Dissolving binaries in sula and fences

Toni Morrison's Sula and August Wilson's Fences have countless similarities. The two stories, which at their cores revolve around African American struggles, showcase the complexities of being a person of color in a rapidly changing society. Characters in both novels—like Sula and Corey— ignore the life paths society expects them to take, forging their own paths instead. Older characters—like Eva and Troy—suffer from painful pasts. Thematically, Morrison and Wilson break down binaries, both arguing that a person isn't inherently good or bad, but somewhere in between.

The characters of Eva, from Sula, and Troy from Fences have many similarities, both in backstories and in the way these backstories affect the way they parent. Even though they both lived after the end of slavery, they still suffered from its effects. Growing up in the south, Troy had a father who only cared about " getting them bales of cotton" in to the plantation owner that he sharecropped for (51). Unable to leave because " he ain't know how to do nothing but farm," he took out his anger on his children and the people around him, once beating Troy so he could molest his girlfriend (51). At fourteen, he leaves his father only to live through years of homelessness and eventually incarceration.

Similarly, to Troy, Eva had a traumatic past due to uncontrollable factors, like her race, class, and gender. Her abusive husband leaves Eva and their young children " confused and desperately hungry" (32). She struggled with starvation, similarly to most other African Americans who lived shortly after the end of slavery, in a time period where " niggers was dying like flies" (68).

Eva and Troy's pasts affect the way they parent their more privileged children. They believe that the struggles they endure to provide for their children should suffice in proving their love for them. Their children verbalize their anger to their parents, like when Corey asks why Troy " ain't ever liked [him]," Lyons accuses Troy of never being there in his childhood and Hannah asks Eva if she " loved [them]" (37, 67). Corey, Lyons, and Hannah fail to see, however, that although their parents aren't compassionate and loving, they make innumerable sacrifices for their children. Both Eva and Troy sacrifice physical parts of themselves to provide for their young children. Eva loses her leg while working for money, and Troy gets shot trying to steal for his family. Wilson paints Lyons's anger about his father not being around during his childhood as unjust, considering that during that time, Troy was in jail for trying to steal for his son.

It's with Eva and Troy's characters the Morrison and Wilson try to break down binaries about good and evil. Although Eva and Troy are generally uncompassionate and cause the other characters in the novel pain, Morrison and Wilson avoid writing them as antagonists. Including details about their tragic pasts makes readers empathize with them, and understand the motives for what they do to their families. This sparks an inner dilemma within readers about morality. Through this tactic, Morrison and Wilson demonstrate the complexities of trying to label a person as good or as evil, and argue that instead, people should look for the grey area in between.

Despite their similarities, Troy and Eva have different fates. Sula ends with Nel realizes that " Eva was mean" just like Sula said (171). Eva lives out the rest of her life in the home Sula put her in, never getting any sort of moral

rejuvenation. Contrastingly, Fences ends with Gabriel telling St. Peter to " open the gates" of heaven for Troy, signifying God's recognition of Troy's goodness (100). Unlike Eva, Troy get's a unquestionable answer about his morality from a higher power.

Apart from Eva and Troy, other similarities exist within Sula and Fences, namely between Eva's granddaughter, Sula, and Troy's son, Cory. Both of these characters attempt to break free from society's expectations of them and follow their dreams, regardless of color or gender. Sula goes off to college and becomes a flapper to finance herself, despite that society believes that women of color shouldn't " walk around all independent like, doing whatever they like" (142). Like Sula, Cory dreams of going to college to play football, something uncommon for black men at the time. Troy inhibits this from happening, however, believing that Cory's race will keep him from being successful, and result in disappointment for his son. Although Sula succeeds in going to college, Cory never does. Even though he doesn't get a higher education, Cory does take ownership of his own life journey by leaving his father's house and joining the Marines, instead of learning a trade like Troy wanted him to. The obstacles Sula and Cory face show that although the twentieth century saw some improved equality between races, it was still extremely difficult for African Americans to achieve their dreams.

The characters of Shadrack, from Sula, and Gabriel, from Fences also have many similarities. Both characters suffer disabilities from fighting in world wars, Shadrack from World War I and Gabriel from World War II. Both these wars were fought in the name of democracy and freedom, but because of

their race, Shadrack and Gabriel don't reap the benefits of what they fought for. In their societies, freedom and equality don't apply to African Americans.

These similarities reveal a universal thread running through literature written about African Americans in the twentieth century. Instead of writing morally perfect characters, Morrison and Wilson write about flawed African Americans. They don't however, portray their character's flaws as results of the genetic and overall inferiority of African Americans, like much of society does. Instead, they humanize their characters by portraying their bitterness and flaws as a justified reaction to years of slavery and oppression by white men. Also, when the characters in Fences and Sula succeed, they do so despite racial barriers, not because they don't exist.