



## **Toward a Democratic Literature: The Study of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Wilson's *Twentieth Century Cycle* in the Twenty-first Century**

Curriculum Unit 08.04.05  
by Matthew S. Monahan

### **Section One: Introduction**

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#### **1.1 Statement of Context**

I was introduced to the work of August Wilson in my first year of teaching professionally at the Choir Academy of Harlem in New York City in the 2005-2006 academic year which coincidentally was the year of Wilson's death. Although Wilson had become a prominent American playwright by the mid-nineteen eighties, winning the Pulitzer for Drama in both 1987 and 1990, he was a virtual unknown in parts of the South, specifically southwest Virginia, where I attended high school. And even though as an undergraduate English major at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) I studied creative writing with the luminary poet Nikki Giovanni my Introduction to Theatre course and other elective courses failed to give cursory attention to or even mention Wilson, of whom *The Times* said:

AUGUST WILSON was not only the finest black dramatist America has yet produced but a dramatist whom posterity may well rate alongside Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller as one of his nation's most important. The cycle of plays for which he will be remembered each set in a different decade of the 20th century, each chronicling a particular aspect of Afro-American history combines subtlety and weight, humour, pathos and a profound sympathy for small, seemingly insignificant people trapped by forces they seldom understand and usually are powerless to resist, let alone overcome ( *The Times* , October 4, 2005).

My students' successes in the classroom while studying Wilson's *Fences* this first year in Harlem led me to seek out as many class sets of Wilson's works as I could get my hands on. My students were able to identify with the characters in Wilson's plays and as a result they discussed and wrote with greater enthusiasm and passion than before. His works took on even greater significance when I relocated to New Haven, Connecticut.

I began teaching at Wilbur Cross Annex High School (WCAHS) in the fall of 2006. WCAHS was a credit retrieval

program whose student body consisted mainly of individuals who had suffered from chronic absenteeism or behavioral issues. One of my greatest classroom management tools became the study of drama and the drama of Wilson specifically. The reason that Wilson's works took on greater significance upon my relocation is that many of them were first produced at the Yale Repertory Theatre located at the corner of Chapel and York Streets. Additionally, many of these works were first directed by Lloyd Richards, dean of the Yale School of Drama. Wilson's body of work referred to as his Century Cycle is set in Pittsburgh, which has more in common with New Haven than New York.

## 1.2 Descriptive Overview and Long Term Plan

What do we mean by the term democracy? Once the question is raised it may be extended to what is democratic literature? Tocqueville asserted, "Drama brings out most of the good qualities, and almost all of the defects inherent in democratic literature...." He also made the claim, "There are no dramatic subjects in a country [the US] which has witnessed no great political catastrophes, and in which love leads by a straight and easy road to matrimony" (Tocqueville 2000).

Of course he made his observations more than thirty years prior to the Civil War, and one may argue that we have put many miles of road between our Puritanical roots and our current state in the past century and a half. And so, if we have grown as a nation and as a democracy, does it not stand to reason that we have cultivated a democratic literature?

This unit was initially conceived as an in-depth comparison of seminal works by the American playwrights August Wilson and Arthur Miller. Early research has proven this to be too narrow a frame, as it has been convincingly argued that while there are "simplistic comparisons of basic plot lines and character schematics" Wilson was not consciously emulating Miller's *Death of A Salesman* when writing his play *Fences*, but rather "has been drawn, nevertheless, to the same view of those American problems of morality identity and freedom" (Abbotson 1997). As a result this unit will more thoroughly examine the role the dramatic arts have played historically and continue to play in our society. Working from collaboratively constructed definitions of democracy and democratic literature students will pay some brief attention to the role theatre going played in Elizabethan England. Although students will later read and critically view works of modern and contemporary American drama, a basic understanding of the theatre's role in Aristocratic England will aid in their determination as to whether or not America's playwrights have been able to create democratic literature.

Before reading and viewing the plays students will continue their examination of the history of theatre by concentrating on the nineteenth century, as described by Luc Sante, and the later Federal Theatre Project (FTP) which ran from 1935 until 1939. Sante pays particularly close attention to the evolution of theatre in New York, observing,

The duality of Broadway and anti-Broadway [the Bowery] began in the mists of New York's theatrical history, around the end of the eighteenth century... Broadway was the theatre of the bourgeoisie, the standard, the temple, while the Bowery was the circus of the masses (Sante 1991).

Further exploration of this phenomenon coupled with the FTP will lead students to ask the following types of questions: What if any, is the relationship between democracy and capitalism? Can democracy be better achieved or more thoroughly realized in a socialist society?

Once students have begun arriving at such questions they will view *The Piano Lesson* . Students will read *King Hedley II* August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize for Drama nominee of 2000. *Hedley* is set in the Hill section of Pittsburgh during the era of Reagan led democracy. The setting of this play may be of particular interest to students in New Haven as we have a similar neighborhood also referred to as the Hill. The titular character is not completely dissimilar to that of Walter Lee Younger in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* , a work with which many of my students have prior knowledge. *Hedley* is an American tragedy, the story of a man whose attempts at attaining the American dream are thwarted time and time again often due to circumstances of class and race. This will lead students to ask whether or not a society or nation that either allows or forces individuals to live in substandard conditions based on such criteria may be considered democratic. This in turn begs the question: can individuals hold and promote democratic ideals in societies that are not necessarily democratic?

Extending the theme of democracy to democracy in the classroom there will be a limited number of choices for students regarding their culminating activity. Each final project will include a written component, either an essay or a one-act play. The culminating project will also include at least one other medium to be presented in class. Other media include visual art, performance, oral presentation/public speaking etc.

## Section Two: General Guide

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### 2.1 Special Issues

Although students will be engaged in reading and critically viewing materials that deal with mature subject matter (i.e. extra-marital affairs resulting in childbirth, incarceration, episodes of violence etc.) and use a great deal of language that may be considered objectionable by some audiences, none of the works included contain nudity or sexually explicit visuals. This being said, facilitators interested in implementing this unit in whole or in part may wish to inform their students of the use of such language and themes before embarking on a course of study that includes these materials. As previously stated this unit is designed for use in the secondary English classroom tenth grade and above; however, upper level classes may contain students who object to these materials on religious or other grounds. In such cases, especially in relation to *Hedley* , it is advisable to provide alternative assignments. As Maynard stated:

If there is any rule to follow when selecting controversial films [dramas or other media] for the classroom, it must be to consider your students first. A teacher should know his class before he tries anything of a disputable nature (Maynard 1971).

Another issue to consider is that sophomores may have encountered *Fences* as freshmen. If this indeed the case I would propose studying another work from the cycle possibly *Seven Guitars* or *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in its stead.

## 2.2 Aims: Objectives and Goals

By completion of this unit of study students will be able to do the following: work individually and cooperatively in defining democracy and related terms, have an understanding of the role that theatre played in the Aristocratic society of Elizabethan England, understand and appreciate the development of the institution of theatre in the United States of America, read and appreciate multiple works by playwright August Wilson, analyze both literary elements and historical significance of these works and develop theories that relate these dramas to their own lives and to the current American sociopolitical landscape.

## Section Three: Unit Description

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### 3.1 Outline: Texts and Methods

Before embarking on an in-depth study of Wilson's Century Cycle and Miller's *Death of A Salesman* students will be exposed to the writings of Tocqueville, Beckerman, and Sante. Tocqueville will be the lens through which all subsequent conversations are framed. For points of contrast in terms of theatre pre- and postdating *Democracy in America* students will read "Shakespeare's Theatre" (Beckerman 1969) and "The Lights" (Sante 1991).

After reading Beckerman and Sante students will critically view the Ford's Theatre/Lincoln assassination scene from D. W. Griffith's controversial *The Birth of A Nation*. Although the film later paints a rather distorted view of Reconstruction and even goes as far as to glorify the Klan, the scene is an undisputed classic of cinema. Not only does it accurately depict theatre going in 1860s America but it also recreates an extremely important event in America's democratic history. After murdering the individual who is often given sole credit for the Emancipation of America's slaves the actor turned assassin leaps on stage to proclaim, "Sic semper tyrannus!" (Griffith 1915). This Latin phrase is the motto of my home state of Virginia and is often misquoted as meaning "Death to all tyrants!" However, its proper translation is "thus ever (or always) to tyrants" a phrase attributed to Marcus Junius Brutus.

In addition to Griffith a clip from Olivier's *Henry V* to complement students' reading of Beckerman will be useful. The film begins with a sweeping pan over a model of Stratford-Upon-Avon. The camera movement hones in on a path to the Globe Theatre. A smooth transition between model shot and live action follows. Inside The Globe spectators settle in while actors preparing to perform change into their costumes. This clip will serve as an excellent depiction of life at The Globe while exposing students to both authentic Shakespearean dialogue and the work of Olivier an important figure in the history of theatre.

In the interests of time, as this is a unit six weeks in duration students will read *The Piano Lesson* independently; however, these same students will concurrently critically view and react through discussion and writing to the Hallmark Hall of Fame adaptation starring original cast member Charles S. Dutton. *The Piano Lesson* is set in 1936, the era of the FTP. Although it depicts the economic troubles of the times it also emphasizes the inequities that African Americans faced on an everyday basis. The film will be shown in class

during the third week of the unit after students have completed reading both *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson* .

Upon completion of these studies students will read Miller. Although *Death of A Salesman* was a contemporary play (set in the time that it was written i.e. the late 1940s) it may be useful to consider this as a point of contrast with Wilson's body of work, much of which falls into the subgenre of historical fiction. It is also of interest that although Wilson was consciously emulating Miller during his writing of *Fences* his protagonist Troy Maxson has almost as much in common with Steinbeck's Tom Joad as he does with Miller's Willie Loman. Maxson, like Joad, was the son of a sharecropper albeit an African American sharecropper. Maxson, also like Joad, served time in the penitentiary for killing a man. And last but certainly not least both Maxson and Joad, reformed criminals as they were, both stood up for the rights of the workingman. Although students will not be reading Steinbeck as part of this unit I intend to introduce works by Woody Guthrie as part of our discussion of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) as an aside to our discussion of the FTP. The Guthrie works to which I refer are "The Ballad of Tom Joad, Parts I and II." Introduction of these works might also be appropriate as part of our study of *The Piano Lesson* as it is similarly set during the Great Depression.

The play *Fences* spans the eight-year period from 1957 to 1965. This period roughly encompasses the beginning of the Civil Rights movement up through America's involvement in the Viet Nam War. Its protagonist is Troy Maxson, an African American garbage collector living in the Hill section of Pittsburgh. At the very beginning of Act One Troy demands his natural rights by posing the question "Why?" Why, he asks his employer Mr. Rand do only whites get to drive the trucks while the black workers are relegated to quite literally doing the heavy lifting. Not long after this revelation are we exposed to one of Troy's main points of comparison to Miller's titular character, Troy is a philanderer. "Don't never let nobody tell you Troy Maxson don't eye the woman" (Wilson 1986). This of course is Troy referring to himself in the third person while employing the vernacular of the "common man."

A point of contrast in the telling of the two stories is that Wilson's drama is fairly linear and does not rely as heavily on flashbacks as Miller's work. In affect the rift has not been created between father and son at the play's onset. Instead, most of the initial tension between Troy and his son Cory stems from Cory's desire to play organized sport, football specifically. It is said that Cory is even good enough that he has piqued the interests of college recruiters. Now why Troy does not view sport as access to higher education as a positive is unclear; however, it is later revealed that the older Maxson was an accomplished athlete in his younger years. He is however embittered that his professional baseball career did not extend beyond the time of segregation. Troy played in the Negro League. Troy is embittered by his past experience and projects his defeatist attitude onto his young son, the aspiring athlete. This is in stark contrast to Willy's delusions of grandeur regarding his son Biff that students will later encounter when they read Miller.

Another major difference in the stories of Loman and Maxson is that Willy's wife Linda remains by his side whereas Troy's wife Rose agrees to care for his daughter from another woman and continues to live in the same house as him but refuses to share a bed with him after it is revealed that he has had an affair with Alberta. Although the wives choose to deal with their husbands' infidelities in very different ways both plays suggest that there are social and economic forces at work that promote feelings of inadequacy and in turn lead these men into the arms of women other than their respective wives. In addition to his current affair Troy has fathered a son Lyons by a woman he was with prior to his courtship of Rose. All of this sleeping around is a far cry from America's puritanical roots cited by Tocqueville as a major shortcoming of our national dramatic arts.

*Fences* concludes with a scene of the Maxson family preparing to attend Troy's funeral. Cory who only a scene

earlier became estranged from his father has returned home a Corporal in the US Marines. This flash-forward places the action at the onset of America's involvement in Viet Nam. *Fences* is the first of many times that Wilson will choose to fly the banner of the common man's heroism as Miller so eloquently stated, "It is time, I think, that we without kings took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time- the heart and spirit of the average man" (Miller 1993).

It is not without a hint of irony that Wilson chose to name his titular character King Hedley II. Once again in alignment with Miller's belief "that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were," Wilson's Hedley is no monarch but rather another former criminal living in the Hill. Hedley, not unlike Loman, is a dreamer. His main aspiration is to raise enough capital to open a video rental store specializing in martial arts films.

Hedley is anything but passive in what he is willing to do to achieve his goal; everything from being involved in the sale of grey market refrigerators to the holding up of a jewelry store. On more than one occasion he denounces such practices but at the same time rationalizes them by making the claim that his status as both an ex-con and as a black man bar him from more legitimate means of raising sufficient funds.

Now that students have studied a significant portion of Wilson's Century-Cycle and have been exposed to Miller's philosophy as expressed in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," it is fitting that our studies turn to the work that arguably started it all, *Death of a Salesman*. The study of this particular work is extremely well suited for junior level/eleventh grade English Language Arts, as one of the New Haven School District's significant tasks is to define and express what it is to be an American. Miller's play, written in 1949, chronicles the demise of Willy Loman, an aging salesman who has fallen victim to his own misconceptions of, for the lack of a better term, the American dream.

Loman is well aware of the opportunities and material trappings that America has to offer; however, he is either unaware of, or unwilling to recognize, the importance of the protestant work ethic. At Loman's center is the belief that it is not what you know, or how willing you are to work hard, but who you know and how well you are liked that really matter.

WILLY: That's just what I mean. Bernard can get the best marks in school y' understand, but when he gets out into the business world, y' understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance...(Miller 1949).

Loman is without a doubt a contrarian, as described by Thomas Berger in his novel *Little Big Man*, not as defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary*. Although Loman continually expresses the idea that hard work

is not necessary in order to attain success, and as a result should not be valued, he is described by Charley at the funeral as having been a hard worker, albeit not a very successful one. Contradictions are not limited to Willy's actions, but are also in evidence in his speech. "Chevrolet, Linda, is the greatest car ever built," is shortly followed by, "That goddam Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car!" (Miller 1949)

Planned obsolescence and installment plans are recurring themes in both Miller and Wilson. Troy Maxson's story about purchasing furniture from the devil is very much akin to, if not reminiscent of, Willy's desire to own something outright before having to replace it. "I'm always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it's on its last legs.... They time those things... (Miller 1949)."

Not unlike his car and his refrigerator, Willy is no longer useful, at least not in the eyes of Howard, the owner of the company where Willy has worked for the past thirty-four years. Arguably of even greater importance, is Willy's inability to comprehend the value his own life. He is only able to view himself as a source of financial stability for his family. When he is no longer able to earn a living, he in effect, loses his desire to live.

Yet another contradictory action is in evidence when Willy's pride will not allow him to go to work for Charley; however, this same foolish pride does not bar him from accepting money from Charley. Willy insists that the money is a loan, but both the audience and Charley are aware of the fact that it is simply a handout. One might ask, why is it so important that Willy be able to pay his bills when he has already set his mind on suicide? In the same scene it is revealed that paying his insurance premium is his first priority.

A major difference in Willy and Troy from *Fences*, is that Willy has no fight left him. This is true from the onset, and is revealed in Act I when Linda tells Happy and Biff about Willy's various suicide attempts, intentionally driving his car off a bridge and adding a nipple and a rubber hose to the gas supply line to the hot water heater.

Willy and Troy may have similar flaws when it comes to their handling of interpersonal relationships, but one must argue, that at least in death, Willy's story is an infinitely more pessimistic one. Although one may view Willy's suicide as a denouncement of American values and culture, Miller's view cannot be assessed in terms of Willy's suicide alone. To find a more hopeful appraisal of the American condition in Miller, one must look no further than to Willy's eldest son, Biff. Biff initially appears to be haunted by the same demons as his father, those of self-doubt and identity crisis. However unlike Willy, Biff, presaging the Beat generation, is able to overcome his neuroses and assess his self-worth on his own terms.

As a final analysis, I would argue that both Wilson and Miller have successfully created examples of democratic literature. With their realistic representations of the lives of everyday working class Americans, each offers a blend of criticism and celebration of our sociopolitical system, our history and ultimately, our way of life. In turn, both Wilson and Miller have demonstrated that the difficulties of American morality and identity transcend racial and, at least to some degree, socioeconomic boundaries. Their work further demonstrates that America has come a long way since it could be, and was said, that we as a nation have experienced "no political hardships," and that we are a nation in which "love leads to a straight and narrow [trouble-free] road to matrimony [and beyond]" (Tocqueville 2000).

## **3.2 Details: Sample Lesson Plans**

### *3.2.1 Text Rendering August Wilson's Obituary*

**Journal/Motivation:** Interpret, agree or disagree, and provide an example in support of the following quotation: “We are born brave, trusting and greedy, and most of us remain greedy.”

**Aim:** How can we begin to frontload our reading of August Wilson’s *Century Cycle* by text rendering his obituary from *The Times* ?

**Mini Lesson :**

*Obituary* - A published notice of a death, sometimes with a brief biography of the deceased.

*Text rendering* - the practice of individually highlighting or underlining interesting, new and or confusing words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs in a text with the aim of discussing these words and word strings as a group/whole class.

**Workshop:**

A. Students read and render August Wilson’s obituary from the October 4, 2005 *New York Times*.

B. Comprehension and Analysis:

1. Not only was August Wilson considered to be the “finest black dramatist America has ever produced” but he was also compared to whom?
2. Wilson’s cycle of plays are set during what years?
3. Why might it be considered ironic that Wilson is our greatest “black dramatist”?
4. Why did Wilson drop out of school at age 15?
5. What did Wilson do while skipping school?
6. During this time Wilson dreamed of becoming part of what twentieth century- movement in Arts and Letters? Can you name at least one person associated with this movement?
7. Although not mentioned in his obituary Wilson had his first big break at the same theatre where his last major work *Radio Golf* was performed in spring 2004; where was this?
8. Although Wilson is referred to as a dramatist throughout the obituary, the final two lines use what synonym of dramatist as his title?

**Summary and Review**

Homework

Begin reading Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* (Act One, Scene 1 pp. 1-28). QWRR (Quick Write Reader



Response) one paragraph minimum.

### 3.2.2 Starter Lesson for *The Piano Lesson*

**Journal/Motivation:** Although you are to read the bulk of Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* independently and outside of the classroom, we shall embark on this journey as a class. Before we begin reading you are to individually describe your feelings toward reparations. Reparations are literally:

1. acts or processes of repairing or the condition of being repaired. **2.** acts or processes of making amends; expiation. **3.** Something done or paid to compensate or make amends. **4. reparations** Compensation or remuneration required from a defeated or mistreated nation or people as indemnity for damage or injury during a war or other institutional injustice such as systemized slavery.

**Aim :** How can we read and appreciate a work by our nation's leading Black dramatist August Wilson and identify and analyze his use of literary allusion in the process?

#### **Mini Lesson:**

Literary Allusion

#### **Workshop:**

A. Students continue to read Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* .

B. Reflection and Analysis (Act I, Scene i):

1. What is the relationship between Boy Willie and Berniece? How far does Boy Willie claim he has come to see her?
2. According to Boy Willie who "got" Sutter? What is said to have happened to Sutter?
3. Why did Limon and Boy Willie find this tragic event humorous?
4. What literary allusion does Lymon make?
5. What might the cost of Lymon's truck tell us about the setting?
6. What conflict is revealed on page 9, Act I, Scene i? Why does Boy Willie want to sell the piano?
7. For how long has Berniece been mourning her dead husband?

#### **Summary and Review**

Homework:

IR (Independent Reading)/ *The Piano Lesson* and QWRR (Quick Write Readers Response). Please note that over the course of the next two weeks you will be expected to complete your reading of the play. You must complete the reading in order to fully participate in discussing the film adaptation that we shall critically view in class.

### 3.2.3 Sample Lesson for use with Act One of Wilson's *Fences*:

**Journal/Motivation:** "It's not our disadvantages or shortcomings that are ridiculous, but rather the studious way we try to hide them, and our desire to act as if they did not exist" (Giacomo Leopardi).

#### **Word of the Day:**

pestilence

SYLLABICATION: pes·ti·lence

NOUN: **1.** A usually fatal epidemic disease, especially bubonic plague. **2.** A pernicious, evil influence or agent.

**Aim:** How can we identify and analyze the use of personification and literary allusion in Act One, Scene One of Wilson's *Fences* ?

#### **Mini Lesson:**

##### ***Personification-***

Literary device- *personification* , in Act One, Scene One, of August Wilson's play *Fences* the playwright uses personification. Personification is when the writer ascribes human qualities or attributes to an animal, a thing, or concept.

Review of *allusion*- a literary device by which an author, through narration or character dialogue, makes an offhand or casual reference to an earlier well-known literary work especially the Bible or Mythology. Likewise there is at least one example of allusion in Wilson's play *Fences* .

#### **Class Work:**

Whole Class begins to read Act One.

**Pairs/Small Groups** , although you are to work cooperatively in formulating your answers and opinions each group member is individually responsible for having responses in his or her English notebook.

#### **Leveled Questions:**

A. Short answer/reading comprehension

1. What do Troy and Bono do for a living?
2. What is Troy's "beef" with Mr. Rand? How does this relate to natural and or "civil" rights?
3. Why does Lyons choose to visit his father on Friday evening?

## B. Applied knowledge of literary terms

1. What animal, object, or concept is personified in Act One, Scene One?
2. Although allusion usually involves a reference to the Bible or Mythology (esp. Greek or Roman), the character of Bono makes an offhanded remark comparing Troy to what literary figure (also Act One, Scene One)?

## C. Questions for further analysis

1. The personification of death is so frequently occurring in literature that it borders on cliché, do you think Wilson's use of the device is particularly effective? What insights does his example provide his readers into the character of Troy?
2. In your reading of the playwright August Wilson's obituary you learned that his work is mainly concerned with the lives of African Americans, how might have this influenced his choice of allusion? Would his use of the device have been as effective had he chosen to refer to a work other than Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* ?

Share

Summary/Review

### Homework:

Finish answering questions from class work and continue reading Act One.

Extra Credit- research and write a paragraph describing your findings as to the significance of Joel Chandler Harris. Why did I choose this figure for this assignment?

### 3.2.4 Other Sample Activities to be used with Wilson and Miller

**Journal/Motivation:** Like most words in the English language the word democracy has multiple meanings. The US fits the first definition, "a government by the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives"; however, one might argue that the US does not exhibit characteristics consistent with the alternative definition, "a place where there is social equality and respect for the individual within the community." What do you think? Is there social equality here in the US? Explain. Response is to be recorded in your English notebook.

### Word of the Day:

**plutocracy** NOUN: **1.** Government by the wealthy. **2.** A wealthy class that controls a government. **3.** A government or state in which the wealthy rule.

If you did not use the WOTD in your response to the Journal/Motivation take a moment to write an original

sentence in which you demonstrate its proper use.

**Journal/Motivation:** Today in your Journal you are to make a text-to-self connection. We know that Troy feels ambivalence about his relationship with his brother Gabe ( *Fences* ). Write about a time you felt ambivalence toward something.

**Word of the Day:**

ambivalence NOUN: **1.** The coexistence of opposing attitudes or feelings, such as love and hate, toward a person, object, or idea. **2.** Uncertainty or indecisiveness as to which course to follow.

**Journal/Motivation:** While reading Wilson’s *Fences* you may have noticed that the character of Troy likes to use clichés (a cliché is an over-used or trite expression/figure of speech) esp. “I don’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.” Although this particular cliché is dated in its reference to the time before indoor plumbing, what is Troy saying when he uses this catchphrase? What clichés or catchphrases do you hear today? Jot a list.

**Word of the Day:**

trite ADJECTIVE: **1.** Lacking power to evoke interest through overuse or repetition; hackneyed. **2.** *Archaic* Frayed or worn out by use.

## Section 4: Assessment

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Students participating in this unit of study will receive grades representing their level of content competency and the amount of effort demonstrated through both written assignments and level of participation in class. In order to receive full credit for participation students must come to class prepared. In effect all students are expected to complete all outside reading assignments. Compliance will be judged through both quick writes and subsequent in class discussions.

The culminating project shall constitute fifty percent of the student’s grade over the six-week period: the writing piece thirty-five percent and other media/presentation component fifteen percent. Studentship and in-class participation shall reflect twenty percent. The remaining thirty percent will be divided amongst homework and quiz grades.

## Appendix: Links to English and Language Arts Standards Covered by Unit

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The culminating project requires that students fulfill Connecticut State Grade 10 Power Standard 3.2.f Publish and/or present in a myriad of ways, including the use of arts and technology. Additionally throughout the course of implementation students will fulfill the following: 1.1.e Draw conclusions and use evidence to substantiate them by using text heard (i.e. Guthrie), read (i.e. Wilson, Miller et al) and viewed (i.e. Olivier, Griffith and Wilson), 1.3.c Analyze the meaning of words and phrases in context (i.e. text rendering of Wilson’s

*The Times* obituary), 2.1.d Analyze literary conventions and devices an author uses and how they contribute meaning and appeal (i.e. Workshops associated with the reading of Wilson and Miller). Other standards covered by the study of Wilson and Miller are 2.4.d Discuss and evaluate themes and connections that cross cultures and 1.2.d Make, support and defend judgments about texts.

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## Films

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The Birth of a Nation (USA, D.W. Griffith, 1917)

Henry V (UK, Laurence Olivier, 1946)

The Piano Lesson (USA, August Wilson, 1995)

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