The Lesson the Piano Teaches:
August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*
and the African-American Experience It Illuminates

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Abstract

August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* is the subject of this curriculum unit prepared for tenth grade English students in the School District of Philadelphia. *The Piano Lesson* is an alternative text available to teachers in the district. An important goal of this unit is to motivate students to read, and students will more readily read what they can identify with. This unit dovetails nicely with the new emphasis on African-American literature in the district. August Wilson had as his goal the recounting of the African-American experience through the course of American history. He wrote a ten-play cycle with that goal in mind. So, what could be more apropos to school district students than to study this play, *The Piano Lesson*, which focuses on the 1930s? But this unit can be helpful to any teacher who wants to teach this marvelous play, *The Piano Lesson*.

This curriculum unit consists of a reading by students of *The Piano Lesson*. Before, during, and after the reading of the play, students will do research and report on the background of the play, on the aspects of African-American experience which this play delves into, that is, the experiences common to blacks after the Great Depression, and during the migration of huge numbers of blacks from the South northward. Students can learn of the centrality of music, especially the blues, in the African-American experience. Students will learn of the influences on August Wilson – especially of the work of Romare Bearden which profoundly affected August Wilson.

In this unit there are suggestions for topics on which students can do their research. There are guide questions which students can use to deepen their understanding of the play. This unit will serve as a useful resource to guide the study of *The Piano Lesson*. 