

# **The Souls of Black Folks in Fences:**

## **A Du Boisian Reading of August Wilson's *Fences***

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In the last decades, racial diversity has become central to an ongoing public conversation in the United States of America. However, Americans are coming to understand that the roots of American society are multiracial, and that all Americans have been shaped to some degree by the national response to race and the presence of African people in America. Considering the problems of discriminations, Brenda Gottschild argues “We desperately need to cut through the convoluted web of racism that denies acknowledgement of the African part of the whole” (Gotschild, 3). In the same way, African American critics and writers, like August Wilson, have presented some ways in their works in order to make the black nation of America get aware of and then stick to their African traditions to attain a respected social standing. For example, In *Fences*, Wilson’s most prominent play, he showed how a working-class family struggles to find economic security and equality through elements of African culture. In the same way, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, during his life, tried to encourage African American to understand the richness of their culture, as he believed cultural achievements would do move to break down race prejudice. He presented his idea about cultural struggle in his inspiring work *Souls of Black Folks* (1903).

To sum up, through some examples, the researcher will elaborate the most important notion of Du Bois to struggle for a better social standing by using the elements of African culture and Wilson actualization of African culture and also making a new identity for African American people through cultural elements in Wilson’s seminal work, *Fences*

Determined to prove the viability of Negro culture, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois worked tirelessly after World War I to shape the Negro Renaissance not only into a movement concerned with the defeat of "Color Line" prejudice, as the problem of twentieth century, but also in which there would be a flowering of Negro arts and letters (Miller, 224). In the same way, he addressed the newly founded American Negro Academy that “it is the duty of Americans of

Negro descends, as a body, to maintain their race identity” (Bloom, 123). To reach this aim, African Americans should change their beliefs that their destiny is absorption by white American culture. Du Bois supposed that to change the miserable situation of black people, black society should firstly accept some race prejudices as an ugly fact and truth; but, at the same time, they should demand social improvements and rights in every aspect of life from the white society through black leaders and using their own cultural heritage (Du Bois, 116).

On the other hand, Du Bois believed that there was a history and culture in Africa and it is time for African Americans to have closer ties with their own culture. Because cultural achievements, he proposed, would do move to break down race prejudice. In the other word, he is clearly telling that the key of changing the miserable situation of black people is in the hand of black people themselves. By portraying their black culture, they would be able to fight and struggle for changing their social statues and presenting a real picture of themselves.

To solve the problem of the blacks, to improve their social status, and to reach an ideal position, Du Bois suggested some ways:

First of all, black people need a correction of immorality, crime, and laziness as the only heritage and result of slavery period. Secondly, for a better adjustment between races, there should be a moral impartial selection of ability in economic and intellectual world, besides a great respect for personal liberty and worth regardless of race. As the final but most significant way, he proposed that as American Negroes, we are resolved to strive in every honorable way for realization of the best and highest aims, for the development of a strong black society and for uplifting the Negro people. (Du Bois, 187)

As it is indicated by him, the capacity for self-recognition is very important because it forms the essential basis for struggling in order to remove racism and inequality. To reach self-recognition and self-confidence, African Americans need knowledge and information about their environment and their past. They should learn more and more about the current situation of themselves, about their rights, and about their true potentialities. The other element which would help black nation during their efforts for making a better social place for themselves, in Du Bois' opinion, is "past experience". About the importance of the past experiences in solving the potential problems of black people in their way toward a better social standing position, Du Bois mentioned that:

Internal problems of social advance must inevitably come, problem of works and wages, of families and homes, of morals and true valuing of life things; and all these and other inevitable problems of civilization of negro must meet and solve largely for himself, by reason of his isolation; and can there be any possible solution other than by studying and thought and appeal to the rich experience of the past? (Du Bois, 75)

Past for Du Bois was not something dead; but, it was a “living recollection that continues to disgrace the present” (Bloom, 146). He believed that the experience of African American inside America is portrayed in their songs and they tried to keep the experience of their suffering in their songs. These old songs, as he mentioned, “stirred people” during different periods and they are “articulated message of the slaves to the world” (Du Bois, 168-169). The message of the songs turns out to be the revelation of the blacks’ social and historical past (Bloom, 148).

In Du Bois' opinion, songs make black people remember their glorious past heritage (*Ibid*). Besides, they reveal, in Du Bois' idea, "suffering and unvoiced longing of black people toward a truer world" and tells "in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding" (Du Bois, 171-172).

Considering Wilson as one of the most influential African American playwrights to shape a new identity through African culture, the following section aims at applying DuBois notion of struggling to *Fences*. August Wilson did not name his play *Fences* simply because the dramatic action depends strongly on the building of a fence in the Maxsons backyard. Rather the title implies that the writer intended to indicate that there are some restrictions and limitations for African Americans in the white dominated society of America. As Weales fully explains "Wilson builds a metaphorical fence, which creates obstacles for fathers and sons, husband and wife and African American living in white America" (320). Considering themselves as the proper race and the black race as the improper race, white Americans constructed some fences to "separate proper from improper" in America (Nadel, 86). Bono confirms this notion, in the Act II Scene I, when he argues that "some people build fences to keep people out" (1524). For African Americans, the most difficult fence to scale, the one that restricted their achievement and stole their opportunity, is the fence that white erect to keep black in a place away from the mainstream success. In this sense, therefore, it could be concluded that these restrictions are like a fence against which blacks are struggling by using different means.

As it was discussed earlier, Du Bois believed that one way of struggling against discrimination and providing a better social standing for the African American people is using African cultural features in their life. In addition, about African American culture, Joseph Holloway in *Africanism in American culture*, pointed out that "Africanism in African American culture exists as conceptual approaches, unique ways of doing things and making things happen rather than specific cultural elements" (349).

In the same way, Wilson, by considering that white Americans are trying to stop African Americans from following their customs and traditions as the essential elements of their identity and of course a very important element by which they would be able to struggle against prejudice and discrimination, decided to portray some of the unique features of African culture in his works.

Du Bois considered using past experience as a means to conquer the racism and discrimination against his people. Thus, African Americans by preventing the repetition of past mistakes would be able to make a brighter future. Wilson, as a black writer, in *Fences* tried to show "how past collides with the present as well as impact the future" (Elkins, 108), therefore, he portrayed how Troy, by repeating the past mistakes, becomes "what he disdain the most, his own father" (Elkins, 97).

Through Troy's recollection of his father, it is shown that his father was a cruel man who did not care about his children and his wife. "All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you working" (Wilson, 1521) and the only thing important was "getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin" (*ibid*). Therefore, emotion and feeling did not have any place in the

behavior of Troy's father toward his family. This notion is confirmed when he forced Troy to run away from home, as Troy forgot his duty to keep the mule:

**TROY.** When my turn came to head out, I was fourteen and got to sniffing around Joe Canewell's daughter. Had us an old mule we called Greyboy. My daddy sent me out to do some plowing and tied up Greyboy and went to fooling around with Joe Canewell's daughter. .... we didn't know Greyboy had got loose and wandered back to the house. .... now I thought he was mad cause I ain't done my work. But I see where he was chasing e off so he could have gal for himself. When I see what the matter of it was, *I lost all fear of my daddy*. Right there is where I became a man .... (Italics mine. Wilson, 1521)

Then, he fights with his father over the girl and his father, or as he call him the devil himself, whipped him until he became unconscious. When he became conscious, he know that "the time had come to leave my daddy's home" (*ibid*). Although Troy's knew that his father's reaction toward his irresponsibility forced him to leave the house, he made the same mistake toward his own son, Cory, when Cory tells a lie about keeping his job in A&P. Gunilla Theander Kester in *Approaches to Africa* mentions that "as a father, Troy very much repeats his father's behaviour" (113). Troy believes that Cory's disobedience has a consequence, like what he did as a child, and declares that "when he get to the point where he wanna disobey me ... then it is time for him to move on" (Wilson, 1521).

Although Troy claims that "he done learned his mistakes and learned to do what's right by it" (Wilson, 1510), but as the play progresses, in his arguments with Cory, he, finally, repeats the same mistake and forces Cory to leave the house exactly like his father.

(Troy advance toward Cory)

**CORY.** What you gonna do....give me a whupping? You can'ywhup me no more. You are too old. You just an old man.

**TROY.** (shoves him on his shoulder): Nigger! That's what you are. You just another nigger on the street to me!..... Get your black ass out of my yard.

**CORY.** I ain't going nowhere! Come on...put me out! I ain't scared of you.

**TROY.** You're gonna have to kill me! You wanna draw that bat back on me. You're gonna have to kill me. Come on! Come on!

(Cory is unable to swing the bat. Troy grab it.)

**TROY.** Then I will show you. Go and get away from around my house.

**CORY.** Tell Mama I'll be back for my things.

**TROY.** They'll be on the other side of the fence.

(Cory Exists). (Wilson, 1532).

Troy, the symbol of past generation of black race which always repeat its mistake, made the same mistake about his son.

That is why, Wilson believed that "without knowing your past, you do not know your present and certainly can't plot your future" (Nadel, 147). Because if a nation knew its past mistake, it would not repeat them. To confirm this idea, Cory, the symbol of present generation

who is aware of his father's mistakes and his father's friend, Bono, decides to choose another way and does not repeat the same mistake. Unlike Troy who never came back to visit his family again, Cory decides to "go to Papa's funeral" (Wilson, 1535) and forgive him. Furthermore, he does not end up in jail for criminal activity, like what his father did; on the other hand, he joins the Army and became a "Marines" (*ibid*); get an honorable job as a respected class of the society which serves his country.

Therefore, by learning from past experience and not repeating the old experience again, it seems that Wilson tried to show that Cory, as the symbol of present generation, makes better choices comparing his father which help his family and in a larger scope his society. Furthermore, by embracing his roots, Cory sheds the limitation posed by his father as the symbol of old African American and achieves self-definition (Elkins, 90) which Du Bois considered as the first step of struggling for a better society.

According to DuBois, African Americans used stories and songs to transfer their history and beliefs because they were not able to read or write. That is why, the story teller became the cultural-bearer of his race. In the same way, Troy's story telling habit is again a sign of African culture which Wilson used in *Fences*.

Troy is always eager to tell the stories of his life in vivid details. Using details in a story is a technique of African culture. This notion is confirmed by Sandra Shanoon who in *Ideas* beautifully explains "as Troy spin vivid tales, he keeps alive an oral tradition that spans from the Atlantic Ocean and predates African slaves in America" (4). As an example, it is good to consider Troy's wrestling with death:

**TROY.** .... I looked up one day and Death was marching straight at me. Like soldiers on Parade. The Army of Death was marching straight at me. The middle of July, 1941. It got real cold just like it be winter. It seem like Death him-self reached out and touched me on the shoulder. .... I say... what you want Mr. Death..... Death standing there staring at me...carrying that sickle in his hand. Finally, he say, "You want bound over for another year?" See, just like that "You want bound over for another year?".... I told him, "Bound over hell! Let's settle this now!" .... We wrestled for three days and three nights. I can't say where I found the strength from. Every time it seemed like he was gonna get the best of me, I'd reach way down deep inside myself and find the strength to do him better. (Wilson, 1508)

Another form of story-telling in African culture is singing songs. Du Bois considered these melodies and songs, the songs of "suffering and unvoiced longing of black people toward a truer world" and tells "in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding" (Du Bois, 171-172). Consequently, Troy's singing a song about his old dog, "Blue", could be considered as another feature of African culture in the play. Interestingly, the song is a kind of Blues song which is a vernacular form that African Americans used "to reflect the complexity and tragedy of discrimination and segregated African American life" and at the same time "to celebrate their ability to survive despite and in the midst of life's challenges" (Menson, 33). To take the advantage of Rallph Ellison' words, in *Invisible Man*, blues enables African Americans "to Keep

the painful details and episodes of a brutal existence alive in one's aching consciousness" he continues "by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (78).

Interestingly, Blue, Troy's dog, was with him in his most difficult times. As an example, when he was whipped by his father and became unconscious, it was Blue "this old dog" which "was licking his face" (Wilson, 1521). Troy reveals that the "song was his daddy's song" (Wilson, 1519) therefore, it seems that this song was a cultural heritage from the past which was transferred to Troy orally. But, the song is never sang completely until Troy's funeral when Cory and Raynell start singing the song together. Transferring the song to Raynell, Troy's daughter, shows that this cultural heritage is transferred to the new generations (Menson, 30) as well. Thus, it could be concluded that this cultural heritage is saved for the next generations too.

**RAYNELL.** ...did you know Blue?

**CORY.** Blue? Who's Blue?

**RAYNELL.** Papa's dog what he sing about all the time.

**CORY** (singing). Hear it ring! Hear it ring!

I had a dog his name was Blue.

You know Blue was mighty true,

You know Blue was good old dog

Blue treed a possum in a hollow dog.

You know from that he was a good old dog.

Hear it ring! Hear it ring! (Raynell joins in singing.)

**CORY AND RAYNELL.** Blue treed a possum out on a limb

But looked at me and I looked at him

Grabbed that possum and put him in a sack

Blue stayed there until I came back

Old Blue's feet was big and round

Never allowed a possum to touch the ground.

Old blue died and I dug his grave

I dug his grave with a silver spade

Let him down with a golden chain

And every night I call his name

Go on Blue, you good dog you

Go on Blue, you good dog you (Wilson, 1535)

Here, Cory reaches an epiphany that he should forgive his father for his mistakes and join his funeral. Then, after a short time of silence, he continues singing with Raynell:

Blue laid down and died like a man

Now he's treeing possum in the Promise land



I'm gonna tell you this to let you know  
 Blue's gone where the god 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 (ibid)

Although Cory and Raynell hardly know each other, but they are linked together by the old blue song which could imply that all African Americans are linked together by their history. This notion is confirmed by Pamela Jean Mancor who considers singing the song of Troy, symbol of old generation, by Raynell, symbol of a brighter future, and Cory, the symbol of the present, a kind of transition:

To the African concept of Manti, which is a belief that the spirit of the dead will influence the living... this African philosophy postulates that "through this interchange of life force, by which the departed give advice to and empower living, the living shall bring honor to the ancestors. (qtd in Elkins, 95) Therefore, using stories and songs, as a tool, has a very important role in fighting against discrimination. However, some of these stories and songs have a ritual and especial kind of body movement within themselves which again refer to another feature of African culture.

Having a ceremony and party over a victory or a success have been a part of African culture from old times and they are considered as Rituals in African culture. In the same way, Troy's Friday nights drinking, a day in which he got his wages, could be considered as a minor "ritual" (Wilson, 1505). Another example of ritual in the play is Gabriel's special dancing at the Troy's funeral. Gabriel who was institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital joins the family in order to participate in Troy's funeral (Wilson, 1535). As Gabriel "believes with every fiber of his being that he is the Archangel Gabriel" and he is in contact with St. Peter in the heaven, he always carries a "trumpet" (Wilson, 1512).

At the funeral's day, when Gabriel arrives, immediately, he starts his ritual for the death of Troy. It is good to consider the description of the stage, which best describes the ritual:

Gabriel, with great fanfare, braces himself to blow. The trumpet is without mouthpiece. He puts the end of it into his mouth and blows with great force, like a man who has been waiting some twenty-odd years for this single moment. No sounds comes out of the trumpet. He braces himself and blows again with the same result. A third time he blows. There a weight of impossible description that falls away and leaves him bear and exposed to a frightful realization. It is a trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to with stand. He begins to dance. A slow, strange dance, eerie and life giving. A dance of atavistic signature and ritual. Lyons attempt to embrace him. Gabriel pushes Lyons away. He begins to howl in what is an attempt at song, or perhaps a song turning back into itself in an attempt at speech. He finishes his dance and the gates of heaven stand open as wide as God's closet. (Wilson, 1535)

His dancing is not understandable by the sane people around him, but like old African tribes he uses his dancing to contact with another world. To confirm this notion, Paul Carter Harrison describes the play's culminating as "a soundless ritual gesture which is at once grotesque and triumphant in its revelry of Troy's transformation into the spirit which promises a new day" (17). In addition, the last part of the play provides a window for Africanist metaphysical ideas that regard death as simply a necessary event to mark passage into another realm (Sandra, 3), also a very firm belief of African people about death. Henry Elam, in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, also noted that Gabriel ritualistic and spiritual enactment is "an exhibition of a syncretic cosmology, the presence of African tradition with-in new world" (14); therefore, it could be proclaimed that in a modern world which African American people are forced to forget their rituals, Gabriel invokes a racial memory as an African inheritance and his action again reinforce the impact of past on the present and how it helps the African American to define their identity. On the other hand, "the most important role of traditional performance is affirming the unity and traditional values of the group" (Nadel, 141). The Maxsons were separated due to the Troy's mistakes through the play. However, by his death, Troy again brings the unity to the family. His friend, children, wife, and Gabriel all participate in his funeral and its special ritual done by Gabriel (Wilson, 1535). Moreover, improving prospects for the future is also at the center of traditional performance whose goal is the harmonious resolution of issues and an improvement in the well-being of the community (Nadel, 141) which is confirmed by Raynell's attitude toward the world which is colorful and bright like her small garden (Wilson, 1532).

All of the above cultural elements helped African Americans to struggle against discrimination in the white society and to make a brighter future for themselves. Wilson has often stated that his purpose was to portray the black struggle, to set the record straight, and "to take custodianship of the Negro experience" (Fitzgerald, 7). Therefore, in his works, examples of struggling of black people with the white society are portrayed. However, as Shanon mentioned in her article, *Ideas*, "his dramatic vision also springs from a sense of the universal struggles that all oppressed people encounter, as they demand participation in a hegemonic society". *Fences* was set the 1950s and 60s. This period was a time of great changes for African Americans. Thus, some examples of these changes in the behavior of the black people about their situation are portrayed in the play. In the prefatory of the play, the spirit of struggling and hoping for a better future is presented: They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole and lived in pursuit of their dream. That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the forces of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. (Wilson, 1505)

However, as the play is set in the beginning of the 1950s, the beginning years of changing in the attitude of black people about their situation, "hot winds of change would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade had not yet began to blow full" (*ibid*). That is why, struggling is limited to changing minor things like job statues. However, through the play, two kinds of struggling are displayed. First of all, struggling for existence; and, secondly, economical struggling which all of them are done by the main character of the play Troy Maxson. The first example of struggling in the play is the struggling of existence. Troy, the



symbol of African Americans, is trying to prove his existence, particularly in the society, by creating an imaginary and metaphysical story of his wrestling with death:

**TROY:** .... I looked up one day and Death was marching straight at me. Like soldiers on Parade. The Army of Death was marching straight at me. The middle of July, 1941. It got real cold just like it be winter. It seem like Death him-self reached out and touched me on the shoulder. .... I say... what you want Mr. Death..... Death standing there staring at me...carrying that sickle in his hand. Finally, he say, “You want bound over for another year?” See, just like that “You want bound over for another year?” .... I told him, “Bound over hell! Let’s settle this now!” ....

We wrestled for three days and three nights. I can’t say where I found the strength from. Every time it seemed like he was gonna get the best of me, I’d reach way down deep inside myself and find the strength to do him better. (Wilson, 1508)

After the third day, he won the wrestling. This symbolic victory shows that Troy, as the symbol of African American, has got a victory spirit, therefore, he would be considered as an African warrior who is defeating his existence in confronting with Death, as the most powerful elements of life; and therefore, he is ready to fight for his right in the real life too. This idea is confirmed as Cohn argued “Troy’s struggle for fairness becomes virtually mythic” (Wilson, 1503).

Taking away the opportunity of suitable social standing from the blacks is one of the main theme of the *Fences*. On the other hand, struggling for gaining equal place within the white society is also evident in the play. Therefore, the play could be considered as a struggling play. This notion is confirmed by Cohn who believed that “Troy’s rebellion and frustration set the tone of the entire play” and, he continued, “He is looking for his rights” (Wilson, 1503). Troy is a garbage collector. He is not satisfied with his current position. Through the play, it is displayed that all of the previous efforts of the blacks in order to change their job statues resulted in the losing their job. However, as Troy is not satisfied with his current situation and also possesses a victory seeker spirit, he revolts against the situation and struggles for changing it. On the other hand, by considering the failure of the previous efforts, Bono and other Troy’s colleagues are worried that Troy’s revolt would resulted in his firing and deterioration of the situation for them. But, Troy is not worried about the consequences as he considers himself a warrior:

**TROY:** I ain’t worried about them firing me? They gonna fire me cause I asked a question? That’s all I did. I went to Mr. Rand and asked him, “why? Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting?” Told him “what’s the matter, don’t I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough drive a truck. .... How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?” He told me “Take it to the union”. (Wilson, 1505)

As Troy is seeking a better position and he has got the victory seeking spirit of his ancestors, he takes the case to the union and wins the case and became “the first colored driver” (Wilson, 1519). This victory, although, it is small, is the beginning of future bigger victories.

Through the play, Wilson depicted the discrimination and racism inside the hegemonic society of America and how African Americans like Troy, as the product of oppression, and Cory as the

symbol of the current situation of blacks struggled for their rights. On the other hand, Wilson, masterfully and in an indirect way, displayed how oppression resulted in criminal activities through Troy, Bono, and Lyon and other African Americans who all end up in jail. However, Cory, by learning and using the past experience of his family and simultaneously a determined will, is going to make a better future.

August Wilson believed that the current problems of blacks reside in the lack of understanding about their past. As the result, Wilson believed African Americans could overcome racism, injustice, and discrimination if they have enough knowledge about their past. Consequently, by presenting cultural and historical elements of African culture, he tried to suggest a solution for African American community. To conclude, the researcher, through highlighting some stances has shown how Du Bois' ideas like using unity, accepting past and preventing the repetition of the past mistakes, promoting cultural features, and fighting against discrimination in every possible way are fibered into the play.

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