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Dreams Deferred: Exploring the Masculine Mystique in August Wilson's *Fences*

Vahit Yaşayan

Abstract

Using Robert Staples' concept of "the masculine mystique," this article explores the protagonist, Troy Maxson's desire to conform the expectations of the masculine mystique in August Wilson's *Fences.* Troy emerges from a battered past and as someone who once dreamed of swinging for the fences—playing professional baseball—but is consigned to being a garbage man. His perception of his existence and worth is inadequate mostly because he, as an "emasculated" man, cannot realize the American Dream economically and socially. By considering his masculinity within the standards of the masculine mystique, he creates pressures that can only be abated by removing the inadequate benchmarks defining him. Measuring himself by the term and concept of "imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy," yet unable to participate in the American capitalist enterprise, he is doomed to fail. Robert Staples' concept of the masculine mystique provides a theoretical framework to understand the ongoing crisis in Troy's masculinity. As a solution to this crisis, August Wilson highlights resistance to European American representations of African American manhood, promoting instead, a spiritual and cultural connection with the African American community and a recognition and appraisal of his ancestry. Unable to take off the lens of the masculine mystique that obscures his view of himself and the world, Troy is inclined to see himself as limited, confused and victimized.

Keywords

Masculinity studies, black masculinity, performance crisis, masculine mystique, August Wilson, *Fences*

Özet

Bu makale August Wilson'ın *Fences* adlı oyunundaki ana karakter Troy Maxon'un erkeklik krizini Robert Staples'ın "Erkeklik Gizemi" kuramı çerçevesinde inceleyecektir. Troy profesyonel bir beyzbol oyuncusu olup, dayatmacı toplumun önüne koyduğu engelleri aşmayı hayal ederken, çöpçü olur. Kendi varlığını ve kıymetini algılayamamasının sebebi Amerikan Rüyasını ekonomik ve sosyal olarak gerçekleştiremeyip kendini "eksik erkek" olarak görmesinden kaynaklanır. Troy erkekliğini "emperyalist, beyazı üstün gören, kapitalist ataerkil" terim ve kavramına göre değerlendirip, Amerikan kapitalist teşebbüsüne dâhil olamadığı için kendini başarısız olmaya mahkûm etmiştir. Robert Staples'ın "Erkeklik Gizemi" kuramı Troy'un erkeklik krizini açıklamaya yönelik bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Bu krize bir çözüm olarak, August Wilson beyaz erkek-merkezli toplumsal anlayış tarafından oluşturulan ve dayatılan siyah erkeklik temsillerine karşı çıkmayı ve bu temsillere karşı Afrikalı Amerikalı toplum ile manevi ve kültürel bağlar kurmayı ve Afrika kökeninin bilincine varmayı savunur. Oyunda bunu başaramayan Troy, eril dayatmayı hak ettiğini düşünürken iktidarsız kalıp, kendini sınırlı, kafası karışmış, kurban edilmiş gibi görür.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Erkeklik çalışmaları, siyah erkeklik, performans krizi, erkeklik gizemi, August Wilson, *Fences*

In his *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (1982), Robert Staples argues that in the post-Second World War era, African American males were isolated and alone. In other words, according to the cultural analysis of the black masculinity of the era, loneliness and emptiness became dominant moods. In order to define the crisis in African American masculinity or the masculine mystique, Staples adapts the concept of "the feminine mystique" from Betty Friedan's feminist work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). After looking at the 1950s, Friedan formulated "the problem that has no name," the confusion, self-blame and anguish experienced by women

who had been told "to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers" (57). Friedan noticed that women spoke with a tone of "quiet desperation" about their problems (62), the same quiet desperation that Henry David Thoreau had observed among American men a century earlier (1875). Like Friedan, Staples draws attention to the massive unhappiness of African American men trying to fit into a media-idealized "strong breadwinner" image while experiencing a masculinity crisis and suffering from "the masculine mystique." He examines how normative definitions of masculinity deprive so many black men of the ability to fulfill the expectations associated with being male in hegemonic America. Fulfilling the American Dream and trying to live up to the hegemonic masculine ideal were not easy tasks for black males. Ultimately, they could only attempt to perform this norm, while being victimized by it under the masquerade of the masculine mystique.

In the framework of Robert Staples' concept of "the masculine mystique," this article analyzes the performance crisis in August Wilson's *Fences*. In other words, Robert Staples' "masculine mystique" provides a theoretical framework to understand the performance crisis in August Wilson's *Fences*. As the reading of the play with the concept of "the masculine mystique" illustrates, August Wilson highlights resistance to European American representations of African American manhood, promoting instead a spiritual and cultural connection with the African American community and a recognition and appraisal of African American ancestry.

1. The Masculine Mystique

The masculine mystique is the notion that a specific set of codes, performances, behaviors and powers represent manhood. Andrew Kimbrell, the author of *The Masculine Mystique* (1995), argues that, unlike the feminine mystique, the masculine mystique was not built on ideas concerning natural biology (65). Instead, it is a mask, a performance and a construct that has been scripted and directed by the mainstream society. For Kimbrell, the unique purpose of the masculine mystique is to maintain the power of normative hegemonic masculinity at the expense of other masculinities (xiv). In return for adopting the masculine mystique, mainstream society provides men with prestigious and powerful positions, which entitle them to the indiscriminate abuse of other masculinities, women and children. The mystique, as Kimbrell

asserts, seemingly perpetuates the image that "men are entranced by simulated masculinity, experiencing danger, independence, success, sexual fulfillment, idealism and adventure as 'power' voyeurs" (128). In reality though, the vast majority of men "lead mostly powerless lives in a servile state, frightened of losing their jobs, mortgaged to the gills and still feeling responsible for supporting their families" (128). They become increasingly frustrated, as they remain powerless and unable to "get ahead."

In *The Masculine Mystique*, Kimbrell devotes attention to the plight of American males who have faced a "crisis of masculinity." In his analysis, he uncovers the reasons why some men have not conformed to current standards of male "responsibility"—husband, father, and breadwinner—and how as a result they have been condemned by the nation's mass media. "Over the years," says Kimbrell, "I have learned that there is something terribly wrong in the lives of most men. Whatever age, political persuasion, race, or creed, these men share a common condition. They feel bewildered, out of control, numbed, angered, and under attack" (xiii). Accordingly, various social forces, along with the constantly difficult burden of breadwinning and the financial and personal devastation of divorce, have destroyed men's lives to the breaking point. "Everywhere I turn," Kimbrell remarks, he encounters "the tragic, intimate toll that these realities are taking on men—the undermining of men's health, the suicide of so many young men, lives spent in meaningless work or joblessness, broken marriages, the inability to properly father their children, the lack of any real relationship to the natural world" (xiii).

It is obvious that men are confronting their performance crisis in the midst of a fundamental confusion about their gender identity. In 1963, Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* heralded a distinct wave of feminism and echoed across America. Writing as a "housewife and mother," she described the dissatisfaction of educated middle-class women like herself, despite their "nice" homes and families. She anticipated the fact that men are actually in serious trouble as well. As she maintains,

> how could we ever really know or love each other as long as we kept playing those roles that kept us from knowing or being ourselves? Weren't men as well as women still locked in lonely isolation, alienation, no matter how many

> sexual acrobatics they put their bodies through? Weren't men dying too young, suppressing fears and tears and their own tenderness? It seemed to me that men weren't really the enemy —they were fellow victims, suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill. (386)

Like women, men were experiencing turmoil and their personal and social crisis became "the problem that has no name." According to Kimbrell, this turmoil is caused by the masculine sex role; the performance of "rigid stereotypes," "financial responsibilities," as well as "economic dislocations and rising demands for a change in gender roles" (xiii). Subsequently, men have been left bewildered, without a consistent, reasonable or healthy concept of their own masculinity. Whatever their frustration, fear, or confusion, one thing is evident: According to Kimbrell,

> whether at work or at home, whether in the doctor's office or on the battlefield, most men will "keep it to themselves." They are locked into a code of denial and silence. When men talk person to person or in small groups, there is usually a tenacious reluctance to speak about their problems or to show emotion about their condition. Unfortunately, when men do break through and open up to discuss their concerns, or complain of constricted and reduced lives, they are often labeled by men and women alike as "whiners." (xii)

By disclosing the concealed masculinity crisis, Kimbrell presents a different profile of the American man using a Masculinity Studies approach. *The Masculine Mystique* also reveals "how older, generative concepts of masculinity have been devastated over the last several generations and how in their place a little-known defective mythology about masculinity has been indelibly encoded into American men's social structures and psyches" (xiv). According to Kimbrell, men experience this myth on a daily basis. "It is the basis for many of their dysfunctional daydreams and most of their nightmares. It has now led society into a dangerous 'misandry,' a belief that masculinity itself is responsible for most of the world's woes" (xv). By making noticeable the invisible structure of the masculine mystique in the American

consciousness, Kimbrell calls for American men to reevaluate their role in society so that they can change the way they understand the past, how they see their present and how they plan their future without the devastating influences of the masculine mystique.

While Kimbrell elaborately depicts how economic industrialization, politics and technology interacted to create the modern white male psyche and the masculine mystique, he does not explore the masculine mystique in relation to other ethnic groups in detail. Similar to Andrew Kimbrell, Robert Staples traces the turbulent history that has brought men to be challenged by the expectations of the masculine mystique through an African American point of view. One of the pioneering figures in Black Masculinity Studies, Robert Staples who published *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society* (1982) before Andrew Kimbrell's *The Masculine Mystique* (1995), begins his book with the following claim—"it is difficult to think of a more controversial role in American society than that of the black male. He is a visible figure on the American scene, yet the least understood and studied of all sex-race groups in the United States" (1). He published *Black Masculinity* at a time when there was no book or a single author that had examined the performance of African American manhood in the United States.

Although Staples does not call his sex role theory "performative," he anticipates many of the concerns of current black masculinity scholars. From today's perspective, it could be suggested that Staples' sex role theory is founded upon a theatrical or dramaturgical metaphor in which black males' behavior is perceived as a sort of performance. He draws attention to the fact that males mostly behave in ways that are socially prescribed by hegemonic society. Very seldom, he suggests, are they genuinely "doing their own thing" (47). Rather, he asserts, they are like actors on a stage, playing out parts that have been assigned to them. From his outlook, masculinity is considered as an act rather than essence. It exists as a set of lines and stage directions that all males have to learn so that they can perform masculinity. For him, similar to white men, African American males are "trapped" into performing a set of stereotypical roles perpetuated by the masculine mystique (19). Nonetheless, black males are in conflict with the normative definitions of masculinity since they are perpetually fighting for economic survival. He describes the dual dilemma of the black man as follows:

> [Masculine] identity is crucial to a person's values, life style and personality. Black men have always had to confront the contradiction between the normative expectations attached to being male in this society and the proscriptions on their behavior and achievement of goals. Surely, this has psychological ramifications, which have yet to be explored or understood. Instead, he is subjected to societal opprobrium for failing to live up to the standards of manhood on the one hand and for being super macho on the other. It is a classical case of "be damned if you do and damned if you don't." (2)

Indeed, in his analysis, Staples points out that historically the masculine mystique was not actually an integral part of black masculinity. Staples suggests that prior to the 1950s and the 1960s, especially in the South, black men's status was based on being a stable husband and father despite the fact that many men endured devastating consequences of racism (143). They performed the traditional attributes of "the plantation patriarchy" and manhood was defined by having a wife and a well-protected family (145). Apparently, the irony is that they had to protect their wives and families from white men, even as they were imitating white standards and definitions of masculinity. However, the Great Depression and the Second World War, in Staples' opinion, altered notions of American masculinity. The 1930s and the 1940s' confusing and conflicting views of American men and their social expectations epitomize this cultural anxiety (145). Men who had been taught to perform the role of idealized men by the mystique experienced failure and questioned their identity, their roles and their performances in American society. As Michael Kimmel asserts,

> [t]he experience of powerlessness (having no control over their actions on the job), meaninglessness (performing specialized tasks that they cannot relate to the whole), isolation (inability to identify with a firm or its goals), and self estrangement (the lack of integration between their work and other aspects of life) led men to search for affirmation and identity outside the workplace, in the realm of consumption. (191)

Undeniably, white men were afflicted by patriarchal socialization, which perpetuated the masculine mystique as the idealized male role.

Nonetheless, that affliction is aggravated in the experience of black males due to the fact that they encountered a situation of double jeopardy. On the one hand, they were asked to fit into normative definitions of masculinity, which were already being questioned, and on the other hand, they realized that the American Dream would be unachievable for black males because of the racism that prevailed in society.

In the 1950s, the masculine mystique—"that impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero—was finally exposed as a fraud" (Kimmel 190). However, mass media continued to perpetuate confusing images that highlighted the presence of the idealized man in the American scene. Staples states that the media accelerated black males' suffering from the masculine mystique because of the development of black males from a traditional community-based approach to one that is externally defined by mass media (146). Apparently, while the media depicted the white American men as "benevolent," black men were characterized as "the carefree, hustling superstud caricature" (145). As bell hooks summarizes the male images on television in the fifties,

> [t]he white fathers we saw on shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best,* and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* were kind of protectors and providers who gave their children unconditional love. They did not yell, beat, shame, ignore, or wound their children. They were the fantasy white family. The real white family, the ones where fathers were controlling, abusive, incestuous, violent alcoholics, workaholics, or rageoholics, did not appear on our television screens. (95)

While this was the representation of white males, African Americans were frequently defined as "the Other" since the hegemonic society often considered the lifestyle and culture of African American males as "threatening, aggressive and intimidating" (Majors and Billson 2). While black men bought into the image presented by the media as readily as white men, they were not as likely to have the resources to bring the image into "reality," which was socially constructed and unachievable anyway. Even when they are successful at fulfilling some of the necessities of the normative masculinity, something continues to plague their masculinity: The masculine mystique. As Staples puts forward,

> [i]n a society where work and money is the measure of the man, joblessness can destroy the male's motivation to live. Because of the masculine mystique, losing a job can cause damage to the fragile male ego, result in psychological breakdown and family violence. It is no wonder that many black families are torn asunder by the male's unemployment. Instead of allowing his wife to pick up the slack and pitching in with domestic chores, he often resorts to abusive behavior toward his wife and children or engage in extramarital affairs, all to bolster his deflated ego or reassert his masculinity. (143)

Thus, African American males, who are the victims of the masculine mystique, frequently pay a high price themselves and oppress people around them. The symbols of manhood, "sexual conquest [and] dominance of women," become significant for black men since they lack the real symbols—economic and political power. The inability to perform the requirements of the masculine mystique led to dysfunctional behaviors among African Americans. As Staples concludes, these values resulted in various dangerous behaviors, such as smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, sexual conquest, dominance and crime, all the reasons of the black masculinity crisis (143).

In conclusion, Staples suggests that the black performance crisis derived from the gap existing between the desire to perform the "ideal male gender role" for the American society and the inability of black males to realize it. As a collection of dos and don'ts, the masculine mystique was a recipe for disaster, given what it actually took to be a "real man." Few, if any, men could fulfill the mystique; consequently, a vast majority of black males felt like failures. What is striking, the physical and psychological costs of trying to live up to the mystique would brought men lives of despair and isolation, of suppressed emotions and deferred dreams. In *Fences*, August Wilson presents Troy Maxson's story of manhood as measured against the masculine mystique while chronicling the black performance crisis with specific references to the norms of manhood in the 1950s.

2. Troy Maxson's Performance Crisis

All the action in *Fences* takes place in the front yard of Troy Maxson's "ancient two-story brick house," which is defined by its

partially constructed fence, the only element of the stage that changes over the course of the play (Wilson 4). This positions the fence as something deliberately built one by one, as Jim Bono mentions in the play, "to keep people out . . . and . . . to keep people in" (59). That is why, the fence around the yard can be considered as a constant reminder of the masculine mystique in Troy Maxson's life. The boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are deliberately constructed by the mystique and do not exist naturally.

According to Isaiah Matthew Wooden, *Fences* "elicited praise for Wilson's nuanced rendering of black domestic life in the US before the civil rights movement that at once repeated, revised, and riffed on key moments and movements in African American history" (125). By setting his play in the 1950s, Wilson is able to describe vividly the consequences of the Great Migration on black males, which left African Americans isolated in northern cities, where they confronted the challenges of everyday living. Struggling beneath the measures of the masculine mystique, Troy tries to participate in the 1950s consumer society when he takes his brother's three thousand dollars and uses it to buy a house. Gabriel has suffered a traumatic head injury during the Second World War, and with a metal plate in his head, he functions at a diminished mental capacity. As compensation for getting "half his head blown off" (Wilson 31), the army gives him a "lousy three thousand dollars" (31). Troy cannot perform the expected patriarch role of the Maxson's family and the house with its fences becomes a constant reminder of this inability. As Troy explains in Act I Scene II, it is the only way he can get a roof over his "head . . . 'cause of that metal plate" (31). In other words, his brother's misfortune becomes his fortune:

> ROSE: Ain't no sense of blaming yourself for nothing. Gabe wasn't in no condition to manage that money. You done what was right by him. Can't nobody say you ain't done what was right by him. Look how long you took care of him . . . till he wanted to have his own place and moved over there with Miss Pearl.
>
> TROY: That ain't what I'm saying, woman! I'm just stating the facts. If my brother didn't have that metal plate in his head . . . I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I'm fifty three years old. Now see if you can understand that! (31)

Because he identifies his masculinity with the accumulation of money and goods, his inability to buy a house has a devastating impact on his life. He continues to live under the masculine mystique's looming shadow, denigrating the lives of the members of his family.

Like Wilson's other male protagonists in *The Pittsburgh Cycle,* Troy is not aware of his gender performance. On the one hand, he assumes he is privileged as a "masculine" man. On the other hand, he sees himself as limited, confused and victimized by gender expectations; as deserving power, yet remaining powerless. Troy understands his fate as an African American man living in the shadows of the masculine mystique; yet, his progress to confront his masculinity crisis is shattered by his inability and unwillingness to alter it. Excluded from the masculine mystique, he must come to terms with what it means to be a black male through his own history, a pattern that Wilson uses for his black male characters in order to underscore their performance crisis.

Troy's reconciliation with his past occurs when he recounts his dreadful experience with his father. Towards the end of Act I, sitting with his son Lyons and best friend Bono, Troy shares his personal history with them. "Sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy" (48), says Troy, and continues with how he determined that the time had come for him to leave his father's house. Having witnessed the brutal beating of a girl, Troy realizes he is no longer scared of his father: "Now I thought he was mad cause I ain't done my work. But I see where he was chasing me off so he could have the gal for himself. When I see what the matter of it was, I lost all fear of my daddy. Right there is where I become a man . . . at fourteen years of age" (50). As he points out in Act II Scene IV, after leaving his father's house, "the world suddenly got big. And it was a long time before I could cut it down to where I could handle it" (50). For Troy, cutting down the world to where he could handle it involved negotiating his past and realizing his unconditional tie with it. While leaving his father's house empowers his self-esteem, coming to terms with the reality of being unable to find a job and a place to live degrades Troy's life. In order to feed himself, he steals, which puts him into jail. There, he learns how to play baseball, which, as Kim Pereira argues,

> gives him a new direction, renewed meaning, and the opportunity to redefine himself and prove that he can do something well. It saves his life in prison and then

> becomes his raison d'être. Soon there was no distinction between Troy Maxson, human being, and Troy Maxson, baseball player. (41)

Thus, his ultimate desire to seek self-empowerment through baseball finally imprisons him in the shadows of the masculine mystique. After fifteen years, Troy is released from prison yet is imprisoned by the masculine mystique. His not being able to reconcile with his past leads Troy to remain passive and incapable of navigating his way out of the masculine mystique. He digs up his childhood experiences to a certain extent; however, when it comes to his rejection of the Major League, Troy escapes from reconciliation.

As Staples previously stated, in the 1950s, the American mass media perpetuated confusing images that highlighted the presence of the idealized man (146). His wife, Rose even suggests in Act I Scene III that Troy is not supposed to fit into the role model of the 1950s; "times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. The world's changing around you and you can't even see it" (40). He desperately responds to her by indicating the routine of his manhood:

> I do the best I can do. I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain't got no tears. I done spent them. We go upstairs in that room at night . . . and I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever. I get up Monday morning . . . find my lunch on the table. I go out. Make my way. Find my strength to carry me through to the next Friday. *(Pause)* That's all I got, Rose. That's all I got to give. I can't give nothing else. (40)

While many men suffered from "the manhood cycle" that Troy explains above, the American media continued to perpetuate images of the idealized man, which included participation in sports such as baseball, which became the epitome of this masculine success. As Avi Santo suggests in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, American baseball, with its spectators and performers, perpetuates the common aspects of American hegemonic masculinity (48). As Troy elucidates in Act I Scene IV, baseball provides "the rite of passage between fathers and sons" and "a nostalgic commemoration of a manliness away from urban complications and corruptions" (48). That is why, it carves out a space

in American males' psyche as an indispensible element of masculinity. It promotes "American courage, confidence, combativeness, energy, spirit and American vim, vigor and virility" (48). As Troy tells to his sons, his wife and the audience, African American players are not allowed to access to the Major Baseball League. Thus, as an indicator of the American masculine ideal, baseball automatically defines American dream and masculinity as white. As Santo adds, "even after racial barriers fell, baseball remained a contested site in which minority players continued to have to prove their worth and their manhood by complying with white standards" (48). Troy's definition of manhood, thus, centers on his ability to play baseball in the Major League and his ability to support his family economically. As Susan Koprince argues in "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*," Troy is "driven to see himself" and measures his success "through the lens of white America" (353). Consequently, the masculine mystique plagues the rest of his life. Because of discrimination in the Major League, Troy cannot break through the race and gender barriers. In other words, he cannot cross the fence. It was not until Jackie Robinson, the first African American to break the color barrier in 1947, that blacks could play in the Major League. By then, Troy is too old to play baseball professionally. As Rose explains, "they got a lot of colored baseball players now. Jackie Robinson was the first. Folks had to wait for Jackie Robinson," (16) Troy responds to her in anger:

> I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play . . . then they ought to have let you play. (16)

His desire to act according to the expectations of the masculine mystique and his inability to participate in the mystique imprisons him. As Staples asserted, since the masculine mystique is a performance that was featured by measures such as the oppression of women, struggle for dominance, the glorification of violence and the embodiment of the capitalist agenda that measures success through the accumulation of money and material goods (143), Troy considers himself worthless according to these standards, thereby sentencing himself into despair.

Incapable of measuring masculinity by any means other than through white standards, Troy turns to seeking power in his personal relationships. Every Friday, he hands his paycheck over to his wife, which is something degrading for Troy's masculinity. Thus, in order to regain his power, he exercises a misogynist attitude towards his wife. Since Troy is driven by the masculine mystique, he attributes the reason of his performance crisis to his wife inflicting a great deal of suffering on her. Retreating into his own crisis and grief, he says in quiet desperation, in Act I Scene II, "just give me same space. That's all. Just give me some room to breathe" (72). Troy betrays his wife and turns to another woman to escape his own failure as a man, and, in so doing, betrays the only person who believes in him even when he no longer believes in himself. Thus, for Wilson the mutual mistreatment is an outcome of his being challenged by the masculine mystique. All chances for reconciliation are shattered when Troy cannot take the hand that Rose tries to extend him and continues in his desperate and futile quest for manhood in the mystique's way.

Overwhelmed by constant defeat in his struggles to participate in the masculine mystique, Troy seeks freedom from his failures. As Staples previously pointed out, those who suffer from the masculine mystique are overwhelmed by sexual conquest and dominance of women, since they lack real symbols (81). In an effort to "steal second" after eighteen years, Troy has an extramarital affair with his mistress Alberta. He explains his relief over his performance crisis in Act II Scene II:

> It's just . . . She gives me a different idea . . . a different understanding about myself. I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems . . . be a different man. I ain't got to wonder how I'm gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed. I can just be a part of myself that I ain't never been. (65)

Troy's sexual prowess becomes a partial substitute for masculine achievement. He thinks that his masculinity has been reasserted by his relationship with Alberta; yet, in reality, his life is revitalized precisely by avoiding the responsibilities perpetuated by the masculine mystique. Troy grasps at straws when "heading" the Maxson family and homeownership become unbearable. The outcome of his affair with Alberta is a baby girl, which only narrows the walls or fences of Troy's

imprisonment. Because Alberta dies when delivering her daughter, Troy feels obliged to take responsibility for the daughter. Hence, the pressures and problems in Troy's life are intensified, not lessened.

Notwithstanding his sense of "heading" his family, Troy manages to alienate not only Rose but also his son, Cory. Troy believes that the fences of the masculine mystique that shape his understanding of masculinity will construct barriers around Cory's dreams of playing football. Frustrated by the denial and discrimination that shattered his baseball dreams, Troy "flatly denies his son the opportunity to test his mettle in an integrated sports environment" (Weber 669). When Rose asks, "Why don't you let the boy go ahead and play football, Troy? Ain't no harm in that. He's just trying to be like you with the sports." (40), Troy responds,

> I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only decent thing ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don't wish him a thing else from my life. I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports. (40)

By detaining his son's dreams, Troy limits Cory's motivation. Since he considers himself as the patriarch of his family, he finds in himself the power to control Cory's future. As Carla McDonough argues,

> because sons are often considered a reflection of a man's masculinity, Troy, by alienating Cory, can be interpreted as diminishing his own identity as well. By refusing to let Cory compete for a football scholarship to college, perhaps out of jealously rather than out of fatherly concern for Cory's future, Troy pushes his son out of his life. (149)

While Troy is able to be a role model for his friend Bono, he is unable to do so for his son. In an attempt to assert patriarchal protection, he becomes the barrier in Cory's life. As Missy Dehn Kubitschek maintains in "August Wilson's Gender Lesson," unable to recognize changes in social conditions, Troy

> [s]ees Cory's talents as a temptation to irresponsibility. He insists on conditions that make it impossible for Cory to satisfy his work requirement and also to attend

> necessary athletic practices. Although he claims to be protecting Cory from inevitable disappointment, he is deforming another generation with Procrustean gender definitions. (186)

Troy's sense of responsibility for the Maxson family comes from his father; yet, it is responsibility from which Troy escapes by the end of the play. In an epigraph at the beginning of play, Wilson stresses the significance of overcoming and acknowledging the sins of the black father, which will help black men escape hegemonic masculinity. As Wilson puts it,

> When the sins of our fathers visit us
>
> We do not have to play host.
>
> We can banish them with forgiveness
>
> As God, in His Largeness and Laws. (7)

Thus, the nature of the odyssey of self-knowledge, for Wilson, involves rediscovering and reaffirming the Africanness in the African American experience. With this regard, the process of self-assertion, self examination and self knowledge involves black men's stepping away from the sins of their fathers, discovering their own place and planting their own roots, which necessitate a reconciliation with their past. Troy is capable of noticing his father's mistakes; nonetheless, he is not able to banish his father's sins. Like his father, who "wasn't good for nobody" (49), Troy becomes a threatening shadow over the dreams of others due to his masculinity crisis. Trapped beneath the normative definitions of the masculine mystique, Troy finds freedom in death.

Even though Troy dies at the end of the play, the audience does not know if he truly escapes from the masculine mystique. Since confronting "the sins of black fathers" is a significant concept for August Wilson, he transmits the problem of masculine identity from Troy to Cory. What kind of a man Cory will become remains a mystery for the audience. In order to establish his own life outside the fences that his father has erected, Cory escapes his father's house to join the military and tries, as the play implies, to make a productive life for himself. Although Troy's death brings Cory to his father's house, his freedom from hegemonic masculinity requires reconciliation with his father's sins as well as his past. After Cory returns home, he experiences the same dilemma Troy experienced, which is when he realizes that he is tied to his father. As Cory explains in Act II Scene V,

> [t]he whole time I was growing up . . . living in his house . . . Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere. It weighted on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn't tell which one was you anymore. That shadow digging in your flesh. Trying to live crawl in. Trying to live through you. Everywhere I looked, Troy Maxson was staring back at me . . . hiding under bed . . . in the closet. I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow. (87-88)

In order to formulate his life as a black man, and not to experience the masculinity crisis that ruined his father's life, Troy's looming shadow must be acknowledged and overcome. Rose suggests that there exist two options for Cory; he must either try to perform hegemonic masculinity or negotiate his own masculine identity against the shadows of the masculine mystique. As Rose suggests in the final scene of Act II,

> You can't be nobody but who you are, Cory. That shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself. You either got to grow into it or cut it down to fit you. But that's all you got to make life with. That's all you got to measure yourself against that world out there. (88)

Although Troy partially reconciles with his past, the idea of a complete reunion of all the members of the Maxson family comes from Gabriel. At the end of the play, the redemptive and ritualistic action that stresses August Wilson's emphasis on African sensibilities on black masculinity occurs through the final act of Gabriel Maxson. He reminds the audience how the exploration of individual characteristics, mythic signification, one's African roots and the struggle to integrate in society is important in the identity search of black males. In other words, Wilson's blend of African rituals with Christian elements highlights the influence of the past on the present as the Maxson's African sensibilities provide a blessing for their African American presence and hope for a better future.

In conclusion, *Fences* is ultimately the story of manhood as measured against that illusory American Dream of material gain. Only this time, in *The Pittsburgh Cycle,* the struggles of the male protagonist are further heightened by the masculine mystique. In his trace of the black performance crisis in different decades of the 20th century, through *Fences*, Wilson illustrates to his audience that the

masculine mystique actually is not unbreakable. His emphasis on the African rituals at the end of the play implies that there exist some possible ways for the salvation of black masculinity from hegemonic masculinity. Since the masculinity crisis continues to exist, Wilson's indirect handling of performance of the masculine mystique indicates that African American males' double consciousness as black men living in a white world requires a fuller perspective of their lives than the one they are performing. In order to have any chance for freedom both for themselves and for their community, they must take off the lens of the hegemonic masculinity that obscures their view of themselves and the world.

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