**August Wilson’s Century Cycle**

**Syllabus - Spring 2018**

**Course Description**

The study group will read and discuss one August Wilson play each week for ten weeks, completing the Century Cycle of ten plays. Each group member will be required to read each play at home, select a passage they think is significant, then read the passage aloud in class and discuss why they think that passage is significant. After class, each student will post to a blog a few paragraphs about the play. The goal of the course will not be to exhaustively discuss each play. Instead, each member (including the group leader) will select a brief passage to read aloud to the class, followed by a brief, collaborative close read and discussion by the group.

**Instructional Methods**

The course uses collaborative group discussion and close reading for a passage selected by each group member. Group members will post their reflections to a blog and these reflections will be peer-reviewed by all other group members.

**Recommended Texts**

Nadel, Alan. *August Wilson: Completing the Twentieth-Century Cycle.* University of Iowa Press, 2010*.* Available online at <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/208>

**Course Requirements**

Class participation. Each group member will be expected to present his/her passage each week for discussion. Each group member will post his weekly reflections after the discussion to a blog or online forum.

**Week 1: Jitney (1979)**

Synopsis: Set in an unofficial taxi station threatened with demolition in 1977, Jitney explores the lives and relationships of drivers, highlighting conflicts between generations and different concepts of legacy and identity.

**Week 2: Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (1982)**

Synopsis: Set in 1927 in a Chicago recording studio (the ten-cycle play not set in Pittsburgh), Ma Rainey examines racism in the history of black musicians and white producers, and the themes of art and religion.

**Week 3: Fences (1984)**

Synopsis: In 1957, Troy Maxson, a former Negro Baseball League player, is a bitter man in his 50s who works as a garbageman. His frustration and disappointments in life affect his wife Rose and son Cory, who like his father, is a gifted athlete.

**Week 4: Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1984)**

Synopsis: Set in a Pittsburgh boardinghouse in 1911, the ensemble play includes characters who were former slaves and examines the residents’ experiences with racism and discrimination.

**Week 5: The Piano Lesson (1986)**

Synopsis: Named after a painting by Romare Bearden, the play follows the Charles family in the Doaker Charles household. A brother and a sister have different ideas about what to do with their piano, a family heirloom. Sell it to purchase land their enslaved ancestors once toiled upon, or keep the piano, which includes carved depictions of two distant relatives.

**Week 6: Two Trains Running (1990)**

Synopsis: Set in 1969, the play revolves around a restaurant in Pittsburgh’s Hill District, which has suffered a long economic decline. The restaurant owner, Memphis, worries what will happen when the city comes to claim the building through eminent domain. A young activist, Sterling, tries to organize protests and rallies that can help save the restaurant, but Memphis is not so supportive.

**Week 7: Seven Guitars (1995)**

Synopsis: Set in Pittsburgh in 1948, blues singer Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton is newly freed from prison when he’s asked to sign a record deal after a song he recorded months before becomes a surprise hit. He struggles to right wrongs and make his way back to Chicago. Black manhood is a theme of the play and a rooster is used in to symbolize it.

**Week 8: King Hedley II (1991)**

Synopsis: Set in Pittsburgh in 1985, an ex-con tries wants to support a family and aims to get the money to open a video store by selling stolen refrigerators. The play features some characters from Seven Guitars.

**Week 9: Gem of the Ocean (2003)**

Synopsis: Set in Pittsburgh in 1904, the play features a man whose small crime has had deadly consequences for another man. Feeling guilty, he comes seeking the spiritual healing of Aunt Ester. A recurring character in Wilson’s plays, Ester claims to be 285 years old and is the kind matriarch of her household in Pittsburgh.

**Week 10: Radio Golf (2005)**

Synopsis: Set in 1990 Pittsburgh, this play concluded Wilson’s Century Cycle and is the last play he completed before his death. The home of Aunt Ester (the setting of the cycle’s first play Gem of the Ocean) is threatened with demolition that will make way for real estate development in the depressed area. Investors include Harmond Wilks, who wants to increase his chance of becoming the city’s first black mayor. History and legacy challenge personal aspirations and ideas of progress.

Assignments. Each week, each group member will reflect on the group discussion and produce a short composition and post to a forum or a blog (yet to be determined).

Final assignment: Collaborative peer-review and discussion of each student’s aggregated blog (or forum) posts.

Materials: Group leader will provide links to background information online, and where available, links to the actual text of each play. Where not available, students will need to check the play out from the library or actually purchase the play at from a book store or from Amazon. Students must also have access to a computer with internet access.