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THE IMAGE OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN IN *FENCES* (1985)

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ABSTRACT: *August Wilson's major concern is to sympathetically put on stage the black experience and thus to arouse the community's awareness for such experience. His black characters are always in constant quest for self-realization and for an authentic identity. Consequently, focuses on encouraging the blacks to rediscover their identities and to maintain self-authentication. He believes that the only way for the African Americans to transcend the limited existence in white racist America is by recovering their Africanness; by recognizing and accepting their African roots. He is keen on reminding the African Americans of their cultural heritage and their identity that has been maintained for ages despite their painful sense of alienation and their separation from their African culture. To Wilson, the African culture and heritage should not be an element of inferiority; rather it must be an evidence of pride because Afro-Americans have their own cultural distinctions: they have their own customs, music, food, clothing, language, rituals of marriage and funerals which are different from the whites'. Thus, he gives a complete record of the black world and culture, and urges, moreover, blacks to be proud of their distinct cultural heritage.*

KEYWORDS: rediscovering self-identity, racism, loneliness, cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

August Wilson (1945 -) is one of America's distinct and most prominent playwrights; a "major find for the American Theatre" according to Frank Rich, the New York Times critic(Pereira ix). Like white America's leading playwrights, such as O'Neill (1888-1953), Albee (1928-), Williams (1912-1983), Wilder (1897-1975) and Sherwood (1874-1941), Wilson won the Pulitzer Prize twice, and within the span of eight years he also won Tony Award, New York Drama Critic' Circle Awards and Drama Desk Awards; "one of only seven Americans who won multiple Pulitzer Prizes for drama" (Majeed 242).

Wilson can be seen as the theatrical mythographer of the African American experience. His major concern is to sympathetically put on stage the black experience and thus to arouse the community's awareness for such experience; specifically, he "takes the responsibility of telling the tale of the encounter between released black slaves and the vigorous and ruthless growing America decade by decade" (*Fences* vii). Early in his dramatic career Wilson wrote ten plays which function as a "record of black experience"; and each of which represents one decade, for example, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*: 1910s, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*: 1920s, *The Piano Lesson*: 1930s, *Seven Guitars*: 1940s, *Fences*: 1950s (qtd. in Majeed 242).

The black characters in these plays project the quest of the African-American for self-realization and for an authentic identity. Thus, through a cycle of plays, Wilson expresses his commitment to the issue of human condition of black America; blacks thus can write and stage

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their own experiences as much as whites. His theatre is also concerned with the survival of the cultural heritage of blacks in a racist society: Wilson states that "the message of America is 'leave your Africanness outside the door.' My message is 'claim what is yours'" (qtd. in Freedman 39-40). Consequently, Wilson's major concern is an attempt to encourage blacks to rediscover their identities and to, accordingly, maintain self-authentication.

A Wilson play can be seen as a record of certain historical episodes in the lives of black Americans throughout the twentieth century, thus, Wilson attempts to find a certain link between blacks and their past. In other words, he endeavours to tie the different generations that have been cut off from their heritage with their roots, recoding, thus, the history of black Americans through his dramas. In other words, he puts the history of blacks in a new context as Jay Plum notes: "Rather than writing history in the traditional sense, Wilson 'rights' American history, altering our perception of reality to give status to what American history has denied the status of 'real'" (Plum 562). To create a clear, reasonable reaction to the dramatic event, Wilson "leads his audience to recurring cultural epiphanies about their collective pasts and sweeps them toward the cathartic awareness that therein lie their greatest strengths" (Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 4). History in a Wilson play helps blacks to know the present and to rediscover the past.

The aim of this paper, then, is to study the image of the African-American, or rather the image of the 'other' in August Wilson's play *Fences* (1985), in order to show how the non-white peoples are seen in America and how they exist in a predominantly white society. Inthis playWilson "attempts his hands in tapping the consciousness of a people relegated to the margins of history"(Pirnajmuddin 43). As a phrase 'The other' has been used by social scientists and philosophers to define "anyone who is not I - the Other actually defines me because it is the ultimate signifier of everything I am not. Because [of] the ... Eurocentrism of western philosophy and other cultural discourses, the Other has been defined as 'Woman' or African or Asian - and hence the Other is what is feared, what exists to be conquered" (Childers 216).

Thus, the term 'other' refers to and characterizes a person or a group of people as 'those' who do not belong to 'us'. The other is to be placed outside the cultural convention to which 'we' belong; hence, to be seen as inferior and is not, perhaps, to be treated according to human demands. However, the others, as a given racial group of their own, have their particular identity and their cultural heritage which may be different from and alien to 'ours'. 'We' may delineate an image or formulate a stereotype for the other as inferior to 'us'.

For example, the West, as Edward Said puts it out in his book *Orientalism*, looks down on the Orient and regards it as "one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other"(Said 1). Although the Orient has its own cultural identity and experience, "a reality [which is] obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West" (Said 5), the Occident considers the Orient as its inferior other. This cultural relationship is built on a certain idea of Europe; "a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-European, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is ... the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European people and cultures" (Said 7).

Like the Orient, that is regarded by the West as its 'other', the Afro-Americans are seen by white Americans as their inferior 'other'. Blacks are placed outside the life system and the

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cultural conventions of the racist white America that identifies itself as superior to blacks. Despite the fact that the Afro-Americans have their own cultural personality and heritage to which they should belong, the racist whites insist on seeing them as the 'leftovers' of America.

Wilson's message, then, is to remind the African Americans of their cultural heritage and their identity that has been maintained for ages despite their painful sense of alienation and their separation from their African culture. Lawrence Levine believes that "from the first African captives, through the years of slavery, and into the present century black Americans kept alive important strands of African consciousness and verbal art in their humor, songs, dance, speech, tales, folk beliefs and aphorisms"(Levine 444). Wilson advocates one's return to one's own cultural ties.

To Wilson, the African culture and heritage should not be an element of inferiority; rather it must be an evidence of pride because Afro-Americans have their own cultural distinctions: they have their own customs which are different from the whites'. Their day by day rites such as their worship, the way they talk, their music, their food, clothing, language, their marriages and their funerals are all reflected in Wilson's drama. He gives a complete record of the black world and culture, and urges, moreover, blacks to be proud of their distinct cultural heritage. Wilson adds: "Blacks have been all too willing and anxious to say that we are the same as whites, meaning that we should be treated the same, that we should enjoy the same opportunities in society as whites. That part is fine ... but blacks are different, and they should be aware of their differences" (qtd. in Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 194).

Unlike the revolutionary theatre of Amiri Baraka, Wilson's theatre aims at depicting and recording the cultural identity of the other in white America. Wilson does not concern himself in his plays with the black image that has been at the centre of political and social scene, rather he is interested in portraying the common folk involved in their everyday life and his concern with 'domestic realism' is in line with the main concern of the twentieth century American drama in which dramatists express their concerns through the personal experiences of ordinary characters.

In his chronological portrayal of blacks in racist America, Wilson focuses, in *Fences* (1985), on blacks' economic, emotional, social and moral limitations. The dramatic action of the play throws light on the period of the 1950s in the life of the Afro-Americans in White America. The action of *Fences* takes place in 1957, the year when many social and cultural changes in the life of blacks occurred, for example, they were not to be considered as a race of ex-slaves who must be kept at the fringes of the society where white America used to keep them. They were moving gradually but steadily into the main stream of the American society: Troy protests against the inequality of his job and complains to his boss; as a result he is promoted to be a truck driver instead of a garbage lifter.

During the post-world war period and perhaps because blacks have responded to their country's call for life, they started to claim full citizenship: "in many ways, 1957 was one of the most important years of this decade, for in that year was enacted the first Civil Rights Act since the Reconstruction era, an act aimed at desegregating the franchise" (Pereira 36). Thus blacks were given the right to lodge a protest against discrimination. Before 1957blacks had little access to any of the benefits which ordinary citizens take for granted such as equal employment and education opportunities despite the fact that blacks had been free for almost a century.

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Fences traces the sense of challenging the American dream through skillfully depicted the African Americans' experience in a racist society. Thematically, in this play, Wilson concerns himself with the tale of a black family unit that represents blacks struggling in a racist society to attain self-realization and self-fulfillment in an industrial Northern city; Pittsburgh perhaps. He also throws light on the earlier generations; blacks' grandfathers in the south. Yet, the foreground of the dramatic situation focuses on an encounter between the freed blacks coming from the south and the white America.

Artistically, *Fences* is a skillful combination of conventional and non-conventional dramatic devices. In other words, the play has an overall realistic framework which is undermined by the use of non-realistic techniques. The set, for example, is apparently realistically designed as the front yard of the Maxsons house; an old building of two stories set in a small alley situated in Pittsburgh in the late 1950s. Thus the play has a specific time and place. The stage props such as one or two chairs, an old-fashioned icebox, a pile of lumber, fence-building equipments, a ball made of rags and a baseball bat all of which suggest the illusion of realism. Thus, the set "provides detailed realism with a rendering of the front porch and yard of Troy's and Rose's house, convincing down to each weathered board and fallen leaf" (Zimmerman 3).

Moreover, the characters are realistically delineated: the main character, Troy Maxson, is a garbage collector, married to Rose but leading together an unhappy family life. The dramatic action, which is a gradually evolving conflict that is ultimately resolved in the final moments of the drama, revolves around Troy's suffering and his struggle for equality in a racial society. The father-son and husband-wife conflicting familial relationships reflect much of the play's theme: the experience of African Americans in the late 1950s. Therefore, "it's from realism that Wilson draws the power of this play, creating both a provocative family drama and a larger comment on society's wrongs" (Zimmerman 3).

However, the playwright employs beneath this seemingly realistic structure a non-conventional dimension which is mainly attained by techniques such as the use of language, storytelling and the Blues. The colloquial language in *Fences* is to be balanced by long monologues and long speeches in which the characters elaborate on the central theme. Again, the realistic fence, Troy involved in building throughout the dramatic event, has a metaphorical significance.

The title of the play is used symbolically to highlight its thematic concern; i.e. the limitation from which the different generations in the Maxson family and the rest of blacks in America suffer. For example, to Cory, the literal fence mentioned in the play objectifies his inability to liberate himself from the domination of his father. It fences him out of his desire for independence and self-reliance. Again, the fence can be seen as a metaphor for the numerous limitations put upon Troy in the white American society. That is why he is perhaps reluctant to complete a wooden border around his yard. The fence may also signify Troy's prison time when he is fenced off from his family and the rest of the society. In the past and because of his skin-colour Troy is also fenced out of his aspiration as an athletic hero. With the uncovering of his relationship with Alberta, Troy is fenced out of his faithful wife, Rose. Moreover, the fence can stand for death, for shortly after the completion of this wooden border Troy dies, the thing which will fence him completely out of life.

However, to Rose it has a positive significance for it protects her family and home against any outsider. Bono, Troy's friend, defines the actual significance of the fence: "some people build fences to keep people out ... and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to

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hold on to you all. She loves you"(21). For Rose the fence would keep her family members together within the home which she is able to furnish with love and compassion. Early in the play Rose who is the mother and the wife is heard singing: "Jesus, be a fence around me every day / Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way" (21).

Wilson uses also the supernatural dimension to transcend the naturalistic world of everyday life in the lives of the Maxsons. Gabriel's strange dance and ecstatic blowing of his trumpet at the very end of the play suggest transcending Troy's problematic world. It is a non-realistic dimension which Wilson adds to the apparently naturalistic milieu of the play; a dramatic strategy which may help Wilson put side by side the American with the African. He ultimately wants his characters as well as his audience to discover their unique African identity; and consequently to attain a sense of belonging.

Wilson also employs the storytelling technique to put on stage the complete history of more than one generation in the Maxson family; their whole legacy of morals and patterns is uncovered in front of the audience. Taking place in the porch of the family house, the dramatic action consists of a series of stories. Troy, the central character in the play, is the excellent storyteller of the play:

> [He] tells stories to his family and friends in that wonderful environment of the pretelevision, pre-air-conditioned era when the back porch and the backyard were the platform for some of the exciting tales of that time. From this platform and through his behavior he passes on to his extended family principles for living, which members of his family accept or refute through the manner in which they choose to live their own lives. (viii)

The most important story Troy learns and tries to pass on to the rest of his family, is that of America, the so-called land of equal opportunities; in fact, there is noequal chance for blacks; Troy, for example, in his younger years, was denied an equal chance in white America; yet the same country asked sacrifice from his brother in World War II. Troy's tale indicates that it is not enough in America (the land of inequality) for a man to have strength of body and strength of purpose; rather man must have fine colour of skin. *Fences*, thus, "deeply personalizes racism, showing in minute detail its destructive power on the human soul and both the pain and strength it extracts to prevail over it" (Zimmerman 4).

Metaphors are skillfully used to dramatize the image of blacks and their disappointment when they cannot obtain their right share of the American Dream.The economic discriminations, from which the black working-class suffer, are underlined in the play by the use of the stew metaphor. Wilson visualizes America as a huge melting pot in which the Afro-Americans are classified as the other or the 'leftovers'. Summing up the unequal opportunities, especially during slavery in the antebellum south, Troy recalls a certain incident in a restaurant: "A Negro go in there and can't get no kind of service. I seen a white fellow come in there and ordered a bowl of stew. Pope picked up all the meat out the pot for him. Man ain't got nothing but a bowl of meat! Negro come behind him and ain't had nothing but the potatoes and carrots"(23).

European immigrants are completely different from the Africans; while the former have the right to settle down in some sort of a business, the latter are regarded as outcasts. The

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discriminating America welcomed its immigrants only on the ground of their skin colour. The city, for example, rejected blacks so they fled and settled along riverbanks and under bridges.

The history of African Americans shows the process of involuntary migration of a race of people from Africa to the New Land. It is a process of separating this race from their homes and culture and throwing them into a complete alien environment. This process results in a deep sense of alienation, frustration and dislocation. Again, the descendants of slaves who moved northward from the rural American south to the urban industrial north struggle in vain to attain a sense of belonging and satisfaction in a hostile racist society.

To dramatize the human condition of blacks and their suffering, August Wilson tells in *Fences* the tale of an extended family consisting of three generations. Through different tales the family's traditions, customs, frustrated hopes, fears, love and hatred and the rest of their history are vividly dramatized in front of the audience. He sometimes resorts to black music to evoke a convincing atmosphere for the history of the black Maxson family members, who personify the human condition of blacks in white America. This dramatic strategy results in a complete participation of the audience in the dramatic situation; they are perhaps shocked because of their awareness of the reality of their existence.

Troy's father, who discovers that he is a failure because he is disappointed in his profession as a sharecropper of the Reconstruction era, turns almost to be an aggressive person inflecting his own sense of failure and frustration, perhaps unconsciously, on the rest of his family members. His young son, Troy, and two wives abandon him because of his cruelty, as Troy reminiscences: "all his women run off and left him. He wasn't good for nobody"(51). Yet, Troy's father himself can be seen as a victim of the ruthless tenant farming system. The younger Troy witnessed his father's suffering in such a system; "sometimes I wonder why he was living .... He ain'tknew how to do nothing but farm. no, he was trapped and I think he knew it" (60). This inhuman American economic system dooms Troy's father to fail, and destroys the ordinary father-son and husband-wife relationships. The family members became alien human beings to one another.

Troy's father was a poor, hardworking man who kept a family with eleven children all of whom worked as farm hands. Moreover, he was entrapped in a circle of debt and deprivation so he turned to his children for help. Troy, regretfully recalls how "sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy. He ain't cared nothing about no kids. A kid to him wasn't nothing. All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working" (50). Thus, because of the cruelty of the economic conditions at that time, the natural familial relationships are ruined.

The dehumanizing attitude of the sharecropping economic system turned Troy's father into a selfish and domineering person. As a slave within his own family unit and within the racist America, Troy recalls: "the only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin" (51). In order to pick cotton for a Mr. Lubin, Troy's father cares little for his own folks. For example, "when it come time for eating ... he ate first. If there was anything left over, that's what you got. Man would sit down and eat two chickens and give you the wing" (50). The selfishness and cruelty of Troy's father resulted in the abandonment of his wives, and consequently the destruction of the family unit. Troy's mother, for example, left her family and escaped; "she run off when I [Troy] was about eight. She sneaked off one night after he [Troy's father] had gone to sleep"(51). Later on, when Troy became fourteen, he learned that sometimes departure becomes a must. His father used to torture and beat him till he himself

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was forced to depart, liberating himself from the enslavement of such a domineering cruel father.

Abandonment, separation and consequently an acute sense of alienation and rootlessness can be seen as a major motif in the play. Blacks are forced by living necessities or by the hardships of life to leave their beloved ones walking down roads for, perhaps, a better life. Troy's friend, Bono, confirms Troy's stories of blacks' abandonment saying: "a lot of them did. Back in those days what you talking about ... they walk out their front door and just take on down one road or another and keep on walking .... Just keep on walking till you come to something else"(51).

In their history, the African Americans moved twice: the first movement was imposed on them when they were forced to abandon their home land in Africa to the new world, while the second movement to the north of America was almost willingly done. The ex-slaves would have been much secure in being close to land in the south. Wilson seems to condemn the black Americans for quitting the agrarian south for the industrial north: "we were land-based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent 200 years developing our culture as black Americans. And we left the south. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transport this culture to the pavement of the industrialized North .... I think if we had stayed in the South, we would have been a stronger people" (qtd. in Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 13). In *Fences*, the playwright attempts to dramatize what he regards as the crucial mistakes of blacks who quit their southern agricultural environment heading to the industrial north overlooking their heritage. Yet, it can be argued that the black Americans would like to escape their experience as slaves and would opt to a new life as free people in the industrial north.

However, Wilson's main concern is not the historical details of the blacks' mistake in moving northward, rather he concerns himself with dramatizing the inner feelings of the Afro-Americans and the accompanying sense of frustration in moving to the north. Wilson highlights the irony involved in their move because they escaped slavery in the south to no better future in the north as he puts it: "we came North and we're still victims of discrimination and oppression in the North. [T]he move to the cities has not been a good move. Today in 1988 we still don't have jobs. The last time blacks in America were working was during the Second World War, when there was a need for labor, and it did not matter what color you are" (qtd. in Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 14).

In *Fences*, Troy, the representative of the second generation, left his family and escaped from the enslavement of the economic system at that time. However, his departure and liberation from a domineering father do not lead him to paradise. Rather, it is merely one primal step in his long journey for survival. Troy's break away from his family and his struggle for a better future lead him, ironically, to prison. It is true that he is able to form another family unit, his own nuclear family with a wife and a son, but he is forced again to abandon them all, this time to prison.

This episode in the life of the smaller family of Troy is reminiscent of a similar one in the history of the larger family of blacks in America. In other words, the departure of blacks from and their abandonment of the dehumanizing conditions in the south end not in the paradise of the urbanized north, but in a larger prison, in being slaves to utter poverty instead of being slaves to whites.

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This episode in the history of the Maxson family, and in blacks' life, is dramatized through the use of storytelling technique. Telling Rose and Bono one of his stories through which the past is revealed in front of the audience, Troy recalls:

> I thought I was in freedom. Shhh. colored folks living down there on the riverbanks in whatever kind of shelter they could find for themselves. Right down there under the Brady Street Bridge. Living in shacks made of sticks and tarpaper. Messed around there and went from bad to worse. started stealing. First it was food. Then I figured, hell, if I steal money I can buy me some food. Buy me some shoes too! One thing led to another. (54)

The journey of black Americans northward and their search for self-realization ended, like Troy's in the larger prison of the hostile white American society. They had to dwell not established family houses or settle into some sort of business, a way of life through which they might maintain their sense of humanity; rather they dwelled riverbanks, alleys, sidewalks and they had to suffer from starvation.

Ironically, in prison Troy finds in baseball an opportunity to attain self-realization and a sense of meaning. It is one step towards maintaining an identity and perhaps self-esteem. "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"; baseball has become the symbol of all that is good in American life: fair play, the rule of law equal opportunity and the brotherhood of man (Koprince 349).After prison Troy plays in Negro baseball leagues moving from town to town as though rootlessness lurks for a black as the only way of success. Yet, talented black players are denied in racist America the chance to excel at the highest level of the sport, and Troy is not allowed a national recognition or a complete chance to excel despite his talent. Later on, Troy refuses to sign his son's papers for an athletic scholarship, because, according to Wilson, "when blacks went to universities on athletic scholarships, they were in fact exploited. Very few got an education. Troy is correct when he tells the kid that the white man ain'tgon' let you get nowhere with that football. As a man born in 1904 and illiterate he's telling his son to get a job so he won't have to carry garbage" (qtd. in Elkins 168). Out of his own bitter experience with 'the white man', Troy tries to protect his son from racism.

Because of the white man's discrimination, the talented baseball player Troy Maxson ends up as a garbage collector. He does not have even the privilege of driving the garbage truck because it is only whites who should drive. Very early in the play, however, Troy protests and complains to his boss, a Mr. Rand, against the sense of inequality: " 'Why?' Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting? .... You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?"(2). Thus, the white man discriminates against the coloured man not only in sports but also in lifting garbage.

Moreover, as an 'other', the black Troy lives not in a wealthy site like that of the white middle class but in the impoverished inner part of city. His dwelling is reminiscent of the depleted shelters, shacks of tarpaper which coloured folks' dwell in riverbanks while moving northward. Troy, moreover, does not own his house through his labour, but through the worthless sum of money the white government gave to his war-injured brother. If he had not been a black, Troy would have achieved his American Dream and would have become a baseball star and a rich man.

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Furthermore, Troy does not enjoy a happy peaceful family life. This is evidenced by the episode of his mistress, Alberta, an episode which highlights the divisive husband-wife relationship between Rose and Troy. Alberta's pregnancy may function as "the straw that breaks the camel's back in the Maxon's marriage, irrevocably separating Rose and Troy while simultaneously providing each with opportunities for redemption" (Grabowski website).Troy's sense of loneliness is evident when he comes home with his motherless child after the death of his mistress, suffering from an acute sense of loneliness for he is womanless, sonless and brotherless. He appears in the yard with a baby in his arms cuddling it outside his own home from which he is already estranged. The stage directions read: "*Troy enters the yard carrying an infant wrapped in blankets. He stands back from the house*"(78). It is an overcharged moment of despair and grief and Troy's literal estrangement from the rest of his family members highlights his inner painful sense of aloneness. However, Troy does not collapse; rather he heroically gathers his strength and appeals to his wife: "Rose ... I'm standing here with my daughter in my arms. She ain't but a wee bittie little old thing. She don't know nothing about grownups' business. She innocent ... and she ain't got no mama"(78).

Troy is alienated from his wife, and Rose is retreating from her role as wife but she accepts to keep the baby of Troy from his dying mistress and refuses to be part of Troy's own life. She tells him: "from right now ... this child got a mother. But you a womanless man"(79). Hiding herself behind a fence of motherhood, Rose draws herself from Troy who is already shut out of her life. Troy Maxson suffers throughout his life from a painful sense of despair, alienation within his family and bewilderment in white racist America. He has been wronged for a lifetime; by his father earlier in his life, by his wife and son later on and all of the time by his discriminating society.

The Blues rhythm reflects Troy's emotional state, his painful sense of loneliness and his inability to belong to a peaceful society. Wilson resorts to the Blues, the Negro folk songs which are can be seen as an expression of despair, grief and a general feeling of hopelessness. These blues lyrics are, as Ralph Ellison describes them, "one of the techniques through which Negroes have survived and kept their courage during the long period when many whites assumed, as some still assume, they were afraid" (Ellison 250).

For the African Americans the blues is more than a means of entertainment. It is rather a way of communication through which blacks express their inner feelings perhaps to one another. C.W.E. Bigsby defines the cultural significance of the Blues as the music which "mark[s] a divisive between the black and white worlds. For one it is 'life's way of talking ... a way of understanding life.'; for the other, entertainment" (qtd. in Bissiri 108).

Moreover, the blues music has, in Wilson's view medicinal and instructional qualities. For example, in *Ma Rainy's Black Bottom* Wilson helps the character of Ma define such qualities when she says: "you do not sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life.... The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something"(87).Hence, the Afro-American feels more comfortable among his own folks communicating with them perhaps through the Blues.

Troy's despair and sense of loneliness are tangibly reflected by the blues through which his inner feelings are externalized and he is perhaps relieved. Two months after the death of his

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mistress and his return home with his baby daughter, Troy is left alone in his house. Rose leaves for the church, Cory is already cut off from his father and Gabe is sent to a mental institute. As a result, Troy is physically as well as emotionally alone. This moment of despair and hopelessness is expressed not by crying or sheer words of complaint, but by the Blues. He resorts to a song about 'a good old dog' named Blue:

> Hear it ring! Hear it ring!
> Had an old dog his name was Blue
> You know Blue was mighty true
> You know Blue as a good old dog
> Blue trees a possum in a hollow log
> You know from that he was a good old dog. (82)

This song encodes Troy's warrior spirit throughout his whole life. The old dog, that is able to 'tree a possum in a hollow log' and that stands for Troy himself, becomes a hero and Troy admires it because it does not yield to despair. Similarly, Troy's life long struggle in a racist society is recognized, respected and accepted by his children. Survival is a leading motif in the play. At the end of the play Cory and his half-sister Raynell are able to celebrate and honour their father's spirit by singing the blues song.

Troy's brain-damaged brother, Gabriel, can be seen as an unmistaken metaphor for racist America. A Second World War injury disabled Gabe; a severe head wound left him almost mad. The three thousand dollars hardly compensate Gabe for his injury spending the rest of his life in an institute for the insane: "Gabriel's injuries and the minimal compensation he received from government ($ 3000) are further indication of how hostile the country was to black men, even to those who risked their lives while performing their civic duties" (qtd. in Shannon,*Dramatic Vision* 98).

Wilson intentionally uses metaphors to dramatize the thematic concerns of his dramas. He himself states that the use of metaphors adds to his strength as a dramatist: "the idea of metaphor ... is a very large idea in my plays and sometimes that I find lacking in most other contemporary plays .... I think I write the kinds of plays that I do because I have twenty-six years of writing poetry underneath all that" (qtd. in Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 108).

Thus, Wilson is able to put on stage an incarnation of America's crippling injustice through the characterization of Gabe as disabled. Dramatically, Gabe personifies America's darker side of racism and physically he highlights the metaphorical disability of Troy himself. Like the physically disabled Gabe, Troy is crippled by racism and both of them represent the 'other' in white America; wronged by severe racial segregation. Gabe, who has made a costly sacrifice, is exploited by his country. Moreover, he becomes part of its refuse: he is laughed at by the neighbours' children, and when he rebels the authorities lock him up and fine his brother.

On the other hand Gabriel himself as a character on the stage evokes a spiritual atmosphere which can to be grounded in the Afro-American culture. There is a deeper dimension of meaning lurking beyond his disability. He suggests a much more significant world behind Troy's present limited one. It can be that Wilson wants to show how one can survive his daily pains and immediate injuries. It is a concept of transcendentalism; the salvation of the other can be attained, perhaps, through his perception of the traditional characteristics of the African American culture.

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This transcendental possibility is staged in the final scene of the play after the funeral of Troy, when Gabriel undergoes "a trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to withstand. He begins to dance. A slow, strange dance, eerie and life-giving. A dance of atavistic signature and ritual.... He finishes his dance and the gates of heaven stand open as wide as God's closet" (101). It can be argued that the long-suffering and alienated Troy may find salvation and peacefulness only in the hereafter world. Even the rest of his family members gather together accepting and forgiving their past emotional wounds. It is Troy's death that is ironically able to bring together the alien members of his family.

Wilson's *Fences* dramatizes the wind of change that started to blow in the history of blacks' struggle for liberation. The different characters in the play struggle to secure a suitable position for themselves. Through dramatizing the history of three generations in a black family unit Wilson aims perhaps at highlighting the gradual change for the better in the lives of the blacks. The Maxsons' frustrated hopes, their fears, pride and their ultimate survival are all underlined during the dramatic event of the play. Consequently, Wilson is able to put on stage the struggle of a complete race of people who fight to move from the edge to the mainstream of the American society.

Wilson employs the father-son conflict between Troy and Cory to highlight this wind of change; a change which Troy, the second generation in the Maxson family, suspects and refuses to accept, while Cory, the third generation, embraces and believes in. Troy's skepticism stems from a certain embittering experience in his younger years: despite his talent and skill, he was denied in the past a chance to play for baseball leagues while lesser white players become stars. As a result, he will not let his son Cory repeat the same mistake and refuses a football scholarship for Cory. A more practical career in Troy's view is much better: "I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain'tgonna let him get nowhere with that football ....He ought to go and get recruited in how to fix cars or something where he can make a living"(8). Because he is afraid that Cory will be destroyed by some forces of racial discrimination, Troy tries hard to prevent him from 'football stuff'.

Nonetheless, things have become different for Cory because by the time of the second generation in the Maxson family blacks did not have the right even to proper school education, but by the time of the third generation, Cory is eligible for a scholarship. Rose reminds Troy that "time's have changed since you was playing baseball .... That was before the war. Times have changed a lot since then," and she adds, "they got lots of colored boys playing ball now - Baseball and football" (9).

The contrasting points of view of the second generation, and the third one is underlined by the conflict between Troy and Cory. To begin with, Cory is angry at his father because of the latter's ill-treatment of his mother Rose: "I don't know how she [Rose] stand you ... after what you did to her" (87). Again, Cory challenges his father regarding Troy's brother, Cory's uncle and the ownership of their house. When Troy tries to rid himself of Cory requesting him to "get the hell out of my yard," Cory responds: "It ain't your yard. You took Uncle Gabe money he got from the army to buy this house and then you put him out" (87).

Moreover, the oral challenge of Cory to his father over Rose and over Gabe's money/house is developed by the end of scene Four, Act Two to a physical confrontation leading to Cory's abandonment of the house. This confrontation fully stages the father-son conflict. Troy advances towards Cory who backs against a tree grabbing a baseball bat. Then "Cory and Troy

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struggle over the bat. The struggle is fierce and fully engaged. Troy ultimately is the stronger, and takes the bat from Cory and stands over him ready to swing. He stops himself"(88).

At this climactic point of the play Wilson explores the complex father-son relationship. It can be that both Troy and Cory are holding together in some sort of a love-hate relationship. During their physical confrontation none of them is willful to hit the other with the bat though each has the full chance to do it. Cory swings the bat twice but he misses but he does not swing when his father comes in the position which Cory cannot miss. Similarly, Troy does not hit Cory when he can do it. Then Cory asks for his things and he is told they'll be on the other side of the fence. Cory breaks out of the house leaving without return till the funeral of his father.

As a mature young man Cory becomes aware of his father's flaws and he wants to make his own choices. As a representative of the third generation of the Maxson family, Cory has to liberate himself from the domination of the previous generations. He is after a sense of identity and self-realization not just 'another Niger on the street' as Troy regards him or even a 'field hand' in his grandfather's opinion.

It is noteworthy that the relationship between Troy and Cory deteriorates not because they are essentially incompatible, but it is because the father does not want his son to suffer the same indignities and disappointments from which he himself and his father before him suffered. As a black American, Troy tries to compete with a white society. It is true that there is a sense of jealousy and unreasonableness in Troy's attempt to thwart Cory's ambition to get a scholarship, but the essential force which motivates his actions is his awareness of his actual position in a raciest society. It can be that Wilson, in portraying Troy's character, wants to personify the 'Other' who struggles hard to fence in his own sense of dignity, his family and his pride; but to fence out any sense of dehumanization and humiliation in white America. Troy tries to guide and shelter his son and to prevent him from experiencing the frustration and suffering he himself has experienced throughout his life. In short, and as Elkins comments, *Fences* is a play about "the fences society builds up around us and those we construct, willingly or unwillingly, around ourselves"(82).

In all of his plays Wilson stresses the character's personal transformation which is gained by one's embracing his heritage and traditions. Wilson adds: "It's largely a question of identity. Without knowing your past, you don't know your present and you certainly can't plot your future" (qtd. in Elkins 90). Wilson suggests that in the act of acknowledging and accepting his own roots, the 'other' may gain his own freedom and perhaps may find a way out of the limitations imposed on him by the white America.

In an attempt to liberate himself from the destiny of his father, Cory joins the marines. However, his escape is incomplete; he is dominated and overwhelmed by the shadow of his father. Wilson writes in the prelude of the play:

> When the sins of the fathers visit us
> We do not have to play host.
> We can banish them with forgiveness
> As God, in His Largeness and laws. (x)

At the end of the play Cory is reconciled with his father and is able to forgive his sins. Cory must acknowledge his father's life-long struggle for survival in a hostile society and must

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forgive the mistakes and pains that result from this age-old struggle. The act of acknowledging, accepting and forgiving the past may lead, in Wilson's opinion, to self-identification: "If black folks would recognize themselves as Africans, then they could make their contribution to the world as African" (qtd. in Elkins 103).

Accepting the past is reflected by the Blues which in Wilson's view are "important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in" (qtd. in Shannon, *The Long Wait* 141). Embracing their past wholeheartedly, Cory and his half-sister, Raynell, are able to sing the blues song which their father used to sing all the time:

> Blue laid down and died like a man
> Now he's treeing possums in the Promised Land
> I'm gonna 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. (99-100)

Singing together their father's song, Cory and Raynell are able to face up to their presence as well as accepting their past. It is a note perhaps of survival for blacks despite the life-long suffering experienced in the racist America. Troy's song helps "Cory to realize his real identity as a black man which he tried to suppress initially" (Jose 580). Cory and Raynell's song binds brother and sister together and attaches them to their heritage; a mixture of pain and in-articulated love. It can be that, as judged from Cory-Raynell's abovementioned episode, the only way for the 'Others' to transcend their limited existence in white racist America is by recovering their Africanness; by recognizing and accepting their African roots reflected at the end of the play by the blues which represent an essential part of the Africans' ancestry.

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