Reality and Misperception of Self-Value: August Wilson’s Use of Dramatic Plot Structure in Act One of Gem of the Ocean

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August Wilson, perhaps the most revered African American playwright of the 20th century, presented to the American public a dramatic visualization of the black experience in an oppressive and defiant society. His century cycle—a series of ten plays representing each decade of the 20th century—provides a sequence of stories illustrating the realities African Americans faced throughout history, and works as a venue to highlight the misperceptions that ardently ignored those realities. In a speech to the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference in 1996, Wilson asserted the “ground on which [one] stands,” is the “affirmation of the value of one’s being, an affirmation of his worth in the face of this society’s urgent and sometimes profound denial” (Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, 11). These words manifest themselves in his plays. In the cycle’s first installment, *Gem of the Ocean*, for instance, Wilson implements dramatic tools to demonstrate these affirmations. In particular, Wilson’s use of dramatic plot structure highlights the challenges African American’s faced at the turn of the century, and identifies the social and cultural interplays of black realities. In Act One of *Gem of the Ocean* Wilson offers the play’s exposition, complication, and climax. The first two stages of plot structure, exposition and complication, are especially effective in delivering the playwright’s message of affirming one’s value amid a society forged upon discrimination and racial supremacy. Specifically, Wilson uses exposition to first establish the oppressed existence of black realities, and subsequently introduces complication as a medium to express the social misperceptions challenging and ignoring those realities.

In order to understand Wilson’s skillful use of plot structure, the audience must first engage a working knowledge of exposition and complication. According to “The Dramatic Vision,” an introductory overview of drama as literature, the most “valuable analysis of dramatic plot structure,” comes in five stages: exposition and complication (rising stages), followed by climax and then two falling stages, falling action and resolution (Roberts and Jacobs, 1269).
Beyond providing the audience with the play’s background, setting, characters and their situations, exposition also supplies the donnée, or “the raw material with which the artist starts…the given” (Harmon et. al, 150). This ‘given,’ “set of assumptions…upon which [the] work of literature or drama proceeds,” illustrates the play’s eternal truths, convictions backed by profound historical evidence (“Donnée”). In Gem of the Ocean, Wilson identifies the donnée as a culture of African American oppression, poverty, and injustice in constant conflict with social misperceptions of black equality, opportunity, and freedom.

Through exposition, Wilson artistically crafts the donnée to establish expectations and truths of black realities. In the first dialogue of the play Eli affirms the realities of the poor, discriminated Negro by explaining to Black Mary how the local constable continues to evict black residents when they cannot meet rent exactly on time (a result of inconsistent wages and pay checks), and proceeds to arrest them for loitering once evicted. “He just gather up what little stuff they got,” Eli says, “and sit it out on the street. Then he arrest them for being out there” (Wilson, Gem, 10). Caesar, the constable and primary antagonist of the drama, is both African American and Black Mary’s brother. Throughout exposition Caesar remains characterized through the speech of others, most often in derision of his authority and seemingly unjust power. Moreover, Caesar’s autocratic role as a character—the audience learns he also operates the mill where most black’s in town work, a bakery, as well as the tenements where he so willfully evicts and arrests residents—opposes that of the typical African American in the play, isolating Caesar from the black population and ironizing his role as constable. By illuminating the characterizations of Caesar, Black Mary and Eli early on, Wilson successfully implements the stage of exposition as a tool to establish black realities.
In addition to exposing the impoverished and subjugated realities of African American’s in 1904, Wilson also uses introductory elements of exposition to highlight the characters’ “affirmation of the value of one’s being”. Specifically, the distinct methods of characterization, or the, “the representation…of actions and emotions on the characters’ inner self,” throughout Act One elucidate the black individual’s constant struggle of proving individual and social worth. For example, Aunt Ester’s character, the matriarch of 1839 Wylie Avenue, provides a medium for the discovery of self-value in Citizen Barlow. Citizen tells Black Mary he came to see Ester because “[he] got to get [his] soul washed real bad,” and was told Aunt Ester “can help anybody” (Wilson, Gem, 42). As Black Mary points out, though, “you got to help yourself. Aunt Ester can help you if you willing to help yourself” (42). In this short but revealing exchange, Citizen evidences his desire to confess, to “wash his soul,” an act representative of a person in pursuit of greater self-value. However, he cannot get there without Ester. Moreover, Black Mary tells the audience Ester can only help those willing to help themselves. Her assertion suggests the affirmation of one’s value comes not through the validation of others, but through personal triumph and discovery.

Wilson further exemplifies the self-discovering route to attaining individual worth with the letter Solly Two Kings receives from his sister in Alabama. Contrary to expectations of what “freedom” may have meant for African American’s in the South, Solly’s sister explains “the people are having a hard time with freedom…the white peoples is gone crazy and won’t let anybody leave” (Wilson, Gem, 15). She goes on to describe how blacks are beaten and killed in their attempt to flee under their newly allotted “freedom”. By illuminating the veil of freedom supposedly bestowed on African Americans in the South, and the realities resulting from such false-autonomy, Wilson demonstrates how such an act removes the oppressed Negro’s ability to affirm the value of her own being. Ultimately, Solly’s sister and her letter provide a mechanism
for the audience to understand freedom and individual value come from the self, not prescribed by any outside persons or institutions.

Finally, the story’s background portrayed in exposition exemplifies the arduous livelihoods sustained by African Americans to survive in a society determined to diminish black existence. Citizen Barlow, Eli, and Solly, (among others) present a life of assiduous work that results in menial compensation, and discriminatory working environments. Citizen Barlow, for example, escaped Alabama only four weeks prior to his introduction in the drama, and found work at the mill in the Hill District. Although he found a job at the mill (incidentally run by Caesar), Citizen finds himself in a situation similar to the one he fled in Alabama: stuck. Wilson utilizes the situatedness of being stuck as a salient theme. This “concept made concrete through representation in person, action and image” throughout the drama establishes the reality of the struggle black workers faced in achieving fair compensation and social justice (Harmon et. al, 476). In Citizen’s case, after escaping the South where racism, discrimination and brutality were guised as “freedom,” he began working at the mill in Pittsburgh. Just as Citizen was forced to make a drastic decision to escape the oppressive South in order for his own survival, so too does he find it necessary to rebel in the work place to save himself. He confesses to Aunt Ester, “I stole a bucket of nails. The mill wouldn’t pay me so I stole a bucket of nails” (Wilson, Gem, 46). At this point in the drama the audience knows the catastrophic result of the stolen nails. Not until the end of Act One, however, does Citizen reveal himself as the thief, again illustrating Wilson’s theme of being “stuck”. With the mill refusing to pay Citizen for his work, stealing the nails seemed his only viable choice; a situation not of his own contrivance, but one forced upon him by the unjust system for which he worked. Through Citizen’s dilemma at the mill Wilson exhibits the onerous livelihoods of black American’s, and the institutions so intent on debasing them.
After the exposition establishes these truths, Wilson advances the drama by introducing the complication. In particular, his stage of complication contrasts with the presented realities, revealing the social misperceptions surrounding black existence. These “beginning[s] of difficulties that seem overwhelming and insoluble,” contradict the realities illustrated in exposition, and become most clearly portrayed through the characterization of Caesar (Roberts and Jacobs, 1269). Caesar’s physical introduction in the play comes in the exact same form as Citizen’s introduction in the prologue. Eli answers a knock on the door, sees it is Caesar, and immediately responds, “This a peaceful house” (Wilson, Gem, 31). Eli’s assumptive response to Caesar’s presence emphasizes the constable’s inability to maintain peace, the very role for which a constable is responsible. That Caesar’s antagonistic reputation precedes him ironizes his character and further distances him from the realities presented through exposition.

One example characterizing Caesar’s misperception of black value manifests itself in his conversations with Citizen and Black Mary. Specifically, while talking with Citizen about where he came from and why he came to Pittsburgh, Caesar offers Citizen a quarter and tells him “[he] gonna see what [Citizen] do with that” (Wilson, Gem, 33). Caesar believes his offer can make Citizen successful, but that too often “these niggers take and throw their money away…[they] can’t see it’s all up for [them] to do anything [they] want…” (33). Earlier in the drama, however, Wilson demonstrates how such “opportunities” mask the reality they present: “freedom” in the South results in violence and brutal discrimination; and “job opportunities” in the North provide less than livable situations. Caesar, in his position of authority, remains blind to this double consciousness. Indeed he is ignorant to and exempt from this reality: the limbo-state of having legal freedom, yet remaining socially, culturally, and racially oppressed. Caesar’s profound blindness dictates his misperceptions of black value.
Moreover, Caesar’s perception of blacks as “troublemakers,” and unwilling workers, illustrated through the stage of complication, elucidates his ignorance towards the realities presented through exposition. Charles Mills offers an illuminating examination of such ignorance in his essay “White Ignorance.” Mills defines ignorance as both “false belief and the absence of true belief,” both of which cause the “spread of misinformation,” and the “distribution of error,” especially in regards to social practices (Mills, 16). Caesar, tainted by a world of impoverished, working class blacks unable to meet payments due to unjust working climates and widespread discrimination, exhibits false belief in proclaiming African Americans often squander opportunities for success. He ignores the veil created around these opportunities, and in his status of power, succumbs to the perceptions of the oppressors. Mills suggests “if society is one structured by relations of domination and subordination…then in certain areas this conceptual apparatus is likely going to be shaped and inflected in various ways by the biases of the ruling group(s)” (25). Caesar, while still a black man and in no way completely assimilated into the ruling group of white males, becomes subject to these biases and perpetuates them through social mediation. Moreover, Mills explains “white” ignorance does not explicitly exclude people of color from participating and propagating such perceptions. “Providing that the causal route is appropriate,” Mills says, “blacks can manifest white ignorance also” (22). With authoritative power as his causal route, Caesar undoubtedly manifests white ignorance.

In addition to perpetuating an attitude of white ignorance, Caesar further contrasts with black realities through delusions of personal supremacy. Towards the end of Act One Caesar explains to Black Mary how he came to his status of power, relaying to his sister the trials he had to overcome in order to affirm his own value. Caesar fails to realize, however, his coming to power required conflict with the law, overcoming discrimination, setting up illegal operations, working outside and against the institutions so resolute on devaluing him: the very same
tribulations he now derides in most other African Americans. “I had to put some bullet holes in a
couple niggers and the police arrested me,” he says, “I had to bust a couple of niggers upside the
head…” (Wilson, Gem, 39). By revealing a past that includes much of the very experiences he
now condemns, Caesar’s character portrays himself as falsely superior, claiming, “in the valley
of the blind the one-eyed man is king” (39). Although Caesar appears to have affirmed his self-
worth in the face of social rejection, he is now participant to that society’s “profound denial.”

Through exposition, the audience engages with black realities of 1904, realities defined
by discrimination, oppression, economic injustice, racial supremacy, and yet a coinciding desire
for self-improvement; for affirming “the value of one’s being.” Eli, Aunt Ester’s protector,
characterizes an indefatigable work ethic; Solly proves heroic in his desire to save his sister from
the violent South; and Ester acts as a catalyst for the discovery of self-worth. Even with these
self-evident affirmations of personal value, however, Wilson’s use of complication reminds the
audience of the debilitating social misperceptions surrounding black existence in America. By
presenting exposition and complication in such intricate contrast, Wilson successfully reveals the
struggle between reality and perception of the African American at the turn of the century.
Works Cited


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