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Transcending Legacy: Cyclical Trauma in August Wilson's *Fences*

Traumatic experiences can permanently alter a victim's state of mind and leave their behavioral patterns forever changed. Parent-to-child trauma can be almost cyclical, where a parent who experienced trauma inflicts the same experiences onto their children, and their children inflict similar trauma onto the next children. In August Wilson's play *Fences*, the Maxsons struggle to overcome traumatic experiences, causing them to build safety fences around their feelings. The family comes from the South, where Troy's father lived as a sharecropper, and then young Troy Maxson fled to the North. Troy rebuilds a new life for himself, now working as a garbage man, finding a wife, and having a son. Troy endures his own struggles and traumatic experiences that he passes onto his son, Cory. The Maxson family finds itself in a cycle of trauma, passing trauma like a legacy onto each descendant. In the play *Fences*, August Wilson uses cyclical trauma throughout the Maxson family lineage to emphasize legacy.

Troy did not have positive parental figures during his life. His mother left him when he was 8 years old with the unkept promise of her eventual return. She was able to escape the toxic behavior of Troy's father, leaving young Troy and his siblings to suffer. This was maybe the first traumatic experience that Troy had, although Wilson does not depict the closeness of Troy's relationship with his mother. Troy's father, the original source of the Maxson family trauma, lived as a sharecropper, meaning he "rented" a piece of land owned by a white man and paid to live on it through the products that he grew. Sharecropping left a traumatic impact on Troy's father. Much like the other sharecroppers of the time, he found himself stuck in debt and doing labor for almost free, only having the piece of land to share with his children. His father felt

dispirited from working so hard for nothing and made sure he took that frustration out on his children. When recounting his own childhood, Troy says his father only concerned himself with “getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin” (Wilson 51). Troy claims his father did not care about children; he only cared about the work they could do on the land – their contributions toward repaying his sharecropper debt (Wilson 50). When dealing with the consequences of the rigged sharecropping system, his father likely looked for all of the help he could get to have a sort of release from his situation. Seeing his 11 children as extra hands to pick cotton for the landowner possibly hindered Troy’s father’s ability to have healthy parent-child relationships. To him, working was life or death, and that meant avoiding being a caring parent for the sake of keeping a home for his family.

Troy had finally had enough of his father’s abusive behavior at age 14. When his father started to sexually assault a girl Troy had been “getting cozy” with, Troy beat his own father with the leather straps from their mule and, in return, received the worst beating of his life (Wilson 52). Through retaliating against his father and then being beaten to near-death, Troy says he became “a man.” Troy’s father passed a legacy down to him with this moment: He had to mature almost rapidly. After 14 years of traumatic experiences and abuse brought on by his father, Troy was forced to leave home. He says, “And right there the world suddenly got big. And it was a long time before I could cut it down to where I could handle it” (Wilson 53). Troy was thrust into a world he was unprepared to enter and had to adjust his way of living to the point where he could handle the weight of his own experiences.

Troy still is affected by the trauma inflicted on him by his father. He searches for forms of authority in his life and buys a house and gets a job as a garbage man. Troy yearns to distance himself from his father’s life choices. He learned from his first-hand experience with

sharecropping to not put himself into debt, contending that he “ain’t gonna owe nobody nothing if [he] can help it” (Wilson 33). Money is central to Troy’s life, since he saw his own father struggle. However, like his father, Troy wants to find ways to cut corners with money and to escape that trauma. His father did so by having children to work for him, while Troy used his brother’s military injury to buy himself a house. The weight of Troy’s trauma is immense, and he tries his own tactics to overcome it. Troy attempts a larger escape from family trauma when he has an affair with the woman from Alberta, asserting to Rose that the affair gives him a way to get away from the issues at home (Wilson 68-69). He also faces the burden of broken dreams. After getting out of jail, he desired to be a baseball player, but that dream could not come to reality. Troy learned the hard lesson, originally taught to him by his father, that he cannot receive all things that he wishes for. He uses this notion to justify his negative behavior toward his son, Cory, claiming that “He’s got to make his own way. I made mine. Ain’t nobody gonna hold his hand when he get out there in that world” (Wilson 39). Troy aims for what he thinks is the most caring approach to keep Cory from trauma, but he embodies his father’s bitterness toward life.

Troy’s son, Cory, is forced to inherit his father’s trauma. Like his own father, Troy wants to raise his son the “right” way and likely teach him similar lessons. Troy’s father’s actions have a profound impact on how he raises his own son. Troy forbids Cory from playing football because he had his own dreams of playing baseball ruined because of the time era and Troy’s race. Troy wants Cory to be taught a similar lesson and to grow up quickly, like he had to. He attempts to give Cory an experience related to his own youth by not allowing Cory to play football and refusing to give permission for him to be on a college team. Troy’s excuse is that “the white man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway.” He tells Cory to read books, emphasizing that “that way you have something can’t nobody take away from you”

(Wilson 35). This discouragement is an example of a form of trauma that was passed from Troy to Cory. Coming from Troy's own experience with baseball, Cory cannot try to play football, in order to keep him from having his dreams destroyed. Troy then passes his most traumatic experience onto Cory: He forces him to grow up, in a similar fashion to Troy's own experience at age 14. Troy gives Cory a "three strike" limit to how many times he can stand up to him.

Cory is the first character in the Maxson family to transcend the cycle of trauma. After standing up to his father in a similar manner to how Troy stood up to his own father at the point of his "third strike," Cory was faced with the choice to continue his life like Troy did – have a child and inflict trauma upon it – or restart his own life and break the cycle. Cory grew up with one different figure that his father lacked: a mother. Rose endured the family's trauma and shielded Cory from some of its harsh effects, which allowed him to break free from his traumatic past. Cory acknowledges Troy's toxic behavior before choosing to leave home, saying "You ain't never done nothing but hold me back. Afraid I was gonna be better than you. I used to tremble every time you called my name" (Wilson 86). Expressing his true feelings gave Cory the authority to understand who his father raised him to be and whether he wanted to continue that cycle. Cory left the house and joined the Marines and came back home a changed man. After Troy's death, when trying to explain to Rose why he does not want to go to the funeral, Cory emphasizes the toxic elements of his relationship with his father, saying, "Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere....That shadow digging in your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you. Everywhere I looked, Troy Maxson was looking back at me....I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow, Mama" (Wilson 97). Cory knows that he wants to discontinue the trauma in his family, and, to him, breaking away from his father is the first step. Rose justifies the presence of the "shadow" that Cory has felt by exclaiming that

“you either got to grow into it or cut it down to fit you” (Wilson 97). Just like Troy’s statement about how the world got too big when he was 14, Cory must either grow into the mold set up for him by his father’s expectations or cut it down to fit where he is and wants to be. He decides to break free from the trauma, and he does not hold his childhood experiences against his father.

Differing from the rest of the Maxson family, Troy’s youngest child, Raynell, does not grow up with a negative father figure. She is 7 years old when Troy dies, so she likely has not had enough traumatic experiences with him to alter her sense of mind, long-term. It can be acknowledged, though, that she could develop her own trauma because of Troy’s death, since she now will be raised by Rose, who is not her birth mother. Raynell and Cory are the two Maxsons who escape the trauma, although they do not hold Troy’s problematic tendencies against him. They both sing the “Old Blue” song at the end of the play, showing that they faced adversity but still respect their father and maybe are understanding of his traumatic past: “Blue’s gone where the good dogs go / When I hear old Blue bark / When I hear old Blue bark / Blue treed a possum in Noah’s Ark” (Wilson 99-100). The song was passed down as a legacy, just like the trauma. After playing a key role in the cycle of trauma and passing it as a legacy to his children, Troy is now at peace and the cycle can finally come to an end with Cory’s trauma transcendence and Raynell’s young age.

Although legacy can have an immensely negative impact on a family, a legacy of trauma also could be argued as being beneficial to family development and group unity. Cory inherited a sense that he would be different from his father, and Troy had a similar sense about his father: He wanted to ensure that he never would endure the struggles his father faced. The idea of inheriting a sense of differentiation from traumatic predecessors is a valid notion, but in the case of the Maxson family, the inherited legacy only pushed the family apart. It had a positive effect

on Cory, since he ended up overcoming his trauma from his father, but Troy could not change himself to be different from his father because the behavior is all he had ever seen. Also, much like his mother did to him, Troy abandoned a child that needed him (although through a 15-year jail sentence) and returned to find his first son's mother had started a new life with their son.

Despite internally committing to be different from his past, Troy had to leave Lyons to grow up without a father figure. Troy tells Cory that he cares for him because he's his "flesh and blood," but even though Troy felt a sense of obligation to take care of Cory and make sure he "moves as far away from [Troy's] life as he can get," Lyons received almost the opposite treatment (Wilson 38-39). He never had a father and is told to leave anytime he goes to see Troy (often visiting him to ask for money), maybe for the sake of keeping him away from Troy's toxic tendencies. Troy expresses how his father did not care for him and his siblings, only wanting them to be workhands, but Troy treats Cory similarly when Cory asks him why he has never liked him. Troy becomes outraged and exclaims: "Who the hell say I got to like you? ... You live in my house... sleep you behind on my bedclothes... fill you belly up with my food... cause you my son... Cause it's my duty to take care of you" (Wilson 37-38). In this moment, Troy is refuting any claim that he might actually *like* his son and, therefore, behaving in a way similar to how his father treated him. Troy's shaming of Cory, despite all of the struggles that he has faced in life, shows that legacy through trauma imposes more negative consequences on its victims.

In *Fences*, the Maxson family passes trauma onto one another, making it their inherited legacies. The trauma centralizes around Troy, giving Cory the chance to escape from it and granting Raynell the ability to avoid it through Troy's death. Troy's struggles while growing up with his father play a large role in how Troy treats his own children. Troy refuses to let Cory play the sport he loves, in efforts to teach him a lesson about opportunity. When Cory grows up,

however, he proves that there exists an ability to grow from trauma, and he overcomes his own cyclical pattern of struggle by living his own life and leaving his father's shadow behind. There exists the opportunity for the remaining members of the Maxson family to escape their preconceived legacy of toxic bitterness and abuse. With Troy's death, the pain is almost alleviated and gives the family a sort of "fresh start" toward creating a new, positive legacy. Without a negative male parental figure looming over them, Cory can choose to make the choice to be a positive father figure for his future children and Raynell can grow up with legacies only passed onto her through Rose.

Work Cited

Wilson, August. *Fences*. Plume, 1986.