

Self-Definition: The Historical Legacy of the Past in August
Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*

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For many years, the black race suffered from various forms of deformation and misrepresentation of their image and history; a scheme deftly carried out by both Americans and Europeans. August Wilson (1945-2005) is an African American playwright whose dramas evolve out of these historical and cultural dilemmas. His dramaturgy is inspired by his belief that there is an identity problem among African Americans living in the United States. This is due to the fact that there is an entire landscape of African American experience which is not explored because mainstream histories consciously distorted African Americans' history and image. As such, he attempts to portray this history, show the importance of heritage, and provide for present black generations examples from the past of strong, courageous characters who have, unlike what has been said of them, proudly asserted their presence and independence. This paper tackles how Wilson, in his play *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) uses the past history to give voice to the misrepresented and silenced African Americans, tell their story, and, refute the salient arguments of all those who have distorted and misrepresented the black race.

A rich tapestry of black history, *Gem of the Ocean* is chronologically the first play in Wilson's ten-play historical discourses on the African American experience since the 1900s. Full of historical allusions and cultural signifiers, the play is set at a critical historical juncture in the story of blacks in America. It is set in 1904 at the dawn of the first migration of southerners



from the South to the North, escaping the increasing onslaught of Jim Crow Laws.¹ The play provides an impression of a black society menaced by oppression, extreme poverty, and injustice. Although the Emancipation Proclamation broke the legal chains of slavery, bondage was replaced by an environment of intimidation and racism where black men and women were treated unfairly in their working and housing conditions.

Gem takes place at Aunt Ester's home which is located at 1839 Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh. The house is shared with Black Mary and Eli, both of whom look after Aunt Ester and the house. The play opens with Citizen Barlow coming to the house of Aunt Ester seeking her aid in healing what he describes as "a hole inside me" (23). Citizen is a young man who recently fled discrimination in Alabama, searching for a new life. A troubled man with a restless soul, he has been unsuccessfully trying to claim the citizenship promised in Abraham Lincoln's 1865 proclamation on the emancipation of American slaves. He stole a bucket of nails from the local mill in the town and feels guilty because another man, Garret Brown, falsely accused of the crime, committed suicide. Haunted by a past sin, Citizen is searching salvation and sanctuary. He badly needs some form of spiritual sustenance and moral forgiveness. Well known throughout the community of Pittsburgh for her ability to "wash people's souls" (Wilson, *Piano* 20), effectively cleansing and absolving the sinners, Citizen seeks Aunt Ester to help him



cope with his past and purge his soul. The compassionate and warm Aunt Ester accepts him, giving him a meal, a job, and a place to stay.

“A spiritual advisor for the community” (Wilson, *Gem* n.p), Aunt Ester functions as a refuge for the wandering, the desperate, and the troubled, including Solly Tow Kings, a former guide of the underground railroad who now earns his living collecting dog manure for sale to tanneries; Black Mary, an unhappy young woman; Rutherford Selig, a traveling salesman and the only white character; and Citizen Barlow. According to Wilson, “Aunt Ester has emerged . . . as the most significant person of the cycle. The characters after all are her children. The wisdom and traditions she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personalities” (“Sailing” 1). Previously mentioned in Wilson’s *Two Trains Running* (1990) and *King Hedley II* (1999) as a mystical off-stage figure, she represents the distant voice of Africa, carrying the memory of all African ancestors and embodying their wisdom and traditions. She is a living force, embodying both a collective and personal history. She believes that past history has a force of authority that could bring present change and spiritual power. As old as the African American experience in America, Aunt Ester was born with the arrival of Africans in America. She claims to be two hundred and eighty seven years old; an age which suggests that she survived the Middle Passage. Harry J. Elam, Jr. describes her as the “actual site of the African American



legacy; history, and memory co-mix in her body . . . Aunt Ester is in fact the ‘Ancestor’ ” (162).

In Wilson’s *Gem*, as well as his other history plays, Wilson is not simply reviewing or reevaluating the choices that blacks have made in the past. Rather, his ideology considers how this past now impacts the African American present. In order to help her new child Citizen rinse his soul and save himself, the supernatural and African prophet Aunt Ester, with assistance from Eli, Black Mary and her friend Solly, takes him back through time and space on a symbolic and spiritual journey. Because he never knew slavery, the desperate and troubled Citizen goes on a mythical voyage on a slave ship. The destination is the City of Bones, a noble kingdom made out of nothing, located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It is the city of “the just dead,” the largest unmarked graveyard in the ocean. An actual city below the surface of the water where black souls have come to rest, it is built from the bones of those who perished on the perilous journey across the ocean. Aunt Ester explains to Citizen:

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 . . . 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. They say, "Let's make a kingdom. Let's make a city of bones." (52)

Aunt Ester reports that she has relatives who live there, not who rest there, so the City of Bones is not simply a memorial to the Middle Passage but also a vibrant place where others can visit. It is a communal site that joins past to present. The redemptive power of history is central to *Gem*, where African Americans are reconnected to the blood memories and cultural rites of the African past. Citizen should return to history in order to move on with his life and into his future. "Aunt Ester," says Wilson, "leads him to the answer. He has to find out what his duty is, and through that he can be redeemed" (qtd. in Gener). Through the psychic process of traveling to the city and through his interaction with former victims who "were too infirm for the journey . . . who mounted unsuccessful insurgencies . . . who jumped into the cold, uncertain water rather than face the cold uncertainties ahead," (Elam 166) Ester gives Citizen the chance to face his sins, confront his demons and, thus, find redemption. As in *The Piano Lesson*, only by being touched by the past, by remembering the lessons of the ancestors, can African Americans move forward.

For Citizen, undertaking this journey necessitates a kind of confession of his sins. Citizen is going to the City of Bones to cleanse his soul after



another man, Garret Brown. Accused of theft and unwilling to go to jail for a crime he did not commit, Brown runs into the river and remains in the cold water until he is drowned and, thus, dies for Citizen's sins. Now he stays in the City of Bones, a spiritual place for sacrifice. Reaching the City of Bones, Citizen realizes that Brown is the gatekeeper: "The Gatekeeper . . . The Gatekeeper . . . it's Garret Brown the man who jumped in the river." Only by confessing his story to Brown, can Citizen get his soul washed: "You got to tell him," Aunt Ester talks to Citizen, "The truth has to stand in the light." Citizen quickly answers her request: "It was me. I done it. My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole the bucket of nails" (69). At this moment, the gate opens and Citizen, taken by the beauty of the city, sits down and begins to cry.

Citizen's journey to the City of Bones occurs at the beginning of the second act of the play. The medium for the journey is a paper boat, modeled after the slave ship *Gem of the Ocean*. It is made out of Aunt Ester's bill of sale as a slave. Bills of sale are reminiscent of slavery where blacks were deemed property that could be bought and sold. Although it is a painful memory to black people, this historical record of black enslavement is employed by Aunt Ester as a powerful legacy that transforms blacks from captives to free people. When Aunt Ester hands the paper ship to Citizen, he complains saying: "This is a piece of paper." She replies: "That not what you call your ordinary boat. Look at that boat, Mr. Citizen. Power is something.



It's hard to control but it's hard to stand in the way of it . . . That boat can take you to that city, Mr. Citizen” (54). To Aunt Ester, her piece of paper which serves as Citizen's magical boat is different from the piece of paper the black constable Caesar brings to arrest her for aiding the fugitive Solly:

I see you got a piece of paper. I got a piece of paper too . . . Sit on down there Mr. Caesar, I want to show you something . . . how much you think your paper's worth? . . . That piece of paper say I was property. Say anybody could buy or sell me. The law say I needed a piece of paper to say I was a free woman. But I didn't need no piece of paper to tell me that. (78)

Caesar, the black local constable, represents the white legal system. He practices his dominance over the black mill workers and chastises them for their ignorance that nothing functions above the law. He does not hesitate to kill blacks who break the law even slightly. He says: “People don't understand the law is everything. What is it not? People think the law is supposed to serve them. But anybody can see you serve it. There ain't nothing above the law. You got to respect the law. Unless you dead. That's the only way you ain't got to respect the law” (36). Unlike Citizen and Aunt Ester who are keen on determining their identities and self-worth by being firmly attached to the collective memory of African Americans, Caesar has separated himself from his collective history. He has no ties to family or to a



communal spirit. Instead of deriving spiritual healing from Aunt Ester, the ancestor, he arrests her and removes her from the house calling the law his Bible: "I'm here to serve a warrant. I got a warrant here for the arrest of Ester Tyler for interfering with the administration of justice and aiding and abetting Alfred Jackson, a fugitive of the law. Them is serious crimes, Miss Tyler. You're under arrest" (79).

To conclude, Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* was inspired by the need to challenge the cultural, political, and social configuration of the African American voice in America with the insistence on celebrating African American heritage. In the play, the African past and African American present is brought into relation with each other in the figure of Citizen Barlow. Wilson weaves multiple history lessons: black history cannot be seen as a footnote of a chapter at the end of the history book, rather, it must be read as constitutive to all history. Wilson's career moves from writing plays to prove his competence as a dramatist to focusing his energies upon reexamining and reviving the neglected expanses of African American history and culture. Wilson is reinvigorating a part of black life that had, for years, lain dormant in African Americans' memory. He presents a decade-by-decade portrait of African American life, capturing both the spirit and voice of African Americans. He gives voice to the marginalized African Americans, formulating for them roles that reveal the value of their heritage and underscore their courage and ability to project an image of courage,



endurance, and strength, thus, redressing the biased and often negative view of African Americans presented by the white man over time.

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