

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 8: August Wilson (1945-2005)

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At Yale University

Playwright August Wilson poses for a portrait at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., in this April 7, 2005, file photo.

Wilson, whose epic 10-play cycle chronicling the black experience in 20th-century America included such landmark dramas as "Fences" and "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," died Sunday, Oct. 2, 2005, of liver cancer, a spokeswoman for the Wilson family said. He was 60. (AP Photo/ Michelle McLoughlin, file) Copyright 2005 Associated Press.

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Jitney, 1979; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 1984; *Fences*, 1986; *Joe Turner's Come and Gone: A Play in Two Acts*, 1988; *The Piano Lesson*, 1990; *Two Trains Running*, 1992; *Seven Guitars*, 1996; *King Hedley II*, 1999; *Gem of the Ocean*; *Radio Golf*, 2005.

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| [Top](#) | August Wilson: A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Dawn Coyan

Two Pulitzer Prizes and a host of other prestigious awards barely begin to notarize the effect August Wilson has had on the African American community and American Theater as a whole. Wilson's plays attempt to address the exclusion of African Americans from history by showcasing moments when, through their struggles, they were able to choose their own fates (Shannon 16). Not only has Wilson's art added a fresh, poetic voice to the stage, his themes have the ability to "explore and communicate the black experience in a way which seems particular to blacks" but at the same time appeals to audiences of all color (Shafer 5). Although his main themes relate to racial injustice and alienation, they also address issues of social class and economic tensions that touch all Americans. This skill has made Wilson not only a well-renowned but also a very wealthy dramatist.

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945 (Shafer 1). His father, for whom he was named, was a white German immigrant baker. Though Wilson was the fourth of six children, his father rarely visited the two-room Pittsburgh apartment where his mother, Daisy Wilson Kittel, raised the children (Wolfe 2). Daisy worked as a cleaning woman (Wang 17), but her income was not enough to bring her children out of poverty (Shannon 18). Wilson later drew on his experience with poverty and his father's abandonment in several of his plays, including *Joe Turner*, *Ma Rainey*, and *Fences*.

Wilson was a bright student, but due to racial taunts and discrimination, culminating in a professor's disbelief in his writing ability and accusation of plagiarism, he dropped out of high school at age 15 (Wolfe 2). No longer encumbered with high school, Wilson pursued his literary education in the "Negro section" of a public library (Wolfe 2). He also started writing poetry (Wang 19). Poetry appears in some of his plays, such as the opening lines of *Fences*, and Wilson's ear for music and poetry can be felt throughout his writing.

Despite the fact that Wilson is half German, he has always identified "black" because his mother "instilled [. . .] black pride and culture" into him (Wang 17). In a 1988 interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson stated that he chose the "black route" over the "white route" because his "cultural environment" was black, and it was from this culture that he shaped his ideas about the world (Wang 17). Some of that culture was absorbed after Wilson served a short stint in the Army in his late teens. While working low-paying jobs, he spent his spare time at Pope's Restaurant and Pat's Cigar Store. He

had discovered that "language is the way any people transmits its culture, beliefs, and values," and he listened to the stories and speech patterns of older African Americans as they wiled away the time socializing together (Wolfe 3). Sandra Shannon notes that for Wilson, spending his time in these mostly male places was a very different education from the Eurocentric writing he had studied in school. "These locations were essential for communal bonding" (Shannon 18).

Wilson decided to become a writer in 1965. This was the year his birth father died, and he changed his name. It was also the year that he first heard the blues, via a tune sung by Bessie Smith entitled "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jellyroll Like Mine." Shannon states that "he was inexplicably mesmerized by the emotions that Smith's sassy delivery exuded" and that Wilson "traces the source of his artistic vision" to this time (Shannon 16). Peter Wolfe also notes that the blues had a big impact on Wilson. Through the blues, as well as his experiences listening to the tales of the older folks, he learned that "both the history and culture of African Americans had their roots in an oral, rather than a written, tradition. By stages it would lead to the understanding that this oral tradition consists of an extended riposte to a set of values and codes imposed on blacks by white America" (Wolfe 3).

Wilson's literary education continued at Pittsburgh's Halfway Art Gallery, where he found an audience for his poetry, and became acquainted with some of "Pittsburgh's black literati." Together they formed the Center Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop. (Shannon 19). Wilson was also greatly influenced by playwright Amiri Baraka, a participant in the Black Art movement of the 1960s. Through Baraka's writing, Wilson "learned sociology and political commitment" and learned to include the emotions of anger and violence. Although Baraka supported a violent revolution, Wilson differed in his belief that African Americans need to develop a "collective self-reliance grounded in black history and culture" (Wang 4). Malcolm X also strongly influenced Wilson, and he possessed an album of Malcolm's speeches. According to Shannon, Malcolm X gave Wilson the sense of direction he needed to resist the easy temptations of the streets. She states: "Malcolm X offered the young fatherless Wilson a vision of black manhood" (Shannon 32). Wilson himself offered: "When we saw or heard Malcolm we saw or heard ourselves. Whatever the self was: Malcolm the Bad Nigger. Malcolm the Boisterous. Malcolm the Defiant. Malcolm the Brave. He was all these and more" (Wilson, "Legacy of Malcolm" qtd. in Shannon 32). This theme pervades Wilson's male protagonists, as each seeks to "survive as a black man in America" (Shannon 32).

Along with Rob Penny, Wilson founded Pittsburgh's Black Horizons Theater in 1969. This theater, like others at that time, was formed to promote "black self-awareness." Here Wilson produced and directed plays that "challenged both the aesthetic and the ideological premises of the reigning Caucasian theater" (Wolfe 3).

In the mid-1970s, Wilson made his first attempts at play writing. His first serious play, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, was written with the encouragement of his friend, Claude Purdy, who also helped him with revision (Shannon 27). Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota in 1978, to be near Purdy, and stayed, finding employment writing short plays for the Science Museum's Children's Theater (Shafer 10). According to Shannon, the drama written during this period does not show much genius, "Yet behind the self-consciousness of these early works is a notable ease with words and a poetic melding of the colloquial and the profound" (Shannon 46).

Wilson sent a few plays to the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwright's Conference, but these were rejected. He then sent one of those plays, *Jitney!*, to the Playwright's Center in Minneapolis. This time he was successful. *Jitney!* was accepted for production and the Playwright's Center invited Wilson to become an associate playwright-in-residence there. Several of his early plays were written and produced at the Playwright's Center (Wang 22, Shannon 47).

Following a few more rejections by the O'Neill Center, Wilson submitted *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1981 and was finally accepted. Though the play underwent major revisions while Wilson spent the summer of 1982 at the O'Neill Center, it went on to play at Yale and in 1984 became Wilson's first Broadway play (Shannon 48). It was a hit. *Ma Rainey* received the Drama Critics Circle Award, and lifted Wilson "into the category of major playwright seemingly overnight" (Shafer 11).

| [Top](#) | Wilson's next play was *Fences*, which opened in New York in 1987 and received the Pulitzer Prize, a Tony Award for Best Play, and the Drama Critics Circle Award (Shafer 11). It also grossed more money in its first year than any nonmusical in Broadway history—\$11 million (Wolfe xiv).

From that point on, Wilson continued creating plays and garnering awards. In 1988, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* opened in New York, receiving the title of "best play of the 1987-1988 theater season" by the New York Drama Critics Circle (Wang xiv), as well as a Tony nomination (Shafer 3). In 1990, *The Piano Lesson* opened in New York, earning the Pulitzer Prize, a Drama Critics Circle Award and a Tony Award for Best Play (Shafer 3). (It was also televised on CBS's Hallmark Hall of Fame in 1995 (Wolfe xiv).) In 1992 *Two Trains Running* made its New York debut, winning the American Theatre Critics' Association Award, a Drama Critics Circle Award, and a Tony nomination for Best Play (Shafer 3-4). In 1996 *Seven Guitars* opened on Broadway, and *Jitney* finally reached the stage (in Pittsburgh). *Seven Guitars* won the

Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play and two Outer Critics' Circle Awards (Shafer 4). In 1998, a second revision of *Jitney* began performing around the country, including stages in Philadelphia, San Francisco, Boston, and Baltimore (in 1999) (Wolfe xiv-xv).

In addition to the awards listed above, Wilson has also received a McKnight Fellowship (1985), a Whiting Foundation Award and a Guggenheim fellowship (both 1986), a Bush Artists Fellowship (1993), and has been selected for membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1991) and the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1995) (Shafer 3-4). According to Shafer, he has been called "the foremost dramatist of the American black experience" (1988) and "the most acclaimed playwright of his time" (1990) (Shafer 5). In addition, many academics have discussed Wilson's work in dissertations and theses. Wolfe notes that one university press book, *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, "includes contributions from professors at major institutions like Stanford, Michigan, and Wisconsin-Madison" (Wolfe 1).

Still active as a playwright, Wilson has been working toward the filming of *Fences* and *Two Trains Running*, though this has been slowed by his insistence on using a black director (Wolfe 11).

Wilson's importance as a dramatist stems from his own background as a black man born and raised in America, struggling against alienation in his own country. He resents the fact that African Americans have not been represented in history over the past century, and that the accounts written have been penned by academics who do not understand or empathize with the black culture. Wilson's vision is to allow African Americans a glimpse of what it means to "reopen their history books" and "choose their own destinies" (Shannon 16) and "inspire healthy spiritual and attitudinal adjustments within his people" (Shannon vii). Reaching beyond the African American community, however, Wilson's art is appreciated as well by the non-black audience, which enjoys Wilson's drama for its lyrical beauty and for his characters' "uncanny knack for conveying universal thoughts and emotions" (Shannon vii). Also, Wilson's characters do not try to push a political agenda down the audience's throat. Rather, "he writes tributes to his people's culture and exposes the unheralded nobility in their endurance" (Shannon 28). With this method, both the African American and non-African American audience can leave the theater entertained and enlightened rather than alienated from each other.

August Wilson died in 2005.

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