

AUGUST WILSON: SLAVERY AS OBSESSION AND AGENT IN SHAPING IDENTITY

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Abstract: August Wilson is an African-American playwright that wants to write about their history, from his own perspective, as black representative, as he feels that the historical moments depicted by the white hegemony do not do justice to the slave descendants. For Wilson, history does not begin in Africa, but at the moment when the first slave has set foot on American land (Wilson, 2011: 16). Identity plays a key role in his plays, as the descendants of the slaves try to find out who they are and what they are supposed to do in life. They are not just African, nor are they only American. They are both and they take great pride in this, even though society does its best to exclude them from the mainstream of history. The present paper analyses how August Wilson deals with the question of identity in two of his plays: "Gem of the Ocean" and "Joe Turner's Come and Gone".

Key words: African-American, identity, (post) slavery, reinterpretation, history, blues

Introduction

Contemporary writer, August Wilson has chosen to interpret and reinterpret African-American history, from his point of view, as a black playwright. The term "black" can be used here without racist implications, since he himself, in *The Ground on Which I Stand*, states that it is inappropriate to talk about a black man as a "coloured" person, because there are other people in this category, such as Asians, Native Americans, etc. (2011: 14).

In his quest to give a new perspective over certain historical facts, he also deals with the question of African-American identity. Thus, his characters are in an endless search, trying to

find out who they are, in a society that often proves hostile. August Wilson even associates the loss of identity with the loss of one's song (as seen in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*).

Together with eight other plays, *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* form part of the *Pittsburgh Cycle*, or the *Century Cycle*, a collection of works that stretch over 100 years of black history, presenting the lives of several African-Americans, more or less oppressed by the institution of slavery (or by its aftermath) and by the white society they are excluded from. Each play takes place in a different decade of the twentieth century and all but one are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, where the playwright grew up.

Gem of the Ocean

II.1. The Play

The action of this two-act play takes place in 1904, only 41 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, in Aunt Ester's house. There are seven characters in the play, who are either ex-slaves or born of slave parents. The play begins with an agitated Citizen Barlow, who seeks Aunt Ester's counsel, in order to obtain redemption (because of him, somebody committed suicide).

As the action progresses, we find out more about the other characters and their ties to slavery; for example, Solly Two Kings is an ex-Underground Railroad Conductor, Rutherford Selig is a white character, a friend of black people, etc. We also read about the Great Migration, the decaying conditions for the African-Americans in the South, the Middle Passage etc. Throughout the play, the characters seek to discover their new identities, in a changing society that does nothing to help them make a living and that constantly rejects them.

According to Caesar Wilks, President Abraham Lincoln made a mistake to free slaves, as they did not know how to appreciate freedom: "It's Abraham Lincoln's fault. He ain't had no idea what he was doing(...) Some of these niggers was better off in slavery. They don't know how to act otherwise." (2006: 34) From a different point of view, other two characters, Solly Two Kings and Eli, Aunt Ester's gatekeeper, consider freedom important, but they ask themselves whether it is worth dying for, or not. Thus, Eli thinks that "Freedom is what you

make it.” (2006: 28), whereas Solly declares that he does not know what it represents and that he is “still trying to find out. It ain’t never been nothing but trouble.” (idem)

Aunt Ester eventually helps Citizen Barlow redeem himself by taking him to the City of Bones, that City in the middle of the Ocean, where the souls of the Africans who perished during the Middle Passage have gathered. When Solly dies, Citizen takes his hat, coat and stick and, as he discovers the letter from his sister, he exits. Thus, the readers/spectators are let to think that maybe Mr. Barlow takes Solly’s identity as an Underground Railroad conductor.

The title of the play bears significant connotations; it can refer to three different things: to the song *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*, published in 1843, to Amiri Baraka’s play, *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean* and to a slave ship, as Aunt Ester herself explains, which she uses while leading Citizen Barlow to a symbolical journey to the City of Bones: “You see this boat, Mr. Citizen? It’s called the Gem of the Ocean.” (2006: 63). This boat is represented by a paper boat made from her Bill of Sale.

Taking into account all these, we can conclude with a quotation from Elam: “Wilson asks that the trauma of these Bones People be re-membered, in order to address the unfinished business of the past within the circumstances of the now.” (2006: 80)

II.2. Aunt Ester: slave or spiritual advisor?

The one who directly links the play to Africa is Aunt Ester, a woman that is 285 years old, “as old as the African American presence in America”. (Elam, 2007: 76) She recalls how she has been brought oversea, from Africa to America (i.e. from freedom to slavery), and the feelings she has experienced during the voyage: “I been across the water. I seen both sides of it.” (2006: 52); “I cried. I had lost everything....” (idem, 53)

Aunt Ester is the carrier of history; she combines Africa and America, she is the testimony of both past and present. Her character is one of the elements that shows history as a continuum within the *Century Cycle*; she is also the one who suggests that African-American history is a collective history. She represents, in Wilson’s words, “our tradition, our philosophy,

our folk wisdom, our hobbies, our culture, whatever you care to call it.” (apud. Elkins, 2000: 241), “our” referring to African-Americans.

Aunt Ester is the one that advises the other characters, but at the same she talks about her life as a wife and a mother, she mentions the moment when she has taken Aunt Ester’s identity and tells Black Mary that one day she will pass it to her. Even though it may seem a burden, people need Ester Tyler, so somebody has to take this name/identity and continue giving advice to others. (Wilson, 2006: 43) As a spiritual guide, she “sustains threads of collective memory, replicating the principle of royal and papal succession: the head does not die, but rather regenerates with a new face.” (Lewis, 2010: 146)

Wilson considers all the characters of the cycle her children and thus she “speaks to the inherent interconnectedness of black people and black lives but also recalls the legacy of slavery and the condition of the mother.” (Elam, 2007: 76), because it was the mother who passed on to the children their condition, according to slave laws. This way, African-American mothers “became the repositories of blackness” (idem, 77)

Ester Tyler, Aunt Ester, or “Ancestor”, as Harry J. Elam Jr calls her, represents, in the eyes of the critic, “the connection to the African American past which is both personal and collective, material and metaphysical.” (2007: 76) In brief, she is the “aunt” of African-Americans. She is the one to guide them in need, to offer advice or even hope. With her help, the others can reconnect with their past and they can heal their wounds.

Some critics have associated Aunt Ester to African deities, such as Oshun¹, Mammy Wata², even though her faith is a mixture of African and Christian beliefs. When she dies of grief, in King Hedley II, nature itself reacts, as the lights in the city go off and as a black cat is heard meowing.

II.3. Slavery as Obsession and Agent in Shaping Identity

¹ the river goddess of the Yoruba people

² the supreme water goddess

Cristopher Bigsby considers that, for Wilson, “Africa had never been dissected out of the African American, while, slavery, as fact and image, was the ineluctable starting point of the American experience.” (2007: 1) In other words, while being African is something with which you are born, the state of slavery is associated with the moment when the slaves have first set foot on the American continent. In order to progress and shape their future, African-Americans must embrace their past. By denying their past, they deny their future. Therefore, the characters should “repeatedly return to their history in order to move on with their lives and into their future.” (Elam, 2007: 76)

The characters from *Gem of the Ocean* are affected differently by the institution of slavery. The oldest of them, Aunt Ester, is the only one born in Africa and forced into slavery when brought to America; the others, except for Selig, who is white, are born into slavery, from slave parents. Through them, Wilson “rewrites the African American past, addressing and righting the wrongs of historical amnesia and social oppression, ritualistically reconnecting African Americans to the blood memories and cultural rites of the African past.” (ibidem)

The characters are obsessed with the opposition between slavery and freedom and they try to define the former in contrast to the latter, although they do not understand entirely what being free means. Each character sees slavery and freedom through his/her own personal experience and each seeks to define their identity according to these two opposites.

In this respect, Aunt Ester often makes reference to her Bill of Sale, which proves that she is property and that she can be sold. She does not trust this law, because she considers that it is unjust: “That piece of paper say I was property. Say anybody could buy and sell me. That law said 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.” (Wilson, 2006: 78) In contrast to Aunt Ester, Caesar Wilks, the constable, whose name alludes to the famous Roman dictator, Gaius Julius Caesar (100? BC – 44 BC), considers that “some niggers was better off in slavery” (Wilson, 2006: 34), because they do not know how to live as free men.

“Repeatedly in *Gem of the Ocean*, and elsewhere in the cycle, Wilson reminds us that the battle to remove the shackles of slavery is not simply an external struggle but an internal one.”

(Elam, 2007: 82) And it is also, generally speaking, a struggle against the mentality of society, as this label of slavery is still associated with African-Americans in this play. For example, after Mr. Brown committed suicide, the newspaper wrote about his death, also mentioning his social status: "Garret Brown of Lousiville, Kentucky (...) born of slave parents in June the 29th 1862, in Charleston, South Carolina." (idem, 25) Also, in the first scene of Act II, Selig enters the house, announcing that somebody has set the mill on fire and as a consequence, people start talking about instilling slavery again, although it might be against the law (idem, 49).

It could be said that slavery has remained an obsession, as important for the whites as it has been for blacks. If Aunt Ester and Caesar consider that they are free and Solly and Eli both agree that slavery was horrible, then the white majority also have difficulties in accepting the "coloured" as their equal, since it is difficult for them to see themselves on the same level with ex-slaves, who were property of plantation owners³. Then, it seems that "the task for Solly and the other characters is to find a way to make the word freedom have concrete meaning." (Elam, 2007: 87)

Actually, what does "freedom" mean in 1904, when the play is set? The readers find out at the beginning of the play that the southerners do not allow African-Americans to leave for the North and they are violent them, because, as Citizen Barlow reinforces, they "had to stay there and work" (Wilson, 2006: 22). He also considers that being in debt is worse than slavery (idem, 56), as the whites force you to work for them in order to repay your debts.

Taking into consideration everything that was above, it seems only natural to realise that the characters continue to be strongly influenced by the institution of slavery, even 41 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was written.

II.4. The Relevance of Names for Defining Identity

Names play a key role in August Wilson's plays, including the title, which represents an intertext. It is interesting to note how "his Citizens, Heralds, Kings, Roses all speak to how a name can convey not only a sense of individual identity, but a history, and a culture. In like

³"Emancipation was not a moment of liberation but a moment in which a formerly enslaved population was set loose in a world where human rights were usually contingent and property rights usually absolute." (Nadel, 2010: 16)

manner, Negroes became coloureds then blacks then Afro Americans then African Americans, with and without the hyphen.” (Elam, 2007: 83)

It is important to analyse the names by connecting them to the institution of slavery. For example, Citizen Barlow receives his first name immediately after the Emancipation Proclamation, as his mother really wanted him to be called a citizen, and thus, she forces everyone to respect him, with or without their will. Solly Two Kings, in his turn, chose this name after running away from the South; his slave name was Uncle Alfred. The two kings to which his name refers are David and Solomon, important figures in Judaism and Christian religions, as they were wise kings. Solly, in his turn, is also a leader, because he could not enjoy his freedom without helping other African-Americans as conductor of the Underground Railroad.

Furthermore, the name Black Mary resembles that of a slave, although she is a free woman. She is Caesar Wilks’s sister and maybe by not mentioning her family name, the playwright tries to separate her, as the future Aunt Ester from Caesar, the fierce black constable.

One of the most interesting names is that of Caesar Wilks, due to its strong connotations. It reminds everyone of the ironic mode in which former slave owners named their property, by alluding to ancient Greek or Roman names. It also makes reference to Gaius Iulius Caesar, the fierce Roman leader. Iulius Caesar was famous for instilling a dictatorship, just as the character in the play. Both of them climbed on the social ladder and both were feared by the others. In addition to this, the name also “signals his demise and his failure to understand the will of the people.” (Elam, 2007: 82)

To sum up, Professor Sanford Sternlich is of the opinion that the play is about “the unfinished business of the Civil War: emancipation, equality, endemic racism, the search for identity, African Americans and white law, employment, and the broken family.” (2015: 16). The quest of the characters to find their identity so that society might finally accept them seems to have no resolution. Since they cannot be at peace with their minds, they have to seek help from Aunt Ester, who reconnects them with their past, so that they can embrace the future.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone

III.1. The Play

The two-act play is set in 1911. It takes place in Bertha and Seth Holly's boarding house, where quite a few interesting characters come across each other. The play is set in a decade that can be characterised by many changes, including the increase of the number of African-Americans migrating from South to North, in the hope of a better life and of better job opportunities, a movement called the Great Migration.

In a brief description preceeding the play, the writer describes how Southern free people come North, with high hopes and dreams, trying to find a new life... a new identity:

"From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. (...) they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy." (Wilson, 1988: ?)

Therefore, even before reading the play, we are "warned" by the playwright that *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* deals with such themes as the Great Migration and the separation that it instills among family members, the loss of one's identity as self and as member of a community and last, but not least, the search to reconnect with one's past. The travellers are both sad and joyful, worried and hopeful as they try to overcome racism and segregation.

Herald Loomis, a tenant, is searching for his wife, Martha, from whom he has gotten separated because of Joe Turner (Joe Turney on his real name)⁴. The impact of Turner's incarceration and forced labour is so high that Loomis has lost his song and, through it, his own identity. The play ends well for all characters, as each of them finds what they have been looking for: a song, a Shiny Man, love, a wife, a daughter.

III.2. The Blues Entitled "Joe Turner's Come and Gone"

"They tell me Joe Turner's Come and Gone (...)

⁴ Pete Turney's brother; the 29th Governor of Tennessee. He had the job of forcing black men into labour for 7 years.

Got my man and gone

Come with forty links of chain (...)

(Wilson, 1988: 67)

The title of the play is actually the title of a real blues song, recorded by W.C. Handy, dedicated to women whose husbands were forced to work for seven years on farms, because of the convict lease system (1846-1928), which could enslave people for crime. The song describes “the agony of African Americans experiencing ruthless behaviour of an actual historic figure and the resultant destruction of the family structure, already hard hit earlier on slavery’s auction block.” (Booker, 2003: 108). This convict lease system was a legal way of prolonging the institution of slavery and of breaking family ties, which were already frail at that time. It also stole people’s identity as they were left asking themselves “Why?”.

The main character of the play, Herald Loomis, imprisoned on a farm and forced to work there, was not told the reason of his imprisonment and, while there, he lost his song. When he comes to the boarding house, Bynum (the conjurer/the rootworker) feels that he needs to help him recover himself, which he eventually succeeds. According to Elam, the song that Joe Turner tries to steal from the ex-deacon can be seen “as a metaphor for African American identity, spirit, and soul”. (2004: 323) What is even more interesting is that Joe Turner is an absent figure in the play; the damage he produces by separating families and stealing identities is so painful that even in his absence the characters suffer a lot. In order for Loomis to find his place in the world, he needs to find his song/identity. From this point of view, the characters in the play (especially Herald Loomis) seek to “find again a sense of human worth previously denied in slavery and to establish a new kind of family in the extended black community.” (Booker, 2003: 111)

When Herald is finally reunited with his wife, he slashes his chest as an act of salvation, which requires sacrifice; he sheds his own blood for this, proving that this act can come from within: He will “accept Joe Turner’s robbery of black freedom to prop up white power or Martha Pentecost’s belief in a white Christ. Loomis will take responsibility for himself and not look to a white God for salvation.” (Booker, 2003: 109) In this way, the character rediscovers his lost identity.

III.3. Stories of Some "Footloose Wanderers"⁵

This play is one "in which the African American residents of a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911 attempt to rediscover, repossess, and redefine themselves historically and socially as free citizens." (Bogumil, 1999: 52) In other words, it is about redesccovering African-American identity in the post-slavery period. The "footloose wanderers" are, in Baraka's point of view, "the displaced ex-slaves who, during the early twentieth century tried to make sense of their social and cultural problems." (apud. Hay, 2007: 89) The only ones that are not wanderers are Bertha and Seth Holly, who run a boardinghouse together. Seth even takes pride in telling everyone that he is born of free Northern parents.

Another wanderer is young Jeremy, a guitar player, who "represents the younger generation of African American men: not easily bullied or corrupted, very mobile, and fickle when it comes to women." (Sternlicht, 2015: 28) He wants a companion besides him, but not a stable relationship that might take away his freedom.

Martha Pentecost (ex Loomis) is Herald's wife and another victim of Joe Turner's convict lease system. She is the one that is left behind after Loomis disappears, wondering whether he is dead or alive. When the church offers her a chance to move North, she leaves her daughter with her mother and settles in Pittsburgh, taking the name of "Pentecost", renewing thus her faith. Martha, Herald and their daughter, Zonia, are the best examples of the displacement feeling following the institution of late slavery and of the Great Migration.

For me, the most interesting character in the play is Bynum, the conjurer. He is directly linked to Africa, as is Aunt Ester, and he is the one that guides every character from *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. He gives the others roots, advice on what rituals to follow if they want something, as well as help to find their stolen identities. According to Bigsby, his role is to "bring people together, to reunite those who have been broken apart." (2007: 12) In the Igbo culture, Bynum represents, as Pereira writes, "the collective African ancestors, called Ndi Ndushi, who made sure that people obeyed ancestral traditions of good and evil, and cleansed themselves of all abominations." (2007: 95)

⁵ Baraka, Amiri, apud. Hay, Samuel A., 2007: 89

According to his deceased father, whom he has seen in a vision, he will find his hidden identity when he finds his Shiny Man. Consequently, Bynum tries to help everyone: he is the one that guides Loomis through his vision with the Bones People (from the Middle Passage), he helps him interpret what he sees, and he also leads the Juba (an African call-and-response dance), after Seth invites everyone to participate in it. Wilson describes the dance in the stage direction:

“The Juba is reminiscent of the Ring of Shouts of the African slaves. It is a call and response dance. Bynum sits at the table and drums. He calls the dance as others clap hands, shuffle and stomp around the table. It should be as African as possible, with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy. The words can be improvised, but should include some mention of the Holy Ghost.” (1988: 52)

Somewhere in the middle of the dance, Herald Loomis enters the house and he is upset when hearing about the Holy Ghost, as he sees Him too big, “Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there?” (idem) It is after this moment that the ex-deacon “is thrown back and collapses, terror-stricken by his vision” (idem, 53). The next verbal exchange is between him and Byum and it is a summation of the playwright’s rewriting of the Middle Passage. Mary Bogumil believes that what actually bothers Loomis is “the sense of community, of solidarity, of an atavistic legacy of Africa and sadly the bondage still in the consciousness of the post-Civil War generation” generated by the Juba, which is against his will to regain autonomy. (1999: 59)

Lastly, there is the only white character of the play, Rutherford Selig, whom the readers met in *Gem of the Ocean*. August Wilson focuses more on him in the present play, as he is “responsible” of finding Martha Pentecost. Although most characters trust him, Seth believes that it is improper to say he finds people, since he is the one that helps them leave and get settled somewhere. Anyway, he takes pride in his identity as a People Finder (a tradition in his family), since his granfather used to work in the slave trade, bringing slaves to plantations and his father, in his turn, used to find runaway slaves. It is Selig’s turn now to find African-Americans, only that the findings have positive implications: he reunites people and families.

In conclusion, we may say that it is important to note the role that the community, represented by the guests in the boarding house, plays in Herald’s search for his song/identity: it

is after the common Juba dance that Loomis has the vision, it is with the others' help that Martha is reunited with her daughter, when she can also say farewell to her husband and it is among them where Loomis rediscovers who he is. As Bigsby explains, "although each individual has to heal himself or herself, that process involves a recognition of a community in the present and over time. In particular, they had to recognize that they were African people, despite the passage of time." (2007: 12)

Conclusion

August Wilson's plays focus on African-American culture, aiming at offering the world an insight of what it truly means to be African-American. The identity that his characters passionately seek can only be found after embracing a common past, full of toils and injustice. Luckily, the community depicted in the two plays presented above has two community leaders (i.e. Aunt Ester and Bynum) that can guide the characters in their quest towards self-definition, admitting/discovering, in their turn, who they themselves are.

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