

The Father-son Relationship in August Wilson's *Fences*
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Abstract:

August Wilson is the most successful African American playwright whose dramatic style has remained essentially realistic in comparison to the fragmented imagery of his contemporaries. His plays rely on realistic narrative and plot, their structure is clearly influenced by musical rhythms, particularly the blues, and is rooted in his youthful vocation as a poet, most evident in the dialogue of his very early plays. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the pros and cons of the father-son relationship and how it is affected by the changes of the society.

Fences is a powerful human drama written in 1986 which highlights the story of a tormented African American man living in the late 1950s and early 1960s whose past controls his sense of self-worth and his responsibility to his family. *Fences* is a play about father-son conflict, social injustices, marital challenges, responsibility, forgiveness, and the succession of sins as its opening epigraph states,

When the sins of our fathers visit us

We don't have to play host

We can banish them with forgiveness

As God, in his largeness and law's'.

With these words he instructs his audiences to recognize their father's frailties and seek away to forgive and understand them.

Fences is an important play because it secured Wilson's presence on Broadway, it also proved that another African-American playwright could meet the challenge and compose a traditional drama _ one that revolved around the actions of one character.

Fences chronicles the last eight years in the life of Troy Maxson and the effects of his decisions and actions upon his family. Troy is a former Negro League baseball star who now works as a trash collector and supports his family. His two sons, Cory and Lyons, are growing up in a world very different from Troy's. They do not necessarily share their father's values or his views on life and success, leading to misunderstanding and conflict. Troy's loyal wife Rose is trying to hold on to a sense of stability and keep her family together. Troy's brother Gabriel, who was injured in the World War II and collects government's assistance, lives with them, giving Troy his welfare cheque to assist with expenses. Gabriel has a metal plate implanted in his head and consequently experiences delusions that sometimes also qualify as insight. He believes that he is the Angel Gabriel, a role that becomes significant at Troy's funeral at the end of the play, when Gabriel blows his trumpet to 'tell St. Peter to open the gates'(2, 5,100)¹ of heaven.

From the play's exposition we learn that, at the age of 14, Troy Maxson walked 200 miles to Mobile, Alabama, and joined a group of southern migrants heading north. Once he reached the north, Troy, like many African-American transplants, found few if any of the promises that the destination promised. He was forced to steal in order to eat, and then after meeting the woman who would become his first wife and fathering a son, Lyons, he was forced to steal to feed three mouths. While stealing to feed his family, Troy commits murder and is sentenced to 15 years in the state

penitentiary. In the penitentiary Troy discovers the sport that he would use to explain his life, baseball, and after his release, he plays for a time in the American Negro Baseball League. During his incarceration, his first wife moved on without him; however, his luck improved when he met the woman who would become his second wife, Rose.

The play revolves around the actions of Troy. Troy is the principal character. He is fifty-three when the play begins. He has led a hard life, raised by an abusive father and later jailed for robbery and murder. During the fifteen years he spent in jail, Troy became an accomplished baseball player. But after his release from jail Troy was too old to play in the newly-integrated major leagues. He is bitter and resentful at the opportunities lost because of the color of his skin and is desperate to protect Cory from the same sort of disappointment.

Troy lives in the past and fails to recognize that the world has changed. His father was brutal and controlling, and although Troy loves Cory, he knows of no other way to bring up a son. Thus, he repeats the mistakes of the previous generation. Troy feels a need to control every element of his life and even declares that he will fight death if necessary. His affair with Alberta represents his attempt to escape the responsibility he feels for wife, son, and home. Unable to open up to those that he loves, Troy keeps much of his emotion inside, building imaginary fences between himself and his family and friends. While he realizes the financial responsibility of being the head of a family, he fails to grasp the emotional part of the job. Troy finally succeeds in isolating himself from his wife, his brother, his sons, and his friend. Troy is a failure and instead of admitting this fact and reconcile with it, he starts showing his anger on everyone around him. He

denies everything they like or feel good about. Cory is disallowed to play baseball because it is his choice and not his father's.

Family life of the 1950s was different from any other time in America's history. Many soldiers return home from the war and married young, in hopes to create simpler lives for them. For so many, this was the white American Dream. For African Americans, this dream was much harder to attain. For Troy Maxson, the tragic hero of the play, this was no exception. Racism, segregation, and poverty ran amuck and many blacks found it difficult to find success in this white man's world.²

Success is something that we are looking for in the race of life. From the moment we are born, we enter the race of life: the race to win, to live victoriously, or to be successful. Generally, we can say that success is defined as accomplishment of something attempted. Therefore, anyone can be successful. But, society holds unrealistic values for the meaning of success. In the play success is one of the main reasons that caused the disintegration of the Maxson family. Troy is a failure and he finds it hard to admit it. His failure stems from the society's unjust rules. Troy feels backed by the 'white man'. At the beginning of the play Troy is shown talking to his manager "why you got white man driving and colored lifting"(1,1,2). This is an example of how Troy feels he will never amount to anything because he is a black man in the 'white man's world'. Therefore, Troy limits his goals in life. Maintaining a job, having a roof over his head and food on the table is Troy's idea of success. This is his idea of success because he had accomplished this while having a hard life. As a result, Troy fences himself into his own little world where no one can question or judge him.³

The African Americans of the 1950s were looked upon as less than citizens, and definitely the lowest of the immigrants that were coming to

American to find better life. It is this aspect of their life that Wilson wants to show in this play and how it affects the lives of these African American people.⁴

August Wilson depicts in the play the struggles and breakdown of an African-American family living in the days of the civil rights movement. Issues of family disintegration appear throughout the play through focus on the African-American family. The opening scene shows a seemingly content husband and wife, Troy and Rose Maxon; however, as the following scenes unfold, problems are seen developing within family.

Fences revolves around the trials and tribulations of the Maxson family, the play is a great example of a family drama. In the play Troy struggles to fulfill his role as a father to his son and a husband to his wife. Troy does not do such a great job in either role; before his death, his family has all but disintegrated due to his failures

The title of the play is both literal and metaphoric. Although Rose asked Troy to build a literal fence, Wilson builds various metaphorical fences, which creates obstacles for fathers and sons, husband and wife, and African Americans in white America. The fence exists to show that two things are separated, and to keep them that way. The play is about separation, the separation between different colors, a husband and a wife, life and death, and generation to generation. These separations are illustrated through the Maxson family. Troy works to build a fence around his backyard. The fence is symbolic of the difference between life and death. This is the meaning of the fence for Troy as he states so bluntly after his mistress death.

With *Fences*, Wilson created a play that explores the barriers that confine blacks. The title serves as a metaphor for all the fences that imprison the Maxsons. The fence that surrounds the Maxson home is not the white picket fence of the 1950s American ideal. Their fence is not a décor and it is not an enchantment-its purpose is strictly utilitarian. At the beginning of the play, Troy thinks he is building a fence to please Rose. She wants a fence that will keep all those she loves safe inside its walls. Later, after Alberta's death, Troy completes the fence to keep danger and death outside its walls.⁵

Rose who realizes that her husband is involved with another woman, wants the fence to be built to hold her family together, and for her it symbolizes protection as she sings the hymns that comfort her:

Rose: (sings) Jesus, be a fence all around me every day

Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way.

Jesus, be a fence all around me every day.

Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel in my way.

(1,2,21)

Troy, on the other hand, sees the fence in terms of shutting out the outside world and its impending changes that were taking place after the World War II, even as he continues to feel 'fenced in', limited by the social structure of the American industrial capitalism. The fence is Rose's attempt to refocus Troy's attention and dedication to his own family:

CORY: I don't see why Mama want a fence around the yard noways.

TROY: Damn if I know either. What the hell she keeping out with it? She ain't got nothing nobody want.

BONO: Some people build fences to keep people out...and some people build fencesto keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you. (2,1,61)

Troy means to say that he has nothing worth value to outsiders. He does not consider his wife and his son in this equation, he is thinking primarily about objects-things that can be stolen. But Rose does have something that someone else wants. Alberta wants Troy. Perhaps Rose suggested that Troy take up this project because she knew the only time he would have to complete it was on the weekends, a way to keep him around the house. She also likely hoped that it would be time for Cory to spend with his father, perhaps repairing of the animosity between them and helping them to bond. While Troy seems either blind or willfully ignorant of Rose's gentle corrections, Bono understands clearly. "Rose'll keep you straight," he tells his friend "you get off the track, she'll straighten you up."(1,4,55) Troy is always trying to make himself the big man that he physically is. He keeps preaching about how honest and hardworking he is. When he knew that Cory has been offered a football scholarship to college, troy looks down on it saying:

Rose: Cory done went and got recruited by a college football team

Troy: I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain't gonna nowhere with that football. I told him when he first come to me with it. Now you come telling me he done went and got more tied up in it. He ought to go and get recruited in how to fix cars or something where he can make a living. (1,1,8)

During his youth, Troy was not allowed to play in important games. Though he was a good baseball player he could not play in major games

because he was black and the whites got the upper hand in everything. It affected him a lot psychologically and he internalized the evil practices of racism. He felt that the blacks would never get the chances that the whites are enjoying. On the contrary, his son is living in an age in which many things have changed favorably for the blacks. Blacks are also chosen for playing in major leagues. He wants for himself a career in the sports. His father cannot reconcile himself with the idea of allowing his son to go for that career. Troy has become blind to the changes of the past ten years, and it is this ignorance that provokes him to deny Cory's chance at succeeding. Too often, fathers use sons to achieve the success they feel they have been denied. But Troy has no desire to live vicariously through his son.

In *Fences*, a tragic character helps pave the way for other blacks to have opportunities under conditions they were never free to experience. This is Troy's situation. Wilson portrays the 1950s as a time when a new world of opportunity for blacks began leaving those like Troy, who grew up in the first half of the century, to feel like a stranger in their own land.

The Civil Rights Movement, especially the battle over integration, allows Troy to express his outrage to an American society that resists his desire to a better life. The Civil Rights Movement began with singular goal-exposing segregationist problems-and eventually splintered into a number of different ideologies. Likewise, *Fences* begins with an intact family dealing with the advent of integration; ultimately, racial discrimination and rejection fracture the family.⁶

When baseball was integrated Troy was 43, too old for a home runner hitter. Troy's disdain for Cory and his football scholarship flows from this. The white man would not let Troy play, so Troy sees that they will not let

Cory play. Later in the play, Cory accuses his father of nixing his football career out of jealousy.

Troy's past dictates the kind of man he is today. His father has had a major impact on him. Troy says that he knows that his father never loved him, but his father stayed with the family because it was his duty to take care of the children. After an incident with his father when he was beaten unconsciously, Troy knew he needed to leave. Leaving the oppressive rule of his father should have brought Troy a feeling of freedom, but Troy found the exact opposite. Because of his troubled relationship with his father, Troy tries to control his own son's life. He also tries to control his son's future because he sees Cory is heading down the same road that Troy was on and was rejected from.

It is apparent that Troy wants his son to have a better life than his own, but he does not consider Cory's dreams and those times have changed enough since he was young and that these dreams do have the possibility of becoming realities. Troy's focus on being a good father to his son, though it may seem misguided, stems from the fact that his own father did not warn him of the world's injustices. Troy had to learn on his own, and Troy is trying to protect his son of the evil injustices that his life has, but he ends up pushing his son away because he cannot look past his own problems. He has pushed his son away just as his own father pushed him away, too.

Troy is upset with the injustice that he experienced in his life with athletics. Yet, he is holding Cory back from obtaining successes that Troy could only dream of obtaining. Troy has a low expectation of what black men can do with their lives just because these low expectations were put onto him. Troy's ouster from the game he loves leaves him gravely embittered. He is consumed with bitterness and is convinced that if you are

black man, "you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate." (1,1,11)

Troy separates himself from his wife by taking a mistress. This separation comes when the existence of Troy's mistress is revealed by her becoming pregnant. The relationship that Troy forges with his wife, Rose, also proves to be limited by his experience in baseball. After eighteen years of marriage, Troy feels he needs to escape the confining walls of responsibility through an affair with another woman. The other woman, Alberta, is Troy's attempt to capture what has been lost, his youth. If Troy is now too old to play major league baseball, he is not too old to be attractive to other women. Troy tries to defend his taking a mistress, but Rose will hear none of it. When the baby is born, Rose takes it as her own, but kicks Troy out; from now on he is a womanless man.

When Rose removes herself from Troy, their son Cory goes with her. Throughout the play Cory and Troy have been at odds. Their conflict stems from Cory's wish to play sports and Troy's wish to have his son learn a trade. This conflict shows the separation between the generations. Troy is the spokesman of the old generation. In Troy's time blacks were banned from playing baseball. He is very bitter about missing the chance to play professional sports, and is trying to keep Cory away from taking his chance. The rift between Troy and his son widens; blocked from going to college on a football scholarship, and disgusted with his father's infidelity, Cory confronts Troy in the only overtly physical scene in the play. In this classic father-son agony, each has an opportunity to kill the other, but draws back. The conflict arises out of differing ideologies; the crux of the Cory/Troy conflict rests in that these two men come from different eras. Their differing viewpoints set up the character's polar attitude, as Troy's

past is filled with lack of opportunities, various disappointments, and an abundance of oppression. In contrast, Cory's future is full of opportunities. Unlike his father, Cory has not faced a lot of disappointments and oppression, and thus he is not having any problems with the American society, like his father. Ultimately, Troy and Cory do battle figuratively, ideologically, and literally; eventually these battles force Cory to leave the house. Cory goes off to join the Marines, returning only for his father's funeral years later, confronting the many fences that have figured in their lives.

Wilson shows how past anguish and discrimination can cruise through familial bloodlines until some family member is able to transfuse the bad blood that has been sustaining past abuses. Wilson illustrates that, in order to move into an ever-changing future, one must accept his past, whether good, bad or both; implicit in his acceptance of the past is recognition of his own anger directed toward racism and its perpetrators.

Powerless to change his situation in society, Troy practically becomes a bully at home. This is one place where he can assert and find comfort in the fact that he is in control. Troy is also least appreciative of Lyon's love for jazz music and dubs it as inconsequential 'Chinese music'. Lyons is Troy's son from a previous marriage. Troy was not present for the first fifteen years of Lyon's life, since Troy was in jail for murder. He makes use of Lyons need for money as a spring-board into talking about himself again through a story about the devil and some furniture:

Lyons: ... let me have ten dollars.

Troy: I'll be damned! I'll die and go to hell and play blackjack with the devil before I give you ten dollars. (1,1,14)

Troy continues talking to Bono that he met the devil and talked to him. He makes use of everything around him to about his fake adventures in order to have all the attention instead of his sons. In doing so, Troy erects a fence between him and his sons. The fence is erected by Troy because of his desire to raise himself up at the expense of his sons.

Troy also stands against Rose because she plays numbers. He violently attacks black men and women who play the numbers. In terms of Troy's putting down others to raise himself up, it seems as if he were doing it here. The conversation between Rose and Troy shows that Troy got his house by taking the money of his brother Gabe when he got shot in the head in World War II. So in attacking the folks that hit the lottery or Lyons for borrowing money, Troy seems to be getting angry at others for something that is part of his own being. His anger at them is a real anger that he has for his own state of being.

The father cannot see beyond his experiences and knowledge. This angers the son and is against the father. Though Troy has experienced the change in his own life he cannot yet accept it. They fight with each other. The father beats his son and sends him away from home. The son too is not respectful to his father so that he is not even willing to attend his father's funeral. It is agonizing and shocking to see such a relation exist between father and son.

Therefore, the inability to understand each other and visible and implicit tension between son and father is very disturbing. To find an answer to this problem we should go beyond individual problems to larger social questions. Neither the son nor the father bothers to see things from another's perspective. The deep rootedness of injustice and inequality has

made the father behave like he is too tied to his own age specific perception. Racism is at the core of it all.⁷

Troy cannot digest his son's courage to stand against him. All the years, Troy had been a big banyan tree denying any light or space to the plants below. Infuriated, he always gives Cory marching orders.

The father-son relationship must be based on love, care, and spirit of accommodation. This is something that Cory never got from his father. In the play *Fences* by August Wilson, the three father-son relationships that are introduced are seemingly complex and abstruse. However, it is clear and definite that the relationships established between Troy and his father, Troy and Cory, and Troy and Lyons are not love-driven relationships. In each, the son tries to escape and break off from the constraints the father sets up. Nevertheless, in the end, these attempts to escape prove futile as the father seems to have an everlasting effect on the sons, creating a cycle of actions that both the father and son undertake in the course of their lives.

The father-son relationships presented in *Fences* can best be shown as the water cycle. Water is an essential part of life, and no matter how far we try to escape from it, it is inevitable that water is present everywhere. This prevailing presence of water also links in with the relationships between the fathers and sons in the play. Because of the way Troy's father treats his family, his actions drive Troy to leave the house in attempt to escape. Despite his efforts to escape from his father, his father seems to have an undying effect on Troy, as seen with the way Troy treats his family, which also drives his own family members to desert him. Due to Troy's harsh personality that was developed from his father (and developed from the past), his relationships with his sons are complicated. Troy's narrow-mindedness causes both Cory and Lyons to push him away from their lives;

however, Troy seems to have a powering impact on both sons' lives, with them ending up very much like Troy. Just like when water from a body of water evaporates into the air, it must return back down to Earth eventually. This repetition of events with water is similar to the relationship between the fathers and the sons in *Fences*, suggesting a cycle of actions between them regardless of the sons' actions.

Notes:

1. August Wilson, *Fences* (New York: Penguin, 1986). All subsequent text and quotations will be taken from this book and indicated by Act, scene, and page number in the body of this chapter.
2. Annette J. Saddik, *Contemporary American Dramas*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 89.
3. Christopher Bigsby. *Modern American Drama, 1945–1990*. (Cambridge University Press, 2000),80.
4. August Wilson, interviewed by Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton, 'the art of theatre no.14', *The Pairs Review*, 1990, 64.
5. Heather Henderson. "Building *Fences*: An Interview with Mary Alice and James Earl Jones" in *Theater*, Vol. 16, no. 3, Summer-Fall, 1985, 67-70.
6. Joan Herrington, *I Ain't Sorry for Nothin' I Done: August Wilson's Playwright Process*,(New York: Limelight, 1998), 64.
7. Alan Nadel, ed. *May All Your Fences Have Gates*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 23.

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1. Bigsby, Christopher. *Modern American Drama, 1945–1990*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
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4. Nadel, Alan. ed. *May All Your Fences Have Gates*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994.
5. Saddik, Annette J. *Contemporary American Dramas*, Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
6. Wilson, August interviewed by Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton, 'the art of theatre no.14', *The Pairs Review*, 1990
7. Wilson, August. *Fences*New York: Penguin, 1986.

علاقة الاب وابنه في مسرحية اسوار لاوكست ويلسون
بحث مستل لطالبة الماجستير: شهد عبد الحسين عبد
ياشرف أ. د. عبد الستار عواد إبراهيم
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الملخص:

يُعدُّ اوكست ويلسون من انجح الكُتاب الامريكيين من اصل افريقي الذي ظل اسلوبه المسرحي واقعيًا مقارنةً بالصور المجزأة للكُتاب المعاصرين. تعتمد مسرحياته على السرد الواقعي والحبكة وتتأثر بنية المسرحيات بالإيقاعات الموسيقية وموسيقى البلوز تحديداً، ومتجذرة في مهنته كشاعر عندما كان شاباً الواضحة في حوارات مسرحياته الاولى. إن الهدف من هذا البحث هو توضيح الايجابيات والسلبيات في علاقة الاب وابنه وكيف أثر تغيير المجتمع عليها.