

Black American Playwrights

Text Selections

Taught by C.J. Celeiro
At Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter High School

*Indicates film study

Dutchman*

by Amiri Baraka

Published: 1964 (film from 1966)

Summary: *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka is a one-act play set on a New York City subway, where a tense and ultimately deadly encounter unfolds between Clay, a young Black man, and Lula, a provocative white woman. What begins as flirtation quickly turns confrontational, as Lula mocks Clay's identity, accuses him of assimilation, and provokes him into expressing his suppressed anger about racism and societal hypocrisy.

Major Activities: Film analysis, discussions, anchor chart (how do each of these characters represent society as a whole?)



Standards:

- **CC.1.3.9-10.D.** Determine the point of view of the text and analyze the impact the point of view has on the meaning of the text.
- **CC.1.3.9-10.C.** Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.G.** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.S.** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research, applying grade-level reading standards for literature and literary nonfiction.
- **CC.1.5.9-10.A.** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CC.1.5.9-10.D.** Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning; ensure that the presentation is appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Topdog/Underdog

by Suzan-Lori Parks



Published: 2001

Summary: *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks is a Pulitzer Prize-winning play that explores the complex relationship between two brothers, Lincoln and Booth, who were abandoned by their parents as children. Living in poverty and haunted by their past, the brothers struggle with identity, rivalry, and survival. Lincoln, once a master of three-card monte, now works impersonating Abraham Lincoln at an arcade, while Booth aspires to take his brother's place as a hustler. As tensions

rise, their bond deteriorates under the weight of jealousy, resentment, and unmet desires, delving into themes of family, fate, masculinity, and the enduring impact of abandonment.

Major Activities: Character analysis, discussion of power ("Who is Topdog?" anchor chart), textual evidence and inferences.

Standards:

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- **CC.1.3.9-10.C.** Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- **CC.1.3.9-10.H.** Analyze how an author draws on and transforms themes, topics, character types, and/or other text elements from source material in a specific work.
- **CC.1.3.9-10.K.** Read and comprehend literary fiction on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.A.** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.G.** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.S.** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research, applying grade-level reading standards for literature and literary nonfiction.
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Clyde's

by Lynn Nottage

Published: 2021

Summary: *Clyde's*, by two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner Lynn Nottage, is set in a truck-stop sandwich shop where formerly incarcerated kitchen staff work under the watchful eye of Clyde, their tough, cynical boss. As they work, the employees dream of creating the perfect sandwich, a symbol of hope, creativity, and second chances. Despite Clyde's relentless attempts to crush their spirits, the kitchen becomes a space of redemption and resilience, where characters grapple with their pasts while daring to envision a better future.



Major Activities: Metaphor analysis (Is *Clyde's* a religious parable?), textual evidence and inferences

Standards:

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- **CC.1.3.9-10.C.** Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
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- **CC.1.3.9-10.K.** Read and comprehend literary fiction on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.C.** Develop and analyze the topic with relevant, well-chosen, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic; include graphics and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.S.** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research, applying grade-level reading standards for literature and literary nonfiction.
- **CC.1.5.9-10.F.** Make strategic use of digital media in presentations to add interest and enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence.

School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play

by Jocelyn Bioh

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Milk Like Sugar

by Kirsten Greenidge



Published: 2017 (*School Girls...*) and 2011 (*Milk Like Sugar*)

Summary: *School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play* by Jocelyn Bioh is a comedy set in Aburi Girls boarding school in 1980s Ghana, where a group of teenage girls eagerly await the arrival of a recruiter for the Miss Ghana beauty pageant. Their confident queen bee, Paulina, expects to be chosen—until the arrival of Ericka, a new student from America with lighter skin and different background, challenges her status. As tensions rise, the play unpacks issues of colorism, beauty standards, and self-worth.



Milk Like Sugar by Kirsten Greenidge is a coming-of-age drama following 16-year-old Annie as she navigates peer pressure, poverty, and the desire for a better life in a world that offers limited choices. When Annie and her friends make a pregnancy pact, dreaming of love, status, and material comfort, she begins to question whether motherhood is truly the path to fulfillment. The play explores themes of ambition, generational struggle, and the search for meaning in a society that often fails young women of color.

Major Activities: Character analysis, comparing major themes, Socratic Seminar
Standards:

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- **CC.1.3.9-10.D.** Determine the point of view of the text and analyze the impact the point of view has on the meaning of the text.
- **CC.1.3.9-10.K.** Read and comprehend literary fiction on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.D.** Organize ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; use appropriate and varied transitions to link the major sections of the text; include formatting when useful to aiding comprehension; provide a concluding statement or section.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.S.** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research, applying grade-level reading standards for literature and literary nonfiction.
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The Mountaintop

by Katori Hall



Published: 2009

Summary: *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall is a fictional reimagining of the final night of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life, set entirely in his room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis in 1968. As a storm rages outside, Dr. King is visited by Camae, a mysterious and flirtatious hotel maid who challenges his beliefs, fears, and legacy. Their conversation shifts from playful to profound as it's revealed that Camae is an angel sent to

guide Dr. King to his fate. Through their interaction, the play humanizes the civil rights leader, showing his vulnerabilities and doubts while honoring his courage and impact.

Major Activities: Character analysis, humanizing a glorified figure, creative writing assignment (researching a currently living black changemaker and creating your own mini version of *The Mountaintop*.)

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- **CC.1.3.9-10.K.** Read and comprehend literary fiction on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.M.** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.
- **CC.1.4.9-10.S.** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research, applying grade-level reading standards for literature and literary nonfiction.

Pipeline*

by Dominique Morisseau

Published: 2017 (film from 2017)

Summary: *Pipeline* by Dominique Morisseau explores the impact of systemic racism and the school-to-prison pipeline on Black families. The play centers on Nya, a dedicated inner-city public-school teacher, who is also the mother of Omari, a bright but emotionally troubled teen attending a private boarding school. When Omari is involved in a violent incident at school, Nya must confront her own fears, guilt, and questions about how to protect her son in a society that is stacked against him.



Major Activities: Film analysis, hot-topic discussion (agree/disagree debate, who is right?), understanding internal conflict with roles a person must play

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White

by James Ijames



Published: 2017

Summary: *White* by James Ijames explores race, privilege, and the politics of representation in the art world. It follows Gus, a white gay artist frustrated that his work is being excluded from a major museum exhibition focused on minority artists. To bypass the system, he recruits Vanessa, a Black actress, to represent his

work as her own, and together they create her artistic persona, Balkonaé. As the plan spirals out of control, both characters are forced to confront the deeper implications of their choices, identities, and complicity.

Major Activities: Character development (how Balkonaé comes to be, and understanding authenticity versus stereotype), genre (satire), intersectionality artwork project

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Passing Strange*

by Stew

Published: 2009 (film from 2009)

Summary: *Passing Strange* by Stew and Heidi Rodewald is a rock musical that follows Youth, a young Black man in America, as he leaves his middle-class Los Angeles home in search of “the real”—a deeper sense of identity, purpose, and artistic truth. Rejecting the conventions of his upbringing and the expectations placed on him, he travels to Europe, immersing himself in bohemian Amsterdam and oppressed Berlin.



Major Activities: Film analysis, narrative structure, understanding how location influences character development, musical analysis

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- **CC.1.3.9-10.E.** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create an effect.
- **CC.1.3.9-10.F.** Analyze how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts.
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Fairview

by Jackie Sibblies Drury



Published: 2018

Summary: *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury is a Pulitzer Prize-winning play that begins as a seemingly straightforward drama about a middle-class Black family preparing for a birthday dinner. However, the play quickly shifts into a bold, meta-theatrical exploration of race, privilege, and surveillance. As the family's interactions unfold, a group of white characters secretly watches and eventually steps into the narrative, forcing the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about racial bias, observation, and complicity.

Major Activities: Literature circles, hot-topic

discussions (surveillance, racial biases), narrative structure, Socratic Seminar

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A Raisin in the Sun*

by Lorraine Hansberry

Published: 1959 (film from 1961)

Summary: *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry is a classic drama that centers on the Younger family, a Black household in 1950s Chicago struggling with dreams, racial discrimination, and economic hardship. After the death of the family patriarch, the family receives a \$10,000 insurance check, sparking hopes for a better future. Each member has different ideas for how to use the money, but their aspirations clash with harsh realities, including segregation and prejudice.

Major Activities: Film analysis, character analysis (Beneatha's identity, Walter's dreams), connections to poem "Harlem" by Langston Hughes, motivation analysis

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Chicken & Biscuits

by Douglas Lyons



Published: 2021

Summary: *Chicken & Biscuits* by Douglas Lyons is a riotous comedy that revolves around a Black family as they gather for the funeral of their beloved patriarch. Amidst the grief and family tensions, the siblings confront unresolved conflicts, secrets, and the complexities of love and loyalty. The play uses humor and warmth to explore themes of family dynamics, forgiveness, and the different ways

people cope with loss, highlighting the importance of connection and understanding even in difficult times.

Major Activities: Use of archetypes, types of literary humor (text analysis/close read)

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***for colored girls who have considered suicide/
when the rainbow is enuf***

by Ntozake Shange

&

Thoughts of a Colored Man

by Keenan Scott II



Published: 1976 (*for colored girls...*) and 2021 (*Thoughts of a Colored Man*)

Summary: *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* by Ntozake Shange is a groundbreaking choreopoem—a blend of poetry, dance, music, and drama—that gives voice to the experiences of Black women in America. Through a series of poetic monologues delivered by seven women identified only by colors, the work explores themes of love, empowerment, trauma, resilience, sisterhood, racism, sexism, abuse, identity, hope, healing, and strength.

Thoughts of a Colored Man by Keenan Scott II is a poetic SLAM narrative that explores the diverse experiences of Black men navigating life in America. Through a mix of storytelling, music, and movement, the play delves into themes of identity, masculinity, friendship, and systemic challenges, highlighting both the struggles and the beauty of Black manhood.

Major Activities: Comparing major themes (gender and racial representation/voice), narrative structure, genre (choreopoem, SLAM narrative), Socratic Seminar, creative writing assignment (writing their own *for colored girls...* poem or *Thoughts of a Colored Man* monologue)



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Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

by August Wilson



Published: 1982 (film from 2020)

Summary: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* by August Wilson is a powerful drama set in a 1927 Chicago recording studio where legendary blues singer Ma Rainey and her band are preparing to record an album. The play centers on tensions between Ma, her ambitious trumpet player Levee, and the white producers who control the session. Levee's dreams of musical success

and recognition clash with the harsh realities of racism, exploitation, and artistic control.

Major Activities: Film analysis, character development/backstory, motivation and drive, Socratic Seminar

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