

The University of Mustansiriya

College of Arts

Department of English

**Meanings within Meanings:
A Study of Metaphors
in August Wilson's *Fences***

A paper submitted by

instructor:

Latifa Ismaeel Jabboury

Abstract

The American playwright August Wilson uses metaphors in most of his plays as main instruments to reveal the life of the black society in his time. His plays are almost always "realistic"; they have to do with everyday people in everyday situations. Almost all his characters are black, and they speak an African-American dialect similar to the one spoken in his native Pittsburgh. Wilson is one of the most influential and successful Afro-American playwright writing in the second half of the 20th century. Among his famous plays are *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and his first Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Fences*.

The present paper discusses the use of metaphors in Wilson's famous play *Fences*. The paper starts with a brief introduction to metaphor, then it moves directly to exhibit the metaphors used in *Fences* and their significance in enriching meanings of the play. This study illustrates "baseball", "fences", "death", "rose" and "garden" as the main images to reveal the inner reality of Troy Maxon, the main character in *Fences*. Analyzing these metaphors within the scope of the play, explores how they intermingle with the themes to present various meanings. The paper ends with a conclusion which states briefly the main findings of the study.

**Meanings within Meanings:
A Study of Metaphors
in August Wilson's *Fences***

Metaphor appears to involve a gap between the conventional meaning of words and their occasion-specific use. This assumption is so widespread that it has received little explicit justification, but at least two obvious considerations can be offered in its support. First, metaphorical interpretation is important on literal meaning. Second, metaphorical interpretation depends not just on knowledge of the conventional meanings of the words but also on substantive of the relevant expressions (Happe; 280-286). As a result, the same word or sentence can receive different metaphorical interpretations in distinct contexts. For instance, a sentence like "Juliet is the sun" will be interpreted quite differently when spoken by Romeo who wants the meaning (*Juliet is beautiful*), by his friend Benvolio (*Juliet is dangerous*) and by his rival Paris (*Juliet is the most important socialite in Verona*) (Ibid; 288-293).

However, metaphor is used widely in all fields of literature and art, either as a kind of embellishment or to enrich the work of art with new and significant meanings. In the theatre, the use of metaphor works in many dimensions to enhance the technique of the play. Metaphor is a tool in the hand of the playwright to support the themes and meanings of the play with new and significant ideas, as each image is used to be a symbol for something or for many things at the same time (Ibid). The playwright August Wilson used metaphors in many plays he has written, but actually his well known play *Fences* is structured completely on metaphors.

Fences is one of Wilson's "Pittsburgh Cycle"; a collection of ten plays, each play explores a different decade in the 20th century, and each one

examines the lives and struggles of Afro-Americans. Wilson has taken upon himself the responsibility to write a play about black experiences in the United States for every decade of the 20th century (Rawson; 3); *Fences* is his play about blacks in the 1950's. The events of the play begin in 1957 and end in 1965. Wilson follows Troy's life within eight years in which his affair with another woman results in her death while giving birth to his daughter. His turning to be angry alienated him from his wife and son.

Wilson's *Fences* paints a picture of black who both rebel against white domination and suffer from frustration basically because of the lack of opportunities and economic insecurity. Though America emerged as the superpower of the world after World War II, things had not changed much for the black population. The older generation, represented by Troy, had internalized oppression, so they depend on the tools which they got in the social setting of their own times. Some changes have certainly taken place and the new generation sees life differently in the light of the changed social environment (Fleming; 2-5).

Structurally, Wilson's "bluesology" acts as an aesthetic and cultural intervention disrupting the conventional frame of realism. Rather than plot or action, character and the lyrical music of the dialogue drive the plays. Wilson, a poet before he became a playwright, celebrates the poetic power contained in the speech of poor and uneducated peoples. Wilson allows his character to voice their history in the verbal equivalent of musical solos. For instance, Troy Maxon-an illiterate garbage man and central figure in *Fences* – fashions his identity and self-awareness through bold expressive tales. Like the ancient city of Troy, he is an epic force, impregnable and larger than life. Troy's stories, which serve to describe the African American experiences as well as his individual life, expand the realistic canvas of the play, reaching beyond the conventional temporal and spatial limits to reveal the inner presence of history impacting on an individual (Elam; 321).

Wilson's *Fences* is imbued with metaphors; it is written within the frame of realism to present the life of Troy's family as the way life really is.

The play is characterized by forthright, open dialogue and narration. In *Fences* all the characters and events are based on the real history of American society at that time. Actually *Fences* is structured upon some extended metaphors: "baseball", "fences", "death", "rose" and "garden". Each one of these metaphors plays a great part to reveal meanings within meanings in the play.

"Baseball" is a very important metaphor in the play for it is the element around which Troy constructs his personal history and his relationship to the world. The game provided him with the opportunity to emerge from a life of despair and crime. Troy came to the North from the South to look for a job in order to support himself, his first wife and child. When he couldn't find a job he turned to be a thief. Eventually, he was caught and put in prison for fifteen years. In prison he learned to play baseball, when he was released he joined the Negro Leagues. There he gained a recognition which he couldn't gain before (Bogumil; 34-38). Accordingly, the game gives meaning to his life. It is this positive experience which intensifies his frustration and bitterness at his being deprived from the highest level of opportunity in playing baseball.

Wilson uses baseball as a vehicle to explore the American society at that time. The game motif operates in a complex manner to make the play an important study of American culture (Kiffer; 3). Baseball also functions in a variety of ways within the play: first it provides a context of social history in its depiction of the denial of black opportunity in sport, second it establishes a standard of fairness that can serve as a metaphor of social justice (Ibid). Although Troy Maxson was a good baseball player and he played very well for the Negro Leagues he was not allowed to play in the white teams, unlike Jackie Robinson (*Fences*, Act I, Scene i; 703). The

success of Robinson and other black players is a sore subject for Troy who represents the older generation to them. Because he was born at the wrong time, he never earned the recognition or the money which he felt he deserved, and any discussion of professional sports will often push him to bitterness.

Troy's teenage son, Cory has another athletic skill, he plays football. But instead of being a source of connection with his father, it creates conflict with him. Because Troy's experience has so deeply affected him, he is not willing to acknowledge that the world has changed. He believes that the white world intends no good for the black man. So, he does everything he can to prevent Cory's success (Bogumil; 34-37). He insists on the boy taking an after-school job even if this means missing practice. When a college recruiter visits, he refuses to sign the papers which would provide the son with a scholarship (*Fences*, Act I, Scene iii; 711-712). Each of the major scenes of confrontation between Troy and Cory ends with Troy saying that Cory has another strike against him. In the description of the setting, Wilson makes certain to mention an important prop placement. "A sturdy porch with a flat roof.... The yard is a small dirt yard, partially fenced.... Opposite is a tree from which hangs a ball made of rags. A baseball bat leans against the tree" (*Fences*; 700). Both Troy and Cory practice swinging at the ball. Later on in the play, we see Troy sitting on the steps of his home when Cory attempts to climb the steps so that he may enter the house he tells his father, "you in my way. I got to get by"(*Fences*, Act II, Scene iv; 725).

Cory's words mean much more than Troy is a physical obstruction. Troy is also a psychological barrier that has prevented Cory from growing into his own sense of manhood. Initially the action between Troy and Cory is primarily verbal, but Troy throws the first punch and shoves his son after Cory tells that he is just "an old man".... This scene intensifies when Cory picks up Troy's bat and wields it as

weapon of self-defense against his father. What ensues is a fierce battle of wills and repression as Cory and Troy, according to the stage directions "struggle for the bat" and then Troy, the father, the stronger of the two men, takes the bat, prepares to swing at his son, but instead of hitting his son, banishes Cory from "around [his] house".... Finally, Cory is free, but the Maxon men's history repeats itself. Like his father, Cory has fought his father, lost, and has been made homeless by the father. It appears that Troy has won this battle, but Troy has struck out again. He has now lost Rose, Alberta and Cory. (Menson-Furr; 39).

The play, *Fences* is set in 1957. Troy was in his early forties when Major League Baseball was first integrated. He was too old to benefit from the change. He is embittered by the denial of opportunity to prove his ability. He repeatedly points to his accomplishments and the skills of those with whom he played. He also repeatedly denigrates the achievements and abilities of white players, past and present. When he brags about how well he could hit, his son Cory comments on the quality of pitchers like Warren Spahn and Sandy Koufax. Troy insists that they cannot compare to Satchel Paige, against whom he hit seven home runs (*Fences*, Act I, Scene iii; 711). His favorite target is a former player for the Yankees: "Selkirk! That's it! Man barring .269. understand? .269. What kind of sense that make? I was hitting .432. with thirty-seven home runs! Man batting .269. and playing right field for the Yankees!" (*Fences*, Act I, Scene i; 703).

When Troy complains that black players are still not getting a chance, his son, Cory points to Hank Aaron, but Troy dismisses Aaron, as he has dismissed Robinson before, boasting foolishly that even at his age he could match the young Aaron's home-run production. Talking about any sport game reflects his frustration at never having the opportunity given to the other players. Then, he immediately makes an economic connection, complaining that he recently saw the daughter of Josh Gibson walking in "raggedy shoes." He angrily concludes that "Selkirk's daughter ain't

walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet!" (*Fences*, Act I, Scene i; 703). Gibson's daughter here is just a reminder of the impact of racism in black life. In addition to white players, Troy even denigrates the talent of African-American athletes who represent the new generation because they are part of the new order of things (Bogumil; 34-38).

After losing the chance to prove his superiority to his contemporary players or even his equality with them of both races, Troy's identity is linked to traditional notions of American individualism. But the racial formation of American society, especially at the peak of Troy's career, denied to blacks any sense of personal worth or even identity. The very existence of the Negro League was the result of a national assumption that the presence of African Americans in the white Major Leagues would contaminate the national pastime. Black identity was restricted to group identity as the other. Troy cannot fully lace the inherent conflict between self-definition as heroic individual and the society's denigration of him and his chosen path to that personal meaning. Therefore, he must boast of his accomplishments, deny status to others, and pretend that time makes no difference, that he could still play the game successfully in his 53 years old (Timpane; 39 & Shannon; 40).

Because Troy sees himself as the only hero, any challenge from his son must be seen as a competitive struggle; he cannot help but defeat and humiliate Cory as long as he has the strength and ability. Because he has complicated and deeply mixed motives, Troy cannot simply be a father to Cory but must effectively limit both of their futures. In the same way, he is led to destroy his marriage without realizing the full implications of his thinking and actions. After eighteen years of being married to Rose, he has an affair with another woman, who eventually becomes pregnant. When he

tries to explain the situation to his Rose, the only language he knows is the language of baseball (Bogumil; 34-36). During Act Two of *Fences*, Troy confesses to Rose about his infidelity. He explains not only that he has a mistress, but that she is pregnant with his child. He uses a baseball metaphor to explain why he had an affair:

TROY: I fooled them, Rose. I bunted. When I found you and Cory and a halfway decent job . . . I was safe. Couldn't nothing touch me. I wasn't gonna strike out no more. I wasn't going back to the penitentiary. I wasn't gonna lay in the streets with a bottle of wine. I was safe. I had me a family. A job. I wasn't gonna get that last strike. I was on first looking for one of them boys to knock me in. To get me home.

ROSE: You should have stayed in my bed, Troy.

TROY: Then when I saw that gal . . . she firmed up my backbone. And I got to thinking that if I tried . . . I just might be able to steal second. Do you understand after eighteen years I wanted to steal second.
(*Fences*, Act II, Scene i; 721).

The marriage, which Rose defines as her life, Troy sees as only a small step in an endless competition. Everything is about how he measures up. He tries to force life into the rules of a game, and it does not work as Rose tells him marriage is not a ball-game. Troy is still obsessed with baseball and, though he is speaking to his wife about his infidelity, he mindlessly equates this act with baseball. To Troy, everything in life revolves around baseball. The imagery of baseball represents “the troubled changes of 1957” (Timpane; 39). Timpane concludes that the actions of the play take place before the 1957 World Series in which for the first time a black player, and not from New York, dominated the series and brought home the win to the Milwaukee Braves. The player was Hank Aaron, who was dismissed by Troy “Hank Aaron ain’t nobody. That’s what you supposed to do. That’s how you supposed to play the game. Ain’t nothing to it. It’s just a matter of timing...getting the right follow-through. Hell, I can hit forty three home runs right now!” (*Fences*, Act I, Scene iii; 711). Troy believes

even at 53, he can outplay anyone. His fixation also shows how stuck he was in the past. He cannot go beyond his glory days of playing baseball, and his belief that he was cheated out of playing professionally. Here Baseball functions as a means for Troy to construct his own identity, his way of understanding the world and his relationships in it (Timpane; 39-40).

There are also actual physical representations of baseball on stage: a baseball bat and rag ball tied to a tree (*Fences*, Setting; 700). The fact that the ball is made of rags could be seen as representing Troy's poverty and his tattered dreams. It also shows that after all these years Troy is still trying to hold onto his glory days. The baseball bat is especially important in the climactic scene in Act II, that is Scene iv between Cory and Troy (*Fences*, Act II, Scene iv; 724-727). In this scene the baseball bat becomes a weapon the father and the son threaten each other with.

Thus, the baseball provides context, character development, relationships, and symbolic patterns. In short, baseball is Wilson's central tool in this play to analyze and depict the reality of American society at that time.

The second important metaphor in the play besides "baseball" is "fences". The image of "fences" has multiple meanings. The play's title, *Fences*, suggests a boundary by which to measure achievement with all the symbolic possibilities. The first image of a fence in the play is the physical one Rose wants Troy to erect around their property. As Bono notes when he was talking to Troy telling him: "Some people build fences to keep people out . . . and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you" (*Fences*, Act II, Scene i; 719). In this quotation Bono explains the meaning of *Fences*, hoping to inform Troy of

how he was pushing his family away. On the other side, Rose wants to keep her man and her family intact. Though, She has already lost them as Bono in this same scene reproaches Troy for buying drinks for "that Tallahassee gal... that Alberta" (*Fences*, Act II, Scene i; 718-719). Troy has already strayed in his marriage, and a fence is not going to keep him in. Also Cory is about to graduate from high school, and his relationship with his father is becoming increasingly problematic. Cory too is only a temporary resident, and he will no longer be able to be contained inside the fence because later his father will dismiss him out of the house (*Fences*, Act II, Scene v; 726-727).

In one of his poems which is entitled "Mending Wall", the great American poet, Robert Frost said "Good fences make good neighbors". But sometimes it's an uneasy peace between what they keep in and what they keep out. In Wilson's play these fences represent the barrier between Troy and his family, his friends, and his enemies. The literal fence which is part of the set is Rose's idea for creating a space in which to make her family's life. Others are welcome within the space, and she encourages her family to go out and come in. She, for example, wants Cory to have the opportunity to play football and go to college. She simply wishes to have a home field. Significantly, Troy is reluctant to build the fence (*Fences*, Act II, Scene i; 719). This is probably because he connects such a structure with the state when he was in prison. When Cory complains that he doesn't see why his mother wants a fence around the yard, Troy replies: "Damn if I know either. What the hell she keeping out with it?" (*Fences*, Act II, Scene i; 719) For Troy, "fences" are boundaries to be surpassed, to be broken. He is, after all, a hitter, not a pitcher. To stay within fences is to fail to achieve the great feat (Bogumil; 34-38). But at the same time, fences are the means to

measure one's achievement; without the fence, there can be no home runs in the conventional sense. Birdwell points out that the functions of fences in the play are

both real and metaphorical, both defenses and obstructions. They are the backyard fence that Troy's wife wants him to build to improve the property and protect the family; they are the fences that enclose mental hospitals; they are the boundaries of graveyards but also of heaven (entered by St. Peter's gate). More importantly, they are family responsibilities and divisions between generations. They are *not* the white picket fences in the front yards of American Dream homes. Instead they are racial barriers keeping blacks, even great hitters who can slam balls over any ballpark fence, from realizing their potential" (Birdwell; 36).

Actually, the image of "fences" works in various ways in the play; it is functioned as a metaphor through which Wilson reveals the inner reality of the characters and their psychological motivation. Thus, "fences" provide relationships, character psychology, context and symbolic models. In other words, "fences" is one of Wilson's central images to analyze and depict the characters in the play.

The "fences" in the play also represent the actions that Troy did to keep things and people out or in of his life, and the situations that caused Troy to become bitter toward life. One of these fences is being black (Nadel; 87); because Troy was black, he could not play professional baseball. By being black, he sees that his chances to find a good job and live comfortably are not always possible. Accordingly, when his son, Cory wanted to play football, Troy objected. His objection here has two implications: The first implication is that Troy can be understood as fearing his son's success. He does not want him to accomplish something he couldn't do. If Cory can succeed, then it means that the world has in fact changed. This would render the years of Troy's life meaningless in the sense that time has left him behind. However, the second implication can mean Troy wants the

best for his son and his actions come out of love. He believes that he is protecting his son by refusing to allow his entry into a world dominated by whites, especially in sports. Because his own experience is one of disappointment, Cory's will be the same. Thus, he thinks that it is better not to allow him to play at all. As Bigsby points out: "Troy frustrates the sporting ambitions of his own son partly out of jealousy, partly out of a desire to protect him from the disappointments which he himself had suffered" (Bigsby; 296). However, Harry J Elam states:

Wilson claims that he started *Fences* (1986), his first Pulitzer Prize winning play, with "the image of a man standing in his yard with a baby in his arms" (qtd. in DeVries 1987: 25). Beginning with this image, Wilson sought to subvert the dominant culture's representations of African American men as irresponsible, absentee fathers. Wilson creates Troy Maxon, a larger-than-life figure, who feels an overwhelming sense of duty and responsibility to his family. With an impenetrable resolve, he perceives familial values only from his perspective. Troy's self-involved concept of familial duty and responsibility prevents him from seeing the harm he causes, the pain his decisions inflict on other family members. (Elam; 325).

In his job also, Troy challenges the discriminatory practices of the sanitation department which is considered another "fence" for him. He refuses to accept that only white men are qualified to drive the trucks and demands that the supervisor change the rules (*Fences*, Act I, Scene i; 701). While the success of his effort benefits all the black men, he presents himself as the only hero who takes on the enemy and gets the improved assignment.

Troy lived during a time when the blacks were mostly treated as second grade citizens. *Fences* presents blacks without education due to which they are left with few choices and poorly equipped for getting through the problems of life. The kind of social environment in which he grew made him internalize the oppression exercised by the ruling whites. The way he was treated blinded him to any possibility of whites giving opportunities to

the blacks (Fleming; 2-5). The legacy he got from his father shapes him in a certain way and he tries to pass the same tools on to the new generation. He couldn't recognize that the times in which his son Cory is growing up is different from that of his own.

The play is imbued with the fence imagery which gives so many different meanings, but there is one more metaphor which cannot be left out, that is Troy's fence around himself. This personal fence built by Troy is one that keeps him from living a good life. He is selfish; he doesn't want anyone in his family to accomplish something he couldn't do. And perhaps because Gabriel has to worry less about life than he does, he is envious and sends him to the hospital (*Fences*, Act I, Scene ii; p.707-709). Because of his objections and his anger, his family and friends begin to separate themselves from him. Troy embarks on a course in which he loses his wife, mistress, brother, son, and best friend. His inability to achieve his dream of becoming a baseball player of his aging, of understanding love, isolates him to where he has no options. "The fence, meanwhile, comes to stand for his wife's attempt to keep Troy in, to bind him to her; it also stands for Troy's attempt to hold knowledge at bay, knowledge of his own betrayals, his own failures and his own mortality" (Bigsby; 297).

It's from realism that Wilson draws the power of this play, creating both a provocative family drama and a larger comment on society's wrongs. Troy's hurt is so profound that he hurts those he loves without ever fully realizing how much. It never seems, however, that he can't help himself, only that he is so weary of life that he has squelched much of his own finer feeling. *Fences* deeply personalizes racism, showing in minutest detail its destructive power on the human soul and both the pain and strength it exacts to prevail over it (Zimmerman; 2). The Maxon family lives in black

tenement in Pittsburgh in the America of 1950s. It is in that setting the whole drama of their struggle, rebellion, frustration, conflict and predicament unfolds. The America, the blacks like is not living the one reflected in Lincolnian definition of democracy and the Jeffersonian idea of natural rights. It is an American where the blacks are not able to enjoy the same facilities and opportunities as the whites (Ibid). When the play opens we find Troy and his friend Bono talking about the former's challenge to the company and the union about blacks' ability to do the same easy work that whites do. Troy's rebellion and frustration set the tone of the entire play. In his old age he is looking for his rights and his life is a story of missed opportunities. This brings to light the kind of life the Blacks were living in America. Due to the lack of education and other trainings, blacks find it difficult to go for white collar jobs.

Besides "baseball and fences", the third significant metaphor in the play is "death". The image of "death" plays a great role in the play. Death is functioned as a metaphor through which Wilson reveals the inner reality of Troy's character. Thus, "death" provides character psychology, context and symbolic model. "Death" is one of Wilson's tools to analyze and depict Troy's character in the play. Troy was so pessimistic and he always believes that Death is constantly after him, this represents another fence which prevents him from living happily. Troy treats Death as a character in the play. He sees Death, talks to it and personifies it. Death personified is first introduced in the opening scene when Troy tells of Death coming for him when he was ill with pneumonia. Troy weaves a tale of his battle with Death, the following conversation highlights Troy's belief that Death is after him and that he must constantly fight to survive:

Troy: Look here Bono...I looked up one day and Death was marching straight at me. Like Soldiers on Parade! The Army of Death was

marching straight at me....it seem like Death himself reached out and touched me on the shoulder. He touch me just like I touch you. I got cold as ice and Death standing there grinning at me.

Rose: Troy, why don't you hush that talk.

Troy: I say... What you want, Mr. Death? You be wanting me? You done brought your army to be getting me? I looked him dead in the eye. I wasn't fearing nothing. I was ready to tangle. Just like I'm ready to tangle now. The Bible say be ever vigilant. That's why I don't get but so drunk. I got to keep watch.

Rose: Troy was right down there in Mercy Hospital. You remember he had pneumonia? Laying there with fever talking plumb out of his head.

Troy: Death standing there staring at me...carrying that sickle in his hand. Finally he say, "you want bound over for another year?" see, just like that..., "you want bound over for another year?" I told him, "Bound over hell! Let's settle this now!"

It seem like he kinda fell back when I said that,and me and him commenced to wrestling.

We wrestled for three days and three nights....at the end of the third night....Death stood up, throwed on his robe...had him a white robe with a hood on it. He throwed on that robe and went off to look for his sickle. Say, "I'll be back." Just like that. "I'll be back." Death ain't nothing to play with. And I know he's gonna get me. I know I got to joine his army....he's gonna have to fight to get me. I ain't going easy. (*Fences*, Act I, Scene i; 704).

The other two examples of Death, as a character, occur when Troy is alone on stage. Each time Troy, in a rage, suddenly conjures up Death and tries to command or control it. Troy puts on a show of bravado, when actually he is in emotional anguish. Troy has just lost someone he loves and cannot find a way to deal with it. The first time is after Alberta dies (*Fences*, Act II, Scene ii; 723), and the second time is when his relationship with Cory is destroyed (*Fences*, Act II, Scene iv; 727).

Troy begins life with few pluses having been abandoned by his mother at the age of eight and left with his abusive father. Troy kills a man and is sentenced to fifteen years of prison. When he is released, he marries, holds a steady job, raises a son and still takes care of his son from his first marriage, and fights and wins a quiet battle to take a position formally

reserved for white men only. In this sense, he is a hero. But unfortunately, he is a tragic hero.

According to Peter Wolfe, Troy Maxson was a mighty but flawed man. In his essay, "Peter Wolfe on the Strength of Troy" Wolfe notes that Troy acts more like a tragic hero, who is assailed by the Furies or fate (Wolfe; 43). Wolfe makes the connection of Troy's first name with the legendary city of Troy from the Iliad, which was also the center of the Trojan battle (Ibid.) The Trojan battle is approximated to have occurred around the 12th or 13th century B.C. and was due to the Trojan Prince Paris stealing the King of Sparta Menelaus's wife, Helen. An ironic reference as it is Troy Maxson who steals from his wife to go to another woman. Heather Zimmerman suggests that "After weathering a lifetime of grief, Troy has become his own Trojan horse; his difficult past lingers with him every day, insidiously sabotaging his present" (Zimmerman; 1).

Joseph H. Wessling sees Troy's character as larger than a tragic protagonist. He believes that, "Troy, for all his strengths, is flawed humanity in need of grace and forgiveness" (Wessling; 43). In the play there are many comedic moments and sorrows, but Wessling thinks that "the full horror of life must be depicted, but in the end there should be a comedy which is beyond both comedy and tragedy. The thing Gerald Heard calls metacomedy" (Ibid; 44). Wessling further explains metacomedy as "a vision that transcends the immediately comic or tragic. It is not evasive and it has room for pain, for heartache, for alienation, even for death, because it affirms the values of mercy, forgiveness, and sacrifice, which adversity calls forth" (Ibid).

Seeing himself as the isolated hitter against overwhelming forces Troy was able to overcome a variety of obstacles in his way. This pattern holds

even when the imagery shifts, as in his folktale about wrestling Mr. Death. Death, like the pitcher, has others to aid him. Late in the play, Troy refers to death as the "fast ball on the outside corner" (*Fences*, Act II, Scene v; 727). Again baseball here serves as Troy's main way of explaining his actions. When he talks about facing death, he uses baseball terminology, comparing death with a "fastball on the outside corner". But that pitch is the one that Troy can drive over the fence when he connects properly. In this sense, his battle against mortality is not a situation of fear but an opportunity to add to his reputation. And, in fact, his death comes as he is hitting a cloth ball he has strung up in his yard as a way of retaining his skills.

At the very end of the play Gabriel shows his dedication to his beliefs. Although he realizes for the first time that he may not be the archangel Gabriel, but he realizes his limitations and he accepts that fact with simplicity, unlike Troy's long-lasting grudges against family and society.

Gabriel, with great fanfare, braces himself to blow. The trumpet is without a mouthpiece. He puts the end of it into his mouth and blows with great force, like a man who has been waiting some twenty-odd years for this moment. No sound comes out of the trumpet. . . There is a weight of impossible description that falls away and leaves him bare and exposed to a frightful realization. . . He begins to dance. . . He begins to howl in what is an attempt at song, or perhaps a song turning back into itself in an attempt at speech. He finishes his dance and the gates of heaven stand open as wide as God's closet. "That's the way that go!" (*Fences*, Act II, Scene v; 730-731).

The image of "rose" can be considered the fourth important metaphor used in *Fences*. Troy's wife, Rose embodies this side of metaphor. Roses are ancient symbols of love and beauty. In the play, Rose is a typical African American housewife of the 1950's; as the caretaker of the family and home, she represents loving care and nurturing, attributes also frequently used to grow plants. Like the characteristics of the flower after which she is named, Rose is a beautiful soul that gives fragrance and love

to her family (Bogumil; 35). She exemplifies patience and generosity in her relationships with everyone in the play; for instance when she sides with Cory on his decision to play football, her compassion and concern for Gabriel when he is arrested and her acceptance of Raynell as her own child when Alberta dies.

When Troy complains that he needs to escape to Alberta's bed because he feels as if he has been in the same place for sixteen years, Rose replies, "I been standing with you! I been right here with you, Troy." (*Fences*, Act II, Scene I; 721). Rose is sedentary, like the flower, growing upward in the same spot. She relates her decision to live life invested in her husband's life even though she knows he will never be as successful as they once hoped. In the same scene Rose's description of her life is a metaphor of planting when she says: "I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams...and I buried them inside you. I planted a seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom. And it didn't take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn't never gonna bloom. But I held on to you, Troy." (*Fences*, Act II, Scene I; 722). This scene

is one of the most powerful scenes in the play. This scene depicts an African-American male-female relationship that is, simultaneously, riddled with love and strife, and demonstrates Rose's strength and belief in the family unit, despite the "sins of the father" and the head of the Maxon household. Moreover, this scene exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between Wilson's primary characters and the seemingly peripheral characters, the women. Thus, this scene is a battle won for black women, the black family unit, and Wilson, in that it presents a family that refuses to die and dissolve despite internal and external forces (Menson-Furr; 39).

Rose lessens the rocky and hard nature of Troy with her love and compassion, providing shelter to her children from their father's destructive

behavior and legacy. She has raised Cory lovingly and teaches Raynell about loving, a hopeful future and forgiveness.

The fifth metaphor in *Fences* is the image of "garden". In the final scene of the play, Troy's little daughter, Raynell, runs out in her nightgown to see if her garden has grown. Of course the garden has not grown yet because the girl just planted it the day before. Rose assures her, "You just have to give it a chance. It'll grow" (*Fences*, Act II, Scene v; 727). This literal garden might have some symbolic meaning. For one thing, Raynell runs out to check her garden on the day of her father's funeral. So, the garden represents the promise of new life in the face of death.

Also we should notice that Raynell is looking at the garden just when her half-brother, Cory enters. Cory is struggling desperately to escape the shadow of his father. Cory refuses to attend the funeral because he wants to rebel against Troy. He attempts to explain why he has mixed feelings for Troy. Cory says to Rose, "Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere." (*Fences*, Act II, Scene v; 729). But later, Cory's interaction with Raynell helps him come to terms with his father's memory. Raynell's garden then, could be seen as representing the possibility that Cory will grow beyond the shadow of his father.

Raynell herself is the flower that has sprung from Troy's seeds. She also stands for the promise of new life. She bears witness to a changed world at the house and represents the changing world of the United States as it evolves into the passionate and liberating decade of the sixties. Raynell holds no grudge against Troy. Her comments about her father are mundane. She, like Lyons, Bono and Troy will grow up without one parent, but she will never experience the hurtful coming of age struggle Cory and the older men experienced. Raynell changes the pattern of violence between father

and son in the Maxson family. When Cory and Raynell sing Troy's father's song about the dog named Blue together, Cory forgives Troy because he witnesses the love and the lessons that Troy passed on to his children. Cory experiences the song as evidence that Troy's deeds were derived from what Troy knew in life. Troy did what he could with what he had and did his best to give what little he had to his family (Pereira; 37-42). Cory was hindered by Troy's mistakes, but will become a better person than his father because of what he learned as a result of Troy's struggle with himself.

Conclusion:

In *Fences*, Wilson focuses on the day to day trials of ordinary people in order to approach the struggle of African-Americans in a racist society. This slice of life, begins with a scale and detail of lower class life, probes meanings within meanings in the play at every turn. Like so many African-Americans, Troy Maxson's life has been one of constant denial and deprivation. The play depicts marvel of contradictions; weary from a lifetime of hard labor, Troy manages to uphold his breadwinning responsibilities to his family all the while ruling them with his seething anger.

Wilson employs the images of "baseball" "fences", "death", "rose" and "garden" as instruments to convey the meanings within meanings of the play. Moreover, in *Fences* he portrays a bleak picture of what happens to blacks when their aspirations go beyond the fences within which they are confined. The fences of a racist society are structured by the fences blacks have often created to alienate themselves from the ones who remind them of their failures.

The play presents a number of powerful themes through metaphors. For instance, the theme of racism is discussed through the image of "baseball";

the play takes place in 1957, the period right before the Civil Rights Movement. Troy struggles with understanding a world where options are just beginning to open up for African-Americans contrasted with a life believing such options don't exist. The theme of marital problems is another important theme which is explored in *Fences* through the metaphor of "rose". Looking at Troy's life, we see that the content of this black garbage man's life is affected by everyday elements of life of all people; love, honor, beauty, betrayal, and duty. The bitterness, self-assertion, and psychology associated with baseball join in defining Troy's troubled relationship with the others around him.

References

- Bigsby, C. W. E. Chapter Ten "Reddening the center: politics, race, gender" in *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Birdwell, Christine. "Christine Birdwell on Scenes as Innings" in *Bloom's Major Dramatists: August Wilson*, pp. 36-37. Edited with an introduction by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House, New York, 2002.
- Bogumil, Mary L. *Understanding August Wilson*, South Carolina, University of South Carolina press, 1999.
- Cohn, Ruby & Dukore, Bernard eds. *Twentieth Century Drama: England, Ireland, The United States*. Queens College of The City University of New York. Random House Inc. / New York, 1966.
- Elam, Jr., Harry J. "August Wilson" in *A Companion to 20th century American Drama*, pp. 318-333. Edited by David Krasner. Malden: Blackwell publishing Ltd, 2005.
- Fleming, John. "August Wilson's 'Fences' comes to American Stage" in *Times Performing Arts Critic: Sunday*. Internet modified 20 September 2009, 6 pages. Online, internet available on [URL:http://www.tampabay.com/features/performingarts/article_1037031.ece](http://www.tampabay.com/features/performingarts/article_1037031.ece)
- Happe, F. " Understanding minds and metaphors: insights from the study of figurative language", 10: 275-295, in *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 1995.
- Kiffer, Meredith. "August Wilson: The Search for Black Identity and Social Standing in 20th Century America". Internet modified 7 April 2009, 5 pages. Online, internet available, [URL:http://www.augustwilson.net/The Search for Black Identity. htm](http://www.augustwilson.net/The_Search_for_Black_Identity.htm).
- Menson-Furr, Ladrica. "Analysis and Commentary", pp. 17-50, in *Modern American Guides: August Wilson's FENCES*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008.
- Moss, Walter G. "The Moscow Art Theater" 21-29 & "Literature, Realism, Comedy, and Tragedy" 45-53 in *The Wisdom of Anton Chekhov*. Copyright © 2010 by Walter G. Moss. Internet modified 26 November, 2010. 74pages. Online, internet available [URL:Home Page:http://www.chekhovEssay.htm](http://www.chekhovEssay.htm).

- Nadel, Alan. "Boundaries, Logistics, and Identity: The Property of Metaphor in *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*", Pp.86- 104, in *MAY ALL YOUR FENCES HAVE GATES: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*. University of Iowa press, 1994.
- Pereira, Kim. *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*, the Board of Trustees of the university of Illinois, 1995.
- Rawson, Christopher. "Obituary: August Wilson; Pittsburgh Playwright who Chronicled Black Experiences". Pittsburgh Post Gazette. 5 pages, internet modified 3 October, 2005. Online, internet available URL: <http://www.Pittsburgh-post-gazette.com/pg/05276/581786.stm>.
- Shannon, Sandra G. "Sandra G. Shannon on Race Relations in the 1950s" in *Bloom's Major Dramatists: August Wilson*, pp. 40-42. Edited with an introduction by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House, New York, 2002.
- Timpane, John. "John Timpane on Pre-and Post-War Athletics" in *Bloom's Major Dramatists: August Wilson*. pp. 39-40. Edited with an introduction by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House, New York, 2002.
- Wessling, Joseph H. "Joseph H. Wessling on the Play as *Metacomedy*" in *Bloom's Major Dramatists: August Wilson*. pp. 43-45. Edited by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House, New York, 2002.
- Wilson, August. "*Fences*", *Types of DRAMA Plays and Essays*. Eds. Barnet, Berman, Burto. pp. 699-733. Glenview, USA: library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, Scott, Foresman and Company, Illinois/ Boston/ London, Fifth Edition 1989.
- Wolfe, Peter. "Peter Wolfe on the Strength of Troy" in *Bloom's Major Dramatists: August Wilson*, pp. 42-43. Edited with an introduction by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House, New York, 2002.
- Zimmerman, Heather. "Battling Barriers in August Wilson's *Fences*, past pains weigh heavily on Troy Maxson and his family". Internet modified 18 April, 2009. 4pages. Online, internet available URL:[Home Page:http://www.metroactive.com/Stage/Fences'. htm](http://www.metroactive.com/Stage/Fences.htm).

