

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

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**Overview**

August Wilson planned to write a ten-play cycle that would illuminate the African American experience in this country. He assumed the role of a tribal *griot* whose duty it was to preserve the legacy and history of his culture: "... the role of the griot is significant since it is with him we mark the beginning of African literary tradition as we know it" (Freeman 1). In order to do that he embarked on his ten-play cycle which would present the African American experience to his people and to the world. "In Blackburn's assessment, Wilson is a playwright-historian whose 'memory embraces the Middle Passage, enslavement, torture, economic deprivation, pseudo-freedom, and human ability to endure'" (Snodgrass 157). One of his central concerns was the correct and accurate representation of the African-American experience. "The inability to suppress, control, manipulate, and right histories of race has repeatedly affected the social and cultural dynamics of African American life" (Elam x). His contention was that only African-Americans should have the last word in accurately and completely depicting the African-American experience. What he called "foreign", that is non-African Americans representations of their experience represented a big problem for him.

Wilson's task, one shared by many black American writers, is a simultaneously reactive/constructive engagement with the representation of blacks and the representation of history by the dominant culture.... In this sense, the transmission of history becomes a binding ritual through which his characters obtain an empowering self-knowledge, a tangible sense of their own worth and dignity (Morales in Nadel 105-06).

So in his ten-play cycle he wanted to present an interpretation of African American history by one who was an inheritor of and product of that history and therefore able to present a first-hand account of the results of that long history.

Wilson writes that his ‘blood memory’ is a guide for his creation. Blood memory – the idea that there are some intrinsic experiences, some ontological knowledge that blacks remember just because they are black – also has the potential to seem essentialized (Elam xvii).

According to Harry J. Elam, August Wilson’s blood memory was not a biological entity, but a “...representation that dramaturgically blurs the lines between figurative and real.... Central to Wilson’s dramaturgical project is the idea that one can move forward into the future only by first going back” (xviii-xix).

The issues of baggage or treasure from the past and their integration into contemporary life are the backbone of Wilson’s fourth play, *The Piano Lesson*, inspired by (Romare) Bearden’s painting of the same name. When Wilson saw Bearden’s painting in an art gallery, he turned to a friend and said, “This is my next play” (Fishman in Nadel 143-44).

“Wilson writes: ‘I never had the privilege of meeting Romare Bearden.... I’m sorry I didn’t, for I have never looked back from that moment when I first encountered his art’” (Fishman 147). Romare Bearden’s vision and art had a profound impact on August Wilson: “In Bearden I found my artistic mentor and sought, and still aspire, to make my plays the equal of his canvasses” (quoted in Herrington 21). Wilson admired and strove to imitate the method of Bearden using a normal scene like an elder teaching a young child to play the piano as a way to imply African-American lifestyle and values. He, as well, admired and tried to emulate Bearden’s collage-style of artistic creation (Fishman 137-38).

*The Piano Lesson* takes place in Pittsburgh in 1937 with The Great Depression as a backdrop and hints at the black migration from south to north then occurring. The play concerns a dispute between a sister who has moved to Pittsburgh and her brother who still lives in Mississippi. The brother wants to sell a family heirloom – the piano – to buy land down south, but the sister wants to keep it in the family because of its familial and tragic associations. The piano has carvings on it done by her great-grandfather which depict important events in the lives of the Charles family under slavery. There is the ghost of John Sutter – of the Sutter family who owned the Charles family in slavery times - which hovers over the piano and which does not want the piano to be disturbed. The central conflict is between Boy Willie and his sister, Berniece, and what will happen to the piano. The play is rich with symbolism. “This play is the story of the Charles family and its efforts to exorcise the ghosts that haunt it” (Pereira 87).

August Wilson was meticulous in his representations of the times. So this play serves as a window into the African American experience of that time period. By reading the play the reader can see into the past, and by making the various aspects of the play a subject of study the student can get a real sense of what the times were like for the characters. This study of the times through the experience of the characters in *The Piano Lesson* will be the focus of this unit.

My students are low-income mainly African American with little motivation to study and read. This unit will try to make this play and its background come alive by showing that the lives of the characters in the play have a dimension which makes their experiences have a very personal resonance for my students. The history in this play is after all their own personal history.

To make this experience meaningful and personally enriching I will assign to students various aspects of this play and its backdrop. Students will research and report to the class on what they have found. Students will give their reports while the class is reading the play together as well as after the reading of the play. The subjects of these reports can be limitless, limited only by the creative imagination of the teacher and students. Topics could be the experience of slavery, the breaking up of families in slavery, racism, southern prisons, the tradition of art in Africa and in America, the blues, blues musicians, slave-master relationships, migration from south to north, symbolism in the play, railroads and railroad workers, the church, jobs in the '30s and on and on. *The Piano Lesson* is indeed very much a window into the past.

### **Rationale**

Because my students are averse to reading and to study, as a general rule it is essential to try to make the subject matter as appealing as possible. If a person can see himself reflected in the subject matter, then it becomes all the more interesting. Most of my students do not have the motivation to see learning as essential to their existence given all the distractions of hormones, peer pressure, and the challenging issues associated with daily living. My students are tenth graders whose skill levels in reading and writing are mostly very basic. It is a real challenge to find material which is at once challenging and yet not undecipherable. Enter *The Piano Lesson*. This play has several advantages over other subject matter. It is, first of all, a play, and students can therefore become involved in the actual reading of it. The reading becomes a fun communal experience, not an isolating experience. It is, secondly about the African American experience, so my students will find it a little easier to identify with than, say, with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

The play takes place in the not-so-distant past, in America. The play involves a background with which most students will have a faint familiarity, that of a black family in a city in the 1930s. There is Avery, a recent arrival to Pittsburgh from the South, who

wants to start a church. There is the hard-charging Boy Willie who knows what he wants and will brook no interference from anyone black or white. There is Limon, new to Pittsburgh, who wants to put down roots there. There is Berniece, the hard-working single mother, working in the white folks' kitchen, trying to survive in the city. There is hard-working Uncle Doaker, the fun-loving Wining Boy, a musician and a gambler. There are ghosts; there's a flashback to the slavery past. The characters, setting, conflicts, issues, and assumptions have a familiarity which is not just a coincidence, but due to the purposeful strategy of August Wilson who wanted to present a history from the perspective of an insider, an heir to the very experiences he recounts in his plays.

While my students are reading the play as well as after they have finished reading the play and viewing the filmed version of the play, they will present to the class the fruits of their research into the multitudinous aspects of the background of the play. This effort will involve selection of a topic, researching of same, and the presenting of findings to the class. The selection of the topic will be a collaborative effort between the student and teacher. The topic is up to the interest and creativity of the student. The manner of presentation will as well be up to the student.

*The Piano Lesson* is an alternative text available to be used in the classroom so it is already a part of the existing Core Curriculum prescribed by the School District of Philadelphia. I have taught this wonderful play in the past with invariably positive responses from my students. By creating this unit I shall be able to delve more deeply and more completely into the myriad aspects of the play which in the past have received cursory attention. And students will become much more actively involved, not only in the reading of the play in class, but also in deriving a richer meaning from the play. And this active participation in their own learning by students places this unit even more completely into the requirements of the Core Curriculum.

## **Objectives**

What this unit seeks to achieve, most basically, is to motivate my students to become energetically involved in the learning process. *The Piano Lesson* is an intrinsically entertaining work. It allows direct student involvement in the reading of the play. It contains elements familiar to my students. For all these reasons *The Piano Lesson* should motivate my students to become interested in the reading of the play. Students, in addition, will be able to exercise their creativity and become active participants in their learning process by presenting to the class their findings on a topic of their choice, associated with the play in a manner that suits their own strengths and styles of learning.

Many standards will be covered and met during this whole process. They will of course be reading, understanding, and evaluating a work of fiction. They will as well be reading and evaluating and analyzing and synthesizing non-fiction texts as they organize information to present to the class in their papers.

They will identify and develop a research topic; they will establish a thesis; they will produce a position paper. Students will read primary and secondary sources and evaluate the reliability of primary or secondary authors. They will be comparing and contrasting a variety of texts reflecting their own and others' cultural heritage. They will make use of library technology, including print and non-print media, CD-ROM, the Internet, all the while evaluating the information gleaned from these sources. They will make perceptive and well-developed connections among the texts, personal experiences and prior knowledge. They will identify and understand explicit and implicit bias in a print or electronic text and be able to discern and label the various techniques associated with propaganda such as generalization, simplification, distortion, etc. They will use writing as a learning tool, to take notes, formulate questions, and solve problems. They will summarize and synthesize data; they may even conduct interviews to gain information about events, careers, and issues; they will of course use writing for personal expression. They will produce a report that engages the reader by establishing a context, advancing a judgment that is interpretive, analytic, evaluative, and reflective; they will support their judgment through references to the text, other works, authors, non-print media, or through references to personal knowledge. They will demonstrate an understanding of the literary work through the interpretation of the work; they will develop a controlling idea and a theme that conveys a perspective on the subject; they will properly document information by using correct citations within the paper, either parenthetically, or with end- or footnotes, following APA or MLA format.

In the oral presentation of their findings students will summarize and interpret material read or heard; they will role-play to develop solutions to problems; they will give oral presentations that substantiate the reliability of sources; they will share ideas and stories. They will develop a video to demonstrate the ability to synthesize and master material which has been researched and the ability to present such material in an interesting manner; they will use a computer to create visually enhanced presentations; they will select and organize information to achieve a particular purpose and to appeal to the interests and background knowledge of audience members; they will speak from notes or recite from memory (*Curriculum Frameworks*).

In the actual reading of *The Piano Lesson* upon which all the preceding activity is based, students will be able to identify and understand literary elements such as setting, character, plot, theme, point of view, allegory, conflict, mood, and tone; they will be able to articulate the effectiveness of August Wilson's use of these elements; they will identify aspects of African American heritage and literary tradition to understand the cultural background and historical times in which *The Piano Lesson* is rooted; they will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of August Wilson's style, and finally they will hopefully enjoy the literary experience and further develop lifelong reading habits.

## Strategies

In order to achieve these objectives the teacher must be both present and absent. The teacher must walk alongside the students as they develop their respective projects as responses to *The Piano Lesson*; the teacher provides the support, guidance, and information needed to bring the students' projects to fruition. The teacher provides the direction and impetus for the projects and then becomes invisible as the student takes the reins and guides the project to completion.

During the reading of *The Piano Lesson* the teacher acts like a director and more, to guide students in the reading of the play; he or she also provides insightful commentary to highlight those aspects of the play which will later become the subjects of the students' presentations: what about the music in and around the play – what importance and meaning does it have? Why is the Charles family in Pittsburgh? What about Boy Willie and his tough-minded pursuit of his goals? Is there a symbolism in Sutter's ghost? Questions like these can be posed throughout the reading of the play. An essential part of this unit is the presentations by the students. In order to have a productive experience the students will need guidance in the formulating of their topics. Here is where the teacher's role is essential in fashioning questions which students can then answer in their presentations. The following are suggested questions which will indicate lines of research.

1. What is the importance of music in the play?
2. What is that musical genre called the blues?
3. Is the awful experience of the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog" unusual in the 1930s south?
4. What brought Berniece and Doaker from Mississippi to Pittsburgh?
5. What were the southern justice and prison systems like in the South typified by Parchman Farm?
6. What is the significance and symbolism of Sutter's ghost?
7. What kind of art existed in Africa and served as a model for art among early slaves?
8. What kind of character is Boy Willie? Does he bear any resemblance to that notorious character of song and story – Staggerlee?
9. Describe the railroad system in the 1930s.
10. How important was the railroad as a mode of transportation in the 1930s?
11. Was Doaker Charles unusual as a black man working for the railroad?
12. Describe the African American Church in the 1930s. Was Avery an unusual example of a preacher in the Church?
13. Describe some aspects of the experience of slavery especially examining the practice of breaking up families at the whim of the master.

14. Who do you think is really pushing those (white) people down their wells? How common was the spirit of rebellion among slaves?
15. What forms might the spirit of rebellion take among slaves?
16. Describe the symbolism of the piano and justify your description with quotes from the play, as well as with August Wilson's statements regarding the piano.
17. Describe Wining Boy and give a picture of the recording of that time.
18. What was the accepted role of women, especially African American women in the 1930s in the North?
19. In the South?
20. How does the use of flashbacks establish a continuity in the play especially with reference to the Charles family?
21. Describe the background of the situation when Crawley got killed. What kind of backdrop is assumed but never stated in that confrontation.
22. Berniece talks about the men's use of violence and its effects. Is she correct? Why or why not?
23. What is a work song? Give some examples. How were they used in the 1930s?
24. What is an allegory? What are the elements of allegory in the play?
25. What was the Great Depression? What impact did the Great Depression have on the characters in the play?
26. Who was August Wilson? Did he fill the role of a griot?
27. What was life like for blacks in the South in the 1930's?
28. What was life like for blacks in the cities of the North during the 1930's?
29. The North won the Civil War. What was life like for blacks in the South immediately after the Civil War?
30. What was the experience of racism for blacks in the South in the 1930's?
31. What was the experience of racism for blacks in the North in the 1930's?
32. Is there racism today? How is it manifested?
33. What are the lingering effects of generations of oppression among blacks today?

These are typical questions which could be addressed by students in relation to the reading of *The Piano Lesson*. I envision these questions on a large accessible list which students can examine for topics which appeal to them or which prod their imaginations to subjects not covered by these questions. With the assistance of the teacher, each student (or students – there being room for students working together in a small group to deliver the project) selects a topic, and the manner of presentation (oral, power point, video, performance).

### **Classroom Activities**

Students need to be introduced to the play and its author. Students will examine the concept of African “griot”, look at the work and goals of August Wilson, and establish the fact that indeed he saw his role as chronicler of the African American experience. So *The Piano Lesson* will be a depiction of the time period covered by the play, as accurate

as the playwright can make it. In reading this play, students will be looking through a window into the lives similar to the lives lived by their very own ancestors. Students will discuss as a group or in small groups the concept of heirloom, and whether they know of any heirlooms within their experience. They will discuss the goal of Boy Willie – that of owning his own land. Is it a laudable goal or selfish? Does the determination of Berniece to keep the heirloom in the family make any sense? The results of these discussions will be noted and recorded for possible later revision as the plot develops.

Students will read the play together, with students sharing and changing roles during the reading of the play. I will point out the aspects of the play which students will plumb further in their projects. This flagging will be brief and cursory, so that the flow of the play is kept smooth. During the reading of the play students will work on graphic organizers which highlight the elements of the play: character analysis sheets, Venn diagrams to compare and contrast characters in the play, cause-and-effect diagrams, plot diagrams to illustrate exposition, rising action, climax, conflict, characters, point of view, and denouement. A timeline should be at hand to keep track of developments in the play and references to the past both immediate and remote made by the characters in the play. These exercises will delineate the literary elements of the play; they will be used discreetly and carefully, so that students' interest remains high and so that students gain awareness of how these elements of the play serve – with unwavering focus – the theme, the author's purpose. Students will also work on guide questions to actively react to and incorporate into their thinking the elements of the play. Students, when they have finished with their own reading of the play will view the delightful film version of same. Armed with the notes, diagrams, and graphic organizers they have produced, students will gain a clearer insight into the workings of the play and into the aims of the playwright, August Wilson, as they view a full-fledged performance of the play. The above activities contain inchoate lesson plans for at least three weeks. The plans are malleable, subject to the exigencies of maintaining interest and involvement of students. The teacher should always be aware and wary of desiccating the play which should be kept as what it was meant to be, a source of enjoyment and entertainment.

The concluding part of this unit requires that students take charge of their learning. In order for this to happen the teacher must guide students into selecting topics of study which are doable and beneficial. And, so for the first two days, the teacher will direct students to the list of questions which the teacher has composed. He or she directs the students to examine the list, think about the possibilities of research which might interest them. He/she directs them to select a topic and then decide how best to present it with a view to the student's own strengths and weaknesses and his/her own predilections. The teacher tells students to take advantage of the technological resources available to them. My school is a school of communications and technology, so the resources available to students are indeed remarkable. I shall enlist the assistance of the teachers of technology courses so that students will have access to, and assistance in using the school's resources. Presentations can take many forms from a straightforward oral presentation,

through a presentation with charts and graphs, to a power point presentation, or a computer graphics display, or a TV production. Students will be permitted to work together in groups of two or three. The process of topic selection, of manner of presentation, and of the size of the group is a process with overlapping and intermingling priorities, so that topic or manner of presentation, or number in the group may take priority from one student to the next. The role of the teacher is to facilitate these decisions, to lay down a tight timeline to which students must adhere, and once these choices are made to then become a guide and consultant to whom students can go for direction and suggestions in the completion of their projects. The first resource is the web from which students can get leads to books, periodicals, or other websites which can be useful in their research.

What I shall do before we begin the reading of the play is to distribute the following guide questions which students will work on for homework. Due dates will be announced as the play progresses.

*Guide Questions Act One, Scene One*

1. Where and when does the first act open?
2. Describe boy Willie, Lymon, Doaker Charles, and Berniece (according to the stage directions). Who is Maretha?
3. Describe Wining Boy.
4. Why does Boy Willie want to sell the piano?
5. Doaker says Berniece will never sell the piano. Why won't she?
6. Who is Sutter?
7. Who is Avery Brown?
8. Whom does Berniece see upstairs?
9. How does Boy Willie react?
10. Who is Crawley? Whom does Berniece blame for Crawley's death?
11. Summarize Avery's dream of the three hobos.
12. Whom could the three hobos represent?

*Act One, Scene Two*

13. Who was Cleotha Holman? How does Wining Boy find out about her death?
14. How long ago (before the time when the play opens) did the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog get Sutter?
15. About how many people did the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog get? List some of their names.
16. For what were Boy Willie and Lymon put in the penitentiary?
17. According to Wining Boy, what's the "difference between the colored man and the white man"?
18. Tell the history of the piano – according to Doaker – from "slavery time".

19. Who took the piano?
20. Who are the “Ghosts of the Yellow Dog”?
21. Boy Willie justifies his desire for land by appealing to his father’s experience. Explain.
22. Berniece says, “You killed Crawley just as sure as if you pulled the trigger”. Explain.
23. How does Boy Willie respond and say that he is not responsible for Crawley’s death?

### *Act Two*

24. Who was the first person to see Sutter’s ghost?
25. Berniece says she will talk to Avery about their relationship when what happens?
26. Why doesn’t Berniece play the piano?
27. What does Avery promise to do?
28. What is Lymon looking for in his life?
29. What does Lymon give to Berniece?
30. How much can Boy Willie get for the piano?
31. How does Doaker react when Boy Willie tries to move the piano?
32. How did the “Yellow Dog” get its name?
33. Why does Boy Willie want to buy land?
34. As Boy Willie again starts to move the piano, what does Berniece do?
35. As Boy Willie rushes upstairs to fight Sutter’s ghost, what does Avery finally say?
36. What does Berniece do as Boy Willie fights with Sutter’s ghost?
37. Whom does Berniece call on for help?
38. How does the play end?
- 39.

By answering these questions as the play progresses, students will keep clear in their minds how the events of the play serve to develop Wilson’s theme.

### Sample Lesson Plan 1

(These lesson plans owe a great debt to *The New York Times Learning Network Lesson Plan* URL:<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/>)

I’ll write on the board the sentence, “The Past is Present” and ask students to write a half-page on what that sentence means. Then students will discuss in class what it might mean and as a result of the ensuing discussion arrive at an acceptable meaning of the sentence which we will tie into August Wilson and how his belief in the importance of the past in determining one’s present led him to write his cycle of plays..

Then students will discuss the title of this play, *The Piano Lesson*, to discover the subtle double meaning of the title. A piano lesson in its first sense of course means a lesson given by a teacher to a student in order to learn how to play the instrument. Another, subtler meaning is the lesson which the piano teaches – in this case a lesson about the past and past suffering of the Charles family.

Students will then begin the reading of *The Piano Lesson* in class, with parts being assigned on a first-come-first-served basis and with a promise of rotating parts among the whole class. Students will have their character-analysis sheets at the ready to record descriptions of a character's appearance and personality and to indicate who gives this information about the character (with page #): the playwright? another character's words? another character's actions? the character himself? Students will perform the first twelve pages of the play (up to when Berniece sees Sutter's ghost). This part of the play gives the plot in skeletal outline. Students will be able to fill out the 'exposition' part of their plot diagrams. Now students assigned reports on Romare Bearden, August Wilson, and the 1930s will deliver their findings to the class. There will be time for discussion, questions, and answers about the playwright, about the task he assigned himself, about the art of Romare Bearden (examine samples of his work via images gleaned from the web and projected on the board in class), about the 1930s in America.

### Sample Lesson Plan 2

Today students will view the video, "August Wilson: 1945-2005". Students will discuss the ideas of August Wilson and how he brought his ideas to fruition. Students will now be able, with the help of their plot diagrams, to answer the following questions about *The Piano Lesson*: What is the setting? What is the main storyline? What is the tone of the play? Who are the main characters? What is the play's major theme? Why do you think Mr. Wilson wrote this play? What do you think audiences learned by watching the play?

This lesson focuses on Doaker Charles' recounting of the history of the piano. This part would involve more than one class period because of the centrality of the piano. Students will read this part of the play. We'll then make a timeline of the events Doaker describes in this flashback. Students will deliver their research on the experience of slavery, on their findings on African art, with a focus on sculpture.

### Sample Lesson Plan 3

This lesson occurs at the beginning of act two when Doaker Charles is singing about the railroad. Students can see a good example of the rhythms a playwright uses to keep the interest and attention of the audience. The last scene ended with a highly-wrought argument between Boy Willie and Berniece and with Maretha screaming in terror from upstairs. Now this scene opens with Doaker calmly singing and ironing his uniform. This calm scene gives the audience time to digest the previous scene and to prepare for the finale. Now, before

students perform their part of the play, there can be reports on railroads of the 1930s, migration of blacks from the South to the North, the experience of blacks working on the railroad, including reminiscences by members of students' families. Students will examine the importance of music, especially the blues, in the lives of African-Americans as well as in the dramas of August Wilson. The students then read the play.

There will be many opportunities to assess the performance of students in this unit. The usual practice of written tests will be useful. Students' research and presentations are valuable assessment tools. The quality of their guide-question responses and of their other written exercises will give an accurate idea of students' grasp of the content of the play, understanding of the literary elements in the play, interpretation of the characterizations in the play in the light of the theme of the playwright, and analysis of plot progression to climax and resolution.

As a culminating activity of this unit students will view the video performance of *The Piano Lesson* in order to approximate the theater-going experience August Wilson intended for his plays. This viewing will have a richness and resonance that will be very rewarding.

### Works Cited

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Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1994.

### **Student Resources**

Some resources available in the study of aspects of *The Piano Lesson* will be listed below. What resources students will use depends very much on what topic they choose and how they choose to present it. Here are a few resources I found useful, and which students can use as well in exploring aspects of the play and its background.

Bell, Kurt. "Tears, Trains and Triumphs." RR Museum of Pa.. [www.rrmuseumpa.org/about/rrhall/facesissues/legacy.htm](http://www.rrmuseumpa.org/about/rrhall/facesissues/legacy.htm) . This article gives a thumbnail sketch of African Americans and the railroads.

Hauser, James P. *The AKA Blues Connection's Stagger Lee Files*. 2002-2005. [www.geocities.com/blueskat2000/stagger\\_lee\\_home.htm?200719](http://www.geocities.com/blueskat2000/stagger_lee_home.htm?200719) . This site talks at length about the song "Staggerlee" and as well provides useful leads to other sources.

Horton, James O., and Lois B. Horton. "African American History: XVII The Postwar Years, XVIII The New Deal." *MSN Encarta*. [http://encarta.msn.com/text\\_761595158\\_90/African\\_American\\_History.html](http://encarta.msn.com/text_761595158_90/African_American_History.html) . This site offers an overview of the conditions endured by African Americans after WWI and into the thirties.

Dubois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. There are articles in this volume that give information bridging the time between slavery and the 1920s.

Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro*. Articles in this volume provide much information on a wide variety of issues from the early part of the century.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Bogumil, Mary L. *Understanding August Wilson*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999. The book has a fine introduction to August Wilson, the playwright. There is a chapter devoted to each of six plays, including *The Piano Lesson*.

- Booker, Margaret. *Lillian Hellman and August Wilson: Dramatizing a New American Identity*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2003. More than somewhat in-depth, uses the phrase *lieu de memoire* a lot in the chapter on *The Piano Lesson*.
- Bryer, Jackson R., and Mary C. Hartig, eds. *Conversations with August Wilson*. Jackson Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2006. A delightful and revelatory collection of interviews with August Wilson – one by Bill Moyers. You get to know the playwright.
- Elam, Jr., Harry J. *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*. The introduction is excellent. There's a good chapter on music in Wilson's drama.
- Herrington, Joan. *"I Ain't Sorry for Nothin' I Done" August Wilson's Process of Playwriting*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1998. There's a chapter on the four "B's": Baraka, Bearden, the Blues, and Borges in which she discusses the influence on Wilson of Romare Bearden.
- Nadel, Alan, ed. *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essay on the Drama of August Wilson*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994. There's an essay on Romare Bearden. The essays demand some intellectual reaching.
- Pereira, Kim. *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995. Each chapter is devoted to one of four plays. The chapter on *The Piano Lesson* is good.
- Shannon, Sandra G. *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1995. There's a lengthy allusion to Charles Fuller, the Philadelphia playwright. In the excellent introduction, one can read about the profound influence of Romare Bearden on Wilson and can learn about the lesser-known works of August Wilson.
- Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2004. Let me quote from the preface: "It provides the reader... with a source of basic data and analysis on characters, dates, events, allusions... from the canon of one of America's finest playwrights (p. 1). It too has an annotated chronology.
- Williams, Dana A. and Sandra G. Shannon, eds. *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*. New York: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2004. Somewhat recondite. The best part is the conversation with August Wilson.

## Standards

Here are some of the Pennsylvania standards met by this unit:

- 1.1.D Learning to read independently – Identify, describe, evaluate, and synthesize the essential ideas in the text.
- 1.1.G Learning to read independently – Demonstrate after reading, an understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction texts, including public documents.
- 1.1.H Learning to read independently – Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading.
- 1.3.A Reading, analyzing and interpreting literature – Read and understand works of literature.
- 1.3.B Reading, analyzing and interpreting literature – Analyze the relationships, uses and effectiveness of literary elements used by one or more authors in similar genres, including characterizations, setting, plot theme, point of view, tone, and style.
- 1.3.C Reading, analyzing and interpreting literature – Analyze the effectiveness, in terms of literary quality, the author’s use of literary devices.
- 1.3.F Read and respond to fiction and nonfiction, including poetry and drama.
- 1.4.B Write complex informational pieces (e.g. research papers, analyses, evaluations, essays).
- 1.6.A Listen to others.
- 1.6.D Contribute to discussions.
- 1.6.E Participate in large and small group discussions and presentations.
- 1.8.A Select and refine a topic for research.
- 1.8.B Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies.
- 1.8.C Organize, summarize and present the main ideas from research.