

## Larger than life: Mythicizing the Life and Death of August Wilson's *Fences*' Hero

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### Abstract

August Wilson's play *Fences* (1986) is part of the playwright's endeavor to dramatize the African American experience in the United States in the twentieth century. In fact, he grounded his plays in African and African American cultures to produce distinguished black drama. Wilson is trying in this play to put the African American experience on equal footing with that of the white culture and to promise hope in a better tomorrow. This research paper aspires to explore how Wilson employs the blues, the game of baseball and storytelling to explain the nature of the adverse world Troy Maxon had to face from birth to death. Additionally, it also intends to describe Wilson's endeavor to mythicizing the life and death of his protagonist and his persuasion that he deserves all respect despite his human mistakes, life defeats and small triumphs. August Wilson uses these three threads-the blues, basketball and Troy Maxon's skill of storytelling- to knit the heroic story of his protagonist.

**Keywords:** African American drama, blues, storytelling, baseball, American Dream

With the publication of *Fences* (1986) and other plays, many critics acknowledge that August Wilson (1945-2005) has established himself as one of America's finest African-American playwrights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is no doubt that Wilson's total dramatic output celebrates his people's struggle since they were first transposed from Africa. He designed a dramatic scheme that can help him represent the entire black experience in the twentieth century in a decade by decade fashion. In fact, Wilson's dramatic endeavor to place his race experience in close association with American history is based on employing black folks' cultural forms and traditions, blues tales, slave narratives, black

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community wisdom, storytelling and finally the failed chase of the American Dream as his dramatic feedstock. Indeed, two factors initiated an ever-growing scholarship on Wilson's works and brought his dramatic output under serious critical examination. These are his African American cultural commitment and his broad artistic and dramatic vision. The portrayal of characters and plot in Wilson's plays unveil the nature of the journey they make with reference to a particular historical moment. Further, in the dramatic world of Wilson, it is the blues legacy that holds together all other themes and joints all text threads in a well-seamed fabric. Not only that, but the blues unites all the apparently divergent characters into a passion that is well grounded into a common racial past. It is their awareness of this common past that holds them all together.

The aim of this research paper is to explore how Wilson uses African American culture, and the game of baseball, in mythologizing the life and death of *Fences*' protagonist Troy Maxon. The analysis of this process will present a description of how the playwright portrays Troy Maxon not only as an oppressed black family provider, and a community spiritual leader, but also as a defiant and sensible racial hero who deserves all respect for surviving an adverse environment. Again, there will be an attempt to further emphasize how Wilson uses storytelling as an African cultural technique to drive the action forward and to present the play's protagonist as a responsible family man despite all the adversities he squared up to. At last, the researcher will adopt a close reading technique and a diligently culture-based approach in analyzing the play *Fences* with an intention to exhibit how Wilson introduces his black folks as getting together to celebrate community rituals in the company of the community spiritual leader and that their struggle and survival deserve all respect.

In fact, many scholarly studies have made Wilson's dramatic works a target of investigation and close analysis. Mary L. Bogumil (1999), for example, focuses in *Understanding August Wilson* on the incompatible viewpoints of African American Christianity versus African spirituality. Joanne Gordon (1994) argues that Wilson is keen "to assert the African in his character" (p.29). That is to say, America asks African Americans to leave what belongs to their mother Africa at the door mat. Wilson, on the contrary, encourages his people to claim what is theirs. Indeed, many critics contend that Africa and race are at the

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core of his canon in spite of the fact that this might not appeal to white American audience who may not be able to appreciate African elements like storytelling, folk rituals, blues tales, pagan religions and beliefs. Kim Pereira (1995) and Sandra Shannon (1995) introduced two more valuable studies to the ongoing Wilson's scholarship. These are *August Wilson and the African American Odyssey*, and *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* respectively. While, the former takes a culture and history-based approach to read Wilson's plays, the latter adopts a biography-oriented perspective to analyze his works. Pereira asserts that Wilson's dramatic attempt to reproduce the black American experience in the 20th century in ten dramatic works is simply an endeavor to write an authentically fictitious account of the African American odyssey in four centuries in America. Shannon, on the other hand, argues that Wilson made African American and mainstream white histories the feedstock from which his dramatic works are made. History is not the outcome of Wilson's project, it is basically the unprocessed material on which his project depends. He felt that despite all the hardships his people have gone through over the last four hundred years in America, they have come to the fore, visible and triumphant. In short, the two previously mentioned studies, push forward the exercise of reading the plays and add to the debate going on about the cultural resonance of Wilson oeuvre.

Similarly, other literary scholars have presented thorough and penetrative intuitions into his plays. Peter Wolfe (1999) has casted light on Wilson's iron-willed African American literary characters who always resist the continuing attempts of the dominant mainstream white culture to victimize them. Moreover, critics like Richard Pettingill (2000) and John Timpane (1999) have explored Wilson's utilization of history in his texts and they have come to the conclusion that Wilson is more interested in revealing how African American total way of life has sustained them and helped the black people survive their exploitative and discriminatory existence in America. Other critics have focused their attention on Wilson's creative and artistic influences. Mark Rocka (1994) has argued that Wilson had fallen under the spell of four African American eminent artists and writers. These are; the well-known blues singer Bessie Smith, the playwright and political activist Amiri Baraka, the short story writer Jorge L. Borge and finally the African American painter Romare Bearden. Hence, he called them Wilson's four B's. Additionally, more than one critic has

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insightfully examined the employment of the blues in his texts. Paul C. Harrison (1991), for instance, has argued that the incorporation of the blues in the plays, being a reservoir of the black people's existence in America, is one of the authentic techniques Wilson uses to describe the African American experience there. Moreover, Houston Baker notes that the whole blues constituents operate like a dynamic network which he calls, "the blues matrix" (1984, p.3). He elaborates that this matrix is a process of ceaseless input and output that is always in a state of active productivity. He even adds that the blues is a dynamic synthetic composite that merges and combines a spectrum of African American musical, vocal and non-narrative forms that developed in the American South right after the American civil war (1861-1865). It came under the influence of church and minstrel-show music, work time songs, ragtime, field and plantation hollers, proverbial brevity, passionate expression of lament and sorrow, lay men philosophy, ribald, and bawdy humor and much more. They simply make an amalgam.

The main reason of using the blues in African American creative writings is to identify and highlight the presence of commonness in the African American existence and continuance in the States. Furthermore, it is an endeavor to reveal the mutuality they share and the common ground the entire community stands upon. Baker further holds that by summoning the blues to describe his people's experience in the States, Wilson sounds like a blues singer himself who historically used to entertain his fellow folks at crossroads and railroad junctures (1984, p.7). Moreover, Harry J. Elam's book *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (2004) provides a through exploration of Wilson's entire oeuvre and casts light on how he blends the past and present time in his cycle of dramatic works. It is one of the few books that takes a retrospective analysis of Wilson's unprecedented project in American drama. He asserts that, "by considering the intersections and continuities across the cycle {of Wilson's ten plays}, I intend this analysis not only to provide insight into the individual plays but, more significantly, to explore how the cycle as whole makes meaning and to theorize how Wilson w (rights) history" (2004, p. xv). Besides, two more studies explore Wilson's relationship to other writers such as those written by Keith Clark (2002) and Margaret Booker (2003). They both focus on his thematic issues, aesthetics and the relationship between his art and his political views. Additionally, there are a number of essay collections on the playwright's

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dramatic output such as Marilyn Elkins' *August Wilson: A Casebook* (1994) and Alan Nadel's *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson* (1994). Despite all these studies, Wilson's unparalleled grand dramatic project which he planned and fulfilled in twenty years still appeals for more critical readings and analysis.

August Wilson asserts that black art "feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of Black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity" (1997, p. 495). This art tradition, he continues:

Occurred when the African in the confines of the slave quarters sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving in his art, in his song and dance, a world in which he was the spiritual center and his existence was a manifest act of the creator from whom life flowed. He then could create art that was functional and furnished him with a spiritual temperament necessary for his survival as property and the dehumanizing status that was attendant to that (Wilson, 1997, p.496).

To August Wilson, art is his people's way to connect with their grandfathers and to empower themselves. As African Americans were denied any type of self-definition in the States, it was in the folks' cultural zone that they felt their self-worth and cultural security. The use of archetypal blues lexicon manifests itself in many fashions in the plays such as singing, rapping, storytelling, call and response, testifying and signifying. Surprisingly enough, Wilson set many of his plays in the Hill District, his Pittsburg favorite black neighborhood. This physical-turned virtual and dramatic setting amounts to the crossroads juncture where the blues singer used to sing in the past. Accordingly, it is here that the African American characters can perform and enjoy their communal blues rituals and activities to connect and link to their forefathers. It is engaging in these ritualistic rites that grants them spiritual empowerment from the ancestors on behalf of God Almighty. That is a requirement which can help them defeat adversities, conquer pain and overcome hard times. Wilson asserts that:

There are some people who will say that black Americans do not have a culture... that cultures are reserved for other people, most notably Europeans of various ethnic groupings, and that black

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Americans make up a sub-group of American culture that is derived from the European origins of its majority population. But black Americans are Africans, and there are many histories and many cultures on the African continent (1997, p.494).

Therefore, coming together at the crossroads is their way to take pride in a culture that is usually devalued by White America. Wilson asserts that race is the most important group identification characteristic and that it is the most essential proposition around which race culture can build up. (Wilson, 1997, p.494). Additionally, he saw the blues as the uneducated people's cultural response that is deeply rooted in oral tradition. It was a response to a strange and aggressive world that they did not take part in its making. This world not only denied them their culture, but also detested their morals and ethos. In such foul circumstances, the blues was the banner carrier of identity search and self-definition. The commonly evoked themes of migratory displacement, parting of ways and reuniting in Wilson's plays are all recurrent ideas and topics in blues narratives, says Pereira (1995). Similarly, Sandra Shannon (1995) is in the belief that the blues Jargon is intuitively used by Wilson to describe the spiritual and cultural bonds and ties that connect the African Americans to their forefathers.

*Fences* (1986) is August Wilson's Pulitzer Winning play of 1987. The action is set in 1957 and covers the two decades of 1930s and 40s with allusions to specific events in the history of Negro league of baseball. The protagonist is called Troy Maxon and he is a garbage carrier from Pittsburgh who led his way to become a garbage truck driver after a struggle with his company senior management. He is, also, a former baseball slugger who is overwhelmed by embitterment for not making it to the major national league in America for racial reasons. Troy Maxon is married to Rose and is a father to Cory and Lyons. While the former is a biological son of Rose and Troy Maxon, the latter is Troy's unemployed older son from a previous marriage. Troy Maxon makes the best use of his Friday evening assemblies in the presence of his family members and longtime friend Bono to talk about his past personal life, work experience, prison days, and baseball. While two of the action drivers are Troy Maxon's cheating on Rose and, his refusal to let his son join college on a

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scholarship, he is repeatedly speaking with his family members and his friend Bono about family responsibilities and life obligations.

*Fences* is one of Wilson's ten major plays. It also does play the role of a dramatic platform that he uses to discuss and investigate the blues presence in the black people's lives and how they convene at the intersection to grant each other spiritual empowerment. That power can reenergize the whole community to endure the misery and adversity they face on a daily basis in their life. In fact, Troy Maxon has a strong blues narrating voice and ability. It is the Friday-evening meeting at his house that acts as the railroad juncture where his friend and other family members get together to lend him an ear while he is narrating his blues stories. His family members; Rose, Cory, Lyons, Gabriel, and his friend Bono are his regular audience and listeners. Troy's narratives and powerful storytelling ability award them all spiritual power and strength. Early in the play, Troy Maxon makes a very important confession about the love he feels only in his community and how this leaves an impact on his decisions and way of thinking. In addition, he has got a strong opinion about his world and especially about how black Americans are treated in America. Furthermore, his stories, speeches and anecdotes are insightful and experience –based. In act one, scene one of *Fences* Troy Maxon and Rose, his wife, debate the following idea:

Rose: There is a lot of people don't know they can do no better than they doing now. That's just something you got to learn. A lot of folks still shop at Bella's.

Troy: Ain't nothing wrong with shopping at Bella's. She got fresh food.

Rose: I ain's said nothing about if she got fresh food. I'm talking about what she charge. She charge ten cents more than A&P.

Troy: The A&P ain't never done nothing for me. I spend my money where I am treated right .I go down to Bella, say, "I need a loaf of bread .I'll pay you Friday." She give it to me. What sense that make when I got money to go and spend it somewhere else and ignore the person who done right by me.? That ain't in the Bible.

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Rose: We ain't talking about what's in the Bible. What sense it make to shop there when she overcharge?

Troy: You shop where you want to .I'll do my shopping where the people been good to me (Wilson, 1986, p. 7).

Troy Maxon considers the food shopping issue from a cooperatively communal viewpoint. He does not care about the ten cents extra charge at Bella's since he is granted extra customer credit. Troy and other black customers patronize and keep the enterprise going in the community and they receive extra spiritual value, respect and credit. His insistence to shop in the community assures us that black Americans should not lose their spiritual value while securing their material needs. He cares about being treated right and with enough respect. In reality, the 1950s presented many challenges to the African Americans in the United States. That decade witnessed strong popular black demands to abolish all kinds of discrimination against the blacks. In such very hard times, Wilson claims that it is the blues that made the black community people comfort and support themselves in multiple ways.

One more example of how Troy Maxon inspires those around him is when he boasts his confrontation with his white management to be promoted from the position of a garbage carrier to that of a trash truck driver. Though he is portrayed as an imperfect African American layman who cheated on his wife, spent some time in prison, and is somehow self-centered, he is capable enough of inculcating race pride in those around him. Troy Maxon contends: "Brownie don't understand nothing. All I want them to do is change the job description. Give everybody a chance to drive the truck" (Wilson, 1986, p. 3). In fact, Troy Maxon is teaching Bono, his friend and confidante, how to stick up for his attitudes and beliefs. In the same fashion, he explains to his son, Cory, that family responsibility precedes personal desires. When Cory asks his father to buy the family a new TV set, Troy Maxon seizes the opportunity to persuade him of his fatherly point of view. Cory tells his father that they can purchase a TV set for about two hundred dollars. Troy, on the other hand, informs him that it has been over ten years since they have last tarred the roof. And, if it is not maintained before the winter, there is a strong possibility that the winter snow may leak all over the house. Troy argues:

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Troy: Now if you have two hundred dollars, what would you do...fix the roof or buy a TV?

Cory: I'd buy a TV. Then when the roof started to leak...when it needed fixing... I'd fix it.

Troy: Where you goanna get the money from? You done spent it for a TV. You goanna sit up and watch the water run all over your brand new TV. (Wilson, 1986, p.32).

The significance of the conversational situation is clear; acknowledging one's family obligations is a type of spiritual maturity. Troy Maxon, says Ama Wattley (2010) "wants to teach Cory to prioritize, and to distinguish the necessities from the luxuries of life" (p.5). Though a TV set may bring with it some entertainment and joy, the roof maintenance, on the other hand, will surely protect the whole household from the elements. In spite of all Troy Maxon's weak points as a human being, Wilson presents him as an unbreakable father whose parental love is uncharitable especially with his male kids. Again, Wattley assures us that "Troy knows the world to be hostile, racist and unwelcoming place for black people, and he attempts to prepare Cory for such a world by behaving toward his son without tenderness or softness, as he will be treated in society" (2010,p.6). In another conversation with Lyons, Troy Maxon tells him about his grandfather's sense of family commitment. He says: "But I'll say this for him...he felt a responsibility towards 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" (Wilson, 1986,p. 51). The point August Wilson is emphasizing here is that there has always been a tradition of family responsibility among black men. In fact, Wilson had to create, strong and responsible black male protagonists to counterbalance the mainstream white myth that black community males are idle, and spiritless.

Troy Maxon continues his stories to his audience to the extent that we feel that he is skeptical of the white people whose exploitation of the blacks is widespread. This apprehension of white Americans makes him refuse that Cory gets a college football scholarship because he cannot imagine that the whites will exploit his son as they have done earlier with him. Following that rejection, Wilson turns Troy Maxon's house front yard into a battlefield for his

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confrontations with his younger son, Cory. He tells his son that, “the white man ain’t goanna let you get nowhere with that football no way” (Wilson, 1986, p. 35). Totally unconvinced, Cory accuses him of intentionally putting a spoke in his wheel and impeding his education plans. He says to him, “you just scared I’m goanna be better than you, that’s all” (Wilson, 1986, p. 53). Harry J. Elam, Jr., describes Troy’s attempt to avert his son from engaging in school football games as a kind of descending into racial madness; that is to say psychosis. The idea is that long years of discrimination against the African Americans may have resulted in a type of a severe collective mental disorder which damages consistency and blurs connection with the real world. This is greatly manifested in Troy Maxon’s inability to see that the spirit of the 1957 and the race situation is much better than 1930s and 1940s. Unfortunately, he is overwhelmed by his disillusionment. He wants his son to continue working at A&P or learn a vocation like auto mechanics or carpentry that can provide him economic security and self-respect. Ama Wattley (2010) argues that:

Troy Maxon, the protagonist in August Wilson’s *Fences* ...finds...the American dream-‘the promise of a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all’- to be false when he finds himself shut out of an opportunity to excel and fulfill his aspirations due to racial discrimination. As a result, he directs his son away from the dream of success and toward the pragmatism of surviving and coping in a racial society (p.3).

Troy Maxon’s vision of his son’s future career is limited and fear-based. He tells Rose that he wants him not to follow in his footsteps. Troy Maxon’s tendency to dominate his family almost wrecks his son’s education and establishes an unequivocal relationship with him. He exclaims: “I don’t want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get” (Wilson, 1986, p. 39).

Furthermore, in act one, scene one, we meet Lyons, Troy Maxon’s first and older son, who stops by his father’s house on Friday nights to say hello and borrow ten dollars from his dad. His father always seizes the chance to instruct him about the importance of persistence and hard work. On one of those nights, when Troy is preaching the importance of earning one’s own money and hard

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work, Lyons suddenly outbursts in his father's face and accuses him of absenting himself from his family's life when he needed him most by stabbing someone to death at an attempted robbery and serving for 15 years in jail. Troy feels embarrassed and admits that: "I done learned my mistake and learned to do what's right by it. You still trying to get something for nothing. Life don't owe you nothing .You owe it to yourself. Ask Bono. He'll tell you I am right" (Wilson, 1986, p. 18). It is obvious that Troy Maxon feels sorry for the mistakes he had committed in his life and which prevented him from providing regular parental care and guidance to his older son at a time when he was in dire need for his father's mentoring. At the end of the play, we become aware that Lyons, like his father, has spent some time in jail as well. Indeed, Troy Maxon is always trying to convince his son that family responsibility has nothing to do with any standpoint towards one's society. Paradoxically enough, the incompatibility between these two poles in Troy's identity -family commitment and one's social or political point of view- is the cause of his refusal to let Cory join college on a football scholarship. Wilson, on the other hand, is so realistic in portraying Troy Maxon as a human being who encompasses in his personality the two sides of good and evil. Near the end of the play, Lyons informs his half-brother Cory that he started to appreciate his father's advice to take life as one package; in other words, he has to take the crooked with the straights. Further, he tells Cory, that he will fight inequality in America with the blues music. Lyons's approach to life has also changed at the end of the play. This time, Troy Maxon succeeds in repairing the damage of misunderstanding with Lyons. Further, Wilson seems determined to return to his protagonist some of his lost parental pride in this situation. Troy Maxon's win of Lyons' heart this time can be viewed as a small personal victory after many of his attempts failed on the road.

Troy Maxon's act of cheating on his wife put a strain on his relationship with her and made him lose the passionate and spiritual zone he enjoyed for a long time in her life and mind. As soon as he enters the house yard carrying his newly born baby, he finds Rose standing on the porch. Then, he cautiously initiates an appealing conversation with his wife and calls her with her name. He appeals to her saying: "Rose...I am standing here with my daughter in my arms...She don't know nothing about grownups' business. She innocent ...and she ain't got no mama" (Wilson, 1986, p.78). Rose answers back in an

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unwelcome tone telling him that what he was saying has got nothing to do with her. She then takes the whole situation to an indicative turning point by turning around and entering the house. Her attitude, pose and body language assure the audience that she has changed. By turning around and entering the house alone, Rose is empowering and re-enabling herself. Furthermore, she is restoring the space she has lost to an unfaithful partner. In act two, scene five and near the end of the play, she makes a significant confession about why her spiritual bond with Troy Maxon has failed at the end. She informs Cory who has come to attend his dad's funeral about her big mistake. She claims: "I married your daddy and settled down to cooking his supper and keeping clean sheets on the bed. When your daddy walked through the house he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me" (Wilson, 1986, p. 98). She even further tells him that: "by the time Ray Nell came into the house, me and your daddy had done lost touch with one another" (Wilson, 1986, p.98). Anne Blue Wills, (2017) comments saying that: "August Wilson's play *Fences* helps me understand the predicament of wives everywhere ... {and} how culture has structured women's choices" (p.51). Therefore, from this moment on, Rose uses the porch whether symbolically or literarily as a platform for re-enabling herself and re-establishing her power and strength on all levels. When Troy Maxon begs her to take care of the baby girl because she has nobody else to do that, she tells him that she will but:

Okay, Troy...you're right. I'll take care of your baby for you...cause...like you say...she's innocent...and you can't visit the sins of the father upon the child. A motherless child has got a hard time. (*She takes the baby from him.*).From right now...this child got a mother. But you a womanless man (Wilson, 1986, p.79).

The point is that Troy Maxon has to accept the fact that he has lost his leading role in the family because of his infidelity. Wilson is alluding to a long established tradition in the black family. When conflict arises, it is the black woman who usually takes the lead as she most probably is the chief psychological and emotional sponsor of the family. Once more, Wilson makes another detailed testimony about the rich character of Rose by describing how she deals with Troy Maxon's brother, Gabriel. In spite of the fact that some people in the community regard him as a person who is suffering from mental

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impairment, she treats him with respect, understanding and with no condescension. In act one, scene two, Gabriel stops by her house to visit his brother. She asks him if he is hungry. He answers saying: "I'll take some biscuits .You got some biscuits? Did you know when I was in heaven...every morning me and St. Peter would sit down by the gate and eat some fat biscuits?" (Wilson, 1986, p. 26) .Rose assures him that: "Well, come on...I'll make up a batch of biscuits" (Wilson, 1986, p. 26). She tells Gabriel that she will prepare the breakfast he likes. Rose, in fact, spiritually associates with Gabriel though she is aware of the fact that he believes that he is one of God's angels. Harry Elam (2004) argues that:

It is the characters who appear mentally or physically impaired, besieged by madness, unable to grasp the reality of the world around them, who represent a connection to a powerful, transgressive spirituality, to a lost African consciousness and to a legacy of Black social activism (p.58).

In fact, biscuits eating offers spiritual nutrition to Gabriel as it may have a biblical allusion to the body of Jesus Christ. The reference here is to the Book of Mathew or Mathew Gospel, verse 6, where Jesus says to his disciples: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). Furthermore, it may also allude to Verse 26 where Jesus tells his followers when they sat together: "Take it and eat it, for this is my body" (Mathew 26:26).Wilson is probably referring to the sacrifices of the black woman in African American history and that black Americans are also the sons of God. Again, the reference to St. Peter is significant as he is the keeper of the keys of Heavens' gates and who can admit the faithful ones-like Troy Maxon - in and send the unfit to hell. Gabriel's language is strongly religious and may be carrying metaphysical guidance to his family and community .Wilson seems to have portrayed Gabriel as the African American angel that operates in the black community to alert the community against God's wrath. Once more, Gabriel shows up in the family house on the day of Troy Maxon's funeral. Ironically speaking, Gabriel tells Rose and Cory that he will ask St. Peter to open the gates for his brother. He even asks the soul of his dead brother if it is ready or not to enter the gates of Heaven. Wilson's expressive language invokes a feeling that Gabriel is a messenger between Earth and Heaven that is coming to offer his comfort and solace. He can not only speak to Rose and other family members, but also to the soul of his brother that

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is waiting for a permission to enter the gates of Heaven. The final stage notes of the play describes Gabriel's futile attempt to blow the trumpet and his slow strange dance. Wilson continues to say that: "he finishes his dance and the gates of Heaven stand open as wide as God's closet" (Wilson, 1986, p.101). Gabriel may be alluding to the souls of all African Americans who passed away from the moment of removal from Africa to the present day. Troy Maxon is granted entry into heaven to join them all because he is symbolically a descendant of all his great forefathers and shares their values, customs and traditions. Simply, he is an earthly spiritual leader of the community.

Wilson's dramatic works depend on employing African American experience and African cultural elements as their raw materials. However, *Fences*, in particular, makes use of the game of baseball as a cultural white practice in order to describe a black experience in the last century of the second millennium. The goal is to highlight the black tradition of peaceful resistance and perseverance in life since slavery and to show that they dared to challenge the white man in his exclusive sport. Susan Koprince (2006) argues that by utilizing this white pastime cultural form, "Wilson artfully expresses Troy Maxon's double consciousness-his complicated experience as a black man in a white dominated world" (p.357). In fact, *Fences* is also one of America's great plays on baseball. In reality, this game in particular has been viewed for a long time as a metaphoric symbol of the American Dream .During the 1950s, baseball was presented to be a battlefield of the bravest, and the most masculine. In *Fences*, Troy Maxon is constantly envisioning himself as belonging to that muscular arena. Further, he is harboring a false conviction that he can go back and play as before (Susan Koprince, 2006, p.355). That is why, he maintains a defiant attitude to life throughout the play. He therefore declines to give in to all types of adversaries he meets in his life; death, work white manager, or the devil which Wilson associates with the white exploitative capitalism. Equally important, Robert Nowatzki , (2016) contends that, "Maxon often uses baseball metaphors in discussing non-baseball situations, which is fitting in that Maxon's opportunity to play major league baseball symbolizes the marginalization of African Americans in American society as a whole"(p.112). Consequently, the history of black involvement in the organized games of baseball and the literary writing of that, cannot be separated from the notion of double consciousness

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that Du Bois introduced early in the twentieth century. They had to find a compromise between their competing racial and national identities, he asserts.

However, Wilson smartly alludes to the early unwelcome and invisible presence of black players in the white-dominated game of baseball in *Fences* to take issue with the elusive reality of the American Dream. Wilson's protagonist, who was also a former baseball player, is overwhelmed by disappointment and believes that a black man in America is usually born with an identifying mark of shame or a stigma. In act two, scene one, he tells Rose about the adversaries of black life in America saying, "But...you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate...You can't afford to let none get past you. You can't afford a call strike. If you going down ... you going down swinging. Everything lined up against you" (Wilson, 1986, p. 69). Throughout the play, Troy Maxon is set within the actual Negro League context and is made to reflect the despair of historical black baseball players who were impeded from proceeding to more prestigious baseball levels. It is this disillusionment in getting access to the American dream that triggered Troy Maxon to cheat on his wife. He himself confesses that frustration after eighteen years of hard work and no big reward, made him feel like he wants to steal again. He tells Rose what he felt when he saw Alberta. He says, "Do you understand after eighteen years I wanted to steal second" (Wilson, 1986, p.70). For Troy Maxon, the American Dream turned out to be an illusion with no visible reward after eighteen years of hard work. Accordingly, his life is one of masked frustration despite his unbreakable endeavor to adapt. In *Fences*, Rose and Bono state in a conversation with Troy Maxon that many people of color –such as Jackie Robinson-have jumped the color line in baseball. Indeed, Jackie Robinson is a historical African American player who actually made an unprecedented entry into the major League in 1947. But, Bono and Rose believe that the problem is that Troy Maxon came too early to the game. He answers them back in a displeased tone .He claims:

Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play...then they ought to have let you play (Wilson, 1986, p.10).

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Ironically speaking, Jackie Robinson, was not selected to be the first African American baseball player to make it to the major baseball League in America only for his sport competencies. In fact, he was known to be self-effacing and non-defiant. Furthermore, he had no retaliatory inclination whatsoever (Shannon, 1995). Troy Maxon, on the contrary, could not have made it by any means to the major league. Simply, he would not have taken any abuse without impulsively striking back. Further, Wilson portrayed the fictional Troy Maxon as having insufficient placatory disposition which can grant him the green light to such closed gates. (Koprince, 2006, p.351).

In fact, Troy Maxon, the defiant and iron-willed protagonist, has decided to look death straight in the eye and he would not give up at any moment in the fight. He will die fighting like a real man. He boasts to Rose saying that, "if you going down...you going down swinging" (Wilson, 1986, p. 69). Kim Pereira argues that Troy Maxon owns the spirit of warriors who insist to go into battles which they may or may not win for sure. Shortly, after Troy Maxon's death, Cory returns back home after seven years of absence. Unfortunately, he is still "harboring a great deal of anger and bitterness towards Troy" (Wattley, 2010, p.15). Therefore, he declines to be present at his father's funeral. It is Rose that reminds him of the truth that he is trying to ignore. She tell him:

Rose: you just like him. You got him in you good.

Cory: Don't tell me that Mama.

Rose: You Troy Maxon all over Again.

Cory: I don't want to be Troy Maxon. I want to be me.

Rose: You can't be nobody, but who you are Cory (Wilson, 1986, p.97).

Cory decides that he will attend his dad's funeral when he asks his sister RayNell to change her shoes inside the house. That sounds like an acknowledgement of Troy Maxon's legacy inside him. The play is really progressive as Cory seems convinced to pick up on what his father had left. The presence of his seven year- old sister, RayNell, makes Cory take a second

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thought on his mother's words and decides to attend his father's funeral. As he meets his half-sister for the first time, he understands the family task he owes her since his father died and left her to him to take care of. Simultaneously, they both burst out singing a song about their late father's Dog, Old Blue. The song is no doubt a kind of cultural heritage that was first innovated by Troy Maxon's father and which passed down from Troy to his descendants, Cory and RayNell. Wattley (2010) contends that, "the song becomes a cathartic release for Cory" (p.16). Both kids appear to represent the hope of the future of the African American community in America. Similarly, the song is a sign that they share with their father and grandfather the black traditions of hard work and conscientiousness. It is Troy Maxon who taught them both the song at different times. Certainly, he was keen enough to educate them about the heritage of their forefathers. Cory and RayNell sing together:

Both: Blue laid down and died like a man

Now he's treeing possums in the Promised Land

I'm goanna tell you this to let you know

Blue's gone where the good dogs go

When I hear old Blue bark

When I hear old Blue bark

Blue treed a possum in Noah's Ark

Blue treed a possum in Noah's Ark (Wilson, 1986, pp.99-100).

The reference to Noah's Ark creates a feeling of consolation, rescue and comfort. The new generation of black people is well educated in the culture of their forefathers and will overcome all discrimination in America. They will be saved from the flood of racism. Harry Elam (2004) argues that the children in Wilson's drama, "function simultaneously to reveal the past, to shape the present and also literarily to represent the hopes and dreams of the future" (p.75). In fact, Troy Maxon is the catalyst who unconsciously turns all other characters into spiritual leaders in the community. Wilson demonstrates in *Fences* that storytelling is one of the black community techniques to spiritually

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empower itself and is a way to initiate the black young generation into the culture of their ancestors. He believes that spiritual and cultural empowerment can lead to economic empowerment in a society that denies them all their civil and other rights.

Since Wilson makes his protagonist die like a combatant fighter, his small dirt playing field is portrayed as a holy place that may provide life regeneration. Susan Koprince (2006) notes that, "by depicting Troy's final playing field as sacred space, Wilson is mythologizing his African American hero and celebrating Troy's warrior spirit—a spirit that would come to dominate the 1960s civil rights era" (p.357). She also believes that Troy's spirit of defiance has blown full in the 1960s and that it is baseball which has taught him to take life by the horns. African Americans have always been in the belief that the game of baseball is a potential land for the making of larger than life sports heroes. August Wilson has deliberately tried to mythicize Troy Maxon so as to associate him with all strong-willed African American heroes. He states in his popular art manifesto speech, *The Ground on Which I stand*, which he delivered in Princeton University in 1996 and was later reprinted in 1997 that:

The Ground that I stand on has been pioneered by my grandfather, by Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, by Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvey and the honorable Elijah Mohammad. That is the ground of the affirmation of the value of one being, an affirmation of his worth in the face of the society's urgent and sometimes profound denial...I felt it a duty and an honor to participate in that historic moment, as the people who had arrived in America chained and malnourished in the hold of a 350-foot Portuguese, Dutch or English sailing ship were now seeking ways to alter their relationship to the society in which they lived, and perhaps more important, searching for ways to alter the shared expectations of themselves as a community of people (Wilson, 1997, p. 494).

August Wilson is taking pride in all his precedent race pioneers. By attempting to mythicize Troy Maxon in *Fences*, he is trying to seek new ways to change his race relationship to the society that was denying his black people's presence. Furthermore, he is also describing their defiant endurance of all kinds of

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discrimination and oppression in the United States. Despite all this social and economic inequality, African American men such as Troy Maxon have bravely fought against all odds and never ignored their family responsibility and obligations.

Troy Maxon's stories are mainly used to express emotions to his spouse, to guide his sons on social and life values, to state his doctrines about dealing with hard times and adverse circumstances, to instill family traditions and customs and to promote dreams for a better future. He can simply adapt his stories to respective situations. In fact, "Troy's stories may be interpreted as suggesting more cynicism about the idea of duty than Troy wants his family to understand" (Blumenthal, 2000, p.76). Troy Maxon sometimes feels that what he preaches is incompatible with what he is experiencing in white America. Additionally, in spite of his ability to tell stories and the admiration of his family members and friend of those stories and their moral or life messages, critics have polarized points of view on Troy's character. Joan Fishman (2000), for example, underscores what she calls, "Troy's personality limitations" (p.170). On the other hand, one sees Troy as a person whose abusive boyhood, early manhood adverse circumstances and his hostile environment have turned him partly into a passionately debilitated person. Cory accuses him of jealousy when he refuses to let him take the college scholarship. But Wilson is also dramatizing his protagonist's mistrust in the American Dream that promises hope and delivers disappointment. In the case of Lyons, Troy sounds more logical in spite of the fact that Cory's accusation is somewhat true. Anna Blumenthal (2000) argues that:

Although his practical expectations may have been shaped by his encounter with racism and the world of work and opportunity, Troy has not been destroyed emotionally by early experience. Wilson suggests through Troy's stories that it may be as much Troy's day-to-day experience on the job in the racist white world, as it is his past experience which leaves him in a perpetual and exhausting struggle to maintain his own belief in the very values of hard work and responsibility that he preaches to his family (p.81).

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Blumenthal (2000) believes that it is the daily struggle of the black and the accumulated impact of suffering and inequality in the white world that makes Troy Maxon skeptical of some of his convictions. Though the play is clearly an exploration of the barriers, and besiegement black people face in America on many levels in the pre-civil liberties struggle phase, the major goal of Wilson is kind of mythologizing the life and death of Troy Maxon the defiant community leader and race torch bearer. He, in fact, is the center of all action, and is the character to whom all others compare themselves. As Wilson's plays are usually based in African, and African American cultural elements, he uses story telling in *Fences* as his main technique to develop his action and build up characters. Wilson's main goal here is to educate his audience and readers about the authentic oral tradition of African culture. Sandra Shannon (1995) argues that Wilson by adopting storytelling in *Fences* as his main African cultural element is simply creating a spirit reminiscent of popular African tribal traditions that are still living in Africa (1995,p.173). Likewise, Mary, L. Bogumil asserts that employing storytelling as a technique to push forward the play's action is an attempt from the playwright to produce a unique African American drama and a recognition of the genuine nature of the forefathers' heritage and legacy (1999,pp.9-10).

Maxon is one of Wilson's most impressive, and inspirational story tellers. He has a disposition to merge his past life memories with his imaginatively invented tales. However, sometimes the time-related dissimilarity between the factual and the imagined memories fade in the stories. Rose, like Bono, sometimes feels that Troy Maxon's imaginative stories are farfetched and that the stories are nothing more than nonsensical utterances. Surprisingly, he has the skill to adapt his stories according to his type of audience like the West Africa griot who does that to maintain his oral narratives. Bono tells him in act one, scene one, that, "... I know you. I know you got some Uncle Remus in your blood. You got more stories than the devil got sinners" (Wilson, 1986, p. 13). It is in act one, scene one, that Rose asks Troy Maxon to stop repeating his tales. She even asks him to be quiet and to stop talking. She then interrupts him saying, "Troy, why don't you hush that talk" (Wilson, 1986, p. 11). In fact, Troy sometimes fails to strike a balance between audience satisfaction and other individual convictions of work ethic in such a racist society. This is simply the reason of his confusion and contradiction in some situations.

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Anna Blumenthal (2000) believes that “Wilson makes Troy a persuasive story teller and family man only in so far as he can control his listeners’ reception of his message” (p.88). When the messages of Troy Maxon’s stories clash with each other, he becomes less convincing to his audience. However, Wilson sometimes keeps Troy Maxon’s skepticism at bay. Though he is preaching work ethic and diligence, he himself does not enjoy equality in his work place. Wilson’s employment of the narratives, via their mutually incompatible denotations, in dramatizing the barriers African American males face, makes Troy Maxon look and sound admirable despite his few defeats. Wilson portrays through the stories the inner composure of his black protagonist in a troubling world and the dilemma he finds himself in when trying to maintain his convictions. In short, Wilson describes not the intuitive distortion of one black individual, but a whole generation that Troy Maxon represents in such a society. Finally, the playwright has called upon his audience and critical readers to show respect to a black commoner who has confronted life, death, the devil, and more importantly racism in all its disguises and still sounds honest and looks strong.

In conclusion, *Fences* covers the 1950s in Wilson’s ten-decade cycle of plays. It represents the life and death of Troy Maxon who has heroic qualities in a very hostile world. Noticeably, all the action revolves around him and he sounds inspirational to all other characters as well. Like the majority of his black American brothers, Troy Maxon’s entire life is nothing but a whole chapter of suffering and struggle. In *Fences*, Wilson sheds light on the role of the blues and storytelling in empowering black Americans, their failure to attain the American Dream and the coping methods they have followed to avoid madness. Troy Maxon’s disappointment drives him to prevent his son from getting a college football scholarship and seduces him to cheat on his wife. Sandra Shannon (2003) asserts that, “*Fences* makes a strong case for elevating the African- American experience to a grand scale and for erasing the color line long enough to make Troy Maxon’s misfortune and pain more than simply one black man’s predicament” (p.85). Shannon believes that Wilson is trying in the play to put the African American experience on equal footing with that of the white culture and to help abolish social injustice. Wilson brilliantly uses story telling as a narrative technique to drive the action forward and to develop his characters. Despite all his suffering, Maxon could maintain a very defiant

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attitude towards life and is determined to fall down fighting .Simply, he is a legitimate black hero and a larger than life dramatic figure. Despite all the white man's endeavor to devaluate Troy Maxon's race and culture over four hundred years, August Wilson succeeds in introducing a character that can take a remarkable place among the memorable dramatic heroes of the American theatre. No doubt, *Fences* offers a lesson in hope not only for black Americans but also, for all mankind.

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## المستخلص

تعد مسرحية "الأسوار" للكاتب الأفروأمريكي أوجست ويلسون جزء من مشروعه الدرامي الكبير لتصوير حياة الأقلية الأمريكية السوداء في الولايات المتحدة في القرن العشرين والذي يعتمد على أن تعالج كل مسرحية من مسرحيات المشروع العشر عقدا من الزمن في شكل درامي. وقد أسس أوجست ويلسون مسرحياته معتمدا على أستلهام الثقافات الأفريقية والأفريقية الأمريكية وذلك في محاولة لإنتاج دراما أمريكية سوداء مميزة تقدم تصويرا فنيا مؤطرا تاريخيا لتجربة شعبه في عقود القرن العشرين كلا على حدة. ومن الواضح أن الكاتب المسرحي يحاول في هذه المسرحية أن يضع تجربة الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي على قدم المساواة مع تجربة الثقافة الأمريكية البيضاء. كما يعد بالأمل في غدا أفضل. وأخيرا وليس آخرا تطمح هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استكشاف كيفية توظيف أوجست ويلسون لحكايات البلوز، ولعبة البيسبول الأمريكية وأسلوب الحكى القصصى لشرح طبيعة العالم المعاكس الذي كان على البطل الأفروأمريكي تروي ماكسون مواجهته من المهد إلى اللحد. وأن كفاحه الإنسانى يستحق كل الاحترام على الرغم من أخطائه البشرية وهزائم الحياة وانتصاراته الصغيرة.

الكلمات الدالة: الدراما الأفرو أمريكية-البلوز-فن الحكى-لعبة البيسبول-الحلم الأمريكي.