

Name _____ Date _____

August Wilson

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was Black, and his father, Frederick Kittel, was a White immigrant from Germany. Daisy raised Wilson and his five siblings mostly as a single mother. The family lived in a poor yet bustling neighborhood of Pittsburgh called the Hill District. This neighborhood would become the setting for most of Wilson's plays.

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When Daisy remarried, the family moved to a mostly White suburb, where they faced racial threats and discrimination. Wilson had to switch high schools to escape the relentless bullying of his classmates. When he was 15, he was accused of plagiarizing a paper and decided to quit school. But he wasn't finished with learning. Instead, he focused on self-education, studying the books of Black authors like Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright. He also spent time talking with the residents of the Hill District to learn about their experiences.

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2. b'

Wilson always knew that he wanted to become a writer, but his mother wanted him to be a lawyer, instead. Wilson left home and joined the military for a year. Then he returned home and worked various odd jobs as a cook, gardener, and dishwasher. After his father died in 1965, Wilson gave himself the pen name August Wilson in honor of his mother and declared himself a writer. He began writing and publishing poetry. In 1968, he became the cofounder and director of Black Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh. Later, he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where his writing flourished. His first major play, *Jitney*, was produced in 1982.

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Wilson is best known for The Pittsburgh Cycle, a series of 10 plays that describe the Black American experience in the 20th century. Each play is set in a different decade. The first, Gem of the Ocean, takes place in 1904. Joe Turner\ue2\x80\x99s Come and Gone takes place at a boardinghouse in 1911, and Ma Rainey\ue2\x80\x99s Black Bottom centers on a group of musicians and their manager in 1927. The cycle continues with The Piano Lesson (set in the 1930s), Seven Guitars (1940s), Fences (1950s), Two Trains Running (1960s), Jitney (1970s), King Hedley II (1980s), and Radio Golf (1990s). Wilson won the Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award for Fences and a second Pulitzer for The Piano Lesson.

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Wilson wrote The Pittsburgh Cycle out of chronological order over 35 years. Although the plays span many decades, they convey similar thematic elements of music, family, the human condition, and Black culture. Wilson also included strong female characters in his work, taking inspiration from his mother.

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Wilson died of liver cancer in 2005, but his legacy as one of the greatest and most prolific Black playwrights in American history lives on. He was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame the year after his death.

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