

Gem of the Ocean

by August Wilson

Directed by Ron OJ Parson



Setting

The play is set in 1904, the Hill District, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the parlor of Eli, Aunt Ester and Black Mary's home at 1839 Wylie Avenue.

Characters

ELI, Aunt Ester's gatekeeper and longtime friend of Solly.

CITIZEN BARLOW, a young man from Alabama who is in spiritual turmoil. Late twenties/early thirties.

AUNT ESTER TYLER, a very old, yet vital spiritual advisor for the community.

BLACK MARY, Aunt Ester's protégé and housekeeper. Late twenties.

RUTHERFORD SELIG, a traveling peddler who is a frequent visitor of the house.

SOLLY TWO KINGS, suitor to Aunt Ester, former Underground Railroad conductor. Sixty-seven.

CAESAR WILKS, Black Mary's brother and local constable. About fifty-two.

Synopsis:

1839 Wylie Street in the Hill District is the home of Aunt Ester, a 285-year-old former slave, who is a keeper of tradition and history for her people and a renowned cleanser of souls. The people who pass through her parlor and kitchen include Eli, Aunt Ester's protector; Black Mary, her housekeeper and protégé; Solly Two Kings, a former slave, conductor on the Underground Railroad and scout for the Union Army; Black Mary's brother, Caesar, a constable; Rutherford Selig, a peddler; and Citizen Barlow, a new arrival from down South who needs Aunt Ester to help him absolve the guilt and shame from a crime he's committed.

An incident at the local mill has ignited the African-American community: a black man is accused of stealing a bucket of nails. Rather than confessing to a crime he didn't commit, he jumps into the river and drowns. This makes him a martyr to his co-workers, who have gone on strike and are rioting. Caesar, the local law enforcement official, is in the middle of it. He arrests several people and shoots another.

Against this turbulent backdrop Aunt Ester launches Citizen on a spiritual journey aboard the legendary slave ship, Gem of the Ocean, to the mythical City of Bones. There, Citizen comes to understand the story of his ancestors and faces the truth about his crime and the man he wronged.

During Citizen's journey the local steel mill is discovered to be on fire. Caesar returns to the house and accuses Solly of arson. Solly strikes Caesar with his walking stick and flees. Aunt Ester and Rutherford Selig help Solly sneak out of the city, accompanied by Citizen Barlow. However, Caesar catches up to Solly and shoots him. The mortally wounded Solly is returned to the house and placed on the kitchen table where Black Mary and Ester clean and dress his body for burial. When Caesar comes to Aunt Ester's to question Citizen about the incident, Black Mary renounces her brother Caesar. Caesar leaves and Citizen dons Solly's coat and takes up his walking stick intending to continue where Solly left off, guiding his people on their journey toward freedom.

From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gem_of_the_Ocean#Synopsis)



Themes/Concepts:

1) Reconstruction/Effects of Slavery on African American Existence

There were numerous effects that slavery had on African Americans and their culture. For example, after slavery ended many African Americans scoured the country looking for family members who had been sold off during slavery or managed to escape via systems such as the Underground Railroad.

Question on this theme: What others effects of slavery and Reconstruction may be found in this play?

2) Family (those by blood and by choice)

Most of the characters found at 1839 Wylie Ave. during the course of this play are not biologically related to one another yet they function more like a family than the characters who are actually related to one another.

Questions on this theme: What does family mean to you? Why are the two people who are related to one another less like family than the people who chose each other as family?

3) Value of Life/Living

The characters in this play constantly speak about life and how they are choosing to live their lives. Some of the characters even speak about how other characters are choosing to live their lives. Life matters in this play so much that facing death propels some of these characters to make decisions about their lives.

Questions on this theme: What are all the ways in which life is spoken about in this play? How does the value of life manifest itself in this play?

4) Religion /Spirituality/Christianity

The way religion and spirituality may be found in this play is a combination of Christianity and some African religions/ways of experiencing spirituality. For example, Black Mary washes Aunt Ester's feet. Also, Citizen comes to Aunt Ester's place in order to get his "soul washed." Aunt Ester is not a typical religious official yet she conducts rituals and is treated with reverence and her house is seen as a place of sanctuary.

Question on this theme: What other ways do you see spirituality and Christianity combined in this play?

5) Freedom

Many of the characters struggle with the idea and/or concept of freedom in this play.



About the Playwright:

- Born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, PA to a German father and an African American mother.
- A playwright and poet who wrote numerous works over the course of his career, including the plays of the 20th Century Cycle.
- Dropped out of H.S. in the 10th grade after a teacher accused him of plagiarism.
- After this, he began working to make money and embarking on his journey of self-education. He accomplished this by spending his time reading books at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. The library eventually granted him a degree, the only time that institution has done such a thing.
- Won two Pulitzer Prizes during his career for *Fences* (1986) and *The Piano Lesson* (1990)
- Had working relationships with Penumbra Theatre, Seattle Rep, and Yale Rep (amongst others)
- Died October 2, 2005
- On October 16, 2005, the Virginia Theatre in Broadway's theatre district was renamed the August Wilson Theatre. It is the first Broadway theatre to bear the name of an African-American.

20th Century Cycle:

Plays of the Cycle (first date is the decade the play is set/Second date is the year it was written)

- 1900s - *Gem of the Ocean* (2003)

- 1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988)
 - 1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984)
 - 1930s - *The Piano Lesson* (1990)
 - 1940s - *Seven Guitars* (1995)
 - 1950s - *Fences* (1987)
 - 1960s - *Two Trains Running* (1991)
 - 1970s - *Jitney* (1982)
 - 1980s - *King Hedley II* (1999)
 - 1990s - *Radio Golf* (2005)
- Each of the plays within this cycle represents a decade within African American culture during the 20th century.
 - The cycle tends to reuse characters or the offspring of varying characters as it tells the story of Pittsburgh
 - Ex: Aunt Ester is in *Gem of the Ocean*, mentioned in *Two Trains Running* and *King Hedley II*. Although technically the Ester in *Two Trains* that dies is Black Mary from *Gem of the Ocean*.
 - Ex: Harmond Wilkes from *Radio Golf* is the grandson of Caesar Wilkes from *Gem of the Ocean*.

Gem of the Ocean

- Premiered April 23, 2003 at The Goodman Theatre in Chicago.
- In 2004 and 2005, the play ran at the Walter Kerr Theatre on Broadway and received five Tony Award nominations.

Other Wilson Plays Outside of the 20th Century Cycle

- *Recycle* (1973)
- *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1977)
- *Fullerton Street* (1980)
- *The Janitor* (1985)
- *The Homecoming* (1989)
- *How I Learned What I Learned* (2002)

Wilson's Influences/Muses

- The gamut of African American culture was his muse
- However, there are very specific people and moments within his plays that have a clear connection to his artistic and historical contemporaries.
- For example:
 - Romare Bearden

- Collage artist that gained prominence in the 1960's
- His work often depicted aspects of the African American experience.
- He had a very similar family history to Wilson
- Several of his works became a muse for Wilson.
- The genesis for *The Piano Lesson* came from Wilson's exposure to Bearden's work "Homage to Mary Lou (The Piano Lesson)" (1984).



Image from: http://rogallery.com/Bearden_Romare/bearden_homage.htm (accessed 15 Sept 2012).

- "Mill Hands Lunch Bucket" (1978) was part of the inspiration for Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. It was also the working title of the play.



<http://www.flickr.com/photos/50611026@N07/4648198933/lightbox/> (accessed 15 Sept 2012)

- Ed Bullins
 - Began a project of recording the African American experience in a series of 20 plays entitled the “Twentieth Century Play Cycle.”
- Pittsburgh, PA
 - Wilson wrote about what he knew. Therefore, Pittsburgh was a huge part of his work.”
 - He focused specifically on the Hill District in Pittsburgh, which is where he spent some of his childhood years.



Wilson's Politics:

- Tended to be controversial
- The majority of his work was never filmed, except for the TV movie of *The Piano Lesson*.
- Much of this was due to his politics surrounding the racial background of people working on his plays. He insisted that works only be done by theatres that would hire African American directors and designers.
- For example, for *Fences*, a Hollywood studio proposed filming the play. Wilson insisted that a black director be hired for the film saying "I declined a white director not on the basis of race but on the basis of culture. White directors are not qualified for the job. The job requires someone who shares the specifics of the culture of black Americans." As a result of his unwillingness to budge on this – the movie was never made.
- In 1996, he gave a speech at the Theatre Communications Group conference that began a famous debate between him and Robert Brustein
- The speech, "The Ground on Which I Stand," was a call to action for African American artists to create their own theatres and begin their own cultural preservation as a means of protesting a theatre environment that has marginalized the contribution of African American artists
 - In this ongoing and emotional dispute, we are asked to choose between Brustein's view that "theater works best as a unifying rather than a segregating medium," and Wilson's view that black theater, like the black experience, is unique and distinct, and "we cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products."
 - (Published in U.S. 1 Newspaper on January 22 and April 16, 1997)
 - In his subsequent response to Wilson, Brustein questioned whether there shouldn't be "some kind of statute of limitations on white guilt and white reparations." He further berated Wilson for having "fallen into a monotonous tone of victimization." On the other hand, Wilson blames Brustein for failing to "imagine a theater broad enough and secure enough in its traditions to absorb and make use of all manners and cultures of American life."
 - (Published in U.S. 1 Newspaper on January 22 and April 16, 1997)
- This led to many conversations in the American theatre over color-blind casting and hiring vs. Racially conscious casting and hiring.
- Ultimately, Wilson's position was two-fold. He was looking to:
 - Provide work for African American theatre artists since they are largely marginalized in the American theatre landscape.
 - and, he felt that a natural understanding of the culture was a necessity for his plays – something that a director or designer outside of the race could not completely understand
- It was not until many years after his death that Bartlett Sher was allowed to direct the 2009 Broadway production of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* - a controversial move in many theatre circles. However, that production received numerous Tony nominations that year.

The Middle Passage

The forced voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. It was one leg of the triangular trade route that took goods (such as knives, guns, ammunition, cotton cloth, tools, and brass dishes) from Europe to Africa, Africans to work as slaves in the Americas and West Indies, and items, mostly raw materials, produced on the plantations (sugar, rice, tobacco, indigo, rum, and cotton) back to Europe. From about 1518 to the mid-19th century, millions of African men, women, and children made the 21-to-90-day voyage aboard grossly overcrowded sailing ships manned by crews mostly from Great Britain, the Netherlands, Portugal, and France.

"Middle Passage (slave trade)". Encyclopædia Britannica. Britannica Academic. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 16 Jul. 2015
<<http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/381398/Middle-Passage>>.

Underground Railroad

Underground Railroad, in the United States, a system existing in the Northern states before the Civil War by which escaped slaves from the South were secretly helped by sympathetic Northerners, in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Acts, to reach places of safety in the North or in Canada. Though neither underground nor a railroad, it was thus named because its activities had to be carried out in secret, using darkness or disguise, and because railway terms were used in reference to the conduct of the system. Various routes were lines, stopping places were called stations, those who aided along the way were conductors, and their charges were known as packages or freight. The network of routes extended in all directions throughout 14 Northern states and "the promised land" of Canada, which was beyond the reach of fugitive-slave hunters. Those who most actively assisted slaves to escape by way of the "railroad" were members of the free black community (including such former slaves as Harriet Tubman), Northern abolitionists, philanthropists, and such church leaders as Quaker Thomas Garrett. Harriet Beecher Stowe, famous for her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, gained firsthand knowledge of fugitive slaves through her contact with the Underground Railroad in Cincinnati, Ohio. Estimates of the number of black people who reached freedom vary greatly, from 40,000 to 100,000. Although only a small minority of Northerners participated in the Underground Railroad, its existence did much to arouse Northern sympathy for the lot of the slave in the antebellum period, at the same time convincing many Southerners that the North as a whole would never peaceably allow the institution of slavery to remain unchallenged.

"Underground Railroad". Encyclopædia Britannica. Britannica Academic. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 04 Aug. 2015
<<http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/614201/Underground-Railroad>>.

Audio/Visual Resources:

YouTube

- 1) "August Wilson with Bill Moyers" – Interview Clip
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YctW96OG364>
- 2) Phylicia Rashad Performs Scene from August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* | American Masters on PBS
<https://youtu.be/IOISXgcIoPU>

Documentaries

- 1) *American Masters – August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand* (PBS) 2015.

Newscasts

- 1) "A Look at the Life of Playwright August Wilson" - NPR
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4934055>
- 2) "August Wilson's Life and Legacy" – NPR
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4933836

Activities:

Script Analysis:

- 1) Free Draw (Drawing 5-7 minutes, Discussion 15 min) –

Draw a small picture that represents what you feel is the most important moment of the play

Discussion – How and why did you pick this moment?

Character Analysis:

- 1) What do you know about these characters? (Group prep 10-12 minutes, Sharing monologues 10-15 minutes)

In pairs, the students will pick a character from the show (or have one assigned to them). The pair will summarize what they think the character feels and does in the play and (in their own words) create a monologue tracing the character's journey through the play. When completed, the pairs will share their monologue with the group and discuss. Are there any major differences in character interpretation? If so, why? If not, what clues in the text brought everyone to the same conclusions.

Other Discussion Questions:

- 1) Discuss the City of Bones. What is it? Why does it exist? Why does Citizen have to travel to the City of Bones?
- 2) What is freedom (as found in this play)? Is anyone in this play free? Do any of the characters find freedom over the course of the play? If so, who does, and how?
- 3) What are some other themes and concepts that may be found in this play that was not discussed in this study guide?

Disclaimer for Teachers

This play uses the “N-word” throughout its dialogue. You may want to talk to your students about the history of this word and its colloquial use by African Americans.

In addition, there are uses of profanity sprinkled throughout. Please familiarize yourself with the play before having the students read it in case there is an issue with some of the language.