

Annotated Bibliography on August Wilson

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Adell, Sandra. "Speaking of Ma Rainey/Talking About the Blues." *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.

Adell begins by citing Houston Baker's notion of the "blues matrix" and relates that notion to August Wilson's drama. She further applies the Nietzschean concepts of the Dionysian and the Apollonian to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Barnes, Clive. "O'Neill in Blackface." *New York Post* 28 Mar.1988. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 63. 450-51.

Barnes argues that Wilson explores a world where "Black people, black life, [and] black themes" prevail. Central to Wilson's plays, according to Barnes, is the notion of separation: "Separation from roots, separation from kith and kin, separation from one's own psychic self."

---. "Piano Lesson Hits All the Right Keys." *New York Post* 17 April 1990. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 63. 455.

Barnes calls *The Piano Lesson* "a play of magnificent confrontations . . . [which presents the] terrible choice between needs of the present and the demands of the past." Focusing upon Wilson's characterization, Barnes writes, "[The] playwright has a gift for people--he fills his plays with characters you could have known, characters who live and breathe, characters who shiver with life."

Beaufort, John. "New Chapter in Wilson Saga of Black Life." *The Christian Science Monitor* 30. Mar. 1988. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 63. 452.

Beaufort identifies *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as a "transcendent new work [which] further explores the personal sufferings and struggles born of a diaspora that began with slavery and continued with the post-emancipation migration of blacks to the industrial North." Beaufort also considers Wilson's vernacular as well as his "lyric flights."

Brustein, Robert. "The Lesson of *The Piano Lesson*." *The New Republic* 21 May 1990. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 63. 457-58.

Brustein initiates his critique of Wilson's work with an attack upon Wilson's most frequent director and mentor, Lloyd Richards. Labeling Richards' use of "non-profit institutions as launching pads...for the development of Broadway products" as "McTheater," Brustein identifies *The Piano Lesson* as an "overwritten exercise in a conventional style...the most poorly composed of Wilson's four produced works." Ultimately, Brustein believes that this "piano is made unplayable" by the ending, which "tacks a supernatural resolution onto an essentially naturalistic anecdote."

Crawford, Eileen. "The Bb Burden." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Crawford examines how music and racial identity are bound together in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. By examining each character in the play, Crawford illustrates how each character's identity is directly revealed through his or her approach to music. This coincides, she argues, with Wilson's own belief that each person needs to learn to sing his or her own "song."

Fishman, Joan (Herrington). "Developing His Song: August Wilson's *Fences*." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Fishman traces the development of *Fences* through its collaborative journey, citing biographical influences upon Wilson as well as how certain changes were made to particular characters in order to create certain effects. For example, the character of Lyons became gradually more "responsible" so as to construct a black male character who is following his artistic impulse but yet is not "lazy and shiftless."

Fleche, Anne. "The History Lesson: Authenticity and Anachronism in August Wilson's Plays." *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.

Fleche examines the use of the term "history" within the context of Wilson's plays. She identifies a "calculated historical displacement" as an ironic feature of Wilson's project. This irony, she posits, creates an anachronism which does not provide a solution to the problem of his "history" as a conscious *a posteriori*.

Freedman, Samuel G. "A Voice from the Streets." *The New York Times Magazine* 10 June 1987. 36, 40, 49, 70.

Freedman considers *Fences*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, focusing primarily upon "Wilson's concern with legacy." Freedman moves through Wilson's life, marking the influences while identifying Wilson as the "bard" of the "ghetto," a "lyric poet fired in the kiln of black nationalism."

Gantt, Patricia. "Ghosts from 'Down There'." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Gantt argues that Wilson's plays are "replete" with references to the South. Southern food and music, as well as references to sharecropping, suffering, slavery, the forced dissolution of family, and "restricted happiness" all combine to remind the characters and the audience of the "vestiges of the past within ourselves."

Gordon, Joanne. "Wilson and Fugard." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Gordon connects the plays of August Wilson to the plays of Athol Fugard, focusing upon how each playwright treats similar themes of race, the past, and how human suffering is brought about by oppression. Pointing primarily to *Fences*, Gordon argues that playwrights "work essentially within the tradition of the well-made play; a gradually evolving conflict is ultimately resolved in the final moments of the drama."

Harris, Trudier. "August Wilson's Folk Traditions." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Harris examines the "patterns in lore [which] reflect patterns in African American history" and how those patterns are presented and expanded upon in the plays of August Wilson. By pointing to such evidence as the "shiny man" and Bynum, Harris argues that Wilson uses folklore to merge the "secular and the sacred in ways that few African American authors have attempted."

Henry, William A., "A Ghostly Past, in Ragtime." *Time* 30 Jan. 1989: 69.

Henry considers *The Piano Lesson* as praiseworthy, noting "[Already] the musical instrument of the title is the most potent symbol in American drama since Laura Winfield's glass menagerie."

Kester, Gunilla Theander. "Approaches to Africa: The Poetics of Memory and the Body in Two August Wilson Plays." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Kester develops her thesis that Wilson brings "the past into the present as a vivid and active component of people's daily lives." In so doing, she argues, Wilson constructs his characters in such a way so as to highlight their abilities to experience life not only through the static metaphors of geography and spatial relations, but also thorough the more dynamic metaphors of the black body as a "vehicle for each person's song and a metaphor for change."

King, Robert L., "Recent Drama." *The Massachusetts Review*. Spring, 1988: 87-97.

King begins by taking *The Piano Lesson* to task, writing: "In *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson writes speeches of exposition and hangs out symbols as if he were a neophyte rather than a prize-winning dramatist whose first three plays have gone from Yale to runs on Broadway." In conclusion, however, King admits that--overt symbols and speeches aside--*The Piano Lesson* is a "cultural and dramatic achievement."

Kroll, Jack. "August Wilson's Come to Stay." *Newsweek* 11 April 1988: 82.

Kroll traces Wilson's development in light of the recent arrival of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* on Broadway. Focusing upon Wilson's language, Kroll writes, "Wilson's gift of verbal music reflects his love of the blues."

Marra, Kim. "Ma Rainey and the Boyz: Gender and Ideology in August Wilson's Broadway Canon." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Marra offers a feminist critique of the work of August Wilson, whose narrative structures, she argues, posit "a male protagonist and constructs female characters as Other." For Marra, the implications are significant, as such products "reinforce the sexist values of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."

Monaco, Pamela Jean. "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: From the Local to the Mythical in August Wilson." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Monaco examines how Wilson develops the "wondrous possibilities that come from establishing bonds with one's ancestry." Monaco argues that by focusing upon highly specific instances his plays, Wilson is able to chronicle powerfully human experiences, and thus "earns the title of mythmaker."

Morales, Michael. "Ghosts on the Piano: August Wilson and the Representation of Black American History." *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.

Morales considers the "mystical elements" in several August Wilson plays. These elements, he believes, allow Wilson to blend "cosmological perspective" with "historical experience" as he writes of black experience.

Nadel, Alan. "Boundaries, Logistics, and Identity: The Property of Metaphor in *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*." *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.

Nadel argues that Wilson's drama investigates what lay on "the other side of the fence...by creating conflicts whose resolution requires inverting the traditional designations of "literal" and "figurative." He then moves to consider the where boundaries exist for several characters in Wilson's plays and how the identities of those characters are determined by those boundaries.

Oliver, Edith. "Boarding-House Blues." *The New Yorker* 11 April 1988: 107.

Oliver considers Seth Holly's boardinghouse [in *Joe Turner*] as "a kind of way station," where people rest as they journey through life. Oliver also writes, "*Joe Turner* is the most mystical, most remote and dispersed of Mr. Wilson's plays."

Pettengill, Richard. "Alternatives . . . Opposites . . . Convergences: An Interview with Lloyd

Richards." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Pettengill interviews Wilson's friend and mentor, Lloyd Richards. The discussion flows from play to play, with particular attention provided to discussing the characters from *Two Trains Running*.

---. "The Historical Perspective: An Interview with August Wilson." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Pettengill interviews August Wilson, with Wilson focusing upon characterization, dominant themes, and particular influences. Wilson provides extensive ideological narrative, outlining his feelings on social and economic circumstances as they pertain to blacks.

Rocha, Mark William. "American History as 'Loud Talking' in *Two Trains Running*." *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.

Rocha applies the Gatesian notion of "loud talking"--where one person talks just loud enough to a second person for a third person to hear--to *Two Trains Running*. Such allegorical loud-talking, according to Rocha, is "doing what black people call 'schooling' [Wilson's] audience in signifyin(g)."

---. "August Wilson and the Four B's." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Rocha identifies artist Romare Bearden, playwright Amiri Baraka, writer Jorge Luis Borges, and Blues music as the four major influences upon August Wilson's dramatic art. Rocha argues that when taken together, "the four B's are much more than discrete influences whose traces are to be sifted out of Wilson's plays, but together form the sign system from which Wilson's plays are written."

Rich, Frank. "A Family Confronts Its History in August Wilson's Piano Lesson." *The New York Times* 17 April 1990: C-13.

Rich calls *The Piano Lesson* a "joyously African-American play...[with] its own spacious poetry, its own sharp angle on the nation's history, its own metaphorical idea of drama and its own palpable ghosts that roar right through the upstairs window of the household window where the action unfolds." Rich continues by considering the themes of history, legacy, and language in the play.

---. "Panoramic History of Blacks in America in Wilson's Joe Turner." *The New York Times* 28 Mar. 1988: C-15.

Rich accentuates the "metaphysical cat-and-mouse game" played by Loomis and Bynum in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, a play filled with characters who are each "looking... either a lost relative or a secret life, or both." Frank calls Wilson "An American writer in the deepest sense," who shows us how to find our own freedom in the freedom of others.

Shannon, Sandra G., "Subtle Imposition: The Lloyd Richards--August Wilson Formula." *August Wilson: A Case Study*. Ed. Marilyn Elkins. New York: Garland, 1994.

Shannon explores the working relationship between Lloyd Richards and August Wilson. She writes, "What seems to be a key ingredient...is the tremendous amount of respect that each man has for each other. As a result, egos are held in check, one listens to the other, and differences of opinion are handled ever so diplomatically." As Richards puts it, his job is to "extend August's thinking...and even to provoke it...You can call it subtle imposition."

Simon, John. "A Lesson from Pianos." *New York Magazine* 7 May 1990: 82-3.

Simon identifies *The Piano Lesson* as actually three plays: "a conflict between the brother...and the sister"; "a play of the supernatural"; and "Broadway entertainment with situation comedy." For Simon, the final product comes across as a "palimpsest, with earlier versions distractingly discernable underneath."

Timpane, John. "Filling the Time: Reading History in the Drama of August Wilson." *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.

Timpane asserts that Wilson's notion of history can be understood by examining the perspectives of the characters who populate Wilson's plays. Focusing largely upon Troy Maxson and Ma Rainey, Timpane argues that "Dramatic irony [in Wilson's plays] issues from the audiences' ability to mark the historical shift that the protagonist insists on denying."

Werner, Craig. "August Wilson's Burden: The Function of Neoclassical Jazz." *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.

Werner posits that Wilson "revoices both African American and Euro-American expressive traditions in a heroic attempt to heal the wounds that devastate individuals and communities as we near the end of the twentieth century." From there, Werner moves to the issue of neoclassical "universalism," particularly Wilson's "nuanced treatment of 'universal' themes."

Wilson, August. "I Want a Black Director." *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. Ed. Alan Nadel. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.

Wilson communicates his desire for a black director for his play, *Fences*, which was--at press time--in the hands of Paramount Pictures. Although Wilson has sold the rights to the play for \$500,000, he believes that the play requires a black director who will bring certain black "sensitivities" to the work.