

The Piano Lesson
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
Caroline Mereness, Assistant Editor

The Piano Lesson—March 15-24, 2024

High school matinee performance at Riley High School on March 20, 2024

Copyright © 2024 South Bend Civic Theatre, Inc.

Copyright Registration Number TX X-XXX-XXX

All rights reserved.

No part of this packet may be reproduced or used in any manner without the prior permission of the South Bend Civic Theatre.

This educational packet has been licensed for educational use by the downloader and may not be used for any commercial purpose. To request a license to use this educational packet, please visit the South Bend Civic Theatre website at <https://sbct.org/resource-materials/>.

Edited by Tatiana Botero and Alena Coleman. Assistance by Caroline Mereness.

Published by the South Bend Civic Theatre, Inc. in South Bend, IN.

South Bend Civic Theatre

403 N Main Street

South Bend, Indiana 46601

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	2
Welcome	4
Understanding <i>The Piano Lesson</i>	
August Wilson: The Man Behind the Legacy.....	5
Production History	7
Characters	9
Time and Place: Depression, Migration, and Art of the 1930s.....	11
Historical Timeline	14
The Rich History of Pittsburgh’s Hill District	16
Ghosts of the Past: <i>Hamlet & The Piano Lesson</i>	17
Reputable Web Resources	19
Further Reading	20
Bibliography	21
Getting Started with <i>The Piano Lesson</i>	
Suggestions for Teaching about August Wilson.....	23
Suggestions for Teaching <i>The Piano Lesson</i>	27
Phyllis Wezeman, Middle School/High School Malawi Matters	
English Language Arts	
<i>The Piano Lesson</i> Introduction	35
Randy Ebright, High School Mishawaka High School	
Memoirs	41
Megan Twietmeyer, High School John Adams High School	
Character Analysis through Drama.....	45
Phyllis Wezeman, Middle School/High School Malawi Matters	
<i>Hamlet</i> and <i>The Piano Lesson</i> : Are Ghosts Real?	75
Alena Coleman, High School South Bend Civic Theatre	

History & Social Studies

The Personal Perspective of the Great Migration 81

Liz Zimmerman, High School
South Bend Civic Theatre

Art

The Backstory 86

Dawn Burns, Middle School
Paramount South Bend

Additional Resources

Supplement: Characters Appearing in the Play 90

Supplement: People Mentioned in the Script but Not Appearing in the Play..... 93

Supplement: Summary of Acts & Scenes in *The Piano Lesson* 96

Supplement: August Wilson’s American Century Cycle 98

Supplement: Biography of August Wilson - Narrative..... 106

Supplement: Biography of August Wilson - Chart..... 110

Phyllis Wezeman, Middle School/High School
Malawi Matters

How to Cite *The Piano Lesson* 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/>.

For example:

Botero, Tatiana, Alena Coleman, and Caroline Mereness, editors. *The Piano Lesson* Educational Resource Packet. South Bend Civic Theatre, 2023.

Twietmeyer, Megan. “Memoirs.” *The Piano Lesson* Educational Resource Packet, edited by Tatiana Botero, Alena Coleman and Caroline Mereness, South Bend Civic Theatre, 2023, pp. 38-40.

Cover image: Romare Bearden’s *The Piano Lesson (Homage to Mary Lou)* (1983), from the [Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts](#).

WELCOME

May 2023

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 *The Piano Lesson* and include this Pulitzer Prize winning 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 a play for the 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:

The Piano Lesson takes place in 1936 Pittsburgh in the home of Doaker Charles, the uncle of the play's two protagonists: Berniece Charles and Boy Willie Charles. The action of the play centers around the piano that sits in the salon of the Charles home. For Berniece, the piano holds the spirits of her family members, those who were sold away in exchange for it and those who later carved it as a family memorial. For Boy Willie, the piano holds the key to economic freedom; he hopes to sell it to buy the land upon which his family was enslaved. Their struggle over what to do with the piano, a physical representation of the legacy of slavery, threatens to tear the family apart.

*“Gin my cotton
Sell my seed
Buy my baby
Everything she
need.*

- Skip James”

August Wilson's epigraph to
The Piano Lesson



From [Vulture's Review](#) of the 2022 Broadway revival.



The Piano Lesson wouldn't have been possible without the artwork on the left, the collage by Romare Bearden titled *The Piano Lesson (Homage to Mary Lou)*, now in the collection of the [Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts](#). August Wilson first saw the painting at an exhibition of Bearden's work and was struck by the fact that the words of the title "looked nice together." He instantly named the girl at the piano "Maretha," and the seed of the play was planted in his mind. As the seed germinated, Wilson began to think bigger. In a [1995 promotional video](#) for the TV adaptation of the play, August Wilson said "I took, then, the question of legacy... and the question of whether you could acquire... a sense of self-worth by denying your past, and I thought that I would write a play that asked those questions."

The Piano Lesson, like many of August Wilson’s plays, was first presented as a staged reading at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center. It was read as part of their 1987 National Playwrights Conference. Lloyd Richards, Wilson’s longtime friend and collaborator, directed the play from its inception and for its early runs. It premiered as a fully produced play at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1987. The play first appeared on Broadway on April 16, 1990, at the Walter Kerr Theatre in New York City. That year, *The Piano Lesson* became August Wilson’s second play to win a Pulitzer Prize. In 1995, the play was adapted into a made-for-TV movie, also directed by Lloyd Richards. Most recently, in 2022-2023, the play was revived on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. In 2023, the play became the highest-grossing August Wilson play to ever run on Broadway, and it is the current highest grossing revival of a play in Broadway history.

The 2022-3 Broadway revival cast included:

- Samuel L. Jackson (Doaker)
- John David Washington (Boy Willie)
- Ray Fisher (Lymon)
- Danielle Brooks (Berniece)
- Nadia Daniel & Jurnee Swan (Maretha)
- Charles Browning (Avery)
- Michael Potts (Wining Boy)
- April Matthis (Grace)



Poster for the 2022-3 Broadway Revival, from the production’s [website](#).

Selected Awards:

- 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Drama
- 1990 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play
- 1990 New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best Play
- 1995 Peabody Award (for the TV film)

The original Broadway cast included:

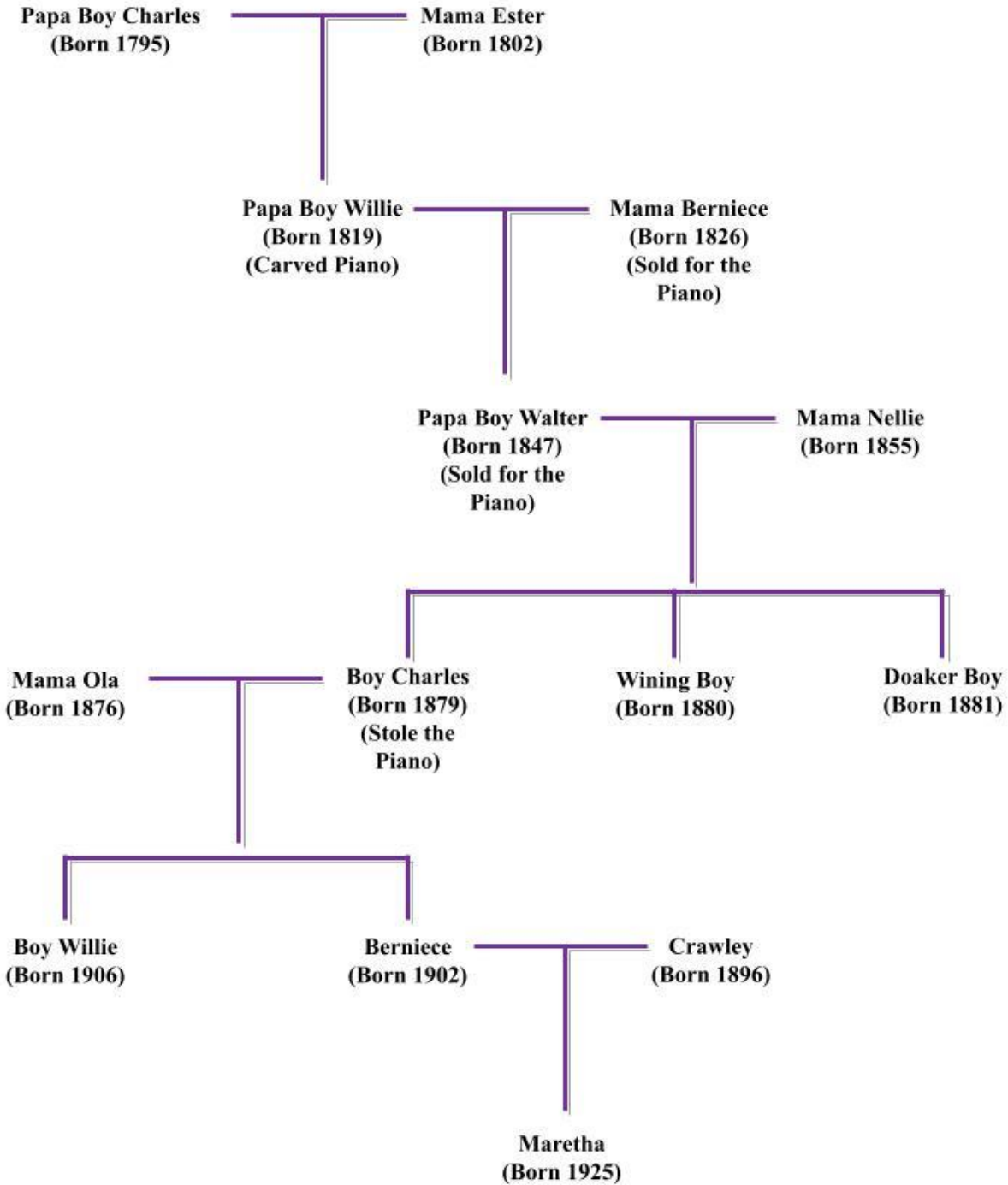
- Carl Gordon (Doaker)
- Charles S. Dutton (Boy Willie)
- Rocky Carroll (Lymon)
- S. Epatha Merkerson (Berniece)
- Apryl R. Foster (Maretha)
- Tommy Hollis (Avery)
- Lou Myers (Wining Boy)
- Lisa Gay Hamilton (Grace)

Many of these actors reprised their roles in the 1995 TV movie. One notable change was that Alfre Woodard took on the role of Berniece.

CHARACTERS

<p>Boy Willie</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Brash, impulsive and fast talking ● Thirty years old ● Wants to sell the family's piano ● Ambitious and determined to buy the land on which his ancestors were enslaved <p>Doaker</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Boy Willie and Berniece's uncle ● Forty-seven years old ● Works for the railroad ● Part of the families oldest living generation <p>Lymon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Boy Willie's partner and friend ● Twenty-nine years old ● Speaks little, but when he does, he is disarmingly straightforward ● Running from the law, wants to stay in Pittsburgh and start fresh ● Obsessed with women <p>Berniece</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Boy Willie's sister ● Mother of Maretha ● Thirty-five years old ● Her husband, Crawley, died three years prior ● Does not want to sell the piano due to its history and sentimental value <p>Maretha</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Berniece's daughter ● Eleven years old ● Is learning how to play the family's piano ● Represents the youngest generation and the future of the family 	<p>Wining Boy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Boy Willie and Berniece's other uncle ● Brother of Doaker ● Middle aged ● Former musician with a gambling problem ● Can speak to ghosts <p>Sutter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The white man whose family owned the Charles family's ancestors ● Died by falling down a well ● Supposedly pushed in by the Ghost of the Yellow Dog ● Haunts the family's house as a ghost <p>Avery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Preacher, building his own congregation ● Thirty-eight years old ● In love with Berniece ● Honest and ambitious ● Helps the family purge the house of Sutter's ghosts <p>Grace</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A young, local woman ● Both Boy Willie and Lymon hit on her
---	--

THE PIANO LESSON: CHARLES FAMILY TREE



Adapted from figure by MIT OCW.

TIME AND PLACE: Depression, Migration, and Art of the 1930s

The United States in the 1930s

In the 1930s, American life was dominated by the Great Depression. The Great Depression was the longest and most drastic economic downturn in American history. It began with the stock market crash in 1929 and came to an end in 1939 with the start of WWII and the increase in wartime industry. The Great Depression left many Americans without work, homes, or food. The effects of the Great Depression were compounded by the Dust Bowl, a period of dust storms and drought that decimated American agriculture in the West.

This economic and social crisis demanded change. In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) won the presidency and set out to reform the country with a slew of new policies that would come to be known as the New Deal. These programs, which included everything from promoting the arts to creating unemployment insurance, helped many Americans survive the Great Depression. Some of these programs continue to benefit Americans today.



A 1936 FDR campaign [poster](#).

While FDR's New Deal was progressive, it was not free of racism. The Social Security Act of 1935, which was designed to pay retired workers a wage, and the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which gave workers the right to organize and bargain for better conditions, both excluded agricultural and domestic workers. At the time, the majority of agricultural and domestic workers were people of color. Thus, excluding agricultural and domestic workers from these New Deal programs prevented many Black Americans¹ from accessing much-needed relief.

The Great Migration

During the 1930s, migration was a constant theme in American life. Due to the Great Depression, Americans of all backgrounds were forced to leave their homes in search of work in other parts of the country. However, for Black Americans, this movement was not only a product of the Great Depression but also part of a larger trend called the Great Migration. According to historian Isabel Wilkerson, the Great Migration was the period between 1910 and 1970 in which an estimated six million Black Americans left the Jim Crow South for the North and West. Black Americans formed communities in urban centers such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Pittsburgh. As refugees in their own country, they fled physical, political, and economic violence in pursuit of better lives.

¹ In this packet, we choose to capitalize the B in Black but not the w in white in accordance with The Associated Press's style. For further information about the reasons behind this style choice, see <https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-cultures-race-and-ethnicity-us-news-ap-top-news-7e36c00c5af0436abc09e051261fff1f>

While some migrants found better wages, they also quickly learned that racism persisted in Northern cities. 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.

Pittsburgh: 1936

By 1936, Pittsburgh had long been an epicenter for industry and a landing point for migrants during the Great Depression. It was a booming metropolis and the 10th largest city in the United States at the time. However, the Great Depression struck the city’s steel industry hard and left many, especially Black Americans, without work.



A shot of Pittsburgh in 1935, from OnlyInYourState.com.

August Wilson, however, does not seem to be particularly concerned with the high rates of Black American unemployment in Pittsburgh of the time. In his description of the play’s setting, he does not focus on Pittsburgh but on the interior of the Charles home. Possibly Wilson understood that Black Pittsburgh was still culturally thriving at the time. Contemporary sources

indicate a dynamic jazz scene in the city and newspaper ads, even in predominantly white American newspapers, show announcements of Black community events.

Selling Watermelons: Inverted Stereotype

One of the first questions anyone may have when they encounter *The Piano Lesson* is, “Why would August Wilson put a Black man selling watermelons on stage?” How could Wilson, a playwright so conscious of the art in Black American life, include such a trope? For Wilson, this choice was intentional and is tied to the time and place of the play. Black Americans had long grown watermelons in America. In fact, many enslavers encouraged enslaved people to grow and sell watermelons, and they used this permission as a special sort of



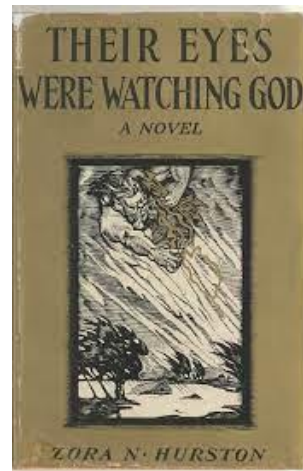
Depiction of a market square in the postbellum South with watermelons, from [“How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope”](#) by William R. Black.

“benevolence.” However, after emancipation, Black Americans continued to grow watermelons and began selling them in public markets. For white Americans and former enslavers, this act of self-sufficiency was too much. To them, Black Americans selling watermelons were flaunting their freedom, so white Americans retaliated with both physical and symbolic violence in the form of racist cartoons.

August Wilson, however, is tapping into the original meaning of the fruit as a symbol of Black American industry and freedom. In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie and Berniece represent a new degree of freedom for Black Americans: the first generation of Black Americans born free to free parents. By selling watermelons, Boy Willie demonstrates his freedom to earn money for himself. In the play, Boy Willie sells his watermelons in white neighborhoods. He makes money from the very people who stereotype and reduce him, and he represents how Black Americans continued to create economic opportunities even during the Great Depression.

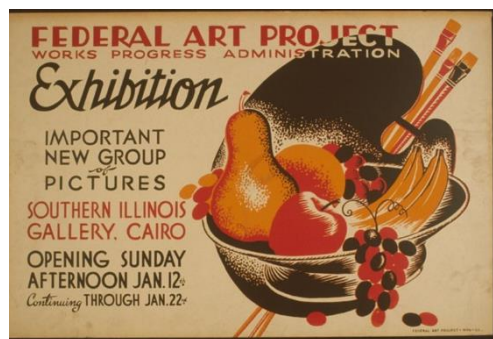
Black Arts in the 1930s

The 1930s is generally considered a time of despair in the American arts, but that conclusion is only part of the picture. White American novelists like John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald were writing works that grappled with the contradictions of the American Dream. Black American authors, on the other hand, had long been conscious of the way America's best promises are often left unequally fulfilled. Instead, Black American artists of the 1930s were continuing the creative outpouring of the Harlem Renaissance, which began in the 1920s. This was the era of many classic masterpieces in the Black American tradition. To name just a few: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937, Langston Hughes was at the top of his game, releasing 6 poetry collections during the decade, and Sterling Brown released his first poetry collection *Southern Road* (1932) as well as began work on many of his key studies on Black American folkways.



First edition cover of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, from the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#).

Additionally, while some programs of the New Deal excluded Black



Advertisement for FAP exhibition, 1930-1940, from the [Library of Congress](#).

Americans, many of its cultural programs were targeted specifically to support Black Americans. The Federal Arts Project, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Theatre Project, all under the Works Progress Administration, actively promoted the work of Black American artists. Black intellectuals, like Sterling Brown, were also part of the leadership of these projects.

The Piano Lesson is firmly rooted in its historical period, but the social forces of the Great Depression seem far away from the action of the play. Instead, the play draws its energy from the great artistic outpouring in the Black American community of the decade. The Charles family,

like many people depicted in Black American literature of the time, must decide what to do with the physical remains of the legacy of slavery. While Americans still grapple with that question today, *The Piano Lesson*, much like Black writing from the 1930s, is ultimately hopeful that healing can be found.

Example Activity: Have students think about the art of the last ten years. What artists (musical, visual, literary) have shaped American culture? Have students imagine that they are going to have a Federal Arts Project exhibition of these artists and write about which artists should be included and why. Then, students can create a poster advertising the event to share with the class.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

Written by La Donna L. Forsgren, 2019; Updated by Claire Stinson, 2023

- 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 white population 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. The Supreme Court ruled 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).
- 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.
- 1929** **The Stock Market crashes.** Plunges the United States into the Great Depression. African Americans face an unemployment rate two to three times that of white Americans.
- 1933** **Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiates the New Deal.** A series of public works projects, financial reforms and regulations attempting to bring the United States out of the Great Depression. Although these programs included African Americans, they were the last hired and first fired.
- 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. 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 RICH HISTORY OF PITTSBURGH'S HILL DISTRICT

Pittsburgh has long been considered a city of neighborhoods, from hip Lawrenceville to traditional -One of the town's most historic areas is the Hill District, a collection of neighborhoods located northeast of downtown Pittsburgh. The city's first Black district, this uptown neighborhood was once a mecca of arts and culture, with a strong sense of community. It was known by many names: Little Harlem, Little Haiti and "the crossroads of the world." However, it was all but lost to urban renewal in the 1950s.

The Early History of the Hill

This city within a city was born of the marriage of two catalysts: the desire to have a better life and the demand for steel mill workers as men went off to fight in World War I. Recently-freed Black men and women found a home in the Hill and quickly made it their own.

A Cultural Icon

From the 1930s until the 1950s, the Hill District was known as the "crossroads of the world." Music, art, culture and commerce thrived in Little Harlem. The Hill boasted the only all-black radio station, its own weekly newspaper (the Pittsburgh Courier), and a vibrantly active jazz scene. The photographer for The Pittsburgh Courier was Teenie Harris, whose work can still be seen today at the Carnegie Museum of Art. Neighborhood nightclub The Crawford Grille boasted such jazz greats as John Coltrane and Dizzy Gillespie. The owner of the club also owned one of Pittsburgh's first and only negro league teams, The Pittsburgh Crawfords, which included famous players such as Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson. African-American entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker even opened a beauty parlor and school in The Hill. It seemed the Hill District was set to become one of the area's strongest and most vibrant historical communities.

Declining Economy and Urban Renewal

After World War II, the housing in the Hill was slated for redevelopment due to aging housing conditions. However, this process was not planned well, and the lives of the local people were disrupted as the renewal got under way. Over 8000 residents (as well as 400 local businesses) were displaced, and the area's access to the downtown economy was cut off. A new arena and parking lot were built in an area that predominantly Black families had once called home. The civil unrest and violence of the late 1960s added fuel to the fire, and soon The Hill had deteriorated into a shell of its former self. By 1990, 71 percent of the community's residents and many of its businesses were gone. Vacant lots and decrepit buildings replaced the colorful and vibrant Hill that had once been such an integral part of the city of Pittsburgh.

The Hill District Today

These days, the Hill can be seen garnering local attention as residents both old and young strive to preserve its culture. Public interest groups are working diligently to restore the Hill to its former glory and bring the neighborhood's residents out of poverty. A new grocery store was finally built in 2013, and both a YMCA and local library have recently joined the community. Newly renovated housing is being built all throughout the district, and a long restoration project is in the works for a historic jazz club. A charter school has also been opened in the area, with great success.

From: <http://www.pittsburghbeautiful.com/2017/08/07/the-rich-history-of-pittsburghs-hill-district/>

GHOSTS of the PAST: *Hamlet* & *The Piano Lesson*

August Wilson has often been called “the American Shakespeare,” and for good reason. Both are “dramatic historians” who explore and reinterpret the past in their plays. Both take “everyday” speech as worthy of art. Finally, both have wide-reaching visions of the human experience, in its humor, frustration, and glory. However, is this comparison just? Wilson himself said that he barely read Shakespeare or other canonical white playwrights, although he once quoted *Hamlet* in a speech, without attributing the line. Further, in comparing Shakespeare to Wilson, we risk flattening Wilson’s work by placing it only in the shadow of Shakespeare without letting Wilson talk back to The Bard. We may fail to critique Shakespeare by holding him up as the pinnacle of theatre rather than examining faults and biases. Let’s work towards comparing these two plays in a way that enriches and uplifts them both. Here, you will find an introduction to three points of connection between the two works that may be used to jumpstart class discussion. [These points of discussion can be used in conjunction with the lesson “[Hamlet and The Piano Lesson: Are Ghosts Real?](#)” if desired.]



Grantham Coleman takes on the title role in a 2017 *Hamlet* production at the Old Globe Theatre in [San Diego](#).

Racial Consciousness in Performance

In comparing *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*, considering the dynamics of race in performance is essential. Color-blind casting, the process of casting without considering the performer’s race or ethnicity, is a common way to adapt and “equalize” productions of Shakespeare, as for example in the Old Globe Theatre’s 2017 production of *Hamlet*, shown on the left. August Wilson himself argued against color-blind casting, instead arguing that more roles needed to be written for Black actors, rather than just having them fill traditionally white roles written by and for white performers. Wilson wrote his plays with Black actors in mind and specified that Black directors take charge of his work. Timothy Douglas, a Black director, responded to criticisms of Wilson’s thinking by stating, “When will we see white

people in [Wilson’s plays]? My answer is: “When we have dealt fundamentally with the conundrum between the races in this country...”” (qtd. in Thompson 27). Nevertheless, classically trained Black actors continue to interpret both Wilson and Shakespeare. Taking the lead from Ayanna Thompson, theatre scholar, we may ask: What are the benefits and risks of performing roles of a different race?

Revenge and Remembrance

Hamlet and *The Piano Lesson* both take up a fundamental question: how do we remember the dead? In both plays, the main characters consider vengeance for the wrongs suffered by the dead as a suitable way to honor them. In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie thinks that, by selling the piano and buying Sutter’s land, he will be able to get back at the former enslavers of his family. Vengeance is also part of the backdrop of the play; Boy Charles, Boy Willie and Berniece’s father, believed he could avenge his father and grandmother by reclaiming the piano, for which

they were sold, from Sutter. Sutter then kills Boy Charles, as well as several other innocent bystanders, by having them burned in a boxcar. This cycle of vengeance does not stop after death. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog murder Sutter, and Sutter's ghost returns to reclaim the piano and avenge his death. In *Hamlet* as well, cycles of violence do not stop after death. Hamlet's father returns as a ghost to command his son to revenge his murder by his brother, Claudius. Much like in *The Piano Lesson*, this initial violence occurred before the action of the play, but the living characters must live with its consequences. Hamlet, like Boy Willie, takes up his father's request for vengeance. However, due to his procrastination, even more people die: Polonius, then Ophelia. These deaths trigger another cycle of vengeance, where Laertes, Ophelia's brother, seeks to kill Hamlet in retaliation. This snowball of vengeance leads to the final devastating scene of the play: Queen Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet all die because of one man's desire for revenge. Shakespeare's response to vengeance is stark: murder leads to more murder. Wilson offers an alternative solution to the legacy of violence. Instead of continuing the pattern of murder for murder, Berniece uses the piano to call on her ancestors for help. In this final exorcism, Berniece finds healing for her family instead of further division. She uses the spirits of her ancestors to put vengeance to rest rather than to cause more harm.



Another [photo](#) from the Old Globe Theatre's 2017 production of *Hamlet*.

Family and Feud

Everyone's family has some problems, a fact that both Shakespeare and Wilson knew well. Wilson claimed that "you could arrive at the universal through the specific" (Thompson 26). This idea is evident in *The Piano Lesson*. While Wilson portrays the specifics of Black life in the 1930s, any family could deal with the same crisis: whether to sell or keep a family heirloom. Perhaps not many people are princes determining whether to commit regicide while their kingdom faces the threat of invasion, but *Hamlet's* underlying question

of how to reconstitute a family after the death of a parent is more common. As such, both plays juggle with what it means to be a family and how to handle family conflict. For Boy Willie and Hamlet, family is patrilineal; both characters want to live up to their fathers' wishes, even though those wishes may be violent. Berniece, on the other hand, offers a matrilineal view of family. She desires to preserve Mama Ola's memory in the form of the piano, and she hopes to use the piano to create the best life possible for her daughter. How do differing definitions of family and responses to family conflict shape both plays?

REPUTABLE WEB RESOURCES

Compiled by Alena Coleman and Claire Stinson

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/hOynfROAqM0>
- The Pittsburgh Hill District
<https://aaregistry.org/story/the-hill-district-pittsburgh/>

The Piano Lesson

- Contemporary *New York Times* review of *The Piano Lesson* by Frank Rich
<https://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/17/theater/review-theater-a-family-confronts-its-history-in-august-wilson-s-piano-lesson.html>
- PBS *American Masters* Series clip about *The Piano Lesson* (5 minutes)
<https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/aug15.ela.lit.piano/the-piano-lesson/>
- “The Making of the Piano Lesson” Hallmark Promotional Video (11 minutes)
https://youtu.be/tQBT_x2mblw
- The Penumbra Theatre’s Packet on *The Piano Lesson*
https://static.pbslearningmedia.org/media/media_files/The_Piano_Lesson_Study_Guide.pdf
- Behind the Scenes of the 2022 Broadway Revival of *The Piano Lesson* (6 minutes)
<https://youtu.be/7phBqd0xvhY>
- LaTanya Richardson Jackson on directing the 2022 Broadway Revival
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/07/theater/latanya-richardson-jackson-the-piano-lesson.html>
- Full 1995 Made-for-TV-Movie of *The Piano Lesson* (1 hr 40 minutes)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aa0xv1RDONA>

Additional Resources

- “Illinois Blues” by Skip James, early Blues recording that inspired Wilson’s epigraph to *The Piano Lesson*:
<https://genius.com/Skip-james-illinois-blues-lyrics>
- “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 Claire Stinson

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>.
- Thompson, Ayanna. “Comparing Wilson with Shakespeare: Teaching the Politics and Practices of Race in Performance.” *Approaches to Teaching the Plays of August Wilson*, edited by Sandra G. Shannon and Sandra L. Richards, *MLA*, 2016, pp. 24-31.
- Kildegaard, Lise. “Constructive Intersections: White Students Meet Black History in August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*.” *The Radical Teacher*, vol. 80, 2007, pp. 19-23. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20710422>.

The World of *The Piano Lesson*

- Shannon, Sandra G. “The Fences They Build: August Wilson’s Depiction of African-American Women.” *Obsidian II*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1991, pp. 1-17. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44485235>.
- Londré, Felicia Hardison. “A piano and its history: family and transcending family.” *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*, edited by Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 113-123, doi:10.1017/CCOL0521866065.
- Rudolph, Amanda M. “Images of African Traditional Religions and Christianity in ‘Joe Turner’s Come and Gone’ and ‘The Piano Lesson.’” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 33, no. 5, Sage Publications, Inc., 2003, pp. 562–75. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180976>.

These readings can be found in the August Wilson 2019-2023 Lesson Plan Development Folder, in *The Piano Lesson* folder, in [Further Readings](#).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Time and Place: Depression, Migration, and Art in the 1930s

- Black, William R. "How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope." *The Atlantic*, 8 Dec. 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/how-watermelons-became-a-racist-trope/383529/>.
- Glasco, Laurence A. Introduction. *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004, pp. 1-14. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.5xkfs3.4>.
- "Harlem Renaissance." *National Gallery of Art*, <https://www.nga.gov/learn/teachers/lessons-activities/uncovering-america/harlem-renaissance.html>.
- "Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s." *U.S. History Primary Source Timeline*, The Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/race-relations-in-1930s-and-1940s/>.
- Raynor, Vivien. "A Black Perspective on the 1930's." *The New York Times*, 12 Mar. 1989, www.nytimes.com/1989/03/12/nyregion/art-a-black-perspective-on-the-1930-s.html.
- Richardson, Gary. "The Great Depression: 1929-1941." *Federal Reserve History*, <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great-depression>.
- Sklaroff, Lauren Rebecca. Introduction. *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era*, University of North Carolina Press, 2009, pp. 1-14.
- "The Great Depression-1934." *Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission*, <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/documents/1865-1945/great-depression.html#:~:text=Pittsburgh's%20slums%20became%20worse%20as,were%20sold%20at%20sheriff's%20auctions>.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. "The Long-Lasting Legacy of the Great Migration." *Smithsonian Magazine*, Sept. 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/long-lasting-legacy-great-migration-180960118/>.

Production History

- Parkinson, Jan, writer and producer. "The Making of the Piano Lesson." *YouTube*, uploaded by chiusimoon, 30 Jan. 2017, https://youtu.be/tQBT_x2mblw.
- Rabinowitz, Chloe. "THE PIANO LESSON Becomes Highest Grossing August Wilson Play on Broadway in History." *Broadway World*, 3 Jan. 2023, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/THE-PIANO-LESSON-Becomes-Highest-Grossing-August-Wilson-Play-on-Broadway-in-History-20230103>.
- The Piano Lesson Play Website*, <https://pianolessonplay.com/>.
- Wilson, August. *The Piano Lesson*. Plume, 1990.

Ghosts of the Past: *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*

- Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Edited by Barbara W. Mowat and Paul Werstine, *Folger Shakespeare Library*, <http://socrates.acadiau.ca/courses/engl/rcunningham/resources/Shpe/Hamlet.pdf>.
- Thompson, Ayanna. "Comparing Wilson with Shakespeare: Teaching the Politics and Practices of Race in Performance." *Approaches to Teaching the Plays of August Wilson*, edited by Sandra G. Shannon and Sandra L. Richards, *MLA*, 2016, pp. 24-31.

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Suggestions for Teaching about August Wilson**

Author: Phyllis Wezeman
Malawi Matters, South Bend

Overview

Grade level: 7-12

Discipline/subject are: Interdisciplinary

Topic of lesson: Techniques for Teaching about August Wilson

Starter Suggestions

- 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

- **Bridges**
 - Look for information about the "City of Bridges," Pittsburgh. August Wilson was born and raised there, and he used the city as the setting for nine of the ten plays in his *Century Cycle*. With 446 bridge structures, Pittsburgh has the most bridges of any city in the world. Remember that a bridge may be a huge architectural structure that spans a major body of water, or it may be a modest board placed over a small stream to join two pieces of dry ground. Regardless of its size, a bridge's function is to connect two areas and to enable people to get from one place to another. Talk about ways in which bridges are needed between people, especially the characters in August Wilson's plays. Brainstorm words, or bridges, such as communication, honesty, and support, that might be needed between people. Draw a picture of a "bridge," using a person on each side of the paper and writing the connecting words between the two individuals.

Art

- **Romare Bearden**
 - Find information on Romare Bearden (1911-1988), a renowned collage/visual artist, who influenced August Wilson's writing. Wilson felt that Bearden's artwork portrayed Black life in all its richness, and August desired to have his plays be the equal of Bearden's canvases. In fact, after August Wilson saw a picture of Bearden's piece *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket* in National Geographic magazine, it became his inspiration for the play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and was the original title of the script. An additional Bearden piece, *The Piano Lesson*,

became the motivation and the title of another play in Wilson's *Century Cycle*. Be mindful of Bearden's impact on the content of all ten of Wilson's plays.

Banners/Textiles

- **Quilt Codes**

- Remember that when August Wilson was one of fourteen African American students at Central Catholic High School in Pittsburgh, he was racially bullied with the negative message, "Go home, N-word," stuck to his desk every day. Learn about Quilt Codes, a positive system of signals used to send messages through fabric during the days of the Underground Railroad. Because it was illegal to teach enslaved people to read and write, and they could not hold meetings, a visual system was developed to help enslaved people get ready to escape and guide them on the journey. Many quilt patterns had specific meanings such as Bow Tie (clothes would be delivered), Flying Geese (head to Canada), Log Cabin (safe house), Tumbling Blocks (box possessions), and Wagon Wheel (pack for a journey). Primers, or samplers, were made to teach the patterns to the people. Think about codes today that could indicate someone is welcome regardless of age, gender, politics, race, or religion. Divide a piece of paper, or fabric, into four parts. Design a quilt code in each square to signal acceptance. Explain the code on the back of each block and share the ideas with others.

Creative Writing

- **Black Poets**

- Sample the writing of Black poets who influenced August Wilson and whose words impact society today. During August's "self-schooling" at the Carnegie Library, he began his education in the "Negro section", reading works by Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and others. Find examples, at a library or online, of their work as well as the writing of Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Kwame Dawes, Amiri Baraka, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni, James Weldon Johnson, Ntokaze Shange, Alice Walker, Wanda Coleman, or any Black American poet. Since Wilson began as a poet, search for his work as well.

Culinary

- **Stewing Pot**

- Wilson claims he began a script by using the image of a stewing pot, throwing in ideas to use in the play, and mixing the elements to create his work. Set a large stewing pot on a table and use August Wilson's collage technique to fill it with ideas for a play about Black American life in the first and second decades of the 21st century – 2001-2010 and 2011-2019. Toss ideas for characters, conflict, plot, setting, and themes for a script into the pot and cook up a new play.

Dance

- **Emotions**

- Act out the emotions August Wilson might have experienced throughout various stages of his life – perhaps confusion in his childhood with different fathers, anger during discrimination throughout his education, and excitement as he discovered the works of Black writers in the library. Be sure to cover the various segments of his career as a poet and a playwright. Work alone, or with others, to share the situations and the scenarios.

Drama

- **One Line of Dialogue**
 - Wilson shared that he began a script by writing a single line of dialog for a character, reflected on what the person might want to reveal, and then wrote his or her story. Imagine the first line August Wilson wrote for each character in one or more of his plays. Select five people in the cast, mixing the leads with the supporting members, and create a single line that Wilson could have written for each of them. Expand the project by composing first lines for a play about people in the community, nation, world, or even the class, today.

Games

- **Concentration – Characters**
 - Prepare a concentration game to learn about people who influenced August Wilson’s life. While concentration, or memory, usually includes pairs of identical pictures, this set will have one card with the name of a person and a second, matching card, with a description of the individual. Prepare the set by printing the names of ten or twelve people on separate cards. Next, print a brief description of each person on a separate card. For example, card one might say “Daisy Wilson” Kittel and the accompanying card would say “August Wilson’s Mother.” Other pairs may be: “Frederick August Kittel, Sr.” and “August Wilson’s Father”; “Rob Penny” and “Co-founder, Black Horizon Theater”; “Lloyd Richards” and “Broadway Producer/Father Figure to Wilson”. To play, mix the cards and lay them - writing side down - in a tiled pattern on a table or floor. To begin, the first player turns over two cards attempting to match a person with a description. If they are a pair, the player keeps the cards. If not, they are turned over and the next player takes a turn. As matches are made, read the two cards so everyone learns more about the people in the process.

Music

- **Blues**
 - Locate a copy on YouTube of the song [“Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine,”](#) sung by Bessie Smith, one of the great blues singers of the 20s and 30s, and listen to the music. As inspiration for Wilson’s work, the Blues get top billing. In his youth, Wilson shopped thrift shops and bought stacks of old albums for five cents apiece. When he heard Bessie Smith’s song, he realized that he could write in Black street vernacular and everything fell into place. Wilson is said to have called the Blues “life’s instructions” and remarked, “Because you can sing that song, that’s what enables you to survive.”

Photography

- **Playbill Covers**
 - Search for images of playbill covers for the ten plays in August Wilson’s American Century Cycle, also called Century Cycle or Pittsburgh Cycle. The titles, the decade the script depicts, and the year each play was written are:
 - 1900s—*Gem of the Ocean* (2003)
 - 1910s—*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988)
 - 1920s—*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984)
 - 1930s—*The Piano Lesson* (1990)
 - 1940s—*Seven Guitars* (1995)

- 1950s—*Fences* (1985)
 - 1960s—*Two Trains Running* (1991)
 - 1970s—*Jitney* (1979)
 - 1980s—*King Hedley II* (1985)
 - 1990s—*Radio Golf* (2005)
- Duplicate each cover on card stock paper and use the posters to create a timeline of Wilson’s work either by the decade or by the year it was written. If possible, find additional pictures of each production from a Broadway show or a community theater run and add them to the display.

Puppetry

- **Rod Puppet People**

- Turn paper tubes, of any size, into puppets and share stories of August Wilson’s career as a poet and a playwright. Include narratives of writing his sister’s college term paper and using the money to buy a typewriter for twenty dollars; composing poetry on cafe napkins, paper bags, and yellow pads; forming Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop with other artists; co-founding Black Horizon Theater with Rob Penny; reading a book from the library on directing before producing his own plays; working in Minnesota; having plays staged at Yale Repertory Theater; and more.
- To create simple puppets, assemble craft sticks, fabric, felt or construction paper, glue, paper tubes, scissors, and yarn. 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 or draw them on with markers. Add yarn to the top of the tube for hair. For a costume, glue a piece of felt or construction paper around the remainder of the tube. 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. Create puppets for a variety of people in August’s life and tell stories of their connection with Wilson.

Storytelling

- **The Great Migration Series**

- Focus on the topic of The Great Migration, the period when over a million African Americans traveled from the rural South to the industrial North after the outbreak of World War I. Locate "The Great Migration" series of sixty paintings by artist, educator, and storyteller Jacob Lawrence on the Internet at <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series>. Select at least ten pictures in the set and connect them with the stories told by the characters and themes in the ten plays in August Wilson’s Century Cycle. Print the chosen pictures and create a timeline to share the account of this important time in African American history.

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Suggestions for Teaching *The Piano Lesson***

Author: Phyllis Wezeman
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

Overview

Grade level: 7-12

Discipline/subject area: Interdisciplinary

Topic of lesson: Techniques for Teaching *The Piano Lesson*

Starter Suggestions

- 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

- **Stones**
 - Study the script, Act 2, Scene 2. Read Avery's comments about carrying and letting go of burdens, which he calls stones. Avery tells Berniece that everyone has stones in their pathway, but people can walk around them, step over them, and set them by the side of the road. He discourages carrying them and picking them up and suggests putting the stones behind and walking ahead, free of them. Recall that a stone is a piece of rock, a mass of hard compacted mineral, that can be used as a building material. Consider how Avery's advice to Berniece about stones might be applied to each of the main characters in the play, *The Piano Lesson*, as well as to actual people today. Connect Avery's comments to one of the seven main characters in the play. For example: Avery – walking ahead as he forms his church; Berniece – putting behind as she lets go of grief; Boy Willie – setting them by the side of the road as he travels back to Mississippi; Doaker – not carrying them on his train trips; Lymon – stepping over them as he restarts his life; Maretha – not picking them up as she learns of the past; and Wining Boy – walking around them as he sidesteps his vices. Next, select and clean seven large stones. Then gather acrylic paint and brushes, or a variety of colors of permanent markers. Paint or print the name of each person and the advice to re-build their life on a stone, one for each of the seven characters. Display the building blocks and apply Avery's advice every day.

Art

- **Romare Bearden**

- Use the link, <https://www.pafa.org/museum/collection/item/piano-lesson-homage-mary-lou>, from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts to access an image of collage artist Romare Bearden's 1983 color lithograph *The Piano Lesson*. Bearden's lithograph was inspired by two Henri Matisse paintings: *The Piano Lesson* (1916) and *The Music Lesson* (1917). Matisse was in turn inspired by Vincent Van Gogh's piece *Marguerite Gauchet at the Piano* (1890). Bearden's work depicts a music teacher and her student in a Southern parlor and is dedicated to the great jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, who, like Bearden, moved as a child from the South to Pittsburgh. Bearden's *The Piano Lesson* inspired Pittsburgh-native August Wilson's 1987 play of the same title. It is said that when Wilson saw *The Piano Lesson* at an exhibition, he was struck that the words "looked nice together" and instantly named the girl at the piano "Maretha." In a [1995 promo](#) for the TV adaptation of his play, Wilson indicated that the artwork prompted him to ponder questions of legacy and acquiring a sense of self-worth by denying the past. He decided to write a play to address those themes. Note that another of Bearden's pieces, *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket*, was the stimulus for Wilson's play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Banners/Textiles

- **Costumes**

- Consider the process of costuming a theatrical production. Costume design is a critical element in accurately depicting the time period and the location in which the play is set; bringing characters to life and revealing occupations, personalities, and social status; and enhancing the story visually through harmonious colors, motifs, and symbols. Brainstorm, or research, a list of steps a costume designer might take throughout the process. These could include: read the script; explore the time period via magazines and newspapers; study styles of the era in books and movies; look at photos of garments, especially uniforms, worn for various jobs; list clothing references in the script; consult and coordinate with the production team; prepare a board of illustrations, pictures, and sketches for each character; create and fit costumes; accessorize each outfit from undergarments to hats, jewelry, shoes, and more. Next think specifically about costumes for the characters in *The Piano Lesson*. Although Lyman bought Wining Boy's green silk suit to impress the ladies, he probably arrived at Doaker's house in coveralls or jeans. Berniece had dresses for inside the home, probably with an apron, as well as a uniform for her job, fancier clothes for church, and a gown and robe at night. Avery and Doaker wore garments to fit their occupations as an elevator operator and a railroad cook. Still, Avery would have worn a three-piece suit when he preached, and Doaker would have a shirt and pants when he was home. After brainstorming a wardrobe for each player, search the internet, including Pinterest, to find story boards and photo collections from productions of *The Piano Lesson*. Also, note that the costumer for the play's 1987 production at Yale was Constanza Romero, a talented design student. In 1990 she was also the costume designer for the Broadway production, and in 1994 became August Wilson's third wife.

Creative Writing

- **Double Entendre**

- Learn the definition of the literary term “double entendre” (DUH-bull ahn-TAHN-druh) and use it to consider the meaning of the title of August Wilson’s play, *The Piano Lesson*. A double entendre is a figure of speech that involves two different interpretations of a word, phrase, or sentence. One meaning is readily apparent while the other is more hidden or subtle, often risqué. While the obvious meaning of *The Piano Lesson* involves instruction for playing a keyboard instrument, each of the people on stage gain important lessons from the piano as well. Consider what the eight scripted characters learn from the conflict over the piano between brother Boy Willie and sister Berniece. Record and share responses which could include: Avery – follow your dreams; Berniece – face the past, live in the present, enjoy the future; Boy Willie – be honest; Doaker – be reliable; Grace – trust your instincts; Lymon – take a risk; Maretha – keep learning; Wining Boy – be faithful. In addition, reflect on double meanings of themes in the play such as the word “property.” For example, the Charles family was the property of the Sutters, the piano was a piece of property that held the family history, and Boy Willie felt the key to freedom was to buy the property that his enslaved ancestors worked. Conclude by thinking about the insights actors in the play, audience members, drama students, movie watchers, and script readers might take away from *The Piano Lesson* as well.

Culinary

- **Watermelons**

- Introduce the topic of stereotypes, an issue August Wilson intentionally incorporated into *The Piano Lesson* by including the symbol of watermelons. In the play, Boy Willie and Lymon Jackson drive a truckload of watermelons – a symbol often associated with belittlement of Black people – from their home in Mississippi to their relatives’ house in Pittsburgh with the goal of selling them and earning money for themselves. During slavery, enslavers encouraged enslaved people to grow and sell this fruit as a special form of benevolence. But after emancipation, when Black people sold watermelons for income, former enslavers as well as other white Americans viewed it as flaunting their freedom and retaliated in the form of racist cartoons. Search the internet for caricatures from 1850 to 1900 drawn on this topic, or see William R. Black’s *Atlantic Article* [“How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope.”](#) August Wilson desired to illustrate the irony of Black men from the South selling watermelons to White people in the North, in white neighborhoods, to stand as a symbol of Black American freedom and industry, especially during the Great Depression. Discuss this stereotype, as well as others in the script, such as children cannot understand difficult subjects (Berniece hides the family history from Maretha) or a woman cannot be successful without a man (Avery and Berniece). Use this discussion as a starting point to explore the history of Black/African American foodways and culinary inventions, including mac and cheese, collard greens, okra, and other delicacies. Explore recipes and consider bringing in watermelon-based recipes or other dishes!

Dance/Gesture/Movement

- **Blues – “Gin My Cotton”**

- Remember that August Wilson’s work was influenced by 4 Bs – Baraka (writing), Bearden (art), Blues (music), and Borges (poetry). Find a copy of his script, *The Piano Lesson*, and note that it begins with an epigraph of lines from Illinois Blues recorded by jazz piano player Skip James, <https://genius.com/Skip-james-illinois-blues-lyrics>. An epigraph is a short quotation at the beginning of a book or chapter intended to suggest the theme of the work. In *The Piano Lesson*, the brief musical prologue that starts the story goes like this: “Gin my cotton, Sell my seed, Buy my baby, Everything she need.” Boy Willie enters Berniece and Doaker’s home with a firm plan, reflected, not coincidentally, in the epigraph which becomes a mantra that he recites throughout the play as motivation to accomplish his goals. Look up several of Boy Willie’s speeches and consider them to be the movement, or dance, that carries the action of the play forward from the moment he arrives in Pittsburgh to retrieve the piano until the time he decides to return to Mississippi without it. Examples include: Act 1, Scene 1 where he says, “Sell them watermelons. Get Berniece to sell that piano. Put them two parts with the part I done saved. Walk in there. Tip my hat. Lay my money down on the table. Get my deed and walk out. This time I bet to keep all the cotton. Hire me some men to work it for me. Gin my cotton. Get my seed. And I’ll see you again next year.” and then in Act 1 Scene 2, “I sell them watermelons. Get Berniece to sell that piano. Put them two parts with the part I done saved.” In addition, add a gesture to each of the phases to illustrate the movement of the mantra Boy Willie carries throughout the play.

Drama

- **Drama Awards**

- Celebrate the awards August Wilson has received for his works by reviewing some of the drama awards received for his plays, especially those in his *Century Cycle*. Prominent distinctions include honors from the American Theatre Critic’s Association, Drama Desk, New York Drama Critics Circle, Outer Critics Circle, Pulitzer Prizes, and Tonys. Look up a few of these organizations, such as Pulitzer Prize and the Tonys, to learn their purpose. For example, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama is given for a distinguished play by an American author, preferably dealing with American life, and a Tony focuses on excellence for plays staged on Broadway. In addition, search for honors associated with Wilson’s piece, *The Piano Lesson*. It’s production, in 2022, received Tony nominations for Best Revival of a Play, Actor, Director, Featured Actor, and Featured Actress. In 1999 Wilson was presented a National Humanities Medal and in 2006 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 Theater in his honor. 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. Conclude by discussing tangible and intangible ways to honor Wilson’s work and his greatest legacy the ten play

Century Cycle chronicling each decade of the twentieth century African American experience.

Games

- **Tug of War**

- Adapt the game “Tug of War” to an activity that highlights the struggles revealed by characters in the play, *The Piano Lesson*. Remind participants that the main “tug” in the story, between brother Boy Willie and sister Berniece, is whether or not to sell the family piano. To begin, organize into two teams equal in number, size, and weight. Offer newsprint and markers. Challenge each group to list five to ten struggles between the characters. For example: Avery and Bernice – getting married; Bernice and Maretha – sharing history; Robert and Ophelia – buying Back enslaved people or carving piano; Boy Willie and Sutter’s Ghost – fighting for control; Berniece and Lymon – giving in to emotions; All – living in the past, present, future; Black Americans – remembering or forgetting their history; Charles family – struggling with possession; Doaker – seeing piano keys moving and believing in ghosts; Wining Boy – living a careless or responsible lifestyle. When the lists are compiled, take turns having each group share their responses. Then, prepare a 10-foot length of sturdy rope for the activity. Remind students that in Act 2, Scene 4 Boy Willie and Lymon leave to find rope to pull the piano, and Lymon returns with it in Act 2, Scene 5. Fold the rope in half and mark the center with a piece of duct tape. In addition, put a piece of tape 4 feet on either side of the center mark. Place a person at a designated mark on the ground to act as the judge. Agree on a signal to indicate the start and end of the game. Arrange each team on either side of the rope being sure to play on grass or a soft surface to prevent injury. At the start of the pull, the rope should be immediately above the line marked on the ground. At the judge’s signal, players on each side pick up the rope and begin tugging backwards. Teams tug until one side’s tape mark is pulled across the center line on the ground and the judge declares the winner.

Music

- **Song: “Berta, Berta”**

- Listen to a recording, read the lyrics, and watch a video of a Parchman Farm Penitentiary work song, “Berta, Berta.” On YouTube, find a film clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32WzZqLN1h4> and the words and music at <http://pancocojams.blogspot.com/2012/06/o-berta-prison-work-song-with-lyrics.html>. In the play *The Piano Lesson*, the song is sung by brothers Doaker and Wining Boy, along with their nephew Boy Willie and his friend Lymon – all of whom have served time in this Mississippi prison. In this music, reminiscent of field songs of slaves and Gospel call-and-response formats, “Berta” symbolizes the women the prisoners left behind. The men imagine seeing Berta walking toward them, give advice on who she should marry, and sing about things they remember about their lives outside of prison. Records from the Library of Congress observe that such songs “revived flagging spirits, restored energy to failing bodies, and brought laughter to silent misery.” The first recording was by Alan Lomax, 1947-1948 (Bull & Group.) and the second by Branford Marsalis, 1992 (“I Heard You Twice the First Time,” Columbia). On the recordings, the

percussive sound of the singers' swinging their hoes is the only accompaniment to the men's voices.

Photography

- **Pictures**

- Contemplate ways in which people memorialize their ancestors. Brainstorm ideas and then search the internet for examples like benches, murals, statues, totem poles, and tombstones. In August Wilson's play, *The Piano Lesson*, the history of the Charles family is carved on an upright piano that resides in the parlor of the home of Doaker, his niece Berniece, and her daughter Maretha. Look online for photos of the pianos used in the 1990 Broadway production and the 2022 revival of the play. During the recent performance, the design team used a 3-D printer to create the carvings for the keyboard instrument, <https://playbill.com/article/how-the-piano-lesson-design-team-created-their-instrument>. In addition, look at images from the 1995 made-for-television movie to see how this prop, almost a character itself, was designed. Then celebrate student's own ancestors from long ago and current times by finding pictures from albums, movies, slides, snapshots, and videos as well as Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Reddit, and Tumblr. Use them to design and share a family heritage collage in a paper format or as an electronic version.

Puppetry

- **Shadow Puppet Scenes**

- Present the story of one or more of over 30 characters mentioned in the script, *The Piano Lesson*, who do not appear onstage—they remain in the shadows—in the format of a shadow puppet show. 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 person, or several, to depict such as Robert Sutter, who bought a piano as an anniversary gift for his wife Ophelia; or their 340-pound son James who mysteriously died in a well but owned the land Boy Willie wants to buy; or Doaker and Wining Boy's deceased or estranged wives, Coreen and Cleotha; or Berniece's female ancestors Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Mama Nellie, and Mama Ola who were called to rid the piano of spirits. Remember that even though these characters remain in the shadows, and were never seen on stage, they had an important part in telling the story of the struggle between the siblings. As an alternative, select symbols to share like the Charles' piano, Lymon's truck, or Doaker's trains. To create the puppets, cut the shape of each character from black poster board. Form the rod to operate the figure by taping the top inch, or bendable portion, of a straw to the back of the puppet. For a simple screen, hold up a piece of white paper, press the figures behind it, and illuminate 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, light it from behind, and use it as a screen.

Storytelling

- **Round Robin**

- Imagine the tales of the travelers Doaker has met in his 27 years of working for the railroad. Use Round Robin, a cooperative method of storytelling, to tell some of them. Refer to Doaker's speech in Act 1, Scene 1 where he shares his

ponderings, and his philosophy of life, with Boy Willie. Doaker states that trains travel in four directions – North, South, East, and West – but sometimes people board one hoping it will go wherever they are headed. He also discusses people who travel – some going to visit a sick relative, others attempting to escape a problem or a person, and many hoping to meet someone who does not show up on the other side. In the end, this railroad cook thinks people should either stay put or be patient, and eventually they will get where they are going or what they want from life. Make up Round Robin stories to tell some of Doaker’s tales. In this approach, each participant adds a certain number of words to the account. If there are many participants, add three to five words per person. If only a few people are involved, increase the number of words for each person to add. Continue until the story seems to be concluded or until the players run out of ideas. Following the narratives, discuss some of the thoughts that were presented. Story starters for the Round Robin activity, based on Doaker’s dialogue, could be: passenger going North, traveler heading South, tourist moving East, vacationer venturing West, woman visiting sick sister, man fleeing a fight, teenager meeting sweetheart, wife reuniting with husband, person on wrong train, adventurer on first trip, individual stood up at destination. An example of the lines of a Round Robin, where the first person begins with five words and, in turn, each player adds five more words might be: My train is heading North ... I’ll be visiting my sister ... She’s been sick so long ... Been years since we’ve met Continue making up Round Robin stories to share the journeys of the main characters, like Avery, Boy Willie, and Lymon – people pulled in many directions whether they are traveling by train, bus, car, truck, or foot!

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
The Piano Lesson Introduction
Author: Randy Ebright
Mishawaka High School, School City of Mishawaka

Overview

Grade level: 9-12

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

Topic of lesson: Introduction to *The Piano Lesson*

Objectives

- Understand the major characters and conflicts in *The Piano Lesson*.
 - Discuss/reflect on literary and historical themes of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*.
 - Apply Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to analyze visual texts, particularly stills from renditions of *The Piano Lesson*.
-

Standards addressed

- 9-10.CC.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade-appropriate topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing personal ideas clearly and persuasively.
-

Materials needed other than text

- [The Piano Lesson Introductory Presentation](#)
 - VTS Handout
 - Nightline Story on *The Piano Lesson* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vy_-qQ1yeLE)
-

Lesson Plan (Day One)

Students:

Quick Write Prompt: How important is one's past? Is it better to remember one's past or to forget it to attempt to make a better future? What can keep individuals from making a better future for themselves? Explain/argue your perspective.

Teacher Presentation to the Class:

- Show [The Piano Lesson News Story](#), available in *The Piano Lesson* Introductory Presentation.
 - Discuss with the class: Why is *The Piano Lesson* still being performed? What importance/impact can the play have on contemporary audiences by casting well-known actors with whom younger audiences are more likely to be familiar?
 - Students reflect or respond to the question through whole class, group, or partner discussion.

- Follow *The Piano Lesson* Introductory Presentation to introduce students to the author, basic plot, and characters of the play. The slides for this presentation are displayed below, and the presentation is linked [here](#) as well as at the beginning of this lesson plan.
 - Discuss: What cultural and societal issues are prevalent in the introductory presentation of the play? What impact do you think they have on the characters? How about 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.
- Introduce or review the process of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to your class. VTS is a critical thinking strategy designed to help students engage with visual objects. The teacher asks three basic questions to students: 1) What’s going on in this picture? 2) What do you see that makes you say that? 3) What more can we find? For a quick but detailed explanation of using VTS in your classroom, see the VTS Handout, also available at the end of this lesson plan. This handout can be printed out and given to students, displayed on the board, or made available through Google Classroom or another platform.
- Use stills from *The Piano Lesson*, in *The Piano Lesson* Introductory Presentation, and have students apply VTS to them.
 - As students review VTS and view/analyze images from *The Piano Lesson*, they may discuss: What are significant themes and ideas from *The Piano Lesson* that are reflected in the images from renditions of the play? Why are these significant?

Background information:

The Great Depression
 Slavery
 Sharecropper

Key words/new vocabulary:

Visual Thinking Strategies
 The Great Depression

Strategies:

Quick Write/Reflection
 Lecture/Note Taking
 Application of Visual Thinking Strategies
 Whole Group Discussion

Student Output and Production:

Completion of Quick Write
 Discussion of “*The Piano Lesson* Returns to Broadway with All-Star Cast”
 Composition of Notes on *The Piano Lesson* Introduction Presentation
 Application and Analysis of Visual Symbols and Themes of *The Piano Lesson* Through VTS

Sources/resources:

- “‘The Piano Lesson’ Returns to Broadway with All-Star Cast | Nightline.” *YouTube*, 23 Dec. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vy_-qQ1yeLE.

- [August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* Introductory Slides](#)
- [VTS Handout](#)

Slides:



The Piano Lesson Quick Write

Prompt:

How important is one's past? Is it better to remember one's past or to forget it, in order to attempt to make a better future? What can keep individuals from making a better future for themselves? Explain/argue your perspective.



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.

The Piano Lesson Synopsis

- Setting
 - Doaker Charles' apartment
 - Pittsburgh, 1936
- Plot
 - Following the Charles family, *The Piano Lesson* focuses on the relationship between a sister, Berniece, and her brother, Boy Willie, and their different perspectives and argument over a family heirloom—a piano with carvings of their enslaved ancestors.
 - While Boy Willie would like to sell the piano in order to be able to afford to buy land, Berniece insists on keeping the piano in the family and has even started having her daughter, Maretha, learn to play it.
 - The apartment soon becomes haunted with the ghost of Sutter, the former owner of the land Boy Willie is attempting to buy, which creates more foreboding for the family.


Doaker Charles

- Serving as a narrator due to his knowledge of the history of the piano, Doaker is the owner of the apartment where he, Berniece, and his great niece, Maretha live.
- Though he does remain neutral throughout most of the play in the argument about the piano between Boy Willie and Berniece, he expresses his understanding of Berniece's desire to maintain the piano and, by extension, the legacy of their family.



Berniece

- Mother of Maretha and widow to her late husband, Crawley, she works as a housekeeper and is courted by Avery, a preacher, though she is still mourning the passing of her husband years after his death
- As opposed to her brother, she wants to keep the piano in the family in order to maintain their legacy and history
- While Berniece insists on keeping the piano in the family, she has stopped playing it due to the pain of remembering the pain and history of her family's struggles with slavery through their




Boy Willie

- After spending several years away from his sister, uncle and niece, the play begins with Boy Willie coming back into their lives with a plan to buy his freedom
- Choosing not to accept his family's past and historical struggles, Boy Willie instead wants to sell the piano for money in order to buy the land he was a sharecropper for
- Though seemingly motivated by money and even the companionship of women, particularly Grace at one point in the play, he yearns to be in control his own life




Lymon

- Serving as Boy Willie's friend and traveling companion, Lymon is motivated by the companionship of women as well as attending and watching picture shows, a lifestyle he believes is more easily attainable in the big city of Pittsburgh
- In contrast to Boy Willie, Lymon is soft spoken and often shy as well as reasonable who attempts to listen and understand the experiences and perspectives of those around him
- However, Lymon is also motivated not to return to the South since he is a wanted man by the law




Maretha, Avery, Wining Boy

- Maretha
 - Berniece's daughter, she is taught how to play the piano, but is not informed of the history of the piano or connections to the family
- Avery
 - One of the few characters not related to the Charles family, Avery who is a preacher who is genuinely kind
 - He attempts to open his own church and court Berniece, though she denies his advances due to her continued mourning of her late husband
- Wining Boy
 - The older brother of Doaker, Wining Boy is a once successful musician and gambler who often drinks and asks for money as he attempts to portray himself as still in his prime as a successful musician



Sutter's Ghost

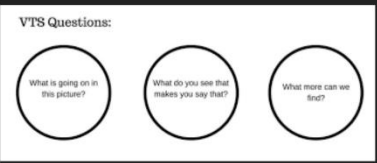
- Represents the spirit of the owner of the Charles family in the time of slavery
- Begins to appear shortly before Boy Willie arrives and is often seen, heard and felt whenever the piano is touched, leaving several characters to believe the piano is haunted
- The ghost symbolizes the horrific history of the Charles family and their need to face it in order to embrace their identity and future



VTS-Visual Thinking Strategies

Inquiry 1: What is going on in the image?
 Inquiry 2: What do you see that makes you think that?
 Inquiry 3: What MORE can we find?

VTS Questions:




Art Education Toolbox: Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

NOTE: The following concept ideas were taken from www.vtshome.org

What is VTS?

Visual Thinking Strategies is a research-based teaching method that improves critical thinking and language skills through discussions of visual images. VTS encourages participation and self-confidence, especially among students who struggle. VTS is easy to learn and offers a proven strategy for educators meet current learning objectives.

How Can a Teacher Implement VTS?

When viewing a piece of art, use the following three questions:

1. What's going on in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can we find?

Facilitate Discussion Among Students By:

1. Paraphrasing their comments neutrally. Do not say “good,” “correct,” “wrong,” etc.
2. Point at the area of the image being discussed by students.
3. Link contrasting and complementary comments made by students.

How Does VTS Benefit Students?

1. The process is learner-driven and places the power in students' control.
2. It is process-focused rather than product-focused— the students are not given a right answer; learning and discussion is the “answer.”
3. Fosters students critical thinking, both individually and in a group setting.

In History There Are Often Right and Wrong Answers—How Can VTS Be Modified for Use with Historical Objects?

While a practitioner of pure VTS would not approve of any modification, the strategy can be applied to analysis of historical objects where there often is a “correct” answer. Teachers are still able to use the questioning and facilitation strategies to ensure students are engaged in critical thinking. Much as is practiced in brainstorming, incorrect answers should not be immediately pointed out, instead, have the student justify their answer, work through their logic, and suggest other ideas or concepts they should consider.

[The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, 2011](#)

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Memoirs**

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

Overview

Grade level: High School/ Possibly Middle School

Discipline/subject area: English Language Arts

Topic of lesson: Narrative Writing

Objective

- Students will practice interview skills and narrative writing
-

Standards addressed

- 9-10.W.3 Write narrative compositions in a variety of forms that:
 - a. Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters.
 - b. Create a smooth progression of experiences or events.
 - c. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plotlines to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
 - d. Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole.
 - e. Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
 - f. Provide an ending that follows and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.
- 9-10.W.6 Demonstrate command of English grammar and usage, focusing on:
 - a. Verbs – Forming and using verbs in the indicative, imperative, interrogative, conditional and subjunctive moods.
 - b. Usage – Identifying and using parallelism in all writing to present items in a series and items juxtaposed for emphasis.
- 9-10.W.7 Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling focusing on:
 - a. Punctuation – Using a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb to link two or more closely related independent clauses.
- 9-10.CC.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade-appropriate topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing personal ideas clearly and persuasively.

Materials needed other than text

- Access to computers
- An item of personal significance (or a photo if the item is something that cannot be brought to school or a pet)
- “What is a memoir?” printed or made available online
<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/memoir-vs-autobiography/>
- “How to write a memoir” printed or made available online
<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-start-writing-a-memoir>

Lesson Plan

Students:

Prior knowledge, first impressions, questions raised:

- Prior to the class, ask students to bring in an item of personal significance or a photo if the item cannot be brought to class.
- Some students may know what memoirs are, but most likely not. Helping them understand the difference between memoirs and autobiographies will be important.

Teacher Presentation to the Class:

- Explain to students that they will be starting a new assignment where they will learn about and practice writing a memoir. This lesson will be done in preparation or after reading the play/seeing the play *The Piano Lesson*. One of the key struggles in the play is a discussion of what to do with a family heirloom, a piano. Imagine one of those people wrote the story of that piano down from their own perspective. That would be a memoir.
- Pass out the article or share “What is a memoir?”
<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/memoir-vs-autobiography/>. Draw a Venn-Diagram on the whiteboard. Ask students to identify differences between memoirs and autobiographies and key features of memoirs. As they come up with answers, have them write them on the board in the Venn-Diagram.
- Next, have students lay out their item of personal significance on their desk. Have them put a sheet of notebook paper by the item with their name and a short naming of the item (like necklace or pet dog or gift from grandma).
- Instruct students they are not allowed to touch another classmate’s item. Then all students should walk around the room and visit each item. Students should “ask questions” of the item to learn more about it. On the sheet of notebook paper by the item, they will write down that question for their classmate. Examples:
 - Why are you important to your owner?
 - Is your color significant?
 - What is your name?
 - How did your owner get you?
 - Were you a gift?
 - What does your owner use you for?
- Students should not repeat a question if it’s already been asked.

- Once students have asked questions to each item, they return to their desk and look over the questions that were asked by their peers.
- Then, pass out the article/share the article “How to write a memoir” - <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-start-writing-a-memoir>. Go over or have students read this article.
- Students should then begin writing a memoir using their item and the questions classmates asked as a starting point. Please note: students should not be expected to answer any or all of the questions. They are brainstorming tools.

Key words/new vocabulary:

Memoir

Autobiography

Sources/resources:

- “How to Start Writing a Memoir: 10 Tips for Starting Your Memoir - 2023.” MasterClass, www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-start-writing-a-memoir. Accessed 23 Aug. 2023.
- “Memoir vs. Autobiography: What’s the Difference?” Grammarly, 7 June 2022, www.grammarly.com/blog/memoir-vs-autobiography/.

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Character Analysis through Drama**

Author: Phyllis Wezeman
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

Overview

Grade level: 7-12

Discipline/subject area: English Language Arts

Topic of lesson: Character Analysis Through Drama

Objectives

- Read the script or watch the movie *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson.
 - Identify the role of characters in a story from any genre.
 - Learn about the primary people, secondary characters, and symbolic images in *The Piano Lesson*.
 - Come to a deeper understanding of the characters in *The Piano Lesson*.
 - Use drama techniques to demonstrate depth of analysis.
 - Discover how characters move a drama from beginning to climax to conclusion.
-

Standards addressed

- 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.
 - 7-12.W.1 – Write routinely over a variety of time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
-

Lesson Summary

In this five-day lesson about August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, students will engage with three sets of characters, analyze their roles in the play, and tell their stories through a variety of drama techniques. In this piece, the fourth work in Wilson’s *Century Cycle*, the 1930s characters include eight people with scripted dialogue, more than thirty individuals named but not seen in the production, and several symbols which portray significant roles throughout the story. As learners work individually, in small groups, and as a class, they will discover that *The Piano Lesson* is more than instruction for playing an instrument. It offers valuable life lessons for all people in every time and place.

Key words/new vocabulary

Ancestors

Character(s)/Character development
Dialogue
Double entendre
First-person drama
Interview
Legacy
Point-of-view
Script

Strategies

Brainstorming
Class discussion
Direct instruction
Drama techniques: first-person, point-of-view, one line of dialogue, interview
Gallery walk
Graphic organizers
Independent practice
Peer feedback
Problem solving
Questioning
Reading script
Recording drama
Small group
Viewing film
Writing

Student Output

Character analysis
Graphic organizers
First-person, point-of-view, one paragraph drama
Interviews
One line of dialogue
Recording first-person drama

Assessment

Class discussion
Group contributions
Graphic organizers
Presentations

Lesson Plan (Day One)

Materials needed

- Clip – Life of August Wilson - Several available on You Tube for example: “[August Wilson, Playwright/Biography](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crsf6cBksdU)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crsf6cBksdU> (2:03); “[The Life of August Wilson](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ell5L1_Ma0)” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ell5L1_Ma0 (5:18)
- Clip – *The Piano Lesson* – Several available on You Tube for example: “[August Wilson’s The Piano Lesson/New York Live TV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm-wUyicVhs)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm-wUyicVhs> (2:58); “[August Wilson's The Piano Lesson returning to Broadway](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQwPITa8W9o)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQwPITa8W9o> (3:17); “[The Making of The Piano Lesson](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQBT_x2mblw)” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQBT_x2mblw (11:01); “[Video Trailer: The Piano Lesson \(Syracuse Stage\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jJoNFsLL-0)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jJoNFsLL-0> (2:09)
- Copy machine or printer and paper
- Equipment to show movie
- Movie: *The Piano Lesson*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aa0xv1RDONA>
- Resource Sheet 1: Characters Appearing in the Play, attached to this lesson plan
- Resource Sheet 2: People Mentioned in the Script but Not Appearing in the Play, attached to this lesson plan
- Script of *The Piano Lesson* or <https://www.cardozohigh.com/ourpages/auto/2018/2/8/53076555/The-Piano-Lesson.pdf>
- Optional: Supplement: [August Wilson’s Century Cycle](#) and/or Biography of August Wilson, [Chart](#) or [Narrative](#), all available at the end of this packet.

Advance Preparation

- Copy, or upload, Resource Sheets 1 and 2 to distribute to students. Note that copies of Sheet 2 (People Mentioned in the Script but Not Appearing in the Play) will be used again on Day Four.
- Display these questions on a board or online: Favorite character in any story? Why?

Introduction - Students [6-8 minutes]

Direct two or three students to form a group and to take turns naming a favorite character in any story such as a book, movie, play, or song. Ask for impromptu, top-of-the head responses rather than thought-through, pondered answers. Tell the student to state the name, offer two to three of the character’s personality traits, the character’s role in the story, and the student’s reasons for their selection.

Discussion – Class [6-8 minutes]

Ask volunteers to name their selected characters, reasons they were chosen, and ideas on why they were included in the story. Invite ideas on how or why authors, musicians, playwrights, and screenwriters decide on the characters to include in their work.

Presentation – Teacher [15-20 minutes]

Tell the group that they will be introduced to eight main characters and more than thirty people, plus symbols, while hearing, reading and/or viewing the play, *The Piano Lesson*, by August Wilson.

Ask students to contribute information they know about the playwright, August Wilson. If necessary, offer this brief background: August Wilson (1945–2005) was an award-winning Black American playwright whose work included ten plays known as *The Century Cycle* that illuminate the joys and struggles of the Black American experience in the U.S. during the twentieth century. Then, show one clip about Wilson’s life from suggested selections from YouTube.

Next, ask the class to share anything they have heard, or know, about the fourth play in Wilson’s *Century Cycle* called, *The Piano Lesson*. If necessary, provide this overview: *The Piano Lesson* (1987), set in 1936, concerns the struggle of two Black American siblings over a precious family heirloom, a piano carved with images of their formerly enslaved ancestors. If possible, share one YouTube clip about the production from the suggested selections.

Explain that as the script is read, or the made-for-television movie is shown, students are to think about their favorite, least liked, most intriguing, and uniquely memorable characters. These people can be either those that have a specific part in the play, like brother Boy Willie and sister Berniece, or others named in the text that do not appear on stage, such as the former enslaver of the Charles family Robert Sutter. During additional lessons on this topic, learners will select a character and drama techniques to tell the character’s story. In addition, since the symbol of the piano is an important part of the work and becomes a character in the play as well, they will use another drama method to tell its story, too.

Reading or Watching *The Piano Lesson* – During Class Time

Show the film, *The Piano Lesson*, or selected excerpts from it, or assign parts and read the script, or portions of it, with the group. If the class is seeing the high school matinee on March 20, 2024, the class may use that viewing experience for this part of the lesson.

Conclusion – Class [5-8 minutes]

Invite popcorn style, spontaneous, responses about the characters – favorite, least favorite, intriguing, and memorable.

Distribute handouts, or direct attention to an online version, of the two resources on the characters appearing in the play and those named, not seen, in the drama. Tell the students to review the lists and to be prepared to name their top choice of a character appearing in the play **and** their first pick of someone named in the play – plus reasons for the selections – during the next class.

Assign reading of the script if the film was viewed in class or viewing of the film if the script was read in session.

Lesson Plan (Day Two)

Materials needed

- Copy machine or printer and paper
- [Image: *The Piano Lesson* by Romare Bearden](#) (cover photo of this packet)
- Markers
- Resource Sheet 3: Main Character Analysis for Pre-writing Activity, attached to this lesson plan
- Resource Sheet 5: Main Characters/Quotes about the Piano, attached to this lesson plan
- Resource Sheet 6: Telling the Story through Drama – First Person, Point-of-View, Paragraph, attached to this lesson plan
- Script of *The Piano Lesson* or <https://www.cardozohigh.com/ourpages/auto/2018/2/8/53076555/The-Piano-Lesson.pdf>
- Sticky notes

Advance Preparation

- Copy, or upload, Resource Sheets 3, 5, and 6 for each student.
- Have extra copies of Resource Sheets 1 and 2 available for students that might need them.
- Write the name of each character (Avery, Berniece, Boy Willie, Doaker, Grace, Lymon, Maretha, Wining Boy) on a separate sticky note. Post them throughout the room. *Save for use on Day Four.*

Introduction – Students [5-6 minutes]

Direct two or three students to form a group and take turns sharing their favorite on-stage and off-stage characters from the play, *The Piano Lesson*, plus reasons why these people stood out from all the others. Discuss why August Wilson might have included these persons in the drama.

Discussion – Class [8-10 minutes]

Invite the learners to share their favorite main characters in August Wilson’s play, *The Piano Lesson*. Call attention to the eight sticky notes that are posted throughout the room. Direct people to move to one of the labeled locations (Avery, Berniece, Boy Willie, Doaker, Grace, Lymon, Maretha, and Wining Boy) and to stand by their choice. Ask a volunteer, or two, in each place to state why they selected that character. Then direct each team to work together to come up with one or two ideas on why Wilson included these people in his play. For example, he wanted to tell a story of family, so he needed people who were related to each other; Wilson used friends of the relatives to give more perspective on these character’s stories. Invite responses from several groups. Then, give a few students an opportunity to name their favorite off-stage characters. Invite everyone to take a seat.

Presentation – Teacher [10-12 minutes]

State that August Wilson decided on the title of the play, and one of the main characters, when he saw a piece of art by collage artist Romare Bearden in an exhibit. Display an image of Bearden's *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson explained that he liked the way the three words, "The Piano Lesson," looked together and decided to use them as the title of his play. In addition, Wilson noted that he immediately named the girl at the piano Maretha and resolved to make the piano a central part of the story.

Explain that students will engage in a three-part activity to explore the main actors in the show. First, everyone will use a chart to prepare a graphic organizer about their selected character. Hand out Resource Sheet 3 and review the sections: name, relationships, facts, characteristics, and quote. Note that while it would be easy to copy data from the handout about the characters, students should use no more than two items from the character handout for each section and provide additional ideas and information based on what they gleaned from reading the script or watching the movie. In addition, they are to search through the script, find, and include a quote related to the piano that was either spoken by the character or delivered by another actor in reference to the character and the piano. Share the example chart, based on the character Doaker, with the group. For additional examples of quotes, refer to Resource Sheet 5. Ask for questions on this part of the project and affirm everyone's ability to complete the activity.

Before forming groups, note that there are two more steps to this assignment. Explain that information on the chart will be used to develop a first-person, point-of-view, dramatic paragraph that will serve to introduce the character to the class. This process will be explained after the graphic organizers are completed. Then, as homework, the paragraph will be written, recorded, uploaded, and shown on Day Three.

Organize the students into same-character pairs to complete the pre-writing activity. Explain that partners should discuss and share ideas about their character, but their charts should not be identical. Allow ten minutes for this part of the project.

Chart/Graphic Organizer - Students [10-12 minutes]

As the pairs work on their charts, remind them to use the script of *The Piano Lesson* as a source to fill in the relationships, facts, characteristics, and quote sections. Offer help as needed and check with each team to be sure they are following the instructions to complete the assignment.

Presentation – Teacher [8-10 minutes]

At the end of the allotted time or when the charts are completed, reconvene as a class. Ask each pair to share one new piece of information they discovered, or an insight they had, during the process of working on the graphic organizer about their character.

Explain that the next step is to use the information on the chart to write a brief first-person, point-of-view, paragraph to share their chosen character's story. Students will write the paragraph then record themselves reading/performing their written text. Display, or hand out, Resource Sheet 6 and review each section: state the definition, cover what's important, offer tips, provide an example, list steps, and clarify the assignment. In addition, answer questions and respond to comments and suggestions.

If time allows, write the first-person dramas in class. If not, assign the activity as homework. Otherwise, writing and editing could take place entirely on day three if needed.

First-person, Point-of-View, Dramas – Students [15 minutes if class time allows]

Instruct each student to develop a one-paragraph drama about the selected character from the play. Circulate through the room offering paragraph revision suggestions and helping students problem-solve when necessary.

Presentation – Teacher [2 minutes]

Remind the students to record and upload their first-person dramas before the next class. Note that the recording should be no longer than two to three minutes at the most.

Conclusion – Students [2 minutes]

Invite three to five volunteers to share one exiting thing that they learned about their characters

Lesson Plan (Day Three)

Materials needed

- Copy machine or printer and paper
 - Equipment to play recorded dramas
 - Resource Sheet 7, attached to this lesson plan
-

Advance Preparation

- Check to be sure equipment works
 - Copy, or upload, Resource Sheet 7 for each student
-

Introduction – Students [4-6 minutes]

Ask students to partner with two or three others and consider ways to provide peer feedback on the first-person, point-of-view, dramas that their peers created and that they will view in this lesson. Direct them to write two examples that offer praise, one idea for a question, plus a sample suggestion.

Discussion – Class [5-6 minutes]

Ask students to share examples of feedback that provides praise and to offer sample questions and suggestions. Review any established peer feedback guidelines used in class and note where they can be found, such as hanging on a wall.

Presentation – Teacher [3-5 minutes]

Thank the class for their work on the first-person, point-of-view, dramas. Remind students that after watching each clip they will offer peer feedback. Explain the method for their response – electronic form, verbal comment, written note, or something else.

Viewing First-Person Dramas – Class [Time available during class]

View first-person, point-of-view, dramas. Provide peer feedback.

Optionally, students might bring in a copy of their script with no name on it. Teacher could distribute anonymous copies throughout the class and students could provide feedback on the anonymous copies.

Presentation – Teacher [5-6 minutes]

Praise the students for their work. Challenge the class to build on their reports by considering two questions about development of their selected characters – their struggle and its resolution. Distribute, or refer to, Resource Sheet 7: Character Development. Review the questions and explain that they are to be used to consider the person’s growth throughout the play. As homework, tell the class to answer the questions, bring the sheet to the next class, and be prepared to discuss their ideas.

Conclusion – Class [2-3 minutes]

Ask students to share one thing they liked about the process of learning about their characters and developing the first-person, point-of-view, dramas. Remind them to bring the completed Character Development sheet to the next class.

Lesson Plan (Day Four)

Materials needed

- Copy machine or printer and paper
 - Basket
 - Resource Sheet 2: People Mentioned in the Script but Not Appearing in the Play [from Day One], attached to this lesson plan
 - Resource Sheet 8: One Line of Dialogue, attached to this lesson plan
 - Resource Sheet 9: The Piano, attached to this lesson plan
 - Scissors
 - Sticky notes with character names [from Day Two].
-

Advance Preparation

- Cut apart the sections of both sides of Resource Sheet 2: People Mentioned in the Script but Not Appearing in the Play. Cut the sheet horizontally across so that each strip has the character and their relationships and information.
- Choose enough characters for each student to have one name, which might mean eliminating some of the less important people.
- Place the paper strips in a basket.
- Display the sticky notes with character names, from Day Two, around the room.

Introduction – Students [2-3 minutes]

Form pairs and challenge students to take turns naming one lesson learned from the life story of the character in their first-person drama. For example, from Berniece – overcoming fear, Doaker – remaining neutral, and Avery – being a friend.

Discussion – Class [8-10 minutes]

Call attention to the eight sticky notes, displaying main character names, located throughout the room. At a signal, tell students to take their homework sheets and move to the location of the person they studied. For example, all learners who wrote about Doaker gather around the note with his name. Instruct each group member to offer an idea on their character’s struggle and its resolution. Call attention to the question “What are the characters plans for the future?” and state that, as a team, they should come up with one sentence to answer it. For example, Doaker left for the railroad station, boarded a train, started cooking, and spent time away from the tension in his household! Invite students to share their imaginative responses! Ask everyone to take a seat.

Presentation - Teacher [5-8 minutes]

Remind the class that there is another set of characters in the play – over thirty of them – that do not appear on stage but still have an impact on the main actors as well as the story line of the drama.

Tell the group August Wilson stated in an interview that he began each script by writing a single line of dialogue for each character, reflected on what the person might want to reveal, and then wrote the person’s story. Tell students they will imagine the first line August Wilson might have written for the named, but not seen, characters in *The Piano Lesson*. Ask everyone to take out Resource Sheet 2, from Day One, which lists information on these behind-the-scenes people. Invite a few volunteers to name a favorite on the list and an idea of what the person contributed to the play. Accept all responses, being sure to note they all add to the legacy of the Charles family. Then, distribute Resource Sheet 8: One Line of Dialogue. State that everyone will pick a slip of paper with a name, work in a group, learn about their selected people, compose a line for each character, post their work, and participate in a gallery walk to meet these folks. Review questions to use to learn about the characters. Then, share the examples of a few first lines.

One Line of Dialogue – Students [20 minutes]

Direct students to count off, one to four, and form four groups. Have each person pick a name from the basket and move with their group to a designated area for discussion. Remind each team that they are to use the One Line of Dialogue sheet as a guide for the activity. In turn, each team member is to state the name of their unseen person and ask group members to help answer questions: What does Wilson reveal about the person? How is the information shared? By whom? When? Where? and Why was this person mentioned in the script? Next, each person should compose a first line for the character. Once finished, each student is to share the line asking for feedback and revising as needed. Direct teams to get a piece of tape to use to post their sheets around to room for others to view.

Gallery Walk – Class [8 minutes]

Instruct students to walk around the room reading and reviewing the first lines. Invite volunteers, or one or two people from each group, to read their lines to the class.

Congratulate the students on their imaginative work. Let them know they will have the opportunity to interview one more character on Day Five. Invite guesses as to who, or what, the character might be. Distribute Resource Sheet 9: The Piano and tell everyone to become familiar with the information on the piano before the next session.

Conclusion – Students [5 minutes]

Ask each student, or pair, to name the most challenging part of the classes on *The Piano Lesson* and to state one way they addressed their challenge. For example, a challenge was learning the names of the ancestors, and it was addressed by using the resource sheets to figure them out.

Lesson Plan (Day Five)

Materials needed

- Copy machine or printer and paper
- Resource Sheet 9: The Piano [from Day Four]
- Resource Sheet 10: Interviews

Advance Preparation

- Duplicate, or upload, copies of Resource Sheet 10 for each student.

Introduction – Students [3-5 minutes]

Form small groups and ask each student to name one personal/family possession that is so valuable it could not be sold at any cost. Offer an example such as a family pet, an item of jewelry, or a secret recipe.

Discussion – Class [5-8 minutes]

Invite volunteers to share responses to the opening question. State that in this play, the piano is the most valuable possession for the Charles family. Refer to Resource Sheet 9: The Piano. Ask students to share one or two things they learned from each category. For example: history – Robert Sutter let Joel Nolander select the slaves he wanted in trade for the piano; or theft – the Charles brothers took the piano from the Sutter home on July 4th – Independence Day.

Ask students to recall the source of August Wilson’s inspiration for *The Piano Lesson* which was the Romare Bearden painting of the same title. Have volunteers read the two Wilson quotes on the handout in which the playwright speaks of the role the piano will play in the story.

Presentation – Teacher [6-8 minutes]

State that the piano, in this drama, literally becomes one of the main characters in the show. Tell the class they will use a drama method called interview to research and report information about the piano so all may learn lessons from it. An interview involves asking questions to converse with respondents and collect data about a subject, in this case the piano.

Ask the class if they have heard of the term “5 W”? State that “5W” is an acronym which means each “W” stands for a word that helps people gather information. In this case, the “5W” words will aid the learners to better understand the importance of the piano in Wilson’s play and the relationship of the characters with this object. Invite volunteers to suggest what the five “W” words might be. Accept all responses but state that the words are Who, What, When, Where, and Why. Explain that students will organize into five groups – one each for Who, What, When, Where, and Why. One person in each group will play the role of the piano and the others will be the interviewers. Distribute, or refer to, Resource Sheet 10: Interview and review the sections. Note that each team will work together to compose two to three questions, related to the piano, for their category. For example, a question from Who? might be Who were the original owners of the piano? and a query for What? could be What did Boy Charles and his brothers, Doaker and Wining Boy, do to regain possession of the piano and what were the results? Remind the groups they should also consider answers that their “piano player” can give during the interview. Support responses with evidence in the text plus quotes. Review the assignment, ask for questions, and form five groups.

Graphic Organizer: Interview – Students [10 minutes]

While the students work in their Who, What, When, Where, and Why groups, circulate through the room to guide the process, respond to questions, and offer affirmation. If time, have each group practice asking and answering their questions.

Interviews – Class [15 minutes]

Re-gather as a class. In turn, invite each group to have one team member play the role of the piano and the others ask two questions for their category in front of the class. Continue until each group has had an opportunity to participate.

Presentation – Teacher [10 minutes]

Share the literary term double entendre. Use it to consider the meaning of the title of August Wilson’s play, *The Piano Lesson*. A double entendre is a figure of speech that involves two different interpretations of a word, phrase, or sentence. One meaning is readily apparent while the other is more hidden or subtle, often risqué. While the obvious meaning of *The Piano Lesson* involves instruction for playing a keyboard instrument each of the people on stage gain important lessons from the piano as well. Ask students to propose what the eight scripted characters learn from the conflict over the piano between brother Boy Willie and sister Berniece as well as from Uncles Doaker and Wining Boy, daughter/niece Maretha, and friends Avery, Grace, and Lymon. Share responses which could include: Avery – follow your dreams; Berniece – face the past, live in the present, enjoy the future; Boy Willie – be honest; Doaker – be reliable; Grace – trust your instincts; Lymon – take a risk; Maretha – keep learning; Wining Boy – be faithful.

Conclusion – Students [2-3 minutes]

Challenge each student to state one take-away, or life lesson, from the study of August Wilson’s play, *The Piano Lesson*.

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 1: Characters Appearing in the Play [Alphabetical Order]

Name & Age	Relationships	Information
Avery Brown Age - 38	+ Romantic interest - Berniece	+ Ambitious, big goals, honest + Moved from Mississippi to Pittsburgh 2 years ago to follow, hopefully, marry Berniece + Works as elevator operator + Became preacher after dream about tending sheep + Raising money for Good Shepherd Church/God in Christ + Encourages Berniece to play the piano & deal with the past
Berniece Charles Age - 35	+ Daughter - Boy Charles & Mama Ola + Mother - Maretha + Niece - Doaker & Wining Boy + Relationship - Avery Brown + Sister - Boy Willie + Widow - Crawley	+ Protagonist of the play + Strong woman focused on raising daughter + Mourning husband & blames Boy Willie for his death + Moved from Mississippi to Pittsburgh after husband killed & lives with Uncle, Doaker + Housekeeper for wealthy steel mill owner in Squirrel Hill + Played piano as a child but now fears waking spirits + Won't allow Boy Willie to sell piano because of family history + In the end, plays piano & reconnects with past
Boy Willie Charles Age - 30	+ Brother – Berniece + Friend/Partner – Lymon + Nephew – Doaker & Wining Boy	+ Another protagonist in play + Boyish, dreamer, naive + Brash, crude, impulsive,

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Romantic interest – Grace + Son – Boy Charles & Mama Ola + Uncle - Maretha 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> persistent, sneaky, talkative + Determined, optimistic, serious + Served time on prison farm + Lives in Mississippi but came to Pittsburgh to raise funds from sale of piano & watermelons + Berniece blames him for death of her husband, Crawley + Wants to buy Sutter’s land – 1/3 each from funds from piano, savings, sale of watermelons + Wrestles with Sutter’s Ghost + Returns to South in the end
<p>Doaker Charles Age - 47</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Brother – Boy Charles & Wining Boy + Estranged husband - Coreen + Great Uncle - Maretha + Uncle – Berniece & Boy Willie 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Tall, thin with sharp features + Caring, loving, quiet, restrained but speaks with authority & purpose + Lives on first floor of house where Berniece & Maretha stay + Keeper of family history, storyteller of play + Worked railroad 30 years, first laying track & now as cook + Believes Sutter’s ghost is tied to piano
<p>Maretha Charles Age - 11</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Daughter – Berniece & Crawley (deceased) + Great Niece – Doaker & Wining Boy + Niece – Boy Willie 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Obedient, quiet + Mother focuses on raising her, giving her opportunities + Attends school for enrichment + Hopes to become a teacher + Takes piano lessons, not good

<p>Wining Boy Charles Age - 56</p>	<p>+ Brother – Boy Charles & Doaker + Uncle – Berniece & Boy Willie + Widower – Cleotha Holman</p>	<p>+ Life mix of sorrow & zest + Helped brothers take family piano from Sutter’s home + Musician who made records & played piano + Current life drinking & gambling + Lives in Kansas City</p>
<p>Lymon Jackson Age - 29</p>	<p>+ Business Partner/Friend – Boy Willie + Romantic interest – Grace, briefly Berniece</p>	<p>+ Generally quiet, but straightforward when he speaks + Determined in his pursuits + Caught stealing wood & sentenced to work on prison farm, then for Mr. Stovall + Owns truck & hid to avoid law + Leaves Mississippi for Pittsburgh with Boy Willie and truckload of watermelons to sell + Ladies’ man; has brief kiss with Berniece + Hopes to find job & woman in North</p>
<p>Grace Age - 20s</p>	<p>+ Romantic interest - Boy Willie then Lymon</p>	<p>+ Meets Boy Willie & Lymon + Intends to spend night with Boy Willie but goes with Lymon</p>

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 2: People Mentioned in the Script but Not Appearing in the Play
[Alphabetical Order; Partial List]

Name & Age (if known)	Relationships	Information
Rupert Bates	+ Cousin - Charles family + Friend - Willa Bryant	+ Gave Willa Bryant Wining Boy's address
Boy Charles Age – 37/39 (at death)	+ Brother – Doaker, Wining Boy + Father – Bernice & Boy Willie + Husband – Mama Ola	+ Boy Charles, with brothers, took piano from Sutter house + Sutter killed him in revenge
Willa Bryant	+ Friend – Cleotha Holman	+ Wrote Wining Boy re death
Coreen Charles Age - 50s	+ Estranged or ex-wife - Doaker	+ Moved to New York after separated
Mr. Cohen	+ Potential landlord - Avery	+ Rent space for church
Crawley Age – 30s (at death)	+ Father (deceased) – Maretha + Husband (deceased) - Berniece	+ Shot by sheriff while helping move stolen wood
Dolly Age - 20s	+ Girlfriend – Lymon	+ Date for one night
Cleotha Holman Age 46 (at death)	+ Wife (deceased) – Wining Boy	+ Met age 16 but rocky marriage + Died out of town
L. D. Jackson	+ Father – Lymon	+ Jailed; Killed at dance
Leroy	+ Former boyfriend - Grace	+ Has key to her apartment
Mama Berniece	+ Great-Grandmother – Berniece & Boy Willie + Grandmother - Boy Charles, Doaker & Wining Boy + Mother – Papa Boy Walter Charles + Wife – Papa Boy Willie	+ Enslaved & traded, with 9-year-old son, Boy Walter Charles, to Joel Nolander in exchange for piano as Robert Sutter's gift to wife, Ophelia
Mama Esther	+ Mother – Papa Boy Willie, the woodworker + Wife – Papa Boy Charles	+ Berniece calls on her for help to rid house/piano Sutter's ghost + Enslaved owned by Sutters
Mama Nellie	+ Grandmother – Bernice & Boy Willie + Mother – 3 Sons	+ Sons are Boy Charles, Doaker & Wining Boy

	+ Wife – Boy Walter Charles	
Mama Ola Age – died 7 years ago	+ Mother – Bernice & Boy Willie + Wife – Boy Charles	+ Polished piano every day + Begged Bernice to play in honor of father, Boy Charles
Jim Miller	+ Employer – Boy Willie & Lymon	+ Hauled wood for him
Miss Eula	+ Piano Teacher - Berniece	+ Mother insisted on lessons
Joel Nolander	+ Owner - piano	+ Traded piano to Robert Sutter
Papa Boy Charles	+ Father – Papa Boy Willie, the woodcarver + Great-Great-Grandfather – Berniece & Boy Willie + Husband – Mama Esther	+ Enslaved worker owned by Sutter family + Patriarch of Charles family
Papa Boy Willie Charles	+ Father – Papa Boy Walter Charles + Grandfather – Boy Charles, Doaker & Wining Boy + Great-Grandfather – Berniece & Boy Willie + Husband – Mama Berniece	+ Used woodworking talents to carve images of wife & son, plus family history, into Ophelia Sutter’s piano
Papa Boy Walter Charles	+ Father – 3 sons + Grandfather – Berniece & Boy Willie + Husband – Mama Nellie	+ Sons are Boy Charles, Doaker & Wining Boy + Traded, at age 9, for piano
People killed by Ghost of the Yellow Dog: Bob Mallory, Howard Peterson, Ed Saunders, Robert Smith, Charlie Webb	+ People living in Mississippi	+ Lost lives to “Ghost of the Yellow Dog”
Henry Potter	+ Person in Mississippi	+ Sold truck to Lymon
Alberta Samuels	+ Sister – Cleotha Holman	+ Friend Willa Bryant
Sheriff	+ Official in Mississippi	+ Shot Crawley; Seeking Lymon
Jack Slattery	+ Resident - Mississippi	+ Doaker’s lodging/Mississippi
Jim Stovall	+ Person in Mississippi + Potential buyer – Sutter’s land	+ Posts bail for Lymon & expects work in payment

Jim Sutter	+ Grandson – Ophelia & Robert + Land owner – Marlin County, Mississippi	+ Big man, 340 pounds + Fell into a well & died
Ophelia Sutter	+ Grandmother – Jim Sutter + Wife – Robert Sutter	+ Receives piano as gift + Missed slaves, likes carvings
Robert Sutter	+ Grandfather – Jim Sutter + Husband - Ophelia	+ Original owner Charles family + Traded two slaves for a piano + Had Papa Boy Willie carve it
Sutter's Brother	+ Brother – Sutter, lives Chicago	+ Selling Sutter's land
Sutter's Sons	+ Sons – Jim Sutter	+ 1 went North for school + 1 stayed in South, not bright

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 3: Main Character Analysis for Pre-writing Activity

Pick a main, scripted, character from August Wilson’s play, *The Piano Lesson*, and develop an information sheet about the person. It will become the basis of a first-person, point-of-view, paragraph to introduce the character.

Character/Person	
Relationship to others in the play (such as brother)	
5 facts about the person (like age, occupation)	
5 characteristics of the person (such as hardworking, reliable)	
Quote from the play, by or to the person, about the piano	

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 4: Main Character Analysis for Pre-writing Activity
Example

Pick a main, scripted, character from August Wilson’s play, *The Piano Lesson*, and develop an information sheet about the person. It will become the basis of a first-person, point-of-view paragraph, about the character.

Character/Person	Doaker Charles
Relationship to others in the play (such as brother)	1. Brother of Boy Charles and Wining Boy 2. Estranged husband of Coreen 3. Uncle of Berniece and Boy Willie and great-uncle of Maretha
5 facts about the person (like age, occupation)	1. Age 47 2. Employed by railroad for 30 years, first laying tracks and now as a cook 3. Moved from Mississippi to Pittsburgh during The Great Migration 4. Rents or owns home where he has a bedroom on the first floor, the piano sets in the parlor, and Berniece and Maretha sleep on the second floor 5. Tall, thin
5 characteristics of the person (such as hardworking, reliable)	1. Knows secrets – piano keys move 2. Keeper of family history 3. Mediator between characters in the play 4. Steady 5. Understands that the legacy of the family lives on through the carvings on the piano
Quote from the play, by or to the person, about the piano	Act 1, Scene 2 Doaker: <i>Boy Charles used to talk about that piano all the time. He never could get it off his mind. [...] He be talking about taking it out of Sutter’s house. Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it...he had us. Say we was still in slavery. Me and Wining Boy tried to talk him out of it but it wouldn’t do any good. Soon as he quiet down about it he’d start up again. We seen where he wasn’t gonna get it off his mind...so, on the Fourth of July, 1911 ...me and Wining Boy went on down there with him and took that piano out of Sutter’s house.</i>

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 5 (Teacher Resource): Main Characters/Quotes about the Piano

Character	Quote
Avery	<p>Act 2, Scene 2 Avery: <i>You got to put all of that behind you, Berniece. That's the same thing like Crawley. Everybody got stones in their passway. You got to step over them or walk around them. You picking them up and carrying them with you. All you got to do is set them down by the side of the road. You ain't got to carry them with you. You can walk over there right now and play that piano. You can walk over there right now and God will walk over there with you. [...] You can walk over here right now and make it into a celebration.</i></p>
Berniece	<p>Act 1, Scene 2 Berniece: <i>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.'</i> [...] <i>You always talking about your daddy but you ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what?</i></p> <p>-</p> <p>Act 2, Scene 2 Berniece: <i>I was only playing it for her. When my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano. She used to have me playing on it [...] say when I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house.</i></p> <p>-</p> <p>Act 2, Scene 5 Stage directions to Berniece: (There are more sounds heard from upstairs. Doaker and Wining Boy stare at one another in stunned disbelief. It is in this moment, from somewhere old, that Berniece realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains in strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle[.]</p>
Boy Willie	<p>Act 1, Scene 1 Boy Willie: <i>Sutter's brother selling the land. He say he gonna sell it to me. That's why I come up here. I got one part of it. Sell them watermelons and get me another part. Get Berniece to sell that piano and I'll have the third part.</i></p> <p>-</p> <p>Act 1, Scene 2</p>

	<p>Boy Willie: <i>All that's in the past. If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn't be sitting up here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that. See, he couldn't do no better. When he come along he ain't had nothing he could build on. His daddy ain't had nothing to give him. The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano. And he died over giving me that. I ain't gonna let it sit up there and rot without trying to do something with it.</i></p> <p>-</p> <p>Act 2, Scene 5</p> <p>Boy Willie: <i>You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle around it ... and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. If you did that she wouldn't have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head held high. [...] You got her going out here thinking she wrong in the world. Like there ain't no part of it belong to her.</i></p>
Doaker	<p>Act 1, Scene 1</p> <p>Doaker: <i>Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano. [...] You can put that thought out your mind. Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano.</i></p> <p>-</p> <p>Act 1, Scene 2</p> <p>Doaker: <i>Boy Charles used to talk about that piano all the time. He never could get it off his mind. [...] He be talking about taking it out of Sutter's house. Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it...he had us. Say we was still in slavery. Me and Wining Boy tried to talk him out of it but it wouldn't do any good. Soon as he quiet down about it he'd start up again. We seen where he wasn't gonna get it off his mind...so, on the Fourth of July, 1911...when Sutter was at the picnic what the county give every year...me and Wining Boy went on down there with him and took that piano out of Sutter's house.</i></p>
Grace	<p>Act 2, Scene 5</p> <p>Grace: <i>I ain't waiting on you. Told me you was coming right back. Now you got to move a piano. You just like all the other men.</i></p>
Lymon	<p>Act 2, Scene 5</p> <p>Lymon: <i>Berniece ... I got to do this ... Boy Willie say he gonna ' give you half of the money ... say he want to get Sutter's land.</i></p> <p>-</p> <p>Act 2, Scene 5</p> <p>Lymon: <i>I got to help Boy Willie move the piano first.</i></p>
Maretha	<p>Act 1, Scene 1</p> <p>Doaker to Boy Willie about Berniece and Maretha: <i>You know she won't touch that piano. I ain't never known her to touch it since Mama Ola died. That's over seven years now. She say it got blood on it. She got Maretha playing on it though. Say Maretha can go on and do everything she can't do. Got her in an extra school down at the Irene Kaufman Settlement House. She want</i></p>

	<i>Maretha to grow up and be a schoolteacher. Say she good enough she can teach on the piano.</i>
Wining Boy	<p>Act 1, Scene 2 Wining Boy: <i>And I'll tell you another thing ... Berniece ain't gonna' sell that piano.</i></p> <p>-</p> <p>Act 1, Scene 2 Wining Boy: <i>I gave that piano up. That was the best thing that ever happened to me, getting rid of that piano.</i></p>

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 6: Telling the Story through Drama – First-Person, Point-of-View, Paragraph

Drama is a powerful method to use to tell stories. Whether a person is a member of an audience viewing a play, a student reading a script for a classroom exercise, or a part of the cast or crew of a local production, many layers of learning take place during involvement in dramatic experiences. Use a first person, point-of-view, drama technique to share information about one of the main characters in August Wilson’s play, *The Piano Lesson*.

What is first-person, point-of-view, drama?

- In a first-person drama, a character becomes the narrator and tells a story from his or her perspective – or point-of-view – using pronouns like I, me, and my. It’s almost like the listener can get in a character’s head, or mind, and watch the story unfold through his or her eyes. The character’s emotions and thoughts are at the forefront and help the viewer engage with and feel close to the person.

What’s important to remember when developing a first-person, point-of-view, drama?

- Even though a first-person paragraph is short, it needs to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the beginning, introduce the character and his relationship to other people in the play. In the middle, set up the conflict and move to the climax. At the end, resolve the conflict in a believable way.

What are three tips to remember for a first-person, point-of-view, drama?

- Use Active Voice – Let the character carry out the action rather than having someone else do it.
- Be consistent with I, Me, My – Use first person pronouns throughout the story rather than slipping into second and third person vocabulary.
- Decide on Past or Present Tense – Consider whether the scenario will be set in the past or in the present.

What’s an example?

Person – Doaker

Sometimes I feel like the referee in a game of tug of war. I’m Doaker Charles, Uncle of my brother Boy Charles’ daughter Berniece and son Boy Willie. Seems these two siblings each have their own idea about what to do with a family heirloom - the upright piano that sets in the parlor of my home in Pittsburgh. It’s almost like each of them are holding an end of a rope and tugging to get their own way. The boy wants to sell the piano to buy the land where our ancestors were enslaved. And, the girl wants to honor the history that’s been connected with the struggle of our family. But, unlike their struggle, I lived through another one when Boy Charles insisted we steal back our heirloom. *Boy Charles used to talk about that piano all the time. He never could get it off his mind. [...] He be talking about taking it out of Sutter’s house. Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it...he had us. Say we was still in slavery. Me and Wining Boy tried to talk him out of it but it wouldn’t do any good. Soon as he quiet down about it he’d*

start up again. We seen where he wasn't gonna get it off his mind...so, on the Fourth of July, 1911...when Sutter was at the picnic what the county give every year...me and Wining Boy went on down there with him and took that piano out of Sutter's house.

What are the steps of this assignment?

1. Choose a main character from the play, *The Piano Lesson*, to use for the assignment.
2. Complete the pre-writing activity chart about the person.
3. Write a first-person, point-of-view, one paragraph drama about the character.
4. Review the paragraph with someone for a second opinion.
5. Revise the writing based on comments from the reviewer.
6. Practice reading the paragraph. It does not need to be memorized.
7. Perform and record the first-person drama.
8. Share the recording on the school YouTube channel and submit the link.

What do I write?

Turn the information on the chart into a one paragraph story using a first-person, point-of-view, drama technique. Use your imagination and remember to use first-person pronouns like I, me, and my throughout the narrative.

First-Person, Point-of-View, One Paragraph Drama

Turn information on the character chart into a first-person, point-of-view, drama!

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 7: Character Development**

Character _____

What is the character's struggle?

What does the character want from life?
How is this revealed by the character's actions and words?
What does the character want from others?
How is this revealed by the actions and words of others?

How is the character's struggle resolved?

What does the character do to resolve the struggle?
What do others do to help the character resolve the struggle?
What leads the character to learn new things about him or herself?
What does the character learn?
How does the character feel at the end?
What are the character's plans for the future?

What can we learn from the characters struggle and its resolution?

From the character?
From other characters?

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 8: One Line of Dialogue**

August Wilson revealed that he began each script by writing a single line of dialogue for a character, reflected on what the person might want to reveal, and then wrote the person's story. Engage in an activity to imagine the first line August Wilson might have written for the named, but not seen, characters in his play, *The Piano Lesson*. Pick a person from "Resource Sheet 2: People Mentioned in Script but Not Appearing in Play", or use the name on the selected slip of paper, to compose one line of dialogue for the supporting character.

- Begin by answering questions, such as:
 - What does Wilson reveal about the person?
 - How is the information shared? By whom? When? Where?
 - Why was this person mentioned in the script?

- Then be imaginative and compose one line of dialogue for the character. For example:
 - *Willa Brown, friend of Wining Boy's deceased wife, Cleotha Holman*: It took a while to get his address from Rupert Bates but I felt I had to let him know Cleotha had died ... and I also wondered, in the back of my mind, if Wining Boy might be available for me.
 - *Coreen Charles, Doaker's estranged wife*: It was hard to have a strong marriage when he was always gone on another train trip – North one week, South the next – maybe even meeting other women on the journey and at the destination.
 - *Miss Eula, Berniece's piano teacher*: Her heart was never in it, but I kept giving Berniece lessons because her mother's soul and her father's spirit were in that piano.

In the space below, or on the back of the page, write one line of dialogue for the selected character.

Character _____

One line of dialogue

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 9: The Piano

Piano

- Focal point of the play and the set
- Piece of furniture in parlor of Doaker Charles' home in Pittsburgh

History – Sale

- Owned by Joel Nolander in Georgia
- Purchased/traded by Robert Sutter as anniversary gift for wife, Ophelia
- Purchase price - Robert Sutter allowed Joel Nolander to select two of his slaves in exchange for the piano. Nolander picked Mama Berniece and her nine-year old son, Boy Walter Charles.

Family Connections

- Ophelia and Robert Sutter owned the Charles family. They are grandparents of Jim Sutter, 340 pound man who mysteriously fell down a well and is the owner of the land Boy Willie wants to purchase through the sale of the piano.
- People traded were Mama Berniece, mother of Papa Boy Walter Charles; grandmother of Boy Charles, Doaker, and Wining Boy; great-grandmother of Boy Willie and Berniece; with her son Papa Boy Walter Charles, father of Boy Charles, Doaker, and Wining Boy; husband of Mama Nellie; and grandfather of Boy Willie and Berniece.

Carvings

- Ophelia Sutter missed Mama Berniece and her son, Walter Boy Charles, and wanted them more than the piano. Robert Sutter tried to reverse the trade but Nolander refused. Ophelia Sutter became sick. Robert Sutter tasked accomplished woodworker Papa Boy Willie, Mama Berniece's husband, with carving images of the sold slaves on the piano to comfort his wife. Carvings included Mama Berniece and Walter Boy Charles plus other ancestors, important events, and memories like births and deaths.

History – Theft

- Boy Charles believed Sutter would always own the family, despite being legally free, if he had the piano. Boy Charles thought stealing the piano would separate his family from the Sutters and their enslavement in every way. On July 4, 1911, while Sutter was at the county's Independence Day picnic, Boy Charles and brothers Doaker and Wining Boy took the piano from Robert Sutter's home. They brought it to Mama Ola's people, his in-laws, in the next county. Boy Charles tried to escape in a box car but as punishment for the theft Robert Sutter first set fire to Boy Charles' house and then to the car killing him and others – which started the mystery of *The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog*.

Ghosts

- Family members believe Sutter's ghost is connected to the piano: Berniece and Maretha both encounter one and scream; Doaker sees keys move on the piano but does not tell anyone; Boy Willie and Lymon cannot move the piano due to an unseen force; Boy Willie fights a ghost at the end.

Conflict

- Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to combine his profit with saved funds and watermelon money to purchase Jim Sutter's land, inherited from Ophelia and Robert Sutter. The family piano represents hope and financial freedom.
- Berniece does not want to sell the piano because it symbolizes the family's history. It was important to her mother Mama Ola, representing a symbol of deceased husband, Boy Charles. Mama Ola spent 17 years of widowhood polishing the piano with blood and tears. For her, its music was a way of processing the loss of her husband, connecting with him and his love for the instrument, and looking for a small amount of peace.

Piano – Current

- Berniece refuses to play the piano because she does not want to stir up the ghosts/spirits and she does not want to share its history with her daughter, Maretha, for fear of upsetting her.
- Berniece eventually overcomes her fears, faces the past, and plays the piano. She summons the strength and power of her ancestors to spiritually cleanse her home and her family's future.

Significance

- The piano is a physical example of the Charles family's painful, sorrowful past. Themes of race and freedom are evidenced by buying and selling enslaved people and separating family members.
- Berniece's inner conflict about the piano highlights the importance of confronting the past in order to live in the present and move on to a better future.

Quotes from August Wilson about the Piano

- "I got the title from a Romare Bearden painting...I wanted to explore the question, Can you acquire a sense of self-worth by denying your past? I don't think you can, and I wanted to show this. I had the idea of this piano. I wanted it to be very visible on stage. I wanted the piano in the course of the play to get bigger and bigger. I figured the more you understand about the piano, the more you understand about these people. The piano goes back 137 years, and was used to purchase members of the family during slavery." 1989 interview with David Watlinton from *Conversations with August Wilson*. (Bryer, Jackson R. and Hartig, Mary C., Editors. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006.)
- "I think I found the one perfect metaphor – which is the music, the piano. One of the things I started out with was the idea of putting this piano on stage, and the audience had to sit there and look at it. It looks strange. And then you begin to find out more, and more, and more. Every time you look at it, you see something different. You learn it was stolen. You learn this happened, and that happened. And every new piece of information you find out about the piano, the piano changes. Hopefully your attitude towards the piano keeps changing, which makes the piano get bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and it becomes more and more and more important." 1987 interview with Dinah Livingstone from *Conversations with August Wilson*. (Bryer, Jackson R. and Hartig, Mary C., Editors. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006.)

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Resource Sheet 10: Interview**

Craft a set of 5W interview questions, along with possible responses, to ask the piano!

Category	Questions
Who?	1. 2. 3.
What?	1. 2. 3.
When?	1. 2. 3.
Where?	1. 2. 3.
Why?	1. 2. 3.

Sample Questions

Category	Questions
Who?	Who is your favorite family member from the past?
What?	What happened on July 4, 1911 – Independence Day?
When?	When did you feel the spirits of the ancestors come alive?
Where?	Where are some of the places you were moved?
Why?	Why are you telling your story?

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Hamlet and *The Piano Lesson*: Are Ghosts Real?**

Author: Alena Coleman
South Bend Civic Theatre

Overview

Grade level: 11, 12

Discipline/subject area: English Language Arts

Topic of lesson: Comparative analysis of *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*

Objectives

- SWBAT identify points of comparison between *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*
 - SWBAT use textual evidence to defend a position on the reality of the ghosts in *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*
-

Standards addressed

- 11-12.RL.2.2 Compare and contrast the development of similar themes across two or more works of literature and analyze how they emerge and are shaped and refined by specific details.
 - 11-12.RL.3.2 Analyze a work of literature in which the reader must distinguish between what is directly stated and what is intended (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement) in order to understand the perspectives.
 - 11-12.RL.4.2 Analyze and evaluate works of literary or cultural significance in history for the way in which these works have used archetypes drawn from myths, traditional stories, or religious works, as well as how two or more of the works treat similar themes, conflicts, issues, or topics, and maintain relevance for current audiences.
-

Materials needed other than Text

- Access to text of *The Piano Lesson*, or performed text
 - Access to text of *Hamlet*
 - Printer
-

Lesson Plan

Students:

Students should have prior knowledge of the play *Hamlet*. If not already familiar, students will be introduced to the play *The Piano Lesson*, either using the physical text or the performative text from the South Bend Civic Theatre's production.

Teacher Presentation to the Class:

Warm-up (can be done as a bellringer): As a whole class, invite students to respond to the question, “Are ghosts real?”

- Expand this discussion by asking: What is a ghost? Have you ever seen one? Invite students to share personal experiences.
- Hand out the “Are Ghosts Real?” worksheet and ask students to write down their response (yes/no/maybe and why, briefly).

Recall and presentation: Explain that today students will be looking at “literary” ghosts in *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*.

- Refresh students on *Hamlet* by asking for a summary of the play if it has been a while and ask students about the ghost of the play. Who is the ghost in *Hamlet*? When did he appear?
- After students have read/seen *The Piano Lesson*, ask them to give a plot summary as well and then ask them about the ghosts of the play. Who are the ghosts? Where/when do they appear? What do they want?
- Students should identify:
 - Sutter- Sutter owned the land in Mississippi upon which previous generations of the Charles family had been enslaved. Despite being a very large man, he was killed shortly before the start of the play by drowning in a well. It is rumored that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed him to his death. He haunts the Charles family, especially in relation to the piano. He is first mentioned in the first scene and first appears to Berniece in the same scene.
 - The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog- Many years before the start of the play, Boy Charles, Doaker, and Winning Boy attempted to steal back the piano their grandfather had carved from the Sutter family. The incident ended with Boy Charles and others being burned to death in a boxcar (the Yellow Dog) while trying to escape. These ghosts seek revenge on former enslavers.
 - The ghosts of the ancestors- At the end of the play, Berniece calls on the ghosts of her ancestors (Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, Mama Ola) in a cleansing ritual to rid the house of the spirit of Sutter once and for all.
- As the group begins to identify these ghosts, have them list them on their worksheet.

Ghosts in the Black American tradition: Explain to students that while today they’ll be looking at ghosts as literary devices, ghosts have a special importance in the spiritual traditions of Black America. August Wilson was very conscious of these traditions and used them in his work.

- Show students the video “Uncovering the Power of Hoodoo: An Ancestral Journey” from the PBS series *Ritual*: <https://www.pbs.org/video/uncovering-the-power-of-hoodoo-an-ancestral-journey-skgv16/> (12 minutes)
- Invite students to use the video to make connections to *The Piano Lesson* (anything that comes up for them)
- Ask them to revisit the question “Are ghosts real?” Can your answer depend on your religion?
- If a more directed approach is necessary for your group, ask students to take notes while watching the video and respond to the following questions: What is hoodoo? Where does it come from? What are some ways Black Americas have practiced and continue to

practice “ancestor worship”? What is conjure? What are practices associated with conjure?

Returning to the text: Highlight that ghosts are very important for August Wilson as part of traditional African spiritual practices, but they are also literary devices! Ask: why might an author use ghosts? What function do they serve?

- Begin directing students to think about ghosts overall in *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*, why did Shakespeare and Wilson include them?
- Now, students will work in pairs or groups to determine if ghosts are real in *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*. Using the worksheet provided, they will provide textual evidence for AND against the ghosts being real in each text. If students have only seen *The Piano Lesson*, they can describe moments in the performance. Instruct students to complete the rest of the worksheet. At the end, they will respond again to the question of why ghosts? what function do they serve?

Extension: If time allows, extend this concept of literary ghosts to more personal ones. Ask students how they remember their own ghosts/ancestors. Invite students to use Daa’iyah Salaam (the Conjure Woman at the end of the video) and her practices of dedicating her Sundays to her ancestors as an example. How might we better remember our dead and our ancestors? Students might make a plan for remembering their ancestors, or they might bring in pictures of ancestors to class to create a whole-group memorial wall/space to commemorate our connections to the past.

Key words/new vocabulary:

- Literary device
- Textual evidence
- Hoodoo
- Conjure

Sources/resources:

- “Uncovering the Power of Hoodoo: An Ancestral Journey” from the PBS series *Ritual with Tank Ball*, <https://www.pbs.org/video/uncovering-the-power-of-hoodoo-an-ancestral-journey-skgyl6/>.
- “Are Ghosts Real?” worksheet
- For extension: “Ghosts of the Past” page in this resource book

Are Ghosts Real? Comparing *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson* Worksheet

Do you think ghosts are real? Explain why or why not:

Who is the ghost in *Hamlet*? Who are the ghosts in *The Piano Lesson*? Identify them and briefly explain who they are:

“Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!” Find textual evidence FOR the ghosts being real in *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*. List what you find below.

<u><i>Hamlet</i></u>	<u><i>The Piano Lesson</i></u>

If it's not a ghost, then what is it? What else could the ghosts of *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson* be? Find textual evidence for why the ghosts of the two plays are NOT ghosts and list what you find below.

<u><i>Hamlet</i></u>	<u><i>The Piano Lesson</i></u>

Now that you've looked at textual evidence about ghosts in both *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*, compare and contrast the ghosts in each text. What is different about the ghosts of *Hamlet* and *The Piano Lesson*? What is the same? Does one play have ghosts that are "more real"? Respond below.

Finally, why do you think Shakespeare and Wilson use ghosts? What function do they serve?

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
The Personal Perspective of the Great Migration**

Author: Liz Zimmerman
South Bend Civic Theatre

Overview

Grade level: 10

Discipline/subject area: History, Social Studies, US History

Topic of lesson: The Great Migration

Objective(s)

- Students will understand the socioeconomic and cultural drivers of the Great Migration.
 - Students will explore the personal implications of migration, examining feelings and experiences associated with moving.
 - Students will analyze a work of art (*The Piano Lesson*) to uncover its historical references and implications.
 - Through group discussions and activities, students will empathize with the personal choices and sacrifices made during the Great Migration.
 - Students will interpret visual art (Jacob Lawrence's Panel series) to connect individual experiences with broader historical trends.
-

Standards addressed

- USH.5.5: Examine the impact of the migrations of various groups within the United States and how these migrations changed the nation.
 - USH.5.6: Analyze the reasons for the migrations of various groups within the United States, including the Great Migration, and the impact of these migrations.
 - USH.5.7: Investigate and analyze the experiences of immigrants, migrants, and racial and ethnic minorities, highlighting their significant contributions to the social, economic, and political development of the United States.
 - USH.6.7: Identify and explain historical and contemporary efforts to reduce discrepancies between ideals and the reality of American public life, including the civil rights movement.
 - WH.5.8: Analyze art, education, philosophy, religion, and science to determine their impact on society, politics, culture, and the arts.
-

Materials needed other than text

- *The Piano Lesson* Act 1, Scene 1
 - KWL (Know-Want to Know-Learned) Chart (available at the end of this lesson)
 - Personal computers or devices with access to the internet
-

Lesson Plan (Day One)

Students:

Bell Ringer: As students enter class, they brainstorm on their own paper/notebooks at least 3 reasons that a person or family might move. Challenge them to come up with a reason that no one else in the class will write.

Start of Class: Have students share their answers. See if anyone has an answer that no one else wrote down.

Teacher Presentation to the Class:

- *Introduction & Engagement*
 - Ask students: How many have moved or relocated at some point? What were some of the associated feelings with moving? (excitement, nerves, sadness, anger, etc)
 - Mention that moving is a common experience.
- *Introducing the Great Migration*
 - Highlight: Approximately 6 million African Americans relocated from rural South to urban North, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970.
 - Emphasize the enormity: Equivalent to Indiana's entire population moving

Key words/new vocabulary:

- Great Migration
- Jim Crow Laws
- Industrial North
- Sharecropping

Strategies:

- Discuss reasons for the Great Migration
 - Connect back to relevant answers from the start of class
 - Escape from Jim Crow Laws: Racial segregation in the South.
 - Economic Opportunities: Job prospects in the North due to industrial growth and World War I labor shortages. Mention cities like Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Detroit.
 - Sharecropping Issues: Farming system in the South that left many in debt.
 - Seeking a Better Life: Desire for better education, voting rights, and safety from racial violence.
- Explore Cultural Impact
 - Use the interactive maps to visualize the impact of the movement
 - https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/map_diaspora-metro.shtml
 - Emphasize: The migration wasn't just a physical move but also a cultural shift.
 - Open discussion: Has anyone ever had someone new move into their apartment building or neighborhood? How has that affected the community? Imagine if 10 new people all moved in at once - what would that be like?
- Transition to *The Piano Lesson*

- Set in Pittsburgh, a city impacted by the Great Migration.
- Our next lesson will explore Act 1, Scene 1 of *The Piano Lesson* and we will talk about the two sides of migration: what is gained and what is lost
- If time: Have students volunteer to read the scene aloud

Lesson Plan (Day Two)

Students:

Bell Ringer: Students complete the Know and Want to Know sections of the KWL chart for The Great Migration

Teacher Presentation to the Class:

- Introduction & Engagement
 - Read Act 1 Scene 1 of *The Piano Lesson* out loud (or review if this was already done)
 - Have students share out some of their initial observations from the scene: What is being discussed? What's happening? What do each of the characters want? Why?

Group Work:

- Have each group examine Jacob Lawrence's Panel series.
 - <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series>
- As a group they should select one panel that they think represents this moment in *The Piano Lesson*. They should discuss and be prepared to answer:
 - Why they selected that panel
 - Are there any elements from Boy Willie and Berniece's perspective that are not represented in the panels?
 - What might be the next panel in the series?
- Have each group briefly share with the class

Instruction:

- Have students read this first-hand account of life in Pittsburgh after a move from the South
 - <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/culture/migrant-life/pittsburg-pennsylvania-may-11-1917>
- Discuss: How does this personal account illustrate some of the facts we have learned about the Great Migration? What does it do for your understanding to have this individual perspective and story?

Wrap up:

Revisit the scene from *The Piano Lesson* with a historical lens. Ask:

- How do Boy Willie and Lymon's views on the North and South mirror the reasons and conditions discovered in the historical accounts?

- What do the land and the piano represent in terms of the opportunities and sacrifices tied to migration?
- How might the characters' personal stories be a microcosm of the broader African American experience during the Great Migration?

Exit Ticket:

Complete the L part of the KWL chart

Sources/resources:

- University of Washington, America's Great Migration Project: https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/map_diaspora-metro.shtml
- Jacob Lawrence, The Migration Series: <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org>
- *The Piano Lesson*, by August Wilson

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class Period: _____

KWL CHART

Topic: _____

K	W	L

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
The Backstory
Author: Dawn Burns
Paramount South Bend, Paramount Schools of Excellence

Overview

Grade level: 6

Discipline/subject area: Visual Art

Topic of lesson: Interpreting the Story of the Piano

Objective(s)

- Create a visual work from the carved images on the piano that might tell a deeper story of the history of the family
-

Standard addressed

- VA:Re7.1.6 (a) Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.
-

Materials needed other than text

- Art paper
 - Acrylic paint
 - Paint brushes
 - Solo cups (for water)
 - Pencils/ Charcoals (for sketching)
 - A copy of the image of the carved piano
-

Images



Romare Bearden's *The Piano Lesson (Homage to Mary Lou)* (1983), from the [Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts](https://www.pennsylvaniaacademyoffinearts.org/)



The piano for the 2023 Broadway revival of *The Piano Lesson*, designed by [Four Horseman Studios](https://www.fourhorsemenstudios.com/). See their website for more information about the production of the piano and higher-quality images: <https://www.sourcehorsemen.com/updates/blog/creating-the-piano-for-august-wilsons-the-piano-lesson>.

Lesson Plan

Teacher Presentation to the Class:

- Start by providing a brief background on August Wilson. Highlight these key facts:
 - August Wilson was born on April 27, 1947, and died October 2, 2005. He was a playwright who created 10 plays, called the *American Century Cycle*; one play set during each decade of the 20th Century. He tells the story of the Black experience. Most of his plays take place in Pittsburgh, PA, and one takes place in

Chicago, IL. He won two (2) Pulitzer Prizes. One for *Fences*, and one for *The Piano Lesson*.

- Show a brief video about August Wilson, perhaps about five minutes of August Wilson in “St. Paul: A MN Original Special”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1czXv6U_64, or this 13-minute clip from 60-minutes <https://youtu.be/pwjqrIFoqDE?si=Cv9JULwq0W9liS8d>
- Explain that August Wilson was often influenced to write by other pieces of art, especially the works of visual artist Romare Bearden.
 - Romare Bearden was born September 2, 1922, and died March 12, 1988. He began his artistic life as a painter, but in the 1960s had discovered collage.
 - See the Production History Page in this packet for more information about how August Wilson was inspired by Romare Bearden.
- Show students the image of the collage by Romare Bearden *The Piano Lesson (Homage to Mary Lou)* that inspired the play *The Piano Lesson*. Connect this work of art to the central drama of the play—the conflict over what to do with another work of art, the intricately carved piano belonging to the Charles family. Introduce students to the piano by showing them the images above from Four Horseman Studios (use their website to see the pictures in more detail) and/or show them the opening scenes of the *The Piano Lesson* movie, which features the piano: <https://youtu.be/R2iWteE2GQc?si=hIlpi6rkqd7TVv4S>.
- In a production of Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, a design team interprets the story of the plan and creates a piano with images representing the painful past of the Charles family. These images tell a story of the family’s past that they don’t necessarily want to confront. Ask students to Think/Pair/Share on the following questions or conduct a whole-class discussion:
 - What thoughts do the images on the piano bring to mind? What story might they tell?
 - Does your family, or does someone you know have a painful past that they might not want to remember?
 - Does an image inspire a more in-depth story you might be able to tell through visual art?
 - What do you feel when you look at the carved images in the piano? Do you feel the history? The painful legacy of slavery?
 - How do these historical images connect to the experiences of descendants of slaves? What generational traumas might linger?

Students:

Now that students have become familiar with August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* and thought critically about the meaning of the images on the piano, invite students to a painting that expands the story of one or more of the images on the piano from the movie/the images shown in class.

Sources/resources:

- Piano images from Four Horseman Studios:
<https://www.sourcehorsemen.com/updates/blog/creating-the-piano-for-august-wilsons-the-piano-lesson>
- Video of August Wilson in St. Paul: A MN Original Special:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1czXv6U_64
- August Wilson in 60-minutes clip:
<https://youtu.be/pwjqRiFogDE?si=Cv9JUlwq0W9liS8d>
- *The Piano Lesson* Made-for-TV Movie:
<https://youtu.be/R2iWteE2GQc?si=hllpi6rkqd7TVv4S>
- Romare Bearden's *The Piano Lesson (Homage to Mary Lou)* (1983), from the Pennsylvania academy of Fine Arts:
<https://www.pafa.org/museum/collection/item/piano-lesson-homage-mary-lou#:~:text=Bearden%20depicted%20a%20music%20teacher,play%20of%20the%20same%20title>.
- Londré, Felicia Hardison. "A piano and its history: family and transcending family." *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*, edited by Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 113-123, doi:10.1017/CCOL0521866065. [Available here.](#)

**The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Supplement: Characters Appearing in the Play**

Author: Phyllis Wezeman
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

Characters in Alphabetical Order

Name & Age	Relationships	Information
Avery Brown Age - 38	+ Romantic interest - Berniece	+ Ambitious, big goals, honest + Moved from Mississippi to Pittsburgh 2 years ago to follow, hopefully, marry Berniece + Works as elevator operator + Became preacher after dream about tending sheep + Raising money for Good Shepherd Church/God in Christ + Encourages Berniece to play the piano & deal with the past
Berniece Charles Age - 35	+ Daughter - Boy Charles & Mama Ola + Mother - Maretha + Niece - Doaker & Wining Boy + Relationship - Avery Brown + Sister - Boy Willie + Widow - Crawley	+ Protagonist of the play + Strong woman focused on raising daughter + Mourning husband & blames Boy Willie for his death + Moved from Mississippi to Pittsburgh after husband killed & lives with Uncle, Doaker + Housekeeper for wealthy steel mill owner in Squirrel Hill + Played piano as a child but now fears waking spirits + Won't allow Boy Willie to sell piano because of family history + In the end, plays piano & reconnects with past

<p>Boy Willie Charles Age - 30</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Brother – Berniece + Friend/Partner – Lymon + Nephew – Doaker & Wining Boy + Romantic interest – Grace + Son – Boy Charles & Mama Ola + Uncle - Maretha 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Another protagonist in play + Boyish, dreamer, naive + Brash, crude, impulsive, persistent, sneaky, talkative + Determined, optimistic, serious + Served time on prison farm + Lives in Mississippi but came to Pittsburgh to raise funds from sale of piano & watermelons + Berniece blames him for death of her husband, Crawley + Wants to buy Sutter’s land – 1/3 each from funds from piano, savings, sale of watermelons + Wrestles with Sutter’s Ghost + Returns to South in the end
<p>Doaker Charles Age - 47</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Brother – Boy Charles & Wining Boy + Estranged husband - Coreen + Great Uncle - Maretha + Uncle – Berniece & Boy Willie 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Tall, thin with sharp features + Caring, loving, quiet, restrained but speaks with authority & purpose + Lives on first floor of house where Berniece & Maretha stay + Keeper of family history, storyteller of play + Worked railroad 30 years, first laying track & now as cook + Believes Sutter’s ghost is tied to piano
<p>Maretha Charles Age - 11</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Daughter – Berniece & Crawley (deceased) + Great Niece – Doaker & Wining Boy + Niece – Boy Willie 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Obedient, quiet + Mother focuses on raising her, giving her opportunities + Attends school for enrichment + Hopes to become a teacher + Takes piano lessons, not good
<p>Wining Boy Charles Age - 56</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Brother – Boy Charles & Doaker + Uncle – Berniece & Boy Willie + Widower – Cleotha Holman 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Life mix of sorrow & zest + Helped brothers take family piano from Sutter’s home + Musician who made records & played piano + Current life drinking &

		gambling + Lives in Kansas City
Lymon Jackson Age - 29	+ Business Partner/Friend – Boy Willie + Romantic interest – Grace, briefly Berniece	+ Generally quiet, but straightforward when he speaks + Determined in his pursuits + Caught stealing wood & sentenced to work on prison farm, then for Mr. Stovall + Owns truck & hid to avoid law + Leaves Mississippi for Pittsburgh with Boy Willie and truckload of watermelons to sell + Ladies’ man; has brief kiss with Berniece + Hopes to find job & woman in North
Grace Age - 20s	+ Romantic interest - Boy Willie then Lymon	+ Meets Boy Willie & Lymon + Intends to spend night with Boy Willie but goes with Lymon

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Supplement: People Mentioned in the Script but Not Appearing in the Play

Author: Phyliss Wezeman
 Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

Partial List in Alphabetical Order

Name & Age (if known)	Relationships	Information
Rupert Bates	+ Cousin - Charles family + Friend - Willa Bryant	+ Gave Willa Bryant Wining Boy's address
Boy Charles Age – 37/39 (at death)	+ Brother – Doaker, Wining Boy + Father – Bernice & Boy Willie + Husband – Mama Ola	+ Boy Charles, with brothers, took piano from Sutter house + Sutter killed him in revenge
Willa Bryant	+ Friend – Cleotha Holman	+ Wrote Wining Boy re death
Coreen Charles Age - 50s	+ Estranged or ex-wife - Doaker	+ Moved to New York after parted
Mr. Cohen	+ Potential landlord - Avery	+ Rent space for church
Crawley Age – 30s (at death)	+ Father (deceased) – Maretha + Husband (deceased) - Berniece	+ Shot by sheriff while helping move stolen wood
Dolly Age - 20s	+ Girlfriend – Lymon	+ Date for one night
Cleotha Holman Age 46 (at death)	+ Wife (deceased) – Wining Boy	+ Met age 16 but rocky marriage + Died out of town
L. D. Jackson	+ Father – Lymon	+ Jailed; Killed at dance
Leroy	+ Former boyfriend - Grace	+ Has key to her apartment
Mama Berniece	+ Great-Grandmother – Berniece & Boy Willie + Grandmother - Boy Charles, Doaker & Wining Boy + Mother – Papa Boy Walter Charles + Wife – Papa Boy Willie	+ Enslaved & traded, with 9-year-old son, Boy Walter Charles, to Joel Noland in exchange for piano as Robert Sutter's gift to wife, Ophelia
Mama Esther	+ Mother – Papa Boy Willie, the woodworker + Wife – Papa Boy Charles	+ Berniece calls on her for help to rid house/piano Sutter's ghost + Enslaved, owned by Sutters

Mama Nellie	+ Grandmother – Bernice & Boy Willie + Mother – 3 Sons + Wife – Boy Walter Charles	+ Sons are Boy Charles, Doaker & Wining Boy
Mama Ola Age – died 7 years ago	+ Mother – Bernice & Boy Willie + Wife – Boy Charles	+ Polished piano every day + Begged Berniece to play in honor of father, Boy Charles
Jim Miller	+ Employer – Boy Willie & Lymon	+ Hauled wood for him
Miss Eula	+ Piano Teacher - Berniece	+ Mother insisted on lessons
Joel Nolander	+ Owner - piano	+ Traded piano to Robert Sutter
Papa Boy Charles	+ Father – Papa Boy Willie, the woodcarver + Great-Great-Grandfather – Berniece & Boy Willie + Husband – Mama Esther	+ Enslaved worker owned by Sutter family + Patriarch of Charles family
Papa Boy Willie Charles	+ Father – Papa Boy Walter Charles + Grandfather – Boy Charles, Doaker & Wining Boy + Great-Grandfather – Berniece & Boy Willie + Husband – Mama Berniece	+ Used woodworking talents to carve images of wife & son, plus family history, into Ophelia Sutter’s piano
Papa Boy Walter Charles	+ Father – 3 sons + Grandfather – Berniece & Boy Willie + Husband – Mama Nellie	+ Sons are Boy Charles, Doaker & Wining Boy + Traded, at age 9, for piano
People killed by Ghost of the Yellow Dog: Bob Mallory, Howard Peterson, Ed Saunders, Robert Smith, Charlie Webb	+ People living in Mississippi	+ Lost lives to “Ghost of the Yellow Dog”
Henry Potter	+ Person in Mississippi	+ Sold truck to Lymon
Alberta Samuels	+ Sister – Cleotha Holman	+ Friend Willa Bryant
Sheriff	+ Official in Mississippi	+ Shot Crawley; Seeking Lymon
Jack Slattery	+ Resident - Mississippi	+ Doaker’s lodging/Mississippi
Jim Stovall	+ Person in Mississippi + Potential buyer Sutter’s land	+ Posts bail for Lymon & expects work in payment

Jim Sutter	+ Grandson – Ophelia & Robert + Land owner – Marlin County, Mississippi	+ Big man, 340 pounds + Fell into a well & died
Ophelia Sutter	+ Grandmother – Jim Sutter + Wife – Robert Sutter	+ Receives piano as gift + Missed slaves, likes carvings
Robert Sutter	+ Grandfather – Jim Sutter + Husband - Ophelia	+ Original owner Charles family + Traded two slaves for a piano + Had Papa Boy Willie carve it
Sutter’s Brother	+ Brother – Sutter, lives Chicago	+ Selling Sutter’s land
Sutter’s Sons	+ Sons – Jim Sutter	+ 1 went North for school + 1 stayed in South, not bright

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Supplement: Summary of Acts & Scenes in *The Piano Lesson*

Author: Phyllis Wezeman
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

Plot Summary

The Piano Lesson takes place in 1936 Pittsburgh in the home of Doaker Charles, the uncle of the play's two protagonists: Berniece Charles and Boy Willie Charles. The action of the play centers around the piano that sits in the salon of the Charles home. For Berniece, the piano holds the spirits of her family members, those who were sold in exchange for it and those who later carved it as a family memorial. For Boy Willie, the piano holds the key to economic freedom as he hopes to sell it to buy the land upon which his family was enslaved. The siblings struggle over what to do with the piano, which is a physical representation of the legacy of slavery, threatens to tear the family apart.

Written by Alena Coleman, from "[Production History](#)" in this packet.

Act One: Summary by Scene

Scene 1

At 5:00 A.M., Boy Willie Charles and Lymon Jackson, who have driven from Mississippi in a broken-down truck, arrive at the home of Boy Willie's Uncle Doaker Charles. They also awaken Boy Willie's sister, Berniece, who has not seen them since her husband, Crawley, died three years ago. Berniece is displeased by their intrusion. The travelers disclose plans to sell a truckload of watermelons as well as the family piano in order for Boy Willie to obtain funds to buy Sutter's land, a place where the Charles family was once enslaved. Berniece sees Sutter's ghost at the top of the stairs. Maretha greets her uncle and his friend and gets ready for school. Avery, preacher/suitor, arrives to pick up Berniece for a trip to the bank to secure funds for his church. Boy Willie and Lymon head out to sell their crop.

Scene 2

Three days later, Doaker's brother Wining Boy from Kansas City is with him in the kitchen catching up on news. When Boy Willie and Lymon return from another truck breakdown, the four talk about the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog." Doaker shares the significance and symbolism of the piano while Wining Boy plays it. When Berniece arrives home, she and Boy Willie argue over selling the piano as well as her husband Crawley's death until they hear a scream from upstairs.

Act Two: Summary by Scene

Scene 1

The next morning, Doaker tells Wining Boy that he saw Sutter's ghost sitting at the piano three weeks ago but didn't reveal it to Berniece. In addition, he shares that he's seen the piano keys moving while no one is playing it. After coming back from selling watermelons, Lymon buys Wining Boy's suit and he and Boy Willie leave to find women.

Scene 2

Later that evening, Avery visits Berniece to convince her to marry him but to no avail. He also encourages her to face the pain of Crawley's death and her family's history but, again, she refuses.

Scene 3

Late that night, Boy Willie sneaks into the house with Grace but awakens Berniece when he knocks over a lamp. Berniece is angry and kicks them out. While downstairs, Lymon returns and he and Berniece talk about the future. After they exchange a kiss, Berniece cuts it off and returns upstairs.

Scene 4

Later the next morning, Boy Willie returns, wakes Lymon and informs him he found a musical instrument collector who will buy the piano if they deliver it. Not only is the piano heavy, but they also hear Sutter's ghost and cannot move it. Doaker enters and stops them saying they cannot take it until Berniece comes home. Boy Willie and Lymon leave to find materials to move the piano.

Scene 5

When Berniece gets home from work, she and Boy Willie argue over selling the piano. At the same time, Berniece fixes Maretha's hair, Doaker attempts to mediate the situation, Lymon comes back to help, Avery arrives to bless the house, Wining Boy enters drunk, and Grace comes in to see why she was left in the truck. As Avery reads scripture and prays to cast the spirits from the piano, Boy Willie encounters Sutter's ghost and violently wrestles with him. Berniece realizes she must face the past, plays the piano, and calls on her ancestors – Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola – for help. As she continues to play, calm envelopes the room. Boy Willie and Wining Boy prepare to catch the next train to return to the South.

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Supplement: August Wilson's American Century Cycle

Author: Phyllis Wezeman
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

Overview

Grade level: 7-12

Discipline/subject are: Interdisciplinary

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

Summary

August Wilson's *American Century Cycle*

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 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 *American Century Cycle* presents African American life in all of its fullness and has changed the face of the American theater.

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*

The Plays

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 2010 – Revival Cort 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 2010, Drama Desk Award – Outstanding Revival of a Play 2010, Tony Awards – Best Revival of a Play, Best Actor, Best 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>
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 piano acquired during slavery through the sale of two of their 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 2022 – Revival Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York, NY
Awards	1990, Drama Desk Award - Outstanding New Play 1990, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award - Best Play 1990, Pulitzer Prize – Drama 2023, Tony Award Nominee – Best Revival of a Play

Radio Golf

Title	<i>Radio Golf</i>
Written	2005
Decade/Setting	1990s 1997 - Pittsburgh, PA
Summary	Roosevelt and Harmond Wilks' plan to redevelop the Hill District,

	including demolition of Aunt Ester's home, raises issues of the present and 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]

The August Wilson Project, *The Piano Lesson*
Supplement: Biography of August Wilson - Narrative

Author: Phyllis Wezeman
Malawi Matters, South Bend, IN

Overview

Grade level: 7-12

Discipline/subject area: Interdisciplinary

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

**August Wilson Biography
Narrative**

Birth

- Frederick August Kittel Jr. (August Wilson) 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 and 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 customers. 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 and served as a director for the 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. 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. In 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. Notable Pittsburgh sites include his home, on the National Register of Historic Places, and the August Wilson Center for African

American Culture, which 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, *The Piano Lesson*
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**

Birth	April 27, 1945 - Frederick August Kittel (Jr.) was born in Pittsburgh, PA
Family	<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"> Freda Ellis Linda Jean Kittel Donna Conley Barbara Jean Wilson Edwin Kittel Richard Kittel <p>1965 - Father died</p> <p>1965 - Changed name/took pen name of August Wilson Adopted/honored heritage of mother Disavowed estranged father</p>
Childhood	<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
Education	<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>
Career - Early Years	<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 - 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>
Career - Poet	<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>
Career - Playwright	<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>
Career - Century Cycle	<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>
Personal Life	<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
Death	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
Legacy	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