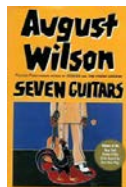
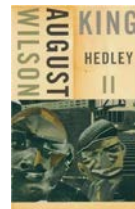
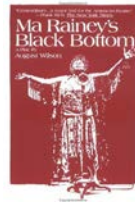
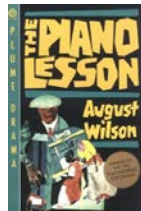
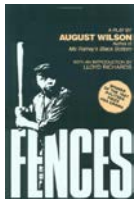


Gem of the Ocean *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
The Piano Lesson *Fences* *Seven Guitars*
Two Trains Running *Jitney* *King Hedley II* *Radio Golf*

The Life and Work of August Wilson



Dr. Mike Downing
Associate Professor of English
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

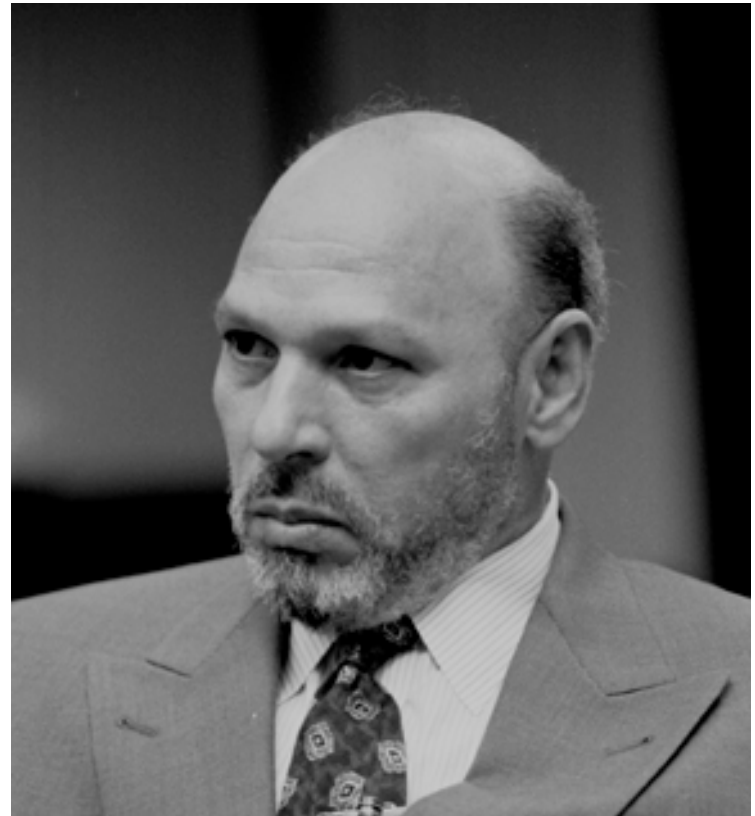


Who was August Wilson?

August Wilson was an award-winning American playwright who chronicled the African-American experience through a series of ten plays.

He was born Frederick August Kittel, Jr. on April 27, 1945 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, PA.

His father was a German immigrant named Frederick August Kittel and his mother was an African-American woman named Daisy Wilson.



Black Horizons Theater



Rob Penny



From a young age, Wilson began to read such writers as WEB DuBois, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, which influenced his own writing.

Mainly self-educated, and after holding various jobs, Mr. Wilson became involved with Rob Penny in Black Horizons on the Hill, a Pittsburgh theater company, in the late 1960s.



The Pittsburgh Cycle

Mr. Wilson is best known for 10 plays. Known as *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, each play is set in a different decade of the 20th Century, chronicling the African-American experience.

Nine of the ten plays are set in Pittsburgh's Hill District, near Wilson's childhood home. The only exception is *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which is located in Chicago.



August Wilson's Birthplace,
Bedford Avenue,
The Hill District, Pittsburgh, PA

The Plays (in historical order)

A List of Mr. Wilson's Plays (in historical order):

- 1904 - *Gem of the Ocean*
- 1911 - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1927 - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1936 - *The Piano Lesson*
- 1948 - *Seven Guitars*
- 1957 - *Fences*
- 1969 - *Two Trains Running*
- 1977 - *Jitney*
- 1985 - *King Hedley II*
- 1997 - *Radio Golf*



The Plays (in written order)

A List of Mr. Wilson's Plays (in written order):

- 1979 - *Jitney*
- 1982 - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1983 - *Fences*
- 1984 - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1986 - *The Piano Lesson*
- 1990 - *Two Trains Running*
- 1995 - *Seven Guitars*
- 2001 - *King Hedley II*
- 2003 - *Gem of the Ocean*
- 2005 - *Radio Golf*



The Plays (continued)

Here is the entire rubric. The dates signify the decade in which the play occurs, followed by the title. The parentheses indicate the year the play was actually written, and the number in brackets indicates the numerical order in which the plays were written.

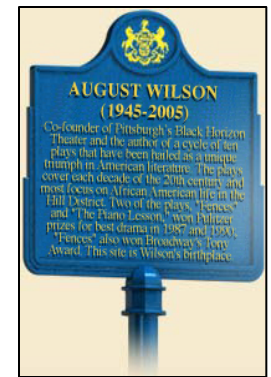
- 1904 - *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) [9]
- 1911 - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984) [4]
- 1927 - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982) [2]
- 1936 - *The Piano Lesson* (1986) [5]
- 1948 - *Seven Guitars* (1995) [7]
- 1957 - *Fences* (1983) [3]
- 1969 - *Two Trains Running* (1990) [6]
- 1977 - *Jitney* (1979) [1]
- 1985 - *King Hedley II* (2001) [8]
- 1997 - *Radio Golf* (2005) [10]



Awards

Awards and Nominations:

- 1985:** New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1985:** Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1987:** Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, *Fences*
- 1987:** New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Fences*
- 1987:** Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *Fences*
- 1987:** Tony Award for Best Play, *Fences*
- 1988:** Literary Lion Award from the New York Public Library
- 1988:** New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1988:** Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1990:** Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, *The Piano Lesson*
- 1990:** New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *The Piano Lesson*
- 1990:** Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *The Piano Lesson*
- 1990:** Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *The Piano Lesson*
- 1992:** American Theatre Critics' Association Award, *Two Trains Running*
- 1992:** New York Drama Critics Circle Citation for Best American Play, *Two Trains Running*
- 1992:** Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Two Trains Running*
- 1996:** New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Seven Guitars*
- 1996:** Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Seven Guitars*
- 1999:** National Humanities Medal
- 2000:** New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Jitney*
- 2000:** Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Play, *Jitney*
- 2001:** Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *King Hedley II*



Key Influence: Romare Bearden

From Wikipedia...

Romare Bearden (September 2, 1911 – March 12, 1988) was an African-American artist and writer. He worked in several media including cartoons, oils, and collage.

Bearden was born in Charlotte, North Carolina. His family moved him to New York City as a toddler, and their household soon became a meeting place for major figures of the Harlem Renaissance.^[1] In 1929 he graduated from Peabody High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He completed his studies at New York University (NYU), graduating with a degree in science and education in 1935.

After he started to focus more on his art and less on athletics, he took courses in art that led to him being a lead cartoonist and art editor for the Eucleian Society's (a secretive student society at NYU) monthly journal, *The Medley*.



Bearden (continued)



The male character at the left of Bearden's collage, "Mill Hand's Lunch," inspired the character of Herald Loomis in Wilson's play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Bearden (continued)



Wilson's play, *The Piano Lesson*, was directly inspired by Bearden's collage of the same name.

Bearden (continued)



Wilson and Bearden both included imagery associated with Blues music, as well as depictions of African Americans, in family situations, doing ordinary things.



Bearden (continued)



Origins of The Pittsburgh Cycle

The idea to write one play for each decade of the 20th Century occurred to Wilson after he finished *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

In an interview with Sandra Shannon¹, Wilson said, "Well, actually, I didn't start out with a grand idea. I wrote a play called *Jitney!* set in '77 and a play called *Fullerton Street* that I set in '41. Then I wrote *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which I set in '27, and it was after I did that I said, 'I've written three plays in three different decades, so why don't I just continue to do that?'"

Fullerton Street and *Jitney!* were both submitted to the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwright's Conference. Both were rejected.

"Maybe these plays are not as good as I think they are," Wilson thought. "I have to write a better play, but how the hell do you do that?"

Wilson realized that *Jitney!* (in its original form) "wasn't big enough," and *Fullerton Street* was, in Wilson's own words, "epic and too unwieldy."

So he sat down and wrote *Ma Rainey* and sent it to the O'Neill Conference. They accepted it. His career bloomed after that success.

¹The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson by Sandra Shannon



Professor Shannon

Themes

Thematically, Wilson's plays deal with such issues as:

- The Middle Passage
- The Underground Railroad
- The Emancipation Proclamation
- Reconstruction and Jim Crow
- The Northern Migration
- Pittsburgh's Hill District
- Oppression
- Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism
- Developing Personal "Songs" and Cultural Mythologies
- Sports Discrimination
- City Politics

Creating a New Cultural Mythology

To date, much of my personal research has involved Wilson's development of a new mythology for people of African descent living in America.

My starting point is Henry Louis Gates, Jr., an African American scholar at Harvard, who writes, "It is the black poet who bridges the gap in tradition, who modifies tradition when experience demands it, who translates experience into meaning and meaning into belief."²

Wilson himself amplifies this notion in an interview with Trudier Harris , when he says, "The one thing we did not have as black Americans was a mythology."³

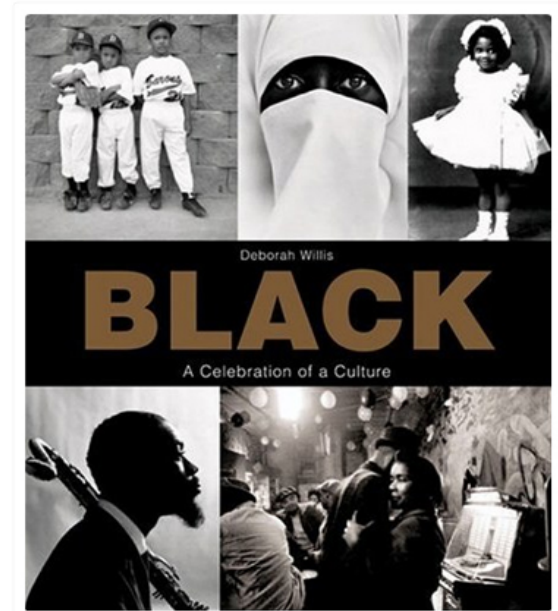
²*Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

³"August Wilson's Folk Traditions" by Trudier Harris

Converting Stereotype to Archetype

Wilson's emerging mythology re-inscribes the cultural symbolic landscape, providing a new sign system where blacks can flourish and grow in their own way, according to their own values, their own rhythms, their own beliefs, and their own language. It's part music, part history, part politics, and part fable. It's a sociology lesson and a celebration. It's the creation of cultural myth.

Specifically, I argue that Wilson's dramatic technique follows a certain pattern. He consistently takes pejorative, racist stereotypes and turns them into holy archetypes—sacred symbols which are imbued with new meaning and power—and, most importantly, are direct products of the African American experience.



Converting Stereotype to Archetype

For example, *The Piano Lesson* begins with Boy Willie and Lymon Jackson driving a truckload of watermelon from the American south to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Typically, the connection between American blacks and watermelons has long been ugly, stereotypical, and racist.

Wilson, however, does not shy away from the subject matter. The audience learns that the watermelons are going to serve Boy Willie in an important way: Once sold, the money from the melons is going to be combined with money that Boy Willie already has. Once he sells the family's heirloom (and titular) piano, Boy Willie will have enough money to "buy some land" and have a future.

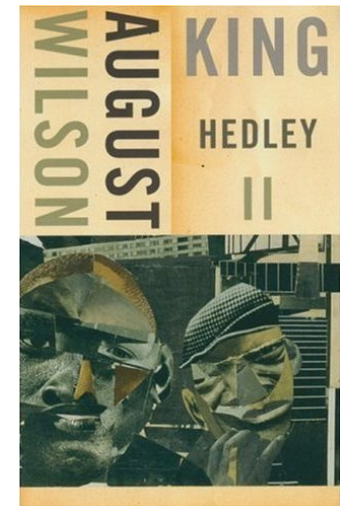
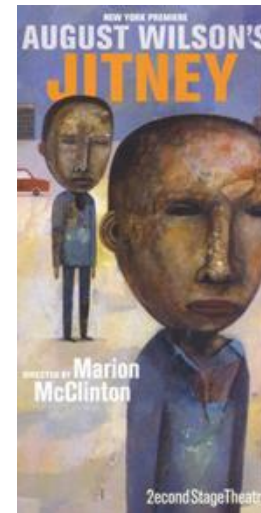
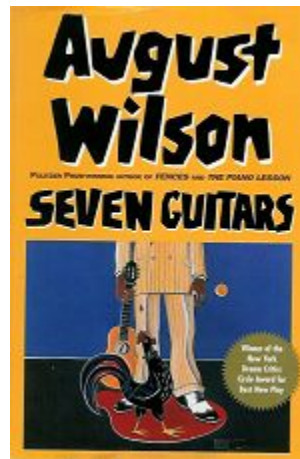
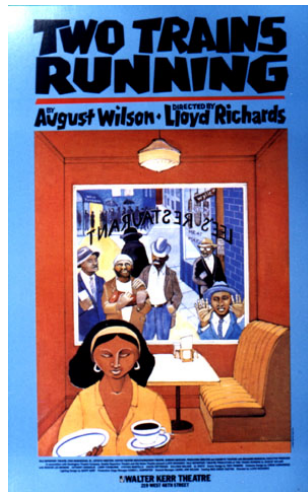
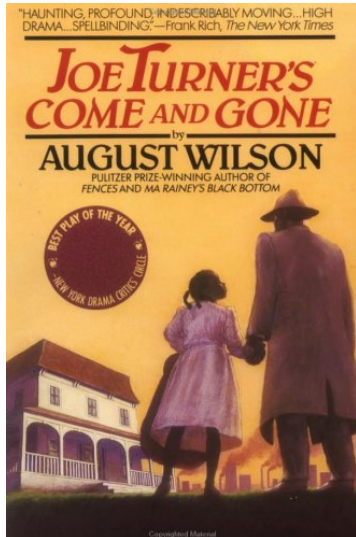
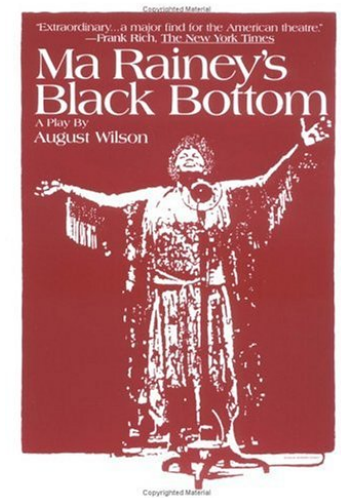
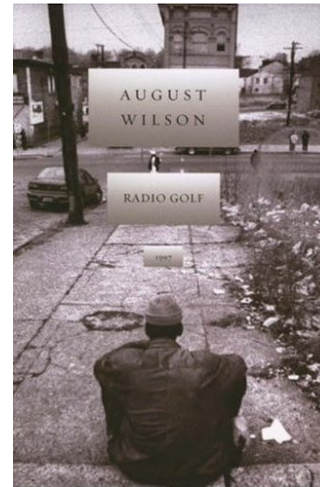
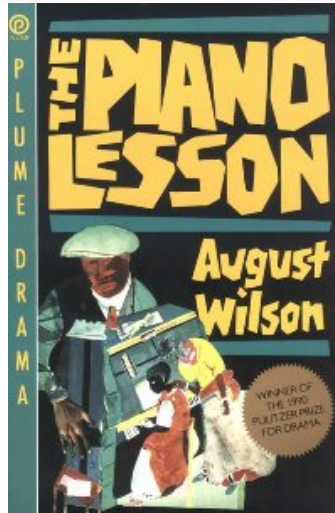
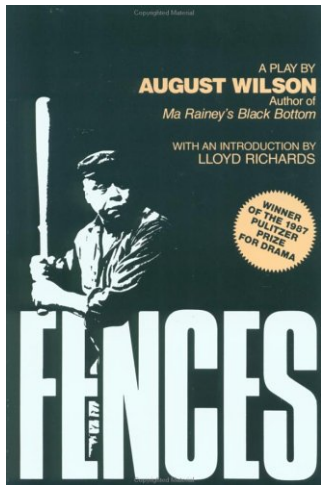


Converting Stereotype to Archetype

In this way, the watermelons are rescued by Wilson as they move beyond the derogatory stereotype that white history has assigned, toward a more sacred "archetypal" role within Wilson's mythology. In other words, the watermelons become essential and holy, rather than representations of poverty and bigotry.

And instead of attempting to hide or ignore the role of such stereotypes within the African American experience, Wilson celebrates them and gives them value as part of the social fabric and history.

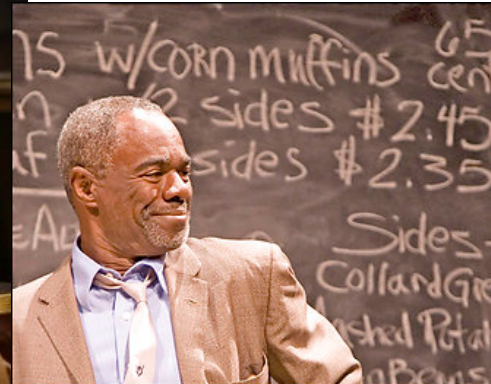
Miscellaneous Covers



Images from performances of *Fences*



Images from performances of *Two Trains Running*



2005 Brings Sad News

- Early in 2005, Mr. Wilson was diagnosed with liver cancer. He passed away on October 2 of that year. His legacy lives on, however, through his plays and the lives he touched.
- From AugustWilson.net: "Mournfully, his bright light shines no more. The man who made us laugh, made us cry, and gave the world tremendous insight into the rich world of African American music, culture, and values passed away on Sunday, October 2, 2005 at Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, WA. He was surrounded by his family at the time of his passing. Mr. Wilson was 60."



AUGUST WILSON

1945-2005

About the author of this slide show...

My name is Dr. Michael Downing and I'm an English Professor at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania (about an hour north of Philadelphia). I have been studying Mr. Wilson's life and work since 1992. Back then, I lived and taught in Pittsburgh and attended numerous Wilson plays at the Pittsburgh Public Theater.

Since then, I have taught, published, and delivered scholarly presentations related to Mr. Wilson and his plays. I also maintain several web presences on Mr. Wilson, which you can find on the following slide.



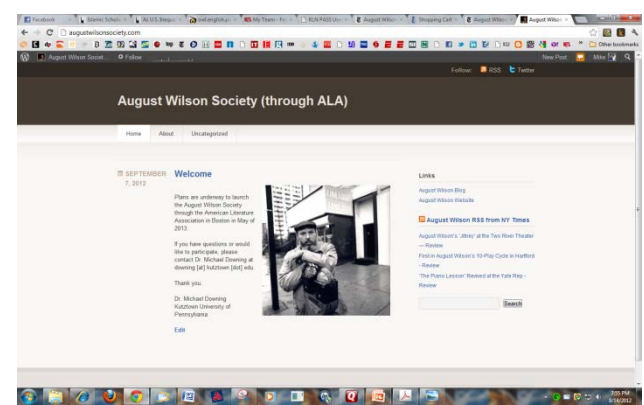
Websites

I host three web projects related to August Wilson, including:

- www.augustwilson.net (website)
- www.augustwilsonblog.wordpress.com (blog)
- www.augustwilsonsociety.com (through the American Literature Association*)

If you would like to contribute to any of these projects, please contact me at [downing \[at\] kutztown.edu](mailto:downing[at]kutztown.edu).

*The ALA Society is currently in the planning stage. I hope to make everything official at ALA May 2013.



Publications

*I have published two scholarly articles on August Wilson.
Click on the links below to read the articles.*

EAPSU Online 2011

[August Wilson's Mythic Conversions in The Piano Lesson](#)

[Michael Downing, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania.....110](#)

EAPSU Online 2010

[August Wilson's Mythic Conversions in Joe Turner's Come and Gone](#)

[Michael Downing, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania 90](#)

Presentations

I have made numerous presentations on August Wilson over the years...

- "Mythic Conversions in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*." English Association of Pennsylvania State Universities Fall Conference 2012.
- "The Life and Work of August Wilson." Eastern Monroe Public Library. Spring 2010.
- "A Selection from August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*." African American Read-In. Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Sponsored by the Black Caucus of the National Council of Teachers of English. Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, PA Spring 2009.
- "Selections from August Wilson's *The Ground on Which I Stand*." African American Read-In. Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Sponsored by the Black Caucus of the National Council of Teachers of English. Kutztown University. Kutztown, PA Spring 2008.
- "Excerpts from the Plays of August Wilson." Mercyhurst North East College. Fall 2006.

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The End



Thank
you!