

*Fences* is a riveting play about the lives of a working-class African-American family battling poverty, restlessness, and anti-Blackness in 1950s Philadelphia. The play centers the trials and tribulations of the male protagonist, Troy Maxson, as he struggles to provide for his family and reckon with his deferred dream of being a professional baseball player in the Major leagues. The characters in the novel each have their own individual literal and metaphorical barrier that prevents them from pursuing and accomplishing their own dreams. Therefore, there is a literal and figurative fence in the novel that also mirrors each character's relationship with love in the play. In *Fences*, Wilson constructs the motifs of women and death to develop the theme of love and articulate that socio-economic, gender, and racial barriers shape the ways that Black Americans love each other.

Throughout *Fences*, Wilson gradually assembles the motif of women to convey that Black women experience both gender and racial marginalization that hinders their ability to love themselves and demand respect from their partners. There are three main women in *Fences*: Rose, Raynell, and Alberta. Rose, the female protagonist, is Troy Maxson's wife and largely acts as both his confidant and the mediator between him and his children. Wilson depicts Rose in a primarily servant role which reflects the stereotypical ideas of the ostensibly good wife who wears her servitude as a badge of honor, and supports the assumption that Black women owe their husbands dedication to their families in exchange for their love. For instance, Rose's opening lines reveal that "[she's] cooking up some chicken [and has] some ... collard greens" which introduces Rose as a server to her family and sets the tone for her presence in the play (I.i). Wilson further insulates Rose into a servile role when Bono states that "Rose'll keep [Troy] straight [when he] get[s] off the track [and that] she'll straighten [her husband] up" which asserts that she loves Troy as a protector and server (I.iv). Rose tries to mend Troy and Cory's broken

relationship by communicating to Troy that ‘everything that boy do[es] ... he do[es] for [Troy]’ which does not fix their issues due to Troy’s fixation on a tough-love parenting style (I.ii). Rose does not emerge as her own person until later on in the play when Troy confronts her about his infidelity that results in Alberta’s pregnancy (I.i). Wilson utilizes Troy’s confession about his infidelity to assert that Rose’s faults as a wife and woman were not the cause of his sins, and that Troy’s dissatisfaction with his life and meager accomplishments leads him to disrespect his marriage. Troy does not know how to love Rose because he has only experienced a violent form of love from his own father and believes that loving Rose and his family means financial support — nothing more. Rose asserts her value and sacrifices to her family when she states that “[Troy is] always talking about what [he] give[s] ... and what [he] do[es]n’t have to give [despite the fact that he] take[s] too ... and do[es]n’t even know [that] nobody’s giving” (II.i). This pivots Rose away from her obligations to Troy and allows her to choose her role in her family despite Troy’s expectations of her. Rose’s revelation of Troy’s ignorance about his family obligations does not negate all of the sacrifices that she makes for her family. It is important to note that Rose eventually chooses to accept Raynell into her home after her mother dies and raises her as her own; this emphasizes Rose’s capacity for empathy and love as well as her ability to make the best of her mistreatment. By welcoming Raynell into her home and raising her as her daughter, Rose refuses to be burdened by Troy’s mistreatment, and chooses to instead “relive a part of her life” (II.v). Rose’s choice to raise Raynell is also her last act of love towards Troy and arguably the biggest act of love toward herself. She chooses to give herself another chance at becoming the mother she aspires to be and rid herself of her Troy’s burdens. Raynell’s existence as a girl allows Rose to raise a daughter who will have all of the knowledge and agency she desires and highlights the importance of a woman’s love for her family. Nevertheless, women have a multi-

faceted role in *Fences* as burdens and fixers and are able to receive the love that they deserve by choosing their own happiness.

Moreover, Wilson develops the motif of death throughout *Fences* to articulate that fate is not defined by societal barriers. Death acts as its own character throughout *Fences* as both a literal event and a literal manifestation of all of the characters' deferred dreams. Wilson conveys Troy's fearlessness about death when he states that "[he's] done seen death [and] done wrestled with him" and repeatedly taunts death during his conversation with Bono (I.i). Troy goes on to state that he intends to "build a fence around what's [his]" after Alberta dies having his child (II.ii). Wilson makes Troy's immediate decision to finish the fence around the Mason household to emphasize that Troy sees his love for his family as a physical servitude void of any emotional support. Wilson also utilizes Alberta's death to imply that Troy's infidelity outside of the fence around his family harms both his family and causes Alberta's death. Troy dies playing baseball which shows that he is able to choose his own way of dying and take ownership of his own life and shows that he is not free from death due to his fence, and he ultimately loses control of his destiny (II.iv). Wilson's articulation of death as both a fate and a motivator to deconstruct the barriers that separate people from their dreams brilliantly highlights the function of death in *Fences*. Wilson also constructs the motif of death to act as a reflection of Troy's desire to protect himself and his family from the violence of anti-Blackness in America which further conveys that Black Americans are burdened by outside factors that negatively affect their relationship with love.

In conclusion, Wilson constructs the motif of women and death in *Fences* to convey the socioeconomic, racial, and gender barriers that hinder Black Americans from loving themselves and their families without harm. Wilson's depiction of death as a motivator and unattainable

event emphasizes the pursuit of racially marginalized people to control their fate because they often have so little control of everything else; this in turn causes a negative relationship with love as it becomes more of a liability than a gift for oneself and others. Ironically, Wilson depicts the women in the play as both subordinate and decisive figures who ultimately control the actions of others — as shown in Rose's convincing of Corey to attend his father's funeral and Raynell's union their family. The women in *Fences* are burdened with the responsibility to love the men in their families and support them despite their abuse. Wilson allows the women in his play to find the love that they deserve by simply being themselves and making small sacrifices for the men in their lives. *Fences* is not only an expert commentary on the lives of working-class Black Americans but also a deep insight into the lifelong search for agency and love for Black Americans.