

**August Wilson American Century Cycle**  
**OLLI-AU, Spring 2024**  
**Syllabus**

**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 and be prepared to contribute to a group discussion on what they have read. The goal of the course will not be to exhaustively discuss each play. Instead, each group 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 of a passage.

**Required Texts**

Group members will be required to procure all the plays listed below. The first five plays are linked in the syllabus, others will have to be purchased or borrowed from the library. The complete set of plays in hardback is available on Amazon for \$100-\$160. Each play can be found separately in paperback for \$6-10 each.

**Additional Suggested Texts** (not required)

Biggsby, Christopher. Editor. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*.  
Bryer, Jackson and Mary C. Hartig. 2006. *Conversations with August Wilson*.  
Elkins, Marilyn. 1994. *August Wilson, A Casebook*.  
Hartigan, Patti. 2023. *August Wilson - A Life*. .  
Herrington, Joan. 2004. *I Ain't Sorry for Nothing I Done*.  
Nadal, Alan. 1994. *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the drama of August Wilson*.  
Nadal, Alan. 2010. *Completing the Twentieth-Century Cycle*.  
Shannon, Sandra. 1995. *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*.  
Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. 2004. *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*.  
Temple, Riley Keene. 2017. *Aunt Esters Children Redeemed*.

**Course Requirements**

Class participation. Each study group member will be expected to contribute to each week's discussion.

**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.

– Lahr New Yorker Interview, 2001. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/04/16/been-here-and-gone>

– Suzan Lori-Parks Interview, 2005. <https://www.americantheatre.org/2005/11/01/the-light-in-august-wilson-a-career-a-century-a-lifetime/>

– Racist Roots of Urban Renewal. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90155955/the-racist-roots-of-urban-renewal-and-how-it-made-cities-less-equal>

- Full play pdf: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/jitney.pdf>
- YouTube playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXZapfkM43eU0KVt5QWBxdIK](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXZapfkM43eU0KVt5QWBxdIK)

**Week 2 – Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (1982)** Synopsis: Set in 1927 in a Chicago recording studio (the only 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.

- The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Walter Benjamin. <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>
- Full play pdf: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/ma-rainey-1.pdf>
- My blog post has lots of links: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.wordpress.com/2018/03/08/some-links-to-background-material-for-ma-raineys-black-bottom/>
- Ruben Santiago-Hudson Ma Rainey film adaptation screenplay
- YouTube playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXb3E8p4pv7MmgNPoDUlqCB7](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXb3E8p4pv7MmgNPoDUlqCB7)

**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.

- Freytag’s Pyramid Dramatic Structure article: <https://www.clearvoice.com/blog/what-is-freytags-pyramid-dramatic-structure/>
- Article on Negro Baseball leagues. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/16/sports/baseball/mlb-negro-leagues.html>
- America’s Most Undefeated Playwright: <https://theundefeated.com/features/august-wilson-is-americas-most-undefeated-playwright/>
- YouTube playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXYPmltHweBOyfAwDJ-x1qwO](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXYPmltHweBOyfAwDJ-x1qwO)
- Full play pdf: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/fences1.pdf>

**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.

- Article on convict leasing programs: <https://www.thoughtco.com/convict-leasing-4160457>
- Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual – <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/09/06/the-prevalence-of-ritual-on-romare-beardens-projections/>
- Maslow on Self-Transcendence. <https://reasonandmeaning.com/2017/01/18/summary-of-maslow-on-self-transcendence/>
- Maslow got it wrong – <https://www.pacesconnection.com/g/tribal-communities-of-northern-california/blog/ravilochan-maslow-got-it-wrong>
- Full play pdf: <https://wp.me/a4gJ6W-qe> YouTube playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXaWJ0J5IXBUUpwoVe-klNmc](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXaWJ0J5IXBUUpwoVe-klNmc)
- Borges link to Joe Turner’s Come and Gone: <https://raymondmaxwell.substack.com/p/additional-notes-how-borges-the-approach>

**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.

– Exploring the Use of Myth and Mystical Practice in August Wilson’s Century Cycle – <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/colloquium-presentation-3-april-20186.pdf>

– Article on Parchment Prison/Farm – <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/inside-mississippi-notorious-parchman-prison>

– Youtube playlist (includes film adaptation): [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXYBNikZcDVM0y\\_xff-c1zCi](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXYBNikZcDVM0y_xff-c1zCi)

– Draft posts to August Wilson Society blog promoting The Piano Lesson: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.wordpress.com/2022/05/24/august-wilson-in-his-own-words-on-the-piano-lesson/>. (Password: deep dive)

**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.

– Dear White People – Two Trains Running is Not About Race: <http://phindie.com/11061-11061-dear-white-people-two-trains-running-is-not-about-race/>

– August Wilson Life and Work Timeline: <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/theater-dance/2012/06/01/August-Wilson-s-Life-and-Work-A-timeline-1945-2005/stories/201206010268>

– YouTube Playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXZOBWNf\\_EwGXjngVAQKrvbC](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXZOBWNf_EwGXjngVAQKrvbC)

**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 to symbolize it.

– Aristotle Poetics, Parts 13-15 – <https://gointothestory.blcklst.com/studying-aristotles-poetics-part-13-a-a-perfect-tragedy-2bcd5e9ed3c>

– A Short History of the Legend of Buddy Bolden – <https://www.jazziz.com/a-short-history-of-the-legend-of-buddy-bolden/>

– YouTube playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXYQzNGKFRhdwbLYZ1mz6hLK](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXYQzNGKFRhdwbLYZ1mz6hLK)

– Educational guide and synopsis: <https://wp.me/a4gJ6W-qu>

**Week 8 – King Hedley II (1991)** Synopsis: Set in Pittsburgh in 1985, an ex-con tries 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.

– The Function of the Chorus in Greek Drama article – <http://krishaamer.com/function-chorus-greek-drama/>

– YouTube playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXaqsHCCMTcpz7qemeLe19xv](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXaqsHCCMTcpz7qemeLe19xv)

– Curriculum guide and synopsis: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/king-hedley.pdf>

**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.

– August Wilson in the “City That Encourages Dreams”. [https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/project\\_muse\\_588846.pdf](https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/project_muse_588846.pdf)

– Prologue: definition and examples – <https://literarydevices.net/prologue/>

– Baraka: Columbia the Gem of the Ocean – <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/baraka-gem-of-the-ocean.pdf>

– YouTube playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXbpLBU1gTGwfhRV207HTXPb](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXbpLBU1gTGwfhRV207HTXPb)

– City of Dry Bones sermon: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/city-of-bones.pdf>

**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 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.

– Radio Golf Student Guide: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/radio-golf-student-guide.pdf>

– The Ground On Which I Stand: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/the-ground-on-which-i-stand.docx>

– Alan Nadal, The Theatre of August Wilson, Chapter 9: <https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/>

[chapter\\_9\\_the\\_century\\_that\\_cant\\_fix\\_nothing\\_with\\_the\\_radio\\_golf.pdf](https://augustwilsonstudygroup.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/chapter_9_the_century_that_cant_fix_nothing_with_the_radio_golf.pdf)

– YouTube playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e\\_eIXbZDGZ3NzTVicN5q755bnrd](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0Lvs-e_eIXbZDGZ3NzTVicN5q755bnrd)