

FENCES

EXPLORING THE PLAY

- 1 What is meant by the concept of the “American Dream”? How do Troy and Cory each view the American Dream? Why do their views differ? Do you think the American Dream is something that can come true for people in your generation?

How does August Wilson’s perspective on the American Dream compare to perspectives on the American Dream presented in other literature you’ve read?
- 2 Is Troy a heroic character, a tragic character, a bit of both, or neither? Why?

- 3 *Fences* is set in 1957. How do the defining characteristics of this era influence the characters and the events in the play? In what ways might the characters’ lives differ if the story had been set in 1937, before World War II? How would they differ if the story took place in 1967, or today?

- 4 **Key Quote:**
“Some people build fences to keep people out...and other people build fences to keep people in.”
—Jim Bono, Act 2

What does the fence-building project represent for each of the Maxsons (Troy, Rose, and Cory)?



Set in
1957

A father’s
frustration with his
own past threatens
his son’s future

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "August Wilson".

Pulitzer Prize Winner

DRAMA
1987

FENCES

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

IN YOUR BACKYARD

When Troy was a young player at the top of his game, Major League Baseball was segregated. By the time the League was integrated, Troy was considered too old to play in it. Research Negro League teams that were established in or near your community. Who were some of the standout players? What happened to them after the integration of Major League Baseball?

Troy's Legacy

Imagine Cory's life after the events that took place in *Fences*. Write a monologue for him set in the future, when he is Troy's age.

EXPRESSION PROJECT

Her Story: Write a one-act sequel or prequel to *Fences*, with Rose as the central character. Write a one-act sequel to *Fences* with Raynell as the central character. Share your work with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

GEM OF THE OCEAN

EXPLORING THE PLAY

- 1 In *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester speaks of the “City of Bones,” a mythical city at the bottom of the ocean representing the burial place of an estimated 15% of the 11-13 million enslaved Africans who perished during the Middle Passage on ships from Africa to the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade.

Read Aunt Ester’s descriptions of the City of Bones and then make a drawing, painting, or collage of it. What do you imagine it looks like?

- 2 After visualizing the City of Bones, write a one-act play that is set there from start to finish.
- 3 Aunt Ester is known in the community as a “washer of souls.” She takes Citizen Barlow on a symbolic, life-changing trip to the City of Bones. Why does this trip have such a profound impact on Citizen? How does it cleanse his soul?



Set in
1904

Through the power of memory, a man takes a mystical journey toward freedom and redemption

Tony Award® Nominee

BEST PLAY
2005

GEM OF THE OCEAN

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

IN YOUR BACKYARD

Before Emancipation, Solly Two Kings and Eli were part of the Underground Railroad. Research nearby historic sites, museums, parks, libraries and monuments in your area to find out if any of these landmarks were stops on the Underground Railroad. If so, create a brochure about these places that could be used by your community's visitors' center or tourism board. A list of known sites can be found at [pbs.org/black-culture/shows/list/underground-railroad/locations](https://www.pbs.org/black-culture/shows/list/underground-railroad/locations).

Key Quote: *"The people made a kingdom out of nothing."*
—Aunt Ester describing the *City of Bones*

Aunt Ester's words also describe the resilience of the enslaved Africans who survived Middle Passage, and of their descendants. Starting with nothing, or very little, African Americans formed communities, built businesses, created art forms (jazz, blues), and more. Ask your older relatives or neighbors to describe a time when they created "something out of nothing." Record these interviews. Choose one as the basis for a piece of creative writing.

Who Keeps the Collective Memory?

At nearly 300 years old, Aunt Ester embodies the African presence in America, beginning with slavery. As such, she holds the collective memory and wisdom of her community. How do the elders and wisepersons in your family and in your community keep the collective memory of your culture? What memories do they hold and have passed down to you? Record these memories (conduct interviews as needed). How does collective memory help sustain and uplift a family or community? Compare your culture to other cultures in this regard.

EXPRESSION PROJECT

Research the contributions and successes of African Americans that you don't typically hear about during Black History Month, including people in your community. Work with your classmates to create a slideshow, photo exhibit, or graphic booklet celebrating these unsung individuals. Share your work with the August Wilson Education Project at [wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share](https://www.wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share) or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

JITNEY

EXPLORING THE PLAY

1 The relationship between Becker and his son Booster is characterized by their different views on personal pride. Do you relate more closely to Becker's perspective on pride, Booster's, both, or neither?

2 *Jitney* is set inside an unofficial cab station. In what ways is this unique setting central to the story? The unlicensed and unregulated cab services currently operating in some cities are modern-day jitneys. These services have come under fire because they do not follow existing rules for cabs. Do you support this transportation option in your community? Why or why not?

3 *Two Trains Running* and *Radio Golf* are two other August Wilson plays that, like *Jitney*, deal with urban

redevelopment's visible and invisible costs to the African American community. Summarize Wilson's view of urban redevelopment, based on these 3 plays. Do you agree with his perspective? Why or why not?

4 **Key Quote:**
"There's no idea in the world that is not contained by black life. I could write forever about the black experience in America."
—August Wilson

Consider the quote above and the interactions between Youngblood and Rena, Becker and Booster, and other characters in *Jitney*. How are these relationships both personal *and* universal, reflecting the broad themes of love, honor, duty, and/or betrayal?



「 Set in 」
1977

Bonds between generations are tested by personal and community conflicts

New York Drama Critics'
Circle Award Winner

BEST PLAY
2000

JITNEY

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

IN YOUR BACKYARD

August Wilson developed the characters in *Jitney* from listening to the everyday conversations of people in his neighborhood, The Hill District of Pittsburgh. Go on a listening expedition to find interesting characters and voices in your neighborhood. Take notes. Coffee shops, barbershops, parks, rec centers — even your school cafeteria and hallways — are full of material. Choose one more bits of dialogue to focus on, and transform this material into a story set in your community.

EXPRESSION PROJECT

Bridging the Generation Gap: If you wrote a play set in the hub, or center, of your community, where would it take place? Who would be there? What conflicts might arise?

What conflicts exist between people of different generations in your family or in your community? How is today's generation gap similar to the one in *Jitney*? How are they different? What might help to bridge today's gap?

Explore the possibilities by writing a scene between two pivotal characters from different generations. Then, write additional scenes to create a one-act play. Share your work with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

EXPLORING THE PLAY

- 1** In *Joe Turner*, as in all of August Wilson's plays, the characters' personal and collective histories take center stage. Research the Middle Passage and The Great Migration. How do these literal, historical journeys influence the personal and emotional journeys of the characters in *Joe Turner*?
- 2** During The Great Migration, millions of African Americans journeyed from the rural South to the North, West, and Midwest in search of greater economic opportunities and freedom. What did freedom mean for them in 1911? What does freedom mean to you, today?
- 3** **Key Quote:**
"I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song...Fellow forget that and he forget who he is " – Bynum

August Wilson defined a person's song as their unique gifts and way of being in the world. What does Bynum mean when he tells Herald Loomis that he has forgotten his song? What caused Mr. Loomis to forget his song?

- 4** **Art + History: Part 1**
The boardinghouse in which *Joe Turner* is set was inspired by a 1978 Romare Bearden painting, *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket*. The title of the play itself comes from a blues song of the same name which was about the real-life Joe Turner (Turney) who ran a chain gang. View the painting, read the song lyrics, and research Joe Turney.



JOE TURNER'S
COME AND GONE

Set in
1911

Tenants of a boardinghouse contend with the personal and social aftermath of slavery and the Great Migration

New York Drama Critics'
Circle Award Winner

BEST PLAY
1988

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

Art + History: Part 2 Like a collagist, August Wilson pulled together pieces of art and history to create an original story. Think of the various art forms — painting, music, literature, etc. — current and historical events, and important people you've studied in school or on your own. Combine two or more of these elements to create a fresh story.

Reach Out: What helped Herald Loomis to sing his song again? Think of someone you know who has forgotten their song. Write a letter of encouragement to them.

IN YOUR BACKYARD

Did African Americans migrate from or to your community during The Great Migration (1910-1930)? If so, conduct interviews with older residents to create a local oral history project about how the migration impacted individuals, families, and the community at-large.

FINAL PROJECT

What's Your Migration Story? Check out examples of interactive history mapping, such as the **The Abolitionist Map of America** at pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/interactive-map/abolitionists-map/ and the projects at historypin.org. Write your family's migration story beginning with the migrations of older generations of your family, up to and including your personal migrations (each time you have moved to a new place, even in the same city). Work with your classmates to map these stories with pictures, audio, and video. Compile the audio of your project into a podcast and share it via iTunes® or another podcast directory.

Share your stories with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

KING HEDLEY II

EXPLORING THE PLAY

- 1** *King Hedley II* revisits the stories of characters introduced previously in August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, set in 1948. Read both plays, and then compare and contrast social and economic conditions for African Americans, almost 40 years earlier. Identify 2-3 historical events that take place between the two plays. How do these events influence the changes you noted?
- 2** When Ruby decided to name her son "King Hedley," what kind of legacy did she give him? Was this legacy a blessing, a curse, or both? Why?
- 3** *King Hedley II* is considered to be August Wilson's most tragic play. Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?
- 4** Aunt Ester dies at the reported age of 366 years old. Her birth parallels the arrival of Africans in America. With her death, what statement do you think August Wilson was making about the state of urban African American communities in the 1980s?



KING HEDLEY II

Set in
1985

A man's quest for identity and dignity is thwarted by limited opportunity, secrets from the past, and personal demons



Pulitzer Prize Finalist

DRAMA
2000

KING HEDLEY II

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

IN YOUR BACKYARD

Ask your relatives, teachers, family friends, neighbors, local business owners, and others how your community has changed since 1985. Then, identify 2-3 historical events that have taken place in the decades since 1985. How did these events influence the changes that took place in your community? Create a visual timeline of events that is unique to your community and share it with your local history museum.

Key Quote: *“I’m through with babies. I ain’t raising no more. I ain’t raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends shoot him. To have the police shoot him. Why I want to bring another life into this world that don’t respect life? I don’t want to raise no more babies when you got to fight to keep them alive.”* —Tonya

Like other urban areas in the 1980s, Pittsburgh’s Hill District — where *King Hedley II* and 8 other plays in the Century Cycle are set — was plagued by gun violence, gangs, and the drug trade. How does this harsh reality color Tonya’s perspective

on becoming a mother again? Find local, state, and national current events, such as in Ferguson, MO, that reflect the issues that Tonya lamented in 1985. Make a collage of headlines to illustrate the problems.

EXPRESSION PROJECT

Who Are The People In Your Neighborhood?

Along with several friends or classmates, take a walking tour of your neighborhood, or of several neighborhoods in your city. Take photos of people that you see (Remember to ask for permission!). How do these pictures tell the story of your community? How do these pictures tell the story of life in the 21st century? Create a photo essay with your pictures. Share your work with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

EXPLORING THE PLAY

- 1 Consider how each of the characters in *Ma Rainey* responds to the personal and professional injustices they face. Which character is most like you in terms of how they react? Which character is least like you? How do you respond when you're treated unfairly?
- 2 What similarities do you notice between each of the musicians in *Ma Rainey* and their respective instruments? Which instrument best reflects your personality and temperament? Why?
- 3 Did Levee's actions at the end of *Ma Rainey* surprise you? Why do you think August Wilson chose to end the play this way? Summarize what you see as the message of the play, based on this ending.



Set in
1927

Stifled and disillusioned by exploitation by white record labels, black musicians turn their rage inward

A stylized, handwritten signature of August Wilson in white ink, positioned below the text.

Tony Award® Nominee
BEST PLAY
1985

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

IN YOUR BACKYARD

What are other examples of institutional racism you've observed or encountered? Write a one-act play, essay, or short story that addresses one or more of these issues.

Key Quote: *"You don't sing [the blues] to feel better — you sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life."*
—Ma Rainey

Listen to some of Ma Rainey's songs on iTunes®:

bit.ly/maraineyblues. Then, listen to some contemporary blues songs by Ruthie Foster: bit.ly/ruthiefostersblues.

Compare and contrast today's blues music with that of the 1920s. Compose a blues song that reflects the cares and concerns of your 21st century life. Work with your classmates to set your songs to music and perform them.

Then vs. now: In the decades immediately following Emancipation, African Americans faced racism, segregation, and prejudice. As a musical form, the Blues gave voice to African Americans' personal and political frustrations. However, institutional racism existed within the music industry itself. Research **"race records"** (African American music recorded in the 1920s and 1930s). Who were the lead artists of the day? How were they treated by music industry executives? Compare and contrast their experiences with those of your favorite contemporary African American recording artists.

EXPRESSION PROJECT

Mother of the Blues: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey was one of the most popular blues artists of the 1920s. Learn more about the real "Ma Rainey." Then, tell a different part of her story by writing a one-act play set before or after the events in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Share your work with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

THE PIANO LESSON

EXPLORING THE PLAY

- 1 The ghosts in *The Piano Lesson* could be viewed as merely restless or vengeful spirits. Or, they could represent the unresolved, internal struggles of the characters. Revisit each appearance of ghosts in the text, and for each, describe what you think is happening.
- 2 Berniece, a widow, objects to the idea that as a woman, her only worth is in relation to a man. How are Berniece and the other women characters in *The Piano Lesson* — including the deceased ones that are mentioned — portrayed? Are they presented only in relation to men?
- 3 Berniece rejects Avery's proposals and resists the pressure to be in a relationship. But she shares an unexpected kiss with Lyman. What does this reveal to you about Berniece?



Set in
1936

Siblings disagree about how to honor the legacy of their family's painful past

Pulitzer Prize Winner

DRAMA
1990

THE PIANO LESSON

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

INSPIRING MINDS

The Piano Lesson was inspired by a Romare Bearden painting of the same name. The painting features a woman and a girl sitting at a piano (see it here: bit.ly/beardenspianolesson), and it's believed that renowned jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams inspired the painting (listen to Williams on iTunes®: bit.ly/marylouwilliams). Who are the artists and others that inspire you? Make a list of your inspirations and how each of them helps you to express yourself.

Key Quote: *“Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in... mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece. Every day. I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece.”* –Berniece

August Wilson used the phrase **“blood’s memory”** to describe the memories of a shared past among African Americans, a past with deep and inextricable ancestral roots in Africa. In all of Wilson’s plays, knowing and honoring this collective past is essential to the community’s present-day viability. In *The Piano Lesson*, the family heirloom — a piano acquired from the sale of two ancestors during slavery — is a point of contention between Berniece and Boy Willie. Decide which sibling’s plans for the piano you believe most honor their ancestors, then write a persuasive letter to the other sibling to make your case.

EXPRESSION PROJECT

Metaphorically Speaking: In addition to the ghosts, what other extended metaphors does Wilson use in this play? Choose one of Wilson’s metaphors and use it to create a creative work (poem, story, play) of your own. Share your work with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

RADIO GOLF

EXPLORING THE PLAY

- 1 August Wilson used the game of golf as a metaphor for a question facing the black middle class toward the end of the 20th century: Do you have to “play the game” of the dominant culture in order to succeed socially and economically?

In *Radio Golf*, what does this metaphorical “game” involve? How do the characters balance personal ambition with personal integrity and a desire to honor the past and their community?

- 2 Research the Hill District, the Pittsburgh community in which *Radio Golf* is set. How does this community’s past and what’s happening there today influence your understanding of *Radio Golf*?



Set in
1997

The rewards of the American Dream are weighed against the cost to the larger community

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads 'August Wilson'.

New York Drama Critics'
Circle Award Winner

BEST AMERICAN PLAY
2005

RADIO GOLF

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

Dare to Dream? Do you think it's possible to achieve success in America without compromising who you are?

What Would You Do? Describe a situation in which your personal integrity came into conflict with something you wanted.

The Fate of 1839 Wylie Avenue: Hold a class debate with two teams — one arguing for the demolition of the house, one arguing against.

Speak Out!: You've been asked to address the crowd protesting the demolition of 1839 Wylie Avenue. Write a 2-minute speech that conveys your thoughts about the fate of the house.

Key Quote: *"A Negro don't know he's a Negro. He thinks he's a white man. It's Negroes like you who hold us back."* —Sterling

How is Roosevelt holding the community back, according to Sterling, quoted above? Do you agree?

EXPRESSION PROJECT

In Your Own Backyard: The issue of gentrification is at the center of *Radio Golf*. Is your school or home in or near a neighborhood that has been or is being gentrified? In what ways has the neighborhood changed? Make a video of a class debate about the pros and cons of these changes. Share your video with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

SEVEN GUITARS

EXPLORING THE PLAY

- 1 August Wilson believed the Great Migration — the early 20th century relocation of millions of African Americans from the South to northern cities like Chicago and Pittsburgh — was a mistake. Read Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Given the experiences of characters in *Joe Turner* and in *Seven Guitars*, do you agree with Wilson? Why or why not?
- 2 What did Chicago symbolize for Floyd? Why do you think he was so determined to get back there, despite the obstacles in his way?
- 3 If Vera had asked you if she should go with Floyd to Chicago, what advice would you have given her? Why?
- 4 August Wilson's *King Hedley II*, set in 1985, features some characters from *Seven Guitars*. Read both plays, and then compare and contrast social and economic conditions for African Americans, almost 40 years later. Identify 2-3 historical events that take place between the two plays. How do these events influence the changes you noted?



Set in
1948

Internal and external struggles shape African American men as they fight for their humanity and self-worth

A white, handwritten signature of August Wilson on a dark blue background.

New York Drama Critics'
Circle Award Winner

BEST PLAY
1996

SEVEN GUITARS

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

Her Story: While the struggles and fate of African American men is a key theme in *Seven Guitars*, the characters of Vera, Louise, and Ruby are also central to the story. For each character, create three brief story sketches/notes:

- 1) Her story before the events of *Seven Guitars*
- 2) Her story after these events
- 3) Her story if she were the central character in *Seven Guitars*.

Challenge: August Wilson sketched his ideas on everyday items, such as napkins, then collected them later to write his plays. Jot down your sketches on napkins (or similar sized items), using one napkin per sketch. Practice working in this limited space. Then, choose one of the nine sketches to develop into a larger story or play.

Key Quote: *“I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother’s life — her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter — are all worthy of art. Hence, Seven Guitars.”* –August Wilson

Seven Guitars is set, literally, in the backyard of August Wilson’s childhood home. How do the “contents” of your parents or other loved ones lives’ inform your view of history and the art you create?

Make a list similar to Wilson’s above about the contents of the life of someone you love. Use these details to create a story, poem, song, or one-act play.

EXPRESSION PROJECT

PSA: Both Canewell and Floyd describe being “arrested for nothing” in Chicago and in Pittsburgh. How might August Wilson have dramatized current events in the news, such as in Ferguson, MO, related to racial profiling and harassment of African Americans? Write and record a 30-second Public Service Announcement raising awareness about this issue. Share your video with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/ share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

TWO TRAINS RUNNING

EXPLORING THE PLAY

- 1 What does Hambone's "He gonna give me my ham" say about his belief in the American Dream? How does this compare to Memphis's idea of the American Dream?
- 2 The character of Aunt Ester is mentioned or appears in three plays (*Two Trains Running*, *King Hedley II*, and *Gem of the Ocean*) in August Wilson's 10-play cycle. In *Two Trains*, her age is given as 349 years old; her birth coincides with the arrival of the first captured Africans in America. Read the three plays mentioned. What does Aunt Ester represent in *Two Trains*, and in Wilson's Century Cycle as a whole?
- 3 By 1969, the Civil Rights Movement had come to an end. As evidenced by the characters and events in *Two Trains*, what issues remain unresolved for African Americans, and for America as a country, in 1969? Did this play change or improve

your understanding of the Civil Rights Movement? If so, how so?

- 4 The year before *Two Trains* takes place, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. August Wilson names one of the central characters Memphis, and the story takes place in a diner, the site of many Civil Rights Movement protests. Memphis laments his declining customer base; as small businesses close, fewer people are coming together to share meals in the community. Risa, the only woman among the central characters, isn't interested in attending the racial justice rally. Through these story and character elements, what does August Wilson reveal about the post-Civil Rights Movement era? Viewed this way, do you think the Civil Rights Movement succeeded, failed, or something in between?

TWO TRAINS
TTTT
RUNNING

Set in
1969

African Americans grapple with the social and psychological impact of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements



New York Drama Critics'
Circle Award Winner

BEST AMERICAN PLAY

1992

TWO TRAINS RUNNING

BEYOND THE PLAY: YOUR VOICE, YOUR COMMUNITY

Her Story: Write a prequel to *Two Trains* with Risa as the central character. In your prequel, reveal the events that led her to cut her legs.

IN YOUR BACKYARD

Find out where your parents and grandparents were living in 1969. How were their lives similar to the lives of the characters in *Two Trains* at that time? How were their lives different? Ask each person to describe that year in a single word. Use those words to create a poem entitled, "1969." Share your poem with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

Key Quote: *"You can't go through life carrying a ten-gallon bucket. Get you a little cup. That's all you need. Get you a little cup and somebody put a little bit in and it's half full. That ten-gallon bucket ain't never gonna be full. Carry you a little cup through live and you'll never be disappointed."* –West

Did West himself live according to his words above? Do you agree with West's approach to life? Why or why not? Write your own philosophy of life, using no more than 50 words.

EXPRESSION PROJECT

"Take a Look": When the jukebox starts up, the song that plays is Aretha Franklin's "Take a Look." Look up the lyrics to this song. Why do you think August Wilson chose this song for this particular play? What song would you choose to play in the background of a story or one-act play about your life this year. Choose the song, then write the play or story.