

# The significance of songs in august wilson's fences



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"Some people build fences to keep people out, and other people build fences to keep people in," offers the sage Bono one afternoon during his usual bonhomie with fellow refuse collector Troy Maxson. The seemingly minor line encompasses the entire leitmotif of August Wilson's play, *Fences*. It is a play that takes place in a time, as the author says, that is "turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative" and during which the collective fences of society begin to dissolve. It is a time that will leave many, like Troy, confused about the changing nature of family and country. Wilson utilizes song to reveal the nature of the emotional and physical fences, which serve to plague or protect the characters in *Fences*. The songs, which permeate the lives of the Maxsons, reveal how Troy imposes his fences on his wife and children, and how these characters react to such fences. Wilson's use of song reveals much about the characters and their relationships with one another. "Jesus be a fence all around me everyday," sings Rose one morning while hanging up the laundry. She sings to be "protected as [she] travels on [her] way." As the first instance of song in the play, this song helps to reveal Rose's mentality regarding her role as wife and mother. Rose asks her husband Troy to build a physical fence around their yard. Bono, a family friend, sees this as a means of "holding on" to Troy because "she loves [him]." This woman has "eighteen years of [her] life invested in Troy" with no other means of keeping Troy faithful but to pray, as with this song. Yet her efforts are abortive as Troy not only cheats on her, but announces that he is "gonna be someone's daddy." At this point in their marriage, Troy and Rose had "lost touch with one another," but she takes the child into her family, and raises her for the reason that "you can't visit the sins of the father upon the child." She deems Troy "a womanless man," however, for

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straying from her protective fence while she has remained obediently within his. Song appears later in the play when Troy revisits the music of his father, whose song reveals Troy's mentality regarding his family. Admonished by Rose for calling her as if she were a dog, he starts singing his father's song about "a dog [whose] name was Blue." Troy then reflects on a dog he had once who "used to get uppity like that [ie. like Rose had done]" and would not come when he called. The nature of the song reflects Troy's attitude towards his family on whom he imposes figurative fences. He expects his family to obey his word, as if they were dogs themselves, and builds restrictive fences to keep them as helpless under his dominion as dogs. He builds fences around Rose to keep her "settled down to cook his supper and clean his sheets", and another around Cory to keep him from "getting involved in any sports." He builds yet another to separate himself from Lyons, whose views of life and purpose differ greatly from Troy's own. Rose "took on his life as [hers]" and he prevented Cory from playing football. Rose later reflects that "he was so big he filled up the whole house;" perhaps this is the secret behind why his fences succeeded and why hers did not. Troy had the power to uphold his fences by brute force or by overpowering the entire family. Rose had let him dominate, and was left with no room for her own fence. Wilson concludes the play with more song, revealing what happens to a fence once it's owner dies. After Troy's death, it is his own song that unites his children. Cory and Raynell, born of different mothers but both blood descendants of Troy. "Had an old dog his name was Blue," sing the two children. Both had learned it from their father, and as their duet comes to an end, one gets the sense of closure. The song is an example of all that Cory shares with his father, including much of his personality. "You're Troy

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Maxson all over again," says Rose to her song. Cory realizes how much of his father has become part of him and decides to attend his funeral after lingering doubts about acknowledging his father's place in his heart. The "shadow" that was Troy Maxson has become Cory "growing into himself," as Rose puts it. Furthermore, both he and Raynell bond in this moment through their father's song. This song is something they both have in common, and it gives Troy one last chance to unite his children, even though it occurs after his death. It is one last fence to keep his family within. In *Fences*, Wilson makes use of song to reveal the fences the characters build around them and those they love. The play takes place in a time when the fences built to keep African-Americans from fulfilling their dreams were just being lifted. The songs reveal the mentality of the Maxsons in response to the changing times and to the barriers they perceive between themselves and their family members. They are songs that have the capacity to restrict, ostracize, and ultimately build the fences that tie families together.