



**RACISM IN AUGUST WILSON'S PLAY
GEM OF THE OCEAN**

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ABSTRACT

African American playwright August Wilson has offers significant visions in his plays. Four hundred years ago, Africans were captured by white slavers and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to the America; they have since then written their traumatic history. African Americans today cannot access their initial tragedy four hundred years ago because those Africans did not have a common language, neither a written language nor a witness. However, this horrifying transatlantic experience has scarred the black psyche. Some racial writers describe this deplorable experience, accusing whites of their malice in causing such inerasable horrific memory in them, for example, Amiri Baraka's Slave Ship. However, August Wilson in Gem of the Ocean sets an aura on this sad ode of the black trauma, transforming thousands of Africans lying at the bottom of the Atlantic Sea into the Bones people in the shining Bones City singing the song of their triumph. This paper is also analyses the representation of African Americans in the play and how the play transforms the trauma and teaches blacks to rebuild themselves and to reconnect themselves with their history of the slaves" voyage in the Middle Passage four hundred years ago.

Key words: August Wilson, Gem of the Ocean, Racial.

Introduction-

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in 1945 in Pittsburgh's Hill District, where he lived for 33 years. Wilson was the fourth of six children of a white German father and African-American mother. He began his writing career as a poet in the 1960s and 70s, while also involved in the civil rights movement and working odd jobs. In 1965 he bought his first typewriter with his sister paid him to write a college term paper. Hoping to use theatre to raise African-American cultural consciousness, he co-founded Black Horizons, a community theater in Pittsburgh, with Rob Penny in 1968. After producing and directing African-American plays at Black Horizons, Wilson began writing his own plays in the early 70s. Wilson's breakthrough came in 1982, when the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Theatre Center accepted *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* for a workshop. The play opened

on Broadway in 1984, and in 1985 it earned Wilson his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award. *Fences*, Wilson's second play to move to Broadway, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and also set a new Broadway record for the highest-grossing non-musical, bringing in million in its first year, 1987. Seven more plays have since followed, joining *Ma Rainey*, *Fences* and *Jitney*, which was written in 1979 but later revised.

Radio Golf, which completes the cycle as the 1990s play, premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre in April 2005, and finished a run at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles on September 18. It will be moving to Broadway in the 2006-07 seasons. With the completion of his extraordinarily ambitious ten-play cycle, Wilson has secured his place as one of the most important American playwrights of his generation. Broadway's Virginia Theater will be renamed for him on October 17, marking the first time a Broadway theatre has been named for an African-American. In August of 2005, he announced that he has been diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. "It's not like poker, you can't throw your hand in," Wilson told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. "I've lived a blessed life. I'm ready." August Wilson died October 2, 2005.

Racism-

Racism is product of complex interaction in a given society of a race- based worldview with prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination .Racism can be present in social actions, practices, or prejudice or aversion in discriminatory practices. The ideology underlying racist practices often includes the idea that humans can be subdivided into distinct groups that are different in their social behaviour and innate capacities and that can be ranked as inferior or superior. Racism and racial discrimination are often used to describe discrimination on an ethnic or cultural basis, independent of whether these differences are described as racial. According to a United Nations convention, there is no discrimination between the term "racial" and "ethnic" discrimination.

Black Trauma in the *Gem of Ocean*-

Gem of the Ocean is the first of the ten plays in August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle. The Pittsburgh Cycle, also known as the Twentieth-Century Cycle, covers the twentieth century with one play depicting each decade. This Cycle brought the trials and tribulations of black life to the stage. Wilson creates a sort of family tree within the Cycle, the characters in *Gem* are seen in other plays within the Cycle, and so are their children. This case study talks about the rehearsal, performance, and production elements in which my dramaturgy was employed. Also, my method of dramaturgy is discussed and my choices examined. It was my intent to chart my work on this production as an example of active dramaturgy with the challenges of a multi-racial team on a race specific production.

The three sections in this initial chapter provide relevant information, and will prepare the reader for various references along the way. In the first section ‘What is Active Dramaturgy’ I explain what I define as “active dramaturgy” according to the Brown’s text. In the next section, ‘Initial Research’ I will give examples of some of my initial research, and how it did or did not inform choices made later in my work. Finally, I provide a synopsis of the play. I intend to offer the play synopsis to make the numerous quotes and references to the text more digestible to the reader, especially in the case that they are not familiar with the text.

Finally, reflecting and questioning frequently go hand in hand, and one often leads to the other. Reflecting on what you have read, practiced, or seen should create questions which will lead you to employ the use of one of the first two components, research or critical and analytical thinking and writing. Creating and answering questions will also lead you back to reflection and the other components. It is through this cycle that an active dramaturge can be successful in their work. The four components listed above were used heavily in my work on *Gem*. Throughout the following chapters, I will highlight these instances. Much of my initial research relied on my ability to do these things without thinking I was doing them, and to use my early instincts to propel me further into my research. Though *Gem of the Ocean* is the first play in the Cycle, it was the second to last to be written and produced. Going through and reading the entire Cycle backwards, I discovered there are innumerable connections, repetitions, and even some inconsistencies within the ten plays.

When you sit down and devote the time to reading all ten plays, you begin to wonder why Wilson waited until the very end to write his first and last plays (*Radio Golf* the last play in the Cycle was the last play written before Wilson’s death). During the time I was working on this production I constantly questioned Wilson’s motives in writing the first and last plays of his Cycle at the very end of his life. I feel that the story within the Cycle is incomplete without them. Unfortunately, extensive research has provided me with no definite answer. *Gem*, like many Wilson plays, *Gem* long, wordy, and dense.

Wilson doesn’t suggest beats or pauses, but leaves them to the actors and directors. On the page are long paragraphs of wordy dialogue, and little of that dialogue is conversational or fast paced. Often time’s actors are left to their own devices while their counter-parts recite several pages worth of monologues. With the first act consisting predominately of exposition, it is up to the actors to make the text come alive with action on stage. *Gem*, like many of his plays, has a multitude of biblical references, and at times read like a chapter of The Bible, or a church service. They are: matriarchal occurrence, the presence, references, and allusions to water, the identity and character of the people presented in the play, and the world in which the play lives. These four topics were a large part of my work on the production and led me to make specific decisions, and do specific research.

How does one retrieve one's racial history after more than three hundred and fifty years? How can one reconstruct this history if it is lost due to diaspora? Why is this diasporic memory still important to one's existence? These are the crucial questions African American playwright August Wilson always asks in his decade-by-decade chronicle of dramas to represent the twentieth century of African American experiences. He particularly stresses the imminence of this diasporic memory in the penultimate play of his ten-part cycle *Gem of the Ocean* (2003). In *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson depicts a young black man Citizen Barlow's journey of redemption through the help of a spiritual adviser Aunt Ester.

Set in 1904 Pittsburgh, *Gem of the Ocean* is also imbued with the memories of the forced black migration in the seventeenth century and after the Emancipation. Citizen Barlow is guilt-ridden because he stole a bucket of nails from the tin mill he worked for. A wrongly accused co-worker Garret Brown, drowned in the river while evading pursuit by a local constable named Caesar Wilks. With the help of other black characters, Aunt Ester takes Citizen on a ritualistic journey, first on an imaginary slave boat named "Gem of the Ocean," where they re-enact the torture of the slaves, then to the City of Bones, where Citizen visualizes his ancestors in their otherworldly glory. At the end of the play, Citizen is not only cleansed of his guilt, but he also takes more initiative in rebuilding his life. Since it was first staged in 2003, many reviewers and critics have written about *Gem of the Ocean*. Harry J. Elam Jr. (2007) emphasizes the redemptive power of history in the play and calls for African Americans' continuous striving to struggle out of their bottom economic status.

Kim Pereira (2007) praises Wilson's ingenuity to create mythology "in dramatizing the collective struggle of the black community as it is expressed through the lives of individuals". Richard Noggle (2009) employs Joseph Roach's theory of "surrogation" to analyze a collective sense of memory and Wilson's call for African American communities to continue reinventing themselves. Cynthia Caywood and Carlton Floyd draw our attention to African American women such as Aunt Ester and posit that due to their counterparts' failure, African American women become a repository for African American culture. Sandra G. Shannon (2009) examines Wilson's strategies of identity construction and its components. Alan Nadel (2010) points out how capitalism commodifies blacks and crumbles blacks' human and property rights, as reflected in this play. Although much has been written about this play, relatively little light has been shed on the two fundamental problems caused by traumatic memory in the play and on the unique representations Wilson fashions as solutions to the problems. This paper employs Pierre Nora's view of memory and history and Wilson's own special idea about African Americans' diasporic memory to analyze the representation in *Gem of the Ocean*.

With Wilson navigating back to the origin of the African American trauma, this play teaches blacks to see through their problems, to rebuild themselves, and to reconnect themselves with their history as slaves abducted in the Middle Passage three and a half centuries ago. To solve

their imminent problems, blacks must seek a positive self-knowledge by transforming their misery into love, power, and hope. African Americans are too much caught up with the problems they have, so they seek solutions in their immediate surroundings, normally without much avail. However, Wilson, the bard, instructs his people to look back, to go deep into the very inception of their sorrow so as to disentangle themselves and to have a fresh and healthy start. Hence, in *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson scrutinizes the problem of personal loss in materialism and the problem of escapist inaction. The former is embodied in Caesar Wilks' malice toward his own people, and the latter in Citizen's cowardice in confessing his transgression. Both representations are indicative of Wilson's anxious concerns about the recurrent problems blacks face in America.

Conclusion-

Gem of the Ocean can stand as "a paradigm for Wilson's entire ten-play cycle" because this chronological first play not only points out the two serious problems of twentieth-century African Americans but also offers the solution to their problems. Wilson believes that, if overly assimilated into the white ideology, blacks might be like Caesar, lost in profit-driven desires. Even if this kind of diligent African Americans becomes successful, they tend to sacrifice their humanity and the best part of African American culture. In this penultimate play, Wilson takes African Americans on board *Gem of the Ocean* in the Middle Passage to disentangle their confusion and to confront their history and life with a new positive attitude. Both the profit-driven and the escapist blacks should connect themselves with those Africans crossing the Atlantic so that they can see through the political, emotional, psychological, and spiritual problems they have had since 1619. Although the few extant records of the transatlantic voyages are not that inspiring, Wilson still wants his fellow blacks to revere those who died in transit, especially those defiant mutinous Africans. The *City of Bones*, though a symbolic creation of the playwright, effectively transforms a dirge into an ode to the dead Africans.

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