

Marginalizing the Traditional Black/White Struggle: Optimistic Black Community in August Wilson's Fences

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Abstract

The present study sheds light on August Wilson's dramatic craftsmanship in regard to his play *Fences*. It shows how Wilson manages to concretize on stage the marginalization of the traditional Black/White struggle. As shall be shown in the study, the playwright gradually unfolds various points of views held by the black characters regarding their white counterparts through the play's central character Troy Maxson. *Fences* is basically a social drama which deals with family problems such as the father-son relationship, husband-wife relationship, social identity and the role of the individual in society. But what the audience / reader cannot overlook is the absolute presence of the black characters in the play and the total absence of the white characters on stage. The present paper also intends to show that the 'off-stage' white characters make a powerful impact which influences the lives of black characters in Wilson's *Fences*. The so called long-standing Black/White struggle and enmity is replaced by Black/Black social life, and the great desire of the black community to make a progressive and better life.

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تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الاتقان المسرحي ل اوقست ولسون في مسرحية (السياج). وتظهر الدراسة كيف جسد ولسون فكرة تهميش الصراع التقليدي بين السود والبيض على خشبة المسرح. كما تبين الدراسة وبشكل تدريجي وجهات النظر المختلفة لدى السود عن اقرانهم البيض من خلال شخصية المسرحية الرئيسية (تروي ماكسون). السياج هي في الاصل مسرحية اجتماعية تتناول علاقة الاب بالابن، وعلاقة الزوج بالزوجة، والهوية الاجتماعية، ودور الفرد في المجتمع ولكن ما لا يمكن تجاهله من قبل المشاهد او القارئ هو الحضور المطلق للسود والغياب الكامل للبيض على خشبة المسرح. وستبين هذه الدراسة التأثير القوي لشخصيات البيض على شخصيات السود رغم غيابهم الجسدي عن خشبة المسرح. ان ما يسمى الصراع او العداء المزمع بين البيض والسود تم استبداله بحياة السود الاجتماعية والرغبة القوية لديهم بحياة افضل ومنتطورة .

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August Wilson's play *Fences* (1985) concretizes family problems, in clear dramatic terms, such as the father-son relationship, husband-wife relationship, social identity and the role of the individual in society. What the audience / reader cannot overlook is the absolute presence of the black characters and the total absence of the white characters on stage. The present study discusses how *Fences* decenters and marginalizes the long-standing Black/White struggle and enmity and replaces it by Black/Black social life. It also shows the great desire of the black community to make a progressive and better life. A serious philosophical and theoretical framework surrounds the play to keep the dramatic action away from the sickening and tiring longtime struggle between the Blacks and the Whites in the U.S. in particular and western hemisphere in general. The Blacks have innumerable worries on their own than to harp on the issue of the hatred for the Whites. Despite the struggles and problems among the black characters in *Fences*, things finally improve and make some progress. The younger generation is doing better compared to their fore-fathers. In *Fences*, Wilson fires a direct salvo against those critics who still traditionally think the Whites always "Govern the lives and personalities of the black character" (Usekes, Gigde, 115)(1). As this paper shall try to make clear, the fences in *Fences* are artificial, marginal and silly ones. The title of the play is ironic in that it tries to destroy all the "historical" fences between the Blacks and the Whites.

The play is based on a two-act structure and is set in a partially fenced yard of the Maxson's house(2). It revolves around an African American home in an unknown geographical location. The play covers the last 8 years of the life of its central character Troy Maxson, 53, to whom all other characters are related. Troy has been married to Rose for 18 years. Cory, his son from Rose, is in high school and very much obsessed with football. Jim Bono is Troy's best friend. He admires what he thinks is Troy's "honesty, capacity for hard work and his strength, which Bono seeks to emulate"(3).

As the play proceeds, it uncovers Troy Maxson's miserable past, a past that reflects the chaos of his family. It introduces us to Lyons, 34, who is Troy's son from a previous marriage. Lyons visits his father on paydays only to borrow money. Gabe, Troy Maxson's brother is mentally challenged due to a war injury(4). Troy manages

to keep the money which was supposed to be given to his brother for his disability to buy himself a house. Troy's situation is similar to that of Arthur Miller's Jo Killer in *All My Sons* who sells defected cylinder heads to the army air force to save his family - or so he claims. Troy too does the wrong thing for the right reasons. In a conversation with his son Cory, Troy expresses his 'high sense of responsibility' towards his family:

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 your 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! (Act I, iii, 38).

Troy's understanding of 'responsibility' does not include love even to his youngest son Cory. It also gives him the right to cheat his brother and take his money to buy himself a house. Troy's 'high sense of responsibility' allows him to father a child (Raynell) from a woman other than his wife Rose, and to tell his wife that it is his responsibility to take care of the child because she is his "own flesh and blood" . "From right now. . . this child got a mother, but you a womanless man," (Act II, iii 79) is "the fitting reply Rose offers to her adulterous husband". (Andrews, 27). Rose's reply at once creates a problem between her and her husband, Troy.

Through the portrayal of Troy's character, August Wilson manages to hammer home the social conditions of this black family. From Troy's past, we learn that at the age of 14 he had to leave his brutal father and live on his own. To him stealing seemed the only way for survival. Furthermore, with his first marriage and the birth of his first son Lyons, Troy felt further need to steal. His situation deteriorated to the extent of killing a man during a robbery. He was sentenced to 15 years in jail where he developed his interest in baseball and met his best friend Bono. As expected in a democratic country Wilson presents the prison as better than the home of a criminal like Troy Maxson. For, it was a place where Troy learnt how to play baseball and made a lasting friendship with Bono. More importantly, those fifteen years 'cured' him from the 'robbing stuff' which he picked up from home (Act. I, iv 55). Ironically enough,

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none of Troy's bad memories are in jail. At no place in the play Troy talks about maltreatment in jail or describes tools of torture. Dramatically speaking, this is a way of 'staging' the negative conditions of Troy's family. For after all, home is home and jail is jail. In any case, by the time he was released from jail, his first wife had already gone with Lyons - a fair justification for Troy to marry Rose.

It should be noticed that imprisonment is a major event in *Fences*. The easiest thing to say, following the traditional Black/White theory is that Troy was a victim of the brutal White System which has no mercy on the poor Blacks. More importantly, Troy's imprisonment is a symbol of white oppression which led Blacks like Troy to be thrown in the street with nothing for sustenance. And therefore, the only option for Troy was to steal, and subsequently spend fifteen long years in prison. To the credit of Wilson, he changes the whole scene of prison into a great reforming experience, where Troy learns what is good, so that he can spend the rest of his life not as a thief but as a reformed citizen. It is crucial to mention that not only blacks but also the whites who steal or go astray would also be imprisoned as Troy. It is also important to notice that Gabe, Troy's brother, was enrolled in the army and he never felt the inclination to steal. The point is that crimes have no race and criminals have no religion.

Troy believes in the philosophy that the past shapes the present and one's present actions are based on past experiences. On the basis of this, Troy finds it difficult to approve of his son's obsession with football. Troy claims that his rejection is based on his own personal experience with baseball and the disappointment he received at the time. But at no place in the play, Troy tells us that his present action of stealing his brother's money is based on his past experience as a thief and a robber. A dialogue between Rose and Troy proves just the opposite! Troy was overage when he decided to join the team and 'play in the major league'(5)

Rose: Why don't you let the boy go ahead and play football, Troy? Ain't no harm in that. He's just trying to be like you with the sports.

Troy: 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 decent

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.

Rose: Troy, why don't you admit you was too old to play in the major league? For once . . . why don't you admit that?

Troy: What do you mean too old? Don't come telling me I was too old. I just wasn't the right color. (Act I. iii 39).

The above quoted lines show the contradiction in Troy's character. He insists that he was rejected just because he 'wasn't the right color'. Needless to say that a white man with Troy's age would also be rejected. Although Troy blames the 'white' for his failure, and even arrived at the conclusion that Big Dreams are not for black men. Yet he believes that Blacks can earn a living or improve their social conditions a bit - a misleading statement that led some critics to focus only on the Black/ White struggle which is but a marginal issue in Wilson's play *Fences*:

A man can perhaps advance himself in small ways if he is willing to stand and fight; thus Troy can improve his position in the workplace. Yet big dreams, like Troy's dreams of baseball glory, lead only to frustration and despair. Troy has looked death in the face. He has survived. He will not let himself be vulnerable. (W. P. Kenney 2).

Through the simple father-son relationship, Wilson explores the various forms of the black experience that exist between the two generations in the US. Troy is unable to openly accept the idea that things have changed and that now a black man can also have Big Dreams and walk with confidence to realize them. Troy, after the jail experience, has become better but not perfect. He stole his brother's money and fathered a child from a woman other than his wife Rose after his release from jail. But he still enjoys talking about the Black/White struggle. So far, the audiences have only seen and heard about Black/ Black issues. At no place we, as audience and readers, felt that the white controlled / dominated the lives of the black characters. More importantly, it is only Troy who blames the white

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for his mistakes. Rose, Lyons, Cory and Bono believe that things have improved. By now the audiences have enough experience with Troy. They are not ready to buy his stuff that black men have the right only to “live in pursuit of their dreams” (Lloyd xvii). Troy poses himself as a good father who wants to save his son from ‘frustration’ and ‘despair’ of such illusions in sports in a white dominant society. In his attempts to convince his son Cory to forget all about sports so long as he hasn’t the right (white) color, Troy says:

If they got a white fellow sitting on the bench . . . you can bet your last dollar he can’t play! 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 get him? They got colored on the team and don’t use them. Same as not having them. All them teams the same. (Act I. iii 34).

Troy goes on to convince his son to find a career in which no white person can compete with him, like fixing cars or building houses!! He says:

The white man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. 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. (Act I. iii 35).

One actually starts wondering if Troy is in his right senses or not. Does he mean to say that that knowledge and education do not offer a social security to the black community? Is sport more important to the white than the army? Why did the white allow Gabe and later Cory to be enrolled in the army? Was not Troy himself denied a driving license at first because he could not read or write? Or professions like fixing cars and building houses are restricted only to the blacks?

At work Troy struggled hard to obtain a permission to drive the truck. He cribs about the white domination in the place where he works. Yet he succeeds in convincing his white boss to let him drive the truck. Troy plays the role of the skeptical African American who has a knack of blaming the white for anything on the basis of ‘personal experience.’ He is not ready to accept his own short comings.

Lyons, on the other hand is introduced to us as a passive character throughout. He does not work and comes to visit his father only to borrow money. It seems that Lyons can neither understand himself nor the society in which he lives. He does not even bother to know. What is important about Lyons' attitude is that his present condition has nothing to do with his color. His wife, though black, works in a hospital. The best attitude is represented by Rose and Cory who believe in change and can see the positive things in the society. Rose tells her husband that "times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. The world's changing around you and you can't even see it" (Act I, iii 49). Critics contend that being the youngest male in the play, Cory in particular stands for hope for the future. His departure from home and his reappearances in a Marine Uniform in the final scene shows that the society had really changed. Unlike his father, Cory did not feel the pressure to steal in order to survive. He fended for himself and finally succeeded in securing for himself a place in society. Joseph Wessling rightly points out:

August Wilson presents us with a multigenerational vision in which our sense of waste is more than balanced by an infusion of hope. (115).

The question that rises here is that what is the difference between Cory and his uncle Gabe? Gabe too did not feel like stealing. He lived and worked like a good white citizen. The only big difference between the two seems to be that Wilson tries to tell us that the black community has found itself in a society in which "the harder you work the luckier you beget". Wilson is telling his black fellowmen that the choice is yours - you can be skeptical as Troy, passive as Lyons or hardworking as Cory.

All Wilson's plays, (and *Fences* is no exception), expose the audience to an "amazing amount of Black culture and Black history" (Armstrong, 23). Therefore it is not a coincidence that *Fences*, as a title, is given to the play. It is highly suggestive and is open to various interpretations: philosophical, historical, social and psychological. Wilson's choice of the title and the setting of the play show his great understanding of "the symbolic dimensions in which every day life presents itself to us if we pay attention". (Alexander, 123). Kenney develops this point by writing:

The fence itself is a rich symbol, as the focus of interaction among the three principal characters. It points as well to invisible fences, created in the desire to hold in and to keep out. If Troy has been fenced in by the rules and conventions of a racist society, he has also created his own fences, both barriers to the understanding and affection of his son and obstacles to Troy's own spiritual expansion. (3).

Therefore, the ordinary house fence becomes enriched and impregnated with symbolic meaning. It could be the psychological barriers to the understanding between the characters themselves, on the one hand and between the black characters and the 'off stage' white characters on the other. A telescopic vision of the whole play would show that the play does not create a fence between the blacks and the whites in the US but rather invites them for dialogue. Sharon Fitzgerald believes that in his theater Wilson was "determined to counter the denial of black culture by creating an arena for social and political dialogue" (18). The Fences have a special meaning to each character in the play. To Troy, for instance, the fences could be an extension of the walls of the jail in which he spent 15 years of his life or could possibly represent the walls of segregation. It could be the fences that the white world has built around Troy and entrapped him in his current meager-paying job as a garbage collector. It could also be the fences which make it difficult for Troy to understand his white counterpart because it is built by his own hands. Troy himself is not willing to see the positive side of the society in which he lives. The Fences also mark Troy's property out of which he kicks his son, Cory when he disobeyed him. At times Troy thinks of the Fences as the line of demarcation between life and death:

Troy: (With a quiet rage that threatens to consume him).
Alright . . . Mr. Death. See now . . . I'm gonna tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna take and build me a fence around what belongs to me. And then I want you to stay on the other side. See? You stay over there until you're ready for me.
(Act II. ii 77).

To Rose the fences offer safety and privacy. It also gives her the sense of belonging. Surprisingly enough, Rose's conception of the fences comes from Bono, Troy's friend:

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 other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on you all. She loves you (Act II. i 61).

Rose did what she could to hold on to her family. She tried to protect it from outside intruders. But all her efforts were in vain for Troy, despite the partially fenced yard, manages to have a relationship with another woman – a situation that Rose struggled hard to prevent. She wanted her family to have only one father and one mother:

I done tried to be everything a wife should be. Everything a wife could be. Been married eighteen years and I got to live to see the day you tell me you been seeing another woman and done fathered a child by her. And you know I ain't never wanted to no half nothing in my family. My whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and mothers . . . my two sisters and my brother. Can't hardly tell who's who. Can't never sit down and talk about Papa and Mama. It's your papa and your mama and my papa and my mama. (Act II, i 68).

Ever since that incident, an unsurpassable psychological fence was created between Rose and Troy. Cory was able to be himself and to do what he liked and disliked only when he left the fences of his parents behind him. To Lyons, the fences offer him a place for social gathering and financial support on paydays. Troy's fenced house is also the place from which we learn about the 'importance' of the white man in the lives of these black characters.

Each character in the play has his or her own story to tell. But we have to keep in mind that all of them are black. None of the white characters physically appears on stage. But the need to establish a dialogue between the two communities is very much felt. We cannot say for sure that the lives of the black characters seem to be controlled by those of the whites. In *Fences*, Troy would like us to believe that the white is the one who establishes peace and order and he is the one who put Troy behind bars for his crimes. The white is also the one

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who controls economy, owns money and goods and can give goods on credit that never seemed to finish. Troy tells us that he has been paying ten dollars a month to a white man for the furniture he bought on credit fifteen years ago, and till now he is “scared to stop paying it” (Act I, i 17). The white is also the one who earlier prevented and later permitted Troy to drive the truck at work. Troy was afraid to be fired from work for having dared to ask his white boss Mr. Rand a question that seemed fair, “Why? Why you got the white men driving and the colored lifting?” (Act I, i 2). Troy would like us to believe that even freedom of speech seemed to be deprived of by the black characters. Logically enough, any white man would pay exactly the same ten dollars when he buys similar things. A white will also be fired if he, for no reason, goes against his boss at work!

All this adroitly proves Wilson’s skillful dramatic craftsmanship in dramatizing the marginal Black/White struggle in the lives of the characters of the play *Fences*. It is important to know that each character has his or her own conception of the White. To Troy, the White is the one who destroyed his dreams of glory in baseball and is the one who is likely to drag his son into a state of despair in football. Rose has an optimistic view of the White and sees in him a possible neighbor. She hardly complains of her White neighbors. This explains her insistence upon having her house fenced. Cory thinks that the White is the one who will make it possible for him to realize his dreams. Lyons lives in his own personally - fenced island. He does not only “fancy himself a musician, he is more caught up in the rituals and ‘idea’ of being a musician than in the actual practice of the music” (Act.I,i.13). Lyons neither counts himself amongst the Whites nor with the Blacks. He is just a citizen of the world. In a conversation with his father, Lyons very eloquently expresses his conception or ‘lack of it’- in life:

Lyons: You got your way of dealing with world. . . I got mine. The only thing that matters to me is the music.

Troy: Yeah, I can see! It don’t matter how you gonna eat . . . where your next dollar is coming from. You telling the truth there.

Lyons: I know I got to eat. But I got to live too. I need something that gonna help me to get out of the bed in the morning. Make me feel like I belong in the world. I don’t

bother anybody. I just stay with my music cause that's the only way I can find to live in the world. Otherwise there ain't no telling what I might do. Now I don't come criticizing you and how you live. I just come by to ask you for ten dollars. I don't wanna hear all that about how I live. Act I, i. 18).

Gabe, Troy's mentally impaired brother, is the only one who does not openly express his opinion of the White. His madness made him "unable to grasp the reality of the world around him". He is oblivious to the social conditions at the time. It is always easy to accuse the White for Gabe's madness and say that Gabe's madness like all Wilson's madmen "results from symbolic or real confrontation with White power structures." Elam goes on to say that:

Gabe's fate reflects the legacy of all the black servicemen who fought in World War II in the jingoistic belief that they were keeping America safe for democracy, only to come home after the war to increased discrimination, second-class citizenship, and anything but democracy. (616).

Wilson would have us believe that Gabe is unwittingly experiencing a life that has been altered by white interference. Or maybe August Wilson tries to communicate to his audience that black men are not similar, though they look the same. Was Gabe alone in the Front? Was he the only injured American soldier at war? Were the white soldiers paid more for their disabilities? The only answer to the above question is "NO". Then why not attempt to see the true message of the play. In *Fences*, August Wilson introduces us to a fenceless world inhabited by black characters. That does not mean that there were no fences in the past. There were but that is a bygone epoch. Therefore, the play *Fences* offers an invitation to both races to look at each other as individuals and citizens in one entity regardless of their color. For diversity, if handled carefully, enriches and empowers a nation.

To conclude, Wilson's *Fences* is a skillfully constructed play, terse and compact with ideas which are interwoven into the texture of the play. The dialogue gradually unfolds to show Wilson's understanding of the black experience in the US. Although, *Fences* ends with the death of Troy and the reunion of Cory and his mother, the play is not pessimistic(6). The audience leaves with a feeling of

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hope. "It is a lesson in hope" to use Joseph Wessling words. The oppressed and depressed 'Negro' of the past is on his way to mending the fences with the American society. Reluctance is the landmark of the phase but it is also a necessary step without which the completion of the fences would be less significant. Martin Luther King's words "I have reached the mountain top. I see the promised land" seem to echo in the ears of the younger generation of the play. Therefore, the audiences are not surprised in the final scene to see Cory putting on a Marine Corporal Uniform. This shows us that despite Troy's having forbidden Cory from playing football, he nonetheless secures a respectable, stable profession for himself. He overcomes his initial setbacks to show the audience that as a young African- American he can maneuver his way through White society- an indication of the type of relationship that waits the coming generations of the 'Whites' and the African - Americans in the US.

Notes

- 1 In his article "Whiteness as Economic Power and Exploitation" Usekes Gigdeem points out: "Wilson's tendency seemingly to marginalize whiteness by restricting it, for the most part to an off-stage presence serves an important purpose: The dramatic focus can thus remain on the black characters while implying the whites, even in their absence, are very much present, since they clearly circumscribe and govern the lives and potentialities of the black characters." (115).
- 2 For further details on the importance of setting in creating the suitable "environment" and "the process of playwriting" in Wilson's plays see "August Wilson on Playwriting: An Interview", 2001 African American Review, Vol. 35. No. 1 93-102
- 3 All quotations are taken from August Wilson's *Fences*. 1986. Plume. New York.
- 4 For details on the significance of madness and its symbolic and literal presentation in Wilson's plays see, Elam, Harry J.JR. (2000). "August Wilson, Doubling, Madness, and Modern African-Drama". *Modern Drama*, vol. 43 (611-32)
- 5 Koprince states 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). She also believes that Wilson "uses Troy's experience in the Negro Leagues to demonstrate that the American dream remained out of reach for people of African Descent". (350). For more details on the significance of baseball in Wilson's play *Fences* see Susan Koprince. (2006). "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*" *African American Review* 349- 358
- 6 Barbera Vincent believes that "the ending of *Fences* is not tragic". And "a spirit of reconciliation is brought by Gabe, who has been allowed to leave the mental hospital to attend his brother's funeral" (1). For details see Vincent Barbera, Jack. (2000) "Magill's Choice" *American Ethnic Writers*.

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