

Spirituality and religion in august wilson's fences



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“Fences” is one of ten plays written by August Wilson that document historic periods in Black American life. It is a colorful and thoughtfully written piece that tells the story of one family’s struggle in Civil Rights Era America, an empowering and complicated time for lower and middle class blacks struggling to attain an ideal of the “American Dream”. Troy and Rose Maxon’s family deal with complex external challenges, such as economic shifts in industry and working classes that shape the financial status, evidenced by Troy’s successful quest for promotion and increased responsibility at his blue-collar job.

Their internal issues range from father-son power struggles, infidelity, and dishonesty as common moral dilemmas; which are presented as a dialogue that illustrates how socio-economic and cultural upheaval can affect the family dynamic. Influences of cultural traditions, such as modern expressions of black spirituality, are implied throughout the play as a source of elevation from present circumstance, seem to unite the Maxons during times of structural change and give cause for their working together to create a better way of life.

Still, social change redefined and reshaped their definition of family, uniting them as it also separated them, as the black progressive movements did within the ranks of classes. Consistently mentioned throughout the story are religious and spiritual themes that describe the hope and optimism that anchors their day to day lives, clearly a constant and a comfort in the uncertainty of the times they faced.

The climatic and deeply religious conclusion at the ending of the story center around Troy's mentally ill sibling Gabriel, who fancies himself the archangel that guides lost souls to the gate of heaven, exemplifies this dedication to hope and spiritual grounding, and personifies the undertone of spiritual themes in modern Black literature collectively, even today. Thesis: Spirituality or religion, deeply rooted in Black culture, is often highlighted in literature to juxtapose the moral dilemmas of challenging or complex circumstances with the real human behaviors and interactions that result from the prescribed problem.

A line is drawn between what is perceived as "right", and what actually happened, and brought forth for the audience to examine based on their own systems of beliefs. The religious signifying and imagery act as an anchor in the story to give depth and realism to the characters, and to invoke compassion, apathy, or disdain for an intended purpose, person or situation as it relates to the framework of the message or overall theme of the story.

A central moral dilemma is attributed to the Maxons through the questions posed by their actions vs. intentions in pursuit of the American Dream, and their idea of family unity. Traditionally, characters that are portrayed as having a weak moral compass or disregard for religious tradition usually face a reckoning, while other characters are involved in resolution and progressive change that make the story come full circle in the eyes of the audience.

In this story, the truth is relative, and right and wrong are posed subjectively for the audience to consider. The reader asserts that the religious overtone

in the final scene of "Fences", makes a statement of elevation from human struggles and shatters our biased and flawed perceptions by closing with Gabriel's described "slow, strange, eerie, and life-giving dance" (p. 1353). His triumphant gesture is a necessary device to connect to the reader to the core of Black experience.