



Resurrecting the Past to Find the True African American Identity: *Gem of the Ocean* by August Wilson

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Abstract

This paper aims to trace the principal characteristics of Afrocentricity in August Wilson's play *Gem of the Ocean* which is wonderfully rich with the intricate layers of the African American pre- and post-slavery experience. It presents a close study of the African American's Masterpiece in a thematic approach to show how history, culture and community are rooted in the African American identity. Afrocentricity is used in this paper to provide a vehicle for analysis relevant specifically to the African and African American experience – particularly in the areas of history and cultural studies – for African Americans. The play provides ample layers of interesting topics namely violence and spirituality. The violence that runs through different incidents in the play is the violence of the oppression of African Americans, which kept them in poverty powerless to control their fate. The spirituality of the characters provides them with strength which they have brought along from their journey across the ocean. Rewriting history through this play comes as an eye-opener to the wrongs and struggles the African ancestors endured for their grandchildren to enjoy a better life. Going back to the roots of the African tribes proves that this race once enjoyed a culture and a solid identity that has disintegrated and somehow vanished over the years. Written in 2003, the play presents the severe racial discrimination and poverty conditions African Americans suffered from. The journey on board the 'Gem' or the slave ship across the ocean shows the degradation of slave life encompassing violence, isolation and utter despair to reach both a metaphorical and physical shore.

Keywords: *Afrocentricity, African American Studies, Drama*

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Afrocentricity is the study centered and derived from Africa or the African population emphasizing the African culture and the contributions of Africans to the development of Western civilization. It highlights the impact the African people made and still are making on the West affecting its culture and literary composition. It is designed to empower the people who are suffering from the African diaspora. “A central premise behind it is that many Africans have been subjugated by limiting their awareness of themselves and indoctrinating them with ideas that work against them” (Asante, 1998, p.1) and misrepresent them to the rest of the world. The representation of the African American identity has long been an important issue tackled, explained and analysed by many writers over the years. Many authors like, Baldwin and Hamilton, have tried to present an equitable society by showing revolutions for justice and liberty. August Wilson is one of them. He believed in Molfi Asante’s powerful words that it is a “fundamental fact that culture is at the base of all values” (Asante, 1998, p.1). He shows how human regeneration with all its interests, values and perspectives highlight the African identity that has been mutilated, changed and misrepresented over the years. He strongly projects the idea that people are deeply rooted and connected with their culture and heritage, hence internal peace and self-acceptance can only come after going back, realising, acknowledging, and embracing this inherited past.

Afrocentricity with its basic interest in: history, culture and community was first presented by Asante in the 1970’s. Names such as ‘Africentricity’, ‘Afracentricity’, ‘African-centred’ and ‘Africology’ embraced by many like Cheikh Anta Diop, Maulana Karenga and Ama Mazama gave birth to a school of thought and later an acknowledged critical school that represents the African American identity from a historical and cultural perspective. History blended with the original roots of the ancestors presented in this context the perfect marriage and consequently the birth of a strong and fulfilled identity.

Asante defines Afrocentricity as “placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour” (1998, p.2). He claims that “the best road to all health, economic, political, cultural, and psychological in the African community is through a centered positioning of ourselves within our own

story” (Asante, 1998, p.vii). He views it as “a philosophical paradigm that emphasizes the centrality and agency of the African person within an historical and cultural context” (Asante, 2021, p.84). It involves a “continual reference to African ideas, cultures, and histories as backdrops to the alternative construction of knowledge” (Hall, 2010, p.24). Thus being African American should be an addition if one accepts the African past and embraces the American present.

The first difficulty that stands in the way of achieving a separate African American culture “arises from the fact that the original African culture of the American Negro is very largely lost” (Whetherford, 1934, p.545). Based on an oral tradition and a folkloric culture, much of the original heritage was either lost or changed through assimilation into other cultures. For most African Americans, part of their freedom is to be able to distinguish their own authentic culture from the American culture. This issue of identification and learning more about the origins of African-ness rests at the heart of the identity struggle. Brought as illiterate slaves and denied their own culture, the oral tradition of the original African Americans with the “absence of written record” implied an “absence of anything worth recording” (Silberman, 1964, p.175). Hence an imposed cultural identity became the general assumed one that should be adopted, believed and lived by in complete subordination and acceptance, as opposed to a forgotten shameful past that should and must be kept in the dark.

In addition to physical relocation, African Americans were forced into a foreign society which imposed on them certain behavioural patterns. Asante explains this stating:

Central to the Afrocentric idea is the fact that Africans were moved off intellectual, philosophical, and cultural terms by enslavement and colonization. In order to return to an authentic consciousness rooted in self-respect and affirming dignity, it is necessary for African people to see themselves in the midst of their own history and not as located in the margins of Europe. (Asante, 2021, p. 90)

By going back to their origins and cultural heritage, African Americans are able to find their true identity and consequently inner peace in their community. The representation of African Americans in literary works to the world aimed primarily to dismantle “prevailing Eurocentric bias ... which have regularly distorted, marginalized, or negated the agency and humanity of blacks and all marginalized ‘others’” (Hall, 2010, p.25). Consequently, with the political

banishment of slavery, African Americans had to fight against another form of injustice, namely racial discrimination against their race. They “have been forced to fight for cultural empowerment to gain independence from colonization of the white power structures that dominate American culture” (Marks, 2013, p.483). Fighting to define the self and project an identity became both an internal and external struggle, one within and the other without in a society which already set the parameters of classification and judgement terms denying all humanistic rights and practices to African American subjects living on American soil because of their African origin.

Afrocentricity hence became a celebration of the uniqueness of the African culture and heritage carried from one generation to the next. It is not the misrepresented image of the barbaric African savage or slave. August Wilson is one of the playwrights who captures this reality and succeeds in giving a true presentation of the authentic African descent. The stereotype of the African man transcended the imposed boundaries of inferiority and neglect to raise up to the level of proper self-assertion and representation where respect becomes the core of understanding and communication. He successfully portrays the modern African American who comes from and eventually ends up in the ‘City of Bones’. He proudly celebrates his past and is optimistic about his present and future in spite of all of the deconstructive hardships, pain and humiliation either, physical or spiritual.

This paper presents a close study of August Wilson’s African American masterpiece *Gem of the Ocean* in a thematic approach to show how history, culture and community are rooted in the African American identity. By using Afrocentricity, as a school of thought, the play provides ample layers of interesting topics presented in it. Rewriting history through this play comes as an eye opener to the wrongs and struggles the African ancestors endured for their grandchildren to enjoy a better life. Going back to the roots of the African tribes proves that this race once enjoyed a culture and a solid identity that has disintegrated and somehow vanished over the years.

Written in 2003, the play presents the severe racial discrimination and poverty conditions African Americans suffered from. The journey on the ‘Gem’, or on board the slave ship in the ocean shows the degradation of slave life encompassing violence, isolation and utter despair to reach both a metaphorical and physical safe shore. Wilson discusses the struggles and miserable conditions of African

Americans in the United States during the twentieth century in his ten-play cycle covering the period from the 1900s to 1990s. Africa to him, like his fellow Afrocentrists, is the mother land, the backbone from which strength, knowledge and healing is taken. In *Gem of the Ocean*, he closely follows the characteristics of Afrocentricity. He revisits the past to reconstruct a future through building the bridge of reconciliation between an undeniable hurtful truth and an optimistic hopeful future. His characters; ‘Aunt Ester’ and ‘Solly Two Kings’ take us on a journey to the past only to reconcile the young generation presented by ‘Black Mary’ and ‘Citizen Barlow’ with their culture. Like all Afrocentric writers, Wilson manages to relocate the younger generation in the center of their history as subjects rather than objects. This is done with the help of the oral tradition and songs which remind them with their African-ness. Along with establishing the connection with the ancestors and their past, Wilson also gives the young generation the responsibility to continue the quest or journey of the elders. Black Mary and Citizen Barlow are both at the heart of action, in the center, just as where Wilson believes each African American should be. Repetitive pictures of the past African culture and folkloric songs highlight the individuality of the African American population. Wilson’s characters revolt against racism and use culture as an important weapon to demolish the black stereotypes enforced by the discriminating American society. Wilson presents in his play typical Afrocentric themes: violence, spirituality, oppression, racial discrimination, poverty, ignorance and powerlessness which put some characters in a state of utter devastation to the extent of choosing to take their own lives since they have nothing left to live for while others choose to endure the struggle and challenge the social norms to try to live a better life.

Gem of the Ocean is the opening play in the ten-play series written by August Wilson. Wilson introduces in his opening lines a picture of the miserable life of African Americans during the era of the First Migration. The title of the play refers to the paper boat made by Aunt Ester out of a bill of sale given to her when she was still a slave. Using this metaphorical boat, she sends a troubled young man, Citizen Barlow, for an inner spiritual journey to wash his sinful soul (for killing a human soul) and to connect with his past and establish an acceptance of his life. His voyage is represented by this paper boat. As Aunt Ester narrates her story of how she was brought to the land of the free as a slave, she hands Citizen a small paper boat to hold in his hands and never to let go. She launches him on a journey on board of this legendary boat to visit the city of bones. A journey which is

intended to cleanse his soul and give him a reason to live and carry on what is expected of him. Aunt Ester tells Citizen that this is:

... not what you call your ordinary boat. Look at that boat, Mr. Citizen. That's a magic boat. There's a lot of power in that boat. Power is something. It's hard to control but it's hard to stand in the way of it. (Wilson, 2006, p.54)

She physically folds and uses her bill to spiritually reconnect Citizen to the ancestral past. She tries to teach Citizen who belongs to the new and younger generation that African Americans should not forget their past and their origins. Ester's bill of sale is not simply a piece of paper, it is a living proof of the struggle and the survival of the dire circumstances freedom was achieved through.

Wilson recalls in the play the Middle Passage journey African Americans physically took to arrive as slaves. The play describes the severe racial discrimination and poor conditions they had to endure. Berlin in his essay 'Coming to terms with slavery in 21st century America' explains how the "Evidence of the degradation of slave life was everywhere. Violence, isolation, exhaustion, and alienation often led African slaves to profound depression and occasionally to self-destruction" (Horto, 2006, p.13).

Asante explains that one can find the roots of Afrocentricity in "the intellectual and activist precursors" like Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Larry Neal and W.E.B. Du Bois "who first suggested culture as a critical corrective to a displaced agency among Africans" (1998, p.37). In the *Gem of the Ocean* we have a found identity which was once lost in slavery of the whole community of the African American body and an individualised identity which is born out of an old generation which has suffered and paid a dire price for the young to survive. Through the main character of Aunt Ester, the need to stress "the necessity for a recentering of African minds in a way that brings about a liberating consciousness" (Asante, 1998, p.38), Wilson presents this character as an anchor character. This old woman provides comfort to all the wondering lost and confused souls who come seeking her help. She represents the connection with a past that is almost forgotten by the present. Aunt Ester's question to Black Mary: "What took you so long?" (Wilson, 2006, p.74) reveals the birth of the new generation which sprouts from the former's womb. Physical survival is followed by spiritual rebirth and ultimate identity awareness of a population which was once inhibited and suppressed to the extent of complete submission to the white master.

The internal struggle of the African American character is presented in the play where we see how the African American character suffers from a duality of what Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* describes as having “double-consciousness, (a) sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” which causes him to live in “ambiguity” when he “feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength keeps it from being torn” (1973, p.3). The name African American assumes two special places, two locations, two cultures, an old one and a new assimilated one and a double heritage. This struggle pushes the characters on a journey of self-exploration, of finding value and meaning to their living. And it is not until they resolve the feeling of non-belonging and internal loss that they are reconciled with their past, centered within and reconnected with their heritage and long lost culture. The ‘two-ness’ disappears with the idea of acceptance of who they really are and the embracement of the African roots. Wilson’s play:

aims at accomplishing three major objectives – first, the depiction of Africans, and peoples of African descent abroad, as historical actors. Second, the rehabilitation and exaltation of the historical and cultural heritage, and experiences of Africans and Blacks in Diaspora. Third, the location of Africa as the foundation of knowledge about Blacks (Adeleke, 2001, p.22)

The play presents a spiritual journey taken by the leading character: Citizen Barlow, a young African American, who is aided by Aunt Ester, the old African American lady who lives in 1839 Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh. She lives with Eli, the gatekeeper and Black Mary, her housekeeper. Solly Two Kings and Rutherford Selig are recurrent visitors and friends to Aunt Ester’s house. Solly is described as a potential suitor to Aunt Ester while Selig is the only White man in the play. Wilson shows how his whiteness is accepted and even welcomed as he is approached by the household to help Solly escape the ruthless Caesar, the black policeman. His character juxtaposes that of Caesar who is Black on the outside but racist from the inside. He represents the white unjust laws against his fellow brothers. His motivation comes from his love of power and greed for more money which changed him over the years. He becomes a suppressive tool for the White racist people under the umbrella of practicing the law.

Through the belief of the power of culture and how it is capable of bridging the gap between the “American South of the slave past and modern day

Pittsburgh” Wilson makes his characters embrace “the past in order to move forward” (Gantt, 2009, pp.12-13). A resurrected cultural identity of African Americans is the most appropriate weapon to fight racism. Aunt Ester’s character is the most centralized African American in Wilson’s play. She represents the 285 years ex-slave experience. She is presented in the play as the representative of African American heritage and the distant voice of Africa. Her house is a refuge to all those who need salvation and inner peace. She is believed to be capable of “wash(ing) people’s souls” (Wilson, 2006, p.20). Her connection with other characters is motherly, representing mother Africa who guides, loves and supports her children. Citizen, like many other young lost men, comes to her for finding a meaning for his life and filling the hole in his heart made by the unintended death of another man. Aunt Ester’s words in the play to Citizen explain it all:

It’s only a half mile by a half mile but that’s a city. It’s made of bones. Pearly white bones. All the buildings and everything is made of bones. I seen it. I been there, Mr. Citizen. My mother live there. I got an aunt and three uncles live down there in that city made of bones. You want to go there, Mr. Citizen? I can take you there if you want to go. That’s the center of the world. In time it will all come to light. The people made a kingdom out of nothing. They were the people that didn’t make it across the water. They sat down right there. (Wilson, 2006, p.52)

Aunt Ester and Citizen’s common ancestors have built the ‘city of bones’ with their own sacrificed bodies. Wilson shows how the city has become the ‘center’, the heart of Afrocentricity. All those who have died during the Middle Passage journey or other similar physical journeys have joined those who metaphorically ‘live’ in the ‘city of bones’. They transcend bodily existence and physical grave limitation to soar spiritually to the center of the world, to ‘live’ united in a city where no human can impose his unjust rules.

Citizen Barlow, Wilson’s African American character shows how he and his fellow citizens have become “subjects rather than objects” in their world. The concept of “a centrist world view and cultural perspective which makes the observers subjects in their own discourse” became “the starting point of Afrocentric theory” (Akinyela, 1995, p.23). In his conversation with Solly, he explains how he got his name:

Solly: My name is Two Kings. Used to be Uncle Alfred. The government looking for me for being a runaway so I changed it.

Citizen: My mama named me Citizen after freedom came. She wouldn't like it if I changed my name.

Solly: Your mama's trying to tell you something. She put a heavy load on you. It's hard to be a citizen. You gonna have to fight to get that. (Wilson, 2006, p.26)

Citizen flees the South, Alabama, in search for a new better life but the bitter truth awaits him in Pittsburgh. He seeks Aunt Ester's spiritual help after stealing a bucket of nails from the town mill and becoming the main reason why another man, Gareth Brown, was accused of the theft and consequently loses his life defending his stance. His imaginary spiritual journey to the 'City of Bones' described by Caywood and Floyd as: "the vast, underwater graveyard for the thousands of ancestors who died crossing the Atlantic on their bloody journey into slavery" (2009, p.75) becomes a continuum of the Middle Passage experience. The "Middle Passage thus emerges not as a clean break between past and present but as a special continuum between Africa and the Americas" (Diedrich, 1999, p.8).

The spiritual journey is a wake-up call to the other characters in the play. Aunt Ester tells Citizen that when she felt alone on the ship of slaves across the ocean, she started singing: "just singing quietly to myself some song my mother had taught me. After that it was alright for a little while" (Wilson, 2006, p.53). Songs magically connect the young generation with the past and Wilson associates the crucial moments in the play with songs because of their importance in forming the African American identity. It is the song, the "African lullaby ... a song his mother taught him" (Wilson, 2006, p.67) that re-centers Citizen and brings him back to the balancing point on the imaginary ship journey. Aunt Ester sums up Citizen's role or right in life, she addresses him explaining: "Life is above all. God raised it to a great height. Live, Mr. Citizen. Live to the fullest. You got a duty to life. So live, Mr. Citizen. Live!" (Wilson, 2006, p.68) and Eli's eulogy over Solly's shot dead corpse summarizes the great battle of what Afrocentricity is all about:

They laid him low. Put him in the cold ground. David and Solomon. Two kings in the cold ground. Solly never did find his freedom. He always believed he was gonna find it. The battlefield is always bloody. Blood here. Blood there. Blood over yonder. Everybody bleeding. Everybody been cut and most of them don't even know it. But they bleeding just the

same. It's all you can do sometime just to stand up. Solly stood up and walked.

He lived in truth and he died in truth. He died on the battlefield. You live right you die right. (Wilson, 2006, p.83)

Physical death leads to spiritual rebirth in Wilson's play. Garret Brown and Solly physically die for Citizen to be spiritually reborn. The 'two pennies' are passed on from a physical materialistic context to a spiritual burial ritual. They are returned by Citizen to Solly to culminate the burial ritual. And by doing so, Citizen becomes the new Solly. He states: "They all look like me. They all got my face!" (Wilson, 2006, p.66) acknowledging the connection, bond and responsibility. He realizes the three main themes Wilson highlights in the play: the significance and importance of the African heritage and culture, the reconciliation with the past and embracing the idea of being part of the whole Black community, to take power and support from.

Asante explains that "the Afrocentric idea, in education seeks to reposition Africans at the center of (their) own historical experiences rather than on the margins of European experiences" (2021, p.35). The letter delivered from Solly's sister from the South is a clear example of how they need to educate themselves.

I am writing to let you know the times are terrible here the most anybody remember since bondage. The white peoples is gone crazy and won't let anybody leave. They beat one fellow on the road so bad his mama say "Who is he?" They killed some more and say the colored can't buy tickets on the train to get away. Say they will sink the ferry if any colored on it.

I want to leave to come North but it is too bad. (Wilson, 2006, p.15)

Solly is unable to read the letter himself and Black Mary aides him to learn about important information by reading it out loud for him. The older generation is illiterate and this comes as a physical impairment. Yet Solly is not afraid and is determined to travel South to rescue his sister.

The act of setting restricting physical boundaries rises once more with the hunt of Solly by Caesar: "all the roads blocked off" (Wilson, 2006, p.75) and "looking for whoever burnt down the mill" (Wilson, 2006, p.75) which shows how someone must be punished for the act of burning down the mill. A judgement is passed claiming that "they know who done it" and an action is immediately taken "They won't let anybody cross the river down in Scotch Bottom" (Wilson, 2006, p.75). By physically banning coloured people from leaving, slavery is resurrected

in a new form. Many African Americans were killed while trying to flee to the North in hope of finding a better life with humane conditions. The act of burning down the mill in the first place is a rebellion against the imposed subordination of Caesar, the authority figure representing the unjust law and Solly the regular man on the street who claims to have burnt it:

Yeah, I burnt it down! The people might get mad but freedom got a high price. You got to pay. No matter what it cost. You got to pay. I didn't mind settling up the difference after the war. But I didn't know they was gonna settle like this. I got older I see where I'm gonna die and everything gonna be the same. I say well at least goddamn it they gonna know I was here! The people gonna know about Solly Two Kings!
(Wilson, 2006, p. 75)

Black Mary's declaration of what her brother, Caesar, used to be shows how some African Americans have given up their true identity only to adopt a false one because it is more powerful. He chooses the misrepresented image and indulges in its darkness over his natural one weaved by his ancestors. The 'other side' shows the dichotomy in character beliefs and behaviour. That which shows brotherly compassion, love and family solidarity as opposed to cruelty and indifference. She addresses him saying:

I remember you when you was on the other side of the law. That's my brother. The one selling hoecakes off the back of a wagon. The one that helped Mrs. Robinson and the kids when nobody else would. That's my brother. The one who used to get out of bed to take me to school. The one who believed everybody had the same right to life ... the same right to whatever there was in life they could find useful. That's my brother. I don't know who you are. But you not my brother. You hear me, Caesar?
You not my brother. (Wilson, 2006, p.84)

Stunned by his sister's harsh yet true words, Caesar steps down and leaves Aunt Ester's house that has been repeatedly mentioned as a "sanctuary" (Wilson, 2006, p.79) for all seeking a home or a shelter.

Spirituality is Wilson's fundamental theme in the play. He is successfully able to construct around it a world in which the African American can shelter himself from all the cruel injustices he is living through. By spiritually reconnecting with the past, with heritage and true identity, the present can be endured and the future rewritten. Solly's stick, the symbol of the painful past is in the hands of the

African Americans. This source of accomplishment, of control brings pride and a sense of fulfilment. The positive note which ends the play signals the continuity of life, the passing of the experience from the old generation to the youth, of the movement, of the stick from Solly to Citizen, symbolises the continuity of the journey with the same strong belief, persistence and zeal of that of his predecessor.

The physical locations represented by; Aunt Ester's house, the City of Bones, the Gem of the Ocean boat, Alabama and the South all stand as stories and experiences of African American proof of survival. The closing words: "So live" (Wilson, 2006, p.85) uttered in the play pass on the mission of living from one generation to the next. From Solly to Citizen who resumes the former's mission in life. Solly's physical death signals a rebirth of Citizen's life and a new start. The play ends with 'live', which shows the survival of Solly's spirit through others in spite of the physical death of his body which will join his ancestors in the city of bones. Wilson here shows how freedom can be achieved through transcending bodily existence with all its imposed limitations and earthly boundaries. Solly's spirit is free to soar into a realm governed and protected by God and no human has power to control or prohibit. True freedom is achieved as Solly joins those who have passed to the Almighty's sanctuary.

Wilson successfully presents a reconstructed image of the African American identity based on centralizing him and sending him back to his original African heritage, land and spirit. Aunt Ester's consistent desire to go back to the past shows how this is the only way to save people's souls from getting lost. Both journeys: physical and spiritual, in the play revisit the past to correct the wrongs and create a satisfying present and future. The characters are supported and helped by those around them to achieve their goals. The idea of a strong and unified community where its subjects depend, rely on and support one another comes at the core of solidarity. He shows how community comes first in importance and how each 'Citizen' must comply to carry the mission and that in its turn empowers the whole body of the African American people. No one will get far on his own, Citizen needs the help of Aunt Ester, the support of Elli, Black Mary and Solly to cross over and reach the 'City of bones' to get reconnected with his lost but not forgotten past. Support of the community, through the old folkloric song performed together as a mood settler and guide on the play within the play scene shows how Citizen needs the past to survive his present and live his future.

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