

**Myth as a semiological system in August Wilson's
*Gem of the Ocean, Joe Turner's Come and Gone and The Piano Lesson***

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Abstract

*Myths are one of the most important elements included in the history of not only African-American lives but also the lives of each and every one of us. Myths are inevitable human resources at times when no other idea justifies our being. As Barthes posits, for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things. This study looks into the significance of "Myths" and their determining roles as semiological systems in August Wilson's dramatic twentieth century cycle plays; *Gem of the Ocean, Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*. In these plays, myths take the forms of individuals, rituals and even ancestral objects. It can be observed that each one of these elements performs the most important role in conveying the significance of the African-American psyche and delicately portrays the eminent influence of ancestral backgrounds in shaping the lives of each character. The works of scholars such as Roland Barthes, Henry Gates, as well as many more, have been employed to better grasp this matter.*

Key words: *Myth, semiological system, African-American psyche, mythical language, ritual*

Introduction

According to Barthes, myth is a kind of speech. Not just oral but anything from sports to art. The mythological characteristics we observe in Wilson are mostly related to Yoruba mythology rooted in Nigeria. In other words, "Myth, or in classical Greek, "mythos", signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology — a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" (Abrams, 2009). According to Barthes, "Myth

is a metalanguage: a second-order language which acts on a first-order language, a language which generates meaning out of already existent meaning" (Allen, 2003)

In *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson* we can see how mythology has influenced the lives of the characters. This bringing of myths to the stage was to help present the spiritual aspect of the African-American psyche. In order to dramatize the radical psychological journey being experienced by black Americans, Bullins thought it was necessary to utilize a variety of theatrical styles and methods. He wrote: It is not a call for a return to realism or naturalism that this theater calls for; it is the exposure of illusion through exploding myths and lies that are disguised as reality and truths. These myths, and especially those concerning the black man, clutter the heart of his existence, his humanity (Pinkey, 2004)

Barthes' idea of myths and how they work in our world is closely related to the effect that Gates' elaborates about the trickster figure, the signifyin(g) monkey. Wordplay and fantastical elements included in Wilson's plays, are there to show the impact of mythology. As Helen Christol explains, the fantastic is thus a crucial element in challenging existing notions of reality, subverting the visions channeled by dominant cultures and provoking action to change both that vision and reality. Departing from consensus reality, the supernatural can signify the differences among culturally imposed ways of seeing; it can become a trope on reality (Christol, 1999).

The already existing myths have come to the stage to be dressed in a different way and project ideas beyond their own meanings. Wilson saw the African past with its roots in ancestral culture. As Kim Pereira notes, He had altogether a different version of history in mind, one which sank its roots in mythology. It is there that he looked for the symbols, metaphors and tales that embodied and expressed the hopes, fears, aspirations, and religious and civic yearnings of communities who laid down their true history in legends, poems, songs, prayers and, in Wilson's hands, plays. (Pereira, 2007)

From the beginning of the cycle until the end, Wilson's plays all convey a certain myth and most of the characters, especially Aunt Ester (in *Gem of the Ocean*), help make that myth come true. Pereira elaborates,

Devoid of their mythological dimensions, his characters, Levee, Troy and Boy Willie, in their separate plays, are merely destructive forces at odds with their world instead of agents of change challenging the status quo and reordering their universe. Within the full context of their cultural ancestry, they are the warrior spirit reincarnations of self-empowered trickster deities, figures which recur in myths from the Yoruban Eshu to the Hindu Krishna, from Bamapana the Australian Aborigine, Prometheus in ancient Greece and Sun Wukong in Chinese lore, to Reynard the French fox, Coyote the Native American, Maui in Hawaii, Susanowo in Japan, Loki the Norse god and even Jacob of the Old Testament. Wilson does more than record myths, he creates them; he continued doing so throughout his ten play cycle from the shiny man in *Joe Turner's Come and*

Gone (1986) to a renegade who wrestles with a ghost in *The Piano Lesson* (1987) and a 300-year-old woman in *Two Trains Running*, *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) and *Radio Golf* (2005). (Pereira, 2007)

Discussion

1. Gem of the Ocean

Aunt Ester is the most mythologized character from the beginning to the end of the century cycle. She is the oral historian, the guiding force, the always omnipotent fairy god mother of the community, she is the myth herself. An example of a myth portrayed as an individual. Harry Elam elaborates on this issue,

Africanist allusions abound with Aunt Ester, and Wilson is always conscious of an African presence in African-Americans. Entrance to Aunt Ester's home is through a red door, and the colour red represents "the supreme presence of color" for many of Nigeria's Yoruba people. Her "faith-based practice", her laying on of hands, has a direct relationship to the Yoruba goddess Oshun or Osun, one of the wives of the powerful thunder god Shango, who, when she died, fell to the bottom of the river and became the divinity of the rivers. At the festival for the river goddess Oshun, at Oshogbo in Nigeria, the celebrants praise her by throwing "flowers into her stream". In keeping with the river goddess's realm of authority, Aunt Ester asks all those who come to her for counsel to throw their offering into the river. Her city, Pittsburgh, is known for its three rivers, the Allegheny, the Monongahela and the Ohio. Oshun is a spirit of wisdom and generosity. Also known occasionally as the Yoruban "love goddess", she controls all that makes life worth living, such as marriage, children, money and pleasure. (Elam, 2007)

As a mythological character, she continues to exist from the start of the cycle to *Radio Golf*. She is divided into many characters in each play which makes her character live on and on. We see a part of her in *Bynum*, then in *Hedley*, then in *Stool Pigeon* and finally with the presence of Old Barlow in *Radio Golf*. *Gem of the Ocean* is full of rich ancestral elements. It is set in the year 1904, in the midst of the migrations from the south to the north. The play begins with the persistence of a man called Citizen Barlow to enter Aunt Ester's house. He has heard that she possesses healing powers and wants to be healed. Aunt Ester has her own specific healing powers one of which is Citizen's journey to the city of bones. This city represents the mythical reference to Africa hence, Citizen's past. Further on in the play we have biblical allusions. Solly two kings (one of the characters) takes us to the Old Testament. His name becomes a myth within a myth. As Barthes mentions about myth being a metalanguage, Solly empties the original biblical name and gives it a new form and cover. He is the black King Solomon. So too is the case of Black Mary. Saint Mary was white yet Black Mary is black. Moreover, 'The Middle Passage' too serves as a myth in *Gem of the Ocean*. This long-lasting journey has its stories and

is passed on from person to person. It lingers in the lives of the slaves. Accordingly, Aunt Ester's bill indicates a mythical feature. She uses it as the symbol for the boat which takes Citizen across the ocean. It is the 'Gem of the ocean'. It signifies freedom and captivation at the same time. The bill of liberty is the Gem of the ocean. It has lost its true sense because the African-American has lost his/her touch with his/her roots. Furthermore, at one point Solly's walking stick becomes the signifier of a signified which has lost its true definition. Does the stick signify weaponry or a guiding apparatus? The difference of signification of the stick to the white man and that of the black man is evident:

CAESAR: I see you still carrying that stick

SOLLY: Yeah I still got it. I'm gonna carry it up the hill to the graveyard.

CAESAR: Well now they got laws against that now. I told you that. This ain't the country. This ain't Alabama. This is Pittsburgh. They got laws against carrying a stick in Pittsburgh. That's a weapon.

SOLLY: This a walking stick! Abraham Lincoln carried a walking stick. General Grant carried a walking stick. You didn't arrest him. Go tell General Grant he can't carry a walking stick!

CAESAR: It's against the law to carry a weapon.

SOLLY: The law can go to hell if you telling me I can't carry a walking stick! (Wilson, 2007)

Objects signify many meanings in Wilson's century cycle plays. According to Barthes, anything can be interpreted as being a myth. As will be seen in the following sections, myths are beyond stories. They are objects within our reach, which we sometimes fail to fully understand. The coins being thrown in the river, the red door of Aunt Ester's house, etc all convey meanings beyond their ordinary self.

2. Joe Turner's Come and Gone

BYNUM: (Singing)

They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone

Ohhh Lordy

They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone

Ohhh Lordy

Got my man and gone

Come with forty links of chain

Ohhh Lordy

Come with forty links of chain

Ohhh Lordy

Got my man and gone. (Wilson, Joe Turner's Come and Gone, 2007)

Bynum, the spiritual force of the play, sings a song about Joe Turner which explains the significance of 'Joe Turner' in the play. When he says, "Got my man and gone", we grasp the idea of Loomis' aversion towards this character which is at the same time present and absent. As Harry Elam elaborates,

In Joe Turner's Come and Gone, the brooding central figure in the play, Herald Loomis, has lost his identity and his place in the world after being incarcerated by Joe Turner. The title character, Joe Turner, is an absent presence in the play. Mythologized in an old blues song, Joe Turne(y)r was the brother of a former governor of Tennessee who kept black men in servitude for seven years. (The actual twenty-ninth governor of Tennessee from 1893 to 1897 was Pete Turney as well as his brother Joe Turney. However, as related in the autobiography of W. C. Handy, the name was changed to Joe Turner in the blues song that black women sang to lament the abuse and capture of their husbands and loved ones.). (Elam, 2007)

In addition to Joe Turner, we have Bynum's vision of a Shiney Man. This man promised to reveal "the secret of life". Most critics have noted the fact that this so called Shiney Man has biblical overtones yet they have not indicated its mythical characteristics. Sandra L. Richards takes note of,

Critics Trudier Harris (1994) and Kim Pereira (1995) have noted that Bynum's description of the shiny man as "One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way" has biblical resonances, but with the exception of Paul Carter Harrison (1991) and Pereira, who offer brief comments, virtually no other critic has probed the narrative's relationship to Yoruba cosmology. In failing to identify this intertext, critics and audiences miss several things. Wilson has fashioned a diaspora text that, given its specific reference to Yoruba belief systems, posits migrancy as the norm and implies an Africa that is always-already hybrid. (Richards, 2004)

Act One culminates in Bynum's leading the people at the boardinghouse in an impromptu Juba, An example of a myth portrayed as a ritual, a dance/song of call and response, "reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves," and interconnecting participants with the antebellum South and beyond to the African past (Gantt, 2009). As mentioned in chapter four about the significance of music and the blues, music serves as a hidden myth in the plays too. In the case of Joe Turner we have the quest in search of one's song. As Elam explains,

Through the action of the play, Wilson reveals that Joe Turner imprisoned Herald Loomis and other black men in an effort to capture their "song." In Wilson's plays, music and song act as metaphors for African American identity, spirit, and soul. Through the invisible presence and symbolic activities of off-stage white characters, Wilson suggests that the dominant culture has continually sought to subjugate African-American humanity and suppress the power and ability of African-Americans to sing their song without looking over their shoulder. The spirituals also served as critiques of slavery, using biblical metaphors to protest the enslavement of black people. (Elam Jr., 2005)

In addition to biblical influences, Wilson has his four B's. As Samuel A. Hay explains, "Wilson found his inspiration for the play in part in Romare Bearden's collage *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket* (1978), which features a hunched-over man sitting sideways in a chair in front of a table with a child – a man, Wilson concluded, who was dejected". (Hay, 2007) This shows the mythical characteristic of paintings, or better to say, Bearden's collages. The inspiration of such a masterpiece is another masterpiece. Bearden's collage is a myth. It signifies Joe Turner's *Come and Gone* for Wilson. It signifies a lost African-American in search of his true self.

Loomis sacrifices his blood to make the stream of ancestors live forever. As with all of the plays, ancestral background is significant if the characters are to give meaning to their lives. Myths play important roles in the lives of all of us. Myths carry hundreds and thousands of experiences. They cannot be neglected. However, they take different forms as time passes. Barthes highlights this issue in his *Mythologies*. Myths are cultural and historical. Wilson manifests many ancient myths in his characters and their surroundings. This allows him to include many concepts indirectly in his plays. 'Signifying', as the main issue concerning black vernacular, has its roots in mythology. Thus, the African-American is inevitably bound by his/her roots which are full of mythical, spiritual and cultural touches.

3. The Piano Lesson

Set in the 1930's, *The Piano Lesson* takes place in the Charles household in Pittsburgh. Doaker Charles, his niece Berniece and her daughter Maretha are the main residents of the house. From the beginning with the description of the setting we capture the sense of African heritage:

Dominating the parlor is an old upright piano. On the legs of the piano, carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are

rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 2007)

The piano carries a history with it that is beyond a work of art. It says something, it wants to show its powers. It has on it traces of African sculpture which resemble totems. A totem represents the symbol of a family or tribe. The person who carved these totems wanted them to linger for ever. The piano and its totems become signifiers of a very rich sign in the past. Thus, to use Barthes' theorization of myth, the piano can represent a myth.

One morning at five o'clock the household is woken up by the sound of someone knocking loudly on their door. Boy Willie, Berniece's brother, arrives after three years absence. Accompanying him is Lyman his friend. They have come all the way from Mississippi with a truck full of watermelons to sell and make money. Boy Willie intends to sell the family piano and take his share so he can buy a piece of land in the south to start farming. However, Berniece believes the piano must stay in the family. Boy Willie tells them about James Sutter and how he was pushed down his well by "The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog". However, later on Berniece accuses him of killing Sutter because she saw his ghost calling out Boy Willie's name. She also accuses him of being the reason her husband, Crawley, died.

The whole play revolves around the "piano". An example of a myth portrayed as an object. This object carries a whole burden on its shoulders, the legacy of a family. Besides the piano, all the characters carry a load with themselves too. As Wilson explains himself,

Each major character in the play is a repository of family and community history, and these histories augment one another, sometimes conflicting in the details, but collectively preserving through storytelling an awareness of elements of the past that contributed to the lives they are presently living. (Londre, 2007)

Doaker is somehow the main storyteller. His depiction of the lives of those who came from "down there", (as the characters repeatedly call the South), to the North represents his nostalgia and his understanding of the way of life:

BOY WILLIE: How long you been with the railroad now?

DOAKER: Twenty-seven years. Now, I'll tell you something about the railroad. What I done learned after twenty-seven years. See, you got North. You got West. You look over here you got South. Over there you got East. Now, you can start from anywhere. Don't care where you at. You got to go one of them four ways. And whichever way you decide to go they got a railroad that will take you there. Now, there's something simple. You think anybody would be able to understand that. But you'd be surprised how many people trying to go North get on a train going West. They think the train's supposed to go where they going rather than where it's going.

Now, why people going? Their sister's sick. They leaving before they kill somebody...and they sitting across from somebody who's leaving to keep from getting killed. They leaving cause they can't get satisfied. They going to meet someone. I wish I had a dollar for every time that someone wasn't at the station to meet them. I done seen that a lot. In between the time they sent the telegram and the time the person get there...they done forgot all about them.

They got so many trains out there they have a hard time keeping them from running into each other. Got trains going every whichaway. Got people on all of them. Somebody going where somebody just left. If everybody stay in one place I believe this would be a better world... (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 2007)

Doaker's account of the journeys the African-American's made from the South to the North is a hint to what Henry Gates mentions as a tropological revision as a sign of signification in Black literature. Doaker reminds one of Toledo in *Ma Rainey*. The one who criticizes his fellow Negroes. He works in a railroad station. A place where people come and go. He observes people coming to be greeted yet being stood up. The railroad symbolizes the road to freedom. Each person takes a train to arrive at a place with more opportunities. Little do they know that it's the same everywhere. Doaker's last sentence clearly conveys Wilson's opinion on the fact that the African-American was better off if he/she stayed in the south instead of wandering about all over the country. Doaker's story is very much related to the way of life. It is as if there is no destination but a circular maze which continues on and on. To put it in Londre's words,

The all-embracing nature of the black aesthetic allows for apparent digressions like Doaker's monologue about 'trains going every whichaway' (19). The fact that his story seemingly has no point is exactly the point; life is not about the destination but the continuity, even with its unplanned detours. Similarly, the truck that keeps breaking down injects the unplanned into the plan. (Londre, 2007)

Berniece never plays the piano but she wants it to remain in the family. Boy Willie thinks of the benefits of the piano and wants to get rid of it. To Boy Willie, the piano is just an object to be sold and benefited from whereas Berniece believes it to be more sacred. According to Felicia Londre,

To achieve economic independence by making a living on the very land to which his enslaved great-grandfather was bound is what Boy Willie envisions as a way of redeeming the history of the family. Selling off a wooden relic that has fallen into disuse seems to him a small sacrifice in return for honoring his ancestors through the realization of his dream. (Londre, 2007)

Berniece has accepted the mythological qualities of the piano. The reason of Berniece's feeling toward the piano can be found in Doaker's story,

DOAKER: Now I'm gonna tell you something, Lymon don't know this...but I'm gonna tell you why me and Wining Boy and Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano.

Boy Willie: She ain't got to sell it! I'm gonna sell it! Berniece ain't got no more rights to that piano than I do.

DOAKER: I'm talking to the man...let me talk to the man. See, now...to understand why we say that...to understand about that piano...you got to go back to slavery time (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 2007)

Consequently, we grasp the fact that there is a whole history behind the piano. Doaker takes us back to his childhood. He shows Boy Willie how important the piano is to the family, DOAKER: ...It was coming up on Sutter's wedding anniversary and he was looking to buy his wife...Miss Ophelia was her name...he was looking to buy her an anniversary present. Only thing with him...he ain't had no money. But he had some niggers. (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 2007)

In order to buy the piano, Sutter sells Doaker's grandmother and his father who was just a child. By selling two of his slaves (one and a half nigger) he bought the piano. However, as time went by Miss Ophelia understood how much she needed her slaves and wished to have them back but the trade was done so Sutter asked Doaker's grandfather to carve the pictures of Berniece (Doaker's grandmother) and Boy Willie (Doaker's father) on the piano. Instead of just carving their pictures, Boy Willie carved a whole story:

DOAKER: Then he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That's when him and Mama Berniece got married. They called it jumping the broom. That's how you got married in them days. Then he got here when my daddy was born...and here he got Mama Esther's funeral...and down here he got Mr. Nolander taking Mama Berniece and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia. He got all kinds of things what happened with our family (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 2007)

With the aim to keep the legacy of the family alive, Boy Willie (the grandfather) carved what he thought as significant in their lives. Birth, marriage, suffering, death and etc. All of what the black family had experienced. Doaker's narration sounds like a tour guide, walking around and guiding the visitors through the history of an object. Similar to a paleontologist, Doaker delves into the background of the piano to reveal its hidden history. The piano has on it the events which happened to the Charles family and Doaker's brother Boy Charles believed that until the Sutter family has the piano with them they have them as slaves, DOAKER: Boy Charles used to talk about the piano all the time. He never could get it off his mind. He be talking about taking it out of Sutter's house. Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it...he had us. Say we was still in slavery. (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 2007)

By stealing the piano from the Sutter family, Boy Charles steals his history. The question raised at this point is how the past can have impact on the present? Boy Willie wants to make the best of what is left from the family yet Berniece wants to keep the piano to appreciate the history behind it. As Londre posits, "where they (Boy Willie and Berniece) differ so acrimoniously is over how the historical past should be allowed or used to impact on the present (Londre, 2007). Should Boy Willie sell it and make a living on their legacy and be proud or should Berniece keep the piano and be reminded every day of their past? This brings us close to Hutcheon's view of the referent and the past adjacent to the present

The referent is always already inscribed in the discourses of our culture. This is no cause for despair; it is the text's major link with the "world," one that acknowledges its identity as construct, rather than as simulacrum of some "real" outside. Once again, this does not deny that the past "real" existed; it only conditions our mode of knowledge of that past. We can know it only through its traces, its relics. (Hutcheon, 1988)

The piano cannot be denied but it can be questioned and observed from different perspectives. As with Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, there is also a sense of African spiritualism in *The Piano Lesson*. The ghost of Sutter constantly haunts the family. During the play we observe the constant debate between Berniece and Boy Willie over selling or keeping the piano. As we come to the end of the play we have a shift in belief. Boy Willie fights Sutter's ghost and Berniece finally starts playing the piano. Boy Willie realizes the importance of family heritage and Berniece comes to terms with the fact that she must overcome her fears to build a better future. The exorcism at the close of the play, when Berniece starts playing the piano and pleading help from her ancestors is somehow an act of redemption. In Londre's terms, they come to a point of self-realization.

When they are rid of Sutter's ghost, the lingering White dominant, they continue their lives in peace. However, if Berniece stops playing the tune of her ancestors, Boy Willie and Sutter might come back: BOY WILLIE: Hey berniece...if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano...ain't no telling...me and Sutter both liable to be back. (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*, 2007)

Conclusion

As seen throughout the study, myths are inevitable forces, tales, and guidance toward a better future for African-American lives. The semiological quality of the myths observed in each play, are employed to portray the everlasting presence of ancestral backgrounds in the African-American psyche. If the connection between each individual and his/her past is lost, s/he loses his/her identity. Similarly, the plays possess meaning as long as each myth has its role and

connection to each character as well as each story. Aunt Ester, Rituals and the piano all serve as significant ancestral roots, deeply connected to the lives of the characters and without which no meaningful identity would exist and continue to exist in the future. A savior to humankind, myths are interwoven and tightly held on to in every individual's life. Wilson, skillfully locates the individuals within each myth to keep the semiological system going throughout his cycle.

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