August Wilson and American Society: *Fences* Then and Now

**1. Troy Maxson as Mythic Hero?**

**Mythology Essential Question:**

How do the mythologies used by Wilson in *Fences* help to illustrate the African American experience?

**Thesis:** In *Fences*, Wilson weaves together allusions to African, Greek and American myths (particularly

myths associated with baseball) that infuse the story of Troy Maxson to transcend the story of a garbage collector who lives in Pittsburgh, drinks on Friday nights and cheats on his wife. In Wilson’s hands, Troy joins that pantheon of mythological figures with whom his name pointedly places him: the mythic hero.

How do Greek, African and American baseball myths inform and develop Wilson’s play? Wilson includes multiple allusions to Greek myths (character names, the hubris Troy exhibits in challenging Death, the storytelling structure present in Homer’s *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, the allusion to Oedipus in Troy’s blindness after he fights his father). The storytelling also closely links Troy to the griots of African

culture who were the keepers of African history and mythology, as well as the Yoruba trickster hero Eshu. Finally, Wilson uses the mythology of baseball (concepts of fair play and meritocracy that make the game “all-American,” mythic players such as Jackie Robinson and Babe Ruth) to challenge the fairness of Troy’s fate.

**Essential Terms**

**Mythic hero—**male or female and usually of remarkable birth, the hero is often the offspring of

a god and human being, but also can be fully human. Heroes may be born under unusual

circumstances, and show early signs of being special either through superhuman physical or mental strength or supernatural powers. The hero often emerges through a journey, also called a quest (for example, Odysseus, Perseus, Hercules, Joan of Arc).

**Folk hero—**is often a very ordinary person who is scoffed at by siblings, parents or society. While lacking superhuman or supernatural powers, they may be out of the ordinary in other ways, such as being exceptionally kind, clever, or resourceful. (Johnny Appleseed, Daniel Boone, Babe Ruth, Harriet Tubman)

**Hero’s Journey/Quest—**a journey taken in search of something of value. It is stressed that the hero is seeking something of value to larger society.

Very specific characteristics mark the mythic hero. They are illustrated below in the **hero’s journey**:

1. Mythology scholar Joseph Campbell defines a hero this way: “A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.” The hero embarks on a journey where he matures as a hero. In an interview with Bill Moyers he adds, “The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there’s something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society.” Campbell adds that the hero is human and, therefore, has weaknesses.

2. The hero is often reluctant and encouraged to undertake his adventure.

3. The hero has friends or mentors who help him/her.

4. The mythic hero has special tools or powers that elevate her/him beyond other humans.

5. The hero is put through tests or trials to strengthen him or her for battle.

6. The hero endures the supreme ordeal.

7. There is an apotheosis where the hero’s best qualities come together.

8. The hero is resurrected and/or transformed by his/her experience.

**Guiding questions:**

1. What is the significance of Troy’s name?

2. What are the essential characteristics that define the mythic hero?

3. How are those characteristics present or not present within Troy?

4. What literary elements or structures help to develop Troy as a mythic hero?

5. How does Troy, as a mythic hero, develop meaning within the play?

6. How does Troy, as a mythic hero, help the audience’s understanding of the experience of African Americans?

7. If Troy is a mythic hero, what contribution or sacrifice has he made for his society?

8. Is Troy a mythic hero or is he a tragic hero (a mythic hero with a fatal flaw)?

**Reflection on unit and essential questions:**

Final discussion pulling the elements of the mythic hero and Troy’s experience together in response to these essential questions:

1. Does Troy embody the characteristics of the mythic hero? Explain.

2. What has he sacrificed and what has he brought to his people?

3. How does Troy help the audience understand the African American experience?

4. How does *Fences* parallel mythologies you know?

5. In the tradition of mythology, what does Troy’s experience offer African Americans in terms of guidance for the future?

6. How does Troy’s experience help students understand how one defines one’s self within the larger expectations of society?

**Finally, please respond to this question in a well-organized essay of at least five paragraphs. Include a clear thesis statement, an introduction which previews the structure of the paper, and solid, text-based evidence (in the form of quotes and references to specific passages from the play) to support your thesis:**

**If it was, in fact, August Wilson’s intention to create a mythic hero in the character of Troy Maxson, was he successful?**

**2. Literary Study**

**Essential Question:** What literary aspects in *Fences* make it both a particularly African American and universal work of art?

From the distinctive idioms and speech patterns of his characters that link them to the African

American community to the larger symbols and metaphors that transcend any one group’s identity, Wilson has fashioned a play that has appealed to audiences around the world. The play is full of many features for literary study such as:

• How does Wilson tell his story? How is the oral tradition present within *Fences,* and what is its effect? Here, comparisons could be drawn to the griots of Africa and the Greeks’ Homer, both as they are present in Troy and the story the playwright himself is presenting. Griots or other cultural story tellers kept alive history before pen and paper were available or, in the case of African slaves or other oppressed peoples, when pen and paper were forbidden. Look at the oral tradition and consider how the tradition is present in the play.

• How does the set of the play affect its meaning? Explore the significance of the play being set in the Maxson’s backyard and the props such as the rag ball and bat and the symbolism of the fence. Other elements of setting (time of day, entrances and exits, the alley) should also be examined.

• Conflict study: what is each of the main character’s primary conflict? Review types of conflict: person v. self, person v. person, person v. society, person v. nature, person v. fate/God. Describe each character’s main type of conflict and support with five examples for each character in a journal. How does the conflict for each character develop that character? The play?

• How is the play divided by acts and scenes, and what is the effect in developing the play?

• How does Wilson’s choice of language spoken by the characters help to develop the play (characterization, tone, rhythm, mood)? This requires you to look up unfamiliar words and consider the effects of idiom and register. Wilson wrestled with whether to use black English in his earlier plays.

What is its effect here? How does it help to develop the play and the characters’ voices?

• What is the significance of character names within the play?

• What role does Gabriel play in the development of the play and its meaning?

• What does it mean to have a “full count”? What are the implications of baseball terminology and metaphors in the play?

• Passage analysis: personification and metaphor

Personification is a term that ascribes human qualities to things that are not human, such as objects, feelings and concepts. Analyze the passage below for the effect of personification. What just happened to Troy? Why does he pick up the bat and assume a batting posture? What is the effect of his addressing Death as a person? What is the significance of the scene happening outside the fence?

TROY: I can’t taste nothing. Helluljah! I can’t taste nothing no more.

*(TROY assumes a batting posture and begins to taunt Death, the fastball in the outside corner.)*

Come on! It’s between you and me now! Come on! Anytime you want! Come on!

I be ready for you . . . but I ain’t gonna be easy.”

*(The lights go down on the scene.)*

Many literary devices add to the richness of *Fences*, but none perhaps more prominently than the allusions and metaphors grounded in baseball. Troy, who played in the Negro League, speaks in baseball metaphor and is bitter that he was not allowed to play in the major leagues. His experience with the sport and being barred because of race from the majors is a clear aspect of his character’s identity. The game of baseball has long been regarded as a metaphor for the American dream—an expression of hope, democratic values, and the drive for individual success. Yet, Troy Maxson found baseball to be anything but fair. The metaphors then take on a certain irony in Wilson’s *Fences*.

**Find five baseball metaphors in the play and discuss in what ways they are ironic in the context of the play. Find five allusions to famous people, places or events in the play and discuss how they enhance meaning.**

**3. Themes:**

**Responsibility**

**Essential Question:** What is our responsibility to ourselves vs. families and society?

One of the questions Wilson explores in Fences is that of what a man owes his family, in terms of responsibility, and how much he must stifle his own desires and dreams to fulfill that responsibility. Troy Maxson, the protagonist of Wilson’s play, through his words, repeatedly stresses the virtue of responsibility to his sons and wife. “I done learned my mistake and learned to do what’s right by it. You still trying to get something for nothing. Life don’t owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself,” he tells his oldest son, Lyons, early in the play. Yet Lyons, in his quest to be a musician, and Troy, through his philandering, show that responsibility is easier to talk about than uphold. In what could be the climax of the play, Troy squares off with his wife, Rose, after informing her that he has gotten another woman pregnant. In explaining why he slept with Alberta, he tells Rose “I done locked myself into a pattern

trying to take care of you all that I forgot about myself.” Troy and Rose’s debate over responsibility at the beginning of Act II has a universal dimension that asks the question of to whom and for whom we must be responsible. **In what ways do we see that debate going on in society today?**

**African American Identity**

**Essential Question:** What are the effects of institutionalized racism? What is institutionalized

racism’s legacy on the individual, families and society? On someone who is trying to define

him/herself? Specifically, what are the effects of institutionalized racism on Americans of African descent who try to define themselves in a society where they receive little or no positive support?

Several literary elements including setting, plot, and diction help to define the African American

identity in August Wilson’s *Fences*. We will explore several devices in order to explore the

way in which Wilson deals with the central idea of African American identity. (Racism is a common theme in August Wilson’s plays chronicling the African American experience.)

**Racism**: discrimination against a group of people based on their distinct physical characteristics and common ancestry.

**Institutionalized Racism**: racism that is codified through government or other societal structures either explicitly or implicitly.

**Guiding Questions:**

1. What does the setting of the play suggest about the Maxson’s place in society? Why?

2. What evidence of Jim Crow and institutionalized racism is present within the play?

3. What factors blocked Troy Maxson’s opportunities to play professional baseball?

4. Why can Troy not drive a garbage truck?

5. What is the significance of Troy winning the right to drive a truck?

6. How do Troy’s experiences affect his relationships with his family and friends?

7. Why does Troy oppose Cory playing football to get a college scholarship?

8. How are the larger effects of Troy’s experiences with racism presented within the play?

**Find at least five examples of institutionalized racism in *Fences*. Which, if any, do you think still exist today?**

**4. Art and Arts Literacy Essential Question:**

**How does art help us to see and understand ourselves and the role we play in shaping society?**  **Craft a personal response to this question using the play as a “jumping off” point.** Consider:

* Characters you can either relate to personally or relate to people in your life.
* The presence of racism and its impact on you today.
* Conflicts in the play—both external and internal—that you can relate to.
* The role of responsibility in the play and as it applies to your life (both your responsibilities and those owed you by others).

Your response should take the form of a personal essay with a standard introduction and conclusion.