



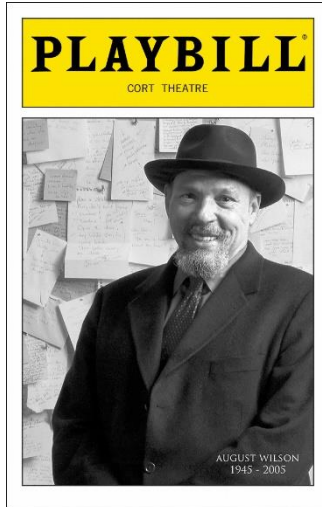
"All I had to do was to pick up a record of Blues music—which will tell anyone all that they need to know about black people in America—and I was able to recreate our people through writing, our ideas of social conduct, our symmetry, our grace, pleasure and pain".

~August Wilson

**The Jewels In Gem of The Ocean
Dramaturg: Holly Kai Hurd
Gem of the Ocean
February 2024**

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Purpose of The Pittsburgh Cycle/ The Century Cycle and Timeline

August Wilson's cycle of 10 plays covers African-American history in the 20th century, with all but Ma Rainey's Black Bottom taking place in The Hill District, where Wilson grew up in Pittsburgh. This "Century Cycle" of plays consists of recurring characters, though the plays were not written in chronological order. All nine of the plays on Broadway received Tony Award nominations, two of those won and two won Pulitzer Prizes.

1. Jitney (1979) *Tony*
2. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1982)
3. Fences (1984) *Pulitzer/Tony*
4. Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1984)
5. The Piano Lesson (1986) *Pulitzer*
6. Two Trains Running (1990)
7. King Hedley II (1991)
8. Seven Guitars (1995)
- 9. Gem of the Ocean (2003)**
10. Radio Golf (2005)

In 2003 August wrote and performed an unpublished one-man play entitled '*How I Learned What I Learned*': A piece about his days as a struggling young writer in The Hill and how his community and neighborhood inspired his cycle of plays. This was produced at New York's Signature Theatre and directed by Todd Kreidler, Wilson's friend and protégé. He passed away in October 2005, the same year that his final installment of the century cycle was produced.



The Hill District

The Hill District serves as the fabric through which the Pittsburgh Cycle is woven --with the exception of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. We tend to write what we know and The Hill District raised August. The rich history of The Hill gives us a glimpse of the *broth he simmered in* and the

spirit of liberation that lived in the soil.

In 1780 Pennsylvania was the first state in the U.S. to pass an Abolition Act. This act would abolish slavery *gradually*. From 1790 to the 1850's the number of free blacks would go from 6,537 to 56,949. The Hill was Pittsburgh's *oldest* black community. It was later dubbed "Little Haiti" after Haiti gained their independence. Early residents were middle-class free black families. The Hill would expand when African Americans began fleeing the south and Jim Crow in search of jobs in mining, the railroad industry, petroleum, iron and steel production and manufacturing. In the 1800's The Hill was also refuge to immigrants from Europe. From the 1930s until the 1950s, the Hill became known as the "crossroads of the world." Music, art, culture and commerce thrived in "Little Haiti". The Hill even boasted the only all-black radio station, its own weekly newspaper (the Pittsburgh Courier), and a vibrantly active jazz scene.



By the 1950's young August would have been absorbing this thriving arts community full of enterprising African-American entrepreneurs: Artists, entertainers, club owners, restaurateurs, educators --many of whom were likely his neighbors.

The Who's Who of The Hill



Pittsburgh even had its own Negro League Baseball team: The Pittsburgh Crawfords (1931-40), popularly known as "the Crows". The Crows were owned by businessman and Hill resident, Gus Greenlee. Greenlee owned numerous businesses in the area including Crawford Grill. He also

established Greenlee Stadium: one of the few stadiums in the country owned by a Negro League team.



Other people of note from The Hill include:

Photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris, Civil rights attorney and Professor Derrick Bell, Actor Bill Nunn, Businessman Gus Greenlee (Greenlee Field). Madame C.J. Walker would open Lelia College of Beauty Culturists at 2518 Wylie Avenue in The Hill. Lena Horne, Billy Eckstine, Billy Strayhorn and even Mr.[Fred] Rogers were also said to have been residents of The Hill at one time or another.



The City of Bones: ½ a Mile by ½ a Mile

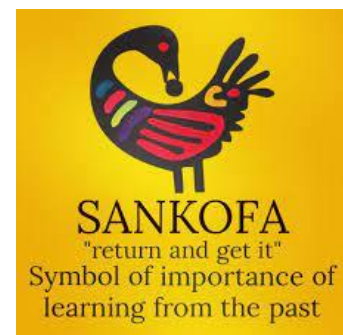
The City of Bones is described as being ½ a mile by ½ a mile. Two halves make a whole and the goal is for Citizen Barlow to heal his brokenness and become whole through a rights of passage that can only occur by journeying to and *through* this unknown place. In black culture and religion there are many versions of "The City of Bones". Heaven could be one. In the black church we reference Zion: that beautiful city of God and Galilee could even be another: the place where Jesus is said to have performed many miracles and much of his ministry. These are places of divinity. The City of Bones is described by Citizen as being the most beautiful place he's ever seen though it was born from the deaths of those abandoned by the Captain of the slave ship named *Gem of the Ocean*. Somehow what could have become a coffin of sadness and grief becomes a gem: A portal of transformation in August's grounded, magical, accessible cosmic realm. In African folklore and reality, the black experience is almost always one of ascension and transformation. Rising above or creating abundance and innovation from nothing. We experience that idea of ascension here as well: that if something so dark could be become something so beautiful and powerful, anything is possible. The City of Bones is a place of life and purification because death was not defeat. *"Life is above all. God raised it to a great height. Live to the fullest. You got a duty to life. So live, Mr. Citizen! Live!" ~Aunt Esther*

Gem of The Ocean takes us on a quest. We meet the “community family” of Aunt Esther, a powerful and trusted matriarch of the neighborhood. Through Citizen Barlow’s arrival and urgent request, it doesn’t take long for us to understand the place that Aunt Esther holds. Through the protective nature of Esthers first line of defense, Eli, and the attentiveness of Black Mary it’s understood that she is a protected and respected figure of this household and The Hill: The Queen. Aunt Esther is referenced in four plays from the Pittsburgh Cycle: Gem of the Ocean, Two Trains Running, King Hedley II and Radio Golf. Gem of the Ocean marks the first and only time we experience her physical presence. Aunt Esther is many things. She is our grandma’s and “Big Mamas”, our family griots and church mothers. The revered Wise Women and healers of our community’s; the glue of our families and perhaps even the outcast to a degree. This folkloric idea that she is 285 years old solidifies her status and places her in America in the pivotal year of 1619. It was 1619 when the first slave ship is documented as having arrived in Hampton, Virginia. She has lived the experience of slavery and now emancipation. At this stage she is the only one that carries the whole of the story.

Blood Memory {*Cellular Memory, Genetic Memory*}

In the world of science *cellular memory*: is the theory that memory is stored in the brain as well as the body. For generations in the black community this is known as *ancestral memory* or *blood memory*: The things we know without knowing; Knowledge obtained without the lived experience but because our ancestors experienced it. Blood memory is the belief that we carry the knowledge and wisdom of our ancestors and that our culture lives in our blood. Maybe you have an unexplained fear of water, or dogs, tight spaces or aversions to certain foods, types of people, even smells but you have no idea why.

Sankofa: In African Culture we speak about the Sankofa: the idea that one must go back and fetch their past to know their future. Sankofa is a principle derived from the Akan people of Ghana. The power of Sankofa centers around this: to know history and your heritage is to know your current self, the world around you, and how to better both.



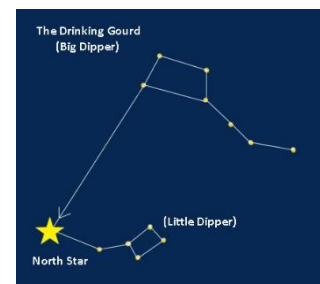
Aunt Ester carries the superpower of remembrance and with her spiritual family, helps the people in the Hill discover the tools they need to not only rid themselves of guilt and shame, but to carry the legacy of the culture forward while feeling confident within themselves. Wielding the power of song and sound, they help usher Citizen through the portal. Spirituals are to the black community what chanting would be to the Native American or Buddhists. Spirituals request the presence of ancestors in the room while acknowledging through sound the sentiment of their complex lives and experiences. Spirituals are spiritual! In so many ways Aunt Esther is asking Citizen to tap into his blood memory and trust all the things he knows in his body if not the mind. Their vocal vibrations and conjured ancestral presence are just what he needs as source of support and protection to complete this journey of Sankofa through the City of Bones.

What's In A Name

Names are important. I would venture to say most if not all playwrights are as intentional about naming their characters as they would be about naming their children. I think it's worth a brief analysis. You'll find some interesting parallels in the following translations of these names and our characters.

[Aunt] Esther : Star; Hebrew; Esther symbolizes bravery and strength. Esther was not just a beautiful queen but a strong, courageous leader in the bible who risked her life to save her people. Our Esther has survived hundreds of years to continuously help her people reconnect with their ancestors and return to themselves. Some would say this act also saves lives. Some translations say Esther also

means "star" in Persian. Esther had faith in God as does our Esther, as well as faith in her people. To escape to freedom, slaves were often instructed to follow the North Star which could be found by locating the Big Dipper.



Eli – Ascent; “My God” Hebrew/ Biblical : Eli may alternatively be an unrelated abbreviation of Hebrew names^[3] such as [Elijah](#), [Elias](#), [Elisha](#), [Eliezer](#), [Elimelech](#), etc., all containing the element אֵלִי, meaning high, ascended or "my God" and spelled with the Hebrew letter [aleph](#) in the beginning. *Eli* was also a popular name in the 1880s. Aunt Esther could only have an *ascended* partner.

[Black] Mary : Hebrew: "bitter, beloved, or drop of the sea." It is derived from the Hebrew name Maryam/Mariam, and though the origins are not entirely clear, it is believed the meaning of Maryam is "drop of the sea" (from Hebrew roots *mar*, meaning "drop" and *yam*, meaning "sea"); "bitter" (from Hebrew *marah*, meaning "bitterness"); and "beloved" (from the Egyptian root *mr*). Depending on what text you read, some site many similarities between the translations behind the names Esther and Mary. Both of them are associated with stars. Mary specifically associated with “the star of the sea”. I don’t know that she is ever directly accused of being bitter, but more than a few times Caesar accuses Black Mary of being mad at him”, “poisoned against him” by their mother and following in her footsteps of wanting to turn “blood into vinegar”.

Citizen Barlow : A citizen is defined as a person who, by place of birth, nationality of one or both parents, or naturalization is granted full rights and responsibilities as a member of a nation or political community. Coming out of slavery, this is exactly what a mother would wish for her child. “*My mama named me Citizen after freedom came. She wouldn’t like it if I changed my name*”. “*Your Mama’s trying to tell you something. She put a heavy load on you. It’s hard to be a Citizen. You gonna have to fight to get that*” (p.29). Citizen hasn’t exactly set the bar high for himself, but he aspires to more even if he doesn’t know what that is or how to achieve it. Citizen has a journey ahead before he can experience a new level of freedom after arriving at a certain place within himself and getting out of his own way. By the end it’s evident that the low bar or *Barlow* has elevated.

Rutherford Selig- Old English/Scottish origin. It may derive from the Old English word *rother*, meaning “cattle,” “ford,” or “river crossing.” Another theory is that a man named Ruther once carried a Scottish king across the River Tweed, and the king's descendant gave Ruther's family land. Rutherford mentions going back upriver several times. He is indeed a river man. Selig: German: Meaning happy or

blessed. He is always on the up and seems to often come bearing gifts. Selig is also clearly a trusted friend to this community.

Solly Two Kings: Named after the Father and son Solomon and David that ruled together until David's death; Solomon from the Hebrew word shalom, meaning "peace." David from the Hebrew *Dawid* meaning "beloved" or "favorite". To name or rename oneself is powerful. Solly names himself "Solly Two Kings" after declaring that "Uncle Alfred" is dead once he is no longer enslaved. He intentionally chooses an ascended name crowning himself not once, but twice! Knowing that his enslaved name was once "Uncle Alfred" and that he even says that Uncle Alfred is dead, speaks to the fact that he clearly considered his renaming a rebirth. ***It may be worth noting there was an actual Uncle Alfred that was Andrew Jacksons lifelong servant. Born in 1803 he passed away in 1901. There is no way to know if this connection was reference for August, but here there were probably many Uncle Alfreds.*

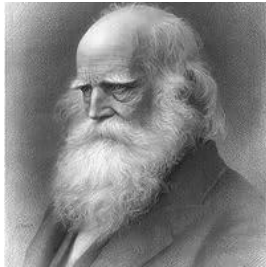
Caesar : Latin : Roman: Derived from the Latin word Caesaries, which means 'head of hair' or 'long-haired. ' A biblical interpretation of the name Cesar refers to those who are cut from the womb because they cannot be delivered via the natural methods of birth. We don't know the specifics of Ceasars birth, but he clearly had a *severed* relationship with his mother. He falls back on the fact that at least he paid for the funeral. He could also be considered a tyrant of sorts. In his "new position", he abuses his power. Like Julius Ceasar he is a bit of a tyrant, a bully. Despite being Mary's brother it's clear he is more foe than friend. Black Mary even questions him about his new attitude and how petty he's become. – How serious he gets over someone stealing something as simple as a loaf of bread these days whereas before, he was less likely to have made such a big deal over such a trivial offense.

Random Notes and References

Was pure a real thing?

- [J Walker Words: More poo and some words from tanning](#)
- [Dog Poo! From Hero to Zero to Hero. A Brief Circular History](#)
- [Pure Dog Dung](#)

William Cullen Bryant, *Thanatopsis*; *To a Waterfowl*; *A Midsummer Sonnet*



“So live, that when thy summons comes to join The innumerable caravan which moves
To that mysterious realm where each shall take His chamber in the silent halls of death, Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night, Scourged to his dungeon; but, sustain'd and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave, Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.”

Thanatopsis”

— William Cullen Bryant, *Thanatopsis*; *To a Waterfowl*; *A Midsummer Sonnet*

African Folklore

In general, most African American Folktales fall into one of seven categories: tales of origin, tales of trickery and trouble, tales of triumph over natural or supernatural evils, comic heartwarming tales, tales teaching life lessons, tales of ghosts and spirits, **and tales of slaves and their slave-owners.**