The Piano Lesson

By August Wilson

Directed by Ron OJ Parson

May 7 – June 7, 2009

at Court Theatre

-Study Guide-

About the Play

Characters

Doaker Charles

- Berniece and Boy Willie's uncle, 47 years old
- The owner of the household in which the play takes place
- Spent his life working for the railroad.
- Functions as the play's testifier, recounting the piano's history
- Like Wining Boy, the other member of the family's oldest living generation, Doaker offers a connection to the family's past through his stories

Boy Willie

- Berniece's brash, impulsive, and fast-talking brother, 30 years old
- Introduces the central conflict of the play
- Coming from Mississippi, he plans to sell the family piano and buy the land his ancestors once worked as slaves
- By selling the piano, he avenges his father, Boy Charles, who spent his life property-less

Lymon

- Boy Willie's longtime friend, 29 years old
- More taciturn than his partner, speaking with a disarming "straightforwardness"
- Fleeing the law, he plans to stay in the north and begin life anew
- An outsider to the family, he functions particularly in the beginning of the play as a sort of listener, eliciting stories from the family's past
- Obsessed with women, he also attempts to seduce Berniece by helping her out of mourning for her dead husband

Berniece

- Sister of Boy Willie, 35 years old
- Still in mourning for her husband, Crawley
- She blames her brother for her husband's death, remaining skeptical of his bravado and chiding him for his rebellious ways

Maretha

- Berniece's daughter, 11 years old
- Just beginning to learn piano
- Symbolizes the next generation of the Charles' family, providing the occasion for a number of confrontations on what the family should do with its legacy

Avery Brown

- A preacher who is trying to build his congregation, 38 years old
- Moves north once Berniece's husband dies in an attempt to court Berniece
- Honest and ambitious, having "taken to the city like a fish to water," and found opportunities unavailable to him in the rural South
- Fervently religious, he brings Christian authority to bear in the exorcism of Sutter's ghost

Wining Boy

- Doaker’s brother
- A wandering, washed-up recording star who drifts in and out of Doaker's household whenever he finds himself broke
- A comic figure, he functions as one of the play's primary storytellers, recounting anecdotes from his travels
- One of the two older players in Wilson's scenes of male camaraderie, providing a connection to the family's history
- Also appears as the other character in the play speaks with the dead, conversing with the Ghosts of Yellow Dog and calling to his dead wife, Cleotha

Grace

- A young, urban woman whom Boy Willie and Lymon each try to pick up

Plot Overview

The Piano Lesson is set in Pittsburgh in 1936, with all the action taking place in the house of Doaker Charles. A 137-year-old, upright piano, decorated with totems in the manner of African sculpture, dominates the parlor.

The play opens at dawn. Boy Willie, Doaker's nephew, knocks at the door and enters with his partner, Lymon. Two have come from Mississippi to sell watermelons. Willie has not seen his sister Berniece, who lives with Doaker, for three years as he has been serving a sentence on the Parchman Prison Farm.

Willie asks his uncle for a celebratory drink: the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog have drowned Sutter in his own well. Willie intends to sell the family piano and use the money to buy Sutter's land, the land his ancestors once worked as slaves. Doaker, however, is sure Berniece will not part with the piano. Indeed, Avery Brown—a preacher who has been courting Berniece since her husband Crawley died—has already tried to get her to sell it. Willie schemes to get in touch with the prospective buyer himself.

Suddenly Berniece cries out off-stage, "Go on get away." Berniece claims she has seen Sutter's ghost, calling Boy Willie's name. She is convinced that her brother pushed Sutter into the well. Shaken, she refuses to cooperate with his plans.

Three days later, Doaker's brother Wining Boy, a wandering, washed-up recording star, sits at the kitchen table discussing the recent events with the men. Wining Boy mentions that he heard Willie and Lymon were on Parchman Farm. Willie explains that some whites had tried to chase Willie, Lymon, and Berniece's husband Crawley from some wood they were pilfering. Crawley fought back and was killed while the other two went to prison. The men reminisce about Parchman and sing an old work song.

Doaker then explains the piano's history to Lymon. During slavery, a man named Robert Sutter, the recently deceased-Sutter's grandfather, owned the Charles family. He wanted to make an anniversary present out of his friend's piano but could not afford it.

Thus he traded a full and half grown slave—Doaker's grandmother Berniece and his father—for the instrument. Though initially Sutter's wife loved the piano, she eventually came to miss her slaves, falling desperately ill. So, Sutter asked Doaker's grandfather, Willie Boy, to carve the faces of his wife and child into the piano. Willie Boy did not only carve his immediately family, however, but included his mother, father, and various scenes from the family history.

Years after slavery, Berniece and Boy Willie's father, Boy Charles, developed an obsession over the piano, believing that as long as the Sutters held it, they held the family in bondage. Thus, on July 4, 1911, he, Doaker, and Wining Boy stole it. Later that day, lynchers set Boy Charles's house on fire. He fled to catch the Yellow Dog, but the mob stopped the train and set his boxcar on fire. Boy Charles died along with the hobos in his car, all of whom became the ghosts of the railroad.

Once Doaker has finished his story, Willie and Lymon attempt to move the piano. Berniece enters and commands Willie to stop, since the piano is their legacy. Berniece invokes the memory of their mother, who attended to the piano until the day she died. She attacks Boy Willie for perpetuating the endless theft and murder in their family, blaming him for the death of her husband. Suddenly, Maretha, Berniece's daughter, is heard screaming upstairs in terror, as Sutter's ghost has appeared again.

The following morning, Wining Boy enters with a suit he has been unable to pawn. Shrewdly, he sells his suit to Lymon, promising that it has a magical effect on the ladies. Lymon and Boy Willie plan to go out the local picture show and find some women.

Later that evening, Berniece appears preparing a tub for her bath. Avery enters and proposes to Berniece anew. Berniece refuses and wonders why everyone tells her she cannot be a woman unless she has a man. Changing the subject, Berniece asks Avery to bless the house in hopes of exorcising Sutter's ghost. Avery suggests that she use the piano to start a choir at his church. Berniece replies that she leaves the piano untouched to keep from waking its spirits.

Several hours later, Boy Willie enters the darkened house with Grace, a local girl. They begin to kiss and knock over a lamp. Berniece comes downstairs and orders them out. As Berniece is making tea, Lymon returns, looking for Willie. He is tired of one-night stands and dreams of finding the right woman. Musing on Wining Boy's magic suit, he withdraws a bottle of perfume from his pocket and gives it to Berniece and they kiss.

The final scene begins the next day with Willie telling Maretha of the Ghosts of Yellow Dog. He has already called the buyer about the piano. Berniece enters and once again orders Willie out of her house. They argue anew and Willie invokes the memory of his

father, arguing that he only plans to do as he might have done. Willie and Lymon begin to move the piano. Berniece exits and reappears with Crawley's gun.

Suddenly a drunken Wining Boy enters, comically breaking the tension of the scene. He sits down to play a song he wrote in memory of his wife, shielding the piano from Willie. A knock at the door follows, and Grace enters. She and Lymon have a date for the picture show and suddenly Sutter's presence asserts itself. Grace flees with Lymon, leaving only the members of the Charles family and Avery in the house.

Avery moves to bless the piano. Boy Willie intercedes, taunting Sutter as Avery attempts his exorcism. He charges up the stairs, and an unseen force drives him back. He charges back up, and then engages with Sutter in a life-and-death struggle. Suddenly, Berniece realizes what she must do and begins to play the piano. "I want you to help me," she sings, naming her ancestors. A calm comes over the house. Willie reappears and asks Wining Boy is he is ready to catch the train back south. Willie says goodbye to his sister, and Berniece gives thanks.

THE HILL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

"Everything was happening on the Hill. . .it was jammin' on the Hill."

--Shirley Anderson, owner of The Beauty Mark Salon

- The Hill District, next to downtown Pittsburgh has remained a major destination for African American migrants to Pittsburgh since the 1890s.
- Though majority black, the area also served as the home for large European immigrant populations well into the 1930s. It remains relatively racially diverse.

August Wilson and Romare Bearden

August Wilson frequently cited visual artist Romare Bearden as a central influence on his work. Though Bearden, born 1911, was more closely tied to the East Coast than Wilson and of a much earlier generation, his childhood summers in Pittsburgh influenced his work, and drew Wilson towards it.

Bearden worked for the most part in paints, ink, and collage, earning his greatest praise for these latter works. He achieved notoriety with relative ease, displaying work both in the United States and beyond. By the late 1960s, his works were famous enough to grace the covers of magazines as widely-circulated as *Time.* His prolific visual output was supplemented by highly-regarded writing, focused in particular on twentieth century African American artists. He had close ties to other Harlem intellectuals of the day, including Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Alvin Ailey. He juggled all of this work with a simultaneous, and somewhat intermittent career in social work.

Wilson took great interest in Bearden from the moment he encountered the artist's work in 1977, but it wasn't until *The Piano Lesson* that Wilson used a single Bearden work as a jumping-off point for his writing: "So I got the idea from the painting that there would be a woman and a little girl in the play. And I thought that the woman would be a character who was trying to acquire a sense of self-worth by denying her past…"

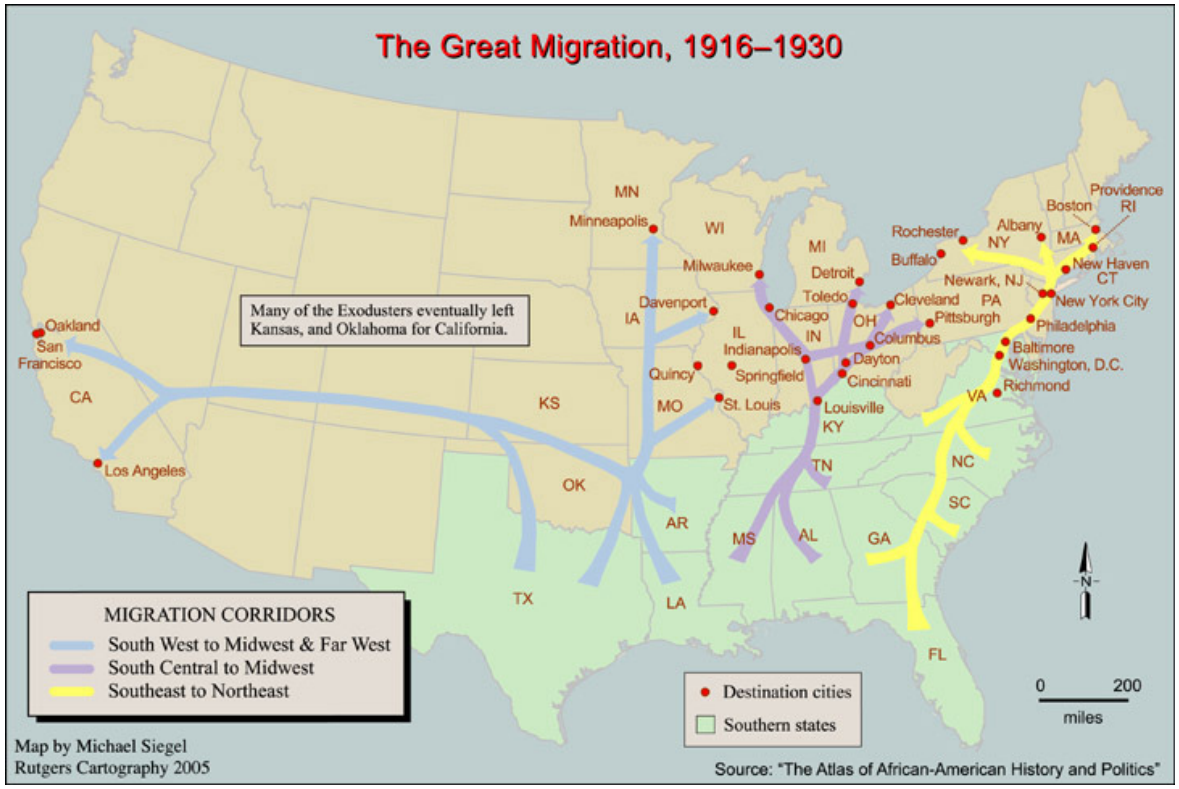
"What I saw was black life, presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence… It defined not only the character of black American life, but also its conscience."

-August Wilson on Romare Bearden

BLACK MIGRATION TO PITTSBURGH THROUGH THE 1930S

Pittsburgh's black population expanded far earlier than other Northern cities, booming as early as the 1880s.

African Americans (alongside huge numbers of European immigrants) poured into the city mostly to take advantage of its large-scale industrial jobs; World War I drastically altered Pittsburgh's settlement patterns, blocking European immigration to the city, but likewise diffusing black settlement throughout other Northern cities.



This map shows patterns of northward African American migration after the First World War. As the map implies, Pittsburgh was located at the end of a major railroad, but was not situated between a megacity and the South.

"40 ACRES AND MULE"

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40 acres and a mule is a term for **compensation that was promised to be awarded to freed African American slaves after the Civil War— 40 acres (16 ha) of land to farm, and a mule with which to drag a plow so the land could be cultivated.**

The award—a land grant of a quarter of a quarter section (160 acres) deeded to heads of households presumably formerly owned by land-holding whites—was the product of Special Field Orders, No. 15, issued January 16, 1865 by Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman, which applied to black families who lived near the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Sherman's orders specifically allocated "the islands from Charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. Johns river, Florida." There was no mention of mules in Sherman's order, although the Army may have distributed them anyway. Federal and state homestead grants of the time ranged from 1/4 section up to a full section.

After the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, his successor, Andrew Johnson, revoked Sherman's Orders. It is sometimes mistakenly claimed that Johnson also vetoed the enactment of the policy as a federal statute (introduced as U.S. Senate Bill 60). In fact, the Freedmen's Bureau Bill which he vetoed made no mention of grants of land or mules. (Another version of the Freedmen's bill, also without the land grants, was later passed after Johnson's second veto was overridden.)

By June 1865, around 10,000 freed slaves were settled on 400,000 acres (1,600 km²) in Georgia and South Carolina. Soon after, President Andrew Johnson reversed the order and returned the land to its white former owners. Because of this, the phrase has come to represent the failure of Reconstruction and the general public to assist African Americans. Cincinnati.

HOW MUCH DOES THAT REALLY COST?

Currency Conversion: 1936 vs. 2009

- Lymon's Truck: $120 in 1936; $1,865 in 2009
- 100 Acres of Land: $2,000 in 1936; $31,068 in 2009
- Wining Boy's Silk Suit: $5 in 1936; $73 in 2009
- Offer for Doaker's piano: $1150 in 1936; $17,864 in 2009

Romare Bearden, *Piano Lesson,* 1983

The central subject of this composition is thought to be jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, who spent her childhood years in Pittsburgh. Just as Bearden's work was inspired by that of others in a variety of artistic fields, Piano Lesson *inspired the play of the same title by playwright August Wilson, himself a Pittsburgh native.*

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

August Wilson (April 27, 1945 – October 2, 2005) was an American playwright. His literary legacy is the ten play series, **The Pittsburgh Cycle** (also known as **The Century Cycle**), for which he received two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama. Each play in the cycle is set in a different decade, depicting the comic and tragic aspects of the African American experience in the twentieth century.

Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel, Jr. in the **Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**, the fourth of six children to German immigrant baker, Frederick August Kittel, Sr. and Daisy Wilson, an African American cleaning woman, from North Carolina. His mother raised the children alone by the time he was five in a two-room apartment above a grocery store at 1727 Bedford Avenue. The economically depressed neighborhood in which he was raised was inhabited predominantly by black Americans and Jewish and Italian immigrants. Wilson's mother was remarried to David Bedford in the 1950's when he was a teen, and the family moved from the Hill to the then predominantly white working class neighborhood, Hazelwood, where they encountered racial hostility and were soon forced out.

Wilson was the only African American student at the Central Catholic High School in 1959 before he was driven away by threats and abuse. He then attended Connelley Vocational High School, but found the curriculum unchallenging. He dropped out of Gladstone High School in the 9th grade in 1960 after his teacher accused him of plagiarism a 20-page paper he wrote on Napoleon I of France. Wilson hid his decision from his mother because he did not want to disappoint her. At the age of 16, he began working menial jobs and that allowed him to meet a wide variety of people, some of whom he later based his characters on, such as Sam in *The Janitor* (1985).

By this time, Wilson knew that he wanted to be a writer, but this created tension with his mother, who wanted him to become a lawyer. She forced

him to leave the family home and he enlisted in the United States Army for a three-year stint in 1962, but left after one year and went back to working various odd jobs as a porter, short-order cook, gardener, and dishwasher.

August Kittel changed his name to August Wilson to honor his mother after his father's death in 1965. That same year he bought his first typewriter for $10.00.

In 1968, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theater in the Hill District of Pittsburgh along with his friend Rob Penny. His first play, *Recycling*, was performed for audiences in small theaters and public housing community centers. Among these early efforts was *Jitney,* which he revised more than two decades later as part of the Pittsburgh Cycle.

In 1976 Vernell Lillie, founder of the Kuntu Repertory Theatre at the University of Pittsburgh two years earlier, directed Wilson's *The Homecoming*. Wilson, Penny, and poet Maisha Baton also started the Kuntu Writers Workshop to bring African-American writers together and to assist them in publication and production. Both organizations are still active.

In 1978 Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota at the suggestion of his friend director Claude Purdy, who helped him secure a job writing educational scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota. In 1980 he received a fellowship for the Minneapolis Playwrights Center. Wilson had a long association with the Penumbra Theatre Company of St Paul, which gave the premieres of some Wilson plays.

Wilson's best-known plays are *Fences* (1985) (which won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award), *The Piano Lesson* (1990) (a Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

In 1994 Wilson left St Paul for Seattle, where he would develop a relationship with Seattle Repertory Theatre. Seattle Rep would ultimately be the only theater in the country to produce all of the works in his ten-play cycle and his one-man show *How I Learned What I Learned*.

Wilson succumbed to liver cancer on October 2, 2005 and passed away in Seattle at the age of 60.

Obituary: August Wilson, Pittsburgh playwright who chronicled black experience

Monday, October 03, 2005

By Christopher Rawson, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Last December, Pittsburgh-born playwright August Wilson's thoughts turned to mortality. With his 60th birthday approaching, he said, "There's more [life] behind me than ahead. I think of dying every day. ... At a certain age, you should be prepared to go at any time."

In May, he was diagnosed with liver cancer and the next month his doctors determined it was inoperable. But he showed that he was indeed prepared, telling the Post-Gazette in August, "I've lived a blessed life. I'm ready."

The end came yesterday morning when Mr. Wilson, 60, died in Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, "surrounded by his loved ones," said Dena Levitin, his assistant.

Mr. Wilson took a characteristically wry look at his fate, saying, "It's not like poker; you can't throw your hand in." He also noted that when his long-time friend and producer, Benjamin Mordecai, the only person to work with him on all 10 of his major plays, died this spring, the obituary in *The New York Times* included a picture of him and Mordecai together. "That's what gave God this idea," he said.

The fierce poignancy of his eulogy for Mr. Mordecai in a recent American Theatre magazine sounds self-reflexive: "How do we transform loss? ... Time's healing balm is essentially a hoax. ... Haunted by the specter of my own death, I find solace in Ben's life." Mr. Wilson also told the *Post-Gazette* in August, "I'm glad I finished the cycle," referring to the unprecedented series of 10 plays with which he conquered the American theater. In the process, he opened new avenues for black artists, changed the way theater approaches race and changed the business of theater, too.

Often called the Pittsburgh Cycle because all but one play is set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh where Mr. Wilson spent his youth and early adulthood, this unequaled epic chronicles the tragedies and aspirations of African Americans in a play set in each decade of the 20th century.
In dramatizing the glory, anger, promise and frustration of being black in America, he created a world of the imagination. Critics from Manhattan to Los Angeles now speak knowingly of "Pittsburgh's Hill District," not just the Hill as it is now or was when Mr. Wilson

grew up in the '50s, but August Wilson Country -- the archetypal northern urban black neighborhood, a construct of frustration, nostalgia, anger and dream.

Mr. Wilson's plays present this world as a crucible in which the identity of black America has been shaped.

"While his death was not unexpected, it's a serious blow to the entire theatrical community in the United States and Pittsburgh in particular," said Ted Pappas, artistic and executive director of the Pittsburgh Public Theater, which has staged most of Wilson's work. "August Wilson is one of the seminal figures of 20th century dramatic art. When we speak of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, we will now add the name of August Wilson to that pantheon."

…One of his mother's enduring gifts was to teach him to read when he was 4. Mr. Wilson called it transforming: "You can unlock information and you're better able to understand the forces that are oppressing you."

Years later he told a library celebration, "when I was 5 years old, I got my first library card from the Hill District branch on Wylie Avenue. Labor Historians do not speak well of Andrew Carnegie ... [but he] will forever be for me that man who made it all possible for me to be standing here today. ... I wore out my library card and cried when I lost it."

…He once told an interviewer, "Pittsburgh is a very hard city, especially if you're black," and another, "when I was 22 years old, each day had to be continually negotiated. It was rough." As he memorably put it, "I grew up without a father. When I was 20, I went down onto Centre Avenue to learn from the community how to be a man."

That community provided many fathers -- the old men chatting in Pat's Place or on street corners; the inhabitants of the diners where Wilson sat and listened; like-minded friends with artistic inclinations. His true father was both the small community that nurtured him and the larger Pittsburgh that, by opposing, stimulated and defined.

…Even as a nonresident, Mr. Wilson remained a good Pittsburgh citizen, visiting frequently to see his family and friends. On several occasions, such as the 1988 Carnegie Institute Man and Ideas series, 1992 University of Pittsburgh Honors Convocation and 2000 Heinz Lecture Series, he delivered uplifting but accusatory addresses about the black position in American history and culture, talking across the great national racial divide with prophetic force.
He also came to praise, as at the 1998 "Affirmation of the Blues," a benefit for Community Media at the Carnegie Lecture Hall. Woven out of a love of African-American community and art, it was shot through with threads of reminiscence over shared early

struggles and joys. Honored with him that night were such "elders" as Billy Jackson of Community Media and Kuntu Repertory founder Vernell Lillie, who remembered Mr. Wilson yesterday as "a brilliant director and poet -- a gentle, creative man who loved the arts."

He also came back to Pittsburgh to work. He was resident at the Pittsburgh Public Theater in 1996 to revise "Jitney" for its professional debut, and again in 1999 to prepare the premiere of "King Hedley II," which had the honor of opening the new $20 million O'Reilly Theater in the Cultural District.

In 1994, he was here to co-produce the filming of "The Piano Lesson" for television, the only one of his plays so far to make it to the screen. He even came to speak of the beauty of this city which he had not always loved. In 1994, he said, "Like most people, I have this sort of love-hate relationship with Pittsburgh. This is my home and at times I miss it and find it tremendously exciting, and other times I want to catch the first thing out that has wheels."

He had come back for six weeks earlier that year, he said, "to reconnect with Pittsburgh, do some writing here -- this is fertile ground." The city remained the deep well of memory into which he kept dipping the ladle of his art.

…He also anchored his own achievements in his heritage. At the Pittsburgher of the Year ceremony in 1990, he said:
"I was born in Pittsburgh in 1945 and for 33 years stumbled through its streets, small, narrow, crooked, cobbled, with the weight of the buildings pressing in on me and my spirit pushed into terrifying contractions. That I would stand before you today in this guise was beyond comprehension ... I am standing here in my grandfather's shoes. ... They are the shoes of a whole generation of men who left a life of unspeakable horror in the South and came North ... searching for jobs, for the opportunity to live a life with dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. ... The cities were not then, and are not now, hospitable. There is a struggle to maintain one's dignity. But that generation of men and women stands as a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit. And they have passed on to us, their grandchildren, the greatest of gifts, the gift of hope refreshened."

Asked for his own greatest accomplishment, he said he would like to be known as "the guy who wrote these 10 plays."

The Pittsburgh Cycle

Wilson's "Pittsburgh Cycle," also often referred to as his "Century Cycle," consists of ten plays—nine of which are set in Pittsburgh's Hill District, an African-American neighborhood that takes on a mythic literary significance (like Thomas Hardy's Wessex, William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, or Irish playwright Brian Friel's Ballybeg). The plays are each set in a different decade and aim to sketch the Black experience in the 20th century.

The Pittsburgh Cycle

1900s - *Gem of the Ocean* (2003)
1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984)
1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982) - set in Chicago
1930s - *The Piano Lesson* (1989) - Pulitzer Prize
1940s - *Seven Guitars* (1995)
1950s - *Fences* (1985) - Pulitzer Prize
1960s - *Two Trains Running* (1990)
1970s - *Jitney* (1983)
1980s - *King Hedley* II (2001)
1990s - *Radio Golf* (2005)

The Hill District, Pittsburgh, 1935

DISCUSSION & FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- What is the thematic significance of the final exorcism? Discuss the roles each character plays in casting out Sutter's ghost.

- Music is a crucial element of this play, as is the theme of the piano lesson. Choose and discuss one example of the use of music in the play.

- Discuss the role of magic in Berniece and Lymon's seduction.

- *The Piano Lesson* relies more on reportage and storytelling than on visible action. Discuss the role of storytelling in the play.

- What are some differences between the roles of men and women in this play? You may want to isolate a few characters for analysis. You also may want to consider their role in the plot, their qualities, their speech, etc.

- What is the significance of the railroad in this play? Consider, for example, Doaker's reflections on railroad travelers, his traveling song ("the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog"), etc.

- *The* Piano *Lesson* is often a humorous play. Discuss one example of the comic in the play. Upon what literary devices does it rely? What is its thematic significance?