages of black communities, and the traumatic intergenerational connection between black fathers and their sons. Using articles from professional journals, books, and essays from a variety of scholars, I will discuss these topics in direct relationship to my role as King Hedley II.

Performance and Educational Background

I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in acting at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, North Carolina. I discovered my love for acting while I was in high school when I played Walter Lee Younger in the notorious play, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. I went to a science and technology high school where my initial interest was forensic science, but once I graduated from high school, I majored in theatre arts at North Carolina A&T State University. My training in my undergraduate experience consisted of many forms of theatre such as acting, stage makeup, stagecraft, theatre management, stage management, and directing. I spent two of my four years performing locally at theatres such as Triad Stage, The Carolina Theatre, and The Winston-Salem Theatre and at the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

The Playwright

August Wilson (1945-2005), was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Wilson's birth name is Frederick August Kittel and he adopted the name "August Wilson" at 20 years old after his father died in 1965. The name was an homage to his mother, Daisy Wilson. In 1968, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theatre. Wilson's plays have premiered on Broadway and have earned him Pulitzer Prizes and Tony awards. He is one of the most notable Playwrights in American history. His plays are produced in many educational and professional theatres across the globe. In 1979, Wilson wrote his first play, *Jitney*, the first of his ten part series called *The Pittsburgh Cycle* also known as *The Century Cycle*.¹ The cycle also included *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and*

¹ "August Wilson." *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 12 Apr. 2019, n.p

Gone, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson, Fences, Two Trains Running, Radio Golf, and Seven Guitars. Each play in the cycle is set in a different decade. It explores comic and tragic aspects of African American life in the 20th century. Wilson received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama for both *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*.

The Original Production

King Hedley II premiered at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre on December 11, 1999 and played at many regional theatres including Chicago, Seattle, Washington D.C, Boston, and Los Angeles. One of the most popular productions of *King Hedley II*, opened on Broadway at the Virginia Theatre. Directed by Marion McClinton, it ran from May 1, 2001 to July 1, 2001. The production closed after seventy two performances and twenty four previews.² The play also ran off-Broadway at the Peter Norton Space, New York City in a Signature Theatre Company production from March 11, 2007 through April 22, 2007. The book cover for the play was used for the eleventh album cover of the American hip hop band, The Roots, in 2014. The album was called *And Then You Shoot Your Cousin*.³

The Script

The play takes place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Hill District in 1985. The protagonist's name is King Hedley II and after spending seven years in prison for murder, he is trying to get his life back in order by selling stolen refrigerators. His hope is to make ten thousand dollars so he can buy a video store. His other hope, now that he is out of prison, is to start a family. The play is set during the Reagan administration and critically

² Wilson, August. *King Hedley II*. Samuel French, 2016. 4-5.

³ The Roots. *And Then You Shoot Your Cousin*. 2014. n.p.

critiques the economics of that time. The play examines whether providing trickle-down benefits to all Americans really improved the circumstances of urban African Americans. King Hedley II has a scar running down the left side of his face. In my opinion, the scar on his face symbolizes the many scars of suffering endured by African American men in the United States. Though those scars have healed, they are never forgotten. This will be further explored within the preceding chapters of this thesis.

Black Identity

What does it mean to have a black identity? William E. Cross Jr, a theorist and researcher in the field of ethnic identity development, wrote an article explaining black identity:

The linking of the different types of identity frames during the renewal process suggests that having a fully developed black identity involves the development of a multidimensional mind-set. In this sense, a fully mature sense of blackness borrows and reticulates aspects from a number of different identity stances. Across history, blacks have attempted to experiment with a broad range of identities, and the legacy of this trial and error is a contemporary perspective that weaves dimensions from a number of these perspectives. From the assimilationist is borrowed a sense of hope and acceptance; however, from the militant, one notes the need to be careful and skeptical. From the culturally focused person, one heeds the need to know and relish black history and culture, and the internalized is discovered a way to feel comfortable with an identity that is complex rather than simplistic. Putting this all together, it becomes possible to approach black identity as a complex mind-set that helps a person better function in a variety of situations.

As part of the legacy of black coping strategies, the fully developed black identity of today serves at least three functions in a person's daily life: (1) to defend the person from the stress that results from having to live in a racist society; (2) to provide a sense of purpose, meaning and affiliation; and (3) to establish mechanisms that make possible productive interactions with people, cultures, and human situations that do not spring from the black experience.⁴

⁴ Cross, William E. "Black Psychological Functioning and the Legacy of Slavery." *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, 1998, 396.

This infers that the black identity is in direct correlation to society and how African Americans train themselves to survive in a racist world.

The Scars

Black male identity contains many scars inflicted by the historical and institutional traumas of America. Before the play begins, King Hedley II receives a cut on the left side of his face from Pernell, the antagonizing force that haunts King Hedley II throughout the play. The cut is stitched and forms into a scar that becomes the staple of his character. King later speaks about trying to find meaning in the scar, “But I figure that scar got to mean something. I can’t take it off. It’s part of me now. As long as Pernell was still walking around it wasn’t nothing but a scar. I had to give it some meaning.”⁵ It was this line that inspired me to write about the scars that black men are given in society that become a part of their identities. These scars are poverty, incarceration, and the traumas of black predecessors that find their way into the next generation. In this case, the traumas of King Hedley I and his biological father, Leroy Slater. The two predecessors of King Hedley II. Just as King tries to find meaning in his scar, I will be exploring the meaning of each of these scars, the racial stigmas they create, and their effect on the black man’s identity.

⁵ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 81.

CHAPTER 1:
SCAR OF INCARCERATION

“The stark and sobering reality is that, for reasons largely unrelated to actual crime trends, the American penal system has emerged as a system of social control unparalleled in world history.”⁶

Behind the Bars

An identity that has been placed on the black man has been the criminal label. Prisoners have to endure the restrictions and stigmas that come with being an ex-offender. The existence of institutional racism creates the criminal identity by developing unfair practices that target black men. Vernellia R. Randall, a law professor at The University of Dayton, wrote an article defining institutional racism. In it she states:

Racism is both overt and covert, and it takes three closely related forms: individual, institutional, and systemic. Individual racism consists of overt acts by individuals that cause death, injury, destruction of property, or denial of services or opportunity. Institutional racism is more subtle but no less destructive. Institutional racism involves policies, practices, and procedures of institutions that have a disproportionately negative effect on racial minorities’ access to and quality of goods, services, and opportunities. Systemic racism is the basis of individual and institutional racism; it is the value system that is embedded in a society that supports and allows discrimination. Institutional and systemic racism establishes separate and independent barriers to access and quality of health care. Institutional racism does not have to result from human agency or intention. Thus, racial discrimination can occur in institutions even when the institution does not intend to make distinctions on the basis of race. In fact, institutional discrimination can occur without any awareness that it is happening. To understand institutional racism, it is important to understand the interaction between prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice is an attitude that is based on limited information or stereotypes. While prejudice is usually negative,

⁶ Alexander, Michelle, and Cornel West. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Revised edition / ed., New Press, 2011, 8.

it can also be positive. Both positive and negative prejudices are damaging because they deny the individuality of the person. No one is completely free of prejudices, although they may not have any significant prejudice against a particular group. Oppression is the systematic subjugation of a social group by another social group with access to social power. Power is the ability to control access to resources, the ability to influence others, and access to decision makers. Discrimination is behavior, intentional or not, which negatively treats a person or a group of people based on their racial origins. In the context of racism, *power is a necessary precondition for discrimination*. Racism depends on the ability to give or withhold social benefits, facilities, services, opportunities etc., from someone who is entitled to them, and is denied on the basis of race, color or national origin. The source of power can be formal or informal, legal or illegal, and is not limited to traditional concepts of power. Intent is irrelevant; the focus is on the result of the behavior.⁷

Individual and institutional racism, discrimination, and prejudice all play a part in the oppression of the black man but I will be discussing the intentional institutionally racist policy that was responsible for placing many black men in prison in the 1980s, “The War on Drugs:”

Public concern about illicit drug use built throughout the 1980s, largely due to media portrayals of people addicted to the smokable form of cocaine dubbed “crack.” Soon after Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, his wife, Nancy Reagan, began a highly-publicized anti-drug campaign, coining the slogan “Just Say No.” This set the stage for the zero tolerance policies implemented in the mid-to-late 1980s.⁸

The entire drug war began with the presidency of Richard Nixon. It was a way to disrupt the hippie and black communities. These were the two communities who were mainly protesting against the war in Vietnam:

A top Nixon aide, John Ehrlichman, later admitted: “You want to know what this was really all about. The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying. We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could

⁷ Randall, Vernellia R. “What Is Institutional Racism?” *What Is Institutional Racism?*, 2008, n.p.

⁸ “A Brief History of the Drug War.” *Drug Policy Alliance*, n.p.

arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.” Nixon temporarily placed marijuana in Schedule One, the most restrictive category of drugs, and pending review by a commission he appointed led by Republican Pennsylvania Governor Raymond Shafer.⁹

The above admission by John Ehrlichman proves that the war on drugs was a way for Congress to control those that they deemed a threat. They specifically targeted the urban communities where they felt that drugs were more abundant. Urban communities could not afford to get their hands on international drugs such as cocaine. An article on the history of crack cocaine states:

While the use of coca leaves as an intoxicant dates back three thousand years, crack cocaine, a crystallized form of cocaine, was developed during the cocaine boom of the 1970s and its use spread in the mid-1980s. According to the US Drug Enforcement Agency, by the late 1970s there was a huge glut of cocaine powder being shipped into the United States. This caused the price of the drug to drop by as much as 80%. Faced with dropping prices for their illegal product, drug dealers converted the powder to “crack,” a solid form of cocaine that could be smoked. Broken into small chunks, or “rocks,” this form of cocaine could be sold in smaller quantities, to more people at bigger profit. It was cheap, simple to produce, easy to use, and highly profitable for dealers. The biggest surge in the use of the drug occurred during the “crack epidemic,” between 1984 and 1990, when the drug spread across American cities. The crack epidemic dramatically increased the number of Americans addicted to cocaine. In 1985, the number of people who admitted using cocaine on a routine basis increased from 4.2 million to 5.8 million.¹⁰

Many of the drugs plunged their way into inner city areas. Once the War on Drugs was enacted, the inner city urban black communities were at the forefront of the siege. The War on Drugs had a consequence of increasing the number of the prison population to 50,000 in the 1980s. Because King Hedley II takes place in 1985, it is greatly affected by

⁹ Ibid, n.p.

¹⁰ “The Crack Epidemic - The History of Crack Cocaine - Drug-Free World.” *Foundation for a Drug-Free World*, n.p.

the war on drugs and its targeting of black men. Though the war on drugs was started by Richard Nixon in June 1971, it was the presidency of Ronald Reagan that caused drug hysteria in the 1980s and 90s:

The presidency of Ronald Reagan marked the start of a long period of skyrocketing rates of incarceration, largely thanks to his unprecedented expansion of the drug war. The number of people behind bars for nonviolent drug law offenses increased from 50,000 in 1980 to over 400,000 by 1997.¹¹

This is the major institutional policy that placed many black men in prison.

Labeling them criminals.

The Criminal

Let's take into consideration the challenges that prisoners face when they try to re-enter into society:

When prisoners in the United States are released, they face an environment that is challenging and actively deters them from becoming productive members of society. Within three years of release, 67.8 percent of ex-offenders are rearrested, and within five years, 76.6 percent are rearrested. With more than 2 million people incarcerated in the United States, recidivism harms both the families of inmates and society in general, as taxpayers continue to support a broken system that sets ex-offenders up to fail once they are released.¹²

Recidivism is defined as: “a tendency to relapse into a previous condition or mode of behavior; especially: relapse into criminal behavior.”¹³ Here are some statistics from The United States Sentencing Commission regarding rearrests. The first are re-arrest rates of offenders over an eight-year period after release:

Over an eight-year follow-up period, about half (49.3%) of federal offenders in the Commission's study were rearrested, almost one-third (31.7%) were reconvicted, and one-quarter (24.6%) were re-incarcerated.

¹¹ “A Brief History of the Drug War.” n.p.

¹² Simmons University “The Challenges of Prisoner Re-Entry into Society.” *Socialwork@Simmons*, 12 July 2016, n.p.

¹³ “Recidivism.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, n.p.

Of those offenders who reoffended, most did so within the first two years of release (median time to re-arrest = 21 months). For each subsequent year after release, fewer offenders were rearrested for the first time. About one-quarter (23.3%) of offenders who reoffend were rearrested for assault as their most serious charge followed by public order (15.5%), drug trafficking (11.5%), and larceny (7.7%) offenses.¹⁴

According to these stats, prisoners who have been recently released are more likely to be rearrested. When a prisoner is released they become a part of the system and are heavily monitored by officers. The countless restrictions placed on ex-offenders halts their progress as a normal citizen. The play does not state how long King has been out of prison. King gets involved in selling illegal refrigerators as a way to make money after his release from prison. Ruby, King's mother, says this to him, "You all out there stealing refrigerators, you going' back to jail."¹⁵ To which King replies, "You don't know where we getting them from. We selling them. We ain't stole them. I ain't asked the man where he got them from."¹⁶ Because King is again involved in illegal activity and according to the statistics above, he could not have been out of jail for more than two years. King has not been rearrested but he does fall under the category of first two year re offenders.

The second collection of statistics are re-arrest rates of offenders by education level:

A federal offender's age and criminal history were closely correlated with their likelihood of reoffending. An offender's education level was also associated with their likelihood of reoffending. Offenders who did not complete high school were rearrested most often (60.4%) while college graduates were rearrested least often (19.1%). The type of federal crime that led to an offender's original conviction was also related to their likelihood of reoffending. Firearms offenders were most likely to be rearrested (68.3%) followed closely by robbery offenders (67.3%). Fraud offenders were least likely to be rearrested (34.2%).¹⁷

¹⁴ United States Sentencing Commission, *Recidivism & Federal Sentencing Policy Recidivism of Federal Offenders: A Comprehensive Overview*. n.d. 1.

¹⁵ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 12-13.

¹⁷ United States Sentencing Commission, *Recidivism & Federal Sentencing Policy Recidivism of Federal Offenders: A Comprehensive Overview*. 1.

In the play, King's best friend, Mister, says to King, "They put that on you in third grade when you kicked Ms. Biggs."¹⁸ With this quote, King at least went to elementary school but the play does not speak on any grades after. According to an article written by Child trends:

The dropout rate has declined considerably, from 15 percent in 1970 to 6 percent in 2016. In 1972, the dropout rate was 21 percent among non-Hispanic black youth, 12 percent among non-Hispanic white youth, and 34 percent among Hispanic youth. Dropout rates for Hispanic youth peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at 36 percent. Rates have since declined substantially for each group. However, these estimates do not include institutionalized civilians, a population that has grown significantly since the 1980s, particularly among young black and Hispanic males. Young adults who have not graduated from high school are incarcerated at higher rates than those with higher levels of educational attainment. It is likely that the estimates of dropout rates, especially those from the past few decades, would be slightly higher if institutionalized civilians were included in these estimates, although it is not clear by how much.¹⁹

With this information above, though it is not written in stone for all African Americans, King more than likely did not finish high school. Also, looking back at the statistics on recidivism, firearm offenders are also more likely to be rearrested. King killed Pernell with a firearm. In the play, King speaks about when he shot Pernell:

About two weeks later I seen Pernell going into Irv's bar. He went straight back to the phone booth. I don't know who he was calling but that was the last call he made. I saw my scar in the window of the phone booth. I tapped on the glass. He turned and looked and froze right there. The first bullet hit him in the mouth. I don't know where the other fourteen went.²⁰

¹⁸ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 61.

¹⁹ "High School Dropout Rates." *Child Trends*, n.p. n.d.

²⁰ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 82.

King is in three categories that make him more susceptible to being rearrested. His time of release, his education level and his crime with a firearm. The third collection of statistics are recidivism and criminal history:

To protect the public from further crimes of defendants, during the development of the criminal history guideline provisions in the mid-to-late 1980s. The Commission considered the relationship between offenders' prior criminal record and their likelihood of reoffending. The Commission's recidivism study found that recidivism rates generally increase as offenders' criminal history calculations increase (thereby increasing an offender's sentencing range).²¹

Because recording criminal history has to do with adding points to the record of offenders who have committed crimes prior to their present sentence and the play does not speak of King committing any crimes prior to his seven year prison sentence, at least not crimes that he was convicted of, King does not have any prior criminal history on record. This means that this aspect of recidivism does not apply to King.

The last collection of statistics for recidivism are re-arrest rates of offenders by age at release:

Studies have repeatedly shown older offenders to have a lower risk of reoffending and the Commission's study confirmed this finding. Just 16.0% of offenders older than 60 years of age at the time of release were rearrested. In comparison, more than two thirds (67.6%) of offenders younger than 21 at the time of release were rearrested. For each age group studied, the older the age group, the lower the re-arrest rate. The same trend holds true for both reconviction and re-incarceration rates.²²

King is thirty six years old during the events of the play. If King has not been released from prison for more than two years and served a seven year sentence, he

²¹ United States Sentencing Commission, *Recidivism & Federal Sentencing Policy Recidivism of Federal Offenders: A Comprehensive Overview*. n.d. 2.

²² *Ibid*, n.d. 2.

would have at least been around twenty eight or twenty nine upon sentencing. If King was thirty five or thirty six upon his release, he would have an average fifty to forty percent chance of being rearrested, reconvicted, or re-incarcerated. With all of these statistics labeling King as an ex offender who will more than likely be rearrested, this becomes his identity as well as the identity of many other black men who share his circumstances. It also does not help when they are living in a system that is not built for black men to succeed.

The System

Social Mobility is defined as:

The shift in an individual's social status from one status to another. The shift can either be higher, lower, intergenerational, and intra-generational, and it cannot be determined if the change is for good or bad.²³

These different types of social mobility are defined as:

1. Horizontal mobility

It occurs when a person changes their occupation but their overall social standing remains unchanged. For example, if a doctor goes from practicing medicine to teaching in a medical school, the occupation's changed but their prestige and social standing remains the same. Sorokin describes horizontal mobility as a change in religious, territorial, political, or for family and other horizontal shifts with no change in the vertical position.

2. Vertical mobility

It refers to a change in the occupational, political, or religious status of a person that causes a change in their societal position. An individual or social object moves from one social stratum to another. Vertical mobility can be ascending or descending. Ascending involves an individual moving from a group in a lower stratum to a higher one or the creation of a similar group with a higher societal position, instead of side by side with its existing group. Descending mobility occurs for example when a businessman incurs losses in his business and is forced to declare bankruptcy, resulting in a move to a lower stratum of society.

3. Upward mobility

²³ "Social Mobility - Definition, Origin of the Concept, and Types. "Corporate Finance Institute, n.p. n.d.

It is when a person moves from a lower position in society to a higher one. It can also include people occupying higher positions in the same societal group. However, upward mobility, while seen as a good thing, can also come at a cost for individuals. When a person moves upwards, they need to leave behind familiar surroundings such as family and places. They may also need to change their way of thinking and behavior. The individual will need to adapt to the new environment as a result of their upward movement and adopt different behaviors in the new society.

4. Downward mobility

Downward mobility takes place when a person moves from a higher position in society to a lower one. It can occur when someone is caught performing a wrongful act that can result in the loss of the position they currently hold. Downward mobility can be extremely stressful for people who face a rapid decline in their social status; they may find it hard to adapt to the new environment as it is not similar to the standard of living they are used to. Downward mobility is an example of the extent to which a society values equal opportunity and structure.

5. Intergenerational mobility

Intergenerational mobility happens when the social position changes from one generation to another. The change can be upward or downward. For example, a father worked in a factory while his son received an education that allowed him to become a lawyer or a doctor. Such societal change also causes the generation to adopt a new way of living and thinking. Intergenerational mobility is affected by the differences in the parents' and their offspring's upbringing, changes in population, and changes in occupation.

6. Intra-generational mobility

The intra-generational change in societal position occurs during the lifespan of a single generation. It can also refer to a change in position between siblings. One way is when a person climbs up the corporate ladder in their career. For example, an individual starts their career as a clerk and through their life moves on to a senior position such as a director. One sibling may also achieve a higher position in society than their brother or sister.²⁴

King is a mixture between horizontal mobility and downward mobility. He is an example of horizontal mobility because his circumstances remain the same even when he tries to change his occupation. He was not always selling refrigerators. This is the occupation he got involved in to make extra money. Though this occupation is illegal, it is still an occupation. King is also an example of

²⁴ Ibid, n.p. n.d.

downward mobility because he is dealing with having such a low status in society. He did not have a high status to begin with and getting arrested made that status drop. King admits to this when he says:

It was alright when they didn't have to pay you. They had plenty of work for you back then. Now that they got to pay you there ain't no work for you. I use to be worth twelve hundred dollars during slavery. Now I'm worth \$3.35 an hour. I'm going backwards. Everybody else moving forward.²⁵

King is not only speaking of himself, but also referring to the black community as a whole when he mentions himself being worth more as a slave than as a free man. His comparison to slavery also reveals how much society actually values equal opportunity and structure. Looking back at the above forms of social mobility on page seventeen, this revelation that King unveils is a direct characteristic of his horizontal and downward mobility.

Ex-offenders become the property of the state. King Hedley was free from the penitentiary, but his sentence had only just begun. This sparks the vicious cycle that leads to recidivism. This is what King knew to be true from his own experiences. King stated:

They got everything stacked up against you as it is. Every time I try to do something they get in the way. It's been that way my whole life. Especially if you try to get some money. They don't want you to have none of that. They keep that away from you. They got fifty-eleven way to get money and don't want you to have none. They block you at every turn.²⁶

King himself points out society's injustices toward black men. When King refers to "They" in the text, he is referring to the white man or the white shadow of America. Ann

²⁵ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 60.

²⁶ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 58.

Jacobs, director of the Prisoner Reentry Institute at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice summarizes:

A person's successful re-entry into society can be viewed through how adequately they are able to meet six basic life needs: livelihood, residence, family, health, criminal justice compliance, and social connections.²⁷

It is these six basic life needs that I base the struggles of King Hedley II's re-entry into society after his imprisonment.

Livelihood

With incarceration comes an employment barrier. Many ex-offenders are automatically denied employment because of their criminal record:

Many employers worry about being sued for damages resulting from "negligent hiring." An employer can be held liable for exposing the public to a potentially dangerous individual, so many balk at the idea of hiring someone with a criminal record. In 72 percent of negligent hiring cases, employers have lost and faced an average settlement of \$1.6 million — powerful disincentive to hire potentially "risky" individuals.²⁸

A high risk person will less likely be hired because they are deemed a liability to a business. It also makes sense to not want to hire a potentially dangerous employee. Many businesses do not want to even entertain the idea of hiring a criminal, it is because of this caution that some businesses will not even look at an ex-offender's application or even invite them for an interview. These aspects make sense and are understood through a business point of view. Let's bring race into the equation now:

Race is also a factor, particularly when combined with a history of incarceration. In the 2002 study of Milwaukee employers mentioned above, African-American offenders were two-thirds less likely to receive offers, and African-American non-offenders were half as likely as white non-offenders to receive an offer. So African-Americans ex-offenders face a huge double-challenge: Even if they hadn't committed a crime, racism significantly restricts their job opportunities; since they have committed a

²⁷ Simmons University, *The Challenge of Prisoner Re-entry into Society*, n.p.

²⁸ *Ibid*, n.p.

crime, they must somehow overcome the racism *and* convince the employer that their ex-con status does not make them a risky hire.²⁹

Not only is King an ex-offender, but he is also an African American convict. The above quote references a study done in 2002 about racism in the job place. King had already dealt with racism in the job place when he was a kid in the fifth grade. He was discriminated against in his first job as a janitor:

That was the first job I got. Cleaning up that bar used to be down on Wylie. Got one job the man told me he was gonna shoot me if he caught me stealing anything. I ain't worked for him ten minutes. I quit right there. He calling me a thief before I even start.³⁰

This was when King was a child. He was already being stigmatized as a criminal simply because he was a young black boy. He had not been to jail or committed a crime yet. With little jobs to go around, being an ex-offender and an African American man, the odds are not in his favor. Glen C. Loury, an economics professor at Brown University, wrote an excerpt that outlined the consequences of racial stigma:

An important consequence of racial stigma is “vicious circles” of cumulative causation: self-sustaining processes in which the failure of blacks to make progress justifies for whites the very prejudicial attitudes that, when reflected in social and political action, ensure that blacks will not advance.³¹

Incarceration is one of the self-sustaining processes that keeps blacks from progressing. Incarceration means less job opportunities. This leads to unemployment, which leads to criminal relapse or recidivism, which leads to re-arrest. This cycle can be broken according to the Simmons University article on prisoner re-entry:

²⁹ Ibid, n.p.

³⁰ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 59.

³¹ Loury, Glenn. “Racial Stigma and Its Consequences.” *University of Wisconsin–Madison Institute for Research on Poverty*, 2005, 2.

Fortunately for many former inmates, employer interest in an ex-offender rises when they find out that the crime was nonviolent or drug-related. So long as the individual remains drug-free and has gained relevant work experience (either inside or outside of prison), there is more employer interest in hiring.³²

This is not King's circumstance however. He was convicted of a violent crime. Without a decent source of income, King would have to rely on the support of his family.

Family

Once ex-offenders return home, they are dependent on family members and must overcome years of limited contact, potential resentment, and a change in the household dynamic. According to the Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, just before release, 82 percent of ex-offenders thought it would be easy to renew family relationships; after returning home, over half reported it was more difficult than expected. Family members often assume a new financial and emotional burden when ex-offenders return home, having to support a dependent adult.³³

King Hedley II, as a young man, was cared for by his adopted mother, Mamma Louise. She served as the matriarchy of the household. King lives with his current wife, Tonya, who is pregnant with their child, and his actual mother, Ruby. Ruby left King with Louise, who is Ruby's aunt, when he was a baby in order to pursue her career as a singer. King is not fond of Ruby because she abandoned him. He does not acknowledge her as his mother. For years it was King and Louise. She was the family that he knew growing up. She made sure he went to school. She taught him the bible and made sure he knew God. She was not able to protect him from everything but she tried her best. When she got older and grew ill, King took up the position as the man of the house and took up different jobs to take care of her. King also had Neesi, his ex-girlfriend at the time. She

³² Simmons University, *The Challenges of Prisoner Re-entry into Society*, n.p.

³³ *Ibid*, n.p.

was present before Tonya came into the picture. Neesi died in a car accident shortly after his imprisonment, she was the one who turned state's evidence that put King in prison.

This was the family dynamic that King was accustomed to before and while he was in prison. When King was released, he had a new family dynamic. Coming back to this new family dynamic is stressful for King. He does not have the resources and funds to provide for his wife and unborn child. The desperate need to be a man and not feel like a burden on his family pushes King to earn money illegally. Being incarcerated for such a long period of time, ex-offenders become obsolete. The skills they possess are no longer needed in the job market. They now have to take the time to acquire new skills that are required for the now advanced job market.

Society

“When ex-offenders are released from prison, they tend to find that their expectations for returning to normal life are not always realistic. This is especially true for prisoners who serve lengthy incarcerations because they are likely to face advances in technologies that are essential in new job markets and lack training that makes them viable candidates.”³⁴

As stated above, King was in prison for seven years. The play takes place in 1985. Which is seven years after King was incarcerated in 1978. After such long sentences, ex-offenders are returning to disadvantaged communities that have no resources to sustain them:

According to an Urban Institute study of Baltimore-area prisoners, offenders who re-enter the prison system tend to come from a concentrated set of communities, which have “above-average rates for unemployment, female-headed households, and families living below the poverty level.”³⁵

³⁴ Ibid, n.p.

³⁵ Visher, Chreisty, Nancy Lavigne, and Jeremy Travis. "Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry: Maryland Pilot Study: Findings from Baltimore." Urban Institute, Jan. 2004. n.d. n.p.

“Ex-offenders face massive obstacles when searching for employment anywhere, so to return with this disadvantage to an area that likely has low job prospects increases the likelihood of unemployment.”³⁶ Thus, we reach the second scar.

³⁶ Simmons University, *The Challenge of Prisoner Re-Entry into Society*, n.p.

CHAPTER 2:
SCAR OF POVERTY

Poor beginnings

Mamma Louise was not working a job while King was growing up. They were only surviving off of the money that Ruby was sending to the house every month that she was getting from her singing gigs. Mamma Louise made sure that King went to school, church, had food on the table, and clothes on his back. That was her job as his guardian and she tried to keep him out of trouble as much as she could. Circumstances changed when Mamma Louise came down with Leukemia.

King wants more for himself and his future family. This is the righteousness that I was able to find in King's character. King does the illegal things in order to allow his future son to grow up with a better life than he had. King states this when speaking with his childhood friend Mister about the money they have been saving for the video store:

I used to tell Neesi I wanted to have a baby. Wanted someone to hand off the ball to. It took me all this time. Now Tonya pregnant. It's like I finally did something right. That's why you got to leave your money in the pot. I don't want him to grow up without nothing.³⁷

The betterment of his son, his legacy, is what drives King throughout the play. King makes many risky choices, but as long as King feels that it will put his son in a better position than himself, he will continue to move forward with tunnel vision. It should be a parent's mission to make sure that his or her children have

³⁷ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 27.

better lives and opportunities than themselves. When King is blocked from his goal or is denied, he feels as if his son is also being denied. This is King's perception, which then triggers his rage. He is a man doing wrong to do right.

King, knowing that Louise could not sustain a living on her own, wanted to help her. This pushed King to want to pick up jobs to help Louise with money. King speaks about his first job where he had to clean up the floors in a bar. "My fifth grade teacher told me I was gonna make a good janitor. Say she can tell by how good I erase the blackboards. Had me believing it. I came home and told mamma Louise I wanted to be a janitor. She said I could be anything I wanted to be. I said "ok I'll be a janitor." I ain't know no better. That was my first job cleaning up that bar down on Wylie."³⁸ King was thinking of anything to help his Momma Louise. This was the beginning of King's "hustler mentality." When Louise fell ill, King was motivated even more to bring in money. It was not until King was convicted of murder that he met a white man in prison who told him about his business selling illegal GE refrigerators:

Some white fellow I was in the penitentiary with ask me do I wanna to sell some refrigerators. I ain't ask the man where he got them from. I asked him how much he was gonna pay me.³⁹

This could be the best opportunity to make enough money to make himself legitimate. King was raised in poverty just as many young black people were in the 1960s and even today.

³⁸ Ibid, 59

³⁹ Ibid, 34

Colored Poverty

There is an imbalance of poverty in America and certain demographics are more likely to be impoverished than others. If you are African American, there is a high chance you will live in poverty. Here are some poverty rates regarding African Americans:

- **Poverty rate:** 23.0 percent
- **Total in poverty:** 9.1 million
- **African Americans as percentage of U.S. population:** 12.5 percent
- **African Americans as percentage of poor population:** 21.4 percent⁴⁰

These poverty rates among African Americans are not just a case of individual mistakes or ignorance. These poverty rates are due to the systematic obstacles that have been put in place in order to keep some African Americans from rising in American society as well as other circumstances that exist within black and urban communities.

Black and African Americans living in the United States face a wide range of institutional obstacles that make earning a steady, livable income, as well as the possibility of escaping poverty, extremely difficult. Black Americans are more than twice as likely as whites or Asian Americans to live in poverty. According to a report by the Brookings Institution, black Americans encounter inequalities in education, discrimination in the workplace, ineffective parenting, high incarceration rates, and more. One in eight Americans are black, but black Americans make up more than one-fourth of the nation's poor population.⁴¹

Poverty is a major problem in America that has lasting effects on those that are impacted by it. Impoverished blacks are blamed as being the culprits of their own circumstance. Simply being told to work harder and dream bigger, those who live

⁴⁰ Sauter, Michael B. "Faces of Poverty: What Racial, Social Groups Are More Likely to Experience It?" *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 10 Oct. 2018, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 1.

in poverty are sometimes given no sympathy by the more fortunate and are told to pull themselves up by the bootstraps. There are some, however, who do take matters into their own hands, such as King Hedley II.

In 1985, King was thirty six years old. King must have been born around 1949. King was absolutely affected by the fluctuating urban crisis, deprivation of the ghetto underclass and social dislocation that plagued so many inner-city areas. Before I discuss King's home, The Pittsburgh Hill District, I am going to discuss the mass crisis of urban communities between the 1960s and 1980s.

In the mid-1960s, urban analysts began to speak of a new dimension to the urban crisis in the form of a large subpopulation of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasted with behavior of the general population. Despite a high rate of poverty in ghetto neighborhoods throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rates of inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime were significantly lower than in later years and did not reach catastrophic proportions until the mid-1970s⁴²

As the above quote states, there was a transition in urban communities where there was poverty in inner-cities, but it wasn't at the drastic rates that it reached in later years. Black families were disadvantaged, but still had stability within their communities. William Julius Wilson, an American Sociologist, Harvard

University professor, and the author of *The Truly Disadvantaged*, continues on:

There were single-parent families, but they were a small minority of all black families and tended to be incorporated within extended family networks and to be headed not by unwed teenagers and young adult women but by middle-aged women who usually were widowed, separated, or divorced. There were welfare recipients, but only a very small percentage of the families could be said to be welfare-dependent. In short, unlike the present period. Inner-city communities prior to 1960 exhibited the features of social organization-including a sense of community,

⁴² Wilson, William J. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Second ed., University of Chicago Press, 2012.

positive neighborhood identification, and explicit norms and sanctions against aberrant behavior.⁴³

There was a shift from the 1960s to the 1970s that ended up changing the dynamic of urban communities into an even more severe economic downturn. This downward spiral in inner-city areas is what brought on the term “ghetto poverty.” William Julius Wilson wrote an article on inner-city social dislocations.

In the article, he speaks on the rise of ghetto poverty and defines it as such:

In attempts to examine this problem empirically, social scientists have tended to treat census tracts as a proxy for neighborhoods. They define ghettos as those areas with poverty rates of at least 40 percent. The ghetto poor are therefore designated as those among the poor who live in these extreme poverty areas.⁴⁴

The term ghetto has been given an extremely negative connotation as well. Many blacks who live in these poor “ghetto” neighborhoods are viewed as drug abusers, criminals, or nonconformists who are not social enough to follow the “American way.” Columbia University professor and American sociologist, Herbert J. Gans, elaborates on these outlandish definitions of the underclass. He states:

The researchers tend to assume that the behavior patterns they report are caused by norm violations on the part of area residents and not by the conditions under which they are living, or the behavioral choices open to them as a result of these conditions.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁴ Wilson, William Julius. “Studying Inner-City Social Dislocations: The Challenge of Public Agenda Research: 1990 Presidential Address.” *American Sociological Review*, 1991. 1.

⁴⁵ Gans, Herbert J. *Deconstructing the Underclass: The Term's Danger as a Planning Concept*. Journal of the American Planning Association. 56 summer: 1990. 272.

Gans goes on to label these new definitions as “dangerous.” Gans is stating that the term dangerous is what is being used to describe the underclass. Gans argues that:

The various definitions of the underclass, have been the subject of vigorous debates between those on the right who maintain that "the underclass is the product of the unwillingness of the black poor to adhere to the American work ethic, among other cultural deficiencies," and those on the left who claim that "the underclass is a consequence of the development of post-industrial economy, which no longer needs the unskilled poor."⁴⁶

This debate is further exhumed in Wilson’s book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*. He asserts what Gans observes:

This underclass exists mainly because of large- scale and harmful changes in the labor market, and its resulting spatial concentration as well as the isolation of such areas from the more affluent parts of the black community.⁴⁷

It is for these exact reasons that many social scholars, including Gans, have come to this consensus:

The term underclass has taken on so many connotations of deservingness and blameworthiness that it has become hopelessly polluted in meaning, ideological overtone and implications, and should be dropped.⁴⁸

It is apparent that they agree that the term underclass is now used as a way of degrading urban communities and inner-cities in poverty. The term is used to demean residents and get the public to think that the uncomfortable nature of the people brought them to their poor circumstances of poverty and joblessness. It is obvious that this is used as an excuse to cover up the real problem, labor market changes and social dislocation.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 272

⁴⁷ Ibid, 272

⁴⁸ Ibid, 272

Weak Labor Force

Many cities that had an increase in “ghetto poverty” during the 1970s were industrial centers. Wilson argues that:

Historic discrimination and a migration flow to large metropolitan areas that kept the minority population relatively young created a problem of weak labor-force attachment within this population, making it particularly vulnerable to the ongoing industrial and geographic changes in the economy since 1970. The shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries, increasing polarization of the labor market into low-wage and high-wage sectors, innovations in technology, relocation of manufacturing industries out of the central city, periodic recessions, and wage stagnation exacerbated the chronic problems of weak labor-force attachment among the urban minority poor. This resulted in accelerated increases in the rate of joblessness (unemployment and nonparticipation in the labor force) among urban blacks, despite the passage of antidiscrimination legislation and despite the creation of affirmative-action programs. The sharp climb in joblessness helped to trigger other problems such as the rise in concentrated urban poverty.⁴⁹

Wilson defines the term “weak labor-force attachment,” which is stated in the above quote, in his book *The Truly Disadvantaged*. He argues a previous explanation of the term produced in a paper by Marta Tienda and Steir Haya, two sociologists, called “Joblessness or Shiftlessness: Labor Force Activity in Chicago's Inner-City.”⁵⁰ In this paper they stated that weak labor-force attachment “refers to a willingness or desire to work.”⁵¹ Wilson disagrees by stating that it does not refer to this rather:

“Weak labor-force attachment” is used here as a structural concept embedded in a theoretical framework that explains why some groups are more vulnerable to joblessness than others. In other words, weak labor-force attachment refers to the marginal economic position of some people in the labor force because of structural constraints or limited opportunities,

⁴⁹ Wilson, William, *The Truly Disadvantaged*. n.p.

⁵⁰ Tienda Marta, and Haya Stier. “*Joblessness or Shiftlessness: Labor Force Activity in Chicago's Inner-City*.” 1989. 19-21.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 19-21.

including constraints or opportunities in their immediate environment, for example, lack of access to informal job network systems.⁵²

The common term here is that there is a lack of something whether it is equal opportunities to education or an imbalance of economic positioning. There is a structural lack in minority communities that makes it more difficult for them to enter into the labor force. In contrast, in a tight job market, there are many job vacancies, high unemployment and wages are higher. James Tobin, an American economist and professor at Harvard and Yale Universities, speaks on this in his book, *“On Improving the Economic Status of a Negro.”* In his research he speaks about the differences between a tight labor market and a slack labor market. He states:

In a tight labor market the labor force expands because increased job opportunities not only reduce unemployment but also draw into the labor force those workers who, in periods when the labor market is slack, respond to fading job prospects by dropping out of the labor force altogether. Accordingly, in a tight labor market the status of disadvantaged minorities improves because unemployment is reduced, wages are higher, and better jobs are available. In contrast, in a slack labor market employers are, and indeed, can afford to be more selective in recruiting and in granting promotions. They overemphasize job prerequisites and exaggerate experience. In such an economic climate, disadvantaged minorities suffer disproportionately and the level of employer discrimination rises.⁵³

Depending on the economic situation of an area, whether it has a tight labor market or a slack one, is what dictates the disadvantages suffered by minorities.

In an economic climate with a slack labor market, minorities are more likely to encounter higher rates of employer discrimination.

Work Force Discrimination

⁵² Ibid n.p.

⁵³ Tobin, James, *On Improving the Economic Status of the Negro*. Daedalus 94. 1965. 878.

Racial discrimination within organizations and institutions is often overlooked. It is these workplace discriminations that create unemployment problems for urban blacks. A survey from the Urban Poverty and Family Life Study (UPFLS) exhumed in, *"We'd Love to Hire Them, But...": The Meaning of Race for Employers,* a paper presented by social and economic researchers Joleen Kirschenman and Kathryn Neckerman, about how employer's hiring strategies affect the employment chances of inner-city blacks, suggested:

Employers in Chicago suggest that inner-city blacks, particularly black males, face a major problem of employer attitudes toward and perception of black workers.⁵⁴

They go on to read interviews of Chicago area businessmen that indicate:

That many consider inner-city workers - especially young black males - to be uneducated, unstable, uncooperative, and dishonest. Furthermore, racial stereotyping is greater among those employers with lower proportions of blacks in their workforce, especially the blue-collar employers who tend to stress the importance of unobservable qualities such as work attitude.⁵⁵

As expressed above, there is racial discrimination that plagues the work force.

There is also "statistical discrimination." As explained by Kirshenman and Neckerman, this is "an employer practice whereby judgments about a job applicant's productivity, which is often too expensive or too difficult to measure, are based on his or her group membership." William Wilson further explores the existence of statistical discrimination by looking into the UPFLS surveys. This is what he discovers:

⁵⁴ Kirschenman, Joleen and Kathryn Neckerman. "We'd Love to Hire Them, But..." The Meaning of Race for Employers." Paper presented at a conference on The Truly Disadvantaged. Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, October. 1989. 19.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 19.

Although an overwhelming majority of the UPFLS's survey respondents did not express overt racist attitudes or a categorical dislike of blacks when explaining their hiring practices, the data strongly suggest that many did, in fact, practice statistical discrimination by screening out black applicants very early in the hiring process because of their inner-city residence, their class background, and their public school education. These factors were used as proxies for judgments about worker productivity.⁵⁶

This is the position that many inner-city residents deal with. They are discriminated against in the workplace solely because of their circumstances which are out of their control. If a person lives in an inner-city area, he or she is seen as having low productivity in the workplace:

In order to understand the unique position of inner-city ghetto residents it is important to emphasize the association between attachment to the labor force and the social environment (neighborhood). A key hypothesis is that "environments with low opportunity for stable and legitimate employment and high opportunity for alternative income-generating activities, particularly those which are incompatible with regular employment," are those which perpetuate weak labor-force attachment over time.⁵⁷

Martha Van Haitsma, a survey lab co-director at the University of Chicago, is stating above that residents who drift away from legitimate (legal) employment and become more involved in alternative (illegal) income activities, create the detachment from the labor force. But when the labor force discriminates against those inner-city residents who are in these areas of weak labor-force attachment, they are more likely to rely on alternative income-generating activities for survival. Wilson further elaborates on the relationship between poor individuals

⁵⁶ Wilson, William Julius. "Studying Inner-City Social Dislocations: The Challenge of Public Agenda Research: 1990 Presidential Address." *American Sociological Review*, 1991, 8.

⁵⁷ Van Haitsma, Martha. *A Contextual Definition of the Underclass*. Focus 12. 1989. 7.

with strong labor force attachment and weak labor force attachment and the effects of both:

Poor individuals who live in a social context that fosters or enhances strong labor-force attachment are less likely to experience persistent poverty than are those living in a social context that reinforces weak labor-force attachment. In other words, poor individuals with similar educational and occupational skills confront different risks of persistent poverty depending on the neighborhoods they reside in, as embodied in the formal and informal networks to which they have access, their prospects of marriage or remarriage to a stably employed mate, and the families or households to which they belong. Moreover, a social context that includes poor schools, inadequate job information networks, and a lack of legitimate employment opportunities not only gives rise to weak labor-force attachment, but increases the probability that individuals will be constrained to seek income derived from illegal or deviant activities. This weakens their attachment to the legitimate labor market even further. Furthermore, the social context has significant implications for the socialization of youth with respect to their future attachment to the labor force.⁵⁸

It is where Wilson speaks on the youth and how their socialization and attachment to the work force is affected by their environment. This takes me into King Hedley's upbringing. In the play, King selling illegal refrigerators to make money proves his personal detachment to the labor force in the Hill District in the 80s. Wilson continues with his stance on poor youth in the following quote:

For example, a youngster who grows up in a family with a steady breadwinner and in a neighborhood in which most of the adults are employed will tend to develop some of the disciplined habits associated with stable or steady employment habits that are reflected in the behavior of his or her parents and of other neighborhood adults. Accordingly, when this youngster enters the labor market, he or she has a distinct advantage over the youngsters who grow up in households without a steady breadwinner and in neighborhoods that are not organized around work in other words, a milieu in which one is more exposed to the less disciplined habits associated with casual or infrequent work.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Wilson, William Julius. *Studying Inner-City Social Dislocations*. 10.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

Children are highly influenced by what they see and King is no different. A child growing up in an area where there is poverty, illegal activity, and high unemployment rates can mold a child's future especially if they see these circumstances in the home. Without a positive role model to show them another way, children often will become a product of their environment. Youth can also take on the psychological states of their parents or of their community. Persistent poverty and prolonged joblessness can have a negative effect on the morale of a community. It can produce feelings of low perceived self-efficiency within a community.

Community Morale

Albert Bandura, the professor of social science in psychology at Stanford University and creator of social learning theory, writes about self-efficiency and its relationship to social cognitive theory. He states:

In social cognitive theory, perceived self-efficacy refers to self-beliefs in one's ability to take the steps or courses of action necessary to achieve the goals required in a given situation. Such beliefs affect the level of challenge that is pursued, the amount of effort expended in a given venture, and the degree of perseverance when confronting difficulties.⁶⁰

Bandura puts it this way: "Inability to influence events and social conditions that significantly affect one's life can give rise to feelings of futility and despondency as well as to anxiety."⁶¹ This explains why inner-city residents can doubt their abilities or give up because they feel that their environment will make their efforts futile. Many impoverished black communities are plagued with low self-

⁶⁰ Bandura, Albert. "Self-Efficacy Mechanism in Human Agency." *American Psychologist* 37. 1982, 122.

⁶¹ Bandura, Albert *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. 198, 140.

efficiency. The view of their environment as uncaring, discriminatory, and merciless can lead to feelings of hopelessness, depression, and rage. Bandura goes on to say, "The type of outcomes people expect depend largely on their judgments of how well they will be able to perform in given situations."⁶² According to Wilson, low self-efficiency can be connected to weak work-force attachment. Wilson states:

The central hypothesis is that an individual's feelings of low self-efficacy grow out of weak labor-force attachment and they are reinforced or strengthened by the feelings and views of others in his or her neighborhood who are similarly situated and have similar self-beliefs.⁶³

King has a low perceived self-efficiency, at least when it comes to legitimate work. King expresses his weak work-force attachment by saying, "I got to make it whatever way I can. I got to try and make it blow some over here. I don't want much. Just a little bit. Why you got to have it all. Give me some. I ain't bothering nobody. I got to feel right about myself. I look around and say, "Where the barbed wire? They got everything else. They got me blocked in every other way. Where the barbed wire?"⁶⁴ King is expressing his frustration toward the work force and the fact that white people have all the money and jobs, meanwhile, he feels isolated. King feels trapped with no money or job in order to help himself out of his, what he feels, and inferior position.

Mister agrees with King saying, "If they had some barbed wire you could cut through it. But you can't cut through not having no job. You can't cut through

⁶² Ibid, 140.

⁶³ Wilson, William Julius. *Studying Inner-City Social Dislocations*. 11.

⁶⁴ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 60.

that. That's better than barbed wire.”⁶⁵ Mister sharing in King’s disdain toward employers is an example of those in a common situation sharing similar self-beliefs. Mister stating, “But you can't cut through not having no job,” reinforces King’s low self-efficiency. Bandura uses the term, “lower collective efficiency.”⁶⁶ This is when peers share each other's low perceptions of themselves and their environment.

King’s perception of the workforce is so low that he mentions that his worth was greater as a slave than as a free man. His perception of his own low self-efficiency when it comes to acquiring legitimate work, has greatly detached him from the weak workforce of the Hill District.

The Hill District

The Pittsburgh Hill District, home of King Hedley II, has gone through many transformations:

The first half of the twentieth century is when the Hill District reached its peak in many respects. By this time, the Hill was now a largely African-American neighborhood, which soon had a life and culture all its own. In 1910, the Hill was 25% black, and in 1930 that percentage grew to 53%. The major streets of the Hill, such as Centre, Wylie, and Webster now housed the leading examples of the black culture of Pittsburgh. Churches, schools, and community centers were numerous, evidence of a thriving neighborhood that was now famous around the country. This stretch of land was now on par with Harlem as one of the cultural centers of Black America.⁶⁷

The Hill District was a black Mecca before King was even born. It was the center for Jazz culture and even hosted a baseball team in The Negro Major Leagues.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 60.

⁶⁶ Bandura, *Self-Efficacy Mechanism in Human Agency*. 122.

⁶⁷ Lubove, Roy. *Twentieth Century Pittsburgh*. Volume 2: *The Post-Steel Era*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996. 154.

The Hill District was thriving, but would soon begin to deteriorate as time went on:

The immense population of people on such a small area of land soon began to experience problems such as overcrowding and poor living conditions. The Hill District is geographically constrained, precluding any expansion from occurring in any direction. The black population of Pittsburgh grew from 37,725 in 1920 to 100,692 in 1960, with the Hill accounting for most of this surge. Many people were squeezed into small living quarters. The quality of housing was also declining at this time. The neighborhood was now over a hundred years old, and many of the buildings were falling into disrepair. As culturally alive as the area was, it was still poor and segregated, not receiving the level of maintenance as in other areas of Pittsburgh. This soon became a major problem as the old buildings were crumbling and few modern improvements were being made. The Hill was described as an area that contained 7.5% of Pittsburgh's population in 1940, yet had 34% of the city's tuberculosis cases, 13.4% of its crime, 24.4% of all juvenile delinquency, and 38.5% of all murders.⁶⁸

This decline in the Pittsburgh Hill District became the circumstances for King as he was growing up. King had to deal with a deteriorating Hill District full of poverty and segregation. These kinds of conditions are no easy environment to raise a child in, but are the reasons for King's hard exterior and very resilient personality. King has no trouble dealing with hardships and accepting unfortunate circumstances. King had no money. He has seen people die of illness, and murder. He has seen people living on the street. His motivation to survive was bigger than his righteousness. King's mind set was, I'm looking out for me and mine by any means. Nothing else matters.

Urban Renewal

Federal involvement in urban renewal began in earnest after the passage of the National Housing Act of 1949. The law was passed with the intention of providing "the goal of a decent home and a suitable living

⁶⁸ Lubove, Roy. *Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business, and Environmental Change*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1969. 85

environment for every American.” This was meant to initially reward the returning veterans with new housing, but it soon became linked to low-income areas. Most of the areas around the country that were being torn down were in primarily minority neighborhoods. As a result of their poor economic condition, people of minority groups were generally living in areas that had started to decay. This was a combination of little opportunity to relocate to better-maintained areas and inability to afford to keep their own homes in good condition. The people being relocated were also hampered in that they were the residents of the city who had the least say in the future direction of the city. By 1963, 600,000 people had been displaced by urban renewal nationwide, eighty percent of them black.⁶⁹

These renewals of the community saw demolition of cultural landmarks and homes. Residents of the Hill were promised suitable living arrangements but many only found themselves homeless and destitute when renewal began.

Unemployment and drugs in the Hill District were also on the rise. Its effects on the African American family were taking its toll:

Unemployment continued to rise, hitting the African American community hard. Companies which once employed the urban center had left the communities for mergers or foreign soil. This left thousands of workers unemployed in the cities, forcing many families to move. This trend did not apply for black families, which were restricted to their neighborhoods by social barriers. As unemployment increased, many sought other sources of income. Some individuals began to be involved with crime. The first generation saw the introduction and rampant growth of drugs and gangs into the African American community. Many young men developed drug habits while serving overseas. A large number of youths became disenfranchised with their families and poverty, eventually turning to neighborhood gangs for support. Gangs operated as surrogate families for the disenfranchised youth.⁷⁰

Unemployment leads to drug use as many families become depressed, anxious and dependent on drugs as a way to escape their feelings of low self-efficiency.

⁶⁹ Jakle, John A. and David Wilson. *Derelict Landscapes: The Wasting of America's Built Environment*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992, 132.

⁷⁰ Gray, Rashad. “The Hill District Community Collaborative: An Oral History.” Chapter 2: *The African American Family*, 2001, 13.

Rashad Gray, history and policy student at Carnegie Mellon University, compliments William Wilson's hypothesis that communities full of joblessness and weak work-force attachment are more likely to be involved in illegal activity. Also the socialization of the youth will be negatively affected as they will take on the habits of their environment:

As drugs became more prevalent in the national community, so did it in the scope of the African American family. Drugs in the African American community were used to sterilize the harsh conditions that existed there. However, it wore at the already fragile foundation of the community. Drugs affect every community across the country. But the effects of drugs on the black family proved much more damaging than the national trends. During the 1970's, under depressed economic conditions and joblessness, drug use in the black community increased dramatically. Resources that were supposed to be allocated to sustain the family were now going to the local drug dealer, making the running of a household much more difficult. Dependency also affected the relationships within the family. Those close-knit bonds that supported the family were being worn away by drug use. This was especially evident in the relationship between parent and child. As one would expect, the drug use would create a barrier between parent and child, affecting their overall relationship.⁷¹

The act of urban renewal and its removal of black families from their original thriving communities resulted in the unemployment and drug dependency that plagued the Hill District during this time:

Urban renewal may have been one of the greatest setbacks for the African American community and hindrance for the family. Urban renewal destroyed neighborhoods, which had rich histories and safe environments for children. It also removed property from African American families where some actually owned homes and shops. Whole neighborhoods were wiped out and families were relocated to various housing projects and low income living across the cities. It destroyed the support structure between neighbors and killed economies for the neighborhoods. It created a system of isolation and segregation whose effects are still felt today. The African American family, who at one time were living in the same neighborhood as other relatives, were now systematically spread across town,

⁷¹ Ibid, 13

surrounded by strangers. It broke down a lot of the security of familial structures and relationships in place before urban renewal.⁷²

These circumstances were instrumental in the development of King's character and the social barriers that surrounded him. King was a child who was raised in poverty, living in low income housing surrounded by drugs and violence. He was separated from his immediate family as a boy and did not grow up with any strong male role models to guide him along the way. King did however, have one man that he looked up to. A man who was not in his life, but the mere idea of him gave King something to believe in. His "father," King Hedley I.

⁷² Ibid, 14

CHAPTER 3:
SCAR OF KING HEDLEY I

The First King Hedley

King Hedley I was a character in one of August Wilson's earlier plays, "Seven Guitars." It was written in 1995. This play also takes place in the Pittsburgh Hill District. The play takes place in 1948. Thirty seven years before the events of "King Hedley II." Both of these plays are intertwined and events from "Seven Guitars" directly find themselves in "King Hedley II." King Hedley I represents one half of the identity King Hedley II. Though Hedley I was not his biological father, he is the father that King Hedley II knew and idolized. This is his namesake. From this chapter forward, because I will be going between both King Hedley I and King Hedley II, I will be referring to King Hedley I as "Hedley" and King Hedley II as "King".

Hedley was a fifty nine year old Caribbean man in "Seven Guitars." He lived with Mamma Louise in an apartment on the second floor. Hedley was sick with Tuberculosis, but refused to get treatment because of his suspicions of white doctors. Like many black men, Hedley developed his "defensive function" as a response to the racist society of which he dwells. It is a survival instinct in order to protect oneself against the unfair majority. William E. Cross defines "The Defensive Function" of black identity as this:

The defensive function of black identity provides a psychological buffer during racist encounters. It is a translucent psychological filter that protects against the harmful effects of racism while letting the person process nonthreatening (race neutral) information and experiences. The structure of the protective function seems to involve five components: (1) an awareness that racism is a part of the American experience; (2) an anticipatory mind-set that, regardless of one's station in life, one could well be the target of racism; (3) keenly developed ego defenses that the person can employ when confronting racism; (4) a system blame and personal efficacy perspective in which the person is predisposed to find fault in one's circumstance and not one's self; and (5) a religious orientation that prevents the development of a sense of bitterness and the need to stigmatize whites.⁷³

Cross also notes how the “defensive function” can become a liability:

It should be noted that the defensive function can become dysfunctional in a variety of ways. In one instance, the person may underplay the importance of racism, in which case the defensive function will be inadequately developed, and the person's identity will provide little protection against racism. The lack of a defensive modality can also result from the person having internalized the racist images of him or herself (self-hatred) and from accepting as true the negative images directed at blacks as a group (group rejection). As is well documented, internalized racism can lead to color phobias, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, anger and rage, and black-on-black crime. Finally, defensive dysfunctionality occurs when the person is overly sensitive or even paranoid, “seeing” racism where it does not exist. Instead of engaging the larger society and using one's defensive mode to filter out racist from race-neutral content, the person simply opposes contact or interaction with anything thought to be linked to the “white” experience. This can be disastrous in school-age black youth, who, in defining academic achievement as “white-behavior,” disengage from academic pursuits.⁷⁴

Upon receiving a letter from the sanitarium to get treated for his illness, Hedley states, “Everybody got a time coming. Nobody can't say that they don't have a time coming. My father have his time. And his father have his time. Hedley is fifty-nine years old. His time come soon enough. I'm not worried about that.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Cross, William E. “Black Psychological Functioning and the Legacy of Slavery.” *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, 1998, 396.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 396.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 22.

Hedley will not affiliate himself with the white world. He instead tries to prove that he can be on the same level as the white man without their help. This form of black identity found its way into King as well.

The Legacy

Legacy is defined as, “anything handed down from the past, as from an ancestor or predecessor.”⁷⁶ Hedley speaks about his father playing the trumpet with “King” Buddy Bolden in a jazz band. His father’s obsession with Bolden is actually what inspired the name “King.” Hedley speaks on this in *Seven Guitars*:

My father play the trumpet and for him Buddy Bolden was a god. He was in New Orleans with the boats when he make them run back and forth. The trumpet was his first love. He never forgot that night he heard Buddy Bolden play. Sometime he talked about it. He drink his rum, play his trumpet, and if you were lucky that night he would talk about Buddy Bolden. I say lucky cause you never see him like that with his face light up and something be driving him from inside and it was a thing he love more than my mother. That is how he named me King . . . after King Buddy Bolden.⁷⁷

The name of “King” is the legacy that was handed down to Hedley from his father. Hedley was always seeking forgiveness from his father even after his death. Hedley never got to hear his father say he forgave him because he was on his death bed by the time he had apologized to him for speaking out of turn:

When I was a little boy I learn about Toussaint L'Ouverture in the school. Miss Manning. She say, "Listen, you little black-as-sin niggers, you never each and none of you amount to nothing, you grow up to cut the white man cane and your whole life you never can be nothing as God is my witness, but I will tell you of a black boy who was a man and made the white man run from the blood in the street." Like that, you know. Then she tell us about Toussaint L'Ouverture. I say I going to be just like that. Everybody say that, you know. I go home and my daddy he sitting there and he big and black and tired taking care of the white man's horses, and I say, "How come you not like Toussaint L'Ouverture, why you do

⁷⁶ “Legacy.” *Dictionary.com*, n.p.

⁷⁷ Wilson, *Seven Guitars*, 72.

nothing?" And he kick me with him boot in my mouth. I shut up that day, you know, and then when Marcus Garvey come he give me back my voice to speak. It was on my father's deathbed, with Death standing there, I say to him, "Father, I sorry about Toussaint L'Ouverture, Miss Manning say nobody ever amount to nothing and I never did again try. Then Marcus Garvey come and say that it was not true and that she lied and I forgive you kick me and I hope as God is with us now but a short time more that you forgive me my tongue." It was hard to say these things, but I confess my love for my father and Death standing there say, "I already took him a half hour ago." And he cold as a boot, cold as a stone and hard like iron. I cried a river of tears but he was too heavy to float on them. So I dragged him with me these years across an ocean. Then my father come to me in a dream and he say he was sorry he died without forgiving me my tongue and that he would send Buddy Bolden with some money for me to buy a plantation. Then I get the letter from the white man who come to take me away.⁷⁸

Though he meant well in trying to live up to his father's legacy, Hedley never had a dream of his own. He took his father's dream for him and planted it deep within himself. Hedley was satisfied with this though. This was the legacy that he had to uphold for the grace of his father's life. This soon changed into a dream to give rather than achieve. Once Hedley came to the realization that he did not have much life left. He changed his goal to having a son that would continue his legacy, just as he was doing for his father:

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 time is running out.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibid, 93-94

⁷⁹ Ibid, 72-73

Hedley knew that if he couldn't do it, he wanted to have a son that would take on his dream of becoming a black messiah and lead his people out of bondage. His son would take on the identity of a king.

The King's Seed

It was mentioned before that King killed Pernell for constantly calling him out of his name and cutting him on the left side of his face. Hedley also did the same thing to a black man who would not refer to him as King:

I killed a man once. A black man. I am not sorry I killed him. He would not call me King. He laughed to think a black man could be King. I did not want to lose my name, so I told him to call me the name my father gave me, and he laugh. He would not call me King, and I beat him hard with a stick. That is what cost me my time with a woman.⁸⁰

This event is why Hedley ended up in prison prior to the events of *Seven Guitars*.

This event would soon be mirrored by his son in *King Hedley II*:

Pernell made me kill him. Pernell called me "champ." I told him my name's King. He say, "Yeah, champ." I go on. I don't say nothing. I told myself, "He don't know." He don't know my daddy killed a man for calling him out of his name. He don't know that he fucking with King Hedley II.⁸¹

King mentions his father's altercation with the man who called him out of his name. He had an obligation to honor the family name and the Hedley legacy. His father did not allow a man to get away with calling him out of his name and neither would he. King speaks about his father killing a man as if it is a badge of honor. In King's eyes, this is what real men do. They correct those who disrespect them. Both Hedleys state that they are not sorry for killing their victims. This was another aspect of being a man to the Hedleys, to never be sorry or have any

⁸⁰ Ibid, 72.

⁸¹ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 80.

regrets for things done. King mentions this when discussing Pernell during his court hearing:

I ain't sorry for nothing I done. And ain't gonna be sorry. I'm gonna see to that. Cause I'm gonna do the right thing for me. Always. It ain't in me to do nothing else. We might disagree about what that is. But I know what is right for me. As long as I draw breath in my body I'm gonna do the right thing for me. What I got to be sorry for? People say, "Ain't you sorry you killed Pernell. I ain't sorry i killed Pernell. The nigger deserve to die. He cut my face. I told the judge, "not guilty." They thought I was joking. I say, "The motherfucker cut me! How can I be wrong for killing him?" That's common sense. I don't care what the law say. The law don't understand this. It must not. They wanna take and lock me up. Where's the understanding? If a burglar break in a white man's house to steal his TV and the white man shoot him they don't say he wrong. The law understand that. They pat him on the back and tell him to go on home.⁸²

King is referring to the institutional racism that exists and his consciousness of it. He feels that there was not any understanding present when he killed Pernell but if it was a white man, there is all the understanding in the world. King understands that there is a target on his back. He understands that because he is a Black King, he is marked for removal. But he chooses to fight against it because that's what Hedley would want from him.

Hedley spoke about kings being marked by the white man in *Seven*

Guitars. He stated:

You are like a king! They look at you and they say, "This one . . . this one is the pick of the litter. This one we have to watch. We gonna put a mark on this one. This one we have to crush down like the elephant crush the lion!" You watch your back! The white man got a big plan against you. Don't help him with his plan. He look to knock you down. He say, "That one!" Then they all go after you. You best be careful!⁸³

⁸² Ibid, 60-61.

⁸³ Wilson, *Seven Guitars*, 76.

This was Hedley's warning to Floyd Barton, the protagonist of *Seven Guitars*, Hedley was speaking about black men who knew their own strength and power. A black man who is not afraid to speak up for himself and stand up for what he believes in becomes an obstacle for the white man. This is the reason why in *Seven Guitars*, King Hedley I is only referred to in the script as Hedley. He did not want to be referred to as "King" because it comes with too much opposition. I mentioned before how Hedley beat a black man to death for not calling him "King." It was after this incident that he no longer told people his name was King. "After that I don't tell nobody my name is King. It is a bad thing."⁸⁴ On the contrary, in *King Hedley II*, the script refers to King Hedley II as King. This shows that King embraces his name and wants others to label him as the King that he is. The name "King" was not the only legacy passed down from father to son. The King identity also came in the form of a machete.

The Torch

In *Seven Guitars*, an intoxicated Hedley kills Floyd with his machete after he would not give him the money Hedley thought was his. Hedley was given the machete from a fellow he knew as Joe Roberts. Hedley stated:

Then I get the letter from the white man who come to take me away. So I say, "Hedley, be smart, go and see Joe Roberts." We sat and talked man to man. Joe Roberts is a nice man. I told him about Toussaint L'Ouverture and my father and Joe Roberts smile and he say he had something to give me. And he give to me this. (*He takes out a machete that is wrapped in his burlap apron, crosses over, and sits on his stool.*) Now Hedley ready for the white man when he come to take him away.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ibid, 72.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 94.

This same machete found its way into *King Hedley II*. It was gifted to King by Stool Pigeon. Stool Pigeon is the neighbor of the Hedley household. He was friends with Hedley in *Seven Guitars*. He was referred to then by his real name, Canewell. Stool Pigeon acts as a proxy for Hedley when giving it to his son. Upon receiving the machete, King exclaims:

This was my father's machete. Stool Pigeon give it to me. Say this the machete that killed Floyd Barton. This the machete of the Conquering Lion of Judea. This is mine.⁸⁶

King accepts his father's machete with honor. The above quote mentions the conquering lion of Judea. This is what Hedley referred to himself as in *Seven Guitars*: "You think I am a clown. I am the Lion of Judah!"⁸⁷ In Christian theology, the Lion of Judah is mentioned in the New Testament in Revelation 5:5. The verse states, "And one of the elders saith unto me, weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to lose the seven seals thereof." This verse is widely regarded as referencing the second coming of Jesus Christ. In this case, Hedley was referring to himself as the Messiah. King accepting the machete, is him accepting the title as the new Messiah bequeathed to him by his father through Stool Pigeon. After gifting King with the machete, Stool Pigeon utters:

That's yours. You can do with it what you want. If you find a way to wash the blood off you can go sit on top of the mountain. You be on top of the world. The Bible say, "Let him who knoweth duty redeem the house of his fathers from its inequities against the Lord. And if he raise a cry and say he knoweth not the sins of his fathers then he knoweth not duty for even if the inequities are great and his father's house be scattered to the

⁸⁶ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 69.

⁸⁷ Wilson, *Seven Guitars*, 96.

numberless winds, if he shall gather it and raise it up then shall it stand even unto the end of time.”⁸⁸

The above quote from Stool Pigeon speaks to a verse in the bible that speaks on the sins of the father being visited on the son. If the son acknowledges his father’s sins and works to redeem them, the sins will be washed away. But if the son ignores his father's sins, then the sins of the father will remain unclean. There is a word used in the Twi language of Ghana, “Sankofa.” It is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana. The literal translation of the word and the symbol is “*it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.*”⁸⁹ The Sankofa expresses the importance of going back to the past to gain knowledge and bring it to the present in order to make positive progress. The machete acts as the object of the past that holds the knowledge of Hedley I. It represents his valiance. It also represents his sin. As Stool Pigeon said, “If you find a way to wash that blood off you can sit on top of the Mountain.” The blood on the machete is the sin. Cleaning the blood would wash away the sins of his father and King could start over anew. The machete was the tool that King had to use as the navigator for the crossroads of his destiny. He had two visual paths. The path of his father, Hedley and the path of his biological father, Leroy Slater.

⁸⁸ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 68.

⁸⁹ “The Power of Sankofa: Know History.” *Carter G. Woodson Center*, n.p. n.d.

CHAPTER 4:
SCAR OF LEROY SLATER

LeRoy

Leroy Slater is a character that is only mentioned by name in both *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*. He never made a physical appearance in either play, however, he still played a major role in both stories. Utilizing quotes from both plays where characters have mentioned Leroy and my own knowledge of the plays, I will deduce who Leroy was and his connection to the identity of King Hedley II.

Ruby was staying in Alabama with her mother prior to the events in *Seven Guitars*. This is mentioned through the words of Floyd who says to Ruby, “This is Pittsburgh. This ain't Alabama. Some things you get away with up here you can't get away with down there.”⁹⁰ Ruby comes to visit her aunt Louise to get away from Alabama after having some problems with her love life. Louise explains:

My sister say it's best if she get away from there for a while. I got the letter but she didn't say. She didn't say what train or nothing. I pulled that mattress out, I can lay it down on the floor. She ain't gonna be here long, knowing her. With her little fast behind. I believe there's more to it than what they say. Talking about love. People don't know what love is. Love be anything they want it to be.⁹¹

Ruby soon goes on to explain her dilemma in greater detail:

⁹⁰ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 73.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 34.

My mother sent me a letter from Elmore. He had the nerve to write me. I can't stand no jealous man. I ain't done nothing to make him jealous. He was always like that. He was jealous when I met him. He don't know that just make you wanna leave him quicker. He trying to hold on to you and end up driving you away. Elmore started to get mean, so I left him. Everybody seen me and Leroy together and knew I had quit Elmore. I told Leroy Elmore was jealous of him. He say he didn't care. Say he still loved me. Asked me who did I love. I told him the truth. I didn't love neither one of them. They both was nice in their own ways. Then they got into a fight. I tried to tell them Ruby don't belong to nobody and Ruby ain't gonna take but so much of anybody. After the fight I saw Elmore and he asked me where Leroy was. Say he wanted to go make up. I told him Leroy was at the barbershop and he went up there and shot him before Leroy could have a chance to say anything. The problem with Elmore was he never could get enough of me. He used to tell me he wanted to take it all so nobody else could have me. He wasn't gonna leave none for nobody else to hear him tell it. That make you feel funny to be with a man want to use you up like that.⁹²

Looking at the above quote, Ruby met Leroy in Alabama while she was having problems with Elmore. In *King Hedley II*, Elmore spoke about how he and Leroy met:

There was this big crap game. The crap game had been going on for about four days and the Mullin brothers was losing. I had a little bit of money and a fellow named Ward Henry came and got me...asked me to come down to the crap game with him. He said, "Let's stop and get Leroy Slater." He say Leroy know how to use a gun and in case the Mullin brothers wanted to get nasty we could back one another up. I say all right, and we went on up there where he was staying with Ruby. Leroy say he ain't had no money. I told him I'd loan him fifty dollars but he'd have to split half his winnings with me. Leroy say okay and we go on down there. We left out of there all three winners. Leroy had two hundred and fifty dollars. He took and give me a hundred. I asked him for my fifty dollars. He said it was in the hundred. I told him say if he didn't pay me the fifty dollars I was gonna tell everybody I know. We argued about it and he turned and walked off calling me a bunch of names.⁹³

This was the event that started the conflict between Leroy and Elmore. Elmore continues:

⁹² Ibid, 78-79.

⁹³ Ibid, 98-99.

I went around telling everybody Leroy owed me fifty dollars. I figured I'd shame him into paying me. I was in this bar...Big Jake's Rendezvous Lounge. Leroy come and saw me. I thought he was gonna pay me my fifty dollars. I spoke to him and the next thing I knew he had pulled a gun on me, telling me he was gonna kill me if I kept putting the bad mouth on him. Now I didn't see the pistol when he pulled it on me. It caught me by surprise. I wasn't looking for that. He shoved it in my face. Held it right between my eyes. I'm supposed to be a dead man 'cause he was supposed to pull the trigger. That's the first thing you learn about carrying a pistol. When you pull it, you better use it.⁹⁴

Leroy was just trying to be a man and protect his name. A name that Elmore was destroying by telling everyone that he would not pay him back the fifty dollars that he owed him. This is similar to how both King Hedley I and King Hedley II confronted their enemies who were calling them out of their names. The difference here is that Leroy did not kill his enemies. Leroy genuinely believed that he paid Elmore back. As a man, Leroy was not going to let Elmore bully him into giving him an extra fifty dollars. This is why Leroy pulled out his gun on him, to protect himself. Elmore continues about their altercation in the barbershop that lead to Leroy's murder:

Gator was cutting his hair and Leroy was sitting in the chair laughing. I'm walking around with this headache and he sitting in the chair laughing. I started to walk away and Gator seen me and waved at me. I walked into the barbershop. Leroy was surprised to see me. My hand come out with the gun. Leroy started to get out the chair. He was coming straight at me when I fired the gun. The bullet hit him right smack in the middle of the forehead. That was the first bullet. I couldn't stop firing. Blood went everywhere. A piece of his skull bounced off the mirror and landed about ten feet away. I found myself wondering what that was. I didn't find out till later⁹⁵

The death of Leroy was the result of Elmore perceiving Leroy's laughter as taunts. This affected his pride and pushed him to end Leroy's life. Ruby showed

⁹⁴ Ibid, 100.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 102.

her choice of men when it came to her child. In *Seven Guitars*, Ruby states that she is pregnant, after being asked whose baby it is, Ruby says, “I don’t know. I have to wait and see. I hope its Leroy’s.”⁹⁶ If Ruby had her way, she would have wanted King Hedley II to be raised by Leroy. Upon Leroy’s death, Ruby knew that she did not want her son to be raised by Elmore. After meeting King Hedley I in Pittsburgh and empathizing with how much he wanted a son of his own, she chose to give him her son:

I just hope he live long enough to see this baby born. I’m gonna tell him it's his. He's the only man who ever wanted to give me something. And I want to have that. He wants to be the father of my child and that's what this child needs. I don't know about this messiah stuff but if it's a boy — and I hope to God it is — I'm gonna name it after him. I'm gonna name him King.⁹⁷

Leroy Slater Jr.

King Hedley II of course did not know that Leroy was his true father. This was hidden from him his entire life. He considered himself the heir to a King. His identity was cemented as King Hedley II. When Elmore spoke about Leroy, King would interject with insults toward Leroy’s character. King would say things like, “I’d put my foot up his ass if he didn’t give me my fifty dollars.”⁹⁸ After Elmore got done describing how he killed Leroy, King utters, “Serve the motherfucker right!”⁹⁹ King viewed Leroy as a coward who deserved to die for not paying Elmore back his fifty dollars. King is on Elmore’s side until he tells King the truth: “That was your daddy, Leroy was your daddy.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Wilson, *Seven Guitars*, 80.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 104-105.

⁹⁸ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 99.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 102.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 104.

When King heard this it shattered him. Elmore's statement was further proved when King confronted his mother and she supported Elmore's claim by saying, "I was gonna carry that to my grave. You didn't need to know that."¹⁰¹ Not only was the man he aspired to be not his father, but he had been lied to by his own family. King's manhood was now questionable. This news forced King to leave along with the machete to rediscover his identity. This was the journey to the crossroads that King had to take using the machete as a navigator. Should he continue with his King identity or should he follow this new found identity of Leroy? King soon makes a choice when he returns to his home:

Hey Elmore, the way I see it... Leroy owed you the fifty dollars. That was man to man. He should have paid you. You say he's my daddy...I'm gonna pay my daddy's debt. Here goes your fifty dollars. Now we straight on that. But see...my name ain't Leroy Slater, Jr. My name is King Hedley II and we got some unfinished business to take care of.¹⁰²

At this moment, King chooses to still follow the identity of King Hedley I as he acknowledges the name he was given. He still acknowledges being Leroy's son when he pays off his fifty dollar debt to Elmore. As Leroy's son, the debt would continue to King. He pays it off to wash away the sins of his father. King also acknowledges Leroy as his father by wanting to kill Elmore for killing Leroy.

Mister explains King's motivations well. Mister states:

Somebody kill your daddy that seem like blood for blood to me. I know King. That's just what he thinking. He just want to think about it a while. Elmore need to go on to Cleveland if he wanna get there. Otherwise somebody gonna have to bury him. Your blood is your blood and ain't nothing thicker than that. King looking for ways to prove it. If you try to take King's honor he'll kill you. Whether he right or wrong.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 104.

¹⁰² Ibid, 107.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 106.

Though King chooses to acknowledge Leroy as his biological father, he still chooses to go about the situation as Hedley would. By killing Elmore with the machete, King would repeat the moment Hedley killed Floyd in *Seven Guitars*. King was still deciding which road he would take. The Hedley identity or the Leroy identity. When King decides to challenge Elmore to a crap game, he reincarnates the crap game that was the reason for Leroy's death. This is how King would avenge Leroy, embarrass Elmore in a crap game, the same way Leroy embarrassed him at Jack's Rendezvous Lounge. King was still deciding on which identity to take. The crossroads of his destiny were colliding at this moment. On Elmore's last roll, King exclaims, "You switched the dice!"¹⁰⁴ King kicks Elmore to the ground and raises up his machete to deliver the killing blow. King freezes in this moment. It was only a couple of seconds in real time but in King's mind, it was ages. It was time for King's ultimate decision.

The Three Kings

When King lowers his machete, he chooses not to go down the path of violence. He does not use the machete to kill as Hedley had done in the past. With this, King learns from Hedley's mistake. The sins of Hedley I have now been washed away. King says to Elmore, "there now...you a dead man twice."¹⁰⁵ With this statement, King had succeeded in humiliating Elmore. Just as Leroy made Elmore stare down the barrel of a gun, King made Elmore stare down the blade of a machete. In not killing Elmore, King chose the Leroy Slater identity.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 109.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 110.

Now that King had explored the identities of both of his fathers, it was time for King to discover his own identity. Stool Pigeon cries out, “The Key to the Mountain!”¹⁰⁶ This refers again to the machete. But it was not the use of the machete that was the key, the machete allowed King to travel to the pasts of his predecessors and learn from it. King was ultimately killed by his own mother’s gun in the end, but King had completed his task of redemption. He was now able to ascend to the Mountain. Hedley referred to King as the Messiah and just as Christ’s blood was sacrificed to cleanse the sins of mankind, King’s blood was sacrificed to cleanse the sins of his fathers.

King believed that he was the son of a King. When he learned Leroy was his true father, he was quick to deny the claim. He did not see Leroy as a king like King Hedley I. Unbeknown to King, he was still the son of a king. Le Roy is an old French term. When translated in English it means “The King.”¹⁰⁷ These three Kings, King Hedley I, Leroy Slater, and King Hedley II, each were on their own odysseys to discover their identities. Their identities would intertwine their lives calling them to a similar purpose, legacy. Just as the Three Kings from the bible traveled to the manger to bring gifts for baby Jesus. These three Kings' lives were the gifts for the birth of the new Messiah. The baby that was to be born from the belly of King Hedley II’s “Virgin Mary,” his wife, Tonya. It was time for the new King to arrive and discover his identity.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 110.

¹⁰⁷ “Leroy.” *Dictionary.com*, n.p.

CHAPTER 5: DEVELOPING A KING

In this chapter, I discuss my process as the actor playing the role of King Hedley II and how each scar I discussed above contributed to the development of King's physical identity. This chapter examines movement, voice, and the challenge in three sections. Movement unpacks how I developed King's motion. Voice explains how I came up with the vocal quality of King. The challenge section discusses a difficulty I faced playing the role and how I overcame that difficulty.

Movement

I related King's movements to that of a male lion. Not just because his name is King, but because lions take up large amounts of space when they move. King, having a lot of ego and pride, would consume space as he traveled. Just as a lion, I made King's movements powerful and poised. Because of the regal nature that I wanted for his movements, I would never slouch or hunch my back. This would communicate weakness. His steps were heavy and large. I gave King a grounded stance when he was still. I did not fidget, stand on the tips of my toes, or pace uncontrollably. The only times I would pace were the times King was stressed. Lions pace back and forth within their enclosures because they are

stressed.¹⁰⁸ This is a common behavior for captured lions to do, however it is not common behavior among wild lions. This has to do with lions being naturally wild animals who are not meant to dwell in enclosed habitats. I took this quality of lions and applied it to King. When King feels trapped or suffocated, this activates the pace. These moments were often when King was being lectured to by the women in the house.

After a heated argument with Tonya, Ruby follows King outside saying, “King. You keep pushing Tonya away and she’s gonna stay away. It ain’t gonna be no time to be sorry. It’s gonna come up on you quick. I done seen it happen. You’re gonna look up one day and find yourself all alone.”¹⁰⁹ To which King replies, “Go on now and leave me go with my business. I don’t need you to tell me nothing.”¹¹⁰ At this moment, King is completely stressed. He just finished an argument with Tonya and the last thing he wants to hear is Ruby telling him what he needs to do. During this moment, I had King pace as Ruby scolded him to show that feeling of suffocation with no way out. The pace was not a full body pace. It was only a back and forth motion of the chest. Dr. Ariadne Calvano spoke about the “tiny dance” in our movement class at the University of Louisville. It is a series of small internalized movements that may not be obvious to an onlooker. These tiny movements are sometimes only clear to the one performing them. An example would be a performer in a circus walking across a balance beam. While the performer is balancing, their feet or legs may be moving quickly back and

¹⁰⁸ Fluger, Lilly. “Lion Pacing Back and Forth.” *YouTube*, 2011, n.p.

¹⁰⁹ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 45.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 45.

forth to maintain balance or concentration. The subtle chest movements became my “tiny dance” for King. King wanted to escape the situation because he felt trapped. Seeing no way out, I begin to pace in the chest. Like a lion wanting to escape its enclosure. This internal dance helped me channel the frustration and stress into King’s chest until it explodes in a powerful exit off stage.

The reason why I chose the chest is because I believe that to be the core power source that activates King’s motion. In movement class we also discussed different places a character would lead from when in motion. For instance, a smart character may lead with their head. A nosey character may lead with their nose, and a sexual character may lead from their pelvis. These, of course, can be interchangeable depending on the circumstances. For King, however, I decided that he would lead from his chest. The reason being is that King is a man with a lot of bravado. He is strong, brave and resilient. He walks around with his chest out to show this strength and courage. King also possesses a lot of passion, resolve, and persistence. Ultimately he is a man full of heart. Since the heart is within the chest, King allows his heart to lead him. This can get him into trouble, as he often does not think things through and makes brash decisions. But his courage leads him to disregard such consequences. This is also why he walks with his heart leading. He thinks himself invulnerable. King is not afraid of his enemies. In fact, he challenges them to attack. When Mister tells King about Pernell’s cousin coming after him to take his revenge on him for killing Pernell, King exits his house with a gun saying, “Pernell’s cousin talking about he looking for me. Naw, I’m looking for him. I wanna see him tell me that shit about

cheating Pernell out of a chance at life.”¹¹¹ Believing that no one can damage him, King always charges toward conflict with his heart completely exposed. King leads with his strength and his weakness.

Another “tiny dance” that I developed in King, was an undulation of the shoulders. This occurred when King went on the offensive. Because lions walk on four legs, there is an undulation of their shoulder blades that protrudes through their upper back. That undulation accelerates when they are preparing to pounce on their prey.¹¹² One scene in particular where I used this motion, was in the last scene where King confronted Elmore about killing Leroy. As soon as Elmore exits the house, I begin to undulate my shoulders. The rate of my undulations increased the closer I was to Elmore. My shoulders got the blood rushing and allowed me to channel King’s anger.

Voice

August Wilson’s work is inspired by the four B’s: writers Amiri Baraka and Jorge Luis Borges, painter Romare Bearden and the Blues. Out of all of these, I believe the Blues to be the most important. Dr. Baron Kelly and I discussed King’s voice as being percussive. Looking further into this, I gave King’s voice the quality of a bass drum. The website, The Music Studio, had a section where they gave some details on the characteristics of the different types of bass drums used in different genres of music. They gave a good summarization of the bass drum used in blues, its rhythm, and its difference in use compared to other drums:

While rock often requires a lot of hammering on the snare drum with all your force, blues drummers show a lot of restraint and control over their

¹¹¹ Ibid, 22.

¹¹² Ralston, Eli. “Sneaky Lioness Pounces on Lion.” *YouTube*, 2016, n.p.

power. While a blues drummer will often use a kit similar to one used for rock, in blues, the real voice of the percussion section is the bass drum, often expressed with a steady stream of quarter notes. Once again, the blues are all about “feeling,” so these bass drum quarter notes are done with a measure of restraint. In blues music, the drums are a fairly simple instrument that uses a linear style, meaning they only use one “voice” at a time. Blues drummers take it slowly and keep it simple!¹¹³

These characteristics of the blues bass drum are what inspired me to develop the rhythm of King’s voice to be very powerful, simple and controlled. He takes his time with his words. Similar to a bass drum playing at ninety beats per minute, the voice of King was a steady flow of notes that were similar to the rhythm of a human heart beat.¹¹⁴ The only time this steady rhythm would be broken is when King lost control of his power. In these moments of anger, King’s voice would go from the powerful yet restrained blues style of the bass drum, to the more forceful hammering style of Rock snare drums. This was King’s roar. The battle cry of the Conquering Lion of Judah. These aspects of King’s physical identity, his movement and vocality, were each developed as by-products of his scars.

Incarcerated Movement/Voice

As stated before, lions tend to pace when they are locked in a cage, bound, or isolated. This is because lions are wild animals who are not meant to be confined to a single space for long periods of time. I configured King the same way. He went through the experience of being confined for seven years in prison. Because of this, King never wanted to feel trapped or dehumanized again. Whenever there was a tense situation where I felt trapped or disrespected, I

¹¹³ Codrops. “Post Navigation.” *The Music Studio*, 30 Oct. 2019, n.p.

¹¹⁴ Improvisation, Guitare. “Blues in A (90bpm): Backing Track - Drums/Bass Only.” *YouTube*, 2013, n.p.

activated the pacing of his chest as a coping mechanism to restrain his aggression and release his energy. Just as lions begin to pace impulsively, King's chest pacing was instinctual. It occurs as a survival method, a contingency policy to maintain King's sense of liberty.

Prison is the plantation for the modern slave. The officers that work there do not treat prisoners with the utmost respect and kindness. Most prisons treat their inmates as if they are subhuman. The officers tell them when to eat, when to sleep, and when to wake up. This is a kind of control that leaves inmates feeling powerless. Though this was many prisoners' realities, demonstrating that kind of weakness as a man gives an impression of inferiority in prison. This leads to those men being chosen as the weak links who are taken advantage of in prison.

Some men are bred to have a sense of toughness about them in order to be respected. Not just in prison, but in society as well. Leading with the chest and the bass drum quality of King's voice, were ways for me to show King's idea of manhood. Leading with the chest out represented King's fearlessness and willingness to expose his heart to the world without qualm. His bass drum voice represented his power. This was how King made sure he was not mistaken for a weak man. His circumstances would not be the determining factors that define him.

Impoverished Movement/Voice

Growing up in an impoverished community was not easy for King. His community became plagued with drugs and violence. Unemployment being at an all-time high meant many were forced into states of desperation. This desperation

leads to drugs and crime as residents are struggling and under stress to make money and provide for their families. The Hill District became a concrete jungle where King had to learn how to be a lion. He had to take what he wanted and not allow anyone to intimidate him. Lions are the kings of the jungle, leaders of their prides, and will defend their territories from any challengers. This was King's mind set. He was either going to be the winner, or the loser. Kill or be killed. In the animal kingdom, when a foreign male lion enters the territory of another, he is automatically seen as a threat. Seeing it as a challenge, the current king lion asserts his dominance and fights the intruder. The king is the one who must protect his kingdom. Whichever lion wins the battle, gets to stay as king. The loser, either dies in the battle, or leaves the pride in disgrace. There can only be one king.

King Hedley II displays this behavior when he kills Pernell and when he almost kills Elmore. When Pernell cut his face and constantly called him "Champ" instead of King, it made King feel challenged. Pernell tried to make himself seem like the top lion by assaulting and insulting King. King could not allow that. King has to be the one in charge. King expresses this to Elmore in the play. He says:

"I set me out little circle and anything come inside my circle I say what happen and don't happen. God's in charge of some things. If I jump up and shoot you I ain't gonna blame it on God. That's where I'm the boss... I can decide whether you live or die. I'm in charge of that."¹¹⁵

King is basically saying that when you enter his territory, he is the king. He has the absolute power and control. He can even decide to kill Elmore if he wants to

¹¹⁵ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 39-40.

and God has no say when it comes to his kingdom. The first time Elmore enters the stage, I undulate my shoulders to assert my dominance to Elmore. Though King respects Elmore as a man. He is still another male lion entering King's territory. He is a threat.

The ending crap game between King and Elmore is where the two male lions fight for dominion. I undulate my shoulders throughout the altercation but the most prominent time is when I first enter the scene as King with my machete, shouting Elmore's name. I undulate my shoulders greatly in order to communicate to Elmore that I am on the offensive and ready to fight.

To King, a man has to be as strong as a lion to survive. A man must protect his territory and defend his honor. The only way to survive in the jungle is to become the top predator. Survival of the fittest was what King knew. Like many young African American men from low income communities, King had to become a man on his own without proper guidance from a father figure. King was a victim of circumstance forced to develop a militant and defensive identity. An identity that can be traced back to his fathers, Hedley and Leroy.

Fatherly Movement/Voice

In the introduction, I mentioned William E. Cross's essay on black identity and how he defines a militant perspective as one where a black person feels the need to be more careful and skeptical. This is the type of black man that King is. I married the militant aspect of black identity with the defensive function, developed in order to protect against the harmful aspects of racism, to create King's physical identity. His militant ways are derived from his fathers, who both

developed these functions to survive in a racist society. King's lion-like aggression and powerful bass-like voice are physical qualities that King developed as a way to protect himself. He puts on this attitude to keep himself from becoming another victim of oppression.

This melding of the militant and defensive function of black identity was chosen because, just like his father, King had an awareness of racism. He understood that no matter his circumstances, he would always be a target of racism. There was an ego in King, developed as a defense to employ when confronting racism. Lastly, King was a system blamer. He saw fault in his circumstances. He rarely saw fault in himself. This constant state of aggression was developed out of necessity. It is a common concept that derives from the years of history where African Americans had to fight to survive. As a militant African American man, King is in a constant state of battle with himself and society.

Pushing through the stigma

The moments of anger and aggression did present a challenge for me, not because I could not access the emotion, but because I did not want King Hedley II to be labeled as "The angry black man." In the beginning of my process as King, I fought against the anger. I did this subconsciously. I was so focused on how the audience would view King during the performances. I was afraid people would say, "Another angry black man." or "see, this is why black men belong in prison." A stigma that African American men today are struggling to re-write. I took steps to overcome this.

The first step was to release the worry of outside perspectives. I did this through meditation and positive affirmations about King's character. Being sedentary and blocking out the judges that I created within myself allowed my mind to be clear. It allowed me to focus on telling King's story truthfully. My positive affirmations did not only involve an utterance of positive words about King, but articulating to myself the reasons behind King's behavior. If I could understand and empathize with King, and approach his character without judgment, there was nothing blocking me from authentically embodying the role of King completely.

The second step was to find moments in the script that called for a more vulnerable side of King to emerge. The scene where this shows the most is when King is speaking to Tonya about the flowers:

Tonya. Look at that. That's dirt's hard. That dirt's rocky. But it still growing. It's gonna open up and its gonna be beautiful. I ain't never tried to grow none. I was coming out the drug store and they had them seeds on the counter. I say, "I'm gonna try this. Grow Tonya some flowers. I ain't got nothing to lose but a dollar. I'll pay a dollar to see how they turn out." Ruby told me they wasn't gonna grow. But then they grew. Elmore stepped on them and they still growing. That's what made me think of Pernell. Pernell stepped on me and I pulled his life out by the root. What does that make me? It don't make me no big man. Most people see me coming and they go the other way. They wave from across the street. People look at their hands funny after they shake my hand. They try to pretend they don't see my scar when that's all they looking at. Pernell put that scar on my face, but I put the bigger mark on myself.¹¹⁶

This was King's testimony. It was here, where King was at his most vulnerable.

This moment showed King's selflessness by putting in the effort to grow his wife flowers. King took responsibility for his own fault in the death of Pernell. He

¹¹⁶ Wilson, *King Hedley II*, 91.

opens up about the fear he sees when he interacts with others. He even points out the power of persistence by referencing how the flowers continue to grow regardless of the circumstances. It was this scene that allowed access under King's rough exterior.

As actors, we are taught not to judge our characters. This is because the judgment and criticism of our characters can make it difficult to build a genuine connection with them. Judgment blocks empathy. But in analyzing King, I actually developed a stronger connection to him by being aware of his faults, his mistakes, and his crimes. This made me see King as an imperfect human being, a trait I was able to relate to better. I gained stronger empathy for King by highlighting his wrongs rather than his rights.

Upon learning this information from the text, I was no longer repelled by the anger. In fact, the moments of anger also became moments of vulnerability. Anger was just King's first emotional response. Knowing this, I leaned even further into the anger because I had to earn King's softer moments. "The angry black man" is a black man who has crafted armor to defend against a cruel world. But underneath, is a man in pain.

CONCLUSION

The black identity is a complicated concept. It can be changed and molded into different forms and is affected by the trauma, and successes African Americans experience in life. There are racial stigmas, institutions, and societal disadvantages that are created in order to destroy black identity. Though the black identity can be tied to the scars from high poverty rates, high levels of incarceration and intergenerational traumas. It is not all that encompasses the black identity.

The story of King Hedley II can be seen in two ways, the tragic death of kings, or the ascension from kings to Gods. King Hedley's story is a reflection of the lives and circumstances of many black men in America who are trying to survive in a white man's world. King Hedley represents the struggle and persistence of the black community. He represents the strength, passion, and resistance that has been ingrained in the DNA of black bodies since the beginning of time. His life reflects the fragility of black male identity and the constant juggling of what it means to be a black man. King Hedley was a leader who challenged authority in order to create a safe path for his family. He believed that his scars made him who he was and he was not ashamed of them. And just like many black leaders before him, King Hedley had a dream that he was willing to die for. King's black skin was a scar. More prominent than the scar on his face. He wanted to leave his scar on America.

I myself do not think that King's actions are justified. Murder and crime are never the right thing to do. However, I do understand King's circumstances and why he believed there was no other way to survive. King is the kind of African American man who has been beat down by life so much, that he takes a more radical approach to dealing with his circumstances. He exchanges his pain for aggression. His tough exterior is an over-compensation for not having the ability to change his current low position in society. King's abrasive persona was his solution to self-preservation and the preservation of his family.

Many African American men go through this. They often have no one to turn to, not the government, not institutions, and not even their own communities. African American families often experience the same pain and circumstances for generations. They often don't know how to escape the cycle in order to create better opportunities for the next generation. So when does the cycle break?

It breaks when we build something of our own. Racism against African Americans is hardly addressed. We address discrimination which includes others. This intentionally dilutes the true issues of African Americans. We have to create a form of reinforced solidarity in the black community where we will be able to give support and grant opportunities to our own when no one else will come to our aid. Constantly blaming the system will not completely rectify or erase the institutional racism that has been sewn into the fabrics of America. We have to have control over things that contribute to our elevation such as hospitals, banking, supermarkets and water supply.

With our own businesses, we can hire our own people. We can give those African Americans who have been put in a disadvantaged position a second chance to gain employment and knowledge to build their own companies. Without owning businesses in our communities, the money spent will not be invested back into our communities. We will always be willingly giving our money, our time, and our business to those who would not reinvest a single penny of that revenue back into African American communities. We need to invest in ourselves first.

We need to build our own havens while working within the law. Not to become isolationists, but to have communities we call home when the world inevitably turns against us. We have to take responsibility for the well-being of the black community before any institution. It is irresponsible of us to expect saviors from a system that benefits from our mistreatment. Our scars make us stronger. We must use our scars to learn from the past, heal, and provide a better future for our culture.

“I don’t want to die without any scars.” -Chuck Palahniuk

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