

**Nomos, Mysticism, and Power Objects in August Wilson's  
*Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Gem of the Ocean, and The Piano Lesson***  
By Marian Wolbers

In his plays *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Gem of the Ocean*, and *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson guides several of his main characters toward life-altering revelatory experiences that contain strong elements of ritual and mysticism. He is concerned with his characters' healing through spiritual revelation, so that each broken or separated individual may enter into the fullness of his or her identity and be able to carry on, affirming life through their coming-through-the-valley events. In *Joe Turner*, Loomis is assisted into finding his own song with the help of Bynum, a shaman. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen turns to the shaman Aunt Ester for his teachings. In *The Piano Lesson*, Berniece—a character who does not initially perceive of herself as lost—comes to terms with her need for ancestral past by physically and metaphysically reconnecting with the family piano.

In every instance, Wilson employs physical objects to propel healings in a forward direction, so that “stuck” individuals, through an investment of belief in the power of that object, achieve transcendence over obstacles in their lives. These power objects serve as focal points for a larger, intangible shift in characters who are in spiritual crisis, and as these hungry souls direct attention from their personal confusion into the power object, magical things happen—including restoration of a meaningful order, or nomos (Berger 19).<sup>[1]</sup>

First, it is important to note that characters do not come by revelation easily nor do they do it alone. The presence of other people, including the shamanic teachers Aunt Ester and Bynum—who resemble underground conductors on the spiritual railroad—is imperative. Second, the characters possess an unquestioned belief in a world beyond the tangible world, beyond waking reality, coupled with a profound respect and awareness of the power of dreams and visions; this constitutes a vital element of the African-American sensibility as revealed by Wilson (Morales 113). As Kim Pereira writes, “In Wilson’s world, spirits can emerge from a piano, the bones of the dead can offer spiritual reunions, and ghosts can walk the earth as easily as humans.” (97). Third, there is a sense of deliberate selection—even providential selection—with regard to the inanimate objects that are assigned power or imbued with power, as the case may be.

In *Joe Turner*, Bynum is established through dialogue as the go-to conjurer early in the play; he is tied to ritualistic voodoo-like practices such as burying pigeon blood and using roots, and is linked with the gifts of prophecy and wisdom about such matters as “binding” and love and destiny. When Mattie comes to him demanding that he get her man, Jack Carper, back, Bynum says he can easily use the roots to cause dissatisfaction in her man, and bring him back to her bed, but suggests that is not the right course: “Maybe he ain’t supposed to come back” (22), he says. In other words, the two are not cosmically meant to be bound together. After talking to her for a while, Bynum convinces Mattie that her lover is just “a strong thought in your mind” and that she can push this thought away more and more until “you wake up one morning and you won’t even be able to call him up on your mind” (24). Unless she does this, he cautions, she’s liable to stay “lost” from herself (true identity) and from “where the places come together, where you’re supposed to be alive, your heart kicking in your chest with a song worth singing” (22).

The latter reference to places coming together relates directly to *nomos*, or what Peter Berger calls alternately social order as well as “the sacred order of the cosmos” (24).

As Mattie begins to trust Bynum and surrender her mental hold on Jack, Bynum concretizes the path she is to follow for her own best welfare by giving her a “small cloth packet,” saying she’s to sleep with it under her pillow, and let it be “like a magnet” so that “it won’t be long before you forget all about Jack Carper” (24). No sooner is the healing amulet given to her than Mattie meets up with Jeremy, who becomes her new lover.

This healing episode with Mattie foreshadows the sacrifice and consequent “redefinition of the self” (Blumenthal 53) of Loomis with Bynum’s intercession and help. Bynum performs an exorcism of sorts, helping to rid Loomis of Joe Turner and freeing him into himself. In the juba sequence, Loomis experiences a vision of dry bones coming to life, draped with flesh. Although metaphysical entities, these bones may also be seen as power objects. They are given validity by Bynum through his call-and-response acceptance:

Bynum: Tell me about them bones, Herald Loomis. Tell me what you seen.

Loomis: I come to this place...to this water that was bigger than the whole world. And I looked out...and I seen these bones rise up out of the water. Rise up and begin to walk on top of it.

Bynum: Wasn’t nothing but bones and they walking on top of the water.

... [*Later in the same dialogue*] Only they ain’t bones no more.

Loomis: They got flesh on them. Just like you and me! (53-54)

In his trance state, Loomis is overcome. He can’t walk: “My legs won’t stand up!” (56). He is physically unable to join the ancestors as they walk on “down the road” (55).

The words that Loomis and Bynum exchange in ritualistic fashion are important because they propel the revelation experience forward into a full-fledged, otherworldly trance. In her writings about August Wilson and Henry Dumas, Dana Williams points out that just as the Biblical Ezekiel called out to cause the bones to come alive according to God’s direction, so too these writers are tellers of new stories that blend folklore and African tradition into the dry bones narrative to make it come alive, and have meaning, as they “privilege” their reality “over a reality defined by others” (319).

The communal setting of the juba, in which the Holy Ghost is called upon, has set the stage for Loomis’ surrender to spiritual guidance, through his profoundly direct vision of dry bones, all of which have come to life as black people. He knows that the bones are ancestors who have suffered before him; they cannot remain inert and dry in his consciousness if he is to realize self. A great wave washes over the bones, bringing them to walk again in the land of the living. Their example eventually aids Loomis in his own ability to walk again, to stand on his own

power. At the end of the play, Loomis completes his sacrificial rites as the old self dies completely. As Anna Blumenthal points out:

Loomis's cutting of himself and cleansing of himself with his own blood...constitutes the sacrificial act which binds him into the community of walkers, because his act is a sign that his loss of his family makes him a sufferer from oppression just as the Africans of the middle passage were. ...Like Abraham, Loomis is finally able to give up his child, and in doing so, let go the outworn definition of himself which has thus far controlled his actions... . (58)

For Loomis, *nomos*—order—is restored. He knows himself (his song), he has accepted his losses, and he has clarified his relationship in the community of others, past and present.

Like Bynum, Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean* is the person sought after by folks whose lives are out of order. Citizen Barlow, “a young man from Alabama who is in spiritual turmoil” (5), comes to Aunt Ester’s house and stands, waiting, across the street for hours on end until she is ready to receive him. As with Loomis, Citizen Barlow also finds himself dealing with bones—a City of Bones. Aunt Ester first tests Citizen by sending him on a journey, or quest, much like any mythical hero (Campbell ). She chooses two pennies as objects for Citizen to focus on, setting in motion the magic(k) nature of these coins. Although no mention is made of Lincoln in the play, it seems deliberately symbolic that coins engraved with the image of the liberating president are chosen.

Upon Citizen’s return, Aunt Ester solicits the help of her protégée, the apprentice shaman Bloody Mary, who brings in a special quilt—another power object—with a map on it. “See that right there... It’s a city,” says Aunt Ester. “You want to go there, Mr. Citizen? I can take you there if you want to go. That’s the center of the world.” Thus begins Aunt Ester’s lengthy, fiery soliloquy about the people “with a burning tongue” who “didn’t make it across the water,” and the ocean and the stars and the wind, all the while fashioning a boat out of paper (52-53). Unbeknownst to Citizen, this paper is actually Ester’s Bill of Sale from her slave days, a fact that imbues it with the heavy weight of the bearer’s past struggles.

Aunt Ester continues, “You see that, Mr. Citizen. That’s a boat. You gonna take a ride on that boat” (53). Using only words and gestures, she convinces Citizen of possibilities beyond the paper reality. Handing the paper boat to the young man, she says, “That’s a magic boat... Do you believe it can take you to that city?” He answers, “I don’t know Miss Tyler.” She insists, “If you believe it can take you. God got room for everybody” (54). Aunt Ester’s words are seductive to Citizen who desperately wants God to wash his soul clean (55), to rid him of the deeply troubling burden on his heart. As the power of her words sink into him, he focuses more closely on the boat, saying, at last, “Yeah, I want to go.” He surrenders himself to Aunt Ester, to God, and to the journey; the paper boat has figured prominently in his decision.

Later that evening, Citizen sails away on Aunt Ester’s *Gem of the Ocean* boat in a mystical rite that involves others (Eli, Solly, Mary) who have already gone on the journey themselves. Aunt Ester has told him he must bring along the two pennies, and chastises him for failing to get an iron piece from Jilson Grant: “That iron would have made you strong” (62). A new power object emerges onto the scene, however, when Solly gives Citizen iron in the form of

his own “good luck chain link” (62), an action that portends his (Solly’s) own death (which may be viewed as the ultimate freedom) later in the play. With some strong drink in him, the penitent is finally ready for the metaphysical experience that is to change him profoundly. As did Loomis, Citizen relives the lives and deaths of the Middle Passage, connecting with the slave ship in a zone where time no longer matters. He tries to pay the Gatekeeper his two pennies to get into the city but is held back. As chanting and singing continue around him, Citizen is finally pushed to the brink. Aunt Ester reminds him of Peter, and the need to tell the truth. “What do you see?” she asks him. And, “The truth has to stand in the light,” she says (69), whereupon Citizen finally confesses he sees in the Gatekeeper the face of the man he wronged, a man who committed suicide rather than confess to a crime he did not do. Citizen summons up his full confession and guilt, and then the Gate opens at last. Wilson’s directions then read, “(*Overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the city and the people with their tongues on fire, Citizen Barlow, now reborn as a man of the people, sits down and begins to cry.*)” (69-70).

Again, the spoken word, incantation-like, serves as a magical force to invest such objects as pennies, a chain link, and a paper boat with a power and energy beyond the physical. Belief comes about through Citizen’s yielding, spurred by his own unquenchable yearning to do whatever he must to be cleansed of his offense against God’s order. The reward for surrender to spirit is *nomos*, a liberating re-ordering of the world. The path to liberation, Wilson insists, must necessarily involve reconciling with ancestral suffering. In writing about Wilson, Paul Harrison explains that “inside the spiritual dynamism of the ancestors—perceived and made useful in the present as opposed to being arrested in the past—is the true song of redemption and liberation” (314).

Amadou Bissiri agrees, writing that Africanness lies beneath all of the folklore, the myths, the mysticism, and conjuring in Wilson’s plays. The invisible world, he says, is taken quite seriously by African societies: referring to Soyinka’s *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, Bissiri writes, “Ritual ceremonies are an attempt to retrieve the original oneness; they are reenactments of the gods’ dramas in their first attempts to re-unite with humans” (2).

Bissiri also notes that “the dead have emotions” (4) which, judging by *The Piano Lesson*, is a core notion for Wilson’s Berniece and Boy Willie characters. In this play, ghosts not only walk the earth but are vested as energies within an ancestral piano artistically carved with the faces of African family members. Importantly, these wooden faces of forebears were crafted by an enslaved family member who was grieving for his own immediate family members—a wife and child torn from him.

The very validity of the word “inanimate” is called into question in this play, especially as it pertains to the large, sound-producing, dominant physical object that is the piano. If the root word *anima* refers to that which has breath, spirit, or life (Webster’s also lists *anima* as “soul” while Jung regards *anima* as the true inner self of the individual, as opposed to *persona*), then the piano that plays on its own is animate, not inanimate. Its alive qualities are what keeps Berniece from touching it, for fear of waking the spirits. In *Mana: Beyond Belief*, a documentary movie produced by Roger Manley and Peter Friedman, power objects and the belief systems surrounding them are shown to be a worldwide phenomenon, whether that object is the Shroud

of Turin or an “heirloom pocketwatch” (1). Emile Durkheim, writing in 1912, noted that common objects become sacred objects because of “something added” (Derlon and Mauze 1).

Wilson exhibits this as he shows how power objects not only exist but become sacred wherever they embody or contain meaning for the beholder. In *The Piano Lesson*, the piano becomes not only the focal point but the only cure for what ails Berniece: By playing the piano, connecting with ancestors who watch over her, she liberates herself. With the piano as sacred vessel, she gains the power to become a sacred vessel herself, the gift of who she truly is.

Berniece’s liberation, an action that also serves to rescue the family, is possible only in a convergence of past, present, and future. It may be said that her revelation is ritually derived, since in ritual all aspects of temporality merge as one. Bissiri explains, “The past, the present, and the future are faces of the same reality, of life, of being. To deny or to search for the past engages and determines one’s ontological self, one’s identity.”

Through reunification with ancestral energies in the presence of a living, breathing kin-community—all of whom are witnesses to transformation, all three soul-searching characters in these plays become integrated as every aspect of their lives—what was, what is, what will be—comes alive as “faces of the same reality.” The objects that served to transport them have accomplished their purpose toward the larger end of a meaningful order, which is, on the August Wilson stage, mystically wrought and cyclical in nature.