

Chapter VI

Moving Beyond Barriers: *Fences*

By the 1950s blacks were no longer a race of ex-slaves. They were inching closer to the "mainstream" of American society. Their struggle was now not against a particular community, but against the policies of the United States. Having responded to their country's call during World War II, they were ready to claim what had been denied to them so long-- full citizenship. This was the time when blacks mounted their most spirited protests against the bastions of white supremacy. In 1951, Thurgood Marshall launched the battle against segregation that culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court ruling against the "separate but equal" doctrine; in 1955, Rosa Parks ignited the civil rights movement and inspired a young Martin Luther King Jr., to become its champion. In many ways, 1957 was one of the most crucial years of this decade, for in that year was enacted the first Civil Rights Act since the Reconstruction era, an act aimed at desegregating the franchise. This also gave legal endorsement to blacks' right to protest discrimination. But later in many southern communities economic sanctions were invoked against blacks who were civil rights activists. Dismissals from jobs, denials of loans, and foreclosures of mortgages were some of the actions taken against

them. Legally, blacks had been free for ninety-four years, but practically they had little or no access to any of the benefits that ordinary citizens take for granted--recourse to the law, equal employment opportunities, education. Thus, 1957 represented a time of some protest, much hope, and great skepticism--all of which are presented in *Fences* (1985) (Pereira 36).

Set in 1957, the play deals with the theme of separation and discrimination, symbolized in the title itself. It traces the fate of the Maxon family for three generations. In their thwarted hopes, their fears, their faith, and ultimately their survivals, we see the impassioned efforts by a race of people, long discriminated against racially and economically, to gain equal status with white Americans. The play interrogates the ideology of the "American Melting Pot," suggesting "America more accurately is a cultural stew in which African Americans are the leftovers" (Plum 562). It dramatizes the evils of segregation and inequalities, especially what Baker Jr. calls the "economics of slavery" as experienced by the black working class (*Blues* 26). But at the same time, it depicts newer strategies of black survival as an answer to racially motivated socio-economic inequality. Separation is again a crucial issue in the play, one that preoccupies Wilson in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and

The Piano Lesson. There are several references to people leaving their homes, families, and lovers. In *Fences*, however, separation takes a different form: people walk down the road in search of a new identity, power, and place which they had been denied for several years even after their freedom.

The question of boundaries takes place at the very outset of the play, which reveals a series of social and personal restrictions placed on blacks. The play begins with Troy Maxon and Jim Bono entering the former's partially fenced yard on "Friday night, payday, and the one night of the week the two men engage in a ritual of talk and drink" (*Fences* 105). This ritualistic space is filled immediately with discussions of blacks' fear of whites:

TROY. I ain't lying! The nigger had a watermelon this big. Talking about . . . "What watermelon, Mr. Rand?" I liked to fell out! "What watermelon, Mr. Rand? . . . And it sitting there big as life.

BONO. What did Mr. Rand say?

TROY. Ain't said nothing. Figure if the nigger too dumb to know he carrying a watermelon, he wasn't gonna get much sense out of him. Trying to hide that great big old watermelon under his coat. Afraid to let the white man see him carry it home. (*Fences* 105-06)

In its reference to the nigger hiding the watermelon and the authoritative white man, the talk effectively characterizes the racially hierarchal relationship between blacks and whites, and attempts to foreground the boundaries set between the races. The socio-economic inequality grows denser as the action moves onward. Most of the play's action concentrates on Troy's refusal to accept the fact that social conditions are changing for the blacks. In the yard where a ball is suspended on a rope serves as a sad memento of his career. His wife, Rose, reminds him that since first colored baseball player Jackie Robinson's breakthrough, things have been a little different. But he will not be persuaded. He had called for a new beginning--not forgetting the past, but seeking to overcome it, to transform its meaning through the creation of a new future. But his aspirations were bruised when it was time for him to reap the fruits of his labor. He was denied the opportunity to excel at the highest level of sports. "Having put all his energies into baseball, he [had] longed for national recognition, for this was America's game. This was where heroes were made," says Pereira. Baseball provided every American player with a chance to excel. Troy's dream never came true; he was never given that chance in the best arenas of the country. "The game that was once a beacon in his life," further says Pereira, "becomes a millstone

round his neck, dragging him into the depths of acrimony, filling his life with bitterness, coloring all his attitudes, opinions, and relationships" (41).

In the same way, Troy epitomizes the tragic plight of Josh Gibson, a baseball player, who is said to have died of a broken heart because he had been denied his entire athletic career. Both Troy and Gibson were powerful hitters, deprived of occupational opportunity. Saunders says, "baseball was so substantially a part of Gibson's life that once his playing days were over, he quite likely lay down and died" (7). Just as we cannot know how good Troy was in his prime, we will never know how good Gibson was, or hundreds of others who were barred from the major leagues during their time.

Troy is so trapped in the tragedy of his own athletic experience that he cannot believe things will be any different in future. He is therefore angry. He vents his anger on sports. Like Levee, he attacks the source of his identity and, in seeking self-empowerment as a free human being, becomes a slave to bitterness. His bitterness grows dense when he observes the condition of the world where he survives. He faces discrimination in job. He is upset that only white men drive the garbage trucks while the job of hoisting the huge trash-filled receptacles and emptying them into the compactors belongs

to the black workers. He claims to have encountered the devil who assumed the guise of an ordinary man offering credit for furniture purchase. That was fifteen years ago. But to this day, on the first of the month, he sends his ten dollars installment for the furniture he had purchased from that man: "Now you tell me," he says, "who else that could have been but the devil?" (*Fences* 117). Of course, we know that it was no devil that extended him the offer of credit, but a white man doing his business. But this white man is indeed symbolically a devil in the lives of poor blacks who are lost in financial indebtedness.

In Troy's experience chance, or fate, has never played a favorable role in the fifty-three years of his career. Chance made him black, chance took him to Mobile when he was fourteen, chance led him into armed robbery, and chance brought him to baseball. He therefore thinks it to be a foolish endeavor of his wife in taking a chance on a lottery: "Them numbers don't know nobody. I don't know why you fool with them" (*Fences* 122). He sees no chance for a better life in America where color of one's skin rather than talent or skill becomes the decisive factor in the workplace, or on the playground. Having been on the losing side of chance for so long, he knows it will never work for him. The only possible success he has been left with

is survival: enduring from dawn to dusk and day to day in a job that provides for his family. When chance does work in his favor, the price is terrible: his brother's life is destroyed and he is haunted by guilt at having profited from that disaster. Like his father before him, he is trapped in hard labor. He is fated to be down at heel because there is no escaping the drudgery of his destiny. Being a descendent of a slave, he is doomed to perpetual "slavery." His never-ending cycle of labor is merely a key modulation in that same kind of slavery that his ancestors were reduced to.

Despite all the traumas, Troy is a survivor, enjoying the transgressions of a trickster, reinventing strategies, as the occasion requires. Like his ancestors, whose shrinking world caused them to experience a sense of everlasting servitude, he does not engage in devaluations of self-esteem that might reduce him to a victim. Instead, says Harrison, in the spirit of Eshu-Elegbara, Troy erects "a fence to set the boundaries of his universe, a barrier that serves the dual function of keeping the profane at bay and containing divine order within his immediate province where, on the heels of hard labor, he engages in weekly payday drinking rituals to signify his sexual prowess and testify to his personal heroics while straddling the brink of despair" (303). Even death is no match for him who, when

stricken with pneumonia fever, challenges Death with a signifying riff:

TROY. 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!" It seem like he kinda fell back when I said that, and all the cold went out of me. I reached down and grabbed that sickle and threw it just as far as I could throw it . . . and me and him commenced to wrestling. 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 one better. (*Fences* 114)

Out of such imaginary wrestling match, Troy fashions a baseball metaphor to help him combat the doom that constantly threatens. It needs a bit of luck to hit such a ball. The percentage is not favorable, however, when you are "born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate" (*Fences* 164). But his skill as a baseball player helps him learn the skill to survive. He knows he cannot always keep that fastball from

streaking past his swinging bat, but until it does he will play hard and survive as long as he can.

Having lived a life of drudgery, Troy seeks to protect his son, Cory, from falling into such mishaps. He sees himself as a father fenced in with responsibilities to keep his son from repeating his failure. Unlike a conventional black father, he expresses a desire for change in the son's life:

TROY. 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 that 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. (*Fences* 137)

But unable to avoid the parental trap, he dominates his son just as his father had dominated him. By protecting Cory, Troy denies him the chance to pursue his own calling. Accusing Rose of "mothering that boy too much" (*Fences* 138), he does so himself. He says that Cory should make his own way without anyone holding his hand, yet he will not let the boy take a chance and try to survive as he himself did. Afraid that the same force that hurt him will destroy Cory, Troy seeks to restrain his son's ambitions. When Troy was growing up, blacks

were, no doubt, denied opportunities. But things are different in the 1950s. The American law has increasingly taken cognizance of racial questions and has rather ruled in favor of equality. The government has exerted considerable influence in eradicating the gap between creed and practice in American democracy. The interaction of these forces has created a better place for African-Americans than before. When, for example, Troy complains to Mr. Rand and subsequently to the union about a hierarchization of labor in the garbage collection company for which he works, he is promoted to the status of driver, thereby achieving a measure of racial justice of the sort he believes he was denied during his baseball career. His insurgent act, which insists on white confirmation of its responsibilities to ensure constitutionally guaranteed African-American rights, might well be viewed as an instance of changing circumstances. Even more, it can be viewed as a formal challenge to the racially hierarchal status quo and an attempt to delegitimize the hegemonic structures, which have sought historically to contain and control black desires. But unfortunately he fails to notice the great opportunity for Cory--the chance to get a college education and perhaps even to become a professional player. In the 1950s, says Pereira, "athletics began to provide a second avenue--after music--for blacks to excel in ways that commanded

the attention and admiration of white society" (43). It is quite ironic that although Troy found self-esteem and pride through baseball, he would deny his son the opportunity to take part in games.

The acute sense of responsibility in Troy finally affects the father-son relationship. Doing right does not mean imposing one's own will; what is necessary is an intense concern about the psychic welfare of those for whom one has assumed responsibility. Troy's defective code of living leaves no space for a pursuit of self-fulfillment and, therefore, his every attempt to mould Cory into his own pattern is met with disapproval, and, slowly, as Pereira says, "their lives begin to revolve in concentric circles--beginning at the same center, destined to describe similar patterns, overlapping in some ways but without any real contact" (44). As Troy cuts off every move Cory makes to follow in his footsteps as a sportsman, the boy's frustration reaches a breaking point, and he attacks his father. He, then, leaves home in pursuit of his own destiny. Believing he will discover himself only when he has dispelled his father's spirit, he joins the marines, a career as far removed from his father's as possible. Cory's moving beyond the barriers is a testament to the times in which he lives. He is not contained by the same circumstances that beset his father and grandfather,

for he lives in the 1950s, a decade of hope for blacks for self-determination and negotiation with the white establishment.

"One of the most important functions Esu bears is that of uncertainty or indeterminacy," says Gates Jr. (*Signifying* 32). Like the trickster, Troy too is unable to reconcile his words and actions to the philosophical views by which he has been governed. On the one hand, he intends not to do Rose, his wife, a bad turn: "I ain't talking about doing Rose a bad turn. I love Rose. She done carried me long ways and I love and respect her for that" (*Fences* 158-59). On the other, he constructs his motives for infidelity to her. Whereas "Esu," despite his indeterminacy, as Gates Jr. says, "rules understanding of truth, a relationship that yields an individual's meaning" (*Signifying* 39), Troy's understanding creates fences between him and his wife, their feelings, their rituals of living, and thereby the meaninglessness of his own individuality. Perhaps, this is the difference between a deity and a mortal human being.

Troy's relationship with his elder son, Lyons, is equally frail despite the fact that he feels guilty for not rearing him properly when he was a child. While Troy, motivated by a strong sense of responsibility, chooses to fight his way past a hostile world, Lyons chooses just the opposite. He would not place himself in a vulnerable position: "I don't wanna be carrying

nobody's rubbish. I don't wanna be punching nobody's time clock" (*Fences* 118). Following an easygoing lifestyle, Lyons is content with his hours at a club. Flamboyant, he dresses stylishly and uses his special brand of bonhomie to make his way into the world. But behind his nonchalant, cheery mask, Lyons is just another confused black man dealing with a difficult world. Raised in poverty by his mother and lacking the fortune to make the up-hill climb, Lyons takes the easy way out. "Such a lifestyle," as Pereira says, "carries a high social price, and Lyons finally pays it--three years in the workhouse" (47). Only then, in prison he decides to turn his life around. He learns to "take the crooked with the straights" (*Fences* 135), and uses them to create his own survival strategy. An important part of that strategy is the music that will sustain him in the years ahead. The blues will help him find his true self. It will help him survive.

Of all the characters in the play, Rose is perhaps the worst victim. As a black woman, she has been doubly marginalized. Living with Troy, she loses her individual freedom required to pursue her own needs; she is reduced to a functionary who has to fulfill expected roles, including bearing the brunt of her husband's frustrated dreams. Her responses to Troy's quest reveal her consciousness of her position as a black

woman, the extremity of his obsession with black manhood, and the indelibly gendered nature of the widening divide between them. Wilson tells us: ". . . her devotion to him stems from her recognition of the possibilities of her life without him--a succession of abusive men and their babies, a life of partying and running the streets, the church, or aloneness with its attendant pain and frustration" (*Fences* 108). She gets confined to her roles as wife and mother. She dutifully washes, cooks, and nurtures the family. Because Troy gives her "a house to sing in" (*Fences* 190), she keeps his bed warm, and his libido satisfied: "We go upstairs in that room at night . . . and I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever" (*Fences* 138). Ignoring her own condition, she always endeavors to keep the family bonds intact. She insists Troy to build a fence around the yard to keep the family together in. But her illusions are shattered when Troy explains to her that he has not only been unfaithful to her but has also fathered a child outside of their marriage, and one day he brings the baby girl home after her mother's death. The fence that she had asked Troy to make to keep herself in keeps her out forever. She turns out to be no more than an expendable commodity--a scapegoat for Troy's insensitive antics. For years, she had been a shoulder to cry on for Troy, co-operated with him to

build a home, and put her personal dreams on hold to let the family thrive. But now she realizes her mistake in not asserting herself more. "Her self-effacement," as Pereira says, "allowed Troy to take her for granted; by giving him her strength, she weakened herself" (50). Years later, at Troy's funeral, she reveals this to Cory:

I married your daddy and settled down to cooking his supper and keeping clean sheets on the bed. When your daddy walked through the house he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me. For my part in the matter. . . . I didn't know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. I did that. I took on his life as mine and mixed up the pieces so that you couldn't hardly tell which was which anymore.

(*Fences* 189-90)

Rose describes here the consequences of her emphasis on marital space; chief among them is her failure to pursue her own desires beyond satisfying the wishes of her husband. Subsequently, she shifts from a male determined world to a self-centered womanhood. In figuring the interior spaces of the self-protective male as a potential uterine site of her own development, she defies--and, in fact, denies--the limitations

of both the biological and Troy's economics of duty. Her act heralds the African-American women's movement for liberation in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the black women were active in that movement and all their lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideology, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was their experience within the liberation movement, as well as experience on the periphery of the white oppression, that spelt the need to develop that was antisexist and antiracist.

Rose, no doubt, breaks the fences of her husband's domination, but she does not forget to recognize Troy's intrinsic worth. That is why she urges Cory not to seek to erase the aspects of his character, especially his imaginative repertoire, which reflect his father, but instead to combine these characteristics with other conceptually persuasive modes of being in order to develop his own ethics of living. Rather than attempting to deny Troy's positive influence on him, Rose suggests him to honor and improve upon that which was good about his father. It is Rose who best understands Wilson's epigraph, which he has composed for the play to insist on the possibility of improving upon, or transcending, the negative aspects of a cultural legacy:

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.

It is only Bono in the play who seems well adjusted. Quite happy with his current life, he gives the impression of having lived through so much that nothing now could disconcert him. His sense of satisfaction is absent in other characters. In that, he bears some resemblance to Bynum in *Joe Turner's*, Slow Drag in *Ma Rainey's*, and even Doaker in *The Piano Lesson*. He walks the middle line wonderfully; wise, experienced, and mature, he has developed a strong sense of who he is and what his role might be. He has learnt how he could survive in the face of pain. At one place, he says that he did not want to have children because he "didn't know if [he] was gonna be in one place long enough to fix on them right as their daddy" (*Fences* 147). He renounces the pleasure of having progeny but develops a strong relationship with his wife, Lucille, and seeks to build a comfortable nook in which they could grow old together.

Bono is also a true friend of Troy Maxon and is very much concerned that his friend, for all his "honesty, capacity of hard work, and his strength" (*Fences* 1), does not recognize the potentially disruptive nature of his interest in another woman

called Alberta. As he tells Troy: "some people build fences to keep people out . . . and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you" (*Fences* 61). Specifically, he is worried that Troy's attention to Alberta may lead his best friend to overstep the boundaries of acceptable marital behavior. Troy's extramarital desires trouble him because he thinks these desires would throw his friend off his personal responsibility and duty. He thus demonstrates an intense concern about the welfare of his friend.

During World War II Troy Maxon's brother, Gabriel, felt it necessary to fight at the front for better treatment at home. President Roosevelt had said, "The nation cannot expect colored people to feel that the United States is worth defending if the Negro continues to be treated as he is now" (qtd. in Franklin 444). Gabriel was determined to do all within his power to win the victory for America so that his own status would improve. For him, the task of protecting the Four Freedoms abroad also involved the elimination of discrimination and maltreatment back home. But in the War when he got "half his head blown off," he received, for his sacrifice, from the government "a lousy three thousand dollars" (*Fences* 128), and from the society--years of intimidation, harassment, and the title of a madman.

Gabriel's "madness," however, has a meaning. For his wound can be read in a broader national and historical context. As a soldier in World War II, he fought for human rights as espoused by the United States. To attain that goal often meant sacrifice. Gabriel's sacrifice also adds a new chapter to domestic history. The normative discourse of white American history, in 1957, as Alan Nadel says, was one of progress and assimilation.

Textbooks promoted the idea of the melting pot and of upward mobility; historical films and dramas reinscribed the myth of the nuclear family; and despite the continued presence of Jim Crow laws, segregated schools and facilities, rampant denial of voter rights, and extensive discrimination in housing and employment, American history and, more important, its popularizations represented the United States as a land of equal opportunity, with liberty and justice for all. (95)

Gabriel's sacrifice for his country spells out the need to re-examine the enshrined ideals in the light of realities and to recognize the contribution blacks have made to the making of the American nation.

Quite noticeable in *Fences* is the regard for Christianity as a positive force that helps sustain the lives of the characters. After a World War II head injury leaves Gabriel mentally retarded, he is convinced that he is, in fact, Archangel Gabriel, whose task is to open the Pearly Gates in Heaven and to chase away Hell hounds. Despite being an object of pity as well as of community harassment, Gabriel maintains self-assuredness uncharacteristic of any of the sane individuals around him. He proves to be the embodiment of Christian virtue that other characters lack. Then Rose also seeks comfort and direction in life by finding solace in the words of Jesus:

Jesus, be a fence all around me every day

Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way. Jesus, be a fence all around me every day.

Jesus, I want you to protect me

As I travel on my way. (*Fences* 122)

Against the view that "contemporary" black women have lost their culture as a result of colonization, Wilson examines the "relationality and spirituality" that have survived to characterize black women. He suggests that black women's relationality is based on giving priority to personal relations based on principles of generosity, empathy and care which connote ideals of respect, consideration, understanding,

politeness, and nurturing. Even after being betrayed by Troy, Rose is a responsible "mother" to his baby daughter, Raynell. As a virtuous Christian, she becomes more involved with the church, participates more in its events, sings more of its hymns, and seeks freedom to find new channels for her energies. She does not leave Troy but continues to be the woman of the house to set it in order. We should be reminded here of Wilson's stance on Christianity. Though he considers Christianity as an enforced religion that produces mental servitude among blacks, he does not deny the important role this religion has played in bringing order and stability to the lives of suffering blacks. This is why he assigns the raising of the next generation to black women who espouse Christian ideology. Such stance is subject to feminist criticism, though.

Apart from Christianity, the characters in *Fences* draw sustenance from the family. During slavery, the forced separation from the kin engendered in blacks a new sense of belonging by way of forming a family of estranged souls held by common fate. According to Franklin, there are numerous examples of the emergence of a stable slave family, especially where there were children to strengthen the bond. The slaves did what they could to stabilize their family and to keep it together. After Emancipation blacks migrated to the North. But the

problem of living in a complex industrial society multiplied their difficulties, so they had to work out their own formulas for survival. An important means for maintaining group cohesion and rendering help to each other was local community. No one was without a "family"; everyone belonged to the community (148-49). In the play, the characters are linked to their families in one way or another. Gabriel lives with Miss Pearls, who has given him two rooms. When he holds up the key to his room, his voice is filled with a triumphant glee: "That's my own key! Ain't nobody else got a key like that. That's my key! My two rooms!" (*Fences* 126). A sense of home generates vigor in him. "He is," says Pereira, "the Archangel Gabriel and the key in his hand opens the gates to his heaven on earth" (40). Bono has a strong relationship with Lucille and is, therefore, comfortable and content. He asks little from life. Though Lyons depends on his wife's earning, he shows signs of starting again with his music. Troy feels more alive as long as he is dedicated to his family and struggles to perform his responsibilities. The sense of responsibility provides him with the spirit to protest against the discrimination in an unfeeling white world. But once he seeks to escape from the family bonds by betraying his wife, his life becomes increasingly empty and estranged. The price is high in terms of separation from one's family. He

cannot survive. The Troy, who, once used to have a heroic perception of his own mortality and grapple with death by placing it comfortably within the context of his convenient baseball metaphor, is now weaker and therefore gets defeated. Rose, by contrast, survives because she does not give up her commitment to her family. As a woman of the house, she willingly relinquishes certain aspects of herself for the upkeep of the family, though that is more an extension of her role as a mother than as a wife. In Daryl C. Dance's words, she is "unquestionably a Madonna, a strong Black bridge that we all crossed over on," whose love, strength, endurance, and "ability to survive in the most ignominious circumstance . . ." (130-31) have made possible the survival of black race under white oppression. The view, however, should not blind one to the loss of her individuality in the process. Family value, when not antithetical to self-reality, can hold a community better.

Like Wilson's earlier plays, *Fences* is also about the intimations of life, impressions of people who are born black, and the images of a society. But unlike those plays, it displays less rage at racial injustice even though the element is present. The family is curiously schematic. As Barnes says, "In many respects, *Fences* falls into the classic pattern of the American realistic drama--a family play, with a tragically

doomed American father locked in conflict with his son. Greek tragedy with a Yankee accent" ("Fiery" 484). Troy Maxon stands on the brink of new society, but his past experiences force him to distrust the promise of change. This creates conflict between him and his son, a conflict between past and present, which covers the greater part of the play. The conflict, however, propels the son toward his own destiny in the new emerging society. The play takes us down to 1965. The 1964 Civil Rights Act can be said to be the most promising of all the civil rights legislations to date, the first real hope for the blacks in almost a century of freedom. Reflecting this optimism are Cory, Lyons, Rose, Raynell, and, perhaps, Bono too. Each of them has a purpose in life. They have learnt, as Wilson says, to "stand to meet life with force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon" (*Fences* 103). As all of them move toward their individual and collective destinies, they have a surer sense of who they are and reveal a greater instinct for survival.