

Generational Dissension in August Wilson's *Fences*

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August Wilson, the celebrated author of the *Pittsburgh Cycle*, has always opposed the assimilation of African Americans into the mainstream American society. Wilson has used his plays as a medium to uphold the African American culture. This article explores his play, *Fences*, and it unwinds how he employs the father-son conflicts as a strategy to prevent the assimilation of a young black man into the mainstream American society. The play revolves around a father-son conflict which springs from the son's desire to play football in whites' team. David Marriot in the book, *On Black Men* posits on the problematic relationship between fathers and their sons: "[. . .] the mark that the black father leaves," is "a mark that is both ineffaceable and irremediable"(96). Marriot observes further: "Typed, in the wider culture as the cause of, and cure for, black men's 'failure,' his father's apparently lost and untellable, life is the story that the son must find and narrate if he is to begin to understand how, and why, blackness has come to represent an inheritable fault"(96).

The "problematic relationship" that arises in the father-son relationship in the black community is well portrayed by Wilson in *Fences*. In *Fences*, Troy Maxon, the protagonist, and the father of Cory tries to mould his son according to his conception of the world which Cory, tries to escape. The conflict between Troy and Cory is inevitable in order to understand the value of Cory's entity as a black man. Though Troy is harsh in his relationship with Cory, he shows responsibility towards his family, a trait he has inherited from his father. *Fences* has an

affirmative ending in which Cory realizes his father's worth and takes up the responsibility of caring his family and his half-sister, Raynell.

Action in the play is set in 1957. In the 1950s there was a transformation in the American society thanks to the African American Civil Rights Movement, and the blacks started mixing with the whites and there was a sort of social amalgamation. Scot III in "The Challenges of Contemporary Criticism: Two Recent Studies of August Wilson" remarks on the social condition of the 1950s in America. "By fifties blacks were no longer a race of ex-slaves to be banished to the edge of town, although white American would have preferred them there. They were inching closer to the mainstream of American society"(163). Though the whites detested the entry of blacks into the mainstream society, young blacks showed a tendency to assimilate into the society which always ended up in the chagrin of the whites. Patricia M Gantt in "Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson's *Pittsburgh Cycle*" points out the conditions prevalent in the fifties in America. "By the 1950s, the setting of Wilson's play, *Fences*, the great Migration, had ended, leaving blacks in northern cities much busier coping with the challenges of everyday living than their parents had hoped when they began the move out of the South"(9).

Wilson in the Prologue to *Fences*, makes this focus clear and states that the European immigrants and their descendents assimilated smoothly into the mainstream society unlike the descendents of the African slaves who migrated to the urban north:

They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they . . . [lived] in quiet desperation and vengeful pride . . . in pursuit of their own

dream. That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. (xvii)

In *Fences*, Troy Maxon, the protagonist of the play, fights against the city's rejection of the blacks and he gets promotion as a driver of the garbage truck from the position of a garbage collector. Though Troy is disillusioned with the American Dream, he never gives up his fight against the mainstream society to get an equal footing with the whites.

Wilson, through the play, establishes the unattainable nature of the American Dream as far as the African Americans are concerned. It is the lack of proper communication between Troy and Cory which causes the conflict between them. Troy Maxon has experienced the racial fence, when he, as a young man, tried to assimilate himself into the white society. In spite of his exceptional talent, he was denied the opportunity to play in the major baseball league, for he was a black. His son Cory's dream of playing football in the white team is thwarted by Troy in order to avoid his son from being disillusioned on the grounds of race and colour. Matthew Roudane in "Safe at home?: August Wilson's *Fences*," remarks, "Troy Maxon emerges as a man savagely divided against himself. He is a figure who is clearly at odds with those who come within his orbit, but he is a man equally at odds with his very being in the world. He fences himself in" (139).

As Troy realizes that assimilation into the white society is impossible, he discourages his son Cory, not to think of being assimilated into the mainstream society. His conflicts with his son can be interpreted as an indirect training that he imparts to him in order to prepare him to face the harsh realities of racism that he may encounter in future. Troy's dislike for Cory's involvement in sports is revealed when his wife Rose says that their son "got recruited by a college football team"

(8). The reason for Troy's dislike for his son's involvement in sports is explicit when he says, "the white man ain't gonna let him nowhere with that football" (8).

In order to understand Troy's objection to Cory's involvement in football, it is essential to trace Troy's own experience with the racial divide in the baseball game. Susan Koprince in "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*" remarks that, "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" (349). Troy through his personal experience of racism has understood that the game of baseball would never allow a black to realize the promises of the American Dream. According to John Thorn, baseball has become "the great repository of national ideals, the symbol of all that [is] good in American life; fair play (sportsmanship); the rule of law (objective arbitration of disputes); equal opportunity (each side has its innings); the brotherhood of man (bleacher harmony); and more" (qtd. in "A Fit for Fractured Psyche," 3).

In his early days, as a young adult, Troy, like his son, had faith in the promises of American Dream, but he was disheartened as he realized the façade of the American Dream. According to the former Yale University president and former baseball commissioner, Bart Giamatti, baseball is "the last pure place where Americans can dream (qtd in "A Fit for Fractured Psyche," 9). As an African American, Troy has learnt from his experience of racism that he should never rely on baseball or any game for social recognition in the mainstream society. It is his strong conviction that has made him oppose his son's involvement in football. The lack of paternal affection in Troy can be traced back to his own personal experiences as the son of an indifferent father.

Troy Maxon is convinced that if a person is born as an African American, he cannot realize the American dream through baseball. Susan Koprince observes that “ in *Fences* Wilson uses Troy’s experience in the Negro League to demonstrate that the American dream remained out of reach for people of African descent” (350). Troy contends that in spite of his talent, his baseball has never given him anything; “ain’t got a pot to piss or a window to throw it out of” (9). He explains to his wife Rose why he does not want their son to involve himself in football:

I don’t want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only descent thing that ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don’t wish him a thing else from my life. I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn’t getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports. (39)

The black baseball players had to encounter a lot of difficulties in the past and Edna Rust in “Art Rust’s Illustrated History of the Black Athlete” quotes the words of the first baseman, Burk Leonard: “Some seasons we would play 210 ball games. You’re riding every day, playing in different towns. No air conditioning. Meals were bad. When I first started playing, we were getting 60 [cents] a day on which to eat”. (33) Troy, as a baseball player, would never tolerate the inequalities endured by successful black baseball players like Jackie Robinson. In *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, Sandra Shannon quotes what Jackie Robinson himself wrote about his experiences in the major league:

This player had to be one who could take abuse, name- calling, rejection by fans and sports writers and by fellow players not only on opposing teams but on his own. He had to be able to stand up in the face of merciless persecution and not retaliate. On the other hand . . . he still had to have spirit. He could not be an ‘Uncle Tom’. (97)

Troy learnt baseball from penitentiary, where he served a fifteen year term for stabbing a man to death in an attempt of robbery. Even in 1957, the year in which action in the play is set, Troy did not have any significant change in his temperament. He would never tolerate any inequality and would fight for his right.

As the play opens, Troy is working as a garbage collector and questions the authorities of the inequality in the workplace. He asks, “Why you got the white men driving and the colored lifting?”(2). As a result, he gets promotion as the driver of a garbage truck. Troy believes that his son, Cory, cannot find a future by involving in games and he dissuades Cory telling him that the whites would not permit the blacks to play regularly (33). Unlike Troy, Cory tries to justify the whites’ stand and it implies his faith in the American Dream. Cory is prepared to ignore the injustice and inequalities that he may have to face in games. When Troy tells his son that the white do not allow the black to play regularly, Cory retorts: “They got some white guys on the teams that don’t play every day. You can’t play everybody at the same time” (34).

Troy attempts to convince his son that it is too difficult to survive in a white team and that a black should be exceptionally talented to find a place in the team: “The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team. That’s why I don’t want you to get all tied up in them sports. Man on the team and what it gets him? They got the colored on the team and they don’t use them” (34). Troy, in fact, wants Cory to learn some trade and make a livelihood so that he need not end up as a garbage collector like him. He would have allowed Cory to pursue football if he had not left the job he had at the shop “A&P.” Troy does not approve of Cory’s decision to find a career in football. Troy observes:

TROY. The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with the football no way. You go on and get your book learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. (35)

Troy wants Cory to have a secured job where he is not affected by the racism prevalent in the American society. He believes that education is the only solution that can free a black man from the shackles of racism. Though Troy has good intentions, he tries to impose his decisions on his son which causes a considerable damage to their relationship. Troy's behaviour towards Cory reminds the reader/audience of colonizer-colonized relationship. Harry Elam remarks on the oppressive nature of Troy. Elam notes that "with an impenetrable resolve, he perceives familial values only from his perspective. Troy's self involved concept of familial duty and responsibility prevents him from seeing the harm he causes, the pain his decision inflict on other family members" (131).

There is always a commanding tone in Troy's utterances: "I don't care what nobody else say. I'm the boss . . . you understand? I'm the boss around here. I do the only saying what counts" (36). He also insists on Cory to call him 'sir' as he says, "Nigger, as long as you in my house, you put that sir on the end of it when you talk to me!"(37). Troy does not have any paternal affection for his son and this makes Cory to ask the question, "How come you ain't never liked me?"(37). As a father, Troy feels that his only responsibility is to feed his son and he asks Cory, "What law is there say I got to like you?"(37). Troy has his own justification for what he does. He feels that his paternal duty is over once he provides food and shelter to Cory. He says:

It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house . . . sleep you behind on my bedclothes . . . fill you belly up with my food . . . cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you!. (38)

Troy would not tolerate anyone who would not obey him. He tells his confidant, Bono, that Cory has to face difficult situations in life, for Cory has resigned from "A& P," and he may not get back the job. Troy's indifference to his son is evident as he says, "when he get to the point where he wanna disobey me . . . then it's time for him to move on . . . I bet he ain't never disobeyed his daddy without paying the consequences"(50). Troy has inherited his callousness from his father and hence his indifference to Cory. He relates,

TROY. Sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy. He ain't cared nothing about no kids.

A kid to him wasn't nothing. All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working. When it comes time for eating . . . he ate first. If there was anything left over, that's what you got. Man would sit down and eat two chickens and give you the wing. (50)

The readers/ audience cannot expect any thing better from a man who has been brought up by an indifferent father. Sandra Shannon in "August Wilson on a Century of Black Work life" remarks on the upbringing of Troy that has caused the father-son conflict, that is, his conflict with his son, Cory:

Troy had a lifelong education in the white man's rules. As a lad, he witnessed the crushing of his father spirit as the Maxon patriarch toiled year round planting, tilling, and harvesting the cotton crops of a white landowner. He also saw how such primitive labor

and perennial debt had changed his father into a man devoid of emotions for wife and family– a man so mean that Troy’s mother simply walks away from her entire family; a man so brutish that he runs off his son and attempts to sexually assault his young girlfriend; This is the warped model of manhood set before a young African American male in post Reconstruction America. From this, Troy must fashion his notions of what it means to be responsible, to be a husband, father and brother, to be a self-fulfilled individual and a respected worker. (119)

Though Troy’s father was very cruel, Troy appreciated and emulated his father’s responsibility for his family. Similarly, Troy shows responsibility for all the members of his family including his grown up son born of his first marriage. Never does he stop giving money to Lyons, his son born of his first marriage on every Friday, when he receives his wages. He is equally responsible towards his mentally retarded brother, Gabriel. Though he has an illicit relationship with Alberta, he fulfils all his duties to his wife Rose. When Alberta dies after giving birth to their child, he brings the child born outside of the ambit of wedlock to his house. Alan Nadel in “Boundaries, Logistics, and Identity: The Property Metaphor in *Fences* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*” remarks that Troy is a positive and negative model for Cory and he (the critic) points out how Troy’s father himself was a positive and negative model for him. Nadel remarks,

For unlike many men of his generation . . . for example Troy’s father refused to leave the family, however much he detested it. As Troy points out, ‘He felt a responsibility toward us. Maybe he ain’t treated us the way I felt he should have . . . but without that responsibility he could have walked off and left us . . . made his own way’ (51). In contrast, as Bono points out, ‘ Back in those days what you talking about . . . they walk out their front door and just take on down one road or another and keep on walking

Just keep on walking till you come to something else. Ain't you never heard of nobody having the walking blues'? (51) (95)

Though Troy had much difference of opinion with his father, he was scared of him, but he lost all fear for his father when he attempted to rape his (Troy's) girlfriend. Troy realizes that he has inherited many of his father's traits of character and he says, "I could feel him kicking in my blood and knew that the only thing that separated us was the matter of a few years" (53).

The dissension between Troy and his father has been passed on to the next generation and this is seen when Troy obstructs Cory's dream of playing football in the white team. The dissension between Troy and Cory reaches its peak when Troy meets Cory's football coach and asks him to exclude Cory from the team. Cory for the first time in his life unleashes his wrath against his father and he feels that his father is jealous of his prospective career in football. He bursts out his anger and says, "Just cause you didn't have a chance! You just scared I'm gonna be better than you, that's all" (58).

Troy's infidelity to his wife, Rose, paves the way for a direct encounter between him and his son. According to the stage directions Cory enters from behind and physically assaults Troy: "*CORY comes up behind TROY and grabs him. TROY, surprised is thrown off balance just as CORY throws a glancing blow that catches him on the chest and knocks him down. TROY is stunned as CORY*" (72). It reminds the readers/ audience of Troy's manhandling his father in the past when he attempted to rape his girlfriend. The readers/ audience have already learnt about this from one of Troy's conversations with his friend Bono. Troy recalls, "I picked up them reins that he had used on me. I picked up them reins and commenced to whupping on him" (52). Cory loses all reverence for his father when he comes to know about his father's infidelity and he tells Troy

that he has least respect for father (85). Cory even goes to the extent of saying “You don’t count around here no more” (85). Cory’s words enrage Troy which culminates in Cory’s expulsion from his own house. As Troy expels Cory from his house, he makes it clear what his son means to him. “Nigger! That’s what you are. You are just another nigger on the street to me” (87). Troy’s efforts to provide his son a secure future does not come to a fruition and in spite of his efforts, Cory finds only fault with his father:

CORY. You aint never gave me nothing! You ain’t never done nothing but hold me back.

Afraid I was gonna be better than you. All you ever did was try and make me scared of you. I used to tremble every time you called my name. Every time I heard your footsteps in the house. Wondering all the time . . . what’s Papa gonna say if I do that? . . . What’s Papa gonna say if I turn on the radio. (87)

Cory misconceives his father’s concern for his future and he feels that his father deliberately holds him back, for he (Troy) fears that he would outdo him in games. Cory returns to his house after seven years on learning about his father’s demise, but even then he does not forgive him and tells his mother that he is not going to attend his father’s funeral (96). But his mother, Rose, makes him realize his real identity as Troy’s son.

ROSE. . . . I know you and your daddy ain’t seen eye to eye, but I ain’t got to listen to that kind of talk this morning. Whatever was between you and your daddy . . . the time has come to put it aside. Just take it and set it over there on the shelf and forget about it. Disrespecting your daddy ain’t gonna make you a man, Cory Not going to your daddy’s funeral ain’t gonna make you a man. (96)

Unlike Troy, Rose could easily convince Cory and make him remember his responsibility to his dead father. Cory tells Rose that his father is like a shadow in his life and he wants to get rid of the shadow (97). Anyhow Rose succeeds in making Cory realize his real identity, and it is all owing to her maternal love, and like Rose, Troy too could have achieved it, if he had expressed love for his son,

ROSE. You can't be nobody but who you are, Cory. That shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself. You either got to grow into it or cut it down to find you. But that's all you got to make life with. That's all you got to measure yourself against that world out there. Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn't . . . and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was. I don't know if he was right or wrong . . . but I do know he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm. (97)

It is a general notion that African American women are voluptuous but the strong personality displayed by Rose and her fidelity to her husband reverse the popular notion about the African American women. Though Troy is not faithful to Rose, as a husband, her magnanimity makes her to take care of Troy's daughter born outside the ambit of lawful wedlock. It is Raynell, Troy's illegitimate daughter, who is instrumental in making Cory acknowledge his father's worth. As he sings his father's song, the readers/audience understand that he has forgiven his father's faults and infirmities. The song which Cory sings was also sung by Troy when he was alive and he proudly told his wife Rose, "That was my daddy's song. My daddy made up that song" (44). Even though Troy had only bad memories of his father, he kept his father's song close to his heart. August Wilson has exploited the healing power of music to resolve the problem of misunderstanding between the father and the son. The significance of the black American music and the responsibility of every parent to pass it on to the next generation has been fulfilled by

both Troy and his father. When African Americans pass their songs on to their children, they are in fact transferring the virtues of their culture to the next generation. Though Cory abhors Troy, his discord with his father melts as he sings the song taught by his father. Cory's singing of Troy's song signifies that he too would preserve the African culture passed on to him by the song. Troy's song helps Cory to realize his real identity as a black man which he deliberately tried to suppress initially. *Fences* authenticates that even though young black males display a tendency to emulate the white culture and attempt to assimilate themselves into the American society, they acknowledge their African identity after a short period of dissension.

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