

The Goodman Theatre  
Student Subscription Series  
2000-2001 Season

**Teacher Guide**

**August Wilson's  
KING HEDLEY II**

**Directed by  
Marion Issac McClinton**

Student Guide written and designed by  
Megan McCabe, Arts in Education Intern

Edited and published by The Goodman Theatre

---

Stacey Ballis, Director of Arts in Education  
Chloë Johnston, Arts in Education Associate

***KRAFT FOODS***

is the Principal Sponsor of the 2000-2001 free Student Subscription Series

# August Wilson

August Wilson was born Fredrick August Kittel in 1945 in the “Hill” district of Pittsburgh- the setting for many of his plays. Raised by his mother, he was the fourth of six children.



His educational background is both a testament to his natural talent for writing, and an unfortunate example of a school system that failed him. Although he was a straight-A student, he dropped out of his Catholic elementary school because he was often beaten up, and the teachers and administration did nothing to stop it. He then went to a trade school, where his days were filled with academics, sheet metal work, and basketball. He dropped out of this school after a teacher punched him for using a drafting tool incorrectly. Wilson finally ended up at a public high school. Although he did not regularly complete his homework, he did do an excellent job on one particular assignment. His twenty-page historical essay on Napoleon was so impressive; his teacher did not believe that Wilson wrote it. Wilson refused to provide documentation such as footnotes or a bibliography. He claimed that his name on the paper alone should be proof enough that he wrote it. The teacher gave him a failing grade on the paper, and August never went to school again. Although he hung around the school, hoping to be noticed, no teachers or school officials encouraged him to come back. So with that, his formal education came to an end.

Although his school days were over, Wilson’s days of writing were only just beginning. His first work was as a poet. Greatly influenced by Amiri Baraka, Wilson tried his hand at poetry in the 1960’s and 70’s. His first significant involvement in the theatre was in the late 1960’s when he co-founded Black Horizons.

In the 1970’s, Wilson focused his creative voice into playwriting. His first play was a satirical Western, “Black Bart and the Sacred Hills”. Although this show was not a success, his 1982 work, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” was a tremendous triumph. It was accepted for Workshop at the National Playwrights Conference of the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center, and went on to win a New York Drama Critics Circle Award. His plays are part of a project portraying the African American experience in each decade of the twentieth century. **King Hedley II** is the 1980’s installment of the series and the first play that is a continuation of another play, **Seven Guitars**. Many of the characters from the 1940’s, **Seven Guitars** reappear in **King Hedley II**.

Wilson has won two Pulitzer prizes, for **Fences** (1987) and **The Piano Lesson** (1990). He has also been awarded the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for his plays **Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom**, **Two Trains Running**, and **Joe Turner’s Come and Gone**, which also won a Drama Desk Award.

# Wilson's Cycle of Plays:

## The African American Experience

***King Hedley II*** is the eighth play that August Wilson has completed in his ten-play project that chronicles the African American experience of this century, setting each play in a different decade. Here is a brief outline of these plays, including when they were written, what they are about, and what decade it represents. What is interesting to note, is that not only will August Wilson's, *King Hedley II* open the new Goodman Theatre, every one of his cycle plays have been produced by the Goodman Theatre at some point in time!

**1910's: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*** (written in 1986, set in 1911, produced at the Goodman in 1991) Herald Loomis is searching for his wife that he lost years ago after joining a chain gang. His search brings him to Seth and Bertha's boarding house, where "conjure man" Bynum shows him that he really is searching for himself.

**1920's: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*** (written in 1981, set in 1927, produced at the Goodman in 1997) Music talents Ma Rainey and Levee learn that white society is not interested in their talents because of their skin color.

**1930's: *The Piano Lesson*** (written in 1987, set in the 1930's, produced at the Goodman in 1989) A ghost helps a brother and sister decide what to do with an inherited family piano.

**1940's: *Seven Guitars*** (written in 1994, set in the late 1940's, and produced at the Goodman in 1995) Blues musician Floyd Barton gives his recording career a second try after his release from prison, until his life is cut short by a confused man named Hedley.

**1950's: *Fences*** (written in 1985, set in 1957, produced at the Goodman in 1986) Garbage collector Troy Maxon has difficulties with his son pursuing his dream of a football career, after Troy's own athletic hopes were erased by racism. Troy's wife Rose takes responsibility for his baby from an affair with another woman, but puts an end to the intimate parts of their relationship.

**1960's: *Two Trains Running***: (written in 1992, set in 1969, produced at the Goodman in 1993) Set in a Pittsburgh restaurant, characters discuss modes of action African Americans should take towards civil injustices in the late 1960's. Sterling has just been released from prison and insists on righting an injustice committed years earlier; a man not rewarded with what was promised him after completing a job.

**1970's: *Jitney***: (written in 1979, set in 1971, produced at the Goodman in 1999)  
Set at a Jitney stand in the Hill District unlicensed taxi driver Becker is reunited with his son Booster, after Booster's release from jail. Their time together is cut short when Becker is killed; yet Booster continues to learn from him about pride and himself.

**1980's: *King Hedley II*** (written in 1999, set in 1985, produced at the Goodman Theatre in 2000)

# The Early 1980's

## Politics: The Reagan Administration

In **1980**, Republican Ronald Reagan was elected President. He and running mate George Bush were re-elected in 1984. The Reagan administration was characterized by supply-side economics. This “trickle-down theory” most benefited the wealthiest Americans. The program granted industries and wealthy Americans tax cuts, while eliminating a number of unemployment and welfare programs. A recession in the early 80's led to an employment rate of 11% by 1982. By 1985, the unemployment rate for African Americans was more than double the rate of white Americans.

## Health News:

**1981:** \* Scientists identify the virus that causes the fatal AIDS. Although originally believed to be a medical concern only of Homosexual men and Haitians, AIDS is found to be an epidemic among other groups.

**1982:** \* The first successful permanent artificial heart implant is performed.

**1983:** Health officials assure a worried public that the chances of catching AIDS from blood transfusions is small.

**1984:** Surgeon General C. Everett Koop informs the public that non-smokers can get cancer through inhaling secondhand smoke.

## Entertainment:

\* Rap is the most popular type of music to emerge from the **1980's**. Although most early rap was primarily dance and party music, such as the first rap hit, “Rapper’s Delight”, soon rap was used to convey social messages, such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” .

\* In **1985**, a group of talented artists come together and record the huge hit, “We Are The World”. The song raises money for the poverty stricken in Africa.

\*Videocassette recorders, (VCRs) gain popularity in the U.S.

By the middle of **1983**, 7 million homes own VCR's, and they are selling at a rate of 250,000 a month. As a result, video rental stores are extremely popular and do very good business.

## Civil Rights Movement

**1980:**\*A race riot breaks out in Miami, killing 18 people and causing \$100 million worth of property damage. The riot was in response to the acquittal of four police officers charged in beating a Black man to death.

**1982:** \*The Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution is defeated.

\*More violent outbursts disease, in Miami after a policeman shoots a young black man.

**1983:** \* Harold Washington becomes the first African American Mayor of Chicago.

\*250,000 gather on Washington to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil Rights march.

\*Martin Luther King , Jr.'s birthday is declared a national holiday. It is observed on the third Monday of January.

**1984:** \* Civil Rights Commission votes to end quotas in the employment of African Americans.

\* Rev. Jesse Jackson announces his bid for the Democratic Presidential Nomination.

## The Hill District

The Hill District consists of 650 acres of downtown Pittsburgh. It is the hometown of August Wilson and the setting for many of his plays. It was originally farmland owned by William Penn's grandson.

Thomas Mellon purchased the land in 1840, it then became the first planned residential neighborhood in Pittsburgh. The first

occupants of the Hill district were mostly wealthy professors. The ethnic makeup of the community began to change in 1870, when African-Americans and European immigrants began to settle down in the Hill district, attracted by job opportunities in the steel industry. By the 1930's, the residents of the Hill district were mostly African American, Jewish, and Italian Americans.



The Hill District



The Crawford Grill

One of the most notable inhabitants of the Hill was jazz. Beginning in the 1930's and throughout the 1950's, the Hill was a nationally known jazz spot. Jazz clubs were extremely popular, and many of them were interracial. Noted jazz performers often visited the famous Crawford Grill and Hurricane Lounge, including Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and Earl Hines. Jazz musicians and singers often visited these small clubs after finishing a show downtown.

Although the 40's and 50's was a time of musical achievement, the neighborhood was failing. Poor housing, lack of successful local business, and racism plagued the growth of the Hill district. To counter the decline, an Urban Renewal project was adopted in 1955. The plan proposed to replace 100 acres of the existing Hill district, (which was predominantly housing for African American residents) with theaters, hotels, and other upscale housing facilities. As a result of this plan, 8,000 people were moved from their housing between 1955-1960. The federal government offered no compensation for their housing or relocation.



Unfortunately, the actions taken by the Urban Renewal plan did not fulfill its mission of renewing the neighborhood. In 1968, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, a weeklong series of riots broke out. Businesses, fearing their safety and livelihood, decided to move to a “safer” location. By 1969, 80% of the Hill residents were on a fixed income. This economic hardship was coupled with food shortages after many local grocery stores were forced to close. Those that did have access to food had to accept the outrageous prices in the suburbs. By 1972, the Hill district was in such turmoil that Governor Jesse Jackson was called in to tour the area as an “Opportunities Disaster Area”.

The Citizens Committee for Hill District Renewal, an organization formed in 1963, worked with “The Pittsburgh Courier”, one of the leading African American newspapers in the country, to encourage and support neighborhood growth. They also demanded attention from the federal and local government, asking for answers to the poverty problem by reviewing urban planning. Although these efforts were continued throughout the 1970’s, by the 1980’, significant progress was not made; arguments were more common than accomplishments. This is the world in which *King Hedley II* is set.

## RACE UNITES FOR DRIVE TO SECURE REAL DEMOCRACY

In continuing the policy of The Courier to fight for the rights of the Negro race, the paper recently started the “Double V” drive for victory at home against prejudice and discrimination as well as victory abroad against the enemies of democracy. Since this “Double V” emblem has been



August Wilson, behind his Mother’s home in the Hill District

### Did You Notice?

In the information you just read about the Hill District, there was a least one historic location and one historic figure mentioned that is **ALSO** mentioned in *King Hedley II*. Can you find these references in the play? Why do you think Wilson chose to include them in his play?

# Explore Your Hometown-

# CHICAGO



August Wilson sets many of his plays in a town he knows best- his hometown in the Hill district of Pittsburgh. By doing so, he shares a bit of local and personal history with us, the audience.

**Now it's time for you to share!**

This is a **creative research assignment**. Through this project, you will:

- Explore an aspect of Chicago's history
- Explore your family history.
- Listen to local voices
- Find your own voice
- Create an original piece with personal connection to you!

**How to start:**

- **READ** three articles of local interest from at **LEAST** 5 years ago.
- **RESEARCH** one historic figure of interest to you. He/she can be from anywhere, **NOT** limited to Chicago.
- **TALK** to a family member from an older generation about an experience that happened to them while in Chicago.

**Once you have your information:**

- **CREATE** a *fictional* short story combining elements of ALL the information you have gathered.

**And finally:**

- **SHARE** your stories with your classmates. How are their stories similar to yours? How do they differ?

Here is a list of the various historical and local elements August Wilson used in, *King Hedley II*. In class, brainstorm some suggestions for your project.

## Local Topics

Equal opportunity employment  
Unemployment  
Gun Violence  
Drive-by Shootings  
Theft

## Historical Figures

Buffalo Soldiers  
Jesse James  
Wyatt Earp  
Aretha Franklin  
Queen of Sheba  
King Solomon

## Voice of an Older Generation

Elmore  
Ruby  
Stool Pigeon

*“ 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, Act I Scene 2  
**Gun Violence**



## In 1985...

- About 31,600 Americans were killed by guns.
- About 130,00 Americans suffered nonfatal gunshot wounds
- The majority of all gun deaths involved handguns
- 79% of all gun homicides involved handguns
- Guns were involved in 1.5% of all deaths in America
  - 59% of suicides
  - 60% of homicides
  - 1.8 % of all accidents
- The leading cause of death among African-Americans ages 15-34 was homicide.

## Gun Ownership

- An increase in gun ownership was representative of rising crime rate. Therefore, most gun purchases were made for *defensive reasons*.
- *Defensive gun ownership: When an individual responds to a dangerous life circumstance, (or one that is perceived as dangerous) by purchasing a gun. It can also be a response to the feeling that the police cannot provide necessary protection.*
- *Criminal gun ownership: When an individual purchases a gun for criminal purposes. Often, one will get a gun through friends or theft, rather than by retail.*

### To Think About:

- How often do you read about gun violence today?
- Gun violence is common in the world of **King Hedley II**. Is it common in your world? If so, how do you live with that? Do you think there is a way that the problem of gun violence can be solved? How?

### In the Play:

- How many characters owned guns?
- Who owned a gun for defensive reasons?
- Who owned a gun for criminal reasons?

On Today's Show...

## **STOP THE VIOLENCE!**

### **Conflict Forum**

In *King Hedley II*, many characters resolve their problems through extreme acts of violence. In fact, many stories of people not even present in the play, but present in the *WORLD* of the play, are also victims or participants of violence. Are their lives better for it? Have their actions resolved the conflict and improved their situation. Tragically, almost always, the case is not. Let's give the characters in *King Hedley II* another chance- better alternatives to solving their conflicts. Let's stop the violence and save lives!

#### **What We Need:**

- Talk show host
- Series of guests
- An interactive studio audience

#### **How We Do It:**

The talk show host greets the audience to today's show, "Stopping the Violence: A Conflict Forum". He/she explains that the guest on today's show experienced conflicts, and choose to end them in violence. Through interviews, we will explore the consequences of these actions, and the feelings of all people involved and affected by the violence. Finally, the studio audience will share their thoughts, feelings, and questions to guests, and offer alternative course of action that the guest could have taken to resolve the conflict. Through role-playing, the guest will try these suggestions and speculate how life would be different had they tried this alternative, rather than violence and crime.

#### **Today's guests:** (may include some or all groups)

- Pernel and King
- Elmore, Leroy, and Ruby
- Elmore and King- (with reactions from Ruby and Tonya)
- Little Buddy Will and his mother
- Mister and King (crime)

#### **Now try this!**

**On Tomorrow's Show: *Communicating in your Relationship- Talk out your Problems***

#### **Guests include:**

- Tonya and Natasha
- Tonya and King
- King and Ruby

One example of Africans' contribution to oral history is the folk tale. Read the following African folktale and answer the following questions in regard to both the tale and *King Hedley II*.

### The Child and the Eagle

[Baila]

A woman had a child. One day she went to work in the fields. While she was going to her work the child cried. When it stopped crying she suckled it, and after she had finished suckling it she laid it down in the shade. Then she went on hoeing. Once again the child cried, and a bird came— an eagle— and sat upon it. It soothed the child with its wings. Then the child which was crying became silent. When she saw this the woman was greatly alarmed and said, "Dear me! How terrible! The eagle is eating my child!" As she went toward it the eagle flew away. Then she suckled her child, and after she had done suckling it she put it upon her back. When she had finished hoeing, she left off work and returned to the village.

On her arrival there, she did not tell her husband of the marvel which she had seen but kept it to herself. The next morning, the woman again went to work in the field with her child. The same thing happened— once again she laid the child to sleeping the shade. After a time the child cried. Then she beheld the eagle alight on the child and quiet it. The woman was amazed and said, "What is the eagle doing? It is sitting upon my child, but it neither bites nor scratches it—no, and then the child is quiet. Truly an astonishing thing!" Once again the woman went to her child. When the eagle saw her coming, it flew off and went to sit on a tree. The woman took her child and was greatly alarmed.

She returned to the village and, on her arrival, told her husband about it, saying, "A great marvel!" Her husband asked, "What about?" The woman said, "Today is the second day I have seen the most amazing thing there where I hoe. I put my child to sleep in the shade, and as soon as it cried an eagle came, and when it alighted it stooped over the child and soothed it with its wings. Today is the second day that I have seen the bird act thus. Its name is 'eagle'." Thereupon the husband refused to believe her, saying, "No, you are lying there never was such a thing." The wife said no more.

Late in the afternoon the woman took her hoe and went to work in the field. On her arrival she laid her child in the shade. The child cried. Thereupon the woman thought, "Now I will go and call my husband, who disputed my word and said that I lied." So the woman ran. When she arrived where her husband was, she cried, "Come on! It was you who disputed, saying there never was such a thing. Let us go now and see."

The man took his bow and three arrows. On his arrival at the field, the woman said to him: "Sit down here. I will put the child to sleep in the shade yonder, and then, when you see the bird coming, hide yourself." The woman left the child and went some distance away, and the man hid himself there. Then the child cried very loudly. As the man watched, he saw the eagle come and sit upon the child. The man was greatly alarmed and charged his bow with two arrows, that he might pierce the eagle sitting on his child. Then he shot, but at that moment the eagle dodged, and both arrows pierced his child.

Now that is the explanation of the origin of murder. The eagle was a kind person; nevertheless the father of the child wished to kill it. Then the eagle cursed him and said, "Now is kindness among men at an end, because you killed your child. Beginning with you, and going on to all people, you shall kill each other." To this day people kill each other.

#### Consider This:

1. What role does misconception play in this story? In *King Hedley II*?
2. In this story, the husband accuses the wife of lying. In what circumstances does lying also lead to violence in *King Hedley II*?

#### What Do You Think:

1. Does this folk tale serve a purpose? If so, what?
2. How are the ending of the story and the play different? Is one more tragic? More hopeful?
3. Why do you think there is so much crime, in particular, murders, committed in *King Hedley II*? Is the reason as simple as the folktale suggests? Or is it more complicated?

#### **Now You Try:**

##### ***The Child and the Eagle***

explains the origin of murder. In groups of 4-6, create your own folktale which a particular character from *King Hedley II* will share with Tonya and King's child, to explain why he/she doesn't have a father. Consider how each character's story would be different from another's. Share them with your classmates. What do you think of their stories? How are they different from yours?

# What Happened to the Working Class?

## Representing Social Class in the Media



*The Cosby Show* was obviously a huge commercial success. It was watched by more people than any other sitcom in history and was ranked number one more times than any other series. The show was historically significant because it represented African Americans in a different light; an upper-middle class, educated family with strong values. Up until the breakthrough of *The Cosby Show*, television in the 1980's was bombarded with negative images of African Americans, portraying them as drug dealers, welfare abusers, and violent criminals. Therefore, *The Cosby Show* is considered a positive contribution to audiovisual medium, because it paved the way for different, more positive images of African-Americans. Journalist Michael Dyson observed the show's accomplishments by stating:

***“The Cosby Show reflects the increasing diversity of African American life, including continuous upward social mobility by blacks, which provides access to new employment opportunities and expands the black middle class”***

True, *The Cosby Show* was a great public proponent of the middle class. But what about the working class? How could King and Mister relate to the lives of the main characters of *The Cosby Show*; Doctor and Mrs.(lawyer) Huxtable. Likewise, how could Dr. Cliff Huxtable relate to selling hot refrigerators? They have drastically different life experiences because of their social class, although they live in the same time period.

### CLASS IDENTIFIERS

On the following page, you will find a worksheet titled, “*Class Identifiers*.” On it is a general list of class identifiers. When reading the script, note specific line references that influenced your view of their social class in the language section. Then, after seeing the performance, fill out the other categories. Consider not only the performances, but also costumes and set design as well. Talk with your friends and come up with some of your own class identifiers. After the show, get into groups and review your findings, and discuss how the identifiers may lead to *stereotypes*.

# Class Identifiers Worksheet

**Directions:** After seeing the show, fill in the following worksheet. Then, reflect on how these class identifiers formed your view of the status of the characters in *King Hedley II*. (HINT: For LANGUAGE, it may be helpful to refer to your script!)

## LANGUAGE (accents, slang, word choice)

1. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Line: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Line: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Line: \_\_\_\_\_

## CLOTHING (outfits, material, accessories)

1. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Description: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Description: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Description: \_\_\_\_\_

## HOUSING (location, neighborhood, exterior)

1. Describe the set: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## JOB/EDUCATION (employed/unemployed, educated/uneducated)

1. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Job/Education: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Job /Education: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Job/Education: \_\_\_\_\_

## HOBBIES (interests, activities)

1. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Hobby: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Hobby: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Character name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Hobby: \_\_\_\_\_

## Wanting a Good Life: *Appreciating the Simple Things*

**King Hedley II** is about a man who wants a good life, a life that always seems just out of reach. Rather than combat a society that is keeping him down, he retreats to nature and tries to start from scratch, growing a garden of his own from a few precious seeds. Just as a garden needs fertile soil, social conditions need to be supportive in order for a person to survive. The Hill District of 1985, in many ways, was like rocky soil, with no rain or sun in sight. Unemployment and violent crime were on the rise. The hope is that Hedley, like his newly planted flowers. Might have a new life, apart from ongoing violence and crime.

The following is an excerpt from Walt Whitman's poem, "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun". Whitman is often considered America's national poet. Idealistically, he believed America to be a place of equality and democracy, a place that can foster a strong sense of community between all people. Realistically, he loved the details of daily life, that so often get overlooked in a fast paced society. Read the excerpt and consider how it relates to the dreams, both large and small, of the characters in **King Hedley II**.

*Give me odorous at sunrise a garden of beautiful flowers where I can  
walk undisturbed,  
Give me for marriage a sweet-breathed woman of whom I should  
never tire,  
Give me a perfect child, give me, away aside from the noise of the  
world, a rural domestic life,  
Give me to warble spontaneous songs recluse by myself, for my own  
ears only,  
Give me solitude, give me Nature, give me again O Nature your  
primal sanities!  
These demanding to have them, (tired with ceaseless excitement, and  
racked by the war-strife)  
These to procure incessantly asking, rising in cries from my heart.*

### **CONSIDER THIS:**

**This poem was written in 1865. The war strife is a result of the Civil War. How so weapons and violence figure in the 1980's world of "King Hedley II?"**

### **BECOME A POET:**

**PICK** three characters from the play.

**IDENTIFY** a major dream and a minor want or desire for each of them. Do any of their dreams, desires, or "wants" match any of the ideals Whitman explores in his poem?

**WRITE** your own line(s), consistent with Whitman's style, that illustrates, in detail, the smaller desires of each character. Try to give a hint in that line as to their larger dream. Make sure that details reflect the life of the characters in the play.

**FINALLY...REFLECT** on your own larger dreams and minor "wants". **WRITE** a few lines that echo the details of your life. How do your details differ/relate to those in the poem? In **King Hedley II**?