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The Internalized Cage: Hegemonic Masculinity and the Tragedy of Troy Maxson in Fences

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Abstract
August Wilson's Fences dramatizes the tragic struggle of Troy Maxson, an African American man who, barred from achieving manhood through societal channels, internalizes the very logic of white hegemonic masculinity and turns its oppressive forces against his own family. This paper traces the construction and eventual implosion of Troy's patriarchal authority, arguing that his downfall stems not from a lack of masculinity, but from his tragic adoption of a destructive model of manhood. Ultimately, Wilson deconstructs this hegemonic ideal to propose an alternative, Afrocentric masculinity rooted in cultural heritage, communal responsibility, and redemption.

Keywords
Fences; hegemonic masculinity; Black masculinity; August Wilson

1 Introduction

August Wilson's *Fences* (1985), the sixth installment of the "Pittsburgh Cycle," explores the psychic, familial, and communal consequences of racial oppression in mid-twentieth-century America. Set in the late 1950s—a moment when the promises of the Civil Rights Movement had yet to materialize for most African Americans—the play situates its protagonist, Troy Maxson, within a social order that systematically denies Black men access to institutional power, economic mobility, and public recognition. Despite the budding Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, African Americans in northern cities remained excluded from socioeconomic equality. As Wilson (1985) writes in his introduction, "The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation[...].The city rejected them" (p. viii). Such institutional marginalization constrains Troy's capacity to construct a socially recognized masculine identity.

Although scholars have examined generational conflict, economic hardship, and the symbolic significance of the fence motif, fewer studies interrogate how Troy's tragedy emerges specifically from the internalization of hegemonic masculinity. R.W. Connell's (2005) theory provides a productive framework for understanding how white patriarchal norms regulate racialized gender hierarchies and exclude Black men from full participation in dominant masculinity. This article seeks to fill a critical gap by analyzing how Troy constructs, performs, and ultimately disintegrates under a hegemonic ideal that was never designed to include him.

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2 The Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity

R.W. Connell, in her seminal work *Masculinities*, argues that masculinity exists in a hierarchy shaped by social, cultural, and racial factors. She distinguishes four relational forms—hegemonic, subordinated, complicit, and marginalized masculinity—while emphasizing that hegemonic masculinity functions as the normative ideal that legitimizes patriarchal authority and secures men's dominance (Connell, 2005, pp. 104–105).

According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is identified as a culturally exalted form of manhood that legitimizes men's dominance over women and reinforces racial inequality (Connell, 2005, pp. 76–81). In a white-supremacist social order, Black masculinity becomes structurally marginalized and symbolically constructed in opposition to the white masculine norm (p. 110) , in this sense, Troy's masculinity is doubly constrained. First, he is denied access to the Major Leagues; then, in his working life, he faces occupational segregation—only white men are permitted to drive the garbage trucks. These intertwined racial and economic limitations form the foundation upon which Troy begins constructing a compensatory model of manhood. Nevertheless, Troy does not merely suffer this racial exclusion, he furthermore internalizes this logic and translates it into his own model of manhood. Troy's memories of his father, an abusive sharecropper who nonetheless "felt a responsibility toward [him]," reveal an inherited conception of masculinity grounded in domination, emotional hardness, and coercive authority. Troy reproduces this paternal legacy through emotional distance, authoritarian decision-making, and insistence on control within the household.

bell hooks suggests that within what she terms the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," Black men are often denied institutional power and thus assert dominance within domestic spaces as a compensatory form of masculinity (bell hooks, 2004, p.xii). Troy exemplifies this dynamic. When Rose enters his conversation with Bono, Troy responds, "This is men talk, woman" (Wilson, 1985, p.8). By framing their exchange as a conversation between men, Troy symbolically silences Rose, denying her equal participation and positioning her as a subordinate subject within patriarchal discourse. His sexualized command, "I got some talk for you later. You know what kind of talk I mean. You go on and powder it up" (p. 8), functions less as communication with Rose than as a performance of virility for Bono, revealing the fragility of a masculinity rooted in performance rather than genuine authority.

By reducing Rose to a sexual object in this male homosocial exchange, Troy does not speak to her but through her. His command is a public announcement of his sexual ownership, a performance of virility meant for Bono's—and his own—validation. In a world that emasculates him economically and racially, this act of patriarchal domination becomes a precarious substitute for the social power he lacks. Thus, Troy's patriarchal behavior is structurally produced: he attempts to inhabit a hegemonic masculine role constructed for white men—one he can imitate but never fully possess. His performance of masculinity relies not on genuine authority but on gestures of dominance aimed at compensating for racial emasculation, it relies on the public subordination of his wife, Rose, treating her as a prop in his theater of manhood.

Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as a gender practice that guarantees—or is intended to guarantee—the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell, 2004, pp.105–106). Thus,

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Troy's patriarchal behavior is not merely personal but structurally produced. His attempt to embody hegemonic masculinity reflects a tragic desire to inhabit a gender role architected for white men—a role he can imitate but never fully possess.

Wilson's drama exemplifies the hierarchy, that is, in the extremely racialized structure of the United States, African American men are positioned within a marginalized form of masculinity defined largely by its deviation from the white hegemonic ideal. In Fences, Wilson intensifies this critique by staging the play without white characters, the invisible yet pervasive presence of white dominance underscores the insidiousness of structural racism, which shapes Troy's worldview precisely through its invisibility. The play thus foregrounds the central question within African American gender studies: How can Black men construct autonomous forms of masculinity when the dominant model is both inaccessible and structurally designed to marginalize them?

3 The Disintegration of Patriarchal Authority

Connell emphasizes that hegemonic masculinity is historically contingent and susceptible to challenge (Connell, 2004, pp.106–107). Although Troy attempts to sustain a rigid patriarchal identity, while as both Rose and Cory begin resisting his dominance, the social and familial conditions that once upheld his authority gradually erode. This destabilization is reflected on multiple levels, to begin with, the domestic sphere becomes a site where Rose renegotiates her position as a wife and mother, while the inter-generational sphere becomes a battleground where Cory contests his father's authority. Through these intersecting forms of resistance, Wilson reveals the inherent fragility of hegemonic masculinity and exposes the impossibility of sustaining patriarchal dominance within a racially and economically oppressed Black household..

Resistance from women constitutes a major force in dismantling hegemonic masculinity. Rose's rebellion against Troy's patriarchal authority ultimately ends his eighteen-year control over her. Connell (2004) notes that, when the conditions sustaining patriarchy change, the basis of dominance for specific masculinities may be undermined. Male hegemony is a historical relation open to challenge and transformation. Rose's confrontation when Troy confesses his affair— You always talking about what you give... and what you don't have to give. But you take too. You take...and don't even know nobody's giving!" (Wilson, 1984, pp.70–71)—releases nearly two decades of suppressed emotional labor and reveals her awakening self-consciousness as a woman whose contributions have been ignored. This moment marks Rose's refusal to continue sustaining the emotional economy that had allowed Troy's authority to function. Later, when Troy brings home the child born from his affair, Rose declares, "From right now . . . this child got a mother. But you a womanless man." (p.88). By severing herself emotionally and spiritually, Rose reclaims her autonomy and exposes the hollowness of Troy's masculinist posturing. Her resistance not only destabilizes his authority but also reveals the extent to which Troy's masculinity relied on the silent emotional labor of women. However, this compensation becomes self-defeating. The more Troy attempts to assert dominance within his household, the more he reproduces the same patterns of control that once harmed him.

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Male resistance also contributes to dismantling hegemonic masculinity, therefore creating a generational rupture that mirrors Troy's own traumatic childhood. As a young boy, Troy fled from his abusive sharecropper father after a violent confrontation, a moment he interprets as the transition from boyhood to masculine independence. To Troy, manhood meant overcoming his fear of paternal authority. Wilson thereby shows how intersecting structures of oppression distort intimate relationships. Such an interpretation complicates Troy's character, situating him not only as a patriarchal oppressor but as a figure shaped by overlapping forms of systemic violence. Yet the very pattern of paternal domination he inherited becomes the structure Cory seeks to reject. History repeats itself when his son Cory rebels against him: "What you gonna do...give me a whupping? You can't whup me no more. You're too old. You just an old man" (pp. 86–87). Cory's physical defiance marks not only his refusal to inherit Troy's rigid and punitive model of masculinity shatters Troy's control, but also symbolizes the collapse of the patriarchal power Troy had modeled on white masculine domination.

Throughout the play, Troy's insistence on control prevents him from forming genuine intimacy with those closest to him. His interactions with Cory are dominated by fear of competition, while his marriage to Rose becomes increasingly defined by obligation rather than partnership. When read alongside Rose's emotional withdrawal, Cory's rebellion completes the disintegration of Troy's hegemonic masculinity, leaving him bereft of both domestic authority and the relational bonds that once sustained his identity. Troy becomes progressively isolated, unable to admit error or express remorse. Wilson, by staging this emotional isolation, criticizes that the tragedy of hegemonic masculinity is not merely its oppressive impact on women and children, but the way it impoverishes men themselves, depriving them of the emotional resources necessary for healing and connection. Therefore, when traditional structures of power fail, men like Troy are left without alternative models of selfhood, resulting in a profound sense of disorientation and loneliness that ultimately accelerates their downfall and tragedy.

4 Reimagining Afrocentric Masculinity

If Troy's hegemonic masculinity leads to familial rapture and personal tragedy, the play's final act gestures toward the possibilities of reconstructing a healthier and culturally grounded model of Black masculinity.

Fences reveals the contradictions and limitations of Black masculinity under white supremacy. Troy's pursuit of control, sexual dominance, and authoritarian decision-making—traits valorized within the dominant white masculine ideal—brings him not fulfillment but alienation from his wife and children. While, other male characters such as Bono and Gabriel serve as contrasts to Troy, Bono embodies loyalty and reciprocal care, while Gabriel represents spiritual connection and ancestral presence. Their roles demonstrate that Black masculinity is sustained not through domination but through relational bonds that affirm shared struggle and collective identity. By juxtaposing Troy's isolation with the sustaining presence of community figures, Wilson implicitly argues that masculinity divorced from communal ethics becomes brittle and ultimately self-destructive.

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In reimagining masculinity, Wilson highlights the importance of community as a counterforce to patriarchal individualism. This ideal rejects the racist and patriarchal standards imposed by white society and instead embraces an Afrocentric model grounded in communal responsibility, empathy, and cultural heritage. For African American men, Wilson implies, true strength lies not in reproducing white patriarchal norms but in reclaiming the spiritual and cultural resources of Black history. As Harry Elam (2004) notes in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, the tension between fathers and sons intensifies Black masculinity; reconciliation requires a return to the past and an act of forgiveness (p.145). Wilson's emphasis on returning to the past highlights the need to recover cultural memory, which serves not only as a site of trauma but also as a resource for healing and reimagining Black male identity.

As Elam argues, reconciliation within Wilson's plays requires a return to cultural memory and an acknowledgement of ancestral influence (2004, p.145). Although Troy resents his father's brutality, he also acknowledges the value of the older man's unwavering sense of responsibility. This ethic of responsibility becomes the one constructive element Troy attempts to transmit to his own children. For Rose, this sense of protection defines her marriage: " I wanted a house that I could sing in. And that's what your daddy gave me" (Wilson, 1984, p.108). In Wilson's reimagining, responsibility replaces domination as the moral center of ideal Black masculinity, offering a counter model grounded in reciprocity, care, and communal obligation.

Wilson further underscores the redemptive power of African American culture through blues music, a recurrent motif across his plays. Blues is a music genre that was originated in the South of the United States around the 1870s by African-Americans from roots in African musical traditions. In an interview with Sandra Shannon, August Wilson claims that the blues is "the best literature" African Americans have, it is also the primary influence of his writing career, "I think that the music contains a cultural response of black Americans to the world they find themselves in" (Shannon, 1995, p.554), Wilson answers Shannon. Greatly influenced by blues music, Wilson has already made blues an inseparable part of his plays like a soundtrack, through which Wilson is able to "interpret and convey the meanings behind the African-American lives that he presented on stage" (Menson-Furr, 2008, p. 33). As one of the most anthologized plays of Wilson, Fences presents to the audiences that how blues connects generations of African Americans together as their cultural heritage.

In *Fences*, the song Old Blue serves as a multi-generational conduit of memory and reconciliation. Cory's decision to sing the blues with Raynell signals his reconnection with a cultural tradition that allows him to mourn, remember, and transcend his father's failures. The blues, as Ralph Ellison once says, "keep[s] the painful details and episodes of a brutal existence alive in one's aching consciousness…and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (Ellison,1964, p.78). Old Blue is the embodiment of the "aching consciousness" of Troy about his father. Cory's participation in the blues is therefore not merely symbolic, it represents his entrance into an Afrocentric paradigm of manhood that privileges emotional expression, inter-generational continuity, and cultural rootedness. In this sense, the song becomes a shared emotional link across three generations, it functions as a repository of collective memory, preserving Black resilience and cultural identity, through which, Troy is remembered

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not only as a flawed patriarch but also as a loving father and husband—a man capable of embodying an ideal Black masculinity rooted in tradition and self-knowledge. Through this lens, Wilson's reconstruction of masculinity becomes part of a larger political project that seeks to redefine Black identity outside the confines of Western patriarchal modernity.

Thus, Wilson redefines Black masculinity not as domination but as responsibility without coercion, strength without violence, and identity rooted in cultural heritage rather than white patriarchal standards. Troy's tragedy thus illuminates the broader dangers of internalizing a hegemonic ideal that was designed to marginalize Black men from the outset. At the same time, Wilson uses the family's partial reconciliation—embodied in Rose's resilience, Cory's healing, and Raynell's innocence—to gesture toward the possibility of a masculinity rebuilt upon cultural continuity, empathy, and communal care. The play thus insists that healing and reconstruction are possible not through assimilation but through a return to, and transformation of, African American cultural traditions. Black culture, as the foundation of racial self-affirmation, provides the means for men to rebuild confidence and define themselves on their own terms. Such a culturally grounded masculinity, Wilson contends, is essential to the spiritual health and cohesion of the entire Black community.

By dramatizing both the failures and the possibilities of masculine redefinition, Wilson encourages a more expansive vision of what it means to "be a man" within the African American experience. Instead of portraying masculinity as a fixed attribute, Wilson presents it as a fluid and negotiated practice shaped by history, family, and community. *Fences* thus invites readers to reconsider how alternative models of manhood, which is rooted in empathy, accountability, and cultural knowledge, might disrupt entrenched structures of racialized patriarchy.

5 Conclusion

Troy Maxson's downfall is not the result of individual flaws alone but from his tragic attempt to embody a hegemonic masculinity crafted within—and sustained by—a white supremacist order. By exposing how racial exclusion fuels patriarchal compensation within the Black family, Wilson demonstrates the insidiousness of internalized oppression. Troy thus becomes both a victim and an unwitting agent of the very ideology that constrains him, revealing the complex psychological consequences of attempting to embody an unattainable masculine ideal. The play ultimately calls for a radical rearticulation of Black masculinity—one grounded not in dominance but in cultural memory, communal commitment, and emotional authenticity.

Through an Afrocentric reimagining of manhood, Wilson reveals that liberation requires not merely escaping external fences but dismantling the internal ones constructed by inherited and racialized gender norms. Wilson's critique reveals that the most insidious violence of racism is not merely exclusion, but the internalization of its oppressive logic. Troy's tragedy demonstrates how Black men can become complicit in their own oppression by enforcing the patriarchal norms of the dominant white society within their own communities. True liberation, therefore, requires a radical break from this hegemonic model and a turn towards an Afrocentric masculinity built on cultural authenticity and communal care.

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