

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
**Educational Resource Packet**



**An Interdisciplinary Resource Packet for Teachers**

Prepared by the South Bend Civic Theatre  
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Erin Farmer, Assistant Editor

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*—May 12-28, 2023

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### **How to Cite *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* Educational Resource Packet**

Please credit the resource packet and the lesson plans authors when using their work following the MLA method recommended for a work in an anthology, reference or collection, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/06/>.

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Title page image depicts Ma Rainey and her band in 1924, from Giovanni Russonello's article "[Overlooked No More: Ma Rainey, the 'Mother of the Blues'](#)" in the *New York Times*, 12 June 2019. The image originally comes the Redferns Collection of the JP Jazz Archives.

# WELCOME

June 2022

Dear Educators,

The South Bend Civic Theatre would like to invite you to take part in the August Wilson Project, an unprecedented ten-year commitment on our part to bring Wilson's Pulitzer Prize winning drama to Michiana. Our mission is to enrich and create community through live theatre. This mission is accomplished through the following three pillars:

- Excellence
- Education
- Equity

We are excited about this project because it forwards our efforts to be:

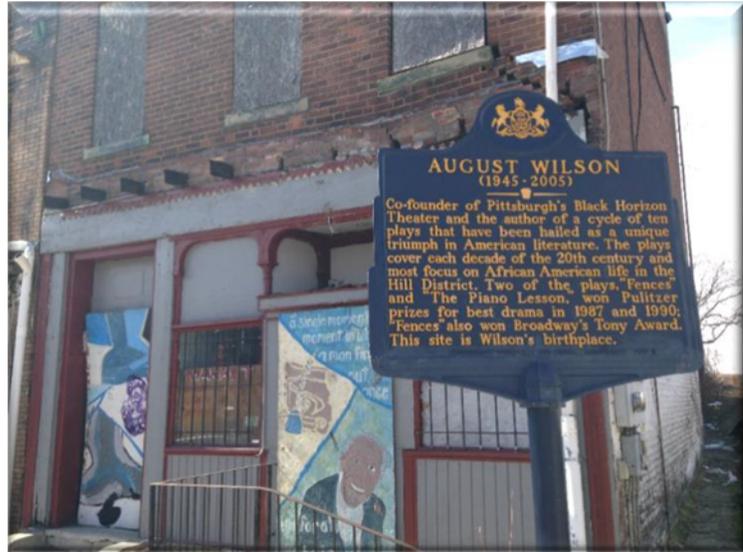
- A light to illuminate the darkness
- A flame to ignite curiosity and imagination
- A beacon to guide all toward hope, unity, and understanding

We hope that you will take this opportunity to attend our production of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and include this Tony Award nominated play in your curriculum. To further these efforts, we have compiled this educational research packet which includes a wealth of information to help get you started. Thank you for your support!



## AUGUST WILSON: THE MAN BEHIND THE LEGACY (1945-2005)

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, to mother Daisy Wilson, a cleaning lady who primarily cared for August and his siblings, and his father, also Frederick August Kittel, a German immigrant and baker. August Wilson was the fourth of six children and the oldest son.



Growing up in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the setting for many of his plays, Wilson attended St. Richard's Parochial School and then progressed to Central Catholic High School in 1959. In the era of Jim Crow laws and stark prejudice against African-Americans, Wilson faced hostility and harassment that forced him to transfer to two other high schools during his freshman year. In 1960, at age 15, Wilson dropped out of Gladstone High School after a teacher accused him of plagiarizing a paper on Napoleon. Undaunted by his troubled high school experience, Wilson continued his education informally at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and on the streets of the Hill District, soaking in the language of its people and the culture of his community.



In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army for three years, but left after one year of service. He then worked odd jobs as a dishwasher, porter, cook, and gardener to support himself. In 1965, Wilson purchased his first typewriter for \$20, using money paid to him by his sister Freda for writing a term paper for her. At this time, Wilson began to write poetry.

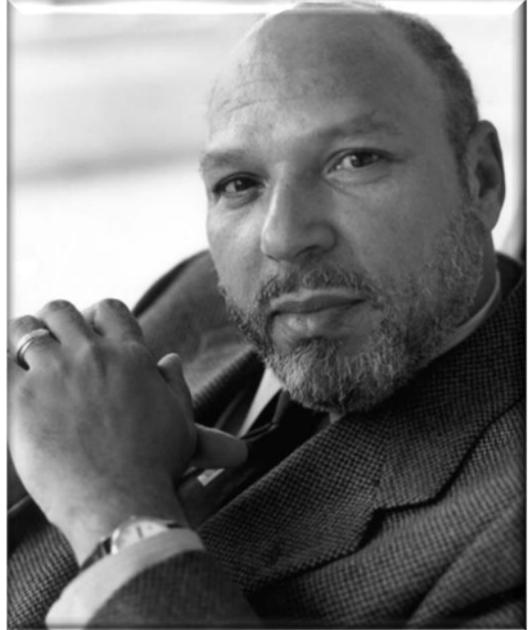
In the late 1960s, at the threshold of the Black Arts Movement, Wilson joined a group of poets, educators, and artists who formed the Centre Avenue Poets Theater Workshop. Wilson met friend and collaborator, Rob Penny, through this group, and in 1968, they co-founded the Black Horizon Theater, a community-based, Black Nationalist Theater Company in the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

Wilson served as the self-taught resident director, and Penny was the playwright-in-residence up until the mid-1970s when the company dissolved. Penny and Wilson produced several plays from and inspired by the black canon, a collection of literature and artwork by African-American artists, assembled and celebrated to raise awareness about the African-American experience. In 1970, Wilson married his first wife, Brenda Burton, and had his first daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson.

In 1978, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he concentrated more on playwriting and became a company member of the Penumbra Theatre led by colleague Lou Bellamy. In 1979, Wilson wrote *Jitney*, which he considered his first real play. Wilson received a fellowship from the Minneapolis Playwrights Center in 1980, and the following year, he married his second wife Judy Oliver.

Wilson's third *American Century Cycle* play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which premiered at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in 1982, was the first to gain him widespread recognition. In the same year, Wilson met Lloyd Richards, the African- American artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre who would direct Wilson's first six plays on Broadway. In 1987, Wilson won the Pulitzer Prize for *Fences*, and in 1990, *The Piano Lesson* earned Wilson his second Pulitzer.

In 1990, he transitioned to Seattle, Washington, where he met Costume Designer Costanza Romero in 1994. They married and together had a daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, in 1997. Wilson continued to work and earn numerous accolades throughout his lifetime. In June 2005, at the age of 60, Wilson was diagnosed with liver cancer. He died on Sunday, October 2, 2005, in Seattle's Swedish Medical Center.



**Example Activity:** Writing prompt: If you were to write play for this decade (2010-2020) what events might you include? Where would you set it? What sorts of characters would you include?

**Biography from:**

<https://www.centertheatregroup.org/programs/students-and-educators/august-wilson-monologue-competition/august-wilson-biography/>

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

### Synopsis:

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place in 1927 and fictionalizes the real-life singer Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, known as the Mother of the Blues, whose career spanned from 1899 to 1933. The play takes place over the course of one day in a Chicago recording studio, in which Ma Rainey and her band are laying tracks for a new album. Ma Rainey, who is simultaneously famous and unable to hail a cab because she is black, commands respect from her white agent and the white owner of the studio. She is late, and as her four band members—Cutler, Slow Drag, Toledo, and Levee—wait for her to arrive, they discuss racial power dynamics, religion, art, and social activism. Levee, who has written his own music, attempts to assert his own style and artistry on the band, based on a supposed promise he extracted from the studio owner that they would record his music. When Ma Rainey fires him and the studio owner withdraws interest in his music, Levee turns his anger on his bandmates, stabbing and killing Toledo when he steps on Levee’s new shoes.

Summary from [SuperSummary](#).

*What I want to do  
is place the culture  
of Black America  
on stage, to  
demonstrate that is  
has the ability to  
offer sustenance.*

*August*



From [Center Theatre's](#) production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was August Wilson’s first successful play. Wilson’s manuscript of the play won him admittance to the Eugene O’Neill National Playwright’s Conference in 1982. There, Wilson was able to produce his play with professional actors without interference from the press and the pressure of Broadway critics. Wilson also met Black American director Lloyd Richards, the Yale Repertory Theatre, who became his longtime collaborator and friend. The play first opened for a full run at the Yale Repertory Theatre in April 1984. It then opened on Broadway at the Cort Theatre in October 1984 and ran for 276 performances. It was a commercial and critical success. A Broadway revival opened in February 2003 and ran for 68 performances.



2020 movie poster feat. Chadwick Boseman and Viola Davis from [Netflix](https://www.netflix.com/title/81040344).

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was August Wilson's second play to be turned into a movie, after *Fences* in 2013. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* came out in select theatres in 2020 before moving to Netflix. It was directed by George C. Wolfe and produced by Denzel Washington, Todd Black, and Danny Wolf. It featured

### 2020 Movie Cast:

- Viola Davis (Ma Rainey)
- Chadwick Boseman  
(Levee)
- Glynn Turman (Toledo)
- Colman Domingo (Cutler)
- Michael Potts (Slow Drag)
- Jonny Coyne (Mel  
Sturdyvant)
- Taylor Paige (Dussie  
Mae)
- Jeremy Shamos (Irvin)
- Dusan Brown (Sylvester)

### Selected 1984 Broadway Production Awards and Nominations:

- Nominated, Tony Award for Best Play
- Nominated, Tony Award for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Play
- Nominated, Tony Award for Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Play
- Won, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play
- Won, Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word or Non-Musical Recording

### Selected 2020 Movie Awards and Nominations:

- Nominated, Academy Award for Best Actor (Chadwick Boseman)
- Nominated, Academy Award for Best Actress

## CHARACTERS

### Ma Rainey

- Based on the real Blues singer Gertrude “Ma” Rainey
- In her forties
- Outspoken and bold
- Works to maintain control over her music
- Powerful, aware of her own influence

### Levee

- In his early thirties
- Member of Ma Rainey’s band, plays the trumpet
- Wants to get his own band and be a star
- Has a temper, is flamboyant, and is often arrogant
- Thinks Ma Rainey’s music is outdated and wants to “jazz it up”

### Cutler

- In his mid-fifties
- Member of Ma Rainey’s band, plays the trombone and guitar
- Leader of the band
- Sensible, described as a “loner”

### Toledo

- In his mid-fifties
- Member of Ma Rainey’s band, plays the piano
- Only group member who can read
- Self-taught, conscious of his own limits, sometimes misapplies knowledge

### Slow Drag

- In his mid-fifties
- Member of Ma Rainey’s band, plays the bass
- Spurs the group to practice so they can finish recording

### Mel Sturdyvant

- White executive in the music industry, possibly the record label’s owner
- Preoccupied with money
- Does not want to work with Black performers and uses Irvin to do so

### Irvin

- White, Ma Rainey’s manager
- Considers himself to be able to “deal with” Black people

### Dussy Mae

- Ma Rainey’s lover
- Young, in her twenties
- Ambitious, uses her attractiveness to try to get ahead

### Sylvester

- Twenty-something
- Nephew of Ma Rainey
- Stutters when he speaks
- Shy and not confident
- Ma Rainey wants him to read the intro to one of her songs

### Policeman

- Officer at the scene of Ma Rainey’s car accident before she arrives on stage
- Does not believe Ma Rainey could own her car because she is Black

# TIME AND PLACE: THE 1920s, CHICAGO, AND THE BLACK RECORDING INDUSTRY

Written by Alena Coleman

## The United States in the 1920s

Throughout the United States, the 1920s was a decade of unprecedented changes. Coming off the heels of World War I, which ended in 1918, American industries were booming. Many middle-class Americans were able to buy radios, cars, and telephones for the first time. The great changes of the 1920s were not only economic. Before the start of the decade, in 1919, Congress ratified the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which banned the sale of alcohol in the United States. The 18th Amendment took effect in 1920 and marked the beginning of the era known as Prohibition. Shortly after the passing of the 18th Amendment, Congress ratified the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote.



A family leaving Florida, from “The Long-Lasting History of the Great Migration” by Isabel Wilkerson in *Smithsonian Magazine*

During the 1920s, the Great Migration was in full swing. According to historian Isabel Wilkerson, the Great Migration was the period between 1910 and 1930 in which an estimated six million Black Americans left the Jim Crow South for the North and West. As refugees in their own country, they fled physical, political, and economic violence in pursuit of better lives. One reason migrants left the South was to find better-paying jobs.

While migrants might succeed in finding higher wages, they did not succeed in leaving white racism behind them in the South. Instead, migrants found that racism persisted in Northern cities and tensions ran high. Black communities banded together to protect new arrivals and combat the effects of racist policies. They created fraternal orders, churches, clubs, and mutual aid societies. The migrants also brought their music including genres like spirituals, gospel, and the Blues, which would become the foundation for August Wilson’s plays. This music would sprout new genres such as jazz, rock, R&B, pop, and rap. Many of these migrants became prominent figures in American life, such as Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis.

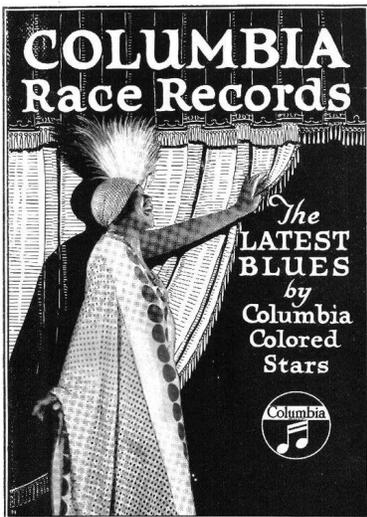
## Chicago, 1927

The only of August Wilson’s plays not to be set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* takes place on one early March day in Chicago in 1927. Wilson describes the 1927 Chicago of his play as, “...a rough city, a bruising city, a city of millionaires and derelicts...” Wilson’s portrait is accurate. The Chicago of 1927 was experiencing a boom in economic

prosperity and manufacturing that led to immense wealth for the rich but also immense poverty for those left behind.

During the Great Migration, Chicago was one of the primary destinations for migrants. Not only did the city offer new factory jobs for migrants, but it was also home to the *Chicago Defender*. Founded by Robert S. Abbott in 1905, the *Chicago Defender* was a weekly newspaper and now continues to operate online today. The *Chicago Defender* focused on issues of a national scope that affected all Black Americans, such as lynching, and it also fueled the Great Migration by advertising job openings in the North. Black Pullman Porters on railroad lines would bring copies of the *Chicago Defender* down to Black Americans living in the South, and many who read the paper were spurred by the help-wanted ads to pursue employment in the North. Because of its prominent newspaper and its plentiful jobs, Chicago became a center of the Great Migration.

Chicago was also the birthplace of a new style of the Blues, known as the Chicago Blues. The Chicago Blues incorporated Southern style Blues with new urban sounds, eventually adding the electric guitar to the mix after its invention in the 1930s. New Blues clubs sprang up on Chicago's South and West sides. The Chicago Blues became one of the most influential styles of Blues, especially influencing British artists like Eric Clapton and the Beatles.



Columbia promotional ad, from "Blues Queens and Race Records in the 1920s" by Matthew Sabatella

### If You are a Stranger in the City

If you want a job    If you want a place to live  
If you are having trouble with your employer  
If you want information or advice of any kind

CALL UPON

### **The CHICAGO LEAGUE ON URBAN CONDITIONS AMONG NEGROES**

3719 South State Street

Telephone Douglas 9098

T. ARNOLD HILL, Executive Secretary

No charges—no fees. We want to help YOU

A flyer offering assistance to migrants to Chicago, from "The Long-Lasting History of the Great Migration" by Isabel Wilkerson in *Smithsonian Magazine*

### **The Recording Industry of the 1920s**

While Black Americans had been recording music since the 1890s, the 1920s was an especially vibrant time in Black music. In places like Harlem and Chicago, the sounds and music that Black migrants brought with them from their hometowns blended into new musical genres, namely jazz and the Blues. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, set entirely within the walls of a Chicago record studio, reflects this boom in musical output.

While many Black artists, like Mamie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Ma Rainey herself, were beginning to grow in popularity, the dominant record labels were all white-owned and operated.

Record labels began to take Black music more seriously and started producing more Blues and jazz records. Such recordings were known as "race records." White companies produced race records in order to capitalize on the popularity of Black music.

The historical Ma Rainey recorded with Paramount Records, although the record label is never mentioned by name in the play. Paramount Records operated between 1917 and 1932. The label was founded by the white owners of a furniture company who were looking to promote their brand by selling records. Aware of the rising popularity of the Blues, Paramount's executives started recording as many Blues artists as they could, including Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Alberta Hunter. Somewhat inadvertently, Paramount Records became the leading producer of this new kind of music, the Blues, and their female stars became household names.

While Paramount Records promoted Black music, it was almost entirely owned and operated by white male executives. These executives dismissed, belittled, and exploited Black artists. Paramount Records did not keep great ledgers of the artists who recorded with them and operated on the principle that these Black musicians were all replaceable, as seen in the play through Mel Sturdivant's treatment of Ma Rainey.



Black Swan Records Logo, from <https://aaregistry.org/story/black-swan-records-formed/>

Not all record labels were owned and operated by white people, however. In 1921, Harry Pace founded Black Swan Record Label to make music by and for Black Americans. Harry Pace believed that he could use his record label to uplift his community and wanted to demonstrate Black excellence through his recordings. Black Swan Records soon achieved success by recording important singers like Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter. The record label expanded beyond the Blues to record Black classical musicians and opera singers, and Black Swan Records was the first company to ever record the Black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Ultimately, the success of Black Swan Records did not last. Paramount Records bought out the company after stealing many of its prominent artists, like Alberta Hunter. However, Black Swan Records shows how Black Americans worked to keep ownership of their art during a time of great creative output. The recording industry of the 1920s demonstrates how Black Americans came to the front and center of American music. The

jazz and Blues artists of the time, like Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters, and Louis Armstrong, laid the foundations for the pop, rock, and hip hop that Americans listen to today.

**Example Activity:** Have students think about the most important events of the last ten years. What events have shaped American culture? Then, have students create their own "record" for the decade, with songs to represent different moments from the past ten years. Students can discuss why they chose their particular songs and design an advertisement or cover art for their record.

**If It's Good It's First on Paramount**

Carroll Clark, Norah Jones, Quinette, Madame Hard Fairfax, Ethel Waters, Ida Cox, Alberta Hunter—and scores of other leading Race artists sing authoritatively for Paramount Records. You can be sure of the best music—definitely nothing on Paramount, the Popular Race Record.

**Carroll Clark's**  
famous uplifting religious selections should be in every Christian home.

1921—By and By, Oh, Didn't It Rain,  
1922—Going to the Sun, Oh, What a Beautiful Morning,  
1923—Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen and By the Waters of Babylon,  
1924—Oye Lord, Remember Me and Jesus Is Coming Home,  
1925—The Stone Broken and I'm So Glad, Trouble Don't Last Always.

**Elkins-Fayne and**  
**Paramount Jubilee Singers**  
1926—Standing in the Need of Prayer and I Cudn't Hear No More,  
1927—Come Home, All Over God's Heaven and Down by the River,  
1928—Good Bye, Love and My Soul Is a Witness to My Faith, Come, Working In and That Old-Time Religion,  
1929—Father Payne, Me and My Lady's Gonna Move The Whole Race, led by Sarah Johnson,  
1930—Loving, Loving, Home and Mountain, Grannie's Blues, sung by Clarence, the Carolina Blues Singers, a Southern Trio, by Alice Scudder, with Tom Anderson and the Georgia Chorus.

**Agents Wanted**  
Hundreds of men and women earn good money easily by selling Paramount Records. Thousands of "Terrific" territories open in America, all you need is a "Write an agent's proposition."

**Send No Money**  
If your dealer can't supply you with genuine Paramount Records, order direct from factory. Records mailed promptly, C. O. D. 12 cents each. If you prefer postage and insurance. Send for complete Paramount Catalogue free.

**The New York Recording Laboratories**  
142 Paramount Bldg. Port Washington, Wis.

**Paramount** *The Popular Race Record*

Paramount promotional ad, from "Blues Queens and Race Records in the 1920s" by Matthew Sabatella

## HISTORICAL TIMELINE

*Written by La Donna L. Forsgren, 2019; Updated by Alena Coleman, 2022*

- 1619**      **The first Africans as slave labor introduced in America.** A Dutch trader exchanges cargo of 20 Africans for food in Jamestown, Virginia. Historians believe this sale was similar to indentured servitude. The slave system was fully developed by 1680. Enslaved Africans were denied use of cultural traditions such as drums and native language.
- 1773**      **Phyllis Wheatley (1753?-1784) publishes Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral in London magazines.** Her work was the first book authored by an African American. However, a dispute arose about whether or not blacks were capable of writing poetry. Wheatley agreed to take a test to prove that she authored the book. John Hancock, future signer of the Declaration of Independence, served as one of her examiners.
- 1787**      **Three-Fifths Compromise.** Constitutional Convention: southern states want to count the Black population as equal to Whites in order to secure more political representation. Northerners argue that slaves are property and should not count at all. Compromise reached: each enslaved person counts as 3/5 of a person.
- 1808**      **U.S. bans the importation of slaves.** (Note: not the sale or practice of slavery).
- 1827**      **Slavery in New York abolished on July 4th.**
- 1831**      **Nat Turner Slave Revolt.** Nat Turner (1800-1831), known as the “Prophet” amongst his enslaved community, leads a revolt in Southampton County, Virginia. He is later hung to death. This revolt leads to stricter laws to support the institution of slavery.
- 1839**      **Amistad Slave Ship Revolt.** Joseph Cinque (born Sengbe Pieh in 1815) leads 37 slaves to revolt. They kill the captain and take over the ship, but are later captured. Senator John Quincy Adams serves as their defense attorney. Their case is taken to the Supreme Court and they are ultimately returned to Africa.
- 1851**      **Sojourner Truth** (with the assistance of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison) publishes *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*. A year later, at the Women’s Convention (Akron, Ohio) she delivers her “Ain’t I A Woman” speech, a precursor to Black feminist movement of the late sixties/early seventies.
- 1852**      **Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.** First major novel to feature an African American hero. Stowe never actually traveled to the deep South but used interviews from slaves, slave masters, and books to create her fictional story. Stowe’s inspiration for Tom was based after Josiah Henson’s *The Life of Josiah Henson, Former Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated By Himself* (1849).

- 1857**      **Dred Scott Decision.** Dred Scott (1795-1858) appealed to the Supreme Court for his freedom but is ultimately denied. Supreme Court rules that slaves are not citizens and therefore did not have the right to bring cases to court.
- 1861-1865**      **U.S. Civil War**
- 1863**      **Emancipation Proclamation**
- 1865-1877**      **Reconstruction Era**
- 1866**      **Civil Rights Act passed.** Meant to protect and grant full citizenship to men born on U.S. soil (excludes Native Americans).
- 1886**      **Gertrude “Ma” Rainey is born.**
- 1900**      **James Weldon Johnson writes the poem “Lift Every Voice And Sing,”** which becomes the “Negro National Anthem.”
- 1910-1930**      **The Great Migration.** Approximately 6 million Black Americans leave the Jim Crow South to seek refuge and opportunities in the North.
- 1921**      **Harry Pace forms Black Swan Records.** Harry Pace forms the first Black-owned and operated record label in the United States.
- 1939**      **Gertrude “Ma” Rainey dies.** The Blues legend dies in her home in Columbus, Georgia.
- 1964**      **Civil Rights Act passed.** Ends segregation in public places and bans employment discrimination on basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.
- 1965**      **Voting Rights Act.** Meant to overcome legal barriers that prevents African Americans from exercising their right to vote under the 15th amendment.
- 1966**      **Huey Newton and Bobby Seale form the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California**

**Example Activity:** Consider using this historical timeline to provide context for the production. Encourage students to complete the timeline by adding other significant events from 1966 to the present. What events— social, political, cultural—have been integral to Black history? Perhaps the election of President Barack Obama in 2008? The formation of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013?

# THE MOTHER OF THE BLUES: GERTRUDE “MA” RAINEY

Written by Alena Coleman

Known as the “Mother of the Blues,” Gertrude “Ma” Rainey was born Gertrude Malissa Nix Pridgett on April 26, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia. The daughter of performers, Gertrude discovered her musical talents early in life. She began performing in her hometown, and as a teenager she joined traveling vaudeville acts, which mixed comedy, song, and dance. While traveling and performing, Gertrude met the singer and comedian William Rainey, and at the age of 18, she married him. Together, they created their own act as “Ma and Pa Rainey.”

After twelve years, Gertrude separated from William Rainey. However, she kept the stage name “Ma Rainey,” and she developed her own act: “Madame Gertrude Ma Rainey and Her Georgia Smart Set.” Ma Rainey drew crowds for her ability to connect to an audience, her flashy style, and her deep,



Ma Rainey, image from <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/gertrude-ma-rainey>

“moaning” style of singing the Blues.

The Blues is a complex musical genre with many different variations, but, at its core, the Blues is a type of music that has its roots in the spirituals and songs of enslaved people on plantations in the Deep South. Deeply

personal and designed for self-expression, the Blues emerged as formerly enslaved people began to move out of the South during the Great Migration. Blues songs are often melancholic and

describe the hard times or difficulties of the individual singer. The Blues became the foundations for rock and roll and pop. Ma Rainey was an innovator of the Blues, and she merged the Blues with vaudeville musical styles.

Unlike other genres, the Blues allowed women performers to express their sexuality and desire in ways that were not allowed in other spaces. Women Blues performers not only sang songs about wishing their former lovers

Record of Ma Rainey’s song “See See Rider Blues,” from <https://www.goldminemag.com/collector-resources/flashback-trace-the-roots-of-see-see-rider-with-ma-rainey>



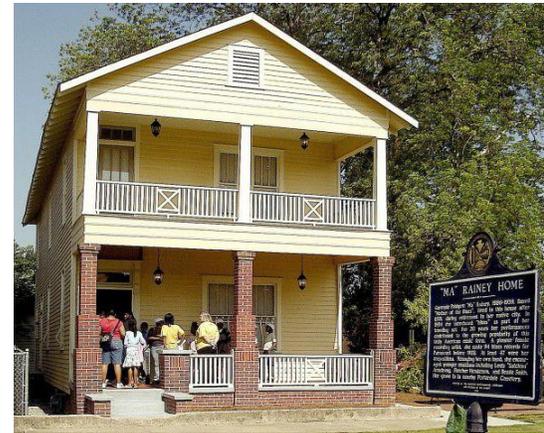
would return, known as “my man left me Blues,” but they would also sing humorous songs full of sexual innuendos in which women exercised control in relationships. Ma Rainey used the Blues this way, and she was open about her bisexuality. For example, in the song “Prove It On Me Blues,” Ma Rainey sings openly about her attraction to women. In the play, August Wilson depicts Ma Rainey in a relationship with Dussie Mae, showing Ma Rainey’s bisexuality.

During her career, Ma Rainey recorded over 100 records with Paramount and reached fame nearly unheard of for Black performers at the time. Ma Rainey mesmerized audiences with her command of the stage and her shining smile of gold teeth. She often played to sold out theaters of racially diverse, though still segregated, audiences. Despite her success, life as a traveling artist was not easy for Ma Rainey. Black artists had to arrange performances through the Theater Owners Booking Association, which was known to exploit Black performers and not pay them a fair wage. As depicted in the play, Ma Rainey also had to fight against the racial prejudices of the recording industry in order to be heard. In 1928, Ma Rainey lost her record deal with Paramount as the label believed that her style of Blues was going out of fashion. She continued to tour until

1935, when she moved back to Columbus, Georgia following the deaths of her mother and sister. There, she owned and operated two theaters.

Ma Rainey died in 1939 at the age of 53 from heart disease. Her legacy,

however, continues to live on long after her death. Ma Rainey’s art influenced other famous singers including Bessie Smith, Dinah Washington, and Janis Joplin. Not only was her story memorialized in August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, but her music continues to inspire. Ma Rainey was inducted into the Blues Foundation’s Hall of Fame in 1983, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990, the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in 1992, and the Georgia Women of Achievement in 1993. In 2004, Ma Rainey’s 1924 recording of “See See Rider Blues,” in which she is accompanied by Louis Armstrong, was added to the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry. In 2008, Ma Rainey’s home in Columbus, Georgia, was officially opened as a museum. With her powerful personality and perseverance, Ma Rainey’s voice changed American music forever.



The “Ma” Rainey Home Museum in Columbus, Georgia, from <https://www.exploregeorgia.org/columbus/arts-culture/cultural-trails-tours/ma-rainey-house-and-blues-museum>

**Example Activity:** Listen to some of Ma Rainey’s songs, like “[Deep Moaning Blues](#),” “[See See Rider Blues](#),” or “[Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom](#).” What elements of these songs stick out to you? How are these songs similar or different to music you listen to today? What do you learn about Ma Rainey from listening to her music? How does she express herself?

## REPUTABLE WEB RESOURCES

*Compiled by Alena Coleman and Monica Caponigro*

### August Wilson

- New York Times: “What August Wilson Means Now”  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/theater/what-august-wilson-means-now.html>
- Interview with August Wilson, Part 1 (29 minutes)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmD4T81IbiQ>
- Interview with Wilson, Part 2 (28 minutes)  
<https://youtu.be/hOynfR0AqM0>
- The Pittsburgh Hill District  
<https://aaregistry.org/story/the-hill-district-pittsburgh/>

### *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*

- August Wilson’s words about *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and summary (5 minute listen)  
<https://www.npr.org/2020/12/18/947649431/ma-raineys-black-bottom-shines-a-light-on-august-wilsons-vision>
- Stage to Screen: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (3 minutes 45 seconds)  
<https://youtu.be/7cZSAKeGye0>
- Viola Davis on Playing Ma Rainey (2 minutes 21 seconds)  
<https://youtu.be/Qg6Q9SIZE-g>
- America’s First Black-owned record label (19 minute listen)  
<https://www.npr.org/2021/06/30/1011901555/radio-diaries-harry-pace-and-the-rise-and-fall-of-black-swan-records>

### Music

- SoundField PBS: “Is the Blues the Mother of All Modern Music?” (11 minutes 42 seconds)  
<https://youtu.be/HYy-6ltraVQ>
- Ma Rainey: “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” (2 minutes 39 seconds)  
<https://youtu.be/uiFUM-g4H4Y>
- Ma Rainey: “Deep Moaning Blues” (2 minutes 42 seconds)  
<https://youtu.be/A-mRHNAeJXE>
- Ma Rainey: “See See Rider Blues” (3 minutes 21 seconds)  
<https://youtu.be/ZOTTYTGv22k>
- “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” Black National Anthem:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46549/lift-every-voice-and-sing>

## FURTHER READING

Compiled by Alena Coleman and Monica Caponigro

### Interview with August Wilson

- Shannon, Sandra G. “Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview with August Wilson.” *African American Review*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1993, pp. 539-559. *ProQuest*, <http://proxy.library.nd.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/blues-history-dramaturgy-interview-with-august-wi/docview/209791581/se-2?accountid=12874>.

### Teaching Black American Drama

- Wood, Jacqueline. “Enacting Texts: African American Drama, Politics, and Presentation in the African American Literature Classroom.” *College Literature*, vol. 32, no.1, pp. 103-126. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25115248>.

### World of the Play

- Davis, Doris. ““Mouths on Fire”: August Wilson’s Blueswomen.” *Melus*, vol. 35, no. 4, The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, 2010, pp. 165–85, doi:10.1093/melus/35.4.165.
- Elam, Harry J., Jr. “Introduction: (W)righting History: A Meditation in for Beats.” *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, the University of Michigan Press, 2004, pp. 1-26.
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- Teague, Jessica E. “The Recording Studio on Stage: Liveness in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2011, pp. 555-571. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41237566>.

Materials for further reading are available in the “August Wilson 2019-2022 Lesson Plan Development” Google folder. Go to the “Ma Rainey’s 2022” folder and then the “Further Reading” folder to access these resources in PDF form.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- “The Ma Rainey Home.” *Columbus Parks and Recreation Department*, <https://parks.columbusga.gov/parks/ma-rainey-home>.

### **Time and Place: The 1920s, Chicago, and the Black Recording Industry**

- Cole, Tom. “Paramount Records: The Label Inadvertently Crucial to the Blues.” *NPR*, 2 Nov. 2013, <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2013/11/02/242428973/paramount-records-the-label-inadvertently-crucial-to-the-blues>.
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- Sabatella, Matthew. “Blues Queens and Race Records in the 1920s.” *Ballad of America*, <https://balladofamerica.org/blues-queens-and-race-records-in-the-1920s/>.
- Silverstein, Barrett A. “The 1920s: A Decade of Change.” *NCPedia*, 2004, <https://www.ncpedia.org/history/20th-Century/1920s>.
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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***  
**Starter Suggestions for Teaching *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***

Author: Phyllis Wezeman  
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

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**Overview**

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**Grade Level:** 7-12

**Discipline/subject area:** Interdisciplinary

**Topic of lesson:** Techniques for Teaching *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

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**Starter Suggestions**

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- Use the suggestions provided, one for each of twelve methods, to:
  - introduce a lesson
  - enhance teacher preparation for a class
  - expand a topic within a section
  - extend projects for individual learners
  - provide activities for small groups of students
  - conclude an activity
  - extend a session

**Architecture**

- **Set Design**
  - Brainstorm ideas for a set design for the play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Be sure to include the two main areas – the Band Room and the Recording Studio. Remember that the Control Booth has access to both areas. Decide how to handle locations such as the scene with the automobile accident and the trip to a store for Coca Cola, which are depicted differently in the movie than they are in the play. As background for the project, read descriptions of the set in the script. In addition, search for pictures from the Broadway production, local theatre performances, and the scenes from the movie of the same title. Present the design in the form of a drawing or a 3D model. Compare the interpretations of various groups and learn from each other.

**Art**

- **Crayon Resist Art**
  - Create crayon resist art to associate colors and symbols with the characters in the play. For example, use blue for Ma Rainey, known as “The Mother of the Blues,” pink for Dussie Mae to emphasize femininity and playfulness, red for Levee to illustrate energy and passion, and green for Cutler to signify balance and harmony. In addition, Sylvester’s color could be orange noting emotion and enthusiasm, Mel’s may be black depicting power and strength, and Slow Drag’s might be brown for reliability and stability. On a piece of card stock paper, use wax crayons to cover the entire sheet with lines of color representing each person in the play. Use a brush to cover the sheet with a coat of black poster paint. Allow

the paint to dry. Then use a bamboo skewer, chopstick, or craft stick to scratch away the paint, let the color show through, and form images representing the theme of the play or symbols associated with each person. For example, images for the play might be a record player, dollar sign, or music notes. Symbols for specific characters could be a car for Ma, microphone for Sylvester, shoes for Levee, dress for Dussie Mae, and a bass for Slow Drag. Compare paintings and learn from what has been revealed about the people and play.

### **Banners/Textiles**

- **Yarn Ball Toss**

- Illustrate the theme of connectedness by engaging in a yarn ball toss. Remark that even though each character in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* has individual aspirations, and wants control of the project, they are connected in a process to produce a recording. For example, Ma had the voice; Cutler the leadership; Irvin the negotiation skills; Mel the recording expertise; and Levee, Slow Drag, and Toledo the musical talent. Explain that the participants will toss a ball of yarn from one person to another. As each one receives the yarn, he or she shares the name of one person in the play and an example of how he or she is connected to the others. Names may be used more than once but new examples should be provided. Then, tightly holding the strand of yarn, the player tosses the ball on to another person to share an example. After several throws, the group will have created a woven design. Point out the connectedness of the strands in the web and offer the reminder that, just as the folks in the recording studio, we are all connected to each other in many ways.

### **Creative Writing**

- **Diamond Poem**

- Compose a Diamond-shaped Poem, a form of creative writing that presents a problem and suggests a solution. The formula for Diamond poetry is as follows:
  - Line 1: One word which is an opposite of line 5
  - Line 2: Two words which describe line 1
  - Line 3: Three words which resolve the conflict
  - Line 4: Two words which describe line 5
  - Line 5: One word which is an opposite of line 1
- Use the theme of the conflict between Ma Rainey, her manager Mr. Irwin, and the record producer Mel Sturdyvant, to suggest a problem and a solution to their recording session. For example:
  - Voice
  - Owns it
  - Singing the Blues
  - Wants it
  - Record.

### **Culinary**

- **Leftovers**

- Find recipes that turn leftovers into delicious dishes. Begin by reading Toledo's speech, pages 44-45, about Black men/people being "leftovers." Turn a negative theme into a positive one by using leftover food in various recipes. For example, extra or old bread makes great croutons, French toast, and pudding. Small

amounts of chicken or meat can be used to make a casserole, soup, or stew. Incorporate fruit into cobblers, salads, and smoothies. Enjoy these tasty dishes - maybe with a Coca Cola (for which everyone on the set had to wait until Ma got one). Discuss ways to help individuals – of any race – who feel they are “leftovers” to know they are people of value.

## Dance

- **Shoes**

- Choreograph a dance to highlight the significance of shoes in the play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Recall the importance of footwear in specific styles of dance such as slippers for ballet, ghillies and reels for Irish jigs, and metal toed/heeled shoes for tap. Review the script and list references to shoes for several of the characters. For example, Levee, who is late to rehearsal because he is buying flashy new shoes, appears with his status symbol and claims they enhance his ability to dance and play music. Ultimately, his anger percolates when Slow Drag steps on his shoes and it erupts when Toledo does it as well, resulting in the tragic end of the story. Levee calls Toledo's shoes “clodhoppers” as he associates him with being stuck in his “sharecropper” past. Ma Rainey takes off her “sharp-toed” shoes that hurt her feet and puts on slippers. And, Dussie Mae is promised new shoes so she'll look good as she travels with the band. Create a dance with gestures and movement that illustrate the importance of shoes to each of these characters.

## Drama

- **Waiting**

- Dramatize the topic of “waiting,” a theme prevalent in the play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Peruse the script for examples. In Act One, situations of waiting include: Irvin and Sturdyvant for Ma, the band for Levee, and everyone for Sylvester to say his lines without stuttering. During Act Two, Ma is waiting for her Coca Cola, Levee is hoping that Mel will record his music, artists are waiting for their cash payments, Irvin is standing by until Ma signs the release forms, and the band is anticipating what will happen when Irvin discovers Levee has stabbed Toledo. Convey the theme of waiting via first person stories, a script-in-hand reading of the lines related to the theme, or a one-act play tying the topic together. Go a step further and include scenarios about the intangible, or non-physical, things for which the members of the cast are waiting such as acceptance, equality, justice, opportunities, and respect.

## Games

- **Shoe Scramble**

- Play a game of “Shoe Scramble,” a theme in keeping with props and symbols in the play. Recall the references to shoes in the script, for example: Levee's new pair, Toledo's clodhoppers, Ma's pointy-toed pair that hurt her feet, Ma's slippers, Dussie Mae's anticipated new yellow ones. Ask everyone to take off her or his shoes and to place them in a pile. Prior to starting the game, jumble the shoes so that pairs are not together in the heap of footwear. Place the participants in groups and explain that each person must run to the pile, put on another pair of

shoes – lacing or buckling them as completely as possible – and return to his or her team, releasing the next player in the race. The first team to complete the process and “walk in another’s shoes” wins the game. Discuss positive outcomes that might have occurred if the characters in the play had “walked in each other’s shoes” and tried to be more aware, as well as understanding, of each other.

## Music

- **Ma Rainey’s Music**

- Locate YouTube recordings of “Ma Rainey’s” music such as *Moonshine Blues*, *See See Rider*, and *Yonder Comes the Blues*. Known as the “Mother of the Blues,” Ma’s line in August Wilson’s play sums up the importance of this genre of music for her – “You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ‘cause that’s a way of understanding life.” Research her life and learn that she was born Gertrude Malissa Nix Pridgett in 1886 to parents who performed in minstrel shows, she married William Rainey and toured with their stage act called “Ma & Pa Rainey,” and she was one of the first Black singers to have a recording contract with a White record label. Owner of two theaters in the south, she died in her birthplace, Columbus, Georgia, in 1939 at the age of 53.

## Photography

- **Chicago in Black and White**

- Take a tour of Chicago, Illinois in the 1920s, specifically during the winter of 1927 when the recording session took place, by looking at black and white pictures of the city in that time period. Find photos in albums at a museum, books in a library, and from online sources, and learn more about the place – especially the south side – where Ma Rainey spent much of her time performing and recording during the 20s and early 30s. While viewing the black and white images, recall the underlying conflict between Black musicians and White record labels that is evident in the play, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

## Puppetry

- **Shadow Puppet Scenes**

- Portray scenes of struggle between characters – both tangible and intangible - through shadow puppet stories. In this type of puppetry, paper figures are pressed against a screen, light shines behind them, and their shadows project to the audience. Pick a topic to depict such as tension between Irvin and Mel over the schedule, conflict between Levee and the band over arrangements, and stress between Sylvester and the producers because of his stuttering. Remember the issues in the “shadows” such as discrimination, marginalization, and racism as well and portray these themes with symbols or words. Cut the shape of people or objects from black poster board. Form the rod to operate the figure by taping the top inch, or bendable portion, of a straw to the center back of the puppet. For a simple screen hold up a piece of white paper, press the figures behind it, and light it with a flashlight, lamp, or natural light. As an alternative, cut a hole in the center of a box, proportionate to the figures, tape a piece of paper inside the opening, and use it as a screen.

## Storytelling

- **And Then What Happened? Stories**

- Craft "And Then What Happened?" stories about the characters in the play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Project what might have happened to Cutler, Levee, and Slow Drag or Dussie Mae, Ma, and Sylvester - and the others - after the end of the play. For example, What happened to Levee after he stabbed Toledo (did the same policeman come to the scene)? What happened when Mel gave Levee's music to another band to perform? What happened when Ma left the recording studio after the session (did she perform in a club that night)? What happened when Dussie Mae went shopping for a new dress and shoes (or did she)? What happened when Irvin tried to schedule another recording session? Pick a point of view to use. In first person the character tells his or her own story using words like I, me, and my. In third person someone else delivers a person's narrative and uses words such as he or his, she or hers. Be creative and imaginative with the scenarios. Share the results with others.

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
Use of the N-Word**

Author: Megan Twietmeyer  
John Adams High School, South Bend Community School Corporation

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**Overview**

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**Grade level:** High School / Middle School (possibly)

**Discipline/subject are:** Interdisciplinary

**Topic of lesson:** Use of the n-word in literature

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**Objective**

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- Students will explore the historic and modern use of the n-word in preparation for watching *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
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**Standards addressed**

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- **9-10.RN.1** Read a variety of nonfiction within a range of complexity appropriate for grades 9-10. By the end of grade 9, students interact with texts proficiently and independently at the low end of the range and with scaffolding as needed for texts at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 10, students interact with texts proficiently and independently.
  - **9-10.RV.2.1** Use context to determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases.
  - **9-10.ML.1** Critically analyze information found in electronic, print, and mass media used to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture.
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**Materials needed other than text**

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- PBS (video with included transcript) <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/n-word-became-atomic-bomb-racial-slurs>
  - NAACP's official stance on the N-Word <https://naacp.org/resources/naacp-official-position-use-word-nigger-and-n-word>
  - Washington Post's Interactive Website <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/the-n-word/>
  - Worksheet (attached)
  - Headphones for independent video exploration
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## Images

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# Expectations for Study Groups and Class Discussions

**Proper Behavior and Etiquette When Contributing to a Classroom Discussion:** Adapted from Framework For Teaching Controversial Issues by A. Smith 2011

- o Always **listen carefully**, with an open mind, to the contributions of others.
- o **Ask for clarification** when you don't understand a point someone has made.
- o If you **challenge** others' idea, do so with **factual evidence and appropriate logic**.
- o Always **critique ideas or positions, not people**.
- o If others challenge your ideas, **be willing to change your mind** if they demonstrate errors in your logic or use of the facts.
- o If others have made a point with which you agree, **only repeat it when you have something important to add**.
- o Be efficient in your discourse; make your points and then yield to others – **take turns speaking**.
- o Above all, **avoid ridicule and try to respect the beliefs of others**, even if they differ from yours.

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## Lesson Plan (Day One)

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### Students:

Prior knowledge, first impressions, questions raised:

- Students will have most likely encountered the use of the n-word in popular culture and possibly even in the classroom; they may not have been taught the historical use of that word

### Teacher Presentation to the class:

**[this should be done BEFORE reading/viewing *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*]**

- The teacher first needs to review all materials and make sure it is appropriate for the age level of students.
- The teacher should prepare the students for the fact that the lesson today will deal with more difficult topics and discuss how to hold respectful conversations (see above screenshot for an example of possible expectations). Also depending on the student population this conversation will be incredibly different.
  - Remember that if your classroom only has one or a few minority students in it, that minority student or group of minority students should not in any way, shape, or form be expected (directly or indirectly) to speak on behalf of their minority. **Explicitly stating that to students is often helpful to clear away any miscommunication/misunderstanding.**
- The teacher should introduce the topic of the n-word explaining that the Black/African American characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* use the word and that it's important to understand the full scope of that word.
- Pass out the worksheet attached below.
  - First version involves a section for independent work
    - It needs to be adjusted for the number of videos you want your students to watch in the WATCH CONVERSATIONS section.
    - You may also want to eliminate or adjust the section where students explore the START CONVERSATIONS.

- Second version removes the independent work section and replaces it with a section for group work
  - It needs to be adjusted for the number of videos you want your students to watch in the WATCH CONVERSATIONS section.
  - I would encourage a discussion after the START CONVERSATIONS section after students have had an opportunity to write down their learning or thoughts.
- Play PBS video “How the n-word became the ‘atomic bomb of racial slurs’” (8 min 49 seconds) (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/n-word-became-atomic-bomb-racial-slurs>).
- Display NAACP’s stance on the n-word and read the stance (obviously not reading the n-word if you are not comfortable doing so- I suggest explaining why you are reading that word if you choose to say it aloud) (<https://naacp.org/resources/naacp-official-position-use-word-nigger-and-n-word>).
- Next is The Washington Post’s interactive website (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/the-n-word/>). The worksheet provides directions.
  - For younger students or classes that cannot work independently perhaps do this next part together. Worksheet two provides directions. I encourage heavy use of discussion throughout.
  - For some students this worksheet is a great opportunity for independent exploration and learning. Have students open whatever electronic device the school has them use. Direct them to the Washington Post interactive website (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/the-n-word/>). The worksheet provides directions. I still strongly encourage the use of discussion/sharing at the end for students who are comfortable if there is time or the following day if there is not time.

**Background information:**

Teachers will have already needed to create a classroom environment where students can explore uncomfortable topics and also discuss things that aren’t always easy.

**Key words/new vocabulary:**

n-word

**Strategies:**

Group or independent exploration

Reflective writing

Class discussion

**Students:**

Worksheet (see below)

**Questions and Activities:**

Questions to Consider:

- How is the n-word used today?

- What is (or is there) a difference between the n-word with an -er and the n-word with an a?
- How was the n-word used historically?
- How does a modern audience interact with a text that uses the n-word especially when the creator of that text is African American?

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**Sources/resources:**

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- PBS (video with included transcript) <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/n-word-became-atomic-bomb-racial-slurs>
- NAACP's official stance on the N-Word <https://naacp.org/resources/naacp-official-position-use-word-nigger-and-n-word>
- Washington Post's Interactive Website <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/the-n-word/>

Name:

Date:

Class Period:

## Exploring the N-Word and Its Use Historically and Today

Note: The use of the n-word is a hot button topic. Being respectful of one another during this lesson is of the utmost importance. Questions are incredibly important during the learning process and sometimes knowing how to ask those questions is difficult. That is okay. It is okay to ask those questions privately instead of to the class if that is easier.

**Part 1:** Watch PBS's "How the n-word became the 'atomic bomb of racial slurs'" and write down at least two things you learned or found interesting in the boxes below.


**Part 2:** Explore *The Washington Post's* interactive website "The n-word". Click on the website to open it up. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/the-n-word/>).

### Task 1:

1. Choose three perspectives.
2. Write/type them down BEFORE you click Watch Your Video. There is no pause button once the video starts.
  - a. Also note: you may have to click the sound button at the top right to have sound work. Click "INTRO" to replay the intro.

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### Task 2:

Write/type one thing you learned from the video OR one thing you thought or found interesting after watching the video.

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**Task 3:**

1. Click the three bars at the top and click on “WATCH CONVERSATIONS”.
2. Select two (2) videos.
3. Write/type which videos you watched and one thing you learned, thought, or found interesting.

Video Title (make sure to use quotation marks since it is a short work):
One thing you learned, thought, or found interesting:

Video Title (make sure to use quotation marks since it is a short work):
One thing you learned, thought, or found interesting:

**Task 4:**

1. Click the three bars at the top and click on “START A CONVERSATION”.
2. Scroll through the questions that have been asked.
3. Write down/type two questions. If you have your own opinion as to an answer, write that down also.

Question from START A CONVERSATION:
My Opinion:

Question from START A CONVERSATION:
My Opinion:

**Task 5 (Exit Ticket)**

Write a paragraph (five sentences) sharing what you learned today or what you thought or found interesting.

Name:

Date:

Class Period:

### Exploring the N-Word and Its Use Historically and Today

Note: The use of the n-word is a hot button topic. Being respectful of one another during this lesson is of the utmost importance. Questions are incredibly important during the learning process and sometimes knowing how to ask those questions is difficult. That is okay. It is okay to ask those questions privately instead of to the class if that is easier.

**Part 1:** Watch PBS's "How the n-word became the 'atomic bomb of racial slurs'" and write down at least two things you learned or found interesting in the boxes below.


**Part 2:** As a class we will explore *The Washington Post's* interactive website "The n-word".

**Task 1:**

Together we will select three perspectives from the options. Write/type one thing you learned from the video OR one thing you thought or found interesting after watching the video.

**Task 2:**

1. Together we will select two videos from the "WATCH CONVERSATIONS" section.
2. Write/type which videos we watch.
3. Write/type one thing you learned or thought/found interesting.

Video Title (make sure to use quotation marks since it is a short work):
One thing you learned, thought, or found interesting:

Video Title (make sure to use quotation marks since it is a short work):
One thing you learned, thought, or found interesting:

--

**Task 3:**

- 4. We will scroll through the “START A CONVERSATION” of the website together.
- 5. Write down/Type two questions that stick out to you. If you have your own opinion as to an answer, write that down also.

Question from START A CONVERSATION:
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My Opinion:
-------------

Question from START A CONVERSATION:
-------------------------------------

My Opinion:
-------------

**Task 5 (Exit Ticket)**

Write a paragraph (five sentences) sharing what you learned today

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***  
***Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* Introduction**

Author: Randy Ebright  
Mishawaka High School, School City of Mishawaka

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**Overview**

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**Grade level:** 9-12

**Discipline/subject area:** English/Language Arts, General Studies

**Topic of lesson:** Introduction to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

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**Objective**

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- Students will be able to make connections between texts and themes/conflicts from the time period they depict.
- 

**Standard addressed**

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- **9-10.ML.1** Critically analyze information found in electronic, print, and mass media used to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture.
- 

**Materials needed other than text**

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- Ma Rainey Introductory Presentation  
([https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Vbs2rvrqfFFcDseP7Jw3X6D\\_95t88GAG4Z90-aypTsw/copy?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Vbs2rvrqfFFcDseP7Jw3X6D_95t88GAG4Z90-aypTsw/copy?usp=sharing)) (Slides also included at the end of the lesson)
  - YouTube link to Netflix trailer for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ord7gP151vk>)
  - Song and Lyrics to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cph7qZoE5d8> and  
<https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/252668/Ma+Rainey/Ma+Rainey%27s+Black+Bottom>)
- 

**Lesson Plan (Day One)**

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**Students:**

Prior knowledge, first impressions, questions raised:

Quick Write Journal Prompt: How can music impact a culture/society? What predictions can you make about the experiences of Black musicians performing and recording music, particularly Blues music, in the 1920's?

**Teacher Presentation to the class:**

Show/Discuss *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* Trailer

- What are your reactions/things you noticed from the trailer of Netflix's version of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*? (Students view the trailer and complete a brief think-pair-share activity with a partner)

Lecture/Present *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* Introductory Presentation

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- What cultural and societal issues are prevalent in the introductory presentation of the play? What impact do you think they have on the characters? On the real people during the time the play takes place? (Students take notes but also discuss the significance of events, conflicts and themes of the play)

Play/Discuss *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and Review/Discuss Lyrics

- What are significant themes and ideas from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* song that are reflected in the play? Why are these significant? (Students listen, read, and react to the lyrics of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*)

**Background information:**

Blues Music

Roaring 20s

Ma Rainey (historical figure)

**Key words/new vocabulary:**

Exploitation

Power Struggle

Blues Music

Text-to-World Connections

**Strategies:**

Journal Reflection

Lecture/Note-Taking

Whole Group Discussion

Think-Pair-Share

**Students:**

Completion of Quick Write Journal Prompt

Composition of Notes on *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* trailer and introduction presentation

Reflection on connections between the lyrics of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and background/overview of the play

**Questions and Activities:**

How can music impact a culture/society? What predictions can you make about the experiences of Black musicians performing and recording music, particularly Blues music, in the 1920s? (Students complete journal prompt)

What are your reactions/things you noticed from the trailer of Netflix's version of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*? (Students view the trailer and complete a brief think-pair-share activity with a partner)

What cultural and societal issues are prevalent in the introductory presentation of the play? What impact do you think they have on the characters? On the real people during the time the play takes place? (Students take notes but also discuss the significance of events, conflicts and themes of the play)

What are significant themes and ideas from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* song that are reflected in the play? Why are these significant? (Students listen, read, and react to the lyrics of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*)

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### Sources/resources:

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- NewOnNetflix, director. *YouTube*, YouTube, 19 Oct. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ord7gP151vk>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.
  - Novonine, director. *YouTube*, YouTube, 7 Nov. 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cph7qZoE5d8>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.
  - “Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.” *Ma Rainey - Ma Rainey's Black Bottom Lyrics* | *Lyrics.com*, <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/252668/Ma+Rainey/Ma+Rainey%27s+Black+Bottom>.
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### Slides:

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#### August Wilson (Playwright) Biography

- Born on April 27th, 1945 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (a working-class area)
  - Father, Frederick August Kittel Sr., was a German immigrant who worked as a baker and pastry cook. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was African-American and cleaned homes for a living
  - Parents divorced early in his childhood, and his mother remarried and moved to Hazelwood, a more affluent neighborhood in Pittsburgh
  - Wilson struggled in school and dropped out after tenth grade, leading him to working low wage paying jobs. Wilson had difficulty transitioning to a predominantly white neighborhood and school, often facing much racism
- 

#### August Wilson (Playwright) Biography Cont.

- Wilson spent much of his early adulthood self-educating himself in the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, reading works by Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, etc.
  - When Wilson's mother found out he wanted to be a writer (she wanted him to be a lawyer), she kicked him out of the house. He joined the Army, but left after only serving one year.
  - Wilson was influenced in his literary work by Malcolm X, especially in relation to issues such as self-sufficiency, self-defense and self-determination.
  - Wilson's *Pittsburgh Cycle* consists of ten plays, each one taking place during a different decade of the twentieth century, chronicling the experiences and adversity of African Americans.
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#### *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* Synopsis

- Setting
    - Recording studio in Chicago
    - 1920's
    - Play takes place all in one day
  - Plot
    - Bandmates of Ma Rainey, a character inspired by the real life Blues singer by the same name, meet at a recording studio and await Ma Rainey's arrival to record several songs.
    - Both before and after Ma's arrival, the traits, dreams, ambitions and struggles of the bandmates are revealed with significant symbolic and philosophical meaning.
    - Eventually, a newer, younger bandmate, Levee, driven with rage after being denied promised opportunities, stabs a fellow bandmate, impacting his dreams of a successful future.
-

## Ma Rainey



- Inspired by the real-life Black blues musician who performed in the 1920's, known as the "Mother of the Blues"
- Uses her power and influence to her advantage to protect herself, as well as the band, from being exploited
- Very demanding and in control throughout her interactions with both Sturdyvant and Irvin, as illustrated by her not signing the release of her songs until the very end of the play



## Levee



- Confident and ambitious, he is unwilling to simply be an accompanist for Ma Rainey and makes many attempts to add his own "flare", including changing the arrangement of one of her songs and writing his own in attempts to create his own band
- Uninterested in tradition and history, but instead is motivated by personal success
- Is promised opportunities to perform his original songs, but when Sturdyvant only offers to buy his songs in order to further exploit his music, Levee takes his anger and frustration out on Toledo...



## Sturdyvant



- A white executive who attempts to exploit several black musicians in the play, including Ma Rainey and Levee
- Orders Irvin to "keep Ma in line", though both he and Irvin eventually give in to Ma's demands due to her not yet signing the release to her songs
- Pays Levee \$5 for his songs even though he previously told him he could record and perform those songs, thus securing his ability to profit from Levee's music

## Irvin



- Ma Rainey's white manager and executive in the music industry
- Though he is supposed to work with Ma Rainey's best interests in mind, he serves as Sturdyvant's messenger and mouthpiece whilst attempting to exploit her music
- Motivated by financial greed, though he attempts to offer moral support for the band, as well as provisions such as food
- Is quite powerless in the power struggle between Sturdyvant and Ma Rainey

## Dussie Mae and Sylvester



Dussie Mae

- Accompanies Ma Rainey
- Remains open to Levee's romantic advances, but with the stipulation that she will not officially date him until he has his own band



Sylvester

- Ma's nephew
- Ma insists he records an Intro to her song though he has a stutter, causing some debate and tension within the band
- Sylvester eventually successfully records the Intro

## Ma Rainey's Black Bottom Themes

- Power and Exploitation
  - Power struggles between Sturdyvant and Irvin vs. Ma Rainey and her band
  - Sturdyvant attempting to buy Levee's songs for others to perform
  - Ma Rainey's incident with the police...
- Race and Identity
  - Levee's personal history with racism
  - The band's discussion of the limitation of their freedoms as African Americans, even Ma Rainey despite her fame and success
- Collaboration vs. Independence
  - Ma Rainey's familial dedication to Sylvester being part of the song recording
  - Cutler's commitment to Ma Rainey and her leadership of the band
  - Levee's determination to change Ma Rainey's song and even write his own in hopes of forming his own band

### Ma Rainey's Audience Etiquette

1. Arrive early
2. Do not be on your phone
3. Use the restroom before or after the play, or during intermissions
4. Do not talk/socialize during the play
5. Be prepared to ask the actors after the performance and discuss the themes of the play



### Chimamanda Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story"



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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
“Can You Imagine?”: August Wilson Biography through Puppetry**

Author: Phyllis Wezeman  
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

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**Overview**

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**Grade level:** 7-8

**Discipline/subject area:** English Language Arts

**Topic of lesson:** Biography of August Wilson

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**Objectives**

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- Learn about August Wilson
  - Understand where the plays of August Wilson originated
  - Consider the author from other perspectives
  - Turn everyday items into puppets
- 

**Standards Addressed**

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- **7/8.RN.2.3** Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).
  - **7/8.W.1** Write routinely over a variety of time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences; apply reading standards to support analysis, reflection, and research by drawing evidence from literature and nonfiction texts.
  - **7/8.W.3.3** Write narrative compositions in a variety of forms.
  - **7/8.W.4** Apply the writing process to all formal writing.
  - **7/8.SL.4.2** Create engaging presentations that include multimedia components and visual displays to clarify claims and findings and emphasize salient points.
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**Materials Needed**

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- August Wilson Biography
  - Biography Chart (included at the end of this packet)
  - Biography Narrative (included at the end of this packet)
  - Optional book: *Feed Your Mind: A Story of August Wilson* by Jen Bryant
  - Optional film: *Feed Your Mind: A Story of August Wilson* (available free from the St. Joseph County Public Library via *Hoopla*)
  - Optional film: *American Masters*. “August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand.” (PBS)
- Handout: August Wilson Biography Basics
- Handout: One Person Puppet Play
- Handout: One Person Puppet Play Pre-writing
- Handout: One Person Puppet Play Paragraph
- Rod Puppet Building Materials (see Instructions for Rod Puppets)

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## Lesson Plan Overview

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### Key words/new vocabulary

- Rod Puppet

### Strategies

- Direct Instruction
- Graphic Organizer for Pre-writing
- Independent Practice
- Peer Feedback
- Storytelling
- Brainstorming
- Kinesthetic Creating

### Student Output

- Puppet
  - Monologue
  - Performance Recording
- 

## Lesson Day One

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### Bell Ringer

Where do artists get their ideas? The ancient Greeks believed in the Muses, immortals who breathed inspiration into humans. What do you think? Where does creative inspiration come from? Make a list of every source that you can think of.

### Teacher Presentation

- Discuss Bell Ringer. Make a list of all the things students share. Make sure everyday events, conversations they hear around them, and media they consume end up on the list, even if they're your contributions.
- Introduce August Wilson as a poet and playwright who picked up pieces of conversations he overheard and turned them into poems and plays, sometimes quite literally putting in full lines of dialogue that he heard someone say out in the regular, everyday world. He transformed the ordinary and made it art.
- Share the biography of August Wilson. Choose the method that works best for you: tell the story, read the book, show all or part of a video biography, distribute pieces of the biography to students in groups and ask those groups to share that part of his story with the rest of the class.
- While the biography is being shared, students should fill in the blanks on the "August Wilson Biography Basics" handout.

### Students

Finish filling in the "August Wilson Biography Basics" handout and submit.

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## Lesson Day Two

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**Bell Ringer (3-4 minutes)**

Based on August Wilson’s biography, list five people or events that probably fueled his creative imagination.

**Teacher Presentation (10 minutes)**

- Present the assignment, going over the steps on the One Person Puppet Play handout. Answer student questions.
- Brainstorm additional people to add to the list on the handout.

**Students (30 minutes)**

- Complete Pre-writing
- Write Paragraph

**Teacher (10 minutes)**

- Present materials available for puppet making.
- Ask students to consider what they would like to use that they don’t see in front of them and where they can find those materials.
- Students write down things they need to bring with them for the next class: buttons, sticks, googly eyes, and so forth

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**Lesson Day Three**

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**Bell Ringer (3-4 minutes)**

Describe your plan for building your puppet and recording your puppet play.

**Students**

- Work on all aspects of the project while the teacher circulates offering paragraph revision suggestions and helping students work through problem-solving when needed.

**Teacher**

- Remind students to record and upload their One Person Puppet Plays before the next class.

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**Lesson Day Four**

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**Bell Ringer (3-4 minutes)**

[Provide the peer feedback guidelines for your class—mine hang on the wall.]

Today, you’ll be providing peer feedback. Write two examples of comments that provide praise and one example of a question to consider.

**View Recordings**

- Students offer peer feedback on paper or electronically. This works well with a Google Form because the teacher can sort and review before distributing to individual students, just in case there’s an inappropriate comment.

**Exit Ticket**

1. What was challenging about this project for you? How did you deal with the challenge(s)?
2. What is something you liked about this project?
3. What is one thing you saw in another student’s play that you admired or found interesting?

## Introduction to Puppetry

Throughout the ages puppetry has been used to educate, entertain, enlighten, and enrich. From the time the earliest cave person projected shadows onto a wall or manipulated a clay figure, puppetry has been used as a form of communication. In Southeast Asia, shadow puppets dramatize religious epics. In Europe, priests introduced the marionette, "little Mary," to help people who could not read visualize stories. In Africa, carved rod puppet figures transmit oral history. In North America, body as well as hand puppets portray characters on educational television. Puppetry has always been, and will always be, an important technique for teaching subjects and for telling stories.

### What is a Puppet?

Any inanimate shape or form given some identity and moved by a person before an audience to convey an idea or message can be considered a puppet. Puppetry is the art of bringing an inanimate object to "life" and communicating a thought, theme, or topic with it.

### Types of Puppets

Puppets are categorized on the basis of how they move. Generally speaking, puppets are operated by a person's fingers, hands, or body, or by strings or rods. Six basic styles of puppets are:

<p><b>Body</b></p>	<p>A type of puppet worn on the body of the operator and worked by the movement of the wearer.</p> <p><a href="https://threadbythread.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/timonpumbastage1.jpg">https://threadbythread.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/timonpumbastage1.jpg</a></p>	
<p><b>Finger</b></p>	<p>A puppet style worn on a person's finger(s) or on the fingers of a glove worn on the puppeteer's hand. Movement is achieved when individual fingers are moved to indicate action.</p> <p><a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/29/Finger_puppets.jpg">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/29/Finger_puppets.jpg</a></p>	

<p><b>Hand</b></p>	<p>Possibly the most common type of puppet, this style is worn on a person's hand, much like a glove or a mitten, and operated by the movement of the fingers, hand, wrist, and arm. Hand puppets often have movable mouths which are worked by inserting four fingers into the top of the head and the thumb into the bottom of the mouth.</p> <p><a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fb/Hand_Puppet.jpg">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fb/Hand_Puppet.jpg</a></p>	
<p><b>Marionette</b></p>	<p>Worked on strings which are attached to various parts of the puppet's body and to a control bar operated by the puppeteer.</p> <p><a href="https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/pictures/250000/velka/mexican-marionette-string-puppets-1522603666vLo.jpg">https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/pictures/250000/velka/mexican-marionette-string-puppets-1522603666vLo.jpg</a></p>	
<p><b>Rod</b></p>	<p>A central rod in the body of the puppet forms the basis for construction and manipulation. To work the puppet, the rod is held by the hand of an operator. Rods, worked by the other hand of the puppeteer, may also be attached to one or both hands or arms of the puppet to provide additional movement.</p> <p><a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6b/Bhima%2C_rod_puppet_%28wayang_golek%29%2C_Cirebon%2C_West_Java%2C_Indonesia%2C_early_to_mid_1900s%2C_wood%2C_cloth%2C_sequins_-_Fowler_Museum_-_University_of_California%2C_Los_Angeles_-_DSC02433.jpg/400px-thumbnail.jpg">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6b/Bhima%2C_rod_puppet_%28wayang_golek%29%2C_Cirebon%2C_West_Java%2C_Indonesia%2C_early_to_mid_1900s%2C_wood%2C_cloth%2C_sequins_-_Fowler_Museum_-_University_of_California%2C_Los_Angeles_-_DSC02433.jpg/400px-thumbnail.jpg</a></p>	
<p><b>Shadow</b></p>	<p>Silhouettes, cut from paper or carved from wood, which are operated with rods form this distinctive puppet style. When this type of puppet is pressed against a screen with a light source behind it, a shadow projects to the audience.</p> <p><a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e9/Branly_sombra_02.JPG/1024px-Branly_sombra_02.JPG">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e9/Branly_sombra_02.JPG/1024px-Branly_sombra_02.JPG</a></p>	

## **Instructions for Rod Puppets**

### **Paper Tube Rod Puppets**

Turn paper tubes, of any size, into puppets.

#### **Materials**

- Craft sticks or dowel rods
- Fabric or tissue paper
- Felt or construction paper
- Glue
- Paper tubes, various sizes from paper towels, toilet paper, and wrapping paper
- Scissors
- Yarn or fake fur

#### **Method**

Form the puppet face by cutting a piece of felt and gluing it to the top one-third of the tube. Make facial features from felt scraps and glue them in place. Add yarn or fake fur to the top of the tube for hair. The facial features may be drawn on with markers.

For a costume, glue a piece of felt or construction paper around the remainder of the tube to serve as the undergarment. Layers of fabric in contrasting or complementary colors can be added as overgarments. Substitute tissue paper for fabric to form the outer garments.

Make arms from strips of cloth or felt and glue them to the sides of the tube.

Apply a craft stick to the inside back of the tube to serve as the rod by which the puppet is operated.

### **Plastic Laundry Bottle Rod Puppets**

Used bottles, in various shapes and sizes, can be upcycled into puppets by adding low-cost or no cost materials.

#### **Materials**

- Bottles, dish washing or laundry detergent type—cleaned and de-labeled in advance
- Duct Tape
- Fabric scraps
- Felt or construction paper
- Glue
- Paper tubes, various sizes from paper towels, toilet paper, and wrapping paper
- Scissors
- Trims
- Yarn or fake fur

#### **Method**

- Pick a bottle. Turn it up-side-down and decide if the side with the handle will form the front of the face or the back. If it is to be the front, the handle becomes the puppet's nose.
- Place a paper towel tube on the pouring spout of the bottle. It will become the rod by which the puppet is operated. Use duct tape to secure the two pieces together.
- Form the face by cutting eyes and a mouth from felt or paper scraps. Glue them in place. Eyebrows, eyelashes, and cheeks may be added.
- Make hair from yarn, fake fur, or fiberfill. Glue it to the top of the puppet head.
- Choose a large square of fabric for the costume. Cut a small hole in the center of the material and slide the paper tube through it. Tape the fabric to the neck of the puppet. Add contrasting pieces of cloth, as well as trims, to complete the costume.

### **Plastic or Wooden Spoon Rod Puppets**

Turn a plastic or a wooden spoon into a rod puppet.

#### **Materials**

- Fabric scraps
- Glue
- Markers, permanent
- Pipe cleaners (Optional)
- Scissors
- Spoons, plastic or wooden
- Trims
- Yarn, cotton, or felt

#### **Method**

- Use permanent markers, to draw a face on the curved, bottom side of the spoon. Make hair from yarn, cotton, or felt and glue it to the top of the spoon.
- Simple clothes can be made from fabric scraps. Choose a piece of material and cut it into a rectangle or triangle the length of the distance from the neck to the bottom of the spoon. Glue the costume to the front of the spoon at the neck. Trims may be added. Arms, made from pipe cleaners, can be twisted around the spoon.
- Kitchen utensils, such as spatulas, brushes, and turners may also be made into puppets using the same instructions.

### **Broom Rod Puppets**

Begin with a broom and end with a puppet. Turn a broom of any size upside-down. The bristles become the head of the puppet and the handle forms the body.

#### **Materials**

- Brooms, any size
- Fabric or plastic bags
- Felt
- Glue
- Scissors
- Tape

- Velcro

#### **Method**

- Cut eyes, nose, and mouth from felt scraps. Glue them to one side of the bristles or secure them in place with small pieces of Velcro.
- Make a costume by slitting the center of a piece of fabric or plastic bag. Slide it up the handle and tape it at the neck of the character.
- Hold the puppet by the handle to operate it.

#### **Paint Brush Rod Puppets**

Pick a paint brush, paste on a few trims, and produce an instant puppet. Use the handle of the brush as the rod, the metal strip as the face, and the bristles as the hair.

#### **Materials**

- Brushes, paint - 2" or larger
- Felt scraps
- Glue
- Plastic movable eyes
- Scissors

#### **Method**

- Glue plastic movable eyes to the face. Add felt scraps, such as a bow tie or a collar, to the handle to suggest a costume.
- Operate the puppet by holding the rod and moving it to convey action.

## August Wilson: Biography Basics

1. He grew up in \_\_\_\_\_.
2. His mother, Daisy, worked \_\_\_\_\_.
3. He left his mostly white Catholic School because \_\_\_\_\_.
4. He left Gladstone High School when a teacher accused him of cheating because he didn't believe a black student \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The \_\_\_\_\_ is where he received much of his education. They even gave him an honorary high school diploma in 1999.
6. His favorite kind of music was \_\_\_\_\_.
7. He served in the Army for \_\_\_\_\_ year(s).
8. He listened closely to \_\_\_\_\_ and wrote down the things they said, later turning their words into poems and plays.
9. He paid \$ \_\_\_\_\_ for his first typewriter.
10. He is known for his plays, but he started out as a \_\_\_\_\_.
11. He moved away from home in 1978 when he went to \_\_\_\_\_.
12. In 1982 he met Lloyd Richards, his mentor, who directed many of his plays and was like a \_\_\_\_\_ to him.
13. He wrote \_\_\_\_\_ plays known as the American Century Cycle.
14. Even though one of the plays was set in Chicago, they are also referred to as the \_\_\_\_\_ Cycle.
15. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place in \_\_\_\_\_.
16. He was married \_\_\_\_\_ times and had \_\_\_\_\_ daughters.
17. He died in 2005 in Seattle, but he's buried in \_\_\_\_\_.
18. One award that he won is \_\_\_\_\_.
19. In 2005, a theater in \_\_\_\_\_ was named after him.
20. He has a \_\_\_\_\_ on the Hollywood walk of fame.

## One Person Puppet Play

To celebrate August Wilson and the many people who inspired him and were inspired by him, you're going to write a monologue—a speech that a character delivers in a play—and perform it. To perform your monologue, you're going to make a puppet. Puppetry has a long and important history in the theatre, and it's a great way to bring a story to life without the pressure of being on stage yourself.

Pick a person from any stage of August Wilson's life, develop a story about Wilson's life for the person to tell, make a puppet to represent the character, then record your very short puppet play.

### What are the steps for this project?

1. Familiarize yourself with the life of August Wilson.
2. Choose a person who knew or encountered Wilson during his life.
3. Complete the pre-writing activity.
4. Write your one paragraph monologue.
5. Review your paragraph with someone whose opinion you trust and revise.
6. Make a rod puppet of your character.
7. Practice saying the monologue and working the puppet.
8. Plan your puppet “stage.”
9. Perform and record your one person puppet play.
10. Share on your school YouTube channel and submit the link.

### Who can I choose?

Choose anyone, real or imagined, who may have come in contact with August Wilson during his life. Here's a list of possibilities, but please feel free to come up with your own unique selection.

- Daisy Wilson, his mother
- Freda Ellis, the sister who paid him to write her college essay on Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg
- Barber in the shop where he hung out to listen to people in the neighborhood and maybe to play dominoes
- Owner of the thrift shop where he went to buy records
- Waitress in a coffee shop where he scribbled ideas and poems on napkins
- Nun who encouraged him to write when he was in elementary school
- Teacher who accused him of plagiarizing the paper on Napoleon
- Librarian who gave him his first library card
- Poet in the artists' cooperative he began in Pittsburgh
- Rob Penny, the friend with whom he started Black Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh
- Person at Minneapolis Playwrights Center who recognized August's talent
- Lloyd Richards, the mentor who produced Wilson's plays at Yale Repertory Theater and on Broadway
- Presenter who gave him the Tony Award for Best Play

- Audience member who lived during the era of one of the plays and appreciated the story

### **What do I write?**

Imagine what that person might say about August Wilson. Tell a story from their time together, imagine the person's thoughts once August Wilson became well known, or explain a choice the person made that affected Wilson's life or showed up in one of his plays.

### **Can I have an example?**

#### **Person**

a young librarian in the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh

#### **Story**

I never imagined that some day I would be shelving plays written by August Wilson. As a young librarian, in my first job, I watched the teenager who came to the Carnegie Library every day during the time others his age were in school. Every day was the same routine, he started in the "Negro Section," took several books to his table, and devoured works by authors like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. Our paths drifted apart after he entered the Army, but when he started his theater company in the Hill District, he often came back to find "how to" do something—even how to direct a play. Today, as a senior librarian I am holding stories that he wrote—stories of our people, of our neighborhood, of our life—and now our people are learning from August.

### **What's this about making a puppet?**

Once you've decided whose story to tell, you can start making your puppet. Your teacher should have basic instructions and materials for you to use. For this project, you're making a rod puppet.

### **How do I make a puppet stage?**

You don't need anything too complicated to do a puppet show, especially since you're recording it rather than performing live. If you frame your shot well, you can simply perform in front of a curtain. Here are some other options:

- Choose a Chair. Kneel behind a chair and work the puppet over the top of it. Stretch a stick or broom handle covered with a blanket, towel, or curtain between the backs of two chairs and manipulate the puppet above it.
- Design a Doorway. Turn a doorway into a puppet stage. Tack the corners of a towel to the sides of a door frame. Operate the puppet from behind the cloth.
- Try a Table. Turn a table on its side and kneel behind it. Attach scenery to the front or cover the surface with a bed sheet or a large piece of fabric. Work the puppets on the table top.

Use your imagination, and have fun making your one person puppet play!

## One Person Puppet Play Pre-writing

Pick a person from any stage of August Wilson's life, develop a story about Wilson's life for the person to tell, and make a puppet to represent the character.

Imagine the details. Base the information on August Wilson's life, and get creative with the things you don't have facts about. Choose a waitress, barber, audience member, or some other NPC-type person? Make up a name, perhaps. Have fun with this.

<b>Person</b>	
<b>Relationship to Wilson</b>	
<b>5 Details About Person</b>	
<b>5 Details Person Knows About Wilson</b>	
<b>Situation for Story</b>	

### **One Person Puppet Play Paragraph**

Pick a person from any stage of August Wilson's life, develop a story about Wilson's life for the person to tell, and make a puppet to represent the character.

Now turn those details into a one paragraph monologue for your one person puppet play. Tell the story.

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
Character Analysis through Poetry**

Authors: Phyllis Wezeman and Stephanie Wezeman  
Malawi Matters and River Bend Arts, respectively

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**Overview**

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**Grade level:** 7-12

**Discipline/subject area:** English Language Arts

**Topic of lesson:** Character Analysis through Poetry

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**Objectives**

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- Come to a deeper understanding of the characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
  - Advance August Wilson's goal of elevating poetry in everyday language
  - Use poetry to demonstrate depth of analysis
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**Standards Addressed**

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- **7-12.RL.1**—Read a variety of literature within a range of complexity appropriate for grade level
  - **7-12.RL.2.1**—Analyze what a text says both explicitly and implicitly as well as inferences and interpretations through citing strong and thorough textual evidence
  - **7-12.RL.2.3**—Analyze how dynamic characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
  - **7-112.W.1**—Write routinely over a variety of time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
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**Materials Needed**

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- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* Script
  - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Overview of Characters*
  - Character Development Notes Handout
  - Poem Patterns Handout
  - Poem Patterns—Examples
  - Levee's Monologues from page 54 and page 82, Reformatted
  - *Home: A Poem* by August Wilson
- 

**Lesson Plan Overview**

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**Key words/new vocabulary**

- Poem Patterns

**Strategies**

- Direct instruction
- Pair-share

- Small group discussion
- Independent practice
- Exemplars

### Student Output

- Poem

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## Lesson Day One

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### Bell Ringer (3-4 minutes)

What character in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* intrigues you the most? Why? What is it about that person that grabs your attention? Alternatively, what character repels you—or name both of them.

### Class Discussion (10 minutes)

Discuss the bell ringer. Ask probing questions to try to get students thinking beyond the superficial (ie: Student: “I like Cutler because he leads the band.” Teacher: “Why does that appeal to you?”)

### Teacher Presentation (20 minutes)

- Remind students that August Wilson was first a poet and let them know that one of his goals was to bring out the poetry in everyday life and language.
  - One of Wilson’s poems, “Home,” is included if you’d like to share it.
- Tell students that Wilson didn’t leave poetry behind when he started writing plays; he integrated it into the language of the characters.
- An excellent example of this is in Levee’s monologues on pages 54 and 82. Display and/or distribute the reformatted version included below. Read this aloud (or play an audio clip). Note that only a small portion of Levee’s speech is provided so feel free to add to it, if desired.
- Ask students to consider why this speech seems to lend itself to being structured in the form of a poem. Students should pair-share their ideas.
- Discuss.
- Explain that they are going to build on this poetic tradition by considering the development of the characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and expressing their growth in poems.
- Introduce Character Poem Assignment.
  - Main idea: look at how a character develops and express the stages of development in poetic forms.
  - In groups of 3:
    - Choose a character.
    - Discuss the three stages of character development in the play.
      - Where are they coming from?
      - What are they looking for?
      - What is their song? At this point, remind the class that the play is set in a recording studio. Each character contributes something to

the music that Ma Rainey sings for the session. Yet, each person in the script is seeking his or her own song in life, too.

- Decide which part of the project each group member will complete.
- Choose a poem pattern and write it.

**Students (20 minutes)**

- Get into groups.
- Choose a character.
- Work on the Character Development Notes.
- Decide who will be responsible for each section.

**Teacher (5 minutes)**

- Distribute the Poem Patterns to each group. Ask students to read the choices and make a decision about which one to write during the next class.

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**Lesson Day Two**

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**Bell Ringer (3-4 minutes)**

What are three things that came up in your character discussion yesterday that hadn't occurred to you before your conversation?

**Teacher (10 minutes)**

- Remind students of the subject of the poems they are writing today.
- Provide students with poem examples—perhaps a gallery walk around the room to read them as they hang on the wall.
- Answer any questions.

**Students (40 minutes)**

- Reassemble in groups.
- Write and workshop poems in groups.
- Share with class.

**Exit Ticket (3-4 minutes)**

What lessons can you take from these characters and the search for their songs?

**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Overview of Characters**

<p><b>Cutler</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age – mid 50s</li> <li>● Leader – Ma Rainey’s band</li> <li>● Plays guitar and trombone in band</li> <li>● Loner</li> <li>● Sensible</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mel Sturdyvant</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age - 50s</li> <li>● White record producer, probably owner, who used Black artist to enhance his label</li> <li>● Wants control</li> <li>● Likes money</li> <li>● Wants to keep Blacks at arms length</li> </ul>
<p><b>Dussie Mae</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age - 20s</li> <li>● Ma Rainey’s lover</li> <li>● Ambitious; Inquisitive; Playful</li> <li>● Likes pretty things</li> <li>● Sensual</li> </ul>	<p><b>Policeman</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age – not noted</li> <li>● Officer on scene of Ma Rainey’s car accident before she arrives at recording studio</li> <li>● Biased – did not believe Black person/woman could own expensive car</li> <li>● Bribed to dismiss charges</li> </ul>
<p><b>Irvin</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age - 50s</li> <li>● Ma Rainey’s White manager</li> <li>● Go-between/middle man with artist, band, producer</li> <li>● People-pleaser who tries to take care of things/plays both sides</li> <li>● Prides self on ability to deal with Blacks and knowledge of Blacks</li> </ul>	<p><b>Slow Drag</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age – mid 50s</li> <li>● Plays bass in Ma Rainey’s band</li> <li>● Impatient</li> <li>● Lacks energy</li> <li>● Plays African style rhythm</li> </ul>
<p><b>Levee</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age - 30s</li> <li>● Plays trumpet in Ma Rainey’s band</li> <li>● Thinks Ma’s music is outdated and wants to jazz it up</li> <li>● Writes music he plans to record with his own band; Success driven</li> <li>● Arrogant; Flamboyant; Hot head</li> <li>● Traumatized by mis-treatment of father and mother by White men</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sylvester</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age - 20s</li> <li>● Nephew of Ma Rainey</li> <li>● Ma wants him to read introduction to one of her songs</li> <li>● Stutters when he speaks</li> <li>● Shy; Uncomfortable</li> <li>● Does what he is told to do</li> </ul>
<p><b>Ma Rainey</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age – 40s in 1927, recording session</li> <li>● Based on real life blues singer, Gertrude Malissa Nix Pridgett Rainey</li> <li>● “Mother of the Blues”; One of first Black singers to have contract with White label</li> <li>● Diva, short; Bi-sexual</li> <li>● Powerful; Aware of her influence</li> </ul>	<p><b>Toledo</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age – mid 50s</li> <li>● Plays piano in Ma Rainey’s band</li> <li>● Reads and is proud of it</li> <li>● Misinterprets and misunderstands a lot he thinks he knows</li> <li>● Sense of right and wrong</li> </ul>

## Character Development Notes

**Character Choice** \_\_\_\_\_

### 1. Where are they coming from?

Who is this person? Consider geography, religion and spirituality, profession, age. Take note of all the ways the character is introduced to the audience. Keep in mind that sometimes this will happen through indirect characterization, often through what other characters have to say. Refer to the text when needed.

\_\_\_\_\_ will write the poem for this section.

### 2. What are they searching for?

What's missing from the character's life? What does the character want from life, from other people? What does the character do or say that builds these ideas?

\_\_\_\_\_ will write the poem for this section.

### 3. What is their song?

What happens that leads the character to understand new things about him or herself? What does the character learn? Do other people suffer or gain? How does the character feel at the end? What does the character plan for the future?

\_\_\_\_\_ will write the poem for this section.

## Poem Patterns

### 1. Where are they coming from?

At the beginning of the play, we learn a little about who the characters are and where they are coming from, geographically and emotionally. These poem patterns lend themselves to introductions.

#### ABC Poem

ABC poetry is written in five lines and expresses strong emotion. The initial letters of the beginning words in the first four lines are alphabetical, for example C, D, E, F or M, N, O, P. The first line does not have to begin with A.

Lines 1–4: Begins with four consecutive letters

Line 5: Starts with any letter

#### “I Am” Poem

In an "I Am" poem, the writer responds to a series of prompts and creates a "self" poem. The template is:

I am (one descriptive word)\* (\*This phrase repeats three times in the poem)

I love (something you love)

I want (something you want)

I play (something you play)

I see (something you see each day)

I am (one descriptive word)\*

I am afraid of (something you're afraid of)

I am happy (something that makes you happy)

I am nervous (something that makes you nervous)

I am excited (something that makes you excited)

I am (one descriptive word)\*

#### Skinny Poem

A Skinny poem contains a total of thirty words and is modeled after the following formula:

One word (Title)

Three words\* (\*This phrase repeats three times in the poem)

Two words

Four words

Three words\*

Seven words

Two words

Four words

Three words\*  
One word

## 2. What are they searching for?

During much of their lives, the characters have done what they were told to do, or what they were forced to do. With that in mind, the poem pattern choices for this section are highly structured.

### **Diamond or Diamonte Poem**

Diamond is a poetry format that presents a problem and suggests a solution. The formula for Diamond poetry is as follows:

Line 1: One word which is an opposite of line 5  
Line 2: Two words which describe line 1  
Line 3: Three words which resolve the conflict  
Line 4: Two words which describe line 5  
Line 5: One word which is an opposite of line 1

### **Nonet Poem**

A Nonet poem has nine lines and a specific syllable count, decreasing by one syllable for each line. The pattern follows:

Line 1: Nine syllables  
Line 2: Eight syllables  
Line 3: Seven syllables  
Line 4: Six syllables  
Line 5: Five syllables  
Line 6: Four syllables  
Line 7: Three syllables  
Line 8: Two syllables  
Line 9: One syllable

### **Tanka Poem**

Tanka is a Japanese verse form much like Haiku except that two more lines of seven syllables each are added to give this type of poetry a total of 31 syllables. The first three lines present an idea or a problem, and the final two lines react to that idea or solve the problem. The format for Tanka poetry is:

Line 1: Five syllables  
Line 2: Seven syllables  
Line 3: Five syllables  
Line 4: Seven syllables

Line 5: Seven syllables

### 3. What is their song?

As the play resolves, most of the characters have a better idea of who they are and what they want; they've found their songs. These poem patterns allow for the most freedom to parallel the choices the characters are now free to make.

#### Cluster Poem

Print a word or a phrase in the center of a piece of paper. Next, brainstorm associations, feelings, ideas, and images that come to mind in response to the word. Cluster, or group, them on the sheet.

#### Hello/Goodbye Poem

Eight line verse with alternating lines starting with "Hello" and "Goodbye" followed by a line of poetry. The format is:

Line 1: Hello...  
Line 2: Goodbye...  
Line 3: Hello...  
Line 4: Goodbye...  
Line 5: Hello...  
Line 6: Goodbye...  
Line 7: Hello...  
Line 8: Goodbye...

#### Senses Poem

Pick a topic for the first line and use five additional lines to describe it through each of the five senses. The pattern is:

Line 1: Topic  
Line 2: It looks like ...  
Line 3: It sounds like ...  
Line 4: It smells like ...  
Line 5: It tastes like ...  
Line 6: It feels like ...

**Poem Patterns—Examples**  
**1. Where are they coming from?**

**ABC Poem [August Wilson]**

Jostled between high schools because of discrimination  
Keen interest in learning from everyday people in the neighborhood  
Library of Carnegie in Pittsburgh his classroom  
Music, especially blues, sings through his life and work  
August Wilson

**ABC Poem [*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* – Ma Rainey]**

Mother of the Blues  
Negro woman with powerful voice  
Opportunities for business with White record labels  
Performer throughout her lifetime  
Gertrude “Ma” Rainey

\*

**"I Am" Poem [August Wilson]**

I am observant  
I love words  
I want to share the stories of my people  
I play their music—the blues  
I see people struggling, celebrating, supporting  
I am observant  
I am afraid of my future  
I am happy that I can learn at the library  
I am nervous about my mother finding out  
I am excited by the words of Black writers  
I am observant

**"I Am" Poem [*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* – Mel Sturdyvant]**

I am a record producer  
I love making money  
I want Ma Rainey's songs  
I play the role of the boss  
I see sales from her music  
I am a record producer  
I am afraid Ma may walk out  
I am happy when things go without incident  
I am nervous about Irvin making the arrangements

I am excited when the session is over  
I a record producer

\*

**Skinny Poem [August Wilson]**

Pittsburgh  
It's my life  
My neighborhood  
Barber, coffee, tobacco shops  
It's my life  
Learned my people's culture and their language  
Street corners  
Made notes on napkins  
It's my life  
Home

**Skinny Poem [*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* – Toledo]**

Toledo  
He can read  
Enjoys books  
Likes to share information  
He doesn't always get the facts right  
Wears clodhoppers  
Reminder of being sharecropper  
Member of band  
Pianist

**Poem Patterns—Examples**  
**2. What are they searching for?**

**Diamond [August Wilson]**

Dropout  
Accusations, Discrimination  
Carnegie Library Pittsburgh  
Books, Writers  
Educated

**Diamond [*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* – Dussie Mae]**

Ambitious  
Attractive, Sensual  
Lover  
Dresses, Shoes  
Kept

\*

**Nonet [August Wilson]**

Ten plays called the Century Cycle  
African American life  
In Twentieth century  
One play for each decade  
Nine set in Pittsburgh  
One Chicago  
Tell the tales  
Of my  
People

**Nonet [*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* - Cutler]**

I'm the leader of Ma Rainey's band  
I play both trombone and guitar  
My group must be well rehearsed  
Some say I'm a loner  
But I'm sensible  
Don't like conflict  
Fifties  
Cutler  
Black

\*

**Tanka [August Wilson]**

Painting on canvas  
Blues tunes on record player  
Both tell a story  
I will use the words of poems  
I will share life on the stage

**Tanka [*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* - Sylvester]**

I am Ma's nephew  
I do what I'm told  
My name's Sylvester  
My speech has a bad stutter  
I'm shy and uncomfortable



Hello tempos jazzed up so people can dance  
Goodbye old fashioned music  
Hello dreams come true  
Goodbye everything holding me back.

\*

### **Senses [August Wilson]**

Four Bs

It looks like shapes and forms in Romare Bearden's collage art  
It sounds like the swaying rhythm of blues music  
It smells like the fresh India ink on my paper  
It tastes like spice in Jorge Luis Borges' odes to Argentina  
It feels like roiling currents of emotion in Amiri Baraka's poems

### **Senses [*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* – Irvin]**

Success

It looks like Ma Rainey and her band in the recording studio  
It sounds like the voice of “The Mother of the Blues”  
It smells like alcohol, Coca Cola, sandwiches, and new shoes  
It tastes like astounding sales of her records  
It feels like money in my pockets

### Levee's Monologue from Page 54, Reformatted

Levee got to be Levee!  
And, he don't need no body messing with him  
about the white man -  
'cuse you don't know nothing about me.

You don't know Levee.

You don't know nothing  
about what kind of blood I got!  
What kind of heart I got beating here!

I was eight years old  
when I watched a gang  
of white mens  
come into my daddy's house  
and have to do with my mama any way they wanted.

### Levee's Monologue from Page 82, Reformatted

Cutler's God!  
Come on and save this nigger!  
Come on and save him  
like you did my mama!  
Save him  
like you did my mama!

I heard her when she called you!

I heard her when she said,  
"Lord, have mercy!  
Jesus, help me!  
Please,  
God,  
have mercy on me.  
Lord Jesus,  
help me!"

And, did you even turn your back?  
Did you even turn your back,  
motherfucker?  
Did you turn your back?

***Home: A Poem By August Wilson***  
Written for the Yale Repertory Theatre, 1985

My face in the mirror.  
The buttons on my coat.  
The coin in my pocket.

These are my compatriots.

My compatriots & I  
ask for your attention.

We are going to begin now.

My compatriots & I have traveled  
many roads. Some circuitous,  
some sharp & straight,  
others brambled & rough,  
& all of them have led  
as if by some grand design,  
to the one burnished with art  
& small, irrevocable tragedies.

We have carried in our pockets  
to bargain our passage,  
memory, peaches, acorns,  
& a wild heart that plies its trade  
with considerate & alarming passion.

Some roads have opened to us.  
Some have refused to our bargain.  
& bred landscapes of severe wolves  
to blunt & discourage our advance.  
Others, closed for repairs,  
shall remain closed & wanting forever.

My compatriots & I have come  
from many places, many tapestries of roads,  
to come now, in our fortieth year,  
to this place rich with welcome;  
remembering the time we batted .400  
& sent eleven homeruns crashing into the windows of the houses

behind the park, how we would touch  
each base nonchalantly,  
& the same bases, the same object:

To find a way home even at the start.

My compatriots & I  
we arrive here at this place  
knowing the measure of distance  
that between that space & this, like  
the space between a man's hand &  
a woman's hair, are many passages  
of tremor & trust.

My compatriots & I  
We take off our hat.  
We salute you.  
We walk up to the door.  
We open it & enter.

We take off our hat.  
We hang it up.  
We give you, with love & thanks  
'this bloodless execution  
of the alphabet.'

<https://olneypianolesson.wordpress.com/2014/03/24/home-a-poem-by-august-wilson>

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
Otherness and Power Dynamics in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***

Author: Megan Twietmeyer

John Adams High School, South Bend Community School Corporation

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**Overview**

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**Grade level:** High School / Middle School

**Discipline/subject area:** English, Interdisciplinary

**Topic of lesson:** Otherness and power dynamics

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**Objectives**

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- Students will explore how the characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* are marginalized or othered in the play and how those same characters work to regain power or share power
  - Students will reflect on otherness or marginalization they see/experience and how they can reclaim their own agency or help provide agency for those without power
- 

**Standards addressed**

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- 9-10.RL.1 Read a variety of literature within a range of complexity appropriate for grades 9-10. By the end of grade 9, students interact with texts proficiently and independently at the low end of the range and with scaffolding as needed for texts at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 10, students interact with texts proficiently and independently.
  - 9-10.RL.2.1 Analyze what a text says both explicitly and implicitly as well as inferences and interpretations through citing strong and thorough textual evidence.
  - 9-10.RL.2.3 Analyze how dynamic characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
  - 9-10.RV.1 Acquire and accurately use academic and content-specific words and phrases at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence
  - 9-10.W.1 Write routinely over a variety of time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences; apply reading standards to support analysis, reflection, and research by drawing evidence from literature and nonfiction texts
  - 9-10.ML.1 Critically analyze information found in electronic, print, and mass media used to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture.
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**Materials needed other than text**

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- Worksheet (attached)
-

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## Images

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Some questions are pulled from Dr. Crawford McKinney's lecture on Children's Literature

### Social Process Among Characters: *Identity and Disability*

Who are the people *or* characters in the book?

Who has names, who doesn't?

Who speaks? Who is silenced?

Who acts? Who is acted upon? Who waits?

How is power exercised? Who has agency?

Who resists and challenges domination and collusion?

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## Lesson Plan (Day One)

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### Students:

Prior knowledge, first impressions, questions raised:

- Students will most likely have experienced some instance of being treated differently whether because of their age, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, ability, religion, language, etc.
- Students should have read or watched either the play or the film *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

### Teacher Presentation to the class:

- The teacher first needs to review all materials and make sure it is appropriate for the age level of students.
- Pass out the attached worksheet. This worksheet can be done as a whole class or in groups.
  - I would encourage frequent check-ins if it is being done in small groups as the topic is heavy and requires a lot of reflection.
- Explain to students that they are going to take the day to think about the different characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and their identities.
- If students are working in groups: go through the directions together and then let them begin to work, frequently checking-in to make sure that they are understanding.
- If class is working as a whole: ask students to use their phones, in-class dictionaries, or their school-provided electronics to look up the words otherness, marginalization, power, and agency (the definitions used for the creation of this assignment came from Merriam-Webster). Then, guide the students to thinking about how these words all relate to one another and relate to the play.
- Next, have the students begin to consider the characters and their identities. Then, have students consider what, if any, of these characters' identities made them the other or

marginalized them. This can be done as a discussion or as independent work, though discussion here may be beneficial.

- Some identities, like race and gender, may be easy to consider. Other identities to consider would be sexual orientation, formal education level, socio-economic status, and ability/disability.
- The next task leads students to consider the characters and where those characters have power and agency. This can be done as a discussion or as independent work, though again discussion here may be beneficial.
- Lastly, students are asked to consider their own identities and where they are seen as the other or are marginalized. It is important here to stress to students to only reflect on aspects they are comfortable sharing. My suggestion is that this part is independent and reflective. Students are asked to consider how they have used their own power and agency to both harm and help others as well.
  - A great place to end would be a discussion of ideas of how to use power and agency to help other people in the future.

**Background information:**

Teachers will have already needed to create a classroom environment where students can explore uncomfortable topics and discuss things that are not always easy.

**Key words/new vocabulary:**

Otherness  
Marginalization  
Agency  
Power

**Strategies:**

Group or independent exploration  
Reflective writing  
Class discussion

**Questions and Activities:**

- What makes someone the other?
- How does someone gain power and agency?
- How can someone use their own power and agency to continue to harm others?
- How can someone use their own power and agency to help others?
- Should people use their own power and agency to help others?

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**Sources/resources:**

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- Merriam Webster
- Questions (see screenshot above)

Name:

Date:

Class Period:

### Otherness and Power Dynamics in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

**Task 1:** Look up the following words and summarize their definition. Note: Some words are used in multiple ways. Use context clues to determine the definition that makes the most sense for today's activity. Then answer the following question.

Define Otherness:
Define Marginalization:
Define Power:
Define Agency:

How do these words relate to one another?
How do you think these words relate to <i>Ma Rainey's Black Bottom</i> ?

**Task 2:** Begin to think about the different characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Which characters have identities that make them the other or would marginalize them (consider race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, formal education level, ability/disability, etc.)?

Character Name	Identities that make them the other or marginalize them
Ma Rainey	
Irvin	
Levee	
Culter	

Character Name	Identities that make them the other or marginalize them
Toledo	
Slow Drag	
Slyvester	
Dussy Mae	

**Task 3:** Continue to think about the different characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Who has power and agency? Where do they get their power and agency? Do they use their power to help or hurt others? How?

Character Name	Does the character have power/agency?	Where does the character get their power/agency?	Who do they help? How?	Who do they hurt? How?
Ma Rainey				
Irvin				
Levee				
Cutler				
Toledo				

Character Name	Does the character have power/agency?	Where does the character get their power/agency?	Who do they help? How?	Who do they hurt? How?
Slow Drag				
Slyvester				
Dussy Mae				

**Task 4:** Consider yourself. Only what you are comfortable writing down or thinking about. What are areas that perhaps you are seen as the other or are marginalized. (Your age is a good place to start.) Where do you have power and agency? Are there places you are using your power and agency intentionally or unintentionally to hurt others? What steps can you take to prevent that? How can you use your power and agency to help others?

What are some elements of your identity you're comfortable sharing/writing down?
Where do you have power and agency?
Have you used your power or agency to cause harm intentionally or unintentionally?
How can you prevent that in the future?
How can you use your power and agency in the future to help others?

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
Black Excellence Takes the Stage: August Wilson**

Author: Lisa Kowalski  
South Bend Community School Corporation

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**Overview**

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**Grade level:** 7-10

**Discipline/subject area:** English Language Arts

**Topic of lesson:** Who is August Wilson, *The Century Cycle*, Designing a Production

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**Objectives**

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- Understanding the importance of black art and storytelling in America.
  - Learning about American authors and literature.
  - Creating mood boards for a production.
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**Standards addressed**

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- 7.RL.1 Read a variety of literature within a range of complexity appropriate for grades 6-8. By the end of grade 7, students interact with texts proficiently and independently at the middle of the range and with scaffolding as needed for texts at the high end of the range
  - 7.RL.2.1 Analyze what a text says explicitly as well as draw inferences from the text through citing several pieces of textual evidence.
  - 7.RL.2.2 Analyze the development of a theme or central idea over the course of a work of literature; provide a detailed summary that supports the analysis.
  - 7.RL.2.4 Students are expected to build upon and continue applying concepts learned previously.
  - 7.RL.4.2 Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.
  - 9-10.ML.1 Critically analyze information found in electronic, print, and mass media used to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture.
  - 9-10.RL.4.2 Analyze and evaluate how works of literary or cultural significance draw on and use allusions, archetypes, symbols and allegories from myths, traditional stories, or religious works, including how the material is rendered new.
  - 9-10.RN.2.3 Analyze a series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.
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**Materials needed other than text**

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- [Google presentation: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1sKq1ScTEltknhKZjh9-4j14BOPY\\_8g2IEgzJ4\\_V49A/edit#slide=id.p](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1sKq1ScTEltknhKZjh9-4j14BOPY_8g2IEgzJ4_V49A/edit#slide=id.p) (Slides below)
  - Worksheet (available at the end of this lesson)
  - Pages 5-6 of this resource packet for students to read (printed or made available to them online)
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## Lesson Plan (Day One)

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- The goal for this lesson is to have students create mood boards that incorporate their newly acquired knowledge about August Wilson, *Ma Rainey*, and theatre production. There are also suggested strategies for expanding this assignment by adding verbal presentation and/or writing components.
- Students should read pp. 5-6 of this Resource Packet and complete the “Who Is August Wilson?” Worksheet available below. This reading/assignment can be done prior to the lesson or during class time as part of the presentation, accompanying slide 2.
- Teacher presents to class using the Google slides:
  - SLIDE 1: Title Slide
    - ESSENTIAL QUESTION: Why is it important that Black stories be shared?
  - SLIDE 2: Who is August Wilson?
    - ESSENTIAL QUESTION: Who is August Wilson? What was his contribution to American history?
    - IDEAS FOR EXPANDING THIS SLIDE: Role Playing: Working in pairs, one student will act as the interviewer and the other will answer as August Wilson. Students will come up with 5-7 questions and research answers, then using their camera or live in class, students will present their interview to the class. Class is responsible for fact checking pairs by comparing responses to their own.
  - SLIDE 3: The *Century Cycle*
    - ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What is the *American Century Cycle*? Why is it important?
  - SLIDE 4: Essential Questions to Ponder
    - ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS: What is the importance/significance of Wilson writing the *Century Cycle*? What new perspectives do we gain by viewing the African American experience this way? Why do you think Wilson chose not to write the plays in chronological order?
    - IDEAS FOR EXPANDING THIS SLIDE: Expanding on the writing assignment, have students create a synopsis on what their 2000s or 2010s play would be about. For a longer-term project, students could create an actual play in small groups, and this project could be worked on throughout the grading period or semester.
  - SLIDE 5: Venn Diagram
    - ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What major themes can be found in these two decades (2000 and 2010)? What are the similarities and what are the differences? What was happening in America during these decades? How do these decades compare to 1920? Are there any similarities between what was happening in 1920 America vs 2000 America? What do these similarities or differences say about the African American experience?
    - EXPANDING THIS SLIDE: Do you think Ma Rainey’s “celebrity” allowed her privileges that other African Americans did not receive? Do

you think this same idea of “celebrity” grants more privilege than others, today? What facts or evidence supports your thinking?

- SLIDE 6: EXPLORING THE PLAY: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*
  - ESSENTIAL QUESTION: (whole group and/or individually complete the chart) What do we know about the play? What do we want to know about the play? What did we learn about the play?
  - EXPANDING THIS SLIDE: As suggested, this chart can be completed together as a whole group or individually. If desired, this chart could also serve as your second slide in your presentation of the lesson. I would recommend that this chart remain visible throughout the discussions so students can refer to it. At the end of all the lesson, you should complete the “what we learned” portion of this slide.
- SLIDE 7: The Real Ma Rainey
  - ESSENTIAL QUESTION: Who is the real Ma Rainey? Why do you think August Wilson thought it was important to write about her? Based on what you have learned about who she is, do you think she was written about accurately by Wilson? What evidence did you find to support your response?
- SLIDE 8: Setting the Stage
  - ESSENTIAL QUESTION: Out of all of Wilson’s plays, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is the only one not set in Pittsburgh. Why is the environment so important to this play? Use evidence from the play or text we’ve read to support your answer.
  - EXPANDING THIS SLIDE: A great idea to introduce this slide is to show students different images and ask them to write or discuss how they feel about each one. Explore how colors and designs help enhance the mood/emotion of what an audience is seeing. Why would this be important for understanding more about what the playwright/designer is trying to communicate? It may be helpful to create your own example of a mood board to show your students. This example will help guide them when it is time to create their own.
- SLIDE 9: Criteria for Mood Board
  - ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What is a mood board? Why do designers create them? How does design help communicate ideas?
  - EXPANDING THIS SLIDE: There are multiple ways that you can create mood boards. You can have students create using an app or by hand. Either way, mood boards are a great way for students to get creative. You can make it a mood board party or hold a competition and reward the best mood board with a prize. You could also have students create mood boards for each character and design their costumes. If you really want to expand this lesson, students can work in “production teams”. Each student can create a board for one of the following types of mood boards: costumes, set, lighting, and sound. You can talk about each aspect or collaborate with your art/theater teachers on this one. Students can present their ideas to the class once the project is due. Projects can be shared with the school and inspire other students. Have fun with this part!

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### Sources/resources:

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- <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/gertrude-ma-rainey>
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnFTDKuOXAE>
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwjqRiFoqDE>
  - Special on August Wilson: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-scenes-and-synposes-of-august-wilsons-10-play-cycle/3701/>
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### Slides:

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A slide with a black background. On the right is a black and white photo of August Wilson wearing a hat and a coat, standing in front of a wall covered in papers. On the left, there is a text box with a yellow border containing the following text: "WHO IS AUGUST WILSON? READ pages 5-6 of the Ma Rainey Educational Resource Packet then answer the following questions in a the document in the link below. [Who is August Wilson?](#) REWIND! Take a look at the flashback 60 minute special spotlighting August Wilson. Click link below to watch. [REWIND: AUGUST WILSON](#)".

# The Real Ma Rainey

Name:  
 Birthplace:  
 Birthday:  
 Marital Status:  
 Occupation:  
 Years of Experience:  
 Claim to Fame:



Click on the images to discover more about the real Ma Rainey. Then complete the information card on the left hand side by filling in the blanks.



## Setting the Stage

The play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place in 1927 Chicago. Imagine you have been hired to design the set for the play. Create a mood board for how you might design the set of this play. Remember, a designer's first job is to research, so begin by researching the following ideas and then come up with your own creative interpretation for how you would design this play today.

Things to think about...

What was happening in 1927 Chicago? What kind of things/places would you see during this time period? How did people dress back then? Did white Americans dress differently than black Americans? What kind of colors, textures, sounds, sights, smells, and moods do you want your audience to experience?

## Essentials Questions to Ponder...Let's Discuss!

1. What is the importance/significance of Wilson writing the *Century Cycle*?
2. What new perspectives do we gain by viewing the African American experience this way?
3. Why do you think Wilson choose not to write the plays in chronological order?

THINKING ALOUD: Imagine you have been hired to continue Wilson's legacy and have been asked to write a play about the African American experience in the 2000's or 2010's? What sort of themes would you explore in these two decades? What are some similarities and differences between the two? How do these decades compare to some of Wilson's earlier work and the themes presented within them?

## Criteria for Mood Board

Must include at least 5-15 images and you must be able to explain why you choose those specific images.

You may complete board using digital images, magazine cutout, fabric, color swatches, or other materials. If you are completing this assignment on a board, be sure to have materials available no later than (date).

This is an individual assignment. You may talk to each other about your designs but each of you will need to submit your own project for grading.

Boards are due: (Date) and are (number) points

## Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

What We Know

What We Want to Know

What We Learned

Name:

Date:

Hour:

Assignment: Who Is AUGUST WILSON?

Read the article “August Wilson, The Man Behind the Legacy” (p. 5-6 of *Ma Rainey Educational Resource Packet*), then answer the following questions below. Please be sure to make a copy of this document before writing your responses. Once completed, submit for grading. This assignment is worth 10 points.

1. When and where was August Wilson born?
2. How many siblings does August have?
3. What were the occupations of both his parents?
4. Why did August drop out of school?
5. What year did August purchase his first typewriter?
6. What is the Black Horizon Theater?
7. What is the name of Wilson’s first play? What year was it written?
8. Which play brought Wilson widespread recognition?
9. Who is Lloyd Richards?
10. In what city did August spend the last days of his life?

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
Music and Poetry in the Harlem Renaissance**

Author: Caroline Zitnik  
University of Notre Dame

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**Overview**

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**Grade level:** 10th, 11th

**Discipline/subject are:** United States History

**Topic of lesson:** The Harlem Renaissance, Black Americans in early 20th century

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**Objectives**

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- Big Question: How did Harlem Renaissance artists express their feelings and political goals through their artwork?
  - SWBAT make connections between previous material and current lessons.
  - SWBAT analyze media critically.
  - SWBAT apply what they know about history to a literary work.
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**Standards addressed**

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- USH.3.5: Explain the importance of social and cultural movements within the Progressive Era, including significant individuals/groups such as Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. DuBois, NAACP, muckrakers and Upton Sinclair and including movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, women's suffrage, labor movements, and socialist movement.
  - 9-10.LH.1.1: Read and comprehend history/social studies texts within a range of complexity appropriate for grades 9-10 independently and proficiently by the end of grade 10.
  - 9-10.LH.2.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
  - 9-10.LH.2.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
  - 9-10.LH.3.3: Compare the perspectives of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.
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**Materials needed other than text**

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- [\*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom\*](#) by August Wilson
  - "[Arts and Letters of the Harlem Renaissance](#): Crash Course Black American History #26"
  - Poetry Foundation's biography of August Wilson:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/august-wilson>
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- “Dream Boogie” by Langston Hughes:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/151091/dream-boogie>

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## Lesson Plan

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### Homework from previous class:

- Watch "[Arts and Letters of the Harlem Renaissance](#): Crash Course Black American History #26"
- Read Poetry Foundation’s Biography of August Wilson:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/august-wilson>

### Warmup:

- As students walk in, play "[Deep Moaning Blues](#)" by Ma Rainey
- What did you think of the videos you watched for homework last night? What did you notice? How might it relate to what we have already learned?

### Teacher presentation to class:

- Teacher will give a short lecture about the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance
- Slideshow [presentation](#) (Slides can be seen at the end of this lesson plan)

### Group work part 1:

- Students will read excerpt from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (attached below) and Langston Hughes' poem "[Dream Boogie](#)"
- Guiding questions: What do you notice about each work? What sticks out to you? What does music mean for the authors of each text? How do they compare? Consider the context in which each was written (1981 for *Ma Rainey* and 1951 for "Dream Boogie"). How might the time in which these authors wrote have influenced their perspectives? How do these sources relate to what you learned about in your homework for today?
- After silently reading each work, students will discuss the questions and their reactions in groups of three or four.
- Students will then have the opportunity to share their thoughts with the class.
- Each group will send up one representative to write an important insight from their discussion on the board. After each group has written something on the board, the teacher will call on each group to explain their point using historical evidence. The teacher may add to the information on the board according to what the students share.

### Group work part 2:

- After sharing their thoughts, students will return to their groups.
- The groups must discuss their answers to the guiding questions and agree on their point of view.
- The groups will collaborate on their answers and produce a paragraph of 6-7 sentences that will be turned in at the end of the class period.

### Look ahead to next class, assign homework:

- Teacher will assign homework according to the trajectory of their class.

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### Sources/resources:

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- Wilson, August. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Penguin Books. 1981. New York.
- [Harlem Renaissance and Ma Rainey's Black Bottom slides](#)
- National Humanities Center Primary Resources:  
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/index.htm>
- The Legacy Project's Summary of the Harlem Renaissance with links to additional resources and a lesson plan handout with different approaches to teaching the Harlem Renaissance: <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/milestone/harlem-renaissance>
- History.com's description of the Harlem Renaissance with special attention paid to Langston Hughes: <https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/harlem-renaissance>
- Poetry Foundation's Biography of Langston Hughes with commentary on his famous poem "Harlem": <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/150907/langston-hughes-harlem>

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### Slides:

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## The Harlem Renaissance

### The Great Migration

- 1910 - 1970
- General movement of African Americans away from the South to the North, usually cities, where there were better economic opportunities
- Escape sharecropping

### What was the Harlem Renaissance?

- Explosion of arts, music, and literature made by African Americans from during the early 20th century
- Named after neighborhood of Harlem in New York, but was prevalent in many cities around the country
- Themes: jazz and the blues, struggle for racial equality, identity and pride

### Music, art, and *Ma Rainey*



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## The Play

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It is early March in Chicago, 1927. There is a bit of a chill in the air. Winter has broken but the wind coming off the lake does not carry the promise of spring. The people of the city are bundled and brisk in their defense against such misfortunes as the weather, and the business of the city proceeds largely undisturbed.

Chicago in 1927 is a rough city, a bruising city, a city of millionaires and derelicts, gangsters and roughhouse dandies, whores and Irish grandmothers who move through its streets fingering long black rosaries. Somewhere a man is wrestling with the taste of a woman in his cheek. Somewhere a dog is barking. Somewhere the moon has fallen through a window and broken into thirty pieces of silver.

It is one o'clock in the afternoon. Secretaries are returning from their lunch, the noon Mass at St. Anthony's is over, and the priest is mumbling over his vestments while the altar boys practice their Latin. The procession of cattle cars through the stockyards continues unabated. The busboys in Mac's Place are cleaning away the last of the corned beef and cabbage, and on the city's Southside, sleepy-eyed negroes move lazily toward their small cold-water flats and rented rooms to await the onslaught of night, which will find them crowded in the bars and

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juke joints both dazed and dazzling in their rapport with life. It is with these negroes that our concern lies most heavily: their values, their attitudes, and particularly their music.

It is hard to define this music. Suffice it to say that it is music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being, separate and distinct from any other. This music is called blues. Whether this music came from Alabama or Mississippi or other parts of the South doesn't matter anymore. The men and women who make this music have learned it from the narrow crooked streets of East St. Louis, or the streets of the city's Southside, and the Alabama or Mississippi roots have been strangled by the northern manners and customs of free men of definite and sincere worth, men for whom this music often lies at the forefront of their conscience and concerns. Thus they are laid open to be consumed by it; its warmth and redress, its braggadocio and roughly poignant comments, its vision and prayer, which would instruct and allow them to reconnect, to reassemble and gird up for the next battle in which they would be both victim and the ten thousand slain.

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
Supplement: Biography of August Wilson - Narrative**

Author: Phyllis Wezeman  
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

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**Overview**

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**Grade level:** 7-12

**Discipline/subject area:** Interdisciplinary

**Topic of lesson - Supplement:** Biography of August Wilson - Narrative

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**August Wilson Biography  
Narrative**

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**Birth**

Frederick August Kittel (Jr.) was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on April 27, 1945.

**Family**

Mother, Daisy Wilson Kittel (1920-1983), was an African American cleaning lady from North Carolina. Father, Frederick "Fritz" August Kittel, Sr. was a German immigrant who worked as a baker/pastry chef. After August's mother and father divorced in the fifties when Wilson was a teenager, Daisy married David Bedford (d.1969), an African American ex-convict who was denied a college football scholarship because of his race.

August had six siblings: Freda Ellis, Linda Jean Kittel, Donna Conley, Barbara Jean Wilson, Edwin Kittel, and Richard Kittel. He was the oldest son.

In 1965, after his father's death, he changed his name to August Wilson to honor and adopt the heritage of his mother and to disavow his estranged father.

**Childhood**

August grew up on Bedford Avenue, a poor section of the Hill District of Pittsburgh. The family lived in a two-room apartment without hot water or a telephone. They relied on public assistance and wages from Daisy's house cleaning jobs. Fritz Kittel, Wilson's father, never lived with the family and rarely made an appearance at the apartment.

After Daisy and Fritz divorced, she married David Bedford. In 1958 they moved to the mostly white Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh but were never welcome there.

**Education**

August learned to read at the age of four. His first books were the *Nancy Drew* series and resources from the public library. For elementary school, he attended St. Richard's Parochial in Pittsburgh. In 1959, he began his secondary education at Central Catholic High School but as one of only fourteen African American students was bullied for his race, with the message "go home, n\*gger" stuck to his desk every day. At his second high school, Connelley Vocational, he was unchallenged. In 1960, he enrolled at Gladstone High School where a teacher accused him of plagiarizing a twenty-page paper on Napoleon because the educator did not believe a Black child could write that well.

At age 15, August dropped out of formal education, unbeknownst to his mother, and continued his studies at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh during the school day. As a voracious reader, he began in the “Negro section” studying the works of Black writers like Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright. Years later, in 1999, the Carnegie Library awarded him an honorary high school diploma.

Barber, coffee, and tobacco shops—as well as street corners—offered insight into the culture of the community and the language of the people. In addition, records purchased at thrift shops nurtured a love of the Blues.

### **Career: Early Years**

In 1962, August enlisted in the U.S. Army for three years, but served only one. Upon his return to Pittsburgh, he moved into a boarding house. While his mother wanted him to become a lawyer, between 1963 and 1964 he worked odd jobs as a cook, dishwasher, gardener, porter, sheet metal worker, and toy store stocker.

### **Career: Poet**

In 1965, August Wilson purchased his first typewriter for \$20.00, money he raised by writing a college term paper on Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg for his older sister. He began to compose poetry on cafe napkins, paper bags, and yellow pads while sitting in bars, restaurants, and shops listening to local folks. In 1971 and 1972, he had poems published in *Black World* and *Black Lines*.

In the late 1960s, together with other poets, educators, and artists, he formed Centre Avenue Poets Theater Workshop.

In 1968, with playwright/teacher friend Rob Penny, he co-founded Black Horizon Theater (Black Horizons on the Hill) which lasted until the mid-seventies. They exhibited art and produced plays to raise awareness about the Black American experience. Wilson served as director, after reading a library book on the topic. He converted some of his poems into a play, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* and performed his first play, *Recycling*, for community and school groups.

In 1976, Wilson was instrumental in forming Kuntu Repertory Theater and Kuntu Writers Workshop at the University of Pittsburgh.

### **Career: Playwright**

In 1978, a friend encouraged Wilson to move to St. Paul, Minnesota to concentrate on playwriting. While connected with Penumbra Theater, he developed educational scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota. In 1980, August earned a fellowship at the Minneapolis Playwrights Center which led to acceptance at the National Playwrights Center at Eugene O'Neill Theater in Waterford, Connecticut. During this time, 1982, August met Lloyd Richards, Dean of Yale University School of Drama and artistic director of Yale Repertory Theater, where many of Wilson's plays were later workshopped or had their first run. In addition to directing Wilson's first six plays on Broadway, Lloyd Richards became a father figure and mentor to August.

August Wilson claims that the greatest influences on his work were the four Bs: the Blues, author Amiri Baraka (a lively political playwright), artist Romare Bearden (who painted Black life in all its richness and inspired Wilson to craft his plays as the equals of the canvases), and Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges.

### **Career: *Century Cycle***

Between 1979 and 2005, August Wilson wrote ten plays that chronicle one hundred years of African American life, 1900 through 1999. Each play depicts a different decade of the twentieth century. Collectively the works are called his *Century Cycle*, *American Century Cycle*, or *Pittsburgh Cycle*. Nine of the scripts are set in Pittsburgh, with only one, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, taking place in Chicago.

The ten plays and the decades they depict are:

- 1900s - *Gem of the Ocean*
- 1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1930s - *The Piano Lesson*
- 1940s - *Seven Guitars*
- 1950s - *Fences*
- 1960s - *Two Trains Running*
- 1970s - *Jitney*
- 1980s - *King Hedley II*
- 1990s - *Radio Golf*

### **Personal Life**

August Wilson had three wives and two daughters. In 1969, he married Brenda Burton, a nurse, and their daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson, was born in 1970. The couple divorced in 1972. Judy Oliver, a social worker, and Wilson were married from 1981 to 1990. Wilson married his third wife, costume designer Costanza Romero, in 1994 and they had a daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, in 1997. At the time of Wilson's death in 2005 they were still married.

### **Death**

In June 2005, Wilson was diagnosed with liver cancer. He died October 2, 2005, at Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, Washington at the age of sixty. August Wilson is buried in Greenwood Memorial Park Cemetery just outside his hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

### **Legacy**

Prominent distinctions, among additional honors, include two Pulitzer Prizes, seven New York Drama Critics Circle Awards, and two Tonys for Best Play and Best Revival of a Play. In 1999 Wilson was presented a National Humanities Medal, and in 2006 he was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame. Shortly after his death, in 2005, the Virginia Theater in New York City was renamed the August Wilson Theatre in his honor. The August Wilson Theatre was the first Broadway theatre to be named after a Black American, and it was also the only Broadway theatre to bear the name of a Black American until 2022, when it was announced that the Cort Theatre in Manhattan would be renamed the James Earl Jones Theatre. Pittsburgh sites include his home, on the National Register of Historic Places, and the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, opened in 2009. 2020 included the release of a PBS documentary, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, and a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Besides accolades too numerous to list, his greatest legacy remains his ten *play Century Cycle* chronicling each decade of the twentieth century African American experience.

**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
Supplement: Biography of August Wilson - Chart**

Author: Phyllis Wezeman  
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

**Overview**

**Grade Level:** 7-12

**Discipline/subject area:** Interdisciplinary

**Topic of lesson:** Biography of August Wilson

**August Wilson Biography  
Chart**

<b>Birth</b>	April 27, 1945 - Frederick August Kittel (Jr.) was born in Pittsburgh, PA
<b>Family</b>	<p>Mother- Daily Wilson Kittel [1920-1983] African American housekeeper from North Carolina</p> <p>Father- Frederick August Kittel, Sr. German immigrant baker/pastry chef</p> <p>Mother and father divorced</p> <p>Step-father- David Bedford [d.1969] Ex-convict; Denied college football scholarship due to race</p> <p>Siblings-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Freda Ellis</li> <li>Linda Jean Kittel</li> <li>Donna Conley</li> <li>Barbara Jean Wilson</li> <li>Edwin Kittel</li> <li>Richard Kittel</li> </ul> <p>1965- Father died</p> <p>1965- Changed name/took pen name of August Wilson Adopted/honored heritage of mother Disavowed estranged father</p>
<b>Childhood</b>	<p>Hill District of Pittsburgh</p> <p>Family lived on Bedford Avenue, a poor area of Pittsburgh, in a 2 room apartment without hot water or a telephone</p> <p>They relied on public assistance and wages from Daisy's house cleaning jobs.</p> <p>Father</p> <p>Frederick Kittel never lived with his family and rarely made appearances at the apartment</p> <p>1958- Oakland neighborhood</p> <p>After mother re-married, the family moved to a mostly white section of</p>

	Pittsburgh where they were never welcome
<b>Education</b>	<p>Age 4- learned to read</p> <p>Child- Read <i>Nancy Drew</i> books and resources from public library</p> <p>Elementary School- St. Richard's Parochial School, Pittsburgh</p> <p>1959- Central Catholic High School, Pittsburgh</p> <p>1 of 14 African Americans; racially bullied; notes on desk - "go home, nigger" - every day</p> <p>1959- Transferred to Connelley Vocational High School, Pittsburgh</p> <p>Unchallenged</p> <p>1960- Gladstone High School, Pittsburgh</p> <p>Accused of plagiarizing a 20-page paper on Napoleon because teacher did not believe a Black student could write that well</p> <p>Age 15- Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh</p> <p>Dropped out of high school without telling mother</p> <p>Continued his education, informally, at library during school hours</p> <p>Started in Negro section reading Black authors like Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright</p> <p>1999- Carnegie Library awarded Wilson an honorary high school diploma</p> <p>Teenage years</p> <p>Educated in barber, coffee, and tobacco shops and street corners to learn the culture of his community and the language of his people</p> <p>Blues-</p> <p>Bought old 78 rpm records at thrift stores; loved the blues</p>
<b>Career - Early Years</b>	<p>1962- Enlisted in U.S. Army</p> <p>Served 1 year</p> <p>After Army</p> <p>Moved to boarding house</p> <p>1963-196 - Odd jobs</p> <p>Worked as cook, dishwasher, gardener, porter, sheet metal worker, and toy store stocker</p> <p>Mother wanted him to become a lawyer</p>
<b>Career - Poet</b>	<p>1965- Purchased typewriter for \$20.00</p> <p>Earned money by writing college term paper on Robert Frost and Carl Sandberg for older sister</p> <p>1965- Began to write poetry</p> <p>Made notes on cafe napkins, paper bags, and yellow pads while in bars, shops, and restaurants</p> <p>Late 1960s- Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop</p> <p>Formed with other poets, educators, and artists</p> <p>1968- Black Horizon Theater (Black Horizons on the Hill)</p> <p>Co-founded with playwright/teacher Rob Penny</p> <p>Exhibited art and produced plays to raise awareness about African American experience</p> <p>Converted poems into play, <i>Black Bart and the Sacred Hills</i></p> <p>Play, <i>Recycling</i>, performed for community and school groups</p>

	<p>Served as director after reading library book on directing  1971-1972 - Poems published in <i>Black World</i> and <i>Black Lines</i>  1976 - Kuntu Repertory Theater and Kuntu Writers Workshop  University of Pittsburgh</p>
<b>Career - Playwright</b>	<p>1978- Moved to St. Paul, MN  Wrote educational scripts for Science Museum of Minnesota  Company member of Penumbra Theatre  Concentrated on play writing to raise consciousness through theater  Greatest influences - 4 Bs  Blues  Amiri Baraka, Playwright  Romare Bearden, Painter  Jorge Luis Borges, Argentinian writer  1980- Fellowship at Minneapolis Playwrights Center  Earned acceptance at National Playwrights Center at Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, CT  1982- Met Lloyd Richards  African American artistic director of Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven, CT and Dean of Yale University School of Drama  Father figure and mentor to August Wilson  Director of Wilson's first 6 plays on Broadway</p>
<b>Career - Century Cycle</b>	<p>1979-2005- Wrote 10 plays known as the <i>American Century Cycle</i>, <i>Century Cycle</i>, or <i>Pittsburgh Cycle</i>  Each play is set in a different decade of the 20th century and chronicles African American life from 1900 through 1999. All but 1, which is set in Chicago, take place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh  The 10 plays and the decades they depict are:  1900s - <i>Gem of the Ocean</i>  1910s - <i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i>  1920s - <i>Ma Rainey's Black Bottom</i>  1930s - <i>The Piano Lesson</i>  1940s - <i>Seven Guitars</i>  1950s - <i>Fences</i>  1960s - <i>Two Trains Running</i>  1970s - <i>Jitney</i>  1980s - <i>King Hedley II</i>  1990s - <i>Radio Golf</i></p>
<b>Personal Life</b>	<p>1969- Married Brenda Burton; Divorced 1972  Nurse  1970- Daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson  Mother- Brenda Burton  1981- Married Judy Oliver; Divorced 1990  Social worker  1994- Married Costanza Romero  Costume designer</p>

	1997- Daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson Mother- Costanza Romero
<b>Death</b>	October 2, 2005- Died at Swedish Medical Center, Seattle, Washington June 2005- Diagnosed with liver cancer Died- age 60 Buried Greenwood Memorial Park Cemetery outside of Pittsburgh
<b>Legacy</b>	Awards [Partial list] Pulitzer Prize - 2 New York Drama Critics Circle Awards - 7 Tony Award - 2 for best play and best revival of a play 1999 - National Humanities Medal 2005 - Virginia Theatre, New York, NY renamed August Wilson Theatre (first Broadway Theatre to be named for a Black artist) 2006- American Theatre Hall of Fame 2009- August Wilson Center for African American Culture, Pittsburgh, PA 2020- PBS Documentary, <i>The Ground on Which I Stand</i> 2020- Star on Hollywood Walk of Fame Forever- 10-play cycle chronicling each decade of African American experience throughout twentieth century

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*  
Supplement: August Wilson's *Century Cycle***

Author: Phyllis Wezeman  
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

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**Overview**

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**Grade level:** 7-12

**Discipline/subject area:** Interdisciplinary

**Topic of lesson:** August Wilson's *Century Cycle*

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**August Wilson's *Century Cycle***

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August Wilson, an American author, wrote ten plays that chronicle the African American experience through each decade of the twentieth century. His collective work is known by several names: the *American Century Cycle*, the *Century Cycle*, or the *Pittsburgh Cycle*, as nine scripts are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh while only one, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, takes place in Chicago. Wilson's one-hundred-year look at Black America, with one play for each decade, was written between 1979 and 2005. The shows tell extraordinary stories of ordinary people; are a blend of comedy, history, and tragedy; and present universal themes of community, identity, and justice. While the works are not serial, nor were they written in chronological order, characters and their offspring appear in several plays at different stages of life. The *Century Cycle* presents African American life in all its fullness and has changed the face of the American theatre.

The ten plays, according to the decade they depict, are:

- 1900s - *Gem of the Ocean*
- 1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1930s - *The Piano Lesson*
- 1940s - *Seven Guitars*
- 1950s - *Fences*
- 1960s - *Two Trains Running*
- 1970s - *Jitney*
- 1980s - *King Hedley II*
- 1990s - *Radio Golf*

August Wilson's plays, in alphabetical order, including year written, decade/setting, summary, key quote, themes, premier, first Broadway production, and major awards, include:

***Fences***

Title	<i>Fences</i>
Written	1985

Decade/Setting	1950s 1957 - Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	Troy Maxson, a middle-aged garbage collector and former Negro league baseball player, must reconcile his frustrations of discrimination in the past which also threaten his relationship with son Cory and wife Rose in the present.
Quote	Jim Bono, Act 2, Scene 1 "Some people build fences to keep people out ... and other people build fences to keep people in."
Themes	Pre-Civil Rights Movement Race Relations Segregation
Premier	1983 - Staged Reading Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Waterford, CT 1985 Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven, CT
Broadway	1987 46th Street Theater, New York, NY
Awards	1987, Drama Desk Award (3) 1987, Outer Critics Circle Award 1987, Pulitzer Prize - Drama 1987, Tony Awards - Best Play, Best Direction, Best Actor, Best Featured Actress

### ***Gem of the Ocean***

Title	<i>Gem of the Ocean</i>
Written	2003
Decade/Setting	1900s 1904 - Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	Aunt Ester, the 285-year-old "cleanser of souls" matriarch of the Hill District of Pittsburgh, guides Citizen Barlow, a migrant from Alabama, on a spiritual journey to find freedom and redemption despite a turbulent history.
Quote	Aunt Ester, Act 1, Scene 1 "I came across that ocean, Mr. Citizen. I cried. I had lost everything. Everything I had ever known in this life I lost that. I cried an ocean of tears. Did you ever lose anything like that, Mr. Citizen? Where you so lost the only thing that can guide you is the stars. That's all I had left. Everything had ever known was gone to me. The only thing I had was the stars."
Themes	Emancipation Middle Passage Post-Civil War and Reconstruction

	Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Underground Railroad
Premier	2003 Goodman Theater, Chicago, IL
Broadway	2004 Walter Kerr Theater, New York, NY
Awards	2005, Tony Award Nominee - Best Play

### ***Jitney***

Title	<i>Jitney</i>
Written	1979
Decade/Setting	1970s 1977 - Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	Jim Becker's Jitney station, which is scheduled for demolition, is the setting for the story of relationships between the drivers, the community, and especially the owner and his recently released from jail son.
Quote	Booster, Act 2, Scene 4 "The only thing I ever knew him to do was work hard. It didn't matter to me too much at the time cause I couldn't see it like I see it now. He had his ways. I guess everybody do. The only thing I feel sorry about ... is that he ain't got out of life what he put in. He deserved better than what life gave him. I can't help thinking that. But you right ... I'm proud of my old man. I'm proud of him. And I'm proud to be Becker's boy. I didn't come here to preach no sermon."
Themes	Post-Civil Rights Movement Urban Renewal
Premier	1982 Allegheny Repertory Theater, Pittsburgh, PA
Broadway	2000 Second Stage Theater (Off-Broadway), New York, NY 2017 Samuel Friedman Theater, New York, NY
Awards	2000, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award - Best Play 2001, Outer Critics Circle Award - Outstanding Off-Broadway Play 2002, Olivier Award - Best New Play 2017, Tony Award - Best Revival of a Play

### ***Joe Turner's Come and Gone***

Title	<i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i>
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Written	1988
Decade/Setting	1910s 1911 - Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	Herald Loomis, along with other residents of a boarding house in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, search for identity and meaning post-slavery and The Great Migration.
Quote	Bynum Walker - Act 2, Scene 2 "Mr. Loomis done picked some cotton. Ain't you, Herald Loomis? You done picked a bunch of cotton. I can tell from looking at you. My daddy taught me how to do that. Say when you look at a fellow, if you taught yourself to look for it, you can see his song written on him. Tell you what kind of man he is in this world. Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is."
Themes	Emancipation The Great Migration Post-Civil War and Reconstruction Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade
Premier	1984 - Staged Reading Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Waterford, CT 1986 Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven, CT
Broadway	1988 Ethel Barrymore Theater, New York, NY
Awards	1988, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award - Best Play

### ***King Hedley II***

Title	<i>King Hedley II</i>
Written	1985
Decade/Setting	1980s 1985 - Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	King, an ex-con, attempts to get his life back on track for himself and his family - especially his child - in a community plagued by prejudice and violence.
Quote	Tonya, Act 1, Scene 2 "I'm through with babies. I ain't raising no more. Ain't raising no grandkids. I'm looking out for Tonya. I ain't raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends shoot him. To have the police shoot him. Why I want to bring another life into this world that don't respect life? I don't want to raise no more babies when you got to fight to keep them alive."
Themes	Family

	Post-Civil Rights Movement Post-incarceration
Premier	1999 Pittsburgh Public Theater, Pittsburgh, PA
Broadway	2001 Virginia Theater, New York, NY
Awards	2000, Pulitzer Prize Finalist - Drama

### ***Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***

Title	<i>Ma Rainey's Black Bottom</i>
Written	1984
Decade/Setting	1920s 1927 - Chicago, IL
Summary	When Ma Rainey, an acclaimed blues singer, and her band attempt to record an album in the early twentieth century they encounter exploitation of black musicians by white record labels.
Quote	Ma Rainey, Act 1 "You don't sing [the blues] to feel better - you sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life."
Themes	The Great Migration Institutional Racism Race Records
Premier	1984 Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven, CT
Broadway	1984 Cort Theater, New York, NY
Awards	1985, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award - Best American Play 1985, Tony Award Nominee - Best Play

### ***The Piano Lesson***

Title	<i>The Piano Lesson</i>
Written	1990
Decade/Setting	1930s 1936 - Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	Conflict arises when brother, Boy Willie, and sister, Berniece, clash over whether or not to sell the family heirloom—a beautiful piano decorated with designs carved by their enslaved ancestors.

Quote	Berniece, Act 1, Scene 2 "Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in ... mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. 'Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece.' Every day. 'I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece.'"
Themes	Slavery
Premier	1987 - Staged Reading Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Waterford, CT 1987 Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven, CT
Broadway	1990 Walter Kerr Theater, New York, NY
Awards	1990, Drama Desk Award - Outstanding New Play 1990, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award - Best Play 1990, Pulitzer Prize - Drama

### ***Radio Golf***

Title	<i>Radio Golf</i>
Written	2005
Decade/Setting	1990s 1997 - Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	Roosevelt Hicks' and Harmond Wilks' ambitious plan to redevelop the Hill District, which includes demolition of Aunt Ester's home, raises issues of reconciling the present with the past.
Quote	Sterling, Act 2, Scene 5 "A Negro don't know he's a negro. He thinks he's a white man. It's Negroes like you who hold us back."
Themes	Post-Civil Rights Movement Redevelopment/Urban Renewal
Premier	2005 Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven, CT
Broadway	2007 Cort Theater, New York, NY
Awards	2005, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award - Best American Play

### ***Seven Guitars***

Title	<i>Seven Guitars</i>
Written	1995
Decade/Setting	1940s 1948 - Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	Blues singer, Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton, recently released from prison, struggles to rebuild his life and relationships as his friends also grapple, internally and externally, with their humanity and self-worth.
Quote	August Wilson "I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother's life - her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter - are all worthy of art. Hence, <i>Seven Guitars</i> ."
Themes	Aftermath of World War II Black manhood History of jazz
Premier	1994 (Staged Reading) Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Waterford, CT 1995 Goodman Theater, Chicago, IL
Broadway	1996 Walter Kerr Theater, New York, NY
Awards	1996, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award - Best Play

### ***Two Trains Running***

Title	<i>Two Trains Running</i>
Written	1991
Decade/Setting	1960s 1969, Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	Regulars at Memphis' "due-for- demolition" restaurant discuss faith issues, race relations, and work topics while grappling with the impact of black power and civil rights movements of the sixties.
Quote	West, Act 1, Scene 2 "You can't go through life carrying a ten-gallon bucket. Get you a little cup. That's all you need. Get you a little cup and somebody put a little bit in and it's half full. That ten-gallon bucket ain't never gonna be full. Carry you a little cup through life and you'll never be disappointed."
Themes	Black Power Movement Civil Rights Movement

Premier	1990 Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven, CT
Broadway	1992 Walter Kerr Theater, New York, NY
Awards	1992, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award - Best American Play

**Additional Plays by August Wilson Include:**

*Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* [1973]

*The Coldest Day of the Year* [1989]

*Fullerton Street* [1980]

*The Homecoming* [1989]

*How I Learned What I Learned* [2002-03]

*Recycling* [1973]

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***

**Title of lesson: Tribute Drawing**

Author: Chad Steele

John Adams High School, South Bend Community School Corporation

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**Overview**

**Grade level:** 10-12

**Discipline/subject area:** Drawing

**Topic of lesson:** Tribute to Black Musical Artists in the style of Aaron Douglas

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**Objectives**

- Students will create a color pencil drawing in the style of Aaron Douglas as a tribute to a black musical artist.
  - Students will show their understanding of color schemes by selecting one and correctly using it in their drawing.
  - Students will create a focal point using radiating shapes.
- 

**Standards addressed**

- **VA:Cr1.2.Ia** Shape an artistic investigation of an aspect of present day life using a contemporary practice of art or design.
  - **VA:Pr6.1.IIa** Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history.
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**Materials needed other than text**

- Music Forward Foundation || History of Blues  
<https://musicforwardfoundation.org/news/exploring-the-history-of-black-music-month/>
  - NGA.gov || Aaron Douglas Biography <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.38654.html>
  - Sulphite paper: 14 x 14" or 13 x 15"
  - Crayola **or** Prismacolor Scholar **or** Prismacolor Premier colored pencils
  - Erasers
  - Rulers (recommended 18 inches or more)
  - Google Slides (included at the end of lesson plan)  
<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/104Kgyq1QOokS2aGCE4psYCFkfFLCv8SUNPTVd9FVYvo/edit?usp=sharing>
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## Images

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Douglas, Aaron. *Into Bondage*. 1936, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.



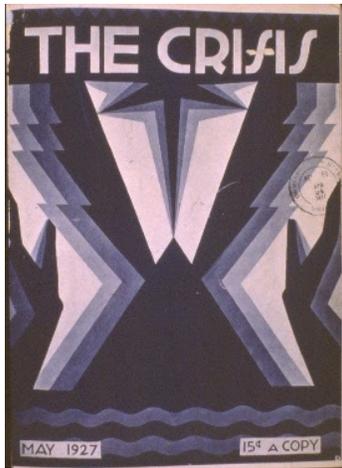
Douglas, Aaron. *Aspiration*. 1936, oil on canvas. The de Young Museum, San Francisco



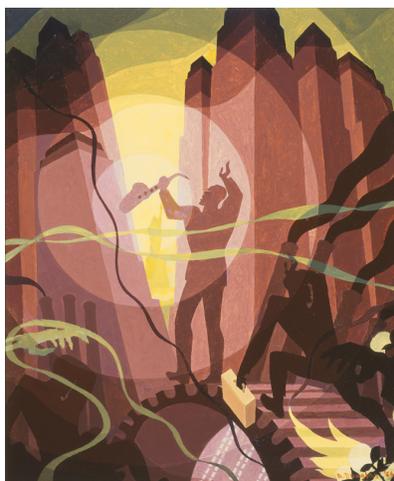
Douglas, Aaron. *The Judgment Day*. 1939, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.



Douglas, Aaron. *The Creation*. 1927, oil on canvas. SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah.



Douglas, Aaron. *The Crisis*. 1927, magazine cover. NAACP.



Douglas, Aaron. *Song of the Towers*. 1934, oil on canvas. Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York.

School of Rock blackboard



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## Lesson Plan (Day One)

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### Students:

Prior knowledge, first impressions, questions raised:

- Write down your favorite music genre and as many artists/groups you can think of within that genre.
- Count and circle the artists of color from your favorite music genre. Write how many you counted.

### Teacher Presentation to the class:

Use “Tribute Drawings” Google Slides presentation.

### Background information:

- Students have learned about drawing with line, sketching, shading, and use of color. Students will choose a monochromatic, complementary, split complement, or analogous color scheme and use it in their drawing.

### Key words/new vocabulary:

- Monochromatic
- Complementary
- Split Complement
- Analogous
- Focal Point
- Geometric
- Abstract

### Strategies:

- Lecture
- One to one instruction
- Graphic organizers for planning

### Students:

- Write down your favorite music genre and as many artists/groups you can think of within that genre.
- Count and circle the artists of color from your favorite music genre. Write how many you counted.
- Students will create a tribute drawing for a black musical artist from their favorite music genre in the style of Aaron Douglas with color pencils.

### Questions and Activities:

- Pre-planning list of artists they know.
- Questions on Google Slides presentation for day 1.

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## Lesson Plan (Day Two)

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### **Teacher Presentation to the class:**

Pass out research questions to the class.

### **Background information:**

- The class may visit the library for instruction on research.

### **Strategies:**

- Lecture
- Direct instruction

### **Students:**

- Take notes on research from the librarian's presentation. (How Library Stuff Works - McMaster Libraries)
- Students will pick one of three artists of color based on which artist has credible sources for the biography.
- Students will answer the research questions on a Google Slides presentation.

### **Questions and Activities:**

- How do we correctly cite research for a biography?
- How can we use the library as a resource for our research?

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## Lesson Plan (Day Three)

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### **Teacher Presentation to the class:**

Return with students to the library for research and review instruction from the previous day.

### **Background information:**

- Instruction on research.

### **Strategies:**

- Lecture
- Direct instruction
- Research

### **Students:**

- Use your background knowledge on research to find information and create a biography of your artist.

### **Questions and Activities:**

- Biography research and creation.

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## Lesson Plan (Day Four)

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**Students:**

Prior knowledge, first impressions, questions raised:

Students use knowledge of thumbnail sketches to quickly come up with two compositions.

**Teacher Presentation to the class:**

Review student examples from Google Slides presentation with class.

Go over criteria for the project.

**Key words/new vocabulary:**

Focal point

Thumbnail sketch

**Strategies:**

Show student sketch examples from Google Slides presentation.

Have examples available for students to physically reference if needed.

**Students:**

Students practice sketching compositions. Have them look up images of the artist they chose.

Students should choose objects/scenery that relates to the artist. Have students sketch 2 different composition thumbnails. The thumbnails should also include the radiating shape that creates the focal point.

**Questions and Activities:**

Sketching. Talk with each student to check for understanding. Sign off on an appropriate sketch based on student skill level. Have students alter their sketch plans to match their skill level.

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## Lesson Plan (Day 4 Onward)

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**Students:**

Prior knowledge, first impressions, questions raised:

Students will use prior knowledge of creating a 1 inch border on their paper. Students will also use previous skills such as light sketching and sticking to their plans.

**Teacher Presentation to the class:**

Tell the class to add a 1 inch border to their paper. Quickly demonstrate how to translate a small thumbnail sketch to your larger piece of paper. Emphasize to sketch lightly so the pencil lines do not show through the color pencil.

**Background information:**

Students will utilize previous plans to execute their drawing. Students will specifically reference previous research and thumbnail sketches to create their tribute drawing.

**Key words/new vocabulary:**

Border  
Scale

**Strategies:**

Demonstration/Lecture Based  
One to one instruction

**Students:**

By the end of the first day all students will have drawn a 1 inch border and started sketching their tribute drawing.

**Questions and Activities:**

Drawing.

While students are drawing the teacher can play music or play films concerning the topics of the assignment. You could choose to listen to the soundtrack or play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* on Netflix.

## Slides:

# Douglas Inspired Tribute Drawings

## Drawing I

### Inspiration

#### August Wilson

- Born in Pittsburg
- He attended three high schools. He switched schools because students bullied him because he was black. Wilson dropped out of high school but continued his education at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.
- He wrote 10 plays that represent 10 year cycles of African American history in the United States.

#### Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

- This is the third play in August Wilson's 10 year play cycle.
- Ma Rainey was an influential black blues singer.
- The play highlights racial discrimination within the music industry.

#### Aaron Douglas

- Aaron Douglas is one of the most influential Harlem Renaissance artists of the 1920s and 30s.
- He was an art education assistant professor at Fisk University in the 1930s.
- His paintings are inspired by cubism and jazz music.

### Cubism

Cubism was a revolutionary new approach to representing reality invented in around 1907–08 by artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. They brought different views of subjects (usually objects or figures) together in the same picture, resulting in paintings that appear fragmented and abstracted.



Pablo Picasso, *Girl with a Mandolin (Fanny Tellier)*, Museum of Modern Art, New York

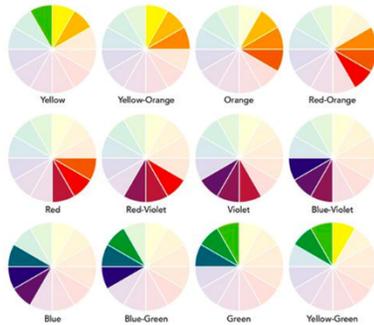


Douglas, Aaron, *Song of the Towers*, 1934, oil on canvas, Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York.



Pablo Picasso, *Girl with a Mandolin (Fanny Tellier)*, Museum of Modern Art, New York

### ANALOGOUS COLORS



- Creates harmony

Image: ElleDecor.com

- Color scheme
  - Analogous
  - Blue, green, purple.



Douglas, Aaron, *The Creation*, 1927, oil on canvas, SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah.



### Monochromatic

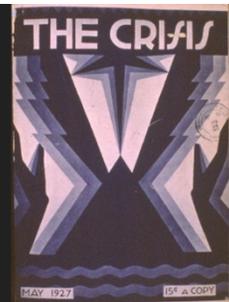
- One color
  - Tints (white)
  - Shade (black)
  - Tone (gray)
- Creates harmony within composition.

Image: ColorMeanings.com

### Monochromatic

- One color
  - Tints (white)
  - Shade (black)
  - Tone (gray)
- Creates harmony within composition.

Image: ColorMeanings.com



Douglas, Aaron, *The Crisis*, 1927, magazine cover, NAACP.



### Complementary Colors

- Colors directly opposite from each other on the color wheel.
- Creates more contrast.

Image: TheShelbyStudio



Douglas, Aaron. *The Judgment Day*. 1939, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

- Simplified (Abstract) Shapes
  - Reminiscent of cubism
  - **What shapes do you see in the figures?**



Douglas, Aaron. *Song of the Towers*. 1934, oil on canvas. Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York.

- Radiating circles
  - Creates a focal point



Douglas, Aaron. *Song of the Towers*. 1934, oil on canvas. Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York.

- Radiating circles
  - Creates a focal point
  - **What's the focal point???**

### Project Criteria

Choose an artist of color from your favorite genre of music. **Choose 3 musicians that you don't know about. We will choose 1 at the library. It will have to be someone we can find credible biographical information on. The works cited will be in MLA format.**

You will create a tribute drawing in the style of Aaron Douglas.

- It will have a color scheme.
- Use abstracted figures/objects.
- Have a radiating shape that creates a focal point.

Hoggie, Erica. *Breaking Free*. 2022, color pencil on paper. John Adams High School.

### Project Criteria Continued

Research: Answer the following questions about the artist you chose...

- Birth, death if applicable, where they learned music.
- Why did you choose this artist?
- What important event(s) impacted their music career?
- Have they ever been mistreated like Ma Rainey was in the play? How so?
- What was something this artist did that is inspiring to you?

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**The August Wilson Project, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***

**Title of lesson: Write A Blues Tune**

Author: Dawn Burns

McKinley Elementary School, South Bend Community School Corporation

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**Overview**

**Grade level:** 6th - 8th Grade

**Discipline/subject are:** Music

**Topic of lesson:** Write Your Own Blues Tune

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**Objectives**

- After watching the play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: A Legacy Brought to Screen*, discuss how the blues is a way for musicians during the Jim Crow era to tell their stories. Talk about the characters Ma Rainey and Levee in Ma Rainey's band.
  - Choose a character (Ma Rainey or Levee) from the work and write a blues verse and a hook for a song from their perspective.
- 

**Standard(s) addressed**

- **Music 6-8 (Cn.2.8.2)** Compare and describe how the characteristic elements of music and the other arts can be used to depict and/or transform events, scenes, emotions, and/or ideas into works of art.
  - **Music 6-8 (Cn.2.8.3)** Apply music for learning and recalling knowledge and information in other disciplines.
  - **Music 6-8 (Cn.3.8.2)** Identify, describe, and apply through performance uniquely American music genres, trace their evolution, and explore the life and work of musicians associated with each.
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**Materials needed other than text**

- Computer, paper, writing utensils.
  - BandLab for creating music.
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**Lesson Plan**

**Students:**

Prior knowledge, first impressions, questions raised:

- What is The Blues? What does it mean to you?
- How can The Blues be a way of telling a story?

- Do you know anyone in your family or friends circle who plays or listens to The Blues?
- How can you compare a blues song to poetry?
- How can you tell a character's story through music?

## Teacher Presentation to the Class

### Ma Rainey's Black Bottom Summary

August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* premiered in 1984, as part of Wilson's Century Cycle, also known as the Pittsburgh Cycle. The Century Cycle is a series of ten plays, each exploring the black experience in the United States during a different decade of the 20th century. Although Wilson wrote a few other plays, the Century Cycle constitutes the bulk of his life's work as one of the most significant African-American playwrights in American theatre history. Wilson won countless awards for his Century Cycle plays, including two Pulitzer Prizes: one for *Fences* (1987), which is probably his best-known work, and the other for *The Piano Lesson* (1990). All of the plays in the Cycle except for *Ma Rainey* take place in the African-American Hill District in Pittsburgh, PA, where Wilson grew up. The plays are loosely interrelated, with a few characters who appear in multiple decades or who are generationally-related, but each work stands alone.

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place in 1927 and fictionalizes the real-life singer Ma Rainey, known as the Mother of **the Blues**, whose career spanned from 1899 to 1933. The play takes place over the course of one day in a Chicago recording studio, in which Ma Rainey and her band are laying tracks for a new album. Ma Rainey, who is simultaneously famous and unable to hail a cab because she is black, commands respect from her white agent and the white owner of the studio. She is late, and as her fourband members—Cutler, **Slow Drag**, **Toledo**, and Levee—wait for her to arrive, they discuss racial power dynamics, **religion**, art, and social activism. **Levee**, who has written his own music, attempts to assert his own **style** and artistry on the band, based on a supposed promise he extracted from the studio owner that they would record his music. When Ma Rainey fires him and the studio owner withdraws interest in his music, Levee turns his anger on his bandmates, stabbing and killing Toledo when he steps on Levee's new shoes.

The play comments on the exploitation of black artistry during the 1920s, as the blues became popular in mainstream society. While Levee dreams of fame, his older and wiser bandmates understand that for African Americans, fame within white society does not equal respect or personhood. Although the white studio owner and agent jump to meet Ma Rainey's demands, she only receives star treatment as long as she can be commodified. As Ma suggests, "If you colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the

street” (63). The play shows the buildup of anger and frustration during the era of segregation and legal discrimination, and the ways in which a racist culture uses the talent of the oppressed while continuing to oppress them.

### **Characters to Study**

#### **Ma Rainey**

- Based on the real Blues singer Gertrude “Ma” Rainey
- In her forties
- Outspoken and bold
- Works to maintain control over her music
- Powerful, aware of her own influence

#### **Levee**

- In his early thirties
- Member of Ma Rainey’s band, plays the trumpet
- Wants to get his own band and be a star
- Has a temper, is flamboyant, and is often arrogant
- Thinks Ma Rainey’s music is outdated and wants to “jazz it up”

Source: [Super Summary - Ma Rainey's Black Bottom](#)

**Play the Netflix Video**, [Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: A Legacy Brought to Screen](#)

**How to Write a Blues Song** - Project the PBS “Understanding the 12-Bar Blues” document. Show the pattern.

#### **Background information:**

- [August Wilson in St. Paul: A MN Original Special](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1czXv6U_64)

- August Wilson was born on April 27, 1947 and died October 2, 2005. He was a playwright who created 10 plays, called the Pittsburgh Cycle; one play during each decade of the 20th Century. He tells the story of the Black experience. His plays take place in Pittsburgh, PA. He won two Pulitzer Prizes. One for *Fences*, and one for *The Piano Lesson*.

**Key words/new vocabulary:**

- **THE BLUES**: a song often of lamentation characterized by usually 12-bar phrases, 3-line stanzas in which the words of the second line usually repeat those of the first, and continual occurrence of blue notes in melody and harmony.
- **STANDARD BLUES PROGRESSION**: A standard blues progression, or sequence of notes, typically features three chords based on the first (written as I), fourth (IV), and fifth (V) notes of an eight-note scale.
- **CHORUS**: In music, a chorus is a repeated section that contains the primary musical and lyrical motifs of the song. In common song structures, it's typically repeated at least twice.
- **VERSE**: A verse is a repeated section of a song that typically features a new set of lyrics on each repetition. Compared to a chorus section, verses tend to vary more throughout the course of a song. And while choruses typically contain a song's signature musical motif, the music of a verse is often written to complement the chorus music.

**Strategies:**

- Ask and answer questions about the theme of the play. Discuss vocabulary words, and check for understanding of the works presented.
- Pair up students to collaborate on the creation of their song. Have a quick talk for 10 minutes. They can brainstorm together and decide which character (Ma Rainey or Levee) they will choose for their work.
- They will spend the rest of the time working on their personal project.
- This should take 1 hour. They may need to finish their work the next day.

**Students:**

- Choose which character (Ma Rainey or Levee) to write their blues work about.
- Compose a blues verse with a hook (verse + chorus) on BandLab from the perspective of Ma Rainey or Levee.
- Present the song to the class.

**Questions and Activities:**

- How did Ma Rainey feel when she was in the studio?

- How did Levee feel when he was in the studio? How did he feel when the company executive changed his mind about letting him record his music?
- How did August Wilson represent the characters, Ma Rainey and Levee in the play?
- Model how to brainstorm ideas to create your point of view.
- Talk about Ma Rainey's songs in the movie.
- Compose the song on BandLab.
- Present your song to the class.

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### Sources/Resources

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- [BandLab](https://www.bandlab.com/?lang=en) <https://www.bandlab.com/?lang=en>
- [Super Summary - Ma Rainey's Black Bottom](https://www.supersummary.com/ma-raineys-black-bottom/summary/) <https://www.supersummary.com/ma-raineys-black-bottom/summary/>
- [Understanding 12-Bar Blues](#) - ©2003 [Vulcan Productions, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.
- [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](http://www.merriam-webster.com) [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)
- [Master Class](http://www.masterclass.com) [www.masterclass.com](http://www.masterclass.com)
- [Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: A Legacy Brought to Screen](#) Directed by Wolfe, George C. Netflix, Mundy Lane, Escape Artists. Netflix [www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com)
- Ma Rainey's Black Bottom Educational Resource Packet. An Interdisciplinary Resource Packet for Teachers. Prepared by the South Bend Civic Theatre. Aaron Nichols, Executive Director, Tatiana Botero and Alena Coleman, Editors, Monica Caponigro, Assistant Editor. Copyright © 2022 South Bend Civic Theatre, Inc.



## Understanding the 12-Bar Blues

### What is the Blues?

#### Understanding the 12-Bar Blues

The most common musical form of blues is the 12-bar blues. The term "12-bar" refers to the number of measures, or musical bars, used to express the theme of a typical blues song. Nearly all blues music is played to a 4/4 time signature, which means that there are four beats in every measure or bar and each quarter note is equal to one beat.

A 12-bar blues is divided into three four-bar segments. A standard blues progression, or sequence of notes, typically features three chords based on the first (written as I), fourth (IV), and fifth (V) notes of an eight-note scale. The I chord dominates the first four bars; the IV chord typically appears in the second four bars (although in the example below, [Elmore James](#) introduces it in the first four bars); and the V chord is played in the third four bars.

The lyrics of a 12-bar blues song often follow what's known as an AAB pattern. "A" refers to the first and second four-bar verse, and "B" is the third four-bar verse. In a 12-bar blues, the first and second lines are repeated, and the third line is a response to them—often with a twist.

Below is an example of a 12-bar blues stanza from "Dust My Broom," as performed by [Elmore James](#), and broken down by bars (measures), beats, chords, and lyrics:

First bar/measure 1-2-3-4 <b>I</b> chord  <i>I'm gon' get up in the mornin'</i>	Second bar 1-2-3-4 <b>IV</b> chord  <i>I believe I'll dust my broom</i>	Third bar 1-2-3-4 <b>I</b> chord	Fourth bar 1-2-3-4 <b>I</b> chord
Fifth bar 1-2-3-4 <b>IV</b> chord  <i>I'm gon' get up in the mornin'</i>	Sixth bar 1-2-3-4 <b>IV</b> chord  <i>I believe I'll dust my broom</i>	Seventh bar 1-2-3-4 <b>I</b> chord	Eighth bar 1-2-3-4 <b>I</b> chord
Ninth bar 1-2-3-4 <b>V</b> chord  <i>I quit the best girl in lovin'</i>	Tenth bar 1-2-3-4 <b>IV</b> chord  <i>Now my friends can get my room</i>	Eleventh bar 1-2-3-4 <b>I</b> chord	Twelfth bar 1-2-3-4 <b>V</b> chord

In each 12-bar stanza, the third four-bar segment (in the example above, the 9-12th bars), serves to resolve the previous four-bar segments. The resolution may signal the end of the song or set up another stanza. If the song continues, the transition to the next stanza is known as the turnaround. "Dust My Broom," for example, contains seven 12-bar stanzas, with a turnaround between each.

Not all blues songs follow the 12-bar format, but by understanding this basic musical framework, the listener will gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for all blues music.

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