

2013 Suggestions for Teaching *Two Trains Running* by August Wilson

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Who was August Wilson? What is his unique contribution to American theatre?
Research Wilson's ten-play series, the Pittsburgh Cycle, of which *Two Trains Running* is the seventh play. These and other websites provide information:
http://www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/bhm/bio/wilson_a.htm
<http://www.augustwilson.net/>
<http://www.august-wilson-theatre.com/index.php>
2. Research the migration of African-Americans from the south to the north during the early part of the 20th century. What were the catalysts that led African-Americans to leave the south? What were they searching for? What were they running from? What were they leaving behind? These and other websites provide information:
http://www.pbs.org/jazz/places/faces_migration.htm
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Migration_\(African_American\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Migration_(African_American))
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129827444>
3. *Two Trains Running* takes place during 1969 in Pittsburgh's historic Hill District. Investigate the history of the Hill District, paying special attention to its transformation during the 1950's, 60's and 70's. What were the consequences of urban renewal on the Hill District? How did the Civil Rights Movement affect the Hill District community? These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_District
http://www.clpgh.org/exhibit/neighborhoods/hill/hill_n4.html
http://www.freedomcorner.org/civil_rights_in_pittsburgh.html
<http://www.wqed.org/education/pghist/logs/wylie.php>
4. Research the timeline of the American Civil Rights Movement, paying attention to events beginning in 1954 and ending the year before *Two Trains Running* is set, in

1968. What were the key events? Who were the major players and what were their contributions? These and other websites provide information:

<http://civilliberty.about.com/od/raceequalopportunity/ig/History-of-Black-Civil-Rights/Civil-Rights-Era--1954-1968-.htm>

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Civil+Rights+Movement+and+the+continuing+struggle+for+the...-a0108197665>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_\(1955%E2%80%931968\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_(1955%E2%80%931968))

5. Research Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. What was the significance of each to the African-American community and to the Civil Rights Movement? In what ways were their ideologies similar, and in what ways different? Who was responsible for the death of Malcolm X? How did the Black Panthers gain power, and how did they lose social credibility? These and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_X

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/malcolmx/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Panther_Party

<http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/>

6. What was the Black Power Movement? What ideals and actions did the slogan “Black is Beautiful” encourage? These and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Power_Movement

<http://eldhughes.com/2012/03/01/black-is-beautiful-50-year-anniversary-a-movement-that-went-viral-before-digital-technology/>

7. Research the “numbers racket.” What are the rules? Why did people play? How much could you win in proportion to how much you bet? These and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Numbers_game

<http://mquee.hubpages.com/hub/History-of-the-Policy-Racket-in-Black-America>

8. Who was Richard King Mellon? What is he chiefly remembered for? This and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R.K._Mellon

9. Define the terms “urban renewal” and “eminent domain.” These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_renewal
http://www.expertlaw.com/library/real_estate/eminent_domain.html
10. Research Samuel the Prophet. In what sense did he span two different eras? This and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel#National_prophet.2C_local_seer
11. Research the Story of Esther. What is Queen Esther hailed for? This and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Esther

After seeing/reading the play

1. Consider the following quotes:
“Well there’s two trains runnin’ but there’s not a one that’s goin’ my way /You know there’s one train runnin’ at midnight/The other one leave just for day.”
(Jimi Hendrix, “Catfish Blues”)

“If the train don’t hurry there’s gonna be some walking done.” (Traditional)

How do these quotes pertain to the story of *Two Trains Running*? Examine the “two trains” of the title as a metaphor for life versus death, North versus South, past versus present, the younger generation versus the older generation and the rule of law versus lawlessness. What other metaphors might the two trains stand for? What symbols do trains in general bring to mind?
2. Refer to your research on the Great Migration. Which characters in the play are especially connected to this movement? What have been the repercussions of the migration on all the characters, and what does the South represent to each of them? How does this inform how they feel about the Hill District and Pittsburgh?
3. Refer to your research on the history of the Civil Rights Movement. What does setting the play in 1969—at the end of the Civil Rights Movement—say about the world in

which the characters live? What memories would these characters have that informs how we see them depicted in the play? How are they connected to the racial and social turbulence of the world around them? How are they disconnected from the turbulence?

4. How have Pittsburgh's urban renewal initiatives physically altered the Hill District neighborhood and its inhabitants? How has it emotionally altered them? What is significant about setting the play in the Hill District as it is undergoing urban renewal when advances are being made for African-Americans in the U.S.? Why might Wilson have chosen to juxtapose these two events side by side? In what ways do the characters in the play have more or less opportunity than they did in the past?
5. Holloway says the "the numbers give you an opportunity." In what ways is this true? What opportunity did the numbers give Memphis? What is ironic about the anger he expresses towards Wolf about his diner being a "legitimate business"? Citing examples from the text, argue whether or not the numbers ultimately help or harm the community.
6. Compare and contrast the notions of "luck" and "faith" in the play. Who believes in luck and who doesn't? Who believes in faith and who doesn't? What have the characters experienced that might make them lucky? How does Wilson depict both luck and faith as a "gamble"?
7. Why does Sterling say that he was born with "bad luck"? What does "having luck" look like to him? What drives him? What does he believe in? How does he differ from the other men in the play?
8. How does each character cope with injustice? What injustices do we hear about or see happen within the play? Which ones are resolved by the play's end, and which ones are not?
9. What is Risa hoping for when she cuts her legs? In what ways does she get it and in what ways does she not? How much authority do Risa and the other women mentioned in the play (Wolf's girlfriends, Memphis's wife) have in relation to the men? In relation to the world in which they live?

10. How do Risa and Sterling influence each other? What qualities does each find attractive in the other and what ultimately brings them together?
11. What is the significance of the broken jukebox? What is significant about when it begins to play again? When Memphis states that he is getting a brand-new jukebox during his final monologue, what is the larger meaning behind his statement?
12. Holloway says Hambone “might have more sense” than any of the other characters. What does he mean by this? In what way is Hambone a figure to be pitied and in what ways envied?
13. Compare Hambone and Memphis. How are their plights similar? Different? Why is Memphis unable or unwilling to see anything admirable about Hambone?
14. Memphis and West cannot find a way to come together over the sale of Memphis’ diner. Why not? How does each man’s way of doing business represent a larger conflict within the Hill District community?
15. Why does Memphis not identify with the Black Power Movement? How do Sterling’s views on affecting change and Memphis’ views on affecting change differ? What is it about Sterling that gives Memphis an uneasy feeling about him?
16. Discuss Aunt Ester’s age and how it coincides with the history of Africans in America. What does her age say about her connection to all of the characters in the play? Besides money, what does Aunt Ester expect the characters to let go of as they throw their money into the river? What does she provide for them?
17. What does West’s refusal to follow the advice of Aunt Ester say about his character? In refusing her, what does he gain? What does he lose? Can he get it back, and if so, what must he do?
18. Aunt Ester tells Memphis “you got to go back and pick up the ball.” What is the “ball” that Memphis dropped? What does the “ball” represent for each of the characters? In telling Memphis to pick it up, what is she telling all African-Americans to do?

19. What are the people clamoring to see the body of Prophet Samuel hoping to get by viewing him? What is the difference between what people expect to get from Prophet Samuel and what they expect to get from Aunt Ester? What conditions do Prophet Samuel and Aunt Ester place on those who seek their guidance?
20. Refer to your research on the biblical figures of Samuel and Esther. In what ways do the offstage characters of Prophet Samuel and Aunt Esther in *Two Trains Running* live up to their namesakes? How is the relationship of the Hill District community to Prophet Samuel similar to the Israelites' relationship to Samuel the Prophet in the bible? How is it like the relationship between the Jews and Queen Esther?
21. Aside from Esther and Samuel, consider what some of the other names in the play might indicate about their owners, such as Sterling, Wolf, Memphis, West and Hambone.
22. Memphis downgrades Aunt Ester's value, yet by the end of the play he goes to see her. What caused him to change his mind? In what ways does Memphis get what he wants from his meeting with her?
23. Towards the end of the play we hear of Hambone's many scars. Compare Hambone's scars to Risa's: what other parallels exist between them? What external and internal battles has each been fighting?
24. *Two Trains Running* ends, for all intents and purposes, on a triumphant note. Who has triumphed by the play's end? Who has not? What message do these triumphs ultimately send?

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