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## **Illuminating Gem of the Ocean with Art Representing African Diaspora**

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### **Introduction**

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“The people made a kingdom out of nothing. They were the people that didn’t make it across the water. They sat down right there. They say, ‘Let’s make a kingdom. Let’s make a city of bones’”<sup>1</sup>.

In August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester educates Citizen Barlow about the City of Bones. The city is Wilson’s literary representation of the afterlife of the Africans who died through the Middle Passage, and it is the place Citizen must visit to understand his ancestry’s painful past, atone for his present sins, and become a leader who will help his people. Although the International Baccalaureate’s works in translation requirement gives my literature course more of a world literature focus, this play by Pittsburgh’s home-grown August Wilson has been a part of the curriculum since before I started teaching the course several years ago. Wilson’s rich, poetic use of African American Vernacular English paired with his story of transformation that addresses topics, such as the necessity of living in authenticity, understanding one’s heritage and history, and challenging injustice, makes Wilson’s play one that my students relate to, appreciate, and learn from. *Gem of the Ocean*, which begins Wilson’s Century Cycle chronicling the African American experience through each decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is one example of an African American artist telling the history of his people in a way that reclaims the power and dignity taken away from this group. Wilson says of his body of work, “I write about the black experience in America. And contained within that experience, because it is a human experience, are all the universalities.” My students can appreciate the play with minimal background knowledge. However, every year that I teach the play, I find myself wishing that my students and I had gone deeper, that we had spent more time elucidating Wilson’s artful use of history, African culture, imagery, and symbolism. My students often find themselves with “a feeling” that certain objects within the play are significant, but they fall short of realizing the full weight of these moments.

As powerful as the written word is, images can expedite an idea, an emotion, or an understanding of a history. Through pairing a variety of images and artwork—ranging from historic to contemporary—with Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*, I will help students better understand this play’s deep historical and cultural context, as well as how artists and writers represent African diaspora culture to achieve a variety of ends. By comparing 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist art to more contemporary art created by Black artists, such as Romare Bearden, Kerry James Marshall, and Kehinde Wiley, students will gain a richer understanding of the significance of

Wilson’s work and the work of all artists who use their craft to challenge the forces of an unjust empire.

This unit’s content will begin with a pre-reading section that explains how I will use images to help students gain thematic and cultural background information before they begin reading the text. In addition to using images to help students begin discussing relevant thematic and cultural background topics, the activities in this section will also help students strengthen their close-reading skills—both of images and literary text. I will model the close-reading process first in the whole-class space as guided discussion. When they are ready for more independent viewing, students will progress into small group and gallery walk activities in which they examine images and bring their observations into whole-class discussions. The content and activities within that section should require three to five 42-minute class periods. Then, in the reading section, I provide several opportunities to help elucidate students’ understanding of *Gem of the Ocean* as they read the play over a two-week period. For each section, I suggest when in the reading of the play to place the content and suggested activities. Some activities involve using images to introduce ideas that will help students understand allusions, imagery, or symbolism they will encounter later in their reading. Other activities will follow given sections of reading, requiring students to use their reading of the literature to evaluate the images. I explain techniques and more detailed activities to help convey the content to students in the Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities sections. The unit ends with a culminating activity in which students create a museum exhibit entry that pairs a work of visual art with a passage from the play—both selected by the student. The students’ exhibit entries will include their analysis of the art, the literary passage, and how the two connect with one another. I anticipate the unit will require four to five weeks of class time in a traditional (42-minute class period) schedule.

## Teaching Situation and Rationale

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My school, the Barack Obama Academy of International Studies (or simply Obama Academy), is an International Baccalaureate magnet school in the Pittsburgh Public School District. Seventy-two percent of the student body identifies as African American; 18 percent as white; 7 percent as multi-racial; 2 percent as Hispanic; and 1 percent as Asian. No entry exam or essay is required to gain admission, but students must maintain a 2.5 average GPA to attend. While some families are attracted by an IB education, many families enroll their children because they believe my school provides a safer environment than their assigned neighborhood schools. Under my school’s full inclusion model, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) learn alongside regular education students of widely varying ability ranges, as well as students with documented Gifted Individualized Education Plans (GIEPs).

Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean* is a great core text to meet the large range of needs in my Grade 11 English classes. Immediately, my African American students say, these characters “talk like us.” Although the play is set in 1904, Wilson’s use of language, meaningful conflict, and relevant themes draw my students in. The play’s main conflict and plot line offer students plenty to analyze and discuss, while Wilson’s layered use of history and culture give readers even more nuance and complexity to wrestle with. This unit’s art pairings will help all learners gain the tools of analysis and contextual understanding to create deeper meaning out of the play’s rich symbols and allusions.

Before I move on to the content of this unit, I must reflect on how my identity as a white educator impacts my teaching of this unit. In 1987, Wilson told the *New York Times*, “Blacks in America want to forget slavery—the

stigma, the shame. That's the wrong move. If you can't be who you are, who can you be?"<sup>2</sup> Wilson, as a Black man, has authority to express this blunt opinion, but as a white educator, I must approach this subject matter with respect and sensitivity. My African American students are well-aware of their ancestry's painful past with slavery, and it is a difficult topic for some of them. The study of such difficult history could be a source of racial trauma that I do not want to inflict. I will strive to teach this unit in a way that does not fixate on the painful past of slavery but acknowledges it with opportunity for an abundance of student voice and a celebration of the triumph, richness, and resilience in African American culture and history.

## Content Objectives

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### Guiding Question

How can representation of African diaspora history and culture enslave people, empower people, or overcome the past?

### Prereading: Gaining Thematic and Cultural Background through Images

Before my students begin reading *Gem of the Ocean*, I will use images and artwork to help my students gain or activate relevant historical knowledge, begin to grapple with important theme topics, and get in the practice of using close reading skills for all texts, whether visual or written. In the sections that follow, I list several key background topics to help enrich students' understanding of *Gem of the Ocean* and explain how the suggested art can help students gain knowledge and understanding of those topics, as well as an understanding of the significance of how artists represent African diaspora. In addition to the information provided below, I will also provide students with a bit of helpful biographical information on each artist. I will dedicate three to four 42-minute class periods to the examination of these works of art and discussion of background information.

### Slave Ship: Introducing the Middle Passage



Fig. 1 Turner, Joseph Mallord, *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*, 1840, oil on canvas. Boston, Museum of Fine Art.

The pivotal City of Bones scene I described in the introduction references the Middle Passage of the Atlantic

slave trade. I will use J. M. Turner's *Slave Ship* (1840) oil on canvas painting (Fig. 1) to begin our use of images to discuss some of this history and its representation. Turner's Romantic seascape painting portrays a ship moving off into the distance in the direction of dark skies representing the title's typhoon coming on. Other than that splotch of black on the left, though, the sky is vibrant—a blend of reds, oranges, yellows, and even bright blues with soft white clouds behind the ship. The ocean waves are rough but not too violent yet. The viewer cannot get too caught up in admiring the sublime beauty of the seascape before noticing the arms and legs of the enslaved Africans thrown off the ship. This horrific image was inspired by the 1781 scandal of Brittain's slave ship the *Zong*, whose captain threw ill and near-death enslaved people overboard to claim insurance money<sup>3</sup>. Some viewers might believe Turner's intention is to elicit shock, pity, or rage within his viewers while denouncing the evils of the slave trade. However, some details, such as Turner's attention to the beauty of the natural setting and the fact that beyond this painting Turner did not leave much indication of his opinions on slavery<sup>4</sup>, add more complexity to this work.

Marcus Wood's *Blind Memory: Visual representations of slavery in England and America* offers some interpretation and history that will help illuminate the class's discussion on this painting. Wood argues that Turner's painting "is the only indisputably great work of Western art ever made to commemorate the Atlantic slave trade"<sup>5</sup>. His lengthy interpretive history of the work presents an array of readings through history—ranging from comedic responses to the slave's leg in the foreground<sup>6</sup> to comparisons to the biblical story of Noah's arc<sup>7</sup> to connections of Turner's color symbolism to violence and murder<sup>8</sup>. Wood concludes that Turner's painting is "brave" in taking on such a difficult, horrific subject. His closing quotation of Ziva Amishai-Maisels presents the challenge an artist faces (particularly a white artist) when depicting the atrocities of the slave trade:

How does one combine the artist's pleasure in the act of creation with the horrific subject matter which is the source of the creation? And finally how does one guard against the spectator's being struck primarily by the beauty of the work, lest he/[she] feel that an atrocity can be beautiful?<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the class would benefit from bringing the question of race into the conversation: In what ways does the artist's race impact their representation of the Atlantic slave trade and its victims? Should white artists avoid subject matter like this altogether?

### **Significance of Representation: Comparing Images of Slave Ships**

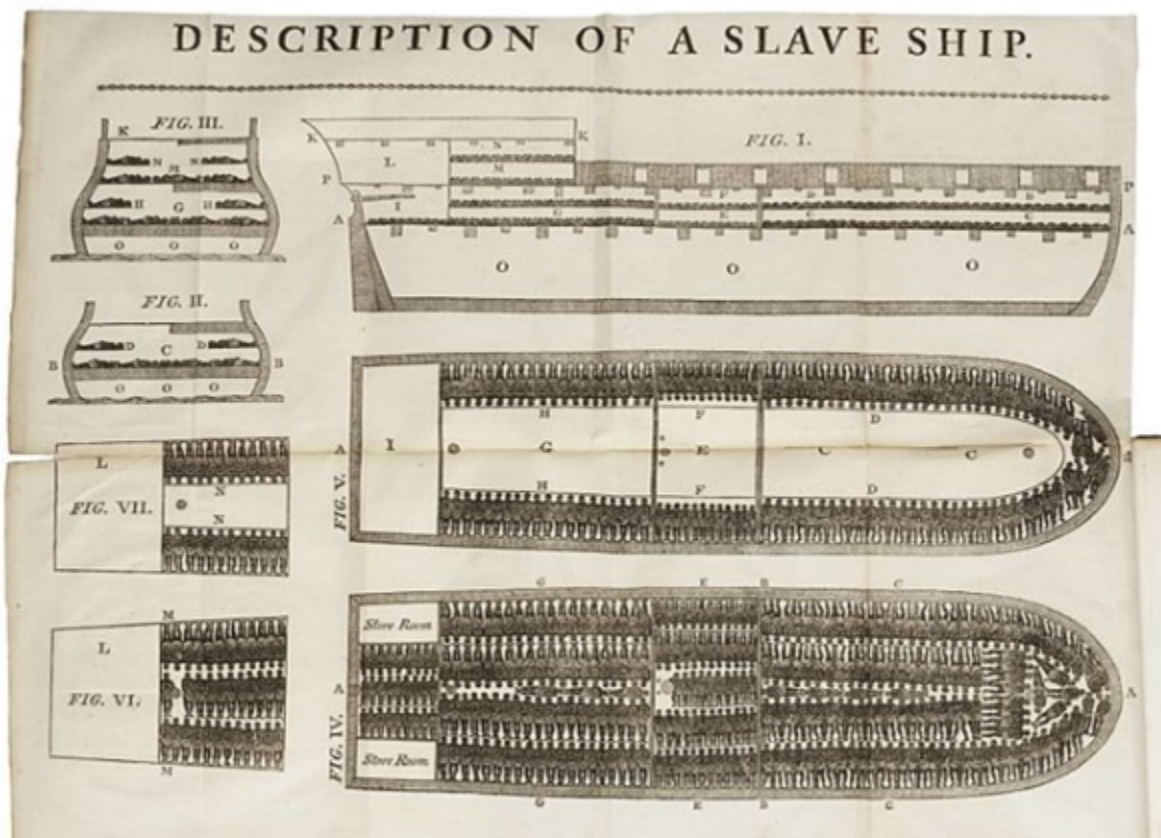


Fig. 2 London Committee of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Description of a Slave Ship, 1789, woodcut illustration. Princeton, Princeton University Library.

The paintings I will feature for analysis in this grouping include the London's Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade's *Description of a Slave Ship* copper engraving (1789) (Fig. 2), *Capture of a Slave Ship* (1915 wood engraving based on Sir J. Noel Paton's 1867 oil painting) (Fig. 3), Francis Meynell's watercolor painting *View of the Deck of the Slave Ship Albanoz* (1846) (Fig. 4), and Kerry James Marshall's *Voyager* (1992) (Fig. 5). See the Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities sections for suggestions on how to use these images with students.

Although *Description of a Slaveship* is arguably the most powerful image of the British abolitionist movement, the image's representation of the enslaved Africans is problematic. It's ship deck lined with indistinguishable, dark human bodies presents the enslaved African people as a commodity. Granted, the creators intended this representation to horrify people and, thus, achieve their abolitionist agenda. However, the image presents another aspect of their agenda, "which dictated that slaves were to be visualised in a manner which emphasised their total passivity and prioritized their status as helpless victims"<sup>10</sup>. Francis Meynell painted his *View of the Deck of the Slave Ship Albanoz* in 1846 while working as a British naval officer stationed off the coast of West Africa. Having abolished its practice of the slave trade in 1807, Britain now worked to end the slave trade in Spain, Portugal, and America; Meynell represents the deck of the Spanish *Albanoz* in his painting. Students might notice that Meynell's depiction gives more humanity to its subjects than does *Description of a Slave Ship*. The chaotic and crowded arrangement of the enslaved, the subjects' barely visible (sometimes absent) faces, and the use of light that highlights the structure of the ship more than the individuals' features work together to create a sense of empathy and pity that only strengthens the narrative of the African enslaved as weak, hopeless objects<sup>11</sup>. J. Noel Paton's *Capture of a Slave Ship* takes this



representation further with its presence of British sailors reaching down into the ship's hold to rescue the enslaved people. Students should notice the level of detail put into the features of both the enslaved Africans and the British rescuers, but they might question the accuracy of the image's representation of the Africans—Do the features seem African? How much variety exists among the features when comparing one individual to the next? Furthermore, the enslaved in the ship's cargo display expressions and gestures of fear, desperation, and near hopelessness, while their British rescuers, angel- or even godlike, reach down from above to save these seemingly “lost souls from the infernal regions”<sup>12</sup> .

African American artist Kerry James Marshall's *Voyager* presents another perspective on the slave trade. The painting is based on accounts of the slave ship *Wanderer* that arrived with over four hundred enslaved West Africans on Jekyll Island, Georgia on October 28, 1858—an action prohibited by the 1808 “Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves”<sup>13</sup> . The *Wanderer* was a luxury yacht purchased by Savannah resident Charles L. Lamar and transformed into a slave ship. Unlike the crowded holds of the previous ships, Marshall depicts the *Wanderer* as a small sailboat transporting only two individuals: a female kneeling at the prow, looking forward into the distance and surrounded by a wreath of pink and white roses, and a male, whose upper body is obscured by the ship's sail. This representation allows viewers to focus on the individuality of the people, rather than the horrific conditions they faced. The image offers plenty of detail to remind readers of the terror, violence, and bondage: the woman's facial expression (Even though some students might observe a sense of strength.), the black sky, the windowless shotgun house, the diagrams of fetuses that seem to bleed onto the image below, the people's nakedness, the skull in the bottom, center. However, curator Abigail Winograd observes other key details that represent the beauty, strength, and creativity of the cultures represented:

Lyrical drawn Afro-Cuban *nsibidi*, an ideographic form of script from Nigeria, and Haitian *vévés* (religious symbols) adorn the sail and sky. These drawings reference the religious practices and cultural forms brought by enslaved Africans to the New World, serving as evidence of the creative forms of active resistance and sophisticated assimilation that resulted from the forced African diaspora.<sup>14</sup>

### **Racism, Migration North, and Pittsburgh**

The images in this section will help students gain knowledge and understanding of the physical and cultural setting of early-1900s Pittsburgh. Students will participate in a gallery walk activity to help them discuss the images, the significance of representation, and the attitudes they suggest (See Classroom Activities.)



Fig. 8 Outcault, Richard Felton. "Postcard depicting a caricatured boy eating a slice of watermelon," 1909, ink on paper. Washington, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Minstrel show propaganda and artifacts of every day racist paraphernalia are revolting and can illustrate the pervasive racism and stereotypes that impacted African Americans at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Minstrel shows began in New York in the 1830s and were widely popular during the setting of *Gem of the Ocean*. Satirizing plantation life, actors in blackface portrayed African Americans as ignorant, crude, dishonest, and licentious. The shows used comedy to create and perpetuate stereotypes and unify white audiences by giving them a common object of ridicule. A poster for W. H. West's Big Minstrel Jubilee (Figure 6) and an image of "The Original Jim Crow" (Figure 7) on a cover to an early edition of the Jump Jim Crow sheet music speak to the popularity of these shows in the northern states, as well as the damaging, unfair stereotypes they perpetuated. Images like the postcard featuring a caricature of an African American boy eating watermelon (Figure 8) accompanied by the text "I'm just very busy right now" show the just how pervasive these stereotypes were<sup>15</sup>.

Nineteenth century photographs of Pittsburgh will help students visualize the setting of Aunt Ester's home on the Hill District in 1904 Pittsburgh, as well as the conditions of the factories and mills that affected several of the play's characters. Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art has helpful photographs in its collection, including mill scenes (Figures 9 and 10), the Detroit Publishing Company's "Panoramic View of Pittsburgh" (Figure 11), and "Pittsburgh: Market District" (Figure 12).

Through the 1960s, African American artist Romare Bearden, who became a sort of muse for Wilson, created collages that depicted African American life in the rural South and the urban North. While the collages are

reminiscent of life in the earlier decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the decades leading up to the Great Migration—they resonated with the African American fight for civil rights in the 1960s, illustrating that “the strong figures of the past are a part of the powerful figures of the present”<sup>16</sup>. When reading Bearden’s collages, it is important to keep in mind that his work was both respected and criticized. Some viewers saw his depictions of rural African American life as representing “the picture of contentment of the old South” and at least inadvertently supporting stereotypes of African Americans in a “primitive environment”<sup>17</sup>. In *Tomorrow / May Be Far Away* (1966/1967) (Fig. 13), Bearden shows three individuals in a rural setting—perhaps a home and small farm that the individuals own. Bearden’s collage style could suggest several possibilities: the disrepair of the home, the fragmented or uncertain lives of the people hoping for something better, or—as it does in many of his collages—the complex cultural background of his subjects. The woman looking out the window on the left has two mismatched eyes, one eye looking upward—maybe suggesting a sense of hope<sup>18</sup>. Her large masculine-looking hand resting on the window ledge indicates the arduous work she invests in maintaining the family’s land and home. The man resting outside the house in the center of the collage sitting with his hands folded and smoking a cigarette. Perhaps he is taking a rest from the day’s hard, manual labor, as suggested by his blue uniform-like clothing. Neither individual looks happy, but one could argue that they are proud people who work hard for what they own. As the title and the train (a common motif in Bearden’s rural collages) in the background suggest, this couple may be contemplating change, maybe change that will take them to new opportunities in the North<sup>19</sup>. Bearden’s *Pittsburgh* (1967) (Fig. 14) includes images presented in the Carnegie Art Museum’s early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs, such as the railroad tracks and the machinery of the mills and factories. The train is now in the foreground, indicating the arrival of African Americans from the South. The individual in the foreground is dressed for work in the factories. His head looks like that of a child, suggesting the start of a new life for those who migrated north.

### **Hybridity and Creolization in *Gem of the Ocean***

According to the authors of *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*, “[s]cholars of the African diaspora have attempted to account for the many complicated ways that African customs and beliefs survived in the New World. They use the term ‘creolization’ to describe the process of give-and-take that occurs when different cultures exchange practices and in the process produce a new and hybrid culture”<sup>20</sup>. Scholar Herman Bhabha labels this process as *hybridity*—the creation of new, transcultural forms created within the contact zone between two cultures. Hybridity shows up in linguistic, cultural, political, religious, and artistic forms<sup>21</sup>. Understanding *Gem of the Ocean*’s African American characters in the context of hybridity will help students better understand Wilson’s use of allusions and spiritual references. He references Christian imagery alongside African spiritual beliefs; ancestor reverence beside reverence of Jesus Christ; Christian values alongside ancient African rituals. Characters like Aunt Ester are not bothered by any seeming ideological conflicts because they are part of a new culture, a hybrid culture that blends elements of both African traditions and Christian beliefs. Teachers could engage students in discussing one or both of the following Bearden collages as another pre-reading activity. If students seem ready to begin reading the play, save the discussion of these images for several scenes into the play, such as after Act I, Scene 1 or 2.

### **Hybridity in Two Romare Bearden Collages**

By analyzing Bearden’s *The Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism* (1964) (Fig. 15), students can quickly develop an understanding of the phenomenon of hybridity in America. This collage’s visual references to both Christianity and relics of African tribal rituals make a great preview of the hybrid culture of the characters in *Gem of the Ocean*. Furthermore, the work’s emphasis on the power of water to renew is also an important connection to



Wilson’s play. In the foreground, three people stand in a body of water, experiencing the rite of baptism. A hand pours water on the head of the woman in the center, and the man on the right raises his hands as if in a posture of praise or surrender after emerging from the water. Bearden uses fragments of photographs of African Americans and images of African statues or sculptures to form the shape of each person. Through this technique, Bearden suggests that these people are neither solely African nor solely American; they are a new culture that is a hybrid of both. The distant church in the upper left suggests that while the rite of baptism links these individuals to the Christian faith, their cultural identity encapsules African traditions. The small boat in the lower left corner might remind viewers of the journey through the water that forever changed the history and identity of these individuals’ ancestors. Suggesting a continuation of change and movement, Bearden places a train towards the upper left in front of the church. Kymberly Pinder comments that *Baptism* is part of Bearden’s larger body of religious work that features water symbolism, rebirth, and ritual. Bearden ties baptism to a rite shared through history across many cultures<sup>22</sup> .

Bearden’s *Sermons: The Walls of Jericho* (1964) (Fig. 16) is another collage that illustrates hybridity. Like *Baptism*, this collage contains an array of references to African cultures and religions, Christianity, and other societies. *Sermons* is more complex and will require more class time to analyze. Students will need to have at least a basic familiarity with the biblical story of Jericho in the book of Joshua. See Nnamdi Elleh’s essay “Bearden’s Dialogue with Africa and the Avant- Garde” for a deeper analysis of this collage<sup>23</sup> .

### **Reading: Using Artwork to Enlighten Understanding of *Gem of the Ocean***

Pairing artwork with the text is a way to help students interact with the literature, understand allusions and imagery, become more fluent in discussing the culture and traditions of the play, and develop deeper understandings of the play’s themes. During the two-week period that students read the play, I will incorporate select works of art to help students achieve these goals.

#### **Aunt Ester: Ancestor**

Aunt Ester is the spiritual guide of the community. After their examination of hybridity in Romare Bearden’s works, students should feel more confident recognizing and understanding the various belief systems present in her stories and advice. She gleans wisdom from the stories of the Bible, yet she exudes a mystical knowledge that connects to African heritage. Many critics link Aunt Ester’s connection to the water and her status as a healer in the community to Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of the rivers. Furthermore, Aunt Ester’s mythology extends beyond the lifetime of a single person. She says she is 285 years old in *Gem of the Ocean*, which places her symbolic birth date in 1619—giving her the knowledge of African history since the day her people first arrived in North America. She appears throughout Wilson’s Century Cycle plays, wrapping the entire cycle and its characters in African mythology<sup>24</sup> .

After students have read Act I, Scene 2, use Bearden’s *Prevalence of Ritual: Conjur Woman* (1964) collages to spur on their analysis of Aunt Ester’s character. Bearden often remade versions of his collages and has two versions of this collage. He created the first version (Fig. 17) for the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar, Senegal, to achieve the festival’s goal of “exploring commonalities among the visual, literary, and performing arts of the African diaspora”<sup>25</sup> . In both versions, Bearden combines pieces of human images and images of African sculpture and relics to create the woman. The first version presents a full body view of the woman. She has two different hands: a realistic human-looking hand that rests in front of her body and an upraised, much larger hand reminiscent of a traditional African sculpture. On this upraised hand rests a bird, suggesting her connection to both nature and her African heritage. The woman’s clear eyes and upward gaze

suggest her confidence in her environment and her connection with a higher being. Bearden’s second version of *Conjur Woman* features a closer mid-level portrait of a woman. Her upraised right hand composed of pieces of two different realistic-looking African American hands could suggest confidence and spiritual authority—a notion that is also indicated by the white garb clothing that arm. Her left hand, the hand of an African sculpture, rests in front of her and, again, holds a leaf that connects this subject to nature and African heritage<sup>26</sup>. Students also should notice the indoor setting of this second version and the full moon outside the woman’s open window that also connects her to nature. After students consider both versions of the collage, they will use their visual and literary analysis skills to argue which version they believe is the best representation of Aunt Ester (See Teaching Strategies.)

### **Black Mary: The Protégé (Representations of African American Women)**

Black Mary is a younger African American woman under Aunt Ester’s mentorship. She will become the carrier of Aunt Ester’s name, role, and history. After reading Act I, Scene 4, use these images to help students analyze the relationship between Black Mary and Aunt Ester and Wilson’s representations of African American woman through these characters (See Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities.)



Fig. 21 Moorhead, Scipio, "Portrait of Phyllis Wheatly," 1773, engraving. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Bearden's *Prelude to Farewell* (1981) collage (Fig. 19) is set in the South in the moments before saying goodbye to a loved one leaving for the North<sup>27</sup>. Bearden's ever-present train chugs past the window, symbolizing this movement and change. However, students could make connections to the characters and imagery of *Gem of the Ocean*. The maternal figure in the foreground might remind students of Bearden's *Conjur Woman* collages. She seems to be a mother or grandmother supervising the younger woman in her private act of cleansing. The woman's headwrap, jewelry, and African sculpture-like facial features represent her as the holder of the family's traditions and heritage. The beauty of the woman's body and the presence of this older woman transform the younger woman's bathing into an act of purification and ceremonial cleansing<sup>28</sup>. Students should consider the ways in which this collage relates to Black Mary and Aunt Ester.

Although again set in a rural setting, students could draw connections between Bearden's *Pepper Jelly Lady* (1980) (Fig. 20) and Black Mary or Aunt Ester. The train in the background again suggests movement north to a better life and progress. The Pepper Jelly Lady, however, with her confident stance and straight gaze beyond the relics of rural life (such as the rooster), is confident in her identity and new opportunities that lie in the direction of her gaze beyond the frame of the collage. Her basket is full of pepper jelly, a Southern and Caribbean delicacy that shows that this woman is "a woman of skill and cultivation, a rooted cultural bearer"; she is "one of Bearden's many powerful women, Northern and Southern, young and old"<sup>29</sup>. What comparisons and contrasts do students notice between this woman, Black Mary, and Aunt Ester?

Scipio Moorhead's *Portrait of Phyllis Wheatley* (Fig. 21) is worth consideration because it is "perhaps the first portrait (1773) produced by an African American of a member of his own race"<sup>30</sup>. The portrait depicts Wheatley, a then renowned Bostonian poet (and slave), in a posture of contemplation as she writes poetry. The image makes interesting contrast with the character of Black Mary, as it represents an African American woman engaged in intellectual academic work, rather than the domestic work that so often trapped African American women and the art that represents them.

The two Jamaican women posing in Kehinde Wiley's *Portrait of John and George Soane* (2013) (Fig. 22) exude power and confidence. Wiley's version is modeled after William Owen's 1805 portrait of John Soane's sons: John Soane, Jr. (right) had just returned from a semester of study at Trinity College, Cambridge, and his younger brother George was soon to follow in his footsteps<sup>31</sup>. Like many of Wiley's portraits, his replacement of the white, European subjects with African Americans wearing street clothes is a move that reclaims power in art's representation (or lack thereof) of African Americans. His choice to feature two women in this portrait, speaks to his criticism of our history's exclusion of African American women, especially, from the table of education and intellectualism<sup>32</sup>. Students should consider connections between this portrait and Wilson's representation of Black Mary and Aunt Ester.

### **Reclaiming the Middle Passage: The Journey to the City of Bones**

In Act II, Scene 2, during Citizen's spiritual journey to the City of Bones, Solly and Eli wear European masks and play the role of slave trader chaining Citizen to the boat<sup>33</sup>. Students might find this moment strange or confusing. Before they begin reading Act II, use this section's images from Isaac Mendes Belisario's *Sketches of Character* to help them preview some of the history and symbolism of this moment. To hook students on this topic, consider showing a trailer or clip from the 2004 movie *White Chicks*, in which actors Marlon and Shawn Wayans are FBI agents who, for an undercover operation, must dress as young white women<sup>34</sup>.

Published in separate sections between 1837 and 1838, Belisario's *Sketches of Character* consists of a series of lithographs depicting citizens and life in Kingston in the 1830s. Seven out of the twelve total lithographs are



Belisario's representations of the "Christmas Amusements," celebrations, known as Jonkonnu, in which the formerly enslaved made revelry with music, dancing, and elaborate costumes that often satirized their white oppressors. Records indicate that these celebrations had been occurring on plantations since the 1700s or even farther back, but Belisario's *Sketches* are the first visual representations of this holiday<sup>35</sup>. While the Europeans were fascinated with the festivities and saw them as an innocuous time of celebration that would promote cooperation and industriousness on the plantations throughout the rest of the year, these masquerades were forms of resistance that "subverted the colonists' strategies for reinforcing social and gender hierarchies"<sup>36</sup>.



Fig. 25 Belisario, Isaac Mendes, "Koo Koo, or Actor Boy," *Sketches of Character*, 1837[-1838], hand-colored lithograph. New Haven, Yale Center for British Art.



The “Queen” or “Maam” presided over the masquerades. In his “Queen or ‘Maam’ or the set girls” image (Fig. 23), Belisario presents her wearing an elaborate colonial dress and holding a slave owner’s whip. Other images feature actors who wore white masks and costumes that contained elements of colonial dress and traditional African attire. These images illustrate that the festival portrayed a “world turned upside down,” combining aspects of African religion and the European colonial practices that oppressed the enslaved<sup>37</sup>. The image titled “Jaw-Bone or House John Canoe” (Fig. 24) features the central figure of Jonkonnu, a masked man wearing a house on his head. The house-hat has its origins in African tradition, but over time the symbol became creolized and by the 1800s took on the form of a plantation, often referred to as a “baby house”<sup>38</sup>. The subversive symbolism of an enslaved man holding the weight of the entire plantation on his head is evident. While many—including the slave owners who watched these masquerades—read the white masks as satirizing white slave owners, Yale art history professor Tim Barringer points out that the white mask also has roots in a Congolese ritual honoring the dead<sup>39</sup>. The next two images titled “Koo Koo, or Actor Boy” (Figures 25 and 26) feature white-masked performers in exorbitant, colorful costumes referencing colonial and European Renaissance attire and a feathered headdress that seems inspired by African costume. Wearing a lady’s dress decorated with elaborate lace, the costume further subverts the colonizers delineated gender norms. These actors would have engaged in a competition in which they recited memorized lines from Shakespeare as they danced and performed<sup>40</sup>. While Wilson’s characters’ donning of European masks in Act II, Scene 2 is not a festive Jonkonnu celebration, discussion of these images before reading the scene will give students some language and understanding of history to work with as they analyze Wilson’s intent.

After students read Citizen’s journey to the City of Bones in Act II, Scene 2, engage students in an activity in which they return to the images representing the slave trade and middle passage from the Prereading: Gaining Thematic and Cultural Background through Images section of this unit (Figures 1-5). Ask students to select the image they believe best pairs with their reading of Citizen’s journey to the City of Bones and support their selection with interpretation of both Wilson’s text and their chosen image (See Classroom Activities.).

## Teaching Strategies

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### Three-Read Close Reading

Under the influence of smartphones and social media, many high school students have difficulty sustaining attention on a text long enough to contemplate its full meaning and weight. Images are powerful, but they are often not exceptions to this problem. This reading strategy uses ekphrasis (detailed description of visual art) and close reading techniques to encourage close reading that digs below the surface. You can apply this strategy to any image and then modify it for close reading of literature. Explain the process to students by telling students what they should be looking for and asking in each reading of a text. The first read should focus on concrete observations and surface-level meanings of the text. What is happening in this text? What do I see? What images are prominent? What is the setting? What colors are dominant? are all questions students might answer in a first read. In summary, the goal of the first read is to identify, literally, what the text says or what it is “about.” The second read should push towards meaning and themes. Push students’ observations and thinking to answer these questions: What does the text/image mean? What are the big ideas or questions this image is trying to convey? In the third read, students should consider the connection

between form and meaning by considering the question, How is it said, and why? In this reading, students should return to their initial observations about the text and consider how the creator’s specific choices and techniques, such as color, size, shading, facial expression, diction, figurative language, symbolism, etc., create the intended effect and message. When leading students in this process, make sure they realize that the process is not necessarily linear. For example, students might jump back and forth between the second and third stages of reading, commenting on the effect of a particular image and then expressing a message the overall text conveys. Or realizing a certain theme might prompt students to notice additional details that they did not observe in their initial first reading.

When first introducing this process to students, a way to help them distinguish the stages of the process is to allow them to view the image for a set amount of time (30 seconds, for example) for each reading. Tell students they will have thirty seconds to observe as much as they can for the first read. Show them the image, and then give them some time to record their observations in their notebooks before discussing; challenge them to record at least ten observations. (See the Harvard Project Zero thinking routine “Looking: Ten Times Two” for more instructions on this part<sup>41</sup> .) Then, after discussing their first read, show them the image again for their second read. Take the image away and discuss their second read. Repeat for the third read. This method will also help them increase their stamina in studying an image.

### **Three-Column Analysis Template**

When students are examining art without direct teacher guidance—in collaborative groups or independently, use the Three-Column Art Analysis Template to help them work through the reading process. The template consists of three columns, one for each part of the three-read process: First Read – literal observations and thoughts on what the work is about; Second Read – comments on the themes and big ideas the work is communicating or exploring; Third Read – connections between the creator’s technical choices and intended effect and meaning. Encourage students not to be too concerned about placing their notes in the “correct” column. They can always draw arrows or color-code their notes in a way that makes sense for them. The idea of the template is to guide their thinking through the close reading process. Before they move away from a text, though, the goal is to have content in each column, even if the content consists of a question about what the creator might be trying to say. Students should also apply this note-taking process to their reading of *Gem of the Ocean*.

### **Illustrated Literature Annotations**

As students read *Gem of the Ocean*, encourage them to reflect the three-read close reading process by taking three-column analysis notes on each scene of the play. If students have copies of the text they are permitted to write in, they may reflect the three-read process by color-coding their annotations and margin notes to reflect comments on each part of the process. In addition to their notes, students should add a visual or art connection to their notes on each scene. This connection could be an original sketch inspired by a quote or moment in the scene or a reflection on how an aspect of the scene connects to a work of visual art—one already studied with the class or a different piece that the student is familiar with. Students should briefly explain how their image connects to the themes, characterization, symbolism, or imagery of *Gem or the Ocean*.

### **Best Representation Awards**

As students read the play, there are several opportunities in which they will view images that present different representations of characters or events, such as Aunt Ester, Black Mary, or the journey to the City of Bones.

Encourage them to make connections between the images and the text and to evaluate the intentions and techniques of each by selecting which image is the best representation of a particular moment or character. Students should justify their selection with a paragraph that analyzes evidence from both the text and their image selection to prove their argument.

### **Creative Ekphrasis Writing with *Gem* Quotes**

A more creative way to allow students to represent the connections they see between the artwork and *Gem of the Ocean* is for them to write an ekphrasis poem or paragraph. Ekphrasis writing is poetry or prose written about or inspired by a work of visual art. Literary examples include August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, inspired by Romare Bearden's painting by the same title, and Anne Sexton's "The Starry Night," inspired by Vincent van Gogh's famous painting. Push students to creatively express the connections they see between a work of art and *Gem of the Ocean* by requiring them to blend quotations from the play into their ekphrastic writing.

## **Classroom Activities**

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### **Guided Three-Read Close Reading using Turner's *Slave Ship***

Using the three-read close reading technique, I will use this painting to introduce the difficult subject of the horrors of the slave trade while also teaching students the skill of close reading a work of visual art. On their first "read" of the text (Allow students to view for thirty seconds.), students might notice the violent ocean waves, the dark storm clouds in the sky, the vibrant reds, oranges and gold of the sunset, the ship sailing away, the contrast of the sky's colors on the left and right sides of the painting. After this read, ask students what they think the painting is "about"? What is its subject? What emotions does the painter want viewers to feel when viewing this painting? (Consider withholding the title of this painting until students' second read—until after they start to notice the people in the ocean.) Then, for the second read, display the painting for another thirty seconds. Ask students to identify what else they notice about the painting. They might elaborate on what they noticed in the first read or observe new details. Once students notice the people drowning in the water, present Turner's title. Now return to the questions discussed after the first read. How have students' answers changed? Next, for the third read, display the image again. This time guide students in considering how Turner's purpose and technique align, using this question: What is Turner's purpose in creating this work, and how do his choices and visual techniques help achieve that purpose? Consider using the write-pair-share method to allow students time to process and support their thinking before bringing it to the whole class space.

### **Racism, Migration North, and Pittsburgh Gallery Walk**

Post the images under the section titled Racism, Migration North, and Pittsburgh around the classroom. Travelling in small groups, students should walk around the room to examine each image. Encourage them to talk to each other about what images are most interesting, their reactions to the different images, etc. Then, each group should select one image from each category (racist propaganda images, photographs of Pittsburgh, and Romare Bearden collages) and complete Three-Column Analysis Notes for each of those three images. Groups will need to rotate among the various images. Allow twenty minutes or so for students to complete this activity. In the whole-class discussion space, groups will explain their observations about each image. Use questioning and guidance as necessary to correct any misunderstandings or fill in any major

oversights. Then, each group will select one image and use the Values, Identities, and Actions (VIA) thinking routine from Harvard's Project Zero to explore the civic implications of the image's messaging<sup>42</sup>. Work with the class to ensure that most of the images are represented within the groups' conversations. Students should record their answers to the VIA questions in their notebooks and prepare themselves to explain their thinking to the class. Allow groups five to ten minutes to discuss and record their answers. Then, groups will explain their VIA thinking about their selected image in the whole-class space. Debrief the activity with the following question, which students should answer individually on an exit slip: Based on today's discussion, what do you think would be the biggest challenges for African Americans living in Pittsburgh in 1904? Support your answer with details from at least two of the images we discussed.

### **Best Representation of Black Mary**

Engage students in this activity after they have read Act I, Scene 4. In groups of two to three, students should examine the four images under the section titled Black Mary: The Protégé (Representation of African American Women). Give each group color copies of the images or links to view the images on their computers. Students should take Three-Column Analysis Notes in their notebooks and discuss the images with each other as they take notes. A brief explanation with artist biographical information and a little bit of contextual information for each image might help students get started with their observations. After students have had 10-15 minutes to take notes on the images, discuss students' observations in the whole-class space to clarify any misunderstandings and assess their understanding of the purpose and themes of each work. Students should add notes from the whole-class conversation to their individual observation notes. Then, working individually, students should select the one image they believe to be the best representation of the character Black Mary. To justify their response and demonstrate their understanding of the image and Wilson's characterization of Black Mary, students will write a paragraph answering this question: What image is the best representation of Black Mary? Justify your answer with analysis of evidence from the image you selected and *Gem of the Ocean*.

### **Culminating Assessment: Representing African Diaspora Museum Exhibit**

To demonstrate their understanding of this unit's topics and their skills in analyzing literature and art, students will create a museum exhibit entry that pairs a passage from *Gem of the Ocean* with a selected work of visual art. The passages and images students select should both speak to the unit's guiding question: How can representation of African diaspora history and culture enslave people, empower people, or overcome the past? The passages and images could relate to each other in a variety of ways--complementing, challenging, exemplifying, opposing, etc. Each exhibit entry display will include the selected passage with one to two paragraphs analyzing how that passage responds to the guiding question, the selected image with one to two paragraphs analyzing how the image responds to the guiding question, and one to two paragraphs explaining how the literary passage and the image interact with one another. Students will create a museum exhibit with each of their displays and will explain their pairings to exhibit visitors. This assessment will challenge students to find overlapping themes and perspectives in multiple works of art, communicate close analysis of both visual and literary text in writing, and practicing analytical writing skills, such as developing strong controlling main ideas and embedding quoted evidence to support analysis.



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## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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CC.1.3.11-12.B: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences and conclusions based on and related to an author's implicit and explicit assumptions and beliefs.

Students will develop this skill first through the Three-Read Close Reading strategy applied to both image and literary analysis. They will have guided practice through gallery walk, small group, and class discussion activities. Then, they will demonstrate their level of mastery through the analysis writing connected to the summative assessment.

CC.1.3.11-12.C: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.

Students will analyze the impact of artist's choices in images and the impact of August Wilson's allusions, imagery, symbolism, characterization, and other literary techniques.

CC.1.3.11-12.D: Evaluate how an author's point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Students will develop this skill as they compare the choices and impact of different representations of the Middle Passage and slave trade. They will consider how the artist's intentions, race, and point of view impacts their choices. They will apply this thinking to their reading of *Gem of the Ocean*.

CC.1.4.11-12.H: Write with a sharp distinct focus identifying topic, task, and audience. • Introduce the precise, knowledgeable claim.

Students' analysis writing for their summative assessment museum exhibit entries will require them to develop and apply this skill.

CC.1.4.11-12.X: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes and audiences.

This unit features several writing varied writing opportunities that engage students in routine writing over both extended and shorter time frames.



CC.1.5.11-12.A: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Small-group and whole-class discussions on images and the play will encourage and develop students' confidence and effectiveness in collaborative discussions.

## Notes

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