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Illustration by Scott McKowen

August Wilson's

Gem OF THE Ocean

Directed by Israel Hicks
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Space Theatre

InsideOUT

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Synopsis

You on an adventure, Mr. Citizen.
I bet you didn't know that.
It's all adventure and you signed up
for it and didn't even know it.
—Aunt Ester, *Gemof the Ocean*

It is 1904 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh and many former slaves from the Southern states have migrated North looking for jobs. One resident of the Hill is Aunt Ester, 287 years old or maybe 349 years old. She possesses the spiritual knowledge of Africa and the wisdom of the ages, which she is trying to pass on to her companion, Black Mary. Aunt Ester is the focus of the play but her house is a refuge: for Solly Two Kings, a former slave and Underground Railroad conductor; for Rutherford Selig, a people finder; for Eli, who brought Aunt Ester to the North, and for Citizen Barlow, a newcomer who is in need of Aunt Ester's counseling. The Hill, however, is dominated by Caesar, the black sheriff who wields the power of the law given to him by the white men in control of the district. While Aunt Ester connects Citizen to his past, the other characters challenge Caesar and the laws that prevent them from the rights of citizenship in the land of the free.

O, Columbia! the gem of the ocean.
The home of the brave and the free.
The shrine of each patriot's devotion,
A world offers homage to thee.
— *Thomas Becket and David Shaw (1845).*

THE PLAYWRIGHT:
August Wilson

It's August's language—the rhythm of hurt,
the rhythm of pain, the rhythm of ecstasy,
the rhythm of family—which sets him apart
and is why we call him
the heavyweight champion.
—Marion McClinton, director [1]

August Wilson was born in 1945 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, the setting of many of his plays, including *Gem of the Ocean*. He was the product of a mixed marriage, but, he said, "the culture I learned in my mother's household was black."[2] As the only African American in his high school, young August's efforts to learn were thwarted by racism, from ugly notes he found on his desk each morning to the beatings he tried to avoid each afternoon. Finally, when a teacher questioned the authenticity of a paper he wrote on Napoleon, he walked out of school at the age of 15 never to return. Every morning for the rest of the school year he spent in the local library reading everything—sociology, anthropology, theology, fiction; he felt he'd found a brand new world. When his mother Daisy discovered he was a drop-out, she banished him to the basement. At about the same time, he discovered the music of the blues when he bought a Bessie Smith record; it was an epiphany for him. The music and lyrics became cemented in Wilson's mind and every play he wrote was influenced by the notion of "finding a song."[3]

After a one year stint in the United States army (1962-63), Wilson returned to the Hill District and began to meet other black writers. With fellow writer Rob Penney he formed the Black Horizon Theatre, hoping to raise consciousness through theatre. In 1976, Wilson saw a production of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* by Athol Fugard, a South African playwright and activist who used his plays to portray the horrors of South Africa's racist apartheid system. The playwright crafted the political and social issues in clear, compelling language while also presenting powerful, unforgettable characters. Wilson saw theatre as a way to inform, as well as to entertain; to move an audience to action as well as to strong emotions. He found it inspirational.

In 1978, he moved from Pittsburgh to St. Paul, Minnesota where his satire *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* was produced. He also wrote children's plays on science-related subjects for the Science Museum of Minnesota. Twice he submitted his play *Jitney* to the O'Neill Playwrights Conference in Connecticut and twice it was rejected. Wilson realized he could write a better play and turned his attention to writing one on the black singer, Ma Rainey. In 1982, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was accepted by Lloyd Richards, Artistic Director of the O'Neill Playwrights Conference and Dean of the Yale School of Drama, for the O'Neill Playwrights Conference. Thus began Wilson's relationship with director Lloyd Richards.

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With the success of *Ma Rainey* on Broadway, Wilson gave himself a mission: to continue to chronicle, decade by decade, the African-American story in the 20th century. *Gem of the Ocean*, written in 2004, is about the first ten years of the 20th Century. *Joe*

Continued on next page

Continued from page 3

Turner's Come and Gone is set in 1917 and revolves around the story of Harold Loomis who returns to a boarding house in Pittsburgh in search of his wife. He is haunted by the memory of a bounty hunter, Joe Turner, who had illegally enslaved him and by his inability to embrace the past. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1920s) deals with a female blues singer who works in the pressure of an abusive music business that victimizes its black artists. *The Piano Lesson* (1930s) concerns a battle over possession of a family piano that carries the meaning of both legacy and opportunity and the choices the characters must make. *Seven Guitars* (1940s) shows the African American's plight after World War II. After fighting and dying for the country, black men return to confront the same inequities they faced before they left. *Fences* (1950-1965) revolves around the character of Troy Maxson, a garbage collector, who takes great pride in keeping his family together and providing for them even as he sets barriers between himself and them. Troy's rebellion and frustration set the tone for the play as he struggles for fairness in a society that would seem to offer none. *Two Trains Running* (1960s) concerns the prospects for securing the American dream in a northern urban ghetto. Memphis Lee and the patrons of his restaurant stand on the precipice of urban renewal and must consider their prospects for survival and their loss of identity when the existence of their community is threatened. *Jitney* (1970s) revolves around the struggles of gypsy Pittsburgh cab drivers to retain their livelihood in the face of redevelopment and the difficulty of father-son relationships. Both *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson* won Pulitzer Prizes and Wilson's success helped bring down barriers for other black artists such as actors Charles S. Dutton, Samuel L. Jackson, Courtney Vance, Angela Bassett and playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks, Keith Glover, Sam Kelley and Caryle Brown.

In 1995,Wilson broke with his mentor, Lloyd Richards, who had been like a father to him. He chose Marion McClinton to direct *Jitney* for the Pittsburgh Public Theatre. McClinton had done many inventive second productions of Wilson's earlier plays and their collaboration was one of mutual trust and respect, both having a say in the rehearsal process and working as brothers. McClinton also directed Wilson's *King Hedley II*, set in the 1980s. Recently out of jail, King struggles to make a living selling refrigerators with his friend, Mister. To get the money to open their own video business, they decide to burglarize a jewelry store. King's mother, Ruby, is reintroduced from *Seven Guitars* and is now living with him and his wife Tonya. They worry about King's illegal activities and Tonya fears bringing a child into the world when King may end up in jail or dead.

In 2005 Wilson completed his cycle of plays with *Radio Golf*, set in the1990s. *Radio Golf* focuses on a projected inner-city redevelopment plan. Its message is more socially overt; as Wilson said, it is about "the failure of the black middle class to return their expertise, participation and resources back to the community."[4] In September 2005, Wilson learned he was suffering from inoperable liver cancer. He died October 2, 2005 in Seattle, Washington.

> We got to be united and come together before we can proceed on, into this 21st century…[5]
>
> — August Wilson

Herrington, Jean. *I Ain't Sorry for Nothin' I Done: August Wilson's Process of Playwriting*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1998.

http://www.kinghedley.com/studyguide/printerversion.html

Lahr, John. "Been There and Gone." *The New Yorker*. August 16, 2001.

Zoglin, Richard. "100 Years in One Life." *Time* magazine. May 2, 2005.

1. Lahr, p. 50.
2. Lahr, p. 50.
3. Lahr, p. 59.
4. Zoglin, p. 66,
5. Zoglin, p. 67.

A Brief History of THE "HILL"

Pittsburgh's Hill district began on "farm number three," a piece of land owned by William Penn's grandson and later sold to General Adamson Tannerhill, a Revolutionary War veteran, for $20 an acre. In the late 1840s, Thomas Mellon bought a tract of farmland on the slope nearest the city. He subdivided the tract into smaller plots and sold them for a tidy profit. Thus began the Hill's development as a settled community.

The Hill is actually composed of several smaller hills that were inhabited by three constituencies. Haiti was on the lower hill, settled by runaway slaves; the middle portion was called Lacyville, while the upper hill was called Minersville. The latter two areas were populated predominately by Germans and Scotch-Irish until the 1880s, when central and eastern Europeans began to settle there.

African Americans began arriving from the South between 1880 and 1910. During the years leading to World War I, blacks were urged to come north by industry recruiters who promised relief from the segregation laws of the South. New arrivals swelled the area and the Hill became an ethnic and racial melting pot of Russians, Slovaks, Armenians, Syrians, Lebanese, Greeks, Poles, Chinese and Jews. The races wove a rich and vibrant tapestry for Pittsburgh city life. Hill District residents supplied the labor for mines, mills, business and government. They toiled, raised their children and contended with each other while establishing a community that left an indelible mark upon Pittsburgh's religion, politics and economy.

The Hill's ethnic diversity produced a bustling business community. Wylie and Bedford avenues and Logan Street were lined with neighborhood stores. Their vibrancy lasted through the Depression. It was through these difficult times that the Hill became a place for music. The Hill was known on the National Jazz Circuit, with such places as the Crawford Grill, Hurricane Lounge, Savoy Ballroom and Musicians Club. Celebrities such as Rudy Vallee and Paul Whitman came to the Hill after performing at downtown theatres and clubs to hear black musicians play. Later black musicians such as Ramsey Lewis, Oscar Peterson, Cannonball Adderly, Billy Eckstine and Lena Horne entertained nightclub patrons. In the 1940s and 50s the Hill was brimming with interracial bars and clubs, with patrons participating in the life and music as they went from club to club.

Although the Hill District continued to be a vibrant, politically active community, a deteriorating neighborhood infrastructure began to take hold. In 1943, George E. Evans, a member of the city council, wrote that "approximately 90% of the buildings in the area are sub-standard, and have long outlived their usefulness, and so there would be no social loss if these were all destroyed."[1] Local residents, however, suspected that the officials were using this as an excuse to create a "neutral zone" between the city's black and white areas.

In September 1955 the federal government approved the lower Hill redevelopment plan, making available $17.4 million in loans and grants. Ninety five acres were slated for clearing, with the demolition of the first of 1,300 structures set for June 1956. Redevelopment displaced more then 8,000 residents; 1,239 black families, 312 white. Of these, 35% went into public housing, 31% into private rentals and 8% bought homes. About 90 families refused to move and ended up in substandard housing. Relocatees received little compensation, with maximal benefits coming from the federal government.

The Hill's fortunes took another blow and struck bottom during the riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968. The riots began on April 5, 1968 and lasted until April 12. That week of rage saw 505 fires, $620,000 in property damage, one death and 926 arrests.

The Hill District's rich legacy has been leveled by botched redevelopments and riots, but it was black Pittsburghers who met and transcended these problems and who are striving to rebuild, inspiring confidence that the Hill District will be revitalized. Crawford Square has returned residential homes to the area with plans for retail developments and for restoring the New Granada Theatre as a jazz center. One hopes that the Hill District can return to the vibrancy it once had.

Everything was happening on the hill—
it was jammin' on the Hill.
—*Shirley Anderson, owner of the Beauty Mark Salon.*

Korol, Paul S. "A Brief History of the Hill."
Pittsburgh Senior News.
http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/-njm1/hill-hist.htm

1. Korol, p. 2.

The Significance of *Names* in the Play

Eli, Aunt Ester's companion, bears the name of an Old Testament priest and mentor to young Samuel. As such, he is steady, reliable and maintains peace and security in Aunt Ester's house.

Aunt Ester's name sounds like the word "ancestor" and she is the connector between the African past and the African American present. Her name suggests both Easter, the holiest day of the Christian calendar and the biblical character Esther, Ahasureus' queen and the heroine of Purim, a Jewish holiday, which celebrates the saving of the Hebrew people.

"A living conscience for Wilson's cycle, Ester is the voice of Africa, the culture-keeper of America's black residents."[1] Because of her advanced age, she is linked to the beginning of slavery in North America which began in 1617. Aunt Ester was sold into bondage at age 12 and still possess the bill of sale for $607.

She is first mentioned in *Two Trains Running* (1991) at 322 years of age. In *King Hedley II* (1999) she dies and her demise symbolizes the loss of connection between American blacks and their African ancestry.

Black Mary, the protégée of Aunt Ester, is trying to learn the wisdom and ways of the old woman. While supervising Ester's house, she serves her and washes her feet in a ritual "reminiscent of the self-abasement of Mary, sister of Martha, at Bethany during the last days of Christ."[2]

Rutherford Selig is the white visitor to Aunt Ester's house where he peddles household items. His surname means "blessed" in German and he proves that he is by his ability to locate and relocate people. His specialty is reuniting black families. Perhaps he is atoning for his family's past; his great-grandfather was a slave owner and his father searched for and returned runaway slaves. As a white man, he is an outsider in this black world, but suggests the possibility of a peaceful alliance in an integrated world.

Citizen Barlow is the seeker and confessor in the play. A migrant from the South, his intent is to work in a factory, but he steals a bucket of nails which results in an innocent man drowning to avoid false arrest. He insists on seeing Aunt Ester to confess his sin of black-upon-black violence. His mother named him Citizen "after freedom came."[3] But Solly Two Kings reminds him that to truly be a Citizen, he'll have to fight to uphold freedom when it becomes a heavy load.

Solly Two Kings is a former slave and conductor on the Underground Railroad whose earlier name was Uncle Alfred. After slavery he changed his name to David and Solomon, two Biblical kings. David means "friend" or "beloved," but he was also known as a warrior when he defeated the giant Goliath. After Saul died, David became king and conquered the city of Jerusalem. Solomon was the son of David; his name means"peaceful." Known for his wisdom and wealth, Solomon expanded the kingdom of David and there was peace on all the borders.

Caesar is the villainous constable and venal slumlord in the play. His name means dictator or autocrat, which originated from the original Roman emperor, Julius Caesar. He is reminiscent of the plantation overseers of slavery times and represents the black-face authority who acts and speaks for the white world.

McCabe, Megan. Student Guide for *Gem of the Ocean*. Chicago: Goodman Theatre, 2003.

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *August Wilson: a Literary Companion*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2004.

1. Snodgrass, p. 83.
2. Snodgrass, p. 42.
3. McCabe, p. 24.

The Spirituality in *Gem of the Ocean*

The metaphysical presence of the spirit world has become increasingly important in my work. It is the world that the characters turn to when they are most in need.
—August Wilson[1]

When crises erupt in Wilson's plays, the characters reclaim their African ancestors' spirits and strategies to survive critical times. Through the use of ritualized cultural practices, the characters negotiate with the spirits to create new possibilities for them to live on. This African influenced spirituality contains healing processes that connect the everyday troubles of black life to the forces of the divine tribal gods and goddesses.

In his book *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, Harry J. Elam, Jr. contends that "the ritual moments in Wilson's cycle are equally ceremonies of freedom. They speak through the spiritual to the possibilities of social, cultural and psychological liberation in this life."[2] In the horrors of slavery, the blacks turned to Christian beliefs in which heaven functioned as a site of liberation. But Wilson advocates for liberation in this life and to accomplish that, he employs ritual practice that will push the characters towards new potentials.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, many blacks migrated north to find jobs and stability, but they received a rude awakening with segregation, low wages, poor housing and a litany of other abuses. It is Wilson's contention that northern migration was not the best option for the former slaves, for in their journey, they distanced themselves from their ancestral, cultural and spiritual roots. Wilson's characters find their faith in Christianity "is often insufficient in addressing their social ills and racial injustice." [3] As a result, Wilson argues that African Americans "have taken Christianity and bent it to serve their African-ness. In Africa, there's ancestor worship—ghosts, magic, superstition….Relating to the spirit world is very much a part of the African and Afro-American culture."[4]

> "…the ritual moments in Wilson's cycle are equally ceremonies of freedom. They speak through the spiritual to the possibilities of social, cultural and psychological liberation in this life."
>
> —*The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* by Harry J. Elam, Jr

Aunt Ester, unseen in Wilson's earlier plays, has the greatest spiritual power of all his characters; she signifies living embodied history. At the age of 287, she possesses the spirit of "ashe" defined as "spiritual command or the power-to-make-things-happen."[5] African allusions are all around her. Her front door is red, the color the Yoruban tribe of Nigeria describes as "the supreme presence of color." Her house number on Wylie Avenue is 1839, the year of an outbreak of white violence against the black community in Pittsburgh. Her practice of "laying on of hands" has a direct relationship to the Yoruba goddess, Oshun, who is the divinity of rivers. Thus, Aunt Ester asks all who come to her for counsel to throw their offerings

Continued on next page

Continued from page 7

into the river—in Pittsburgh, either the Allegheny, the Monongahela or the Ohio. Water is a regenerative force within African and African-American rituals and it joins with Christianity in the practice of baptism. In black churches, baptism is performed at the river's edge and involves total submersion in water; thus, baptism confirms the presence of the spirit within the body of the African-American infant.

Aunt Ester never dictates a course of action; rather she asks her counselees to determine their own way. She gives advice in parables that compel her advocates to interpret, think and then act. Her healing is internal and psychological and involves her troubled souls touching their past. Only by re-remembering the experience and lessons of the ancestors can the character move forward.

In *King Hedley II*, Aunt Ester dies at the age of 367; only the prophet-like Stool Pidgeon recognizes what has been lost. His rituals are intended to revive her spirit, but all the other characters have forgotten their connection to history. Her death "is a call for African-American rebirth and reconnection. Her voice—eventually heard in the cat's meow at the play's conclusion—cries out loudly from the grave."[6]

Aunt Ester got the wisdom.
She got the Book of Life.
—Stool Pidgeon. *King Hedley II*.

Elam, Harry J., Jr. *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *August Wilson: a Literary Companion*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2004.

Wilson, August. "American Histories: Chasing Dreams and Nightmares." *New York Times*. April 25, 2000. Sec. 2:1.

1. Wilson, p. 1.
2. Elam, p. 169.
3. Elam, p. 177.
4. Elam, p. 182.
5. Elam, p. 169.
6. Elam, p. 196.
3. McCabe, p. 24.

From *Emancipation* to *Migration*

> The people think they in freedom.
> That's all my daddy talked about.
> He died and never did have it.
> I say I got it but what is it?
> I'm still tryin' to find out. It ain't
> never been nothin' but trouble.
> —Solly, *Gem of the Ocean*

With the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865 and the Civil Rights Act of 1866, blacks were freed from slavery and given the rights of citizenship. But with white people assuming the responsibility of governance in the South, their greatest concern seemed to be the controlling of former slaves.

They accomplished this by passing a series of laws known as Black Codes, which reflected their racism and fear. For example, African Americans were limited to specific areas where they could rent or buy property. They were forced to work for white employers at low wages, whether they wanted to or not; non-working African Americans were arrested for vagrancy and penalized heavily. Numerous fines were imposed for insulting speech and gesture, absence from work, violating curfew and possession of fire arms. Those who wanted to leave often were prevented from taking available transportation. There was, of course, no enfranchisement and no indication that blacks could vote in the future.

When it became apparent to white Southerners that their control was to be weakened by Reconstruction, secret societies were formed to exert control. Such organizations as the Knights of the White Camellia, the White Brotherhood, the Pale Faces and the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan established white supremacy through illegal and terrorist tactics. With the support of the white community, they used intimidation, force, murder and lynching to deprive blacks of political equality—a "holy crusade in which a noble end justified any means."[1]

A touching feature of the times was the problem of ex-slaves searching for husbands, wives and children who had been separated by sale or by the war. This desire for reunification illustrated the stability and resiliency of black families and their efforts to make their marriages and children legitimate after decades of living together as slaves with no marriage contract. The importance of family is illustrated by Rutherford Selig, the people finder, and Solly Two Kings, who struggles to bring his sister to the North.

Believing that conditions for freedom were better in the Northern states, more than 400,000 blacks left the South between the Civil War and World War I. Their optimistic expectations were shattered by the Northern whites who viewed the rising black population with alarm. As murder and lynching were used as a controlling device in the South, race riots were used by Northerners. White mobs entered black communities; destroyed property; beat, injured or killed the inhabitants, forcing many to flee for their lives. Invariably, local law officials sat on the sidelines or sometimes joined in.

Continued on next page

Continued from page 9

African Americans found it difficult to secure employment. Black men were employed chiefly as strike breakers. As a result, white workers barred blacks from their labor unions. The master mechanics, builders, carpenters, blacksmiths, etc. were white; if a black artisan found work, he faced displacement in the event a white worker came around. Young African-American men were barred from training as craftsmen by the unions. Most black men then found employment digging ditches, building and repairing roads and moving tons of freight in railroad yards and docks while the women worked at jobs involving cooking, cleaning and washing. Moreover, as Americans moved toward a more formal European style of serving and cooking, they wanted a staff with qualifications of literacy, training and expertise. Thus, they often replaced their black workers with European immigrants.

In the early 20th century, black leaders found new solutions for old problems. Under the leadership of W. E. B. DuBois, the Niagara Movement demanded freedom of speech, male suffrage, abolition of distinction based on race and recognition of principles of human fellowship. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1910 and began a program to widen industrial opportunities for African Americans. The National Urban League was formed in 1911 and assisted blacks in adjusting to urban centers. In this difficult task of social reform and regeneration, African Americans took on another difficult journey, as Aunt Ester would say, "to make it right."

Under the leadership of W. E. B. DuBois, the Niagara Movement demanded freedom of speech, male suffrage, abolition of distinction based on race and recognition of principles of human fellowship.

"You can't hold a man down without staying down with him."
— Booker T. Washington, attributed.

Franklin, John Hope and Moss, Alfred A., Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

Trotter, Joe Williams, Jr. *The African American Experience*. Boston: Houghton Miflin Co., 2001.

1. Franklin and Moss, p. 275.

The Middle *Passage*

The people made a kingdom out of nothing.
They were the people that didn't make it across the water….
They say "Let's make a kingdom. Let's make a City of Bones."
—Aunt Ester, Gem of the Ocean

Aunt Ester's remembrance of the people who didn't make it is a reference to those who didn't survive The Middle Passage, the most destructive aspect of the trade in human cargo. This ocean journey received its name because it was the second leg of an intercontinental trade network that included, first, movement from Europe to Africa; second, the dispatch of human beings to the colonies in The Americas; and third, return to Europe from the Americas.

> …the Middle Passage, the most destructive aspect of the trade in human cargo.

To prepare for this overseas trip, the people were stripped naked, chained together and packed tightly in highly confining compartments. Then they were forced to lie down on layers of shelving with little room for sitting up straight or moving about. For the next several weeks, the bonded men and women suffered some of the most inhumane conditions known in human history. A survivor of the journey, Equiano Olaudah, was captured and sold into slavery in 1756; this African from the Nigol Ibo region of West Africa wrote an account of his passage in a book called *Interesting Narrative*.

"The closeness of the place and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspiration, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died…. The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."[1]

Equiano told of two of his countrymen who, chained together, jumped into the sea, preferring death to such a life of misery. Equiano envies them when he wrote, "Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself…"[2] For each day that his situation worsened and his apprehension increased, his "opinion of the cruelty of the whites" rose.[3]

When they reached the shores of North America, another round of indignities ensued. After agents inspected their physical conditions, the slaves were transferred to a warehouse where they were allowed to eat, clean up and rest. Survivors of the Middle Passage were about to embark on more journeys in the new world.

http://www.byrcchanaarey.com/equiano/extract3..htm

Horton, James Oliver and Horton, Lois E. *Hard Road to Freedom: the Story of African America*. New Jersey: Rutger University Press, 2001.

Trotter, Joe William, Jr. T*he African American Experience*. Boston: Houghton Miflin Co., 2001.

1. Equiano, p. 1.
2. Equiano, p. 1.
3. Equiano, p. 1.

The Underground Railroad

I joined the Underground Railroad. Look at that. (shows the walking stick.)
That's 62 notches. That's 62 people I carried to Freedom.
I was looking to make it 63 when Abraham Lincoln came along and changed all that.
—*Solly,* Gem of the Ocean

The Underground Railroad, a vast network of people who helped slaves escape to the North and to Canada, was not run by any single organization or person. Rather, it consisted of many individuals—many whites but predominantly blacks—who knew only of the local efforts to aid fugitives and not of the overall operation. Still, it effectively moved hundreds of slaves northward each year. According to one estimate, the South lost 100,000 slaves between 1810 and 1850.

An organized system to assist runaway slaves seems to have begun toward the end of the 18th century. In 1786 George Washington complained about how one of his runaway slaves was helped by a "society of Quakers, formed for such purposes." The system grew, and around 1831 it was dubbed "The Underground Railroad," after the then-emerging steam railroads. The system even used railroading terms: the homes and businesses where fugitives would rest and eat were called "stations" and "depots" and were run by "stationmasters"; those who contributed money or goods were "stockholders" and the "conductor" was responsible for moving fugitives from one station to the next.

For the slave, running away to the North was anything but easy. The first step was to escape from the slaveholder. For many slaves, this meant relying on his or her own resources. Sometimes a "conductor," posing as a slave, would enter a plantation and then guide the runaways northward. The fugitives would move at night; they would generally travel between 10 and 20 miles to the next station, where they would rest and eat, hiding in barns and other out-of-the-way places. While they waited, a message would be sent to the next station to alert its stationmaster.

Follow the drinking gourd,
Follow the drinking gourd
For the old man is waiting for to
carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

—Spiritual that contained secret codes with directions on the Underground Railroad. The "drinking gourd" refers to the Big Dipper.

The fugitives would also travel by train and boat—conveyances that sometimes had to be paid for. Money also was needed to improve the appearance of the runaways—a black man, woman or child in tattered clothes would invariably attract suspicion. The money was donated by individuals and also raised by various groups, including vigilance committees.

Vigilance committees sprang up in the larger towns and cities of the North, especially New York, Philadelphia and Boston. In addition to soliciting money, the organizations provided food, lodging and helped the fugitives settle into a community by helping them find jobs and providing letters of recommendation.

The Underground Railroad had many notable participants including John Fairfield in Ohio, the son of a slaveholding family, who made many daring rescues; Levi Coffin, a Quaker, who assisted more than 3000 slaves and Harriet Tubman, who made 19 trips into the South and escorted more than 300 slaves to freedom.

African American Resource Guide. *The Underground Railroad.*
http://www.pbs.org/Heinrichs, Ann.
The Underground Railroad. Minneapolis: Compass Point Books, 2001.

Black *Spirituals*

No more auction block for me,
no more, no more.
No more auction block for me;
many thousands gone.

—Slave Songs of the United States, *1867.*

All of August Wilson's plays incorporate music and *Gem of the Ocean* continues that use with spirituals. Spirituals are a form of folk literature. Since the composers of the songs are unknown and the songs were passed down by word of mouth from one generation to another, many songs have several versions. The "call and response" form of these work songs came straight out of the slaves' African heritage and traditional religions. The only instruments they used were drums and their voices.

However, not long after the slaves arrived in the colonies, the drums and singing in native languages were prohibited by slave owners fearing this practice might incite rebellion. Thus, the slaves began to use the tone and rhythm of their old languages with the lyrics of their everyday lives. There was a double meaning to many spirituals. They expressed a desire for spiritual salvation while also manifesting the anger, fear and frustration of a slave's life. Many spirituals also spoke of the past as a way to keep the memories alive for future generations.

The slaves based most of their spirituals upon characters and stories from the Bible; the manner in which these stories are sung shows a colorful imagination and a strong faith. Many slaves thought of themselves as modern children of Israel and looked for a black Moses to deliver them from their bondage. In songs such as "Go Down, Moses,""Deep River," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" there is a warm and sincere appeal.

Spirituals were little known outside the Southern states until after the Emancipation Proclamation (1865) and African Americans were freed from slavery. In 1867, William Francis Allen and Lucy McKim Garrison published a collection of spirituals called *Slave Songs*. In 1871 spirituals were introduced to other parts of the country by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University from Nashville, Tennessee. Other groups followed, such as a quartet from Hampton Institute in Virginia and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

In the past 20 years, African American music has turned back to the spiritual in a modern form—rap and hip-hop. The "call and response," the rhythmic use of the voice as an instrument, and the frustration with society and the environment are all present.

Lomax, Alan. *The Folk Songs of North America*. Garden City, NY: Dolphin Books, 1975.

McCabe, Megan. *Student Guide: August Wilson's* Gem of the Ocean. Chicago: Goodman Theatre, 2003.

World Book Encyclopedia. Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1972.

Activities

I. Aunt Esther has been mentioned in several *August Wilson plays (Two Trains Running and King Hedley II*). In *King Hedley* she is called "the Book of Life incarnate." In G*em* we again meet Aunt Esther. How is she "the Book of Life?" What does this mean? Her life or the symbol of an entire people. Explain.

II. The play takes place in 1904 when slavery is still living memory for some of the characters.Contrast the experiences/attitudes of Aunt Esther, Solly Two Kings and the much younger Caesar.

III. What does the line "they got a long row to hoe and they ain't got no plow" mean?
What is the price of freedom in the 1900's, in the 1960's in 2006?

IV. Is Aunt Esther a religious figure? Discuss the sense of confession, absolution, and atonement when Citizen goes to the City of Bones. How has Aunt Esther helped to guide Citizen to this point?

V. Who is Rutherford Sellig? What does he represent? What is his relation to the other characters?

VI. Read the following poem, "Columbia, Gem of Ocean." It is a song written in 1843 and was very popular during the Civil War. It was played often by Marine Bands and for Lincoln. What do the lyrics imply?

Columbia the Gem of the Ocean
By David T. Shaw

O Columbia! the gem of the ocean,
The home of the brave and the free,
The shrine of each patriot's devotion,
A world offers homage to thee;
Thy mandates make heroes assemble,
When Liberty's form stands in view;
Thy banners make tyranny tremble,
When borne by the red, white, and blue,
When borne by the red, white, and blue,
When borne by the red, white, and blue,
Thy banners make tyranny tremble,
When borne by the red, white and blue.

When war wing'd its wide desolation,
And threaten'd the land to deform,
The ark then of freedom'm foundation,
Columbia rode safe thro' the storm;
With her garlands of vict'ry around her,
When so proudly she bore her brave crew;
With her flag proudly floating before her,
The boast of the red, white and blue,
The boast of the red, white and blue,
The boast of the red, white, and blue,
With her flag proudly floating before her,
The boast of the red, white and blue.

The Union, the Union forever,
Our glorious nation's sweet hymn,
May the wreaths it has won never wither,
Nor the stars of its glory grow dim,
May the service united ne'er sever,
But they to their colors prove true?
The Army and Navy forever,
Three cheers for the red, white, and blue,
Three cheers for the red, white, and blue,
Three cheers for the red, white, and blue,
The Army and Navy for ever.

Colorado Model Content Standards; Reading & Writing

1. *Students read and understand a variety of materials.*
2. *Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.*
3. *Students write and speak using conventional grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.*
4. *Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing.*
5. *Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media and reference sources.*
6. *Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.*

Rocky Mountain PBS Salutes *Black History Month*

Celebrating African-American Heritage

Rocky Mountain PBS offers many special programs in honor of African-American Heritage Month in February, plus regularly scheduled series such as *Tavis Smiley* and *Tony Brown's Journal*. For children, programs such as *Reading Rainbow* and *Sesame Street* celebrate diversity throughout the year.

Special programs include:

African-American Lives (on the cover) takes Alex Haley's *Roots* saga to a whole new level. Genealogy, oral history, family stories and DNA analysis trace participants' lineage through American history and back to Africa. **Airs Wednesdays Feb. 1 & 8 at 8 p.m.**

American Experience "Reconstruction-The Second Civil War" tells the story of the tumultuous years following the Civil War. **Airs Mondays Feb 13 & 20 at 8 p.m.**

Briars in the Cotton Patch: The Story of Koinonia Farm tells of a daring social experiment in the 1940s. **Airs Saturday, Feb. 19 at 10 p.m.**

Independent Lens "Negroes with Guns" is the story of a North Carolina community leader who spent much of his life in exile. **Airs Tuesday, Feb. 7 at 10 p.m.**

Nickels from Heaven recounts the story of the first African-American paratroopers. **Airs Sunday, Feb. 12 at noon**

Rocky Mountain Legacy "Jazz in Five Points" recounts the jazz history of the legendary Denver neighborhood. **Airs Sunday, Feb. 5 at 10 p.m.**

Slavery: The Making of America is an in-depth look at this era in American history. **Airs Fridays at 1 a.m.**

Spirit of Colorado "Cowboys" explores the history of black cowboys in Colorado. **Airs Saturday, Feb. 25 at 1:30 a.m.**

Spirit of Colorado "It Beats Workin'" The world-renowned Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble is featured. **Airs Saturday, Feb. 4 at 7:30 p.m.**

Summer Hill examines the success of the all-black Cartersville, Ga., neighborhood. **Airs Monday, Feb. 13 at 9:30 p.m.**

Whispers of Angels: The Story of the Underground Railroad examines the pivotal eastern line. **Airs Sunday, Feb. 12 at 10 p.m.**