

## EXAMINING DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN AUGUST WILSON'S *FENCES*

**Harith TURKI<sup>1</sup>**  
**Karabuk University, Turkey**

**Hindreem Azad**  
**Directorate of Education, Iraq**

### **Abstract**

*August Wilson's Fences is one of the landmarks in the American theater. The play deals with many issues regarding the plights of the African Americans in the racial American Society. The present paper tries to explore August Wilson's play Fences in the light of Du Bois' concept of the double consciousness. Du Bois' theory focuses mainly on the psychological and social struggle of the African Americans against the difficulty of defining their own identity, due to the fact that they are torn between two different cultural and psychological consciousnesses. Despite the fact that the play has extensively been studied and analyzed, especially in terms of themes of racism, the generational clash, and some other ideas, no research has been done on analyzing the play from the perspective of Du Bois' theory. Therefore, this study aims at focusing on the exploration of the psychological and identity crisis of Wilson's characters. They are clearly torn between their African and American consciousnesses. They can never find a compromise, simply speaking because each of these consciousnesses is deeply rooted. Therefore, Wilson tries to depict the characters' struggle with their double consciousness and their endeavors to find a compromise. The characters must surrender to the fact that they can never live with one of the consciousness on the expense of the other. And this is the lesson that the main characters in the play understand at the end of the play.*

**Keywords:** August Wilson, Du Bois, Double Consciousness, *Fences*

### **1. Introduction**

The term *Double Consciousness* is a term coined by the African-American critic and philosopher, W. E. B. Du Bois, to refer to the kind of state African Americans live in. According to him, it refers to the duality of African American lives and the serious dilemma of their lives. Du Bois defines it as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: harith.turki@karabuk.edu.tr

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn a sunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face (1965: 114-115).

This duality, Du Bois expresses, is present within every black individual. It creates many obstacles and problems for blacks living in the white dominant society. In addition, it hindered them from realizing their dreams and their search for self-identity. Most of the African Americans have an identity crisis. African Americans have been in continuous striving to compromise their two distinctive cultures that make up their identity. They see America as the land where they were forced to live there against their will, and in which their identities are greatly distorted, while they see Africa as their homeland which they belong to. This leads to the view that they must return to their original home which is Africa one day. Due to the plantation, Africans were mixed with other different ethnic groups, and this led to the loss of some of their cultural codes and absorbing some of the other cultures. They were forced to speak English, and thus, their language was gradually forgotten. They were even forced to convert to Christianity and forgot about their own religion, in addition, their most important cultural practices were banned. Thus, a great deal of their identity was distorted and replaced by another culture. With the successions of generations, Africanness was almost assimilated into Americanness, and younger generation started to forget completely about their original identity.

Moreover, African Americans were isolated from full integration into either culture and alienated from the society. Therefore, they were lost in the American society. They felt that they could not adapt and belong. They also felt that their identity and values were at war with the ones the white forced them to accept. They were stripped of their national sense, and now

are denied to live neither life. Du Bois sees the “color line” as the criterion that categorizes people.

According to Du Bois, having the dual consciousness of an African American is not to refuse all other ideas entirely, but to allow the fortification of these ideas with the perceptive spirit of intuitive understanding. He believes that Negro is not supposed to lose either of the two selves, the African and the American. They wish to have both identities at the same time despite the differences in character traits of African Americans and those of Americans. He sees these differences to be “complementary rather than incompatible in nature” (Allen E. Jr: 220). He considers both identities to be equally important.

## **2. Double Consciousness in Wilson’s *Fences***

The Pulitzer-Prize winning play, *Fences* is regarded as one of the masterpieces of the African American playwright August Wilson. *Fences* is a play about blacks in 1950s. The play is about Troy Maxson and the decisions he makes and the impact of these decisions on his and family’s life. The play paints a picture of an Afro-American person who, because of not having opportunities and because of economic insecurity, faces many problems and suffers from frustration, as he tries to rebel against a society, which is dominated by the white. It is true that the play is about African Americans, but the play concentrates on a private experience rather than a public one. It reveals the psychological aspects of Troy Maxson. A greater emphasis is placed on the inner part of the characters generally. The play also tries to explore the extent to which the cultural clash of the African American character is portrayed. It explores the clash of the two cultures inside the main character.

Unquestionably, the play is about Troy Maxson, other characters such as Bono, Cory, Lyons, and even Rose serve as backdrop to Troy’s massive presence. Much of what they are about in the play is determined by their relationships with Troy. All the characters are either foil characters to Troy or they reflect Troy’s character in one way or another. With the notable exception of Cory, it appears that Troy is the center of each of their universe.

The events of the play take place in the front yard of a house inhabited by an African American family. The time of the play has a significant remark because it refers to an important period in the Civil Rights movement. Troy is one among many immigrants who came from the south to ascertain a secure position for himself and his family in the north, namely in Pittsburgh Hill District. The play involves a war of a garbage collector which is

waged against himself, his coworkers, and his family for missing his dream of playing major league baseball due to racism and cultural difference.

*Fences* features African presence differently from any other plays. The play explores the white society's attitudes towards the Africans as being slow-witted, backward, lethargic, and irresponsible. Tendencies that Wilson totally refuses by demonstrating Troy Maxson, with all his flaws, as a responsible black man. As Elam observes: "Wilson sought to subvert the dominant culture's representation of African American men as irresponsible fathers". He makes sure to make Troy the opposite model of Wilson's own father by delineating Troy Maxson as "a larger than life figure who feels an overwhelming sense of duty and responsibility that the character of Troy is problematized." (2001:847) In a touching scene in the play, Wilson shows the responsibility of Troy Maxson towards his family and daughter as Troy stands helplessly alone in his own family's front yard while cradling his infant daughter shortly after the death of his mistress and the baby's mother. In an interview with Dennis Watlington, Wilson explains his main purpose behind writing this play as he declares:

For the new play. I wanted to explore our commonalities of culture. What you have in *Fences* is a very specific situation, a black family which the forces of racism have molded and shaped, but you also have husband-wife, father-son. White America looks at black America in this glancing manner. They pass right by the Troy Maxsons of the world and never stop to look at them. They talk about niggers as lazy and shiftless. Well, here is a man with responsibilities as prime to his life. I wanted to examine Troy's life layer by layer and find out why he made the choices he made (1989:110).

The power of *Fences* is in its ability to bring the past to bear the present to provide relevant historical contexts that demonstrate the usefulness of the African American past as a frame of reference for negotiating current situations and looking to the future. The play sketches the lives of three generations of the Maxsons, pinning point of how their lives bear connectedness with each other. Troy's father is dramatized on the stage through Troy's bitter recollections of the past, showing the impact his father had on him as well as on his sons. Troy recalls what happens between him and his father. His shows how angry he was towards him "sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy. He ain't cared nothing about no kids. A kid to him wasn't nothing. All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working. When it comes time for eating... he ate first. If there was anything leftover, that's what you got" (Wilson, 50). Troy tries as hard as possible to be a different father from

what is father used to be, this is why he works very hard to be a loving, caring, responsible and sacrificial father. Similarly, his history serves as motivation for conscious wrongdoing. In his behavior with his surroundings, one can easily see the impact of his painful background on him and what his past has played in shaping his mentality and his consciousness. His relationship with his father, his felonious past, and the most devastating, is when he was not allowed to play major-league baseball due to cultural difference and racism, have all contributed to shaping what he has become.

August Wilson resurrects an Africa in his play that reveals itself by varying degrees and in both implicit and explicit forms. Often these forms cannot be comprehended if Western logic prevails as the sole standard. By examining the play within an African cosmology rather than by relying solely upon western paradigms of analysis, the play yields a much more telling portrayal of how African Americans compromise the ambivalence of their ‘double consciousness’ in America. In this case, African cosmology becomes an essential part of the play’s narrative which contrasts America’s divisive racism with Africa’s capacity to heal, empower and reunite. The play must be measured in accordance with African cultural codes and African world view.

One can note that the cultural practices of the African Americans are drawn through the indirect tension that Wilson dramatizes in *Fences* between African indigenous faith and Christianity. In history, these two cultures have been in a conflict for several reasons. The most important one is the belief that Christianity bore the mark of white oppression and a passive submission to fate, as Pereira noted (1995: 79).

Echoing Wilson’s argument that “God does not hear the prayers of blacks.” (Wilson, qtd in Reed, 1987: 95) Troy Maxson does not look for protection in black church and the grace of Christianity. Instead of seeking help from the Lord at his lowest point, and feeling the need to repent from his sins, Troy assumes the characteristics of his cultural descendants, Eshu. Troy looks ignorant to African American Christian tradition as he reinvented himself out of alternative models from a competing African tradition. But still, Christianity remains as an important part in *Fences* as it is also important in African culture. Wilson asserts that, for various reasons, African Americans relegate African spiritualism to a lower step status while Christianity receives more widespread acceptance among African Americans.

Moreover, Wilson continues to challenge the binaries between Christianity and African spiritualism in *Fences*, as Gabriel, Troy's mentally wounded brother, becomes the purveyor of the preferred order. His actions, gestures and comments draw attention to both the inhumane treatment he and other African American veterans receive after World War II and Africanist cosmology that develops from the play's backdrop to a very influential presence by the end of the play. When Gabriel's horn fails during his brother's funeral to honor his dead brother, who, according to African belief, has not died but moved to another realm, Gabriel substitutes "a dance of atavistic signature and ritual" (Wilson, 101). In performing this dance, "Gabriel invokes a racial memory, an African inheritance. His actions again reinforce the impact of the past on the present as the family's African heritage provides a benediction for their African American present." (Elam, 2001: 848) Gabriel begins healing process that the Maxsons come across. The play makes the audience and readers believe that re-establishing the ties with Africa will play a large role in that process. Troy's final send-off appears offstage. No audible ritualistic that is associated with a Christian burial can be seen: hymns, testimonials, prayers, eulogies, scriptural passages, ... etc. Instead, the play only privileges the scenes that immediately follow Troy's funeral. Christianity seems to be overshadowed by African spiritualism. *Fences* gives a large space for considering an African alternative. For Troy, African culture and Africanism is more important than Christianity and American culture.

Furthermore, Rose Maxson provides a visible representation of Christianity that has limited impact on this Afro-American family. As she knows about Troy's betrayal and accepts to take care of his child, she finds comfort and stability in the church. As she hangs the day's laundry, in her hymn she asks Jesus to protect her and be a fence around her every day:

Jesus, be a fence all around me every day,

Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way. (Wilson, 21)

Although the Christian church becomes a refuge for Rose, symbolically the institution is loaded with lingering negative historical baggage. For African American, Christianity marks the white domination over blacks that dates back to slavery, a means that the whites used to control blacks in the society. Church was a systemic tool of mental oppression, a tool which the whites used centuries ago among slave owners as a means of countering rebellion and ensuring passivity. Kim Pereira observes: "By forcing its God on blacks, the white church

could control their spirits. This process attempted, in part, to change the African into an imitation white man, a carbon copy of the European model; it was a process that robbed him of his individuality, dehumanized him and turned him into chattel.” (1995:31) This can justify why Troy Maxson does not pray for forgiveness from the Christian God and why Wilson continues to foreground African spiritualism as the more culturally appropriate response to the world.

A significant product of the Afro-Christian blend in contemporary African American culture is an acceptance of a similar spiritual universe. Much credence is given to supernatural phenomena like ghosts, superstition and magic. Troy brings death to life. As he recalls the imaginary battle he wages with the Grim Reaper, he accords the spirit a degree of respect, knowing that in a matter of time, the spirit will claim victory over him. Gabriel optimizes the African response to ghosts, superstition, and magic in the play. He owns some sensory abilities that make him easily touch his African ancestral spirits. His mental alteration, due to war, allows him an access to the African spiritual realm unguardedly. These instances show the interconnectedness of daily Afro-American lives with the world of spirits and their own culture. It also shows that the spirits have a respectable place in African American culture.

Troy Maxson highlights his divided consciousness as an Afro-American. His attempts to blend the two consciousnesses lead to many problematic issues. W.E.B. Dubois describes Troy’s divided status of “Two-ness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled striving, two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1965:114-115). Troy is torn between abiding by the American rules which are related to his life and his society, and the African roots which he wants to pass over to his Cory that involves reclaiming the spirit of African warrior. We can also notice that many of the acts and decisions that Troy has made were due to this “two-ness”, to his divided consciousness, and to his uncompromised African and American selves.

Moreover, Troy’s problem is that he has to merge two different traditions. He faces the problem of being African and American at the same time i.e. two identities. Troy undergoes identity crisis as he strives to achieve his dreams. Troy feels that he is alienated from the American society. His sense of double consciousness arises as he is regarded as an American person, but his working condition is not equal to those of whites. He was not given the same opportunity as whites to be a driver until he talked to his boss about that.

Troy used to be a very talented baseball player, but because of his color he was denied to play in major league. He experiences double consciousness in a country where his talent is ignored and wasted because of having a different identity. Although he was an American citizen, he was deprived of the opportunity to achieve success in the sport. In her famous article “Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson’s *Fences*”, Susan Koprince talks about Troy’s divided consciousness when she sees that he “embodies both the psychological fragmentation of the black American and the dualistic nature of black baseball”. Moreover, Troy’s divided consciousness can be clearly shown as he “driven to see himself (and to measure his success) through the lens of white America.” (353) to use Koprince’s words.

Troy suffered from racial bigotry as he was prevented from becoming a basketball player and play in a well-known tournament like the major league and does not want his son to suffer from the same experience. He does not want his son to feel the same damage that he felt from when he was young. He wants to avoid his son the pain and misery of racism that he felt from, This is why he tells him: “The white man ain’t gonna let him get nowhere with that football” (Wilson, 8). He fears that his son will be subject to racist whims of coaches, team owners and other team players. He also fears that his son will be sidelined and no longer will be useful for the sport. He is worried that his son will finally be leftover like him. Despite being a great basketball player, and he used to play for the Negro baseball leagues but due to the racial mindset of the Americans during Tory’s youth, he was not allowed to ascend to the better leagues and become a professional player. This is why when his son got a scholarship based on football, he tries very hard to stand between his son and his dreams, fearing that the same thing that happened to him may happen to his son. Cory, Tory’s son, who belongs to the new generation of African-Americans, sees his father’s rejection as evidence of jealousy and fear that his son will have a better future than him and that he will surpass him. When he faces his father, he tells him: “Just cause you didn’t have a chance. You just scared I’m gonna be better than you, that’s all” (Wilson, 58) Cory never understand his father’s concerns and he feels that his father’s time and all the racial bigotry his father suffered from cannot be repeated with him. The injustice that fenced him from the white world, should not fence Cory, because Cory is different, this is why he cannot fathom why his father his interfere in making a decision on his son’s behalf, because Tory, according to Cory, should not define his son’s future life.



Troy tries to provide lectures to his son on work ethics, responsibility, and self-sufficiency from white control. He advises his son to “get your book learning so you can work yourself up in the A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses.” (Wilson, 35) He wants his son to have a good job instead of thinking to play football, but it seems that his advice is futile because Cory has already quit his job at the grocery without his father’s knowledge. This clash to some extent represents the double-consciousness. This double-consciousness is not only seen inside the characters, but we can see it embodied in the clash between Troy, who represents the conservative African culture, and his son, who believes in the American values.

Moreover, this father-son conflict prevails throughout the play and witnesses several stations till it results in physical contact and separates father from son. Wilson tries to ration and justify this tension between Troy and his son by showing that it is a normal American thing. He told David Savran that these misunderstandings and fights are not only normal but good and upbeat. Besides, Wilson also sees Troy’s concern and behaviors with his son as a sin of love and consideration. He states:

Troy is seeing this boy walk around, smelling his piss. Two men cannot live in the same household. Troy would have been tremendously disappointed if Cory had not challenged him. Troy knows that this boy has to go out and do battle with that world: ‘ so I had best prepare him because I know that is a harsh, cruel place out there. But that is going to be easy compared to what he is getting here. Ain’t nobody gonna whip your ass like I am going to whip it’. (Wilson qtd in Savran, 1988:32).

August Wilson believes that it is very important to sustain intergenerational connections among both young and old Africans. This theme manifests a major theme in *Fences*. In an interview in 1987 with Theatre Communications Group, Wilson explains:

First of all, we are like our parents. The things we are taught early in life, how to respond to the world, our sense of morality-everything, we get from them. Now you can take that legacy and do with it anything you want to do. It is in your hands. Cory is Troy’s son. How can he be Troy’s son without sharing Troy’s values? I was trying to get at why Troy made the choices he made, how they have influenced his values and how he attempts to pass those along to his son. Each generation gives the succeeding generation what they think they need. One question in the play is ‘Are the

tools we are given sufficient to compete in a world that is different from the one our parents knew?' I think they are, it is just that we have to do different things with the tools. That's all Troy has to give (ibid., 299).

What Troy fails to see is that his son is a replica of him, his son does also repeat what Troy did with his father. Both Troy and Cory had both verbal and psychological issues with their parents. They are both adamant and see their parents as impediments in front of their career. This double consciousness is seen through both character's struggle to come on good terms with what their parents want and what their society and their career require them to be. Troy's father endured backbreaking labor while employed by his merciless white proprietor, Mr. Lubin, just because he felt responsibility toward his family. He felt that it is his duty to feed his family. Despite his poor relationship with his father, Troy seems to have inherited some of the redeemable features in his character. Most obviously, Troy inherited a strong work ethic and a serious regard for responsibility to his family, which are emblematic of the Africanness in him. Although Troy's father was treating Troy very cruelly as he took away his mother, sexually assaulted Troy's girl, punches him unconscious when confronted and denies food to his children, Troy still boasts that "he felt a responsibility toward us. Maybe he ain't treated us the way I felt he should have...but without that responsibility, he could have walked off and left us... made his own way" (Wilson, 51). Troy feels the same responsibilities. He feels it is his charge to take care of the family, to feed his family and to protect his family and son. He feels it is his duty not to let his son suffer from the same experience he suffered from. These show the decline in the American prevalent Individualism and adherence to African culture which is feeling of responsibility toward the family and others around them.

Despite all the difficulties Troy faces while trying to pass on some of African valuable lessons to his son, the play concludes in a scene of true love, understating and recognition on the part of all characters. Troy succeeds in making his son understand the need and the importance of his African roots though he is so saturated in the Americanness of his consciousness. He makes him grasp the African pride in him, When Troy dies at the end of the play with his mother's compassionate appeal, Cory indicates a change of heart as he urges his younger sister Raynelle to "go on in the house and change them shoes like Mama told you so we can go to Papa's funeral" (Wilson, 100). In one way or another, Cory shows his acceptance of the generational torch passed on to him by Troy. He agrees to do and complete

what his father has left undone for the family. He becomes his father's son and the hope of his family's future.

### **3. Conclusion**

To conclude, Troy cannot compromise the two cultures. He wants to fence himself and those who are culturally close to him while living in different culture and environment. He cannot maintain a good relationship with his surroundings. He lives as a prey to the two cultures, to the double-consciousness. He tries to instill the African values in his son and his family, but he knows that it is not easy. Thus, no matter how enthusiastic Troy toward his African roots, his American consciousness is also dominant. He decides to accept the fact that living on one of the two consciousnesses is not a solution. He must find a medium through which he can reconcile the two conflicting consciousnesses.

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