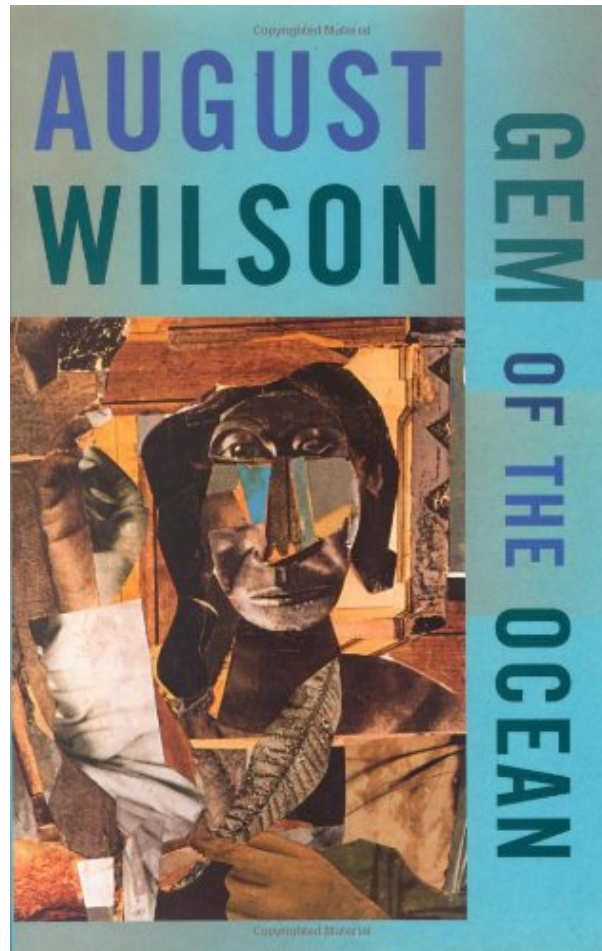
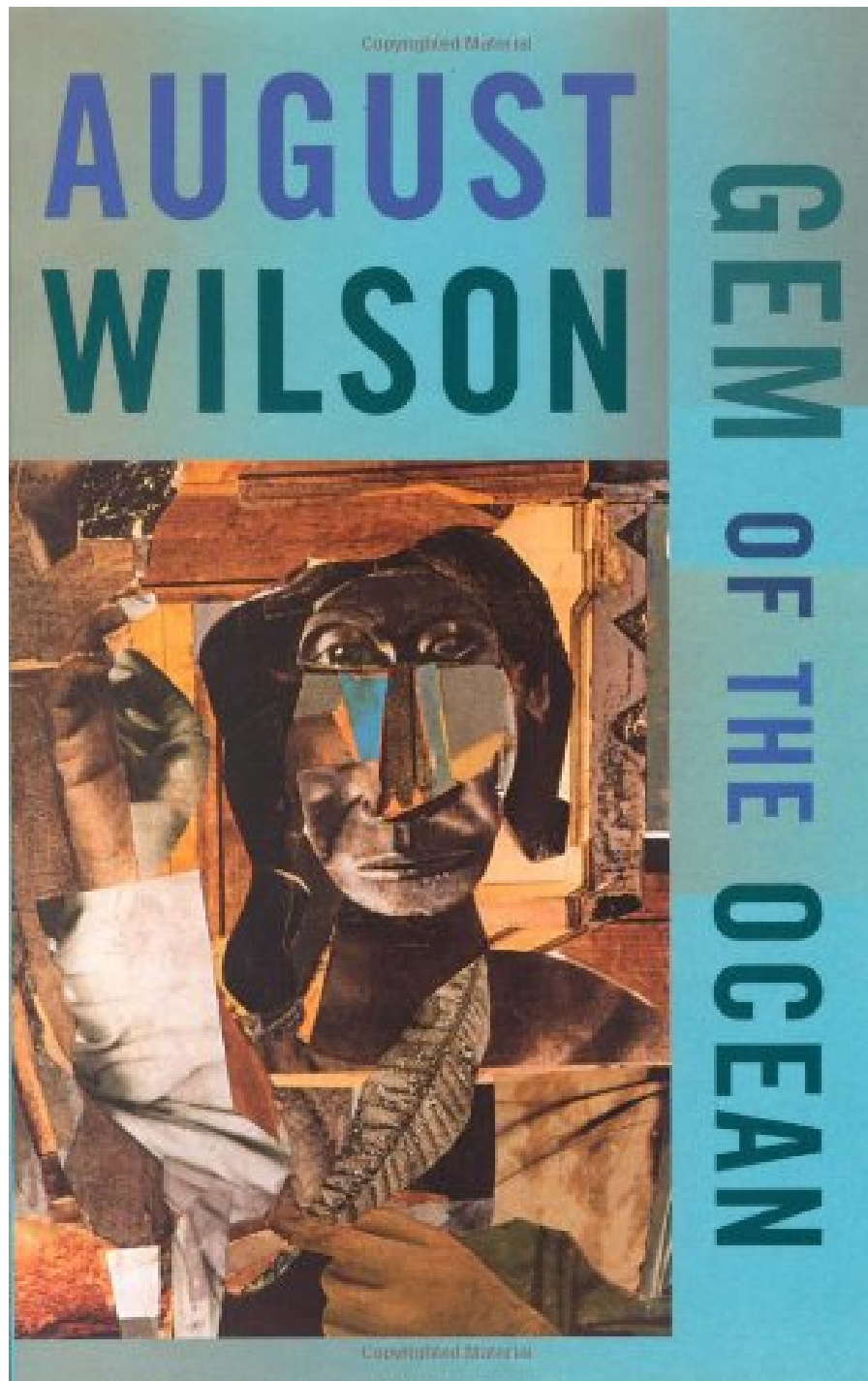


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“No one except perhaps Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams has aimed so high and achieved so much in the American theater.”—John Lahr, *The New Yorker*

“A swelling battle hymn of transporting beauty. Theatergoers who have followed August Wilson’s career will find in *Gem* a touchstone for everything else he has written.”—Ben Brantley, *The New York Times*

“Wilson’s juiciest material. The play holds the stage and its characters hammer home, strongly, the notion of newfound freedom.”—Michael Phillips, *Chicago Tribune*

Gem of the Ocean is the play that begins it all. Set in 1904 Pittsburgh, it is chronologically the first work in August Wilson’s decade-by-decade cycle dramatizing the African American experience during the 20th century—an unprecedented series that includes the Pulitzer Prize–winning plays *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. Aunt Esther, the drama’s 287-year-old fiery matriarch, welcomes into her Hill District home Solly Two Kings, who was born into slavery and scouted for the Union Army, and Citizen Barlow, a young man from Alabama searching for a new life. *Gem of the Ocean* recently played across the country and on Broadway, with Phylicia Rashad as Aunt Esther.

Earlier in 2005, on the completion of the final work of his ten play cycle—surely the most ambitious American dramatic project undertaken in our history—August Wilson disclosed his bout with cancer, an illness of unusual ferocity that would eventually claim his life on October 2. Fittingly the Broadway theatre where his last play will be produced in 2006 has been renamed the August Wilson Theater in his honor. His legacy will animate the theatre and stir the human heart for decades to come.

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1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A Gem of a Play

By J. Blanton

This is the play about the first decade of The Century Cycle. 1904 is its time, so several of the characters are ex-slaves including Aunt Esther who was born in 1619, the year the first slaves came to America; this very old woman is a soul-cleanser. Citizen Barlow comes from Alabama for cleansing. Caesar Wilks is an enforcer for the white establishment. Solly Two Kings used to help on the underground railroad. Aunt Esther takes Citizen Barlow on a spiritual ride to the "City of Bones." The people in the house dance and play juba and sing ring-shout songs, hangovers from slavery. However, Caesar is there to crush any displays of resistance to the established order and carry out the tragic ending.

A brilliant start for the ten-play cycle depicting the African-American adventure in the United States. All ten plays were nominated for at least one drama award (this one for a Tony). Most were nominated for at least three awards. Eight won at least one of the awards. Eight won a New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best play. One won a Drama Desk Award for best play. One won a Tony for best play. Two won a Pulitzer Prize for best drama. August Wilson is one of the top five American playwrights of the 20th century.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

a powerful statement on America at the turn of the last century

By doc peterson

August Wilson's "Century Cycle" is a serial of 10 plays, each set in a different decade of the 20th century, each addressing the historical challenges African-Americans faced at that time, as well as speaking to the wider problems and issues that tie us together as humanity. The first play in the Cycle, *Gem of the Ocean*, is set in Pittsburgh in 1904. The primary players are Aunt Esther, a "soul-cleanser", Solly Two Kings, a former conductor on the underground railroad, and Citizen Barlow, a young man newly arrived up north from Alabama. As with many of Wilson's plays, the connection between past and present is of primary importance - in *Gem of the Ocean*, Barlow seeks to have his soul cleansed for a crime he has committed.

In "cleaning his soul," Esther takes Barlow (and the audience) on a spiritual journey aboard a slave ship, the "Gem of the Ocean," helping Barlow (and the audience) understand the journey that African-Americans have been on, and which we Americans (black and white) are still on. Rather than blame or preach about the evils of slavery and how it has affected African-Americans, Wilson instead asks us to pause, think and reflect on the injustices we have done and which have been done to us - and he asks us how we can make these transgressions right.

I have not yet had the opportunity to see the play performed, although I hope to soon; the play itself is an easy read (just under 90 pages), but a masterpiece written by an author at the peak of his craft. Highly recommended.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Possibly Wilson's most comprehensive expression of his vision. Wilson ...

By William K

Possibly Wilson's most comprehensive expression of his vision. Wilson was a genius, an extraordinary playwright and myth maker. Review his life story if you wish to learn what "self made" really means. I have seen several of his plays produced at the Court Theater at the University of Chicago. A remarkable window into African American life. Thank you for the gift of your art, August Wilson

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