and management in states such as Montana and Nevada and suggest the boom-to-bust economies of such places.

Rich vivifies her poem with much of herself and her friends (there is a strong autobiographical component that Dickie is right to notice). But to gain a fuller sense of what Rich, a serious student of American history, is up to in a poem depicting a self-damaging nation, readers must accept the challenge of recollecting lost sites and recurring patterns in American history.

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NOTE

1. The double spacing between certain words, here and later, is Rich's.

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Wilson's FENCES

It is easy to make the case that August Wilson's play *Fences* is a tragedy and that Troy Maxson is its tragic protagonist. Few comedies end with a funeral, and there is no denying that Troy's character and life are the stuff of tragedy. But Wilson's vision is much larger than Troy's heroic side, his deeds and omissions. Troy, for all his strengths, is flawed humanity in need of grace and forgiveness.

Such grace and forgiveness are the spirit of true comedy, and a case can be made for viewing *Fences* as a comedy or, perhaps, a metacomedy. The term is taken from Christopher Isherwood, who took it from Gerald Heard: "I think 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' [. . .]" (421).

Metacomedy, then, is 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. For a religious person, metacomedy is what

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Christopher Fry called a "narrow escape into faith" and a belief in "a universal cause for delight" (17). Fry's metaphor for life is a book of alternating pages of tragedy and comedy. As we read (that is, live) the book, we are anxious about what the last page will be. The comic vision holds that on the last page all will be resolved in laughter (17). The essence, therefore, of metacomedy is hope, and *Fences* is a lesson in hope.

First there is hope for a better future for African Americans and by extension, for all humankind. If we view Troy's earthly life as an autonomous whole, we are looking at an ultimately tragic book of life. But if we view Troy's life as a page in an ongoing saga, perhaps we can see it not only as a prelude to a happier time but as a success story of itself. George Meredith advises us that to love comedy we must know human beings well enough "not to expect too much of them though you may still hope for good" (325). What should a realist expect of Troy Maxson, who was abandoned by his mother at age eight, fled a brutal, lustful father at age fourteen, began to steal for a living, and served fifteen years on a murder charge? One can only hope for some measure of good, and Troy exceeds a realist's expectations. He holds a steady but disagreeable job as a garbage collector, supports a wife and son, stays sober six days a week, wins his own private civil-rights battle to become a driver, and remains faithful to Rose for eighteen years before he falls.

Moreover, August Wilson presents us with a multigenerational vision in which our sense of waste is more than balanced by an infusion of hope. *Fences* is about the always imperfect quest for true manhood. Troy's father was less of a "true" man than Troy, but he was a worker and a provider. Troy, even as a runaway, carried with him his father's virtues along with a considerable lessening of the father's harshness and promiscuity. To Troy's credit he can appreciate his father's legacy and forgive his evil side: "But I'll say this for him [. . .] he felt a responsibility toward us. [. . .] he could have walked off and left us [. . .] made his own way" (716).

It is Troy's capacity for gratitude and forgiveness that his son Cory must internalize on the morning of Troy's funeral. After a seven-year absence, the young man has returned in his marine uniform, proudly wearing his corporal's stripes. There is an aura of maturity about him but also a lingering bitterness—he refuses to attend his father's funeral. Troy's mother, Rose, articulates the deep truth that Cory does not want to face.

> *Rose.* You just like him. You got him in you good.
> *Cory.* Don't tell me that, Mama.
> *Rose.* You Troy Maxson all over again.
> *Cory.* I don't want to be Troy Maxson. I want to be me.
> *Rose.* You can't be nobody but who you are, Cory [. . .]. (729)

Rose's words, wise as they are, would have been ineffectual without the catalyst of Raynell, Troy's illegitimate daughter now seven years old, whom Cory

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meets for the first time. Together they sing a song about Troy's boyhood dog, Old Blue. The song is a cultural legacy that bridges the generations, a legacy created by Troy's father and passed on through Troy to Cory and Raynell. Cory's casual "You go in the house and change them shoes like Mama told you so we can go to Papa's funeral" (730) is the only indication that he has accepted and forgiven his father. Cory is able to accept the Troy within himself and begin to build on it. *Fences* is ultimately forward looking, as comedy must be.

But the play does not end with Cory's transformation. When the family is about to leave for the funeral, Troy's simpleminded brother Gabe attempts three times to blow his trumpet, signaling St. Peter to open the gates for Troy. The trumpet has no mouthpiece; no sound comes from it, and Gabe is "exposed to a frightful realization." But his weakness is his strength.

> (. . . It is a trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to withstand. He begins to dance. A slow, strange dance, eerie and life-giving. A dance of atavistic signature and ritual. LYONS attempts to embrace him. GABRIEL pushes LYONS away. 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.) (730–31)

Gabe then utters the closing line of the play: "That's the way that go!"

There has been little commentary thus far on how the play's ending is to be understood. Yvonne Shafer merely describes this "climactic event" without interpreting it (22). Mark William Rocha, in his discussion of "black madness," sheds important light on Gabe, stating that "August Wilson's conception of madness is born of an avowedly African sensibility that perceives banishment itself as *the* act of madness. Why? Because banishment of the madman denies the community a dialogue with madness which is vital." Rocha adds,

> [Madness] thus gives access to a completely moral universe. . . . Gabriel is included because he is valued as a teller, even if his story seems as inexplicable as the one a tribal African might receive from the god Esu. To the African Americans in Wilson's telling communities, inexplicability is an interpretive problem for the listener, not a sign of the teller's disfunction. (193)

Gabe's shift from the angel's trumpet to a "dance of atavistic signature and ritual" could be taken as the rejection of Christianity explicit in the character Levee of Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Bottom* and Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. This rejection is convincingly stated by Sandra Shannon, whose generalization includes even *Fences*: "Quite noticeable in each of August Wilson's plays is the cynical regard for Christianity in the lives of his African American men" (138). But the vision of *Fences* is broader than that, embracing the

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comic value of inclusiveness. Though Troy's "religion" may be Social Darwinism (Shannon 136), Rose sings out her Christianity: "Jesus build a fence around me every day" (Wilson 707), and Shannon rightly notes that Gabe "proves to be the purest representation of those Christian virtues that Troy lacks" (135).

The androgynous Gabe is central to the metacomedy of *Fences*. Brain-damaged in World War II, Gabe carries a battered trumpet, thinks of himself as the angel Gabriel, reports on conversations with St. Peter, and claims to have seen Troy's name in the book of life. He plays a most complex role in Wilson's drama. Like Rose—perhaps more than Rose—he personifies unconditional love. His practice of salvaging defective fruits from the garbage identifies him as a redeemer figure. He is also a Christlike scapegoat, first in being wounded in World War II, then when arrested for chasing some boys who tormented him. He is also the wise fool in the tradition of Parsifal, Don Quixote, and Gimpel, living the right values while being looked down on by his moral inferiors. There is an old tradition that went out with the advance of science which held that the feebleminded were close to God and worthy of special respect. The decline of that respect is mirrored in the etymology of the word *cretin*, a corruption of the French *Chrétien*—Christian—"used at first for the goiterous idiots who during the Middle Ages inhabited the high Alpine meadows" (Adams 296). Gabe is such a *Chrétien*, and that tradition of the holy simple-minded underlies his salvific presence at the play's end.

His vision of transcendence is beyond the power of a "sane and normal mind" as the world would understand those words. The "atavistic signature" is that of the shaman of his ancestral past, a figure who is "life-giving" as a conduit of spiritual power and vision while in a trancelike state. "It's not a question of going back to Africa," Wilson stated. "It's to understand the Africa that's in you, [. . .]" (Wilson, interview 173). Thus, though Troy is central to Wilson's story, Gabe is central to Wilson's vision and paradoxically his most complex character. The simpleton is simultaneously scapegoat, wise fool, shaman, Christian mystic, and an angel wakening the dead to life. Wilson's metacomedy comes to a close as Gabe turns to the last page of the book of life and reveals it to be profoundly comic, witnessing a universal cause for delight.

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