

Introduction

The Power of Place

August Wilson occupies a unique place in the history of American theater. His main body of work, the so-called Pittsburgh Cycle, consists of ten plays, each set in a different decade of the twentieth century and all but one set in Pittsburgh. Looked at individually, the plays are notable for featuring unforgettable characters and compelling dialogue. Looked at collectively, the Pittsburgh Cycle is a remarkable, century-long theatrical history. Although the plays are not an exhaustive interpretation of Black life in America, Wilson consciously sought to have each play in the cycle—*Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Running*, *Jitney*, *King Hedley II*, and *Radio Golf*—delve into “one of the most important questions that blacks confronted” in a specific decade.¹ No other playwright—certainly none in the United States—has written a comparable set of excellent plays set in the same place and treating a common topic over an extended period of time. Eugene O’Neill once attempted such a feat, but ultimately abandoned the effort.² Wilson’s success in fulfilling such an ambitious project is unprecedented, and has enshrined him in the pantheon of American playwrights.

Through his plays, Wilson gave dignity and respect to the lives of Pittsburgh’s working-class Black residents that he carefully observed and came to value. In his plays, those residents demand respect and understanding. They

burn down a mill in protest of a fellow worker's unnecessary death. They reclaim their racial identity by participating in African-based rituals. They argue vigorously about when certain trains did and did not pass through the city. A blues performer believes fame and fortune will soon be his, a former star of the Negro Leagues complains about not getting the chance to play in the majors, and a waitress scars her legs so that men will focus more on her personality than on her looks. Unlicensed cab drivers worry about losing their station to urban renewal, pessimism about the future causes women to obtain abortions, and politicians scheme to "redevelop" the neighborhood by bringing in a Starbucks and other "amenities."

In making Pittsburgh the setting for his plays, Wilson put his hometown on the world-cultural map, doing for Pittsburgh what William Faulkner did for Oxford, Mississippi, and James Joyce for Dublin, Ireland. Today, thanks to the Pittsburgh Cycle, the city occupies an iconic place in the story of America in general and of Black America in particular. Among theatergoers and many others, Pittsburgh's Hill District has challenged Harlem as the metaphorical site of the urban Black experience. This book explores how Pittsburgh influenced both Wilson's identity and his accomplishments—the life experiences that generated them, and the consequences for Wilson himself, his work, and his literary career.

Pittsburgh profoundly shaped both Wilson and his literary output. Without question, the city meant a lot to him. It is where he was born, where he spent almost all the first thirty-three years of his life, where he first fell in love, married, and started a family, where he began his literary career, and where he acquired much of what he knew about life. The city furnished Wilson with memories of people, places, and events that became raw material for his plays. Just as importantly, through his early life and experiences in Pittsburgh, Wilson acquired a set of set of identity traits that defined who he was and who he would become, both personally and professionally: outsider, warrior, race man, and poet. Being an outsider made him a close observer of others, being a warrior taught him to persevere in the face of setbacks, being a race man gave him a central theme for his writings, and being a poet gave him the ability to create compelling dialogue that amounted to free-verse poetry. This fourfold set of identity traits became crucial to his later success, and Wilson embedded them in the personas of the leading characters of his play.

Despite thousands of books, articles, dissertations, and videos about Wilson's literary output,³ Wilson himself has been the subject of only one previous book-length biography, Patti Hartigan's *August Wilson: A Life*. Published in 2023, it is a

detailed, engaging examination of Wilson's life by the longtime theater critic of the *Boston Globe*. While Hartigan's biography offers gripping detail, it provides little in the way of an overarching theme, little concerted effort to define, simply and convincingly, who Wilson was, how he got that way, and how his own persona shaped his plays. Moreover, and perhaps relatedly, the majority of Hartigan's book focuses on the period after Wilson achieved national fame and fortune.⁴ An understanding of Wilson's relationship with Pittsburgh provides the key to understanding both the playwright and the plays.

Happily, there is no shortage of material relating to Wilson and Pittsburgh. The archives at the University of Pittsburgh hold Wilson's personal papers as well as the papers of several of his friends and colleagues. There are numerous public documents to draw upon, including census records, city directories, and legal documents. Opportunely, Wilson's friend Lee Kiburi interviewed both him and others in the 1990s as part of an investigation of Pittsburgh's Black Power movement. Those detailed interviews are of central importance in telling the story of Wilson and his hometown. Most importantly, there still are many individuals who knew Wilson personally and remember him well. Many of his former neighbors, friends, relatives, classmates, girlfriends, and wives were willing to talk about a person they knew and admired. For this biography, I interviewed some sixty or so individuals from those days, interviews that add greatly to an understanding of Wilson's personal life and literary development.

To appreciate the power of a place, one first needs to know something about the place itself. For our purposes, that would be Pittsburgh's Hill District. The setting of nine of the plays in the Pittsburgh Cycle, the Hill District is the neighborhood where Wilson lived as a young boy, and he returned to it as a young man when he was beginning his career as a writer. Wilson's story is tied up in the neighborhood's story, which begins early in the nineteenth century, when African Americans became the first to settle the rolling hills just east of downtown. The Hill's natural beauty and favorable location soon attracted white professionals and businessmen, who settled among these original Black residents. A local newspaper praised the industriousness and work ethic of these Black settlers. "In repeated instances, they have dug the cellars of their abodes with their own hands and have made brick of the clay upon the spot." The paper went on to praise local Black settlers for their "orderly conduct, sobriety, and [respect for] the civilities of life." It added that their behavior was "appreciated and warmly approved by their white neighbors." The paper