

The African-American Mother's Role in *Fences*

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Introduction

Fences (1985) is a play written by the famous playwright, August Wilson (1945-2005) who had great success on Broadway, winning a Tony Award for Best Play and Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1987 for his work and the play was restaged in 2010.

August Wilson was born in 1945, and he was considered an intelligent child because his mother used important learned words. He always used the library because he could get excellent results, but he experienced racial discrimination when he was high school student and he dropped. He read many African-American author's novels. August Wilson writes about the history of African-Americans in Pittsburgh in ten parts. This is known as the 'Pittsburgh Cycle'. Ten playwrights separate each period from the 1900's to the 1990's, each playwright telling a different story. But, August Wilson wrote on African-Americans life in each of the eras. Pittsburgh is August Wilson's hometown. He has spent most of his life there and has been inspired by Pittsburgh. He thinks most important is African-Americans roots and spirits.

Lloyd Richards writes in the introduction to *Fences*:

Fences is the second major play of a poet turned playwright, August Wilson. One of the most compelling storytelling to begin writing for the theater in many years, he has taken the responsibility of telling the tale of the encounter of the released black slaves with a vigorous and ruthless growing America decade by decade. (Introduction)

Lloyd Richards directed three of Wilson's plays: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), *Fences* (1987) and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988). These got good reviews and Lloyd Richards was made famous through his work with August Wilson.

Fences is set in 1957 in Pittsburgh, the main character being Troy Maxson. He is fifty-three years old. He works for a garbage collection company with his friend and has an old house where he lives with his family. Troy is always drinks alcohol with Bono on Friday night because it's payday. This family has many problems. They suffer many things because of Troy being on oppressive person. He harshly deals with his son and has an affair with woman not his wife. In the end, Troy causes the breakdown of the family.

The setting is the yard which is the entrance to Troy's house. Matthew Roudané

said:

Wilson has resisted comparisons between *Fences* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), there is a similarity between the houses of the Lomans and Maxsons; a similarity both in architectural and symbolic terms; a similarity in the fathers' respective infidelities, and, more compellingly, in the father-son tensions. (Matthew Roudané, 139)

These plays are similar in character and story. It shows a discord between the father and the son. However, the two plays involve different situations. Most African-Americans could not get good salaries. They live a life of penury. And although behind the scene in the overriding theme of racism in *Fences*, August Wilson doesn't write directly about discrimination. Troy's experience is the focus of this play. Troy's speeches are in a same storytelling, in keeping with oral traditions among African-Americans. His purpose is not telling of discrimination from white people but rather to tell of African-American traditions and emotional problems that are partially the result of racial discrimination. It's intention of the author. August Wilson writes about the 1950s background in the play:

"The Milwaukee Braves won the World series, and the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full." (The Play)

The 1950s could be considered a bridge between past and future. African-Americans were struggling for civil rights then into the 1960s. During this era appeared many African-Americans who led the Civil Rights Movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr, Ralph Abernathy and Rosa Parks. This time saw wild changes to American society, making the next leap. In this way, the 1950s became a crucial cross between past and future. *Fences* is based on Wilson's experience about clashes with his stepfather. Wilson said Troy's life is similar to his stepfather. His stepfather was a good football player when he was high school student. He wants to get a scholarship but couldn't because of racial discrimination. So, *Fences* deals with many problems.

August Wilson said in Samuel Freedman's interview in the New York Times Magazine:

"Trying to uncover the nobility and dignity that I might not have seen. I was ignorant of their contributions. Part of the reason I wrote 'Fences' was to illuminate that generation, which shielded its children from all of the indignities they went through." (New York Times).

Therefore, this drama is about an African-American family that especially focuses on the father's behavior. However, this paper will focus on the values of Rose Maxson as a foster parent raising her husband's love child, and also pay special attention to the symbols

which the title *Fences* contains.

1. Father's Behavior as Broken Fences

In this play, Troy Maxson's house contains important symbols. Especially, it has a broken fence. This fence is a symbol full of meaning in this story. In the many layers in this play, it's said that the meaning of broken fence is Troy and his father who can't save his family. Comparing Troy and his father, their behavior appears to be similar.

Troy's father was a southern sharecropper, who repressed his family, partially because he suffered debt he owed to whites, and he took it out on his family. This behavior invited the collapse of the family. One day, Troy skipped farm work to meet a girlfriend. His father learned of this situation and was angry at Troy. Troy doesn't accept his father's anger because his father wants Troy's girlfriend. So, Troy tried to resist, but suffers violence from his father. Troy always remembers that. Troy can't endure his father's behavior, driving him to leave the house when he was fourteen.

Troy talks about his father:

“He [Troy's Father] stayed right there with his family. But he was just as evil as he could be. My mama couldn't stand him. Couldn't stand that evilness. She run off when I was about eight.” (Act One. 51)

Troy said his father is evil and Troy ran off to escape his father's tyranny and suffered so much. He couldn't find employment, and although he was a good baseball player in the Negro League, he couldn't go to the Major Leagues because the Major Leagues shut out black players. Therefore, he lost his faith in American society. In this way, Troy wants to protect Cory, but he fails and ironically causes Cory to suffer. Troy's behavior drives Cory from home. However, Troy justifies his behavior by using the low status of African-Americans. He talks about the baseball player's life:

Troy: Selkirk! That's it! Man batting .269, understand? .269. What kind of sense that make? I was hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs! Man batting .269 and playing right field for the Yankees! I saw Josh Gibson's daughter yesterday. She walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet. Now I bet you Selkirk's daughter ain't walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet! I bet you that! (9)

Troy compares white and African-Americans lives with this situation. This play helps explain a little about Baseball history in America. In these times, The Baseball League started to accept African-Americans. Jackie Robinson being the first person to play in Major League in 1957. Troy, however, wasn't able to advance to the Majors, therefore, his speech in full of sadness and jealousy. Actually, he doesn't want Cory to have the same kind of experience. Troy said:

“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.”
(39)

It’s Troy’s real intention to not be like his father. Nonetheless, Troy ironically is like his father. He keeps a tight hand on the family. Fences symbolizes the father not being able to take care of his family, connecting the past and present.

2. Rose’s position in the household

Rose is a housewife who almost always stays in house. She sometime goes to church. She is comment on this fence religious. In Act One, she prays and sings:

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. (21)

She loves her family and her image and a good wife. After World War II , the family model and roles returns to a 1920s style. In the 1950’s, many women married early and did housework, like Rose. But, she is a little different from the stereotypes 1950s image of the housewife. Troy’s family has strange conventions. Rose manages the family money. In this story, she often collects Troy’s salary.

Consider the following scene:

LYONS: Here you go, Rose. If you don’t take it, I’m gonna have to hear about it for the next six months.

(He hands her the money.)

ROSE: You can hand yours over here too, Troy.

TROY: You see this, Bono. You see how they do me.

BONO: Yeah, Lucille do me the same way. (47)

Troy points out the irony and asks for help from Bono, but, Bono supports Rose, because, his wife does the same thing. In the 1950’s, housewives managed the salary of their spouses, but Rose always demands money from Troy and she gets all his salary. It can be seen that Rose is in a strong position in the home. In this way, Rose takes the helm in house management. In another scene, Rose acts more strongly.

In Act two, Troy gets his mistress pregnant. Her name is Alberta. Rose gets angry at the attitude when he makes excuses to her.

This quote shows her anger:

I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn’t the finest man in the world. And wherever you was going ... I wanted to be there with you. Cause you was my husband. Cause that’s the only way I was gonna survive as your wife. (71)

Rose is assertive, yet she thinks if she were not Troy's wife, she couldn't live at all. Women were subservient and took care of children in the 1950s. As a result, Rose accepts the housewife's role, but, she doesn't blindly obey Troy because, she isn't a weak person. In the next scene, Troy brings the baby home because Alberta died in childbirth. Troy wants Rose to take care of the baby.

Rose said:

"From right now ... this child got a mother. But you a womanless man." (79)

Rose pities the baby, so she tries to fill the role of surrogate mother. However, she turns away from Troy. This behavior has two meanings. The first one is one of understanding that the baby needs a mother. She decides take care of the baby. The second meaning involves a woman's understanding. She doesn't love Troy anymore. Therefore, her behavior reflects to two roles of woman. That of "mother" and "woman". For these reason, Rose is a symbol of 1950s housewife. But, she can say strong opinion against Troy. Rose is a strong woman. Historian Paula Giddings write about the development of African-Americans culture in *When and Where I Enter*:

"However dubious the "repository" statement, it was true that the economic role of Black woman was important, even essential, to the rise of the Black Bourgeoisie." (Paula Giddings)

Therefore, African- American women have strong power and supported and helped African-American men.

3. The Role of Rose in the Family

In the final scene is Troy's funeral. Time went by, and many characters change a little. Raynell grows up and Cory becomes a marine and has his corporal stripes. However, Cory still doesn't like Troy and still is afraid of Troy. Rose tries to reconcile Troy and Cory. She talks about him when Cory said that he I will not go to Troy's funeral:

"I wanted a house that I could sing in. And that's what your daddy gave me. I didn't know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. I did that. I took on his life as mine and mixed up the pieces so that you couldn't hardly tell which was which anymore." (Act Two, 98)

She deeply appreciated Troy's home worth, and she doesn't regret walking through life with Troy. Accordingly, Rose thinks about how important Troy and Cory are, In the scene, Rose, apologized for not being a perfect housewife. Actually, Rose respects Troy's behavior and his way, so she wants to raise Raynell in the same way. Rose says Raynell is essential to her:

"Like I'd been blessed to relive a part of my life. And if the Lord see fit to keep

up my strength ... I'm gonna do her just like your daddy did you ... I'm gonna give her the best of what's in me." (98)

First, Rose feel hurt at helping take care of Raynell. She thinks raising would mean winning happiness from misfortune. But, Rose said Raynell is present to help restart her life. In this way, Rose identifies with Raynell. After that, Cory sings a song to his father with Raynell. Cory forgives Troy when he talks to Rose. Rose fixes family ties and saves the family. In act one, Troy and Cory were repairing a broken fence. They have the same opinion:

Cory: I don't see why Mama want a fence around the yard nowadays.

Troy: Damn if I know either. What the hell she keeping out with it? She ain't got nothing nobody want. (61)

Rose wants to repair the fence but has doubts about it. In this situation, the difference in thinking between man and woman can be seen, and it connects to the last scene. She knows that she can repair the relationship from the beginning because, she tries to protect the family from breakdown. In act two, Bono talks about the reason to repair fences:

"Some people build fences to keep people out... and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you." (61)

Rose wants to keep the family together to "hold on" to all of them.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper examines aspects of the Patriarchy in African-Americans family. Its focus is on the mother. The way to protect the family differs from father to mother but if husband and wife work together, they can keep the family relationship. August Wilson thinks mother has strong power because it's was the same with his mother, too. Wilson's father broke up with his mother when He was a child. His mother was not educated but she only took care of him and his brothers. So, August Wilson learned the history and traditional in African-Americans through his mother's. He explains another play about the experience with her mother.

"I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother's life—her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter—are all worthy of art." (A Note from the Playwright)

His mother is more important than anymore else to August Wilson. Therefore, in August Wilson's plays appear many traditional African-Americans. Especially, he wants to tell a strong of an African-American family and show strength of the mother in *Fences*.

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