

Level: undergraduate upper division
Focus: critical analysis
System: semester
Class size: 10-15

Utica College

THE 310: The Black Experience in August Wilson's Cycle Plays Spring 2022

Credit Hours: 3

Prerequisites: none

Class Meeting Times: MWF 10:20am-11:10am

Classroom: Hubbard 209A

Instructor: Rachel M. E. Wolfe

Office: Library concourse 132

e-mail: rmwolfe@utica.edu

Office Hours: TR 4-5pm or by appointment

Welcome! In this class, we will be taking an in-depth look at one of the most unique and ambitious feats of playwriting to come out of the American theatre scene: the Pittsburgh Cycle. August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle, also called the Century Cycle, is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest achievements in American playwriting. Chronicling the Black experience through the 20th century in the U.S., the Pittsburgh Cycle consists of ten plays: one for each decade 1900-2000. This course examines the whole of the Pittsburgh cycle, critical and literary reviews of the plays, film adaptations, and the place of August Wilson's momentous achievement in the history of American drama.

This is a Writing Intensive course, which means that we will be using our exploration of the Century Cycle as the subject matter for developing critical reading, writing, and thinking skills which we will then use to generate our own academic writing. By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. Identify a thesis in another writer's work
2. Formulate your own arguments to join the scholarly conversation both orally and in writing
3. Use relevant contextual information and close reading to identify hidden meanings in playtexts

4. Articulate the place of August Wilson and the Pittsburgh Cycle in American theatre and African-American histories

All of this is in service of General Education goal 5, area 1, “Literary Representation,” which carries these broader aims:

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of literature in its time and culture.
- Students will articulate ideas about text with the use of close reading.

We will develop these skills through a combination of lectures, class discussions, writing assignments, and class presentations—and along the way, get to enjoy one of the most grand-scale extended artistic achievements in storytelling!

REQUIRED READING

August Wilson’s Century Cycle plays:

Gem of the Ocean (2003) – 1900s

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1988) – 1910s

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (1984) – 1920s

The Piano Lesson (1990) – 1930s

Seven Guitars (1995) – 1940s

Fences (1987) – 1950s

Two Trains Running (1991) – 1960s

Jitney (1982) – 1970s

King Hedley II (1999) – 1980s

Radio Golf (2005) – 1990s

All are available in the UC bookstore, on reserve at the UC library, and in multiple editions through online booksellers. As the published versions of these plays do not vary much by edition, you may use whatever edition fits best into your budget and preferred reading style.

Scholarly Collection:

Bigsby, Christopher, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2007.

Available in the UC bookstore or through online booksellers. Whenever the reading for the day is listed using an author’s last name and a title in quotes, that listing refers to a chapter in this volume.

Required Viewing:

Richard, Lloyd, dir. *The Piano Lesson*. Craig Anderson Productions and Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions, Inc. 1995.

Available for free on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8dUHxdeowE>

Washington, Denzel, dir. *Fences*. United National Pictures and Kanopy. 2016.

Available on just about all the major streaming platforms. This website has a list of where to stream: <https://decider.com/movie/fences-2016/>

Wolfe, George C., dir. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Mundy Lane Entertainment and Escape Artists. 2020.

Available on Netflix: <https://www.netflix.com/title/81100780>

GRADE BREAKDOWN AND ASSIGNMENTS

The grading in this course is designed to reward sustained engagement by having many small-value assignments which, when paired with a couple of higher-value assignments, cumulatively add up to your final grade in the course. Like the Century Cycle itself, this course is a marathon, not a sprint. Every single day you come to class and express your opinion in conversation with your classmates will earn points toward your grade, as will every written assignment and your midterm presentation. The small acts of participation you do over the course of the semester will set you up for success in the higher-weighted assignments that come later, so that finishing strong is an indication of staying the course as much as success on one particular paper. As this is a Writing Intensive course, written assignments will be a mix of low-stakes informal writing (the response papers) and higher-stakes formal writing (the final paper, toward which we will be working the entire semester).

Your grade will be broken down as follows:

Attendance and Participation – 42% (42 class sessions at 1% each)

Response Essays – 24% (8 at 3% each)

Midterm Presentation – 10%

Final Paper – 24% (8% for the first draft, 16% for the final draft)

Each of these elements is explained in more detail below.

Attendance and Participation:

As you may have noticed, the bulk of the work you will do in this course is reading. Before each class period you will do quite a bit of reading (or sometimes viewing!) outside of class, which we will then follow up with supplementary lectures and discussion. Because I want to ensure that you get the information and grade credit for all this reading—alongside practice engaging in

critical discussion about it—I base the largest portion of your grade on class attendance and participation.

Each day will earn points out of 5 as follows:

- ⤴ 1 point for showing up to class
- ⤴ 1 point for being present the entire class period (i.e. not coming late, leaving early, or ducking out in the middle)
- ⤴ 1 point for speaking up in class
- ⤴ 1 point for making a comment that proves you did the reading
- ⤴ 1 point for adding insight, stimulating critical discussion, lifting up a classmate, or otherwise going above and beyond with your comments

Excused absences: Excused absences will be issued in the case of illness, accident, or extenuating circumstance (ex: a relative's wedding, an away game, etc.) provided that the absence is cleared with me *by e-mail in advance*. Excused absences *will not be issued retroactively*, nor is an absence considered excused until I e-mail back with my approval. Excused absences earn 2 points for the missed day—essentially, all of the attendance points but none of the participation points.

Unexcused absences: Any time you miss class without an e-mail from me excusing the absence is considered an unexcused absence. Each student will get one free (no grade penalty) unexcused absence per semester. Each successive unexcused absence will earn zero points for the day.

Making up absences: Whether your absence is excused or unexcused, you may earn up to three extra points for the day you missed by sending me an email that proves you did the reading and demonstrates insight about it. This means that excused absences may be fully made up (totaling 5 between the excused attendance points and the supplementary participation points) while unexcused absences may earn up to 3/5 points for the missed day.

Response Essays:

Most weeks in this class are structured the same: on Monday we read a play in the Century Cycle and discuss it, on Wednesday we read a professional scholar's published work on this play and discuss it, and on Friday we speak back to this scholar's ideas by writing and sharing an informal response paper detailing whether we agree or disagree with their claims and why. These response papers constitute the informal, reflective writing component of the Writing Intensive designation, and are a starting ground for you to develop and begin to articulate your own ideas. Each response paper will be framed by a different scholarly approach to understanding the plays, and will give you experience with that form of analysis as well as practice identifying thesis statements in academic writing and joining scholarly conversations through writing of your own. In many ways, these response papers are a rehearsal for your final paper; more restricted in subject matter but less restricted in form, they offer a low-stakes opportunity to develop the skills

and knowledge you will need to make your own scholarly contribution to the ongoing analysis of the Century Cycle at the end of this course.

Response papers should be written as follows:

1. Clearly identify what you believe to be the central argument of the scholarly essay you are responding to.
2. Take a stance of your own that builds off of this central argument (“I agree, but feel that Scholar A left out X”; “I think this totally mischaracterizes Y”; “This causes me to understand Z in a whole new light”; etc.)
3. Support the claim you made in step 2 using specific examples from the play in question.

Papers should be double-spaced, Times New Roman 12pt. font, and have one-inch margins on all sides. A specific length is not prescribed, but your paper should adequately convey your ideas on the subject. 1-2 pages is a good ballpark. Spelling, grammar, organization, and citations will not factor into your grade; however, I will draw your attention to any patterns in the way you write response papers that may cause you problems when we get to the final paper, in which these things will be graded.

Response papers may earn up to a total of 6 possible points: each of the three steps listed above may earn either one point for technically completing the step or two points for completing it thoughtfully. Points, however, are ironically not the main point of doing this exercise; we will share our response papers aloud with classmates on Fridays in order to discuss and help refine one another’s ideas, and ultimately the value of these papers lies in that opportunity to get your ideas into circulation and join the scholarly conversation.

Midterm Presentation:

Once we hit the midterm, you will have had plenty of experience reading and critiquing other people’s ideas through class discussion and your response papers. Now, it’s time to formulate and advance some ideas of your own! The midterm presentation is your opportunity to draft and present your own unique analysis of one of the plays we have read so far during the semester. You may use any angle of approach or type of analysis you like and present your ideas in whatever format seems best to you (a powerpoint presentation, an essay you read aloud to the class, an interactive exercise with class participation, a performance, etc.). The important things about this presentation, whatever form it takes, are that you:

1. Make an original argument about the play
2. Present your original thesis in a way that makes it clear to others
3. Support your thesis using concrete examples from the play

After your presentation, classmates will have the opportunity to ask questions, offer feedback, or otherwise help you refine your ideas. Depending on what you choose as the subject for your final paper, you may use the midterm presentation to formulate, test, and refine the thesis that you eventually use as the basis for your final.

The midterm presentation will be letter-graded on the basis of a rubric to be distributed separately and is worth 10% of your total grade.

Final Paper:

At the end of the course, you will write a scholarly essay modeled on the ones we have been reading all semester, analyzing one or more of Wilson's Century Cycle plays. Your argument may be an in-depth analysis of a single play, a comparison of two or more plays, or even a unifying claim about the Century Cycle as a whole. The topic, angle of approach, and thesis statement are all up to you. What's important is that you join the scholarly conversation, make an original contribution, and prove your points using concrete evidence.

As a piece of formal writing, this final essay will be graded on use of mechanics and conventions as well as ideas. Thus, you should be paying attention to matters like spelling, grammar, citations, formatting, and organization that were touched on but not required earlier in the class. To help you with mastering these conventions, we will spend a week near the end of the semester learning about and implementing the techniques of formal writing through a combination of in-class assignments and homework. Over the course of this week, we will generate first drafts of your final papers, which I will offer individual coaching on the following Monday. The week of finals will be dedicated to revision, so that by the time you hand in your paper for a final grade, it will already be a polished second draft.

The entirety of the work we do in this course will build toward the final paper, so you should go into the class with this final assignment in mind from the beginning. Keep an eye out for plays that speak especially strongly to you; they will be the best candidates for you to write about at the end. Pay attention to the feedback I give about your writing style in your response papers, as it will help you identify and nurture your own critical voice. Use class discussion and your classmates' comments as an arena to test your own logic and analytical skills, because other people are an excellent resource in refining your ideas. Keep notes for yourself about which of the scholars we read you liked and why; you may learn some tricks you can use in your own essay. Take advantage of the whole semester, and by the end you will be well positioned to write a stellar final paper.

The final paper will be letter-graded on the basis of a rubric to be distributed separately and is worth 24% of your total grade, divided as 1/3 of the points awarded for the first draft and 2/3 for the second draft.

Undergraduate Grading Scale			
A	94 – 100	C	74 – 76.99
A-	90 – 93.99	C-	70 – 73.99
B+	87 – 89.99	D+	67 – 69.99
B	84 – 86.99	D	60 - 66.99
B-	80 – 83.99	F	0 - 59.99
C+	77 - 79.99		

POLICIES

Class Discussion:

Respectful engagement is mandatory. The free and critical exchange of ideas is largely what a university education is all about, and there is no topic that is off-limits in this class. Because the plays that we will be reading engage with many aspects of the human experience (some of which may be sensitive or politicized), it is vital that we approach all class discussions with respect for one another. While it is perfectly acceptable to disagree with ideas expressed by your classmates—and to refute those ideas with your own points—you must always direct your criticisms toward the points made and not toward the speaker. There is a difference between a disagreement and a personal attack, and personal attacks or insults toward a classmate will not be tolerated. Nor will derogatory remarks or slurs aimed at a larger social group (i.e. a particular race, gender, religion, etc.). It is important that you do participate in class discussion and engage with your classmates, but equally important that you do so in a manner that fosters respectful dialogue.

Trigger Warnings: Because what triggers any given individual is highly variable and subjective, I do not issue specific trigger warnings in this class. In a general sense, students should be aware that this course covers stories on many different topics, some of which are violent, sexual, religious, or otherwise highly charged. Racism is a particularly salient theme in Wilson's plays, and will be highlighted and discussed in virtually every class session. If there is a specific topic or type of content you know that you would like to be warned about, please e-mail me and I will be happy to send you a list of plays we'll be reading that treat your particular topic—and, if necessary, we can discuss the possibility of alternate assignments that allow you to avoid them.

Contacting Me:

In an effort to have a proper work-life balance, I only check email during business hours on weekdays. If you email me with a question, please allow sufficient turnaround time, as I will not respond evenings or weekends. That said, you should feel free to email me with any questions you have, and I am also available in my office during office hours (listed at the top of this syllabus) if you want to talk to me in person about anything. No appointment or heads up needed; just stop on by.

Turning in work:

All coursework is to be turned in electronically via the ENGAGE course page. I prefer to receive papers as **Word documents** for ease of grading. Please do not submit PDFs (because they are difficult to write comments on) or .pages files (because my computer is incapable of opening them). Please include your own name in the title of the document. I will return corrected papers electronically on ENGAGE.

I accept late work. Each student may take one no-questions-asked two-day grace period to turn in an assignment of their choice during the semester. If more than two days have passed, or you have already used your freebie, and you need a further extension, please e-mail me so we can work out an alternate deadline appropriate to your situation. That said, however, deadlines exist so that your work will be spread out over the semester and not wind up snowballing into the world's biggest stress-fest at the end of the semester, so it is in your own best interests to meet them. Moreover, since this is a writing class, I will be able to help you develop your writing better if you turn in your assignments with enough time for me to offer feedback before you write the next assignment. And of course, any work not turned in by the end of the semester will earn a zero and negatively impact your grade.

Work is due by the start of class time on the due date. This timing is designed so that you won't have to miss my class because you're still working on the paper for my class. If you're not done by the start of class on the due date, put the assignment aside and come to class. It's already late, and will not incur extra penalties because you took an hour out to attend.

Academic Honesty:

Academic honesty and plagiarism prevention are topics that I take very seriously and teach in this course. Students are warned right from the outset, however, to review the Utica College academic honesty policy: <http://www.utica.edu/academic/facultyinfo/honestypolicy.cfm> . Please take particular note that **FAILURE TO CITE SOURCES COUNTS AS PLAGIARISM**. If I find an instance of plagiarism, the student will receive a zero on the assignment in question and be reported to the Provost, who may impose further penalties.

Emergency Preparedness:

Students are advised to review the campus safety information and procedures available at <http://www.utica.edu/finance/environment/safety/> , particularly the sections on lockdown and shelter-in-place procedures. In addition, any student with safety-related special circumstances to report (EpiPen, evacuation assistance, etc.) should come to office hours early in the semester to create an emergency plan with me. All students should be aware of the locations of the first aid kit and fire extinguisher nearest to the classroom. I am Red Cross certified in first aid and CPR. If you have any emergency training or certifications, please let us know!

Students with Disabilities:

I am committed to creating a supportive learning environment for students with disabilities. Any student who has need of special accommodations in this class due to a documented disability should notify me via e-mail as soon as possible, preferably within the first two weeks of class. You should also contact the **Director of the Office of Learning Services (315-792-3032)** in order to determine eligibility for services and to receive an accommodation letter. We will work with you to help you in your efforts to master the course content in an effective and appropriate way.

I am equally committed to safeguarding my students' mental health. If you are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or depressed and this class is contributing to your having unacceptable levels of stress, please e-mail me or come talk to me during office hours so we can work out an alternate plan for your coursework that will enable you to be both healthy and productive. Also, don't be afraid to take advantage of the resources available through the on-campus **Counseling Center (315-792-3094):** <https://www.utica.edu/student/development/counseling/> .

SCHEDULE

Week 1 – Course Intro / August Wilson

Jan 19 W – Syllabus

21 F – Bigsby, “August Wilson: The Ground on Which He Stood”

Week 2 – 1900s

24 M – *Gem of the Ocean*

26 W – Elam, “*Gem of the Ocean* and the Redemptive Power of History”

28 F – RESPONSE ESSAY: INTERTEXTUALITY

Week 3 – 1910s

31 M – *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Feb 2 W – Hay, “*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*”

4 F – RESPONSE ESSAY: AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Week 4 – 1920s

7 M – *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

9 W – 2020 film adaptation, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

11 F – Nadel, “*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*: Cutting the Historical Record, Dramatizing a Blues CD”

Week 5 – 1930s

14 M – *The Piano Lesson*

16 W – 1995 film adaptation, *The Piano Lesson*

18 F – Londré, “A Piano and its History: Family and Transcending Family”

Week 6 – 1940s

21 M – *Seven Guitars*

23 W – Murphy, “The Tragedy of *Seven Guitars*”

25 F – RESPONSE ESSAY: COMPOSITION

Week 7 – 1950s

28 M – *Fences*

Mar 2 W – 2016 film adaptation, *Fences*

4 F – Roudané, “Safe at Home?: August Wilson’s *Fences*”

Week 8 – MIDTERMS

7 M – MIDTERM PRESENTATIONS

9 W – MIDTERM PRESENTATIONS

11 F – MIDTERM PRESENTATIONS

Week 9 – SPRING BREAK

NO CLASS this week. Enjoy your spring break!

Week 10 – 1960s

21 M – *Two Trains Running*

23 W – Bottoms, “*Two Trains Running*: Blood on the Tracks”

25 F – RESPONSE ESSAY: SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Week 11 – 1970s

28 M – *Jitney*

30 W – Krasner, “*Jitney*, Folklore, and Responsibility”

Apr 1 F – RESPONSE ESSAY: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Week 12 – 1980s

4 M – *King Hedly II*

6 W – Herrington, “*King Hedly II*: In the Midst of All This Death”

8 F – RESPONSE ESSAY: COSMOLOGY

Week 13 – 1990s

11 M – *Radio Golf*

13 W – Booker, “*Radio Golf*: The Courage of His Convictions – Survival, Success, and Spirituality”

15 F – RESPONSE ESSAY: PLACE

Week 14 – The Century Cycle

18 M – Pereira, “Music and Mythology in August Wilson’s Plays”

20 W – Sauer and Sauer, “Critics on August Wilson”

22 F – RESPONSE ESSAY: FORM

Week 15 – Crafting Our Own Arguments

25 M – Topics & Theses, Research, and Organization

27 W – Catch-up day

29 F – Course wrap-up and review

FIRST DRAFT OF PAPER DUE

Week 16 – The Final Paper

May 2 M – Individual paper coaching

FINAL PAPERS WILL BE DUE AT NOON ON FRIDAY, MAY 6. There will be no sit-down final exam.