

A NOISE WITHIN'S 2022-23 SEASON

STUDY GUIDE

AUGUST WILSON'S  
**RADIO**  
**GOLF**

DIRECTED BY Gregg Daniel



OCT. 16-NOV. 13, 2022





# STUDY GUIDES FROM **A NOISE WITHIN**

*A rich resource for teachers of English, reading, arts, and drama education.*

Dear Reader,

We're delighted you're interested in our study guides, designed to provide a full range of information on our plays to teachers of all grade levels.

A Noise Within's study guides include:

- General information about the play (characters, synopsis, timeline, and more)
- Playwright biography and literary analysis
- Historical content of the play
- Scholarly articles
- Production information (costumes, lights, direction, etc.)
- Suggested classroom activities
- Related resources (videos, books, etc.)
- Discussion themes
- Background on verse and prose (for Shakespeare's plays)

Our study guides allow you to review and share information with students to enhance both lesson plans and pupils' theatrical experience and appreciation. They are designed to let you extrapolate articles and other information that best align with your own curricula and pedagogical goals.

More information? It would be our pleasure. We're here to make your students' learning experience as rewarding and memorable as it can be!

*All the best,*

Alicia Green

**DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION**



Pictured: Carolyn Ratteray, Evan Lewis Smith, and Veralyn Jones, *Gem of the Ocean* 2019. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

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## CHARACTER MAP **RADIO GOLF**

### Roosevelt Hicks

Harmond's friend and business partner in the Hill District redevelopment project. He was recently promoted to vice president at Mellon Bank, but he is more enthusiastic for his prospects of becoming a partner at a radio network. He is also an avid golfer.



### Mame Wilks

Harmond's wife and campaign manager. She works for the governor and is hoping to get promoted to be his press representative.

### Harmond Wilks

Current real-estate developer and aspiring first Black mayor of Pittsburgh. He was raised in Pittsburgh's Hill District and now has plans to tear down its old houses to build a new apartment complex.

1839

### Elder Joseph "Old Joe" Barlow

Former resident of the Hill District and contested owner of 1839 Wylie who has recently returned to his house to fix it up for his daughter. He has fond memories of the past and hopes to preserve the Hill District. It is revealed that he and Harmond are related.

### Sterling Johnson

A local contractor who is looking for work from Harmond. He is protective of the Hill District and its residents.

## SYNOPSIS

**Radio Golf is the final play** in August Wilson's American Century Cycle, set in Pittsburgh in 1997. It tells the story of real estate developer Harmond Wilks, and the financial, historical, and social costs of his success.

The play opens with Harmond, a well-educated Black man, his determined wife Mame, and his close friend Roosevelt all on the precipice of huge success. Harmond and Roosevelt are in the Hill District of Pittsburgh where they are working together on the development of a new complex. The complex will include apartments, a rooftop garden, a Whole Foods, a Barnes & Noble, and a Starbucks. At the same time, Harmond is running for mayor with the help Mame, who is about to get promoted to the governor's press representative.

These big plans, however, are complicated by Joseph "Old Joe" Barlow, the owner of 1839 Wylie, a seemingly abandoned house located on the site of Harmond and Roosevelt's future apartment complex. Old Joe has been seen painting the house, which is thought to be owned by Harmond and Roosevelt's company and set to be demolished in a few days. Harmond learns that Old Joe is fixing up the house for his daughter. Old Joe admits that he has not been paying taxes but denies receiving notice that the city was taking his house. Harmond promises Old Joe that he will investigate the ownership of the house.

Meanwhile, the progress of Harmond and Roosevelt's other business and political ventures begins to crumble. Roosevelt is offered a partnership at WBTZ Radio, but Harmond insists that Roosevelt is being taken advantage of because he is Black. Mame has one of Harmond's speeches published in the paper, but they try to edit out his references to the shooting of a Black man by police that occurred three years prior. To add insult to injury, Harmond's golf clubs are stolen from his car. Through all this turmoil, Harmond struggles to devise the perfect mayoral campaign slogan until Sterling, a local handyman who has been asking Harmond for work, gives him the slogan, "Hold Me To It."

While investigating the ownership of the house at 1839 Wylie, Harmond discovers that the city illegally sold the property to Harmond before Old Joe was given notice. To further complicate matters, Old Joe brings Harmond evidence that years earlier, Harmond's father was paying taxes on the Barlow's

house. This baffles Harmond—he cannot reason why his father, who did not tend to be charitable, would have paid these taxes. When Harmond tries to convince Roosevelt that they need to compensate Old Joe for the illegally obtained house, Harmond gets a call informing him that the Hill District is set to be blighted. This is good news for Harmond and Roosevelt, as it means they can begin next steps in developing their new complex. Sterling arrives just as Roosevelt celebrates this news, outraged that someone has ruined the paint job he's just done for Old Joe on 1839 Wylie when they marked it with a red X for demolition. Sterling cannot abide this and declares war between himself and Harmond and Roosevelt.

In an effort to make the demolition of the Wylie house legal, Harmond tries to compensate Old Joe with a check for ten thousand dollars in exchange for ownership rights to the property—an offer Old Joe refuses as both he and Sterling believe the house has been stolen, and that it rightfully belongs to Old Joe. When they insist the house not be torn down, Harmond attempts to alter the design of the apartment complex around the house, which frustrates Roosevelt but satisfies Old Joe. Harmond then discovers that the reason his father paid taxes on the Wylie property is because he, and by extension Harmond, is related to Old Joe.

Frustrated with Harmond's apparent willingness to throw away their plans for success, Roosevelt and Mame try to take over the development project, but Harmond continues to fight against the destruction of Old Joe's house. The impact of Harmond's defense of the Wylie house begins to grow until Harmond's prioritization of the house eventually causes Mame to lose her job offer from the governor. As a result, Mame steps away, telling Harmond he is on his own with the campaign and development project.

Despite Harmond's best efforts to keep it standing, Sterling informs Harmond that Old Joe's property on Wylie is still set to be torn down. Roosevelt arrives and confirms not only that the house is to be torn down, but that he is buying Harmond out of their development company with financial assistance from his partner at the radio station. The forced buyout destroys Roosevelt and Harmond's friendship. After Roosevelt leaves, Harmond decides to join Sterling in an active protest against the destruction of 1839 Wylie. ♦



## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: **AUGUST WILSON**

**Originally named Frederick August Kittel Jr., August Wilson** was born on April 27, 1945, in the Hill District community of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Daisy Wilson, a cleaning lady, and Frederick August Kittle, a German immigrant and baker. Wilson's father was absent for most of his life, leaving Daisy Wilson to raise August and his six siblings in a two-room apartment.

In 1958, Daisy Wilson married David Bedford. Growing up, Wilson had a complex experience with race. His mother was Black, his father was white, and his stepfather, David Bedford, was Black. The complexity of Wilson's experience with race is reflected in many of his plays.

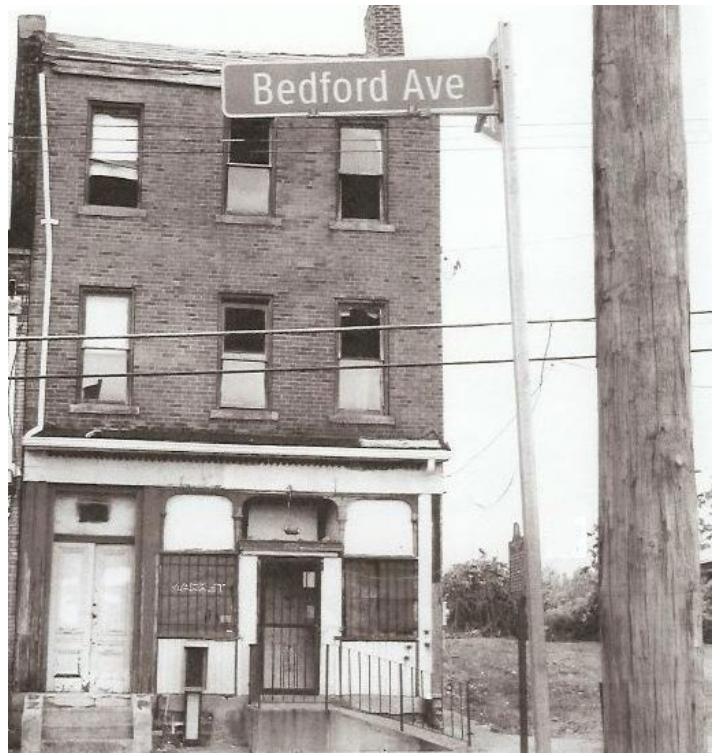
While Wilson was a bright and creative student, he found school life difficult. In 1959, Wilson attended three different schools. He began high school at Central Catholic High School, a predominantly white, private school. There, he experienced such extreme race-based bullying that he transferred to Connelly Trade school. However, Wilson quickly grew bored at Connelly Trade school and transferred once more to Gladstone High School. There, he was accused of plagiarizing a paper he had written, and secretly dropped out of school altogether at the age of 15.

Wilson, still eager to learn, chose instead to educate himself, frequenting the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh during school hours to study while his mother thought he was at school. During this self-education, Wilson read the works of Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, and discovered his love of the blues and of Bessie Smith's voice. During this time, he began spending time in restaurants and barbershops around the Hill District simply to listen to the residents' voices and stories. Wilson would later draw on these voices and stories as inspiration for his writing.

In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving for a year before ultimately dropping out. After leaving the Army, he began to work a variety of odd jobs while writing poetry. By the late 1960s, he became involved in the Black Arts Movement and officially adopted the name August Wilson in honor of his mother. During this time, he collaborated with poets, artists, and educators and became the co-founder of the Black Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh. Wilson served as the resident director of the theater company until the mid-1970s, when Black Horizon Theater dissolved. Before the company dissolved, Wilson met Brenda Burton, his first wife. In 1970,



August Wilson, 2003. Photo from The Estate of August Wilson



Historic home of August Wilson in Pittsburgh by unknown artist, located on Wikimedia Commons, uploaded on November 26, 2007.

they married, and Wilson's first daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson, was born.

In 1978, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota. There, Wilson began to focus on playwriting. In 1981, he married Judy Oliver, his second wife. One year later, he was accepted to the National Playwrights

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: **AUGUST WILSON** CONTINUED...

Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut in 1982. During this conference, Wilson met Lloyd Richards, the dean of the Yale University School of Drama and the artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. Lloyd Richards was a legend in the theatrical world, especially in Black theater. Richards became a mentor for Wilson and eventually directed Wilson's first six Broadway productions. The same year, Wilson's play *Jitney*, premiered at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. It was the first play in his American Century Cycle, a 10-play series depicting the African American experience throughout each decade of the 20th century.

In 1984, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the second play in Wilson's American Century Cycle, premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre to great critical acclaim. The production moved to Broadway and earned Wilson his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, Wilson continued writing his American Century Cycle. During this time, he won two Pulitzer Prizes: one for *Fences* in 1987, and one for *The Piano Lesson* in 1990.

In 1990, Wilson's marriage to Judy Oliver ended, and Wilson moved to Seattle, Washington. There, he met costume designer Constanza Romero, and the two married in 1994. Three years later, Wilson's second daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, was born.

In June 2005, Wilson was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer and only a few months later, on October 2, he died in Seattle. His funeral service, however, was held in Pittsburgh, and he is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, not far from his mother, Daisy. Later that same year, the former Guild Theatre reopened as the August Wilson Theatre, cementing his legacy on Broadway and beyond. ♦

Edited from:

"August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 29 Feb. 2016, [www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/).

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopædia. "August Wilson." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 23 Apr. 2019, [www.britannica.com/biography/August-Wilson](http://www.britannica.com/biography/August-Wilson).

## TIMELINE OF **AUGUST WILSON'S** LIFE

### 1945

August Wilson is born on April 27th in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His given name is Frederick August Kittel, Jr. after his father, Frederick August Kittel, Sr. He is the fourth of seven children in his family, and the oldest son. Frederick August Kittel, Sr. is absent for most of Wilson's life.

### 1959

Wilson begins his first year of high school at a predominantly white private school. After enduring race-based bullying, he transfers schools twice and ultimately ends up at Gladstone High School.

### 1960

At Gladstone High School, Wilson is accused of plagiarizing a paper on Napoleon Bonaparte, and he decides to secretly drop out of school. He begins to spend his days at the Carnegie Library reading and teaching himself.

### 1963–1964

Wilson works a number of odd jobs while he begins to write poetry. He buys his first typewriter.

### 1965

Frederick August Kittel, Sr. dies, and Frederick August Kittel, Jr. changes his name to August Wilson in honor of his mother.

### 1968

Wilson co-founds the Black Horizon Theater with colleagues. He becomes the company's self-taught resident director.

### 1969

Wilson marries Brenda Burton, his first wife—the two divorce in 1972.

### 1976

Wilson's first play, *The Homecoming*, is produced at Kuntu Repertory Theater in Pittsburgh.

### 1981

Wilson marries Judy Oliver, a social worker.

### 1982

*Jitney*, the first play written in August Wilson's American Century Cycle, premieres at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. The same year, Wilson is accepted into the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. There, he meets Lloyd Richards, and the two forge a lasting friendship.

### 1983

Wilson's mother, Daisy Wilson, dies.

### 1984

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* premieres at the Yale Repertory Theatre and transfers to Broadway. Wilson wins his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the play.

### 1987

*Fences* opens on Broadway. With this production, Wilson wins a New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his first Pulitzer Prize.

### 1990

*The Piano Lesson* opens on Broadway. This production earns Wilson a New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize. Wilson is named the 1990 Pittsburgher of the Year by Pittsburgh Magazine. Wilson and Judy Oliver divorce, and Wilson moves to Seattle, Washington.

### 1994

Wilson marries Costanza Romero, a costume designer.

### 1995

Wilson writes *Seven Guitars*

### 1996

Wilson writes the controversial essay, "The Ground on Which I Stand," about Black cultural separatism. The same year, *Seven Guitars* opens on Broadway and wins the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play.

### 1997

Wilson's second daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, is born.

### 1999

The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh awards Wilson with a high school diploma, the only diploma the institution has ever given.

### 2005

*Radio Golf* premieres at Yale Repertory Theatre—it is the last play in Wilson's American Century Cycle. In June, Wilson is diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. He dies on October 2 in Seattle, Washington.

Edited from:

"August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 29 Feb. 2016, [www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-augustwilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-augustwilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/).



## AUGUST WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

### THE HISTORY OF CYCLE PLAYS

After the Roman Empire fell in the 600s CE, theatre and theatrical storytelling in general all but disappeared. What was once a celebrated and communal art form in ancient Greek and Roman societies largely fell out of practice. It wasn't until around the year 1000 CE that theatre started to make a comeback. However, the art form had changed. No longer was theatre a tool for social commentary and satire, no longer did it explore great tragedy and adventure as it had in ancient Greece and Rome. Instead, theatre became a tool to communicate and disseminate stories of Christianity to a largely illiterate general population.

During this time, churches began to produce liturgical dramas, short dramatic performances of biblical stories. The number of these short dramas grew until eventually, they were organized into what is known as a cycle, covering all biblical stories from Creation to the Last Judgment. These were known as Mystery Cycles and consisted of up to 50 short plays which were typically performed over periods of several days.

### AUGUST WILSON'S CYCLE

Over the course of his playwriting career, August Wilson wrote his own cycle of ten plays collectively called the "American Century Cycle," or the "Pittsburgh Cycle." Wilson sets each of his ten plays in a different 20th-Century decade, offering insight into the complexities of the African American experience through changing social and historical landscapes over the course of 100 years. The plays in Wilson's cycle, except *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—the area of Pittsburgh where Wilson grew up.

When he began writing his plays, Wilson did not have a large-scale cycle in mind. In fact, he wrote the plays out of order—Wilson's first play, *Jitney*, is set in the 1970s, his second is set in the 1920s, and his third in the 1950s. Eventually, Wilson realized that he could create a cycle out of his plays. While the ten plays in his cycle all serve a greater narrative spanning 100 years, there is no single plot thread that runs through all ten of the plays. Rather, the cycle tells the story of a neighborhood through

#### WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE INCLUDES:

*Gem of the Ocean*

(written in 2003) set in 1904

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

(written in 1986) set in 1911

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

(written in 1984) set in 1927

*The Piano Lesson* (written in 1989) set in 1937

*Seven Guitars* (written in 1995) set in 1948

*Fences* (written in 1985) set in 1957

*Two Trains Running*

(written in 1990) set in 1969

*Jitney* (written in 1982) set in 1977

*King Hedley II* (written in 2001) set in 1985

*Radio Golf* (written in 2005) set in 1997

time— cataloguing the neighborhood's changing community, and the challenges facing the individuals in that community.

In his cycle, Wilson highlights characters who typically go unnoticed in society—an elderly woman in *Gem of the Ocean*, a garbage man in *Fences*—giving voice to otherwise invisible groups. The plays in his cycle also tend to feature spiritual and supernatural elements of African and African American cultures set against the gritty realism of a city plagued by inequality. In an essay published in *The New York Times* in 2000, Wilson reflected on his work, saying, "I wanted to place this culture on stage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us all in areas of human life and endeavor and through profound movements of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves."

Edited from:

"10 Plays, 100 Years - Playwright August Wilson Reveals the History of a Community (From the Playbill)."Marin Theatre Company, [www.marintheatre.org/productions/fences/fences-august-wilsons-century-cycle](http://www.marintheatre.org/productions/fences/fences-august-wilsons-century-cycle).

## THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

**The Black Arts Movement** is often seen as the artistic and cultural sister movement of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and early 1970s. Reflecting the work of Civil Rights activists, artists of the time responded to social injustice through painting, poetry, literature, film, and theatre. Artists and academics organized to create works that challenged the unequal social and racial structures in the United States and addressed issues of Black identity and Black liberation.

The movement was originally spurred on by the assassination of Malcolm X, a prolific Civil Rights activist and staunch supporter of Black Nationalism. As a Black Nationalist, Malcolm X promoted the celebration of Black identity and ancestry as separate from a larger American identity. He fought against the assimilation of Black identity into a monolithic American society. His death deeply affected those who were proponents of Black Nationalism.

Malcolm X's assassination prompted the writer LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) to create the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem, New York. The establishment of this theatre company is considered the beginning of the Black Arts Movement. Works in the Black Arts Movement commonly featured the concept of community at their core. Art that emerged as part of the Black Arts Movement directly addressed the needs and aspirations of Black America. In addressing these needs, the Black Arts Movement art radically reorganized the symbols, myths, and icons that were popular in "mainstream" American culture by creating and expressing a separate set of symbols, myths, and icons.

In creating its own, separate set of artistic symbols and narratives, artists in the Black Arts Movement explored and expressed a cultural identity distinct from the larger American cultural identity—one that celebrated ideals and beauty centered on Black culture and experiences. The aesthetic created through these new symbols, myths, and narratives centered around the relationship and ethical dynamics between an oppressor and the oppressed. In examining the oppressor-oppressed relationship, the art and artists of the Black Arts Movement began to pose the following questions:

Whose vision of the world is more meaningful?

What is truth?

Who is able to express that truth?



"Portrait of Bessie Smith holding feathers" by Carl Van Vechten, 1936.

Who should be able express that truth?

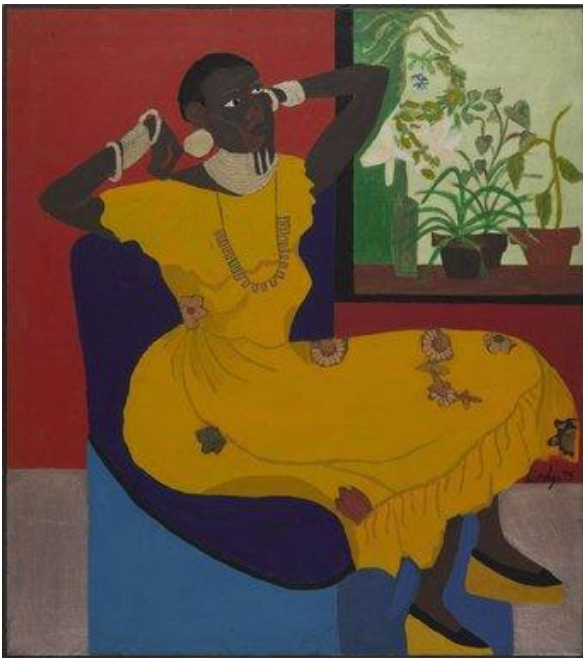
In exploring and answering these questions, the Black Arts Movement sought to answer the call of civil rights activist and sociologist W.E.B. DuBois: creating art that is "about us, by us, for us, and near us."

### AUGUST WILSON AND THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s when it produced some of the most radical music, art, drama, and poetry. It was in this creative and social environment that August Wilson began to develop his distinct voice as a poet, writer, and theater practitioner. Wilson describes his greatest sources of inspiration as the "Four Bs":

1. Jorge Luis Borges, a poet and key literary figure in the genre of magical realism.
2. Blues music.
3. Romare Bearden, an African American artist who

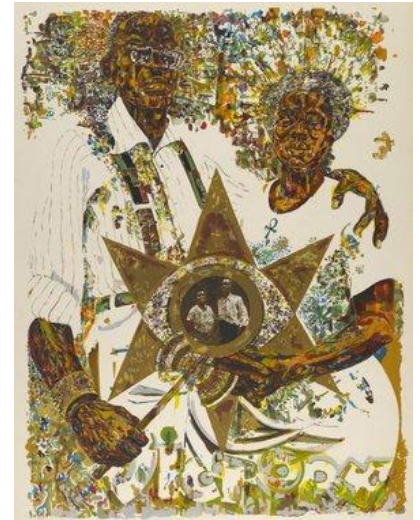
## THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT CONTINUED...



"Empress Akweke" by Dindga McCannon, 1975



"Revolutionary (Angela Davis)" by Wadsworth A. Jarrell, 1971



"Victory in the Valley of Eshu" by Jeff Donaldson, 1971

created works depicting daily African American life through oil paint, printed images, and collage.

4. Amiri Baraka, a playwright, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, who created the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem, and who is credited with sparking the start of the Black Arts movement.

With these four sources of inspiration in mind, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theater with fellow playwright Rob Penny. Wilson describes his work with the Black Horizon Theatre as being based in the "idea of using the theatre to politicize the community or, as we said in those days, to raise the consciousness of the people"—an idea that has its roots in the community-centric, political core of the Black Arts Movement.

Beyond his work with Black Horizon Theater, Wilson became a prominent public proponent of African American self-determination. He made his views about self-determination clear in a televised debate about colorblind casting during which he delivered an address titled "The Ground on Which I Stand." In his address, Wilson calls for Black artists to define themselves through their own art rather than to participate in a work of art originally created by and for another group:

"I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the

blood and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth. As there is no idea that cannot be contained by Black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instruction." ♦

Edited from:

Butler, Isaac. "Breaking 'Ground': How the Speech Came to Be and What It Set in Motion." AMERICAN THEATRE, 6 Jan. 2017, [www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/breaking-ground-how-the-speechcame-to-be-and-what-it-set-in-motion/](http://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/breaking-ground-how-the-speechcame-to-be-and-what-it-set-in-motion/).

Frederick, Candice. "On Black Aesthetics: The Black Arts Movement." The New York Public Library, The New York Public Library, 21 Sept. 2016, [www.nypl.org/blog/2016/07/15/black-aesthetics-bam](http://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/07/15/black-aesthetics-bam).

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." The Drama Review: Summer 1968, vol. 12, no. 4, 1968, p. 28., doi:10.2307/1144377.



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT: AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE 1990S

**While the 1990s** might not seem very far away in our history, American culture in the 1990s was far different from what we experience today. The American economy was making significant progress under President Bill Clinton following hardships for the working class during the 1980s era of Reaganomics— in which the economy was ruled by trickle-down theory, which favored wealthy individuals. During the 1990s, the United States economy grew by an average of four percent per year between 1992 and 1999, and an average of 1.7 million new jobs were created per year. Unemployment fell from eight to four percent, and the median household income grew by ten percent over the decade, signifying a decade of progress in the United States.

Along with the growth of the economy, the world of entertainment and pop culture made huge strides. TV series from the 1990s remain iconic and beloved today, including *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *The Simpsons*. The concept of reality television was born, J.K. Rowling's first *Harry Potter* books were published, and Pixar Animation Studios released their first films. Popular entertainment throughout the decade reflected this time of progress, while also tackling the myriad social issues still facing marginalized communities.

Hip-hop music, which originated in communities of color as a means of expressing frustration with the racial, economic, and political realities in the U.S., became mainstream in the 1990s. The anti-



"LA Riots- Aftermath," by Mick Taylor, uploaded 2006

establishment beliefs articulated in hip-hop and rap found purchase in the mainstream cultural consciousness, which suddenly reflected a desire for social change. However, as hip-hop and rap became more popular, it began to be commodified by white music executives. Music that began as an expression of the Black experience in America was made marketable to white Americans, forcing many creators to choose between artistic freedom and mainstream success. This isn't to say that the authenticity of the hip-hop culture was lost. Quite the contrary, innumerable artists of color pushed back against this whitewashing, continuing to make bold strides in both musicality and representation of social issues.

## THE HILL DISTRICT

**Radio Golf**, like most of Wilson's plays, takes place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Of the plays in his American Century Cycle, only *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is set elsewhere, finding roots in Chicago instead. The Hill District acts as a character in its own right, growing, changing, and responding to the social and political issues facing its community throughout the cycle.

Located northeast of downtown Pittsburgh, the Hill District's history is as vast and diverse as its inhabitants over the years. It has gone by many names, being known at some points as "Little Haiti," "Little Harlem," and "the crossroads of the world." Most commonly, however, it is referred to in sections of Lower, Middle, and Upper Hill. Initially, the Hill District was home to a predominantly Jewish and Eastern European population. When World War I sent many men overseas, there was an increased demand for labor in Pittsburgh, especially considering the city's booming steel industry. As a result, many recently freed African American people moved north seeking a better life and finding a home in the Hill District. By the 1930s, the Hill District was a predominantly Black neighborhood with a culture and social scene all its own.

Even as poverty continued to plague the area, the Hill District became a flourishing epicenter of arts and kinship. As the documentary *Wylie Avenue Days* says, "from the 1930s to the 1950s, the Hill District emerged as one of the most prosperous and influential Black communities in America." Indeed, the Hill District earned a reputation for its thriving jazz scene, boasting famous jazz artists including Lena Horne, Billy Eckstein, and Earl "Fatha" Hines as well as iconic jazz clubs like The Crawford Grill.

In addition, the Hill District was home to Madame C.J. Walker's thriving hair care business, the business that made her the first self-made Black female millionaire in American history. Her school, Lelia College of Beauty Culture, one of the first beauty schools in America, was also located in the Hill District. As was Greenlee Field, the first Black-built and Black-owned baseball park in America and the home of the legendary Pittsburgh Crawfords.

As the 1950s came to a close, the Pittsburgh



"Pittsburgh" by Esther Bubley, July 1950 Description: Street scene in Hill District

government was hooked on the idea of urban renovation. One member of the city council noted, "90% of the buildings in the area are sub-standard and have long outlived their usefulness, and so there would be no social loss if they were all destroyed." This comment, of course, ignores the thousands of people living in these "sub-standard" buildings who would feel a great "social loss" if their homes, community centers, and churches were torn down. Nonetheless, the Pittsburgh government made the decision to effectively destroy most of Lower Hill to make room for Civic Arena, which finished construction in 1961. 8000 residents were forced out of their homes to make room for Civic Arena, decimating Lower Hill and cutting Upper and Middle Hill off from the rest of Pittsburgh.

After decades of marginalization, police brutality, and the systematic destruction of local homes and businesses, tensions in the Hill District were higher than ever. This tension finally gave way on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968, when the news broke that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been murdered on a balcony in Memphis, Tennessee. By the next day, residents had taken to the streets of the Hill District, protesting mistreatment and expressing their grief at the loss of Dr. King.

Angered, devastated, and faced with a police force prepared to escalate, one citizen said, "They killed the most nonviolent member of the movement — let's burn the damn place down." And indeed, over the course of the following several days, many businesses known to discriminate against Black

## THE HILL DISTRICT CONTINUED...



Three colour (blue, yellow-orange, black) lithographic print showing Pittsburgh in 1902, by Thaddeus Mortimer Fowler, 1902.

people were the targets of fires, bricks, and looters. Unfortunately, those fires spread indiscriminately, destroying many BIPOC-owned local businesses in the process. Hundreds of citizens were arrested, and conflict continued as the national guard was called in.

To publicly demonstrate the community's grief at the loss of Dr. King and at the continued mistreatment of the Black community in the Hill District and beyond, a march was organized by NAACP President Byrd Brown and Executive Director Alma Speed Fox. Public Safety Director David Craig attempted to shut down the march, but Alma, march permit in hand and dressed in her Sunday church clothes, calmly faced off against Craig and the police line. A half hour later, 3500 people began marching from the Hill District towards downtown Pittsburgh.

While the fires set during the 1968 conflicts may have been extinguished, the movement never died in the hearts of the Hill District residents, with hundreds of people still fighting to restore the neighborhood to its former glory. They fight an uphill battle against bureaucracy and systemic racism as they advocate for affordable housing, reasonable property taxes, and basic neighborhood amenities. After thirty years without a grocery store, a Shop n' Save market was built in 2013 thanks to the relentless efforts of residents. By their unending

determination in the face of marginalization and gentrification, Hill's inhabitants honor the neighborhood's history and legacy.

The love August Wilson felt for his hometown is palpable throughout his American Century Cycle. Wilson's work not only reflects the transformation of the Hill District through the 20th century, but also draws attention to its residents and the battles they are still fighting. Wilson's work reminds us that the Hill District isn't simply the remnants of a cultural hub, nor should it be reduced to a footnote in the biographies of its most famous inhabitants. The Hill District is a living, breathing community full of real people facing tangible issues now, in 2022, and with his plays, Wilson calls on the rest of us to listen to their voices. ♦

Edited from:

Foretek, Jared. "The Story of the Pittsburgh Neighborhood That Inspired 'Fences': National Trust for Historic Preservation.", 24 Feb. 2017, <https://savingplaces.org/stories/the-story-of-the-pittsburgh-neighborhood-that-inspired-fences#.YiksJXrMLcu>.

Klein, Emily. "The Hill District, a Community Holding on through Displacement and Development." *PublicSource*, 5 Nov. 2021, <https://www.publicsource.org/hill-district-displacement-development/>.

Mellon, Steve, and Julian Routh. "The Week the Hill Rose up: Pittsburgh Post." *Gazette*, 2 Apr. 2018, <https://newsinteractive.post-gazette.com/the-week-the-hill-rose-up/>.

"The History of the Hill." *Hill Community Development Corp*, <https://www.hilldistrict.org/history>.



## HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE WILSON CYCLE\*\*

Article originally written by the Huntington Theatre Company for their study guide in 2006

As scholars approach the work of August Wilson, they face an inevitable question: in what order should the plays be considered? Ten plays, each set in one decade of the 20th century, were written out of order. The first play to be professionally produced, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, occurs third, chronologically. *Gem of the Ocean*, the first chronologically, was written next-to-last. *Jitney*—the eighth in chronological order — was written in 1979 but rewritten and expanded nearly twenty years later. There can be only one answer—they must be considered in the order in which the events of the plays occur. With the cycle complete and *Radio Golf* (the final play in every sense) set for its Broadway debut\*, the order in which the plays were written must necessarily fade into the background. Wilson chose to tie his plays to the procession of decades of the 20th century, but the Wilson cycle is more than just a series of plays. This singular achievement is both a history and a mythology of an entire people.

Asked about the foundations of African-American culture in a 1991 interview, Wilson replied, “The one thing which we did not have as Black Americans —we didn’t have a mythology. We had no origin myths.” The Wilson cycle is permeated by the tropes of mythology, and indeed, drama and myth have been intertwined since their twin births in ancient Greece. In the Athens of 5th century B.C.E., playwrights drew upon the shared body of Greek myths for their stories. At the same time, the writers were able to both reinforce and take advantage of the Athenian self-image in the way they crafted their plays. It is no coincidence that at the end of the Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (his version of the Orestes myth) the goddess Athena summons Orestes to Athens, where he is put on trial for his crimes; Athenians prided themselves on their rational system of justice, and Aeschylus could cleverly play into this nationalism for the climax.

August Wilson had no analogous body of mythology upon which to draw in writing his cycle, and so he created one himself. There are literal myths told and retold over the course of the plays: Aunt Ester



“Malcolm X in discussion”, by unknown, 1959 or 1960.



Amiri Baraka addressing the Malcolm X Festival in San Antonio Park, Oakland, California,” by unknown artist, located on Wikimedia Commons, uploaded May 19 2007.

takes Citizen Barlow on a mystical journey to the fabled City of Bones in *Gem of the Ocean*, and Herald Loomis of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* sees the City in a vision. Characters are mentioned again and again — in *Two Trains Running* we learn about the opulent funeral of “Patchneck Red,” a famous gambler, and in *The Piano Lesson* we learn that Patchneck Red’s beginnings weren’t so impressive. The figure of Aunt Ester— who we meet in the flesh only once, in *Gem of the Ocean*— takes on the status of a myth in the later plays. In *Two Trains Running*,

## HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE WILSON CYCLE\*\* CONTINUED...

Sterling Johnson is transformed through a visit to her house at 1839 Wylie Avenue. She has died at the beginning of *King Hedley II*, where Stool Pigeon declares that God has called her back to Heaven to clear the field of battle before Armageddon. Finally, the sale of her house at 1839 Wylie Avenue is a central issue in *Radio Golf. Gem*, as the first play of the century, is appropriately filled with mythological characters. Solly Two Kings—the Underground Railroad conductor named for Kings David and Solomon, who makes a living selling the literal waste of society—is every bit the mythical trickster, and would not be out of place in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

At the same time that Wilson is creating a mythology in the cycle, he is retelling the history of African Americans in the 20th century. Historical drama has a proud tradition, with no less significant a figure than William Shakespeare at the forefront. Through his history plays, Shakespeare was able to examine the very notion of what it meant to be English. In a way, all British monarchs are judged against the example of King Henry V. At the same time, Shakespeare is able to show us that the great figures of history were also human beings — is there a more complex, flawed figure than Prince Hal (*Henry IV Part I*), whom we meet again in *Henry V* as the eponymous King?

In writing his histories, however, Wilson chose not to focus on the great and the powerful. The blues singer Ma Rainey was a real person, but more often the characters that fill Wilson’s plays are original, and exist just to the side of what might be written into a history book. Troy Maxson, the protagonist of *Fences*, played baseball in the Negro Leagues, but failed to make a career of it and spent fifteen years in jail. King Hedley II, despite his oversized name, is an embittered ex-con, trying to rebuild his life but failing miserably. Wilson deliberately chose to dramatize stories on the periphery of “official” history — in *Two Trains Running* the shadow of a

Malcolm X rally hangs over the play, but none of the men at the lunch counter make it there, and Sterling ends up at Aunt Ester’s instead. Yet at the same time, Wilson’s characters exhibit as much nobility of spirit as any Shakespearean king. If Shakespeare demonstrates the humanity within great men, Wilson dramatizes the greatness within seemingly ordinary men. Men like Troy Maxson, Citizen Barlow, and King Hedley II are faced with nearly insurmountable obstacles, and if they sometimes fail, the mere fact that they continue to struggle is a triumph.

*Radio Golf* occupies a unique position within this framework. In many ways, it dramatizes the central conflict between history and mythology. Harmond Wilks is a man of history, a man of destiny. The path before him is clear, and he knows what he must do in order to walk it. But into his life comes Elder Joseph Barlow, a mythological archetype in the vein of Solly Two Kings or Aunt Ester. He represents the tradition of mythology and folklore for which Harmond has never previously had time. As the successive revelations of the plot unfold, Harmond learns that he is not just a product of history; Wilson’s mythology of Aunt Ester, of Bynum the binder and Herald Loomis of *Joe Turner*, of Stool Pigeon of *Hedley* and Hambone of *Two Trains*, runs in Harmond’s blood, and he cannot turn his back on it. August Wilson gave the African American community, and all Americans, a great gift in his cycle. He created the cycle for all of us, and he showed us in *Radio Golf* that we need both history and mythology to move forward into the future. ♦

Edited from:

\* ANW note: *Radio Golf* had its Broadway debut in 2007 to great success, including the 2007 Tony Award for Best Play.

\*\*Notated articles were created by the Education Department at the Huntington Theatre Company (Boston, MA) as part of their curriculum guide for their 2006 production of *Radio Golf* and are included in this guide with the Huntington’s permission. Inquiries regarding Huntington-created materials should be directed to Meg O’Brien, Director of Education at the Huntington Theatre Company, by emailing [mobrien@huntingtontheatre.org](mailto:mobrien@huntingtontheatre.org).

## THE **LANGUAGE** OF AUGUST WILSON

*“August’s language—the rhythm of hurt, the rhythm of pain, the rhythm of ecstasy, the rhythm of family—sets him apart and [is] why we call him the heavyweight champion.” —John Lahr*

*“There weren’t many black folk around. In the silence, I could hear the language for the first time...[I] hadn’t really valued or respected the way that black folks talked. I’d always thought that in order to create art out of it you had to change that...I got lonely and missed those guys and sort of created them. I could hear the music.” —August Wilson*

August Wilson’s early writing career as a poet certainly helped to shape the way he heard and wrote language. He struggled to find his poetic voice early in his career. However, in a poem called “Morning Statement” he was finally able to write something that “didn’t pretend to be anything else.” Wilson said, “It wasn’t struggling to say eternal things. It was just claiming the ground as its own thing.” This sentiment is the basis for how Wilson approached playwriting.

In his plays, he was able to share his poetic voice, a voice common to the Black experience. However, it took silence for him to truly hear the language. In 1978, Wilson moved away from the Hill to St. Paul, MN. He went from a neighborhood with 55,000 Black people to a state with 55,000. The absence of his peers forced Wilson to really hear how they speak, and Wilson incorporated it into his plays. The way Wilson uses language in his plays is considered one of the most poetic in all of modern theatre.

The anecdotal style often incorporated by Wilson stems from the oral tradition of African culture—a time-honored method of passing history and stories through generations. Wilson has even referred to his own style of story-telling as “the blood’s memory,” those things a person knows just by being a part of a culture.

In *Radio Golf*, the most stylized and poetic language is used by Old Joe and Sterling. Why would Wilson have Old Joe and Sterling speak more poetically than Mame, Harmond, or Roosevelt? How does the manner in which the characters speak affect how they are perceived?

*Thanks to Goodman Theatre’s Education and Engagement department for the use of this article. It was originally written for the study guide for the Goodman’s production of RADIO GOLF in 2007.*



*“The Calabash,”* by Romare Bearden, 1970, taken from The Library of Congress.



# THEMES

## IDENTITY

Identity is one of the most important themes in *Radio Golf*. More specifically, African-American identity lies at the center of this play, and Wilson presents five distinct variations of that identity. For Sterling, identity has a clear moral code, and despite his past brushes with the law, he defines both himself and others in terms of what is right and wrong. For three of the other characters, identity is closely linked to the notion of time. Mame's identity is tied to the future: how to build toward goals not yet reached. For Roosevelt, identity is rooted firmly in the present: what he can get out of life right now. Old Joe's identity is intertwined with the past: he rarely speaks of himself or his life in the present. Finally, Harmond's identity is an intersection of all of the other four. Unsurprisingly, he is the character who changes the most over the course of the play.

## MASCULINITY

The theme of masculinity is also notably linked to the notion of identity. Both Roosevelt and Sterling talk about their genitals in very frank language. For both of them, being "a man" is defined largely in sexual and biological terms. Harmond, in describing his attraction to Mame, notes that she could be hard

and soft at the same time. In essence, he sees both traditionally masculine and feminine qualities in her, and he praises her for possessing the right balance of the two. Since Mame is the only female character in the play and has a relatively minor role, Wilson is clearly placing his question about African-American identity in a male context.

## MONEY

Money is also an important theme in *Radio Golf*. Throughout the play, money not only dictates the characters' actions but often defines the characters themselves. Roosevelt and Sterling both brag about money in their final standoff. The central plot of the play revolves around monetary transactions: Old Joe's back taxes, the money needed from various sources to fund the development project, and the illegal sale of Aunt Ester's house. One of the principal characters even works for a bank. As a result, the difference in class between the characters of Old Joe, Sterling, Mame, Roosevelt, and Harmond is keenly felt throughout. ♦

Edited from:

This article was written by Joi Wright and originally appeared in Trinity Rep's 2020 Study Guide for *Radio Golf*. It is included in this guide with their permission.

## INJUSTICE AND GENTRIFICATION: THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF *RADIO GOLF*

**August Wilson's *Radio Golf*** takes place over 20 years ago, in an era obsessed with progress. Nevertheless, Wilson's characters endure racial discrimination and social inequities rooted in the Jim Crow era and enforced by systemic oppression. While the Jim Crow era ostensibly ended in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, its systems and principles persist today, and were certainly active in the 1990s. Over the course of *Radio Golf*, Wilson sheds light on a number of these systems and principles. Members of city government blatantly disregard the law when they fail to provide Old Joe notice regarding his property. Furthermore, they willingly ignore the harm they cause to Pittsburgh citizens as they "blight" the Hill District in the name of progress. In order to understand how racial discrimination and social inequity function in *Radio Golf*, it is important to understand the legal history of these practices in the United States.

In 1896, during *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the United States Supreme Court ruled that it is Constitutional to enforce and maintain it is racially segregated, "separate but equal" spaces. In doing so, it legally justified and ethically validated racially discriminatory behavior and policy. Racial discrimination was already common practice in the United States, but by its 1896 decision, the Supreme Court ensured that it went socially unchecked and legally unquestioned for the next half-century.

While considerable progress has since been made towards reforming the racially discriminatory laws and behavior that are so deeply rooted in American society, racial inequality is still widespread today. Outright acts of discrimination are less tolerated and are no longer justifiable by written law, but racism is still incredibly prevalent on a systemic level. The system that plays perhaps the largest role in the perpetuation of racial inequality in the country is the justice system.

The United States criminal justice system is the largest in the world. In 2015, 2.2 million individuals were incarcerated in federal, state, or local prisons and jails, accounting for nearly 22% of all prisoners in the world. Within the United States' massive correctional and criminal justice system, there is significant racial disparity. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Black Americans are 5.9 times more likely than white Americans to be arrested. Once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted. Once convicted, they are more likely to receive lengthy prison sentences. In fact, as of 2001, one in three Black boys could expect to end up



At the bus station in Durham, North Carolina, by Jack Delano, May 1940, taken from Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division.

incarcerated at some point in their lives compared to just one in seventeen white boys. Despite making up only 13.4% of the population, Black Americans account for 22% of fatal police shootings, 47% percent of wrongful conviction exonerations, and 35% percent of those given capital punishment.

Gentrification is complicated social extension of the discrimination seen in the legal system. Essentially, gentrification describes a process wherein wealthy, college-educated individuals begin to move into poor or working-class communities, often originally occupied by people of color. The people and businesses that move into gentrifying neighborhoods may have goals for the community that are often at odds with the goals of long-time residents. Rising costs of living and a changing community culture can make for a difficult adjustment for longtime residents. These changes may drive out people of color and minority-owned businesses and perpetuate a racially-based geographical segregation. In this sense, gentrification tends to resemble European colonization efforts of the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries—efforts that upended and altered the preexisting social systems, cultures, and histories of communities of color. At the same time, gentrification brings much needed investment into long-neglected areas, making it a complicated issue involving many different stakeholders and perspectives.

Viewing the justice system and gentrification practices through this critical lens, it becomes clear

## INJUSTICE AND GENTRIFICATION: **THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF *RADIO GOLF*** CONTINUED...

that our current justice and social system is steeped in practices and policies that mirror those of the Jim Crow era—practices and policies that inherently target and limit the rights of communities of color. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, articulates the archaic roots of the contemporary U.S. legal system's practice of incarceration of Black Americans on a mass scale:

“As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a Black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.”

There is much more to be said about the impact of systemic racial inequality on members of marginalized communities- Latine, Indigenous, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities are also impacted by the disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system. If you would like to learn more about the history of and disparities in the criminal justice system, we will include additional resources at the end of this study guide.

Edited from:

Inman, Shasta N. “Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice.” *Americanbar.org*, [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/young\\_lawyers/publications/after-the-bar/public-service/racial-disparities-criminal-justice-how-lawyers-can-help/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/young_lawyers/publications/after-the-bar/public-service/racial-disparities-criminal-justice-how-lawyers-can-help/).

“Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System.” *The Sentencing Project*, [www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/](http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/).

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/gentrification/>



“Black Lives Matter rally H Street, Washington, DC,” by Tracy Meehleib, 2020, taken from Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **RESEARCH**

**Purpose:**

These research prompts will help students develop an understanding of the social and historical contexts of August Wilson's *Radio Golf*.

**Prepare:**

Students will divide into small groups and each group will research one of the following topics related to *Radio Golf*. Once all groups have prepared their research, they will present their findings to one another.

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**August Wilson:**

- His life
- His works
- His legacy
- His influences
- Amiri Baraka
- Jorge Luis Borges
- Romare Bearden
- Blues music

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**The 1990s:**

- Pop culture
- American politics

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**The Hill District:**

- Its history
- Its current state
- The cultural significance of the district
- Gentrification: its definition, its effects on the Hill District community and on your own.

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**Pittsburgh:**

- The city's geography
- Industries in the city
- Demographics of the city in the 1990s and now
- Cultural and artistic movements that started in the city

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**The Black Arts Movement:**

- Key artists
- Key writers
- Origin of the movement
- Black Arts Repertory Theatre
- Black Nationalism
- Marcus Garvey
- Malcolm X

## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES**

### Purpose:

These activities will prompt students to think critically about the themes and ideas in *Radio Golf* and engage with the narrative.

### THE MUSIC OF CHARACTER

In this activity students will have the opportunity to explore how the language and sounds a character uses to express ideas can reveal information about that character.

**Background:** August Wilson was fascinated with the way people speak. When he was young, he would spend time at barbershops and restaurants in the Hill District of Pittsburgh listening to peoples' voices—their vocal intonation, their words, their rhythm of speech. As he grew older, Wilson became increasingly interested and artistically influenced by music, particularly Blues music. As he began to write for the theatre, Wilson used the voices he heard in the Hill District as well as the Blues as inspiration for developing the ways in which his characters speak.

1. Have each student conduct a brief, 5-minute interview with a family member or friend on a subject of the student's choosing.
2. Instruct students to either record the audio of the interview or to take down the interviewee's responses in writing.
3. After they have completed their interviews, divide students into pairs, and instruct the students to give each other the audio or written recordings of the interview they conducted.
4. Have students listen to or read the new interview and develop a profile for a fictional character based on the interview. This profile should include details about the following:
  - a. The character's upbringing
  - b. Where the character currently lives
  - c. What the character does for a living
  - d. What the character does for fun
  - e. The character's greatest fears
  - f. The character's greatest hopes
5. Encourage students to focus on the interviewee's language usage, rhythm of speech, and vocal intonation as well as any details the interviewee may reveal about themselves when creating this profile.
6. Allow students to share their character profiles as well as the recording used as inspiration for the profile.
7. Facilitate a class-wide discussion about the ways in which speech and language reveal character traits by asking questions such as: how was this activity? What words or speech patterns did you notice when listening to or reading the interview? How did you draw conclusions about a character from the interview?

### POLITICAL CONNECTIONS ACTIVITY

In *Radio Golf*, Harmond is running for mayor in hopes of being the first Black mayor of Pittsburgh. Both Sterling and Old Joe challenge Harmond on what this really means and what he will do to advocate for Black citizens of Pittsburgh. Today, over twenty years after this play is set, politicians and voters in the United States still grapple with these ideas.

Working individually or in small groups, research one of the following modern day American politicians:

1. Barack Obama
2. Julian Castro
3. Corey Booker
4. Stacey Abrams
5. Kamala Harris
6. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Compare the politician to Harmond Wilks. Look at their similarities as well as their differences. See how many you can come up with.

Create a winning campaign slogan for each politician. You can use the ones in *Radio Golf* as a starting point.

Present your research and thoughts to the rest of the class. Discuss as a class if or how well politicians accurately represent the American people. How has our country progressed since the 1990s, when *Radio Golf* is set? How do we as a country choose our representatives? Do we look for people who share our race? Our gender? Our ideas? Which of these is most important to you? Why?

*Thanks to Goodman Theatre's Education and Engagement department for the use of this activity. It was originally written for the study guide for the Goodman's production of Radio Golf in 2007.*

## PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES** CONTINUED...

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### DEBATE ACTIVITY\*\*

Choose two characters in August Wilson's *Radio Golf* that have differing opinions about a central issue in the play, like the demolition of 1839 Wylie St. or the larger issue of race and politics. Ask for two volunteers and conduct a debate of this issue. Give the first pair a chance to argue their case for at least two minutes. Next, ask the other members of the class if anyone would like to "tap in" and take over one or both of the characters by entering the scene silently and gently tapping the actor they wish to replace. Give these two a chance to debate, and then allow others to "tap in" again. Continue this process as long as there are students who wish to participate in the debate. This allows students to hear different perspectives.

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### CHARACTER COLLAGE ACTIVITY\*\*

August Wilson credits the art of Romare Bearden as one of his major influences. Look at some of Romare Bearden's work and discuss why he chooses collage as his primary medium of expressing Black history. Have students choose one character from *Radio Golf* and create a character collage. Students can use paper, sketches, paint, fabric pieces, photographs, old puzzle pieces, magazine and newspaper clippings, and quotations from the play to express the character's conflicts, relationships, and emotions. Encourage students to consider texture and color when making decisions to best represent their chosen character. Have students share their work with the class without naming the character. By picking out the qualities of each collage, have the class guess which character is being expressed.

\*\*Notated articles were created by the Education Department at the Huntington Theatre Company (Boston, MA) as part of their curriculum guide for their 2006 production of *Radio Golf* and are included in this guide with the Huntington's permission. Inquiries regarding Huntington-created materials should be directed to Meg O'Brien, Director of Education at the Huntington Theatre Company, by emailing [mobrien@huntingtontheatre.org](mailto:mobrien@huntingtontheatre.org).



## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the title “Radio Golf”? Using examples from the play, make an argument for why both radio and golf are important or symbolic in this story.
2. How does August Wilson use language to denote character? In a well-developed essay, compare and contrast the language that two different characters use and describe why it is significant.
3. Consider the exploration of identity in *Radio Golf*. How do the perspectives of different characters insight into the intersectionality of race, economic status, and gender in the American experience?
4. Analyze the relationship between two characters of your choice in *Radio Golf*. How might this relationship exemplify larger social tensions of the United States in the 90s?
5. In Act 1, Scene 5, Sterling tells Harmond, “The world I live in right is right and right don’t wrong nobody.” Analyze the role of moral codes in *Radio Golf*.
6. How and why does Harmond Wilks change over the course of the play?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### PLAYS:

*Radio Golf* by August Wilson. Published by Samuel French in 2007.

*Gem of the Ocean* by August Wilson. Published by Samuel French in 2015.

### BOOKS:

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2012.

Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. PLUTO Press, 2019.

Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, a Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

### ARTICLES:

Cherry, James M. "August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle." *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre (JADT)*, 5 June 2017, [jadtjournal.org/2016/12/23/august-wilsons-pittsburgh-cycle/](http://jadtjournal.org/2016/12/23/august-wilsons-pittsburgh-cycle/).

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review: Summer 1968*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1968, p. 28., doi:10.2307/1144377.

Robinson, Phoebe. "Pittsburgh's Underground Railroad, Preserved and Not." *The New York Times*, 24 Feb. 2017.

Shafer, Yvonne. "An Interview With August Wilson." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 1989.

### FILMS:

*American Masters—August Wilson: The Ground On Which I Stand* (PBS, 2015)

### ONLINE RESOURCES:

August Wilson and the Black Arts Movement (PBS Learning Media):

<https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/aug15.ela.lit.blackarts/wilsons-bs-baraka-black-arts-movement/>

"The Ground on Which I Stand" Address Text: <https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/>

### VIDEO CLIPS:

Playwright August Wilson on Writing About Black America (1988 interview): <https://billmoyers.com/story/august-wilson-on-writing-about-black-america/>

August Wilson on Beginning with Dialogue: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-on-beginning-with-dialogue/3726/>

August Wilson's Youth: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilsons-youth/3707/>

## ABOUT THEATRE ARTS: KEY THEATRICAL TERMS

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of amusement: going to the theatre. But attending a live theatrical performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of entertainment.

In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd.

After this *A Noise Within* performance, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

**blocking:** The instructions a director gives actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

**character:** The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

**conflict:** The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

**dramatic irony:** A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

**genre:** Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

**motivation:** The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

**props:** Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

**proscenium stage:** There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

**set:** The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

**setting:** The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

**stage areas:** The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

**theme:** The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

**thrust stage:** A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.



## ABOUT A NOISE WITHIN

**A NOISE WITHIN** A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.

### Study Guides

A Noise Within creates study guides in alignment with core reading, listening, speaking, and performing arts standards to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study guides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: [www.anoisewithin.org](http://www.anoisewithin.org). The information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with the California VAPA standards, The Common Core, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of A Noise Within's artistic interpretation of the work, statements from directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website.

### Credits

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