

AUGUST WILSON'S
THE PIANO LESSON

DIRECTED BY JADE KING CARROLL

STUDY GUIDE OBJECTIVES

This study guide serves as a classroom tool for teachers and students, and addresses the following Common Core Standards and Connecticut State Arts Standards:

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading Literature: *Key Ideas and Details*

- **Grades 11-12:** Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **Grades 11-12:** Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop related elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set; how the action is ordered; how the characters are introduced and developed).

Reading Literature: *Craft and Structure*

- **Grades 9-10:** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

Reading Literature: *Integration of Knowledge and Ideas*

- **Grade 8:** Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.
- **Grades 11-12:** Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text (include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist).

InterACT SUPPORTS THE FOLLOWING NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

- **HS Proficient TH:Cr3.1.I. b.** Explore physical, vocal, and physiological choices to develop a performance that is believable, authentic, and relevant to a drama/theatre work.
- **HS Advanced TH:Re9.1.III. a.** Research and synthesize cultural and historical information related to a drama/theatre work to support or evaluate artistic choices.
- **HS Advanced TH:Re9.1.III. c.** Compare and debate the connection between a drama/theatre work and contemporary issues that may impact audiences.
- **HS Proficient TH:Cr11.2.I. a.** Research how other theatre artists apply creative processes to tell stories in a devised or scripted drama/theatre work, using theatre research methods.
- **HS Proficient TH:Cr11.2.I. b.** Use basic theatre research methods to better understand the social and cultural background of a drama/theatre work.

GUIDELINES FOR ATTENDING THE THEATRE

Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to Hartford Stage.

- How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?
 - › Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience can affect what kind of performance the actors give. No two audiences are exactly the same and no two performances are exactly the same—this is part of what makes theatre so special! Students' behavior should reflect the level of performance they wish to see.
- Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. Audience members are more than welcome to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be?
 - › Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!
- Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off (or better yet, left at home or at school!). Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food and gum should not be taken into the theatre.
- Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun. If possible, restrooms should be used only during intermission.

Wilson and His Work

Adapted from *About August Wilson* by Sarah Powers, written for McCarter's 2007 *Radio Golf* production website



Photo of playwright August Wilson

"I fell in love with words as concretized thought when I was a kid and knew somehow that I would spend my life involved with them."

—August Wilson

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in 1945 in Pittsburgh's Hill District, where he lived for 33 years. Wilson was the fourth of six children of a white German father and an African-American mother. He began his writing career as a poet in the 1960s and '70s. Hoping to use theatre to raise African-American cultural consciousness, he co-founded Black Horizons, a community theatre in Pittsburgh, with Rob Penny in 1968.

Wilson's breakthrough as a playwright came in 1982, when the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Theater accepted *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* for a workshop. The play opened on Broadway in 1984, and in 1985 it earned Wilson his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

Fences, Wilson's second play to move to Broadway, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1987 and also set a Broadway record for the highest-grossing non-musical, bringing in \$11 million in its first year. Eight more plays followed, joining *Ma Rainey*, *Fences* and *Jitney* (Wilson's first play, written in 1979) to complete Wilson's ambitious ten-play Century Cycle chronicling the African-American experience.

In August of 2005, as Wilson put the finishing touches on *Radio Golf*, the final play in his cycle, he announced that he had been diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. He told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "I've lived a blessed life. I'm ready." Weeks later, Jujamcyn Theaters announced that it would rename the Virginia Theatre on Broadway the August Wilson Theatre. It was a fitting gesture to honor a man who is not only one of the most important playwrights of his generation, but also one of the most important voices in American theatre.

DID YOU KNOW? Actor Denzel Washington is going to produce ten of August Wilson's plays on film.

Of his plan, Washington says: "We're going to do one a year for the next nine years. I'm really excited about that." The first, set to premiere in December of 2016, is **FENCES**. For this film, Washington will be reprising his role from a 2010 Broadway production of *Fences* opposite his previous costar Viola Davis.

Washington also said the following about August Wilson: "His stories are specifically African-American stories, but the themes are universal. Families, love, betrayal, whatever the theme is. People relate and enjoy listening to or seeing his work. He was just a bright, brilliant shining light who was here and then he was gone, but his work will live forever to be interpreted by actors and directors for as long as we're here."

1619

Approximately 20 captured Africans are sold into slavery in the British North American colonies.

1787

Northwest Ordinance forbids slavery in the North but requires residents to return fugitive slaves.

1788

The U.S. Constitution is adopted and includes a fugitive slave clause, as well as a clause stating that a slave is 3/5 of a person.

1793

The cotton gin is patented, which increases the need for and the value of slaves.

1817

The American Colonization Society helps freed slaves re-settle in Africa.

August Wilson’s Pittsburgh Cycle

By Aurelia Clunie

August Wilson is perhaps best known for writing ten plays that explore African-American experiences throughout the twentieth century. Known as the “Pittsburgh Cycle” or the “Century Cycle,” each play takes place in a different decade and nearly all are set in Pittsburgh’s traditionally African-American Hill District. Wilson did not write the plays chronologically, but together they follow aspects of African-American experience over the course of one hundred years.

Many of Wilson’s plays are known more for their characters and dialogues than for the plots that drive them. Wilson’s Century Cycle plays introduced such iconic characters as Troy, Rose, Boy Willie, Canewell, Ruby, and Aunt Ester. Themes of family, legacy, economic strife, reconciliation with one’s past, the American Dream, father-son relationships, and ancestry reappear throughout the plays.

Each play from Wilson’s cycle is listed below with the year it was written, the setting, and a short synopsis.

GEM OF THE OCEAN

Setting: 1904, Pittsburgh | Written: 2003

A man feels guilty that his actions caused the death of another man. He seeks out Aunt Ester, a reportedly 285-year-old matriarch of the community, for absolution.

JOE TURNER’S COME AND GONE

Setting: 1911, Pittsburgh | Written: 1984

This play follows the stories of the residents of a Pittsburgh boardinghouse, as well as its owners, Seth and Bertha Holly.

MA RAINEY’S BLACK BOTTOM

Setting: 1927, Chicago | Written: 1986

The only one of Wilson’s Century Cycle plays not set in Pittsburgh; *Ma Rainey* explores the experience of black artists in the recording industry as they deal with white producers.

THE PIANO LESSON

Setting: 1937, Pittsburgh | Written: 1982

A brother travels to Pittsburgh from the South and challenges his sister on what should be done with a piano that has been in the family for generations: should they keep it for the priceless engravings of their ancestors, or sell it and buy the land their family worked as slaves? Titled after a painting by Romare Bearden, *The Piano Lesson* explores legacy during the Great Migration.

A **CYCLE** is a series of plays that chronicles a set of connected stories. Play cycles originally come from medieval theatre in which troupes traveled and performed multiple short plays that told biblical stories from creation through the resurrection. Now a play cycle may explore ongoing themes, interweaving stories, or overlapping characters.



Photo from Hartford Stage’s 2011 production of *Gem of the Ocean*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

1820

The Missouri Compromise states that for any new slave state that enters the Union, there must also be a free state.

1848

The Free Soil Party is formed, which opposes the westward expansion of slavery and would later become the Republican Party.

1856

Mama Berniece and Boy Walter are sold to Nolander for the piano.

1857

In *Dred Scott vs. Sanford*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that slaves, ex-slaves, and descendants do not have citizenship.

1860

Abraham Lincoln is elected president.

SEVEN GUITARS

Setting: 1948, Pittsburgh | Written: 1995

This play explores manhood and responsibility. When Floyd Benton is released from prison and has the opportunity to sign a deal with a record label, he works to straighten out his life before moving to Chicago.

FENCES

Setting: 1957, Pittsburgh | Written: 1984

Troy Maxon, a garbage man, struggles to connect with his wife and teenage son as he lives in the shadow of his own Negro Baseball League glory.

TWO TRAINS RUNNING

Setting: 1969, Pittsburgh | Written: 1990

While Memphis, the owner of a restaurant in Pittsburgh's Hill District, begins to see his store threatened by economic decline in the area, a young activist named Sterling works to save the store. All the characters grapple with what histories and assets to hold onto as they hurtle uncomfortably into the future.

JITNEY

Setting: 1977, Pittsburgh | Written: 1979

Set in a "Jitney" gypsy taxi station in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, the owner works to ensure the future of the depot and to reconcile his relationship with his son as taxi drivers struggle with their own personal challenges.

KING HEDLEY II

Setting: 1985, Pittsburgh | Written: 1991

King, an ex-con, tries to restart his life and support his family by selling stolen refrigerators and opening a video store.

RADIO GOLF

Setting: 1997, Pittsburgh | Written: 2005

Harmond Wilks is poised to run for mayor of Pittsburgh. He, his wife, and his friend Roosevelt Hicks plan to revive the Hill District by bringing a high-rise commercial development to the area. When Wilks encounters residents of the neighborhood and learns how his plans may fly in the face of the District's history, he must choose between pursuing his own success and protecting the area's legacy.

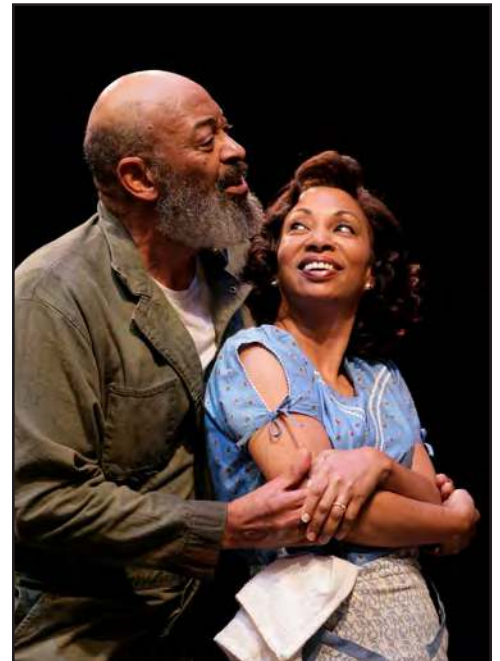


Photo from Hartford Stage's 2007 production of *Fences*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- If someone were to write about trends in your hometown over the course of one hundred years, or even ten years, what stories would they tell? Use your neighborhood as an example and write a one-sentence synopsis for five plays that might be set between 1960 and 2010.
- A reoccurring event in Wilson's plays is men coming back to their neighborhood after being released from prison. How do you think this might affect a person's choices and attempts to start over? Try writing a half-page monologue in which a person lays out their hopes, dreams, and plan after returning home.

1861

The American Civil War begins.
11 states secede from the Union and form the Confederacy.

1863

Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, which frees all slaves in the Confederacy.

1865

The Thirteenth Amendment abolishes slavery throughout the country.
The American Civil War ends.

1868

The Fourteenth Amendment grants citizenship to former slaves.

1870

The Fifteenth Amendment grants all citizens the right to vote.

1879

Boy Charles is born.

- Many of Wilson's plays feature business owners trying to save or grow their businesses in a blighted area. What concerns might you have if you were trying to make a good economic decision for your family? Whose advice would you seek? Who might offer their advice even if it wasn't sought out?
- Why do you think Wilson focused so much on one community? How might a specific African-American community in Pittsburgh engage with or be isolated from a broader, more diverse community?

Interested in reading more of August Wilson's plays and trying your hand at acting? You are not alone!

THE NATIONAL AUGUST WILSON MONOLOGUE COMPETITION was started by Kenny Leon and Todd Kreidler in 2007 to encourage high school students to learn about Wilson's works. Starting at Kenny Leon's True Colors Theatre Company in Atlanta, the competition now includes ten cities and a national competition in New York. High school students study Wilson's plays, and each learns and performs one of his monologues to compete for scholarships. More information can be found here:
truecolorstheatre.org/august-wilson-monologue-competition

Try your own hand at some of Wilson's plays! Gather a group of friends and scripts at the library, choose parts, and read together. Or, learn a monologue and perform it for your friends. What do you learn about the character's wants and struggles?

The Hill District

Adapted from "The Hill District" by Kyle Frisina, written for McCarter's 2007 *Radio Golf* production program and "The Hill Demolition 1956" from Long Wharf Theatre

"I moved from Pittsburgh to St. Paul, Minnesota, on March 5, 1978. I left Pittsburgh but Pittsburgh never left me. It was on these streets, in this community, in this city that I came into manhood and I have a fierce affection for the Hill District and the people who raised me, who have sanctioned my life and ultimately provided it with its meaning."

—August Wilson, "Feed Your Mind, the Rest Will Follow"

August Wilson was born in 1945 in Pittsburgh's Hill District, a largely African-American community where he spent his youth. With the exception of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which is set in Chicago, each play in Wilson's Century Cycle (sometimes dubbed the Pittsburgh Cycle) takes place in the Hill District. While the plays contain several recurring characters, the central character in the cycle is Pittsburgh's Hill District itself.

The first residents on the Hill arrived in the 1840s, members of the Pittsburgh elite who sought relief from the increasingly industrial nature of the city's center. In the years following the Civil War, as Pittsburgh expanded and the population of the city exploded, those residents were enabled by the invention of the trolley to move even farther away. They were soon replaced on the Hill by immigrant groups including Jews, Italians, Syrians, Greeks, and Poles.

1896

In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that states are allowed to segregate public facilities, so long as the facilities for black people are not of lesser quality than those for white people.

1880

Wining Boy is born.

1889

Doaker is born.

1901

Berniece is born.

1904

The events of *Gem of the Ocean* (Pittsburgh Cycle) take place.

1906

Boy Willie is born.

1909

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is founded.

1911

Boy Charles, Doaker, and Wining Boy retrieve the piano from the Sutters.

Boy Charles is burned to death in a Yellow Dog train car.

African-Americans began migrating to Pittsburgh in the 1880s, motivated by the promise of jobs in the steel and railroad industries and hope for relief from the segregation laws of the Reconstructed South. As blacks continued to flock to Pittsburgh and specifically to the Hill, they began to outnumber other ethnic groups. By the 1930s, the Hill was a nationally recognized Mecca of black culture and business. Like New York City's Harlem, the Hill was effectively a segregated, self-sustaining community by day, although the neighborhood's nightlife attracted people of all races. Music lovers thronged to jazz clubs like the Crawford Grill, where performers included Duke Ellington, Charlie Mingus, Miles Davis, and Lena Horne.

The street of the Hill District was the stage for public life, and adults and children were outside often, sitting on stoops, playing in the alleys, walking to see and be seen, talking with neighbors and friends. The closeness of the houses created a strong sense of community and shared public life, and the inhabitants of a particular block knew each other well and watched out for each other's children.

As soldiers returned home from World War II, cities across the country looked to welcome them with the best that mid-twentieth century urban planning had to offer. At the heart of Pittsburgh's urban renewal efforts were plans to rid the city of its largely industrial image and to create a gentrified cultural center for the middle and upper classes. Politicians hoped that a Civic Arena for sports events and concerts and a Center for the Arts, both to be located where the Hill met Downtown Pittsburgh, would make the city truly competitive with urban centers like Chicago and New York.

These redevelopment projects would force the relocation of thousands of poor, predominately African-American residents from the Lower Hill, the business and cultural center of the neighborhood. Politicians justified their proposals, however, by pointing to the neighborhood's overcrowded conditions, insufficient infrastructure, and declining property values, and were granted \$15 million from the 1949 Federal Housing Act plus state funds. By 1961, over 8,000 residents had been displaced.



A panorama of Pittsburgh, PA photographed in 1920.

"By the 1930s, the Hill was a national recognized Mecca of black culture and business. Like New York City's Harlem, the Hill was effectively a segregated, self-sustaining community by day, although the neighborhood's nightlife attracted people of all races."



Iron Mills at night in Pittsburgh, PA.

1911, continued

The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog claim their first victim.

The events of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (Pittsburgh Cycle) take place.

1916

The Great Migration begins, relocating more than 6 million African-Americans from the South to the North over the course of 55 years.

1920s

The events of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Pittsburgh Cycle) take place.

1925

Maretha is born.

1933

Crawley dies.

1936

The events of *The Piano Lesson* (Pittsburgh Cycle) take place.



August Wilson's historic home in the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

Redevelopers promised to build new low-income housing, but the little they provided was not enough to stem the tide of relocation to the already over-burdened Middle and Upper Hill. This deterred investors in the Center for the Arts, who feared association with the deteriorating neighborhood. Four days of rioting on the Hill after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. only exacerbated these concerns. Along with active lobbying from black residents and the Citizens Committee for Hill District Renewal against the development, the riots spelled the end of the plans for the cultural center. What the Hill got instead was not much better: a massive parking lot for the Civic Arena.

Challenges in this neighborhood exist today, and there is still a sharp divide between the Hill District and downtown Pittsburgh. A recent, painfully ironic illustration of the economic damage caused in part by this short-sighted destruction and relocation is the imminent foreclosure of the August Wilson Center for African-American Culture. Built in 2009, the center, intended to embrace and promote the African-American culture that August Wilson celebrated in his plays, is suffering from severe debt and mismanagement. Perhaps executed a little too quickly and ambitiously, the center had trouble attracting exactly the kinds of people Wilson wrote about: "working-

class blacks, many of whom feel unwelcome downtown with its skyscrapers and largely white-owned businesses" (Gabriel, "Pittsburgh Center Honoring Playwright Finds Itself Short on Visitors and Donors," *The New York Times*).

Despite this recent setback, there are other signs that the area is recovering from the blight of the late twentieth century. People of all income levels are moving back and conveniences like supermarkets, taken for granted in cities and suburbs across the country, are also returning to the Hill, bringing jobs. An equally positive sign is that the famed Crawford Grill, razed in the construction of the Civic Arena, has reopened on Wylie Avenue.

Moving On: August Wilson and the Great Migration

By Anna Morton, reprinted from the McCarter Theatre

The Piano Lesson tells the story of the Charles family, who has roots in Sunflower County, Mississippi, but has partially relocated to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The family's move north was part of a much larger migratory trend that affected most of the African-American population in the United States, a movement that would eventually become known as the Great Migration. Fed up with the growing hostilities and rampant dangers in the Jim Crow South, black families began to leave for Northern cities where there were industrial job prospects and promises of a higher quality of life. Between 1916 and 1918, approximately 16,000 people left the South each month. These numbers grew as time went on; the movement continued steadily throughout the twentieth century, ultimately counting eight million African-American Southerners among its participants. Practically all of the characters in August Wilson's Century Cycle are affected by the Great Migration directly or indirectly; as a defining event of the century for African-Americans, it is the backdrop against which Wilson's plays

1945

August Wilson is born.

1948

The events of *Seven Guitars* (Pittsburgh Cycle) take place.

1950s

The events of *Fences* (Pittsburgh Cycle) take place.

1954

In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that segregated public schools are unconstitutional.

1955

In Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks is arrested after refusing to give up her seat to a white person at the front of a bus. This triggers city-wide boycotts of buses.

1960

Ruby Bridges and the McDonogh Three become the first black children to attend previously white-only schools.

are set.

In her book *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, Isabel Wilkerson describes the Great Migration as “the first big step the nation’s servant class took without asking.” For many, the Great Migration represented a movement towards agency, ownership, and control over their own lives. Although African-Americans legally had the opportunity to own land in the Antebellum South, the cultural climate was such that they had no legitimate avenue through which to purchase it. Sharecropping replaced slavery as the system through which white landowners could exploit their black workers. Black families thus remained poor, landless, and low in social status. Even so, the choice to migrate was not easy. The South was the only home these men and women had ever known, and although it was not always a hospitable one, it connected them to their family history. The Charles family grapples with this tension very literally: while Boy Willie sees value in owning land where his relatives once were slaves, Berniece welcomes the chance to begin afresh in Pittsburgh.

In the postwar years, emigration from Europe to the United States slowed, which created labor shortages in cities across the country. This meant job opportunities for African-Americans, so long as they could get themselves there. Many had to make enormous sacrifices when they decided to migrate. Often, men would start the journey alone in the hopes of finding jobs that would provide them with money to send home to their families so that they could follow.

People tended to migrate in groups or on the recommendation of friends or neighbors who had already left for the North. Once arrived, they built communities of migrants within their new cities. Black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* helped to publicize job opportunities available for African-Americans looking to work their way North.

The Great Migration was a community-oriented movement, and each success story that found its way to the ears of those in the South made the North look even more desirable. The North became symbolic of a new frontier, the land of opportunity, and the chance to exhibit a modicum of agency over one’s own life, although it did not always deliver.

But to truly move forward as so many of Wilson’s characters hope to do, one must also be able to look back. In his plays, Wilson questions the success of the Great Migration: did it recover or erase the heritage and stories of the African-American people? Members of the Charles family ask each other similar questions as they struggle to understand their difficult family history. They look for ways to reclaim and make meaning out of the pain they have experienced, and are ultimately divided on how best to forge ahead.



Lymon. Costume design by Toni Leslie James. Costume illustrations by Isabela Tavares.



A migrant worker in 1936, photographed by Dorothea Lange

1963

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers the "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington.

1964

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in voting, public accommodations, public facilities, public education, federally-assisted programs, and employment.

1965

Civil rights activist Malcom X is assassinated in New York City.

1967

In *Loving v. Virginia*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that laws prohibiting interracial marriage are unconstitutional.

1968

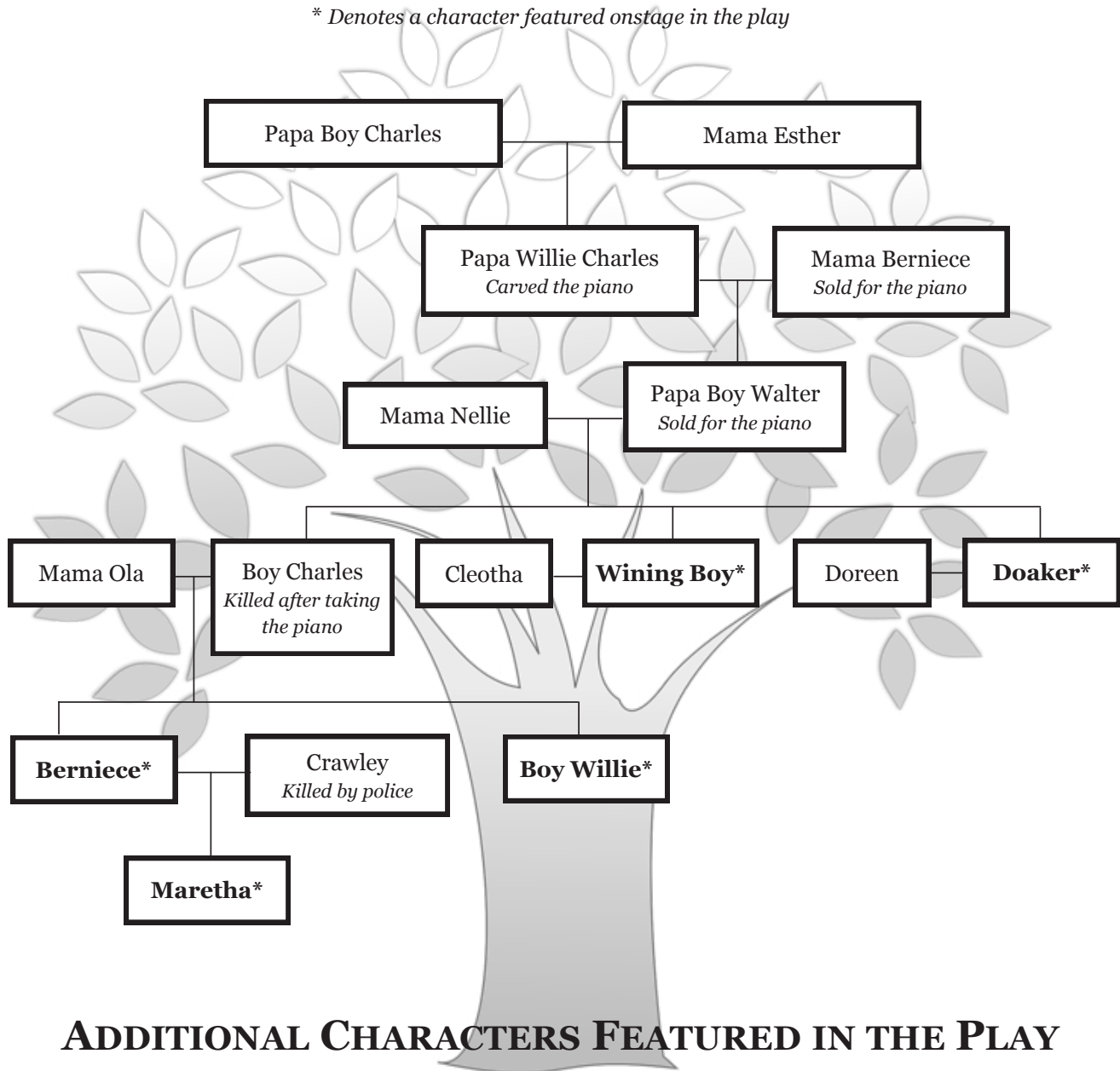
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

1969

The events of *Two Trains Running* (Pittsburgh Cycle) take place.

THE CHARLES FAMILY TREE

* Denotes a character featured onstage in the play



ADDITIONAL CHARACTERS FEATURED IN THE PLAY

Lymon*
Friend of Boy Willie

Avery Brown*
Aspiring preacher who wishes to court Berniece

Grace*
A girl from town

1970s

The events of *Jitney* (Pittsburgh Cycle) take place.

1980s

The events of *King Hedley II* (Pittsburgh Cycle) take place.

1982

Jitney (Pittsburgh Cycle) premieres.

1983

Romare Bearden paints *Piano Lesson*, which inspires August Wilson to write *The Piano Lesson*.

1984

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (Pittsburgh Cycle) premieres.

1985

Fences (Pittsburgh Cycle) premieres.

1986

Joe Turner's *Come and Gone* (Pittsburgh Cycle) premieres.

1982

The Piano Lesson (Pittsburgh Cycle) premieres.

1990

The Piano Lesson wins the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play, New York Drama Critic's Circle Award for Best Play, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

MORE ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

BOY WILLIE CHARLES visits his sister Berniece's home in Pittsburgh to get enough money to buy the farm where his ancestors had been slaves. He drives up from Mississippi with a truckload of watermelons to sell, and intends to also sell a piano that has been in the Charles family for generations.

BERNIECE CHARLES is Boy Willie's sister. She does not want him to sell the piano. Three years before the events of the play, Berniece's husband Crawley died, leaving her to raise their daughter **MARETHA** by herself.

DOAKER CHARLES is one of Boy Willie and Berniece's uncles. He lives with Berniece, and works as a cook for the railroad company.

WINING BOY CHARLES is Boy Willie and Berniece's other uncle. He plays piano, has a habit of gambling, and tends to visit Berniece and Doaker when he runs out of money.

LYMON JACKSON drives up with Boy Willie to Pittsburgh. After they sell all of the watermelons, he wants to stay in Pittsburgh. Lymon, Boy Willie, and Crawley used to work together on Parchman Farm in Mississippi.

AVERY BROWN wants to marry Berniece. He recently became a preacher and is trying to open up his own church.

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

Art Inspires Art: Romare Bearden

By Ishaar Gupta



Portrait of artist Romare Bearden photographed by Carl Van Vechten.

"I got the idea from a Bearden painting called 'The Piano Lesson.' It's of a little girl at the piano with her piano teacher standing over her. And in my mind I saw Maretha and Berniece."

—August Wilson

In 1987, at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, a painting by artist Romare Bearden came to life in the form of August Wilson's acclaimed play, *The Piano Lesson*. In an introduction written for Myron Schwartzmann's book *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art*, Wilson wrote that he saw Bearden's art as "black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence." In the years



Two men rest on a truck, photographed by Ben Shahn in 1935.

1990, continued

Two Trains Running
(Pittsburgh Cycle)
premieres.

1995

Seven Guitars
(Pittsburgh Cycle)
premieres.

1999

King Hedley II
(Pittsburgh Cycle)
premieres.

2003

Gem of the Ocean
(Pittsburgh Cycle)
premieres.

2005

Radio Golf
(Pittsburgh Cycle)
premieres.

August Wilson
passes away.

2008

Barack Obama is
elected America's
first black president.



Above: Two women canning peas. Below: An African-American family on their porch in 1938. Photographs by Marion Post Wolcott.



of the Great Migration, many felt a sense of cultural detachment. The residual effects from the horrors of slavery were still very prominent, making the creation of family legacy difficult. Bearden aimed to chronicle these experiences of troubled legacy through his art. Bearden, one of the most celebrated artists of the twentieth century, has been credited with displaying a deep engagement with the African-American community. Likewise, Wilson, who played a similar role in the rise of black theatre, asks his audience: "What do you do with your legacy, and how do you best put it to use?" In a play named after and inspired by a collage by Bearden, his characters face many issues of historical legacy and memory, and as a result, the two share much more in common than a title.

Romare Howard Bearden (1911-1988), who grew up during the Great Migration, began his career depicting scenes of the American South, later focusing on unity within the African-American community. During the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, Bearden experimented with new ideas, leading to more abstract works. *Piano Lesson's* use of patterns, explorations of interior space, and subject matter recalls the 1916 painting of the same name by Henry Matisse. Bearden drew inspiration from Matisse during this time period. Originally intended to be a poster for a dance and musical collaboration between Bearden's wife Nanette and jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, the scene portrays a teacher standing over her student who sits at the piano.

When Wilson saw the painting, he began to see Maretha and Berniece sitting at the piano that would become the symbol of legacy in the Charles family. Wilson already had much in common with Bearden; although Wilson and Bearden grew up decades apart, both grew up in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and both drew inspiration for their work from the twentieth-century African-American experience. In many ways, Wilson's play and Bearden's painting accomplish similar goals in portraying African-American life.

Many African-Americans faced both cultural dissonance and fundamental changes in everyday life during the Great Migration. Bearden's use of the collage, itself an

DID YOU KNOW? Hartford owns two Romare Bearden murals! Commissioned in 1980, "Olympics" and "Untitled" depict images of sports and arts, respectively. They first hung in the former Hartford Civic Center (now the XL Center), and in 2014 were transferred to the downtown branch of the Hartford Public Library. The larger piece is 10 feet by 16 feet and together, the murals are worth \$4.2 million dollars. They are now on display in the atrium and North Reading Room of the library where anyone can visit and appreciate them.

Visit www.courant.com/business/hc-bearden-murals-move-hartford-connecticut-librar-20141002-story.html to learn more about the process of transporting such large and heavy works of art.

inherently disjunctive and fragmented medium of artistic expression, helped to convey these feelings. Experiences that may have been viewed as simple everyday occurrences—such as a piano lesson—were often robbed of comfort for African-Americans during this time period. Following slavery and subsequent emancipation, many were still feeling the residual effects of the horrors of the time period that came before. Bearden uses the abstract to illustrate this disjunction. Wilson felt that his plays often had this type of collagist form, and aimed to express similar ideas through his work.

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson combines the abstract with the harsh realities of the Great Migration and post-slavery America to depict a family's struggle with the legacy they have been left with. Lymon moves from the South to Pittsburgh because, as he says, "they treat you [blacks] better up here" (1.2). Boy Willie attempts to sell the piano to avenge his ancestors and secure his success in a world that has granted him newfound freedom, while Berniece clings to the piano, considering it an heirloom of a time gone by and leaving it relatively untouched. Despite all of the characters' attempts to live a healthy life, they are quite literally haunted by their past, in the form of Sutter's ghost. Sutter's ghost brings the abstract themes of legacy and historical memory to the forefront. The play's final scene, detailing the struggle between Boy Willie and the ghost of Sutter, is representative of their families' and races' battle across time.

Wilson and Bearden both found solace in using the abstract to express the feelings of African-Americans in post-slavery America. Their work discussed the importance of legacy, while also honoring the troubles of recognizing the past. Both used their art to represent the issues with legacy many African-Americans faced during this time period.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What does legacy mean to you? How has it been interpreted in your family?
- How can art portray legacy? Can you think of any other art—plays, books, music, etc.—that does so? Does it use the abstract to represent meaning? How so?

A Modern Ghost Story

By Samantha Reser

While Boy Willie and Berniece argue about their piano's future, they also discover they are being haunted by ghosts from their pasts. The Ghosts of Yellow Dog and Sutter's ghost both appear in *The Piano Lesson*, whether they are seen or only spoken of. The presence of these ghosts forces the family to face their history and learn how to move on from their past.

The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog are the first to be discussed, after purportedly taking James Sutter's life. After Boy Charles—Berniece and Boy Willie's father—took the carved piano from the Sutter home, he and three other men were burned alive in a Yellow Dog train car. The spirits of the four men are said to be the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, and exist as an entity that is thought to push white men down their wells: "Must be about nine or ten, eleven or twelve. I don't know," says Boy Willie (1.2). These ghosts are never seen by anyone in the play, and are only heard by the audience in the final scene as the sound of a train whistle to take away Sutter's ghost. It is rumored that one can contact them, and Wining Boy claims that he has: "I done been to where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog and called out their names. They talk back to you, too" (1.2). He claims the ghosts gave him intuitions on what to do and where to stand, and that because he followed those intuitions, he got a stroke of good luck

CULTURAL DISSONANCE is a sense of discomfort, discord, or disharmony arising from cultural differences or inconsistencies which are unexpected or unexplained and therefore difficult for individuals to negotiate.



Berniece. Costume design by Toni Leslie James. Costume illustration by Isabela Tavares.

that lasted three years. This is similar to some urban legends that can cause ghosts to appear, such as saying Bloody Mary into a mirror three times. Unlike common urban legends, however, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog are directly tied to the Charles family.

Sutter's ghost, too, is tied directly to the family, but instead of acting as an unseen entity, he appears to multiple members of the Charles family: first to Doaker before the play begins, then to Berniece in the first scene, and then to Maretha in the second. In the last moments of the play, the whole family finally senses his presence and Boy Willie fights him off upstairs. This ghost has a described appearance, confirmed by both Berniece and Doaker:



Maretha. Costume design by Toni Leslie James.
Costume illustration by Isabela Tavares.



Photo by Sabine Schulte.

BERNIECE: He was standing there...had his hand on top of his head. Look like he might have thought if he took his hand down his head might have fallen off...Just had on that blue suit...I told him to go away and he just stood there looking at me...calling Boy Willie's name (1.1).

DOAKER: He was sitting over there at the piano. I come out to go to work...and he was sitting right there. Had his hand on top of his head just like Berniece said. I believe he broke his neck when he fell in the well (2.1).

There are also times when he isn't seen, but is present: "I heard him playing on [the piano] one time. I thought it was Berniece but then she don't play that kind of music. I come out here and ain't seen nobody, but them piano keys was moving a mile a minute" (Doaker, 2.1).

The intention of Sutter's ghost is debated throughout the play. Berniece believes it is there to get revenge on Boy Willie for pushing him down the well, but Boy Willie and Doaker believe he's finally found the missing piano and wants to get it back. Boy Willie claims, "Sutter was looking for that piano. That's what he was looking for. He had to die to find out where that piano was at...If I was you I'd get rid of it. That's the way to get rid of Sutter's ghost. Get rid of that piano" (1.1).

While the ghosts manifest themselves in different forms, the family histories of the ghosts are intertwined. The Ghosts of Yellow Dog were reportedly created after Boy Charles took the piano from the Sutter family house and was killed on the train; Sutter's ghost was potentially created because the Ghosts of Yellow Dog pushed him down the well. The ghosts are very real and personal to the Charles family. Boy Charles took the piano that was traded for his father and grandmother by the Sutters. Sutter owned the land that Boy Willie

is trying to purchase. This isn't a ghost story of people trying to call on ghosts for thrills like you might see in a horror movie; many people in the family firmly believe in one, the other, or both. These ghosts have their own agenda, and it is up to the family to figure out how to live with them or get rid of them.

The ghosts in *The Piano Lesson* may resemble ghosts we see in modern day culture or have heard of in American folklore, but they also draw heavily on traditional African religious beliefs and merge with American culture, which is something August Wilson felt was essential in creating an African-American identity. In African tradition, it is very important to worship one's ancestors because they can influence the outcome of one's future and bring protection to the family. It is also commonplace to have some sort of object used to worship ancestors or bring good luck, such as a totem or a shrine. The piano is the Charles family's shrine. Previously, the Charles family had never experienced ghosts in their homes, because Berniece would play for Mama Ola. But because Berniece stopped playing the piano and refused to put it to any use, she symbolically rejected her family ancestry. It is essential to continue worshiping one's ancestors, or else their spirits may become malevolent or remove their protection. This is what allows Sutter's ghost to enter the Charles family home. In the end, the only way to remove Sutter's ghost is for Berniece to finally play the piano, which calls on the protection of her ancestors, including the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. According to Boy Willie, who says, "Hey Berniece...if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano...ain't no telling...me and Sutter both liable to be back" (2.5),

the only way to keep Sutter away is to continue playing the piano, acknowledging the history of the family instead of shamefully setting it aside.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do ghost stories get created? What can make something a ghost?
- How are the ghosts portrayed in this production? If you were directing a production of *The Piano Lesson*, how would you portray ghosts that are never seen but are such an important part of the story?

The Legacy of Music

By Ishaar Gupta

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

—Skip James

The epigraph of *The Piano Lesson* kicks off a series of musical interludes and references that pervade the whole of August Wilson’s modern classic. The text—a verse from Delta blues guitarist Skip James’ Illinois Blues—accomplishes a number of feats; it evokes images of a slavery-era South, foreshadows Willie’s pursuit of land, and as a double entendre, references the splitting of the family (“Sell my seed”). These moments, where the words of a song tie into the themes and events of the story, are abundant throughout, and each one serves a unique purpose in documenting specific cultural aspects of black history. These musical examples not only give us a sense of the characters’ emotions, but the kind of world they live in, and the culture they have grown up with.

African-American work songs have a long history. Developed during the era of slavery, work songs have origins in African song traditions, and were sung to help endure the harsh conditions of their drudgery and remind them of home. The first work song referenced is “Oh Lord Berta” (also known as “Berta Berta”). The song, which the men learned during their time at the Parchman Prison Farm, directly references Parchman Farm, a real historical penitentiary which had a reputation of being one of the toughest prisons in the United States. Convicts would work ten hours a day for six days a week, often on the farm, brickyard, sawmill, cotton gin, or hospital. The prison was protected by “trusty shooters,” armed prisoners who had authority to shoot escaping convicts, and the punishments for apprehended escapees who weren’t shot were barbaric. Boy Willie and Lymon both served time on the farm, enduring working conditions that paralleled the era of slavery. The song, which Boy Willie, Lymon, and Wining Boy sing together at the end of Act 1, Scene 2, indicates male camaraderie during these harsh conditions, and serves as the jumping off point for Wining Boy and Boy Willie’s disagreement about racial inequality.

As “Oh Lord Berta” serves to remind the three men of their past, Wilson uses many musical examples to drive home the theme of legacy throughout. In the beginning of the play, during the only “piano lesson” we see, Maretha plays a simple exercise for Boy Willie using sheet music, and Boy Willie responds with a boogie-woogie. Willie believes this surpasses any written music, as something passed down from an earlier generation is more intimate than something written and taught. The boogie-woogie, a genre popular among African-American communities during the late 1920s, was mainly associated with dancing, and was the predecessor to genres such as rock and roll and rhythm and blues. The idea of music as a vehicle for legacy is exemplified here, as Willie passes down what he has learned to a younger generation.

Another musical perspective is offered by Avery, the preacher who attempts to court Berniece



A young photo of blues musician Skip James.



Prisoners at Parchman Farm, forced to work the fields.

throughout the play. Constantly expressing a Christian view of life and aspiring to build a congregation, Avery makes several references to gospel music. Gospel developed during slavery as a hybrid of African music and the European Christian hymns that white slave owners forced on their slaves. Avery encourages Berniece to pursue religious music, telling her to put the piano in the church and start a choir, claiming it “as an instrument of the Lord” (2.2). Avery believes playing the piano will help her get over the pain of her past, and this sets up her use of music to banish Sutter’s ghost and reclaim her household from the darkness of their family’s past. Music, in this sense, is used not only to fight back against the horrific legacy left on the family, but to create a new one, as well as a new beginning for Berniece.

The question of what to do with one’s historical legacy pervades the whole of Wilson’s play. Music, specifically genres that document black history during and prior to the Great Migration, offers a powerful exploration of this question, and gives the audience a view into the emotions of the characters and the culture they live in. When Boy Willie, Lyman and Wining Boy break into “Oh Lord Berta,” we sense the pain they have been through on the prison farm. When Berniece uses the piano to exorcise the ghosts that have haunted their household for the majority of the story, we feel her overcoming the past, acting as a priestess of sorts, and beginning anew. The music of *The Piano Lesson* is not only used to communicate the emotions characters feel, but also to document the history that has brought them to where they are.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What music has made an impact on you/your family? How does it affect your view on your family history?
- What other examples of music can you think of that relate to legacy and historical memory? How do these examples and genres accomplish this connection?

The Legacy of Everyday Objects

By Erin Frederick Rose

In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie and his sister Berniece fight over the legacy of a family heirloom. The battle over this object threatens to tear the family apart, as Berniece treasures the beautifully hand-carved antique piano and its role in their family’s past, and Boy Willie sees it as the key to his future. While this family’s particular heirloom is unique, the importance of the family’s legacy is something many of us can relate to. Often, it is not so much the items themselves that hold value, but rather the stories that go with them. The love letters written back and forth between grandparents during World War II, the family Bible that was lovingly wrapped to protect it from the damp sea air during a transatlantic crossing, the dining room table with worn edges from years of elbows resting on it, or a grandmother’s famous chocolate chip cookie recipe that always reminds you of home—all of these items may not be worth anything to someone else, but to your own family, they are precious.

According to TheFamilyCurator.com, the top 15 most common family heirlooms are:

1. Bibles
2. Photos, Albums and Scrapbooks
3. Letters, Diaries and Datebooks
4. Clocks and Watches
5. Jewelry
6. Furniture
7. China and Silver
8. Weapons
9. Military Relics
10. Quilts and Samplers
11. Recipes
12. Clothing
13. Dolls and Toys
14. Musical Instruments
15. Christmas Decorations

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you have any family heirlooms? What are they? What are the stories that make them important to you?
- Write an essay from the point of view of a family heirloom. It “watches” a family through the

years, and it likely bears witness to many family events. How does life change for it? How does each family member, or each new generation, handle it differently?

- Some of our strongest memories can actually stem from tastes or smells. Is there a family recipe that holds particular memories for you? What do you think of when you smell or taste this dish?
- In the play, Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to help start a new future for himself, while Berniece refuses to part with the family legacy. What do you think is more important: honoring the past or forging a new future?
- Is there something that you currently own that you hope will be passed on to your own children and grandchildren? What makes that object special, and what do you hope future generations will get from it?

For our production of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, Hartford Stage is partnering with **HUMANS OF HARTFORD** photographer Nick Cinea to capture the unique legacies of local residents with their most prized family possessions. Be sure to visit the lower lobby on performance day to see their heirlooms and to read their stories!

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Table Rhythm

Listen to “Oh Lord Berta” from the 1995 film version of *The Piano Lesson* and read along with the text. Create a table rhythm to play with the song (www.youtube.com/watch?v=32WzZqIN1h4).

O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal oh-ah
 O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal well

Go 'head and marry don't you wait on me oh-ah
 Go 'head and marry don't you wait on me well
 Might not want you when I go free oh-ah
 Might not want you when I go free well

O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal oh-ah
 O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal well

Raise them up higher, let them drop on down oh-ah
 Raise them up higher, let them drop on down well
 Don't know the difference when the sun go down oh-ah
 Don't know the difference when the sun go down well

Berta in Meridan and she living at ease oh-ah
 Berta in Meridan and she living at ease well
 I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave oh-ah
 I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave well

O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal oh-ah
 O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal well

When you marry, don't marry no farming man oh-ah
 When you marry, don't marry no farming man well
 Everyday Monday, hoe handle in your hand oh-ah
 Everyday Monday, hoe handle in your hand well

When you marry, marry a railroad man oh-ah
 When you marry, marry a railroad man well
 Everyday Sunday, dollar in your hand oh-ah
 Everyday Sunday, dollar in your hand well

O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal oh-ah
 O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal well



Boy Willie. Costume design by Toni Leslie James. Costume illustration by Isabela Tavares.

Creating an Advertisement

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wining Boy struggles to sell his secondhand suit to make some money. Eventually, he convinces Lymon to buy it from him, claiming that it is a “magic” suit. Have you ever had an old clothing item, game, or toy that you have tried to pawn or sell?

Design or write an advertisement for an object you own that you would like to sell. Include three descriptive elements of the item and include the price you are looking to sell it for. Take a picture of the item and put it with your ad. Think about how you frame the photo or make the object look. Do you embellish its worth? Do you put the price higher than you may think the actual value is? Make the advertisement as appealing as possible.

Show your advertisement to classmates and see if you can sell it to them. Did your advertisement work? If not, what could you have done differently? Is it worth it?

Write Your Own Scene

In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie and Berniece argue over what to do with the piano that depicts their family history and has been passed down for generations. Berniece wants to keep the heirloom in the family, but Boy Willie wants to sell it so they can own land in the South that their family worked as slaves.

Dialogue in theatre is a conversation onstage between two or more people.

Write a dialogue between two siblings, Bea and Jay. Their parents are writing a will and plan to leave the siblings an engagement ring worth \$15,000 that their older brother Drew bought and planned to give his girlfriend. Drew and his girlfriend died in a tornado, and the only surviving item the siblings have from their brother is that engagement ring. The parents offer to give Bea and Jay the ring to keep in the family, or sell it and give each sibling half of the money as an inheritance, but they must agree on their choice. Write a scene in which Jay wants to keep the ring in the family and Bea wants to sell the ring and split the money. What tactics do they use to sway the other’s opinion? What family history comes up in the scene? The scene ends when one sibling convinces the other.

The Carvings on the Piano

Through *Doaker*, August Wilson provides a description of some of the carvings adorning the Charles family’s piano. It’s up to the scenic designer and the director to decide exactly how the designs should come to life, which means the piano in each production is unique. Choose an event or two from *Doaker*’s description below and draw them the way you think they could appear on the piano.

DOAKER: Now, our granddaddy’s name was Boy Willie. That’s who Boy Willie’s named after... only they called him Willie Boy. Now, he was a worker of wood. He could make you anything you wanted out of wood. He’d make you a desk. A table. A lamp. Anything you wanted. [...] Sutter called him up to the house and told him to carve my grandmother and my daddy’s picture on the piano for Miss Ophelia. And he took and carved this...See that right there? That’s my grandmother, Berniece. She looked just like that. And he put a picture of my daddy when he wasn’t nothing but a little boy the way he remembered him. He made them up out of his memory. Only thing...he didn’t stop there. He carved all this. He got a picture of his mama...Mama Esther...and his daddy, Boy Charles...Then he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That’s when him and Mama Berniece got married. They called it jumping the broom. That’s how you got married in them days. Then he got here when my daddy was born...And here he got Mama Esther’s funeral...and down here he got Mr. Nolander taking Mama Berniece and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia. He got all kinds of things what happened with our family (1.2).

Comparison of Film and Stage

In addition to watching Hartford Stage's production, watch the 1995 film version of *The Piano Lesson*. Write an essay or have a classroom discussion about the similarities and differences of both versions. How did different actors approach the same characters? How is the setting different on film or onstage? Were any scenes very different in the play than in the film? Why do you think the directors made the choices that they did? Which rendition did you enjoy more, and why?

Collage Art

Read the article "Art Inspires Art: Romare Bearden" and search Romare Bearden's work online. Much of his work focused on everyday life. In particular, *Piano Lesson* (painting) was influenced by his wife's upcoming jazz concert. Pick an everyday object that inspires you (instrument, jewelry, furniture, etc.) and create an image of it by adding together small pieces of paper. You can use almost any kind of flat supplies: newspaper, magazines, photographs, or fabric. Get creative!

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