



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
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Illuminating Gem of the Ocean with Art Representing African Diaspora

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America's history of slavery is one many of us would like to forget. And when we do revisit this history, it is often from a too-distant vantage point that allows us to oversimplify. We scorn the oppressors' violent injustice but too easily ignore how present-day systems allow injustice to continue. We pity the victims of the atrocities without realizing that pity alone can strip people of individuality, identity, and strength. But August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, the opening play of his Century Cycle representing the African American experience through each decade of the 1900s, challenges readers to come face-to-face with the difficult past to heal and move forward. Wilson expects his readers to have a level of cultural understanding to appreciate the depth of his allusions to African heritage and spirituality. This unit will use images ranging from historic to contemporary to help students gain understanding of the play's cultural and historical context. Through this process of examining images, students will strengthen their close reading skills, which they will apply to their reading of the play. Then, as they read the play, they will examine images that will help them gain knowledge related to allusions they'll encounter later in their reading or develop a richer understanding of what they've already read. At the end of the unit, students will create a museum exhibit entry with a piece of visual art, a passage from *Gem of the Ocean*, and their own analysis writing that explores the unit's guiding question: How can representation of African diaspora history and culture enslave people, empower people, or overcome the past?

This unit was designed for a Grade 11 IB DP Literature course but could be adapted for Grades 10-12.

(Developed for International Baccalaureate Diploma Program English Literature, Year 1, grade 11; recommended for English Language Arts, grades 10-12)

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