

New historicist psychoanalysis of troy in fences



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August Wilson's *Fences* is a classic play about African-American life written in 1983 and set sometime in the 1950s. It serves as the sixth installment in Wilson's "Pittsburgh Cycle," which spans ten installments in total. *Fences* is a period piece during a decade through which Wilson had personally lived by the time he wrote the play, which makes it more than presumable that he likely pulled from real-life experiences and observations to create such a realistic portrayal of Blacks in the '50s. His protagonist, Troy Maxson, is widely considered by Black Baby Boomers to be a very relatable, perhaps even archetypal character of the Black community from that era, but Wilson delves deeply into the psyche of the character to reveal all of Troy's dimensions, elucidating what would otherwise be the mysteries of a misunderstood character of the 1950s.

Troy works as a garbage collector for the Sanitation Department to provide for his wife, Rose, and his teenage son, Corey. Troy has settled into a rhythm of life that hinges on a very grim outlook, but he prefers it because he has endured too many upsets in life thus far. He was something of a baseball star in the Negro Leagues, but he was barred from playing in the Major Leagues, first because he was Black and subsequently because he was too old by the time integration began. He, therefore, represents a common criticism of Jackie Robinson in the Black community that, despite the barriers Robinson broke, he was hardly the best Black player that could have broken them down. Troy represents that perspective and even says outright at one point, "I done seen a hundred niggers play better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make!" (Wilson i. i). Now, Troy proves to be a character predisposed toward hyperbole, but this

remains a relatable statement for many African Americans alive today who, perhaps as children, heard these sentiments bandied about with much fervor at the time.

Troy represents a Black archetype, but Jackie Robinson serves as a sort of unseen character in the story due to the many references throughout the play to his abilities and the barriers he broke. Robinson represents both in the story and in reality a successful challenge to traditional norms and, more importantly, historic change. No doubt, August Wilson was of a generation thoroughly influenced by the change of discourse that Robinson effected in the latter half of the twentieth century. New Historicism is a lens of literary criticism that defines the term, discourses, as “ways of seeing and talking about the world” (Dobie 181). The discourse in the era of *Fences* is mid-shift, changing from one that not only segregated Blacks and Whites on a subaltern level but also segregated their ambitions as well. Lives for African Americans were changing because they were able to dream the same dreams as their White counterparts and pursue those dreams (i. e. professional sports).

Troy's son, Corey Maxson, is very much a product of August Wilson's generation. He is influenced by the shifting discourse in America at the time, and he, therefore, is committed to the dream of pursuing a professional career in football, which is rapidly eclipsing baseball as the American pastime. Corey has been offered a scholarship to play football in college, and Rose nurtures this ambition, seeing it as an opportunity to, at the very least, go to college and further his education if not also ultimately play for the NFL. Troy, on the other hand, is quintessentially unsupportive, and for some, it

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can be frustrating to read or watch on stage without understanding the true psychological drive behind Troy's reasoning.

Carl Jung furthered what is termed neo-Freudian psychology as a student and, as some call him, a successor of Sigmund Freud. Jung purported that “we must deal with three powerful archetypes that compose the self. They are the shadow, the anima, and the persona” (Dobie 64). Jungian psychoanalysis defines the shadow as the side of the self that one does not wish to confront, likening it to a villain of sorts or the devil within. The anima (for men; animus for women), on the other hand, is the driving force that wills an individual to act, and Jung suggested this anima is female for men—the animus male for women—to indicate it as a characteristic of the opposite sex within a person and to suggest that people are often only aware of this opposite sex in dreams (a Freudian concept) or by projecting it onto someone else in reality. Finally, the persona is most akin to Freud's idea of the ego; it is external mask one portrays to others as an accurate representation of the self. Jung believed that, to achieve individuation (i. e. well-adjusted, psychological health), one must discover and accept one's different sides of self.

Troy comes up short of individuation because he has not accepted all sides of self, though all are present and observable in the play. Troy is constantly expressing his love for Rose in the most grandiose ways in front of Bono, Corey, Gabe, and Lyons alike. He is vivacious around her and claims that she is the center of his world in one way or another, but he refuses in the process to concede that he is unfaithful to her. He cheats on her with a woman from work whom the audience never sees, and Bono confronts him about it

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multiple times. In fact, one of the most classic lines of the whole production comes from Bono's answer to Troy about why the fence Rose wants Troy to build is so important. Bono says, "Some people build fences to keep people out... and other people build fences to keep people in" (Wilson). Troy stubbornly responds that he does not need anyone to tell him that his wife loves him. The side of him that betrays the woman he genuinely seems to love is a side of himself with which he cannot come to terms or even acknowledge.

Meanwhile, Rose is most certainly the woman on whom Troy projects his anima. She gives him the impetus to get up and go to work every day. Troy's unseen mistress can easily be mistaken for the projection of his anima in that Troy admits that she enables him to feel good about himself, but this is not a move to action. Troy receives, for all intents and purposes, his will to live from his relationship with Rose. His infidelity, however, is evidence that he has lost sight of just how crucial Rose is to the makeup of his individual self, which is an oversight that only further exacerbates his lack of individuation. He has, instead, concocted a lively and highly opinionated persona for himself that is allegedly self-sufficient, faithful, and supportive. The latter is just as much a lie as the two former since he does not support his son's ambition based on the illusion he has created for himself that the White man will not let any Black man achieve anything since he never achieved his own ambitions.

August Wilson extrapolates these three dimensions from this character, perhaps from real-life experiences with similar people, and highlights them for the audience. This makes Troy a very complex, three-dimensional

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character, befitting his corresponding Black archetype. Jungian psychoanalysis is also commonly referred to in literary theory as mythological criticism, however, which deals specifically with literary archetypes, and Wilson uses them extensively in the play. For example, mythological literary criticism establishes gardens as symbols of innocence much like the Garden of Eden, and when the audience is introduced in the final act to Raynell, Troy's daughter born out of wedlock, she is tending to a small garden in the backyard for Rose. This alludes to Troy's primary argument as to why Rose should help him raise her on the basis that, despite his sins, Raynell is innocent and, therefore, does not deserve to be abandoned just because her mother dies in labor. Similarly, Wilson fits Rose to a relatively common archetype among female figures like Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Aphrodite of Greek mythology, or Isis of Egyptian mythology. The audience likely expects Troy to bring Raynell to her when he does because the audience has come to associate her with nurturance and fertility.

One of the primary archetypes with whom Troy interacts, though, is the devil, even if only figuratively. Troy repeatedly invokes an unseen personification of death, challenging some harbinger thereof to come and get him. Mythological criticism loosely analyses the devil as simply an evil of sorts that intrudes into characters' lives to either destroy or tempt them. Wilson has no use for its in-depth, Faustian roots, but he certainly employs the archetype to presage Troy's death.

Carl Jung died in 1961, and it was during the twentieth century that his neo-Freudian work served as a sort of springboard for many further

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advancements in the field of psychology. New Historicism would not overlook the fact that August Wilson lived during the time that Jung's work was still heavily influencing the field, and by the 1980s, the adaptation of Jung's work for literary application (beginning with Northrop Frye in the 1950s) had seen three decades of development and was likely just on the cusp of being proliferated nationwide throughout several more collegiate programs. There is substantial evidence in Wilson's work to suggest that he was privy to and influenced by the emergence of psychoanalytical literary theory, and his characters appear that much fuller for it.

Works Cited

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