



# Study Guide 2026

Oregon Shakespeare Festival



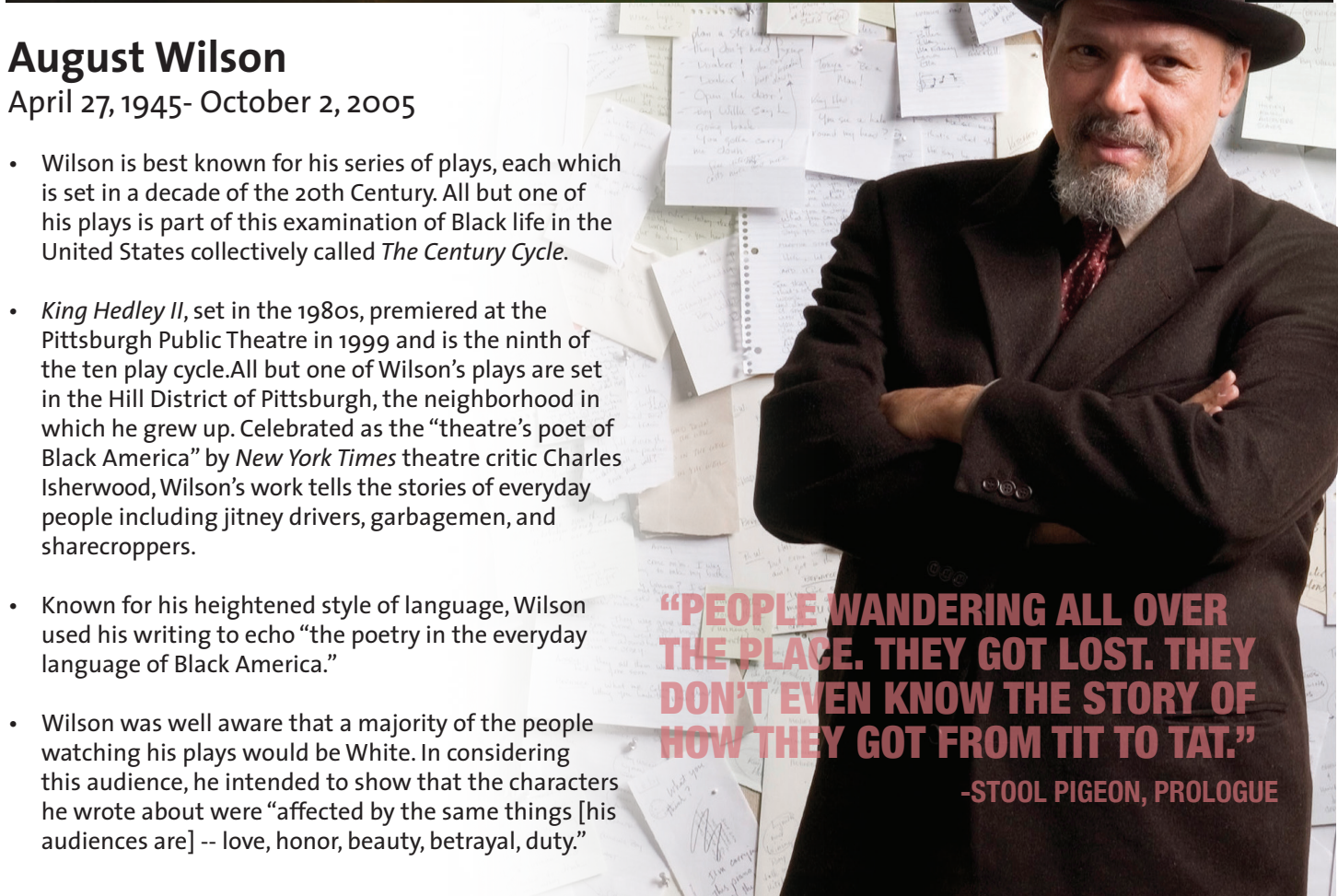
## August Wilson

April 27, 1945- October 2, 2005

- Wilson is best known for his series of plays, each which is set in a decade of the 20th Century. All but one of his plays is part of this examination of Black life in the United States collectively called *The Century Cycle*.
- *King Hedley II*, set in the 1980s, premiered at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre in 1999 and is the ninth of the ten play cycle. All but one of Wilson's plays are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, the neighborhood in which he grew up. Celebrated as the "theatre's poet of Black America" by *New York Times* theatre critic Charles Isherwood, Wilson's work tells the stories of everyday people including jitney drivers, garbagemen, and sharecroppers.
- Known for his heightened style of language, Wilson used his writing to echo "the poetry in the everyday language of Black America."
- Wilson was well aware that a majority of the people watching his plays would be White. In considering this audience, he intended to show that the characters he wrote about were "affected by the same things [his audiences are] -- love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty."

**"PEOPLE WANDERING ALL OVER THE PLACE. THEY GOT LOST. THEY DON'T EVEN KNOW THE STORY OF HOW THEY GOT FROM TIT TO TAT."**

**--STOOL PIGEON, PROLOGUE**



## Before the Play

1. Several of the characters in *King Hedley II* have been incarcerated at some point in their lives. Research mass incarceration and its effects. What is mass incarceration? What are some ways it affects individuals and communities? These and other websites provide information:  
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9149680/>  
<https://paloalto.edu/resources/business-of-practice-blog/the-long-term-effects-of-incarceration>  
<https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2019/08/07/prison-book-home-families-relationships>  
<https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/human-services/incarceration-reentry-o>  
<https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/mass-incarceration-trends/>  
<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/history-mass-incarceration>

**“THE THINGS I WANT YOU CAN’T BUY WITH MONEY. AND IT SEEM LIKE THEY BE THE HARDEST TO GET.”**

**-Tonya, Act II, scene iii**

2. There are several references in the play to characters’ names and why they are called what they are called. How might a person’s name affect the way they exist in and are perceived by the world?
3. Research Pittsburgh’s Hill District. How might a neighborhood’s history affect the people that live there? Why do you think August Wilson decided to set much of his *Century Cycle* there? These and other websites provide information:  
<https://www.visitpittsburgh.com/blog/hill-district-a-neighborhood-guide/>  
<https://aaregistry.org/story/the-hill-district-pittsburgh/>  
<https://aaregistry.org/story/the-hill-district-pittsburgh/>  
<https://www.hilldistrict.org/history/>  
<https://savingplaces.org/stories/the-story-of-the-pittsburgh-neighborhood-that-inspired-fences>  
<https://hillhistory.org/tours/show/5>  
[https://www.giveto.pitt.edu/show\\_module\\_fw2.aspx?sid=1729&gid=2&control\\_id=10211&nologo=1&cvprint=1&page\\_id=4306&crd=0&viewas=user](https://www.giveto.pitt.edu/show_module_fw2.aspx?sid=1729&gid=2&control_id=10211&nologo=1&cvprint=1&page_id=4306&crd=0&viewas=user)
4. Two characters — Ruby and Stool Pigeon — appear in August Wilson’s *Seven Guitars*, set 40 years before the events of *King Hedley II*. Research the events of that play. What predictions might you make about how they have grown since the 1940s? These and other websites provide information:  
<https://www.scribd.com/document/556055505/Seven-Guitars-Full-Play>  
<https://awaacc.org/american-century-cycle/seven-guitars/>  
[https://www.anoisewithin.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SevenGuitars\\_StudyGuide\\_Fall21\\_r5.pdf](https://www.anoisewithin.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SevenGuitars_StudyGuide_Fall21_r5.pdf)

5. The characters of *King Hedley II* have varying opinions about and relationships with violence. Is violence ever justified? What, if any, link do you see between violence and survival?
6. Research how poverty affects one’s mental health. What are some side effects of experiencing poverty? These and other websites provide information:  
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7525587/>  
<https://www.jrf.org.uk/psychological-perspectives-on-poverty>  
<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/how-poverty-affects-the-brain-and-behavior>  
<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aayo214>  
<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/povertys-toll-mental-health>  
<https://usafacts.org/articles/how-does-poverty-affect-peoples-mental-and-physical-health/>

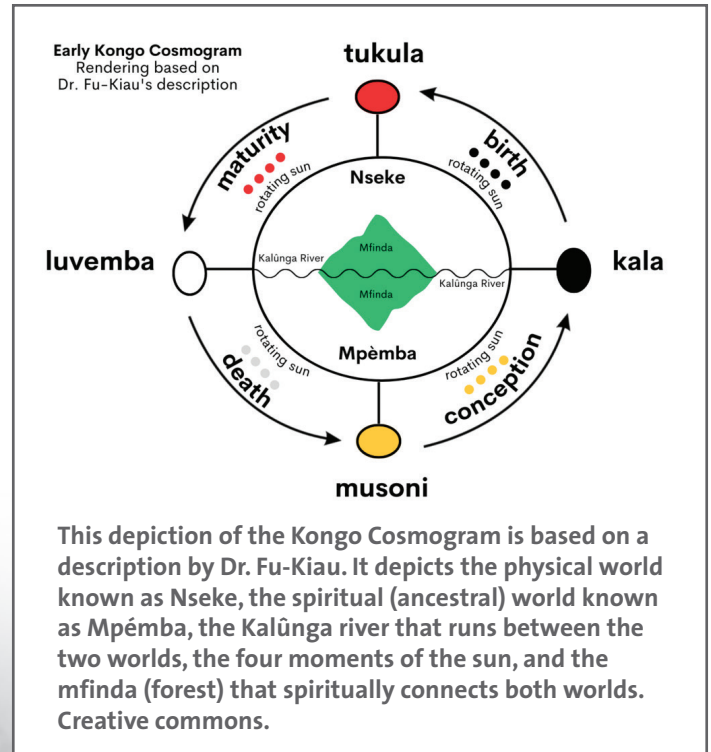


Tonya Costume Rendering  
by Costume Designer  
Helen Q. Huang

# Wilsonian Spirituality

*King Hedley II* opens with an aria by Stool Pigeon wherein he laments that “times ain’t nothing like what they used to be” — citing that the people’s connection to God through the pathway to Aunt Ester’s house has been “grown over with weeds”. This pathway through Ancestral knowledge to God is a thread that runs through August Wilson’s Century Cycle. All of Wilson’s work pulls on the spiritual traditions of African Americans, marrying the creoled religions of the African diaspora and the learned Christian practice of their European captors. To this day, African Americans remain the most religious of all the racial/ethnic groups in the United States, and while many Black people identify as Christians, much of the “old way” survives. The adoption of European Christianity by enslaved Africans was often a survival tactic, and some used Christianity as a way to secretly practice their native religions. As time wore on, much of it became intermingled to the point of being indistinguishable.

While on the surface Wilson’s work seems rooted deeply in Christianity, even that is a creation, a melange filtered through the lens of Africanness. Most of the passages attributed to the Bible are actually not direct quotes, but rather inventions of Wilson — perhaps even the translation of his memories of what the Bible says.



Wilson has said that the center of his play *Gem of the Ocean* “is the incredible spirituality of African people who honor their ancestors. They have concepts of God — Trees that have spirits. All of these things have been part of their belief system”. This belief system is present in all of August Wilson’s plays — personified in one way or another. We find ghosts in *The Piano Lesson*, a conjure man in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Cutter’s God in *Ma Rainey*, Mr. Death in *Fences* and, finally, Aunt Ester in *Two Trains Running*, *King Hedley II*, *Radio Golf*, and *Gem of the Ocean*. In each of these personifications we find characters who are wrestling with their identity and only find and then either embrace or reject their fullness once they reckon with their connection to the spiritual and ancestral memory.

In the preface to *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* — set in 1911 — Wilson wrote “newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of their gods, only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned”. This seems to be the thread, pulling Wilson’s cosmology together: memory and its cardinal sin, forgetting.

August himself has called Aunt Ester “the most significant persona” in the Century Cycle and when she dies in *King Hedley II*, many of the characters believe that all is lost. The person who carried the memory of the people is gone, taking with her what may be the true religion of August Wilson’s work — remembrance and redemption.



Washington, D.C. Members of the congregation of the Church of God in Christ. Gordon Parks, 1912-2006, photographer. Wiki image.

## After the Play

1. Why do you think the playwright chose to begin the play with a preface by Stool Pigeon? How does this set up the action for the rest of the play?
2. Refer to the “Wilsonian Spirituality” section on page 3. In the opening monologue, Stool Pigeon says “They don’t even know the story of how they got from tit to tat. Aunt Ester know. But the path to her house is all grown over with weeds...” How do you feel the events of the play are directly affected by the loss of access to Aunt Ester and her house?
3. What significance do King’s seeds have in the play? Why does he insist that they grow in “his dirt?”
4. Why does King dream of a halo around his head? What does this reveal about his character and ultimately his outcome.
5. Does King feel guilty about his involvement in Pernell’s death? Why or why not? Are his reasons for killing Pernell valid?
6. Refer to your research on the psychological effects of poverty. How do the characters’ financial situations affect their mental and emotional health? How does it guide their decision making?
7. Both King and Ruby had big dreams for their lives — to own businesses and make records — how do these dreams affect the way they live? How does not achieving them change things for themselves and those around them?
8. Stool Pigeon and Ruby appear in *Seven Guitars* which is set in the 1940s. In that play, Stool Pigeon is still referred to by his given name Canewell. Do you think 40 years later, he still deserves the name Stool Pigeon? What meaning does it have in the context of *King Hedley II*? Research the origins of the term using the websites below. Use that information and the summary of *Seven Guitars* to guide your discussion.  
<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/83619/why-informant-called-stool-pigeon>  
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/stool-pigeon>  
<https://ornithology.com/stool-pigeon/>  
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/seven-guitars-august-wilson>
9. King spends most of his life estranged from his mother and not knowing his father. How do you think this affects the way he relates to Ruby? To Tonya and to the child they have conceived together?
10. There are many offstage characters in *King Hedley II*. Consider “That boy who got killed on Bryn Mawr Road” and Neesi, how do their deaths affect the events of the play?

11. During the robbery, King takes his gun’s safety off while Mister leaves his on. Why do you think that is? What does this say about the difference between these two men.

**DURING THE EARLY 1990’S RECESSION, WHICH BEGAN IN MID-1990, THE LABOR GAP WIDENED SIGNIFICANTLY. BY EARLY 1992, THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE FOR BLACK AMERICANS PEAKED AT 14.7%, WHILE THE WHITE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE PEAKED AT 7.2%.**

**-CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS.**

12. Why does Tonya refuse King’s money?
13. Refer to your research on mass incarceration, and the 80s section on pg 5. How does the economy and the fact that most of the characters have been in prison before impact their actions in the play?
14. The play ends with the sound of the black cat meowing. What do you think this signifies? Why do you think that King’s blood being spilled on its grave allows for this to happen?
15. Dreams play a role in *A Raisin in the Sun*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *King Hedley II*, and *You Are Cordially Invited...* How did each playwright use dreams in their play? How is the dream world different than the conscious world?
16. If you are seeing *A Raisin in the Sun*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *You Are Cordially Invited...*, *King Hedley II*, or *Emma*, compare the relationship between love and marriage in the plays. How do the parents in these plays influence their children’s marriages or relationships? How much agency do the children have in determining their partners? What attributes other than love do the parents value?



Elmore Costume Rendering by Costume Designer Helen Q. Huang

# 1980s America: Decadence and Deprivation

The 1980s was known, by a sector of the country, as the Decade of Decadence. It was the decade that brought us MTV, CNN, Star Wars, John Hughes, fictional businessmen like Gordon Gecko, and Michael Jackson's "Thriller". President Ronald Reagan, who served from 1981-1989, rode the growing wave of conservatism and capitalism to create an America that benefited the wealthy, championed consumerism and ushered in an era of increased incarceration and policing.

Reagan's policies added billions of dollars to the defense budget while cutting from social programs like Medicaid, Social Security and Food Stamps. His spending tripled the national debt, even as he professed belief in a smaller government, with fewer guardrails. While "Yuppies" — career minded, college educated, upwardly mobile young professionals — experienced growing prosperity due to massive tax cuts for the wealthy, other groups of Americans found themselves in growing precarity.

The President believed that "supply side" or "trickle down" economics would bolster the economy; if the wealthy had more money, they'd spend more and their wealth would "trickle down" to the less wealthy. The trickle did not quite reach those on the bottom, stopping instead at the upper middle class. And while unemployment numbers decreased,

and on the surface it looked like the median household income increased, this was due in part to the need for double income households because of the cuts to social programs. By 1990, the unemployment rate for Black Americans was 15.2% compared to 6.2% for white Americans "and in some parts of the country, 50% of African American males between the ages of 16 to 19 were unemployed".

While Reagan's predecessor began the "War on Drugs", his 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act moved the conversation around drug use from rehabilitation to incarceration. It established mandatory minimum sentences for possession, and created the "100 to 1" rule — the possession of 500g of cocaine carried the same sentencing as 5g of crack. At the height of the crack epidemic, 80% of its users were Black, compared to the vast majority of cocaine users, who were White. By the end of Reagan's term, the country's prison population had nearly doubled. According to the ACLU, while only 15% of drug users are Black, they make up 74% of those incarcerated on nonviolent drug charges.

The Women's Movement of the 60s and 70s drove workplace and healthcare reforms that benefited many. However, the rise in conservatism brought about a federal government that sought to curb that progress. Reagan's alignment with evangelicals made him a vocal opponent of abortion. His administration's cuts to social programs heavily impact on women and children. On the 10th anniversary of *Roe vs. Wade* the president published a book entitled *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation* which linked abortion to eugenics and enslavement. Though not successful in curbing abortion rights on a national level, the President's insistence that abortion "killed more than 15 million unborn children" fueled public opinion leading to abortion restrictions on Native reservations and changed doctors' disclosure rules for underaged pregnant people.



Former President Ronald Reagan and his "tax ax."

Part of the crowd at the U.S. Capitol May 17, 1980 denouncing the high unemployment rates for African Americans. "Photo by Rosemary Martufi. The image is courtesy of the D.C. Public Library Washington Star Collection © Washington Post.

# The Century Cycle: August Wilson's Chronicle

August Wilson spent 26 years writing a century of Black history in his 10 play cycle. Each play captures a moment in an African American family and neighborhood, sharing the hopes, dreams, heartbreaks, and triumphs of everyday people in Pittsburgh's Hill District. While some characters reoccur, each play can stand on its own.

## ***Jitney* (1982)**

Set in 1977, this play follows the men who congregate in the jitney cab station owned by Jim Becker. Veterans, formerly incarcerated people, and numbers runners tell a story of brotherhood, tragedy, and reconciliation.

## ***Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984)**

The only play not set in Pittsburgh, this play fictionalizes a recording session of real-life blues legend Ma Rainey and her band. The band gathers on a sweltering Chicago day in 1927 as Ma fights for agency over her art and hot-head trumpet player Levee confronts the weight of existing in Jim Crow America.

## ***Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984)**

In Seth Holly's boarding house in 1911, a community forms among the newly freed roomers — a “conjure man” with a connection to African religion, a young migrant from North Carolina, and a mysterious stranger who arrives searching for the wife who abandoned him and his daughter.

## ***Fences* (1987)**

The first of Wilson's two Pulitzer Prize-winning plays, and arguably the most famous of his works, this play is set in 1957 and tells the story of the Maxon family, led by complicated patriarch Troy — a former Negro League baseball player — and his devoted wife of 18 years, Rose.

## ***The Piano Lesson* (1990)**

The second of Wilson's plays to win a Pulitzer, this play is set in 1936 in the aftermath of The Great Depression. Siblings Boy Willie and Berniece disagree on what to do with an invaluable heirloom — the family's hand-

carved piano crafted by their formerly enslaved ancestor. While Boy Willie, a sharecropper living in the South, feels they should sell it and buy the land he tends, Berniece is emphatic that they should keep it in honor of their family history.

## ***Two Trains Running* (1991)**

In 1969, Memphis Lee's diner serves as a meeting place for members of the Hill District. Set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement and the rapid gentrification of Pittsburgh, the diner is set for demolition. While Memphis fights for what his restaurant is worth, his customers search for love, freedom, and justice in a changing country.

**“MY PLAYS INSIST THAT WE SHOULD NOT FORGET OR TOSS AWAY OUR HISTORY.”**

**- AUGUST WILSON**

## ***Seven Guitars* (1995)**

Fresh from his release from jail and on the heels of the release of his first and only hit record, blues singer Floyd Barton returns to the Hill District in 1940, in hopes of reconnecting with his love Vera. However, the demons of his past come back to haunt him and he is tragically killed. Those who love him gather to mourn and celebrate his electric life and work.

## ***King Hedley II* (1999)**

In 1985, King Hedley, a formerly incarcerated man, hatches a plan to support his wife and mother by using cash made selling stolen refrigerators to buy a video store and become a respectable businessman. The play is searing critique of the Reagan administration and the “supply-side economics” that landed many in financial precarity.

## ***Gem of the Ocean* (2003)**

In 1904, we are introduced to Ester Tyler, the matriarch of August Wilson's Century Cycle, as she opens her home to individuals on the path towards redemption and the building of a new culture that recognizes the path from Africa to post-enslavement America.

## ***Radio Golf* (2005)**

In the last play in the Cycle, set in 1997, we meet Hammond Wilkes, an Ivy League-educated local politician whose redevelopment project would alter the Hill District in irreparable ways — namely, by demolishing 1839 Wylie Avenue, the home Aunt Ester occupied for nearly 100 years.

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