

English 4312: Studies in Drama
August Wilson's Twentieth Century: Ten Plays
Texas Tech University
Fall 2023

Section 001/D01: TR 2:00-3:20pm

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With the staging of the 2005 drama *Radio Golf*, just months before his death, playwright August Wilson completed a monumental creative project more than two decades in the making: to compose a ten-play cycle narrating African American history and experience through each decade of the twentieth century. Through ten critically acclaimed dramas, Wilson had revisited one hundred years of Black American life. This class will study August Wilson's twentieth century.

Course Goals, Expected Outcomes, Methods of Assessment:

The objective of the humanities in a core curriculum is to expand the students' knowledge of the human condition and human cultures, especially in relation to behaviors, ideas, and values expressed in works of human imagination and thought. Through study in disciplines such as literature and philosophy, students will engage in critical analysis and develop an appreciation of the humanities as fundamental to the health and survival of any society.

Our general goal is to consider in detail the ten plays in Wilson's African American history cycle. We will examine his dramatization of historical concerns like slavery's complicated legacies; industrialization and the Great Migration; challenges to segregation and the emergence of the Civil Rights movement; and tensions over class difference within African American communities. We will be attentive to Wilson's recurring thematic and stylistic elements: his depiction of a broad collective history through the intimate, "local" examples of individual Black families, for instance; or his ongoing representation of vernacular expression and cultural forms as redemptive amidst the challenges of twentieth-century history. As well, we will consider Wilson's influences, such as the Black nationalist rhetoric and aesthetic strategies of the Black Arts Movement, or inheritances from Black artists in other forms like painting and music.

Students who satisfactorily complete this course should be able **to demonstrate** a thorough understanding of Wilson's work. More specifically, students should evince an effort **to integrate** course readings, instructor lectures, and class discussions into a critical understanding of Wilson's writing and his ongoing engagement with American history, African American culture, and twentieth-century drama. Students should be

able **to articulate** their own understanding of Wilson's twentieth century through consideration of these various contexts.

The methods of assessment for this course are various. The most weight will be given to critical writing, in both formal and informal assignments. In the final paper, students should be able **to articulate** their understanding of Wilson's major themes and concerns based on one of two assignment options: 1. an extended critical reading of a course text (or texts), in straightforward prose that bears evidence of critical thinking about course issues and topics, is organized around a **clear, distinct thesis statement and direct topic sentences**, and developed through research and incorporation of secondary sources; or, 2. a directorial plan in which the student outlines how they would stage one of Wilson's plays, with clear arguments about major themes they wish to highlight, guidelines for casting and production, and commentary on why all these choices are important to bringing the selected course text to life in performance.

In the more informal ongoing reading journal, students should be able **to articulate** their personal observations, interpretations, and questions about course readings, producing at least 2-3 pages of text for each course reading. Students are not expected to produce polished interpretations in the reading journal, but simply **to work through** ideas about our readings and, hopefully, stimulate participation in class discussions. Similarly, in class discussions, students are not expected to show mastery of each work, or offer fully formed interpretations of works, but simply **to work through** ideas about readings and topics in conversation. Finally, in the course's dramatic presentations, students should be able **to stimulate class discussion** by staging a brief scene from one of Wilson's plays and explaining self-consciously why they have presented the scene as they have.

Please see the attached list of questions at the end of the syllabus as a prompt for journal entries when you're stuck.

Required Texts:

August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean*

August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*

August Wilson, *Seven Guitars*

August Wilson, *Fences*

August Wilson, *Two Trains Running*

August Wilson, *Jitney*

August Wilson, *King Hedley II*

August Wilson, *Radio Golf*

August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*

Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson*

Plus, an assortment of supplementary materials which I will post online as .pdfs on Blackboard.

Course Work/Distribution of Marks:

Final paper (10-12 pages, double-spaced)	30%	due 5 Dec
Submission of complete reading journal	10%	due 28 Nov
First student-selected journal entry (2-3 pages)	10%	due 10 Oct
Second student-selected journal entry (2-3 pages)	10%	due 7 Nov
First dramatic presentation (20-25 minutes, in group)	10%	sign up
Second dramatic presentation (20-25 minutes, in group)	10%	sign up
Informed participation in class discussion	20%	

On Reading Journals:

Each of you is required to keep an ongoing reading journal in which you record, for each course text, your own observations, interpretive points, questions, connections between texts, and follow-up points to class discussions. This journal is intended to keep you writing throughout the course, but without the burden of having always to produce polished prose. Use the journal to work through your ideas about the various readings in the course and to provide you with material to bring to class discussions.

The writing in your journal may be informal, but you are required to submit two excerpts (which I will grade, but which you choose) at different points in the semester. These excerpts should be selections that you think offer a breakthrough in your thinking about a text or texts (or about Wilson in general), interpretive moments that you think reflect your best critical thinking, feelings about how you would stage Wilson's work, or writing in which you build productively on points that we have raised in class. Toward the end of the semester, you will be required to submit the entire reading journal, just so I can see that you have been keeping up with your writing throughout the duration of the course. Know that I expect to see, on average, 2-3 pages of material for each text. Know also that you're free—and encouraged!—to write *as much* as you want. The excerpted selections must be typed, but your entire journal may be handwritten in a notebook.

On Dramatic Presentations:

Each of you is required (in groups of five or six) to make two brief dramatic presentations (around 10-15 minutes of scene presentation, with another 5-10 minutes explaining your rationale) from one of the plays on our course reading list. These presentations are intended to complement our discussion of the texts' literary qualities, and help us remain mindful of the fact that dramatic texts are intended for performance. Your group will choose the scene for presentation, stage it in such a way that you decide best emphasizes its thematic importance and/or character development, and then offer a brief reflective presentation in which you explain why you made the staging decisions you did. The dramatic presentation portion may take any form that you think best reflects your interpretation of Wilson's work, including a staged reading, a video or audio recording, or the use of music, dance, visual art, etc. We will take the second day of class to have you introduce yourselves to each other, arrange yourselves into groups

for the semester, and sign up for plays. **Please note that because this is a hybrid class, groups will break down according to modality—online students together, and in-person students together.** All students must be members of a group and signed up for both presentations by **12 September**.

On Final Papers:

There are two options for the final paper assignment: a research paper, or a directorial plan.

Option 1:

The **research paper** allows you to engage in recent critical debates on African American literature and August Wilson's work specifically, through sustained analysis of one or more literary texts from the course. Think of the research paper as an argumentative exercise, organized around a clear thesis statement, and intended to persuade a reader to adopt your position about how to understand Wilson's work. For the research paper, I expect to see a **thoughtful and considered engagement with at least three secondary sources** rather than a superficial citing of materials from your bibliography. I want you to decide on your own topic for the research paper, but I also suggest that you do so in conversation with me to ensure that the scope and subject matter of your paper are both manageable and appropriate for the course. Because this is a substantial assignment, I encourage you to begin thinking about topics early and to schedule a meeting with me to discuss your topic well in advance of the deadline.

Option 2:

The **directorial plan** asks you to imagine yourself as director for a production of one of Wilson's plays. In this assignment you are tasked with identifying the work's major themes and historical concerns, and how you intend to animate those elements through your hypothetical staging of the text. What are the most important criteria for deciding who you cast? What production choices will you make, including lighting, music, or costuming? What scenes or moments of dialogue will you put special emphasis on? For this assignment, I encourage you to research if there are available recorded productions of the text you choose for the sake of comparison. What will make your production different from what has been done before?

Informed participation assumes that you will not only read all assigned texts in time for their discussion in class, but also consider that material carefully and be prepared to contribute to our collective contemplation of them. I suggest that you take notes as you read each text, and be careful to record your observations as you move through material. Pay attention to connections between texts. Take note of how works correspond to contextual issues that I introduce in class. Make a list of questions that arise when you read the material. All of these approaches will be beneficial to our discussions as a group.

Course Policies:

Grades and Written Assignments:

1. Grades will be assigned as percentage scores (0-100) throughout the term and ultimately converted to the university's letter grade system at semester's end using this scale:

A+= 97-100	A=94-96	A-=90-93
B+=87-89	B=84-86	B-=80-83
C+=77-79	C=74-76	C-=70-73
D+=67-69	D=63-66	F=62 or below

Please note that I tend to reserve A-range grades for work of superior quality or effort. Grades in the A-range are by no means the default grade for completing all the assignments in this course.

2. You must complete **all** the writing assignments (both the ongoing reading journal and the final paper) to pass this course.
3. Late writing assignments will be penalized with a 10% deduction for each day they are handed in after the due date, including weekend days. Even after deductions have guaranteed that an assignment will receive a failing grade, you **must** still submit that paper to pass the course.
4. If extenuating circumstances will prevent you from handing an assignment in on time, talk to me **before** the paper is due. I am very *flexible* if you talk to me before the deadline has come and gone.
5. All papers are to be typed (in a font no bigger than 12-point), double-spaced, and submitted via assignment portals on Blackboard. Please adhere to MLA guidelines for formatting and bibliographical citations.
6. I do **not** accept email submissions of written assignments.

Plagiarism and Cheating:

I expect you to adhere to the highest standard of honesty and academic integrity. All work that you complete in this course **must** be your own.

All written work must be organized around your own ideas and arguments. (In the interest of aiding the resolution of any potential disputes about plagiarism, I encourage you to retain all drafts of your work until the completion of the course.) When you introduce any ideas or quotations that are not your own in an essay, you must **cite explicitly** the source of that material according to MLA citation practice. To repeat, **any** material that is not your own—including verbatim quotations from outside work or paraphrases of other writers' ideas or arguments—must be referenced explicitly. If you have any questions about whether or not you have used a source properly on a given assignment, I encourage you to discuss the issue with me **before** you hand that assignment in. Because academic dishonesty constitutes a grave breach of trust between instructor and student, and diminishes the value of honest students' work, I take all plagiarism cases very seriously. **Plagiarizing materials in any of the written assignments for this class will warrant a failing grade for the entire course.**

Absences:

I will allow each student **three** absences without penalty. Each class that you miss after three absences will warrant a reduction of your **overall** course grade by 10%. I do not designate between excused or unexcused absences, except for those designated as excused according to university policy. Because you only have three classes you can afford to miss without penalty, I encourage you to manage your attendance wisely, reserving those three absences for emergencies when you need them. For an explanation of university-approved absences, consult your student handbook. **Also, I expect you to know how many classes you have missed throughout the term. You may confer with me at various points in the term about how many absences I have recorded, but please also manage your own attendance record.**

Classroom Civility and Access:

I expect each of you to assist in creating and maintaining a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. At the bottom level, this assumes that you will always be respectful to me and to your fellow classmates. Our classroom space will be open to differences of opinion and ideology, and accessible to all students without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, creed, sexual identity, or differences in ability.

Please note that I will **not tolerate** the use of any derogatory or demeaning language. **This includes the repetition of racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, or anti-trans slurs, even in quotation while discussing course texts.** We will be reading many texts that use dehumanizing language but we need not reproduce discursive violence by saying any of that language aloud in our meetings. These words may appear in our course texts and you may quote them in your academic writing (or choose to use some other designation when quoting in your work) but we will not say them in class. In moving to this philosophy, I have adapted the argument presented in this excellent blog post by Dr. Koritha Mitchell of Boston University, which I encourage you to read: <http://www.korithamitchell.com/teaching-and-the-n-word/>.

Always extend the same courtesy to other members of the class that you wish to see extended to you. Listen quietly when others are speaking; raise your hand to ask questions or introduce new points; do not have side conversations apart from our main discussion. I encourage dissent but insist that you articulate your ideas respectfully. You are welcome to bring food and drink to class provided they're not a distraction. Please keep your cell phones silenced during class time.

Texas Tech Institutional Required Syllabus Statements:

Please consult the following link for the university's policies Concerning Academic Honesty, Special Accommodations for Students with Disabilities, Student Absences for Observance of Religious Holy Days, and Accommodations for Pregnant Students: <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/tlpdc/RequiredSyllabusStatements.php>

TTU Resources for Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Violence

Texas Tech University is committed to providing and strengthening an educational, working, and living environment where students, faculty, staff, and visitors are free from gender and/or sex discrimination of any kind. Sexual assault, discrimination, harassment, and other [Title IX violations](#) are not tolerated by the University. Report any incidents to the *Office for Student Rights & Resolution*, (806)-742-SAFE (7233) or file a report online at titleix.ttu.edu/students. Faculty and staff members at TTU are committed to connecting you to resources on campus. Some of these available resources are: **TTU Student Counseling Center**, 806-742-3674, <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/scc/> (Provides confidential support on campus.) **TTU Student Counseling Center 24-hour Helpline**, 806-742-5555, (Assists students who are experiencing a mental health or interpersonal violence crisis. If you call the helpline, you will speak with a mental health counselor.) **Voice of Hope Lubbock Rape Crisis Center**, 806-763-7273, voiceofhopelubbock.org (24-hour hotline that provides support for survivors of sexual violence.) **The Risk, Intervention, Safety and Education (RISE) Office**, 806-742-2110, rise.ttu.edu (Provides a range of resources and support options focused on prevention education and student wellness.) **Texas Tech Police Department**, 806-742-3931, <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/ttpd/> (To report criminal activity that occurs on or near Texas Tech campus.)

Tentative Schedule of Readings and Discussions:

WEEK ONE:

24 August: Introduction to course

WEEK TWO:

29 August: Introduction to fellow students, arrangement into presentation groups, presentation sign-up. Lecture/discussion on African American performance and theatre history.

31 August: Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement" (on Blackboard); Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre" (on Blackboard)

WEEK THREE:

5: Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Chitlin Circuit" (on Blackboard); *The Ground on Which I Stand*

7 September: *The Ground on Which I Stand*

WEEK FOUR:

12 September: *Gem of the Ocean*; "A 10-Play Odyssey Continues with *Gem of the Ocean*" (*Conversations*, 253-6)

14 September: *Gem of the Ocean*

WEEK FIVE:

19 September: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*; Kim Powers, "An Interview with August Wilson" (*Conversations*, 3-11)

21 September: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

WEEK SIX:

26 September: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*; Michael Feingold, "August Wilson's Bottomless Blackness" (*Conversations*, 12-18), Bill Moyes, "August Wilson: Playwright" (*Conversations*, 61-80);

28 September: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

WEEK SEVEN:

3 October: *The Piano Lesson*; Sandra G. Shannon, "August Wilson Explains His Dramatic Vision: An Interview" (*Conversations*, 118-54)

5 October: *The Piano Lesson*

WEEK EIGHT:

10 October: **First Reading Journal submission due**; *Seven Guitars*

12 October: **No class scheduled, instructor away.**

WEEK NINE:

17 October: *Seven Guitars*

19 October: **Guest Lecture, Ranney Lawrence, actor and director.**

WEEK TEN:

24 October: *Fences*; Dennis Watlington, "Hurdling Fences" (*Conversations*, 81- 9)

26 October: *Fences*

WEEK ELEVEN:

31 October: *Two Trains Running*; Richard Pettengill, "The Historical Perspective: An Interview with August Wilson" (*Conversations*, 155-71)

2 November: *Two Trains Running*

WEEK TWELVE:

7 November: **Second Reading Journal Submission due**; *Jitney*; Elisabeth J. Heard, "August Wilson on Playwriting: An Interview" (*Conversations*, 223-34)

9 November: *Jitney*

WEEK THIRTEEN:

14 November: *King Hedley II*; Herb Boyd, "Interview with August Wilson" (*Conversations*, 235-40)

16 November: *King Hedley II*

WEEK FOURTEEN:

21 November: **Final paper workshop.**

23 November: **No class scheduled (Thanksgiving)**

WEEK FIFTEEN:

28 November: **Complete Reading Journals due**; *Radio Golf*; Sandra G. Shannon and Dana A. Williams, "A Conversation with August Wilson" (*Conversations*, 241-52)

30 November *Radio Golf*

WEEK SIXTEEN:

5 December: **Final Papers due**; conclusions.

Note: You are responsible for finding out about any changes that I make to this schedule of readings while you are away from class.

Reading Journal Prompt Questions:

Use the following questions to generate your journal responses if you feel stuck about what to write.

1. If this is a non-fiction text or interview with Wilson, what is the main argument or most compelling idea you took away? What does the text critique or what ideas does it challenge?
2. If this is a play, what contexts does it represent or dramatize for readers? What problems does it illustrate through creative means?
3. What historical figures or contexts were you introduced to in this reading that you didn't know already and had to look up? Explain any references you looked up.
4. What character in the play did you find yourself most emotionally moved by or sympathetic to? Why?
5. What connections might you draw to other readings in this course or other texts you've studied?
6. Identify a passage or scene from this text you found beautiful. Why do you think it affects you?
7. How do you see the relevance of this text to our current time?