Gem of the Ocean
Setting: 1904
Written: 2001
Huntington Production: 2004

Characters

- **AUNT ESTER:** Her name sounds like the word “ancestor” and she is the connector between the African past and the African American present. Her name suggests both Easter, the holiest day of the Christian calendar, and the biblical character Esther, Ahasureus’ queen and the heroine of Purim, a Jewish holiday, which celebrates the saving of the Hebrew people. She is both the physical and the mystical link between present and past. Her home is a sanctuary where troubled people come to be cleansed of guilt and sorrow. Aunt Ester’s birth, approximately 285 years prior to when the play takes place, coincided with the arrival of the first shipment of African slaves in the English colonies. She is both the keeper and the transmitter of African-American memory.

- **CAESAR WILKS:** Black Mary’s brother, a policeman, baker and land-owner. He is the villainous constable and venal slumlord in the play. His name means dictator or autocrat, which originated from the original Roman emperor, Julius Caesar. He is reminiscent of the plantation overseers of slavery times and represents the black-face authority who acts and speaks for the white world.

- **BLACK MARY:** The protégée of Aunt Ester, she is trying to learn the wisdom and ways of the old woman. While supervising Ester’s house, she serves her and washes her feet in a ritual reminiscent of the self-abasement of Mary, sister of Martha, at Bethany during the last days of Christ.

- **CITIZEN BARLOW:** The seeker and confessor in the play. A migrant from Alabama, his intent is to work in a factory, but he steals a bucket of nails which results in an innocent man drowning to avoid false arrest. He insists on seeing Aunt Ester to confess his sin of black-upon-black violence. His mother named him Citizen “after freedom came,” but Solly Two Kings reminds him that to truly be a Citizen, he’ll have to fight to uphold freedom when it becomes a heavy load.

- **ELI:** Aunt Ester’s companion, bears the name of an Old Testament priest and mentor to young Samuel. As such, he is steady, reliable and maintains peace and security in Aunt Ester’s house. He was Solly's comrade in his efforts on the Underground Railroad and for The Union Army.

- **SOLLY TWO KINGS:** A sixty-seven-year-old former slave and conductor on the Underground Railroad whose earlier name was Uncle Alfred. After slavery he changed his name to David and Solomon, two Biblical kings. A friend and suitor to Aunt Ester, he makes a career of gathering up dog excrement, which he calls "pure", for manure.

Synopsis
Act I Prologue: Gem of the Ocean opens late at night at 1839 Wylie Avenue in 1904. Eli prepares to head to bed when there is a violent knock at the door. It is a young man named Citizen Barlow, demanding to see Aunt Ester, an old woman with a magical
reputation for washing people’s souls. Eli tells him that Aunt Ester won’t see anyone until Tuesday, which agitates Citizen. He tries to push by Eli, but Aunt Ester emerges, and calmly tells Citizen to return on Tuesday.

Scene 1: A day later, Citizen Barlow is outside of the house, apparently prepared to stand there waiting until Tuesday comes. Rutherford Selig, a white peddler, arrives to sell his wares, but also brings news that the mill upriver has been shut down for the funeral of a man named Garret Brown. Brown was accused of stealing a bucket of nails but claimed he did not do it. Caesar Wilks, Black Mary’s brother and the local constable, chased Brown, who jumped in the river and stayed in until he drowned.

Solly arrives and confirms that no one is going to work, but instead are heading over to the church for the funeral. Despite Black Mary’s objections, Solly brings in his basket of what he refers to as “pure.” Pure is dog excrement, which Solly collects and sells as manure. Eli asks Solly for help building a stone wall on the side of the house. Eli hopes the wall will “keep Caesar on the other side.” Black Mary and Solly agree that Caesar is just doing his job and that he’s good at it. Solly takes out a letter from his sister, Eliza Jackson, which Black Mary reads aloud for him. Eliza reports that times are tough for colored people down South in Alabama. Solly says that he plans to go down there to help his sister and that a man named Jefferson Culpepper will accompany him.

Aunt Ester enters and inspects Solly’s pure and purchases some. Black Mary heads out to do the shopping but Aunt Ester and Solly know she is really going to visit a man named Percy Saunders. Aunt Ester reveals to Solly that she had a dream about Black Mary before she knew her and then Black Mary showed up at her front door the next day. Aunt Ester had a dream last night that Solly was going to Alabama and Solly confirms that it’s true. Solly and Eli head out to attend Garret Brown’s funeral.

Scene 2: Citizen crawls into Aunt Ester’s house through a window. He is hungry and stands in the kitchen devouring a piece of bread and looking for more food. When Aunt Ester finds him there, Citizen claims that he “ain’t no robber” and that even though Aunt Ester said he had to come back on Tuesday, he cannot wait that long. Aunt Ester says that Citizen reminds her of her son, Junebug, who was a rascal who caused her trouble. They discuss Garret Brown’s determination to maintain his innocence by staying in the water, choosing to die innocent rather than live guilty. Citizen explains that he is only recently arrived in Pittsburgh from Alabama. The journey was difficult because all of the roads were closed to colored people so he had to sneak out. He got a job working at the mill but the money he was being paid working at the mill was not enough to cover his room and board, and as a result he became indebted to the people at the mill. Citizen confesses that before he could go to another city, he killed a man and is now full of despair and needs Aunt Ester’s help. Aunt Ester comforts Citizen and decides that he will stay and help Eli build the wall.

Scene 3: Eli and Black Mary discuss Citizen’s arrival. They are skeptical of Aunt Ester’s explanation that he simply knocked on the door and she opened it. Solly enters and reports that people at the mill are rioting and refusing to work. The police arrested as
many people as possible, but there are plans to continue the strike the next day. Solly also says that he will have to make his trip to Alabama alone because Jefferson Culpepper has consumption and is likely to die soon. He dictates a return letter to his sister, which Black Mary writes for him and signs, “Your brother, Two Kings,” at Solly’s request. Solly explains to Citizen that he changed his name from Uncle Alfred (the name given to him as a slave) to Two Kings (for David and Solomon) because the government was looking for him for being a runaway. Citizen says his mother gave him his name after freedom came and Solly notes that in doing so, Citizen’s mother has put a heavy load on him—“It’s hard to be a citizen. You gonna have to fight to get that.” Solly and Citizen reminisce about their respective homes in Alabama and their reasons for leaving. As Black Mary sets out lunch, she and Solly debate God’s contradictory statements in the Bible: “God say different things,” Solly says. “Say, ‘I will smite my enemies.’ Then he tell you to ‘turn the other cheek.’”

Caesar enters in an agitated state and Eli tries to remind him that “this a peaceful house.” Caesar is up in arms about the mill worker strike and claims that if “they don’t go to work tomorrow there gonna be hell to pay.” He claims that Eli is wasting his time trying to build a wall and that is Citizen needs a job he should either go to the mill or move on to Philadelphia. Caesar warns Citizen to stay away from Black Mary and warns everyone to keep an eye on Citizen. Caesar claims that the mill workers are ungrateful for the opportunity the mill provides them and that if they continue striking, they will all end up in jail for loitering and not paying their rent. He believes that the black community will disintegrate and fall into poverty, for which he blames Abraham Lincoln, and says that some of them were “better off in slavery.”

Caesar mocks Solly for his work collecting dog excrement and puts down Black Mary for working as a washerwoman in Aunt Ester’s house. He tries to convince her to return to work for him in his bakery but she refuses, saying accusing Caesar of cheating his customers and his tenants by overcharging them. Black Mary has not forgotten when Caesar shot a boy for stealing a loaf of bread, but Caesar claims he was justified and that the law is everything. As a black man he has had to play the hand that was dealt to him. Years ago, he put down a riot started by a troublemaker, and as a result, was made constable of the Third Ward. He tries to convince Black Mary that blood is thicker than water and that she should not turn her back on him, who is her family. “You give up on family and you ain’t got nothing left.”

Scene 4: Black Mary confronts Citizen about coming in through the window and he admits that he was desperate to have his soul washed. He asks her to come to his room later that night, saying that she is “too young a woman not to have a man.” Black Mary tells him that if she does, it will not change anything for either of them. She says that men use women up and are so focused on their own needs that they can’t see women’s needs. But Citizen, she says, does not even know what he needs and is blinded by it. They kiss, and in the end, she agrees to go to his room.

Scene 5: Black Mary washes Aunt Ester’s feet. Aunt Ester recounts how she came to have the name “Ester Tyler” and that she is now 285 years old. She says that Black Mary
will need to make up her mind about whether she wants to be her successor, and sends Black Mary to send Citizen down to talk. When Citizen enters, Aunt Ester asks him what he had done. Citizen admits that he stole a bucket of nails, the same bucket of nails Garret Brown was accused of stealing. When Brown was accused and jumped in the river, Citizen remained silent. He is filled with guilt over Brown’s death. Aunt Ester compares Citizen’s choice to Peter’s denial of Christ in the Bible and wonders if Citizen will take a chance for redemption if it is handed to him. She decides she will help him and take him to the City of Bones, but first he must do something. He must go upriver and find two pennies lying side by side on the ground. When he finds them, he must pick them up and bring them back to Aunt Ester. He must also go to see a man name Jilson Grant, who will give him something. After Citizen leaves, Black Mary asks Aunt Ester why he needs the two pennies and Aunt Ester explains: “That’s only to give him something to do. He think there a power in them two pennies. He think when he find them all his trouble will be over. But he need to think that before he can come face to face with himself. Ain’t nothing special about the two pennies. Only thing special about them is he think they special.”

A moment later, Eli bursts in, shouting that the mill is on fire.

Act II Scene 1: The next day, Selig sits in the kitchen with Black Mary, telling her that all the way to Philadelphia, people are talking about the mill fire. There is rumor that the army may be called in if the police cannot handle the situation. Eli enters saying that it doesn’t look like the fire at the mill can be put out.

Citizen returns to the house with the two pennies, but without finding Jilson Grant. On a quilt made to look like a map, Aunt Ester shows Citizen the location of a city made of bones that is the home of the thousands of people who never made it across the water. She folds her bill of sale from when she was sold as a slave into a small boat and tells Citizen that he will take a ride on the boat. She says that it will take him to the City of Bones if he believes it can. Aunt Ester says that she will guide Citizen to the City of Bones that night to wash his soul, but first they must both prepare for the journey.

Scene 2: Black Mary and Eli make preparations for Citizen’s journey. Solly arrives, prepared for his trip to Alabama. He tells Citizen that mill has been burning so long because of the tin inside. He gives Citizen a piece of chain that he carries for good luck. When Solly was a slave, this chain used to be around his ankle. He tells Citizen how he became a conductor on the Underground Railroad and explains that the sixty-two notches on his walking stick symbolize the sixty-two people he carried to freedom. He and Eli tell stories about working together to help the Union army and taking escaped slaves on secret routes to Canada. Solly, Eli, and Citizen drink some whiskey as Solly and Eli continue to reflect on the Civil War and their view that Emancipation did not turn out to be exactly what it was promised to be.

Aunt Ester persuades Solly to take Citizen to the City of Bones before leaving to see his sister in Alabama. She hands Citizen the paper boat and tells him its name is the Gem of the Ocean. Aunt Ester begins to describe the boat as Black Mary, Solly, and Eli sing, and
within moments, Citizen feels he is on the *Gem of the Ocean*. Solly and Eli wear European masks and symbolically chain Citizen in the boat. Citizen experiences whippings and brandings on his symbolic journey and soon finds himself at the Twelve Gates to the city. He uses his two pennies to pay the gatekeeper but is horrified to discover that the gatekeeper is Garret Brown, the man who jumped in the river. Aunt Ester tells Citizen he must accept responsibility or else he will never be right with himself. Citizen says, “It was me. I done it. My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole a bucket of nails,” and the gate opens. He sees the people in the city with their tongues on fire, as described by Aunt Ester. Moments later, he is returned to Aunt Ester’s home, and the others celebrate Citizen’s renewal and absolution.

Caesar arrives, accusing Solly of setting the mill on fire. Solly whacks Caesar’s knee with his walking stick and runs out. Caesar declares that he will get justice.

Scene 3: Black Mary tells Citizen that it does not matter whether Solly actually burned down the mill or not. If Caesar catches him, Caesar will kill him. Citizen notices Black Mary’s blue dress and tells a story about a girl he once met at a dance who wore a blue dress. They spent the night together but when he woke up the next morning, she was crying and could not stop. Black Mary says that you have to be right with yourself before you can be right with anybody else.

Aunt Ester sends Citizen to find Rutherford Selig and bring him to the house. She criticizes Black Mary for having the fire too high and Black Mary claims that she cannot do everything exactly as Aunt Ester wants her to. If she is going to stay around, she is going to do things her own way. Aunt Ester asks, “What took you so long?”

Scene 4: Citizen returns with Selig, who reports that all of the roads are blocked off because of the search for whoever burned down the mill. Aunt Ester asks Selig to take Solly downriver. Solly exclaims that he burned down the mill because freedom has a high price. Citizen says he will go with Solly. Aunt Ester sends Solly out the back door just before Caesar arrives. Selig says goodbye to Black Mary and Eli, and leaves. Caesar has a warrant but Aunt Ester shows him her piece of paper: her bill of sale. Caesar says he wouldn’t give 10 cents for the piece of paper, so Aunt Ester counters that his piece of paper, his warrant for Solly’s arrest, is not worth anything either. Black Mary argues that 1839 Wylie Avenue is a house of sanctuary for those wanting redemption, as described in the Bible. But Caesar says that the law is above all else and arrests Aunt Ester for aiding Solly’s escape and interfering with his arrest.

Scene 5: Eli and Black Mary arrive home with Aunt Ester, having bailed her out of jail. Citizen enters a few moments later, reporting that Caesar has shot Solly. Citizen and Selig bring Solly into the house, and Aunt Ester and Black Mary try to stop his bleeding, but they are unsuccessful. Citizen places his two pennies in Solly’s lifeless hands so he can pay the gatekeeper. Eli’s eulogy is interrupted by Caesar’s arrival. Citizen hides as Caesar enters looking for him. Black Mary disowns Caesar and he leaves. Citizen puts on Solly’s coat and hat, takes his walking stick, and exits.
Joe Turner’s Come and Gone
Setting: 1911
Written: 1984
Huntington Production: 1986

Characters

- **BERTHA HOLLY**: Seth's wife of 25 years and 5 years his junior. She knows her place in the hierarchy of the boardinghouse, yet still has some say in the decision-making and will often voice her opinion. A very loving mother to the boardinghouse family. In the end, she tells Mattie that the only two things you need in your life are love and laughter; the things that she has had faith in and have helped her get by.

- **HERALD LOOMIS**: A resident of the boardinghouse. Having been enslaved by Joe Turner for seven years, Loomis has completely lost his way in life. An odd man that dons an overcoat and hat in mid-August, Loomis is 32 years old and a displaced slave searching for his wife. In the end he finds his song, an independent, self-sufficient song that he can sing proudly.

- **MARTHA LOOMIS PENTECOST**: Herald Loomis’s wife. She is about 28, very religious and a member of the Evangelical church. She left the South and her daughter behind. She does what it takes to ensure her self-preservation and remains a strong, self-sufficient woman until the end.

- **RUTHERFORD SELIG**: A peddler. Known as the “People Finder,” he is the only white character in the play. Selig is from a family that first brought Africans across the Atlantic to become slaves, but now he unites people by recording the names and places of all the people he peddles to.

- **JEREMY FURLOW**: A resident of the boardinghouse, he is 25 years old. He represents a younger generation seeking to find its identity as the first liberated slaves. Jeremy's "blues playing" character is classified as a suave, artist young man looking to make a quick buck and travel the nation. He is constantly seeking the attention of the women in his vicinity and tries to find the perfect girl for himself.

- **SETH HOLLY**: Owner of the boardinghouse in his early fifties. Born of free African-American parents in the North, he is set in his ways; never losing his composure and always running a respectable house. He even condemns other African-Americans that do not follow this kind of lifestyle. He is economically very capitalistic and does whatever is necessary to stay afloat; including working night shifts and odd craftsman jobs he can pick up from Selig. He understands his world on a very literal level, and doesn’t aspire to become more than he is.

- **BYNUM WALKER**: A rootworker in his late sixties. A "conjure" man staying with the Holly's at the boardinghouse, Bynum is one of few characters that understands his own identity. Convinced of the fact that everyone has their own song, Bynum perpetuates the theme of identity and our constant search for it.

- **REUBEN MERCER**: A boy who lives next door. Reuben represents the repetitiveness of history. Even as an adolescent, Reuben is aware of his place in society, notices the spiritual differences of people around him, and decides at a
very early age that he needs a woman to settle down with and marry. Many of the ideals that are seen in the adult characters of this play are instilled in Reuben and will repeat, the good and the bad, as he grows into adulthood.

- **MOLLY CUNNINGHAM:** A resident. She is a good looking young woman of 26 who is strong and independent. Unwilling to let herself be told what to do by anyone, Molly is convinced that she will never return to the South and refuses be associated with anything that her old life entailed.

**Synopsis**

It is August of 1911, a generation after Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation granted legal freedom to all enslaved Africans in America. Still subject to Jim Crow discrimination in the rural South, black Americans have begun migrating to the industrial cities of the north, seeking work and the opportunity to establish a life with dignity for themselves.

Seth Holly, born of Northern free parents, and his wife Bertha, run a boarding house in Pittsburgh where many of these itinerant workers pass time while sweeping through the northern cities in search of jobs. On such boarder who approaches the Hollys for a place to stay is Herald Loomis. Loomis is an intense, odd man of thirty-two who has come to Pittsburgh from Memphis with his eleven-year-old daughter, Zonia, to search for a wife who abandoned them. There is a sense of violence lurking under Loomis’s steely exterior, a dark, explosive anger that causes Seth to be suspicious of this newcomer, and at first makes him reluctant to rent him a room; but Seth’s wife, Bertha, takes pity on the little girl and so Loomis allowed to stay.

The boarding house is full of other itinerants like Loomis looking for a place to put down roots and set up new lives. Jeremy, a talented guitar player, has come up from North Carolina and gets work here and there in mills and on road crews until he is forced out by white immigrants competing for the same jobs. Bynum is a mystic who works magic with roots and plants to “bind” people. Mattie, a young girl whose man has left her, is seeking another man to whom she can belong until he also moves along without her.

Loomis asks around about his wife, Martha, and engages the services of a white peddler, Rutherford Selig, who has a business on the side helping dispersed slave families to reunite. Seth Holly knows of a woman in town who fits Loomis’s description, but refuses to reveal this to Loomis because of his suspicions about Loomis’s character.

After dinner one night, the boarding house begins to entertain itself by doing a juba, a rhythmic dancing and singing of hymns. Loomis, who has been watching others in silence, suddenly explodes, venting his pent-up rage in a violent tirade against praising God. He reveals himself for the first time as a man who has been cruelly abused by life, and asks his fellow boarders what they have to thank God for. For the suffering and injustice that is their daily companion? He rants about terrible visions, until he is no longer in his right mind and collapses. The other boarders have listened in stunned silence to Loomis’s raging. Bynum talks to Loomis and manages to calm him down.
Loomis’s violent outburst shocks and scares the other boarders. Seth tells Loomis he has to leave after the week for which he is paid up.

Bynum, a healing man by nature, has taken an interest in Loomis. He coaxes Loomis into revealing the trauma that has caused his rage, and Loomis relates his pathetic story. Loomis was once a pious man who spent his time farming and spreading the word of God. One day, he stopped to preach to a group of men gambling in the street, when the whole group was rounded up and arrested by Joe Turner’s men. Loomis was forced to do hard labor for seven years as a result of his “crime.” No word was ever sent to his family of his whereabouts, and when he was at last released he went home to find that his wife was gone and had left their young daughter nearby with her mother. Loomis has been looking for her ever since, so that he can pick up the pieces of his life and find a place to start over again.

When Loomis’s week is up and they still have not located Martha, he and Zonia pack up to leave. Just after they exit, Rutherford Selig, the peddler and “people finder,” enters with a woman. It is Martha. Just as Seth is telling them that they are too late, Loomis and Zonia, who have seen Martha coming, reenter. It is an anxious reunion. Loomis bitterly accuses Martha of abandoning him and their daughter. Martha tries to explain that she thought he was dead, and that she was forced to come North because the members of their church, where Loomis had once been a devout member, were persecuted and forced to flee. To everyone’s surprise, Loomis tells Martha that he is moving on, and leaving Zonia with her; he says that he chased her all these years just so he could say his goodbye and start over again. He tells Zonia she has to go live with her mother now. He tells them all that no man or woman is going to bind Herald Loomis any more. Joe Turner has come and gone, and now Loomis is free. He pulls a knife as if he expects someone to try and stop him from leaving. Martha, aghast at his behavior, begins reciting Psalms, trying to win his soul back to Jesus, but Loomis can no longer believe that there is any justice in religions or find any comfort in the idea of heavenly salvation as a reward for his suffering on Earth. Jesus is a white man, a Simon Legree asking him if he has done his day’s work, and then throwing him a scrap of a promise of salvation and asking him to live on that. Loomis says goodbye to Martha and leaves, knowing that he can at last make his way on his own legs.

(From the Huntington’s curriculum guide for Joe Turner’s Come and Gone)
**Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom**

**Setting:** 1927  
**Written:** 1982  
**Huntington Production:** 2012

**Characters**

- **CUTLER**: Guitar and Trombone player in Ma Rainey’s band, Cutler is also the leader of all the other instrumentalists. A loner type in his mid fifties, he plays his music without embellishment—the same can be said for how he feels about life: he believes in getting things done quickly.

- **MA RAINEY**: Based on a real life Ma Rainey with a career in Blues Music in the 1920's, Wilson’s character is praised as “Mother of the Blues.” She has the final word in everything regarding the band, making all the decisions. Not one to be disillusioned, Ma Rainey was always aware that her manager and producer were set on simply making money off of her.

- **SLOW DRAG**: As the slow-moving, yet talented bass player in Ma’s band, Slow Drag is a professional in his mid-fifties who is focused on his music. His name is the result of an incident in which he slow-danced with women for hours in order to make some money. Critics have referred to the music that Slow Drag plays as being reminiscent of African music.

- **LEVEE**: The talented and temperamental trumpet player, Levee is the youngest member of the band, being in his thirties. He is a man who is confident with his appearance, especially when it comes to the expensive shoes he owns. Perhaps it’s because of his age that Levee is also the band member who wants to go off on his own and will begrudgingly play Ma Rainey’s music until he’s got his own band to do with what he pleases. He is frustrated, bitter, and is usually picking a fight with someone in the band. When he was only eight years old, he saw his mother raped by a gang of white men.

- **TOLEDO**: Toledo, in addition to being the piano player for Ma Rainey, also acts as the band philosopher. Literate and reflective, he discusses abstract concepts like racial memory and the plight of the black man throughout the play despite his band-mates’ misunderstanding of much of what he says. He believes that style and musicianship are important to a performance. Having been married with children, Toledo lost his family in a divorce.

- **STURDYVANT**: Overworked, penny-pinching, and obsessed with making money, he is the white owner of the Southside recording studio where Ma Rainey makes her music. Because he is uncomfortable dealing with black performers, he communicated mainly with Ma Rainey’s white manager, Irvin. Because of these reasons, he represents white exploitation of black music.

**Synopsis**

**Act I**: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* opens in a Chicago recording studio in early March 1927. Rainey has taken a break from touring to record some songs for Sturdyvant’s studio. As the lights come up, Sturdyvant is warning Irvin that he will not put up with any of Ma Rainey’s “shenanigans.” Sturdyvant characterizes Rainey as a prima donna, someone who expects the world to do her bidding. Irvin’s assurances that Rainey will show up on time do not sound
convincing, however, and the more Sturdyvant warns Irvin that he won’t put up with Rainey’s attitude, the more prepared the audience becomes for an inevitable conflict when she does appear.

Cutler and the band appear shortly, and Levee shows up carrying his new shoes, which he paid for in part with money he won from Cutler the night before playing craps, a dice game. Levee’s new Florsheim shoes represent a shift in musical taste from blues to jazz and swing, a change that Sturdyvant wants to exploit, at least initially, when he tells Irvin to have the band record Levee’s version of ‘‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.’’

The bulk of act I is comprised of bantering between and among band players, with Levee arguing with almost everyone. The stories the band members tell and the subjects of their arguments both reveal their respective characters and outline a particular struggle blacks historically have had with whites.

One of these struggles is exemplified when Rainey finally makes her entrance, along with Sylvester, Dussey Mae, and a policeman, who threatens to arrest her for assaulting a cab driver after the group attempted to leave an automobile accident they were in. Wilson’s scenarios are universal enough to appeal to a racially diverse audience and to create empathy for dilemmas specific to blacks. The struggle for financial control of goods made by black labor is evident, for example, in the way in which Rainey responds to Irvin and the way in which Sturdyvant pressures Irvin. Act 1 ends with Levee, the youngest band member, telling the story of his mother’s rape and his father’s murder at the hands of white men. The important thing to remember about the action in this act isn’t what happens, but the emotional effect racial conflict has on how band members interact with one another, as well as with whites.

Act II: In this act, Rainey asserts her prerogative in having Sylvester do the introduction to ‘‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,’’ even though band members and Irvin think it’s a bad idea because of his stuttering. Rainey’s insistence, however, symbolizes the duty she feels in giving powerless blacks a voice, both literally and figuratively. This demand—and her refusal to sing unless she has a Coca-Cola—illustrates almost stereotypical behavior of prima donna celebrities. However, Rainey’s motivation for behaving this way is more closely related to her desire to let her white producer and agent know that they cannot take advantage of black people in general and her in particular. Various characters, including Rainey, give speeches about white exploitation and mistreatment of blacks throughout the act. Levee, who Sturdyvant had promised could record some of his own songs, is humiliated by the producer, who now tells him that his music isn’t what people want. Enraged at a system that has squelched his creative powers, at a people who have shamed and exploited him, and at a man who has lied to him, Levee stabs Toledo. He does so, not because Toledo stepped on his shoe, but because Toledo was unfortunate enough to be in the vicinity just after Sturdyvant’s exchange with Levee. By offering no transcendence or resolution at the end of the play, Wilson figuratively ‘‘sticks it’’ to his audience as well, reminding them that the plight of African Americans remains the same.

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The Piano Lesson
Setting: 1936
Written: 1986
Huntington Production: 1988

Characters

- **AVERY**: Thirty-eight years old, Avery is a preacher who is trying to build up his congregation. He is honest and ambitious, finding himself opportunities in the city that were unavailable to him in rural areas of the South. While fervently religious, he manages to find the time to court Bernice after her husband’s death.

- **BOY WILLIE**: Brother to Bernice, Boy Willie is a thirty-year-old brash, impulsive, and fast-talking man. He has an infectious grin and a boyishness that is apt for his name. His story provides the central conflict for the play in that he plans to sell the family piano in order to buy land that his family worked on as slaves. He feels it’s important he does this in order to avenge his father, who grew up property-less—but not everyone in the family agrees.

- **LYMON**: Boy Willie’s long time friend is a twenty-nine year old who speaks little, but when he does with a disarming straight-forwardness. As he flees the law, he makes a plan to begin anew in the North. Eliciting stories from the families past, Lymon proves a vehicle by which we learn about the family. He is also a big fan of women, and plays a part in helping Bernice move on from her husband’s death.

- **BERNIECE**: Bernice, Boy Willie’s older sister, is a thirty-five year old widow who blames the death of her husband three years prior, on her brother. She resents her brother’s bravado and chides him for his rebellious ways. She doesn’t want to sell the piano, but also has no intention of playing it. She has an eleven-year-old daughter, Maretha.

- **DOAKER**: Doaker is the tall, thin, forty-seven year old uncle to Bernice and Boy Willie. He has worked for the railroad his whole life—first laying rail and then as a cook. He functions as the family patriarch and the play’s oral historian, recounting stories, many about the piano’s history. The play takes place in the house that Doaker owns, and while he won’t take a side on whether to sell the piano, he does step in when things begin to get out of hand.

- **WINING BOY**: Doaker’s wily, carefree brother who shows up in town and stays with the family whenever he is a bit down on his luck. He used to play the piano and made his livelihood making music, but quit that life when he decided he no longer wanted to be an entertainer. Despite this, he is protective of the piano.

Synopsis

Act I: The play is set in Pittsburgh in 1936, in the house that Doaker Charles, a railroad cook, shares with his niece, Berniece, and Berniece’s eleven year old daughter, Maretha. Both Doaker and Berniece have come to Pittsburgh from the South. Although the house is sparsely furnished, there is one extraordinary item whose presence dominates its surroundings: an old upright piano, whose legs have been carved in the manner of African sculpture, with mask-like figures resembling totems. Powerfully rendered, the carvings make the piano into a work of art.
One morning, Doaker is awakened before dawn by someone calling his name outside his window. It is Boy Willie, Berniece’s younger brother, who has arrived unexpectedly after having driven for two days from Mississippi with his friend, Lymon Jackson. Both in need of money, Boy Willie and Lymon have come with a truck full of watermelons to sell. Boy Willie plans to return to the South with his earnings; Lymon, who is on the run from the law, wants to make a new life for himself in the North.

Boy Willie, once he has awakened Doaker, starts yelling for his sister to come down. Although it’s been three years since Berniece has seen Boy Willie, she greets him with irritation and standoffishness. Boy Willie has spent the past three years at Parchman Farm, a Mississippi correctional facility, and is clearly seen as trouble by his sister. When Boy Willie tells them that Sutter, the man whose family used to own the Charles family during Slavery, has fallen into a well and drowned, Berniece suspects Boy Willie of having murdered him. Berniece goes back to her bedroom, telling Boy Willie and Lymon she wants them to sell their watermelons and head back home.

Boy Willie tells Doaker that the reason he needs money is that Sutter’s brother, businessman from Chicago, has offered to sell Sutter’s land to Boy Willie. While he can get some of what he needs by selling watermelons, Boy Willie plans to get the rest by selling the piano, which he owns jointly with Berniece. Doaker tells Boy Willie that Berniece will never sell it, and that she has already been offered a good price for the piano when Avery, a preacher who has been courting Berniece, once sent a man to the house to look at it so that he could get money to finance his church. Berniece turned him down. Boy Willie decides to find out from Avery who it was that made the offer.

Suddenly, a scream is heard from upstairs. Berniece enters, running and unable to speak. When Berniece catches her breath, she claims to have seen Sutter’s ghost at the top of the stairs, calling Boy Willie’s name. Boy Willie mocks Berniece, and tells her it was all in her head. Berniece says she believes Sutter came looking for Boy Willie because it was Boy Willie who pushed him down the well. As she vents her anger at Boy Willie, it becomes clear that much of her feeling toward him comes from the fact that she blames him for the death of her husband, Crawley, who was shot when he went with Boy Willie and Lymon to steal some wood from where Boy Willie was working. She orders Boy Willie out of the house. Boy Willie agrees to leave as soon as he sells his watermelons.

Doaker starts cooking breakfast, and Maretha comes downstairs to get ready for school. Avery comes by to pick up Berniece, who is going with him to the bank from which he is seeking a loan to start his church. Until he gets that going, he is working as an elevator operator in one of the new skyscrapers downtown. Boy Willie asks Avery about the man who wanted to buy the piano, and tries to get him name, but Avery no longer remembers it. Berniece and Avery leave together, taking Maretha with them.

Lymon and Boy Willie go off to try to sell their watermelons, but their truck breaks down, and they have to leave it in the shop for a day for repair. They return to Doaker’s to find that Doaker’s older brother, Wining Boy, has unexpectedly arrived from Kansas City for a visit on his way down South, having learned by letter that the woman who he once loved and lived with
Wining Boy has passed away. Wining Boy is a piano player, who once made a few records, but he now spends his time gambling and drinking. When Boy Willie tells Wining Boy about Sutter falling in his well, Wining Boy says he believes it was the ghosts of the Yellow Dog that got him, like they got three other men, all of whom were involved in a violent incident long ago.

Boy Willie tells Wining Boy about his plan to sell the piano. Doaker describes for Lymon the history of the piano, and the reasons why Berniece will never sell it. During slavery, their family was owned by Robert Sutter, the grandfather of the Sutter whose land Boy Willie is hoping to buy. Robert Sutter was the original owner of the piano, which he acquired in exchange for “one and a half” slaves—Doaker’s grandmother, and his father, who at that time was a child of nine. The two of them were sent off to Georgia, while Doaker’s grandfather, Willie Boy, remained at Sutter’s farm by himself.

Willie Boy was a woodworker for Sutter, so skilled that people from around the region would pay Sutter to have Willie Boy make furniture for them. One day, Sutter asked Willie Boy to set his skill to work on the piano, and so Willie Boy carved the legs, using images of his wife and son as he remembered them, as well as images of other members of his family.

After emancipation, Doaker’s grandmother and father were reunited with Willie Boy, and they became sharecroppers on Stovall’s farm, a farm not far from Sutter’s. It was there that Doaker, Wining Boy, and their eldest brother, Boy Charles, the father of Berniece and Boy Willie, grew up.

Boy Charles had never forgotten the piano his grandfather had carved. He felt the piano rightfully belonged to their family, and decided one day to steal it out of Sutter’s house. Because Stovall’s farm abutted the train tracks, boy Charles had gotten to know some of the hobos who hitched rides back and forth on the Yellow Dog line. He got some of them together, and on the Fourth of July in 1911, when they knew Sutter would be gone to the county’s annual Fourth of July picnic, they all took the piano from Sutter’s house, loaded it on a wagon, and hid it with Boy Charles’s relatives in the next county. Afterward, Boy Charles and his hobo helpers jumped on the Yellow Dog and headed out of town.

When Sutter found the piano was missing, he and some local men had the train stopped to look for the piano. They found no piano, but they did find Boy Charles and three hobos hiding out in a boxcar. The boxcar was set on fire and all four of them were killed.

Nobody knew for certain who was responsible for setting the boxcar on fire. Two months later, however, a man named Bob McGrath mysteriously fell into his well and was drowned. People said it was the ghosts of the four men killed in the boxcar getting their revenge. Since then, Sutter, the grandson of the Sutter who owned the piano originally, was the fourth man to die mysteriously by falling in his well.

Berniece, Doaker explains, will never sell the piano because her father died for it. Boy Willie believes the best thing he can do for his father’s memory is to do what his father never had the chance to: farm his own land. He believes his father died to give him that chance, by leaving him the piano, which can be the key to his future.
When Berniece returns with Maretha, it comes out the Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to get the money to buy Sutter’s land. Berniece firmly tells Boy Willie that she won’t sell the piano, and that he might just as well go home. “Money can’t buy you what that piano cost,” she tells him. “You can’t sell your soul for money.” She blames Boy Willie again for what happened to her husband. Boy Willie denies it, but all of Berniece’s pent up bitterness at the needless deaths, first of her father, then of her husband, comes pouring out in one vast flood, and she attacks Boy Willie, hitting and punching him until suddenly Maretha is heard screaming upstairs: she believes that she has seen Sutter’s ghost. Boy Willie tries to assist her, followed by Berniece and Doaker.

Act II: It is the next day. Doaker is in the kitchen cooking when Wining Boy, always short on money, returns from downtown, where he has tried unsuccessfully to pawn his silk suit. Boy Willie and Lymon have fixed the truck, and have been out all day selling watermelons. Berniece has been urging Boy Willie to leave, thinking that if he leaves, Sutter’s ghost will follow him. Doaker has not told Berniece, however, that he saw Sutter’s ghost in the house, sitting at the piano, two weeks before Boy Willie even came. He appeared just as Berniece had described him: wearing a blue suit, with his hand on his head. Doaker thinks that it is the piano that attracts Sutter’s ghost, not Boy Willie.

Boy Willie and Lymon return to the house after selling all of their watermelons, with their pockets full of money. Lymon buys Wining Boy’s silk suit, and after changing into his new outfit, he and Boy Willie go out to try and meet some women.

Later that evening, Berniece is home alone, preparing to take a bath and go to bed when Avery stops by. Berniece had asked him to come and see if he could somehow bless the house or do something to get rid of Sutter’s ghost. Avery agrees to research the problem and stop by tomorrow to see what he could do. Before he leaves, Avery tries to convince Berniece that they should get married, but Berniece says she isn’t ready, and becomes angry when Avery tries to suggest that what she needs in life to make her happy is a man. Avery leaves, frustrated that Berniece once again has made an excuse to delay their engagement.

Several hours later, after Berniece has gone to bed, Boy Willie returns home accompanied by Grace, a woman he has met in a bar downtown. As Boy Willie attempts to persuade Grace to stay the night with him, Berniece is awakened. Berniece tells Boy Willie he must take Grace somewhere else because she doesn’t allow that kind of thing in her house. After they leave, Lymon comes home looking for Boy Willie. He tells Berniece that all he found downtown were women who wanted to drink up all his money. He gives Berniece a bottle of perfume he bought to give to whatever woman let him take her to the movies. Something about Lymon touches Berniece, and when Lymon begins to caress her, she doesn’t try to stop him in the way she stopped Avery just a short time earlier.

Boy Willie returns the next morning all excited and wakes Lymon up. He has found the man who was interested in buying the piano, and has agreed to give Boy Willie $1,150 for it. Boy Willie has promised the man that he would deliver it, and is anxious to get the piano moved out before Berniece comes back and tries to stop them. The piano is too heavy for them to move by
themselves. Doaker returns home and tells Boy Willie not to move the piano until Berniece comes home. Boy Willie says he’ll leave it just until he can find a plank and some wheels, but that then he’s taking it out.

By the time Boy Willie gets back with the plank and wheels, Berniece and Maretha have returned. Berniece is telling Doaker how she and Avery have decided to get married. When Berniece discovers Boy Willie’s plan to move the piano, she threatens him, but he will not be deterred.

Lymon returns to help Boy Willie move the piano, accompanied by Grace, who has agreed to go to the movies with him. Boy Willie and Lymon start to move the piano. Berniece goes to her room and returns with a gun, and they continue to argue. Grace, who has been waiting for Lymon in the truck, comes to the door to hurry him up. Lymon leaves to take Grace home, and Boy Willie, obsessed with the idea of selling the piano and getting his money, tries to continue on by himself. Avery, who has stopped by with his Bible to try to exorcise Sutter’s ghost, begins saying blessings and sprinkling holy water over the piano, which Doaker has told him is the root of their troubles. Boy Willie laughs at Avery, saying that there isn’t any ghost. He grabs a pot of water in mockery of Avery and starts flinging it around the room, calling out to Sutter’s ghost. Suddenly some unseen but very real force seems to push Boy Willie. As Boy Willie begins to defend himself against the unseen spirit, the others in their own way leap into action. Avery begins praying louder. Berniece crosses to the piano and begins to play, pleading with the Lord to help them. Boy Willie, still wrestling with some unseen force, has caused it to retreat up the stairs. Boy Willie calls Sutter’s name and chases upstairs after it.

(From the Huntington’s Curriculum Guide for *The Piano Lesson*)
**Seven Guitars**  
**Setting:** 1948  
**Written:** 1995  
**Huntington Production:** 1995

### Characters

- **CANEWELL:** He and Red Carter are Floyd’s closest friends. He’s an edgy, quick-tempered harmonica player, who’s tired of playing back-up in life for Floyd. He made the trip with Floyd to Chicago the first time and regrets it. He loves Vera.

- **FLOYD:** Blues singer Floyd "Schoolboy" returns to Pittsburgh at thirty-five years old with a hit song and an opportunity to record a record back in Chicago. In the time since the recorded the initial song, Floyd has squandered the flat fee he received for recording, left his girlfriend (Vera) for another woman, was then left by the other woman, pawned his guitar, and spent ninety days in jail after being arrested while walking home from his mother’s funeral. After a year of trials and tribulations, Floyd wants to return to Chicago with Vera, his guitar, and a new sense of self. He is ready to “live with” not “live without.” Unfortunately, the lengths he’s willing to go to, to make his dreams happen, become his undoing.

- **RED CARTER:** He and Canewell are Floyd’s closest friends. He’s a drummer by profession, an expansive, laid-back fellow who can identify a rooster's birthplace by the sound of his crow.

- **VERA:** Floyd’s ex-girlfriend and eight years his junior. She loves Floyd, but after he left her for another woman she is slow to trust him again. She may have had a relationship with Canewell in Floyd’s absence. She is good friends with Louise.

- **LOUISE:** A hearty, buxom woman who, years earlier, allowed her man to walk out peacefully in exchange for his pistol. Louise describes herself as, “forty-eight going on sixty.” Although she claims to have no interest in love, she has an attachment to Hedley.

- **HEDLEY:** An old man, not altogether right in the head, who has turned his back on the white world he loathes. He's a believer in saints, spirits, prophets and the ghost of Charles (Buddy) Bolden, the legendary New Orleans trumpeter who died in an insane asylum. More than anything else, Hedley would like to sire a messiah.

### Synopsis

The play opens just after the funeral of Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton in the Hill District of Pittsburgh in 1948. Floyd Barton was a talented blues guitarist who was on the verge of signing a deal with a record company in Chicago when he was killed. A group of his friends—Vera, his former girlfriend; Louise, Vera’s upstairs neighbor; Hedley, a Caribbean immigrant street vendor with radical political ideas; and Canewell and Red Carter, members of his band—sits in the yard outside Vera’s house remembering Floyd in his final days.

Time shifts to the week before Floyd’s death. Floyd has just been released from prison, and has come back to the Hill District to find Vera and to put together a new band. Floyd has just spent ninety days in the “workhouse” after being arrested on a vagrancy charge. He had pawned his guitar to buy flowers for the grave of his mother, who had recently died. Because he had no money in his pockets when he was stopped randomly by the police, he was charged with
vagrancy and given a ninety day sentence. While incarcerated, a record he made for a recording company in Chicago has been released and has become a hit. A letter from the recording company was waiting for him upon his release, saying that they want to talk to him about more recording opportunities.

Floyd finds Vera and begs her to take him back, but she is reluctant. The last time she put her trust in him he cheated on her. Floyd promises Vera that he has changed. He tells her he is going to Chicago to make a record and asks her to come with him.

Louise, Vera’s upstairs neighbor, comes home. She tells Vera that she has just received a letter from her niece Ruby in Alabama. She has gotten in “man trouble” back home, and is coming to Pittsburgh to stay for a while.

The next day, Vera’s upstairs neighbor, Hedley, a Caribbean immigrant who makes a living selling sandwiches and cigarettes, is killing chickens in the yard and preparing to cook them. Hedley is considered excitable and “not quite right in the head” by those who know him. He rants to whoever will hear him about how the black man will rise up and overcome his white oppressor. He believes that destiny has chosen him for a great purpose and that one day he will be a great man. His father has named him “king” after the great black jazz musician “King” Buddy Bolden. He thinks that this name holds special meaning and holds Buddy Bolden to have a sort of magical significance in his life. As he works, he constantly sings to himself a song about Buddy Bolden coming to “give him the money.” Floyd teases him about this obsession with Buddy Bolden at every opportunity.

Louise comes down from her room and tells Hedley, who is sick with tuberculosis, that he had better see a doctor. Hedley refuses to go to “the white man’s doctor.” Louise tells him he is going to die. Hedley says he isn’t worried about dying because he is going to be a big man some day.

Canewell, a harmonica player, has heard Floyd wants him to be part of his band and comes looking for him. He has brought a golden seal plant as a gift for Vera. He tells Louise that the neighbors have gotten together a committee to decide what to do about the next door neighbor’s rooster, which crows all the time and wakes people up. Floyd emerges and asks Canewell to go with him to pick up the “thirty cents a day” the state owes him from his time in the workhouse. He wants to use the money to get his guitar out of the pawnshop.

Floyd and Canewell return several hours later upset. The state doesn’t want to pay him his money because he doesn’t have the proper paperwork. Red Carter, another musician friend that Floyd is recruiting for his band drops by. Red says he’ll go along with the band to Chicago if Floyd agrees to get his drums out of hock. Floyd doesn’t have any money for that; Canewell suggests he ask his manager—that’s what they’re there for.

Floyd tells the others that this time when he goes to Chicago, he isn’t coming back. That’s why before he leaves the Hill, he wants to buy a gravestone to mark his mother’s grave so he can be at peace with her and not owe anybody anything when he leaves.
That evening, the mean gather around the radio to listen to the broadcast of Joe Louis fighting Billy Conn. When Louis knocks out his opponent, the men celebrate. Red Carter grabs Vera and starts dancing with her. Floyd, jealous, pulls a gun on him. The others talk him into putting the gun away and they all sit down for a hand of cards.

Unexpectedly, Louise’s niece, Ruby, shows up. She is a voluptuous girl, and clearly aware of the power she has over men. Canewell and Red Carter cannot disguise their admiration for her. Back in Birmingham, he boyfriend shot and killed another man who was paying her too much attention. Now he is in jail and Ruby is pregnant.

As they play, the neighbor’s rooster starts once again creating a disturbance. Vera and Louise win the hand and Hedley exits abruptly, saying he has work to do. When Hedley returns, he is carrying the neighbor’s rooster. In a sudden violent gesture, he wrings its neck and slits its throat with his butcher knife, while the others look on in stunned silence.

Act II: The next day, Hedley is grilling chickens in the yard when Ruby saunters in, looking for attention, and starts talking to Hedley. Hedley is clearly excited by her presence. She asks him why he kills the rooster. He tells her that he spent many years in jail. Now he is fifty-nine years old and his time is running out. He always wanted to be a big man, but now he dreams of fathering a son who would be “big like Moses, somebody to lead the black man out of bondage.”

That evening, Floyd comes home excited. His manager, T.L. Hall, has booked them a gig at the Blue Goose. He also promised to meet Floyd at the pawnshop to get his guitar out of hock, and has secured them a date at the recording studio in Chicago on June 10.

The next day, Floyd goes to meet T.L. Hall at the pawnshop to get his guitar, but Hall never shows up. Red Carter shows up and tells them T.L. Hall has been arrested for selling $50,000 of phony insurance policies. Floyd sees his dream dissolving before his eyes—without T.L. Hall, he will not have the money to get his guitar from the pawnshop or to go to Chicago to meet with the record company. He determines that he will not let this set him back, and somehow he will make it to Chicago and make a record. He runs off without telling anyone where he is going.

Later, Red Carter, Vera, Louise, and Ruby are sitting the yard. Canewell has gone looking for Floyd but can’t find him anywhere. Suddenly, there is a lot of commotion in the neighbor’s yard. Vera looks over and sees Mrs. Tillery kneeling down on the ground. Canewell and Red Carter run next door to see what happened and learn that Mrs. Tillery’s son has been shot and killed by police.

Hedley comes into the yard singing, in unusually good spirits. He has just gotten a big order to make chicken sandwiches for Joe Roberts’s daughter’s wedding. Hedley tells them how he told Joe Roberts all about his heroes, the Haitian liberator Toussaint L’Ouverture and the African nationalist Marcus Garvey. When they finished doing business, Joe Roberts tells Hedley he has something for him and gives him a gift of an old machete. “Now Hedley ready for the white man when he come to take me away.”
Later, Ruby comes out of the house to find Hedley grasping his machete and talking madly to himself. When he sees Ruby, he becomes even more excited, waving his machete and telling her he is a great warrior, and she can be his Queen of Sheba. He has selected her to become the mother of his children, with her he will father “seven generations.” Unafraid, Ruby walks over and takes the machete from him. He grabs her and kisses her violently, feverish with lust. “I offer you a kingdom. The flesh of my flesh, my seven generations. I am the Lion of Judah!” Ruby slows him down, and speaking softly to him, lifts her dress and gives herself to him.

Later, Floyd returns to the house with a brand new guitar and a new dress for Vera. He tells Vera he has bought them each a bus ticket to Chicago, and reserved a room at the Delaware Towers Hotel for himself and “the soon to be Mrs. Floyd Barton, that is... if she say yeah.” When she asks him where he got the money for all of this, he only says “I took a chance.”

That night they get dressed up to go to the Blue Goose. Ruby has gone to church with Hedley and returns just in time to go to the club; Hedley has gone off to buy moonshine from his friend Jim Breckenridge. Louise rolls her eyes, knowing that he will come home fired up and ranting about “how Ethiopia shall spread forth her wings.” Ruby says she has talked him into turning himself into the sanitarium, and that she hopes he lives long enough to see her baby born—she wants to tell him that it is his, so he could die thinking about “his seven generations.”

Canewell comes in with a newspaper. Vera asks him if it says anything about how the neighbor’s son was killed. The paper says that he was shot fleeing the scene of a robbery at the loan offices of Metro Finance, and that the police are still looking for two other men believed to be accomplices who escaped with an undisclosed amount of cash.

The gig is a huge success, and they all come home in good spirits. Louise heads upstairs. Vera sees that the golden seal plant Canewell gave her is still sitting on the table and is concerned that its roots are going to dry up. Canewell offers to plant it for her. Vera goes upstairs and Canewell grabs a shovel. He begins to dig a hole in the yard when Floyd comes over and tries to take the shovel from him. When Canewell insists on planting the golden seal himself, Floyd tells him to plant the thing in a different part of the yard. Surprised at Floyd’s aggressiveness, Canewell looks down where he was digging and sees that he has unearthed a blue handkerchief with $1,200 wrapped up in it. He stoops to pick it up, and Floyd grabs for it, saying it is his. Canewell hangs onto it, thinking it is Hedley’s stash. He knows that Hedley buries his money rather than put it in a bank because he is afraid that the white man is going to steal it from him. Floyd once again demands his money. When Canewell refuses, Floyd pulls a gun. Canewell stares at Floyd in disbelief. He suddenly realizes that Floyd was the accomplice that had pulled the robbery with Mrs. Tillery’s son, and that’s how he has had the money to buy a new guitar and a bus ticket to Chicago. Canewell hands Floyd the money and exits.

At that moment, Hedley returns home, drunk. He sees Floyd in the yard with a wad of cash and stops and rubs his eyes. He begins to laugh with joy. In his drunken state, he thinks Floyd is Buddy Bolden who has come to give him the money. He says to Floyd, “You come, Buddy. Oh how I wait for you.”
Floyd tells Hedley to go away—he’s not playing any game now. Hedley tries to take the money from Floyd and Floyd pushes him down on the ground. Hedley gets up and goes into the cellar. He returns with the machete that Joe Roberts gave him and in a swift blow strikes Floyd in the throat and severs his windpipe.

The scene returns to the aftermath of Floyd’s funeral. Louise, Canewell, Red Carter, and Hedley are in the yard. Ruby and Red Carter go to get a beer; Louise and Vera go in the house to fix some dinner. Hedley and Canewell are left alone together in the yard. Canewell is the only one who suspects what really happened to Floyd. To confirm his suspicion, he sings to Hedley the song about Buddy Bolden and the money. “What he give you?” he asks Hedley. Hedley opens up his hand and shows him the wad of bills that Canewell had dug up the night before.

(From the Huntington’s Seven Guitars Curriculum Guide)
Fences
Setting: 1957
Written: 1983
Huntington Production: 2009

Characters

- **TROY MAXON**: The protagonist of Fences, Troy is a working class African-American man who lives with his wife Rose and their son Corey and. He works for the Sanitation Department as a trash collector. He is devoted to providing for his family and guaranteeing that his sons have better lives than he did. Having been a great player baseball play in the Negro leagues, Troy was too old to join the Major leagues when they were finally integrated. It’s this experience, and several others from his past that color his outlook on life and his relationship with his sons.

- **ROSE**: Rose is Troy’s second wife who he married upon his release from prison. She is the mother of his youngest son, Corey. She is a 43-year-old housewife who makes time for her Church regularly. The compassionate matriarch of the play, Rose is a fair judge of character who hopes for a better future for herself, her husband, and her son. She has high hopes for Corey, and keeps on looking forward instead of romantically clinging to the past like her husband. She personifies the qualities of love, patience, and forgiveness—and has plenty of opportunities to exhibit all three.

- **BONO**: Having served time together in prison, Troy and Bono became very close and remain best friends well out of their time spent in jail. Having seen Troy through thick and thin, Bono often serves as the voice of reason and perspective for Troy—especially when it comes to Rose Maxon. Despite having been friends with him for over thirty years, Bono’s concern for Troy’s marriage trumps his loyalty to the friendship. Bono himself is a devoted husband to his wife Lucille.

- **GABRIEL**: Gabriel is Troy’s brother who suffered a head injury during World War II. Part of the effect is his nonsensical ramblings that actually touch on quite a bit of truth. He is sometimes convinced that he is the Angel Gabriel waiting for St. Peter to open the gates of Heaven. He is the wise fool, often knowing more about those people surrounding him than they know about themselves. Gabriel receives money from the government because of his injury, some of which Troy used to pay for the house where the Play takes place.

Synopsis
Act I: The play begins on a Friday, Troy and Bono’s payday. Troy and Bono go to Troy’s house for their weekly ritual of drinking and talking. Troy has asked Mr. Rand, their boss, why the black employees aren’t allowed to drive the garbage trucks, only to life the garbage. Bono thinks Troy is cheating on his wife, Rose. Troy and Rose’s son, Cory, has been recruited by a college football team. Troy played baseball in the Negro Leagues but never got a chance to pay in the Major Leagues because he got too old to play just as the Majors began accepting black players. Troy tells a story about his struggle with death in July of 1943. Lyons shows up at the house to say hello, but Troy says he’s only there because he knows it’s Troy’s payday. Lyons then asks Troy for money, which Rose persuades Troy to give him. Rose reminds Troy about the fence she’s asked him to finish building.
Cory and Troy work on the fence. Cory breaks the news to Troy that he has given away his job at the local grocery store, A&P, during the football season. Cory begs Troy to let him play because a coach from North Carolina is coming all the way to Pittsburgh to see Cory play. Troy refuses and orders Cory to get his job back, telling him that the white man won’t let him succeed in sports.

Act I, Scene 4 takes place on a Friday afternoon and mirrors scene 1. Troy has won his case and has been assigned as the first colored garbage truck driver in the city. Bono and Troy remember their fathers and their childhood experiences of leaving home in the south and moving north. Cory comes home enraged after finding out that Troy told the football coach that Cory is not allowed to play on the team. Troy warns Cory that his insubordination is “strike one” against him.

Act II: Troy bails his brother, Gabriel, out of jail. Bono and Troy work on the fence. Bono explains to Troy and Cory that Rose wants the fence because she loves her family and wants to keep her loved ones close. Troy admits to Bono that he is having an affair with a woman named Alberta. Bono bets Troy that if he finishes building the fence for Rose, Bono will buy his wife, Lucille, the refrigerator he has been promising her for a long time. Troy tells Rose about a hearing in three weeks to determine whether or not Gabriel should be recommitted to an asylum. Troy confesses to Rose that he has been having an affair. Rose accuses Troy of taking and not giving. Troy vehemently disagrees and grabs Rose’s arm angrily. Cory enters the scene and grabs Troy from behind to protect his mother. They fight and Troy wins. Troy calls “strike two” on Cory.

Six months later, Troy says he is going over to the hospital to see Alberta, who went into labor early. Rose tells Troy that Gabriel has been taken away to the asylum because Troy signed him away. Troy says he never signed any such papers. It may be that he was unable to read them. Rose receives a call and tells Troy before he’s able to leave that Alberta had a baby girl but died during childbirth. Alone, Troy challenges death to come and get him. Troy brings home his baby, Raynell, and begs Rose to help him raise her. Rose agrees to take in Raynell as her own child, but refuses to be dutiful as Troy’s wife.

On Troy’s payday, Bono shows up unexpectedly after the two have not seen each other for a while. Troy and Bono acknowledge how each man made good on his bet about the fence and the refrigerator, but there is a new estrangement between them. Cory comes home and is rude to Troy, citing Troy’s treatment of Rose as justification. Troy insists that Cory leave the house and provide for himself. Cory points out that the house and property that Troy is throwing him out of should actually be owned by Gabriel, whose government checks covered most of the mortgage payments. Troy physically attacks Cory and kicks him out of the house for good. Cory leaves. Troy swings the baseball bat in the air, once again challenging death.

Eight years later, Raynell plays in her newly planted garden. Troy has died from a heart attack. Cory returns home from the Marines after years away. Raynell does not remember Cory. Cory tells Rose he will not attend the funeral because he needs to say no to his father for once in his life. Rose teaches Cory that not attending Troy’s funeral does not make Cory a man. Raynell and Cory bond by singing one of Troy’s father’s blues songs. Rose’s words and singing with
Raynell seems to persuade Cory to attend the funeral after all. Gabriel turns up, released (or perhaps escaped) from the mental hospital and blows his trumpet so that St. Peter will open the gates and let Troy in, but no sound comes out. He tries again but the trumpet will not play. Disappointed, hurt, and desperate, Gabriel begins to dance. He lets out a cry and the Heavens open wide. He says, “That’s the way that go,” and the play ends.

(Adapted from sparknotes.com)
Two Trains Running
Setting: 1969
Written: 1990
Huntington Production: 1990

Characters
- **MEMPHIS**: Memphis Lee is a self-made man whose values of hard work, diligence, persistence and honesty have been consistently challenged by the circumstances of his life. His greatest asset is his impeccable logic. He owns a restaurant that the city intends to demolish. He is determined to negotiate a fair price out of the demolition. He is confident in playing the White man’s game as long as he knows the rules. With little patience for those who preach the “black is beautiful” mantra—he claims it sounds as if those black people are trying to convince themselves.
- **STERLING**: A young man of thirty, he appears at times to be unbalanced, but it is a combination of his unorthodox logic and straightforward manner that makes him appear so. Only recently released from the penitentiary after serving some time for robbing a bank, Sterling is new to the scene of Two Trains Running. He is in search of work, and when he finds Memphis Lee’s restaurant and the group that hangs there it gives him the chance to seek advice from a colorful group of characters.
- **WOLF**: He is a Numbers Runner—someone who carries the money and betting slips between the betting parlors and the headquarters or “Numbers Bank.” He enjoys the notoriety and popularity that comes with this work. While he manages to keep money in his pocket and a decent pair of shoes on his feet, his inability to find secure female companionship is the single failure that marks his life.
- **HOLLOWAY**: A retired house-painter, who, in his retirement, has become a self-made philosopher of sorts. He is a man who all his life has voiced his outrage at injustice with little effect. His belief in the supernatural has enabled him to accept his inability to effect change and continue to pursue life with zest and vigor. He is equally enraged by white men who exploit black men, and any black men who try to fight back. If anyone happens to come to him with a problem, he will send them on over to the oldest woman in town—an Aunt Ester—to sort it out.
- **WEST**: A widower in his early sixties, he is the owner of the wealthiest business on the block. West runs the funeral parlor across the street from the restaurant. His wife’s death has allowed his love of money to overshadow the other possibilities of life. It is his practical view of death that has earned him the title of perhaps the sharpest social observer in the play.

Synopsis:
Act I Scene 1: The play opens in a small restaurant across the street from West’s Funeral Home and Lutz’s Meat Market. Wolf finishes up a phone call on which he takes down some one’s numbers bet and the restaurant owner, Memphis, scolds him for tying up the phone line. Memphis is waiting for a call from his lawyer. Risa, a waitress, states that she does not understand why people play the numbers and Wolf compares it to putting money in a bank, except that “this way you might take out more than you put in.” Wolf asks Memphis if he’s heard from his “old lady” and Memphis reports that she’s up at her sister’s house but hasn’t
spoken to him for two months. He says that she left him saying she was tired, but Memphis can’t understand how that could be so when all she had to do was take care of the house and kids.

Holloway comes in, describing the long line of people across the street, waiting to get in to the funeral of a man called Prophet Samuel. West, the owner of the funeral home, is a rich man but there are rumors he got that way through unethical behavior. He has been trying to buy the building housing Memphis’s restaurant for years. But on Tuesday, Memphis will be going downtown to find out how much the city will pay him when they demolish it. Memphis laments the fact that businesses have been pushed out of the neighborhood. It seems as though West has been getting richer while everyone else has been getting poorer. Memphis is skeptical that the city will give him a good price. Holloway says the last person West buried that he cared about was his own wife. Everyone else is just a dead body to him.

Hambone enters. He is a man in a deteriorated mental state. He only says “He gonna give me my ham” and “I want my ham.” Risa fixes him some lunch and gives him a jacket to keep warm. She does not plan to go see Prophet Samuel because it will be too hard for her.

Sterling enters, recently released from prison. He is disdained to find out that the only food currently available in the restaurant is beans and cornbread. He has been eating beans for five years in prison and is looking for a real, home cooked meal. He remembers Risa from their youth when he was friends with her brother, Rodney. Before their conversation gets too far, Memphis orders Risa back into the kitchen to clean and fry some chicken. Sterling asks the other men if they know where he can get a job. He tried the steel mill but the mill said he had to join the union before he could work but the union said he had to be working before he could join. Holloway suggests he try a nearby junkyard. Sterling tries to sell Wolf a watch for three dollars.

Sterling says he thinks he was born with bad luck. He thinks that maybe if he goes to see Prophet Samuel his luck will change. He’s heard of others rubbing Prophet Samuel’s head and then finding money a short time later. Holloway thinks the smartest thing is to go see Aunt Ester, who can help anyone who is having problems. She is 322 years old. Memphis thinks it makes more sense to go try to rub Prophet Samuel’s head for good luck than to go see Aunt Ester. But Holloway insists that the peace and positive energy you can get from Aunt Ester is better than simply getting rich. Sterling goes off to see her.

Scene 2: Memphis and Wolf watch Hambone through the window. He is asking Lutz, a white man who once promised to give him a ham for painting a fence, for his ham. Holloway says that Hambone is not going to let Lutz forget about the ham because “he ain’t willing to accept whatever the white man throw at him.” Memphis recounts being run off his own farm in the South before coming to Pittsburgh and his determination to take it back some day.

The men discuss the scars on Risa’s legs. She cut them up to make them ugly and get men to leave her alone. She wants people to pay attention to her personality, not her body. She was examined at a psychiatric hospital once but the doctors could not find anything wrong with her. They have noticed Sterling looking at her. Memphis says he heard that Sterling was in prison for robbing a bank. He got caught because he went out and spent the money ten minutes later. He
was recently laid off from a construction job for being lazy. Holloway rejects this notion, saying that white people only got what they have by climbing on the backs of blacks who did all the work for hundreds of years.

West comes in to the restaurant for coffee. He dispels rumors that Prophet Samuel’s casket is full of rings and hundred dollar bills. He asks Memphis when he’s going downtown. Memphis will go tomorrow and is hoping to get $25,000 for his building. West thinks this is foolish and that he’ll get $12,000 at the most. He reiterates that he is willing to buy the building from Memphis for $15,000, which Memphis refuses. West leaves.

Sterling returns, having been turned away from Aunt Ester’s by a man who claims she is sick. Sterling invites Memphis, Holloway, and Risa to a rally celebrating Malcolm X’s birthday. Memphis complains that Black Power is a misguided philosophy. He says the only power that whites understand comes with a gun and that those who say “black is beautiful” sound like they are trying to convince themselves.

Hambone comes in and Risa pours him some coffee. She and Memphis argue about whether Hambone should be allowed to stay. Memphis says he is sick of hearing Hambone and sends him back outside to bother Lutz.

Scene 3: Sterling eats alone in the restaurant. He tells Risa he tried to talk to Hambone. Risa says that Hambone understands everything that goes on around him, but people don’t take the time to understand him. Sterling admits to Risa that he was in prison for robbing a bank. He asks her about her scars and she does not say much, other than that it did not hurt to cut herself. He asks her again to come to the Malcolm X rally with him but she says she stays “away from all that kind of stuff.” He says that if he doesn’t find a job soon he’ll have to make money playing the numbers. Risa says she doesn’t understand why people throw money away like that, but if he’s going to play, he should play 781.

Holloway enters and Sterling asks him which fence Hambone painted for Lutz. When Holloway tells him, Sterling says Lutz should have given him two hams for a job that big. Sterling laments the fact that the world is as crazy as it is and that it is so difficult to get ahead. He says that if he can’t find a job he may need to find a gun. Wolf says that it is impossible to avoid ending up in jail and Sterling says that if he’s going to go, it might as well be for something. Wolf tells a story about a man currently in jail who was arrested for stealing a dress to bury his deceased wife in. The group all pitch in a dollar or two to contribute to the collection towards helping bail the man out of jail.

After Wolf leaves, Sterling sits one-on-one with Hambone. He has been working on getting him to say something else and gets him to say “black is beautiful.” Memphis returns, angry that the city will only give him $15,000 for his building. He fired his lawyer, which caused the proceedings to be postponed. Memphis is determined that the city will meet his price. He has been through a lot of hardship and has nothing to lose.
Act II, Scene 1: Sterling arrives at the restaurant with flowers for Risa. They are stolen from the funeral home across the street. Hambone enters and appears to have reverted back to saying just his old phrases. Sterling coaxes him to say “united we stand, divided we fall.”

Wolf enters with a brown paper bag and sells Sterling its contents (presumably a gun) for $20. Memphis derides Wolf for running numbers out of his restaurant. West enters and reports that someone has busted out his window. He has hired a man named Mason to sit by the gaping hole with a shotgun to protect the funeral home. West makes a new offer to buy Memphis’s building—he will pay $20,000 ($15,000 up front and $5,000 more when he sells the building to the city himself. Memphis recounts the story of how he was run off of his farm in Jackson, MS and his intent to go back and reclaim it some day.

Sterling tries to convince West to give him a job as a hearse driver or washing the cars. West declines. Sterling has just been to try to see Aunt Ester again but was turned away because she was sleeping. West says that when he went to see Aunt Ester, he asked if his wife was in heaven. She told him to throw $20 in the river and then come back and see her. But he refused to “waste” his money like that. Holloway went to see her once because he wanted to kill his grandfather. He was instructed to throw $20 in the river every week for a month but it got the desire to go away. Sterling says he would throw $20 in the river if it would help him get a job.

Scene 2: Holloway enters, asking if anyone has seen Hambone. Lutz has been asking about him, but no one seems to know where he is. Wolf takes Holloway’s numbers bet on 781, the number Sterling has been playing. Wolf warns that Sterling will not like it and tells Holloway that he needs to explain to Sterling that it’s not Wolf’s fault, but Holloway refuses to tell Sterling anything. Wolf exits to get his pistol from the pawnshop.

Holloway and Memphis discuss the reasons why people play the numbers. Memphis sees the flyer for the Malcolm X rally on the wall and tears it down, saying he “ain’t putting no sanction on nothing like that.” He believes that a rally should “spur you into action” but that those who participate in these rallies do nothing but plan for the next one. They do not know how to take any action. Memphis advises Risa to stay away from Sterling. Holloway agrees that Sterling is bad news, especially because he is now carrying a gun.

Sterling enters, looking for Wolf and having come from watching Prophet Samuel’s funeral. Risa claims that “Prophet Samuel wasn’t no preacher. He was a prophet like they have in the Bible. God sent him to help the colored people get justice…Whatever Prophet Samuel prophesied, it come true.” She thinks that many of those who turned out for the funeral were just hypocrites who did not go to see him when he was alive. Sterling says he thinks the end of the world is coming soon and Risa says that Prophet Samuel preached that God would send a sign when the end times were near. Memphis thinks it is foolish to worry about the end of the world because there’s nothing you can do about it. Memphis is continuing his fight to get $25,000 for his building. He confirms Aunt Ester’s address with Holloway, planning to go there for her help.

Scene 3: Later that day, the news has come that Hambone is dead. West has gone down to the morgue to get the body. West enters the restaurant and Risa suggests that he lay Hambone out in a nice casket. West says he wouldn’t look right in a fancy one and will be putting him in a
pauper’s casket because of the price difference. Sterling enters, looking for Wolf, who he claims owes him $1200. He says that when he has his money, he will take Risa to Vegas where they will get married and buy a ranch. Risa is not interested in playing along and resumes hassling West to put Hambone in a better casket.

Wolf enters and Sterling asks for his money. Wolf says he will only get $600 because the odds were cut by half. Sterling takes the $600 and leaves, saying he is going to go give it back the Alberts, who run the game.

Scene 4: Sterling enters the restaurant and asks Risa if she wants to go to the rally. He tells her he confronted Old Man Albert and got his original $2 bet back. On his way back, he finally got in to see Aunt Ester who gave him some advice and told him to throw $20 in the river, which he did. He again tells Risa that he wants to be with her. “I figure me and you get us a nice little old place…Ain’t you tired of sleeping by yourself? I am. You ain’t got to take care of you…let me do that.” He asks Risa why she scarred her legs and Risa responds that she wanted to make them ugly. He tells her that she should take male attention as a compliment and that it says a lot that he continues to go after her even when she’s turned him down so many times. Risa says she won’t get tied up with him because he’s likely to go back to the penitentiary. She doesn’t want to be with some one she has to worry about like that. But moments later, there is an Aretha Franklin song playing on the jukebox. Sterling and Risa dance together and kiss.

Scene 5: The day of Hambone’s funeral. Wolf went over to see him and reports that West has laid him out nicely. At the rally the night before, he saw Risa and Sterling. He remarks on how peaceful the rally was. However, a fire that is still burning destroyed a drugstore. Holloway claims the owner burned it down himself to collect the insurance.

West enters and says he plans to bury Hambone the next day. Memphis enters, drunk. He followed Aunt Ester’s instructions to tie his $20 to a rock and throw it in the river before heading down to the courthouse. When he got there, the city offered him $35,000 for his building. As Memphis makes plans for a new restaurant, there is a sound of breaking glass and a burglar alarm. Sterling enters, bleeding from his face and hands, carrying a large ham. “Say Mr. West,” he says. “That’s for Hambone’s casket.”
Jitney
Setting: 1977
Written: 1979
Huntington Production: 1998

Characters

- **BECKER**: A well-respected man who runs the jitney station. Sixties.
- **DOUB**: A longtime jitney driver and Korean War veteran.
- **RENA**: Youngblood’s girlfriend and mother of their young son.
- **TURNBO**: A jitney driver who is always interested in the business of others.
- **BOOSTER**: Becker’s son, recently released from prison. Early forties.
- **SHEALY**: A numbers taker who often uses the jitney station as his base.
- **YOUNGBLOOD**: A jitney driver and Vietnam veteran in his mid to late twenties.

Synopsis

Act I, Scene 1: *Jitney* is set in a gypsy cab station in the Hill District of Pittsburgh in the fall of 1977. As the play begins, Youngblood, a Vietnam War veteran, and Turnbo, another jitney driver, are playing checkers. Fielding, a driver who is a drunk, asks the other men for four dollars, but they refuse to give it to him. Fielding answers the phone and tells the customer who is calling that it will cost her four dollars for him to drive her where she wants to go. Doub enters, and when Fielding asks him for some money, Doub gives it to him, but tells him to repay it after he makes his next trip.

Shealy, the “numbers man,” enters, and denies to Doub and Youngblood that his lottery was responsible for “Big Ben” down the street buying a new car. He tells a story about a woman named Rosie who rejected him and cursed him so that he would see her face whenever he was with another woman. He says that he will marry the first woman he sleeps with who doesn’t cause him to see Rosie’s face. Shealy asks if anyone has seen Becker, the jitney station boss, and remarks that Becker’s son will be released from prison next month.

Philmore, who is drunk, enters, and asks Shealy for a ride home. Shealy tells him that he doesn’t have a car; when Youngblood reenters, Philmore gives him four dollars for the ride. Turnbo comes back in, and tells Shealy about a trip he made that morning hauling a television for a youth who stole it from his own grandmother. Becker enters, and gives his wife’s numbers bet to Shealy, who asks Becker if he can help his nephew get a job at a nearby steel mill. Becker says that he will see what he can do, and Shealy exits. Turnbo says that Shealy’s nephew is a “thug,” and Becker criticizes him for “always gossiping and running off at the mouth.”

Youngblood enters and asks Doub if Peaches, his girlfriend’s sister, has come by; he says to tell her that he will be next door if she arrives. Turnbo asks Youngblood to bring him back a cup of coffee, but Youngblood refuses. Turnbo tells Doub that he thinks Youngblood has been “messing around” with Peaches, and Doub tells Turnbo that he should stay out of other people’s business. Turnbo replies that he should stay out of other people’s business. Turnbo replies that he has the right to express his opinions, but Doub says that he should keep them to himself. Youngblood speaks to Peaches on the phone, and tells her he will pick her up later to go to a
furniture store. He then calls a Mr. Harper about a house he is buying, and learns that he does not have enough money to pay for the title search. After he counts his money and sees that he is short, he gets an idea about how to make up the difference.

Act I, Scene 2: Youngblood comes into the jitney station and asks Turnbo for the 30 cents he owes him. Turnbo refuses to give the money to him, saying that he should not have to repay it because he never drank the coffee. Becker orders Turnbo to give Youngblood the money, and Turnbo throws it on the floor. Youngblood refuses to pick it up, and Turnbo suddenly reaches for it. When the phone rings, the two men argue about who has the next trip, and Becker says that it belongs to Youngblood. When Youngblood exits, Turnbo says that Youngblood doesn’t have good sense. Becker exits after telling Turnbo that his car needs to be washed.

The phone rings and Turnbo answers it. He tells Peaches that he will give Youngblood the message she leaves with him. Rena, Youngblood’s girlfriend, then enters, and asks where Youngblood has gone. Turnbo invites her to wait for his return, and tells her that she would be better off with “an older man who got some sense and know how to treat a woman.” He mentions that he has seen Youngblood with her sister, Peaches. Rena denies that Youngblood has been chasing other women, and asks Turnbo to give him the message that she came by to see him.

Youngblood now enters, and Rena tells him that they need to talk. She asks him what happened to the 80 dollars that she had in a drawer at their apartment, which was supposed to be for groceries. Youngblood says he needed the money to pay a debt, and promises to replace it. Rena says that she would never have touched the grocery money because it is needed to buy food for their son, Jesse. Youngblood replies that he is only trying to do what is right, but Rena says that his efforts aren’t enough. She also wants to know why he has been out half the night lately. She tells him that she doesn’t believe that he has been working for the UPS, because she never sees any of his income. Youngblood tells her that he had to pay a debt, and that she should be patient with him. Rena says that she also knows something is going on between him and Peaches, and before she exits, tells him to not bother coming home that night.

Becker and Doub enter, and Becker tells him that the city plans to tear down the entire block where the station is located. Doub becomes upset that Becker hasn’t mentioned anything before about this problem, because all of the drivers depend on the station to provide their income. Becker says that he hopes they can find a new place, but that he is tired of driving jitneys and running the station. Doub says that Becker has lost control of the men, and Becker replies that he does the best he can with them. Turnbo enters and head the news about the station. He asks Becker what he is planning to do, and Doub says that the men should have a meeting to talk about their futures. The phone rings, and Becker’s wife, Lucille, tells him that his son, Booster, is getting out of jail the next day, a month earlier than he had been expected to be released.

Act I, Scene 3: Early the next day, Youngblood is sitting in a chair calculating the projected mortgage payments on his new house. Turnbo enters and asks him if he has heard the news about Becker’s son, and Youngblood says he hasn’t even known that Becker had a son. Turnbo tells Youngblood that Booster has been in jail for 20 years following a murder conviction, and that Becker’s wife died soon after Booster was sentenced. Turnbo explains that a white woman
Booster was meeting regularly accused Booster of raping her when their relationship was discovered by the woman’s father, and that Booster shot and killed her. Youngblood says that her fate “served her right for lying,” but Turnbo counters that Booster had no right to kill the girl. He asks if Youngblood’s girlfriend has a right to kill him because he lies to her and runs around with her sister.

Angered by Turnbo’s remarks, Youngblood attacks the older man and tells him to stay out of his business. He knocks Turnbo to the ground and bloodies his mouth. Becker enters and separates the mean. The men continue fighting and insulting each other, and Turnbo soon goes to get a gun, which he aims at Youngblood. Becker convinces Turnbo to put the gun away, and escorts Turnbo out of the room. After Becker reenters, he tells Youngblood to stay away from Turnbo. Youngblood leaves to take a trip to the bus station, although he is reluctant because he does not want to have to carry suitcases in his car. Turnbo comes back in and tells Becker to “straighten up that young fool.” Fielding enters and asks him what happened. Fielding begins to drink from a bottle, and Becker tells him that he is fired because he isn’t allowed to drink when he is driving jitneys. Fielding refuses to leave, and Becker tells Turnbo to take the next trip. Turnbo says that he doesn’t want to get in the middle of an argument; Becker again tells Fielding to leave and takes the trip himself.

Act I, Scene 4: As the scene begins, Fielding and Turnbo are speaking with Booster, who has just been released from prison. Fielding tells a story about a woman he hasn’t seen in 22 years, but whom he says still loves him. Becker enters and orders Fielding again to leave, but when Fielding asks him to let him work the two weeks before the station is closed for good, Becker relents and tells him to come in sober the next day.

Fielding and Turnbo exit, and Becker and his son are left alone. Becker interrupts his son’s first reminiscences by asking him what he plans to do with his life now that he has ruined it. Booster replied that he has paid his debt to society, and doesn’t want to be criticized by his father. He says that he turned down parole five years earlier because he didn’t want anyone to be empowered to look after him, including Becker; but he says that he doesn’t hold a grudge against his father for not communicating with him for so many years. Becker angrily replies that he constantly has to worry about people talking about him behind his back. He says that although Booster has nothing, at least he can respect himself. Booster tries to justify his actions by saying that he had to kill the girl for accusing him of rape, but Becker says that his son is wrong to think that, because he would have helped him to fight her lie.

Becker tells his son that he had long hoped Booster would follow the examples he set. Booster says that he didn’t want to, because in his view his father was always accepting whatever happened to him instead of fighting for his rights. Becker responds that he swallowed his pride because he had the responsibility of a family, and that he hoped his son would know better than to commit a crime. Becker becomes more and more upset, and says that all that his son turned out to be was a murderer. He accuses him of also being responsible for his wife’s death, because she became sick the day Booster was sentenced to jail, and died soon after. The first act ends with Becker telling his son that he no longer wants to have anything to do with him. As the phone rings in the jitney station, Booster remains alone on stage looking down at the floor. The lights go black.
Act II, Scene 1: The next day, Turnbo and Doub are arguing about who is prettier, Sarah Vaughn or Lena Horne. Doub says that he refuses to talk about women and money, because those subjects are what get most people killed. Turnbo exits as Youngblood enters. Youngblood asks Doub about news of the station’s closing, and accuses “the white man” of always picking the worst possible time to do something that will deprive him of an income. Doub tells him not to think that everyone is against him. He suggests that Youngblood should go to school under the GI Bill, and says that he is too young to depend on driving jitneys for his income. Youngblood replies that he is worried about the present, because he needs money for furniture and a mortgage, and adds that he refuses to work in the steel mills. Doub says that he is not worried about his own future because he only has himself to take care of and has a railroad pension.

Fielding comes in and asks Youngblood about his altercation with Turnbo. Although Youngblood says that he and Turnbo have straightened things out, Doub says that Turnbo is crazy and has the potential to kill someone some day. Turnbo enters, interrupting their conversation, and the men continue to talk about their future prospects. Booster enters and finding his father not present, asks the men to tell Becker that he came by to see him.

Youngblood and Rena enter, separately, and Rena inquires where he spent the night. He asks Rena how she could believe rumors about him and Peaches; Rena says that she never thought that they were having an affair. Youngblood reveals that he had hoped to surprise Rena with a new house, and Rena becomes angry that he would make such a big decision without consulting her. She says that although his heart was in the right place, he should have considered her needs more than he did. Youngblood replies that she should have noticed how much he has changed since they first met, and says all he wants to do is provide for her and their son. They resolve to confide in each other more and to live together happily in their new house.

Becker enters and Youngblood gives him a message to return a call from Mr. Glucker at the J&L steel mill. Becker calls Glucker and agrees to work a fill-in shift. He then asks Glucker if he can help find Shealy’s nephew a job. He congratulates Youngblood and Rena on their new house, and tells Youngblood that all the men should meet later that day to discuss what they will do after the station closes. Youngblood and Rena exit, and Booster enters. Booster tells his father that he has been thinking about what he said, but Becker ignores him. Becker tries to walk about, but Booster stops him, telling him that they need to have another conversation. He says that he killed the girl because he wanted “to deal with the world in ways that you wanted to and couldn’t or didn’t or wished you had,” and that he had hoped Becker would have been proud of him. Booster adds that he never would have committed the murder if he expected it would kill his mother, and that he only wanted to prove he was a man. He asks Becker why he never came to the courtroom to help his wife bear the burden of her son’s trial, and says that his father needs to share part of the blame for her death. Becker does not have an answer, and exits.

Fielding comes in, bottle in hand, and tells Booster about his career years before as a tailor. He adds that he knows drinking is against Becker’s rules, and Booster replies that his father’s rules are what landed him in jail. Booster exits and Philmore enters, sober. He asks Fielding to give
him a ride to his mother’s house, because his wife has thrown him out. Although Philmore is a dollar short of the fare, Fielding agrees to drive him.

Act II, Scene 2: The jitney drivers are meeting to discuss what they will do when the station closes. Becker says that they can try to find a new location, but that he wants to fight the city’s decision to board up and then tear down their building. He says that he will get a lawyer to file a petition, and the men agree that this is a good idea. Becker also tells the drivers that they need to keep their cars clean and charge consistent rates, and that everyone should provide the customers with the services they want. He says that he is going over to the mill to work a night shift, but that they all need to work together to fight the city.

Act II, Scene 3: The following day, the drivers are in the jitney station talking about Becker, who has been killed suddenly in an accident while working at the mill. The men take up a collection for flowers, and wonder if Booster knows about his father’s death. Booster comes in, excited that he has won money by betting on a winning number; he becomes confused when he sees everyone looking at him. Doub finally tells Booster that Becker is dead, and Booster becomes hysterical, punching Doub. The other men restrain Booster and wrestle him to the floor as the scene ends.

Act II, Scene 4: Three days later, the men have just come back from Becker’s funeral. Doub asks Youngblood when he is moving, and the men talk about his new house. Fielding and Turnbo continue to bicker, and Doub tells them to stop. Shealy asks if the men will continue to fight the city, and Doub says that their situation will be much more difficult without Becker to lead the. Youngblood says that he will remain with the station if everyone else does, but that otherwise he’ll find another job to support his family. Booster enters and thanks Doub for what he has done for his family, and Fielding tells Booster that he should be proud of Becker for having been such a good person. Booster says that his father deserved more out of life than he received, and then says that he is proud to be Becker’s son. As he turns to leave, the jitney station’s telephone rings, and Booster crosses toward it. He answers the phone, as his father had done so many times before, with the words “car service.” The lights go black.

(From the Huntington’s Jitney Curriculum Guide)
King Hedley II
Setting: 1985
Written: 1999
Huntington Production: 2000

Characters

- KING HEDLEY II: thirty-six years old, he is the spiritual son of King Hedley from Seven Guitars. He is engaged in life and death struggles with a scar to prove it. The slash down the left side of his face has left him with a glass eye. He looks like a bogeyman at the crossroads. He spent seven years in prison and strives to live by his own moral code.

- RUBY: King’s mother and blues singer, sixty-one.

- TONYA: King’s girlfriend who is pregnant and wants to have an abortion because she does not want to bring a baby into this corrupt, crazy world, thirty-five.

- ELMORE: Sixty-six years old and an old hustler who has been carrying a torch for Ruby for more than 30 years. He exudes an air of elegance and confidence born of his many years wrestling with life. He knows the secret of King's true patrimony.

- STOOL PIGEON: A sixty-five year old harmonica player also seen in Seven Guitars. He is now a newspaper-collecting history carrier.

Synopsis

The play opens with thirty-six year-old King Hedley II entering the yard of the house he is sharing with his mother, Ruby, and his wife, Tonya. He takes a packet of seeds from his pocket and begins to plant them in the yard. Ruby enters, ascertains his intention to grow flowers for Tonya, and tells him that the ground is too rocky and the soil too poor to sustain life. King adamantly asserts that “dirt is dirt! A seed supposed to grow in dirt!” Ruby, changing the subject, asks him what he and his friend Mister have been doing and soon accuses him of stealing the refrigerators he says the two men are selling. King denies stealing and states simply that he doesn’t know where the man who hired him received the appliances he is providing for King and Mister to sell. Ruby worries that the police will soon arrest her son, and declares that “they know everything.” King refutes her statement with examples of unsolved crimes in the neighborhood. When King presses her on her plans to move, Ruby responds that she’s waiting for insurance money due her following the death of Louise, her recently deceased Aunt, who raised King.

Mister stops by on his way to work with news about a black cat that has apparently been staking out a hole in a wall for two solid days. King replies that the cat belongs to the neighborhood fortune teller, Aunt Ester. After suffering another of Ruby’s warnings about their illegal activities, King tells Mister of his intention to get Tonya’s portrait taken at Sears for the anniversary. Mister replies with a remembrance of having his mug shot taken by the police, and that in turn reminds him of a dream in which he had a halo around his head and therefore was respected by everyone. Ruby assures Mister that he certainly has no halo around his head in reality and warns that believing in such things will land him in Mayview, a psychiatric hospital. Mister tells King he has heard that Pernell’s cousin is back in town badmouthing King for having killed Pernell and never giving him a chance at life. King murdered Pernell in retribution for his
slicing King’s face open with a razor, from which King received a vicious scar. King dismisses the danger and berates Pernell as stupid, implying that his cousin is stupid, too.

Tonya enters, dressed for her photograph sitting, but complaining that her daughter, Natasha, has taken the red blouse she had intended to wear. Mister compliments her on how nice she looks in the yellow she is now wearing and then remarks how Natasha and her child resemble one another. Frustrated, Tonya says she has sent Natasha to her mother’s, and talks of Natasha’s penchant for quitting things (school, hair dressing school).

Ruby tells Tonya she has received a letter from Elmore, her ex-boyfriend, in which he states that he has changed, that he is “a new man,” and that he is coming to see her. Ruby wishes that Elmore would stay away, proclaiming his inability to change and warning King against gambling with him if he arrives. She says that Elmore brings trouble with him, leaves it, and walks away “smelling sweet.”

Ruby next asks Mister why she hasn’t seen his wife, Deanna, for a while, to which Mister replies that she has left him because she wanted more than he could provide. The conversation turns to refrigerators again and Ruby mentions her desire for a new one. King callously tells her she can have one for two hundred dollars, and when Tonya asks why he won’t give his mother one, he replies that “this is business. If everybody did business that way they’d be broke.” Mister, King, and Tonya leave for their respective destinations.

As Ruby smoothes the dirt over the seeds that King had planted, Stool Pigeon enters from his house next door. Ruby tells him to leave and accuses him of killing Floyd Barton, a blues musician who was murdered in 1948. Stool Pigeon denounces her as a liar by quoting a biblical passage and leaves the yard as Ruby returns to tending the seeds.

Act I, Scene 2: Two days later, Mister enters the yard as King is watering his seeds and tells him that the cat is still in the same place, evidently waiting for the rat she chased into the hole to come out. King directs Mister’s attention to the first sprouts of green coming up from his seeds and inquires as to Mister’s refrigerator sales. Mister complains that selling TVs would be easier and asks King if he can dip into their pot, the stash of money they have put aside toward the purchase of a video business, to buy some furniture. King replies that he also would like to have some money, for rent and phone bills, and especially for baby supplies, as Tonya is pregnant, but insists that they have to leave the money where it is, and keep adding to it, or they will never realize their dream. King brings up the idea that Mister had proposed earlier of burglarizing a local jewelry store, and tells Mister that he’s interested after all.

When Mister gripes about Deanna’s mother threatening him, King tells him that that’s what mothers are supposed to do: look out for their kids. As an example he speaks of a mother of Bryn Mawr Road who has a .9 millimeter gun and is looking for the drive-by killer of her son. King’s thoughts turn to Neesi, his ex-girlfriend, who turned state’s evidence against him. She later died in a traffic accident while King was serving prison time for Pernell’s murder. After King avers that he doesn’t blame Neesi for his incarceration, Stool Pigeon arrives, carrying a bundle of newspapers and attributing a headline describing a house collapsing to an act of God. Responding to King’s inquiry about why he goes around removing the lids from his neighbors’
garbage cans, Stool Pigeon says he does it to allow dogs to get food. Stool Pigeon and Ruby argue over the mass of newspapers cluttering his house. Finally, Stool Pigeon goes into his house, uttering an oft-heard refrain, “I ain’t studying you woman. I don’t want you,” contradicting the past when he did indeed long for Ruby’s love.

King and Ruby are now interrupted by the arrival of Elmore, passing through on his way to Cleveland, looking for a crap game and a place to sleep. Learning that King is selling refrigerators, Elmore sees an opportunity to make some money and negotiates a deal for a percentage of every unit he sells. Elmore then sees Stool Pigeon sitting on his steps. When King greets him as “Stool Pigeon,” the older man reacts strongly, denies the appellation and identifies himself as “Canewell.” After Elmore tells a cautionary tale illustrating the relative value and fleeting nature of money, Stool Pigeon likens him to the Buffalo Soldier who needed to be “a bad motherfucker” in order to survive. He is interrupted as Tonya, visibly upset, storms in. When King learns that Tonya has attempted to obtain an abortion, he voices his anger over the decision, and the two debate the merits of having the child. Tonya argues against King’s ability to live within the law, cites Natasha’s irresponsibility, and proclaims her reluctance to bring another child into a society that doesn’t treat poor black people with respect. Declaring “I ain’t having this baby…and I ain’t got to explain it to nobody,” she runs into the house. As King turns to leave the yard, Ruby stops him and warns him that he’s going to lose Tonya if he isn’t careful.

Act I, Scene 3: The next morning, Ruby and Elmore are talking about their shared past and catching up on each other’s lives apart. Elmore professes that he has always loved Ruby, but says that he couldn’t handle her “fire;” that being with her he was “starting to get trapped in a burning room.” The conversation turns to Leroy, a long-ago boyfriend of Ruby, for whose murder Elmore served jail time. Ruby concedes that she felt guilty for loving Elmore after he killed Leroy, and admits to wishing she had killed Elmore to assuage her guilt. At this, Elmore alludes to a disease that his doctor says is killing him by degrees and then asks Ruby if she has ever told King that Hedley, the man for whom King is named, wasn’t his father. Ruby replies negatively and warns that King would likely kill Elmore if he ever told him that. She goes on to chastise Elmore for walking out on her years ago even after they had gotten a marriage license, and tells him of her mothers death, Louise’s leukemia, King’s incarceration, and how she finally gave up singing with a band. Elmore once again proposes marriage but Ruby rebuffs his advance, instead demanding the present he has said he has brought for her. Elmore goes to get the gift.

Mister stops by looking for King, who has gone to Sears to pick up Tonya’s pictures. Mister and Ruby reminisce briefly about Mister’s father, a drummer named Red Carter, who introduced Ruby to the bandleader with whom she sang in East St. Louis, Walter Kelly.

When Elmore returns with his gift, an inexpensive piece of costume jewelry, Ruby responds delightedly. He promises her a new dress to accompany the necklace and she goes back in the house to fix breakfast, leaving Mister and Elmore alone in the yard. Elmore offers to sell Mister a derringer for seventy-five dollars and, after negotiating and test-firing the gun, parts with it for fifty-five.
King returns. He expresses frustration that, as a black male, it is more difficult to get a decent job and succeed in the system that to steal and get what you need for yourself and your family. Claiming to have no regrets for the events of his life, he describes his rationale for killing Pernell: “The nigger deserve to die. He cut my face. Your blood supposed to stay in your body.” King’s tale of the declaration of the guilty verdict and his subsequent actions reminds Mister of an incident from third grade. King then relates a story about how a teacher labeled him unruly, a term which was to stick with him throughout his school years. He declares his honor and dignity come from within; he was born with them, he says, and he will let nobody take them from him.

Act I, Scene 4: As Ruby and King argue over financial matters, Mister enters with the news that the local conjure woman, Aunt Ester, has died. Ruby borrows twenty dollars from Mister to buy flowers for Aunt Ester and Stool Pigeon enters with yet another stack of newspapers, hollering that God is responsible for Aunt Ester’s death and is getting ready for the second coming of the Messiah. Hearing the commotion, Elmore comes from the house as the two women depart for work and the florist respectively.

Elmore tells King he has a buyer for a refrigerator and, after dickering over the price, pays and tells King to deliver one to Ruby. He has bought it as a gift. After a discussion comparing the merits of different types of guns, Elmore and King each proclaim themselves gunfighters, the type of men who command fear and respect. Elmore rhapsodizes on his unique style and segues into the rules by which a man must live: “You can’t let nobody take nothing from you” and “Push back.” He continues to impart wisdom developed though years of hard living—characterizing honor, describing a man’s need for woman, defining love, and ultimately designating himself as the center of a circle wherein he controls the destiny of all those who enter. King denies his assertion and, outraged that Elmore has inadvertently stepped on his new-flowering seeds, attempts to bury himself in the dirt—replanting himself in hopes of a new beginning.

Act II, Scene 1: Tonya comes out of the house to find Stool Pigeon burying Aunt Ester’s black cat next to King’s flowers and upbraids him for not calling the city to dispose of it. Stool Pigeon explains to an unbelieving Tonya that if he sprinkles some blood on the grave the cat may come back in seven days if she hasn’t used up her nine lives.

King enters with a roll of barbed wire, determined to protect his seeds. Seeing the cat’s crave, he draws a line in the dirt, effectively setting a boundary that he will not allow others to cross. King, demanding to be left along, dismisses Tonya, who goes into the house with Ruby.

Stool Pigeon presents King with a machete, telling him that it is the weapon Hedley, the self-proclaimed “Conquering Lion of Judea,” used to kill Floyd Barton in 1948. As he describes seeing Floyd ascent to heaven carried by angels dressed in black it becomes apparent that this event marked a turning point in Stool Pigeon’s life. He tells King that Ruby pinned the name Stool Pigeon on him for turning on Hedley after Floyd’s murder, and that somehow it stuck, but he calls himself a Truth Sayer. By giving the machete to Hedley’s son, he says, “me and Hedley come full circle…I give it to you and we can close the book on the chapter.” Stool Pigeon expounds on God and, his duty done, goes back into his house.
King unwraps the rusty machete as Mister enters with a pillowcase; “about the only thing” Deanna has left him. King notices Mister’s derringer and the two men, after a brief comparison of the relative “badness” of Billy the Kid and Jesse James, turn to the task of the impending robbery of the jewelry store. The men swagger from the yard, men with a dangerous job to do.

Act II, Scene 2: Stool Pigeon enters the yard from his house carrying a paper bag. He has a bandage above his left eye, owing to an attack by me who have robbed him of sixty-three dollars and burned his newspapers. The paper bag contains ashes of his papers, which he sprinkles over the cat’s grave. As he approaches the grave, King and Mister run into the yard, King clutching the pillowcase holding the robbery money under his coat. The men wait for Stool Pigeon to go home and then count their stolen money. Disappointed in their relatively small take, they briefly argue about why they didn’t force the proprietor to open his safe.

Elmore comes in grumbling about the dearth of serious gamblers in town. He has just won two hundred dollars but complains that “nobody down there got any money.” Mister leaves and Elmore is left alone with King. The two men each relate the stories of the murders they have committed and it becomes clear how these acts of violence have irrevocably changes their lives and their perspectives on honor.

As Elmore sees Ruby enter, he states his intention to take her out to a nightclub, promising first to buy her a new dress, and he goes in to change his clothes. At the same time, Tonya is on her way out to work and King stops her, handing her a thousand dollars. Surmising that King has stolen the money, Tonya refuses to accept it and once again warns him that she doesn’t want her child to grow up not knowing his father because he’s in jail. King lies and tells her he obtained the money legally, “the best way I can.” Disbelieving, Tonya goes off to work.

King, Elmore, and Mister wheel Ruby’s new refrigerator into the yard. Delighted, Ruby inspects the appliance thoroughly as Elmore promises to buy her a new stove and furniture as well. The men leave to make another delivery but promise to carry the refrigerator into the house for Ruby as soon as they can return.

Three hours later, Tonya returns and sees Stool Pigeon ministering over the cat’s grave. He explains that he is making offerings to satisfy God. He tells Tonya that Aunt Ester was taken to the coroner to determine the cause of her longevity, but declares that she died too soon—she was only three hundred and sixty-six years old. After another verbal assault from Ruby, Stool Pigeon places some plastic flowers on the grave and goes back into his house.

Left alone with Tonya, Ruby reveals the nature of her relationship with Hedley and the circumstances of King’s birth. Ruby explains how proud Hedley was to hold King as a baby, believing himself to be the father. She tells Tonya that Hedley, though sick and dying, was the first man she ever met who didn’t want something from her, except for the baby. All he wanted was to be a father, so Ruby kept her pregnancy (by her dead lover Leroy) secret, giving Hedley his last wish. Ruby goes on to enlighten Tonya about her difficulties with men after King was born. Enumerating various affairs and incidents, including her near marriage to Elmore, she explains that she finally got tired of men.
Mister enters with the news that King has been detained by the police for questioning because he was in a local bar when a shooting took place. Mister describes the murder and the victim just as King returns. King describes his interrogation by the police.

Act II, Scene 3: Mister tells Ruby how he got fired from his job as she notices something in his hand. He shows her the derringer and explains how it’s too big to actually be hidden in his hand. When she comments that she needs a gun, citing the battery of a little old woman in the neighborhood, he gives it to her. King returns and complains that his flowers would be bigger had Elmore not stepped on them. Ruby goes in to get him some water for the plants and King tells Mister that the police have apprehended someone for the jewelry store robbery. King explains that he went out to visit Neesi’s grave and in so doing, stumbled across Pernell’s grave and was surprised to learn from the inscription that the man he had killed was a father. His thoughts turn to Pernell and to a time when, as children, Pernell had spilled a carton of milk on a picture of a lion representing Hedley that King had drawn. He recalls getting so mad at Pernell that is caused him to dislike King ever after.

Stool Pigeon enters claiming that the previous night’s strong winders were caused by God. He further states that God had to get Aunt Ester out of the way because He’s planning to visit Pittsburgh with fire. Warning the two men to lock their windows and bar their doors, he hurries into his house as Tonya brings water for King’s seeds. Mister goes off to a record store to get Aretha Franklin’s new album.

King reiterates his desire for Tonya to keep the baby. He reveals his belief that everything should have a chance at life, referring to the flowers, which are growing despite the barren soil and Elmore’s stepping on them. He further indicates at least an understanding that Pernell was not, as he had always believes, entirely to blame for the way in which people perceived King. He states, “Pernell stepped on me and I pulled his life out by the root. What does that make me? It don’t make me a big man.” Tonya says that if she is going to have the baby, King must stop stealing. She is afraid that her child will be fatherless because King will be in jail. When King protests that the world won’t give him a break and replies that he can’t stop living, that he’s just trying to do his job, Tonya retorts that she doesn’t want “everything;” all she wants is King. She states that his job is simply to be around so that the baby will know its daddy. Unable to respond, King turns to tend to his seeds.

Act II, Scene 4: As Mister complains to King about being evicted from his place, Elmore and Ruby enter with the news that they are going to get married. Elmore has gotten her a diamond ring. Tonya arrives in time to hear the news and is elated for Ruby. Ruby presses Elmore to dance with her, and after he acquiesces, they dance a silent waltz around the yard. Stool Pigeon enters, and for the first time in many years, Ruby addresses him by his given name, Canewell. Pleased, he quotes a biblical passage and leaves. Ruby grabs King, attempting to teach him to waltz, but he demurs and Mister steps in for a moment. When he drops out, she continues by herself. In her glory, Ruby alludes to having danced all over the country with Leroy. At the mention of his name, Elmore becomes angered and launches into a long tale, which begins with Leroy cheating him of fifty dollars. Leroy told Elmore that the fifty dollars was included in the fifty percent split of Leroy’s winnings to which the men had previously agreed. When Elmore
later confronted him publicly about the money, Leroy pulled a gun on him and held it right between his eyes, but ultimately did not pull the trigger. That, says Elmore, was Leroy’s mistake—“I’m supposed to be a dead man cause he was supposed to pull the trigger. That’s the first thing you learn about carrying a pistol. When you pull it you better use it.” Feeling lost and humiliated, Elmore pawned his possessions and bought a Greyhound ticket for Natchez, but before departing he went looking for Leroy. Finding him in a barbershop, he drew his gun and killed him. Shaking and crying, he went home, sat down, and fell asleep. Elmore recalls waking the next day and going about his normal business until a chance visual image made him remember the previous day’s events. Ruby then describes the painful experience of identifying Leroy’s body and how her feelings for Elmore changed when she learned that he had been the killer. Elmore presses Ruby to tell the rest of the tale and when she is reluctant to do so, Elmore shocks King with the news that Leroy was King’s father. King turns away and walks about of the yard.

Act II, Scene 5: No one has been able to find King, although Mister feels that he is probably visiting Neesi’s grave again. Mister explains to Tonya and Ruby that Elmore had better get on his way to Cleveland if that’s his plan, or it is likely that King will kill him. He says, “Somebody kill your daddy and that seem like blood for blood to me.” King enters the yard with Hedley’s machete, cleaned and shined, in his hand. He calls for Elmore to come out of the house and when he does, King draws a circle on the ground with the machete saying, “Come on, let’s shoot some crap.” Elmore accepts the challenge; frightened, Ruby and Tonya attempt to stop the two men, but to no avail. King offers four to one on a twenty dollar bet and as Elmore throws his money down, King accuses him of disrespect for telling him about Leroy, then rolls the dice.

King loses the bet. He then places sixty dollars on Elmore’s twenty. When Elmore calls attention to the fact that the bet was four to one, King replies, “How much money you got there? Eighty dollars. That’s how much you supposed to have.” Realizing that King is baiting him with the same ploy that Leroy used on him, Elmore bends to roll the dice again. As he does so, King kicks him knocks him down, pulls his pistol and places it against Elmore’s head. Ruby runs into the house as Tonya screams. Mister urges King to shoot Elmore—“Blood for blood.” King, however, fires the pistol six times into the ground, stating, “There now...you a dead man twice.” As he turns to walk away, an enraged Elmore pulls his pistol, screaming for King to turn around. Ruby rushes from the house with the derringer in her hand imploring Elmore to leave King alone. This causes King to turn and as Ruby tries to shoot around him at Elmore, King grabs her hand and the bullet catches King in the throat. He falls to the ground on the cat’s grave. As Tonya lurches for the house to call 911, Ruby sits down on the ground and begins to sing:

“Red sails in the sunset
Way out on the sea
Oh carry my loved one
Bring him home safely to me.”

Mister walks over to comfort Ruby, and Stool Pigeon, who has observed the action from his porch, begins to rail to the heavens, exhorting God’s angry will on earth. As the lights fade, the sound of a cat’s meow is heard.

(From the Huntington’s King Hedley II Curriculum Guide)
Radio Golf
Setting: 1997
Written: 2005
Huntington Production: 2006

Characters

- **ELDER JOSEPH “OLD JOE” BARLOW:** Recently returned to the Hill District where he was born in 1918. Although ostensibly as harmless as he is homespun, his temperament belies a life checkered by run-ins with the law and a series of wives. He sees and calls things plainly, requires little and seeks only harmony.

- **HARMOND WILKS:** Real-estate developer seeking mayoral candidacy. He grew up a privileged and responsible son of the Hill District and intends to bring the neighborhood back from urban blight through gentrification, while making a fortune in the process. He cares about the city of Pittsburgh, the neighborhood and its people, but is caught between what is politically expedient and what is morally and ethically just.

- **ROOSEVELT HICKS:** Bank vice president and avid golfer, as well as Harmond’s business partner and college roommate. Roosevelt is preoccupied with his financial status and getting green time. He values the end result of a transaction more than the practical or spiritual virtues of a job well done. Had he any time for self-reflection, he might describe himself favorably as a consummate materialist and conspicuous consumer.

- **MAME WILKS:** Harmond’s wife of more than twenty years and a professional public relations representative. She is focused on Harmond’s success, as well as her own, and is confident that she has the proper plan to achieve both. Firm, independent and ambitious, her love of and belief in her husband are tested by his struggle to stay focused and on message.

- **STERLING JOHNSON:** Self-employed contractor and neighborhood handyman who robbed a bank thirty years ago. Sterling and Harmond attended the same parochial school as boys, but the economically disadvantaged Sterling chose in youthful recklessness to rob a bank rather than build one. Now an older, reformed pragmatist, Sterling finds pride in his work and in his independence.

Synopsis:

Act I Scene 1: Harmond Wilks and his wife, Mame, enter his new office in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Harmond sells real estate and plans to run for mayor of Pittsburgh. He and his business partner are planning a large redevelopment project in the Hill District and this will be the construction office. A public relations representative, Mame is immediately turned off by both the general state of the building and the location. “How am I supposed to get the TV trucks to come up to the Hill? They won’t drive up here until there’s been a shooting.” But Harmond is insistent that the symbolism of having his business’s office in the Hill District is vitally important to his mayoral campaign. His business partner, Roosevelt Hicks, enters with an artist’s rendering of their redevelopment project. He and Harmond plan to gentrify the neighborhood with a large complex that will house apartments, markets, coffee shops, and bookstores, and they hope to rename the area Bedford Hills. Among Harmond’s projects is the renaming of the local Model Cities Health Center as the Sarah Degree Health Center, in honor of
the first black registered nurse in the city. Harmond is convinced that the Democratic Party will fall in line behind him as soon as he announces his candidacy and the city will support his company’s projects. Roosevelt is mostly concerned with riding his friend’s coattails.

Harmond and Roosevelt discuss the golf camp Roosevelt is running. He is passionate about getting kids “to know what it feels like to hit a golf ball.” He thinks that when young people try it out, they will discover the same feeling that he did—that of having a chance at life and that all options are open. “You don’t have to hide and crawl under a rock just ‘cause you black.”

Sterling Johnson enters, looking for construction work. He recognizes Harmond Wilks as an old grade school friend. The two men reflect on incidents of the past. Harmond did not serve in Vietnam because he was in school. Sterling did not serve in Vietnam because he was in jail for robbing a bank. Harmond tells Sterling of his plan to revitalize the neighborhood and Sterling rejects it. “How you gonna bring it back?” he asks. “It’s dead…What you mean is you gonna put something else in its place. Say that. But don’t talk about bringing the Hill back. The Hill District’s dead.” Sterling has no resume to show Harmond other than pointing out local examples of his work. He leaves his phone number with Harmond and Roosevelt, who say they can use him and will give him a call.

Harmond and Roosevelt discuss a man who they saw painting a house that is scheduled to be torn down. Roosevelt told him to stop because it’s private property but the man insists on painting it, even though it has been abandoned for twelve years. Roosevelt leaves to go to the bank for his new business cards because he needs them to pass out at the golf course. “Without them cards they’ll think I’m the caddie.”

Scene 2: Elder Joseph Barlow, aka Old Joe, enters the office, saying that he is looking for some Christian people. He needs a lawyer because he has been charged with fraud. Harmond tells him to go to Hill House for help. Old Joe is skeptical of whether an African American like Harmond could become mayor. Harmond insists that times have changed and that his redevelopment of the Hill is going to help propel his candidacy.

Roosevelt enters. He recognizes Old Joe as the man he told to stop painting the abandoned house. Roosevelt and Old Joe argue about whether or not Bedford Hills Redevelopment owns the house, located at 1839 Wylie Avenue. Old Joe claims he owns it and was fixing it up for his daughter, who wants to live there. Old Joe reveals that when the police came, they issued him a misdemeanor summons for vandalism. Harmond calls the police station and has the summons dismissed. Old Joe shows them his deed to the house but Roosevelt has a demolition order that supercedes it. Old Joe leaves.

Roosevelt tells Harmond he’s been invited to play golf with a man named Bernie Smith. Roosevelt is excited about this because “Bernie Smith don’t play golf with just anybody.” He is convinced that he can get something good out of his time with Smith. Roosevelt has his new business cards to reflect his new promotion at work and is optimistic that things are going his way.
Scene 3: In the office, Mame helps Harmond edit the speech he will give to announce his candidacy for mayor. It will be printed in the Post-Gazette and Mame wants to take out the part that mentions a three-year-old incident in which an innocent man was shot by a policeman, who subsequently received a promotion. Harmond is insistent that it should stay in. In the midst of their argument, Old Joe enters and reports that Harmond’s car has been broken into. Harmond heads outside to investigate.

Old Joe tells Mame that he is looking for some Christian people and needs to speak to Harmond, who is his lawyer. When Harmond returns, he says that his golf clubs have been stolen, but nothing else. He laments the loss, having purchased them twelve years prior when he started playing golf. He declines to make an insurance claim or call the police. Instead, he calls the Post-Gazette and tells them to publish his speech in its entirety. Mame exits, disappointed.

Old Joe says that went he went downtown to get his deed, he was told that Harmond had it because he bought the house. The city sold 1839 Wylie Avenue when Old Joe did not pay the back taxes on it. Old Joe says he got the house from his mother, who said they didn’t pay taxes. Harmond tells him that everyone needs to pay taxes and that it is within the city’s rights to seize and sell the abandoned property of people who are delinquent on their taxes. Old Joe questions whether Harmond will be the kind of mayor who puts “the big man on one side and the little man on the other,” and Harmond agrees to look into Old Joe’s case.

Roosevelt enters, bragging about his performance on the golf course. Old Joe takes this as his cue to leave. Roosevelt reveals that Bernie Smith wants to partner with him to buy WBTZ radio for an undervalued price. The current owner will get a tax incentive called a Minority Tax Certificate for selling to them. Harmond says Bernie Smith is using Roosevelt as a black face on the deal and warns that Smith is not to be trusted. But Roosevelt counters that he’s just using an opportunity to get his foot in the door. Even though he doesn’t know anything about radio, he sees a profitable opportunity.

Scene 4: Mame announces that it looks like she will be hired as a PR representative for the governor. There are still a few more interviews but the governor’s office said they are simply formalities. She goes over options for slogans for Harmond’s campaign, then heads out to have designers begin working on poster ideas. Sterling enters, reading Harmond’s speech printed in the newspaper. He wants to check on the status of the construction job he discussed with Harmond and explains that he’s “been going in the back doors all my life ’cause they don’t never let me in the front.” Old Joe enters and he and Sterling talk about old businesses that have been torn down or boarded up and are still empty. Old Joe’s house that he is trying to save is revealed to be Aunt Ester’s house. Old Joe sees Harmond’s flag pin and the two men reflect on those they knew who died under the American flag in the military. Old Joe reveals papers that say Harmond’s father was paying the taxes on the house.

Scene 5: Roosevelt tells Harmond that he has felt Bernie Smith out and that they should be able to bring him on as a partner if the federal money doesn’t come through for the redevelopment project. Harmond is confident that the money will come through. However, he tells Roosevelt that the sale of Old Joe’s house was not legal because it was purchased before it went to auction. This means that Old Joe must be compensated. He has not yet figured out why his own father
was paying the taxes on the house. Roosevelt is unconcerned. He is equally unconcerned with his boss at the bank’s recent dissatisfaction with his job performance.

Sterling enters and demands to be paid for the gallon of paint he used to paint the door of 1839 Wylie Avenue, which has now been marked with a giant X. Harmond pays him but insists that no matter what, they will be tearing the house down, and wonders why Sterling would bother to paint it anyway. Sterling says that Old Joe hired him to do it. He is prepared to defend the house against Harmond and Roosevelt’s insistence on demolishing it. “You the cowboys. I’m the Indians. See who win this war.”

Act II Scene 1: Harmond sits in the construction office, listening to Roosevelt’s new radio show, “Radio Golf.” Sterling enters with a flyer for a paint party he has organized to paint Aunt Ester’s house at 1839 Wylie Avenue. He reflects on how Aunt Ester helped him and many other people and how horrible it would be to tear down her house. He exits briefly and returns with Harmond’s golf clubs. He paid $20 for them and will sell them back to Harmond for $20. Harmond gives him the money for his clubs. Sterling asks him, “You get to be mayor is you gonna be mayor of the black folks or the white folks?” When Harmond says he will be the mayor for everyone, Sterling explains that the white mayor helps the white neighborhoods of Pittsburgh but neglects the black ones. Harmond reasserts that he has a plan to help the city as a whole, not just one group or the other.

Old Joe enters and Harmond gives him a check for $10,000 in compensation for the house. Old Joe doesn’t want it. He’d rather keep his house. Harmond says that regardless of what Old Joe wants, the house will be torn down on Thursday to make way for his company’s redevelopment project. Even if the city had not sold the house, Old Joe would still owe $12,000 in back taxes. Old Joe again refuses to take Harmond’s money but says he can only pay $100 per month towards the taxes and doesn’t know if he’ll live long enough to pay them off completely. He also mentions that he needs a new roof first. Old Joe exits. Sterling points out that in buying back his golf clubs, Harmond is technically guilty of receiving stolen property. He says that taking Old Joe’s house is the same thing.

Scene 2: Roosevelt is fully invested in his work at the radio station and tells Harmond that he quit his job at the bank. Harmond reports that he went to 1839 Wylie Avenue and looked around inside. He was struck by how special and unique the house was. He has come up with a plan to adjust their redevelopment to preserve the house within the new structure. Because they don’t legally own the house they must build around it. Roosevelt rejects the idea and says that the house will be demolished at 10 a.m. on Thursday whether they own it or not. Roosevelt exits.

Harmond calls the demolition company and tells them not to come. Moments later, Old Joe enters and gives Harmond $100. Harmond gives him back the money, telling him they will not be tearing down the house. He shows Old Joe a rendering of the new construction plans. Harmond will transfer the deed to Old Joe, but Old Joe must keep up with the taxes from now on. Harmond discovered that his father’s paying the taxes was a continuation of what his grandfather, Caesar Wilks, started. It is revealed that Old Joe’s mother, Ester Tyler, used to be named Black Mary. Harmond’s grandfather, Caesar, had a sister named Black Mary. The two men discover that they are blood relatives.
Scene 3: Mame and Roosevelt sit in the office, discussing their concern for Harmond. He has been obsessed with talking about his family and wants to move back into the house he grew up in on the Hill. Mame is firmly against the idea. Harmond enters a few moments later. Mame tries to persuade him to postpone the groundbreaking and go away to San Francisco or the Caribbean to relax for a few days. Harmond says he can’t go anywhere until after the campaign and plans to keep the groundbreaking on schedule. But Roosevelt says there have been serious complications from the change in plans. Some of the businesses that are supposed to be part of the new complex are upset at the loss of retail space and parking that resulted from the redesign. The federal money is in jeopardy due to the changes in their construction plans and Roosevelt thinks the challenge of renting the apartment units will be even greater with Aunt Ester’s house at the front of the building.

Harmond is resolute that they cannot tear down the house and believes that anyone who is upset about the changes will calm down in time. In an effort to discredit Old Joe, Roosevelt presents Harmond with Old Joe’s rap sheet. When Harmond dismisses the information, Roosevelt says he has had the demolition rescheduled for Thursday. Harmond says they cannot demolish a building they do not own and will go to the courthouse to file an injunction to stop it from happening. When Roosevelt warns that there could be serious consequences for Harmond’s career and reputation if the illegal sale becomes public, Harmond tells him, “You got to have rule of law. Otherwise it would be chaos. Nobody wants to live in chaos.”

Scene 4: Harmond sits in the office alone, fending off phone calls requesting interviews with him. Mame enters and he tells her they need to put together a statement about the pending injunction for the press. Despite the bulldozers positioned nearby, people are still planning on having a paint party there on Thursday morning. Mame laments Harmond’s choices, saying that he could have become mayor if he had just followed the plan. As a result of his choices, she is out of the running for the job with the governor. She is devastated and says he is on his own with the campaign and the redevelopment. She exits.

Sterling enters, reading a newspaper article about Harmond’s accusations of illegal property sales and admission of involvement in such dealings. It states that the news may put Harmond’s candidacy for mayor in jeopardy. Roosevelt enters. He and Sterling clash over racial identity, money, and class. Sterling dips his fingers into a can of paint and puts war paint on his face. “We on the battlefield now,” he says before exiting.

Roosevelt tells Harmond that the judge has dismissed the temporary injunction and the house will be demolished at 10:15. Harmond is shocked. He is angry that the rules are always changing and Harmond does not want to live like that any more. Roosevelt says he is going to buy Harmond out. It is in their business’s charter that “if one of the partners jeopardizes that business by straying from the company’s initial charter the other person can force the sale to protect the company’s financing structure.” Harmond deduces that Roosevelt will use money from Bernie Smith to do it. He says that once again, just as with the radio station, Smith is using Roosevelt as the minority face on a profitable business deal. Roosevelt collects his things from his desk and leaves. Harmond picks up a paintbrush and exits to join the paint party.