

## ENGL 257 -- August Wilson and His Legacy Section XX | Fall 2022

### Class Details

Instructor: Kari Daly

Email:

Office:

Office Hours:

Class Meetings:

Room:

### Course Inquiry

August Wilson (1945-2005) is quite possibly the greatest African American playwright. Over the course of his career he crafted a series of ten plays, each representing a decade of the twentieth century, chronicling the African American experience. In this class, we will read what is popularly referred to as “The Pittsburgh Cycle,” analyzing the historical contexts and juxtaposing Wilson’s representations against contemporaneous fiction and nonfiction of each decade. We will also turn to twenty-first-

century works and attend to modern playwrights who seek to carry on his legacy. Acknowledging the role of the film industry in carrying out this legacy (through productions of *Fences* and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, among others), this class will also assess the efficacy of this medium in introducing new audiences to his works. Most importantly, we will evaluate the themes that Wilson highlighted in his work. How have the concerns he represented evolved or changed over the course of the twentieth century and how are they expressed today? Do contemporary works of drama build on or divert from Wilson’s legacy?

### Course Objectives

In this course, you will:

- Become familiar with August Wilson's play cycle (The Pittsburgh Cycle) and be able to identify major themes in these works
- Compare and contrast Wilson's representation of each decade of the twentieth century against contemporaneous fictional and nonfictional works
- Identify the major themes in Wilson's plays and evaluate these through the lens of the twenty-first-century African American experience
- Develop your own inquiry into the African American experience and conduct original research
- Hone your writing skills by composing in a variety of modalities

### Required Texts

We will be reading the ten plays from August Wilson’s “Pittsburgh Cycle”: *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *Two Trains Running*, *Fences*, *Jitney*, *King Hedley II*, and *Radio Golf*.

Electronic copies of some of these, as well as supplementary readings, will be provided via our learning platform. You are expected to either bring a written copy of the text under discussion for the day or a laptop/tablet (if using an e-book). Students who attend class without either a paper copy of the texts or a laptop/tablet to reference an electronic copy will be not be given credit for class activities (for more on class activities, see below).

### Grading

We will be using a grading contract for this class. In a grading contract, your grade is calculated entirely on the basis of what you do – on your labor, your conscientious effort and participation. Additionally, your grade is not about your knowledge of drama, your educational background, your writing ability, or your technical skills. Instead, this course assigns grades in such a way that

foregrounds your active participation, engagement, and sustained effort as a student. For details on the grading contract, please see the end of this syllabus.

### **Electronic Devices**

While the use of electronic copies of the texts is acceptable, phones are discouraged. However, I understand there are times when technology fails and students aren't left with many options. Please be respectful of our time and resist the urge to be distracted. Students found engaging in social media, texting, YouTube videos or the like will not get credit for participating in class activities.

### **Email and Communications**

Please be aware that I frequently use the announcement feature in our learning platform. You are responsible, therefore, for regularly checking your college email, especially if classes are canceled. Note, too, that I will only respond to emails from your official Mount Holyoke email address.

### **Writing Center**

I strongly encourage you to make use of the Writing Center for your projects. This is a free service and can help you identify weak points in your work.

### **Ethical Scholarship**

It is crucial to find and use sources legally and ethically. Please review and abide by the college's code on academic misconduct (plagiarism and misuse of sources); you will be held responsible for understanding these materials. Anyone found plagiarizing will not get credit for completing the assignment and possibly the course.

### **Accommodations**

It is important to me that all students have the tools and resources necessary to be successful in this course. I have worked to ensure that this class is as accessible as possible for all students, incorporating UDL, multimodal texts, accessible content, and flexible deadlines and schedules. I am dedicated to meeting any accommodation requests, whether or not you are registered with the Center for Students with Disabilities. I am also always learning, so I encourage you to approach me at any time with suggestions or requests for ways to make this class more accessible.

## **Details on Class Assignments**

### **Reading Responses:**

Students are required to submit a 300-600 word response on our learning platform for each text we read this semester. These can be casual responses, but should be respectful and thoughtful. Mere summaries of the texts we have read will not be accepted.

### **Scaffolding Assignments:**

Each major assignment includes a series of scaffolding assignments that build up to the final product.

### **Class Activities:**

Students will be expected to participate in activities during each class session. These may be collaborative or individual projects (such as peer review or mini-multimodal assignments) and I will try as best I can to design activities which can be completed asynchronously if a student cannot attend a class meeting. Your suggestions are always welcome.

### **Major Assignments:**

There are three major assignments in this course: a joint analysis and presentation of a play from the supplemental readings list (groups of 2); an annotated bibliography and literature review; a final multimodal group project (either a video essay or a podcast; we will decide as a class which). I will provide a detailed assignment sheet with scaffolding assignments for each project.

## Class Schedule

Note: This is an ambitious reading schedule. We will negotiate readings as snow days and pandemic-related phenomena arise. If the schedule changes, I will alert you through our learning platform and post an updated version.

Week	Day	Date	Due
1	Monday		Introductions
	Wednesday		Wilson, from <i>The Ground on Which I Stand</i> ; excerpts from Anna Julia Cooper's <i>A Voice From the South</i> and W.E.B. Du Bois's <i>The Souls of Black Folks</i>
2	Monday		<i>The Gem of the Ocean</i> (1900s)
	Wednesday		TBD
3	Monday		<i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i> (1910s)
	Wednesday		Nella Larsen, <i>Passing</i>
4	Monday		Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to be Colored Me"; excerpts from Linda Hutcheson's <i>A Theory of Adaptation</i>
	Wednesday		<i>Ma Rainey's Black Bottom</i> (1920s)
5	Monday		Film adaptation of <i>Ma Rainey's Black Bottom</i> (2020)
	Wednesday		Excerpts from Langston Hughes's <i>A New Song</i> and Du Bois's <i>Black Reconstruction</i>
6	Monday		<i>The Piano Lesson</i> (1930s)
	Wednesday		Hurston and Hughes, <i>Mule Bone</i>
7	Monday		<i>Seven Guitars</i> (1940s)
	Wednesday		TBD
8	Monday		<i>Fences</i> (1950s);
	Wednesday		Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations"
9	Monday		Lorraine Hansberry, <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>
	Wednesday		TBD
10	Monday		TBD
	Wednesday		<i>I Am Not Your Negro</i> (2016)
11	Monday		Draft of literature review
	Wednesday		<i>Two Trains Running</i> (1960s); annotated bibliography and literature review due
12	Monday		<i>Jitney</i> (1970s)
	Wednesday		Excerpts from Angela Davis, <i>Women, Race and Class</i>
13	Monday		<i>King Hedley II</i> (1980s)
	Wednesday		13th documentary
14	Monday		<i>Radio Golf</i> (1990s)
	Wednesday		TBD
15	Monday		TBD
	Wednesday		Draft of final project

### Supplementary Readings List

Only one group may present on each reading, unless you make a powerful case for otherwise. Please let me know asap which readings you choose so I can update this list for the rest of the class and we can schedule a presentation day.

David Mamet, *Race*

Matthew Lopez, *The Whipping Man*

Stacey Rose, *America v. 2.1: The Sad Demise & Eventual Extinction of the American Negro*

Lynn Nottage, *Sweat*

Tracy Letts, *Superior Donuts*

Bruce Norris, *Clybourne Park*

Jeff Talbot, *The Submission*

Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play*

TBD

TBD

TBD

## Grading Contract

### Why do a grading contract?

So, why are we doing a grading contract this semester? For students, grades tend to produce a sense of uncertainty and anxiety. With our grading contract, you -- the student -- have more control over how you are evaluated in this course, as you can set the terms of the contract alongside your peers and you can make informed decisions about completing and submitting work in this course. Studies have found that contract grading tends to produce more interesting work, as students feel more freedom to submit creative or unconventional projects. Grading contracts also minimize systemic or personal implicit biases (e.g. related to language use, identity, political beliefs). In short, the decision to make use of contract grading for our course this semester was done because I think it's best for learning and for creating an equitable and just classroom.

### Proposed Grading Contract:

Grade	# Missed Class Activities (24)	# Missed Reading Journals (12)	# Missed Major Assignments (5)	# Scaffolding Assignments (TBD)	#Late Assignments (Class Activities, Journals, Major Assignments, Scaffolding Assignments)
A	0-4	0-2	0	TBD	TBD
B	4-5	2-3	0	TBD	TBD
C	6-7	4-5	1	TBD	TBD
D	8-10	6-7	2	TBD	TBD
F	10+	8+	3	TBD	TBD

*\*\*In order to achieve an "A" for this course, you will need to fulfill the requirements listed above AND earn three **Additional Activities** points as explained on the next page*

I've proposed a grading contract based on my values as an instructor -- that is, **engagement** (completing assignments) and **consideration** (completing assignments on time, when possible). I've also attempted to prioritize **flexibility** by giving room for error, tardiness, incompleteness, etc. while still making commitments to high standards for our course.

### How does this contract work?

Using this contract, your grade is determined by the *lowest listed score*. So, if you have 0 missed class activities and assignments but miss 3 journal entries, your baseline grade would be a "B."

**Please Note:** All assignments must be completed in good faith. This means that submissions which do not meet the criteria of the assigned work will not be accepted.

This contract is negotiable on a class-wide basis. I will check in mid semester to see how we feel about it. If you have concerns prior to or after that point, please let me know and we can see if the class would like to renegotiate.

### **Additional Activities**

To earn an “A” for this course, you must complete three points worth of Additional Activities:

- Taking notes for a class session (1pt; you may do this as many times as you like)
- Presenting on a scholarly article associated with our reading that week (2pts)
- Guiding class discussion for the day (2pts; may be done in groups of 2)
- Coming to office hours (1pt per visit; you may do this as many times as you like, but office hour visits must include substantial discussion or question)

I am also open to other ideas if you’d like to suggest some. You must connect with me prior to the class meeting if you’d like to complete any of these Additional Activities. We don’t want overlapping note-takers or presenters in one class session, so the sooner we talk and you get on the schedule, the better!

***Please note:*** *Additional Activities are not extra credit. Completing these activities will enhance your grade **only** if you already meet the requirements for an “A” grade as outlined in the table above.*